

Review Article

An Appreciation of William Brown's Handbook to Old Testament Exegesis and the Pedagogical Challenge of Teaching the Old Testament

Richard S. Briggs

Visiting Research Fellow in Old Testament at Cranmer Hall, St John's College, Durham, and Prior of the Community of St Cuthbert, St Nics Church, Durham
richard.briggs@durham.ac.uk

Introduction

'The wait is over!' says Jacqueline Lapsley, on the back cover of William Brown's substantial Old Testament Exegesis textbook.¹ Carol Newsom adds 'This is the exegetical and hermeneutical handbook I've been waiting for'. I too am impressed by Brown's achievement. I am less sure that I knew that I was waiting for an interpretative Old Testament textbook, but on the arrival of such an accomplished one, we have a useful opportunity to reflect on the shape of the pedagogical challenge in the field of Old Testament studies today.

William Brown's single-authored *A Handbook to Old Testament Exegesis* is the fruit of a year's leave funded by Brown's home institution (Columbia Theological Seminary), and researched at Princeton's Center of Theological Inquiry. In other words: this is not the incidental production of an esteemed lecturer's course notes, though maybe it has its roots in that, but is the product of a year's focused research writing. Furthermore, Brown dedicates it to James Luther Mays, in particular in debt to Mays' 1960 Union Theological Seminary inaugural lecture on 'Exegesis as a Theological Discipline'.² The farthest shore of the project, then, is theological in nature. But the waters between here and there will take some navigating, and so Brown sets out to navigate them, with an enviable range of tools to hand, and hermeneutical self-awareness suffusing the book from first to last.

I will proceed in two straightforward stages. First: what does Brown do, and how? – in the process seeking to point out his particular achievements, and correspondingly, any

¹ The book in question is William P. Brown, *A Handbook to Old Testament Exegesis* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017). Page references to this book are in brackets in the main text.

² Published by Union as a pamphlet in 1960. It proves difficult to track much reception of this intriguing article in the literature, except for James Barr's piece in a Mays Festschrift (*The Hermeneutical Quest*), reprinted in Barr's *Bible and Interpretation. The Collected Essays of James Barr*, ed. by John Barton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), *Volume I: Interpretation and Theology*, 127–55.



lacunae. Secondly, and more broadly, in the light of Brown's achievement, how might one best reflect on the nature of the pedagogical challenge in teaching Old Testament in our present time?

(I) Brown's Project

The book is organised in four parts, but the fundamental distinction that orders Brown's approach, inhabiting his parts two and three, is between *analysis* and *location*: analysis – the laying bare of what is there – and location – the perspective from which what is there is seen. The 'what is there' with which we have to do is the text of the Old Testament. This is part physical reality, regardless of one's perspective; part a human construct in the sense that some texts have been counted in and others out; and part divine construct (a theological given), which can be contested but is still at least a factor in the first place if it is capable of being contested. Hermeneuts can thus point out the potential sleight of hand by which interpretative theory can be divided into analysis and location, since one could say that the nature of the thing to be analysed is fundamentally different depending on your reading location. Admittedly that way lies theoretical tedium and what Jeffrey Stout once called endless methodological foreplay,³ but there is a sense in which one has to at least acknowledge that the interpretative world is more complex than analysis first and location second if one is to do justice to hermeneutics at all. So acknowledge it is what Brown does, by way of back-peddalling to a modest part one: 'Getting Started'.

Here Brown imagines a great hermeneutical adventure: an Anselmian definition of exegesis as 'reading seeking understanding' (6), a diagram of text, interpreter and meaning in an awkward and ungainly spiral (8), a recognition that 'Interpreting biblical texts requires creative and empathetic imagination as well as analytical acumen and lexical proficiency' (7), a plea to read slowly (9), and all in all a pursuit worthy of Peter Pan: approximating to something approaching 'to read shall be the greatest adventure'. This is followed – chapter 2 – by 'Self Exegesis', front-loading the 'place' in 'reading from this place', by way of five pen-portraits of readers from multiple combinations of core contexts: age, gender, race, class, ecclesial conviction, theological heartland, or even just range of interests. Finally, he asks us to read two passages that will serve as test cases for every chapter to follow, and which he wants us to slow down and notice in terms of content, gaps, surprise, purpose, and so forth. The two texts are Gen. 1.1–2.4a, and Gen. 2.4b–25 – Genesis 1 and 2 as I shall call them. This is a bold choice but certainly one that offers ample scope to reflect on every reading approach under the sun, or under the 'greater light', as attentive exegetes will know that Gen. 1 actually calls it (1.16).

