

Book Reviews

A Brief History of Old Testament Criticism: From Benedict Spinoza to Brevard Childs. By Mark S. Gignilliat. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012. ix + 186 pages. \$16.99 (paper).

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Written for students, this delightful and clear text outlines the history of Old Testament criticism and captures the thought and methodologies of some of the greatest scholars in the field of biblical studies. Beginning with the 1600s and continuing through to 2007, Mark S. Gignilliat presents the central ideas and contributions of Benedict Spinoza, W. M. L. DeWette, Julius Wellhausen, Herman Gunkel, Gerhard von Rad, William Foxwell Albright, and Brevard Childs. Included in the study is an introduction and a postscript/conclusion. Gignilliat states clearly in the introduction that he is “not a neutral observer of the history of Old Testament criticism” (13), since he has a working understanding of the Old Testament as Christian Scripture and embraces an Anselmian epistemology of faith seeking understanding. Confessional stance aside, Gignilliat not only explores the contributions of each scholar he presents in his text but also includes critiques and comments from other biblical scholars who have engaged the thought and methodologies of those scholars being presented. Particularly helpful and useful for scholars and students alike are the detailed footnotes and the list for further reading that appears at the end of each chapter.

Each chapter of the text opens with a brief history of the scholar being explored. Gignilliat highlights the scholar’s major contributions and then gives a brief biographical sketch, inclusive of social location, educational background, and faith persuasion and tradition. Gignilliat shows that these scholars were trailblazers not only in the field of biblical studies but in their personal lives as well, often disagreeing with their own religious traditions to the point of being excommunicated, as in the case of Spinoza. A real treasure in this text is Gignilliat’s discussion of the major influences that shaped the thinking of each scholar; for example, Descartes influenced Spinoza; Johann Gottfried Herder played a significant role in DeWette’s study of the Old Testament; and Gerhard von Rad and Karl Barth were foundational for Childs’s interest in biblical theology and the canonical approach to

Scripture. Gignilliat's attention to these matters is striking because it provides readers with an appreciation not only for the content of biblical criticism but also for the thought process behind the contributions made by each of the seven scholars presented. The discussion also allows readers to see where the various scholars moved into the trajectories that made their contributions distinct and creative.

Gignilliat's exploration concludes with the year 2007, the year of Childs's death, and this suggests a major weakness of Gignilliat's text: no women scholars are included in this brief survey; this omission makes for an incomplete study. The text as written, however, is a fine one that presents a wealth of material in a story-like fashion that is sure to engage today's students at both the undergraduate and the graduate levels.

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Onesimus Our Brother: Reading Religion, Race, and Culture in Philemon. Edited by Matthew V. Johnson, James A. Noel, and Demetrius K. Williams. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012. vii + 175 pages. \$39.00.
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In this ambitious volume, Johnson, Noel, and Williams assemble seven essays from biblical scholars and theologians. Taken collectively, the essays have a single purpose: to read Paul's short and controversial letter to Philemon in conversation with other Pauline letters and through "the political economy of modern slavery" (159). For the past fifteen centuries, Philemon traditionally has been interpreted as Paul's delicate handling of a runaway slave, Onesimus, whom Paul returns to his owner, Philemon, with ambiguous instructions. The essay writers challenge this interpretation through their use of African American biblical criticism and their placing of Onesimus at the center of discussion (5-7). Ideological criticism, within which African American biblical criticism, feminist criticism, and postcolonial criticism lie (to name three examples), has become more prevalent in recent decades, as the publication of scholarly books and the proliferation of Society of Biblical Literature sessions featuring these perspectives indicates. Thus the book would be a welcome addition to any library as an example of this particular type of reading strategy.

If the book has one weakness, it is the lack of transparency in some essays regarding how controversial this reading strategy is. Williams's history of interpretation essay is clear regarding the distinctions between the common