

Reading with the Great Cloud of Witnesses

BY RACHEL M. BILLINGS

Given the impressive and accessible resources reviewed here, readers have no reason to delay their acquaintance with earlier Christian interpreters of Scripture. These books bring us alongside that “great cloud of witnesses” that has read the Bible before us, and allow us to benefit from their testimony.

For Christians, the Bible is an account and vehicle of the living God’s ongoing work around the world and across history in the community of his people, the Church—gathering, shaping, sorting, and redeeming. When we are reading our Bible alone at home, however, it can be hard to keep in mind the vast global and temporal scope of God’s activity. That loss of perspective can cost us dearly, especially when we try to “apply” the Bible to our lives. Many of us have experienced the awkward silence that falls at the end of a Bible study when the question of application arises. Not only do we find ourselves flummoxed if we expect every word of Scripture to apply to us personally, but we make the platform for God’s speech much too small. However, when we hear Scripture as members of the body of Christ, the universal Church, which spans all of time and space, this opens up countless pathways of interpretation!

In the last two decades, evangelical Protestants have begun to regain this sense of perspective, an awareness of the breadth and depth of the Christian tradition, and to bring this newfound awareness to their reading of Scripture. The books reviewed here set out to remind us that any Christian reading of the Bible takes place in the context of a long tradition of Christ-centered reading, and that our reading can flourish by its rootedness in such

a tradition. In *Praise Seeking Understanding: Reading the Psalms with Augustine*, Jason Byassee looks at how Augustine's *Enarrationes in Psalmos* (*Expositions on the Psalms*) can and should serve as a guide for Christian allegorical readings in today's church. John L. Thompson's *Reading the Bible with the Dead: What You Can Learn from the History of Exegesis That You Can't Learn from Exegesis Alone* has a title that explains itself. Thompson focuses on specific texts rather than a specific interpreter to provide models and companionship for Christian readings today. Finally, selections from two recent commentary series designed to help readers encounter the Bible within the long tradition of Christian interpretation will round out our selections. The *Genesis 12–50* volume of the Early Christian Commentary on Scripture Series and the *Genesis* volume of the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible will provide further examples of how an awareness of Christian readings from the past can enrich our appreciation and understanding of Scripture in the present.



Jason Byassee's *Praise Seeking Understanding: Reading the Psalms with Augustine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007, 290 pp., \$32.00) beckons the reader to reexamine and reclaim the ancient Christian practice of reading Scripture allegorically, with Augustine as its model. Modern seminary students and scholars have been so thoroughly steeped in the historical-critical method that they have grown wary of the Church's long tradition of allegorical readings: how can a method that "reads things into the text" possibly be appropriate for a historical work like the Bible? Through a guided tour of Augustine's homiletical exegesis of the Psalms, Byassee argues that allegory is, in fact, the most natural and theologically coherent way for *Christians* to read Scripture. To make clear why this is the case, he directs us to the proper *telos* or end of a Christian reading of the Bible—a theological goal, pursued in the context of the Church (p. 3). The Church most properly reads Scripture as God's own witness to himself, and as an agent of God's ongoing redemptive work in creation (pp. 48, 56–57). What does this mean, exactly? The most direct response comes in Byassee's quotation of Augustine: that "Christians are to treat the Bible as 'the face of God for now'" (p. 67). That is, a Christian reading of the Bible is much more about an encounter with the living God than it is about an encounter with a historical text. Although this does not change the historical nature of the Bible, it shifts our focus from antiquarianism to worship. Byassee frames this lofty goal with incredible succinctness: "Exegesis is intertwined with liturgy, which has as its end the beatific vision" (p. 241).

