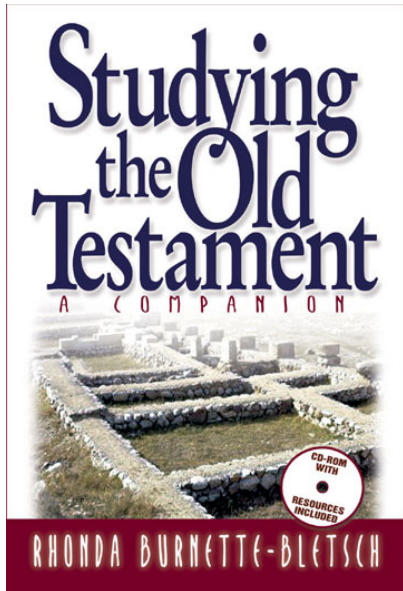


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Burnette-Bletsch, Rhonda

Studying the Old Testament: A Companion

Nashville: Abingdon, 2007. Pp. xiv + 304 + CD. Paper.
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Qoheleth sagely observes, “Of making many books there is no end” (Eccl 12:12). Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch helps us confront this seemingly cynical view with a necessary introduction to the Old Testament: *Studying the Old Testament: A Companion*. Its format and content call readers to consider what constitutes a “book” and what constitutes a good introduction to the Old Testament in a technological age. As introductory books go, this one offers unique insights, methods, details, and directions for the study of the Old Testament. This work encompasses traditional biblical scholarship and newer reading strategies but also straddles the media of print and digital texts. This “book” ushers readers into a new world of biblical study and of reading the Bible.

The paper text, comprising 299 pages, commands the reader’s initial attention, although the CD contains 802 additional “pages” of content. Burnette-Bletsch organizes the chapters of the printed text using the canonical divisions of the Hebrew Bible. Since she has done this, one wonders why she sticks to the nomenclature “Old Testament.” Although she offers in the introduction definitions and arrangements of this text corpus from different faith communities, she presents no rationale as to why the Jewish canonical order serves her purpose. The decision to use a canonical order as an organizing principle betrays Burnette-Bletsch’s bias for focusing on the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible (herein after

only the Old Testament, in keeping with her title) as literature of faith but more so as literature.

Chapter 1 presents an overview of several critical topics, such as the geography of the biblical world, a historical outline of the Old Testament, translations of biblical texts, and methods of biblical study. She lists ten different methodologies, of which only four are not traditional historical-critical methods. In presenting historical details relating to formation, canonization, and translations of the Old Testament, Burnette-Bletsch balances the historical content with attention to the function of the text in faith communities.

In chapter 2 Burnette-Bletsch focuses on the Torah. This lengthy chapter steers readers through dense texts. While only the major events such as the creation, the garden story, the ancestral narratives, the exodus, the wilderness, and law are treated, this coverage provides a solid foundation for preliminary readers of these stories. The third chapter continues the swift journey through the corpus and deals with the Former Prophets. Naturally, the focus is on the entry into the land, the establishment of the monarchy, the divided monarchy, and the events leading to exile. The chapter contours these movements, ending on the note of suspense that the journey continues beyond exile. Chapter 4 deals with the Latter Prophets as “Israel’s moral compass.” Burnette-Bletsch opts for organizing her treatment of the prophetic books in their historical and imperial contexts. Before examining the prophetic texts, she sketches the respective empire’s presence and impact upon ancient Israel and the way these events shape the prophet’s work. This periodization enables Burnette-Bletsch to deal with all of the prophetic texts and not give a cursory treatment to lesser-known parts of the Book of the Twelve.

Chapter 5 treats the final division of the canon, as Burnette-Bletsch explores the Writings from the standpoint of three paths: worship, wisdom, and apocalyptic. Taking “worship” to refer to the Second Temple period, Burnette-Bletsch deals with the Chronicler, Ezra-Nehemiah, the Psalms, and the Megilloth in one section. The paths of wisdom and apocalyptic yield little surprise, as they deal with the wisdom texts of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes and the apocalyptic text of Daniel. While one would expect more attention to proto-apocalyptic texts than the single paragraph (287) in this section, Burnette-Bletsch ushers the reader into the further evolution of Judaism in preparation ostensibly for a reading of the New Testament. This helps her to work her journey metaphor into a fitting conclusion to the book noting that the “journey continues.”

The content of the book remains essentially the standard fare of introductory textbooks. Its appeal lies in its organization and its use of the metaphor of journey. Burnette-Bletsch opens possibilities for reading the individual books across broad canonical sections

without being lost in a maze of issues relating to individual authors and styles. She takes readers through the essential contours of the historical periods and how several authors or communities address these issues. Admittedly, canonical discipline separates Ezra-Nehemiah from being treated together with postexilic prophetic texts such as Haggai and Zechariah. Nonetheless, Burnette-Bletsch pushes readers/learners of these texts forward by situating the impact of the exile upon the formation and re-formation of the Old Testament. While not advocating for the exile as the single period of text production, she warms to several notions of the exile as a vital lens through which to read the production of several layers of Old Testament texts.

Reading the “book” *Studying the Old Testament: A Companion*, the reader has the benefit of both print and digital media. While it may appear as if one has the choice between these two aspects of the “book,” they both exist as “companions” in making up the “book.” Nonetheless, the printed text can stand on its own to serve as a swift survey of this complicated corpus. Burnette-Bletsch sufficiently pares down the material in the printed text to an operable core, presenting only that which is essential to know. This makes the “book” more flexible than others. The printed text can be used for a semester-long introductory course at the undergraduate level that may also involve dealing with New Testament texts. The entire “book” lends itself to a much more engaged look at the material. Readers get the opportunity to work through, from the CD, engaging preliminary exercises, review and discussion questions, names and concepts in the glossary, as well as reflection questions to maximize their reading of this “book.” Users (the term intentionally used here, not readers) of various levels face standard material in the teaching of introductory survey courses—multiple choice, true/false, fill in the blanks “tests”—only in *Studying the Old Testament: A Companion* these lie at their fingertips. A key feature of this book stands in the exercises that call readers to actively engage the material in its literary and cultural contexts.

