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# IN THE STUDY

A book sub-titled "Reconstructing Israel's Early History"[1] might be presumed to be clearly self-descriptive. Things however are slightly more complex. We are indeed given a discussion of Israel's history up to and including settlement in the promised land. But there is also presented an outline of historical method and its tools together with a summary statement of the dependence or otherwise of faith, theology and biblical witness upon historical underpinning. There are thus three counts on which assessment has to be made and judgment passed.

Historical method is simply and fairly presented. We hear of evaluated evidence and reasoned inference. We find recognition of the bias of witnesses, though not perhaps overmuch explicit recognition of the presuppositions of historians. So we turn with some expectancy to see methodological bones receive empirical flesh as modern scholarship's dealings with the period from Abraham to Joshua are reviewed.

In its own potted way, this section is something of a *tour de force*. Most of the major contested issues appear and the destruction of many a popular theory of yesterday is faithfully recorded. The patriarchal stories do not point to seminomadism; Amorite migration into Palestine at the dawn of the second millenium B.C. is dubious; there is no neat fit between Sinai covenant and Hittite treaty form; a thirteenth century date for the Conquest scarcely fits the evidence better than a fifteenth century one. It all adds up to a worthwhile exercise illustrative of historical method at work which, at the same time, tells the student a good deal about the present state of scholarly play.

Yet at the same time, it may leave the unwary with a too simple picture of the objective and dispassionate historian operating with evidence on the one hand and a pair of scales on the other. Diversity of conclusion - so thoroughly illustrated by Ramsey - may reflect not simply the lack or amibiguity of evidence but also the divergent presuppositions and stances of historians. The Hayes-Miller volume on Israelite and Judaean History some years ago showed clearly that scholarship had moved into an era of heightened scepticism with regard to the historicity of biblical material. Ramsey's report breathes the same air. How far is this shift due to a closer reading of (additional) evidence? How far does it reflect a theological mood?

Such difficult questions take us on to the concluding evaluation of the significance of historical underpinning. "Is it supposed", asks Ramsey with a flourish, "that a biblical story is more authoritative and its power to evoke faith greater, if the story is based on actual events?" The implied answer is in the negative. Rather are we to come to scripture

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1 *The Quest for the Historical Israel* by G. W. Ramsey, SCM Press, £5.50, 1982.

listening to what it says about God and ourselves, approaching it much more as we would a Shakespearean play. We are to live off the biblical story. The tradition may tell of events that in fact never happened. No matter, provided that it continues to ring true for believing experience.

I think it has to be said that this just will not do. Negatively, some important points are being scored. It *is* too easily and widely assumed that the attribution of historical facticity to some recorded biblical event automatically adds theological weight to it. It *is* too easily and widely assumed that fiction is inherently a secondrate vehicle of revelation. We all need to think more deeply and speak more carefully as to where, when and why a judgement of facticity becomes important in relation to a biblical "historical" narrative. But none of this justifies a slick and simple omnibus slide from history to story. Exactly at this point a deal of careful argument becomes necessary. This book does not provide it. And therefore it purchases theological immunity too cheaply.

From the Old Testament we turn to the New, and to a study[2] which begins with a bang but which threathens to end with a whimper. The purpose of Luke-Acts remains a hotly contested issue. Decision upon it carries judgments on a range of other issues in its train. Robert Maddox weighs and summarises the current state of the debate and does it initially in so impressive a manner that we are led to expect more from him than he proves able to deliver.

The two-volume Lukan work is a unified project. It dates from around the eighties of the first century. It is a theological history. So far, so good; and no surprises. Is it intended as a political apologia? Certainly not, concludes Maddox, despite the stress on the political innocence of the Christian believers and the portrayal of Roman officialdom as broadly favourable. Is it an evangelistic document, with "Dear Theo" as the representative pagan target? Once again the Maddox verdict is negative. And on both points the right-thinking will, I judge, concur.

So where do we go from there? Happily, not to that overworked master key "the delay of the parousia". Rather does Maddox offer a finely-drawn examination of the place of the Jewish people in the Lukan story and of the significance of the heavy concentration in Acts on Paul the *prisoner*. Add to this his recognition of the pivotal function of the Ascension as the point of intersection of christology, ecclesiology and eschatology, and some major pieces of the puzzle have been shrewdly tabled.

But then the construction falters. A study of the theological traits common to Luke and John is arguably made to bear far more weight than it can shoulder. Jamnia and the prayer against the Nazarenes, for long deftly employed in explanation of John and Matthew, now gets dragged in as background to the Third Gospel. In the end, eschatology and ecclesiology are set forward as the central Lukan concerns -

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2 *The Purpose of Luke-Acts* by Robert Maddox. T & T Clark. £9.95. 1982.

with the latter delineated rather more convincingly than the former. And the purpose of Luke-Acts emerges in overly broad terms as that of aiding the Christian community to understand its life and vocation while reassuring it of the significance of the Gospel.

