

Faith and Knowledge

by Rev. Robert Edward Greene

The famed archaeologist, Nelson Glueck, claimed that the only resource he needed to explore ancient Israel was the Hebrew Bible. And Glueck was remarkably successful in finding sites using only that guidebook.

On the other hand, one of the greatest disappointments to Biblicalists was Kathleen Kenyon's dig at Jericho. Carefully described, a model for all future digs, Kenyon did indeed find remains of the walls which had surrounded Jericho. But she could find no evidence of any walls that had been destroyed during the 13th to 15th centuries B.C., the time ascribed to Joshua.

That, combined with the inability of archaeologists to locate most of the rest of the cities allegedly destroyed by Joshua or to find destruction dated to the time of Joshua at those cities they did locate, caused the archaeologists to re-evaluate the nature of the Hebrew incursion into Canaan and, more importantly, how Jewish religion developed. And the more the archaeologists find, the more questions are raised about the reliability of the Biblical record and, even more important, its underlying theology.

Yet, says William Dever, perhaps the leading contemporary American archaeologist, at a seminar I attended last month, archaeological evidence should have no effect on religious beliefs. Anyone whose faith depends on archaeology, says Dever quoting George Bush, "is in deep dew dew."

And Dever is so right! Faith depends on evading knowledge, ignoring knowledge. For see what happens if, disregarding Dever's advice, we confront faith with the knowledge that archaeology provides.

First, the archaeological evidence strongly suggests that Yahweh, as portrayed in the Hebrew Bible, is just another mythological god patterned after two older Semitic gods. The first, and primary, of these is El, the father god, creator of heaven and earth, wise, compassionate, the divine judge. Indeed, "El" is the very name by which God is known in the Hebrew text of Genesis. The second of the Semitic gods is Baal, the god of storms and rain, a warrior god capable of protecting his people.

Both of these gods were prominent in Canaanitic worship at the time of the Hebrew incursion in the 12th and 13th centuries B.C. The Hebrews simply borrowed them, combining their characteristics into a single god would be the divine creator, judge, and protector of this particular tribe. They didn't even dare then to claim that Yahweh was the one and only god: no one would have believed them! They merely said that they would have no other god before him: Yahweh would be their primary god.

Even more distressing to Jewish monotheism, as it has developed in the common era, is new evidence suggesting that Yahweh had a consort, that Judaism, as it was practiced at least in pre-Exilic Palestine, acknowledged the universal mother goddess, who was known among the Semitic peoples and in Canaan as Asherah. Not only have images of a female goddess been found at the Hebrew high places, but now inscriptions have

turned up at Kuntellet Ajrud in the Sinai referring to "Yahweh and his Asherah." Vessels and lampstands have been found with images of the goddess and an empty space: is the empty space the place of Yahweh, whose image cannot be drawn, the archaeologists ask? While some, like the Israeli archaeologist, Ze'ev Meshel, who did the excavations at Kuntellet Ajrud, say, "Maybe," others like William Dever answer unhesitatingly, "Yes!"

It fits, for Asherah was the consort of El -- the mother of all creation as he was the father. The prophetic ranting against Baal, the effort to show Baal as the epitome of evil, the effort to ascribe Asherah as the consort of Baal rather than El and so equally evil, only reinforces the archaeological evidence of how difficult it was, and how unsuccessful the Jerusalem authorities were, in getting people away from worshipping the Canaanitic deities who were so closely associated with agricultural success.

Thus knowledge destroys the most crucial underpinning of the Jewish faith and so of its successor, Christianity. God, Yahweh, is no more real than any other gods whose existence modern Judaism and Christianity so persistently deny and ascribe as but a pagan myth. Yet as it is with El and as it is with Baal, so also is it with Yahweh!

Second, archaeology discloses that the Biblical materials are not unique. With the discovery of Assurbanipal's library at Ninevah and the Ugaritic Texts, it has become increasingly evident that the stories told in Genesis and the laws prescribed in the Torah (the Pentateuch) borrow substantially from other near Eastern sources -- Sumerian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Canaanitic.

