

[MJTM 17 (2015–2016)]

#### BOOK REVIEW

John F. Evans. *A Guide to Biblical Commentaries and Reference Works*. 10th ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016. xix + 469 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-0-310-52096-2. \$24.99.

Given the relatively high cost of many reference works and commentaries as well as the limited amount of time and funds that are often available to the vast majority of missionaries, pastors, Christian educators, and Bible college/seminary students, it is imperative that readers derive as much value as possible from every resource material that they choose to purchase or consult. Would it not prove beneficial to have a trusted aid to help answer the questions: “What resources have the highest recommendations? Where should I best spend my time and money? Are there any commentaries or reference works that I should perhaps avoid or use with increased circumspection? How do the different commentary series and authors approach the Bible? Which writers share a particular theological approach (e.g., Reformed, Wesleyan, Pentecostal/Charismatic, Anabaptist, etc.)?”

John F. Evans’s *A Guide to Biblical Commentaries and Reference Works*, now in its 10th edition, has set a new standard and benchmark for many years to come being the largest and most comprehensive, single-volume commentary and reference works survey that covers the entire Bible. To be more precise, Evans’s work is primarily an annotated bibliography of hundreds of commentators that covers several thousand titles. Both recent and more dated works are included, and there are even remarks on certain forthcoming volumes (albeit with a disclosed understanding that some of the “promised” works will, of course, perhaps never be published).

No changes have been made to the format of the current

publication (as compared to previous editions) with respect to either the symbols employed or the standards for evaluating commentaries. Evans uses a simple seven-symbol key (including a stylized *F* for forthcoming volumes) to clearly distinguish the various types of books in the list and to indicate specifically whom he is commending the commentary at hand. An average of five or six works for each book of the Bible (Ezra–Nehemiah, 1–2 Thessalonians, the Pastoral Epistles, and the epistles of John are each dealt with as one book) are marked with a solid-colored star as a suggestion for purchase. Evans notes that “in making recommendations for purchases, I have mainly had pastors in mind . . . more specifically, I have been thinking of studious pastors, who take seriously the life of the mind and the academic study of Scripture” (28).

Not to be forgotten, however, are the “seminarians’ interests in philology, grammar, sophisticated hermeneutical methods, cutting-edge literary analysis, bibliographies, etc.” (28). Such volumes are marked in the text in bold face type. The star-outline symbol designates a valuable commentary or reference work that would be worth buying (but a second priority), while the checkmark (British “tick” symbol) designates an important scholarly work that could profitably be consulted for seminary papers, but is either difficult/expensive to obtain or of debatable value for a pastor’s library. In addition, Evans notes and distinguishes between works that espouse a so-called critical theological position and those that adopt a “mediating” or mildly critical approach to biblical interpretation (pages 32–34 of Evans’s introduction delineate more specifically his criteria and definition of these terms).

Although Evans is an evangelical Christian and is generally reformed in his theology, he prudently states: “even as we recognize theological differences and their ramifications, we want to avoid ‘theological profiling’ which excludes” (34). Indisputably, Evans takes to heart his own admonition in his writing and is to be commended for the judiciousness of his comments. Neither too trenchant nor too bland, Evans’s snippets and annotations are quite tactful and becoming, even when they are addressing a given volume’s possible weaknesses,

limitations, solecisms, or infelicities, including but not limited to the length of the text (Evans's critique is usually that the given work is "too thin" rather than being "too mammoth"), the cost of the title for purchase, the lack of a bibliography/author index, or, on occasion, the author's particular stance or approach towards Scripture. To be clear, however, Evans deals fairly with works from every perspective.

In addition to bibliographies covering distinct groupings of books or themes, such as Pentateuchal Studies, Decalogue, Reading Narrative and the Former Prophets, Poetry and Wisdom Literature, Prophets and Prophetic Literature, Apocalyptic Literature, Jesus and Gospels Research, Sermon on the Mount, The Parables of Jesus, and Pauline Studies, Evans also includes a twenty-five-page annotated bibliography on commentary series, where he clarifies the aims and audience of different series, and a four-page list of other bibliographies/lists to consult. There is also a fairly thorough, though not exhaustive, seventeen-page author index (something that the ninth edition was missing, quite regrettably). Do note, however, that the index is perhaps *too* thorough at times (see Kenton L. Sparks and Kent Sparks for example). Not to be forgotten is Evans's list of "An Ideal Basic Library for the Pastor" which includes more general reference works for both the Old Testament and the New Testament along with some suggested "Background Reading" that will orient the "fledgling student" on matters of higher criticism, history of biblical interpretation, and the like. Let it also be known that the introduction to the text includes a helpful orientation to the "use" and "abuses" of commentaries—something that is surely not to be missed by any user of this work. Although it is relatively rare that Evans has not been able to review a book himself, personally, when such is the case, he often provides at least some quotation or reference to another review article or related work that assists the reader as to the commentary's value, orientation, etc., so as not to leave the reader "hanging."

