

John L. Thompson. *Reading the Bible with the Dead: What You Can Learn from the History of Exegesis that You Can't Learn from Exegesis Alone*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007. 324 pages. \$15.00.

Are preachers preaching sermons on “hard texts”? Can there be a word of God for today’s listeners in stories like the rape of Tamar by her brother Amnon, Abraham’s giving Pharaoh his wife Sarah as his sister, teachings of Jesus prohibiting or severely limiting divorce, or instructions that make distinctions between the roles, dress, or status of men and women in the church? More to the point in respect to Thompson’s book, is there any benefit to a modern congregation from reading commentaries on these texts by male theologians stretching back to the Reformation and beyond it to the patristic period?

Thompson wrote this book to both raise and give an affirmative answer to these questions. He is promoting a recovery of a knowledge of the heritage of the church through the ages that, for all its limitations, is very rich indeed. He is including unheard voices in our study of the Bible by introducing us to these old commentaries and facilitating both our access to them and a just hearing of what these male theologians have to say. He expands the agenda of being inclusive by mustering their comments on Biblical texts largely ignored both because they are offensive and because they are excluded from the lectionary. He offers an extensive bibliography of old commentaries in English in an appendix supplemented by a website where he is bringing the appendix continually up to date.

These older commentators did not shy away from these texts that are so off-putting to modern congregations. And while we frequently may not agree with their judgments, they can draw us into a careful and detailed reading of the text and stimulate our efforts to establish principles of sound interpretation. We may even be surprised to learn that they do not fit popular modern stereotypes, which are frequently based on a very scanty and select sampling of these earlier voices. Thompson reports, for example, how a friend of his heard a modern preacher advocate unreserved submission of wives to their husbands, which he based on the fact that the Bible does not condemn Abraham for lying about his relationship with Sarah and exposing her to adultery. As Thompson surveyed 30 to 40 old commentaries on Genesis, he discovered that “most of them worry over how Abraham exposed Sarah to adultery by his deceitful approach to Pharaoh. A few labor to excuse Abraham. None admires his action. And no one commends him as a model for Christian husbands today” (7).

In his discussion of the rape of Tamar, Thompson lays out the view of both Calvin and Vermigli. Both offer very perceptive comments about Amnon’s way of adjusting his way of naming Tamar depending on the person to whom he is speaking and the impression he wishes to create. Both condemn David for not punishing Amnon. Calvin’s judgment of Tamar comes as a shock in the wake of his judgments of Amnon and David. He is appalled that she would suggest violating the divine law against incest by proposing Amnon marry her. Thompson notes that Calvin’s views may be influenced by his own family scandal involving his sister-in-law’s involvement with another man five years before. Contrast Vermigli’s view of Tamar. She is quick to muster verbal arguments in response to Amnon’s physical strength, pointing out his obligation as her brother to protect her, not violate her. She appeals to the law, to Amnon’s self-respect, and finally to marriage as the proper way. This brief account of the expositions of these

two commentators leads us deeply into the Biblical story as we listen to their insights and the way those insights may be colored by their own experience. While we may not agree with Calvin in his offense that Tamar would even suggest violating the law, his response to Tamar raises the question of our own fundamental bases of judgment and whether there are ever circumstances in which they may need to be bent. Perhaps knowing the personal experience that may be coloring Calvin's response, we may begin probing the personal experience lying behind our own.

The body of the book draws these old commentators into conversation with each other on the rarely considered stories of Adam and Eve, of Hagar, of Jephtha's daughter, of the improprieties of the patriarchs, of Gomer and Hosea, of Dinah and Bathsheba as well as Tamar, on the imprecations against enemies in the Psalms, and on texts about divorce and marriage and about the role and dress of women in relation to men in the church. At the end of each discussion, Thompson articulates what we may usefully learn from attentiveness to these earlier exegetes. These concluding observations are as enriching of our Bible study as the detailed description of their wrestling from which Thompson draws them. They are too many to name, but they highlight the weakness of our present lectionary, which avoids texts to which these commentators gave serious attention. They note the way these old commentators differentiated among Biblical commands, accommodating them to circumstances and to the principles of Christian freedom. They also make clear both the role of stereotypes in these older expositions and our own inclination to stereotyping these earlier commentators without ever having listened to them.

One would hope that reading a book like this and taking up the author's challenge to expand our study of scripture to include listening to these earlier voices would yield a new appreciation for the church throughout history in a time when it is popular to discredit it. Our dismissal of earlier commentators is not only unfair to them but impoverishes us. They were fallible but still have much to teach us. At the very least we may come away with a more humble view of ourselves that is at the same time more teachable.

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