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BOOK REVIEW

John H. Walton and Andrew E. Hill. *The Old Testament Today: A Journey from Ancient Context to Contemporary Relevance*. 2nd edition. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013. xvii + 452 pp. Hbk. ISBN 978-0-310-498209.

This is a revised and updated edition of the authors' 2004 volume. New features include a book-by-book survey and updated sidebar discussions, maps, and charts. The authors now treat the Psalms under the broader category of Wisdom Literature rather than as a separate entity. The aim of the book remains to provide an introduction to the Old Testament that more coherently expresses the relationship of each part to the rest of the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the life of the contemporary Christian. The authors make a point of claiming that they will try not to overwhelm the reader with trivia but tie details into the plotline of the Old Testament. Their stated aim is to orient students to the world of the Old Testament and the methods through which it is studied.

This book contains six sections. The first is entitled "Orientation Fundamentals," and it provides the framework for how Walton and Hill approach the Old Testament. It begins by acknowledging the wide variety of literary genres and styles in the Old Testament before providing a brief summary of its basic plotline from creation to the Intertestamental Period. From there the authors explain the different types of literature in the Old Testament through the metaphor of a tapestry in which the focus of the whole is God, while individual scenes highlight particular perspectives. The authors also present preliminary discussions of exegesis and hermeneutics, placing the text against its cultural and historical backdrop. They conclude this section with a brief description of the process of writing and transmitting the text.

Sections 2 to 5 are the heart of the book, discussing the Pentateuch, Old Testament narrative, Prophets and Prophetic Literature, and Wisdom and Psalms in turn. Each section contains chapters introducing the literature and theology of these corpora, book-by-book discussions, and a concluding chapter on relevance and application. The epilogue then extends the view of the book into the New Testament and considers further areas of contemporary relevance.

Section 2 on the Pentateuch begins with a brief background history of the ancient Near East, including some interesting sidebars on ancient archival material and how it contributes to the study of the Old Testament. It then moves into a discussion of the literary background to the Pentateuch, highlighting comparable literature from the ancient world, including creation stories, legal codes, and covenant treaties. Walton and Hill discuss some theological concepts in the Pentateuch that stress Israel's status as the people of God. These focuses stress that the Pentateuch is a product of its ancient context while also presenting it as a witness to the unique relationship between God and Israel. This is followed by a chapter summarizing each book of the Pentateuch, paying attention to issues of narrative flow, structure, and theology. The section concludes with an insightful chapter on relevance and application that includes a modern reframing of the Ten Commandments.

The third section discusses Old Testament narrative. It begins with a chapter that summarizes the historical context surrounding the rise and fall of Israel and Judah, discussing the influence of surrounding great powers such as Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon. The next chapter focuses upon ancient historiography and its influence on the biblical accounts. The authors also track Israel's history through the periods of the judges, monarchy, and exile. The chapter concludes with several interesting theological discussions, notably on the appropriateness of seeing the protagonists of biblical narratives as role models. The authors stress that the reader must place individual narratives into the broader context of Scripture so that biblical narratives are not reduced to teaching moral lessons.

The next chapter gives summaries of the historical books,

quite detailed in the discussion of 1 and 2 Kings but rather sparse when it comes to the other books. In particular, the discussion of 1 and 2 Chronicles could have been strengthened by some introductory comments on synoptic issues. The final chapter of this section addresses issues of contemporary relevance. Hill and Walton provide excellent reminders of the dangers of simplifying cause and effect and making every disaster out to be an act of divine judgment. They also give a spirited defense of the historicity of biblical events, tying God's revelation of himself to what he does on behalf of his people. This is helpful, especially when tied together with previous discussions of ancient and modern historiography.

