

Facts and Fancy about the Bible - 14

In his treatise on Genesis, Voltaire commented, “Learned and ingenious men, full of their own talents and acquirements, have maintained that it is impossible that Moses could have written the Book of Genesis...”

This attack on the authenticity of Genesis developed after Voltaire’s time into a multi-pronged assault on what was first known as the Hebrew Torah = “law” of God, which was put into writing by Moses. Now also called the Pentateuch - from Ecclesiastical Greek, “five books” - it contains the first five books of the Old Testament, from Genesis to Deuteronomy.

Voltaire continued, “One of their principal reasons is that in the history of Abraham that patriarch is stated to have paid for a cave which he purchased for the interment of his wife, in silver coin, and the king of Gerar is said to have given Sarah a thousand pieces of silver when he restored her, after having carried her off for her beauty at the age of seventy-five. They inform us that they have consulted all the ancient authors, and that it appears very certain that at the period mentioned silver money was not in existence.”

A review of the facts as they are now known shows that the author was not only ignorant of all the facts, but ignored the necessity, clearly stated in the text, of weighing out the silver. Genesis 23:16 NKJ states that “Abraham weighed out the silver for Ephron which he had named in the hearing of the sons of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, currency* of the merchants.” In contrast, the NIV, and other modern translations similarly, render the last phrase, “four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weight current among the merchants.”

*From the Latin Vulgate Voltaire would have read *monetae* = money/coin, similar to NKJ, “currency”, which also indicates money. But the later renderings reflect what is now known from archaeology, the scientific study of the material remains of past human life and activities.

The International Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology shows that the shekel, originally Babylonian, was a unit of weight equal to about 11.5 grams or 0.4 ounce of silver.

On the subject of coins that Dictionary comments, “The earliest known coins seem to have been introduced in the seventh century BC...Coins in the Bible only begin to be mentioned specifically in the post-Exilic period” (sixth century BC). Of Abraham’s purchase from the Hittites at Hebron, the Dictionary notes that after metals replaced cattle, (from which the Latin word for money, *pecunia* - from *pecus* = cattle - is derived), and which had been the most frequent medium of exchange, ingots of uniform shape were molded, in addition to rings and bracelets of standard weight - see Genesis 24:22.

“True values of these forms of currency could only be established by weighing the items” at a time when cheating was prevalent - see Proverbs 16:11.

As to the “thousand pieces of silver” - Genesis 20:16 - this was not a commercial transaction, but a gift from Abimelech king of Gerar, hence there is no mention of weighing out the silver. But this incident ties in with the comment of Voltaire, in mocking style, on the mention of Sarah’s beauty at the age of seventy-five - adding further implication that this whole story is mythical.

In so saying he was rejecting the possibility of divine intervention in the furtherance of the Creator’s purpose.