

Latimer Trust

Monthly Reading List – October 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
Esau McCauley	<i>Reading while Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope</i>	This book gives voice to a distinctive Black, orthodox, understanding of the Bible. For those who want to engage seriously with these issues from a biblical perspective McCauley's book is now a must read.
Alister McGrath	<i>Through a Glass Darkly: Journeys through Science, Faith and Doubt – A Memoir</i>	This is a book that will be of interest to anyone who has read McGrath's numerous other publications and wants to know the story behind them. It is also a book that will be useful as a tool for starting conversations about Christianity with serious intellectual enquirers.
Amy Orr-Ewing	<i>Why Trust the Bible?</i>	This revised and updated version is useful both as a resource to help Christians make sense of the difficult questions they are asked about the Bible, and as tool for Christians to use to explain to non-Christians why the orthodox Christian belief in the authority of the Bible continues to make sense today.
Christopher J Wright	<i>'Here Are Your Gods!': Faithful Discipleship in Idolatrous Times</i>	This is an extremely helpful book that anyone interested in biblical theology and its application to the contemporary world needs to read.
Tom Wright	<i>Broken Signposts: How Christianity Makes Sense of the World</i>	<i>Broken Signposts</i> is a very useful book that will help people to understand better some of the key ideas in John's Gospel and to see how these relate to the seven key issues of justice, love, spirituality, beauty, freedom, truth and power that are important to all human beings.

Esau McCaulley, *Reading while Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope*, IVP Academic, ISBN 978-0-83085-486-8, £12.44 (e and audio editions also available).

Overview:

Dr Esau McCaulley is assistant professor of New Testament at Wheaton College in the United States and a priest in the Anglican Church in North America. In his new book *Reading while Black* he 'looks at the tradition of African American biblical interpretation and argues that the Bible rightly understood and read from a decidedly black perspective can speak a word of hope to African Americans in the United States.'

As he explains in his first chapter, the purpose of his book is to 'make the case' over against criticism from both white evangelicals and white and African American 'progressives' that an:

... unapologetically Black and orthodox reading of the Bible can speak a relevant word to Black Christians today. I want to contend that the best instincts of the Black church tradition – its public advocacy for justice, its affirmation of the worth of Black bodies and souls, its vision of a multi ethnic community of faith – can be embodied by those who stand at the centre of this tradition. This is a work against the cynicism of some who doubt that the Bible has something to say: it is a work contending for hope.

As he goes on to say, his book:

... is an attempt to show that the instincts and habits of Black biblical interpretation can help us use the Bible to address the issues of the day. It is an attempt to show that for Black Christians the very process of interpreting the Bible can function as an exercise in hope and connect us to the faith our ancestors. More than that, it is one attempt of one son to do justice to the faith given him by his mother as a representative of a tradition that has borne Black people in this country up under suffering for centuries. It is an assertion of a claim, namely that the Black ecclesial tradition has something to say that strikes a different note than the standard options often given the students of the Bible and theology. It is a love letter from a somewhat wayward son of the Black church who did not appreciate its depth and power until he went searching for the truth – and found that it was at home all along.

The book is in eight chapters.

The first chapter explains the origins and nature of the book along the lines just described.

Chapter two sketches 'A New Testament theology of policing' because 'a pressing question for the Black Christian today is the relationship between the populace and those entrusted with the task of serving and protecting our communities.'

Chapter three looks at 'What the New Testament has to say about political protest and the witness of the church.' It seeks to show that 'The Scriptures provide Black Christians with a bevy of examples and resources that inform the church's witness to the watching world.'

Chapter four addresses the question of justice and contends 'That the New Testament (drawing mostly on the Gospel of Luke) paints a picture of the just society that is distinctly Christian and speaks directly to the hopes of Black Christians.'

Chapter five considers 'ethnicity,' exploring the question of 'whether God saves me from my blackness (the colorblind kingdom model), or whether my blackness is a unique manifestation of the glory of God.'

Chapter six 'addresses the question of black anger and pain. Given our historic mistreatment, is there a way to deal with our frustrations and anger in a way that heals us?'

Chapter seven explores 'The question behind most of our questions, namely the relationship between the Bible and slavery' and also looks at the issue of 'the freedom of the enslaved person.'

