

Biblical Studies Bulletin

Edited by Richard S Briggs—Published Quarterly—Read Religiously—Disposed of Reluctantly—Free to Grove Biblical Subscribers

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A Word of Welcome —————

After 12 years of excellent editorship, Mike Thompson has passed on the baton, and now *Biblical Studies Bulletin* falls to me to edit. Let me just offer a brief word of introduction: I teach Old Testament at Cranmer Hall in St John's College, Durham, where I am officially the 'Director of Biblical Studies and Hermeneutics.' And I look forward to carrying on the tradition of BSB, with several 'comments on commentaries' in the pipeline, and hopefully the chance to keep alive some humour in biblical studies. At this time of year, it is exam scripts which mainly provide this, and a recent highlight was this hard-pressed undergraduate gem slightly confused about the Hebrew textual tradition: 'This language has been kept alive by Masoreets and by Rabies.' Send jokes now or I shall pass on further student wisdom next time.

Richard S Briggs

What's Blogging? —————

On the principle that it is better that one person wastes his time on the internet and then reports some highlights I've been asked to write a brief blog report. So just three things to report for now.

First, for those who don't want to waste time on the internet, it is useful to know about the 'carnival' blogs which collect highlights from other blogs each month. For a taster of biblical studies on the blogs try the latest offering: <http://jwest.wordpress.com/2008/05/01/biblical-studies-carnival-29/> (for a complete list of past carnivals: <http://biblical-studies.ca/carnival/>). Plenty of other fields also have their own carnivals (eg patristics: <http://uperekperisou.blogspot.com/2008/05/patristics-carnival-xi-april-2008.html>; general Christian interest: <http://parablemania.ektopos.com/archives/2008/05/christiancarn225.html>—I confess to never looking at this one).

Secondly, of more substance and considerable interest on blogs recently has been the decision of Westminster Theological Seminary to suspend (pending termination) one

of their tenured professors, Peter Enns, for failure to uphold the confessional standards of the seminary in his book *Inspiration and Incarnation*—a book which proposes that the Ancient Near Eastern setting of the Old Testament, the diversity of views within the Old Testament, and the unusual ways in which the Old Testament is interpreted in the New Testament are all aspects of the full humanity of Scripture, which evangelicals ought to embrace. Well, this raises so many interesting questions (what does the inspiration of Scripture entail in relation to the human authors? to what extent does the person of Christ provide a helpful analogy for our view of Scripture? how does the actual phenomenon of Scripture and its different historical settings and different emphases relate to the doctrine of inspiration? should biblical scholars or systematicians be in charge of seminaries?) and has been discussed from so many angles it is difficult to know where to start. So, you can read the internal faculty debates (http://www.wts.edu/about/beliefs/statements/theological_discussion_documen.html); then get some general orientation and links to various reviews of the book (<http://www.digitalbrandon.com/?p=194>); and maybe check through the arguments of the 440 comments at this blog (<http://greenbaggins.wordpress.com/2008/03/28/on-peter-enns/>). Then just google.

Thirdly, for an attempt to defend the indefensible try <http://evangelicaltextual-criticism.blogspot.com/2008/05/in-defence-of-red-letter-bibles.html>.

Peter Head, Tyndale House, Cambridge

Book Reviews

John Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007) ISBN 978-0-664-22587-2, pp x, 206, pb £13.99

John Barton's aim in this book is to define biblical criticism and having done this to defend its importance. In passing he, of course, touches on particular methods within criticism but his concern is to assess the enterprise as a whole not to talk about how it can best be done.

Barton argues that central to criticism is the concern to establish the plain sense of the text. In chapter 4 he shows how it is more accurate to sum up criticism with reference to the plain sense than the 'original,' 'intended,' 'historical' or 'literal' senses. The previous chapter has argued that 'historical-critical method' is an inappropriate misnomer: the critical enterprise is not a method—still less a scientific method—nor is it limited to interest in history. In chapter 5 he demonstrates that biblical criticism is not just a child of the Enlightenment but can trace its roots back to the Reformation, Renaissance, and beyond.

Barton believes the plain sense is the meaning the text had when it was created and still has: he believes that the *meaning* of texts does not change over time, though their *significance* may. To interpret a text readers must first establish its plain sense, an operation requiring them to bracket out their own convictions; having done this readers are in a position to evaluate and/or apply the text, which may perfectly legitimately be done differently by different readers. Barton rightly argues this is not in itself anti-religious—indeed for him appreciation of what is given prior to reflection on it is part of Christian faith.

