

Book Reviews

FIRST THEOLOGY: GOD, SCRIPTURE, AND HERMENEUTICS

Kevin Vanhoozer

Leicester: Apollos, 2002 384pp £17.99pb ISBN: 0-85111-267-6

Kevin Vanhoozer will be known to many as the author of *Is There a Meaning in this Text?* (Apollos, 1998), one of the best evangelical works on Scripture and hermeneutics. *First Theology* is a collection of his articles, originally published between 1993 and 2001. Vanhoozer is one of those authors who is difficult to understand, but who creates in the reader an intense desire to understand him, by virtue of the fact that what they have to communicate is clearly so vitally important. His engagement with non-Christian thought in this volume confirms his reputation as one of the most creative and profound evangelical theologians at work today.

First Theology is a plea for 'theological hermeneutics', that is, hermeneutics that are based on Christian, Trinitarian presuppositions. 'When it comes to doing theology, God must be our first thought, Scripture our second thought, and hermeneutics our third and last thought' (p. 9). The hermeneutics that he has in mind is not simply a way of reading Scripture: it is a way of reading all texts. Thus, Christian, theological, hermeneutics becomes a way of facing the crisis of interpretation that threatens to overwhelm Western culture.

Chapter 1 raises the question of prolegomena: should theology start with God? But we cannot talk about God without first talking about Scripture; and can we talk directly about Scripture without first thinking about hermeneutics? On the other hand, our approach to hermeneutics will be shaped by what we believe about God, and so on. Out of these questions Vanhoozer's opening chapter proposes 'a way of speaking about God that allows theological matter to influence the theological method'; what he terms 'first theology'. *First Theology* refuses the either/or of beginning with God or Scripture; it is instead a Christian, Trinitarian approach to biblical interpretation. Developing C. S. Lewis' essay 'Meditations in a Tool Shed', Vanhoozer calls for an approach to biblical interpretation that will look along the text, as well as at it, that will see God, the world, and the interpreter as God sees them. This approach is in contrast to both modernist and post-modernist hermeneutics which has consciously stood outside the text. The book is then divided into three sections.

Section one, 'God', deals with the Trinity and religious pluralism, the love of God, and the doctrine of the effectual call, establishing the key concepts of the Trinity and communicative agency. In several places here he responds to Openness Theism. Section two, 'Scripture' then sets out Vanhoozer's doctrine of Scripture. Here he notes the importance of the doctrine of providence, and thus the doctrine of God, for the doctrine of Scripture. Section three, 'Hermeneutics', then sets out the consequences of the first two sections for interpretation, in interaction with contemporary thought and culture. For those who have not read Vanhoozer's earlier book, chapters 6 and 7 are a convenient summary of his convictions concerning Scripture and hermeneutics.

Readers of *Is there a Meaning in this Text?* will find several familiar elements in these essays. The first is a robust response to post-modern hermeneutics, notably radical reader-response theories, in which meaning is determined by an interpretive community, and deconstruction, which denies the presence of meaning and truth altogether. Instead of despairing of language as a cave from which we can never escape to see the 'real' world, Vanhoozer proposes that we delight in language as a gift of God (p. 33). The second is the critical appropriation of speech act theory in the service of Christian theology, and the resulting concept of the triune God as 'communicative agent'. The third is the consequent response which emphasises an ethical reading of texts which respects the otherness of the other, and thus locates meaning in the intentions of the author once more, through discerning the author's speech act. Vanhoozer sees the crisis of interpretation as a moral crisis, a failure to respect the otherness of our neighbour. Radical post-modern interpretive theories are a form of violence against the text, and against the author; we have a moral duty to listen to the testimony of the latter. Against those who would deny such a moral duty, Vanhoozer asks if we should ever forget the testimony of those who survived the Shoah, or the testimony of Solzhenitsyn and Shostakovich against the Soviet Union. The fourth is that interpretation and theology cannot be solely academic exercises: they demand a whole-life commitment of the interpreter as a witness, and the possession of the 'epistemic virtues' of conviction and humility.

