

Latimer Trust

Monthly Reading List – October 2022

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
Paul Copan	<i>Is God a Vindictive Bully?: Reconciling Portrayals of God in the Old and New Testaments</i>	This book will be extremely useful to Christian apologists, to Christian ministers and to ordinary Christians alike. All three need to know how to answer the critics of the God of the Old Testament who exist both inside and outside the Christian Church.
Matthew Emadi	<i>The Royal Priest: Psalm 110 In Biblical Theology</i>	This is a very important book which highlights how the promise of a priest-king after the order of Melchizedek given in Psalm 110 sits at the heart of the message of the Bible and is gloriously fulfilled in the ministry of Christ.
Dave Gobbett	<i>The Environment</i>	The volumes in this series are meant to provide short, accessible, biblically based, introductions to current issues facing Christians and Gobbett's book fulfils this brief in an exemplary fashion. This book would make a great basis for a teaching series on environmental issues and the discussion guide means it will also be equally useful as the basis for discussion in home groups.
Carolyn Weber	<i>Surprised by Oxford: A Memoir</i>	This book will be helpful to Christians as a powerful reminder to them of the truth that God really is alive and well and intervening in power even in the lives of those caught up in the futility of modern secular society. It will be appreciated by anyone who enjoys a good story well told, and as such can be shared with those who would never agree to read a book of Christian apologetics.
Carolyn Weber	<i>Sex and the City of God: A Memoir of Love and Longing</i>	Today, the traditional Christian sexual ethic is widely viewed as restrictive and inimical to human happiness. What this book shows through the medium of a well told story is that the opposite is true, that the traditional Christian ethic actually frees people to live in the way God intends for them and living this way brings happiness across the generations in this world and results in eternal happiness in the world to come.

Paul Copan, *Is God a Vindictive Bully?: Reconciling Portrayals of God in the Old and New Testaments*, Baker Academic, ISBN 978-1-54096-607-0, £44.23 (paperback and e editions also available).

Overview:

Dr Paul Copan is a noted Christian apologist who is Professor of Philosophy and Ethics at Palm Beach Atlantic University in the United States.

In his new book, which is a companion to his previous work *Is God a Moral Monster?* (Baker, 2011), he begins by noting that the God of the Old Testament has ‘plenty of critics.’

Some of these critics, such as Richard Dawkins, stand outside the Christian faith. Their arguments are summarised by Dawkins as follows:

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.

However, there are also critics of the Old Testament God from within the Christian Church. In Copan’s words:

The Old Testament’s portrayal of God has critics from within the Christian community as well. These include theologian and pastor Greg Boyd, Old Testament scholars Eric Seibert and Peter Enns, and others. On the one hand, they would largely agree with Dawkins’s description of ‘the God of the Old Testament’ as ‘genocidal,’ ‘vindictive,’ and so on. On the other hand, these critics from within don’t think the true God is like this. The portrayal of ‘the most unpleasant character in all fiction’ is not the actual God but the textual God.

So, what’s the difference between the ‘actual’ God and the ‘textual’ God? As these scholars see it, when Scripture says that God gave David the victory over Goliath (1 Sam. 17:45–47) or that God promised to ‘drive out’ the Canaanites from the promised land (Josh. 13:6), that wasn’t the actual God. The actual God is nonviolent, enemy-loving, self-sacrificing, and forgiving—especially as revealed in Jesus on the cross: ‘Father, forgive them’ (Luke 23:34).

So the 415 mentions of ‘Thus says the Lord’ often don’t come from the actual God—as you might think—but come from just the textual God. Who or what is this textual God? This is the literary depiction of God by a fallen, violence-prone, culturally conditioned ancient Near Eastern biblical narrator or prophet. That is, the textual God is just a fictitious and flawed representation.

According to Copan, in responding to these internal and external critics we need to do two things. First, realise that God is both kind and severe in both the Old and New Testaments alike.

