

The New Hermeneutical Situation

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Reading the Bible Theologically. By Darren Sarisky. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019. xix + 407 pp. \$125.

Darren Sarisky has written an important monograph that challenges several interwoven ideas concerning biblical interpretation among contemporary biblical scholars and theologians. This new volume, a sequel to an earlier study of scriptural interpretation that focused quite a bit on the legacy of Basil of Caesarea, expands his treatment of the theological interpretation of the Bible with the assistance of Augustine of Hippo and several modern theologians.

Sarisky's leading idea is that the Bible is best understood as a set of signs for depicting God and God's actions. He develops this semiotic position in a reflective and painstaking style that he terms a "via media" between the theological interpretation of Scripture movement, on the one hand, and the set of historically based views on the other hand. His primary concern is to diagnose the main problem with biblical scholarship, which is its methodological naturalism. Some theologians responding to the reigning naturalism of the biblical guild have overreacted by emphasizing doctrinal meaning at the expense of taking seriously what the biblical texts have meant in the past, according to Sarisky.

Sarisky believes that current longstanding discussions about the interpretation of the Bible can be resolved by attending to a theological anthropology of the reader depicted by Augustine, who was

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the first to treat the issue of theological method in his *De Doctrina Christiana*. Augustine's relevance is sharpened in light of numerous instances of biblical scholars who marginalize theological doctrine and faith in God on the basis of the false belief that such concerns cloud objectivity. The problem here is eisegesis, the practice of reading into the Bible what one already believes rather than allowing biblical texts to convey something fresh and historically contingent. As Sarisky describes in his conclusion, "Recent advocates of the objection that theological reading amounts to eisegesis all concede that complete objectivity is impossible, but they continue to recommend it as reading's desideratum" (341). Thus, critics of the theological interpretation of Scripture are caught in a performative contradiction. What makes things worse is that in their zeal to confront this theological evasion, many traditional theologians seem willing to overlook the historical context of the texts' original meaning. This is how the "non-debate" over the Bible continues to be conducted.

In facing this conundrum, Sarisky proceeds in two basic steps, the first of which consists of the retrieval of the Augustinian notion of the sign, a way of thinking of how God is both present and absent in the biblical text. It is the outcome of reading, not the rules of reading, that count. For Augustine, moreover, the reader is defined in such a way that avoids the pretense of neutrality. As such, Sarisky is keen to introduce the notion of ontology, and he is surefooted when it comes time to challenge those scholars of Augustine who think that the patristic father knows what the Bible is going to say before he has read it. Moreover, Augustine's ontology of Scripture is meant to be complementary to those natural signs that speak to the God who illumines our minds.

The second, constructive part of the book takes up the roots of modern biblical scholarship by examining the influence of Baruch Spinoza's division between meaning and truth. The analysis of Spinoza is an intriguing step in the argument, which proceeds in the three final chapters to treat the reader, text, and the acts of interpretation as parts of an overall approach. Unlike other biblical scholars, such as John Barton, who thinks in Spinozistic terms, Sarisky sees value in outlining the anthropological conditions for understanding God. This approach has the benefit of avoiding an overly narrow doctrinal or ecclesial domestication of the biblical texts. He ends the book by claiming that biblical interpretation itself is best performed in three discrete steps: *explicatio*, *meditatio* and *applicatio*: (1) the sense of

the text; (2) its meaning and the categories used for understanding its meaning, and (3) understanding oneself in response to the text as correctly judged.

This book is sophisticated and its successes are considerable. Its resemblance to the hermeneutical schema put forward by Bernard Lonergan fifty years ago is uncanny. It has to be said that Lonergan's way of reading theologically not only gave credence to history as Sarisky does, but it also benefited from a full-blown cognitional psychology and a clearer set of categories for understanding meaning. Sarisky's accomplishments are not so fundamental perhaps, but show the promise of important dialectical reflection nonetheless. He begins with a sharp typology of biblical interpretive strategies, he shows a clear familiarity with secondary sources, and his deft interactions with Ricoeur and other European hermeneutists is strong. He also crafts measured responses to perceived opponents. Compared with standard theological interpretations of Scripture, Sarisky takes a key step forward to identifying the active rather than the passive stance of the reader. Chapter 4 goes further than most theological interpreters of Scripture by outlining the difference between a Christian active reader and the active reader of contemporary reader response theorists, such as those of Stanley Fish and Roland Barthes.

There are some perplexities to the book, which is inevitable when an argument such as this one covers such wide ground. The first oddity is that Augustine features less centrally in Sarisky's conclusion than expected. Much of the anthropology and indeed the metaphysics of Augustine's idea of a Christian reader lies in the nature of the sin and the shape of salvation that is required, given the universality of original sin and the limits of human freedom. But these anthropological elements (as motivations to read revelatory texts) do not feature in Sarisky's rendering of Augustine's hermeneutics. Equally as puzzling is the absence of figures from the 1850–1950 period in Sarisky's narrative. Such analysis would seem vital to his diagnosis of the ills of modern biblical scholarship, so far as I can tell. While Spinoza receives welcome, overdue attention, Baur, Strauss, Bultmann and the historiographical approach of Walter Bauer (who has deeply overshadowed how Christian orthodoxy is viewed in light of alleged divergences in early Christian experience) go untreated.

More daunting still, given Sarisky's aim, is the lack of an account of tradition or experience in this work. If the ontology and meaning of God's communication to Israel and the church has a bearing that

traverses historical epochs, then some anthropologically adequate account of religious experience should be on offer. Logically, one would expect a more organic bond between Christ and believer than his recourse to "ontology" suggests. My worry is that a view of the Bible that strategizes for correct interpretation might allow for a kind of gnosticism to shape the ascent that Sarisky ascribes to a properly attuned theological reader.

On the other hand, Augustine's conversion on the occasion of reading Romans 13:13 is the Urtext for exemplifying a fully affective reorientation to God. Yet the opportunity of a recourse to such converted reading seems to have been missed somewhat. In the end, John Webster and Karl Barth, with their more didactic approaches, are what draws Sarisky forward. I am very sympathetic to Sarisky's aim, and for that reason I wish he had sought to make his argument pack more punch with examples, both those taken from the history of the Bible's reception by Augustine and others, not to mention specific, contested debates of textual interpretation. However, his work is rich and splendidly executed, with a style that is patient and rewarding. He anticipates objections carefully and proceeds without rash judgment. One would hope that others in the theological interpretation of Scripture school will see the wisdom of Sarisky's proposal and take heed in the future. His sobering admonitions concerning a few of the volumes in the Brazos Theological Interpretation of Scripture series are spot on. This is a monograph that is intellectually subtle and densely packed with insightful footnotes that satisfy a variety of tastes in modern theology. It is a must buy for all theological libraries and for any university library that carries monographs in biblical studies, religious studies, philosophy of religion, Christian history and philosophical hermeneutics.