

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 —————

IVP's 'big black dictionary' series rolls on...the third OT volume is just out, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writings* (eds Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns; Nottingham: IVP, 2008; ISBN 978 1 84474 306 3, xxiv + 967pp, hb, £32.99). The standard is up to the usual strengths of the series: thorough explorations of focused topics, up-to-date bibliographies, even-handed weighing of options. Negatively, there is a persistent tendency to favour traditionally conservative views: not exclusively so, but occasionally annoyingly so, although several times I discovered some heavy-handed treatment in one place, eg of the canon, balanced by a more wide-ranging opinion elsewhere. 143 articles cover most of what one might look for, with some repetition as many specific topics come up in longer articles too. Entries on particular books are split into multiple sections such as 'ANE background' or 'history of interpretation,' although where one author wrote most of the sections this seemed odd. The coverage relates to 'the writings' except Daniel, Chronicles and Ezra–Nehemiah, plus (briefly) Ben Sira and Wisdom of Solomon. If I have a reservation it is that this is an odd sub-section of the canon to go looking for an article on, say, 'rhetorical criticism,' 'satan' or 'time,' although it does work well for topics like 'imprecation' or 'wisdom theology.' But that aside, this will be a ready resource for those times when I am indeed working on one of the books covered here, and several pieces are models of introductory orientation.

Richard S Briggs, Cranmer Hall, Durham

Comments on Conferences—

This year's British New Testament Conference—the 27th meeting and possibly the largest, with almost 200 people present—squeezed into St John's College, Durham, one wet weekend in September. The local organization was smooth, the bookstalls lavish and tempting, and the programme fascinating and full. John Barclay spoke in the opening plenary about contrasting visions of grace in Romans and in the Wisdom of Solomon. The author of Wisdom wanted to understand God's election, and to see reasons for his favour. Whereas for Paul, grace is a more anomalous and inscrutable quality, grounded in the strange contradictions of the cross.

The other plenaries were interestingly varied: Eddie Adams on early Christian meeting-places, Loveday Alexander on classical literary motifs in Acts, and a swift tour by Dale Martin of angel and demon language in Jewish and Greek literature. He concluded that demons are not, in the NT period, fallen angels. They are located and somewhat animal-like (theriomorphic), whereas angels are anthropomorphic beings of cosmic significance. All of this sheds light on NT usage, and some will find it pastorally relevant too. One suspected that Martin might be working out a book-length treatment of this material.

Then there were seminars. I went to the one on Revelation, chaired with warmth and expertise by Grove's own Ian Paul. We enjoyed papers on Revelation and environmental ethics, on Revelation and Greco-Roman games (struggle, assembly, emperor worship, death and glory, if you're wondering what possible connections there could be), and on a survey of twentieth century Revelation scholarship.

So on to Aberdeen in 2009 (September 3–5) and Bangor in 2010. See you there?

John Proctor, Westminster College, Cambridge

Books on Christian Faith and the Environment —————

If this month's Grove Booklet stimulates you to read more about this issue, here is a brief review of some of the most recent Christian books on the subject—all published in the last two years.

Perhaps the easiest read, and one for those who like their books short and simple, is Dave Bookless' *Planetwise: Dare to Care for God's World* (ISBN 978 1844742516; IVP, 2008). The book sets out to explore 'the story of God and the whole of creation' (p 18) and does so within a five-part framework which views God's dealings with his world as a drama in five acts: creation, fall, Israel, Jesus and the present/future age. It is a book full of stories and personal reflections, as well as perceptive discussion questions at the end of each chapter and suggestions for practical action at the end. Its accessible style and brevity means that it sometimes oversimplifies complex theological ideas; nevertheless a helpful and useful resource.

Those who wish to engage with the scientific, social and economic implications of

global warming, as well as theological responses to it, should read *Christianity, Climate Change and Sustainable Living* by Nick Spencer and Robert White (ISBN 978 0281058334; SPCK, 2007). Written by an economist and a geo-physicist, the book explains the science of climate change as well as offering a biblical theology of creation care. It then looks more widely at a range of social and economic issues arising from our unsustainable lifestyles and proposes an alternative biblical vision for a sustainable society based around the prophetic vision of Isaiah. The final part offers a Christian response—both in a series of principles and a range of practical suggestions at local, national and international levels. It's a book full of data, analysis and biblical reflection, as well as suggesting some ways that change might be implemented

In *Cherishing the Earth: How to Care for God's Creation* (ISBN 978 0825462757; Monarch, 2008), Martin and Margot Hodson bring together their scientific and theological perspectives to explore spiritual as well as technological resources for living sustainably. The book delves into a wide range of issues, from the importance of biodiversity to the impact of climate change on the global South, from biblical models of husbandry and leadership to examples of organizations already addressing environmental issues. It is a journey of hope as well as of challenge and offers an infectious enthusiasm for a better way of living. If you like your reading matter to be gentle perceptive reflection rather than facts, figures and systems, this is the book for you.

