

REVIEWS

Svigel, Michael J. *The Fathers on the Future: A 2nd Century Eschatology for the 21st Century Church*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2024. 320 pp., \$21.99 Paperback.

Reviewed by Daniel P. Jarms, DMin, Associate Dean of the Master's Seminary Spokane and Pastor at Faith Bible Church, Spokane, WA.

Michael J. Svigel is department chair and professor at Dallas Theological Seminary. He has written extensively on theology, church history, as well as Christian fiction. He specializes in patristics and has written about these topics at an academic and popular level. His aim is to present “A comprehensive (not exhaustive) treatment of Irenaean premillennial eschatology” (3). As he claims at the outset, he does even more by clarifying, strengthening, and even correcting some missteps of 2nd Century eschatology. True to his goal, Svigel’s volume is a well-researched, examination, defense and interpretation of futurist premillennialism. It includes twenty-nine links to articles as “go deeper excurses” which are referred to in www.fathersonthefuture.com. These act as useful appendixes. If printed, this volume would stand well over 500 pages.

The opening chapter lays out Svigel’s approach to Irenaean premillennialism. He uses an integrative theological method utilizing original languages of both the biblical texts and a grammatical-historical hermeneutic. He seeks to read “the whole of Scripture in light of its parts and its parts in light of the whole.” He follows Irenaeus’ emphasis on the Trinitarian creation-fall-redemption narrative centered on Christ and His first and second coming (5). These and other pre-commitments promise to give a thorough examination of Irenaeus’ eschatology. Svigel writes,

He believed in a seven-year tribulation period at the end of the age, climaxing in the return of Christ as king, the resurrection of the righteous as well as a remnant of mortal survivors of the anti-Christ’s reign left to repopulate the earth, followed by a thousand-year intermediate kingdom, and concluding with the resurrection of the wicked and ushering in of the eternal new creation. (8)

Following Irenaeus’ *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* Svigel explains the narrative structure of creation-fall-redemption. In Chapter 2 Svigel explains Irenaeus’ teaching that God created man to transform the earth from “formless and empty” to “formed and filled” (17). Despite the fall into sin, this aim was never changed. The story of redemption begins, according to Irenaeus, with God’s gracious

governance and an establishment of a theocratic rule through Abraham and the nation that would come from him (22–23). The Abrahamic covenant provides a framework for God’s rule over His nation (24–25) and the Mosaic Covenant provides ‘contextualized expression of moral, civil, and ceremonial obligations (25). The Davidic covenant promises a king who will rule over the whole world. This king will empower his followers as image bearers in a new humanity that “becomes the means of ultimately transforming the world from chaos to order, from emptiness to fullness, from wickedness to righteousness, from death to life” (26).

In Chapter 3 Svigel explains how this OT trajectory is developed in the NT. Christians of all eras have agreed that God’s plans will be fulfilled in three ways. In Svigel’s helpful nomenclature, each term begins with an “R”: 1) The return of Christ as king and judge; 2) The resurrection of the dead when the righteous are raised to eternal life and the wicked to eternal condemnation; and 3) The restoration of all creation to sinless perfection. Today, Premillennialists, Amillennialists, and Postmillennialists disagree significantly on the details but are unified on the framework. For the student of historical theology, chapter 5 gives a generous sampling of the earliest church fathers’ views on the future.

In terms of biblical theology, Svigel spends one third of the book (Chapters 6–13) walking through the OT and NT passages regarding the future. The categories found in covenantal or dispensational theology were not developed for another 1400 years. Irenaeus and his contemporaries cannot be neatly placed in them. Svigel interacts with the early church fathers as he details his own exegesis of the OT and NT writers. Significant time is given to an exegetical analysis of Revelation 20:1–6 (Chapters 11–13) and how it relates to the major modern views.

Svigel deals positively and peaceably with the major areas of modern debate on eschatology. The topic of the Kingdom of God is one of the first (Chapter 4). He highlights 11 distinct ways the phrase or idea of the kingdom of God is used in Scripture (42–43). It is multilayered with present and future realities, as well as spiritual and material ones. It will be fully present at Christ’s second coming in which Christ will transform the world and establish paradise. A frequent point of differentiation of amillennial, postmillennial and premillennial viewpoints is the character of the kingdom. Chapter 14 presents a case for a positive earthly and spiritual millennium with Christ reigning on earth. He compares amillennial and postmillennial views today with Irenaeus’ view.

