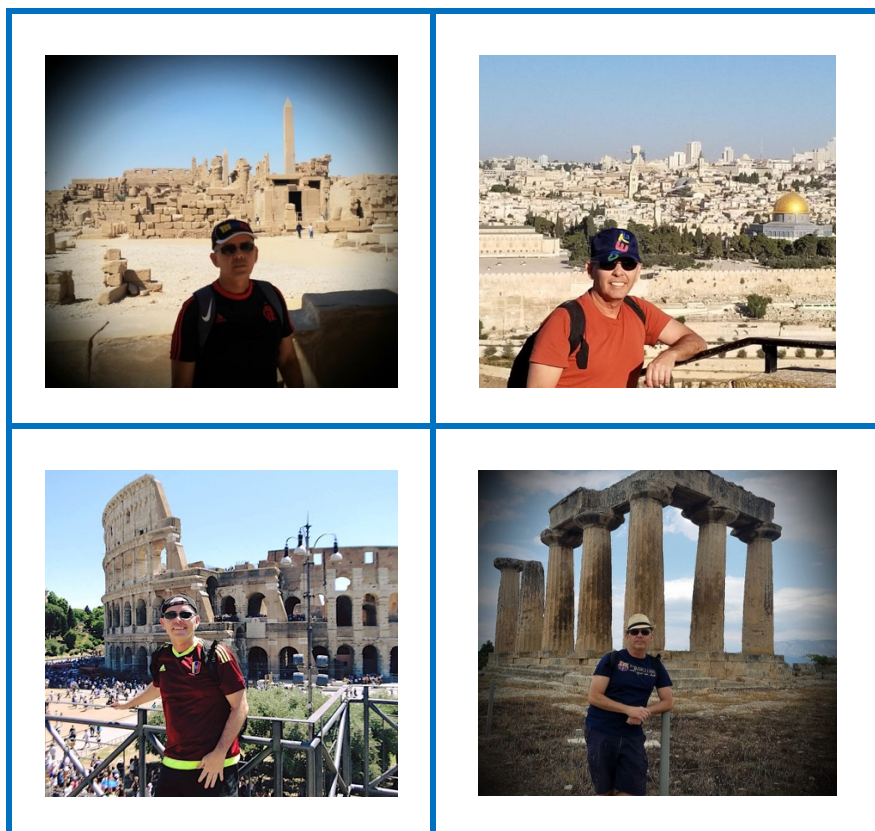


August 10, 2021

Obvious and Not-So-Obvious Lessons Drawn from Archeological Tours in the Biblical World

Aquiles Ernesto Martínez¹



¹ Dr. Martínez, born and raised in Venezuela, is an Ordained Elder in the United Methodist Church, Professor of Bible and Religion at Reinhardt University (Waleska, GA, U.S.A.) (aem@reinhardt.edu), and is currently part of a research group called “Arqueologia do Antigo Oriente Próximo -Universidade Metodista de São Pablo”, in Brazil.

With the support of Reinhardt University, I have been fortunate to travel to some of the most remarkable places in the Greco-Roman World and the Ancient Near East. In these travels, I have been involved in several activities and projects, which have significantly contributed to my academic career and the education of my students: picture-taking, analysis, and posting them in social media; archaeological digs as a volunteer; participating in conferences led by prominent scholars; visiting prestigious museums; participating in research tours to key religious and historical sites; attending ground-breaking lectures on topics pertaining to personal areas of interest; and reading, writing, and publishing articles, essays, and books addressed to different types of audiences.

In all these formative adventures, the land of Palestine has been a mandatory point of reference because of its obvious connections with the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, the larger social milieu of which they are reflection, and the main focus of my scholarship. Visiting other sites related to the field of Comparative Religions has only enriched my knowledge, beliefs, and methodological leanings.²

The fascinating thing is that every time I have had the privilege of crossing borders and immersing myself in a variety of historical settings, my expectations have been reassured but mostly challenged and even changed, thanks to the achievement of several learning outcomes mutually upholding. My openness to cross-culturalism, history, religion, and ancient texts, the decisive role played by social location in the formulation of meaning and relevance, along with a restless curiosity and a compare-and-contrast approach to social reality, have been rewarded with the abandonment of some old concepts, the refinement of previous ideas, and the addition of new insights. A list of

² Which resulted in the publication of my book *Encounters with the Mystery: An Understanding of Religion* (Waleska, GA: Reinhardt University and CreateSpace.com, 2019), in English and Spanish.

publications and a promising research agenda have also been part of this harvest of benefits.³

Being a firm believer that there should be an application of what I think and do, and that all the gifts, talents, and the knowledge I have drawn from all my experiences must be shared with others, through the present autobiographical exercise, I would simply like to identify some of the greatest and yet simple lessons I have been able to learn over the years.

