REVIEW ESSAY

A New Discussion of Archaeology and the Religion of Ancient Israel

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In the third volume of his series for Eerdmans, Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel, William Dever examines the role of religion in ancient Israel. Specifically, he considers the evidence for folk religion inasmuch as it can be determined from the archaeological remains. Especially, he focuses on the role of women and goddesses in the cults represented by folk religion. It is this emphasis that provides the suggestive title.

Dever begins his study with some observations regarding the nature of religion and the need to evaluate it by including both the verbal and the nonverbal aspects of contact with the supernatural. This naturally leads into archaeology and particularly the realia of the world that ancient Israel inhabited. The author considers the agrarian and village society that most of the families of ancient Israel experienced. He then turns to the approaches behind the study of Israelite religion. Dever finds little value in OT theology because it is a product of the elite circles of Jerusalem and not a description of the people in general and of their religion. He concludes that this discipline is of no value whatsoever in recovering the religious world of ancient Israel. After devoting only two pages to the sociological study of religion, Dever reviews some of the major books on Israelite religion, observing how little archaeology has been used. Nevertheless, some works, and especially the works of Zevit, do reflect a greater appreciation of the material culture. More importantly, Dever also notes the lack of consideration of the various roles of females in the ancient world. He helpfully

1. See also W. G. Dever, What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It? What Archaeology Can Tell Us about the Reality of Ancient Israel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); idem, Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From? (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).
notes the increasing emphasis applied to this study and concludes with a survey of women scholars who have made significant contributions to the field, regularly by incorporating archaeology.

Chapter 5, “Archaeological Evidence for Folk Religion,” reviews many of the cult centers throughout Palestine during the Iron Age. Dever begins with the smaller cult centers found in village and especially urban contexts. He argues that these are examples of family religion. While this may be the case, there is no inherent reason that these places of altars, offering stands, benches, and other accoutrements could not have been used by larger or more diverse groups. Indeed, unlike in the villages, there is no single example from the Bible of any family-based worship in the urban environs. Samaria locus E207 does not appear to be a cult center at all but a depository or even a refuse heap for discarded cultic objects. The same is true of Jerusalem Cave 1, which Dever reasonably postulates may provide “evidence of Josiah’s purge of the Temple” (p. 157). In the remainder of the chapter, the twelfth-century b.c.e. “Bull site,” the huge high place at Dan, Kuntillet ‘Ajrud, and the smaller but public worship center at Arad are considered.

The second half of the book devotes most of its attention to a study of the goddess Asherah and the piety of women, and of non-elite people in general. Dever argues that in ancient Israel at the time of the Monarchy and before, the preferred means of access to the supernatural for women and men who were not among the elite was to pray to the goddess Asherah and to worship her. While Yahweh was understood as the national male deity, he was considered too busy with the affairs of the state to have time for the specific concerns of individuals. Therefore, the role of his female consort, Asherah, gained prominence among women, who sought her aid for all sorts of practical matters related to life. The biblical writers suppressed both the association of this goddess with Yahweh and the goddess herself. Dever concludes his book by arguing that the true recovery of this feminine side of the divine is necessary for the continuation of Christianity and Judaism, as well as for the well-being of humanity.

In general this is a well-presented and reasonable volume with a strong dose of reliable archaeological and biblical information that addresses the topic. In this sense it may be commended to the reader as one contribution among a good number of recent works on ancient Israelite religion. A special contribution of this work is the attempt to integrate more archaeological evidence than has previously been applied to the question. One may profit a great deal from the reliable reporting and analysis of much old and some new information from the material culture. At the same time, the polemical nature of this book evokes a number of critical responses that need to be considered.

First, there is the absence of a full appreciation of West Semitic and other texts relevant to the study of Israelite religion. By way of introduction it must be affirmed that Ugarit is indeed a primary source for texts that suggest an understanding of the background to Israelite religion. Many of the names of Israel’s deity as well as poetic descriptions of him
have parallels in the Ugaritic myths (pp. 257–64). Even so, it is misleading to argue that the form *Elohim*, when applied to Israel’s God, was ever understood as polytheistic or that the name necessarily reflects a polytheistic background (p. 263). The first words in the Bible do not use Elohim in the plural but consistently apply a singular verb to it. They thereby treat it as a singular noun. Whatever the meaning of Gen 1:26, “let us make *’êdîm* in our image,” the use of the plural cannot be seen as in any way related to a plural form of Elohim. As applied to Israel’s God, Elohim is always singular and always takes singular forms of the verb throughout its thousands of occurrences in the Hebrew Bible.

