

Reviews

NEW TESTAMENT INTERPRETATION by Ian Boxall, *SCM Press*, London, 2007, pp. 217, £14.99 pbk.

THE BOOKS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT by Ian Boxall, *SCM Press*, London, 2007, pp. 265, £14.99 pbk.

These companion volumes by the Senior Tutor and New Testament Fellow at St Stephen's House, Oxford, appear in the SCM Studyguide series, and are explicitly aimed at A-level students and first year undergraduates. They might not, then, seem apt subject matter for review in this journal; such, indeed, was the view expressed to me by their author. However, I suggest that in his modesty he does himself a disservice, for it would be a great pity if these excellent books flew beneath the radar, as it were, of New Blackfriars readers. Especially for those not expert in the field of biblical studies and hermeneutics, who perhaps have not kept fully abreast of developments in the field, or even forgotten much of what they once knew, these would be ideal places to begin (again); and even for those who lay claim to greater and more up-to-date expertise, they provide both models of how to go about writing introductory volumes, and the opportunity to review at a distance some of the changes in the discipline over the last generation.

Thus, as I read, I was constantly comparing these books to my own introduction to the field, the book that got me hooked on NT studies, Stephen Neill and Tom Wright's *Interpretation of the New Testament 1861–1986*. In terms of entertainment value, principally for its trenchant opinion and almost comical bias against all things German, the latter probably has the edge, but one of the great strengths of Boxall's writing is that, while always fair and balanced, keeping his own views appropriately in the background, he is never dry or uninteresting. Like Neill and Wright, he manifests a love of and a delight in his subject which I suspect will prove infectious to those students fortunate enough to come to the topic via these books. And for those who are perhaps long past the stage of sitting three-hour written papers, they may come as a thrilling revelation of what has been happening in the subject in recent years. It is here that the contrast with Neill and Wright, and with other typical introductory books such as RE Brown's *Introduction to the New Testament*, LT Johnson's *Writings of the New Testament*, or for that matter the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, might come as a surprise.

Beginning with the first, methodological volume, then, we find at the start two very thoughtful introductory chapters dealing with hermeneutical questions, the first in general – 'Where is meaning to be found' and the second with the question of the specific issues raised by the interpretation of the NT – 'The Jesus effect'. More pleasing still is the inclusion of a substantial chapter dealing with the issue of textual criticism, something that far too often is barely touched upon in introductions to the NT and which often even commentaries leave to the experts, as if it were a tiresome technical prolegomenon to the really meaty stuff. Such an attitude is simply irresponsible, as JC O'Neill pointed out in an article in this journal back in February 2000; despite which, it continues to be the case that the great majority of theology undergraduates do not receive any instruction on the matter.

More striking even than that is the proportion of the book given to the historical-critical methods of NT interpretation: the sections on source, form and redaction criticism and biblical archaeology together take up twenty pages, or ten percent of the text of the book. Compare this with virtually the whole of Neill and Wright, which of course is a historical survey, and we see just how much has changed in the field in the last twenty-odd years. Subjects that receive a chapter to themselves in Boxall, chapters as long as that on historical-critical method, but are barely touched on in Neill and Wright include literary-critical readings (especially narrative criticism), social-scientific interpretation and the hermeneutics of liberation. Each is dealt with thoughtfully, with the advantages and limitations of the various approaches explained clearly and often-confusing terminology carefully defined; indeed, I have never read so clear an explanation of the subtle difference between reception criticism and *Wirkungsgeschichte*.

More pleasing still is the inclusion of a chapter on theology and the NT. As Boxall points out, the worlds of scripture scholarship and theology proper rarely intersect: 'God is the neglected factor in New Testament study in the academy' (*New Testament Interpretation* p. 160), but he also illustrates the recent resurgence in certain circles within the NT academy of explicitly theological readings, a resurgence which is now starting to be felt even here in Oxford, I can happily report. Boxall is by no means pressing for some kind of radical orthodoxy in the field, nor an approach in which exegesis is pre-determined by ecclesiastical canons – he writes of 'the valued Catholic tradition of "loyal dissent", which is able to push the boundaries from within' (p. 169) – but for the legitimacy of an approach to scripture in which biblical scholarship, including historical-critical scholarship, and the theological discussion of doctrine and morals are neither mutually antagonistic nor totally independent. Finally on this volume, it is a pleasure to read a short but very helpful section in an introduction to the NT on *lectio divina*.

