

Aquinas on Scripture: A Primer

John F. Boyle

Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic

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Reviewed by Teagan McKenzie

A critical challenge is posed to anyone who seeks to adapt pre-critical interpretation of scripture for a modern/post-modern audience. Modernity brought several novelties to biblical exegesis: a skepticism towards tradition, developments in the importance of science and technology, greater attention to the facts of daily life for historical persons, and frequent denials of the existence of spiritual/metaphysical beings. A whole suite of critical tools was developed to complement these changes in focus and shifts in dominant ideas. Biblical texts are now primarily evaluated for their internal history, their genre, their audiences, their reception over time, and their structural logic rather than for their meaning *simpliciter*.

John F. Boyle's *Aquinas on Scripture: A Primer* is a bridge into the world of pre-critical exegesis. A very readable academic book in the 120-page style, Boyle's little book is a handbook on St. Thomas Aquinas as an exegete and his hermeneutical attitude. Boyle provides a careful review of St. Thomas' methods, the grammatical building blocks of his interpretation, and the multiple senses of biblical texts in which St. Thomas worked freely. The bulk of the book is constructed in imitation of Aristotle's four causes. This ancient philosophical idea was applied liberally to biblical texts by St. Thomas. Reviewing this exegetical style summarizes much of his method. Although the terms "senses" and "causes" are not the common stock of terms and ideas now common for critical exegetes, a contemporary audience will find Boyle's treatment perfectly followable. He displays keen audience awareness often clarifying the more obscure points.

Boyle includes familiar questions of authorship and context in his coverage. In addition, readers will find that Boyle carefully highlights

the theological weight behind St. Thomas' comments on these matters. On issues of context, Boyle demonstrates the ways in which the mystical/spiritual interpretation of scripture is constructed on top of the literal. Not hermeneutical axiom common in today's critical commentaries. On the topic of authorship, he details Thomas' opinion that God is the primary author of scripture over and above the human author. This leads Boyle to eschew certain points of consensus that have arisen from critical exegesis. For example, he refers in passing to St. Paul as the author of *Ephesians*. Importantly, this work is not a critical adaptation of St. Thomas' ideas and methods for use in contemporary biblical scholarship. It is a handbook on the constituent elements of St. Thomas' exegetical ideas and assumptions, and it is useful within the scope of that project.

Now, Boyle is not totally unaware of trends in biblical scholarship that have been developing since the Renaissance. He is careful, for example, to note that St. Thomas believed in the exegetical significance of human authors and in the irreplaceable significance of the literal meaning of the biblical text. He clarifies these procedural points in order to explain how and why St. Thomas emphasizes divine authorship and mystical interpretation. And yet it is true that Boyle does not do enough work with St. Thomas' exegetical ideas to allow a contemporary exegete to begin using them in biblical scholarship. On this point, Boyle's work can be contrasted with Matthew Levering's 2004 work, *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology*. Levering does work in that volume to uncover the connection between biblical scholarship and theological studies, which is not present in Boyle's work. Levering's work, at more than double the length of Boyle's, still does not lay out the constituent parts and assumptions of St. Thomas' exegetical method as plainly as Boyle does. For this reason, neither work renders the other irrelevant, and they can read usefully in dialogue with one another.

A key point of connection between Levering's and Boyle's treatment of St. Thomas is the emphasis on his contemplative attitude towards scripture. In Levering's treatment, this is the defining aspect of Thomist exegesis that links it to metaphysical discussions. In Boyle's treatment, St. Thomas' contemplative practice is part of an overarching attitude towards scripture. Even as he puts the more exotic aspects of St. Thomas' exegetical method in context with its more approachable features, Boyle also puts his contemplative approach to scripture in context with other salient features of his hermeneutical theory. On account of its chosen

topic, this is an irreversibly academic book. If it has a popular valence, it is Boyle's careful effort to highlight St. Thomas' reverence for scripture as essential to his exegetical method.

Boyle's work does not bridge the centuries between critical exegesis and St. Thomas' methods, but he did not set out to do so. He does provide a useful introduction to St. Thomas' method and the terminology and tools that constitute it. More usefully for those unfamiliar, he sketches a way of viewing scripture characterized by reference, keen to grasp complex imagery and metaphors, and totally devoid of textual skepticism. A vision, in other words, rarely seen in the scholarly environment formed by critical scholarship.

Prophetic Disability: Divine Sovereignty and Human Bodies in the Hebrew Bible

Sarah J. Melcher

Studies in Religion, Theology, and Disability,

Waco, TX: Baylor University Press

2022, 145 pp., hardcover, \$39.99

ISBN 978-1-4813-1024-6

Reviewed by Marshall Johns

With the (alleged) waning of the historical-critical method and the increase of approaches in critical and literary theories, the field of biblical studies seeks to find its way in the twenty-first century. Sarah J. Melcher's *Prophetic Disability: Divine Sovereignty and Human Bodies in the Hebrew Bible* is one example of scholarship's growth through minoritized voices continuing the struggle for recognition in the field. Her monograph situates itself within the growing field of disability studies, claiming to be the first book-length use of this model of critical theory upon the Hebrew Bible's (HB) prophetic corpus. What follows is a brief review of Melcher's *Prophetic Disability* and a few points of constructive dialogue.

