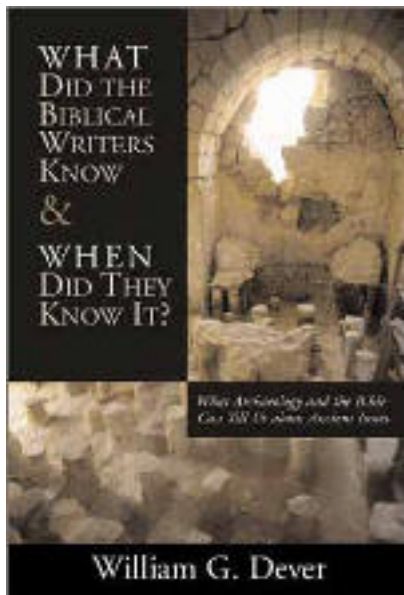


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**Dever, William G.**

***What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It?: What Archaeology Can Tell Us About the Reality of Ancient Israel***

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This book rehearses most of the commonly cited archaeological data to refute the claims leveled by the “minimalists” against the historical value of the Bible. The book is thus a type of “apology” in the truest sense of the word. The author marshals archaeological evidence as if in courtroom in order to prove his case. The book is polemical, engaging, and even entertaining. In the end, the author succeeds in discrediting the proposals of the “minimalists.” However, as will be seen below, the method Dever chooses to attack his opponents puts him at risk of creating a greater problem for the theological and historical value of the Bible than the threats posed by his opponents.

Dever’s methodology is twofold: first he focuses on problems found in the methodologies of scholars he labels as “postmodern” and/or “minimalist”; then he shows how archaeological data can be used not only to expose these methodological problems but to provide a means out of the chaos. As the title of the book indicates, Dever argues that there is an external reality of Israel, that the biblical writers knew a lot of real historical information, and that these writers had access to this information at an early stage (see esp. 295). Dever presupposes that if he can convincingly show that the biblical writers had access to historical memories, he will have proven wrong the postmodern claims of the minimalists. The book can be seen as both a summary of Dever’s views presented over the past thirty years and as a forceful and convincing rebuttal of the minimalists.

The book begins with three chapters on methodology. The first chapter (“The Bible as History, Literature, and Theology”) briefly rehearses attempts to salvage the value of the Bible by using historical, literary, and theological interpretations. Dever argues that the new literary and theological techniques that have arisen during this debate cause more problems than they solve. For Dever, the problem is that these new ways of reading the Bible tend to deny an external reality of Israel, and he questions the validity of a postmodern reading of the Bible in a rational world. Further, he presents archaeological data as a way out of the cloudy situation because these data can show and prove that there was an external reality of Israel and that the biblical writers had access to historical memories about this real entity, Israel.

The second chapter is titled “The Current School of Revisionists and Their Nonhistories of Ancient Israel.” The title summarizes the content of the chapter. Following a few paragraphs that outline the methodology of postmodernism and deconstruction, Dever systematically and by name addresses the articles and books of those scholars that he considers his opponents (T. L. Thompson, N. P. Lemche, P. R. Davies, and K. W. Whitelam). Dever reviews the proposals presented by each of these scholars and describes how archaeological data can be used to discredit each proposal. The chapter also includes a critique of these scholars’ motivations as well as their inability to recognize that there is much external data about ancient Israel. The arguments presented are quite convincing, even if a bit more polemical than this reviewer prefers in scholarly prose.

Dever also includes an assessment of the work of Israel Finkelstein in chapter 2, but it is unclear how this discussion fits into the overall argument. The evaluation focuses on how Finkelstein’s work has been used (almost inappropriately) by Dever’s minimalist opponents. The problem is that Finkelstein does not deny the external reality of Israel, but the discussion in the chapter along with the placement of this section left the reader with the general impression that Finkelstein should be placed in the same camp with the minimalists. Although many of the criticisms that Dever levels against Finkelstein are accurate, the inclusion of what might be taken as a diatribe against an archaeologist who is an opponent of Dever but not a minimalist adds to the overly polemical tone of the volume and detracts from the arguments that Dever rightly makes against his other opponents.

The third chapter outlines a history of archaeology in Syria and Palestine and explores how archaeology can respond to the questions about the historical character of the Bible. Dever forcefully argues that archaeological data should be the *primary* data for reconstructing an Israelite history, while the written texts should be used as the *secondary* data because they are more biased. The method that evolves from his discussion is one

that uses archaeology to substantiate at least essential features in the biblical and extrabiblical accounts. If these features can be substantiated or at least supported with some degree of probability, Dever concludes that there is important historical material in the written texts.

The next two chapters make up the heart of the book, both in terms of length (about 150 pages) and in terms of the message. These chapters survey the archaeological data that illuminate the period of the origination of Israel, the united monarchy, and the divided monarchy. Dever presents an extremely helpful summary of the most important archaeological data that have bearing on our knowledge of biblical Israel. These chapters are extremely helpful for nonspecialists who need a quick discussion of a broad range of material as well as brief bibliographical references. This survey also convincingly reveals a fatal flaw in the methodologies of the minimalists. Dever shows time and time again how the biblical account during the periods mentioned contains much data that are in essential agreement with the extrabiblical, archaeological data. This essential continuity points to the high probability that, when the biblical writers wrote their ideological documents, they must have had access to historical memories if not historical texts. As Dever puts it, “While the Hebrew Bible in its present, heavily edited form cannot be taken at face value as history in the modern sense, it nevertheless *contains* much history.”

