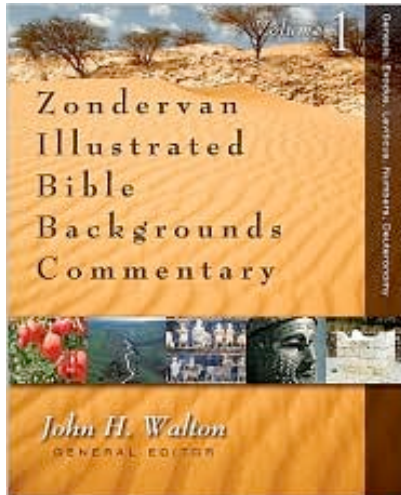


RBL 05/2010



Walton, John H., ed.

***Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary:
Old Testament***

Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009. Pp. 2,928 (5 vols.).
Hardcover. \$249.95. ISBN 0310255724.

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“The premier reference for engaging the historical and cultural context of the Old Testament.” So claims the slip case of this new reference resource from Zondervan. Pastor Dan Kimball then endorses the set as one “every Christian should own.” As one who has conceived, designed, and edited several reference volumes, I am not sure any reference could live up to such extraordinary claims. This one comes remarkably close to meeting the first claim but is far too technical in its design and content to be suitable for the second claim. The slip case points to over 12,000 endnotes (on average, 325 per book, with larger ones approaching 1,800), a feature that eliminates many readers already. Then come nine pages of abbreviations of technical sources. What makes this book a must for the academic world eliminates it from a large percentage of the world’s “every Christian.”

This is a five-volume commentary on the Hebrew Bible set out in an order distinct from any manuscripts or translations. It presents the reader “over 2,000 photographs, drawings, maps, diagrams, and charts (that) provide a visual feast that breathes fresh life into the text.” Here the slip-case copy proves not as hyperbolic as one might expect. The publishers have helped tremendously by using high-gloss paper that allows the artwork to pop off the page in as strong a detail as possible. Each commentary has a brief or briefer introduction of historical and some literary background, often duplicating other introductions (with a few exceptions, such as Kings and Chronicles). The commentary itself follows the biblical chapters without commenting on each verse. Beautiful Bible land, artifact, reproduction, map, and chart artwork graces almost every page, most of the time matching content materials on the same page. A brief bibliography, chapter

endnotes, and sidebar and chart notes complete each commentary. Each volume ends with a picture index that covers all five volumes but gives Bible passages rather than page numbers.

This review will look at the commentaries in volume 1 and then sample books from the other volumes, noting strengths and weaknesses. Finally, I will point to the overall achievements of the five volumes along with some suggestions for improvement.

John Walton opens each volume with the same five-page methodological essay on how to do comparative studies, completed by a one-page addendum on the uniqueness of the particular type of literature represented in the particular volume: “Comparative Studies and the Pentateuch,” “Comparative Studies and Historical Literature” (vols. 2 and 3), “Comparative Studies and Prophetic Literature” (vols. 4 and 5), and “Comparative Studies and Wisdom and Psalms.” This editorial introduction is of great value in forcing the academic to consider methodological issues in applying ancient Near Eastern background materials to biblical study. The “addenda,” however, prove too brief to accomplish much.

Walton and the other writers come to the task with an avowedly evangelical approach, but this should not turn away critical scholars, for the information provided and the light-handed dealing with areas of scholarly dispute can be invaluable to readers, no matter what one’s literary and theological assumptions. Everyone who teaches comparative literature in any sense can profit greatly from considering Walton’s approach in the introductory essay. His basic assumption finds “nothing inherently damaging to orthodox theology and beliefs about the Bible *if its authors were interacting at various levels with the literature current in the culture*. All literature is dependent on the culture in which it arises—it must be if it intends to communicate effectively” (emphasis original). At the literary level, “understanding genre contributes to legitimate theological interpretation.” But “without the guidance of comparative studies, we are bound to misinterpret the text at some points.” One does wish all the writers had taken time to hear this and devote more space to genre issues and comparisons.

Walton closes with ten principles of comparative study and three central goals. The principles are: (1) “Both similarities and differences must be considered”; (2) “Similarities may suggest a common cultural heritage rather than borrowing”; (3) “It is common to find similarities at the surface but differences at the conceptual level and vice versa”; (4) “All elements must be understood in their own context as accurately as possible before cross-cultural comparisons are made”; (5) “Proximity in time, geography, and spheres of cultural contact all increase the possibility of interaction leading to influence”; (6) “A case for literary borrowing requires identification of likely channels of transmission”; (7) “The

significance of differences between two pieces of literature is minimized if the works are not of the same genre”; (8) “Similar functions may be performed by different genres in different cultures”; (9) “When literary or cultural elements are borrowed, they may in turn be transformed into something quite different”; and (10) “A single culture will rarely be monolithic, either in a contemporary cross-section or in consideration of a passage of time.”

Walton’s three goals for comparative studies are: (1) “We study the history of the ancient Near East as a means of recovering knowledge of the events that shaped the lives of people in the ancient world”; (2) “We study archaeology as a means of recovering the lifestyle reflected in the material culture of the ancient world”; and (3) “We study the literature of the ancient Near East as a means of penetrating the heart and soul of the people who inhabited the ancient world that Israel shared”

Walton presents a quite brief general bibliography on reference works, translations of texts, and Bible backgrounds. The entries apparently cut off at 2003, except for one 2005 entry. Each book commentary also has a brief (one page or less) bibliography and extensive end of chapter notes.

