

Latimer Trust

Monthly Reading List – December 2020

This is a summary of recent books read by Martin Davie, compiling his evaluations and the commendations of others. In this edition:

Author	Title	Martin's opinion
Nigel Biggar	<i>What's Wrong with Rights?</i>	Important study on the concept of human rights. It is easy to view the existence of rights as obvious and unproblematic. However, Biggar highlights the difficulties in the use of rights language and the importance of talking about moral obligation and virtues.
Craig Bartholomew	<i>The God Who Acts in History: The Significance of Sinai</i>	Not for beginners or the intellectually fainthearted. Argues against current scepticism about God's action at Mt Sinai, and for Exodus text as a continuous and coherent narrative. Affirmation of historicity of Sinai event is vital and can be achieved with intellectual integrity.
Stephen T Davis and Eric Yang	<i>An Introduction to Christian Philosophical Theology: Faith Seeking Understanding</i>	Helpful, user-friendly guide to key issues in Christian theology from a philosophical perspective. Enables theological students and educated ministers and lay people to assess issues and ideas for themselves. Wholeheartedly recommended.
Mark Regenerus	<i>The Future of Christian Marriage</i>	Important piece of research which helps readers understand the decline in traditional forms of heterosexual marriage and suggests how the situation can be addressed.
Fred Sanders and Scott Swain	<i>Retrieving Eternal Generation</i>	Important collection of essays on the doctrine of the Son's eternal generation. Highly recommended to students of theology.

Nigel Biggar, *What's Wrong with Rights?* OUP, ISBN 978-0-1988-6197-3, £30.00 (e edition also available)

Overview:

Since the proclamation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations in 1948, the concept of human rights has become widely accepted as the basis for both morality and law. However, there are still voices that question the concept, and these voices are not new, but go back at least as far as criticisms made of the use of the idea of rights during the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century.

Nigel Biggar is the Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology at Oxford. In his new book, *What's Wrong with Rights?*, which has grown out of his previous studies of the ethics of euthanasia, war, and reconciliation after civil conflict, he joins his voice to those who have raised questions about the concept of human rights.

The book is in two parts. In the first part, Biggar traces the history of what he calls the 'sceptical tradition' about rights since 1776. In the second part he then adds his own critique.

In his own critique, Biggar supports the idea that because human beings are one species, there are claims which we can make upon one another that have universal status. He thus rejects the idea put forward by some critics that the belief that such claims exist is simply a Western liberal invention and that such claims should not be viewed as having universal applicability.

However, Biggar holds that we run into problems when we express what is morally desirable in terms of these claims in the language of rights. This is because, as he sees it, the language of rights only make sense when rights are legally codified in a particular society, apply to a specified set of people, and when there are those who are responsible for their enforcement. In his words, 'the paradigm of a right is positively legal, granted by law-makers in a particular society, and commanding the support of social institutions.'

This means that the idea that there is a right to subsistence, for example, is problematic since there are no clear answers to the issues of who has the legal obligation to feed the world's poor and who has the authority to enforce this obligation.

Biggar also argues that the steady extension of the concept of rights has led to an improper transfer of power from elected politicians to unelected judges. In his view, complex and controversial moral questions about matters such as abortion, assisted suicide, or the treatment of prisoners and refugees, are increasingly being decided by the courts on the basis of the judges' interpretation of the implications of the existence of rights, whereas the proper place to decide such issues is in an elected Parliament.

However, for Biggar, the fundamental problem is that the idea of rights has increasingly crowded out the importance of virtues. As a Christian, he writes:

...it is obvious that there is much more to right than rights. A society that cares only about protecting the rights of its citizens may end up sacrificing charity, generosity, prudence, forbearance and forgiveness. What happens when legal rights and moral virtues collide?

Whereas we have no trouble at all in confidently asserting our own legal rights or those of others, we become diffident or tongue-tied in talking about duties and virtues and moral law. Rights-talk does not embarrass us, while talk about what is morally right does.

For Biggar, we need to tone down the assertion of rights and focus on the cultivation of virtues instead. Rather than focussing on claiming legal rights we ought instead to focus on our moral obligation to treat others in a virtuous fashion.

Martin's opinion:

Like his previous book on just war theory, Biggar's study of the concept of human rights is an important study that deserves to be read by all who are interested in the subject. In the contemporary Western world, it is all too easy to view the existence of rights as obvious and unproblematic. Biggar helpfully reminds us of the difficulties and dangers

of the use of rights language and the importance of affirming the language of moral obligation and virtue alongside the language of rights.

