

Lesson #1A - Historical Reliability 2019

Reading the Bible can be overwhelming or confusing. Some of it seems contradictory; other parts do not make sense. Often there are more questions than answers. In this overview, the goal is to take complex, confusing ideas and make them logical and reasonable as well as relevant. We will look at one book per lesson in order to see how the books, the people and the stories fit together. However, before we study the books, we need a background about the Bible itself. I want to begin with the historical point of view. Is the Bible reliable when it talks about events of the past? Is it historically reliable?

Some people believe it is reliable. Some have doubts while others are sure it is not reliable. Personally, I believe the Bible is the word of God. Therefore, I believe it is reliable.

But this lesson is not about my belief or opinion. It is about facts. So the question is: how can we know events are facts if they happened hundreds or thousands of years ago? For example, in our universities today, professors teach ancient history as facts. In military schools, professors describe ancient wars as facts.

How do they know they are facts? There are no originals in the handwriting of the author. There are only copies. How do scholars know these copies are accurate? How do they know the details are accurate? Because this is so important, a professor of military history developed 3 tests to find out if an ancient writing is historically accurate.

(Sanders-Introduction to Research in English Literary History)

TEST #1 involves the **copies** -

How many copies do we have?

When were they made?

TEST #2 involves the **author** - When the author is writing about events...

Is he writing as an **eyewitness**?

Is he writing **from eyewitness accounts**?

TEST #3 involves **others** -

Are there **other sources** that confirm what the author says?

Because these tests are dealing only with facts, when they are applied to secular history, scholars can say with certainty, *This author is giving details that are historically accurate*. Since the Bible deals with ancient history, we are going to apply these same tests so we also can say, *The details are historically accurate*.

TEST #1 deals with **copies**.

Since we are talking about books before the time of the printing press, all *copies* are handwritten. This is why they are called manuscripts. *Manual*, meaning *hand* and *script* meaning *written*. *Manuscript* - *handwritten*. These manuscripts can be in the original language of Hebrew or Greek, or one of the early translations such as Aramaic or Latin. Our ability to **date** a manuscript is based on 7 factors:

The material it is written on, the size and form of the letters, whether it has punctuation, how the text is divided, the kind of ornamentation, the color of ink and finally, the texture and color of the parchment.

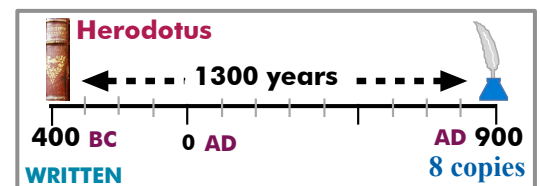
It is an exact science based on fact.

Thinking of the copies, we will take 2 examples of ancient history in the secular world and then compare them with New Testament copies.

The *father of history* was a Greek man named **Herodotus**.

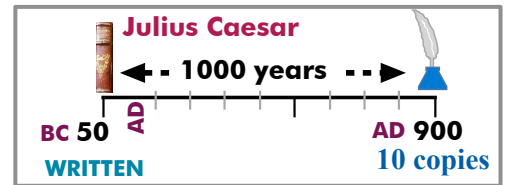
In the 400's BC, he wrote a book entitled *History*. Since that was 2500 years ago, there is no original. But we have 8 copies. The oldest copy is from c. 900 AD.

This means there is a time gap of 1300 years from the original writing in 400 BC - to the oldest or first copy we have today from 900 AD.



Another example is **Julius Caesar** - one of the famous Roman generals and leaders.

In the 50's BC, he wrote the book *Gallic Wars*. Again, there is no original, but we have 10 copies. The first or oldest copy is dated c. 900 AD. So there is a time gap of almost 1000 years between the original and the oldest copy available.



In both cases, the secular world considers itself fortunate to have this many copies. Scholars quote these books as reliable history when they discuss the wars of the past.

