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Pyramid Codes, Playacting, and Veiled Israelite Histories

Pre-Critical Biblical Interpretation and Victorian Archaeology

Biblical archaeology is often thought to have emerged as a positivist hybrid of Victorian Near Eastern studies and the new critical approach to biblical studies. When the results of this emerging field were applied to biblical studies, rather than solely helping focus critical approaches along historical lines, the newly discovered Near Eastern materials opened up interpretation beyond the academy. The enterprise gave pre-critical biblical studies a new life for now there were different and charismatic sources. This paper examines some of the new pre-critical readings of the Bible inspired by archaeology offered by artists, playwrights, showmen, and new religious leaders.

On June 22, 1865, the Archbishop of York, chairing a meeting to bring the Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF) into existence, made the following pronouncement on the quasi-secular goals of the new organization:

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> we are about to-day to embody ourselves into a society, to be called the Palestine Exploration Fund, having this object in view —the exploration of the Holy Land; but in order to bind together persons differing in important points of opinion, and in order to work together for this one common object, we mean to lay down and vigorously adhere to this principle—that our object is strictly an inductive inquiry. We are not to be a religious society; we are not about to launch into any controversy; we are about to apply the rules of science, which are so well understood by us in other branches, to an investigation into the facts concerning the Holy Land.[1]

Here is a claim, from a religious authority of great stature, that the PEF (which would develop into one of the most important facilitators of British archaeology in the Near East) would not operate from any one denominational perspective but would in fact seek to use "science" to identify the "facts" about the Holy Land. A few moments later, the Bishop of London, also present at the inauguration of the PEF explained what he saw as the true value of biblical archaeology. To a rousing response of "hear hear" from the audience, the Bishop described "exegetical theology" as the "theology of this age" and that "nothing is so likely to strengthen a man's faith as an intimate acquaintance with the scenes in which the great events occurred on which our teaching depends." Here then, archaeological exploration was framed as a method of providing a material and geographic context for scripture. There was a confidence, apparent in these opening statements and others from that inaugural meeting, that just as had been the case with Austen Henry Layard's excavations of Assyrian cities in the 1840s, the ground of Palestine was filled with biblical treasure waiting to be discovered.

Biblical archaeology seemed to offer the promise of a scientific approach to verifying or rejecting scriptural historicity. In the twenty-first century, despite methodological concerns about using arguments based on materiality to verify arguments based on literature, archaeologists who work in Israel continue to use excavations to debate biblical history. As of 2016, debates about the historicity of the United Monarchy have been in vogue for about 20 years, having replaced earlier debates about the historicity of the conquest

[1] "Report of the Proceedings at a Public Meeting Held in the Willis's Rooms, St James's, on Friday 22 June 1865." Palestine Exploration Fund Proceedings and Notes. Palestine Exploration Fund, London.

and even earlier attempts to find an archaeological exodus.[2] Yet these kinds of approaches were not part of the initial enactment of biblical archaeology and it is only in retrospect that nineteenth-century biblical archaeology can be viewed in this light.[3] For there is little hint in Victorian scholarship that, beyond the inconsistent treatment of the primeval history of Gen 1–11, archaeology would unearth a negative valuation of the history written in the Bible. Finds like the Babylonian flood tablet, the Moabite Stone, and the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III, if anything, seemed to confirm the historicity of the Bible in a surprising fashion. Archaeology offered the promise of positive (and positivist) proof of scripture. It had the potential to confirm faith in an age when it was potentially undermined by critical biblical scholarship, or, conversely, to lead to radical reimaginings of biblical history that contradicted established authority. The seemingly scientific approaches of archaeology ironically facilitated the development of new pre-critical methods of re-reading the Bible and made these new types of readings available to a wider group of interpreters, including painters, playwrights, traveling showmen, amateur scholars, and the leaders of new religious movements.

Early Archaeology and Critical Biblical Scholarship

In the late-nineteenth century, archaeology was itself still a pre-professional discipline, still in a pre-critical stage. It was not really until the early twentieth century that anything of a methodological consensus in archaeology had been established so it should not be surprising that there was a lack of sophisticated critical theory regarding appropriate, meaningful, or scientific uses of the Bible within the discipline. Rather than encouraging critical readings of the Bible, archaeology seemed to offer new interpretive opportunities for pre-critical readings of the Bible, divorced from academic biblical studies but rooted in scientific studies nonetheless. Here was an alternative exegetical strategy. Rather than potentially subversive readings that treated the author-

[2] For introductions to the archaeological debate on the historicity of the United Monarchy, see: Walter Dietrich, *The Early Monarchy in Israel: The Tenth Century* BCE, trans. Joachim Vette, Biblical Encyclopedia 3 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007); Israel Finkelstein, Amihai Mazar, and Brian Schmidt, eds., *The Quest for the Historical Israel: Debating Archaeology and the History of Israel*, Archaeology and Biblical Studies 17 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007).

[3] For an overview of the history of biblical archaeology, see: Neil Silberman, *Digging for God and Country: Exploration, Archeology, and the Secret Struggle for the Holy Land 1799–1917* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982).

ship of the biblical text as complex and historically grounded, archaeology provided seemingly objective material facts in which to situate biblical narratives to better make sense of obscure biblical customs. As Daniel Martin Varisco and others have noted, archaeology was readily applied to the types of literalist biblical readings that were not acceptable in critical biblical studies.[4] Apart from inscriptional evidence, the materiality that archaeology brought to the surface was relatively ambiguous. Archaeological discoveries allowed for flexible interpretation, opening up interpretation to non-specialists rather than focussing it or limiting it. The materiality offered what felt like proof of scripture's reliability within an academic environment that threatened to call that reliability into question. Archaeology's invocation as a means of checking the factual truth of the Bible, as practiced in Victorian times, made the Bible seem less alien by explaining unusual-seeming practices and harmonizing biblical stories with the new experiences of globalization. There might be elements of the Bible that seemed odd but this was shown to be proof of its historical accuracy.

