

CAMELS

CULTURAL INSIGHT

The Old Testament mentions camels multiple times in the narratives of the patriarchs and matriarchs in Genesis. This can raise some questions because the patriarchs and the matriarchs are usually dated to have lived in the second millennium BC, and we do not find strong evidence for domesticated camels in the Levant (the region of the Holy Land) until around the first millennium BC (around the time of David and Solomon).

There are a number of ways to deal with this inconsistency while still preserving the integrity of the biblical record. One is to suggest that there were domesticated camels earlier, but archaeological evidence simply has not preserved them. Another is to observe that these stories circulated orally for centuries and so could have been written down after the domestication of the camel. The appearance of camels would then reflect the cultural understanding of that later period retrojected into the original received narratives. Something similar can be seen in the King James translation of the temple lampstand as a “candlestick” (Exodus 25:31–35). Although candles were not a technology used in the biblical period, the seventeenth-century European translators transmitted the text according to their own cultural and technological understanding.

Related verses

Genesis 12:16

Genesis 24

Genesis 31:17–34

Genesis 37:25

Exodus 9:3

Leviticus 11:4

Judges 7:12

Job 1:3

Credits

Author: Avram R. Shannon

General Editor: Taylor Halverson

Associate Editor: Morgan Tanner

Senior Editor: Sarah Whitney Johnson

Assistant Editor: Verlanne Johnson

ScripturePlus Design: Jasmin Gimenez Rapple