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The Blue Parakeet: Rethinking How You Read The Bible



Synopsis

Why Can't I Just Be a Christian? • Parakeets make delightful pets. We cage them or clip their wings to keep them where we want them. Scot McKnight contends that many, conservatives and liberals alike, attempt the same thing with the Bible. We all try to tame it. McKnight's *The Blue Parakeet* has emerged at the perfect time to cool the flames of a world on fire with contention and controversy. It calls Christians to a way to read the Bible that leads beyond old debates and denominational battles. It calls Christians to stop taming the Bible and to let it speak anew for a new generation. In his books *The Jesus Creed* and *Embracing Grace*, Scot McKnight established himself as one of America's finest Christian thinkers, an author to be reckoned with. In *The Blue Parakeet*, McKnight again touches the hearts and minds of today's Christians, this time challenging them to rethink how to read the Bible, not just to puzzle it together into some systematic theology but to see it as a Story that we're summoned to enter and to carry forward in our day. In his own inimitable style, McKnight sets traditional and liberal Christianity on its ear, leaving readers equipped, encouraged, and emboldened to be the people of faith they long to be.

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Customer Reviews

Any book that forces you to stop, think, and reevaluate what you believe is a book worth reading. Scot McKnight's new book *The Blue Parakeet* is that kind of book. McKnight uses an odd encounter with an out of place bird (I won't spoil the story) to illustrate the way many people approach reading the Bible. In particular McKnight's concern is that Christians aren't making the effort to understand

those passages in Scripture that seem somewhat out of place from the rest. McKnight suggests that there a number of these passages which are not only being ignored because of their apparent difficulty; some passages are even being silenced by Bible readers today. It's bad enough that Christians might choose to ignore or silence teachings found in God's Word, but as McKnight argues even worse is the fact that the Church is being harmed as a result. McKnight surveys a number of these "blue parakeet" passages in his book, but focuses in on one teaching that he believes is detrimental to the Body of Christ: the role of women in the church. As I considered McKnight's story there were a number of points he made that resonated with me, especially related to the general level of biblical ignorance that is present in our churches. The book offered some helpful discussion to help Bible readers better understand the text they have. There were other times when McKnight's arguments went in directions that I found some discord with. But even in these points of disagreement, McKnight's witty style caused me to at least reconsider that which I believed to be true. I did feel that the sections related to the topic of women in ministry tilted the balance of the book beyond what the subtitle (Rethinking How You Read the Bible) indicated the book was to be about. I do not think that the example was out of place; in fact it fit well with the other "hot button topics" McKnight pointed to in order to illustrate his point. I wonder if his passion for the subject would have been better served in a separate work. There did come a point in reading this work that I felt as if I were reading an entirely different book from what had come before. That being said, *The Blue Parakeet* is definitely worth reading and will be a helpful tool for anyone who needs to shore up their own understanding of how they approach and read the Bible.

BE FOREWARNED: THIS IS A LONG POST. SORRY. Special thanks to Dr. McKnight for the invitation, and to Zondervan for the advance reader's copy. --- Scot McKnight, *The Blue Parakeet: Rethinking How You Read the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008). 240 pp. (Page references given in this review refer to the paperback "advance reader copy" and may not be accurate when used with the final, publication edition.) In *The Blue Parakeet*, McKnight (The Jesus Creed, A Community Called Atonement, The Real Mary) wades waist-deep into the internecine conflict over hermeneutics and the way hermeneutical decisions shape the evolution of Christian theology, orthodoxy, and religious praxis. But that's not the language McKnight, a seminary professor, would use to describe this book. In fact, he's trying - too hard, methinks - to distance himself from his theology vocation and write primarily for the masses. His audience in *Parakeet* is probably best approximated by his impressively large, denominationally diverse blog community ([...] composed of laypersons, paid ministers, and academics, most of whom share McKnight's somewhat postmodern

