



**Nickelsburg, George W. E.**

***I Enoch 1: A Commentary on the Book of 1 Enoch,  
Chapters 1–36; 81–108***

Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on  
the Bible

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This book, a welcome addition to the Hermeneia commentary series, is a critical and historical commentary on books 1, 4, and 5 of *I Enoch*, which provides a careful use of philological, historical, textual, and literary methods. Nickelsburg brings together the results of a lifetime of study on what is probably the most important of the Jewish “pseudepigrapha” of the postbiblical period. Accordingly, most of Nickelsburg’s major contributions are not presented here for the first time, but they are presented in a comprehensive and integrated way, possible only in a full-length commentary. Not the least of its virtues is that it contains the most authoritative and readable English translation currently available. It is to be hoped that it will soon be possible to purchase this translation separately in the form of an inexpensive paperback [editor’s note: see now <http://www.bookreviews.org/BookDetail.asp?TitleId=4561>].

The introduction consists of a short discussion of methodology and “Some Hermeneutical and Theological Observations,” a review of the Enochic corpus, textual and literary notes, a long theological discussion of worldview, the place of *I Enoch* in the history of ideas and social contexts, followed by a treatment of *I Enoch* in ongoing Jewish and Christian tradition and in modern scholarship. The commentary itself consists of introductions to each major section, translation, extensive textual notes, and detailed notes. The book also includes a useful bibliography and index.

Nickelsburg has contributed greatly to the study of the text of *I Enoch*, although, as he himself says, “A major desideratum is a new critical edition of 1 Enoch” (125). In the

absence of a printed text the translation is based on Nickelsburg's own decisions in each passage. Where Aramaic or Greek texts are available, Nickelsburg generally translates them, but occasionally he translates two or more different versions combined. Independent of, but generally in agreement with, Uhlig's appraisal of the Ethiopic textual evidence (Siegbert Uhlig, *Das äthiopische Henochbuch* [JSHRZ 5/6; Gütersloh: Mohn, 1984]), Nickelsburg prefers "the older mss. (T<sup>9</sup>, 2080, and g)" but notes that the later MS t and sometimes even the later group β deserve serious consideration (19). In most (but not all) of the passages that I investigated, I have been persuaded by Nickelsburg's textual choices, even in some for which I had previously argued for other readings.

Nickelsburg accepts the use of emendation as "a last resort," one that he makes use of when the text is "opaque" or "clearly corrupt" (20). The Ethiopic, Greek, and even Aramaic texts of *1 Enoch* are frequently corrupt, and bold emendation is often the only practical recourse for one who wants to understand the text as a product of second century B.C.E. Judea. One of the many persuasive emendations offered by Nickelsburg is his proposal to read *dabbar* (Aramaic for "leader") at the end of the Animal Vision (90:41 [p. 403]) where the Ethiopic reads *nagar* (thing). This is by far the best proposal offered for this corrupt text.

Nickelsburg's understanding of *1 Enoch* and the arrangement of his commentary depend on his view that the text is best seen not as a corpus of collected Enochic books but as an accumulation in stages of a single book that consisted at one point of books 1, 4, and 5. Nickelsburg's argument that this "book" was testamentary in form has often been criticized (and sometimes not well understood), and this has unfortunately deflected attention from the more important issue, that of the shape and history of the corpus.

This argument controls the shape of the commentary primarily in that the first volume of the commentary covers books 1, 4, and 5 along with chapters 81–82. Although these chapters now belong to the Astronomical Book, Nickelsburg believes that they consist of a remnant of the final vision of the Book of the Watchers and a narrative bridge between books 1 and 5. They were further modified when the Book of Dreams (book 4) and then the Astronomical Book (book 3) were inserted into the present corpus, disrupting the original function of those chapters. Nickelsburg's understanding of the corpus also colors the shape of his commentary in that instead of providing separate introductions to each of the present-day "books" he introduces each bit of the corpus that he thinks has a separate literary history. So he offers introductions to chapters 1–6, 6–11, 12–16, 17–19, 20–36, 81–82, 83–84, 85–90, 92–105 (with a separate section on 91:1–10, 18–19), 106–107, and 108. The introductions cover topics such as date, setting, literary form, function, and relation to the rest of the corpus. This is a little less convenient for those who want the

commentary to conform to the shape of *Ethiopic Enoch*, but it provides a form that is laudably consistent with the analytical function of a commentary.

Nickelsburg's argument for a testamentary form at this stage in the development of *I Enoch* is based primarily on three observations (21–26): (1) 4QEn<sup>c</sup> suggests that books 1, 4, 5, and the Book of the Giants already existed as a collection with the *vacat* between chapters 105 and 106 indicating that the latter chapters were considered a separate unit. This is certainly suggestive but not much more than that. J. T. Milik's conjecture that 4QEn<sup>c</sup> contained the same books is only conjecture. We have nothing to tell us whether any of four books collected in 4QEn<sup>c</sup> were considered to be a literary unity. (2) Book 5 is testamentary in form, consisting of the last words of the patriarch to his sons. (3) Chapters 81 and 82, which are foreign intrusions into the Astronomical Book, function adequately as a narrative bridge between the Book of the Watchers and the Epistle of Enoch and seem to be the remnants of an original final section of the Book of the Watchers. Book 1 provides the narrative introduction to the testament.