Svigel follows Irenaeus and his contemporaries in a three-fold understanding of paradise planted, paradise removed into heaven, and paradise restored. This is an early articulation of a New Creation Model much of which is affirmed across millennial perspectives today.¹ There are significant sections devoted to the Day of the Lord from the OT and NT (Chapters 15–18). In these he uses Irenaeus and extensive biblical exegesis to argue for the Day of the Lord and the second coming being a process rather than momentary event (211). This is a key perspective for today that speaks to the distinction between amillennialists and pre-millennialists. Svigel shows how Irenaeus and other church fathers’ exegesis would refute preterism (Chapter 17). Without saying pre-tribulational rapture, he argues for an impending

¹ Michael J. Vlach, *The New Creation Model: A Paradigm for Discovering God's Restoration Purposes from Creation to New Creation* (Cary, NC: Theological Studies, 2023).

pre-day-of-the-Lord rapture. Chapter 18 highlights the rapture views of the church fathers. Their views were often not clear or detailed. There appears to be no clear distinction between the church and Israel as in modern dispensationalism, but there is a strong anticipation of the conversion of Jews and a restoration of Israel in the land. Christ would rule from Jerusalem in the millennial kingdom. Both historic premillennialists and dispensational pre-millennialists claim Irenaeus as the earliest proponent of their views, but Irenaeus cannot be easily categorized by the modern viewpoints.

Svigel delivers on his objective. He ably argues an Irenaean Pre-millennialism. This is not a polemical work, but a rhetorical one in which he wants to persuade the reader to this view. In sum, all major eschatological views would benefit from holding up their views in the light of the early church fathers. Svigel may not say it outright, but his presentation would fall comfortably within progressive dispensationalism. It provides a useful and surprisingly contemporary expansion of Irenaeus ably using exegesis, church history and theology.

Schnittjer, Gary Edward, and Matthew S. Harmon. *How to Study the Bible's Use of the Bible: Seven Hermeneutical Choices for the Old and New Testaments*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2024. 304 pp., \$23.99 Hardcover.

Reviewed by Caden Colson, ThM Student, The Master's Seminary.

Gary Edward Schnittjer (PhD, Dallas Theological Seminary) is a distinguished professor of Old Testament for the School of Divinity at Cairn University. He has been teaching Biblical Hebrew and Old Testament at Cairn since 1997. Dr. Schnittjer's books include *Torah Story: An Apprenticeship on the Pentateuch* (Zondervan, 2023), *Old Testament Narrative Books: The Israel Story* (B&H, 2023), and the substantial, 1,104-page reference work, *Old Testament Use of Old Testament: A Book-by-Book Guide* (Zondervan, 2021).

Matthew S. Harmon (PhD, Wheaton College) is a professor of New Testament Studies at Grace Theological Seminary, where he has taught since 2006. Dr. Harmon's books include, among several others, *The God Who Saves and Judges: A Theology of 2 Peter and Jude* (Crossway, 2023), *The Servant of the Lord and His Servant People: Tracing a Biblical Theme through the Canon* (IVP, 2020), and *Rebels and Exiles: A Biblical Theology of Sin and Restoration* (IVP, 2020).

With their combined Old Testament (OT) and New Testament (NT) savvy, as well as a common interest in biblical theology and Scripture's use of Scripture, Schnittjer and Harmon present *How to Study the Bible's Use of the Bible: Seven Hermeneutical Choices for the Old and New Testaments* (Zondervan, 2024). While designed to be used as a textbook in hermeneutics, this book is also a useful resource to pastors and teachers, and even the layman who is serious about studying the Bible in greater depth.

The NT's use of the OT is a critical topic in biblical interpretation, with about 350 direct quotations and between 400 and 4,100 allusions (depending on who is

counting).² In *How to Study the Bible's Use of the Bible*, Schnittjer and Harmon cover both how the NT uses the OT and how later OT passages use earlier ones. To guide Bible students in interpreting Scripture's use of Scripture, they structure the book around seven key hermeneutical choices (one chapter each). These are choices an interpreter must make when studying a given passage of Scripture and how it connects to a previous passage or passages.

