

INTERPRETER

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A JOURNAL OF MORMON SCRIPTURE

Volume 17 · 2016 · Pages 201-203

The Old Testament and Presuppositions

TB Spackman

Offprint Series

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ISSN 2372-1227 (print)

ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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TB Spackman

Review of Peter Enns, Inspiration and Incarnation- Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament, Second ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015). 197 pp. \$19.99.

Abstract: Peter Enns identifies three problematic assumptions Evangelicals make when reading the Old Testament. LDS readers tend to share these assumptions, and Enns' solutions work equally well for them.

Trained at Harvard in the Hebrew Bible, Peter Enns was fired from Westminster Theological Seminary over this book in spite of his tenured status. This second edition, published for the tenth anniversary of the first, contains an added preface and postscript looking back at its purpose, reception, and controversy. Enns tries to answer the question, “How do we incorporate certain data with full integrity without sacrificing the truth that the Bible is God’s book for his people?”

He wrote *Inspiration and Incarnation (I&I)* for “lay readers for whom standard critical issues are obstacles for their faith and for whom conventional explanations are not helpful”¹ and “to provide a theological paradigm for people who know instinctively that the Bible is God’s Word but for whom reading the Bible has already become a serious theological problem — perhaps even a crisis” (15). In other words, this book is for people with faith in scripture who are finding that faith undermined by some of the details. *I&I* includes a glossary, an index of scriptural and non-biblical citations, and a topical index. Each chapter concludes with an annotated list of further reading.

Though addressed to his fellow Evangelicals concerning the Bible, the general assumptions and problems Enns deals with are equally found among LDS readers and how they approach the expanded LDS canon, leading to similar problems. These issues are not abstractions

1 See his discussion at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/peterenns/inspiration-and-incarnation/responding-to-critics/ii-and-westminster-theological-seminary/the-audience-of-ii/>, last accessed 09-05-2015.

imposed on scripture by theologians but “are generated directly by the Bible itself” (16).

Enns addresses three main topics that challenge the reader and which he feels have not been treated well in conservative scholarship. Along the way he offers general critiques of those treatments as well as observations on various unjustified assumptions shared by laypeople and scholars, both conservative and liberal.

First is the common assumption of the absolute uniqueness of revelation, that because scripture is revealed, it should not bear any resemblance to its environment. The problem is that the more one studies the Bible in its historical and cultural context, the more it resembles the cultures around it. “How can we say logically that the biblical stories are true and the Akkadian [Assyrian/Babylonian] stories are false when they both look so very much alike?” (40).

Second is the assumption of the absolute unity or harmony of scripture. If revelation comes from God, should not God have one opinion on something? Should not all revelation be unified in its outlook on theological or doctrinal issues? Why, then, does inspired scripture include differing doctrinal approaches to certain issues?

Last, Enns treats the difficult issue of the New Testament authors’ treatment of the Old Testament. Put briefly, neither Jews nor Christians until the Middle Ages thought the proper way to understand scripture was to read it in historical context. Authors of later Old Testament books (such as Daniel), the Dead Sea Scrolls, the New Testament, the Book of Mormon, and Rabbinic texts all interpreted scripture through the same non-contextual method, the same method we today delegitimize and call proof-texting. How, then, should we understand the interpretations of the Old Testament found in the New?

The individual treatment of these three topics will prove quite helpful to LDS readers, but Enns’s overall strategy is less likely to. Enns proposes an incarnational model, that as deity (God) became human (Jesus) in Christ, scripture too has both divine and human aspects. The human aspect does not cancel out the divine or vice-versa. There are no doctrinal issues with that proposal from an LDS perspective, but because Mormons lack the habit of talking about the incarnation in such a way (setting aside differences in understanding the nature of man and deity), it will likely have less of an explanatory impact than it does for Evangelicals. Nevertheless, LDS seeking a deeper understanding of the Old Testament will find much good to think about with Peter Enns’s *Inspiration and Incarnation*. Highly recommended.

TB Spackman graduated from BYU in Near Eastern Studies. He then received a MA and did further PhD work in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations (Comparative Semitics) at the University of Chicago, during which time he was a Hugh Nibley Fellow. He has taught part-time at BYU and served as a volunteer Institute teacher for 10+ years. Currently, he is authoring a book on how we read Genesis 1 and the parallel LDS accounts, tentatively titled Reading Scripture, Reading Creation: The Ancient Context of Genesis 1. He blogs at Times&Seasons, and writes Gospel Doctrine background posts at Benjamin the Scribe.