First Theology is a rich and fruitful book. Although in some ways post-modernism's manifest absurdities mean that it is now considered passé, (see D. A. Carson's *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, pp. 81-82) it

still has great influence in higher education and the media. Vanhoozer's work is a major contribution to a confident Christian apologetic because it not only exposes those absurdities, but provides a credible alternative. Given its purpose, I was surprised that there was not more direct interaction with Scripture, and I was left asking what Vanhoozer's ideas mean for the 'ordinary' Christian, as they try to understand the Bible. How hermeneutically self-conscious does one have to be to read Scripture fruitfully? Also, I would like to see Vanhoozer, and other evangelical scholars who have developed speech act theory, interact with two other approaches to Scripture: the 'gospel-centred' approach of Peter Jensen, and the school of thought stemming from Cornelius Van Til, whose work anticipates many of the challenges of post-modernism (the Vantilians also need to interact with Vanhoozer *et al*). Two of Van Til's successors in particular have tried to develop a Trinitarian approach to hermeneutics: John Frame in *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* and Vern Poythress in *God-Centred Biblical Interpretation*. On p. 38 Vanhoozer even uses the latter phrase for his own hermeneutics, apparently unaware of Poythress' title. Evangelical theology will be greatly enriched if these schools can come together.

The moral basis of hermeneutics is surely Vanhoozer's greatest insight; as he notes, it is scripturally grounded in Matthew 6:12 and Exodus 20:16. It beggars belief that anyone could ever have been so foolish as to think that post-modern hermeneutics was a bulwark against oppression and totalitarianism. Could such a view of truth ever have produced a Bonhoeffer or a Solzhenitsyn? It can only produce another Goebbels, or Orwell's O'Brien. Vanhoozer helps us to see that the idol of epistemological autonomy has proved dumb and inert. Indeed, his point could be made even more strongly: the crisis of interpretation and the death of truth and meaning are one more result of modernism's failure to provide any basis for values, to derive an 'ought' from an 'is', following the enlightenment's rejection of God. Instead, we must once more believe in order that we may understand. Only a return to the triune, communicative God of Scripture, the God preached in the Reformation (and certainly not to a God who is like a silent 'spastic child') as the basis of all thought and life can give a basis for values, and thus preserve us from a new totalitarianism.

STEPHEN WALTON

Leicester

DISCOVERING BIBLICAL EQUALITY: COMPLEMENTARITY WITHOUT HIERARCHY**Ronald W. Pierce, Rebecca Merrill Groothuis (eds.) and Gordon D. Fee (Contributing Editor)****Leicester: Apollos, 2005 512 pp £16.99 pb ISBN 1-84474-067-3**

This collection of essays sets a marker in the debate about biblical equality and women's ministry by summarising current egalitarian arguments. It is published alongside Wayne Grudem's *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth* which aims to do the same for the complementarian case. The scope of the volume under review here is to inform the debate among evangelicals, that is among those who hold to the supreme authority of Scripture, for whom it is important to discover what the Bible teaches on these topics, and for whom neither tradition nor reason act as final authority. The tone of the essays is deliberately irenic, despite evident frustration that fellow evangelicals fail to share the same point of view. Nevertheless, the aim is to inform and persuade rather than to bully and to belittle. Whether or not one agrees with the position advocated, the present volume serves as a fair summary of the evangelical case for undifferentiated equality regarding women in Christian ministry.

The essays are grouped into five parts. Section 1 offers historical reviews of the debate from the eighteenth century to the present day. Section 2 turns to the biblical texts from Genesis 1 to 1 Peter 3, including 'difficult' texts, surveys of women in the Bible and so on. Section 3 gives logical and theological perspectives on the main assertions underlying the exegetical treatment. These include the logic of equality and the nature of subordination in the Trinity. Overall, the case for egalitarianism against patriarchy (the terminology adopted by the authors) rests on three bases. First is the logical assertion that equality of being must imply equality of function. If one cannot be equal and different, then (as Kevin Giles argues) there cannot be eternal functional subordination in the Godhead. While egalitarians are complementarian in the sense that they allow individuals to perform different roles, they reject the notion that any role may be closed on grounds of gender. The priority of Spirit gifting comes second (as it were). Since the Holy Spirit is given to all Christians for ministry, the gifts do not discriminate on grounds of gender. This is asserted from experience with the support of Acts 2:17 and Galatians 3:28, among other passages. Third, the texts that more directly bear on women and ministry

are dealt with on the understanding that the biblical writers were bound by their culture—more so than other interpreters admit. As a result they were constrained in how clearly they were able to express themselves to us. These three bases surface time and again in sections two and three, demonstrating at least that the arguments are not merely exegetical: they are also hermeneutical.

