

Bible, it seems to me that the experience of reading the Bible without chapter or verse numbers is likely to be stimulating and to encourage a fresh reading that moves beyond any preoccupation with individual verses, which has beset the traditional Christian reading of the prophets in particular.

The brevity of Smith's guide on the pre-exilic prophets does not allow him to offer detailed commentary, and in the case of difficult texts like these, this is likely to cause some frustration at times. Perhaps study groups should be advised to have access to at least one more detailed commentary for those times when further information and explanation are required. That said, it was evident that Smith is well-informed, not only concerning the prophetic books as such, but also with respect to the conclusions of biblical scholarship.

However, for me the highlight of this guide was the discussion questions. They were among the very best of such questions I have ever come across. They encourage readers to pay attention to what the prophets were saying in the context of their own time. They also encourage honest and unflinching engagement with the difficult questions raised by the texts, including divine violence and the nature of God as envisaged by the prophets. Smith's questions further promote reflective, thoughtful and creative engagement with current issues in the light of the prophets' message. In fact, this is an area in which the questions particularly excel. And they invite not only critical, but also positive engagement with today's world. What I mean by that is that Smith, for instance, frequently asks readers to find positive examples of where contemporary social injustice, obviously one of the key issues addressed by these prophetic books, has been alleviated by humanitarian efforts.

It is encouraging to come across a project that promotes the communal study of the biblical texts in their entirety, and I would highly recommend this guide to Christian readers wishing to engage with the prophetic books of Amos, Hosea, Micah, Zephaniah, Nahum and Habakkuk.

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Genesis by John H. Walton. Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013. 176 pp., US \$16.99, softcover.

John Walton's *Genesis* is part of the Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary series. This commentary on Genesis was previously released in 2009 as the first part of volume 1, bound together with the commentaries on each of the five books of the Pentateuch. Walton is the general editor of the series.

The commentary is written at a semi-popular level and is printed in full color on glossy pages. There is at least one image (pictures, maps, charts, and the like) on one of the facing pages in the entire commentary (most pages have two or more images). There are also more than 100 sidebars and/or charts spread through the commentary. The volume is visually pleasing, sporting a semi-glossy magazine look. Half of the 140 page commentary is devoted to the background of Gen 1–11 and the other half to chapters 12–50. The commentary ends with an annotated bibliography of about a dozen and a half titles and about 20 pages of endnotes.

The commentary does not provide an interpretation of the biblical text, but offers individual comments pertaining to background issues of selected verse fragments or phrases. It reads much like *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* by John Walton, Victor Matthews, and Mark Chavalas (InterVarsity, 2000), but it is much more visually appealing. The background materials treated include: historical, cultural, religious, mythological, chronological, architectural, archaeological, and so on. Walton has written extensively on the background matters of Genesis previously; those familiar with his writing will not find surprises here.

For whom is this commentary designed? The student studying ancient Near Eastern context of the Scriptures interested in Walton's views might do better reading his *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Baker, 2006). The student or pastor studying the biblical text to prepare for a paper or sermon might benefit more from Walton's *Genesis* in the NIVAC series (Zondervan, 2001). The student or teacher interested in the research behind Walton's innovative views of Gen 1 would do better checking out of the library his *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology* (Eisenbrauns, 2011). I can see how busy teachers and pastors could use the concise materials in this illustrated background commentary for writing sermons and lessons, yet we all hope they will indulge in more detailed study of the issues. Ideally, this book should only serve as first step in sermon research. However, the book appears as though it is meant for the lay reader.

Walton's *Background Commentary* lacks any statement about its purpose and approach, what is meant by "background," or about its basis

for comparisons. The theoretical explanation is handled by a promotional blurb on the back cover in terms of what readers can hope to avoid: “[W]ithout knowledge of the ancient context we can easily impose our own culture on the text, potentially distorting it.” Presumably this background commentary is meant as an antidote in the case of interpreting the book of Genesis.

The heavy lifting in Gen 1–11 is comparison to ancient myths and legends and in Gen 12–50 to short snippets regarding relevant aspects of ancient cultures. Historical, geographical, and theological comments are less of a focus but appear frequently through the commentary. The commentary offers no introductory explanation regarding methods or aims or basis of the comparisons, not even in the introduction. The commentary offers no thesis, no running argument, and no overall interpretation of Genesis. Walton simply begins comparing ancient things to Genesis. He regularly, but not always, affirms or challenges the relative viability of the elements he introduces to compare to Genesis. The reader is left to think that anything ancient that *seems similar in any way* is the necessary background for Genesis.

