
The past century has witnessed remarkable change in the questions scholars have asked regarding the Old Testament, as well as the methodologies proposed to answer them. Additionally, the growing fields of archaeology, ancient Near Eastern studies, and literary criticism have brought new concerns to the table. Not only does Old Testament scholarship deal with the text of the Old Testament, but it also deals with the history of ancient Israel, historiography, comparative literature, and many more nuanced disciplines. In such a broad field, it is difficult for any scholar to be fluent in even a few of these discussions, and with the landscape ever-changing, the task may be more difficult now than ever. However, *The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches*, edited by David W. Baker and Bill T. Arnold, offers some help. In this work, the editors have commissioned sixteen essays from leading scholars in each of these various disciplines of Old Testament study in order to provide the reader with a survey of the past, present, and often future of each sub-discipline of Old Testament studies.

**Summary**

The first sub-discipline discussed is textual criticism. Al Wolters explores the issue of textual criticism from a broad perspective, choosing to focus on major trends rather than specific examples of detailed work (19). One of these major trends is the contribution of Bruce Waltke and his identification of five different approaches that scholars have taken to Old Testament textual criticism. These five approaches are restoring the original composition, restoring the final text, restoring the earliest attested text, restoring accepted texts (plural), and reconstructing final texts (plural) (31-32). Wolters concludes his survey by noting the surprising fact that evangelical
scholars, whose theology is bound closely with the notion of inspired autographs, have done little work on that subject in the past thirty years (36).

The next two chapters deal with background of the ancient Near East. Mark Chavalas and Edwin Hostetter focus on epigraphy and survey some of the major epigraphic findings in the past century, while the second essay by Chavalas and Murray Adamthwaite look at the history and culture of the ancient Near East through the lens of archaeology.

Tremper Longman’s essay in chapter four provides a survey of the rise of literary approaches to the Old Testament. Dealing with their appearance in chronological order, Longman discusses structuralism, reader-response, deconstruction, and poststructuralism. With respect to the three approaches one can take toward the gaps and tensions in the biblical narrative, Longman rejects source criticism and the starting point of deconstruction and poststructuralism, namely that all literary is “undecidable,” in favor of a third stance that he terms narrative criticism. This approach argues that modern readers must “recover the ancient literary conventions that will help us elucidate the text” (115).

In chapter five, Gordon Wenham evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches to the Pentateuch before suggesting that New Critical methods must be combined with historical criticism if a new model is to emerge (144). V. Philips Long is the next contributor with an essay on historiography. Long also hopes to emerge from the present confusion of the discipline into greater clarity. His contention is that the discipline needs to move forward by examining background beliefs (166). One aspect of Long’s discussion is on the close relationship in present scholarship between Israel’s history writing and writing a history of Israel, the latter of which is K. Lawson Younger’s focus in chapter seven. Younger’s purpose is to summarize the different models for explaining Israel’s origin, primarily through a comparison of
scholarship and the book of Joshua (177). Younger concludes that the rise of ancient Israel was complex, and thus not explainable by one simple factor (205). He also takes a mediating position on the Bible’s role in reconstructing history: the Bible is not sufficient for historical reconstruction, but nor is it of no value (205).

Chapter eight is Gary Knoppers’s discussion on the monarchy in which he traces the history of Israel from the united monarchy to the dual monarchy to the Assyrian campaign and finally to the Babylonian exile. He notes many various and competing views on the topic and argues that now, more than ever before, the discipline needs integration, making use of the material and literary evidence that has come to light in recent years (235). Picking up where Knoppers left off with the exile, H.G.M. Williamson considers the post-exilic period, particularly asserting some of the factors that led to a renewal of interest. He list five key factors for such interest: a reaction against those who try to portray the postexilic period as a time of priestly legalism; an interest in this period as the time when the Hebrew Scriptures took form; a sharper focus on the archaeology of this time period; an interest in the Persian dynasty and Achaemenid period and Judah’s place in it; and finally, the rise of social scientific appraisals of this period (236-237). Williamson notes that the progress on historical reconstruction has come very little from the study of the biblical texts themselves, but rather from archaeological and social-scientific research (264).

