Why is it important to study the ancient Israelites, a people whose history was recorded in books more than 2,000 years ago? The answer is as simple as it is powerful: They created monotheism, the worship of one god.

Israelite writings recorded the many interactions they had with their god over the first millennium B.C. Collected into the Jewish Hebrew Bible and, then, the Christian Old Testament, they became the foundation for three of the world’s major religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Nearly half of the world’s population, at least its religious population, look to ancient Israel for their religious roots.

So, how do we study the ancient Israelites? For centuries, even millennia, people looked to the Old Testament when they wanted to know about the Israelites. The advice was, if you want to know about ancient Israel, read your Bible.

The problem with this advice is that the Old Testament is incomplete. It does not give a full picture of Israel’s history, its religion or its way of life. Gaps appear everywhere. Take the language, for example. Modern Americans know more than 20,000 words; the Old Testament has only 8,000 words. It speaks of combing hair, but lacks the word for comb. It talks about sewing, but gives no word for needle.

Enter archaeology. About 150 years ago, archaeologists began excavating in the Middle East, from Iraq and Syria to Israel and Egypt. Their discoveries clarified questions from the Bible and filled in the gaps of the Old Testament.

A new field was born called biblical archaeology, a field of biblical studies that brought archaeological finds to supplement the Bible. In some cases, pastors became archaeologists and excavated, as one wag put it, with a trowel in one hand and a Bible in the other.

Biblical archaeology became the basis for a new type of book about Scripture, especially at the beginning level. Books for college courses and general readers featured the Old Testament text but brought in archaeological finds where they supported or illuminated biblical stories, history or religious practice.

Such introductory books are still used in Old Testament survey courses in colleges and universities today. The biblical text provides the basis for each work’s organization, both overall and for each chapter. Archaeological results and discoveries are brought in as relevant and discussed for the light they shed on questions generated by Scripture.

In the 1970s, however, Middle East archaeology broke away from its attachment to biblical archaeology and joined the wave of “New Archaeology,” as it was called then. Uniting with other forms of archaeology, it returned to the field’s roots in anthropology. As a result, it became much more scientific and developed new areas of expertise. Archaeozoology and paleoethnobotany, for example, identified practices of food processing, cooking and eating -- a large hole in our earlier understanding.

Despite the huge expansion of archaeological knowledge during the last 50 years, introductory books and textbooks about ancient Israel continue to follow the model established by biblical archaeology -- focusing on Scripture with archaeology only supplementing the discussion.

But, the old saw mentioned above no longer holds. Today, the truth is, if you want to understand the Old Testament, you must study the ancient Israelites. Archaeology and historical analysis today provide a fuller picture of ancient Israel than does the Old Testament.

Does that mean we should ignore the Old Testament? By no means. Both archaeology and Scripture constitute primary sources for the study of ancient Israel. They must be used together for the most complete historical picture.

This fall sees the publication of the first introductory book that does just that -- a book suitable for both general readers and introductory college courses. It is called “The Old Testament in Archaeology and History” and is edited by a team led by Jennie Ebeling and Edward Wright, and includes Mark Elliott, a former longtime Cheyenne resident, and myself. The chapters are written by experts in archaeological research and biblical studies, and bring together the latest finds and best analyses to provide a history of ancient Israel.

The book takes a historical approach to understanding the ancient Israelites, bringing together biblical evidence and archaeological discoveries to address questions of historical analysis and understanding. Rather than pit the two kinds of data against each other, it treats all the information equally; indeed, it often finds them on the same side.

I will end with a shameless plug: Read this book! You will gain the fullest and most complete understanding of ancient Israel available.


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