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the baptist ministers'  
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January 2015 volume 325

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the baptist ministers'

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## ***From the editor***

### *What goes around, comes around*

Or does it? This common saying slips off the tongue but has a couple of associations that I don't like—one being the sense that, in the end, everyone gets what s/he deserves (no, we don't!); and also a slight sense of fatalism—that *que sara, sara* (no, it won't!).

I recently began to read the *Expository Times* again after 'resting' it for a few years. In the December 2014 issue there is an interesting discussion of musical settings of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, with easily the most famous example being the Pete Seeger 1960s hit *To everything there is a season (turn, turn, turn)*. The author of the paper, Katharine Dell, notes that the popular song is almost entirely faithful to the biblical text but makes slight alterations that lead to a subtle change of flavour. Taking the 'polar pairs', the song almost always puts the positive sentiment first (not always just to make a better rhyme, thinks Dell), and also, the song has a lively beat. It merely hints at the weariness of the Teacher's original words.

Is this typical of our modern desire to eliminate the down side of life? And what is the difference between a false optimism and a hopeful vision?

One of our themes at church during Advent was the importance of having a vision, of being oriented towards something. This orientation has to be the essence of hope—that the future is not shut, but open—and for us, that means open to God. Often, faced with a decision or dilemma, we might desperately want to predict what will happen next—but actually, with hindsight, we may realise that *not knowing* was a blessing. A certain knowledge of the future would have crushed us and stolen the joy of the present moment, the delight in what is happening right now, because of the fear of what would (definitely) happen next. Indeed, faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.

There is no cyclical inevitability about life. What goes around does not necessarily come around. As we start a new year the only certainty we need is the One who calls us into His future. God. SN

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you have read, please contact the editor***

# The pattern of this age

by Michael Peat

***D**o not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will (Romans 12:2, NIV).*

It hardly needs saying that the title of this article alludes to this verse from Romans. Perhaps less obvious is that in doing so, I have drawn on particular ways of translating key terms in the verse, not because I think they are necessarily more accurate, but because I think they highlight features relevant to Christian moral thinking about prenatal testing for Down's Syndrome. The NIV translation of this verse is distinctive in specifying that it is 'the *pattern* of this world' against which Paul urges resistance, thereby indicating that Paul has in mind a constellation of assumptions and priorities that have generated the dominant norms evident in the culture around him. Thus 'Paul does not call for escape from the world and its pressures but for a life in the world that is impelled and controlled by other factors', that is, by a pattern of thinking and acting determined by the new order revealed in Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, while English Bibles tend to use 'world' as a translation of *αἶων* in this verse, I have opted for 'age', a legitimate alternative, for the title of this essay. Paul speaks in Romans 12:2 of idolatrous tendencies that, in some form or other, have recurred throughout human history. But ideological patterns take distinctive forms as they emerge in particular historical contexts, that is, as they embody the 'spirit of the age'.

The Dutch theologian Hans Reinders has recently demonstrated the significance of this for our theme by identifying 'the project of modernity' as emerging from a cultural shift in 18th century Europe towards the veneration of prosperity and progress. As a result, 'somewhere in the course of the nineteenth century the notion of the "feeble-minded" emerges to identify those human beings on which society cannot count to participate in its endeavour to be a progressive and prosperous society'.<sup>2</sup> Reinders goes on to suggest that the 'feeble-minded' become a victim of our habit of designating some instances of a species (in this case, our own) as 'weeds' to serve the prevailing ideals of humanly conceived projects.

In common parlance, 'weed' is a classification we have devised for plants that hinder our plans for the land we cultivate, and consequently we act to avoid them spreading. In the project of modernity, people whose capabilities do not correspond to ideals that invest heavily in intelligence are similarly classified as 'undesirable', with prenatal

screening followed by abortion now an established strategy for reducing their presence in the future.

For Reinders, the claim that this logic should be resisted as (to use Paul's terms) a 'worldly pattern', turns on his insistence that '[f]rom the perspective of a theology of creation there are no "weeds", because creation is not limited in ways that are dependent on any type of human design'.<sup>3</sup> Thus each and every human being is equally valuable simply because she or he has been created, regardless of their potential to fulfil conventional expectations of a 'worthwhile' life.

Whatever the full moral implications of this claim may be, it should at least give Christians cause to pause before accepting the prevailing logic which regards an additional copy of chromosome 21 (the genetic basis of Down's Syndrome) as a tragic 'mutation', and the termination of a foetus bearing it a legitimate option.<sup>4</sup> My hope is that this article will encourage, and begin to equip, readers to recognise some of the cultural forces at work in prenatal screening for Down's Syndrome, and so explore with congregations how their response to it might witness within this world to God's 'feeble-minded' wisdom (1 Cor. 1:25)!

### **Not being conformed**

A profound realism that echoes the first phrase of Romans 12:2 is expressed in the second verse of Brian Wren's hymn, 'Great God, your love has called us here'. It reminds us that we do not encounter the pattern of this age as detached observers, able to recognise its contours before deciding at what points to resist or collude with them. Rather, from the outset, our choices are made in the midst of forces liable to exert an influence prior to our awareness of them, so that:

*We come with self-inflicted pains  
of broken trust and chosen wrong,  
half-free, half-bound by inner chains,  
by social forces swept along  
by powers and systems close-confined  
yet seeking hope for humankind.*

*(Baptist Praise and Worship 442, v2)*

Furthermore, Wren's language details some impoverishing effects of these moulding forces on our lives and relationships, symptoms of conformity that are surfacing in the current habits of antenatal medicine.

For example, in what they describe as a biographical 'snapshot' of the impact of these forces on prospective parents engaging with antenatal services, Brian and Stephanie Brock describe the breakdown of trust between themselves and medical professionals involved in the care of their newborn son Adam.<sup>5</sup> This was caused by the attitudes and assumptions of the latter regarding parenting a child with Down's Syndrome. After Adam's birth with suspected (and later confirmed) Down's Syndrome, a doctor told

the couple that an inconclusive genetic test for this condition had already been done without their knowledge—much less their consent—and simply announced that the test would be done again.

At this point, the Brocks decided not to give consent for this second test, on the grounds that it was not aimed at serving Adam's healthcare needs but at providing information about his parents' 'risk' of having a second child with Down's Syndrome. This decision was perceived as misguided and unreasonable, even though the couple making it included an academic Christian ethicist and a neonatal nurse! It provoked amongst medics the 'self-inflicted pain' of anxiety out of all proportion to the therapeutic benefit a confirmed diagnosis might bring and, in turn, they ironically became the cause of moments of avoidable distress for Adam's parents.

It is likely that this anxiety within the medical community is partly, if not always consciously, fuelled by a contrived need to ensure that prenatal screening programmes prove their financial worth. To do so, they must reduce the future cost to the state of supporting people with learning disabilities by more than the amount invested in them. As the disability policy researcher Linda Ward observes, these economic considerations provoke an implicit social bias that detracts from the purported aim that prenatal diagnosis should enable prospective parents to make an informed choice.

