Archaeology and Tanakh: What It Can—and Cannot—Teach Us

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Over the past two centuries, archaeology has transformed the study of the ancient world. Periodically, a dramatic announcement appears in the news: an inscription, a seal, or a structure that allegedly sheds new light on the biblical period. The reactions tend to be immediate and predictable. People of faith celebrate: at last, the truth of Tanakh has been proven. Some scholars respond just as quickly in the opposite direction, dismissing the find as a forgery or a misinterpretation. A debate ensues, and before long, public attention moves elsewhere.

Despite their differences, both reactions share a common assumption: that Tanakh stands or falls based on external validation. If archaeology confirms it, then it is true; if archaeology challenges it, then it is suspect. This framing, however widespread, is fundamentally flawed.

The problem begins with a misunderstanding of what Tanakh is. Tanakh contains a great deal of history, but it is not “history as it really was” in the sense defined by the nineteenth-century historian Leopold von Ranke. Rather, it is historiosophy—a divinely guided interpretation of history that conveys meaning, not merely events. Its goal is not to provide a neutral chronicle of the past, but to teach enduring truths about God, humanity, and the covenantal relationship between them.

Once this point is recognized, the limitations of archaeology become clearer. Archaeology is not an experimental science; it cannot recreate the past under controlled conditions. It works with fragmentary remains, incomplete data, and interpretive judgments. Arguments from silence—claims that something did not exist because we have not yet found evidence for it—are inherently weak. Tomorrow's discovery may overturn today's consensus, or it may be that we would not reasonably expect to find such evidence in the first place.

For this reason, attempts to use archaeology to "prove" or "disprove" Tanakh are misguided from the outset. Some readers approach Tanakh as entirely and literally true in every detail. Others adopt a more flexible stance, generally trusting the biblical record unless clear evidence suggests otherwise. Still others assume that Tanakh has little or no historical value unless independently corroborated. These positions differ sharply, but they share a common error: they assign archaeology a role it cannot fulfill.

Classical Jewish thinkers offer a more nuanced approach. Figures such as Rambam and Rabbi Saadyah Gaon maintained that truth is unified—there can be no ultimate conflict between Torah and genuine knowledge of the world. At the same time, they recognized that our interpretations, whether of Scripture or of empirical data, are fallible.[1] This principle applies equally to the interpretation of archaeological data, which is itself tentative and subject to revision.

Moreover, even from within the field of archaeology itself, the picture is far from one-sided. Gary Rendsburg has argued that the broad contours of Israel's history align well with the archaeological record, apart from certain debated areas—most notably the extent of the united monarchy.[2] Kenneth Kitchen likewise emphasizes the general reliability of the biblical record within its ancient Near Eastern context.[3]

In light of all this, the question is not whether archaeology can validate Tanakh in some absolute sense. It cannot. The more fruitful question is how archaeology can be used as a tool to deepen our understanding of Tanakh as the word of God.

Once we move beyond the unproductive search for external proof, archaeology opens up a range of meaningful possibilities. One particularly important area is the study of Tanakh in its ancient cultural context. Over time, scholarship has moved through several phases: first seeking to confirm Tanakh, then arguing that it borrowed from surrounding mythologies, and more recently recognizing that Tanakh engages its environment while transforming it in profound ways.

Several examples illustrate this dynamic. In the ancient world, myths of immortality were widespread. Other cultures emphasized a “Tree of Life,” reflecting a deep human desire to transcend death. In the Garden of Eden narrative, however, the Tree of Life plays only a secondary role. The central element is the Tree of Knowledge. As Umberto Cassuto observed, this shift is striking. The Torah is not primarily concerned with immortality, but with moral and spiritual knowledge—how human beings ought to live in this world.

Similarly, circumcision was practiced in various ancient societies, often as a rite of passage into manhood. In the Torah, however, it is transformed into a sign of covenant. As Leon Kass has argued, this redefinition is profound. Manhood is no longer measured by physical potency, but by the capacity to sustain and transmit a covenantal relationship across generations. The act points beyond itself to a lifelong responsibility.[4]

A third example may be seen in the principle of lex talionis—“an eye for an eye.” Ancient law collections, such as that of Hammurabi, also recognized bodily injury as a matter of legal concern (see laws 196–198). Yet the Torah’s formulation introduces a critical innovation: the law applies equally to all members of society. The dignity of the individual is not contingent on social status, but rooted in a shared moral framework under God.