Before an overview of each of these seven chapters, the reader may find it helpful to know a few general characteristics of the book, as well as the authors' stated presuppositions about hermeneutics and bibliology. A couple of helpful features are the inclusion of a case study or two and a list of study questions at the close of each chapter. The case studies clearly exemplify how to put each hermeneutical principle into practice, and the study questions help the reader gauge how well he understood the contents of the chapter. A characteristic to which some readers may need to acclimate is Schnittjer's and Harmon's tendency to use their own preferred terminology in place of more standardized terms in biblical studies. For example,

- They use “plain sense exegesis” to refer to a literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic.
- They use “Mesopotamian exile” to indicate the Babylonian exile.
- They use “Israel's scriptures” to refer to the OT.
- They use the wording, “individual and collective” to refer to the concept of corporate solidarity or federal headship.
- They use “donor text” and “receptor text” to refer to an earlier passage and a later textual connection back to that passage.

Helpfully, they include a substantial glossary at the end of the book which defines their commonly used terms and phrases.

Moving to the convictions and content of the book, Schnittjer and Harmon are to be commended for their stance on hermeneutics and bibliology, especially as it relates to Scripture's use of Scripture. They argue in the introduction that modern interpreters ought to interpret the Bible the same way it interprets itself. They further believe that the Bible itself demonstrates the use of a consistent hermeneutic throughout. “[Jesus and the NT authors] interpret the Old Testament the way the Old Testament interprets itself—as it had been for more than a thousand years before the days of Jesus” (xx). Thus, they do not see the NT authors as transforming the meaning of the OT or reading more meaning into it than was originally intended (*sensus plenior*). Instead, with a sound view of progressive revelation and the unified storyline and message of the Bible, they see the OT writers and NT writers employing a consistent hermeneutic. Authors of later revealed Scripture read previously revealed Scripture according to its originally intended sense and purpose. As Schnittjer and Harmon emphasize, “The authors of the New Testament did not invent a new hermeneutic. They followed the well-worn interpretive path used by the prophets, psalmists, narrators, visionaries, and sages of Israel's scriptures” (xxiv). This well-worn interpretive path is simply the literal-grammatical-historical

² Michael J. Vlach, *The Old in the New: Understanding How the New Testament Authors Quoted the Old Testament* (Sun Valley, CA: The Master's Seminary Press, 2021), viii.

hermeneutic, or as Schnittjer and Harmon prefer to call it, a “plain sense hermeneutic” (xxii–xxiii). They hold that “when later biblical authors—of either testament—interpret scriptures according to the very ways these earlier scriptures interpret themselves, this is nothing other than plain sense exegesis” (xxvii).

Thus, because the NT writers are simply continuing the OT exegetical method, Schnittjer and Harmon believe one must study how the OT interprets itself to understand how the NT interprets the OT. This leads to the burden of this book:

How can modern interpreters understand the New Testament's use of scripture without studying the scriptural exegesis within the Bible of Jesus and the apostles? The present study emphasizes the Old Testament's interpretation of itself as a resource to study the New Testament use of scripture (xxvii).

Schnittjer and Harmon demonstrate not only sound convictions regarding progressive revelation and a consistent hermeneutic but also a lucid explanation of this in the introduction. The robust Introduction well-prepares the reader to engage fruitfully with the seven hermeneutical choices around which the rest of the book is structured. In each chapter, Schnittjer and Harmon either argue for one choice over another, or sometimes encourage a responsible combination of both.

Chapter 1 presents the choice of seeing the OT and NT as either *sequestered* or *connected*. The burden of this chapter is essentially to convince the reader that neither testament should be read in isolation (sequestered). Schnittjer and Harmon claim the NT has too long been studied according to Second Temple rabbinical exegesis. Modern interpreters ought to extend their view further into the past to use OT exegesis, they argue. “Israel's scriptures should be approached on their own terms rather than overlaying them with categories of Second Temple sectarian and rabbinic exegesis” (5). The NT authors are not simply employing a hermeneutic popular in their day. Rather, they are continuing to employ the hermeneutic of the OT authors before them in a connected way. Thus, recognizing the intentional interconnected nature of the OT and NT is a crucial starting point to study the Bible's use of the Bible.

Chapter 2 presents the choice between “adjusting meaning and/or adjusting context versus advancement of revelation.” Schnittjer and Harmon commendably take a firm stance in favor of advancement of revelation. One of the strongest features of this chapter is a substantial section in which Schnittjer and Harmon point out the deficiencies of the *sensus plenior* approach (38–43). This chapter well-equips interpreters to recognize that the NT authors are not changing the sense of OT passages but rather exegeting and continuing the trajectory set up in the OT.