In a society where prenatal screening for Down's Syndrome has become routine, 'the state's interest in prenatal testing is not about women making *any* informed choice but about making a *particular* choice, namely to have an abortion'.<sup>6</sup> Such a society is susceptible to forging the inner chains of guilt that inhibit parents' freedom either to decline routine screening or to undermine its economic viability by continuing a 'burdensome' pregnancy. Whether by steadily eroding the public resources available to support their child over time, or eventually by stigmatising this choice as socially irresponsible, '[t]he same argument that leaves a woman alone to her 'choice' may leave a woman alone *with* her "choice"'.<sup>7</sup>

I suspect that social forces which, over the past few centuries, have increasingly pressed us into measuring human life against norms rooted in productivity, and aligned our hopes and fears accordingly, underlie the suggestion often made that efforts to reduce overall suffering are bound to be aided by reducing the number of births of children with Down's Syndrome. Richard Dawkins expressed this view when explaining his recent controversial twitter comment that bringing a child with Down's Syndrome into the world would be immoral if it could be avoided.<sup>8</sup> In doing so, he echoes the opinion of several influential contemporary moral philosophers.

Leaving aside the question of whether minimising any and all suffering should have such an exclusive claim in moral judgement, the assumption that Down's Syndrome of *itself* causes excess suffering is questionable. Social psychologists researching perspectives on quality of life for people with disabilities have observed that 'non-

disabled' people typically assume that those with a disability have a significantly lower quality of life as a result of it. However, their view is often not reflected in the account of people who actually live with a disability. One reason identified by researchers for this clash of perspectives is a tendency for the 'non-disabled' to be misled by a 'focusing illusion', a phenomenon in which the condition deemed disabling is the predominant, or even exclusive, factor determining their judgement.

By contrast, those directly experiencing the same condition are more likely to take into account a far wider range of their experiences. Linda Ward's article (mentioned above) includes a report on one such piece of research that carefully explored the, often ignored, views of people with Down's Syndrome about prenatal screening to eliminate embryos with the condition they live with.

Feedback from participants included remarks indicating a different sense about the causes of suffering for people with Down's Syndrome: 'The fetus should be aborted if a test shows it has a learning difficulty because I don't think it should be born into a cruel world'; 'Scientists should find the gene that makes people pick on those who are different. Then our lives would be better'.<sup>9</sup> To return to the language of Wren's hymn, the 'powers and systems' of modernity can 'close-confine' our view of other people's lives, fostering a focusing illusion (one preoccupied with intellect) which encourages us falsely to regard screening programmes as a vital source of hope for a better humankind.

### **Being transformed**

In *Church Dogmatics*, Karl Barth emphasised that the one Word of God comes to us as gospel and law simultaneously. God's gracious word to us is 'Gospel according to its content and Law according to its form and shape', and so establishes genuine human freedom even as it confronts us 'warning, disturbing, restraining, binding and committing'.<sup>10</sup> This is surely true of the divine command to show hospitality which, through its witnesses in the Bible and Christian tradition, exhorts us to be prepared to rearrange our own lives for the sake of accommodating the needs of others.<sup>11</sup>

A number of theologians who have written about disability recently have drawn attention to the contradiction embodied in our society's response to disability: On the one hand, we insist that the personhood and rights of people with disabilities are enshrined and continually affirmed in public discourse, while on the other, we commit considerable energy and expense to prenatal screening programmes that routinely seek to minimise future births of children with various forms of disability (especially Down's Syndrome).

I suspect this contradiction has its roots in a partial, and therefore misconceived, vision of hospitality as an activity that stops short of requiring either individuals or society to be significantly affected when exercising their role as 'host'. To use the words of one commentator, where people with disabilities are concerned, it is deemed enough that 'we love you...now that you are here'.<sup>12</sup> Ironically, this attitude can only be sustained

by ignoring the way it entrenches our lack of love, by conveying to those with disabilities the message that our welcome is really temporary tolerance that hopes for a 'better' future without them.

Concerns about the negative message expressed through widespread prenatal screening (often dubbed the 'expressivist' objection) are, I suggest, something Baptists should remain keenly attentive to, bearing in mind that our congregational polity once served as a protest endorsing the equal and intrinsic value of every human being.<sup>13</sup> Such attention is vital if we are to remain committed to ways of being together that are truly hospitable, ready to change our lives both individually and communally to accommodate the needs of others. As churches, we are called to be communities in which people with Down's Syndrome, like any with disabilities, receive a message of unambiguous welcome penetrating the disturbing clamour for prenatal testing, and where prospective parents pressured to conform to its priorities find their fears assuaged by the promise of enduring practical support. We are called, in other words, to seek true freedom beyond the strictures Wren describes in his second verse, in a source of hope and prophetic witness encapsulated by the hymn's finale:

*Great God, in Christ you set us free  
your life to live, your joy to share.  
Give us your Spirit's liberty  
to turn from guilt and dull despair  
and offer all that faith can do  
while love is making all things new.*

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#### **Notes to text**

1. D. Peterson, *Worship and ethics in Romans 12*, in *Tyndale Bulletin* 1993, **44** (2), 282.
2. H. Reinders, *Understanding humanity and disability: probing an ecological perspective*, in *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 2013, **26** (1), 40.
3. *Ibid*, p48.
4. Abortion of a foetus with Down's Syndrome is one of the more common reasons for a legal abortion justified under Ground E of the 1967 Abortion Act, *ie* that 'there is a substantial risk that if the child were born it would suffer from such physical or mental abnormalities as to be seriously handicapped'. See especially pp 7, 27 of Department of Health, *Abortion Statistics, England and Wales: 2013*. At [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/319460/Abortion\\_Statistics\\_\\_England\\_and\\_Wales\\_2013.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/319460/Abortion_Statistics__England_and_Wales_2013.pdf).
5. B. Brock & S. Brock, *Being disabled in the new world of genetic testing: a snapshot of shifting landscapes*, in J. Swinton & B. Brock (eds), *Theology, disability and the new genetics: why science needs the church*. London & New York: T&T Clark, 2007, pp 29-43.

6. L. Ward, *Whose right to choose? The 'new' genetics, prenatal testing and people with learning difficulties*, in *Critical Public Health*, 2002, **12**(2), 191.
7. A. Hall, *Public bioethics and the gratuity of life: Joanna Jepson's witness against negative eugenics*, in *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 2005, **18**(1), 27.
8. R. Dawkins, *Abortion and Down Syndrome: apology for letting slip the dogs of Twitterwar*. At <https://richarddawkins.net/2014/08/abortion-down-syndrome-an-apology-for-letting-slip-the-dogs-of-twitterwar>.
9. Ward *op cit*, p196.
10. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957, pp 567, 586.
11. See the discussion in L. Bretherton, *Tolerance, education and hospitality: a theological proposal*, in *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 2004, **17**(1), 91-98.
12. J. Swinton, *Introduction: re-imagining genetics and disability*, in J. Swinton & B. Brock (eds), *Theology, disability and the new genetics*, p6.
13. S. Holmes, *Baptist theology*. London & New York: T&T Clark, 2012, p101.

## Samson and the animals

by Simon Woodman

**S**amson, the last 'judge' of the book of Judges, may well be the most notorious of them all. While not exactly an endearing figure, he has certainly proved an enduring one: occupying a recurring place in the popular imagination, and stimulating musical, artistic, poetic, and film compositions, especially in relation to his amorous adventures with Delilah. In this article, I want to offer one very specific way into the Samson saga, through the mechanism of what is known as 'subversive' reading.

The practice of 'subversive' reading is the discipline of consciously stepping outside the ideology of a given text. When modern readers approach an ancient text, they bring their own ideological perspectives—ones that are almost certainly different from that of the text. However, the next stage in the reading process usually involves the reader setting aside their own ideologies and entering into the ideology of the text. To a certain degree this is necessary, as it enables readers to get closer to the original meaning of the text, and to appreciate the text on its own terms.

