

[*MJTM* 16 (2014–2015)]

BOOK REVIEW

Trent C. Butler. *Joshua 1–12*. 2nd ed. WBC 7A. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014. 561 pp. Hbk. ISBN 978-0-785-25268-9. \$41.48.

———. *Joshua 13–24*. 2nd ed. WBC 7B. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014. 362 pp. Hbk. ISBN 978-0-310-52012-2. \$37.38.

The Word Biblical Commentary series has been a valuable resource for nearly four decades. Students, ministers, and scholars alike have benefited from its commitment to critical engagement and evangelical faithfulness. Over the years, various volumes in the series have been revised and updated, enabling its continued relevance amidst the exponential growth of scholarly knowledge. Trent Butler's second edition of his commentary on Joshua is a thorough update of his original 1983 volume, and is almost three times as long.

The substantial introductory materials deserve comment. An informative and even heartfelt preface offers probing reflections on Butler's faith perspective, which sees room for traditional "higher-critical" methodologies. This is followed by a thorough introduction, which at approximately one hundred fifty pages is enough space to provide a more than adequate overview of the significant critical and theological issues found in Joshua scholarship. The bibliographies found in each subsection of the introduction are outstanding. An explanation of the characteristics of the textual witnesses to Joshua is provided, followed by a survey of the most significant academic commentaries available. Next, separate sections summarize the state of discussion in the endeavours of form criticism, tradition history, source criticism, narrative criticism, and redaction

history. As Butler is attentive to the presence of Deuteronomic language in Joshua, he provides a summary of theories of the Deuteronomistic History. The difficulties of reconciling Joshua with the data uncovered so far through archaeological investigation are legendary, so readers will be grateful for the extensive discussion of site excavations, evidence of the conquest, and the emergence of the Israelite people-group. A final section surveys the theological issues raised by the book, such as the violence of God, the place of the law, and leadership.

Throughout the body of the commentary itself, Butler follows the familiar Word Commentary format but augments it with a few additional types of analysis. While preserving the usual design of translation, notes, form/structure/setting, comments, and explanation, he includes the additional headings of tradition, as well as source and redaction, to allow for a more detailed and organized interaction with critical research.

The translations are clear and readable, with every effort taken to ensure that the nuances of the original language come through. For example, in Josh 5:3, Butler's rendering has Joshua circumcising the men of Israel on the "hill of the foreskins," a detail that some modern translations (such as the ESV, HCSB, NASB, NRSV) prefer to hide through transliteration of the Hebrew (although to be fair, most have it explained in a footnote). At times, however, this kind of literal rendering takes place at the expense of the readability of the English, such as when the conventions of English word order are transgressed. While this has the virtue of faithfulness to the text, it does not necessarily succeed in creating a translation that conveys whatever nuance was intended in the Hebrew.

Perhaps the most valuable feature of this commentary for scholars will be the textual notes. While some volumes in the Word series merely list variants, Butler provides significant discussion of both individual and large-scale divergences in the Septuagint and other versions. Each feature is not only discussed but treated with bibliographic references supporting different perspectives on the correct reading, giving the interested scholar further resources to explore for investigating a particular disputed reading.

In light of the wealth of scholarly detail provided in this commentary, it is refreshing when Butler displays his devotional sensitivity and provides reflections on the text in light of modern day church application. For example, at the conclusion of Joshua 1, the themes of leadership, courage, and land that are prominent in the chapter are brought to bear on the Christian life: strong leadership is still necessary for spiritual victory. Additionally, the commentary states that while God has provided a gift of salvation in Jesus Christ (paralleled to the gift of the land to the Israelites), this gift must still be grasped through doing battle with the enemy of sin. Even the issue of a group maintaining cohesion while relatively spread out geographically is made relevant for the unity of the worldwide church today (see 7A: 232–233).

Several supplemental sections provide further information on questions raised by the subject matter of Joshua. The excursuses cover Yahweh war in tradition and theology, the nature of *herem*, the ban, and the Philistines. As an example of what is covered, the excursus on the Philistines (see 7B: 72–79) covers what is known concerning their origins, their depiction in the literature of other ANE cultures, their relation to the surrounding Canaanite world, and archaeological data concerning the settlements attributed to the Philistines in the Old Testament.

While there is much to be excited about in this commentary, however, some areas of weakness should be noted. Unfortunately, its greatest asset of sheer comprehensiveness is also its greatest weakness, as most pastors and undergraduate students (to say nothing of curious laypeople) will likely be discouraged by its sheer bulk. The kind of details that are of homiletical value can be very easily missed by the reader who attempts to fast-forward through the pages of summaries of source-critical hypotheses. While scholars will doubtlessly appreciate having the conclusions of the key source-critical reconstructions abridged throughout, the critical analysis of and interaction with these viewpoints are sometimes minimal. Butler often indicates that he may find a given partition theory unconvincing but does not always explain why, a feature that will likely disappoint the very audience inclined to wade through

the source and redactions sections of this commentary. Furthermore, it is somewhat lacking in linguistic detail. While there is no shortage of grammatical discussion, the commentary is sometimes unclear regarding its own criteria for adjudicating difficult cases. An example is found in the analysis of the precise location of the section boundary at the beginning of Joshua 5; while scholars debate whether the pericope begins at 5:1 or 5:2, Butler finds the change of time and subject as enough evidence to start the pericope at 5:2 (7A: 320–321). It is places like this that his treatment could benefit greatly from work in discourse analysis or text linguistics. While he makes frequent reference to various treatises on Hebrew grammar, one searches in vain for interaction with works that perform analysis at a level above that of the clause.

In conclusion, this commentary will be useful for any pastor, student, or scholar. It represents both a careful exposition of the text as well as a diligent survey of a multitude of secondary sources.

David J. Fuller
McMaster Divinity College
Hamilton, ON