

New Old Testament survey criticizes JEPD

The Old Testament: A historical, theological, and critical introduction

Richard S. Hess

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Richard S. Hess's *The Old Testament: A Historical, Theological, and Critical Introduction* will doubtless become a standard textbook used in Bible colleges and seminaries. It does many things well, and there are some encouraging aspects to the textbook, although there will be areas of disagreement as well.

The goal of a survey such as this volume is to provide a general background to each book in question and to introduce major interpretive issues and give a general bibliography which can serve as a basis for more in-depth study. This book fulfills these functions well and takes an appropriately neutral tone throughout. So there will likely be a lot of appeal to use this book in evangelical schools, as it will be acceptable to a wide range of evangelical opinions.

Helpful format

The book is divided into four parts: discussing the Pentateuch, historical books, poetic books, and prophetic books, and within those parts each Old Testament book. Each chapter contains an overview of the book, a discussion of premodern readings and source criticism of the book, tradition history, literary readings, gender and ideology criticism, ANE context of the book, canonical context,

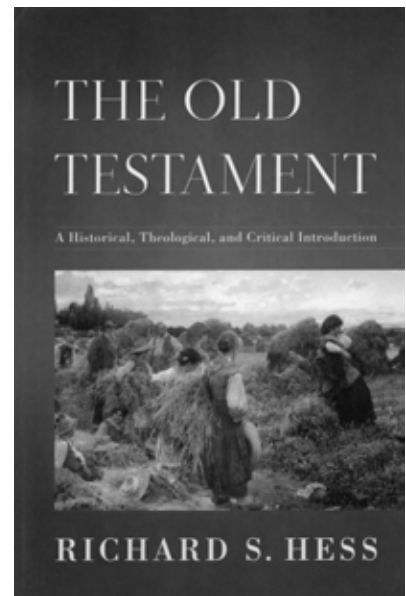
and theological perspectives. At the end of each chapter is a list of key commentaries and studies, though the student who wishes to find good sources will also want to consult the numerous footnotes.

Overall, the format is helpful, though a few of the longer books such as Psalms and Isaiah suffer from length restraints.

Critical of JEPD

It is critical for students of the Old Testament to be aware of source criticism—both what it posits about the composition of the Old Testament text and current scholarly skepticism about some of the older literary theories. Hess does a good job of covering this ground, noting, for instance, how more recent discoveries have supported an older composition date for the Torah:

“For example, the much earlier (fifteenth–twelfth centuries BC) Hittite suzerain-vassal treaties give evidence of a remarkable similarity to the outline of Deuteronomy 1–28. There is also the manner in which the recently published text from thirteenth-century-BC Emar have demonstrated the antiquity of practices (priestly anointing) and of literary forms (detailed multimonth ritual calendars) traditionally assigned to postexilic P authors. Add to this the archaic name forms, grammatical spellings and morphology, and aspects of the cultural world of Genesis that fit best in the second millennium BC (or sometimes the early second millennium), and one has some strong arguments to regard this material as something more than an invention of the Israelite monarchy



and postexilic world of the first millennium BC.” (p. 34).

Hess also notes the existence of ancient Near East creation myths that are often paralleled with the biblical account, but notes that there are significant differences between these myths, including *Enuma Elish* and the *Atrahasis Epic*, and the biblical account. He asserts that “there never was a close relationship between the creation stories of Genesis 1–2 and any ancient Near Eastern accounts” (p. 42).

Restrained on creation

Hess avoids any position at all on creation vs evolution; it is nearly impossible to discern his view as he apparently aspires to neutrality which is quite proper in an introduction such as this. His summary of Genesis sticks closely to the text, which is refreshing. This means that a wide variety of evangelical students will be able to use this introduction, though biblical creationists will take issue, for instance, with the implication that there was “brokenness and suffering” (p. 51) built into the pre-Fall creation.

Hess notes about the Torah:

“These texts remain the key starting point for the whole of the



Figure 1. Hess suggests that behemoth might be an hippopotamus, but the description fits a sauropod dinosaur much better.

Bible. They provide the essential understanding of the biblical view of creation, sin, the belief in a single loving and holy God, and the need of God’s people for redemption and a life of love and holiness so that they may enjoy the blessings of a covenant relationship with God” (p. 24).

