

Unearthing the Bible

INTRODUCTION

Overview:

Modern archaeology offers unique glimpses into the ancient world and sheds light on the origins and historical context of biblical accounts. In this lesson, students become aware of this complex and fascinating relationship as they compare biblical stories with relevant archaeological evidence. Whether it seems to bolster or undermine the biblical account, students experience archeology as another way to learn about the biblical period.

Grade Level: Middle School, High School

Subjects Covered: Biblical History, Ancient Civilization, World History, World Religions, Writing

Goal: Students will discover how archeology can inform our knowledge of the biblical period.

Learning Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- understand the role of archeologists;
- understand different perspectives on the Bible as a historical document;
- compare and contrast archaeological evidence with passages from the Bible;
- participate in small-group and whole class discussions;
- demonstrate an understanding of how archaeology impacts our understanding of the Bible.

Suggested Time Frame:

Three to four 45-minute class periods

LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Before You Begin

Teachers should be sure to explore all bookmarked pages of the DVD-ROM used in this lesson. Teachers may also want to consult the additional bookmarks provided as reference material.

Introductory Activity: The Role of the Archeologist

Students consider what archeologists do, and how what they discover can impact our understanding of history.

1. Write the following terms on the board: archaeology, artifact, excavation. Elicit definitions of these words from the class and write them on the board. Ask students to share any first-hand experience they may have with finding or seeing archaeological ruins and/or artifacts from ancient cultures. This might include museum exhibits.

Archaeology - the study of ancient civilizations by discovering, labeling, analyzing, and systematically reconstructing the past using historic remains, ranging from buildings and cities, to personal and religious items, to documents and other written records.

Artifact - an object found at an archaeological site that archaeologists use to understand ancient cultures.

Excavation - digging at an archaeological site to uncover artifacts.

2. Ask students to consider what it would be like to work as an archeologist. (Note: in the “Materials” section of this lesson you will find suggestions for books, magazines, television programs, and websites, covering both general and biblical archeology. Some of the materials have activity suggestions.)

- What do archeologists try to find?
- What tools do archeologists use?
- What can information provided by archeologists tell us about ancient times?
- What are some other sources of information about events in the past?

3. Tell students that they will be looking at how archeology has shed light on some of the stories in the Hebrew Bible.

Learning Activity 1: Archeology and the Bible

Prior to the nineteenth century, the Bible was the primary source of information about the ancient world. Modern archaeological excavations have shed new light on biblical stories. The object of this lesson is not to refute or confirm biblical accounts of various

historical or ahistorical occurrences. Rather, it is designed to have students discover how archeology may inform our understanding of the Bible, and vice versa.

1. Play the video segment [Archeology and the Bible](#). Explain to the class that “Torah” is a Hebrew word for teaching, and denotes the first five books of the Hebrew Bible.
2. Ask the class:
 - What do you see archeologists doing in the film?
 - What are our sources of information about the ancient world?
 - How has archaeology impacted our understanding of this period?
3. Play the multimedia presentation [Archaeology and the Bible](#).
4. Ask the class:
 - When do most scholars think that the Torah was written down?
 - What do most scholars believe about the Torah’s relationship to the time period in which it was written?
 - How was the Bible viewed until the 19th century?
 - How has this view changed in modern times?

Learning Activity 2: Archeology and the Flood Story

Genesis, the first book of the Hebrew Bible, tells us that God created a catastrophic flood as punishment for disobeying God’s laws. Archeologists have come across writing on stone tablets indicating that other cultures had similar flood stories. Scholars believe that the Jewish scribes who wrote the Torah incorporated some non-Jewish ideas and stories into the text.

Students will read, compare, and contrast two flood stories. You may wish to look in the Index under “[The Flood](#)” for background on the different narratives.

1. Explain to students that one story from the Torah that archeologists have researched is the story of the flood, from Genesis. Read the document [The Flood Story of the Bible](#) aloud. Also read the first paragraph of the explanatory sidebar.
2. A Sumerian flood story, discovered on a stone table, has many parallels with the biblical text. Read aloud [A Mesopotamian Flood Story](#). Again, make sure to read the sidebar.
3. Ask the class:
 - What are some similarities and differences between the two accounts of the flood?
 - How do you explain the parallels and the differences between these two stories? If there was indeed a catastrophic flood, do you think it happened exactly as described in one of the stories?

- Do you think that the existence of these two stories means that a flood actually happened? Why or why not?

5. Explain to the class that archeologists have been looking not only at different cultures' flood stories, but also at whether there might have actually been a world-wide flood. Go back to The Flood Story of the Bible. Read the second paragraph of the sidebar.

6. Explain to the class that scientists have found evidence of a catastrophic flood from the Mediterranean into the Bosphorus straits and the Black Sea in about 5600 BCE. Point out the Black Sea on the modern atlas. There is debate whether this flood really took place, and people who read the Bible literally contend that the story of the flood indicates that there was a worldwide flood, not just a local one.

