

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 —————

On 'Literary History'—Or: How We Got the OT and the NT

Two matching new volumes from Fortress offer English translations of state-of-the-art continental scholarship, focusing on the 'literary history' of the two testaments. In other words: how the books came together and, eventually, how the canon was formed. My own feeling is that the great value of these books is their synthesis of a wide range of current proposals. I must admit to a certain suspicion that many of the current reconstructions are 'best guesses,' and that comparable volumes in twenty years, say, will look rather different. Perhaps I am just an unreconstructed agnostic on many of these matters, though that has served me well with regard to every paradigm thus far! Nevertheless, for convenient one-stop shops explaining today's continental theories, these are valuable tools. I think that equates to recommending them for libraries, at least.

For the OT we have Konrad Schmid, *The Old Testament: A Literary History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012; pp xiv + 321, hb, ISBN 9780800697754; £32.99). Schmid, who teaches in Zurich, published the German original in 2008, and is one of the major contributors to current discussion of the Pentateuch. There is some bibliographical updating for this translation, but the frame of reference is still the continental (and specifically German-language) discussion of five years ago. The book thus has a double value for English readers: both as a presentation of the topic, and also a second hand introduction to a great deal of scholarship not easily accessible to those who do not read German. As to what he argues: this is a historical reconstruction of the gradual bringing together of written materials. There is a little that is here and there dated to the 10th century BCE, but things pick up speed in the Assyrian period, and thereafter are distributed through the Babylonian, Persian, Ptolemaic and Seleucid periods (each of which merit a chapter). Only Daniel, in the Protestant OT, is as late as the last-named of these. The primary history of Genesis–2 Kings is Persian. Bits of Genesis and the

Moses story arise independently in the Assyrian era. A brief conclusion emphasizes (rightly, I think) that Scripture and canon are not the same ideas, and that there is canonical normativity long before there is a fixed canon.

Then for the NT we have Gerd Theissen, *The New Testament: A Literary History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012; pp xvi + 311, hb, ISBN 9780800697853; £32.99). Theissen, from Heidelberg, will perhaps be more widely known, and his German original is from 2007, with (almost) no updating for this translation. Theissen traces a twofold beginning to early Christian literature: charismatic traditions in the earliest gospel literature (Mark and a somewhat untroubled Q), and a similarly charismatic phase in which Paul's letters came together (all seven of them, plus pseudonymous additions). He then adopts the rather unwieldy phrase 'Jesus' Fictive Self-Interpretation' as a second phase: later canonical and non-canonical gospels, along with deutero-Pauline writings. A third phase sees various independent forms grow up, giving rise in due course to three one-off canonical entries: Acts, Revelation and Hebrews (a 'discourse', which means something like a sermon here). Two interesting concluding chapters explore the canon 'as a means to stability', along with a look at extra-canonical literature. Theissen's main conclusions: (1) the NT is 'primeval literature' which looks back to Jesus and Paul; (2) it is 'minor literature' which comes from the margins of the literarily-educated; (3) it is *koine* literature deriving some of its purpose and identity from the Septuagint.

On another occasion it would be fascinating to ask about the differences between these two books which indicate how the two testaments relate differently to history: the OT growing towards its historical manifestation as a book, while the NT grows out of its founding events and eventually becomes part of a much wider stream of literature. Perhaps such a comparison requires another study: *The Bible: A Literary History*? But it is not one that I am keen to write.

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

Book Notes

Seven Soundings in the New Testament

No let up in the never-ending deluge of new coverage of the good old New Testament. So, in canonical order, we welcome:

David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (3rd edition, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012; pp xiv + 191, pb, ISBN 0800631609; £16.99). An updating of the complete 1999 revision of the celebrated 1982 original, with a new afterword by Mark Allan Powell on what made it all so exciting in the first place. Still a great book.

C Clifton Black, *Mark* (Abingdon New Testament Commentaries; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011; pp 406, pb, ISBN 9780687058419; £16.99). This is a delightfully well-judged reading of Mark, strong on theological pointers, but above all committed to retaining the 'openness' of the text: 'It is to Mark's everlasting credit that he never "explains" the kingdom of God...It is an amazing story, brilliantly told' (p 40). Black lets the text's openness linger with the reader, up to and including commentary on all the possible endings of chapter 16. Recommended.

Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012; pp xxx + 1281, hb, ISBN 9780802866356; £49.99). This epic reading interacts with certain well-chosen figures from church history (Augustine, Chrysostom, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and five major 18th/19th century writers), and then cuts loose from footnote engagement to try and follow the text in pursuit of ‘the main reality in life and the most important fact of history...Jesus of Nazareth’ (p xvi). It is especially valuable for its compendium of historical interpreters, neatly arranged around key themes and interpretive questions.

