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Review: Interpreting the Historical Books: an Exegetical Handbook

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Finally, Haykin looks at the importance of prayer in the work of the Spirit in revival. He notes Edwards's understanding of prayer and the importance of it in the life of the community of faith. Haykin includes some helpful appendices: "Jonathan Edwards, Directions for judging of persons' experiences," "Beauty as a divine attribute: The western tradition and Jonathan Edwards," and "Esther Edwards Burr (1732–1758) and Edswardsean piety."

This non-technical work is obviously designed for much more than the scholar. Haykin writes in a lucid and easy to understand fashion which makes this book appropriate for Christian leaders and informed laypeople, as well as the scholar. The scholar of Edwards, revival, or the Holy Spirit will find that this volume fills an important niche in that it treats the issue of the role of the Holy Spirit in revival in a systematic way, which no other work has really done. Others have dealt with Edwards's views on revival, but none have really looked at the role of the Holy Spirit. Edwards was a theologian of revival and therefore a theologian of the Holy Spirit. The church leader and informed layman will find challenges and encouragement in the thinking of Edwards. For example, Edwards thought that it was not unusual for someone to faint when thinking of the God of the universe. We need more of that thinking in today's churches, and this book will help to fill that gap.

While this book is incredibly helpful in its content, a reader might desire to see more work done in explicitly laying out a theology of the role of the Holy Spirit in revival. Haykin has only a section of the book actually dealing directly with the issue, and the rest of the book helpfully supplements it. However, the main thought that the Holy Spirit is sovereign in revival could possibly be more developed. Otherwise, Haykin does a tremendous job of showing us that Edwards was truly a theologian of revival and the Holy Spirit. This will surely whet the appetite of those who are interested in Edwards's life and thought and will move them to begin to work through the incredible corpus of Edwards and the ever growing body of secondary literature on the man.

Overall, this book makes a real contribution to Edwards studies and to the theology of revival and of the Holy Spirit. Scholars, church leaders, and church members should make this book required reading in their goal to live an authentic Christian life and see others do the same. It cannot be recommended any higher.

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Interpreting the Historical Books: An Exegetical Handbook. By Robert B. Chisholm, Jr. Handbooks for Old Testament Exegesis, ed. David M. Howard, Jr. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2006, 231 pp., \$19.99, paper.

This work is the first of six titles in Kregel's Handbooks for Old Testament Exegesis, a series designed to "provide readers with an enhanced understanding of different Old Testament genres and strategies for preaching and teaching these genres" (back cover). Robert B. Chisholm is the chair of the OT department and Professor of Old Testament Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary. His previous work, *From Exegesis to Exposition*, and his recently released *A Workbook for Intermediate Hebrew* also attempt to assist the reader in blending exegetical study of the Hebrew Bible with exposition of the text. In line with the objective of this new series, Chisholm models an approach to the OT historical books that focuses on both their literary features and theological message. Rather than "a dry record of bare facts about what happened in the past," the historical books contain "exciting and

fascinating stories” of a highly literary nature that “read more like a historical novel complete with plot structure and character development” (p. 21). An evangelical view of OT narratives affirms that they “are historically accurate,” but also recognizes that they possess “an aesthetic, literary dimension” that contributes to their theological development and purpose” (p. 26).

Chisholm proposes a method for both interpreting and applying biblical narratives. The interpretive process involves two steps: (1) place the text in its historical, cultural, and broader literary contexts; and (2) evaluate the text from a literary point of view. The first chapter, which comprises one-fourth of the book, explains and illustrates the second step in this process. Among the strengths of the book are the numerous illustrations and examples of literary devices and features taken from a wide variety of OT narratives.

