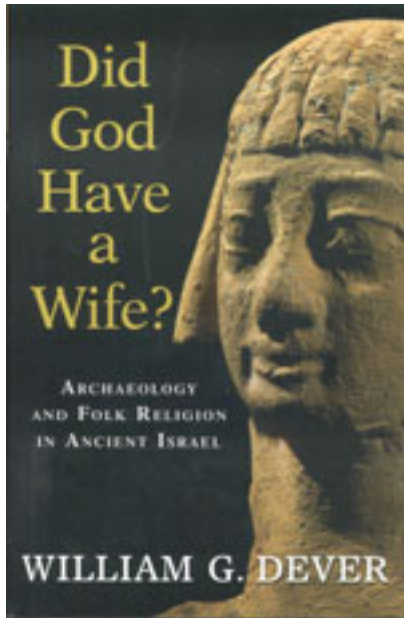


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**Dever, William G.**

*Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel*

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005. Pp. xvi + 344. Hardcover. \$25.00. ISBN 0802828523.

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With his marvelous title, William Dever writes provocatively—indeed, more provocatively than necessary, but more of that later—about early Israelite religion. The title and the subtitle identify the two foci of the book. Dever’s large aim is to uncover—primarily through archaeological data—the character of folk religion in ancient Israel, which he regards as in some sense the true religion of the Israelite people before “book” religion took over. Very much at the center of that is goddess worship, something largely suppressed, if recognized, by the textual tradition of the Hebrew scriptures.

Following an introduction, which both sets out what he is about and acknowledges a very personal perspective at work in and influencing his approach, Dever discusses some notions of religion, but with particular attention to “folk religion” and its relation to the natural world, the social and political world, and especially family and household. Two chapters then continue the extended prolegomena to his intended subject, folk religion. In the first of these, he engages recent scholarship, largely critically, with more positive words for some of the feminist studies of Israelite religion (e.g., Ackerman) and those that have focused on popular religion (e.g., Belinerblau). He concludes this section with helpful discussion of what archaeology can and cannot do, including a proper focus on ideology and its place in the history of religion. The final piece of introductory work is an

extended summary of cultic terminology and activities as recorded in the Hebrew Bible as background for the more artifactual discussion of folk religion.

The substantive presentation and interpretation of the archaeological evidence for Israelite folk religion comes in chapter 5. This is largely a treatment of various cultic sites, including local or household shrines and their artifacts and larger public open-air sanctuaries, such as those at Dan and Kuntillet 'Ajrud, both of which are discussed extensively. This is followed by a look at the two monumental temples of Shechem and Arad. The chapter also includes an extended discussion of magic.

Then Dever turns to Asherah and makes his case for the widespread presence of an Asherah cult, evidenced by the well-known inscriptions referring to *'srth* from Khirbet el Qom (excavated by Dever but not fully deciphered by him) and Kuntillet 'Ajrud, female figurines, pictorial representations, and biblical texts. In this context, he once again takes up a number of recent treatments of the topic, for the most part in a largely critical manner (although the reviewer comes out more generously treated than some other scholars). Dever seems to assume that a large part of the problem is the masculine gender of so many of the interpreters of Israelite religion, whom he calls "literati, like those who wrote the Hebrew Bible, with whom they easily resonate, as though their interpretation were 'the truth of the matter'" (196), although it is hard to imagine a treatment of this topic that could convey more of an air of "here is the truth of the matter" than the book under review.

The evidence for Asherah, particularly iconic representations and motifs, is discussed further in a chapter connecting Asherah specifically to women's cults, evidence for which is probably most clearly present in the Hebrew Bible. The whole of this chapter and the preceding one is an important and up-to-date analysis of the critical data and texts relating to the Asherah figure. Finally, Dever presents a kind of précis of Israelite religion under the rubric "From Polytheism to Monotheism." There is not much new here, and the discussion grows largely out of the Hebrew Bible with a few references to archaeological data.

The usefulness of this treatment of folk religion in ancient Israel is obvious. It is accessible and illustrated profusely. Dever's expertise and control of the data, both artifactual and textual, are everywhere evident. The book is not only informative but interesting and fun to read. At the same time, it is also frequently frustrating, largely because of the tone of the book and the unnecessary sideswipes at so many scholars and the field of biblical scholarship in general.