This argument has the virtue of explaining the origin of chapters 81–82:4ab, which most commentators agree did not originally belong to the Astronomical Book. They cohere nicely with both the end of book 1 and the beginning of book 5. Since one should not expect to encounter in apocalyptic literature a “pure” literary form, it seems possible that book 1, 81–82:4ab, and parts of book 5 constituted a single text until the addition of book 4 and the rest of the corpus. Such a book would have been more like a testament than any other single genre. Perhaps it would be more accurate to call it a text of mixed genre with a strong testamentary flavor.

According to Nickelsburg, the key function of the Enochic literature is to provide eschatological, revealed wisdom that will save the elect or righteous by means of a resolution of the many dualisms (37–42). Perhaps *restoration* would be a more appropriate category than *salvation*. As Nickelsburg notes, “This dual notion of judgment as reward and punishment . . . usually appears within the context of the book's narrow focus on present injustice and the future restoration of justice. . . . This restoration is always linked to primordial beginnings as defined by enochic revelations, never as defined by Mosaic Torah.”

Nickelsburg correctly notes the Enochic preference for revealed wisdom over the Sinai covenant and Torah (50–54). Righteousness is understood as adherence to the divinely ordained, cosmic order as received by revelation. This is consistent with the choice of pre-Sinai, pre-Israelite Enoch as the ultimate righteous one. The future restoration of the earth and of justice for humanity depends on the reception of Enoch's revealed wisdom.

The correct observance of the cult and priestly purity are still important issues for *1 Enoch*, but only in the sense that this conviction provides the Enochic writers with grounds for accusing the priesthood of the Second Temple of impurity. The real temple is the heavenly one, and Michael is the high priest. The consequence is that the eschatological Jerusalem, once cleansed, will not have a separate temple in the Animal Vision. Accepting my own argument (Patrick Tiller, *A Commentary on the Animal Apocalypse* [SBLEJL 4; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993], 376), Nickelsburg says, “What seems certain is this: all Israel will be present in ‘the house,’ which is located in Jerusalem and reprises the desert camp. If the house is thought of as city and temple, it will be a temple in which God dwells (v 34) and where no traditional cult is necessary both because of God’s presence and because the human race has been fully and permanently purified of sin” (405).

The need for the cult is eliminated with the elimination of polluting sin. This may also be related to the marginalization of Mosaic Law in *1 Enoch*, or it could be due to the fact that the third and final era of human history should be understood as a restoration to primordial conditions (355). As Eden lacked a temple, so the New Jerusalem has no need for a temple.

Nickelsburg argues that Enochic revealed wisdom is a fusion of prophetic and sapiential streams. He cautiously, but correctly, notes that this “offers a precedent for the similar tendency expressed by Paul and attributed to Jesus of Nazareth” (61). Nickelsburg shows that *1 Enoch* attests to the wonderful diversity of pre-Christian Judaism, which has divergently influenced not only the traditions of Judaism but also those of Christianity.

I turn now to a particular example of exegesis that exemplifies Nickelsburg’s originality and contribution on controversial issues. The seventy shepherds of the Animal Vision are a key hermeneutical move that uses the primordial myth of the Watchers to interpret the experienced reality of some Judeans living during the Maccabean revolt. The significance is that God’s people are again experiencing the unholy terror wrought by the Watchers and by their giant offspring. The identity, however, of these shepherds is, as R. H. Charles noted, “the most vexed question in Enoch” (R. H. Charles, *The Book of Enoch* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1912], 200). Nickelsburg proposes a new solution, which improves on earlier interpretations and yet remains somewhat unsatisfactory. Contrary to all earlier commentators that I am aware of, Nickelsburg notes that the account of the commissioning of the shepherds is parallel to the activity of the sheep in the preexilic period. He concludes that the visionary introduction to the seventy shepherds describes the same historical period as the preceding section, which focuses on the reign of Manasseh (2 Kgs 21–24 [390]). Nickelsburg builds on this observation; accepts the assumption, which I share, that each shepherd should rule for seven years; and rejects the

conventional and admittedly sensible view that the four periods of the shepherds should “coincide with Israel’s submission to four empires or kingdoms” (392). Instead, he proposes that the “precise numerical symmetry of the periods” argues against their coincidence with events in empirical history (392). This, however, is too rational. The tradents of the Enochic traditions might well have disagreed. According to Nickelsburg, each period is characterized by a major event that occurs sometime within it. Period 1 includes the destruction of Jerusalem; period 2 includes the return and rebuilding of the temple (an event that is otherwise unremarkable for Enochic literature); period 3 includes the coming of Alexander the Great; and period 4 includes the religious reform of the author’s community represented by the opening of the eyes of the lambs. The importance of Nickelsburg’s proposal is that it correctly identifies the beginning of the period of the seventy shepherds. The only reason that I remain unconvinced is that it seems intuitively obvious that the four periods correspond to four kingdoms, like the four metals of Dan 2 or the four beasts of Dan 7.

This commentary is extremely valuable for its careful historical, textual, and literary analysis; its very accurate and readable translation; its attention to both the details and the overall shape of the text; and its constant awareness of the importance of social context. It contains countless new, small contributions to scholarship on Enoch, and it brings together the many important contributions that Nickelsburg and others have made over the past thirty years.