Chapter 3 presents the choice of “detecting allusions as an art versus science.” Schnittjer and Harmon advocate a responsible blend of both, and that the interpreter must not be too extreme on either side. This is a helpful chapter overall, but with the somewhat vague instruction to combine art and science, the student is left with no sure-fire way to confidently identify any given allusion. This chapter would be helped by emphasizing that one must seek to prove authorial intention to be sure of an allusion, and that this is possible with the careful study of each passage in its original context and the illumination of the Holy Spirit as its ultimate Author.

Chapter 4 discusses “horizontal versus vertical context.” While the “vertical” and “horizontal” terminology can be confusing at first, this chapter's strength is that

it makes the reader aware of the very sophisticated interconnectedness of Scripture. Thus, interpreters are urged to work hard to understand the meticulous and intentional interplay not just within a book, but across all books of Scripture that came prior. This insightful chapter admirably serves those who desire to learn more about the strings of connections between an entire network of biblical passages.

Chapter 5 discusses “biblical versus extrabiblical relationships,” arguing that the interpreter should give the greatest weight to connections within the canon of Scripture. However, interpreters should also pursue a “basic grasp of different kinds of extrabiblical literature” (110). Schnittjer and Harmon refer readers to some of the most important extrabiblical works to consider (110–15), providing an easy starting point for further study.

Chapter 6 focuses on the topic of biblical typology, examining the choice between “backward-looking versus forward-looking typological patterns.” This is the difference between typological connections that are only recognizable in retrospect versus connections that one can identify as intentional foreshadowing. Schnittjer and Harmon rightly caution interpreters to limit proposed types to only those that can be seen as authorially intended, explaining,

Biblical types are not rooted in the creativity of the interpreter; they are embedded by God himself within the text. While the degree to which the human author was aware that the person, event, institution, or pattern was pointing forward to someone or something greater can be debated, the larger redemptive-historical and canonical contexts indicate this in some fashion. (139)

Schnittjer and Harmon display good caution and solid, single-meaning exegesis in this chapter. Their helpful, final cautions are that “we must hold our proposed types with a measure of interpretive humility” and avoid the danger of “hunting for ‘secret messages’” in the Bible ... Instead, our focus must remain on the plain sense meaning of the text within its literary, historical, social, redemptive, and canonical contexts” (157).

Finally, Chapter 7 requires a heightened sense of discernment. Their discussion of “historical exegesis versus historical and prosopological exegesis” verges on inconsistency with a “plain sense” and single-meaning hermeneutic. Prosopological exegesis is defined in this chapter as “a biblical author *reading an earlier biblical speech in the light of a new character*” (160, emphasis original). This seems to mean that the later author takes the words a previous character spoke and applies them to a different character. For example, “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?” in Psalm 22 are taken as David’s personal words, yet applied later to Christ. More concerning, Psalm 45’s, “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever” (v. 6) is taken as an exaggerative honorific address to a merely human king, only later applied to Christ by the author of Hebrews (1:8). Schnittjer and Harmon seem to depart in this one section from their conviction that earlier writers of Scripture intentionally looked forward to the advancement and fulfillment of their predictive writing, fearing that “[r]ejecting prosopological exegesis altogether results in a reading of scripture limited to the historical context of the donor text” and “confinement of the sense to the historical context of the donor text does not adequately handle the biblical evidence” (164). With such a view, they dismiss the possibility that the psalmists in

the above examples wrote prophetically with the Messiah in mind as the primary speaker or referent of the words they recorded.

In the closing section of the book, Schnittjer and Harmon succinctly summarize how students, pastors, and Bible teachers may responsibly interpret the Bible's use of the Bible. They give four simple steps, all informed by the principles elaborated throughout: "Identify allusion, study donor text, study receptor text, explain exegetical outcomes" (179). Helpfully, they close with a couple of case studies that pull together the principles from the previous chapters, showing interpreters how to employ them all in the exegesis of a given passage.

