BOOK REVIEWS / BOEK RESENSIES


From the pen of polemicist extraordinaire, William G. Dever, came a history book that deals with the eighth century BCE in Israel/Palestine, based primarily on archaeological information. I think the book, that is presented as a methodological experiment, is a great success with incredible potential. From Dever the reader should expect a well informed archaeological argument. Whether you know this prolific author from his constant stream of articles in leading archaeological journals, from one of the many articles in Festschriften or thematic collections, or from his Syro-Palestinian Archaeology (aka “Biblical Archaeology) trilogy”: What did the Biblical writers know and when did they know it? What Archaeology can tell us about the reality of Ancient Israel (2001); Who were the early Israelites and where did they come from? (2003); Did God have a wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel (2005), you may already know that he has extensive experience and knowledge of matters archaeological. But the focussed integration of information is what impressed me most in the reviewed book.

Previously, around the middle-1980s, Dever was the prophet of doom for the term (and subject of) Biblical Archaeology. His polemical position was primarily a reaction to the way the subject conducted itself, especially in the USA. He stirred up quite a debate and results followed. The reputable journal Biblical Archaeologist, published by the American Schools of Oriental Research, was renamed Near Eastern Archaeology, at least partly as a result of the debate. In passing it can be mentioned that the trend was not universal. The popular US based journal Biblical Archaeology Review retained its name without apology, while the term “Biblische Archäologie” was still used in German publications and Institutes. In Israel the debate was reviewed by Israel Finkelstein, literally as a “rejoinder” (Israel Finkelstein, “Bible Archaeology or the Archaeology of Palestine in the Iron Age? A Rejoinder.” Levant 30:167-174, 1998).

However, at the transition to the third millennium of the Common Era, for Dever the Biblical Archaeology debate was all but forgotten. During the 1990s a more despicable phenomenon has appeared from the British Isles and Denmark in the form of the late dating Nihilists and Revisionists, notably Lemche, Whitelam, Davies, Thompson and Carroll. Rebuttals by Dever of their epistemology and the historiography they produced can be found in each of the three books of his trilogy. However, the coup de grace was delivered in the
first two chapters of the book under review. And that brings us to the lives of ordinary people in Israel.

After decimating the opposition – who thought no history of Israel could be written – in typical direct confrontational Dever style in the first two chapters, he commences with the history of the eighth century BCE in Israel/Palestine, based on archaeological information (chapters 4-10). The basic proposition of the book is that history can be written, primarily based on archaeological information. Previously Dever has often pleaded that archaeology should be recognised as the primary source of information for historiography of ancient Israel. He was publicly supported by Lester Grabbe in 2007. In the book under review Dever succeeds commendably in proving his point, while he points the way to what will inevitably follow: a history of ancient Israel based on archaeological material. Soon I think we can expect a history of Canaan from the Late Bronze Age (or earlier) to the Persian Period (or later), when the rich archaeological sources that have already been excavated are presented according to the guidelines Dever presented.

Such a history will not be a political history, based on events and interpretations dictated by individuals in high political, military or cultic positions. To the contrary, it will be a history based on the life patterns and conditions of settled people in the capitals, cities, towns, villages, hamlets and farms of the countries under scrutiny. This history will deal with the houses, the villas and the palaces that were inhabited, and deductions will be made on the living conditions of those who inhabited the dwellings. Everyday activities, such as writing, trading, measuring and farming may be studied, while aspects of religion, including the actual objects that were venerated will be described. The effects of warfare on settlements and settlement patterns will be described on the basis of fortifications and weapons that are excavated. The remains of sieges, battles and deaths will be described to tell of the direct effects the killings and dispersion had on the effected communities. In short, it will be a history of the everyday existence of ordinary people. Archaeological information is the ideal source for such an approach, because it is in essence democratic and not elitist.