In each case, Tanakh does not merely echo its environment; it reshapes it. Archaeology allows us to see this process more clearly by providing the broader cultural backdrop against which the Torah’s message emerges.

Beyond these conceptual insights, archaeology also serves as a practical tool for interpreting the biblical text. Already in the Talmudic and medieval periods, sages drew on real-world knowledge to clarify details of Tanakh. The Talmud (Sukkah 5a) records that when Rabbi Elazar visited Rome, he saw Temple vessels, including the *tzitz*, the High Priest’s golden headband, and reported on its appearance. The Arch of Titus informs our understanding of the design of the Temple menorah. Ramban revised his understanding of the geography of Rachel’s burial place after arriving in the Land of Israel and seeing the terrain firsthand (see his commentary on Genesis 35:16).

Material discoveries likewise illuminate specific terms and practices. The “*pim*” mentioned in I Samuel (13:21), once obscure, has been identified through archaeological finds as a particular weight, helping to clarify the verse. Linguistic advances, drawing on Akkadian, Ugaritic, Egyptian, and other ancient languages, have deepened our understanding of biblical vocabulary, much as earlier commentators used Aramaic and Arabic as cognates. Even historical

context—knowledge of Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian imperial practices—enables a richer reading of the prophetic books.

All of this falls under the category of using archaeology as a tool for understanding God's word in Tanakh. It sharpens our reading, clarifies ambiguities, and situates Tanakh within the lived reality of the ancient world.

Perhaps the most powerful example of this approach lies in the study of covenant. Scholars have noted parallels between the structure of biblical covenantal texts and ancient Near Eastern treaties, particularly those of the Hittites.[5] These treaties typically include a preamble identifying the ruler, a historical prologue, stipulations, and a list of blessings and curses.

The Torah adopts a similar structure for the revelation at Sinai. Yet the similarities only highlight the profound differences. In the ancient world, treaties were agreements between a powerful ruler and a subordinate vassal. In the Torah, the covenant is between a transcendent God and an entire nation. The laws are issued not by a king or sage, but by God Himself. The covenant is eternal, embedded in a narrative that gives it meaning, and addressed to every member of the community.[6]

Moreover, the Torah introduces concepts with no true parallel in the ancient world: the prohibition against representing God physically, and the demand for inner moral integrity, extending even to one's desires. As Samson Raphael Hirsch noted, the very notion that a law could govern human thought and emotion points to a divine origin beyond the reach of ordinary legislation.

Here, too, archaeology and comparative study do not diminish the uniqueness of Tanakh—they bring it into sharper focus. By understanding the familiar forms, we can better appreciate the revolutionary content.

In the end, the role of archaeology in the study of Tanakh is both significant and limited. It cannot determine the truth of Tanakh, nor should it be asked to do so. Attempts to use it as a final arbiter are bound to fail, as scholars will continue to debate fragmentary evidence and incomplete data.

At the same time, when used properly, archaeology is an invaluable resource. It enriches our understanding of language, geography, historical context, and cultural background. It allows us to see more clearly how Tanakh speaks within its world—and how it transforms that world through its message.

"What happened" in history matters. But for the religious reader, what Tanakh teaches through history matters much more. Archaeology uncovers the

physical remains of ancient civilizations; Tanakh reveals the meaning of human existence. When approached with clarity and intellectual honesty, the former can illuminate the latter—but it can never replace it.[7]

[1] For further discussion, see Hayyim Angel, “Controversies over the Historicity of Biblical Passages in Traditional Commentary,” in Angel, *From Ideas to Ideals: A Collection of Essays by Rabbi Hayyim Angel* (Conversations 44, Fall 2024) (New York: Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals), 202–213.

[2] Gary S. Rendsburg, “Israel without the Bible,” in *The Hebrew Bible: New Insights and Scholarship*, ed. Frederick E. Greenspahn (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 3–23.

[3] Kenneth A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2003).

[4] Leon R. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 313.

[5] See Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 23–36.

[6] See Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1996), 140–144.

[7] For extensive discussion of this topic, see Amnon Bazak, *To This Very Day: Fundamental Questions in Bible Study*, trans. Kaeren Fish with Elka Weber (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2020), 237–333; Joshua Berman, *Ani Maamin: Biblical Criticism, Historical Truth, and the Thirteen Principles of Faith* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2020), 3–75.