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Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

ELEANOR DANIEL AND MARK LOVE, EDITORS

Book Review
GREG TAYLOR

Leaving Ruin

By Jeff Berryman

Orange, CA: New Leaf Books (now Leafwood Publishers), 2002. 361 pages.

A customer returned the novel *Leaving Ruin* to a Christian bookstore with a complaint.

The complaint? The reader didn't get what many consumers of Christian fiction have come to expect: Ideal characters in an evil world, battling triumphantly against the odds in near-perfect perseverance. For every reader searching for this mega-Christian persona, however, another is combing the shelves for authentic characters with whom she or he can truly identify.

That reader—the one looking for genuinely human characters—will find them in *Leaving Ruin*. In this book, first-time novelist Jeff Berryman “has taken an evangelical preacher, and turned him into the most unexpected thing: a human being,” according to Pulitzer-prize-winning author Annie Dillard.

No doubt the unhappy reader's complaint was about the main character's earthy life: Cyrus Manning, pastor of the First Church of Ruin, a fictitious West Texas town, wrestles with lusting after his wife's best friend. Given recent church sex scandals, the viewpoint of Cyrus Manning is even more intriguing. Who doesn't want to know what makes a quirky (and sinful) preacher tick, particularly when he or she is leading our children and us spiritually?

Most gripping about Berryman's novel is the reader's peek into the mind of a pastor. Church pastors who have read the book have asked Berryman, “How did you know my thoughts?” This is not the Mitford series, though like Jan Karon, Berryman

combines memorable characters in a strong sense of place. No, this is not Mitford—it's West Texas, cowboy, and Berryman has captured the true grit of a West Texas preacher with humor, serious doubting of his faith, and poignant turn of phrase.

The key conflict in the novel and the drama is a church scandal. The First Church of Ruin wants to oust Pastor Cyrus Manning. Members want a preacher who gives sermon outlines and more absolutes, asks fewer questions, does not struggle with depression, and definitely does not make out with his wife on the porch. Cyrus, meanwhile, has to fend off his own doubts in God and lust for a former girlfriend while preparing a eulogy for a close friend and wondering what old lady Loreen meant when she said she would be giving him “a gift to die for.”

This year, Berryman, also a dramatist, has hit the trail with a one-man drama of *Leaving Ruin*. He has performed the drama at Willow Creek's staff retreat and the National Conference on Christianity and the Arts and was scheduled to perform a four-night stint in a community theatre in Portland, Oregon.

The dialogue (and monologue in the drama) is fresh and real, but there's not enough of it in the novel. And for Cyrus, God doesn't talk enough, either. “How hard can it be for a God to speak?” Cyrus wonders.

The strength of the novel is that it provides what many readers of Christian fiction do not look for: dog-eared, funny, imperfect, left-hanging lives. That a preacher can fight depression, doubt, lust, and marriage problems can be disturbing for some readers, but it is precisely these battles that encourage others, like me, that prophets are human, too.

Says Cyrus, “I don't suppose families fighting, and marriages breaking up is just a big city problem; people yell in Ruin, too.” The line, though not the first in the novel, reminds me of the opening sen-

tence in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, "All happy families resemble one another, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

While marriages and lives fall apart around him, Cyrus realizes his own wife needs his words more than his church wants them. The first line in the novel, "Last night, Sara and I talked," resurfaces thematically through dynamic conversations: in the First Church of Ruin family, where members dissect Cyrus's life and preaching on the board-room table; in Ruin(ed) families, where Cyrus is nearly crushed under the weight of death and secret sins of the community; and in Cyrus's own family, where at one point he raises a toast to his wife, their children, and their struggling marriage:

"To Sara, and coffee, and her willingness to live with a stupid man."

She gave little quarter. "To me, that I'm willing to live with ... and love ... a stupid man."

... She kept her eyes on me, and though the worst of the storm was past, I knew it wasn't quite over ...

"If you ever touch another woman, you lose me. And the boys. Do you understand that?"

I nodded, my throat too tight to speak.

"Cyrus, I need your words. When are you going to start talking to me again?"

Cyrus had been so consumed with the church ouster and the silence of God that he himself had become mute to Sara. In the end, both Cyrus and Sara learn they must drink from the cup they've been given, to somehow find joy and meaning in it.

The cumulative effect of *Leaving Ruin* is not merely a story of a "stupid man," but of a pastor with passions like the parishioners, who is brave enough to face the intense West Texas gale of temptation, drill the depths of doubt, spit in the wind, and laugh, even in the face of Ruin.

