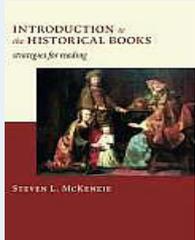


McKenzie's new 'Introduction to the Historical Books: Strategies for reading'

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Review Title:

McKenzie's new 'Introduction to the Historical Books: Strategies for reading'

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This book will probably be a standard introduction in many universities and seminaries around the world for years to come. McKenzie manages to find the right balance between clarity and depth that is a perfect fit for undergraduate students. In his first chapter (pp. 1–12) he sets the scene by defining what he understands by 'historical books'. For him this refers to the Former Prophets of the Hebrew Bible (or what scholars call the Deuteronomistic History) and the books of Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah. McKenzie seems to be very sensitive to students of more fundamentalist persuasions, arguing that recognition of genre is probably one of the most important skills in understanding the Bible. He explains this by means of the book of Jonah. He then engages with the issue of why nations tend to write histories about their past, drawing on insights from John van Seters. The next two chapters continue to prepare the way for what follows in the rest of the book.

Chapter 2 (pp. 13–24) explores in a compact but thorough way how Martin Noth coined the term 'Deuteronomistic History' and how his thoughts were developed to form the Göttingen/Smend and Harvard/Cross schools. McKenzie himself takes up a position much closer to Noth's original notion. The reader is then introduced to the theories around the Chronicler and the authorship of Ezra-Nehemiah. The contributions and impact of Sarah Japhet and Hugh Williamson are discussed – especially the resultant interest in these later books which had earlier been mostly ignored by biblical scholarship. McKenzie argues that the majority of scholars would regard Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah as written by different authors, especially because of the differing ideologies and theologies in these books.

The third chapter (pp. 25–38) would also be valuable to undergraduate students as McKenzie introduces the reader to the different methods used in reading biblical texts. The classic distinction between diachronic and synchronic approaches is explained. Under diachronic approaches methods such as 'textual criticism', 'source criticism', 'form criticism' and 'historical reconstruction' are discussed. With regards to synchronic methods he outlines two approaches: 'canonical criticism' and 'narrative criticism'. All of these methods are presented by discussing 1 Samuel 17 and what insights into the text the different methods might generate. Apart from the fact that David and Goliath is always an exciting story, McKenzie manages to use this text successfully in order to explain the various methods.

In the rest of the book McKenzie offers an overview of Joshua (pp. 39–56), Judges (pp. 57–71), 1–2 Samuel (pp. 72–90), 1–2 Kings (pp. 91–112), 1–2 Chronicles (pp. 113–141) and Ezra-Nehemiah (pp. 142–159).

McKenzie mostly adopts a particular sequence when discussing the individual biblical books. He starts off by providing an overview of the content of each book under headings such as 'Content and Structure' (p. 57), or 'Contents and Plot' (p. 72). He then focuses on diachronic issues, before concluding with more synchronic readings and explanations of theological themes in the book. Yet the discussion of each book is slightly different and tailor-made for that specific biblical book.

For instance, when he deals with the book of Joshua, we find a good discussion on the tension between the things described in the book and the data uncovered by archaeology. The student is introduced to most of the interpretive problems regarding the conquest narrative in the book. The discussion of the book of Judges combines a consideration of the layers identified in the text by historical-critical scholars and the plots and themes revealed by narrative-critical scholars. In the chapter on 1–2 Samuel we find a similar mix of diachronic and synchronic approaches, although he tends to spend more time on the former. The chapter on 1–2 Kings focuses mostly on historical issues such as the scarcity of external sources and the problems faced in attempting to untangle the chronology of the different kings of the two kingdoms. The theological similarities between 1–2 Kings and Deuteronomy are also discussed. In his discussion of 1–2 Chronicles McKenzie spends much time on the way that the Chronicler used his sources to write a history 'albeit for theological and didactic purpose' (p. 113). A large part of the last chapter on Ezra-Nehemiah dwells on the historical reality behind these texts, placing them in the context of the Persian Empire.

All in all McKenzie provides the undergraduate student with a thorough entry into the world of biblical scholars dealing with the historical books of the Hebrew Bible. Some people might complain that he spends too much time on historical-critical issues and too little on more synchronic readings. I, for one, do not agree.