

the baptist ministers'
journal



April 2022 volume 354

Ukraine

Keith G. Jones & Roger Martin

The Cost of Discipleship

Michael Jackson

Jeremiah

Hetty Lalleman

Father, in High Heaven Dwelling

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Response to a Festschrift

Ruth Gouldbourne

Leonard Cohen and Religion

John Matthews

Interview: Regional Ministry

Gale Richards

Reviews

Of Interest To You

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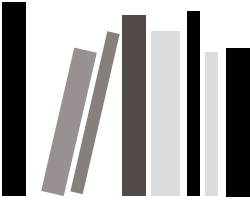
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from the editor

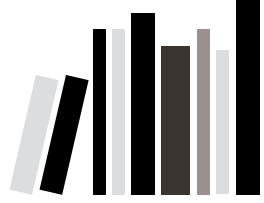
Rumours of war

When I wrote the editorial for January's *bmj*, the war in Ukraine had not even been imagined (at least, not by many of us). So much has tragically changed in just a few weeks, and in this issue I am deeply grateful to Keith Jones and Roger Martin for their helpful reflections, which should help us to pray and perhaps to understand a little better the complex background to this conflict.

There is an interesting question posed about whether Brexit visibly destabilised the unity of Europe such that Putin perceived an opportunity, to which readers may respond differently—but one thing is for sure. The roots of violence are not very deeply buried beneath the surface for any of us, and it is only by the nonviolent identification with the victim shown by Jesus Christ that we even begin to understand what each of us is capable of. This Good Friday and Easter offer us a fresh opportunity to 'stand unprotected before God and let him possess us,' in a rough paraphrase of Sister Wendy Beckett's comment on prayer. May we be overtaken and transformed by the Spirit of the Prince of Peace, and then breathe that peace into the communities we serve.

We welcome some new members onto the BMF Committee—Brian Bishop and Misha Pedersen, who will help with some of the tasks facing BMF at this time. There will be a BMF stand at the Assembly in Bournemouth—come and see us on the Saturday in the Exhibition area. We have BMF pens and bookmarks to give away as well as paper copies of *bmj*—and please encourage your colleagues to join us. One of our BMF commitments is to pray for one another on Sunday mornings. This is a service we can render to one another in ministry, remembering old college friends and newer colleagues, wherever we are.

I hope you enjoy this issue with the variety of articles and reviews it offers—and may I wish you Easter blessings in your own ministry and service. **SN**



A Lament for Ukraine and our 'Common European Home' by Keith G. Jones

Author: Keith Jones is a Baptist minister and is now retired, but was Rector of IBTS in Prague from 1998-2013, and also served in UK national and regional roles.

It was Mikhail Gorbachev, one-time General Secretary of the USSR Communist Party, who brought to our attention that phrase 'our common European home.'¹ Brexit—the UK's exit from the European Union by referendum in 2016—and the invasion of the sovereign Republic of Ukraine by the tyrant Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin and his Russian army, have surely shattered the vision of Gorbachev.

With events changing by the moment, it would be naïve, in early March, to write a piece for the *BMJ* to be published in mid-April about the situation in Ukraine and the surrounding countries. However, the editor requested something from me and I could not refuse, as I have the privilege, spanning over 30 years, of being involved in the life and mission of European Baptists. After 15 years of teaching students from Ukraine, Russia, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Moldova at IBTS in Praha (Prague) and of bearing deep within me in this Lenten season something of their pain and heartache, I feel bound to

set some thoughts down on paper. This is in the context of the tragic events, the violation of women and children by an aggressive tyrant, unfolding hour by hour in our 'common European home.'

This article is submitted through Baptist binoculars. It cannot, in the space allotted, address the deep historic issues between the Russian Orthodox Church leadership and the Ukrainian Orthodox and Catholic communities, nor fully explore the various attitudes of Slavs from the Black Sea coast in the south to Murmansk and St Petersburg in the north—this belongs to people with greater expertise than I.

What I can remind you of is that the Baptist Union of Ukraine is one of the largest in Europe with 2382 churches and 125,509 members (for comparison, BUGB has 1897 churches and 99,475 members²).

Nor can I untangle the important early history of Rus—Kyiv³ and the founding of the city on the river Dniiper /Dnipro, (which rises near Smolensk in Russia and then flows through Belarus and Ukraine to the

Black Sea), which occurred long before anyone had established a community in Moskova-Moscow. There is much being published at present around the complex history of Ukraine.⁴ As we watch reporters speaking from Lviv⁵ in western Ukraine, we are reminded it was named after Leo, eldest son of Daniel, King of Ruthenia. In the 1700s it was part of the kingdom of Poland, then in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, ruled from Vienna, and later back to Poland, until invaded by the Germans and Soviets in 1939 and placed within the USSR by an agreement between Hitler and Stalin. From 1945 it was part of the USSR until the Soviet Empire collapsed and the 'old' nations re-established themselves post-1990.

Sisters and brothers in a Slavic heritage

When the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christian-Baptists in Soviet Russia was set free from the yolk of the USSR in 1989-91, parts of our European Baptist community sought to join with those of their own ethnicity in establishing or re-establishing national ethnic Baptist associations and unions which identified with their own culture and ethnicity. Each nation established its own Union and many of them joined together in an informal fellowship with Gregory Komandant, a Ukrainian pastor, as the first President. We understand this concern to have a national Union. The Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland recognised the legitimacy of Irish Baptists to be self-referencing by removing the word 'Ireland' from our title in the 1980s. It has proved more difficult to help our Scottish sisters and brothers, who certainly have their own Union—but what do we call a community of English

(and some parts of Wales) Baptists? Morris West thought we might rename ourselves 'The English Baptist Union.' So, we understand something of the travails of disentangling what history and politics have imposed upon us from days past.

Post-1990 Baptists in many parts of the former USSR established their own Unions—Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and so on. Some kept close ties with the Russian Baptist Union, others, like the Baltic countries and Georgia felt it important to develop their lives and churches and as a Union within the context of the European Baptist Federation alone.⁶

Some, especially those which felt a Slavic affinity⁷, decided to federate together, much as we have today the Federation of British and Irish Baptists. The first President of this Federation was the outstanding Ukrainian Baptist, Gregory Komandant, a dear brother in Christ. I write about this to indicate there is a Slavic interdependency, important, but not over-riding. Perhaps this is what Putin banked on when he invaded the sovereign Republic of Ukraine? There may be a sense of 'family,' but there is, also, as Gorbachev rightly noted, a European home with different entrances.

Ukrainian people, Slavs in ethnicity, are nevertheless holders of their own culture, territory, values and hope⁸. So, the tyranny imposed on Ukraine by Vladimir Putin is about his desire to re-establish a world that disappeared in 1989, but really only came into being in WW2. In seeking to do that, he assumed the 'West' would not retaliate in any meaningful way, as we

failed to do when he annexed the Crimea (which was, historically, more Russian in ethnicity and outlook than most of Ukraine). He believed that ordinary Ukrainians would 'welcome' Russian liberators—but they did not. Perhaps as people in the Republic of Ireland might not welcome the Royal Marines trying to undo the events of 1926 and re-incorporate the Republic of Ireland into the UK?

In all of this, Baptists—who have peacefully got on with our work and mission post-1989—now find ourselves facing political and geographical challenges which belong, so we thought, to a time when Europe was divided, before Gorbachev declared we had a 'common European home' which we could all share, without having the same doors in!

How should we pray and act?

First, we have to admit that the Isles were part of the problem. Brexit destabilised Europe, there can be no question about that. Putin saw, what he thought, was a fracture in common European identity. In fact, his invasion has proved to be the reverse for much of Europe. Countries that previously had little or no interest in being part of the 'European home' are now seeking to begin the process of acceding to the EU, the most tangible form of common home available in the continent—Georgia, Ukraine and others. Countries that had sought to observe strict neutrality—Finland, Sweden and Switzerland, are now making moves to identify more closely with NATO and, amazingly, Germany, which has nurtured a deep sense of guilt post-1945, has overcome that to provide help and military

sustenance to Ukraine. We should be sure to lament our role in this crisis.

Secondly, to continue in prayer for our sisters and brothers in Ukraine, in Russia, in Belarus and in the countries receiving Ukrainian refugees—Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, Moldova (principally). That a poor country such as Moldova should welcome, with compassion, refugees from Ukraine is very humbling. Additionally, many 'ordinary' people in Russia have been appalled by the actions of tyrant Putin and his intimate supporters.

We should also hold in prayer former Soviet Republics who think that the tyrant will come for them next in his desire to re-establish the old Soviet Empire—Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

Thirdly, we need to continue to support those working hard to provide succour for those displaced by the tyrant—there are many channels to do this, but we commend Baptist World Aid/EBF/BMS World Mission who are supporting on the ground relief organisations like the amazing Hungarian Baptist Aid (they even got a mention on the BBC News!).

Fourthly, our own parliamentarians need to be called to account. For all the rhetoric, the UK has been slow to respond with aid and offering a place of refuge to those displaced by war. In the main railway station in Praha (Prague) there is a statue to Sir Nicholas Winterton, who organised the 'kindertransport' trains of Jewish children from Praha to London at the beginning of WW2. It is currently draped in Ukrainian blue and

yellow flags as the Czechs receive, and like the rest of the EU, offer, three years' asylum to Ukrainian refugees. What is the UK doing? Again, I don't know what this might be by the time you read these words, but as they are being written, the answer is very little. While other countries accept refugees crossing the border with hospitality, food, shelter⁹, our government has insisted in a regime of limited granting of visas, either through the online only visa centre in Poland, or by making a visit to Brussels, Paris, or, possibly, Lille. A nation that opened its arms to Indians escaping the persecution of Idi Amin in Uganda, a nation which has offered refuge to Chinese people escaping the clamp-down in Hong Kong by the Chinese Communist regime, must surely offer temporary hope to Ukrainians fleeing tyrant Putin and his conscript army?

Concluding thoughts

Europe has been twice devastated by major continental wars—1914-18 and 1939-45. War brings death and destruction. Sadly, some leaders feel bound to seek to enlarge their territory by brutal aggression. Many of us long for peace and justice in our common European home, but perhaps that can only be accomplished by recognising the integrated history of Europa over at least two millennia and refusing to engage in narrow, nationalistic agendas which falsely divide people groups with borders, boundaries and partial histories. For us, who dare to try to follow Jesus on the way to the cross, the commonweal of God, the love of our neighbours, the concern for the widows, the orphans, the beleaguered at our gates must surely count first, over the

narrow nationalistic flag-waving agendas of the principalities and powers.

This Lent, as we see the use of arms against innocent civilians, people fleeing from tyranny, I am drawn back for Lenten reading to that small book by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*¹⁰ prepared as a way of living for the seminarians at the Confessing Church Seminary at Finkenwalde, Stettin, as the tyrant Adolf Hitler strutted the world stage. I quote from Bonhoeffer's chapter on ministry:

Where Christians live together the time must inevitably come when in some crisis one person will have to declare God's Word and will to another...The basis on which Christians can speak to one another is that each knows the other as a sinner, who, with all his/her human dignity is lost and lonely if he/she is not given help.