Section 4 takes a closer look at the hermeneutics of the debate and begins with brief explanations of basic evangelical hermeneutics by Roger Nicole and then Gordon Fee. The principles of interpretation, on which evangelicals would all agree, are presented as if their correct use can only ever lead to the authors' own position. In practice the debate among evangelicals lies not in the use of principles, but in the fine judgements that follow from these principles: for instance, in deciding whether a text is prescriptive or descriptive. William Webb outlines his 'redemptive-movement hermeneutic'. He denies this is a new hermeneutic and shows that it does not necessarily lead down the slippery slope to the acceptance of homosexual practice as a holy Christian lifestyle. The issue of women's ministry is different to that of human sexuality, and even if Webb's hermeneutic of trajectory is unconvincing, his summary of biblical teaching on marriage and sexuality is helpfully clear and conservative.

Section 5 concludes with some reflections on living it out and is the weakest part of the book; most chapters are either woolly or polemical. The final essay on 'reconciliation' rightly observes that the debate is about a difference of paradigms. Reconciliation itself seems a bit further off, at least until it ceases to be synonymous with 'unconditional surrender', and until each side is able to acknowledge specks in its own eye as well as spotting the planks in the eyes of opponents.

This collection will serve as a valuable landmark because key authors summarise the state of the evangelical egalitarian position. It is, however, a much less reliable guide to the patriarchal position, which is why readers must consult literature written from both sides of the discussion. IVP have published this volume and Grudem's together in order to encourage this enterprise. On a matter of detail, two editions of the volume under review were published in 2005; the second differs only by a chapter, and is identical to the US edition. Details above refer to the later edition.

ED MOLL
Basingstoke

NEW LIFE IN THE WASTELAND**2 Corinthians on the cost and glory of Christian ministry****Douglas F. Kelly****Fearn & Edinburgh: Christian Focus & Rutherford House, 2003
160pp £6.99pb ISBN 1-85792-903-9**

Few books on ministry manage to be triumphant without being triumphalistic. But this is one of them. The first chapter outlines the context of twenty-first century ministry in western culture. The remaining twelve chapters are a superb exposition of 2 Corinthians, originally given at Rutherford House, Edinburgh. Along the way Professor Kelly covers such issues as the value of suffering for the Lord, church discipline, the work of the Holy Spirit in assurance, 'Seeker-friendly services', the temptation to water down God's word, effective ministry, relativism, ministerial burnout, spiritual conflict, the Christians attitude to death, giving, and more, in only 160 pages! The author is under no illusions about the colossal challenge we face: contemporary western culture is diseased and corrupt, and virulently anti-Christian, having refused to know God and instead turned to idols, (he partially endorses E. Michael Jones' thesis that modernity is rationalised sexual behaviour). Nor is he under any illusions about what ministry in this context will involve: suffering and sacrifice are the only ways in which the gospel will triumph. Yet this is not a depressing book; it is profoundly uplifting and encouraging. Kelly believes, as Paul surely would have also believed, that 'no matter how bad our cultural collapse, God can change it; his gospel is competent to handle it....A power is stealing through that is far greater than all the forces of death and destruction, and which is able to revive the situation in this culture, as it has in other cultures: namely the resurrection power of the Lord Jesus Christ'. 'The pure and full word of God received into my life and given out in my ministry, regardless of my assessment of the reactions it may cause always goes along with the personal presence of the risen, crucified Lord Jesus Christ. That is the price and that is the gain of such a ministry'.

I was deeply moved by this book; it is one to read slowly, ponder, and re-read. I would recommend to any minister daunted by the task that lies before us, to every ordinand, and indeed to every Christian.

STEPHEN WALTON
Thurnby

PAUL AND THE JEWS**A. Andrew Das****Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003 238pp £14.99pb ISBN: 1-56563-676-7**

Sixty years on from the Shoah, Christians must again face the responsibility that they bear for the evil of Auschwitz. Many would claim that the New Testament, and thus Christianity itself, is ineradicably anti-Semitic. This makes it difficult to press the claims of Christ, and in particular to evangelise Jews, without being seen as complicit in mass murder. These are the issues that form the background to Andrew Das' important study of Paul. Paul attitude towards Judaism seems divided. On the one hand he speaks positively of his past, of Israel, and of the Torah; on the other hand he speaks of the Torah as promoting sin and dismisses it, and seems to start the idea that the Jews are 'Christ-killers' in 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16. Das sets out to show that anti-Semitism finds no justification in Paul, and that his diverse statements are part of a complex, but logical and consistent, 'chain of reasoning'.