1. Deeper Knowledge of the Dominant Milieu

The first lesson that comes to mind is as simple as it is self-evident for those of us who have passionately studied the Bible contextually. Because of my trips, I now have a more profound appreciation and understanding of part of the larger generating matrix and influencing environment of the original writers and readers of the Bible and other Semitic and non-Semitic cultures. The simple fact of being present in some of the geographical and architectural dilapidated scenarios, experiencing different climates, and seeing first-hand many artifacts have given a more precise picture of the contexts where important events, stories, values, beliefs, and customs of the past took place and developed. My photography has not only strengthened my exegetical work but have

³ As exemplified in the following works: “Grande es Artemisa diosa de los efesios según Hechos 19:23-41 y otras fuentes”, *Arqueología Metodista* (5 de enero del 2021); “Observaciones metodológicas acerca de la arqueología bíblica y la interpretación bíblica”, *Pistis Praxis: Teología Pastoral*, vol 12, no. 2 (maio-agosto 2020), 251-275 <https://periodicos.pucpr.br/index.php/pistispraxis/article/view/27110>; “Cesarea a la Orilla del Mar: Pablo y el mundo *detrás* de los Hechos de los Apóstoles” 01/07/20 *Arqueología Metodista* <http://portal.metodista.br/arqueologia/artigos/2020/cesarea-e-la-orilla-del-mar-pablo-y-el-mundo-detras-de-los-hechos-de-los-apostoles/view>; and “Tesoros bajo tierra, escombros y silencios: fundamentos de la arqueología bíblica”. 06/04/20 *Arqueología Metodista* <http://portal.metodista.br/arqueologia/artigos/2020/tesoros-bajo-tierra-escombros-y-silencios-fundamentos-de-la-arqueologia-biblica/view>

also guided my students' imagination as I try to bring that world to them. This, in itself, has been very rewarding since the Bible has no drawings, videos or photographs, and it does not always do a good job in describing the actual contexts.

2. Biblical Texts Becoming Alive

Trying to visualize how the biblical world looked like, based on the present layout of many sites and the surrounding topography, has been an incredible experience that has sharpened my knowledge, skills, and methodology. Among other benefits, it has improved my exegetical and hermeneutical analyses of biblical texts in conversation with their macro milieu. Thanks to my access to the material culture, I can now have partial access to information that biblical passages take for granted, are in the background, do not describe, or do it in fragmentary, incomplete, and even slanted ways. As a result, my understanding of the Bible, its creators, and intended readers has been powerfully illuminated. Because of the presence of figurines, altars, temples, and statues, the pervasiveness of idolatry and non-monotheistic religions, as denounced in the Bible, has been well attested. The authors' narratives are relatively consistent with the terrains and the existing material culture as well. In any given plot, places can play primary or secondary role making the Bible more accessible, readable, and relatable. Thanks to all these expeditions, the hidden backgrounds of biblical texts have been made explicit.

3. Cultural Consistency and Predictability

Based on the remains of what used to be creations and representations of now-gone peoples, I have been constantly reminded how similar if not equal people are at so many levels. But, like us, they are also creatures of habit. Regardless of culture, place of living, and time in history, all of us are and behave "the same" way. We have the tendency to create what we have inherited from our predecessors, and what we create is an extension of who we are, what is easy, and what is comfortable. With little changes,

then, all humans follow patterns, repeat themselves, and are predictable. Because of this timeless trait, all people may be studied cross-culturally but also analogically. No matter where you go and with some expected local changes, Greco-Roman theaters were built according to the same designs. The same thing may be said about pottery, temples, and paintings. And because of all these similarities across the board, we can frequently know who their creators were and what time periods their creations were popular. For all practical purposes, it would be no exaggeration to say that, essentially, “If you have seen one, you have seen them all!”

