

# Picking Through the Books

TONY GRAY

Publication of Christian and theological books continues at a furious pace. A number of pressures face the publishing market. Academics are now under almost compulsion to produce and make available research — their very finance and existence depends on it. Although we are constantly told that Christian reading is on the decline, the trend seems to be that publishers are now producing more books with a shorter shelf-life. Any attempt to keep up with what is coming out is doomed to be partial and biased. Yet the following reflections aim to pick out some of the best, most important, and most influential books in the general area of systematic theology over the past few years. Not all are evangelical. Not all are biblical. But hopefully a picture will emerge of what has come, and what we might find useful on our shelves in both understanding the contemporary theological scene, and interacting with it at various levels.

## *All things post . . .*

Postmodernism has become *the* term and *the* defining 'ism' of the day. Articulating it and getting hold of it is perhaps much more difficult. One of the most useful

works to try and interact with postmodernism at all levels from an evangelical point of view must be Don Carson's *The Gagging of God* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996). Carson outlines the academic and practical issues at stake, and brings the biblical story line to bear on the deconstructionist attitude of postmodernism. The resulting pluralism of the day, both outside and within evangelicalism, is then dealt numerous blows. Religious pluralism, inclusivism, annihilationism — these and more are dealt with. A huge *tour de force* from an expert New Testament scholar, the immensity of the volume should not put readers off, for Carson is always clear and engaging. Although some academics may question both his interpretations of post-modernist authors and some of his responses (how much does an evangelical apologetic have to deal in modernist principles of reasoning?), scholars and pastors wishing to understand the times must be in possession of this volume.

At a more technical level, Kevin Vanhoozer's *Is There a Meaning in this Text?* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998) enters the battle for the mind on the playing field of hermeneutics. Although this discipline can be seen by many evangelicals as a means whereby to hide critical views of the biblical text, it is in fact literary theory that has driven much postmodern thought and its criticism

of a realist approach to biblical truth. Vanhoozer here provides a sympathetic and detailed interpretation of the likes of Derrida, before retaliating with a robust theological critique. As his subheading indicates, there are not only epistemological questions at stake, but also ethical questions involved in the way we read and search for truth — hence ‘The Bible, the reader, and the morality of literary knowledge’. Even if you don’t make it through the whole work, the conclusion and advice concerning a hermeneutic of humility and conviction are superb. A vital work with implications reaching beyond the walls of academic theology.

If hermeneutics seems frightening and way beyond your ‘horizons’, Richard Briggs has written an excellent and hilarious introduction, *How to be an expert in Interpreting the Bible* (Bletchley: SU, 1998). Hilarious, immensely readable, and backed up with acquaintance with the real issues, this is a brilliant work. It is practical and applied, and takes the mystery out of that German professor, Hermann Eutios. At the other end of the ‘weight’ spectrum, the work of Anthony Thiselton’s two volumes have almost set the agenda in theological hermeneutics, and Briggs himself studied under him. *The Two Horizons* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1980), and more recently *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1992) bring with them a wealth of knowledge, detailed exposition of hermeneutical theory, and balanced conclusions. Thiselton has recently applied some of this work in a more digestible form to issues of postmodernism and self-understanding, in *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995). A great blast in the water against the anti-realism of the like of Don Cupitt, it is great to see Thiselton take his thinking further into the theological sphere. In a similar vein, Stephen Williams’ *Revelation and Reconciliation: A Window on Modernity* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995) takes to task, amongst others, Nietzsche, and brings an ethical perspective to such discussions.

If you are still struggling to understand what this postmodernism is all about, two works may be of help. The small *Postmodernity* (Buckingham: OUP, 1994) by David Lyon is a short walk through the issues, and the longer but more far-reaching *The Condition of Postmodernity* by David Harvey (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) examines how this is much more than just a movement within theology or philosophy. On a completely different tack, a recent Christian paperback by Peter Hicks, lecturer in philosophy at London Bible College, explores the implications of postmodernism for Christian epistemology by using stories. *Transmission* (Leicester: IVP, 1998) involves stories of space travel, almost childish ditties about a caterpillar, and correspondence between the author and a reader in Blackwells book shop in Oxford to unravel some of these basic issues. If postmodernism is right, then a

much more common way of learning and interaction is through narrative. And what a superb narrative Hicks provides. I’m almost tempted to say, if you read nothing else, read this.

### *Of systems and doctrines . . .*

Traditional systematic theology continues, either interacting with the postmodern world, or carrying on unawares. The IVP *Contours of Christian Theology* series has provided some excellent mid-level accounts of central doctrines. The best of these are Paul Helm’s *The Providence of God* (1993), Robert Letham’s *The Work of Christ* (1993), Donald Macleod’s *The Person of Christ* (1998), and Gerald Bray’s *The Doctrine of God* (1993). This last one is particularly important, given the current urgency with which this doctrine requires attention. Many aspects of the doctrine of God are under renewed consideration or attack. The openness theologians (as seen in Clark Pinnock, editor of *The Openness of God* [Carlisle: Paternoster 1994]) are from within the evangelical camp and questioning the classical picture of God — his eternity, his immutability, his impassability, etc. Bray has written a popular account of a biblical doctrine of God to counter this movement, entitled *The Personal God* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998). There is obviously much more to be said on this issue. Feminist theology, of a radical kind, has often seemed to be attacking the names we use for God. In this context, the language of Scripture has once again come up for grabs as the NIV looked towards making and distributing an inclusive language version of the text. A very sensible look at this issue was provided by Don Carson in *The Inclusive Language Debate* (Leicester: IVP, 1998), and is a measured exploration of the nature and use of language, whilst holding firmly to a God who reveals himself.