No book of this sort can proceed without dealing with the 'New Perspective on Paul' (NPP); indeed part of the attraction of the NPP is that it offers a more positive view of Judaism than the so-called 'Lutheran' view. Das admits the justice in E. P. Sanders criticism of the traditional Protestant view of Judaism, yet he comes down in favour of what is basically an adjusted form of the traditional view, which he terms a 'Newer Perspective'. He rejects the idea as improbable that the phrase 'works of the Law' refers solely or primarily to ethnic 'boundary markers', and against Dunn and Wright defends a traditional exegesis of Galatians 3:10 and Romans 9:30-10:4, key texts for understanding Paul's critique of the Law. Das rejects the false antithesis offered by the NPP, and argues that Paul saw a two-fold problem in the Law: it required a total obedience that no-one could give, and it promoted ethnic exclusivity.

Das' careful reconstruction of the historical background to Romans is very valuable. He sees the Roman church as predominantly gentile after the expulsion of Jews by Claudius, and the 'weak' in chapters 14 and 15 as Gentile Christians who had previously been 'God-fearers' attracted to Judaism, and who wished to live by the Mosaic Law. This means that the dispute was an intra-Christian one, and Paul cannot be convicted of anti-Semitism here; instead Das suggests that if one should be respectful of the Law-observant within the Christian community, one should be respectful of the Law-observant outside it. He then deals with

Romans 9–11, demolishing the ‘two-covenant’ theory of Lloyd Gaston and others, which holds that Paul believed that Jews would be saved through the Mosaic covenant, without faith in Christ. Das shows that Paul believed that ethnic Israel were still elect, and the Gentiles took second place in God’s plan. He defends the view that Paul expected Israel’s election to be expressed in a conversion *en masse* before Christ’s return. With regard to 1 Thessalonians 2:14–16, he believes that by ‘Jews’ Paul meant ‘Judeans’, and that he was speaking in the exaggerated, apocalyptic language of intra-Jewish polemic.

In contrast to many modern interpreters, both from the NPP and the ‘Lutheran’ perspective, Das believes that ‘Paul claims that the Law can continue to function as a norm and guide for the Christian even while the Christian’s focus remains primarily upon following the example of Christ’. This requires him to argue that the term ‘nomos’ always refers to the Torah, in such phrases as ‘the Law of Christ’, and amounts to a weighty defence of the ‘third use’ of the Law.

Das rejects as anachronistic the charge that Paul was anti-Semitic; he never condemned the Jewish people as a whole, or left them without any hope in God’s final plan. His strongest rhetoric is reserved for disputes with other Christians, not directed at Jews. However, there are no easy answers; he does see painful disagreement between Jew and Christian as inevitable if a Christian is to maintain ‘Paul’s emphasis on faith in Christ as the sole means to salvation in the world to come’. The book closes with the testimony of Moishe Rosen, the founder of ‘Jews for Jesus’ of how he was rejected by other Jews, and the recognition that Christ will continue to be a stumbling block. But Das holds out the hope that such disagreement can be expressed with ‘respect and humility’, and in the conviction that ethnic Israel still has a special place in God’s plan. This is an important contribution to Pauline scholarship; Das’ exegesis is sober, careful and convincing, and he is particularly good at tracing the logic of Paul’s argument. My only major criticism is that some of his comments on Second Temple Jewish texts give away a bit too much towards Sanders, and in this respect he needs to be supplemented with the more recent work of Simon Gathercole in *What is Boasting?* However, *Paul and the Jews* is more than a scholarly monograph: I hope that it will encourage Christians to love their Jewish neighbours, treat them with respect, and yearn and pray for the salvation of all Israel.

STEPHEN WALTON
Leicester

EVANGELICALS AND TRADITION: THE FORMATIVE INFLUENCE OF THE EARLY CHURCH

D. H. Williams

Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 192 pp \$16.99pb ISBN 0-8010-2713-6

Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press 176 pp £9.99pb ISBN 1-84227-386-8

This is the second volume in the series 'Deep Church' or 'Evangelical Ressourcement'. The term 'Ressourcement' was coined by French Roman Catholic writers in the mid-twentieth century to describe theological renewal that returns to the sources of the Christian tradition. Evangelical Ressourcement is undertaken in order that the Protestant church may become better integrated into the larger and older picture of what it means to be catholic (small 'c'). Williams writes with one eye on the Protestant suspicion of 'tradition' as opposed to Scripture, and another on Newman's jibe that 'To be deep in history is to cease to be Protestant'. Lurking in the foreground, too, is the Evangelicals and Catholics Together (ECT) declaration which has found a mixed reception among evangelicals. Observing that many Protestant pastors and students have little knowledge of the patristic tradition, Williams seeks to explain how that tradition underlies the church's understanding.

