

Chisholm, Robert B. *Interpreting the Historical Books: An Exegetical Handbook*. Vol. 1. 6 vols. Handbooks for Old Testament Exegesis. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2006.

Robert Chisholm, Jr. is Department Chair and Professor of Old Testament at Dallas Theological Seminary. He holds a Bachelor of Arts from Syracuse University (1973), a Master of Divinity from Grace Theological Seminary (1976), a Master of Theology (1978) and a Doctor of Theology (1983) from Dallas Theological Seminary. Particular areas of interest and expertise include Old Testament Exegesis, Old Testament Narrative, Old Testament Prophetic Literature, and the Hebrew language. In addition to his work at Dallas Theological Seminary, Chisholm serves as a translator and the Senior Old Testament Editor of the NET Bible. He has published seven books and numerous articles in the field of Old Testament.

### **Thesis/Purpose**

*Interpreting the Historical Books: An Exegetical Handbook* is the first of the six book series entitled, *Handbooks for Old Testament Exegesis*. According to series editor, David M. Howard, Jr., the purpose behind this series is to provide “students basic skills for exegeting and proclaiming the different genres of the Old Testament” (17). Howard continues, writing “these volumes are primarily intended to serve as textbooks for graduate-level exegesis courses that assume a basic knowledge of Hebrew” (18). “Each volume is built around the same six-chapter structure” (19). That structure is as follows:

1. The Nature of the Genres
2. Viewing the Whole
3. Preparing for Interpretation
4. Interpreting the Text
5. Proclaiming the Text
6. Putting It All Together

The first chapter deals with genre. The second deals with “the purpose, message, and primary themes in the individual books and canonical sections under consideration” (19). The third chapter deals with background information and other critical issues that might impact exegesis. While fourth chapter establishes rules for interpretation, the fifth chapter discusses how the student can move from interpretation to proclamation. The sixth and final chapter demonstrates the principles that have been studied in the book.

### **Outline of the Book**

In chapter one, Chisholm begins by asking the question: What is narrative literature? He spends the rest of the chapter detailing and demonstrating how Old Testament narrative, while being a genuinely historical account, is reported in a “story-like fashion” through the use of different literary types (25). He, then, briefly discusses the differences between stories and other literary types like reports, genealogies, and lists. In particular, Chisholm discusses how stories

will generally be characterized by “setting, characterization, and plot” (26). After detailing the elements of these three characteristics, the author moves on to detail the elements of discourse structure and dramatic structure. At this point, Chisholm deals with the contribution of the *wayyiqtol* clauses in discourse analysis and how they are used to form the “basic counters of the story at the surface level” (36). Next, Chisholm explains the discourse function of “offline clauses deviate from the *wayyiqtol* pattern” (38). Finally, the author addresses how quotations and dialogues function in the discourse structure to shape the plot structure of the story and impact characterization. After discussing discourse structure in general, Chisholm goes deeper into the analysis of the discourse by exploring the dramatic structure with its episodes and scenes. He concludes his discussion on structure by considering a few remaining elements of literary structures that one might encounter in the biblical narrative. This discussion includes paneled sequencing, chiasmus, overlapping accounts, and flashbacks. Moving on from structure, Chisholm addresses discourse types and speech function as they relate back to quotations and dialogue. Having considered speech function’s relationship to the narrative, the author sums up the chapter with details on the role that ambiguity plays in narrative development, the need to remember the narrator’s authority and perspective, the reader responsibility to read individual stories in light of the macroplot, and the place of intertextuality in understanding the message of narrative. The chapter concludes with seven, summarizing interpretive principles. They are as follows (87):

1. Analyze the basic elements of a story (setting, characterization, plot) and determine how they contribute to its message
2. Identify a text’s discourse structure, dramatic structure, and other structural features and explain how they contribute to the story’s message and impact
3. Analyze the narrative’s quotations and dialogues with respect to their discourse type and speech function
4. Avoid excesses when filling gaps, but attempt to resolve ambiguity in a cautious manner that is sensitive to context and utilizes common sense
5. Respect the authority of the narrator and attempt to identify his assessment of the events and characters. However, also be alert for the rhetorical use of a limited or idealized point of view.
6. Relate individual stories to their macroplot and explain how the various genres within a book contribute to its overall message.
7. Be sensitive to matters of intertextuality and how they contribute to the message of the narrative.

In chapter two, the book provides summaries of the primary themes and overall purposes of the historical books. Of the books included in this summary, first and second Samuel receives the most attention due in part to the author’s conviction that they represent the “theological heart of the history covered in the Former Prophets” (101). Throughout the summaries of the books, Chisholm briefly addresses interpretive matters raised by source critics when deemed necessary. He concludes the chapter by grouping the former prophets thematically. Joshua through Second Kings are considered to deal primarily with “Deuteronomistic themes” (128), while First and Second Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther are focused mainly on postexilic matters. Chisholm concludes the chapter by providing a “thematic synthesis of the historical books” (130). He contends that the “two major themes of the historical books” are “God’s covenant relationship with his people Israel” and “kingship.”