GREG TAYLOR

Mr. Taylor is managing editor of *New Wineskins* magazine.

Author Jeff Berryman, a former drama teacher at Abilene Christian University, is touring a 90-minute drama based on Leaving Ruin. Steve Pederson, Willow Creek's director of drama, called it "a masterpiece."

In God's Time: The Bible and the Future

By Craig C. Hill

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002. 229 pages

Is it possible to love Jesus and not know whether "666" refers to MasterCard or Visa? Craig Hill thinks so, and his new book addresses what he believes to be a biblical and reasonable approach to eschatology in scripture.

Hill, a professor of New Testament at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., believes that understanding what the Bible says about the future is, in his own words "essential to an informed reading of the Bible, particularly the New Testament" (p. vii). Yet, this understanding is often blurry because much of what is written about the end times today comes from one particular perspective. Technically, it is referred to as the "dispensational, premillennial, pretribulational perspective," although most people know it as the view in the best-selling *Left Behind* series.

According to Hill, other approaches are either not heard at all or drowned out by the *Left Behind* camp, and this is resulting in too many people being reluctant even to broach the subject of biblical eschatology. It is for these people, the people who find the subject "baffling, off-putting, or troubling" that the book is written (p. vii). This book attempts to approach the scholarly study of the future from a biblical perspective at a popular level, and readers will find it largely successful in reaching its goals. Very thorough, accessible, and at times surprisingly humorous, *In God's Time: The Bible and the Future* is a book for anyone interested in engaging the issues of the end times in an intelligent and non-sensationalistic manner.

Chapter 1 begins with a general definition of eschatology intended to champion its importance in biblical thought. An interesting feature of this chapter is Hill's discussion on the faith of the first Christian followers as a decidedly eschatological faith, based on the resurrection of Jesus. Chapter 2 discusses Hill's approach to the Bible. Here, Hill discusses the inductive process of reasoning whereby one can hold firmly to the infallibility of the biblical

text without sliding off into the sort of thinking one finds in the *Left Behind* series.

In Chapter 3, Hill looks at the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and outlines from it the role and development of prophecy as well as the development and history of its prophetic eschatology. Chapter 4 attempts to put biblical apocalyptic literature in its proper context by looking at two developments. One is the development of prophetic expectation from the Persian to the Hellenistic periods. The other is the development of apocalyptic literature in the second temple period, particularly in 1 Enoch and 1QM. OT buffs will enjoy the discussion of the relationship between prophecy and apocalyptic in this chapter.

Chapter 5 discusses the two major apocalyptic books of the Bible: the book of Daniel in the Old Testament and the book of Revelation in the New Testament. His outline of what Revelation says and doesn't say will yield some surprises for many readers. Chapter 6 deals with a subject often neglected in a study of the end times: the eschatology of Jesus' teachings. Hill's discussion of the historical Jesus is noteworthy in its own right, and his ability to tie it into Jesus' ideas about the future is much-appreciated. Chapter 7 deals with the historical development of NT eschatology, and looks at the tension between future eschatology and realized eschatology. Paul is examined as an example of a Christian holding ideas of both future and realized eschatology in tension.

The conclusion acknowledges the need that eschatology fills in the life of the believer: a reason for hope about the future. It also issues a call for those who believe in a future eschatological vision to bring that vision firmly into present behavior. Hill wants the reality of the future to impact Christian lives today, and thus turn eschatology into something with immediate practical relevance. The appendix at the end of the book responding to the *Left Behind* perspective will be worth the price of the book for many people.

Does Craig Hill accomplish what he sets out to do? I believe he does for the reasons I examine here. One is that the book is very thorough. It follows a simple logical sequence of building its case, so that readers leave the book with the sense that the case was well made.

Second, Hill takes the text seriously and is truly concerned with developing an eschatology that comes out of the text, rather than pouring his own ideas about this controversial subject into the text. The Old Testament is discussed, the inter-testamental literature is discussed, Jesus is discussed, and Paul is discussed. One frustrating aspect about most literature about the Bible and the future is that the populist focus is almost always on Revelation (and to a lesser extent, Daniel). But in fact, there is eschatological thought and development throughout the Bible.

Thirdly, this book is very understandable. Anyone, regardless of background, can pick up the book and grasp the information within it. I'm amazed at how well Hill achieved such readability with a topic that is so tricky, so controversial, and so subject to slippery terminology.

Finally, if I had to describe one aspect about the book that really surprises me, it would be this: at many points it's quite humorous. Hill has a quick wit, and that comes through in several places. Frankly, as an introduction, this is one of the better books on the subject.

