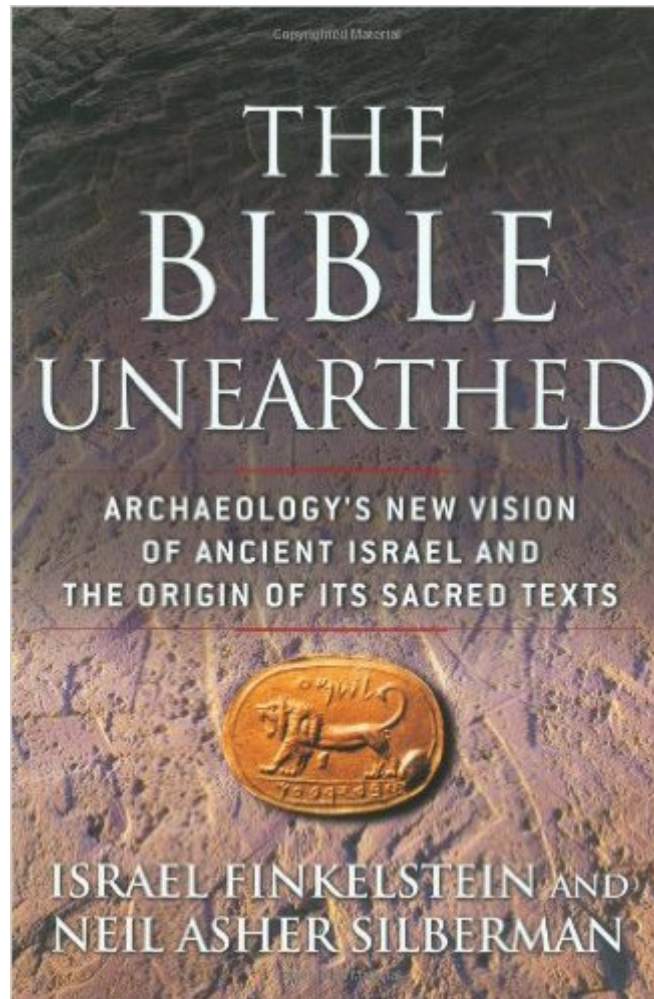


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# The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision Of Ancient Israel And The Origin Of Its Sacred Texts



## Synopsis

In this groundbreaking work that sets apart fact and legend, authors Finkelstein and Silberman use significant archeological discoveries to provide historical information about biblical Israel and its neighbors. In this iconoclastic and provocative work, leading scholars Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman draw on recent archaeological research to present a dramatically revised portrait of ancient Israel and its neighbors. They argue that crucial evidence (or a telling lack of evidence) at digs in Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon suggests that many of the most famous stories in the Bible—the wanderings of the patriarchs, the Exodus from Egypt, Joshua's conquest of Canaan, and David and Solomon's vast empire—reflect the world of the later authors rather than actual historical facts. Challenging the fundamentalist readings of the scriptures and marshaling the latest archaeological evidence to support its new vision of ancient Israel, *The Bible Unearthed* offers a fascinating and controversial perspective on when and why the Bible was written and why it possesses such great spiritual and emotional power today.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In "The Bible Unearthed," Israel Finkelstein and Neil Silberman display a rare talent among scholars--the ability to make specialized research accessible to a general audience. In this book the authors reveal how recent archaeological research forces us to reconsider the historical account woven into the Hebrew Bible. Among the conclusions they draw are: 1) The tales of patriarchs such as Abraham are largely legends composed long after the time in which they supposedly took place. This is seen in anachronisms such as the use of camels, not domesticated in the Near East until

