

# ***Appreciating and Writing Book Reviews***

by Dennis M. Swanson

## ***Introduction***

One of the most useful, and often most neglected, resource materials for study is the book review. In many respects the book review is the most basic or foundational type of writing in theological literature. It encompasses all of the required aspects of a good research paper: (1) apprehension of the material; (2) detailed examination and critical evaluation of the material; (3) interaction with and integration of corollary material; and (4) summation and conclusion.

Good book reviews can also be a great source of research, as the reviewer will often be well versed in the field and bring additional insights and issues to bear in the review itself. He may also point you toward other resources that you had not previously considered.

Book reviews are featured in most theological journals and a typical review will encompass 1000-1500 words. Longer reviews may reach up to four pages. Normally, a review of longer than four pages will become what is called a "Review Article" where the review is much more detailed and extensive. For an excellent example of a "Review Article" see Richard L. Mayhue, "Alarmed by the Voice of Jack Deere," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 8:2 (Fall 1997), 151-61.

Important journals to examine for their book reviews include, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, *Trinity Journal*, *Journal of Theology*, *Westminster Theological Journal*, *Bulletin for Biblical Research* and, of course, *The Master's Seminary Journal*. Other more popular Christian publications and some secular literary related works (e.g. *Library Journal*) will also have book review sections, but often they limit their contributors to 200-300 words, which really does not allow for the type of in-depth review that will be helpful for research. Journals that are more specialized in specific areas of Biblical studies or theology will also be important for reviews of works in those specific fields. The reviews that you can find at Amazon.com are sometimes helpful, although they are generally more anecdotal and emotional than useful for research.

## ***Book Review Indexing***

Indexes of book reviews in the main theological journals will be located in the following sources (for more complete descriptions of these resources see the *Annotated Bibliography* in this syllabus):

- *The American Theological Library Religion Database*: This resource has nearly 400,000 book reviews citations available. At The Master's Seminary this is accessed through the OCLC First Search system. This information also exists in printed form at *the Index to Book Review in Religion: An Author, Title, Reviewer and Annual Classified Index of Books Published in and of Interest to the Field of Religion*. Published quarterly by the ATLA.
- *Critical Review of Book in Religion*: Published as a joint venture of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature. Provides review information on important books in religion, Biblical and theological studies. Published bi-annually and is available in the Main Periodical section of the seminary library.

- *Book Review Index*: Available through the OCLC *First Search* database access this provides a wide range of book reviews for fiction and non-fiction. Covers theology, but not exclusively. This will be the stop for those seeking reviews of current books of interest.
- *Review of Biblical Literature*: Available at <http://www.bookreviews.org> this is a site also operated by the *Society of Biblical Literature*. Reviews are available here from a wide range of scholars and are very high in terms of currency. You can subscribe to their email notification and be made aware of when a new batch of reviews has been made available. This is an excellent service.
- *Society for Old Testament Study Book List*: Published annually since 1949 each volume will generally have about 500 books listed in the area of Old Testament studies. There are usually short reviews for each book listed. In *The Master's Seminary Library* this title will be located in the Reference Department.

## ***Writing Book Reviews***

In learning to write book reviews it is useful to read some good reviews as well. The below from *The Master's Seminary Journal*, serve as good examples of reviews of different types of works in Biblical and theological studies:

- Prof. Keith Essex, review of: *1, 2, Samuel*, by Robert D. Bergen. Volume 7 in *The New American Commentary* series. E. Ray Clendenen (ed). Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman and Holman, 1996. (*The Master's Seminary Journal* 11:1 [Spring 2000], 117-19).
- Dr. Trevor Craigen, review of: *Evolution, Science and Scripture: Selected Writings*, by Mark A. Noll and David N. Livingstone. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 2000. (*The Master's Seminary Journal* 11:2 [Fall 2000], 260-62).
- Dr. William D. Barrick, review of: *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It?: What Archaeology Can Tell Us About the Reality of Ancient Israel*. by William G. Dever. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 2001. (*The Master's Seminary Journal* 13:2 [Fall 2002], 275-79).
- Prof. Dennis M. Swanson, review of: *Archaeology and the Galilean Jesus: A Re-examination of the Evidence*, by Jonathan L. Reed. Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press, 2001. (*The Master's Seminary Journal* 13:2 [Fall 2002], 291-94).

Read and digest the style, format and interaction with the material that you will see in these reviews. They serve as models of what good book reviews should contain.

## ***How to Write a Book Review***

Books reviews are important contributions to the literature. William Zinsser has stated that, "Criticism is a serious intellectual act."<sup>1</sup> The following are the key issues to consider when writing a book review:

### ***Read the Book with Comprehension:***

When reading the book, make notations for yourself. Some people (myself included) don't like to write notations in a book itself, which is fine as long as you have some note-taking method that works.

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<sup>1</sup> William Zinsser. *On Writing Well: An Informal Guide to Writing Nonfiction* (revised and enlarged 3<sup>rd</sup> edition). (San Francisco, California, 1985), p. 172.

Don't rely on memory to remember a particular quotation or passage. Use small "sticky notes" to mark a page or write the page number in your notes. This will save you a lot of wasted time skimming through page after page looking once again for the one paragraph.

