

Reviews



EZEKIEL, by Ronald E. Clements. Westminster Bible Companion. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996. Pp. x + 211. \$17.00 (paper).

This is a kindly, gentle commentary on Ezekiel, one sympathetic to the prophet's plight and problems. (There is a book of recent vintage which attempts to free western civilization from the sexual pathology foisted upon it by the sexual psychopath Ezekiel. It is not sympathetic.) The text of the NRSV is amply used but the entire text is not printed out: some of Ezekiel's well-known prolixity is consigned to the welcome three dots...

Some highlights:

"Radical as are the prophet's sweeping condemnations of Israel's past, so are his words of hope for the future equally and uncompromisingly assured and confident" (4).

Well said. No prophet condemns Israel more thoroughly and consistently—not to say radically—than does Ezekiel (think of his rewriting of Israel's history in chapter 20 where he has Israel's idolatry and apostasy beginning in Egypt before the wilderness wanderings even begin). But the same all-or-nothing spirit pervades his oracles of consolation as is evident in his "I the Lord myself will search out my sheep," of chapter 34 and in the details and structure of the Dry Bones Vision of chapter 37.

In a neat summary of Ezekiel's entire opus we have: "In all this we hear the thinking of a priest drawing heavily and almost monotonously from three central themes: God's holiness, God's wrath against all human sin...and God's glory" (4).

In comparing Ezekiel with Jeremiah, Clements is clear that while these two contemporaries used different conceptual frameworks for their messages, their judgment was identical: Jerusalem must fall because of Israel's sin and the Lord will do it. Their differing conceptions are unexpected

because they both come from priestly backgrounds (4-5).

I like Clements' handling of the difficult inaugural vision with its almost unimaginably conflicting details (try to picture a four faced head; how do the ears and eye-lines meet and blend?): "...the prophet does not leave us with any static and rationally explicable symbolism of the kind that enables us to say that 'this' figure means 'that' truth" (13). Artists and allegorists are equally advised to leave Ezekiel have his say without trying to explain him. His words are powerful and meaningful by themselves; attempts to reproduce in graphic art or to unlock superficially his opaque words are doomed to failure.

Very helpful is Clements observation that "Ezekiel's rather coldly reasoned argument hides the real intensity of his feeling" (18) This helps the reader past the priestly legalese and verbal redundancy to look for the passionate Ezekiel who is the subject of so many symbolic acts and actions (I count 39 in all).

To aid in understanding the complexity of Ezekiel's call vision (chapters 1-3) Clements opines that "in all Old Testament accounts of how a prophet is called and commissioned by God, a good deal of later reflection has been woven in (11).

Ezekiel is no exception to the truth that prophets speak with an in-your-face, either-or language, no doubt one of the reasons they were hunted down and persecuted. Clements observes this in Ezekiel: "[His] message was uncompromising because it was the only way in which he could ensure that his fellow exiles would listen to him" (26). The prophets knew they had to practice extreme talk in order to be heard let alone be taken seriously. "You are all to blame," the prophet says with sweeping condemnation, but "only by insisting that all share the blame can [the prophet's] message bring about genuine national repentance" (26).

Ezekiel has been criticized by Christian scholars for his insistence on seeing all misconduct as infringing upon a sacral order of life.

Clearly this is not a way of looking at life or understanding the nature of sin with which we feel comfortable; we have long since lost any sensitivity to such a world-view. It reflects a world governed by a priestly rule book (in reality a code of holy practice passed on orally by priests from one generation to the next) that has been lost in our modern secular society. Our modern sense of sin arises out of an awareness of the inner personal stresses and motives that distort our sense of what is right and good. So we have to look under the surface very carefully when Ezekiel discusses the nature of human evil. When we do, we find he is speaking sensitively about many of the deepest of all human anxieties and fears. What we must not do is to dismiss his language as superficial and meaningless, as though he thought simply in terms of priestly rules and taboos. (28)

A helpful warning in a way but do we really need it? Have we really become so secular and defined sin so psychologically that we need to translate Ezekiel's concepts into ones more congenial to us? I am thinking of that clarion verse, "Against thee, thee only, have I done this evil in thy sight" (Ps 51:4a) Is not Ezekiel saying the same thing: all sins are sins against God, whether cultic or social? And didn't Jesus assume the same when he forgave people the sins which they had committed against others?

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MARK, by Douglas R. A. Hare. Westminster Bible Companion. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996. Pp. x +230. \$17:00 (paper).

This volume is part of a series "intended to help the laity of the church read the Bible more clearly and intelligently." An underlying presupposition of the series is that these volumes are written from the perspective of faith for faith: "The scriptures

are clear and clearly available to everyone as they call us to faith in the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ and as they offer to every human being the word of salvation" (ix).

The intention and presupposition of the series is clearly evident in this volume on Mark. Hare is emeritus professor of New Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and currently adjunct instructor at Bangor Theological Seminary. He will be known to readers as the author of the commentary on the Gospel of Matthew in the *Interpretation* series, also published by Westminster John Knox Press.

A nine page introduction to the Gospel of Mark covers the portrayal of Jesus in Mark and responds to the questions: Who wrote the Gospel according to Mark? When and for whom was Mark written? Why did Mark write? A final section on the literary structure of Mark identifies the way in which Hare will treat the sections and subsections in the volume.

Working from Martin Kähler's definition of a Gospel, Hare draws upon this understanding as the overall theme for his work: A Gospel is a passion narrative with an extended introduction. What emerges in this definition is his interpretive approach to the Gospel: "Jesus is important to us primarily because he is the window through which we see God; in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God's love for us becomes visible" (3).

