O’Day, Gail R., and David L. Petersen, eds.

Theological Bible Commentary


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As the introduction to this one-volume commentary suggests, the shape of biblical studies has experienced significant change during the last half century. The ideal, inherited from the Enlightenment, that biblical exegesis should be free from the shackles of any dogmatic theological framework prevailed in the two centuries or so of “modern” scholarship. Biblical study was to be pursued in a rigorous, “scientific” way, following where the evidence led. Scholarship “without presuppositions,” even if difficult to achieve, was the gold standard, as Rudolf Bultmann argued in an essay widely read when I was beginning doctoral study in the dark ages of the 1960s. The editors of this volume rightly note that the ethos of the contemporary scene, whether or not we describe it as “postmodern,” looks very different. Presuppositions and commitments are not only acknowledged to be an inevitable feature of scholarship; they can be important tools for meaningful engagement with the biblical text. To recognize the place from which one reads a text is not only an act of honesty but a foundation for effective appropriation. Presuppositions are not sacrosanct but are both inevitable and potentially productive.

Biblical scholarship of the last half century is replete with this self-conscious hermeneutical stance. The variety of engaged readings is familiar. Feminists, third-world scholars, racial and ethnic minorities, GLBTQ folk, environmentalists, political
liberationists, and many others have gained a place at the table of biblical interpretation. What, then, of the many readers who encounter the Bible as, among other things, religious believers? Their concerns, too, should in some way or another be put at the center of the interpretation of the biblical text, and to do so is the goal of this one-volume commentary.

One could think of a number of ways in which a “theological” commentary on the biblical text might be constructed. Taking a cue from the Anselmian definition of theology as “faith seeking understanding,” one might first specify how faith is to be understood and expressed in some combination of creed, code, and cult, then see how it relates to its complex connections with its purported scriptural sources. Such a project might have more theological coherence and more connection to the lived faith that theology attempts to understand, but it would be considerably more difficult to organize as a commentary on scripture. Instead, the editors of this volume have chosen to follow scripture’s canonical order, leaving it to the commentators on each book to construe the task as they see fit. Their approach is to “create a resource that modeled diverse ways of thinking theologically about biblical literature.” There are certainly advantages to that strategy, although those who seek for a coherent theological approach to reading scripture will need other resources.

Given the canonical organization and the diversity of models of theological reflection at play, the individual contributions vary considerably in their results. Not surprisingly, some books offer more opportunities for reflection on larger theological issues. The treatment of Genesis by Ted Hiebert, for instance, discusses the character of God, the origins of the universe, human identity and culture, human identity and morality (i.e., the notion of the fall), human identity, and gender. This thematic treatment precedes a sequential discussion of the stories of Genesis, highlighting topics such as Jacob’s questionable character and the notion of wrestling with God. Like many other essays, Hiebert’s directly confronts theologically challenging passages such as the story of Tamar in Gen 38. Like many others, he also acknowledges the ways in which an Afrocentric biblical interpretation has found a useful tool in the portrait of Egypt in the Jacob and Joseph stories.

The pursuit of interesting theological themes is a regular feature of most sections of the commentary, even when the pickings are more slender. In the case of Genesis, the thematic dimension resonates with major components of the doctrinal tradition of several faith communities. The treatment of Leviticus by Frank H. Gorman is, quite appropriately, more an exposition of the logic of sacrificial and purity systems as well as a reflection on the role of a collection of ritual materials in the life of Israel. Leviticus, however, is a rich lode compared to some other books. Daniel Smith-Christopher, writing...
on Ezra-Nehemiah, appropriately remarks that “reading Ezra and Nehemiah theologically presents interesting challenges” but finds things to say about the questions raised by the books for “interpersonal and group dynamics in modern church, mosque, and synagogue.”

The approach to theological issues is often shaped by the character of the book. The treatment of Psalms by William P. Brown offers a brief introduction to the Bible’s largest book, noting the heterogeneity of its poetic collections. He appropriately wrestles with the difficulty of offering a theological analysis of disparate materials with poetic language that is “allusive and multivalent.” He also usefully distinguishes between the “first order” language of address to God, particularly in laments and petitions, and “second order” reflection on God and God’s ways in hymns of praise, songs of trust and thanksgiving, and psalms of instruction. His treatment of the Psalms is more an essay organized around such themes than a sequential comment on the individual poems. He reserves a special section for the “theological challenge of the Vengeance Psalms” (e.g., Pss 12, 44, 55, 58, 83, 109, 137, 139). After trying to contextualize these psalms as desperate prayers for “God’s judgment to restore a defeated and demoralized people,” he finds theological relevance in them as a summons to modern readers in the first world to hear in them the voice of the world’s oppressed poor.

Methodological diversity is evident in the treatment of the major prophets. Isaiah, rightly labeled by L. Juliana Claassens “a rich resource for theological reflection,” offers, after a brief introduction, a thematic essay on issues such as “facing reality,” both the reality of global power and that of social inequity within Israel; “imagining God,” an exposition of Isaiah’s “theological imagination”; and, finally, “vocation as participation,” which highlights the challenges to Israel in the Servant Songs. Carolyn Sharp provides a similar thematic treatment of Jeremiah, focusing on themes of “vocation,” “discernment of idolatry,” and “dialogical movement between Judgment and Restoration.” Her conclusion offers a critical reflection on two features of Jeremiah’s rhetoric: the gendered imagery of the book, in which figures of “adultery, prostitution, and nymphomania” characterize idolatry, and justification of “phallocentric violence” as a way of responding to sin. Here theological commentary involves a strategy of critical reflection on and critical resistance to elements of the text. Such a reading strategy is entirely appropriate; indeed, it is probably a moral imperative. It might have been useful to label this up front as a necessary dimension of the task.

