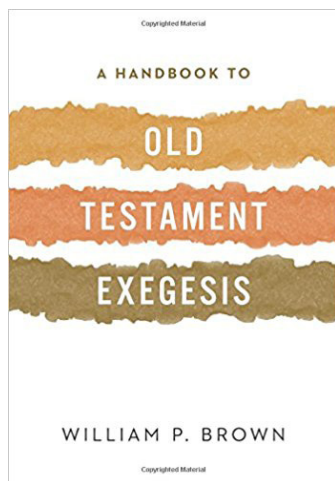


A Handbook to Old Testament Exegesis

William P. Brown. *A Handbook to Old Testament Exegesis*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017. 380 pp. \$35.00. ISBN: 9780664259938.



William P. Brown begins *A Handbook to Old Testament Exegesis* with a bold claim: “Meaning is not something contained within the text, as if it were waiting to be unlocked and released from literary confinement. Meaning, rather, emerges from one’s encounter with the text” (3-4). This relationship between the interpreter and text in exegesis defines Brown’s work, as he considers this methodology through the basic lenses of sound biblical interpretation. His work succeeds as a unified, cohesive whole that is also useful when broken into separate parts. With its thorough but ready-for-use content, one can see continued use of the *Handbook* long after the initial read.

Brown’s reputation in and outside the academy and his education and publishing backgrounds make him more than qualified for such an undertaking. He is an active member of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and has a PhD from Emory University in Hebrew Bible studies and an MDiv from Princeton Theological Seminary. Brown’s research primarily focuses on biblical poetry and wisdom literature, two genres of biblical writings that require extensive work with language, poetics, hermeneutics, and history

of interpretation. Further, his work is known for its deft pairing of scholarly depth with genuine accessibility, helping Brown shape and remain part of academic biblical scholarship without neglecting the Bible’s lived ecclesial life.

Brown’s relational understanding of meaning and exegesis represents another iteration of the current reception historical trend permeating biblical scholarship. Like his co-faculty member Brennan Breed in his *Nomadic Text: A Theory of Biblical Reception History* and C.L. Seow in his “History of Consequences” section of his Job commentary, Brown’s approach to exegesis casts a wide net that considers how biblical texts have functioned and how readers have used biblical texts throughout history.¹ Brown grounds his central focus in this method, considering the life of a text dependent on external and historical factors. He uses this approach as a lens through which he views traditional analytical approaches alongside readings that, in some circles, remain relegated to the lesser strata of reader-response criticism. Brown breaks this pattern of relegation and elevates previously “lesser” methods alongside tried and true approaches.

Brown devotes the majority of the *Handbook* to methods of exegetical analysis and breaks his book into four sections. Part I acclimates the reader to Brown’s central argument while also offering questions to consider for what he calls a “self-exegesis.” This self-exegesis is the crux upon which Brown’s exegetical theory rests, as he argues a reader must first know themselves before beginning any attempt of biblical reception. Examples of self-exegesis from some of Brown’s students buttress his stance while providing helpful examples of what implementing Brown’s approach can yield in classroom, ecclesial, or personal exegetical settings. Brown pairs this self-exegesis with a call to be fastidious in one’s work with a biblical text’s original language, history of interpretation, and other scholarly voices so as to prevent self-indulgent interpretations.

Each chapter in part II offers a general overview of traditional biblical analysis, including Brown’s perceived strengths and weaknesses of each method. He discusses text-critical analysis, stylistic approaches, and structural, compositional, comparative, literary, historical, and canonical analyses. Part III steps beyond traditional methods and devotes eight chapters to discuss what Brown calls “Readings in Place.” He engages a number of approaches, including science, ecology, gender, empire, minority, disability, and theology. Brown ties parts II and III together, along with the respective approaches under their headings, by applying each approach to portions of Genesis 1:1-2:4. This provides a greater sense of cohesion to the

¹ Brennan W. Breed, *Nomadic Text: A Theory of Biblical Reception History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014); C. L. Seow, *Job 1-21: Interpretation and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 110-248.

book as one can compare how Brown reads Genesis 1:1 from the various perspectives for a sense of what makes each unique. Part IV offers a simple but sound conclusion that urges readers to piece together seemingly disparate parts to create a unique exegetical work that is grounded in sound scholarship and personal reflection without one superseding the other.

Accessibility is the greatest strength of Brown's *Handbook*. It is both an end in itself, in terms of methodological explanation and examples, while also being a means to the end of expanded scholarship and exegesis. The content itself buttresses this strength, as each approach and perspective receives equal respect. For example, one can read disparate chapters, like "Ecology" or "Structural Analysis," and leave with a basic but sound understanding of the method, its parameters, and goals. Each major section is broken by clear and well-articulated subheadings that guide the reader without feeling overbearing or cumbersome. Another strength is Brown's guidance toward external resources. Each chapter ends with a brief bibliography of reliable sources for continued analysis.

Brown's work is not perfect, though the weaknesses are few and minor. One could argue Brown attempts to do too much in such a concise manner, but looking at the book's larger whole dampens such criticisms. In terms of Brown's handle of the methods, his familiarity with traditional approaches could be seen as favoritism, as it is clear he has a better understanding of the contents of part II. However, one could argue this bias is simply the product of a scholar working to expand his horizons and open others up to the necessary changes and growth of biblical scholarship. Further, Brown operates with an awareness of his own scholarly gaps as his best bibliographies often come after chapters with which he lacks proper familiarity. For example, Brown, being a white male, cannot properly speak to minority or non-male gender exegesis, and he handles this reality with care and skill by pointing readers beyond this book.

In short, this is an excellent volume. Brown carries a lot on his scholarly plate, but executes his intentions with the acumen scholars have come to expect from his work. It is worthy for undergraduate and graduate studies, a seminarian's library, a pastor's shelf, and anyone eager to read the Bible with precision and a critical eye.

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