Hare responds to the questions of authorship and date by noting that "the Gospel itself is strictly anonymous" and that "it is unlikely that Mark was published much later than the early seventies, in view of its probable use by Matthew and Luke" (4-5). The explanation of Jewish customs and translation of Aramaic expressions indicates to Hare that the Gospel was written for a gentile audience to preserve the oral tradition and to provide a correct theology centering on the meaning of the crucifixion (5-6).

Hare divides the Gospel of Mark into four major parts: Beginnings (1:1-20); Jesus' Public Ministry (1:21-8:26); Preparing the Disciples for the Passion (8:27-10:52); The Passion and Resurrection of Jesus (11:1-16:8).

In part one (1:1-20), Hare focuses upon

the identity of Jesus as a prologue to the public ministry of Jesus: "Each of the five brief units in the prologue...serves to define Jesus in anticipation of his manifestation of divine authority in the Capernaum synagogue" (13). With an economy of words, Hare identifies the intentions of these texts. On the baptism (1:9-11): "The narrative function of the voice from heaven is to permit the messianic status of Jesus to be affirmed by God" (18). On the testing in the wilderness (1:12-13): "The brief narrative suggests only that the Messiah learned in a hostile environment that he could depend on God's sustaining power" (20).

Hare divides part two (1:21-8:26) into four subsections: Jesus' Healing Ministry Begins (1:21-39); Jesus' Ministry Provokes Controversy (1:40-3:12); Jesus Prepares Twelve Apprentices for Mission (3:13-6:13); Jesus' Immense Popularity Prompts Antagonism (6:14-8:26). In each pericope, as applicable, Hare identifies Old Testament stories, customs, practices, and themes that inform the text; cultural references to the Greco-Roman world; archaeo-

logical information; and synoptic references noting nuances and significant differences in the narrative contexts of Matthew and Luke. In an instructive and informed manner, the concluding paragraphs of the various pericopes move toward the understanding of the text within the contemporary context.

Part three (8:27-10:52) is divided into three subsections: The First Passion Announcement and the Transfiguration (8:27-9:29); The Second Passion Announcement (9:30-10:31); The Third Passion Announcement (10:32-52). Noting that the watershed of the Gospel (8:27-9:1) inaugurates this section of the Gospel, Hare focuses on the meaning of the Christ in Peter's confession and Jesus' self-designation as the Son of Man. Paralleling the baptismal voice from heaven (1:11), the voice at the transfiguration (9:7) anticipates "the metamorphosis Jesus will undergo when he is exalted by resurrection to the right hand of God" (104). The restoring of Bartimaeus' sight (10:46-52) concludes this section of the Gospel, drawing out Jesus'

identity as the Son of David and Bartimaeus' identity as one who now sees and follows Jesus to the cross.

With part four (11:1-16:8), we begin the royal procession into the city of David. Over a third of the Gospel is directed to Jesus' last week: The Messiah's Royal Arrival in Jerusalem (11:1-25); Jesus Refutes his Opponents (11:27-12:44); Jesus Teaches About the Future (13:1-37); Jesus' Last Days (14:1-15:47); The Empty Tomb (16:1-8). Throughout Hare's treatment of the pericopes in this part, helpful responses are made critiquing the NRSV rendering of the text, introducing each pericope with details that set the text within the context of the Gospel and the first-century world. The details of customs, laws, and traditions are informative of the final week, drawing the reader into the unfolding pathos of the passion events. The interpretive perspective that concludes each pericope focuses the text and draws the hearer into the word of the Gospel.

Written for a lay audience, this volume serves the church well as a "companion" resource by equipping lay-led Bible study in a way that focuses on the meaning of the text and its meaning within the life of the Christian community today. Hare's concluding words on 15:21-32 express this clearly:

Readers of Mark's story become spectators of the event—hostile, indifferent, or irresistibly drawn into the dramatic action. Some find it utter foolishness to make so much fuss over the death of one man when there is so much suffering in the world. Others are awed by the power and wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:24). (214)

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CULTURAL INTERPRETATION: RE-ORIENTING NEW TESTAMENT CRITICISM, by Brian K. Blount. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995. Pp. 222.

What Albert Schweitzer observed about those questing for the historical Jesus—that the picture of Jesus rendered by the questors says as much about the ques-

tors as it does about the "real" Jesus—appears now to extend to biblical exegetes as well. According to Brian K. Blount, "The meaning [interpreters] derive from historical-critical and/or literary investigations, or some mixture of the two, therefore, says as much about them as it does about the biblical material they analyze" (viii). Blount also cites the "commonplace" admission of biblical scholars that "textual inquiry is influenced by the contextual presuppositions of the researcher" (vii). Apparently, Heisenberg's Indeterminacy Principle holds true not only for nature but for scripture as well, and what we observe is not the Bible itself but the Bible exposed to our method of analysis. Biblical texts contain "meaning potential" and various interpreters, according to Blount's analogy, help themselves to slices of the meaning potential pie. Such being the case, Blount notes that this pie is divided-up "arbitrarily, not according to individual constituent expectations, but according to a perspective of standard white Eurocentric values" (3). Since this review has already referenced two white Europeans (Schweitzer and Heisenberg), there's not much ground left to argue this point.

