

Reviews



**PROVOKING THE GOSPEL OF MARK:
A STORYTELLER'S COMMENTARY
YEAR B**, by Richard W. Swanson. Cleve-
land: Pilgrim, 2005. Pp. 349. \$35.00
(cloth).

The title of this book warns you of what is to come. Commentaries by nature are not provocative, but this one provokes. The book moves through the lectionary texts from Mark, challenging the fundamental assumptions with which we often approach them. Swanson continually makes us ask ourselves, “[W]hat if this line does not mean what I always thought everyone thought that it meant?” (39). Swanson’s findings have come out of flesh-and-blood wrestling with this story in the midst of storytellers playing and improvising with subtexts that break open the familiar words. He states, “Physical embodiment of the story is the best tool I’ve found for honoring these old stories” (10). The members of his group have told the story in extraordinary ways that command our attention if not our assent. A DVD comes with the book, showing the basic dynamics as the group struggles to find the tensions within Mark’s gospel. Do not miss watching this!

Swanson will not let the sleeping dogs of our interpretations rest. He pokes and prods them until they become wild again (7). These, he insists, are stories of Israel. And Israel means the one “who struggles” (41). Faithfulness in the presence of these undomesticated stories demands that we join in ongoing argument.

Swanson wants us to sympathize with and understand the wisdom of those biblical characters whose ways we typically reject in their conflicts with Jesus. He notes that “the temptation among Christians is always to give Jesus the benefit of more doubts than

anyone could possibly entertain” (119). He shows the real threat of Jesus’ disregard of Sabbath traditions. He defends the temple authorities that Jesus disrupts. He asks about the hypocrisy of Jesus who rejects the practice of Korban when he himself has refused to recognize his own mother out of dedication to God’s mission. Swanson understands the pig farmers who have just lost their livelihood and finds himself asking why “so many of Jesus’ accomplishments come at a high price for people involved?” (181). What if in some of these conflicts we said that Jesus was the one in the wrong? Swanson insists, “Mark is telling a story of Jesus that requires you to argue with Jesus” (203). And “these old stories, when engaged with integrity, equip their readers, performers, and hearers to wrestle afresh with issues that people of faith (Christian and otherwise) must engage today” (11).

Swanson’s book is for those of us who have lived in a Gentile Christian world for so many centuries that we have forgotten the offense that Jesus brought to people of faith in his own day. It invites us into an argument and demands that we rethink basic assumptions. Swanson finds the source of this impulse in the Gospel of Mark itself, most clearly in its odd endingless end. “And they said nothing. Not a thing to anyone. For they were afraid” [Swanson’s translation of Mark 16:8]. “What if the brokenness of the end is what holds Mark’s story together?” Swanson asks (75). What if every pericope in Mark’s Gospel leaves us less with resolutions of the big questions than with even bigger questions about God and life? What if Mark’s Gospel demands of us more restlessness and less rest?

If I could have only one commentary about Mark’s Gospel, I am not sure this is the one I would choose. But with a shelf full

of various movements on similar themes, this book makes a fundamentally distinctive contribution. It introduces new questions about what matters most. Swanson is always engaging, always provocative. He equips us to be more faithful and effective storytellers. He makes us sympathize with those in the Gospel narrative who are usually dismissed without serious thought. He shows the real and dangerous shaking of the foundations that Jesus brought with him everywhere. He does this not only by presenting the wisdom in the venerable traditions of Jesus' Jewish contemporaries, but also, effectively, by putting our own venerable interpretive traditions under attack. We will often feel, while reading this book, as the chief priests, Pharisees, and scribes must have felt in Jesus' presence.

Only rarely does Swanson set his wrestling aside to show us unambiguously the hope that was weighty enough to keep people telling the story of Jesus. Like Luther in the Heidelberg Disputation, Swanson refuses to reflect on God in glory if he has not first reflected on God in brokenness and suffering. But after hearing Swanson take seriously the objections to easy answers, the declaration of hope feels more substantial. He ends his video with the recognition that there is "something in the story that finally ends in a resurrection out of death; there is something in that—a provocation to life. There is something in that that says even when Pilate and the Centurion win, in the hands of God, they do not finally win."

If you are looking for a commentary to help decorate a room with beautiful snapshots that complement the vision of faith you have lived in for decades, then this is not the book for you. But if you are open to a total remodeling project—ripping up the carpet and checking the soundness of what is underfoot—then this is your book.

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BEYOND THE PASSION, by Stephen J. Patterson. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004. Pp. 161. \$18.00 (paper).

