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# The HarperCollins Visual Guide to the New Testament: What Archaeology Reveals About the First Christians [Review]

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# Book Reviews

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## The HarperCollins Visual Guide to the New Testament

What Archaeology Reveals  
about the First Christians

Jonathan L. Reed  
HarperOne, 2007  
176 pages, \$24.95

Jonathan Reed begins the first chapter of *The HarperCollins Visual Guide to the New Testament* with the assertion that “archaeology is imperative for the study of the New Testament.” This much most students of the New Testament and early Christian literature would grant. But how and to what degree archaeology is important to biblical studies is less clear and can be at times a contentious issue. The expectation that archaeology should provide proof of the historical reliability of the New Testament has for decades sent many a would-be Indiana Jones off in search of this or that biblical site with inconclusive if not entirely disappointing results.

Despite sensational and questionable claims—the recent furor over the alleged discovery of Jesus’ tomb is one example—strikingly little has been found that proves the historicity of the New Testament texts. So what can archaeology do for biblical studies? What complicates matters is the fact that the technical nature of the discipline of archaeology means that many—including some New Testament scholars—stay away from it. Reed’s book is a much needed and welcome introduction to what careful and responsible use of archaeology can bring to the study of the New Testament.

On one level the book is important simply as a collection of visual resources for the archaeological study of the world in which the New Testament was written. It is filled with beautiful color photographs of a wide range of archaeological materials, maps, floor plans, etc. But the greater importance of the book lies in Reed’s concise,

careful, and largely jargon-free introduction to the archaeology of the New Testament world.

The basis of Reed’s argument is that the common expectation that archaeology ought to provide proof of the reliability of the New Testament not only misses the mark, but obscures the real contribution that the study of material cultures can bring to the study of texts. Archaeology’s benefits cannot be reduced to a few spectacular finds; rather, it is the cumulative effect of many disparate and unsensational finds and inquiries that help reconstruct the larger historical, social, and cultural contexts in which the texts of the New Testament were written. Reed’s clear, accessible prose takes the reader on a tour of the Mediterranean that spends more time on sites and data not actually mentioned in the New Testament than it does on those that are.

The first three chapters introduce the approach, the basic tools and methods of archaeological study, and the big-picture historical landscape, including a look at the legacies of Alexander the Great and of Augustus, the first Roman Emperor. The next five chapters tackle different aspects of the Mediterranean world that are relevant to some aspect of the New Testament. One chapter reports on what is known about the Galilee in which Jesus spent most of his life, concluding that it was relatively poor, and less urbanized, Hellenized, and Romanized than other parts of Palestine. Another chapter discusses life in first-century Jerusalem and the Temple complex as the backdrop to the gospel accounts of Jesus’ passion. Reed also examines life in urban centers of the Roman Empire as a backdrop to Paul and later Christian communities.

Reed leads the reader through fairly technical discussions of a wide range of aspects of the Mediterranean world while managing to show the relevance for the study of the New Testament in sometimes surprising ways. His discussion of houses and roof construction in the Mediterranean, for example, sheds light on the intriguing passage in Mark in which several men dig through a roof in order to let a man down through the hole to be healed by Jesus. Most houses in first-century Galilee would have had thick roofs made of packed reeds and mud. Luke’s retelling of the story imagines a more urban and probably wealthier setting, and therefore has the men remove tiles from the roof in order to let the paralytic man down.

I have one minor complaint. One of the clear strengths of the book is Reed’s ability to guide the reader through complex archaeological data without sacrificing nuance. Sometimes, however, his treatment of New Testament texts themselves is not as nuanced or as careful. Occasionally references to the gospels appear to assume—at the very least they allow the assumption—that they are historically reliable. At one point Reed contrasts the male-centered, patriarchal Roman social world with

Jesus' more inclusive practice, citing Jesus' request that Mary join him at the table in Luke 10:38–42. Reed's interpretation of this story is highly problematic, as the passage describes Mary sitting at Jesus' feet listening to his teaching, not joining him at the table. In addition, Luke does not state that Mary's action was the result of Jesus' invitation. And if there is something "radical" in this passage, it is unclear whether we ought to attribute this to Jesus or to the author of Luke. Elsewhere Reed suggests that further evidence for the New Testament's egalitarianism is to be found in Luke's use of a matrilineal genealogy for Jesus. That the differences between the genealogies in Matthew and Luke can be accounted for by attributing one to Joseph and the other to Mary has certainly been suggested, but it is by no means a common or widely held position. In my judgment Luke's genealogy is, like Matthew's, patrilineal. At the very least, some discussion on this would have helped.

These concerns notwithstanding, this is an excellent and welcome contribution for its breadth, clarity, and accessibility.

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**Level:**



## A Short History of Myth

**Karen Armstrong**  
(Canongate, 2006)  
149 pages, \$12.00, paperback

Karen Armstrong's *A Short History of Myth* is a well written overview of myth starting with the earliest people and continuing to the present day, for a popular intermediate audience.

Using Neanderthal graves as her example, she tells us that myth is rooted in the experience of death, is inseparable from ritual, concerns extremity, puts us in the right psychological posture for action, and that a mythic plane exists alongside this world.

Armstrong gives us her view of the evolution of myth from hunter/gatherers, ancient Greeks and Mesopotamians, people of the pre-axial, axial, and

post-axial ages to the present. Hunter/gatherers saw no distinction between "mythos" (religious understanding) and "logos" (practical understanding). The distinction between them began with agriculture in the pre-axial age. The axial age saw the rise of a more personalized interior religious sense. The post-axial age includes the re-interpretation of this sense into Christianity, Islam, and post-temple Judaism. The current time period (c. 1500–present) is, according to Armstrong, a "child of logos": all truth is equated with empirical fact. Thus, either the Bible is seen as false—because it is not historically true—or history is rejected because it disagrees with the Bible. In either event, mythos has been lost. According to Armstrong, today only artists and writers understand mythos.

Armstrong's effort is marred, unfortunately, by factual errors, suggesting that she is unfamiliar with the last forty years of anthropological and archaeological research, and by a Western ethnocentric bias. This bias shows up in two of the book's assumptions: first, that as cultures have become more complex, life has become better for the majority; second, that all previous cultures have been male dominated and patriarchal.

These sweeping assumptions create otherwise unnecessary puzzles. First, Armstrong says "only men hunt," so she doesn't understand why the deity of the hunt should be female. However, anthropological studies have shown that women in hunter/gatherer societies from the Philippines to the Arctic, from Australia to Africa, hunt. Armstrong also sees agriculture as a great improvement in life style. Yet research has shown that hunter/gatherers have a more varied, richer, and healthier diet than any people prior to the invention of refrigeration and modern transportation. Next, Armstrong doesn't understand why early agricultural peoples worshiped a female deity though early agricultural sites show no evidence of dominance by class or gender making either gender god credible and fertility is often associated with women. The finds indicate that they worshiped female deities, were egalitarian, and were family focused with some gender specialization. Finally, Armstrong doesn't understand why the biblical writers saw the development of cities as a sign of the human separation from God. Yet archaeology and history show that war, slavery, and inequalities of gender and class develop with the transition from agrarian village kin groups to urban kingships.

Does it matter that Armstrong has some facts wrong? First, it makes things mysterious when they need not be, and second, it keeps us from seeing that the myths of the Hebrew Testament tell of people's real experience. Three examples illustrate the point. First, Eden—god walked with people, was part of everyday experience, and abundance was available to everyone—reflects the experience