Much less frequent is the deliberate practice of reading while maintaining a standpoint

outside the ideology of the text. When this is done it enables the reader to engage with the text on a level that does not involve a sacrifice of ideological integrity. Examples of such a reading strategy would include feminist, materialist, and Marxist criticisms.

The first step in the subversive reading process is to define the ideology of the text in question. Only then is it possible to take the second step, the one which takes readers outside that ideology and back to their own perspectives. Sometimes this is easy—so, for example, someone who normally reads the *Guardian*, on finding themselves with a copy of the *Daily Mail*, will quickly identify the ideology of the paper in front of them, because it is at odds with their own. However, it can be rather more difficult to identify the ideology of a text whose ideology is at one with that of the reader. The *Guardian* reader, when reading the *Guardian*, does not experience it as ‘ideology’ at all.

There are four passages in the Samson saga (Judges 13-16) that form the basis of the subversive reading that I want to explore here.

***The killing of the lion (Judges 14:5-6).*** Then Samson went down with his father and mother to Timnah. When he came to the vineyards of Timnah, suddenly a young lion roared at him. 6 The spirit of the LORD rushed on him, and he tore the lion apart barehanded as one might tear apart a kid. But he did not tell his father or his mother what he had done.

***The story of the bees (Judges 14:7-9).*** Then he went down and talked with the woman, and she pleased Samson.<sup>8</sup> After a while he returned to marry her, and he turned aside to see the carcass of the lion, and there was a swarm of bees in the body of the lion, and honey.<sup>9</sup> He scraped it out into his hands, and went on, eating as he went. When he came to his father and mother, he gave some to them, and they ate it. But he did not tell them that he had taken the honey from the carcass of the lion.

***The burning of the fields by using foxes (Judges 15:3-5).*** Samson said to them, ‘This time, when I do mischief to the Philistines, I will be without blame’.<sup>4</sup> So Samson went and caught three hundred foxes, and took some torches; and he turned the foxes tail to tail, and put a torch between each pair of tails.<sup>5</sup> When he had set fire to the torches, he let the foxes go into the standing grain of the Philistines, and burned up the shocks and the standing grain, as well as the vineyards and olive groves.

***The killing of 1000 Philistines by using the jawbone of a donkey (Judges 15:14-17).*** When he came to Lehi, the Philistines came shouting to meet him; and the spirit of the LORD rushed on him, and the ropes that were on his arms became like flax that has caught fire, and his bonds melted off his hands.<sup>15</sup> Then he found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, reached down and took it, and with it he killed a thousand men. 16 And Samson said, ‘With the jawbone of a donkey, heaps upon heaps, with the jawbone of a donkey I have slain a thousand men’. 17 When he had finished speaking, he threw away the jawbone; and that place was called Ramath-lehi.

### **The human/animal power dynamic**

My working assumption is that the ideology of the Samson saga with regard to animals falls into two parts. First, that animals are tools and are expendable; and secondly, that humans are stronger than animals, have complete mastery over them, and that God approves of this.

The belief that animals are tools and are expendable is brought out in three of the four passages. In the lion story, the author says that Samson killed the lion when the spirit of the Lord rushed upon him; with the implication being that this killing carries the approval of the Lord, and also therefore the approval of the author. In the story of the foxes in the grain fields, Samson says of his action, 'This time, when I do mischief to the Philistines, I will be without blame.' He then goes on to burn 300 foxes, secure in the knowledge that he is blameless because he is doing it in the interests of a higher purpose, namely revenge and the annoyance of the Philistines.

The use of a jawbone of a donkey to gain victory over the Philistines epitomises the text's ideology with regard to animals as expendable tools. Like the lion episode, Samson is acting when the spirit of the Lord is upon him, with the implied approval. Like the foxes story, Samson gains victory over the Philistines by use of an animal (albeit a dead and decayed one). The rhyme which Samson recites after his victory twice mentions that he performed his task with the jawbone of a donkey; it could almost be a rhyme in praise of a weapon, similar to other ancient literature containing praise of mythical and fantastic weapons or tools. However, just to make sure the reader knows what is important, Samson throws the jawbone away (v17). It may have been the instrument, but he was the instrumentalist, and that is, to the author, far more important.

Having defined this aspect of the ideology, it is now possible for us to begin to step outside it. It is the contention (and hope) of this paper that an attitude towards animals which views them merely as expendable tools, is one which most contemporary readers will want to reject. The pain, suffering, and careless disregard shown towards the animals in the Samson saga is not considered by the author, but is something that a modern reader may wish to consider.

Within the world of the text, these events seem perfectly acceptable, since they further the interests of the narrative. So the killing of the lion seems to serve no purpose other than to demonstrate the strength of Samson. The burning of the foxes is justified on the grounds of scoring a victory over the Philistines, and offers further demonstration of Samson's strength, cunning and ability. The fact that these ends could easily have been reached by other means, and yet the story includes the destruction of the animals anyway, evidences an ideology which it is possible for a contemporary reader to reject.

Once again, the jawbone episode epitomises this point. What is important to the author of this story is Samson's actions, and the fact that he was under the spirit of the Lord. The

donkey's jawbone, the weapon, is discarded. One has to wonder whether things would have been different if Samson had killed 1000 Philistines with a holy sword. It is likely that a man-made or God-given weapon would have acquired greater status than was afforded to a bone from an animal skeleton, which is cast aside so the glory can go to the human agent.

The second part of the ideology of the Samson text with regard to animals is the belief that humans are stronger than animals, have complete mastery over them, and that God approves. This is again brought out in three of the four passages under consideration. In the lion story, once the Spirit of the Lord has rushed upon Samson, he has no trouble disposing of the lion. There is no account of any 'epic struggle', there is no tension with the hero fighting for his life; he tears it apart, 'as one might tear apart a kid' (14:6). This story demonstrates that even the strongest and most fearsome animals are no match for a human being such as Samson. The author constructs the narrative to show that it is because of God that Samson has this mastery, with the implication that it is God-ordained that he should have such power over animals, and if he wants to kill them, God will support him in this.

In the story of the foxes it is recorded that 'Samson went and caught three hundred foxes' (15:4), again demonstrating the complete mastery Samson had over the animals. There is no mention of Samson stalking the woods for nights on end tracking down foxes; it is almost as if he whistled for them, and they came running like tame dogs. In the story of the bees, Samson scrapes honey out of a wild bees nest. There is no record of him protecting himself first, or of him getting stung. The implication is that if he wants to take honey from the bees, they are powerless to prevent him reaching in and taking it.

To step outside the text's ideological dream of mastery over animals, one only has to ask what the likelihood is of Samson really being able to do these things? The answer has to be that tearing apart a lion with no effort, catching 300 foxes, and stealing honey from bees with no ill effect, are unlikely events. They are, in effect, mythical stories which serve to reinforce the ideology of the author's desire that humans might attain ultimate power over the animal kingdom. While it is true that the motivation of the author is to tell the story, it is in the telling that the ideology is portrayed. For example, the point of the lion story is to show Samson's strength. The fox episode is a demonstration of Samson's cunning (more cunning than the foxes), and of his victory over the Philistines. It is in making these points that the author displays an ideology at variance with that of a modern reader, who may feel that it is no longer a matter of fervent desire that humans be stronger and better than animals on all occasions.