And so Blount sets out to reorient (rather than reform) the traditional perspective of biblical interpretation by demonstrating that when the perspectives of the marginal members of society "are included, biblical interpretation can have new meaning and impact in both the academic and ecclesiastical arenas" (3). In this way, *Cultural Interpretation* sets out to offer a clear course-correction for exegetes of the dominant-class presumptuous enough to proclaim a text's meaning—pastors and theologians trained in the various European-inspired biblical-critical methods. Pastors of the euro-critical persuasion can appreciate the author's efforts here in that, unlike certain "liberationist" approaches, Blount's program seeks not to supplant dearly-held (by this reviewer, at least) historical and literary perspectives but to engage and enrich them.

Blount organizes his argument around some meaty terminology: sociolinguistic method, analectical process, ideational analysis, and micro- and macro-interpersonal levels of textual investigation, to

name most of it. Although it is true that *Cultural Interpretation* offers considerably more down-to-earth examples than it does lofty abstractions, the reader will nonetheless need to master Blount's particular lexicon in order to follow the arguments presented. This is not to scare away potential readers because, once the few less-familiar terms are mastered, *Cultural Interpretation* is as readable as it is thorough.

Indeed, Blount leaves no hermeneutical stone unturned. The first of the book's two major sections surveys four diverse settings for scriptural interpretation: The Gospel in Solentiname (a collection of discussions of Gospel texts by Nicaraguan peasants), the Sermon in The Black Church, the Negro Spiritual, and the work of Rudolph Bultmann. This part of the book is particularly invigorating, providing a bit of everything: from a new spin on the old critiques of Bultmann's views of history and existence, to examples of African American sermon illustrations, including one by Martin Luther King, Jr. explaining Mark 10:35-45, and "The Drum Major Instinct."

In the second section of the book, Blount offers up various slices of meaning potential encountered in Mark's trial scenes. Here, a specific text is evaluated through the eyes of various scholars and their investigative methods as applied to Mark 14:55-15:15. Not only scholars but preachers too, and their sermons, undergo Blount's scrutiny as the myriad meanings of these trial scenes are explored and assessed. The purpose of this *tour de force* through the expanse of scholarly and homiletical terrain is to demonstrate two of Blount's central assertions: "Meaning is not limited to a single interpretation" (90) and "analectical engagement"—recognizing and analyzing marginal perspectives—is the way for interpreters to go (96).

The upshot of Blount's meticulous analysis is that "different communities, literally, see different Jesuses. Each community accesses and values that part of the potential meaning that is uniquely responsive to its communal needs and concerns" (159). This is not to say that Blount believes that all interpretations ought to enjoy similar merit or regard or, for that matter, that biblical truth is culturally relative (even if

certain meanings may be). Indeed, in the initial chapters of the book, Blount details certain linguistic analyses (there are three) which guide interpreters "by unequivocally stating what a text cannot mean" (89) and again in his conclusion, points up the factors which "establish limits on a text's potential meaning" (184).

Blount's accounting and surveying of the different ideological constructs and cultural settings which extract meaning from the meaning potential pie is indeed broad, thoroughly-researched, well-reasoned, and of immense help to the discussion of how context influences the interpretation of scripture. In this regard, Blount delivers on the promise of "reorienting New Testament criticism." Indeed, Blount's strategy to break down interpretive boundaries and assemble a "rainbow" of biblical perspectives from various disciplines and social contexts bears promise for the future of biblical studies.

For preachers attempting to determine a text's meaning and then deliver that meaning to their hearers, Blount's proposal to "allow different approaches to engage each other...and therefore learn from and be changed by one another" (184) is helpful as well. Perhaps a good step in this direction would be to invite not only Presbyterians and Episcopalians to your next ministerial text-study, but also Baptists, Pentecostals, and Roman Catholics. Which raises the question: what rules for dialogue—what sorts of checks and balances—will there be for those interpretations which are fortunate enough to fall within the established hermeneutical boundaries? Still to come then is an equally thorough discussion of how, once we gather all of these interpreters and interpretations together, varying and (often) competing claims of meaning can be evaluated as to their applicability and viability. Because—all valid meanings being equal—when it comes to pie, some will want to claim a bigger piece than others.

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THE REAL JESUS: THE MISGUIDED QUEST FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS AND THE TRUTH OF THE TRADITIONAL GOSPELS, by Luke Timothy Johnson. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996. Pp. 182. \$22.50.

This is a book about the long hunt for the *real Jesus*. Not just any Jesus. Not the make-believe Jesus. Not the false Jesus. Not even the near-as-we-can-tell, best-we-can-do-for-now Jesus.

Johnson deals with the latest version of this hunt, that carried on especially by the Jesus Seminar, voting with colored beads on the sayings of Jesus. While Johnson attends especially to representatives of this project (Borg, Crossan, Funk, Mack), he includes others as well: Barbara Thiering, John Spong, A. N. Wilson, and Stephen Mitchell. This expansion is significant because Johnson holds that the current hunt for the "real Jesus" is not simply the preoccupation of a small group of like-minded academics (though it is that), but is evidence of a larger cultural and social dislocation.

"Christianity in America," says Johnson, "is today profoundly divided" (59). On one side of this faultline are those who perceive Jesus chiefly in terms given by the Christian creed, with its focus on Jesus' death and resurrection; on the other, those who hold that "Jesus must be understood apart from the framework of the Christian creed: the resurrection is reduced to a series of visionary experiences of certain followers, and the significance of Jesus is to be assessed from the period of his ministry" (57).

Partisans of either side will find Johnson's work stimulating, either because it confirms dearly-held views, or because it stirs their blood and sends them back to the trenches. If that were all it did, this book would be no great service. Such wars of attrition always leave people in the pews (and in the pulpits) wishing for something new, something better.

