

Reviews



HOW TO READ THE BIBLE: A GUIDE TO SCRIPTURE, THEN AND NOW, by James L. Kugel. New York: Free Press, 2007. Pp. 819. \$35.00 (cloth).

This book is disquieting. What if what makes the Bible *biblical* is not anything contained in the text itself, but rather a certain way of reading the Bible that emerged during the intertestamental period? That is, the Bible is or has been Scripture not because of *what* it contains but because of *how* we read it. James Kugel calls this a massive rewriting of the Bible. No words were changed, but the community gathered around the text changed the way they read the words, and this in effect rewrote the Bible. Kugel believes this is precisely what the Jewish and Christian communities have

done. It is what he terms the *ancient* interpretation of the Bible.

The fact that we now know that the ancient interpreters did this, and can perceive it with such clarity, is a result of the “extraordinary intellectual achievement” of modern biblical scholarship. Although Kugel is uncomfortable and disquieted by his own conclusions, nevertheless he recognizes that the intellectual achievements of modern biblical scholars like Julius Wellhausen, Hermann Gunkel, and W. F. Albright are on a par with the intellectual achievements of Albert Einstein, Charles Darwin, and Sigmund Freud. Courageous in their willingness to challenge long-held beliefs, they forever transformed the way we read “*the* central text of Western civilization” (663).

Most readers will know that the ancient and

modern approaches to biblical interpretation differ considerably. College and seminary students are often introduced to historical critical method while studying Scripture, and modern methods of biblical interpretation pepper popular conversations on faith and Bible—think of the Jesus Seminar. Simultaneously, most preachers and other readers of Scripture go about their daily lives reading (sometimes unawares) according to the methods of the ancient interpreters.

Just how different the two approaches are remains a matter of debate. At least some biblical scholars and theologians find ways to weave the two approaches (ancient and modern) together in creative fashion. Kugel's argument, however—argued compendiously in this volume—is that the difference between the two approaches is not simply a matter of degree, but of kind. Almost as if there are two different Bibles, the ancients' and the moderns'—"the words of each Bible are exactly the same, but they turn out to mean something quite different" (134). Kugel is concerned that modern readers of the Bible want to have it both ways—they want to read the Bible as divinely inspired *and* be open to or keep in mind the modern approach. They want "to have their Bible and criticize it too" (677). Kugel argues, finally, that this is an impossible and naïve stance. One simply cannot have one's cake and eat it, too.

James Kugel, an Orthodox Jew, believes that modern biblical scholarship and traditional Judaism are irreconcilable. Although he himself studies modern biblical scholarship professionally, as a person of faith he believes it is irreconcilable with Jewish practice. In place of modern biblical scholarship, he offers the idea of "Oral Torah." He writes, "Judaism has at its heart a great secret. It endlessly lavishes praise on the written Torah, exalting its role as a divinely given guidebook and probing lovingly the tiniest details of its wording and even spelling.... Yet upon inspection Judaism turns out to be quite the opposite of funda-

mentalism. The written text alone is not all-powerful; in fact, it rarely stands on its own. Its true significance usually lies not in the plain sense of its words but in what the Oral Torah has made of those words; this is its definitive and final interpretation" (680–681).

Christians might call this Oral Torah the *regula fidei* or Rule of Faith. The Bible does not stand alone, it is not itself that which the community worships; instead, it is the text in and through which the community discovers how to serve God. It is the service of God itself that is holy, rather than the text (685).

By now any reader of this review can see why Kugel's book is so disquieting. It challenges many cherished and closely held beliefs on every side of biblical hermeneutics. Modern scholars will be disquieted by Kugel's assertion that the Bible should or still can be read as a book of faith, irrespective of their insights. Ancient scholars, fundamentalists, and orthodox readers of all stripes will be disquieted that Kugel has read modern scholarship enough to know there is no going back—after such knowledge faith becomes something new and different, and the scholar who spent time with such knowledge can't get back to Kansas any more, at least not with a tap of their heels.

Kugel's book is much more than simply a long argument for this thesis, however. For the most part, this book is precisely what the subtitle indicates—a guide to Scripture. Kugel methodically walks the reader through the entire Hebrew Scriptures. Each chapter reads a specific text in light of the ancient reading first, then the modern reading. Kugel periodically plays these two readings off each other, and very intermittently inserts commentary highlighting how different the two readings are.

