

A Critical Review of *Dominion and Dynasty* by Stephen G. Dempster

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As one wades through the Old Testament, its disparate nature becomes quickly evident, consisting of 39 books by different authors written over a period of 1,000 years and composed of a variety of genres. For many Biblical scholars this raises the question of the Bible's unity: can these books be said to be unified, and if so, by what? It is Stephen G. Dempster's contention that the unity of the OT is evident in the narrative it unfolds: using the analogy of Mount Rushmore, he relates the OT's "patchwork" to the narrow focus of an observer who only sees the individual juts and crags that make up the rock face but relates its unity to the wide focus that takes in the whole scene and sees the art as it was intended to be seen (30). This is Dempster's thesis, that viewing the OT through a "wide-angle lens" reveals a purposeful pattern, a coherent narrative: Dempster presents a literary reading of the OT as a continuous narrative, a primary history presenting the story of Israel from Genesis to the uncertain resolution of 2 Chronicles, with poetic commentary interpolated in the middle (Jeremiah-Esther) (39, 49-50). The plot unifying this narrative is the realization of God's kingdom, centred on the themes of dominion (or geography) and dynasty (or genealogy) through the Davidic house (which combines both dominion and dynasty in one), moved forward by the ups and downs of Israel's relationship with God (49, 62). Dempster proceeds by unpacking this twin theme of dominion and dynasty throughout the Biblical canon (according to the order of the Talmudic *Baba Bathra*), concluding with a brief reflection on the relationship of the OT to the NT.

Dempster's work demonstrates great familiarity with the OT and the relevant literature and an excellent mixture of scholarly erudition with faithful Christian commitment. A student of the OT cannot but benefit from the fresh perspective Dempster provides. The perennial debate in OT biblical theology is whether a single theme does justice to all the biblical data; though Dempster may not convince the reader that dominion and dynasty together are *the* central theme

of the OT narrative, he surely succeeds in demonstrating the importance of these concepts to the biblical material.

However, in the opinion of this reviewer, Dempster's attempt to read the whole Bible literarily fails to consider what the OT is and the contribution its nature and structure make to the question of the OT's unity. By seeking the unity of the OT in a narrative plot unpacking the themes of dominion and dynasty, Dempster forces the OT into a procrustean bed, failing to adequately reckon with the unity given by its structure. That is, by adopting his bipartite narrative-commentary schema, Dempster ignores the significant external and internal evidence that the OT has a tripartite structure and gives undue priority to the narrative sections of the OT, resulting in several significant oversights. The rest of this review will take up these charges by first looking at his choice of a bipartite structure instead of the more conventional tripartite structure for the Hebrew Canon and then considering the resulting over-prioritization of narrative and its consequences.

Taking up the first charge, it is important to observe that the structure one adopts for reading the Bible, like reading any book, has significant implications. Though technical limitations prevented the various books of the OT being put together into one physical whole, Dempster writes that "canonization *does* make one text out of many": ordering and connecting individual books to be read together produces a work that can be read with a beginning middle and end (41-42). "This means," writes Dempster, "that the overall design of the Tanakh provides a hermeneutical lens through which its content can be viewed" (42). Yet, when he considers the structure of the canon and the hermeneutical lens it provides, Dempster writes that it is structured "in terms of a narrative sequence with commentary" (43). For one familiar with the Hebrew

Bible and the relevant literature, including Dempster's previous work, this should raise an eyebrow. As Dempster observes earlier in the book, the Hebrew text as attested in the Talmud and printed in Hebrew Bibles is structured in three parts, *Torah* (the Law), *Nevi'im* (the Prophets), and *Ketuvim* (the Writings)—represented by the acronym TaNaKh (36). He writes early on that both tripartite and bipartite structures should be considered, yet the former better attested structure is neglected as the book unfolds (39). It is the contention of this reviewer that Dempster does not provide sufficient evidence to overturn this received structure and replace it with his bipartite narrative-commentary structure. That is, because the TaNaKh is the structure of the Hebrew Bible in Jewish and first century Christian communities and no external evidence exists for the structure Dempster adopts, he has the burden of proof: he needs to prove that priority should be given to his structure, given its hermeneutical implications.<sup>1</sup> To show that Dempster fails to meet this burden, his brief argument will be considered and then the evidence for maintaining the traditional order will be presented.