The stories of the patriarchs essentially are paraphrases of stories borrowed from other religious sources. Thus the story of Noah and the flood appears on a stele in Assurbanipal's library as the story of Utnapishtim on Tablet 11 of the Epic of Gilgamesh. Other archaeological findings, less completely preserved, suggest that this Gilgamesh chapter was borrowed from even earlier Sumerian sources.

Another example is the tale of Joseph and the wife of Potiphar, derived from the Egyptian Tale of Two Brothers, where the same set of circumstances are revealed.

Thus the Bible is not a book of divine revelation, but a compilation of incidents at least in part borrowed primarily from Mesopotamian and Egyptian sources in order to create a history, to create a background, to create a context for this new religion of Judaism.

The same is true of the laws. They come not from the mouth of God, but from the typical law codes of the day. The most remarkable simile probably is the black diorite stele uncovered at Susa on which is inscribed in cuneiform the Code of Hammurabi, dated to the 18th century B.C. Not all the Mosaic laws are identical to those of Hammurabi or any other Mesopotamian or Egyptian code, for each law code reflects the political, the economic, and the social conditions of a particular place at a particular time. But the similarities are enough to make it clear that the Biblical law is no divine revelation, but a practical set of rules consistent with the social mores, and the political needs of the rulers, and ascribed to God to assure its authority.

Interestingly enough, the drawing at the top of Hammurabi's stele shows the law code being delivered to the king by the sun god, Shamash, just as the Jewish Law was delivered to Moses by Yahweh, whose monotheistic antecedents can be traced to Aton -

- briefly asserted to be the one and only god during the reign of the Egyptian Pharaoh, Akhnaton; Aton also was identified with the sun.

Furthermore, archaeology demonstrates that Judaism was not pronounced in a single moment but was created and developed over a long period of time. Even its god changed: by his own admission in Exodus 3, Yahweh acknowledges he previously had been known as El.

The religion of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob -- that which Judaism claims as its source -- was not the religion of Moses, which provided the effective beginnings of Hebraism.

Yet the religion of Moses was not the religion of David and Solomon. The religion of Moses was a religion for a nomadic, unsettled sheep-herding confederation of tribal families.

The religion of David, commenced by a reluctant Samuel on commission from a disgusted Yahweh, shifted Judaism from an idealized shepherd religion to the religion of an urbanized, settled kingdom anxious to establish a centralized religion as a unifying element among its diverse population. Even though it is this greatness to which later Judaism traces its antecedents, it was, archaeology demonstrates -- and Kings and Chronicles and the Prophets confirm -- a failure at least until the Babylonian Exile.

Newer archaeological finds continue to suggest that in real life the religion described in the Old Testament was not the religion practiced by ordinary Jewish people in Old Testament times. Notwithstanding the Biblical insistence on the centralization of Jewish ritual at the Temple in Jerusalem, in fact sacrifices and other rites consistently were practiced in the various high places throughout Israel. Indeed the critical words of the Prophets appear to be more representative of actual practice than the prescriptions of Deuteronomy, Leviticus, and Numbers. The form of the altars and artifacts found suggest a far greater consistency between early Judaism and Canaanite religion than the Biblical authors ever were willing to acknowledge.

Post-Exilic Judaism, rabbinic Judaism -- the Judaism that developed during the Persian Empire and continued into the Greek and Roman Empires -- was again different. The Bible was closed: God had finished speaking. Instead the rabbis spoke. Their interpretations of the Bible clearly responded to the needs and the desires of people cognizant of the Near Eastern mythologies surrounding them, aware of the new religious developments, like Zoroastrianism, that were seeking to respond to the growing knowledge and changes of that day, and anxious to make the adjustments that would keep Jews Jewish -- borrowing from the surrounding culture and fitting it into the older traditions while insisting anew on a monotheistic concept that would mark Judaism as distinct.

Archaeology tells us less perhaps about Christianity, much to the discouragement of a Christianity that assumed archaeologists would offer support for its truth. Instead what has been disclosed is, if anything, antithetical.

