

# Biblical Studies Bulletin

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

## Contents ————— Issue 53: September 2009

- 1 *NEW IN THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION*      What is it and where might you find out?
- 2 *NEWS*      Luke's Gospel dramatization now on CD
- 3 *COMMENTS ON CONFERENCES*      British NT Conference: Is the NT missing in action?
- 4 *BOOK REVIEWS*

## New in Theological Interpretation —————

Discussions of theological interpretation continue to develop and to attract the crowds at conferences. An admirable brief orientation to the whole area is just out: Stephen Fowl's *Theological Interpretation of Scripture* in Wipf and Stock's 'Cascade Companions' series (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009; pb; \$13.00; ISBN 978 1 55635 241 6). Fowl's c100 (small) page offering is probably the best way in for those wondering what the fuss is all about. It's an engaging report from the midst of the network of practices and explorations going under the title 'theological interpretation.' Elegantly written, it sheds clarifying light on several of the pathways such interpretation might take, and includes a well-judged annotated bibliography.

More substantive, and also highly recommended, is the collection of essays in Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Richard B Hays (eds), *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008, pp xiv + 345; pb, \$28.00; ISBN 978 0 8028 2471 4). This is a follow-up of sorts to the volume edited by Hays and Ellen Davis, *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Eerdmans, 2003), representing the further work of the now finished 'Scripture Project' at Princeton's Centre of Theological Inquiry. As with the earlier book, an inter-disciplinary group of theologically engaged scholars explore various aspects of a central topic. There is an obvious resonance in the title with Bonhoeffer's famous question regarding 'Who is Jesus Christ for us today?', but to my mind it was actually an observation of Barth which illuminated this book. Early in the *Church Dogmatics* Barth claimed that in contrast to exegetical theology, 'dogmatics as such does not inquire what the Apostles and Prophets have said, but what we ourselves must say "on the basis of the Apostles and Prophets"' (vol 1, p 16). For me, the Gaventa/Hays volume is a fascinatingly successful attempt to stop the endless preoccupation with asking 'Who was Jesus—when he was on earth?' and to ask instead 'Who should we

say Jesus is, today, on the basis of what the Scriptures said about him when he was on earth?' Or to put it another way, the canonical gospels have already done the necessary historical work, and our job today is not to go back and do that same work better, but to work with where we go onward from the four canonical gospels.

Thus the introduction looks at sources for the knowledge of Jesus: the testimony of the biblical witnesses; the role of extracanonical writings; the testimony of the church; the role of contemporary experience. Perhaps the nearest thing to a keynote article is Francis Watson's '*Veritas Christi: How to Get from the Jesus of History to the Christ of Faith without Losing One's Way.*' And other highlights include angles of approach from the OT (Gary Anderson and Walter Moberly), Paul (Hays himself), Jewish perspectives (Markus Bockmuehl), eucharist and liturgy, and much more. It's a rich collection, and I'm finding that reading it slowly over a period of time is a rewarding exercise on many levels. (The book was the subject of a somewhat heated review discussion at last year's *Society of Biblical Literature* conference in Boston, where debate turned on whether this kind of project is a step forward from or a futile retreat from more historically-orientated 'What actually happened?' scholarship. It may be one of the best books for experiencing what goes under the 'theological interpretation' banner and asking oneself precisely that question as it works out in practice with specific texts, rather than theoretically).

For those who would like to pursue this whole area further back to source, 2009 also saw the publication of the stimulating and crystal-clear study of Mark S Gignilliat, *Karl Barth and the Fifth Gospel: Barth's Theological Exegesis of Isaiah* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009; ISBN 978 0 7546 5856 6; hb, £55). This allows Barth's own practice with one OT book to model what might count as theological interpretation, though framing chapters include wonderfully lucid accounts of Barth in the context of OT interpretation in his time, his own dogmatic account of the OT as 'the time of expectation,' and a concluding review of 'theological exegetical implications' which interacts directly with current issues. To over-simplify: Gignilliat thinks one might look to Childs to see Barth's approach carried out with more systematic attention to detail, while Barth himself offers no programme so much as a series of outworkings of the conviction that Jesus is 'really present' in the subject matter of the OT. By way of summary: 'dogmatic instincts should order the use of historical-critical tools and not *vice versa*' (p 10). The notion of 'proper order' in interpretation struck me as helpful, and this is a very readable account of one trek through a vast and sometimes bewildering territory. I recommend it.

*Richard S Briggs, Cranmer Hall, Durham*

## News

---

In BSB46 Michael Thompson reported on the BBC Radio 4 production of *Witness*, a series of five striking radio plays based on the gospel of Luke. This is now available on CD, eg from amazon.co.uk (where to avoid turning up the Harrison Ford movie you can search for 'Witness (BBC audio)'—the price has been going up and down a bit so check for the latest price). This could be useful for church groups, or as a Lent series. The series was written by Nick Warburton and won him the Sanford St Martin Premier Award for Broadcasting Excellence (awarded 1<sup>st</sup> June at Lambeth Palace).