nearly 1000 years after Abraham's time, in many of the stories.<sup>2</sup>) There is good reason to believe that the Exodus never happened. Had migrants to the number of even a small fraction of the 600,000 claimed in the Bible truly sojourned in the Sinai Peninsula for 40 years, archaeological evidence of their passage would be abundant. In fact, there are no traces of any significant group living in the Sinai at the supposed time of the Exodus.<sup>3</sup>) The Israelite "conquest" of Canaan, such as there was, was far from the military invasion of the books of Joshua and Judges. Many of the cities described as being conquered and destroyed did not even exist at the time, while those that did were small, unfortified villages, with no walls to be brought down, by blowing trumpets or otherwise.<sup>4</sup>) While there is evidence that a historical David existed, and founded some sort of ruling dynasty known by his name, there is good reason to believe that he did not rule over the powerful united monarchy described in II Samuel. One reason for doubt: Jerusalem, portrayed as the great capital of a prosperous nation, was during the time of David little more than a village.<sup>5</sup>) Neither Israel nor Judah emerged as organized kingdoms until significantly after the supposed period of the united monarchy. Israel does not appear as a recognizable kingdom until the time of the Omrides of the 9th century BCE, while Judah does not appear as such until the late 8th century BCE, at the time of kings Ahaz and Hezekiah. Along with their revision of the biblical account of history, Finkelstein and Silberman attempt to explain the origins of the Hebrew Bible, suggesting that the composition of much of the Bible can be tied to the religious agenda of King Josiah of Judah during the late 7th century BCE. While the origins of the Bible will never be known with certainty--there simply isn't enough evidence--Finkelstein and Silberman definitely provide a plausible interpretation. The authors, as I noted above, do a superb job of making their work understandable to non-specialists; since even college history majors often don't study the ancient Near East, they take care to include sufficient background information for the reader to understand the context of their account. Anyone with an interest in the subject will find "The Bible Unearthed" to be fascinating reading. And anyone who thinks the Bible is an accurate history book should definitely read it.

I just finished *The Bible Unearthed* and I have one overall word to say about it: EXCELLENT! First of all, the authors provide a complete and easy to read explanation of ALL of the "hot" issues currently debated in the field of archaeology and biblical studies. Should the reader not find full agreement with the authors' final conclusions, he or she will have the data available to express this disagreement, especially since the authors place their arguments in the context of what is believed by both majority and minority scholarly opinions. They provide an excellent summary of the opposing arguments; summaries that are fair and complete. Too often people are quick to dismiss

Finkelstein as a "biblical minimalist" because these readers are often misinformed or have misread Finkelstein's work. In "The Bible Unearthed," Finkelstein and Silberman are clear to disassociate themselves from the biblical "minimalists" while affirming the questions that they raise, questions that even the most "maximalist" scholar must honestly deal with in light of the paucity of archaeological evidence associated with the time of the ancestors through the rise of the Omride dynasty in 9th century Israel. One of the major questions plaguing the field of biblical studies is the one concerning David and Solomon. Do they really exist? Finkelstein and Silberman unequivocally state that both David and Solomon are historical beings. The magnitude of their kingdom, however, is the issue at hand. Based on the archaeological evidence, the authors suggest that the biblical account of these kings is a mixture of both fact and some embellishment by later authors, most likely writing during King Josiah's reign in 7th century Judah. Finkelstein and Silberman argue convincingly that Josiah, wanting to expand his kingdom to include the now fallen kingdom of Israel, found it useful to weave together the "histories" of the northern and southern kingdoms to create one unified and sacred text uniting the peoples of these two kingdoms. This understanding is not so far afield from earlier scholars who attribute the Deuteronomistic History (Joshua--2 Kings) to the time of Josiah and later. As a seminary professor and an ordained Christian minister, I am not willing to throw David and Solomon out and I struggle with those who argue that the Bible was constructed in the Persian and Hellenistic periods. Finkelstein and Silberman are not among these minimalists and are well within what is argued by mainline scholars, especially those trying to come to terms with how the Bible and the archaeological data coincide and differ. Yes this book will rankle feathers yet it isn't far afield from what has been recently argued by biblical experts. This book will be assigned to my students because I want these people, who will be church leaders and scholars, to struggle with these issues. It is a well written and researched book and has a great deal to offer the reader. Besides, should questions threaten one's faith, one must question the veracity of the faith that was threatened.

Whoa! If you are a person who interprets the Bible from a modern, traditional perspective then be prepared to be troubled when you read this book. These authors suggest some brow-raising hypotheses and seem to show some support for them. I read this book after I read Richard E. Friedman's book *Who Wrote the Bible?* That was a good way to do it. Friedman's gentle voice (he seems to still value the Bible as a spiritual guide of some sort and states he still holds a Christian perspective) tenderly lowered me into the cauldron while Finkelstein and Silberman's more stark and detailed punches knocked me around a bit. I will say that this book took some discipline for me

to get through. It was definitely worth the effort, but it is not quite as easy a read as Friedman's. I do grieve and mourn that the Bible will never be the same for me again. On the other hand, I am beginning to be hopeful that one can embrace all these new perspectives of the Bible and still find spiritual food (Walter Brueggemann is a Christian author that seems to have embraced many of these new findings and yet seems to be unperturbed by them. In fact he seems to be finding a way to incorporate them into his spiritual journey.) I must also admit that I am excited about what this new paradigm can do in liberating many of us from Biblioidolatry.

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