outlook. Rather, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he is representing his blog community, not speaking to them. Viewed against McKnight's prolific web journal, *The Blue Parakeet* is arguably an extended apology for the emergent brand of evangelical Christianity within which most of his blog community dwells. Broadly speaking, McKnight's eclectic blogosphere is weary of mainstream American Christianity with its naive, simplistic approach to resolving the cognitive dissonance that results when the uninitiated reader encounters Blue Parakeets. But what are these strange birds, anyway? And what do they have to do with hermeneutics? Blue Parakeets serve double duty in McKnight's book. At the outset, they are odd passages, isolated verses, surprising narratives, or strange teachings that don't fit cleanly into a reader's interpretive paradigm - or, for that matter, that don't fit into any of the classic orthodoxies without some creative sophistry. For readers who take a surpassingly high view of chastity and sexual modesty, for example, the stories of Ruth "uncovering Boaz' feet" and Tamar's brazen seduction of Judah - especially when the women are presented as heroines - are Blue Parakeets. They are the square pegs that the Bible invites the reader to shoehorn into round, doctrinal holes. What are we to make of a seemingly double-tongued Jehovah who requires sexual purity but lauds a seductress? What are we to do with an Anointed One who permits a two-bit whore to shame the pious, chaste elites? Secondly, as McKnight develops his hermeneutical thesis, Blue Parakeets assume human form as people who serve a contrarian, prophetic, de-centering function for those of us who have grown comfortable in our personal orthodoxies. In New Testament terms, for example, Cornelius is the Blue Parakeet to Peter's Judaic exclusivism. McKnight himself reels off a litany of Blue Parakeets who have sailed through his life in the classroom. Parakeets are the living embodiment of the difficult hermeneutical questions that inevitably arise when we let the Scriptures speak for themselves. The overriding theme in *Parakeet* - true to McKnight's academic training - is intellectual honesty. There are many ways of trying to come to terms with the Blue Parakeets on the sacred page, but they all seem to require some sort of mental gymnastics - either ignoring the plain sense out of hand, or reading one's extrabiblical philosophies and traditions into the text to mitigate the difficulties, or imposing interpretive rules after the fact in order to achieve a predetermined outcome. McKnight puts his finger squarely on half a dozen ways that we play dishonest or disingenuous games with the Biblical text in order to make it all fit. If there is a single, great service that *The Blue Parakeet* will accomplish, it is to make all of us face our hermeneutical sins and inconsistencies in their naked glory. Every one of us is guilty of it to some extent: we find ways to take the Blue Parakeets and mold them to fit in some unnatural way. It is one thing, however, to render an accurate diagnosis of a disease that has afflicted us ever since we began writing to each other. It is another thing to propose

a coherent alternative, a way of reading that helps us avoid the hermeneutical pitfalls that are always nearby. McKnight lends his voice in *The Blue Parakeet* to the chorus of contemporary authors (e. g., Eugene Peterson's *Eat This Book*) who argue persuasively for a narrative approach to Scripture. In this view, the Scriptures are not a static, prescriptive account of how religious lives ought to be ordered; they are an ongoing, ever-developing record of how people throughout (Middle Eastern and European) history have worked out their relationship to God, their place in the world, and their understanding of how best to live. As such, the Scriptures invite the reader into humanity's cultural arc, a trajectory in which each generation must reevaluate for itself its predecessors' arguments and conclusions, sift those arguments through a cultural mesh, and extract the seminal ideas capable of informing new cultural judgments in new cultural settings. That, of course, is also the antinomian danger of a narrative approach: if Scriptural doctrine and ethics are culturally contingent, what considerations constrain our reading of the text so that we do not make "God's will" merely a reflection of our own, dominant culture, robbing "God's will" of its divinity and its transcendent authority? The solution McKnight offers us, which he calls a "third way" between extremes, is to read the Bible with church tradition, as opposed to reading it (a) through church tradition (after Stanley Hauerwas, for example) or (b) thoughtlessly divorced from church tradition (the neo-evangelical temptation). McKnight's test case for illustrating how his tradition-informed approach differs from our tradition-bound or tradition-illiterate approaches is, "what is the proper role of the woman in public expressions of Christianity?" The last several chapters of the book explore that question in dialogue with Scripture. McKnight first asks, "what did women do in the Bible?" He finds numerous examples of women who served God's purposes in a variety of public leadership roles, and then he grapples with the difficult, direct teachings of Paul that appear, at face value, to contradict those examples of women in authority. Implicit throughout McKnight's argument is the narrative lens that is foundational to the entire book: narrative evidence ("what did women do?") trumps doctrinal evidence ("what did so-and-so say that women ought to do?"). For McKnight, given the narrative evidence that God called, equipped, and confirmed women in roles of public authority, the burden of proof lies upon those who believe Huldah and Deborah and Priscilla to be exceptions to God's will rather than compelling evidence of it. One wishes that McKnight had dealt more explicitly and extensively with the question of burden of proof as he develops his argument. After all, the primary purpose of *Parakeet* is to gain a fresh, open-minded hearing among his fellow evangelicals, people for whom assigning the burden of proof is a vital first step in persuasion. Modern evangelicals - McKnight numbers himself among them, but clearly sees himself as a black sheep and a dissident - are not likely to be persuaded by an argument that merely shifts the burden