The apostle Paul writes, ‘Behold then the kindness and severity of God’ (Rom. 11:22). As we’ll see in this book, severity, toughness, or harshness is a theme in both Old Testament and New alike. That is, severity is a description not just of the textual God but of the actual God. That doesn’t mean, though, that severity or wrath is central to the triune God’s nature. As we’ll see, love is God’s central attribute, and God’s severity flows out of his love. God desires the ultimate well-being of humans, but he will sometimes have to say, ‘Enough is enough.’ He will have to act in judgment to stop dehumanization and other evils that undermine human flourishing.

In the light of this truth, writes Copan, we need to emphasise to the external critics:

.... that God is far more loving, kind, patient, tender, and merciful than we could ever know. Throughout the Old Testament we see language of God attempting to woo his people back to himself (Hosea 2:14), being hurt by their rebellious hearts (Ezek. 6:9), longing to show mercy (Isa. 30:18) and to provide for them (Ps. 81:10–16), and pleading with them to return to him (2 Chron. 36:15). He patiently waits half a millennium

(from the time of Abraham to the time of Joshua) to bring judgment on the ‘disobedient’ Canaanites (Gen. 15:16; Heb. 11:31), and he is willing to relent in judgment if any people turn from their wickedness (Jer. 18:7–8; Jon. 4:2).

By contrast, we need to emphasise to the internal critics that:

God is more severe and harsh and unsafe than they suggest. For those who oppress, dehumanize, defraud, mislead, and live hypocritically, divine wrath is the appropriate, just response, as it is to other objective moral evils. Thankfully, the God-created world we inhabit is one that guarantees cosmic justice will be done.

Secondly, ‘we walk with the Old Testament as a friend—but over rough terrain and through slime pits.’ This is because the Old Testament:

... reveals both an idealism of hoped-for peace and order and a realism about its ancient Near Eastern setting. Thus, some of these Old Testament laws will ‘push society as far as it could go at that time without creating more damage than good,’ even if it ‘can and should ultimately go further.’

Another matter: we shouldn’t be surprised if some people may simply disagree about certain moral assumptions about what a good God once commanded under certain conditions and at a certain time and for certain reasons perhaps known only to him. This doesn’t mean reversing good and evil altogether. It does mean a divine command from a good God may still be very difficult and severe even if it isn’t intrinsically evil. To command intrinsic evil would be impossible for God (Jer. 19:5).

Some critics from within may hold that certain divine commands are merely difficult, not impossible—while others may consider those commands just plain impossible. Kenton Sparks admits that he’s not sure if God really commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Greg Boyd says God did issue this command, even if the command seems troubling when taken on its own without any additional historical context. Randal Rauser says God couldn’t have done so, even though the New Testament itself takes for granted that this was God’s command (Heb. 11:17–18; James 2:21–23).

In the midst of all of these questions, remember that ultimately God will do what is good and just. He will not do otherwise. A perfectly good, all-wise Cosmic Authority will have justifiable reasons for commanding or permitting certain actions—reasons for which we don’t always have access.

In the remainder of the book Copan then develops this argument in seven parts.

In part 1, Copan shows that the Bible makes clear that the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament are the same.

In part 2 he looks at the origins of the Law of Moses and the differences between this law and other Ancient Near Eastern law codes.

In part 3 he looks at the penalties set down for violations of Old Testament law and how literally these should be understood.

In part 4 he looks at difficult issues raised by some Old Testament texts such as why God is said to harden people’s hearts, why the Psalmist asks for the heads of babies to be bashed against a rock and why God loves Jacob but hates Esau.

In part 5 he looks at the status of women and servants in Israelite society, addressing the claims that the Old Testament supports the oppression of both.

In part 6 he looks at what the Old Testament (and the New) have to say about warfare and violence.

In part 7 he pulls the argument together and considers again how Christians should respond to the critics of the Old Testament God from both within and without the Christian community. He concludes by declaring to the internal critics:

So we can certainly agree with [Michael] Ramsey that 'God is Christ like and in him there is no un- Christ likeness at all.' But let us not forget that Christ, who in *love* poured out his very life for us on the cross, is also the *severe*, wrathful judge who stands against those who resist his loving gracious initiative. Behold, the kindness and severity of Jesus.