³ Jeffrey Stout, *The Flight from Authority. Religion, Morality, and the Quest for Autonomy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 147.

Also, as it happens, the beginning of Genesis was the subject of Brown's doctoral dissertation, which compared the ancient versions of Gen. 1.⁴ How much Hebrew (let alone Greek) does Brown's implied reader need? His official answer is 'none' – only chapter 4 'presupposes a rudimentary knowledge of Hebrew' (x), even though it is all transliterated and translated. But how often do wise instructors forget just how unfamiliar Hebrew is to their classes? By page 54 Brown is writing about guidelines for textual criticism and says 'If the LXX, for example, disagrees with the MT ... [and if] this is due ... to the Hebrew text the translator was using', 'then a "back translation" is required, which involves retroverting the Greek into Hebrew, that is, reconstructing the Hebrew from the Greek.' He immediately adds 'Frequently the *BHS* apparatus does this for you'.⁵ I suspect the average student, and a fair number of instructors too, may find that word 'frequently' a bit unnerving – i.e. sometimes we are on our own reconstructing Hebrew from the Greek. Anyone capable of breezing through such a claim is an odd candidate for being a reader who needs a handbook to Old Testament exegesis in the first place. In the next paragraph Brown offers some guidelines for 'Once you have compared the (variant) witnesses ...'. His is not the first handbook to imagine students deploying text critical principles to check up on the work of experts who went before them, but I still find it an unlikely picture. There follow four pages of edited highlights of Brown's own text-critical work on Gen. 1, all of which are without a doubt interesting and illuminating, though it is debatable whether readers can evaluate such blunt assertions as 'The suggestion by the *BHS* that the divine approval formula be placed at the end of v.7 rather than within v.8, as in the LXX, is without merit' (56, n.14). His own conclusion is that text criticism is not about procedural rules and assured conclusions, but involves imagination, empathy and 'an intuitive understanding of variants'. (59) I only wonder whether the level of expert imagined who can do this restricts us to a small number of people in the whole world, let alone the average Old Testament exegesis class. This is not intended as a major criticism – just a reminder of how easy it is for those of us who teach Old Testament to spend too much class time attending to the imagined fellow professor over one's shoulder who is tut-tutting as we fail to mention textual complexity and the possible benefits of retroverting translation from the Greek.

After the opening study of translation (ch.4), the title of every remaining chapter (5–13) in Brown's part two, 'Analytical Approaches', includes the word 'analysis'. This section patiently serves the goals of 'analysis': *ana-luō*, the 'loosing again' of the component parts into the elements from which they came. How does Brown do this? Let me count the ways: nine of them, along with some highlights of the case studies.

⁴ William Brown, *Structure, Role, and Ideology in the Hebrew and Greek Texts of Genesis 1:1-2:3*, SBL Dissertation Series 132 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1993).

⁵ The 'BHS apparatus' is the system of textual notes found in the standard critical edition of the OT Hebrew text – the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* – which may already be a technical level beyond the average reader of this handbook. They may presumably be expected to know that 'MT' refers to the Hebrew Masoretic Text, and 'LXX' the Greek 'Septuagint' translation of it.

(1) Translation – Brown values communication above all else, with literalness a subservient and/or awkward goal. Gen. 1.1 is rehearsed from multiple angles. *tohû wābohû* he translates as ‘mishmash’ (‘the earth was an empty mishmash’ – here and throughout). Inclusive language is a desideratum, but needs care to be achieved. The RSV’s decision to treat *‘immâ* in Gen. 3.6 as redundant is offered as a misjudgement – the RSV had ‘she gave some to her husband, and he ate’; more helpfully spelled out in the NRSV as ‘her husband, who was with her (*‘immâ*) ...’. Wordplays in the garden are given some space, especially the Adam from the *‘adāmâ* (ground/earth), and noting the question of when to render *hā-ādām* (‘the man’) as Adam, which Brown wants to defer to 4.25, since 3.17’s lack of an article is, in his judgment, ‘probably a scribal error’ (36, which is a slightly awkward way of first mentioning that category).