Vladimir Putin proclaims himself as a follower of Christ and surely, at this time, he needs help to see his sins.

Notes to Text

1 M Gorbachev, *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our country and the World*, London, 1987, pp191-5: 'We are Europeans'(p199), 'the home is common, but each family has its own apartment, and there are different entrances'(p195).

2 Statistics from BWA Member Body Prayer Email of March 2022.

3 Norman Davies *Europe: A History*. Oxford: OUP, 1996, p656 'Rus.'

4 For a reasoned article see Keith Gessen 'Was Putin's war in Ukraine inevitable?' *The Guardian*, Journal Long Read, 15 March 2022.

5 In German Lemberg, in Polish Lvov, in Russian Livov

6 For a history of the Unions of each country see Ian M. Randall, *Communities of Conviction: Baptist Beginnings in Europe*. Schwarzenfeld, Germany: Neufeld Verlag, 2009.

7 The non-Slavic peoples in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania declined to join this new Federation.

8 Joshua T. Searle and Mykhailo N. Cherenkov, *A Future and a Hope: Mission, Theological Education and the Transformation of Post-Soviet Society*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2014.

9 In Krakow a shopping centre has been adapted to a refugee reception facility in the space of a few days.

10 Dietrich Bonhoeffer (transl John W. Doberstein), *Life Together*. Munich: Chr Kaiser Verlag; London: SCM Press, 1949.

A scripture widely used in Ukraine at this time:



Psalm 31

*In you, Lord, I have taken refuge;
let me never be put to shame;
deliver me in your righteousness.
Turn your ear to me,
come quickly to my rescue;
be my rock of refuge,
a strong fortress to save me.
Since you are my rock and my fortress,
for the sake of your name lead and guide me.
Keep me free from the trap that is set for me,
for you are my refuge.
Into your hands I commit my spirit;
deliver me, Lord, my faithful God*

A Pastoral Perspective: Mission in Ukraine

by Roger Martin

Author: Roger is a Baptist Minister in NW London and the Vice-Chair of Trustees for Dnipro Hope Mission.

Ukraine's pro-Kremlin government was toppled following three months of protests culminating in a disastrous and murderous suppression that killed over 100 pro-democracy protesters in February 2014. 'In Ukraine there is now a new spirit of freedom',¹ said Canon Dr Michael Bourdeaux at the time. Despite Russia's immediate response to annex Crimea and support pro-Russian separatists in Donetsk, were Michael's words prophetic?

The Christian University in Donetsk was overrun in 2014, forcing the displacement of all staff and students, some of whom joined approximately 1.5 million Internally Displaced Persons² resulting from the pro-Russian backlash, but a spiritual awakening had begun. The Protestant church was encouraged by the solidarity of the people against a corrupt and authoritarian government and began rediscovering its own missiological root to be the 'salt of the earth' (Matthew 5:13).

Their voices had been missing both in national and local government, but the Christian duty to speak out and defend the poor and needy (Proverbs 31:8,9) combined with a new solidarity and determination to increase their presence and create communities built on the principles of God's Kingdom.

I experienced that as I visited mission centres across Eastern Ukraine with Dnipro Hope Mission (DHM) in January 2020. Birthed from their own experiences and hope to 'help make the Kingdom of God a visible reality in Ukraine'³ Joshua and Varduyi Searle founded DHM in 2016 to partner with local churches so that they may be encouraged and better equipped to lead and be a voice for good in their society. I was keen to see how DHM were fulfilling this vision, for it is one thing to state a vision but another to live it out,⁴ and I was not disappointed. Pastors were missionary activists who were subverting Soviet-inspired bureaucratic communities through their inspiring and courageous acts.

I witnessed efforts such as:

The 'pronouncing a blessing on all that was accounted worthless'⁵ was witnessed to the disabled in a Kyiv district, even when some in the church were still indoctrinated in setting a value on people by what they could give. Disabled people were helped out of cramped apartments to meet in the local church building, to learn new skills where possible and even when this was not possible to be valued as a member of the community. No-one who witnessed the baptism of these people could suppress tears of joy. The

pastor campaigned on their behalf to get better accommodation, bringing their plight to the attention of local government.

Likewise in Poltava the church reached regularly visited schools, children's care homes and a children's hospital to show God's love and care. When I was with them this included a group of us having to sneak into a ward of a children's hospital (which was little more than a plain dormitory room last painted in the USSR-era), guided by some of the nursing staff who dared not let the principal know of the visit of this Christian group, lest they be reported to the local government. Before we left, we were 'caught' by a parent coming to collect an outpatient and, following the prayers of some of the team while we were sharing gospel stories with the children, they suddenly and dramatically changed their tune from threatening to report us to supporting God's love being shown.

A final example is that of a church community in Novomoskovsk. They had heard about DHM through their Mennonite network and wanted to explore a possible future partnership to help their work of providing homes and hospitality to the many IDPs coming into their district. They had already held a children's activity day and invited the local mayor. Conscious of trying to build good relationships with him, they had pondered on how pointed they should be in sharing that it was Christ's love that drove their motivation, but they were

relieved to find that the mayor himself had become a voice for Christ's compassion.

There are many other stories, including those from DHM's base in Vasylykivka, but insufficient space to share them and they have, in every case, been severely disrupted. On 24 February this year Russia dealt a hammer-blow as they launched a so-called 'special military operation' that has now turned into a campaign of mass murder against the Ukrainian civilian population. Our growing mission in Ukraine was hit with the blunt force of the hammer and our careful crafting of these community relationships with churches of Eastern Ukraine appeared to be scythed as people fled the horrors of shelling.

On the one hand, I am stunned by the savage blow that has been dealt. It is a desperate situation directly affecting our founder's family—who have had to abandon their home—and causing other pastors to send their families to safety while they took on the work of pastoring and creating refugee centres in or near war zones. Already prevented from visiting and building on relationships because of the COVID pandemic, we find ourselves having to give our encouragement from the sidelines while at least able to provide funds directly to the churches on the frontlines of the Russian advance, and those receiving refugees from Mariupol, Irpin and Kyiv. Those in Poltava, Vasylykivka and Zaporizhia now find themselves on the frontline too. We may not have completed a partnership with the local church at Novomoskovsk, but we have doubled the direct contacts with activist pastors and their churches in the last three weeks,

thanks to our network of friends and the Mennonite European Conference, led by José Arrais, a Portuguese Mennonite pastor who serves on our International Advisory Board.

On the other hand, I still think Michael Bourdeaux was right. I do not downplay the horrors of war and the effects it has on many generations as families are torn apart. The trauma is huge, and I am sceptical that the masks of evil have—as yet—been brought into the light. In 2014 Searle and Cherenkov thought that Russia's mask had been removed,⁶ but it is apparent that was not a full unveiling and that we in the West have colluded with evil through our own pursuit of economic self-interest. How then can I be so sure that Christ's spirit of freedom lives on? Our guiding scripture and blessing to speak over the people of Ukraine is

We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. 10 We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. (2 Corinthians 4:8-10, NIV)

The bravery and leadership being provided in the towns and villages by the churches is most humbling and Ukrainian resistance has hampered Russia's advance, helped I am sure by the fervent prayers of the saints.

We must not give up! Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that the only alternative to being the salt of the earth is to be annihilated.⁷ In Britain we can give practical engagement though the continued provision of funds

for humanitarian relief and have both Krish Kandiah's Sanctuary Foundation⁸ and the Government's Homes for Ukraine⁹ scheme, through which we can take upon ourselves a solidarity with the people and a godly responsibility for them. We must pursue the defiance, determination, and transformational hope of 2 Corinthians 4:8-10 for Ukraine and we must embody the principle shared by Bonhoeffer on Jesus' releasing of the disciples from political associations and overcoming evil by loving our enemies¹⁰ (Romans 12:20).

Notes to Text

1 M. Bourdeaux, Foreword, in *A Future and a Hope: Mission, Theological Education and the Transformation of Post-Soviet Society*, by Joshua T. Searle and Mykhailo N. Cherenkov. Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2014, ix.

2 According to the United Nations Humanitarian Refugee Agency reporting on figures provided by Ukraine's Government, <https://www.unhcr.org/ua/en/internally-displaced-persons?msclkid=1c81a876a8fd11ecb3ee84cd5b286440> [accessed 15 March 2022].

3 Dnipro Hope Mission's Vision statement, see <https://dniprohopemission.org>

4 Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, revised edn. Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2019, p310.

5 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, revised edn. London, SCM Press, 2015, p73.

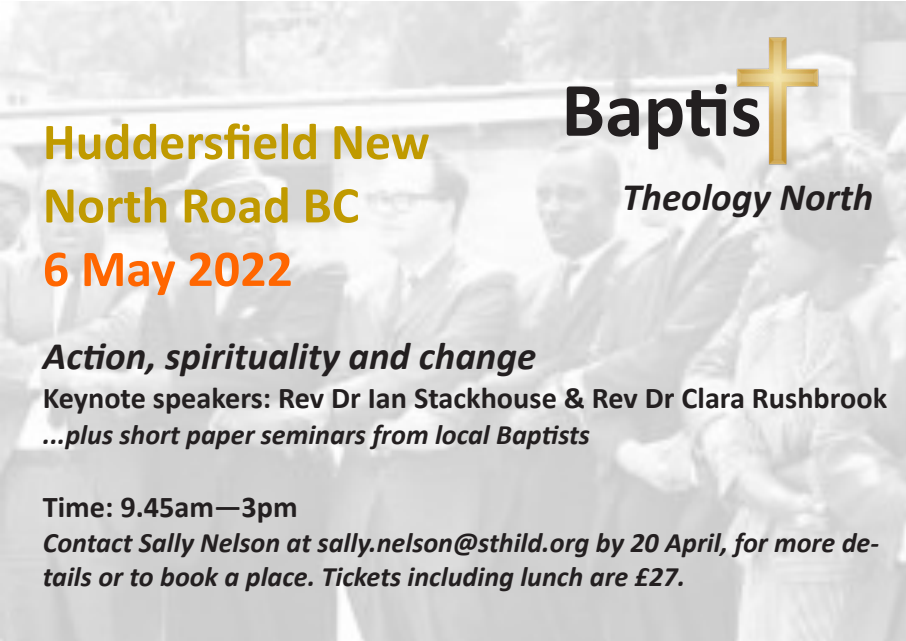
6 Searle and Cherenkov, p111.

7 Bonhoeffer, p69.

8 See <https://www.sanctuaryfoundation.org.uk>

9 H.M. Government, see <https://homesforukraine.campaign.gov.uk/>

10 Bonhoeffer, p96.



**Huddersfield New
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The Cost of Discipleship for a Marginalised People

by Michael Jackson

Author: Michael Jackson is now retired from Baptist ministry and living in Yorkshire, where he continues to write, particularly on historical topics.

The New Testament church is defined both by its experience of being persecuted by others and by the need to exercise discipline within its own ranks. This is typical of any marginalised group which needs both to sustain its life in the teeth of opposition and maintain its core integrity whenever there is inner dissent or heresy. The symbiotic relationship between 'in-group' and 'out-group' helps both to sustain their identity and value systems: they need each other.