However, Ugarit is not the only source for important information as to how the West Semitic peoples practiced religious observance at the time of the emergence of Israel in Canaan in the thirteenth and twelfth centuries B.C.E. There are many parallels between the biblical presentation of the cult of Israel in Leviticus and the cult found among the Hittites. In his massive and authoritative commentary on Leviticus, Jacob Milgrom devotes hundreds of pages to the study of Hittite religion and its comparison with the biblical prescriptions.2 Dever does not discuss the Hittite context of biblical religious practice. If he did, it would be difficult to see how he could refer to the references to clean or “kosher” animals as things that “may be innovative” (p. 267). In fact, they are not. The Hittites had a system of clean and unclean animals with specific designations for them. Clean animals could be eaten and sacrificed, while unclean animals could not. The terms for these animals formed part of the legal collection of the Hittites.3

Even more important, by way of comparison, is the evidence from the cuneiform texts found in the north Syrian city of Emar. Like the Hittite evidence, Emar flourished in the thirteenth and possibly early twelfth centuries B.C.E. and thus provides background material from the period of earliest Israel. Like Ugarit, Emar was a city composed of predominantly West Semitic peoples, as reflected by their personal names. The Israelites shared the culture and language of the West Semites. Unlike Ugarit, both Emar and Israel were inland peoples primarily devoted to an agrarian lifestyle. For these reasons we might expect the religious texts of Emar to be as important and possibly even more so than the texts of Ugarit. Although these have now been published and translations of the more important ones are available in handy collections of ancient Near Eastern texts, no reference is made to them in Dever’s work. He twice discusses the Israelite calendar (pp. 107–9, 267–69). Reference is made to Baal’s resurrection coming at the New Year, and the sources cited are the Ugaritic texts. Although reference is made to Baal’s battles in these texts, his resurrection is disputed, and there is no explicit evidence for connecting this activity with the New Year


in the autumn and with the beginning of the winter rains. On the other hand, a careful study of the thirteenth-century cultic calendar from Emar reveals many parallels with Israel’s calendars of festivals, especially the one found in Lev 23. Key festivals occur in the autumn and spring. Deities associated with fertility of grain are emphasized. Even the Passover and Days of Unleavened Bread have parallels in the zukur festival. Both cultures roast lamb, use distinctive breads, are concerned with memory (the very name zukur carries this meaning), and last seven days in the midst of the key spring month. That this festival was known among other West Semitic peoples in the thirteenth century B.C.E. argues against its introduction as a “pastoral feast” for sacrificing lambs by (semi-)nomadic peoples (p. 268). Theories of this sort should give way before actual texts recording the practice of this feast among other settled peoples of the second-millennium B.C.E. West Semitic world. More could be said about detailed parallels between the Emar and biblical ritual calendars, including repetitive forms in Lev 23 that are also found in the Emar text and thus do not necessarily bear witness to later editorial hands. There are other parallels with the Passover rituals and important comparisons between the installation of the high priestess of Baal (or the storm god) at Emar and the installation of the priests in Lev 8–10. All this evidence attests to much older traditions for the “oppressive” priestly religion than the period after the Exile. It also implies that, for a much longer period than suggested, the institutional religion of the biblical priestly cult “tracked” alongside the “folk religion” that Dever so aptly describes. It was not late, innovative, or absent.

Second, there is the assumption of complete continuity between the religion of the Late Bronze Age and the (“proto”) Israelite religion of the Iron Age. For this reason the anomalous thirteenth- and twelfth-century B.C.E. site on Mt. Ebal is not mentioned. It may be that this is not a cult center. However, no other convincing explanation has been proposed. Certainly the excavator’s identification of an altar at the site has yet to be disproved. It seems that one of the real problems here is the lack of conformity with preceding Late Bronze Age cult sites and the reluctance to postulate the appearance of something completely new in the countryside. The absence of continuity in terms of a possible belief in a single deity and an iconism are discussed below.

