

# Biblical Studies Bulletin

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## New Resources —————

### The Birth of Christian Hermeneutics?

Every so often I try to draw readers' attention to some slightly more out-of-the-way study or monograph from beyond the familiar worlds of Old and New Testament scholarship, which I think might offer some perspective(s) of fresh interest. This month it is Margaret M Mitchell, *Paul, the Corinthians and the Birth of Christian Hermeneutics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010; pp xiv + 178, hb, ISBN 9780521197953, £50.00). Here we are at least partly in the world of patristics' scholarship as it intersects with the study of the New Testament and its reception, tracking the very earliest moves in Christian hermeneutics; and what a fascinating and multi-faceted investigation it is.

Mitchell's fundamental point about early Christian hermeneutics is that its goal was 'utility to the purpose at hand, however contextually defined' (p x) and thus rather than there being specific rules about how to arrive at the correct interpretation, it is more the case that there were rules about how to use Scripture in establishing a case or winning an argument. The framework for hermeneutics was thus pragmatic and rhetorical. The argument is then rooted in 1 and 2 Corinthians, which she describes as 'a correspondence course in hermeneutics' (p 38), arising out of the fact that Paul is engaged in the foundational task of putting Christianity into words. Mitchell proposes what she calls 'an agonistic paradigm' for early hermeneutics: texts are contested and widely adaptable; 'how can an ancient, fixed and authoritative text deal equitably and flexibly with any or all possible later contexts?' (p 21), and the result is a series of reflections on how Paul (and others) set to work out this conundrum. What particularly focuses the mind is that in 1 and 2 Corinthians, Paul is dealing with readers who, in his opinion, had not understood him, so how does he argue the case for the right interpretation of his own text without falling back into accepting that he didn't get it right the first time?

Along the way there are intriguing studies of the extent to which different levels of meaning match up to the spirit, the soul and the flesh (not too well, suggests Mitchell); how texts operate on a spectrum from being in plain view to being veiled, as per some aspects of the Corinthian correspondence itself (famously 1 Cor 13.12 and in 2 Cor 3.12–18); and how the criteria for supporting a particular reading of a text include visible signs and multiple witnesses (which leads to a particularly illuminating reading of 2 Cor 10–13).

Then in the closing ten pages or so Mitchell draws some conclusions for how one might best think of biblical interpretation today in the light of this study of Paul. Here she upholds a careful balance between ‘three cardinal virtues of ancient textual interpretation’: precision, or keen attention to the text; an awareness of its benefit for its readers; and ‘clemency’ which seeks to balance the first two points (p 108). In particular, being rigorous and being useful are not to be opposed. One attends to the text as wholeheartedly as possible in order to prepare it for wider consumption.

This is not altogether an easy book for those of us not well schooled in ancient interpretation (as I am not), but it does retain something of the relaxed style in which its six chapters were originally given as lectures in Oxford. And I think it offers real food for thought in terms of showing how our hermeneutics might be more wisely shaped by attending to early Christian examples of it. Interpreters are frequently in the business of trying to win arguments: maybe it is time to acknowledge that and work on how to do it appropriately, rather than keep argumentative contexts hidden behind what is often designed to look like dispassionate analysis.

Two further developments would be welcome in the short term: a paperback edition of this book to make it affordable; and some popularising of the implicit ideas about hermeneutics to bring the argument to wider attention. There is a conversation to be had here which will yet be of benefit to many.

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

(PS Just after completing the above review, two new volumes on different aspects of hermeneutics arrived on my desk: Dean B Deppe, *All Roads Lead to the Text: Eight Methods of Inquiry into the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011; pp xvi + 395, pb, ISBN 9780802865946, £16.99) which offers a user-friendly and practical handbook style approach to various methods; and Stanley E Porter and Jason C Robinson, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction to Interpretive Theory* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011; pp xx + 308, pb, ISBN 9780802866578, £19.99) which offers a fine textbook of philosophical hermeneutics with chapters on theological and literary angles at the end. They do very different jobs and are completely different again from Mitchell's book above.)

## RIP

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We note with sadness the passing of two wonderful Christian scholars, both in February of this year:

R T (Dick) France, 1938–2012, will be known to many through his teaching (including at Wycliffe Hall and at London Bible College) as well as his many fine works of NT scholarship, including major commentaries on Matthew (NICNT) and Mark

(NIGTC). Grove readers may recall too his excellent early contributions to our series.