of proof from one side to the other at the outset. (For his part, McKnight would probably reject my binary, one-or-the-other-but-not-both formulation.) The Blue Parakeet is an important work and is laced with valuable insights for us laypersons who are struggling to reconcile their intuition, their changing cultural setting, and their reading of Scripture over important doctrinal matters. McKnight frames the key, hermeneutical issues in a helpful, accessible way. Technical specialists in Scripture, though familiar with the basis for McKnight's arguments, may be less impressed by his method. McKnight begins with the assertion that Scripture ought to be read through a narrative lens centered in a particular narrative trajectory (the restoration of unity and the evaporation of arbitrary distinctions), and then feigns delight later when his reading of Paul's teachings on women's roles is "consistent, then, with the story and plot of the Bible" (p. 203). Of course it is; his setup and follow-through ensured that it would be.---Stylistically and editorially, I found The Blue Parakeet distracting, but perhaps that tells more about me than about the book. The following observations should be taken with a grain of salt. My overarching criticism of McKnight's style is that in his effort to connect with a non-academic audience, his writing is overtly self-conscious and does not give the reader credit for being able to detect irony or wit without the author's help. Until I read his other books - this is my first exposure to them - I cannot tell whether that is (a) a standard McKnight feature or (b) an artifact of his choice of audience in this case. To say that the style is "insulting" would surely be too strong, but I did find myself wishing McKnight would give me more credit. Editorially, the prose could stand some tightening, and here are some illustrative examples. There are oddly selected verbs (p. 159: "eyeballing it into three basic options?"); presumptuous shifts from "I" to "we" (p. 154); unnecessary self-references ("I am arguing" and "Let me play with that metaphor by..." on p. 144); clumsy parallels and restatements (p. 144 again); and flabby, superfluous constructions ("it need only be mentioned that..." on p. 139). An appropriate watchword for the final, editorial sweep before printing: concision.---Now to disagreements. The chapter on "patterns of discernment" is an important contribution that helps us to be honest about the inconsistent logic that we often use when we apply Scripture to some vexing ethical, religious, and political questions. But McKnight gives short shrift to Christian thinkers of the past. On p. 140, for example, McKnight says (with reference to speaking in tongues) that "a pattern of discernment arose that 'tongues aren't for today, they were a sign gift of the first century.'" He then notes that when the charismatic movements of the 1970s and 1980s emerged, "the 'pattern' was discerned as a 'no longer not for us' pattern. In other words, 'that was then, but this is now' became a 'that was then, and it is also now' pattern." Just like that. Does he believe that the "patterns of discernment" were merely ad hoc, or does he believe that some of them were carefully reasoned? Supernatural

manifestations of God's power are no occasion for sloppy thinking or bland, noncommittal splitting of differences. If they are genuine, they are powerful evidence for God in a society that demands hard evidence; but if they are counterfeit or contrived, they are powerful evidence that Christians (especially) are dupes, frauds, and simpletons, and the church's witness, our credibility in the world of ideas, is seriously diminished. Unfortunately, McKnight seems not to be terribly concerned about that; he appears more concerned that we just not fight about it.---In chess, a "gambit" occurs when Player A sacrifices a piece - without immediately taking an equivalent piece from an opponent - in order to secure a more advantageous position on the chessboard. If Player B takes the gambit, Player B enjoys a short-term advantage in firepower; but if the gambit is skillfully played, Player A reaps a positional advantage whose benefits do not emerge until much later in the game, when the kings are more exposed and the stakes are higher with every move. McKnight's discussion of I Corinthians 9:19-23 ("I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some") is standard, missional fare (pp. 142-144); it is the primary proof text cited to support cultural innovations, adaptations, and (sometimes) compromises of many kinds. Its rhetorical force often shows up in uncritical statements like, "if [an innovation] furthers the gospel, how can it possibly be wrong?" McKnight allows himself to be drawn in by a clever gambit. The central issue here is to decide what we mean - or what Paul meant - by, "furthering the gospel." In modern, evangelical settings, for example, it is commonly if tacitly thought that getting more people through the front doors and into the theater seats (!) is "furthering the gospel;" as the logic goes, then, nearly anything short of pornography or drinking contests that gets fannies into the seats is an appropriate means of cultural adaptation in the church. But thoughtful scholars like Philip Kenneson (*Life on the Vine, Selling Out the Church*) have provided carefully reasoned arguments to the contrary. To Kenneson, many of our clever strategies and tactics for filling the seats actually do long-term violence to the church's long-term, prophetic stance in society. In short, by adopting and adapting those tactics, we may gain numerically, but we lose positionally. I do not mean to suggest that *The Blue Parakeet* is a sell-out or that McKnight is an uncritical accommodationist. I do not believe either is true. Moreover, I do believe that thoughtful, cultural adaptation is an important aspect of the church's incarnational mandate as the body of Christ. But I am disappointed that McKnight does not raise these issues and deal with them explicitly and at length. How are we to know when a cultural accommodation is benign and when it is malignant? How are we to determine when we have sacrificed too much at the altar of cultural relevance and congruence? The naive reader - and there will be many of them who pick up this book - is vulnerable to the shifting wind of doctrine and may not be equipped to discern rightly and well. McKnight owes such readers a fair warning, but he does not deliver it with adequate

force.---With some caveats, I am inclined to agree with McKnight's thesis. If nothing else, McKnight has helped me confront the incoherence in my fundamentalist approach to Scripture. And as to McKnight's case study of women's public roles in the church, I am on a similar journey; Deborah and Priscilla have been blue parakeets in my backyard for quite some time, but the Joyce Meyers of the world have been holding me back from a full commitment. I still have questions, and I think they're valid ones, so McKnight hasn't closed the deal.qb

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