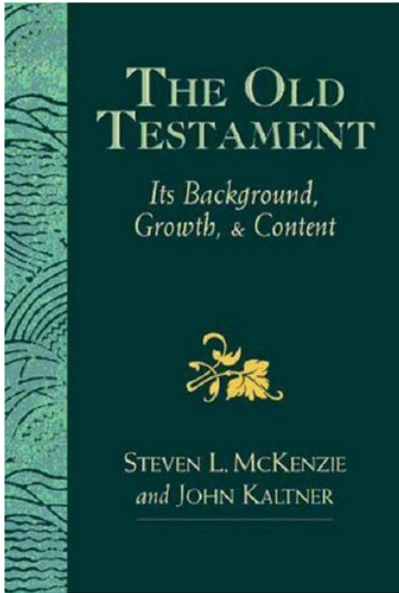


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McKenzie, Steven L., and John Kaltner

The Old Testament: Its Background, Growth, and Content

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Francis Dalrymple-Hamilton
Peebles, Scotland, United Kingdom

1. General

Without doubt, Steven L. McKenzie and John Kaltner have taken the study of Old Testament introduction many steps forward by their attractive presentation of a work that combines so many associated disciplines, namely, archaeology, history, geography, ancient Near Eastern background, and literary interpretation, to name but a few. In addition, the work is supplied with many photographs of archaeological sites and relevant associated texts, a feature that by itself is rare in Old testament introductions. Further, there are excerpts from related texts such as the Gilgamesh Epic and the annals of King Sennacherib of Assyria.

2. Plan

The plan on which the work throughout is based is introduced in the first chapter, which is entitled “Introduction” and includes the four subsections of “Content”; “Growth”; “Context”; and “Interpretation.” In the introductory section the authors make clear that this work adopts the four-part division of the Jewish Canon, with sections on the Torah, Former Prophets, Latter Prophets, and Writings. This section discusses the growth and canonization of the various books that now comprise the Hebrew Bible. There is a further interesting section on the translations of the English Bible that concludes with a very

helpful paragraph on rules that would help the student choose an English translation of the Hebrew Bible. The subsection on Context discusses the geographical, historical, and cultural issues that underlie our understanding of the Hebrew Bible. The subsection on interpretation deals with such topics as “Early Forms of Interpretation” and “The Rise of Critical Scholarship.” It is a great pity that in a section such as this only minimal attention is paid to the Hebrew text and the place of the versions in our attempt to restore the text of the Hebrew Bible. While it may be argued that these are matters for more specialized works on these topics, nevertheless I do feel that some consideration should have been made to them in this introductory section.

3. Torah

In this section the authors state that they adopt the basic thesis of the Documentary Hypothesis that different sources underlie the Pentateuch. They do concede, however, that they are emphasizing the presence of the J and P material, since the evidence for these writers seems particularly clear and well accepted. It is interesting to note that the authors concede on page 117 while dealing with the Law that P may be little more than a scholarly construct. In fairness to the authors, they also concede that some version of the Documentary Hypothesis is still held by the majority of biblical scholars at least in North America, while European scholars tend to be more diversified in opinion. In the opinion of this reviewer, it is a great pity that a brand new textbook to the science of Old Testament introduction should be committed to such outmoded datings of JEDP without further investigation of the alternatives. More attention should have been paid to study of the techniques of oral composition and the transmission of oral literature. What can be said in their defense, however, is that the way that they have dealt with the various sections of the Pentateuch gives more prominence to the individual books than is normally the custom is such presentations of the JEDP theory.

In dealing with the Primeval History, they have added a very useful excursus on Yahweh, which will surely be helpful to students and other interested parties. It is a great pity that in dealing with Gen 14 on page 92 they make no reference to Hebrew of this chapter, which is so different to other similar chapters in this book that it is usually deemed to be a source on its own. In dealing with the book of Exodus, the authors refer as might be expected to the varying sources at work in this narrative, but what is helpful is their comparison of the exodus story with other parallel accounts, such as Pss 78 and 105.

In dealing with the book of Leviticus, the authors note that it used to be the custom among scholars to assign the entirety of this book to the source P, but this is no longer the consensus view. This view has now been replaced by one that argues for multiple sources that are conceived of in different ways. The movement now in understanding such issues

is to note that both sources P and H (if such be allowed) contain material that is quite ancient and predates the exile. Clearly this means that the contents of the book of Leviticus must now be reexamined in the light of such conclusions. Here the authors are avant-garde in their presentation.

Despite what has been stated above with regard to the authors' commitment to JEDP, their handling of the book of Deuteronomy is quite unusual in that instead of considering it with the Pentateuch they prefer to consider it with the Former Prophets. The reason for this is that scholars have long recognized that Deuteronomy shares more with the books that follow it than with those that precede it. Once again, in this matter they have made a substantial contribution to our understanding of the Pentateuch in their presentation.

