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The World of the Old Testament

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The World of the Old Testament

A.S. van der Woude, General Editor

Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1989

300 pages \$27.95

This multi-faceted work on the Old Testament (volume II) edited by van der Woude and translated by Sierd Woustra, is a comprehensive accomplishment, done by teams of scholars.

The first part, "The History of Israel" has been completed through the cooperative efforts of M.J. Mulder and A.S. van der Woude. This treatment deals with the whole history of Israel from earliest times through the late period. For the sake of convenience the material has been divided into the following subsections: Preliminary Questions, The Patriarchal Era, The Exodus and Conquest, The Settlement in Canaan, The Monarchical Periods, The Babylonian Captivity, and The Final Century Under the Persians.

Another large section which deals with the Old Testament literature has been written by H.A. Brongers. Here readers will find the many genre spanning the whole of the Old Testament. The comparative sensitivity between the writings of Israel and relevant literature of the Near East is apparent. For example the delicate and careful treatment of mythology, e.g. creation, and its place in the comparison to myths on creation in the Near East is critically but sympathetically handled. Israel did borrow insights from such Babylonian creation myths as *Enuma Elish* but appropriated the story to Israelite monotheism. In time, the myths of creation and others were demythologized and adapted to Israel's historic interests.

The third and last part of the handbook, "The Books of the Old Testament", has been done by a group of scholars. C. Houtman prepared studies on the Pentateuch. He takes us on a path beginning with the documentary hypothesis of the 18th century leading to the newer analysis of Kuenen and Wellhausen of the 19th century.

Studies since Wellhausen involved the rise of form criticism, Gunkel and Gressman, documentary studies, Smend and Eissfeldt, and thence tradition criticism, Von Rad, Pedersen and Engnell. The section ends with further literary considerations, e.g. date of the Pentateuch.

H.H. Grosheide wrote the subsection on the "Historical Books", Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah.

The work on the prophets has been prepared by B.J. Oesterhoff with a general format including life and times of each prophet, while the writings, Psalms, Job, Proverbs, etc. was prepared by J.P.M. van der Ploeg.

Throughout the book lists of bibliographies follow each subsection. Lists of works and abbreviations are given on pp. X and XI.

Admirable, from this reviewer's perspective are the rich and comprehensive studies compassing a volume of modest length. This Bible Handbook is a helpful review for scholars and pastors already acquainted with Old Testament Studies and also a worthwhile project for those engaged in these efforts for the first time.

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Who Was Jesus?

N.T. Wright

Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1992

107 pages

This slender volume is primarily an extended and occasionally ascerbic review of three recent and controversial books about Jesus. It is rounded out by an introductory chapter which sketches the history of Historical Jesus research, and a conclusion which sets the frame for Wright's own major work on Jesus.

The first chapter introduces the reader to the problem of the Historical Jesus and to the scholars who have proposed solutions, from Reimarus over two hundred years ago to recent serious monographs. This is a serviceable introduction to the issues. However, like any attempt to summarize major works in a few paragraphs, it loses important nuances. Especially regarding the more recent works by Crossan and Mack, the reader is advised to consult the original volumes and other reviews rather than relying entirely on Wright's summaries. One can easily see that Wright's well known attempt to divide Historical Jesus research into three "quests", and to place Crossan, Mack, and the Jesus Seminar into the second of the three, is inaccurate.

Chapter two discusses Barbara Thiering's hypothesis, which has been popularized in her book *Jesus the Man: A New Interpretation from the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Thiering claims that the Dead Sea Scrolls give us direct information about the first generation of Christianity, despite recent unambiguous carbon dating which places them well before the Christian era. She also claims that both the scrolls and the Gospels were written in a kind of secret code that she alone has been able to decipher. Among her "findings" are that Jesus was not only married and had children, but divorced and remarried. His death and resurrection were faked. Thiering's hypothesis is so far into the fringes of the academy that one cannot in good conscience recommend reading her work, except perhaps as a curiosity. Wright's review of Thiering, though, is worth reading, in case you encounter someone who might have stumbled across her work and asks you questions about it. Her work does have appeal to those who enjoy conspiracy theories.