Saint Patrick of Ireland: A Book Review

Gary E. Silvers, Ph.D.
The biography of St. Patrick of Ireland is an attempt to paint a picture of the mysterious missionary to Ireland by examining the times in which he lived. As Freeman asserts, Patrick was, “A remarkable man living in a world that was both falling apart and at the dawn of a new age” (p. xviii). Freeman succeeds in producing a fresh portrait of the life of St. Patrick and the amazing times in which he lived.

Freeman begins the work with the story of Patrick’s kidnapping from his family home in Britain by Irish raiders who made a living off of enslaving women and children, “Grown men were difficult to handle and were often killed, but young boys could be broken more easily and were useful in the dirty and dull tasks of farm life” (p. xi). Patrick had lived a life of relative privilege until his abduction at the age of fifteen. For the next six years he would serve on a small farm and shepherd sheep near the Western Sea if Ireland.

Freeman does a very good job of describing what Patrick’s relationship with God was like during his enslavement. During his captivity, Patrick began to develop a strong reliance on God. He was a man who claimed to hear God audibly. Patrick claimed that God spoke to him and told him where a ship would be waiting to return him home. Freeman describes in great detail how Patrick became a fugitive as he trekked approximately 185 miles to the harbor. Patrick was offered a position as a crewmember of a ship and back to Britain he sailed.

After returning home, Patrick began to have visions that indicated to him that wanted him to return to Ireland. Freeman writes, “He could not ignore this divine call, this awesome commission. Patrick was going back to Ireland” (p. 51). The period after this call is followed by what Freeman calls the “missing years.” Freeman offers conjecture, but finally states, “The missing years of Patrick’s life are so frustrating because we don’t know exactly where he was or
what he was doing. We do know he eventually became a Bishop, but we don’t even know when he achieved this position” (p. 65).

One strength of the text is that Freeman paints a very vivid picture of what Ireland was like during the time that Patrick ministered there. Women were considered property of a male whether it be father, husband, or son. Freeman argues that a typical Christian convert would, “Have grown up in a land with many gods, a land with Druids and magical bards, a land where mysterious, invisible Otherworld was always present and watching” (105). Freeman explains in detail why women, slaves, and the poor were so affected by Patrick’s gospel message.

One can almost feel Patrick’s pain at the murder of his converts at the hands of tyrants raiding the area. The irony that Patrick must have felt that raiders had killed, or taken, his flock members to the land of his birth is explained. His anger is understood as he writes his letter to Coroticus.

A second strength is that Freeman’s biography contains exceptional research. He pays particular attention to archaeology that aids in describing Patrick’s times. An example would be the practice of baptizing new converts unclothed. Freeman describes, “A lead tank found at Walesby in Britain. On the panel is a naked woman flanked by two female attendants, with six males standing near as witnesses” (p. 129).

One weakness of the text is the lack of reliable information on the life of St. Patrick. Freeman must make conjecture throughout most of the text about this historical figure. The words “likely” and “probably” are used throughout the book. This is not due to Freeman’s lack of diligence. Freeman states at the beginning of his work regarding Patrick’s letters, “Though Patrick wrote neither of these letters as history or autobiography, they contain fascinating and precious bits of information about his own life as well as about Ireland during a turbulent age”
Freeman also admits that, “The details that Patrick gives us of his life are few and often tantalizingly vague” (p. xviii). Freeman did an exceptional job in what he had to work with.

It is difficult to find another weakness of this text. The photographs that Freeman provides are a nice touch, but could have included descriptions of the photographs under them in the text. Overall this text is great for Christians who know little about such a remarkable member of Church history.

Gary E. Silvers
Rome, GA
Liberty University