Overall, *The Bible's Use of the Bible: Seven Hermeneutical Choices for the Old and New Testaments* is a valuable and commendable resource for Bible students, pastors, teachers, and anyone else looking to go deeper in Bible study. Schnittjer and Harmon masterfully demonstrate the beauty and sophistication in the interconnectedness of the Bible. The book might slightly be improved by a greater emphasis on previous authors' intentional anticipation for future connections and the development of revelation (as opposed to the larger emphasis on later authors' recognition of connections). The reason the scriptural authors saw these connections was because the authors of earlier portions of Scripture intentionally set them up. Thus, later authors obeyed the intention of previous authors by ultimately making those connections. Additionally, the advocacy of prosopological exegesis (though limited and careful) is troubling because it takes a step afield of the authorial intention of a previous biblical author. However, students who employ appropriate discernment will derive great value from this book and the further resources Schnittjer and Harmon suggest within. It is an excellent treatment overall and recommended to anyone who desires to better understand the Bible's use of the Bible.

Bowman Jr., Robert W. and J. Ed Komoszewski. *The Incarnate Christ and His Critics*. Kregel Academic, 2024. 853 pp., \$42.99 Hardcover.

Reviewed by William Varner, Professor at The Master's University.

Since I endorsed this book, I begin this review by citing the words of that endorsement. "How do you improve on a classic? Bowman and Komoszewski's book *Putting Jesus in His Place* has achieved such a status since its publication in 2007. Yet the authors have actually improved on their own classic defense of Jesus' full deity in this new book by bringing it up to date (since critics always rework their arguments) and by sharpening and expanding their exegesis of key texts. You will never need another work on the deity of our Lord Jesus if you get this book!" (7).

It is actually inaccurate to call this book a second edition of an original volume because it truly is an entirely new work. The authors have structured their revised book around the same *HANDS* acronym in the earlier one. Part 1 is Crown Him with Many Crowns: Jesus' Divine *Honors* (81–166). Part 2 is Like Father Like Son: Jesus' Divine *Attributes* (167–324). Part 3 is The Name of Jesus: Jesus' Divine *Names* (325–528). Part 4 is Doing What only God Does: Jesus' Divine *Deeds* (529–666). Part 5 is The Lamb upon His Throne: Jesus' Divine *Seat* (667–764).

But this tome by the authors (henceforth called B&K) is far more than a clever acronym. It simply is a comprehensive study of biblical Christology in defense of Jesus' incarnation. Such a book is sorely needed because we live in a period when Jesus' divine identity is increasingly denied and misinterpreted and even deliberately distorted. This is true among many of the so-called cults who uniformly deny His deity, but there is also a resurgence of unitarians who even deny not only our Savior's deity but also His preexistence! Painful memories return of a former colleague who developed just such an idea and joined that cult! We can also add the Muslim views of Jesus as only a prophet and that of religious liberal academics who want to build a wall between the Jesus of history and the so-called Christ of faith.

B&K take their readers systematically through the numerous examples in the New Testament witness to Jesus as prophet, priest, and king, including His role as a true man, the Son of God and the eternal second person of the Trinity. If there is any drawback to this book, it is actually also its strength! I mean by that statement that the book is truly exhaustive (and sometimes exhausting) as it thoroughly explores the biblical texts that teach by both declaration and by inference that Jesus is the second member of the Trinity and fully Divine. No relevant text is ignored, as is evident in its 26 pages of Biblical texts cited in the Index (825–50). Many of us know by experience how cults can ignore the original languages and also distort them as they twist the languages to fit into their often absurd interpretations. Our authors skillfully expound the meaning of the original languages in their thorough discussions. For example, the infamous ideas of the Watchtower Society in their twisting of John 1:1 by calling the Logos “a god” are thoroughly refuted on pages 411–31. B&K's mentor, Daniel Wallace, recently retired from Dallas Theological Seminary and author of the classic, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, adds his enthusiastic endorsement on the back cover: “The Finest defense of our Savior's deity in the 21st century and perhaps in all of Christian history.”

While the reader's patience will be demanded because of the extremely thorough discussions, this is a book that you will return to over and over as you encounter attacks on the deity of our Lord Jesus. You will not be disappointed to have this tool on your bookshelf even if you do not read it through entirely when you first purchase it. This reviewer's considered conclusion after pouring through *The Incarnate Christ and His Critics* is that this volume is simply the best volume you can ever study on the Deity of Christ.

