

In his conclusion, Parker considers the irony of the fact that he offered these lectures in 2011, the 400th anniversary of the King James Version, musing on “the impact of multiple privatized versions on the concept of authorized versions to be read in churches” (146). The question, however, is whether such a development should be considered an advance for the Christian movement and its New Testament or potentially its unraveling and downfall.

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***A Brief History of Old Testament Criticism: From Benedict Spinoza to Brevard Childs.* By Mark S. Gignilliat. Zondervan, 2012, 186pp.**

As the title indicates, this book offers a survey of modern historical-critical study of the Old Testament from the Enlightenment to the present day. The author completes this survey not through a general discussion of scholarly trends and developments, but by a “picture gallery tour” (12) that examines the key contributions of seven prominent Old Testament scholars, spanning a period of some four hundred years (Spinoza died in 1677 and Childs in 2007). Mark Gignilliat teaches Old Testament at Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Alabama.

Gignilliat opens by explaining that this work is “by no means a comprehensive attempt at expounding the very complex history of Old Testament interpretation” (12). It is instead a “historiographical approach” (13), or an attempt to convey history through historical biography. The seven figures discussed are: Benedict Spinoza (1632-1677); W. M. L. De Wette (1780-1849); Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918); Herman Gunkel (1862-1932); Gerhard Von Rad (1901-1971); William Foxwell Albright (1891-1971); and Brevard S. Childs (1923-2007).

Each chapter follows the same general pattern with enough variation to not be tedious. Gignilliat first introduces the subject and their significance. Second, he offers a biographical sketch of the person’s life and a description of his cultural setting. Third, he surveys the subject’s primary works and contributions to the field of Old Testament studies. Fourth, he offers a concluding evaluation.

Gignilliat writes in a popular and engaging manner. Technical topics are helpfully explained. The personal details which pepper the biographical sketches are particularly interesting and humanizing. So, we learn, among other things, that De Wette’s 1804 doctoral dissertation was only sixteen pages in length (44), that Wellhausen was rumored to swim on Sunday mornings so that pious churchgoers could see him with a bathing suit over his shoulders (58), that pro-Nazi students avoided Von Rad’s courses (108), and that Albright was a sickly and bookish lad who at age ten saved up enough money by doing chores to purchase a book on Babylonian history (124).

Most importantly, Gignilliat provides a winsome narrative that weaves through this “picture gallery”, describing the development of historical-critical study of the Old Testament. It begins in the Enlightenment with Spinoza setting the trajectory for modern-critical study of the Old Testament by applying rational rather than supernatural interpretation. With De Wette came the influence of Romanticism, including skepticism

toward the factuality of the religious history of Israel in the Old Testament. Wellhausen was a German idealist who articulated the classic Documentary Hypothesis (J-E-D-P) of the Pentateuch and influenced the trend toward late dating the Old Testament to the exilic and post-exilic eras. With Gunkel came the emphasis upon finding the *sitz im leben* of the text, along with form and genre criticism. Von Rad championed a tradition-historical approach to Old Testament exegesis and placed the spotlight on “Israel’s first and greatest theologian—the Yahwist” (115). The positivism of Albright, the “dean of biblical archaeologist,” and his “Baltimore school” (over against the Alt-Noth school) emphasized comparative ANE studies, valuing one manuscript, one papyrus over a thousand theories. Finally, with Childs came the “canonical approach” and its attempt to understand the text in its final form.

On one hand, I do not think anyone would object to the seven towering figures chosen to be included in the book. On the other hand, there will no doubt be some who might wish that Gignilliat had included a few others (an objection he anticipates on p. 13). Given that Gignilliat writes from a more or less self-consciously “evangelical” perspective, it might have been interesting if he had also included some figures representing a more conservative perspective in reaction to the rise of modern historical-critical methodology, like Franz Delitzsch or Edward J. Young (again, an objection he anticipates, pp. 169-170). Admittedly, however, he chose to work with more mainstream and influential figures from the wider academy. Along these lines, it might also have been interesting if he had included some figures from the pre-critical world of Biblical studies (e.g., Augustine, Calvin, Owen, etc.).

In the introduction, Gignilliat notes that he does not come to this discussion as a “neutral observer” (13). In the postscript, he makes clear his own high regard for Child’s canonical approach (169). Gignilliat also addresses in the postscript some of the tensions that exist for scholars who are attempting both to hold a confessional perspective on the Old Testament and to make use of the historical-critical method, though he ends by stating that he wonders “if the polarity is as evident today in our particular epistemological climate” (175).

Though Gignilliat expresses more confidence in the believing scholar’s ability to embrace the historical-critical method and retain a high view of the Scripture than I might personally affirm, his book is to be commended. It presents an interesting and useful survey of Old Testament criticism since the Enlightenment. This will prove a helpful work, in particular for seminarians and graduate students, as well as pastors and others who wish to get a bird’s-eye-view of some of the key people, moments, movements, and works in modern Old Testament critical scholarship.

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