



Book Review
By Michael Chan

Clyde E. Fant & Mitchell G. Reddish. *Lost Treasures of the Bible: Understanding the Bible through Archaeological Artifacts in World Museums*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008.

INTRODUCTION/SUMMARY

Clyde Fant and Mitchell Reddish have written an excellent volume that may be useful to educators who are interested in how material culture sheds light on the Hebrew Bible (HB) and the New Testament (NT).

Lost Treasures of the Bible is, quite literally, a literary museum. The book is divided into ten units that are arranged in a loosely chronological order (e.g., The Persian Period, 267-85; The Hellenistic Period, 289-96), the result of which is a reading experience that feels like a guided tour of biblical history. The units are further divided into 2-5 page chapters, each of which is dedicated to a certain artifact or set of artifacts (e.g., The Rosetta Stone, 33-37; Head of Caligula, 329-332). Each chapter contains a general introduction to the artifact along with an explanation of its significance to the biblical material. In addition to a high quality picture, nearly every chapter contains the following information about the artifact: (1) dimensions, (2) the language used on the artifact (if applicable), (3) provenance (where it was found) (4) date, (5) present location, and (6) identification number. And while much of this information is clearly directed toward those who are planning to find these objects in a museum (xvi-xix), in my opinion, the book is written in such a way that both teachers and students will benefit from the layout, even if they do not have access to the museums in which the artifacts are found. In addition, many museums now have online collections that can be better navigated with the help of this book.

PEDAGOGICAL POSSIBILITIES

Lost Treasures of the Bible holds great potential for the secondary educator interested in classroom engagement with the Bible from the perspective of material culture and historical context. I will explore its pedagogical potential by way of two questions: (1) Would this book help prepare an educator to teach secondary-level students? (2) Would this book perform well as a classroom textbook?

Would this Book Help Prepare an Educator to Teach Secondary Students?

A secondary educator could easily use this book as a resource for lesson or even unit planning. The loosely chronological ordering of the book, the text citation index in the back, the timeline of rulers (xxii-xxv), and the detailed bibliography (434-443), make the volume user-friendly, even for those who lack extensive knowledge of biblical literature. For example, if a teacher were interested in constructing a unit on poetry and wisdom literature in the Bible, a quick perusal through the section titled "Poetry and Wisdom Literature" would provide a general introduction to the role of wisdom literature in the Bible and the ancient Near East. Regarding poetic materials, the authors also included a Sumerian love poem (see 247-49), which could be used in a lesson on love poetry in the biblical world. One could even compare Sumerian,

biblical, and contemporary love poems/songs, looking for similar themes, motifs, and images. Concerning the biblical materials, the Song of Solomon/Canticles would be the natural choice.

While I would highly recommend consulting other introductory resources to fill in the gaps (see the aforementioned bibliography on pages 434-443), *Lost Treasures of the Bible* certainly provides a helpful entry into the area of ancient near eastern archaeology as it relates to the Bible. Additionally, the authors include translations of important writings found on many of these artifacts, which provide the teacher with primary sources that she/he can easily cite in class, include in writing exercises, or utilize as focus texts. For example, the various quotations from the Sumerian Proverbs tablet on pages 242-243 could provide ideal material for a wide variety of assignments. Because each of the proverbs is pithy, clever, and often timeless (e.g., "In the city of no dog, the fox is overseer," 243), these statements could be implemented as entry points into a larger lesson on the genre of wisdom literature in the Bible/ANE, or as small group focus texts for discussion. Alternatively, placing one of these pithy proverbs at the top of a page and asking students to critique, qualify, or support the statement, would be an excellent way to develop critical thinking skills.

Would this book perform well as a classroom textbook?

The choice of any textbook is a challenging task. The choice of a textbook relating to the Bible, however, carries its own set of difficulties. Several issues must be considered, including, (1) the reading level of the students, (2) a book's appropriateness to a public school setting, and (3) a book's ability to effectively communicate information.