A brave try, which clears away a lot of dead wood. Perhaps the heart of the problem is this. It is relatively easy to provide illuminating verdicts on the Third Gospel. It is relatively easy to make significant judgements about the Acts of the Apostles. It is exceedingly difficult to offer convincing precision verdicts on Luke-Acts considered as a unity. That Maddox is right in insisting on the unity of Luke-Acts is overwhelmingly probable. But he who takes that road stacks the cards against himself. Theophilus's pen-friend still guards his secrets.

We are by now firmly accustomed to seeing the Reformation as embedded in the context of late mediaevalism. Conversely, Protestants tend to view the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as a run up to the really interesting thing, a sort of necessary stage setting within which a Luther, a Zwingli, or a Calvin speak their lines. A special welcome then, to a book[3] which seeks evenhandedly to plot three hundred years of reform and which, in the doing, offers an intellectual and religious history of late mediaeval and reformation Europe. No one has done more to uncover the period in question than Heiko Oberman; and upon his broad shoulders others have climbed. What Ozment provides is an impressive systematisation of recent insight and emphasis. "Intellectual and religious history" is his chosen preoccupation. But the political and social context that alone makes such history meaningful is not ignored. Chapter headings like "The Ecclesiopolitical Traditions" or "Society and Poltics in the German Reformation" make that crystal clear.

If there is a thesis being advanced it is surely that the later Middle Ages and its thinking saw a fateful division between the sacred and the secular, a deepening gulf between revelation and reason. We do not need to accept *in toto* that judgment in order to applaud the presentation that undergirds it, particularly in relation to the Scholastic Traditions (soteriology, epistemology,....) and the Spiritual Traditions (Monastic piety, mystical experience,...). These are incisive surveys which trace the significant lines binding Reformers to their predecessors.

The treatment of the foundation figures of the Reformation is, probably predictably, more run of the mill. But there is a refreshing scepticism (or is it just a willingness to ask the unexpected question?) which surfaces particularly helpfully in Ozment's treatment of the radical wing of the Reformation and helps him to survive the blandishments of extremist interpreters at both ends of the current argument.

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3 *The Age of Reform 1250-1550* by S. Ozment. Yale University Press. $25.00. 1980.

Similarly, in an otherwise unremarkable discussion of Calvinism, it is salutary to find posed a query, a propos the necessity of good works, as to the essential "Protestantism" of Calvinism.

Weaknesses there are. They derive partly from the "lecture room" origin of the material, partly from the earlier publication of self-contained pieces of it. For a variety of reasons, the coherent drive of the earlier chapters is not maintained to the end. But the mastery of the material is there, as is the overall unifying purpose and vision. Add to that a clarity of style and a control of language, and you emerge with an introductory study of a particular piece of religious terrain which the student can scarcely better and the expert will handle with respect.

Unhappily, the same cannot be said about another offering from the United States. Rectifying distorted images of Barth's theology in American circles and introducing social scientists to the Barthian discussion of humanity are among the slightly grandiose purposes of this latest Barth study.[4] Add to them the attempt to clarify Barth's method of thinking (dialogical-dialectic) and categories of thought (actional/relational), and you have an impressive agenda. In content it amounts to some seventy pages of introduction, discussion and summarisation, followed by the text of that section of the Church Dogmatics III/2 entitled "Man in his Determination as the Covenant-Partner of God". Perhaps it is not surprisng that the range exceeds the grasp.

We are assured that "much of the creative work in social science" confirms Barthian theological insights. We are given to understand that the category of "covenant" is not only crucial for Barth's theology but "is increasingly supported by the empirical evidence from social science". We are informed that some aspects of the man-man relationship presented by Barth "find impressive support among some social scientists". We are reminded that it is in company "with humanistic psychology" that Barth affirms the interdependence and unity of body and soul". It all goes to suggest that "his thought provocatively overlaps many movements of current theory and research of the social sciences". It leads to the "opinion that his approach had greater potential for empirical analysis" than has been realised.

I doubt whether a collection of throwaway judgments of this kind really make a convincing case. McLean has much to offer by way of the illumination of terms, metaphors, context and architecture in respect of the Church Dogmatics III/2, and is well-equipped to assist a keener and more accurate hearing of Barth at this point. Concentration here would have justified itself. But on the broader fronts both a wider range and a more detailed probe would have been required to justify the claims and conclusions here confidently advanced.

