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## Numbers-Joshua: The Tragedy of Fear and the Glory of Faith - Lesson 2

### Supplement One.

#### The Bible and Two Crucial Disciplines for Studying It

##### I. Introduction to Old Testament Background

In this unit, you will probe the premise that the biblical record is God's self-revelation, which is founded on a twofold principle of covenant and authority. The Bible is very clear about the fact that God's self-revelation took place in real time and in real places. And indeed, the land where the descendants of Abraham were instructed to settle played a significant role in the subsequent history of Israel. You will learn more about the discipline of archaeology, the importance of pottery to relative chronology, and about the archaeological periods associated with the Levant, more generally called the Holy Land.

##### II. God's Word

Scripture is God's self-revelation to the reader. It is God's invitation to hear "His" story. It is where God makes Himself known. The Bible claims to be not only a revelation from God, but also an infallible record of that revelation. It documents the person and acts of God, Creator of the universe. At the core of that self-revelation is the concept of covenant. Even the English designation of Old Testament and New Testament indicates that covenant was a core concept of these collection of books (testament = covenant).

##### A. Covenant.

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew berit ("covenant") was a legally binding obligation, and thus could be commanded (Judges 2:20; Psalms 119:9). Hebrew terms related to "covenant" express pledge and commitment, which actually create the covenant. This is the concept by which the Israelites gave definitive expression to the binding of themselves to their God, Yahweh.

The covenant tradition of Israel was rooted in the conviction of Yahweh's intervention to rescue a group of Hebrew slaves out of Egypt and in the covenant-making on Mt. Sinai, in which Yahweh revealed the basis of Torah, which was to form the moral foundation of Israel's life. This covenant was a legally binding obligation, especially as it related to God and to human redemption.

##### B. Authority

We know this covenant was valid because it was backed up by the authority of the self-revealing one, the Creator of the universe. God has authority both in the sense that He has absolute possibility or freedom of action, being under neither necessity nor restraint, and also in the sense that He is the only ultimate source of all other authorization and power (cf. Luke 12:5; Acts 1:7; Jude 25). In relation to the universe, the authority of God is indeed that of

Creator as well as Ruler. It is worked out in both nature and history. Thus God controls the natural and historical forces that fulfill His purposes (Rev 6:8; 9:3,10,19).

Authority is what makes the books of the Old and New Testaments different from all other literary works. In 2 Timothy 3:16, Paul refers to the Old Testament as being "God-breathed," or inspired. These Scriptures, having divine authorization, carry the authority of God Himself. Similarly, being God's Word, they have the freedom of God, not innately or inherently, but by virtue of their divine authorship or authorization. The ultimate stress, however, lies not on Scripture but on the God who rules the universe. "To the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen" (Jude 25).

### III. Physical Geography.

The study of geography is an essential part of biblical exegesis. It is not generally recognized that the Bible is the only book of the religions of the world that puts any emphasis on geography. But in the biblical record almost every event is anchored to a specific location. From Abana to Zuzim, there are about 2,000 place names in the Bible, including regions and countries, cities and villages, mountains and valleys, seas and rivers.

The area known as the Near and Middle East, or Western Asia, originally consisted of separate cultural entities, which gradually merged to assume a common identity under the aegis of the Persian Empire. This vast complex of territories was bounded by the Mediterranean Sea, the Black Sea, the Caucasus Mountains, and the Central Asian steppes or deserts, and, to the south, by the seas of the Indian Ocean. Its coherence was related to the fact that it was made up of three concentric zones: the Syrian-Arabian Desert, the plains of the Fertile Crescent, and the highlands of Anatolia, Armenia, and Iran.

#### A. Fertile Crescent and Egypt.

The Syrian-Arabian Desert was an enormous void that no caravan could cross without camels. Nomads had traveled back and forth along its fringes from time immortal in search of pasturage for their herds. The nomadic tribes were a continual threat to the sedentary residents of the zone made fertile by rain and irrigation. The Tigris and the Euphrates, the two great rivers coming down from the Armenian Mountains, amply watered the territory called Mesopotamia on the eastern horn of the Fertile Crescent. This area also contained desert regions, its north differing greatly from its south. It reached from the Persian Gulf northwest through Mesopotamia, then west to north of Syria, then southwest through Syria and Palestine to the Nile River valley and delta in Egypt.