Beginning with (1), *Lost Treasures of the Bible* is written for an adult audience, although it is clearly intended for the non-specialist. That being said, if a teacher decides to use this book in a secondary education setting, students in the 11th-12th grade who are reading at grade level are probably the most appropriate audience. Alternatively, an advanced 10th grade class could probably work its way through the material as well. From a different angle, if a teacher were only interested in, say, a few key artifacts, copies of individual chapters relating to those artifacts could easily be made and distributed. Small group research projects and presentations dealing with certain artifacts are also possible.

Concerning point (2), the book is purposefully non-confessional. In the authors' terms, "this is not one of those books that will twist the facts or ignore evidence in a misguided attempt to 'prove' the Bible" (xviii). Conversely, I would add that neither is the book intended to *disprove* the Bible. I detect no hostility towards readers situated within faith communities. Generally, the authors have succeeded in providing a neutral evaluation of the material world out of which the HB and NT arose. In this sense, *Lost Treasures of the Bible* seems like an appropriate resource for a public school setting. Teachers, of course, must ultimately make this decision for their own classrooms.

On point (3), the book is generally effective and compelling in its communication of the relationship between the Bible and the various artifacts selected for discussion. Its heavy use of images, for example, contributes to its general effectiveness. As an example, students are often interested in how war was waged in the ancient world. Is it as it is in the movies? Well, sometimes war in the ancient world is more gruesome than anything Hollywood might dream up! One Neo-Assyrian wall relief from the time of Sennacherib (image 5 in the colored-picture section), for example, clearly depicts the flaying of prisoners. As an exercise in comparative media, it would be interesting to compare scenes of violence in modern films with scenes of violence in ancient media. Both forms of media are depicting the same thing (human suffering),

but are they doing it for the same reasons? Why does Hollywood feel a need to depict gruesome violence? Why did the Neo-Assyrians feel that same need? What role do depictions of pain play in our own culture? The art itself provokes such questions. Another part of the book's effectiveness, and one of the reasons it would make such an interesting textbook, is the authors' quotation of primary source material. For example, in the discussion of The Epic of Atrahasis (12-16), a creation and flood story that is similar to the stories found in Genesis 1-12, well over 20 lines from the Epic are quoted. Students, therefore, are not only given condensed summaries of texts and artifacts, they are also given the opportunity to connect objects with related contextual literature in translation.

To my mind, many of the most important characteristics of a classroom-friendly volume are present in this book. In particular, the images included by the authors are particularly relevant to the contemporary classroom. While most readers of the Bible are used to talking about the biblical world through the lens of texts (the Bible, in particular), visual sources are also an important window into the biblical world. And the fact that much of Israelite culture was illiterate suggests that the visual sources play a remarkably important role, and may be a more accurate depiction of how the "normal" Israelite thought about the world. Similarly, while schedules and funding often make it difficult, it would be interesting to team-teach a course on the Bible with an art specialist. The Bible, both in popular culture and the ancient world, was not only interpreted on paper, it was also interpreted in the visual arts.

While a teacher wanting to use this volume would undoubtedly have to supplement the book with outside resources (see below), I anticipate that those willing to use *Lost Treasures of the Bible* in the classroom will have an enriching experience.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

In this section, I would like point the reader toward some additional resources to supplement *Lost Treasures of the Bible*. Anyone teaching the Bible through the lens of material culture should be aware of the British Museum's vast electronic resources. Using museum numbers (like the one's provided in *Lost Treasures of the Bible*!) one can search for high quality images of artifacts on the British Museum website (www.britishmuseum.org). Many of the images in *Lost Treasures of the Bible* are black and white; high quality color images from the British Museum, therefore, can further bring the biblical world to life for students. These images are free and can be used for most educational purposes without special permission. The British Museum also has a series of interactive web pages meant to introduce learners to various cultures associated with the Bible, including, Egypt (<http://www.ancientegypt.co.uk/>), Mesopotamia (<http://www.mesopotamia.co.uk/menu.html>), and Persia (<http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/forgottenempire/>). For maps of the ancient Near East, one can consult the website of the Oriental Institute, which has its own map series (<http://oi.uchicago.edu/research/lab/map/>).

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