



**Michael S. Moore**

***What Is This Babblers Trying to Say? Essays on Biblical Interpretation***

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Michael Moore's recent volume is a collection of seventeen previously published essays from the 1990s to the early 2000s. The book's organization roughly mirrors the tripartite organization of the Hebrew Bible, with three essays concerning the Torah, eight essays on prophetic/apocalyptic literature, and six essays on wisdom literature and other writings. Moore utilizes the a comparative approach, comparing the Hebrew Bible with other literature within the ancient Near East. Most of his chapters are scholarly in nature, with a few practical essays that appeal to faith communities sprinkled throughout.

The book begins with a preface explaining that the book got its title from Paul's encounter with the Greeks upon the Acropolis (ix). Within this New Testament narrative, the Greek in Athens respond to Paul's preaching by asking, "What is this babblers trying to say?" (Acts 17:18). Moore invites readers to ask this question throughout the book as they attempt to understand his words.

Within the first section of the book, on the Torah, Moore includes three essays that represent some of his earliest work. The first set of essays utilize role theory and apply this theory to Balaam and the Israelite priesthood in general. Stemming from his 1990s book on Balaam, Moore employs role theory to explore the diverse portrait of Balaam within ancient Near Eastern literature instead of resorting to a nineteenth-century interpretation that identifies two opposing traditions about Balaam: Balaam as curser and Balaam as blesser (5). Similarly, in another essay on Balaam, Moore

rejects limiting Balaam's role to that of a prophet, pointing to the variety of role labels the biblical text and the Deir 'Alla inscription assign to Balaam. (22) Finally, this section ends with Moore again using role theory and comparing biblical priestly rituals with Akkadian purification rituals.

The second section contains the bulk of the essays in the volume, covering prophetic/apocalyptic material within the Hebrew Bible. Three essays examine the Latter Prophets, while four study the Former Prophets. Three of the essays on the Former Prophets address Jeremiah's laments. The first explores the origins of Jeremiah's skepticism within his laments, analyzing Jer 11, 12, and 18 (64). Moore interacts with Norbert Ittmann's 1981 *Die Konfessionen Jeremias* by claiming that Jeremiah had a conflict with multiple groups, rather than Ittmann's argument that identifies Jeremiah's primary conflict being with other prophets. Instead of a primary conflict with other prophets, Moore assigns the origin of Jeremiah's skepticism with Jeremiah's conflict with the "wisemen." Jeremiah resists the wisemen's questions and reasoning for a time but eventually begins to let their viewpoint influence him, leading to his skepticism evident within some of his laments (80).

The second essay on Jeremiah's laments mines them for advice to avoid pastoral burnout. First addressed to the Christian Scholars Conference in 1991, this essay compares Jeremiah's experience with the contemporary pastor and uses God's response to Jeremiah's laments as an antidote to pastoral burnout. The third essay compares the Hodayot scroll from Cave 1 within Qumran with Jeremiah's laments, seeking to show intertextual overlap between the two texts. Moore marshals an impressive list of sixty "shared nouns, verbs, and idioms" to demonstrate that Jeremiah's laments "holds a prominent place in the [Hodayot] poet's creative mind" (121).

Within the essays on the Former Prophets, Moore primarily compares the biblical text with other ancient Near Eastern texts. In one essay Moore compares Jehu's coronation with the Baal-Anat myth, arguing that the Jehu coronation functions as a parody of the Baal-Anat myth. Moore lists parallels of characterization, plot, and theme that make the case for Jehu's coronation stemming from "a skilled satirist" (139). Similarly, in another essay Moore compares covenant language within Kings with the Amarna correspondence. He finds similar terms (love and friendship) and parallel situations between Solomon and Hiram and Abimilku of Tyre and Pharaoh from the Amarna letters. These parallels elucidate Solomon's economic aspirations and the binding nature of his treaty (155).

The third section of this book contains essays about the Hebrew Bible's wisdom material, focusing primarily on women (two essays on Ruth, one on Bathsheba, and one on gender roles in the ancient Near East). Moore first looks at Boaz's blessing of Ruth by tracing the biblical theme of *Aussensegen*, the blessing of or by foreigners. He examines the blessings of Melchizedek, Jethro, Balaam, and the Sabean queen to show that Boaz's blessing shows a shift toward a more familial blessing and a blessing that is less "xenophobic" (191). Moore's second essay on Ruth employs a Protestant canonical reading of Ruth that explores the juxtaposition of Ruth with Judges.

The remainder of the essays in the third section of the book continue to employ the comparative literature approach, situating wise women in Israel with other texts about wise women in the ancient Near East and comparing Bathsheba's mediatory role in 1 Kgs 1–2 with Anat within the Aqhat epic. The book ends with a comprehensive bibliography and author, subject, and text indices.

After reading many essays by a single author, patterns begin to appear about the author's method. First, Moore favors a literary comparative approach to the Hebrew Bible and often uses extrabiblical sources such as the Amarna letters, Dead Sea scrolls, and Ugaritic literature as his point of comparison. However, the chronological gap between these texts and the biblical text raises questions about the validity of the comparison, which Moore addresses in one essay (153). However, he does not address the chronological gap in all his comparative essays. With scholarly trends pushing the writing and editing of the biblical texts later and later, one wonders if some of the essays need a more robust defense of the comparative method between texts that have such a large chronological gap.

Second, Moore's essays have a literary pattern that makes his work easy to read. He begins with a standard view on a topic. Then he raises questions about the standard view and lists the questions he will attempt to answer. Finally, he presents his thesis and the evidence for the thesis. This pattern is rather refreshing in that Moore is up front about what he aims to prove; his literary pattern and clarity in what he aims to accomplish should serve as a model for scholars to emulate.

One of the weaknesses of this book is its misleading subtitle: *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*. Some may see this subtitle and assume that the book deals with hermeneutical questions. The essays within this volume do not deal with hermeneutics. Instead, they are interpretations of the biblical text itself. One other potential problem area within Moore's essays is his assumption that texts contain historical depictions of the "real world," which is increasingly come into question since many of his essay were written. For example, in his final essay Moore compares a Hittite ritual text and Proverbs. He describes the Hittite ritual texts as representing the "real world" of women while other texts (Proverb's depiction of the wise woman) are assigned to "the imaginary world of literature" (259). Indeed, the genre and language of Proverbs suggests an imagined ideal world, but what reasons does Moore have to trust that the Hittite literature aims to portray actual women? Might these Hittite ritual texts also be from the imaginary world of literature or at least examined with a critical eye that questions if these texts portray the "real world"?

Overall this volume puts an excellent scholar's work on display, and is recommended for those interested in comparing ancient literature to the Hebrew Bible and those interested in role theory.