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Book Review: The Text in the Middle

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Michael B. Shepherd. *The Text in the Middle*. Studies in Biblical Literature 162. New York: Peter Lang, 2014. 193 pp. Hardback. ISBN 978-1433128325. \$82.95 (Hardback).

For several years, Michael Shepherd has been publishing works that highlight the compositional features of biblical literature. In *The Twelve Prophets in the New Testament* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), he argued that the New Testament writers used and understood the twelve Minor Prophets within the literary context of the Book of the Twelve. In *The Textual World of the Bible* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), he examined the way biblical authors summarize and interpret previous narratives as they recount the history of redemption and compose their own texts. In *The Text in the Middle*, Shepherd furthers this broader project by examining a network of inter-textual connections that span the biblical canon.

Shepherd begins with the assumption that “the Hebrew Bible is a text composed of other texts” and that “those ‘other texts’ are within the Bible itself” (p. 1). He argues that those who helped shape the Hebrew Bible into a coherent collection gave the texts a specific perspective by their compiling and editorial work. The Hebrew Bible “was thus built to interpret itself” and later biblical readers including the authors of the New Testament “understood this phenomenon and were greatly influenced by it” (p. 1).

In this study of inner-biblical exegesis, Shepherd focuses on what he terms “bridge texts” or “texts in the middle” (p. 2). Shepherd explains, “This is where a citation of a text occurs, but the way in which the text is cited has already been anticipated in a previous citation of the original text, thus involving at least three texts (primary, secondary, and tertiary)” (p. 2). Recognizing the difficulty of identifying the “direction of dependence” in cases of inner-biblical exegesis, Shepherd looks for “clues as to how those who gave these texts their final shape wanted readers to understand inter-textual links” (p. 3).

The book itself consists of a long series of case studies that involve multiple texts (approx. 90 groupings!). The four chapters cover citations from the Pentateuch (chapters 1–2), the Prophets (chapter 3), and the Writings (chapter 4). Each chapter consists of main headings that list the passages that the following subsection will examine. This organization gives the volume a technical feel, but it also means that the groupings unfold organically and that a specific textual example is relatively easy to locate.

Shepherd's analysis shines when he examines a genuine "bridge" text. In these cases, the explanatory power of his approach is evident. For instance, Shepherd shows how the writer of Hebrews draws on Psalm 8 in order to illustrate the incarnation of Jesus (pp. 7–9). This particular psalm, though, is *already* an interpretive reflection on the creation narratives of Gen 1–2. Further, the "exegetical warrant" for connecting the general comments about mankind in Psalm 8 to Jesus is the connection that already exists in the Psalter between this psalm and Psalm 110 which speaks of a messianic priest-king. In fact, these texts appear in close proximity in the opening argument of Hebrews (i.e., Heb 1:3, 13). Accordingly, Shepherd argues, "the writer's exegesis of Psalm 8 is based upon a holistic reading of the book of Psalms" (p. 9). Similarly, Shepherd shows that when Hebrews speaks of entering God's rest in Heb 4:1–11, the writer not only draws on the conclusion to the creation narrative in Gen 1–2, but also on the notion of Sabbath rest in Ex 20:11 and the promise of entering the land in Josh 13:1 and Judg 1:27–33 (pp. 11–13).

This type of study broadens the scope of investigation to include not only the way that the New Testament authors draw on the Old Testament, but also the inter-textual activity already at work within the Hebrew Bible. For instance, Shepherd notes that "theologians sometimes cite Rom 9:13 in support of the view that Paul is talking about corporate election rather than individual election" (p. 45). This seems to be the case when Paul quotes Mal 1:2–3, which speaks of the nations of Israel and Edom rather than individuals like Jacob and Esau. However, Paul also quotes Gen 25:23, "a text that announces both the birth of two individuals and the birth of two nations" (p. 45). In this case, "the Malachi text is an exegesis of the Genesis text" and "Paul's text is thus an exegesis of an exegesis" (p. 45). Because the Malachi text connects the "story of two sons" with the "history of two nations," Paul can "move fairly freely between the election of individual and that of corporate entities" (p. 45). For Shepherd, recognizing that the author of Malachi is interpreting the Genesis narrative is critical when interpreting Paul's understanding of the Malachi text.

Though there are many "text in the middle" examples, perhaps a more accurate general description of the nature of most of the textual case studies comes much later in the volume: "the phenomenon of inner-biblical exegesis involving three or more texts" (p. 108). In most groupings, Shepherd coordinates and considers a

“constellation of texts” (p. 43). For instance, Shepherd discusses the various ways that subsequent biblical authors understand and utilize the account of the Lord’s covenant with David in 2 Sam 7:1–17 (pp. 122–29). Prophetic texts like Zech 6:12–13 and poetic texts like Psalm 89 and 132 allude to different features of the Davidic covenant in their messages of future deliverance. The author of Chronicles and the New Testament writers also understand Jesus’ messianic role through the lens of the Davidic covenant (1 Chron 17:1–15; Luke 1:32–33; Acts 2:30; Heb 1:5). Though in many cases like this one there is no true bridge text *in the middle* (as he defines it), through these examples Shepherd clearly demonstrates how frequently inter-textual connections appear in all parts of the biblical canon.

This fuller inter-textual awareness will enhance the study of all of the texts under review and enable readers to appreciate the inter-textual nature of biblical literature. Some of Shepherd’s treatments are strikingly brief and would require further development to persuade most readers (sometimes only a few sentences for a large number of texts; the final chapter on the Writings is also only six pages). Shepherd’s discussion of methodological issues is also surprisingly condensed (pp. 1–4, 107–09). Because his work covers so many texts, a little more reflection on the method he uses to make exegetical decisions would benefit the reader trying to keep track. Nevertheless, virtually every page brims with grammatical, syntactical, and text-critical insight. Because of Shepherd’s deep grasp of the Hebrew Scriptures and the biblical languages, his work here is an important supplement to similar works from the field of New Testament studies.

A critical reader of this volume could rightly conclude that in many cases Shepherd *makes* but does not *demonstrate* and/or explain the connection between two or more texts. While generally acknowledging this conclusion, a sympathetic reader will also recognize that Shepherd has located hundreds of inter-textual goldmines and provided guidance for how they might be gainfully excavated by students, scholars, and pastors. Perhaps the most valuable aspect of this work, then, is that it forces the reader to consider the textual logic of a large swath of biblical literature and offers a compelling model of close reading.

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