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Review of Mervin Breneman, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther

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In the second part of her book, B. presents the pastoral aspects of eight prophets (Hosea, Amos, Micah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Second Isaiah, Zephaniah, and Zechariah) and highlights pastoral elements in Psalms, Song of Songs, Ecclesiasticus, and Ecclesiastes. In the conclusion B. contemporizes these insights by applying them in modern society to the laity, to the art of governing, and to the pastoral quality of wisdom.

Wide margins, attractive drawings of artifacts, a glossary of Hebrew terms, and a select bibliography enhance and complete the book. Unfortunately the author's florid Italian is translated woodenly, with her meaning sometimes obscured.

Bosetti is on the right track when she recognizes that people of the same culture, even when they are separated by centuries, are more likely than outsiders to interpret that culture correctly. But the natives she follows pursued a midrashic method that highlights "one aspect of the many factors that go into the reading of that text at the expense of all other equally relevant factors" (Martin I. Lockshin, "Truth or *pěšār*? Issues in Law and Exegesis," *Law, Politics and Society in the Ancient Mediterranean World* [ed. Baruch Halpern and Deborah W. Hobson; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993] 272).

Like midrash, B.'s interpretations and contemporary pastoral applications often have little connection with the plain meaning of the biblical text. Instead of consulting a Middle Eastern cultural data bank for information about shepherds, she develops associations and suggestions evoked by Hebrew words. Her New Testament sequel will be more successful if she engages *pěšār* like that of Rashbam which paid careful attention to the literal meaning of all aspects of given texts.

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MERVIN BRENEMAN, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (The New American Commentary 10; Nashville: Broadman, 1993). Pp. 383. N.P.

As the editor states in his preface, the New American Commentary series is a commentary written by authors who "affirm the divine inspiration, inerrancy, complete truthfulness, and full authority of the Bible. The perspective of the NAC is unapologetically confessional and rooted in the evangelical tradition." For those not entirely comfortable with this forthright and somewhat polemical assertion, it should be clearly stated that Dr. Breneman, of the Seminario Internacional Teológico Bautista in Buenos Aires, has written a thoughtful commentary, in dialogue with much of the most important literary and critical scholarship on Ezra-Nehemiah, especially the English works by Eskenazi, Blenkinsopp, and Williamson. B.'s knowledge of Mowinckel and Rudolph, however, appears to be only through the comments in Williamson and Blenkinsopp. The absence of Rudolph is unfortunate, given the seminal importance of Rudolph's commentary in the HAT. One also would have hoped for consideration of the important critical work of W. in der Smitten.

Breneman deals fairly with some of the more complex problems of the redaction of Ezra-Nehemiah, and he accepts a compositional history involving the use of original Ezra memoirs and Nehemiah memoirs and their possible mixture in Nehemiah 8-9.

On issues that require a more nuanced analysis than the mechanical relationship of verses and dates, B. takes a significantly more conservative line. For example, B.'s comments on the apparent contrast intended between Ezra and Nehemiah, especially as argued by Eskenazi, are informative of his theologically oriented approach to interpretation and exegesis. Ezra's refusal to accept an armed guard, for example, should not be interpreted as a criticism of Nehemiah's acceptance of an escort but simply as an indication that "two of God's servants acted differently; both were following God's leading, and God used both of them" (p. 143). This tendency of B. to avoid some of the more vexing literary questions raised by Eskenazi and in der Smitten, to name only two, is regrettable, because he otherwise shows a fine ability to interact with critical issues in textual history.

Interestingly, B. is not nearly as disturbed by the handling of mixed marriages as many recent commentators have been (both Clines and Williamson have recently spoken quite candidly about their personal disagreements with Ezra's actions, and it has certainly been a significant topic in feminist literary analysis of the Bible). This is partly to be attributed to the fact that B. accepts the text at face value when it speaks of intermarriage with Canaanites or "pagans."

