

## BOOK REVIEWS

### General

**Exploring Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: History, Method, Practice.**  
R.S. Sugirtharajah, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

This volume is a review of this academic field, conducted by a scholar who has been a major player in its development. It opens by setting the scene in the 1980s with the emergence of Postcolonial Theory within the Humanities, noting how the academic work emphasised the topic of Empire and insisted that interrogation of texts had to look at the impact of such literature on everyday affairs in colonial contexts. This was and is a hermeneutical discourse which seeks to draw out imperialistic tendencies politically, economically and in texts. The writer argues that the Bible is an inherently ‘colonising’ collection of material, which advocates imperial views even as it decries great empires with which the original authors had to engage. Postcolonial biblical criticism aims, then, to highlight this reality both in the text and in its associations with Christian Missionaries and Western Empires in the last two centuries.

A chapter is dedicated to a review of main biblical works in the emerging field which include the writer alongside Whitlam, Prior, Horsley, Dube, Tamez, Segovia, Moore, Boer, Pui-Kwok-Lan, Althusser-Reid. This is followed by a treatment of ‘Orientalism’, working from Said’s classic study. Biblical Studies with a focus on a static truth about texts and a theology which seeks universal abstracts such as love, as metathemes of the entire canon, is a major force of turning Western approached to understanding text into a unique approach to reading the Bible. It is the role of postcolonial voices to resist this tendency both in textual examples and with regard to their implications for society as a whole. Hence it is important that the ‘Empire Writes Back’ and is heard globally. For the writer Postcolonial Biblical Studies is not an abstract Theory but deals with three ‘dangerous’ concepts to which the inherited texts give life – conquest, conversion and election. This book is useful both for those new to the academic field and also to those who have encountered aspects of it and wish to have a broader grasp of its underlying principles.

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## **New Testament**

### **The Synoptic Gospels Set Free: Preaching without anti-Judaism.**

Daniel Harrington SJ, Paulist Press, 2009. Pp. xii, 231.

Daniel Harrington's scholarship has always been not only immensely erudite, but also eminently pastoral, and appropriately reflective of his position in the believing community. One issue that has long interested him is the anti-Judaism that some Christians have found in, or squeezed from, the gospels, with the catastrophic results of which we are all aware, and which he is determined to prevent. In this admirable book, he takes fifteen Sunday readings from each of the years given to Matthew, Mark and Luke, and shows how they do not have to be read from an anti-Jewish point of view, even though in the past many Christians (and Jews) have so read them. He uses his enviable learning to place them in their historic context, and so liberate us from this embarrassment.

Each evangelist is given a gem of an introduction, so that the particular readings can be set in their appropriate context. Matthew, he points out, can be seen as both Jewish and anti-Jewish; there can be no doubt that Matthew was a Jew, and involved in the ongoing debate of the first century of our era about how to preserve the Jewish heritage after the catastrophic events of 70 AD, and about which Jewish movement best represented the tradition. The evangelist confirms his readers in their Christian Judaism, and encourages the Gentile mission; Jesus is portrayed over against his followers, his opponents, and the crowds, in an alternating pattern of narrative and the five great discourses, as Matthew weaves a claim for the superiority of his brand of Christian Judaism. This procedure can obviously be dangerous, if it is taken out of that inner-Jewish context. Matthew's polemics are best seen as a 'family quarrel' in late first century Judaism, which was forgotten when Christianity became largely Gentile, with the sad result that Jews endured persecution and Christians forgot their Jewish origins. Of all the Synoptics, Matthew is the one that is most awkward for those who wish to discredit Christian anti-Judaism, and Dan Harrington uses his very considerable learning to show, again and again, how the criticism that Matthew allows on Jesus' lips is, though often sharp-edged, not aimed at the Jewish people, but at their leaders. 'Whether we like it or not, Matthew's critique of the scribes and the Pharisees fits well in the contentious atmosphere of the Mediterranean world of the first century CE'.

Mark's gospel, which has received far less attention in Jewish-Christian dialogue, is written by a Christian Jew, and is, if you see it in context, a Jewish book, set in Israel and in Galilee; Jesus is for Mark a Jewish teacher, with Jewish disciples. Most of the people in the story are Jews, and Mark assumes in his reader a knowledge of the Jewish scriptures, and applies Jewish titles to Jesus, in what is a Jewish apocalyptic drama; he is, moreover, critical of the Temple authorities, in a manner that is entirely appropriate for a 1<sup>st</sup> century Jew. In this context, Harrington is excellent on the role of the scribes, and of family, in 1<sup>st</sup> century Mediterranean society, and the difficult pericope Mark 7:1-23, on Jesus' interface with Jewish purity rules. In general it must be said that Harrington's easy grasp of the text of the Synoptics, and of the necessary background makes this book a very rewarding read, with a fresh insight on every page.

