

The Bible as History

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An interesting read, not a reference.

The book is organized to follow history as outlined in the Bible, starting with Abraham in Ur of the Chaldees in proceeding up until about the time of the Greeks. It ties out all of the major biblical narratives to archaeological digs and textual evidence from other sources.

The biblical Abraham lived sometime during the Bronze Age. That was a time in which agriculture already had two millennia of history and writing was well-established in both the Fertile Crescent and Egypt. Abraham's birthplace was a large city near modern Basra, meaning he presumably left a comfortable life to become a nomadic herdsman wandering through parts of what are today Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, and Egypt. As with Abraham, they plot his son and grandsons' meanderings by associating biblical references to archaeological discoveries of places with similar names and in the identified geographical locations.

The Exodus presents something more of a difficulty, but the author does a workmanlike job of providing plausible explanations for manna, the quail, and the various tribes that Moses encountered along the way. The same is true for Joshua's conquest of the land of Canaan. The cities mentioned are there, where they're supposed to be, and they are destroyed, as they were supposed to be. Explanations are forwarded for smaller miracles; larger ones such as the sun standing still for a day, or Jericho's walls tumbling at the sound of the trumpet, are not. The authors present arguments both supporting and questioning the text of the Bible, though the sense of the book tends to accept the biblical account except when proven otherwise.

The authors admit that there are many difficulties in the chronology. The ages of the patriarchs is one such difficulty. Abraham and Sarah supposedly lived within historical times, when nobody else achieved anywhere near Abraham's 175 years. Also, it is hard to find enough time in the tie-in with chronology of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon and other kingdoms to allow for 480 years of Egyptian captivity and another 430 from Moses down to King David. They identify some of these problems, but don't resolve them.

This book reflects its 50-year-old roots and what it does not address. Its history embraces the period from the middle Bronze Age to the middle Iron Age. There were constant advances in technology. The coming and going of each city can be dated by the technologies they used, writings, and foreign references. Later researchers have found a number of anachronisms. It does not consider population densities or resources. In particular, how could the Sinai support the supposed 600,000 exiles from Egypt, what happened to that large number during the 40 years of wandering, and how could Joshua have had adequate arms and men to conquer Canaan? You fall back to accepting that these stories are at best fuzzy, or part mythical.

The book lacks an index, a timeline, and graphs and tables to visibly display the associations that it is making in words. A reader has to approach the book on a chapter by chapter basis, following the same organization as the Bible. For that reason among others, the Bible as History appears to put the Bible first and history second.

On a positive note, a person who has not had the time or fortitude to wade through the first 14 books of the Bible, namely Genesis through Chronicles, will find this a very readable summary of biblical history, and one which puts the Bible into the perspective of world history.