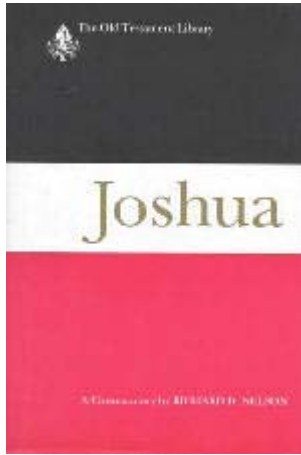


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Nelson, Richard D.

Joshua: A Commentary

Old Testament Library

Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997. Pp. xviii + 310, Hardcover, \$40.00, ISBN 0664219411.

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Much learning and digested scholarship are included in this compact commentary. Matters of historical background, literary and form analysis, and textual criticism are treated briefly in the introduction (pp. 1-24), and the main body of the commentary is divided into twenty-eight sections. With a few exceptions Nelson's sections correspond to the canonical subdivisions of Joshua (twenty-four chapters). The book includes an appendix of site identifications and two indexes. One index is for ancient sources cited in the commentary, and the other is a general subject index. A bibliography is provided before the introduction and commentary.

This is a historical-critical commentary in the now classical sense of the term, supplemented with careful observations about structure and literary theme in the final form of the text. In each section the author deals with theories of underlying sources, form-critical proposals, and text-critical issues, building on the observations in the brief introduction. He holds that editors associated with the Deuteronomistic History have shaped the final form of Joshua and that theories which attribute a substantial layer to the priestly writers (or school) are suggestive but not proven. More specifically, Nelson sees the double redaction theory of 1-2 Kings as related to the redactional history of Joshua. In the seventh century BCE, a version of Joshua was compiled, and it was supplemented by an exilic editor. Thus there is a relationship between the portrait of Joshua and that of Josiah from the last quarter of the seventh century.

Does the book of Joshua assist the critical historian in evaluating the settlement of the early Israelite tribes in Canaan? Nelson concludes that it offers little direct assistance: “Joshua is fundamentally a theological and literary work. Hardly any of the material it preserves is of the sort that can be directly used for historical construction” (pp. 2-3). In other words, “Joshua is a historical witness to what later generations believed had happened to their ancestors” (p. 4). In comparison to the attention given to textual, redaction and thematic analyses, only minimal attention is given to historical reconstruction of either the settlement period or those of the primary redactors.

Along with his translation Nelson provides a stream of references to the book’s textual transmission and textual variants. In some places (i.e., the sections on chapters 5-6 and on 20:1- 9) he provides a translation in two columns. The first column is called the “unrevised text” and the second column is called the “MT [=Masoretic Text] revision.” Quite apart from whether his translation division is persuasive in every instance, it provides good examples for readers of the ways that scholars undertake the task of evaluating manuscript traditions and textual variants. Nelson works with the theory that an “old Greek” tradition derived mainly from the Septuagint can assist one in discerning the earliest recoverable text of the book of Joshua. The Hebrew text, therefore, in some instances is expansionistic.

Nelson does not give short *schrift* to Joshua 13-22, the portion dealing with tribal inheritances, cities of refuge, and levitical settlements. This can be difficult material for modern readers. He does not, however, devote a major portion of the space to either historical or geographical reconstruction. For site identification he points to the appendix, although he will make use of such matters in explanation (cf. the comments on the “southern campaign” of Joshua 10 on p. 147 or the comments on Judah’s inheritance in Joshua 15, pp. 185-93).

Matters of theology in Joshua (“fundamentally a theological work” according to Nelson) are not given much evaluation. It is clear that the author has some interest in these matters but has chosen to put his emphasis elsewhere. The strength of the volume, therefore, comes in the succinct way in which he has digested a lot of scholarly work on Joshua and sought to guide a reader through its maze in order to see the book of Joshua from various angles. On occasion he not only guides but provides his own suggestions to improve the interpretive process (e.g., his evaluation of the command for the sun to “stand still” in Josh 10:12-13, pp. 142-45). Typically he provides a thematic and literary summary of a section that repays careful attention. This is an instructive volume and one that adds to the value of the Old Testament Library Series.