(2) Text critical analysis – in which scribal errors are introduced properly, after alerting readers to the full range of texts in play (the Dead Sea Scrolls from Qumran, the Latin Vulgate, and so forth). This chapter was the one being discussed briefly above, with regard to textual witnesses.

(3) Stylistic Analysis – in two parts, pertaining to poetry and to narrative respectively. Brown follows Dobbs-Allsopp in seeing biblical Hebrew poetry as ‘free verse’ (67), governed neither by rhyme nor meter, but beholden to parallelism.⁶ Psalm 23 furnishes a worthwhile example of poetic analysis. The narrative chapter, interestingly, is strikingly short on theory, but packed with examples, and offers multiple levels of stimulating engagement. Brown moves briskly to Gen. 32, pondering its famous ambiguities before concluding ‘The story of Jacob at the Jabbok is part of a larger narrative in which antagonists are turned protagonists, heroes limp in defeat, and enemies extend grace. The story can be read on so many levels, from the etiological to the psychological to the theological. It is a compact story with a generative capacity for meaning’. (82) This rather helpful attitude pervades the chapter: an attitude shaped by the capacity to ask probing questions, enjoy the wonder of the text, and sit light to undetermined answers. Thus, on whether Gen. 2.4a closes the first or opens the second creation account: ‘Is it a retrospective title, rare as that is in Hebrew narrative? Or does it introduce what follows? Or both? One wonders.’ (86) The *tone* of this handbook is itself a thing of delight. After enjoying the ‘divine eloquence’ of Gen. 1’s commands (‘Let the waters swarm with swarming things’) Brown neatly juxtaposes this alternative perspective: ‘The great biblical scholar Claus Westermann claims that this “etymological formation” serves the “monotonous style that characterizes this chapter” ...’ – one awaits the critical put-down, but all Brown adds is ‘To each one’s own’. Is it from scripture itself that Brown has learned that lightness of touch can sometimes be the sharpest of rhetorical moves? Further on, Gen. 2–3 is viewed as ‘jazz improvisation’, and Brown rehearses a range of fascinating exegetical insights: the man and the woman who realise not that they are clever (*‘arûm*) but that they are naked (*‘ērummim*); the mix of rivers

⁶ Cf F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *On Biblical Hebrew Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), following the pioneering 18th century work of Robert Lowth.

in 2.10–14 that locate Gen. 2 'somewhere between mythic and geographic reality', and the gendering of the *'ādām* ('man'/human) in 2.23 as *'īsh* (man) and *īshshā* (woman), where Brown writes 'Call it the splitting of the *'adam*'. (91)

(4) Structural analysis – where I confess to being unpersuaded by an emphasis on chiasms and forms. Here we have: Gen. 11–22 as chiasm; the whole Jacob cycle as chiasm; long-list tabulations of form-critical analyses; and the reading of Gen. 1 in the structural image of a temple or tabernacle (days 1 and 4 marking off the outer court; 2 and 5 the holy place; 3 and 6 leading to the holy of holies; day 7 found in God alone). Brown concludes 'One could argue from structure, for example, that the primary reason for the "seven days" of creation is to demonstrate that creation is God's cosmic temple'. (111) Perhaps one could, but would one be right? On the other hand, there is a passing note in this chapter that 'the relationship between text and genre ... is to be viewed dynamically and organically, not essentially or rigidly' (103). In my view this insight into the instability of genre is all too rare in Old Testament studies in general, and in textbooks in particular. Is Brown's handbook an attempt to respect genre from a distance in the light of this point, without being unduly constrained by it?

(5) Compositional analysis – in which oral tradition and redactional analysis take their stand. Clearly these tools need their moment of introduction, but I am doubtful that Brown's account will persuade any who are not already convinced that one can peel apart texts into layers and then draw conclusions about redactional strategies. He does manage the occasional 'Perhaps' after a full example (116, on the ancestress in danger, which on an earlier occasion he had noted did not always include an ancestress in danger (84).) I even wondered if his heart was fully in it with this concluding summation: 'as tedious as it may seem, it is fascinating to speculate about the dialogue [of a text's reconstructed multiple layers]. ... As analytical as it may seem, even redaction criticism engages the imagination, occasionally resulting in "Aha!" moments of discernment.' (125) Occasionally, perhaps, and is the discernment not often speculative?

