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READING THE OLD TESTAMENT
Tools and Techniques

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As a Bible teacher, students of Scripture are constantly asking me which books they should add to their library on a particular topic or Bible book. While not precluding the necessity of answering their individual questions, a forum such as this might help answer the question for a wider audience. This article will set out various criteria for evaluation of books, specifically those relating to the Old Testament, though other disciplines should be able to use them also. Using these criteria, I will evaluate a range of books on the Old Testament which have appeared in the past several years, coming from a number of different approaches and looking at different topics.

I. Evaluative Criteria

Several years ago, Douglas Stuart published a useful guide to commentaries in which he included criteria through which they may be judged.[1] These will be adapted for this article. Such criteria are necessary since each person coming for advice has different needs, often unarticulated, so one cannot make a sweeping, general recommendation (except for one's own books, of course!). Hopefully the categories and observations noted below will help frame the questions, and also lead in a search for answers.

Five major areas need to be explored in selecting one's reading resources. They involve questions of genre or form, breadth, depth, audience, and perspective or slant. (1) First one needs to note the obvious, that there are available different books to address different needs. Commentaries explain a text sequentially, while introductions highlight questions asked of a text and its history of interpretation, histories explore the socio-political background and other studies might look at theological motifs. Still other works explain the methodology of how to read or interpret a text. (2) Breadth concerns the amount of material covered in a piece. Some volumes cover the entire Bible, while others focus down even to a single verse. Clearly the wider the breadth of coverage, the more difficult it is to cover a topic or text with any (3) depth. This concerns the amount of detail available for any given point. Some commentaries, for example, can devote several pages to a single verse, while others spend the same on an entire chapter. (4) Audience concerns the intended readership of a piece, whether the linguistically-trained scholar or graduate research student, the working pastor, the

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educated layperson, or the interested inquirer. This can be determined by such matters as language use (do foreign languages appear, and are the words translated and explained or not) or technical jargon. (5) Slant or perspective concerns the starting point or presuppositions of the author, which are at times hard to determine. They include theological perspective, such as finding out whether the author is Jewish, Catholic or Protestant, and where within the theological spectrum, ranging from fundamentalistic to liberal, she falls. This can affect the understanding of the inspiration and trustworthiness of Scripture, and the acceptance or not of other resources such as archaeology, sociology, or literature. Not only do one's presuppositions determine to some extent the way questions may be answered, they also determine which questions are even asked. While one should by no means avoid reading what those with other presuppositions propose, lest we not be challenged in our own understandings, it is useful to know from where an author is coming. Another important question to ask in relationship to slant is the amount of interaction with other positions the author enters into. Some acknowledge their own starting point, and argue their own reasoned opinions in dialogue with other views. This could be designated as a more open view, where one is free to glean truth from whatever source it might come. The opposite extreme presents only one view, not arguing for it against all comers, but quite often not even acknowledging that other positions might exist. The latter view could be called obscurantist, if the purpose is to hide the need for legitimate debate on an issue, or just pre-critical, since at times such a discussion of issues does not forward the purpose for which the book was written. Most often the epithet 'obscurantist' is flung at conservative writers, but liberals can be just as guilty, presenting as 'assured results of biblical criticism' what is in fact nothing of the sort. The use of pejorative name-calling can thus redound onto one's own head.

II. Selective Descriptions

The following, major part of this paper, will look at books pertaining to the study of the Bible, but most specifically the Old Testament, in a manner moving from the general to the specific and also sequentially through the canon. For individual biblical books, we will restrict ourselves to the Pentateuch. The selection of texts receiving comment is somewhat serendipitous, with by no means even the majority of recently appearing works being covered. While it is hoped that volumes mentioned will spark the readers' interest, the evaluative process itself is also something which hopefully will be of use.

A. How to Read a Book

The subject of hermeneutics, or how to read a book, is one which has received considerable interest of late. So many varied, and often mutually

exclusive, claims are made using Scripture as a base that people are becoming aware that there must be right and wrong ways of approaching and understanding a text, unless one holds, as some modern interpreters do, that a text can mean whatever you want it to. Two major Seminary-level textbooks which have appeared in the last five years are worthy of note. Both the single-authored work by Grant Osborne,[2] and that by William Kline, Craig Blomberg and Robert Hubbard[3] come from an Evangelical position, holding to the inspiration and authority of Scripture. The former is especially strong on linguistic issues, with a special leaning toward the NT, the author's speciality. The latter volume enjoys authors specializing in both Testaments, and has a useful discussion of modern interpretational approaches.

An interesting, multi-disciplinary approach provided by leading Evangelical scholars from Regent College has recently appeared.[4] Here experts in different areas highlight how their particular field of interest can helpfully inform the understanding of Scripture. Directed to the educated reader who might not have been to Seminary, the book deserves place in church libraries. Earl McQuay has produced a much more popular volume directed toward the lay Bible student.[5] This conservative Baptist professor of practical ministry makes his volume practical by presenting seventeen steps toward understanding the Bible. Using examples from both Testaments, he takes specific passages and asks interpretative questions about them which necessitate the use of the steps he just articulated. Undergraduate classes and even home Bible study groups would undoubtedly find this volume useful.