4. The Identity and Use of Sources

When one notices significant connections among ancient manuscripts and epigrams and think about when, how, and from whom the information recorded in these media came, the issue of sources and their use receives our devoted attention. But even more interesting has been the amount of information these writers provided and how precise they were about places, individuals, and events. How is it possible that in “illiterate societies” or times in which writing was absent or very rudimentary, for example, information could be so massive at times and so accurate? This is fascinating. How did they know what they knew and communicated so well? Where did the data come from? Oral tradition, live informants, documents and/or the writers’ personal knowledge? Or is it possible to even entertain the hypothesis that many or some of these writers were geniuses since their long-term memories were above average? Similarly, how does one explain similarities and differences among different accounts? Coincidence, access to common sources, authorial creativity, or all of these possibilities? Although today it is commonplace to believe that ideas did not come from heaven or were articulated in a vacuum, many times we fail at unveiling some of the mysteries associated with the origin and use of ideas in the biblical world as well as their parallels.

5. *The Tangible Legacy of the Elite*

Consistent with what I knew from studying literature, the big structures (or whatever is left of them) archaeologists normally discover are a living testimony to the socio-economic radical disparities that characterized life in antiquity. The ruins of temples, palaces, mortuaries, and citadels are primary indicators of the dominant sectors of past cultures and who were at the margins and at their service; unfortunately, they ultimately pay tribute to those who were at the top of society. This means that, in order to have a wider picture of the ancient world, from the available material evidence, we are forced to draw inferences about the lives of common people, particularly regarding those who lived in the rural areas or were nomads. The reason for this type of approach is obvious: except for pottery and similar evidence, they hardly ever left enough material culture to study them directly. At the same time, the remains of impressive buildings may be taken as symbols of the narcissistic personalities of kings, the pleasure-seeking nature of the rich, and the universality of exploitative work. Thus, it would be no exaggeration to say that “the wonders of today,” which entertain world tourists, were built on the graves of those who served as them as slaves. Take, for example, the many pyramids of the Egyptian pharaohs, the fortresses build by Herod “the Great,” and the Roman Coliseum.

6. *Referential Coherence*

Not to be apologetic in any way, but it strikes me as interesting that the authors of many biblical texts, at the very least, were knowledgeable of and consistent with the topography, climate, or geography of the land and some historical events, circumstances, times, and communities. This does not prove that the Bible is “the Word of God” *per se*. To embrace such an idea would simply fall under the category of religion and, as a result, is beyond the realm of socio-scientific scrutiny. But at best and in terms of their connections with the surroundings and material culture, the authors of biblical texts were

consistent with their social reality, making their messages well-grounded and relatively credible. In principle, this feature would challenge some pre-conceived forms of *a priori* skepticism. And while it is true that oftentimes we come across some biblical imprecisions, the lack of evidence to back up some historical claims, and even contradictions with respect to other sources, the creators of the world of meanings encoded in the Bible are not just “making things up.”

7. Gaps, Ambiguities, and Contradictions

No matter how precise the research is or claims to be, it has become apparent to me that the scholars that deal with material cultures to reconstruct the past of people or civilizations, experience many of the issues we biblical scholars constantly struggle with. Regardless of the sophistication of knowledge, how masterly the skills are, and how effective the methodologies might be, there will always be voids and imprecisions in our understanding of now-gone people, times, and cultures of which we only have glimpses. The evidence is not self-explanatory and is not a true, definitive representation of their reality and how they conceived it. Subjectivity cannot be transcended or ruled out either. Silence is the norm and puzzles are all over the place. The dots of the past cannot always be joined. Consequently, in our role as interpreters and in the face of the limitations and possibilities pertaining to space and time, our knowledge will always be fragmentary and imperfect. Thus, intellectual humility must be embraced at times as we respect and consider the hypotheses of others to improve our own.

