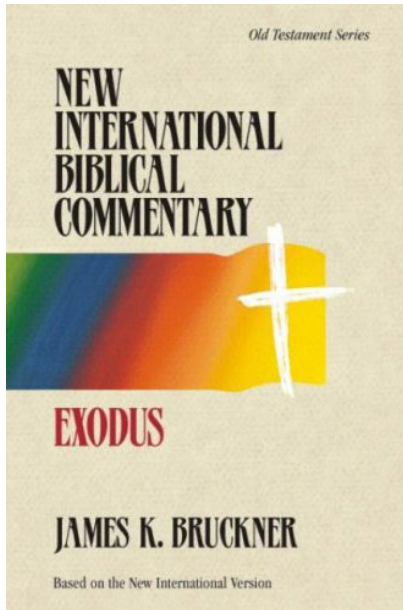


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Exodus

New International Biblical Commentary

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The New International Biblical Commentary series aims to read the Bible from a context of believing criticism. Its contributors are committed to engaging the biblical text as people of faith who confess the authority of Scripture and as academics who interact with the full range of modern scholarship. The goal is to produce a faithful reading of the Bible that can enrich both the church and the academy by bring both into conversation with the biblical text.

James K. Bruckner serves as professor of Old Testament at North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago. He has also written *Implied Law in the Abraham Narrative: A Literary and Theological Analysis* (JSOTSup 335; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002) and *Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah* (NIV Application Commentary Series; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

Bruckner follows the standard format of the NIBC series. He opens with an introduction (1–17). The commentary proper is divided into forty-eight short sections (19–331). Each section includes commentary on the relevant verses of Exodus followed by a section of notes in which Bruckner provides bibliographic references and more detailed dialogue

with critical scholarship and technical issues in the text. *Exodus* ends with a bibliography for further reading (333–38), a subject index (339–42), and a Scripture index (343–48).

Bruckner reads the book of Exodus through six interpretive perspectives (5–6). First, Exodus is about liberation. This liberation, however, is principally a liberation to serve God rather than a liberation understood as a move from oppression to autonomous freedom. Second, Exodus highlights the role of Israel as Abraham’s descendants through whom God will bless the nations. This lens ties Israel’s deliverance from Egypt with God’s mission to extend blessing through God’s people. Third, God’s grace is the basis for the Sinaitic law. Law ordered the redeemed community and must not be read as the means for the salvation of the community. Fourth, Exodus traces the beginning of the emerging relationship between God and God’s people. This includes the theme of grumbling and rebellion against God and God’s willingness to forgive his people despite their disobedience. Fifth, the tabernacle represents a cooperative effort in which the Creator invites his people to craft a dwelling place for God’s glory. Last, the book of Exodus as a whole exists to speak a word of hope to God’s people. The reverberations of the Exodus message resonate across the literature of the Old and New Testaments.

In the introduction (1–15), Bruckner provides an overview of key interpretive issues. His conclusions are rooted in evidence in the book of Exodus itself and are irenic in tone. He overviews recent source-critical approaches to the Pentateuch. He recognizes the complexity of the final literary product and argues that its final redaction occurred in the late sixth century B.C.E. in light of the return from exile. Bruckner focuses on making sense of the diversity of the text by reading its individual units in light of one another instead of emphasizing the differences between them. Moreover, Bruckner lends a sympathetic ear to the interpretive voices of liberation theology. As noted above, Bruckner understands liberation in the book of Exodus as a liberation for service in God’s mission more than as a liberation from oppression. However, Bruckner recognizes rightly the power of the Exodus narrative for those who have found themselves under oppression. He cautions the reader to assess one’s own “social group as oppressor and/or oppressed” (12). Bruckner also offers a nuanced description of the complex nature of Exodus’s portrait of God. In Exodus, God acts both unilaterally and through the agency of human beings. God gives life but also kills Egyptians and some disobedient Israelites. Throughout the commentary, Bruckner emphasizes God as the Creator as a dominant theme of Exodus’s theological understanding. This follows in the footsteps of Terence Fretheim (*Exodus*; IBC; Louisville: John Knox, 1991), Bruckner’s doctoral advisor, and serves to give a coherent center to Bruckner’s commentary.