On Luke, Dan Harrington rightly points out that he is regarded as a 'dangerous' book, as many feminists have commented, because he writes so attractively and paints such memorable pictures, for example of the Pharisee and the Tax-Collector, which may have influenced us more than we are aware. His account of the who and what and how of the Third Gospel is admirably clear; and the author quite rightly indicates that Luke may well have been Jewish (there is an uncritical tendency to repeat the fable that Luke was a Gentile); and he makes the important point that virtually all the characters in Luke's infancy narrative are exemplary observant Jews; and they sing eminently Jewish songs to punctuate the narrative. He is perfectly correct in suggesting that Luke's infancy narrative looks both backwards and forwards, as does the 'mission statement' (4:16-30), so carefully crafted by Luke. It is notable that Harrington concentrates much less on anti-Jewish elements in Luke, and that is probably as it should be, since the issue is less urgent in this gospel. What the reader of this book will receive is encouragement to go deeper into the text of this gifted story-teller, and preachers will get some helpful ideas how to approach Lucan texts of a Sunday. Very importantly, he insists on the location of the Lucan narrative deep within the Jewish tradition. The book ends with a very moving epilogue, citing the important text Zechariah 8:23, and a handy glossary of some of the relevant terminology. This book is warmly commended to readers of *Scripture Bulletin*.

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**Introducing Romans: Critical Issues in Paul’s Most Famous Letter.**

Richard L. Longenecker. Grand Rapids/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2011. Pp. xxvii and 490.

This very fine book offers to readers the fruit of its author’s lifelong devotion to scholarship and teaching. The title, *Introducing Romans*, appropriately reflects the book itself in functioning at several different levels.

In the first place, the volume introduces Romans by paving the way for the author’s forthcoming commentary. It does so by clearing some of the ground and introducing the major lines of interpretation that will there be presented much more fully. Frequently, then, consideration of a topic ends with the promise of more detailed treatment in the commentary proper.

Secondly, the volume is, technically ‘introduction’: the presentation and assessment of issues of authorship, form, occasion, date, addressees, purpose, characteristic literary features, textual and interpretive concerns, and the focus, structure and argument of Paul’s letter. In this respect it is a model of pedagogy. Beginning by indicating issues that are largely uncontested, in Part Two Longenecker engages with recent work on the nature of the earliest Roman Christianity, as a basis for his conclusions about the addressees and purpose of the letter. He agrees with Raymond Brown that the multiple, mixed communities of Jews and Gentiles remained strongly connected with and influenced by their Jewish-Christian founders. The Claudian expulsion of 49 C.E. may have complicated the situation, but friction about the weight to be given to the Jewish element of Christianity was primarily between and among different Roman communities rather than within them. Into this essentially Jewish setting Paul must argue for the legitimacy of the gospel that he has preached in such places as Thessalonica and Corinth, where Gentile communities are the pattern for the ones that Paul hopes to establish in Spain. The apostle rightly understands that his Spanish mission will not receive the necessary material support from the Roman Christians unless he can convince them that their form of Christianity is not the only possible way of living the gospel.

The third sense in which the book can serve as an introduction to Romans is that, throughout, it includes summaries of views, ancient and more recent, that are fundamental to the understanding of Romans: the author

has gathered much key material from disparate sources. Thus, Part Three treats the ‘conventions, procedures, and themes’ of oral and literary works of the time, both Greco-Roman and Jewish/Jewish-Christian. Part Four then deals first with textual criticism of Romans, including a useful summary and evaluation of the history of the discipline up to the appearance of NA<sup>27</sup> and GNT<sup>4</sup>. The remainder of Part Four details seven of the major interpretive approaches of recent times and concludes that the distribution within Romans of the underlying themes and features of these approaches is essential to understanding it aright. This idea Longenecker develops in Part Five, as he demonstrates how Paul first writes of matters about which he and his audience are in agreement, before going on to present ‘his’ gospel of peace and reconciliation with God, in chapters 5—8, and its various consequences in the remainder of the epistle.

Although there is some repetition, overall the book is a delight to read. Scholars and teachers will appreciate it as a taster for the full commentary, but will also find here many sections to which they can direct students for a succinct and up-to-date treatment of many of the major issues relevant to an understanding of Romans. It could also be a useful resource for non-specialists who have been told that Romans is an important text but need help in figuring out why that should be so.

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**All Things Made New: The Mysteries of the World in Christ.**

Stratford Caldecott, San Rafael, CA: Angelico Press/Sophia Perennis, 2011. Pp. 218. Pbk.