Johnson's book may be both new and better. The book takes sides, to be sure. Look at the subtitle: "The misguided quest for the historical Jesus and the truth of the traditional gospels." Readers will hear both Johnson's commitments and his

century-old debt to Martin Kähler (who wrote *The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ*). There is, however, more to hear.

First of all, Johnson presents a solid, and incisive analysis of the methodological problems in the work of the current questers. These questers pit "Jesus...against the church, and the gospels...against the rest of the New Testament" (65). He notes also a certain naiveté among the questers about the feasibility of searching for the "real" Jesus (or the "real" Socrates, for that matter), about the meaning of the word "real" (106), and about the effect of "creeping certitude" (130). So far, Kähler guides the way nicely.

The value of Johnson's work emerges when he establishes "points of convergence" (116) amongst the sources of historical information about Jesus. His work here is careful and persuasive. For all that we cannot know, Johnson still finds, using reliable historical methods, a discernible shape to the character, Jesus.

The greatest promise, and the greatest frustration, in this book come when Johnson discusses the "narrative controls" (125) exerted by the canonical gospels on our picture of Jesus. The reasons for frustration come in rushing squads: Is this a retreat from historical investigation back to dogmatic assertion? What is the practical meaning of "narrative control"? If the important issue is (as Johnson says) the permanent contemporaneity of the risen Lord, do the historical gospels need to become timeless to exert "narrative control" on the Jesus who is, who was, and who is to come? How can narratives so insistently different from each other collaborate to exert any effective control on anything?

Johnson, of course, recognizes the variety among the gospels. He argues, however, that they share a similar pattern, a similar focus, and a similar assessment of Jesus in general terms. These general agreements, says Johnson, ought properly to exert "narrative control" on our construing of Jesus; at least, they should not be thrown out when we begin trying to throw Jesus together.

Johnson further understands this variety to be complementary, not competing

(146), but here one finds also the single most disturbing aspect of the book. Johnson sketches the gospels, and finds in all of them "the same pattern of radical obedience to God and selfless love toward other people" (158). This same pattern, says Johnson, is to be found in the Christian creeds.

This is a good pattern, but what if one were to disagree with Johnson's sketches? What if a reader does not find Mark to be the story of Jesus as "the suffering Son of man"? What if Luke's quick skip over the passion of Jesus leads a reader to wonder whether this gospel does, indeed, make the "pattern of the suffering Messiah...even more central" to its plot?

Johnson's sketches have much to commend them, including the accumulated weight of traditional interpretation. But they suffer from a certain formulaic stiffness, and each time a reader notices a disagreement with Johnson's sketch, one wonders what the outcome will be. Johnson's argument, at this point, works better in general than it does in particular, but he began by intending to respect the particularity of the several canonical gospels. This contradiction may well frustrate readers.

No matter where you stand on the issue of retrieving the "real" Jesus, the "historical" Jesus, the "traditional" Jesus, or any other Jesus you can imagine, read this book. Johnson offers a reliable analysis of what cannot be known. He presents a promising sketch of what may be known, and of what needs to be done next. But most important of all, the frustrations that result from this book may well move this discussion genuinely forward. This would be a worthy accomplishment.

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THE ARCHEOLOGY OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY, by William H. C. Frend. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996. Pp. 432. \$39.00.

Until modern times studies in early Christianity have been primarily if not exclusively text-based. This was true even of Harnacks work at the turn of the century, in

which he judged that Christianity was never extensive or deeply rooted in north Africa, a conclusion which is completely at variance with recent archeological finds. Frend's book, the first of its kind, explains the important light archeology sheds on the art, architecture, and social world of Christians in the Roman Empire and provides clues to long-ignored popular religion and non-orthodox traditions. Archeology decisively corrects and modifies scholarly assumptions which have been based exclusively on textual tradition.

Frend, professor emeritus of Ecclesiastical History at the University of Glasgow, Scotland, is known for his works on Donatism, martyrdom and persecution in the Early Church, and his monumental *Rise of Christianity* (1022 pp). Archeology is a child of the Renaissance in which ancient Rome was beginning to come into its own, and he begins the narrative with a description of early "genteel pillage" which produced discoveries in Asia Minor, Syria, and North Africa, including digs at ancient Ephesus and Troy, acquiring the Codex Alexandrinus and other artifacts, mostly under the guidance of the British. Napoleon Bonaparte was the unwitting patron of continued excavations which accompanied his exploits including the Rosetta stone and monumental statuary and obelisks which are now housed in the Louvre and the British Museum. Throughout the work it is clear that both nationalistic interests, especially during the imperialism which preceded WW I, and ecclesiastical concerns (mostly pro- or anti-Roman), were the engines that drove archeological expeditions. The French military forces in Algeria discovered an immense harvest of Roman and Christian antiquities which excited the attention of academics who recorded and preserved these finds. In Algeria alone the remains of 170 Christian churches were discovered by 1902, ranging from very large basilicas to country chapels. In Numidia 1,200 sites were discovered—one every two and a half miles—and in Timgad (Numidia) 1,500 Christian burials were found in one large cemetery. These finds date from the fourth and fifth century, and indicate that Christianity was indeed dominant and pervasive. In ancient Carthage, the actual

burial site of Felicity and Perpetua (d. 203) was discovered as well as the amphitheater that witnessed their death. Christian burials were found wherever there was room (over 7,000). Not only were orthodox Christians numerous, but so also were the Donatists pervasive, and there is strong evidence for non-theological factors causing the rift between them.