Journeying together with Kugel through these texts is wonderful. Every page brings profound insights. For example, Kugel reads the ancient interpreters and discovers that they believed that the rock that Moses struck in the desert for water, the waters of Meribah

(Exod 17:1–7; Num 20:2–13), was actually a traveling rock. The best way to reconcile the tension between differing texts on the matter was to posit a traveling rock that somehow moved or was transported wherever they went in the wilderness wanderings. This rock travels with them as long as Miriam is alive, and when she dies, this becomes the well of Miriam.

Lest we think this is an interpretation only to be found in ancient Jewish interpretation, however, Kugel reminds us that Paul himself believed the same thing: “I want you to know, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all . . . drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the rock was Christ” (1 Cor 10:1–4). So the assumptions of the ancient interpreters, and their methodology, are informative for a Christian reading of the Old and New Testaments. Kugel spells out these ancient assumptions in an opening chapter. The four primary assumptions, according to Kugel, are: (1) the Bible was a fundamentally cryptic text, (2) the Bible was a book of lessons directed to readers in their own day, (3) the Bible contains no contradictions or mistakes, and (4) the entire Bible is essentially a divinely given text (14–15). Although each of these assumptions is more nuanced than these quick summaries, even the short definitions give the reader an idea of how the ancient method of interpretation continues to shape and influence contemporary readings of Scripture.

Kugel’s book is so long that they could not fit all of the content in the print version. He has made an additional essay on “Apologetics and Biblical Criticism,” as well as the full bibliography, errata, and reviews, available at his website, <http://www.jameskugel.com/read.php>.

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THE LIFE OF A GALILEAN SHAMAN: JESUS OF NAZARETH IN ANTHROPOLOGICAL-HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE, by Pieter F. Craffert. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2008. Pp. 451. \$52.00 (paper).

In recent years, historical Jesus research has proceeded primarily along two lines. On the one hand, studies have been characterized by a radical skepticism arising either from the assumptions of the so-called “second quest,” or from the “up for grabs” ethos of postmodern historiography. Other studies have emerged from a more conservative historical positivism that optimistically seeks to ground the church’s Christology in history. With these competing approaches in mind, the author attempts a new approach to historical Jesus research that moves beyond the postmodernist-positivist divide.

Craffert begins this study with a critique of current methodologies used in historical Jesus research. His stated goal is to move beyond a methodology that is caught between the aforementioned extremes by forming new categories to discuss the historical Jesus. This book is unique in that it contains both the explication of a new model for historical Jesus research and the application of that model.

Using Wright’s well-known distinction between the *Schweitzerstrasse* (“the Schweitzer street”—represented by the so-called Third Questers) and the *Wredebahn* (“the Wrede path”—represented by the Jesus Seminar), Craffert offers a third alternative to the postmodernist-positivist divide through a methodology known as “cultural bundubashing.” This approach is an interpretive, interdisciplinary, and cross-cultural approach to historiography that, continuing with the roadway-travel metaphor, may be likened to off-road driving. Current historical Jesus research proceeds under the assumption that the *real* Jesus could not have been like the person described in the New Testament, and that the layers of tradition must be peeled away to get

back to the historical core truths. Craffert rejects this idea, and he attempts to show that the gospels can be understood as social artifacts that point to Jesus as a specific type of individual—what he calls the “shamanic figure.”

For some readers, the term “shaman” may conjure up notions of tribal religious activity or voodoo mysticism. Craffert carefully explains that in his model the term shaman “refers to those religious entrepreneurs who enter controlled ASC’s [alternate states of consciousness] on behalf of their communities and perform certain social functions that center on healing, divination, and control of spirits” (166). In such a complex, the shaman is situated in the position of teacher, healer, prophet, and sage largely through a cooperative communal effort where shared assumptions and values give the shaman credibility. The teaching and healing activities ascribed to Jesus in the New Testament are thus part and parcel of his shamanic role, and should neither be separated from one another nor evaluated apart from the alien social context of first-century Palestine. Craffert writes: “The dichotomy between teaching and healing does not exist and cannot be defended, not even to claim that Jesus was primarily a healer who also taught. He was a shamanic figure for whom teaching and healing together constituted who and what he was as a social personage” (51). Against this backdrop, Craffert examines not only Jesus’ teachings and healings, but also the infancy and resurrection narratives.