Tom Smail, 1928–2012, teacher, preacher and author; who taught at St John’s College Nottingham, as well as King’s College London, and wrote several significant works on the Spirit in the context of the Trinity (and *vice versa!*).

Both will be much missed.

# The Daily New Testament Study Bible for Everyone:

## Barclay and Wright Compared

In BSB62 we noted the completion of Tom Wright’s *New Testament for Everyone* series, and reviewed the final volumes. A reader’s letter asking about how this series compared to William Barclay’s famous Daily Study Bible series prompted a range of opinions from Grove writers, and then finally a query to Prof Wright himself, who has generously offered his own opinion of the differences, below. Barclay (1907–78) covered the NT in 17 volumes; Wright has just finished a series of 18. First, John Proctor offers this by way of comparison:

Overall, Barclay analyses and informs while Wright synthesises and affirms, with the former being fuller on classical background and lexical detail while the latter is better on theological overview. On average Barclay has a little more to say per verse of text (although this is not true of every single passage), and tends to begin a snippet with an explanation whereas Wright normally does so with an illustration. To compare them:

- 1) Barclay was not an innovative research scholar—at least not in a very big way—so many of his scholarly opinions were grounded in the work of others, and typical of his time. Wright, by contrast, has something fresh to say about many issues in NT study, and some of his own particular positions are reflected in his popular commentary work as well as in his weightier and more scholarly books.
- 2) One might also say something about ministerial experience. Barclay spent a sizeable portion of his career as a parish incumbent, before becoming a university lecturer. Most of Wright’s pastoral experience has been in more specialised posts—colleges, cathedrals and a diocese. So while Wright wrote some of his books when he was a pastor (*ie* a bishop), Barclay had more experience of speaking the gospel at street level. Perhaps as a result Barclay’s prose style is very plain—less exciting than Wright’s, if sometimes more accessible.
- 3) Barclay calls himself a ‘theological middleman.’ Wright is a more complex figure, shaped by quite a conservative view of scriptural authority, but regularly prepared to be novel and radical in scholarship.
- 4) The two series are just about fifty years apart in date, and this is reflected in the illustrations and discussions.

We then asked Tom Wright himself, and he sent us the following thoughts, which he has allowed us to present here in slightly edited form as they may be of interest to BSB readers:

‘I have been asked orally about my series *vis-à-vis* Barclay, but have never written anything about it (so far as I recall, though like Paul with baptisms, I don’t always remember these things). When I was originally asked to do the series I did glance at one or two Barclay commentaries to get a feel for them, but quickly decided I didn’t want to look at them in case I was thinking about them too much and either subconsciously imitating or subconsciously avoiding imitation! So I really am not in a position to compare.

The main thing, though, was the anecdotes. My wife has more than once said that sooner or later someone will write a biography of me based entirely on those snippets! They were hard to begin with. SPCK insisted on them, rightly I think. Then, actually, they became surprisingly easy as the series went on, with the trick being that in praying about each passage and jotting down rough notes as to where I thought the main emphasis ought to lie, and thinking about how I would explain it to a teenager or newly converted adult, I just had to wait until one of them popped into my head. Sometimes that took five minutes, sometimes it took an hour or so. Once that was done the piece wrote itself. But the thing that’s been in the back of my mind for decades, and which I hope and pray the series has achieved, is a line from C S Lewis where he says that a theologian ought to be able to translate academic theology into the vernacular, because (he said) if you can’t do that you either don’t understand it or don’t believe it. I have no idea whether Barclay felt the same.

One of the big decisions—which I don’t think Barclay did—was to do, and then use, my own translation. The main point was that we did not want to clutter the books with “well, the NRSV says this, but it’s wrong because...” which would be likely to confuse or alarm precisely the people for whom the series was meant. You rightly drew attention to 2 Peter 3 [in the BSB62 review—ed], which is either the only time or very nearly the only time in the whole series when I felt I had to deal with textual variants.

One other thing perhaps. I am aware that Barclay was inclined to take the line, *eg* on the nature miracles, that even though it may not have happened it sets out a spiritual truth (I remember him in a radio programme saying that the point of the stilling of the storm was that “if I have a storm in my heart, Jesus can still it”). I have taken the harder line that my job as an exegete was to try to explain what the text said and meant without apologising for it or explaining it away.’

Warm thanks both to John Proctor, Tom Wright, and others who contributed thoughts to this discussion. Do other BSB readers have comments they would like to add?