Structurally, the book unfolds in three parts: An introductory chapter that advocates Melcher's choice of method and model within disability and biblical studies, four chapters surveying the literary prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve), and a brief conclusion. Since the chapters on the biblical material are all surveys of

the respective texts based on a framework outlined in the introduction, we will focus on that framework rather than casuistically engaging the biblical texts covered.

For those unfamiliar, it is worth generalizing that disability studies are motivated by what it *is* to be human, particularly a human whose existence is marked by “difference.” Melcher situates *Prophetic Disability* within a critical realist approach to disability studies as opposed to approaches such as medical models (focused on physiological aspects of disability), socioeconomic models (focused on “disability” in relation to barriers found in “environments”), or cultural models (focused on the cultural constructions of, and deviations from, “ableness;”)(4). Melcher’s choice is generative, a choice casting a larger area of exploration for the project since the critical realist model is marked by multifaceted engagement through phenomenological analysis (intransitivity in existence and transfactuality in social realities) as well as quantitative and qualitative analysis (stratified data gathering). She does admit there are shortcomings in using disability studies’ critical realism since the biblical texts are “gathered,” and thus limited, literary materials. She advocates for reading the text in as much as possible within this model since to do so still adds clarity to the rhetoric of God’s sovereignty over human bodies. That is to say, even if the potential data input required by the method and model are limited within the HB, this effort is worthwhile due to what it could tell us about the formative rhetoric of the people who used, and use, these texts. It is to that aspect of *Prophetic Disability* that we now turn.

In the chapters on the biblical texts, Melcher highlights passages that deal with a handful of rhetorical tropes, all of which seem to center on one point: The God portrayed in the prophetic material is a deity that is able both to heal and cause disability, often in direct relation to people’s faithfulness/righteousness or lack thereof. Some of these consistently used tropes include: 1) Walking, stumbling, or falling in relation to “the path”), 2) A willing turn from “the path” toward disabling realities, as well as the turning back toward “the path” and being healed from those disabling realities, 3) God and God’s anointed as superhuman in bodily aptitude, 4) infertility, the biological processes associated with potential birth (including menstruation cycles), or even just being “womanly” as defiling and/or disabling, 5) Idols and false religious practice as impure and thus “disabled,” and 6) Brokenness of bodies through intentional external forces or illness. It is important to note that all of these tropes vary in uses from the

personal to the national level, further demonstrating God's "sovereignty." Melcher argues the overwhelming rhetorical weight of these tropes is at best a negative perception of disabled bodies and at worst an indictment of God's character. How could God be able to heal people of these devastating situations yet be the one *causing* them? And why does God approach capriciousness surrounding the issue of when and how these situations of punishment or healing occur? Melcher is sure to highlight positive rhetorical aspects of the text (one thinks of Amos's and Ezekiel's respective ties to justice for the disenfranchised, including the disabled), but her point is clear: Using the critical realist method to approach these texts highlights manifold problematic instances of "ableist" rhetoric used on behalf of the communities of the texts. This means that people who use these texts need to critically guard against subsuming this rhetoric, whether these people are disabled or not.

A note before any constructive dialogue regarding Melcher's work: Melcher consistently qualifies her statements about the *potential* rhetorical effects of these sections of scripture on *some* people with disabilities. Critiques of her work are doomed to fail if based upon "what-about-ism" regarding the diverse experiences of religious life and "scripture" among people with disabilities. With this in mind, let us turn to three points of consideration this author has after engaging Melcher's *Prophetic Disability*.

First, the textual scope of *Prophetic Disability* is worth discussing. We preface this point with the stated goals of the "Studies in Religion, Theology, and Disability" series: The books in this series include "shorter, crisply argued volumes... larger scholarly monographs... textbooks that provide a state of the discussion... and select edited volumes..." (viii). Melcher's work falls into the first category and is not critiqued for this. However, she makes a case for not engaging Daniel as a prophetic book because it is placed in the Writings rather than the Prophets in the HB. This is a wise move, but it raises the question of why the Former Prophets are not also discussed in *Prophetic Disability*. There are manifold stories in the Samuel and Kings narratives centering on people with disabilities as Melcher outlines "disability," so one is left wondering if space constraints or editorial decisions are behind the silence on such rich materials.

