

Book Review

“From Paradise to the Promise Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch”
Reported by T. Desmond Alexander

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Summary

This book review is on T. Desmond Alexander and his book called, From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch: Baker, 2012.

The purpose of the book is to provide an introduction of the Pentateuch, which gives the reader a better understanding of the first five books. Alexander mentions that, “While they are vaguely familiar with the better-known stories of Genesis and Exodus, few could claim to have a clear understanding of the Pentateuch as a whole. What was lacking was a good guide to the text, a book that was suited to the needs of such students.”¹ In the book he also explains the connection between the Pentateuch and the New Testament, as well as the different scholarly approaches regarding the development of the Pentateuch. Alexander mentions that “Most scholarly research on the Pentateuch has sought to (1) discover the existence of these hypothetical sources, (2) explain the process by which they were combined to form the present text, and (3) relate the existence of these earlier sources to the history and religious development of the Israelites before the final composition of the Pentateuch in the exilic or postexilic period.”²

Interaction and Critique

In the beginning of the book the author begins by discussing the modern approaches to the different hypothesis that were developed regarding the Pentateuch. At first, I was confused by his chose of structure only; because I assumed that the books focal point was going to be about the introduction of the Pentateuch. I realized that this had to do with my preconceived notion regarding biblical criticism, and not feeling comfortable regarding Pentateuchal criticisms - I would prefer to just stay within the text. Alexander mentions that, “Penned originally in Hebrew, the books of the Pentateuch were already important texts by at least the fourth century

¹ T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), Location 242, Kindle.

² Ibid. Location 273.

BC, and over the years they have had a significant influence, both knowingly and unknowingly, upon the religious outlook of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. In spite of this, most people today have only a passing familiarity with their contents, and much within them is likely to strike the modern reader as a strange and/or incomprehensible.”³

Alexander also mentions that, “First, many students of theology and religious studies approach the Pentateuch from a Christian perspective and are naturally interested in how this material relates to the beliefs and practices of the New Testament church.” (Location 248).⁴ After reading the book, I realized that I was approaching the text too from a Christian perspective. This book was very insightful and helped me to understand the importance of looking beyond my Christian perspective regarding the Pentateuch, in order to understand the significance of the development of Pentateuchal criticism. Alexander informs the reader that, “During the past 250 years, scholarly research on the Pentateuch has developed around four main methods: *source* criticism, *form* criticism, *tradition-historical* criticism, and *literary* criticism. Since each method addresses a specific set of issues, it is important to understand how they differ from each other. Moreover, as we shall observe, the rise of each method signaled a new stage in the study of the Pentateuch.”⁵

The other insight would be that the author also provided the reader with a detailed amount of information regarding the history behind the development of Pentateuchal criticisms. Alexander begins with source criticism and states that, “Source criticism was the first of these four methods to be employed, and it has established itself as a major tool in the pentateuchal criticism.”⁶ He mentions that form criticism is, “Following the almost universal acceptance of

³T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 4, Kindle.

⁴ Ibid. Location 248.

⁵ Ibid. 4.

⁶ Ibid. 4.

the Documentary Hypothesis, biblical scholars turned, perhaps not surprisingly, to consider the *oral* phase that was thought to lie behind the source documents. Pioneered by Hermann Gunkel in the early decades of the twentieth century, a new methodology arose, subsequently termed form criticism.”⁷ As for tradition-historical criticism, Alexander mentions that, “Having determined (1) the earliest oral forms of the pentateuchal material and (2) the four main source documents, the next stage in the history of pentateuchal criticism was to describe the process by which the former were combined to produce the latter. Since this method was interested in the *history of traditions* underlying the Pentateuch, it was designated tradition-historical criticism. Two of the main scholars associated with the development of this approach are Gerhard von Rad and Martin Noth.”⁸ The last criticism that he mentions is literary criticism. Alexander states that, “While interest remains strong in uncovering the process by which the Pentateuch was composed, many scholars either have acknowledged or are gradually recognizing the need to comprehend the Pentateuch in its final form. This shift in emphasis entails a switch from a diachronic (through time) to a synchronic (at the same time) reading of the text. Instead of locating portions of the text in different historical periods, literary criticism seeks to understand the Pentateuch as a coherent, unified work composed at one specific point in time.”⁹

After learning about the different Pentateuchal criticisms, I must admit that it can become overwhelming; so I enjoyed the way Alexander created a balance between the scholars who have rejected some of these criticisms. Alexander mentioned that, “Some scholars, however, have continued to investigate the literary origins of the Pentateuch and as a result have proposed

⁷ T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 4, Kindle.

⁸ Ibid. 4.

⁹ Ibid. 4-5.

modifications of different kinds. Others, however, have completely rejected the Documentary Hypothesis. One of his opposers would be R. N. Whybray, Alexander states that:

While others have already noted many of the shortcomings of the Documentary Hypothesis highlighted by Whybray, his work is noteworthy for two reasons. First, his rejection of the Documentary Hypothesis is not motivated by an underlying theological conservatism. Indeed, he concludes that the narrative sections of the Pentateuch were probably composed in the sixth century by a single author who, while drawing on some recent traditions, relied mainly upon his own imaginations. Second, Whybray offers a generally comprehensive assessment of the Documentary Hypothesis. While some issues are dealt with briefly, he demonstrates that the Documentary Hypothesis rests on unacceptable presuppositions, inadequate criteria for distinguishing the different sources, and a method of literary composition for which there is no analogy elsewhere.¹⁰

The other strength for me would be the way Alexander illustrates the narratives. He summarizes the narratives in way that is intriguing, as well as clear and concise. In his book he discussing Genesis 1-3, and mentions that:

Interpreted against their ancient Near East background, the opening chapters of Genesis anticipate that God's plan for the earth center on the creation of an extraordinary temple-city where God will dwell in harmony with humanity. To this end, humans are given a royal and a priestly status, with the expectation that they will be God's vice-regents on earth. However, tempted by the serpent, Adam and Eve betray their Creator, resulting in their expulsion from Eden and the loss of their special status. The following narratives comes to a significant climax with an account of humanity's attempt to construct an alternative city to the holy temple-city planned by God.¹¹

I have read these scriptures several times, and after reading Alexanders brief narrative encouraged me to view the scripture from a different stance – to look deeper into the scripture; especially, when he mentions that, “The opening chapters of Genesis are exceptionally important for understanding the rest of the Pentateuch.”¹² I never knew that Genesis 1-3 is the pivotal of the rest of the Pentateuch. Last but not least, the connection between the Pentateuch and the New Testament.

¹⁰ T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 62, Kindle.

¹¹ Ibid. 119.

¹² Ibid. 119.

In conclusion to this book review, the book was an easy read and informative, especially as it related to in introduction of the Pentateuch. One of the things that I enjoy in Alexander's book is the way he connected the Pentateuch to the New Testament. After taking this class, I especially like to listen to sermons, and see how they contrast the two together. Most sermons that I have heard, if they're preaching from the New Testament, they always reference the Pentateuch.

Bibliography

Alexander, T Desmond. *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*, 3rd ed.

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