

BOOK REVIEWS

General

Blake and the Bible.

Christopher Rowland, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010. Pp. xx + 289. Hbk.

This is a quite remarkable book, an investigation of William Blake's engagement with the Bible, and of his biblical hermeneutics. It is a book to be read and savoured, not merely by Blake's admirers, nor just by those who would read the Bible, but by all those who grapple with the tension between the Spirit and authority. Christopher Rowland is himself a very careful reader of biblical texts, and has no hesitation in classing Blake as 'a brilliant biblical interpreter – eccentric perhaps, but one of Britain's most insightful exegetes'. Blake is, however, an interpreter quite different from most practitioners of biblical hermeneutics, and one who asks very critical questions of them. In particular, Rowland assesses Blake's Job engravings as biblical exegesis, and how Blake engages the reader and the viewer, inviting us to have our 'perception cleansed', so that we can learn to see, with Blake, God as an immanent divine presence, and to favour 'the practice of forgiveness of sins rather than a divinity located in heaven above requiring sacrifice for sin'.

This is a book that no one else could have written; for Rowland brings to it not only his renowned exegetical skills, as befits the Dean Ireland's Professor of Exegesis of Holy Scripture, but also a remarkable gift for reading a painting, and for picking up Blake's allusions to Old and New Testament texts. Rowland also shares with Blake the profound sense that Scripture needs to deal with the constraints of human existence; reading the Bible is more than a matter of seeing the marks on a page, for 'concealed in the religion of obligation is a gracious promise of liberation'. Blake, he argues, is a serious theologian, who knew enough Hebrew to make it work for him, and to serve his profoundly theological purpose. In some ways chapter 4 is the heart of this enterprise, aptly entitled 'Exploring the constraints in divinity'; Blake is, it turns out, deeply sensitive to the complex understanding of God in the Old Testament. This is an issue that, as Rowland points out, has 'taxed the greatest theological minds of Christendom'; for Blake, we should be thinking of 'differing kinds of divine activity' in a kind of dialectical relationship. Blake has, according to Professor Rowland, anticipated

questions about the nature of monotheism in antiquity raised by several biblical scholars today. Blake has a powerful ability to make us see things differently, ‘the doors of perception cleansed’, and a determination to challenge orthodox Christianity’s emphasis on ‘restraint of desire’, and the too ready linkage that it makes between energy, desire, and the work of Satan. For Blake, ‘Jesus was all virtue, and acted from impulse, not from rules’; and, more striking yet, he holds that ‘Christ died as an unbeliever’.

Blake was, moreover ‘one of the earliest commentators on the Book of Enoch, a book whose importance he grasped, and whose import he succeeded in communicating’. For Blake, who objected strongly to the use made by Christianity of the Book of Genesis, original sin is not so much a refusal to obey the divine monarch, as simply male violence, and the terrible effects that it has brought about. Blake saw himself standing in the prophetic tradition, not just Ezekiel and John of Patmos (though certainly them), but also Joanna Southcott and Richard Brothers: prophecy is a *present* reality, and requires the creative use of the imagination ‘to discern the eternal in the midst of history’. Prophecy is, for both Blake and Rowland, not about a time long ago, but about the present, and is a pointer to what is going on in the world. Blake is sharply critical of ‘a religion which places institution and rituals above the needs of people’. What marks out all the radicals to whom Blake was heir is their stress on the importance of knowing God over against knowing Scripture; Blake wants to break the ‘mind-forged manacles’ of religion.

As Rowland shows, Blake is an interesting and original theologian. In his poem on the extraordinary story that of the woman taken in adultery (John 8:1-11), Jesus is ‘not portrayed as a teacher of chastity or moral virtue so much as one who enables space for the woman to enjoy discovering (or, better according to Blake *rediscovering*) the human form divine in herself’ (p.190). Rowland draws an interesting analogy with Paul, whom he sees as a mystic rather than primarily an interpreter of the Bible: Paul differs from contemporary Judaism in that he sees Scripture as a general guide for life, not for literal implementation of all the laws; but that does not make Paul antinomian, in the sense of arguing against moral discipline for believers. In this context, Rowland offers a rich, and highly illuminating, six-fold typology of antinomianism, exploring the links between Blake and Paul, and stressing the relatively lax attitude to law in early Christianity, which Rowland expresses with immense delicacy: ‘Antinomianism is the other side of the coin from eschatology.

The two together are the key to comprehend the motor of novelty which is at the heart of early Christian identity' (p. 206).