The discussion of “Genesis and Mythology” in the *Illustrated Background Commentary* does not define myth but points to myths’ functions. Walton infers that Genesis functions more like ancient myths than the normal ways moderns think (see pp. 9–10). He says Genesis “offers an alternative encapsulation of how the world worked” (p. 9). However, that is not necessarily the impression one gets when reading the comparisons he offers. Here is a representative sampling of the comparisons (usually presented favorably or without judgment):

- “Expanse (1:6)” is compared to the Mesopotamian views of “skins” and contrasted to Nut the ancient Egyptian sky goddess, and concludes that virtually all ancients thought of the firmament as “solid” (see p. 17);
- “Water above it (1:7)” is compared to the Marduk’s dividing of Tiamat in *Enuma Elish* and other myths (see pp. 17–18);
- “Seventh day ... holy (2:3)” is compared to the Near Eastern New Year’s festivals which celebrate the enthronement of the deity (see pp. 23–24);
- “Tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:9)” is compared to the hero’s sexual intercourse to a prostitute in the Epic of Gilgamesh (see p. 28);
- “Helper suitable for him (2:18)” is compared to the hero’s counterpart Enkidu in the Epic of Gilgamesh (see p. 31);

- “Serpent (3:1)” is compared to the magical plant in the Epic of Gilgamesh, serpents in Egyptian mythology, and other ancient mythic traditions (see pp. 33–34);
- the long lives of the genealogy of Gen 5 are compared to the Sumerian King List (see p. 42);
- “Married any of them they chose (6:2)” is compared to the deflowering of the bride in the Epic of Gilgamesh (see pp. 43–44);
- “Nephilim . . . heroes (6:4)” is compared to Gilgamesh (see p. 45);
- some of the details of Noah’s flood are compared to several ancient accounts (Epic of Atrahasis, Epic of Gilgamesh), but Walton concludes that the biblical account provides a different interpretation of the tragedy (see pp. 48–49);
- the Abrahamic covenant is explained in relation to Weinfeld’s distinctions regarding the treaty and grant forms (see pp. 76–77);
- circumcision is compared to ancient Levantine and Egyptian practices (see pp. 88–89);
- Nuzi texts which mention family gods are compared to the teraphim Rachel took (Walton emphasizes ancient females converting to their husbands’ gods but does not mention contrary evidence like the treaty marriages of 1 Kgs 11; see p. 112);
- “Fulfill your duty to her as a brother-in-law (38:8)” is compared Hittite laws (see pp. 124–26).

These kinds of comparisons attended on every page by images of associated ancient sculptures, reliefs, artifacts, and the like reinforces page after page that the book of Genesis shares much with the surrounding ancient cultures.

In many of Walton’s other writings he is explicit in what he does *not* say about the Bible and myths: “When we use the literature of the ancient Near East in comparison with the Bible, we are not trying to identify or suggest literary relationship” (*Genesis* [Zondervan, 2001], 27; also discussion on pp. 21–35). For other such deflections as well as reasoned explanations on wrong and right means of ancient comparative studies for biblical interpretations see, for example, “Creation,” *Dictionary of Old Testament: Pentateuch* (InterVarsity, 2003), 155–68; and the introductions to his *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology* and *The Lost World of Genesis One* (InterVarsity, 2009). In other places Walton boldly claims ancient background as essential. “[A]t times the cultural

background of the text is an essential ingredient for deciphering the authoritative message and meaning of the text” (“Interpreting the Bible as an Ancient Near Eastern Document,” in *Israel: Ancient Kingdom or Late Invention?* [B&H, 2008], 299 [298–327]; also see Walton’s brief discussion on “Confessional Scholarship and the Role of Comparative Studies,” 301–3). In a carefully nuanced explanation of using ancient comparative studies in evangelical biblical interpretation, Walton offers similar bold claims under the heads “God did not reject the entire world-picture of Israel’s neighbors, but used much of its structure as a framework for revelation” and “Revelation did not always counter ancient Near Eastern concepts, but often used them in productive ways” (“Ancient Near Eastern Background Studies,” *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* [Baker Academic, 2005], 40–45).

Walton has written extensively on the use of ancient Near Eastern background for biblical interpretation. His contributions both to the theory and specific applications of ancient comparative studies to the Scriptures offer much to students and scholars. The colorful background commentary on Genesis under review here, however, provides no theoretical explanation of method and does not provide any extensive discussion of the comparisons. The many comparisons are simply there as suggestions, undifferentiated in value or significance for the laity. If the commentary were to have an introduction I would imagine it being along the lines of the picture-less *IVP Background Commentary* co-authored by Walton (cited above). The stated two-fold purpose of that commentary is to “help the interpreter avoid erroneous conclusions” and sometimes “simply to satisfy curiosity” (see pp. 7–9). The *IVP Background Commentary* comes short of acknowledging an incongruity between the intended nonprofessional readership’s lack of access to look up sources for further information and the lack of any such references to look up. The *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary* under review corrects part of the problem by providing endnotes for many entries. However, the same incongruity between manifold suggested comparisons and lack of adequate interpretation for lay readers stands. Perhaps this problem could be solved by an introduction which advised lay readers to use the background commentary alongside other reliable published interpretations of Genesis.

The general reader could benefit by a careful reading of this book, especially if used alongside a reliable semi-popular commentary on the book of Genesis itself. Walton’s background commentary is attractive and fun. Perhaps the ideal reader is the lay person preparing to teach Bible studies or church classes. Walton’s illustrated background

commentary could well serve the general reader but only if used in concert with other reliable interpretive guides.

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