

Oxford Dictionary of the Bible and Archaeology

Daniel M. Master, ed. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Bible and Archaeology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. 2 vols. Cloth. \$295.00. ISBN: 9780199846535.

As the saying in the field goes, “Absolute truth in archaeology is generally good for about five years.” That being the case, it is often difficult for reference works, given their generally long production cycle, to maintain currency (xiii). This was illustrated a few years ago when Zondervan rather disastrously produced *The Archaeological Study Bible* (2006), a volume that was significantly dated before it was even released. This problem is further exacerbated by the fact that there is often a considerable delay from the discovery of an artifact to its publication. This reviewer is currently aware of three significant discoveries that directly impact Biblical studies that probably will not be published until the middle of 2014.

This set is part of the larger *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible* series that is being published in conjunction with the publishers, Oxford Biblical Studies Online. The total series will number twelve volumes. It also represents a move beyond their respected print volumes and “more and more, in digital format” (xiv).

The editor-in-chief of this set is Daniel M. Master, an Associate Professor of Archaeology at Wheaton College and research associate of the Harvard Semitic Museum. He is co-Principal Investigator and Field Director of the Leon Levy Expedition to Ashkelon, Israel, and co-editor of the final publication reports on Ashkelon (2008) and Tell Dothan (2005). He has assembled an impressive set of contributors, all experts in the field. In his rather brief introduction Master discusses the development of the field of “biblical archaeology” (xv) and the contribution of William Foxwell Albright. One could have wished that either his introduction were longer or there was an actual entry discussing the concept and history of Biblical archaeology as a discipline.

The thrust of these volumes is to move beyond a discipline dominated by physical artifacts to “pursue an approach in which geographic and social patterns are explored as a way of enhancing the reading of biblical texts” (xvii). Again, however, given the brevity of the introduction, Master does not elaborate on this, and one is left wondering how this “approach” is uniquely archaeological as opposed to the study of cultural geography.

The first volume contains the encyclopedic entries, while the second volume contains a “Chronology of the Southern Levant,” “A Topical Index of Entries,” a Directory of Contributors, and an extensive index. Each volume also contains the same listing of abbreviations in the front matter (which seems superfluous to repeat in Volume 2). Structurally, Master’s Levant chronology, where he also discusses the standard archaeological eras, would have been much better placed in the front matter of the first volume. The article authors are all named, and each entry has an extensive bibliography. For two volumes there aren’t that many articles, only 122 with an average length of nearly nine pages. One significant criticism is the relative limited number and poor quality of the pictures and scarcity of useful charts. The pictures are grayscale, but they often lack clarity, and detail is obscured (e.g., 1:383; 1:222; 2:108; 2:420). The pictures from Todd Bolen and Bibleplaces.org (a long-time instructor at the IBEX Extension Campus of The Master’s College) are generally superior. Interestingly enough, this reference work centering on the Bible adopts the neutral “Common Era” (CE) and “Before Common Era” (BCE) phrases for dating.

Because of limitations of space this reviewer cannot comment on all or even a significant number of articles, but several are noteworthy. Thomas Davis’s entry on “Ethnoarchaeology” explains that field well and notes that Albright “flatly dismissed” (1:383) this as a valid study model. The lengthy article on “Galilee” by Alexandre is well written and balanced, keeping the perspectives of the maximalist and minimalist schools fairly presented. There is an excellent article on “Numismatics,” a key source of artefactual information. Oddly enough, there is no separate entry for pottery, still one of the most significant and developed form of dating sites. One wishes that Yigal Levin had been allocated more space to expand his excellent article on “Bible and Historical Geography.”

Some of the articles are decidedly soft on archaeological material and heavier on cultural geography or cultural anthropology. The overall feel of these volumes is that it is a work in progress. The number of entries is small, and there are lots of holes (e.g., no entry on Ai, where significant work by Bryant Wood and his team is currently taking place). Articles on methodologies would have strengthened the work as well.

All in all, these are rather disappointing volumes in terms of actual archaeological studies. There are other significant options that are more thorough, including Oxford University Press's own *Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East* (1998). The nearly \$300 price is an excessive investment for the return in that field. If the volumes were the Bible and "Cultural Anthropology" this text would be more appropriately named. The Oxford name will naturally drive libraries to purchase this set for their reference collections and some researchers will benefit from the material, but many more seeking a detailed and traditional archaeological reference will be disappointed.

Dennis M. Swanson
The Master's Seminary