Solid introduction to Genesis

Hess’s outline of Genesis does not differ much from most biblical creationist outlines, and he also notes the *toledot* structure. He does call Genesis 2 “the second story of creation” (p. 26), which is a characterization most biblical creationists would take issue with. However, he usefully compares Genesis 1–2 with genealogical doublets which occur later in Genesis (p. 37).

Also, oddly, he makes the statement, “Nevertheless, Noah’s drunkenness leads to immorality and the loss of the pristine world after the flood” (p. 27), as if the point of the Flood was to make the world pristine again. Aside from a few such statements, there is very little that is objectionable in his characterization of the first 11 chapters of Genesis.

Regarding premodern readings of Genesis, Hess acknowledges:

“From the beginning, the church and synagogue interpreted the text of creation literally, but they also tended to find in the text metaphorical and other symbolic meanings in support of their own philosophical understanding of the beginning of the world” (p. 31).

Evidence for the historicity of the Exodus

Hess’s introduction to Exodus is consistent with a high view of the text. He defends the historicity of the Exodus partially by appealing to the unlikelihood of a nation inventing a humiliating time of enslavement:

“If there had been no oppression and exodus, why would any Israelite authors invent such a humiliating origin for their people? If the Israelites were indigenous to Canaan and never came from Egypt, how did this story come to form the beginning of the nation’s founding epic?” (p. 70).

Hess weighs the pros and cons of the early or late Exodus dates and the evidence supporting either one.

Other creation links

Hess helpfully recognizes links to the Genesis creation account in other places in the Old Testament. In his section on the Ten Commandments, he notes:

“In Exodus 20:11 the basis for the Sabbath is tied to the creation of the world in six days, followed by God’s rest on the seventh. Thus the Sabbath observance becomes a reflection of the created order” (p. 146).

He notes the Edenic imagery present in the temple (p. 310). The genealogies in 1 Chronicles began with Adam, linking the historical origin of the Hebrew people with the first man created by God (p. 321). He notes that wisdom was with God at creation (p. 464).

Unfortunately, Hess follows the common line of equating Job’s behemoth (figure 1) and leviathan with a hippopotamus and crocodile, respectively (p. 416). However, he does recognize that God’s authority as Creator is central to God’s challenge to Job (p. 406). “For Job, the Creator’s power is so far beyond what mortal minds can understand that to challenge him or to seek to understand his ways is not possible” (p. 416). He also notes:

“Job 38–39 presents another account of God as Creator. This account follows a set of topics similar to Genesis 1; Psalm 89:10–13; and Psalm 104, texts in which God creates and controls the sea (and overpowers the sea monsters), fixes the earth on its foundations, brings forth springs of waters, creates day and night, creates the sun and seasons, and creates people” (p. 415).

Readers may take issue with Hess’s assertion that Ecclesiastes teaches, “There is no real meaning behind creation, and one’s effort and work contribute little or nothing because everything continues as it was” (p. 477). However, he does note the more positive interpretations others have put forward; for instance:

“A person has an interest and ability to know how all the created universe fits together but cannot know this through human efforts. Instead, it is necessary to know God the Creator, who made humanity in the divine image (Gen. 1:26–28). Only then does a person have the capacity to understand oneself, and what is the true value of things, beginning with life itself” (p. 483).

Chronology

Chronology is a concern for those studying the Old Testament. In particular, some judges overlapped with each other, and it is necessary to assume some co-regencies of the kings to make sense of the Bible’s statements about how Judah’s and Israel’s kings related to each other. His chronology here is generally in line with evangelical views, though there is always room to debate the finer details. He proposes a thirteenth, not fifteenth, century BC date for the Exodus, so many will take issue with that (p. 70).

A solid Old Testament introduction

Overall, *The Old Testament: A historical, theological, and critical introduction* does well what it aims to do. Students or interested laypeople will find an overview of each Old Testament book along with the most important related archaeological finds, the most pressing interpretive questions, and conservative enough for most evangelicals. While no one will agree with everything Hess advocates, it does serve as a useful introduction to the Old Testament. And while creationists may take issue with some of his statements, it is refreshing to see a mainstream work that is not overtly hostile to creation.