As its title suggests, the primary premise of this book is that the death and resurrection of Jesus cannot be understood apart from his life, which reflected the vision of an "empire of God." Such a vision had to involve indictment of the religion and politics of the Roman Empire; at its head Augustus, "patron of the whole empire," bathed in "nostalgic religious ideas and ceremony." Jesus' "lifestyle" was thus "countercultural," for which reason he was tortured to death. More, his crucifixion served notice that the penalty for following him would be humiliation and death. So it was Jesus' challenge to the empire of Rome, his "countercultural voice," "lifestyle," "dissident stance," his "radical reordering" of human life and relationships, which made sense of his death and resurrection.

The author writes that when the Christian community came to reflect on Jesus' death, three motifs lay ready to hand. First, his early followers spoke of his death as the death of a victim. Next, they began to speak of it as the glorious death of a martyr. For this motif, Jewish martyrological tradition yielded a fertile interpretive field, and became the "narrative home" of resurrection in the Christian story. Finally, Jesus' followers spoke of his death as sacrifice, an idea of central importance in Hellenistic culture. It was left to Paul to take these motifs and give them ritual power in the idea of baptism as union with Jesus. But again, as the author insists, none of this reflection can be separated from the exemplary aspects of Jesus' life. Even Paul, with all his reference to the reconciling power of Jesus' death, insisted that it was by his life that his followers were saved (79).

Author Patterson concludes with his own indictment of those for whom Jesus' death and resurrection have become the universal saving events, "oblivious to the vision of human life and the God he embodied" (128), adding that "we do not look to

Jesus for a way of life, but for salvation....So we prefer our Christ crucified" (130).

In assessing the volume, questions arise respecting the author's description of the age toward which Jesus ran counter. It was, he writes, an age of such peace and security as the world had never known, a "pure and virtuous age," the emperor himself a champion of ancient piety and traditional values. The description is hasty and tipped to the advantage of those at the apex of the pyramid. In the city of Rome, at least, the condition of the plebs was the worst imaginable. Rome was totally without industry, and lacked any freedom of community. Only the circus remained, and when it was removed the people were too enervated to revolt. As for Augustus himself, who "established the peace...secured the borders...added province after province to the greater glory and enrichment of Rome" (19), the Germans' crossing of the Rhine, their slaughter of the army of Varus, their exhausting one Roman commander after another until finally the emperor abandoned the entire enterprise tells a different story. As the celebrated historian Mommsen once put it, it would be presumptuous to want to depict the Roman world of this age from the bulk of its literature (Theodor Mommsen, *Römische Kaisergeschichte* [München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1992] 137).

Again, touching the historical context, Patterson neglects mention of any complicity on the part of ecclesiastical leaders in Jesus' crucifixion. There is in fact consensus among Jewish and Gentile scholars that at least "a few Sadducees" or "temple priests," at any rate a motley of religionists cooperated with the Romans in preparing a violent end for Jesus. Since nothing in the gospel accounts suggests judicial murder, in the eyes of his opponents Jesus was justly accused, condemned, and suffered death as a *Mezzith*, a sorcerer, and seducer of the people, as Rabbinic sources testify.

Or again, the reader is left to infer that the move from Jewish martyrology or Hellenistic cultus to the interpretation of Jesus' death was linear, continuous, without distantiation. The result is that with the Pau-

line perspective excepted there is nothing in the Jesus-tradition to qualify, correct, or even nuance those motifs of victim, martyr, and sacrifice so ready to hand. More, preoccupied with the formal description of Jesus' activity, the author can give it no content beyond quoting John Dominic Crossan to the effect that "mutual care, nourishment, and support" lay at the heart of his notion of an empire of God (23). The old history-of-religions scholars, dismayed at the innumerable parallels between Jesus and a Heinz-fifty-seven variety of saviors in the Greco-Roman world, and, just as our author, suspicious of the resurrection accounts, were nonetheless able to furnish his life with a sufficient amount of substance to justify his attracting a following.

Finally, Patterson's irritation at Christians who look to Jesus for salvation but not a way of life, registered at the book's beginning and end and however justified, cannot serve as historical legitimation for reversing the conceptuality of the New Testament, which interprets Jesus' life in light of his death.

I was taught that the principal task of the biblical interpreter is to give attention to particulars, to texts, but not without an eye to universals, to contexts—and somehow, in, with, and under it all, never to leave off self-examination.

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FORTRESS INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS, by Rodney R. Hutton. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004. Pp. 115. \$16.00 (paper).