For most of church history, and especially for the period reviewed here, Scripture and tradition existed in harmony. The apostolic and patristic tradition is foundational to Christian faith in a normative sense because it gives us the vocabulary of theological discourse. In the early church, Scripture and tradition functioned hand in hand: for the Fathers, tradition was the primary interpreter of Scripture, and Scripture the authoritative anchor of tradition's content. The Reformers also saw the tradition as the norm of the faith and not opposed to orthodox belief, and the Reformation slogan of *Sola Scriptura* was born of medieval disputes and never intended to construct a *Nuda Scriptura* reading of Scripture separated from patristic exegesis. The relationship between tradition and Scripture provides the background for the different documents by which the tradition is available to us. Creeds, for instance, are 'in effect, milestones in the tradition's argument with itself about the nature of orthodoxy as new doctrinal issues were addressed in the light of what the church had always believed' (p. 79).

The contemporary debate surfaces when the patristic tradition is examined on what it says about justification by faith. In response to the Reformed contention

that justification by faith is the essence of the gospel, Williams asserts that while it is a major aspect of the gospel, he would not want to equate it with the gospel. The Fathers did not make this doctrine a touchstone; rather they operated on the basis of a 'rule of faith' to which justification by faith is to be submitted and the focus on justification by faith that arose in the Reformation obscured earlier voices that should again be allowed to contribute to theological discussion.

There were other emphases in the patristic age such as *theosis* or being included in the life of God. It is therefore more in keeping with tradition to see justification by faith as one element of the faith, albeit a major one, rather than the defining element, and this pinpoints one source of the negative response to ECT by some evangelicals. Whether the latter will be convinced remains to be seen; Williams has at least made clearer how the tradition operated and how it is understood by those who seek to integrate their understanding with the larger and older Christian tradition. The Baker edition places footnotes at the bottom of the pages whereas Paternoster puts them at the end. There is an index in the Baker edition, but American spelling is retained in both.

ED MOLL
Basingstoke

MY VERY FIRST BIBLE Illustrated by Diana Mayo
London: Dorling Kindersley 2005 80pp £9.99 hb ISBN 1 4053 0377 8

Choosing a children's Bible is a bewildering task for a parent. In this case however, the publisher's priorities are clear from the cover: only the illustrator's name and picture appear on the dust jacket. Inside, her name is given in larger letters as that of the author of the text. Diana Mayo's illustrations are beautiful. The colours are bold without being garish, and the figures simple, but naturalistically drawn, without being 'cartoonish'; (I have never understood why Christians give their children Bibles with cartoon pictures—surely this tells them that the Bible is a cartoon world?). A test on my 3 year old daughter revealed that she liked the pictures of animals.

Would a child hear the gospel from this 'Bible'? Sadly, the answer is 'no'. James Harrison's text is too moralistic. For instance, the story of the Good Samaritan begins: 'Jesus liked to tell stories that explained the difference between right and

wrong. These stories are called parables. Jesus told this parable to show how we should love and care for people, whoever they are'. Even more seriously, in retelling Mark 2:1-12, Harrison omits any mention of Jesus forgiving the man's sins, and in John 20:24-29 he leaves out Thomas' confession of Jesus as Lord and God! I think that I could use the pictures in the book to retell the stories to my daughter, but I could not read them as they stand.

My Very First Bible contains pictures of Jesus, a practice with which some parents may be uncomfortable on theological grounds. The dust jacket makes a lot of the fact that there are 'key sentences' (such as 'clip clop' for the Samaritan's donkey), in larger type for children to read, and activities such as counting animals and spotting shapes. However, it is hard to see how the sentences and activities, whilst fun and helpful for developing 'learning skills', would fulfil one of the stated goals of aiding comprehension of the stories. There are also Scripture verses ('carefully chosen by a religious advisor') for older children to follow up. The book ends with the resurrection, and then the Lord's Prayer. It is a shame that Dorling Kindersley didn't exercise more imagination in this regard—I would love to have seen Diana Mayo's interpretation of Paul's shipwreck or Revelation 21, or of some Psalms.

