

Dismantling the House that Albright Built: Dever's Rise and Decline Narrative in the Reorientation of American Biblical Archaeology

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Abstract: William G. Dever's contribution to the reorientation of 'biblical archaeology' should not be under-estimated, although his historiography of the movement's transition to 'Syro-Palestinian archaeology' certainly requires adjustment. In the paper, the significance of Dever's 1972 Winslow Lectures, delivered at Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, is examined.

A creditable approach to the history of American 'biblical archaeology' is to trace the trajectory that links the scholarly lineage of William F. Albright, G. Ernest Wright, and William G. Dever. It is a story that has been framed as a convincing 'rise and decline' thesis, and as narratives go, it strikes a certain and useful resonance. There was a heyday, a 'golden age', and there was a 'decline', when some evidence from the dirt skewed a plain reading of the biblical texts. There was a 'renaissance' of sorts, and a reorientation of the aims and methods within the biblical excavation paradigm. The term 'Syro-Palestinian archaeology' was thought more befitting, it looked to developments from elsewhere, principally from the American academic scene known as 'new archaeology'.

Ernest Wright and his school fostered many fine researchers, archaeologists who found plenty of work in the Holy Land, but he had one student who settled in the heartland of the 'new archaeology', the American Southwest. That student, Bill Dever, made his voice heard above the others somewhat more forcefully. Pre-eminently, it was *his* interpretation of the rise and decline thesis, with which posterity has been forced to reckon. Indeed, the published doctoral thesis of Dever's student, Thomas W. Davis, contains that very phrase in the sub-title: *Shifting Sands: The Rise and Fall of Biblical Archaeology* (Davis 2004).

We would not want to take issue with a convenient historical archetype. However it is appropriate to acknowledge that the 'decline' was initiated in the decade of the Seventies when many leading archaeologists died. Not only the two central figures, William Albright himself, who died in 1971, and Ernest Wright in 1974, but also Paul Lapp, who drowned in 1970, and Nelson Glueck who passed away in 1971. Elsewhere there was the passing of the French Dominican, Roland de Vaux, also in 1971, the Israelis Michael Avi-Yonah in 1974 and Yohanan Aharoni in 1976, and the British titan, Dame Kathleen Kenyon, in 1978. Truly that decade struck down many giants in the land. With the passing of another colossus, Yigael Yadin in 1984, the heroic era had most certainly passed. It buried itself.

Dever probably went further than warranted with the rhetoric that accompanied his narrative of 'decline', per-

haps with some expediency, since he had other purposes in its promulgation, some defensible, others not so. In his favour, Dever had front and centre the reconstruction (in fact for him it was the *establishment*) of a *discipline*. It was marked by a shifting of its home-base from seminary to public university, from a biblical studies orientation to one planted in world archaeology, from 'political history' to one encompassing socio-economic and environmental change, and from apologetics to hypothesis-based testing. The sources of funding for the new look discipline should (and would) move from private to public, the status of its practitioners from dilettante to professional, and for the character of the enterprise, it was a transition from sacred to secular.

Such a transformation demanded a new name, hence 'Syro-Palestinian Archaeology', if only – but not only – to establish some distance from its discredited antecedent ('biblical archaeology'). Dever wanted his students to identify as professional archaeologists, respected in the great academic fraternities and conferences, and not be prejudged and dismissed as amateur gentleman clergy-archaeologists (or worse).

Dever himself was moving from Christian orthodoxy,¹ though he did not embrace the naked European denialist tradition. Rather, with the assault of postmodernist linguistic lunacy into biblical studies, Dever resuscitated a strand of Albrightean apologetics, the tradition of a (qualified) biblical historicity that supported the backbone of Western civilization, the contribution of the Judea-Christian tradition to law, democracy, human rights, modern science, morality and civic decency. Dever rightly feared the social and political implications of the new nihilism, and in recent years has been unyielding in highlighting archaeological and epigraphic evidence in support of an historical basis upon which the biblical tradition – a key plank and source of the Western heritage – can credibly stand.