Third, the assumption of a homogenous set of practices in the cult of women needs to be noted and questioned—that is, the assumption that women all (or nearly all) worshiped Asherah and identified with her cult in a similar manner. Now the varieties of religious paraphernalia in various cultic assemblages as well as the odd evidence for forms such as the


female pillar figurines as limited to the territory of Judah argue against a single, unified set of religious practices or beliefs, on the one hand, and in favor of more influence by the nation on these practices, on the other hand. Indeed, the main title of Ziony Zevit’s comprehensive work attests to the multiplicity of Israelite religions.\(^6\) This means more than two: that is, Deuteronomistic and prophetic orthodoxy and Asherah worship. It means that our present evidence, from both the Bible and archaeology, does not permit us to limit the number of religions or to assume a uniform standard. Nevertheless, uniformity is an assumption in Dever’s presentation. It leads to the all-important fourth assumption.

The fourth point is the assumption of a fundamental antagonism between the official, oppressive cult of the priests and the cult of the women and others represented by the folk religion (for example, p. 240). In order to assert this point, Dever must argue that there are no women associated with any of the formalized religious structures of the Monarchy. He therefore downplays the role of prophetesses such as Huldah. He also asserts that no woman wrote any of the materials in the Bible (p. 61). Yet this point cannot be proved. Indeed, the dominant female voice in the Song of Songs suggests that the composition was more likely due to a woman than a man, although certainty is impossible. And this is the point. Certainty about this sort of thing is impossible. This is not to argue that the Hebrew Bible was not written in a patriarchal culture. It certainly reflects those biases. However, it is one thing to observe this fact and quite another to assert without proof that women found this religion “oppressive” and therefore sought the alternative worship of a goddess. This may have happened in various ways and in various times and places; but Dever does not and, on the basis of the present evidence, cannot show that this was the case throughout all of Israel.

As current evidence has demonstrated, the assumption that academics can predict what will and will not attract women or any other segment of society is wrong. If it were true, then the liberation theology of the latter twentieth century should have witnessed a mass religious movement of women and various oppressed Latin American peoples into base camps, where they would find religious freedom. Instead, as Bernice Martin has shown, the populist movements that have taken place among women and others have been toward Pentecostal-type religious groups throughout the continent. The fact that these are male-dominated in terms of leadership argues that Western academic assumptions about what will and will not work in such contexts are wrong. Martin’s article uses this easily quantifiable and verifiable example to ask fundamental questions about predicting religious attraction among the among various groups.\(^7\) She also asks

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why this sort of information has not been addressed more broadly in the study of the sociology of religion: 8

There is a special irony in the Latin American case since many left-leaning development specialists, both in sociology and anthropology, notwithstanding the colonial nature of Latin American Catholicism, had placed their hopes on the success of liberation theology (which was, after all, the project of Western intellectuals like themselves) as the anticapitalist “option for the poor.” The popular success of Pentecostalism and the failure of liberation theology to take off among the masses was not easy to accept.

Thus the gender of religious leadership and the authoritarian aspects of its exercise do not by themselves dictate whether it will be accepted or rejected by the people whom it seeks to serve. The same lack of certainty must be applied to Dever’s model of women and others who supposedly ignored temple worship in ancient Israel due to claims about its oppressive, male-dominated nature.

Fifth, Dever appears to assume that “book religion” as represented by the Deuteronomists and prophets occurred late in Israel’s religion, in the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E., and that during the Monarchy it remained known to a few elite leaders, priests, and other professionals in Jerusalem. Dever does argue for an earlier and more widely accepted ability to read and write in ancient Israel than many modern scholars would accept. The issues concerning the origins of what Dever (using a term coined by Karel van der Toorn) designates as “book religions” are too broad to address here. However, the debate about the origins of the worship of a single deity in Israel has not been settled. William H. C. Propp’s article “Monotheism and ‘Moses’: The Problem of Early Israelite Religion” provides just one recent example of a significant challenge to these arguments, questioning both their logic and evidence and fruitfully comparing the monotheistic tendencies of the fourteenth-century B.C.E. Amarna revolution. 9 In the end we must ask what sort of evidence one would expect to find if an aniconic faith did exist in early Israel. This is not to assert a dominant monotheism throughout the Iron Age. It is, however, to affirm that the possibility exists from very early on for some ancient Israelites, and not necessarily the elites, to have worshiped a single deity named Yahweh. Further, the fact that there is a preponderance of epigraphical evidence in the onomastica for the sole worship of Yahweh at the end of the Monarchy needs to be appreciated, as does the aniconic nature of much of the religious expression at this time. It may suggest more of the worship of a single deity by the time of Josiah, if not also before his reign. Thus the evidence does not require a late emergence of the belief in a