Having said this, if I had to offer one central criticism, I would say that after reading Chapter 7, "The Once and Future Kingdom," I am still not clear about the exact parameters of Hill's eschatology. In other words, he builds his arguments well, but I'm not sure how he ties everything together in the end. Given the fact that part of the paradigm developed in Chapter 2 is that there is no single "biblical eschatology," and given the fact that he persistently rejects the *Left Behind* view, I naturally assume he has some other position. But I'm not sure what it is, and I have two reasons for wondering.

One, I suspect that many of the people who read this book will want a model for how to live out its implications in their spiritual lives. Offering one's own perspective in a positive way in a separate chapter would help readers as they struggle to process this material. Second, Christian views on the future have themselves changed over the course of the history of the Church, though there are some general outlines. The premillennialism of Charles Ryrie, for example, looks very different than the

“chiliasm” of the first few centuries. And most contemporary amillennialists have a different take on the end times than, say, Augustine. Had Hill narrated his own view more explicitly, this might have made these distinctions a bit clearer.

I think that even if you were to assume that the Bible more or less presents a unified eschatology, this book goes a long way toward showing that the Left Behind view involves more acrobatics than even a biblical conservative should ever have to make. Yet my concern is that although this is a great book for a general audience, its message still may not be heard by those who most need to hear it. There is a tendency in some circles to look down on those with the Left Behind view as unwilling to consider other positions. In my experience, this is just not true.

For example, I recently led a Bible study on Revelation at my church. At the beginning, virtually everyone was of the Left Behind persuasion—not because this is taught from the pulpit but because this is the view most American Christians seem to hold unless otherwise instructed. As we discussed Revelation in this lay Bible study, I shared many different views with them about eschatology; although some (not all) are still of the Left Behind persuasion, all now have a greater appreciation for perspectives other than their own. Craig Hill’s *In God’s Time* can help many other teachers reach similar objectives.

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Second Corinthians (Sacra Pagina)

By Jan Lambrecht

Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999. 250 pp.

The *Sacra Pagina* commentaries always seem to provide the reader with a balance of scholarship and ministry. Lambrecht’s book is no exception and lives up to the reputation by not overemphasizing footnotes and leading the reader to make application to each section under discussion. Each section offers comments on the structure, theological reflection, and problems of translation. Lambrecht also offers an activation portion at the end of most sections. In

this activation, he brings the text to the reader and attempts to make a modern application. I find this portion of the commentary extremely valuable in creating the balance between scholarship and ministry/application.

Lambrecht takes the approach that Paul is writing an apologetic document. In the introduction, he claims that 2 Corinthians does not have the “mild admonishing tone of 1 Corinthians” and is “defensive and passionate” (5). He writes that 1 Corinthians attempts to change the Christian community’s behavior but that 2 Corinthians is an apologetic defense of Paul’s integrity and ministry (11). The letter is also designed to win back the Christians and reconcile them to God (12). This is also evident in his discussion of the “triumph” in 2 Cor 2:14 where, after discussing various interpretations, he suggests that Paul (or his ministry) is the captured prisoner in God’s triumph (38-39).

I find that this commentary also addresses two major issues in a simple and objective fashion. First, Lambrecht discusses the integrity of 2 Corinthians. Questions to the divisions of the text or which parts are authentically Pauline are discussed. Lambrecht addresses the issues by saying that nothing in the text betrays a lack of integrity, that those who follow the post-Pauline view must work with unconvincing hypotheses to explain the book, and that modern interpreters may require from Paul too great a consistency (9). The second issue is the search for Paul’s opponents. Lambrecht suggests that “Paul’s portrait of his opponents remains vague,” and that they represent a small group with possible connections between them and Jerusalem (7).

In 2 Cor 1-5:10 Paul gives a defense of his ministry. His discussion of the Old Testament covenant suggests that God is working through their ministry. Satan, however, is blinding the eyes of Paul’s opponents and harassing Paul (4:4). Paul believes that his ministry provides a transformation so that Paul can be seen for what they are (5:10).

Paul’s persuasive power is his openness to God and preaching the gospel. Paul’s apology is his openness to God and to them. (92)

This section ends with Lambrecht suggesting that Paul’s major point involves the reconciliation of

Christ and Paul's ministry to the early Christians (102-5).

2 Cor 6-9 occupies the next section of the book where Lambrecht suggests that Paul's apology is an appeal for the church to look to God for salvation. After the challenge to be reconciled to God, Paul calls the Christians to salvation. He then moves to the description of his sufferings for the ministry. Lambrecht makes a comparison in chapters 6 and 7 with a breakdown of Paul's appeal and apology to the church (121).

