

Biblical Studies Bulletin

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

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New Resources —————

BSB’s ‘Comments on Commentaries’ has been a mainstay for over ten years, and we have covered almost everything except some of the minor prophets. But if you want a handy book on your shelf reviewing commentaries, what are your options?

Recently out in the UK is John Glynn, *Commentary & Reference Survey: A Comprehensive Guide to Biblical and Theological Resources* (Tenth edition, ‘fully revised and updated,’ Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2007, ISBN 978 0 8254 2737 4; pb, 380pp, £12.99). Glynn likes to list everything, over 2500 titles extending well beyond biblical studies, though mainly interested in commentaries, and using (a lot of) boldface type to highlight recommendations. He follows up with a concluding ‘Ultimate Commentary Collection’ running to 240 titles, where, oddly, one would end up with more volumes on Chronicles and Obadiah–Micah than anything else. Comment is reserved for footnotes, which enthusiastically list several volumes one should ‘wait’ for, or are even ‘anxiously anticipated,’ and he offers such gems as ‘Hagner gets antsy over the resurrection of the dead [in Matt 27].’ The recommendations are relentlessly conservative. Far better in this mould was David R Bauer’s 2003 volume *An Annotated Guide to Biblical Resources for Ministry* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, ISBN 1 56563 723 2) which offered a fairly full paragraph of comment on a handful of the best for each book, before listing ‘significant others.’ Bauer, though, does seem to drift between recommending books for ministry and for academic study without much discrimination.

A more focused survey which keeps a firmer grip on the uses a particular book might have is Tremper Longman III, *Old Testament Commentary Survey* (Fourth edition; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007, ISBN 978 0 8010 3123 6; pb, 157pp), which indicates appropriateness for ‘layperson/ minister/ scholar.’ Longman has a secure grasp of commentaries, having written several good ones, and offers short if occasionally journalistic notes on everything. Everything receives a star rating out of 5, and the final

listing of 42 five-star commentaries seemed about right. The recommendations are weighted toward conservative works, though he seems comfortable with ‘moderately critical’ scholars (where he consistently includes Brueggemann, Childs, Fretheim, and others). He also frequently asks probing questions about NT concerns in OT commentaries. A matching New Testament volume by D A Carson, *New Testament Commentary Survey, 6th Edition* (Nottingham: IVP, 2007, ISBN 978 1 84474 168 7; pb, 160pp) has been picked up in the UK. Unlike Longman, this presents lengthy discussion of all the books together on any one NT book, making it less easy to use as a reference work, though freeing it up to adjust its coverage only to those worth discussing. Some of the text of this edition still goes back to the original 1970’s version written by Anthony Thiselton, and in my judgment the project would be better freshly organized and much of the old text taken out, since knowing the ‘best used to be’ is not all that helpful. Carson (like Longman) likes to see issues like historicity given good discussion but is very open to commending good work across the theological spectrum. Neither of these two volumes make much of the generally excellent *New Interpreter’s Bible* 12 volume set, even while they plod through other multi-volume works bit by bit. The *NIB* series remains an underutilized resource on this side of the Atlantic.

Increasingly projects such as these will find their natural home on the internet, where regular updating can occur. One good online example is the Denver Journal, the annual web-journal of Denver Seminary, (www.denverseminary.edu/resources/the-denver-journal/), again with a conservative drift in recommendations, but listings right up to date.

Richard S Briggs, Cranmer Hall, Durham
(Comments on Commentaries will return next issue)

Comments on Conferences—

Report on Latest SOTS

The Society for Old Testament Studies (SOTS) held its 2009 winter meeting at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge from Jan 5–7. As always these twice yearly conferences are an opportunity for scholars working on Old Testament and related areas (eg ancient Near Eastern studies, early Judaism, archaeology of the Middle East) to meet one another, renew friendships and exchange news as well as engage with the latest scholarship on a wide range of topics. From a paper on literary use of deception in biblical narrative to one on laments from the Second Temple period; from textual criticism in Samuel and Kings to portrayals of King Saul in the works of Gide and his librettist Teste, we were treated to an informative and stimulating start to the year. A more unusual session was a discussion on the use of the internet and world wide web in biblical studies, with recommendations on useful ‘blogging’ sites from those who run them and use them. For me the highlight of the meeting was the inaugural paper by the incoming President, Prof Lester Grabbe (University of Hull) who urged us to adopt a healthy skepticism with regard to ‘consensus’ views in scholarship, since the consensus view can often take on a life of its own. His address was witty, memorable and short—and accompanied by the offer of drinks on him in the bar afterwards to further the discussion! A final treat was a private visit to the University Library to see the manuscript fragments from the Cairo Genizah—well worth a visit.

Hilary Marlow, Faraday Institute of Science and Religion, Cambridge

What's Going on in *The Shack*?