I began this brief review with the quotation of my own endorsement inside the book. I now close this review with a quotation from the Australian scholar Michael Bird who contributed the Preface to the book. “It will be a reference resource for pastors, a primary text for apologists, a teaching tool for professors, and a refreshing read for anyone who wants to understand what it means to say to Jesus, “My Lord and my God!” (16).

Toombs, Rachel. *Reading the First Five Books: The Invitation of the Pentateuch's Stories*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2024. 175 pp., \$17.49 Paperback.

Reviewed by Karl Walker, Associate Editor, The Master's Seminary.

Rachel Toombs completed her Ph.D. in theological studies at Baylor University with a focus in Hebrew narrative. The idea for her most recent publication, *Reading the First Five Books: The Invitation of the Pentateuch's Stories*, is the product of communal reading experiences during COVID in 2020. Combining her educational background at Regent College (M.A.) and Baylor University (Ph.D.), Toombs presents *Reading the First Five Books* as both an invitation and a work of instruction. She invites her readers to a particular way of reading the Pentateuch's stories, instructing them in the reading tools applicable to Hebrew narrative. Toombs puts forward "a hermeneutic that recognizes the active role of readers in meaning-making, because readers must first accept the invitation" (xiii). Driven by the certainty that "stories transform readers," Toombs hopes that readers will engage with the narratives of Scripture, encountering their brevity (ch. 2), pacing (ch. 3), characterization (ch. 4), complexity (ch. 5), and grotesque elements (ch. 6). These encounters will bring change to readers as they eat these stories (ch. 7) and remember who they are, who God is, and what He has done on their behalf.

Toombs begins by outlining her hermeneutical approach (ch. 1). She rejects spiritual/allegorical readings of the text, as well as approaches that pursue the author's intention in writing. Alternatively, Toombs desires readers to "wander around, as it were, and wonder about why the stories are told the way they are" (2). This phrase functions as the heartbeat of her reading approach and runs throughout the remainder of the book. To unpack what she means by "wonder and wander," Toombs critiques the evangelical formulation of biblical hermeneutics found in the Chicago statements on inerrancy and hermeneutics.³ Though she believes this statement produces numerous problems to reading and interpretation, Toombs focuses on just two. First, "the Chicago statements place the biblical witness and scientific discovery in opposition to each other" (7). Second, the CSBI and CSBH place too much responsibility on "interpreters to get it 'right' in order to apply Scripture to their daily lives" (7).

In response, Toombs' hermeneutical approach draws on the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Wolfgang Iser, suggesting that reading is an event in which the situation of the reader has a role in "meaning-making." The reader's ability to make meaning of the text is largely influenced by one's historical context and experiences. Therefore, as Toombs concludes, "meaning resides not somewhere 'out there' but within us" (15). Yet, to avoid total subjectivity in interpretation, Toombs quickly moves to the stylistic elements of Hebrew narrative. Because the narrative has been composed artistically, Toombs argues that these aesthetic elements of the story transmit meaning to the reader (referencing the work of Robert Alter).⁴ She argues the advantage of her approach is that it "muddies the waters of 'objective' interpretation without dissolving into a puddle of subjectivity and relativity" (8).

Turning to these artistic features, Toombs begins with the brevity of Hebrew narrative (ch. 2). Trademark of its style is the absence of background detail in most biblical stories, such that much remains unsaid. In Toombs' assessment, the sparse

³ Hereafter, CSBI and CSBH. See "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 21, no. 4 (Dec 1978): 289–296, and "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25, no. 4 (Dec 1982): 397–401.

⁴ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

detail of Hebrew narrative propels the reader to creatively visualize how the silence of the text contributes to its meaning. This practice, described as “sanctified imagination,” should push the reader further into the text (39). Toombs exemplifies her argument by appealing to Leviticus 10:1–7, the story of Nadab and Abihu offering strange fire. The ambiguous nature of this story points to the meaning of the story residing in its gaps. Toombs advocates a contextual interpretation that reads the ambiguity in light of the surrounding context of clarity through the abundance of commands specified to Moses.

Next, Toombs unpacks the importance of a narrative’s pacing (ch. 3). The pacing, or rhythm of a narrative, creates certain expectations for the reader which, when disrupted, point to meaning in the text. A major component of a narrative’s pacing is its usage of the *waw* conjunction. Though difficult to render in English, the *waw* disjunctive and *wayyiqtol* can either slow down or speed up the pacing, such that the reader should pay attention to their occurrences. Toombs’ case study stems from Genesis 32:22–32, in which the usage of the *wayyiqtol* combines the pacing of the narrative with its brevity, prompting the reader to make sense of its unspoken details.