8. *The Names of Places, Life-Stories, and the Land*⁴

I have known that all geographical areas (i.e., rivers, lakes, hills, islands, etc.) and settlements (e.g., villages and cities) have specific “names” with direct ties to concrete historical events and important individuals. But what I have not thought about is that sites are also linked to popular religious myths or specific characteristics of the surrounding topography. Recognizing this trait and using it as a criterion in our analysis helps tremendously in the reconstruction of the history of important places. The island of Mykonos, for example, was named after its first king, believed to have been related to the god Apollo. Its large rocks are seen as the petrified corpses of the giants killed by Hercules in a memorable battle. Jezreel, meaning “what God has planted,” may be taken as a reference to the beautiful and fertile nature of the valley where this biblical city was established. Also, information about the history of the names of any given place is not always available and leaves us wondering or forcing us to read between the lines based on the existing surroundings. Not only that, depending on who controls any given area, a specific place, over time, receives other names and new meanings are added to the list of previous ones. Naming in itself is an act of power, a window to the identity of leaders, their communities, and their times in history. Archaeologists call this practice “toponym.” Although, with a more encompassing connotation, literary critics or biblical experts refer to part of this phenomenon as “etiology.”⁵ The amazing thing is that both concepts overlap and, because of it, these disciplines can help each other.

⁴ A *Tel* is a technical term archaeologists use to refer to an elevated site or mound (natural, human-made, or a combination of both) where excavations are taking place.

⁵ For example, it explains and legitimates the origin and meaning of beliefs, rituals, names of people and events.

9. Tactical Locations

Travelling has made me paid more attention to the layout of the land and the physical structures built therein. In the process, what I have discovered is that many of the cities mentioned in the Bible, and that I had the privilege of visiting, were built on natural mounds, and surrounded by massive walls; they also had different systems for collecting, saving, and distributing water as well as administrative buildings, houses for the common people, stables, and places of worship. These cities also had an upper and a lower level, and their populations were distributed according to status, privilege, and power. But what really surprised me was that many of these cities were located in strategic loci. From high fortified places, not only did the inhabitants of these population centers take advantage of the topography, but the layout also allowed their kings and their armies to oversee valleys and roads, control trade, and provide protection against their enemies. Megiddo, Gezer, and Hazor were designed and built according to this architectural blueprint I just described; also the ports of Kavala (Neapolis), Corinth, Thessaloniki, in Greece, and Istanbul, in Turkey. Surprisingly, these characteristics are not explained in the Bible. Only participant observation can really reveal traits that are either taken for granted by biblical writers or not addressed because they are not part of their main agenda.

10. Myths, Holy Ground, and Ceremonies

In my dealings with world religions, I have witnessed a consistent and predictable association between the messages of popular stories (in their oral or written forms) and concrete places. Because of these associations and out of faith and devotion to different understandings of the Enigma (i.e., god, deities, spirits, ancestors, etc.), these places have been seen and treated as “sacred.” And with this understanding, devotees have built temples and altars or erected steles to visit them periodically to celebrate the identify and feats of selected individuals, deities, or communities. These links have been reinforced

by the creation of holidays, the use of specific symbols, and the performing special rituals therein. The annual pilgrimage to Ortygia, near Ephesus, is based on the understanding that Leto gave birth to goddess Artemis and to her twin brother Apollo on the island of Delos. In Palestine, Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike have erected sanctuaries in specific areas because of the significant role these areas have played in the plot of their oral traditions and Scriptures.

11. Everything Migrates

It is great to be reminded that when humans move from one location to another, for the reasons we all know, not only do they take their own cultures with themselves, but also their animals, coins, architectonic and artistic styles, utensils, manuscripts, tablets, figurines, bullae, epigraphs, clothes, jewelry, tools, weapons, statues of deities, seeds, figurines, jewelry, etc. Excavations have made this human practice apparent. Thus, from a holistic understanding of social and physical dislocation, relocation, and fragmentation, in the old days as in today's world, anything or everything migrates, not just people or animals. And as this happens, both "the guest cultures" and "the host cultures" interact with each other and might influence each other, but not always in a cordial, welcoming manner. The identification of structures and objects in Palestine from foreign cultures has corroborated the presence the Egyptians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Persians, Greek, Romans, and other late empires, as diverse written sources have said all along. Their presence in Palestine and other parts of the Ancient Near East demonstrates the relative freedom of movement, but also the constant efforts of crossing borders to control territories, its people, trade, and natural resources for nationalistic ends.