In doing literary analysis, the interpreter gives attention to the basic elements of the story (setting, character, plot), discourse structure (the story line), dramatic structure (the way the story is arranged into episodes and scenes), and the functions of quotation and dialogue within the story. When reading OT stories, one must respect the narrator’s “omniscient” authority and perspective, so that the biblical writer’s understanding of the characters and events is the focal point of the interpretive process. This approach runs counter to postmodern forms of literary criticism that attempt to deconstruct the text from a reader-centered perspective or ideology. While discerning the narrator’s message is what matters most, there are places in almost all biblical narratives where the interpreter must attempt to fill in gaps when the text leaves ambiguous why a character acts or speaks in a certain way or whether a character’s actions are commendable or not.

Individual stories do not stand alone in the Bible, and each narrative must be assessed in light of its larger macroplot. Every OT story ultimately is part of the larger canon of Scripture as a whole, and the interpreter should be aware of literary devices like intertextuality, foreshadowing, typology, allusion, and repetition that are used to link an individual story to its larger biblical context.

Literary analysis also requires attention to the structural features and episodic arrangement of biblical narratives, patterns within these stories that include flashback, paneling, and chiasmus. Determining structure enables the reader to isolate the individual episodes in a narrative, trace the progression of the plot, and recognize key themes in the story. The oscillating style of 1 Samuel 27–2 Samuel 1 that shifts back and forth from Saul to David highlights their respective fall and rise much more effectively than a simple chronological narration. The chiasmic structure of the book of Esther highlights the “turning of the tables” for the Jews and their enemies and for Mordecai and Haman in particular.

Chisholm’s discussion provides a helpful introduction to how biblical narratives are structured, but overall there could be a fuller explanation of the significance of structural patterns in the examples given. The reader will need further immersion in other works dealing with rhetorical and literary criticism before being able to do this type of literary analysis with confidence or being able to see beyond the structures to their ultimate significance. As Chisholm notes in his warning on the tendency to find chiasmic structures everywhere in the Bible, “one often gets the impression that the proposals are more a testimony to the scholars’ creativity than a design intended by the biblical author” (p. 52). Students new to this form of analysis should especially heed this warning.

Recognition of the literary techniques employed by a biblical writer can assist the interpreter in resolving theological difficulties and lead to more theologically nuanced understandings of biblical narratives. When the biblical writer states in Judg

1:19 that the men of Judah, even with the Lord's help, could not defeat the people of the plains because of their iron chariots, he is not making a statement of fact. Chisholm argues that the narrator has adopted for rhetorical effect the perspective of the unbelieving men of Judah as a means of condemning their lack of faith.

Chisholm's "literary" approach to passages like Gen 18:20–21 and Gen 22:12 where God appears to learn or discover information offers a mediating position between open and classic theism. Rather than denying God's omniscience or simply explaining the passages as "anthropomorphic," Chisholm instead argues that one must understand these statements about God gaining knowledge in light of the larger metaphorical framework of the passage. In Genesis 18, God is portrayed as a righteous judge, and as a judge, he is responsible to sort through the facts and the evidence before rendering a verdict on the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. The statement that God is going down to investigate also has the dynamic function of motivating Abraham's intercession. Before grappling with ontological issues related to God's nature and attributes, one must understand that God himself has become a character interacting with other characters in the story. Concerning the portrayal of God in OT narratives in general, Chisholm observes that biblical narratives are "not so much concerned with making philosophical pronouncements about the divine character of God as they are with revealing a personal, dynamic God who longs to relate to his people and move them toward the goal he has for them" (p. 32). Keeping this perspective in mind will keep the interpreter from mining biblical narratives for the wrong kinds of information.

When moving to the level of application, the interpreter must ask four essential questions: (1) how are the themes of the story nuanced and developed in the Bible as a whole, especially the NT; (2) what does God reveal about himself and how he relates to people in the story; (3) does the story offer any insight into how people should respond and relate to God; and (4) how should the story be evaluated in light of the Christological emphasis and themes of the Bible?