Two other volumes show other ways of approaching hermeneutics. One is a collection of papers read in England to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the birth of the English scholar William Tyndale.[6] Prepared by members of the influential Tyndale Fellowship, an organization seeking to strengthen the production and dissemination of sound Evangelical scholarship at a high level, they are technical papers discussing issues of the history, methodology, and theology of the study of Scripture. While not the unified, progressive presentation of the volumes mentioned above, it will surely forward the scholarly debate in the field. Another volume, by Donald Carson, should be read by scholars, but is also accessible to the careful lay reader, concerns all-to-common ways in which Scripture is misread through 'exegetical fallacies.'[7] Here, with the lavish use of mainly New Testament examples, Carson points out errors in interpretation through the faulty use of word studies, grammar, logic, presuppositions and history. It is a useful guide to errors which can at times arise from lack of thought rather than from purposeful distortion.[8]

A useful textbook by Odil Steck details the process for reading the Old Testament.[9] It has recently been translated into English from German, and is an excellent introduction to the process from a liberal perspective, with intriguing

questions pertaining to the process scattered copiously throughout. There are also numerous, very useful bibliographies which not only present the method under discussion, but also alternative approaches to the method, examples of the method in practice, and the history of the method as used in interpretation. Conservative readers might feel more at home with the earlier volume by Douglas Stuart.[10] Steck's understanding of such areas as composition will undoubtedly make many conservatives uncomfortable, but if so, they need to be able to articulate why they feel that way, and what alternatives they propose which explain the text in a more fruitful way. Steck is more accessible to those without Hebrew competence, since Stuart relies quite heavily on it in some of his examples. To Steck's detriment is the pedantically literal translation from the German original which can make heavy going for the native English speaker, and puts an unnecessary hurdle in the way of those for whom English might not be the first language.

Finding the literary form or genre of a text is necessary early on in the interpretational process. Two conservative scholars, Brent Sandy and Ronald Geise, have recently edited a volume which introduces this subject for the study of the OT.[11] Here sixteen authors with a high view of Scripture highlight the importance of recognizing literary forms, and provide guidance on how to interpret narrative, history, law, salvation and judgment oracles, apocalyptic, laments and praise, and proverbial and non-proverbial wisdom, with a concluding discussion of the use of the method for teacher and preacher. The style is such that educated non-specialists can benefit from the work, which includes numerous examples and helpful supplemental bibliographies.

B. Introduction

Since the study of any discipline is not static, an introduction to any field, including that of OT studies, needs constant updating. There have been numerous examples of this in the last five years from various perspectives. The new volumes attempt to summarize the background and content of the biblical books, in some cases indicating the state of debate on some of the more controversial issues. Among these, there does not seem to be much distinction between those called either 'survey' or 'introduction'. Four Evangelical works in this category have appeared of late, two, one by Andrew Hill and John Walton and another by Paul House, are directed toward the undergraduate market,[12] while two others, one by former Westminster Theological Seminary colleagues Raymond Dillard and Tremper Longman and the other by former Fuller teachers William LaSor, David Hubbard and Frederic Bush, cater for graduate and seminary readers.[13] Of the former pair, House consists almost entirely of text, which very briefly introduces the various OT books and sections of them. He does provide several maps, and also study questions at the end of each chapter, but is so brief that readers would probably be frustrated with it as other than one of several texts in a very

introductory Bible survey course, unless it was greatly supplemented by lectures and other reading material. Hill and Walton is much more user-friendly, with time-lines, figures, chart and diagrams scattered throughout. It also provides study questions for each chapter, including the introductory ones on interpretation, history and archaeology, in addition to extensive 'further reading' suggestions. It would serve well for its intended audience as the primary text for an OT survey course. Of the two seminary texts, Dillard/Longman corresponds more closely to House, with most of its presentation as text, while LaSor, Hubbard and Bush provide more visual helps. Both present various positions on different issues of debate, though they themselves hold a high view of Scripture. Longman appears to have taken over the project after Dillard's untimely death, so the product does not come off as a piece equally strong in every canonical portion. This is a disadvantage over having a fully collaborative effort with input from a number of experts in different areas, as the latter volume has done, especially in the second edition. Our Seminary has used the first edition of LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush for the last number of years with success, and the new edition seems to be improved, with fuller treatment of introductory issues such as canon, geography, and archaeology. Both volumes have extensive bibliographies, and also do not neglect the relevance of the OT for students of the NT, a necessity for Christian readers.

From a more mainstream Protestant perspective, James Crenshaw has written a helpful introduction for beginning students.[14] While many will disagree with matters such as composition and dating of some passages, Crenshaw is deft in handling the two areas of the subtitle, showing sensitivity to literary patterns and theological constructs which are all too lacking in this type of literature. He is open to discussing other opinions and defending his own, and also usefully includes discussions of the apocryphal, intertestamental literature which is often ignored in Protestant works.