The fourth section turns to prophetic literature. It begins with a chapter on the nature of prophecy and places biblical prophets in their historical context, making brief mention of pre-writing prophets before devoting its attention to prophetic books. Walton and Hill highlight different types of prophetic oracles while also drawing some comparisons to prophetic literature from the ancient Near East. The second chapter in this section considers the theology of the prophetic books, beginning with the idea of the prophet as mouthpiece or messenger of God's word. This chapter, then, addresses a number of key prophetic themes, including Yahweh's promises of salvation, the inadequacy of the temple without Yahweh's presence, sovereignty over nations, and social justice. The following chapter then offers brief, almost cursory, introductions to each prophetic book. The final chapter wrestles with issues of contemporary application. The authors seek to bring forward prophetic voices of indictment, judgment, and instruction. They also begin to grapple with issues of prophetic fulfillment and effectively communicate the challenging nature of this task, guiding readers towards interpretive humility while trusting in the ultimate fulfillment of God's promises through the work of Christ.

The fifth section explores wisdom literature and the Psalms. The first chapter places wisdom literature into its ancient context, highlighting other examples of righteous sufferers, philosophical discourse, and love poetry. The next chapter introduces the psalms by listing types of psalms and providing a brief

summary of Hebrew poetry. It also provides examples of hymnic literature from the rest of the ancient Near East. The third chapter examines the challenges of reading wisdom literature as Scripture, focusing on the idea of wisdom as a way of seeking order out the chaotic events of the world. Walton and Hill also note the close connection between wisdom and creation language, suggesting that wisdom is foundational to an understanding of the cosmos. The fourth chapter is a summary of the wisdom books and Psalms. The authors are able to go into detail and provide useful comments on issues such as the purpose of proverbs and the shaping of the Psalter. The final chapter considers issues of contemporary relevance and draws from each of the wisdom books in turn. The authors use these books to address the problem of suffering and evil, to find a purpose of life rooted in the fear of the Lord, to identify the call to self-sacrifice and discipline, and to appropriate a theology of worship.

The book concludes with an epilogue that briefly traces the story of the Old Testament forward into the New Testament. It also suggests that the overarching theme of the Old Testament is “the presence of God” (429–30). The fact that God is present calls readers of the text, both ancient and modern, to respond in obedience and to savor the hopeful expectation of God’s continued engagement with his creation.

The strengths of this book are numerous. The authors demonstrate a serious commitment to explaining the ways in which each corpus of the Old Testament operates and how they connect to the broader biblical plotline. The authors employ sidebars to good effect, rounding out their discussion by presenting evidence from the ancient Near East as well as providing appropriate theological commentary. For example, on pp. 36–37, the authors discuss Israel’s geographical location and emphasize its strategic location for commerce and transportation in the ancient Near East. This helps to place Israel in the context of its surrounding world. Discussion on the role of prophecy and legal codes in the ancient world also help to orient the Old Testament in its ancient context. Further, on p. 175, the authors address the question of whether God wanted Israel to have a king. Surveying evidence from Genesis, Deuteronomy, and 1 Samuel, they show that while

kingship may have been in God's plan, the specific circumstances that led to the anointing of Saul demonstrated Israel's lack of faith in its divine king. A close and careful reading of this book will permit the student to track the basic progression of the Old Testament story while also learning a significant amount about the world that produced it. In order to deepen learning, each chapter concludes with a series of reflection questions that will encourage readers to engage deeply with the material.

For its intended audience, this book has few weaknesses. The sheer length of the Old Testament means that surveys such as this are likely either to sacrifice depth in order to cover the entire corpus, or to overwhelm the reader with more information than can be retained. The authors attempt to deal with this through the use of sidebars for "offline" commentary. This is helpful but may encourage readers to skip these sections since they are not part of the main text. One of the most significant changes in this edition is the inclusion of brief book-by-book surveys found in each section just before the discussion of relevance and application. These surveys offer an initial glimpse of each book and how it fits into its broader corpus. However, it is likely that professors who use this book for introductory Old Testament courses will want to supplement it with a more detailed examination of each book, especially for books such as Ruth, Esther, and the Minor Prophets.

Overall, this is a thorough, thoughtful introduction to the Old Testament that provides a clear exposition of the biblical story and encourages its readers to develop their understanding of literary genre and its influence on how to read these books. Its focus on contemporary application gives it a different feel than other introductory texts. This book will not replace the authors' *Survey of the Old Testament*, which takes a more traditional, book-by-book approach, but *The Old Testament Today* (2nd edition) certainly has a place in orienting readers to literary and theological concerns of the Old Testament while exploring both its ancient context and contemporary relevance.

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