



KEEPING  
CURRENT

**Scripture**

Liturgy and Preaching  
Systematic Theology  
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Cross-cultural Studies  
Spirituality  
Moral Theology  
Pastoral Theology

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## **New Studies of the First Testament**

It is just as difficult writing about “Keeping Current” as it is actually keeping current. This is because so many horizons of interest have been opened in the field of biblical investigation and so much has been written in each area. From the vast array of possibilities works from only three areas will be mentioned here: comprehensive commentaries or dictionaries, examples of literary analysis, and works in the area of social science studies. The specific investigations are all studies in some aspect of the First Testament.

### COMPREHENSIVE WORKS

Several comprehensive projects devoted to biblical interpretation have recently appeared. Three of them will be of particular interest to the readers of *New Theology Review*. The first is *The International Bible Commentary: A Catholic and Ecumenical Commentary for the Twenty-First Century* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998). Under the editorial supervision of William Farmer, 118 scholars from around the world have collaborated to produce this one volume tome. It includes individual commentaries on each of the books in the Roman Catholic canon, as well as several significant topical essays. Although various interpretive approaches and perspectives are present in the articles, each entry provides valuable historical and literary information, as well as suggestions for further reading.

Those who previously found *The Interpreter's Bible* helpful either for study or for their preaching preparation will be happy to know that the *New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon) is now appearing volume by volume. This is not a revision; it is a completely new

venture. It consists of informative and insightful section-by-section commentary and reflection on the biblical books. As a complement to these marvelous resources, Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann's *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1997) has been translated by Mark E. Biddle and has been published in a set of three volumes. The entries are comprehensive examinations of over three hundred biblical concepts. Although this is a translation of a 1971 work, it continues to be an invaluable tool for biblical study.

#### LITERARY ANALYSIS

In addition to the investigative tools, there has been a flood of writing in the last several years dealing with biblical interpretation. While much of the analysis has followed the standard historical-critical approach, a good deal of it has launched out in different directions. Since biblical interpretation has always employed methods and insights gleaned from other fields of investigation, we should not be surprised if currently it is particularly influenced by literary criticism as well as social scientific studies, two areas of broader contemporary theological interest.

While most people involved in some form of ministry make great use of the Bible, only a very small percentage of them have facility with the biblical languages. Therefore, a book like J.C.L. Gibson's *Language and Imagery in the Old Testament* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998) will be greatly appreciated. Gibson explains the characteristics of the language in which the First Testament was written as well as the literary forms used by the authors to convey its message. This uncomplicated and insightful explanation of some of the structure and workings of Hebrew draw the reader into the dynamism of the language without actually studying it. The insights gleaned will enhance one's appreciation of the message of the biblical passage.

The renewed attention given to literary analysis has resulted in a growing interest in the use of metaphors and the way they shape our thinking. Since the Bible is so rich in metaphorical language, an appropriate grasp of its meaning requires some understanding of the forms used to express it. In the first chapter of *Like a Tree Planted: An Exploration of Psalms and Parables Through Metaphor* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1997), Barbara Green leads the reader through an easily grasped seven-step process of examining metaphors. Her work is doubly impressive since it is both eco-sensitive and attentive to cultural diversity, two pressing contemporary concerns.

Susan Niditch, on the other hand, writes for those who are already somewhat schooled in literary criticism. Her *Oral World and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox

Press, 1996) provides a fresh look at the way the biblical tradition emerged from an oral culture into its final written form. She sees orality and literacy as the two ends of a continuum rather than opposing ways of developing traditions, and the chapters of her book carefully examine various points on this continuum. The current interest in cultural diversity makes this study exceptionally interesting.

Within the recent past we have recaptured an appreciation for narrative. We use narrative in analyzing and developing theology, in preaching, and in reflecting on spiritual growth. Interest in narrative is not new to biblical study. It is perhaps one of the most enduring approaches to interpretation. Since so much of the Bible is narrative, it is important that we understand how it works so that we can better grasp its meaning.

Steven Weitzman and Uriel Simon have each produced critical works in the area of narrative analysis. Weitzman's *Song & Story in Biblical Narrative: The History of a Literary Convention in Ancient Israel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997) examines the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15), the Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32), the Song of Deborah (Judges 5), the Song of David (2 Samuel 22), and the Song of Daniel (Daniel 3 [Greek]) in order to discover how songs function within narratives. In *Reading Prophetic Narratives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997) Simon painstakingly examines, scene by scene, the form and structure, plot and characterization, narrative techniques, and the rhetorical significance of seven prophetic stories. Both of these studies not only explain the meaning of various passages, but also provide insights into how one can use narrative to express a theological message.

#### SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES

Interest in this area includes examination of the social realities of the ancient world, interpretation of the biblical material through the lens of a contemporary issue, investigation that takes seriously the social location or reality of the investigator, to name but a few points of interest. Leo G. Perdue, Joseph Blenkinsopp, John J. Collins, and Carol Meyers have produced a volume as part of a project that investigates various aspects of the family. *Families in Ancient Israel* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997) surveys the social history of ancient Israel during the tribal period, the periods of the first and the second Temple, and early Judaism. They examine marriage contracts, kinship patterns, gender roles and divorce, polygamy, monogamy, levirate, concubinage, and how household patterns and roles shape perceptions of God and of Israel's relationship with God.

Theodore Hiebert's *The Yahwist's Landscape: Nature and Religion in Early Israel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) is a fine example

of a combination of the first two approaches. He draws on the findings of archaeology, history, anthropology, and comparative religion to examine the view of nature as found in the Pentateuch. Dianne Bergant does something quite similar in *Israel's Wisdom Literature: A Liberation-Critical Reading* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997). She reads the Wisdom Tradition of ancient Israel from the perspective of the integrity of creation and with an eye to biases that originated because of race or ethnic origin, class or gender. Athalya Brenner and Carole Fontaine have edited *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible: Approaches, Methods, and Strategies* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), a collection of the work of twenty-five scholars from around the world, both women and men, who address questions of gender, ethnicity, and social location.

Stephen Breck Reid not only discusses the importance of attending to social location, but in *Listening In: A Multicultural Reading of the Psalms* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997) he uses nondominant cultural material to demonstrate this.

Gerald West and Musa W. Dube have edited "*Reading With*": *African Overtures* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1996), a collection of the work of some of the most prominent South African scholars. In *Subversive Scriptures: Revolutionary Readings of the Christian Bible in Latin America* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1997), Leif E. Vaage has done the same with Latin American biblical theologians.

This doesn't scratch the surface of contemporary biblical study. Although *New Theology Review* provides timely book reviews in each issue, it cannot even begin to survey the field. However, each of these works contains a bibliography which will serve to broaden our horizons. Happy reading!

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