Not so in Catholic works, since some of the intertestamental literature forms part of the Catholic canon. Three works from this tradition have recently appeared, two, by Michael Duggan and Seán McEvenue, from mainline Catholic scholarship, which differs little from its Protestant counterpart in matters of dating and composition,[15] and one by Anthony Ceresko from a liberation theology perspective.[16] Duggan is written for a general audience, summarizing the content of the various books and pointing out matters of theological significance while not belaboring points of minutiae. Study questions guide readers, and the bibliographies are more inclusive than in many Evangelical works, since liberal and conservative Protestants also receive mention. McEvenue spends much more time introducing criticism and literary theory, with his textual discussion based on the proposed source documents (JEDP) rather than on the existent text. Useful insights are offered on a number of passages, but the arrangement of the discussions based on these hypothetical criteria will probably be off-putting for

many readers of this review. Ceresko's volume, while dealing with the regular introductory issues, also addresses such points as wealth and poverty and oppression, using socio-political tools of analysis which are not part of the standard scholarly methodology. It provides a useful and needed corrective to so many of our readings which fail to remember that Israel, in both the OT and NT periods, were most often an oppressed people who sought God's guidance and help in areas of physical and economic oppression, a search shared by many of our brothers and sisters today which is too often forgotten or ignored in our comfortable Western society.

Two further useful types of introduction are worthy of note. One type is an introduction to the world of the OT, and the other is to its theology. An example of the former by John Walton reviews OT literary forms in light of their ancient Near Eastern counterparts such as the Egyptians, Canaanites, and the Assyro-Babylonian cultures.[17] Yet another, edited by Alfred Hoerth and others, studies each of the peoples who produced this literature or came in contact in other ways with the OT story.[18] In addition to those already identified, there are articles on the Sumerians, Persians, Hittites, Arameans, Phoenicians, Philistines, Ammonites, Moabites and Edomites. While the subject matter of these two will probably restrict them to the serious student of scripture, both are very accessible and important for the educated reader, and provide helpful insights into the background against which the OT arose. Much more lavishly illustrated and directed toward all interested readers are two other volumes, by Roberta Harris and Sarah Kochav. Both present the archaeology of the land with breathtaking pictures and informative text, and can well find a place on the home coffee table as well as the church library.[19] The cultural world of the OT is also a matter of interest, since so many practices of family and daily life which are important to all societies are different for us than they were for the OT figures. John Pilch has produced a useful workbook in which a Bible study group or individual reader at most levels can explore these topics, not only from the OT but also from the Apocrypha.[20]

A more technical discussion of the important area of history and historiography within Israel and also in its Near Eastern environment is a collection of papers form an Evangelical perspective read at a conference at Wheaton College which is edited by Alan Millard, James Hoffmeier and myself.[21] These are to provide positive responses to recent studies in which the biblical evidence is afforded only minimal importance in reconstructing the history of the time period which it purports to describe.[22]

A final introduction to the theology of the OT is worthy of note, mainly since this is a much undervalued area of OT study. The author, Christoph Barth, who is a son of the great theologian Karl Barth, shows a love for the OT God and an interest in his working as revealed in the text.[23] While not exhaustive, Barth has

chapters discussing creation, election, salvation, providence, revelation, the land, monarchy, Jerusalem, and prophecy.

C. Pentateuch

Pride of place here undoubtedly lies with the massive The New Interpreter's Bible, an introduction and commentary in twelve volumes, the first of which appeared in 1994.[24] The editors have selected leading scholars from across the Catholic, Protestant and Jewish spectrum to write, though the commentaries themselves seem all to be done by Christian scholars, both liberal and conservative. The first introductory articles concern the Bible as a whole, dealing with canon and English versions, interpretational issues such as authority, interpretation within Jewish and Christian traditions as well as within different social settings such as African American, Asian, Hispanic, Native American as well as women's reading, and the use of Scripture in preaching and worship. Introductory OT articles follow, touching on life in Palestine, literary background, and introductions to ancient Israelite history and religion, as well as early Jewish religion. Following overviews of OT text criticism and the Pentateuch itself, there are commentaries on the first three OT books. While there are a lot of things contained in this one volume, its mammoth size allows as much scope for individual books and topics as is often found in series which dedicate a single volume to a biblical book. For example, the commentary on Genesis by Terence Fretheim, Professor of OT at Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary in St. Paul, covers over 350 pages, Exodus by Walter Brueggemann of Columbia Theological Seminary over 300, and Leviticus by Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary over 200 pages.

Each commentary includes an introduction to the book, looking at its critical study, composition and form, along with a preliminary bibliography. The text itself is provided from both the NIV and the NRSV, followed by a commentary proper looking at structure, words, history, background, etc. This is followed by a 'reflections' section', which seeks to aid in applying the passage to life and the church today. It is this latter section which distinguishes the series from many commentaries, which restrict their interest to the 'then' of the text rather than applying it to the 'now'. While there will be material with which all readers will disagree, there is also much that is useful in teaching and preaching, and will challenge us to greater thought.

A similar series from a completely Evangelical perspective is The Expositor's Bible Commentary, the second volume of which covers the first four books of the Pentateuch.[25] It too provides good coverage of the texts, though not every word or even every verse can be covered. It would be a good commentary choice for preacher and Sunday School teacher. The more technical notes are in a separate section, so most people should be able to learn from the series.