A third feature of Hebrew narrative is its characterization (ch. 4). Toombs overviews primary themes in characterization such as modes (indirect or direct), or types of characters (flat or round, type or agent, etc.). She notes the varied nature of these characters to demonstrate that the Bible includes highly sophisticated characters, rarely able to be pinned to a simple evaluation. Her case study is the characterization of God in the book of Exodus (Exod 3:1–6; 4:24–26; 19; 24). Without seeking to be irreverent, Toombs articulates how the narrative demonstrates the beauty of God’s nature, such that “we find here a ‘character’ in God who can be known but not in the usual ways, who can be spoken of but only by pushing the boundaries of ordinary language, who can take center stage but not without turning that stage (in the spirit of Emily Dickinson) slant” (98). This moves Toombs to a treatment of the complexity in characterization often found in narrative (ch. 5). And she argues for this complexity through the drama between Isaac and Rebekah, and Esau and Jacob (Gen 27).

Finally, Toombs moves to the grotesque elements of Hebrew narrative (ch. 6). These elements include the sacrificial system of Leviticus, its various laws about sickness and bodily fluids, the rite of circumcision, and Jacob wrestling with God. Toombs places these examples into three categories: the grotesque in relation to an individual body, in relation to another body, and in relation to God. Her case study here appeals to Numbers 16, the account of Korah’s rebellion against the authority of Moses and Aaron. Toombs suggests that the effect of the grotesque in narrative is to “draw readers more deeply into the possibility of God at work in the world” (134). God’s awe-inspiring might and His interventions in the earthiest of events demonstrates both His transcendence above His creatures and His immanence among his people. In response, the reader is called to eat these stories (ch. 7), to read and remember. Toombs advocates this response by referencing Deuteronomy which recounts numerous stories for the people of Israel that remain central to their identity as God’s chosen people.

Reflecting on *Reading the First Five Books* yields a complicated evaluation. First, of benefit to the reader is the attention given to the literary features of narrative

(brevity, pacing, characterization, etc.). Toombs' treatment of these sections generally follows in the path of that trod by previous literary critics such as Sternberg, Alter, Berlin, and others. With this literary emphasis, Toombs is discontent with a cursory reading of the text that overlooks its intricate details. Certainly, these features are evident throughout numerous Old Testament narratives. However, to focus on the aesthetic qualities of the text demands, by default, an author-centered approach in which meaning is transported away from the reader to the one who wrote the text and included these features. It was the author's intention to include and exclude certain details, and thus he would have his own motivation in mind. This appears to be at odds with the hybrid hermeneutic that Toombs advocates. For example, in Toombs' chapter on brevity, she rejects Sternberg's distinguishment between gaps and blanks because "readers are often not immediately in a position to determine what constitutes a productive narrative 'gap' versus a fruitless narrative 'silence'" (40). Note that in one sense Toombs' statement is correct because the narrator, not the reader, is the one to make this distinguishment. Yet in her case study she concludes that the answer is found by a close literary reading of Leviticus 10:1-7 within its broader context" (48). That is to say, the text itself contains the answer, not the reader. So she concludes that the "text is not a blank slate but gives us material to engage with, material that speaks to how this text should be read" (49). But this seems to contradict her earlier suggestion regarding the reader's role in ascribing meaning to a text. To pose this tension in a question: in Toombs' hermeneutic, where is the intersection between the author speaking to how the text should be read and the role of the reader in meaning-making?

Second, Toombs' work focuses on key elements of narrative but does not clearly articulate a methodology for their implementation. The reader may come away with the major tools of Hebrew narrative, and yet remain unsure of when to implement them. This may be due in part to Toombs' lack of treatment of the relationship of plot to the transformative effect of stories. Toombs' writing is driven by the conviction that stories transform readers. But Toombs does not clearly answer how a story generates that transformation. What role does the plot play in generating that transformation? As Toombs notes, Hebrew narrative plots are particularly selective (brevity, pacing). Yet their selectivity should be read in light of the plot structure and tension. Additionally, the characters of the plot are portrayed in respect of the plot. For example, Berlin notes that physical descriptions of characters, whether height, clothing, or appearance always bear relation to the broader plot.⁵ Otherwise stated, direct characterization occurs in relationship to the plot, and by extension achieves the intended transformative effect upon the reader. However, to examine the tools of narrative such as characterization, brevity, or pacing without studying the role of plot in narrative strips the reader of interpretative guardrails for discerning intended artistic elements in the text.

