

BOOK OF THE MONTH

Jesus – The Centre of New Testament Ethics

Richard A. Burrige, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007. \$35.00. pp. 512. ISBN 978-0-8028-4458-3).

Richard Burrige, Dean of King's College, London, and Director of NT Studies, contributes richly to NT ethics. The book complements R. Hays', W. Schrage's and A. Verhey's fine contributions. His Bibliography, forty-six pages, is of great value, as are his many footnotes.

The book consists of seven chapters. After an orienting chapter, 'Being Biblical', *Jesus comes first*, then Paul, Mark, Matthew, Luke–Acts, John, and finally: *apartheid* in South Africa. Despite his insistence on starting with Jesus, the chapter on Paul is the longest, with John and Luke–Acts next in length. He does not treat Paul's Pastorals, the General Epistles, and Revelation, but refers to them.

Burrige (ch. 1) wends his way through the maze of issues: where to begin and why; method: window, mirror, or stained glass; relevance of historical Jesus studies; criteria for 'finding' Jesus, etc. He reiterates his distinctive angle: read the Gospels as *biographies*, taking the whole narrative, *words and deeds*, to gain an ethical portrait of Jesus. Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God for the Synoptics, and Christology always, are at the centre. Jesus' words are strenuous moral demands but his deeds show *inclusion*, accepting sinners and tax collectors. The biographical nature of the Gospels (see his *What Are the Gospels?*) presents Jesus as pattern for imitation (p. 73).

With priority on *start with Jesus* and Gospels as *biographies*, rather than as treatises on moral instruction, each chapter ends with focus on Jesus as 'friend of sinners' and/or 'inclusive community'. Stressing this point, Burrige mutes other streams of witness: Jesus' parables and sayings where judgement *excludes* (e.g. Mark 8:38 par.; Matt 25:31–46; Luke 19:11–27; John 3:18–21; 9:29) – also with 'multiple attestation'.

Burrige's treatment of Paul follows the usual topics: Christology, law and gospel, present and future, indicative and imperative, etc. He rightly calls for the inseparability of theology and ethics (pp. 99–100). He slights 'principalities and powers' and overlooks Paul's novel appellation of God as 'God of peace'. He misses the crucial Romans 5:6–8 declarations, 'Christ died for the ungodly' and 'God proves his love ... while we still were sinners': key Christological bases for his *inclusive* ethical emphasis. He treats in sequence *imitation of Christ* (pp. 144–48) and '*Keeping company with sinners*' (pp. 149–53) at the end. In *imitation* he rightly emphasizes humility and Christ's self-giving love: 'To follow the example of Jesus Christ's self-giving love even to death on the cross lies at the heart of Paul's own life as well as his theology and ethics' (p. 148). He contends that Paul follows Jesus' deeds more than Jesus' words. Paul's *only* exclusion is for incest in 1 Corinthians 5:10, even then with the man's salvation as goal. Paul's *practice* adjusts commands, e.g. 1 Corinthians 7:10–16 on divorce (*vs.* Jesus' *word* in Mark 10:5–9). Burrige also considers Paul's 'put off' sins and the vice lists, but Paul's *inclusive practices* are the pattern to imitate.

His treatment of Mark excels. His thematic headings arise from Mark's unfolding portrait of Jesus. This raises a curious paradox. His thesis argues the *biographical* nature of the Gospels, to prevent abstracting Jesus as some Q-type moral teacher. But this riddles his other priority: *Jesus first*. Is there really a Jesus to present apart from a given Gospel narrative? Surely, one can distill common elements, but such is stripped of its biographical particularity – good reason to reject the *Diatessaron* (p. 158). The difference in the persuasive quality of chapters 1 and 3 illustrates the point. The two priorities internally compete!

In treating Matthew, Burridge warns that the Sermon should not overbalance the biographical narrative. *Love your enemies*, e.g. is noted (p. 216), but not explicated (though he quotes Matt 5:48 several times). He says little on Matthew's frequent appellation of God as Father and its ethical import. All five discourses are important with the final judgement discourse (chs 24–25) balancing the Sermon (p. 202). But this does not figure into his final section on 'imitating Jesus', nor in his 'Conclusion'. He emphasizes Jesus as 'true interpreter of the law'; 'the law holds', but this is not considered for imitation.

Burridge treats Luke–Acts masterfully, but with little attention to Luke's *peace-justice* thematic (p. 270). Luke shines for Burridge's emphases. He speaks of both *follow* and *imitate* (p. 280). His quotation of Longenecker uses *discipleship* language. Earlier, when using both terms, he speaks of *shifting* from Jesus' *teaching* to Jesus' *activity*, in light of the biographical genre (p. 274). In biography, is action more important than teaching for imitation?

