

Review of Neville, David J. (ed.), *The Bible, Justice and Public Theology*, The Bible in the Modern World, 63; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014

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THIS BOOK IS A WELCOME CONTRIBUTION to a neglected field, namely thinking through the relationship between the church's public action and biblical texts. Public theology is focused less on the interests of the church and more on the interests of society and the wider world (to borrow Duncan Forrester's lapidary formulation). It is, as Christopher Marshall expresses it in his contribution, 'essentially a theology of society, a society in which the state is one institution among many, not the all comprehending and society-constituting reality it is often assumed to be' (p. 29). Such a description would also fit how the church is spoken of by public theologians. The church, in public theology, is not to out-narrate secular understandings of the world, but to contribute to public discussions with the aim of building up the common good. It must offer something distinctive, yet this offering must be readily understood by a society that can no longer be assumed to be biblically literate. A key conundrum faced by public theology is how to speak the language of the gospel in a public square that often wants religious actors to trade in their distinctive language for the sake of wider social harmony. 'What is lost in translation?' is frequently asked by those vexed about the church being forced to dilute its motivating convictions in order to negotiate some attention in the metaphorical public square. 'Is the Bible not a conversation stopper?', might be asked back by the reader of Richard Rorty. It is into this fraught (and well-rehearsed) debate that this book attempts to clear some new ground. The aim of the different essays is, in the words of the editor, to reflect on 'the challenge of relating biblical imperatives to public concerns within a pluralist social context' (p. 5).

The collection of a dozen essays arose out of a conference held in Canberra, Australia (a country where much interesting work on the Bible and public theology *has* been written) that honoured the work of Christopher Marshall. In his publications Marshall has sought to bring New Testament texts into dialogue with theory in restorative justice and in some way all the essays attempt to engage with Marshall's work, especially his interpretation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Contributors all hail from New Zealand or Australia. A few of the essays are worth highlighting in what follows.

David Neville sets out Christopher Marshall's contribution to the topic in hand, particularly through his most recent book *Compassionate Justice*. He offers a taxonomy of recent attempts to bring the Bible and public theological questions into relation, along with recent discussions of justice. The essay serves as a useful introduction to the volume. Jione Havea presents a contextual reading of Luke 10.25-37, based around his experiences of reading this text with prisoners. In line with other contributions, and indeed with contextual theology generally, the parable is seen as having a potential energy, awaiting activation from engaged readers. The 'meaning' of Luke 10.25-37 is

something that ‘happens’ in the encounter between text and the particular reader, in Havea’s case those who ‘know what it means to be dragged and discarded, to be seen but not noticed’ (p. 63).

Jeanette Matthews focuses not on parables (a major focus of the volume), but on the biblical prophets as theologians who represent their message performatively, through their bodies, acts, and personalities. Jeremiah, Ezekiel, or Isaiah, are seen as embodying counter-cultural acts in their person, with the aim of shocking their audience into new ways of action or envisioning their world. Imaginative readers of the text in our time are charged not with doing exactly what the prophets did in their time, but in acting in an analogous, counter-cultural manner, with the aim of re-directing public attention. Some particular examples of how biblical prophetic behavior might resonate in our time are given. One pastor from New Zealand led a campaign opposing the selling off by his local council of social housing. Having exhausted the usual lobbying devices of letter writing, petitions, and advocacy he re-directed a decisive council meeting by stripping to his underwear and likening his condition to the tenants of the social housing. His behavior was an unwitting echo of Isaiah’s removal of his clothes and sandals for a period of three years, an act that expressed Isaiah’s willingness to undergo the same humiliation as the political captives of his time.

Tackling some of the theoretical issues that underpin public theology Philip J. Mathews reminds us in his essay of the distinction between ‘thin’ and ‘thick’ levels of agreement (drawing on Michael Walzer’s work). It is possible to work with others in pursuit of justice despite having different motivating principles (such as biblical texts). Moral pluralism, Mathews reminds us, is different from moral relativism. Moral relativists say that there are no moral universals. Moral pluralists hold that there are moral universals, but they are derived from a diverse set of philosophical and theological traditions. In this context, it is possible to see how the Bible can contribute non-coercively to public projects.

The characteristics of the parables—their location in the everyday life of their original hearers, their narrative construction, and their open-ended quality—make them ripe for public theology. In this way the book alights upon one of the more promising parts of the biblical text. The book will chiefly be appreciated by those with an interest in public and practical theology, namely those theologies that seek to relate Christianity dynamically to present contexts. Theologians (and biblical scholars) who become a little queasy at the ‘reader-response’ orientation favoured by public/practical theology will end the book with the same set of questions with which they started.

Edited books can never be expected to represent an entirely united front—the offering by Lorenzen, especially, seems to be written in a different key from its fellows—but as a whole the book makes a consistent contribution to seeing how (in the words of Helen-Ann Hartley) ‘the potential for meaning to unfold over time creates space around the text for deeper understandings to emerge’ (p. 100). What this book does not offer is a sustained *theology* of the Bible’s life in extra-ecclesial contexts. That is a task for another volume, one suitably provoked by this present collection of essays.



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