



Rev. Dr. Bob Robinson

Books Worth Reading

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HONEY FROM THE ROCK

James Robson (Apollos / IVP, 2013, £14.99, 240pp ISBN: 9781844746255)

In the Old Testament, the Promised Land is said to offer milk and honey. But reading the Law (Deuteronomy, for example), can be hard and un-nourishing work for some Christians today. In fact, it can appear to be as unlikely as getting honey from a rock (to use the book's title and its reference to God as the Rock—Deut 32:4).

But that is the key: Deuteronomy is not a book of mere words but a book of words from God himself. Subtitled "Deuteronomy for the People of God" the volume places Deuteronomy in the wider story of the whole of Scripture; it is, according to Robson, "a word with a story, to shape the life of God's people." This is a fine answer to the question "How can the Old Testament, especially the Law, be Scripture for the church?" Some chapter titles give the flavour: "Deuteronomy's vision for Israel," "Dead ends in interpreting Deuteronomy's laws," "Deuteronomy's laws: challenges for the Christian reader," "Deuteronomy's laws for the Christian." So, while this is not a commentary in the usual sense, no preacher or teacher or homegroup leader could read it without wanting to read and get others enthused!

THE KINDNESS OF GOD

David W Smith (IVP, 2013, £9.99, 176 pp ISBN: 9781844746491)

What would happen if we attempted to place two things side by side: the idea of the *kindness* of God, and the violence and suffering we see nightly on our television news? That is what David Smith does in this book, subtitled "Christian Witness in Our Troubled World." The best summary of the volume comes from the author himself: "It is Paul's striking use of the phrase 'the kindness of God' in a passage in Romans (11:22) in which he wrestles

with the ambiguities of history and the rise and fall of nations which I have taken as the title for this book. Having explained the tragic situation of his own Jewish people in terms of their experience of the divine 'sternness', the apostle to the Gentiles warns non-Jewish believers in the imperial city of Rome to beware of arrogance, counselling them to 'be afraid' that the appearance of the same sort of spiritual pride which led to the downfall of biblical Israel, will also be their undoing.

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In the deeply troubled times described in this book, this disturbing text speaks in powerful ways to Christians throughout our world, summoning a world church to prioritise what really matters and to discover its unity in the service of the Christ whose life and death displayed in human form precisely the kindness of God." The book is all the more poignant given its origins as a series of studies prepared for a violent part of Africa. It is a fine reflection on that difficult question, "How does the Gospel *actually* translate as mission into a violent and suffering world?"

SEX AND MONEY

Paul David Tripp (IVP, 2013, £10.99, 224 pp ISBN: 9781844748426)

Chapter one of this book is called 'Sorry, but We've Gone Crazy' and starts with three and a half pages of one sentence examples of what happens in a

world obsessed with finding, enjoying and trying to maintain a love affair with sex and money—what the book’s publicity calls “two pleasures unequalled in their power to captivate our attention and demand our worship.” The examples are almost all American, but New Zealand is not far behind. The author himself (a popular but biblically-trained and theologically smart conference speaker) explains his book as follows: “I am sad to think that when it comes to sex and money we still buy into the legalism that says if we can organise people’s lives, give them the right set of rules, and attach them to efficient systems of accountability, we can deliver people from their sex-and-money insanity.

Few areas of the human struggle reveal more powerfully the sad sinfulness of sin than the sex-and-money evils that are done thousands of times every day. Yet in the face of all of this, there is still robust reason for joy. All over, the church of Jesus Christ is returning once again to the hope of the gospel.

The fact that we can look at the power of sex-and-money sin to deceive and enslave people and feel comfortable in our reliance on the scant power of human intervention is itself insane. Few areas of the human struggle reveal more powerfully the sad sinfulness of sin than the sex-and-money evils that are done thousands of times every day. Yet in the face of all of this, there is still robust reason for joy. All over, the church of Jesus Christ is returning once again to the hope of the gospel. All over, Christian leaders young and old are looking to the gospel of Jesus Christ to help them diagnose sex-and-money problems while at the same time holding out to those who are tempted, weak, or addicted the hope that is found only in the grace of Jesus.” This is a book that is both honest and challenging (both because it is biblically-sound, and has a robust embrace of the Lordship of

Christ) and written in a wise and often witty way. A case can be made for making sure that every one of our young adult groups has copies of this engaging, serious but accessible volume—and mature leaders to guide them through it.