This book is filled with interesting anthropological insights that are not typically found in most works on the historical Jesus. Craffert is careful in how he constructs his hermeneutical model, and also in his application of that model to the New Testament narratives. A great deal more could be said about this volume, but suffice it to say that this book makes an interesting, thought-provoking, and unique contribution to current historical Jesus research. The manner in which Craffert challenges the assumptions of historiographical

positivism has the potential to promote dialogue in a number of key areas, not the least of which is scholarly obsession with ontological monism. Craffert’s work is dense reading and will likely be useful only for those immersed in the weighty discussions and attendant scholarly literature. Those pursuing advanced research in the field of historical Jesus studies will find this volume to be a welcome addition.

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GOD AND THE NEW ATHEISM: A CRITICAL RESPONSE TO DAWKINS, HARRIS AND HITCHENS, by John F. Haught. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008. Pp. xvi + 124. \$16.95 (paper).

Like many of the readers of this journal, I have been amazed in recent years at the upsurge of interest and multimedia attention devoted to the “new atheism.” Just in case you were lost in a blizzard or on a desert island, books like Sam Harris’s *The End of Faith* (2004) and Richard Dawkins’s *The God Delusion* (2006) have not only been best sellers, but have spun off a worldwide conversation on radio, the internet, and TV. There was even a TV special in the United Kingdom entitled “The Enemies of Reason” (now on DVD). At RichardDawkins.net, which advertises itself as a “clear thinking oasis,” you will find not only “the atheist bus” but lots more self-promotion from the world’s most famous atheist.

What is a respectable church leader supposed to make of all this? Are we supposed to keep up with the latest anti-Christian fads? That would take a lot of time away from real ministry, wouldn’t it? Relax. You need only read one very small book to get the lowdown on Dawkins and friends: Jack Haught, *God and the New Atheism*. It is one of the best books on

this topic that I have read (and I have read quite a few). Haught is a prolific author and internationally respected expert in religion and science. In about one hundred pages Haught provides a refreshing and readable response to the strident but quite popular claims of the new atheists. He helpfully lays out the main tenets of the new atheists, and argues that they are surprisingly nonacademic in their knowledge of serious theology and religious studies: “The new atheists reject the God of creationists, fundamentalists, terrorists, and intelligent design (ID) advocates” (xv). What is more, there is not much here that is new. While the packaging may be slick, the complaints against religion go back to the eighteenth century in some cases, and were in full swing two centuries ago.

Haught taught undergraduates at a top university, and in his classes on religion, science, and atheism they go through major atheistic arguments from heavyweights like Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud. One of the main points of this book, and it is a good one, is that the worldview assumptions of the new atheists are simplistic when compared to their great forefathers in the “faith.” Their definition of religious faith, for example, as belief without evidence, is itself

patently absurd. For all their claims to be at the cutting edge of intelligent and scientific thought, Haught exposes scientific atheism for the rather thin and simplistic philosophy it is; the irony is obvious and I couldn’t help enjoying it. Along the way, he is up-front in advocating a reasonable, intellectual form of Christian theology. In many ways, this book is an excellent apologetic for learned and broadly “scientific” Christian thought, that is, a faith fully engaged in intellectual development and debate. He exposes as a false dilemma the choice between fundamentalism and atheism or between Darwin and divinity, arguing that biological evolution in particular and science in general are best understood in the light of rational religion. “Theologically interpreted, not only biblical faith but also the long religious journey of our whole species is a series of responses to an invitation to intimacy by the inexhaustible mystery of God” (98). This is a wise book about important questions raised by the arrogant rhetoric of what passes for atheism in our time. Even busy church leaders should make time to read it.

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Index to Volume 29 (2009)

(Pagination for this volume is as follows:
No. 1 = 1–104; No. 2 = 105–212; No. 3 =
213–320; No. 4 = 321–444)

Articles

Advancing the Cruciform Revolution: A Kingdom Perspective on Evangelism, Gregory A. Boyd. 407–417.

All God's Critters: A Feminist Reflection on Darwin and Species, Ann M. Pederson. 47–55.

But What Kind of a Jesus Is He? Frederick J. Gaiser. 107–108. (Editorial)

Canon and Conscience: A Feminist Perspective, Tatha Wiley. 357–366.

The Canon: Open or Closed? Closed: A Historical Commitment, Eric D. Barreto. 419, 421. (Face to Face)

The Canon: Open or Closed? Open: A Living Witness, Mary Hinkle Shore. 418, 420. (Face to Face)

Charles Darwin: Friend or Foe? Francisco J. Ayala. 19–29.

Diversity, Difference, and Access to Power in Diaspora: The Case of the Book of Esther, Steed Vernyl Davidson. 280–287.

