

Biblical Studies Bulletin

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

Contents ————— Issue 54: December 2009

- 1 *HE WALKED WHERE I WALK?* Jesus in England, perhaps...
- 2 *STOCKING FILLERS (1)* The best Christmas list in town
- 2 *STOCKING FILLERS (2)* Devotional reading suggestions
- 3 *THE SOCIETY OF BIBLICAL LITERATURE ANNUAL CONFERENCE* A personal perspective
- 4 *BOOK REVIEWS* Ranging from Paul to postcolonialism
- 6 *FORTHCOMING ATTRACTION*

He Walked Where I Walk...?—

Late November 2009 saw the screening of a new film in London entitled *And Did Those Feet*. According to Church of Scotland minister Dr Gordon Strachan in the film, Jesus may have visited England, and might have planted a church in Glastonbury, presumably the very first fresh expression? The story hit the BBC and other papers immediately. We asked top Grove reporter Mike Thompson for an on-the-spot reaction:

‘It would be a fun thing to believe. I want to believe it. But then, there are lots of things I want to believe that simply aren’t true or even likely. It would not be surprising at all for there to be Roman soldiers who became Christians (like a centurion or two we read about somewhere) and took the good news of Jesus to Glastonbury. It would not be surprising if they helped to build an early church building and taught people that the real ‘builder’ was Jesus, the foundation of our faith. It *would* be surprising for Jesus to go all the way to Glastonbury to learn from druids when as far as we know he didn’t go to Greece to learn from mystery religions. Although one can draw some parallels between his teaching and that of the *Cynics* (see Downing and Crossan), the great majority of scholars today would argue that Jesus got his wisdom from the Jewish scriptures. *Could* Jesus have visited England? Yes. But I suspect he might have stopped off in Athens first if the wisdom of God didn’t satisfy.’

In true BBC style, let’s conclude with ‘What do you think? Did Jesus visit Glastonbury?’ We invite BSB readers to offer their suggestion of the strongest evidence that Jesus came to Glastonbury. Email your suggestions to the editor: best ones printed next time. [Editor’s note: The next issue of BSB will be appearing around the 50th anniversary of Elvis’s visit to Scotland, so perhaps there is scope for a new regular feature here...?]

Stocking Fillers (1)_____

We asked the Grove team for a 'pick of the year' to recommend to keen Grove readers (possibly for the January sales by the time you get this...). Warning: you may need a reinforced stocking.

Hilary Marlow: The best book I read this year was *Sisters of Sinai* by Janet Soskice (London: Chatto & Windus, 2009). It tells the extraordinary story of two Victorian Scottish sisters whose expeditions to St Catherine's monastery in the Sinai desert led them to discover a number of ancient biblical documents, including one of the earliest copies of the Gospels written in ancient Syriac. This is the previously untold story of two remarkable women, without university qualifications, who overcame insuperable odds to become world-class scholars with a place in history. I couldn't put it down!

Philip Jenson: The book I've valued most this year is *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writings* (T Longman and P Enns [Eds]; Downers Grove, IL; Nottingham: InterVarsity, 2008). I love reference books that I'm going to refer to again and again, and this is already well-thumbed. The articles are substantial (but you can always skip to the next one!), up-to-date and generally very good indeed.

Richard Briggs: The theological book I enjoyed reading most this year was Dale B Martin's, *Pedagogy of the Bible: An Analysis and Proposal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008). It's short, engaging, and full of fresh energy and enthusiasm about teaching the Bible in a college/seminary setting. An ideal discussion partner for anyone involved in teaching Scripture.

John Proctor: I've enjoyed Constantine Campbell's, *Basics of Verbal Aspect in Biblical Greek* (Zondervan, 2008). It's clear, crisp and concise, and it summarizes a complex and vexing debate with just enough detail to inform without overwhelming. The enjoyment of Greek may always be a minority interest, even among BSB readers. But the majority of this minority would learn something from Campbell, and quite painlessly too. [Ed: John correctly guessed that no one else had thought of recommending this one.]

Stocking Fillers (2)_____

Two little gems from SPCK which would be good devotional/Bible study reads: OT readers may enjoy Michael Sadgrove, *I Will Trust in You: A Companion to the Evening Psalms* (London: SPCK, 2009, pp xiv + 176, pb, ISBN 978 0 281 05987 4, £9.99). This offers a brief introduction to the Anglican daily psalms schedule—all 150 in a month—and then one chapter per day commenting on the evening psalms for that day. This grouping into 'clusters' of texts for each day offers some interesting insights (eg concerning Ps 137 alongside its companion psalms of 'remembering'). It also positively invites a second volume on the 'morning Psalms.' For a month of night-time readings this one is hard to better.

NT readers will find some thoughtful Bible study resources in Gerald West (ed), *In the Beginning Was the Word: Group Bible studies on the Gospel of John* (London: SPCK, 2009, pp ix + 86, ISBN 978 0 281 06168 6, £9.99). Seven writers from around the world bring together studies originally designed for the Lambeth Conference in 2008, but revised and here offered for more general consumption: 16 studies on 'I am' sayings and 7 on signs. This is 'contextual Bible study' as long championed by West, and offers insights from a refreshing multiplicity of perspectives. The book could be used individually on a devotional basis, but is written for group use, with a gentle attention to textual detail that will help those looking to start taking John (and Jesus) seriously.