Third, Toombs' rejection of the CSBI and CSBH will prove troubling to the inerrantist. Indeed, as Toombs notes, the Chicago statements affirm both the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture. Furthermore, as Toombs also notes, these statements place a lofty weight upon interpreters to "get it right in order to apply

⁵ Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, Bible and Literature Series 9 (Sheffield, UK: The Almond Press, 1983), 34.

Scripture to their daily lives” (7). The Scripture is the Word of God, and nothing less. To speak for God when God has not spoken bears incredible consequences, evidenced in Scripture. And so, this lofty weight should remain upon the reader and student of Scripture. The solution for the reader is not to alleviate this burden in interpretation. Rather, one should pursue reading and interpretation in prayer, much study, and in the fellowship of the local church.

By virtue of these three points, any usage of *Reading the First Five Books* should be done in light of broader works on Hebrew narrative such as Sternberg’s *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, Berlin’s *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, and Bar-Efrat’s *Narrative Art in the Bible*. Furthermore, consideration of an evangelical appraisal of these techniques would prove helpful, when engaging with Toombs’ treatment of these issues.⁶ Consequently, this review does not recommend Toombs’ work as an evangelical starting point in the study of the Pentateuch’s stories.

MacArthur, John. *The War on Children*. Los Angeles, CA: John MacArthur Publishing Group, 2024. 223 pp., \$15.96 Hardcover.

Reviewed by Marc Daniel Rivera, Independent Reviewer.

The War on Children tackles one of the most urgent and contentious issues of our day: the ideological and moral assault on the youngest members of society. Pastor and author John MacArthur argues that children, from the moment of conception, have become a primary target for secular agendas aimed at dismantling traditional, biblical values. Published by John MacArthur Publishing Group, this book serves as both a wake-up call and a guide for Christian parents, guardians, and anyone concerned with the moral welfare of future generations.

The book opens with a powerful preface detailing how today’s culture has moved from protecting to actively endangering children. Through entertainment, education, media, and even government policies, secular forces are intent on reshaping societal norms. Rather than aiming to merely complain about this shift, MacArthur uses this book to offer practical, biblically grounded ways to protect and nurture children in a hostile environment. As he notes, the stakes are eternal, making this not just a social issue but a spiritual battleground.

Divided into two main sections, *The War on Children* first introduces readers to the historical and contemporary “Slaughter of the Innocents.” MacArthur explores how children are devalued, beginning with attacks on life itself. From abortion to ideological manipulation, children’s rights to spiritual and moral freedom are increasingly curtailed. Chapters like “Whose Children Are They, Anyway?” and “Children Are a Gift from the Lord” remind readers of the God-given stewardship and responsibility that parents have over their children, a responsibility MacArthur argues is being systematically undermined by government interference.

⁶ J. Daniel Hays, “An Evangelical Approach to Old Testament Narrative Criticism,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 166 (Jan – Mar 2009): 3–18.

The second section, “The Key Battlefronts,” dives into specific challenges faced by families today. MacArthur discusses five major cultural “attacks”—on conception, life, family, women, and men—highlighting how each of these spheres has been manipulated to destabilize the nuclear family and sever traditional roles. For instance, in “The Attack on the Family,” MacArthur critiques the erosion of parental authority, particularly in educational and governmental settings. The book also explores how redefined gender roles not only challenge the structure of family but directly oppose biblical teachings.

Throughout, MacArthur emphasizes the critical importance of raising children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. He offers biblical counsel and pastoral guidance, encouraging parents to take an active role in their children’s spiritual formation. MacArthur’s message is clear: raising children cannot be left to the state or even to nominally Christian institutions. Parents are called to be the primary influences, modeling and teaching biblical truth.

For readers familiar with MacArthur’s previous works, this book is consistent with his call for clarity and courage in faith. However, *The War on Children* goes beyond typical social commentary, calling Christians to actively resist cultural currents and to uphold God’s truth, especially for the sake of their children. MacArthur does not sugarcoat the challenges but insists that Christian parents are not without hope or resources.

