

Two Current Views of Biblical Archeology:

Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From? By William G. Dever (2003)
Archeological Study Bible: An Illustrated Walk Through Biblical History and Culture, Edited by
Walter C. Kaiser and Duane Garrett (2005)

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The Authors. William G. Dever and Walter C. Kaiser are professional giants in their respective fields. Dever, a recently retired professor at the University of Arizona, is probably the foremost American Syro-Palestinian secular archeologist working today, with more than 35 years of fieldwork behind him. Dever, “not even a theist,” labels himself a mainstream nonpolitical archeologist in a field he believes is sometimes dismayingly twisted by religious and/or nationalistic agendas. Kaiser, a renowned theologian, is president of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, professor of Old Testament, and author of numerous books. Dever’s book, a superb survey of Archeology 101 for “the educated layman,” concentrates on three main subjects: the origins of the Israelites, the Exodus, and the Conquest of Canaan. Kaiser’s magnificently graphic book, weighing a hefty six pounds, provides versions of archeological evidence that supports a literal reading of the *New International Version of the Bible*.

Dever’s Book. Dever wrote his book in response to what he calls the “raging controversies” brought about by “revolutionary” evidential discoveries in biblical archeology during the last decades of the 20th century, evidence that keeps mounting. Dever believes that these scientific “facts on the ground” trump contradictory historical claims in the Bible. He earnestly believes that “[m]any biblical scholars, theological, seminary professors, and clergy...are deceiving the public.” His first chapter, for instance, argues for a model of the origins of early Israel, the core of which renders “all older models obsolete.” His next three chapters describe the mainstream archeologists’ views on the Exodus, the Conquest of Transjordan, and the Conquest of Canaan. Other chapters describe breakthrough methodologies unavailable to earlier scientists, current models for interpreting evidence, a discussion of the most respected American and Israeli archeologists publishing today, and a summary of their variant models.

Dever, along with Israel Finkelstein, probably Israel’s most famous secular archeologist, claims that these “facts on the ground” confirm beyond reasonable doubt that the biblical Exodus never happened. Dever and most of his colleagues claim that the Israelites did not arrive from Egypt, but arose primarily (along with a “motley crew” of other marginal ethnic groups) from among dissident Canaanites living on the fringes of the Canaanite city-states. As the Mediterranean economies collapsed in the mid to late 12th century and the peasants became increasingly impoverished, they began settling in the Judean hills. In fact, in a single century, the growth of these proto-Israelite small farming complexes exploded into hundreds of settlements that over time, coalesced into a minor monarchal state. As for the military Conquest of Canaan, Dever offers detailed proofs that this, too, never literally happened. Here are two of numerous examples: Joshua could not have destroyed Jericho. That unfortunate city had lain in ruins for 200 years before Joshua’s time. In addition, Gezer was destroyed, not by the Israelites, but by the Egyptian or Philistine armies. Dever’s hardcover book has great charts and lists, but no index, which I find annoying and inconvenient.

Kaiser’s Book. Not unexpectedly, Kaiser stands on the opposite side of Dever on these three issues. Let me give you the flavor of some of his claims. “Science and theology...offer competing and incompatible views.” Biblical “divine facts” trump archeology. Moses himself wrote the Pentateuch via “supernatural communication” with God. Historical evolution is untrue. He reasons thus: “[S]uch a theory is sharply contradicted by the divine facts revealed in Genesis 1-2.” His articles discuss the probable location of the Garden of Eden and extol the biblical view of the Exodus and the Conquest. While Kaiser concedes that two million fleeing slaves could not been supported by the desert and its manna for forty years, he insists the numbers proclaimed in the Bible cannot be contradicted because no one knows their “real” meaning. Kaiser theorizes that the “two million” actually represents around 20,000 people who fled Egypt, enough to field an army. As for the conquest of the Promised Land, Kaiser follows the biblical timeline, including the conquest of Jericho. Kaiser admits in an article, “The Walls of Jericho,” that there is an archeological issue of dates here, but he nevertheless “encourages” his readers to accept “the reliability of the Joshua 6 account.” And so on. One of the best features of this beautiful book are 500 interesting and well-indexed archeological articles, categorized

into five topics, "Archeological Sites," "Cultural and Historical Notes," "Ancient Peoples, Lands and Rulers," "The Reliability of the Bible," and "Ancient Texts and Artifacts." In addition, this Bible includes over 8,000 "bottom of the page study notes," and excellent maps.