Not all who were involved in these early archaeological enterprises were so enthusiastic about proving the Bible true. Austen Henry Layard, who by 1865 was a politician and celebrity long retired from archaeology after his well publicized excavations of the Mesopotamian city Nimrud, was also at the meeting to found the PEF. At that gathering he argued for archaeology's value for the working man within the context of the improvement culture of the Victorian era, where the upper classes attempted to replace the lower class's pub visits with educational activities. Layard's association of his discoveries with the Bible was rooted in a more cynical approach to public outreach. His publisher John Murray had asked him to emphasize the biblical relevance of his discoveries in an abridged version of his best-selling book aimed at American audiences. This cynicism is even more apparent in the advice given to Layard by Sir Charles Alison, the Oriental Secretary at Britain's Embassy in Constantinople, that he should "fish up old legends and anecdotes, and if you can by any means humbug people into the belief that you have established any points in the Bible, you are a made man."[5] Here then was an explicit

[4] Daniel Martin Varisco, "The Archaeologist's Spade and the Apologist's Stacked Deck: The Near East Through Conservative Christian Bibliolatry," in *The United States and the Middle East: Cultural Encounters*, ed. Abbas Amanat and Magnus T. Bernhardsson (New Haven: YCIAS Working Paper Series, 2002, 2002), 57–116.

[5] Shawn Malley, "Austen Henry Layard and the Periodical Press: Middle Eastern Archaeology and the Excavation of Cultural Identity in Mid-Nineteenth Century Britain," *Victorian Review* 22, no. 2 (1996): 157–58.

attempt to encourage the public to think about the Bible in relation to new archaeological discoveries.

Archaeology allowed a new means for non-academic interpreters to engage with the Bible, and stabilize the ancient text as a normative framework for understanding their own lives. People could see that in the context of what was thought to be known of the Ottoman East, biblical stories were plausible and meaningful. These approaches were easily co-opted by other, non-archaeologists who were inspired by archaeological explorations. On the symbolic or allegorical level, artists merged archaeological *veritas* with typological interpretation. On a literal level, some interpreted archaeological remains as material manifestations of God's message, the physical correlate of the biblical text. Archaeological material culture could be used to predict the future (especially the rapture) and when integrated with biblical studies, and non-narrative records of the major events of the Bible (like the exodus) were thought by some to be literally encoded into ancient bricks. Even though the increased tourist access to Palestine threatened to make the Bible seem more "oriental" than English (when travelers encountered "difference" in their journeys), archaeology provided tools for pre-critical readers to claim the book as their own.

Hans Frei's identification of pre-critical approaches to reading the Bible can be usefully applied to understand how archaeological explorations inspired people to think about the Bible. Three main elements that Frei identifies are readily apparent in archaeologically-inspired interpretation in the nineteenth century: a presumed historicity of the events recounted in the text; the use of figuration or typology to understand the meaningfulness of historical events in later contexts; and readings of historically-specific events that could reflect the experiences of a reader from any era.[6] As Frei shows in his book, these approaches to biblical narrative were marginalized in the academic study of the Bible throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As shall be explored here, however, archaeological interpretation of the Bible allowed non-professional Biblicists the opportunity to perpetuate these earlier types of readings. Archaeology and a greater understanding of ancient Near Eastern context allowed scholars to treat the Bible in an almost Rabbinic fashion, filling in the "gaps" in the biblical narrative and expanding biblical stories beyond the text itself. These kinds of pre-critical, archaeologically inspired readings are apparent in a variety of Victorian-era media. What

[6] Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 2–3.

follows are examples of different ways in which archaeology and Near Eastern studies were invoked in the nineteenth century in ways that facilitated these kinds of pre-critical readings.

Painting a Pre-critical Bible

In regards to the first element of pre-critical reading, the presumed historicity of biblical narrative, archaeology (and ethnographic studies of Ottoman-era Palestine) provided a material illustration for biblical stories. The archaeological endeavour may have on the surface level seemed to have been part of the critical concern that Frei identifies as directed towards factuality.[7] In actual practice, however, those endeavours were aimed at better understanding obscure elements of the biblical text, for example, providing an ethnographic basis for the understanding of Old Testament law or explanations of biblical-era agriculture. These observations supplemented the biblical verses that were invoked and biblical readers could, with the assistance of illustrated Bibles, see pictures of ancient technology or architecture, assuring them of the historicity of the Bible. The Bible's messages could be better understood by learning more about its historical context. The historical aesthetic that artists employed in illustrating the Bible was framed as educational.

These artists were arguably the most prolific early "readers" of biblical archaeology, now able to paint biblical scenes in a *veristic* or academic fashion. The art critic John Ruskin had led the argument that painting more generally should present a certain realism, both historical and theological.[8] Painting should, in Ruskin's view, be used to present moral instruction for its audiences and so biblical artists that followed his lead created historically grounded moralizing images of the Bible.[9] This mixture of symbolism and archaeological realism is evident in "The Finding of the Saviour in the Temple" by William Holman Hunt (1827–1910), one of the founders of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood. His 1860 painting is an interpretation of Luke 2:41–52, where a young Jesus argues with the Rabbis in the Temple. Hunt

[7] Frei, *Eclipse*, 5.

[8] John Harvey, *The Bible as Visual Culture: When Text Becomes Image*, The Bible in the Modern World 57 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013), 58, 92.

[9] Jeffrey Richards, *The Ancient World on the Victorian and Edwardian Stage* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 20.

used various sources in the composition of his painting.[10] Hunt modeled the marble of the Temple after examples that he saw in his own trip to Jerusalem and the architecture is itself a hybrid of the description of the First Temple in I Kgs 5–7, nineteenth-century Ottoman architecture, and Corinthian capitals described by Josephus. Artifacts in the scene are based on models that Hunt found on display in the British Museum. Here is not a Jesus contextualized within the Roman world but a Jesus arguing with the orientalist excesses of the east.

