
As William Yarchin, author of *History of Biblical Interpretation: A Reader*, notes in his preface, interest in the history of interpretation is growing among students of the Bible (vii). In this work, Yarchin attempts to fill a gap that he sees in this study, namely that no single-volume reader exists that spans the entire history of the interpretation of the Bible. In his attempt to provide such a book, Yarchin organizes his work into five sections (Parts 1-5 respectively): prerabbinic Jewish interpretation (150BCE-70CE), patristic interpretation (150-1500CE), rabbinic interpretation (150-1500CE), modern interpretation (1500-present), and late modern interpretation (1970-present). In selecting his work for each section, Yarchin has attempted to compile “documents and writers that most clearly and best represent the most important ways interpretation of the Bible has been understood and practiced from the third century B.C.E. to the present” (xi).

**Summary**

Part one on prerabbinic Jewish interpretation considers three important collections, each which speak to a different aspect of preabbinic Jewish exegesis. The *Letter to Aristeas* is not only a good example of prerabbinic interpretation, but it is also significant because of its witness to the supposed origins of the Septuagint. Part one also discusses the *pesher* method of the Qumran community found in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Finally, part one addresses Philo of

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1The reader should note that due to assignment requirements, this review only considers Parts 1-2 (chapters 1-11) and chapters 12, 17-18, 21, 23-24.
Alexandria who combined Jewish exegesis with a respect for Greco-Roman culture towards the goal of discerning divine wisdom found in the Scriptures.

In part two Yarchin explores varied figures in the patristic to medieval area, most notably Justin Martyr (chapter 4), Origen (chapter 5), Augustine (chapter 7), and Thomas Aquinas (chapter 10). Yarchin’s survey and selections in the section demonstrate no single way in which the patristics interpreted Scripture. Justin used a prophetic approach, seeing Jesus as the fulfillment of OT prophecy, whereas Origen defended and utilized an allegorical approach. Tychonius meanwhile promoted an oracular conception of Scripture, arguing that in any part of Scripture God spoke prophetically, but one could only discern the oracle if he had a “knowledge of the logic by which Scripture speaks typologically” (51). Augustine, like Origen, used allegory to interpret the Scriptures. Augustine’s contribution was to recognize the words of Scripture as a signal to the true world beyond, including one’s understanding of God (61). Theodore of Mopsuestia provided a critique of allegory and focused on an historical reading, but his position did not gain traction as a dominant view. Although rooting the meaning in the literal sense of the biblical text, Gregory the Great also utilized allegory, particularly as it applied to the moral significance of a text (86-87). Over time, the need grew to defend a distinction between the literal and spiritual meaning of the text. Thomas Aquinas not only met this need, but also provided a “basis for deriving theology from Scripture” (94). Finally, Yarchin considers Nicholas of Lyra who focused on the “text’s expression within the historical horizon of the life of ancient Israel” (98), though not abandoning mystical interpretations of Scripture in the process.

In chapter 12, Yarchin moves on to an overview of Rabbinc exegesis. Here Yarchin highlights two aspects of midrash: halakah and haggadah. Halakah “is a legal ruling that
determines correct observance of a biblical law” (112), whereas haggadah “is an ethical or theological interpretation of Scripture, usually derived from a narrative portion of text rather than from a legal passage” (113). Much of the rest of the chapter surveys the teaching of twenty-nine rabbis from the first through fourth centuries.

John Calvin, according to Yarchin, followed the humanist concern for the best manuscript readings and sources. Calvin’s approach was to begin in the Greek and Hebrew, from which he would translate into Latin. Calvin’s interpretive method led him, in the style of his classic humanist training, to pay close attention to grammar and rhetoric in an attempt to read the text in its historical context (184). As a result, Yarchin categorizes Calvin as taking a literalist approach and regularly expressing disagreement with patristic tendencies toward allegory (184).