For a more serious read on the ethics of climate change, invest in a copy of Michael Northcott's *A Moral Climate: the Ethics of Global Warming* (ISBN 978 0232526684; DLT, 2007). This book tracks some of the philosophical and economic ideas which have profoundly influenced Western society and led to our dependence on fossil fuels—a dependence which takes no account of the limited resources of earth nor our need for community. Northcott draws a parallel with the biblical world of ancient Israel and in particular Solomon's profligate use of cedar trees for his own ambitious building projects. Throughout the book he weaves together reflection on biblical texts with incisive comment on contemporary issues. He ends with a celebration of the ancient virtue of wisdom, and highlights our need to be rooted in community and to have a sense of place. It is a challenging, provocative book which seeks to reclaim true Christian values of respect for the earth and all its inhabitants.

Finally, and by no means least, the second part of the story of A Rocha has now been written by its founder, Peter Harris. Entitled *Kingfisher's Fire* (ISBN 978 1854248480; Monarch, 2008—you'll have to read it to grasp the title!), it follows the story told in *Under the Bright Wings* of the beginnings of this Christian conservation organization twenty-five years ago in Portugal. Now A Rocha has projects in nearly twenty countries and Peter explores the development of this global family, each project serving its local community and bringing hope and new life to rural and urban areas. The book is a delightful blend of personal story, theological reflection and passionate vision.

Hilary Marlow, Faraday Institute of Science and Religion, Cambridge

Comments on Commentaries—

The Book of Esther has had a controversial career. Christian readers have often given it a negative assessment. That the first Christian commentary did not appear until the

ninth century illustrates its traditionally marginal status. By contrast, Esther has always been enthusiastically embraced within Judaism. These starkly different receptions in the two communities have recently been overturned, with much more positive Christian appraisals of the book. Yet good commentaries remain thin on the ground.

For those curious to know how things used to be, **Paton's** old volume (ICC, 1908) exemplifies the old school of liberal Christian commentary, questioning the book's place in the Christian canon and judging it to be ethically and theologically bankrupt.

A very good orientation to contemporary scholarship, though not a commentary *per se*, is **Larkin**, *Ruth and Esther* (OT Guides, Sheffield, 1996). It provides a readable survey of current thinking on the book's theological, historical and literary worth, as well as issues arising from the very different Greek versions. However, matters have moved on a little since its publication.

Good general purpose commentaries on Esther which should nurture thoughtful ministry include **Bush**, *Ruth, Esther* (Word, 1996). Some parts of this require a detailed knowledge of Hebrew, but the format of the Word series means non-specialists can still find much helpful material. An extensive introduction includes an excellent section on theme, purpose and theology. Less detailed and more attuned to issues arising in ministry is **Day** (Abingdon, 2005). Each section of Esther is given a literary, exegetical and theological analysis, plus suggestions for relating the book to contemporary issues. Others worth considering in this category are **Reid** (Tyndale, 2008) and the volume it replaced in the same series by **Baldwin** (1984). Both provide the end results of close engagement with the text from an evangelical perspective, though naturally Baldwin's volume is beginning to show its age. Even older, but worth picking up second-hand is **Moore's** *Anchor Bible* volume (1971). An extensive introduction deals with canonicity, history of reception, Septuagint, style, etc, followed by a solid commentary. **Clines**, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (NCB, 1984), is very helpful while being not too technical. **Huey** (Expositor's 1988) is also a balanced commentary with suggestive remarks, conservative yet creative.

Further volumes which stand out for their attention to theological issues are **Bechtel** (Interpretation, 2002), in a series designed specifically for preachers and teachers, and **Crawford** (New Interpreter's Bible, 1999), which provides a helpful, creative treatment of the text, with suggestive comments for contemporary application.

Recent trends in literary interpretation of biblical texts have produced some remarkable reassessments of the book. Not that long ago the received wisdom was that Esther was driven by its plot and its characters were one-dimensional and undeveloped. **Fox**, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (2nd ed, 2001), on the other hand, convincingly shows the complexity of its characters. This volume includes a commentary on the entire book, but its main contribution is a detailed assessment of major characters, including God (despite his absence). There is plenty here to stimulate creative application in a ministry context. **Beal** (in Linafelt and Beal, *Ruth and Esther*, Berit Olam, 1999) presents a more challenging interpretation from a postmodern perspective. The emphasis here is on narrative artistry and the (alleged) thoroughgoing ambiguity of the book. The theological possibilities of the text are generally resisted. Likely to produce some disagreement from most readers, it is recommended for those who enjoy a vigorous debate with a commentator.