This article examines the experience of the early church through the eyes of Luke, as recounted in the Acts of the Apostles, since opposition from without and struggles within characterised it absolutely. In this examination, social factors are taken into account by using social science insights. Conflict theory has been a notable feature of sociological research since the work of Max Weber (1864-1920); and subsequently applied to many areas of life.¹ Such an approach to the text, together with the theological, helps to draw a sharper picture of the life and experience of the nascent church.

Overview: Christians in the Empire

The *modus operandi* of the Roman Empire was to absorb, rather than confront, the philosophical and religious ethos of the nations it conquered, so contributing to the unity of its sprawling dominions. The

result was myriad belief systems which the *Pax Romana* tolerated on condition that due respect was paid to the genius of the emperor, acknowledging his divine status. That, for many, was a relatively painless demand in view of the all-pervading syncretism. This syncretism ensured that to maintain a good relationship with 'gods many and lords many' it was necessary to give credence to them all. A sole exception appears to have been Judaism, on account of its unyielding monotheism (Exodus 20:4-6); this was a reflection of Rome's respect for Judaism's ancient faith and high moral standards.² Because Christianity sprang from the loins of Judaism, it brought some credibility to its followers. However, any such discretion would weaken once it became clear that it was not a reform movement within Judaism, but rather a new faith, creating clear blue water between the two.³

When it comes to the role of Rome *vis-à-vis* Christianity, it is sometimes assumed that it was state policy from the outset to destroy it. It is closer to the truth to understand much persecution in terms of local action by its opponents who would appeal to magistrates and governors to take action against Christians, as in Thyatira, where the root issue was the undermining of lucrative business practices (Acts 16:16-24). It is true that under such emperors as Nero⁴ and

Domitian⁵ state persecution was evident, but appears to have been the exception rather than the rule. Such evidence as we have includes the much cited correspondence between Pliny, governor of Bithynia, and the emperor Trajan (c. 112 CE), as to how to deal with Christians in the light of Roman law.⁶ Though Pliny had already condemned some to death, his uncertainty about the right course of action is clear. In his eyes 'obstinacy,' 'unbending perversity' and 'superstition'⁷—that is, forsaking the worship of Rome's traditional gods—appear to be the crimes at the heart of the matter, although such generalisations suggest there was no legislation aimed specifically at Christians at this stage.⁸ Trajan approved of Pliny's approach.

Coincidentally, this correspondence also described the new religion's 'contagion,' resulting in deserted temples and neglect of regular worship, with economic consequences. Clearly, Christianity was having a marked impact in Bithynia, though at the same time believers in the province were suffering for their faith (1 Peter 3:13-17). It is significant that Tacitus, in his observations of the great fire of Rome, while disagreeing with Nero's inhuman treatment of Christians, accused them of 'hatred of the human race.'¹⁰ Such an epithet is grounded in the failure of believers to participate in civic affairs—the essential 'glue' binding together the life of society, since many societal activities were shot through with pagan religious significance, such as the offering of sacrifice. It probably seemed to the average citizen that Christians adopted a superior stance to everyone else, notwithstanding their efforts to be law-abiding.¹¹

Perhaps this reflects the fact that, unlike modern western society, life in the ancient world was much less individualistic, encouraging wholesale community involvement, and discouraging deviancy. The wider context in the Greco-Roman world is the growth of voluntary associations or clubs, formed around a common theme or profession. So we find trade associations, burial clubs and political groupings. Such *collegia* uniting around a common interest or felt need proliferated, despite laws which sought to rein them in because of the tendency of such groups to become political and a potential threat to the state.¹² It is highly likely that to many onlookers the first house churches appeared to be just another example of *collegia*.

Conflict within the community

It is often felt that a social organisation such as the church is more than the sum of its parts. Essential characteristics include effective leadership, allocation of responsibilities, clear aims and objectives, mechanisms to deal with stresses and strains among members.¹³ The central focus is to maintain a cohesive unity in the midst of external forces which may threaten the group. For the missionary church these two factors may work against each other, for by its very nature it must be open to the world, porous enough to welcome potential converts. There is little doubt that the admission of Gentiles to what was, initially, a Jewish community provoked great tension, testing the very nature of this new movement (Acts 15:1-21). The fact that the scope of the Jerusalem decision to admit them is stated differently in Acts (15:19-20) and Galatians (2:10) indicates it was not

understood in the same way by everyone, so tensions continued (Galatians 2:11-13). In time such disagreements would issue into a consolidation of authority and more formal means of decision-making.¹⁴

While most examples of conflict in Acts are external in nature, there are a handful which shine a light on the internal life of the nascent church as it faces issues which threaten its unity and effective witness. The fact that these are even recorded is not simply a matter of historical record, but also a hermeneutical tool for the benefit of churches in the future, lest they become complacent.

The first cites the deceit of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11), clearly a negative aspect of behaviour following the positive example of Barnabas's generosity. Whether we attribute their sudden deaths to divine judgement or psychological guilt the basic issue here is truth and integrity without which any community is compromised and weakened. A second example concerns Simon the magician attempting to 'buy' the Holy Spirit from the apostles to impress the populace (8:9-24). Though a baptised believer, his naïve request reveals a basic ignorance of the way God works in and through his church, as though the Spirit is a mere commodity to be bought and sold. Was he unique in this misapprehension? At any rate Peter's damning condemnation would serve as a warning to the church to honour and respect its motive power in its life and witness. It would also serve to reinforce community boundaries. The third incident involves the reprimand Peter received from Jewish Christians for breaking the sacred law of cleanliness by eating with Gentile believers (11:1-3), which he defends

by recounting the visionary experience of the unclean animals and the voice which commanded 'kill and eat': a re-telling of the Cornelius episode (10:1-16), stressing its importance as Luke saw it. Here, the Levitical food laws (Leviticus 11:1-47), so central to Jewish identity, cannot be faced too soon, for their abrogation marks a new *Christian* identity. The fact that Peter later faltered under pressure (Galatians 2:11-14) is an indication of the pain and struggle of leaving things behind as the movement evolved.

Related to this, and even more important in the life of the nascent church, is the crisis over circumcision, seemingly resolved at the Jerusalem conference (Acts 15:1-21). It is quite clear that the 'Judaisers', zealous for retaining the central initiating rite of Judaism, envisioned a very different future for the Jesus community: a renewing stream within Judaism rather than a separate, and thus competing, faith. Such a central matter of principle, generating passion on both sides, reveals significant aspects of the church's early life. First, a concern to reconcile differences, even if ultimately flawed. Secondly, the emergence of local leaders located in Jerusalem, the mother church, regarded initially as the reference point. Lastly, an informal structure for dealing with dissent and disputes, eventually replaced by a more centralised authority.¹⁵ Together with its developing theology the church needed to devise ways of dealing with conflict, to reflect unity in Christ. The examples above represent Luke's desire to reflect inner dissent and to alert the community to its destructive impact.

Suffering

Since the New Testament church faced opposition from both Jewish and Gentile worlds, the nature of its suffering reflected this dual adversary. And, though unsought, it positively strengthened ideology, group-binding and self-definition.¹⁶ Communities under pressure are likely to be defined by those who oppose them.

Although there are clearly theological reasons behind the opposition from Judaism, social factors were also in play at the end of the first century. A major one was heightened tensions between the foreign occupation and the axis of priestly aristocracy and Herodian rulers.¹⁷ Although those with wealth and privilege might have argued for the *status quo*, since such depended ultimately upon Rome, violent nationalists led by Zealots and *Sicarii* (dagger-wielding guerrillas), motivated by religious zeal, were increasingly evident. In such a situation the unity and coherence of the Jewish nation was paramount. In addition, this period was noted for the dissemination of religious sects, reflecting a shaking up of the body politic. Noteworthy are the desert-dwelling Essenes, the reforming Pharisees and the traditional, aristocratic Sadducees. There were, too, economic factors, such as endemic poverty, food shortages, landlessness and chronic unemployment. All of these social factors threatened the unity and coherence of the nation. Therefore the emergence of the Jesus movement, with its challenge to authority, would simply exacerbate the situation (Acts 4:5-12; 5:27-32). Believers would be chastised as much for threatening Jewish boundaries and identity as for their theology of the Jesus-Messiah.¹⁸

The book of Acts reflects the author's triumphalist portrayal of the Jesus movement, as it powered its way from a small minor province to the centre of the empire, Rome itself. In the course of this we are presented with a wide range of confrontations which illustrate both the church's vulnerability and also its robustness in facing a variety of dangerous scenarios, as examined below.

Treatment by Judaism

Early references in Acts cite the Sadducees as being arch opponents of the Jesus movement, rather than the Pharisees, as in the gospel accounts.¹⁹ The apostles are charged with preaching resurrection (4:1-22), a doctrine denied since the Pentateuch alone defined their creed. Yet, later, quite different reasons are adduced to condemn believers. One is 'jealousy', presumably because of their success in winning converts (5:17-18). Such a motive operates later in Acts with Paul and Silas brought before the magistrate in Thessalonica (13:44-47; 17:4-9). The second reason for the Sadducees' opposition is preaching in the name of Jesus, that is using the *name* of a crucified felon as an ultimate spiritual authority, which would amount to blasphemy (5:27-32 cf Deuteronomy 21:22). It is not surprising that the Sadducees are confrontational in view of their conservative stance within Judaism, determined to defend the Torah, the soul of Jewishness, as well as their own privileged position in society.

Clearly, the slaying of Stephen (Protomartyr) marks a turning point in the persecution of the nascent church (6:8-7:60). It is possible that the members

of the 'synagogue of the Freedmen' initiated it to curry favour since Jews, once enslaved, carried the stigma, even when freed.²⁰ His crime is denoted as blasphemy against God, Moses and the Law, as well as threats to the Temple. Here we have a basket of accusations, which are characteristic of those that will follow in Luke's story.

The killing of James, brother of John, by Agrippa I (12:1-5), for which no explanation is given, represents the psychological attempt to ingratiate oneself, to enhance acceptability. This is borne out by the fact that it so pleased the populace that he arrested and imprisoned Peter. Because the Herodian bloodline was not pure Jewish (rather Idumaeans), and therefore resented, it was necessary to indulge the nation by such acts.

Most accounts of the church's persecution result from the work of the Apostle Paul, reflecting different degrees of ferocity. In Corinth, for example, he is met by Jewish opponents who merely revile and scorn him, leading to the key strategic decision to turn to the Gentiles (18:5-6). Similarly, when in Ephesus, opposition took the form of deprecating the church: they 'spoke evil of the Way' (19:8-9). So here we have low-level verbal abuse—name-calling—which in the day was intended publicly to dishonour an opponent, inviting a response.²¹ Similarly, at Iconium, it is asserted that Jews, acting through Gentiles, 'poisoned minds' against them, which amounted to psychological warfare (14:1-2). That there was a response to such stigmatising by Jesus deviants is possibly found in the many references to 'Jews' (*Ioudaizein*) with a negative overtone (9:23; 14:2; 23:12 et al).²²

Early physical violence against the church cites a Sanhedrin flogging of the apostles (5:40), after which Saul, motivated by a desire to defend the purity of Judaism against the heresy of Jesus followers, began his purge (8:1-3). Luke's vivid description—ravaging the church—dragging off men and women to prison—well reflects the zeal of the persecutor, convinced he is doing the will of Yahweh.

