

Review of R.R. Reno, *The End of Interpretation: Reclaiming the Priority of Ecclesial Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022).

This journal's editor has gifted us a book that is at once timely and important, and which invites Christian biblical studies and theology to re-engage each other in a task of uncommon urgency. For me as a biblical scholar, it is an honour to be invited to that dialogue in these pages.

Biblical Interpretation, it used to be said, is in crisis. This sentiment is here associated with Joseph Ratzinger (1988), although in fact it long predates him. Ratzinger's papal DNA might be said to include predecessors both constructive and sceptical about modern biblical criticism, reaching back at least to Pius IX, X and XII, Leo XIII and Benedict XV. Reno's endorsement of Ratzinger leads him, not unlike Barth's famous quip introducing Romans a century ago,¹ to call for more deliberate criticism of historical criticism. Reno's desire is for a properly theological reintegration of standards of academic study with Christian theological commitments: the core question at issue for the book as a whole is "How do we square doctrine with Scripture?"

If this appears to reinforce a sharp polarity between secular and ecclesial study, that's par for the course. In a contest between reason and revelation, between Justin Martyr's humanist, Seneca-like sentiment that "whatever is well said by all belongs to us" (2 *Apol* 13.4-5) and Tatian's or Tertullian's separation of Athens from Jerusalem, Reno's sympathies lie with the latter.

For ancient and modern believers alike, this is an important dialectic that any engagement of faith and reason does well to sustain rather than to collapse. Reno's "Farewell to the Greeks" is at one level a justified lament for a discourse of biblical learning that once upon a time was not yet tone-deaf to its theological subject matter. Even less than half a century ago, for example, one might still occasionally hear a president of the Society of Biblical Literature intoning with a straight face that the Bible is fundamentally both a cultural classic and Holy Scripture, and that the former status is unthinkable without this religiously normative function within the church and the synagogue.² No successor to the SBL presidency would today dream of stepping quite nonchalantly into such puddles of political toxicity.... Others including your

¹ "Kritischer müssten mir die Historisch-Kritischen sein!" *Der Brief an die Römer*, 2nd ed. (Munich: Kaiser, 1922), xii.

² E.g. Krister Stendahl, "The Bible as a Classic and as Holy Scripture," SBL Presidential Address, 1983.

reviewer have in recent years publicly wondered what, if anything, might be salvaged from the ruins of that older discourse. During this past half-century the identity of ‘biblical studies’ has shattered into a thousand methodologically incompatible fragments and now patently lacks any consensus about the object or criteria of its inquiry, whether theological or not.

The book’s simple central thesis is that good interpretation is known by its “accordance” with the teaching of the church, above all the Roman Catholic Church – although Reno notes that Lutherans and Calvinists in principle also believe this in relation to their own churches. Scripture and ecclesial doctrine may seem to stand in tension, but the “best” Biblical interpretation is always in accordance with doctrine.

Two opening chapters lay out this theme as a task of “overcoming” dichotomies between exegesis and theology, instantiated in two further chapters on “spiritual” reading in Origen and on Reformational struggles with the Epistle of James vis-à-vis justification by faith “alone.” Theology is emphatically not derived from Scripture, but nevertheless “orthodox dogma expresses the teaching of Scripture”: the Bible “accords with what the church proclaims” and therefore doctrine and exegesis “*must* be in accordance” (my italics).

It is not always clear to this reviewer what prevents that imperative of “overcoming” from taking on theocratic or indeed Promethean ambitions. Might such a combative, adversarial stance in effect dull or forestall an encounter with Scripture’s Word addressing the church and its formularies? *Dei Verbum* spoke of that encounter with the sacred page as the soul of sacred theology, a vision that Bishop Robert Barron’s endorsement of the book acknowledges as remaining largely unrealized even in the Catholic Church. Similarly, the imperative of “overcoming” seems at times to stand in tension with the task of “discerning”, which is elsewhere said to characterize the *best* reading of Scripture. If our interpretation “must” assume that “a correct reading of the Bible... accords with doctrine,” what difference does it make that non-Catholics since Luther and Calvin have also long polemicized in this vein, or that Arius and Valentinus laboured indefatigably to ground their Christology or cosmogony in “accordance” with Scripture?

From an insider’s perspective on how Christian faith in fact “works,” that imperative of accordance clearly does hold considerable intrinsic importance. It also seems designed in gleeful annoyance of certain Truths Held Self-Evident in contemporary academic guilds—the membership not only of the Society of

Biblical Literature but of the American Academy of Religion too, where theology is rarely more than “religiously inspired philosophy.” For most of these practitioners, the horse of non-accordance has long since bolted; and good riddance too. But as Reno points out, its open stable door now leaves contemporary biblical scholarship without any meaningful further use for a canonical text—thereby accounting for the disappearance of academic positions in “New Testament” or “Old Testament” from North American universities and colleges.