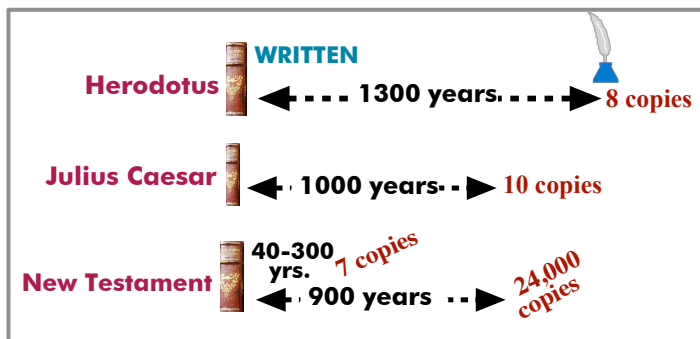
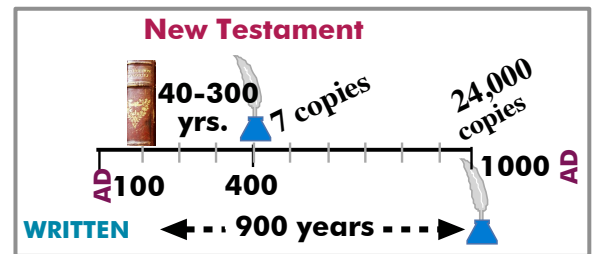
So what about our **New Testament** that was written 100 years after *Gallic Wars*. How does it compare?

As with the others, there are no originals - only copies. But we do not have just 8 or 10 copies; we have over 24,000 copies. Now this is referring only to handwritten copies, before the days of the printing press. They only go to about 1000 A.D. 5,300 Greek copies, 10,000 Latin Vulgate copies and over 9,300 copies in other early versions.

What about the time gap?

A part of John's gospel is the oldest copy in existence today. John wrote the original in the 90's AD. The copy is in England, called the **Ryland Manuscript**. (Manchester, Ryland Museum). It is dated c. 130 AD. So the time gap between the original and this copy is only 40 years

However, the Ryland Manuscript is just a fragment - a small portion of one chapter. The next oldest copy is called the **Chester Beatty Papyri**. (Dublin, Ireland) It includes almost all of the New Testament. It is dated 200 AD - meaning there is 100 - 150 yr. time gap. There are 5 more copies that contain the New Testament or portions of it that are dated between 2 - 400 AD.



The secular world has 8-10 copies of historical writings that are 1000 or more years removed from the original. Scholars believe they are reliable because of the many copies.

Certainly then the New Testament should be accepted as reliable when there are 24,000 handwritten copies. Seven of them are only 40 to 300 years from the original writing.

Of all ancient literature, only the New Testament has so many copies for comparison. The next highest number is Homer's book called the *Iliad*. It was written c. 750 BC. There are 643 copies.

These numbers are important because it is a way to check if it is an accurate copy. The greater number of copies, the greater chance there is to compare and find differences. If you have 10 copies, 8 of which say exactly the same thing and 2 have some differences, the assumption is that the 8 are correct and the 2 are in error. But if 5 copies say one thing and 5 say something else, there is doubt about which are the correct ones.

With 643 copies of the *Iliad*, we would expect a lot of differences. But scholars found only 5% of the text was in doubt. With 24,000 copies of the New Testament there is an even greater possibility of differences. But when scholars compared them, only 1/2 of 1% was in doubt.

So if we are honest, we have to say that **TEST #1** in regards to the New Testament far surpasses any secular literature in:

- Number of copies
- Closeness of the copies to the time of the original
- Agreement between copies.

TEST #1 - number of copies

		% IN DOUBT
Homer - <i>Iliad</i> (750 BC)	643 copies	5%
New Testament (45-95 AD)	24,000 copies	1/2 of 1%

TEST #2 in secular history is about the **author**.

Is he writing either as an eyewitness, or from eyewitness accounts.

How close is he geographically? Writing from 2000 miles away could limit an author's accuracy.

Let's take 2 examples: Herodotus and Julius Caesar. Both wrote about events of their lifetime.

According to the encyclopedia *University 1 Volume Encyclopedia*, Herodotus is valued for his information on the Persian Wars because he interviewed survivors of those wars.

Secular history books say, *Gallic Wars by Julius Caesar is a most effective piece of factual reporting*. They say this because as a general of the Roman army, Julius Caesar is writing about what he experienced.

So what about the New Testament? Let's take 3 examples, **Luke**, **John** and **Peter**.

First of all, **LUKE**, the author of the 3rd gospel.

He was a Greek historian and medical doctor. He was not an apostle nor even Jewish. He did not know Jesus personally, never saw Him, and in fact, was not in the land of Israel during the time of Jesus.