Other Thoughts. In the spring of 2007, Dr. Zahi Hawass, Egypt's chief archeologist, announced via *The New York Times* journalist Michael Blackman that the parting of the Red Sea had no basis in fact. "Really, it's a myth," Hawass told reporters. "What about those you offend?" one listener asked. "If they get upset, I don't care," Hawass retorted. "I should tell them the truth." Kaiser, on the other hand, accepting the biblical version, serves up an article proposing "the wind set-down hypothesis" for the parting of the waters and Lake Timsaw as the probably location of this miraculous event.

Dever has long agonized over the great faith/science divide exemplified by the above example and the fundamentalists' dismissal of archeological mainstream consensual "core" evidence. Dever expresses his frustration in his last chapter, "Salvaging the Biblical Tradition." For decades he has passionately called for a dialogue regarding this evidence among groups of archeologists, theologians, anthropologists, linguists, and scholars of other related disciplines. In a worthy YouTube interview, taped by the University of Arizona, the professor regrettably admits that he does not see this happening anytime soon. Dever himself believes that the "facts on the ground," concerning ancient Palestine and its environs, contain hard evidence of a developing Israelite culture diverging from Canaan, as well as factual remnants, ancient historical memories, and propaganda to which we must pay close attention. He argues vehemently against the radical European Copenhagen and Sheffield schools of archeology that flat-out deny ancient Israel's very existence, hence the "growing crisis" in his field. He appeals to us to be aware of these trends.

In September 2008, a momentous event, recorded by *The New York Times* journalist Frances D'Emilio regarding the inerrancy of the Bible, made news around the world. Pope Benedict XVI warned Catholics again against a literal interpretation of the Bible and reemphasized "that faith is not incompatible with science." The foundational proposition was expressed by the Pope himself, that the Bible's structure "*excludes by its nature everything that today is known as fundamentalism. In effect, the word of God can never simply be equated with the letter of the text.*" [Italics mine.]

A Challenge. As for me, I have cast my lot with Dever. I further confess being hooked on modern Syro-Palestinian archeology. My own Dever book is dog-eared from four or five readings. I love this new "restored history" of the Bible, with its fresh glimpses into the Iron Age and perhaps even Bronze Age minds. I rejoice that the vast, cruel, and unthinkable Canaanite genocide by Israelite armies never occurred. I believe, too, that the Bible doesn't require a "literal" reading, a hot-button term fraught with multiple and controversial definitions and nuances and that, linguistically, has no bearing on the genres of poetry, song, metaphor, parables, or myth. I agree with the Pope that science and faith can co-exist and thrive and that believing in the inerrancy of the Bible is an unnecessary prerequisite for the Christian journey.

In this spirit, I offer my readers this challenge: check out Dever's book from our library. Read this dense but concise Biblical Archeology 101 masterwork. Then at least browse the preface, articles, footnotes, and glossary in this colorful, even "lush," Archeological Bible and ponder for yourself what definitions of "evidence," "facts," and "truth" fit into the parameters of your own faith. Wherever this mental journey may guide you, both books will enrich your knowledge of current biblical archeology--and introduce you to its vast implications for 21st century Christianity. I bought both for my library, along with a dozen yellow markers.

NOTES:

Dever, William G. *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From*. William B. Erdman's Publishing Co., 2005. Available on Amazon in both hardback (2003) and paperback (2006) and in the OBC Library.

Kaiser, Walter C. Jr., Duane Garrett, eds. *Archaeological Study Bible: An Illustrated Walk Through Biblical History and Culture* (Hardcover), Zondervan, 2005. Available on Amazon and in the OBC Library.

Blackman, Michael. "Did the Red Sea Part? No Evidence, Archeologists Say." *New York Times*, April 3, 2007.

D'Emilio, Frances. "Vatican Affirms Scientific Value of Evolution." *New York Times*, Sept. 17, 2008, p.A5.