

John Riches, *Conflicting Mythologies: Identity Formation in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew* (Studies of the New Testament and its World). Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000. pp. xxviii+ 363, hb. £29.95. ISBN 0-567-08744-1

John Riches has taught New Testament studies at Glasgow University for more than thirty years, giving his fullest attention over this period to theological issues in the gospels. So this book is a careful, shrewd and mature product of a long interest, and brings into considered focus ideas and lines of enquiry that have intrigued the author for many years.

Riches' main thesis is that the Gospels of Mark and Matthew each reflect, in related though different ways, a conversation between two different kinds of theology. Two voices can be heard in each gospel, outlining two contrasting views of the world. One view is a broad picture, of a world invaded by demonic forces and yearning for evil to be swept away by a new and transforming work of God. There is a stark polarity between good and evil, messianic hope is deeply revolutionary, and discipleship must involve radical conversion from darkness to light. The second view is more analytic, tracing evil to the sin within the human heart, and looking for a renewing work of God within this present order. Faithfulness involves responsible and reforming service, the realisation of ancient hopes through patient obedience.

Riches tracks the ways in which these two theological strands are woven together by Mark and by Matthew. He finds that in neither gospel does one pattern of thinking wholly exclude, extinguish or obscure the other. Nor can neat formulae explain how the two are connected within the gospel narratives. The bricolage is more complex than this, less tidy, more persistently a matter of dialogue and dialectic. If in each gospel 'it is the reformist myth that gains the upper hand', yet, 'This is not to say that the revolutionist myth is simply set aside' (315). The conversation, the interplay of one view with another, leads to a richer story and a more balanced view of discipleship, than any simple or one-sided ideology could offer. Against the warp and weft

of two rather different world-views, bound in relationship by the gospel narratives, the evangelists invited their readers to perceive and pursue faithful Christian vocation.

Riches' work has nine chapters in all: two at the beginning, six in the middle, and one to end. A brisk introduction of themes for discussion leads on to a longer second chapter, examining how Jewish writers from around the New Testament era handled the issue of identity. We hear in particular of various mutant forms in which the key Jewish symbols of kinship and holy land appear. This lays the ground for solid treatments of Markan themes in chapters 3 to 5: one chapter compares the followers of Jesus to Jewish experience of family; the second interprets discipleship against the background of Old Testament pilgrim traditions; the third looks at how Mark presents Jesus, within the spectrum of Jewish messianic ideas. Chapters 6 to 8 then deal in parallel ways with Matthew: we explore the difficult relationship between Matthew's people and Judaism; we hear of how Matthew's story both honours and transcends specific Jewish traditions of sacred site and place; and we trace Matthew's christology to the awesome and climactic tableau of the sheep and goats, where the new world is given to those who have served and loved amid the suffering of this present age.

The ninth and final chapter gathers and complements this careful exegetical work, with a reflection on Christian identity and community, in the New Testament period and today. Riches thus suggests that our present relationship to the gospels should be reflective rather than straightforward, that we can learn from them without being tightly bound by any single pattern of interpretation. For if the evangelists themselves defy simple reading, if they were concerned to blend different perspectives within their story of Jesus, should not the communities who use these gospels also be characterised by diversity? When Christian understandings of our foundation documents vary, that is only to be expected. When our own discipleship leads us to insights that do not combine in precise and easy ways, perhaps then we have understood the gospels, and not radically misread them.

It will be evident that the substance of Riches' argument is quite subtle. His writing style is appropriately serious, but lucid too. The main focus throughout is direct study of the gospels themselves. The progression from chapter to chapter is logical and well explained, and there are plenty of indications of how each part of the book contributes to the whole. A well-motivated reader who has enjoyed teaching of this quality at university could make steady and rewarding headway.

A book of this kind can sharpen our senses, so that when we read the gospels we are more likely to evaluate for ourselves the angles and emphases discussed here. We may think too about our own identity as Christians today, about the stories we live by, the ways that we do theology, and the blend of grace and obedience that characterises true Christian vocation.

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**Derek Murray, *Faith in Hospices: Spiritual Care and the End of Life*, London: SPCK, 2002, pp148, , £10.99, ISBN 0-281-05228-x**

This book combines the reflections of the author gleaned from over 23 years experience as Chaplain to St. Columba's Hospice in Edinburgh and forms a multi-faceted introduction to the spiritual care of the dying and bereaved.

Whilst the work is the considered reflection of an experienced palliative care professional it also includes the personal reflections of the author gained at times when he and his loved ones have been 'users' of the service rather than providers of it. The opening chapter details powerfully his experience of his wife's terminal illness and care within the hospice. His vivid account leaves one in no doubt that this is someone who understands hospice from 'both sides of the sheets'.

Moving beyond the personal the author also provides in this chapter a map of the development of the hospice movement from its earliest