Walton also wrote the commentary for Genesis, where he uses eight pages for a creative introduction. He favors Mosaic authorship, but a 500 B.C.E. date would have little effect on background issues. He sets the historical setting (2400 to 1600) by looking at the Sumerians, the dynasty of Akkad, the Gutians, Ur III, local city-states, the Old Babylonian period, and the Hittite sack of Babylon. The city-states of Canaan and the Old and Middle Kingdoms of Egypt are mentioned. A short geographical setting leads to the literary setting based on the idea that genre categories represent a consensus of expectation among readers. Genres involved in Genesis include cosmogony texts, genealogies, founders’ or ancestors’ narratives, destiny proclamations, conflict tales, battle accounts, and a rise of a courtier narrative.

Turning to Genesis and mythology, Walton looks more at function than definition. The mythology of the ancient world “encapsulated contemporary thinking about how the world worked and how it came to work that way.” Walton devotes sixty pages to Gen 1–11 and seventy to the rest of the book. His commentary shows some sort of Near Eastern connection to nearly every section of Genesis and declares that some have no relationship to the biblical text, some leave options to apply to the text, some biblical texts are unique, and many comparative materials show surface comparison but different theological meanings.

Charts and sidebars give special attention to Mesopotamian history, Egyptian history, creation of the cosmos, cosmic geography, control attributes, a Sumerian astrological treatise, Sumerian creation of living creatures, the Instruction of Merikare, the temple and the cosmos, Gen 1 and temple building, an Eridu Genesis quote, the creation of humankind, garden parks, the Gilgamesh Epic, Ewe and wheat, the Pyramid Texts, an Eridu Genesis explanation, the foundation of Eridu, metal working in history, the Sumerian king list and long lives, genealogies, kings claiming divine sonship, a comparison of biblical and Babylonian flood accounts, archaeological evidences of the flood (no real evidence), the Atrahasis Epic, the table of nations, factors to identify names in Gen 10:8–12, early empires, Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta, an ancient Near Eastern confusion of tongues account, personal gods in Mesopotamia, the covenant, Gen 14 and ancient history, Melchizedek in later traditions, the religion of Abram, child sacrifice, a temple and the gate of heaven, teraphim and family gods, a tribute list from Hindanu, mourning in the Baal Epic, Middle Assyrian laws, Hittite laws, the Egyptian Tale of Two Brothers, and embalming.

Walton's Genesis provides in many ways the model that each chapter should follow with its wide range of knowledge of Near Eastern religion, geography, history, genres, archaeology, and theology. Walton makes judicious choices as to where to bring outside materials, where to question previous claims for parallels, and where to insist on Israelite uniqueness.

Bruce Wells on Exodus gets only 108 pages. Seeing the historical setting as “essentially unknown,” he broadly outlines the New Kingdom of Egypt (1550–1069) and the Late Bronze/Early Iron in Palestine (1550–1000), a time of great Egyptian expansion and construction. This opens up the end of the Late Bronze Age as the “most attractive option” for the setting of Exodus. Turning to literary forms, Wells speaks of epic narrative, law, building of sacred shrines, and ritual instructions. As with Walton, Wells spends few words on literary matters within his textual studies. Rather, he devotes much of space to scholarly theories: Israel and the Hyksos, Hebrews and ‘*apiru*, Midianites and Yahweh worship, milk and honey, Yahweh and “I am,” messengers and angels, God's attack on Moses, biblical leprosy, festivals outside of Egypt, introduction of the name of Yahweh, God's taking Israel as God's people, hardening of the heart, Moses' staff, fall and spring calendars, numbers in the exodus, similarities to Near Eastern treaties, monotheism or henotheism, the tabernacle and its parallels, the function of the golden calf, the nature of the Asherah pole, the radiance of Moses' face, the women at the tabernacle entrance, and geographic descriptions such as that of the Nile, Sinai, and Horeb.

Wells offers charts and sidebars on Egyptian kings of the New Kingdom, Bedouin (Shasu) in Egypt, Semites in Egypt, Moses and the Legend of Sargon, God's name, no straw and hard times, the historicity of the exodus, Egyptian military campaigns and prisoners of war, the timing of the exodus (no solution to how long Israel lived in Egypt or to which pharaoh ruled), the magician and the crocodile, snakes in Egyptian thought, plagues as natural phenomena (some merit, but plagues represent chaos), the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, plagues as attacks on Egyptian deities, Pharaoh's staff, modern locust plagues, the Egyptian pantheon and its sun gods, plague terminology, religious and civil calendars, Passover, runaways from Egypt, Egyptian pharaohs, the Philistines, judicial personnel in the ancient Near East, the location of Mount Sinai, law codes from the ancient Near East, a depositor found guilty, instructions to Hittite priests, weight measurements, and pole-carrying priests and religious processions.

Still, Wells adequately incorporates ancient Near Eastern examples to add depth and up-to-date information from Near Eastern sources that help explain many parts of Exodus.