8. Ibid., 62.
single deity, nor does it demand that, in the final century before the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem, belief in Yahweh alone was limited to the elite of that city.

Sixth, one may mention the assumption that evangelicals have contributed nothing to the study of Israelite religion and that they refuse to recognize the Asherah as a goddess worshiped by ancient Israelites. In particular, Dever surveys a variety of views represented by different scholars on the question of the identity of the “asherah/Asherah” in the Khirbet el-Qom and Kuntillet ʿAjrud expressions. A section near the end of this discussion is entitled, “Conservative and Evangelical Scholarship” (p. 207). Here he names only the fine summary article on the subject of Israelite religion by Bill T. Arnold. Because it is specifically a summary article, Arnold does not go to great lengths to answer this disputed question. Because this is the only work that Dever cites, he uses it to argue that these scholars have either ignored the issue or “at best they have approached it quite defensively.” This is simply not true. There are evangelicals writing in mainstream scholarship on this subject. There are also those who explicitly identify their work and who interact with the best of scholarship.10 More to the point, I have published several works where clear positions have been taken that identify the name on these inscriptions with the goddess Asherah.11 These works are cited in a number of the volumes that Dever reviews, but for some reason he omits mention of them. They would certainly contradict his point that evangelicals are defensive about the preponderance of goddess worship in ancient Israel.

The “pan-Asherah” tendency of the book is the seventh criticism and one of the most pervasive “ideologies” present in the book. Every female figure is identified with the goddess of this name. Deities differentiated as Anat, Asherah, and Astarte in the Late Bronze Age are melded into a single Earth Mother figure whose name is Asherah. Pillar-based figurines as well as plaques and all references to lions are associated with this particular goddess. At Kuntillet ʿAjrud the picture of the female lyre player is understood as the goddess, despite the fact that this figure is smaller in size than the adjacent Bes figures. Further, the argument that she sits on a lion’s throne remains unconvincing. None of the parallels of royalty or deities on lion thrones have such a simply drawn chair, nor do they have someone playing a musical instrument (pp. 165–66). The pillar-based figurines that appear almost exclusively within the territory of Judah in the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E. may indeed be a goddess, but there is

10. See, for example, Philip S. Johnston, Shades of Sheol: Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 2001).

no certainty as to her identification, nor is it necessary that she even be identified with deity. Why are all the images of this form so cheaply done? If this is a goddess, why is there not at least one example from the many hundreds found of a metal or more valuable image? Surely this must be the only goddess in antiquity who “required” that her image be made of the cheapest substance possible. No, the patent absurdity of this conclusion renders a consistent identification of these clay forms with the goddess Asherah as unlikely. This also explains why the figure is not mentioned in the biblical texts (rather than abhorrence and fear, p. 184). Whether a deity or a model of a woman in general or some sort of good luck charm, this image may have served a variety of purposes in different contexts. As for the various Late Bronze Age goddesses of the West Semitic world, there is evidence for some identification of Asherah and Astarte within the Hebrew Bible but not for any identification with Anat (who is remembered in the place-name of Jeremiah’s home town, Anathoth, as well as the site named on p. 166). Any two goddesses might share a variety of traits (war, sex, love, and so on). However, this overlap does not mean that the goddesses were identified or shared the same name.

These concerns do not take away from the important contribution that this book makes to our understanding of the material culture of the religious practices in ancient Israel. If anything, they demonstrate how stimulating Dever’s work has been. *Did God Have a Wife?* may not make the final case for polytheism as the true and original “orthodoxy” in Israel, but it will evoke many responses and much interaction in the ongoing discussion of the religions of ancient Israel.