However, I do not believe interpretation should (or can) work like this. Rather it should be a circular process or dialogue between the interpreter and the text. Biblical criticism—as helpfully depicted by Barton—is important in giving the text its full weight; as a check on one’s interpretation there needs to be a ‘realistic measure of objectivity’ in weighing the text, and there is a danger in ‘too heavy an emphasis on *Vorverständnis* [preunderstanding]’ if it does not allow the text to challenge prior beliefs (188). But this does not mean that we need to start with a neutral assessment of meaning (which, after all, cannot really be done), before we can see what we think of the text as Christians.

Keith Beech-Grüneberg, Director of Studies, Diocese of Oxford

John H Hayes and Carl R Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis. A Beginner’s Handbook* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007) ISBN 978-0-664-22775-3, pp xi, 236, pb £13.99

This revised and updated third edition offers brief introductory / overview chapters on a range of exegetical approaches: a dozen or so generalizing pages on criticisms textual, grammatical, and on into form, redaction, literary, canonical and even structuralist criticism. A new chapter looks at ‘exegesis with a special focus: cultural, economic, ethnic, gender and sexual perspectives.’ It concludes: ‘Persons whose concern in exegesis does not focus on these perspectives in particular should nonetheless gain some acquaintance with these approaches and keep them in mind when reading and studying the Bible.’ But why? To what end? And is it worth a chapter of limp generalities regarding such approaches if it is no part of the brief to offer any kind of evaluation of assumptions, pitfalls or even possible benefits?

The bibliographies are immense, and include ‘beginner’s recommendations’ which are surely aimed at fellow scholars. I was reminded of sitting in (and indeed myself giving) an introductory lecture where the main worry is the visiting professor sitting at the back. This book serves as a beginner’s tour of your local seminary library, pointing out desks of busy form critics and offering the chance that you too could one day join them. So if that is your heart’s desire, this is the book for you. For myself, I was somewhat discouraged to arrive at the end of this tour and be told ‘When we read the Bible for moral and spiritual guidance, we assume the position of a first-time hearer’—the lack of a sense of integration between critical rigour and theological formation is not unique to this volume, but it is dispiriting none the less.

Richard S Briggs, Cranmer Hall, Durham

Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots and Heroes* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007, Second Edition) ISBN 978-0-664-23028-9, pp 296, pb £13.99

This collection of essays by Alice Ogden Bellis, which originated in a lecture course she developed for Howard School of Divinity, has now been revised and updated by the author. The book is written with students and the interested ‘general reader’ in mind, so the content and style is accessible and readable. The first part consists of an introduction which provides a clear and concise overview of the history, definitions and key issues surrounding feminist and womanist interpretations of the Old Testament / Hebrew Bible. Each of the succeeding 9 chapters gives a thumbnail

sketch of various female biblical characters in different books of the Old Testament, and draws on the principles of feminist hermeneutics to ask salient and insightful questions about the text. The book concludes with a summary chapter giving the author's conclusions and reflections. A set of perceptive discussion questions at the end of each chapter provides scope for further personal reflection or group discussion. This is the first book on feminist hermeneutics that I have read and is one of the best introductions to the subject. The extensive bibliography on each chapter ensures that those who want to can find plenty of further reading.

Hilary Marlow, Faraday Institute of Science and Religion, Cambridge

Marvin A Sweeney, *First and Second Kings: A Commentary* (Old Testament Library; Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007) ISBN 978-0-664-22084-6, pp 476, hb £27.99

The *Old Testament Library* is steadily being updated, and this volume replaces that by John Gray (2nd ed, 1970). At 476 pages it is briefer than the 802 plus pages of Gray, and it is not only a more readable size, but also reflects a number of positive shifts in the interpretation of these books over the last 40 years. One is the increased concern to read these texts as a literary whole. Yes, Sweeney argues that there are several editions (associated with the eras of Solomon, Jehu, Hezekiah, Josiah, and the exile), but there is not the same concern to trace the history of the text in detail as there is in Gray. Gray frequently stops along the way to discuss words, history and geography, whereas these are discussed more selectively by Sweeney. The most valuable change, in my opinion, is a greater interest in theology. Gray's comments are minimal and sometimes dated (eg when employing the concept of imitative magic). Sweeney's reflections are often evocative, although, since he respects the traditional historical-critical approach of this commentary series, they rarely take wings. Nevertheless, his use of 'G-d' regularly reminds us that he himself is a committed Jew. Those wishing a more overtly Christian theological approach will find help in the briefer works by R D Nelson, I Provan, W Brueggemann, and P J Leithart. But for a careful reading of the text in its historical, literary and historical context, this is now the first commentary that I would consult.

