

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 —————

One Volume Bible Commentaries

In the world of one-volume Bible commentaries there are many books that tell you exactly what you already know and skip over what you don't. My own recommendation of choice is the *Eerdmans Bible Commentary* (eds Dunn and Rogerson, 2003), which is sufficiently massive to offer engaging readings of the texts in question without being sidetracked into scholarly infighting (though beware of the unusual entry on Isaiah). To my mind it edges out the *Oxford Bible Commentary* (eds Barton and Muddimann, 2001) which is still more likely to tell you about JEDP than the theological vitality of the finished text, despite its self-description as a work of 'chastened historical criticism.'

New to the field is *The New Interpreter's Bible One Volume Commentary* (eds Beverly Roberts Gaventa and David Petersen; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010; pp xii + 1061, hb, ISBN 978 0 687 33411 7, £49.99). This is a weighty but elegantly produced volume, part of the mightily impressive range of NIB resources which Abingdon have been producing in recent years. Its target audience is perhaps more at a beginner's level than most of its other reference volumes. No matter how pithily the contributors write, there is a limit to how much you will learn from 32 pages (of relatively large print) on Genesis, or 20 on Romans, good as both those entries are. Most of the contributors are American or working in North America. Some reprise books they have written on elsewhere (Iain Provan on Kings; John Goldingay on Isaiah). Others take on new texts (Stephen Fowl on Colossians, for example). The apocryphal books are included, though here brevity overtakes comment, except, oddly, for the various one-chapter inserts into other texts, which are given two or three pages each here. The book ends with 60 pages of general articles, 19 of them, mainly helpful dictionary-like pieces on 'canon' or 'letters', but also some more unusual pieces like 'Bible and Spirituality' or a fine little reflection on 'Teaching the Bible.'

In general it seemed to me (admittedly without reading every entry) that commentators had been advised to focus on laying out interpretive options rather than venturing too many opinions. The essay writers gave slightly more of a focused perspective. The editors suggest adjectives such as 'accessible, reliable, concise' to describe the project, and these are all true. 'Brief' might be another one, and in a low-key way 'theologically interested.' These are all recommendations, even if, in the end, I will still be referring students to the Eerdmans volume first.

News and Notes ---

Liturgical Press are publishing an interesting series entitled *Paul's Social Network: Brothers and Sisters in Faith*. These are short but perceptive studies on a whole range of minor NT characters: Apollos, Epaphras, Luke, Lydia, Phoebe, Priscilla and Aquila, Stephen, Timothy, Titus. Some major names are among the contributors. These might provide excellent ways of resourcing studies and sermons on some of the lesser-known people of the NT, at the same time as helping readers learn their way around the social world of the 1st century.

The Old Testament has been keeping TV viewers challenged and/or puzzled. Our sloth-like blog will not be able to alert you to these as upcoming programmes, but with a little internet resourcefulness you might still track down evidence of one US and one UK production:

Archaeology And The Old Testament—a National Geographic documentary exploring what the evidence from the ground says about the existence of David and Solomon. See <http://on.msnbc.com/fspXdI>

Meanwhile Exeter University OT lecturer Francesca Stavrokopoulou was on BBC2 in March with a series on *The Bible's Buried Secrets*, looking at such well-known scholarly topics as 'Did King David's Empire Exist?' and 'Did God Have a Wife?' This was a rare example of academic OT studies enjoying a wider spotlight. Students who took notes will now have sample answers to model essay questions. *Daily Mail* readers were treated in response to the views of Ann Widdecombe, saying 'I would guess that most other theologians will demolish her theory in three seconds flat.' Those taking neither OT exams nor the *Daily Mail* may like to ponder the role of the OT as a document with other agendas than the recording of what did or did not happen, or what was and was not believed, in ancient Israel, a view which did at least receive some airtime in the series itself.

Further to our report of Bible chapter tweets in BSB57 (still ongoing at www.twitter.com/biblesummary), we can recommend 90-second audio-file Bible book summaries at Grovemeister Ian Paul's blog: go to <http://www.psephizo.com/> and follow 'The Bible on Local Radio.' Last time I checked around a dozen books had been covered.

Bible Reading Plans ---

In the year when everyone is talking about reading the KJV on its 400th birthday, many have taken the chance to advertise Bible reading plans of all sorts. Rob Bewley links to some good resources:

There are a bewildering number of Bible reading resources out there. Here are just a few. If you don't like any of these, just google 'Bible in a year' and you will have a wide choice.