Hunt and other members of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood embody Frei's second element of pre-critical interpretation as manifest in painting for they brought typological interpretation back into artistic vogue. Similar interpretative strategies had been employed in both painting and biblical readings in the past. Frei explains figural interpretation in more depth:

> In figural interpretation the figure itself is real in its own place, time, and right, and without any detraction from that reality it prefigures the reality that will fulfill it. This figural relation not only brings into coherent relation events in biblical narration, but allows also the fitting of each present occurrence and experience into a real, narrative framework or world.[11]

Archaeology allowed painters to bring back this kind of figural interpretation for they could make claims to *veritas* in keeping with Victorian tastes. They could show the potential reality of biblical narrative because scenes could be depicted realistically. Yet within these historically realistic scenes, allegorical truths are also apparent and so the paintings act as evidence that prefiguration and historical reality are not intrinsically opposed. Symbolic truth could be found embedded within historical events.

Less clearly theologically symbolic is Edward John Poynter's 1867 "Israel in Egypt". Here is a vision of the slavery of the Hebrews from Exod 2:11 that has been profoundly influential in imagining that situation. At first glance, this massive painting is an evocative depiction of a seemingly historical event. An Egyptian foreman drives a group of Hebrew slaves who haul a large stone lion. In the background are exemplars of Egyptian architecture, all of which convey an historical Egyptian setting, despite the fact that the hodgepodge of

[10] For a detailed discussion of these sources, see: Kenneth Bendiner, *Introduction to Victorian Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 74.

[11] Frei, *Eclipse*, 153.

buildings from different times and places means that this is really an idealized Egyptian plain.[12] Here archaeologically realistic detail has been invoked to make more historically real a relatively unspecific, yet important, verse of the Bible. This is an example of Frei's first element of pre-critical readings, the presumed historicity of the text, made more historical through archaeological detail. From this painting, the viewer can imagine an historically particular example of the forced labour of the Hebrews.

Similarly historicizing trends are apparent in painted scenes from the book of Esther. Esther was a subject that could easily blend orientalist and historical approaches and the late-Victorian visions garnished Ahaseurus's Persian palace with the lush sensuality of a sultan's harem fused with Assyrian architectural details. Edwin Long's "Vashti Refuses the King's Summons" from 1879 exemplifies this. A pale-skinned Vashti is poised in distress while her dark-skinned slaves urge her to not refuse the king. The furnishings are fully Ottoman, the background architecture based on Assyrian examples from the British Museum. Ernest Normand's 1890 "Queen Vashti Deposed" is a similar vision of this biblical situation. Vashti lies resigned to her new status across a bed with her topless slave girl kneeling in anguish. Again, Assyrian and Ottoman times are merged. As with Poynter's vision of Hebrew bondage, these paintings of Vashti's refusal and deposal from Esth 1:12–20 illustrate an empty space in the biblical narrative. There is little textual treatment of Vashti's response to the king. Long and Normand have created historically plausible scenes that fill in the narrative gap.

Paintings like these at first seem to be grounded in historical-realism and certainly this is the aesthetic. Attention to the details, however, show that archaeology has been used to assert a claim to realism that cannot be upheld. The painters have used the material culture of many different times and places to create scenes that are dressed up in convincing material culture. Yet in practice, the hybridization of different cultures, places, and periods, helps make these images timeless and universal within an authentic aesthetic. In these paintings, biblical characters, sometimes explicitly made to seem European, are oppressed by the timeless culture of the Orient. Contemporary viewers found meaning for their own lives in these evocations of ancient events. Saidean readings here are apt and likely well reflect the in-

[12] For more on this, see: Patrick Conner, "'Wedding Archaeology to Art': Poynter's Israel in Egypt," in *Influences in Victorian Art and Architecture*, ed. Sarah Macready and F. H. Thompson (London: Thames & Hudson, 1985), 113.

tentions of the painters. The Bible is set within an oriental culture but these paintings argue that the Bible is a story of liberation from that oppressive and degraded culture. Frei's third element of pre-critical reading is thus exemplified as biblical liberation can be read as both historically particular and universal simultaneously.[13]

Staging a Pre-critical Bible

The theatre also allowed for similar explorations of how the Bible could be read as a western story set within a context of eastern oppression. British censorship laws of the nineteenth century did not allow for actual biblical scenes to be performed on stage but dramatists got around this by instead imagining stories set in biblical times without invoking actual biblical personages.[14] One of the more successful producers of this kind of Christian theatre was Wilson Barrett. Best remembered today for *The Sign of the Cross* (made into a film by Cecil B. DeMille), his plays provided Christian moralizing in different historical settings, all presented with claims of historical and archaeological accuracy.

Barrett's vision of what life must have been like for the Israelites during the exile in Babylon was presented in his *The Daughters of Babylon*. When staged in 1896, Barrett went out of his way to use historically accurate stage dressings, sets, costumes, and props. Israelite material culture was modeled after that of nineteenth-century Bedouin, in keeping with the belief that the two peoples had analogous material culture despite the 2500 years that separated them. For the Babylonian costumes and sets, Barrett used exemplars from the British Museum as the basis for his production and probably also made reference to those from earlier stage productions of *Sardanapalus*, a play about Mesopotamia that was produced in many forms over the latter half of the Victorian era. In a souvenir booklet, he even thanks professional Assyriologists for working so hard to reconstruct this ancient culture, arguing that their research is the basis for his production.[15]

[13] For my extended discussion of this, see: Kevin M. McGeough, *The Ancient Near East in the Nineteenth Century: Appreciations and Appropriations. III. Fantasy and Alternative Histories*, Hebrew Bible Monographs 69 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2015), 14–92.

[14] For more on this kind of stage censorship, see: Richard Foulkes, *Church and Stage in Victorian England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[15] Wilson Barrett and Robert Hitchens, *The Daughters of Babylon: A Novel* (London: John MacQueen, 1899), 57-63.

Archaeological investigations of Mesopotamia, in this instance, gave Barrett enough source material to try to imagine ancient biblical life. It is an exploration of how difficult it must have been to live according to the beliefs of the community while in exile. The basis of the plot of the play, however, is explicitly rooted in an attempt to understand biblical law in practice. In particular, Barrett explores Deut 22:23–24 where it is noted that the proper punishment when a betrothed woman takes another man as a lover is that the two shall be stoned to death. Referencing Talmudic interpretations of the law, Barrett uses this biblical verse as the basis for a Victorian melodrama, in which the rights of the individual are weighed against the obligations to the community.