Background: The 'Rise and Fall' of Biblical Archaeology in a Long-Term Perspective

Historically, Biblical Archaeology has a well-worn progress narrative. The broad outlines began in the pre-critical era, the consensus of a straightforward belief in

historicity that obtained well into the late eighteenth-century. Anomalies, anachronisms, contradictions and irregularities in the biblical text were exploited in the Enlightenment, culminating in various theories of how the extant biblical text was created. The reigning sentiment for this enterprise – critical biblical studies - was scepticism, and rarely entered public debate unaccompanied by vigorous apologetic reaction.

At the same time, and not unrelated to this movement, adventurous seminary scholars took interest in the ‘monuments’, the inscriptions and ancient architectural remains of the lands adjacent to the Levant, principally Egypt and Mesopotamia (Schoville 1996a, 1996b; Lloyd 1980; Silberman 1982; Ceram 1967). To put it another way, to counter the possibility of an adverse consensus developing within one discipline (biblical studies or theology), its adherents went outside the discipline to test assertions and foil orthodoxies (or foil emerging heterodoxies), by the founding of counter-balancing cognates, principally biblical archaeology, geography, and epigraphy.

While modern excavation started late in the Holy Land itself, it was preceded by explorations and topographic observations by a number of individuals, among whom the American, Edward Robinson (1794-1863), was foremost. As debates over biblical criticism and theology intensified toward the end of the nineteenth century, a host of ‘exploration’ societies and archaeological missions were founded in Britain, the United States, Germany, France, and elsewhere. A high point was the first scientific excavation in the Holy Land; the initial soundings by Flinders Petrie (1853-1942) at Tell el-Hesi and his subsequent identification of the outline of Palestinian stratigraphy. Many large scale excavations soon followed, but the story line reached a ‘revolution’ with the advent of William Foxwell Albright, and his influence in the early and middle decades of the twentieth century. In his wake came a coterie of scholars and archaeologists such as George Ernest Wright working on ‘biblical theology’ assumptions. From Israel, there were stirrings of a nationalistic archaeology under Eliezer Sukenik (1889-1953) and his son, the remarkable soldier-statesman archaeologist Yigael Yadin (1917-1984), and others (Silberman 1993a).

There followed a period of disillusionment as the broad outlines of the (Joshua) conquest thesis met with a patchy and incomplete archaeological corroboration and confirmatory evidence for ‘Israel in slavery’ failed to materialize from Egypt. At the same time, scholars looked anew to older ideas from Albrecht Alt (1883-1956), and toyed with alternative historical scenarios for the Middle Bronze Age, with consequences for the Patriarchal narratives. Others, such as the Americans George Mendenhall (a student of Albright’s) and Norman Gottwald canvassed ideas associated with the indigenous origins of biblical Israel. With the overdue introduction of the techniques and ideas of American ‘new archaeology’, together with the rise of comparative literature flowing from spectacular

cuneiform finds in Syria, Turkey and Iraq, new hypotheses flourished to occupy generations of graduate students.

The last three or four decades of the twentieth century saw the rise of national Israeli archaeology, and the discovery of more than three hundred new Iron Age sites (mostly unfortified highland villages) in areas occupied by Israel after the Six Day War (Finkelstein 1988). The story came to a climax (or perhaps a nadir) with several new challenges to traditional renderings of the biblical text. One line of challengers rehabilitated Julius Wellhausen and other nineteenth century critics concerning the wholesale creation, or compilation of a credible, nationalistic, historical narrative (assembled for contemporary political purposes) under Josiah in the seventh century. The claim that the absence of indisputably tenth century architectural remains, which would have strengthened evidence for the Davidic and Solomonic eras, shifted the focus for the creation of the biblical epic forward several centuries.

The second challenge posited the origin of that epic as a fictional and pseudo-historical creation around the time of Ezra and Nehemiah to meet the national psychological needs of a displaced, nascent Jewish people in the post-Exilic era; a purely origins myth. This latter idea implied wholesale lateness for biblical historiography, placing it nearer in time to the Greek chroniclers such as Herodotus. Related to this, another line of challengers, noting the paucity of epigraphic material from the sixth to third centuries, posited an even more recent – virtually Roman era – origin for the Pentateuch, in effect reversing the literary dependence of Genesis with Berossus, and Exodus with Manetho (Gmirkin 2006). The effect of shifting the status of the biblical corpus from historiography to invention implied the final collapse of the biblical archaeology superstructure, and a victory for ‘minimalism’ or archaeological nihilism.

