

Biblical Studies Bulletin

Edited by Michael B Thompson—Published Quarterly—Read Religiously—Disposed of Reluctantly—Free to Grove Biblical Subscribers

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News in Brief —————

Radio 4's 'Witness' —————

By the time you read this, a new series of five plays based on the gospel of Luke will have aired on Radio 4 (17th-21st December at 2.15 pm each weekday), and chances are that any opportunity to listen again on the Radio 4 website will be gone. If you missed it, I hope you can find a way to hear a copy (perhaps through someone who captured the audio stream). It turned out well, and I hope the BBC will be persuaded by the public response to make it available for a wider hearing. But I would say that, because I was the biblical consultant for the project.

The author of the plays is Nick Warburton, an award-winning writer who has produced scripts for television and stage. Nick played the role of Jesus in our local church's production of Dorothy L Sayers' *The Man Born to Be King* a few years ago, and the experience affected him. It led him to want to create a series of radio plays doing something similar to Sayers' for our generation. He also has become one of our church wardens—another sign of change!

The aim of the series was not to reproduce the exact words from Luke, but to be deliberately imaginative in allowing some of the participants in the story to reminisce and to share some of the bits they remembered. There was no claim to be strictly representing history. Although Nick made every attempt to stick only to material from the third evangelist, he felt free not to follow a 'strict' Lukan chronology. We got that idea from Luke himself, who also moves things from Mark around to make his point.

Listeners may have been surprised to hear Jesus and the rest of the cast say a number of things that are not in the bible. That was perhaps the most difficult part of the editing for me; obviously he said far more than we have in the gospels, but what was his everyday language like? Did Jesus make 'small talk', or like some Greek

oracle was his every statement profound? Did he have a sense of humour? We were convinced that he did. We wanted 'Witness' to make the story of Jesus accessible to a wide range of people, sparking interest and motivating them to read the Bible to learn more.

As suspected, the project prompted some protests on the Radio 4 message board from those who oppose airing Christian programmes. Thankfully it drew no flak that I am aware of from more conservative Christian listeners. Given the largely positive feedback so far, it sounds as though not a few people found it provocative and moving. As one would expect of the BBC, it was well-produced, using fine actors (including Peter Firth from BBC TV's 'Spooks' series as the apostle Peter). Because Galileans had discernible accents, Jesus has a northern UK accent which took some getting used to.

I think Nick Warburton and Jonquil Panting (the director/producer) have accomplished something special. I hope that 'Witness' will prove to be an inspiration and a resource that ignites faith, prompts discussion and draws us back to the text. If enough folk contact the BBC and request a copy, it might just reappear.

Book Reviews

William Loader, *The New Testament with Imagination* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2007) pp216, ISBN 978-0-8028-2746-3; £8.99.

The prolific Prof Bill Loader, from Western Australia, has published a mountain of original research, most recently on attitudes to sexuality in the NT era. But this is a book of a different hue. It aims to introduce the NT to non-specialists, and to open up briskly and concisely some issues and insights of critical academic scholarship.

There are five chapters: on Jesus in Galilee, Jesus in Jerusalem, Paul and his churches, the synoptic evangelists, and the community of John's gospel. Each chapter starts by asking you to imagine – hearing the sounds and stories around Capernaum, sharing the tension of Holy Week, sailing to tell Paul about the cares of your house-church, watching your friend Matthew write, and living through many years with the gospel of love and light. There follow, in each chapter, discussions of four particular texts, which bring a range of themes and topics into focus. For example the first text in chapter three is Galatians 1 and 2. Under this heading we hear about epistolary conventions, the trouble in Galatia, Paul's apostleship, his clash with Peter, and his attitude to scripture. All this fills just over six pages, before the tour moves on to Corinth and all stations to gender, gifts and glossolalia.

Loader values his readers' time, and gets to the point quickly; he involves the text, and prompts people to read it attentively, enquiringly and confidently; and he covers the territory, with a wide-ranging introduction to most of the NT. The snippets on imagination are not always tightly integrated with all that follows, but they do make you ask what it was like to be there. There isn't much about what to do with the text today. But Loader wasn't aiming for that. What he did aim for, he has hit.

John Proctor, Westminster College, Cambridge.

R T France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2007); ISBN: 978-0-8028-2501-8; £33.99.

As expected, the author of the superb introduction *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher* and the very fine (if brief) Tyndale New Testament Commentary series volume on the gospel, has now produced this long-awaited volume in the NICNT. He has kept up to date, and does not simply rehearse what he has said before. To my mind, this is the most useful, accessible, and well-balanced large scale commentary on the early church's favourite gospel. If you are a pastor or teacher, I'd say this is now the first book to buy on Matthew.