The story of the bees emerges (literally) from the story of the lion, and an examination of the episode makes a fitting conclusion. Not content with simply

killing the lion, Samson returns to the carcass. Reading between the lines, his motivation seems to be a reliving of this demonstration of his strength, a bolstering of his ego by looking at what he had done. Nature had begun to take its course, and the result of Samson's destructive act had become the life of other creatures—the bees. So Samson, once again demonstrating disregard for wild animals, reaches in with no harm to himself, destroying their nest so that he can eat the honey.

Not wanting to blame Samson, who is, after all, merely a tool in the hand of the author, one is back at odds with the ideology of the text itself. If a modern reader approaches the Samson saga with a concern for animal rights and welfare in mind, I would suggest that they cannot help but take issue with the way in which the text views animals as incomparably weaker than humans, with even the strongest, most cunning, and most volatile offering no match for the idealised hero Samson. The ideology of the text views animals as expendable tools, to be used, cast aside, and destroyed, the only benefit being to further the interests of the human-centric narrative.

The animals in the Samson story represent a dream: he is the superhero who can tame the wildness of the natural order, unlike the ordinary everyday people of the time, who found lions threatening, bees hard to get honey from, and foxes a pain in the neck. The original readers of this saga were people waging daily war with wild animals, and they fervently desired mastery of creation. The animal stories of the Samson saga give voice to that desire.

We who read these stories in the 21st century experience the world very differently. Our technological society has achieved all the power that Samson had, and so much more. Our weapons, chemicals, and expertise have enabled us to tame creation to the point where we don't just kill one lion with ease, we wipe entire species off the face of the planet without even noticing, and we do so with all the ease of pulling apart a kid. We have become Samson, and more so, and we display the same indifference to the destruction of the animals in our world that Samson displayed in his. Animals die because they further our narrative. They are tools, and they are expendable, and we are so much more powerful than they are.

Our subversive re-reading of the Samson saga invites us, as the contemporary heirs to Samson, to step outside our own ideology of ecological destruction, to reconsider our relationship with the creation over which we have dominion, and to respond accordingly. Can we learn to be different to Samson? If not, then maybe we too will, ultimately, find that our superhuman strength brings destruction crashing down on our heads (16:30).

***Simon Woodman is minister of Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church.***

# Ministry: practice of paradox

by John Rackley

**W**e, who hold this priceless treasure, are like clay pots  
to show that the supreme power belongs to God:  
we are often troubled, but we are never crushed;  
we are puzzled, but never in despair;  
we are persecuted, but never forsaken;  
we may be knocked down but we are never knocked out!  
(2 Corinthians 4:7-9)

Paul describes the contradictions of his ministry and then strides into a concluding paradox: *so death is at work in us, but life in you.*

Will Thompson, minister at Yeovil Baptist Church until his death a few years ago, offered a variation on Paul's theme. He owned an earthenware pot which had cracked in the process of glazing. To illustrate the poignancy both of Paul's image and the work of God through us, Will used to place a lit candle within the pot. Its light would shine through the crack to quiet but stunning effect. It was a visual paradox. The crack defaces the pot but without the crack the light would not be seen.

It is not possible to get far along the Christian way without meeting ambiguity and contradiction. What do we do with these two disconcerting experiences? Are they to be welcomed or resisted? It does not seem enough to just live in the tension they create. They must be taken on even though we know they will never be defeated. They are the ingredients of paradoxical thinking and living.

Jesus favoured teaching through dichotomy and paradox. We might conclude from his parables that:

- insiders are really outsiders, while those that seem to be outsiders are really insiders;
- what appears to be strong is really weak, and what appears to be weak is really strong;
- what appears to be the smallest is the greatest;
- the first shall be last and the last first.

Jesus taught through challenging the obvious. It was central to the calling of his disciples, which was defined as a cross-bearing existence: *whoever wants to save his own life will lose it; but whoever loses his own life for me will save it.*

John Dominic Crossan suggests that Jesus brought story and paradox together to create the unsettling and subversive tales and sayings which explain both his identity and the Father's kingdom.

Jesus reverses common sense and meaning and then turns them inside out! So a fearless judge becomes a victim of a widow's persistent demands and two mean-minded sons are invited to their father's welcome-home party for one of them.

Jesus did not make his case by setting up sequences of consecutive thought. He teaches that appearances are deceptive. What appears to be X is really Y and what appears to be Y is really X; but only if you do not separate what 'God has brought together', for a paradox is more than a seeming contradiction. It is the juxtaposition of two things that cannot both be true at the same time but nonetheless hint at a deeper truth.

Much of Christian theology works through the same linguistic device. Contradiction plus ambiguity equals an enigma. Both are needed to explore the incarnation and atonement. Jesus is the familiar stranger. He is both the complete picture and the puzzle. He fulfils, yet he leaves us asking for more. He lays it on the line and goes beyond the obvious.

Romney Mosely, in *Becoming a self before God*, suggests that the continual New Testament paradox—of *kenosis* and *plerosis*, of power and powerless, fulfilment and struggle, brokenness and wholeness—is a way of challenging arrogant certainty on the one hand and immobilising pessimism on the other. This use of paradox is exasperating, and not all take to it willingly. People want clarity and a life without contradiction; they want to hear it straight. They often decide that because we cannot figure out a paradox, we need to turn away from it. Paradox is dangerous. For others, this is not possible. For them life is a curve that turns back on itself even as we move along it.

How might this be more than a linguistic device to help us know God and follow the way of Christ? What might it suggest for the practice of a pastoral ministry? William Martin describes ministry as a nonlinear vocation in a linear world. His book, *The art of pastoring* offers a series of brief reflections on the nonlinear character of the pastoral ministry. He writes of the pastor:

*Seeking to look attractive creates blindness.*

*Seeking to sound impressive creates deafness.*

*Seeking to please all creates tastelessness.*

*Seeking to control creates thoughtlessness*

And then continues:

*A congregation does not exist  
to fulfil the needs of its pastor.*

*You are not the dreamer  
of your people's dreams,  
nor are they the characters  
in your life's play.*

*They dream their own dreams,  
And live their own lives,  
if they are so encouraged.*

*Attempt to understand the dreams of each person  
and give those dreams  
a welcome place to grow.*

He continues in the same vein and suggests that a wise pastor should not inspire his congregation with grand visions for the visions would readily turn into idols. He declares: *a congregation does not need great visions or dreams. We are not called to bring inspiration to people. Rather we are called to loosen the tightness in their chest that restricts their breathing so that their lungs may expand of their own accord and they are able to inspire themselves' and thus dream their own dreams.*

Of course the temptation is to give our congregation *our* dreams—it turns the members into an orchestra for our symphony, or a back-up team for our adventures, or at worst, sycophantic groupies. It is a seductive temptation. And isn't it just so much quicker and easier than waiting for them to catch up—if they ever do? And it avoids the risk of discovering that they might not have any dreams or visions—after all thinking of dreams and visions is hard work. And above all; it gives us our place. They and we know where we are. While we might struggle to resist this temptation (if we think it right so to do), the congregation often seems to be willing for us to be led into the temptation, enjoy it and succumb to its subversion.

