
FAQs for Educators

This frequently asked questions for educators has been developed to provide you with support for questions that may come up in your classroom about NOVA's "The Bible's Buried Secrets."

One of the most important messages for students regarding this film is that science and religion can coexist. The work of archeologists and biblical scholars is different from the work of theologians and clergy. Archeologists and biblical scholars seek to understand how the Bible and the people of Israel emerged thousands of years ago. They want to know what produced the Bible's distinctive ideas. They ask what the biblical texts meant in their community of origin rather than what they mean for believers today. Individuals who view "The Bible's Buried Secrets" can then decide after watching the program how the discoveries and theories presented in the film can be related to their present faith.

Certain ideas in this program may challenge some students' understanding of the Bible. The educational materials for this film were developed not to address personal religious beliefs, but rather to help you and your students understand how archeologists and scholarly research come together to examine the past, and what can be learned from these pursuits with regard to historical events. The NOVA film presents some of the most exciting archeological discoveries in Bible lands and sheds light on how these discoveries enrich our understanding of the Bible and some of its most enduring features.

This FAQ will help you address some of the questions that may arise from your students or their family members. Additional resources, and a discussion board where you can join the conversation about this program, can be found on the companion Web site at pbs.org/nova/bible.



FAQS FOR EDUCATORS (CONT.)

Q: What is this film about?

A: NOVA's "The Bible's Buried Secrets" is an archeological journey into the Hebrew Bible, also known as the Old Testament. Building on centuries of scholarship and excavation, this film tackles some of the biggest questions in biblical studies by examining information from archeology and from other ancient cultures in addition to biblical texts. Where did the ancient Israelites come from? How and when did ancient Israelite religion transform into modern Judaism? Who wrote the Bible, when, and why? How did the ancient Israelites come to worship a single god? The answers to these questions emerge from an exploration of biblical texts describing events such as Abraham and his journey to the Promised Land; Moses and the Exodus; David's kingdom and Solomon's Temple; and the destruction of Jerusalem followed by the Exile to Babylon.

Q: Why is this film important for educators and students?

A: The general public may be largely unaware of the significant developments in historical studies, linguistic research, and archeology over the past century and a half and how these have been applied to our understanding of past events. The NOVA film spotlights how these areas of scholarship have come together to provide the most comprehensive in-depth understanding of who wrote the Bible, who the Israelites were, what their world was like, and how Judaism and the belief in a single God emerged. This film will allow students to better understand the nature of this scholarship.

Q: What is biblical archeology?

A: The simplest definition is that it is the archeology of biblical lands and times. The lands correspond mostly to modern-day Israel and Palestine, but also to parts of Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. The times are from roughly 2000 B.C. to the time of Jesus.

Today most biblical archeologists have the goal to bring to life the world that produced the Bible and the people who wrote it, the ancient Israelites. Archeology is our best tool for understanding daily life in biblical times—the food they ate, the houses they lived in, the tools they used, and even the gods they worshipped. When archeologists are lucky enough to find an ancient Hebrew inscription, it is also possible to know what they thought. A clearer picture of the people who wrote the Bible, the ancient Israelites, gives us a better understanding of the Bible itself.



FAQS FOR EDUCATORS (CONT.)

Q: What is new or noteworthy about the origins of the Bible in this film?

A: There are several ideas in this show that students may never have encountered or that may conflict with what they have heard elsewhere, although these ideas are well established in biblical scholarship. The following section further elucidates some of the ideas presented in the program.