Luke knows that to be credible, he must explain how he got his information. He writes his explanation, not in the common, koiné Greek but in classical Greek. He does this to show he is educated and qualified to be an historian. He says in Luke 1:1 (TEV/NIV)

*Many people have done their best to write a report of the things that have taken place among us. They wrote what we have been told by those who saw these things from the beginning ... Because, I carefully studied all these matters from their beginning, I thought it would be good to write an orderly account ...so you may know the **certainty** of the things you have been taught.*

Luke traveled to Israel to interview people who were eyewitnesses. He must have interviewed one of the shepherds. We know he interviewed Mary because several times he tells us what she was thinking.

JOHN the apostle writes in 1 John 1:3, *What we have seen and heard we announce to you.*

The apostle **PETER**

He had seen Jesus in the transfiguration - in the glory of His deity. Peter loved to describe this to others. In his book of 2 Peter 1:16 he says, *We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty.*

In Acts 2:22, when Peter was preaching to Jewish leaders who had rejected Jesus, he said, *Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you thru Him **as you yourselves know**.*

The Jewish leaders were eyewitnesses of what Jesus said and did. Years later, if the apostles had written anything that was not accurate, these leaders would have been the first to point it out. But they knew that what the apostles wrote was true. It is proof the gospel records are accurate.

The New Testament compares with secular literature in **test #2**. It is based on eyewitness accounts of the **author** or his sources.

TEST #3 asks if **other sources** confirm what the author says.

In **secular** writings, later authors review what historians said and then confirm it, *yes, this really did happen just like the author said.*

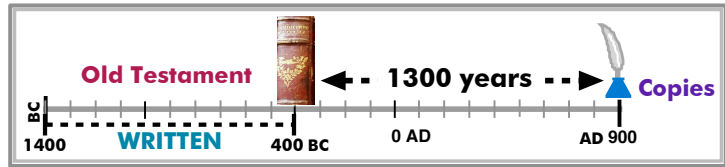
The same is true for the New Testament. Young people who studied under the apostles lived into the 2nd century. They quoted and confirmed the facts for early church leaders. These leaders then wrote down what was told them.

Amazingly, if all the Bibles of today were destroyed and the 24,000 early copies of the New Testament were destroyed, we still would have the complete New Testament from the quotations of the early church leaders. (except for 11 verses)

In summary, the secular world has given 3 tests to find out the accuracy of the copies and reliability of ancient history. When we apply them to the New Testament, we find it is every bit as accurate and reliable as other historical writing.

But what about the **Old Testament**? It is dealing with a much earlier time period.

The Old Testament was written in the original from 1400 to 400 BC. Obviously none of the original has survived. For a long time the oldest copy of the Old Testament was c. 900 AD. This means there was a time gap of 1300 years between the original and the oldest copy that we had today. That is the same amount of time as the writings of Herodotus.

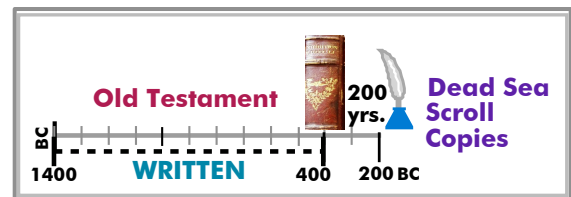


The secular world has accepted the writing of Herodotus as history, but has not wanted to accept the Old Testament as history. Between AD 1750 and 1940 critics wrote book after book saying the Old Testament was not accurate nor reliable. But then in 1947 something happened - the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls - over 800 of them.

700 of the scrolls have nothing to do with the Bible. They are the beliefs of the people who lived there.

The Essenes were Jewish people who rejected their Jewish faith and accepted ideas that were considered heresy. They were kicked out of the Jewish communities and lived in isolation in the desert. Because their beliefs were so unique, they wrote them down in great detail. Almost 700 scrolls deal with these beliefs. However they also had copies of Old Testament books because of their Jewish culture.

Amazingly, 127 of the Dead Sea scrolls are copies of Old Testament books and commentaries about them. They are dated c. 200 BC. For Bible scholars, this discovery of the scrolls changed everything. Instead of a 1300-year gap between the original and the oldest copies, now it was down to just a few hundred years.



The big question was how much difference would there be between the Dead Sea scrolls of 200 BC and the later texts of 900 AD. Since all copies were made by hand, it would be natural to expect errors and differences.

