Rolf A. Jacobson and Michael J. Chan

*Introducing the Old Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey*


Sandie Gravett
Appalachian State University

This textbook was designed as a companion volume to *Introducing the New Testament*, by Mark Alan Powell. At 625 pages without the glossary or the index, its heft alone makes the authors’ self-described effort to undertake a study of an ancient library (xiii) seem like an apt characterization. The content is arranged in five traditional divisions: “The Old Testament Context and Scope”; “From Creation to Inheritance”; “Stories of Land, Loss, and Homecoming”; “Poetic Collections”; and “Prophetic Literature.” The opening section has chapters on the Old Testament world and the canon. The four sections with biblical content consist of discrete chapters dedicated to a book (with 1–2 Samuel, 1–2 Kings, and 1–2 Chronicles each treated as single units). All of the biblical chapters proceed according to a pattern: introduction, background, literary interpretation, theological interpretation, historical interpretation, and suggestions for further reading. Maps and other figures are provided throughout the volume when deemed useful, and the stories are illustrated with art from a wide variety of time periods and locations.

Jacobson and Chan clearly aimed this textbook at a Protestant Christian audience, despite the assertion that they “have written the book so that believers, nonbelievers, doubters, inquirers, those who are curious, and those who simply have to take a required course are all welcome” (xiii). While the authors do introduce the Tanak as well as detail why and how Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant versions of the Old Testament differ, their primary focus is on the organization of this literature in the Protestant canon. Additionally, in spite of claiming not to have an agenda or to favor a particular approach, Jacobson and Chan clearly are academically indebted to traditional historical-critical study of the biblical text as developed and utilized in the Protestant tradition in
that they read the Old Testament as theologically inflected literature that is best informed in interpretation by an understanding of the historical context of the writers. There are hints at reliance on other critical academic tools, such as social-scientific study or feminist biblical criticism, but those approaches are not fleshed out in their work. Moreover, when considering the texts theologically, there is rarely mention of perspectives on the divine from other faith traditions that see these texts as scripture, such as rabbinical interpretation.

Jacobson and Chan also speak to their audience in ways that assume familiarity with mainstream Protestant conceptions of the biblical material. Many chapters start with Christian reference points. For instance, the introduction to the idea of a canon begins by using the reference in Luke 24:44b–45 to the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms and references to scripture in 2 Peter to make the point that scripture for early Christians was not what is known to Christian communities today. Likewise, the chapter on Leviticus opens with a story about Rob Bell preaching through that book during his first year at what would become the megasized Mars Hill Bible Church as a way of demonstrating the ongoing relevance of this text to the Christian world.

This perspective also informs their work in other areas. For instance, the opening chapter, entitled “The Old Testament World,” outlines the sequence of events as presented in the biblical text and maps them against history to establish a chronology, while also accepting the biblical account at face value—including on matters that cannot be verified as historically reliable. Although there is consideration of the geography, religious landscape, and daily life in ancient Israel as well, this conceptualization of the content reveals an inclination toward readers being taught to think about the Bible as history. Discussions in later chapters do offer some nuance, even if brief. In considering the question of the historicity of an exodus from Egypt, for example, Jacobson and Chan mention the possibility that figures such as Moses and Aaron and Miriam might be mythic or that the emergence of the people of Israel was complicated. Similarly, in the section introducing what are labeled Historical Books, they ask the question: “Are the ‘Historical Books’ Truly History Books?” (169). At this point, Jacobson and Chan explore different meanings of the word history itself, acknowledge that the writers of these accounts do not do history in the modern sense of the world, and indicate that the biblical writers were, in fact, writing religious texts. It is a point, however, that can all too easily get lost in the wider volume.

Jacobson and Chan state in the preface that the chapters on each biblical text are designed to be utilized independently, suggesting that instructors may approach the material in different ways and that students assigned this textbook in a class should be prepared for presentations of the content that might not follow the order of the book. They even outline some of the options, including tracing the Jewish canon. But that acknowledgment does not mean that their work lends itself to ready rearrangement. The logic of the Protestant canon is woven into the structure and content of the book itself. For example, the theological interpretation of Malachi in their final chapter emphasizes links to John the Baptist as the promised messenger provided by the New
Testament writers, with the two-sentence mention of Elijah traditions at Passover reading almost as an afterthought.