William G. Dever has now written such a history of Israel, Judah and their neighbours during the eighth century BCE. The historical image of the period that he has constructed is remarkable. In the book he manages to present archaeological information in such a way that the dwellings and their inhabitants seem to come alive.

As an introduction to the history of Israel and Judah, Dever starts with the historical geography of the Levant (chapter 3). He quotes Aharoni who emphasised the centrality of the geographical environment for the understanding of any history. The topography guided physical realities and Dever uses the apt description of “fractured topography, fractured history” for a
paragraph on regional differences and divisions. He also indicates why the biblical phrase “the land of milk and honey” should be viewed as a rhetorical phrase, with little reference to the real situation in Palestine. The first part of the chapter is called “The physical data”, while the second part deals with “The biblical data”, and this pattern continues throughout the book. In later chapters a third part is added under the question: “What was it really like?” reminiscent of Von Ranke’s ideal to write history to tell it “wie es eigentlich gewesen war”. This brief conclusion to each chapter is used to tie the loose ends of issues mentioned in the chapter and to imagine realities. The tripartite division of the chapters is not used in chapter 9, dealing with Israel’s neighbours.

Chapter 4 contains the database for the rest of the study, which is a hierarchical classification of 68 sites in Israel. The sites are classified according to 4 tiers and a group of forts. The information is presented in a series of tables under the following rubrics: Site name (Arabic/Hebrew name), Biblical name and archaeological stratum, Size in acres, Population size. The first tier is divided into two groups: Capitals (which includes Samaria and Jerusalem) and Other (seven Administrative Centers and District Capitals). Second tier sites include eleven Cities and Urban Centers (with more than 1,000 inhabitants). Third tier sites include 24 Towns with populations between 300 and 1,000. Fourth tier sites include twelve Villages with between 50 and 300 people. Finally twelve Fortresses are listed, including Jezreel and Qumran. The fifth tier of settlements represents Hamlets and Farms with less than 50 people associated with the sites. A mean population density of approximately 100 people per acre is used. A list of the last group of sites was not supplied and there is no map of their positions. Dever concludes that one can surmise a population of approximately 150,000 for Israel and Judah during the eighth century BCE. That includes the people living on farms and the inhabitants of neo-Philistine, Phoenician and Aramean sites in the area.

In the section on the biblical data, Dever refers to Ferdinand Deist’s book Material Culture of the Bible: An introduction as the best guide, but he finds the book “a great disappointment” as it deals with texts only, not with actual archaeological (i.e. material) data. The Hebrew Bible recognises only two tiers of settlements (viz. Fortified cities and Villages), but the main problem is that the biblical texts dealing with eighth century Israel and Judah, do not date from the eighth century BCE. They are therefore problematic sources and they have to be corroborated by extra-biblical sources such as the Neo-Assyrian annals. When these coincide, Dever uses the term “convergences” and view the biblical material as useful sources for historiography.

In chapters 5 (Cities and Towns) and 6 (Towns, Villages, and everyday life) physical aspects of the various types of settlements are analysed and described. In the information on both larger and smaller sites Dever concludes
that little information is added by the biblical texts after the archaeological information has been systematically scrutinised. At the end of chapter 6 an extensive discussion is presented on the actual conditions of those living in towns and villages during the eighth century BCE. (Dever explains that he “lived in primitive Arab villages in the Samaria and Hebron hills for many months, in all seasons of the year”). This first-hand experience of the landscape and geography, and the exposure to more traditional ways of living, seem to have alerted the historiographer to conditions that texts would never have been able to convey to him.