The reforms of Nehemiah 5 have often been read as providing important insights into the nature and form of the postexilic community in the Persian period. B. correctly sees that the evidence for the nature of the postexilic community indicates that it was not composed of wealthy and privileged exiles—although he cites the Murashu archive as evidence that at least some members of the exiled community were economically successful (a difficult inference from a very *late* collection of texts, I would argue, and one that is challenged by Ran Zadok's work on Hebrew onomastica in these same archives). The forced economic enslavement of fellow community members, for example, is taken up by B. as an example of indentured servitude to foreign peoples (p. 204). Furthermore, on the theological side, this text gives B. the opportunity to suggest that "one's 'legal rights' can cause oppression and be morally wrong in God's sight. Often Christians do not realize how serious and sinful 'indirect' oppression can be." This statement certainly reveals B.'s sensitivity to current socio-political aspects of the interpretation of the Bible (perhaps especially in his own Latin American context?).

In the brief commentary on Esther B. also deals with some of the most important historical and textual difficulties of the book, and his freedom in dealing with the text is evident in his refusal to deal with "historicity" as a significant issue in assessing and interpreting the Book of Esther as a Jewish tale of the Persian court in the same genre as the Book of Daniel and the story of Joseph.

The well-written style of this commentary and the author's incorporation of scholarship representing a wide range of theological and historical-critical opinions, make B.'s work an interesting contribution to Ezra-Nehemiah scholarship; but this reviewer could not help wondering what far more interesting and original contributions might have been possible in a forum not so clearly dictated by conservative theological agenda. Reading "between the lines," we see in B.'s work some thoughtful realizations of the complexity of these short biblical books in modern analysis.

Perhaps in the future we can hear more from B. that is intentionally informed by his South American experience.

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WILLIAM P. BROWN, *Structure, Role, and Ideology in the Hebrew and Greek Texts of Genesis 1:1–2:3* (SBLDS 132; Atlanta: Scholars, 1993). Pp. xvi + 268. Cloth \$44.95; paper \$29.95.

Typically, two types of knowledge are imparted as one reads or engages in dialogue. There is information that confirms what one believes, and there is information that challenges what one believes. The best academic enterprises effectively challenge consensus by offering fresh insights and interpretations that demand attention. Brown's book is such an effort. Expanding on a proposal by E. Tov (*The Text-critical Use of the Septuagint in Biblical Research* [Jerusalem: Simor, 1981]), B. argues against scholarly consensus that the LXX text of Genesis 1:1–2:3 represents a harmonizing translation of the Hebrew. It is his thesis that the Hebrew *Vorlage* of the LXX represents a tradition earlier than that preserved by the masoretes.

Brown's attempt to undermine traditional scholarship is based on a methodology he himself refers to as a "cross-fertilization of disciplines." He appends a particular form of literary criticism, based on the ideological poetics of M. M. Bakhtin (1895–1975), to the working principles of the text-critical approach. The most important assertion of Bakhtin's work borrowed by B. is that texts are by nature *dialogical*. This means that, rather than the meaning of the text arising out of its inherent structure dictated by some universal dictum of literary language, the meaning is established through discourse with others, or in other words, through social construction.

Utilizing traditional text-critical methods, B. initially attempts to "isolate the literary work as such, to reveal its structure, to determine possible forms and variations of this structure, and to define its elements and their functions." It is only then, according to B., that the values concealed in the form and structure can be ideologically identified. B. assures his readers that formal ideological analysis is capable of uncovering layers of meaning, from the explicit to the implicit. It is his opinion that past attempts at dealing with the text in Genesis have come up short precisely because scholars have investigated the dense structure "without taking seriously the nature of literature as ideologically active in the general cultural and social world in which it is embedded."

Plainly stated, B. attempts to demonstrate the efficaciousness of combining ideological criticism with textual criticism by examining the dialogical relationship between the MT of Gen 1:1–2:3 and the Hebrew *Vorlage* of the LXX. In the three chapters following the introduction he philologically and text-critically analyzes, first, the LXX, then, the MT, and finally, a Hebrew retroversion of the LXX text of Gen 1:1–2:3 which he designates as VorLXX. Within each chapter he provides