

**The World and Literature
of the
Old Testament**

The World and Literature of the Old Testament

John T. Willis
Editor



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Introduction

The fundamental presupposition lying behind all OT literature is that the God of Israel (Yahweh) is continually at work throughout nature and all nations to accomplish his purposes. Thus the various books of the OT record great events in nature, Israelite history, and world history and give a theological interpretation of the meaning or meanings of those events. Man can use various scientific tools to understand and reconstruct historical facts, but there is no way by a scientific method to verify or disprove the accuracy of theological interpretation by the various biblical authors. This must be accepted by faith or rejected by unbelief. The Christian accepts the theological proposition that "all scripture [here meaning the OT] is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16).

The OT (like the New) is not a book of dogmatic theology; i.e., it is not arranged along the lines of great theological concepts, such as God, man, Christ, the church, ethics, and eschatology. There is good reason for this. God cannot be limited to any set of abstract, religious declarations deduced from Scripture by his creature man. Man cannot anticipate how God will behave in any given situation. God is not programmed to act according to any logical human system. He is God! And he acts as he wills as each new situation arises. The biblical writers do not speculate on God's nature; they record his mighty acts and declare their relevance to their own audiences. Thus all biblical texts are tied to the historical situation in which they were originally produced. The task of the commentator is twofold: (1) to recon-

struct the historical situation in which a divine word was delivered, a divine act was performed, or a book was written; and (2) to explain the divine message that the author of that book intended for his audience.

A modern commentary is forced to deal with many matters that would have been unnecessary for those to whom the various books of the Bible were first addressed. They knew firsthand the author or authors, the historical setting, the language (Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek), the emphases the author(s) intended, the location of sites mentioned in the text (geography), the lay of the land (topography), the meaning of various customs and practices (both secular and religious), kinds of dwellings, articles of clothing, etc.

Modern man, however, is not in such an advantageous position. Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek seem far away and long ago. The average English-speaking Christian must depend on British and American translations prepared by biblical scholars. Customs, dress, modes of travel, dwellings, types of animals and birds, etc., mentioned in the Bible are strange to modern man and must be learned by careful study often involving a number of disciplines. These and many other considerations make it necessary for the biblical text to be explained either orally in classes, sermons, or study situations, or in writing, as in commentaries, introductions, and special studies. Essentially there is no difference between a Bible class teacher explaining a biblical passage orally to a class and a commentator explaining that same passage in writing to any who would care to read his comments. Whether this is done in oral or written form, it is done by fallible men with imperfect knowledge and can always be corrected or improved. It is with this conviction and in the spirit of a dedicated search for truth that the *Bible Study Textbook Series* is designed.

A careful study of the Bible is indispensable to one who seriously believes that it contains the word of God. He who holds such a conviction approaches the text in a spirit of humility, sincerely desiring to understand its meaning. He tries diligently to rid himself of preconceived ideas and strives to open his mind and heart to allow the various in-

spired writers to say what they really intended to their original audiences and not what he would like for them to have said. Thus he never reaches the place where his mind is closed to possible interpretations different from those to which he has already been exposed. In fact, he welcomes new light on any passage. After all, if his interpretation is correct, he will not be afraid to examine any position, because his correct understanding can reveal the inadequacies of other views. If he is incorrect and is honestly searching for truth, he will be glad to abandon wrong understandings for more correct ones. It would be impossible to grow intellectually or spiritually (as 2 Pet. 3:18 admonishes) if one did not have to re-examine his earlier views and attitudes again and again and frequently change them. The contributors to the present commentary series offer their *present understanding* of the biblical text (which in each case is based on many years of careful and prayerful preparation and study) and pray for greater insight as the years come and go.

Although the commentators in the *Bible Study Textbook Series* are scholars in their own right, they are charged to write for the average church member and not for other biblical scholars. Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek words and phrases, words and phrases in other foreign languages, technical scholarly terminology, allusions to other works, and footnotes are used very sparingly, and then proper explanations are given. A list of abbreviations appears at the beginning of each volume.

Commentaries can deal with a variety of issues. This series will concentrate on explaining the biblical text in its original context (exegesis). Responsible application to the reader's own life (hermeneutics) must proceed from that point.

But before one undertakes a study of any single OT book, it is helpful to get a panoramic picture of the historical periods lying behind OT literature, of the ways this literature came into existence, and of the kinds of literature involved. This introductory volume is designed to aid the reader toward these ends.

John T. Willis