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In this provocatively titled work, William Dever attempts to break new ground in the study of ancient Israelite religion. Dever's goal is to uncover and articulate Israelite "folk religion," which he contrasts with the "book religion" that supplanted and suppressed it. Central to Israelite folk religion, according to Dever, is goddess worship, in particular the worship of the Canaanite goddess Asherah.

Dever clearly outlines the scope of the work and his intentions for it in the introduction. As much as possible, he restricts his attention to material evidence from the twelfth to the early sixth centuries of the Common Era. His reason for excluding evidence from ancient texts (especially biblical texts) is that he suspects them of promoting an artificial view of religious belief in ancient Israel. From the first page, Dever insists that he wants his book to be "mostly about the practice of religion, not about belief, much less theology" (ix). He intends the book to be a popular synthesis of the archaeological evidence, not a technical work for scholars. Nonetheless, he invites scholars to "quarrel with me elsewhere for what they may see as oversimplifications" (xii).

Because the book is intended for nonspecialists, Dever begins with four chapters of preliminary discussion. These opening chapters (which weigh-in at 109 pages) are intended as a primer on the methods and sources employed in the study of ancient Israelite religion. He begins with a discussion of the academic study of religion in general, paying special attention to the notion of "folk religion" (chap. 1). This is followed by a history of the academic study of ancient Israelite religion (chap. 2). The third chapter provides a helpful discussion of what archaeology can and cannot prove. Chapter four outlines the facets of ancient Israelite religion presented in the Hebrew Bible, a picture of the religion that he views as a prescribed "theological ideal" not a "religious reality" (90-91).

Chapters 5-7 are the heart of the book. In them, Dever examines and interprets the material evidence for Israelite folk religion. According to Dever, the data reveals that the Canaanite mother-goddess, Asherah, was widely worshiped in ancient Israel and Judah. Dever concludes that she was embraced as the spouse of the supreme Israelite God, and that her main function was as a protective deity for pregnant women. In making this argument, Dever provides detailed discussions of the relevant cult sites (e.g., Dan, Kuntillet 'Ajrud, Schechem, Arad) and artifacts (e.g., pillar figurines, pictorial representations). He demonstrates the widespread evidence for an Asherah cult, and connects Asherah worship specifically to a women's cult. Trace evidence of this cult, largely through negative polemic, can still be seen in the Hebrew Bible. There is nothing new in these chapters that has not been dealt with many times in the scholarly literature (contra his claim to be "pioneering" [89]), but his presentation is a model of clarity, up-to-date and incisive.

In the last two chapters (chap. 8: "From Polytheism to Monotheism"; chap. 9: "What Does the Goddess do to Help") Dever tries to make the case that monotheism is an artificial construction of (unidentified) "orthodox, nationalist parties who wrote and edited the Hebrew Bible" (252). This
transformation of the community, he argues, occurred during the Babylonian exile. The writers and editors of Hebrew Bible interpreted the exile as the act of a jealous God and successfully persuaded the exiles of this interpretation. The success of this campaign established the "Book religion" of the Hebrew Bible as the orthodox religion of Israel and eradicated folk-religion both from practice and from historical recollection. Dever sees himself as rescuer of this lost legacy. He closes the book with this pronouncement: "With the full recognition of women the other half of humanity in religion and society, the spirit of the Great Mother will at last be freed. Here I have tried simply to anticipate her emancipation by showing that in the world of ancient Israel, among other places and times, she was once alive and well, at least until she was driven underground by the men who wrote the Bible. Archaeology brings her back to life" (317).

Dever's style is engaging and clear; the book is beautifully readable. Chapters 5-7 are among the clearest, most readable, descriptions of ancient material evidence that I have ever seen. The one thing that interfered with my reading pleasure was Dever himself. Though he claims that the book is intended for a popular audience, he is unable to shed his professorial persona. He continually bogs down in summarizing and critiquing the secondary literature, and he is intolerant of any other interpretation of the data. It makes the book more exciting but eventually becomes tedious and detracts from the principal argument.

A few observations. Dever makes his case, in part, by constructing false dichotomies. Three are systemic. First, Dever does his best to omit textual evidence regarding ancient Israelite practices in favor of material evidence, because he wants to describe Israel's religious practices, not beliefs or theology (ix). But there is no one-to-one equation between artifacts and practice. Artifacts can be highly "theological" as iconographers and semioticians have taught us. Nor are texts devoid of evidence about practice. Even their negative statements and silences can be telling. Second, his dichotomy between folk-religion and book-religion is handy but not very accurate. The great Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918) attempted a similar dichotomy and was widely criticized for it. In his case, Wellhausen distinguished between the free, open, (dare I say) happy religion of the Israelite tribes and the sterile, inflexible, hidebound religion of the exilic priests. Dever has, in part, redefined the nature of ancient folk-religion, but his proposal is similar to Wellhausen's in many ways. Dever's third dichotomy is reinforced throughout the book but never clearly articulated. That is, he describes Israelite folk-religion exclusively in terms of women's worship of Asherah, and he persistently describes book-religion as the product of men. In truth, we know very little about the individuals responsible for the production of the Bible, but we do know a great deal about the role of men in folk-religion. The worship of Baal, who is often paired with Asherah in the Hebrew Bible, can be seen everywhere in the Hebrew Bible and the material evidence. Did Baal worship not include men? Moreover, Dever underestimates the possibility that Asherah was worshiped by men. For example, the graffiti on the Kuntillet 'Ajrud vessels, which are central to Dever's arguments, may well have been produced at a military outpost.

These criticisms aside, Dever is the leading voice in the field of ancient Israelite archaeology today, and anything he writes deserves careful attention. He consistently makes the field more accessible, and he continually challenges our assumptions about it.