7. Ask the class:

- How might archeology support the idea that there was a local flood?

Learning Activity 3: Archeology and King David

The story of King David, unlike the flood story, is not found in the Torah. Rather, it is located in various Prophetic writings that are also part of the Hebrew Bible. These tell us that David was the second king of Israel. Many of the Psalms are credited to David, and he was thought to be a great warrior and musician as well. However, evidence has been lacking to prove that King David ever existed.

1. Read The House of David, found at the end of the presentation, in the four panels. The panels can be accessed by hitting the space bar after the presentation begins. Tell the class that the writing on the *stela* (stone slab) is in Aramaic.

2. Ask the class:

- Before archeologists found the *stela*, what was the only evidence for the existence of King David and his dynasty?
- What does the discovery of the *stela* do for the biblical account of David?

3. Read aloud a portion of the inscription on the Tel Dan *stela* which contains An Early Reference to King David. Point out that the text is incomplete, because only a portion of the *stela* was found. Be sure to read the sidebar text as well, as it helps clarify the importance of this inscription.

4. Ask the class:

- Why did historians have to fill in missing words on the *stela*?
- What does this tell us about getting a complete picture of a historical event or period?

- Why is this inscription significant to historians and archeologists?
- How does the inscription support the biblical account?
- Although the fragment is small, the information is important. What is the key line for archeologists?

Learning Activity 4: Archeology and Canaanite Civilization

The story of the Israelites' entry into Canaan is told in two books of the Bible: Joshua and Judges. These two books tell differing versions of Israelite settlement. Archeologists have been looking at evidence such as ruins of settlements and buildings, ancient artifacts, and human remains to shed new light on these stories. Archeological excavations have led to the development of various theories of Israelite settlement in Canaan.

1. Watch the multimedia segment [Settlement in Canaan](#).. Do not close the window after the presentation ends, as you will be looking at the multimedia panels. For Joshua's account of the Israelite victory in Canaan, listen to the audio segment [The Conquest](#).

2. Ask the class:

- Why do you think there are differing accounts of how the Israelites got to Canaan?
- What do the books of Joshua and Judges say about the Israelite settlement in Canaan?
- How might archeologists try to discover if either account is true?

3. Summarize the four theories set forth by archeologists regarding the Israelites' entry into Canaan. These theories are explained on the clickable [panels](#) at the end of the multimedia presentation; click on each in turn.

Conquest Theory: This theory holds that the Israelites took Canaan by force.

Peaceful Infiltration Theory: This theory states that the Israelites came into Canaan's hills peacefully, as nomads. Later, their settlements became larger and more permanent.

Peasants' Revolt: This theory holds that the Israelites were Canaanite farmers who were kicked off their land and moved to nearby hills, forming a new society.

Indigenous Origins: This theory states that there was no distinct Israelite group until the ninth century BCE, when a group of Canaanites began calling themselves Israelites.

4. Divide the class into four groups. Give each group the [Graphic Organizer](#) and instruct each group to choose a recording secretary. Each group should look closely at one of the theories, and fill in the columns on the organizer.

5. Come back together as a group. Have each group share what they came up with.

6. Ask the class:

- Which theory do you think is the strongest?

- If the conquest of Canaan did not take place as described in the book of Joshua, why do you think it was written and included in the Hebrew Bible?
- Do archeologists always agree on what the evidence suggests? Why or why not?

Culminating Activity: You Be the Archeologist

1. As a class, read the Concise Judaica entry on King David. Students may wish to expand on any parts of David's life with which they are familiar.

2. Using the encyclopedia article as a guide, have students come up with a list of key events, as per the Bible, in David's life. Some examples include:

- *David existed and was king of Israel*
- *He engineered the capture of Jerusalem*
- *He expanded the empire and unified its tribes*
- *He brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem*
- *He played the harp*
- *He killed the giant Goliath*

3. Have students work in groups. Give each group the following scenario:

You are working in a team of archeologists researching the life of King David. You are aware of the existence of the Tel Dan stela, but would like to find more evidence of David's reign and lineage. Particularly, you would like archeological evidence for certain claims of the biblical text.

Each group should consider the following questions:

- What sorts of evidence might you look for to suggest that the biblical account (and various statements) is historically accurate?
- What would you look for to suggest that the biblical account is not historically accurate?

4. For homework, students should write a one-page summary of their plan.

Extension Activities

1. Visit a local museum that has an exhibit on the art and artifacts of the Ancient Near East. Or examine archaeological evidence of the Ancient Near East at one of the following museums online:

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <http://www.metmuseum.org>

The British Museum, <http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk>

The Cairo Museum, <http://www.egyptianmuseum.gov.eg>

The Israel Museum, <http://www.imj.org.il>

The City of David, <http://www.bibleplaces.com/areag.htm>

Biblical Archaeological Society, <http://www.bib-arch.org>

2. Have students try one of the projects explained on the Archeology for Kids website (see “Materials” section). Students should work in small groups and report on their findings in an essay that links back to ideas from the in-class lessons.