The Nile carried the water of Lake Victoria for 3,000 miles over the desert sands to the Mediterranean. The final 750 miles of the Nile bisected the area known as Egypt in antiquity. Annual flooding replenished the fertility of the soil, which would otherwise have been depleted by the early inhabitants. Ancient Egypt was divided into an Upper Kingdom (along the narrow strip of river valley in the south) and a Lower Kingdom (essentially the delta area in the north).

The countries of the Levant lay on the western horn of the Crescent. Part of the prosperity of this region was due to its seacoast and its situation at the focal point of the trading routes from Asia and Africa. Unfortunately, for the most part the Mediterranean coast was largely outside the Jewish sphere of influence. The coastal area north of Mount Carmel was controlled by Phoenicia and its two principal cities: Tyre and Sidon. The area south of Carmel was usually controlled by Philistia, which in the end gave its name to the area, i.e., Palestine.

## B. Land of Palestine

The land of Palestine is easily divided into four basic longitudinal, or north-south, geographical regions: (1) the coastal plain, (2) the central hill country, (3) the Jordan rift, and the (4) Transjordan plateau.

1. The coastal plain extends northward from Sinai along the Mediterranean coast to the border of modern Lebanon. It narrows progressively from a twenty-mile width near Gaza on the Philistine plain to twelve miles near Joppa on the border of the Plain of Sharon, to less than two miles along the Plain of Dor, south of Haifa. Mount Carmel, a northwesterly extension of the central highland, interrupts the coastal plain where it meets the Mediterranean Sea at the modern city of Haifa. North of Mount Carmel, the Plain of Acco, some five to seven miles in width, ends abruptly at the white limestone cliffs of Rosh Hanikra, the ancient "Ladder of Tyre." Beyond this point, narrow plains occur irregularly along the coast between the mountains that extend to the sea. This was the area that the Phoenicians occupied in antiquity.

2. The hills of Galilee comprise one of four main regions into which the central highlands can be divided. The Galilean Mountains consist of alternating ridges and valleys running east-west. Then comes the Jezreel plain, enclosed by mountains, but with gates to the coast, the Sea of Galilee, and the Transjordan. South of it stretches the central range from the north to south. It dips to the Beersheba depression, which runs east-west. The land then rises into the mountain wilderness of the Negev and Sinai.

3. The Afro-Syrian rift is a north-south fault that runs from Asia Minor to Africa, which reaches its deepest point in the land of Israel. This cleft in the earth's surface begins in the plain between the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon Mountains to the north and extends southward through Palestine, the Gulf of Eilat (Aqaba), and on into Lake Nyasa in Africa, a distance of 3,000 miles. The rift valley in Palestine averages ten miles in width and varies in altitude from about 300 feet above sea level in the north to 1,290 feet below sea level on the surface of the Dead Sea, the lowest point on earth apart from the ocean depths. The rift valley can be divided into five areas: the Huleh Valley, the Sea of Galilee, the Jordan Valley, the Dead Sea, and the Arabah.

4. The Transjordanian hills that rise sharply from the eastern floor of the rift valley are broken into regions by wadis, which penetrate into the valley from the east. These wadis are stream beds that are usually dry, but which may flood during the rainy season. In the north, the Yarmuk River enters the valley slightly south of the Sea of Galilee. It provides a natural boundary between the present states of Syria and Jordan, while in biblical times Bashan, to the north, was separated from Gilead, to the south. No natural boundary separated the region of

Moab from that of the Gilead, but the northern boundary was generally eastward from the north end of the Dead Sea. The Wadi el-Hasa, the biblical brook Zered, which enters the Dead Sea at its southeastern corner, provided a natural boundary between Moab and Edom to the south. The mountains of Edom rise in places to a height in excess of 5,000 feet.