The most qualified scholars decided to make the test on the Dead Sea scroll of Isaiah, dated 125 BC. They would compare it with the Isaiah text of 916 AD. Bible critics were excited. They assumed they would be able to show the Bible was full of errors. After 1000 years of copying by hand, the text was sure to be completely different and now they could prove it.

By 1950 the study was finished. One of the scholars said,

The Isaiah scroll (from 125 BC) proved to be word for word identical with our standard Hebrew Bible (916 AD) in more than 95% of the text. The 5% of variation consisted chiefly of obvious slips of the pen and variations in spelling. (Gleason Archer, degrees from Harvard, Princeton; law degree; known for ability with languages)

Please notice; the 5% of variations only involves obvious typos and alternate spellings, neither of which changes the meaning of the text. The critics were wrong. Our Bible text is not full of errors.

For us, the greatest value of the Dead Sea Scrolls is proof the Old Testament, as we have it today, is accurate and reliable.

But how was it possible to have such accuracy? Everyone knows there are errors and changes when making copies by hand over a long period of time.

Under ordinary circumstances this accuracy would not be possible. But the Jews' attitude towards their sacred writings was not ordinary. From the days of Moses, the Jews always had a professional group of men who were responsible for making copies. From 1300 BC to 100 AD they were called **Scribes**. They went to great lengths to protect the accuracy, because they believed these books were sacred.

From 100 - 500 AD Jewish scribes made copies not only of their sacred writings, but also the commentaries that explained them. The combination of Old Testament books and the commentaries is called the Talmud. So those who copied them were called **Talmudists**. They knew that in the past, there were occasional typos or slips of the pen. So they developed 17 rules to make sure they had exact copies from this point onward.

After new copies were made, the old leather copies were used as reading books in the schools. When they were no longer readable, they were burned or buried. This is why there are not as many old copies of the Old Testament. The Jews believed their new copies were more accurate.

From 500 - 900 AD the scribes became known as the **Massorites**. They developed even more ways to check the accuracy of their copies.

They would look at the old copy of a book and count the number of times each letter of the alphabet occurred in the book and then write it down. How many A's in the book, how many B's, how many C's. They would figure out the middle word in the book as well as the middle letter. Then they would begin making a new copy of that book. When it was finished they would go thru and count each letter of the alphabet - how many times it occurred in the book - the letter A, the letter B.

They would compare that number with the number in the old copy. They counted all the words to find the middle word and middle letter in the new copy to see if it agreed with the old copy. If there were just 3 differences they had to burn the new copy and start all over again.

Today, we have a name for this - *obsessive, compulsive*. But the Jews were neither obsessive nor compulsive. They believed it was God's message to them and they did not want to change what God had said. They were willing to go to any extreme to protect it. This is why in 1000 years of hand-made copies, the text remained accurate.



With this information, let's check out the Old Testament for its historical accuracy, using the 3 tests of reliability.

TEST #1 - the number of copies,

The Old Testament does not have as many copies as we have for the New Testament. Yet the number is still higher than for secular writings. We have at least one thousand complete or partial manuscripts of the Old Testament. The time between the original and the earliest copy is only a few hundred years. Even with copies that have a time gap of 1000 years, there is no significant difference between the copies.

TEST #2 - Were the authors eyewitnesses to the events they described?

Yes. The Old Testament authors said they were writing about events in their generation. They described their own lives as well as the lives of their leaders. The one exception is Moses writing the book of Genesis. He got his information from the one eyewitness who was present for everything – God the Holy Spirit. Genesis 1:2 “And the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.”

TEST #3 - Can the Old Testament be confirmed from other sources?

During the 17 and 1800's AD, critics said no. They pointed out that names and places mentioned in the Bible had never been found in other sources. But then archeology made more and more discoveries.

Let's consider 3 areas in the Old Testament that have come under heavy criticism. **Moses, Genesis** and **Daniel**.

First in regards to **Moses**.