Commendations:

Robin Lowin writes:

'What's Wrong with Rights? is a finely crafted review of the history of rights and an insightful assessment of contemporary discussions across a range of disciplines and contexts. Nigel Biggar raises important basic questions for theology, ethics, and law, and this book will reshape our ways of thinking about rights in all three fields.'

Craig Bartholomew, *The God Who Acts in History: The Significance of Sinai*, Eerdmans, ISBN 978-0-80287-4-672, £22.17 (e edition also available)

Overview:

Craig Bartholomew is an Old Testament scholar who is the director of the Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics, at Tyndale House, Cambridge. He has written numerous books and commentaries on the Old Testament and his latest book, which was a result of time spent as the Senior Research Fellow of the Herzl Institute in Jerusalem.

As Bartholomew explains in his Preface, the theme of his book is 'divine action in history' and the purpose of his book is to address a 'puzzle' about why both Jewish and Christian writers are unwilling to affirm the historicity of the biblical account of God's action in meeting with the people of Israel at Mount Sinai as recorded in Exodus 19-24. In Bartholomew's words:

Jewish authors in particular, but also Christians, assert the fundamental importance of the Sinai event as foundational and generative for Israel and the HB/OT. At the same time many are reluctant to affirm the historicity of this event or at least retain what one of my readers of this manuscript refers to as a 'prudential agnosticism.' This is the puzzle: how can an event that is so formative, so foundational and so generative have no basis in divine action in history, and perhaps turn out to be an imaginary projection onto the past by later Israelites? The aim of this book is to explore closely the reasons for such reluctance, to see if they withstand careful evaluation, and, if not, to propose an alternative approach to the Sinai event.

In response to this puzzle Bartholomew's book contains four key elements:

One is to identify the reasons why so many doubt the historicity of Sinai, ranging from the state of the text in Exodus 19-40 to philosophical and theological assumptions. A second is to show that such reasons are not *defeaters* for affirming the historicity of Sinai. This could be thought of as a ground-clearing exercise. So many elements in modern approaches to Sinai go unnoticed that this is an essential part of the argument. A third, however, is to show that there are rigorous and rich alternatives to the threads that constitute the cord of those who deny the history city of Sinai or agnostic about it. A fourth is to bring these constructive alternatives together in a reading of the Sinai event that affirms its historicity with appropriate nuance and is theologically fecund.

The shape of the book is that Bartholomew first of all sets out the modern sceptical view of the historicity of the biblical account of the events at Sinai by looking at the work of the Jewish writer Benjamin Sommer, who is clear about his scepticism and the theological reasons for it. Bartholomew then traces the roots of Sommer's theological assumptions in the work of the Jewish writer Maimonides, the medieval Christian theologian Thomas Aquinas, and the philosophers Baruch Spinoza and Immanuel Kant. Bartholomew argues that their theological and philosophical approaches are flawed, that a better way of understanding God and his action in the world is provided by the Jewish writer Judah Halevi and the Christian theologian, Colin Gunton, and that when one reads the text of Exodus in the lights of their theological approaches, and with a proper appreciation of the narrative structure of the text, the arguments that it is a late and composite text that does not bear witness to God's action in history can be seen to be unpersuasive. His overall conclusion is that:

...the reasons for doubting the historicity of Sinai are not persuasive and that there are very good reasons for affirming it, so that scholars like myself and many others are rationally justified in affirming that Sinai happened.

Martin's opinion:

It has to be said at the outset that this book is not a book for beginners in theology or biblical studies, or for the intellectually fainthearted. There is a lot of detailed theological and philosophical material that many readers will simply find impenetrable. However, those who have studied theology and biblical studies, and are willing to persist in working through the text will find that in the end they reap a rich reward. This is because Bartholomew succeeds in showing both that the current scepticism about Sinai is rooted in an unbiblical understanding of God and his activity, and that the Exodus text can be read as a continuous and coherent narrative that fits well into the historical setting the Bible gives to it. It is vital that Christian theologians affirm the historicity of the Sinai event since its

historical character is a fundamental part of the biblical message and Bartholomew shows how they can do this with intellectual integrity.

Commendations:

The *Expository Times* review declares:

‘The Sinai narrative (Ex. 19–24) is of paramount importance within Judaism and, of course, has significance within Christianity as well. Curiously, many Jewish and Christian philosophers and theologians affirm the important of the Sinai narrative at the same time as denying its historicity. How is this stance intellectually coherent? This is the question which Bartholomew seeks to answer ... The book does provide an answer to Bartholomew’s question, and his ability to engage with such a range of philosophical, theological, and biblical scholarship is impressive.’

