



## New archaeological find in Jerusalem

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In September the press reported a new find in Jerusalem, from the New Testament period. A large underground drainage channel, beneath the southern city wall, probably served as an escape run for people trapped in the city, when the Romans captured it in AD70. This tunnel may be what Josephus refers to as 'subterranean caverns', at the end of Jewish War §6. I have not been able to find an academic report of the find on the web, but there are plenty of popular accounts (e.g., [www.wtop.com/?nid=105&sid=1243164](http://www.wtop.com/?nid=105&sid=1243164) and [www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/RT-GAM.20070911.wtunnel0910/BNStory/Science/home](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/RT-GAM.20070911.wtunnel0910/BNStory/Science/home)).

## O little town

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In July this year a group of theological students from Britain and Ireland visited the Holy Land, supported by the British Trust for Tantor, under the erudite leadership of Stephen Travis from St John's, Nottingham, and helped (less encyclopaedically) by your guest editor. Year by year, and sometimes week by week, the situation in the land changes, and news is never quite up-to-date. But Tantor looks down on Bethlehem, and many of our group visited there a number of times during our stay.

Day-to-day life has been affected by the security barrier that loops around the town. Getting in and out is harder than it used to be, and the local economy has suffered. Bethlehem depends heavily on visitors, and receives them with courtesy and great goodwill. Many of its people are particularly pleased to welcome fellow-Christians.

We also went to Herodion, Herod the Great's fortress, a few miles south of Bethlehem. The grand tomb in the side of the mound, which was unearthed only a few months ago, was open to view and you can get very close. The slabs that formed the tomb are quite badly fragmented, and the claim for this as Herod's grave is admittedly based on inference rather than inscription. But this is indeed a plot fit for a king, in both construction and location. There is a bit more comment, and a couple of web addresses, in *BSB44*.

# Special Report: the British New Testament Conference 2007

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This annual conference is a great opportunity for mutual stimulation and encouragement among those who research or teach the NT. This year the company enjoyed balmy September weather in the congenial surroundings of the University of Exeter. Our spies were out.

## Starting pastorally

The three main plenaries give opportunity for senior scholars in the field to share a breadth or depth of perspective on a big topic which most of the rest of us feel we have yet to attain! On the opening evening Professor Morna Hooker, whose first work was published half a century ago, offered a lucid and fascinating overview

of 'Paul the Pastor'. The main burden of this was to demonstrate that the ways in which Paul addressed the specific pastoral needs of his hearers by taking them back to the heart of his Gospel as expressed through the creedal summaries that can be found in his letters. It was especially suggestive for anyone involved in preaching or the teaching of preaching, raising as it did in a fresh way the old question: how chameleon-like can the gospel be as it is communicated to a range of different situations and cultures? One intriguing suggestion was that Paul's argument in 2 Cor. 5:14-15 ('one has died for all, therefore all have died') might have been formulated in response to a Corinthian interpretation of Christ's death as a crude exchange which conveniently let them out of shame and suffering ('he died, so we live').

## Paper trail

Friday night's presentation is traditionally lighter, visual, and possibly even entertaining. This year's paper was from Larry Hurtado, Professor at Edinburgh, who is best known for writing on early Christian worship of Jesus as shaping christological doctrine. He asked the basic question: when we get so excited about the discovery of early artefacts that shed light on the first Christian centuries, why have we ignored the most obvious artefacts we have - the manuscripts of the NT?

Through statistical analysis and visual presentation, he demonstrated the rise of the codex (the book form) as the preferred physical form of writing, rather than the scroll. Of the early secular manuscripts we have, 93% are in the form of scrolls, and the other 7% codices, yet amongst Christian writings, 74% were codices and 26% scrolls. He then went on to show differences in the way writing looked. Classical manuscripts were written with the assumption that reading was an elite activity - the province of the professional - and so the text was written in a highly compressed way without any 'helps' for the reader. By contrast, Christian texts were more spaced out, and often included spaces showing the ends of words and marks indicating the ends of phrases. Both these developments evidence the 'democratising' effect of Christian belief on practices of reading.