The novelization of the play preserves Barrett's narrativization of Deut 22:23–24.[16] The specific law is identified by the narrator, without reference to the scriptural passage and a dramatic court-room scene unfolds as the couple guilty of the transgression are judged by the law-giver. The judge asks each party to testify and Socratically leads them to admit their guilt. After their guilt is demonstrated, the judge asks the jury for their verdict and the response is that they shall be stoned with stones until they die. For Victorian theatre audiences this would have been as dramatic as any contemporary court-room scene. Yet it also helped make the biblical tradition more sensible for their own lives. The alien-ness of the ancient legal traditions is made familiar by its enactment through a legal process that would have seemed familiar to the audience. The laws may be somewhat different but the enactment of law would have seemed strikingly familiar. The timeless theme of the "star cross'd lovers" is made into biblical exegesis.

The theatre, despite censorship laws, allowed for a kind of embodied reading of the biblical text that was well supported by the archaeology of the region. Costumes, props, and sets, were claimed to be based on archaeological exemplars, and helped people imagine themselves in an historical biblical world. By recreating the setting, people were inspired by biblical narrative and gained an interpretative freedom that while constrained by a materialist literalism, opened up thinking about daily life in the Bible. These kinds of embodied experiences allowed audiences to center themselves within the biblical narrative through visual and material encounters.[17]

[16] Wilson Barrett, *Souvenir of "The Daughters of Babylon"* (London, 1897).

[17] For more on this play and other biblical stage performances of the era, see: McGeough, *Fantasy and Alternative Histories*, 93–135.

Acting Out a Pre-critical Bible

Even more personal embodied experiences of biblical daily life could be had in various fairground experiences of Palestine.[18] Prefiguring the living history museums of the twentieth century like Colonial Williamsburg in the United States or Fortress Louisbourg in Canada, fairground experiences allowed visitors to physically interact with biblical materials and living "orientals". One of the most influential of these was Palestine Park at Chautauqua in upstate New York, which fused adult education with Methodist camp meetings. Visitors to Palestine Park walked around a gigantic topographic model of the Holy Land, inspected models of the Tabernacle and the Great Pyramid, visited a museum of biblical archaeology, shopped for souvenirs typically sold in Palestine (like olive wood products) and interacted with "residents" dressed in eastern garb. One such resident was A. O. Van Lennep who claimed to have been born in the east and converted to Christianity from Islam. Events from the life of Jesus were enacted and "tours" of the Holy Land were given, pretending that the models were the real thing. Here was a geographic representation and interpretation of biblical space. Visitors could pretend to gaze from atop Mount Hermon, seeing the boundaries of the biblical lands conquered by Joshua (Josh 11–13). They could see a physical version of the Tabernacle from Exod 26ff. Biblical geography was made material through a visit to Palestine Park.

Palestine Park facilitated pre-critical readings that demanded both the historicity of scripture and readers' ability to place themselves within the center of the narrative. Eitan Bar-Yosef, John Davis, Burke Long, and Yorke Rowan have shown that these kinds of events were important means for people to claim the biblical heritage as their own.[19] By dressing in eastern garb, visitors to the parks assumed biblical identities and the biblical stories came

[18] For my extended discussion of this, see: Kevin M. McGeough, *The Ancient Near East in the Nineteenth Century: Appreciations and Appropriations. II. Collecting, Constructing, and Curating*, Hebrew Bible Monographs 68 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2015), 85–103.

[19] Eitan Bar-Yosef, "Jerusalem, My Happy Home: The Palestine Exhibition and the Limits of the Orientalist Imagination," in *Victorian Prism: Refractions of the Crystal Palace*, ed. James Buzard, Joseph W. Childers, and Eileen Gillooly (University of Virginia Press, 2007), 189; John Davis, "Holy Land, Holy People? Photography, Semitic Wannabes, and Chautauqua's Palestine Park," *Prospects* 17 (1992): 257–60; Burke O. Long, *Imagining the Holy Land: Maps, Models, and Fantasy Travels* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 27, 36; Yorke M. Rowan, "Repackaging the Pilgrimage: Visiting the Holy Land in Orlando," in *Marketing Heritage: Archaeology and the Consumption of the Past*, ed. Yorke M. Rowan and Uzi Baram (Lanham: AltaMira, 2004), 263.

to be part of their own lived identities, not just abstract stories listened to in church. The difficulties of the book's "exotic-ness" were overcome through a willing celebration of its otherness and upstate New York became the setting for the replaying of events of biblical importance. By dressing in "authentic" biblical costume, an alien culture became part of the visitor's memory and own personal, spiritual story.

In England, the most important of these embodied and archaeologically informed experiences of the Bible was the Palestine Exhibition, a traveling fair put on by an evangelical organization, the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews. The Palestine Exhibition was a traveling fair where replicas of eastern buildings were set up within community halls and people dressed as biblical figures. Prominent locals also dressed up in biblical garb and acted out scenes from the Bible. Attendees could also listen to lectures, purchase souvenirs, or just marvel at their local community transformed into Iron Age Israel for the village fete.

These kinds of enacted experiences of biblical times were, in some ways, established as antithetical to the critical appreciation of the Bible. Samuel Schor says as much in his guidebook to the Palestine Exhibition. He writes:

> It is far more "scientific" to sit in one's study, and to prove that the story of the blessings and curses repeated on Gerizim and Ebal in the days of Joshua was an utter impossibility, owing to the distance of the two mountains from one another, and the fact that it is not known how far the human voice can travel. It may be less "scientific" to visit those two mountains, and to see if any spot can be found from which the voice of man can travel across the intervening valley, and reach the hearers on the opposite hill; but it has been tried, the very words—the blessings and curses—have been repeated, and every word distinctly heard. Such an "unscientific and uncritical" method must demonstrate, however, to the study critics, that there is a "screw loose" in his philosophy.[20]

Here, referencing Josh 8:33–35, Schor argues that experience trumps scientific logic. The academic that studies the Bible from a scientific perspective may imagine that it would have been impossible for people standing on Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal to have heard Joshua at the same time.