Leviticus is covered in forty-six pages by Roy E. Gane, who states that "the scope for relationships between this biblical book and parallel materials is practically limitless.... Leviticus was meant to communicate with and address the needs of real people in the context of their ancient Near Eastern culture, which contained a number of positive elements worthy to be affirmed and continued." He finds the book "firmly rooted in its ancient Near Eastern historical setting, especially that of the second millennium B.C., when nations such as the Hittite empire flourished" (1:286).

Literary parallels appear for Gane in divine speech within a narrative, instructions for performing rituals and festivals, rules for priests and other personnel, laws grouped by topic, and blessings and curses after laws. He sees monotheistic religion in Leviticus. Leviticus shows that "unlike their neighbors the Israelites were supposed to offer sacrifices as tokens of relational transactions (including atonement/reconciliation) with a supreme deity who made moral demands and required obedience within a covenant context" (1:287). Israelite laws overlap Hittite and Mesopotamian laws in relation to sexual offenses, dishonesty and injustice (including lying and stealing), murder and assault, property ownership, slavery, and debt. Unique to Leviticus are commands for respect to parents and the elderly, provisions for care for the poor and aliens, regulation of inner attitudes, prohibitions against divination, and religious law as the major component. Israel's laws came from God, not from kings or other persons as in the ancient Near East.

To make atonement means to remove sin, not to cover it. Mesopotamia and Ugarit lacked blood rituals, and Mesopotamia and Egypt apparently did not practice burnt offerings. Offerings often called fire offerings should be seen as gift offerings. Thus Gane explains

Hebrew meanings as much as he explores cultural parallels. Salt represented union in mutual obligations. The fellowship or peace offering is better seen as a well-being offering. “Sin offering” should be “purification offering.” Guilt offering is reparation offering. Raising hands to God represented humility. God’s sanctuary become an alcohol-free zone so priests could make good decisions. Babylon purged the sanctuary of evil demons, while Israel purged evil caused by their own impurities and moral faults, the Day of Atonement being Israel’s judgment day.

Gane provides charts and sidebars on Ugaritic sacrifice, ancient grain processing and bread making, installing a high priestess of the storm god at Emar, daily routine in an Egyptian temple, the use of incense in the ancient world, sexual laws in Lev 18, 20 and in Hammurabi and Hittite laws, divination in the ancient Near East, penalties for adultery and related sexual offenses in Israelite and Mesopotamian law, and a Babylonian meal fit for a god.

Thus the Leviticus section is quite strong in finding ancient Near Eastern materials that illuminate Israel’s practice and beliefs, especially in Mesopotamian sources, and suggests new meanings for key technical terms quite distinct from traditional interpretations.

Dennis Cole finds three geographical settings providing the theological program for Numbers: Sinai wilderness, the journey, and the Plains of Moab. Cole joins the other writers in not taking a stand as to the date of the exodus and makes no mention of literary settings or genres. He furnishes strong geographical information and many interesting parallels. He claims that the traditional “wave” offering should be called an elevation offering. Cole provides a brief but valuable history of the origin of Baal worship in Canaan and shows that high places are simply worship sites with an altar, cult symbols, standing stones, and other cultic instruments. Levitical cities follow an Egyptian means of allowing priests land grants.

Charts and sidebars include Eighteenth and Nineteenth Dynasty pharaohs in Egypt; large numbers in the book of Numbers (giving three options but no conclusion until later, where he appears to see *'eleph*—1,000—meaning only a small unit); redemption money in the ancient Near East; suspected but unobserved adultery; the chronology of events in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers; manna; incense; Hittite instructions to priests; firstborn males; diplomatic correspondence; Balaam in the setting of the ancient Near East; the journey from Rameses to the Red Sea; the deserts of Sinai: Sin, Sinai, and Paran; the spies sent from Paran desert returning to Kadesh in the Paran Desert; the journey from Kadesh to the Arabah; desert journeys to Edom and the death of Aaron; and travel from Punan to the plains of Moab.

Eugene Carpenter contributes the Deuteronomy unit. He duplicates much of Cole's historical information and some of Wells, while giving a chart of Egyptian rulers whose dates differ from those of Cole's chart and refusing to suggest a date for the exodus. Under literary setting, Carpenter discusses ancient law codes and their subgenres and suzerain/vassal treaties. He also mentions poetic parallels and those with curses and blessings. The religious setting centers on the renewal of the Sinai/Horeb covenant. Identification of itinerary stops leads to a discussion of Israelite government organization as compared with that of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Hittites. The peoples and places of Deuteronomy receive significant explanation and identification. Carpenter points to ancient Near Eastern confession of sin along with individual and communal laments.