Dick France draws on a lifetime of scholarship, teaching, seminary leadership and parish ministry, and this work gives us the fruit of his excellent judgement. It will not replace Davies & Allison (ICC) for close, critical study of the Greek text, Hagner (Word) and Nolland (NIGTC) for bibliography and evangelical sifting of possibilities, and Keener (Eerdmans) for giving us lots of cultural background. What it does do is to keep the ideas in the text and the scholars largely in the footnotes, as it sets out clearly and sensibly the most likely original intention of the text.

The Editor

R L Wilken, A R Christman and M J Hollerich, *Isaiah: Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators* (Church's Bible; Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2007); ISBN: 978-0-8028-2581-0; £24.99.

Recent years have seen the rehabilitation of pre-critical Christian commentary on the scriptures as a subject worthy of study. The importance of Isaiah in the New Testament makes it a particularly apt book for an anthology such as that found here. The emphasis is on more extended citations, sometimes spanning several pages. The most frequently mentioned authors are Augustine, Cyril of Alexandria, Eusebius of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, Jerome and Origen. Sensibly the editor has chosen just a selection of passages for comment, but for these a new translation of the Greek version of the Bible (the Septuagint) is provided. The brief introduction gives some guidance about the principles underlying the approach, especially that of reading the Bible as a coherent whole. With this I completely agree, and there was much that I enjoyed and learnt from the selections I read. Metaphors are exuberantly explored, cross-references illuminate the larger theological themes, and the desire of the authors to build up and encourage the readers is heart-warming.

At the same time I realized that the last two hundred years of historical biblical criticism is hard to set aside. The links made often seemed somewhat arbitrary or shallow, if ingenious and edifying, and downplay the rich developing narrative that spans the Testaments and leads on to later theological developments. Of course, this is not a criticism of this book, but a reflection of my desire to see more scripture-based theological commentary that is a contemporary synthesis of old and new. The aims of the authors have been amply fulfilled, and this book is warmly commended to anyone who would like to taste the style and insights of the greatest Christian thinkers and writers of the first millennium or so.

Philip Jenson, Ridley Hall, Cambridge

E F Lupieri, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse of John* (Tr. M P Johnson and A Kamesar. Grand Rapids / Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2006); ISBN: 978-0-8028-6073-6; \$36.

This commentary has been very well received since it was published in Italian in 1999, and the Eerdmans website sets out its aims:

“Edmondo Lupieri’s main goal...is to introduce readers to the mental and spiritual world of John as both a first-century Jew and a follower of Jesus. The fruit of over ten years of research, a constructive response to postmodern criticism, and an academic best-seller in its Italian edition, Lupieri’s commentary offers both new proposals and traditional interpretations to shed light on this complex coda to the biblical message.

“In an illuminating preface Lupieri discusses the strange world of the Apocalypse and promises an open commentary, full of original treatments of knotty interpretive problems. Maintaining a strong historical perspective throughout, he examines the text of the Apocalypse line by line, paying careful attention to the Greek text, offering a new translation, making wide use of apocryphal, pseudepigraphal, and Qumran literature, and often analyzing John’s Apocalypse as compared to other Jewish apocalypses.

“Thoughtful, thorough, and nonsectarian, Lupieri’s Commentary on the Apocalypse of John will appeal to anyone with a serious interest in the meaning of the biblical text.”

But our reviewer was more cautious. Because this commentary was first published in 1999, the bibliography mentions few works since 1999. For example, there is no mention of Beale’s and Aune’s major English-language commentaries. Also missing is any interest in the violent aspects of the book, which we see in the works of particularly Barr and Friesen. The commentary provides the Greek text and translation. It is not obvious what the translation contributes to the commentary. For example, 20.4 has the ambiguous ‘and judgement was given to them’. There is no discussion of the other possible translations of the Greek dative *autois* rendered ‘to them’.

