

Book Review

Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003). 424 pages.

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Old Testament historical scholarship is dominated by two types of works: historical-critical books, which deny the historicity and authority of the Bible, and conservative apologetics, which often are not sufficiently critical. The former is defective for those who afford authority to the Bible, even when interesting information is presented. The latter often is inadequate to deal with the critical issues that do arise from the biblical texts.

These three scholar/professors have written an important work that successfully challenges the epistemological basis of the historical-critical method. They do so while taking an irenic tone that does not challenge the integrity or spirituality of its proponents. Special attention is given to the overall subject of historiography: How is history to be done?

The center of the authors' argument is to clarify the role of testimony in constructing history. Modern biblical criticism tends to view non-biblical "neutral" historical testimony (archaeological data, Ancient Near-Eastern texts, etc.) as more valuable than the ideologically loaded biblical texts. The authors demonstrate that these other sources are themselves not free of ideology, and that ideology itself does not mean accurate history cannot be transmitted. They further show how the Old Testament shows itself to be a credible witness. Another advantage of this volume over some other conservative works is its treatment of

outside evidence. Rather than attempt to use this data as "proof" of the biblical accounts, they show where there is "convergence" between the sources. The difference is that proofs built on such little available evidence are easily countered. Convergence, however, merely shows that the evidence neither contradicts the sacred texts nor makes them seem implausible. The authors also show that, in light of other evidence, what the Bible claims is reasonable to reasonable people.

The first hundred pages of the book deal with these foundational issues and could be a separate monograph. The next two hundred pages sketch out the history of Israel. These chapters, however, do not paint an easily readable narrative of biblical history. Rather, they present a much abbreviated portion of the history and then discuss the problematic issues. Difficulties presented by the text itself or by outside evidence are dealt with as completely and fairly as possible. This section is, therefore, more valuable as a reference for dealing with these specific texts than comfortable reading.

Even with that qualification, this is a valuable book for any pastor or scholar who wishes to have a solid base for dealing with the issues of the historicity of the Old Testament texts. It is especially useful when one is confronted with the assertions of the historical-critical approach to those books.