The Dead Sea Scrolls, for example, do not describe an early Christian community but rather exemplify the existence of other Jewish sects with some similarities to early Christianity. Fragments from Cave 4 suggest that in this time of political and economic difficulty several Jewish sects around the beginning of the common era were offering

messianism -- the promise that a messiah would come to rescue the people -- or eschatology -- the expectation that this world soon would end -- as a response and a hope. Christianity was only one among others. Of Jesus, archaeology tells us nothing except that his crucifixion, if it occurred, was far from unique: crucifixion was a common punishment for robbery and treason and Jews suffered execution at the hands of the Romans in significant numbers. Archaeologists cannot even settle on where is located the Garden of Gethsemane or Calvary or the tomb where Jesus is supposed to have been buried. While there is no archaeological evidence about the resurrection, literary scholars have found numerous similes to the spring agricultural myths of the surrounding near east, as we saw last week.

Thus scholars searching for the historical Jesus increasingly are forced to acknowledge that Jesus, if he existed, was a Jewish prophet who like so many others was calling for moral reform and around whom was created, after his death, a mythological tale substantially borrowed from earlier, non-Jewish sources.

That religion has failed William Dever readily acknowledges. The prophets were correct in pointing out the failure of religion to impact on the lives of people and on the society in which they lived. And Dever admits his own pessimism that religion is performing any better today; he has studied, he says, too much of the history of ancient Israel to be other than pessimistic.

Dever's pessimism, based as it is upon such historical knowledge as archaeology has revealed, is justified. A religion based on faith has not worked. Given that reality, given that failure, given that appropriate pessimism, is it not time, then, to try a new tack?

Is it not time to create a religion based, not on faith, but on knowledge?

Is it not time to replace falsehood with truth and ignorance with understanding?

Is it not time to reunite science and religion?

Is it not time to take what we have learned, and can learn, and apply that knowledge to the most important part of human life -- to an application of moral values, to the way we live as an individual and to the way we live with each other?

Let us start with a basic underlying reality: people exist as individuals, but people choose to live together in communities.

Ethics is nothing more than that set of behaviors which by assuring the right consideration of each individual preserves the effective functioning of the community. This becomes the foundation of religion.

But religion becomes corrupted by the question of how to correct the behavior of those who deviate from these critical moral norms. The typical answer has been fear. The difficulty is that fear does not work! Centuries of wrongdoing notwithstanding the use of fear ought to be proof enough of that.

What is effective to alter behavior, as Dr. Dean Ornish has demonstrated, are changes that promise to improve the joy of living.

A religion based on knowledge, then, would encourage ethical behavior, not by threat, but by leading people consciously to understand how moral actions increase their own joy of living and everyone's joy of living.

A religion based on knowledge would test decisions on the basis of whether it will enhance the fulfillment of every individual's well-being and thereby the proper functioning of the community.

A religion based on knowledge would not insist that there need be poor any more than once religion insisted there must be slaves.

A religion based on knowledge would not commend sharing with others and then go on to reward greed.

A religion based on knowledge would never ask whose work is more worthy than another's, but would respect each individual's special capacities whatever they might be.

A religion based on knowledge would not call for peace and then justify killing because we have faith that God is on our side.

A religion based on knowledge would not condemn the crucifixion of one man and then promote capital punishment for others.

A religion based on knowledge would join with science, not separate from it, joyously accepting the truth it has found while admitting it does not know what science has not yet discovered.

Only when we are ready to replace a religion of faith with a religion of knowledge shall humanity achieve the resurrection of religion. Then, and only then, shall the prophetic call for justice, peace, and love replace a faith of fear and doom and hopelessness. Then, and only then, will people be able to live their religion, for it will be a religion that can be understood, a religion that can be know, a religion that can be felt, a religion worthy of belief and a religion worthy of living.

This page is copyright © 1996, Robert Edward Greene; Commercial Duplication Prohibited. Non-commercial reproduction with attribution is permitted; prior notice would be appreciated.