Ethics is currently breaking out all over the place in the theological publishing world, but nowhere more notably than

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4 *Humanity in the thought of Karl Barth* by Stuart McLean. T & T Clark. £6.95. 1981.

in a major two-volume discussion from the United States, the first instalment of which is currently on offer.[5] Its author is based in Chicago. In itself that goes a long way towards typecasting him in terms of theological approach.

We are given "ethics from a theocentric perspective". Do not however be misled. This is not neo-orthodoxy revamped. The discussion pivots on "experience", and never strays far from it. But "theocentric" stands over against "anthropocentric", over against the contemporary consensus that makes man the measure of all things. If Augustine, Calvin, Jonathan Edwards can be reappropriated by the Gustafsonian probe - and they can be and are - so may Schleirmacher. By contrast, the worthy Teilhard gets the thumbs down. All of which breeds rare confusion in our conventional categorising. We are not therefore surprised at the assurance, early on, that what is projected "may not be recognizable ethics in the traditional Western sense at all".

What then is the key to this topsy-turvy ethical range which Gustafson rides with such elan? Let me try to identify a few markers and some boundary fences. Ethics, we may say, depends upon a religious vision that comes to expression in theology understood as a way of construing the world and our life in it. "God" is the ultimate power that bears down upon us and sustains us. The religious response is sparked by human experience and is given form and shape by participation in a religious tradition. Yet such a tradition has to be appropriated and reappropriated selectively, with one eye at least on what the sciences have to tell us about self and world. The upshot is the putting in question not of the purpose of God and its ultimate goodness but of the definition of that purpose in exclusively human-related terms. The basic moral issue becomes: "What is God enabling and requiring us to be and to do?" The basic moral answer becomes: to relate ourselves and all things "in a manner appropriate to their relations to God". If this leaves all the detailed ethical issues devoid of illumination, wait for volume two.

Those who like their theology strongly laced with biblical ice and unadulterated by secular tap water will not relish the potion offered. To add to the confusion, most of the current ethical brand labels are missing. Yet before this brew is disgustedly poured down the sink, some of the more powerful ingredients need to be identified and savoured. Might it not after all be profoundly Christian to delineate the purpose of God in ways that relate it to the total cosmos and not narrowly and exclusively to human "well-being"? Might it not after all be profoundly Christian to relate man to the divine purpose rather than God to the conventional categories of the human predicament and susceptibilities? And if the chief end of man is indeed to glorify God and enyoy Him (rather than ourselves) for ever, might that not dictate a piety - and therefore an ethic - which stands a good deal of the received

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5 *Theology and Ethics* by J. M. Gustafson. B. H. Blackwell. £15. 1981.

wisdom on its head? My provisional quarrel with Gustafson is less with what he asserts, more with what he denies. But then we are none of us immune from the inveterate human desire to have our cake and eat it. Perhaps it is after all a case of "wait for volume two".

Not the least of Gustafson's merits is that he listens carefully to the natural sciences. Fortunately he is not alone. The Christian church indeed owes a profound debt to those who foster dialogue between the theology and the sciences. It is also good that from time to time a progress report should be rendered. The publication of papers[6] given at the Oxford International Symposium in 1979 is therefore particularly to be welcomed. The collection constitutes an interdisciplinary review in which theological, scientific, philosophical and sociological strands all find a place.

The material offered is ordered in two groupings. First, a number of contributors explore the contemporary relationship between theology and the sciences. Secondly, that relationship is plotted on the more specific front of issues concerning nature, man and God. Thirdly, the epistemological questions are explored. Finally, the sociological cat is unleashed among theological and scientific mice alike.

Anyone looking for an agreed breakthrough should save his money. Both science and theology, inspecting their own foundations, find superficially firm ground beginning to crumble. Inevitably, pluralism and relativism emerge as the spectres at the feast, whichever side of the banquet table you happen to be sitting on. Some sort of moderate "realism" may be the working philosophy of most practitioners; but the theoretical justification for it remains agonisingly difficult to uncover.

Detailed comment on individual contributions is impossible. The whole should be read and studied for what it is: a collection of shots at a moving and multicoloured target by an impressive array of marksmen including Bowker and Hefner, Pannenberg and Torrance, Lash and Swinburne, Alves and Schlegel, Martin and McMullin. What is specially worthy of comment is the retrospective summing-up survey by Mary Hesse. Nearly thirty years ago, Professor Hesse put us in her debt with a book entitled *Science and the Human Imagination*. She has continued her incisive work in the field ever since, and in this idiosyncratic overview steps heavily on a number of corns. Torrance is clearly aggrieved by her judgements; and Pannenberg reacts in positively waspish fashion: viz. "Nobody is obliged to read books and articles of other people. But if one doesn't, one should be just a little careful in talking about their views". Can anyone join in?