12. The Challenge of Dating

Guided by concrete scientific presuppositions, scholars have used several methods, techniques, and equipment to date the structures and artifacts they discover.

However, the fact that the margin of error may be anywhere between 80 and 100 years, that the evidence tends to be cumulative to argue for any given time frame, and that many of us have not had any scientific training to assess the results correctly, raises all kinds of questions and, at times, creates feelings of powerlessness and uneasiness. It forces many of us to rely on the expertise of others and, in extreme cases, depend on their best educated guesses. These feelings are only natural in a world in which we cannot and must not know everything. In a world of interdependence, what we can do is use of best judgement in dealing with the contributions of others and trust their conclusions and guidance but with caution and a healthy dose of suspicion. This is what it means to be part of an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary undertaking.

13. Construction, Destruction, Reconstruction

The identification of strata underground in order to name, date different historical periods, and identify the inhabitants of every layer of occupation, is part of the goals of archaeological digs. Based on sophisticated and scientific knowledge and through the use of specialized techniques and equipment, archaeologists can detect different periods of human presence as far back as pre-historic times. The astonishing thing is that oftentimes those underground strata can provide clues about possible natural disasters and battles at any given strata or even the abandonment of the settlement once survival was no longer possible. Layers of human presence may also be found in temples built on previous ones, for practical reasons or to even make the point that the new cult was “superior.” Beyond all these contributions, I would also like to think of these coatings of human presence as social indicators of power struggles and a predictable pattern that begins with the building of the city, its destructions by a more powerful group that takes over and rebuilds the place, but only until another army conquers, destroys, and does the same thing that previous inhabitants did with the settlement. In this sense, history repeats itself.

14. A Cycle of Violence and Devastation

In my visits to archaeological sites (explored or partially excavated), I have hardly ever found complete, undamaged buildings or intact objects for scrutiny. Although occasionally one might find objects relatively well-preserved, devastation is the norm. Leaving aside the additional disruption caused by guided excavations, what we normally see is ruins, dirt, junk, trash, sand, and rocks piled up. One is struck at so much damage, silence, and desolation. And only then, thinking about human pain and death, one is moved to ask some logical questions: What happened? All that work and investment of time and resources, for what? At the end of the day, was it worth it, and did the ancients even thought about the risks involved and the potential for failure? And while people abandon cities because of natural catastrophes (like earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, etc.), in many cases, we know that what now impresses our eyes may also be regarded as the result of cruelty, greed, egoism, and injustice. Regardless of their race, religion, and culture, are humans intrinsically violent creatures? Or perhaps one might entertain the possibility that the silent ruins are the indicators of situations in which all people were struggling to survive, resources were scarce, and only the strongest and fittest would make it to tell the story, either because they were in the land first and were able to defend it, because they took it away from others, and/or because communities were not willing or able to share the limited bounty.

15. Imperialism and Social Adaptation

In a world where dominant groups and minority groups interacted with such clear distinction between the elite at the top and the large majorities at the bottom, it is clear to me that marginalized communities or city-states resorted to different modes of social adaption, and understandably so. Those who lost and were powerless either accommodated, assimilated, or amalgamated. The strongest cultures always found a way of imposing their will and ways of living on those who were weaker or more vulnerable.

As a result, and for the sake of survival, many people marginally participated of the imposed social life while trying to maintain their own collective identity, actively got involved in what was offered, or simply adopted the ways of the strongest until their own uniqueness ended up disappearing. This is precisely what happened in the Greco-Roman world. These modes of social acculturation are partially attested in the ruins of buildings and artifacts of different sorts. With some local input, the layout and design of many cities, walls, temples, and ceramics, for example, tend to imitate what they have inherited from the conquerors. In this sense, imperialism triumphed and was effective.

16. Empires Come and Go

As revealed by diverse historical documents and epigraphical witnesses and unequivocally reinforced by present ruins everywhere, there is an important lesson that gives me hope as we face newer forms of exploitation and oppression by foreign nations in our globalized, digital, scientific, post-modern, global village. When it comes to privilege, fame, and power, no community, nation, civilization, or empire is eternal. They all fade away. And while this in itself does not guarantee that specific good things will cross our path in the future or what they will consist of, at least it gives us the reassurance that pain and death are not forever. In due time, glory will give way to misery only to be replaced by stronger, evil systems and ideologies that fortunately will disappear as well, as we all try to create a better society. Hardly anything is truer than this law of history. A Spanish saying puts it this way: *¡No mal que dure cien años ni cuerpo que lo resista!* (lit., “There is no evil that lasts more than 100 years and a body that can cope with it”).

