

# Reviews

**Susan Balderstone, *Early Church Architectural Forms: A Theologically Contextual Typology for the Eastern Churches 4<sup>th</sup>- 6<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, Melbourne: Australian Institute of Archaeology, 2007, ISBN 9780980374711, x + 70 pp, AUD 43.**

*Reviewed by Professor Robert Gribben*

This short but thoroughly packed monograph invites the reader into a fascinating set of connected fields, the title naming the main ones: architecture, ancient churches, theology. The architectural variations of these buildings are indeed fascinating, and obvious to anyone who has wandered through archaeological sites in the Middle East - I think of my own in Egypt, Armenia, Jordan, Palestine and Syria with an eye to the liturgical purposes of such variations. The parallels in the development of such buildings, Jewish, Graeco-Roman, Latin, whether house, synagogue, aula, or basilica, in the early centuries of the common era are intriguing (so the work of Michael White). And the 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries saw the greatest explosion of Christian theology that faith had yet experienced, where clarifications were made, such as the Nicene creed and the Chalcedonian definition, which account for several of the divisions of the early church, and which can be visited in their modern forms any Sunday in Melbourne. Into this complex mix, Professor Balderstone has ventured, providing some significant classifications and guidelines for interpretation.

So I come first with real admiration of the years of field work and study which has gone into this work. Susan Balderstone has described and catalogued the vast majority of early basilicas from the late 3<sup>rd</sup> (the famous house-church at *Dura-Europa*) to the early 7<sup>th</sup> century of the Common Era, covering the whole eastern Mediterranean area. Most of the introductory paragraphs on the churches are also illustrated with a ground plan, culled from various sources, but of a standard kind so that they may be compared. It has been wonderful to visit some old friends. (I once walked through Hagia Sophia with Fr Robert Taft as he described how the building served the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom in the 6<sup>th</sup> C under that amazing dome).

The book ends with two tables, the second, a summary of the various church types - house, hall, commemorative church with ambulatory, single-apse, centralized with an octagon, or round, cruciform plan, churches incorporating the tri-conch as a tripartite symbol, the use of transepts, and finally the triple apse in various forms. Table A, however, tabulates each church by date, emperor (and dominant theology), local bishop, the forms adopted for baptistery and sanctuary - all colour coded. This really is

a prodigious piece of work, but it is, of course, not merely for taxonomic purposes.

Table A summarizes the evidence for the tendencies which suggest the thesis which runs through the book (as it does in the author's earlier articles) that the reason for the variation in basic patterns of early churches is the particular theological stance which those in power took during the various disputes, Christological or Trinitarian, and which were so church-dividing (and therefore empire-dividing) in the middle of this period, especially from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup> Centuries. It is an intriguing thesis, and worth exploring. The author acknowledges that written evidence is barely extant, and reading ancient stones is difficult, as readers of this journal know.

In my own field of liturgy, a really major challenge has been directed at most conclusions based on documentary evidence by Professor Paul Bradshaw of Notre Dame, South Bend, Ind., in his *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, and applied to one particular area of liturgical theology in his *Eucharistic Origins*, London: SPCK 2004. (Bradshaw is not represented in the book's bibliography.) Bradshaw bluntly points out how many gaps there are in the record; church historians, and liturgiologists have allowed themselves to become romantically attached to certain early sources, making the covert assumption that they represent what went on in many churches within a region. But we don't know what has not been found; we cannot make a secure judgement as to the value of the source for saying what the eucharist looked like in Syria or Egypt or Milan at a particular time. Some may say that Bradshaw protests too much, but it is a sober reminder, at least in my own field. Susan Balderstone is also aware that the liturgical record is thin for what might have influenced the building of sanctuaries. I ought to add that there has been a recent reassessment of the influential writings of Dom Gregory Dix - by Dr Simon Jones of Merton College, Oxford; see his commentary in a new edition of Dix's *The Shape of the Liturgy* [1945]. Interested persons might like to consult the published work of our own Dr Andrew McGowan, Warden of Trinity College in the University of Melbourne.

