

BOOK REVIEWS

General

Radical Christian Voices and Practice: Essays in Honour of Christopher Rowland.

Zoe Bennett and David B. Gowler (ed.), Oxford: OUP, 2012. Pp. xiv + 303.

This is a very unusual Festschrift, in that at every point it catches the genius of its distinguished honorand, and that every single contribution is marked by an unmistakable affection and admiration for Christopher Rowland, who is unusual among Professors of Exegesis in that he thinks that reading the NT should make a difference to the reader and to their action in the world in which s/he lives.

There is a striking foreword by Alan Kreider, which precisely catches what is different about Rowland (hereinafter CR), his insistence on the voice of the ‘diminished and marginalised’ as testimony to the voice of God: ‘a pocket of resistance against religion too much at ease with itself’. The Introduction, by the editors, presents exegesis (in CR’s view) as discerning God’s message for the present in the Christian experience and community, especially in the voices of the silenced. They single out four important elements in CR’s life: imagination, ‘minute particular’ (this a quotation from his beloved Blake), the marginalised and ‘action is the life of all’, from his justly admired Winstanley. They also stress the importance of listening out for ‘dissident voices’. At the beginning of Part I (‘The Bible and Radicalism’), David Gowler has a piece on Luke 13, and asking the all-important question: what do you do when Luke’s lofty expectations are apparently not realised? This is a very illuminating contribution, focussing on the rhetoric of the story, and the expectations that Luke has built up, appropriately attentive to Lucan language. It forms a wonderful tribute to CR, in just the sort of terms that are appropriate to this eminent and radical scholar.

Peter Garnsey offers an intriguing essay on the radical early Franciscan Peter Olivi’s reading of the community of the first Christians in Jerusalem, against the background of the fierce controversies over whether OFMs could have any possessions at all. Ched Myers has penned a most thoughtful and characteristically challenging article on reshaping the economic status quo on the basis of Luke 16:1-13, and warning

against the over-consumption that spreads its dark shadow over the affluent world, using the work of a number of modern economists who see another way of doing things; he speaks of the ‘biblical vision of Sabbath economics’ a notion that does indeed hold out some hope. He argues that Jesus’ parables must be separated from a real social situation: they either unmask the way the world really is, or else they illustrate how it could be. The rich man stands for the ruling elite, while the steward crosses over, in a happy phrase, from *Gesellschaft* to *Gemeinschaft*, to the ‘older tradition of the “love economy”’. This is a challenging and compelling reading, which encourages us all to continue struggling against the unsustainable system, the present dominant economic narrative that is killing us.

Judith Kovacs writes most interestingly on the radical stance of the Valentinians with regard to the interpretation of the Bible on grace and election, in a paper that is most admirably directed towards CR’s interests. She is especially telling on the Valentinians’ use of Paul’s language of election: like Paul, they felt that they were chosen before their birth. John J Collins has a contribution on some of the ambiguities of apocalyptic, especially the inadequacy of the phenomenon of ‘updating’ predictions. He deals with the discomfort that we feel with some of the brutality of apocalyptic, and argues that the real trauma underlying Revelation was the destruction of Jerusalem: ‘people embrace apocalyptic fantasies not only because of political oppression, but because they feel culturally marginalised and feel that their cherished beliefs are not respected or accepted in current discourse’ (p. 94). He makes an important point about the complexity of apocalyptic millenarianisms: there is, certainly, hope for the oppressed on offer, but also the genre tends to divide the world into light and darkness. Collins points to the importance of CR’s ‘retrieval of the radical social aspects of the apocalyptic tradition, which have all too often been eclipsed by the fantasies of eschatological violence. Biblical texts do not interpret themselves...’ (p. 99).

Paolo Nogueira contests various unsatisfactory readings of Revelation, from the apocalyptic watchfulness of historicist approaches to the moralising ‘God reigns’. Quite rightly, he emphasises the ‘eschatological visionary imagination, while taking the ‘average reader’ into account. There tends to be a ‘dualistic’ vision: the just against the unjust, and you know who the holy are because they are given a seal of some kind. ‘Our team’, the implied readers and followers, are idealised, while the ‘others’ are demonised, by way of various religious symbols; adversaries are constructed in terms such as ‘synagogue of Satan’, ‘Jezebel’, and ‘Balaam’ notably in the letters of Revelation 2 and 3. He argues for ‘a complex narrative structure that maintains the tension between the reality

experienced by the author and its readers and their expectations of a future transformation of the reality' (p. 114).

Part II does honour to CR by speaking of 'Reception History: The Appropriation of the Biblical Text in the Radical Tradition'. It starts, appropriately enough, with his esteemed colleague Christine Joynes, with an article on 'Gospel Women and their Afterlives'. The point here (she is talking of the two remarkable intercalated women's stories in Mark 5) is that the afterlife reveals the radical possibilities of the text. The woman is restored to a new community (possibly with the use of a baptismal formula); and Chris Joynes makes the important point that the only other mention of blood in Mark is at 14:24, in the last supper. And the evangelist uses Resurrection language for Jairus' daughter. It is a fascinating study of the subsequent retellings of the story: what Matthew and Luke do with it, for example, or the use of the text on magical amulets and Roman sarcophagi, through patristic readings (the woman as a model disciple), all the way down to 21st century readings in post-colonial feminism, and action that enables the oppressed to become agents of their own empowerment, with a glance at the colonial exploitation of Africa. It is a model of the light that reception-history can cast on a text, underlining the life-giving possibilities of the narrative of the two women. In different ways they are both fore-runners of Christ himself.

