Dozeman, Thomas B., ed.

Methods for Exodus

Methods in Biblical Interpretation


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Methods for Exodus, edited by Thomas B. Dozeman, is the fourth volume in the series Methods in Biblical Interpretation. Earlier volumes include Methods for Luke, edited by Joel B. Green; Methods for Matthew, edited by Mark Allan Powell, and Methods for the Psalms, edited by Esther Marie Menn. The Methods in Biblical Interpretation series from Cambridge University Press seeks to introduce students and general readers of the Bible to six distinct hermeneutical approaches to the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. Methods included range from traditional historical-critical “world behind the text” approaches to new “world in front of the text” methodologies influenced by the globalization and democratization of biblical studies. Each volume includes an introductory essay followed by six essays penned by a leading practitioner of a discrete interpretive method. Each essay introduces the student to a specific hermeneutical method by reviewing its history of development. The scholars then discuss each discrete method’s applicability to the given biblical book. Finally, the writers apply the methods to the same set of texts. By assigning each writer the same texts, Methods in Biblical Interpretation allows the reader to see the similarities and differences between the various approaches to the text. Moreover, the authors themselves attempt to point out connections between their approach and the exegetical lenses of others.
Dozeman’s *Methods for Exodus* offers a strong addition to the series. Dozeman is a leading scholar on the book of Exodus and has gathered an impressive band of exegetes to contribute to the volume. Dennis T. Olson writes the chapter on “Literary and Rhetorical Criticism.” Kenton L. Sparks covers “Genre Criticism.” Suzanne Boorer discusses “Source and Redaction Criticism.” Jorge Pixley describes “Liberation Criticism.” Naomi Steinberg illustrates “Feminist Criticism.” Gale A. Yee proffers an introduction to “Postcolonial Biblical Criticism.”

Dozeman’s introductory essay (1–12) sketches out the aims of the book. First, *Methods for Exodus* seeks to introduce the above six methodologies that help readers to understand the book of Exodus. Second, *Methods for Exodus* hopes to show the ways that these discrete approaches relate to one another in terms of similarities and differences. Toward this second end, Dozeman notes that the divide between the approaches turns on how one understands the authority of the book of Exodus. Traditional historical-critical approaches locate authority in the “world behind the text” of its authors and reconstructed social setting. More recent ideological methodologies locate authority in the “world in front of the text” rooted in the social location of its modern readers. Dozeman argues that these approaches find common ground in that both “behind the text” and “in front of the text” methods reflect critically on the historical setting of the literature. Moreover, certain flavors of historical-critical methods such as genre criticism recognize the role of the modern reader in creating meaning. Dozeman then moves to describe the content of the book of Exodus in broad brushstrokes. He divides the book of Exodus into two sections: 1:1–15:21 and 15:22–40:38. The first division narrates the conflict between God and Pharaoh over the service of Israel. The second describes the means and manner in which God will be present with God’s people as they move toward the promised land of Canaan. Next, Dozeman introduces the two texts that will serve as the common text to explore the various methodologies used to study Exodus: Exod 1–2 and 19–20. Dozeman concludes his introduction by providing a synopsis of the remaining chapters.

Dennis Olson’s “Literary and Rhetorical Criticism” (13–54) offers a brief history of the rise of “text-centered” and “reader-centered” approaches as they emerged against the more traditional “author-centered” focus of historical criticism. Olson concentrates principally on text-centered reading methods over against reader-centered methodologies that deploy literary/rhetorical techniques such as feminist. Olson, as will be true of all of the authors in this volume, offers a strong survey of the literature as represented by its best practitioners. Olson offers the clearest example of how to practice literary/rhetorical criticism by adopting Phyllis Trible’s step-by-step outline from her seminal work *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994). By describing and adopting a clear-cut methodology, Olson’s chapter may be the
most helpful for students because it can easily be appropriated into their own exegetical work.

