

More Archaeological Evidence

by F.F Bruce

The archaeological evidence provides significant confirmation of the historical accuracy of the New Testament accounts and sheds light on the cultural and historical context in which they were written.

Scripture: John 4:23, John 5:2, John 7:38, John 20:31, Acts 14:12, Acts 18:7, Acts 21:28, Romans 16:23, Ephesians 2:14, 2 Timothy 3:16

Topics: "Biblical Archaeology", "New Testament History"

Description

F.F. Bruce discusses the archaeological evidence supporting the New Testament, highlighting the importance of inscriptions and papyri in confirming historical events and locations mentioned in the Bible. He explores how discoveries in Jerusalem, such as the temple barrier inscriptions and the pool of Bethesda, provide insights into the cultural and religious context of biblical accounts. Bruce also delves into the significance of Greek papyrus finds in revealing the common language spoken during New Testament times, challenging previous notions about the language of the Holy Ghost. Additionally, he touches on the discovery of sayings of Jesus in papyrus fragments and the Gospel of Thomas, shedding light on early Christian beliefs and Gnostic influences.

Transcript

The archeological evidence bearing on the New Testament is not so imposing as that bearing on the Old Testament; but, though less spectacular, it is not less important. We have already considered some of the evidence from inscriptions and papyri; we may look at one or two more examples before passing on to evidence of another kind.

The reader of Acts will remember that on Paul's last visit to Jerusalem, a riot arose in the temple because the rumour got around that he had polluted the sacred precincts by taking Gentiles into them.' Gentiles might enter the outer court, which was not really part of the temple buildings proper; but they might not penetrate farther on pain of death.' So anxious were the Roman authorities to conciliate the religious susceptibilities of the Jews that they even sanctioned the execution of Roman citizens for this offense. That none might plead ignorance of the rule, notices in Greek and Latin were fastened to the barricade separating the outer from the inner courts, warning Gentiles that death was the penalty for trespass. One of these Greek inscriptions, found at Jerusalem in 1871 by C. S. Clermont Ganneau, is now housed in Istanbul, and reads as follows:

NO FOREIGNER MAY ENTER WITHIN THE BARRICADE WHICH SURROUNDS THE TEMPLE AND ENCLOSURE. ANYONE WHO IS CAUGHT DOING SO WILL HAVE HIMSELF TO THANK FOR HIS ENSUING DEATH.

When Paul wrote in Ephesians ii. 14 of 'the middle wall of partition' between Jew and Gentile which is broken down in Christ, it has been thought that his metaphor was drawn from this temple barrier, which forbade Gentiles to trespass on ground reserved for Jews alone.

Other New Testament incidents have been illuminated by archaeological discoveries in and around Jerusalem. The pool of Bethesda, described in John v. 2, has been located in the northeast quarter of the old city of Jerusalem, the quarter which was called Bezetha, or 'New Town', in the first century AD. In 1888 excavations near St. Anne's Church, in that quarter, revealed the remains of an ancient church building. Beneath this lay a crypt, with its north wall divided into five compartments in imitation of arches; on this wall there could also be distinguished traces of an old fresco representing the angel troubling the water. Clearly those who built this structure believed that it marked the site of the pool of Bethesda. And subsequent excavations below the crypt showed that they were right; a flight of steps was uncovered leading down to a pool with five shallow porticoes on its north side, directly underneath the five imitation arches on the north wall of the crypt. There are few sites in Jerusalem, mentioned in the Gospels, which can be identified so confidently.

The identification of New Testament sites in Jerusalem can rarely be made with such confidence because of the destruction of the city in AD 70 and the founding of a new pagan city on the site in AD 135. Besides, it is not practicable to conduct archaeological excavations on any scale in a city which is still so densely populated. Hence, for example, there is still some doubt about the place where our Lord was crucified and buried. The traditional site, occupied by the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, is that which was pointed out to the Emperor Constantine when he visited Jerusalem in AD 327, and it is now certain that it lay outside the 'second wall' of Jerusalem, as Golgotha must have done. The course of this wall has not yet been fully traced.

In 1945 the late Professor E. L. Sukenik of the Hebrew University found what he claimed to be 'the earliest records of Christianity' in inscriptions written on two ossuaries or repositories for human bones near Jerusalem. But it now seems fairly certain that the inscriptions have nothing to do with Christianity, but refer to two separate first century individuals named Jesus, neither of them being Jesus of Nazareth.

Writing his Epistle to the Romans from Corinth during the winter of AD 56-57, Paul sends greetings from some of his companions, and adds: 'Erastus the City Treasurer greets you' (Rom. xvi. 23). In the course of excavations in Corinth in 1929, Professor T. L. Shear found a pavement with the inscription ERASTVS PRO: AED: S:P: STRAVIT (Erastus, curator of public buildings, laid this pavement at his own expense). The evidence indicates that this pavement existed in the first century AD, and it is most probable that the donor is identical with the Erastus who is mentioned by Paul.

From Corinth, too, we have a fragmentary inscription which originally stood over a doorway; when complete, it appears to have said 'Synagogue of the Hebrews'. Conceivably it belonged to the synagogue in which Paul debated when he came to Corinth, until the authorities could no longer tolerate his activity and he had to move next door, to the house of Justus (Acts xviii. 47). Yet another Corinthian inscription identifies the makellon or 'meat market' of the city, to which Paul refers in Corinthians x. 25 (AV 'shambles').