In chapter ten, David Baker discusses the various approaches to Israelite prophets and prophecy in recent decades. One of Baker’s goals in this article is “to bring some semblance of order to the vast amount of literature dealing with them [the prophets] that has appeared over the past three decades” (266). He organizes his discussion “under four main headings that follow a chronological progression” (267): precomposition, composition, transmission, and application.
Baker then proceeds by asking numerous questions under each of the four headings, spending the rest of the essay answering these questions.

Chapters eleven through thirteen deal with the changing studies in the wisdom books, Psalms, and apocalyptic respectively. Bruce Waltke and David Diewert’s chapter on wisdom literature aims to survey the changes in the study of wisdom books through an analysis of the changes in approaches to Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. David Howard’s analysis of recent trends in Psalms’ studies emphasizes the rising interest in treating Psalms as a book (329). After addressing some of the key figures in involved, Howard identifies three remarkable features of the discipline since 1970. The first is the movement to read the Psalter as a unified collection. The second is to read Hebrew poetry more and more syntactically. The third is the growing number of approaches to different psalms and psalm types (366-367). Though each of these has advantages, Howard notes some potential pitfalls, including the possibility of subjectivity, failure to yield the meaning of poetic lines, and a lack of checks and balances on various interpretations and approaches (376). Next, John Oswalt attempts to discern the time and cause of a resurgent interest in apocalyptic literature (369). After defining apocalyptic and comparing it with prophecy, Oswalt concludes that apocalyptic is meant to coexist with, not replace, prophecy. Apocalyptic is meant to enrich and expand prophecy, not supplant it (390).

Chapters fifteen and sixteen return to an interest in backgrounds and methodology. Bill Arnold’s chapter on religion in Ancient Israel surveys Israel’s religion by analyzing the origins of Yahwism and the history of Israel’s monotheism. In the following chapter, Charles Carter considers the contributions of applying social sciences to the Old Testament text and culture (422), concluding that its success makes it no longer an optional mode of interpretation but critical to the task (451).
In the final chapter, R.W.L. Moberly traces the changes in Old Testament theology. He highlights the historical and theological concerns that have vied for acceptance, concluding that Old Testament theology has a rich future if it can relearn how to be “truly theological” (477).

**Critical Evaluation**

Given the nature of the book as a collection of essays on the recent past, present, and future of various aspects of Old Testament study, it is difficult to assess its strengths and weaknesses as a whole. This struggle is exacerbated by the brief and relatively uninformative preface provided by the editors. Their commentary on what is to come is limited to a statement about the fluidity of each of the essays and an appeal to the reader that their book must be supplemented by “the reader’s own willingness to follow the trajectories set by these essays” (11). As the reader proceeds, he or she will find this appeal to be true, as the editors never provide commentary to help guide the reader in these trajectories. Nevertheless, there are many helpful aspects to this work.

One of the strengths of this work is the consistent focus in each essay on the past and present research in a particular sub-discipline of Old Testament studies. This consistency gives the reader a general view of each sub-discipline and provides a starting point for further research in that area. Many of the essays also add sections on the future of the sub-discipline and further areas for exploration, both of which are a great help to the reader. A great example of this emphasis on the future of a sub-discipline is in Long’s essay on historiography. Long argues that “the way forward in the study of Israel’s history and historiography must involve greater attention to the subsurface portion of the iceberg,” which he identifies as background beliefs (166). He identifies the significant influence that background beliefs have on the discipline and urges scholars to consider these in their projects for more open and honest discussion in the
future. He then narrows this further with a distinction on a specific background belief, namely the question of worldview. It is not a question of primitive versus modern, Long argues, but rather theistic versus atheistic or nontheistic (167). These points help give the reader a starting point for his or her own entrance into the discussion, and provides a necessary caution to be aware of one’s background beliefs before engaging in the discipline.

Strengths such as Long’s are found in numerous chapters, but there are also several weaknesses evident in many of the chapters. One specific example is in Chavalas and Hostetter’s essay on epigraphy. The authors assert that they will “chronologically survey the most significant epigraphic finds and reevaluations and those that help to further an understanding of Old Testament material” (38). They accomplish their task of surveying the epigraphy remarkably well, but there is almost no explanation how any of these epigraphic finds are significant for understanding the Old Testament. As such, they not only fail to meet their own stated intentions, but also the common purpose of the book, namely that the chapters will each contribute to one’s understanding of the Old Testament. A similar problem is evident in Wenham’s essay on the Pentateuch. Wenham asserts in his thesis that he will “make suggestions for future research” (119), yet his suggestions essentially amount to the final sentence in the essay. In that final sentence, Wenham suggests that New Critical methods must be combined with “sober historical criticism” in order to be effective (144). This brief comment hardly seems to satisfy the claim that he will make suggestions for future research.