[20] Samuel Schor, *Palestine and the Bible*, 20th ed. (London: The Book Society, 1934).

His answer is simple and potentially convincing to his readers; he states that the people who actually tried this found that a voice could be heard in both places. It is not difficult to see the extended argument here, that people should come to the Palestine Exhibition and experience the Bible rather than just thinking about it. By wandering through an artificial version of the Bible, people could be convinced of the material plausibility of scripture.

Archaeology allowed biblical education to be both scholarly and non-critical simultaneously. For rather than dealing with issues of sources and *sitz im leben*, students at Chautauqua, who could earn designations like "Templar" as they reached educational thresholds, concentrated on geography, ethnography, languages, and material culture. Not all of these pre-critical, but archaeological, readers of the Bible purposefully set out to subvert critical scholarship in the way that Samuel Schor did. The amateur scholarship of the students of Chautauqua (inspired by their seminary-trained instructors) was not much different from some of the popular fringe scholarship of the period. In the mid-nineteenth century, in fact, it could be difficult to differentiate archaeological fringe scholarship from mainstream academia given the only nascent professional standards.

Measuring a Pre-critical Bible

This was certainly the case with Piazzi Smyth, whose theories about the Great Pyramid at Giza were almost immediately rejected by the scientific community at the same time that they were widely embraced by the reading public.[21] Smyth's own work was the continuation of pre-critical biblical metrology, specifically Isaac Newton's theory about biblical and divinely ordained measurement systems. Newton had postulated that the ancient cubit that had been used in building the pyramid was of divine significance and he had hoped, after identifying the size of this cubit, to reconstruct the exact dimensions of Solomon's Temple. Smyth hoped to expand on Newton's and later scholars' work (like John Taylor's) by traveling to Egypt to measure the pyramid and using all of the advances in nineteenth-century scientific measurement that were previously unavailable.

After returning from Egypt, Piazzi Smyth published his work in an immediately best-selling three-volume book, *Life and Work at the Great Pyra-*

[21] For an extended treatment of Smyth, see: Kevin M. McGeough, *The Ancient Near East in the Nineteenth Century: Appreciations and Appropriations. I. Claiming and Conquering*, Hebrew Bible Monographs 67 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2015), 350–80.

mid. Popular audiences embraced the book, which was part travel account, part collection of mathematical measurements, and part speculative history. The academic community, however, was unimpressed and Smyth's upstanding reputation as an astronomer and innovator in the field of spectrascopy was immediately undermined. It was not that his measurements were bad, although they were not as accurate as they could be since he was not himself able to finish clearing the base of the pyramid before he had to return home. What was unacceptable to the scientific community was his biblical reading of the pyramid. For he saw the Great Pyramid as a monument to metrology, established by God, as a physical sign of his wonders.[22] His book begins by quoting Jer 32:18–20, "The Great, the Mighty God, the Lord of Hosts, is his name; great in counsel, and mighty in work:—which hast set signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, even unto this day."[23] This was not meant symbolically. Piazzi Smyth believed that Jeremiah was referencing the Great Pyramid. God had built the pyramid as a lasting record of His measurement system, a measurement system that coincidentally well-matched the one in current use by the British but was under threat of replacement by the metric system.[24]

According to Smyth, it had been Melchizedek who had built the pyramid (here he was in disagreement with his mentor John Taylor who believed it had been Noah). In Gen 14:18–20, Melchizedek is said to be the king of Salem and priest of *el elyon* (God most high). This title and the reference again to Melchizedek as a priest in Ps 110:4 were simultaneously intriguing and ambiguous so there had been a long tradition of expanding the biblical account of this figure. Smyth's contribution to this interpretative tradition was to argue that Melchizedek worked in tandem with the Egyptian king Cheops (Khufu), who the pyramid was really built for, offering the Egyptian king the design for the structure as well as an explanation of how to go about constructing it.[25]

In later books, Piazzi Smyth explained how the text of the Bible was actually encoded in the very bricks of the pyramid. He had a particularly

[22] Charles Piazzi Smyth, *Life and Work at the Great Pyramid; during the Months of January, February, March, and April, A.D. 1865; With a Discussion of the Facts Ascertained*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Edmonston & Douglas, 1867), I: xiii.

[23] Ibid., I: facing page 1.

[24] Ibid., I: 595.

[25] Charles Piazzi Smyth, *Our Inheritance in the Great Pyramid*, New and enlarged ed. (London: W. Ibister & Co., 1874), 463.

fruitful relationship with Robert Menzies and the two were able to "translate" Melchizedek's coded designs in the interior of the Great Pyramid into a statement of biblical history. For example, he explains how the lengths of the passages in the pyramid equate directly to a timeline of history: "Measuring along the passages backward from the north beginning of the Grand Gallery, you find the Exodus at either 1483 or 1542 B.C., and the dispersion of mankind in 2528 B.C., up at the beginning of the passage."[26] Whereas Frei has shown that critical biblical readers of this era had stopped seeing arguments of prefiguration in the Bible as historically credible, here, archaeology seemingly proved the accuracy of this approach materially.[27] Smyth could point to a physical and seemingly ancient example of such typological understanding—prophecy that had been sealed for thousands of centuries. Smyth and Menzies believed that Christ's return could be predicted to the exact year based on reading the pyramid's architecture and these ideas were picked up by some of the important founders of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Writing a "New" Pre-critical Bible

The Jehovah's Witnesses were not the only new religious movement inspired by pre-critical readings of the Bible framed through archaeology. Perhaps the most archaeologically-oriented of these new groups were the Mormons, who emerged in upstate New York in the 1820s after the founder, Joseph Smith, claimed to have been visited by the angel Moroni and given the Plates of Mormon. Written in what Joseph claimed was Reformed Egyptian (or non-standard Egyptian), he was able to translate the plates into the Book of Mormon, using a variety of divination tools. These included the Urim and Thummim (mentioned in I Sam 14:41), two stones he reported finding buried with the plates. The Book of Mormon, sub-titled "Another Testament of Jesus Christ", retells the history of the Americas, involving the arrival of one of the lost tribes of Israel (the Jaredites), their subsequent battle with indigenous peoples, and the visit of Jesus to the region to preach the message of the gospels in the New World.