A concluding chapter 'An exercise in Hope' summarises the argument of the book as whole.

An appendix, what McCauley calls a 'bonus track' gives more details on the development of Black ecclesial interpretation of the Bible.

Martin's opinion:

This is an important book that deserves to be widely read. It gives voice to a distinctive Black, orthodox, understanding of the Bible and shows that one does not have to choose between a 'progressive' approach to the Bible which fails to take seriously what the Bible itself has to say, or a 'colour blind' reading of the text that ignores the issues raised (not only in the United States but in this country as well) by the existence of racial injustice and the continuing legacy of slavery. For those who want to engage seriously with these issues from a biblical perspective McCauley's book is now a must read.

Commendations:

N T Wright comments:

Esau McCaulley's voice is one we urgently need to hear. This book is prophetic, biblical, measured, wise, friendly, and well-reasoned – and thus all the more hard-hitting. A powerful word for our times.

Alister McGrath, Through a Glass Darkly: Journeys through Science, Faith and Doubt – A Memoir, Hodder and Stoughton, ISBN 978-1-52932-760-1, £14.99 (e edition also available).

Overview:

Professor Alister McGrath, who is Andreas Idreos Professor of Science and Religion at Oxford University, is one of the most important contemporary Anglican theologians. He is a polymath who has written extensively in the fields of historical and systematic theology, church history, Christian biography, apologetics and the relationship between science and faith.

In what he anticipates will be his final book, McGrath gives an account of his personal spiritual and intellectual journey and explains the key lessons he feels he has learned in the course of that journey.

In his words:

This book tells the story of how I, a restless freethinking atheist with a love of science, found my way to an unfashionable, but deeply rewarding, rational and resilient way of understanding the world that I discovered was called Christianity. It is not an autobiography, although biographical details are inevitably woven into my narrative of discovery and reflection. Nor is it a work of theology, although I touch on many theological issues. It is a story of the loss of my intellectual innocence in the face of a world that obstinately refused to conform to my preconceptions of what it ought to be like.

As he goes on to say:

This short work is fundamentally an exploration of ideas, an account of intellectual journeys of discovery, in which I reflect on my growing awareness of the complexity of reality, the limits placed on our understanding of it, and the implications for my doomed youthful quest for a simple take on a complicated world. It involves my own shift from atheism to Christianity, set in the context of the cultural restlessness of the late 1960s, and my discovery of the exhilarating and rewarding discipline of theology while researching at Oxford University's Department of biochemistry. For those who know me best through my theology textbooks, this book explains how those came to be written.

The final element of the book is his reflection on how he has come to understand that in this world we have to live with uncertainty since we only see 'through a glass darkly' (1 Corinthians 13:12) rather than with the absolute clarity that we will have in the world to come. To quote McGrath again:

Although my transition from atheism to Christianity is an important component of this story, it is not the only journey of discovery I made over the course of my life. Alongside this change in my religious views, I learned that an early expectation of certainty in relation to the big questions of life was unsustainable. All of us, whether atheists or religious believers, have to learn to live with uncertainty about those beliefs that we think *really* matter – such as the existence of God, the nature of the good, or the meaning of life. I had to learn to live in a world in which we cannot prove our core convictions. The images of darkness and shadows loom large in this narrative, precisely because it explores how we can live meaningfully and authentically in the midst of uncertainty and doubt. It can be done.

Martin's opinion:

This is a book that will be of interest to anyone who has read McGrath's numerous other publications and wants to know the story behind them. It is also a book that will be useful as a tool for starting conversations about Christianity with serious intellectual enquirers. Christians can lend them this book and then use it as the starting point for a discussion about why one can hold to Christian faith with good conscience in the face of scientific discovery and in the fact that uncertainty and doubt are an inescapable part of human experience. Finally, it is a book for those Christians who are worried by their awareness that doubt and uncertainty do exist alongside faith. McGrath will explain to them that this is not because there is something wrong with them, or a sign that the faith isn't really true, but simply part of the way things are in this stage of our human existence. Highly recommended.