Lambrecht suggests that this parallel is *asyndeta*, which was designed to challenge the church with compassion and love (121). These parallel phrases are repeated by Paul to show the passion in the letter for the church. Chapter 7 discusses the return of Titus to tell them of the Corinthian church's situation. Paul responds with an apologetic in chapters 8-9 with a collection and defense of the ministry and accountability for the relief to Jerusalem.

Lambrecht discusses the third section of the letter as a unit, which was a more dramatic defense of Paul's ministry. Lambrecht suggests that chapters 10 and 13 frame 11 and 12 (158). In this section, Paul discusses his actions for the ministry of Christ, which include a recap of his sufferings, mentioned in 6, as well as the stress for the congregations. Lambrecht indicates that Paul ends with a defense against his opponents. He discusses the various tenses of the verbs, which point to Paul's future face-to-face visit with these "false apostles."

It seems that Lambrecht ends Paul's defense with this discussion (224). For Lambrecht, Paul plans to take up the issue with these Corinthians, whoever they are, because Christ is present in him to bring power and apostleship.

It is this type of analysis and discussion that makes this commentary a great balance of academics and ministry. *2 Corinthians* is another success for the *Sacra Pagina* series that will help readers at all levels of understanding develop a strong feel for the apologetic tone of the letter. Lambrecht seems cautious with his analysis of the text as well as the history of interpretation. The resources listed after each section and the Greek study included in each section will further challenge the readers.

I feel this commentary would be valuable for scholars, ministers, and graduate/seminary students. Lambrecht is technical at times but seems to know when to leave the issue and make an application. He does push the reader to live in the text but has not become so modern that the book becomes limited to a decade of influence. This commentary will be a valuable tool for many years because it leaves the door open for readers to find their own modern application. I think that the strength of the commentary is Lambrecht's respect for the apostle Paul and his passion for the early Corinthians. Lambrecht refuses to work from hypotheses and continues to be conservative in speculation concerning the "opponents of the apostle."

I also feel that the Stone-Campbell movement can benefit greatly from this commentary. While our movement has been characterized by strong Biblical scholarship, there has always been a need for us to continue to push for strong application, without confining the interpretation to a decade or generation. We have also had the tendency to chase theological and academic rabbits and, even though rabbits are agrarian, at times have lost touch with the common member who wonders why they should read 2 Corinthians. A movement that has been strong in 1 Corinthians has somewhat neglected the second letter.

As Lambrecht would admit, we have become strong at addressing behavior in the church but weak at developing a strong apologetic to our ministry. Our apologetic should not be in words but in our openness to God, as Lambrecht indicates of Paul (92). In our history, the farmer and scholar have both worshipped in the same building and studied the same Bible. We have helped each other see the value of the text, theology, and application of the scriptures. Lambrecht's work holds great value in that he resists the tendency to chase the theological bunnies and stay with the text. This book is a good volume for the library of any serious Bible student and for any serious minister who wants to boast in the power of God rather than the power of self.

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Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views

Edited by James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy

Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001. 206 pages.

There has been a growing interest in recent years among evangelical theologians (and evangelicals in general) in the doctrine of divine foreknowledge. The issue is not whether God has foreknowledge, but how exhaustive that foreknowledge is. The issue is very complex, and the arguments mustered in support of each view have been meticulously formulated over the years. Yet, for all the mental complexity, a person's perspective on this doctrine has fairly practical implications; and so, it is necessary—at some level—for each of us to wrestle with them. This book presents four ways of doing that. Each author presents his view, and then each of the other three authors gives a response. The result is a *Reader's Digest* presentation of several lengthy and complicated conversations concerning a basic doctrine of the Christian faith.

The first view presented is called “open theism,” explained here by Gregory A. Boyd. Boyd cites examples from scripture that speak of God's self-expression of surprise (e.g., Isa 5:7; Jer 3:6-7), of regret (e.g., Gen 6:6; Exod 32:14), of frustration (e.g., 1 Pet 3:9), of opposing potential futures (e.g., Exod 4:1-9; Matt 26:39), of the need to test people (Gen 22:1,12; Deut 8:2), and of changes to his plans (e.g., Jer 18:4-10). For Open Theists, these examples show that God knows more than the *actual* future, that he knows *all possible* futures.