- **Monotheism was not fully formed at the time of Abraham.** Like many great ideas in human history, monotheism evolved over the course of time, as the Bible itself suggests. Even one of its most important commandments—“you shall have no other gods before me”—hints that the existence of other deities is being downgraded but not denied. Also, Israel’s god has a personal name, Yahweh, because a name was needed to identify this god from among all the other gods thought to exist at the time. The Bible notes that the ancient Israelites often lapsed into idol worship. This idea is well supported by archeological evidence. Thousands of clay pagan idols have been found at Israelite sites.
- **No archeological evidence has yet been found for a mass exodus as described in the Bible.** The account of the departure from Egypt and the wandering in the wilderness unfolds in a series of dramatic and metaphoric biblical narratives. Yet there is currently no evidence to support the account of Exodus as described in the Bible—a massive outpouring of some 600,000 men and their families. Despite this, scholars don’t deny the possibility that an exodus in some form might have occurred. In fact, many of them think that a smaller departure from Egypt *did* take place.
- **Findings suggest that God had a wife.** Archeological evidence indicates that the Israelites may have worshipped many gods, likely including a Canaanite goddess named Asherah. Ancient Hebrew inscriptions uncovered during excavations referring to “Yahweh and his Asherah,” combined with thousands of female figurines discovered at Israelite sites, suggest to some scholars that Asherah was considered the wife of Yahweh.
- **Evidence suggests that the Israelites were Canaanites.** Canaan consisted of well-fortified city-states, each with its own king, that in turn served Egypt and its pharaoh. These city-states contained elite upper-class Canaanites as well as lower-class commoners, serfs, and slaves. Archeological evidence suggests that, rather than conquering the Promised Land from outside territories as a separate people (as described in the book of Joshua), the Israelites were actually disenfranchised Canaanites who joined in a revolt to overthrow the elites. Out of these people who overthrew the ruling class, a culture of Israelites emerged.



FAQS FOR EDUCATORS (CONT.)

- **The first five books were written by multiple sources.** The repetitions, contradictions, anachronisms, stylistic variations, and different names for God in the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible) have long been noticed by people who studied the Bible carefully. But it was only in the 19th century that scholars began to study those features in a systematic way. They produced a theory about Torah authorship that grouped passages according to similar features. Four major groups of passages, thought to have been composed by four groups of scribes, were discerned. Because authors in biblical times did not “sign” their writings, scholars have designated each group of passages using letters that reflect a major feature of the group: J—for passages that use Yahweh (Jahveh, in German) for God’s name; E—for passages that use Elohim (God) to designate the deity; D—for the author of Deuteronomy; and P—for passages with great interest in priestly matters. Though this idea may be new to students, human authorship of the Bible is now accepted as fact by many mainstream religious organizations, seminaries, and rabbinical schools.

Q: Can you accept the information in this show and still be a person of faith?

A: Yes. Many of the most important theories about biblical origins and authorship have been developed by scholars trained as clergy and working in divinity schools or seminaries—discoveries about the nature and purpose of biblical literature do not interfere with their religious beliefs. (In fact, many of the scholars in this film are people of faith.)

One biblical scholar had this to say about the program: “With remarkable care, it lays out the multitude of ways that archeology and the Bible both contribute to our understanding of ancient Israel,” notes Roy Heller, associate professor of Old Testament at the Southern Methodist University Perkins School of Theology. “From the dedicated skill of the foremost biblical scholars that appear, it reveals how the Bible came into existence over centuries and through the work of a great multitude of witnesses, authors, and editors. With the experienced, objective eye of top-ranked archeologists, it shows that the truth of the Bible is not as simple as is often believed, but is remarkably deeper and more liberating than could be imagined.”

Q: Why is NOVA, the science series, developing classroom materials for this film?

A: NOVA is the most-used video series in high school classrooms, and classroom materials are developed for every new NOVA program. Should educators decide to use a NOVA program in their classrooms, NOVA provides support to help them integrate the program and explore its scientific concepts. The materials developed for this program focus on how researchers can learn more about the past from historical documents.

FAQS FOR EDUCATORS (CONT.)

Q: Would using this program in the classroom be a breach of the separation of church and state?

A: “The Bible’s Buried Secrets” is not a religious program. It does not denigrate, confirm, nor interfere with anyone’s religious beliefs. It is a science program, synthesizing decades of work in biblical archeology and biblical studies and providing a coherent illustration of the scientific process at work. It reveals how researchers continually pursue evidence and refine their ideas as more information becomes available, and it shows the tools they use to understand ancient peoples and their beliefs.

For more information about this film and why it was made, see the Senior Executive Producer’s Story on the NOVA Web site at pbs.org/nova/bible/apsell.html

Contributing Writer

Professor Carol Meyers is the Mary Grace Wilson Professor of Religion at Duke University. Dr. Meyers is an archeologist with decades of field experience and a specialist in biblical studies and in research on women in the biblical world.