

---

# Pro Rege

---

---

Volume 20 | Number 3

Article 7

---

March 1992

## Topical Analysis of the Bible (Book Review)

Michael Williams

*Dordt College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege)

---

### Recommended Citation

Williams, Michael (1992) "Topical Analysis of the Bible (Book Review),"

*Pro Rege*: Vol. 20: No. 3, 27 - 28.

Available at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege/vol20/iss3/7](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol20/iss3/7)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Dordt Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Dordt Digital Collections. For more information, please contact [ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu](mailto:ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu).

Randall Balmer made a crucial mistake in his recent book *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America* (1989). Balmer attempted to organize and define evangelicalism under the notion of cultural retreat. He typified evangelicalism as a movement that sees the world about it as operating by different norms and working in different ways than its own. Thus, the evangelical response is to escape to some safe haven, to a monastic cocoon in which the believer is free to live out his own private vision. Marsden is certainly cognizant of that strand within evangelical piety, but he is also aware that evangelicalism has a tradition of social and political involvement, and that is a strand which gets considerable attention in the book. The reader will not get a one-dimensional or simplistic analysis from Marsden; he's too good a scholar for that.

Marsden's book should be required reading for every

student in a Christian college. The story of evangelicalism tells us about ourselves. It sheds historical light upon our responses to the culture about us. The Reformed ship sails in an evangelical sea, whether we like it or not. We would do well to have some understanding of those waters. The immigrant Reformed movement came to North America after the evangelical ethos was already firmly ensconced and had already forced its own shape upon the American Presbyterian tradition—our closest cousin in the North American context. Because we have many of the same allegiances, the Reformed tradition has joined hands with the evangelical movement at many points. But we also need to be aware that the evangelical sea has frequent storms, hidden whirlpools, and strange currents, and many of its inlets and apparently peaceful and inviting bays are far too shallow for the Reformed vessel. Is the Reformed church evangelical? Yes, and um, no.

*Topical Analysis of the Bible*, by Walter A. Elwell (ed.), (Grand Rapids: Baker) 1991. 894 pages. \$39.95. Reviewed by Michael Williams, Assistant Professor of Theology.

We live in an age in which computers can do truly marvelous things. The entire Bible can be entered onto a hard disk and with the touch of a button you can find every reference to Jerusalem. Unfortunately that very same technology can be used to generate products of questionable worth. You can just as easily type in "sanctification," print out the verses in which the word appears, and then believe that you have in your hand everything the Bible has to say about the life of faith. That's pretty much what you have in this work. Think of it as a doctrinalistic concordance, or better yet—a reduction of the Bible to a systematic theology generated by computer. But perhaps the best characterization is to describe the book as a list of 35,000 proof texts. This is the Bible treated as a vast, unorganized storehouse of data, eternal nuggets of truth that can be decontextualized, atomized, and placed into tidy, watertight, rationalist compartments.

The doctrinalistic agenda is clear from the start. The introduction characterizes the work as an arrangement of the "theological content of the Bible" into "a set of recognizable topics" which presents a list of "biblical passages that speak about each of those topics" (ix). If the Bible is a doctrinal textbook, it is a pretty poor one. There is nothing rationally systematic about Scripture. Does God know what he's doing? Obviously not if we think of the Bible as raw data for the development of a systematic theology, for the bone structure of Scripture is not doctrine but narrative history. At its most basic level the Bible is about

the mighty deeds of God in the history of his creation. The Bible is not a jigsaw puzzle requiring our doctrinalist reconstruction of its teachings as one might color code a file or call up references to "Hades" on a computer screen. A biblical text cannot be arbitrarily taken from its context and turned into an independent, eternal verity. Meaning and reference always go together. The form and content of Scripture are divinely intended and complementary, and therefore not to be separated. The narrative story of Scripture is not at our disposal to transform into a more rationally palatable collection of individual verses cut loose from all historical particularization and contextualization, and then reorganized under doctrinalist headings as if it sprang (or should have sprung) that way from the mind of God.

The Bible is about events, not doctrinalist categories. The gospel is that God delivered his people through the waters of the sea. The gospel is that God was in Christ—in the manger; in the temple; on the Mount; in the Garden; in the courtroom before Pilate, at Golgotha—reconciling the world to himself. The bite of the gospel is lost in the dispassionate folding, spindling, and mutilating of the Scriptures into rationalist loci.

The organization and theological headings are almost as unfortunate as the approach to Scripture found in the proof text underpinnings of the work. But to deal with the theology generated in the book would require more time and space than the work merits. Suffice it

to say that if one genuinely wants to find doctrine, he or she need look no further than the drama. To come face to face with the message of Scripture, you need to hear the story! Whatever fails to relate

that story is unfaithful to Scripture's very intent. Sadly, in this most unfortunate work, the story, the drama of redemption dies the death of 35,000 proof texts.

*Understanding the Book of Amos: Basic Issues in Current Interpretations*, by Gerhard F. Hasel (Grand Rapids: Baker) 1991. 166 pages, paperback, \$10.95. Reviewed by Michael Williams, Assistant Professor of Theology.

Hasel contends that some forty percent of all biblical commentaries written since 1800 have been given over exclusively to, or have included treatments of, the book of Amos. Over sixty commentaries on Amos have been published since 1960. Hasel sets out to synthesize the findings, debates, and methodological trends of a vast Amos literature. Surveying and reviewing some 800 separate publications, most of which date from 1960 to the present, Hasel provides us with a window into a very important avenue of biblical and Old Testament theological research. The book of Amos is the earliest product of the writing prophets of the Old Testament. Thus Hasel declares that "our understanding of prophecy and how it functioned in biblical times is to a significant degree shaped by the oracles and invectives, the predictions and accusations, and the pleadings and calls to repentance provided by Amos" (11). In light of the importance of Amos in the biblical canon, the attendant weight that Amos studies have enjoyed in the last 200 years make those studies something of a "microcosm for the study of all the prophetic writings of the Old Testament."

Hasel reviews critical theories bearing upon the authorship of the book, the prophetic vocation, the background and purpose of Amos' prophecies, Amos' relationship to the covenant, the character of his oracles against the nations, and his use of social criticism and eschatology.

While the reader will not find a commentary on Amos here, he will be treated to a tour of the historical stages of biblical studies: from the source criticism of Julius Wellhausen to Hans Wolff's form criticism to traditio-historical criticism. Through it all, Hasel seeks to take note of the trends and paradigm shifts of critical biblical studies. The strength of the treatment is Hasel's observation that there "is no such thing as a purely objective or scientific study" (25). While noting that there are a plurality of methods in biblical study, Hasel suggests that the atomizing tendencies of redaction and form criticism are on the wane, and that the fundamental unity and integrity of the canonical shape of the book of Amos is reasserting itself in the 1980s. The recent work of such conservative scholars as David Hubbard, G.V. Smith, and D.K. Stuart stand as worthy contributions to the wealth of Amos studies. Yet even in circles where it was once held that there is little or nothing of the *ipsissima verba* of the farmer from Tekoa in the book of Amos, a more unitary reading of the book may be coming to the fore.

Inclusion of the most extensive bibliography ever compiled on Amos makes this book a must for both pastor and seminarian. While the appropriate reader of the book may be just this clientele, Hasel employs a minimum of technical terms and his style is highly readable, so the book can be enjoyed by a broader audience as well.