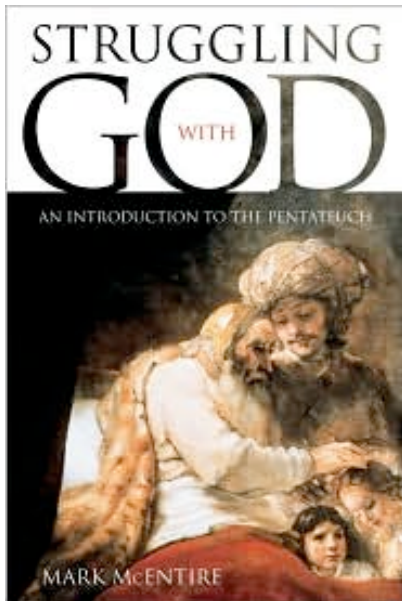


RBL 09/2009



McEntire, Mark

Struggling with God: An Introduction to the Pentateuch

Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2008. Pp. xii + 249. Paper. \$25.00. ISBN 9780881461015.

Lissa M. Wray Beal
Providence Theological Seminary
Otterburne, Manitoba, Canada

Mark McEntire's *Struggling With God* is directed to undergraduates in a classroom setting. Intended as a textbook, it provides summarizing tables throughout, questions for reflection, lists of key terms, and sources for further study. McEntire seeks to provide a resource for "students and teachers ... as they struggle together to understand the books of [the Pentateuch]" (x). McEntire also seeks to engage the rapidly changing field of pentateuchal studies and to apply the insights of literary studies to each of the five books and the whole corpus.

Chapter 1 ("Introduction: Reading the Pentateuch") creatively reveals the complexity of studying ancient texts. Given the text as found in Christian Bibles and Hebrew Tanak, McEntire moves backward from this known entity, through the manuscript traditions, the production and canonization of the Pentateuch, and concludes with the question of authorship. Affirming textual development over a long period, McEntire first explores the assumptions behind the tradition of Mosaic authorship, followed by an application of historical-critical methods to the authorship question. McEntire uses this as a forum to introduce and evaluate the contributions of historical-critical methodologies; he then concludes with some contemporary methodologies, particularly literary approaches, which he uses as his primary means of entry into the text.

Two related sections conclude the chapter. “History and the Pentateuch,” and “‘Literal’ Reading of the Bible” explore the various historical contexts in which an ancient text can be considered (of its component parts; of its final production; that in which the events may have occurred) and the assumptions underlying concepts such as inspiration, methods of interpretation, and a text’s possible historical witness. Here McEntire’s thoughtful reflection is revealed as he seeks to move students to more informed, nuanced reading of the Pentateuch.

Chapters 2–6 address the five books. Each chapter begins with a discussion of the book’s literary shape, followed by a discussion of the major literary complexes of the book, focusing on their shape and function. Close readings are given to select passages throughout to “serve as important interpretive examples and demonstrate major issues” (x). Given the many passages that could be discussed in detail, McEntire’s selection intends to trace the development of the pentateuchal narrative (x). McEntire does engage historical-critical issues (primarily source-critical) as a helpful adjunct to reveal the text’s compositional complexity and detail and to acknowledge that historical-critical study still informs pentateuchal studies; having done so, he returns to the final form of the text for the discussion of its literary shape. Each chapter ends with a discussion of history and the particular pentateuchal book and takes up issues of historical plausibility (whether such can be determined and the means toward such an end) and the effect of the final form of the books upon the postexilic community in which McEntire places the Pentateuch’s final production.

In chapter 2 (Genesis), the discussion of literary landscape focuses on two narrative tasks accomplished in Genesis: to identify the people called “Israel”; and to narrow the geographical scope from a universal canvas to the particular people, Israel, situated in Egypt. These narrative tasks are shaped by literary features such as the dual complexes of the primeval and ancestral history and the genealogical framework. Working through the major component narratives, he works well to introduce their major plot lines and themes.

The discussion of Gen 12:1–3 engenders the first discussion of covenant, here a “booming voice ... that steals the show” (68). A table follows in which all the repetitions of the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis are presented, and a few references to covenant follow in the remaining discussion of Genesis. A final comment notes that the promises of the covenant remain unfulfilled (83). However, what does not appear but that would be so helpful for an introductory text is a larger explication of what the covenant entails: What are its major emphases? Which of these is the concern of the Genesis narrative? And, if the narrative task of Genesis is that of identifying the people Israel and bringing them to Egypt, how does this relate to the covenant?

