

What's All The Talk About Camels?

Did you hear the buzz last week about camels? Maybe you saw something on the news or on Facebook. Two professors from Tel Aviv University recently published an article about camels in Palestine. Here is the paragraph that set the news wires on fire,

“It was recently suggested that the introduction of the camel to the southern Levant occurred in the early Iron Age (late 2nd–early 1st millennia BCE) [approx. the time of Abraham, rb]. Our study of faunal remains from Iron Age sites at Timna, together with previous studies of Late Bronze and Iron Age sites at Timna and Wadi Faynan, enable us to pinpoint this event more precisely. The new evidence indicates that the first significant appearance of camels in the Aravah Valley was not earlier than the last third of the 10th century BCE [approx. the time of Rehoboam, Jeroboam I, and the beginning of the divided kingdom, rb].”¹

In typical sensational form, the headlines took this paragraph and ran wild: National Geographic: Domesticated Camels Came to Israel in 930 B.C., Centuries Later Than Bible Says / Forbes: Camels Don't Belong in the Old Testament / Time: The Mystery of the Bible's Phantom Camels / CNN: Will Camel Discovery Break the Bible's Back? / Fox News: Camel Bones Suggest Error in Bible, Archaeologists Say.

Here is a simple breakdown of what's happening. The camel paper says that there is no evidence of *domesticated* [vs. wild] camels in Palestine prior to about 930 BC. Based upon the lack of camel bones in excavated cities and their presence in paintings, camels were not an essential staple of Ancient Near Eastern living. This is an apparent problem because the mention of camels in Gen. 12-50 (Abraham thru Joseph) are dated roughly to 2000 – 1700 BC. Further, they are mentioned in Ex. 9:3; Lev. 11:4 and Deut. 14:7, which was written around the time of the Exodus (approx. 1400 BC). There are other mentions in Judges, Samuel and Kings as well. Is the Bible wrong? If domesticated camels did not appear in Palestine until about 930 BC, then why does the Bible say that they were there about 1000 years earlier?

My first reaction is to argue; but then I stop and remember that this is not the first time something like this has happened. Our memories are short, and our perspective is small, and headlines do what they are designed to do—attract readers. I'll give three (really big) examples of where this kind of things has popped up in the past. First, the Hittites are mentioned throughout the Old Testament. This problem, historically, was that there was no archaeological proof of their existence—until the late 1800s. In 1853, Francis Newman wrote, “...if the Hittites existed at all...” This was the kind of critical approach to the Bible. The Hittites were a fictional people who never really existed; but time proved him wrong, and now there is much to say about the Hittites.

Second, Dan. 5 & 8 refers to the last king of Babylon as Belshazzar. The problem was that until 1854 the only known records of the Neo-Babylonian Empire listed Belshazzar's father, Nabonidus, as the last king of Babylon. The only apparent answer at the time was to claim that the Bible must be wrong. Then, in 1854 the Cylinders of Nabonidus were discovered in Ur. As it turns out, the Bible taught something that secular archaeological history did not.

Finally, critical scholarship (even today) claims that Christianity is not the result of Jesus and his apostles and their teachings, but that it was born as a gradual process of religious and political evolution. One such “proof” is

¹ http://archaeology.tau.ac.il/ben-yosef/pub/Pub_PDFs/Sapir-Hen&Ben-Yosef13_CamelAravah_TelAviv.pdf

the late date of Biblical witnesses. An argument might sound something like this: The New Testament documents were not actually written until much later than we are inclined to think (even up to the end of the 2nd century). Simply consider the titles of Bart Ehrman's latest books: *Forged: Writing in the Name of God: Why the Bible's Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are* (2011); or *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (2009). In 1934 C.H. Roberts published his findings on a tiny little scrap of the Gospel of John called p⁵², which put the Gospel of John with certainty towards the first part of the 2nd century—much earlier than critical scholars wanted to say it was written. Even as I write this article, the world is anxiously waiting for Brill to publish a book. In 2013 Daniel Wallace claimed to have discovered a 1st century fragment of Mark's Gospel. We'll see what the evidence says. If it is confirmed, doubters will be forced to move their dates up again, just as they have time and time again in the past.

The point in all of this is to wait. Don't get excited when headlines like these pop up. The so-called dating of domesticated camels in Palestine is just one of many historical examples of people looking for a reason to not take God's Word for what it is – reliable and true. I will cast my lot with God.

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