Commendations:

John Lennox writes:

Alistair McGrath has written an intellectual thriller that documents his transition from a nature-loving schoolboy Marxist to the Oxford Professor of Science and Religion. The detail is fascinating: discovering that what once was certain crumbled, probing the methods and limits of science and finding in literature, historical, philosophical and imaginative, a pathway from the shadows of Plato's cave to an epiphany of understanding in the sunlit uplands, similar to that of C. S. Lewis before him. Realising not only that science and religion give different but complementary maps of the world, but also that Christianity offers the coherent big-picture framework for which his mind and heart had been questing. This is a must read for all those interested in the life of the mind and the science-religion debate. I could not put it down. You will not be able to either.

Amy Orr-Ewing, *Why Trust the Bible?*, IVP, ISBN 978-1-78974-165-0, £9.99 (e edition also available).

Overview:

Dr Amy Orr-Ewing is a theologian and apologist and is the Co-Director of The Oxford Centre of Christian Apologetics. She has written numerous books and articles and her latest book, published by IVP, is a revised and updated version of her 2008 book, *Why Trust the Bible?*

As she explains in the introduction, the background to her book is the experience that she had when studying theology at Oxford.

... in my wildest dreams as a student at Oxford, I never thought that one day I might have to defend my Christian faith before the dons of the university. That is, not until February of my final year. I was reading Theology at Christ Church, preparing for finals, when one night I dreamed that I would be vivaed for my degree! A viva voce is an oral examination that involves appearing before a panel of examiners and defending what you have written in your final exams. This particular form of torture is usually reserved for examining doctorates. But sure enough, a couple of weeks after my degree examinations were finished, towards the end of June, I received a phone call letting me know that I was required to appear before the Theology Faculty, so that I could 'answer a few questions'. The date of the viva voce happened to be the day before my wedding no less! During my interview with the professors, I was asked a number of questions about my personal Christian convictions. But one in particular stands out; I remember it as clearly as if it happened yesterday: 'You don't honestly mean to tell us that you think Jesus actually said the words recorded in the Gospels, or, for that matter, that the events recorded in the Bible really took place?'

As she goes on to say:

My first impulse was to reply by asking, 'On what basis do you assume out of hand that Jesus did not say those words?' The astounding prejudice demonstrated then by highly educated people draws our attention to the scepticism with which the Bible is now treated by many people in all walks of life. A conviction that the Bible must be unreliable, held by those a few decades ago at the highest level of academic excellence, seems, in turn, to have been embraced at a popular level by many people who have barely glanced at the Bible, but feel sure that it is not to be trusted.

Her viva, she writes:

... became the first of many occasions when I have been involved in defending the intellectual credibility of the Bible, and, indeed, the credibility of the Christian faith, in different settings. I later went on to complete my doctorate in Theology at the University of Oxford and to experience another, much friendlier, viva. As I travel and answer questions about the Christian message around the world, I find that, time and time again, although the experts may tell us that people are not interested in truth any more (and certainly not authoritative texts such as the Bible), questions about the Bible do come up.

Initially I was surprised by many of the questions that were articulated. They were less about facts and evidence, and more about ethics and interpretation. These questions contain nuances of pluralism and relativism, the sexual revolution and anti-authoritarianism. All the questions addressed in this book have been posed by real people, on multiple occasions, in different cultural contexts. I have found myself personally confronted by these questions too, and I hope that seekers of truth will find the reflections and observations offered here helpful.

After more than twenty years of working in the field of Christian theology, I have become convinced that if we are able sensibly to answer the concerns of the truth-seekers we come across, many will come to faith in Jesus Christ. For this reason, I want to address the ten questions I am most commonly asked about the Bible, refreshing the work that I did in my original book *Why Trust the Bible?* more than fifteen years ago with new insights and updated responses.

The ten questions she tackles in her book are:

- Isn't it all a matter of interpretation?
- Can we know anything about history?
- Are the biblical manuscripts reliable?
- Is the content of the manuscripts reliable?
- Did a group of men decide what would be in the Bible?
- What about the other holy books?
- Isn't the Bible sexist?
- What about all the wars in the Old Testament?
- Isn't the Bible out of date on sex?
- How can I know?

