

Biblical Studies Bulletin

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

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News and Notes —————

In June, Vatican officials unveiled paintings discovered in the catacombs beneath Rome by the latest laser technology: the oldest known icons of the apostles Peter and Paul, along with images of the apostles John and Andrew. They have been discovered in an underground burial chamber beneath an eight-storey office building in a working-class neighborhood of Rome. Dating from the second half of the 4th century, the pictures can be seen online in a variety of places: try googling 'earliest Paul icon' for example and you should see plenty of options.

A friend of our editor, Chris Juby, has found fame and no fortune at all as a result of telling the *Northern Echo* that he was tweeting the Bible a chapter a day. Chris, who works for Kings Church in Durham, has made the news around the world with his project summarizing the Bible on social networking website Twitter. Each morning he condenses the major themes of a full chapter down to a single 'tweet' at a maximum of 140 characters, which is then published to the account's 'followers.' It's a 1189-day project, so will keep him busy for three and a half years (a symbolic time?). The project is still only in Genesis, but following the *Northern Echo* story it was picked up around the world by the likes of the *Telegraph*, the *Guardian*, the *Toronto Star*, *Stern*, the *Australian*, and even a TV interview for CNN's 'World Report.' The Bible Summary Twitter account now has 14,000+ followers after less than a month. You can find the Bible Summary on Twitter at www.twitter.com/biblesummary and the archive at www.biblesummary.info

This summer Jeremy Paxman hit headlines by commenting on trends in 'University Challenge,' the long-running BBC quiz show where students offer quick-fire responses on questions which range from Homer's *Iliad* to Homer Simpson. Some newspapers reported the story as 'Jeremy Paxman sets a university challenge: Learn your Bible,' which made for a good headline, though what he actually said was 'It's interesting

to see how, as years go by, they know less and less about classics and the Bible, and more and more about science and computing.’ The Bible as bulwark of British culture remains one of the easiest niche’s to secure for interest in Scripture, as next year’s anniversary of the KJV is bound to underline. Is it a case of whether one sees the culture as half-full or half-empty?

Do you find yourself spotting cultural trends by noticing which topics the best-selling Christian books are responding to? If so, then (a) you need to get out more, and (b) you will have seen that in the honourable tradition of books offering Christian ‘responses’ to Harry Potter, Richard Dawkins and Dan Brown, we are now looking at responses to Philip Pullman’s *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* (Canongate Books, 2010), published in hardback at Easter this year at £14.99 in (symbolic?) black or white covers, ISBN: 978 1 84767 825 6, though now out in a bright red paperback too. I’m not sure this book has hit the headlines as much as some others, but to any in your congregation troubled by its somewhat anti-Pauline Jesus/Christ distinction (which is well-summarized in the book’s title!) you can now recommend David Wenham’s *Did St Paul Get Jesus Right?: The Gospel According to Paul* (Lion, 2010). We may have more on this next time.

Reflections on the British New Testament Conference –

Bangor, 2–4 September 2010

Around 175 NT scholars—professors, PhD students and ordinary mortals like me – gathered in Bangor, North Wales, for the 30th Anniversary British New Testament Conference. The magnificent wood panelled university hall was the scene to celebrate what has become a vital stimulus for NT research in the UK. Increasingly it has become an international gathering, and it was good to engage with folk from Sydney, Addis Ababa, Helsinki, Dublin and Miami, for example. There was poignancy too in that Bangor’s theology department, our hosts, is winding up and being combined with that of the new university of Trinity St David’s (formerly Carmarthen and Lampeter), so there won’t be the same opportunity again to discuss the New Testament in this beautiful corner of the country.

In the opening plenary address Bridget Gilfillan Upton (Heythrop College, London) explored how Mark might be read as a ‘propaganda’ text. I wasn’t convinced that ‘propaganda’ was sufficiently defined to make the case, but it was interesting to be made to think about the uses and possible echoes of the Gospel in film (including, provocatively, a Nazi propaganda film) and to ask the question how far visual portrayals of scenes such as the ‘triumphal entry’ reflect a ‘propaganda’ thrust in Mark’s text.

The late Friday afternoon slot was occupied by a debate on the case for and against the existence of ‘Q.’ Francis Watson (Durham), unfortunately absent through illness, argued against, through the persona of Simon Gathercole (Cambridge), and Christopher Tuckett (Oxford) gave a lively rejoinder in the flesh. A straw poll indicated that the majority of participants believe the ‘Q’ hypothesis still accounts for Matthew and

Luke's common material better than the alternative hypothesis of simple Lucan dependence on Matthew. Someone commented to me afterwards that it was interesting that this subject could still arouse such passion. Yet as Watson notes, it does have its theological implications for how we think about the nature of the NT canon; and the debate was refreshingly (to my mind!) free of the more rarefied speculations about Q that have become a minor NT industry in themselves.