And to the external critics:

We have approached untidy and unsettling (add perhaps some still unsettled) questions. Nevertheless, we see a generally coherent picture of a God who was made a path for reconciling a broken humanity to himself. *Could it be that this biblical story – as former sceptics have discovered – is true and offers a better explanation than the alternative world views?* In the Scriptures and in Jesus himself we find a better explanation than any other. That is why we look in that direction rather than elsewhere.

Martin's opinion:

This new book by Paul Copan will be extremely useful to Christian apologists, to Christian ministers and to ordinary Christians alike. All three need to know how to answer the critics of the God of the Old Testament who exist both inside and outside the Christian Church. Copan's book gives them the tools to offer an answer. He shows clearly and persuasively that in both the Old and New Testaments God is both kind and severe. He also shows that there are good answers to the specific difficulties that people have with the Old Testament and that the picture of God that we see in the Old and New Testaments is both coherent and if accepted provides the basis for a worldview that makes sense of the witness of history and our general experience of the world in which we live. This is a first class piece of work that Christians seriously need to consider buying and keeping on their shelves as a standard work of reference.

Commendations:

Chris Wright has written:

Do you have a problem with something, or a lot of things, in the Old Testament? Copan has provided a virtual encyclopedia of helpful answers to frequently asked questions that trouble many readers. This is a thoroughly detailed reference work that those of us who teach or preach the Old Testament will turn to frequently, or point others to, when such questions are aired. An excellent resource indeed!

Matthew Emadi, *The Royal Priest: Psalm 110 In Biblical Theology*, Apollos, ISBN 978-1-789744-14-9, £ 19.99 (e edition also available).

Overview:

Dr Matthew Emadi is the senior pastor of Crossroads Church in Sandy, Utah in the United States and also serves as an adjunct professor of Hermeneutics and New Testament for the Salt Lake School of Theology. His new book is an edited version of a dissertation written while he was a student at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

The subject of his new book in the IVP New Studies in Biblical Theology series is Psalm 110 and especially the declaration by God in Psalm 110:4 'The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, you are a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.'

Psalm 110 is the Old Testament text that is most often quoted in the New Testament, where it is used to explain the person and work of Christ. This use of Psalm 110 in the New Testament raises four basic questions for students of the Bible. First, what are the historical and theological origins of this Psalm? Secondly, what did it originally mean? Thirdly, how does its message fit into the theological message of the Bible as whole? Fourthly, what does it tell us about who Jesus is and what he came to do? It is these four questions that Emadi addresses in his book.

Emadi argues first of all that:

The union of kingship and priesthood in a single person began with God's purpose for Adam at creation. Adam bore God's image. He was God's covenantal son, worshipping God as a priest-king in the sanctuary and commissioned to establish God's kingdom on the earth. After Adam's fall into sin, his office of priest-king found expression in key covenantal figures: Noah, Abraham, Melchizedek and Israel. Melchizedek is unique because of his connection to Abraham and the Abrahamic covenant.

He then argues that if we move on through the Old Testament:

... God's covenant with David became the programme that would bring the Abrahamic covenant to fruition. For David's greater son to bless the nations he needed a superior priesthood; one that could overcome the inadequacies of the Levitical order and unleash the blessing of Abraham. David himself would have realised this when reflecting on Genesis 14. Through the patterns of his own life experience and the content of the Davidic covenant, David concluded that the Messiah would be a royal priest after the order of Melchizedek. David's portrait of the Messiah in Psalm 110 is unique for its explicit mention of Melchizedek, but it shares much in common with Psalms 1–2 which comprise the Psalter's own messianic interpretive lens.

Evidence for belief in a Messiah who would fulfil the promise of Psalm 110 by being a priest-king after the order of Melchizedek is found in Jewish intertestamental literature, says Emadi, and it is central to the theology of Mark and Hebrews.

