William Johnstone’s longstanding interest in the book of Exodus, already evident in his Old Testament Guide, Exodus (1990), and several of the previously published essays that were reprinted in the collection Chronicles and Exodus: An Analogy and Its Application (1998), has been further expressed in several more recent articles relating to the interpretation of the book. Already a formidable corpus, this work now culminates in a two-volume commentary, the first of which is reviewed here. The scope of the Smyth & Helwys Commentary, with its informative sidebars, illustrations from the arts, and accompanying CD-ROM, is by now well established, and Johnstone has utilized the format to considerable effect, although I will express some reservations below with respect to the publisher’s use of the format. The series has the laudable aim of making “serious, credible biblical scholarship more accessible to a wider audience,” and that aim is greatly enhanced by the engagingly lucid prose in which the author expresses his mature reflection on the book.

The “Introduction to Exodus” (1–26) provides important insights into the position Johnstone takes on critical issues, and a close study of this chapter will help readers who are not acquainted with his earlier and often more technical publications to understand the basis on which he assigns material to those sources he recognizes in Exodus. The chapter also, in a section titled “Exodus as Christian Scripture,” allows him to introduce his perspective on the “Connections,” which he traces throughout, between matters of
critical commentary and how these might be appropriated today from the standpoint of Christian faith.

Noting the differences that exist between the Exodus and Deuteronomy versions of the Sabbath commandment, then taking account of the “cross-referencing” phrase found at Deut 5:12, “as the L ORD your God commanded you,” Johnstone argues that the author of Deuteronomy must have taken over his wording—which he presents as “reminiscence”—from a version of Exod 20 earlier than that found in the present text. The existence of this and numerous similar examples has led Johnstone to conclude that two “complementary views” can be detected throughout the book of Exodus, so that underlying its final form there can be traced an earlier D-version (i.e., a version of the Exodus narrative from which the author of Deuteronomy has derived his reminiscences) and a later (Priestly) P-version. Although the P-version in places overlays and has become so closely combined with the D-version that some of the finer detail may be difficult to identify, the broad separation of the versions is not too difficult.

A gratifying and constructive feature of this is that, for Johnstone, the identification of these layers, or versions, in the text is not simply an academic exercise but something that indicates “a rich dialogue, even debate, between two competing viewpoints,” one that demands careful and creative attention (3). A crucial aspect of the working out of that debate is that the D material regularly displays a “covenantal” ideology, while P exhibits “cosmic” concerns.

The D and P versions are dated to the exilic and postexilic periods, respectively, and, having situated them there, Johnstone refers to the anthropomorphisms found therein: “Beyond the limitations of actual historical reality and verifiability, and the acids of historical falsifiability, the biblical narrative can now speak in physical terms figuratively of the significance of Israel’s ancient religious institutions now long gone” (8). In the interest of clarity, it should be noted that, while Johnstone prefers D rather than “Non-P” as his designation of the earlier version that has been overlaid and expanded by the later addition of P, unlike many who use the Non-P designation, his D-version in several places refers back to and is continuous from the Genesis narrative. Thus Johnstone expresses doubts that Exod 1:1–5 is a P insertion and takes issue, particularly with Konrad Schmid, with the thesis that Genesis and the following books were first bound together by P.

Following the introduction, the text of Exod 1–19 is treated in fifteen sections, with a chapter of commentary devoted to each section. Eight chapters deal with a single chapter of the book, while the other seven deal with passages of varying length, Exod 13:17–22 (Guidance through the Wilderness) being the shortest and 7:14–11:10 (The Plague Cycle)
the longest. Each of the fifteen chapters begins with a substantial section of commentary that provides readers with a good account of the narrative as it progresses as well as significant discussion of the D and P versions and in particular the ways in which the P-version has modified and entered into dialogue with the D-version. Much of the more technical discussion, as well as matters that are relevant to more than one place in the text, is presented in the sidebars, while close to the beginning of each of the fifteen sections there is a helpful sidebar that outlines its structure. The clear separation between “commentary” and “connections” in every chapter is helpful to the extent that it draws a firm line between matters relating to the understanding of the given text in the former and theological and practical reflection upon the Exodus narrative and laws in the latter.

There is a twenty-four page select bibliography, followed by indices of modern authors, scripture, sidebars and illustrations, and topics. While these features are helpful, a suspicion remains that at least one or two of the entries are incomplete. There are ten entries for Brevard Childs in the index, but his name appears on six pages that are not indexed. Other names checked at random were correctly indexed.

Some technical issues should be addressed. I found the font used in the sidebars (colored and reduced in size) testing on my aging eyes, although these can be resized on the CD-ROM to make for easier reading. Sidebars are not always printed in close proximity to their reference point in the text, while some are referenced several times. For example, “The Vocabulary of Liberation” is first referenced on page 35. A trawl through the commentary discovers “The Vocabulary of Liberation in Egypt” on page 55, but it is not until page 78 that the referenced sidebar (“The Vocabulary of Liberation”) actually appears. As another example, the sidebar “The Priest of Midian,” first referenced at page 54 is printed on page 56, which is fair enough; however, when it is referenced again at pages 113, 374, 380, 383, and 391, a reference to the page where the sidebar appears would have been helpful. Irritatingly, page 141 note 7 refers to a sidebar, “The Vocabulary for Wrong-Doing,” that apparently is printed in the Exodus 20–40 volume but not in this one!

Attempting to replicate multimedia on paper is certainly commendable, but where the reference and sidebar are separated by many pages, the addition of a page reference would have been helpful. Understandably, in the interest of publishing at an economical price, illustrations are reproduced in black and white, both in the commentary and CD-ROM; however, the multimedia aspect of the CD could have been greatly enhanced by incorporating links to sites where a larger color version of the illustration or map may be found. Thus, the link http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/59426 would take the reader to the page in the Art Institute of Chicago site where Chagall’s White Crucifixion is exhibited. A further and more valuable enhancement of the CD-ROM would be the utility
to bring sidebars and footnotes into view whenever the user hovered the cursor over these.

These quibbles about layout and the use of media do not detract from the quality of the author’s work. At one level Johnston’s commentary is ideally suited to the audience this series is intended to address. It provides a good standard of critical commentary on the first nineteen chapters of Exodus, often commenting on the translation of the widely used NRSV and more occasionally on other versions. The views of other scholars are treated judiciously, and the tone of such discussion is generally irenic. A substantial proportion of the sidebars and bibliography should encourage readers who may not have done so before to take an interest in more technical matters of commentary, and the Connections seek to demonstrate the value of the book of Exodus where it is read as Christian scripture and may well provide inspiration for those whose task it is to preach.

Yet there is more to it than that. Even if the D-version is partly obscured in places where it has been overwritten by the P-version, the “reminiscences” Johnstone notes in Deuteronomy provide a sufficient basis to permit him to offer an account of these versions that is sufficiently coherent to command attention. It would sell the commentary short if, because the series in which it appears aims to have a broad general and more popular appeal, the fruit of the technical studies that undergird it was to be disregarded by other scholars working in Exodus and the Pentateuch more broadly. This commentary, together with its second volume, which draws on work its author has developed over three decades, deserves the careful consideration of all those who take a different view on the formation of the Pentateuch, both those scholars who hold that an early fifth-century P was the first to create a continuous pentateuchal narrative and those who would still argue for a more traditional form of the Documentary Hypothesis.