Richard Bauckham (Emeritus, St Andrews) gave the first Graham Stanton Memorial Lecture on 'The Individualism of the Fourth Gospel,' lucidly outlining John's strong focus on the importance of individual encounters with and responses to Jesus, while pointing out that this did not make John an 'individualist' like many modern Westerners. We were sent on our way with a fine paper from our own Mike Thompson (Ridley Hall, Cambridge) on Paul in Acts, posing the question whether the contrast traditionally drawn between Luke's presentation of him and that seen in his letters needs to be rethought in view of recent re-readings of those letters that yield a more thoroughly 'Jewish' apostle than earlier ones.

Seminar groups continued to flourish. Ian reports: 13 folk listened to 6 papers on Revelation (and we already have 4 planned for next year); interesting that folk continue to be so interested in Revelation 10 years on from the millennium. In general the groups are often at least as significant as the plenaries.

Overall it was striking that three of the four main sessions exhibited a considerable sense of hospitality to a 'confessional' perspective. This is very different from how it was 20 years ago, and perhaps is the fruit of the contribution to the guild of people like Tom Wright, Richard Bauckham, Dick France and Howard Marshall, as well as the growth in interest in academic research amongst evangelicals.

Finally, BSB readers might like to look at Nottingham University's Biblelex website, of which we were given a taste. Their team of theologians have between them contributed a short video introduction to every book of the Bible, plus a few extras: <http://www.biblelex.com/>. The cover picture for Amos is a picture of Henry VIII. Take a look!

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

Humour

Limericks have poured in after our last issue's offering. From this quarter's avalanche of 1 comes Patrick Blair's meditation:

King Sol had endless capacity
To engage in all forms of salacity
But Sheba's queen
Was clearly seen
To preserve her unsullied sagacity

Patrick offers a textual variant for the last word, 'veracity,' though this is not attested in the better manuscripts...Thanks Patrick. Immortality awaits other contributors (possibly in a variety of ways, but I had in mind the print and web variety).

Book Reviews

John Barton, *What is the Bible?* (3rd edition; London: SPCK, 2009; pp xvi + 159, pb, ISBN 978 0 281 06114 3, £9.99)

This is the third edition of John Barton's helpful and balanced introduction to the Bible. It has been updated and slightly amplified by the author to include brief comments on the apocryphal gospels, textual criticism, fundamentalism and the 'left-behind' movement. In the first five chapters Barton addresses a range of questions and key issues such as why the Bible has survived, how it reached its present form, its different genres or literary styles, the importance of biblical criticism and whether or not the Bible represents a 'historical' record. The four chapters that follow address issues of continuing concern—the Bible and ethics, the Bible and politics, sexism and the Bible, and biblical authority. Barton ends with a helpful guide to reading the Bible including an overview of reading schemes and an appendix comprising two lists of biblical books—the first in the (putative) order in which they were written and the second sorted according to genre.

In this accessible and comprehensive overview, Barton's high regard for the Bible (but not for biblical literalism or fundamentalism) is evident. His approach to contentious issues is sensitive and thought-provoking. This is both an informative book and a good starting point for those in the evangelical tradition who are unaware of the controversies provoked by the Bible. It will hopefully encourage further reflection on what the Bible is and how Christians interpret it.

Hilary Marlow, Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge

Mark J Boda, *A Severe Mercy: Sin and Its Remedy in the Old Testament* (Siphrut 1; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009; pp x + 622, hb, ISBN 978 1 57506 164 1, \$59.50)

The opening volume of this promising new series is a massive study of the topic advertised in its subtitle. Boda pursues a canonically-orientated and careful reading of all the relevant OT texts, after a brief introduction situating his work as an exemplar of biblical theology attentive to the whole canon. Each chapter (roughly one per biblical book) then starts with some general discussion of the literary shape and integrity of the book (which seemed slightly odd for an already large volume) before selecting key texts and themes illuminating the treatment of sin. This approach avoids prejudging the shape of the material—instead Boda patiently catalogues a whole range of emphases from the breaking of commands, to the lifestyle of folly, to the priestly concerns with impurity and uncleanness, and questions of the extent to which sin is intentional, or its effects inter-generational. The range of 'remedies' in view includes primarily 'divine discipline,' penitence, sacrifice, human transformation, and its effecting through acts of divine transformation of the human.