# Comments on Conferences—

## **The British New Testament Conference: Aberdeen, 3-5 September 2009**

New Testament scholars can find themselves in some strange bypaths as they seek illumination on the text. Even some seasoned participants in this annual get-together might have struggled to get their bearings in the opening lecture by Dr Todd Klutz from Manchester, focusing as it did on the ‘Eighth Book of Moses,’ a Jewish magical text from the fourth century CE. The upshot of this rarefied exploration was that we cannot (as Morton Smith once argued) trace a line back from such texts to Jesus, on the basis of certain similarities with the Gospels, to argue that Jesus was a ‘magician.’ More likely, this ‘magical’ text is evidence of a fourth-century public happy to fuse contemporary magical practice and literature with the newly-fashionable stories about Jesus. The coming of Christendom meant that there would be a ‘large market for Christian wonderlists in the fourth century, but not before.’

We ranged quite far in the second plenary session, too, when the distinguished textual critic Professor David Parker from Birmingham invited us to imagine what factors were really at work in the scribal transmission of the biblical texts in the first few centuries after Christ. It was a much more human and down-to-earth process than many imagine; perhaps remarkably few variants were motivated by profound theological considerations. Accuracy was not all-important; the look of the page and even financial considerations may have played a part. Textual scholars today tend to create ‘scribes in their own image’ who are as meticulous as they. Professor Parker also introduced the amazing website <http://www.codexsinaiticus.org/en/>, on which detailed images of the entire fourth-century *Codex Sinaiticus* can now be seen free of charge by anyone with an internet connection.

The conference closed with a lively presentation by Dr Helen Bond of Edinburgh about Herod the Great. Again, however, it was not so much the New Testament portrait but the full account of Herod in Josephus on which we focused. This does indeed provide fascinating background to NT study in illuminating the political machinations of the scene into which Jesus entered. Dr Bond explored the tension in Josephus’s *Jewish War* between an initially positive portrayal of Herod (in order to underline for his Roman readership a point about Jewish loyalty to Rome) and his later picture of a frenzied Herod with a chaotic family life, reflecting Josephus’s general distrust of monarchy as an aberration in Jewish history.

Coincidentally, there was more Herod in the Jesus seminar group—this time Herod Antipas. Dr Douglas Dalrymple gave a careful reading of his portrayal in Luke-Acts, suggesting that Luke drops hints of what a threat Jesus would have been to Herod, but downplays this dimension because of his desire to present Christianity in a favourable light to the authorities. The group also heard Dr James Crossley of Sheffield speak on ‘The Politicization of the Historical Jesus,’ exposing how easily contemporary political positions shape ‘scholarly’ understandings of Jesus and his relationship with Judaism. The final Jesus paper was a masterly study of the parable of the wicked tenants in Mark 12.1–12. Professor Maurice Casey from Nottingham argued that a translation of the parable into a putative Aramaic original strongly suggests that reference to Jesus’ death in this parable was not just something read into it by the early Church, but goes

back to Jesus himself. This was a refreshing presentation which demonstrated the plausibility of Jesus understanding his own death in sacrificial, redemptive terms.

The Revelation seminar group had some interesting papers on a range of topics, from the first-century context and the implications of the imperial cult, through an exploration of how the metaphors in Revelation 11 function, to a fascinating exploration of the artistic rendering of John on Patmos and how this had shaped interpretation of the book. Interestingly, there appears to be something of a surge in interest in Revelation. The group made space for an additional paper this year; there were three papers on Revelation elsewhere in the programme; and we already have three papers lined up for next year.

Short and stimulating plenary papers were also given by postgraduate students Nijay Gupta, Derek Brown and Jason Matson on 'the mercies of God' in Romans 1, Paul's concern for Satanic activity in Corinth, and Romans 7 as a critique by Paul of the traditional 'two ways' scheme which implies that it is possible for humans to choose the way of life. Our very own Ian Paul gave a paper exploring issues of dating Revelation in the light of archaeology, and managed to show pictures from a recent trip to Turkey (*as reported in BSB52; where do readers think Ian should go next year? Send suggestions — ed*).

One of the enriching things about this annual conference is the way in which believers and non-believers can engage in fruitful and cordial interchange about the New Testament. I trust that it keeps all of us, in the best sense, on our scholarly toes.

*Stephen I Wright, Spurgeon's College, London  
with additional notes from Ian Paul, St John's College, Nottingham*

## Book Reviews

---

Frank J Matera, *New Testament Theology: Exploring Diversity and Unity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007; pp 485; ISBN 978 0 664 23044 9)

Anyone seeking a sane, sensitive and thorough exposition of the theology of the New Testament literature in its varied forms and its common strands need look no further than this book.

After a succinct introduction to the discipline of 'New Testament Theology' and approaches that have been adopted to it, the book is set out in four parts. These cover respectively the synoptic tradition, the Pauline tradition, the Johannine tradition, and 'other voices.' Within these, chapters are devoted to individual NT books or groupings of books. Thus the distinct voices of the various witnesses are highlighted. Finally, a conclusion discusses five key themes in NT theology, summarizing what each group of witnesses contributes to them and showing how they converge.