#### IV. Archaeology.

Much of what is known about past civilizations has been discovered through archaeology. Archaeology is the scientific study of the material remains of past human life and activities. The simplest method of archaeology is surface exploration, but the usual site for excavation in the lands of the Bible is a "tell." The Arabic word tell, commonly meaning "hill," has been taken over by archaeologists to designate a hill that has been formed from the debris of human occupation, built up in successive layers over the centuries through a sequence of habitation, destruction, and reconstruction. There are thousands of tells of this nature in the Middle East.

##### A. Biblical Archaeology.

The archaeology of the Bible cannot be confined to the land of Palestine. The biblical story began at the eastern end of a long rectangle where the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers join to run into the Persian Gulf, and where Ur, the Sumerian seaport, lay at the culminating point of the great trade routes over desert, mountain, and sea. When the last apostle laid down his writing instrument near the end of the first century of the Christian era, the church had been established in Rome, then ruler of all the territory where the story of the Bible had taken shape and form. Rome, the great city of seven hills located on the Tiber River, was near the western end of the same long rectangle of lands. In other words, this rectangle central to biblical archaeology went from Ur in the southeast corner, to the Caspian Sea in the northeast corner, and Rome in the northwest corner, to Carthage in the southwest corner.

Biblical archaeology, therefore, is a specialized field within the larger field of general archaeology, related to those lands that played significant roles in the unfolding of the Hebrew story and the subsequent founding of the Christian church. Within these lands, lie the remains of seven great empires: Egyptian, Hittite, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman (or those significant parts of them that had a place and a part in the biblical account). In addition, countless kingdoms, principalities, and city-states, and numberless people who came and went, left memorials of their culture meaningful for the study of the Bible in that same area.

##### B. History of Biblical Archaeology

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact beginning of biblical archaeology. The great American scholar, William F. Albright, traces a genuine scientific interest in the archaeological remains of Palestine back to travelers of the sixteenth century. In the middle years of the seventeenth century, the Roman Pietro della Valle produced an account of travels in Palestine that contains true archaeological descriptions. Other travelers also wrote down their observations, but for the most part they sensed the romantic impact of the remains of long-vanished civilizations, but missed their scientific and historical significance.

Napoleon's expedition to Egypt in 1798 may be seen as the beginning of scientific archaeology. The French conqueror was rightly convinced that Egypt was the strategic key to the Mediterranean. He took the unprecedented step of attaching a scholarly deputation to his military staff. Napoleon's concern for the protection and copying of the bilingual inscription found on the Rosetta stone is on record and is entirely to his credit. Another highlight took place in 1830, when the pictorial script of Egypt was successfully deciphered. Paul E. Botta, a physician and the French consular agent in Mosul, began excavations on the mound of ancient Nineveh in 1842, but, failing to find anything of monumental size, turned to the site of Khorsabad, ten miles north. Here he discovered almost immediately huge sculptures from the ruins of the palace of Sargon II. In 1845, Austen Henry Layard began excavations at Nineveh. His discovery, almost immediately, of the palace of Ashurnasirpal II brought into the British Museum treasures superior to those discovered by Botta. The race of the archaeological treasure hunters was on.

George F. Grotefend was the first to decipher Persian cuneiform in 1815, and Henry Rawlinson soon followed by deciphering the Old Persian text on the Darius' Behistun Inscription by 1846. Between 1846 and 1855, Rawlinson, Edward Hincks, and Jules Oppert succeeded in unraveling the mysteries of the Akkadian script. Apart from the advances in understanding ancient languages, little progress was being made in the mid-nineteenth century toward scientific excavation.

The missing tool, a means of scientific dating, required for the accurate interpretation of archaeological finds was finally discovered and introduced into Palestinian archaeology by W. M. Flinders Petrie. Petrie became convinced that if enough attention were given to unpainted pottery it could be just as effective an instrument for dating as the painted and much rarer pottery used by classical archaeologists.

Following World War I, in the fifteen years from 1920 to 1935, archaeological excavation in Palestine proceeded on an unprecedented scale. Perhaps the most noteworthy of the technical advances was the firm establishment of the chronology of Palestinian pottery. This was due in large part to the work of William F. Albright from 1926 to 1932 during his excavations at Tell Beit Mirsim (possibly biblical Debir). Since the close of World War II, refinements and improvements in excavation techniques have continued to be made. Of primary importance was the work of Kathleen Kenyon at Jericho, from 1952 through 1958. Another notable trend of post-World War II archaeology was the application of physical science techniques to the analysis of archaeological data. The carbon 14 method of dating organic material was but one of a group of highly specialized techniques that included such procedures as neutron activation, thermoluminescence dating, and resistivity surveying.

