

the Bible and the British Museum

Alex Bunn shares some highlights



Have you ever been in a conversation where the Bible is treated as a fairy tale? Have you ever wanted to justify your conviction that the Bible is trustworthy? Thanks to our colonial history of 'safeguarding' international treasures, the British Museum (BM) in London hosts a whole range of artefacts that corroborate the biblical account. As one archaeologist summarised:

*'Scores of archaeological findings have been made which confirm in clear outline or exact detail historical statements in the Bible. And, by the same token, proper evaluation of Biblical descriptions has often led to amazing discoveries.'*¹

Each year international students attending the SYD conference² take a tour of the BM led by a guide from Pfander (details below). This article recounts some of the highlights.

Genesis



Sceptical scholars say that Genesis was written in the sixth century BC, and redacted back to the time of Moses (c1400BC). But many details of Genesis in Abraham's time (c1900BC), including places, customs and peoples are historically correct.

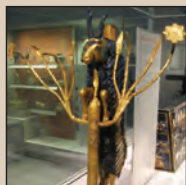
For instance, the existence of Ur, Sodom and Gomorrah, was not known outside of the Bible, and

judged mythical. The best evidence for this period comes from four sets of clay tablets including the Ebla tablets (pictured - c2300BC). One mentions five cities: Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboyim and Zoar, the exact same cities that Abraham defended in Genesis 14:8. The order of the names is the same, suggesting they were on a trade route. This has led to speculation on the locations of Sodom and Gomorrah, based on the probable location of Zoar, the most recently inhabited city. Could they be under the Dead Sea?

The Nuzi tablets (c1400BC) describe laws and customs regarding surrogacy, dowries, cult gods, oral wills or a man calling his wife his sister³ that appear in Genesis, but quickly became obsolete. How could Moses have written so accurately 700 years later? Especially about Sodom which had been erased from history?

Similarly, archaeology caught up with the Bible when it finally uncovered whole civilisations of 'legendary' peoples like Hittites, Horites, and the people of Ur, with large sections now dedicated to them at the BM. The most famous citizen of Ur was of course Abraham. The city he left was certainly

no primitive dust bowl, as this art collection demonstrates. Here is a spectacular ram caught in a thicket. What an appropriate symbol for Abraham's home city!





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the conquest of Palestine

The Armana tablets were written from the governor of Jerusalem to the pharaohs appealing for help during Joshua's conquest. They refer to the invading people as *Hapiru*, which the British Museum believe were the Hebrews, the Israelites.

the kings of Israel



Here is the oldest depiction anywhere in the world of an Israelite king; King Jehu,⁴ paying homage to

Shalmaneser III. Jehu had been an Israelite military captain, instructed by Elisha to oust the rebellious King Ahab, and end idolatry in Israel.

parts of history are illuminated by the Biblical record

In 701BC King Sennacherib came from Assyria and attacked the fortified cities of Judah, including Lachish as described in 2 Kings 13-15.⁵ There is a whole room dedicated to these campaigns with some quite grizzly reliefs, and the Taylor Prism, a clay tablet that corroborates the biblical account in seven areas. But the secular account does not explain why the king left. The Bible fills in the gap by telling us that he returned home to defend Nineveh from Tarharqa, king of Cush.⁶ He was another character previously thought to be fictional, but the museum now has a statue to show just how real he was. On his second campaign, Sennacherib returned with an army 200,000 strong. The Hezekiah mural from Nineveh describes his advance to Jerusalem, and his subsequent return home without firing an arrow. He was assassinated by his sons as a result. But

why would he get so far and retreat? Perhaps the Bible can provide the missing detail.⁷ Here we learn that the Lord killed 185,000 of the fighting force overnight. It's not the kind of detail that found its way onto murals and tablets, the social media of the day!

parts of the Bible are illuminated by other historical documents

Do you remember the 'writing on the wall' of Belshazzar's feast in Daniel 5? He was a king who



would not humble himself before God, and as a result his kingdom would be given over to the Medes and Persians. For interpreting the signs, Daniel was proclaimed third highest



ruler in the kingdom.