Stoning, justified by Levitical law (Leviticus 20:27) and a common form of Hebrew execution for a variety of offences, including idolatry, is meted out to the church at intervals. The coordinated attempt at Iconium is not successful (14:5-7), but at Lystra the crowd-stoning proved almost fatal for Paul (14:19-20). Similarly, in Jerusalem, he is beaten before being rescued by the Roman authority (21:27-36). As regards flogging, not all such punishment is recorded in Acts, for in his letters (2 Corinthians 11:24) Paul records receiving the customary 'forty lashes but one' at the hands of the Jewish authorities on five occasions. Such treatment infers that he was still regarded as a synagogue member and not expelled, so his status was ambiguous: an enigmatic figure within Judaism.²³

It has been proposed that the main opponents in Acts were more likely to be Jewish Christians than Jews, in view of Luke's perceived antagonism towards such people who urge circumcision on Gentile believers, and that this colours his view of Jews in general.²⁴ If so, is it likely that they would encourage persecution of fellow believers by the authorities despite their misgivings over uncircumcised Gentile converts? A further scenario is that it was fear of Jewish persecution

on the part of believing Jews who were accepting of Gentile believers, eating and drinking with them at the Lord's Table, that led them to pressure such Gentiles towards circumcision and the Jewish Law (Galatians 6:12).²⁵ What seems certain is that it was the Gentile mission and its success that angered Judaism, in both Luke's gospel (4:25-30) and Acts (13:48-52).²⁶ Overall, the source of the bitter Christian-Jewish conflict is rooted in the fact that they shared much common ground, so it was vital to stress the differences which separated them.²⁷ This is reflected on the occasions when Jews stress their distinctiveness from the Jesus believers before the authorities, as in Thessalonica (17:5-9) and Corinth (18:12-13). Whether Jewish opposition and persecution was uniform across the Diaspora has been questioned.²⁸ Rather, it may well have been relative, depending on location, the personnel involved and their estimate of what constituted apostasy. It was a fluid situation where universal norms of belief were yet to be established.

Treatment by Rome

In Acts, the record of suffering at the hands of Roman magistrates and governors is rather restrained. This reflects one of the founding pillars of the Pax Romana, namely *lex* (law), which, though robust, sought to be impartial and just, rather than arbitrary. Notwithstanding, the picture painted here may well reflect Luke's desire to present Roman rule in the most favourable light possible. The motive, many commentators argue, is to portray Christianity as non-subversive and loyal, engaged in harmless activity as far as the state is concerned. This apologia, it was hoped, would facilitate the advancement of the faith.

The above is well portrayed in the action of Gallio, proconsul of Archia (18:12-17). In the face of Jewish accusations that Paul is subverting the Torah, he dismisses the case on the basis that this is a purely Jewish matter, falling outside Roman jurisdiction. Significantly, he believes that the accused before him is simply another Jew, reflecting a time when the Jesus movement lacked self-identity in the eyes of the world at large. Similarly, when loss of livelihood and uproar in Ephesus results in the town clerk becoming involved, he refuses to act since there is no clear evidence of a crime (19:23-41), referring the mob to the legality of the courts. Later, the threat of a flogging by a tribune is promptly removed when Paul discloses his Roman citizenship (22:22-29 cf. 16:37)), representing a further example of adherence to law.²⁹ In the succeeding chapter he is threatened by a Jewish conspiracy which plots to kill him (23:12-25), but is protected by the tribune who provides him with an armed guard from Jerusalem to Caesarea. The one exception to such considerate treatment is the flogging Peter and Silas received at Philippi (16:19-24 cf 2 Corinthians 11:23), for pre-trial punishment was permissible and common.³⁰ The final episodes in Paul's life are clearly used by Luke as a vehicle for apologia, in the course of which they also testify to Roman legal attitudes. The chapters relating to Felix and Festus, succeeding governors of Judaea (chapters 24 to 25), cite the initial Jewish charges against him, in terms of agitator and ringleader of a troublesome sect ('Nazarenes') as well as profaner of the temple. Felix reserves judgement, keeping Paul in custody. Festus, not finding any charges worthy

of punishment, simply acquiesces to his request to plead his case before Caesar as a privileged Roman citizen.

The sum total of the above evidence presents the imperial government as, if not a friend of the Jesus movement, then a dispassionate dispenser of justice which effectively ensures Paul's safe journey to Rome, symbolic of Christianity reaching the heart of the empire. Such a presentation stands in sharp contrast to the movement's treatment by Judaism which is portrayed as frequently inciting local authorities to chastise believers.

A functional interpretation of conflict

It is clear from the above that Luke, in Acts, does not minimise the degree of conflict experienced by the church, encountering that which came from within its own ranks and, more significantly, from both Jews and Romans. As such it may be concluded that conflict was wholly negative, threatening its life and mission, a source of pain and suffering. It is true that such pressure may have destructive consequences on any community such as the haemorrhaging of members, compromise, and even internal disintegration. Members initially attracted to a particular group may not have anticipated the changed attitude of former friends or society at large which may engender unease, even a questioning of the decision to associate with the group in the first place.

However, this is not necessarily the whole story, for the Christian church not only survived conflict but flourished. This can be explained theologically: the non-negotiable conviction that 'Jesus is Lord.' In addition, there is the contribution the social sciences can make, particularly

by way of conflict theory. Such a theory may be applied both to a community and the individuals comprising it. When experiencing conflict, the result may be a strengthening of group identity, cohesion and a reinforcing of boundaries. Upon the group members themselves the impact may be an increase in personal discipline, an enhanced commitment to other group members and a sense that one embodies the group's purposes and ideology.³¹ So, far from being wholly negative and destructive, conflict may have constructive consequences. In addition, the portrayal of the courage and commitment of the church's leaders, notably Paul, in Acts would serve as an encouragement and inspiration to succeeding generations with Paul as a role model.

Notes to text

- 1 Gordon Marshall (ed), *Oxford Dictionary of Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 108
- 2 John Stambaugh and David Balch, *The Social World of the First Christians* (London: SPCK, 1986), 47
- 3 Stambaugh and Balch, 61
- 4 Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome* xv. 32-47
- 5 Eusebius, H.E. III.17-20
- 6 Pliny, Epp. X.96-97
- 7 Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, Nero 16, in which he, too, attributes superstitio to Christians as a major justification for limiting their activity.
- 8 Stambaugh and Balch, 33
- 9 It is likely that blame for the act was the first occasion Christians were identified as distinct over against Jews.
- 10 Tacitus, *Annals*, XV. 44. 2-8
- 11 Robert Louis Wilken, *The Christians As The Romans Saw Them* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 66
- 12 Stambaugh and Balch, 124-127

- 13 Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1983) 84
- 14 Meeks, 113
- 15 Meeks, 111-113
- 16 Jack T. Sanders, *Schismatics, Sectarians, Dissidents, Deviants* (London: SCM Press, 1993), 125-129
- 17 Richard A. Horsley, *Sociology and the Jesus Movement* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 83-88
- 18 Sanders, 141
- 19 Derek Tidball, *An Introduction to the Sociology of the New Testament* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1983), 58-59
- 20 Tidball, 60-61
- 21 Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 30
- 22 Sanders, 232-233
- 23 John M. G. Barclay, *Deviance and Apostasy in Modelling Early Christianity* ed. Philip F. Esler (London and New York: Routledge, 1995) 122-123
- 24 Sanders, 184-186
- 25 Philip F. Esler, *The First Christians in Their Social Worlds* (London: Routledge, 1994) 61-62, 69
- 26 Sanders, 185
- 27 Sanders, 127
- 28 Barclay, 121-125
- 29 Roman citizenship is not claimed in any of Paul's corpus of letters, though perhaps such a reference was unwarranted in that context. Humiliating punishment of Roman citizens was forbidden by Valerian and Porcian laws, see C. S. C. Williams, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (London: A. and C. Black, 1978), 246
- 30 Stambaugh and Balch, 35
- 31 John H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 112-118

Jeremiah as a Role Model for Christian Workers: an Exegesis of Jeremiah 20:7-18

by Hetty Lalleman

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Jeremiah, Jesus and Paul

Persecution and hard times were part and parcel of the ministry of God's messengers in the Old Testament, of Jesus, and of his disciples. Jesus called his followers blessed when they were insulted, persecuted and falsely accused (Mt 5:11-12). Followers of Jesus cannot expect a successful life in the eyes of the world, for the One whom they follow died in weakness. Yet we will live by God's strength just like Christ, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 13:4.

What does the life of Jeremiah add to this? In another article I have discussed possible influences of the book of Jeremiah on the apostle Paul.¹ Both were involved in battles over who was the true prophet/apostle. Both were attacked in their ministry and their persecution was closely related to that ministry. Paul lists many aspects of his suffering and need: hunger, persecution, danger in all sorts of ways, hard labour, yet in all of this God's grace was sufficient for him (2 Corinthians 11). Jeremiah's list would be similar.

This article will show how Jeremiah's whole being was involved in bringing God's message and how his suffering was caused by his vocation. In this respect Jeremiah is a forerunner of Jesus who, in his parable of the tenants (Matthew 21:33-41) recalls how God continually sent prophets, only for them to be persecuted and rejected; and finally the owner of the vineyard sent his son...

Jeremiah 4

Many of Jeremiah's announcements of judgement are full of metaphors and vivid, poetic language. In 4:23-26, for instance, sin results in a return to the pre-creation order; sin results in chaos as before God's creation work, the land returns to the pre-creation chaos. Sin pollutes the land.

It is obvious that the prophet is struck by the message God asks him to bring. He feels the desperate situation in his own body (4:19). Suffering because of his message is integral to his life. He is so strongly connected with his own people that he physically feels their pain and misery. Yet he is also on God's side, recognising and feeling the devastating effects of disobedience to Him.

The Confessions

Throughout Jeremiah 7-20 the prophet analyses the deplorable situation of the people. In this part of the book we find his so-called 'confessions' (11:18-12:6; 15:10-21; 17:12-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-18)². In between announcements of judgement and calls to repentance, these confessions are very personal prayers of the prophet. They are called confessions although they have nothing to do with confession of sin; they are rather outbursts of the personal pain which is caused by being a prophet and the persecution linked to that mission. The

one who is sent cries to his Sender. The contexts of the five confessions differs but they all have to do with the prophet's task and mission.

In 1917 the German scholar Baumgartner noted that the confessions are similar in form to the laments in the book of Psalms.³ In the Psalms the reasons for lament differs from case to case: there may be illness, the threat of enemies or suffering because of the psalmist's sins. For Jeremiah, it is mainly the threat of enemies who ridicule his message and plot against him to kill him. Jeremiah's laments concentrate on his call, life and work as a messenger of God. While Jeremiah's confessions have the form of psalms, their content specifically focuses on his prophetic ministry, on the essence of being a prophet, which is the essence of his entire life. Jeremiah was called by God for his task even before he was born (Jeremiah 1:5). As a prophet he is rejected and ridiculed, persecuted physically and emotionally. In all of this he is a living illustration of the people's rejection of God and his word.

