



February 2003

# What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It?

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## BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Grey, Matthew J. "What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It?." *Studia Antiqua* 2, no. 2 (2003).  
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studiaantiqua/vol2/iss2/16>

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William 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, MI: Eerdmans, 2001.

Reviewed By Matthew J. Grey

The field of archaeology has long held an honored position of fascination for students of the Bible because of the field's importance to the study of the world from which the Bible originates. In this regard, a recent work by William G. Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It?*, will be of great value to students of biblical studies and related fields, as well as lay readers with an interest in the topic of archaeology's relationship to the Bible. Here Dever has offered both a readable and enjoyable introduction to the field of archaeology, as well as a head-on discussion on issues of extreme importance in current biblical scholarship. As he writes to the popular audience, constantly offering helpful discussion, maps, and images, the book is less an in-depth reference source than a quite insightful overview of the issues meant to familiarize the reader with the subject. Dever also masterfully combines the popular overview with solid research and commentary that naturally elevates the reader's understanding and appreciation for the intimate relationship between archaeology and the Bible.

Dever himself insists that he is not out to "prove" the Bible through archaeology, but merely to promote the honest investigation of such an important field. Raised the son of a mid-western Protestant preacher, his academic background includes study at a liberal Protestant Theological Seminary, the Hebrew Union

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College, and direction of the W.F. Albright Institute of Archaeological Research in Jerusalem. Eventually, Dever moved into the university setting in the capacity of teaching and writing on Syro-Palestinian archaeology. During his career, he converted to Judaism but today is a secular humanist.

This multi-layered background has allowed Dever to catch the vision of the possible link between the fields of archaeology and biblical studies (which, incidentally, he shared in a BYU Forum in recent years). Indeed, this concept is the driving force behind the project being discussed here. The two declared emphases of the book are to 1) counter the current trend of “revisionist” scholars and their flagrant abuse of archaeology, and 2) show how modern archaeology indeed “brilliantly illuminates a real Israel in the Iron Age, and also to help foster the dialogue between archaeology and biblical studies that [he] had always imagined” (x).

In Chapter 1, “The Bible as History, Literature, and Theology,” Dever quickly introduces the issue currently at the forefront of biblical studies—Is the Bible really history? Indeed, the historicity of the biblical narratives are under fierce attack, and currently posing the greatest challenge are a group of scholars known as the “revisionists.” This is a small collection of mostly European intellectuals who, while not representative of the mainstream, are certainly among the more vocal and active. Their agenda, as Dever quotes from their own sources, is not even to attempt rewriting a history of ancient Israel, but to abolish it altogether (deny its very existence) and create a new discipline of biblical studies.

As their emphasis includes the mythical, folkloric, and epic elements of the biblical account, their conclusion is that the Bible contains no history whatsoever. It is mere literature, after all, and as such, not only has no real grounding in history, but has no real meaning either! Steeped in current trends of postmodernism (“no one can ever really know anything”), the revisionists impose this reasoning onto the biblical text and maintain that we can never

really know what happened, the biblical authors themselves had no real intention in their writing, and that any meaning must rely upon the response of the reader. Dever summarizes this approach by their insistence that the reader of the bible 1) identify the text's problems and look for any possible dissonance, 2) read the text in their own language (i.e., English or Spanish) so as to strictly adapt the message to their own situation, 3) read the text in terms of political correctness, and 4) be rid of the old fashion notion that literature is a reflection of reality. All of this concludes, for the revisionist, that no correct interpretation of the Bible's history or meaning is possible.

Dever offers a list of criticism for this seemingly reckless approach to the biblical text (or anything else for that matter!) which includes its "anti-history" attitude, as well as its promise to offer results superior to traditional scholarship which, in reality, is more entertaining than edifying. The revisionists, Dever maintains, completely ignore any original context the writings may have had and focus solely on the current social application of the text (a philosophy apparently adopted by many local Sunday School instructors as well!). Finally, their post-modern "know nothing" approach, while bypassing any linguistic and historical support (again comparable to the average Sunday School class) sustains a "cultural relativism"; the text can mean anything the reader wants it to mean. This allows for more of a forum for promoting modern ideologies and political correctness than an understanding of the biblical text itself.

Critical to the discussion, Dever demands that certain controls exist when approaching a text. First and foremost, the text, in this case the Bible, is a product of a particular time, place, language, and culture, all of which are absolutely essential to understand in gleaning the original meaning from the text. Also is the certainty that the author of the text actually did have a specific audience in mind and did have an intended message when writing the text. While these things seem almost absurdly obvious, they

are indeed lost on many in the field. Truly, an original meaning can be deciphered, but background in languages and history must be attained to adequately find it.

