

Shorter Reviews

Leviticus as Literature

by Mary Douglas

Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001. 298 pp. \$16.95.
ISBN 0-19-815092-X.

DOUGLAS HAS BEEN FASCINATED with the book of Leviticus for a good portion of her scholarly career, first evidenced in *Purity and Danger* (1966). This latest study demonstrates the hidden riches in a book often seen as dry, sterile regulations about arcane rituals. The monograph seems to have several messages. First is the literary structure of Leviticus, which has often been difficult to fathom. Douglas argues that the book is divided into three sections by the two narrative passages (8–10; 24:10–23) inserted into the legal description and instruction. This threefold structure represents the three levels on Mt. Sinai at the giving of the law and the three parts of the desert tabernacle.

A second message of Douglas's study is that Leviticus and Deuteronomy have different languages, outlooks, and worldviews, which means that Leviticus should not be interpreted by Deuteronomy's criteria. A third theme of the book is the significant changes wrought by eliminating magic and divination from official religion. The underlying system of Leviticus must originally have presupposed the use of divination to determine "inadvertent" sins. This change is extremely important and would have come about only after a major catastrophe (such as the exile). What emerges most clearly is that the core of Leviticus is a quest for justice and righteousness. The system of holiness and cultic purity is not opposed to them but is the vehicle for their achievement. *Leviticus as Literature* might just as well have been titled *Leviticus as Theology*.

Douglas's ability to look with new eyes at material long familiar—even hackneyed—to biblical scholars has done great service to biblical scholarship. You may not always be convinced,

but it always makes you think.

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Joshua, Judges, Ruth

by J. Gordon Harris, Cheryl A. Brown, and
Michael S. Moore

New International Bible Commentary. Hendrickson,
Peabody, 2000. 398 pp. \$11.95. ISBN 0-85364-726-7.

THESE EXCELLENT SHORT COMMENTARIES will be useful to lay readers, ministers, and biblical scholars alike. Since Joshua is probably the most "historical" of the books, Harris's approach is the most traditional. He admits the harshness of Achan's punishment, but accepts it and also the rules of the *herem* (holy war) as necessary to the Israelites' acquisition of the land.

Brown finds that some of the more distasteful episodes in Judges actually depict Israel's plight. Israel's weakness after the fall of the northern kingdom is shown when Samson squanders his strength (i.e., his faith), knowing full well he will become "like any man." This Brown equates with Israel's desire to acquire a king in order to become "like other nations" (1 Sam 8:3–4). Because God had "chosen" each to be "set apart," both committed grievous errors. Despite the repugnance that Christian readers initially have for Judges, Brown proves that the author is a gifted literary artist whose work deserves our admiration.

Moore sees Ruth as the positive side of the negative picture given in Judges. In the last stories of Judges, fathers completely mishandle marriages, while the book of Ruth shows the proper way to marriage through community negotiations, kindness, loyalty, and responsibility. "Ruth is a sharp chisel in the hands of a master sculptor, methodically chipping away at Israel's hopelessness until a marvelous theology of hope

begins to emerge" (p. 300). Despite the strictures against intermarriage in Judges, the marriage of Boaz to Ruth—the Moabite foreigner—became acceptable in Israel.

These critics, all brilliant scholars, discuss how today's Christians can relate to these texts. They accomplish this through the literary-critical skill with which they uncover the deeper meanings of the narratives.

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Esther

by Adele Berlin

Translated by Am Oved. JPS Bible Commentary. The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 2001, 169 pp. 34.95 (cloth). ISBN 0-8276-06990.

THE LAST SEVERAL YEARS have seen an explosion of interest in the book of Esther, a text whose ancient Jewish-Persian context is as hard to access as its contemporary relevance is uncanny. This new commentary is among the very best. Berlin provides a rich and highly readable analysis and interpretation of the text and its early social and literary contexts.

Berlin's commentary is unique in the way it draws extensively from early Greek literature of the Persian period as a context for understanding the Esther narrative. We see how the story world of Esther is like and unlike other contemporary literature about Persia. At the same time, she reads the book of Esther in relation to other biblical narratives and early Jewish interpretive tradition. The result is an expansive appreciation of the Esther story in relation to what comes before it, what surrounds it, and what it inspires within the interpretive communities that inherit it.

At one point in the introduction Berlin indicates that her commentary does not pose "questions about the roles of women versus men, the relationships of sex and power that are in play in the story, and similar questions that reflect modern feminist ways of reading" (p. lv). Depending on how one approaches them, such questions need not reflect modern ways of reading any more than trying to understand a biblical text in its original context does. And if Berlin did in fact bracket such questions out of her com-

mentary, that would be a serious problem.

Indeed, the text of Esther begs that they be asked, especially among those of us concerned with how this story world reflects and comments on the social world of Persia in which it is set. Yet, happily, I find that Berlin's commentary does more than it promises in this regard. The analysis of sexual-political dynamics offers many valuable insights into the ways gender identities and roles were constructed and represented in ancient Persian culture as well as in early Jewish interpretive culture. Berlin does not avoid questions about gender and power in the story world and its social world. She does, however, expand, reframe and complicate those questions in ways that will enable future gender studies of the text and its early contexts to move forward in new and important directions.

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Psalms

by James Limburg

Westminster Bible Companion. Westminster John Knox, Louisville, 2000. 509 pp. \$29.95. ISBN 0-664-25557-4.

IT IS CLEAR from the very beginning of this volume that Limburg's work grows out of a lifetime of reading, meditating upon, teaching, and preaching the Psalms. The editors of the series aim at assisting the laity of the church, especially lay teachers, and they "hope this series will serve the community of faith, opening the Word of God to all the people, so that they may be sustained and guided by it" (p. xii). This hope is wonderfully fulfilled by Limburg's contribution.

Limburg's mastery of the field of Psalms study is evident. He is fully conversant with the conclusions of the form-critical and cult-functional methods that dominated Psalms study for most of the twentieth century, as well as with the results of the more recent rhetorical approach to the Psalms and the even more recent scholarly attention given to the shape and shaping of the Psalter as a book.

Even more impressive is Limburg's ability to draw upon the results of Psalms scholarship to communicate theological insights. Limburg appeals to an array of biblical scholars, but he also cites a wealth of other sources as he illus-



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