Sometimes minor details in the New Testament narrative have been illuminated and confirmed by archaeological research. For example, when Paul and Barnabas, in the course of their first missionary tour, visited Lystra in Asia Minor, and healed a lame man, the populace jumped to the conclusion that the gods had come down to them in the likeness of men, 'and they called Barnabas Zeus, and Paul Hermes, because he was the chief speaker' (Acts xiv. 12). Now Zeus and Hermes (whom the Romans called Jupiter and Mercury) were traditionally connected with that region; in the eighth book of his *Metamorphoses* (lines 626 ff.) the poet Ovid tells a well known story of how they came to those parts incognito and received hospitality from an aged couple, Philemon and Baucis, who were well rewarded for their kindness, while their inhospitable neighbours were overwhelmed by a deluge.

But more precise evidence of the joint worship of these two deities in the vicinity of Lystra was found in 1910, when Sir William Calder discovered an inscription of c. AD 250 at Sedasa near Lystra, recording the dedication to Zeus of a statue of Hermes along with a sundial by men with Lycaonian names,' and again in 1926, when the same scholar, along with Professor W. H. Buckler, discovered a stone altar near Lystra dedicated to the 'Hearer of Prayer' (presumably Zeus) and Hermes.'

A good parallel to the phrase 'the chief speaker' (Gk., *ho hegoumenos tou logou*; literally, 'the leader of the speaking') is found in *The Egyptian Mysteries* of Iamblichus, where Hermes is described as 'the god who is the leader of the speeches' (Gk., *theos ho ton logon hegemon*). In their way, these 'undesigned coincidences' are as telling as the more direct confirmations of biblical statements.

We have already seen something of the importance of papyrus discoveries for New Testament studies, when discussing some early fragments of Scripture that have been found among them.' But these by no means exhaust the interest which these papyrus finds have for us. One of the happiest consequences of these discoveries has been the coming to light of a great quantity of Greek writing on scraps of papyrus (or on pieces of pottery) by | people of little education, and we are thus able to see | the sort of Greek spoken by the common people of New Testament times - at any rate in Egypt.

Now, it had always been recognized that the Greek of the New Testament was different in many ways from the classical language of the great Greek writers. Scholars tried to account for the peculiarities of this 'biblical Greek' in various ways; some, like Richard Rothe in 1863, suggested that it was a new 'language of the Holy Ghost',' invented for the purpose of expressing divine truth. We do not, of course, deny that, in whatever language the New Testament was written, it would certainly be in one sense 'a language of the Holy Ghost', when we consider the good news and divine truth conveyed to us in that language; but the discovery of these unliterary writings in the sands of Egypt quite reversed the previous opinions of scholars, for they turned out to be written in much the same kind of Greek as the New Testament. The Greek of the New Testament, in fact, was very like the vernacular Koine or 'common' Greek of the day; the 'language of the Holy Ghost' was found to be the language of the common people - a lesson which we should do well to keep in mind.'

Great excitement was aroused towards the end of last century and the beginning of this one by the discovery by B. P. Grenfell and A. S. Hunt at Oxyrhynchus of three papyrus fragments containing sayings of Jesus, some of which were similar to sayings occurring in our Gospels, while others had no known parallels. The discovery of otherwise unknown sayings of Jesus is not surprising; in the early days of the Church a great number of them must have been current, transmitted from one generation to another. The Oxyrhynchus papyri, which were dated not later than AD 140, were not fragments of a Gospel, like the papyri mentioned in an earlier chapter; they had formed part of collections of isolated sayings, each

introduced by such words as 'Jesus said'. Whether they are all genuine sayings of Jesus is doubtful. But it is interesting that some of them represent Jesus as speaking in the way in which He speaks in the fourth Gospel, though the resemblance is one of subject matter rather than style.

In 1946 there was discovered in Egypt a Coptic version of a work (originally composed in Greek) called the 'Gospel of Thomas', which consists of 114 sayings of Jesus, strung together without narrative framework. Among them are found those previously known from the three Oxyrhynchus papyri. The collection opens with the words:

'These are the secret words which the living Jesus spoke and Didymus Judas Thomas wrote them down, and he said: "Whosoever finds the interpretation of these words shall not taste death.'" Jesus said: "Let not him who seeks cease to seek until he finds, and when he finds he will be stirred; when he is stirred he will marvel, and he will reign over the universe."

The relation of these sayings to the canonical tradition must be a matter for further study. It is evident that several of them reflect a Gnostic outlook.

The Gnostic colouring of this 'Gospel of Thomas' is not surprising, because it was found along with a whole library of Gnostic texts. These texts, called the Nag Hammadi texts from the name of the place where they were discovered (the ancient Chenoboskion, on the west bank of the Nile some sixty miles north of Luxor), comprise forty eight treatises in thirteen papyrus codices. The codices belong to the third and fourth centuries AD, but the Greek originals were composed a century or two earlier. They do not help us to understand the New Testament better, although they do show us what was thought of its meaning by a very significant, if unorthodox, body of people in the second century; and they show that orthodox churchmen were not the only ones who accepted practically the whole catholic canon of New Testament writings as early as the middle of that century.

Reference has already been made to the affinities in thought and language traced between the Qumran documents and the Gospel of John. These documents, which have come to light since 1947, tell us much about the life and faith of a Jewish community which flourished for about 200 years (c. 130 BC-AD 70) and which resembled the primitive Christian community in a number of respects. Both communities regarded themselves as the true remnant of Israel, both supported this claim by a distinctive interpretation of the Old Testament, and both interpreted their calling in eschatological terms. Whether direct contact can be established between the two communities is doubtful; thus far the least unpromising attempts to do so have centred round the figure of John the Baptist. Alongside the resemblance between the two communities, we must take note of some radical differences, and chief among these is the fact that primitive Christianity was dominated by the uniqueness of Jesus' Person and work, and by the consciousness of being energized by His risen power. But these discoveries have begun to fill in a hitherto blank area in the setting of the gospel story, and will no doubt continue to illuminate New Testament studies in exciting and unexpected ways.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/ff-bruce/more-archaeological-evidence/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net