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Fact-Checking The Bible – In Chicago's Oriental Institute

By **Aimee Levitt**

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he Oriental Institute, one of the world's most valuable collections of ancient world artifacts, takes no position of the historical veracity of the Bible. But one of its most precious holdings testifies vividly to at least part of it.

In the early seventh century BCE, Sennacherib, king of Assyria, invaded the kingdom of Judah. The Assyrian army destroyed the fortified cities of the north and rapidly advanced toward Jerusalem. Sennacherib demanded that Hezekiah, the king of Judah, empty the royal treasury and strip the Temple of all its gold and silver. He also sent a message to

Hezekiah, telling him that the Judean god was useless and that if the Judeans surrendered, he, Sennacherib, would restore the land's prosperity. If not, he would destroy Jerusalem.

The Judean version of what happened next appears in the [Second Book Of Kings](#). God, angry at Sennacherib's taunts, reassured Hezekiah that all would be well. He then sent an angel to smite the 185,000 Assyrians camped outside Jerusalem. Sennacherib retreated, only to be murdered by two of his sons in the temple of Nineveh as he prayed to his own god.

The Assyrian version appears on a 14-inch tall, six-sided clay prism inscribed with closely written rows of minute cuneiform text at [Oriental Institute](#) museum at the University of Chicago, one of the nation's largest repositories of texts and artifacts from the ancient Middle East. Sennacherib, it says, did indeed invade and destroy a lot of Judah, but turned back before he could take Jerusalem. The prism doesn't mention the 185,000 smitten soldiers, but it also doesn't give any other reason for the abrupt reversal. Maybe it was worth the effort to sack the city. Maybe the Assyrian army had indeed drained the Judean treasury and decided they'd collected enough loot. Maybe there was an urgent matter back at the palace in Nineveh that needed to be attended to.

Whatever the case, Jerusalem was saved, and with it the religious tradition that would become Judaism. "If there was no Jerusalem said Joey Cross, a graduate student of the Hebrew Bible and Egyptology at the University of Chicago "there would be no Bible. The deliverance of Jerusalem is one of the most important events in the history of ancient Israel. It was a sign the Israelites were protected by God. Even the Death Star couldn't destroy them."

But the Assyrians left their mark on the Hebrew Bible anyway, and not just as an object lesson in what happens if you incur the wrath of God. Sennacherib's father, Sargon II, made every city and nation he conquered sign a written treaty, and the words to those treaties appear nearly word for word in the Book of Deuteronomy, except instead of pledging their fealty to Sargon, the Israelites show their devotion to God.



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[Anthony Weiss](#) | May 16, 2014

"Even the curses are lifted from treaties we have from the Assyrians," Cross said. "They were using the material they had at their disposal. They were God's vassals. They were making a political statement."

Cross is among the many scholars who use the Oriental Institute's holdings in their work. Since its founding in 1919, the museum has been one of the leading institutions in collecting and studying artifacts of ancient Middle Eastern civilizations, ranging from Egypt eastward to what is now Iran. In the past, its work has been interrupted by wars and revolutions in the Middle East. But now for the first time, its work has been interrupted by events in the United States.

Museum officials say that the Trump administration ban this past winter on travel to six Middle Eastern countries has already affected fieldwork and research. An amicus curiae brief against the travel ban filed in February by the University of Chicago and 16 other colleges and universities mentioned that the Oriental Institute, which depends on scholars being able to travel to and around the region, has been particularly affected.

So far at least one scholar has been blocked from traveling to Chicago, and the museum's plans to resume excavation work in Iran have been postponed.

It's unclear how Cross's work will be affected by current events. But the museum continues to emphasize the importance of its work with public exhibitions and lectures. And the study of the origins of the Bible is of particular interest.

The Hebrews had a distinct advantage over other ancient civilizations, Cross said, in that their historical and sacred texts have been read continuously in the 2,000 years since they were first compiled into the Bible. Of course, the text of the Bible wasn't always consistent, as the world learned with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947. Its biblical fragments were found to vary in some cases from the Hebrew Bible we have today. The Oriental Institute has the only fragment of the scrolls on permanent display in the United States, a tiny 2-inch fragment of a psalm, shaped like the lower peninsula of Michigan.

But the writings of most of the other groups who lived in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia became altogether indecipherable after their people, who created them, died out, Cross explained. It wasn't until the 19th century that archaeologists and historians learned how to read them again. And it was sheer luck that one of the first newly deciphered documents from Mesopotamia was the story of a flood that mirrored the one described in Genesis. After that, researchers began looking for what Cross called "flashy" evidence that the Bible chronicled actual historic events.

In the past 50 years or so, though, scholarly interest has only grown in ancient Middle Eastern political documents and their relationship to the Bible. "There's a huge body of Near Eastern law that the authors of the Torah drew on," Cross said. "It helps us understand the world the Bible came out of. The biblical legal codes have their own spin, but they're based on what was around them."

It's unclear whether the Assyrians were aware that the Israelites and Judeans borrowed their legal codes, but even if they were, Cross said he didn't think it ever occurred to them to be offended that the Israelites substituted their God for the names of the Assyrian rulers. "Assyria was very big," he said, "and Israel and Judah were very small."

Another Oriental Institute artifact, a reproduction of an obelisk depicting the travels of the Assyrian king Sargon II, includes a drawing of King Jehu of Israel lying prostrate before him.

The ancient Hebrew authors also borrowed liberally from the Egyptians, particularly in Numbers, which enumerates the laws the Hebrews were supposed to follow when they were wandering in the desert after leaving Egypt. The Oriental Institute has an amulet on display that contains a prayer to the goddess Nekhbet. It reads like the Priestly Benediction from Numbers: “May the goddess and protect you, may she deal kindly and graciously with you, may she bestow her favor upon you and grant you peace.”

One of the more bizarre chapters of Numbers describes a procedure for detecting an adulterous woman. It involves transferring a magical spell to some holy water; when an adulteress drinks the water, it will cause her belly and thighs to distend. That comes from the Egyptians, Cross said. The Egyptians believed it was possible to transmit spells, prayers and information through water. The Oriental Institute has on display a small stele upon which is written, in hieroglyphs, a short prayer to the god Horus. Very few Egyptians could read, but if they drank water that had been poured over the stele, it would be as if they were saying the prayer themselves. The Egyptian word for “to swallow” also meant “to know.”

Unlike with the Assyrians, no archaeological evidence has emerged yet of how the tribes who lived in Israel and Judah were connected to the Egyptians. But, Cross said, there's no reason to deny that there was a connection: There was a lot of movement between what is now Israel and Egypt. The historical Egyptians appear to have been more tolerant than the Egyptians of the Bible. But other than that, Cross was reluctant to speculate on what events may have inspired the biblical Exodus.

“There's no way to say anything more,” he said. “In my opinion, it's a very risky affair.”

Correction: A previous version of this story stated that the Oriental Institute had the only fragment of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the United States. In fact, there are other fragments in the US, but the OI's is the only one on permanent display.

Aimee Levitt reports regularly on Chicagoland for the Forward. Contact her at levitt@forward.com. Follow her on Twitter

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Author

[Aimee Levitt](#)