3. Have students, either at home or in the classroom, play “date the dish.” Using an online interactive tool developed by PBS, students look at an ancient porcelain dish from China’s Yuan dynasty, and try to assess its age.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/sultan/dish.html>.

MATERIALS

Graphic Organizer

Additional Reference Materials:

NB: Many of the materials listed have good background information for both students and teachers. In addition to the books, websites, and magazines listed, there are often articles on current topics in archeology in The New York Times, Christian Science Monitor, Washington Post and Boston Globe, as well as popular science publications like Scientific American.

For middle schoolers:

Panchyk, Richard. *Archeology for Kids: Uncovering the Mysteries of our Past, 25 Activities*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, Inc., 2001.

Archeology for Kids. <http://www.cr.nps.gov/ archeology/public/kids/index.htm#>.

A program of the National Park Service. Great information on what archeologists do, different types of archeology, ideas for projects, and information on careers in archeology. The information presented is also appropriate for older students.

Dig magazine and <http://www.digonsite.com>.

An archeology magazine for kids. The website contains articles, quizzes, and teachers’ guides.

For high schoolers:

Ancient Refuge in the Holy Land. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/scrolls/>.

The webpage for this *Nova* program contains articles, a teacher’s guide, and interactive activities. The program can be downloaded from the site, and there is a link to buy a video or DVD copy.

Archeology magazine and <http://www.archeology.org>.

A publication of the Archeological Institute of America. Contains interesting articles on new topics in archeology, interviews, and reviews.

Biblical Archeology Review and <http://www.bib-arch.org>

A publication of the Biblical Archeology Society. Site contains information on current findings, exhibits, and recommended books.

Ben-Tor, Amnon. *The Archeology of Ancient Israel*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale UP, 1992.

Marcus, Amy Dockser. *The View from Nebo: How Archeology is Rewriting the Bible and Reshaping the Middle East*. Boston: Back Bay Books, 2001.

STANDARDS

From the National Standards for Social Studies

www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp

1. Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of culture and cultural diversity.
2. Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of people, places, and environments.

Listening and Speaking

Standard 8, Level II, Benchmarks 1, 3, 7

1. Contributes to group discussions.
3. Responds to questions and comments (e.g., gives reasons in support of opinions, responds to others' ideas).
7. Makes basic oral presentations to class. (e.g., uses subject-related information and vocabulary; includes content appropriate to the audience; relates ideas and observations; incorporates visual aids or props; incorporates several sources of information).

World History

Standard 7, Level III, Benchmark 4

1. Understands social development and religious beliefs of Jewish civilization (e.g., the course of development of the Jewish kingdoms and the Jews' maintenance of religious and cultural traditions despite destruction of these kingdoms, the significance of the Torah in Judaism).

Historical Understanding

Standard 2, Level III, Benchmark 5

5. Understands that historical accounts are subject to change based on newly uncovered records and interpretations.

DVD-ROM BOOKMARKS

Archaeology and the Bible (Video > A People Is Born > Mesopotamia > Archaeology and the Bible > Play)

Archeology and the Bible (Video > A People Is Born > Mesopotamia > Archaeology and the Bible > Explore Topic > Play)

The Flood (Index > Flood > Encyclopedia)

The Flood Story of the Bible (Video > A People Is Born > Mesopotamia > Archaeology and the Bible > Explore Topic > Historical Documents > The Flood Story of the Bible)

A Mesopotamian Flood Story (Video > A People Is Born > Mesopotamia > Archaeology and the Bible > Explore Topic > Historical Documents > A Mesopotamian Flood Story)

Black Sea (Atlas > 3100 BCE > Modern View)

The House of David (Video > A People Is Born > Mesopotamia > Archaeology and the Bible > Explore Topic > Play > The “House of David”)

An Early Reference to King David (Video > A People Is Born > Mesopotamia > Archaeology and the Bible > Explore Topic > Historical Documents > An Early Reference to King David)

Settlement in Canaan (Video > Building a Nation > Settlement in Canaan > Explore Topic > Play)

The Conquest (Video > Building a Nation > Settlement in Canaan > Explore Topic > Play > Conquest > The Conquest in the Book of Joshua)

Four Panels (Video > Building a Nation > Settlement in Canaan > Explore Topic > Play > Four Panels)

King David (Index > David > Encyclopedia)

Graphic Organizer: Canaanite Settlement Theories

Theory name:

Summarize what this theory says about Israelite settlement in Canaan:

Evidence Chart:

Evidence that supports this theory	Evidence that contradicts this theory	Extra findings that would support this theory if found