"God of your Father" and canonical formulas forbidding changing the document are firmly set in ancient Near Eastern contexts. The function and understandings concerning foreign gods is helpful, while the relationship to ancient treaty forms and threats for breaking the treaty or covenant becomes frightfully clear. The grace and mercy of ancient gods stands beside a list of Yahweh's unique qualities. Apodictic law is traced to treaty language, not law code language. Love between a god and worshipers is a paramount characteristic of certain Egyptian gods. Misuse of the divine name included swearing oaths falsely in the god's name or using the name in a frivolous manner. Israel's Sabbath law knows no parallel. Many examples show ancient Near Eastern people commanded to honor and support aged parents, but Israel did not follow in the path of ancestor worship. Assyrians believed that right living brought a promise of long life from the gods. Adultery, especially by a married woman, was a serious crime demanding serious consequences in the ancient Near East, but also allowing pardon in some cases. Many examples show the seriousness of coveting in various forms. Yahweh is the one and only God, not one among many. Egypt offers several practical and conceptual forms of monotheism. Gods and suzerains expected and demanded love from their vassals. Poor sanitation and other health conditions led to many diseases and malformations, as shown by Egyptian art. Ancient Near Eastern gods gave enemies into the hands of their people or general so they could wipe the enemy out. Evidence for child sacrifice is heavily debated. The basic forms and motifs of prophecy are rooted in ancient Near Eastern literature, as is execution of a prophet for disloyalty. Many nations avoided pig consumption, but the Philistines herded pigs. Israel's slave laws say more about the native slave than about the master, in contrast to the laws of other peoples. The city gate served as the center of judicial and social activities in the ancient Near East. In Israel's cultural milieu, Gods gave kingship over to humans and selected each king. Ancient Near Eastern nations had various levels of priests. Israel's contemporaries dealt with false prophets but did not have cities of refuge. Armies often cut down an enemy's trees. Interest practices charged 20 to 33.3 percent, but

Israel did not allow interest charged to fellow Israelites. God revealed his covenantal expectations to Israel, which other gods often did not.

Carpenter offers charts and sidebars on Kadesh, Canaan, climate and agriculture; Moab; ancient fortified cities; ancient Near Eastern treaties and covenants; astrology in the ancient Near East; aniconism in the ancient Near East; truth in Egyptian society; the education of youth; gods in the ancient Near East; Israel's law and other ancient Near Eastern laws; ancient Near Eastern worship; ancient Near Eastern prophecy; ancient court systems; dealing with homicide; inheritance practices in the ancient Near East; parallels between Hammurabi's Code and the Bible; eunuchs; divorce; widows, orphans, and the poor; issues in levirate marriage; reading the covenant document; the tablet of destinies; the Assyrian incantation ritual of two stones; and Hittite law and laws in Deuteronomy.

Too frequently Carpenter and other writers in these volumes list several examples of ancient Near Eastern parallels but do not show clearly enough the relationship to Israel's laws and practices. At other times writers speak in a general way that this is the ancient Near Eastern culture or pattern without showing specific examples of a particular culture's precise variation on the pattern. Still, Carpenter provides us a full plate of similarities, differences, and uniqueness practiced in Israel in relationship to other countries and cultures.

Volume 2 addresses Joshua, Judges, Ruth, and Samuel. Richard Hess brings his wide experience with Joshua to focus on the cultural factors of the book. He selects two important areas for concentration: history and archaeology; and literary genres. The editors have chosen in this section and some others (e.g., Exodus) to use dating charts that are difficult to read and follow, particularly because the dates are small and horizontal at the bottom of the chart and because the entries are tied to a particular time period by bending lines and arrows. Hess rehearses and expands the historical information found in introductions to earlier books. Hess is willing to argue for a thirteenth-century exodus and an entry from the east into Canaan based on Egyptian papyri, storage city names, Egyptian names among Israelites, Hazor destruction evidence, the Amarna letters, archaeological survey work showing numerous new villages, similar forms among new villages and some east of the Jordan, and lack of religious images and of pig bones, indicating a refusal to eat pork.

Hess points to various genres, including annals of military campaigns, suzerain/vassal treaties, Egyptian campaign itineraries, Egyptian scribal exercises dealing with Canaan, Hittite instructions for the military, Hittite boundary descriptions, personal names, town lists of Alalakh and Ugarit, cultic calendars from Emar, Old Babylonian laws, and land grants, the latter being especially important for Hess. Land grants emphasize the rights of

the vassal and represent gifts of a city-state or kingdom, with conditions of loyalty placed on the vassal. Thus Hess sees Joshua as a land grant from God to the tribes of Israel.

Hess believes that the Egyptian description of the land of Canaan fit the early biblical descriptions and that Hittite treaties give a close correspondence to the Israelite covenants. City-state kings are responsible for a certain area but accountable to a higher authority. Jericho's walls may have eroded. "Three days" is a general time reference, not seventy-two hours. "One thousand" (*'eleph*) refers to a group or unit, not necessarily to a thousand units. Hess gets around the extermination of noncombatants by referring to "Israel" as stereotypical, meaning "all" or "everyone." The traditional locations of Ai, Beth-el, and Beth-Aven are accepted. Ai is a fort without a permanent population. A Hittite example joins the Ai campaign as unusual examples of reports of military setbacks. The comprehensive narrative of the Ai battle and the ruse of the Gibeonites have no parallel in Israel's environment, but Josh 10 has parallels galore. Writing exemplars from the thirteenth and twelfth centuries show that Joshua and many of the Israelites were likely to have known how to write. Jabin may have been a dynastic name at Hazor. Lists of cities are summarizing, selective, and annalistic. Egyptian summary conquest lists parallel 12:9–24. Towns of refuge—unique to Israel—belong to earliest Israelite understanding of law. City elders form a kinship institution from the earliest period of Israel's tribal history. Levitical cities represent a simplification of an Egyptian system. The east/west conflict of Josh 22 has no similar narratives in ancient Near East. The general but not inclusive use of "all Israel" appears in 23:2. Apparently, Shiloh did not replace Shechem and Mount Ebal as the meeting place for national assembly.

