

Resources.

The Bones of Joseph: From the Ancient Texts to the Modern Church

by Gareth Lloyd Jones (Eerdmans 1997, ISBN 0-8028-4596-7, 208pp, £9.99)

This is a book for clergy and lay people who wish to think harder about the Bible and some of the important issues it raises. It is written in an accessible style, avoids jargon, and does not presume expertise in theology nor any prior knowledge of the texts it studies. Gareth Lloyd Jones is an academic (he is Professor of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Wales, Bangor) but this book started out as a series of lectures to lay people wishing to learn more about their Scriptures, and that has determined the character of the book.

It is not, however, a book for the faint-hearted or the lazy minded. At every turn it is designed to make us look, think, and ask hard and uncomfortable questions. It is not just a book about the Bible. In each of its twelve chapters, the author moves from discussion of the chosen biblical passage to exploration of some issue of importance to the contemporary Christian. Thus the references in Genesis, Exodus and Joshua to the taking of the bones of Joseph to Shechem lead into a balanced, thoughtful piece on tradition, its ubiquity, its value and the variety of attitudes towards it. The Golden Calf story allows the author to produce a passionate and devastating critique of the dark side of religion. An appalling saying in John's Gospel about "the Jews", put into the mouth of Jesus, brings him to the very important subject of the history of anti-Semitism in the Church and its roots in the New Testament. Other topics explore whether we are to regard the stories of the Bible as fact or fancy, the finding of God in the wilderness, Liberation Theology (whose origins and are simply and powerfully

explained), martyrdom and the creative suffering of the martyr, guilt and forgiveness, and the nature and resilience of worship which, as the author observes, in every religion "is characterised by a certain stubbornness – it refuses to die out".

This is a stimulating, encouraging and properly disturbing book. It clearly feeds on Gareth Lloyd Jones' work as a priest, pastor and scholar. It deserves a wide readership and careful reading of those who buy it. Those who do so must be ready for the wisdom of the observation that forgiveness and reconciliation cannot change the past, but can change what we let the past do to us, as well as the statement that "organised religion is to blame for more misery and intolerance than mankind has suffered from any other source".

Trevor Dennis

The Revd Canon Dr Trevor Dennis is Chancellor of Chester Cathedral. He was previously Vice-Principal of Salisbury and Wells Theological College, where he lectured in Old Testament. He is the author of a number of books including Speaking of God and Lo and Behold (SPCK).

Fare Well in Christ

by W H Vanstone (DLT 1997, ISBN 0-232-52220-0, £8.95, 147pp)

I came to this book with some relish. As one whose Christian formation owes much to Canon Vanstone's great books, *Love's Endeavour*, *Love's Expense* and *The Stature of Waiting*, I was probably destined to be initially disappointed.

The substance of the book is an apologia for the 'grace of God' particularly as made manifest in the person of Jesus Christ. Each of the six chapters poses interesting questions for those who are enquirers or for the theologically curious. For instance, in the first chapter, in an exploration of 'the grace of God' we are told that the phrase never appears in the Old Testament and only appears as an

attribute of God in New Testament Christianity. In the second chapter we are told how historical religion seeks to find meaning in the human narrative. Being attentive to our story is to understand the nature of events. We are then shown how this expressed itself in the power of the *kerugma* of the first evangelists. This argument flows into the next chapter where there is a succession of stories concerning the sign of the cross and its ability to effect change in people's lives. Vanstone then broadens this, first in a chapter about the 'grace' of Jesus Christ, and then in a chapter about the ministry of grace in the first century Church. The book ends with the mystery and meaning of human existence, 'Welcome and Good Mysteries' – a new future written amidst the farewell.

The best of this work is in the tone and texture of the writing. Canon Vanstone writes out of a pastoral heart – many of his evocative stories are those of a quintessential parish priest, taken from the streets and communities he has held in prayer and affection. It reflects a quality and commitment of ministry which is not just clerical – one of his most memorable figures is a local man who assiduously dropped in on his neighbours whilst also reminding the clergy of their complimentary duties.