### *Pay Attention to the Author and Publisher:*

Normally a book will have at least some information about the author. This is worth more than a glance. Who is he? What is his educational background? Why is he (or perhaps isn't) qualified to write this book? Where is he teaching or ministering? Be alert for his academic credentials! When listing his academic background be certain to see if a degree was actually awarded. People who list "attending" different institutions, means he was a student, but never graduated. By the same token pay attention to the publisher information. Who published this book? Is the book self-published or published by a "vanity press"? Self-published book can sometimes be hard to spot because an author may create his own publishing company (it's not hard to do) with an impressive sounding name, but when you check, the "publisher" has actually only printed one book or only a few books by the same author!<sup>2</sup> For any self-published work an important question to be asked is, "why wouldn't a standard publisher print this work"? Because, trust me, they tried to get a established publisher to take it!<sup>3</sup>

### *Pay Attention to the Front Matter:*

One of the most important places to examine for a book review is the front matter. That is any introduction, preface, foreword or such. This is the place where the author should tell you the answer to some important questions:

- *Why* did he write this book?
- *What* is he trying to accomplish with this book?
- *Who* is this book directed towards?
- From *Where* has he drawn his information?
- *When* did he write the book, how current is his research?

A key part of the review is to identify the author's purpose and determine whether or not he accomplished it. You may not like a book or anything about it, but if the author accomplished the purpose he determined for the book, then he should be commended at least for that.

### *Pay Attention to the End Matter:*

Check the bibliography of the book. What works has he referred to? Are there important works in the field that he has ignored or overlooked? Does the book have good useable indexes. Our opinion is that every book should at least have a good *Subject Index*. A *Scripture Index* (for Biblical and theologically oriented books) and an *Author* or *Person Index* is also quite helpful. Remember that while the bibliography is under the control of the author, the indexes usually are not. If you make a criticism regarding the lack of indexes or poorly conceived indexes, those criticisms should either be directed generically (i.e., "this book would have been much more useful had a good subject index been provided.") or directed towards the publisher (i.e., "the publishers should have committed the resources to provide a good set of indexes for this otherwise fine work."), not directly at the author.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> If the book in question has an ISBN number (International Standard Book Number) you can check the publisher directory in the library to get more detailed information about the company.

<sup>3</sup> Even a reputable publisher like *University Press of America* is somewhat problematic in that they will publish books for an author who pays to have it done.

<sup>4</sup> The same principle applies to items like charts, maps, or pictures within a work. Unless it is otherwise noted, the author likely had little actual input in the selection of such material. For example in reviewing O. Palmer

### *Examine the Author's Presentation Critically*

By “critical” we don’t mean to “criticize” as though you are looking for every little flaw to exploit. What we mean is to examine and evaluate the material objectively and in depth. A good book review is not a publisher’s press release. The reviewer’s job is to evaluate the material and make judgment calls as to whether or not the author has achieved his goals and made a cogent presentation. Here are some important things to look for:

- Does the author have a clear and comprehensible writing style? If you have to read a sentence several times to try to figure out what he is saying, other people probably do to.<sup>5</sup>
- Does the author treat those he is writing against fairly? Does he try to make straw men out of his opponents?
- Does the author avoid fallacious reasoning? Is there a logical flow to his presentation?
- Does the author use good primary sources or is there too much secondary material?
- Does the author demonstrate a thorough knowledge of the *current state* of the issues involved?

### *Some Other Minor Considerations*

In reviewing a book it is also acceptable to examine the work of the publisher. Be on the look out for these issues:

- Is the format of the book (type style and size) and general layout easy to read and follow?
- Has the publisher foolishly tried to save money and produced an inferior product? For example have they tried to make a 600-page work into a paperback instead of a cloth bound book?
- How good is the proofreading and editing of the work? Are there a lot of typos or misspellings?

These are not the issues that the review will hinge on, but when they are especially noticeable the reviewer should not be shy to point them out. Publishers are making a lot of money on the publication of books and reviewers can help ensure that they produce quality material. By the same token, good publishing qualities should be noted and commended (see *TMSJ*, 13:2 [Fall 2002], 296).

## ***A Suggested Book Review Format***

The following is a suggested format for a book review. There are no particular rules here, but all of the items in this outlines should be covered somewhere.

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|------|---------------|--|
| I.   | Introduction: | Introduce the issues under discussion and the book to be reviewed. |
| II.  | Part One:     | Introduce the Author   |
| III. | Part Two:     | Examine and evaluate the physical structure of the book            |

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Robertson’s *Understanding the Land of the Bible: A Biblical-Theological Guide* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishers, 1996) in *The Master’s Seminary Journal* (8:1 [Spring 1997], 122-23), I noted that the maps were of very poor quality and contained incorrect site locations for a couple of the cities. However, I made the criticisms generically, not directed specifically at the author. Additionally, avoid being picky in terms of pointing out typos and other editing issues unless they are especially egregious. Proofreading is normally the responsibility of the publisher and their editorial staff.

<sup>5</sup> Make certain to note whether a work has been translated into English from another language. Some languages (Dutch for instance) often do not translate well into English so be a little more generous on criticisms of English usage for translated works.

- IV. Part Three: Examine and evaluate the contents of the book
- V. Conclusion: Tie it all together and don't forget to tell the reader if you liked the book and recommend it or not.

Also, don't forget that as in all scholarly or formal writing the review should be written in the third person. When referring to yourself, use the phrase, "this reviewer cannot recommend this work," or "we heartily endorse this fine book."