

# Camels and Critical Thinking

By Andrew Roberts

“Hump Day!” Camels are iconic animals that American advertisers have used to sell everything from cigarettes to car insurance. Yet in recent weeks camels have been the face of a new campaign pushing Biblical skepticism while selling Tel Aviv University. A February press release from American Friends of Tel Aviv University (AFTAU) entitled *Finding Israel's First Camels* boldly claimed:

Camels are mentioned as pack animals in the biblical stories of Abraham, Joseph, and Jacob. But archaeologists have shown that camels were not domesticated in the Land of Israel until centuries after the Age of the Patriarchs (2000-1500 BCE). In addition to challenging the Bible's historicity, this anachronism is direct proof that the text was compiled well after the events it describes.

Now **Dr. Erez Ben-Yosef** and **Dr. Lidar Sapir-Hen** of *Tel Aviv University's Department of Archaeology and Near Eastern Cultures* have used radiocarbon dating to pinpoint the moment when domesticated camels arrived in the southern Levant, pushing the estimate from the 12th to the 9th century BCE. <sup>1</sup>

What is AFTAU? It is an American fundraiser and support organization for Israel, the city of Tel Aviv, and Tel Aviv University (TAU).<sup>2</sup> Basically it is a booster club. Like any good booster club, if their school does something cool, they issue a press release to raise the school's profile, generate revenue, and attract potential students. Surprisingly, this press release was published by AFTAU a full eight days before it was posted on the English webpage of Tel Aviv University, itself.<sup>3</sup>

Within days, the press release was picked up and rebroadcast on several internet news sites including CNN<sup>4</sup>, Foxnews<sup>5</sup>, and the NY Times<sup>6</sup>. I read these three news stories and the original press release quoted above. What struck me was the journalism practiced in all three news reports. There was little to none.

By that I mean, that any quotes used in the news stories were taken directly from AFTAU's press release. Furthermore, all of the archaeological information, as well as the “conclusions” drawn about the historicity of the Bible, were taken from the same press release. It appears that the press release was copied and pasted with only minor commentary or further sensational suppositions to dress it up. No interviews with the archaeologists appeared. No additional insights from U.S. or British universities were shared. Not even a spokesperson from AFTAU or TAU made comment.

Seriously? These news outlets announced to the world “proof” of Bible anachronisms and nobody wanted to go on the record?

These news outlets used a sensationally written press release from a fundraising organization as the smoking gun for the demise of biblical historical reliability. I'm sure it generated some website hits but it evidenced a lack of critical thinking all the way around.

1. **The Findings Do Not Add Up To The Conclusions.** If you just read the press release closely you see that the interpretation of the data is entirely overdrawn from the report of the dig and dating experiments. In other words, a sensational lead paragraph was written, but the information doesn't support it. The archaeologists were excavating copper smelters that date to the time of David or Solomon when they found the bones. They did not find camel bones in older rock strata at those sites, so the press release says camels never lived anywhere or were used in any capacity in Canaan prior to that “moment.” That is a real stretch. Furthermore, when questioning the Genesis account, how could someone unequivocally pronounce that a single family hailing from

Mesopotamia could not have had camels? Even if one were to concede that camels were not widely domesticated in Canaan at the time of Abraham, does it follow that it is an absolute impossibility and thus the Bible's record of one family owning camels must be an "anachronism"?

2. **Other Archaeological Data Pertaining To Camels Was Not Mentioned.** This TAU dig is not the first excavation teaching us about camels in all of Middle Eastern archaeology. For example, archaeologist

"Randall Younker discovered a gold camel figurine in a kneeling position from the 3rd Dynasty of Ur (2700-2350 BC). He also found a petroglyph at Aswan in Egypt which shows a man leading a camel by a rope, dated to 2423-2263 BCE, a figurine from Aabussir el Melek, Egypt showing a camel carrying a load dated to the 3rd millennium BCE, and a figurine from the 2nd millennium from Hama in Syria. According to Yonker: "This is not to say that domesticated camels were abundant and widely used everywhere in the ancient Near East in the early second millennium. However, the patriarchal narratives do not necessarily require large numbers of camels.... The smaller amount of evidence for domestic camels in the late third and early second millennium B.C., especially in Palestine, is in accordance with this more restricted use" (1997, 42:52)."

