

# 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 —————

### An Old Testament Textbook for those 'Listening for God'

Many BSB readers will remember the *Scripture and Hermeneutics* series which appeared annually between 2000 and 2007: eight large and vibrant volumes (reviewed in BSB49). The 'Scripture and Hermeneutics Seminar,' the collective of Christian biblical scholars responsible for these works under the watchful supervision and editorship of Craig Bartholomew, has continued to meet annually at the Society of Biblical Literature, and to pursue a range of study and review projects. And now a new volume appears which draws several of its contributors into print again, gathered around the task of leading the reader into Christian engagement with the Old Testament: Craig G Bartholomew and David J H Beldman (eds), *Hearing the Old Testament: Listening for God's Address* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012; pp xvii + 475, pb, ISBN 9780802865618; £12.99).

This remarkably low-priced volume intends to focus on 'listening for God's address' as its distinguishing contribution to Old Testament study. It comes in four unequal parts. Part One, 'The God Who Speaks,' consists of a single programmatic chapter from Bartholomew, outlining what he calls 'a *mere* trinitarian hermeneutic for the Old Testament'. This offers his characteristic blend of philosophy and theological orientation, suggesting that the doctrine of the trinity impresses upon us the need to receive the OT as authoritative Scripture, as a discrete witness within a larger canonical whole. It is not wedded to any one construal of the trinity, hence his use of the qualifier 'mere' (after C S Lewis).

Part Two, 'Learning to Listen,' opens with Al Wolters 'anecdotal survey' of the history of OT interpretation, where 'anecdotal' I think means broad and fairly sweep-

ing. Seven chapters follow on 'X and OT Interpretation,' where the X is, variously: philosophy, literary approaches, history, biblical theology, canon, ethics and mission. These are all helpful overviews. On occasion one wonders whether the structure of some of these chapters tends towards offering an intense critique of more critical approaches, highlighting their problems, and then falling back to a somewhat less scrutinised option of a more traditional nature. The result, perhaps less here than in some other projects of this kind, is that the traditional view is not fully expounded and explored, and its weaknesses are let off rather more lightly than those of other perspectives.

Part Three, 'Hearing the Old Testament,' addresses the OT canon in six disparate groupings: Pentateuch, Historical Books, Psalms, Other Wisdom, Major Prophets, Minor Prophets. One could ponder what is at stake theologically in dividing the canon up this way, but perhaps it was a purely pragmatic decision (though that would sit oddly with some of the things Bartholomew writes about the key significance for interpretation of one's frameworks and undeclared assumptions). Again these are all strong surveys, but I will permit myself one observation, below, regarding how I was left slightly puzzled. Finally, Part Four, 'Hearing and Proclaiming the Old Testament,' again has only one chapter: Aubrey Spears 'Preaching the Old Testament,' which offers many helpful philosophical reflections on homiletics, and is drawn to de Lubac and the four-fold sense of Scripture. Spears makes some probing points, though I think it might be a stretch for the kind of reader envisaged by some other chapters.

And now my question, which I will illustrate with respect to the 23-page 'Hearing the Pentateuch,' by Gordon Wenham, a chapter that is—as one would expect—a master-class in reviewing the basic interpretative approaches, followed by a wise and perceptive review of how various sections of the Pentateuch trace out some key issues and perspectives. I would recommend all that without reservation. The oddity is that he opens with a quick rehearsal of shifting interpretative paradigms, which ends with 'In what follows I shall try to show how these approaches illuminate the message of the Pentateuch' (p 235). This he does excellently. And then he concludes with 'This attempt at a trinitarian reading of the Pentateuch...' (p 253). But I wonder: what was trinitarian about it? His final two paragraphs, on 'the essential contribution of a trinitarian hermeneutic,' are basically saying that God and theology are key. But there is nothing on the trinity, nor really anything on the second and third persons of the trinity. So I am left wondering whether what all this is really about is theological interpretation, rather than trinitarian interpretation. (Wenham's chapter is, I think, one of the strongest: some contributors do not attempt to tie their contributions to the trinitarian rubric. The other piece which does offer real connections with both trinitarian concerns and the significance of 'hearing' is Richard Schultz's fine essay on the major prophets, aided of course by the fact that hearing is a key theme within that collection.)

Actually, I have another question. Notably, only once in the whole book does any contributor ask the question: Does YHWH = the Father; or does YHWH = the trinitarian three-in-one God? (Thus Chris Wright, on pp 193–95, whose answer slides from the latter to the former via also saying that the NT affirms of *Jesus* what the OT affirms of YHWH: but at the very least Wright is surely addressing all the right issues). Overall I think I would have welcomed a little more clarification of what is really being urged and a little less on how important it is.

Okay, I have many more questions (such as why all the contributors are men; what difference it makes that all, excepting Wright and Wenham, work in North America;...), but this review is already too long. And I think all will benefit from engaging with the issues this book brings into focus.