There is a huge amount to reward the careful reader, and Boda regularly lines up all the key issues in a lucid manner (though I missed some discussion of the remarkable Daniel 4.27 and its lengthy reception as a text understood to encourage almsgiving to atone for sin). By the end I did wonder if a shorter book would have been more helpful. It feels rather as if Boda is showing us all his 'working out' of the question, with relatively little space given to synthesis and a constructive theological vision of

how we should, in the light of all this, best understand sin and its remedy. There is one brief reference to his choice of the topic 'because it is an area of personal interest'—one might have liked to hear more then of how Boda sees the significance of this study for today. Correspondingly, however, this excellent presentation of all the data will serve well all those who wish in turn to reflect on the topic.

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

Eric Eve, *The Healer from Nazareth: Jesus' Miracles in Historical Context* (London: SPCK, 2009; pp 194, pb, ISBN 978 0 281 06001 6; £16.99)

For many believers, Jesus' miracles testify straightforwardly to his divine nature. For many unbelievers they constitute a stumbling-block to acceptance of Christian claims. In this clear, beautifully-written book, Eric Eve gently shows both believers and unbelievers that things are more complicated but also more interesting than those positions imply.

Through an accessible study of the historical background of the idea of miracle in the Jewish and Greco-Roman worlds, and especially of the phenomena of healing and demon-possession, Eve highlights the remarkable nature of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' mighty works. There is, indeed, nothing like them in antiquity for the sheer concentration of such reported events. The Evangelists clearly present these works as attesting Jesus' authority and identity as the ultimate prophet and Messiah, and Eve offers an excellent account of Mark's use of the miracles in particular. Yet he also shows that Jesus' activities of 'making whole' and casting out evil spirits are not without anthropological parallel. This means both that the idea of Jesus as a healer can be seen as plausible without making any faith-assumptions about his identity, and that Christians should not simplistically see the miracles as automatic evidence of 'divinity' or even messianic status. It is precisely the eye of faith, both in the ministry of Jesus and today, that is able to interpret the phenomena in this light.

Underlying Eve's argument is a useful distinction between 'miracle,' as a striking event attributed to an act of God, and 'anomaly,' an event 'which would contradict some fundamental scientific principle' (p 161). A particular event may be either miraculous or anomalous or both. This is a considerable advance on the early twentieth-century scholarly position epitomized by Troeltsch, which ruled out 'miracle' in its entirety because it supposedly did not conform to modern wisdom about how the world works. Eve treats the so-called 'nature miracles' and raisings from death as strictly anomalous miracles and hence unhistorical (though powerful symbols for faith), but the great majority of the Gospel miracles—the healings and exorcisms—as simply 'miraculous': the Evangelists present them as divine events but they do not, in themselves, overturn or contradict the processes of nature.

Not all will agree with Eve's analysis of how particular Gospel stories fit into these categories. But Eve does a great service to pastors and scholars in clarifying the issues, and to the discipline of apologetics in highlighting what the Gospel stories of Jesus' mighty works do, and do not, suggest.

Stephen Wright, Spurgeon's College, London

John S Kloppenborg, *Q, the Earliest Gospel: An Introduction to the Original Stories and Sayings of Jesus* (Louisville & London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008; pp x + 170, pb, ISBN 978 0 664 23222 1, £12.99)

I found this reasonably short (170 pages) paperback to be an excellent introduction to Q (the hypothetical sayings source used by Matthew and Luke). There are a number of things I liked about it: firstly Kloppenborg knows what he is talking about (he has written two major works on Q, numerous articles, and has been a major player in the Q-studies community for decades); secondly Kloppenborg is patient with those who might be skeptical of the existence of Q, and carefully explains his reasons for believing that Q is a necessary hypothesis; thirdly Kloppenborg carefully explains the way in which the Q-studies community have reconstructed the wording of the hypothetical document, some of its major themes and some of the implications which follow acceptance of the Q-hypothesis. Students will appreciate the clarity of the presentation, the neat little diagrams and charts, the English translation of Q in the appendix, and helpful notes, glossary and list of further reading. Scholars will learn from (and also occasionally quibble with) the myriad of detailed observations and arguments, wonder how far they accept the broader argument and even the historical existence of Q (and its community of Q-people), and be stimulated to wrestle again with some of the central questions in Gospel studies.

Peter Head, Tyndale House, Cambridge

Grove Biblical Series

This month's Grove booklet (B57) is by Margaret Cooling, and looks at the important and practical topic of *How to Engage with the Bible in Small Groups*.

Many people value studying the Bible in small groups—but also experience getting stuck for a number of reasons. This outstanding study explores the whole range of issues, from group dynamics and lack of clarity, to assumptions about the Bible and our approaches to learning. It offers a range of ways of engaging practically, and includes worked examples on the accompanying web pages.

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