The final part of his presentation focused on the 'nomina sacra', abbreviations of the divine name using some letters, omitting others, and drawing a line over the word. The most common uses of this kind of abbreviation are for theos, Iesous, christos and kyrios, thus providing evidence for the early association of the person of Jesus with God and supporting Hurtado's argument for early Christian devotion to Jesus.

All of this was summarised from Hurtado's recent book *The Earliest Christian Artefacts* (Eerdmans). You can find a good review of this at <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/bmcr/2007/2007-06-39.html> and a discussion of nomina sacra at <http://evangelicaltextualcriticism.blogspot.com> written by our very own Peter Head.

## Received text

The final lecture was given by Professor John Riches, and was a powerful and engaging exploration of how the growing discipline of 'reception history' acts as a necessary partner to, rather than competitor of, more traditional historical methods in the search for fruitful interpretations of texts. He drew our attention especially to the

vigorous way in which Luther famously sought 'what Paul wanted' in a particular text. Luther is seen here as an example of serious tussling with the core theological messages of Scripture - a rebuke to emaciated forms of historical enquiry in more recent times, which have eschewed big ideas in favour of bare details or facts. And our very engagement with Luther then becomes an example of how we cannot seriously encounter the messages of Scripture without some engagement with those who have tussled with them before. (We did, though, get a salutary reminder from the final questioner that 'texts can't talk back'.)

## Brief encounters

Shorter papers were also very helpful. Bruce Longenecker interacted with statistics and proposals from several scholars (Friesen, Whittaker, Scheidel, the Stegemanns, Meggitt) to argue for the existence of a sizeable 'middling group' in Graeco-Roman society, while pointing out, surely correctly, that it would be quite anachronistic to call this a 'middle class'. Nijay Gupta, a postgraduate student at Durham, argued interestingly (though not without an element of query from some listeners) that Paul's statement of equivocation about his future in Philippians 1:21-26 is to be understood not (as some have said) against the background of the sometimes honourable estimation of suicide in Graeco-Roman society, but as a subversion of the 'honourable' plea for death of certain Old Testament exemplars including Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, Jonah and Job. Whichever background is preferred, the honour/shame theme is illuminating: despite his imprisonment, it is (because of Christ) no shame for Paul to stay alive and serve the Philippians.

## High flyers

The conference is also a chance to 'fly a kite' by testing out ideas in the 'critically supportive' environment of smaller seminar groups in a range of subject areas. In the hermeneutics group we heard Ben Blackwell, another Durham postgrad (it's a fertile place!) give a thorough treatment of the theme of 'glory' in Romans, which opened up some fresh interpretative possibilities. In another session we joined with the group looking at the 'Use and Influence of the Bible' for a discussion on Martin O'Kane's new book, *Painting the Text: The Artist as Biblical Interpreter* (Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2007), led by Professors Philip Esler and Tim Gorringer. This showed again the extraordinarily rich insights yielded by the conjunction of art and text, exegesis and imagination.

*Stephen Wright (Spurgeon's College) and Ian Paul (St John's, Nottingham)*

# Book Reviews

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Bruce K. Waltke, *A Commentary on Micah* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2007) xviii+490; £18.99. Writing a commentary is a challenge for anyone, but this is now the third (and longest) on Micah by the indefatigable Walke. The introduction is relatively brief, where he sets out his view that the prophet Micah is the author/editor of the whole of the book that bears his name. But the overwhelming emphasis is on the text, with the commentary on each section divided into exegesis and

exposition. The former is a detailed look at the Hebrew (transliterated) text, with extensive reference to scholarly discussion of the meaning of words and the syntax. As the author of a standard Hebrew grammar, Waltke carries this out with authority, although readers without Hebrew and a good technical vocabulary will find much of it hard going. The exposition is more accessible, exploring the form, structure and message of the passage. Waltke's passion to apply the text comes through, and reference to the New Testament outworking of theological themes will prove helpful to preachers. One curious (though harmless) eccentricity is the use of "I AM" for the divine name (YHWH, the Lord).