Such asperity is what we have learned to associate with continental theologians. Here we operate in a more gentlemanly manner. Which brings me to the recent report[7] from the

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6 *The Sciences and Theology in the 20th Century* ed. A. R. Peacocke. Routledge & Kegan Paul. £12. 1981.

7 *Believing in the Church*. S.P.C.K. £8.50. 1981.

Doctrine Commission of the Church of England. It breathes filial piety. And why not? Here are all the characteristics we have learned to expect - tolerance, balance, reasonableness, a proper measure of ambiguity (or, it may be, a healthy sense of mystery), and a modestly startled but self-admiring recognition that after all, *mirabile dictu*, the Church of England is composed of just about the right measure and blend of ingredients that a masterful providence would have wished to see.

Three hundred pages might suggest highly developed argumentation; but in essence the case being made is a simple one. It has two prongs. The one is that "believing" is essentially a corporate activity of the Church; we enter into a tradition, a corporate memory which offers identity; that tradition is a living, growing thing which comprehends and is affected by critical and constructive protest. The other is that this tradition is most helpfully and accurately understood in terms of story rather than statement, proposition, or definition. All this is filled in and filled out by the thirteen contributors, whether in terms of a case-study of George Eliot and *Middlemarch* or a model of systems analysis or a trot through the centuries. It is however largely a number of restatements of a few basic attitudes and positions. The angle of vision changes slightly. The view remains essentially the same.

Is it a satisfying view? For the answering of that there are two further issues to be faced. The first is the question as to whether the report makes positive progress in the territory it seeks to map. The second is the question of whether the territiory in question is substantial enough to provide a springboard for further advance. Neither issue admits of quick confident adjudication.

In the first instance, we need to remind ourselves of the difference between solving a problem and restating it. The language of tradition and story is the theological language of the nineteen seventies. Its use has enabled a number of old controversies to be transposed into an apparently uniting key. Everybody now uses it. It is not surprising to find the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England getting in on the act. Indeed, it might fairly be adjudged culpable had it entirely failed to do so.

What is more difficult to determine is whether anything other than the language has changed and whether the real problems about an agreed understanding of "believing" have or have not been bypassed. It is just at that point that I wonder whether the exercise has been carried out on too narrow a front to allow of confident forward advance. Wise and helpful things are said - and said again - and said for yet a third time; but what are the P.C.C.s going to get when they present the Commission's cheque for cashing? The move from meaning to content, from plotting the shape of believing to indicating the shape of that which is to be believed, is what will most quickly test the usability of the models, the angles of vision, the stories, currently on offer. And there is a fair amount

of recognition in this report that such a move may rightly have to be made, not least in the context of other religions which decline to go away. Whether the tools here provided are sharp enough for such a venture, I wonder.

Meanwhile, Baptists may well sigh enviously as they sample this amalgam of wit and wisdom. Not for them the taking of doctrine so urbanely. Nonetheless, the concerns here canvassed are of burning relevance to a wider Christian constituency than the Anglican Church.

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## SOME RECENT LOCAL HISTORIES

The following histories of local churches and allied subjects have recently been received and are commended to the attention of interested readers and researchers.

*Living Stones: The Story of the Baptist Church in Westbury Avenue, Wood Green, North London* by David Rushworth-Smith. 1981. 36pp. £1. Available from Westbury Avenue Baptist Church, Wood Green, London N22 6SA.

The booklet vividly describes the life of the church from its beginnings 90 years ago, in what was then a village on the edge of London and is now a busy suburb. While emphasizing the church's uncompromising evangelical stand, the writer describes fully and frankly some of the problems and turbulent episodes in its history.

*A Church in Our Town 1818-1981* by W. Byrne Robson. 35pp.

Westoe Road Baptist Church, South Shields dates from 1818, and this booklet was published to mark the centenary of the present building in 1981. The writer admirably sets the story of the church in its wider religious and social context of the north-east, and many fascinating details of life and times in the last century, both in the church and in the town, emerge.

*St Leonard's Baptist Church 1880-1980* by Kenneth N. Kirby. Bethany Enterprises, Moorwood Lane, Nuneaton. 1980. 104pp.

Drawing heavily on the church minutes, this is a very detailed account of the 100 years' history of the church, including the difficult years of the Second World War when St Leonard's found itself on the front line. The style is episodic rather than connected narrative, but an excellent index (rarely found in such histories) makes the assortment of material accessible to the reader.

*The Baptists at North Bradley since 1650* by A. P. Isaacs. 1982. 29pp, Available from the author, 11 Manton Close, Trowbridge, Wiltshire, BA14 ORZ.

Bradley was one of the earliest and most important centres of