



National Museum of Natural History • Smithsonian Institution

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20560 • TEL. 202-381-5961

THE BIBLE AS HISTORY

The Smithsonian's Department of Anthropology has received numerous inquiries in recent years regarding the historicity of the Bible in general, and the Biblical account of Noah's flood in particular. The following statement has been prepared to answer these questions:

Most Biblical scholars and Near Eastern archeologists and historians regard the Biblical story of the flood and Noah's ark as a story handed down by oral tradition. This story has obvious relationships with the Mesopotamian account of a flood found in the Epic of Gilgamesh. The Biblical and Mesopotamian accounts differ in important details--the respective boats are of different sizes and shapes, the Biblical boat lands on Mount Ararat, the Mesopotamian boat lands on Mount Nisir--and both stories may go back to a still earlier common source which remains unknown to us today.

Many people ask if the Biblical flood actually took place, i.e. a flood which literally covered the entire earth and wiped out all living things except those which managed to board the ark? The occurrence of a flood story in both the Bible and the Epic of Gilgamesh, as well as in other folk traditions, does hint that there may have been enormous flooding of river valleys in a far distant time. However, thus far, after literally hundreds of archeological excavations at different places in the Near East, no all-encompassing flood stratum has ever been found. During the 1920's, Sir Leonard Woolley found a six foot thick flood layer at Ur with evidence of earlier occupations below the flood layer and later occupations above it. We now know that this flood stratum was deposited by a change in the course of the Euphrates River which meandered rather widely over the flood plain much as the Mississippi River once did before flood control measures were taken. Other sites near Ur display no such evidence of a flood stratum. Another difficulty in verifying the Biblical story is that the identification of the particular mountain now known as Ararat goes back to more than a few hundred years and, in fact, we have no idea where an ancient Mount Ararat might have been located. In addition, there is no hard evidence of an early ship resting on top of any mountain anywhere in the Near East.

In short, it is impossible to verify the actual events recorded in the Biblical account of the flood. On the other hand, much of the Bible,

in particular the historical books of the Old Testament, are as accurate historical documents as any that we have from antiquity and are in fact more accurate than many of the Egyptian, Mesopotamian, or Greek histories. These Biblical records can be and are used as are other ancient documents in archeological work. For the most part, historical events described took place and the peoples cited really existed. This is not to say that the names of all peoples and places mentioned can be identified today, or that every event as reported in the historical books happened exactly as stated; there are conflicts between archeological evidence and historical reports that may result from a lack of information on our part or from misunderstandings or mistakes by the ancient writers. However, in the stories found in the Book of Genesis, Chapters 1-12, such as the flood story, the record is quite different: the time period under consideration is much more ancient. The factual bases of the stories are hidden from our view archeologically. The stories remain a part of folk traditions, and were included in the Bible to illustrate and explain theological ideas such as: Where did man come from? If man is created by God (who is perfect and good), how did man's evil come to be? If we are all related as children of God, why do we speak different languages? It must be remembered that the Bible is primarily a book of religion, a guide to faith. It was not a book of history, poetry, economics, or science. It contains all sorts of literary genre, which are used to teach about the relationship between God and Man. Even biblical history is edited history: events were chosen to illustrate the central theme of the Bible. The Biblical writers did not pretend they were giving a complete history; instead they constantly refer us to other sources for full historical details, sources such as "The Annals of the Kings of Judah (or Israel). It is therefore not possible to try to "prove" the Bible by means of checking its historical or scientific accuracy. The only "proof" to which it can be subjected is this: Does it correctly portray the God-Man relationship? In the best analysis, the Bible is a religious book, not an historical document.

For further reading on the Bible as History, the following books may be consulted:

The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible
(Abingdon Press, 1962)

The Flood and Noah's Ark by Andre Parrot (Studies
in Biblical Archeology No. 1, The Philosophical
Library, New York, 1955).