(6) Comparative analysis – enter stage left *enuma elish* (the Babylonian creation epic), for a whirlwind rehearsal of standard ancient near Eastern comparisons with Gen. 1 and 2. S.R. Driver said that Genesis 1 'was the Hebrew version of an originally Babylonian legend' (cited here 132), but Brown elegantly dismantles that suggestion, allowing that Gen. 1 can take care of itself, and 'studiously avoids the fray of epic conflict'. Is Gen. 1.14 polemically understating the sun and moon as mere lights, rather than deities? Having noted that some say so, Brown finds a more 'irenic perspective' in Gen. 1 more plausible. That such questions are posed, though, is the point. In conclusion: 'Parallels should be taken with a grain of salt and a dose of sugar'. (140) I am not sure what confection that represents, other than his paraphrase of 'openness and wariness'. But this is a model introduction to the legitimacy and limits of such comparative reading.

(7) Literary analysis – 'looking beyond a text to surrounding texts' (145). After several examples (the tower of Babel, the end of Amos 9, resonances between Ps. 23 and other

Psalms, which I might have put under the rubric of intertextuality more specifically), Brown reflects on the two creation accounts of Gen. 1, and then drifts into a short rehearsal of Pentateuchal source criticism. The documentary hypothesis, he says, is just that: a hypothesis, not a method. (156) His own elegant presentation achieves elegance by skirting the minefield that is the present state of Pentateuchal play, which may be a virtue rather than a failing. Either way, that point, combined with the sense that we are pondering old-style literary criticism as the reading of how texts got relocated to new contexts, makes for what feels a strangely old-fashioned presentation.

(8) Historical analysis – a brief and bracing reflection on historiography, and historical context. Brown, it may be noted, wrote the lengthy introduction and afterword to the 4th edition of Bright's *History of Israel*, and is well aware of what used to be said and what is now not said.⁷ But historical investigation as the anchoring of an historically-informed imagination (169) is all he wants in view here, and the point is well taken.

(9) Canonical analysis – briefly following Childs' notion of canon as 'a platform from which exegesis is launched rather than a barrier by which creative activity is restrained' (cited on 173), Brown launches into a well-judged reflection on biblical authority. In short: 'Scripture is authoritative primarily with respect to its theological subject, God' (175), but since God is creator of all things this has consequences involving respect for other forms of created enquiry too, such as the sciences. He then suggests that 'The canonically minded interpreter serves as host, finding ways to encourage open dialogue with the expectation of discovering new connections...' (177). The examples that follow again seem close to what one might call intertextuality: Ps. 22 and Mark 15's cry from the cross; Psalm 23 and Mark 6's feeding of the 5000; Gen. 1 and Second Isaiah. What Brown means by canonical reading is not wholly tied to the discussion of biblical authority, illuminating as it may be.

After a brief pause for breath – a three page interlude that reminds us that we are pivoting now from description to construction – part 3 of the book rolls out 7 (or 8) reading perspectives to enlarge the 'table of discourse' (196). We thus enter into the realms of perspectival or advocacy readings. In fact, Brown slightly reorientates the resultant hermeneutical discussion by opening up his list of perspectival readings with 'Science', which I will take along with his second candidate, 'Ecology'. It tells us something about Brown's own background that the science chapter is the longest in the book (26 pages), although Brown's own explanation is that most readers need bringing up to speed in the hard sciences in order to have the mutually illuminating and respectful dialogue that he wishes to promote. (cf. 202) Unlike Stephen Jay Gould's NOMA (non-overlapping magisteria, cf. 204), Brown proposes TOMA – tangentially overlapping magisteria.⁸ For Brown, science's questions sharpen the reading of Genesis. For example: 'For both the

⁷ John Bright with William P. Brown, *A History of Israel* (4th edition; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), cf. Brown's 'Introduction' (1–22) and 'Appendix' (465–86).

⁸ He also takes a little sideswipe at attempts to integrate Genesis with science by way of harmonising, which would be 'completely overlapping magisteria', and thus 'COMA' (!).

