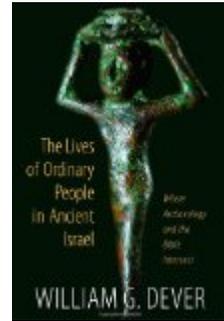


William G. Dever. *The Lives of Ordinary People in Ancient Israel: Where Archaeology and the Bible Intersect*. Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012. x + 436 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8028-6701-8.

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Picturing Life in Ancient Israel

The Lives of Ordinary People in Ancient Israel: Where Archaeology and the Bible Intersect is the newest work by William G. Dever, American dean of Syro-Palestinian archeology. In this book, Dever once again focuses on aspects of Israelite history and culture in order to answer an old question: how was it, really? Specifically, he seeks to reconstruct, almost exclusively from “primary” archaeological data, the lives of ordinary men, women, and children in ancient Israel and Judah in the eighth century BCE. Dever is fully aware that history writing is as much about the present as the past. As he says, the people telling the story do so in large part to define themselves against that past. Since this notion surely applies to the biblical writers, he uses historiographic information from the Bible only secondarily, if at all. The reader’s task, then, is to determine if Dever succeeds in the task that he sets out for himself.

This book consists of ten chapters plus a conclusion. In chapters 1 and 2, Dever discusses history writing and confronts challenges by revisionists and postmodernists that a history of ancient Israel cannot be written. His question, rather, is “what can we really know?” (p. 30). His response is that archaeological remains in their original context reflect a cultural context on which reasonable historical constructions can be built, with or without the Bible. In chapter 3, Dever explores the natural setting of the land, deducing possible effects that geography had in determining lifestyle in Iron Age Israel.

Chapters 4-6, the heart of the book, contain lengthy discussions on what excavations at sites throughout Israel have revealed about life in the eighth century in the land of Israel. Chapter 4 focuses on sites and hierarchies, analyzing the formation and function of various settlement types. It contains a handy database of key eighth-century sites. Dever categorizes the sites into a four-tier structure: capitals and administrative centers, urban centers, towns, and villages (forts are outside the tier structure). His multi-tier hierarchy is based on location, size, monumental architecture, cultic remains, and socioeconomic aspects. He discusses key archaeological finds from nine major tier 1 sites, including Jerusalem, Megiddo, Hazor, and Dan. He then compares archaeological evidence of life in Israel with data from biblical and extra-biblical texts, searching for convergences and divergences in the data.

Chapter 5 examines cities and towns (tiers 2 and 3) that reflect urban and town planning based on archaeological remains (defensive systems, neighborhoods, administrative buildings, storage facilities, industrial installations, water systems, domestic dwellings, and cult places). Dever notes, on the one hand, that biblical terminology distinguishes site type but with fewer categories than indicated by the archaeological record. On the other hand, the biblical accounts detail functions of the structures. Dever, however, considers the biblical data of little if any additional value to the primary archaeological material.

In chapter 6, Dever focuses on villages (tier 4) and everyday life of the common Israelite. From excavation remains at specific sites he offers the reader a good idea of what a family owned, made, and used (ceramic assemblage, household production items such as weaving, food preparation, cult items, etc.). In constructing the social structure of such settlements, Dever often relies on anthropological data gleaned from modern life in Palestinian villages. His analysis of the latter in conjunction with material remains from the ancient sites brings to life the daily existence of average eighth-century Israelites, although an astute reader will want to consider alternative interpretations by other archaeologists.

Dever addresses socioeconomic issues in the following chapter. Based on archaeological data, such as remains of palace/administrative structures and ostraca incised with related matter, he constructs a three-four tier society composed of ruling elite, entrepreneurial and proprietary class, and large working class. While he rightly connects seal ownership with social status, curiously he assumes that seals were only functional because their owners were illiterate.

Chapter 8 deals with religion and cult. Dever focuses on cult places and practices as reflected in the archaeological evidence. He presents useful discussions of well-known public shrines in Israel, Judah, and the Sinai, as well as private household cult places/corners. For each he describes the small and large artifacts found therein. Notably, in connection to the three thousand or so pillar type female figurines that he identifies with goddesses (probably correctly), he claims that the Bible is silent. That however is debatable, since scholars have yet to conclusively identify the biblical *gillulim* (idols) or *teraphim* (household idols) (as the ones Rachel hid in her camel cushion [Gen 31:34]).^[1]

Next, Dever presents brief overviews on the subject of Israel's neighbors and sites in territories identified as Neo-Philistine, Phoenician, Aramean, Ammonite, Moabite, and Edomite. I find these descriptions too curt with summaries useful only for limited contextualization and comparisons of cultural differentiation in the archaeological record.

Chapter 10 deals with archaeological evidence of warfare. Here Dever writes what is basically a brief

history of military conflicts. These he references with biblical, nonbiblical, and archaeological data. Surprisingly, the discussion hardly touches on the effects warfare would have had on the daily lives of Israelites—soldiers, women, and children. Dever also misses the opportunity to discuss available data on population depletion in Israel and Judah, the phenomena of exile, and the like. One exception is his somewhat fuller description of the siege of Lachish as gleaned from the Nineveh reliefs.

In his conclusion, Dever evaluates the dialogue between archaeology and text (with an emphasis on the Bible). Since he recognizes that both texts and archaeological data require interpretation, he questions whether in the end the separation of sources has yielded a better and more accurate historical reconstruction. He answers in the affirmative reiterating his long-held thesis that primary archaeological data is less susceptible to misinterpretation than the texts, which already bear the ideological markers of generations of authors and editors. Although I agree that artifacts recovered from primary contexts can tell a less biased story, I am not fully convinced that a disengagement of biblical accounts would yield a recognizable picture of life in ancient Israel, certainly not one which takes note of historical events that surely affected the populace. For example, the biblical accounts in Kings and Chronicles that feature the reign of Hezekiah identify the players and geopolitical happenings in the late eighth century (supported by Assyrian texts as well). In contrast, the archaeological remains mainly testify to prewar buildup (fortification, storage) and massive destruction of sites. In the end, both types of data are essential, requiring biblicists and archaeologists to confer with each other and evaluate all extant material judiciously.

In sum, despite my critiques, *The Lives of Ordinary People in Ancient Israel* has much worthwhile material to offer the reader. In fact, it should be utilized as a core text, especially in introductory archaeology courses for students of the Hebrew Bible. Dever has authored another well-written, stimulating account of early Israelite history and culture. Although more critiques will undoubtedly be forthcoming, they, after all, will season biblical, archaeological, and Near Eastern scholarship.

Note

[1]. Precise meaning of these terms is uncertain.

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