17. The Pervasiveness of Religion

In my tours, the premise that religion is as old and human existence has been strengthened and diversified with the addition of more insights derived from the material evidence that scholars have unearthed and interpreted for our benefit. In most

of the places I have visited, I have found evidence of people's beliefs in higher beings or another world, not so much in manuscripts, ostraca, or similar means, but primarily in the design of temples, altars, statues, figurines, coins, paintings, tombs, stelae, pottery, columns, and the walls and floors of houses and palaces. Although subject to criticism by our standards, they did their best to please and honor their deities in exchange for the many benefits received. But what has really stuck with me, in the absence of clear explanation of what they ultimately believed in and meant, is how much emphasis ancient cultures put on rituals or ceremonies. I have noticed the same thing happening among Native Americans and other primitive and religious minority groups. While in the West we have focused so much on "ideas" or "reason" to explain spiritual or esoteric realities, in more pristine societies, "religion", as a cultural effort to create connect with the invisible world and cultivate a relationship with it, was a practical undertaking, not so much an intellectual one. For them, such a mystical relationship was something they simply believed in, experienced, and did.

18. In Their Image and Likeness

In my book *Encounters with the Mystery*,⁶ I have argued that all religious are concrete extensions, replicas, and/or symbols of who they are, their histories, and the cultures they represent. Therefore, when look at the abundant material culture they have left behind, in reality we are looking at their creators' projections of their own selves. From this perspective and contrary to what Abrahamic monotheistic religions have defended for centuries, humans are not ultimately created in the image and likeness of God, but the other way around. Part of this characteristic involves a direct connection with politics to an extent in which one cannot differentiate one institution from the other.

⁶ See https://www.amazon.com/Encounters-Mystery-Aquiles-Ernesto-Mart%C3%ADnez/dp/1729526675/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=encounters+with+the+mystery%2C+aquiles&qid=1626637196&sr=8-1

What we call politics and religions are practically the same thing. We can easily see this in the graphic representations of the gods and goddesses in the Greco-Roman world *vis a vis* political figures or kings. The many statues, frescos, stelas, figurines, and paintings I have seen, mirror, not who the deities were and did, but part of the identity of their artists, the cultures they were members of, and the leaders they were committed to. These media reveal people's beliefs, daily habits, religious practices, and worldviews. In my opinion, all these traits have important methodological implications with respect to how we should study the ancient world.

19. Water is Even More Precious

Water is indispensable for the existence and survival of all living beings and organisms. But somehow this truth, when interpreted in light of the Crescent Levant, with its fertile and barren soring areas, becomes even truer. Because of its many droughts, scarce lakes and rivers, scorching heat, and deserted areas, water was very difficult to find, conserve, and distribute in mostly deserted regions or desolate dunes. Natural wells and oases are scarce too. Thus, communities in the Ancient Near East really struggled to make this precious liquid available to their families. Despite this uphill situation, it amazes me to see how the ancients used their imagination and intelligence to build cities near sources of water or, when this was not possible, how they took advantage of the topography to bring water to the cities by creating sophisticated cisterns, channels, and aqueducts. As research has shown, in the desert of Nabatea, the architects of Petra built a very sophisticated system of water distribution before the collapse of this important city and its inhabitants were forced to go someplace else. Something very similar took place with the building of the fortress of Masada and the seaport of Caesarea Maritima.

20. Somebody's and Nobody's Land

Seeing first-hand so much destruction as the result of natural disaster and armed conflicts, as the analysis of strata has shown in dialogue with what ancient documents affirm, has made me asked a series of questions for which there are no definitive answers: the land belongs to whom and on what basis? + Who were the first ones to ever settled in any given area? Or is it more appropriate to think of plurality of owners at different times? What right does anyone have to come, destroy, and occupy a piece of earth that peaceful people have been living in for years? What possible justification will there be to expropriate someone who has previously expropriated someone else? How does one go about legitimating either action? And accepting the paradox that the land has historically belonged to somebody and nobody at the same time because of greed and hunger for privilege and power, I am often reminded that we must go back to and reaffirm the theological and moral maxim that the land ultimately belongs to God. And humans should be their God's faithful and responsible stewards.