They also claim that they intend to steer away from taking sides in matters they deem to be disputed so as to promote student engagement rather than indoctrination (xv). Isaiah is highlighted as an example of this practice, with the “debate” being whether Isa 40–66 comes from a later writer than the first part of the text. Although they say in the preface they hold to multigenerational authorship and will go on to talk about First and Second Isaiah in subsequent material, the clarity of that point of view is frequently tough to discern. While the chapter on Isaiah itself explains in overview some of the scholarship on the tripartite division of Isaiah and offers evidence for the work emerging in different eras, Jacobson and Chan provide the outline of the argument for a uniform composition as well. Additionally, in the historical context section of the chapter they say there is a “difference of opinion” among scholars about whose words the book contains and then choose to focus solely on the eighth-century Isaiah (see 428). The authorial agenda here seems less to stay out of the fray and more to ensure that this textbook might be used at institutions where confessions of faith hew more toward traditional views of the biblical text. Indeed, at the close of the chapter, Jacobson and Chan raise questions such as: “What does it mean to call a book like Isaiah—with its complex compositional history—the Word of God? How can one, on the one hand, affirm the deeply human and historical processes that produced the book of Isaiah and, on the other hand, call the book Holy Scripture?” (442). Posing such reflective queries is designed to press contemporary theological issues being argued within particular faith communities.

While the authors are willing to foreground ideology in the form of theology, they do not embrace the benefits of contemporary ideological approaches such as feminist readings of the text. The chapter on the book of Ruth, for instance, finds Jacobson and Chan describing the story as “charming and elegant” (221) as well as focused on hesed, while eliding (along with the text itself) the trauma of two widows trying to survive in a world socially and economically centered on men. A reader of this textbook could easily miss how these women must resort to gleaning to eat and seduction of a wealthy kinsman to ensure some possibility of a life moving forward, thereby risking danger to their physical safety and social status. Even though Jacobson and Chan discuss Ruth as a Moabite and acknowledge that the story may have been “part of a vigorous conversation about the influence of foreign people on the faith life of the Judean people” (229) in the postexilic period, they do not note how Ruth disappears from the narrative (i.e., a son is born to Naomi in 4:17) and is, of course, shut out from the closing genealogy (4:18–21). For a textbook that asserts it wants to engage readers, a willingness to embrace more contemporary perspectives would encourage students to wrestle with the position of women in certain cultural settings rather than simply be entertained by an enjoyable story.

To assess the contribution of Jacobson and Chan, it is useful to think about the nature of textbooks themselves. Textbooks function to communicate core content in an area of study to a nonspecialist
audience, although these type works prove particularly useful if they also demonstrate how scholars produce that content and understand key topics without too much technical detail. Moreover, in this era, while textbooks are often still available in print, they absolutely must work thoughtfully in virtual formats. On these points, Jacobson and Chan’s entry is dated in terms of its reliance on a layout that does not lend itself well to electronic access and its limited engagement with more contemporary approaches to the field. The arrangement of the pages is easily accessible only in print format, although the illustrations are a sound addition if an instructor had interest in exploring some of the history of the reception of these texts in art across time and culture. Even more, if an instructor is committed to a broad overview approach to the biblical material, one might wonder if a study Bible would be a better option, since it would include brief introductions to the issues of authorship, date, and setting but would also provide the primary text itself and some critical apparatus to showcase how it was produced.

With regard to level, this textbook could be used in confessional Protestant institutions by beginning-level undergraduates or even advanced high-school students. In either case, an instructor would need to weigh its length in assessing its usefulness. The explicitly theological content, however, is not confined to a consideration of theology within the text and thus would not be suitable for use in public institutions or in private, nonconfessional schools. With respect to students enrolled in theological education, the dated nature of the scholarship and the unwillingness of the authors to take on more difficult issues in both interpretation and application are both concerns. Especially given that preparatory programs often require only one semester of study in the Old Testament, a richer and more in-depth introduction to the kinds of questions about the biblical material and controversies surrounding it that persons working in ministry often encounter would be preferable.