STEPHEN WALTON (with help from Miriam, age 3)

Thurnby

A TEXTUAL HISTORY OF THE KING JAMES BIBLE

David Norton

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005 387pp £55hb

ISBN: 0-521-77100-5

If there is one thing about English literature that everybody knows, it is that the Authorised or King James Version of the Bible, issued in 1611, is one of the pillars of our language and its culture. So much so in fact, that the AV is identical with the Bible as far as most ordinary people are concerned, since the newer translations seldom get beyond the rather restricted world of the regular churchgoer. It comes as a surprise therefore to discover that the 1611 text is not the AV that we use today that, in fact, it evolved over more than one and a half centuries, so that what we now read first saw the light of day in 1769.

Of course, the evolution was slow and modest, so that the casual reader would not readily notice the difference, but the changes have been significant nevertheless. David Norton has done us all a great service, not only by reminding us of this but also by cataloguing the changes in immense detail. His book will be the definitive work on the subject for a long time to come, and is unlikely to be superseded unless and until significant new evidence comes to light—an unlikely, though not an impossible prospect.

The book is not easy reading, but it does go through the text verse by verse, cataloguing just what the changes have been and enabling us to get a good picture of biblical study in general during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is a work for specialists, but one which they would do well to study, since it will subtly change the way in which we understand the traditional biblicism of the English-speaking world.

GERALD BRAY
Cambridge

HOMILIES ON JOSHUA

Origen Barbara J. Bruce (trans.) Cynthia White (ed.)
Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2002 viii,
232pp. \$34.95hb ISBN: 0-8132-0105-5

Most of this translation is not from the original Greek (which has not survived) but from the translation by Rufinus into Latin made around AD400. Also extant are Greek fragments in the Philocalia and Procopius' Catenae. The English translator compares these to the Latin to give a better idea of Origen's exact thought and contributes to the debate over the faithfulness of Rufinus' many translations of Origen.

To my knowledge, this is the first published English translation of the Homilies on Joshua, previous translating being available only in microfilm, if at all. Until the work of Bruce and White, the most ready translation of the Latin text and translation into a modern language was the French one of Annie Jaubert in 1960. In the main, Bruce and White have used Jaubert's paragraph numbering which results in easier reading and comparison with Jaubert's Latin text.

The *Homilies of Joshua* were originally preached in Palestine around AD249/250. This was on the eve of, or during, the Decian Persecution, the first thorough-going, widespread and severe persecution of the Christians in the first three centuries AD. The Homilies touch on the lax state of Christians after years of peace and tolerance, and reveal their unreadiness to withstand government coercion, which accounts for the great numbers of apostasies during the Persecution.

Another indication Origen gives of early Christian times relates to the status and moral state of the Christian clergy, by this time already called 'priests' in a well-established order of bishop, presbyter and deacon. Although many were corrupt and unfit, Origen reveals that it was nevertheless a custom for Christians to bow to their priests.

Origen also sets out the first canon of the New Testament identical to our own, with the possible omission of the Revelation of John. The faithfulness of the fourth/fifth century translator to Origen's original in the relevant passage is currently disputed by some students of the canon. Bruce or White wisely makes a footnote on the passage, but to my mind it should have been more fulsome and give a broader idea of modern views on the matter, even if by no more than citing works the reader may consult.

Also of interest to students of church history, or indeed the modern church person in general, are descriptions of exorcism, a reference to infant baptism as the rule rather than the exception, Origen's comments on the doctrine of the Trinity, and his three expositions that the church contains both saints and sinners.

As for the last-mentioned, Origen reveals a mid-third-century view that is shared by Anglicans and Lutherans today: there are many sinners in the church but it is not possible to purge it completely, not is any Christian perfect but there is always hope for improvement. Origen exegetes the parable of the wheat and the tares to the effect that the sinful (weeds) cannot be removed for fear of harming the good Christians (corn) in the field (church). Origen says that only those whose lives are clearly and plainly sinful should be cast out of the church. Very topical for ethicists in the twenty-first century are his discussions of lot-casting in the Bible, which adds to our debate about gambling.

In all this is an excellent and valuable work, both as to the original and as to the English translation.