If you are looking for a solid introduction to current issues in doctrine, then there has been little to beat *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, edited by Colin Gunton. Part of a new series, this work covers all the major basis, with contributions from scholars who are, by and large, sympathetic with orthodoxy. If this represents a new direction in systematic doctrine, then it must be guardedly welcomed. The essays from Gunton, Vanhoozer and Webster are especially useful. There are other volumes projected in this series (at the time of writing one on Liberation Theology has appeared), and this may become a series to look out for. Three other series have been launched in the past few years, two of them from Edinburgh University Press. The first on ‘Reason and Religion’ is edited by Paul Helm, and addresses issues in the philosophy of religion. His own volume, *Faith and Understanding* (1997), is an extremely handy and reliable guide to the

issues of belief involved, and the work by Stephen Davis, *God, Reason and Theistic Proofs* (1997) takes the reader through most of the standard philosophical issues. The second series from Edinburgh is entitled 'Edinburgh Studies in Constructive Theology', and uses top class scholars who are again, by and large sympathetic with historic orthodoxy, to address key issues in contemporary systematic theology. Gabriel Fackre's work on *The Doctrine of Revelation* (1997), whilst by no means evangelical, addresses an issue which has all too often been left out of systematics all together. One of the main figures in contemporary systematics, Colin Gunton, has just produced *The Triune Creator* (1998), and this is certainly a work to consult in the future. There is also an offering on *God and Contemporary Science* (1998) from Philip Clayton, and future volumes will include work from Alister McGrath, Paul Fiddes, Bruce Marshall, and Kevin Vanhoozer. The final series to mention is from Cambridge University Press, and again is to look at doctrine under the title 'Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine'. The first and most recent is that by David Ford on *Self and Salvation*, with again many more projected by an international team of 'weighty' scholars.

Talking of science (well, only one step back), the ever productive Alister McGrath has produced two complementary and competent guides to issues related to the interaction between science and religion. They are *Science and Religion: An Introduction*, and *The Foundations of Dialogue in Science and Religion* (both Oxford: Blackwells, 1998). They are a good place to examine contemporary issues in the science-religion debate, and McGrath begins to develop his own proposals in the second volume.

To move to a completely different subject, the theology of the Holy Spirit has not been left out in recent years. Two major works are almost 'must-reads'. The first, by an English scholar, is Max Turner's *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts: Then and Now* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996). Immensely practical, but also rooted in academic discussion, I have found this a great help in preaching and teaching many times. Even more humungous is Gordon Fee's *God's Empowering Presence* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 199\*), Dubbed by the suspicious as 'The Pentecostal's Bible', it is in fact an extraordinary achievement — measured, practical, and balanced in a biblical sense, I would heartily recommend it. Finally on this subject, out of the many paperbacks that get written on the Holy Spirit, and the various

manifestations thereof, an enormously useful but overlooked volume came out almost too late. *The Mark of the Spirit* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), edited by Lloyd Pieterse, is a critique of the Toronto Blessing written from within the charismatic camp. With biblical and sociological essays, this quietly and confidently raises vital issues which all involved in any form of experience expression must take account of.

This article would not even pretend to touch on biblical studies, except to mention one writer. Tom Wright is an extremely creative theologian who comes from an evangelical stable, and is at present making a huge and original contribution to international New Testament studies with his now 6-volume series on 'Christian Origins and the Question of God'. The first, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), is useful for all engaging in theology today, and has a particularly useful first section dealing with contemporary hermeneutical issues as applied to NT studies. The second volume, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), has now been out for a while, and has a similar huge contribution to make to the interpretation of the historical Jesus. Although Wright's work has not been without its critics (for example, on Wright's eschatology, his understanding of the Jewish context, and from other work his contributions to the New Perspective on Paul) they cannot be ignored. Wright also has an uncanny ability to write at a devotional level with many acute perceptions, so look out for some of that material, mainly published by SPCK/Triangle.

Of course there are thousands of other worthwhile and helpful books. There are many publishers I have not mentioned, or important authors over-looked. This has only been a personal pick through some of my best-buys in recent years. Finally, for any wanting to educate themselves or others in a most delightful and entertaining way, my final comment will be for a book I have thoroughly enjoyed as I have referred to it for teaching, research, and just for fun to look at the pictures! Mark Noll's *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity* (Leicester: IVP, 1997) is a brilliant walk through church history. Noll selects 12 key events in the history of the church that have affected its course and direction, explaining both the historical and theological background and consequences. Some of his choices are delightfully surprising, yet all the time he focuses on the people that matter in theology — the Christian people, the church, and the real and fleshly and sinful theologians!