Jeremiah 11-12

True prophets are never popular! In Jeremiah 11:18-12:6 Jeremiah's friends and family make plans to kill him. They come from the very village where he was born and had grown up, Anathoth, which was walking distance from Jerusalem. Yet Jeremiah was, as he says, 'like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter': he had no idea that they wanted to kill him, until God revealed it to him. Their anger and hatred are immediately linked to Jeremiah's message, for they say: 'Do not prophesy in the name of the Lord or you will die by our hands...' (11:21).

God's answer to Jeremiah's lament is not very encouraging: things are bad now, but they will get worse (12:5). Anathoth is only a small place and Jeremiah is still in an environment he knows well, but there will be a time when he stands before the king and the political leaders and has to speak out God's words to them!

Jeremiah 15, 17, 18

Other confessions have the same connection between Jeremiah's words and life as a prophet and the opposition he meets. In 15:10-21, the second confession, Jeremiah records how he 'ate' God's word with joy when it was given to him (15:16), but also how lonely he was and excluded from normal social contacts because of God's word. Jeremiah 16 illustrates his loneliness: he is prevented from marrying or even taking part in weddings and funerals, a major prohibition in a non-western culture. Jeremiah will be an outsider and a loner. His life illustrates the time when judgement comes and nobody will marry anymore. Joy will be gone and there will be so many corpses that there will be no time or people to bury the dead. The prophet suffers as a result of his ministry.

In Jeremiah 17:12-18 the prophet laments that people mock him by doubting whether the word of the Lord will come true: 'They keep saying to me, "Where is the word of the Lord? Let it now be fulfilled!"' (v15).

The fourth confession in Jeremiah 18:18-23 quotes the prophet's adversaries as follows: 'So come, let's attack him with our tongues and pay no attention to anything he says' (v18). In the fifth and final confession (20:7-18) it is again obvious that Jeremiah's laments concentrate on

his being a prophet and the results of that for his own life and being. This article takes a closer look at this particular passage.

Confrontation with power

In Jeremiah 20:7-18 we are struck by the abrupt alternation between lament, trust and praise, see for instance, vv11, 13 and 14. This change in tone is characteristic of the psalms of lament, but in Jeremiah 20 the contrast between the different elements is even stronger. Moreover, the passage does not end in a positive way but in despair. This fifth confession is the most desperate and depressing of all, at least for us as modern readers.

In its current context Jeremiah's lament in 20:7-13 follows an incident with Pashhur, the chief officer of the temple. Jeremiah 19:14 reports that the prophet is commanded by God to stand in the court of the temple—the centre of religious life in Judah and Jerusalem—and to proclaim judgement on the city and the land. Pashhur is responsible for keeping order in the temple and Jeremiah's words are regarded as politically and religiously dangerous and offensive. Pashhur therefore has the prophet beaten and 'put in the stocks': a very uncomfortable way to spend the night. The next day Jeremiah is released, but he does not hesitate to proclaim judgement on Pashhur himself. Jeremiah calls him '*Magor-Missabib*', 'terror on every side' (20:3). To his friends Pashhur will be a source of panic and terror. The terror will come through the king of Babylon, who will bring destruction and disaster and who will take Pashhur and his family into exile.

In this context Jeremiah's lament in verses 7-20 is a cry of despair of a prophet who has been deeply humiliated. It is not just 'anybody' who was beaten and put in stocks, it is Jeremiah 'the prophet,' as is emphasised in verse 2, that is, the messenger of the Lord! In Jeremiah 20:7-18 we meet a disillusioned prophet in the depths of despair. Yet his first point of call is the Lord who sent him (verse 7, compare how the 'psalms of lament' start by addressing God).

The verb translated as 'deceived' in the NIV can also mean 'strongly persuaded.' The same verb is also used of 'seducing' a virgin, thus having sexual overtones. However, translating it that way suggests that the prophet did not know what would happen to him. Jeremiah's call narrative in chapter 1 shows that he knew well that his ministry would cause much trouble (1:7-8, 17-19). Hence I think the verb should be translated as 'strongly persuaded.'⁴ The Message reads: 'You pushed me into this, God, and I let you do it. You were too much for me.'

The lament of Jeremiah 20 expresses that Jeremiah feels trapped in his ministry as a prophet. He would like to give up and abandon his life's call, but he cannot (end of verse 9). Verbs like 'be able to' and 'cannot' are significant in this passage. God has 'prevailed' (verse 7); the same verb is used in verse 9 where NIV reads 'I cannot,' in verse 10 (the enemies try to prevail over him) and in verse 11 (my enemies will not prevail).

Apart from this verb, we find words that express the overwhelming feeling of being trapped constantly, by everyone, everywhere: 'all day long' everyone mocks

me' (verse 7), 'All my friends are waiting for me to slip' (verse 10), people whisper: 'Terror on every side!' (v10). This last phrase may describe Jeremiah's message of judgement, but it may also be a taunt name, like Pashhur's new name given by Jeremiah in verse 3.

Verses 7-10 give the impression of great disturbance because of the opposition Jeremiah experiences: God, his enemies and even his own call are all too strong for him. The prophet feels trapped on all sides. He cannot resist the One who sent him, nor his enemies, his calling or his so-called 'friends' (v10).

Change of tone

However, in vv11-13 those overwhelming feelings of despair make way for expressions of hope and trust: God will defend his case and will make an end to his enemies' behaviour! Jeremiah is no longer overwhelmed by the threats of the enemies, for God is 'a mighty warrior' (v11) who knows what is in the enemies' heart (v12) and will deliver his prophet from his adversaries.

We can explain the sudden change in tone as follows: in a situation of being trapped on all sides the only way to escape is running to God. It is always better to fall into the hands of the God who sent you than in those of the enemies, however difficult the Sender's orders are. With his back against the wall, God is the only one who will receive and carry him. The prophet is so convinced that God will indeed rescue him that he praises him (v13). A sudden change from despair to praise is not unusual in psalms of lament: see Psalm 31, which resembles Jeremiah's lament.

Jeremiah 20:14-18

However, in vv14-18 Jeremiah's words become darker again, full of even more despair. The contrast is so sharp that some scholars think that these verses were not connected to vv7-13 originally. Yet since historical data are missing, we need to try to make sense of the text as we have it.

Two different elements stand out in this passage: first the repetition of the idea of being 'cursed' and 'not be blessed' in vv14-15; and second words that are connected with birth: to be born (three times in vv14-15) and (my mother's) 'womb' (three times in vv17-18). In these verses the prophet tries to hand back his call to God, a call before he was born. There are clear connections with chapter 1, where we read how Jeremiah was called 'before he was born', yes, even before God formed him 'in the womb' (1:5). If he had not been born, if he had never left his mother's womb, he would not have been called as a prophet and he had not had all this trouble. God's calling would have been useless had he died in his mother's womb.

Jeremiah's lament here is similar to Job's lament in Job 3:3-8, where Job wishes the day of his birth had disappeared from the calendar. Neither Job nor Jeremiah curse their parents, a major sin (Exodus 21:17; Leviticus 20:9), but both concentrate on their birth and in Jeremiah's case even on his conception. In this way both the beginning and end of this confession concentrate on his prophetic call: God had persuaded him, but in the strongest possible way Jeremiah demands to have it reversed.

In this confession the prophet reaches the lowest point and most desperate point in his entire ministry. However, his ministry continues. Jeremiah continued speaking because God continued revealing him his Word. The mournful question of v18 is not the end of the book nor of Jeremiah's prophetic life, as we know from the rest of the book.

The suffering of God

It is clear that Jeremiah's suffering was not just the suffering of an individual, but of someone sent by God. God's messenger does not deliver God's message in a detached manner, as if it leaves him untouched. The Book of Jeremiah reports on various forms of suffering: the people are suffering and will suffer as a result of sin, Jeremiah suffers from adversity against his message and therefore his person, and between the lines we notice some of God's suffering. This is obvious from the fact that it is sometimes hard to know who the speaker is: God or Jeremiah. Take for example the passage 8:18-9:3, which ends with 'declares the Lord.' But where did God begin to speak? In v1? There is an ambivalence here, which we should leave there. In Jeremiah we hear the voice of God. The prophet is situated between his people and God.

That God suffers is obvious in 31:20, which includes an effective rhetorical question: indeed, Ephraim is God's dear son (cf v9). Both the phrases 'I still remember him' and 'I have great compassion for him' have a repetition of the verb in Hebrew, thus emphasizing their content. When God 'remembers' he will act (cf Exodus 2:24; 1 Samuel 1:19). God's heart 'yearns for' his beloved child; the NRSV reads:

'Therefore I am deeply moved for him!' The sentence literally reads: 'therefore my intestines make noise for him.' The words convey a great sense of intense grief over Ephraim and a longing for the people's return.

Jeremiah 31:20 displays the struggle that takes place in God's 'inner being.' It is expressed with a strong anthropomorphism. God cannot bring total destruction because he loves his people too much. Not long after this verse we read the amazing hopeful words about a new covenant which will be established when God grants his people total forgiveness (31:31-34).

Jeremiah and workers in Christian ministry

1. Honesty

The Book of Jeremiah and in particular the Confessions hold the mirror up to us: how honest are we in our relationship with God? Passages like Job 3 and Jeremiah 20 have not been left out when the canon found its shape. These people are regarded as sincere worshippers of God. Their reactions, however, are quite different from what we expect normally of Christian workers.

I am not saying that we should express our frustrations in the pulpit. After all, Jeremiah's anxious laments are personal conversations with God; there is nothing in the text which tells us they were part of his proclamation.

If our ministry gets stuck, if nobody seems to respond to our message and we are still sure of our calling, and walking in the Lord's way, how honest are we to

God that we feel frustrated? That we are disappointed in the outcome and maybe in God himself? Do we keep in touch with God, do we utter our frustrations or even anger, or do we walk away from him and break off the contact?

Do note that on one occasion God corrects Jeremiah and urges him to repent: in 15:19 the prophet accuses God of being untrustworthy, but God does not accept the accusation. Yet apart from this we have seen how the prophet freely cries out to God.

Workers in Christian ministry should examine themselves whether they are honest in their prayers and their personal relationship to God. To keep the lifeline to God open, it is necessary that we take time to meet him. That is often a weak point in the life of Christian workers. We are so busy encouraging people, making sermons, reading the Bible and praying in a professional role that we struggle to find time just for God and ourselves. Henri Nouwen encourages us to book

time in our diaries for meeting God, just as we put other appointments in our work schedule. He adds that for most people it is difficult to spend an hour with God without doing 'useful things' He wrote these words before the internet invaded the world!

Nouwen holds that only in the quietness we are confronted with our own heart and what lives in it: 'our restlessness, anxieties, resentments, unresolved tensions, hidden animosities, and long-standing frustrations.'⁵ Only when we create space for the Spirit of God, we will realise that

'God's heart embraces all the sufferings of the world.'⁶ Nouwen continues:

*Prayer always leads us to the heart of God and the heart of the human struggle at the same time. It is in the heart of God that we come to understand the true nature of human suffering and come to know our mission to alleviate this suffering, not in our own name, but in the name of the one who suffered and through his suffering overcame all evil.*⁷

Meeting with God in this intimate and honest way indeed creates space in our heart and releases us from the tensions we may feel in Christian ministry. We do not always know what is in our own heart—in fact, I often think we never know exactly what our deepest motives are. Yet:

This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: if our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. (1 John 3:19-20)

That God knows everything, even our deepest thoughts and feelings, is not a reason for despair but for hope. We are not alone in our struggles: not in our calling or frustrations and neither in our efforts to alleviate suffering in the world. God can and will work through our vulnerability and he is the one in charge, the Almighty God, Creator of heaven and earth.

