

MORRIS, LEON L. (1914–2006)

Leon L. Morris represents the voice of a sane conservatism, not only in the field of biblical studies as a whole, but also in biblical theology in particular. His best work was not always as widely received by his academic colleagues as it might have been, partly because he wrote with deceptive simplicity, partly because a very substantial part of his prolific output was designed either to serve lay Christians or to be a mediating conduit between technical scholarship and well-trained pastors and other Christian leaders. His *New Testament Theology* is an excellent example of the latter. Doubtless his years of pastoral ministry in the Australian bush, combined with his years of teaching and administration at Ridley College, Melbourne, combined to reinforce these priorities.

Nevertheless, in two domains in particular Morris' contribution has been strategic. First, in addition to a score of essays on the subject, Morris wrote at length on the cross and the atonement. His three books on the subject – one technical, one a substantive survey, one popular – reflect the kind of work that was typical of him: painstaking word studies, grammatico-historical exegesis, and close attention to related themes. For instance, in Morris' view the great atonement passage Romans 3:21–26 cannot be abstracted from the argument of Romans 1:18–3:20, which is a damning indictment of Jews and Gentiles alike, both under 'the wrath of God' which is revealed from heaven against 'all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness' (Rom. 1:18). This datum necessarily feeds into the analysis of Romans 3:21ff.: by God's design, what the cross achieves, amongst other things, is the setting aside of his own principled wrath, such that God himself is vindicated (i.e., his 'righteousness' is disclosed). These connections Morris traces through the canon. Although his views on these matters are not currently in vogue, any biblical theology of the cross that does not wrestle with them merely impoverishes itself.

The second domain in which Morris made important contributions is the field of Johannine studies. In a major commentary, a volume of critical studies, a useful theology of John, and several more popular works, Morris plowed a furrow in line with the earlier works of Hengstenberg and Westcott. In some ways he was helped by the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which have gone a long way in showing that the world of the Fourth Gospel by and large fits comfortably into the matrix of first-century Palestinian Judaism, rather than something much later and more esoteric. If he did

not always advance the most original proposals, he was refreshing in his stubborn refusal to stray too far from the text. His theology of John is less interested in the outlook and religio-social world of the Johannine community than it is in the theology of the texts as we have them — a frustration to some critics and a breath of fresh air to many students.

One of Morris' contributions to biblical theology has less to do with innovative synthesis than with a sterling ability to write books helpful to students at the precise moment when faddish research is in danger of leading the discipline astray. When many were highly impressed by the thesis that liturgical cycles explain the structure of one or more of the canonical Gospels, Morris' study of Jewish lectionaries was one of the works that helped turn the tide. When apocalyptic was on everyone's lips, widely advanced as the 'mother' of primitive Christian thought, Morris' little book on apocalyptic helped many a student retain a sense of proportion. Neither work was the sort of thing destined to be milestones in biblical studies, but both exercised a strategic role at the time. Similarly, his many commentaries (he wrote commentaries on almost all the New Testament books, and on two of the Old Testament books) are marked by workman-like sobriety within historic confessionalism — which is surely a better place for students to begin than with the merely faddish, even if in due course they may choose to expand their horizons.

References and further reading

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