1. Genesis

Since Genesis is foundational for understanding the world and our place in it under God, it is not surprising that the past several years have produced numerous single or multi-volume commentaries and other studies on it. Of the former, to my mind pride of place goes to that written by the British Evangelical Anglican (Episcopalian) scholar, Gordon Wenham.[26] He is strong in interaction with various views, and also shows literary sensitivity, noting unifying structural elements. The layout is standard for the Word Biblical Commentary, though his conservative theology is not. He starts each section with a bibliography, followed by his own translation, a section of technical notes dealing with text critical matters, but also parsing all weak verbs for the elementary Hebrew student. Then follows a section identifying literary form or genre of the passage, its literary structure and setting. The subsequent 'comment' section' provides the discussion in depth of the individual verses and words. Some of this can be fairly technical, but all Hebrew words are transliterated and/or translated to aid the non-specialist. There are periodic excurses here, dealing with specialized topics of interest such as the location of Eden, and circumcision. The final, 'explanation' section looks at the passage as a whole, exploring theology and its further expansion or discussion elsewhere in Scripture, both OT and NT. Pastor and student alike should find material of interest and benefit in these volumes.

Another two-volume work from an important Evangelical series has also recently reached completion.[27] Victor Hamilton includes many of the same features as Wenham, but the text-critical information is less full, as is the form section. The various sections are not as clearly demarcated, so it is somewhat harder to work backward, from contemporary application to exegesis. Some of the technical jargon is not explained for the novice, though the foreign language words are transliterated though not always translated or commented upon.

The first volume of a new series from the conservative wing of the Southern Baptists appeared in 1996.[28] Kenneth Matthews provides an excellent introduction to Genesis, with special strength in the area of ancient Near Eastern backgrounds. The commentary is based on the NIV, whose text is provided. Hebrew is transliterated in the body, but left in the original in the copious footnotes. There are good theological discussions, as well as sensitivity to literary issues. The pastor will find the volume, and the series, of use.

A more lay-oriented single volume specifically targeting the Sunday school teacher is by the Church of the Brethren scholar Eugene Roop.[29] While older than most volumes in this survey, it is part of a useful series from a Believers Church tradition, with representation from the Brethren Church, Church of the Brethren, Brethren in Christ and various of the Mennonite groups. It has useful sections on 'the text in the biblical context', highlighting the impact of the passage

elsewhere in Scripture, as well as a section on 'the text in the life of the church' giving the relevance of the passage as understood by teachers and preachers through history.

John Scullion has done a volume from a Catholic perspective, though again it does not differ appreciably from a mainline Protestant approach.[30] Since the author's translation takes up so much of the space, any more than a quick look will frustrate most readers, since the actual comments are very light.

Before looking at more technical or limited studies of Genesis, two more theologically oriented series should be noted. From an Evangelical perspective, The Bible Speaks Today sets out "to expound the biblical text with accuracy, to relate it to contemporary life, and to be readable".[31] Following a passage cited from the RSV, the authors readably and very helpfully comment on and apply the text, not going into detail so much on history and background as what the passage meant for the hearers both then and now. Authors are chosen for their pastoral heart and writing skills, admirably shown by David Atkinson and the late Joyce Baldwin. Preacher and teacher should find the series a great help, and church libraries should also consider adding it.

A second series, the International Theological Commentary, has similar aims, but also seeks to be sensitive to the need to 'transcend the parochialism of western civilization.'[32] Therefore authors are chosen to represent different 'geographical, ideological, and ecclesiastical backgrounds.' Any critical issues such as authorship or unity receive only secondary comment, if mentioned at all, and the primary focus is upon the existent text. Therefore the interpretational and applicational insights offered can be usefully weighed on their own merits rather than through an at times disconcerting critical grid. The series does merit careful consultation by pastor and teacher.

Numerous more limited studies of different topics related to Genesis have appeared in the last several years. Some are technical studies of the text itself. For example, a series entitled 'The Aramaic Bible' presents English translations of and comments on the very early translations of and commentary on the biblical text into Aramaic, a practice evidenced as early as the time of Nehemiah (Neh 8:8).[33] While mainly of interest for the scholar, they are very readable by all students of Scripture, and provide interesting insight on how people in the past have interpreted the Bible for their own time and circumstances. For example, Martin McNamara shows in Genesis 1:2 how the writer understood aspects of the text when he wrote: "And the earth was waste and unformed, *desolate of man and beast, empty of plant cultivation and trees,* and darkness *was spread* over the face of the abyss; and a spirit *of mercy from before the Lord* was blowing over the surface of the waters."[34] In many ways the process evidenced here, and helpfully explained in a fifty page introduction, is not far removed from that of commentators and preachers seeking to interpret and apply the text today.

Another type of scholarly exercise seeks to go behind the present text and hypothesize concerning its formation and composition.[35] David Carr is updating and refining a diachronic approach to pentateuchal composition known as tradition or transmission history. He shows literary sensitivity in his interst in intratextuality, the use put by later texts on earlier ones. He bases his method on work done by, among others, Jeffrey Tigay on the Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic[36] as well as other literature which is purported to be a conflation or mixing together of several different sources written over a period of time.[37] He sets out to reconstruct from the finished product (Genesis) what the original sources were and of what the process of compilation consisted. Interaction with views arguing for a central unity for the text are rare, so what the author is in effect doing is starting from an admitted presuppositional base and following it through to its own logical conclusions. This is an important and acceptable scholarly procedure, but one which is wrong-headed and ultimately unproductive if the presuppositions themselves are not valid. The very method is called into question to a large extent since Tigay's work on Gilgamesh, for which there exist documents from various stages of the formational process, shows that any working back from a final document to its sources is only guess work, and the chances of hypothesizing a process and sources which accurately correspond to actuality are very slim indeed. The volume illustrates the current lack of consensus in this area of OT study, and itself acknowledges "that it is not possible to achieve an acceptable level of plausability on many issues regarding the formation of Genesis,"[37a] a statement which all scholars need to keep in mind.

Other studies look at the content or background of the text itself from a number of different perspectives. One recent collection edited by Richard Hess and David Tsumura presents reprints of articles which have been significant in understanding Genesis 1-11 from the points of view of linguistics, literary studies and the ancient Near Eastern background.[38] While mainly for serious students, others will find material of interest.

A similar collection of essays, this time being papers presented to a 1993 OT conference of the Evangelical Tyndale Fellowship, covers, as its sub-title states, "Biblical Themes from Genesis 12-50".[39] Topics discussed include Abraham and Melchizedek, the ancient Near Eastern world, especially Egypt and its influence and also animal slaughter as found in Gen 15, the understanding of parts of Genesis in later tradition (Abraham and the NT doctrine of justification by faith, Abraham in Isaiah 41; Genesis 22 and Christ; vocabulary in Genesis and Daniel), and studies on Genesis 32, and some hidden agendas in writing Genesis commentaries. Though technical and using original languages without aids for the non-specialist, selective reading will interest preacher and teacher, as well as serious students.

Sheffield has been the source of numerous recent monographs and

collections with particular interest in literary aspects of the study of the Pentateuch, a recent and growing trend in biblical study.[40] Beverly Stratton looks at different ways of reading Genesis 2-3 from within a feminist approach, using reader-response theory, narratology, and ideological criticism.[41] The very important question of the biblical view of women is the aim of this study, so it is imperative to have a sound interpretation of this foundational passage concerning this issue. As the author states repeatedly, and what students at all levels need to hear, is that 'interpretations matter'. A sound hermeneutical methodology is necessary for understanding all texts, but especially one which claims life-directing authority. One wonders, however, whether such methodologies as those employed here, with their all-too-often subjective understandings, can ever hope to provide a reading which is in any way normative. The audience for this volume is mainly the guild of OT literary students, with any interpretational nuggets needing then to be gleaned and passed on to the person in the pew.

Two studies will provide examples of a continuing flood of books which deal with two of the many topics in which modern readers are trying to force the biblical text to answer questions which it does not address. The first, by Del Ratzsch, deals with the creation/evolution debate,[42] and the other, by the geologist Davis Young, with the Flood.[43] Neither volume seeks to present one or another side of the debate, but rather they seek to understand how the different parties through the past century have thought about and argued for their positions, and also how one should think about the issues today. This is very important not only as a study in apologetics, but even more, I feel, in ethics, how we should live as brothers and sisters within the body of Christ. The non-Christian world is impacted more, I am convinced, by the vitriol and hatred they readily see evidenced among Christians, who are to be known by their love, than on whatever position might win the day in the end. These are both excellent examples, accessible to the educated reader and not needing a detailed technical understanding, of how we all should be challenged concerning how we think and argue as well as what we think and argue about. Both volumes provide extensive bibliographies in order to read first-hand further into the debates themselves.

Five volumes will exemplify the approaches to understanding people and personalities in Genesis. Three address specific individuals, Noah by Lloyd Bailey,[44] Rachel by Samuel Dresner,[45] and Joseph by Lee Humphries.[46] In the first, study of Noah the person in Genesis is limited to part of one chapter. Fuller treatment is made of catastrophe stories in general, and flood stories in particular, around the world and in the ancient Near East, physical evidence for a Noahic flood (looking at many and varied interpretations), the survival of Noah's ark (no convincing evidence as of yet), the place of the flood story in the context of the 'primeval history' (composition and date, following Documentary Hypothesis), and the meaning of the stories for original and contemporary audiences. It is a

wide-ranging and fascinating study not only of a biblical figure but also of the subsequent search for evidence of him.

Though in the same series, the study of Joseph takes a different, more literary tack than the archaeological/historical one taken with Noah. Humphreys analyses the literary form or genre (novella, or creative fictional prose with a plot which is authored by a single individual for purposes of entertainment), its rhetorical techniques and theology, and its development into its present form. As apparent even from this brief description, historical accuracy or 'truth', while by no means ignored, are not of primary concern for the author. While these might not be the primary reason for which the story was originally composed, most readers of this review will be uneasy supposing that literal truth is unimportant. Conservatives up until recently have not appreciated the literary power and function of written documents, a lack which works such as this can start to redress, but they cannot afford to adopt an historical relativity of some kind in which truth becomes solely subjective, with no objective base.

Instead of the more liberal Christian perspective of the last two works, Dresner brings a Jewish view which ranges not only through the biblical text but also covers Jewish rabbinic and mystical writings as well as art and literature. He leads us not only through the Genesis narrative, but into Jeremiah 31 where Rachel plays a significant part, and also into a discussion of Rachel's Tomb, of significance not only in Genesis but also to subsequent Jewish (and Christian) pilgrims. This volume will provide a window into a fascinatingly different way of approaching a biblical personality.

Two other Jewish authors look more widely at personality in Genesis, specifically from the perspective of family conflict, of which the book is replete.[47] Devora Steinmetz looks at the problem as a literary construct, rather than strictly an anthropological or sociological one. She follows the text quite closely, not worrying about such matters as composition/authorship. Hebrew words are transliterated, and are usually understandable from the context, so interested educated readers, as well as scholars, will find material of interest. Norman Cohen, on the other hand, has a more pastoral goal, providing a modern midrash, which he defines as 'the attempt to find contemporary meaning in the biblical text.' It, like Dresner's book on Rachel, has similarities more with sermon than study, since illustration and application are key features. They provide welcome reminders that at the end of the day, Scripture is to be applied and not just analyzed. Application does need a foundation on careful and accurate analysis, however, so scholarship cannot be a stranger to the pulpit, though its demeanor and presentation must differ from that of the lecture hall. Insights from a different, in this case Jewish, perspective can serve to open eyes which have become dulled by familiarity. Fresh understandings still need weighing, especially with different presuppositions such as the person of the Messiah, but this volume should challenge readers in

understanding and application.

Finally, a recent volume by Richard Clifford looks at an important aspect of Genesis, namely creation as it is understood there and in the ancient Near East.[48] Clifford lucidly discusses accounts from Mesopotamia (in Sumerian and Akkadian), Egypt and Canaan, as well as biblical accounts not only from Genesis, but also from Psalms, Isaiah, and the wisdom literature. This is an important area of scholarly study, since Israel developed within a literary milieu, knowing and reacting to other accounts in its presentation of how it understood the formation of its universe and its place in it.

2. Exodus

While less well-covered than Genesis, several significant works on Exodus have appeared recently in English. Though a bit earlier than most books in this survey, The Word Biblical Commentary has a useful work by John Durham.[49] He points out that no single event in the book has been confirmed archaeologically, but that does not deny the historicity of the events of the book. After all, the Bible was not written as a history book, but rather to present theological truths of a God who acts in history. The author makes the point that the historical events are only 'marginally relevant' to the narratives, which though true at one level, is dangerous if it in fact means that a belief that an event took place is all that is necessary, whether that belief was misguided or not. While Durham does not seem to be saying this, a little more interest in history could be of use. The historical events must have taken place for the claims to be valid, and these can at times be corroborated from external sources. Even if not, they are no less true. The presence of God in the events is not provable using the parameters of history, since, as it is practiced, the discipline functions within a closed universe. That is, if an abundance of Egyptian military remains are found in one area of the waters of the Red Sea, there is no archaeological proof possible which could confirm that it was Yahweh who drowned the owners in their pursuit of fleeing Israel. His presence, and the effect it has on the events, is a matter of faith which, while not provable using historical-critical methods, is no less true.

While less a major element in Exodus than in Genesis, the author holds to a form of the Documentary Hypothesis as regards Pentateuchal composition, though acknowledging that the present text must take interpretational priority over any hypothetical reconstruction.

An older Jewish perspective has also only appeared recently.[50] Finished in the 1940's by Benno Jacob, various circumstances did not allow the work to be published earlier. Jacob, while having no full-time academic post in biblical studies, being a rabbi, was a careful student of the text. A maverick in his day, and even today among mainline biblical critics, since he did not swallow the JEDP

hypothesis of his contemporary, Wellhausen, according to the foreword of the volume under review, "he sought to preserve and conserve the text against pseudo-scholarly methodology and fanciful reconstructions. He acknowledged that the Biblical text was edited by later hands and that segments of the Pentateuch did not stem from Moses, but also considered the editor at least as intelligent as the modern reader and not prone to obvious mistakes. Furthermore, he felt that the sources which preceded the editorial period were not recoverable. Efforts in that direction were vain and avoided the main task of scholarship, which was the study of the transmitted text."[51] A very good approach to take. A careful Hebrew scholar, the volume well repays consultation on that level, and useful rabbinic comments are also highlighted. While over 50 years dated, the book is useful since it brings insights from a tradition outside of that of most readers of this journal which nevertheless also values the message of Scripture and the hand of its Author.

Another translated work, this time from the Dutch of Cornelis Houtman, appeared recently in Holland.[52] As the series title indicates, history is a main interest of the work. The author provides a lengthy introduction to names, terms, and numerals, which is very beneficial. He also provides an extensive look at the historical context of the events, discussing alternative views. In agreement with many of the points regarding history and historicity made immediately above, Houtman states that "it goes without saying that it is not the task of the exegete of the book of Exodus to offer a reconstruction of Israel's early history. The exegete's responsibility is to explain and clarify the picture the author of Exodus aims to give."

The commentary proper provides the author's own translation, a section entitled 'essentials and perspectives', setting the passage in its nearer and distant context and summarizing the message of the unit. Then follows a lengthy 'scholarly exposition', looking at text critical issues, and then doing an exegesis of the passage verse by verse. The comments are detailed and technical, and, while providing excellent insight, are directed to the more advanced reader, since Hebrew discussion is extensive and not user-friendly unless one knows Hebrew. Citations from other languages are also generally left untranslated. Separate 'observations' sections on select verses provide insight on interpretation from, e.g., rabbinic sources, as well as useful comments of the author's own. In all, the volume is a valuable contribution to the understanding of Exodus, and the series should be in academic libraries.

Two monographs exemplify more detailed studies on the biblical text. One addresses the question of 'the evolution of the Exodus tradition,'[53] which originated in Hebrew in 1968, with a second edition in that language in 1987. The author acknowledges the importance of looking at the historical circumstances of the events. He sets out instead to look at the growth and development of the

tradition concerning the historical complex surrounding the Exodus of Israel from Egypt, including the plagues, the Passover sacrifice, the Exodus proper, and the parting of the sea tradition. He is especially interested in the impact of the narrative on later biblical texts. His approach finds little use for the classical Documentary Hypothesis, which dissects a living text and is based on too much speculation. While not himself holding a Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, he provides a challenging alternative to the established views which the careful reader can benefit from, especially since the motif of Exodus is so important for later biblical generations.

Another, much more recent study by Joe Sprinkle also looks at the final form of the text, in this case that of Exodus 20:22-23:33.[54] His aim, the author states, is "to determine whether a synchronic 'literary approach' to biblical law might not be superior to the heavily source-oriented methodologies that in modern times have dominated the study of biblical law."[55] This literary approach looks to appreciate and understand the unity of a text rather than the diversity sought by source analysis. The approach seems more logically valid, since it explores aspects of something which now exists, rather than making hypothetical conjectures on something which does not exist (i.e., the putative sources) and perhaps never existed, at least in the form hypothesized. The author seeks to find out what the effect of the present formulations might be within the text itself rather than speculating what the text might have looked like at an earlier stage of development.

Sprinkle first looks at the historical narrative context in which the legal texts are placed (Exod 19-24), and then he does a 'close-reading' of each pericope in his passage. He makes useful and interesting observations not only on literature, but also on law, and his work repays careful reading. It is not for the layperson, however, since it is based on the author's thesis, and contains technical linguistic discussion based on original languages. It is heartening to see such careful work by one with a high view of Scripture. We need more such work by Evangelicals who are not afraid to enter into the scholarly arena. While popular and more limited, in-house works are needed for the church, it also needs to be on the cutting edge of positive interpretation and understanding, not just striking a reactionary pose in their approach to the text.

3. Leviticus

Four recent commentaries on Leviticus from as many different positions deserve mention. Two come from the pens of the Jewish scholars Baruch Levine and Jacob Milgrom, and reflect opposite extremes of commentary writing depth.[56] Levine's volume is in a companion series to the helpful Jewish Encyclopedia, which it resembles in physical appearance. It is not really clear from looking at it

what its intended audience might be. There are included the Hebrew text and JPS translation of each passage, which takes up a good proportion of the available space. There then follows a very brief comment on aspects of the verses in question. While there is a good introduction to the book and helpful excurses on aspects arising from the text, the commentary itself will undoubtedly prove inadequate for any but the most cursory reader of the biblical text, and seems frightfully expensive for what it has to offer.

Milgrom's work is from the opposite end of the spectrum, almost being an 'all that you wanted to know about Leviticus but were afraid to ask'. As well as bringing in useful insights from his Jewish interpretational background, Milgrom's keen interest and expertise in matters of law and the ancient Near East come through on almost every page. Discussion of foreign terms, presented in transliteration, might be more detailed than needed by the casual reader, but they are accessible through translation which usually accompanies the terms. His care and detail will provide material of interest for teacher and preacher, as well as scholar, though it is not set out to be a theological exposition, and, of course, detailed New Testament application will need to be provided by the reader rather than the author, though there are numerous New Testament citations given in the text. His detailed bibliography also provides a useful entryway into further study of the book, if his own discussion should prove insufficient.

Two volumes have also appeared from Protestant scholars.[57] John Hartley follows the format already mentioned for Wenham's commentary in the same series. Relevant bibliography is a strong point here, as are excurses on such topics as each of the various offerings of Leviticus 1-7, ritual purity, and skin diseases. His approach to the text is such that he 'holds to the full authority of the Word of God without neglecting the work of critical scholars'. Concerning authorship, he points out the position as regards Leviticus mainly deriving from P, but also highlights the recent suggestions that P is an early rather than the latest source. He takes a conservative position, giving Moses serious place in the composition of the book, though later additions are possible. He also gives attention to New Testament interpretation and application of various of the practices and concepts incorporated in Leviticus.

Philip Budd comes from a more critical position as regards authorship, positing a post-exilic date for the final composition of the book, with some pre-exilic material as well. Thus one presumes that when he states that Moses is customarily seen as the recipient of laws, in actuality Moses had little to do with the whole process. He therefore has to strain to fit, for example, mention of a 'Tent of Meeting' (Lev 1:1) into a Temple, or even post-Temple setting, a place where a tent would make little logical sense, though it finds great sense if placed during the earlier, wilderness wandering period, in which the text itself places the events. The commentary itself is a fairly straightforward discussion of the meaning

of terms, accessible to the educated reader since English is the sole language. The pastor or student will find helpful material here from a more liberal perspective, but will probably find the interest whetted more by Hartley or Milgrom, due to the depth of the latter and the more evident theological perception of the former.

4. Numbers

Numbers, like Leviticus, is not overwhelmed with material concerning it, though two important commentaries will be presented here.[58] Baruch Levine, who also wrote recently on Leviticus, as noted above, shows that he can produce a much more substantial work if parameters allow. Holding to a Documentary view regarding the book's composition, he develops his understanding in great detail in the introduction. Such detail is necessary more here than with other Pentateuchal books due to the lack of coherence it seems to have in relation to the others. He sees the main concern of the final form being a legitimization of the Aaronide line as priests. The commentary proper does a good job in analyzing the text, one which is accessible due to translation of the transliterated Hebrew terms used. Levine has a particularly marked historical and literary interest which is evident in his writing. The reader will thus find help in these areas, while theology and application are more fully found in Dennis Olson's volume.

The Interpretation series to which Olson has contributed is subtitled 'A Bible commentary for teaching and preaching', so theology and application play a more specific role in the series, with other concerns, while not by any means ignored, taking more of a back seat. The relative brevity of the volume, however, as compared to the Levine text, indicates that he does not find too much of relevance in this area in Numbers, a fact which must be acknowledged in comparsion to other books such as Genesis or Deuteronomy. Historical questions such as the large numbers in the census passages come under discussion, but the theologically significant fact that the numbers reflect a stage in the fulfillment of God's promise of descendants to Abram in Genesis 12 is also brought out. Unlike a regular commentary, the text is divided into one or two chapter sections for discussion, so individual words are not the focus, but broader themes as they develop within the passage and elsewhere in the Bible, both Old and New Testament. While by no means the only, or even the first volume which a preacher or teacher should buy on any of the biblical books, the series does merit consideration since it can provide stimulating suggestions lacking in other commentaries due to their different focus.

5. Deuteronomy

At last, like the Children of Israel, we come to the verge of the end of our

journey with the book of Deuteronomy. The Anchor Bible contribution is by the Israeli Moshe Weinfeld, an established Deuteronomy scholar as well as an authority on the ancient Near Eastern background of the Bible.[59] In his introduction he highlights such areas as the alternation between singular and plural in the book, the pivotal part it has played in the formulation of the Documentary Hypothesis, its relationship to the work of the Priestly school, and its place in Israelite religion and theology, especially as regards election, the land, and worship-where and how. The commentary proper is strong on text critical and background issues, though theology and application is not the aim of the series in which it is a part.

This is much more the aim of the Interpretation contribution by Patrick D. Miller from Princeton.[60] This author is not content to leave the text in its original setting, but points out areas of NT and contemporary application as well. This is also the case with the more theologically conservative offering of Eugene Merrill of Dallas.[61] He presents a more full-orbed commentary than Miller, coming from a position of Mosaic authorship, which is accepted without much argumentation. Inner-biblical ties are a strong point in this commentary, which is based on the NIV translation. Merrill is not loathe to quote and interact with other positions than his own. Most educated readers should benefit from the work, since Hebrew and Greek, appearing in transliteration, are generally explained in the context.

Two other works comment on Deuteronomy in a much more limited scope. Earl Kalland, coming from an Evangelical position, is limited by the parameters of the series in which his work appears.[62] The comments here, while useful, are sparse since so much room is taken up by the biblical text itself (also the NIV), which seems a waste of space in an endeavor such as a commentary, since people would be expected to have already before them the text which is being commented upon. Lay readers again can follow the material without difficulty, though they would soon find themselves seeking more detail on most passages.

This will also, and even to a greater extent, be the reaction to the work by Thomas Mann.[63] Here again the English text, this time the NRSV, is printed, with minimal comment which seeks to "explain the biblical book in its original historical context and explore its significance for faithful living today."[64] While the goal is laudable, it is hard to bring it to any meaningful fruition if the comments occupy less space than the reprinted text, as happens in several places. While the comments themselves can be insightful and challenge thought, one wonders if the cost-return ratio is sufficient to acquire the volume.

A collection of essays covering numerous aspects of the scholarly research on Deuteronomy has been helpfully compiled by Duane Christensen.[65] Following an essay on contemporary research on the book, he collects previously

published pieces on such topics as law, covenant, wisdom and ancient Near Eastern influences, and literary structure. Though technical, the edition provides translations of foreign words, and the interested student will find material of interest in the volume.

This then is an attempt to present some of the plethora of material on the OT, and the Pentateuch in particular, over the past half decade. A set of evaluative criteria were presented and used to some extent as a grid through which to pass the works. I hope that the grid and the comments might be useful to the busy reader in order to aid in selecting material of use in life and ministry.

ENDNOTES

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