

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 —————

Matthew—Revelation for Everyone

The final two volumes of Tom Wright's 'NT for Everyone' mini-commentary series have arrived. One is on the general epistles: *Early Christian Letters for Everyone* (London: SPCK, 2011; pp xi + 224, pb, ISBN 9780281064656, £9.99), and the final one is *Revelation for Everyone* (London: SPCK, 2011; pp xii + 227, pb, ISBN 9780281064632, £9.99). That makes the complete set—18 volumes covering all 27 books—and, as we reported in BSB61, the NT translations are now out as a separate edition of the New Testament too. The series was widely hailed as a great new publishing venture when it started back in 2001, and after the rapid appearance of the gospels and most of Paul there has been some waiting for the final instalments, but now the whole enterprise may be warmly welcomed and saluted. It is undoubtedly true that many preachers who rarely venture into longer commentaries are finding inspiration and insight here, and such sermons will be all the better for it. Meanwhile, for those who do spend their time in weightier works, Tom Wright's *For Everyone* approach remains a master-class in how to wear one's learning lightly and draw the reader (or listener) towards the key points as smoothly as possible.

These last two volumes extend the by-now familiar style through the final books of the canon. The shorter letters offer a wide range of challenges. Wright's opening anecdotes take us through childhood memories, visits to the dentist, a passion for rock climbing, and meditations beginning with lines as varied as 'The first time I went snorkelling on a tropical reef...' right through to 'One of the many things I relished about serving as a bishop...' (!). Just occasionally he is so struck by the passage that he jumps in with an observation about the text: the famous James 2 'works' passage is one such case (picking up on 2.26 with the helpful observation of the oddity of pairing body/spirit with faith/works as a way in to seeing that faith is not the disembodied part of Christian life). 2 Peter 3 begins with an anecdote which leads straight to an account of text-criticism as a way of handling the key verse 10 (where the earth will be

'disclosed' rather than burned up). The end of 1 Peter 3 sees him taking a rare detour into 1 Enoch, possibly a little fast for the average reader. And intriguingly the book of Jude is renamed 'Judah' throughout, preferring the 'royal and ancient name', though whether this will change the church's practice seems unlikely.

The Revelation book opens with 'Many can't even get [the book's] name right: it's Revelation, singular, not Revelations, plural!', though the flier which SPCK put out to accompany the book rather delightfully proclaimed in large letters: 'A new illumination of Revelations.' Here perhaps the popularising of good scholarship is needed more than ever, and this is a trustworthy guide to the contours of John's thought, rooted in first century reality but with an imaginative scope to reach to our day too. My sense was that the exegetical detail expanded as the book went on—just occasionally one almost feels drawn into scholarly analysis—but perhaps that is appropriate for some of the most disputed passages. Wright offers an interpretation of the book alert to its call for dissent from an apparently benign society. He surely rightly concludes that chapter 11 is 'one of the most important and central statements of what John wants to say', and as the book moves on towards its anti-Roman themes with Nero coded in the '666' of chapter 13, or the depiction of Rome itself as 'Babylon', there is much scope for reflection on the resonance today of reading Scripture against Empire.

This was a big, bold and wonderful project. May it nourish sermons and studies for years to come.

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

News and Notes ---

Anvil is back! The evangelical Anglican journal which existed in print form from vol 1.1 (1984) through to vol 26 (2009) took a year out in 2010 while reconsidering its format and purpose, but is now back as an on-line production. The initial e-issue (27.1, 2011) is available at <http://anviljournal.org/1>, where some articles from previous years' print copies are also on-line. The goal is to make all the back issues available electronically in due course. The return issue had the theme of 'Fresh Expressions', and future issues have been announced on global mission, and 400 years of the King James Bible.

The latest handsomely produced reference work on the Bible, aimed squarely at the beginning reader, is *The Eerdmans Companion to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011; pp xvii + 834, hb, ISBN 9780802838230, £26.99). The general editors are Gordon D Fee and Robert L Hubbard Jr, who kick things off with a short essay 'What is the Bible?' Most impressive is the list of some 60 experts writing brief selections on topics and themes of interest. A brief running 'commentary' by Connie Gundry Tappy fills much of the volume, focusing on basic orientation. One could imagine this as a useful addition to a church library, in somewhat the mould of the trusty 'Lion Handbooks' which will be familiar to UK readers.

In the last issue Stephen Wright noted in a book review that vol 1 of the two-volume *Exploring the New Testament* from SPCK had appeared in a revised edition in 2011.

Stephen Travis writes to point out that volume 2 was revised and appeared at the same time: *The Letters and Revelation*, by Howard Marshall, Stephen himself, and our regular Grove writer, Ian Paul (London: SPCK, 2011; pb, ISBN: 9780281063635, £16.99).

