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entirely reasonable: 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father' — and Jesus's response correspondingly unreasonable: 'Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God'. The burial of the dead was a sacred duty; hence his attitude seems extreme to the point of fanaticism.

It would be wrong for us to try and water down such a saying. But the commentaries make it clear that possibly the command is not as stark as it appears. 'Let me go and bury my father' could be understood as 'Let me stay at home until my (perhaps ailing) father has died'. In other words, it may be that we are not to think of the father's corpse actually lying in the house as the man speaks. (What was he doing out and about if that was the case?)

But whether or not that is so, Jesus's words convey a powerful sense of the urgency of the task ahead. It is such as to overturn the normal conventions and duties of society. If God really is to come first, there are times when agonizingly difficult decisions have to be made. And, even making allowance for the different cultural setting in which we live, the same may be true for us too.

The third man (v. 61) offers to follow Jesus, but asks permission first to 'say good-bye to my family'. Again, Jesus's riposte is uncompromising: 'No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God'. There is another echo here of the Elijah story, though Jesus in this instance comes across as more severe than his counterpart; the Old Testament prophet acceded to such a request (1 Kgs 19:20).

However we may seek to soften the impact of Jesus's words, there can be no doubt about the essence of his teaching: *God's kingdom demands absolute priority*. Following Jesus is no game, no pastime, no mere icing on the cake of life. This is life — and it is hard, rugged, raw. Is the weakness of the modern church to be explained partly by its tendency to play down this truth for fear of putting potential converts off? How can we have failed so dramatically to grasp the clear teaching of the one we profess to obey! Even on the level of human psychology, it is a fact that people respect the call to a challenge; a call to a comfortable and conventional life holds out little appeal. 'Take up your cross and follow me', said Jesus. By what right do we suppress or dilute this scandalous word?

In a nutshell, what Jesus is talking about in these encounters is *conflicting loyalties*. If we imagine that we can be Christians without at some time or other experiencing such conflicts, then we are living in a fool's paradise. They come, as they say, with the territory. To borrow the words of one commentator: 'The most difficult choices in life are not between the good and the evil, but between the good and the best'.

Jesus demands of us a decision. Yes, it must be made with our eyes wide open. But made it must be. The decision to be made is clear: *to follow him*. The time to make it is also clear: *now*. How about it?

Two Contrasting Approaches to John's Gospel

Maurice Casey, Reader in Early Jewish and Christian Studies at Nottingham University, is well known for his many learned contributions to New Testament scholarship. In *Is John's Gospel True?* (Routledge, 1996, £50.00, pp. xii + 268, ISBN 0-415-14630-5) he offers an original study of John's Gospel. His basic message is this: the Fourth Gospel is inaccurate historically; it misrepresents the teaching of Jesus, is offensively anti-Jewish, and has fostered anti-semitism. It consists largely of 'inaccurate stories and words wrongly attributed to people'. Ordinary church members expect their sacred texts to be true: John's Gospel is 'profoundly untrue' (p. 229). These are serious charges, which deserve to be taken seriously.

We begin with the question of historical accuracy. Responding vigorously to conservative scholars (e.g., Morris, Carson and Blomberg), and some not-quite-so-conservative (e.g., Dodd and John Robinson), Casey argues that John has no reliable independent sources. He is wrong in his dating of the Temple Cleansing and of Jesus's crucifixion; and if he should prove to be right over the length of Jesus's ministry, this is due not to genuine ancient traditions, but to secondary developments. John omits Jesus's exorcisms, parables, and almost all his teaching on the kingdom of God. His reported dialogues (e.g., with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman) and his confrontations with 'the Jews', are unhistorical. So too is the portrayal of the Baptist's witness to Jesus as 'the lamb of God'.

In many of these matters, Casey could be right. For example, it is most unlikely that Jesus 'cleansed' the Temple twice (as maintained by Morris and Carson), and there is much to be said for preferring Mark's chronology here and in the Passion narrative. But it is hard to see for whom Casey is writing: critical scholars already acknowledge that John's Gospel offers a creative presentation of Jesus's ministry in which chronology and strict historical detail have been subordinated to theological teaching, while 'ordinary' church people who view it more naïvely are unlikely to cope with Casey's detailed and technical scholarship; conservative theological students, who might otherwise benefit from Casey's ruthless exposure of weak arguments, will be alienated by the use of terms like 'inaccurate', 'false', and 'historically spurious' in relation to a canonical Gospel.

