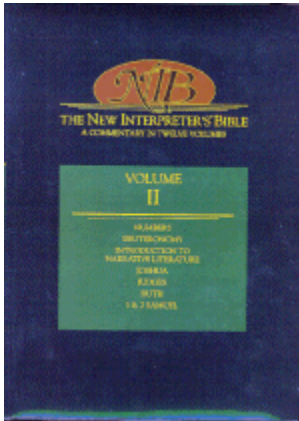


RBL 10/15/1999



Keck, Leander E. et al., eds.

The New Interpreter's Bible: Numbers, Deuteronomy, Introduction to Narrative Literature, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel

Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998. Pp. xviii + 1388, Cloth, \$70.00, ISBN 0687278155.
Volume: 2

Won Lee
Calvin College
Grand Rapids, MI 49546

This second volume of *The New Interpreter's Bible* (NIB) contains condensed interpretations of six Old Testament books and a general article on narrative literature. Each interpretation provides concise introductory notes covering the major topics and critical problems of the book as a whole. In its main section, the contributors begin with a portion of the biblical text ("coherent and manageable primary units") based on the NIV and NRSV translations, discuss both critical and interpretive issues of individual units, and end with a homiletic or theological "reflection" illustrating the unit's significance for the contemporary community of faith. This format of introduction-commentary-reflection provides cohesiveness to each interpretation as well as the whole volume on the surface level, which in turn makes the volume readable and easy-to-use.

The substantive discussions of the volume in its entirety can also be seen as coherent. It is true that the volume as a whole seems to be a collection of six independent studies, which are unaware of each other's contributions, and has no clear flow among them. Nevertheless, the contributors share the common exegetical decision of focusing primarily on the final form of the text. Neither ignoring the results of historical-critical approaches nor insisting only on literary characters of the text, they provide diverse theological perspectives and innovative ways of reading the text.

Departing from the documentary hypothesis, Dozeman understands the "pre-priestly" tradition (traditionally called as JE) as containing material that is not limited to Genesis-Numbers but extends from Genesis through Kings. This material was composed not in the seventh century BCE., but in the late monarchical or the exilic period; hence it has literary interdependence with materials contained in Deuteronomistic History. He also

defines the literary character of the priestly tradition not as an independent history from pre-priestly literature but as a redaction of it; thus, there is a dialogue between traditions in the formation of Numbers. From these principles, he attempts to explain "the themes that arise in priestly literature" and "the ways in which additions by priestly writers reinterpret and restructure the pre-priestly history" (p. 8). As a result, he argues that the dominant theme of Numbers is priestly religion, whose goal is "to bring a holy God and a profane people together through the tabernacle cult" (p. 15). Heavily influenced by his exegesis on Exodus and Leviticus, he contends that Num 1:1-10:10 outlines how Israel ought to be organized as a community around a holy God; Num 10:11-21:35 portrays the journey of the Exodus generation as full of conflicts leading to death in the wilderness; and Num 22:1-36:13 narrates the wilderness generation's final preparation for entering Canaan. The transition of generations and their settings from Mt. Sinai to the plains of Moab via the wilderness provides a unified conceptual framework for Numbers. This conceptuality is also evident in his reflections where he addresses various aspects of a community of God travelling through contemporary society.

Clements, unlike Dozeman, maintains traditional understanding of Deuteronomy with a slight modification. He asserts that the book is "neither the earliest nor the latest to have been composed," but stands as "a midpoint, and even a balance point, for the Pentateuch as a whole" (p. 274). The book in its present form was composed in Judah during the six century BCE in response to the historical situation filled with the danger of losing the sense of nationhood and of commitment to the Lord as sovereign God. However, emphasizing the book's highly developed exhortation and rhetorical persuasion, he characterizes it as "preached law" or a "national polity" for all Israel. As a polity, the book regulates Israelite belief and practice; it demands the entire nation of Israel give its undivided and exclusive allegiance to worship the Lord alone. This loyalty must be translated into its religious practice as well as moral and social behavior. Structurally, the Ten Commandments play the dominating role in the entire book.

