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New International Biblical Commentary: Ezekiel (review)

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NEW INTERNATIONAL BIBLICAL COMMENTARY: EZEKIEL.
By Steven Tuell. Pp. xv + 368. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009. Paper, \$16.95.

The New International Biblical Commentary series is a well-established Evangelical Christian series that has contributed a number of important commentaries on the books of the Hebrew Bible. It eschews pre-critical approaches that avoid reference to modern scholarship and anti-critical approaches that seek to “defend” the Bible against purported scholarly detractors. Instead, the series focuses on an approach labeled “believing criticism,” that employs a full range of critical methods to engage in “probing, reflective interpretation of the text to loyal biblical devotion and warm Christian reflection” (p. x). The goal of such work is to bring the message of the biblical texts to life so that the minds of modern readers might be illumined and their faith deepened. Such claims might set alarm bells off in the minds of those who do not subscribe to the theological worldview of Evangelical Christianity, but this volume in particular provides a model on how to engage in such interpretation with full integrity to the analysis of the text and to the religious commitments of the author and the volume’s presumed readers.

Steven Tuell does in fact provide readers with a fully credible, critical interpretation of the text that takes into account a combination of historical-critical methods and theological analysis. He does not allow the New Testament to govern his interpretation of the text of Ezekiel. Instead, he enables his analysis of Ezekiel to stand as the basis for observations as to how the book was read in the New Testament and early Christianity. This is not to say that there is not room for disagreement or discussion, but a dogmatic reading of the text is not a factor here.

Tuell’s work grows out of his long engagement with the book of Ezekiel, from his Ph.D. dissertation, published as *The Law of the Temple in Ezekiel 40–48* (HSM 49; Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1992), through his ongoing engagement with the Society of Biblical Literature Seminar on “Theological

Perspectives on the Book of Ezekiel.” A brief introduction provides an overview of the book. Tuell recognizes Ezekiel’s strange character, with its vivid visions of the divine retinue and its portrayal of Ezekiel’s own bizarre actions, such as shaving his head and refusing to mourn for his dead wife. But he also points to the beauty of the book, with images taken by the New Testament such as the good shepherd, the river of life, and the new Jerusalem. He argues that the book is only lightly edited so that Ezekiel himself is the likely author of most of the book. Although Ezekiel’s voice predominates throughout the book as author and initial editor, other priestly hands shaped the final edition of the book, including the concluding vision of the new Temple in Ezekiel 40–48 during the early fifth century reign of the Persian monarch Darius I (522–485 B.C.E.). He notes Ezekiel’s dependence on other works, such as the Holiness Code of Leviticus 17–26, elements of the work of Jeremiah, Zephaniah 3:1–4, and aspects of the literature and history of the broader ancient Near East. He argues that the literary structure of the book falls into two major components, namely, the visions and oracles concerning Jerusalem’s fall in Ezekiel 1–33 and the visions and oracles of hope and possibility in Ezekiel 34–48. Within this structure, the three vision cycles of Ezekiel 1–3; 8–11; and 40–48 aid in tying the entire book together. He notes the difficulty of the Hebrew text, which represents a stage of transition from early and late forms of Hebrew, but correctly holds that analysis should focus on the Masoretic form of the text as the Septuagint form appears to be “cleaning up” the difficulties of the Hebrew.

Tuell stresses that the book presents G-d’s message rather than that of Ezekiel. Although the message is harsh, it also holds out hope. But restoration does not depend on Israel’s righteousness or repentance; rather it depends on G-d’s own character, identity, and honor as G-d attempts to sanctify the divine name and presence in the world. Ultimately, the book argues for the manifestation of divine presence in the world and G-d’s desire for “fellowship” with “G-d’s people.”

The commentary itself is filled with insight, including both a literary-historical and theological overview of each sub-unit of the text together with detailed comments concerning the meaning and background of individual phrases within the passage, quoted from the New International Version. Noteworthy insights include identifying the enigmatic thirtieth year of Ezekiel 1:1 as Ezekiel’s age at the time of his inaugural vision; recognition of the theological problems inherent in the deaths of all of the old men, young men and maidens, women, and children in Ezekiel 9:1–11; recognition of Christian anti-Semitism in relation to the past interpretation of the “statutes that were not good” in Ezekiel 20:25; recognition of the interrelationship of vision and law code in Ezekiel 40–48; recognition that Zion is Eden in Ezekiel 47; and

much, much more. A short, but useful guide to further reading appears at the end of the volume, together with detailed subject and Scripture indices.

Despite the many strengths of this volume, there is room for disagreement and discussion. One important aspect is Tuell's argument that the book comprises a two-part structure as noted above. Although this contention is ultimately rooted in the rabbinic construction of the book as beginning with destruction and ending with comfort (*b. Baba Batra* 14b), such focus on broad thematic concerns overlooks the formal features of the book, the many exceptions to these broad themes, and Ezekiel's own identity as a Zadokite priest. The book is structured chronologically from beginning to end and accounts for the period from Ezekiel's thirtieth year, the year in which he would have been ordained as a priest, and his fiftieth year when he would have retired as a priest (Num 4:3; cf. Num 8:23–25). Although the reference to Ezek 29:17 is the sole exception to this pattern, interpreters consistently argue that the reference was edited to account for Nebuchadnezzar's delay in taking Tyre. A second aspect is theological. Tuell's position that the book represents G-d's word rather than Ezekiel's understanding of G-d's word forces him to argue that the victims of divine punishment in Ezek 9:1–11 deserved punishment due to the guilt of the entire people, but such theological perspectives have been rightly challenged in the aftermath of the modern experience of the Shoah (Holocaust), which saw the murder of some six million Jews (and millions of others), including some one and a half million children.

Despite these reservations, Tuell's commentary is a very welcome and worthwhile addition to the literature available on Ezekiel. It will be especially useful for undergraduate and theological students who are beginning their own engagement with this perplexing and magnificent book.

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BEYOND THE QUMRAN COMMUNITY: THE SECTARIAN MOVEMENT OF THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS. By John J. Collins. Pp. xii + 266. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2010. Paper, \$25.00.

Since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, there has been controversy about who produced these texts. A predominant view has been the Qumran-Essene theory. While Collins still holds to this theory for the most part, he does suggest some alterations. He thinks that the origin of the Essenes was