Casey is also highly critical of John's presentation of Jesus's deity, which he sees as a 'breach of Jewish monotheism' and inherently 'anti-Jewish'. Here again many critical scholars consider it improbable that Jesus

went round claiming his own pre-existence, calling himself 'the Son', or uttering the 'I am' sayings in the form given by John. Whether we view John's acknowledgment of Jesus's divinity as a 'fatal step' with baleful repercussions (Casey, p. 2) or the climax to a movement in early Christian theology in which Jesus is recognized as Messiah, Saviour, and Lord, depends on our own faith-commitment rather than objective evidence. Casey argues that both John's 'high' christology and his 'subordinationist' passages were hammered out in a Christian community with 'gentile self-identification' in the context of bitter controversies with Jews, following a ban on Christians from Jewish meetings c. 90 CE. We may agree that John's use of *aposunagōgos* seems anachronistic, but there remain many problems about the dating, nature, and extent of the so-called 'ban'. One must remember that even the existence of the Johannine 'community' is a scholarly hypothesis, not a fact. The historical circumstances in which John's Gospel came to be written remain conjectural.

And what of the charge of anti-semitism or anti-Jewishness? Casey rightly criticizes attempts to explain away John's use of *hoi Ioudaioi* as meaning 'the Judeans' or 'the Jewish leaders'. In the Fourth Gospel this phrase, which normally denotes 'the Jewish people', is used as cipher for Jesus's opponents – for those who fail to come to Christian faith. It effectively distances Jesus and his disciples, who were historically Jews, from their own people. In the wake of the holocaust, and in the light of the church's appalling treatment of Jews in earlier centuries, this usage must now seem distasteful and (to put it mildly) unfortunate. But the Fourth Evangelist cannot be held responsible for all the evils perpetrated by later Christians. He wrote in accordance with conventions of his day, and many other early Christian writings share his negative attitudes. What is needed now is a frank recognition of these facts.

Not all the book is polemic. Two especially interesting chapters are those on 'Words: Content and Style' and 'Authorship and Pseudepigraphy'. In the former Casey cogently criticizes the hypothesis of an Aramaic original (or substratum) for the Gospel, and suggests that many of John's semitisms may be due to bilingual speakers over-using familiar constructions. His hypothesis that the Gospel originated in a circle which spoke a sub-dialect of (semitizing) Greek deserves to be further developed. Casey plausibly argues that this could have occurred in Ephesus, where there was a substantial Jewish community. The Gospel's link with Ephesus is about all that he accepts from the church traditions which ascribed authorship to John, the son of Zebedee. These Casey attributes to speculation about 'the disciple whom Jesus loved'. He takes this figure neither as one of the Twelve, nor as a real, later leader of the Johannine community, but as a symbol for true disciples.

There is much in the book to challenge and stimulate. I found the analogy drawn between John and Jewish 'rewritten histories' (e.g., Chronicles and Jubilees) illuminating, and the statistical tables contrasting Johannine and Synoptic vocabulary impressive. There are individual passages on which Casey casts light (e.g., 3:36c, where he suggests that we have a tiny fragment of the Baptist's preaching on judgment). But there are also places where his interpretation could be disputed (e.g., 1:34, where he reads 'chosen one of God', and his high sacramentalist understanding of 3:3–5 and 6:51–58, which he sees as excluding Jews from salvation). The book was rather spoilt for me by its polemical tone. I felt it needed a proper discussion of method and presuppositions; the final chapter, 'What is Truth?' lacks philosophical depth. The indexes are also inadequate, and there is a mix-up in the word-order of the Aramaic sentences on pp. 95f (partly caused by the problem of setting texts in an original script, which should read from right to left, divided over two lines).

Casey's main achievement is to raise issues which Christian scholars need to face – not only 'anti-Jewishness' of the more obvious sort, but the whole question of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, with its 'replacement theology' (found not just in John, but also in other New Testament writings, especially Hebrews). John's Gospel may be 'untrue' in one sense but profoundly true in another: it does, however, need more honest and sensitive exegesis, both to bring out what is good and salvific within it and to enable those not expert in 'historical Jesus studies' to regard it as something other than a literal account of what Jesus of Nazareth and his fellow-Jews actually said and did.

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Of considerable importance for all who try to engage with the Fourth Gospel is the new commentary by Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1997, £25.00/\$42.00, pp. 719, ISBN 0-8028-0453-5). Seeking to be an exposition of the Gospel as it is, it eschews discussion of many introductory questions to concentrate upon the author's explanation of the Fourth Gospel's 'peculiar character'. Its distinctiveness, and the large measure of interpretation to be found in its pages, is best accounted for by seeing it as the work of an eyewitness who builds on the tradition with the freedom of one who stands at its source. Using traditions, he is nevertheless able to be untraditional. He focuses everything upon the Person of Christ. His is christological reflection which is influenced by controversy with the Jews. Though interpreting Jesus, since he sees the glory in the descent of the Son, history is not 'pushed back, blurred, spiritualized or even simply fabricated'. He does not make what they have seen of

Jesus's earthly glory into a vehicle for the expression of his heavenly glory. 'What moves the evangelist to write is not his theological ability to construct a grand christology from traditional material that he could not verify. It was rather the profound awareness and inspiration of having been a witness to revelation.' His personal experience and his call to witness together produce what we now have in his gospel. 'We cannot retreat from the story to the safe haven of his theology.'