Biblefresh is a movement of churches, agencies, colleges and festivals seeking to encourage and inspire churches across the UK to a greater confidence and appetite for the Word of God. Their vision is to make 2011 a year of the Bible to help individuals and the whole church gain greater skill in handling the Scriptures and a greater passion for hearing and obeying the Bible. Their website includes a wide variety of resources: <http://www.biblefresh.com/>

Zondervan offers a variety of schemes, including Bible in a Year and a series of different 30-day plans: <http://www.zondervan.com/Cultures/en-US/Product/Bible/Plans.htm?QueryStringSite=Zondervan>

Bible Gateway offers to email you your readings each day, according to a couple of different schemes: <http://www.biblegateway.com/resources/readingplans/>

Holy Trinity Brompton's online guide to reading the whole Bible in 2011, complete with notes from HTB leaders: <http://www.htb.org.uk/one-year-bible/2011>

The Bible in one Year with Soul Survivor. This is both a printed version and an online notes resource: <http://thebibleinoneyear.wordpress.com/>

One Year Bible online comes complete with additional resources: <http://www.oneyearbibleonline.com/>

A version of the NIV laid out to ease reading in one year: <http://www.eden.co.uk/shop/niv-bible-in-one-year-1951156.html>

For several years I used an adapted form of the Murray M'Cheyne plan: <http://hippocampusextensions.com/mcheyneplan/>

Rev'd Dr Rob Bewley, Associate Vicar, St John's, Harborne

Comments on Commentaries

Romans

Such is the number of commentaries on Romans that Michael Thompson's 1997 version of this *Comments on Commentaries* (way back in BSB3—*ed*) asked forgiveness for omitting readers' favourites. I likewise ask for leniency in this update that focuses mainly on commentaries published since the late-90s.

The most recent full-scale, technical commentary is by **Robert Jewett** (Hermeneia, Fortress, 2007) which is especially strong on the use of extrabiblical sources and studies of comparative literature. The exegesis is exhaustive but the writing is somewhat dense and may be impenetrable at times to those without intermediate level Greek. Its nearest competitor is the more conservative, 1000 page volume by **Douglas Moo** (NICNT, Eerdmans, 1996), which remains a very useful work for its exegetical competence.

Almost as good, and nearly as lengthy as Moo's work, is **Thomas Schreiner's** commentary (BECNT, Baker, 1998), one of the better efforts in a series that has been somewhat inconsistent. Compared to Moo or Jewett, Schreiner devotes more space to theology (reformed) than exegesis, while his presentation of Paul's structure is valuable for students and pastors alike. It is also more readable than most large commentaries on Romans and although knowledge of Greek is an advantage, all words are translated

and transliterated and much of the technical discussion should be understandable to those without ancient languages.

Ben Witherington's socio-rhetorical commentary (Eerdmans, 2004) is not the strongest of his New Testament works but is characteristically well-written and is noteworthy for its evangelical, Arminian theology. The sections on Paul's structure and rhetoric are the best part of the commentary but the exegetical work is not as expansive as Witherington's other socio-rhetorical commentaries. All Greek is transliterated and although primarily a technical/exegetical work, frequent sections called 'Bridging the Horizons' provide homiletical comment.

Mark Seifrid has written an informative entry as part of the unique, one volume *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (edited by G K Beale and D A Carson, Baker, 2007). As the title suggests, Seifrid surveys Paul's quotations and allusions to the OT. By focusing on this alone, the commentary provides great detail in its 90 pages. It is partly aimed at pastors and preachers whose aim is to bring the Old Testament Scriptures to everyday Christians.

On the semi-technical/expository front, a beautifully presented, easily understandable commentary by **Charles Talbert** (Smith & Helwys, 2003) provides a useful survey and discussion of Romans but offers little new. It is also slimmer than others in its series and therefore feels like a missed opportunity. Like other Smith & Helwys commentaries, it is aimed at students or interested lay people without Greek but the high pricetag is likely to restrict its circulation, especially as decent alternatives abound.

One such example is **Everett Harrison** and **Donald Hagner's** collaborative work in the recently revised 13 volume *Expositor's Bible Commentary* series (Zondervan, 2008). Those without Greek who are looking for a scholarly, expositional study of Romans will be well served here, particularly if sermon preparation is in mind. It is a solid update to Harrison's original 1977 version.

N T Wright offers a typically well-written commentary as part of the *New Interpreter's Bible* (Abingdon, 2002). As expected, the New Perspective on Paul is a prominent feature of the theological discussion. Although longer in comparison to other entries in the 12 volume work, space limitations of the series mean that some readers may be disappointed by the depth of exegesis. **James Dunn** (Word, 1988) remains the best technical commentary from the New Perspective. (Wright also covers Romans in two short devotional books in his *Paul for Everyone* series.)

Douglas Moo (NIVAC, Zondervan, 2000) has a volume in the popular *NIV Application Commentary* series that attempts to mix solid exegesis with practical application. He is better on the former than the latter, but as a one-stop shop for busy pastors, it is a good resource. For practical exposition, it is still hard to beat the older work by **John Stott** (BST, IVP, 1994) although **R C Sproul** (Crossway, 2009) gives excellent value.