The Shack, by William P Young (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2008, ISBN 978 0 3409 7949 5, pb, £7.99), is a fictional story about a man (Mackenzie) struggling to come to terms with the abduction and probable murder of his young daughter. In the midst of his continuing grief he receives a note, apparently from God, inviting him to spend a weekend with him in a country shack. The narrative tells the story of this weekend as Mackenzie spends time with and wrestles with God in the form of three distinct (and quite surprising) persons.

If we come seeking an accurate portrayal on which to build our doctrine of the Trinity, we will be disappointed, but if we will allow ourselves to be transported to Young's fictional world, we will find a richness of story-telling, an honest grappling with the question of suffering, an acknowledgement of the absence of easy answers, and a helpful stretching of any neatly held conceptions of God that we might hold. The author describes himself as one who has suffered great loss as a child and young adult, but who now enjoys the 'wastefulness of grace.' I would particularly recommend this for those who have known great suffering, but any thinking person would find value in it.

Rev Dr Rob Bewley, St John's Church, Harborne

Book Reviews

Robert M Bowman Jr and J Ed Komoszewski, *Putting Jesus in His Place: The Case for the Deity of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007; ISBN 978 0 8254 2983 5, 392pp, pb £11.99)

Who might need convincing of 'the deity of Christ'? Jehovah's Witnesses (whose views and writings are explicitly engaged here); young Christians lacking a solid grounding in the faith; scholars who sound equivocal about the nature of the New Testament witness; those outside the orbit of Christian faith altogether? This thorough overview of relevant NT texts, drawing on first-class up-to-date scholarship from the likes of Bauckham and Hurtado, should convince at least the second category, young Christians. Whether it is the right tool for convincing any of the others I am not sure.

Rather than offering anything like a historical outline of the early development of Christological belief, it takes a thematic and therefore rather static approach, which seems to fall only just short of proof-texting. The assumption from the start is that 'God' denotes a known, understood and accepted referent (hence my doubt as to whether this would engage a contemporary sceptic). To have located the NT within the developing Jewish (and also Graeco-Roman) understanding of 'God' would have connected better with the honest doubter or adherent of another faith. Jesus is exalted here, but in a mood that tends to be more triumphalist than humbly awed. (For me, some of the chapter titles suggest trivialization: 'The Ultimate Reverence Package,' 'Jesus: The Right Stuff,' 'He's Got what it Takes'; although others are helpfully suggestive: 'The Worship of the Carpenter,' 'Sing to the Lord.') I wonder too whether the ethical implications of the claim of Jesus' divinity are fully felt. What might it mean to serve as *God a man who lived like this?*

This is certainly valuable as a reference work and a pointer to key texts, debates and scholarship; but I don't think it makes a significant independent contribution to developing Christological understanding.

Stephen Wright, Spurgeon's College, London

Ben Witherington has published commentaries on most of the New Testament, and the pace of his work shows no sign of abating. *1 and 2 Thessalonians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2006; ISBN 978 0 8028 2836 1; pb, xxxi+286pp) is characteristically lucid, academically informed (as befits a long-serving seminary professor) and accessible to careful readers who are not specialists.

Many of Witherington's conclusions are quite traditional. For example, both letters were written by Paul, in the order in which we now find them. But a consistent burden of his commentating is to emphasise the importance of rhetorical analysis. The books of the NT were written to be read aloud, in a culture where rhetoric was a widespread and conventional skill. So the first epistle is epideictic rhetoric, affirming the Thessalonians' faith, and pointing out and advocating in a general way the virtues and vices that beckon and beset the Christian life. The second epistle, by contrast, is deliberative rhetoric, visibly concerned for what is ahead, and seeking to persuade the church: stay the course, hold the faith; do not panic or lose track because of anxiety about the eschaton.

Nine short *excursus* sections, typically of two or three pages, deal with background issues or major exegetical problems. Those on manual labour, and on ancient anxieties about the fate of the dead, struck me as especially helpful. This commentary will not trampoline you instantly from text to sermon. But Witherington's blend of learning, briskness and clarity will surely help very many readers.

John Proctor, Westminster College, Cambridge

Donald Capps, *Jesus the Village Psychiatrist* (Louisville: WJKP, 2008; ISBN 978 0 664 23240 5; pb, xxv+145pp)

Pastoral theology in the USA has long cultivated a relationship with clinical psychology and this book by a Princeton professor reflects that interest. The thesis is that most of the people whom Jesus healed had psychosomatic diseases, rather similar to some well-catalogued conditions in the psychiatric literature. So the healings were real, but they were not contrary to the laws of nature. Rather, Jesus was often able to release or resolve the intense mental conflict that had affected a person's bodily well-being.

So Jesus' word about forgiveness equipped a lame man to walk home (Mark 2.11) and cope in new ways with the difficult relationships that had beset and immobilized him there. The blind men in Mark 8 and 10 may be victims of their own internal psychological conflicts, perhaps arising from suppressed erotic desires. The epileptic boy of Mark 9 had behaved self-destructively as a 'symbolic resolution of an unconscious psychological conflict' with his parents (p96). And Jairus' daughter had been paralysed by an inability to confront the looming responsibilities of being offered in marriage.