Also, according to the September/October 2002 issue of *Archaeology Odyssey*, "Domesticated camels appeared in Mesopotamia by the middle of the second millennium B.C. The dromedary (a single-humped camel) was originally domesticated in southeastern Arabia, perhaps as early as the third millennium B.C. Around the same time, the Bactrian (double-humped) camel, which was mistakenly thought to be native to Bactria, in northern Afghanistan, was being domesticated in eastern Persia. The Sumerian word for the Bactrian camel literally means 'wild bull from the foreign mountains.'"

This information coincides perfectly with the time and travels of the patriarchs. Abraham was from Ur of the Chaldees which was Sumeria/ Mesopotamia.

It is not the booster club's job, when writing a press release, to give greater context to archaeology and camels. However, a journalist might think it wise to give a more complete story and then show what detail the new "discovery" potentially adds to the story.

3. **Camel Bones Offer Limited Information.** Aren't there some significant limitations on what camel remains can and cannot tell us? Camel bones can tell you exactly *where* that camel was buried. The bones may (and various dating methods will give various results) date to an approximate age and they may tell you something about the health and use of *that* camel. But these bones cannot tell you everywhere that camel lived, or traveled, or how it was *always* used.

Indeed, the AFTAU the press release admitted other camel bones have been discovered in older rock layers in Israel, just not near the copper smelter sites. These camel remains were said to be "wild" camels. How can such be proven? It is important to assert they were "wild," otherwise there is nothing newsworthy about carbon dating the copper smelter camel remains!

It is not surprise that another salvo has been launched against the Bible from the ranks of "Science" or the media. But it is surprising at how lazily some of them are going about it. Close reading and critical thinking is all that is required to steel one's faith against the latest advertisements for skepticism: camel remains.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Finding Israel's First Camels*, AFTAU. ORG, February 3, 2014.

<http://www.aftau.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=19673>. Downloaded Feb. 14, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.aftau.org/site/PageServer?pagename=about\\_aboutaftau](http://www.aftau.org/site/PageServer?pagename=about_aboutaftau) . Downloaded Feb. 14, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> *TAU Scientists Find Israel's First Domesticated Camels*, February 11, 2014.

[http://english.tau.ac.il/news/first\\_camels](http://english.tau.ac.il/news/first_camels). Downloaded Feb. 14, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Joel S. Baden, *Will Camel Discovery Break the Bible's Back?* CNN.COM, February 11, 2014.

<http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2014/02/11/is-camel-discovery-the-straw-that-broke-the-bibles-back/>. Downloaded Feb. 14, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> *Camel Bones Suggest Error In Bible, Archaeologists Say*, Foxnews.com, February 6, 2014.

<http://www.foxnews.com/science/2014/02/06/camel-bones-suggest-error-in-bible/>. Downloaded Feb. 14, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> John Noble Wilford, *Camels Had No Business in Genesis*, NYTimes.com, February 10, 2014.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/11/science/camels-had-no-business-in-genesis.html>. Downloaded Feb. 14, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Comment 2. Noah Weiner, "Camel Domestication History Challenges Biblical Narrative," *Bible History Daily*, Feb.

7, 2014. <http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/ancient-cultures/daily-life-and-practice/camel-domestication-history-challenges-biblical-narrative/> Downloaded February 14, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Noah Weiner, "Camel Domestication History Challenges Biblical Narrative," *Bible History Daily*, Feb. 7, 2014.

<http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/ancient-cultures/daily-life-and-practice/camel-domestication-history-challenges-biblical-narrative/> . Downloaded February 14, 2014.