The high hopes of the first archaeologists who excavated in what is now the state of Israel never really panned out. They were certain that their new discipline would support the historical value of Old Testament narratives. As the methods of excavation and interpretation became more sophisticated, however, some archaeologists have abandoned this goal almost entirely. A good, readable, and fair assessment of what archaeology has revealed about the historical value of biblical stories is The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology’s New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts by Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman (New York: Free Press, 2001).

Finkelstein and Silberman provide a review of archaeology in Israel over the last several decades that can be disconcerting to readers who have not kept current in this area. Reflecting the scholarly consensus, they maintain that the patriarchal narratives (Genesis 12–50) cannot be used to reconstruct the history of ancient Israel’s ancestors. They note that despite years of intensive excavations in the Sinai, no archaeological evidence of a mass migration as described in the book of Exodus has emerged. Digs at sites such as Jericho,

Finkelstein heads Tel Aviv University’s Institute of Archaeology and directs the Megiddo Expedition while Silberman is a historian from Belgium’s Ename Center for Public Archaeology. They assert that the narratives found in the Pentateuch and the Former Prophets (Genesis through 2 Kings) were composed at the end of the seventh century B.C.E. Internal crises in Judah’s national life occasioned the telling of these stories whose purpose was to support the religious and political reforms of King Josiah. The Pentateuch and Former Prophets, then, had a theological purpose and do not provide an accurate account of ancient Israel’s history. Finkelstein and Silberman criticize modern attempts at reconstructing that history as little more than paraphrases of the biblical text because they are not fully informed by archaeology, which provides the data to write a genuinely accurate account of ancient Israel’s history.

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Ai, and Hazor have shown that the process of how the Israelite tribes acquired their land was a very complicated affair. It was certainly nothing like the quick military conquest by the armies of a united Israel under a single leader as narrated in the book of Joshua. Their most controversial assertion concerns the narratives about David and Solomon. Study of excavations at important Iron Age sites in Israel has led them to conclude that David and Solomon were local tribal chiefs and not the rulers of an empire as the books of Samuel and Kings assert. Finkelstein and Silberman characterize the narratives of the Pentateuch and Former Prophets as “a treasury of ancient memories, fragmentary histories and rewritten legends.”

A Counter-Position

While biblical scholars have had a few decades to digest the results of archaeology regarding the patriarchs, the Exodus, and the conquest, the more recent questioning of the historical value of the biblical narratives about David and Solomon has led to a debate that has sometimes descended into acrimony unworthy of scholarship. The most vocal opponent of Finkelstein and Silberman’s views is William G. Dever of the University of Arizona. In his book *What Did the Biblical Writers Know, and When Did They Know It?: What Archaeology Can Tell Us about the Reality of Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001), Dever takes on Finkelstein and others who read the archaeological record of the monarchical period differently than he does. Dever has not only the scholarly credentials to respond to Finkelstein and others; he also is a passionate and articulate exponent of the historical value of the biblical narratives.

Dever does not reject the consensus that has developed around the issue of the historicity of the narratives about the patriarchs and the Exodus. He does, however, see a convergence between the archaeological record and the biblical narratives beginning with the stories about the Israelite settlement at the end of the Late Bronze Age (thirteenth century B.C.E.). Dever reads the archaeological evidence as rooting the biblical stories about David and Solomon in the early Iron Age rather than in the seventh century. Excavation at sites such as Gezer and Megiddo support the Bible’s claim that these two kings ruled over a centralized state in the tenth century B.C.E. Still, Dever has to pepper his presentation with qualifiers such as “probably,” “perhaps,” and “almost certainly.” Nonetheless, he concludes that the archaeological record undergirds the historical value of the biblical narratives about the settlement and monarchical periods. Unfortunately, the polemical and patronizing tone of the book becomes tiresome.