In Mark, declares Emadi, we find Jesus as the Messiah exercising a priestly ministry:

By casting out unclean spirits (Mark 1:21-28; 5:1-20), cleansing the leper (Mark 1:40-45), forgiving sins (Mark 2:1-12), ruling the Sabbath (Mark 2:23-3:6), reconstituting sacred space (Mark 2:23-3:6) and redefining purity codes (Mark 7:14-23), Jesus behaves like a priest.

Then, later in Mark, in his teaching in the Temple (Mark 12:36) and in his arraignment before Caiaphas (Mark 14:62), Jesus uses Psalm 110 to describe who he is:

In the temple and before the high priest, Jesus' use of Psalm 110 makes explicit what was implicit earlier in Mark's narrative: Jesus is David's Lord, the messianic king and a priest after Melchizedek's order. The kingdom Jesus proclaimed at the beginning of Mark's gospel is the Kingdom he came to establish (Mark 1:15). The irony, however, is that he inaugurates this kingdom not with political power but through his own death on a cross. Regal and priestly images seem to converge at Calvary when God's crucified Son ushers in the kingdom through his own covenant sacrifice.

Turning to Hebrews, says Emadi, we find that it teaches that:

Because of his faithful obedience in life and in death, Jesus is now seated at the right hand of the Majesty on high (Heb. 1:3). The author of Hebrews read Psalm 110 as part of the bible's covenantal storyline culminating in the resurrected Christ. Jesus has dominion over the universe as the Davidic Son, priest and king of Psalm 110. He has fulfilled God's creational design for humanity to rule the world (as king) from the place of God's presence (as priest) (Heb. 2:5–9). Crowned with glory and honour, Jesus presently reigns over the world to come until all his enemies are made a footstool for his feet. Better than all the Old Testament types and shadows, Jesus mediates the blessings of a better covenant as a Melchizedekian priest (Heb. 8:6). That better covenant is the new covenant. It is better than the old covenant because Jesus' priesthood is better than the Aaronic. Jesus' Melchizedekian priesthood is attached to Zion, not Sinai; the promise to Abraham, not the law given to Moses. Weak, mortal, sinful men could not mediate the better promises of the new covenant (Heb. 7:23-28). But Jesus offers full and final cleansing from sin. He rose from the dead, never to die again. He holds his priesthood permanently. His life is indestructible. He is a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

Martin's opinion:

This is a very important book which highlights how the promise of a priest-king after the order of Melchizedek given in Psalm 110 sits at the heart of the message of the Bible and is gloriously fulfilled in the ministry of Christ. Because of its origins as a dissertation, that book is full of detailed exegesis and the introduction is full of summaries of the ideas of other scholars. This means that it will be heavy going for those not used to reading works of academic biblical scholarship. However, for those who are used to reading such works this book will prove an invaluable resource for biblical study, for preaching and for teaching. It is a book that students, preachers and teachers will return to again and again. Strongly recommended.

Commendations:

Don Carson writes:

Dr Emadi's work will not only stimulate fresh levels of biblical-theological integration but will also enliven and enrich the sermons of pastors who plumb this book with the care it deserves.

Dave Gobbett, *The Environment*, The Good Book Company, ISBN £4.99 (e edition also available).

Overview:

Dave Gobbett is Minister of Highfields Church, Cardiff, Wales, having previously served at Eden Baptist Church, Cambridge, and Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC. His new book from the Good Book Company looks at why Christians should be concerned with environmental issues and what this should mean in practice.

Gobbett begins the first chapter, 'Greeting Greta,' with a brief summary of why environmental issues are such a matter of concern in the world today. He then argues that we should avoid both a 'panicked response' where 'all things green become all that matters' and a 'passive response' in which we shrug our shoulders and 'just carry on with life as it is.' Instead, he says, Christians should take a 'prudent approach' which avoids both these extremes.