The intended readership is 'pastors, chaplains, and others who are engaged in

ministry to the sick and the suffering' (p xxv). So while Capps has used J P Meier's major book on Jesus, there is not a very wide interaction with NT scholarship. On the psychological side, Freud is the author most often referred to. In a necessarily speculative argument, Capps certainly made me think in some fresh ways about the domestic and social contexts of the miracles. There are a few real gems of insight, some of them quotable: 'our aptitude for trust...is our most important ally in our struggle for life,' and Jesus 'was eminently trustworthy' (p131).

John Proctor, Westminster College, Cambridge

Getting the Word Out —————

One of the (many) well known conundrums of contemporary theological and biblical study is the profound mismatch between the amount of excellent scholarship which floods the halls of academia and the seeming complete unawareness of it found in a good deal of popular Christian writing. Of course the fault for that lies on both sides of the fence but this new occasional feature of BSB is designed to highlight some of those works which consciously seek to 'get the word out' for the general reader.

First up is Christopher Wright with *The God I Don't Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008, ISBN 978 0 310 27546 6, hb, 224pp, £13.99). The tough questions relate to four areas: the problem of evil, the OT narratives of conquest and destruction, the cross (as in: why? what? and how does it work?), and the end times. It's a gently written book, or perhaps four somewhat disparate 'booklets,' reflecting great pastoral warmth and a delightful honesty about how much Wright wishes some biblical passages didn't say what they in fact do, or how much we really can't understand the 'problem of evil.' All four areas are tackled, as one would expect from this author, with one eye on the biblical sweep of the whole OT-NT narrative, and the real highlight is the patient drive for the full, canonical witness to be brought to bear in every case. The style is chatty, indeed 'rather meandering' as he says himself (p217), in a self-confessedly 'very personal book' (p161). The section on the cross felt like it belonged to a different project, and I did wonder if even Wright himself thinks that the OT conquest narratives are no less problematic at the end of his account than they are at the beginning. I could imagine giving it to a (fairly conservative) churchgoer who needs help getting a grasp of what the Bible says beyond all the popular Christian understandings they have perhaps been handed.

In honour of our previous editor we should also mention the new book of biblical meditations from Ridley Hall staff, students and spouses: *The Cast of the Kingdom: Biblical Characters who Model Faith* (London: Canterbury Press, 2008, ISBN 978 1 85311 933 0, pb, x + 102pp, £5.99). Arranged as 47 daily readings with a biblical text on one page and a short reflection on the facing page this could serve as a Lent Book or a fine devotional read for any time of year. Each 'thought' picks a biblical character, ranging from the Pauls and Ruths we know so well right through to Mrs Zebedee and Benaiah (1 Chronicles 11.22—I had to look that one up). It's simple, edifying, and refreshing in its focus on some of the less well-known biblical figures. I enjoyed it.

Richard S Briggs, Cranmer Hall, Durham

Finally, a reader asked us to have a look at Andy Croft and Mike Pilavichi, *Storylines: Tracing Threads that Run through the Bible* (Eastbourne: Survivor, 2008, ISBN 978 1 84291 384 0, pb, 207pp, £6.99).

For those who are just beginning the journey down the path of biblical literacy, this book provides a good starting point. Its light and at times humorous approach makes it particularly accessible to those with little academic inclination. The authors begin with a brief overview of the biblical metanarrative, and then add depth to this overview by exploring six biblical themes: Jesus (including a look at Old Testament typology), covenant, the presence of God, the Kingdom of God, salvation and worship. They conclude with a helpful discussion of how to read the Bible.

Their target readership, however, is not always clear. While Croft and Pilavachi's book should be accessible to even fairly young readers, the authors use one or two graphic sexual examples that make the book inappropriate for young teens. Their target readership appears to be adults with little or no biblical knowledge. In order to keep the book accessible, the authors simplify their subjects repeatedly. For instance, in their discussion of salvation, they provide a light but clear introduction to atonement theology but tack their all too brief discussion of the resurrection under the *Christus Victor* view of the atonement, and in their list of follow-up passages completely omit 1 Corinthians 15. This book, then, would be a useful beginning point, but not a concluding one for those who want to improve their own or others' biblical literacy.

Melody Briggs, University of Sheffield

Grove Biblical Series

This month's Grove booklet (B51) is *How the New Testament Came Together* by Peter Head (of Tyndale House and the Grove Biblical Group). It is an attempt to clarify the process by which the 27 books of the New Testament came to be regarded as Holy Scripture by the early Christians (not bad for 28 pages!). Great value.

Individual titles in the Biblical Series are available direct from Grove Books at **£3.50** each. Annual subscription (4 books) costs **£10.00, a saving of 28%**. Call, fax, email sales@grovebooks.co.uk or visit www.grovebooks.co.uk to order.

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