Chapter three begins by stating, “One should place the text in its historical context, determine what the text is and what it says, and consult the works of others who have paved the interpretive pathway” (132). Recognizing the need for these measures to be taken by the student, this chapter provides a summary of biblical chronology, a short overview of textual criticism and translation of the Old Testament, and concludes with a commentary on selected resources that will equip the student for the task. The summary of biblical chronology approximately covers the timeframe of 1400 B.C. till 433 B.C. As for the discussion on textual criticism, Chisholm focuses on “two basic principles” which are as follows:

1. One should not automatically assume that the traditional Hebrew (Masoretic) Text preserves the original text.
2. One should base text critical decisions primarily on internal considerations.

Following the discussion on textual criticism, the matter of translation is explored in brief, after which, a list of significant, critical commentaries and works on the former prophets are discussed by Chisholm.

Chapter four, following the outline suggested by the series editor, attempted to answer the questions that rise from the “contextualized nature of the text,” which requires an attempt at identifying the “implied readers” (167). The chapter begins with balanced assessments and critiques of diachronic and synchronic methods of study with examples of both. After evaluating these methods, Chisholm concludes with what he considers to be an “essentially synchronic” interpretive method that is “also sensitive to the historical and cultural background of the text and respectful of the narrator’s authority” (184). Furthermore, he concludes, “a text may be read legitimately against its primary historical background, but also against the background of its larger literary context” (184). The chapter concludes with an expansion of the seven interpretive principles from chapter one. The expansion is as follows (185):

1. Place the text in its historical, cultural, and broader literary contexts.
2. Evaluate the text from a literary point of view, observing the principles in chapter one.
3. Summarize the theme(s) of the story and how they contribute to the theme(s) of the book as a whole.
4. Consider how the story should have impacted the implied reader(s), given their time, place, and circumstances.

Chapter five deals with a “homiletical strategy” for the historical books. Chisholm’s approach can be summarized as a “contextualizing of the biblical text (i.e. – explaining it in the context of its implied readers) followed by the decontextualizing of biblical text (i.e. – considering the principles of the passage that transcend its historical-cultural context) with the text ultimately being recontextualized in our modern situation” (189). Since the first four chapters of the book deal with the “contextualizing” of the biblical text, this chapter mainly focuses on the last two steps of the homiletical strategy. As with other chapters, this chapter concludes with a summarizing list of principles for application by the student.

Chapter six brings all the principles from the previous chapters together and demonstrates how they are to work together. Two samples of such exegetical and homiletical work are provided for the student’s consideration.

### **Critique**

There is tremendous amount to commend about this book. Chisholm does a great job wedding the rigors of exegetical work to the practical applications that the intended audience

finds interesting and needed. For one, this book is accessible, yet scholarly. Throughout the book, critical words are in a bold font, which indicates that they are defined in a glossary in the back of book. Chisholm fairly represents those with whom he disagrees while explaining clearly and persuasively why he disagrees. A second point that is worthy of commendation is the thoroughness of examples without becoming bogged down in peripheral details. Good examples of this can be found throughout the first chapter, which seeks to broadly consider narrative literature. Whether he is addressing with how *wayyiqtol* clauses impact discourse analysis or explaining the significance of language function, he does it with concision without sacrificing content. A third point of commendation would be the summaries provided in chapter three. By centralizing so many of these details for the reader, they are able to focus on the task at hand without constantly digging through biblical histories. This book definitely accomplishes its goal of providing a true handbook for students. It is no mere guide.

In terms of disagreement, this reviewer found Chisholm's use of the word "contextualization" misleading considering its use in missiological setting. Typically, to "contextualize" a text (in modern missiological terms) means to bring that text to bear on the life of the modern audience by contemporizing it. The flexibility of the word obviously presents issues for both parties.

This book by a first-rate scholar is a welcomed addition to the growing number of accessible exegetical guides in Old Testament studies. The reviewer highly recommends it.

### **Synopsis of Three Reviews**

Mark D. Vander Hart's review in the *Mid-America Journal of Theology* essentially concurs with this review that book accomplishes its express purpose as "handbook to get the primary matters of survey and exegesis before its readers. His only criticism of the book is its lack of a textual index, which this reviewer agrees, would have been a helpful addition.

Gary E. Yates's review in the *Criswell Theological Review* provides a more sustained review of Chisholm's examples his review, but basically agrees with Hart and this review that *Interpreting the Historical Books* is an "excellent introduction to the new series" and does an "excellent job of distilling information found in more technical studies of biblical narrative." He concludes his review with additional suggestions for readers that want to read a work devoted completely to the "sermonic development" of biblical narrative.

Glenn E. Schaefer's review in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* takes more negative angle Chisholm's work due mainly in part to his concerns with the series itself. Schaefer voices concern about how future volumes will deal with sections of scripture that do not fit neatly into one genre category. As for his specific critique of Chisholm, he acknowledges that there are "some good insights" particularly "in the first chapter," but that the book "hardly measures up to a textbook" and should be supplemented by other works.