How does allegory come into the picture? Christians necessarily relate to the Old Testament indirectly and by extension, since Christians are not part of the ethnic people of Israel addressed by God in the Old Testament. As a result, Byassee asserts with regard to the Church, "Our very existence

is allegorical" (p. 50), and thus allegory is our only access to these divine words that did not originally address us. This distance between the text and its Christian readers who have been grafted in cannot be bridged by historical knowledge, but only by the work of Christ. A Christ-formed people warrant a hermeneutic that nourishes the body of Christ. Byassee most distinctively makes this point in his discussion of how Augustine reads the Psalms with an eye for the *totus Christus*, the whole person of Christ, such that our allegory finds not only Christ but also the Church present throughout the Bible (pp. 60, 84). In his concluding chapter, he draws Augustine's method out into the congregation, urging that practice and teaching are needed to form good allegorical readers (pp. 264–272). While some of his proposals for widespread education seem impractical, I would be eager to see Byassee edit a "reading with the Church Fathers" Bible study series to get things moving. For now, prospective readers should be aware that this book provides an in-depth study of Augustine's exegesis of the Psalms and will be most navigable by the theologically educated reader.



For a broader and more approachable introduction to the historic voices of the Church, John L. Thompson's *Reading the Bible with the Dead* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007, 336 pp., \$24.00) does nicely. Thompson takes the reader on a conversational journey through some of the Bible's "difficult" texts with the guidance of various voices from church history. Confronted with modern, especially feminist, arguments that the Church has ignored or abused biblical texts dealing with the oppression and subjection of women (pp. 3–4), Thompson takes us back to the sources to give the history of Christian biblical interpretation a fair hearing. He shows that if the Church has failed on some points in its treatment of these texts, it has at least struggled with them extensively, refusing to ignore the hard questions they raise (pp. 45, 216). The chapters are conveniently divided by individual stories or types of texts, so that readers can easily locate exactly which discussion they need, whether that is the problem of Jephthah's daughter or the Psalms of cursing or the role of women in the Church. For those who might be suspicious of reading the Bible with the "Church Fathers" or even the Reformers, Thompson makes the case that Christians from the past deserve to be our partners in reading the Bible just as much as our contemporaries (pp. 226–227). And for those who are still skeptical that we should use other texts to help us read the Bible, the subtitle says it all: *What You Can Learn from the History of Exegesis that You Can't Learn from Exegesis Alone*. While some interpreters may celebrate the "freshness" that comes from an "independent" reading, Thompson rightly points out that novel readings can be ill-informed as often as "fresh" (pp. 6–7). In Thompson's view, it behooves us to familiarize ourselves with the past so

that we will not be doomed to ignore it, repeat it, or re-invent it. To aid us in this task, he offers a gracious and non-intimidating approach to our forebears.

For each topic, Thompson offers a range of opinions from church history, mostly summarizing his sources but providing brief quotes as well. When he surveys the interpretive options of the past, Thompson includes the ignominious as well as the insightful. For example, he does not hesitate to convey that he is appalled at Ambrose for blaming Jephthah's daughter for her untimely demise (pp. 37–38). Often, however, he can report with equal candor that such morally distasteful conclusions do not set the standard for earlier Christian exegesis (p. 38), as when he praises Luther's sympathy for Hagar (p. 25). From each chapter's examples, he draws out several concluding points for the reader to carry forward in interpreting the text in question. These generally focus on broad ways in which the Church has most fruitfully appropriated the text, roads best not taken, and important reminders that these difficult passages hold for the Christian reader. This book could serve as a handbook in the truest sense of the word—a book that pastors and other interpreters of the Bible will want to keep readily at hand for reference as those difficult questions arise.



For lengthier examples of early Christian exegesis, readers can turn to InterVarsity Press's Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture series. Launched in 2002 and arranged book-by-book like a typical biblical commentary, this series contains excerpts from early biblical exegetes that range from the first through the eighth centuries. Each selection ranges in length from a few sentences to a few paragraphs, and some are newly translated from original languages. Like Thompson's book, this series aims for an audience of pastors or educated lay readers who want to read the Bible in conversation with interlocutors from the early church. Instead of having to load their bookshelves with dozens of commentaries by different ancient authors, readers can pick up the appropriate ACC volume and find relevant selections from a variety of ancient authors grouped according to the order of the biblical text. This arrangement draws its inspiration from earlier Jewish and Christian commentaries that assembled commentators' words around portions of the biblical text for the reader's easy access—in a way, creating the prototype of the study Bible.