One of the great strengths of this book lies in Rowland's ability to locate Blake's insights in modern scholarly understanding of, for example, the Pauline corpus; and readers interested in that area will find themselves enormously enriched by studying this book. Blake is awash with challenging insights, that we shall do well to reflect upon: 'All Bibles or sacred Codes have been the causes of ... errors'; 'everything that lives is Holy' (a central plank, this); the Bible should not be a text to police people, but 'fill'd with Imagination and Visions...not with Moral Virtues'. We need also to listen to Rowland thinking aloud, meditating what it is that we do when we do biblical interpretation. For 'early Christian writers ... never allowed what had been written in the past to determine what God's Spirit was calling people to in the present', he argues, and 'The Bible is an aid to sight rather than the goal of what one might be looking for'. And, finally, in quest of how old images are to be reborn: '... texts are less an object to be explained than a stimulus to the exploration of the imaginative space that biblical texts may offer'. There is much to challenge and inspire here, not only for admirers of the extraordinarily gifted William Blake, but also for all those who want biblical scholarship to rediscover its soul.

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New Testament

The Living Paul: An Introduction to the Apostle and his Thought.

Anthony C. Thiselton, London: SPCK, 2009. Pp. x + 190. Pbk.

There are many introductions to Paul and the Pauline letters. One might therefore be forgiven for wondering whether yet another is called for. Yet such reservations would be premature in this case. Anthony Thiselton is an experienced teacher and an accomplished New Testament scholar, well-known both for his work on Paul (notably on 1 Corinthians) and for wider issues of New Testament hermeneutics. In this volume, he brings his significant learning, familiarity with the scholarly literature and communication skills to the task of providing an introduction to the apostle, his ministry and his theological vision which is both profound and accessible to those seeking a way into the apostle's thought and writings.

Thiselton begins with two chapters exploring some of the difficulties contemporary readers of the New Testament have with Paul: whether because of the imagined gulf between him and Jesus (on which he sides with David Wenham in emphasizing the continuities), or between his radical conversion on the Damascus Road and the more mundane experience of most Christians. In regard to the latter issue, Thiselton makes a good case for this ‘immense cut’ in Paul’s thought being less about his own psychology than about the apocalyptic ‘new creation’ in Christ, which entails a process and not simply one dramatic event.

The following two chapters describe the main stages of Paul’s life and ministry, combining Paul’s own letters with a judicious use of Acts. Given Thiselton’s own scholarly interest in the Corinthian correspondence, his vivid description of Paul’s Corinth is one of the highlights of this part of the book.

The remaining chapters are more explicitly theological. He begins with an exploration of Paul’s preferred christological titles: whilst acknowledging their existential significance, he leaves room for an ontological dimension. His treatment of the concept of lordship in the ancient world is particularly illuminating. He then moves from Christ to God (why not the other way round?), though showing how what he says about Christ makes a difference to Paul’s inherited Jewish doctrine of God. Further chapters deal with Pauline pneumatology, soteriology, ecclesiology and Baptism and Eucharist. Thiselton is particularly good on Paul’s theological anthropology, reminding us that the decisive question for Paul is not ‘Is Christ truly human?’ but ‘Are *we* truly human?’

Perhaps most distinctive about Thiselton’s book, distinguishing it from other introductions, is the final chapter on Paul and postmodernity. By treating postmodernism as a mood rather than a period (reminding him of the mood of first-century Corinth), Thiselton is able to set up a dialogue between Paul and some of postmodernism’s key figures, in which Paul becomes both a sympathetic and a critical dialogue partner.

As in any attempt to describe Paul’s theological thinking, this book has had to make decisions about starting-point and organization. The theological chapter headings reflect those of a Christian systematic theology (Christ, God, Spirit, humanity etc., though not, e.g. the doctrine of creation). While this interpretative grid may not be inappropriate, there are other ways of systematizing Paul’s thought. One might have hoped for a more explicit articulation of the rationale for the chosen framework. There are other occasional little slips. When discussing the ‘new

perspective’, for example, Thiselton names Terence Donaldson along with James Dunn as one of its defenders, yet Donaldson’s work is cited neither in the relevant footnote (p. 98, n. 27) nor in the bibliography.

These quibbles aside, this is an excellent introduction to the apostle to the Gentiles, exposing the reader to a wide range of Pauline scholars (mainly modern, although some more ancient interpreters are also included) in order to show how the scholarly land lies. Most importantly, Thiselton succeeds in showing the reader how Paul’s thinking works from the inside, and in teasing out resonances for our contemporary world while avoiding simplistic equations between first and twenty-first century contexts. This book could be recommended to undergraduates beginning their study of Paul, but also to clergy and laypeople wishing to engage intelligently with the Pauline letters.