biologist and the Yahwist, the primordial past points to what humanity shares with all of life' (217). Sometimes there is conflict: Brown finds science unequivocal on an original state of savage competition and ravaging disease long before humankind (222), even if he wants to conclude 'From the biosphere's perspective, our birth was by no means benign. So also from the Yahwist's'. (222) I confess it was not altogether clear to me how well these science-provoked questions really clarified interpretative matters. The 'Ecology' chapter is more tightly tied to questions about the hermeneutical frameworks generated by care for the creation, and helpfully reviews the kinds of sustainability-focused questions that such readings pursue, relating to creation's worth, interdependence and diversity, among other things. The hard case, of course, is the command to *kābāsh* ('subdue') the earth in 1.28, a verb with little scope for being taken as other than aggressive and harsh. Brown works away at saying it is only one word in a remarkably ecologically-friendly chapter; and that it is followed by *rādā*, to rule, which can be a generous 'good and just king' sort of ruling; but in the end he has to allow that something like a *Chaoskampf* (a conflict with chaos) has reinserted itself into Genesis 1 under the scope of mandated human activity. (238–40) 'Most ambivalent' is his concluding evaluation. Was there scope for wondering whether Gen. 1 envisions something that is not straightforwardly ecologically friendly, while still saying that it constrains human activity through the tensions retained in the passage?

Next come two chapters on gender: one on feminism, and the other more wide-ranging. By way of contrast to the two preceding chapters, the wide-ranging critical discourses of feminism allow Brown to survey others' approaches to offer his own account. In particular, he gives taxonomies of questions and angles that interrogate power with respect to male and female. The challenges of reading through a feminist lens may be insurmountable, he admits (253), but he faithfully records them here. Of course, Gen. 1–3 gives much scope for exploring further gender-related issues, in dialogue with the work of Phyllis Bird and Phyllis Trible, and there follows an elegant deconstructing of the unthinking patriarchal privilege sometimes deduced from these texts.⁹ Did the Yahwist mislead by elevating the 'pain' of farming to the level of the pain of childbirth, asks Brown? (261) Strange, he notes, how there was never any movement to prohibit air-conditioned tractors along the lines of arguments that it was biblical for women to suffer in childbirth and thus to deny them anaesthetics ... A second gender chapter presses on to explore womanist, Mujerista, Asian feminist, and genderqueer readings. Here the reading perspectives move on to race as well as gender, and end up at the last category by profoundly confronting binary thinking. Brown points to some ways that a binary-challenging reading might take inspiration from Gen. 1–3, but they are – inevitably – thinly supported, and if the pre-creation state of 'formless fluidity' (cf. 274) as at best 'open to interpretation' is one of the stronger pieces of evidence, then one is left wondering if it might not have been more

⁹ Cf. the two volumes in the *Overtures to Biblical Theology* series: Phyllis A. Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities. Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997) and Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1978).

illuminating to say that this is one of those perspectives that is in basic conflict with the text, and then to explore what follows from that?

From gender politics to politics: the next three chapters tackle life in all its socio-political complexity. First comes *Empire* – we are with the postcolonialists, and asking what biblical texts do when read through the lens of imperial subjugation and its aftermath? (280). This theory-strewn discourse is admirably introduced, via Said on 'othering', Spivak on the subaltern, hybridity, mimicry and much else.¹⁰ My own view is that this whole area is of tremendous relevance to reading Old Testament texts, implicated on many levels in the discourse of empire as they are. Brown offers examples: the Cyrus Cylinder is compared to the edict of Cyrus constructed by Ezra and Chronicles (once thought to be the same author, but in any case clearly on the same page here); there is civil disobedience in Exodus, read under the rubric of mimicry (aping the Empire's discourse); the book of Daniel is clearly in part about Empire; Psalm 137 is read as subversion of Babylonian cruelty. Mark Brett's work on Gen. 1–3 resources another turn around the sample texts.¹¹ Next comes 'Minority', a label perhaps to some degree opaque to readers outside North America, but chosen by Brown to avoid the connotations of talking about 'race', which is more or less the subject. This chapter is strong on hermeneutical self-reflexivity, briefer on how to read biblical texts in the light of these concerns. Yes Gen. 1 envisages the creation of all people equally, male and female, and by extension the creation of any minority at all – Brown writes movingly of being challenged to reconsider a 'radically inclusive anthropology' (302) – and yes the misappropriation of texts once appropriated for racial supremacy is helpfully exposed, but I wonder whether these examples, hermeneutically, do more than say that sensitised readers can see that wrong interpretative moves were made, so that those moves can be resisted, and space apart from such oppressive readings be reclaimed. This feels hermeneutically different from claiming that the interpretative lens facilitates new insights. It would have been good to have Brown reflect on this point. Finally in this sub-section comes disability, one of the newest perspectival readings to gain purchase in the academy. Brown rehearses the complex politics of representing the differently abled, then turns to the texts, whether on 'impaired eyesight [and] damaged testicles' (308) that disqualify service in the priesthood, or the biblical construction of infertility as a form of disability, or exemplars such as Mephibosheth, or attitudes to the blind and deaf and lame in the prophets. He lands on a 'disability liberation ethics' (311), and suddenly one realises that liberation has not been one of the categories deployed in part 3 of the book. I return to this point below.

