

Steven Coxhead, review of Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel*, *Reformed Theological Review* 65 (2006): 106–7 (used with permission, and re-edited to conform with SBL style).

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### **A BIBLICAL HISTORY OF ISRAEL**

By Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), xiv + 426 pp., n.p.

As the title of the book suggests, *A Biblical History of Israel* is concerned to present “a biblical history” of Israel. What is meant by a biblical history in this context is “a history of Palestine defined and dominated by the concerns and presentation of the biblical texts” (p. 3). The approach that Provan, Long and Longman take in the book is to argue forcefully for the validity of biblical historiography and then to present their own example of such. This methodology gives the book its two-part structure.

Part One is concerned to counter the views of historians, such as J. A. Soggin, J. M. Miller, and J. Hayes, who have discounted the historical value of large sections of the Bible, and in particular K. W. Whitelam, who has called into question the whole concept of an ancient Israel. Apart from critiquing the arguments of these scholars and outlining the main scholarly approaches to the history of the Old Testament since the nineteenth century, Part One also contains philosophical reflections on the epistemology of historiography, the importance of historical testimony, and the historical value of narrative, as well as a brief chapter describing the approach to the history of Israel that will be presented in Part Two of the book. All of this discussion means that Part One, at 104 pages, is rather long. In fact, Part One makes up one-third of the body of the book.

The other two-thirds of the body of the book is given over to a history of Israel from the time of Abraham through to Ezra-Nehemiah under the Persians. All in all, Provan, Long and Longman do a sterling job in interacting with the major historical issues of this period of history. Long’s chapter on the settlement of the land is a particular highlight as he addresses the question of the archaeology of the conquest with great insight. One particular disappointment, however, is that Longman’s comments on the Sinai covenant are too cursory for such an important stage in Israel’s history. In addition, the authors’ focus on narrative history means that the historical issues relating to the prophets of Israel are basically totally absent.

Overall, *A Biblical History of Israel* is well-written and well-argued and is recommended reading for all students of the Old Testament. Provan, Long and Longman are also to be commended for engaging with critical biblical historiography in a respectful, honest, and forceful way. At the same time, however, for many students of the Scriptures who already accept the basic theological presuppositions of the authors, it is a shame that the amount of space devoted to the history of Israel is limited. The comments at the end of chapter 8 are pertinent in this regard: “If ... the biblically literate reader is left wondering about the many episodes and events recounted in [the biblical text] that have not been discussed or even mentioned, we may offer by way of explanation that our intent has not been to paraphrase the biblical material, nor even to rehearse it in full. Instead, we have thought it worthwhile to inquire if and to what degree the biblical text is deserving of credence [as far as its historical value is concerned]” (p. 237). And this is the main problem with the book from a conservative

point of view. The impression is that the authors have spent more time justifying their biblical approach to people of a different historical and theological tradition than they have in giving a comprehensive biblical history of Israel. In fact, the authors note how “in the interests of communicating to a

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wide audience, we have not ... allowed our core convictions and motivations, whether theistic and theological or not, entirely to surface in the way in which the volume is written” (p. 103). While it is good that the authors have sought to write a history of Israel that critical scholars can read without “insuperable difficulty” (p. 104), this reader was left feeling hungry for more of the history of Israel than what Provan, Long and Longman have tastily dished up on this particular occasion.

STEVEN COXHEAD