Readers will be pleased to find that the series covers the complete Bible as well as the Apocrypha, though the amount of material presented varies dramatically. Some books of the Bible have their own volume or even two, while others are grouped together with several neighbors within a single volume. For the purposes of this review, I consulted the volume covering the Patriarchal history: *Genesis 12–50*, edited by Mark Sheridan (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002, 392 pp., \$50.00). In the series introduction

by Thomas C. Oden, the series editor, I found his inspiration by the format of the Talmud with its varied comments encouraging, hoping for the sort of survey of views found in Thompson's chapters. Oden, however, propounds a distinctive, quite intentional focus on the consensus of early interpreters, and I fear that this could lead to less variety in the selections than I had hoped for. Likewise, the word "wholesome" used twice on the flyleaf unfortunately evokes an indigestible bran cereal, while a truer description of the fathers would employ words like "provocative," "creative," and even sometimes "delightful."

Within the commentary, the biblical text is printed for the reader's convenience with a brief summary of the patristic comments that follow. Despite my concerns, the comments exhibit some diversity. The account of Abraham's lie about Sarah being his sister, for example, includes an on-the-ground justification of Abraham's action as prudence along with an all-out allegory in which Sarah represents virtue. Lest readers feel daunted by a minimally-mediated encounter with these unfamiliar sources, they will be glad to find an excellent set of biographical, temporal, geographical, and topical indices to help orient them. Overall, I highly recommend this series, but commend Thompson's more winsome introduction to the Patristic interpreters as a prologue.

For those who would like their earlier Christian sources somewhat more digested, the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible series is a good choice. This series draws upon academic theologians to offer a consciously Christian theological reading of Scripture, defying the scholarly convention of leaving commentaries to biblical scholars. Quite a few volumes remain in production, so readers will only find commentaries for about half the books of Scripture at this point. R. R. Reno's volume on *Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010, 304 pp., \$32.99) launched the series, which Reno also edits. He anchors the traditional verse-by-verse commentary format within five larger thematic categories mapping the forward thrust of salvation history: creation, fall, dead ends, the scandal of particularly, and the need for atonement. He frankly states in his introduction that "readers who wish for a self-contained commentary that approaches Genesis on its own terms will be disappointed" (p. 21). This volume, on the other hand, unapologetically aims to serve those who allow the Bible to evoke larger questions about life, the universe, and God, and who, with Reno, choose to read Genesis "as a promise-driven, future-oriented text" (p. 22). To illustrate this, we can turn to our previous example: Abraham's lie in Genesis 13. Reno acknowledges patristic concerns about the ethics of this lie about Sarah, and then moves beyond them to recognize the larger salvation-historical significance of the fall-redemption pattern this text depicts (pp. 147-148).

Reno does indeed, however, pay very close attention to the text itself, not merely in the limited modern sense that knows only an "original setting," but in the tradition of – and with the help of – the Church Fathers

and early Jewish interpreters. He practices the sort of close reading that brings theological awareness of the trajectory and fullness of Scripture to the meaning of a single verse, allowing it to resonate between the Old Testament and the New (pp. 287–291). Similarly, he brings the full range of extrabiblical commentary to bear on the question, for example, of not only *how* to translate Genesis 1:1 (“In the beginning, God created . . .” vs. “When God began to create”), but *why*. For this initial, crucial verse of Genesis, his references range from Augustine to the nineteenth-century Documentary Hypothesis. Reno’s adroit incorporation of diverse ways of reading not only draws upon ancient Christian commentary, but mirrors its methods. Just as Augustine could draw upon the lexical details of the Psalms to draw further theological meaning out of the text, Reno ably pulls in historical information where it can illuminate the theological shape of the text. With his literary flourishes of metaphor and turns of phrase, Reno provides an enjoyable commentary on Genesis as well as a well-Scriptured one.



Given these impressive and accessible resources, readers have no reason to delay their acquaintance with earlier Christian interpreters of Scripture. Even beginners will find it easy to navigate Thompson’s user-friendly book, and the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture series provides a good follow-up for further reading. More ambitious readers can take on Byasee’s tour of Augustine’s exegesis or the Brazos Commentary series. Any of these books will help to bring readers alongside that “great cloud of witnesses” that has read the Bible before us, and allow us to benefit from their testimony.



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