

MY NINE LIVES

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Sixty Years in Israeli and Biblical Archaeology

William G. Dever

SBL Press



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Atlanta

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2020950570

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For my children
Sean, Jordana, Hannah, and Zeb

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FOREWORD

I have put off writing this book—my memoirs—for many years, for several reasons. For one thing, the idea seemed self-serving (it is, of course). Then I thought I'd wait until nearer the end of the journey (that could be soon, the way things are going). Finally, to tell some of the best stories I had to wait until a few people died (that is happening).

Many colleagues and friends, however, have convinced me to write this book not so much to recount my own adventures as to tell the larger story of the momentous changes in “biblical” or “Syro-Palestinian” (now “Levantine”) archaeology that I have been privileged to be a part of these last sixty years. Retirement and then a period of confinement after surgery persuaded me that it was time to reflect and to tell the story now.

Some of the following is quite personal, sometimes painfully so. But I have tried to be as honest as possible, despite occasionally portraying myself (and others, too) in a negative light. My hope is that readers, especially young people, will find courage in seeing how one can overcome difficulties in both family life and career.

Part of my rationale is that archaeology is not a science but an art—a very subjective human art in which creative imagination plays a pivotal role. That is why I have told so many candid stories, not only about myself, but more significantly about a remarkable generation of giants in archaeology in Israel whom I was privileged to know personally. A similar personal memoir of an archaeological career has recently been published by Michael Coe, a distinguished New World archaeologist, entitled *Final Report: An Archaeologist Excavates His Past* (Thames & Hudson, 2006). I only hope that mine is not *quite* the final report. Since the framework of this narrative about changes in my branch of archaeology is my own story, I have not hesitated to recount many of my own achievements, but always, I hope, in the larger context of what was happening at the time in archae-

ology in the Middle East and America. (In any case, fake modesty would not fool anyone who knows me.) Some people will feel left out, while others may wish that they had not been mentioned at all. Many will have a different perspective on events I discuss. But this is, unabashedly, *my* story. It will appear in 2020, near the sixty-fifth anniversary of my first trip to Israel and my first exposure to the seductions of archaeology. Thus the title, and also the focus, is on Israel, not the only locale of importance, but the place where nearly all of my experiences took place. The focus is also on the Old Testament, or better Hebrew Bible, since historically biblical archaeology has been largely concerned with the Bronze and Iron Ages, not the classical era of Judaism and early Christianity or with archaeology in Jordan (on the latter, see the bibliography). These are important studies but must be left for others to tell.

Much of my boldness comes from the fact that I happen to have been right in the middle of nearly all of the changes in archaeology that I describe, sometimes even instrumental in them. Much of this good fortune was simply a matter of being in the right place at the right time and possessed of enough self-confidence to plunge in. Of course, I worked very hard through good times and bad. But I was also one very lucky fellow. I know personally nearly every person (and site) mentioned in this story. That means I am indebted to many people.

First and foremost would be my parents, Lonnie Earl and Claudine Watts Dever. From them I learned, more by example than by word, the importance of what I call “moral earnestness.” I also got from them an overarching sense of duty and responsibility, self-reliance, and persistence in the face of adversity.

I owe more than I could ever repay to my teachers, especially Ernest Wright, without whose inspiration and guidance I would likely have been an obscure Congregational minister somewhere in New England. I am also indebted to Rabbi Nelson Glueck, of blessed memory, who took a chance in 1965 in hiring me at Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem, where I got my professional start. Richard Scheuer, also now of blessed memory, was a patron for forty-five years. To the latter two, I dedicate this volume.

I have learned more from my graduate students than I have taught them, and when so many other things seemed futile, they made the investment seem worthwhile. They will be my best legacy.

I want to add my profound thanks to the staff of SBL Press—Bob Buller, Nicole Tilford, Heather McMurray, and Lindsay Lingo—for their skill and patience in transforming a rough manuscript and a miscellany of photographs into a finished book. I am delighted to be publishing a second book with them.

Innumerable colleagues and friends, both in Israel and in America, have made my odyssey an even more rewarding journey.

Both of my families loom large in this story, as they should: Norma and Sean in the earlier years; Pamela, Jordana, Hannah, and Zeb in the later years. I am grateful for their support and forbearance. In the end, they matter more than anything else.

I really have had nine lives, some of them so different that they seem contradictory. But each was a response, whether subconscious or deliberate, to a set of different circumstances. That it seems to have turned out reasonably well is a source of constant amazement and satisfaction to me.

The last chapter is not (I hope) a postmortem but a postscript on the likely future of biblical archaeology after my time. The subsequent annotated bibliography will guide serious readers to some of the scholarly literature that will flesh out the story. (For instance, all the dozens of sites here will be encountered in full detail in Stern 1993–2008.) When publications of my own are referred to only by year, they can be found easily in the complete list of my publications in Gitin, Wright, and Dessel 2006 (see also the bibliography below). There is no adequate history of biblical or Israeli archaeology, however, and this account certainly makes no pretense to be one.

Alampra, Cyprus
January 2019

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