Asking these application questions in connection with correct interpretation is vitally important for sound teaching and preaching of the historical books. While OT narratives are fertile ground for Christian teaching and preaching, they are often used to merely illustrate right and wrong behavior without regard for the original purpose or theological message of the narratives themselves. As a result, sermons on these passages often fail to move beyond flat readings of the text or simplistic moralizing. For the right kind of application, Chisholm explains that the preacher must take the text through the process of contextualization, decontextualization, and recontextualization, moving the text from its ancient setting in order to discover its contemporary relevance.

Applications of complex and ambiguous narratives must be as measured and nuanced as our readings of these texts. Chisholm especially warns against the danger of overgeneralization in applying narrative texts, where the actions of God or the characters in the story are assumed to be normative for all times and situations. The fact that God acts in a particular way in one instance does not mean that he will or must always act in this manner. In the book of Judges, God responds in a variety of ways to the covenant unfaithfulness of his people—in the Gideon story, God calls on his people to repent before he delivers; in the story of Jephthah, he refuses to deliver when his people cry out to him; and in the Samson story, he sends a deliverer even when the people of Israel do not ask for one. One learns from these stories that God responds in appropriate ways to the sin of his people, but it would be wrong to view any one of these events as his normative response to his disobedient people.

In making application, Chisholm also warns that “we must exercise extreme caution when evaluating the actions of human characters in the biblical stories. The actions and experiences of sinful, flawed human beings are not necessarily normative or designed as models to emulate” (p. 192). Gideon’s act of putting out the fleece in Judges 6 is one of the ways that the narrator reflects the weakness of Gideon’s faith in responding to God’s call, not a practice that is normative for believers attempting to determine God’s will for their lives. When making application with regard to the actions of a character in a biblical story, one must look at the narrator’s overall portrayal of the character and must also correlate the derived principle with the teaching of all of Scripture.

One of the reasons that many pastors avoid preaching and teaching the historical books is that they are often unsure of how to deal with the ethical dilemmas raised by the social customs, violence, and sexual ethics reflected in the OT. Chisholm’s extended discussion of the troubling passage in 2 Kgs 2:23–25, in which some youths are mauled by two bears after mocking the prophet Elisha, provides a particularly helpful model for handling such texts. Correct interpretation of the details of the incident reveals that the story is not about a “mad prophet” and “an abusive God,” as some have suggested. These youths are challenging Elisha’s prophetic authority during a time of national apostasy, and rejection of God’s messenger is ultimately a rejection of God himself. Correct application of the text for today also requires the interpreter to read this passage through the filter of later NT revelation. The issue of response to God’s messenger is just as serious today as it was then, but Christians in light of the cross are called to forgive and show mercy to their enemies rather than to call down judgment upon them (cf. Matt 5:44–45; Luke 6:28; Rom 12:14).

Chisholm’s book also provides a helpful overview of the theological themes in the historical books and a survey of the history of Israel from the conquest through the return to the land and the rebuilding of the temple in the post-exilic period. Though brief, the historical survey integrates key events in biblical and ancient Near Eastern history, including discussion of important extra-biblical documents and footnote references to English translations of these primary sources.

This work is highly recommended and provides an excellent introduction to this new series. The target audience for *Interpreting the Historical Books* is readers with at least a basic working knowledge of Hebrew, though more technical aspects of literary analysis and Hebrew exegesis are explained simply enough for the more general reader. The work does an excellent job of distilling information found in more technical studies of biblical narrative. Bibliographies (some annotated) of Hebrew reference works, studies on Hebrew narrative, and commentaries on the historical books are also provided. Students in both undergraduate and graduate courses in the historical books would benefit from reading this book as an introduction to their studies. Pastors will find this book a helpful resource when doing expositional preaching in the historical books. As a primer for interpreting OT narratives in preparation for preaching and teaching, this book nicely complements the 1999 work by Steven D. Matthewson titled *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*. Chisholm’s study focuses more on the technical aspects of literary analysis, while Matthewson’s work devotes greater attention to sermonic development.

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