Despite the implications of the structure one adopts for reading the OT, Dempster does not provide much in the way of argument for his bipartite structure: the one argument he makes is to reprint Freedman's statistical argument (Dempster 2003, 39).<sup>2</sup> In a monograph arguing for the literary unity of the Hebrew Bible, Freedman argues that a statistical analysis of the OT yields a startling symmetry indicative of an intentional unity: considering its four pieces (the Torah, the Prophets divided as the Former & Latter Prophets, the Writings), they each have

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<sup>1</sup> Concerning the hermeneutical implications of the Bible's structure, see Dempster 2003, 42–43; Sailhamer 1995, 214, 252; Greg Goswell 2008, 673.

<sup>2</sup> He appeals to Sailhamer for support but fails to offer a citation where it is to be found. My reading of the same source suggests that Sailhamer provides strong intertextual support for the received order, e.g., Sailhamer, 1995, 239-252 (the same section cited in Dempster 2003, 39).

roughly 75,000 words (80,000; 70,000; 72,000; 84,000), suggesting a perfect division into two halves of about 150,000 words—a primary history and, in Dempster’s words, a prophetic commentary (Freedman 1991, 5–6). Yet, as Dempster himself observes in an earlier article, “[Freedman] can attain the equality of consonants [sic: Freedman discusses words] in each half of the canon only by excluding Daniel from the second division” (Dempster 1997a, 41). If Freedman’s statistics could withstand this scrutiny, it is possible that the “canonicler”—the person responsible for the final canonical shape (Dempster 2003, 39)—was concerned with numerical symmetry and structured the OT to achieve it, but this is not necessarily the case: the symmetry Freedman proffers is only one piece of evidence to be considered among many others. A consideration of the evidence for the OT’s tripartite structure demonstrates that Freedman’s symmetry is irrelevant to the OT’s structure.

In addition to the lack of evidence for a bipartite structure, three lines of evidence can be produced to establish the pre-eminence of the tripartite TaNaKh structure: the testimony of various extra-biblical writings, the testimony of the NT, and the internal testimony of the OT. First, as many scholars have observed, there is extensive evidence from extra-biblical writings for a tripartite OT canon finished sometime in the last 4 centuries BC (e.g., Beckwith 1986, 110–27; Stephen Dempster 1997; S. G. Dempster 2001; Stephen Dempster 2009; Dunbar 1986; Sailhamer 1995, 2002, 34–35). Significant evidence for this are the early testimonies of Ben Sira, his grandson, and the Qumran document sometimes identified as 4QMMT. From the 1<sup>st</sup> century, the testimonies of Josephus in *Against Apion* and Philo in *The Contemplative Life* are also significant (cf. Dempster, 2009, 59-64). Ben Sira’s work distinguishes between the Law and the Prophets in a list of biblical heroes (Sir., Chs. 44-49); the introduction to the Greek translation of

Sira's work by his grandson identifies "the Law," "the Prophets," and the "other books" three times; and a fragment of 4QMMT mentions the book of Moses, the books of the Prophets, and David (Fragment C, ll. 10-11). From the first century, Josephus speaks of 22 books in three divisions (Josephus 1987, bk. 1, para. 38) and Philo may provide support when he describes the practice of some Jews who studied "in [every houses' sacred shrine] the *laws and the sacred oracles of God enunciated by the holy prophets, and hymns, and psalms, and all kinds of other things by reason of which knowledge and piety are increased and brought to perfection*" (emphasis added, Philo 1995, para. 25).

Second, the NT affirms this structure: Jesus echoes 4QMMT<sup>c</sup> in speaking of "the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44) and the OT is summarized throughout the NT as "the Law and the Prophets" (Matt. 5:16, 7:12, 11:13, 22:40; Luke 16:16; John 1:45; Acts 13:15, 24:14, 28:23; Rom. 3:21) and as "the Law" (Matt. 5:18; John 12:36; 1 Cor. 14:21). In Matthew 23:35, Jesus alludes to the Hebrew order of the OT, which at this time involved a tripartite structure, speaking of the "blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar": canonically, not chronologically, these are the first and last martyrs in the OT (Gen. 4:4; 2 Chron. 24:20-21). Though not overwhelming on its own, in conjunction with the evidence of the grandson of Ben Sira and the 1st century writers, Jesus's words are best understood as a reference to a tripartite canon and the shortened "Law" and "Law and the Prophets" as references to the whole via synecdoche.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> That "Psalms" is a synecdoche for all the writings is supported by Philo, 4QMMT, and several passages from the Talmud and Tosephta (cf. Beckwith 1986, 112-13, 117).