Joseph A Marchal (ed), *Studying Paul's Letters: Contemporary Perspectives and Methods* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012; pp xiv + 233, pb, ISBN 9780800698188; £21.99). A collection of papers, originating from SBL presentations, pushing back the boundaries of Pauline scholarship. We are in the territory of spatial, visual, economic, queer... and seven other readings. Even the history chapter is subtitled ‘Which Past? Whose Past?’ We are not in Kansas anymore.

J Patout Burns Jr (trans and ed), *Romans: Interpreted by Early Christian Commentators* (The Church's Bible; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012; pp xxvii + 428, hb, ISBN 9780802825759; £30.99). The fourth volume in Eerdmans' large-page-format compendium of extended citations of early commentaries: nine commentators from the first five Christian centuries are cited at sufficient length to see where their arguments are going. Reread Augustine and Pelagius at first hand! (It would be interesting to hear from any readers who are making use of this series: in what ways have you found it helpful?)

Anthony B Robinson and Robert W Wall, *Called to Lead: Paul's Letters to Timothy for a New Day* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012; pp xv + 239, pb, ISBN 9780802867407; £16.99). A pastor and a biblical scholar think together about the message of a NT book for leadership in the congregation today. An engaging intro locates Paul's mentoring of Timothy in the light of *The King's Speech*: helping the new leader find his voice! It is Paul's departure which is seen to ‘occasion’ the letter, not some supposed heresy or crisis in Ephesus. Each chapter is taken twice—exegetically and then with pastoral warmth. Walter Brueggemann commends the book in a foreword.

Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012; pp xlix + 742, hb, ISBN 9780802824929; £40.99). The familiar NICNT format, addressing ‘the pastor's sermon’ that is Hebrews, emphasizing its appeal to the Old Testament as valid divine revelation which we (today) must not ignore. I liked his handling of 6.4–6 on apostasy and restoration (but, obviously, will not tell you what he said, as if a lengthy commentary could be transmitted via a one-sentence signpost...). But most of all: this volume replaces the older one in this series by F F Bruce. Replaces F F Bruce! Such a thing was surely never envisioned in Israel...

The Editor, rediscovering his desk underneath the pile of books

Humour

Well, maybe these have appeared before, but they've come in from one keen contributor, who may prefer to remain anonymous(?). Anyone found checking on whether

these *have* been in BSB before is advised to get out more...

Where is baseball mentioned in the Bible?

In the big inning! (straight out of both Gen 1.1 and John 1.1...)

What kind of car is mentioned in the Bible?

A Honda—the Apostles all came in one accord.

What US state is mentioned in the Bible?

Arkansas—Noah opened the window and looked out of the ark and saw...

Book Reviews

Emily Arndt, *Demanding Our Attention: The Hebrew Bible as a Source for Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011; pp xvi + 197, pb, ISBN 9780802865694, £19.99)

Emily Arndt focuses on a passage which has always been a rich seam for ethicists: the 'Akedah' or the 'Binding' of Isaac (Gen 22). She makes an impassioned case for the study of the Hebrew Bible ethically. Arndt is herself an ethicist rather than a biblical scholar and this made her approach a valuable one. She begins with a survey of recent explorations into ethics by biblical scholars: Barton, Wenham and Sherwood will be familiar names to students of biblical ethics. Arndt then identifies why the question of the Hebrew Bible and Christian ethics is so pertinent now for the church in a postmodern age.

Arndt goes on to explore how ethicists reading the Hebrew Bible can actually 'stop reading—stop attending to the concerns of the biblical text itself.' She explores the writings of Ronald Green, Philip Quinn and Timothy Jackson to illustrate what she means.

One might then have expected Arndt to turn immediately to her own thesis of how to read the Akedah as a source of ethics for Christians, but instead she turns to three interpreters who exemplify what she believes to be examples of the desired approach in other times and contexts. She argues that each of the readings she explores (that of Kierkegaard, Philip the Chancellor and the Genesis Rabbah) gives 'simultaneous' weight and importance both to the reader's experiences and ideas and to the biblical text itself. I found this emphasis on simultaneity helpful as it made claims for both sides. Arndt claims that Christian ethics must first acknowledge that the Hebrew Bible is authoritative in their ethical tradition 'and then negotiate how that authority functions.' This, then, is the heart of what Arndt is trying to achieve as I understood it, an ethical reading that takes seriously the authority of the Hebrew Bible and the reality of the interpreter's horizons and needs.

Finally, Arndt gives her own reading of the Akedah and of the implicit idea of Other. This might have been just another interesting exegesis except that what Arndt is doing is exploring how the Other is used in the story as an illustration of how Christian ethicists should use the text as Other when reading it: with due rigour and sensitivity, as something that pre-exists and post-dates the reader, granting authority and expecting that as the reader changes, so also the way the text challenges her will change. She argues, intriguingly, that the very critical tools which can seem a threat

to Christians are in fact the means by which we can come to the 'place that God will show' and allow the text to be the sacred text of our time and our place.

