

[MJTM 17 (2015–2016)]

#### BOOK REVIEW

Stephen Westerholm and Martin Westerholm. *Reading Sacred Scripture: Voices from the History of Interpretation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016. x + 470 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-0-8028-7229-6. \$40.00.

In 1787 Johann P. Gabler delivered a lecture calling for a distinction between biblical and dogmatic theology. The goal was to separate the practice of religion from the study of theology. Gabler presented a serious step in distinguishing between ecclesiastical reflection and academic inquiry. A century later in 1860, Benjamin Jowett was teaching in Oxford what was already accepted in German scholarship. Namely, the Bible should be read like any other book. Scholars were arguing that the Bible should be treated like a piece of ancient literature. The approach to its study should be like that used for other literary compositions.

Today many circles of academia pride themselves on using scientific methods of analysis that treat the Bible like any other ancient text. The Bible, however, is not approached like any other book. No other text has undergone such scrutiny in every jot and tittle. Higher criticism is not applied with such ferocity to any other book. Whole fields of research are not devoted to vehemently attacking the historical accuracy of Jane Austen or debating the possible linguistic anachronisms of Charles Dickens. The Bible, whatever significance is placed on it, is always treated as unique.

Stephen Westerholm and Martin Westerholm, a father and son team, contend in *Reading Sacred Scripture* that the Bible must be approached unlike any other book. The authors believe the Bible is wholly unique in both its content and ontology. They acknowledge that any person can read the content, but to be

understood as intended the Bible requires prayer and spiritual illumination. The main goal of the book is to historically ground Westerholm and Westerholm's position by surveying the life and works of Irenaeus, Origen, Chrysostom, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, Barth, and Bonhoeffer. The dozen characters were chosen as representatives of a common theme: the apprehension of Scripture requires a spiritual approach.

The co-authors are well suited for such a work. Stephen Westerholm is professor emeritus of early Christianity at McMaster University, and Martin Westerholm lectures in systematics at Durham University. Together they show expertise in handling the writings of these historical figures. Each chapter effortlessly weaves together a thumbnail biographical sketch and an overview of the character's appropriation and use of the Bible.

The book also demonstrates extensive knowledge of the individual figures and scholarly comprehension of the theological, hermeneutical, and social dimensions of their historical context. There are many excerpts from relevant historical works with translations from Greek, Latin, and German. The result is a readable historical study that is nuanced without being abstruse. The authors succeed in staying clear of needless rabbit trails.

A short review is not able to summarize each historical interpreter. However, the general layout and common themes will be highlighted here. The fifteen chapters are divided into three primary sections. First, there are two chapters detailing the authors' agenda. The second and largest section contains the twelve figures surveyed. Finally, there is a concluding chapter that reflects upon the common theme found in the historical characters.

The two opening chapters set the tone of the book. The first chapter, "The Voice of Scripture," directly interacts with the hermeneutical question of whether or not the Bible should be read like other works of literature. The authors answer in the negative because an important distinguishing characteristic of the Bible is that it asks (or requires) things from readers no other

book does or can. The writings of Paul, the Gospels, and the Old Testament are cursorily reviewed to defend this point.

The second chapter, "Before the Christian Bible," functions as a historical map for the time period between Jesus and Irenaeus. During this period the New Testament documents were written, collected, circulated, and began establishing themselves as the book for the church. While developmental challenges and debates are noted, the goal is demonstrating that by the time of Irenaeus the New Testament was held to be as authoritative as the Old Testament. More specifically, the early church viewed the New Testament as being the true Word of God.

The largest section contains twelve chapters, each of which focus on a single historical author. Here readers are given much helpful information. The fact that the authors manage to cover seventeen centuries of influential figures without becoming painfully tedious is a remarkable accomplishment. Despite the length and breadth of the book, the primary intention is simple. The book demonstrates that influential figures in the history of Christianity were convinced that the Bible is the word of God. Furthermore, as a conveyor of divine things, the Bible cannot be apprehended or properly understood by ordinary literary interpretive methods. The primary goal of the book is to historically ground the claim that the church has "read the Bible as they read no other book" (409).

A few points are worth highlighting to show how the authors substantiate their claim. From Origen the authors point out that "inspired Scripture, then, is true, harmonious, and profitable" (79). From the earliest stages of church history, Christians believed, "Scripture cannot be understood, nor its benefits enjoyed, apart from the grace and illumination of God" (126, concerning Chrysostom and Origen). Scripture was given by God for the benefit of people and not as a mere object to be scrutinized. Believing the Bible is true is of no consequence if it is not also understood to be "for us" (Luther, 237). The Bible was designed as revelation for humans, which Calvin explained as a *lisp*.

Even later with the rise of higher criticism the Bible retained a foundational place within the Church. Schleiermacher could

label portions of scripture as inauthentic and therefore decide they were not a reliable source of Christian teaching. However, he simultaneously contended that Scripture is the “norm” for the faith of the church.

In summary, a quotation from Bonhoeffer captures the goal of the book. He contended that Christians should meditate on God’s word to “allow ourselves to be seized and conquered” by what it says, “allowing it to bear us upward to eternal heights and expanses” (cited on 407). The authors draw this theme out of all the figures while being mindful of individual nuances.

This book is not a textbook. While some textbooks are compartmentalized, with one section quoting from the past and then another offering an interpretation, the Westerholms blend their voice with the voices from the past. For instance, the authors interweave multiple works of Origen with various scriptural references and their own interpretation to discuss how the Old Testament is used in the New Testament. The result is both a pleasant reading experience and an insightful study of the past contained within a single volume. Additionally, the authors are able to firmly ground their thesis with numerous citations from the history of Christianity.

The book is enjoyable and I am confident many others will agree. I concur with the authors that understanding how the Bible was read and used is essential to understanding the history of Christianity. If one does not concur with that position the book could come across as tedious. Additionally, I am not sure there is enough historical detail to substantiate utilization in a church history course. The book uses the historical figures to discuss the Bible and is not intended as a dedicated study of the figures.

Furthermore, I am not sure the book has a place within seminary biblical studies courses. There is little attention given to the precise details of the exegetical processes or the hermeneutical principles that the historical characters used. The general parameters of their approaches to scriptural interpretation are presented, but the amount of detail given would be inadequate if the reader wished to effectively replicate any of the methodologies. In short, I am not confident that at

nearly 500 pages the book can justify itself as a textbook for a seminary course. Other books cover similar themes and topics with greater brevity. For instance, the extended quotation of Sir Lancelot in old English, and some of the other long block quotations, unnecessarily bloat the book.

Of course, the above critiques are not intended to degrade the quality of the book. On the contrary, I believe it will be well received in at least two circles. First, general readers wanting a thoughtful historical reflection on what the Bible means to the Church and how it has been used will enjoy the book. It reads more like a biography than a textbook. The authors do not delve into sophisticated hermeneutical matters, and thus a degree in philosophy is not a requisite to enjoy the book. The authors have done the hard work of keeping the language and tenor accommodated to an undergraduate level. Consequently, it will also be well received by general book clubs or adult Sunday schools with a facilitator.

On the other hand, I also believe the book would serve excellently within advanced graduate seminars. The reason is that while the book is readable, there is a depth of scholarship underlying the points made. Those familiar with the topics and history of philosophical, hermeneutical, and higher critical debates will find much worthy of interaction within a seminar setting.

Overall it is a well written and enjoyable read covering a range of characters from the history of Christianity. The authors wrote the book for the specific purpose of calling readers to adopt the position of the figures surveyed, namely to read the Bible prayerfully and unlike any other book.

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