The author begins with a disarmingly candid and personal introduction, letting the reader know from the beginning that his nontheological approach to the matter of Israelite religion reflects not only his archaeological interests and experience but his own personal beliefs. On the first page, he indicates that his book is “mostly about the *practice* of religion, not about belief, much less theology” (ix), and his own perspective is nontheistic and focused on praxis, as in Reform Judaism, “rather than on systematic theology.” This personal stance, he acknowledges, “fits well with the interest in ‘folk religion’ that prompted this work” (xi). Of course, at the same time it raises a fundamental question that permeates the book from the first page onward: Is the dichotomy between practice and belief a legitimate avenue for interpreting a religion? The reviewer finds it difficult to comprehend how that works, except that it makes it easier to deal with a lot of archaeological data where there is no interpretive clue as to what the data indicate about “belief,” that is, what prompts this site, this figurine, this vessel, and so forth. Assuming there is no thought behind the practice simply because there is no written text is dubious. Further, there is much written text that has much to say about belief and cannot be avoided in writing about this topic or interpreting the data (see below).

Dever is insistent on the primacy of artifactual data over textual data but does not seem to mind drawing on the text to help interpret the artifacts. He tends to regard the use of texts by others as a “prove the Bible” approach (151), whereas his frequent and heavy reference to texts is to be regarded as “simply pointing out that an independent analysis of the two sources of information leads us to a ‘conclusion beyond a reasonable doubt’ ” (151). Why not assume that others are seeking to do the same thing? His dismissal of a textual approach does not really work, as this book well indicates. Examples of Dever’s heavy dependence upon texts abound. Only a few can be mentioned.

- ▶ One is his extended and valuable treatment of the cultic center at Dan, where he, appropriately, draws heavily on textual evidence to confirm what archaeology seems to indicate. Along the way, he dismisses other interpreters of Israelite religion as not even giving attention to the Dan cultic center and not connecting it with the biblical texts. Nothing is gained by this dismissal, and it is not in fact accurate, at least with regard to the reviewer’s reconstruction of Israelite religion, where both archaeological and textual evidence are taken into account, including the important inscription referring to “the god who is in Dan,” a text that, as far as I can tell, does not enter into Dever’s discussion.
- ▶ Another example of Dever’s heavy dependence on textual data is his treatment of the horse and rider figurines found in Cave I at Jerusalem and elsewhere. His interpretation of these figurines as “symbols of Baal” is entirely dependent upon

biblical and extrabiblical texts. In contrast, P. R. S. Moorey, in his Schweich lectures on the small images of clay in the Ancient Near East (*Idols of the People: Miniature Images of Clay in the Ancient Near East* [The British Academy; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003]), draws on artifactual data, the “Near Eastern repertory of terracottas as a whole” to argue, with other scholars, that these figurines are toys or suppliants (61). Indeed on the basis of comparative data Moorey reaches a very different conclusion from that of Dever: “If the male and female images are considered together, plausible arguments may be advanced for regarding both as votive figurines in human form rather than as anthropomorphic images of deities.... Until *both* male and female images may be convincingly accommodated amongst the deities of early Israelite religion, this is arguably the more probable identity for them” (63).

- ▶ Yet another instance of heavy and primary dependence upon textual data is the conclusion to his chapter on defining and contextualizing religion, where Dever presents an understanding of the good life as the goal of religion, at least folk religion. The notion of the good life he puts forth is entirely derived from biblical material and not from archaeological data.
- ▶ In his discussion of the religious practices reflected in the Hebrew Bible (ch. 4), he notes accurately that, “however great a role prayer may have played in liturgical rites, it is invisible in the archaeological record with rare exceptions.”
- ▶ The treatment of magic, which is quite comprehensive and helpful, is completely dependent upon textual evidence, much of it inscriptional, but still textual.

Because Dever sets methodological issues to the fore, his book has to be evaluated along those lines. It would be better if he forsook the polemic against other scholars and modes of understanding Israelite religion and simply presented the data and his interpretation to see if they are persuasive and helpful. In many instances, that is clearly the case. That presentation, however, is so overlaid with his methodological polemic and ad hominem arguments that they become distracting and not helpful or persuasive. It is time to let it go. Dever is a superb archaeologist and interpreter of artifactual data. That is his contribution. It is very large and does not need to be intermingled with constant assaults on other scholars—even when or if the criticisms are accurate.