

Shorter Notices

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The Hebrew Bible: A Critical Companion. Edited by John Barton. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2016. Pp. xii + 613. \$45.

Rather than a regular introduction or guidebook, this collection of essays is designed not only to introduce one to study of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament but also to serve as a “companion” for more in-depth analysis. It does this by inviting the reader to pay attention not just to texts, but in particular to contexts. Parts 1 to 3 focus on the various contexts that impinge on the text; part 4 on the contexts of readers.

Part 1 considers the biblical text as a whole within its various historical and social contexts. Its chapters reflect the historical interest and bias of modern Western scholarship. Is the Hebrew Bible historical report or something else? Attempts to answer these questions involve critical reconstructions of the history of ancient Israel and its context, the Ancient Near East.

Parts 2 and 3 deal with the various genres of biblical texts and their meanings. We communicate meaning in a variety of forms, and a consideration of genres provides a necessary framework for reflection on key themes. There is much valuable material here, but it is a pity that no consideration is given to the various forms or genres of narrative, in particular story, nor to the various forms of prophetic speech (the broad term used is “oracle”). Nor is attention drawn to the poetic nature of much prophetic speech, a feature that it shares with wisdom literature and the psalms.

Part 4 considers the various contexts within which readers have operated at different periods and how these influenced their (and our) understanding of the text. The impact of contextual reading can be seen in the Bible itself; Chronicles appears to be based, in part at least, on a “reading” of the Former Prophets. There are some helpful reflections on the hermeneutics of Jewish midrash but virtually nothing on the allegorical reading that dominated Christianity for centuries.

Two final chapters discuss “tools of the trade” that critical readers need, such as reliable texts and translations, and trustworthy maps. Despite the omissions noted, this book achieves its aim of helping us become critically aware readers of the Bible.

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