Bruckner’s exegetical treatment of Exodus is remarkable for its blend of brevity *and* depth. I have not always found volumes in the NIBC series to be helpful due to their short

treatment of passages. Bruckner's volume has been edited well. He wastes few words and is able to produce explanatory comments on the text that are penetrating and full of rich insight. Bruckner reads each passage within the narrative of Exodus, but he is also able to bring it into dialogue with relevant passages in the wider biblical literature. This serves to link key themes in Exodus with the larger biblical narrative and permits Bruckner to reflect on the theological meaning of passages.

Each section of the commentary ends with "Additional Notes" in which Bruckner delves deeper into critical issues raised by the text itself and by the scholarly community. Readers will find keen insights and clear guidance to significant secondary literature on the text. Bruckner demonstrates that he has read widely and well in the field. His interpretive judgments are based on solid scholarship.

Bruckner achieves a welcome balance in the space that he allocates for the two halves of the book. There are roughly 160 pages of commentary/notes on the mostly narrative material in Exod 1–19 and 150 pages for the principally legal/liturgical instructions in Exod 20–40. It is vital for understanding the book of Exodus to engage the difficult materials in the Book of the Covenant and the tabernacle sections in relationship to the narrative of deliverance in the first half of Exodus. The equal space allotted to the two halves allows Bruckner to read Exodus holistically and well. The ethical vision of the Sinai covenant is read in the context of Israel's response to God's prior gracious actions on behalf of the people.

Bruckner gives extended treatment to theologically and historically important texts such as the Ten Commandments (20:1–17). He also provides introductions to key units within Exodus such as the plague narrative, golden calf, and tabernacle. Bruckner succeeds in writing a coherent commentary that engages the details of the text without losing sight of the broader literary and theological issues at stake in the book as a whole.

Another strength of Bruckner's work is his appropriation and critique of liberationist interpretations of Exodus. Bruckner critiques the excesses of some liberationists who overemphasize the human role in liberation at the cost of divine action and sovereignty. He is equally critical of attempts of the opposite tendency to overplay God's role at the expense of humanity's actions in the service of the Creator. As Creator, God may act unilaterally and is the one who initiates the deliverance of God's people. But God engages humanity for participation and limited partnership in God's mission to bring blessing to all Creation. He reads the story of liberation and the giving of covenant within a context of grace and mission. The liberation of Israel from Egypt serves as the necessary means of Israel accomplishing God's mission for God's people of embodying God's blessing for all humanity. The relationship between God's actions and the work of God's people is

dynamic. In its essence, God's people act and live in response to God's gracious action and invitation to serve as God's missional people in the world. God as Creator has chosen to accomplish his wider work of salvation in part through the agency of people. Both aspects have to be understood and reflected upon to give due justice to the book of Exodus's understanding of human liberation. Of Moses' role, Bruckner writes, "God acted in history to dispossess Egypt of its slaves and the peoples of Canaan of their land. God took the initiative but chose not to act alone. Gifted human leadership was crucial to God's work in the world from the very beginning" (43). Of the interaction between God and Israel, Bruckner's comments on the completion of the tabernacle and the glory of God filling it are poignant:

Building this home together best expressed the reconciliation between the people and the Lord. God designed it and directed the construction through Moses. The people made and gave everything.... By building the Tabernacle they participated in the restoration of hope. These chapters tell the truth about the dependence of love and reconciliation on mutual labor and attention to detail. The Lord met the excellent work of the people with approval, "moving into" their camp to "tabernacle" in their midst. (330)

Exodus is an excellent short treatment of the book of Exodus. It will prove a valuable and trustworthy guide to pastors and teachers. It explains the content of the book well with an eye to its theological meaning and offers clear bibliographic notes for those who may want to explore a particular issue more deeply. It achieves its goal of a reading of the text that brings the voices of the church and the academy together in a way that can enrich both communities. I recommend it heartily.