The books of the New Testament tend to receive a more detailed treatment than some of their antecedents in the Hebrew scriptures. Treatments of the Gospels are generally sensitive expositions of the perspectives and claims of the individual authors, with considerable attention to the social and historical context of the early Christian movement within the Roman Empire, a theme particularly highlighted in the commentary on
Matthew by Stanley P. Saunders. The treatment of Luke by G. Wesley Allen Jr. offers the kind of systematic treatment of major themes characteristic of many of the commentaries on books of the Hebrew Bible, while David Rensberger’s commentary on John takes a more narrative approach, exploring the complex Christology of the Gospel as it unfolds through the narrative. The treatment attends to the major theological issue of the text, how the life and death of Jesus functions as a revelatory event, and leads to other important theological issues raised by the text.

The focus on the canon as an organizing principle obscures some major theological issues. Chief among these in the sphere of the New Testament is the pursuit of the “historical Jesus” and the implications for theology of the various “quests,” from Reimarus to John Meier, to recover the “facts” about Jesus. One need not subscribe to the methods of the Jesus Seminar to recognize that the whole enterprise of recovering the historical Jesus is fraught with and impinges on major theological issues. Yet a reader of this commentary would scarcely be aware of the problem.

The Pauline corpus presents major challenges for a “theological commentary,” since the writings of the apostle articulate categories fundamental to the Christian theological tradition. Yet those unsystematic writings are full of tensive theological elements, such as the differences between Galatians and Romans on the role of the law or the apparent differences in the Christology of, say, Rom 1:3 and Phil 2. Further differences surface between what are usually acknowledged to be authentic Pauline epistles and the texts, such as the Pastoral Epistles, generally thought to be Deutero-Pauline. Efforts to deal with these issues within the confines of a sequential commentary are not totally satisfactory.

The individual Pauline letters receive various treatments. The all-too-brief discussion of Romans by Michael Brown describes the way in which Paul traces a movement from alienation to salvation in this complex letter. Interestingly, Brown also singles out the theme of “slavery” (as in, e.g., Rom 6:20–23) as an organizing principle of his reflection. No special attention is given to thorny passages such as Rom 1:26–27 or Rom 13. The treatment of the Deutero-Pauline texts that limit the role of women in the church is all too brief. Deborah Krause, writing on 1 Tim 2:13–14, notes that contemporary readers might “chafe at this interpretation of Genesis.” It would have been useful to hear a bit more about how one deals theologically with such chafing.

Some problematic texts receive a more adequate treatment. Gail O’Day’s discussion of the book of Revelation is an excellent orientation to anyone baffled or disturbed by that complex book.
The “introductions” to most of the biblical books offer some very basic information usually found in introductions, but hardly enough to satisfy the needs of readers seeking information on issues of date, historical setting, sources, literary history, and the like. Some suggestions, for example, that the Gospel of Mark was “addressed to a rural peasant audience,” as an “oral narrative … performed and heard,” require more justification than can be given in the confines of this commentary. The issues of pseudepigraphy in the Pauline corpus are mentioned in passing in the introductions to some Deutero-Pauline letters. Such references might leave a reader unfamiliar with the phenomenon curious about whether pseudepigraphy has implications for the theological claims made in a text.

No book can do everything, but it is worth noting several things that are missing from this theological commentary. The first is the attention to books of the “Apocrypha” that are in some Christian Bibles but not in others. These are books that have played a role, minor perhaps, but not negligible, in shaping the theological imagination and discourse of major elements of the Christian tradition, Roman Catholic and Orthodox. They also provide useful resources for understanding the development of the emergence of early Christianity and may even be of use for contemporary theological reflection. Their absence will mean for some readers that the theological analysis is necessarily incomplete because the canon is incomplete.

A second missing element is related to the first: attention to the phenomenon of the canon itself. A theological interpretation of scripture should render some account of why it is that some books from antiquity merit the special status of being the focus of theological reflection. One could, of course, do theological reflection on Shakespeare, Dante, or, for that matter, Dan Brown or Patrick O’Brien, but the premise of this volume is that the Bible merits a special form of theological reflection. How that came to be is both a historical and a theological question well worth exploring.

One might also probe the resources offered by the various theological reflections within the commentary in a more systematic way. For most of the authors of this commentary, scripture apparently serves as an authority, but one that to some degree or other can be criticized, questioned, and resisted. I suspect that many would have a theoretical framework that would explain how authoritative status and critical reflection relate. Articulating some of these frameworks, and the ecclesial resources that are available in some traditions for wrestling with them, might have proven useful for readers of this volume. Some earlier attempts to provide similar resources, such as the Jerome Biblical Commentary, explicitly treated issues of canonicity and inspiration and offered an account of the dogmatic pronouncements that frame, or were supposed to frame, a Catholic interpretation of scripture. Doing something similar in an ecumenical
commentary such as this would obviously be challenging, but not doing so leaves a gap in the theological reflection on scripture.

This theological commentary will therefore provide a useful tool for lay biblical study and a point of reference for introductory-level students seeking an orientation to the theological claims that have been grounded in Scripture. For attentive readers, it will probably raise as many questions as it answers. Those who use it as an instructional tool or reference work should think about what will be needed to supplement what it offers.