Matera has the skill of writing and summarizing lucidly without over-simplification. He draws on contemporary scholarship while keeping his footnotes to a minimum and offering his own crisp judgments (for example, on who the 'I' of Romans 7 is and is not, pp 178–179). I shall certainly be recommending this book to third-year undergraduates. But I also strongly recommend it for ministers and preachers. It does not break any striking new ground, but in a solid and eirenic way it offers a 'big picture' that is often lacking, or much harder to discern, in commentaries. It could help us in glimpsing the grandeur of the whole, while not losing a fascination with the parts.

*Stephen I Wright, Spurgeon's College, London*

Michael J Gorman, *Reading Paul* (Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 2008; pp x + 196; ISBN: 978 1 55635 195 2)

This fine little paperback is an excellent introduction to the thought of Paul. Gorman is highly regarded for his previous and more academic works on Paul (*Apostle of the Crucified Lord* and *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross*); here he is popularizing his conclusions in a form that is very accessible and readable. After very briefly introducing Paul's letters, he focuses on eight themes in separate chapters to summarize Paul's ideas: apocalyptic eschatology; covenant faithfulness and grace; the meaning of Christ's death; Jesus as Son of God and Lord; reconciliation with God; community in the Spirit; cruciform faith, hope and love; and return, resurrection and renewal. Gorman refreshingly refuses to polarize the options in the current debate about new perspective readings and sees our participation (by grace) together with justification as two sides of the same coin of relationship to God the Father through the Son enabled by the Spirit. Highly recommended!

*Michael Thompson, Ridley Hall, Cambridge*

Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2009; pp xxii + 953pp; ISBN 978 0 8028 2748 7)

This massive study of baptism by a highly-regarded patristics scholar offers a wealth of information surveying the doctrine and practice of baptism in the first five centuries of Christian history. The material is arranged chronologically, and helpful subject, author and textual indices make it a standard reference work that every Christian library will want to have. My major disappointment with the volume is its treatment of infant baptism. Ferguson is a member of a credo-baptist denomination, and this is reflected in what reads as a less than even-handed discussion of paedobaptism. But then, as a paedobaptist I would say that! Ferguson does not omit evidence, but he consistently minimizes the significance of early texts that support the practice (of the overwhelming majority of Christians throughout history) which he rejects. More fundamental is his failure to reckon with the corporate mentality of the ancient world and the gulf between that and our post-enlightenment individualism. I find it unlikely that the apostle Paul would have said that the children of Christians were still in bondage to the old age, in Adam, under the wrath of God, separate from Christ, strangers to the covenant of promise, etc (which Paul does say of non-Christians), when the pattern of God's relating to his people in the Old Covenant had provided for their being marked out as his own by circumcision (in this respect the girls were fortunate) and included. The first clear reference to infant baptism is in Tertullian who questioned (because so many parents were poorly instructed in the faith) whether the practice *should be continued*; I suspect it will continue despite Ferguson's giant tome.

*Michael Thompson, Ridley Hall, Cambridge*

Anyone in pursuit of a one-stop text book for an 'Introduction to the Bible' course, and who doesn't mind it being big and heavy, could do worse than the elegant and gently understated large-format new volume from Robert Kugler and Patrick Hartin, *An Introduction to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009; hb; pp xxv + 538; £27.99; ISBN 978 0 8028 4635 5). It reads a little like a more dispassionate update of John

Drane's old stand-by introductory volumes, and covers pretty much everything with modest and largely unobtrusive critical positions taken on many standard issues. Only occasionally does one find a noticeable opinion, such as 'not all have found Ezekiel's claim particularly helpful or convincing' (p 261)—more commonly the data is laid out and conclusions left to the reader (eg with Paul's teaching on sexuality which 'needless to say...has provoked much study and discussion,' p 440). Interactive questions spur the new reader on ('List your favorite TV programs' begins the gospel section brightly), and a scattering of charts and pictures make it all reader-friendly. The one feature which might raise it a little above the crowd of such productions is that each biblical book is introduced with a low-key 'walk through' of its contents, thus presuming little on prior biblical knowledge.

*Richard Briggs, Cranmer Hall, Durham*

## Grove Biblical Series —————

This month's Grove booklet (B53) is by Heath Thomas on *Lamentations*, TEXT HERE

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](mailto:sales@grovebooks.co.uk) or visit [www.grovebooks.co.uk](http://www.grovebooks.co.uk) to order.

---

Contributions to BSB should be sent to: Richard Briggs (Editor—*Biblical Studies Bulletin*) at Cranmer Hall, St John's College, Durham DH1 3RJ (or via email to: [richard.briggs@durham.ac.uk](mailto:richard.briggs@durham.ac.uk)). Unsolicited material is welcome, but it cannot be returned.

---

**GROVE BOOKS LIMITED**

RIDLEY HALL RD CAMBRIDGE CB3 9HU

Tel: 01223 46 47 48 Fax: 01223 46 48 49

ISSN: 1365-6090