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BOOK REVIEW

John H. Walton. *Genesis*. Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013. xv + 159 pp. Pbk. ISBN: 9780310492085.

Zondervan has decided to republish the contents of their 2009 Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary five-volume set as individual softcover commentaries on the books of the Old Testament. Lest they be accused of shameless profiteering, it should be noted that Walton's treatment of Genesis contains more than enough material to justify a volume of its own. This individual book format also allows for greater portability and accessibility.

In many ways, John Walton, a professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College, is the ideal scholar to write a background commentary on Genesis. He has years of experience in the study of the ancient Near Eastern background of the Old Testament, having previously published a commentary on Genesis in the NIV Application series (Zondervan, 2001) along with other materials with a background orientation such as *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament* (Baker, 2006) and *The Lost World of Genesis One* (IVP, 2009). Additionally, Walton spent twenty-five years actively teaching Bible classes to all age groups in a church setting, giving him a familiarity with communicating knowledge to laypeople for their own edification. It is this lay audience that Zondervan seems to be targeting with its Illustrated Bible Backgrounds series. The abundance of colorful pictures and illustrations lends a nonthreatening ambience to the work and the short sections covering various topics make it easy to employ as reference material. Further catering to the audience in a local church, the precise citations of ancient sources and other discussions of a more technical nature are relegated to

endnotes at the back of the book. This facilitates an uncluttered reading experience.

At its best, this *Genesis* volume is a thrilling potpourri of tidbits of historical background that truly resuscitate stories that have undoubtedly grown stale for an audience used to hearing them milked for the same predictable moral platitudes since childhood. While space does not allow for a full rundown of all of its finest moments, some highlights from the discussion of the Tower of Babel should serve to demonstrate the usefulness of this commentary. It should be no surprise that Walton can capably handle this text, since it was the topic of his 1981 Hebrew Union College doctoral dissertation. He first explains that ziggurats were not intended for human use or even religious rituals; they were hollow shells packed with dirt and were usually located near temples rather than serving as the temples themselves. Walton then lists the names attributed to several ziggurats found at Babylon, noting that these names help establish the function of ziggurats as stairways for the gods to come down to earth, not for people to ascend to heaven. Therefore, new meaning is lent to the report in v. 5 that “the LORD came down”—this was the desired result of such a structure, but, surprisingly, this visiting deity was displeased rather than eager to bless the people. Walton also highlights several similar ANE accounts of deities punishing people for the “unauthorized . . . construction of sacred space” (p. 65). Similarly detailed are the treatments of the creation and flood stories, on the former of which Walton has published extensively. Here he offers a superb, condensed presentation of both the raw ANE data and his own view of the implications of such data for reading Genesis 1. Such information should be appreciated by anyone, regardless of their views on the genre and interpretation of the opening chapter of the Bible.

While Walton’s enviable breadth of knowledge makes the reading of *Genesis* a fascinating experience, several factors coincide to make this commentary somewhat less helpful than one might have hoped. First, while the book intends to provide data strictly on the historical and cultural background of the text and not function as a stand-alone commentary, there are places where

either it is difficult to tell how the background information provided serves to illuminate the text in question, or the background information simply raises challenging interpretive issues that are left unaddressed. An example of the latter problem is found in Walton's treatment of Gen 50:2, where Joseph has his father, Jacob, embalmed. After correctly expounding in considerable detail the ways in which embalming was inextricably linked with Egyptian religious beliefs and preparation for the afterlife, Walton taciturnly sweeps aside the questions raised regarding Joseph's association with pagan customs by stating, "Nothing in this text suggests that Joseph or his family had adopted the complex afterlife theology of ancient Egypt with its emphasis on rituals, spells, and other sorts of magic" (p. 137). For a more in-depth analysis of the complex issues raised by Joseph's ordering of the embalming and the narrator's presentation (or sanitization?) thereof, one would have to read Pnina Galpaz-Feller, "And the Physicians Embalmed Him (Gen 50,2)," *ZAW* 118 (2006) 209–17. These problems are particularly relevant, however, in light of the book's intended lay audience, which would naturally be expecting more in the way of exposition of the text, fulfilling the promise on the back cover that the book will "open your eyes to new depths of understanding both familiar and unfamiliar passages."

Second, Walton completely glosses over preliminary issues of authorship and dating. While he attempts to justify this with the plea that the various reconstructions of the date of the composition of Genesis, or parts thereof, have little impact on "background issues" (p. 3), this completely overlooks the central tenet of traditional evangelical hermeneutics that a text's meaning is to be sought in the author's historical context. Surely a scholar of Walton's stature is capable of differentiating between the historical background of the events described in the text, the historical context of the author(s), and the implied background created by a text's placement in the canon(s) in which it is found. If Genesis was composed during the Persian period, that would require a significant reconfiguration of the intended immediate significance of the material. In light of the present climate in which even popular evangelical scholars are writing books that

assume a post-exilic background for Genesis (such as Peter Enns, *The Evolution of Adam* [Brazos, 2012]), a lack of engagement on this point would seem to be a lamentable omission.

Third, the background “insights” provided occasionally border on the banal. When discussing the altercation between Abraham and Lot’s herdsmen in Genesis 13, Walton takes the time to explain that herdsmen would become frustrated and irritable if they could not adequately feed their flocks. This seems to be self-evident and unnecessary.

In conclusion, this volume would be helpful for the seminary professor and Sunday school teacher alike, although the former will likely desire more detail and the latter will at times wish more help was provided concerning how the data might inform one’s reading of the text. Nonetheless, the wealth of information contained here easily qualifies this book as essential supplementary material for serious study.

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