Martin offers us an illustration of being a pastor of paradox; and to be such a person is also to be an enigma. In Luke 7 Jesus accepts the invitation of Simon the Pharisee to a meal. A woman of uncertain reputation joins the scene. She sits at his feet and wipes them with her hair. The situation is paradoxical. It is clear what is happening. It is unclear what is going on. Jesus embraces the ambiguity of the moment and uses it to illustrate the contradictory nature of the kingdom by telling a parable about the difference between disengaged piety and passionate faith. In fact, he is going further

than that. An outsider is made to feel like an insider while the insider doesn't know where he should stand. Simon is left wondering who it is he is dealing with and to what his own way of faith amounts.

Sister Margaret Magdalene, in her Grove booklet, *Vocation*, declares:

*Vocation is really a matter for rejoicing that, sinful as we are, God has chosen us for the privilege of loving and serving him, and our response to any call clearly depends upon our relationship with the one who calls us and what it is about him that draws us to respond.*

She then comments on her own text: '*Draws*' is the vital word here, for we are always drawn by God—not driven. I do not know whether she is knowingly criticising the 'purpose-driven' mode of church and ministry. It is a pertinent challenge to this popular style. But more importantly she invites us to consider our understanding of God. Does the God who gives himself away for the salvation of creation, drive us toward his purposes or draw us into his will? Does God attract or compel? And how should his ministers act?

In John 12:32, Jesus states that the cross is where he will be at his most attractive. His death will create a fascination that entices anyone from anywhere to come closer. Throughout his ministry Jesus invited his followers to take the same path. It is only as they keep their eyes on him that they will be able to die-to-self. It is the way of the cross and the unsettling, subversive tales of Jesus were in effect a continual looking at the cross and the cost it will exact for his followers.

What might this mean for our self-understanding as pastors and also our place in the public space? I suggest we should expect to be regarded as enigmas by both church and community. It has been fashionable in recent decades to justify the existence of the pastor by likening it to the role or work for instance, of the therapist or counsellor and most recently (among some) spiritual director. Other scriptural and secular categories have been called upon either to justify or to explain who we are, such as elder, community worker, mission agent, church leader and now, entrepreneur.

We should take care that this is no more than the demands of those frustrated with paradox who want to straighten curves. We live in a world both ecclesiastical and secular where everyone must have a place and there is a place for everyone. So people who embrace paradox are controversial and unsettling. It may well be time to move on from trying to make the pastor fit into a category that is readily understandable because it can be likened to other caring professionals (such as the counsellor), or be honoured by our tradition (eg the Baptist preacher).

Herbert Anderson & Ed Foley, in their book *Mighty stories, dangerous rituals*, offer this powerful definition of pastoral care:

*the primary aim of pastoral care is to assist people in weaving the stories of their lives and God's stories as mediated through the community into a transformative narrative that will liberate them from confining beliefs, confirm their sense of belonging, and strengthen them to live responsibly as disciples in the world. The task of pastoral care is to help people expand their own narrative in ways that recognise and accept God as an active agent in our own personal narrative.*

This model requires a pastor not only to know God's story, but also to have the time and skills to read the story of the congregation. Each church has background stories and myths which explain how it has arrived where it is. The stories can provide positive support for the present or be thoroughly undermining; like the lady who said farewell to me at the end of each service with 'I remember the time when this church had a Sunday School of hundreds'. She didn't intend to sound critical, but for her it was the defining story of the church by which she understood its nature and purpose and appraised every morning service.

A pastor needs to live within the story of the congregation and its community, while not becoming just its next chapter. The result would then be that the pastor is a disconcerting stranger immersed in a congregation, wherever it may form, who tells stories that speak truthfully about the inconsistencies and tensions of living and re-threads them into the story of the grace of God.

The congregation facilitates the existence of such a person. He or she may not fit easily among the rectors and priests and leaders of other expressions of church, and might even be best kept away from chairing church meetings! But exist they do, and the congregation will benefit from the paradoxical nature of such pastors. The times require that the calling of God invites the pastor to be a frustrating enigma.

Might this be the need of the church and our world? Might this be the provocative work of God in our Ministerial Recognition Committees and College Selection processes? Might this be the 'dare' that God is placing before our churches and in the hearts of women and men who sense his call?

We are in the Age of the Holy Misfit.

***John Rackley is minister of Manvers Street Baptist church, Bath.***

### **Books**

W. C. Martin, *The art of pastoring*. CTS Press.

H. Anderson, *Rethinking the care of souls*, a paper for Zion 12 Conference.

C. Freeman, *The paradoxical teachings of the historical Jesus in Journal for the Renewal of Religion and Theology*.

# Journeying as disciples

by John Weaver

There is a strong tradition of journey within the Christian faith, often used by practical theologians as a motif to describe Christian discipleship. Journey and pilgrimage figure in much Christian literature. Chaucer's *Canterbury tales* present the stories of pilgrims on their journey to Canterbury, while John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's progress* describes the journey of faith made by Christian, describing the places he visited and the people he encountered or who accompanied him on the journey.

The motif of journey or pilgrimage helps us to move beyond the idea of a place to rest—a place to settle down into a comfortable life—and instead to explore the ideas of being and becoming. Karen Smith notes that ‘the emphasis on journey with others is a central theme in any exploration of Christian spirituality and has been taken up in both the Old and New Testaments—Israel in their journey to the promised land, the disciples following Jesus to Jerusalem, the post-resurrection encounter on the Emmaus Road, and the communal life of the early church’.<sup>1</sup> On the journey people are listening to God, and meeting him where he is going. What might it mean to know Christ on the journey of discipleship?

## Encountering Jesus

The gospel of Mark ends when the women go to the tomb and find it empty.<sup>2</sup> They are encountered by an angel, and run away in fear, telling no one what they have experienced. The words of the angel challenge us to step out in faith and meet Jesus on our journey: *But go, tell his disciples and Peter, “He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you”* (Mark 16:7). He is going ahead of you and you will meet him on the road.

This suspended ending leaves us uneasy, dissatisfied, wondering what happens next. In Mark's account the story of Jesus, his life, ministry, trial, and death ends abruptly. We are left hanging. We are frustrated; the story is only half told. Who had rolled the stone away? Who was the mysterious young man in white? Was his message about Jesus being raised from the dead true? Did the disciples go to Galilee and see him? Did they hear the message, when the women were too frightened to say anything?

By ending with the women's fear and silence, Mark also challenges us to believe.

Human props are being knocked away—no facts, no eyewitnesses to Jesus alive; just an empty tomb, the promise made by a young man, and the testimony of women. Throughout his account Mark challenges the reader to make up his/her own mind—is Jesus the Messiah and Son of God? Mark is continuously challenging us to take the crucial step of faith for ourselves: Who do you say he is? (Mark 8:29-34).

We want concrete proof of Jesus' resurrection, and that is precisely what Mark wants his readers to have. So Mark encourages the reader to supply the response of faith, because it is only those who believe and set off on the journey of faith who will meet the risen Lord.

The words 'just as he told you' will force the disciples to think about all the things that Jesus taught them. He has gone before and they must follow, just as they did on the way to Jerusalem (10:32). There they were afraid and amazed, because they were not yet fully prepared for discipleship. Now it is the women who are afraid and amazed. The story throughout the gospel has been of the disciples' slowness to learn, which culminated in betrayal, denial, and running away. Now they are given a chance to begin again, just as he promised (14:28). For Peter this would have been especially poignant (14:29-31). The young man's proclamation is not only about resurrection, but also the offer of forgiveness and a new start for the disciples. The specific reference to Peter points to an encounter with the risen Lord, such as that recorded by John (John 21:15-19).

