

So, what is the NT today?

Lionel Wickham is impressed by this scholar's answers

Is Scripture Still Holy? Coming of age with the New Testament
A. E. Harvey
 Eerdmans £14.99
 (978-0-8028-6808-4)
 Church Times Bookshop £13.50

A GOOD question! Things can stop being what they once were, and scripture could be one of them. After a fashion, of course, in this fine book — so much more illuminating, not to say even important, than its slender dimensions might give you to think — it is provided with an answer.

A “tentative” answer, Anthony Harvey calls it: one that attends to “some considerations which should

be taken more seriously by scholars than is usually the case”. It may be “tentative”, but is also, I can report, positive. He has delivered it without footnotes or bibliography; and the word “eschatology”, a sure sign that the conversation has taken off to where you might not feel able to go, does not appear in the index of subjects.

The index of biblical references mentions only the New Testament, because written here are some things that a specialist New Testament scholar of great experience and, I would add, of refined judgement particularly wants to say now about that strange and all but literally fascinating, or “bewitching”, bundle of documents.

His thoughts do not need footnotes or bibliography. They surely and certainly arise from long study. His readers will give their respectful attention, conscious that, at the drop of a hat on any particular point, he could furnish a long list of scholars who have or have not thought the same as he; and that for his present purpose such listing is pretty well irrelevant: he is writing what he thinks to be the case.

There are seven chapters. The first, “Coming of Age”, focuses the theme, and has all the trickiest ideas in the book: what elsewhere in an old-fashioned handbook of doctrine you would find under the headings “Godhead”, “Providence”, and “Revelation”. Scripture is holy in so far as it “mediates some moment of experience in the past when the transcendent God in whom we believe intervened in the universe he

had created”; scripture is authoritative in so far as it is historically reliable, morally relevant, and nourishes the imagination. The rest of the book is about how it continues to fulfil these conditions.

Chapter Two, “Checking the History”, looks first at Acts, and gives reasons for judging it to be “true to the facts” according to the standards and methods of the historiography of its author’s time; the “Jesus tradition” of the Gospels is consistent and was carefully preserved, its integral miraculous element not incredible.

Chapter Three, “Evaluating John”, allows for the differences from the other Gospels and as complement to them, but concludes that a negative assessment of its witness is not called for.

Chapter Four, “Seeking a Moral”, deals with New Testament ethical teaching. Chapter Five, “Questing for Jesus”, makes “Messiah” the dominating category for interpretation of Jesus’ role. Chapter Six, “Reckoning with Paul”, does just that; and the final chapter, “Supplying ‘If’”, is about interpreting the New Testament understanding of ultimate and imminent divine restoration.

This book pursues the historical method. History provides no spiritual or metaphysical truths. It describes how they came to be entertained. I commend this reliable description. It deserves pondering on.

The Revd Dr Lionel Wickham is a former lecturer in the Faculty of Divinity at Cambridge.



Pietà: The Lamentation, c. 1480, Castilla-La Mancha (Guadalajar), Spain, once the centre of an altarpiece in the Benedictine monastery at Sopetrán, north-east of Madrid, is one of the beautiful medieval artefacts displayed in a 75-year-old branch of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Cloisters, celebrated in a handsome and scholarly new paperback guide. See caption overleaf for full details

Frank exchange on Jesus

Richard Harries finds a healthy openness about differences

Soundings in the Religion of Jesus: Perspectives and methods in Jewish and Christian scholarship
Bruce Chilton, Anthony Le Donne, and Jacob Neusner, editors
 Fortress Press £32.99 (978-0-8006-9801-0)
 Church Times Bookshop £29.70

JESUS was a Jew, and can only be understood within the Jewish context of his time. That truth, so long ignored, is now taken for granted by all scholars of the New Testament. When Geza Vermes wrote his famous book *Jesus the Jew*, he assumed that objective scholarship would show us the truth of Jesus. What differentiates this book, written by distinguished Jewish and Christian scholars, is an awareness that scholarship is never as objective as we think it is; for we bring our religious assumptions to bear, and, furthermore, there is a proper loyalty to the religious community of which we are a part.