The ambiguity within the title of the book is a clever play on the Christian Mystery – that in our deaths we find all things well, that in our radical experience of our own insignificance are the seeds of an awareness of infinity. It may be that the ambiguity is also meant to suggest that this is in some way a valedictory work by Canon Vanstone. If that is the case, it is a fitting tribute to some enduring and Christ-like features of the pastoral soul which he would like to commend to us, that they might fare well in the future.

June Osborne

The Revd Canon June Osborne is Treasurer of Salisbury Cathedral.

Gone But Not Forgotten: Church Leaving and Returning

by Philip Richter and Leslie J Francis (ISBN 0-232-52236-7; DLT 1998; 192pp; £10.95)

The authors and their research team have collaborated to address "the foremost questions confronting the churches at the end of the twentieth century". Why are so many people currently leaving the churches and how might they be encouraged to return? In his Foreword, John Finney tell us that, although there are more than 40,000 churches in England with a total budget in excess of £500,000,00, very little money is spent on researching what could be improved or avoided.

The deeper questions of course would enquire how much of all this ecclesiastical activity and expense is worthwhile. Church life seems so impoverished for the 27 leavers interviewed in depth, that I frequently found myself thinking they had done the right thing. Why did the non-leavers want to stay? The question matters because encouraging a faith worth sharing in a church worth joining has to be about more than good organisational politics: "are we asking too much of them? They might leave. Are we asking too little of them? They might leave."

My guess is that any clergy group brainstorming on a flip-chart would come up with most of the reasons presented here for people leaving. The strength of this book, therefore, is that it confirms what many local church leaders have felt to be true for a long time, but lacked any concrete evidence. It also adds information about the authors' statistical survey and some elementary social theory, which is useful for those who have not previously encountered Grace Davie, James Fowler, Anthony Giddens, and Robin Gill, but are interested to learn how their work

describes a context for church decline. Michael Jacobs and John Hull are not mentioned.

This is a useful piece of research, but I was left wondering whether the conclusions are likely to take you much beyond that clergy group with the flip-chart:

Churches are most likely to retain their members and encourage leavers to return when they:

- avoid pigeon-holing people into tidy membership categories;
- notice and react sensitively when people are leaving;
- avoid blowing out any embers of faith;
- meet and respect people where they are culturally and spiritually;
- help people grow in their faith;
- offer practical support as people cope with life's changes;
- encourage parents in their upbringing of children;
- offer people a gospel worth investing in;
- authentically embody the gospel;
- offer people a sense of true community (p.165)

Nicholas Bradbury

The Revd Nicholas Bradbury is Rector of Horfield in the Diocese of Bristol. He is a former Director of Pastoral Studies at Salisbury and Wells Theological College, and is the author of City of God: Pastoral Care in the Inner City (SPCK's New Library of Pastoral Care).

Word of Life

by **Martin Kitchen, Georgina Heskins and Stephen Motyer (Canterbury Press 1997; ISBN 1-85311-177-5; 125pp; £9.99)**

Sharing the Word through the Liturgical Year

by **Gustavo Gutierrez (Cassell/Geoffrey Chapman 1997; ISBN 0-225-66858-0; 288pp; £12.99)**

Both these books provide a commentary on the *Revised Common Lectionary* now adopted by many of the major denominations in Great Britain. Gutierrez covers all three years of the lectionary. Kitchen *et al* covers year C only; further volumes will follow in due course. Either would be a useful asset for the preacher wanting some stimulation in preparing

their sermons without having to wade through commentaries. However, both these volumes have a very different style and focus.

Gutierrez is a Peruvian theologian, closely associated with the liberation theology movement. His book has been translated from the Spanish and he sets out his stall at the beginning. "The characteristic mission of Christians is proclaiming the gospel, the good news of the gratuitous love of God for every person but preferentially for the poor and excluded". The focus throughout is on the practical actions called for by the gospel message. In his commentary on 2 Sam 12.7-10, Gal 16.19-21 and Lk 7.36-8.3 he concludes "Being Christians is not a mystical experience; it is 'Christ who lives in me' actualised in our daily historical responsibility – the giving of our lives – for a loving society based on new relationships of justice which reconciles and builds up peace" (p 168). In commenting on the parable of the Good Samaritan his focus is on the way love was expressed in concrete, practical action. In commenting on Luke's account of the temptations in the desert (linked with Deut 26.4-10 and Rom 10.8-13) his key sentence is "The word of faith must be proclaimed" (p. 94). He writes with a passion which is informed with a depth of scholarship. His scholarship combines traditional exegesis with symbolic interpretation, giving a freshness which frequently presented me with an unusual slant on the passage, jolting me out of complacency and challenging my commitment to living out the Gospel.

