
Book Review

Vitaly Voinov

Institute for Bible Translation, Russia/CIS

The Bible Translator

2021, Vol. 72(2) 255–259

© The Author(s) 2021

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/20516770211033843

journals.sagepub.com/home/tbt



Paul J. N. Lawrence (2020). *Egg Whites or Turnips: Archaeology and Bible Translation*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock. 166 pp. ISBN 978-1-7252-6035-1 (paperback edition).

The only thing that people in general, including many Bible translators, know about the relationship between archeology and the Bible is what they have seen in Indiana Jones movies. Fortunately, there are scholars like Paul Lawrence who ably fill in the knowledge gap with books that are easy to access yet full of useful information, for both laypeople and translators. *Egg Whites or Turnips* is one such book.

Paul Lawrence is a Bible translator and translation consultant with SIL International. His academic specialization is Near Eastern archeology, which he has been actively involved in since the 1980s. Over the years Lawrence has authored a number of articles and books dealing with the Bible and ancient history, such as *The IVP Atlas of Bible History*, *The Books of Moses Revisited*, and *Treaty, Law and Covenant in the Ancient Near East* (co-authored with Kenneth Kitchen). His latest work, *Egg Whites or Turnips*, is a collection of very short articles dealing with some of the more obscure details that Bible translators have to deal with when working their way through Scripture. The material comes “out of notes amassed on Bible translation for over thirty years” (vii). Some of it had been published earlier in journals such as *TBT*, *Artifax*, *Buried History*, and *Bible and Spade*, while the rest is a previously unpublished compendium of information culled primarily from recent scholarship on various minutiae in the Bible. Lawrence’s book is not ground-breaking new research, but rather a condensed, useful overview of existing research by other scholars.

Corresponding author:

Vitaly Voinov, Institute for Bible Translation, 2 Andreyevskaya Embankment, Moscow 119334, Russian Federation.

Email: vovoinov@hotmail.com

Structure and content of the book

The first chapter sets the stage with a brief explanation of how archeological findings can sometimes help translators interpret difficult scriptural passages. It starts out by giving some very basic definitions—what biblical archeology is about, what languages the Bible was written in and translated into in ancient times, the three main types of evidence provided by archeology for biblical studies (geographical, textual, and material), and so forth. At the end of the chapter, Lawrence sets out his agenda for the book: to provide a selective but interesting summary of “how archeological discoveries of the past two centuries have impacted Bible translation” (13). The meat of the book follows in Chapters 2–11, each of which offers a collection of short examples of relevant archeological discoveries.

Chapter 2 presents several Bible passages containing difficult words that have been clarified by other ancient Near Eastern texts. For example, the book’s title *Egg Whites or Turnips* is taken from an exegetical difficulty in Job 6.6, in which the meaning of the Hebrew word *ḥallāmût*, traditionally translated as “egg white” based on the Aramaic Targum, can now be translated more accurately as “*ḥilimetu*-turnip” based on fifteenth-century B.C. Akkadian texts discovered at the site of Tel Atçana in Turkey. (Lawrence readily admits that the traditional rendering has greater intelligibility in its favor.) Lawrence also discusses nine other problematic terms found in the Old Testament, relying primarily on Akkadian, Ugaritic, and Egyptian texts to help solve the exegetical difficulties.

In Chapter 3, Lawrence presents information on material artifacts uncovered by archeology that elucidate the meaning of four OT terms—catapults, beds, hinges/door sockets, and hooks.

Chapter 4 moves on to archeological finds that clarify the nature of musical instruments mentioned in the Old Testament. Although Lawrence admits that matching Hebrew instrument names to instruments found in the archeological record is often a tenuous endeavor, he is cautiously optimistic because the sheer number of musical artifacts that have been found so far in Israel, Egypt, and Mesopotamia is very large.

Chapter 5 is the longest chapter in the book, with twenty pages. In it Lawrence deals with archeological finds that help identify thirty-two of the plants and trees mentioned in Scripture. He divides his review of the archeological record into eight subcategories: vegetables, pulses, cereals, condiments, fruit and nut trees, other trees, fiber and oil-producing plants, and miscellaneous vegetation.

After flora in Chapter 5 comes fauna in Chapter 6, subdivided into mammals, birds, reptiles, and animal products (such as dyes, silk, and ivory).

In Chapter 7, Lawrence discusses the identification of precious and semi-precious stones in the Old and New Testaments. He focuses on cognate terms in other languages, and notes that in some cases no archeological finds have yet been adduced to confirm certain gem identifications based on cognates.

Chapters 8 and 9 are exceedingly short, only three pages each. Chapter 8 deals with the archeology of disease, in particular bubonic plague and leprosy. One of the most interesting passages of the book for me was footnote 5 on p. 77, where Lawrence very briefly argues that archeological findings in southern Turkey from the third millennium B.C. actually invalidate the often-cited assertion that Hansen's disease (leprosy) was nonexistent in the Near East prior to the start of the Hellenistic era. Chapter 9 presents five examples from the Dead Sea Isaiah Scroll that provide a more satisfying Hebrew reading than the Masoretic Text of Isaiah does.

