

Firth, David G., 1 & 2 Samuel (Nottingham: Apollos, 2009). Apollos Old Testament Commentary, series editors David W. Baker and Gordon J. Wenham; ISBN 978-1-84474-368-1; 614 pages, including bibliography.

Every so often (less frequently than I would like) I come across a gem of a commentary. This commentary by David Firth in the Apollos OT series is one. Given the limitations of a one-volume, scholarly, but non-technical commentary on the books of Samuel, Firth has, quite simply, done an exemplary job. He handles the text with literary sensitivity and theological acumen and is able to bring his excellent grasp of OT scholarship to bear with a light touch. As I would expect from the Apollos series, Firth is avowedly evangelical in his view of Scripture, as is evident (without being intrusive or precious) throughout his handling of the text. While there are some matters on which I disagree with him and some features of the commentary I would prefer to see otherwise, this is an outstanding OT commentary, one I will be heartily recommending to my students. Let me give some substance to these claims.

Firth follows the standard commentary format, beginning with introductory matters before moving to exegesis of the text. The Introduction opens with a useful survey of issues of Genre and purpose, Composition (sources, date, authorship, etc.), Structure, Text and Place in Canon (pp. 19–41). This is generally sound, even if at times Firth's meaning is obscured by multiple dependent clauses and his argument a little obscured by such-and-such claims x and so-and-so claims y . This is, I suppose, the risk with introductory material in a commentary and, I expect, most readers will hurry on to his treatment of key texts. His discussion of key literary devices (pp. 32–37 in Composition) is more interesting—especially the discussion of chronological techniques in Samuel—and the concluding material on Central Themes (pp. 42–48) is excellent (although I would have expected that God's grace and sovereignty and the wages of sin would have also featured there), and well worth reading. There was, however, one surprising omission: there is no direct discussion of the cultural and historical context of the events portrayed in Samuel, including such matters as the character of Israel and Judah's society, the spread of iron-age technology into the Judean hills and the nature of a subsistence agrarian economy. While it does come up in the exegesis of specific texts, some discussion of these issues in the introduction would, I believe, enrich most reader's understanding of the context and so deepen their understanding of the text. Nonetheless, this is a sound, if not exciting, orientation to the literature of Samuel.

His exegesis deals with literary units as a whole, and follows the format of the Apollos series (similar to that of the Word commentaries): Translation, Notes on the text (and translation), Form and structure (dealing largely with literary analysis, with passing comment on issues in OT scholarship; I like the way that this section deals more with the literary qualities and function of the text than with critical debates; a little more on structure, etc, would have been useful—although his understanding of structure can be gleaned from the sub-headings in the 'Comment' section), Comment (detailed exegesis of each literary sub-unit), and Explanation (integrating the purpose of the text and key theological themes). While others prefer to have these elements integrated into a continuous commentary on the text, I find this format helpful, as it ensures that both literary and theological issues are covered in the exegesis of the OT. I must say, however, that I dislike having to read Hebrew in transliteration. I would much prefer the Word's pattern of using Hebrew in

text/translation sections, since only those with Hebrew will be able to make any real sense of that discussion anyway. But this is an editorial/publisher's decision, not Firth's, I expect—as is the series' use of in text citations rather than footnotes. This is irritating, but there you have it; such are the vagaries of publishers. These are minor irritations, however. While at times he could say a little more (especially on matters of discourse analysis), and I don't agree with all of his conclusions, the standard of *exegesis* in Firth's commentary is superb. Let me note some instances, taken somewhat at random.

His comments on 1 Samuel 1:1–2:10 are excellent. He makes some interesting translation decisions and explains them well. He comments on the text, as well as (briefly) on critical issues. I particularly appreciated his insights on the use of 'Yahweh of hosts' at key junctures in Samuel (p.55). He has a good turn of phrase—'peeping Tom Eli' (although I think some reference to the pagan orgiastic rituals that probably lie behind his criticism of Hannah would be useful). His use of formal features to highlight the text's meaning is wonderful (e.g., the way that the increase in speech elements paves the way for the climax in Hannah's song/speech p.59), and his treatment of the Psalm itself is very good indeed (not surprising in someone whose earlier research was in Psalms). The explanation here is wonderful; a clear summary of the meaning of the text, a nice exposition of its theological significance and a careful articulation of relevant NT themes. While (unavoidably) brief, this is a fine example of Christian OT theology and will be of inestimable value for students and (thoughtful) preachers of the text.

That same sensitivity to the workings of narrative is seen in his comments on 2:11ff, and the introduction of the key word in Ch3–5, 'glory/honour' (כבוד *kabod*)—and in the tracing of that theme through the 'Ark Narrative' which, as he rightly acknowledges, is both a discrete unit within the early chapters of Samuel and integrated into it (he uses the term 'bifurcated narrative' with good effect here).

Firth also nicely picks up on the ironies of 1 Samuel 8, and the tensions and ambiguities in 9–15, rightly following Long's narrative analysis, seeing Saul as failing to 'do what his hand found to do' (i.e., attack the Philistine garrison), and noting that Jonathan, in fact, does what his father fails to do, heightening the tragedy of Jonathan being deprived of future kingship by his father's faithless failure. I would like to have seen more on the *realpolitik* of 1 Samuel 15 in light of the tenuous nature of Saul's kingship and control of the (volunteer levy) army, as well as on the theological-ethical issues of *herem* and its application. Still, this is a fine treatment that nicely deals with the charges that have been levelled against Samuel's (and Yahweh's) integrity in their treatment of Saul.

