Davies, P R 1992 (reprinted 1995) — In search of Ancient Israel'

Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press. 166 Pages. Price: $14.95

Reviewer: Rev C A P Van Tonder

The appearance of this book in 1992 hooks up with a still raging controversy about the historical emergence of what biblical scholars call 'Ancient Israel'. Davies' argument in this nine chaptered work about the origins of Israel and its scriptures deserves to be read for its contribution to this debate.

Although this book deals with a historical research, it is not another 'history of Ancient Israel'. Davies differentiates between three Israels: (1) a literary one (the biblical), (2) a historical one (the inhabitants of the northern Palestinian highlands during part of the Iron Age), and (3) an amalgamation of the two.

He arrives at the conclusion that the final shaping of the biblical Israel was strongly influenced by the political-cultural ideology of the Jerusalem 'establishment', based in the temple and court of the governor (p 20). He also saw the final result of the Bible as 'an integral part of the constitution, historically, of Israel' in Hellenistic Judah. It was in the name of that 'Israel' that the Jews fought Rome, and of that 'Israel' that the rabbis successfully achieved a non-political 'reconstitution' (p 155).

Davies starts with some preliminary remarks regarding 'Ancient Israel' as a scholarly construction, separate from the Israel of biblical literature. Chapter two deals with 'ancient Israel' and its creators, followed by the Israel(s) of the biblical literature in the third chapter. Chapter four examines the historical people of Israel (mentioned in the third) who lived in a kingdom that already bore the name Israel in Iron Age Palestine. In chapter five he tries to ascribe the biblical 'Israel' to a historical society at a particular time, looking for the historical context of the writing of the day.

In the last part of the book, Davies no longer looks for any kind of 'ancient Israel', but for a society which created for itself an identity, resulting in the literary Israel. Chapters seven and eight concern the authors, setting, process, and reason for writing the biblical literature. Chapter eight details the development of the biblical literature toward a religious categorized form of scripture. The final chapter suggests a further step in the establishment of the biblical literature as the 'writings of the Jews', in which the biblical literature achieved a fixed and authoritative status.

The book is well structured with indexes of abbreviations easily referred to (at the beginning), and bibliographical works cited, authors, and quoted biblical and non biblical texts (at the end).

From the view of historical criticism, this is more highly recommended as a textbook for future students and scholars interested in the literary development of the biblical Israel, than a monograph for scholars in general.