For 200 years the skeptics said Moses could not possibly have written the first 5 books of the Old Testament. They said the laws in those books were too detailed and organized for the time period around 1400 BC. The people were not that intellectually advanced or capable. The laws had to be written much later in history by other authors. So let's see what archeology has found. (ME:McDowell pp. 63-66)

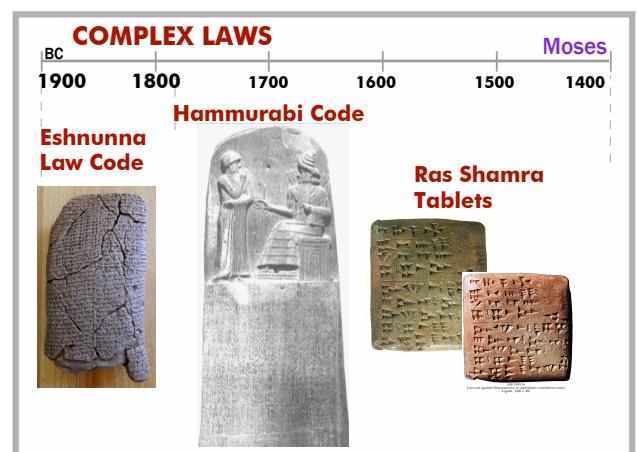
The **Ras Shamra Tablets** were found in Syria. (1928). They described sacrificial and religious laws of the Canaanites, written at the time of Moses, around 1400 BC.

In 1901 a 7 ½ foot black stone was found in Iran (Susa). On it were 282 laws written in 16 columns. It was the **Hammurabi Code** - a

detailed and organized set of laws written in the 1700's BC, 300 years **before** the time of Moses.

The **Laws of Eshnunna** were found in Iraq (1945). On 2 of the tablets were organized laws from old Babylon, written in 1900 BC - 200 years before Hammurabi and more than 500 years before Moses.

Archeology shows there were complex, organized laws hundreds of years before Moses.



Critics also said Moses was not the author because there was no developed writing in his day. But now, according to a leading archeologist (Albright), writing was well known thruout the Middle East. Five hundred years before Moses, 5 written languages were in use. (Egyptian, Akkadian, Phoenician, Sinian and Ugaritic).

One example is the hundreds of Ras Shamra Tablets that were a library in Syria. They were written in the time of Moses, in the Ugaretic language. They were filled with stories, poetry and dictionaries in four languages. (ME pp. 68-69; RD pp. 98-104). That hardly sounds like a society unable to read or write.

Archeology proves the critics wrong in regards to **Moses**. Hundreds of years before Moses, society had writing; society had detailed, organized laws.

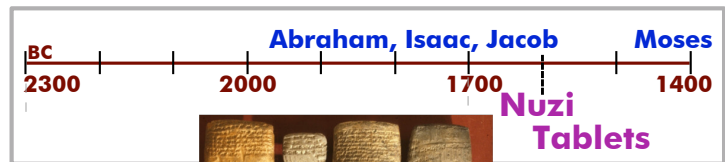
In regards to the book of **Genesis**, critics said the stories were myth and legend. There was no historical basis because most of the names and places were not mentioned in other history. The social and legal customs of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were not mentioned in other sources. But since 1925, archeology has made more and more discoveries.

First the **Nuzi Tablets**. Some 4000 tablets were found in Iraq (between 1925-31 near Nineveh)

They were written c. 1600 BC, describing the life and culture of that time. They tell about selling a birthright - remember Esau in the book of Genesis?

The Nuzi tablets say that if a wife cannot give her husband a son, he can marry her female slave.

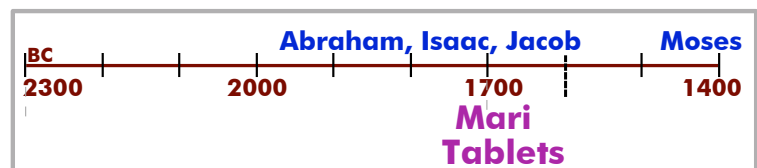
Remember Abraham, Sarah and Hagar? The Nuzi tablets show that the culture of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph fit the time period of 2000 to 1500 BC.



The **Mari Tablets** were found in Iraq in 1933. 20,000 tablets give details of life in the 1700's BC.



A Mari Tablet

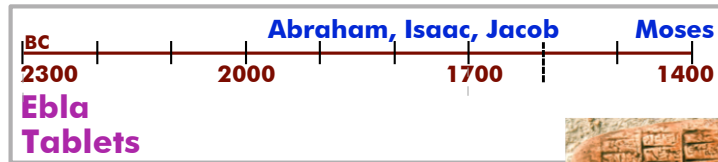


This again proves that writing was developed hundreds of years before Moses. These Mari tablets talk about the towns of Nahor and Haran, towns mentioned in the book of Genesis. Nahor was Abraham's brother. He and his family moved to the city of Haran.