Reno does score useful points in his observation that where contemporary exegesis fails to accord with Christian doctrine, it invariably accords instead with something else—not splendid critical autonomy but secular doctrine of one kind or another. And he rightly discerns and chastises a penchant among both Catholic and Protestant theologians for the correlation of theology with philosophy (or “theological scientism”) rather than, say, with Scripture.

Chapter 3 unfolds a full-throated defence of Origen as a scriptural interpreter *par excellence* who exemplifies this accordance of scripture and doctrine. After several centuries of banishment to the exegetical wilderness for his allegorical exoticism, Origen has more recently (and not just in *ressourcement*-friendly circles) experienced considerable rehabilitation as a masterful textual scholar and close reader of Scripture. Theologically literate readers would agree that for Origen as for Irenaeus, “the end or goal of exegesis is to dispose the reader to ‘see Christ.’” To that extent, Reno is manifestly pushing on open doors.

For instance, Origen finds the true meaning of Israel’s departure from their Egyptian home at Rameses—a place-name he dubiously etymologizes as “the commotion of a moth”—in the call to depart the world’s darkness and to follow Christ. Homiletically and for *lectio divina*, the texts are undoubtedly tolerant of such readings, a point that Reno deploys to do much heavy lifting.

Despite or because of Origen’s comeback, however, some readers may experience a hint of intellectual queasiness when Reno swats away modern (and pre-modern!) scholars’ questions about Origen’s philosophical presuppositions and hermeneutical criteria as so much “theorizing,” or as a narrow “foundationalist” preoccupation.

But it is indeed the absence of any criteria of falsification, let alone verification, that tends to worry even faithful modern readers of Origen. Effortlessly, if also problematically in the eyes of ancient and more recent readers, his anagogical

helicopter ascends to heights sufficiently rarefied to obviate a literal planting of paradise, validity of Old Testament law, or even (some might argue) damnation of Satan. Certain (say) Catholic readers of *First Things* might be led to wonder: to what analogous allegorical altitudes might that helicopter legitimately travel from a literal male priesthood, defence of life at its literal beginning and end, or holy matrimony as literally the lifelong union of one woman with one man?

Reno argues that the “true test of exegesis” is perspectival, i.e. a matter of what helps us “see what holds all the different pieces together.” But if so, then there may be much to be said for the present century’s allegorizers of Scripture on questions such as marriage or priesthood. Many of them would also affirm a Catholic or “postliberal” Protestant creedal orthodoxy, and are often happy to claim for their allegories *du jour* pretty much what Reno postulates for Origen’s: if we harbour any doubts about them, “in all likelihood it’s because we’re not confident that God exists.” This reviewer struggled to reconcile the alleged adequacy of a “true test” that allegorically “holds all the pieces together” with Reno’s welcome assurance elsewhere that in fact it is first and foremost the *literal* sense that “embodies the way of the cross” and “drives the reader toward Christ.”

Fuller application of these principles is then developed in three chapters offering case studies of the accordance of true interpretation with church teaching: in Genesis 1 vis-à-vis creation “out of nothing,” John 17 vis-à-vis ecclesial unity, and Paul’s discussion of the “body of Christ” in 1 Corinthians vis-à-vis church teaching on culture and society – which Reno juxtaposes with Langland’s account of the political community in *Piers Plowman*.

Reno’s nuanced iterative engagement of Genesis 1 and creation *ex nihilo* throughout the book surfaces much useful if familiar fare. That said, one looks in vain for critical engagement with exegetical opinion other than the author’s own. The characteristic appeal here is to 2 Maccabees 7.28, invoked no fewer than five times in explicit support of creation *ex nihilo*. But even among Catholic interpreters, few close readers of the Greek (as opposed to Latin) would now uphold that verse as a support for this doctrine. This seeming dialogical deficit is not an exception, but emerges in exegetical comments elsewhere too: the book of Proverbs is said to confirm the Catholic doctrine of natural law, and Mary’s bodily assumption “fulfills” Jesus’s teaching about the proximity of his coming in Matthew 16.28 as well as Job’s confession at 19.26. Yet this latter confession, to take just one example, is exegetically mysterious: even Catholic

commentators recognize that since antiquity, “opinions and writers” on this passage have been “equal in number”, as E.F. Sutcliffe puts it.

