BOOKS I HAVE READ: STUMBLING TOWARD ZION

Posted on March 17, 2020 by Eddie

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Category: Observations

I have a problem with a lot of the Evangelical responses to the coronavirus. I'm not talking about the barking mad healing-people-by-touching-their-TV responses, but the more thoughtful, mainstream commentaries. I've read lots and lots of articles saying that we should not fear, that the Lord is in control and that we should trust a Sovereign God who has our best interests at heart. Before you start worrying about me, I believe all of this, stuff. It is true and it is comforting, but it is not the whole story. If Jesus could weep at his friend's grave, then in the face of a pandemic which has already taken many lives and which is likely to take many more, we should have space for weeping, too.

Which brings me to David Smith's excellent book Stumbling Toward Zion: Recovering the Biblical Tradition of Lament in the Era of World Christianity. If you are finding yourself self-isolated and looking for something to do, forget Netflix for a day and buy this book. It is an important book for Western Christians to read; especially now that the issues it raises have moved centre stage.

The book is a medium format paperback and has 150 pages. The style is not particularly academic, but nor is it easy reading. The subject matter is serious and the writing is profound so it pays careful reading and you will want to go back over some pages a couple of times to make sure you've got the thread. For those who like those things, there is a sprinkling of footnotes and a decent bibliography. The book will set you back around a tenner, with the Kindle version retailing for about half that. Buy it!

The book finds its genesis in two events, the first of these, David's widowhood is mentioned in the introduction. The second emerges from his earlier struggle in relating his own Christian formation to the lives of his students in Nigeria and is found in the first chapter; *Recovering a Lost Biblical Tradition*.

> *... how could my version of the gospel come as good news in a situation where life expectancy was so low and I had to provide transport for the corpse of a young man who had died as the result of the lack of medical services capable of responding to preventable diseases*
>
> *p.2*

Reflecting on his experiences in Africa, showed him that there was a gap in the dominant expression of Christianity in his home country.

> *... the biblical tradition of lament has receded ever further from the worshipping and devotional life of the churches in the West, lost and largely forgotten as the onrushing tide of postmodernism has left us with new forms of Christianity which focus almost exclusively on celebration and victory and appear to interpret the gospel as a kind of therapy for the satisfaction of personal needs and desires. Beyond and very likely within, this distinctively contemporary form of religion there remain aching hearts and a host of people in an ever-increasing fringe who have profound and important questions and who must either suppress these in order to retain credibility with the believe community or turn elsewhere in the quest for sympathetic and understanding listeners who will take their sense of the ambiguities of faith seriously.*
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> *p.6*

The second chapter *The Testimony of Biblical Israel* includes meditations on the book of Job and (fittingly) Lamentations. It demonstrates clearly, how lament was a part of the experience of the people of Israel as they navigated their faith in a righteous, holy and all-powerful God through a world in which he often seemed to be silent and apparently inactive.

Chapter three, *The Testimony of the Jesus Movement*, looks at the Gospels. I was particularly struck by the lengthy meditation on the significance of Easter Saturday. Because we are familiar with the end of the story, we fail to grasp the pain and the pathos of that day when all of the disciples' hopes were ended.

> *...the danger remains that we move too quickly from the cross to the empty tomb with the result that theology becomes associated with abstract theories of atonement which are invariably divorced from the harsh reality of the historical death of Jesus on the hill of Calvary.*
>
> *p.39*

Chapter four, *The Witness of Paul: Ecstasy and Agony*, does essentially what it says on the tin and looks at how the theme of lament is worked out in both the life and the theology of Paul.

The penultimate chapter, *Speaking of God*, considers how the themes of the book have been expressed in the life of the church over history.

> *Lament moves the practice of prayer beyond a passive acceptance of whatever liefe brings upon us and raises questions which require answers. In doing so, lament seeks to initiate a dialogue with heaven, hoping - longing - that God will respond to the sufferer's anguish and confusion.*
>
> *p.75*

The final chapter is entitled *Biblical Lament and the Future of World Christianity* and it attempts to project what has been a retrospective reflection into the future. It is both encouraging and challenging.

> *How can Christianity appear as a source of a credible hope in the twenty-first century if it knows only the language of praise while the world burns?*
>
> *p.128*

In giving the chapter titles and some representative quotes, I've tried to illustrate the breadth of the book. I have made no attempt to capture the details of the arguments developed in each chapter. That would require a much longer review and you'd be much better off just reading the book.

Each chapter closes with a section intended to inspire individual or group reflection (this would be an excellent project for a book club) and there are two short appendices at the end.

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