

Levering, Matthew. *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008. 310 pp.

Levering's proposal in *Participatory Biblical Exegesis* poignantly addresses what R.W.L. Moberly calls "a curious situation" in Christian biblical exegesis (2). Modern Christian biblical interpretation has heavily relied on historical-critical methods that tend to preclude interpretations that invoke the most important divine and spiritual realities to which the biblical texts refer (2). Since historical-critical inquiry and discovery has proven fruitful for a fuller understanding of the linear-historical realities of the biblical texts, rather than propose something *less* than historical-critical methodology, Levering hopes to redeem the valuable finds of historical-critical methodology for Christian interpretation by proposing something *more*: a broader understanding of history as including also a participatory dimension (1). His proposal is that history is not merely linear-historical but also metaphysically participatory (finite participation in divine being). Therefore in order to do justice to the human and historical aspects of exegesis, Levering argues that one must go beyond the linear-historical dynamics of the text to account for the realities beyond the words (the *res*, 11). The ultimate argument of the book, then, is about the nature of history (3).

Chapters one and two seek to demonstrate the "gradual displacement" of the patristic-medieval participatory approach to scripture (14). Levering hopes to shine light on exactly why history came to be conceived as purely linear-historical and divine realities as extrinsic. This metaphysical shift takes place in "the Scotist rupture" of the fourteenth century (19). Scotus rejected the Platonic understanding of participation and the Aristotelian understanding of ultimate teleology that Christian theology had, up to this point in history, largely appropriated in Christian theology (19). After locating the origins of the modern understanding of history in medieval nominalism, Levering hopes to show the implications such a view of history has for biblical exegesis. He does this by looking at how biblical commentary of the same text (John 3:27-36) drastically changes over time, starting with Aquinas' exegesis that illumines the participatory elements of historical reality (25) and ending with modern modes of biblical exegesis that marginalize all such approaches (53). For Christian interpreters, "commentaries do not [easily] blend history and theology" because the modern idea of history makes history "exegetically problematic" (52).

In chapter three, as Levering begins to offer a vision for participatory biblical exegesis, the real concerns come to the fore as he warns that notions of history and biblical interpretation that do not involve recognition of divine realities are ultimately "anthropocentric (and thus, from a Bible's perspective, idolatrous)" (64). Renewing the tradition of patristic medieval participatory biblical exegesis, on the other hand, offers Christian interpreters the sorely needed "theocentric model of biblical interpretation" (64). Levering marshals the brilliance of St. Augustine's insight into the nature of teaching: "all teaching is about *res*, realities" and therefore, "in order to understand true teaching one must learn how to judge the relative importance of various *res*, so as to be able to get to the heart of the teaching" (65). To do otherwise would be to cling to "created realities, loving them without reference to their Creator"—a "doomed enterprise" that confuses the means as above the end (65). (Here is the real heart of Levering's

proposal; the rest of the book is historical/theological/exegetical troubleshooting. In this chapter, most of his ideas find expression.) The ultimate end of all teaching “aims at building up love of God and neighbor in ecclesial communion” (68). Humility requires that one recognize the “norm of Scriptural reading” of the Body of Christ (68). The scriptures ultimate *telos* (my word, not his) is to mediate an encounter with God: “‘*existential*’ *participation*” that amounts to God’s own teaching which “re-orders” one’s loves (69). This effectively reverses the hermeneutical priority from linear-historical to existential-participatory (69). The author then further expounds on this key idea through Thomas Aquinas’ doctrine of Scripture as “transformative *sacra doctrina*” (71) that must be understood as a unified whole rather than “a mere repository of facts and ideas” (75).

In the second half of chapter three, Levering is forced to take the reader a step back from the euphoric teachings of Augustine and Aquinas to revisit the muddled issues of contemporary biblical interpretation (76). Levering by then, however, has made his point well: linear-historical tools cannot be employed in a “neutral” fashion (77): they either include or preclude the divine realities *as part of real history*. Levering claims not only that a participatory mode of exegesis is necessary for discerning the divine *res*, but he makes the further claim that this approach is “required to account for even the linear-historical complexity of the biblical texts” (77). But is such a participatory perspective able to capture fully the “unsystematic” messiness of human authorship and intention? Levering argues that his approach does not demand “that all biblical authors/redactors, working in various genres, are saying and intending the same thing,” but only “that Scripture’s human authorial teachings and intensions be recognized as belonging to the participatory framework—divine revelation and inspiration—of the Trinitarian *doctrina*” (80). Problematic passages must be governed by the schema of *doctrina*, which includes abandoning a particular explanation of any passage “if it be proved with certainty to be false” (81). Levering backs this claim by appealing to *Dei Verbum*’s doctrine of inspiration that claims that Biblical interpretation “seeks salvific truth” (83-84). This chapter concludes by an affirmation of the “centrality of God the Teacher, in whose teaching exegetes participate” (89).

Chapter four is concerned with affirming the necessary locus of receptivity to God the Teacher—the “*divinely ordained fellowship*” (90). Here Levering is concerned to show that his proposal is more promising for finding common ground for dialogue with Jewish interpreters than the “comparative textology” of mere historians who ignore the divine and ecclesial aspects of biblical exegesis (96). The Pontifical Biblical Commission document, in spite of its “good job” in some respects, is troubling on account of its “presumption of a solely linear-historical model” to both Jews and Christians who see Scripture as more than just “ancient texts” (96). To do justice to real history, including the “communal participatory appropriation” of Scripture, biblical interpretation must heed the communal traditions in which the biblical texts are “operative” (99). This aspect of historical transmission should distill the fears of “total semantic indeterminacy” (100). To ignore communal interpretation is fatal because the true meaning of Scripture is “embodied” in this “communal, intellectual, moral, and liturgical” history (104, 102).

As we discover in chapter five, for Levering, the communal teaching of the Christian church that sets the context for all exegesis is “kenotic love” that includes “cruciform peace” and is therefore more promising than the Spinozian undermining of ecclesial authority (140). In the end, Levering comes through with a robustly Christian biblical exegesis that “under the guidance of the Holy Spirit” in ecclesial communion, understands the fullness of sacred scriptures because

it participates in the realities to which they refer—specifically the “Christological plan of human salvation” (143).

Levering’s narrative of the origins of modern notions of history will need to be evaluated by interested historians, and his peculiar Platonic understanding of participation (though nowhere extensively explained) may not be shared by all Christians (although some account of our participation in God is indeed necessary). Certainly, however, Levering has exposed a naïveté in Christian biblical exegesis by showing the woefully inadequacy of any interpretation that does not take the divine realities into account *as real history*. In this respect, his work is a brilliant myth buster, forcibly deconstructing the illusion of neutrality in historical-critical methods that exclude the divine realities *in history* and perhaps an eye-opener to what should be more obvious to those who cherish this aspect of Scripture above all else. This insight is especially relevant to those who use the historical-critical method in apologetic postures. Although Protestants will perhaps wish to dispute his argument for ecclesilogically governed interpretation, I would argue (as a Protestant) that such Protestants engage in performative contradictions anytime they use the word “heretic.” Although Levering’s work still leaves certain questions unanswered, it appears to be more suggestive than comprehensive, inviting other Christians to join him in rethinking an authentically Christian hermeneutical framework that does not shy away from all useful critical tools but keeps the divine realities central to the task of interpretation.

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