

BOOK REVIEWS

The lives of ordinary people in ancient Israel: where archaeology and the Bible intersect, by W G Dever, Grand Rapids/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2012, x + 436 pp., US\$25.00 (paperback), ISBN (10): 978-0-8028-6701-8

For various reasons this book by William Dever is not a history in the usual sense of the word. First, in this work the archaeological data are treated as the primary source, while textual data are only drawn upon once the archaeological data have been exhausted. Second, only the eighth century is treated in this “history”. At times Dever does infringe on both the ninth and seventh centuries, but the eighth century remains the focus. According to Dever, the fact that this period is archaeologically well documented favoured the choice of this period as subject matter. Dever basically constructs a parallel history of one era in the history of Israel and Judah to “correct”, so to speak, the history we construct according to the Hebrew Bible.

Let me state from the outset: to my mind Dever succeeds in his “experiment” of writing a history of ancient Israel (albeit only of a limited time frame) from an archaeological perspective. This work should encourage all who are interested in both archaeology and Hebrew Scripture to pursue this kind of study in future, if only to expand on Devers’ limited time frame.

After addressing the topic of history and history writing very briefly in the first chapter, Dever – and I almost wants to say unfortunately – in the second chapter once again embarks on the now very familiar and very unsatisfying minimalist-maximalist debate distancing himself from the likes of Philip R Davis, Niels P Lemche, Thomas L Thompson and Keith W Whitelam. It is of course necessary to state one’s position with regard to the question of the historical value of the Hebrew Scriptures. But Dever has done it in almost every one of his last monographs. We know his position by now, and I for one accept it. Dever will do well not to repeat it in future, unless of course his position changes.

The book is well written and logically structured. It consists of ten chapters, with a preface, conclusion and extensive bibliography. The three indexes, namely that of names, subjects, and Scriptures, makes it a handy reference book as well. The chapters addresses the following subject matters: (3) natural setting; (4) the database: sites and hierarchies; (5) cities and towns; (6) towns, villages, and everyday life; (7) socioeconomic structures; (8) religion and cult; (9) Israel’s neighbours, and (10) warfare and end.

These chapters are logically structured and lavishly illustrated with drawings and photographs as Dever sets out to prove his point, namely that a history of Israel can indeed be written. Being an archaeologist, he proves his point by writing it primarily from the archaeological data. Writing a history based on archaeological data is something that Dever has advocated for a long time. In the book under review he has shown us the way.

As always, Devers' style of writing is accessible to the non-specialist as well as the specialist. He thus ensures that interest in the book under review, as is this case with many of his previous monographs, will go beyond the classroom and academic circles, keeping the public in general interested in the archaeology of the Levant.

By writing a history based on archaeological data, this book does not so much deal with political matters or the interests of the cultic elite. It rather opens a window on the lives of ordinary people in ancient Israel. Archaeology helps us to get a glimpse of how ordinary people probably lived their lives in ancient Israel. The difference between ordinary people and the elite becomes clear as more and more data become available to archaeologists and the writers of history.

This work does not lessen the value of previous "histories" of Israel. Indeed it does sometimes "correct" them, but even then it should not be seen as an opposing perspective. Rather this kind of history writing has the potential of revolutionising our interpretation of the Scriptures in general.

Therefore this book is not only commendable to academics, students or academic institutions. Lay people in general, and pastors/ministers of religion in particular should take note of this work. I recommend this book and want to encourage people to read it. To my mind new ground has been broken in the history of writing a history of ancient Israel.

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