Third, there are significant intertextual clues that support this structure: that is, when the OT is read in the order of the TaNaKh,<sup>4</sup> there are clear “canonical seams,” repeated motifs and phrases that delineate and bind each section together ( Sailhamer 1995, 240; Van Pelt 2017a). On account of space limitations, we will only consider four pieces of evidence: the intertextual connections along the borders of each section (Deut.—Josh.; Mal.—Psalms), the use of poetic texts to divide and close off the Pentateuch, the parallels at the beginning of the second two and ending of all three sections, and the inclusio formed by Genesis and Chronicles.

Firstly, the close connection between Joshua and Deuteronomy is evident: the books are tied closely chronologically and Deuteronomy anticipates the leadership of Joshua taking the people into the land (Sailhamer 1995, 240; Van Pelt 2017b). But Deuteronomy also anticipates the content of all the Prophets. It does so in three ways: firstly, the account of the possession of the land, disobedience, and exile of Israel in Deuteronomy 28-31 anticipates the history of Israel unpacked in the Former Prophets; secondly, the song of witness in Chapter 32 anticipates the covenantal lawsuits of Latter Prophets (Van Pelt 2016, 36–37); and thirdly, the prophecy of the future circumcision of the heart associated with a post-exilic internalization of the law becomes a key text as the prophets anticipate a new covenant in which God would enable his people to be obedient (Deut. 30:1-14; Isa. 54:13-14; Jer. 31:31-34; Ezk. 36:25-30) (Rutherford 2016, 263–73). Support for this is found in that the key word of Deuteronomy 30, שׁוּב (“to return”), and the phrase שׁוּב שְׁבוּתְךָ (“restore your fortunes,” ESV; Deut. 30:3) become key words throughout the

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<sup>4</sup> There is no unanimity on the order of the TaNaKh. The differences most difficult to resolve are the locations of Ruth (before Psalms or after Proverbs) and the relative order of the Latter Prophets (beginning with Jeremiah or Isaiah). For various reasons beyond the scope of this paper, it is assumed that Ruth belongs after Proverbs.

Latter Prophets.<sup>5</sup> A seam is also discernible between Malachi and the Psalms: Psalm 1-2 continues the theme of two ways, of wickedness and of righteousness, that concludes Malachi. As the wicked are stubble to be burned in Malachi 4:1, so they are chaff blown away by the wind in Psalm 1:4. Malachi ends with a call for the righteous to remember the Law; similarly, Psalms 1-2 exhort the righteous to delight in and meditate on the Law (e.g., 1:2) (Dempster 1997b, 205–6).

Secondly, in his studies of the composition of the Pentateuch, John Sailhamer argues that major poetic texts are used at key points in the narrative to create macro-structural seams; of these, he notes three of special significance. In Genesis 49, Numbers 24, and Deuteronomy 31-33, the central figure of the narrative calls together an audience and gives his final words concerning “the end days.” The figure’s final words take the form of a poetic text. Genesis 49 and Numbers 24 are themselves linked by an anticipation of a future king from Judah (Gen. 49:9, Num. 24:9) (Sailhamer 1995, 210–12). Balaam’s speeches indicate a strategic shift in the narrative of Numbers; the poems of Jacob and Moses indicate, respectively, the closing of the book of Genesis and then the Law as a whole. This final conclusion suggests that the Torah is to be regarded as a single unit, not part of a narrative continuing through Chronicles. That the Torah is a single unit, the first of three divisions in the OT, is confirmed by the next set of intertextual clues.

