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## Review of *Layer by Layer: A Primer on Biblical Archaeology* by Ellen White

Deirdre Dempsey

Marquette University, [deirdre.dempsey@marquette.edu](mailto:deirdre.dempsey@marquette.edu)

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## ***Review of *Layer by Layer: A Primer on Biblical Archaeology* by Ellen White***

Deirdre Dempsey  
Marquette University

For the past twenty years, I have taught a course that I designed and named, Digging the Bible: Biblical Studies and Archaeology. The impetus for this course on the relationship between biblical studies and archaeology was my experience at Tel Qarqur in Syria and Tel Nimrin in Jordan, both digs funded in part by the Catholic Biblical Association. The course has several goals: (1) to give the students an understanding of both biblical studies and archaeology as disciplines, (2) to introduce the students to the ongoing (not always harmonious) relationship between the two disciplines, and (3) to inform the students of some of the more important Ancient Near Eastern archaeological sites and discoveries.

I have never been able to find a textbook I thought adequate; some of the available textbooks focus too much on archaeology, not enough on biblical studies, or vice versa, and some textbooks are still mired in the 1950s habit of unreflectively interpreting excavations in light of the biblical text. Consequently, I have drawn my readings from a variety of places (for example, *Biblical Archaeology Review* or the now defunct *Bible Review*). This small book (the text is about 100 pages) fills a lacuna, not only for the undergraduate classroom but for graduate classes (for example, I plan to use the book in our MA in Theology Old Testament Method class). The book's author, Ellen White, does not shy away from the difficult task of defining biblical archaeology. Early in the book, in chapter 2, "The Bible and the Spade," the author notes that the phrase "biblical archaeology" has developed (this chapter gives a fascinating overview of the history of this development). Once used to refer to the archaeological subdiscipline that focused on ancient Israel and the nations surrounding it, now biblical

archaeology refers (or should refer) to an interdisciplinary dialogue between biblical studies and archaeology. White presents a clear and necessary argument against using biblical archaeology as a term for a separate discipline; this is, White argues, simply inaccurate.

This redefinition and rehabilitation of the phrase “biblical archaeology” is one of the most valuable aspects of this book, but by no means the only reason the book is useful. The book contains a chapter on the basics of archaeology; this chapter begins with a short history of the development of the discipline (it opens with a look at the career of Flinders Petrie), then turns to an explanation of modern principles. This chapter, titled “Archaeology 101,” is followed by a chapter on the basic methods of biblical studies, called “Engaging Exegesis.” Armed with a basic knowledge of archaeology and biblical studies, the student is prepared for the next chapter, “Biblical Exegesis and Archaeology: Stronger Together.” This chapter explores the benefits of dialogue between archaeology and biblical studies by way of a couple of examples. The first example sets the archaeological discovery of female figurines in Israel in dialogue with Genesis 31. White suggests that Genesis 31, the story of Rachel's theft of her father's household gods, could shed some light on what these female figurines might be. The text of Genesis 31 can help explain the archaeological data. The second, much longer, example uses the much-debated question of how the nation of Israel developed. White looks at each of the well-known three models (Conquest, Peaceful Infiltration, Peasant Revolt/Resettlement) through the lens of “Biblical Arguments in Favor of,” “Biblical Arguments Against,” “Archaeological Arguments in Favor of,” and “Archaeological Arguments against.” White is not trying to prove any of these models; her goal in this exercise is to demonstrate what archaeology can (and cannot) contribute and what the Bible can (and cannot) contribute, and how the dialogue between biblical studies and archaeology can lead to a fuller interpretation.

This well-written, well-organized book is useful for anyone teaching a class, undergraduate or graduate, that touches on how archaeology has impacted biblical studies. Each chapter ends with a list of key terms and a set of questions for discussion and review. Bolded terms in the text are defined in a glossary.