4. Former Prophets

The basis of their presentation of this section of the Hebrew Bible is that of the Deuteronomistic History. In this the authors want to understand the book of Deuteronomy not as the conclusion to the books that come before it, but to the books that come after it. In their presentation of these books, their use of history with archaeological evidence comes to the fore; however, in my opinion it is a pity that the authors treat archaeology as if it were an absolute science that either proves or more likely disproves the historicity of the Bible. One only has to think back to similar presentations over a century ago when the reading public were assured that such was the state of archaeology as a science that the historicity of the Bible had now been disproved. Because one may not know what future explorations will throw up, it would have been better to leave the conclusion open and to await what future archaeologists will discover.

In their handling of the books of 1 and 2 Samuel, it is a great pity that the state of the existent Hebrew text is not commented upon. It should be noted however, that when the authors come to deal with the story of David and Goliath, they note the different accounts in the MT and the LXX. Here they note that the Hebrew text of this story that is translated in the English versions of our Bibles is twice as long as that preserved in the LXX. This they put down to textual development that the text was then undergoing by the textual scribes. This is an important evaluation that should not be ignored.

In dealing with 1 Kings, the authors note that, although historically Omri was a very significant king, the Hebrew Bible regards him as of almost no importance, describing his total reign in a matter of six verses. It is here that the authors make a significant contribution, since under the section entitled "Context" the historical vacuum is filled in from further archaeological and inscriptional evidence. Of particular import for these books is the Tel Dan Stela, which provides the first mention of David's name in the

expression “house of David.” Here as in previous section the unique blend of this textbook of the biblical texts with archaeology is of supreme importance.

5. Latter Prophets

In this section, the books under discussion are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve Minor Prophets. From the introduction to this section it would appear that the authors are partially committed to the postexilic redaction of the prophets, which if applied in totality would mean that we could never uncover the original message or context of the prophet whose name the book is applied to. This in itself is contradicted by what we know of Judaism historically, which is able to transmit the texts of its own religion orally and accurately over many centuries.

When dealing with Isaiah, the authors note that there are two distinct sections to the book: First Isaiah (chs. 1–39), much of which comes from the time of the eighth-century prophet; and Second Isaiah (chs. 40–66). It is in their dealing with Second Isaiah that their most innovative method come to the fore. They evaluate the evidence that scholars usually use for attesting the existence of a Third Isaiah but conclude that it is not conclusive enough to attest the existence of a third strand within the book. This is a valuable conclusion that is based on solid textual evidence, and it is to be hoped that such a view will gain a priority position among Old Testament scholars.

In their handling of the book of Jeremiah, the authors come to an assessment of the versions of the text that are current to us: the MT and the LXX. They note that it is the usual trend for the LXX to be longer than the MT, but in this instance it is actually shorter. In fact, the LXX is about one-eighth shorter than the Hebrew text. In addition, after 25:13, the order of the two versions differs in significant ways. They rightly note that evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls confirms the importance and value of the LXX Jeremiah text. They rightly observe that this evidence would suggest that by the second century B.C.E. a shorter Hebrew text (different from the Hebrew text that led to the MT) existed that was translated into Greek to be used by some Jewish communities. Interestingly enough, the section on “Interpretation” is devoted entirely to the dating of the beginning of the prophet’s career.

With regard to the prophet Hosea, it is disappointing to note that the authors make no reference whatsoever to the difficult nature of the Hebrew text underlying the book nor to the exegesis that the various versions make of it. This would have been a useful consideration for serious students of the Hebrew Bible. What is helpful in this section is the way that the various prophets are arranged in chronological order in respect to their relation to the exile.

6. Writings

In their handling of this section, the authors note the various subsections that comprise this final portion of the Hebrew Bible. Forming one such subgroup are the wisdom books: Proverbs, Job, and Qoheleth, which is also known as Ecclesiastes. Another such subgroup is the Megilloth, a Hebrew word meaning “scrolls,” which comprises Ruth, Song of Solomon, Lamentations, Esther, and Qoheleth. The nature of all these works and their content is explored in full within these pages.

I found the authors’ handling of the book of Job to lack any substance. Once more there is no mention of the language of the book of Job, which surely betrays Arabic and Aramaic influences and would have proved a useful point of discussion. Neither is there any mention of the nature of the LXX text to that of the MT. As scholars know, the LXX text of Job, like Jeremiah, is substantially shorter than that of the MT, and this disparity between the texts is to be seen particularly in chapters 22–31; like the previous consideration on the language of Job, this also would have provided a useful guide for students and other interested parties. As scholars know, the third cycle of speeches in Job 22–31 breaks down somewhat, and it is necessary to reconstruct the speech of Zophar, which otherwise is excluded from the text; however, it should be stressed that the authors make no reference to the broken-down nature of the text at this point. Under the heading of “Interpretation,” they do, however, make a careful assessment of the issue of theodicy.

7. Conclusion

Clearly, this is a work that the authors have spent a lot of time preparing, and it no doubt reflects their teaching in many of the aspects that it covers. As such, it is to be recommended as a useful and up-to-date resource that covers many of the newer trends in literary criticism of the Bible, such as narrative analysis. In this setting, it will serve as a composite and modern introduction to the Hebrew Bible for many years to come.