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# The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of its Sacred Texts

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## **The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of its Sacred Texts**

Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman

New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002

385 pages, \$18.70 Softcover

If you want one clear and well written book to bring you up to date on the historical and archaeological investigation of the Hebrew Bible, this is it. A renowned archaeologist teams up with a fine textual scholar to present a thorough and eminently readable summary of current research.

Both the subtitle and the introduction (22) claim that this is a “new vision” of biblical history. The prologue claims that recent archaeological work has “revolutionized the study of early Israel” (3). For those familiar with this field of study during the past couple of decades, there is nothing particularly new or startling here. On the other hand, readers who have not kept abreast of the discipline since seminary some years ago, or who are not familiar with the academic study of the Hebrew Bible, may well be surprised, even shocked.

Finkelstein and Silberman argue persuasively that it was the time of King Josiah, the latter part of the seventh century BCE, which was the formative period for the major portion of the biblical story (Torah and Deuteronomistic history). The decline of the Assyrian empire, prior to the expansion of the Babylonian empire, provided a unique window of opportunity for the small states of the Levant. Since the larger and wealthier northern kingdom of Israel had been devastated by the Assyrians, it was now Judah's turn to shine, and to dream of “a great, Pan-Israelite state” guided by a centralized cult (283).

Many would disagree, of course. Even so, earlier traditions were probably used in the creation of a national epic. Nevertheless, Finkelstein and Silberman are able to show how decisively the archaeological and historical evidence fails to support or even outright contradicts the details of the story. Students of the Bible will be familiar with challenges to the historicity of the patriarchal narratives, the exodus and the conquest. But in addition, the authors show that even the legendary united kingdom of David and Solomon is missing from the archaeological record. In fact, the evidence suggests that prior to the seventh century BCE, Judah was a relative backwater, and Jerusalem a rather small city. Thus they appropriately

call the northern state "Israel's forgotten first kingdom" (chapter 7), and argue that Jerusalem only belatedly came to prominence.

If Finkelstein and Silberman find little historical accuracy in the biblical story, this does not lessen their appreciation of the Bible. Indeed their entire book is suffused with admiration for the biblical vision and its enduring power. In particular, it survived and adapted to the exile and return, when others would have given up.

This book often reads more like a historical novel than a dry, academic tome. Yet it shows an intimate knowledge of the entire range of historical and archaeological research in the field. The lack of footnotes will occasionally annoy the specialist, but the bibliography (356-372) is carefully chosen, and is organized by chapters and topics. All in all, this book is highly recommended!

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### **Preaching Mark**

Bonnie Bowman Thurston  
Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002  
218 pages, \$27.90 Softcover

If you are in the habit of preaching from the Gospels, this affordable volume will be a helpful addition to your library. Bonnie Brown Thurston has written a dry but useful book for preachers of Mark. There is nothing very exciting about it, to be sure, but her succinct and detailed approach will likely endure in value.

*Preaching Mark* addresses the whole of the Markan Gospel (not just lectionary selections). Thurston has divided the material into eight progressive chapters. Within each chapter is a brief introduction followed by chapter-and-verse pericopes (sadly lacking helpful titles). Further reading is given at the end of each pericope (useful for those who have access to scholarly journals, frustrating for those who do not!); endnotes and two appendices (lectionary readings, helps for preaching Mark) are also provided.