Fear, Hate, John's First Letter, and the Task of Ministry, Roland Miller. 5–6. (Editorial)

Forging a Common Story, Frederick J. Gaiser. 215–216. (Editorial)

Genesis after the *Origin*: Theological Responses to Evolution, S. Brian Stratton. 7–18.

Grist for the Mill: Luther on the Apocrypha, Christopher M. Croghan. 389–396.

I Don't Believe in Evolution, Frederick J. Gaiser. 3–4. (Editorial)

Jesus and the Angels, Susan R. Garrett. 162–169.

Jesus and the Trinity, Lois Malcolm. 143–151.

Jesus in the Balance: Interpretation in the Twenty-First Century, Maggie Ross. 152–161.

Jesus: Real to Reel, Richard S. Ascough. 179–186.

Judges: A Public Canon for Public Theology, Richard D. Nelson. 397–406.

Learning Our Place: The Agrarian Perspective of the Bible, Ellen F. Davis. 109–120.

Lutherans as Immigrants, Stephen Paul Bouman. 270–279.

Maids for Madams: Toward a Theology of Global Neighbors, Lilian Dube. 262–269.

Meeting Jesus with Young Children: Accompanying the Youngest Members into Christian Community, Elizabeth M. Hunter. 170–178.

Ministry with Immigrants: Blending the Cultures, Patrick Cabello Hansel. 288, 290. (Face to Face)

Ministry with Immigrants: Sharing the Mission, Glenn E. Berg-Moberg. 289, 291. (Face to Face)

The Miracle Stories in the Gospels: The Continuing Challenge for Interpreters, Arland J. Hultgren. 129–135.

Must Every Christian Sermon Name the Name of Jesus? No! Frederick J. Gaiser. 197, 199. (Face to Face)

Must Every Christian Sermon Name the Name of Jesus? Yes! Gracia Grindal. 196, 198. (Face to Face)

"No Longer Strangers" (Ephesians 2:19): The Ethics of Migration, William O'Neill. 227–233.

Noncanonical Texts: *The Da Vinci Code* and Beyond, David Landry. 367–379.

On Loving Strangers: Encountering the Mystery of God in the Face of Migrants, Miguel H. Díaz. 234–242.

- On Primal Fear and Confidence: Reinterpreting the Myth of the Flood as the Climate Changes**, Stewart W. Herman. 63–74.
- Our Creaturely Adventure: Post-Darwinian Directions for Christian Anthropology**, Paul R. Sponheim. 30–38.
- Peopled by the Book**, Allen G. Jorgenson. 325–333.
- Preaching Creation: Genesis 1–2**, Terence E. Fretheim. 75–83. (Texts in Context)
- Preaching Jesus**, David J. Lose. 187–195. (Texts in Context)
- Putting on the Whole Armor of God: Preaching Ephesians 6:10–20 in a Multicultural Congregation**, Hollie M. Holt-Woehl. 292–299. (Texts in Context)
- Radical Hospitality: Sociotheological Reflections on Postville, Iowa**, Peter Kivisto and Jason Mahn. 252–261.
- Reading the Bible after Darwin**, Mark A. Throntveit and Alan G. Padgett. 39–46.
- Refugee Resettlement: One Congregation's Transforming Experience**, Joanne Karvonen. 243–251.
- Religion and Immigration, Old and New**, Mark Granquist. 217–226.
- "Things That Matter": Historical Jesus Studies in the New Millennium**, Mark Allan Powell. 121–128.
- To See the Canon in a Grain of Sand: Preaching Jude**, Bryan J. Whitfield. 422–430. (Texts in Context)
- Two Biologists on Church and Faith: A Call for Building Partnerships**, Evelyn E. Gaiser. 85, 87. (Face to Face)
- Two Biologists on Church and Faith: A Problem of Language and Knowing**, Don Alstad. 84, 86. (Face to Face)
- What Are We Reading? Canonicity and the Old Testament**, Stephen B. Chapman. 334–347.
- What Are We Telling the Kids? Teaching Genesis to Teenagers**, Paul E. Nynas. 56–62.
- Who Do You Say That I Am?** Kathleen McManus. 136–142.
- Whose Canon?** Frederick J. Gaiser. 323–324. (Editorial)
- "You shall bear witness to me": Thinking with Luther about Christ and the Scriptures**, Gary M. Simpson. 380–388.
- Zigzagging through Deep Waters: A Guide to Brevard Childs's Canonical Exegesis of Scripture**, Dennis T. Olson. 348–356.