Previously, Belshazzar was thought to be fictional; even the

great historian Herodotus 100 years later didn't mention him. But only 90 years ago the Nabonidus Cylinder was unearthed, which confirms that Belshazzar was real. He was co-ruler with his early retiring father Nabonidus, the last known king of Babylon. It also explains why Belshazzar rewarded Daniel by promoting him to *third* in the kingdom,⁸ as there were already two kings! Once again, the Bible is shown to be reliable, where it can be compared with other sources.

prophecy

The historicity of Daniel is contested, with sceptics proposing a late date after the events it prophesied: the fall of Babylon, and rise of Persia,

Greece, Rome, and most importantly the king whose kingdom would never end.⁹ But artefacts like the Ebla tablets, Taylor Prism, Hezekiah Mural and Nabonidus cylinders give us confidence that the Bible was written earlier than the sceptics demand, are reliable when compared with secular sources, and could therefore



be a source of prophecy. You can even see physical evidence of prophecy fulfilled in the Ninevah murals, which are badly damaged by the fire and water predicted by Nahum.¹⁰ In 612BC the Babylonians set the city on fire, then flooded it with waters from the Khoser river.

On a lighter note, you also have the opportunity to see the silver plates that Esther may have eaten off in the court of Ataxerxes in Persia.

early church



Here is one of the oldest depictions of Christ anywhere in the world, from a Roman villa in Dorset AD 350. The Roman Empire had only been Christian for 40 years, but

there were already Christians in Britain. Behind a fair haired and clean shaven Jesus are the first two letters of the Latin title *Christos*, Chi and Rho, mixed with some more pagan symbols of fruit.

take a walk of faith

So, as we have good reason to accept the historical claims of the Bible where it can be tested, we can walk around the BM to reflect on a key theme of the Bible: idolatry and its alternative, faith in a gracious God. Consider how Sodom was destroyed for its idolatry, despite God's gracious offer to spare the city for the sake of just ten righteous people. God promised to make a fresh

start through Abraham's family,¹¹ who trusted God and left the comfort of the prosperous city Ur for the Promised Land. He would later see a real ram in a thicket that would substitute for his own son Isaac,¹² foreshadowing Jesus' final work on the cross.¹³ The Hebrews did finally enter Canaan. The kings and people of Israel were warned not to follow other gods. Sadly there is a sample from a collection of 400 idols from Jerusalem on display at the BM, and whole cities like Lachish and kings like Ahab were judged for it. But faithful kings like Jehu and Hezekiah who sought God's mercy saw God's saving power. Israel was eventually exiled for idolatry, but God was still faithful to his promise to Abraham. The book of Daniel predicted that God would come himself as the king whose new international kingdom would never end. There were attempts to wipe out the Jewish people and the bloodline of the Messiah in the time of Esther in Persia. But the 'kingdom' of the church that Jesus finally launched spread quickly even to the British Isles, and continues to grow.

If you want more on the New Testament, you should walk up to the British Library at King's Cross. There you will find the oldest surviving copy of the complete NT, the Codex Sinaiticus dating from c350AD, which has not changed in any significant way from the Bibles we have today.

If you have enjoyed this taster, why not book yourself onto a tour? Contact info@pfander.uk for more information. ■

REFERENCES

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| 2. www.cmf.org.uk/students/syd/ | 7. 2 Kings 19:35-36 |
| 3. Genesis 12:12, 20:2, 26:7 | 8. Daniel 5:29 |
| 4. 2 Kings 9 & 10 | 9. Daniel 2, 7:14 |
| 5. Lachish were also warned by Micah 1:13 that Assyria | 10. Nahum 1:10, 2:13, 3:13-15 |
| | 11. Genesis 12 |
| | 12. Genesis 22:13 |
| | 13. Hebrews 11:17-19 |