Chapter 10 focuses on the archeology of places—specifically, OT geographic designations outside the land of Israel, such as Togarmah and Ophir—that are also mentioned in other ancient Near Eastern texts or inscriptions. Such identifications sometimes help modern-day scholars and translators get a better general feel for where on the map these places actually were.

While most of the information amassed in the previous chapters had to do with the Old Testament, in Chapter 11 Lawrence turns to papyri (primarily, the Oxyrhynchus papyri) and stone inscriptions from the Hellenistic and Roman periods that shed some light on unclear terms in NT texts. Words and phrases examined include “the kingdom of heaven is *within you/within your reach* [ἐντὸς ὑμῶν]” (Luke 17.21); “chief shepherd [τοῦ ἀρχιποίμενος]” (1 Pet 5.4), which “was once considered to be fabricated by the New Testament's writers” but has now been demonstrated by archeology to have been “in common use at the time” (100); and eleven other NT Greek terms.

The final chapter is a two-page summary and conclusion. This is followed, however, by four valuable appendices on the terms discussed in Chapters 4–7: musical instruments, flora, fauna, and precious stones mentioned in Exod 28. In each appendix, Lawrence lays out in tabular form the most relevant archeological and textual details that shed light on the meaning of these terms. See, for example, an entry from the Plants and Trees appendix (111) in Table 1 below.

Four indexes end the book: (1) an ancient document index, including ancient Near Eastern documents, OT and NT passages, Greco-Roman writings, and a few references to rabbinic writings and early Christian writings; (2) a subject index; (3) a word index (organized alphabetically by language names, from Akkadian to Ugaritic); and (4) an index of zoological and

Table 1. Sample entry from Plants and Trees appendix.

Reference	Name	Eng. name	Scientific name	Archeological evidence	Represented in art	Textual evidence
Num 11.5	<i>qiššūāh</i>	Musk-melon	<i>Cucum ismelo</i> var. <i>chate</i>	≠ cucumber. Seeds found in Predynastic Egypt 3500 BC	Shown on several Egyptian tomb paintings and on a piece of linen	Akk. <i>Qiššū</i> from Old Babylonian period (1894-1595 BC) onward

botanical names according to the Linnaean system. These indexes provide a useful tool for quick data mining from the information-filled chapters.

Strengths and weaknesses of the book

Lawrence’s book directs our attention to many fine details of the biblical text that often get swept under the rug due to the translator’s primary focus on broader issues such as key terms. But the arcane minutiae still need to be translated at some point; they cannot simply be ignored indefinitely, so Lawrence’s labor to gather many of them together here is very welcome. Having a highly competent professional’s glance at these issues together with his bottom-line analysis frees up Bible translators to focus their own research on other needed areas. The details provided in this book often go beyond what the UBS Handbook series can offer, since in questions of arcane minutiae, the Handbooks sometimes merely give an overview of the options and recommend settling for the majority view even if this has not taken into account the most recent data from the archeological record.

Lawrence is excellent at setting out each problem with a minimum of verbiage and presenting a solution if one is potentially available. Where evidence is lacking or ambivalent, he cautiously withholds judgment, as in his discussion about identifying the spice *šēḫēlet* (onycha?) in Exod 30.34 (66–67). He does not get side-tracked in the text, but leaves broader issues of interpretation for footnotes. At the same time, as has already been noted by at least one other reviewer of Lawrence’s previous books (see Ralph K. Hawkins’s review of *The Books of Moses Revisited* in *Review of Biblical Literature* [02/2019]), it sometimes feels that the material is too brief, too condensed, and that a bit of expansion on the topic at hand would make the material even more digestible and pleasant to read, with less of a rushed feeling.

Lawrence does not hide the fact that he holds to a fairly traditional Christian viewpoint on some of the issues mentioned in the book (the early date of the Exodus; the final chapters of Daniel as actual prophecy,

not *vaticinium ex-eventu*; BC/AD instead of BCE/CE; the christocentric salvific golden thread of Scripture; etc.). However, his theological commitments are nowhere elevated to a central point in his argument, and do not leave the reader feeling that Lawrence has a doctrinal axe to grind in this book. Lawrence typically mentions such points in passing, allowing readers to follow his footnoted references to a more detailed examination of the issue at hand if they are interested. On occasion, a bit of apologetic spirit may be noticed, as in his mention of “chief shepherd” (100), but never annoyingly so.

Sometimes the arrangement of the material in the book seems a bit forced, such as Chapter 9 dealing specifically with the Dead Sea Isaiah Scroll. The chapter left me with the impression that Lawrence couldn’t bear to leave out this set of notes and felt he had to put it somewhere in the book, so he created a separate three-page chapter for it. Nevertheless, the material itself is well presented and should be interesting to readers, especially if this book is their first exposure to the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The strengths of *Egg Whites or Turnips* far outweigh any weaknesses. It will find a welcome place in the working library of translation consultants, exegetical advisors, and advanced translators, and should also be of interest to lay readers who want a fast-paced, bite-sized introduction to the relationship between archeology and Bible translation.