As can be seen from this list, Orr-Ewing doesn't just tackle the familiar question about the historical reliability of the Bible, but also look at questions concerning the reliability of the biblical manuscripts, the formation of the biblical Canon, the violence depicted in the Bible and its teaching about sexual ethics. She also tackles the question that is often asked about why we should trust the teaching of the Bible rather than that of other holy books such as the *Quran* or the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Martin's opinion:

Since its first publication in 2008, *Why Trust the Bible?* has been found consistently useful both as a resource to help Christians make sense of the difficult questions they are asked about the Bible, and as tool for Christians to use to explain to non-Christians why the orthodox Christian belief in the authority of the Bible continues to make sense today. In this revised and updated version, it will continue to provide an invaluable service in both these roles. If there is one really basic book to give to people who have questions about the Bible, then *Why trust the Bible?* is probably it.

Commendations:

Susan Griffiths declares:

Dr Orr-Ewing addresses key questions about the reliability of the Bible and the coherence of a Biblical worldview, deftly handling issues of context and presuppositions, and moving adroitly through the counterarguments. The opening chapters lay a solid foundation by untangling postmodern and post-postmodern anxieties over hermeneutics and epistemology. Subsequent chapters benefit from her profound awareness of the current cultural landscape and her skill at reframing our questions in more helpful and elucidating ways to get at the heart of the matter. Refreshing, informative, and engaging. This is a book to buy in bulk to share with others!

Christopher J Wright, *'Here Are Your Gods!': Faithful Discipleship in Idolatrous Times*, IVP, ISBN 978-1-78974-231-2, £9.99 (e edition also available).

Overview:

Dr Chris Wright is an Old Testament scholar who was formerly Principal of All Nations Christian College and is currently International Ministries Director of the Langham Partnership. He has written extensively on the Old Testament, biblical ethics and missiology and these three strands of his writing coming together in his new book *'Here are your Gods!'* The title of his book is taken from the words of Aaron and Jeroboam in Exodus 32:4 and 1 Kings 12:28, both of whom tell Israel that a pair of golden calves are their gods. In their biblical context these words are examples of idolatry and they are included in the biblical record as a warning to God's people that the worship of idols is forbidden to them. In similar fashion Wright's book is a warning to against idolatry and an explanation of what is involved in living in a non-idolatrous way today.

The book is in three parts.

Part one 'The Lord God and other gods' is based on material previously published as chapter 5 of Wright's earlier book *The Mission of God*. It consists of four chapters. Chapter one, 'The paradox of the gods' explains that while the Old Testament recognises the existence of other gods it consistently insists that they are not to be compared with the one, true, all powerful creator God, the Lord God of Israel.

Chapter two, 'What are the gods?' explains that the Old Testament depicts these other gods as '(1) objects within the visible creation, (2) demons, and (3) the product of human hands.'

Chapter three, 'Discerning the gods' notes that the fundamental distinction in the Bible is between 'the Creator God and everything else that exists anywhere.' The problem with idolatry is that it means the 'rejection of the God-ness of God and the finality of God's moral authority.' The mission of God's people is to work with God in 'exposing the idols' that blur the distinction between God and creation and between good and evil 'and to liberate men and women from the destructive delusions they foster.'

Chapter four 'Mission and the gods' looks at how God's people should address idolatry 'in the many different social, cultural, evangelistic and pastoral contexts in which we are called to minister.'

Part two 'Political idolatry then and now' is based on a lecture on 'Following Jesus in an age of political turbulence' given by Wright in 2017. This part consists of two chapters.

Chapter five, 'the rise and fall of nations in biblical perspective' emphasises that, according to the Bible, 'all empires come to an end under the sovereign hand of God' and that when an empire falls that is 'interpreted as the judgment of God, mediated through...human circumstances and socioeconomic realities.' Furthermore:

... there are signs of something comparable to the collapse of those ancient biblical empires in these later decades of Western civilization in general, and in the social, economic, and political direction of the cultures of the United Kingdom and the United States in particular.

Chapter six, 'God in the political arena' looks at:

... how the Bible makes very clear the standards God requires of those in political office; then at how it exposes the idols that God rejects, which easily infest public life; and finally at how it portrays the judgement that God operates within history, when whole societies persist in rejecting those standards and instead pursue those idols.

Part three, 'God's people in an idolatrous world' addresses the question 'What does it mean to be the people of God?' in the light of the situation described in part two. It consists of two chapters.