Kitchen, Heskins and Motyer (two men, one woman, all ordained) come from different traditions within the Anglican church. They set out to share the insights of those who make it their business to study scripture in depth. Their writing is more measured, less passionate than that of Gutierrez. Their focus is more on explaining the background to passages and making connections between them than on drawing out implications for action. The reader is either left to draw implications for themselves or presented with generalised conclusions. Their conclusion to the Lk 7 passage is "Religious observance can cushion us against a realistic encounter with God...let us hear the warning" (p. 76). The focus of their commentary on the Good Samaritan is that if your heart is right, detailed regulations become unimportant. And their focus on the commentary on the temptations and related passages is that "It is on this larger (cosmic) canvas that Christian discipleship is to be understood

(p. 38), which beckons us towards a more humane world. Although they bring fresh insights to the passages which illuminate them, their comments have something of the feel of Oxbridge where there is leisure for scholarly discussion distanced from the pressing concerns of the gospel, which gives them a very different feel from the urgency of Gutierrez's writing.

Ideally, have both of these alongside you as you prepare and you will benefit from their contrasting approaches. If you can only afford one, and your concern is mission, go for the Gutierrez. You will find yourself profoundly challenged and stirred into action as well as becoming better informed.

Chris Peck

Chris Peck is Director of Development for Mission in the Diocese of Liverpool.

Mysterious Messengers: A Course on Hebrew Prophecy from Amos onwards

by **John Eaton (SCM 1997; ISBN 0-334-02706-3; 214pp; £12.95)**

It is easy to write an introductory book about the Hebrew prophets. I have rows of them on my shelves. Much less easy is it to relate them to everyday church life, and to make the prophets accessible for today's Christian readership. John Eaton's aim is avowedly to bring home the wonder of the prophetic literature to non-specialists, and this book arose not out of the lecture-room, where he has lived for the past years, but out of a series he prepared for his local Open Learning Centre.

The scholarship is undeniably there but gently concealed. The aim is communicability. So despite the daunting task of touching on everyone from Amos to Daniel, he restricts himself to a chapter of a mere fifteen pages each on such giants as Isaiah and Jeremiah. The minnows get even less and are lumped together in groups. Every chapter begins with a page entitled "The Voice of..." and quotes a sample of typical verses from the prophet in question. He then talks us through the contents, feeding in background material in a digestible fashion, and from time to time popping in exercises for the reader.

As an exercise in engaging the reader this certainly works, and is helped by the layout of the page, with occasional boxes supplying additional information drawn from archaeology

or from other writing from the ancient Near East. I found it most appealing and despite having spent many years myself in teaching the Old Testament, there was a great deal I learnt from this approach and for which I am grateful.

I give the book high marks for content and usability. For private study, group work, at sixth form and student level, and in the local church, this is a refreshing approach to the prophets. But there is still much the reader or preacher has to do to bring all this into the present day. We are given no instant applications, no great relevancies – and for this I am thankful. Application must come out of a proper understanding of the text and context, and that is precisely what John Eaton gives his readers. How this relates to the contemporary task of making the prophets credible and applicable to situations the churches face today is a task which we still have to do.

John B Taylor

The Rt Revd John B Taylor was Bishop of St Albans from 1980 to 1996. He is President of Bible Society.