Archeology in Asia Minor reflected the rivalries of France, Austria-Hungary, and Germany, primarily to enrich their national museums. In this competition careful archeological method was usually ignored in the race for monumental statuary, and smaller shards, mosaics, inscriptions, and jewelry were swept into the dump. Archeologists did establish Paul's stay in Corinth between the autumn of 51 and the end of 52, a pivotal date in Paul's missionary career. In 1902 the church of the "Ever Virgin Mary" was discovered at Ephesus which has since been accepted as the site for the third ecumenical council in 431 A.D. and that of 449 A.D. as well ("lat-rocinium"). Archeology confirms the vitality and originality of early Christian art and architecture in Asia Minor—Ephesus, Nazianzus, Antioch, and Tyre.

Throughout this century archeologists' discoveries have mandated revisions in interpretations which have been based solely on texts. Frend's narrative continues into the Nile Valley, Central Asia, the Balkans, and western Europe. He concludes with a chapter on the significance of archeology from 1965 into the 1990s. Recent developments include the refinements of methodology, specifically that of stratigraphy, which is the careful digging of a small area or square by layers or strata, and making precise measurements of elevations, soil samples, bone fragments, and other artifacts. In the last thirty years the sheer volume of research and discovery has been overwhelming. In the last ten years over one-hundred new Christian monuments have been discovered in Asia Minor. It has further been determined that at the time of Justinian (d. 565) about two-thirds of Palestine was Christian and one-third Jewish. Six congresses of Christian archeology have been held since 1965 with over 500 delegates at each meeting. The record of new findings reported in 1975 fill 1,284

pages in two volumes. Although the old rivalries of nations and Christian apologetics have disappeared, there remain new suspicions between Classicists and theologians, the former considering anything post-Constantinian as decadent.

One of the most exciting finds in the last fifty years has been the Christian catacombs in Rome at several sites from the third century. The Christians were self-confident enough to develop their own art in order to demonstrate their trust in Jesus message depicted through his authoritative teaching and acts of healing. Also a large number of early churches have been discovered in Italy in the last ten years, leading to questions regarding the impact of Christianity on society in Late Antiquity. There was a profound change of outlook in the western provinces in the fifth century as witnessed by the archeological discoveries in gladiators rooms, forms of city administration, classical education, and the evidence that gradually urban government and leadership was in the hands of bishops. Augustine and Ambrose were two great fourth century giants who busied themselves with secular affairs (and whose churches have also been identified and excavated), and their involvement in society became the normal pattern in the fifth century.

This is a welcome contribution to the study of early Christianity that brings the findings of archeology into contemporary discussion. I regret that the archeology of Israel/Palestine, where I have worked four seasons as an archeologist at Caesarea, was not included; it may be that Palestine requires a volume for itself alone. The bibliographies after each chapter are useful and inclusive. This book should be in church libraries and available to those who are interested in archeology and Christian history.

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LUTHER, MINISTRY, AND ORDINATION RITES IN THE EARLY REFORMATION, by Ralph F. Smith. New York: Peter Lang, 1996. Pp. 292. \$52.95.

Before his untimely death, Ralph F. Smith was Associate Professor at Wartburg Theological Seminary. He held a degree in Liturgical Theology from the University of Notre Dame, the center in this country of the "liturgical renewal movement." This school of thought, which has become enormously influential since the 1970s, offers its adherents an attractive, all-embracing theological myth that purports to define the essential nature of true Christian identity. According to this myth, the key to Christian faithfulness across the ages is the Christian cult. In worship, centered on the Lord's Table, the church is thought to be most truly itself and one with its Lord.

Two key assumptions drive the myth. The first is an idealized concept of "the Liturgy." The central representation of this "Liturgy"—now generally referred to as "the Eucharist" by liturgical experts—is the Mass of the Roman Catholic Church. Other historical representations of the Liturgy include the rites of the Orthodox and Anglican churches. Fervent Lutheran supporters of the myth, of whom Smith was one, wish to add the Lutheran churches to this exclusive company.

The second assumption concerns the ministry. The primary role of the ministry is to be the custodian of the Liturgy and so insure the continuity of proper worship. Ministry is a holy priesthood, an office that emerged at the dawn of revelation in the figure of Aaron, and, with the coming of the New Covenant in Christ's body and blood, passes to the generations that follow by the laying on of hands in episcopal succession.

Part of the attraction of this theological myth is its ecumenical vision. It declares that Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, and Lutheran churches have the duty to strive to incarnate the True Church through common participation in the continuity of the Liturgy that stretches back to the first five centuries of the church's existence. In this way Christ's priestly prayer "that they may be one" in John 17 achieves visible, historical realization.

The myth of liturgical renewal, although ostensibly about eternal things, had its earth-bound origin in nineteenth-century European Romanticism and Hegelian Idealism. Its central concept of "Liturgy"—which it defines as public acts of worship under the responsibility of ecclesiastical authority—is itself largely a neologism of the nineteenth century. The myth's original purveyors were territorial church bureaucrats and conservative university professors seeking to defend traditional ecclesiastical privileges against the encroachments of secularism, liberal theology, and democratic reform.

Can Lutheranism be made to fit this theological myth? In the nineteenth century, one prominent Lutheran figure who answered in the affirmative was Wilhelm Löhe (1808-1872). Löhe asserted that proper Lutheran worship "may be compared to a twin mountain, one of whose heights is a little lower than the other...[T]he lower is the sermon...the higher is the Sacrament of the Altar." Löhe also argued that the ordained ministry was a privileged priestly caste that exists prior to the assembly of believers: "Not the office originates from the congregation, but it is more accurate to say, the congregation originates from the office."

