In recent years the polemical exchanges between William Dever and the biblical ‘deconstructionalists’ have been steadily heating up, and the temperature throughout this curious volume is preset to boiling point. Dever positively fulminates against developments that he sees as a danger not only to Levantine archaeology and history but to humanistic scholarship generally. An attempt to debunk ‘revisionism’, this book is also a self-justification, giving some intimate glances into Dever’s own relationship with the Bible. The son of a clergyman, Dever began by studying theology, moved into what was then ‘biblical archaeology’, and later flirted with the ‘new archaeology’. With evident relief Dever records how, in the 1990s, ‘post-processualism’ rejected the sterility of the new archaeology and ‘made history-writing respectable again’. And it is mainly on history-writing from the material record that Dever rests his case against the biblical minimalists.

The book opens with a useful and compact review of current trends in biblical revisionism, with character sketches of its leading lights. Centre stage is given to Thomas Thompson who, having participated in the Gezer excavations as a student, insists that Dever fudged the evidence for dating its ‘Solomonic’ gate and walls to the tenth century B.C. Not surprisingly the spectre of this accusation looms large in later chapters.

When arguing the contribution that archaeology can make to questions of biblical historicity Dever is at his best with wider cultural matters. For example, the distribution of both bulla stamps
worked out a map of the Shishak
they barely comment on the Shishak-Shoshenq equation. The reason (unexplained by Dever) is that,
in Egypt
(Kenneth Kitchen pointed out that the Sheshonq, ca.
evidence, we used the datum provided by the well-known campaigns of the Egyptian Pharaoh
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the late 'Solomonic' account of Shishak. Rather, in marvellously circular fashion, he has actually transferred information
minimalists he insists that Shoshenq
135
Faith in it, however, is not grounded in any text (biblical or otherwise) but merely in the traditional
destruction synchronism as one from an Egyptian inscription into the biblical text! Revealingly, Dever describes the Shishak-
accounts of Shishak. Rather, in marvellously circular fashion, he has actually transferred information
1972
Unaware of (or ignoring) objections to the identi
Dever goes on to list some fourteen towns (from Hazor to Tell Mazar), allegedly identifi
d in Shoshenq's list, which show signs of destruction in the late tenth century. As an argument against the
minimalists he insists that 'later compilers . . . could not have known about specific destructions at the
tsites noted above, since the ancient remains of these cities had long been buried under the sands of
time'. Dever is oblivious to the fact that now of his fourteen destroyed sites is mentioned in the biblical
account of Shishak. Rather, in marvellously circular fashion, he has actually transferred information
from an Egyptian inscription into the biblical text! Revealingly, Dever describes the Shishak-
destruction synchronism as one 'so secure that most archaeologists take it for granted' (p. 137). His
faith in it, however, is not grounded in any text (biblical or otherwise) but merely in the traditional
Albrightian paradigm.

On the contentious issue of Gezer Dever offers two points in his defence. First, that he could date
its 'Solomonic' walls to the tenth century B.C., by the pottery forms, 'which have always been dated to the
late 10th century'. But pottery, of course, does not date itself. Second: 'In addition to the ceramic
evidence, we used the datum provided by the well-known campaigns of the Egyptian Pharaoh
Sheshonq, ca. 925 B.C. . . . to fix the date of the destruction. . .' (p. 132). Three pages later Dever
admits that the reading of Gezer in Shoshenq's records is 'now uncertain'. Now? It is thirty years since
Kenneth Kitchen pointed out that the 'new copy' of the inscription 'would rule out "Gezer",
(\[33\][121]1\[33\]3\[121]2\[33\]), as overconfidently advocated by Mazar, Aharoni and others' (The Third Intermediate Period
in Egypt (1972), 435). Almost needless to say, Dever does not refer to Kitchen's authoritative study,
satisfied instead that 'earlier scholars like William F. Albright, Benjamin Mazar, and Yohanan Aharoni
worked out a map of the Shishak [sic] raid a generation ago'.

One would imagine that the minimalists might have a field-day with the serious lapse in critical
scholarship displayed by Dever on this issue. Actually it is unlikely. As Dever observes (p. 135, n. 49),
they barely comment on the Shishak-Shoshenq equation. The reason (unexplained by Dever) is that,
like him, they work within a chronological framework based on an assumed link with the Bible. As Hughes, among many others, has appreciated: ‘Egyptian chronologists, without always admitting it, have commonly based their chronology of this period on the Biblical synchronism for Shoshenq’s invasion’ (Secrets of the Times: Myth and History in Biblical Chronology, JSOT Supplement Series, 66 (1990), 110.) That is, it is the biblical date for Shishak (c. 925 B.C.) that has allowed Shoshenq I and the 22nd Dynasty to begin in 945 B.C. Given the shaky nature of ‘Sothic dating’ (see conveniently Manning, op. cit., 966–73), it is this identification which provides the lynchpin for Egyptian Third Intermediate Period chronology and, ultimately, that of the New Kingdom.

The overall framework for dating the Late Bronze and early Iron Ages in the Levant thus hinges on a single piece of information in the Old Testament. For Dever, this might be an acceptable position. For the minimalists it clearly is not, explaining why they have yet to assess critically the biblical Shishak story. When that day comes, Thompson and co. should realize they are chiselling away the main prop supporting the consensus chronology — and any arguments they have based on mismatches between the Old Testament account and the material record will have been in vain.

The subtle mechanics of chronology are unfortunately lost on Dever, and his  idées fixes colour his treatment of all new developments. Finkelstein’s recent arguments in favour of redating ‘tenth’ century ‘Solomonic’ strata to the ninth (essentially an unacknowledged return to the Kenyon position) are given short shrift (pp. 43–44). By summarily dismissing the matter Dever attempts to cover up the fact that — within the present chronological framework — identifying the archaeology of the United Monarchy does indeed present a serious problem.

If Dever’s attempts to link narrative biblical history and archaeology represent mainstream thinking (as he claims), then the field is indeed in deep trouble. It is the kind of blind acceptance of traditional (unsubstantiated) ‘synchronisms’ espoused by Dever that has provided the very fuel for the minimalists’ criticisms. In short, Dever may prove to be his own worst enemy.

Peter James