Baruch Spinoza’s contribution to biblical interpretation comes primarily from his work *Tractatus theologico-politicus* in which he focused his method for biblical interpretation upon rational consistency (195). Spinoza’s rational approach led him to demystify the Bible, place it entirely within the natural realm, and require an historical approach that excluded theological and cosmological aspects of the text (196). Spinoza helped catapult biblical interpretation into the modern period that concerned itself more with historically contextualized meanings and less with theological doctrines (196-197).

Hermann Gunkel was a pioneer in both the history-of-religions (238) and form-critical approaches to Scripture (237). Gunkel’s work aimed to trace the transmission of literary forms of a text to get back to its original *Sitz im Leben* and the tradition passed down from earlier social and religious groups (237).

William Albright “sought a full explanation of the Bible in its ancient context according to the scientific examination of empirical philological and archaeological evidence” (261), a goal
which led him to become a significant influence on biblical archaeology. In Yarchin’s view, the selections of Albright portray a “tone of confidence in the objectivity of method and in the certainty of historical results as they pertain to understanding the Bible” (261).

Langdon Gilkey was an influential figure in interfaith dialogues. Gilkey’s own convictions and experience in this realm led him to reconsider the ways in which ancient texts could speak to a modern audience. He was intrigued by the attempts of the biblical theology movement of the 1950s and 60s, but he saw certain inconsistencies, namely the failure to bridge the gap between ancient and modern worldviews (276-277).

**Critical Evaluation**

Yarchin’s work is immensely helpful in several respects. First, Yarchin is successful in his attempt to provide a one-volume reader that spans the history of biblical interpretation. He provides a wide breadth of material from prerabbinic exegesis all the way up to modern interpretive methods. Not only does Yarchin provide a wide breadth of material, but the depth of each section is more than one would expect. Yarchin provides helpful summaries of each interpreter in order to give the reader a deeper understanding not only of the interpreter’s own views, but also of the impact it had on his contemporaries and the shape the discipline took after his time.

A second helpful aspect of this work is the way in which Yarchin ties his summaries in to the selections. In many readers of this type, the author provides a brief summary of an individual’s life and/or teachings, but he does not clarify why he has chosen the selections that he has. What is he trying to accomplish or communicate with *this* selection rather than *that* selection? Many times these issues are unclear, but this is not the case with Yarchin. For example, in his chapter on Gregory the Great, he notes that “Gregory is included in our
anthology in order to display the fruits of the formative Western patristic period of biblical
interpretation as exhibited in a single commentary on a single biblical book” (87). He provides
similar help with his chapter on Calvin when he writes, “the selections below are chosen simply
to highlight Calvin’s attitude toward figurative exegesis (and his low regard for apocryphal
books such as Sirach), and to clearly represent the more historically minded exegetical direction
taken by prominent Protestant interpreters of the Reformation era” (185). These two examples
are representative of many other equally helpful clarifications.

A third strength is that the relevancy of the selections. This strength is closely tied to the
previous one, but goes beyond it. To claim the selections have a certain purpose is immensely
helpful to the reader; to manage to follow through and provide selections that actually meet the
goals he claims they are meant to meet makes the work highly valuable.

Inevitably in a work such as this one, a common critique will be that of selection. Why
did the author choose one work or author rather than another that the reader finds more
significant? This work is likely no exception. One applauds Yarchin for including less common
patristic authors such as Tyconius and Nicholas of Lyra; the same can be said for including
Langdon Gilkey and Christian Hartlich. Nevertheless, certain key movements in biblical
interpretation are missing. For example, there are no chapters on monumentally important
interpreters such as Gerhard Von Rad and Julius Wellhausen. Similarly, no mention is made
regarding key movements in tradition history and deconstruction. Finally, though there is a final
chapter on multiple voices in postmodern biblical interpretation, and the chapter provides an
adequate overview of the central aspects of postmodern interpretation, Yarchin does not explore
any individuals within this movement, nor does he provide primary source material by way of
reading selections as he does elsewhere. In subsequent editions of this book, this is the greatest area for improvement.

**Conclusion**

Despite this minor final critique, this work is well-intentioned, expertly handled, and immensely helpful. Anyone interested in the history of interpretation or an introduction to any of the interpreters discussed within will find this book an excellent starting point.