The most recent act to the story line begins in the sunset of the twentieth century, a trenchant rear-guard rejection of the biblical fictionalising movement, together with a forthright reaffirmation of the role of archaeology in properly testing biblical claims to context. It would not be true to say that scholars ever totally gave up the notion that the biblical record contained reliable evidence. Several traditions, notably evangelicalism and Seventh Day Adventism, saw little need for a wholesale abandonment of older paradigms. It is of interest that the case for historicity exploded back into the public limelight courtesy of two agnostics, William G. Dever, and Biblical Archaeology Review’s editor and founder, Hershel Shanks.

Dever Tests the Waters

In a paper read at the Second International Congress on Biblical Archaeology in Jerusalem in 1990, Dever reminisced about the need to ‘clear the ground’. ‘It was never my intention’, he announced, to

sever Syro-Palestinian archaeology from literary sources, biblical or other. . . In the 1970s it was

necessary, however, to clear the ground of such accumulated rubbish before the foundations for a new structure could be laid over the ruins of the old. Unfortunately, because of the emotional over-reaction of scholars in both disciplines, clearing the ground took nearly 20 years . . . (Dever 1993: 707).

Dever was alluding to a difficult earlier episode in his scholarly career. At some time between positions in Jerusalem, near the end of his tenure at the Hebrew Union College, and the start of his directorship of the Albright Institute, Dever, who was then primarily known as the excavator of Gezer, forayed into controversy. A brief (two-page) article in a little-known periodical, *Christian News From Israel* was the piece in question. It was entitled ‘*Biblical Archaeology*’ – or ‘*The Archaeology of Syro-Palestine*’? (Dever 1972).

Some three decades after he published this brief missive, Dever revealed the painful disjunction that occurred between him and his friend and mentor, Ernest Wright. Dever thought it ‘an innocuous little piece in an obscure magazine’. As Dever tells the story, his then wife, Norma, warned him about ‘twitting the Establishment’

I ignored her. I recall saying, ‘But nobody will ever see this.’ They did, of course. And Ernest Wright – my revered teacher and mentor – promptly wrote me the sort of anguished letter that a father would write to a prodigal son. In it, he said that I ‘must get right with Albright,’ that if I persisted I would destroy our discipline. That was my first shot across the bow of the Establishment. It was prompted by a reluctant but growing recognition that traditional-style ‘Biblical archaeology’ was full of contradictions, hopelessly compromised by Biblical biases, and in any case rapidly becoming obsolete . . . (Dever 2003: 58).

The theme of the paper concerned the age-old connection between biblical studies and archaeology, but more to the point, the proper relationship between these historic disciplines, ‘recent developments’, he wrote, ‘made for an increasingly uneasy association between the two’ (1972: 21). In fact, he wrote, there were ‘certain tensions which have developed recently between the two disciplines’, such that ‘Biblical scholars and Palestinian Archaeologists have not always been able to work so well together’ (Dever 1974: 15, 31).

His short essay into irreverence, rightly described (later) by Dever as being ‘programmatically’, was likely his first in that genre. It initiated an identifiable style in the author’s prose, not unrelated to the unmistakable advocacy role that Dever has carved out over his public career. Common within that corpus, certain events can be stated simultaneously as being still-in-process, imperative, and *fait accompli*. ‘For the first time in history, Syro-Palestinian archaeology is becoming an autonomous discipline, no longer merely an adjunct of biblical studies’ (Dever 1972:

22). Clearly, this was news to Ernest Wright, but for Dever, it was a statement which outlined both an incipient narrative of what could be said to be (already) occurring, while initiating a new direction for the field.

The title of that article heralded the main theme, what to call the new ‘discipline’, and why a name change mattered. For Dever the practice of the past, needed to be identified as, and only with, the label ‘biblical archaeology’. While the thoroughly reoriented endeavour that he saw as characterising newly emerging practice, and that which he thought should occur in the future, was best served by being dignified with another name. In this case, it was the resurrection of an older name (from Albright, in fact), the term ‘Syro-Palestinian Archaeology’.

