

William Dever. *Did God Have a Wife?*
Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel.

Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005

Reviewed by Paul Hoskisson

While *Did God Have a Wife?* is a catchy title (no doubt employed to pique interest and increase sales), William Dever's latest foray into Israelite religion has more to do with its subtitle, *Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel*, than with God's marital status. Nevertheless, Latter-day Saints may be more interested in the answer to the question of whether the God of Israel had a wife than in a tour de force through what archaeology can tell us about the religion of biblical Israel—even if that grand tour was produced by arguably the foremost living American archaeologist of all things associated with the Old Testament.

Dever answers the question posed in his title with an unqualified “Yes!” In his view, the God of the Old Testament (“Yahweh” in scholarly cliques and “Jehovah” in conservative circles) certainly did have a consort, and her name was Asherah. The evidence is laid out in great detail throughout the book, but specifically in chapters 6 and 7. The data he presents consist of (1) textual evidences, such as the “asherah” and “asherah” (plural of “asherah”) mentioned in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament but not always recognizable in the King James English translation, (2) ancient graffiti found in Israelite territory mentioning “Yahweh and his Asherah,” and (3) evidence from numerous archaeological excavations conducted in and around the lands traditionally associated with the Israelites of the Old Testament (211–47).

The idea that Father in Heaven might have a wife is not unknown to Latter-day Saints. We are reminded of the concept every time we sing the famous lines, “In the heav’ns are parents single? No, the thought makes reason stare!”¹ And because we believe that nearly all primary and many secondary religions are derivatives (and in some cases perversions) of gospel-based dispensations, we are not surprised when scholars point out some “newly discovered” aspect of an ancient religion to which Latter-day Saints can say, “We already knew that.” Nevertheless, taking a clue from

latter-day prophets, seers, and revelators, most Latter-day Saints see no point (except perhaps in meetings devoted to discussing doctrines found nowhere in the scriptures²) in squandering time on issues for which we have almost no answers, including our Mother in Heaven—even if many of us nurse a reverent curiosity.

The question of God's marital status aside, the bulk of the book reviews the information archaeology can add to and correct about our notions of ancient Israelite religion. Dever's thesis throughout the book is that there is not one monolithic Israelite religion during the Old Testament period, but rather variations of "book religion" (the theology contained in the Old Testament) and "folk religion" (what the people were actually doing). As the chapter headings reveal, his intent is to walk the reader through the process of discovering these religions: (1) "Defining and Contextualizing Religion," (2) "The History of the History: In Search of Ancient Israel's Religions," (3) "Sources and Methods for the Study of Ancient Israel's Religions," (4) "The Hebrew Bible: Religious Reality or Theological Ideal?" (5) "Archaeological Evidence for Folk Religions in Ancient Israel," (6) "The Goddess Asherah and Her Cult," (7) "Asherah, Women's Cults, and 'Official Yahwism,'" (8) "From Polytheism to Monotheism," (9) "What Does the Goddess Do to Help?" and (10) "Afterword (and Foreword Again)." Leaving aside the question of the role of Asherah, Dever's premise is that the current biblical text was produced by a male, priestly elite, and therefore it "is not an adequate source *in itself* for reconstructing a reliable portrait of Israelite religions as they actually were" (32, italics in original). Dever then convincingly demonstrates that the findings of archaeology confirm the widespread nature and popularity of many practices that the authors of the Bible anathematize.

Readers who are familiar with the assumptions common to secular biblical scholarship will immediately recognize that Dever has accepted many of these assumptions as the starting points for his arguments. Latter-day Saints will find themselves agreeing and disagreeing, and rightly so, with some of his presuppositions. For example, we would reject the "intellectual reservations" of contemporary people, "critical scholars or not," to "the ancients' assumption of direct, divine revelation (now known as the doctrine of 'verbal inspiration')" such as "the call of Abraham" or God "speaking in person to Moses" (91). This review, however, is neither the time nor the place to examine all of Dever's suppositions. Nevertheless, I would like to mention another of his suppositions wherein I think he might be mistaken. I believe there is sufficient evidence to cast doubt on his assumption that less than 5 percent of the ancient Israelites were literate (28).³ In fact the assumption that most people in the ancient world

were illiterate is an example of modern cultural hubris. To his credit Dever himself seeks to avoid cultural hubris when talking about the religion of ancient Israel and castigates the “not-so-veiled implication of superiority” evident among many modern commentators vis-à-vis the ancients (127). Yet he fails to recognize that his assumption of widespread illiteracy is just that, an assumption.

Dever debunks several commonly held ideas that neither biblical text nor archaeology support. For example, as for “fertility cults,” he states that “there never was much actual evidence for the more titillating aspects of such cults” (34). In fact, a little later in the book he becomes even more emphatic, “There is neither etymological, cultural, nor historical evidence to support these notions” of “sacred marriage” and “cultic prostitution” (216). He also concludes that the reconstruction of “an annual ‘enthronement festival’ in which Yahweh was enthroned in his Temple, and the king as his divine representative was once again legitimated . . . is very speculative” (109).

In addition to the two questions Dever poses—“Did God have a wife” and “What was the nature of Israelite religion”—readers will find a third not-so-covert (and to some Latter-days Saints even more fascinating) theme running through his book. Dever manages to weave occasional asides that reveal snippets of his transition from his evangelical, born-again roots, through his academic training and concomitant jettisoning of his inherited faith, to his present stand as a convert to Judaism, albeit a rather “humanistic” Judaism. Latter-day Saints will resonate with, without being shaken by, many of Dever’s criticisms of traditional Christian and Jewish readings of the Bible. However, as Latter-day Saints, we cannot go to some of the places Dever has gone. “Theology” has not become for us, as it did for him, “a dead end.” Neither can we “become more a student of religion than a practitioner” (xi). Yet Dever’s journey from old faith to new belief delightfully adds spice to the entire book.

It is also ironic that in this volume Dever has in some ways come back to his roots, since he defends through archaeological evidence some aspects of biblical history. Early in his career (between his roots and his conversion to Judaism) he almost single-handedly obliterated the concept of “biblical archaeology” from academic discussions. Yet now at the latter end of his career, he has come almost full circle with statements such as, “If the Hebrew Bible is all a pious hoax, I do not see how it can be morally edifying” (59). He means, of course, that at this stage of his career he has been attempting to demonstrate that the Bible is not a pious hoax.

In summary, Latter-day Saints will find much to enjoy, much to agree with, much to reject, and much to contemplate in *Did God Have a Wife?*

However, a certain familiarity with the issues and presuppositions of biblical scholarship is assumed. The discourse of necessity includes discussions of technical terms, which Dever admirably attempts to define and make clear. The wealth of information Dever provides is reward enough for serious students of the Old Testament. It is a great read for those who are willing to winnow.

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1. "O My Father," in *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 292.

2. See, for example, Orson Scott Card, *Saintspeak: The Mormon Dictionary* (Salt Lake City: Orion Books, 1981), under several entries.

3. For example, when Jeremiah spoke to the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem in chapter twenty-five, he used an *atbash* in verse twenty-six. An *atbash* works only if the target audience is generally literate since it is constructed by writing the first half of the alphabet on one line and then lining up the second half of the alphabet in the reverse order on the second line. In verse twenty-six, "Sheshach" is an *atbash* for "Babylon." If Jeremiah's audience were generally illiterate, his use of an *atbash* would be gratuitous. Another piece of evidence that people were expected to be literate comes from Job and other books, including Genesis, where the presence of Janus parallelisms demonstrates that these passages were written to be read silently. As soon as the Janus parallelism is read aloud, let alone performed on a stage, the parallelism is destroyed.