Lupieri believes Babylon, the great city, represents Jerusalem (following Beagley and Corsini). This view has generally been rejected. Still, Lupieri might have drawn upon Margaret Barker’s *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (T & T Clark: 2000), which would have supported him. Lupieri dismisses Bauckham’s consensus view that the cargo in 18.11-13 must be seen in the context of Rome’s policies of importing from the provinces (p 289). He makes sense of the cargo in the light of the city being Jerusalem. The argument needed a more careful assessment with reference to Provan’s 1996 article in *JSNT*, ‘Foul Spirits, Fornication and Finance: Revelation from an Old Testament Background’. While Lupieri is a sensitivity to Feminist scholarship, there is no acknowledgement of Schüssler-Fiorenza’s major works. I found the view that the Apocalypse is antifeminist rather naïve (p 12). It is worth listening to women in oppressed countries to whom the text is an important liberation message. The lamb image receives unexpected lack of attention given its dominance. There is little mention, for example, of the Hebrew background, with no awareness of the slain lamb of Isaiah 53. In sum, this commentary is of limited value to those working on the cutting edge of Apocalypse scholarship, and the Greek makes it difficult to use for those without the language.

Mark Bredin, Tanzania

John Morris, *Contemporary Creed: A mini-course in Christianity for today* (Ropely: O Books [an imprint of John Hunt Publishing Ltd.], 2005); ISBN 1-905047-37-1; £5.99.

What is wonderful about this book is John Morris' willingness to create a space for exploring Christianity that feels refreshingly different. It will appeal to some who would not want many of the other introductions that crowd the shelves.

Morris writes 60 poems covering a constellation of theological and spiritual issues. They are grouped around some fairly familiar headings: God and Creation; the Incarnation; the Ministry of Jesus; the Death of Jesus and the Atonement; the Resurrection of Jesus; the Trinity; the Scriptures; Christian Living. In each case the poem is followed by a question and an answer that opens up the doctrine. The answers have strong scriptural teaching woven into them. Poem, question and answer tend to cover a couple of pages which suggests this book could be used as a daily resource fairly well. Whilst it works fine if read from cover to cover it would also be the sort of book to dip into as particular issues arose. It feels to me that it is designed more for individual than group use.

Morris has worked hard to paint a well rounded picture of Christianity. There is plenty of wrestling with the big questions and no shortage of relevance. But I have some worries. Like many introductions this book makes much of personal relationship with God and little of shared worship and witness as members together in the Body of Christ. There is little here on the Kingdom and the transformation of all creation. Our individualistic society too easily misses the corporate glory and challenge of faithfulness.

And I wonder if the book does full justice to the reality of poetry? Poems invite and inspire our imaginations. So don't they work best when we have room to let them speak? Sometimes I found the riches of the poems flattened by the weight of the doctrine. The verse can feel a little contrived at times because it has to become a key to unlock the theology. So this isn't all it might be, but it is a good and welcome addition to our resources for evangelism and nurture.

Neil Thorogood, Westminster College, Cambridge

Email to the Editor_____

Derek Foster, lecturer in biblical studies and theology at Redcliffe College, writes,

Does someone on the translation committee of the *ESV* [English Standard Version] have a sense of humour? There we were in class conducting an exegesis of Isaiah 61 using the *ESV* for the English text and we came to verse 11a. It took a while to restore order! Biblical brassicas?

It took me a while to get this one, probably because of my aversion to vegetables...

Computer Corner

- Well-known for two decades of published research on early Christology and Christian worship, Professor Larry Hurtado of Edinburgh University offers an 8-part series of lectures as a DVD course produced by Wesley Ministries of Washington, DC. His subject is 'Devotion to Jesus: The Divinity of Christ in Earliest Christianity,' and the good news is that **the first lecture is free to view** on the Wesley Ministries website (www.wesleyministrynetwork.com). The course is intended for use in church/adult study groups, etc. To date there is no UK distributor (there's an opportunity for someone!), so copies would have to be ordered directly from US—not such a bad thing given the current exchange rate.
- Keith Beech-Gruneberg points out how cheap online subscription is to the journal *Interpretation*. It's \$20 for 1 year, \$36 for 2 and \$48 for 3—good value, especially given the current exchange rates. Keith notes that *Interpretation* is very accessible in its language and style; for more information or to order, go to the website (<http://www.interpretation.org>).
- The Ecumenical Coptic Project (www.metalog.org) has completed an online edition of three Coptic Gospels—Thomas, Philip and Truth. At the website are helpful resources, including a full introduction with bibliography, fully-annotated translations into both English and Spanish, the texts themselves in the original Coptic, the Oxyrhynchus fragments of Thomas in Greek, English interlinears and more. Also on the website is some interesting information regarding the Shroud of Turin.

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This month's title (B46) is *Using the Psalms for Prayer Through Suffering* by Simon Stocks. Simon shows how the psalms of lament, with their two features of complaint and petition, can enable us to be both honest and faithful in expressing disappointment with God. The psalms offer a framework for prayer which can sustain us through dark times as well as through the good.

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