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

## News and Notes

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Late 2012, and it turned out that Jesus had a wife! A published fragment from Harvard said so. A couple of days later, and it turned out that he probably didn't. Were we all holding our breath?

Credit to Harvard Professor Karen King for actually publishing proper photographs of the manuscript fragment in question. Among various responses, Francis Watson, currently finishing up a major book on gospels canonical and non-canonical, suggested that the text in question was in part a less than entirely ancient collection of citations from the Gospel of Thomas. Details are available at, for example, Mark Goodacre's NT blog. There were also some different responses on the Tyndale House website.

Any readers like to suggest what manuscript 'finds' might hit headlines in 2013? And how many of those will we still be talking about in 2014?

## Humour

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Kudos to Eerdmans, for the republication—indeed the second edition!—of the legendary collection of essays in honour of a theologian who never existed: Martin E Marty and Jerald C Brauer's *The Unrelieved Paradox. Studies in the Theology of Franz Bibfeldt* (originally Eerdmans, 1994; now republished in 2012, ISBN 9780802869784, \$20.00). The new edition, with a couple of extra pieces, is subtitled *18<sup>th</sup> or Perhaps 19<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Revised Edition*. For those not paying attention, this book, as described in BSB56 back in 2010, is a collection of spoof essays, sending up everything from hermeneutics and exegesis through to his famous thesis on 'The Theological Significance of the Year Zero' and his great work of pastoralia: *Pastoral Care for the Dead*. Buy this book for all your too-serious friends. I don't know how Eerdmans do it, but it's great to see someone enjoying themselves in theological publishing...

## Book Notes

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### New on the Old Testament

This issue we catch up on some recent Old Testament studies:

Gregory Mobley, *The Return of the Chaos Monsters—And Other Backstories of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012; pp xii + 155, pb, ISBN 9780802837462, £10.99). Mobley offers a kind of narrative Christian theology of the Old Testament, by way of

seeking out ‘backstories’—which undergird and illuminate the contours of the text. This is a wonderfully engaging book, written with passion and much acute insight. He is indebted to his Harvard teachers Jon Levenson and James Kugel for many fine Jewish theological insights too. The title refers to Genesis 1’s marginalising of the ‘defeat of chaos’ version of creation, which is the focus of the opening chapter. A most enjoyable study.

Philip F Esler, *Sex, Wives, and Warriors: Reading Old Testament Narrative with its Ancient Audience* (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co, 2012; pp xi + 408, pb, ISBN 9780227679913, £27.50). James Clarke are producing UK editions of books published by the remarkable Wipf and Stock press from Eugene, Oregon. Esler’s work fundamentally explores bringing together anthropological and narrative approaches to OT narratives, interestingly drawing on Christopher Booker’s *Seven Basic Plots*. Eight detailed studies follow: two each on wives and sex; four on warriors. Apart from Genesis 38 and Judith, all the examples are from 1–2 Samuel. Each study is fascinating and thought-provoking: social context insights at their most perceptive.

Thomas W Mann, *The Book of the Former Prophets* (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co, 2012; pp xi + 443, pb, ISBN 9780227680100, £30.50). Mann’s *Book of the Torah* was an incisive little ‘reading’ of the Torah, back in 1988. This is touted as a ‘sequel,’ though it is comparatively much longer: not just 450 pages, but large ones, in double column format. It is, however, just as good: a literarily and theologically acute reading with historical sensitivity, straightforwardly arranged with one chapter per book (oddly including Ruth). It is perhaps rather US-orientated for UK readers, but most of the illustrations are comprehensible. From the intro I note ‘Anyone who is uncomfortable with the notion that God might curse a nation as well as bless it should not read the Former Prophets, because that is the premise behind the whole narrative’ (p 11). And from the conclusion: ‘Overall, the Former Prophets is a theodicy...it attempts to show how God is good despite all the evil that has consumed Israel’ (p 383).

Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipated Word* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012; pp xv + 158, hb, ISBN 9780800698973, £16.99). 60+ books in, and Brueggemann is still going strong, still exploring imagination as a key rubric (with a nice nod to Barth on p 106), and still voicing a Scripture-soaked alternative to the dominant narratives of our world. This is not the place for a critical engagement, though I wonder if the time may now be ripe for something which really investigates his ‘central thesis’ about imagining God as ‘a real character and the defining agent in the world’? But this new book revisits ‘prophetic’ imagination, which remains a more helpful idea, I think, than his sometime alternative the ‘postmodern’ imagination. The focus is on sustaining our preaching, which it will surely do well. As always: energising, envisioning, and full of freshly-contextualised insights.

