Intersections
Exploring where Judaism and Christianity meet

Daniel J. Harrington | MARCH 8, 2010

An intersection is a junction where one road crosses another. This year’s annual survey of Books on the Bible focuses mostly on some recent publications that explore intersections between Judaism and Christianity, both in antiquity and today. They remind us of the Jewish roots of Christianity as well as the divergent paths they have taken.

The Ten Commandments found in both Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 stand alongside the Lord’s Prayer and the Sermon on the Mount as among the most beloved and influential passages in the Christian Bible. Martin Luther claimed that “those who know the Ten Commandments perfectly know the entire Scriptures.” In (Westminster John Knox), Patrick D. Miller, emeritus professor of Old Testament Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary and author of *The Ten Commandments: The Religion of Ancient Israel* (2000), seeks not only to provide a fresh reading of each commandment in its original context but also to lay out the trajectory of its movement and place in the Bible as a whole.

An experienced teacher and distinguished scholar, Miller brings to this task extraordinary philological and historical learning as well as wide knowledge of the Bible, love of theology and pastoral sensitivity. In dealing with each commandment he tries to get at its fundamental meaning, present context, resonances and reflections in other parts of the Old Testament, its place in the New Testament and how it might be preached and applied today. An appendix deals with the ethics of the Ten Commandments. Miller’s remarkable ability to link the Ten Commandments to other parts of the Bible and to bring them alive as representing the Bible in miniature gives substance to Luther’s claim and shows how they can serve as a fruitful entry point in developing a comprehensive biblical theology and an authentically biblical spirituality.

“Agrarianism” is a way of thinking and ordering life in community that is based on the health of the land and of living creatures. In *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge Univ. Press), Ellen F. Davis, a professor of Bible and practical theology at Duke Divinity School, explores the agrarian mindset of the biblical writers by bringing Israel’s Scriptures into sustained conversation with the works of contemporary agrarian writers like Wendell Berry. She is convinced that only a thorough understanding of how ancient Israel represents the human place in the created order can enable Christians to delineate a responsible vision of what participation in the renewal of creation might mean.
Davis first considers the visions of Isaiah and Jeremiah about the unmaking of the created order through human sinfulness and shows how the concerns of modern agrarians can illumine our reading of biblical texts. Next she focuses on key passages, chiefly from the Torah, that focus on creation, manna, eating and land care, and covenantal economics. Then she develops insights from the agrarian prophets Amos and Hosea and the wisdom books and explores the potential of urban agrarianism today in the light of various Old Testament texts. Davis concludes that in its character of hopefulness tempered by sad experience, the biblical conversation is a good match for our contemporary agrarian conversation and an indispensable resource for enriching it. This is biblical theology at its best.

In Stones and Stories: An Introduction to Archaeology and the Bible (Fortress), Don C. Benjamin, who teaches biblical and Near Eastern studies at Arizona State University, offers a masterful description of how Near Eastern archaeologists listen to the evidence, what they hear and what difference it makes for understanding the Bible. His hope is that archaeology and biblical studies may once more be partners in a conversation that will be better informed and more modest than it has been in the past, especially with regard to what each discipline can contribute and can expect from the other.

With particular attention to Old Testament texts, Benjamin organizes his presentation with reference to five approaches that have developed over the years. At each point he explains the approach, illustrates its value with discussions of specific sites and discoveries and indicates how various biblical passages can be illuminated by archaeology. Benjamin offers a timely and nonpolemical invitation to archaeologists and biblical scholars to resume working together in a more respectful and fruitful dialogue. His handbook (which can serve as a textbook) is enriched by many photographs and other illustrations, text-boxes, references to Web sites, summaries, questions for discussion, a list of universities where this kind of archaeology can be studied, a glossary of terms and an extensive annotated bibliography.

In Back to Masada (Israel Exploration Society), Amnon Ben-Tor offers a splendid illustration of what biblical archaeology can and should be. Masada was the last outpost in the First Jewish Revolt against the Romans in A.D. 73 (or 74). Before that it had been built up by Herod the Great on an elaborate scale in the late first century B.C. as a combination of vacation facility and fortress. The site was excavated in the mid-1960s by the famous Israeli scholar Yigael Yadin and has become the second most popular tourist attraction in Israel (after Jerusalem), drawing more than half a million visitors each year.