2. Hidden from view

Secondly it is good to realise that working in God's 'garden' means that results are not always open to human observation: sometimes (often?) there seems to be

no result at all. It is safe to say that in his suffering and despair Jeremiah could never have imagined how far his words would reach:

*Few passages in Scripture show as clearly as here the limits of one's own testimony about life, particularly one's own life, its value to the community of faith, and what importance it has in the economy of God.*⁸

Jeremiah had no idea how far-reaching his message was. He did not know that one day his words about the 'new covenant' (31:31-34) would be repeated by the Messiah of Israel who saw these words fulfilled in his own suffering for the world's reconciliation with God (Luke 22:20). Neither could he have imagined that these words would be read worldwide as Paul's words are quoted at the Communion table: 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood...' (1 Corinthians 11:25)

Christian workers who preach Sunday after Sunday and pastors who keep on listening to the problems and stories of their church members—all apparently without visible results—are examples of how the Kingdom works. Ministry differs from business approaches, where growth has to be measured and no growth means the end of the enterprise. How would you measure the growth of a tree in one year's time? Christian ministers may remind themselves time and again that God works in his own way. Much is now hidden which may finally turn out to be of great value in God's plan.

Publications about church development and leadership are not always helpful in this respect. Sometimes there is too much

focus on one particular model that 'should work,' read: should increase our numbers. In *Liberating Ministry from the Success Syndrome*⁹ one minister describes how he used all the techniques he had learned during his training at college...and how everything failed. The fact that growth does not automatically take place is not easy to accept. We want to be successful even if it's only 'for Christ's sake.' In a 'celebrity culture' all Christians are influenced by the world. Some preachers, speakers and worship leaders attract large audiences, but who pays attention to the minister of a small church with a handful of faithful people attending every Sunday? At the end of time, we will be surprised how much fruit there will be in unexpected places. To quote Henri Nouwen again:

*The radical challenge is to let God and the divine Word shape and reshape us as human beings, to feast each day on this Word and thus grow into free and fearless people. Thus we can continue to witness to God's presence in this world, even when there are few or no visible results.*¹⁰

When I was a tutor at Spurgeon's College, I was sometimes asked to address students who were ordained as Christian ministers. I often gave them some flower seed and explained that it is good for ministers to sow and plant flowers in their own garden. Whenever the work in the church seems to have few results, let them be encouraged by seeing flowers blossom in their garden: it takes time, but it's worth waiting for.

3. Forewarned

In the third place, do we realise that

serving God may mean suffering and loneliness? Jesus clearly said that his followers will not be popular in this world. We are 'strangers' here, for in essence we are citizens of another Kingdom. Only as our life is focused on Jesus, we will be fruitful and follow the right path.

John Goldingay writes: 'There is a cost involved in being a prophet, in being a servant of God. There is a cross involved... as we carry the cross, we can also reveal the glory.'¹¹ As we live in the light of cross and resurrection, there is still suffering and at the same time there are already signs of new life. There is an 'already' and a 'not yet.' In this space we operate as Christian ministers. If we find life and work difficult, Jeremiah can help us to gain a deeper understanding of what it means to follow Christ in his suffering. Bringing God's message can result in rejection. Yet in the words of Paul, 'God's grace is sufficient for us' in summer and in winter. Jeremiah can also encourage us to proclaim new beginnings. In the meantime we live and work in the expectation that one day 'everything will be new.'¹²

Notes to Text

1 Hetty Lalleman, 'Paul's self-understanding in the light of Jeremiah: A case study into the use of the Old Testament in the New Testament' in *A God of Faithfulness. Festschrift J.G. McConville* (New York and London: T&T Clark, 2011), 96-111.

2 Hetty Lalleman, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove/Nottingham: IVP, 2013), 51.

3 W. Baumgartner, *Die Klagegedichte des Jeremia*, BZAW 32 (Giessen: Topelmann, 1917).

4 Cf. Peter C. Craigie, J.H. Kelley and J.F. Drinkard, Jr, *Jeremiah 1-25*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1991), 273.

5 Henri Nouwen, *The Selfless Way of Christ: Downward Mobility and the Spiritual Life* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2007), 86.
6 Nouwen, *The Selfless Way of Christ*, 87.
7 Nouwen, *The Selfless Way of Christ*, 88-89.
8 Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20*, Anchor Bible Commentary (New York & London: Doubleday, 1999), 873, commenting on Jer 20:14-18.
9 Kent and Barbara Hughes, *Liberating Ministry from the Success Syndrome* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1987), 28-29.
10 Nouwen, *The Selfless Way of Christ*, 52-53.
11 John Goldingay, *God's Prophet, God's Servant: A Study in Jeremiah and Isaiah 40-55* (revised edition; Toronto: Clements, 2002), 33.
12 The author taught Old Testament and Hebrew at Spurgeon's College, London, from 2005-2016 and is currently senior research fellow of this College. From 2021 she will also be working as 'community pastor' in Knaphill, Surrey.

Further reading

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Holladay, William L., *Jeremiah 1, Hermeneia* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986)
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McConville, J. Gordon, *Judgment and Promise. An interpretation of the book of Jeremiah* (Leicester: Apollos, 1993)
Nouwen, Henri, *The Wounded Healer* [1979] (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2002)
Parsons, Michael, and Cohen, D.J. (eds), *On Eagles' Wings: An Exploration of Strength in the Midst of Weakness* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2008); esp. D.J. Cohen on Jeremiah in 'A prophet in motion: The counterpoint of speaking, acting and reflecting', 15-35.

Father, in High Heaven Dwelling

by Bob Allaway

Author: Bob Allaway is now retired from Baptist ministry but continues to serve a local church.

My wife and I appreciated participating in the latest BURG retreat. At one evening prayer service, we had the opportunity to sing George Rawson's (1807-89) *Father, in high heaven dwelling*, BHB 692. Though the words are weaker than his *In Christ redeemed or We limit not the truth of God*, they give an excuse to use William Jackson's *Evening Hymn*, a beautiful tune that sadly lacks other hymns of that metre that would suit it. I thought I would try modernising it, so that others might be able to use it.

The first two verses are easily modernised, and the second verse could tie in with the Ignatian idea of an examen at the end of each day. (I seem to remember this was the reason why we used it on the retreat.) Apart from changing *Thou* to *You* etc, I have only really changed the last lines of these verses. For the first verse, this was to help anyone who did not feel as confident as George Rawson that they could see God's guidance in their lives!

I find the final verse too sentimental, so I have written a completely new one that is, I hope, more biblical. If you can suggest something better, please do so. (Some hymn books have an additional verse after the second, but it upsets the trinitarian pattern, without adding much.)

Here is my effort. I have dumped the convention of starting each line with a capital letter, which I find pointless.

*Father, in high heaven dwelling,
may our evening song be telling
of your mercy large and free:
through the day your love has fed us,
through the day your care has led us,
even when we cannot see.*

*This day's sins, O pardon, Saviour,
evil thoughts, perverse behaviour,
envy, pride and vanity;
from the world, the flesh, deliver,
save us now and save us ever,
Jesus, Lamb of Calvary.*

*As the darkness falls upon us,
Spirit, may you move among us,
as you once moved on the deep,
bringing forth the new creation;
may we know your restoration:
wake in light beyond our sleep.*

v1,2 George Rawson (alt), v3 Bob Allaway

Response to a Festschrift by Ruth Gouldbourne

Author: Ruth Gouldbourne is minister of Grove Baptist Church, Cheadle. She was presented with the festschrift, Re-remembering the Body, on a recent significant birthday. This book is reviewed in this issue of bmj.

For about 20 years, once a month, I made the journey to Glastonbury, to meet with an amazing woman who was my spiritual director. As you can imagine, over those years, she got to know me very well—and I got to know her. There was a day when I turned up deeply fed up. I had lost a vital piece of paper, and it was causing all sorts of problems; partly because, contrary to popular opinion, I don't often lose vital pieces of paper. But I knew exactly what had gone wrong in this case. I knew it was very important, and so I had put it away safely. Indeed, I had filed it.

The problem was I couldn't remember what I had filed it as, or under. It could have been this—or that—or something else. I couldn't remember which aspect of it had seemed most important when I had filed it, and therefore, into which category I had put it, and so, in which file it had ended up.

It really upset me—not because I didn't think I would find it; I knew I would eventually, and indeed I did. Rather, it symbolised for me something that I was more and more aware I struggled with,

and which made me feel frustrated, miserable and cross with myself. I mean, I know I am not stupid, but organising—in ways that were regularly commended to me, and that seemed so obvious, and would clearly make life easier—constantly and absolutely eluded me. I spent rather more time than I should in that session moaning about how fed up I was with my incapacity to organise and do the stuff that the people around me seemed to find ways to manage.

Elizabeth listened to me very sympathetically for quite a while—and then—as she often did—pulled me up out of self-pity, as she was wont to do, with the comment—the problem—if problem it is, is that you see the oneness of things. You might want to think about that as a gift of God rather than a failing.

That was also the day when we decided we would write a book together—we didn't manage this one, though there is another one we did awaiting a publisher!—which would be what we chose to call 'unsystematic theology'. Her discernment of me—probably because it was her way of being too, and so such a gift to me—was that the processes of system, categorisation, a filing system, were incongruent with the way I meet and experience the world. I'm not claiming some deeply spiritual and mystical sense of the oneness of being—more a much more a pragmatic response to a world that bewilders me. To grasp or understand something can never come to an end because there is always another bit of it, it's always bigger than I can grasp, deeper than I can plumb, wider than I can see...I'm not big enough, clever enough,

enough enough...it's all about the overlaps and connections and links and this taking us on to that...

This book delights me because it does exactly that. I know there are sections—though it took me two readings to notice that, sorry. But it seems to me that more than the categories into which the various essays might be put, the interlinking between them and the overlaps are significant. You start off reading fascinating exploration of colour and its capacity to lead us into transcendence, and you find yourself reading a wonderful history an artistic movement. You set out to read a history of a woman who travelled all over the world and find yourself exploring a theology and practice of mission and of what it means to provide a welcoming space for transcendence in a community setting. You settle to wrestle with the depths of philosophical ethics about issues of transgender identity and find yourself exploring the history of Baptist theology around communal discernment..you get the idea. Those of you who have had the delight of reading the book will know what I mean, I hope, and those who haven't read it yet are in for such a delight.

The experience of reading it has got me back to pondering this question of overlaps.