Sidebars in Joshua include the text of Alalakh grant 456, prostitutes and inns, the instruction for the royal bodyguard, the *zakra* festival from thirteenth-century Emar, the fall of Jericho, the altar on Mount Ebal, resorting to a ruse, the annals of Tutmosis III from Karnak, the summary of the seventh campaign of Sennacherib, literary background to and forms of the allotments, a boundary description in the Hittite treaty between Tudhaliya IV of Hatti and Kurunta of Tarhuntassa (closest parallel with Josh 13–19), towns belonging to another tribe or state, descriptions of regions in Canaan in the Papyrus Anastasi I, an Old Babylonian town list from Alalakh, and a comparison of Josh 24:2b–20, 22, 27 and a Hittite treaty.

Hess thus uses ancient Near Eastern parallels to argue for a late exodus and an early origin for most of Israel's customs and practices.

Daniel Block provides commentary on Judges with an extended discussion of the historical background—repeating much from earlier commentaries—but only a couple of paragraphs on literary introduction. As genres, he lists annalistic summaries of conquests,

a victory hymn, prayers, prophecies, political speeches, a fable, and geographical equations, all evidenced in ancient Near Eastern literature, though he finds the nearest analogies for the entire book in the Greek historians Herodotus and Thucydides. He sees no ancient Near Eastern contemporary attempts to create the intentional historiography of Judges. Block dates the events to the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages, but all dating is dependent on internal biblical evidence, there being no confirmation from outside sources. The author of Judges made no attempt to synchronize chronological data. The city of Palms is different from Jericho; Beitin may not be Bethel. Spying may mean the erection of an observation post. The covenant is always Yahweh's, never Israel's. We do not know how one became an elder. The stone images near Gilgal in 3:19 are "stelae either marking the boundary of the territory claimed by Egypt or ... a monument to a battle by which Eglon achieved control over this region" (2:129). The upper room of 3:20 is a raised throne room. Shamgar may have been a Hurrian mercenary soldier in an *'apiru* troop fighting for the Egyptian pharaoh and devoted to the goddess 'Anath. (This is one of the more questionable conclusions in the five volumes.) Jabin is a dynastic name in Hazor. Jael violates a number of foundational social norms. "The One of Sinai" is an archaic title for Yahweh. The association of Dan and Asher places Dan in the north and the battle of Deborah and Barak at a date later than that of the events behind chapters 17–18. Israel's culture deified the stars, but Israel saw them only as God's messengers. Camels were domesticated before 2000. Israel had problems identifying Yahweh as a personal, family deity. The criteria for reducing Gideon's troops are arbitrary, not logical. The hands of 8:6 point to the military practice of cutting off hands of enemy captives to be able to number them. Alphabetic pictograph writing seems to have begun in Wadi el-Hol in Egypt about 1800. Earrings symbolized a worshiper's relationship with the deity. Seventy sons is a popular motif in the ancient Near East in the world of both the gods and humans. El/Baal Berith represents an allusion to a covenant between the god and Shechem. Mesopotamian discoveries offer no clue of anointing kings, but the Hittites did. The Old Testament does not have a sophisticated demonology. The "navel of the earth" really refers to elevated ground. The meaning of salting a conquered town is not known. Distress at defeat is attributed to divine punishment for sin in the ancient Near East. The three hundred years of 11:26 represented political exaggeration more than historical reality, as seen by Jephthah's inaccuracy in naming Chemosh the god of the Amorites rather than of Moab. Jephthah's vow was an act of piety adding force to a prayer by making a contract with God. Ancient Near Eastern armies blinded certain captives to punish, humiliate, and prevent them from fleeing. Ten shekels represented a typical annual salary for a laborer. The Danite northward trek must have occurred shortly after Joshua's death. Inheritance represents land given by a superior to a vassal for past service. The second part of the vow of 18:6 is ambiguous. Apparently, Shiloh had a structure more permanent than the tent when the Philistines captured the ark.

Sidebar include the pattern of chronological notices in the book of Judges; a historical chart of the Levant with early and late exodus; high and low Egyptian dating; Assyrian, Babylonian, and Hittite columns; chronological notices between the exodus and temple; points of pressure on Israel; the antiquity of Judg 1; genre: Judges 1 as annalistic military reporting; inhumane treatment of captives; iron chariots; Baal and Astarte; following the will of one's lord; the identity of Cushan-Rishathaim; locks and keys in the ancient world; Hazor; war oracles; triumph hymns in the ancient Near East; Edom; the social structure of ancient Israel; the Spirit of God and the individual; testing the deity; dreams in the ancient world; concubines; fables in the ancient world; the scattering of salt on Shechem; Hittite vows, Jephthah, and Ugarit; the importance of a son; ancient courtship and weddings; religious, civil, and agricultural calendars; stories of long, invincible hair; the teraphim; and sexual deviation in the ancient Near East.

Block's Judges commentary points to fewer parallel materials than many of the other commentaries and refrains from much literary comparison. He does give focused attention to site locations, lexical meanings, and theological interpretation.