Authors

- Alstad, Don.** Two Biologists on Church and Faith: A Problem of Language and Knowing. 84, 86. (Face to Face)
- Ascough, Richard S.** Jesus: Real to Reel. 179–186.
- Ayala, Francisco J.** Charles Darwin: Friend or Foe? 19–29.
- Barreto, Eric D.** The Canon: Open or Closed? Closed: A Historical Commitment. 419, 421. (Face to Face)
- Berg-Moberg, Glenn E.** Ministry with Immigrants: Sharing the Mission. 289, 291. (Face to Face)
- Bouman, Stephen Paul.** Lutherans as Immigrants. 270–279.
- Boyd, Gregory A.** Advancing the Cruciform Revolution: A Kingdom Perspective on Evangelism. 407–417.
- Chapman, Stephen B.** What Are We Reading? Canonicity and the Old Testament. 334–347.
- Croghan, Christopher M.** Grist for the Mill: Luther on the Apocrypha. 389–396.
- Davidson, Steed Vernyl.** Diversity, Difference, and Access to Power in Diaspora: The Case of the Book of Esther. 280–287.
- Davis, Ellen F.** Learning Our Place: The Agrarian Perspective of the Bible. 109–120.
- Díaz, Miguel H.** On Loving Strangers: Encountering the Mystery of God in the Face of Migrants. 234–242.
- Dube, Lilian.** Maids for Madams: Toward a Theology of Global Neighbors. 262–269.
- Fretheim, Terence E.** Preaching Creation: Genesis 1–2. 75–83. (Texts in Context)
- Gaiser, Evelyn E.** Two Biologists on Church and Faith: A Call for Building Partnerships. 85, 87. (Face to Face)
- Gaiser, Frederick J.** But What Kind of a Jesus Is He? 107–108. (Editorial)

- _____. Forging a Common Story. 215–216. (Editorial)
- _____. I Don't Believe in Evolution. 3–4. (Editorial)
- _____. Must Every Christian Sermon Name the Name of Jesus? No! 197, 199. (Face to Face)
- _____. Whose Canon? 323–324. (Editorial)
- Garrett, Susan R.** Jesus and the Angels. 162–169.
- Granquist, Mark.** Religion and Immigration, Old and New. 217–226.
- Grindal, Gracia.** Must Every Christian Sermon Name the Name of Jesus? Yes! 196, 198. (Face to Face)
- Hansel, Patrick Cabello.** Ministry with Immigrants: Blending the Cultures. 288, 290. (Face to Face)
- Herman, Stewart W.** On Primal Fear and Confidence: Reinterpreting the Myth of the Flood as the Climate Changes. 63–74.
- Holt-Woehl, Hollie M.** Putting on the Whole Armor of God: Preaching Ephesians 6:10–20 in a Multicultural Congregation. 292–299. (Texts in Context)
- Hultgren, Arland J.** The Miracle Stories in the Gospels: The Continuing Challenge for Interpreters. 129–135.
- Hunter, Elizabeth M.** Meeting Jesus with Young Children: Accompanying the Youngest Members into Christian Community. 170–178.
- Jorgenson, Allen G.** Peopled by the Book. 325–333.
- Karvonen, Joanne.** Refugee Resettlement: One Congregation's Transforming Experience. 243–251.
- Kivisto, Peter, and Jason Mahn.** Radical Hospitality: Sociotheological Reflections on Postville, Iowa. 252–261.
- Landry, David.** Noncanonical Texts: *The Da Vinci Code* and Beyond. 367–379.
- Lose, David J.** Preaching Jesus. 187–195. (Texts in Context)
- Mahn, Jason, and Peter Kivisto.** Radical Hospitality: Sociotheological Reflections on Postville, Iowa. 252–261.
- Malcolm, Lois.** Jesus and the Trinity. 143–151.
- McManus, Kathleen.** Who Do You Say That I Am? 136–142.
- Miller, Roland.** Fear, Hate, John's First Letter, and the Task of Ministry. 5–6. (Editorial)
- Nelson, Richard D.** Judges: A Public Canon for Public Theology. 397–406.
- Nynas, Paul E.** What Are We Telling the Kids? Teaching Genesis to Teenagers. 56–62.
- O'Neill, William.** "No Longer Strangers" (Ephesians 2:19): The Ethics of Migration. 227–233.
- Olson, Dennis T.** Zigzagging through Deep Waters: A Guide to Brevard Childs's Canonical Exegesis of Scripture. 348–356.
- Padgett, Alan G., and Mark A. Throntveit.** Reading the Bible after Darwin. 39–46.
- Pederson, Ann M.** All God's Critters: A Feminist Reflection on Darwin and Species. 47–55.
- Powell, Mark Allan.** "Things That Matter": Historical Jesus Studies in the New Millennium. 121–128.
- Ross, Maggie.** Jesus in the Balance: Interpretation in the Twenty-First Century. 152–161.
- Shore, Mary Hinkle.** The Canon: Open or Closed? Open: A Living Witness. 418, 420. (Face to Face)
- Simpson, Gary M.** "You shall bear witness to me": Thinking with Luther about Christ and the Scriptures. 380–388.
- Sponheim, Paul R.** Our Creaturely Adventure: Post-Darwinian Directions for Christian Anthropology. 30–38.
- Stratton, S. Brian.** Genesis after the *Origin*: Theological Responses to Evolution. 7–18.
- Throntveit, Mark A., and Alan G. Padgett.** Reading the Bible after Darwin. 39–46.
- Whitfield, Bryan J.** To See the Canon in a Grain of Sand: Preaching Jude. 422–430. (Texts in Context)
- Wiley, Tatha.** Canon and Conscience: A Feminist Perspective. 357–366.

