Book Review: Introduction to the Historical Books

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and how the use of this genre contributes rhetorically toward the goals of the speaker. Thus, Schipper (chap. 2) identifies the genre of Jotham’s parable (Judg 9:7–21) as a fable containing a curse that sees fulfillment in the subsequent narrative; Nathan’s parable (2 Sam 12:1–14) as a fable (not a juridical parable) that allows Nathan to focus attention away from international politics and onto David’s destruction of a family unit (chap. 3); the parable of the Wise Woman of Tekoa (2 Sam 14:1–20) as a petitionary narrative that enables David to defer to Joab in the case of Absalom without himself losing face (chap. 4); the parable that a nameless prophet speaks to Ahab (1 Kgs 20:35–43) as a petitionary narrative aimed at exposing Ahab’s incompetence (chap. 5); and Jehoash’s parable (2 Kgs 14:8–14) as a fable of the disputation genre (p. 104) designed to precipitate war with Amaziah (chap. 6). A final chapter (chap. 7) extends this analysis into the prophetic books by examining Isaiah 5:1–7 and Ezekiel 17:1–24.

Whereas parables are usually interpreted as attempts at avoiding or minimizing conflict, Schipper takes the opposite approach (thus the title of the book). He says, “In short, we found that parables (1) intensify announcements of judgment and condemnation rather than call for a change of behavior or facilitate conflict resolution; and (2) perform this intensifying function by invoking specific genres to address the speaker’s specific communicative needs” (p. 111). Such conflict or condemnation usually results from the failure of the addressee to understand precisely the point of the parable, a possible goal for parabolic discourse (pp. 12–18; cf. Matt 13:10–17!). For instance, Schipper suggests that David interpreted the poor man in Nathan’s parable as Bathsheba, the rich man as Joab, the ewe-lamb as Uriah, and himself as the traveler (pp. 46–49). If so, David may have been promising the punishment of Joab (the “rich man” responsible for Uriah’s death; cf. 2 Sam 11:14–25) in 2 Samuel 12:5–6 when Nathan declared to him, “You are the man!” (12:7).

With only 123 pages of text followed by 23 pages of notes, the book is a quick and easy read. Schipper deals exclusively with the final form of the biblical text and looks skeptically at redactional solutions to perceived tensions between parables and their narrative contexts (pp. 10–12, 27–29).

Schipper succeeds in highlighting the importance of genre-analysis for these parables; yet, he fails to demonstrate a significant exegetical harvest as his readings are rarely exciting and distinctive. The presentation of Nathan’s parable and David’s interpretation of it (chap. 3) is interesting and plausible, but Schipper himself characterizes this as the “creative highpoint” of the book (p. x), which (correctly) implies that the other chapters are not as innovative. Nevertheless, for those interested in the role of parables in the Hebrew Bible or who seek a close reading of the particular passages discussed by Schipper, this book will prove helpful.

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Steven McKenzie prefaces his survey of the historical books with three chapters that guide his understandings of these texts and provide an important foundation for an informed reading of his conclusions. The first—“In Search of the Historical Books”—deals succinctly with issues that would require much more space to cover adequately. Yet, for an introductory-level book, he provides a fitting description for those who are not as familiar with such issues as the significance of the historical genre, various approaches
to reading ancient historical writings, and the character of historical writings as etiological and theological. The emphasis upon the writers as theologians, which is introduced here and carried throughout the book, is most welcome in these discussions.

For the evangelical, McKenzie’s approach to reading ancient historical books will be somewhat disconcerting, given that he follows Van Seters closely in this regard and gives little credence to those who would argue for reading these books as recording history accurately. He recognizes that conclusions by archaeologists and historians that regard biblical history as erroneous (or at least misleading) will at times be dismissed as bias “particularly among people of faith” (p. 8). McKenzie, who seems sympathetic and appeals for the acceptance of such scholars, counters with the role of genre in this regard and concludes, “The source of the discrepancy [in the Bible’s record of history] may lie not with the Bible per se but with the way in which it has been read” (p. 8).

In chapter 2, “The Works behind the Historical Books,” the author discusses the general theory of the Deuteronomistic History and the misleading nature of the Chronicler’s History. For those uninitiated into these discussions, McKenzie’s comments are valuable in introducing these concepts, even if one does not regard his suppositions as valid. The final introductory chapter, “Methods and Approaches to the Historical Books,” provides the needed background into contemporary methods of reading the historical books. Approaches that are both diachronic (e.g. literary and form criticism) and synchronic (canonical and narrative criticisms) are discussed, showing their significance to reading the historical books. In his conclusion to this chapter, McKenzie indicates that the primary goal of his book is to synthesize the conclusions reached by various reading strategies to the text believing that implementing such approaches “guide[s] readers and help[s] them to examine the biblical text carefully” (p. 38). Thus, in the remainder of the book, McKenzie walks systematically through those books he has labeled as historical: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, and Ezra-Nehemiah.

I was particularly interested in reading the book because of the subtitle—“Strategies for Reading.” For the most part, I was pleased with some of his conclusions in light of his stated purpose for the book, such as the recommendation to read Joshua with “an awareness of the tensions in the book” that reflect different perspectives within the books “unitary message” (p. 56). Yet, I found that too little attention was given to these issues and that the comments were more motivated by a literary approach rather than originating from the textual strategies of the authors. In addition, it is somewhat baffling that a separate section for this was not provided for Kings, Chronicles, and Ezra-Nehemiah.

McKenzie’s work makes a valuable contribution to the classroom in that he has provided an introduction to these books that is readily accessible for students of all levels. Readers will receive quality, succinct summaries of content for each book that are accentuated by the author’s theological observations. For the professor, this text provides an appropriate platform by which contemporary hermeneutical and critical approaches to the OT might be taught and assessed without requiring students to read longer, more technical works on these topics. But the ones who will find this work most valuable are those who are more prone to read these books as McKenzie, convinced of: (1) a more ahistorical approach; (2) the validity of Deuteronomistic History; and (3) an acceptance of the category of historical books, as opposed to the significance of the canonical ordering the books in the Hebrew Bible.

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