Christ’s prayer for unity in John 17 is rightly linked to sanctification in the truth (v.17), here understood as the truth of doctrine and of the apostolic witness. Reno is concerned, not without some justification, to rescue this concern for unity from the velvet-gloved clutches of anaemic ecumenism on the one hand and unnamed critics of visible Catholic institutions on the other. His rhetorical, but scantily referenced style of argument at times resembles a kind of *Reno contra mundum*: the chapter features two footnotes, one to the KJV and the other to RRR himself.

The first and final chapters reflect, in celebratory as well as apologetic mode, on the Brazos Theological Commentary (BTC) edited by Reno, with its impressive gallery of authors distinguished as theologians, if often inexperienced as exegetes. Reviewers found that series something of a curate’s egg, with work of expository excellence and insight intermingled with volumes that found in the text a welcome invitation to say afresh the sorts of things the author was accustomed to saying in any case. While conceding its “extreme” heterogeneity of execution, Reno finds that series to illustrate that the Nicene tradition is indispensable to all “good” biblical interpretation.

“Theological interpretation” is here identified as a relatively recent conceit. Classic exposition of (for example) the fourfold sense of Scripture was undoubtedly theological. But it had no need to invoke that terminology, which appears instead to date back only to the later 20th century and perhaps to leading Yale lights like George Lindbeck and Hans Frei, whose students came to predominate among the BTC editors and commentators.

The final chapter is called “An Exegetical Postmortem,” one of several slippery double entendres. The implication is that a patient has died; but it remained unclear to this reader if the death is that of the Commentary series, the Yale project of “theological interpretation,” or perhaps something else like the need for exegesis itself—a possibility also raised by the book title itself, and perhaps never quite satisfactorily resolved.

Be that as it may, Renoesque imperatives of accordance do pose the quite practical question of whether what they entail is essentially a two-way or a one-way process. Can Scripture in practice ever speak truth to the hegemony of

inherited doctrine? Can Jews ever help Christians read their Bible better? Can Muslims? Or even atheists?

One might have thought not, but apparently Scripture does occasionally get to talk back. Reno resists both Catholic and Protestant forms of what he calls “doctrinal supersessionism” vis-à-vis the Bible, effectively confining its role to a kind of annotation of self-subsisting doctrine. A Protestant example of the latter is the privileging of favoured doctrines like *sola scriptura* over the potentially nuanced voice of the Scriptural text itself; a similar case might be made for *sola fide*. On a more constructive note, we hear that fresh exegetical insights gained in readings like the “New Perspective on Paul” enabled the 1999 Lutheran and Catholic *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, and analogous developments might conceivably result from Jewish scholars’ participation in New Testament study. The book’s support for “modern historical study and other methods” may strike some readers as a little mealy-mouthed, but they are at least permitted to play “an ongoing role in the church’s reading of the Bible.”

Mostly, however, Reno has in practice little time for contemporary exegetes. Excepting a handful of usefully superannuated straw men, for the most part he does not read or cite their works, because even those very few who do believe Scripture to be fulfilled in Christ “think they must cordon off their faith from their work.” This claim doubtless carried more than a hint of truth once upon a time, such as when Reno was a graduate student, and perhaps even at Yale. Your reviewer certainly knew and still knows older academic colleagues of distinguished standing, some of them ordained priests, who “firmly believe and truly” that religion has no business interfering with what interpreters do from Mondays to Saturdays.

It is also doubtless true that the landscape of biblical interpretation, just as that of *soi-disant* “modern theology”, has in recent years become far more explicitly and thoroughly beholden to accordance with strikingly authoritarian doctrines of the post-Christian sort. Ironically (given our present cultural moment), that landscape can be quite fiercely non-Diverse, non-Equitable and non-Inclusive when it comes to viewpoints other than its own—including those, say, that are sympathetic to the subject matter of the text, or to the beliefs and practices of its historic and global stakeholder communities.

That said, however, the truth about those few academics who do still persist in biblical studies as believers in Christ seems to me now more often the opposite of what Reno claims. They tend to know what third-century Christians also

knew well: faithfulness to the truth may exact an equally high price from those who stay as from those who leave. Today's believing biblical scholars in the academy are of course no less buffeted than their peers by the zeitgeist's political groupthink or by the ever-increasing precarity of their employment. Most are also culturally and intellectually less conversant in the Ratzinger sociolect than Reno would prefer. But they do seem far more likely than their intellectual grandparents to carry on not in spite of their faith but because of it. Perhaps Rusty and his team might occasionally venture forth beyond Midtown Manhattan to meet, hear from and even encourage some of these often isolated young warriors holding out in the trenches of academia. Who knows, they just might, like the reviewer, warmly welcome a two-way conversation about this important volume's call for accord—*the sort of conversation that could actually permit the study of the sacred page to become the soul of sacred theology.*