Chapter seven, 'A people shaped by the living God' argues that 'we must be Bible people: living by the story of God,' that 'we must be gospel people: committed to the mission of God' (which involves building the Church through evangelism and teaching, serving society through compassion and justice and stewarding creation through the godly use of natural resources and ecological care and action) and that 'we must be Kingdom people: submitting to the

reign of God' (which for Wright involves the rejection of 'the Christendom way of thinking' that identifies Christianity with contemporary culture and contemporary political power structures).

Chapter eight, 'Following Jesus in turbulent times' declares that God's call to holiness involves a call to be 'a distinctive people: shining the light of God,' a 'praying people: appealing to the throne of God' and a people who proclaim the cross of Christ 'in this world of evil, folly, idolatry, and confusion' because it is 'in the light of the cross that all gods and idols are exposed for the despicable frauds they are.'

An Epilogue declares that Christians are called to 'lament, love and hope and to do so with tears of trust in the sovereignty and goodness of our heavenly Father.' We are called to do this 'on behalf of our neighbourhoods, our countries and our world with the tenacity of trust in the compassion and ultimate justice of creation's Lord and King.'

Martin's opinion:

This is an extremely helpful book. The first part is an excellent resource for anyone wanting to understand the Bible's teaching about the relationship between God and the 'gods' and the nature and danger of idolatry. The second and third parts, which build on the work of John Stott and the Lausanne Movement, provide a challenging account of the state of Western civilisation and politics from a biblical standpoint and a clear call to Christians to engage in holistic mission in the midst of the rampant cultural and political idolatry of the contemporary world.

Not everyone will agree with Wright's very strong criticisms of the present and former Conservative governments in the UK and the Trump administration in the United States, or his wholly negative view of Christendom. However, even those who disagree with him on these points will be challenged by him to take seriously what the Bible teaches about the ever present dangers of political idolatry and the forms of national behaviour that evoke the just judgment of God.

This is a book that anyone interested in biblical theology and its application to the contemporary world needs to read.

Commendations:

Tremper Longman declares:

Christopher Wright has given us a powerful and incisive analysis of the nature of idolatry both in biblical times and today. He spares no punches as he exposes the dangers of political idolatry, which has tempted many contemporary Christians. Importantly, he not only diagnoses the problem, he gives us the remedy. This book should be a must-read for Christians as they engage with the political process.

Tom Wright, *Broken Signposts: How Christianity Makes Sense of the World*, SPCK, ISBN 978-0-28108-493-7, £16.99 (paperback and e editions also available).

Overview:

Professor Tom Wright, who is now Senior Research Fellow at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, is one of this country's foremost New Testament scholars. His latest book argues that that we can identify seven 'signposts' that:

Name realities that all human cultures value as well as pointing beyond themselves to the meaning of life, to the meaning of the world. They indicate, in fact, how we ought to 'make sense' of the world – how we ought to understand the way the world is and the challenge of being human within it.

In his 2005 book *Simply Christian* Wright looked at four of these signposts 'justice, spirituality, relationships and beauty,' considering how they relate to the Christian faith. In his 2019 book *History and Eschatology* he added three more signposts, 'freedom, truth and power' and explored how all seven signposts 'all too often let us down at the crucial moment.' In his new book he looks at these seven signposts in relation to the teaching found in John's Gospel.

The book consists of seven main chapters which focus on each of the signposts in turn. In between these chapters there are six 'interludes' looking at particular issues relating to John's Gospel and a concluding chapter summarises the book's overall argument.

Chapter one looks at 'Justice.' It argues that:

John's Jesus suffers the ultimate injustice and, with that, declares that the passion for justice that all humans feel – even though we all distort it to suit ourselves – always was a true signpost, albeit a battered and broken one, to the nature of God. With the resurrection, the signpost has at last been put right. The risen Jesus won the victory over injustice and now sends his followers to work on the multiple projects of new creation. Justice itself – restorative, healing, lifegiving justice – is central to that task.

The following interlude considers how best to read John.

Chapter two looks at 'Love.' It argues that according to John:

What we see going on in the story of Jesus, up close and personal, is what is going on in the much larger, immeasurably larger, cosmic picture. This is how God loves the world, his creation.