Regrettably, however, some titles receive little to no comment to be truly useful. For example, Habel's 1968 commentary on Lamentations (in the Concord series) and Gould's 1896 commentary on Mark (in the ICC series) are both considered by

Evans to be “safe to ignore” with no further comment or reason given. Other annotations are also too brief to be of real help. For example, concerning McKane’s *Commentary on Samuel* (1963), Evans writes: “quite critical.” Does not the inquisitive mind hunger for increased specificity and detail? The same may be said for Evans’s “review” of both Harrison’s and Guthrie’s sizable introduction. Suffice it to say that merely stating that these volumes have “information that is hard to find elsewhere” (see 444, 446) does not provide an effective annotation, especially when the volumes at hand are being considered as part of an “ideal basic pastors’ library” (441) collection!

Although it is not an understatement to say that there are truly few works that Evans has neglected to mention or review, some rather notable and unfortunate omissions (in this reviewer’s opinion, at least—others may disagree or find more volumes that they are persuaded ought to have been included but were not) may be found, including Michael J. Gorman’s *Elements of Biblical Exegesis* (2008), which contains a plethora of annotated bibliographies, and John H. Sailhamer’s *Introduction to Old Testament Theology: A Canonical Approach* (1995), which, in my opinion is, by far, the best seminal introduction to that specific topic, and should have stood alongside Vos as one of Evans’s most recommended research tools for the whole Bible.

Concerning the Old Testament, specifically, Evans neglects to mention Tov’s magisterial *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (2011), which, in my opinion, is a non-negotiable purchase, even though many students would likely opt for either Wegner’s (2006), Brotzman and Tully’s (1993, 2016), or Würthwein and Fischer’s (2014) more basic/intermediate works, to bring students up to speed with the topic. Evans also neglects to annotate Tremper Longman III’s *How to Read Exodus* (2009), or note Longman and Walton’s *How to Read Job*, which, I assume, appeared too late for review given its 2015 publication date. For the New Testament, Porter’s *Romans* commentary (2015) was also absent from Evans’s volume presumably for the same reason as Longman and Walton’s volume noted above, but the absence of his 1992 *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (among many others by Porter) is particularly unfortunate as both the

intermediate and advanced student of Greek would be well served by using it. With respect to Septuagintal studies, specifically, Evans neglects to mention Chamberlain's *The Greek of the Septuagint: A Supplemental Lexicon* (2011), Taylor's *Analytical Lexicon to the Septuagint* (2009), and Silva and Jobes's *Invitation to the Septuagint* (2000, 2015). Users of each of these volumes would be quick to affirm not only their accuracy, user-friendliness, and cost-effectiveness, but also their indispensability with respect to doing scholarly Septuagintal studies.

Lastly, one may perhaps also more than quibble with respect to Evans's choice to highlight only the *NIV Study Bible*, *ESV Study Bible*, and the *HarperCollins Study Bible* to the neglect of other main-stream/popular, "solid" translations, such as the *Holman Christian Standard Study Bible*, *Common English Study Bible*, or the *New Living Translation Study Bible*, which is the only study Bible that I am aware of that includes a dictionary and index for Hebrew and Greek word studies, along with in-line citations and transliteration of the original languages in the margins fully indexed. To this end, I believe that it would behoove Evans to include in future editions a nominal section that focuses on contemporary translations, translation theory, linguistics, etc., as it would indisputably allay any qualms the reader might have with respect to Evans's competencies in these areas, and as it would greatly benefit the intended user of Evans's work. In closing, there is much to be gleaned within this guide, and one should be reticent about dismissing the text based upon any of the above criticisms. Serious undergraduate/graduate students and studious pastors alike will be well served for many years to come by the painstaking assiduousness that has been undertaken in this volume.

Dustin Burlet  
McMaster Divinity College  
Hamilton, ON