Space would not permit a thorough critique of each essay, but it may be instructive to explore one essay more thoroughly in order to provide a representative sample of the book as a whole. As David Baker is one of the editors and also a contributor to the work, it will be helpful to look more closely at his essay on “Israelite Prophets and Prophecy” (chapter ten). One of
Baker’s goals in this article is “to bring some semblance of order to the vast amount of literature dealing with them [the prophets] that has appeared over the past three decades” (266). In order to accomplish this task, Baker employs a variant of Petersen’s two-pronged model of prophetic identity and prophetic literature. Baker organizes the study under four headings: precomposition, composition, transmission, and application. Baker proceeds by asking numerous questions under each of the four headings. In the rest of the article he will answer the questions that he has proposed here (267).

With respect to the issue of precomposition, Baker highlights the scholarly attempts to place the prophet in his wider social and historical context (268). One way of accomplishing this task was to consider the role the prophet played in society with respect to the institutions of the monarchy and priesthood (268). Scholars have also noted the prophet’s role as covenant mediator, a role supported by ANE links (274). The first issue in a discussion of composition was the manner in which the prophets spoke. Baker suggests that the prophets were preachers who tried to persuade their audience to repent (280). Thus, he concludes that the original form of most of their messages was oral, leading to questions of whether or not the words of the prophetic books are written by the prophets themselves (283). A related issue is whether the Israelite prophet was merely insightful or inspired (285). The primary issue of transmission is the way in which a prophet reused earlier texts and messages. This question has led some to suggest that composition of the book of Isaiah came about along the lines of organizing and commenting upon previously existing oracles. If this is true, then one could see a genuine unity in Isaiah (289). Finally, Baker addresses the issue of application. Among other possibilities, Baker explores the application in recent years of the prophetic material to disciplines such as
evangelism, pastoral theology, Christian education, preaching, liberation theology, and feminism (292-293).

Two of the many strengths of Baker’s work are its scope and its categories. Regarding its scope, Baker does an excellent job of highlighting the important questions raised in the past thirty years of prophetic studies. Among these helpful questions are “How did the prophets speak?” and “How did the prophetic messages move from speech to text?” (267). Related to the scope of Baker’s work are his helpful categories. Baker succeeds in his wide survey primarily because of his ability to fit numerous questions into four main categories. Besides nicely containing the pertinent issues involved in current prophetic studies, Baker’s categories also follow a logical progression from precomposition to composition to transmission to application. Any written work can be understood along the lines delineated above, which helps Baker relate the biblical text to ANE texts and, if he were so inclined, to apply more modern literary-critical methods.

One significant weakness of Baker’s work is its lack of foresight. For example, his work successfully surveys the past thirty years up to the current state of the discipline and establishes helpful categories for further discussion. However, though Baker encourages the further exploration of these issues, he provides no hint as to the manner in which one might progress. He argues that “any means that might advance understanding should be explored and encouraged,” but he does not provide any preliminary ideas or guidelines of what types of approaches might yield results (294). This problem is all the more evident in that he provides little commentary on the contributions of the recent attempts at application he mentions in the final section (292-293).
Conclusion

The lack of foresight evident in Baker’s work is perhaps the most consistently disappointing aspect of the book, though as mentioned above, several essays accomplish this task quite well. Nevertheless, the wide scope both in terms of the number of sub-disciplines covered and the thirty-year survey of scholarship in each chapter are immensely helpful as a starting point for further research. If a reader is interested in the variety of Old Testament studies or desires to acquire a working knowledge of the past thirty years of scholarship in the Old Testament, then this is a helpful work. Additionally, since the work is now twelve years old, one will need to find other sources to survey the rich panoply of work produced in the past decade, especially in the field of literary study, Old Testament theology, and the Psalms.