



Walton, John H., ed.

***Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary:  
Old Testament (5 volumes)***

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

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When I was contacted and asked if I'd be interested in reviewing the *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Old Testament* (hereafter *ZIBBCOT*) the answer was a no-brainer: of course I'd be interested! Sure, it's always nice to get your hands on some shiny new books (and let's face facts, Zondervan has been publishing some beauties lately), but I'm in a position to really benefit from a set such as this since I tend to focus my time and attention more on the NT than the OT. Don't get me wrong, I do read the OT, and quite often at that, but I rarely study the corpus with the same tenacity that I do the NT.

As it turns out, over the past year or so *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* has become a standard reference tool in my library. When questions about the setting of an OT passage or a particular custom or whatever arise, it's usually the first place I turn. John H. Walton along with Victor H. Matthews and Mark W. Chavalas edited that volume and they did an excellent job. So with such a great resource why would there be any need for another? The answer is simple: more scholars contributed to the *ZIBBCOT* so there are more voices to learn from; the *ZIBBCOT* is much larger and is therefore able to interact with any given passage in more detail; and there are a multitude of visual aids that help to bring the text to life.

Under the general editorship of John H. Walton the *ZIBBCOT* brings together an international team of more than 30 OT scholars, many of whom have written full-length commentaries on the books they cover, and a good number of whom have written or contributed to books on OT

background. I'm not familiar with each contributor so I can't speak to all of their denominational backgrounds, but those whom I am familiar with (e.g., John Walton, Tremper Longman, III, V. Philips Long, Daniel I. Block, et al.) are all situated within the evangelical spectrum.

Each volume of the *ZIBBCOT* contains roughly the same front matter: table of contents, acknowledgements, introductory essay, general bibliography, and abbreviations. Where they differ is in John Walton's "Methodology: An Introductory Essay." The essay is identical in its first part on "comparative studies" (in general) in all of the volumes but the second part varies according to the genre of books being covered. So in volume 1 the second section focuses on "comparative studies in the Pentateuch"; volumes 2 & 3 "comparative studies and historical literature"; volumes 4 & 5 "comparative studies and prophetic literature."

The commentary itself follows a pretty standard format. Each book is given a brief introduction where the historical setting/background, the geographical setting, and the literary setting/form are set forth before moving into the commentary proper. While not addressing every single verse or passage in the OT, the contributors cover those that need the most explanation with reference to pertinent background material. Information on the geography, rituals, practices, laws, religion(s), etc. of Israel and her ANE neighbors is provided while being undergirded by reference to various archeological discoveries such as ancient manuscripts, artwork, tools, locations, etc. The icing on the cake is the visual representation of many of these discoveries. I'd be remiss to not mention the copious chapter end notes. Generally I gripe about end notes but every once in a while they make sense. In a set as visually driven as this one they work. To include them on the same page as the text would take away from the overall aesthetic.

It's difficult to offer anything more than a brief and generalized sketch of such a large reference set as the *ZIBBCOT* because of its sheer size and detail. I've not read each volume through completely and I don't know that I ever will. I have been able to put this set to good use though in the few short weeks that I've had it. For example, the other night I received a phone call from a friend asking me to watch a television program in which the host made reference to Genesis 1 and suggested that Jesus was the "light" of Genesis 1:3. Aside from the theological problems I saw inherent in such an interpretation (i.e., it suggests then that the Son was created and it doesn't take into account that God *speaks* the light into existence, i.e., his *word* is already present with him, cf. Jo. 1:1-3), it simply didn't make good sense of the passage in its original context. So I was happy to grab volume 1 of the *ZIBBCOT* off the shelf and read John Walton's brief treatment of "Light" in vs. 3:

As just noted, light was not considered something physical in the ancient world; rather, it was a phenomenon. Here in Genesis, light is identified with the

alternating periods of day and night. Since light is called “day” and darkness is called “night,” the text indicates that the functional focus is time. In Egypt, the sun god Re is considered the creator of time as he rises every morning, again relating the day-night cycle and light to time. In a broken section of the Babylonian Creation Epic, Marduk is apparently creating time as the text’s references to the day and the year are followed by a reference to watches of the night. (1.16)

Likewise, the Bible study that I taught two weeks ago focused in part on the work of the prophets in the OT. I read from Ezekiel 33 where the LORD calls Ezekiel as a watchman with the underlying point that the prophet was called to warn the nation and call them to repentance (as opposed to the “feel good” messages of many so-called prophets of today). It was nice to be able to open up the *ZIBBCOT* and include some background information on the “Oracles Relating to the Fall of Jerusalem” (4.476-84) in my notes and provide some context for what was going on at the time that God called Ezekiel.

And before I close this review I’d like to offer a final word on the design of this set: it’s beautiful! As I said in the introductory paragraph, Zondervan has been producing some beauties as of late. Whether or not we want to admit it, the way books look matters! It’s a genuine pleasure to have a nice set of books displayed proudly in your bookcase, or if you prefer, on your desk since this set is housed in an equally attractive slipcase. It’s nice to flip through a volume that is visually appealing because of all the high resolution photographs, but it’s even better when these photographs serve to support the text and give the reader a better sense of what is being discussed. And in the case of the *ZIBBCOT* it doesn’t hurt that each volume is closed with a detailed picture index that makes finding exactly the picture you’re looking for a breeze. Would that an online or digital version of this set was available; I can imagine the PowerPoint presentations that could be prepared from this material!

In the end this is a set that will benefit the non-specialist and specialist alike. It’s well focused, easy to follow, informative while not being too detailed and just plain fun to look at. I’d highly recommend the *ZIBBCOT* to one and all, especially the student like myself whose knowledge of OT backgrounds is stunted by his/her primary interest in the NT.