### C. Dating of Finds

Chronology is a subject of great importance to biblical archaeology. Relative chronology is to be carefully distinguished from absolute chronology. Most archaeological data provide us at best with relative chronology: Level II was later than Level III and earlier than Level I. Accordingly, the types of material found in those levels can be arranged typologically and sequentially.

As mentioned above, one of the most important items in establishing a chronological sequence is pottery, painted and unpainted. Pottery is the most profuse artifact recovered by archaeologists in the lands of the Bible. These are classified by their characteristics and are helpful in developing a chronology of the site. There are several features that make pottery the ideal material for relative chronology: (1) Styles changed rather frequently. (2) It was relatively inexpensive, and subsequently quite plentiful in the ancient Near East. (3) It was fragile and once broken practically useless. (4) Sherds of pottery are almost indestructible. In addition, pottery does not dissolve in water and is not consumed by fire. As a result of these factors, pottery is the most plentiful and the most reliable means of building a relative chronology available to the modern archaeologist.

#### D. Archaeological Periods

Biblical archaeology lies within the Holocene Epoch of geological study and the anthropological cultural levels of the New Stone Age and later. Time frames are delineated primarily on the basis of significant technological changes. There is broad general agreement among scholars on the sequence of cultural development and on the suggested dates. For the biblical world, these are as follows:

1. Aceramic (Pre-pottery) Neolithic Age / circa 9000-6000 B.C.
2. Neolithic-with-Pottery Age / circa 6000-5000 B.C.
3. Chalcolithic Age (introduction of copper tools) / circa 5000-3200 B.C.
4. Early Bronze Age (copper tools predominated) / circa 3200-2000 B.C.
5. Middle Bronze / circa 2000-1600 B.C.
6. Late Bronze Age / circa 1600-1200 B.C.
7. Iron Age (introduction of iron tools) / circa 1200-300 B.C.
8. Hellenistic Period / circa 300-63 B.C.
9. Roman / 63 B.C.-A.D. 323

Of course, the Aceramic Neolithic Age did not end concurrently throughout the biblical world. The discovery of how to make plastic clay, fashion it, fire it, and so fabricate pottery was probably localized to one place (or more), from which the craft spread into other areas. Likewise, the discovery of metallurgical competencies spread, probably more slowly because of the more limited sources of copper ore and the higher skill level needed to make copper tools as compared to the manufacturing of pottery.

#### E. Significant Archaeological Finds

There are several major archaeological finds that have shed a great deal of light onto the early patriarchal period. These include the Nuzi (Tell Yorghan Tepe) archive, which is the most important personal library uncovered in the ancient Near East. Nuzi was a city near modern Kirkuk, Iraq. It dates from the time of the Hurrian Empire of Mitanni from 1500 to 1350 B.C. It features a large number of family documents such as marriage contracts, adoption agreements, and land transfers. The Amarna (Tell el-Amarna) archive preserves almost 400 documents of correspondence that passed between the pharaohs of Egypt and the nations of the Near East in

the fourteenth century B.C. These letters record the social and political situation in the land of Canaan in the Late Bronze Age.

Ugarit (Tell Ras Shamra) was a bustling seaport and city-state in northern Syria in the Late Bronze Age. The myths and legends of Ugarit permit us to glimpse the conceptions of the supernatural that infused Canaanite life and thought and to observe their cultic rites and practices, especially those associated with Baal. Another significant archaeological discovery was Ashurbanipal's library at Nineveh, a capital of Assyria. This archive introduced the modern world to ancient classics such as the Gilgamesh Epic, with its startling parallel to the biblical flood, and Enuma Elish, which discloses some of the Babylonian creation theology. In addition, archaeology has given historical credence to many people mentioned in the Bible, such as the prophet Balaam (Numbers 22-24). Texts found at Deir 'Allah (on the east side of the Jordan River) attest to his existence.