

NEW TESTAMENT ARCHAEOLOGY

Archaeology is the science and art of recovering the material remains of humankind's past. It speaks to every aspect of ancient society, including government, religion, animal husbandry, agriculture, cultural interchange, and a host of other subjects. Two primary aspects fill out this discipline, the discovery and reclamation of ancient remains from **surface collecting** and **field excavation** followed by the analysis, interpretation, and publication of the findings.

Archaeology connected with the study of the Bible for the most part is located in the Near East and the Mediterranean. It includes Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Mesopotamia, Anatolia, Greece, and Italy. Though archaeological research covers all the remains of human history from all periods, the primary archaeological periods of importance for biblical study are:

Early Bronze Age (3300-2100 BC) EB I, II, III and IV

Middle Bronze Age (2100-1550 BC) MB I and II

Late Bronze Age (1550-1200 BC) LB I and II

Iron Age (1200-539 BC) Iron I and II

Persian (539-331 BC)

Hellenistic (331-31 BC)

Roman (31 BC – AD 476)

As can be seen, the earlier periods are defined by the technology of metal, bronze, and iron. Later periods are defined by political entities. In this study, we will concentrate on the last of these periods, the Roman Period.

Even though the time period for the New Testament is appreciably shorter than for the Old Testament, archaeology has made important connections between the texts of the Bible and the first century excavation of material finds in the Mediterranean world. Here, we will explore some of these important connections. This archaeological history can be divided into three broad categories, the archaeology of Palestine that connects directly or indirectly with the **life of Jesus**, the archaeology of the Roman world that connects with the **history of the early church**, and the early **texts of the New Testament**.

The biggest difference between the archaeology of the the New Testament and the archaeology of the Old Testament is surely time. While most of the history in the Old Testament covers a millennium and a half, the period of the New Testament is confined to about a century. While in the Old Testament one moves from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age to the Persian Period and later, the New Testament falls into a single sector, the Roman Period. At the same time, the fact that material evidence relating to the New Testament is more recent can be a benefit. In many excavations, archaeologists reach strata that date to the Roman Period long before they reach strata from as far back as Iron Age II or earlier. For instance, the excavation at Bethsaida, one of the villages where Jesus performed “most of his mighty works” (Mt. 11:20-21) is a golden example, since the mound was not resettled after the first Jewish revolt in the 60s AD. Hence, the very first occupation level the excavation team encountered was from the time of Jesus!

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The Village of Bethsaida, north of the Galilean Lake, has been under archaeological excavation for several decades. Here is an aerial of the site. Several of Jesus' disciples, Philip, Andrew, and Peter (Jn. 1:44), came from this village, and Jesus also healed a blind man here (Mk. 8:22ff.).

THE LAND



The geography of the land of Israel consists of several distinct areas, including the **Transjordan** (east of the Jordan River), the **central mountains** running north to south, the **foothills** to the west (called the Shephelah), the **coastal plain** on the Mediterranean coast, the **Galilean highlands**, and the bodies of water, which are, the **Sea of Galilee**, the **Jordan River**, and the **Dead Sea**. By the Roman Period, these areas were divided into three major concentrations of Jewish occupation, **Judea**, **Galilee**, and **Perea**, as well as several adjacent territories with mixed populations.

INTERTESTAMENTAL HISTORY

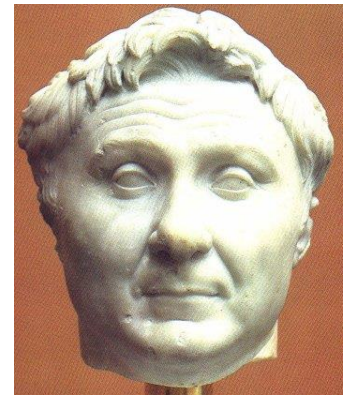
The span of time between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New was about four centuries. At the beginning of this period, the Jews were part of the Persian Empire. Subsequently, they became part of the Hellenistic Empire, and still later, in 63 BC, they became part of the Roman Empire. During

this period, a number of significant changes occurred. Greek became the international language, Greek and Roman structures began to dot the countryside, and some particular Jewish institutions had their origin, especially **synagogues**, the **Sanhedrin**, **Pharisees**, **Sadducees**, and **zealots** (freedom fighters). Jesus taught in synagogues, he was condemned by the Sanhedrin, St. Paul was a Pharisee,

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and one of the apostles was a zealot.

The Persian Period ended in the 4th century BC when Alexander the Great conquered Asia Minor, Syria, Egypt and Medo-Persia. After his premature death at the age of thirty-three, his empire was left to his generals, who continued to carry out his vision of spreading Hellenistic culture throughout the Near Eastern world. Many Palestinian cities were won over to the Greek way of life, and the homeland of the Jews began to see the erection of forums, gymnasiums, and amphitheaters, while the images of Greek and Roman deities were paid homage in many places. All these were threats to the faith and culture of the Jews. When Antiochus IV Epiphanes attempted to abolish altogether the Jewish religion, a priest and his sons, called the Maccabees, led a revolt in 168-167 BC. They drove out the Syrian-Greek armies, and for about a century managed to perpetuate a state of independence. Then, in 63 BC, Pompey conquered Palestine for Rome. From then until long after the time of the New Testament, the homeland of the Jews was under Roman occupation.