The Mari Tablets give rules for selling property - for example, you could not buy a small area, but had to buy acreage around it. Genesis tells about Abraham, who wanted to buy a cave under an oak tree to bury his wife. The owners said he had to buy the land around it as well.

So both the **Nuzi** and **Mari** Tablets confirm the social customs in the book of Genesis, showing they are historically accurate.

The **Ebla Tablets** were discovered in Syria (from 1964-74). This was a library of some 16,000 tablets describing life c. 2300 BC



They prove again, there was both writing and laws in Syria 900 years before Moses and even 300 years before Abraham. These tablets mention the 5 cities of the Plain including Sodom and Gomorra. In fact they mention the 5 cities in the exact order as found in the book of Genesis.



4500 year old Ebla tablets

The tablets include bilingual dictionaries and a list of 70 previously unknown animals. They name 260 ancient cities, historians did not know about. Some of them were towns mentioned in Genesis that critics said never existed.

After scholars had done an extensive study of these tablets, TIME magazine (September 21, 1981) did a cover story on them.

Included in the article were the following statements.

Many liberal Bible scholars do not treat Abraham as an historical figure. Their view is that the stories about Abraham and the other Patriarchs must have been written more than 1,000 years later than the events they purport to describe.

Now in the area of the world that produced the Bible, Ebla has established that sophisticated and extensive written culture existed well before Moses and even Abraham, as early as 2500 BC. One Bible scholar now says, (Fr. Dahood, an American Jesuit of Rome's Pontifical Biblical Institute) 'After Ebla, we have got to take the Bible much more seriously as an historical document. The people who wrote those books had a long literary tradition behind them.'

Archeology has confirmed the historical accuracy of both Moses and Genesis.

Another Old Testament book that has been attacked is **Daniel**. According to history, Nabónidus was the last king of the Babylonian empire. The Bible says Belshazzar was the last king. So the critics said this is proof the Bible is full of errors. History has no record of the name Belshazzar. Can you guess what happened?

Archeologists found a prayer inscribed on a building and on a cylinder in Babylon.

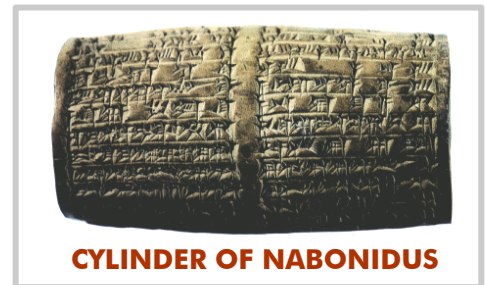
It was a prayer by Nabónidus for his first-born son (Bible in British Museum).

It reads,

Life for long days give as a gift to me; and as for Bel-shar-usur, my first born, the offspring of my body, may the reverence for thy great godhead be placed in his heart. May he not contract sin. May he be sated with the fullness of life.
(McDowell:D:63)

(Notice, this is a prayer for Belshazzar. Prayers inscribed on buildings were only for the reigning king.)

This inscription says Belshazzar is the first-born son of Nabónidus.



CYLINDER OF NABONIDUS

Another archeologist discovered a poem written by the Persians about Nabónidus. It is known as the Persian Verse Account.

“He (Nabonidus) put the eldest, his firstborn, in charge of a camp.
The troops of the land he sent with him.
He freed his hand; **he entrusted the kingship to him**,
while he himself set out on a distant campaign...
The forces of Akkad advanced with him.
Towards Teman, in Amurru, he set his face.”

So archeology tells us Nabonidus, the last king of Babylon, entrusted the kingship to his first born son and the son's name was Belshazzar. The night Babylon was conquered, it was Belshazzar who was the acting king. The Bible once again is shown to be accurate in its history.

One archaeologist has said: ... *Discovery after discovery has established the accuracy of details and has brought increased recognition ... of the Bible **as a source of history*** W. F. Albright

Archaeology is based on science and facts. However we need to be careful. It can never prove the Bible is truth from God or the Word of God. But archeology **can** prove that what the author said is **HISTORICALLY** reliable. It has proven that the critics of Moses, Genesis and Daniel have been wrong.

Does it take faith to believe the Bible? Absolutely it does. But it is not a blind faith - a leap into the dark. It is a faith based on facts and evidence from the copies, the authors and from the other sources. The Bible **IS** worthy of our faith and of our trust.