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Understanding the Old Testament (Book Review)

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The third section is intended to provide the practical part of the anthology: essays examining the work of specific authors such as Camus, Yeats, Eliot, Auden, Faulkner, Greene, O'Connor and others.

One of the cardinal issues in an anthology of this sort is the matter of one's definition of "religion." Is it to be given a narrow theological boundary, or a broad, world-view scope? The editors wisely choose the latter, yet do not always escape the crippling dilemma of the traditional sacred-secular dualism, "sacred" then being synonymous with "religious," and "secular" with something that is supposedly "non-religious." The anthology provides a fine opportunity for the editors to work towards the resolution of this problem facing the Christian academic community, yet they do not fully utilize this opportunity.

The anthology's main value lies in its impressive array of essays. Despite the variety of topics and contributors (and strength of the essays) the editors have compiled a unified anthology which may prove to be the standard textbook on the subject for many years.

Understanding the Old Testament—by Bernhard W. Anderson, Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1975. 649 pages. Third Edition. \$11.95. Reviewed by Wayne Kobes, Instructor in Theology.

Bernhard W. Anderson, Professor of Old Testament Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, has offered this revised edition of Understanding the Old Testament "to help a new generation to understand and appreciate our scriptural heritage" (p. xix). The first edition appeared in 1957 and a second, revised edition in 1966.

Anderson's approach reflects his conviction "that the only way to understand the faith of ancient Israel is to portray the historical drama reflected in the pages of the Old Testament" (pp. xix-xx). He attempts to avoid the colorless recounting of one fact after another which too often has characterized Old Testament surveys. In this he has been fully successful. He presents a fresh approach which skillfully weaves together biblical theology, historical research, archeological discoveries and discussions in literary criticism.

In addition Anderson tries to probe beneath surface issues and to go beyond simplistic answers to more foundational matters. For example, he begins his book with a discussion of history as interpreted history. Maintaining that all history is interpreted history, he comments

on the unique characteristics of biblical history. The Reformed believer may not be fully satisfied with Anderson's perspective and his conclusions, but significant issues are brought to light.

The author attempts to present various points of view on biblical issues under debate. This makes his book more appealing to readers of differing perspectives. Yet his own stance of moderate higher criticism rings through clearly. For example, the documentary hypothesis is unquestioningly assumed as valid throughout the book, although Anderson concedes that there are minor differences between scholars on this point. The Old Testament is seen to be the product of Israel's religious history, although Anderson is quick to add that it is grounded in historical events. The following quotation gives an idea of Anderson's approach:

Every reader of the Bible has to make up his mind about the historical nucleus which lies at the heart of the tradition that has been elaborated and colored by Israel's faith over a period of generations. Some miracles are more central to the Exodus story, more native to the Mosaic period, than others. Other aspects of the story are an artistic and imaginative expression of the conviction that Yahweh was active in history, delivering his people from servitude and calling them to serve his purpose. Because the whole account is interpretive, it is very difficult to separate sharply the central elements of the tradition from later accretions. Nevertheless, Israel's ancient faith undoubtedly was based on the experience of actual events which facilitated the escape of slaves from Egypt, events in which they perceived in moments of faith the work of God (p. 66).

Although the Reformed believer will reject many of Anderson's approaches and conclusions, he will nevertheless find the book to be interesting and helpful. Understanding the Old Testament provides the beginning student of Old Testament studies with a good, elementary understanding of literary criticism and current issues in Old Testament scholarship. The book is especially helpful in relating recent archeological discoveries to the biblical text in lucid fashion. It is well illustrated with pictures of archeological findings, maps and chronological charts and constantly refers the reader to biblical passages under consideration.

The prospective reader who has a special interest in the Old Testament will find Understanding the Old Testament to be interesting and thoroughly worthwhile.