ONE BODY

Alexander R. Pruss (University of Notre Dame Press, 2012 480 pp, US\$45 ISBN: 9780268038977)

Baylor University is a southern American university, of Baptist origins, with an outstanding research reputation. This volume, from one of its Philosophy professors, is an example of Christian philosophy applied to a range of issues related to sexuality. The book, subtitled “An Essay in Christian Sexual Ethics,” begins with a long chapter on ‘Love and Its Forms’ as it explores the nature of love as a mix of goodwill, appreciation, and unity. He argues that different forms of love (eg. parental, filial, friendly, fraternal, romantic) differ in terms of the kind of relationship they seek. Pruss gives particular attention to the relationships that romantic love seeks and examines in some detail the nature of marriage and related (and sometimes controversial) ethical questions. As well, there are lengthy and erudite philosophical-theological chapters on, for example, ‘The Meaningfulness of Sexuality,’ ‘One Flesh, One Body,’ ‘Contraception and Natural Family Planning,’ ‘Same-Sex Attraction,’ and celibacy. Another reviewer (Professor Robert George of Princeton University) writes that “This is a terrific—really quite extraordinary—work of scholarship. It is quite simply the best work on Christian sexual ethics that I have seen. It will become the text that anyone who ventures into the field will have to grapple with—a kind of touchstone. Moreover, it is filled with arguments with which even secular writers on sexual morality will have to engage and come to terms.” I agree.

THE ANTICIPATORY CORPSE

Jeffrey P. Bishop (*University of Notre Dame Press*, 2011 432 pp, US\$35.00 ISBN: 9780268022273)

Your reviewer sat on this book (with its rather unappealing title) for quite a while—until he realised that of all the books sent for review over recent years, this has attracted by far the greatest international attention, both inside and outside the church. In it, Bishop, an American philosopher, ethicist, and palliative care specialist, argues that because of scientific advances and continuing debates about euthanasia and the ‘right to die’—or even the right to live—something has gone greatly wrong in the care of the dying in current medicine and more widely in the social and even political views of dying and death. The book (subtitled *Medicine, Power, and the Care of the Dying*) analyses both Western medical practices and medical ethics, and argues that both are dominated by a perspective that sees people as no more than machines in motion—people as, in effect, “temporarily animated corpses with interchangeable parts.” In other words an un-Christian view of the human person now dominates as contemporary medicine not only ignores but refuses questions of a transcendent cause of and purpose for human life. If Bishop is correct (and the near-universal praise the book has received suggests that he is) then several things become clear, even to a non-medical reader. Firstly, as a British academic reviewer puts it, “Jeffrey Bishop’s book constitutes a public ethical bombshell. For the first time, certain common mainline medical practices are thoroughly exposed to view as questionable, because grounded in the normativity of the dead body. And Bishop unerringly explains why they are the consequence of a secular non-recognition of the reality of life and a liberal ethics of mere rights and utility, which fails to value personhood.” (John Milbank, University of Nottingham) Secondly, concerning palliative care, and end-of-life practices, Bishop shows how contemporary palliative care has diverged in essential ways from Cicely Saunders’ original

vision and practice of hospice. As I mentioned, the book has been widely praised. The usually feisty American theologian, Stanley Hauerwas, writes: “To say this book is the most important one written in the philosophy of medicine in the last twenty-five years would not do it justice. This book is destined to change the way we think and, hopefully, practice medicine.” And across the Tasman, a review by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s ‘Religion and Ethics’ programme concluded: “*The Anticipatory Corpse* is ... the most important book of 2011.”

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Although much of the volume is medically and philosophically complex, its final paragraph is poignantly challenging: “It might just be that the practices of religious communities marginalised in modernity and laughed at as unscientific are the source of humane medicine. Perhaps there, in living traditions informed by a different understanding of space and time, where location and story provide meaningful contexts to offer once again hospitality to the dying ..., we will find a unity of material, function, form, and purpose. ... We have now moved ... to questions that bear on thinking and doing, which are questions properly of holy men and women, of saints ... who offer themselves to the living and the dying. Avoiding a theological turn here becomes hazardous. ... Might it be that only theology can save medicine?” (p. 313).