Dever’s experience of modern American excavations in Israel, their innovations, aims, and character, was worlds away from the amateur dilettantism that flew the flag for ‘biblical archaeology’. The methods of Dever and his staff at Gezer, for example, were unrecognizable when compared with those of R.A.S Macalister at the same site half a century earlier – and different from digs in the decade or two since the Second World War. What then, according to Dever, was now happening?

Firstly, he argued the evolution of independent ‘national schools’, notably the Israeli school, and their embrace of a secular orientation was pointedly at variance with ‘many of the older British, French and American schools’. Secondly, he saw the scope of Palestinian archaeology naturally broadening, certainly beyond the biblical eras, and the specialisations that have arisen to assist excavators are far from those normally found in Biblical studies (he mentions anthropology, cultural history, and ecological studies). His third point was that the student volunteers that came to dig were, more typically, ‘non-Jewish’ or ‘Post-Christian’ ‘with little interest in the ‘Holy Land’ *per se*’. Fourth, the funding of modern excavations in Israel was being sourced less from church and conservative religious institutions, and more as grants from private foundations and the US government such as through the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Fifthly, field method standards had risen and excavations were more expensive, consequently, their results were superior (1972: 21). His sixth point was that natural science techniques were ‘rapidly becoming indispensable, bringing to new disciplines, new motivations, new research projects, and totally new vistas to Syro-Palestinian archaeology’.

The results of these developments heralded a ‘coming of age’ (a term used ubiquitously throughout the Dever corpus), characterised by a professionalism appropriate to the development of the newly autonomous discipline of Syro-Palestinian archaeology.

The Winslow Lectures

Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, an Episcopal institution, now folded into another Anglican institution, Bexley College, was attuned to ‘progressive’ social and theological convictions. It invited Dever to deliver the

Winslow Lectures in January 1972. Dever's two lectures substantially developed his *Christian News From Israel* missive, and while respectful of Wright, they were pointed and critical of him; the reorientation of Palestinian archaeology was now mainstreamed and public. The lectures are significant in that the new 'heir apparent' was not only 'clearing the ground' (and few would have found this unwelcome), but laying it waste as well.

The first lecture, 'Biblical Archaeology: A Chapter in the History of American Scholarship', emphasized the unique nature of the discipline as found in the United States. The underlying assumption was that here was an endeavour that had effectively run aground, and the reasons needed to be explicated. 'I suggest' spoke Dever

that it is the peculiar relationship between Palestinian Archaeology and the Bible in this country that has brought us to this impasse . . . I want to trace the development of that relationship and ask specifically how we came to this state of affairs (Dever 1974: 6).

There followed a potted history of Palestinian archaeology with particular emphasis on the American contribution. The unique feature was that biblical studies (and to an extent, apologetic concerns) initiated, motivated, controlled and funded American archaeological ventures in Palestine. It began with Edward Robinson of Union Theological Seminary and his student, missionary Eli Smith. 'Bibles in hand' (this term recurs in the literature as a jibe), they sought, successfully, to locate ancient sites on the basis of modern Arabic place names. When digging eventually did begin (the Americans trailed Europeans by decades) it was inevitably at the biblical sites. Even before the First World War, European excavations were working at 'Ta'anach, Megiddo, Gezer, Jericho, Beth-shemesh and elsewhere' (Dever 1974: 8). Dever added the later American digs at Tell en-Nasbeh (biblical Mizpah), Tell Beit Mirsim (thought by Albright to be Debir/Kiriath Sepher²), Beth-zur, Bethel, Dhiban, Dothan, Shechem, 'Ai, Shema and Tell el-Hesi (1974: 11), predominantly, and notably, also biblical sites.