In Chapter 2, Dever offers a more in-depth discussion on revisionist thought, methodology, and agenda. A main tenant of this new approach, to be utterly refuted by Dever in subsequent chapters, is that all texts of the Hebrew Bible in their present form actually date to the Hellenistic Era (2nd-1st centuries B.C.) rather than the much earlier period that it describes. It is, after all, non-historical propaganda with the intent of creating a historical Israel for religious and political purposes. Thus, the revisionists attempt to “liberate” the Bible from any historical setting whatsoever. This “new approach” pretends to make all other traditional approaches (linguistics, archaeology, history) altogether obsolete. However, little by way of filling the gap is attempted. By briefly discussing some of the major revisionist voices (Phillip Davies, Thomas Thompson, Peter Lemche, and others), all seem to agree that both “biblical” and “ancient” Israel are mere fictitious social constructs whereas little can be said of any real Israel that may have existed.

Dever finds this approach faulty to say the least, and quite honestly irresponsible scholarship. “The fact is that one of the revisionists’ major faults is that they ignore, cite selectively and cavalierly, misinterpret, distort, or otherwise abuse modern archaeology and the rich data that it produces” (48). For Dever, the presence of such rich and telling archaeological data as has been produced in the last few decades is a major, and ignored, obstacle to this overly liberal approach. Supporting this assertion makes up the remainder of Dever’s work. To conclude Chapter 2, Dever entertainingly summarizes the revisionist mindset. Such philosophies include: always attacking the establishment in the name of revolutionary scholarship, creating false issues and dichotomies, rejecting consensus scholarship as the more bizarre gets the attention, denying objective facts and insisting that all interpretations (except their own) are biased and illegitimate,

pretending to science but rejecting or falsifying evidence, being politically correct in term of race, gender, and class, and above all announcing the inevitable triumph of the “new truth.”

Chapter 3 discusses the role and importance of archaeology and what it can (and must) add to biblical studies. A main point Dever makes is the insistence that a relationship be recognized between the text and discovered artifacts. Both act as data to describe something of the ancient world, and both offer an essential context in which to establish a true history. As the archaeological data is external to the text, it acts as an independent witness of those things the text may describe. Thus the dialogue between text and artifact must be achieved, meanwhile respecting the legitimacy of both fields of study (biblical text and archaeology), competence and open-mindedness on behalf of both types of scholars, and the courage and honesty of both to accept new things. This dialogue is necessary to discover the real story of ancient Israel.

The subsequent two chapters give powerful examples of how the text and archaeological data must and do work together. Dever begins the discussion by reminding the reader that some texts are more historically reliable than others. While a Latter-day Saint may appropriately differ with the extent to which assigning historicity may be taken, Dever nevertheless offers insightful and informative discussion on the various schools of textual criticism (the J, E, P, and D schools) and himself believes that 1-2 Kings, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, and the Prophets all offer bits of true history within the text. While he accepts the current thought of later redaction and editing (perhaps post-exilic), he insists that “nuggets” of true history are found in these texts that demonstrate their authentic ancient origins.

For example, Dever shows how the biblical text describes the period of the United Monarchy (tribal structure, conflicts with incoming Philistines, and internal interactions with local Canaanites) and the various ways in which the archaeological record converges with the text (evidence of the house plan, and ex-

ternal and internal affairs, etc.). He also points to such important finds as the Tel Dan inscription, a 9th century recording of a “king of Israel” in connection with the “house of David.” This is clear evidence that such a concept existed much earlier than the revisionists will allow. Dever likewise points to the 10th century gates at Gezer, Hazor, and Megiddo as an important correlation to the strong centralization of government which textually characterizes the reign of Solomon. Along with these matters, the extensive administrative lists as well as the great details describing Solomon’s Temple all have solid parallels among the archaeological data. Such convergences between text and artifact serve to support the history rather than detract from it.

In discussing Solomon’s Temple as a model of this phenomenon, Dever writes,

let me now emphasize that every single detail of the Bible’s complicated description of the Jerusalem temple can now be corroborated by archaeological examples from the Late Bronze and Iron Ages. There is nothing ‘fanciful’ about 1 Kings 6-8. What is truly fanciful is the notion of the revisionists that a writer in Babylon in the 6th century, much less in the hellenistic-Roman era, could have ‘invented’ such detailed descriptions, which by coincidence happen to fit exactly with Iron Age temples in Syria-Palestine hundreds of years earlier – temples that had long disappeared and had been forgotten (155–7).