The rest of the volume deals with the books from Joshua to 2 Samuel from the vantage point of the larger Deuteronomistic History, and it employs newer exegetical methods to interpret them. With a brief survey of the historical development of biblical methods since the 1960s and an explanation of some key terminology used in literary study of biblical narrative, Miscall paves the way for the readers to appreciate the innovative ways in which the books are treated.

In keeping with the results of archeological, social-scientific, and comparative studies, Coote pays attention to the political nature of Joshua. From the Davidic monarchic perspective, he argues that Joshua as a hero, is portrayed in the manner after David; the tribes of Israel are depicted as having "politics of radical reform and centralization." Further emphasis is placed upon Josiah's reform, its cultic and judicial centralization, and the periodic remission of debt. Thus, the whole book was composed mainly during the period of Josiah's reform. The account of Israel's conquest is to foreshadow Josiah's

attempt to reconquer Israel and to confirm its sovereignty; and the account of the distribution of the conquered land elaborates upon Josiah's policy of centralization for the sake of his poor subjects by promulgating a program of debt remission.

As another aspect of newer methods, Olson stresses redactional and narrative readings of the final form of Judges. The editors of the final form have redefined the well-established cyclical pattern of Israel's life during the time of Judges. The book depicts no longer "a series of flat cycles in endless repetition" of sin-oppression-cry out-deliverance-rest-sin again, but "a downward slide and increasingly severe disintegration of Israel's social and religious life" (p. 726). The structure of the book itself shows this change. The book begins with the gradual deterioration during Israel's conquest of Canaan (1:1-2:5) and its faithfulness to the covenant with God (2:6-3:6) and ends with the total disintegration of its religious and social life (17:1-21:25). In between there is the gradual decline of chosen Judges' faithfulness and effectiveness (3:7-16:31).

Similar to Olson, Farmer focuses on its narrative elements, such as word play, repetition, character development, etc., which leads her to the character of Naomi, instead of Ruth. The book is not about a story with moral interests that challenges the readers to be or act like Ruth, who was an outsider and yet accepted solely by faithfulness to her mother-in-law. Rather, it is a redemptive story of God in which Naomi's life has been completely turned around. In this story of Naomi, "whose feelings of bitterness, emptiness, and hopelessness are reversed," Ruth's faithfulness is "only the instrument God uses to accomplish Naomi's redemption" (p. 892). Thus, the book demonstrates not the faithfulness of the people but the faithfulness of God. Moreover, the book, taken together with Judges and 1 Samuel, functions "as a 'witness to the moral legitimacy of the Davidic monarchy.'" (p. 894). Saul was rejected because of his ancestors' immoral behavior, despite his pure bloodline. In contrast, David, exemplified by Ruth, was accepted because he voluntarily chose to join to the Lord, despite his foreign bloodline. Furthermore, the book, as part of post-exilic and wisdom-oriented writings in the Hebrew Bible, reveals the greatness of the Davidic line of kings rather than defending their legitimacy.

Like Dozeman, Birch seeks to explain how independent literary units (such as ark narrative, a history of the rise of David, and a court narrative) and prophetic editions (evident in 1 Sam 1-3; 7-17; 16; 28; 2 Sam 7; 11-12; 24) contribute to the books of Samuel in their present form. In this way, he sees the deuteronomist not as a mere historian but as the literary artist and theological commentator. Interested also in the book's socio-historical context, like Coote, he contends that the books seek to legitimize the social and governmental transformation from a loose federation of tribal leagues to politically centralized monarchy and to resist this new centralized political and economic structure as well. Like Farmer, Birch pays attention to the role of various personalities including Samuel, Saul, and David. Their inner struggles and actions are portrayed in both the imaginative and realistic terms. Finally, like Clements and Olson, he points out

the theological nature of the books. The books testify to "the providence of God," that the power of God is working in and through various personalities and historical events to overturn the usual pattern of the world and eventually bring Israel to a new future.

Despite reflecting different exegetical priorities among the contributors, this second volume accomplishes what NIB envisions: "to bring the best in contemporary biblical scholarship into the service of the church to enhance preaching, teaching, and study of the Scriptures" (p. xvii). Each commentary is up-to-date, argued clearly, and faithful to the theological meaning of the text; and each reflection, drawn from the exegesis of the text, is thoughtful, illustrative, and readily applicable for contemporary communities of faith.