This recent book by William Dever offers its readers more than the mere title suggests, as I will explain below. The book aims at the average intelligent reader and is not aimed at academically trained historians and theologians. Dever succeeds to some degree in this goal, but sometimes he can be quite specific.

First of all, Dever argues his interpretation on the “Yahweh and his Asherah” inscriptions and the many plaquettes and pillar figurines depicting a goddess that are known to us from archaeological excavations. Dever’s view on the material is clear and can easily be summarized: Asherah was a goddess venerated in Iron Age Israel and Judah. Asherah is not just a symbol but should be seen as an important deity. Dever classifies her—like Albright before him but not without reason—as a dea nutrix, her main function having to do with birth. Dever correctly argues that the pillar figurines represent a divine being and not a human. They are “prayers in clay” by women (and sometimes men) in need of protection during the threatening phases of pregnancy and birth. The material, epigraphic as well as archaeological, opens our eyes for a form of religion that was suppressed by the monotheistic and elitist writers of the Hebrew Bible. In other words, the God of the ancient Israelites was not seen as a bachelor. After the exile, Asherah went underground.
waiting to be excavated by twentieth-century archaeologists, although her cult was, albeit partially, continued in the veneration of Maria Regina Coeli and the Shekinah.

Second, Dever interprets the veneration of Asherah within the framework of folk religion. He juxtaposes this form of religion to the elitist “Book religion” of the Jerusalem circles. Contrary to other historians of ancient Israel (i.e., those who would write “ancient Israel”), Dever values the Hebrew Bible as a primary source, albeit a difficult one (as has been outlined in his previous publications). Despite its obvious bias for a monotheistic, Jerusalem-centered, and aniconic Yahwism, the Hebrew Bible offers a few windows and perspectives on Israelite folk religion. Dever correctly sees a window in the textual parts that condemn the veneration of images and deities other than Yahweh. The mere fact of this condemnation proves the existence of this folk religion. Furthermore, Dever is of the opinion that the biblical writers possessed some knowledge of earlier forms of Yahwism or of the folk religion that was marginalized by their time. This becomes clear from passages in the Hebrew Bible such as those on the theraphiem or on local cults outside Jerusalem. It comes as no surprise that Dever argues that archaeology supplies the modern scholar with exhaustive evidence on folk religion. Iron Age temples and their assemblage, pillar figurines from household cults, and remnants of the bamót all give an insight into this religion, which was basically magical and illiterate. Folk religion in all its diversity met with the perennial problems of peasants and other ordinary people in the struggle for daily life. Dever’s bottom-up definition of religion (i.e., in connection with the perils of a not-yet disenchanted world) is conclusive and convincing. He sees, for instance, the cultic calendar of ancient Israel as originally based on the agricultural year, which was by definition the basis for almost all members of the population.

Nevertheless, I have a few remarks. I do not understand why Dever pleads for a dichotomy between “folk religion” and “Book religion.” “Book religion,” an idea adopted from Karel van der Toorn but slightly changed by Dever, implies the existence of a book, or a Book. That book did not yet exist in Iron Age Judah and Israel. Further, I would prefer the distinction made by Manfred Weippert and Rainer Albertz of three levels. Religion is attested at the state level functioning in the central organisms of court and temple. Religion is, however, also present at the level of the clan or the village. Finally, religion plays a role at the level of the family or the household. To phrase the same in more sociological terms: religion can be found functioning at macro-, meso-, and micro levels of society. These levels are interwoven, since most individuals function in at least two

levels. In Dever’s model the religion of the clan and that of the household are seen as one sphere. Another weakness of his dichotomy is the juxtaposition of the societal and religious strata. As is well known, religious ideas and customs travel through the strata of society. This is also noticed by Dever, but his language on this phenomenon is too much in the dialect of in- and acculturization, implying cultural or religious interchange as a take it or leave it matter. I would prefer to depict the dynamics of religion in terms of appropriation: persons or groups are taking over religious ideas and customs, giving them a new function within their own context (see, e.g., B. Meyer, “Translating the Devil: An African Appropriation of Pietist Protestantism. The Case of the Peki-Ewe in Southeastern Ghana” [Ph.D. diss., University of Amsterdam, 1995]). Besides, sociological research has shown that the demarcations between strata in a society are much more fluent than Dever seems to suppose (see, e.g., P. Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* [repr., Aldershot: Ashgate, 1994]). Even the peasant society of ancient Israel was already rather complex in its structure and dynamics.

Third, this book once again informs us about Dever’s classification of biblical scholars. It seems to me that an open eye for the results of archaeological excavations is the main criterion for the division of the good and the bad guys. Since I seem to be part of the first group, I find myself in the position to remark that no greater goals are served by this distinction.

Dever’s book is a good read. His argument is easy to follow, and the illustrations in the book are very helpful. It is a pity that some minor flaws disfigure this book: (1) on page 108 he states that Pesach was celebrated in the first month of spring (Abib), but Jan Wagenaar has shown convincingly that Abib never was the name of a month (“Post-exilic Calendar Innovations: The First Month of the Year and the Date of Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread,” ZAW 115 [2003]: 3–24); (2) on page 144 Dever has printed a beautiful faience die from the ninth century B.C.E. that he connects with magical aspects of religion and not as a token from the world of games and toys, despite the monograph of Ulrich Hübner on this topic (*Spiele und Spielzeug im antiken Palästina* [OBO 121; Fribourg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992]); (3) there is a strange typographical error on page 211, suggesting that Elijah was not the only prophet of Yahweh present at the contest on Mount Carmel; (4) in the discussion of the “male cult prostitute” as referred to in 2 Kgs 23:7, Dever seems to have overlooked

the important contribution by Meindert Dijkstra, who argued that the *qdšm* never were prostitutes but a lower class of cult personnel (“The List of *qdšm* in KTU 4.412+.II.8ff,” in: *ARBOR SCIENTIAE: Estudios del Próximo Oriente Antiguo dedicados a Gregorio del Olmo Lete con ocasión de su 65 aniversario* [ed. J. Sanmartín, M. Molina, and I. Márquez Rowe; AuOr 17/18; Barcelona: Editorial AUSA, 2000], 81–89).

Despite these remarks, I would like to recommend Dever’s book to all ordinary people—but especially to theologians—who are interested in the “real religion” of ancient Israel, especially in the context of our contemporary discussions on multireligiosity.