Volume 3 includes Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. Edwin Yamauchi writes on Ezra and Nehemiah, providing a brief introduction to the Persian period and arguing for the original unity of Ezra and Nehemiah. He leaves open the question of Ezra's relationship to the Persian government. He denies the theory that Egyptian and other supposed parallel documents provide a literary setting for the biblical books because those documents address and seek approval from human authorities, while Ezra-Nehemiah addresses only God. Yamauchi apparently sees Ezra and Nehemiah as part of a Persian strategy against threats from Athens to extend their territory. Syncretistic Samaritans must be distinguished from monotheistic Samaritans who later developed into a schismatic Jewish sect. Estimates place annual Persian tax collections at twenty to thirty-five million dollars, with very little returned to the provinces. Darius permitted Jews to rebuild the temple only after his wars established stability. An Aramaic papyrus memorandum permits the Elephantine Jews in Egypt to rebuild their temple. The Jerusalem temple was completed 12 March 515. Ezra's return to Palestine required 119 days. A straight line between Babylon and Jerusalem stretches five hundred miles, but the route around the desert is nine hundred. Ezra's commissioning document appears to be an official Persian document. A talent weighed 75 pounds; a cor was 6.5 bushels; a bath contained 6 gallons. In a divorce, the children went with their mother. Fasting was rare. The reduced territory of Judea was thirty-five miles north to south and twenty-five east to west. Nehemiah prayed about his decision for four months. Arabs became dominant in the Transjordan area from the Assyrian to the Persian periods. The perimeter of the Jerusalem wall was a mile and a half, and Nehemiah worked on it for fifty-two days. Ezra brought back the entire Pentateuch. The people stood for five hours listening to Scripture.

Judean sites do not seem to have had pigs, but Philistine sites and others did. Old Testament wine was fermented. Nehemiah had a violent temperament and acted quickly to express his anger. Plucking hair from a man's beard showed anger, insult, and scorn.

Sidebars topics include Aramaic, the Cyrus Cylinder, "operation Ezra," what is in a name, the cedars of Lebanon, the Behistun Inscription, mixed marriages, Zoroastrianism and Judaism, loans at interest, synagogues, and the Murashu texts and the Elephantine Papyri.

The commentary on Ezra and Nehemiah appears to have fewer references to external parallels and more attention to word study and explanation of biblical details.

Anthony Tomasino comments on Esther, again with some duplication of the preceding introductions. Xerxes was not as pious toward foreign gods as was Cyrus. Tomasino leaves open the question of the historical character and genre of Esther, pointing to Joseph and Daniel as court tales based on historical figures and perhaps even on actual events. Judith is seen as a novel. Esther has a comical aspect that should not be missed and is secular, with no mention of God nor of any religious rites or acts. The Persian Empire had several capitals: Babylon, Ecbatana, Susa, and Persepolis. The events of Esth 1 may have occurred before Xerxes' departure to battle Athens, while the selection of the new queen occurred as he came home, having suffered defeat. Herodotus names Amestris as Xerxes' queen. Vashti may represent a second queen whose place Esther then took. Persians made decisions while they were drunk and confirmed them later. Eunuchs had high value and were included as part of tribute payments. Women enjoyed high social status, on occasion managing a business and supervising men. Kings of Persia frequently changed decrees, although it was disgraceful for a king to admit an error. The names Mordecai and Esther are related to the gods Marduk and Ishtar. The women all became part of the royal harem as wives of the king, so Esther did nothing immoral in bedding the king. Six months of beauty treatment was extraordinarily expensive. The major requirement to join the royal harem was beauty. Ancient sources know nothing of execution by hanging; criminals were impaled on poles either as execution or as display of bodies after execution. Haman's position is not clear, but he was possibly a personal bodyguard. Bribery was widely practiced in Persia. Haman's bribe was two-thirds of Persia's annual revenue. Less than 5 percent of Israelites could read. Esther had her own quarters and saw the king infrequently. Nothing outside the Bible recognizes a Mordecai with a position in the Persian government.

This section includes no sidebars and only one small chart on the Archaemenid dynasty. Tomasino gives more textual explanation than cultural parallels.

Volume 4 comments on Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel. Walton's brief addendum to the introduction adds little except to say other countries had prophets, but they did not collect oracles or preach on themes Israel's prophets addressed.

David Baker does the commentary on Isaiah in 188 pages and 1,771 footnotes. His brief introduction is purely historical, repeating much of the material from the introductions to the historical books and not mentioning literary genres or structure. The editors insert one of the more difficult to read timetables. Baker makes excellent use of parallel material to explain the meaning of individual verses.

Space forbids the listing of findings done for previous commentaries, so a few notes will suffice. Baker skips over the question of multiple authors. He dates the fall of Jerusalem in July 586. Isaiah 7:14 does not refer to a virgin, and the use in Matthew has skewed the interpretation of Isaiah. No mention is made of the child's parentage. The servant's election in chapter 42 is national, not individual. A Northwest Semitic seal uniquely uses "Servant of Yahweh." Baker charts royal ideology connected to the servant but does not appear to identify the servant.