The last chapter of this section is 'Theology', as Brown finally arrives at the far shore on which he set his sights at the very beginning. He opens with 'Theological interpretation is a

¹⁰ One may follow up the references to the work of Edward Said and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak via Brown's lucid summaries.

¹¹ Cf Mark G. Brett, *Genesis. Procreation and the Politics of Identity*, Old Testament Readings (London: Routledge, 2000).

crucial, if not culminating, step in the exegetical enterprise, since it builds on everything that we have done so far' (317). It is thus both 'descriptive and constructive' (318), expanding the net beyond all the previously considered contexts, to include matters of 'faith and practice' concerning the whole of reality – God, the world and ourselves. (319) It would of course be possible to write a whole book on the theological import of Gen. 1 and 2. Brown contents himself with exploring these two texts as a Bach organ fugue and a jazz improvisation respectively. In the former case, he dialogues with creation *ex nihilo*, side-stepping whether Gen. 1 supports it or not, and choosing instead to marvel at creation *ex vetere*, out of the old, even out of chaos. In the latter case he notes the absence of cosmic orientation or royal profile, and the startling immediacy of divine-human interaction. In summing up: 'Humanity holds creation's promise yet can so easily be creation's problem. Such is the common wisdom shared by both accounts being set side by side'. (325)

There is a very brief part 4. Probably its existence is more significant than its content: it is about communicating the results of what one has learned. The text is to be retold, an act that requires hermeneutical awareness across text, audience and self. Brown mentions that when he preaches he starts by 'exegeting' the website of the church where he is to preach. He includes a sermon, on Gen. 1 preached for 'Earth Day' (22 April) on the Gardener God; and a set of three studies, from which I learned that church groups where Brown works are considerably more advanced educationally than many places where I have ministered, although maybe my unease with his 'living in the cosmic temple' blueprint for a Bible study was also a function of not finding the point itself very helpful. As I say, the significance in this brief coda is that it is there at all: that the goal of an academic handbook to Old Testament exegesis is the communication of the text beyond the vanishingly small world of other scholars.

(2) The Pedagogical Challenge

I have tried to point out several of the highlights of Brown's approach in the foregoing survey. It is written with an enthusiasm and awareness of the world in which we live. It is hospitable to multiple perspectives, finding something of worth in all of them, and still pressing on to put forward canonical questions as an integrative focus for the analytical chapters, and theological interpretation as an integrative focus for the location chapters. Readers of the Old Testament, in Brown's view, are most likely to be Christians. He does not spend any time reflecting on the kind of construct which the Old Testament itself is (an interesting lacuna), but under that title it is of course a Christian one; and what would be the point of a Christian interest in the Old Testament that did not consider itself beholden in some measure to integrating canonical and theological concerns? Brown does not defend this point, and insofar as he makes it at all it is politely put forward as the perspective for people of faith (i.e. Christian faith). Other textbooks are available. But Christian interests will make a lot of sense of this one's structure and purpose.

This brings us directly to the complexities of how best to approach the task of teaching the Old Testament today, even if one's perspective is relatively narrowed to taking on board Christian assumptions and perspectives. If one wants to let the Old Testament itself set the agenda for an Old Testament class, what are the priorities in a world of limited time and pressure on the syllabus? Brown's book offers what I take to be some interesting angles on this question.

First, one particular theological conviction underlies certain key aspects of this project: Brown's commitment as a theologian with a scientific background to bring to bear a reasoned faith that takes seriously the findings of scientific enquiry. His theological apologetics here is that science properly understood is derivative upon the goodness and reliability of the creator God, and therefore there is, in his phrase, a tangential relationship (between science and scripture). I think this perspective in turn explains the way in which theological interpretation is seen by Brown, in a strikingly measured way, as the capstone of all the other approaches. The result is an approach to theological interpretation – itself profoundly indebted to the kind of approach James Mays supported – that stands in a productive tension with some overly enthusiastic advocacies of 'theological interpretation' today that almost present it as a rising up to throw off the shackles of historical-critical enquiry.¹² By way of contrast, might one say that theological enquiry is theorised here by Brown as being built upon the rational and scientific exercise of critical discipline?