Stephen T Davis and Eric Yang, *An Introduction to Christian Philosophical Theology: Faith Seeking Understanding*, Zondervan, ISBN 978-0-31010-408-7, £14.99 (e and audio editions also available)

Overview:

Stephen Davis and Eric Yang are both philosophers by profession. Davis is Professor of Philosophy at Claremont McKenna College in the United States and Eric Yang is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Santa Clara University, also in the United States. However, as well as being philosophers, Davis and Yang are both Christians who use their philosophical expertise to understand and explain the truths taught by Christian theology. Their new book is a textbook for students that is designed to show them how they can do the same.

As Davis and Yang explain in their introduction, the discipline of philosophical theology 'involves employing philosophical tools while studying topics in Christian theology,' the purpose of so doing being to understand these topics more clearly in order gain a clearer view of God and his ways.

To put it another way, philosophical theology is concerned with faith seeking understanding. As they see it:

...once we start thinking about and reflecting on what we believe, a whole host of questions arise, and hence we have a faith that seeks understanding. Though we will never fully understand the mystery of God and his ways, we want to know as much as we can, just as lovers want to know as much as they can about their beloved. Lovers ask questions. If you love a sport or a particular team, then you will want to find out quite a lot about it. If you love a person, then you will want to know the details of their personality and their history. If Christians are to love God with the whole hearts, souls, minds and strength (Mark 12:30) then how much more should you want to know and understand all that you can know and understand about him? For us, the authors, our love for God is what motivated our academic and intellectual pursuits. And we are inviting you to join us. We can say from experience that our philosophical and theological reflections on these issues have not gotten in the way of our worship of God; instead, they have increased our awe and love for the God who has revealed himself to us.

Their book, they say, is intended to be:

...a user-friendly guide for those interested in asking philosophical questions about the Trinity, the incarnation, the atonement, the resurrection and other Christian doctrines. We will show what sort of contribution philosophical reasoning can bring while studying and reflecting on some of the core Christian doctrine, and we sincerely hope that this book serves as a helpful introduction to these issues and ideas.

After an opening chapter explaining in more detail the nature of philosophical theology, the subsequent chapters look in turn at revelation and Scripture, the Triune God, the incarnation, redemption and atonement, resurrection and life after death, and heaven and hell. A final chapter then looks at the three additional issues of the ascension of Christ, original sin and petitionary prayer.

In each of these chapters, Davis and Yang explore the key issues that arise in relation to the topic covered by the chapter, asking how we are to make sense of them, and evaluating the range of proposals that have been made. Thus, in the chapter on revelation and Scripture they look at why God needed to provide special revelation in Scripture to supplement the general revelation given in nature, and at how we might make sense of the truth that Scripture is both a set of human writings and a set of writings which carry God's own authority. Likewise, in the chapter on the Triune God they look at the reasons for believing in the Trinity and then evaluate the answers that have been given to the logical problem of how God can be both three and one at the same time.

Martin's opinion:

This is a very helpful book that fulfils the authors' desire to provide a user-friendly guide to thinking clearly about key issues in Christian theology using the tools that philosophical analysis provides. It is not a book that provides its readers with definitive answers about how, for example, Jesus could have both a human mind and a divine mind, or how we will avoid being bored in an eternity spent in heaven, but it is a book that explains very clearly the strengths and weaknesses of the answers that have been given to such questions, and thus gives its readers the information

they need to make up their own minds about the matters it covers. This is a book that can be wholeheartedly recommended to students who need to know about the issues it covers as part of their theological studies, and to educated ministers and lay people who simply want to think about how to understand their faith better.

Commendations:

J P Moreland has written:

'An Introduction to Christian Philosophical Theology is as delightful as it is important. While first-rate philosophers, Davis and Yang have managed to write this crucial book with creativity, clarity, and a readable, engaging style. Their book is accessible to a general reader without being simplistic or watered down. Perhaps more important is the range of topics they cover. They are just the right ones for a book like this. Let's be honest. There is a crying need among Christians to learn how to think carefully and deeply about their faith. Where does one go to learn how to do this? Look no further. Because it combines accessibility with deep, careful reflection, I envision *An Introduction to Christian Philosophical Theology* becoming the go-to book to meet this need.'

Mark Regenerus, *The Future of Christian Marriage*, OUP USA. ISBN 978-0-19006-493-8, £22.99 (e edition also available)

Overview:

Mark Regnerus is Professor of Sociology at the University of Texas at Austin, and a senior fellow at the Austin Institute for the Study of Family and Culture. He is well known for his research in the areas of sexual relationship, behaviour, family, marriage, and religion.

