

# The British Museum And The Bible



*“Nevertheless He did not leave Himself without witness...” (Acts 14:17)*

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## Introduction

- I. During the eighteenth century, knowledge of the world of the Bible depended entirely on the Bible itself and other written sources, such as the *Antiquities of the Jews* by Flavius Josephus.
  - A. When students of the Bible read the description in Jeremiah 18:1–12 of the potter at work, they had no idea what the pot would have looked like.
  - B. The Biblical subjects so frequently undertaken by painters depicted men and women in clothing and with buildings and objects of everyday life which were those known to the artist in his time.
  - C. This explains why such famous paintings as *The Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci show Christ and His disciples at a table that would have been entirely unknown in the New Testament age.
- II. This was the state of knowledge when the British Museum in London, England was first opened to the public in 1759.
  - A. The British Museum was established in 1753 to take charge of the library and collections of Sir Hans Sloane (1660–1753).
  - B. There was a veritable revolution in knowledge of the Biblical World during the nineteenth century.
  - C. The period between the two World Wars saw a healthy increase in the number of excavations in Palestine, and this trend has been greatly expanded over the past forty years.
  - D. There is now a wealth of material for the reconstruction of the culture of ancient Palestine and the surrounding area.
- III. The Bible, from Genesis chapter 11 onwards, contains a history of the Hebrew people from about 2000 B.C. to the first century A.D.
  - A. The Bible begins with a brief glimpse of the preceding history of mankind, notably the Creation, the Flood, and the Tower of Babel.
  - B. With Genesis 11:27–28 we enter the world of the Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph.
  - C. Abraham sets out from Ur in Babylonia and travels to Syria-Palestine.
  - D. There his successors and the tribe founded by him remain until Isaac's old age when, following Joseph, 75 people travel to Egypt (Acts 7:14).
  - E. In the process of time over two million of the descendents of Abraham leave Egypt and travel to the promised land.
  - F. Israelite history thereafter largely was confined to Palestine.
  - G. In spite of Divine warnings, the Jews picked up many of the elements of local culture and religion that was already established in the area.
  - H. The period of the Divided Kingdom is richly illuminated by many inscriptions, and other antiquities from Assyria, Babylonia, and from other areas outside Israel and Judah, as well as from Palestine itself.
  - I. The inter-Testamental Period falls within the Hellenistic period, a time when Seleucid and Ptolemaic rulers were rivals in the area, and which saw the beginnings of Roman control.
  - J. The events of the New Testament took place against a background of Roman rule, and the spread of Christianity by men such as Paul in Asia Minor, Greece and Rome all took place within the Roman Empire.

- K. Greek was used throughout the eastern areas of the Empire, and continued as the official language of the Byzantine Empire, so it is not surprising that the New Testament documents have been handed down to us in Greek.
- IV. In this lesson we want to examine some of the artifacts from the British Museum and see how they relate to our understanding of the Bible.
  - A. There are six and a half million objects in the museum's collection.
  - B. Even if you just confined yourself to those objects dealing with the lands of the Bible you could easily spend days there and not see everything.

### Discussion

## I. The Land Of Egypt

- A. Mud brick with chopped straw.
  1. Mud bricks were used for the walls and storerooms surrounding Egyptian temples—some bricks were stamped with the name of the king responsible for the construction.
  2. This brick is stamped with the name of Ramesses II (1279–1213 B.C.), and was taken from a building in Thebes, near the Valley of the Kings.
- B. Egyptian god Horus (note the ivory eyes).
  1. Horus was the falcon-god “lord of the sky” and the symbol of divine kingship—he appears in hieroglyphics as early as 3000 B.C.
  2. In Egyptian mythology **Horus** was the god of light who personified the life-giving power of the Sun.
    - a) He was usually represented as a falcon-headed man wearing a sun disk as a crown.
    - b) Reigning kings in Egypt were believed to be incarnations of Horus.
- C. The Rosetta Stone.
  1. This inscribed stone was taken from Rosetta, Egypt in 1799 by an officer in the French army, and it came to the British Museum in 1802.
  2. The stone contains a decree which was written in 196 B.C.
  3. The stela is inscribed in three scripts:
    - a) *Koine Greek* was the language of government.
    - b) *Demotic Egyptian* was the everyday script of literate Egyptians.
    - c) *Hieroglyphics* was the 3,000 year old traditional script of Egyptian monuments.
  4. The stone was a major key to deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphics.