I think his case for a 'dischronologized' presentation of David's advent is sound (whatever the likelihood of different sources being used at this point), so that the events have been ordered for a theological purpose rather than simple temporal succession. Firth presents a particularly fine analysis of 1 Samuel 17, noting the way that popular readings of the 'David and Goliath' story lull us 'into a false sense of insecurity' (p.193; nice phrase, that). He notes David's clear theological (and theocentric) perspective, and that his actions display both the kingly qualities that Saul has failed to demonstrate and that David sees Israel (and so this victory) as a sign to the nations. Firth rightly shows that this story is not about 'the triumph of the little guy' in the face of insuperable odds, but about Yahweh's glory being displayed through Israel to the nations.

He has an excellent treatment of the ambiguity of providence and David's avoiding presumptuous violence in attaining what Yahweh has promised (2 Samuel 24–26). And I liked his keeping in his translation (and explaining) the deliberately crude 'all who pissed against the wall' as a demeaning reference to Nabal's men in Ch.25. Firth has, furthermore, done extensive work on the (in his eyes substantially reduced) Succession Narrative (1 Samuel 27–2 Samuel 1), particularly in relation to

its narrative form and literary devices. The fruit of this scholarship is clearly evident in his discussion of these chapters. So too, his treatment of 2 Samuel 1-3 is excellent, but it seems to me that the narrator's noting of David's taking many wives is a clear critique in light of 1 Samuel 8, not just a possible hint of criticism (so also in 2 Samuel 5). He is also very good on 2 Samuel 6 and its ambiguities and on chapter 7 (which, I think, is also more ambivalent about David's motives than Firth seems to think).

Firth's treatment of the 'Samuel Appendix' and its role in shaping the books of Samuel literarily and theologically is brilliant, particularly the way he notes that the central passages (2 Sam 22:1-51, 23:1-7) pick up on themes and key words from Hannah's Song. Mind you, I think he's a little sanguine in his reading of David's actions in 21:1-14. Yahweh requires that the legitimate claims of the Gibeonites be honoured; Yahweh does not endorse *this* form. As he rightly notes, it's only when the executed men are receive an honourable burial that the famine is averted. Here we see, I think kingship in all its ambiguity: Saul brings a curse on the land, long after he's dead; David, even in seeking to rectify it, complicates matters, requiring an act of extraordinary *hesed* on the part of one of Saul's house to prompt him to finally resolve it. The framing narratives, then, show the dangers of kingship (and of the king's solutions to the problems of kingship); the lists show that at least kings bring with them military prowess—either their own, or that of their loyal followers; the central Psalm and prayer show the *possibilities of kingship done right*, and the way that it necessarily depends on Yahweh (rather than relying on even the military prowess that kings bring to the table). But for anyone who has wondered what these chapters are doing here at the end of Samuel, read Firth and you will be enlightened (and, at times, your heart will sing).

In sum, although I would differ with him on some shades of meaning, Firth's exegesis is, quite simply, excellent.

However, there are times when Firth presents an interpretation that I find less than persuasive. The clearest is his reading of 2 Samuel 11 as a sustained attempt on Uriah's life (which is, of course, eventually successful). In the end, I think it fails, largely because the evidence he adduces for that reading is better understood otherwise. Furthermore, I don't think he pays enough attention to the way that the uses of the word 'take' (לָקַח, *laqach*), and their connection with the word 'send' (שָׁלַח, *shalach*) and its connotations of moral autonomy, tie his action back to Samuel's warnings against kingship in 1 Samuel 8, or the way Nathan's oracle (2 Sam 12:1;12) speaks of what David did in secret being done to him openly as a result of God's judgement. Nonetheless, it is an interesting reading and one which, if you grant his premises, works quite well. Certainly it accents the right elements in the text—David's violent abuse of power—rather than focusing on sex (as most traditional readings do).

I would also like to have seen a little more engagement with feminist (and related) interpretations of Samuel. For instance, while he has some good material on 2 Samuel 13, he does not directly engage with key feminist critics of the text (notably Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror*). This is a shame, and his analysis of the text would have been richer (and more complex) had he done so. So too, while he has a very good discussion of the interplay between providence and human initiative in 2 Samuel 15-18, I would have liked more on the familial and political paralysis of David. Even in the midst of his clear piety, David fails as king and father to take the initiative he so brutally assumed in 2 Samuel 11. I think that shows the way that God's judgement also works itself out in the consequences of sin on the perpetrator (as well as the victims and other agents). Still, these are relatively minor quibbles.

Speaking of quibbles, some might like to have seen 'preaching helps' or an 'application' section in the commentary (which you won't find). I don't: partly because application and preaching, when

done well, are so situation specific that what works in one context very often doesn't work in another (especially across continents and hemispheres); mostly because I think that application and preaching points emerge naturally out of a good exegesis that is sensitive to the literary features and theological significance of the text, especially in its canonical context. And that is something Firth does admirably.

All told, this is an excellent commentary: it is scholarly without being technical; theologically sensitive and alert to literary issues without sacrificing (too much) exegetical detail. If I have one significant complaint, it's that I would like more. And so, while I have some (generally minor and contestable) quibbles, the main problem with Firth's commentary on 1 & 2 Samuel is (as Tolkien said of *Lord of the Rings*) that the book is too short.

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