It is not just the overlaps within the essays; it is the productive overlaps. As some of you know, I make things. When you take two bits of wood, and overlap them with glue, something new is produced; overlaps are productive. This book does that. This is not a book about one thing. It is a collection of disparate essays;

disparate, but not separate, because they are physically enclosed and the overlaps are almost forced, maybe better created by the covers. The danger I fear is that people will look up the essay that relates particularly to something that they are studying. And such a use of this resource is great—there is great riches to be found in each essay. But it is in reading them as a collection, hearing their conversation and encountering their overlaps that new things are made.

Reading the masterly analysis of Shakespeare alongside, in conversation with, overlapping an exploration of singleness such as Lina has given us to have new understanding of what it is to be people who are capable of love and people who live in a context where the nature of loving is contested; or to read it overlapping with reflections on 2 Corinthians, and on what it means to do biblical reflection is to discover something new about how to read and what texts might be. The overlap between an essay on Proverbs and an Estonian woman who preaches yields a new perspective on what it might mean to live as a person, a woman, in response to Scripture's calling—a new and challenging model that undermines the too easy assumption that there is a biblical model of femininity, and that reminds us that there is always more...overlapping an analysis of Martin Luther King's preaching with the call to 'spend and be spent' is profoundly moving and challenging, producing an ever-deepening awe that anybody would ever dare to respond to this call. The overlap between the recognition of the models of gender identity explored in *Women and Ministry Again*, and the nature of prayer

in the writing of the BT produces a new way of thinking about how we think about being who we are—and a recognition of the ways in which such thinking is shaped by ideas and teaching we might never actually hear named—and so the questions around that.

Overlapping a profound reflection on leading prayer with challenging insights on what it is to listen produces a new sense of the calling that is the prayer of presence, while overlapping women seeking suffrage with a letter that pays close attention to what can appear a small context produces a deepening sense of understanding that life is not to be assessed only by public presence, and challenges us to do our history rooted in the story of people's lives as they actually are.

It's all about the overlaps and their productivity. These are mine. Others will be different because they will be yours and yours and yours...because the overlaps are not just between the essays but between the essays and the readers and then between the readers and their own lives and contexts and the others who live with, beside and near them...This is made so clear in the opening essay— whoever needs to write my eulogy at my funeral is going to have an easy job, because here it is – but what it makes so vivid is that life is overlaps; I am who I am because of the layering and interleaving, the overlapping of my life with that of so many others, even those unknown to me, but overlapping with those who have made up my context. That is why I love the title of this book so much; re-membering the body.

There is so much dismembering, so much separating, categorising and filing. There are definitely times when that needs to happen, but it is not the only way to live and it is not, I believe, the deepest truth about us or about the world. It seems to me that these essays are all in their own ways and together about re-mem-bering, and that is what history is about—for it is bringing together the stories and the memories and the bits that have been forgotten to offer to us a deeper understanding of how we got here and so what here means. And it is what theology is about, bringing together, re-mem-bering the world before God and so re-mem-bering what it is to be human before God; it is what the arts offer us—re-mem-bering experience and encounter, delight and challenge, re-mem-bering humanity by touching, meeting us not

just in our heads but in our hearts, our feelings, our imaginations – the whole of us. It is the call of ministry; to re-mem-ber —bringing people together to know their story, to be before God, to discover a full humanity. And we do it through the overlaps—the putting together of things that don't seem connected and discovering that they do, and that their overlap produces something new and life-giving.

I've used the word overlap as a way into thinking about my response to this book —but the real word I have wanted to use is *perichoresis*, interdwelling. And in the end that is what I think this collection of essays offers; a perichoretic reflection on what it is to be human; to live as a creation, creatively, in relation to the creator. And a greater gift I cannot imagine.

Leonard Cohen and Religion – A Review Article

by John Matthews

Author: John Matthews is now retired from Baptist ministry but continues to write and reflect.

It is not unknown for religious imagery and language to be used in the lyrics of contemporary songs. Sometimes whole passages of scripture are quoted, as in The Byrds' recording of Pete Seeger's *Turn, Turn, Turn*, using words from Ecclesiastes chapter 3, and Boney M's *Rivers of Babylon* quoting words from Psalm 139 —set to an curiously upbeat tune for a lament. Sometimes the lyrics are explicitly religious, as with Bob Dylan's *Gotta Serve Somebody*—'it might be the devil, it might be the Lord'. At other times they are

ambiguous, like U2's *Grace*, which is 'the name of a girl' but also 'covers the shame, removes the stain' and 'makes beauty out of ugly things'. Arguably, no popular songwriter has used religious imagery and language more often, and sometimes more mysteriously, than Leonard Cohen —not least in *Hallelujah*, which has been covered over 300 times.

Cohen was born in Montreal on 21 September 1934 to one of the oldest Jewish families in Canada. His maternal

grandfather was a rabbi. He was a published poet and novelist who did not release his first album in 1967. As he grew older his relationship with the Jewish community started to waiver and in 1963 he made a speech condemning their practices as lacking in spirituality, though he continued to light candles on Friday evenings and said in 1997 'I was always happy with the religion I was born into and it satisfied all the religious questions.' A sentiment which seems at odds with his practice, since for 40 years from the 1970s, he spent periods of time in a Buddhist monastery at Mount Baldy, California, including three years from 1996, and was ordained a Buddhist priest. He showed an interest in Jesus as a universal figure, and said that his investigations into other spiritual systems had illuminated and enriched his understanding of his own tradition. He died on 7 November 2016, aged 82.

Last year saw the publication of two books which discuss the role of religion in Cohen's work; Marcia Pally's *From This Broken Hill I Sing to You*, subtitled *God, Sex, and Politics in the work of Leonard Cohen*, published by T&T Clark, and Harry Freedman's *Leonard Cohen*, subtitled *The mystical roots of Leonard Cohen* and published by Bloomsbury. Pally's book also includes discussions of women and politics, and covers Cohen's poems and novels, and well as his song lyrics. Freedman's work confines itself to religion and to the lyrics, which are printed in bold type.

The authors tackle their tasks in very different ways, and write in very different styles. This is not surprising given that Pally is an academic (Professor in

Multilingual Multicultural Studies at New York University) whereas Freedman is a writer who has published at a popular level on Jewish culture and history.

Pally looks at Cohen's theology and theodicy through the lens of covenant. He is concerned 'with his failure—humanity's failure—to be constant to God and other persons, to act covenantally in the Jewish tradition into which he was born and which he plumbed throughout his life' (p2). But is the responsibility for this failure to keep the covenant ours or God's? Pally's first chapter is a discussion of various theodicies, but with little reference to Cohen's writings. She then looks at covenantal commitment as it takes shape in Cohen's work, before discussing failure to keep the covenant, followed by a chapter on Moses and Jesus as people who did keep the covenant. Cohen's self-confessed failure to keep the covenant with women is then discussed, followed by a chapter on political failures. Pally concludes that Cohen ends up feeling 'frustrated with himself, human intimate and political relations and often with God' but believing that 'God does not leave us' and that 'God has made us with the capacity to make choices' (p148).

Freedman focuses on Cohen's use of Jewish and Christian ideas and his book is as much an exploration of Cohen's sources as his work. For him, 'the songs and poems he bases on Jewish ideas tend to be philosophical, mystical or defiant, whereas his works inspired by Christianity preach a simpler message, of love and purity of spirit' (p115). After an introductory chapter on Cohen's influences, the book is in four parts, each of which includes substantial discussions of several songs.

Bible as Allegory explores those where Cohen has reshaped a biblical narrative to give it a new meaning, often with contemporary relevance. *Ideas from the Bible* is where he challenges the Bible or our understanding of it, attaching new meanings to biblical themes. *Heaven and Earth* examines the mystical traditions which evolved from the Bible to the mechanics of creation and the mysteries of the human soul. And *Prayer* concerns conversations with whatever we conceive of as above, whether conventional idea of God or something more ethereal.

Pally's style is more academic and includes bibliographical references in parentheses in the text, which sometimes interrupt the flow. Her index only lists album titles, so to see whether she discusses a particular song, you need to know which album it is on and then look up the references to that

album. Freedman's style is less academic and confines references to endnotes. The list of the 50 songs which he discusses is duplicated in the index.

Pally's book is a paperback of 200 pages with small print and three small illustrations. It includes a 15-page bibliography, including a number of articles which can be accessed online. Freedman's is a hardback of nearer 300 pages with larger print and eight pages of plates. It has no bibliography and refers to far fewer sources. The published prices of the two are identical.

There is a certain sense of irony in the publication of these books since, according to Freedman, Cohen was reluctant to discuss the religious aspects of his work. That, however, does not stop his fans from doing so, and these two very different volumes provide plenty of material for such discussions.



the *bmj* interview

Gale Richards on her move to regional ministry

Ed: Gale, please introduce yourself by telling us what you are doing in ministry at the moment.

GR: I am a part-time regional minister for Eastern Baptist Association and an associate chaplain for Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge.

Ed: What has your journey into ministry been?

GR: I responded to a sense of call to ordained ministry back in 2013. Prior to this I had spent five years working as a part-time church-based youth worker in London. Followed by five years as a project development worker for a Baptist Association, and a part-time tutor for a Baptist college.

Ed: As a Baptist pastor-scholar, tell us about your own research interests.

GR: I am studying for a part-time PhD through Bristol Baptist College. My current research interest is using life-stories as a source of theology, with particular reference to Black women ministers.

Ed: You have recently become a RM on a part-time basis. Please tell us what the transition from being a pastor to being a RM is like.

GR: I have gone from spending the past five years serving as minister of a small congregation in Cambridge to serving 30-odd Baptist churches of different sizes and styles in Cambridgeshire. I am enjoying sharing the insights I gain as to how things can be done differently, by engaging with all the different churches, as well as the various ministers serving in contexts that range from established churches to missional communities, theological institutions and secular institutions.

Ed: What key thing do you think Regional Ministers and Associations are called to do at this time?

GR: Regional Ministers have a key role to play in the building of strong relationships and collaborative working between Baptist churches and ministers. This includes understanding the barriers to them working together and facilitating appropriate theological reflection to help overcome them. It also includes offering appropriate challenge to ministers and churches to remain focused on God's mission. This mission includes addressing matters of injustice both (local and global) in church and wider society, as each plays their part in making and growing disciples in appropriately contextual ways.

Ed: How do you see the role of Baptists Together developing in the future?

GR: There is potential for ministers and churches to grow into a stronger shared national Baptist identity. Baptists Together is the umbrella under which this can take place. This would particularly require ministers, Regional Ministers, Associations, specialist teams and Baptist colleges to find greater unity in their diversity, in a way which remains faithful to our Baptist identity. That Baptist identity is bound up in (but not limited to) the story of the establishment of the very first Baptist church.

Ed: We live in a time of rapid change. How do you keep grounded?

GR: Finding and keeping an appropriate rhythm for daily life is important but challenging. A key part of finding that rhythm for me is being aware of my strengths and weaknesses, and trying to be clear on what my calling is. That helps me to sift through the different things that could potentially take up my time. I also find it helpful to have a spiritual director, and a circle of friends and mentors that I meet with, and pray with regularly.

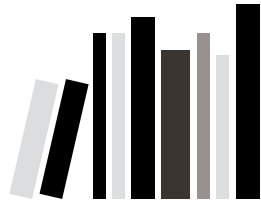
Ed: What is your greatest passion for Baptist life, and how can we pray for you and others in Regional teams?