I don't feel competent to make a judgement over such a detailed set of evidence, but I bring a concern from another related field, which is that of the history of doctrine. Church History has often been read as a development of intellectual thought without relation to what we might call the social and political aspects of their cultural context. What difference (for instance) did it make to the Council of Nicaea that they worked out their creed while staying in the imperial palace at Iznik (now submerged in the lake) with the emperor in residence, and the imperial guard rattling their spears at every gateway? This was ignored in my own studies at Cambridge - where we studied J. N. D. Kelly's *Early Christian Doctrines* (1960, later revised) - but it frustrated me and I have changed my mind about the

approach since. Who decided on these labels – Orthodox, Arian, Nestorian, Monophysite, Monothelite, Miaphysite, Eutychian, Pelagian and all the rest? They are – they must be – political labels as well. It is interesting to note how many of the churches condemned as heretical at the early Councils just happened to be outside the influence of the Roman-Byzantine emperor: greater Syria, Armenia, Assyria, Persia, Egypt. We read in this study of the swings between the acceptance and the rejection of the Definitions of Chalcedon and other councils. Indeed, in the last forty years, the theologians of the Eastern Orthodox (related to Constantinople) and the Oriental Orthodox (mostly the churches accused of heresy) have got together and managed to agree on a common statement on Christology, recognizing that forces other than theology had driven them apart. In fact, the first Great Schism of the Christian era (451) has been largely resolved. I suggest the categories of doctrine need nuancing, and we need perhaps to look more closely at local, cultural and even architectural factors in explaining certain repeated patterns. I am prepared to accept that theology is one of the *influences*, and that numerology, which modern people might find hard to accept, was another; coping with the architectural legacy of the last temple under your building was a factor too – and local fashions, materials, and the abilities of your builder.

Whatever your conclusion, I recommend a thorough read of this very fine piece of research, which provides detailed information for many more interests than the thread which holds it together. Pack it in your suitcase next time you wander around Middle Eastern ruins!

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**James H. Charlesworth (ed), *Jesus and Archaeology*, Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2006, xxv+720pp, dwgs, b/w plates, ISBN 978 0 8028 4880 2, USD 35.**

*Reviewed by Christopher J. Davey*

This book contains thirty-one papers that were delivered at the millennium conference in Jerusalem in 2000. While the delay in publication is a disappointment, the volume itself represents a comprehensive and invaluable coverage of the subject.

Introducing the work Charlesworth reminds readers that no one has a mortgage on objectivity, ‘One should not imagine that biblical scholars are subjective theologians and archaeologists are objective scientists’. Comments on the differing perspectives of New Testament scholars and archaeologists occur throughout the book. Many of the contributors according to Charlesworth have a foot in both camps.

The first paper entitled ‘What is Biblical Archaeology’ by Avraham Biran, a student of Albright, demonstrates how his excavations at Tel Dan have illuminated many Old Testament references to the site. He does not defend his approach which has not fared well since the death of Albright. His claim that in the early Iron Age the tribe of Dan had within it a tradition of metal working is interesting, as it seems that in the Bronze Age there were also nomadic Semitic metal workers.

Charlesworth’s essay on ‘Jesus Research and Archaeology’ sets the scene. His approach aims to use the results of archaeological work to ‘enrich Jesus Research’. He sets aside the various quests for the historical Jesus and instead begins with open questions not shaped by the theological agendas that drove those who were attempting to write a biography of Jesus. The book aims to assess ‘what has been learned from archaeological excavation of sites known from the New Testament and how such information helps us re-create the world of Jesus’ time and his life and message’. This approach leaves archaeology as an autonomous discipline excavating and accurately recording data independently of any historical hypothesis. Biran’s does not say if his archaeology has such autonomy although it is strongly implied when he describes Albright’s method as ‘detached’ and ‘scientific’.

The demise of Biblical Archaeology is discussed briefly noting that opposition to it arose partly because of attempts to use it as a tool to prove the historicity of the Bible. Charlesworth believes that there is now a willingness by archaeologists and New Testament scholars to re-engage in the task of understanding Jesus in a historical context; this is what the volume is about.

Sean Freyne traces the history of archaeology and the theological quest for a historical Jesus and discusses the