The Isaiah sidebars and charts deal with a timetable of Aramean, Babylonian, Assyrian, Egyptian, Judean, and Israelite kings between 800 and 590; covenant lawsuits; cultic activity; dyes; silver and dross; superstitions and divinations; allegories; wordplay; dating methods; a timetable of Judean kings from 796 to 587; Rezin and Pekah; "virgin" semantics; land to be laid waste; a timetable of Assyrian, Israelite, and Judean kings from 752 to 681; writing in the ancient Near East; royal birth; names and naming; unjust laws; the places Calno, Carchemish, Hamath, Arpad, Samaria, Damascus, and Jerusalem (with map); the ideal king; utopian animal behavior; oracles against foreign nations; eighth-century Babylon; Babylon's defeat; Sheol and the afterlife; Moab; mourning rites; fruit and harvests; Damascus; background information on Egypt; Egyptian dynasties and pharaohs per the low chronology; Egypt and the Nile; the flax industry; Sargon's campaign against Ashdod; Hezekiah's tunnel and water projects; Assyrian siege tactics; lament; theophany; the timeline of festivals; Egyptian relationships under Hezekiah; a timeline of Egyptian pharaohs and Assyrian kings; silencing the prophets; the Lord dwelling on high; Sennacherib and Hezekiah; psalms of thanks for healing; military action versus diplomacy; road building; ordering the cosmos; creator gods; God as a warrior; oracles of consolation and hope; a Babylonian and Persian king timeline; criticisms against idols, Cyrus's religion; occult practices; the servant and royal ideology; substitutionary rites; divine mercy; discontinuity between gods and humans; the cult of the dead; caring for the needy as an act of piety; the year of the Lord's favor; and utopian paradise.

Baker's Isaiah is chock full of cultural parallels so that he offers source material for interpretation rather than explanation of the text. He truly offers background study, not exegesis.

Paul W. Ferris Jr. prepared the Lamentations material. Again, a historical introduction repeats what earlier commentaries have given. Entering a temple and putting the gods under submission was as important or more so than putting the king and his military forces under control. Neo-Sumerian laments are over major cities or over a deified king. City laments follow a particular form. Later *balag* compositions lamented national disasters, while *ershemma* laments were recited to a drum beat. The book of Lamentations is different from both the Sumerian laments and those found in the Psalms. Lamentations features acrostics and off-beat meter (3+2). Lamenting was a community affair, even involving professional mourners, male and female. Musical instruments were used in mourning ceremonies. The book of Lamentations offers a deeper, broader theological content, includes strong moral standards, and is decidedly monotheistic. These laments focus not on restoration but on the cause of the lament, yet still incorporate songs of praise.

Lamentations sidebars include Babylonian and Judean kings and Egyptian pharaohs; a structural comparison of major-city laments; lamentations and acrostic; a portrayal of suffering; the Queen of heaven; siege; alphabetic order; the distinctives of chapter 5; and captives.

Ferris gives strong exegetical explanations without incorporating as much ancient Near Eastern materials as do several other of the commentators.

Volume 5 contains the Minor Prophets, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs, departing from the order of the English, Greek, and Hebrew canons. Walton's addendum to his introduction repeats the brief one on prophets in the earlier volume and is followed by one on wisdom and psalms, again basically saying that Israel's neighbors had psalmic creations and wisdom works, including some on the innocent sufferer and proverbs.

Alan Millard's Obadiah commentary gives a geo-political background of Edom to lead off the introduction. Egyptian inscriptions from the thirteenth century mention both Edom and Seir. The next evidence comes from Assyrian records from around 800. Millard sees Jeremiah quoting Obadiah and both prophesying between 597 and 587. "Men of your covenant" comes from widespread ancient Near Eastern language. Obadiah sidebars deal with rebels annihilated and a governor appointed. With such brief material to work with,

Millard gives a fair division between actual materials from the ancient Near East and basic explanation.

Walton also wrote the Jonah commentary. His historical introduction again echoes that of several others among the prophets and historical books. It leads to the point that, at the time of Jonah between 790 and 760, Assyria had not been a threat for Israel for a generation, and Nineveh was not the capital city, only a provincial city of a struggling nation. This does not show, for Walton, a centuries-later writing but that God chose this date in anticipation of the role Nineveh would eventually play.

Literarily, this tale of a prophet represents a biblical category with Elisha and Elijah that has not been found outside the biblical literature. Jonah is satire, a genre based on reality but exaggerating it. Walton points to the Babylonian Dialogue of Pessimism and Isa 44. The Gilgamesh Epic is one example of fantastic creatures sent by gods. Walton concludes, "In Gilgamesh the Bull of Heaven is not symbolic or allegorical. It is considered real, but as a supernatural creature would not be classed alongside any standard list of zoological specimens. A similar understanding may be possible for the fish in Jonah" (5:105). Tarshish's location is not known, but it represented the farthest known point in the west. Perhaps only one exception keeps Israel from being the only nation known to have prophets direct judgment oracles to a king. Individuals in Mesopotamia occasionally fasted. Reference to the king of Nineveh raises the problem that Nineveh was not the capital of Assyria in Jonah's day and apparently did not have a place where one would encounter him on his throne. Reference is probably to a governor or noble ruling the city. Some Assyrian provincial leaders in this time were rebellious. God responded to Nineveh's humility and repentance even when they did not know Yahweh's covenant, laws, or nature. Ancient Near Eastern gods were erratic and might act out of caprice rather than conviction or moral nature. Yahweh does not change the divine mind in terms of covenant agreements but may in terms of prophetic announcements of judgment. God cannot be manipulated. His response is one of compassion, not of coercing. Ancient Near Eastern prayers also speak of divine righteousness and compassion. Jonah's list of divine attributes "does not necessarily distinguish Yahweh from how the gods of the ancient world are portrayed" (5:116). The population of Nineveh does not seem exaggerated.