The Faith of the Managers: When Management Becomes Religion

by **Stephen Pattison (Cassell 1998; ISBN 0-304-70144-0; 188pp; £12.95)**

Somewhere in one of his writings, G.K. Chesterton ridicules Freud for being so concerned with sex. His hero is beer-obsessed: he sees beer everywhere. Things are in the shape of a beer glass or brown with a white top. Pattison's book reminds me of this story. He sees managers everywhere. There is a new religious faith called "managerialism", complete with a set of assumptions, beliefs, practices and gurus, the high priests of the new faith. Although he claims he is not knocking managers, for him the modern culture of management is malign. The trouble is, however, if we replace the word "management" with some other notion, much of what he writes would remain true. The professions, for example, are susceptible. The law, education, medicine – all have their own assumptions, beliefs and practices which, to some degree are beyond criticism. The most interesting aspect of the book is the way in which he seeks to apply his theological training to develop a critique of management. This is an unusual perspective and creates interesting interactions between two disciplines. He advo-

cates that all managers should become theologically aware and use a theological critique to examine their behaviour.

But I do not think it works. In spite of disclaimers, much of the book reads like an attack. What is more, as Pattison himself notes, one's definition of religion is as crucial to such an argument as the definition of management. Both can be difficult to define precisely. His definition is taken from Geertz, a cultural anthropologist (another discipline with its own religion?): as (a) a symbol of symbols which acts to (b) establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men (*sic*) by (c) formulating conceptions of general order and existence and (d) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (e) the moods and motivation seem uniquely realistic. But ingeniously Pattison writes "There are many aspects of social life which could be described as religious in these terms". Quite so. The book is an interesting read and has several insights. However, it would not be helpful to ministers as they seek to devise ways to manage churches that match both the task of the Church and the implicit criticism that the gospel makes of every human system.

Wesley Carr

The Very Revd Dr Wesley Carr is Dean of Westminster. He has written extensively on the nature and practice of the ordained ministry, and is the editor of SPCK's New Library of Pastoral Care. His latest book is A Handbook of Pastoral Studies (SPCK).

Down to Earth

by Donald Reeves (Mowbray 1997; ISBN 0-264-67460; 196pp; £6.99)

Let me come clean from the start. I began my ordained ministry as one of the author's curates in a housing estate parish in South London. Whether he would now lump me with those bishops whom he castigates as "more like chief executives of a shrinking business than spiritual leaders" I don't know!

Donald Reeves traces his own spiritual journey, very much a love-hate relationship with the institutional church, and focuses on those issues which have made his present ministry at St James, Piccadilly, famous and sometimes notorious. This is mission on the edge, seeking to connect with, and learn from, those who do not conform easily or thoughtlessly to conventional religion.

We have here both a call for the world to set the agenda, but also

the denunciation of a Church which has too easily followed the ways of the world. The Church, he says, has colluded with the fantasies of a consumer paradise for all, and made too many concessions to the existing culture. Faced with violence against the poor, and women in particular, and surrounded by all the signs of a planet being destroyed, Christians have often just reinforced the "techniques of avoidance".

And yet, says Reeves, at its best the Christian faith communicates a story which provides meaning and makes sense in the face of guilt, wickedness, suffering, death, joy, grace and hope. And so, to motivate and sharpen the imagination and our knowledge of God, he begs us to listen to the voices from the margin (and liberation theology), to receive insights from Judaism and the Holocaust, and to rediscover a renewed sense of ourselves in relation to nature and creation.

He is attempting, he says, to sketch the contours of a radical church. It must address the loss of "the public" in our contemporary culture. It must free both women and men from patriarchy. It must seek a more positive evaluation of sexuality, desire and intimacy as paths to holiness and God. Among the ways forward he cites the rediscovery of the Bible, which has come to play a new and fresh part in his own preaching, and the importance of ritual – although his linking of this to the New Age movement will worry some.

In many ways, Donald Reeves is a child of the Sixties and "South Bank Religion". Like many of us, his personal pilgrimage was profoundly shaped when, as he says in this book, John Robinson shifted the image of God from a transcendent father figure in the sky to the knowledge of "the other". *Down to Earth* is his plea that the Church should go on to embrace the insights of feminism and ecology.

At a practical level, he sees a key to the future (apart from the creation of "alternative households") in the breaking down of the bureaucratic and hierarchical Church of England by forcing parishes to become self-supporting, setting their own priorities and paying their own priest. His hope is that this would liberate a new lay movement, focussing on the real issues and cries which this book so rightly highlights. My fear is that the result would be an increase of the kind of consumerism and privatisation which the book so rightly castigates.

Michael Doe

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