

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 —————

The Academic Bible vs the Scriptural Bible

Biblical interpretation is often profoundly shaped by historical developments several centuries ago, in ways which we can be slow to realise and evaluate. A probing new study of 18th century approaches to scripture sheds thought-provoking light on just such matters, and suggests that there are deep reasons why academic enquiry in biblical studies stands in a complex relationship with the role of scripture in the church. The study in question, by Michael C Legaspi of Creighton University in Nebraska, bears the provocative title *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (Oxford Studies in Historical Theology; New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010; pp xv + 222, hb, ISBN 9780195394351, £45). Its price and the series in which it appears mean that it may not be read by some who would benefit from it, but I would recommend that those with an interest in the status and value of academic biblical studies should seek it out.

Legaspi argues that when modern academic biblical studies took shape in Germany two hundred years after the Reformation, it adopted the working assumptions of classics and philology, and thus turned the study of 'scripture' (*ie* the church's book) into the study of a classic text—the Bible. Even where such pursuits sought to defend and encourage attention to the biblical text, they did so in terms of its being an 'inert' text rather than a living witness. A key quote at the end of the introduction puts it like this: 'Instead of looking *through* the Bible in order to understand *the truth about the world*, eighteenth-century scholars looked directly at the text, endeavouring to find new, ever more satisfactory frames of cultural and historical reference by which to understand *the meaning of the text*' (p 26, emphasis in the original). All kinds of features of our present situation are thereby illuminated: the replacement of the spiritually wise church leader with the technical expert as the one who has authority in handing the Bible; the elevation of 'irenicism' as the major virtue in academic study (where what matters most is that we can all get along with each other whatever we

think about the text); and the ever-expanding pursuit of detailed matters of historical and linguistic detail.

Obviously this is a thesis of enormous scope and relevance. To keep the study manageable, Legaspi tells the story of the development of these concerns in the University of Göttingen (Georgia Augusta), and in particular in the work of Johann David Michaelis (1717–1791). The result is a clear focus, with plenty of examples relating to specific matters of philology or, in particular, early discussions of Hebrew poetry. One consequence is that it is mainly the Old Testament in view throughout.

This is not the place for a thorough evaluation of the book. Legaspi acknowledges the many gains of critical study, and he is careful to document his argument about ‘modern biblical study’ with particular examples from the eighteenth century. But the result is still strongly stated: the modern phenomenon of ‘biblical studies’ treats the Bible like a literary classic, and this is an approach which presumes that the Bible is no longer ‘scripture’ (and hence, for example, assumes also that its ongoing reception in communities of faith is largely irrelevant to academic study of it). The final paragraph of the book draws a striking contrast between the ‘pale’ academic virtues of bland tolerance, reasonability and critical self-awareness on the one hand, and the life-giving virtues of sacrificial love, hope and faith on the other. The choice is between spending our time with an academic Bible, or a scriptural one.

I commend this book and hope that its bold thesis will be widely discussed. It is a work which reminds me in some ways of Hans Frei’s seminal *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (Yale, 1974), and perhaps it will take its place alongside that work as a key pointer along the way in which biblical studies might yet develop as a twenty-first century discipline

Richard S Briggs, Cranmer Hall, St John’s College, Durham University

Comments on Commentaries

Ephesians—An Update

We did a full survey of commentaries on Ephesians some time ago in 1999, and updated it in 2004. Since then Ben Witherington has contributed a volume (on his way to writing commentaries on all the books of the New Testament) and I would strongly recommend anyone adding it to their ‘must buy’ list. It combines comment on Philemon, Colossians and Ephesians as three ‘captivity’ epistles directed at an Asian audience. [Ben Witherington, *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians: A Socio-rhetorical Commentary on the Captivity Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007)]

Witherington is well known for his use of ‘socio-rhetorical’ criticism, and whilst not all are persuaded of its value, I think it is a very significant approach, particularly for those interested in the application of scholarship in a ministry context. Since this approach focuses on the original impact of the forms of language we have before us, it bridges the divide between ‘historical’ and ‘literary’ approaches to text, and potentially offers a disciplined way of engaging with the formational power of the text.

This is evident at two levels. First, Witherington considers the significance of the context for assessing whether the language is truly Pauline; one of the main planks of the scholarly view that Ephesians is deutero-Pauline is the difference in language from

the 'core' Pauline corpus. Witherington offers a powerful case for the specific distinctives of vocabulary arising from the author adopting an Asiatic style of 'epideictic' ('showy') rhetoric, which also accounts for other features such as the longer, more complex sentences at certain points. This, together with more traditional arguments about the actual amount of variation from the Pauline corpus and from Colossians, allows Witherington to argue that the author is Paul himself.