21. Tentative Frameworks of Interpretation

In addition to the previous lessons and to expand and justify what I already knew, I have been reminded of the centrality of subjectivity in the generation, codification, and communication of meaning. Dirt, stones, and rubble never interpret themselves; people do this. Material cultures are imperfect indicators of someone's creations of the past. But in order to interpret that past, we obviously rely to presuppositions, criteria, and methods. We need to start somewhere and have at our disposal useful tools, don't we? And since there are limited number of manuscripts and inscriptions in the ancient world to interpret that world, archaeologists, just like Bible scholars or historians do, create tentative frameworks of interpretation that need calibration and diversification as time goes on and new discoveries cross our path.

22. Cognitive and Methodological Parallels

Thinking about the theme of methodology, I have come to the realization that the field of Biblical Studies, in its nature, scope, and goals, is very similar to archaeology, history, and other disciplines. Epistemological, philosophical, and methodological possibilities and limitations overlap with my own area of specialization. Upon this foundation, therefore, I believe I can easily and with confidence move from my area of expertise to another to better understand both in the process, and be part of an educated, engaging dialogue. Again, consistent with my compare-and-contrast approach to life, this rediscovery has been very enlightening in my professional development and has given me a boost to interact with other sources of knowledge. Since I believe I must share with others what I have been able to assimilate over the years, I have tried to pass this important lesson unto other generations so they can capitalize on what they are good at and are familiar as the first step to transition into other fields. Starting with points in common is always part of the secret.

23. What “Really” Happened and on What Basis

Being exposed to different interpretations of the identity of people or events of the past has really made me revisit some important questions about the nature and purpose of history: How do we know that an individual or group existed and that any given event took place? What are the appropriate criteria we must use to decide? What is our definition of history or is it more appropriate to talk about histories? What should the goal(s) of this discipline be? What role, if any, does subjectivity play in the interpretation of the past? Is it possible to be objective and accurate? What should we do when we have two different interpretations that conflict with each other? How does one determine what version is right and which one is not, and how does one know? What elements should be part of a precise understanding of the past? My experience has somehow validated the paradoxical principle that “truth” is a relative concept and that its meaning, significance,

and validity, at the end of the day, will depend on the interplay of so many variables. I have also entertained the possibility that diverse concepts of what is historical or not must be diversified, especially when it comes to religious views. Part of the challenge is that we have been so much influenced by Western historicism that we have a very restricted notion of what is factual.

24. A Voice of the Voiceless

Because present material culture, for the most part, is the tangible legacy of people at the top of society or those who were members of the elite, it is obvious that we must not rely solely on what we have at our disposal to assume or conclude that this type of evidence speaks for all sectors of ancient society on equal basis. At best, we can use objects and big buildings to draw inferences about marginalized communities. With their logical exceptions, in quantity and quality, present ruins represent the rich and powerful: kings and queens, priests, members of the nobility, and the military. And if this is true, our methods of analysis of the past must be calibrated and diversified. New presuppositions and procedures must be implemented to try to recover the untold side of the story of those who are not alive or who left hardly anything to tell us who they were, what they believed in, and how their lives were like. Part of this process involves trying to draw inferences or read between the lines in order to speak for those communities whose identities, values, beliefs, and practices are buried and silenced by the extant dominant material culture.

25. Romanticism, Skepticism, and Anything in Between

It has become apparent to me that there are intellectual pressures that may influence or even determine scholarly interpretations. One could simply use the material culture to try “to prove” that the Bible is right. One may also have the opposite pre-conceived goal in mind, or simply adopt a middle-of-the road stance. On the basis of

already reached conclusions, some people may try to make sense of the meaning of rituals, beliefs, traditions, customs, and symbolism, pushing aside the objective, factual truth or twisting it to their own advantage. Many times, the seemingly face value rhetoric of biblical texts can easily prevail over critical thinking or contrary evidence. In either one of these cases, one has to be aware of existing presuppositions, proceed with caution, and let the evidence speak for itself somehow so we can modify our beliefs and future procedures or get rid of them altogether if necessary. An open mind is needed and so should be a disposition against hermetic, irrational dogmatism. Archaeology is as subjective as any other discipline, with its pros, cons, and grey areas.