For each Synoptic account, Burridge discusses 'love and law', identifies ethical issues in each; then focuses on *imitation* of Jesus in the Gospel, privileging the double love commandment and Jesus as friend of sinners. In John this outline changes, with the exception of the last emphasis, supporting therefore his overall thesis of 'an inclusive approach'. Burridge cites other scholars who have come on board with his 'biography-imitation' thesis, though they more often speak of discipleship – heeding Jesus' moral teachings. They serve a common purpose (Bonhoeffer quote, p. 224), to enable us to emulate Jesus' person and teaching, as I also propose in *Covenant of Peace* (pp. 356–76). Matthew, with its preponderance of Jesus' teaching forces the question: is it only the person of Jesus that is to be imitated or is it also his interpretation of the law and teaching – the greater righteousness – that is to be heeded?

For John, Burridge tangles his readers in its irresolvable puzzles, including John's negative portrait of 'the Jews', indeed an ethical problem. His resolutions are as good as they come, but the chapter is wordy and redundant. His central point is that Christology is the carrier of the Gospel's ethic, the divine taking on human flesh. Though John lacks explicit moral instruction, *love* and *truth* disclose John's ethic. Jesus' foot-washing *exemplifies* the humble service we are explicitly enjoined to imitate.

Jesus' new commandment to love one another may appear solipsist, but the community of love witnesses to the world (with three differing connotations). Love lays down one's life for the other, which Jesus did. The community of love *includes* marginalized people in the Gospel, the Samaritan woman; it is an inclusive, mixed community ('friend of sinners' is not explicit in John). He mostly misses the 'peace and mission' themes.

For Paul and each Gospel except John, Burridge discusses ethical issues, such as rich and poor, marriage and divorce, women, state and violence. His work shows significant differences among the Gospels; yet *each is biographical*. But this prompts the question: how does one decide which parts of the portrait are to be imitated? It seems that Burridge's choice to present *Jesus first* (ch. 2) presets what he selects for imitation from within the varied biographical portraits. Marius Reiser's *Jesus and Judgement* focuses on another extensive emphasis. Does this count for *imitation*?

The final chapter, like the first, guides the reader through another maze of issues, here those inherent in the hermeneutical appropriation of Scripture to current issues. He tests the model he chooses, adapted from Hays and Gustafson, in the crucible of the biblical debates for and against *apartheid* in South Africa. His documentation of the appeal to Scripture in the protracted debate is a valuable contribution.

Had Burridge taken up the *imitation texts* in 1 Peter and Hebrews, it would have reshaped his *imitation* profile. He refers to these books in one sentence (pp. 390–91) and then returns to them (p. 349) to say 'we cannot apply our method to these books in its entirety' even though they speak much of imitation with Jesus as example. They 'emulate his example as part of Christian discipleship, all of which will lead to the later tradition of *imitatio Christi*' (p. 349). The subtext? These books don't emphasize Jesus as 'friend of sinners' and the 'inclusive, mixed community'. His project has a 'canon within the canon'. Burridge acknowledges that 'women bishops' and 'the gay issue' are the 'elephant in the room' for his project (pp. 127–31, 407).

Utilizing his Gospel-biography thesis (which may be debated – see my *Israel's Scripture Traditions*, pp. 282–86), Burridge selects canonical portions that fit his sub-title. In one of his final paragraphs (p. 408) Burridge briefly summarizes the main emphasis of

each Gospel: none is ‘friend of sinners’ and/or the ‘inclusive, mixed community’. Similar to Jan Botha’s resolution of the hermeneutical quagmire (p. 406), Burridge selects a particular value and then shows how Scripture supports it. Burridge emphasizes Jesus’ double love command. Considering the entire NT, is not *cross*, Hays’ focal image, consistently the heart of the NT, exemplifying what *love* is? John H. Yoder says of the NT imitation ethic:

There is thus but one realm in which the concept of imitation holds, but there it holds in every strand of the New Testament literature and all the more strikingly by virtue of the absence of parallels to other realms: this is at the point of the concrete social meaning of the cross and its relation to enmity and power. Servanthood replaces dominion, forgiveness

absorbs hostility. Thus – and only thus – are we bound by New Testament thought to ‘be like Jesus’. (*Politics of Jesus*, 1994, p. 131; *Covenant of Peace*, pp. 360–66).

Another monograph might seek to reconcile Burridge’s Jesus-portrait of *imitation* with the larger *explicit* NT *imitation*-profile, examining important NT studies on imitation, e.g. Oepke and Larsson. *Imitation* and *discipleship* are complementary. Tutu’s profuse appeal to Scripture (pp. 373–76) enlightens. *Truth* and *Reconciliation* (*peacemaking*) guide Scripture’s address of social issues.

Despite the critique, Burridge offers a gift Scripture scholars and students will treasure.

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