The Book of Mormon is not the only important text for the community that has come to be known as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS). Before his death in 1844, Joseph Smith had written other works inspired by pre-critical readings of the Bible and pre-critical Egyptology. Since

[26] Ibid., 390.
[27] Frei, *Eclipse*, 6.

the Egyptian language was only in its first stirrings of decipherment, Joseph had a particular freedom to interpret hieroglyphs and many of the formative documents of Mormonism are based on his "translations" of papyri that he had purchased from collectors. What are actually Late Period Funerary texts have been represented in English as alternative stories of the patriarchs and are now published in the LDS collection *The Pearl of Great Price*.

Of particular interest in this collection is The Book of Abraham, an account of Abraham's life that expands upon what is told in Genesis. It is purportedly a translation of an Egyptian papyrus, what would in more standard Egyptology be understood as a copy of the Book of the Dead. Joseph Smith's interpretation varies considerably from normative Egyptological interpretation. Joseph Smith also freely interprets the biblical text of Genesis in The Book of Abraham, which models its language after the King James translation and adds new elements to the story. The most readily apparent difference in translation from Gen 1–2 is that reference to God in The Book of Abraham is substituted with "the Gods", in keeping with the Mormon belief in the multiplicity of divine beings. In Chapters 4 and 5, Joseph Smith expands on the biblical creation story with a cosmology that he believed God presented to Abraham. According to Chapter 3, God had given Abraham this cosmological knowledge while still in Ur, and presented in The Book of Abraham is a revised version of Gen 12, in which Abraham is commanded to depart his father's house. Verse 3:3 of the The Book of Abraham reads: "And the Lord said unto me: These are the governing ones [meaning the stars in the sky]; and the name of the great one is Kolob, because it is near unto me, for I am the Lord thy God: I have set this one to govern all those which belong to the same order as that upon which thou standest." Joseph Smith's reading is supported by the art that accompanied the Egyptian hieroglyphs on the papyrus. In what is now referred to by the church as Facsimile 3, there is what Joseph Smith interpreted as a scene of Abraham seated on a throne teaching astronomy to Pharaoh (the cosmological vision given to Abraham by God). A more probable reading of this papyrus is that it depicts an enthroned Osiris with the goddess Isis standing behind him. Here then, Mormon cosmology, based on symbolic interpretations of Egyptian papyri, is inserted into the standard biblical narrative of God's call of Abraham. These new readings are justified by the materiality of the Egyptian papyri (or at least the facsimiles of what were undoubtedly authentic Egyptian documents) that are presented with the narrative.

Much more could be said of how Mormon readings of the Bible were inspired by archaeology. Like Piazzi Smyth, Joseph Smith found Melchizedek to be an intriguing figure and expands his history in Alma 13:17–19 to include an account of the wicked people of Salem repenting and becoming peaceful under his leadership. In his translation of the Old Testament (Gen 14:25–40) Joseph elaborates further on the priesthood established by Melchizedek. Again, here is a pre-critical reading of the Bible that mimics biblical scholarship inspired by Near Eastern studies. The materiality of archaeological artifacts and the details of ancient Near Eastern cultures that are supplied mask the lack of academic rigour and for many non-specialists (given the growth of the church), Joseph's treatment has been convincing.[28]

Channelling a Pre-critical Bible

Academic approaches to the study of the Bible from a comparative perspective are almost parodied in another movement that emerged in the nineteenth century—Theosophy. The Theosophical Society was founded in 1875 by Madame Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891) and Colonel Henry Steele (1832–1907).[29] The society became popular in Britain and the United States very quickly and by the end of the Victorian era Theosophy was a relatively mainstream movement. Fundamental to Theosophy is the idea that all religions descend from one original set of spiritual truths, but the diversity of traditions as they have developed purposefully obscured that original religion. Various occult masters, however, have retained the original knowledge throughout the centuries, and contact with them allows access to this ancient wisdom. In its present day form, Theosophy is most concerned with South Asian traditions but in Blavatksy's original writings, Egypt and the Bible are of primary importance. As with Piazzi Smyth and Joseph Smith, Madame Blavatsky built on older Hermetic traditions that saw Egyptian and biblical wisdom as entangled.

Blavatsky lays out the interrelatedness of Egyptian and Israelite wisdom, and their relationship to the *ur*-religion of the earliest days in her *Isis Unveiled*

[28] For more on Mormon readings of the ancient Near East, see: McGeough, *Fantasy and Alternative Histories*, 274–84. For a treatment of some of the formative texts of Mormonism from an Egyptological perspective, see: Robert K. Ritner, ed., *The Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri: A Complete Edition* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2013).

[29] See also: McGeough, *Fantasy and Alternative Histories*, 323–54.

(1877). The title of the book is a reference to the hidden nature of this primeval religion and through the book she claims to be lifting the veil of particularistic religious traditions that had been obscuring the real truths. Isis is not a goddess; it is a term for this hidden wisdom tradition. In this two-volume book, Blavatsky mimics and subverts academic approaches to the study of ancient religion. She claims to use a library but this is the Akashic Library that exists on the astral plane.[30] Here is an explicitly pre-critical approach modeling an academic approach to comparative religion that, on a surface level, seems to be in line with other comparitivists of the period, like James Frazer, whose work, although usually deemed highly questionable today set the standard for critical comparative study in his day.

The Bible was one of these religious documents in which the truth of Isis had been purposefully obscured. Blavatsky's reinterpretation of Gen 2 illustrates the varieties of sources that she brings to bear:

> Starting as a pure and perfect spiritual being, the Adam of the second chapter of *Genesis*, not satisfied with the position allotted to him by the Demiurgus (who is the eldest first-begotten, the Adam-Kadmon), Adam the second, the "man of dust," strives in his pride to become Creator in his turn. Evolved out of the androgynous Kadmon, this Adam is himself an androgyn; for, according to the oldest beliefs presented allegorically in Plato's *Timaeus*, the prototypes of our races were all enclosed in the microcosmic tree which grew and developed within and under the great mundane or macrocosmic tree.[31]

Although difficult to follow, here Blavatsky is reading Genesis through Rabbinic and Greek sources. Adam-Kadmon is a term from Rabbinic sources referring to the original man but in later Kabbalistic thought comes to be the anthropic manifestation of God or the collective original vessel for all human souls. *Timaeus* is one of the two Platonic dialogues that refer to Atlantis, which also plays a part in Blavatsky's version of ancient history.