Christians are well placed to do this because:

Unlike the atheist, we don't believe this physical world is all there is. We believe that God, who made our planet, owns it and rules it, and that he has promised 'never again will I destroy all living creatures' (Genesis 8 v 21). We're not sitting on a ticking time bomb waiting for our world to explode. As we used to sing to our kids when they were little, 'he's got the whole world in his hands.' So we mustn't fall prey to panicked fixation. But neither must we passively sit by and ignore what's happening to God's world. We are stewards of his planet (Genesis 1 v 28; 2 v 15), and so not caring at all about deforestation, or plastic pollution, or global warming is not an option either. The Christian worldview uniquely enables us to avoid the extremes of panic and passivity.

In the second chapter, 'My Father's world,' Gobbett addresses the question 'Why should Christians care about the environment?' He explains that:

The Bible's answer summarised in the doctrines of creation and sin, is because this world belongs to God. We must neither overvalue nor undervalue it. And even this side of the fall, he cares deeply about our planet: both people and non-people.

If it matters to God, it should matter to us. And why wouldn't it? This is our Father's world. And we've got a vital role to play.

In the third chapter, 'Kings and Queens of Narnia,' Gobbett goes on to explain that according to the creation stories in Genesis, human beings are created to rule over the world on God's behalf just as in the Narnia stories by C S Lewis it is humans whom Aslan appoints to rule over Narnia. This calling means that we should neither withdraw from creation nor abuse it. Instead we should 'lovingly *rule creation*, as we 'we preserve and develop the earth's hidden potential and fruitfulness' in life-giving, environmentally sustainable ways.'

Gobbett then goes on to note that contrary to what Sir David Attenborough suggests, the future of the Earth does not depend on us. As the second Adam, Jesus has already secured its future. This means that:

... we roll up our sleeves in our studies or our science or our stewardship of this world. But we go to sleep at night trusting the Lord Jesus to be the saviour of the world. We don't have to carry the wight of the world on our shoulders – that job's already taken.

In the fourth chapter, 'Tomorrow never dies,' Gobbett sets out four principles that flow from the Bible's promises about the future of the world:

- We'll answer to Jesus about how we used his world. Being careless with something that wasn't ours in the first place won't go down well.
- Don't allow creation care to force personal evangelism down the agenda. Sharing the hope of the gospel must always be high priority for Christians, given the Lord's return.
- As threatening as the climate crisis may be, human life on earth will not end before Jesus comes back. And God alone is privy to the time scales.

- The fact that Jesus will one day restore and renew his world gives greater significance to any beautifying creational acts we do while we wait.

Referencing the work done by the restoration experts on the TV series *The Repair Shop* Gobbett writes:

What the craftspeople on *The Repair Shop* can do is cool. Just imagine what the Lord Jesus will make with the raw ingredients of planet earth when he returns. It makes the spine tingle just thinking about it. And it should move us to take care of what he's given us, for his praise and glory.

Finally, in the Postscript, 'No one is too small to make a difference,' Gobbett tells the imaginary story of an environmentally active Christian called Sara to provide 'a day in the life account of what it might look like to engage prudently as a Christian with environmental concerns.'

At the end of the book there is a list of useful resources for further study and a 'discussion guide' with questions relating to each of the book's chapters, which can be downloaded from the Good Book Company's website.

Martin's opinion:

Dave Gobbett and the Good Book Company are to be congratulated on this new addition to their 'Talking points' series. The volumes in this series are meant to provide short, accessible, biblically based, introductions to current issues facing Christians and Gobbett's book fulfils this brief in an exemplary fashion. As Gobbett suggests, Christians are tempted to either panic about the current threats to the environment, or to ignore them as a secularist fad. His book explains why neither approach is adequate. Christians who take the Bible seriously will also take environmental issues seriously because they know they have a responsibility to God to be careful stewards of the world he has made. However, they will not panic about the matter, nor avoid other priorities such as evangelism, because they know that the future of the planet is safe in God's hands. The book's postscript also helpfully illustrates what this approach should mean in practice. This book would make a great basis for a teaching series on environmental issues and the discussion guide means it will also be equally useful as the basis for discussion in home groups. Highly recommended.