Predictably, there was no enthusiasm for digging prehistoric cave dwellings or Islamic sites. The aims were to get to biblical strata as quickly as possible and in some cases sponsoring organisations expected it. The motivations were clearly religious, the personnel almost all seminarians and biblical scholars. The precursor to the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR), the American Palestine Exploration Society (APES) was founded in 1870. Dever cited its charter, which stated in part that it was concerned with the 'illustration and *defense* of the Bible' (Dever providing the italics).³ Although ASOR was not founded for the 'defense' of the bible, religious interests remained prominent, Dever argued

Although it might not have been intended that way, during the years since 1900, I would estimate that approximately 80% of the persons associated with

the School [ASOR] have either been professional Biblical scholars, or clergymen, Rabbis, priests, and others with more than a passing interest in the study of the Bible (Dever 1974: 11).

In regard to both personnel and sites

I would estimate that fully 80% of the post-prehistoric digs are at Biblical sites and are sponsored by people from the Biblical background ... Let us take Gezer as an example. It is one of the larger and better known current excavations and in every way typical of American archaeological enterprises in Israel. Of the eight professional members of the Core Staff at Gezer, six are clergymen – and the other two are women! (Dever 1974: 12).

He noted that the Gezer advisors were Rabbi and seminary President, Nelson Glueck, and Ernest Wright, 'Presbyterian minister, Old Testament theologian, and Parkman Professor of Divinity at Harvard'. This pattern extends even further, continued Dever, 'even our photographers, geologists and other people who had degrees in secular fields were mostly ordained clergymen with advanced theological degrees'.

The criticisms of Wright (mostly carried out in the footnotes) could not be suppressed

Wright's books are well known, particularly his book Biblical Archaeology, which is perhaps the best popular statement of the particular view which we are characterizing (Dever 1974: 10).

Wright, like Albright, saw Palestinian archaeology as essentially a handmaiden of biblical studies and thus viewed the context chronologically and spatially as widely as possible. Wright's views were expressed plainly and up front. For example,

biblical archaeology . . . studies the discoveries of the excavators and gleans from them every fact that throws a direct, indirect, or even diffused light upon the Bible . . . It's central and absorbing interest is the understanding and exposition of the Scriptures (Wright 1947: 74).

But even so, Dever also quoted from private correspondence to define Wright's position, namely, that

biblical archaeology is the archaeology of the whole eastern Mediterranean, as well as its ancient history per se, which provide the Bible setting and in which alone the Bible is to be understood (Quoted in Dever 1974: 25, fn. 25).

It was not so much the 'width' of the definition that bothered Dever, rather, that

allowance must be made for other views of the field, in which the Biblical motivation does not figure. For instance, why must we call the study of the Neolithic of Cyprus 'Biblical Archaeology'? Wright and I do not differ on what our field

consists of; he simply wishes to call it all 'Biblical Archaeology', while I prefer a more general name [Syro-Palestinian Archaeology] (Dever 1974: 25; fn. 25).

Towards the Secularisation of Archaeology

The context of the seventy-year reign of religious involvement and dominance in the Palestinian archaeological enterprise is naturally central to Dever's definition of 'secularism'. In his list of pre-Second World War digs, he noted that there are four exceptions, ventures that did not have a 'religious' orientation, which in his interpretation comprised 'a parallel tradition in Palestinian Archaeology'. These excavations included the Harvard University Semitic Museum dig at Samaria (1908-10); the University of Pennsylvania (University Museum) at Beth-shan; Chicago University's Oriental Institute at Megiddo; and Yale University at Jerash (1974b: 18).

Ernest Wright however, also cited the orientation of these digs, in addition to Albright's at Tell Beit Mirsim, and enterprises like the British School of Archaeology, the Ecole Biblique, the Jordanian Department of Antiquities, the Hebrew University (under Yadin at Hazor) and his own Drew-McCormick Expedition at Shechem

All of these excavations have been directed by people whose main interest in the work has been historical and cultural. Archaeological field work in Palestine has for the most part been viewed as an adjunct of history; it has been carried out by those intent on recovering the cultural history of the country, and their achievement has been notable (Wright 1958: 39).

According to Dever, Wright was here writing against the 'common assumption that Palestinian archaeology was, and still is, cradled and nurtured in the desire to prove that the Bible is true' and was 'fully cognizant of the secular tradition. . . [yet sought to] assess it differently' (Dever 1974: 11, fn. 10). Dever's point was that a powerful religious element had been longstanding, and further, that it was part of the problem, the reason that biblical archaeology was floundering.

