The books of the Bible were not organized in a systematic way. The Old Testament was not even collected at the same time. It is more like a family library, passed down through generations and added to when one descendant or another had an opportunity.

In the fifth century B.C., Ezra knew only the Torah, Genesis to Deuteronomy. In the second century B.C., two Jewish writers speak of the Torah and the Prophets, as well as “other books of our ancestors.” Perhaps these were Psalms and Proverbs, or maybe Chronicles.

At the end of the first century, the Jewish priest Josephus talks of a 22-volume canon of the Hebrew Bible; the present Hebrew Bible, which is equivalent to the Protestant Old Testament, has 24 books. The rabbis in the early third century echo Josephus, revealing uncertainty about Esther and Song of Songs. Ultimately, they decided to include the two books.

This haphazard procedure was guided largely by theological concerns, and not by any sense of history or linguistics. Those who made the choices did so because they believed the books revealed and explained important theological beliefs, religious practices or pious behavior.

The resulting picture of the Israelites, therefore, is incomplete. It leaves out key information. To gain a fuller understanding of the ancient Hebrews, then, we must supplement the Bible with knowledge gained from archaeology and writings from other ancient cultures.

Some of the missing information is linguistic. The average American adult has a vocabulary of 20,000-30,000 words. The Old Testament contains only 8,000 distinct words. Not a complete language by any means.

Its books use the word for nephew, for example, but not niece. They speak of sewing but never of needles. They mention knives and forks but never spoons. They talk about combing one’s hair, but never use the word for comb. Since needles, spoons and combs appear regularly in the archaeological record, the failure to mention them in these books does not mean the Israelites lacked them.

The biblical books also left out important historical information.

For instance, during the four centuries before Joshua and the Israelites conquered the land of Canaan, it was controlled by Egypt. The books describing the Israelites’ entrance into Canaan never indicate that Israelites fought Egyptians, or even mention Egyptians, even though the Egyptians controlled Canaan longer than the United States of America has been a country.

The Merneptah Stele, erected by Pharaoh Merneptah in 1207 B.C., describes his military expedition to Canaan during which he conquered a people called “Israel,” along with other opponents. This battle goes without remark in the biblical books.

Once the Israelites were in Canaan, biblical books widely report that Israelites used horses. Chariots were a frequent mode of transportation, at least among the nobility and the military. But, what the books do not reveal is that Israel’s chariots made the Israelites a military powerhouse in the eighth century B.C.

It was not until the discovery, in 1861, of the Kurkh Monolith, a carved stone stele written by the Assyrian emperor Shalmaneser III, that this became apparent.

Shalmaneser spent much of his reign trying to break through to the eastern Mediterranean coast from Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq). The Kurkh Monolith states that, in 853 B.C., Shalmaneser defeated a coalition of 11 smaller countries at Qarqar, along the northeastern Mediterranean coast. Among these was Israel, under the leadership of King Ahab.

To make the size of his victory clear, Shalmaneser listed the number of soldiers, cavalry and chariots each country brought to the battle. Israel brought 2,000 chariots, far more than the next country, Damascus, which brought only 1,200.

Two thousand chariots represented enormous military strength and required a large support system. Chariots were expensive and required regular maintenance. Each chariot would have had three horses assigned to it: two to pull it and one in reserve. That would mean 6,000 horses would have gone north to the battle.

At the site of Megiddo, one of King Ahab’s largest cities, archaeologists found remains of a large stable near the main gate. This suggests that the Jezreel Valley, with its large fields, was a key location for managing such large herds.

So, while the Old Testament provides some indication of Israel’s language and history, we need to look to archaeology and the written records of other countries to understand more fully the Israelites and the books they wrote.

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