In an age such as ours, when televangelists blur prophetic and apocalyptic texts, when biblical morality has come to mean courthouse postings of the Decalogue, and when nationalistic claims are confused with the biblical word, Christians do well once again to consider Israel's prophets. Doubtless this accounts for the recent spate of introductory texts on the prophets, now

including Rodney R. Hutton's *Fortress Introduction to the Prophets*.

Hutton's approach is the historical critical one. He believes that "it is fundamentally an abuse of the ancient prophetic texts to rummage through them and co-opt bits and pieces as evidence for current events in the twenty-first century, as widespread as that practice may be" (viii). Amen! In contrast to the populist approach, Hutton's goal is to introduce his readers to the prophets in their historical contexts, understanding their oracles to have been directed to their own times and circumstances. He mainly leaves contemporary application of the prophetic word in the hands of the reader.

As an introduction, Hutton's essays about various prophets are not unlike the introductory articles one might find in the more reputable study Bibles, albeit Hutton's treatments of the prophets are perhaps a bit lengthier and thus more thorough. Also like essays found in many study Bibles, Hutton eschews footnotes, opting instead to provide a severely selected bibliography on prophecy. The lack of footnotes is, of course, frustrating for those already familiar with the prophets. Hutton hopes, however, that this strategy will be inviting for his target audience, identified by him as those who are encountering Israel's prophets for the first time as well as those who find themselves in need of a more panoramic view of the prophets in order that they might navigate the choppy waters of weekly pericopes.

Given his narrow goals, Hutton's book mainly succeeds in its purpose. He provides significant information about individual prophets. He also sharply focuses on those critical questions of which one must always be aware when reading prophetic literature. And he does all of this usually without presuming any prior knowledge on the part of his readers. An important exception to this last observation is the book's scattered references to the Deuteronomistic Historian, a biblical author whose work is finally described in a single paragraph halfway through the book. Doubtless, Hutton's "first time" student would receive an expla-

nation of the hypothesized biblical author sooner in Hutton's classroom than in Hutton's monograph.

As the book's title promises, Hutton does deliver an introduction to the prophets and especially to Jeremiah, who is the focus of five of twelve chapters. And yet, the title of the book would be more descriptive of the monograph's actual content if the word "pre-exilic" were inserted. The book simply stops with Jeremiah and a significant portion of the prophetic corpus is thereby left without introduction or treatment. About this lamentable lack, Hutton cryptically remarks that "one can hope that the gap in attention to the exilic and post-exilic texts might soon be remedied" (viii). One wonders why Hutton has not attempted to address the problem himself. In any event, and until that gap is filled—perhaps in a much expanded second edition—the book will remain of rather limited utility to preachers and teachers.

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FROM HURT TO HEALING: A THEOLOGY OF THE WOUNDED, by Andrew Sung Park. Nashville: Abingdon, 2004. Pp. 183. \$19.00 (paper).

Andrew Sung Park is professor of Theology at United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio. This volume is an attempt to provide healing tools for victims who have been violated repeatedly. In his October 20, 2002, crusade in Dallas, Billy Graham's prescription for people's suffering is: "being saved." This requires acknowledgment and repentance of sins. However, this sin-repentance-salvation formula does not address a person's deeper pain. There is no theology for the wounded to follow up on such evangelistic messages. Hence, the book is subtitled *A Theology of the Wounded*. Park attempts to integrate psychological terms from assorted authors with biblical terms and texts.

The Korean word *Han* is used to describe

a loss of hope, which is a repeated violation of one's boundaries by oppressors. He elaborates with such terms as: boxed-in hope; collapsed feelings of anguish; unfathomable wound; emotional heart attack; and the void of abysmal grief to describe *Han*. These repeated violations have long-lasting effects on the soul.

Park's own mother provides the initial illustration of *Han*. As a North Korean citizen, she experienced government confiscation of all her possessions. Later she suffered as a refugee during the Korean War. As a pastor's wife, she experienced financial bankruptcy. As she grappled with repeated wounds, she had no time to heal amidst the repeated violations in her life. Categories of "sin-repentance-salvation" do not heal such *Han*.

Modern illustrations include rape victims who endure the legal system and public humiliation. Collectively, any people such as the Jews in the Holocaust or the oppressed minority in South Africa experience some form of *Han*. If not addressed, Park fears it will be passed on to future generations. For example, a father who has been abused as a boy later recognizes that he almost abused his eight-year-old son. Park's volume provides a roadmap for Christians, caregivers, clergy, and community leaders to confront and address *Han*. Hopefully, this can lead to what Park calls the "Healing and Holiness, Jubilee and Christian Perfection" in his final chapters.