# Book Reviews

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Bruce W Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010; pp xi + 380, pb, ISBN 9780802863737, £16.99)

This book is the fruit of many years' study of this subject by Longenecker, and some of the chapters are adapted from articles that have been previously published. But the book as a whole puts together a compelling argument that Paul has a clear commitment to the care of the poor as an integral part of his teaching, and that this was a hallmark of the Jesus-groups which he founded, taught, led and wrote to.

The opening chapter offers something of a devastating critique of earlier commentators on Paul and his views on poverty, and refreshingly clears the air. As with other sections of the book, this is written in an engaging and well-structured way, and highlights the problem with great clarity.

The book then falls into two halves, the first looking primarily at the first-century context and academic understanding of it, and the second half looking at texts in Paul and how we might understand some of the economic implications of Paul's teaching. Chapter 2 explores the nature of 'advanced agrarian culture' as understood by macro-sociologists, and quite interestingly links this to scriptural denunciations of the acquisitiveness of the economic elite, something that was clearly a social and economic reality. Chapter 3 looks at the models of socio-economic scaling in the first century, and the vexed question of exactly what proportion of the population were at subsistence level. Then follow chapters on charitable initiatives in the Graeco-Roman world, and a parallel analysis of the same within the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

In the second half, Longenecker's focus switches to the Pauline communities and the Pauline texts. A significant part of this section derives from his work on Galatians and in particular the injunction in Gal 2.10 to 'remember the poor.' Longenecker argues (convincingly, in my view) that this was not a cipher for the (poor) Jerusalem church, but did indeed refer to the poor in general. Perhaps the most fascinating chapter in this second section is chapter 10, where he takes information about some named characters in the Pauline letters, and tries to locate them on the economic scale he has constructed in dialogue with Friesen and others. But the most important, in terms of his argument, is the exegesis contained in chapter 12, which explores where we can find concern for the poor within Paul's theology. As Longenecker summarises in his conclusion, Paul was concerned about the poor in the urban contexts in which he worked, and whilst this was not his sole interest, 'care for the economically needy was a matter that he deemed to be characteristic of the identity of Jesus-followers.'

Overall, this volume is a convincing exercise in reading Paul in context—in the context of a key area of Judeo-Christian concern, in the context of social realities of his day, and reading particular texts in their wider context within Paul. It is well written, and a good read, and on the whole the structure of argument, with good introductions and summaries throughout, make it an easy book to navigate around.

*The Revd Dr Ian Paul, St John's College, Nottingham*

Richard S Briggs, *The Virtuous Reader: Old Testament Narrative and Interpretive Virtue* (Studies in Theological Interpretation; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010; pp 270, pb, ISBN 9780801038433; £14.99)

As Richard Briggs notes (p 35) it is very easy to engage in hermeneutical discussion without getting anywhere near the business of actually engaging with biblical texts. In this book, his aim is rather through looking at particular Old Testament texts to consider what virtues the Old Testament itself might commend to those who wish to read it.

The first chapter discusses the theory behind the book, especially what it might mean to talk about 'interpretive virtues.' Then follow five chapters each looking at a particular virtue, largely through a case study of a narrative text from the Old Testament. So Briggs considers humility through the example of Moses in Numbers 12, wisdom through Solomon in 1 Kings 3, trust through Hezekiah in 2 Kings 18, love through Ruth (Ruth 1) and Elisha (2 Kings 5), and receptivity through the narrative about Isaiah in Isaiah 6. The final chapter acknowledges the limitations of the project (the way its case studies largely or entirely ignore ordinary people, women, difficult texts, non-narrative texts and the New Testament!) while showing that this does not undermine it. The book ends with the suggestion that in Daniel 9 we see how Daniel's virtuous character bears fruit in his engagement with Scripture.

Briggs is very well read in the scholarly literature, and carefully argues his views—this is a serious study, not a light read. It is important, too, both for what it explicitly argues about the practice of interpretation and as a model of careful handling of the biblical text in the process of theological engagement with it. The book demonstrates not only those virtues on which it explicitly focuses, but also that of imagination, which as Briggs notes (pp 195–6) is just as important in interpretation though harder to instantiate from the Old Testament.

(And if you wonder how to interpret a BSB review of a book written by the editor of BSB, I would commend the virtue of trust, rather than an attitude of suspicion—see chapter 4.)

*Keith Beech-Grüneberg, Diocese of Oxford and Ripon College Cuddesdon*

## Grove Biblical Series —

This month's Grove booklet (B63) is *Reading Deuteronomy* by Jenni Williams.

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