GR: I would love more of our ministers and churches to have a stronger Baptist identity that is combined with a stronger commitment to working together as Baptists, as well as with ecumenical partners. I also think the challenges for ministers and Regional Ministers are similar. There is a risk that we spend an awful lot of our time on maintaining existing policies and structures, and not enough time on supporting our churches in mission.

Ed: Gale, thank you for sharing your thoughts with us—we wish you God's blessing in the new role.

reviews

edited by Michael Peat



Women Without Walls

By Mary Coates

Graceworks, 2020

Reviewer: Leigh Greenwood

The introduction of *Women Without Walls* tells us that ‘this book is about the many ways in which God calls women to be ambassadors for his Kingdom,’ going on to explain that while men and women are called ‘side by side as disciples of Christ,’ the invitation to discipleship can present ‘a particular challenge to women’ because they have traditionally been kept to the private sphere. As someone who has grown up surrounded by women in lay and ordained ministry, and who is now a woman in ministry herself, I do recognise the particular challenges that women face in living out their callings, and I appreciate the need to encourage and affirm women in ways that recognise and overcome those challenges, and yet I confess that I found myself becoming slightly frustrated with the gendered focus as laid out in the opening pages.

In part this was because I wanted to read more on the resonances Cotes identified between our own time and Jesus’ time, and the parallel calls from those kingdoms into another Kingdom. She tells us it was reflection on the fraught atmosphere created by a series of terrorist attacks in the summer of 2016 that first inspired the book, but doesn’t go much further with that—and in part it was because I

felt it was a shame that there should be any need to justify telling the stories of women, when there is rarely felt to be the same need to justify telling the stories of men. It would have felt like such a gift to be handed a book which explored the Kingdom through the lives of women without additional comment. It should be normal and normative to hear the stories and voices of women, but I fear that won’t happen while we begin by asserting our right to speak, although I am willing to accept that I may be a little too idealistic in this regard, and we may still need books like this one to take us there.

All I have written so far is intended as personal reflection rather than criticism, because in truth I really enjoyed this book. In the first place, I appreciated the mix of stories chosen to illustrate aspects of the Kingdom. The women whose lives are explored and celebrated represent a range of Christian traditions, but there is something wonderfully baptistic about putting gospel characters and well-known names and people from the author’s own life alongside one another, giving them equal weighting if not necessarily equal space.

It is a practical demonstration and outworking of Cotes’ premise that the yeast of the Kingdom can work in all our lives, and an invitation to reflect on what stories the reader might contribute of the women they have known. Similarly, restricting the biblical narratives to a

single gospel, and using a single parable as a linking device, has left me wondering what the other gospels might have to add, or what might be brought out by a different framing story, and it will be interesting to take those wonderings further.

Picking up on that linking device, a real strength of the book is the way it is threaded through with reflections on the parable of the yeast. Returning to the passage at the start of each chapter allows Cotes to draw out details that I hadn't noticed before, such as the sheer quantity of flour the woman uses, which suggests that she was baking not just for her family but for a feast, emphasising the expansiveness and generosity of the Kingdom. It also gives Cotes a series of themes to work with, which hold the narratives together and offer some powerful descriptors for the Kingdom. Those descriptors also form the chapter headings, with the related scriptures and biographies listed as subheadings, and so the contents page serves as a reminder that it is not really the women whose stories are told that are most significant, but rather the Kingdom their lives reveal and realise. That Kingdom is open and enduring and transformative for all of us, and so while this book may speak a particular word of encouragement to women, it has something to say to anyone who picks it up.

The Humble Church: Renewing the Body of Christ

by Martyn Percy

Canterbury Press, 2021

Reviewer: Robert Draycott

'The question is not, "how can we get more people into church?" This quote could be a litmus test for potential readers, for

surely that is our very *raison d'être*—it is in our DNA. Another reason for not reading this book is that it is very C of E. But that is about it (for me at least) in terms of not reading this book by Martyn Percy.

Let us look at what he thinks the real question is: 'how can we get more people from church to love and serve the world as Christ would have us do?' The author questions the assumptions about growth, referring to Karl Barth's observation that the growth of the church is not to be thought of in extensive terms but those that are intensive. The parable of the sower is referred to. 'What kind of growth can you expect from the ground and conditions you work with?' Emphasis on numerical growth can be demoralising for some. But—we may protest—targets are needed: 'if you aim at nothing...courage, vision, objectives, and some strategy; those were not in short supply..' (for the charge of the Light Brigade).

The book is divided into three sections, *Culture and Change; Challenge and Church; Christ and Christianity*. It is written against the backdrop of Covid and lockdown. The theme running through, underpinning it all, is that of humility—which is something we do, or live out. Here is a quote from the end of the first section: 'Love, truth, attentiveness, and humility all need to flourish in our world. We are the vessels for this.'

The middle section is very C of E-centric, for example with the chapter entitled, *Abuse, Authority, and Authenticity*. Yet that provides those from other denominations with the opportunity to apply the insights to their own situation. For example, think

around this: 'we need to know that our bishops affirm the ministry of all their clergy - irrespective of their gender.' All we have to do is substitute 'churches' for 'bishops.'

The opening chapter of the third section is entitled, *Us and Them*. 'That may be one of the defining divisions of our age.' This chapter provides an opportunity to refer to another strength of the author's approach as he intersperses various pieces of poetry throughout. Here is one snippet, from Steve Lodewyke: 'I know otherness. It's who I am. But it's not what I want to be.' In this chapter he considers the Canaanite. Having recently preached on this passage I read this with great interest. Re-reading it now I remain both intrigued and enlightened by Martyn Percy's careful analysis leading him to remark that Jesus is for something richer than the either-or of including or excluding, namely 'incorporation.'

I could go on with this recommendation but this has been intended to give something of the flavour of a very rich read.

Mentoring Conversations: 30 Key Topics to Explore Together

by Tony Horsfall

BRF, 2020

Reviewer: Helen Wordsworth

Mentoring conversations is a resource book for all who engage in mentoring others in the Christian faith. Much is spoken about the concept of mentoring in our time, be that spiritual mentoring between peers, pastoral guidance with church members, or an experienced Christian helping a new believer understand the essentials of the faith.

Clearly and sympathetically written, this book brings discipleship into focus. Covering 30 different aspects of the Christian life, it provides a biblical background to each one, along with relevant contributions from various authors. The writer's own extensive experience in Christian mission and ministry filters through at times, giving glimpses of authenticity among the quotations from others.

Of particular note is the way in which each topic is followed by several searching and relevant questions. The ability carefully to construct discussion starters is a skill that is sometimes lacking in the writers of various home group discussion books, but not here. These questions are both helpful and thought-provoking, and although meant for a one-to-one conversation, could also be used for personal reflection and in a small group setting.

Some may want to take issue with the writer's stance on the filling of the Spirit, but other than this, the theological foundations on which the topics are based are fairly standard Christian doctrine. There is a little repetition in the sections that touch on self-care but this is only noticed if one is reading the book through at one sitting, and does not devalue the content.

One disappointment is the paucity of contributions from female writers. With the exception of the chapter on resilience, where all the references are from female writers(!), most of the contributions in each section are from male authors.

In summary, an extremely useful and necessary resource for ministers, spiritual mentors, and all those who want to guide new believers in their development.

It could also be helpful as a reflective exercise for anyone who is going through a period of doubt and questioning of their faith. And the first chapters could certainly offer some good material for baptismal classes.

***Iris Murdoch and the Others: A
Writer in Dialogue with Theology***

by Paul S. Fiddes

T&T Clark, 2022

Reviewer: Stephen Copson

Iris Murdoch was an incisive Oxford philosopher and popular novelist of the late 20th century, probably now better known not for her fiction but for the memoirs by her husband John Bayley, and the film *Iris* (2001), which sensitively charted living with Alzheimer's disease.

She rejected the traditional Christian God, elevating instead The Good, an impersonal transposition of the deity in whom she found neither confidence nor credibility. But while not religious in the traditional sense, she was always observing how people tried to live well (and often failed) with each other. She sought a moral imperative to direct people, inevitably engaging and critiquing Kant. She aimed to strip away the false selfhoods—religious and other—that protect people from the inexorable claim on them to pursue moral seriousness shorn of any eternal reward. It was in 'doing good for nothing' that people incarnated The Good. That in her writing, both philosophical and literary, she explored the borderlands between faith and philosophy makes her an interesting subject. While dismissive of most Christian theology, nonetheless toward the end of her writing life, she edged toward an understanding of a mystical Christ - but not as we know him.

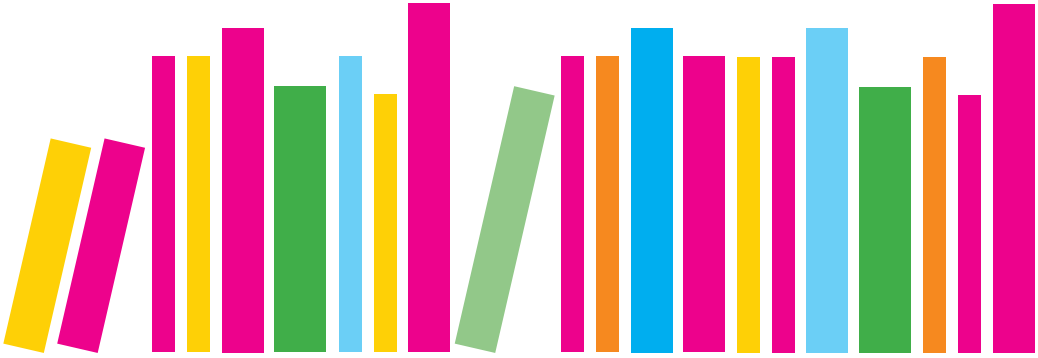
The 'Others' with whom Paul Fiddes sets up a dialogue are a diverse bunch including Bonhoeffer plus the demythologising theologians of the 1960s, Jacques Derrida, Simone Weil, Gerard Manley Hopkins and Julia Kristeva (quite a dinner party). Assessing these, Fiddes compares and contrasts Murdoch with her contemporary ethical and philosophical models. She promoted the importance of giving attention to the particular, which gives her writing a grittiness that often eludes many a moral or religious discourse.

Murdoch considered that she did not write philosophical novels, but her ideas are embedded in the plots and characters of her fiction. Paul Fiddes illustrates the concepts that she explored through key novels, by using the messy and convoluted lives of her characters as they follow the twisting, turning plots exploring personhood and relationships, enjoying or enduring varieties of sexual encounters, facing moral dilemmas they cannot resolve and sharing contexts from which they are unable to break free. There is some sort of resolution for these tortured individuals, but not necessarily a happy ending. Not the easiest sales pitch, perhaps. But Murdoch championed the struggle for moral endeavour in the messiness of life and not in some sunny uplands of virtue rewarded.

The chapters have largely appeared in print before. First published at £85.00, it can be found on the web for less. A short review cannot do justice to the rich and multi-layered tapestry of ideas, but for those with an interest in the interface of philosophy and theology (and a generous book allowance) this book offers a challenging read. You can hear Professor Fiddes talking about Iris Murdoch at Theology Live 2022 on Youtube.

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