The companion volume on the particular books of the NT shares all of the first volume's positive qualities of clarity, balance and a lively and engaging style. Once again it is the balance and ordering of the material that is of interest: Boxall begins with a brief overview of the historical background to the NT – its socio-historical and religious *milieu(x)* – followed by an introduction to the question of the historical Jesus. Arguably these sections might have fitted at least as naturally into the other book (and then they would have been more nearly equal in length) but it matters little, since really the two books need to be read together. Then we begin the study of particular sections of the NT with two chapters on Paul, one on Paul in himself and one introducing those letters which Boxall considers to be truly written by the Apostle. These are more or less mainstream conclusions (he includes Colossians and 2 Thessalonians, but not Ephesians nor the Pastorals), and they are ably if briefly defended, as is his decision to structure his book around these conclusions rather than on the canonical order and attributions. The Synoptics follow – discussion of the 'synoptic problem' occurs in the other volume, a wise decision since it stops discussion of the Gospels themselves being dominated by it, and it is a typically well-balanced and helpful discussion, though Boxall does not entirely disguise his preference for the Farrer-Goulder hypothesis. A somewhat briefer chapter on John is followed, perhaps surprisingly, by one dedicated to the passion, resurrection and infancy narratives, in that order. Again, the reasons given are cogent and interesting in themselves.

Acts follows, then the allegedly pseudepigraphal parts of the Pauline corpus – though space is given to alternative views – then Hebrews, the Catholic Epistles and the Apocalypse. It is again interesting to note the proportion of material, with as much devoted to these last three sections as to Paul or the Synoptic Gospels. Boxall is at pains to point out and to encourage the reader to help to

undo the relative neglect of these latter parts of the NT, and in his final chapter on the development of the canon he notes that in Athanasius's canon Hebrews is, as it were, promoted up in the Pauline corpus, and the Catholic Epistles follow Acts. This has the effect of shifting the centre of the canon both textually and theologically, and he suggests perhaps also geographically eastwards, if some at least of the Catholic Epistles are, as Richard Bauckham has recently proposed, directed to Jewish Christians of the eastern diaspora.

These two volumes are outstanding examples of clear, interesting and fresh writing which could provide the foundations of an exciting and thoroughly twenty-first-century course on the NT for beginners; but they deserve a readership far beyond their target audience.

RICHARD J. OUNSWORTH OP

MONK HABITS FOR EVERYDAY PEOPLE: BENEDICTINE SPIRITUALITY FOR PROTESTANTS by Dennis Okholm, *Grand Rapids*, 2007, pp. 144, US\$12.99

This attractively produced, slim volume comes well-recommended by Kathleen Norris, author of the bestselling *The Cloister Walk*, who has also written the Foreword. It is a welcome addition to the growing literature on Benedictine spirituality. While many such books have similarly catchy titles, this one distinguishes itself by its subtitle. It is very much written with the Protestant reader in mind, who will almost certainly have inherited some Protestant prejudices regarding monastic life and, by extension, monastic spirituality*.

Monk Habits for Ordinary People can be read on a number of levels. At its most basic level it is an introduction to Benedictine spirituality that can be read with profit by both Protestants and Catholics. It can also be read as a contribution to the re-appropriation of the catholic tradition by Protestants, what some are calling the 'Evangelical *ressourcement*'. But perhaps without realising it, Okholm has written a Catholic and monastic critique of evangelical Protestantism. While the author does not question Protestant doctrine — he quotes with approval the opinions of Luther, Calvin, and Knox throughout the book — he does continually criticise Protestant practises and the Evangelical mentality more generally. He offers Benedictine spirituality as a corrective to much of the consumerism and superficiality that mark evangelical Christianity in America. As Okholm honestly admits, 'We have become consumers of religion rather than cultivators of a spiritual life; we have spawned an entire industry of Christian kitsch and bookstores full of spiritual junk food that leaves us sated and flabby' (p. 35). Sadly, this is becoming increasingly true of our Benedictine monasteries as well.

Dennis Okholm, the author, is both a theologian and pastor. In addition to completing three Master of Arts degrees, Okholm established his Reformed credentials with a doctoral dissertation on *Petitionary Prayer and Providence in Two Contemporary Theological Perspectives: Karl Barth and Norman Pittenger* at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1986. A further glimpse of Okholm's wide-ranging theological interests can be gained from his impressive publishing record. He is co-author of *A Family of Faith: An Introduction to Evangelical Christianity*

* It may be useful for the reader to know that the present reviewer is a former Protestant, whose pedigree, like that of the author, 'includes Baptist and conservative evangelical strains' (p. 20). Moreover, the reviewer grew up in southern California, where the author now resides.