The Society of Biblical Literature Annual Conference

Spreading our conference reporting a little further afield than usual: this year's annual SBL get-together took place in New Orleans from 20–24 November. Around 4,400 participants crowded into two huge downtown hotels (as well as many surrounding B&B's) for something in the region of 500 different seminars, review panels, consultations, conversations and—most important of all—the Book Exhibit room, home to 89 publishers offering substantial discounts on major and new titles. (British attendees can't quite make back the airfare on book discounts, but it's close.) The SBL conference has to be seen to be believed: for myself I can't get used to overhearing discussions about 1 Enoch or Greek teaching aids over breakfast in a hotel, or stumbling into ongoing seminars in the line at a coffee shop.

This year included a notable first: the first ever presidential address by a non-US scholar, Sheffield's own David Clines, who by all accounts gave a stirring call to improve the nature and quality of teaching in biblical studies. I wasn't there, having spent the day getting my head around theological hermeneutics, the nature of commentary writing, and Romans as Christian theology. My own personal pick of the sessions was a review panel of Gary Anderson's new book *Sin: A History* (Yale University Press, 2009, ISBN 978 0 300 14989 0, hb, \$30) with perspectives from both Christian and Jewish respondents.

Many other meetings take place around the SBL: one can attend the Institute of Biblical Research sessions (I enjoyed one on the nature of theological interpretation); there are lots of specialist groups getting together (I was at the Scripture & Hermeneutics Seminar's stimulating panel on Ellen Davis' fine book *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge University Press, 2009, ISBN 978 0 521 73223 9, pb, £14.99)); and there was plenty of opportunity to partake of New Orleans specialities: jambalaya, gumbo and rather too much deep fried sea food.

It's a kind of biblical studies jamboree: part party, part intense working groups, part massive bookstall, part dropping in to keep up on developments on a range of subjects. It is a wonderful opportunity to meet many scholars face to face. Next year in Atlanta: beginning 19th November.

Richard Briggs, Cranmer Hall, Durham

Book Reviews

Francis Watson, *Paul, Judaism and the Gentiles: Beyond the New Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007; pp 400, ISBN 978 0 8028 4020 2)

The question of the nature and implications of Paul's gospel continues to be of vital importance for both history and theology. Is his emphasis on the justification of human beings by grace through faith directed at *all* efforts to be right with God through 'works', as in the Lutheran understanding of him? Or is it directed primarily at the limitation in *scope* imposed upon God's grace by Jewish nationalism and non-acceptance of Gentiles, as in the so-called 'new perspective' (not very new now!) represented especially by E P Sanders, J D G Dunn and N T Wright?

Francis Watson is an important voice in Pauline scholarship and in the project of 'theological interpretation of Scripture' generally (see the last BSB, 53). On the basis of sociological insight and careful exegesis, he refuses to be pigeon-holed within the assumptions of either 'old' or 'new' perspectives. In this revised and expanded edition of a work first published in 1986, he engages with the debate as it has unfolded, but presents essentially the same thesis: that Paul's great antitheses (grace/law, faith/works etc) are essentially *community-forming* language, by which Paul hopes to establish the Christian community (including especially its Jewish members) firmly on the foundation of Christ, weaning them away from any lingering attachment to the synagogue and its practices. Thus 'law' and 'works' sum up the entire Jewish system and current way of life. This emphasis on the concrete implications of Paul's rhetoric for the actual life of the Church is worked out in detailed study of the texts, especially Romans, which Watson reads (very persuasively, I think) as Paul's appeal to the semi-fragmented Christian community in Rome to unite on the basis of Christ alone. Paul is thus presented as the advocate of a 'sectarian' Christianity, in contrast to earlier perspectives within the Christian movement (and initially that of Jesus himself), which regarded it as a reform movement within Judaism.

Thus Watson critiques aspects of both 'old' and 'new' perspectives. Against Luther, he argues that Paul's polemic is seldom directed against 'works' in abstraction, but nearly always against the limitations of the traditional Jewish community from which he wants Christians to make a decisive break. Against the 'new perspective', he argues that Paul (especially in his use of Scripture), far from asserting covenantal continuity between Israel and the Church, wishes to highlight the *discontinuity* which the coming of Christ entails.

This is a scholarly work which is always careful but not always easy to read. A bonus in this edition is an article reprinted in an appendix, in which Watson clearly sets out reasons why paying attention to the historical and social particularity of texts such as Paul's letters need not lead to seeing them as theologically irrelevant for today.