For the most part, Burnette-Bletsch’s instincts as to what constitutes core knowledge appears correct. This core material surfaces in print, while the digital material is seen as “tangential but frequently asked questions” (xiv). This description, however, seems unfortunate, since the content of the digital text, described mostly as “special topics,” represents the innovative turns in biblical scholarship in more recent time. On the CD she engages issues relating to gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity. In this material, for instance, she raises the problematic of the exodus for indigenous people, the myth of the curse of Cain for persons of African descent, and the conflicting feminist readings of the Sarah and Hagar narratives. That these should be regarded as “special” or “tangential” seems odd and reflects the difficulty of updating introductory textbooks to adequately reflect the turns taking place in certain areas of the guild.

Further reflection of Burnette-Bletsch's tendency to prioritize traditional scholarship over newer ideas appears in her intriguing treatments of older scholarship in the print text while subverting them in the digital text. For example, treatments of the Documentary Hypothesis (35–46) and the theories relating to the formation of the Deuteronomistic History (118–31) are labeled as “interludes” despite their length. Why are these “interludes” not part of the digital text? Why make Wellhausen and Noth more authoritative than Van Seters, Smend, or Dietrich? Even more, it is on the CD that she raises the problems related to the Documentary Hypothesis and explores the new thinking in this area. Through the CD she allows readers to move beyond Lowth's understanding of parallelism, having laid out his method in the printed text. Although the book remains current with newer scholarship ideas such as the Judean bias against Israelite kings or the porous nature of early Israelite worship that includes iconography, it still seems wanting.

At the outset Burnette-Bletsch addresses Qoheleth's observation on the making of books by justifying this work as one that “deliberately focuses on the process of critically reading and seriously thinking about biblical texts” (xiii). That her aim lies in cultivating readers of the Bible remains clear. As several points one cannot miss the hints of the kind of reader she hopes holds the “book” or will emerge having read the “book”: “intrepid readers,” “observant readers,” “modern readers,” “attentive readers,” “careful readers,” and the like. These readers are created in the process of engaging the preliminary exercises, reading the Bible alongside this book, performing the follow-up exercises, and delving into the “special topics.” This process suggests the subtitle for the “book” that Burnette-Bletsch insists on quoting, *Studying the Old Testament: A Companion*. Here she surpasses the standard introductory text that focuses merely on the historical context with little attention to the literary appropriation of the text through foregrounding the title with an active verb and enclosing it with a relational term. More than a glossary appended to the book, the content of the CD provides a means for readers to become solid companions in reading the Bible.

The other distinguishing feature of *Studying the Old Testament: A Companion* stands in its claim that the Bible “as religious literature ... was composed mainly for purposes other than preserving history” (xiii). A purely nonhistoricist approach to the Bible is impossible, and Burnette-Bletsch does not aim for this. Instead, when she is able, she draws attention to literary movements in the Bible. Her choice of canonical divisions and literary genres as an organizing tool for the book makes sense in this regard. The clustering of the texts around the “path of worship” that pulls together postexilic concerns also stands out here. The notable contribution that Burnette-Bletsch makes in this introduction exists in the detailed presentation of the refractions of the Bible in Western culture. The presence of artwork, film and movie reviews, music, and cultural movements affected and impacted

by the Bible points readers to the multiple places in Western culture where the Bible makes sense. The strength of this claim lies in the sensitive focus on the intersections with other Abrahamic faith traditions. In this way Burnette-Bletsch introduces readers not merely to the history of the Bible but to the Bible, its readings, its readers, and its consequences.

Qoheleth's concern about the making of books leads us in this digital world to ask whether a book needs to be both print and/or digital. Burnette-Bletsch's work is not the first introduction to contain a CD. Thankfully, it advances a trend to use varying media to write books for biblical studies. This "book" breaks new ground in incorporating references to the digital material in the print material to visibly connect the two. Yet the fact that the material is largely PDF files raises the question as to whether this move merely reflects artful use of technology or cost savings. Using the CD presents certain challenges. Users can navigate easily from the index at the start of each chapter but may face difficulties finding their way back easily to the index or previous entries. Some maps may require rotation if being used on a PC. Apart from the hot links from terms and concepts to the glossary, users face cumbersome paths to work across the different chapters or working back from the glossary to the special topics. This disconnect shows up in multiple entries of similar content for terms and concepts found across several areas. For example, one will find three entries for "satan," two entries of the chart tabulating "Insertions of Exilic Historians (Dtr²)," and two entries on "type-scenes." The temptation exists to pose these concerns simply as issues relating to publisher decisions rather than see them as central to a modern understanding of "book" and how this medium and related technologies effectively aid in teaching biblical studies. Undoubtedly, the modern reader reads differently given current technological advancement, and this "book" situates itself within that stream.

Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch offers new insight through her book. She opens the door to the cultivation of a new generation of readers of the Bible who understand its place as more than a history book, more than a book of faith, but also a literary tome in Western culture. This "book" commends itself as an introductory book that would make both teachers and students alike comfortable with its content and format. The variety of exercises will stretch the imagination of readers to return to the vast resources of charts and insights offered in their ongoing reading of the Bible.