Even a reader with a modest historical knowledge of the Reformation can see the problems in these claims. Luther's reform centered on the preaching of the word. The sermon was the "higher mountain" to which everything was made subordinate. "Whoever has the office of preaching imposed on him," said Luther, "has the highest office in Christendom. Afterward, he may also baptize, celebrate mass, and exercise all pastoral care; or, if he does not wish to do so, he may confine himself to preaching." Further, this "preaching office" was not restricted to a priestly caste holding cultic powers but was understood confessionally in terms of the work of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the gospel. According to Wilhelm Maurer, the Augsburg Confession (Article V) "does not tie the idea of an official institution to the term 'preaching office' but thinks rather of a spiritual occurrence that encompasses all Christendom. Even the emergency baptism administered by women [i.e., the sixteenth-century's idea of an

extreme case] provides the preaching authority for every Christian—man, woman, and child—who has the opportunity.” The office of ministry has its authority from Christ to be sure, but it is ratified in the public or outer call of the gathering of believers. The congregation is prior to the pastor in a most practical sense.

What about ordination in episcopal succession, so important to the myth of liturgical renewal? Once again, Luther is an inconvenient obstacle to the advocates of liturgical renewal. “Of [ordination] the church of Christ knows nothing,” wrote Luther in 1520: “it is an invention of the church of the pope. Not only is there nowhere any promise of grace attached to it, but there is not a single word said about it in the whole New Testament.” Despite this claim, pastors were eventually called and ordained among Lutherans. The reasons why have been the subject of intense study by theologians and Reformation scholars for nearly two centuries.

One of the most accomplished scholars to investigate the practice of Lutheran ordination in depth—and to do so in full awareness of the myth of liturgical renewal in its initial nineteenth-century manifestation—was Johann Michael Reu (1869-1943), Smith’s illustrious predecessor at Wartburg Seminary. Reu, who had been educated at Löhe’s school in Neuendettelsau and was Professor of Theology at Wartburg for three decades beginning in 1899, grounded his research in long neglected liturgical materials of the sixteenth century—the very stuff that Smith explores in his book.

Ordained ministry, said Reu, derives its authority not from any sacramental transmittal of heavenly grace, but from the public call of the universal priesthood of the church. Ordination rites in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are many and various among the Lutherans. These rites do not stipulate a particular method of mediation in preference to others. The episcopal succession of bishops who ratify ministers by the laying on of hands is entirely dispensable, as the reformers showed again and again. Indeed, ordination itself, even when it is reduced to the bare minimum of the ritual act of laying on of hands, is dispensable. When, for exam-

ple, in 1531 a certain Pastor Sutelius in Göttingen doubted his authority because he lacked episcopal ordination, Luther advised him to undergo the laying on of hands by other ministers in the city in an act of public worship. This ceremony was, however, not essential to authentic preaching. Its purpose was to relieve the confusion of lay people in the parish and soothe the psychological doubts of Sutelius himself. Johannes Bugenhagen (1485-1558) was even more suspicious of the laying on of hands, especially in the first decade of Lutheran reform. He wrote against it and, on occasion, ignored it, replacing services of ordination with services of installation. This is not to say that the laying on of hands was universally banned. On the contrary, it was frequently employed. But its use reflected the evangelical freedom with which the reformers treated all “human traditions.”

After 12 May 1535, this situation changed. The Elector Johann Friedrich ordered that a rite of ordination by laying on of hands be uniformly observed. The Elector’s motivation was practical and political. After centuries of Catholic indoctrination, the populace was unsure of the authority of evangelical pastors. In some territories, ordination by the laying on of hands did not return until the seventeenth century.

It is curious to note that Smith ignores the work of his great predecessor in both the argument of his book and his extensive bibliography. Smith claims that despite the radical rejection of the episcopal authority of Rome, the Lutherans maintained continuity with the tradition of the church by retaining the practice of laying on of hands in the rite of ordination. A number of Reu’s counter-examples to this thesis are neither mentioned nor, apparently, known to Smith. Smith also fails to provide an adequate political account of one of the central claims of Reu’s investigation: namely, that it is the Elector’s Erastian decree of 1535 that changes the direction of Wittenberg practice.

At every turn, Smith goes out of his way to soften the radical nature of the reformers’ theological views on ordination by speaking of what he perceives to be a “development” and “emerging consensus” in

the elaboration of ordination rites. This development moves Lutheran ordination practice in the direction of the medieval Latin rite. That rite, which Smith lovingly examines in the first chapter, functions in the book as the unspoken ideal of ordination practice. Whereas Reu sees political retreat from an originally bold, biblical position, Smith sees the striving for liturgical continuity as the goal of Lutheran reform. Smith slants his interpretation of the historical material in this direction because the myth of the liturgical renewal movement requires an ordained priesthood in succession to the rites of the early church.

The reader is in Smith's debt for his painstaking catalogue of ordination services which he lays out in chronological order and quotes at generous length. This is the importance of the book. With Smith's death, the church lost a talented historical researcher. But the theology that undergirds the book is misleading. *Luther, Ministry, and Ordination Rites in the Early Reformation Church* should be treated with the utmost caution.

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RURAL CONGREGATIONAL STUDIES: A GUIDE FOR GOOD SHEPHERDS, by L. Shannon Jung and Mary A. Agria. Nashville: Abingdon, 1997. Pp. 156. \$16.95 (paper).