If you are looking for a full-scale commentary, this is a very good choice, even if you only ever look at the exposition. Micah has a number of very well-known passages (e.g. 6:1-8) that are well worth exploring at this depth. If you remain doubtful, there is now an alternative to finding it in a bookstore and having a skim-read. The American Amazon.com site has a 'Search Inside' facility for the book, which will allow you to get an idea of its style and quality. Taste and see!

*Philip Jenson, Ridley Hall, Cambridge*

Gordon Oliver, *Holy Bible, Human Bible: Questions Pastoral Practice Must Ask* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2006); Pp xiii+171; ISBN 0-232-52671-0. Long ago, before becoming the Bishop's Officer for Ministry and Training in the diocese of Rochester, Gordon Oliver was once a teaching colleague as the Director of Pastoral Studies at St John's College, Nottingham. I remember many hours spent with him at the college's snooker table and on golf courses where we would sometimes have to give each other absolution for losing sanctification after poor shots. Gordon is a passionate, profoundly honest man who loves people. He also loves the Bible, and will not let its gift and challenge to us be dissolved by cultural relativity. He has produced a very readable book full of insights and examples that call Christians of all sorts to consider afresh the nature and use of Scripture in addressing pastoral issues.

Inspired by Stephen Fowl's plea for 'charitable listening', Gordon evenhandedly traces different answers to questions including, 'How does the Bible relate to the Word of God?', 'Who owns the Bible?', 'Is the Bible a bridge or a boundary?' and 'Can we be human and biblical at the same time?'. Those looking for sweeping conclusions that dismiss alternatives (whether conservative or liberal) will be disappointed; the strength of this book is its ability to be generous and critical at the same time as it educates the reader to be more respectful and aware of what is happening when we 'use' the Bible. Some readers will feel that he is better at raising questions than answering them, but the same could be said of a certain Nazarene. This will be an excellent resource in the training of sensitive and faithful pastors.

*Michael Thompson, Ridley Hall, Cambridge*

Andrew Gregory (ed.), *The Fourfold Gospel Commentary* (London, SPCK, 2006). The coming Sunday looms, and the cry goes up: 'Where do I start?' This book aims to give the preacher at least part of the answer, by means of a sustained treatment of all the lectionary passages for each Gospel. These are arranged by the sequence in which they appear in the Gospels rather than in the lectionary, which is useful in

maintaining the narrative flow. As each of the Gospels is treated by a single scholar, there is helpful continuity of treatment. The contributors (David Bartlett, Richard A. Burridge, Andrew F. Gregory, Morna D. Hooker, and Henry Wansbrough) come from a range of backgrounds (Roman Catholic, Anglican, Baptist and Methodist) and are all experienced preachers within their own traditions.

The introductory essays for each Gospel give helpful summaries on key areas such as 'Matthew's communities: what's going on?' and 'Who is Jesus in Mark's Gospel?' The detailed notes on each passage are intended as a starting point for those who preach on the Gospels, with comments which are 'primarily exegetical rather than expository'. That said, the best of the notes are clear, insightful and to the point, with much material that can be used not only for understanding the text but for shaping the sermon itself.

The limited amount of space allocated to each passage means, however, that the notes can really only provide a starting point: for instance, one has to have some sympathy for the commentator required to deal with exegetical aspects of the wedding feast at Cana in three short paragraphs. It does seem likely that the preacher will very soon be reaching for the much fuller treatment available in the commentaries. Nevertheless, for kick-starting the process of producing a sermon on a Gospel passage, this book offers a worthwhile resource.

*Ann Sheldon, Sutton Coldfield*

**And finally, a reflection from the biblical zoo:**

The lion shall lie down with the lamb. But the lion will get the better night's sleep.

## Grove Biblical Series

This month's booklet (B45) *Singleness: A Biblical Theology* by Barry Danylak is a helpful theological study that explores the different perspectives on singleness in the Old and New Covenants.

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