Ridderbos therefore expounds the gospel as one man's witness to what he saw. The evangelist's comments on what motivated Jesus tell of Jesus's actual motivations. Conflicts with the Jews were located in the life of Jesus himself. The signs are miraculous events rather than parabolic stories or symbolic actions. 3:31–36 is a recapitulatory epilogue joined by the evangelist to the earlier dialogues but derived from what Jesus revealed concerning himself. As a word of Jesus, it is questionable whether in 8:59 the reference is ontological: it is rather referring to the fact that he is the one sent by the Father as the fulfilment of Abraham's hopes.

Though in incidents like those of the Paralyse Man and Nicodemus Ridderbos leaves some room for a representation of types of responses to Jesus, he has little time for that position which sees the Fourth Gospel as reflecting stages in the life of the community which possessed it. It does not witness to later conflicts with the Jews, tension in the community, or secret believers. Such 'two-level' hypotheses are to be eschewed. In the same way, chapter six neither reflects nor expresses the sacramental theology of the Johannine church.

This concentration upon the period of Jesus to the exclusion of later reflection does, I think, make for an impoverished exposition of John which does not allow the evangelist's insight the free rein that it deserves. Ridderbos does, however, make some valuable points which exponents of the 'two-level' approach to John will have to take seriously. His treatment of Nicodemus and his discussion of chapter 8 for instance must be met. Whether his concept of an untraditional witness really accounts for the peculiar character of the Fourth Gospel is very doubtful. He fails to consider John's distinctiveness at points like the arrest of Jesus. He does need to take more seriously the actual 'factual' differences from the Synoptics. These might rather encourage a belief in a very free, and theologically deliberate, reshaper of the tradition. One cannot allow a note in 21:24 to overrule all other considerations.

In short, Ridderbos must be considered by all who approach John from a different starting point, for he raises legitimate questions. Not to be used as an initial introduction to John, he is best recommended as signalling an amber light to those whose understanding of this work leads them on other tracks.

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Book Reviews

HELPS TO UNDERSTAND THE PROPHETS

People coming fresh to the Bible and reading the prophetic books of the Old Testament are often puzzled by what they read and at a loss as to how they relate to everyday life in the twentieth or twenty-first century. Any book, therefore, which will help them to begin to read with understanding is to be welcomed. John Eaton has written a very simple book which should go some way towards this: *Mysterious Messengers: A Course on Hebrew Prophecy from Amos Onwards* (SCM Press, 1997, £12.95, pp. 214, ISBN 0-334-02706-3). After four chapters dealing with prophecy in general he then deals with each book in turn. At the end of each chapter there are suggestions of things to do or questions to answer which are meant to encourage the reader to read the books again and study what they say. There is little here for those who are already familiar with the prophets, but for beginners in, say, church study groups it should prove very useful, except that it is a bit pricey for the purpose.

Reading this book one could gain the impression that there is nothing too complicated about the prophetic books. Understanding and interpretation seem relatively easy and straightforward. As those who have pursued their studies further will know, nothing could be further from the truth. How to read the prophets in a way which makes them useful and relevant for today is a complex and much debated matter. Scholars have come at the books from many different angles and this is especially true at the present time when insights from literary study, sociology and anthropology are brought to bear on them. It is good, therefore, to have some guidance in this maze. Jehoshua Gitay has edited a collection of essays by eight different scholars, four of whom are from America, two from South Africa, one from Germany and one from Britain (R. E. Clements): *Prophecy and Prophets* (SBL, Scholars Press, 1997, \$39.95, pb. \$24.95, pp. 174, ISBN 0-7885-0317-0, pb. -0316-2). The essays are very diverse both in subject matter and in style. Some are relatively easy to read, others more difficult. As with most collections of this sort, some essays will appeal to one person, others to another. Some apply their insights to particular books: Jeremiah, Isaiah, Joel; others deal with wider issues of a more general nature: the function of the prophet, the idea of charisma, the influence of ancient Near Eastern parallels, the artistic representation of the prophet and his words. It is not possible to summarize such a book or to offer a critical appraisal of each essay. Suffice it to say that the book takes us way beyond the approach to the prophetic books which was common, say,