A couple of years ago Ben Witherington III completed his avowed aim of writing scholarly commentaries on every single one of the NT books, aided by a mini-series from IVP in which he rounded up all the shorter letters. Such an achievement is arguably even more remarkable than a project like Tom Wright's (see above): I can think of a (small) number of people who have written briefly or in devotional/semi-devotional mould across the whole NT canon, but none—in recent times at least—who have managed the level of intense academic coverage that Witherington has achieved, particularly in his trademark 'socio-rhetorical' style. Is there anyone else who has done this? Even Calvin, thorough commentator extraordinaire, never got round to Revelation in his series of NT commentaries (for reasons which I have always suspected may have been in part theological?).

Well it turns out that Witherington himself may not be quite finished: one or two of his efforts were briefer than others, and in the case of *Philippians*, which he addressed in 1994 in a small book entitled *Friendship and Finances in Philippi*, he has returned to go over the ground more thoroughly. Thus we have the new volume: *Paul's Letter to the Philippians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011; pp xxix + 312, pb, ISBN 9780802801432, £25.99). The paradigm is rhetorical communication, rather than epistolary convention. The implied reader seems to be someone willing to work hard both at scholarly technicalities and also homiletic application. Those who have found this approach helpful with other NT books will welcome this new addition.

The annual Society of Biblical Literature programme provides good value to those who want to see what is being talked about, regardless of whether one makes the trek to the conference (which was in San Francisco this past November). One could have attended, for example, a paper on 'Reading Joshua/Judges in Oz: Postcolonialism in Kansas?' I have often wondered whether the scene in *The Wizard of Oz* where Dorothy realises that she is 'not in Kansas anymore' is a particularly good illustration of the effect of waking up to a postmodern world. Be that as it may, the most engaging title of all was in the AAR (American Academy of Religion) programme: "I Can Hold Up TWO Books as I Hop on a Ball... But That Is Not All! Oh, No. That Is Not All!!" *Balancing Family and Work in the Academic World.*

Beyond such obscurities and delights were hundreds of seminars, panels and book review sessions. Time to draw BSB readers' attention to just one: a high-profile gathering (including Richard Hays, Walter Bruggemann and Larry Hurtado) discussing the English translation of a major new German work in biblical theology: Reinhard Feldmeier and Hermann Spieckermann, *God of the Living: A Biblical Theology* (Baylor University Press, 2011; pp ix + 612, hb, ISBN 9781602583948, \$59.95). Baylor and translator Mark Biddle are to be congratulated on getting an English version out almost simultaneous to the German volume, whose title more precisely translates as 'The Living God: An Introduction to the Biblical Doctrine of God.' The two authors (from Göttingen) represent an attempt to co-write a volume from an OT and NT perspective—much to be applauded in these days of over-specialisation.

Book Reviews

Petr Pokorný, *Hermeneutics as a Theory of Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011; pp xv + 208, pb, ISBN 9780802827210, £19.99)

This slim and somewhat forbiddingly dry volume is translated from a 2005 Czech original, where it was part of a three-volume disquisition on hermeneutics and its relevance to biblical interpretation. This means that (a) one misses the two volumes of worked exegesis which followed and (b) the discussion has a lot of (faithfully translated) references to Czech culture and literature. The book works with the understanding that biblical interpretation offers the same hermeneutical challenges as the interpretation of any text, and canonical criticism (equated to the task of constructing a biblical theology) is roundly dismissed as seeking to fit all of Scripture into a pre-determined unified picture. This leaves space to explore the chosen issues—language, text, method—without reference to the complexities of two testament holy Scripture. Tellingly, all the examples are NT ones. One will learn a little about textuality, semantics, and a mild preference for preferring synchronic approaches to historically-focused critical reconstruction. But overall this is a somewhat odd translated product, making its points (where it makes them) in the philosophical reaches of hermeneutical theory rather than with respect to the biblical text.

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

Stanley E Porter, Jeffrey T Reed and Matthew Brook O'Donnell, *Fundamentals of New Testament Greek* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010; pp xxi + 466, hb, ISBN 9780802828279, £26.99) and Stanley E Porter and Jeffrey T Reed, *Fundamentals of New Testament Greek Workbook* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010; pp xii + 260, pb, ISBN 9780802828262, £12.99)

Porter unapologetically admits that this is a 'very full, comprehensive, and perhaps even challenging grammar' (p x), one that may even be daunting for some. However, his high expectations for the reader are neither unreasonable, nor without good reason. *Fundamentals* seeks (and finds) a balance between grammar and vocabulary so that the learner finishes with a solid foundation, prepared for active involvement with and exegesis of the Greek text. The book is organised well and easy to navigate. Each chapter is both full and concise, adeptly guiding one through introductory concepts, relevant definitions, vocabulary, developed discussions of grammar, and helpful summaries. In addition, Porter helpfully introduces more advanced grammar with corresponding relevant topics, not separating, for example, concepts like the genitive absolute from the participle. There are other useful attributes, including Porter's discussion of aspect, the early introduction of *mi*-verbs, and the extensive charts, guides, and paradigms at the end of the book.