The final chapter is summarized by the title “What Is Left of the History of Ancient Israel, and Why Should It Matter to Anyone Anymore?” Following another summary of postmodernism, Dever concludes that the archaeological data he presents shows that the Bible must be read with skepticism because it is not entirely factual. At the same time, he advocates a separation of faith and history as a means of finding the “truth” in the Bible. He says, “We may separate history from theology, theology from religion, religion from morality, and perhaps even morality from culture.” Having made this assumption, Dever continues with a classic restating of an argument for finding the truth of the Bible in its meaning. He says that the Bible is true (1) because what it means is true and (2) there are multiple meanings found in the text (esp. 282–86). These conclusions allow Dever to advocate what he calls a middle ground. He proposes a type of “secular humanism” as a method to allow the Bible to be true for both secular readers and for Christians and Jews.

There are many helpful and laudable features in this book. Biblical scholars and nonspecialists will find it especially helpful as a guide through much archaeological data. Dever, definitely one of the leading archaeologists of the biblical world, rehearses the relevance of these data like no one else. The archaeological sections are not only enlightening but also entertaining and easy to read. More important, Dever amasses example after example that serve to discredit the sloppy historical assertions of the minimalists. It is a shame that this type of repetition and detail is needed, but the

forcefulness and clamor raised by the minority views of the minimalists would probably not be matched without a response in kind. Dever joins a growing list of well-known historians who have exposed the true nature of these so-called scholarly arguments.

Unfortunately, several features in the book detract from its overall quality. Dever tends to simplify his arguments and assessments. This tendency is especially apparent in the sections that summarize postmodernism and narrative readings. The author claims to have undertaken extensive research in these areas in order to write this book, yet time and time again the summaries of postmodernism are presented in a facile manner. The problem comes to a head in the concluding chapter because Dever does not seem to understand that humanistic attempts undertaken on the heels of the Enlightenment to explain and quantify all reality pose a problem for integrating historical data with the biblical narratives. Dever criticizes postmodernism for ignoring reality, but then he does not understand how the secular humanism that he advocates necessitates that one be able to define and describe the reality of God through external means.

This tendency ends up creating a greater philosophical problem than Dever solves. On the one hand, a reviewer might point out that Dever is going forty years back in time to the same proposals that his teacher G. E. Wright made when he attempted to substantiate the external reality of God with an “essential continuity” argument. Wright interpreted the archaeological material as substantiating in general the theological message of a God who acts in history. For the last thirty years Dever has criticized Wright for this move, yet in the final analysis his method for refuting the minimalists is quite similar. Dever does not conclude that there is enough of an essential continuity to prove many parts of the Bible as “true,” but he highlights many features of essential continuity with historical memories that show that the biblical writers knew a lot of history and include a lot of history. For Dever, this allows much of the Bible to be “true,” or at least historically valuable. However, his overall method is really very similar to the method of Wright.

The failure to understand the relationship of postmodernism and a positivist interpretation of the Bible and the archaeological facts actually places Dever’s mode of argumentation a lot earlier than the Biblical Theology era of Wright. Dever’s positivist stance places him back into the nineteenth-century debate of whether one must define and describe an external reality of God in order to write a theology. This is ironic in the truest sense of the word because Dever is trying to avoid theology. However, his attempt to locate the truth of the Bible in its meaning as information by external historical data forces him to make a nineteenth-century move of equating the value of the Bible with the ability to substantiate it. If the secular-humanism position that Dever advocates were actually possible, his arguments would either directly support Feuerbach’s conclusions that God is a human

construct or one would need to be able to articulate and define the external reality of God and Israel.

Fortunately (again in a truly ironic sense), the position of secular humanism that Dever advocates is based upon a faulty assumption, so even though his argumentation is called into question, the archaeological and historical data that he presents need not create this type of fundamental problem for assigning truth to the Bible. As stated above, Dever finds the Bible to be true because he assumes that one can separate faith and theology from history. He posits, "I suggest that we may separate history from theology, theology from religion, religion from morality, and perhaps even morality from culture" (282). If one does not need to separate faith and history, then the archaeological and historical data that Dever so aptly highlights can be used to illuminate one's imagination as he or she engages anew with the classic text of the Bible.

In the final analysis, Dever's book illustrates why biblical theologians have come to disregard history and archaeology as a helpful means for doing biblical theology. Indeed, biblical theologians such as Walter Brueggemann (*Theology of the Old Testament*) and Brevard Childs have tired of the solutions such as those proposed by Dever. These biblical scholars realize all too well the philosophical problem for theology that is posed when one must describe and define the eternal reality of God that is described in the Bible. Unless a theologian chooses to adopt a position similar to Karl Barth and argue that Christianity is unique and true because it is a revealed religion and cannot be quantified and described, then one is left in a positivist malaise.

An archaeologist such as Dever can hardly be expected to have mastered systematic theology, postmodern theory, and literary theory in order to write a responsible book on Israelite history. Indeed, the present reviewer is all too aware of his own limitations as a person who is trained primarily as a biblical historian and theologian. However, the problem is that in the book Dever makes the claim to have undertaken this type of focused study. In one sense he is correct. The field needs this type of integration in order to promote discussion between biblical historians, archaeologists, and theologians. It is beyond the scope of this review to explore discussions of these types, but hopefully Dever's book will encourage further reflection like that undertaken by Leo Perdue in his book *The Collapse of History*. Perdue very thoughtfully and thoroughly lays out a way for biblical historians to converse with biblical theologians. This is the type of discussion that is needed in a refutation of allegations such as those brought forward by the minimalists. One hopes that Dever has stated the arguments in such an extreme manner that the discussion will be shifted in more helpful directions.