26. Power Struggle and Excavations

The Ancient Near East is as conflictive a region today as it was centuries ago. Depending on whom you ask, this may have negative or positive implications as well as different interpretations. However, given the present socio-political situation in Palestine, for example, I know that the power struggles in the land and nearby regions can impede or promote excavations; many are indifferent and believe that resources should be used for other priorities. Structural constraints and interests are primary forces in shaping or, in extreme cases, determining research and its conclusions. One can easily see this operating in the occupied territories in Palestine - take Samaria, for example. In getting involved in archaeological projects or articulating certain conclusions, one has to be careful with external constraints as one weighs in the choices available and their potential repercussions. Sadly, peaceful archaeological expeditions cannot be carried out in the land where peace is a deeply rooted desire if not a utopia. *Scholarly Tours are Rare*. My experience has taught me that, for the most part, group trips to Palestine and other parts of the world tend to be tailored to meeting the needs of tourists or religious communities whose members participate on periodical pilgrimages to sacred sites in the region. This means that oftentimes the information provided about the history and culture of the land

and its peoples tend to be faith-based or depending on legendary and sometimes nationalistic interpretations for entertainment purposes. Unfortunately, educational tours or scholarly expeditions are the exceptions and oftentimes have to compete with superficial, idealistic understandings of the present material culture. Unless you are part of university programs, the expeditions led by scholars are not as numerous as they should be. I hope this changes in the near future.

27. The So What Question

As a matter of principle, I believe that all areas of learning must be meaningful and somewhat applicable. Along with that, every expert is responsible for modelling this principle and finding ways of making it achievable for others. I understand that what might be relevant for one person might not be relevant for another. However, when I think about archaeological work, I frequently wonder how archaeologists justify the importance of what they do and whether they are successful in bringing others on board or not. Consistent with this concern, is there more to excavations than the thrill of discovering treasures of the past in order to reconstructing people's past beliefs, practices, and daily living? If so, what is it? Or is this an area of specialization that only matters to their practitioners and beneficiaries for sake of knowledge and nothing like it is in any other discipline? Are excavations worth of the investment of time, energy, and use of so many resources? And going beyond the implied issues alluded by these questions, how does archaeology contribute to the wellbeing of others? What are the implications for the construction of a better society, if any?

28. Opportunities to Get Involved

Not without any criticism, it has been interesting to me to see how many groups of volunteers have been involved in digs, educational programs focusing on the history, religion, and culture of the Ancient Near East at different levels, and an increasing

interest in sponsoring initiatives of this sort, particularly by philanthropists. The chances to participate are growing although such experiences are still limited to professors and students who can afford to be part of these activities as volunteers or who might benefit from scholarships and grants extended to them in their countries of origin or international organizations. This is only to say that although there are exceptions to the rule, archaeological work continues to be limited to privileged countries at those at the margins continue to be dependent. I also find paradoxically if not unfair that while numerous volunteers literally do “all the dirty work,” someone else gets all the credit.

29. The Future is Full of Surprises



There are still many archaeological, historical, and religious sites in the biblical world yet to be discovered and analyzed. Underground or in remote areas, the treasures

are there waiting to be exhumed. The future is promising, and new understandings are on their way. Hence current presuppositions and conclusions are tentative, must be put on hold, and be re-evaluated constantly. We must not prove or disprove anything *a priori*. What was true in the past might not be true tomorrow. Therefore, we all need to be patient and open to surprises in the spirit of hope. From this standpoint, the history of research has been and will always be self-corrective as part of that restless quest for knowledge, truth, and wisdom.

Presented in a telegraphic format and briefly fleshed out as theses or axioms, all the above lessons are not complete, unique in themselves, or definitive. More nuancing and examples are needed. A healthy critique is a necessary second step, and I am sure more insights are yet to cross my path. For now, I simply look forward to visiting more places and letting my exchange with the new experiences and the material culture enlighten me once more. Learning is truly a life-time adventure we should all embark on, fully enjoy, and share with others!