The result is that the contributors to this book are not shy of being critical of one each other’s evaluation of the evidence, where they think it is justified. This is itself a sign of how Jewish-Christian dialogue has moved on from simply trying to find commonalities to an honest facing of the differences. Indeed, they argue that it is in facing really difficult texts and issues that future dialogue is likely to be most fruitful.

This trenchant honesty is particularly marked in James D. G. Dunn’s response to Eyan Regal’s understanding of why Jesus was sentenced to death. Dunn argues that Regal has failed to take into account the clear messianic implications of Jesus’s teaching. But

this is followed by the complaint of Bruce Chilton and Jacob Neusner, echoing Amy-Jill Levine, that this criticism is itself a reflection of the fact that the terms of the debate are too often set by Christian rather than Jewish priorities.

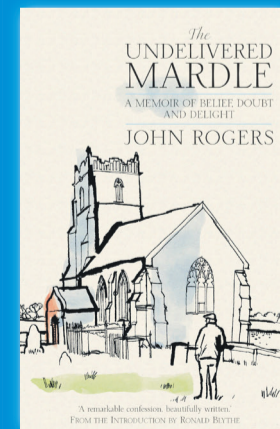
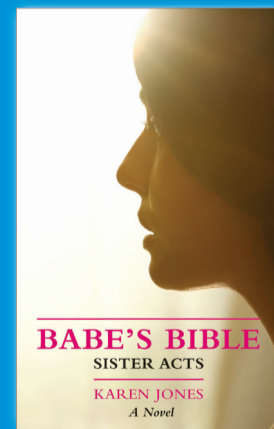
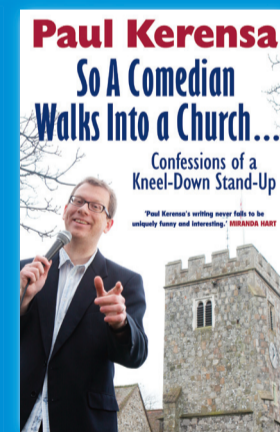
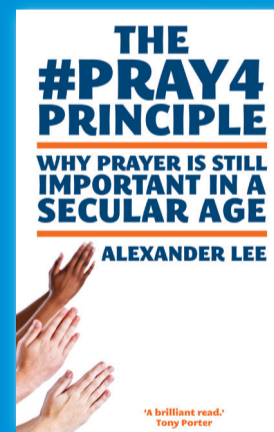
A basic assumption behind this book is that good scholarly work on the historical Jesus can contribute to the wider issue of Jewish-Christian relations. So, as well as discussions of particular passages in the New Testament, there are essays on New Testament interpretation in the periods from the Reformation onwards, including the Nazi period, and a setting out of Jewish and Christian truth-claims.

A further assumption of the book is that a generative approach to the scriptures must be taken, so that we see Jewish scriptures as unfolding from the first to the seventh century, not as something static, and similarly with the New Testament. For example, it is with this in mind that Joel Lohr argues that Matthew 25.31-46 is best seen against the background of Jewish ideas of judgement at the end of the first century, as well as Matthew’s understanding of the mission to the Gentiles. This is a story specifically about the judgement of the Gentiles (not the whole world), with an ethical criterion similar to the Jewish idea that they will be judged by the Noahide code.

It would be good to have more books of this kind focusing on particular texts, Jewish as well as Christian. It would be helpful if they could distinguish historic anti-Judaism from anti-Semitism more sharply than this book does. From a Christian point of view, one issue that remains to be discussed, as Dunn argues, is how developed views of Jesus (the Christ of faith) can be fitted into the Jewish context of the time, and how, if they can, this might contribute to constructive Jewish-Christian dialogue.

The Rt Revd Lord Harries of Pentregarth is an honorary professor of King’s College, London. He is the author of After the Evil: Christianity and Judaism in the shadow of the Holocaust (OUP).

Great reads for Easter!



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