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Davies' "The history of ancient Israel: A guide for the perplexed" (Book Review)

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Book Reviews



Davies, P. R. (2015) *The history of ancient Israel: A guide for the perplexed*. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark. 186 pp. \$29.95 ISBN 9780567655851

This short work is intended to be an introduction to the history of Ancient Israel. Davies layouts in his prologue how he hopes to tell his history of Israel. However, for Davies the Bible as a source for Israel's history is unreliable. Secondly, contrary to the book's title, he does not believe in "the" history of Israel but histories. In addition, unlike the book's title he does not discuss just Israel but several Israels. This writer finds this rather perplexing. His chapter on "Orientation" summarizes for the reader past, present and future approaches to the history of Israel.

The book is then divided up into four parts; the first treats the subject of historiography (chapters 2-4). Davies believes that the biblical histories were written in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. He sees Genesis as myth or folklore. Davies divides the Hebrew Bible into two histories; the first being from Genesis to 2 Kings while the second includes the books of Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. Both, according to Davies portray different views of Israel so that we cannot see one Israel but different Israels. In this section, Davies points to what he considers time and factual errors.

In the second part of the book (chapters 5-6), he turns his attention to what he considers 'Israel.' He seeks to determine this by relying on select non-biblical sources. He ends up equating ancient Israel with what the Bible calls the northern kingdom under the 'house of Omri.' He rejects any of the biblical history up to Omri, including David and Solomon. He does not even accept the Tel Dan inscription as evidence for the existence of King David even though the Hebrew word *dwd* found on the inscription appears to be a clear reference to King David.

The third part (chapters 7-8) deals with using archaeology and sociology to determine a history of Israel. In the past, archaeology was used to support the biblical text. Now with the rejection of Scripture as history, scholars like Davies rely on archaeology and sociology.

In the final part of the book (chapter 9-10), Davies turns to “Constructing a History of ‘Ancient Israel.’” In chapter 9 he describes minimalism which does not see much historic value in the biblical narrative. The biblical narrative is historical only in that it reflects the time when it was written. However, as far as reflecting real events, and real people, it must be supported with external evidence to have any historic value. The last chapter is a valuable literature review on the subject of ancient Israel. This review is helpful for additional research.

Although this work is contrary to our evangelical belief regarding the historicity of Scripture, I would recommend that you purchase it to balance your collection. Philip R. Davies is an important minimalist. He is prominent in the field of Old Testament studies and evangelicals and maximalists must deal with his work.

Reviewer

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