One way to avoid the sometimes puzzling and rancorous scholarly debates is to read a book on this topic by a good popularizer. Amy Dockser Marcus, a former Middle East correspondent for the Wall Street Journal, has written an engaging description of how biblical archaeology has developed in recent years: *The View from Nebo: How Archaeology Is Rewriting the Bible and Reshaping the Middle East* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2000). Written for the general reader, this book does not contain the sort of argumentation and documentation that the books by Finkelstein and Dever contain; it is, nonetheless, responsibly done and a good place to begin.

New Testament Archaeology

While archaeologists who specialize in Bronze and Iron Age sites still occupy themselves with questions of historicity, those who focus on sites from the early Roman period in Palestine have not been so encumbered. At first, biblical archaeolo-
gists paid little attention to sites from the Roman period. New Testament studies focused on theology and nearly everyone assumed that archaeology had little or nothing to contribute. But the rise of the sociological and anthropological approaches to New Testament interpretation changed all that. The social sciences have shown that religious texts are bound to the societies that produced them. A prerequisite of informed biblical interpretation, then, is a knowledge of the societies in which the biblical tradition took shape. It is archaeology that supplies the raw data necessary to profile the Jewish and Greco-Roman spheres in which the books of the New Testament were written. Archaeology also helps cultural anthropologists describe the people who wrote and first read the Christian Scriptures by defining the characteristics of the “Mediterranean person” in the first century and all that this involves.

An excellent example of how the archaeological enterprise contributes to New Testament studies is Marianne Sawicki’s book *Crossing Galilee: Architecture of Contact in the Occupied Land of Jesus* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 2000). Sawicki offers a new model for understanding the Galilee of Jesus’ day: grounding and circulation. She maintains that “grounding and circulation constituted the basic idiom of Judean and Galilean social organization and its architectural expressions.” To sustain her thesis Sawicki must take on other models currently used to understand first-century Palestine: the economic conflict, gender-ideological, and honor-shame models. Here archaeological experience has led her to notice that these twentieth-century models have concealed indigenous practices.

Not only does Sawicki challenge the current models of understanding Galilean society and its values, she asserts that the views which portray the first Christian community as radically egalitarian and embracing a mission of liberation from oppressive social structures are misguided. She characterizes the activities of the early Church as “stealth tactics,” i.e., “adaptive innovation”—resistance to imperial structures rather than liberation from them.

Sawicki’s reconstruction of first-century Galilean society is, of course, speculative. The more focused her reconstruction is, the more speculative it becomes—something that she does acknowledge. A case in point is her discussion of the circumstances of Jesus’ birth. She cites Jane Schaberg’s hypothesis that Jesus’ conception was the result of his mother’s rape by a Roman soldier but maintains that this does not overturn Christian belief in Mary’s assent to a divine invitation. Her discussion of the consequences of this hypothesis for Jesus’ life and for Christian belief is creative and even inspiring.

Another look at how archaeology can inform New Testament studies is Jonathan Reed’s *Archaeology and the Galilean Jesus: A Re-examination of the Evidence* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 2000). Reed helps clarify how Jesus’ Galilean origins are reflected in his message and activity, his relationship to the Temple, and his appropriation of the prophetic tradition. Reed takes a close look at two important Galilean cities: Sepphoris, in whose shadow Jesus grew up, and Capernaum, which served as Jesus’ home during his ministry. Both these cities helped shape the religious, cultural, economic, and social context in which early Christianity arose. By closely examining several New Testament texts, Reed illustrates how archaeology can help in the exegetical enterprise. This book makes it clear that archaeology is not simply an interesting yet peripheral enterprise but one that goes to the heart of New Testament interpretation. An accurate picture of Jesus’ mission and ministry must be informed by a reconstruction of the social world of...
first-century Galilee—something that archaeology makes possible.

**Conclusion**

Scholars who work primarily with texts differ with one another about the interpretation of those texts. Sometimes the differences are striking. It should not be surprising, then, that archaeologists will differ in how they interpret what they find. Still, there is one significant point of convergence. All archaeologists agree that biblical interpretation that is not informed by the archaeological record is flawed. The people of ancient Israel, early Judaism, and the early Church left behind not only texts but material remains. The student of the Bible needs to become immersed in both.