After cataloguing the 'success stories' of biblical archaeology in his Winslow Lectures, Dever argued that 'no matter how well it has worked in the past', it 'probably will not work very well in the future' (Dever 1974: 15). He then suggested a number of reasons why this was likely to be the case.

Firstly, the 'tensions' between the disciplines had to ease with the need for specialisation. Full-time biblical scholars could not be expected to keep up with the rapidly expanding body of archaeological literature. From the archaeological perspective, the current anthropologically-oriented archaeology training regime could not simply be 'tacked on' to the language and text oriented training that biblical scholars received. Genuine professionalization demanded specialisation.

The second tension was also alluded to in his 1972 paper; entry into the field needed to take account of those with interests other than biblical studies. More specifically, Dever was concerned about the 'embarrassments' and 'scandals' that plagued biblical archaeology, the search for Noah's Ark, attempts to identify the walls of Jericho, etc, that made genuine archaeologists appear to be rather odd in the eyes of their Americanist colleagues.

The third tension concerned the existence of a genuine 'secular tradition' in Palestinian archaeology. Dever thought that this tradition, did not lead to long-term commitments and was 'too often dismissed in our circles'. Dever charged

I would suggest that perhaps these people disappear after a brilliant start simply because, while institutions like Chicago, Yale, Harvard and others provided them with major financial support, the field itself was so dominated by 'Biblical Archaeologists' that secular scholars found no place (Dever 1974: 18).

There followed an enumeration of 'secular' schools, scholars and excavations in Palestine by representative American, British, German, and French - either overwhelmingly secular, or 'religious' with no fundamentalist tendencies at all, and in the case of the Israeli national endeavours, 'without exception secular' (1974: 21; emphasis in original).⁴

To complete the picture, the change in methods, the escalation of excavation costs, the trend to professionalism, the rising interest of secular scholars in Palestine, and changing political realities in the Middle East, would be decisive. Clearly, 'there are several legitimate ways of approaching Palestinian archaeology, and that the distinctively American brand of 'Biblical Archaeology' may represent a minority view' (1974: 22). Dever concluded that this all 'suggests to me that we may soon see a movement away from the traditional Biblical axis in Palestinian archaeology' (1974: 26).

The SBL Centennial Volume: *The Hebrew Bible And Its Modern Interpreters* (1985)

The skeleton of Dever's rise and decline narrative was greatly expanded just over a decade later. In 1980, the Society of Biblical Literature initiated an ambitious series to showcase the state of scholarship for its Centennial year. Dever was invited to contribute a paper, entitled 'Syro-Palestinian and Biblical Archaeology', in a volume edited by Douglas Knight and Gene Tucker; it was probably written in about 1982 although not published until 1985. Dever appears to reference this paper more often than his others, it is obviously his key statement in regard to the recent history of the discipline.⁵ The paper is informative for its time, and a helpful 'state of the art' overview, but its historiography is problematic.

The paper is divided into three sections, the final one, entitled 'New Vistas and New Relationships' being a

‘tame paean’ on future prospects of Levantine archaeology and its relationship with biblical studies. The first (and longest) section is a straightforward overview of the state and recent history of Palestinian archaeology. Previous treatments in this genre, he notes, ‘have actually been general summaries of the recovery of the ancient Near Eastern context of the Bible’ (1985: 31), or ‘the general progress of Near Eastern archaeology, particularly in epigraphic discoveries bearing on early biblical history’ (Dever 1985: 53).

Dever’s concern to shift the focus from biblical studies to an academic pursuit allied to general archaeology, led him to sketch a ‘discipline history’ of Syro-Palestinian archaeology from World War II. This he did with reference to excavations, people, journals, national schools, indigenous university archaeology departments, and museums, together with methodological progress. In these developments, Dever was able to identify trends and outline eras, noting, for example, the ‘revolution in field methods’ in the 1950s, a disciplinary ‘coming of age’ in the 1960s, and the ‘new archaeology’ of the 1970s (1985: 33-53). The roles of Wright, and the Shechem excavation, and of Dever, and the Gezer dig, are quite prominent in his description. The validity of this prominence may be judged partly from the contrasting accounts of the period by King (1983), Moorey (1991), Davis (2004), and others.