In John, 'The resurrection says God's yes to the whole created order and, with it, to the love that all humans know in their bones is central to what it means to *be* human.'

The following interlude considers how John understands the Old Testament idea of God's covenant love for Israel.

Chapter three looks at 'Spirituality.' It argues that in John's Gospel:

The presence of Jesus and the power of the Spirit confirm that to be human was and is a good thing; being creatures of space, time, and matter was and is good; and that the powerful, rescuing, healing, transforming love of God is renewing the whole world, and ourselves with it. That is the meaning of Johannine spirituality.

The following interlude considers what John has to say about Jesus as the Messiah.

Chapter four looks at 'Beauty.' It argues that in his account of Jesus's resurrection:

John is speaking of a beauty that had always been pointing back to its maker, even though 'the world was made through him, and the world did not know him' (1:10). By focusing our attention, in his telling of Jesus' story, on the Tabernacle and the Temple as well as the world of creation, John was picking up their ultimate purpose: to point forwards to the coming day when, with the Word having become flesh, beauty itself would become incarnate to make all things new.

The following interlude considers the significance of Jewish festivals in John's Gospel.

Chapter five looks at 'Freedom.' It argues that, according to John, freedom is created by love:

Jesus himself was the most free person who has ever walked the earth, and his freedom led him to crucifixion. That is because, once more, freedom grows out of love. If you want to know what freedom really means, think of the time you have been loved. Of the time when the Son of God loved you and gave himself for you. Of the time when God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.

The following interlude considers how, through prayer, we can join in the conversations that we find in John's Gospel.

Chapter six looks at 'Truth.' It argues that in John's account of Jesus before Pilate:

... Although Pilate would never understand it, Truth was standing before him, the truth of creation rescued and renewed, truth turned into flesh, Truth loving his own who are in the world and now loving them to the uttermost, Truth leading the way through death and out the other side into God's new world, giving his followers the Spirit of truth so that they could come after him and speak the creative truth that will bring that world into being.

The following interlude considers what John has to say about the identity between Jesus and the God of Israel.

Chapter seven looks at 'Power.' It argues that John describes how Jesus reveals a new sort of power:

... a power exercised through giving, serving, and loving. A power that transforms the world in ways nobody could imagine at the time, in ways that today's anxious secularists do their best to hush up. A power that calls, confronts, transforms, and then equips more and more people from every conceivable background to be in their turn powerful witnesses to the Jesus they have come to know and love.

In the concluding chapter, 'Mending the Broken Signposts' Wright declares that the story of Jesus as told by John:

....offers a new framework for understanding the world – the framework of victory over corruption and death itself and the launching of the new creation. The old questions were the right ones to ask. They indicate a deep human sense that the world is not, after all, as it was meant to be. That intuition is correct. That is why the signposts appear broken. John tells us what the creator God has done, is doing, and will do, through his Son and his Spirit, to put things right. The signposts, duly straightened out, will then provide us with a template for our Spirit led mission, sent into the world as the Father had sent the Son.

Martin's opinion:

Broken Signposts is a very useful book that will help people to understand better some of the key ideas in John's Gospel and to see how these relate to the seven key issues of justice, love, spirituality, beauty, freedom, truth and power that are important to all human beings. This book is probably not a book to give to people just beginning to explore the Christian faith, but for those who know the basics and want to dig deeper it will prove an invaluable resource. It would make a good basis for a sermon series, and it would be a good text for studying in a house group setting.

Commendations:

Nicholas Wolterstorff writes:

Some writers are perceptive commentators on human affairs. Some are perceptive interpreters of scripture. In this book Tom Wright is both at once. With a wonderfully keen eye he describes 7 features of our existence that everyone recognises as being indispensable to making sense of our world but that we all experience as broken. He calls them signposts, pointers to a day when they are no longer broken and to the possibility of a God who created this world and still cares for it. And then, for each signpost, Wright shows how the story of Jesus, as presented in the Gospel of John, deepens our understanding of the signpost, of why it is broken, and how it can be repaired. Wright's interweaving of these two strands is masterful; his exegesis is often amazing. This reader had no intimation of the richness, subtlety and relevance of John's Gospel that Wright brings to light.