Among more slimline volumes, **Leander Keck** (ANTC, Abingdon, 2005) has written a readable overview that can be easily consumed in a single sitting. It takes a passage by passage approach and is useful for presenting the overall message of Paul's theology as it unfolds in the Epistle. Along similar lines is **Craig Keener** (Wipf and Stock, 2009), who is stronger on first century context and provides a number of valuable excursuses for more detailed study. Another short commentary is that by **Grant Osborne** (IVPNT, IVP, 2004) which is readable and helpful but does not add much when compared with its nearest equivalent, Stott's BST commentary.

Andy Cheung, Tutor in New Testament, King's Evangelical Divinity School

Humour

Limericks Abound! Thanks to readers for these new submissions:

Of King Herod J the B said
'He can't take Herodias to bed'
Herod put him in clink
Then Salome, plus drink
Made Herod, and John, lose their head.

For eating a small fruity snack
God told them, 'you're not coming back'
So from Eden they went
But God did relent
To find out more, please read 'The Shack'
Rev Richard Martin, Rochester

Qoheleth said 'Life is just vain,
And I've said so again and again,
But you need to be told,
While you're still not too old,
To remember your God and start prain'.

Chris Watts, Reader, St Martin's, Dorking

Thanks to those who have pointed us to the bizarre 'NewsBiscuit' site, where among its offerings is the revelation that recent Dead Sea Scrolls finds were in fact small ads. The sense of humour will engage some and bypass others, and any who might take offence should stay away, but to enjoy what is on offer head to <http://www.newsbiscuit.com/2010/10/24/latest-dead-sea-scroll-fragments-just-classified-ads/>

Book Reviews

Brevard S Childs, *The Church's Guide for Reading Paul: The Canonical Shaping of the Pauline Corpus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008; pp xi + 276, pb, ISBN 978 0 8028 6278 5, £18.99)

Modern Christian reading of Paul's letters, as of the rest of the Bible, finds itself tugged in two directions. On the one hand, as heirs of centuries of historical scholarship, we want to do justice to what Paul meant when he wrote *this* letter to *those* people at *that* time. On the other hand, as those who accept the letters as canonical Scripture, we want to see how they fit together with each other, with the rest of the New Testament, and with the Bible as a whole.

It was Brevard Childs' quest to the end of his life (sadly before this book was published) to demonstrate how the concerns for a 'historical' and a 'canonical' reading of Scripture were compatible and interdependent. In this fascinating study, he explores how the canonical arrangement of the Pauline letters (especially its beginning with Romans and conclusion with the Pastorals) was designed to guide our interpretation of them. He argues that it should do so still, and that this does not entail a flattening of the unique witness of each. Romans, as Paul's mature testament, offers a definitive guide on a range of topics adumbrated more fragmentarily in earlier letters: for example, chapters 9-11 give us a model for understanding the canonical function of the Old Testament in the Pauline corpus. The Pastoral letters model the way in which Paul's apostolic teaching can and should be applied to succeeding generations.

Childs also includes some intriguing reflections on the 'bracketing' of the Pauline

collection in the NT by Acts and Hebrews, to unify the witness of Paul with that of the other apostles (Acts) and to show how continuity and discontinuity between the covenants can be held together in a sophisticated manner (Hebrews).

I found various stylistic infelicities in the book, which may reflect less-than-careful editing of a posthumous work. There are also sections where Childs seems to do little more than paraphrase parts of the text—though one can be sure that a subtle point about how to read it ‘canonically’ will emerge sooner or later. But there are also brilliant flashes of insight and lucid summaries—for example, five ways not to read Hebrews’ use of the OT on one page (245). Childs was interacting with a formidable range of scholarship in both English and German to the end. This is a fitting last testament of one who has taught us so much about how to read both Testaments with integrity as one divine word.

Stephen I Wright, Spurgeon’s College, London

Peter Oakes, *Reading Romans in Pompeii: Paul’s Letter at Ground Level* (London: SPCK, 2009; pp xiii + 194, pb, ISBN 978 0 281 05931 7, £14.99)

This is an unusual book. Peter Oakes is interested in what archaeological finds among the extensive ruins at Pompeii can tell us about social stratification and everyday life for most (*ie* the non-elite) city dwellers in the Roman empire. His aim is to help us to hear Paul’s letter to the Romans more as the original hearers would have, and so to open up its implications for the real issues people faced at street level.

The strength of this book is in its details, some of which (including Greek terms and archaeological particulars), however, not a few may find too technical. Persevering readers will find real insights, including a particularly useful commentary on Romans 12, as well as comments shedding light on a number of texts in the epistle. Especially interesting is the exploration of how a poor slave, a stoneworker, a barmaid and a cabinet-maker might have differently heard Paul’s language of salvation, depending on their situations. Oakes highlights God’s judgment, language about the body, notions about Judaism, endurance, and life after death as themes that would have stood out to Paul’s first readers. In the latter part of the book there is much to offer for preachers and students of Romans.

Michael B Thompson, Ridley Hall, Cambridge

Grove Biblical Series —————

This month’s Grove booklet (B59) is *Women and Authority: The Key Biblical Texts* by Grove’s Managing Editor, Ian Paul.

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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