This book broadens and deepens one's understanding and appreciation of congregational life set within the dynamics of rural America today. It is written for the benefit of pastors, priests, lay and judicatory leaders. The authors' insights about rural congregations were generated from a coalition of pastors, seminary interns and faculty from Wartburg and the University of Dubuque theological seminaries who were involved in a special three year congregational study focused in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin. The purpose of the book is to strengthen rural congregations by (1) articulating what it means to live and serve rural America today; (2) underscoring the importance of mission and vision in the ru-

ral sector; and (3) developing a resource for seminarians, seminary faculty and administrators, clergy "new to rural," and rural parish leaders. In addition, the book is a resource for cross-cultural studies, programs in ethics, theology, evangelism, pastoral care, polity, preaching, worship, and spiritual formation.

With a compelling introductory overview and an excellent concluding compendium listing of books, journals, audio-visual, and organizational resources for ministry with rural communities, key chapters cover the subjects of understanding the rural context, how rural congregations express themselves in action, leadership, style and process in rural congregations, and strategies for empowering rural communities.

Each chapter ends with an extensive listing of questions for discussion dealing with such subjects as tools for analyzing rural life, defining the congregational sense of identity, reassessing a rural call, preaching, worship and mission in the rural context, women rural clergy in a patriarchal setting, the fine art of listening, the role of pastors and priests in sustaining rural community, and the distinctiveness of rural life.

The research materials incorporated into the book are designed to help the reader develop a better understanding of the complexities associated with ministry and mission in the rural context. They do so by exploring, for example, human issues that make or break rural congregations, the influence of the congregation's sense of mission and evangelism and issues affecting the agricultural community. With such understandings in place, the authors offer practical approaches for addressing these subjects.

This book contributes to the alleviation of many preconceptions and fears about rural ministry, and points to the new challenges and opportunities awaiting to be addressed about congregational renewal; better understanding about rural social and economic structures; and the dynamics of congregational life, identity and leadership. A study of this work strengthens one's skills to understand, appreciate and negotiate ones role as a rural pastor or priest. Questions are raised about how

members of rural congregations express their faith, understand the role of their congregations in the wider community and how they dedicate themselves to rural ministry. These questions are designed to enable a pastor or priest to enter skillfully a rural congregation and community, and to approach such responsibilities as Bible study, worship, confirmation classes and general programs in Christian education in imaginative ways. At the end of several chapters, biblical texts are identified that integrate the chapter material with the Christian faith tradition.

Because of its breadth of coverage of issues and challenges, this book makes a very significant contribution to the contemporary literature on rural ministry. It serves as a "wake up call" for judicatories that, for one reason or another, have often failed to understand and support adequately rural congregations exposed to the winds of rapid social, economic, environmental, technological, industrial and demographic change. It also functions as a very effective tool for use in programs of continuing education for rural clergy and laity. The book is as provocative as it is insightful. A careful reading leaves one with a new sense of enthusiasm, challenge, hopefulness and confidence for wrestling with the massive issues involved in rural ministry...a ministry so tragically misunderstood and neglected in recent times.

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10 HABITS FOR EFFECTIVE MINISTRY: A GUIDE FOR LIFE-GIVING PASTORS, by Lowell O. Erdahl. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1996. Pp. 160. \$12.00 (paper).

Who else is in a better position to write such a book? After twenty years as a parish pastor, five as a seminary professor, and a dozen years as a bishop, Erdahl has observed the strengths and foibles of pastors, plus the joys and pitfalls of ministry, as have few others.

The theme of the book is the "life-giving pastor," and each chapter deals with a topic

that can give vitality to ministry or sap it of its life. The first and last chapters sandwich the whole book with living and growing in grace. Ministry is a professional career, but if it's only that, it dies. We need the reminder that we live and minister under the umbrella and the support of God's grace.

The eight chapters in the middle each deal with an area of ministry. "Life-giving pastors" bond with their people, exercise gift-evoking leadership, are lifelong learners, have something to say and say it well, are good stewards of time, pick their battles wisely and fight them fairly, are prophetic as well as pastoral, and respect boundaries. Readers can pick and choose what order to read the chapters in. I suspect most start with the topic that most frustrates them.

I started with the chapter on being good stewards of time, since that's an area I struggle with a lot. Much of the advice in the chapter I've already heard, but I need reminding and prodding: Plan ahead, prioritize, manage meetings better. One of the major breakthroughs I discovered in the parish was how to use the phone more effectively—calling shut-ins when I didn't have time to visit them; talking to committee chairpersons ahead of the meeting time, so that I didn't have to be at the meeting; calling people who had done something special, calling to say "thank you," etc. I could accomplish in two hours about as much as I could do in three days of driving around to find people. The other side of that coin is that there are times when one absolutely must drive around and find people for face-to-face contact.

I moved to the next chapter, "Life-Giving Pastors Pick Their Battles Wisely and Fight Them Fairly," since dealing with conflict is an area in which we do not prepare new pastors very well. Erdahl gives ten specific and helpful suggestions. I would add a couple more: (1) the need for a lot of one-on-one pastoral calling in times of conflicts, probably with those you want to talk with least, and (2) the deadly allure of *ad hominem* argumentation, that wonderfully effective but underhanded way of arguing which people will routinely use against you, but which will backfire against you every time you sink to it.

It's a sign of our troublesome times that there is the obligatory chapter on "bounda-

ries." Decisive and candid church action on this issue is overdue, and I think we are doing better than most professions in confronting it. Erdahl lays out some early warning signs that can help a pastor avoid trouble. I would add another even more basic precaution: I believe pastors and their families can develop close friendships with members of the parish, but one must keep these connections very distinct from pastoral work. When a pastor gravitates to friends at meetings and parish functions, there's trouble ahead. My advice to young pastors is that in parish activities spend most of your time with people you know the least or who tend to disagree with you. Save talking with friends for private times.

