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The Historical Writings: Introducing Israel’s Historical Literature, by Mark Leuchter, associate professor of Hebrew Bible and ancient Judaism at Temple University, and David Lamb, professor of Old Testament at Biblical Theological Seminary, is the first in Fortress Press’s Introducing Israel’s Scriptures series. The series has volumes forthcoming on the Pentateuch and the Prophets. One can hope that the rest of the series will live up to the very high bar that was set by Leuchter and Lamb in this contribution. It is intended as a textbook, so the context for my assessment of this book is on the basis of using it as a primary resource for my own teaching on the Historical Books in the autumn of 2016 at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford. For that purpose, I found this volume immensely successful and will certainly be the resource that I use in the future. It is, for my money, the best introduction to the Historical Books available.

The volume begins with an introduction that includes brief discussions on the following topics: the structure and features of the volume, the nature of history and historiography, authors and audiences, the Deuteronomistic redaction of the Former Prophets, ancient versions of the Bible, and a definition of the Historical Books. Two of these sections deserve comment. First, the delineation of the Historical Books (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles) is probably not a surprise to those familiar with
English Bibles, but those familiar with the Hebrew canon will note the somewhat arbitrary nature of this grouping, which sometimes includes Ruth and Esther. Leuchter and Lamb helpfully delineate these books as those whose “primary interest is history—perhaps not understood as we would understand it, but understood as a record of Israel’s story” (19). Second, the discussion of the Deuteronomistic redaction is as concise and clear an introduction to the history of the literature on the Deuteronomist redaction as one could want. We are briefly introduced to Noth’s theory, to the double-redaction theory (Cross), and to what they term the triple-redaction theory (Smend and others). As helpful as this is, it falls victim to a problem with so much introductory work on the Deuteronomistic theory: it introduces the reader to the theory without really showing any of the textual issues that gave rise to these various theories. Obviously, in a work such as this, brevity is an understandable concern. However, it would be beneficial in a textbook to include a few additional pages showing some of the textual phenomena that caused Noth to postulate a single Deuteronomistic History or Cross to suggest that it likely existed in two versions or Smend that there are at least three sources or redactions behind this work.

The chapter on Joshua is divided, as all the chapters are, into sections on (1) introduction, (2) literary concerns, (3) historical issues, (4) theological themes, and (5) commentary. These five contributions in each chapter highlight the breadth and usefulness of this book. Not only does each biblical book receive substantial discussion of standard introductory issues (numbers 1–4), but a key strength of this book is a substantial commentary on each book introducing students to its content. One notable contribution of the chapter on Joshua is the clear and helpful treatment of the question of a partial or complete conquest as a literary issue separate from the discussion of redaction and historical issues. This is successful because it allows students to see the complexity of the literary portrayal of the conquest within the book of Joshua itself, thus making it easier to discuss redactional or historical issues with the conquest narrative.

The chapter on Judges contains all of the introductory materials one would want, from discussing the role of judges to the structure, composition, and historical issues of the book. The themes discussed seem to follow the basic pattern of the judges cycle: idolatry, oppression, leadership, and supernatural empowerment. One aspect of this book seems to be highlighted in this chapter in perhaps a more focused way than the rest of the book: the engaging and sometimes humorous nature of the writing. Both Leuchter and Lamb write well and are happy to inject humor into the situation. Perhaps because of the nature of Judges, which does occasionally seem to treat its dark subject matter with a degree of humor, it comes out more often. So, for example, in commenting on the Samson cycle, they write, “After publicly calling her a heifer, Samson still thinks he can be reconciled to his wife (perhaps things were different back then?)” (149). Then later, “displaying
MacGyveresque resourcefulness, he uses the jawbone of a donkey as a weapon to slaughter a thousand Philistines, and then with Davidesque versatility, he composes a song (Judg. 15:16)” (150).

The chapter on Samuel again does all that one would want it to do: discusses the style of the narrative, redactional issues, historical issues, and major themes. This chapter highlights one of the few issues that is inherent in the whole volume, that is, the occasional overemphasis of redactional and compositional issues. In the section on literary concerns on the book of Samuel one page is dedicated to the style of the narrative, while a full ten pages are dedicated to sources and redaction, followed by an additional six pages on compositional history. A couple of things make this feel a little imbalanced. First, this is somewhat surprising for the book of Samuel, a book that, judging by its prominence in literary studies of the Hebrew Bible, deserves a little more introduction to its narrative poetics and complex characterization. Second, the discussion of redaction and composition history is much more than the student is ready for, given the very limited introduction to issues of redactional theories from the introduction. The space given to this subject in this chapter does not match the introduction to redactional issues from the first chapter. Finally, this amount of space is much more than is given to many other chapters in this book.

In contrast to the chapter on Samuel, the chapter on Kings contains a fairly minimal discussion on compositional or redactional issues and spends the majority of its discussion of literary concerns on prophets and prophetic narratives. A strength of the chapter on Kings is its very good discussion of the historical context of the narratives in the book of Kings, introducing the three major empires of Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon as well as the important neighboring nations. A number of helpful tables highlighting the numerous references to these foreign entities in the book of Kings and the numerous references to Israelite and Judahite kings in other ancient documents helps to paint the ancient Near Eastern context of Kings.

The chapter on Ezra-Nehemiah returns to a fairly lengthy discussion of compositional issues (twenty pages!). The complex compositional issues related to the Ezra and Nehemiah traditions perhaps warrants a relatively lengthy discussion. However, when the thematic discussion of the key issue of insiders and outsiders only takes half a page, it does feel like there could have been a better balance in introducing this book. Compositional issues are, after all, not the end all and be all of a biblical book.

Finally, the chapter on Chronicles notes that much of the narrative material has been covered in previous chapters on Samuel and Kings. Nevertheless, as the authors note, “Chronicles is anything but redundant” (456). The commentary portion of the chapter
helpfully highlights the contributions of Chronicles in comparison to narrative elements that occur elsewhere in books such Samuel and Kings, including several sidebars that highlight different presentations (e.g. “Solomon in the Books of Kings and Chronicles”).

The book also includes a helpful and lengthy glossary that defines key terms that have been highlighted in bold throughout the book. There is no general bibliography, as each chapter, with the strange exception of the introduction, includes its own bibliography.

I started this review by noting that I had adopted this work in my teaching on the Historical Books, and it seems appropriate to conclude by noting that fact again. While there are certainly a few things to be critical of in this work, most notably the relative overemphasis on compositional issues in a couple of the chapters, it remains in my opinion the best introduction to the historical books. It is very well written and clear. It tackles difficult issues with clarity. It introduces critical literary, historical, and theological issues in each biblical book while also introducing the reader to the content of the book itself through the substantial commentary portion of each chapter. It does all of this in a way that is thorough enough to make this a substantial resource and yet is clear and basic enough (for the most part) to be an excellent introduction to this material. I anticipate that this will be a standard work for years to come.