The second section is more problematic. It critiques ‘biblical archaeology’ in the period 1945 to 1980, and offers an account that is *separate, but parallel*, to the history of Syro-Palestinian archaeology. In so doing Dever was able to write a ‘portrait of two disciplines during the crucial years of their development’ (1985: 32), ‘one in the ascendancy, and the other possibly in decline’. In summary, writes Dever,

The fact that the present treatment has been able to survey Syro-Palestinian and biblical archaeology separately for the first time means that a new stage has been reached in which not only is a certain style of archaeology past, but the mid-1970s debate over it . . . is passé (Dever 1985: 60).

Albright and Wright, are for Dever part of ‘Syro-Palestinian archaeology’, but their apologetic and theological objectives were reason enough to allocate large portions of their contributions to a *separate* endeavour – ‘biblical archaeology’. In fact, he writes, ‘biblical archaeology is what it *always* was, except for its brief bid in the Albright-Wright era to dominate the field of Syro-Palestinian archaeology’ (Dever 1985: 61).

Dever’s argument makes much of the apparent intertwining of biblical archaeology and the neo-orthodox ‘biblical theology movement’ that occupied Wright through much of his career. According to Dever, they rose and fell together because they were so entwined (1985: 56, 57). The problem, in a nutshell, was that Wright insisted on an historical reality that of necessity lay behind traces they should find in the soil. Dever’s story of the discipline, in

other words, sanitises a secular trajectory by disemboweling it of the inconvenient semi-apologetics agenda of Wright and (to a less extent) Albright.

It is true that both Albright and Wright (and many others) were strongly motivated by religious objectives for their endeavour. But their contributions and objectives were as much an integrated part of the discipline, and as legitimate and necessary as any other part of the endeavour such as, for example, excavation methodology. It would be thought strange indeed, if any discipline were to be similarly eviscerated if several of their leading personalities were, for example, Marxists, or atheists.

In the end, Dever manages to credit Wright, or at least,

the natural momentum generated by the school that Wright himself launched in the 1960s, together with his students at Shechem, Gezer, and elsewhere, pushed biblical archaeology in the 1970s irresistibly toward the professionalism and secularization we have noted, and thus toward status as a field of research more and more independent of biblical studies (Dever 1985: 59).

So it comes as a surprise when Dever announces, ‘in a more profound sense’ biblical archaeology

did not die at all; it evolved naturally, perhaps inevitably, into the discipline of Syro-Palestinian archaeology whose progress we have charted above. In the end, no one was more responsible for that beneficent development than Wright himself (Dever 1985: 59).

In short, Dever has it both ways: banishing Wright (especially) and his theology, while according him credit for crucial progress in the field. Like his Winslow Lectures, Dever’s paper in the 1985 SBL centennial collection, gets at the heart of issues that still await definitive solutions, but his ‘construct’ cannot easily bear the substantial load he places upon it.

Conclusion: Denouement and Evaluation

There is no question that Dever’s Winslow Lectures (1974) are among the most seminal documents in the progress of the study of the ‘bible and archaeology’ (regardless of the discipline’s name). Dever’s pragmatism can be applauded, his attempt to set some directions in accommodating the inevitable, the irreversible infusion into traditional biblical archaeology by scholars oriented to non-religious outlooks. The same process has occurred in other fields that religious scholars previously had to themselves, ecclesiastical history in general, Reformation history, biblical linguistics, and of course, theology and biblical studies. In this sense the Winslow Lectures were keenly prescient. It would not be too much to say that Dever was the future.

With the value of hindsight, it would be natural if his prescience did not work out exactly as envisaged – as Dever himself has acknowledged. While he was vocifer-

ously advocating for a new name for the field – ‘Syro-Palestinian archaeology’, he quietly dropped the title by the turn of the century. He himself advocated, fairly early, a new name for the interaction of bible and spade, calling it ‘new biblical archaeology’, but the old label has still stuck, and has even found new life. Dever’s forward calls to build the new discipline in secular universities started to look shaky when he catalogued the decline of departments of Syro-Palestinian archaeology in North American institutions. In the same article he opined that the momentum had in fact swung to conservative Christian institutions (Dever 1995). It is not without interest that Ernest Wright warned Dever that it was unwise to damage the link with the prime consumers of biblical archaeology knowledge – the Christian public. Secular funding sources were also disappointing due to economic conditions with the American economy. In fact the shortfall, in recent years, seems to come from private (American) Jewish sources. Perhaps of greater surprise is the fact that some of the leading exponents of biblical historicity are actually wholly secular in outlook.