This latest book by Stratford Caldecott is a book in two halves. The first explores the New Testament Apocalypse in an unusual but illuminating way, through the lens of Christian mystagogy. In the second part, Caldecott examines various aspects of the life of prayer. The connection between the two parts, at first appearance only loosely connected, is Caldecott’s reading of the Apocalypse as a compendium of the Christian mysteries, digesting not only the Judaeo-Christian visionary tradition, but also the best of the mythologies of surrounding cultures.

The first six chapters set out Caldecott's reading of the book of Revelation. It is, as is clear from Rev. 1:3, a book to be read aloud, and ecclesially, in the midst of the liturgical community. Moreover, it is a book which calls for a reconfiguration of the readers' imaginations, so that they experience this world differently. In contrast to many scholarly interpretations of the Apocalypse on the one hand, and popular readings on the other, Caldecott offers a reading which treats the book not as predicting historical events (whether of the first century or the twenty-first), but as an unveiling of the mystery of the Incarnation. He sensitively interweaves John's book with a key intertext, the Book of Genesis, to uncover the Apocalypse's 'central thrust' in the new creation, orchestrated by the Creator who 'makes all things new'. What this newness might mean in the light of Christ is explored in dialogue with theologians both ancient and contemporary.

Perhaps one of the most significant features of this book lies in Caldecott's refusal to treat the symbolism of the Apocalypse as a mere code to be cracked, or as a text ripe for 'demythologization' through translation into a different genre. Although aware of the charge that dwelling on symbolism risks de-historicizing Christ and the Christian faith, he is much more open than many to the scriptural reclamation of ancient cosmic symbols, including numerology. He thus draws upon Pythagorean mathematics, classical and medieval number symbolism, the calendrical exegesis of Qumran, and more ancient myths such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, to illuminate the Apocalypse's own undoubted and extensive use of symbolic numbers. Christians, argues Caldecott, should not be afraid of plundering such sources and finding meaning in them, if they believe that Christ is indeed the Logos of God: 'Like a magnet dropped into a field of iron filings, he oriented all things to himself, for he was their maker and master' (p. 37).

The book also offers a reading of the Apocalypse as a book of spiritual exercises. Thus the messages to the seven churches are not simply calls to ancient congregations, but to the Church here and now. John's vision of the heavenly throne-room is given to us that we too may approach the throne 'with amazement and awe'. Indeed, the eight 'visions of heaven' which permeate the book (Rev. 1:12-20; 4:1—5:14; 7:9—8:5; 11:15-19; 14:1-13; 15; 19:1-10; 21:1—22:5) are examined as eight 'stations' in John's journey. Nor are the 'darker passages' of Revelation neglected in Caldecott's theological readings, but interpreted as revealing the intensity of the contrast between heaven and earth, 'when the one is brought kicking and screaming into the light of the other' (p. 80). However

shocking they may appear to the sanitised Western worldview, they graphically portray the spiritual peril in which our world, its sense of sin numbed, finds itself. But they also point to the resolution: we are not resigned to sinking with Babylon; we are invited to enter the New Jerusalem. Indeed, Caldecott offers a detailed analysis of this city, a ‘liturgical city’ in which the faithful Christian already walks.

More speculative and perhaps diffuse is the second part of Caldecott’s book. He correlates the twelve clauses of the Apostles’ Creed to the twelve ‘gates’ or ‘facets’ of the New Jerusalem, and also to the twelve Marian ‘gates’ or mysteries found in Scripture by von Balthasar. Other chapters explore the structure and meaning of the Lord’s Prayer, the mysteries of the Rosary (finding a cruciform pattern to the fourfold structure created by John Paul II’s addition of the Mysteries of Light), and the Stations of the Cross. In particular, Caldecott detects a ‘profound correspondence’ between the Apocalypse, flowing from John, and the Rosary, flowing from Mary: ‘both leading us ever deeper by a spiral path into the mysteries of the world in Christ’ (p. 174). The book concludes with a series of helpful appendices, covering topics as diverse as the reading of Scripture, the meaning of gematria, and the Temple Theology associated with the Old Testament scholar Margaret Barker (offering a sympathetic though not uncritical assessment of her contribution).

This is an unusual book, which offers an interesting correlation of idealist interpretation of Revelation with concern for the spiritual life. Most importantly, Caldecott has written a book of acute ‘apocalyptic’ sensitivity, in that its author understands that the Apocalypse is about the ‘end’ of the world, not primarily in a cataclysmic or chronological sense, but in its capacity to unveil the world’s ‘meaning’ or ‘purpose’.

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