Overall, as a call to reading the Hebrew Bible ethically I found this stimulating and challenging. It's a demanding read but well worth it for those who want to engage with the method of doing biblical ethics whilst avoiding both the trap of 'stopping reading' and the trap of discounting the reader's role. Arndt has not entirely resolved the tension between an authoritative text and the claims and needs of the reader but her work is a great stepping stone.

Jenni Williams, Wycliffe Hall, Oxford

Richard S Briggs, *Reading the Bible Wisely: An Introduction to Taking Scripture Seriously* (Revised edition; Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011; pp xii + 153, pb, ISBN 9781610972888, \$19.00)

This is a significant expansion of a book first published in 2003. Of the four new chapters, two are heavily based on the author's recent Grove booklets, B55 and B60, and two are adapted from journal articles in *Anvil*. With this pedigree one might expect the book to give a rather composite impression, yet the reverse is the case. There is a growing sense of coherence as the chapters unfold, through three sections.

The first five chapters introduce the phenomena of Scripture—genre, complexity and variety, the frontier between the testaments, and the key role of Jesus. There is no formula, suggests Briggs, for dealing with texts; you have to relate to them, rather than process them.

The middle section is all about the theology of Scripture. How do you trace the work of God within it, around it and through it? How does it inspire, why was it collected, what sort of response does it claim, and how might you offer this?

Then the final section deals with the business of using Scripture—seeing what is real, listening to God's concerns, and living a responsive life. The main idea is the same as that of Briggs' *Virtuous Reader* (reviewed in BSB 63)—that the text itself both outlines and cultivates the virtues that enable us to read it well. Confidence, openness to be transformed, awareness of God's presence in the world: these qualities are both nurtured and necessary when we deal with Scripture.

The style is compact, fresh and accessible, but this is not a book for a novice Bible-reader. It would serve best a person who knew the Bible pretty well, had plenty of questions, had ceased to be content with tidy cliché, but still wanted a constructive, positive and God-centred relationship with the text.

The price is about twelve pounds for the print edition, or less for Kindle.

John Proctor, Westminster College, Cambridge

Michael J Gorman (ed), *Scripture: An Ecumenical Introduction to the Bible and its Interpretation* (originally: Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005, but from 2011 available through Baker Academic; pp xv + 288, pb, ISBN 9780801046421 [Baker], \$25.00)

(Note: The transfer of most of Hendrickson's academic titles to Baker Academic reminded me of an old review of this book which I never published—that and meeting the delightful Michael Gorman at a conference this summer, who lamented that this volume had not been widely noticed back in 2005. So here are some belated, but

hopefully still edifying, thoughts—Ed.)

This is an extremely well done introduction to handling Scripture today. It will make a very useful resource for anyone beginning biblical studies, and even more so it will be a most convenient refresher for those who studied a while ago and either wish they could remember more than they do, or wonder where the discussion is at these days. It is especially commendable on account of its irenic tone and willingness to avoid needless polarisation.

The book is conceived and presented as a companion volume to Gorman's own *Elements of Biblical Exegesis* (Hendrickson, 2001; revised and expanded edition Baker, 2008). All 14 contributors have been at some time or other members of the St Mary's Ecumenical Institute of Theology in Baltimore, and represent a wide ecumenical range of perspectives.

In part one ('The Bible') seven chapters survey basic information about content and character of the texts, including convenient introductions to noncanonical literature, canon formation, and textual transmission. Part two broadens the scope in more engaging ways, offering nine chapters on 'The Interpretation of the Bible.' These range across chronological periods, different ecclesiastical traditions, and specific concerns such as 'The Bible and Spiritual Growth' and 'The Bible and Social Justice.' Stephen Fowl's chapter on 'Theological and Ideological Strategies of Biblical Interpretation' is a welcome succinct statement of key issues. It is interesting to compare it with the companion chapter on spiritual growth, where we are encouraged to consider the 'necessary dispositions' for Bible reading, as well as being led into meditation and *lectio divina*.

All in all, this book introduces the reader, with all due care and attention to detail, to Scripture as a life giving book of the church(es), rather than a problem to be overcome, and for this we may be grateful.

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Grove Biblical Series —

This month's Grove booklet (B65) is *The Psalms and the Way of the Cross: Six Studies for Individual or Group Use* by Keith Beech-Gruneberg. Keith is a member of the Grove Biblical Group and Director of Local Ministry Training in the Diocese of Oxford.

Individual titles in the Biblical Series are available direct from Grove Books at £3.95 each. Annual subscription (4 books) costs £11.00, a saving of 30%. Call, fax, email sales@grovebooks.co.uk or visit www.grovebooks.co.uk to order.

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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