As he explains in the introduction, his new book is concerned with the issue of 'how modern Christians around the world look for a mate within a religious faith that esteems marriage but a world that increasingly yawns at it.'

The research for his book involved Regenerus and his team of researchers having in-depth interviews with nearly two hundred young-adult Christians from the United States, Mexico, Spain, Poland, Russia, Lebanon, and Nigeria, and from the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical and Protestant traditions.

The book itself is in seven chapters.

Chapter 1 introduces the research project undertaken by Regenerus and his team.

Chapter 2 looks at the history of Christian marriage and how the meaning and timing of marriage has changed in recent years.

Chapter 3 looks at the expectations that Christian men and women have of how the marital relationship will work and what the evidence says about the key aspects of Christian marriages in practice.

Chapter 4 looks at how the access to sex has become easier while access to marriage has become more difficult particularly in congregations in which young adult Christian women outnumber young adult Christian men.

Chapter 5 looks at how the high expectations that Christians have for what marriage should be are combine with uncertainty that these expectations can be achieved and how this tempts Christians to 'solve uncertainty and anxiety' by opting for cohabitation instead.

Chapter 6 looks at what Christians found particularly helpful in giving support to marriage and sets down eight ideas that emerged as worth consideration.

Chapter 7 looks at how the practice of marriage, including Christian marriage, is changing, explains why marriage is central to the practice of the Christian faith and to its transmission, and gives five predictions about what further changes we should expect next.

The key findings of the book are:

- (a) Stable marriages between two people of the opposite sex are the forms of relationship that are most conducive to the well-being of individuals and their children.
- (b) The future of traditional marriage lies in the hands of those who are religious.
- (c) Christians are not immune from the changes relating to marriage that are taking place in wider society.
- (d) Young adult Christians still have a recognizably biblical ideal for what marriage should be. Those interviewed by Regenerus and his team typically mentioned the idea of a lifelong union of man and woman, they often talked about how marriage is a picture of Christ and His Church in line with Paul's teaching in Ephesians 5, and many mentioned having children as a central part of God's design for marriage.
- (e) What has changed is that young Christians are increasingly buying into a 'capstone' view of marriage in which marriage because something that is entered into after a lot of other life goals have been achieved. In his words:

'The focus of twentysomethings has become less about building mature relationships and fulfilling responsibilities and more about enjoying oneself, traveling, and trying on identities and relationships ... We now get ourselves ready for marriage, rather than marry to get ourselves poised to accomplish

common objectives – a home, a job, a family. Instead, marriage itself has become one of those objectives, an accomplishment signalling that [we] have ‘made it.’”

This view of where marriage fits into people’s lives means that increasing numbers of young Christians are either postponing marriage, or not marrying at all, and increasing numbers are cohabiting instead of marrying.

- (f) The big challenge for the churches is to challenge this capstone view of marriage so that marriage becomes seen as a normal part of young adulthood rather than something to be possibly attained in the future, and to help young people to have a less idealised view of marriage, seeing it not as a magical, romantic, happily-ever-after kind of relationship, but as a form of relationship that will have its ups and downs and which demands hard work, self-sacrifice and commitment if it is to succeed.

Martin’s opinion:

This book is an important piece of research that needs to be widely read. The challenge that is facing the Christian Church today is not simply, or indeed primarily, the growth of same-sex relationships, but the decline in traditional forms of heterosexual marriage in society and in the Church and their replacement by cohabitation. The work of Regenerus and his team helps Christians to understand this development and the reasons for it. It also suggests practical steps that churches can implement to change the situation. There is a saying that it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness. Regenerus’ book can help churches to light that candle so far as marriage is concerned.

Commendations:

Helen Alvare writes:

‘The future of marriage is the question on everybody’s lips. Might Christians save it? Mark Regnerus responds with his trademark blend of sobering realism, sophisticated yet readable empirics, non-partisanship, and first-person accounts of young adults sharing their hopes and uncertainties. Scholars, parents, political and religious leaders, and young adults will benefit enormously from this thorough and sensitive treatment of current relationship practices, and their implications for the future of marriage.’