Reviews

- Bornstein, Daniel E., ed.** *Medieval Christianity*. Mark Granquist, 313–314.

- Bos, Rein.** *We Have Heard That God Is with You: Preaching the Old Testament.* James Limburg, 301–304.
- Brown, Jeannine K.** *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics.* Dean M. Erickson, 88–89.
- Chung, Paul.** *Martin Luther and Buddhism: Aesthetics of Suffering.* Lois Malcolm, 209–211.
- Craffert, Pieter F.** *The Life of a Galilean Shaman: Jesus of Nazareth in Anthropological-Historical Perspective.* Christopher W. Skinner, 434–436.
- Davis, Ellen F.** *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible.* Michael Chan, 304–305.
- Driggers, Ira Brent.** *Following God through Mark: Theological Tension in the Second Gospel.* Jeannine K. Brown, 300–301.
- Granquist, Mark, and Maria Erling.** *The Augustana Story.* Susan Tjornehoj, 318–320.
- Harrell, Daniel M.** *Nature's Witness: How Evolution Can Inspire Faith.* Alan G. Padgett, 308–310.
- Harrisville, Roy A.** *Fracture: The Cross as Irreconcilable in the Language and Thought of the Biblical Writers.* James L. Boyce, 201–204.
- Haught, John F.** *God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris and Hitchens.* Alan G. Padgett, 436–438.
- Jordan-Lake, Joy.** *Whitewashing Uncle Tom's Cabin: Nineteenth-Century Women Novelists Respond to Stowe.* Nancy Koester, 100–104.
- Kay, James F.** *Preaching and Theology.* Justin C. Boeding, 92–94.
- Koester, Nancy.** *The History of Christianity in the United States.* Sarah E. Johnson, 94–98.
- Kugel, James L.** *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now.* Clint Schneklath, 431–434.
- Lindley, Susan Hill, and Eleanor J. Stebner, eds.** *The Westminster Handbook to Women in American Religious History.* Nancy Koester, 211–212.
- Mattes, Mark C., and Ronald R. Darge.** *Imagining the Journey... of Contemplation, Meditation, Reflection, and Adventure.* Robert Brusich, 98–100.
- McIntosh, Mark A.** *Divine Teaching: An Introduction to Christian Theology.* Timothy J. Yoder, 89–92.
- Rollins, Peter.** *The Fidelity of Betrayal: Towards a Church beyond Belief.* Andrew Root, 310–313.
- Rosner, Brian S., ed.** *The Consolations of Theology.* Andrew Root, 206–209.
- Ruge-Jones, Philip.** *The Word of the Cross in a World of Glory.* Natalie Gessert, 305–308.
- Smith, D. Moody.** *The Fourth Gospel in Four Dimensions: Judaism and Jesus, the Gospels and Scripture.* Craig R. Koester, 200–201.
- St. Clair, Raquel Annette.** *Call and Consequences: A Womanist Reading of Mark.* Philip Ruge-Jones, 204–206.
- Wengert, Timothy J.** *Priesthood, Pastors, Bishops: Public Ministry for the Reformation and Today.* Michael Rogness, 315–318.

DMin Ad---repeat from p. 317 of Summer issue