BOOKS I HAVE READ: BIBLICAL THEOLOGY ACCORDING TO THE APOSTLES

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Category: Observations

Generally, sometime in the spring, I start a book review with the words, this may just be the best book that I read all year. This is that point for 2020. IVP has provided me with a pre-publication pdf of Biblical Theology According to the Apostles: How The Earliest Christians Told The Story Of Israel and I have to say that it is brilliant. Go away now and order yourself a copy and then return and read this review.

This is a medium format paperback of around 250 pages, the last twenty of which are a bibliography. The book is unashamedly academic, with slews of footnotes. That being said, it's not a difficult read and there are one or two witticisms thrown in (I particularly enjoyed the Star Wars analogy), which lighten the touch. Currently it will set you back around Â£15 or a tenner for the Kindle book. On a personal note, I would say that I'd always prefer to read a book like this on my Kindle, as the facility to highlight passages and then retrieve and file the highlights is a huge help. Other opinions are available.

The title of the book basically gives away what its subject matter is. Essentially, the authors look at a variety of passages in the New Testament which give summaries of Israel's story (abbreviated to SIS) and examine the context in which they occur, the content of the summary and their contribution to the NT author's argument. Some of these summaries, such as Stephen's recap of Israel's history in Acts 7, are obvious, whereas others, such as the parable of the tenants in Matthew 21 are less so. That being said, the authors give perfectly adequate justifications for the passages they have included.

After an initial chapter which sets out their methods, the authors plunge into the biblical text. The pattern of the chapters in the main body of the work is similar, they give the context of the passage that they are looking at, they then examine the passage in some detail before looking at the contribution that the summary of Israel's story makes to the argument. The exceptions to this rule are the first two chapters, each of which look at two summaries, in these cases, the contribution of the summaries are drawn together at the end of the chapter. There is a degree of helpful repetition and recapitulation in each chapter which helps keep you tracking with the discussion; but this is definitely a book to read with an open Bible in front of you (unless you have memorised the whole NT).

Chapter 2 covers Matthew's genealogy of Jesus and the parable of the tenants. I particularly appreciated the detailed breakdown of the three sections of the genealogy, while the following quote about the presence of Tamar, Rahab and Ruth in the list, was always going to grab my attention:

> *These three Gentile women are not only the ancestors of the Messiah, but also point forward to him in their work of preserving Godâ€™s covenant line and rescuing his people from imminent destruction. In other words, they are themselves saviours of Israel. While interpreters who see the Gentile women in the genealogy foreshadowing the commission to the Gentiles in Matthew 28 are correct, this foreshadowing is found not only in their Gentile identity, but also in their direct actions that preserve the line of promise.*
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> *p. 21-22*

It is impossible to rehears all of the arguments of the first chapter, but I found this summary sentence very helpful:

> *Moreover, the shaping of the Gospel of Matthew implies that Jesus not only is the culmination of Israelâ€™s history and covenants, but also repeats Israelâ€™s history in his own life, death and resurrection.*
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> *p. 42*

Chapter 3 looks at the summaries of Israel's story in Acts 7 (Stephen's defence before the council) and Acts 13 (Paul at Pisidian Antioch), though it takes a brief look at Luke's Gospel in order to establish the context. Though not essential to the book, I did find this quote very helpful:

> *However, it is best not to think of them as a single book (â€˜Luke-Actsâ€™) but rather as a two-volume series. One might say they are less Lord of the Rings and more Chronicles of Narnia.*
>
> *p. 52*

More pertinently, the context and purpose of Stephen's speech is set out:

> *As we consider the place of the speech in the structure of Acts, it stands as an introduction to the movement of the gospel from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria, and subsequently from Judea and Samaria to the end of the earth. Thus, Stephenâ€™s underlying emphasis on the universalistic aspects of the covenant with Abraham are unsurprising. Stephenâ€™s speech*

> *is not only a recitation of salvation history in the past, but also of the foundation for the continued story of Godâ€™s saving acts.*
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> *p. 66*

Chapter 4 examines passages that I have always found difficult; the Sarah/Hagar and Isaac/Ishmael narratives in Galatians 3 and 4. While I was reading this chapter, I found it the most helpful in the book, however, it is also the most dense and I will need to return to it in the near future to get the best out of it. I have always struggled with these passages, partly because of the way in which typology and allegory seem to be intertwined; the authors very helpfully untwined these aspects, but I will need to revisit what they said.

Chapter 5 takes us to Romans 9-11, the most extensive summary in the book.

> *The goal of this book has been to observe the exposed iceberg of apostolic biblical theology, and in this chapter we come to one of its highest peaks, Romans 9 â€“ 11. This complex argument is the longest SIS in the NT, and contains the most concentrated series of OT quotations in all of Paulâ€™s letters and perhaps the entire NT.*
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> *p. 115*

Running through this chapter is the theme:

> *Paul argues that Israel have never had a fundamentally ethnic identity but have always had (and always will have) a theological identity â€“ Israel are the people who have mercifully been called by God.*
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> *p. 116*

This is not particularly new, but the way in which the authors hold the tension between the overlapping ethnic and theological Israels is very helpful. It is perhaps understandable, if a little frustrating, that three authors couldn't agree on what exactly "all Israel will be saved" means, but they do provide a brief overview of the different readings of this passage.

Chapter 6 looks at the "heroes of faith" passage in Hebrews 11 as a summary of Israel's story. I'd never consciously noticed (though it's pretty obvious, now that it has been pointed out) that this passage has two distinct sections. The first one is about named individuals and moves at a slow pace through the cannon, while the second section is far faster and draws people together apparently at random. What is more surprising is the way that the two lists echo each other (look at verses 13 and 39 if you don't believe me). Having done this clever bit of analysis, the authors go on to examine the significance of the list in the overall argument of Hebrews.

The final chapter draws the whole book together, reprises the main themes and sets out some eminently sensible rules for doing biblical theology on the basis of what the book has uncovered.

> *We submit, then, that in our own biblical theology we should read the story both backwards and forwards. The OT witness to Christ is seen more clearly through the lens of the NT and thus we should use the end of the story to enlighten the beginning. On the other hand, we should also read the story forwards. We should expect the OT, as the very Word of God, to bear prophetic witness to the person and work of Jesus Christ.*
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> *p. 187*

It should be obvious that I enjoyed the book. There are many individual highlights, some of which I've mentioned above. However, the great thrill in the book lies in the way in which it unites the Old and New Testaments in a thought-through way. I found my appreciation for the whole of Scripture growing as I read the book. I also very much appreciated the missional way in which it closes with a quote from Lesslie Newbigin:

> *Authentic Christian thought and action begin not by attending to the aspirations of people, not by answering the questions they are asking in their terms, not by offering solutions to the problems as the world sees them. It must begin and continue by attending to what God has done in the story of Israel and supremely in the story of Jesus Christ. It must continue by indwelling that story so that it is our story, the way we understand the real story. And then, and this is the vital point, to attend with open hearts and minds to the real needs of people.*
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> *p. 201*

As a reminder, I was provided with a pre-publication electronic copy of this book in return for this review.

I have attempted not to allow this generosity to influence my views. If I thought it was a stinker, I would have said so.