As in the rest of his gospel, Mark challenges readers to make up their own minds and to take the crucial step of faith. If they want to see the risen Lord they must respond in faith. They must go to Galilee—and if they obey this command they will see Jesus (16:7). This is similar to Jesus' own words recorded by Matthew: 'Go...and surely I am with you...' (Matthew 28:19-20).

Resurrection is about new life—new life in those who have gone to meet Jesus: but this suspended ending leaves us mystified—wondering what happens next. Do we end with fear or faith? Those who seek Jesus will not find him in the tomb; they must look for him themselves and not rely on the evidence of others.

Mark does not tell us whether the disciples actually obeyed and met the risen Lord. He expects us to set off on the journey to meet him—to finish the story for ourselves. As Hooker expresses it, 'The ending Mark demands that *his readers* supply is the response of faith: it is only those who are prepared to believe and who set off on the journey of faith who will see the risen Lord'.<sup>3</sup> It is this faith and this discipleship to which the gospel draws the reader, promising that all who set out in faith will encounter the risen Lord, and find forgiveness for past failure.

Exploring this theme further, it is helpful to consider a much earlier call to step out in faith in Genesis 12—the call of Abram. Abram's call to journey begins in Ur. The

trade route from Ur to Haran was used by many merchants and traders and in Haran the religious life was similar to that of Ur. Terah and his family would have been comfortable here, but Abram is called to go on.

What does this call to go on feel like? The family has already travelled over 600 miles from home. By the time he reaches the Negev it will be another 500 miles or so. Abram is called not only to leave his home, but also to leave behind his family clan, all the familiar things of life and go; and he is 75 years old.

Go where? Where I show you! says God. God knows the thoughts and feelings that must have been cascading through Abram's mind and he speaks directly to Abram with a fourfold promise of land, descendants, covenant, and blessing to the nations. For Abram it is God who is the source of all success and good fortune. The command to go is outweighed by the promises, which are implied in the command. This is similar to the promise and invitation that the angel gives for the disciples in Mark 16:7.

Abram's faith is expressed in trust and obedience. His knowledge of God is limited to a call and a promise; the place where God will reveal himself in a fuller way is not Haran, but in the unknown country of Canaan, 1100 miles from home. The fuller revelation comes through the further separation—just as the disciples experienced when they left their nets, business, family and followed Jesus (Luke 5:1-11), and ultimately when they travelled to Galilee to meet the risen Christ.

Abram travels from the north to the centre, and then to the south of Canaan. He is claiming the ground for Yahweh, or more correctly declaring the truth that the land already belonged to Yahweh—that God was already there. The Lord appeared to him at Shechem, and he worshipped God at Bethel, yet Abram does not stop; he continues southward, and we leave Abram in the Negev, on the very southern border of the land, as God leads him into an unknown future, where he will fail and make mistakes.

This is a challenge to us who seek to be disciples on the way of Jesus, but for the moment let us continue to consider God's call and revelation in the Old Testament.

In God's call to Abram we have a life shaped by God's promise, where God is providing new opportunities which can become historical events through human obedience. The promise of blessing is central to these verses; Abram receives God's blessing and is to be a blessing; he has an intimate relationship with God, who will bless those who Abram blesses. Gordon Wenham comments:

*The NT looks on the advent of Christ as ushering in the age in which all the nations will be blessed through Abraham (Acts 3:25; Gal 3:8). And his faith is held up as a model of God's dealings with all men [sic] (Rom 4; Gal 3); in particular his willingness to forsake his homeland is an example to us who should look for "the city...whose builder and maker is God" (Heb 11:8-10).<sup>4</sup>*

Alan Jamieson draws on the work of Paul Ricoeur, for whom the deconstruction of an

old faith creates the space from which we can be ‘called again’, realising that being ‘called again’ can never simply mean being called back to the faith we have left.<sup>5</sup>

This can certainly be seen in the call of the disciples beyond the resurrection, and Jamieson observes that the call of God for Abram is to leave country and people and journey into an unknown desert. The call to leave comfort and security is God’s. Jamieson, writing about Christians who, being dissatisfied, leave evangelical-charismatic churches, concludes that in journeying into a spiritual desert, modern pilgrims are finding that God is already waiting in the desert, where they encounter him in new ways.<sup>6</sup>

When called by God into new situations, which may or may not be difficult and challenging, we are left to ask: How am I to live here? How am I to grow here? What am I to learn here? We need to learn to live in the context to which God calls us, not trying to chase either the experiences of the past or an easy way out. Through this we find the personal and spiritual growth that God desires for us.

We can see this in Jesus’ encounter with Peter on the beach in Galilee, where Peter is forgiven, recommissioned to a sacrificial life (John 21). A new relationship with God can come in and beyond failure, in which lies the hope of new beginning. So Peter and the other disciples must go to meet Jesus in Galilee, where the bankruptcy of personal strength, integrity and morality is named and the deeper grace of God is received.

### **An ever-changing journey**

We might ask: how does my relationship with God, and my understanding of God develop? As a practical theologian I might pose a different question: What is the connection between the nature of theological reflection, the forms it takes, and the spiritual disciplines (traditions) on which it is based?

For example, we can consider theological reflection through meditative or contemplative prayer. There are insights about self, God, and our relationship with God, which are demonstrated through the prayers we write. This demonstrates a reflection on our understanding of God and of ourselves, for example John Baillie’s *A diary of private prayer* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1949):

There can be a common experience, which recognises our encounter with God: ‘Lord we don’t know what to pray, but we know the one to whom we pray’. This speaks with integrity of what we know of God, how we view God, and our reflection on the circumstances we face.

When I ask of a situation, ‘What does this say about God?’ I am also asking ‘What

does my belief about God lead me to think about the situation?’ It is at this point that I begin to see the whole of life, my journey of discipleship: my thoughts, actions and words as prayer and worship (Romans 12:1-2; 8:26). The experience enriches my understanding of God, and my understanding of God informs my reflection upon the experience, where God, the situation and self are in a triangular relationship. With God at the apex of the triangle, the closer we bring both ourselves and the situation to God, the greater the possibility of understanding. These are the marks of being and becoming a disciple of Christ.

The objective check for our theological reflection comes through our current understanding or conception of God. But then we recognise that our theological reflection can modify or lead to changes in our understanding of God. However, this must be congruent with Scripture, tradition and prayer life.

Such theological reflection has to have a credible theology behind it—but we recognise that a theological framework may differ from one person to another. For many, such a framework will be based on a living experience of God, which will be gospel- and Christ-centred. From an academic theological standpoint, classical views of general revelation, special revelation, God, Trinity, incarnation and atonement may be added.

On a personal level we may find it helpful to keep a spiritual journal, where we discover more about our understanding and experience of God and our self-understanding, through the relationship between ourselves and what we write. By writing we impose a shape on the world because the words we use are subjective. It is my world, because it is the world as I see and experience it. We reveal ourselves by the words we use; and if we do not question the words we use, we will never question how we view the world, and how we view God. We are writing about our experiences of meeting Christ on the road—always ahead of us.

## **Conclusion**

By listening to stories of other life journeys we recognise common turning points and features. When looking at our faith, our human formation and transformation, we should take seriously the fact that our adult identity and faith has been shaped by our earliest years and relationships. When we are open to God and to others our faith grows and matures and our perception of how and where God is at work will broaden. We will find an increased range of people with whom we are able to share our journey of discipleship. We will be open to learning from people who do not share our theological position, or even our faith.