## II. Israel And Her Neighbors

- A. The Jericho Tomb.
  1. Between 1952–1958 Kathleen Kenyon excavated Jericho on behalf of the British School of Archaeology.
  2. She uncovered many ancient tombs.
  3. Due to environmental conditions the organic material was well-preserved, including leather, wood, basketworks, and skin.
- B. Ancient Lamps.
  1. The first terracotta lamp pictured was made around A.D. 450–600.
  2. Next is a wheel-made terracotta lamp made in Jerusalem (A.D. 50–100).
  3. The third lamp was taken from Jerusalem (25 B.C.–A.D. 50).

- C. Assyrian Slingers.
1. Next to archers, slingers were the most effective long-range warriors of the ancient world.
  2. The sling and stone is often mentioned in the Bible (Judges 20:15–16).
  3. The account of David and Goliath (1 Sam. 17:32–40, 48–49).
- D. Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III.
1. First Assyrian king to come in direct contact with Israel (859–824 B.C.).
  2. This obelisk was erected in the center of Nimrud shortly before Shalmaneser’s death.
  3. It records his military campaign’s, showing the tribute he received from all directions.
  4. The obelisk shows Jehu, king of Israel, paying tribute, and his servants presenting bars of precious metals—an event not mentioned in the Bible.
  5. This makes Jehu the only Israelite king whose “picture” is available.
- E. Stela of Shalmaneser III.
1. This round-topped stela was found at Kurth on the Tigris River in south-eastern Turkey in 1861.
  2. It bears a relief carving of Shalmaneser III (859–824 B.C.), king of Assyria, facing the symbols of four gods (Assur, Ishtar, Anu, and Sin).
  3. Across the front and back of the stela are inscribed 102 lines of cuneiform recording the events of his first six military campaigns up to 853 B.C.
  4. In his sixth year he describes his campaign to the west where he encountered a coalition of states, including Israel.
- F. Relief of Tiglath-pileser III.
1. This is a carved relief showing Tiglath-pileser III, king of Assyria (744–727 B.C.), in his chariot before the fortified city of Astartu (in modern Jordan), with Assyrian soldiers driving out prisoners and herds.
  2. The Bible mentions Tiglath-pileser III several times (1 Chron. 5:4–6, 26).
  3. Ahaz, king of Judah, appealed to him for help (2 Chron. 28:20–21).
  4. There is a relief from a wall in the Central Palace at Nimrud which shows Tiglath-pileser III standing over an enemy, making his enemy his footstool (cf. Acts 2:34–35; Heb. 10:12–13).
- G. Annals of Sennacherib (the Taylor Prism).
1. Sennacherib (705–681 B.C.) was an Assyrian king noted for his campaigns against Judah.
  2. The prism was found at Nineveh in 1830.
  3. The best known passage on this prism describes that because Hezekiah had not submitted to the Assyrian “yoke,” Sennacherib laid siege to forty-six fortified Judean cities, deported 200,150 people, and shut up Hezekiah in Jerusalem “like a caged bird.”
  4. The prism tacitly agrees with the Biblical version by making no claim that Jerusalem was taken (Isa. 36–37; 2 Kings 18–19; esp. 2 Kings 19:35–36).
  5. The Greek historian Herodotus tells of “field mice” eating leather handles, quivers and bow strings of the Assyrian army.
- H. Winged Bulls of Sargon II.
1. There are many sculptures from the city and palace of the Assyrian king Sargon II at Khorsabad (721–705 B.C.).
  2. These human-headed winged bulls stood at the gates of the citadel, as magic guardians against misfortune.
  3. Sargon is only mentioned once in the Bible (Isa. 20:1).

