

BOOK REVIEWS

General

Chasing Mystery: A Catholic Biblical Theology

Carey Walsh, Collegeville MI: Michael Glazier/Liturgical Press, 2012. Pp. vi + 164.

Biblical theology has an indifferent reputation in these days, though there have been occasional attempts to restore it. And there are those, at both ends of the ecclesiological spectrum, who regard ‘Catholic Biblical Theology’ as a contradiction in terms; so it was with some caution that I opened this book. It is however a delight, an attempt to enable the reader to experience God in the holy writings, with a cheering interest in the elusive liveliness of the biblical God, who can be experienced not only in presence but also in absence (something known not only to atheists but also to Mother Teresa and Pope Benedict XVI, as it happens).

The underlying argument of the whole book, which is a careful and widely-read, though in places inevitably untidy, examination of a good many biblical texts, rescuing them for our day, is that ‘biblical descriptions of God’s presence and absence are...ways to negotiate divine mystery’. The author is very perceptive on the importance of story in preserving and presenting this mystery to all ages. In Scripture, she argues, the divine presence is not described, but offered and evoked, using archetypal images such as fire, speech, or breath. The divine presence is mixed in, we cannot say quite how, with our flawed humanity. This book is not a polemic against the currently fashionable atheisms, so much as ‘a proclamation of wonder as the divine possibility in our midst’.

A word that the author frequently uses for God’s presence is the telling epithet ‘sly’. She sees the human condition as somewhat trapped by modernity, which has shifted us from a basically God-centred world-view to one that is centred on human beings, and, ultimately, self-centred and therefore going nowhere, which does not successfully speak to our longing for ‘home’, for something rather than nothing. The book does not in the end give us answers so much as point us to mystery, to the reality of human living. Revelation is for her the act of a constitutionally humble God, who trusts that humans will eventually ‘get it right’. What we humans require is a basic receptivity, that of Moses at the burning bush, who was able to see the desert sand as ‘holy ground’, at least for the time of that encounter. Carey Walsh shows how diverse are the ways in which God appears in Scripture: angels, fire, storms, glory, the names of God,

and the oracles of God, for God's presence is fluid and lively, rather than set in stone. It is her conviction that 'the Bible offers a continual corrective to theology, in order to preserve this wild freedom of God'. So the Bible is not to be understood as 'God's self-portrait'.

So is this biblical theology? Well, not if by that phrase you understand a full and systematic set of doctrines based on biblical texts. But if you are happy to see how, sometimes in the most difficult passages of the Bible, an elusive and fleeting glimpse of God is possible, in the interplay of presence and absence (even in the life of Jesus), then this is the book for you. The point of the gospels is not biography, but a depiction of the 'enigmatic, compelling character of Jesus, and [to] elicit a response to him from readers', because Jesus is tantalisingly enigmatic, and more absent than present: 'Jesus is elusively real, just as God is'. So the Resurrection narratives do not simply turn the clock back to 'the good old days, back in Galilee'; they are rather an invitation to go forward in faith into the mission. God is never, for our author, a firm and permanent fixture (that would be idolatry), for 'love and communion include periods of silence...these do not constitute proofs of divine non-existence'. This book is strongly recommended, and charts a way ahead for Bible readers who feel that the text of Scripture should make a difference to their lives, and that Catholicism needs to take seriously the sacred writings.

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New Testament

Keys to Galatians: Collected Essays

Jerome Murphy O'Connor, Collegeville MI: Liturgical Press, 2012. Pp. xvi + 194.

The veteran Pauline scholar, who has been teaching at the French Biblical School in Jerusalem for half a century, has added this volume to the series of collections (*Keys to...*) of his past articles, originally published mostly in the *Revue biblique*. To the older articles, e.g. 1982, he has appended a postscript, often almost as long as the original article, commenting on subsequent discussions. These are detailed, scholarly articles, usually commenting on a single phrase in the letter, arguing a brilliant, original insight.

Of course not all scholars will accept all of these insights, even with the postscripts. Some of them might have been usefully refined through the seminar discussions in which brilliant insights are honed by colleagues in more mainline

universities. The important first article insists that Paul's journey to Galatia, Macedonia and Corinth took place before the Council of Jerusalem without discussing whether that Council really occurred as described in Acts 15.

One of the many strengths of the work is the familiarity with and the use of classical rhetoric such as irony and (more technical) *concessio*. One of the more surprising constant positions is the argument that there were few Jews in Galatia. My favourite articles are two. 'The Irrevocable Will' (from 1999) explains that curious piece of legal argument in Galatians 3.15 by appeal to the legislation for adoption of a son and heir which was hardly ever cancelled. The final article on the Origin of Paul's Christology (from 2003) explains clearly and sympathetically the new insights into Jesus' voluntary gift of himself which enrich the Letter to the Galatians.

Attention should be drawn to the shameful number of typographical errors, particularly in Greek, Latin, French and German.

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