

THE Geneva Review

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Recent Old Testament Commentaries

Reviewed by James B. Jordan

Westminster Press of Philadelphia has begun a set of Old Testament commentaries called "The Daily Study Bible Series." These are designed for laymen, following the style of the New Testament commentaries written by William Barclay for the same series. The overall editor for the Old Testament set (Barclay completed the New Testament years ago) is John C. L. Gibson of New College, Edinburgh.

Twelve volumes have been issued, in both hardcover and paperback (though since only the first volume of *Jeremiah* has been published, I shall not review it in this essay). The volumes are not marked as to price, but clearly are intended to be reasonably priced. The overall theological perspective represented in the set is a kind of conservative liberalism. Most of the writers hold to some type of literary, form, or redaction criticism of the books of the Bible, but they want to emphasize that God superintended this process, and interpret the text in a conservative fashion. Like theistic evolution, this position is not intellectually tenable nor Biblically defensible. All the same, people who hold this view can sometimes write good and helpful commentaries.

Genesis by John C. L. Gibson (two volumes) is an unreliable guide for the layman. Gibson assumes that Genesis is built up out of sources, and a lot of space in his commentary is taken up with discussing this. He frankly disbelieves much of what is written in Genesis, denying that the tribes of Israel are descended from Jacob's sons, for instance (2:180). The preacher may find some good homiletical points in Gibson's commentary, however.

Exodus by H. L. Ellison is much better from my point of view. Ellison almost never refers to "sources," and his theological discussion of the text is quite helpful. I think that a layman could benefit quite a bit from this little work, and so could the pastor.

Leviticus by George A. F. Knight is way too much afflicted by a liberal comparative-religions approach to the Bible. I found little of any use in it, especially considering the fine commentaries by Wenham (Eerdmans) and Harrison (IVP) currently available.

I & II Samuel by David F. Payne is helpful, especially considering how little material there is on these books. Payne only occasionally refers to "sources." (He uses them to evade some of the problems in the text.) His comments are generally moralistic rather than theological, so that for instance David's sin with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah are seen as an abuse of power rather than a repetition of the fall of Adam and the corruption of Israel's call to manifest purity in the world and minister to the gentiles (Uriah the *Hittite*). All the same, there are some good preaching points in Payne's work, and laymen can benefit from it.

Psalms by George A. F. Knight (two volumes) has the same problems as his *Leviticus*, though there are some good preaching observations in it. Not recommended for laymen.

Ezekiel by Peter C. Craigie is the best of the set thus far, in my opinion. Craigie's perspective is more conservative in the area of source criticism (in fact, I didn't notice anything about sources as I skimmed the book). Craigie manages to get through Ezekiel calling attention to the main matters and not stumbling over the difficult specifics in the text. A very good popular commentary for laymen, with helpful preaching points for pastors.

Daniel by D. S. Russell will be a welcome addition to the pastor's library, because Russell is a real expert on the intertestamental era (when most of Daniel's prophecies came to pass). Russell unfortunately dates Daniel late, and thus denies the supernatural aspect of prophecy. Russell also reads too much apocalyptic into Daniel. (There is no apocalyptic in the Bible. Apocalyptic says the world is coming to an end, so stop working and wait; while prophecy says the world is coming to a new beginning, so get to work.) I cannot recommend this book to laymen, but I can recommend it to pastors. Russell's discussion of the career of Antiochus Epiphanes in Chapter 11 is very helpful.

Numbers by Walter Riggans needs to be compared to Wenham's outstanding commentary (IVP), reviewed in these pages earlier, and to Philip J. Budd's (Word Incorporated, 1984, \$18.95). There is not very much material on Numbers, and such as does exist is not very good. Budd is thoroughly committed to source hypotheses, and much of his 400 pages is wasted on this nonsense. As a result, he misses the theology of the text rather consistently. The value to the pastor and scholar of Budd's work lies only in its summary of recent technical studies of words, and such like.

Riggans's work is directed at the layman, and so avoids most of the technical critical rubbish. There is still too much of a comparative religions approach, in my opinion, to make this book commendable to laymen. His comments are usually moralistic rather than theological, and so of some help in preaching but not much help in understanding Numbers. For instance, the death of Aaron in Numbers 20 is the death of the high priest, which enables Israel to leave the (city of) refuge of the wilderness wanderings and reenter their possession. Accordingly, the next event which takes place is Israel's first victory over the Canaanites. Then, however, we have a repetition of the fall, complete with serpents (Numbers 21). Neither Riggans nor Budd notices this theological pattern. (Nor does Wenham, but he comes much closer, and there is a lot of good theological comment in his study.)

Budd's *Numbers* is part of the Word Biblical Commentary series. Another recent volume in that series is Ralph L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi* (1984; 358 pp.; \$18.95). This is quite a valuable book for the pastor to have. Smith summarizes what everybody else has said about a passage, and has helpful comments of his own to make. His summaries of recent literature are so thorough that the reader needs practically nothing else. Smith avoids radical views, and treats the text holistically (while sidestepping the confessional question of whether or not there were "sources"). I commend it. Other works I can also recommend on these books are:

Micah: Clarence Stare, *None Like Thee* (Premier).

Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi: Joyce Baldwin (IVP), and T. V. Moore (Banner of Truth).

Zechariah: A. A. van Ruler, *Zechariah Speaks Today* (used bookshops).

Finally, Inter-Varsity Press has issued *The Song of Solomon* by G. Lloyd Carr in the Tyndale OT Commentaries series. This is an excellent commentary. A long introduction sets out the various ways in which Canticles has been interpreted, and isolates major themes such as "garden" and "wine." The commentary takes Canticles as primarily a celebration of marital love, and Carr does not shy away from a straightforward rendering of the explicit symbolism of the text. In this respect, Carr's treatment is for grown-ups, not

for children.

While Carr admits that there are typological overtones to Canticles, I wish that he had done more with it. The woman is compared to a garden in Scripture, but Canticles also uses the vocabulary of the architecture and appointments of the Tabernacle and Temple in describing her. Moreover, the progression of events in the story, particularly the break in the relationship after the consummation of the marriage (5:2ff.), reminds us of the way Israel related (and the Church relates) to her Lord. In my opinion, a really full commentary on Canticles will not be written until the Church becomes familiar once again with the fulness of Biblical symbolism, especially architectural symbolism. But for now, Carr has written not only a helpful study, but an outstanding one. Highly recommended for mature audiences!

Mark A. NoU, Nathan O. Hatch, and George M. Marsden, *The Search for Christian America* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1983). 188 pp. \$12.95 Pb.

Reviewed by Bradley P. Hayton, Ph.D.

The search goes on for "Christian America." Many seem to find such an America, one that has been built upon Christian principles. Those that find such an America desire that our present America return to its Christian roots and thus again build a firm and Scriptural foundation for our country's political economy.

Although the authors do not deny that there has been much Christian influence in America, it is the purpose of their book to dispute the belief of a "Christian America." Their argument is that a *careful* study of the historical facts reveals that America was neither distinctly nor predominately Christian, if by "Christian" we mean adherence to the Scriptures. In fact, evangelical themselves are partly to blame for the spread of secularism in American society. The authors also seek to demonstrate that the idea of a "Christian nation" is very ambiguous as well as "harmful to effective Christian action in society" (p. 17). "Treating the naturalistic political ideals of American history as if it were on par with Scriptural revelation . . . leads to idolatry of our nation and an irresistible temptation to national self-righteousness" (p. 23). Also "the failure to establish an independent scriptural position over against the prominent values of the culture . . . can lead to secularization" or confusion (p. 23). A false estimation of American history can compromise a biblical analysis of our contemporary condition as well as make us more cautious in our thinking about "biblical politics."

The meat of Nell's, et.al., book lies in its historical analysis of America from the Puritans to the American Revolution. The authors criticize the Puritans on several counts: 1) they fell short of their own aspirations and guidelines; 2) they had a false belief of America as the New Israel and thus falsely thought they could directly apply Old Testament biblical law to contemporary civil law; and 3) they mistreated the American Indians. Rather than saying anything historical about the Puritans, these criticisms mainly reveal the theology of the authors. The authors also state that the concept of "the law above the law" was not unique to the Puritans, but a common belief of the Greeks, Romans, Anglo-Saxons, and Enlightenment. This statement is historically inaccurate. The Greek gods had no law but themselves, the Roman god was the State, the Anglo-Saxon god was the King, and the Enlightenment gods were the people themselves. The English Puritan emphasis on biblical law caused a paradigm shift in political thought: law, i.e. biblical law, was now King, and when the King of England disobeyed, he was to be prosecuted.

The authors also contend that the Great Awakening had almost no effect on the American Revolution, and in fact was a counterforce to the Revolution. Edwards and his followers' millennial expectations and absence of a Christian political theory destroyed any vestiges of the Puritan conception of an organic Christian society. Thus, without a biblical framework in which to think about society, American leaders began to confuse biblical theology and secular nationalism.

The faith of the founding fathers is also found wanting. Not only do the authors find the faith of Jefferson, Franklin, and Washington of a nonscriptural sort, but upon further examination find that Madison's and Witherspoon's political philosophy, to their own admission, was based upon British Whig political theory rather than the Scriptures.

Nell's, et.al., book is one that will shake some of the arguments of those who advocate a return to the Christian America of the past. It will challenge some of their assumptions. But, for the most part, these historians, contrary to their own contentions, have not written an explicitly historical book about America. At least half of their book is pure theology-their own theology with a touch of a philosophy of history. They believe civil law cannot and should not be based upon biblical law, and then criticize Witherspoon and Madison for using secular philosophy to build their political ideology. They believe that there are rules that the world and Christians can agree upon, and yet criticize the Puritans and the founding fathers for attempting to find these rules, if they do in fact exist. Despite its inconsistencies, this is a book that every Christian student of American history will want to read.

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