Secondly, it may be noted that he speaks easily and without apologetics about God, and indeed in this is not so unrepresentative of the academy generally. Despite occasional stridency both positive and negative, the view that one is not allowed to talk about God in public discourse may be relatively rare these days, and the stridency can be of those who oppose God-talk in the public square as well as those who defend it but say that no one is doing it (except perhaps themselves). Brown's God is the God of Christian faith – if pressed it is the God of his Reformed tradition – and he never seriously entertains the possibility that this is unrelated to the God to whom Gen. 1 and 2 (and the rest of the Old Testament) witness. Here, and indeed in my first reflection above, one might have wished for some space at least to be given to reflection on Jewish interpretative practices, or locations. The Christian construct of the 'Old Testament' does have a good deal in common with the Jewish construct of the Tanakh – all its component parts for instance – and even if all Brown could do was point out this adjacent field of exegetical endeavour it would have been helpful.

Thirdly, the balance between exemplar texts and coverage of critical discussion is refreshingly weighted in favour of tackling exemplar texts. I am sure this is the right way to introduce students to Old Testament study. In every chapter Brown offers fairly weighty bibliography, but mainly it is bibliography that supports and sustains the particulars of

¹² Rhetorical exaggeration on behalf of theological interpretation does it no favours at all. In my view some of the contributors to Craig G. Bartholomew and Heath A. Thomas (eds.), *A Manifesto for Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016) drift this way, for example.

discussion. A few chapters do offer overview additional resource lists (such as good dictionaries, or ANE resource texts), but on the whole we are reading Brown, or Brown deliberately mediating specific examples of contextual readings, most of which are recent (typically from the last 20–25 years). Rarely is the history of scholarship in view. Readers will see what form criticism or literary analysis look like by seeing them in action. It is clear always and everywhere that Brown could also have written a survey of scholarship, but he has surely made the right decision here. Students need to know why an approach is worth considering in terms of what fruit it bears, and if they are thus motivated they will head off and find out who said what in the event that they need to know. But it rarely works the other way round. The choice of Gen. 1 and 2 as focal texts in this regard is bold, but worthwhile. Interestingly, along with the range of back up examples from the Psalms (on which he is writing the *Old Testament Library* commentary), Brown ends up working mainly with texts that require relatively little grasp of the history of Israel or issues in Israel's status as God's people. Gen. 1–3 and the Psalms are in this sense democratised texts, that work well pedagogically. There is wisdom here in avoiding requiring too much grasp of historical particulars as a prerequisite to thoughtful reading of specific texts. It is interesting to reflect on the pros and cons of orientating an 'Introduction to Old Testament' course around the Psalms, for example: what one would lose in historical overview would be compensated by existential immediacy, and in any case the Psalms of historical recital (such as 78, 105, 106) would afford opportunity for introducing historical overview if desired.

Fourthly, it is worth asking what is gained and missed by keeping an introductory focus on exegesis rather than the wider range of hermeneutical issues. A couple of striking omissions might provoke the reader to reflect on how far Brown's exegetical handbook, while hermeneutically self-aware all the way through, is structured in a way to do justice to some aspects of the hermeneutical task. One omission, noted above, is the absence of liberation hermeneutics as a perspective in part 3, though I wonder if in Brown's taxonomy the relevant title would be 'class'. It is obviously a futile critique to point out that he has not covered every angle – which is never going to be practicable for any 'handbook'. But liberation theology is as well known as feminism as being among the best-rooted examples of reading strategies that foreground interpretative location, and it is fascinating to see that it does not make the cut, except where it is marginally brought in to the discussion of minority reading. But minority reading and liberation reading are fundamentally different categories, because liberation can be driven by a theological rationale, as indeed can feminism, whereas the approach by way of reader category (i.e. gender, empire, minority ...) foregrounds a type of location rather than a hermeneutical perspective. In short, Brown's part 3 is indeed still about exegesis, from various places, rather than hermeneutics. Brown pulls back from any real analysis of the difference between those hermeneutical dynamics that derive some part of their rationale from the text and those that do not. He will allow that such and such a reading has moved a long way beyond what the Yahwist had in mind, for example, but this is not essentially a negative, in this book. So what is missing is the loop

back from the climactic theological perspective to ask whether any of the preceding perspectives receive fresh and positive evaluation in the light of the whole, or whether theological reading might render some perspectives as less significant for exegesis? My guess is that this is an awkward conversation to have in our present time, but then is part of the pedagogical challenge of teaching the Old Testament today not precisely to encourage students to ask this question?