Philip Jenson, Ridley Hall, Cambridge

Leo G Perdue, *Wisdom Literature: A Theological History* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007) ISBN 978-0-664-22919-1, pp 352, pb £22.99

From being, just a short while ago, a neglected area of Old Testament study, the wisdom literature has now become the focus of some of the most exciting and provocative theology being carried out today (eg David Ford, *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, ISBN 978-0-521-69838-3]). In this learned book Leo Perdue gives us an extended and detailed introduction to the setting and content of five key wisdom books in the Bible (Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes) and the Apocrypha (Wisdom and Ben Sira). His major approach is through the history of religions, so we learn a great deal about the centuries following the exile, when these books were shaped and edited. Special attention is also paid to the theology of wisdom, especially in relation to creation and

metaphor. Anyone who works through this book will learn an enormous amount, but it also raises significant issues of theological method. One is the awkward relationship between the historical and the exegetical parts of this book. Because the wisdom writings rarely refer to historical events, I wondered whether this was the most helpful starting point, and whether the approach required decisions about the historical setting and development of the books that went well beyond the limited evidence. Another is that at various points the author adopts interpretive stances that struck me as extreme and one-sided. For example Job denies a compassionate God, while Ecclesiastes views him only as capricious. This emphasized for me how different theological reflection becomes when exercised within a commitment to a diverse but still unified canon of Scripture. This book is primarily aimed at scholars, who will value it greatly. For a more approachable introduction I recommend Ernest Lucas, *Psalms and Wisdom Literature* (London: SPCK, 2003).

Philip Jenson, Ridley Hall, Cambridge

Ira Brent Driggers, *Following God through Mark* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007) ISBN 978-0-664-23095-1, pp 148, pb £13.99

Unconcerned about authorship or historicity, Driggers focuses on God's action and role. Following Dahl, who lamented the lack of scholarly interest in NT statements about God, Driggers presents a work which 'tells the story of an incomprehensible God,' whose actions both reveal and conceal in the events the gospel narrates. He examines what happens in the act of reading showing both how privileged the reader is, having been given information denied to characters within the narrative, and how she can be shaped by the reading. Mark offers ambiguity that widens the scope of meaning. Thus readers, like the disciples, are commissioned to follow and become 'fishers of men,' by learning to avoid their failures. All rely on God's mercy.

With few Greek references, this work should find a place, alongside commentaries, on the bibliographies of modules taught in theological education, as readers contemplate content, interpretation and communication of that message today.

Canon Elizabeth Fisher, St John's College, Nottingham

Thomas R Yoder Neufeld, *Recovering Jesus: The Witness of the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 2007) ISBN 978-0-281-0-5972-0, pp 336, pb £12.99

Neufeld teaches at a Canadian university, and this book grew out of undergraduate teaching—some of it to students from other subjects, who had dipped into just one religious studies module. So it digests a great deal of specialist historical Jesus scholarship into a careful, clear and accessible account. The approach assumes enough motivation and interest to think deeply about the career of Jesus, and to ask how this led to the faith of the church. But it requires no special religious allegiance.

There are thirteen chapters. Five of these introduce the issues, the gospels, the world of Jesus, and Jewish ideas about God's kingdom. One covers Jesus' birth. Four look at his active career: on baptism, temptation and disciples; on parables; on healing, exorcism, food and purity; and on ethics and justice. Finally come chapters on the cross, Easter, and NT Christology. A little list of key terms and concepts appears at the end of each chapter. A single alphabetical index includes ancient names and

topics, and modern authors.

Neufeld is carefully positive about the historical substance of the gospels' material, but he argues also that the evangelists adapted it to their purposes and contexts—for example 'Matthew augmented and shaped...an earlier collection of Jesus' ethical instructions...into what we today call the Sermon on the Mount' (200). An emphasis on the social dimensions of Jesus' healings (without denying their physical and medical significance) links these helpfully to food and purity issues. I would have liked a bit more about Galilee and its topography, people and problems; but that is a minor cavil.

This book would not please an outright sceptic, nor perhaps an extreme conservative. But its merits are clarity, candour, balance and a wide and shrewd understanding of the issues. I commend it gladly. It deserves to be very well used.

John Proctor, Westminster College, Cambridge

Computer Corner

The latest 'Tyndale Tech' email from David Instone-Brewer at Tyndale House (<http://www.tyndale.cam.ac.uk/Tyndale/TTech.htm>) offers a wealth of resources for making use of maps and geographical aids in biblical studies. He writes 'There is now no excuse to teach or preach without pictures and maps,' and points to various ways of incorporating interactive maps, photos and even 'Google Earth' into presentations.

Grove Biblical Series

In BSB 44 we reviewed Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Cambridge/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), describing it both as 'exceptional,' and as 'an academic book, not written for popular consumption.' Well, this month's Grove booklet (B48), *The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, is designed to spread the word a little about the book's stimulating thesis, being based on some presentations of the book's content which Prof Bauckham has given in recent months.

Individual titles in the Biblical Series are available direct from Grove Books at £2.95 each. Annual subscription (4 books) costs £8.50, a saving of 28%. Call, fax, email sales@grovebooks.co.uk or visit www.grovebooks.co.uk to order.

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