Kenton Sparks’s essay on “Genre Criticism” (55–94) describes the emergence of the discipline as a corrective out form criticism. The goal of genre criticism is to achieve reader competence in terms of understanding the verbal discourse of a given piece of literature. Reader competence implies that a reader recognizes how a given type of literature works and as well as the ability to understand it. The advance that genre criticism makes over traditional form criticism is the recognition that ideal types of literature do not exist. Rather, readers group types of literature together in terms of common traits rather than in relationship to an ideal type or form. Sparks demonstrates the necessity of a close reading of the text in ways similar to the other methods in the book as well as the importance of extrabiblical comparative literature in attaining reader competency. Part of this competency as it relates to the book of Exodus is recognizing the diversity of interests and concerns embedded in the final form of the text.

Suzanne Boorer writes on “Source and Redaction Criticism” (95–130). This is the most traditional approach in this collection of essays. Boorer rehearses the history of source/redaction criticism, including its interplay with form and traditio-historical methods. There is not much new ground broken in this essay, but her review of the literature is probably the broadest and most helpful in the collection. The complexity and subjectivity of identifying discrete sources as well as the vastly different conclusions reached by competent scholars applying the method will remind the reader of the reason for the rise of the newer text and reader-centered hermeneutical approaches.

Jorge Pixley’s chapter on “Liberation Criticism” (131–62) is a lively and compelling read. Pixley is a leading and well-respected liberationist whose commentary on Exodus broke new ground in the field (On Exodus: A Liberationist Perspective [New York: Orbis, 1987]). Pixley emphasizes the importance of the social location of the reader. He notes the irony and artificial nature of introducing a “method” to Western academics when it originally developed among poor and marginalized persons of faith living in the remote villages or in the urban slums of Latin America. Liberation theology reminds the reader that the reader’s context matters profoundly in interpretation. Pixley demonstrates that the book of Exodus is foundational for developing a theology of liberation. He argues that the prophets drew their liberationist and justice-centered themes from the book of Exodus rather than creating these themes that are so central to the Torah.

Naomi Steinberg covers “Feminist Criticism” (163–92) well. Her introduction to the discipline is brief. She traces the rise of feminism among North American Anglo women and its spread to more marginalized groups in North America and around the world. She
focuses the bulk of her chapter on illustrating a feminist reading of Exod 1–2 and 19–20. Her engagement with these common texts is the most thorough in the book and helps the reader to experience the range of interpretive options and the diversity within feminist criticism in terms of class, gender, and ethnicity. Steinberg also compiles the most extensive bibliography in this volume.

In the final chapter, Gale Yee introduces “Postcolonial Biblical Criticism.” Her chapter spends a significant amount of space on introducing the philosophical roots of postcolonial theory. Postcolonial method is jargon-heavy, and readers encountering it for the first time may find themselves lost in the array of new vocabulary. Yee, however, is an able guide and demonstrates the powerful lens that postcolonial theory provides for illuminating new dimensions in the text of Exodus. She notes that Exodus may be read in support of both liberation and oppression. This leads her to remind her readers to ask two questions of their own interpretations: Whom does my interpretation help? Whom does it harm? Good questions, indeed.

Each chapter concludes with a bibliography of key secondary resources for further study. *Methods for Exodus* also includes a glossary, name index, and scripture index. The glossary is particularly helpful, since the various hermeneutical approaches introduce a plethora of specialized jargon into the English language that can be bewildering to the beginning student. The glossary gathers the most common terms together and offers a brief definition.

*Methods for Exodus* is an excellent resource for advanced exegetical courses in colleges and seminaries. Its stated target audience is students, scholars, and interested clergy. I think that this may be overly optimistic. This is a book best suited for advanced students and scholars. It is well-written but assumes a solid grounding in the current climate of biblical hermeneutics. *Methods for Exodus* does achieve its goal of illustrating how six different methodologies read the book of Exodus.