Secondly, Witherington draws on understandings of rhetoric in the body of the commentary. But he combines this with strong exegesis, and an impressively comprehensive survey of previous commentaries. On Ephesians 5 (which I have been reading in connection with my recent Grove booklet), he cites a range of views and is not afraid to critique and build on the different positions. Setting the *haustafel* ('household code') in the context of its relation with Colossians and against the background of first-century literature, he reads it as offering a powerful egalitarian trajectory.

Yet he does all this in a readable style, and one which is highly suggestive for the preacher, without having specific sections of application. As with his much more substantial commentary on Acts which I have also been enjoying, I expect to be making much use of this volume.

Ian Paul, St John's College, Nottingham

Humour

God made the earth very good
But folk didn't act as they should
From the people he chose
One was born, died and rose
And so we're not guilty, m'lud.

The Rev'd Richard Martin, Rochester

And, from Song 2.6 and 8.3:

'My lover is handsome', she said.
'His left hand is under my head.
Meanwhile, with his right,
He cuddles me tight
As he lies here beside me in bed.'

Chris Watts, Reader, St Martin's, Dorking

Book Reviews

Walter Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation* (Facets; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010; pp x + 85, pb, ISBN 9780800696337, £6.99)

Here is a reprint of a book from 1973, opening up some of the concerns that energised and informed Wink's 1980s writing on the powers. This edition starts with a short new preface by Wink, and ends with an afterword from Marcus Borg, to endorse the author and his message.

Wink argues that historical-critical study cannot deliver. It may promise to make the past live, and so to beckon us into 'new possibilities for personal and social transformation' (p 2). Yet it always stands back from questions of significance and hides within technique; it speaks for a false kind of objectivity, and ignores the subjective standpoint and attitudes of the critic. It is time, he says, to get beyond this, to make critical study a means not an end, to let the text reshape the living of individuals and communities.

An obvious academic resource is Paul Ricoeur, and his discussion of the interplay in reading between distance and involvement. But perhaps a larger influence came through Wink's contact with the Guild for Psychological Studies, and its blending of historical-Jesus study with Jungian depth psychology.

Much of what this small book pleaded for has since been abundantly granted, in the work of scholars like Walter Brueggemann, Ched Myers and Gerald West. Yet there are passages of Wink's writing that still sound very fresh and lively. I enjoyed his extended worked example (pp 39–47) on the healing of the paralysed man (Mark 2 and parallels). There are plenty of crisp and well-made theoretical points too.

John Proctor, Westminster College, Cambridge

J Gordon McConville and Stephen N Williams, *Joshua* (Two Horizons OT Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010; pp xii + 257, pb, ISBN 9780802827029, £12.00)

In this latest volume in the Two Horizons series, an Old Testament scholar and a systematic theologian team up to tackle part of the Bible many modern readers find challenging, because of its portrayal of a God who seems not only to sanction but to command violence and genocide. The book contains a short introduction (12 pages) and a section by section commentary on the text (80 pages), but primarily consists of theological essays on Joshua (140 pages).

The authors take (and justify) an unashamedly Christian theological perspective, seeing Joshua as part of the whole biblical narrative and situating it within a Christian understanding of God and the world. Williams explores theological themes of land, genocide, idolatry, covenant and miracle. He argues that in Joshua we see God dealing with the reality of a world where violence is present rather than acting in any kind of ideal way. McConville explores 'Joshua and Biblical Theology', concluding that Joshua tells of God's ongoing conflict with 'the powers', both affirming God's victory and making clear that the victory is not yet complete. There is an interesting debate between the two authors on issues of historicity, with Williams stressing the importance of core elements being historical, McConville the fact that at least at some points it seems clear that the book is more concerned with a theological vision than with what actually happened.

This is stimulating theological engagement likely to prove helpful to anyone wrestling with Joshua. However at times it felt somewhat defensive, asking more how a Christian can cope with Joshua and fit it in to what they believe, rather than really demonstrating what Joshua adds to the Bible. I would have liked more of a positive statement of why we might choose to preach and study Joshua, not just how to deal with the book when it comes to our attention. Ingredients for this are there – one could talk, for example, about the value of a clear statement of what may seem troubling statements about God's action in a messy world (*cf* p 216); or the presentation of a nuanced relationship between Israel and the land even at the point where possession of the land is becoming a reality (*cf eg* pp 26 and 50). I am happy to recommend this book for what it does do, but taking it a stage further would make it even more useful.