Commendations:

Tim Farron declares:

In this book Dave takes scripture, handles it carefully, wisely and faithfully and helps us to see how and why practical concern for our environment should be a feature of every Christian's life. As Dave puts it, we are called to neither abuse nor to withdraw from God's creation – which leaves only one option: to care for it, and to do so prayerfully and sacrificially.

Carolyn Weber, *Surprised by Oxford: A Memoir*, Thomas Nelson, ISBN 978-0-84992-183-4, £14.15 (e and audio editions also available).

Overview:

This book by the Canadian Christian author and academic Dr Carolyn Weber, which was first published in 2011, has come to my attention recently because it has just been made into a film (details at <https://www.surprisedbyoxford.movie/>) . I don't know how good the film will be like, but the book is well worth reading.

Christian autobiographies are an important genre of Christian literature because they remind us how God acts in the lives of his human creatures in such a way that their individual stories become part of the bigger universal story of the saving work of God in human history recounted for us in Holy Scripture.

In the twentieth century two classic examples of this genre were C S Lewis' *Surprised by Joy* and Sheldon Vanaucken's *A Severe Mercy*, both of which tell stories that have their focus in the city and university of Oxford. Carolyn Weber's *Surprised by Oxford* (its title a deliberate reference back to Lewis' earlier work) joins them as a classic of the genre and as its title suggests, it too tells a story that has its centre in Oxford.

The book tells the story of what happened to Weber during her first year as a post-graduate student of English literature at Oxford in 1994–1995. The story is structured round the three terms of the Oxford academic year, Michaelmas term in the autumn, Hilary term in the Spring and Trinity term in the Summer and it describes how Weber (then Drake), a secular, angry, young Canadian feminist from a poor background and a broken home, was not only culturally surprised by Britain in general, but by Oxford in particular, but how she was also surprised by an encounter with God which led to her conversion to Christianity on the Eve of Valentine's day 1995 and her subsequent baptism later in the Summer.

The story is bookended with her reference to her Christian Professor back in Canada, Dr Deveau. In the prologue his response to her attempted feminist deconstruction of John Donne's sonnet 'Batter my heart, three-personed God' is to explain that she has missed the central point of the poem which is that:

Anything not done in submission to God, anything not done to the glory of God, is doomed to failure, frailty and futility. This is the unholy Trinity we humans fear most. And we should, for we entertain it all the time at the pain and expense of not knowing the real one.

Deveau, normally a very restrained and polite individual, then goes on to startle her by saying:

The rest is all bullshit, Miss Drake. It's as simple as that. Your purpose here in life is to discern the real thing from the bullshit, and then to choose the non-bullshit. Think of the opportunity that God has given you to study as the means by which to attain your own bullshit detector.

In the final chapter of the book the story closes with Weber on her flight back to Canada at the end of her first year in Oxford reading a letter of encouragement and Christian advice from Dr Deveau's widow to whom she has written about her conversion. Weber has followed Deveau's advice and discerned and chosen 'the real thing from the bullshit,' the real thing being the Triune God of Donne's Sonnet.

The story of how Weber chose the real thing is populated by a colourful and varied cast of characters, but at the centre of the story is the person referred to as 'TDH' (tall, dark and handsome), an American post-grad, and 'son of a preacher man' who is studying theology. After helping Weber to discover email to keep in contact with home (this was 1994 remember), they strike up a friendship with TDH encouraging her to consider the Christian faith and fielding her questions about it. In the story the development of Weber's relationship with TDH reflects the stages of her relationship with God. In Michaelmas term the cautious growth of their friendship (she has difficulty trusting men due to her abandonment by her father as a child) mirrors her gradual movement before God. In Hilary term her eventual willingness to apologise to him for offering her help mirrors her eventual willingness to put her trust in the greater help offered by God and in Trinity term her jealousy over his relationship with 'Miss Georgia', a rich,

beautiful, fashionable Christian visitor from the US is a symbol of Weber's struggle to come to terms with the difficulties of living life as a Christian after the end of her 'post-conversion high.'