Chapter 3 (Exodus) surveys the literary landscape through the dominant literary modes found in Exodus: narrative and law. The different modes are tied together into a coherent narrative through the thematic center of the book, which is appropriate worship of YHWH (88). The theme of worship is not specifically addressed in the initial discussion of the Sinai covenant (105), but the discussion of Exod 32–34 does bring the whole Sinai experience under the rubric of worship. Further, while the Sinai covenant is mentioned as covenant, this theme is not tied in to the covenants of Genesis, so that it is not apparent whether the covenants of Genesis and Exodus are considered related.

This chapter provides a good introduction to the forms of law found in the Pentateuch, their possible origins, and the process of collection. The various law codes are enumerated, although no explanation of the name for each code is given; while some may intuit the source of the names Covenant Code, Holiness Code, and so forth, a simple explanation would be appropriate.

Chapter 4 (Leviticus), the shortest treatment of the five books (about one third shorter), acknowledges the difficulty of reading the text as narrative (125, 146). Additionally, the chapter wisely addresses common questions of “What is the point of reading this book?” by which Leviticus is too often dismissed. Its value is found in its central place in the overall structure of the Pentateuch and its unique lack of forward narrative arc. McEntire suggests an editorial decision to include Leviticus that valued its priestly focus. He concludes the chapter by considering the needs of the postexilic community, demonstrating to his intended audience the importance of the historical contexts first broached in the book’s introductory chapter.

Chapter 5 (Numbers) surveys its literary landscape in relation to the whole Pentateuch, describing its connection backward to the Sinai pericope (chs. 1–10) and forward to the new wilderness journeys of Israel. McEntire notes that it is the dual census-taking (chs. 1 and 26) that enables the canonical book to hold together across the division of 10:10–11. The component parts of the narrative are discussed through the rubric of law and wilderness narrative, and the outlines of different scholars are surveyed, although the discussion does not wholly follow any of the outlines provided. This may cause a careful reader some confusion: Which division pattern does McEntire follow? Despite this, a theme emerges amidst wilderness narratives, census, and laws and appears to be that of group identity (159, 171), but this theme is not discussed in relation to the larger narrative, especially that of Genesis, whose narrative purpose was earlier stated to be group identification.

Chapter 6 (Deuteronomy) focuses the literary survey upon Deuteronomy’s multiple layers, signaled by its several superscriptions. Working through the sections, McEntire

identifies worship as the primary theme (200), although the theme of covenant is also readdressed in the discussion of Deut 29. In this chapter, the question of land possession is first intentionally addressed (207–8); although it was listed as part of the covenant promises given in Genesis, that connection only now is made explicit, so that this aspect of Deuteronomy is not closely tied to the larger narrative.

A final chapter introduces the Pentateuch's relation to the Deuteronomistic History, Chronicles, contemporary society, and ongoing pentateuchal studies. The chapter's diversity and brevity does not enable strong interaction with any of these topics and leaves a sense of incompleteness to the discussion. Perhaps a review of the book would have been more helpful, summarizing the various themes addressed.

The book is strong in dealing with the background issues of assumptions and the thorny issues concerning historicity and tradition. It nicely reveals the value of historical-critical work, while championing the ability of literary approaches to unfold a text. Where the book is most wanting is its unfolding of the narrative arc of the whole corpus—a task that McEntire consciously undertakes when he asks in what sense the Pentateuch is a coherent work of literature to be read all the way through (1) and when his selection of texts to be examined in detail is driven by a desire to unfold that narrative (x). Given this question, it would improve the book to have outlined at some point its understanding of *the* narrative point of the Pentateuch. Is it covenant, as suggested in Gen 12:1–3? Is it worship, as suggested in Exodus and Deuteronomy? Is it Israelite identity through Jacob, as suggested by the title and Genesis? Or, given these themes (which are argued in the discrete books), how do they interact together in the whole? A final chapter attending to this question McEntire proposes, or at least attention to summative statements throughout, would strengthen this work, assisting its intended audience to see the whole as well as the discrete books.