The Jonah commentary has sidebars on an Assyrian kings timeline, ships and seafaring in the ancient world, Sheol and other netherworld terminology, Nineveh, and prophets receiving a hearing. Walton is strong on ancient Near Eastern parallel materials and dares to approach most of the hard questions that Jonah raises. He apparently dates the writing contemporary with the prophet.

Finally, we turn to Tremper Longman III's work on Proverbs, which he squeezed into sixty-six pages. He finds Solomon's wisdom often set in an international context and much international wisdom material to use in studying Proverbs. This removes the shock of discovering how much of Israelite wisdom is shared with Egyptian, Babylonian, and Aramaic wisdom. Longman begins with a quite helpful description of the main exemplars of ancient Near Eastern wisdom. Egyptian instructions include those of Kagemni, Ptahhotep, Merikare, Any, Amenemope, Ankhsheshonq, and Papyrus Insinger. Sumerian examples are the Sumerian proverbs and the Instruction of Shuruppak and the Counsels of Wisdom. Aramaic works include the proverbs of Ahiqar. Mesopotamian and Aramaic literature shows schools and a scribal education for employees in the royal court. The situation in Israel is not clear. Were schools connected to the court, the temple, or the home? Thus the social place of the use of Proverbs has to remain an open question.

Other texts have opening prefaces similar to Prov 1:1–7. All Near Eastern traditions place practical wisdom in the setting of father and son. Proverbs mixes family, professional, and scribal advice. Proverbs gives a larger place to the mother in the son's education than do instructions from other cultures. Only with the New Testament does God fully describe the afterlife to his people. Throughout his work on the individual verses and sections of Proverbs, Longman skillfully works in materials from the works he described in his introduction. He has little to say about wisdom genres. Proverbs sidebars are devoted to woman wisdom, exhortations, adultery, the "strange" and "foreign" woman, woman folly, the extent to which proverbs are always true, and rewards, not promises.

The selected materials above should demonstrate the high value of these commentaries. Wide-ranging knowledge from all parts of the ancient Near East with fresh information from recent archaeological finds can rewrite a professor's notes or a pastor's sermons, replacing outdated consensus with up-to-date background information and adding new information to bring new life and vitality to one's preaching and/or teaching. Colored maps help locate events and geographical/topographical names. The generous numbers of inset boxes give further information on interesting and relevant subjects. The most interesting contents may lie in the colored pictures of archaeological artifacts and excavation sites. These seek to help readers feel involved in the ancient culture and appeal to emotions rather than simply to need for knowledge.

Still, even this fine set could easily be improved. The most obvious improvement would be a uniform style for captions for the fine artwork giving place of discovery, date of origin and/or use, and relationship to biblical materials. The generous layout for captions in the margins allows for much more information than is presently given. Tie-ins in text, even on the same page of text, do not suffice, for some readers will simply look at artwork on one venture through the volumes. Present captions must often bewilder all but the

most up-to-date researcher in ancient Near Eastern studies. A few picked at random will illustrate the need for additional information: Ur-Nammu laws, Tel-Malhatah, Demon Pazazu, Shofar, hero defeating lion, Zakkur Stele, runners by ruler's chariot, Mari wall fresco, extispicy tablet, widow's plea, Enki and Ninmah, execration figurine, devourer from the Book of the Dead, Taharqa in sphinx form, Nungal hymn, Obelisk at Karnak, four-faced god, Ludlul bel Nemeqi, Ptah, Izbu omens, curse of Agade, storm god, anthropoidic terracotta cult stand from Qitmit, 7th–6th century, slinger on orthostat from Tell Halaf, dispute between a man and his soul (ba), Enki and Ninmah, creation of humans, one of the Shulgi hymns.

A second improvement would be to refrain from using valuable space to print pictures of grass, rocks, and flowers and labeling it as Tell Yalo or Tel Kinrot. Publish a picture that shows remains in sufficient clarity to inform the reader. A third improvement would be to provide only one historical introduction with a standard timeline for each of the writers. This introduction would avoid so much duplication and would show the various alternative interpretations. If necessary, this introduction could be repeated at the front of each volume, as is Walton's general introduction. This would provide space for strong introductions to ancient Near Eastern narrative, prophecy, wisdom, poetry, and apocalyptic. It would incorporate in each introduction a wider discussion of ancient Near Eastern genres and Israel's appropriation and/or creation of them. Timeline charts and tables should be unified in format, replacing the unwieldy format of volume 2, pages 4–5, where one has to turn the book around to determine the date and then follow bending lines to locate an event in a particular chronological period.

A major improvement would be to add a rather extensive glossary at the front of each volume giving a brief introduction to each of the locations whose finds are noted in the main text simply by name. Thus the reader could easily be reminded of the location, occupation dates, find dates, and other pertinent information about Emar, Mari, Ugarit, the Mesha Inscription, Uruk, Mastaba of Mereruka, and so on. A similar glossary of ancient Near Eastern deities would enrich the produce. Without such added materials, the product limits its true audience to seminary graduates or professors who will be able to locate and describe at least 50 percent of the names and gods discovered in the text.

Still, I say thank you to John Walton and company for a task well done supplying information and commentary badly needed.