
“Behind” the Text, the fourth volume of the Scripture and Hermeneutics Series, is a product of the Scripture and Hermeneutics Seminar (SAHS). According to their website, SAHS “was set up in 1998 to see what could be done to renew interpretation of the Bible as Scripture in the Academy.” SAHS strives to be academic, interdisciplinary, distinctively yet ecumenically Christian, and communal. These parameters are well conceived and clearly exemplified in the collection of essays and responses that make up “Behind” the Text.

The occasion for SAHS and thus the Scripture and Hermeneutics Series is that even though “the Bible has been scrutinized with the best scientific tools the modern world could provide. . . its effect has generally been to fragment Scripture and to make opening the Book as Scripture, in which we hear God speak to us personally and as communities, very problematic” (SAHS website). A central issue involved in this problem is the relationship between history and biblical interpretation. The “Boston consultation” of SAHS, out of which “Behind” the Text arises, was devoted to “many of the key issues” related to the “complex reassessment of history and biblical interpretation” occurring within the current theological turn in biblical interpretation (12).

“Behind” the Text is divided into five sections of varying lengths: Historical Criticism—Critical Assessments, Rethinking History, Tradition and History, History and Narrative, and History and Biblical Interpretation, respectively. Most sections consist of just two essays, though the last section is expanded to four. The first section, however, devoted to the “critical assessments” of historical criticism, contains ten chapters including responses to the noteworthy epistemological critiques offered by Alvin Plantinga and Peter van Inwagen. Immediately following these exchanges are William Alston’s critique of the argumentation employed within some historical critical scholarship, Mary Healy’s exploration of the interpretive usefulness of the analogy between the hypostatic union of two natures in Christ with the divine and human authorship of Scripture, and Peter S. Williamson’s essay on the position taken by the Pontifical Biblical Commission on the place of history in biblical exegesis as
expressed in *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. Every essay in the volume is worth reading, and those of the first section are particularly rewarding and merit the attention of anyone who strives to be a serious and faithful interpreter of the Bible.

Due to both the number of philosophically minded contributors and the prominent role given to Plantinga, van Inwagen, and Alston in the opening chapters, this volume has a decidedly philosophical flavor. Later in the volume, C. Stephen Evans makes a case for the viability of the rule of faith in contemporary Protestant biblical interpretation. Other philosophically flavored essays include Gregory Laughery’s and David Lyle Jeffrey’s engagements with postmodernism, Mary Healy’s essay that begins with a discussion of Kant’s failure, and Walter Sundberg’s turn to Kierkegaard for help traversing Lessing’s ditch.

The place allotted to Christian philosophers in this volume highlights what is perhaps the most important contribution of “Behind” the Text to the current debate on biblical interpretation. These Christian philosophers—Plantinga, van Inwagen, Alston, and Evans—are addressing fundamental issues related to the interpretation of Scripture. Some theologians have been profiting from their arguments (Kevin Vanhoozer is a noteworthy example); fewer biblical scholars seem equally engaged. Evans reports that his earlier work on the matter has “not called forth critical notice of any kind; it has simply been ignored” (321-22). Van Inwagen likewise observes that “few people seemed to have read [his essay] the first time round” (101). “Behind” the Text is performing a valuable service simply by taking these philosophical critiques and proposals seriously and publishing them in a context that ought to attract the attention of biblical scholars and not just Christian philosophers and philosophical theologians.

As Evans’ and van Inwagen’s comments indicate, these philosophical voices are not new and their critiques and proposals, or ones very much like them, have been in circulation for more than a decade in some cases. Plantinga’s critique has been available in print at least since April of 1998 when it appeared in *Modern Theology*. It was also included in *Warranted Christian Belief*, published in 2000. Evans’ views referred to above were offered as early as 1996 in *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith*. Van Inwagen’s critique was included in *Hermes and Athena: Biblical Exegesis and Philosophical Theology* in 1993.

The central thrust of the epistemological critique pressed by Plantinga and van Inwagen is that historical criticism lacks anything like a compelling case for the warranted Christian believer. Plantinga begins by observing two major types of biblical study: traditional biblical commentary (TBC) and historical biblical criticism (HBC). TBC “assumes the main lines of Christian belief” (93) and thus begins with some meaningful notion of the divine authorship of Scripture and, quite naturally, seeks to interpret the Bible for the divinely intended meaning or message. With the Enlightenment came a different sort of biblical scholarship that seeks to interpret Scripture objectively and scientifically—that is, by excluding all faith-based truth claims. Bartholomew suggests that the difference between TBC and HBC is that TBC is biblical interpretation as faith
seeking understanding whereas HBC, at least the forms criticized by Plantinga and van Inwagen, represents biblical interpretation as “unbelief seeking understanding” (73).

Plantinga contends that those kinds of HBC that tend to be inconsistent with TBC actually part ways from TBC along epistemological lines rooted in their assumption of strong or classic foundationalism—a thoroughly modernist epistemic position that is fully exposed and under heavy assault today. If we have no reasons to buy into strong foundationalism—which Plantinga contends is fatally flawed—then there appear to be no necessary or even very compelling reasons to buy into these objectionable versions of HBC. Thus, the epistemologically warranted believer is perfectly entitled to dismiss both HBC and its conclusions wherever they prove inconsistent with TBC and its basic assumptions. Van Inwagen presents a clear and concise argument supporting this point and concludes that “users of the New Testament need not... attend very carefully to” such critical studies as those versions of HBC that are incompatible with TBC (129).

The prospect of the reintegration of serious biblical scholarship with faith and theology on the basis of epistemologically warranted Christian belief raises numerous interesting possibilities. The mere suggestion of academic biblical interpretation aimed at understanding what God, as the Bible’s author, has said or is saying to us is scandalous to a Protestant biblical scholarship that has long been in the habit of bracketing any conviction about the divine inspiration or authorship of Scripture and assumed the priority of the historically conditioned human author. Although taking the divine authorship of Scripture seriously does not necessitate the demotion of the priority of the human and historically conditioned authorship, it at least reintroduces the question of the interpretive significance of the divine authorship of Scripture and creates room for seriously considering alternate interpretive approaches in sympathy with the precritical exegetical tradition in ways that go beyond both canonical and postliberal options.

The Enlightenment captivity of biblical interpretation has resulted in the present crisis in biblical scholarship. This crisis, admitted by many, but not all, manifests itself on several fronts. Among these are the fragmentation of Scripture, the loss of the analogies of Scripture and faith, tension between orthodox theologians and contemporary biblical scholarship due in part to the erosion of biblical support for particular doctrines such as the Trinity and the Incarnation, and the rendering of the precritical exegetical tradition as practically useless and even embarrassing to the contemporary biblical scholar. SAHS exists to address these sorts of issues and “to renew interpretation of the Bible as Scripture in the Academy” such that it is once again possible—or perhaps better, acceptable—to study “the Book as Scripture, in which we hear God speak to us personally and as communities.” This seems to be the central issue in biblical scholarship today and a fundamental concern driving the current theological turn within biblical interpretation. Because this amounts to an
attempt to recover basic features of the precritical exegetical tradition, this vol-
ume would have been enhanced by contributions from certain church histori-
ans (David Steinmetz, Richard A. Muller, and John L. Thompson are
noteworthy examples) who have argued for a greater appreciation of precriti-
cal exegesis over against the Enlightenment alternative(s). Nevertheless, there
is much in this volume that recommends it highly. Hopefully, it will be read
widely and the arguments and proposals it contains discussed extensively.

—Bruce P. Baugus