We will discover new truths in new places and from people who differ from us in their

life and faith experiences. We will find challenges, insights and new contexts for our stories, in the patterns within which other people's stories are told. In our faith communities we share our interpretations and experiences of the world and of living.

***John Weaver is now retired and is past principal of South Wales Baptist College.***

#### **Notes to text**

1. Karen E. Smith, *Christian spirituality*. London: SCM, 2007, p91.
2. For a closely worked discussion of Mark's ending of the Gospel see Morna D Hooker, *Endings: invitations to discipleship*. London: SCM, 2003.
3. Hooker, *Endings*, p23.
4. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*. Word Bible Commentary, 1987, p283.
5. Alan Jamieson, *Journeying in faith: in and beyond the tough places*. London: SPCK, 2004, p10.
6. Jamieson, *Journeying in faith*, p15.

## **A contemporary creed**

by Brian Oman

For some time I have wanted to produce a contemporary creed, which gives a simple statement of Christian faith in five sentences! This offering is a first attempt, and I hope to produce a revised edition after receiving comments and suggestions. We said it together in Emmanuel Baptist Church Swanage recently and it is now in our church magazine.

It is a work in progress and I would welcome help from readers of *bmj*. My vision is to produce a creed that could help people understand and believe the essentials of our faith. I recognise the need to refer to the significance of the resurrection of Jesus, perhaps include a sentence on eschatology and something more about the Holy Spirit. This, and probably more, but my aim is for it to be no longer than seven sentences!

It may be that a contemporary creed already exists or some readers may like to try to produce one.

## **A contemporary creed**

(in five sentences)

I believe  
Almighty God the Creator of the universe  
came to planet earth  
in the form of Jesus, the unique God/Man.

Jesus came  
to reveal that God is like a loving Father,  
to teach us how we should live and  
to make it possible for human beings to have  
a personal relationship with God which lasts for ever.

Jesus made this possible by dealing with the problem of sin  
which separates us from God.

By suffering and dying on a cross He took the blame for us  
so that we can enjoy a personal relationship with God  
that lasts for ever, called eternal life,  
if we truly believe this good news.

God is so amazingly great that we cannot  
adequately describe him in human terms  
but He has revealed Himself as  
a loving Father,  
Jesus, willing to die for us and  
powerful Holy Spirit  
all rolled into One in the mystery of the Trinity!  
Hallelujah!

***Brian Oman is a retired Baptist Minister living in Swanage.***

## Return to our roots

*A BMF Conversation Day, combined with the AGM,  
to take place at:*

**Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church  
17 March 2015, 11am-3.30pm**

Ed Kaneen, Tutor in Biblical Studies at South Wales Baptist College, will give the 2015 Whitley Lecture, *Patterns of ministry*, to stimulate our conversation on the relationship between New Testament patterns of ministry and those of today.

Please let Jenny Few know if you would like to come.

Watch the BMF website for more details and for information on the parallel BMF North event in the autumn.

# Reviews

edited by John Goddard

## ***The Word's out: speaking the gospel today***

David Male & Paul Weston  
BRF

### ***Reviewer: Brendan Bassett***

This joint effort by two ordained Anglican educators is a timely reminder of the church's mission to evangelise an aimless Western world. Part 1, *Evangelism and the New Testament* is written by Paul Weston. This section revisits familiar biblical data in a fresh way that includes helpful insights on Paul's sermon to the Athenians and our own peculiar post Christian context, which is essentially a 'post knowledge' era. Sobering statistics about church attendance are included; the one that caught my eye is 'childhood church attendance' which has plummeted 42% in just 16 years, 1989—2005.

In Part 2, *Evangelism and the local church*, David Male provides some stimulating anecdotes while trying to work out what the connection between evangelism and discipleship is, reminding us that, 'if we fail to disciple people in our churches then the culture will disciple them for us'.

I would have liked to have heard more about evangelising arguably the most marginalised group from our churches, namely white working class people and those of modest educational achievement.

This is certainly a useful book for ministers, leadership teams and individuals serious about encouraging evangelism, even if only to serve as a stimulant for refocusing on mission and to think through what evangelism actually is, and what it is not. It could prove to be an excellent resource for a home group or leadership team appraising a church's current understanding of where they are in relation to evangelism.

There are no great revelations or mysteries revealed in a very readable book that will put the question to any church leadership 'are you and your church engaging in evangelism?' The answer for some may be surprising.

## ***The eschatology of 1 Peter: considering the influence of Zechariah 9-14***

Kelly Liebengood

CUP, ISBN 978-1-107-03974-2

### ***Reviewer: Pieter J. Lalleman***

This is a well written book, a model of clarity. Liebengood sets out to show how 1 Peter's picture of the Christians' situation, in particular their suffering, is based on Zechariah 9-14.

First he introduces the readers to these difficult chapters of Zechariah, showing how they foresee suffering for God's people after the coming of the messianic figure. Secondly, he traces how other Jewish texts received Zech 9-14. Then he shows that the figure of the shepherd in 1 Pet 2:25 is based on Zechariah, how the 'fiery trials' of 1 Pet 1:6-7 and 4:12 likewise originate in Zechariah, and how 1 Pet 4:14 is again best explained as a reading of Zechariah. (The origin of the idea of fiery trials was particularly hotly disputed until recently.) Finally, Liebengood provides an overview of the entire epistle and its line of argument.

Throughout he constantly corrects previous scholars. It all makes so much sense that you wonder why someone did not see this before. From a scholarly point of view, it is an important contribution to the study of the use of the OT in the NT. I also learned much about Zechariah 9-14. The book is very well produced and some (but not all!) Greek is translated.

Once you've read this book, nodding with approval at the right moments, you will have seen that only pp 175-199 are of any help with the preparation of your next sermon or Bible study series. And you may not get to read this book at all, because like many scholarly books its price is absurd. So I suggest that ministers who enjoy studying borrow this book or plunder the coffers of their church. Those of you who tend to ask 'So what?' will find most of this book academic.

***The tortoise usually wins: biblical reflections on quiet leadership for reluctant leaders***

Brian Harris

Paternoster 2013

**Reviewer: Kath Lawson**

*The tortoise usually wins* sounds as if it should be the title of a sequel to Aesop's fable, *The hare and the tortoise*. It is actually a book on leadership, aimed particularly, but not exclusively, at reluctant leaders, using Aesop's fable to illustrate his point. It is not aimed solely at church leaders, but is applicable to any leader. The principles are the same.

Harris defines reluctant leaders as those who have arrived in positions of leadership almost by accident, and who would be very happy to pass on the role to someone more suited to the traditional view of a leader. In his foreword, Michael Quicke says that Brian Harris confronts the secular assumption that those who demonstrate dazzle and flair are somehow superior to those he calls 'quiet leaders', who have found themselves in leadership because there seems to be no one else to do it. He believes that quiet leaders are more likely to follow the leadership model of Jesus than are the more charismatic leaders, who are likely to fall prey to their own egos.

The book is meant to be read a chapter at a time, allowing time for reflection, using the questions supplied. Each chapter includes a leadership interview with a variety of leaders, some known to

me, some not, in which their view and style of leadership is examined.

There is a comprehensive list of contents, giving information about the topics covered in each chapter.

