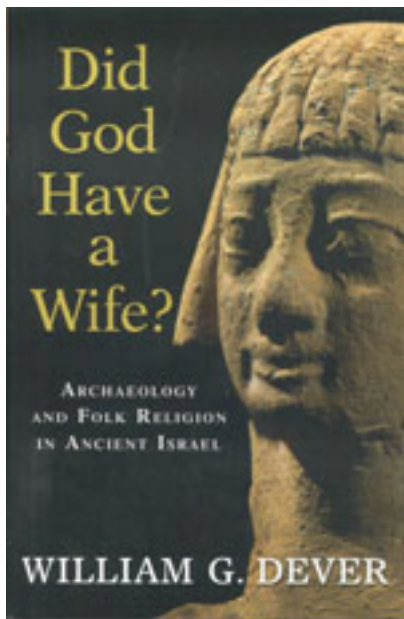


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**Dever, William G.**

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

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005. Pp. xvi + 344.  
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Scholars would respond to Dever's provocative title *Did God Have a Wife?*—"Indeed he did, because we have known for many years that he had a wife, that her name was Asherah, and that she was part of the Canaanite pantheon of pre-Israelite times." Dever is aware of this, as he states in the introduction: "My rationale for the format here is that this is intended as a popular work. My scholarly colleagues can quarrel with me elsewhere for what they may see as oversimplifications" (xii). At the same time, he is convinced that his work is a pioneering one and that he is the right man at the right time: "So why am I attempting what will have to presume to be a pioneering work, however modest and preliminary? Because it is time. And because perhaps I seem to have a unique background and experience. ... I can wear a clerical miter; a yarmulke; or no hat at all" (introduction and 89).

In this book Dever is uninterested not only in his scholarly colleagues; he also cares little for the scholars of ancient Israel. He is not concerned with the intellectual elite of Israel, those who created and edited the "Book religion," but with the ordinary people in their everyday religious lives and their "folk religion," which was their vital, varied, and colorful creation. His description is based on archaeological evidence and on the Hebrew Bible itself. The book begins with some definitions (ch. 1: "Defining and Contextualizing

Religion”). In chapters 2 (“The History of the History: In Search of Ancient Israelite Religions”) and 3 (“Sources and Methods for the Study of Ancient Israel’s Religions”) he describes in brief the different scholarly approaches to Israelite religion, the biblical sources, the nonbiblical texts that he uses, and the importance of archaeology. In chapter 4 (“The Hebrew Bible: Religious Reality or Theological Ideal?”) he examines cultic terminology and activities in the Hebrew Bible. The core of the book lies in chapters 5 (“Archaeological Evidence for Folk Religions in Ancient Israel”), 6 (“The Goddess Asherah and Her Cult”), and 7 (“Asherah, Women’s Cults, and ‘Official Yahwism’ ”), which are rich with photos and drawings and are devoted to a depiction of folk religion in ancient, mainly polytheistic, Israel, because of his reasonable view that this was the reality in the religious lives of most people. The last two chapters (ch. 8: “From Polytheism to Monotheism”; ch. 9: “What Does the Goddess Do to Help”) sum up the book. Here he concludes, by examining the historical sequence, that monotheism is an artificial phenomenon, the “ideal of most of the orthodox, nationalist parties who wrote and edited the Hebrew Bible” (252) that was adopted as a way of life only in a late stage of Israelite history, during the Babylonian exile. According to this view, monotheism—as expressed in the “Book religion”—was preferred to the folk religion because many of the exiles in Babylon, as well as the remnant in Judah, learned the painful and fundamental lesson “that Yahweh was indeed a ‘jealous god’, punishing those who flirted with other gods.” Dever supports this position with archaeology and notes that the archaeological evidence also shows that the polytheistic practices disappeared in the Israelite community during and after the Persian period. On the other hand, some vestiges of folk religion, such as the Asherah, found new niches in the magic and mysticism of later Judaism.

The focus on God’s female spouse and the awareness of women’s part in folk religion led him to his “feminist manifesto”: “With the full recognition of women—the other half of humanity—in religion and society, the spirit of the Great Mother will at last be freed. Here I have tried simply to anticipate her emancipation by showing that in the world of ancient Israel, among other places and times, she was once alive and well, at least until she was driven underground by the men who wrote the Bible. Archaeology brings her back to life” (317).

The book is a pleasant and fluent summary of an extensive and often controversial scholarly literature. It is written in a friendly style, accompanied by personal anecdotes, stories about other researchers, and even such contemporary notes as the following: “There is even a sacrifice and a ritual to ward off male impotency (the forerunner of Viagra)” (256). I have mainly enjoyed his atheistic viewpoint, which feels like a refreshing drink of water on a warm day. However, as Dever expects his colleagues to quarrel with him elsewhere for what they may regard as oversimplifications, I do not wish to disappoint him here.