Thirdly, it has been observed that the Prophets opens and closes with a series of references to God’s Law (Greg Goswell 2008, 675); Van Pelt has observed in connection with this that the Writings opens in a similar way (Van Pelt 2016, 40–41). Regarding the latter

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<sup>5</sup> They occur 309 and 19 times respectively. **שׁוֹב לְבָבוֹת** appears only once in the Torah and six times in the Ketuvim. Dempster, in another work, notices **שׁוֹב** as a key word in the Latter Prophets but fails to make the connection with Deuteronomy 30 (1997b, 198).

connection, Van Pelt writes, “the Old Testament Prophets and Writings begin with statements that express their dependence upon the Law by uniquely highlighting the protological importance of meditation on the 'law of the Lord' 'day and night' (cf. Josh 1:8; Ps. 1:2)” (Van Pelt 2016, 40–41). Dempster makes the same connection, adding that “each begin with Joshua and the Blessed Man meditating on the *Torah* during the day and night, the only time there is such a description of this religious behavior in the entire Bible (Josh. 1.8-9; Ps. 1.2-3)” (Dempster 2001, 43). In a different context, Dempster observes that Genesis 1-3 has a similar emphasis, focusing on the “importance of the speech of God” (Dempster 1997a, 49). All three sections also close on a note of expectancy: Deuteronomy and Malachi anticipate another prophet likened to but greater than Moses and Elijah (Deut. 34:10-12; Mal. 4:4-6); 2 Chronicles ends without resolution, suggesting that the exile is not yet over and awaiting its fulfillment (Greg Goswell 2008, 684; Van Pelt 2016, 39–41). This connection is strengthened in light of the NT, where it is revealed that the end of the exile comes through the greater prophet anticipated by Deuteronomy and Malachi.

Fourthly, it has been observed by various authors that Genesis and Chronicles both begin with Adam and end with the expectation of immanent “divinely enabled going up to the land” (using the Hebrew roots עלה and פקד, Gen. 50:24-25; 2 Chr. 36:23) (e.g., Gregory Goswell 2015, 22; cf. Dempster 2009, 74). This encloses all the material of the OT between these books, forming an *inclusio* with Genesis as the introduction and Chronicles as the conclusion of the OT. Together, these intertextual connections cohere well with the extra-biblical and NT evidence for the OT’s tripartite shape. That is, like Jesus statement about the testimony of martyrs “from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah,” this doesn’t explicitly demonstrate that the OT had a tripartite shape; it does, however, show that the OT has a shape which begins with Genesis and ends with Chronicles, a shape that historically has been unanimously tripartite.

Therefore, from these three lines of evidence—from the external evidence, the evidence of the NT, and the evidence of the OT—we see that the OT is not structured as Primary History and Commentary but as the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings.

As we saw earlier, Dempster himself argues that the structure one adopts has significant ramifications for one's interpretation of the OT (41-42). By adopting a bipartite structure for the OT, Dempster overemphasizes the role of narrative as the unifying element in the OT and this has several consequences. Following many contemporary biblical theologians, Dempster argues that the unifying element of the OT, identified by viewing it through a wide-angle lens, is a sweeping narrative from creation to exile and return to the land, a narrative that works out the themes of dominion and dynasty coming to fruition through David's house as Israel experiences the ups and downs of relationship with God (49). Dempster's narrative emphasis smooths out the OT's contours, minimizing the unique contribution of its three sections.

Though narrative texts are found in each section of the OT, that no section gives priority to its narratives suggests that narrative is not the primary focus of the OT. Dempster himself notes that the narrative sections of the Law focus on and highlight the centrality of the covenant to the Pentateuch (Dempster 2003, 100–101); this feature shifts the focus away from the narrative to the legal portions of the books. The narrative texts in the Prophets and the Writings are likewise not the focus of these corpi. To show this, that narrative is not as preeminent as Dempster's analysis suggests, we will give careful consideration to the received shape of the OT, revealing that its tripartite structure gives unity to the OT. From this, we will see several ways in which Dempster's approach proves inadequate. To anticipate, each of the OT's three sections use their respective genres to expound the law in a specific way, being unified by their relationship

to the Sinai covenant expounded in the Law. An insightful analysis of this structure has been provided by Miles Van Pelt, working upon the foundation laid in Meredith Kline's *The Structure of Biblical Authority*. Looking first at Kline's work, we will then consider Van Pelt's analysis of the Law, Prophets, and Writings. Considering the theological significance of the OT's structure will reveal several inadequacies in Dempster's approach.

