



Book Review

Steven L. McKenzie. *Introduction to the Historical Books: Strategies for Reading*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010.

By Cian Power

Steven McKenzie's efforts to make his new book, *Introduction to The Historical Books*, accessible and valuable to the non-specialist have clearly paid off. The volume provides an extremely useful introduction to the historical books of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible (HB), and to current biblical scholarship, for both teachers and students.

Overview

McKenzie's work introduces the "the Deuteronomistic History" (a technical term for Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings), 1-2 Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah.¹ These represent the core of history writing or "historiography" in the HB, narrating the history of ancient Israel from c1300-400BCE. To each of these biblical books the author devotes a short chapter (roughly twenty pages), and for each explains its structure, content and themes, explores historical issues, and recommends strategies for reading.

In addition, McKenzie provides three prefatory chapters, which lay out general issues. The first examines history writing as a genre, and specifically history writing in the Bible, a current focus of biblical scholarship. In the second, he outlines the larger works in which these history books appear: the Deuteronomistic History (see footnote 1) and the "Chronicler's History" (1-2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah). The third explains modern scholarly approaches to the Bible.

Potential use in secondary-level education

To introduce the historical books

Firstly, McKenzie's book provides an extremely succinct, balanced and, for the most part, accessible introduction to the current status of scholarly research. For instance, regarding 1-2 Kings, McKenzie explains: the source documents scholars discern behind the books (e.g., Israelite royal annals); relevant archaeological discoveries, including recent ones like the Tel Dan "David" Inscription; and more. Any or all of these chapters could therefore be presented to (upper level) students, to help them read the biblical books, and to form the basis of informed classroom discussion. This indeed seems to be one of McKenzie's goals, since each chapter (except, for some reason, that on Ezra-Nehemiah) contains explicit guidelines and tools for reading biblical texts. The chapter on 1-2 Chronicles, for instance, provides a brief analysis of the differences between the

¹ The title, "Deuteronomistic History," is part of a theory that Joshua-2 Kings was brought together and edited by an editor living in the time of the Babylonian exile. With Deuteronomy as an introduction, the Deuteronomistic History narrates Israel's history, beginning with its conquest of Canaan (Joshua) and ending with its loss of the land (2 Kings). This "history" is told from the theological and ideological perspective of the book of Deuteronomy.

Chronicler's accounts of the kings of Judah and the parallels in 1-2 Kings. This follows his suggestion to read 1-2 Chronicles with a view to identifying and exploring such differences.

While McKenzie's analysis is occasionally too technical or specific for high school students, the book remains helpful for a teacher, as preparation for introducing these issues in class.

As the blueprint for a lesson

Secondly, McKenzie's book readily provides a format for structured classroom activities. In his third chapter, where he concisely and clearly introduces various academic approaches to biblical texts (e.g., source criticism), he illustrates these methods by applying them to a test-text, the story of David and Goliath with some surprising results! For instance he explains how two quite different perspectives on this event are recorded in 1 Samuel 17, one of which (the more picturesque) is absent from the ancient Greek translation of the Bible. Exercises like this allow students to see the complex nature of biblical texts, how different editors, authors, and redactors have left their fingerprints on the text as we have it today.

This practical, "hands-on" approach could be replicated productively in a lesson for any number of biblical texts, from the HB or the New Testament. For example, students could examine a biblical text in small groups, each group applying one methodology, such as form criticism, to the text, and giving a presentation of the results. Thus, students would gain a multifaceted appreciation of that text by employing skills implemented by biblical scholars.

To introduce the Bible more widely

Finally, *Introduction to the Historical Books* seems useful for its broad coverage. Through considering the texts it does, it actually introduces many of the methods and results of biblical scholarship more generally. For instance, he treats the issues of archaeology and the Bible (see the chapter "Joshua") and the ancient versions of the Bible (like the Septuagint [Greek]) and also introduces the Dead Sea Scrolls.

McKenzie also addresses the difficult issue of the Bible's historicity. He presents a sensitive discussion in relation to faith and the Bible, himself clearly valuing the historical texts highly. He suggests one approach that is not intrinsically inimical to faith, following from his theory about the purpose of biblical historiography: "interpreting the meaning of the past for the present" (p. 11). This section of the book could play a role in the classroom depending on the desire of teachers to engage their students with these (sometimes sensitive) topics.

In these respects, particular sections of the work could be assigned to students for reading, or could adequately prepare teachers to facilitate discussion in class. I highly recommend McKenzie's *Introduction to the Historical Books* to secondary-level educators as an excellent entry into to a range of issues, general and specific, and as a pedagogical tool.

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