Surprised by Oxford is a rich and extremely well written story, full of wisdom and packed with interconnected references and allusions to both the Bible and the classics of English literature. It is difficult to do the book justice in a short review, but her description of her conversion, sitting on the floor of her student room after having left a Valentine's party early, gives a flavour of the whole:

... everything all of a sudden became very, very clear. I knew that Jesus was who He said He was. Plain and simple and true and everlasting. I knew that I wanted to know Him. To know Him first, and then to know Him better.

I knew that I had been an idiot, proud and imperfect, despite all my best efforts. I had been hard on myself and hard on others. Who would have guessed that when you really look at it, perfectionism (like anything else) can be a sin?

Everywhere I turned in the labyrinth I was met by an impenetrable wall. The only way out was to be lifted up, or a ladder out of my want. There existed no act, no achievement, nothing I could *do*. The only freedom was in faith. And then I knew what I did *not* want. I did not want to return home, wherever that may be, again and again in my life, to no one, and finally, to nothing of any importance. I did not want my life to be empty, a regurgitation of excess, no matter how fluorescent, or a desperate existentialist filling of a bucket with a hole in the bottom. I did not want to live according to the meaningless exchange of bodily fluids, sweating among strangers, manoeuvring amid pseudointimate relationships.

Christ offered the bridge over the gap I felt, sitting there on the floor, between myself and my own soul. Between my God and me, I wanted to know God and to be known by him – a relationship so intimate that there was no space between him and my soul...

And then, just like that, I was on the other side – the other end of the chasm. Through me, over me, beyond me. Safe. Saved.

On that Eve of St Valentine's Day, I stepped out on to the sea and walked. I did not go under. Strangely, instead, even in my disbelief, through my ardent desire to believe, I was lifted up. The grace of it all poured out, like expensive perfume on weary feet, like soothing oil on a heavy head.

.... to be one person one moment: lost. Then to be another person the next moment: found. It is the difference, as the saying really does go, between night and day. Outwardly I seemed the same, but inwardly everything had changed. I went to the window and watched the birth of the dawn. Everything, every thing appeared in this better light, this brighter light. The ordinary revealed its extraordinariness, like a lover stripped of mundane garments, suddenly naked and beautiful and true,

Come away my lover,

And be like a gazelle

Or like a young stag

On the spice laden mountains. (Song of Songs 8:14)

This is the ultimate Valentine.

Dominus Illuminatio Mea. 'The Lord is my Light.'

Surprised by Oxford, the birthday of my life came.

Yes, my Love came to me.

Martin's opinion:

This book will be helpful to Christians as a powerful reminder to them of the truth that God really is alive and well and intervening in power even in the lives of those caught up in the futility of modern secular society. It will also be helpful in reminding them that friendships (like those between Weber and TDH) remain the key to successful evangelism. Finally, it will be helpful to them as an evangelistic tool. This is a book that will be appreciated by anyone who enjoys a good story well told, and as such can be shared with those who would never agree to read a book of Christian apologetics. Share it with friends and then begin a conversation about God with them by asking what they made of it. Highly recommended.

Commendations:

Alister McGrath has written:

A hugely readable journey of cultural and spiritual discovery, sparkling with wit and wisdom.

Carolyn Weber, *Sex and the City of God: A Memoir of Love and Longing*, Inter-Varsity Press US, ISBN 978-0830845859, £9.99 (e and audible editions also available).

Overview:

Although *Sex and the City of God* was published nine years after *Surprised by Oxford* (and by a different publisher), it nonetheless constitutes part II of the previous work. It tells us what happened to Carolyn Weber and TDH (the friend who led her to Christ) in the years after the event described in the first book.

The title of the book is a deliberate double reference both to Augustine's master work *The City of God* and to the hit TV series *Sex and the City*. What the book considers, with copious references to the biblically based wisdom of Augustine's work, is how we should live as faithful citizens of the city of God in the sex-saturated world depicted in *Sex and the City*.