Recommended for providing a Jewish perspective, which should widen the horizons of Christian readers, is the excellent volume by **Levenson** (OTL, 1997). Particularly

good on literary matters and rabbinic insights, it takes a relatively optimistic view of the book's theological worth. This is a major contribution which should be near the top of anybody's 'must buy' list. Also very good, but more literary and less theological is **Berlin** (JPS, 2001).

There are numerous more popular-level commentaries, but most fail to acknowledge the difficulties in the book, and especially at the theological level reflect the presuppositions of their authors rather than the message of the text. The pick of the bunch in this category is **McConville**, *Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther* (DSB, 1985). Though brief, it is insightful and well suited to a lay readership.

Laurence Turner

Principal Lecturer in Old Testament at Newbold College, Bracknell, Berks

Book Reviews

Geoffrey W Grogan, *Psalms* (The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), ISBN 978 0 8028 2706 7, pp xi, 490, pb £13.99.

This new series of commentaries highlights the theological character of the text rather than detailed issues of exegesis and interpretation. The most unusual aspect of this volume is the space devoted to comment on individual Psalms (188 pages) compared to general theological reflection (199 pages). The former combines general comment on sections of the Psalm with observations on key words and a welcome interest in the canonical sequence of the Psalter. The theological section has extensive discussion of the Psalter's key theological themes, its contribution to biblical theology, and its modern relevance. In line with the goals of the series there are many good things affirmed, and it is stimulating to find the Psalms in conversation with a wide range of ethical and theological issues. However, the brief Appendix on preparing a sermon on a Psalm focused a question I had. How far is this commentary meant to be read through, and how far is it meant to be a resource for the preacher? Comments on a Psalm can be found in potentially four different sections of the book, and this makes exploring a Psalm or a theme more difficult, although there is a helpful subject index. This may partly explain why I found it solid rather than inspiring. Preachers may prefer the more integrated commentaries by J L Mays (1994) or J Goldingay (2006–8). Nevertheless, anyone who works through this will receive a fine introduction to the importance of the Psalms for life and faith.

Philip Jenson, Ridley Hall, Cambridge

Ruth Anne Reese contributes to the *Two Horizons New Testament Commentary* a volume on 2 Peter and Jude (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2007; ISBN 978 0802825704, pp x, 234; pb). She treats these two epistles separately, giving almost equal space to each. And within each half of the book, she assigns nearly as many pages to reflecting on the theological themes of the letter, as she does to sequential comment on the text. Jude, she finds, is principally concerned with division in the church and denial of God, with keeping the faith and being kept by grace. In 2 Peter she gives most attention to christology, ethics and eschatology (the main themes of

chapters 1 and 3 of the letter, while chapter 2 is rather similar to material in Jude).

We surely need commentaries that help us think doctrinally about texts; this volume certainly does. There is depth in it, and care, and pastoral insight too. One vital response to division and dispute in the church must be patient and persistent attention to holiness. This advice—Jude's, and Reese's (p 101)—will not go stale.

John Proctor, Westminster College, Cambridge

Klyne R Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2008), ISBN 978 0 8028 4241 1, pp xviii, 846.

For once, here is a book whose title and cover blurbs are accurate. The fruit of years of teaching experience and research by a seasoned scholar, this is simply the finest single volume I have seen on the parables that could function as a textbook for a serious course as well as a helpful tool for a preacher. Succinct, clear and accessible (despite its size), it is structured to answer the key questions either brought to or arising from the texts. Snodgrass pays good attention to parallels in other primary sources that shed light, as well as to the history of interpretation; he summarizes the most important contributions (including the work of Ken Bailey, whose cultural insights are particularly enlightening) for each parable of Jesus. Readers may not always agree with the author's preference among the interpretative options, but they will come away with a solid education and appreciation for the depth of Jesus' parables. We will be using it next term as required reading for an MA course on the parables in the Cambridge Theological Federation, but don't let that put the average reader off. Highly recommended!

Michael Thompson, Ridley Hall, Cambridge

Grove Biblical Series

This month's Grove booklet (B50) is *The Earth is the Lord's: A Biblical Response to Environmental Issues* by Hilary Marlow. Hilary is a member of the Grove Biblical Series editorial group and a Research Associate in theology and the environment at the Faraday Institute for Science and Religion. Her book on reading the Old Testament in the light of environmental ethics, *Let the Earth Sing*, will be published by OUP in 2009.

Individual titles in the Biblical Series are available direct from Grove Books at **£3.50** each. Annual subscription (4 books) costs **£10.00, a saving of 28%**. 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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ISSN: 1365-6090