[30] See Bruce F. Campbell, *Ancient Wisdom Revived: A History of the Theosophical Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 33–34. See also: Marsha Keith Manatt Schuchard, "Freemasonry, Secret Societies, and the Continuity of the Occult Traditions in English Literature" (PhD Dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin, 1975), 621.

[31] Helena P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled. A Master-key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology*, vol. 1. Science (London: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1877), 297.

Blavatsky's exegetical approach was to read between the lines of the Bible and reconstruct, in tandem with a reading of sources from other religious traditions, the common spiritual truths. Another example of this is her treatment of Exod 2:5–9, where she fills in the gaps about the Egyptian woman who rescued the infant Moses. Citing Justin Martyr and the Book of Acts, she writes:

> Moses was indebted for his knowledge to the mother of the Egyptian princess, Thermuthis, who saved him from the waters of the Nile. The wife of Pharaoh, Batria, was an initiate herself, and the Jews owe to her the possession of their prophet, "learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and mighty in words and deeds." Justin Martyr, giving as his authority Trogus Pompeius, shows Joseph as having acquired a great knowledge in magical arts with the high priests of Egypt.[32]

Here then, Blavatsky argues for two possible mechanisms through which the Hebrews could have learned of the primordial wisdom from the Egyptians, through Joseph's initiation amongst the priests of Egypt or through Moses's time with his adoptive mother, Batria.

Blavatsky finds clues to Joseph's acceptance as an Egyptian priest through close reading of the biblical text itself. She finds Gen 43: 32 particularly instructive, since Benjamin is said to have eaten separately from the Egyptians who were not supposed to eat with foreigners. She presents her interpretation of the passage:

> Did the idea never strike the reader of the *Bible*, that an alien born and brought up in a foreign country *could not* and *would not* possibly have been admitted—we will not say to the final initiation, the grandest mystery of all, but even to share the knowledge of the minor priesthood, those who belonged to the lesser mysteries? In *Genesis xliii*. 32, we read, that no Egyptian could seat himself to eat bread with the brothers of Joseph, "for that is an abomination unto the Egyptians." But that the Egyptians ate "with *him* (Joseph) by themselves." The above proves two things: 1, that Joseph, whatever he was in his heart, had, in appearance at least, changed his religion, married the daughter of a priest of the "idolatrous" nation, and become himself

[32] Ibid., I: 25.

> an Egyptian; otherwise, the natives would not have eaten bread with him. And 2, that subsequently Moses, if not an Egyptian by birth, became one through being admitted into the priesthood, and thus was a SODALE.[33]

Blavatsky goes on to argue that this is evidence that the Israelites and Egyptians both engaged in a kind of serpent worship that has also been identified in the Americas. Precisely how Gen 43 provides evidence of this is somewhat difficult to understand but again, Blavatsky's interpretive approach seems to blend pre-critical reading methods and comparativist methods.

Egyptianizing a Pre-critical Bible

Egyptian-biblical connections were an important aspect of pre-critical biblical scholarship outside of church tradition and especially typical of Hermetic scholarship prior to the Enlightenment (e.g., in alchemical thought). Readings like those offered by Piazzi Smyth, Joseph Smith, and Madame Blavatsky were encouraged by the new access to Egyptian antiquities through nineteenth-century archaeology. There was a long history of seeing a connection between Egyptian and biblical wisdom and this was made easier to palate by nineteenth-century Christians with the commonplace presupposition that the ancient Egyptians were actually monotheists. This was based in part on the belief that a culture as advanced as Egypt could not have been so while still holding to polytheistic practices and in part on the account of the Egyptian god Osiris's death and seeming resurrection preserved in Plutarch.

One of the most important popularisers of Egyptian-Christian monotheistic connections amongst Victorian readers was Gerald Massey (1828–1907), a self-educated former factory worker turned writer-poet. His "insights" on ancient culture came from close literary readings inspired by his psychic connections with the ancient Egyptians. These psychic connections to Egypt led him to understand the gospels in a way that no one else had previously been able. In one of his books, *The Natural Genesis*, Massey "demonstrates" the parallels between the narratives of Jesus and the narratives of the Egyptian god Horus, son of Osiris. Here again is Frei's second element of pre-critical biblical reading, where typology is an appropriate exegetical technique. Massey himself argues that "In typology nothing can be more important than types"

[33] Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, I: 556.

and much of the book is spent in defining and identifying different prefigurations of Christian belief in non-Christian settings.[34] For example, Luke 21:27, according to Massey, preserves a tradition about the Egyptian god Horus as a child. The logic is difficult to follow but primarily relates to the fact that the passage in Luke refers to the Son of Man coming in a cloud, a description that Massey also claims can be identified in Egyptian texts.[35] Massey goes on to argue for other parallels between the gospel accounts and Egyptian literature in this manner, following the same kind of logic, showing various other similarities in the traditions that he believed were homological.

Gerald Massey's books were very popular amongst non-academic audiences but for Egyptologists, the leaps of logic and misunderstandings of scholarship were readily apparent.[36] There are few references to Massey's studies in the Egyptological scholarship of his era although he claims that Samuel Birch reviewed his basic Egyptological facts and found some of his readings "interesting and ingenious."[37] When he is mentioned directly by Egyptologists or Near Eastern studies scholars, it is with scorn or dismissal. For example, in an editorial published in 1887, Massey refutes the criticisms of his work offered by a Mr. Coleman in the *Religio-Philosophical Journal* of that same year. In his "retort", Massey reprints the evaluation of his work by one of the most prominent Assyriologists of the day, Archibald Sayce, that Coleman included his own editorial:

> Many thanks for your [referring to Coleman] very thorough demolition of Mr. Massey's crudities. It is difficult to understand how a man can have the effrontery to put forward such a mass of ignorance and false quotation. You have done a real service to the cause of truth by exposing him so fully. You ask me if I can detect any errors in your essay. Errors enough on the part

[34] Gerald Massey, *The Natural Genesis*, 2 vols. (1883; Leeds: Celephaïs Press, 2008), II: 385.