Divided into eight chapters, Park's roadmap or themes in this journey toward healing are: sin and wounds (chapter 1); guilt and shame (chapter 2); guilt anger and shame anger (chapter 3); repentance and resistance (chapter 4); forgiven-ness and forgiveness (chapter 5); justification and justice (chapter 6); sanctification and healing (chapter 7); and full sanctification and jubilee (chapter 8).

Early in the book Park reveals the primary sources for his multidisciplinary approach. Julian Hans Pleasants and Howard Zehr inform many of Park's assumptions. Park also indicates that he is prone to use liberation theology categories (Gustavo

Gutiérrez). A *caveat* for some readers: Park rejects St. Augustine's idea of original sin, characterizing it as illogical (30). Also, for the more orthodox or conservative reader, Park might raise a few eyebrows when he argues that Jesus was a victim of *Han*:

If God cannot forgive sinners without the violent execution of Jesus, then God is neither gracious nor merciful, but interested only in retributive justice....It is inappropriate to think that God smote Jesus for the sins that people will commit in the future and that God forgave them before they repented of their sin. (27–28)

However, Park does offer some helpful insights as to how the wounded may seek healing, holiness, and jubilee. One example is for those people who are shamed. Utilizing the categories of shame and resultant guilt as identified by various authors, Park encourages victims to assert their anger and rage by understanding their offenders. Victims confidently confront offenders while knowing that God's justice works in this process. After a healthy confrontation, victims are urged to forgive their offenders, so as to allow oppressors to change their ways and make recompense. The idea of victims forgiving their offenders is what he coins as "forgiven-ness." This is accomplished both individually and collectively. These two strands run throughout the book.

Park tends to equate repentance with compensation such as that received by the Japanese Americans who lived in internment camps in World War II. Many postholocaust Jews rejected such compensation from German offenders. Park implies this could be one source of current friction in the Middle East—the offended Jews have not embraced this "forgiven-ness." If one takes forgiven-ness seriously, this is a path of restoration and empowerment of victims that urges oppressors to repent and make recompense.

Beyond seeking compensation for offenses, victims themselves must become advocates for justice. As suggested earlier, Park believes that the Bible shows that "God's grace is not impartial. God is more

concerned about the victim than the victimizer” (103). Park tends to be critical of the basic Lutheran and Calvinist ideas of God’s redemptive process wrapped up exclusively in justification, and stakes a claim for a life of sanctification where all Christians seek justice. The works of the Paraclete or Holy Spirit and the seeking of structural healing are components of Holiness.

He is critical of the American criminal justice system, as retribution often takes precedence over restoration (113–114). Park supports a justice model used in New Zealand, where the offender confronts and participates in a mediation program with the victim. This is a restorative justice! Another such example is when the new postapartheid South African government sought similar victim-offender reconciliation so both sides could be fully restored toward healing or wholeness. The Gen 45 text of Joseph’s reconciliation with his ill-intentioned brothers is a biblical example of a model that leads to healing of such deep (*Han*) wounds.

Overall, this volume is a good manual for working out embittered and dehumanizing feelings one may have toward oppressors. The critique leveled against liberation theology applies here as well. Does God’s justice favor *all of his creation*, or *only* the oppressed? Also, aren’t *all people sinners on some level*—be they the oppressed or oppressor—who need God’s forgiveness?

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WHAT’S THE MATTER WITH PREACHING TODAY? edited by Mike Graves. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004. Pp. 182. \$19.95 (paper).

Take some of the foremost names in preaching today, place them under one roof, and you have a recipe for something extraordinary. What’s more, if you are Mike Graves, you give these preachers Harry Emerson Fosdick’s article, “What Is the Matter with Preaching?” from a 1928 publi-

cation of *Harper’s Magazine*, tell them to go to work, and suddenly you have a virtual homiletical goldmine. As these eleven premier preachers—David Bartlett, David Buttrick, Ernest Campell, Fred Craddock, Marva Dawn, Anna Carter Florence, Cleophus LaRue, Thomas Long, Eugene Lowry, Barbara Brown Taylor, and Graves himself—reflect upon Fosdick’s seventy-six-year-old article, the result is this short collection of essays, that, each in its own unique way, attempt to answer Fosdick’s question. After all, as Graves suggests from the outset, “Fosdick’s question is still relevant: What’s the matter with preaching *today*?” (4).