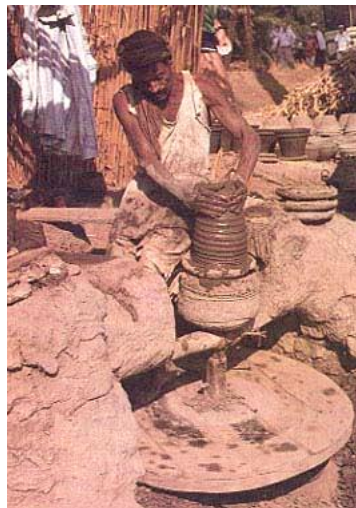


Pompey the Great (106-48 BC), who conquered Palestine and Jerusalem for Rome in 63 BC.

Technological Advances in the Hellenistic Period



ABOVE Hand-turned wheel for throwing pottery
RIGHT Pottery double wheel that can be turned by the potter's foot.



In some ways, the Hellenistic Period was similar to the industrial revolution with respect to technological advancement. The addition of a foot disc on the potter's wheel, for instance, streamlined the entire industry (prior to this time, throwing pottery on a wheel required turning the wheel by hand). Another Hellenistic contribution was the bivalve mold with "keys" (small matching indentations enabling the craftsman to bring

together the two halves perfectly). Artisans also learned how to cast glass and metal using the lost wax process, producing highly elaborate jewelry, icons, and other household objects and tools. Glass-blowing was discovered about the middle of the 1st century BC, and floor mosaics made from cut stone cubes called "tesserae" became the pride of wealthy citizens who could afford such luxury. A geographically and seasonally adjusted sundial derived from an increased knowledge of astronomy enabling a more accurate measurement of time. Some of the earliest surgical instruments come from the 200s BC, and within a hundred years, large quantities of surgical instruments began to appear. The

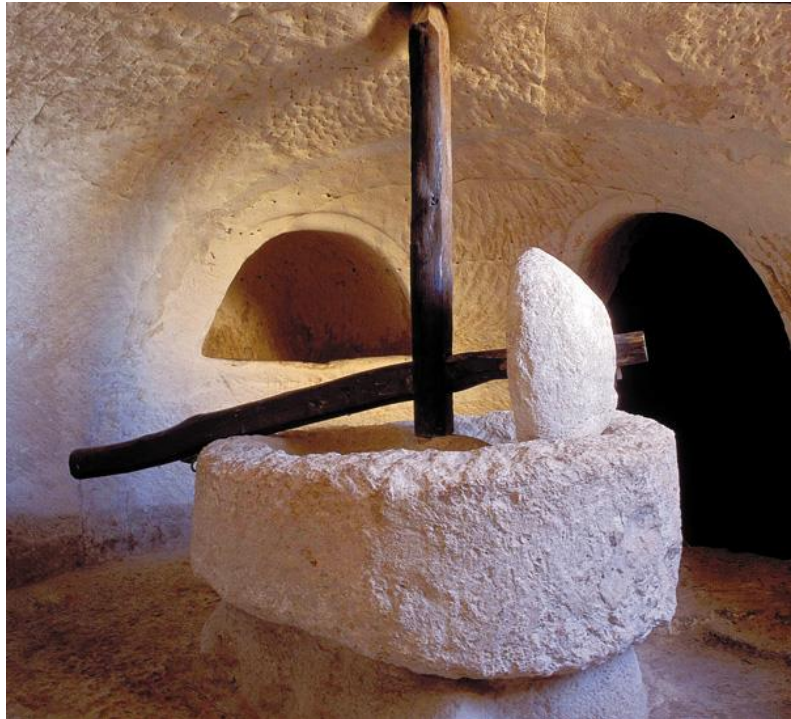


Jerusalem sundial, AD 70, with 12 radial segments casting shadows from an upright piece of metal.

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common horseshoe, also, began developing in this period, which in turn enhanced the stamina of horses and affected the transportation industry and the movement of armies. Hence, the period shortly before the time of Jesus saw a veritable explosion of technological advances affecting life in Palestine and throughout the Mediterranean world.

One of the more fascinating discoveries has been the extensive underground olive oil factory about 35 miles south of Jerusalem that produced olive oil for export. Maresha, a site in the *shephelah* (foothills), contains a subterranean labyrinth of hundreds of caves. In addition to their use as burial tombs, these caves became the site of some twenty-two underground olive oil factories, with crushing basins (about 5' to 6' in diameter), presses, and stone weights (about 800 lbs. each). Residents in Maresha a century and more before the birth of Christ produced nearly 300 metric tons of olive oil annually, using olives from nearby orchards.



WHAT ARCHAEOLOGY CAN AND CANNOT DO

Early on, many Christians hailed archaeology as the "savior" of biblical studies, depending upon material remains to buttress cherished beliefs and to provide "scientific" evidence of the veracity of the Bible. However, a more modest goal is probably appropriate.

The most important reason why this is so is that archaeology is a discipline in process, and material remains are always subject to interpretation and reinterpretation. Yesterday's proof might become tomorrow's Achilles heel. Only fragmented material remains have survived from the past, so any interpretation of this evidence must be offered with reserve. Only some of the ancient sites have been found, and of those identified, many remain unexcavated. Of those excavated, only a few have been fully excavated. Only a fraction of the material finds has been published. Hence, archaeology may corroborate certain things in the Bible by way of illustration, and it may validate the existence of historical individuals, but it is unwise to expect archaeology to "prove" the authenticity of the Bible. Archaeological findings can raise questions about biblical narratives as well as "authenticate" biblical material. Christians should be cautious about using words like *confirm*, *prove*, *authenticate* and *substantiate* when connecting archaeology with biblical texts. At the same time, archaeology provides a wealth of material to help us know more about ancient cultures, architecture, international relationships, war, farming, and home-building, to name a few examples.