DAVID W. T. BRATTSTON
Nova Scotia

TRANSFIGURATION

Dorothy Lee

London and NY: Continuum, 2004 158pp £14.99pb ISBN: 0-8264-7595-7

Is it really possible to write an entire monograph on the transfiguration of Jesus? Many people would have their doubts about this, not least because the transfiguration has seldom received its due in commentaries on the Gospels and is almost unmentioned in most theologies, even those intimately concerned with the incarnate Christ. Dr. Lee recognises that she is faced with a formidable challenge in trying to raise the profile of this mysterious event, but it must be said that she has made a better case for bringing it back into the forefront of Christian theological thinking than might have been thought possible. She divides her study into chapters which deal in turn with each of the synoptic Gospels (putting Mark first), then continues with 2 Peter and concludes with a more general assessment of the rest of the New Testament and the Christian theological tradition which has emerged since the first century.

This approach allows her to put the characteristics of each of the four separate accounts of the transfiguration, which she sets within the wider context of each Gospel. She examines some of the puzzles which the story raises—e.g. why did Peter want to build three tents for Jesus? After surveying the various answers which might be given to this question, she concludes with her own assessment, which respects both the textual evidence and the theological integrity of the apostles without claiming to resolve the problem in any definitive way. She is even quite conservative in her reading of 2 Peter, placing it at the end of the first century and suggesting that it may well contain authentic reminiscences from Peter himself, even though she cannot bring herself to accept that the apostle actually wrote the letter.

The greatest weakness of her thesis is revealed when she turns from the biblical accounts to the wider New Testament background. To quote her (p. 100): In

addition to the Synoptic Gospels and 2 Peter, transfiguration themes and imagery are to be found elsewhere in the New Testament. Their presence suggests, indeed, that the transfiguration story—perhaps in different forms—was widespread in the early Church and not simply a Markan invention.

A Markan invention? Here Lee reveals what the careful reader will have suspected all along. She does not believe that the transfiguration actually happened. For her it is a story replete with theological meaning, but that is not quite the same thing. On the one hand, it enables her to say that the Gospel of John can be regarded as a ‘transfiguration narrative’ in spite of the fact that it never mentions the incident, because the fourth gospel is full of the same themes—glory, light, illumination and suffering. The notion that John must have been fully aware of the transfiguration because he was there when it happened simply does not occur to her. Yet to believe that God is at work in transforming human life, which is one of her themes, must surely imply that the transfiguration was a real event. If it was not, how can we say that our own lives are genuinely being transformed? Has Mark invented that too? The question of historicity cannot be evaded, however hard it may be to interpret some of the evidence—not least the absence of the transfiguration from both John and the Pauline epistles.

This book has a great deal to offer on the theological level and, for people unused to thinking about the transfiguration, it will undoubtedly prove to be very stimulating. But more work needs to be done on the key question of whether it actually happened or not, since the reality of its supposed effects on our lives cannot be properly defended without underpinning it in real human history.

GERALD BRAY
Cambridge

PAUL AND FIRST-CENTURY LETTER WRITING

Secretaries, composition and collection

E. Randolph Richards

Leicester: Apollos 2004 252pp. £12.99pb ISBN: 1-84474-066-8

Few things are more familiar to Christians than the letters of the apostle Paul, and yet it is surprising how little we really understand about them. Letter-

writing is a lost art in the e-mail age, and we find it difficult to imagine what it was like in the days when people took the time to write at great length to people with whom they could not communicate in any other way. Even so however, we are inclined to picture Paul as a Victorian letter-writer, sitting in his study with his thoughts and his books, and forget that the whole process of literary composition in antiquity was completely different. For a start, it was much more likely to be a co-operative affair to which many people made a contribution, and none of Paul's letters is likely to have been sent without careful thinking over a considerable period of time. This may well account for the apparent discrepancies of style and subject matter which modern scholars claim to detect in the letters, since each of them would have been composed in different circumstances and with a somewhat different mix of people involved.

None of this means that the thoughts expressed are not those of the apostle himself; Dr. Richards makes it very clear that he was always fully in charge of what was written. But the book opens up perspectives on ancient culture which are largely unknown, and that is its great merit. It is also a book which can be read with profit by ordinary people with little specialist knowledge of the subject, as well as by scholars and students. This is definitely a book to recommend to anyone with a serious interest in the Pauline epistles, and can be used equally well in house groups as in the classroom. A definite must!

GERALD BRAY
Cambridge