While Dever’s call for an approach more in tune to American ‘new archaeology’ was certainly embraced, its drawbacks took some time to be realized. Excavation reports, including those edited by Dever in his *Gezer* series, are replete with technical appendices that are rich in contributions from diverse and far-flung fields, but they often appear marginal to an understanding of, for example, Gezer and its role in the biblical era. Dever would say that *that* is what archaeology is all about and he is not wrong. But potential private donors to expensive excavations will naturally look to the explication of more germane questions.

In the final analysis, the more powerful currents of intellectual curiosity have always been to connect archaeology to texts. This pertains not only to the biblical tradition, but also the Dead Sea Scrolls, the epics of Homer, or even the ancient texts of nationalistic or ethnic origins (from China to Ethiopia to the lands of the Maya). This explains why Albright’s prime agenda, which is indicative most clearly in the interests of his students, was linguistic and epigraphical, the recovery of the voices that speak from the ruins.

In this sense, it is unlikely that the trajectory of biblical archaeology would ever surrender to a view that its Christian ‘primitivism’ needed to be replaced by a ‘secular enlightenment’, in the same way that scholarship coursed human evolution studies or American (especially Boasian) anthropology. It was hardly the case that some crude ‘proving the bible’ agenda was the only or major program in the ‘old’ paradigm. There was no ‘decline’, rather a readjustment to secular realities, and a reorientation to the same questions, which continue to hover close to questions of biblical historicity. The career of Dever himself, heir to the old biblical archaeology, exponent of the need for a broader canvas, and the author of numerous volumes on biblical historicity, demonstrates this *par*

excellence. It was true there were (and are) embarrassments and problems, the frustration that certain aspects of historicity defied the current state of evidence. These are the challenges that are the stuff of scholarship and their resolution the undoubted field of future developments in both new excavations and archaeological science. It is not wholly true that ‘Syro-Palestinian archaeology’ is uninterested in reconciling text and the data in the dirt. Nor is it wholly true that ‘biblical archaeology’ was both hamstrung and obsessed with narrow apologetic preoccupations.

Let the last word belong to the Great Excavator of Gezer, who wrote that it is ‘absurdly wrong’ to use archaeology trying ‘to prove the truth of the Bible’

The Biblical record, like any other literary document, must stand or fall on its own merits. It cannot be either authenticated or disproved, as a whole, by excavation. In minor points of detail it can be corroborated, or it can be corrected. . . . What we gain from excavation is illustration, rather than confirmation. Above all, we obtain a background, filling in the outlines drawn by the historian.

This statement is typical of Dever and would not be out of place in any of his publications. But it is not by him. It was written nearly a century ago by a previous Great Excavator of Gezer, R.A.S. Macalister (1925: 266-7). *Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*.

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Endnotes

- 1 Dever began as an ordained Protestant clergyman, and later identified as a secular humanist with a Jewish identity.
- 2 Joshua 15:15 speaks of Caleb who 'marched against the people living in Debir (formerly called Kiriath Sepher)'.
- 3 It should be noted that many biblical scholars were member of both organisations. Rachel Hallote (2011) has shown that membership in the fading APES and the emerging ASOR largely overlapped: 'defense of the Bible' was hardly absent.
- 4 D. L. Holland, commenting on Dever's *Christian News From Israel* paper (Dever 1972) notes, 'There is surely an element of forensic overstatement in Dever's describing the secular orientation of some new schools of archaeology as 'entirely divorced' from biblical concerns and the work which they do as 'often quite unrelated' to biblical studies' (Holland 1974: 22, fn. 2).
- 5 Even in a casual conversation about the history of Palestinian archaeology, he referred me to this article (pers. comm).