Biblical archeology by Earnest G. Wright (The
Westminster Press, 2nd ed., 1963)

The Bible as History by Werner Keller
(W. Morrow, 1956)

GILBERT M. GROSVENOR
PRESIDENT
OWEN R. ANDERSON
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT
ALFRED J. HAYRE
VICE PRESIDENT AND TREASURER
EDWIN W. SNIDER
SECRETARY

WILBUR E. GARRETT
EDITOR
ROBERT L. BREEDEN
VICE PRESIDENT, PUBLICATIONS

National Geographic Society

WASHINGTON, D. C. 20036

MELVIN M. PAYNE
CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD
ROBERT E. DOYLE
VICE CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD
LLOYD H. ELLIOTT
VICE CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD
THOMAS W. MCKNEW
ADVISORY CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD

December 23, 1982

Mr. Virgil Jennings
Route 1, Box 105
Shoshone, ID 83352

Dear Mr. Jennings:

We appreciate the interest that prompted you to write the National Geographic Society.

I referred your inquiry to Dr. George Stuart, the staff archaeologist of the National Geographic Society. He informed me that neither the Society nor any other institution of equal prestige has ever used the Book of Mormon in locating archaeological sites. Although many Mormon sources claim that the Book of Mormon has been substantiated by archaeological findings, this claim has not been verified scientifically.

I trust this will prove helpful, Mr. Jennings. It was a pleasure to hear from you.

Sincerely yours,

Richard J. Arnold

Richard J. Arnold
Research Correspondence

RJA:rd



Information From the

SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

WASHINGTON, D. C. 20560

STATEMENT REGARDING THE BOOK OF MORMON

1. The Smithsonian Institution has never used the Book of Mormon in any way as a scientific guide. Smithsonian archeologists see no direct connection between the archeology of the New World and the subject matter of the book.

2. The physical type of the American Indian is basically Mongoloid, being most closely related to that of the peoples of eastern, central, and northeastern Asia. Archeological evidence indicates that the ancestors of the present Indians came into the New World--probably over a land bridge known to have existed in the Bering Strait region during the last Ice Age--in a continuing series of small migrations beginning from about 25,000 to 30,000 years ago.

3. Present evidence indicates that the first people to reach this continent from the East were the Norsemen who arrived in the northeastern part of North America around A.D. 1000. There is nothing to show that they reached Mexico or Central America.

4. One of the main lines of evidence supporting the scientific finding that contacts with Old World civilizations, if indeed they occurred at all, were of very little significance for the development of American Indian civilizations, is the fact that none of the principal Old World domesticated food plants or animals (except the dog) occurred in the New World in pre-Columbian times. American Indians had no wheat, barley, oats, millet, rice, cattle, pigs, chickens, horses, donkeys, camels, etc., before 1492. The domesticated dogs of the Indians accompanied their ancestors from northwestern Asia. Domesticated sweet potatoes occurred in both hemispheres, but probably originated in the New World and spread from there into the Pacific.

SIL-76

Summer 1979

5. Iron, steel, glass, and silk were not used in the New World before 1492 (except for occasional use of unsmelted meteoric iron). Nuggets of native copper were used in various locations in pre-Columbian times, but true metallurgy was limited to southern Mexico and the Andean region, where its occurrence in late pre-historic times involved gold, silver, copper, and their alloys, but not iron.

6. There is a possibility that the spread of cultural traits across the Pacific to Mesoamerica and the northwestern coast of South America began several hundred years before the Christian era. However, any such inter-hemispheric contacts appear to have been the results of accidental voyages originating in eastern and southern Asia. It is by no means certain that even such contacts occurred; certainly there were no contacts with the ancient Egyptians, Hebrews, or other peoples of Western Asia and the Near East.

7. No reputable Egyptologist or other specialist on Old World archeology, and no expert on New World prehistory, has discovered or confirmed any relationship between archeological remains in Mexico and archeological remains in Egypt.

8. Reports of findings of ancient Egyptian, Hebrew, and other Old World writings in the New World in pre-Columbian contexts have frequently appeared in newspapers, magazines, and sensational books. None of these claims has stood up to examination by reputable scholars. No inscriptions using Old World forms of writing have been shown to have occurred in any part of the Americas before 1492.

9. There are copies of the Book of Mormon in the library of the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution.