
Old Testament Literature Survey

(2001–2003)

Philip H Eveson

The following books have come to my attention and I have had the opportunity to dip into them and sample their contents. They are but a small fraction of what is published each year on the Old Testament that would keep me from doing nothing else but reviewing books! The selection mainly covers authors who claim to be of a conservative evangelical background but one or two from other traditions are also included.

Dictionaries

For those with some knowledge of Hebrew, the new-look **Koehler-Baumgartner Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament**, Study Edition in two volumes, revised by Baumgartner and Stamm, translated and edited by M.E.J. Richardson (3rd edition, Brill, 2001) is a must for those who can afford it. Though expensive it is an important reference tool in reading the Old Testament in the original languages. It has a number of advantages over older lexicons like Brown-Driver-Briggs. For one thing it is more user friendly in that words are arranged in strict alphabetical order, instead of being placed under their verbal roots. It also takes account of the advances in Semitics studies that have occurred during the 20th century. In the German original it has been an indispensable tool in the scholarly world for many years and in its new form will greatly assist pastors and students.

Long-suffering Hebrew students who began collecting *The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* edited by **Botterweck & Ringgren** (and more recently **Fabry**) with volume 1 published by Eerdmans in 1974, will be pleased that volume 12 is now available. While we are on the subject of Hebrew, **A.P. Ross's** *Introducing Biblical Hebrew* (Baker 2001), a traditional grammar, provides a clearly laid out, modern guide to those wishing to acquire a basic understanding of the language in preparation for studying the biblical text.

The Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch edited by **T.D. Alexander & D.W. Baker** (IVP, 2003) is the first in a four-volume series on the text and background of the Old Testament. It follows a similar series on the New Testament. Old Testament scholars from around the world, the majority from the USA, give informative and detailed information on almost every aspect of Pentateuchal studies. Each of the 158 articles has at least a thousand words with some articles exceeding ten thousand words. The longest articles are 'Sacrifices and Offerings' and 'Historical Criticism'. Other substantial pieces include 'Covenant', 'Creation', 'Religion', 'Theology of the Pentateuch', 'Exodus, Date of' and 'Authorship of the Pentateuch'. Beside the Article Index there is a useful Subject Index for cross-reference that includes items not given special treatment in the main articles, and an invaluable Scripture Index.

Commentaries

Some interesting publications on the Pentateuch have appeared recently. These include three commentaries on Genesis in the same year. **B.K. Waltke's** *Genesis: A Commentary* (Zondervan, 2001) provides pastors, teachers and students with a well-researched, lucid work that expounds the message of this crucially important biblical book. This is a commentary worth obtaining. As the author makes his way through the various sections of Genesis exegeting the text he pays particular attention to the development of the big story line, to the literary techniques that make up this artistic masterpiece and to the theology of the book. What liberal scholarship destroyed, a new generation of scholars are now appreciating, namely, the unity of the book with its 'patterns of structure' and 'plot development'. Waltke desires to be true to the text as God-breathed Scripture but many will be unhappy with his thoughts on science, history and theology in relation to the creation account in Genesis one.

The Book of Origins: Genesis simply explained (Weiwyn Commentary, Evangelical Press, 2001) by **P.H. Eveson**, keeps the big picture before the reader throughout, opens up the meaning and theology of the text and seeks to apply its message in a natural and contemporary way.

J.H. Walton's *Genesis* (The NIV Application Commentary; Zondervan, 2001) is an expensive publication for what it is. The author seeks to demonstrate how Genesis shows God's mastery in creation covenant, and history. There is no detailed treatment of the text but a large amount of space is given to application, some of it providing some useful insights into how the Genesis message speaks to today's world. My main criticism is that the application rarely brings us to Christ. This is in large measure due to him not seeing the importance of Genesis 3:15 and the theme of the royal 'seed' that runs through the biblical text.

Very different is the work of **D. Fortner** *Discovering Christ in Genesis* (Evangelical Press, 2002). In this book the author finds types of Christ everywhere. For instance, God's creative work on the first day is 'a type of the incarnation of Christ', 'the cross of Christ is foreshadowed' on the second day and 'our Lord's resurrection is foreshadowed' on the third day, and so on. He compares and contrasts the tree of the knowledge of good and evil with the tree on which our Lord was crucified. The work is not intended to be an exposition of the text of Genesis, but seeks to comment on the main characters to whom God revealed himself in order to give the reader a greater appreciation of Christ and to encourage believers in their service for him. He assumes the so-called 'gap' theory in his treatment of Genesis 1:2. While not always a safe guide to interpreting the first book of the Bible messianically, the author's knowledge of the Scriptures and evangelical convictions will enable many to find good food for their spiritual health.

There has also been some significant work done on Leviticus. **J. Milgrom's** massive work on the third book of Moses comes to a close with his third and final volume *Leviticus 23–27* (The Anchor Bible; Doubleday, 2002). This Jewish scholar's commentary is described by Walter Kaiser as 'the benchmark for all studies on Leviticus for the foreseeable future'. **M.F. Rooker** on *Leviticus* (The New American Commentary; Broadman & Holman; 2000) provides one of the best modern

commentaries on this important yet neglected biblical book. He argues for the Mosaic authorship and is particularly helpful in his treatment of the sacrifices.

A close second is the work by **A.P. Ross**, *Holiness to the Lord. A guide to the exposition of the book of Leviticus* (Baker Academic, 2002). Preachers will find many useful hints. Each chapter of the book is divided along similar lines, giving the theological ideas, a summary and outline of the passage, an expository outline, concluding observations and a bibliography. He is well abreast of all the scholarly literature relating to Leviticus and the subjects covered and what is more he directs the reader to Christ and to New Testament parallels.

T. Longman III has produced a most readable and reliable exposition of the Old Testament's priestly work with the aim of showing its relevance for Christians today. The book is entitled, *Immanuel in Our Place: Seeing Christ in Israel's Worship* (Presbyterian & Reformed, 2001). It is the first in a series on *The Gospel According to the Old Testament* that is designed to help preachers and Christians generally to read and preach the Old Testament in a Christ-centred way. Longman's book is divided into four parts: sacred space, sacred acts, sacred people and sacred time with nineteen chapters in all. At the end of each chapter there are questions for further reflection. This is a most helpful study, worth buying and consulting alongside V. Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (reprinted by P & R, 1996).

W.H. Bellinger in his commentary on *Leviticus, Numbers* (New International Biblical Commentary; Hendrickson/Paternoster, 2001) presents the reader with a very clear account of scholarly views on disputed issues and is generally helpful in his treatment of the text. On Mosaic authorship of these books Bellinger is disappointing. For him they merely preserve 'ancient traditions carrying the authority of the Mosaic covenant' and are the product of unknown priests living toward the end of the Babylonian exile.

After expounding Deuteronomy and Nehemiah in the same series, **R. Brown's** latest contribution to *The Bible Speaks Today* is *The Message of Numbers* (IVP, 2002). Sprinkled with many apt illustrations this book, based on sound scholarship, helpfully expounds the text and presses home the message(s) of this fourth book of Moses.

Unlike Ralph Davis in his contributions to the same series, **A. Harman** on *Deuteronomy* (Focus on the Bible; Christian Focus, 2001) does not make the book live with modern illustrations and application. Nevertheless, it is a careful exposition of the text with a useful introduction setting out the significant teaching of this final book of the Pentateuch.

A new series of scholarly commentaries on the Old Testament has begun with **J.G. McConville's** *Deuteronomy* (Apollos Old Testament Commentary; IVP, 2002). The volume is the fruit of a lifetime of study and writing connected with this biblical book. In many respects this is a fine piece of work. The author's exegesis of the text displays fine scholarship and the insights into the theology and message of Deuteronomy are most helpful. How the book can be applied to our contemporary situation is not forgotten. In reviewing the introductory issues of date, authorship and sources, he disagrees with many of the conclusions of scholars committed to some variation of the documentary hypothesis. McConville's 'A Fresh Approach To Deuteronomy'

unfortunately is not so fresh in that he works within a world of liberal criticism that means he cannot hold to the book's Mosaic authorship.

R. Ellsworth's *Apostasy, Destruction and Hope: 2 Kings simply explained* (Welwyn Commentary; Evangelical Press, 2002) is the sequel to his earlier book in the same series on First Kings. Original sermon material has been reworked to produce this readable and pastorally helpful exposition.

S.S. Tuell's *First and Second Chronicles* (Interpretation; John Knox Press, 2001) is not as rewarding as some of the other commentaries in a series that aims to help teachers and preachers. Aware of recent scholarly work on the Chronicler the author seeks to bring out the theological message of Chronicles. While there are some helpful insights, it fails to stress such important themes as prayer and the Chronicler's concern for 'all Israel'. The book is much more positive in its approach to the historical reliability of Chronicles than a previous generation of scholars but it still betrays some liberal hang-ups. For Tuell, 'Chronicles is a Bible study'. It is 'an extended meditation on the Hebrew Scriptures' in much the same way as 'we come to Scripture... in search of guidance and strength'.

R.S. Fyall has produced an exceptionally fine piece of work called *Now my Eyes have seen You. Images of creation and evil in the book of Job* (New Studies in Biblical Theology; Apollos/IVP, 2002). He considers the book of Job to be primarily about creation, providence and knowing God and how these are to be understood in the context of human suffering. There are many helpful insights and his handling of how the book points us to Christ is superb. The reader does not have to agree with all his conclusions to gain much benefit from this volume.

This commentary by **I. Provan**, *Ecclesiastes/Song of Songs* (The NIV Application Commentary; Zondervan, 2001), has much to commend it. In his treatment of Ecclesiastes he does not pit the 'editor' of Ecclesiastes against the 'Preacher' as some modern commentators do. Furthermore, it was gratifying to see that Provan does not go along with the almost universal idea that the 'Preacher' (Qohelet) is speaking about the meaninglessness of life (The NIV has a lot to answer for by rendering the Hebrew consistently as 'meaningless'). Provan rightly observes that this is not its normal meaning in other parts of the OT. The point that Qohelet is making is that life is fleeting. Interpreting the Hebrew to mean 'meaninglessness' or 'absurdity' is, says Provan, '(perhaps unknowingly) too much indebted to an influential modern French existentialism and insufficiently grounded in biblical texts.' His exposition of Song of Songs has that balance which E.J. Young encouraged. He shows how the Song 'celebrates the dignity and purity of human love' while at the same time speaking of God and his people.

While **T. Longman III** in *Song of Songs* (New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Eerdmans, 2001) criticises the allegorical approach, arguing instead that the book is a collection of poems 'that celebrate and caution concerning human love', he does show the legitimacy of a theological reading of the text within the context of the canon of Scripture. More debatable is the way in which he views the Song against the background of Genesis 2 and 3. Like Provan, Longman argues against Solomonic authorship and translates the introductory words as 'concerns Solomon' rather than 'belonging to Solomon'.

The Prophetic Literature by **D.L. Petersen** (Westminster/John Knox Press, 2002) provides a refreshingly new introduction to the study of the four great canonical works: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Book of the Twelve. It is not an evangelical work but it will be particularly useful to students wishing to have a systematic and comprehensive introduction that takes into account current critical research.

J.A. Dearman's *Jeremiah/Lamentations* (The NIV Application Commentary; Zondervan 2002) begins to fill a noticeable gap in commentaries on these books of the Bible. The comments on the text are judicious and the message and theological themes are helpfully drawn out. Compared with other commentaries in this series the application is more succinct and generally quite useful although the illustrations continue to betray the American stable from which the series comes.

A valuable addition to The Bible Speaks Today series is **C.J.H. Wright's** *The Message Ezekiel* (IVP, 2001). This difficult prophetic book is opened up and explained in a most helpful and judicious way.

In the same series as McConville's commentary on Deuteronomy is the one by **E.C. Lucas** *Daniel* (Apollos, Old Testament Commentary; IVP, 2002). It has been written primarily for those teaching and preaching the Bible. After presenting introductory matters relating to the text, interpreting the narratives and visions and the historical context for understanding the book, the author then provides his own translation of the Hebrew and Aramaic text with notes on points of grammar, syntax and textual criticism followed by comment on the text. He leaves to an epilogue any discussion of the date and authorship of the book. While he shows a conservative bent in upholding the historical accuracy of sections often assumed by liberal scholars to be suspect, unlike trusted commentators of the calibre of R.D. Wilson and E.J. Young, Lucas encourages belief in a second century date for the book by arguing that pseudonymous quasi-prophecy is compatible with belief in God-breathed Scripture.

P.S. Johnson's *Shades of Sheol – Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament* (Apollos 2002) is a comprehensive study of an important yet often neglected Old Testament issue. Nothing is assumed and each passage relating to the subject is examined carefully and competently. His reasons for coming to so many negative conclusions with regard to the afterlife will need to be taken into account in any future study of the subject.

Conclusion

Every commentary should be read and used in a wise and discriminatory way but a further cautionary word is necessary. Looking at the helps emerging from within scholarly conservative circles, there is some very fine scholarship and helpful theological reflection that is satisfying and refreshing. Unfortunately, it is too often accompanied with the baggage of a rationalistic approach to Scripture that seeks to win the approval of the academic world. It impresses no one, least of all those whose acceptance is coveted.

Rev. Philip Eveson is Principal of the London Theological Seminary and Director of Studies at the John Owen Centre.
