Bill T. Arnold

*Introduction to the Old Testament*

Introduction to Religion


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Introductions to the Hebrew Bible, like commentaries for a semi-scholarly readership, seem to be the one area of excessive growth in biblical studies. It is almost impossible to keep track of the myriads of introductions, and making a choice which one to use in class becomes an academic subject in itself. Bill T. Arnold, Paul S. Amos Professor of Old Testament Interpretation at Asbury Theological Seminary has now joined the chorus producing a beautiful and eye-pleasing introduction to the Hebrew Bible.

Methodologically he opts for a literary approach, that is, treating the books of the Hebrew Bible as a literature. As a result, a significant part of the work is dedicated to a paraphrase of the biblical text in canonical order, and the reader will become familiar with much of the Hebrew Bible. This literary approach is supplemented by the focus on the origin of monotheism, which Arnold sees as “the Old Testament’s unique contribution to the history of religious ideas in human civilization” (xv). Thus literary and theological developments are fused. It is an interesting plan for a book but one that would require, at least in my opinion, a distinct literary-historical approach.¹ This is not done. Instead, Arnold operates with Karl Jasper’s notion of an axial age in which “[o]ne’s behavior becomes more important than ritual performance. And sacrifice becomes a matter of

inward faith, in which one’s attitudes and submission are more important than the physical act itself” (32). I find the concept of an axial age fascinating, and the renewed interest in sociology shows that a reevaluation of the concept will yield many fruitful insights.² If “Israel’s monotheism is at least among the most significant contributions to the Axial Age” (164), I wonder why the concept itself is so often disputed in the Hebrew Bible and very difficult to verify outside the pages of the Bible. Also, Arnold never explores the possibility that “monotheism” may have been a result toward the end rather than the beginning of the axial age. By using the concept, however, he is able to show that the emergence of ancient Israel (and its literature) is part of a larger cultural movement, albeit with a distinct focus that will, in Arnold’s view, ensure its survival over the centuries as well as being the bedrock for the Bible’s lasting relevance.

Despite the focus on the Hebrew Bible as a piece of literature, Arnold does not neglect the geographical and historical dimensions. Several maps, charts, and numerous high-quality pictures provide ample background, and the reader gets a good grasp of the cultural realm in which the literature of the Bible was composed. Each chapter of the book begins with a section entitled “Old Testament Reading.” Here the reader is introduced to the nature of the texts that will feature prominently in the following chapter, and one is expected to have an open Bible at hand. Further information is provided in sidebars where the reader finds excerpts from extrabiblical material as well as brief explanations of redaction-historical and other problems. At the end of each chapter a section on “Where to Find More” offers bibliographical suggestions for further reading and often a brief comment about the nature of the works listed. In broad strokes Arnold follows the canonical order of the biblical books, and it is one of the main features of the book that its reader will, in the end, be acquainted with much of the biblical literature. Also Arnold takes into account that the Hebrew Bible is of religious importance for many of is readers. Thus he frequently refers to the lasting relevance of the Bible and is adamant to show that the books of the Hebrew Bible are not simply “some relic from a dead civilization” (389).

One problem of Arnold’s introduction is the review of scholarship. Often when positions are discussed or alluded to the reader misses names. Thus it is almost impossible to relate scholarly ideas to further readings. Then there are instances when Arnold misleads his readers. To state that “the idea is almost beyond dispute: Deuteronomy has been intentionally structured to read like an ancient Near Eastern treaty” (137) assumes a unity in scholarship on Deuteronomy that is simply not the case. Similarly, when talking about the formation of the book of Isaiah, Arnold refers only to H. G. M. Williamson’s proposal as “the best theory for how the book was formed” (321). One wonders why other

proposals, such as an originally independent Deutero-Isaiah, are not mentioned, even though a host of scholars subscribe to such an interpretation of the literary history of the book. Also, the reader stumbles over ideas and proposals that are quite out of date. Is it really necessary in 2014 to rehearse in detail the Hittite suzerainty treaty and the (alleged) form-critical parallels to the biblical idea of a covenant when most scholars would regard the idea of a covenant as a late product of biblical Israel? The same has to be said of the version of the Documentary Hypothesis put forward in the book. Readers working through the pages dealing with the Pentateuch get the impression that this is the only way to explain the literary genesis of the Torah. What will they do when they happen to pick up a book dealing with the Pentateuch that does not subscribe to the theory? Of course, the formation of the Pentateuch is one of the most complicated issues in Hebrew Bible scholarship, but an introduction that claims to take the literary character of the Bible seriously should not simply rehearse a single position. In my opinion, it is an important role of an introduction to help students to begin to appreciate the possible range of solutions to contested questions, even if one acknowledges the fact that a textbook for the beginning student cannot cover every critical issue for every biblical book.

The literary approach to the Hebrew Bible is a fine entry point for an introduction, and one has to congratulate Bill Arnold for producing a clearly written textbook that acquaints the reader with much of the biblical literature within its ancient Near Eastern context. On the other hand, a reviewer accustomed to the German concept of Einleitung misses a more critical approach and asks why several dated scholarly views are once again listed in a book that will serve as an introductory tool for students.