Although the grammar may leave one hungry for more examples, the companion workbook more than makes up for it. It offers a wide variety of exercises to reinforce and practise the partnering grammar and vocabulary lessons. While some workbooks focus only on translating and parsing, Porter's offers additional exercises that deepen one's knowledge of Greek, such as constructing a different form of a Greek word or phrase (eg an imperfect from a given aorist form). While this may seem as though one is learning to write Greek, it is practising the valuable skill of recognizing the small

changes in the different Greek forms.

Although some beginners might be overwhelmed by the vast amount of information given, there is no need to learn it all at once: certain sections could be skimmed and returned to later. Overall, whether one is intending to begin learning Greek or is looking for a quality introductory grammar for reference, Porter's *Fundamentals* is comprehensive, well-organised, and one to remember.

Kristian Bendoraitis, Cranmer Hall, St John's College, Durham

James D G Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011; pp xx + 201, pb, ISBN 9780802866455, £13.99)

Despite the publisher's claim, this is not a 'compact theological primer', but something much more interesting: a distillation of a major New Testament scholar's wisdom about the impulses which launched the Christian faith and gave us the NT.

The book attractively combines historical scholarship with attention to contemporary concerns. It is the published version of nine lectures delivered variously to Roman Catholic and Jewish audiences, and its Protestant author displays sharp awareness of how deeply intertwined are questions about the origins of the NT, and about relationships between Christians and Jews and Christians and Christians. Dunn issues a graciously inclusive yet challenging call to hear the NT's message with fresh clarity over against some all-too-familiar misconstruals.

The lectures have been elegantly combined into a sequence through which we encounter key themes of Dunn's scholarship over forty years: the 'impact' Jesus made on his followers; the continuing oral tradition which gave rise to many of the variations between the gospels; the development of the genre 'gospel' itself, as an extended version of the very 'gospel' Paul preached; the continuity between Jesus and Paul, not least in their concern to include in God's family those whom others were excluding; the 'church of God' in Paul's thought as the continuation of the community of Israel; the crucial role of the Spirit in directing and uniting the church. The crispness of the book reminded me somewhat of *The Phenomenon of the New Testament*, a similarly penetrating but deceptively simple investigation of core questions by Dunn's mentor, C F D Moule, written in 1967.

Those who wish can turn to Dunn's longer works for more detailed elaboration of his various arguments. Those seeking a lucid but profound introduction to central questions about the origins of Christianity need look no further than this.

Stephen I Wright, Spurgeon's College, London

John Riches and others, *What is Contextual Bible Study? A Practical Guide with Group Studies for Advent and Lent* (London: SPCK, 2010; pp xiii + 112, pb, ISBN 9780281061983, £9.99)

This is a useful and elegantly written little book which is, as its subtitle says, a 'practical guide.' Riches reports on an approach to contextual Bible study which first began in South Africa, where it played a role in helping the poor and marginalised discover their voice in the face of oppression. Transposed to various Scottish communities—particularly in and around Glasgow—it does not work quite the same way, but it still facilitates those who might lack confidence in studying Scripture to do so

with insight and attention to detail. The great merit of the book is its jargon-free approach to practical hermeneutics, with plenty of examples and anecdotes packed into its brief narrative. It is not until the fifth chapter that you actually get a presentation of the kinds of core questions that CBS asks: always starting with ‘what jumps off the page at you?’ before moving on to close reading, the text in its context, resonance with today, and a seeking after transformation. Three years’ worth of Advent and Lent studies close the book, offering rich practical resources.

I cannot think of a Bible study leader who would not benefit from reading this book. It will annoy those for whom the goal of such study is to find the one right answer, but for those interested in letting participants explore Scripture in a constructive yet open-ended way, this may be the popularising book we have been waiting for. Read it—it won’t take you long—and then pass it around your church study group leaders.

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Grove Biblical Series —————

This month’s Grove booklet (B62) is *The Galilee that Jesus Knew* by Stephen Travis.

This is Stephen’s first contribution to Grove Books since he wrote *Audio-Visual Media: A Guide to Sources of Materials for Christian Education and Worship* (Grove booklet No 6b) back in 1972, making him the new record-holder for a break in between contributions to Grove. Welcome back Stephen! We look forward to your next contribution around 2050.

The booklet is accompanied by a rich resource (on the Grove website) of photographs of Galilee and Israel illustrating many of the points Stephen makes and offering useful background material. Point your browser at: <http://www.grovebooks.co.uk/resources/biblical/B62>

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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