The issue I am raising here concerns how to factor in the significance of the identity of the reader in deeper ways than just by noting how different locations open up different perspectives. In particular, given Brown's own probing work elsewhere on character in wisdom literature, it is striking that no attention is paid to the reader's *character*.¹³ This is surely the missing ingredient in a hermeneutical inventory that attends to the reader's social, racial, gender, educational and theological formation, but does not probe into their character, or comparably into their embodied spirituality. Among two students in the 'Old Testament Exegesis' class to which this book might serve as handbook, what might be the major difference between the one who probes ever deeper into the complexities of the subject matter and the one who bounces off the surface with a dismissive assessment that it is all ancient and irrelevant primitivism? Every factor will make a difference, but will character make the biggest difference of all? (This may also be the place to point out that perennial issue with textbooks: that much of the interpretative pay-off modelled by a wise author is actually dependent on that author's wisdom rather than the interpretative method they are deploying. One could learn from and believe everything Brown says, and still not know how to engage in imaginative text criticism or literary criticism, because one does not have half his wit and wisdom ...).

Finally on the hermeneutical side, there is a positive aspect to all these limitations on awareness of wider and further framing issues. The absence of much of an apologetic agenda frees Brown to get on with the task of reading the text and hearing what it says, from a range of places. Some of his readings later in the book are well aware of discomfort (imagined or actual) when reading agendas are brought face to face with texts that jar with their assumptions, but Brown's project is not to try and justify the reading of the Old Testament in the first place. I suspect that for the purpose of teaching good interpretative approaches, such a side-lining of apologetic issues is a helpful move. Is that because the best way to 'justify' continued attention to the Old Testament is by practising such attention, with good examples, wisdom and generous grace? In this regard, one may note the approach taken by Ellen Davis' in her survey-style textbook, *Opening Israel's Scriptures*, which spends all of 7 pages on interpretative approach, and then settles down to actual readings and examples of approaches for 400+ pages of interpretative wisdom.¹⁴ Again,

¹³ See William P. Brown, *Character in Crisis: A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996) updated and revised as *Wisdom's Wonder: Character, Creation, and Crisis in the Bible's Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014).

¹⁴ Ellen F. Davis, *Opening Israel's Scriptures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

the pedagogical implications are clear, and persuasive: more time on reading scriptural texts, less on justifying doing so.

Conclusion

To return to where we began: I was not aware that I was waiting for a textbook on Old Testament exegesis. But now that Brown's impressive volume is here, it has clarified several issues for me regarding the pedagogical challenges of teaching the Old Testament at the present time. It also, perhaps inadvertently, made me realise what I *am* waiting for: a textbook that leads us through the vexed question of how to form good readers of the Old Testament. The key, I imagine, is to switch the focus, from the methods at hand, to the formation of the person able to deploy those methods. My conviction is that scripture has something to say about the kind of person that would be, which is itself an instantiation among other things of the hermeneutical circle once more.¹⁵ I think the book I have in mind could be called *A Handbook to Being an Old Testament Reader*. It would take in texts and contexts – of authors, redactors, compilers, and readers – ancient, modern, and dispersed around the world today. But it would come back always and explicitly to what practices of interpretation, and indeed life-practices more generally, are to be most eagerly sought after by those coming to study in Old Testament classes, whether at introductory level or beyond.

In the meantime, William Brown's *Handbook to Old Testament Exegesis* gets us a good long way around the hermeneutical circle anyway, at least on a first circumnavigation. Whatever subsequent achievements Old Testament students manage will assuredly be better off from learning from Brown's rich and varied wise insights.¹⁶

¹⁵ I have begun the task of sketching how this circle might cultivate virtuous readers in my *The Virtuous Reader: Old Testament Narrative and Interpretive Virtue*, Studies in Theological Interpretation (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010).

¹⁶ I am grateful for discussion of an earlier version of this paper at the Durham University Old Testament research seminar, several of whose members reflected that 'Introduction to the Old Testament' may be the hardest of courses to teach well (or *wisely*), which surely deserves a little more attention than it is typically given.