

Casey Hough

Review of *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*

Submitted to Dr. Cole for the course BIHB9401 Interpreting the Pentateuch

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Alexander, T. Desmond. *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*. 3rd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012.

Author Information¹

T. Desmond Alexander is a senior lecturer in Biblical Studies and director of Postgraduate Studies at Union Theological College, Belfast. He earned a PhD from The Queen's University in Belfast, Northern Ireland, UK. For ten years, he had been director of Christian Training for the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. Previous to that position, he lectured for 18 years in Semitic Studies at the Queen's University of Belfast. He has written and contributed to a wide variety of academic and reference books on the Bible. His areas of expertise are the Pentateuch and Biblical Theology. An elder in Fitzroy Presbyterian Church, he is married to Anne, and they have two adult children, Jane and David.

Thesis/Purpose

On page xiii of the preface, the author writes that the “present volume seeks to (1) guide the reader through the maze of modern approaches to the Pentateuch, and (2) focus on the main themes of the Pentateuch, viewed as a unified literary work, by drawing on the best insights of recent research into Hebrew narrative techniques.” These two aims are undertaken in distinct sections of the book. The first section, which makes up roughly 1/3 of the book, deals with the study of the Pentateuch in modern times. The second section of the book systematically progresses through the themes of Pentateuch using a synchronic approach.

Summary

In chapter 1, Alexander briefly outlines the four main methods of Pentateuchal study. These four methods (source criticism, form criticism, traditio–historical criticism, and literary criticism) are explored in greater depth in the following chapters. In chapter 2, the author explores the rise of source criticism by taking a cursory look at the Documentary Hypothesis and its many forms. The author notes that the Documentary Hypothesis focused primarily on the written sources behind the final form of the Pentateuch. In chapter 3, the author states, “Following the widespread acceptance of the Documentary Hypothesis as the definitive explanation for the source documents underlying the Pentateuch, toward the end of the 19th century a few scholars began to consider the pre-literary stage in the growth of the Pentateuch” (32). Accordingly this “led to the development of two new methods of studying the Old

¹ Information obtained from “Faculty and Staff,” *Faculty and Staff*, n.d., n.p. [cited 27 January 2015]. Online: <http://www.union.ac.uk/departments-and-staff/9>; “Authors,” *Authors*, n.d., n.p. [cited 27 January 2015]. Online: <http://bakerpublishinggroup.com/authors/t-desmond-alexander/553>.

Testament text: form criticism and traditio-historical criticism” (32). According to Alexander, form criticism sought to examine the development of the Pentateuch's sources in their oral form. By contrast, traditio-historical criticism sought to examine “what happened between” the oral form of the source and the written form of the source (35).”

Having explored the initial introduction of these different forms of criticism in Pentateuchal studies, the author moves on to discuss the developments and threats that have arisen in the field. Chapter 4 details the many modifications and alternatives that have been postulated since the inception of the three forms of criticism mentioned above. It is in this chapter that we find a brief discussion of the use of literary criticism, which will be further developed in chapter 6. Before concluding the first section, Alexander presents a test case using the Sinai narrative in chapter 5. His ultimate conclusion in that chapter is that the Sinai narrative “provides no evidence to support the existence of the sources associated with the documentary hypothesis” (80) and that “while links have been observed with the book of Deuteronomy, these are best explained in terms of the priority of the Sinai narrative” (81). These conclusions lead to chapter 6 wherein the reader finds Alexander's brief case for a literary approach to the study of the Pentateuch.

Chapter 7 begins part two of the book. In this chapter Alexander presents in simple terms an argument for the unity of the Pentateuch. The chapters in part two deal with the content of the Pentateuch in both a thematic and narrative way. Each chapter begins with the introduction of its respective material and is followed by a discussion of theme in its Pentateuchal context. After each discussion of the theme, the author provides an Old Testament summary and a New Testament connections section to demonstrate how the theme fits within the rest of the canon of Scripture. Chapters 8 through 23 comprise the bulk of the book covering topics ranging from the establishment of God's temple city in the garden of Eden, the initiation of a royal lineage, Abraham and the blessing intended for the nations, the covenant disclosure of the Lord, the significance of the Passover, the covenant at Sinai, the tabernacle, the need for holiness and its relationship to the Lord, the sacrificial system, the significance of food laws, the role of the different tribes in preparation for entering the promised land, the frequent unfaithfulness of the wandering people, and the place of love and loyalty to the Lord as the elect people of God. Each of these topics is dealt with successively as they appear in the books of the Pentateuch and provide a surprisingly well-organized outline of the history of the Israelite people prior to their entrance into the Promised Land. Chapter 24 begins where chapter 7 ended with a discussion of the unfinished story of the Pentateuch. Alexander concludes the book with a brief attempt to demonstrate how the Pentateuch fits with in the framework of Scriptures metanarrative. While interested readers will doubtless want more, the chapter whets the appetite for a whole Bible theology that incorporates the richness and complexity of Old Testament content into the life of the New Covenant community.

Critique

This book was well written and well organized. It accomplishes its stated purpose; especially in terms of familiarizing the beginning student the different approaches to Pentateuchal study. There are many commendable aspects about this book. Whether it is Alexander's deft handling of the intricate details related to the Documentary Hypothesis or his

broad canonical understanding of biblical themes, it is exceedingly clear that he possess an expert grasp on these issues. His evaluation of those with whom he disagrees is fair and free of inflammatory polemical rhetoric. He does not settle for easy answers, but instead evaluates the evidence and weighs it accordingly. One such example of fairness is found on page 110 where he states, “A late date of editing does not automatically deny the authenticity of traditions contained in the Pentateuch, especially when, as we have noted, earlier written documents have been used in its composition.” Unlike some of the anti-intellectual fundamentalism of his day, Alexander is able to incorporate the best of biblical scholarship into his study of the Pentateuch without buying into the naturalistic worldviews of some of the more popular historical-critical scholars.

In terms of how this book helps the student/pastor, Alexander's incorporation of how a theme fits not only within the context of the rest of the Old Testament but also connects with the New Testament enables students/pastors to teach the Pentateuch as Christian Scripture. This of course is not to suggest the Pentateuch should not be understood in its grammatical historical context, but rather that the Christians claim to its application and significance is mediated through Christ who as the seed of Abraham blesses all nations through their incorporation into the people of God by faith. In terms of a final point of appreciation, Alexander's inclusion of a “Recommended Further Reading” section and a Scripture index makes this book a perpetually helpful resource for future study of the Pentateuch.

As for a few suggestions regarding how this book could be improved, this reviewer states two possibilities. In chapter 18, entitled “The Sacrificial System,” it seems like an additional chart would have made sorting through the different sacrifices a bit easier to follow and understand. Most of the other chapters were well illustrated but this chapter only included one table at the bottom of page 250. The second suggestion would be for the author to expand chapter 24 and possibly relocated it to the beginning of part two. While recognizing the Chapter 24 brings resolution to the content that began in chapter 7, it seems to this reviewer that inclusion of this material prior to the study of the themes would have led to a better sense of the unity of the storyline of the Pentateuch. Yet, while these two caveats might be voiced, the book is still a tremendous resource for anyone who would desire to grow in their understanding and application of the first five books of the Old Testament.