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What they don't tell you: a survivor's guide to biblical studies

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What They Don't Tell You: A Survivor's Guide to Biblical Studies

Michael Joseph Brown

Louisville, KT: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000

157 pages, \$16.95 Softcover

If you venture into a typical academic library you will encounter numerous shelves filled with volumes entitled "Introduction to the Old Testament" and "Introduction to the New Testament." Such "Introductions" are designed to cover such matters as date, authorship, place of origin, and historical context of the books of the Bible — matters which have traditionally been regarded as preliminary to the study of the Bible itself. Of course, such volumes are essential: I often consult Kümmel's *Introduction to the New Testament* (which I first read when I was in seminary) to refresh my memory about the scholarly view of the dating or authorship of a particular biblical text.

Nevertheless, the significance of the questions addressed by such "Introductory" books is often no longer self-evident to students who are beginning the academic study of the Bible. Michael Brown's *What They Don't Tell You* is intended to bridge the gap faced by students who have been used to approaching the Bible primarily as a devotional text and who are undertaking critical biblical scholarship for the first time. In effect, this book offers a "pre-prolegomena" to scholarly introductions to biblical studies. Brown's goal is to show why biblical scholars do what they do, to explain the rationale of the practice of biblical scholarship to students with no prior experience in the discipline.

The book begins by explaining "why biblical scholarship is not Sunday School." Brown surveys the rise of modern biblical scholarship; describes source, form, redaction, literary, and canonical criticisms; and offers a helpful look at postmodern approaches to the Bible. As well, he reviews the origins of the canon, discusses the languages in which the Bible was written, and explains how the division of the text into chapter and verse divisions arose. In a very useful section Brown offers practical advice on how the student can relate critical questions to his/her own faith commitments.

The bulk of the book consists of 28 "rules of thumb" for reading and interpreting biblical texts. In this section, the basic assumptions of biblical scholarship are presented in a very engaging manner: the

author's light touch is evident, for example, in Rule of Thumb Number 7 ("An overactive imagination can get you into trouble"), Rule Number 10 ("The Bible means what it says and says what it means. Except when it doesn't") and Rule Number 20 ("Most biblical scholars can't agree on lunch, much less the precise meaning of a text"). Other of Brown's rules make explicit the need for common sense in biblical studies: see Rule Number 2 ("Be careful not to read your modern assumptions into ancient texts"); Number 7 ("An overactive imagination can get you into trouble"); Number 8 ("Get a map"); Number 12 ("If somebody in the Bible is upset about something, it's because someone else is doing it"); Number 15 ("Everybody has an ax to grind" [including scholars!]); and Number 27 ("If your faith can't stand a little shaking, perhaps there wasn't much of a foundation there in the first place"). The Rules are frequently illustrated with examples derived from biblical texts.

This book is a useful and accessible resource for those seeking to understand the mindset of modern biblical scholarship better.

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I See Satan Fall Like Lightning

René Girard. Translated with a Foreword, by James G. Williams
Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001.
256 pages, \$29.95 Softcover

This book presents, yet again, with minor modifications, René Girard's theory about the origins of violence, the interrelation of violence and religion, and Jesus' role in peace promotion. It is the eighth book on this topic by the now-retired professor of language, literature, and civilization at Stanford University (the first was *La violence et le sacré*, 1972; English 1977), helping to establish Girard as a conversation partner in most academic discussions about violence and religion. Those with little or no familiarity with Girard's theory will find *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* to be an excellent introduction, especially given Williams's primer in the Foreword. The book is intended for a general Christian audience. It uses footnotes sparingly, supports its points with clear examples, and employs a conversational tone. Orbis Books has also prepared it attractively.