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Reading Romans in Pompeii: Paul’s Letter at Ground Level.

Peter Oakes, London: SPCK/Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009. Pp. xiii + 194. Pbk.

The sheer theological complexity of Paul’s Letter to the Romans has given it a prominent place in the history of ideas, especially in Western Europe. Yet this has the danger of turning a letter penned to a diverse set of first-century Christians into a theological abstraction. Peter Oakes’s fascinating book, provoked by two visits to the ruined town of Pompeii, redresses the balance in a strikingly imaginative way. For Oakes, the excavations of different types of dwelling and workshop at Pompeii offer a precision which enable us to see diverse ordinary lives with a degree of roundedness rarely encountered by New Testament scholars. They challenge the rather monochrome image of the ‘craftworker’, regarded in many social-scientific reconstructions as the typical member of the Pauline churches. Analysis of two houses in the Insula of the Menander, for example, reveals that the cabinet-maker and his household occupied a space some twelve times the size of the stoneworkers. Walking the streets of Pompeii also forces a rethink of the scholarly presumption – typified in Jerome Murphy-O’Connor’s analysis of a villa at Anaploga as a typical meeting place for Corinthian Christians – that most early Christians met in elite houses, thereby breaking down a sharp distinction between churches meeting in houses and those in apartment blocks.

What Oakes attempts in this book is a subtle and careful application of evidence from the evidence-rich Pompeii to the rather different situation of Rome in Paul's day, in order to consider how Romans might have sounded to different social types in their particular social locations. He posits four imaginary first-century hearers, representatives of different social types: Holconius the cabinet-maker; the slave Primus; Sabina the stoneworker (and therefore much less socially privileged than her fellow craftsperson Holconius), and Iris, a slave barmaid. Among his reasonable adjustments to a Roman location is his recognition that a cabinet-maker such as Holconius would have been able to afford smaller accommodation in the capital (thus the church meeting in his dwelling in Rome would have been about 30 as opposed to the 40 he could accommodate in Pompeii).

The book contains some stimulating re-readings of Romans in the light of Oakes's careful analysis. In a translation and running commentary on Romans 12, for example, he considers how this chapter would have been heard by members of a craftworker house church in an apartment block in Transtiberium (Trastevere). This enables sharper focus to be given, e.g. to the exhortation to 'offer your bodies as a living sacrifice' (Rom. 12:1), an action possible even for slaves, who were unable to afford to sacrifice the 'body' of an ox. Oakes's reading also brings to the fore issues of patronage and fictive kinship. Equally stimulating reading of other sections of Romans are found throughout the book.

Acknowledging the limitations of a twenty-first-century reader's attempt to hear Romans from these four standpoints, Oakes nonetheless shows how such attempts yielded four different readings. For Primus, Romans' promise of justice and a consequent changed status (including the staggering claim that this slave was a 'son of God') come to the fore. Sabina, in a more tenuous economic position as a freed slave with a low-value craft, would hear those aspects of Romans which offered encouragement in a life of struggle. Iris might detect particular resonances between her own situation of sexual exploitation and the 'divided self' of Romans 7, offered a resolution through the promises of Romans 8. A separate chapter is devoted to the impact on Holconius the cabinet-maker and house-church host, a Gentile with little knowledge of Judaism (and possibly even disdainful of it), of the Jewish cultural resonances of Romans, and its vision of a holy people created out of the 'ragbag of craftworkers, slaves, men, women, children, young, old, modestly well off, destitute' which met in his workshop.

In the final chapter, Oakes addresses some of the criticisms and pitfalls of his approach: the objection, for example, that such readings are turning the text into a mirror, looking for justice or survival, for example, and finding them. As he wryly notes: ‘If we looked for coffee-advertising, maybe we would find that too (13.11: ‘the time has come for you to wake up from sleep’?)’ (p. 175). However, he makes a good case that the results are sufficiently substantive, and surprising even for a scholar with a long history of interpreting Romans, to merit serious consideration. His detailed studies certainly bear this out. This is one of the most stimulating and refreshing works of New Testament scholarship I have read in a long time, and deserves serious attention both in terms of the interpretation of Romans, and for its potential for the study of other New Testament texts. Whatever else New Testament scholarship is concerned with, Oakes reminds us that these are texts written ‘at ground level,’ intended to be read and responded to at ground level.

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