Paul Hedley Jones, *Sharing God’s Passion: Prophetic Spirituality* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2012; pp xvi + 284, pb, ISBN 9781842277454, £16.99). In something of the spirit of Brueggemann, Jones examines narratives of prophetic figures in Scripture: 12 from the OT, then also John the Baptist and two chapters on Jesus. He looks to draw out ‘spiritual virtues’ (p 200) adding up to a kind of ‘prophetic paradigm,’ which then is held out for all God’s people (via Numbers 11—‘that all would be prophets’—and a brief conclusion about the early church in Acts). My favourite quote concerned Hosea with regard to his strong gender-specific imagery: he did not just

'use such images to deliberately offend women. Actually, [he] offended everyone' (p 138). The book brings the prophets alive through careful reading of a range of narratives, and each chapter ends with 'Dig Deeper' questions for reflection, so that overall this feels like being led through some reflective studies by a sure guide.

*The Editor*

## Readers' Responses —

Further to our brief notes in BSB56 about the new *Old Testament for Everyone* series, we have a view from reader Dr David Williams in Cambridge:

I have to confess that I am neither a theologian nor a biblical studies guru, as you might have noted from my Grove booklet *Animal Rights, Human Responsibilities?* (E151). But I revel in work that opens up the Bible to Christians such as myself and as such I really enjoy the Grove Biblical Series. Hence you will not be surprised to know that I devoured Tom Wright's *New Testament for Everyone* commentaries as they came out year by year. Yet niggling away at the back of my mind from my first volume of Wright's series was who would take on the Herculean task of the *Old Testament for Everyone*? So imagine my delight when out came *Genesis for Everyone* by John Goldingay. I had enjoyed reading Goldingay's *Songs from a Strange Land* (on the Psalms) and *God's Prophet, God's Servant* (on Isaiah and Jeremiah) back as a student in the early 1980s, and now equally value reading his reflections on the Old Testament in this new series.

As with Wright's New Testament contributions Goldingay provides his own translation of the passage and then a perceptive and very personal commentary on it. As I say I am no Old Testament scholar so can't comment on the accuracy of these often new (well to me at least) insights. Goldingay uses the phrase *Yahweh Armies*, for what is translated 'Lord of Hosts' in many modern Bibles, which gives a new perspective on how Israel saw their God, to give just one example. But perhaps the most revealing part of these commentaries is how Goldingay relates the passage to himself. In the beginning of the first of two Genesis volumes he tells us of his wife Ann's long struggle with multiple sclerosis, how that affected both of their lives and how his Old Testament studies brought a different perspective to their troubles. Soon he tells us that Ann has died, and I guess that perhaps writing these commentaries is somewhat of a way of working through that immense grief. So here we see not just the thoughts of someone who has been immersed in Old Testament studies for years, but someone for whom keeping on reading the Old Testament for himself and writing about it for us, is having a daily impact on his life. And that is a very special read. Thank you John.

*Dr David L Williams, Cambridge*

## Book Review —

Richard N Longenecker, *Introducing Romans: Critical Issues in Paul's Most Famous Letter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011; pp xxvii + 490, pb, ISBN 9780802866196, £26.99)

Richard Longenecker is in the process of writing a major commentary on Romans (for the *New International Greek Testament Commentary* series). In this volume he presents at length the kind of material one would expect to see in the introduction to a commentary. So there is discussion of the letter's author, its date, its addressees, its purpose, its text, rhetorical and epistolary features underlying it, major interpretative approaches and the letter's central thrust before (in the book's final part) Longenecker goes through the letter section by section to seek to show how it fits together. The scale of Longenecker's work is apparent from the fact that this concluding section itself takes 80 pages and almost functions as a mini-commentary on Romans!

In general Longenecker provides helpful summaries of key issues in the scholarly discussion of Romans which might be a good way in for those who want to get a sense of that discussion, as well as giving his own position. Perhaps his most significant contention is that the whole church in Rome, Gentile as well as Jewish, was heavily influenced by Jewish forms of Christianity, so in chapters 1–4 Paul is setting out the gospel as those at Rome would already have understood it, while in chapters 5–8 Paul sets out the gospel as he presents it to Gentiles. Paul's goal is to show to the Romans that these two understandings are complementary.

Often the material in this book stands in its own right. However its character as companion to the forthcoming commentary sometimes becomes apparent, with argument of a point being left to the discussion in the commentary. Given the amount that has been written on Romans, and the complexity of Paul's thought, it is inevitable that even in a work of this length there is only so much that can be covered. However, I suspect I will not be the only reader frustrated to be told repeatedly that I will need to wait for a forthcoming book to conclude something begun here.

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

## Grove Biblical Series —

This month's Grove booklet (B66) is *Born Again? — What Did Jesus Mean?* by R Alastair Campbell (formerly Tutor in New Testament Studies, Spurgeon's College).

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](mailto:sales@grovebooks.co.uk) or visit [www.grovebooks.co.uk](http://www.grovebooks.co.uk) to order.

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