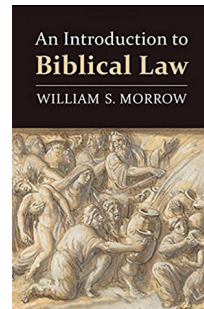


Book Review

William S. Morrow,
An Introduction to Biblical Law
Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 2017. Pbk, xvi, 270.
ISBN: 978-0-8028-6865-7. \$24.00.

Reviewed by, Jason A. Riley.
Fuller Theological Seminary. Pasadena, CA



Some introductions are a mile wide and an inch deep, in contrast to monographs that are often an inch wide and a mile deep. Morrow admittedly seeks a middle ground. While covering the entire canon of biblical law, from Exodus to Deuteronomy, he focuses on specific topics within this corpus with chapters that are relatively brief (no chapter exceeds 13 pages), informative, well organized and researched, and enjoyable to read.

Morrow begins with the premise that Christians often neglect biblical legal material and, thereby, miss an important part of the Old Testament. While Morrow admits that this biblical material raises a number of hermeneutical issues, which he does not avoid addressing, he also maintains that biblical law represents an important and meaningful genre of biblical literature. According to him, “law represents a significant way in which ancient Israel did theology” (p. 5). Thus, Morrow seeks to introduce both theology students and lay readers to this important corpus of biblical literature.

Morrow’s approach is both critical and canonical. He places his canonical approach in the tradition of James Sanders. He makes four claims regarding his canonical reading: 1) Canon and community are interrelated. 2) Scripture contains a diversity of voices. 3) Scripture provides believing communities

stability and adaptability. 4) Scripture “enables communities to monotheize in a particular time and place” (p. 7). Morrow stresses the importance of the Pentateuch to both Jewish and Christian communities, and reminds readers that the biblical legal material was important for Israel’s self-definition.

The book is organized into five major parts. Part One, chapters 1-4, comprise the book’s introduction and foundational material. In chapters 2-4, Morrow addresses issues of terminology, Moses the mediator of law versus the Moses of history, and approaches to studying biblical law, respectively. In Part Two, Morrow introduces the Ten Commandments (ch. 5) followed by a detailed discussion of the second commandment (ch. 6). In Part Three, he discusses the Covenant Code in Exodus, including chapters addressing the goring ox (ch. 8) and slavery (ch. 9). In the longest section of the book, Part Four (chs. 10-17), Morrow looks at various aspects of the Priestly and Holiness codes in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. Regarding the sacrificial instructions in Leviticus, Morrow does an excellent job providing a helpful synthesis of the biblical material, while also acknowledging that the biblical texts are not entirely clear on a number of matters. Finally, in Part Five (chs. 18-22), Morrow investigates various aspects of the book of Deuteronomy. Each chapter concludes with a brief discussion on developments of the legal material in focus in later Jewish and, primarily,

Christian tradition. Additionally, each Part concludes with a select bibliography for further reading. Morrow concludes the book with a brief chapter expanding on the four claims he raised regarding a canonical reading.

Morrow strikes a reasonable balance between addressing critical issues of the biblical legal material and taking seriously the role of this material as Scripture. However, he does not attempt to provide facile explanations for either the critical issues or the moral difficulties this material presents. For example, in his chapter on slavery (ch. 9), Morrow admits that this material was used throughout history in support of slavery, and that the biblical writers and early Jewish and early Christian communities did not demand an end to slavery even though they were, in some cases, sympathetic to the humanity of slaves (pp. 104-5). Morrow stops short prescribing strategies to deal with this and other difficulties (p. 8); nevertheless, he admits that contemporary communities may need to be adaptive in their appropriation of these texts, as did ancient Israelite communities (p. 256).

In general, Morrow is neither a maximalist nor a minimalist—he provides balanced and helpful discussions of origins, dating, and historical developments of the legal material while making reasonable conclusions regarding these issues. While he places any events related to the Exodus tradition in the Late Bronze Age or early Iron 1 period (p. 27), he concludes that the current form of the Decalogue derives from the late monarchal period (p. 55) and suggests that the exilic period is best time period in which to place the composition of the Covenant Code (p. 83-4). Morrow recognizes that the legal material in Exodus-Numbers underwent a complex history of composition and editing from the pre-exilic to the post-exilic period (pp. 111-3) and his canonical

approach allows for a profitable reading of the biblical legal material in light of this complex history. Morrow acknowledges the importance of Deuteronomy in dating the other legal material in the Pentateuch and discusses three models for dating *Urdeuteronomium* (pp. 200-205). Although noting that Deuteronomy was expanded over a period of time, he places the origins of Deuteronomy after the fall of Israel in 720 and during the period(s) of religious reform in Judah (p. 205). Throughout the book, Morrow carefully stakes out reasonable positions regarding the various critical issues related to Old Testament legal texts, although some readers may not accept Morrow's conclusions on these issues. However, by taking an overall canonical approach throughout the book, Morrow provides a fine resource for introducing biblical legal material even for those who may not side with him on issues such as origins, dating, and development.

Biblical scholars will likely not find anything particularly new in this *Introduction*; although, the presentation of the material, the topics addressed, and helpful charts throughout the book make this a useful pedagogical text. I highly recommend this for undergraduate and Seminary courses addressing the Pentateuch and biblical legal material. Students and laypersons will find this to be an enjoyable, informative, and challenging read, and will walk away with an understanding of the important issues regarding biblical legal material, as well as the depth and complexity of this corpus of biblical literature.