Working from the discovery of ANE treaties, Kline argues in *The Structure of Biblical Authority* that the Law and Deuteronomy are structured like the legal written document that accompanies an ANE suzerainty treaty, or covenant. His argument is that canon, a binding legal written document, is a necessary corollary of covenant. Observing that the Law is such a document, he identifies Genesis-Exodus as the covenant prologue—introducing the background of the relationship to be formalized in the covenant—and many of the narratives that occur in Exodus-Numbers as case examples of the law's statutes. He notes that “this unusual union of history and law was distinctive of [ANE] treaties” (Kline 1975, 53). Sailhamer makes similar observations, noting the many ways in which the narrative is shaped to highlight and focus on the legal text, serving “as an extended treatise on the nature of the Sinai covenant (Sailhamer 1995, 272–89). Considering the rest of the OT, Kline extrapolates from the features of an ANE covenant and identifies the Former and Later Prophets as providing the history of the covenant people and an account of their Covenant Lord's legal intervention in this history through His prophets, His covenant prosecutors (Kline 1975, 57–59). The Writings give instruction and meditation upon the basics of the Law: poetry aims to maintain a proper relationship with the Covenant Lord and wisdom to explicate the covenant (Kline 1975, 63–65).

Building upon Kline’s work with attention to the literary details of the OT, Van Pelt argues that the OT is structured around “the covenant” (the Law), a history of the Covenant People (“covenant life,” the Prophets), and instruction in “covenant living” (the Writings) (Van Pelt 2016, 25). Working with these categories, the distinctive emphases of the narrative texts in the Prophets is clarified over against the narratives of the Writings: narrative in Prophets functions as a witness against Israel, the covenant people; as a testimony to the faithfulness of the Yahweh, their covenant Lord; and as an anticipation of His future action on their behalf. The narrative in the Writings serves to exemplify the ideals of covenant living, the Law worked out in life and worship: the relationship of Ruth to Proverbs exemplifies this, with the former illustrating the “woman of virtue” extolled in the latter’s concluding chapter (Sailhamer 1995, 213–15). A similar relationship can be identified between Lamentations and the following books of Esther and Daniel (Van Pelt 2016, 38) and, possibly, between Psalms and Job.<sup>6</sup> Chronicles presents its characters in their best light, often with an emphasis on their morally exemplary features, and so gives a guide to living in exile (Greg Goswell 2008, 675–76; Van Pelt 2017a).

The work of these authors with the text of the OT demonstrates that the narrative is shaped to serve a greater theological purpose, a purpose that gives unity to the OT as a covenant document intended to lead its readers in the appropriate life under that covenant. Dempster’s bipartite division of the OT and his overemphasis on narrative results in a failure to adequately consider how its three parts might contribute to the unity of the whole and how the narratives in

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<sup>6</sup> One may ask if Job is an exception to this paradigm. I have not studied Job to a great depth, yet its content is not opposed to this understanding: though it may not explicitly mention covenant, in its present context, it delineates man’s relationship to God in the midst of suffering, a subject relevant to those in His covenant. Furthermore, the expectation of blessing and the cursing revolving around one’s relationship to God is an assumption grounded in God’s covenant with creation—as are all His sovereign actions within the creation, of which Job is full. Lastly, Peter J. Gentry claims that “without the covenant and the related notion of the *goel* (kinsman redeemer), its instruction on suffering would be emasculated.” (Gentry and Wellum 2012, 364–65)

each section serve purposes greater than telling a story—how the narratives of the Law, Prophets, and Writings have distinct purposes. His approach also neglects the centrality of the Sinai Covenant to the OT and the narrative it records.

In summary, Dempster's book rings true in many ways: he succeeds in demonstrating the significance of OT themes of dominion and dynasty and the unity this shows. Yet, by adopting without sufficient substantiation a bipartite structure for the OT and by over-prioritizing its narrative elements, he ignores its own contours and fails to reckon with the unifying force exerted by the Sinai covenant recorded in the Law and the subsequent reflection upon and applications of it in the Prophets and the Writings. Despite the substantial criticism offered above, Dempster's book remains a significant contribution to the study of the OT and to biblical theology and would serve well as supplementary reading for courses providing an introduction to the OT.

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