Yadin produced a popular book on Masada in 1966, and the results of the excavations have been published thus far in eight massive volumes with contributions by many of the top Israeli archaeologists trained by Yadin. Ben-Tor, now the Yigael Yadin emeritus professor of archaeology at the Hebrew University, who describes his own work with Yadin at Masada from 1963 to 1965 as “the best years of my life,” has synthesized for the general public the contents of those highly technical reports. After describing the phases in the settlement of Masada, Ben-Tor provides a guided tour of the various buildings and other installments at Masada, considers the finds (pottery, written materials, coins, etc.), discusses the final battle for Masada with reference to the artifacts discovered there, notes the reuse of the site by Christian monks in the Byzantine period and evaluates the relevance of the excavations for assessing the “Masada myth” in its ancient and modern forms.

A distinguished archaeologist in his own right, Ben-Tor has performed a great service by making accessible the scientific reports on the Masada excavation for the general public. The close relationship of the more than 250 beautifully produced photographs and other illustrations with the main text makes this volume a perfect introduction to the “nitty-gritty” of archaeology and to the material culture of Israel in the first century (and thus of Jesus and the Gospels).
One of the most prominent developments in biblical studies over the past 30 years has been "the Third Quest of the Historical Jesus." Although this quest has taken many forms, one of its characteristics has been a renewed interest in and respect for the Jewishness of Jesus. In his massive synthesis of Jesus research, Craig S. Keener, professor of New Testament at Palmer Theological Seminary of Eastern University in Pennsylvania, gives particular attention to Jewish sources and is especially concerned to situate Jesus within the context of Judaism.

In *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Eerdmans), Keener investigates how much we can know about Jesus from the best sources available and offers examples of how these sources can provide us more adequate information about Jesus than many scholars think we have. After surveying the disparate views about Jesus that have developed in recent years, he considers the character of the canonical Gospels and their value as historical sources. Then he reflects on what we can learn about Jesus' life, teachings, death and resurrection from the best sources. Keener concludes that on the whole there is much we can know about Jesus historically, and that the first-century Gospels preserved by the church remain by far the best sources for this information.

Keener’s work is thorough, believing and balanced. His familiarity with the pertinent ancient texts and modern scholarship is very impressive. More than half of his almost 900-page book is devoted to appendices, endnotes, bibliography and indices. At several points Keener recalls his own conversion from atheism to Christianity, a refreshing feature at a time when the reverse journey is more often highlighted. In describing and evaluating the views of other scholars, Keener is fair and polite, and his own views on Jesus and the Gospels reflect mainline biblical scholarship and are compatible with the Christian theological tradition.

In his review of modern Pauline research, entitled *Approaches to Paul: A Student’s Guide to Recent Scholarship* (Fortress), Magnus Zetterholm, associate professor of New Testament studies at Lund University in Sweden, focuses on Paul’s relationship to Judaism. After an introduction to what the New Testament says about Paul’s life and apostolic activity, Zetterholm traces the emergence of the "standard view" of Paul in 19th-century German Protestantism. Basic to this view were a negative understanding of Judaism as a religion of “works righteousness” and the Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith alone. This paradigm continued well into the 20th century and still has many supporters today. Under the influence of Krister Stendahl, E. P. Sanders, James Dunn and N. T. Wright, however, there has developed what has come to be called “the new perspective” on Paul, one that situates Paul more accurately in the complex and varied context of first-century Judaism and rejects reading Paul through the spectacles of Luther’s theological problems. This development has in turn inspired both spirited defenses of the traditional Protestant position as well as even more radical readings of Paul from a variety of perspectives (philosophical, postcolonial, feminist, interdisciplinary). Zetter-holm provides a fair and lively presentation of some important aspects of modern Pauline studies. His guide can and should be read and appreciated by anyone interested in the apostle Paul and in modern biblical scholarship. He argues persuasively that trying to understand Paul as part of first-century Judaism, rather than in conflict with Judaism, is a better perspective when searching for the historical Paul.