Stated negatively, this implies that while God knows the future, the actual future is only one of an infinite number of possible futures he knows; however, he does not know (by choice?) which one *is* the actual future in every instance. This is not to deny that God knew ahead of time precisely what would happen in certain instances (e.g., Matt 26:34), but it does deny that his foreknowledge is exhaustively definite in most cases. The primary responses to this view are that it diminishes God, and that the Biblical passages cited are supposed to be interpreted anthropomorphically, not literally.

The second view is called “simple foreknowledge,” described here by David Hunt. This view holds that God has always known exhaustively and

precisely what will happen—nothing less, and nothing more (his knowledge does not include other possible outcomes). A major objection to this view is that simple foreknowledge precludes God's ability to change the course of history (no alternative courses are real).

W. L. Craig defends a third position, called the “middle-knowledge view” or “Molinist view” (named for a 16th-century Spanish theologian). This view holds that God has always known everything that would ever happen but that he also has known what *would* have happened *if* conditions had been different. Thus, God created the best world possible (in terms of what would fulfill his divine intentions). The central objection raised to this view is that it does not sufficiently answer questions about evil in the world, because it seems to imply that God—rather than humans—is the cause of evil.

Paul Helm explains the traditional or mainstream view, which attributes exhaustive foreknowledge to God. This is the view espoused by Augustine, the majority of medieval scholastics, and the early leaders of the Reformed churches (especially Calvin). This “Augustinian-Calvinist view” holds that it is necessary to conceive of God's omniscience in the most expansive way imaginable. To do otherwise is to believe in a God who is less than perfect, less than the greatest—i.e., less than God. The problem of evil is solved by the argument that God knowingly permits humans to choose evil, but he does not cause the evil. A primary objection is that much of the proof for this view seems to derive from philosophy, rather than from scripture.

Some simple statistics from these essays seem to substantiate this last point. Helm argues for the scriptural warrant for the traditional view on the basis of one passage (Acts 2:23). The rest of his case derives from arguments formulated by Christian theologians over the centuries. (Helm does cite a few other passages in his responses to the other contributors, but Hunt and Boyd actually give much more of the scriptural evidence for the traditional view than does Helm.) In contrast to Helm's discussion of the traditional view, Boyd cites more than four dozen passages (by my count) to justify the open theism view. The impression this leaves is that open theism

is based more on scripture, while the Augustinian-Calvinist view is based more on (human) philosophy. Not surprisingly, this leaves the traditional view open to the charge (made by all three proponents of “non-traditional” views) that the traditional view owes more to neo-platonism than to the Bible. It makes it seem ironic, then, that the open theists most commonly receive accusations about holding “heretical” views.¹

This is a difficult book to read, not because the contributors make it so but because the topic makes it so. Unfortunately, the baggage of centuries of theological and philosophical conversation tends to encumber rather than facilitate the discussion. The reader is required to become familiar with modes of philosophical argumentation and philosophical jargon to understand the views presented. A glossary at the end of this work supplies helpful definitions of the terms used by the four authors, and this alleviates much of the latter problem. But even with these definitions, I fear that readers who are not well trained in philosophical argumentation (which includes most of us) are going to be put off by the complexity with which positions are defended in much of the book. Whereas a graduate student of theology might find this book a helpful summary of the positions on this doctrine, the common person simply does not think in these terms, and she or he will instinctively be suspicious of understanding that is almost entirely dependent on such specialized training.

This situation is regrettable, because our understanding of this doctrine does have numerous practical implications. First of all, there is the basic reality that living our lives on the basis of assumptions held uncritically—especially when those involve matters of faith—is unhealthy and unwise. More than that, on a pragmatic level, I would say that, like it or not, issues of interest to evangelicals seem to find their way into our congregations; so, we should not be surprised to encounter questions about this doctrine in the years ahead.

I will mention just three areas of concern that have been raised to me on more than one occasion. The first is in the area of biblical interpretation. The

Augustinian-Calvinist view involves a decision to read certain texts “metaphorically,” because they do not fit our theology. Is this sound methodologically? One might get the impression that we think we understand God better than the biblical writers themselves understood him. Second, as all four contributors point out, there is major uncertainty about how to understand human sin in relation to divine omniscience. If God has always known the sins we would commit, why does he do nothing more to stop us? And how can we then be held solely responsible?

Third, and perhaps most practically, this doctrine influences our understanding of prayer. Does human prayer have any effect on God if God has exhaustive foreknowledge? If prayer does not affect God, what is really going on in prayer? These essays touch on these and other significant questions that many of us raise. It is regrettable, then, that they probably will not be able—in their present form—to point many of us to answers.

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¹ The fact that the editors and Boyd come from the same school (Bethel College in St. Paul) makes me a little suspicious about the editors' motives in putting together this volume.