The book is structured around three door knocks. The book begins by an unexpected knock on the door from Weber's generally absent father that saves her as a new Christian from engaging in extra-marital sex with her ex-fiancé. Then there is the knock on the door by Weber that admits her to a Bible study that launches her into her new life as a Christian disciple after she has returned to Oxford to study for her doctorate. Finally, there is knock on the door from a nurse that summons Weber to sit holding hands with her father as he dies.

The link between the three knocks is that because Weber continues to live God's way rather than go the world's way she eventually (and unexpectedly) marries TDH, because of TDH's witness his father-in-law becomes a Christian, and Weber and her father, after a lifetime of conflict, are reconciled before he dies. The whole story is given as an example of how God works for good in the lives of those who open up their lives to him and how they then go on to become a source of blessing to those around them.

In addition, the book explores, with reference to real life examples, how Christians are tempted to go the world's way rather than God's way when it comes to sex and relationships, how God's way is the only one that is ultimately fulfilling and how marriage (and sexual intimacy within marriage) are an image of God's unbreakable covenant with his people and of the unending love we shall enjoy with God for eternity in the world to come.

Like its predecessor, this is a rich and well written book, and it is also one that is unflinchingly honest about the difficulties as well as the blessings Christians experience in their relationships ('for most, and for those married the longest, it is learned that you have to fight the devil for your marriage. You have to dig around in the rubble for the remnant of your noble selves. And then, with God's help, together you build a new temple').

The overall message of the book is summarised in the following words from the epilogue:

We talk about our children having protected sex but not about protecting their hearts. We don't set examples for their bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit. Growing up, I wish I had been given the knowledge of God's great love for me. I could weigh it and dismiss it if I so chose, but I could also implement it and all such a concept holds. What are we afraid of, especially in the walls of our schools, that we do not give our children such rudimentary knowledge? Nor the dignity to decide for themselves?

And so this book is the product of my giving serious thought as to what I would like to tell my own children about what relationship means to those who live in the city of God. Their father TDH (Tall, Dark and Handsome), who is now TBH (Tall, Bald and Handsome), offers proof of how one good man does indeed change the world – for generations to come. And yet for all of its foreshadowing and foretasting, a marriage of two imperfect people is in no way a substitute for, or detraction from, our First Love who loves each of us perfectly.

'The sexual intercourse of man and woman, then, is in the case of mortals a kind of seedbed of the city,' wrote Augustine. 'But while the earthly city needs for its population only generation, the heavenly needs also regeneration to rid it of the taint of generation.' This wide, troubled, lost world – for all its remnants of beauty, its reminders of joy – will murder and wound and steal. The only antidote, the only hope, I remind my children, is to cling to God with all they are worth, to always remember who they are, to never allow

anyone or anything – in other words, any idol – to take their hearts away from their first love in God. For where their treasure is, their hearts will be also. Such treasure enriches all decisions they make through their hearts.

Martin's opinion:

Like its predecessor, this book will be helpful to Christians as a reminder of what they believe about sex and marriage and why. Like its predecessor, it will also be a useful book for Christians to share with unbelievers, or those seeking faith. Today, the traditional Christian sexual ethic is widely viewed as restrictive and inimical to human happiness. What this book shows through the medium of a well told story is that the opposite is true, that the traditional Christian ethic actually frees people to live in the way God intends for them and living this way brings happiness across the generations in this world and results in eternal happiness in the world to come. Buy. Read. Share.

Commendations:

Gregory Wilbur comments:

Carolyn Weber looks at her life with all of the inherent symbolism, irony, and foreshadowing of fine literature because she sees the unfolding of its episodes not as happenstance but the revealing of an intricate plot by the Master Storyteller. *Sex and the City of God* continues her memoirs after her first year at Oxford with the subplot of what it means to be, and become, the bride of Christ and to embrace the beauties of love – divine and human, spiritual and physical. Refreshing and frank, this book will encourage and challenge your own perceptions of being the beloved of God.