In *Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision* (InterVarsity Press Academic), N. T. Wright, Anglican bishop of Durham, England, offers a passionate and stimulating treatment of the core of Paul’s theology. As a proponent of the “new perspective” on Paul, Wright has been attacked by some more conservative Protestant exegetes and theologians for failing to give sufficient attention to the doctrine of justification by faith. His book is both an engaging exploration of Paul’s theology and a lively defense of his own approach to what in some circles is regarded as the heart of Christian doctrine.
The first part of the book develops Wright’s approach to justification according to Paul, while the second part offers exegetical analyses of pertinent passages in Galatians and Romans, as well as other letters. Wright has established a well-deserved reputation as one of the best biblical theologians of our time. In this volume he demonstrates how the new perspective not only situates Paul more securely in first-century Judaism but also greatly enriches and enlivens our appreciation of Paul’s theological achievements.

Wright contends that Paul’s statements about justification have been read in a too narrow and excessively individualistic context, especially under the influence of Martin Luther. He maintains that while justification is an element in Paul’s theology, it has to be understood in the wider biblical framework of covenant, Christology, the law court and eschatology. He regards the covenant as God’s plan for humankind unfolded in his promises to Abraham that he would become the father of many nations, reaching its pivotal moment in Jesus’ death and resurrection, and thus opened up to all peoples as we await the full manifestation of God’s kingdom. In this framework the legal metaphor of justification means God’s validation of the status of those who are in Christ and who trust and believe in God’s covenant. The “faith of Christ” is primarily the trust and fidelity that Jesus showed as God’s Son in response to his Father’s plan.

Whether Judaism in the time of Jesus and Paul was a missionary religion has long been a topic of intense debate among biblical scholars, with learned monographs arguing either side of the question. In Crossing Over Sea and Land: Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period (Hendrickson), Michael F. Bird, tutor in New Testament at Highland Theological College in Dingwall, Scotland, explores the nature of early Jewish proselytizing activity among Gentiles and its significance for the origin and development of Christian missionary activity. He cuts a middle path through the dispute and may well have solved the problem.

Taking his title from Mt 23:15, Bird contends that while Second Temple Judaism attracted proselytes and facilitated the conversion of Gentiles, it was not self-consciously missionary, since the role of Israel, the Torah and the synagogue was never directed unequivocally toward Gentile recruitment. He bases his position on an analysis of ancient sources pertaining to Jewish missionary activity in Palestine and the Diaspora, as well as evidence from the New Testament and early Christianity. In a 20-page appendix he assembles the major ancient primary sources on Gentile conversion and Jewish missionary activity. He also provides abundant bibliographical information pertinent to the topic. A rising star in New Testament studies, Bird displays a talent for using literary and historical analysis of biblical texts to illumine important theological topics.

For those in search of a holistic and comprehensive approach to biblical interpretation and theology, Scott W. Hahn’s Covenant and Communion: The Biblical Theology of Pope Benedict XVI (Brazos) will be very helpful. Hahn, who teaches at St. Vincent Seminary in Latrobe, Pa., and the Franciscan University of Steubenville, Ohio, contends that more than any other theologian of his time Pope Benedict XVI has articulated a biblical theology that synthesizes modern scientific methods with the theological hermeneutic of spiritual exegesis. He describes Benedict as less a systematic thinker than a symphonic thinker, and observes that his writings are usually composed like a polyphonic melody from many different strains—scriptural, historical, literary, liturgical and patristic.

Drawing heavily on direct quotations from the pope’s many writings, Hahn discusses Benedict’s theological project, his critique of biblical criticism, the hermeneutics of faith, the spiritual science of theology, the inner unity of revelation, the theology of the divine economy, mystagogy and the transformation of sacrifice, the cosmic liturgy and the beauty and necessity of the theologian’s task. Catholic readers will find in Benedict’s views and practice echoes of the many excellent documents about
biblical interpretation that have emanated from the Vatican in recent years. They will appreciate especially the pope's insistence in declaring indispensable the historical critical method (properly understood) and come to understand better the place of the "spiritual sense" in the process of biblical exegesis. Benedict's approach to Scripture can be especially useful in helping us to find the unity and spiritual dynamism amidst the diversity in the Christian Bible and in the history of its interpretation.