Stephen I Wright, Spurgeon's College, London

James D G Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem: Christianity in the Making, Volume 2* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009; pp xv + 1347, ISBN 978 0 802 83932 9)

This second volume in Dunn's three-part account of Christian origins takes up where *Jesus Remembered* stopped. It covers the period from 30 to 70AD: from the resurrection to the fall of Jerusalem; following a Jewish renewal movement deep into

the Gentile world; shaping the memory of Jesus into an articulated faith. There are four main sections: 130 pages of orientation; roughly 400 each on Acts 1–15 and on Paul’s missionary work; and about 200 exploring the last stages and legacy of this formative period.

Acts is a prime source. Dunn reckons it responsible historical writing, shaped by artistry as well as research, as readers of the time would expect. While he dates it around 90, he takes the ‘we’ passages at face value: Luke was involved. Yet he sometimes finds a division between Luke and Paul, for example in their take on the Jerusalem council. Paul would never have accepted the fourfold decree (Acts 15.20) as the basis for Christian fellowship between Jew and Gentile. Luke has ‘told his story more from the perspective of Jerusalem than that of Paul’ (p 465).

The third and fourth sections include discussions of ten of Paul’s letters (bar the Pastorals, presumably kept back for Volume 3), also those of James and 1 Peter. This allows a proper little commentary on Romans, of over 50 pages—quite enough to inform many an essay writer—and 1 Corinthians is treated almost as fully. So there is plenty of theology to discuss, yet Dunn’s approach does not gather or thematize this but comes to it through the sequence of events and the separate epistles.

Dunn’s overall view is that first-generation Christianity had a discernible identity, as a movement with biblical roots and an international scope, all based on the claims of Jewish monotheism, centred in a consistent focus on Jesus, and dependent on the Spirit. Yet there was much variety and even untidiness, and perhaps eventually the loss of Jerusalem so trimmed the spectrum of Christian diversity that it ‘changed the character of the whole’ (p 1174). We must wait to learn what Dunn thinks about this. In the meantime here is a magnificently clear and thorough resource for studying the apostolic age.

John Proctor, Westminster College, Cambridge

Fernando F Segovia and R S Sugirtharajah (eds), *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings* (The Bible and Postcolonialism, 13; London: T&T Clark, 2007; pp x + 466, pb edition 2009, ISBN 978 0 567 63707 9; £24.99)

A welcome, and appropriately affordable, paperback edition of the ‘landmark’ 2007 study on postcolonialism and the NT. For those who don’t know what it is: postcolonial reading is basically concerned with issues of power, ‘empire’ and its manifestations, and the questions of whose voice is allowed to be heard by whom. It is a lively academic discipline in its own right. What does it offer biblical studies?

On the one hand it foregrounds elements of many texts where questions of power and empire are alive and waiting to be heard. Thus we have here Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza highlighting the ‘resident alien’ aspect of 1 Peter, Stephen Moore exploring what he admits is the relatively familiar dynamic of Revelation against empire, or Warren Carter showing how Matthew sets up a ‘kingdom of God’ vision over against Roman imperial power. On the other hand, as with almost any liberation-orientated reading, there are times when what one gets is perhaps more illuminating concerning the writer than the text. We read about 1 John and Buddhism, or about certain Pauline epistles from various cultural perspectives. The chapter on Colossians, for example, while making use of Walter Wink’s work on the powers, is a long way from the concerns of a book like Walsh and Keesmaat’s, *Colossians Remixed*, which was, after all, subtitled ‘subverting the empire.’

A somewhat epic editorial introduction sifts out those contributors who do and do not offer 'critical interaction' with the text (and looked a little unwilling to give space to positive appropriation of the text, to me), while an editorial afterword calls for further critique. This is something of a more systematic 'Voices from the Margin' type project on the cutting edge of liberation reading today. All will be stretched, and especially those in multicultural environments will do well to ponder, even if not always (or often) in agreement.

Richard S Briggs, Cranmer Hall, St John's College, Durham

Forthcoming Attraction —————

Spurgeon's College is pleased to announce details of a study day led by Richard Bauckham, Professor Emeritus at St Mary's College, University of St Andrews (and Senior Scholar at Ridley Hall, Cambridge) on Friday 29th January 2010.

Professor Bauckham will present two papers on the Gospels and eyewitness testimony, and a further paper on the Bible and ecology. Dr Nigel G Wright and Dr Stephen I Wright will offer short responses to the papers. It is also envisaged that there will ample time for questions 'from the floor' (even if your name isn't Wright). Prepare yourself for asking questions by a quick read of Grove Books B48 and B50, on these two topics.

Delegates must pre-book their places. For further details and a booking form, please contact Dr Terry J Wright at rjbconference@aol.com.

Grove Biblical Series —————

This month's Grove booklet (B54) is by Grove biblical series regular John Proctor, on Jesus is Lord. What did the first Christians think of Jesus and why? They drew on the rich resources of the Jewish Scriptures, read with messianic expectation and followed Jesus' own creative theological thinking about his identity. As Christians moved into the different subcultures of Empire, this quickly produced a complex but compelling view of Jesus as part of the Godhead, one that was not mere theory but which nurtured faith and shaped discipleship.

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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). Unsolicited material is welcome, but it cannot be returned.

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