Space considerations prevent even mentioning the remaining chapters. They are equally helpful for those who need that particular advice. For those who want more assistance, Erdahl has included a whole list of footnotes directing the reader to further materials.

There are two problems with this book, neither of which is the author's fault. First, its one thing to read all this good advice, but its quite another thing to practice it! For example, we all know the old adage, "Handle every piece of paper just once" (83), but how many of us really do that? I have two 4-6 inch piles of stuff on my desk which I cant seem to get rid of. If I file it, I may never see it again, and someday my children will have to sort through it before throwing it away. (Even Lowell Erdahl admitted to me, on the sidewalk where nobody could overhear us, that he has some piles of paper in his office.) Sooner or later I do get to the important stuff and keep the piles reasonably in order. I will probably retire and/or die with two piles on my desk! Still, it's not four or six piles! Second, the people who should read the book won't. My guess is that everyone who reads the book will already be doing "effective ministry." We have many preaching workshops at the seminary, but who comes? The preachers who badly need improving? Hardly ever. Its the good preachers who want to preach better. Alas, it will probably be the same with this book: The ones who really need it will never read it. *Big Hint:* If one of your flock gives you this volume as a gift, read it

carefully! Your member is telling you something. Lowell Erdahl can help you a lot.

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**NARRATIVE AND IMAGINATION:
PREACHING THAT SHAPES OUR
WORLD**, by Richard L. Eslinger. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995. Pp. 231. \$19.00.

Preaching is a difficult task. Even the small, wearisome logistics of preaching—rising early on Sunday mornings week after week after week—can, over time, wear down the most eloquent of preachers. The task appears ever the more daunting when other variables, ranging from pluralism to epistemology, are thrown into the mix. It is here that Eslinger plants his discussion, in the midst of these large and often slippery variables.

I would venture to say that the questions raised by Eslinger cross every preacher's mind at one time or another. (Whether these questions are visited frequently and with any intentionality is another issue). How does one stay grounded in the biblical text? What is our unique truth claim as people of God? How do narrative and image, in particular the biblical narrative and image, shape and provide meaning for the hearer? And finally, ultimately, how do we use what we know to our full advantage as preachers of the Word? Weaving in and out of current literature from post-modern and post-liberal thinkers, Eslinger argues that we really do have an agenda in the church, and we need not be apologetic about it. It is our task to preach the gospel story. In preaching the primacy of this story, in its imagery and irony and metaphor, meaning is created which is sustaining not only to the individual, but to the life and mission of the church as well. Given the root paradigm of the life, death, and resurrection of this One from Nazareth, we can address issues as varied as inclusivity and civic pride, without compromising the integrity of the gospel narrative or the issue to be addressed.

But this hardly does the book justice. In

the first half of the book, Eslinger explores in great depth how narrative, imagery, metaphor, and Gadamer's theories of play intersect and finally weave themselves into meaning. All of these variables are enough, but he reminds us that these are more deeply woven into the incarnation of people, places, and time. Covering all this ground creates quite a bit of movement for the reader as one jumps from idea to idea, and often in between. Frequently, I would have to set the book down for a moment simply to catch my breath, and absorb one idea before he was off on another one. Nevertheless, Eslinger does an excellent job of staying focused in grounding himself in the biblical narrative, all the while bringing in current conversations from related discussions in linguistics, imagery, and epistemology.

The second half of the book is dedicated to practice. Though more concrete, the book still remains highly theoretical. Eslinger offers three sermons for the reader to chew on, with accompanying critiques. All three sermons are beautifully written, but unless one is confident with how imagery and narrative play against and with one another, Eslinger's point of "preaching from the middle...where narrative and imagery interplay with rough equity" (176) still seems abstract.

Perhaps most helpful is Eslinger's repeated contact with the gospel narrative itself. He offers a firm corrective for those whose tendency is to find roots elsewhere. Arguing from George Lindbeck's work, he critiques two dominant models of preaching, the cognitive and experiential-expressive. Along with Lindbeck and Hans Frei, Eslinger agrees that we, as a Christian community, need to reclaim the primacy of the biblical narrative. He makes his appeal for a cultural-linguistic model based upon this One who once nailed to a tree, rolled away the stone.

The radical assertion implied in the cultural-linguistic model of doctrine and interpretation is that any and all so-called inner experiences are shaped by the formative environment of culture and language. For the church, that culture and language come to fullest expression as the biblical narrative shapes its worship, guides its preaching, and is lived again in

its sacramental life—ultimately at the heart of the matter in the Easter vigil. (20)

As with all models, the cultural-linguistic is flawed. For example, one can never fully incorporate, at least with complete integrity, other truth claims outside of scripture. Yet at least within the cultural-linguistic model we do not compromise the integrity of our truth claim to satisfy a need for pluralism and inclusivity. In other words, we need not throw out the baby with the bathwater.

This book's primary failing is its level of difficulty. It is not a book to idly peruse before drifting off to sleep. Heavy in theory, it would be frustrating for one seeking practical tips on how to make a sermon more dynamic. And yet, ironically, it finally does teach exactly that. Perhaps Eslinger could have made it more user friendly. Unfortunately, I'm afraid most preachers will not expend the time and energy needed for this book. And that's too bad. Every preacher should know how a little irony works.

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