For Dever, as with many students of Joseph Smith and his incredible feat in providing the Book of Mormon, the possibility that writers living in a much later age (Hellenistic) and having no access to the earlier accounts (10th-9th century), as the revisionists maintain, and yet providing such precise detail as will be vindicated by archaeology hundreds of years later is simply too incredulous for words. “Perhaps the question is simply this. Which

strains the reader's credulity more: the supposedly 'fanciful' descriptions of the temple in the Hebrew Bible; or the revisionists' scenario of its 'total invention' by writers living centuries later?" (157)

In a following chapter Dever continues along these lines, this time by pointing to what we now know of daily life in ancient Israel. As it turns out, the archaeological record confirms the details contained in the biblical text. These include the detailed king lists of Assyria and Babylonia (one inscription even mentioning King Hezekiah by name, although with a different propaganda twist than is found in the bible), as well as descriptions and artifacts of the popular religion practiced by the Israelites and condemned by the prophets. Examples of this are the high places, incense stands, Asherah figurines, and other items now discovered and denounced by the major Israelite prophets. Other textual and artifactual convergences include signature seals, ostraca, economy, pottery types, measures of volume, and ivory carvings—all alluded to in the biblical text and attested to by archaeology with precision.

It would be incredible to suggest that the biblical references were 'invented' by writers living in the Hellenistic or Roman period. They must have had ancient sources, in this case records going back at least to the 8th century, if not earlier (239).

The final section of the book returns to refuting revisionist ideology, now having cited the large quantity of evidence to sufficiently undermine their arguments. He again decries the political correctness of their revisions by reminding the reader that we *can* know things of the world of the bible. Indeed, understanding the archaeology, history and languages of the text are essential to solid scholarship.

The section ends with Dever discussing the "historical core" of the bible. In other words, those portions of true history we can



find within the text. Indeed, for Dever, elements of early Israel, the United and Divided Monarchy, and the settings of the prophets are quite consistent with the archaeological record, some even in remarkable ways. So in asking the question posed in the book's title, what did the biblical authors know and when did they know it?, For Dever, the answer is that they knew a lot and they knew it early ("based on older, and genuinely historical accounts"). "One cannot simply force all the biblical texts down into the Persian, much less the Hellenistic, period" (273). As, again, is often said of Joseph Smith producing the Book of Mormon, if the writing really is a later "pious fraud," surely there would *something* historically inaccurate to give it all away—"which surely even the most ingenious 'forger' could not have known" (273).

A final question asked by Dever, in response to Davies' proposition of a Hellenistic composition, is what would the text indeed look like if it *was* written in the Greek era? Certainly, Dever concludes, it would look a lot more Greek. Perhaps containing the Greek world-view of rational western thought, rather than the strictly oriental thought that is clear in the text. Or possibly more allusions to the Greek *poleis*, rather than to the Iron Age city life that is described in ancient Israel. Or most of all, it surely would have been written in Greek, rather than the Hebrew and Aramaic in which it originated. Indeed, for a 2nd century writer to project a story back into the Iron Age, he would have to do it without trace of anachronism (i.e., giving away the conditions of his own day), write with no records (for all Iron Age records had disappeared, only to be discovered centuries later), and he must provide such a work of fiction so as to fool the entire world for 2000 years (that is, until Davies and his revisionist friends found him out!).

Thus Dever, in blasting the minimalists, encourages the reader to continue study of the Bible, accompanied by archaeology, and to constantly search for those historical nuggets contained in the narrative. Even in the portions of the Bible Dever

does not believe to be historical, he recognizes the importance of asking, what are the authors (or editors) trying to say in interpreting these things? The answers have proven to provide the very foundations to our society and should not be discounted. We should take the Bible at its best, rather than at its worst as the revisionists do. For Dever, it is important to find the middle ground (verses the extreme left of the minimalists or the extreme right of the fundamentalists) and defend it.

For a Latter-day Saint student of the Bible, there are some conclusions Dever makes that may soon conflict with LDS belief (i.e., authorship, some elements of historicity, etc.). However, after perusing much of the research in biblical scholarship, his approach and research is overall quite refreshing in its conservative stance and its honest assessments of the facts, seemingly unbiased by current trends in ideology and academics. The principles of biblical studies he purports (the stress on language, context, history) should be well considered by the Latter-day Saints in their own study of the bible. Not to mention the amount we could learn of Book of Mormon apologetics with Dever's arguments and methodology. Overall, this is an easy to read and an academically inspiring book by a competent scholar offering insight and hope to the believer that there are still academics out there honest enough to declare that the Bible might contain truth after all!