

*The Torah Story: An Apprenticeship on the Pentateuch.* By Gary Edward Schnittjer. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 2006, 592 pp., \$44.99.

*The Torah Story* by Gary Edward Schnittjer is an impressive and lengthy entry into the growing list of books that treat the Pentateuch as a literary and theological unity. The book consists of 29 chapters, including two introductory chapters and one concluding chapter. The first introductory chapter, "An Apprenticeship on the Torah," describes the purpose and format of the book. The purpose is to offer "an invitation and guide—an apprenticeship or part of one—to the Five Books of Moses to challenge and assist the apprentice reader" (p. 10). The book is not designed to be comprehensive in treating every verse, every law, or every problem in the Torah.

The format of most chapters consists of two primary sections. "A Reading" focuses on the meaning of the biblical text itself, and "Another Look" considers questions related to history, chronology, culture, theology, and connections to the broader biblical canon. Each chapter contains a wealth of helpful study aids, including "Focus Questions"; lists of terms to guide the reader; an outline of the biblical text under consideration; a concluding chapter summary; a repetition of the key terms for review; "Challenge Questions"; "Advanced Questions"; ideas for further research; and a select bibliography. At the end of some chapters is a creative section entitled "American Stories and the Torah Story," in which the author invites the reader to consider how popular culture (e.g. *Raiders of the Lost Ark* or comments by Bono of the rock group *U2*) resonates with the Torah story. Questions on the content occur frequently throughout each chapter as an encouragement to regular assessment of reading comprehension.

The author explains his presuppositions in the first chapter. He reads the Torah as Christian Scripture, the authoritative word of God, not merely as an example of ancient Near Eastern literature or a part of the Hebrew Bible. He places interpretive priority on the biblical narrative and biblical intertextuality, treating other background contexts (e.g. historical, cultural) as valuable, but not to be used at the expense of the biblical story. This biblical story is "God's story," and is "the story into which everything, including the world of the narrator, fits" (p. 16). This story is not reducible to propositional statements, and the one reading the story should seek not to "do something to it but learn how to hear it" (p. 28).

The chapter "Introducing the Torah" provides an excellent, brief overview of Genesis through Deuteronomy. The next chapter, "Reintroducing the Torah," reviews the Torah story and highlights connections with the broader canon. Chapters 3–28 form the core of *The Torah Story*. The author devotes eight chapters to Genesis, five to Exodus, four to Leviticus, four to Numbers, and five to Deuteronomy. Within each chapter are sidebars and tables that provide extensive information about the text and its context. For example, on pages 178–80, Schnittjer provides an explanation of biblical poetry. In other sidebars he discusses a variety of issues, such as chronology (e.g. of the Genesis narratives and the date of the exodus) and geography (e.g. the location of Mt. Sinai). At the end of the book one finds a list of tables, figures, maps and sidebars, a Scripture index, and a subject index.

Many features of this book make it easy to recommend. Most noteworthy are the breadth and depth of Schnittjer's many excellent observations and comments on the biblical text. It is an unfortunate irony that reading a book about the biblical text often replaces reading of the biblical text, in spite of the author's stated intention to help readers grapple with the biblical text itself. This is a special danger with textbooks such as this one, inasmuch as they are typically lengthy, and when used in classroom settings put students in the position of making difficult choices regarding how best to invest their study time. More often than not it seems that the biblical text loses out. In *The Torah Story*, however, Schnittjer deftly guides the reader to consider the depth and beauty of

meaning in the Torah. He does not merely give lip service to the priority of the biblical text. Instead, on page after page he discusses the structure, patterns, and surprises of the narrative in a way that draws the reader into the biblical story. This is an impressive feat, and one that makes this rather long book still very suitable for use in the classroom. It would serve particularly well in a course on the Pentateuch at either the undergraduate or graduate level, and could also be used as a text on the hermeneutics of OT narrative literature or a survey of the OT.

One significant result of Schnittjer's careful reading of the text is that he offers many reasonable explanations to traditional questions and problems in the Torah without resorting unnecessarily to extrabiblical materials. Sometimes these explanations highlight answers in the text found through a close reading, such as his emphasis on reading Deuteronomy not as a sermon, covenant, or law code, but as God's instructions to his people within a broader "storied context" (e.g. Chapter 24). At other times, these explanations show refreshing caution and reserve based on the lack of specific textual evidence. For example, he follows the biblical text in not attributing the plagues in Egypt to specific Egyptian gods (p. 223), and he agrees that the distinctions between clean and unclean in Leviticus are arbitrary (simply "because God said so," p. 327).

There are, inevitably, a few editing errors in this extensive survey (e.g. the pictures of plants created by God on the *fifth* day of Genesis 1; p. 64). More distracting are some of the pictures in the text, which are obviously intended to maintain reader interest but are poorly selected. For example, after arguing in the text that there's no certainty on where Mt. Sinai is located, the book proceeds to display a number of pictures labeled "Mt. Sinai." But these are small issues in what is otherwise an excellent treatment of the Torah as Christian Scripture.

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