In chapters 7 (Socioeconomic structures) Dever looks at ways that archaeological data can inform us about social stratification, literacy and trade. Chapter 8 (Religion and cult) deals with the practice of religion. The third book of Dever’s trilogy mentioned above dealt with folk religion and already there he expressed appreciation for the work of Ziony Zevit in his monumental monograph *Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallactic Approaches*. Also in the book under discussion, Dever’s indebtedness to Zevit for certain insights is obvious. With a view to his discussion of religion and cult in the eighth century BCE, Dever offers five criteria for defining cult (i.e. practice of religion) in archaeology, i.e.: a cultic site is one that is deliberately “consecrated” for religious rituals; cultic sites are often located on elevated sites; cultic installations exhibit unusual architectural features; the artifacts are exotic; there is material evidence for sacrifices. The most decisive point made in this chapter is that the religion that we know from the biblical texts was not the religion practiced in towns, villages and houses far away from the temples and royal capitals. Archaeology enables the reader of the biblical texts to understand what the practices were that the prophets were opposing. It gives a real-life context to some texts and it informs the modern reader about practices that would never have been known, had they not been excavated.

In a significant ninth chapter, and somewhat out of the blue, Dever describes “Israel’s neighbors”. In chapter 4 on the database, he remarked that he deliberately left out references to sites of the neo-Philistines, Phoenicians and the Transjordanian kingdoms, except for the final calculation of the population. In this chapter the following sites and regions are discussed with descriptions mostly based on the site reports in the five volumes of the *New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, edited by Ephraim Stern (1991, 2008). Where relevant, brief remarks are made about Biblical references to the sites.

Neo-Philistine: Ekron, Gath, Ashdod, Ashkelon, and a few others.
Aramean: Bethsaida, Tel Hadar, ‘En Gev, Tel Soreg.
Regions of the Transjordan: Bashan, Gilead, Ammon, Moab, Edom.
Seemingly almost as an afterthought, Dever added chapter 10 (Warfare and the end) to his book. It is often said that war and natural disasters, which are threatening to settled communities, are “good” news for archaeologists. This chapter illustrates the veracity of the statement. The amount of energy and money spent on defensive structures, forts and armaments in Israel and Judah was significant, while a large part of the Assyrian budget would have been spent on the Neo-Assyrian military campaigns to the west. The proof of these expenses is to be found in the archaeological remains of the affected cities and towns. Dever remarks that the eighth century BCE was a time of war. That is not an overstatement. The Assyrians and the territorially much closer Arameans threatened the integrity of the Kingdom of Israel since the middle of the ninth century BCE. From Assyrian records it is clear that the successive eighth century kings campaigned aggressively towards the west and that no city or king who stood in their way was safe, not even the distant, inland kingdom of Judah. In a systematic study of thirteen Israelite sites the Assyrian campaign is described and one can fathom the threat that the Assyrians must have posed to all living in the towns and cities of Israel. The Judeans would also not have been unaware of the events that threatened their northern neighbours. However, biblical reports of the events have been found wanting. Dever dismisses the explanations in 2 Kings 19 and 2 Chronicles 32 concerning Jerusalem as sources of any value. He says “these accounts hardly qualify as a believable explanation” and “...it disqualifies these writers as anything like reliable historians” (p. 367).

In his conclusion Dever reflects on what he has been doing in the book. He is tentative and he explains his motives rather extensively. He scrutinises his experiment thoughtfully and refers again to many sources which have been referred to previously. There is an almost pastoral air to the conclusion as Dever ponders questions such as: Passing the test? What have we learned? But “What really happened?” What is left of the Bible? His answers to these questions are well formulated and worthy of reflection.

No longer can one ask whether (an archaeologically based) history of a biblical period can be written. We now know that it has been done. A sequel to Dever’s book is eagerly awaited, and it will be interesting to see how archaeological and interested biblical scholars will react to Dever’s tour de force, to which, according to his own admission, all preceding writings became prolegomena.

The book concludes with an extensive bibliography of 40 pages – a veritable source of relevant archaeological references, a name index, a subject index and an index of references to Scripture.
This reviewer’s advice is to acquire the book soon and to read it firstly for the pleasure of good scholarship and authorship, and secondly to fathom possibilities for new directions in the historiography of ancient Israel.

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