Fred Sanders and Scott Swain, *Retrieving Eternal Generation*, Zondervan, ISBN 978-0310537878, £25.00 (e edition also available)

Overview:

Ever since the Trinitarian debates of the fourth-century orthodox Christians have affirmed that God the Son who became incarnate as Jesus Christ was, in the words of Article II of the *Thirty-Nine Articles*, 'begotten from everlasting of the Father.' As Fred Sanders and Scott Swain note in their introduction to a collection of essays on the subject, now available on Kindle, this affirmation (technically known as the affirmation of the Son's 'eternal generation') is fundamental to thinking rightly about the Trinity:

It is not enough to say that the Son is God; we must see that he is God the Son, not just God in general. Sonship, or eternal generation, is what gives both form and content to the relation between the Father and the Son: the relation has the form of fromness and the content of filiality. Whenever the nature of that relation is left unspecified, any articulation of Trinitarian theology becomes brittle and disconnected. Without eternal generation, the constellation of truths that constitute the doctrine of the Trinity remain just so many points of stellar light; they are stars that failed to constellate. They remain strangely isolated facts about threes and ones, essences and persons, in the cold vacuum of theologoumenal abstraction.

However, as Swain explains in his essay, in spite of the fact that there has been an ecumenical consensus down the centuries about the truth and importance of the Son's eternal generation:

...a scan of recent evangelical systematic theologies and biblical commentaries reveals that evangelicals have not warmly embraced the aforementioned ecumenical consensus on eternal generation. Many are not convinced the doctrine of eternal generation is true. Even among those who continue to affirm the doctrine, some wonder whether it is theologically meaningful. Still others question the doctrine's basic intelligibility as a concept.

In the face of this reality, the purpose of the collection of essays on the subject that Sanders and Swain have edited is to engage in a 'retrieval' of belief in the truthfulness and significance of the Son's eternal generation. As they put it:

The goal of *Retrieving Eternal Generation* is to make three cases in adequate detail: that this classic piece of theological confession is in fact biblically, traditionally, and systematically satisfying. It is our hope that these three are one persuasive argument for retrieving the doctrine of eternal generation and recognizing its central importance for the doctrine of the Trinity.

The collection is divided into three parts.

Part I is entitled 'Biblical Reasoning.' In the seven essays in this part, Swain looks at how belief in eternal generation is integral to a proper interpretation of the biblical witness to God's identity. Matthew Emerson and Mark Gignilliat defend the Fathers' use of Proverbs 8 and Micah 5:2 as witnesses to the Son's eternal generation, Don Carson explains how John 5:26 likewise testifies to the Son's eternal generation, Charles Irons argues that the Johannine word *monogenes* ought to be translated 'only begotten,' Madison Pierce considers how eternal generation is present in Psalm 2 and Hebrews 1, and Kendall Soulen contends that the biblical language of the Father giving the Son the divine name leads to belief in eternal generation.

Part 2 is entitled 'Historical Witnesses.' In the five essays in this part, Lewis Ayres and Keith Johnson look at the teaching on the Son's eternal generation found in the works of Origen and Augustine, Chad Van Dixhoorn outlines the discussions about eternal generation that took place among the Reformed theologians present at the Westminster Assembly, Christina Larson considers the central place of the Son's eternal generation in the theology of Jonathan Edwards, and Michael Allen explores how theology post-Barth has grappled with the doctrine of eternal generation.

Part 3 is entitled 'Contemporary Statements.' In the three essays in this part, Mark Makin considers the strength and weaknesses of models of eternal generation in contemporary philosophical theology, Fred Sanders explains how the doctrine of salvation and the doctrine of eternal generation 'enjoy mutual fittingness', and Joshua Malone looks at the role eternal generation plays in Christian dogmatics.

Martin's opinion:

Retrieving Eternal Generation is an important collection of essays that should be read by anyone who wants to understand why Christians in the past have believed in the Son's eternal generation and why Christians today should continue to believe in it. The essays comprehensively demonstrate that doctrine of the Son's eternal generation deserves retrieval because (a) it is taught in both the Old and New Testaments, (b) it is theologically coherent, and (c) it helps us to understand the nature of the Trinity and by so doing helps us also to understand the basis for the acts of God in creation and redemption. Highly recommended to all students of theology.

Commendations:

Paul Nimmo comments:

'The Christian teaching of the eternal generation of the Son has from the beginning engendered detailed scrutiny and fierce opposition, and again in the present, the doctrine is causing great controversy. By way of response, Swain and Sanders have gathered together for this volume a range of experts from the fields of biblical exegesis, church history, and systematic theology to consider this teaching in detail. The result is a powerful and dynamic defence of the doctrine, insisting vigorously upon its scriptural, traditional, and dogmatic importance. At a time of much doctrinal diversity and uncertainty, this book lucidly sets out a salutary and welcome account of this venerable teaching and of its central significance for faithful Christian belief.'