



A Secular History of Ancient Israel

What Did the Biblical Writers Know & When Did They Know It? What Archaeology Can Tell Us About the Reality of Ancient Israel, by William G. Dever. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001. xiii + 313 pp. Hardcover \$25.00. ISBN 0802847943.

Much press has recently been given to the so-called Copenhagen school of revisionists. These revisionists view the Hebrew Bible as worthless when it comes to writing the history of ancient Israel. The aim of Dever in this book is to refute the revisionist position and to offer his own version of a history of ancient Israel.

Dever begins with a short discussion of literature and history as they relate to ancient texts. He then turns to the revisionists, whom he prefers to call “nihilists.” He reveals the postmodern, deconstructionist ideology driving the revisionists’ agenda. He then addresses individually the recent work of Philip Davies, Thomas Thompson, Keith Whitelam, Niels Peter Lemche, and Israel Finkelstein. The critique is penetrating and robust. This is followed by a chapter outlining Dever’s own proposal for doing a “secular history” of ancient Israel, including lengthy discussion of what data is admissible, what kind of questions should drive the search for additional evidence, and how the dialogue between archaeologists and biblical scholars should take place. Two chapters are subsequently devoted to analyzing the convergences between the archaeological and biblical data, first during the rise of the state of Israel and then during the divided monarchy. The concluding chapter addresses once again some of the larger issues of postmodernism in the current debate.

To his credit, Dever clearly lays out his own prejudices. He is a self-proclaimed moderate—“practical, sensible, middle-of-the-road,” “neither ‘minimalist’ nor ‘maximalist.’” He rejects the majority of the Old Testament as overtly theological, and therefore useless for writing history. His goal is to write a “secular history” of ancient Israel. However, he credits the biblical authors with having a lot of accurate information at an early date (to answer the question raised in the title of the book), and so suggests that there is a “historical core” in the “Deuteronomistic” books.

The central chapters of the book are especially good. The overview of the history of archaeology in Palestine in chapter 3 is excellent, providing good background to the current debate. The “convergences” between archaeology and the biblical text that are given in chapters 4 and 5, while obviously not exhaustive, incorporate some of the most recent archaeological work and are a valuable source.

Not all of Dever’s methods, however, are praiseworthy. He discards the first four books of the Pentateuch as composed of “legendary and even fantastic materials,” with the Exodus and Moses traditions existing as nothing more than late editorial additions that are not even “edifying, much less historical.” Dever fails to take seriously the archaeological work that tends to support the patriarchal and Exodus accounts, such as Kenneth Kitchen’s “The Patriarchal Age: Myth or History?” *BAR* (March/April 1995), Nahum Sarna’s “Abraham in History,” *BAR* (Dec. 1977), John Currid’s *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament* (Baker, 1997), James Hoffmeier’s *Israel in Egypt* (Oxford, 1997), Nahum Sarna’s “Exploring Exodus: the Oppression,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 49:2 (1986), or John Bimson’s *Redating the Exodus and Conquest* (Sheffield, 1978). While Dever might complain that these scholars are too conservative for his taste, it cannot be denied that they are working with the archaeological data. The second millennium

B.C. in Palestine is not nearly as well known or documented at this point as is the first millennium, and I suspect that Dever's analysis of this period will be subject to drastic revision in the not-so-distant future.

Dever suggests that the biblical text cannot be used as valid testimony for history writing except where it is corroborated by archaeology (107). Are we to accept the historical existence of Baruch, since we have two bullae from Jerusalem bearing his name, but reject the historical existence of Jeremiah for lack of archaeological corroboration? One must wonder if this rule works in reverse- must an archaeological artifact be matched by textual evidence before it can constitute valid testimony? Should we discount the inscription from Kuntillet 'Ajrud, "Yahweh and his Asherah," because this combination is not found in the biblical text? Dever has already criticized the revisionists' "one witness is no witness" principle, but now he appears to appropriate it himself. This methodology is dubious at best.

To Dever's observation that "archaeology cannot disprove the Bible's assertions of the *meaning* of events" (emphasis mine), we can safely add that so far it has not disproved any of the Bible's events either. While Dever is content to relegate the patriarchal narratives to the realm of myth, he does not do so on solid archaeological grounds.

With the advent of the revisionist movement in recent years, Dever's volume is a welcome addition to the discussion. As Dever rightly notes, the evidence speaks to those who are willing to listen.

Reviewed for JBS by
Kris J. Udd
Michigan Theological Seminary