Keith Beech-Grüneberg, Diocese of Oxford

James L Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom. An Introduction* (3rd edition; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010; pp xviii + 308, pb, ISBN 9780664234591, £23.99)

Of the updating of textbooks there is no end, as Ecclesiastes might have put it had he gone through several redactions (or perhaps he did?). Crenshaw's fine introduction is here given new life and substantially bulkier presence on the shelf by way of another round of additions and refinements, though the 1981 original is still determinative of the overall shape and argument (with the 1998 second edition having contented itself with updated notes and references). This time though there is a new chapter on how the sages understood the acquisition of knowledge, and some minor additions elsewhere. Those who have followed Crenshaw's own dispute over the label 'wisdom psalms' will note that where earlier editions spoke of such texts (*eg* Pss 37, 39) we now read that such a label is 'not justified' (p 187).

I like the way that non-Israelite wisdom is only brought in at the end for clarification rather than as a supposed norm by which to judge the material, and the basic theme that wisdom is an 'attitude toward reality, a worldview' (p 11) is key, although I wonder if it is somewhat incomplete. The incompleteness (for this reviewer) is underlined by the slightly problematic notion of wisdom as 'a viable alternative to Yahwism'—pp 243–245—which is arguably less helpful. Does the 'worldview' in question not need to be 'Yahwistic' to count as wise? Elsewhere, as always, Crenshaw is good on doubt and scepticism in this literature. Overall this remains a good textbook for those studying the OT wisdom literature.

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

Nancy R Bowen, *Ezekiel* (Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010; pp xxiv + 280, pb, ISBN 9781426704451, £23.99)

This series focuses on the biblical text, with commentary on a passage including sections on literary character, exegesis, and then broader ethical and theological reflections that are especially helpful for the preacher. Nancy Bowen has read widely in the scholarly literature and packs a great deal of helpful information into her pages. I enjoyed her lively juxtapositions of Ezekiel's themes with those of the present day, such as the new temple as an 'extreme makeover.' She also develops some distinctive emphases. One is the proposal that Ezekiel represents a reaction to the trauma of exile. I found this an intriguing suggestion, though one I felt was ultimately too anachronistic and individualistic. She is also interested in gender issues, and Ezekiel comes in for strong criticism in the notorious passages. Elsewhere too she is not afraid of stating that Ezekiel is mistaken or wrong. Besides raising questions of the authority of scripture, I felt that this prevented her probing with sufficient depth either the specific context of Ezekiel or the challenge in relating the book to today. I am glad to have it on my shelf, but I'll continue to turn first to Daniel Block and Iain Duguid.

Philip Jenson, Ridley Hall, Cambridge

Gordon D Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians* (New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2009; pp xxviii + 366, hb, ISBN 9780802863621, £29.99)

Anything by Gordon Fee has something very good to offer, and this – his third contribution to the NICNT series—is no exception. A world-class exegete and a charismatic preacher, he writes with energy, clarity and confidence. Strong points for this work include his comments on textual variants (eg his case for ‘infants’ instead of ‘gentle’ in 1 Thess 2.7), his Christological awareness, his ability to trace the overall argument while paying attention to details in the Greek, his wisdom in treating the controversial eschatology in 1 Thess 4, and his concern to keep the main point the main point in his applications.

In a few ways, this commentary disappoints. Fee says he is writing for pastors and students, but many of those will want more. Evangelicals seeking a survey of interpretative options will need to look elsewhere (eg in Gene Green’s Pillar volume). Paul’s statement about wrath having come in 1 Thess 2.16, for example, gets very little attention (apart from discussion of the section’s anti-Jewishness). Fee thinks the wrath language is prophetic (referring to an unknown future event), and says nothing about alternative views. Asserting Pauline authorship for 2 Thessalonians (thereby confirming my bias!), he offers a number of original observations from the Greek that support his claim, but leaves it to his predecessors for answers to arguments against authenticity. Apart from clarifying the grammar of 2 Thess 2, he does not have much to say about its obscure referents, and one could wish for far more wrestling with the darkness of 2 Thess 2.11. Nevertheless, this is now the first commentary I will turn to for wisdom on the Thessalonian letters. But it won’t be the last.

Michael B Thompson, Ridley Hall, Cambridge

Grove Biblical Series

This month’s Grove booklet (B60) is by BSB editor Richard Briggs, *Why Read the Old Testament?* Drawn from his experience teaching the OT to initially unconvinced groups in churches and colleges, it sketches out a map of reasons for applying ourselves to reading the OT, as well as looking at texts both difficult and inspiring.

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