Denys Turner has a very helpful piece on 17th Century radicals, beloved of CR: Winstanley, so to say, versus Hobbes, a radical and a conservative, each building up their solution to the tabula rasa caused by the Civil War, on theological grounds; this is undoubtedly a lesson for our times, including the 'God-at-a-distance' of 'the scriptural scholars of Oxford and Cambridge...the principal oppressor'. This is an immensely challenging paper, which the Christian churches will do well to reflect upon.

Rowan Williams has a quite spectacular article on radicalism and orthodoxy in Blake, a fitting tribute to CR, showing an impressive command of the poet's work (the reader may pause to wonder how many Archbishops of Canterbury, ever, could have managed anything like that), in a charming and knowledgeable tribute to CR, woven seamlessly into the theme of the article. Like much of what the Archbishop writes, it would reward more than one reading, but that is not a criticism. Jane Shaw then concludes this part with 'A Modern Millenarian's Bible', a fascinating account of Mabel Baltrop (Octavia of the Panacea Society).

In Part III, likewise a tribute to CR's range of gifts and interests, since it is called 'Radical Christian Voices Today', you have Brad Braxton on

African-American Christology, a characteristically challenging piece with some very sharp questions that have to be faced by Christians today (not least by African-American churches), but also by the dominant (white) ruling culture; this is an admirable and appropriate tribute to CR. Then Ivan Petrella on the ‘Futures of Liberation Theology offers an article that, like so many in this volume, is a warm and clearly heartfelt tribute to CR, and not just the scholar. He speaks of liberation theology beyond the constraints of Christian theology, and identifies three key elements: the epistemological, starting from the standpoint of the oppressed (whereas most theology is slanted in the direction of the affluent white male heterosexuals who ordinarily conduct it); the practical-moral, thinking about ideals by thinking about what you do not about abstract words like ‘justice’ and ‘peace’; and the metaphysical. Here, he makes the point that the modern world is not so much secular as idolatrous. All this argues strongly for a new kind of theological education: one that moves people in the direction of the vocation to transform human lives and society, asking, for example why tuberculosis is not a priority in medical research: ‘the most beautiful things for the poorest people’ should be our watchword.

This is then, a very different sort of Festschrift. Look at Tim Gorrings’s remarkable article, a challenging and inspiring piece asking ‘Does God tell us how to build?’ or Andrew Bradstock on ‘Seeking the Welfare of the City’, reflecting on CR’s work as ‘public theology’. He argues that ‘the marginalisation of the Christian world view means that theology must pay more attention to the language it uses to articulate its concerns’ (p. 227). In our situation, it is pointless to found rigid principles on the text of the bible; our task is to argue from the point of view of ‘public good’ to the ‘life-giving intent of the original biblical text’ (p. 230). The problem is not so much religion as the union of religion and power, which is always messy; and the much-heralded ‘freedom of choice’ needs to be challenged on, for example, life-style, or crime and punishment; we need to ‘concretise the radical themes of peace and justice’.

Marilyn McCord Adams has an immensely challenging contribution on homosexuality, ‘Fertility Religion versus Human Rights’; she is very critical of the contribution of the three Abrahamic religions, notably Christianity, on this issue, and mounts a characteristically rigorous examination of the arguments against allowing homosexuals to marry. For the most part she dismisses them as ‘illiberal’ and points to four (probably unconscious) steps by which religious people (‘brilliant of mind and zealous in heart’, as she charitably remarks) got to that point: social modelling, and the argument from tradition; a confusion between true and civil religion, whereby God is in danger of becoming the enforcer of

idolatrous civil religion; fertility religion, and the fear of not surviving (in this portion she shows a really admirable biblical competence); and ‘rationalising the taboos’.

There follows a concluding, magisterial, and highly allusive coda by CR, reflecting on what has gone before, on the importance of radical thinking in Christianity, the difficulties of utopianism, the creative tension involved in the dialectic of opposites in theology, as well as the longing to do the divine will. He has a very stimulating reflection on Paul’s role in Christianity’s uneasy compromise between radicalism and conservatism’ (p. 262). Rowland’s immense range of reading, and his ability to grasp ideas, serves to demonstrate how the Bible, in its own way inadequate, and requiring more ‘exegesis, meditation and revelation’, can feed Christian radical reading. As always, he makes a point of the absolute importance of context in exegesis, and of hearing dissident voices in the biblical text. ‘Merely mouthing the sentiments of the past will not bring us any closer to the divine’ (p. 268). ‘Theology... is...a language that can all too easily become wrapt in its own seclusion and esotericism, cut off from the cry of humanity, the longing for a better world and the action which seeks in some way to bring that about’. He returns to Winstanley’s all important sentiment that ‘action is the life of all’, and the insight of liberation theology that ‘it is in action that theological understanding comes about’ (p. 272). The volume ends with a biographical note that makes CR come utterly alive, which is not the ordinary experience of readers of a *Festschrift*. This one is different, and should be widely read.

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