[35] Ibid., II: 404.

[36] For a recent example of the survival of Massey's ideas in amateur works, see: Tom Harpur, *The Pagan Christ: Recovering the Lost Light* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 2004). For a critique of this and other similar works, see W. Ward Gasque, 'The Leading Religion Writer in Canada … Does He Know What He's Talking About?', *George Mason University's History News Network*, Tuesday, August 17, 2004.

[37] Massey, *Natural Genesis*, I: x.

> of Mr. Massey, but they have all been exposed impartially and mercilessly by yourself.[38]

That same "retort" also preserves the appraisal of an unnamed Egyptologist connected to the British Museum, who Massey himself concludes was Peter le Page Renouf:

> You are right in your exposure of Mr. Massey. Some people think him dishonest; and that he is quite conscious of the ridiculous blunders which he publishes. I do not think so after having examined his large book. It is a work which I should have thought could only have been written in Bedlam. No lunatic could possibly write more wild rubbish, without the least consciousness of the incredible ignorance displayed throughout. The man is AT ONCE an ignoramus of the worst kind, viz., not in the least being aware of his ignorance, and he has the pretension of explaining things which cannot be understood (except by trusting other persons) without a considerable knowledge of different languages, which he does not possess.[39]

Renouf, when confronted about this quotation by Massey, avoided actually confirming that he was the evaluator. Regardless of which British Museum employee actually described Massey's work in this manner, the assessment well reflected the response to Massey by most mainstream Egyptologists. However, it should be noted that E. A. Budge, who would later replace Renouf as Keeper of the Egyptian section, was one of the foremost proponents of the theory that the Egyptians were monotheists.

It is amongst amateur scholars, pseudo-scholars and the comparativists that Massey was most influential. For example, the Masonic scholar, Albert Churchwood, who attempted to find traces of Freemasonry in ancient and primitive societies evaluated Massey's work positively, even though Massey himself was not a Freemason. He writes: "No one ever understood the mythology and *Ritual* of Ancient Egypt so well as Gerald Massey since the time of the Ancient Philosophers of Egypt."[40] Churchwood's book is dedi-

[38] Gerald Massey, "A Retort", *The Medium and Daybreak*, March 18, 1887, 163–66 (http://gerald-massey.org.uk/massey/epr_09_a_retort.htm).

[39] Ibid.

[40] Albert Churchwood, *Signs and Symbols of Primordial Man* (1910; New York: Cosimo, 2007), xviii.

cated to: "All my brother Masons in whatever clime and whatever creed who believe in an acknowledge the One Great Architect of the Universe." The book and his other works are based on the premise, following Massey, that much Christian knowledge predates biblical times and reflects a primordial knowledge of which Masonic teachings are based. For Churchwood, and amateur historians of his ilk, Massey's ideas offered seemingly evidentiary-based arguments that challenged the primacy of Christianity by demonstrating that biblical thinking obscured older truths.

The Survival of Pre-critical Biblical Studies in Archaeology

Massey's type of emulation of academic archaeological practices but without academic rigour, has been one of the important ways that pre-critical biblical archaeology readings have survived into the twenty-first century. When a documentary like The History Channel's *Ancient Aliens* asks, "what is the archaeological evidence that aliens built the Garden of Eden?" (a question that was really asked in an episode), no meaningful response can be given. One of course would answer that there is no evidence, but the problem is that the questions asked or the evidence that is cited in treatments like these are completely senseless in an academic context. Yet somehow, the popular merger of the two disciplines, ancient Near Eastern studies and biblical studies, allows for that senselessness to be somewhat obscured and for popular audiences, pre-critical approaches to both disciplines can masquerade as legitimate intellectual enquiry. The materiality of archaeological evidence allowed and continues to allow non-academics an entrance into interpretation of the ancient Near Eastern past and the Bible in manners that challenge the authority of the academy and embrace interpretative techniques that are irrational (both purposefully and accidentally) and based on intuition or revelation. The new sources for biblical studies that emerged from archaeology were charismatic; Lynn Meskell, for example, has characterized Egyptian things as auratic in a Benjamin-esque manner.[41] People construct relationships with these ancient cultures through the consideration of the ancient objects and texts and imagine reconfigurations of the past that better fit these dreamed associations.

As has been shown here, nineteenth-century applications of archaeology and the results of ancient Near Eastern studies to the Bible facilitated the per-

[41] Lynn Meskell, *Object Worlds in Ancient Egypt: Material Biographies Past and Present* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 183.

petuation of pre-critical readings of the Bible. Contrary to Frei, pre-critical readings of the Bible did not come to an end in the nineteenth century but were perpetuated outside of academic biblical studies. While professional biblical scholars and theologians had started to ask difficult questions about the text, archaeology provided an avenue for non-biblical scholars to apply the results of seeming scientific research to the Bible in manners that were typical of those Frei has identified as common to pre-critical approaches. In particular, archaeology encouraged the treatment of the biblical narrative as historical, as typological, and as a text that could meaningfully reflect the experiences of any reader, not just an ancient one. Archaeology allowed the Bible to be expanded upon, filling in the gaps between verses and potentially revealing what was not apparent in the text. For some, this meant illuminating a literal reading of biblical truth. For others, like Helena Blavatsky, Joseph Smith, or Gerald Massey, archaeology allowed access to truths that had been obscured by conventional readings of the Bible and allowed them to reject the authority of biblical tradition and religious practice. Archaeological findings, which were widely reported in the periodical press, provided the evidence and opportunity for interpreters outside of the academic community to fashion their own readings of the Bible. It would be many years before a professionalized archaeological discipline would emerge and many more for that to be enacted as part of a critical treatment of the Bible.