One of the challenges of any adaptation of Bible stories for children is in pitching them at an age-appropriate level. Here, the results are mixed. Whilst stories such as the destruction of Sodom deftly gloss over the reasons why the city was destroyed, the retelling of the Cain and Abel story begins with the statement, ‘Adam had intercourse with his wife Eve’ (14). The average parent would deem explicit references to sex such as this inappropriate for primary school–aged children. Unfortunately, such content detracts from an otherwise good publication, and it is hoped that in a future edition the publisher would seriously consider removing such content.

The Comic Book Bible could be a useful publication for parents, teachers and other adults to introduce Bible stories to children. However, given the concerns noted above, if it were to be used, for example in educational contexts, teachers would have to select carefully which stories they utilise.

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Andrew Murray’s latest book offers a reading of Aristotle’s Politics in the context of life in the Pacific, an area understood as including Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia, places in which Murray has long had political-philosophical interests. The structure of the book largely follows Aristotle’s own framework, with discussions of the notion of a political community, its purpose, the idea of a constitution, the meaning of citizenship, and the material and cultural conditions needed for political life to survive and thrive. But the reading of Aristotle has as its background the rich diversity of political histories and systems that characterize Pacific life. Murray has direct experience of many of the places talked about, and has a sharp eye for the telling detail. The main narrative is interrupted by four ‘Excursions’ that discuss particular examples at more length, the Melanesian Wantok system, Fiji’s constitutional struggles, the recent political history of Tonga, and the survival of the Chamorro culture of north-west Micronesia. The excursions come as welcome breaks in the overall narrative of the book. After working through the sometimes complex distinctions and qualifications of the Aristotelian narrative, the reader enjoys the brief stories of politics in action.

Murray’s own voice accompanies us throughout the journey, acting as guide both to Aristotle and to Pacific political life. He points to things along the way, explains features that puzzle us, and answers our questions. His narrative is always measured and balanced. He is aware of difficulty of the task, the complexity of cultures, the near impossibility that an outsider ever fully understand a foreign culture, and the need for respectful reticence when offering
comment. In this he is in tune with Aristotle himself, who (in a way that might surprise modern readers) is also slow to judge. Aspects of Aristotle’s philosophy are admittedly unpromising for beginners. His texts are often messy, lacking proper continuity. Murray notes that the Politics seems to begin five different times, suggesting disarmingly that we could see this as showing Aristotle’s concern to get the beginning (or ‘beginnings’?) right. But Aristotle’s overall tone and approach fit very well with Murray’s project. The Philosopher is no ideologue who imposes thought-ideals at all costs. He is deeply aware of the complexity of human communities, and of the extraordinary variety of factors that underpin political forms, so that it would be silly to propose a single political recipe. Practical matters should not be settled by theoreticians, but by those with informed political expertise, working on the ground. As Murray notes, this runs counter to the approach taken by many apologists of the ‘modern’ state, who assume without further ado that they already possess the ideal structure to which all political orders should aspire. Aristotle’s concerns are more fundamental, focussing on the question of how to start thinking about political issues at all, what exactly we are trying to achieve, what definitions play into our discussions, and what structures might best help us achieve successful political life in our particular situation.

Given the generality of his approach, one can ask what precisely Aristotle contributes to a solution. If taken superficially, he can come across as a kind of schoolmaster, one with a passion for naming and labelling things (Murray’s book seems to indicate that most of them come in threes…). But this overlooks the fact that in his naming and defining, Aristotle often enables us to see things for the first time, coming to them in the manner of philosophical awakening, as realities we somehow already know, but have never noticed. One of the best aspects of Murray’s book is its ability to wake us up to political things we have lived with like this without noticing them, for example what exactly constitutes a ‘political order’, or a ‘country’. Remarks in Murray’s text often surprise the reader into a new awareness, as with his comment that the lines of Aristotle’s despotic master-slave (or ‘master-servant’) relationship can be discerned in the modern employer-employee relationship, or the way in which a presidential system allows more freedom of discussion, so that parliamentary voting need not always proceed along party lines, or his highlighting of Aristotle’s definition of commerce as ‘selling what other people have produced’.

Some readers of Murray’s book will want to progress to the Politics, or to other texts mentioned in the work. Others will discover an enhanced clarity of vision as they participate in political life in the Pacific or elsewhere. Others will just want to have their eyes opened to things we all live among, but rarely notice. Murray has provided all these readers with an original, simple, engaging, no-nonsense introduction. In this, he has done them a great service.

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