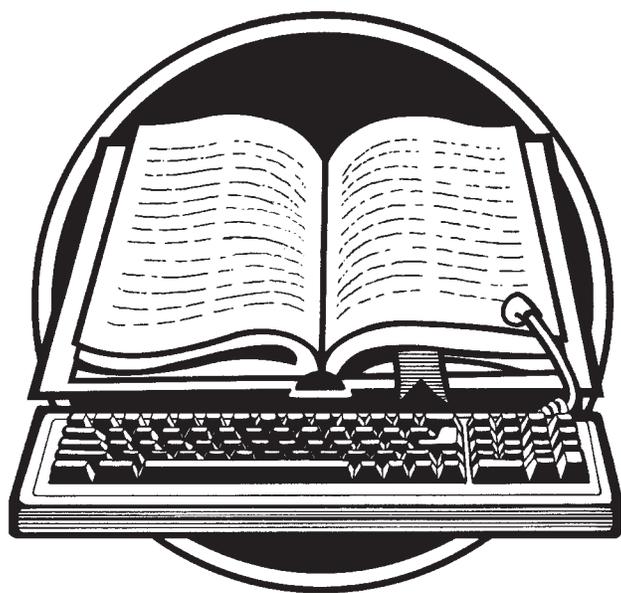
- I. The Cyrus Cylinder.
  1. This clay cylinder is inscribed in Babylonian cuneiform with an account by Cyrus, king of Persia (549–530 B.C.), of his conquest of Babylon in 539.
  2. He describes the measures of relief he brought to the city, and tells how he restored a number of god-images to their proper temples throughout Babylonia, Assyria and western Iran.
  3. He also arranged for the restoration of numerous temples and allowed captives to return to their homelands.
  4. This is consistent with what we read in Ezra 6:3–5, where Cyrus authorized the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, and the return of the Jews to Palestine (Ezra 2).

### III. The Roman Empire

- A. Augustus Caesar (ruled 29 B.C.–A.D. 14).
  1. He was the first Roman Emperor and the great nephew of Julius Caesar.
  2. His birth name was Gaius Octavius—he died at the age of 76 in A.D. 14.
  3. He became supreme ruler in 29 B.C., and received the name *Augustus* from the Roman Senate in 27 B.C.
  4. The word *Augustus* is a title meaning “worthy of honor” or “consecrated”
  5. He is mentioned in Luke 2:1 as being the Emperor during the time of the birth of Christ.
  6. The name Augustus was later taken by most of the following Emperors.
- B. Tiberius Claudius Caesar.
  1. Generally known as Claudius.
  2. He was the Emperor when the early church was growing, and is mentioned in the book of Acts as the ruler in whose time a famine took place (Acts 11:28).
  3. When the Jews at Thessalonica accused Paul and Silas of violating Caesar’s decrees by proclaiming that Jesus is the king, he was the Emperor in question (Acts 17:7).
  4. He is mentioned by name as having expelled the Jews from Rome, Aquila and Priscilla being among them (Acts 18:1–2).
- C. The Emperor Vespasian.
  1. This head is from an over-life-size statue of the Vespasian (A.D. 69–79).
  2. The head is from Carthage, in north Africa.
- D. The Emperor Titus (ruled A.D. 79–81).
  1. The Roman General in charge when Jerusalem was destroyed (70 A.D.).
  2. This statue is from Utica, near Carthage in north Africa.
  3. His conquest of Jerusalem made it possible to build the Coliseum in Rome (Nero did *not* kill Christians there).

#### Conclusion

- I. We have barely scratched the surface of the British Museum.
  - A. We have not had time to examine items from Greece (a lesson in itself).
  - B. The museum once housed the oldest complete manuscript of the New Testament (*Codex Sinaiticus*), but all of the old Bibles and manuscripts have been moved to the British Library.
- II. God had prepared the world for the entrance of His Son (Gal. 4:4).
- III. Have you opened you heart to receive Him?



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