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**von Wijk-Bos, Johanna**

***Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther***

Westminster Bible Companion

Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998. Pp. x + 145, Paperback, No Price Available, ISBN 0664255973.

John W. Wright  
Point Loma Nazarene University  
San Diego, CA 92106

This slim volume in the Westminster Bible Companion addresses a particular audience: it is written "to the church and more specifically to the laity," particularly those engaged in teaching the Bible within the context of the local church (p. ix). Wijk-Bos, therefore, has the difficult task of mediating to lay Christians an academic reading of two biblical books, Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther, that have not exactly been at the center of Christian piety.

The commentary's approach is broadly historical-critical, sprinkled with literary and feminist observations. Especially influential is Tamara Eskenazi's work on Ezra-Nehemiah, *In an Age of Prose* (SBLMS 36; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988). The commentary follows a similar format throughout. Following short, general historical-critical introductions to each book, the commentary moves serially through the book from beginning to end with discussions ranging from one paragraph to four pages per section. Usually each section opens with a short selection from the NRSV, chosen from amidst the larger section.

Such commentaries and series serve an important function within biblical scholarship, but are not the place for detailed, innovative interpretations. Wijk-Bos gives a general, informed reading of the text. She clarifies potentially mystifying elements in the text, and points the way to an informed, coherent reading of the text at a level appropriate to her audience. What is most interesting, however, about the commentary is how it attempts to reach its audience/market. Lines of historical connection, a "hermeneutical bridge," are drawn to connect experiences recorded within the text to the experience of the contemporary reader. Wijk-Bos accomplishes this in at least two ways. First, she attempts to relate to her reader through personal anecdotes and references to current events. For instance, the text revisits scenes from the author's family dinner table during the author's

childhood (pp. 21-22) and we hear about the rash of church-burnings in the mid-1990's in the United States (p. 19). Apparently, the goal here is to provide a "human face" through which to understand the text. A second technique is through moralistic exhortations based upon a concept of "justice" to provide a counter-balance to the emphases of the text (pp. 41-2, 93). The commentary, therefore, alternates between the "objective," past historical-critical realm, the private realm of human interest, and the public realm of Christian action in the world.

The problem with such an approach is the absolute foreignness of Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther to contemporary experience. Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther both presuppose a doctrine of the election of Israel, a notion that runs counter to contemporary democratic ideals. As such, the "hermeneutical bridge" cannot touch the core convictions of the narratives. The commentary therefore walks a tight-rope between critique and affirmation. The points of critique, especially its feminist observations, are actually more profound in raising issues for the reader, but here the author seems aware that she risks alienating her intended audience as well as concerned to stay away from denigration of Second Temple Judaism—an attempt not always successfully accomplished. Yet even in its affirmations, the commentary often goes to universal anthropological observations about tendencies embedded in human communities in certain parallel socio-political situations, rather than working out of the biblical narrative about Israel that the texts presuppose.

For a general literary, historical-critical introduction to these biblical texts for laity teaching within the church, the tension between its intended audience and the constructive-yet-critical task of the commentator is the most remarkable aspect of this book. The commentary shows the difficulty of adopting historical-critical readings within an ecclesial setting and the loss within the academy of a Christian theological reading of the Old Testament, even within a series laudably devoted to such a cause.