Following a brief introduction to the content and purpose of this book by Graves, Fosdick’s article is reprinted, as it is the main conversation partner for each of the contributing authors. In his article, Fosdick answered his own question by asserting that preaching during his time had become banal because it established “no connection with the real interest of the congregation” (8). In his view, the main purpose of a sermon was to “help people solve their spiritual problems” (9). By using the Bible as a “searchlight” exposing the shadows of human living, the sermon becomes “an adventure in co-operative thinking” (13) between the preacher and the congregation, whereby relevant problems are solved. Though Fosdick’s answer is worthy of debate in this collection (and debated it is!), the majority of contributors focus their time and energy on Fosdick’s question as it relates to preaching in these days. Rather than explicitly mentioning each author’s answer or answers to Fosdick’s question, I will highlight three voices I found most fruitful to my own participation, as both hearer and purveyor, in the daunting task of preaching the gospel.

In his chapter, “Preaching: An Appeal to Memory,” Fred Craddock admits to only partially answering Fosdick’s question, prior to his assertion that in preaching the “failure to draw on the deep resonances within both listeners and Scripture is one of the most serious oversights” (60). “Memory pervades all we are and all we do” (60), and preaching must delve into the inmost re-

cesses of our memory—into the wells of “deep resonances”—for it is there that God is present. Even though one may not know God, God still exists in memory. Therefore, effective preaching is “calling out something from the hearers, letting them bring something to the sermon, offering their contribution to God as a part of that portion of worship we call the sermon” (67). As such, the gospel is a “twice-told” tale: a hearing and a rehearing, a recognizing from depths of memory, a sort of homecoming. Craddock admits not knowing precisely how it all works when he writes, “In some way not clear to me—call it human nature or the Holy Spirit—the gospel is a word for which we had waited and listened, and when we heard it, its affirmation and promise did not sound new or strange” (68). Maybe this is not the answer readers would like; yet, for a preacher to ultimately rest his or her claims upon the mystery of Holy Spirit is powerfully appropriate.

For her part, Anna Carter Florence identifies unwitting abuse of scriptural texts as the pervading problem in modern-day preaching. In her chapter, fittingly titled, “Put Away Your Sword! Taking the Torture out of the Sermon,” Florence emphasizes the point that preachers, both fledgling and seasoned, all too often approach the biblical text as something that needs to be explained, something that needs to be solved. This approach is how preaching has been taught and, unfortunately, this is what hearers have come to expect. Preachers do violence to the text when they “start hacking away at the text until they grasp a piece of it to hold up, while announcing, ‘Let me tell you what this passage [insert any biblical pericope] means: it means that everything will be fine if we only have faith!’” (94). Florence calls preachers to examine the work of poets “because they take words as seriously as we do” (96), and “we read poem/texts in order to enter relationship with them” (98). This relationship between preacher and text is, like all relationships, founded on truth—a truth witnessed and worthy of testimony. Therefore, Florence concludes that preaching is not solving a

text but rather looking at a text [witnessing!] and truthfully describing what one sees [testifying!] (102–103).

Reading Cleophus LaRue’s contribution, entitled “Two Ships Passing in the Night,” sharpens the reader’s awareness of the black preaching tradition and its oft-forgotten importance in homiletical thought in the twenty-first century. LaRue writes, “Even while taking note of the downward spiral in their own tradition, white homileticians saw in black preaching much that was admirable and attractive” (127). After all, “black preaching continues to be regarded in many circles as the most vibrant, imaginative, and communicatively effective preaching on the scene today” (127). Nevertheless, LaRue notes that while praise for black preaching abounds, there is “little or no substantive engagement of black preaching on behalf of those who speak so movingly of its potency and persuasive power” (129). In his view, this lack of engagement is a major problem in preaching today. Thus, in the remaining pages of the chapter, he offers a brief synopsis of black preaching and its “symbiotic relatedness” with the whole of homiletical theory. LaRue’s chapter, if nothing else, inspires readers less familiar with black preaching to listen and learn more about this rich, dynamic preaching tradition.

Craddock, Florence, and LaRue are only three of the eleven voices that wrestle with Fosdick’s timeless question, “What is the matter with preaching?” Much more resides in this book, and the other eight voices are worth your hearing. I encourage you to open these pages and discover which authors resonate with your own experience of preaching and which authors stretch you in your endeavor to witness and testify to the crucified God. “Of course,” Fosdick said, “nothing can make preaching easy. At best it means drenching a congregation with one’s life blood” (17).

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