

Clines, D. J. A. *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*. The New Century Bible Commentary. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984. xx + 342 pp. Paperback, \$7.95.

This is a commentary that I would rate very highly. On occasion, Clines adopts positions on some elements in the narratives of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther which see these narratives as less historical in nature than I would; but such occurrences do not, in my opinion, detract from the fact that this is a well-written, well-informed, and judiciously presented commentary. Moreover, the volume is packed with information, including references to the secondary literature; and the linguistic, historical, and archaeological facts presented are up-to-date and accurate.

The commentary begins with a bibliography for all three of the OT books treated. Introductory matters on Ezra and Nehemiah are then taken up, with the sources for these books being discussed first. Clines indicates that these sources include mainly the memoirs of Ezra and Nehemiah, plus various lists of persons. As to the composition of these books, he takes the rather standard view that the Chronicler put them into their present form ca. 400 B.C. (pp. 9, 14).

The major problem here is, Who came first—Ezra or Nehemiah? And what were the dates of their respective missions to Judah? Clines has weighed the arguments “pro” and “con” from several points of view (pp. 16-24), and concludes that Ezra preceded Nehemiah and that Ezra’s mission should be dated in 458 B.C. Nehemiah then followed Ezra to Judah in 445 B.C. Clines injects one qualification, however; namely, that the references to Ezra in the book of Nehemiah should be rejected as historically inaccurate; there was, he feels, no overlap between the work of these two men.

The last introductory topic that Clines takes up is the matter of the theology of these books. Here he emphasizes the Chronicler’s view of post-exilic Judah as the true heir and legitimate successor to pre-exilic theocratic Israel (p. 25).

A few minor historical and typographical errors have found their way into the verse-by-verse commentary that follows. Anshan is in Persia, not in Elam (p. 34). Artaxerxes’ decree has been left out of the list of decrees given in Ezra 6:14 (p. 94). Obviously, 331 A.D., not 31 B.C., is intended for the end of the Persian period (p. 272). The Jerusalem priesthood probably was “unconfident” rather than “inconfident” in the face of Tobiah’s opposition (p. 239). Nebuchadnezzar did not campaign through the Negeb in 598, but went straight to Jerusalem (p. 46; cf. W. H. Shea, in *PEQ*, 1979, 113 and *passim*). And in regard to the trans-shipment of cedars for the temple (p. 68), the reference should be to the “Yarkon River” rather than “Tell

Qasile." These few inaccuracies do not detract, however, from the overall value of the commentary.

A commonly discussed problem relating to the early chapters of Ezra is whether Zerubbabel was the same person as Sheshbazzar or whether these two names are the names of two different individuals. Clines follows the majority view that Zerubbabel and Sheshbazzar were distinct persons (pp. 41, 89), while this reviewer follows the minority view in holding that one and the same individual is represented by both names. Clines makes the interesting suggestion, however, that Sheshbazzar might be identified with Shenazzar, a son of the exiled king of Judah, Jehoiachin (referred to in 1 Chr 3:18).

Another problem with which Clines wrestles is the differences between the parallel lists in Ezra 2 and Neh 7. He concludes in favor of the priority of Nehemiah's list (p. 45), but offers no final solution for reconciling the two lists (p. 60). His linguistic and geographic observations connected with the treatment of these lists are informative and useful.

Clines consistently employs a spring-to-spring calendar for the Jews (pp. 63, 89), but he is forced to emend the dates in Neh 1:1 and 2:1 in order to make them fit this calendrical theory (pp. 136-137). The preferable alternative, which requires no emendation of these dates, is to accept a fall-to-fall calendar for the dates in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Also, recognition of a fall-to-fall calendar in these books would have resolved Clines's problem of having Ezra traveling on a Sabbath (p. 95).

With regard to occupation of the site of the city of Jerusalem before Nehemiah got its walls up, Clines holds that there was some occupation. However, the sparse support for this conclusion makes it dubious. Concerning Nehemiah's task to get the walls of the city of Jerusalem back up again, Clines calls attention to archaeological evidence indicating that the stumps of the pre-exilic walls were used for this purpose on the north and west sides of the city, but that Nehemiah's new wall followed the crest of the city's hill on the east and thus lay inside of the old walls (p. 147).

In general, Clines presents an accurate and sympathetically positive picture of the characters and work of both Ezra and Nehemiah. He also gives accurate discussions of Persian history and Persian loanwords in several connections (pp. 36, 42, 84, 86).

The major literary-historical problem with regard to Ezra and Nehemiah is where to locate the narrative of Neh 8-10. Clines transposes Ezra's reading of the law in Neh 8 forward time-wise to 458 B.C. and connects it with Ezra's earlier ministry instead of with Nehemiah's later ministry (pp. 180-181). In this case, Clines must excise the reference to "Nehemiah the governor" in Neh 8:9 (p. 185) as being the work of a later scribe. This leaves the "day-of-repentance" narrative in Neh 9 rather free-floating, not tied directly to either Ezra or Nehemiah (p. 192). Because of the connections

between the offenses described in Neh 10 and 13, Clines locates the former as following historically after, and as a response to, the latter (p. 199). The memoirs of Nehemiah then resume in 11:1 and continue to the end of the book, along with the lists located within them. This arrangement for chaps. 8-10 may not be entirely satisfactory, but Clines has set forth his case clearly and forcefully and it warrants careful study.

The third and final book covered in this commentary is Esther. Following a discussion of the relationship of this book to its extracanonical additions, Clines takes up the subject of the historicity of the events described in the book. Current scholarly opinion commonly sees Esther as a historical novelle. To this Clines accurately objects: "The term 'historical novel' is a misleading one, however. No matter how authentic the period detail of a historical novel may be, if its central plot or narrative is fictional, it belongs on the fiction shelves and not among histories—good, bad or indifferent" (p. 256). Nevertheless, Clines himself follows a somewhat curious course with regard to the question of historicity. He presents seven arguments against the historicity of the book (pp. 257-260) and five arguments in favor of its historicity (pp. 260-261), but then comes to no final conclusion in the matter: "No clear conclusion emerges from this survey of the evidence, but there can be little doubt that the evidence should be thoroughly reviewed before any decision by the reader is reached" (p. 261).

Next, Clines treats the following topics: (1) Purim (extra-biblical source for this allowed, p. 266); (2) extra-biblical literary influence upon Esther (largely rejected, p. 268); (3) the theology of Esther—(a) God reverses historical fortunes of Israel and brings salvation, and (b) human and divine factors are complementary (p. 268)—; and (4) the date of composition (considered to be relatively early in the Persian period, p. 272).

The verse-by-verse commentary on Esther is then provided. Here Clines is sensitive to the fine literary nuances in the book (pp. 284, 300, 303, 307), to the Persian-period background (pp. 275-279, 295-296), and to the Yahwistic value of the theology of the book in spite of the absence of God's name in it (p. 271).

Clines holds that in its original form Esther ended with chap. 8, and that chaps. 9 and 10 were added later (p. 319). Some evidence against this position can be found in the literary structures proposed for the book by Radday and Berg, to which Clines has referred (p. 269).

Regardless of whether or not one agrees with the positions which Clines has taken on the more-debatable issues in these three OT books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther, gratitude and thanks are due him for providing a commentary which is lucid, informative, sensitive, and useful. Indeed, this is a welcome addition to the commentary literature on these three biblical books.