I was 'just' a housewife when I felt called to the ministry, and was convinced God could not be serious! As a quiet leader I found this book immensely enlightening and encouraging. I have read a number of books on leadership but this was easily the best and most exciting one I have come across. It would benefit anyone in leadership in whatever capacity. Even if they didn't consider themselves a quiet or reluctant leader, there is something to be gained.

### ***Titus for you***

Tim Chester

The Good Book Company

**Reviewer: Stephen Walker-Williams**

*Titus for you* is the first in the Good Book Company's series God's word for you not to be written by Timothy Keller, and Tim Chester continues to uphold the theological pedigree, accessibility and freshness as other titles in the series. The series aims not to be a commentary but to help all who read the books—pastors, small group leaders or individuals—as part of their personal devotionals, to read and feed on God's word and as a result lead both their lives and churches in a biblical manner.

*Titus for you* provides a stimulating exploration of Paul's letter, one that focuses on getting and keeping the good news of Jesus Christ central to our living, our personal growth as disciples, and also our mission. It reminds us that although part of Titus' role on Crete was to ensure a godly and strong leadership structure was in place in the church, his main role was to encourage and teach all the believers to keep Jesus and the truth of the gospel central to everything they were and everything they did. Through the pages of the book Tim challenges us to capture the passion of the early believers of Jesus.

The exposition and practical application of Titus displays not only Chester's pastoral heart and experience but also clear Spirit-led nurture and passion for discipleship. He is faithful to the context of the letter and includes helpful and insightful challenges to each of us. Chester's style and language use makes the book accessible and enjoyable to read and the summary text boxes provide helpful and memorable sound-bites. The questions for reflection at the end of each chapter enable individuals or groups to consider prayerfully what they have read and where God is challenging them.

I will be encouraging a number of our church Life Groups to explore Titus through this book and the accompanying study guide next term.

## ***Bible commentaries: the same yesterday, today and forever?***

*The new interpreter's Bible: a commentary in twelve volumes (Abingdon)*

*The lectionary commentary: a guide for good preaching (Morehouse/Continuum)*

**Reviewer: John Goddard**

Twenty years ago I had a strange addiction. I collected Bible commentaries. I had long and animated discussions with friends and colleagues over the relative merits of this series of commentary over the next, and spoke a language fuelled by acronyms like NIGTC, BST, NICOT, NICNT and WBC. This compulsion was initially fuelled by preaching fees as a ministerial student, and then consolidated by becoming the editor of a sales review journal (*Nota Bene/Engage*)—a role in which my remuneration was almost entirely in the form of theological books. I gathered a large collection of commentaries, and looked forward to reading them all as I engaged in a lifetime's preaching ministry.

As time passed I began to question the wisdom of my collection. Would I really have time to read them all? How many sermons would I actually be preaching on Leviticus and Numbers, and was it possible that I would have more commentaries than sermons? And was it healthy to wake up one morning having had a vivid dream about finding a secondhand bookshop with a ridiculously cheap copy of Schnackenburg's *The gospel according to St John*?

I also began to realise the limitations of even a quite comprehensive library collected over a few years: what about new scholarship and commentaries? And would I be forever tied in to volumes that were predominantly written by authors who were almost all men of a similar ethnicity and cultural outlook? Would my taste in commentaries change as my own theological views and opinions developed?

I remain passionate about understanding and communicating the Bible, and as such continue to value the art and the science of a good commentary. But if I were starting from scratch, perhaps as a minister in training in one of our

Baptist colleges, what would I buy and how else might I resource my preaching and teaching ministry?

Facebook has provided an unexpected but helpful forum for discussion, particularly *via* the Baptist Collaboration group. On several occasions recently someone has asked for suggestions for a good commentary on a particular book, because they were planning to preach a series sometime soon. Perhaps that is the ideal time to buy a couple of bigger commentaries—when you actively plan to preach a series on an individual book of the Bible. But life doesn't always follow a plan, and you never know when someone might just ask you about that verse in 2 Peter. Of course, there is always Google...But I would be reluctant to be without access to something reasonably reliable on my shelves, even if it is only to check the outlandish interpretation found online!

Some commentaries and commentary writers will stay with you throughout your ministry. On another occasion I might try to pick a list of my favourites, and already I know that the names Brueggemann, Goldingay, Dunn and Wenham will feature. And I would be very interested to hear your suggestions – either short lists or even better just a few lines about one commentary that you have found especially helpful. But for the remainder of this article I want to focus on two purchases that I am yet to regret, and would imagine will still be of great use to me in 10 or 20 years' time.

Although I haven't always preached from the lectionary (by which is meant the *Revised common lectionary*, years A, B, &C), when I do I have found *The lectionary commentary* to be a great place to begin. Published in three complementary volumes, each provides a section of exegetical notes and reflections on each of the three readings: *The first readings: The Old Testament and Acts; The second readings: Acts and the Epistles; and The third readings: The Gospels*. Each pericope is explored by a writer, usually an experienced theologian and preacher, who is fully aware of the parallel readings for the day and explores the passage in that context. When published in 2001 the authors were all based in either North America or the UK, and of the 80 or so contributors, about 10 were women. (Although this ratio is still far too low, it rates much higher than many traditional commentary series.) Names familiar to me through their other works include Richard Bauckham, Colin Gunton, John Goldingay, Elizabeth Achtemeier, Roland E. Murphy, Karen Jobes, Stephen Wright, and Douglas Moo.

*The lectionary commentary* is not a collection of other people's sermons, or even

sermon outlines, but rather a source of information and inspiration specifically designed to help the preacher to preach from the lectionary. The full set of three volumes will set you back about £100, but should prove good value for money over time. (NB: volume 3 is currently a little harder to track down than volumes 1 & 2—if stuck, try print on demand direct from Eerdmans).

Most of my preaching ministry, however, does not follow the lectionary. I am much more likely to be exploring a theme or unpacking a biblical book, or even combining the two. Hence my second selection...

*The new interpreter's Bible: a commentary in twelve volumes* is the commentary I invariably find myself consulting first these days, and often it is more than sufficient for my needs. Twelve large volumes (plus an 'optional' 13th volume of indexes...) cover the whole of the Bible, including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books. The full NIV and NRSV text is included, set out side by side for ease of comparison. An overview of each section is provided, followed by more detailed commentary, and concluding with a series of reflections. These reflections are varied in their scope, but often provide an interesting angle to pursue in preaching or small-group Bible study. As well as the commentaries introductory articles are also provided covering topics such as wisdom literature, epistolary literature, and Hebrew poetry.

*The new interpreter's Bible* is published in the US by Abingdon Press, and has over 90 contributors of commentaries and articles, of whom just under 20 are women. At the time of writing all contributors appeared to be based in North America or the UK. Many of the names are instantly recognised and respected in the study of that particular book of genre. For example, Walter Brueggemann on Exodus; Christopher Rowland on Revelation; J. Clinton McCann, Jr, on Psalms; James D.G. Dunn on the Pastoral Epistles; N.T. Wright on Romans. Obviously I have not read each and every contribution, but one particular highlight was Phyllis Trible's little gem of a commentary on Jonah.

I believe the volumes were all published in the period 1994 to 2004. Each volume is a substantial investment, usually retailing at between £35 and £47 a volume, but for that you are getting an awful lot of book! An electronic version is also available (Logos—\$599). That is a large investment to make on a single set of books, but so far it has proved to be good value for money for this reader/preacher.