Second, an issue of linguistic use and range is worth pondering. As noted above, Melcher discusses the rhetorical weight of metaphors surrounding stumbling and walking for some folks with disabilities. While

many verbs of motion are used in the HB, let us consider one. Perhaps too much of the physical movement of one's legs has been associated with *הלך*. Though seemingly pedantic, this verb is associated with movement in any regard, not necessarily the physical movement of legs or even the *unassisted* physical movement of said legs. I offer two examples. First, in Genesis 3 two unexpected figures *הלך*: God and the serpent. Without invoking broader comparative ANE religious issues that are of debate (i.e. does the god(s) of the HB have a body, and if so what sort of body?), it may strike readers as odd to consider God's "walking" here to be the literal movement of legs. Even setting aside this more contentious point, the "walking" of the snake remains, and *הלך*, referring to the movement of physical legs here would, similarly, require bizarre interpretations. Secondly, in 2 Sam 19:26, David, based on the dubious report of the Mephibosheth's servant Ziba, questions Mephibosheth about the latter's lack of support for the monarch. Here, Mephibosheth reminds the king of something that is made painfully clear throughout the narrative: Mephibosheth is disabled, seemingly unable to physically move his legs in an unassisted fashion (cf. 2 Sam 4:4; 9:13). In fact, in 19:26 Mephibosheth says that he saddled a donkey to ride out *in order to הלך* to the king *because* he has a disability. Here, then, *הלך* connotes *assisted* movement. These examples hopefully open a discussion on lexical usage of *הלך* in the HB, something that would have implications for Melcher and her work.

Third, there is a missed opportunity regarding the theme of infertility. Again, Melcher notes that some disability studies scholars see infertility in the HB as "disability." This argument seems compelling and will not be contested. However, in her chapter on the Book of the Twelve Melcher glosses over the book of Joel, stating "...it does not contain much interest for the task at hand," (84). This is interesting given the fact that a major theme in Joel is the infertility of the land, something Kevin Scott's presentation entitled "Judah's Land is a Cage: Infertility as Disability in Joel's Call to Lament" highlighted in a session on the Book of the Twelve at the 2023 National Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature. To be clear: Melcher's work cannot be critiqued for not engaging scholarship that postdates her book. It is, however, worth noting that *Prophetic Disability* is not exhaustive and that there may be additional opportunities to build upon the foundations she has laid here.

Ultimately, Melcher's *Prophetic Disability* is a fantastic introductory example of the field of disability studies. This primer is an excellent addition to syllabi at any level of higher education, as it provides a strong bibliography for those interested in further research in disability studies while not being bogged down by drawn-out analysis or conversations of theory.

Christian Zionism in the Twenty-First Century

Motti Inbari and Kirill Bumin

New York, NY: Oxford University Press

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Reviewed by Zachariah S. Motts

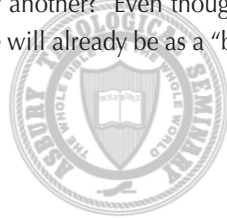
The difficulty with any type of surveying is that, by the time the results have been published in a book, they are a snapshot of a reality that is receding further and further into the past. That is especially true on a topic that is currently volatile and tied to major world events. *Christian Zionism in the Twenty-First Century* reports on the results of three surveys of American evangelicals with a focus on understanding the sources of and adherence to Christian Zionism. How much of support for the nation of Israel is tied to various “theological, cultural, social, and political considerations” (1)? Each of the three surveys examined take place between 2018 and 2021, which means that they straddle the COVID-19 pandemic and that they are, of course, unaware of the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, the military response from Israel, or the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Motti Inbari and Kirill Bumin have placed the results of their surveying in the context of generational change among evangelicals, but current events make extrapolation from these results to the present situation untenable.

That being said, the book does present a snapshot and context of U.S. evangelical opinion in this period. The 2018 survey included 1,000 respondents from across evangelical and born-again Christians. The 2020 phone survey covered 1,000 evangelical pastors, attempting to understand how evangelical leadership may differ from their congregations. Given generational differences that were evident in the earlier surveys, the 2021 survey was specifically commissioned to examine 700 evangelical

respondents under 30 years old. The results are discussed alongside relevant data from major surveys, like Pew and Gallup polls. The authors attempt to piece apart the opinions and beliefs among evangelicals that are hypothesized to most closely correlate with support for Israel. Analysis of the data suggests that eschatological beliefs are connected to Christian Zionism, with a strong premillennial stance being likely to predict strong support for Israel. On the other hand, the demographic factor that was most impactful to support for Israel was age, with more younger evangelicals showing sympathy for the issues faced by Palestinians and weaker support for Israel. Younger evangelicals also showed weaker adherence to premillennial views.

While the results of the work done here are useful and informative, they are not particularly astonishing. There is nuance added to some of the wider stereotypes of evangelicalism, but not much that outright contradicts them. They show that older evangelicals with conservative political views who have consistent socialization in a church are more likely to support features of Christian Zionism than younger, more liberal, evangelicals. They also show a weakening of the influence of premillennialism as a background assumption as time has passed. Perhaps the most interesting approach was the attempt to contrast the views of evangelical elites (pastors) with the beliefs of the larger evangelical sample. The feedback loop between a congregation and a pastor concerning beliefs and worldview understanding deserves further study, as the authors note.

With the major developments in Israel and Gaza that are occurring on a daily basis, and the way that support for Israel has become such a heatedly contested topic, it is hard to predict where evangelical support is now from this data. Has it hardened into a clearer generational divide? Has it shifted one way or another? Even though this book was published so recently, its main value will already be as a “before” to whatever surveys come after.



Origen of Alexandria and the Theology of the Holy Spirit

Micah M. Miller

New York, NY: Oxford University Press

2024, 208 pp., hardcover, \$100.00

ISBN 978-0-1988-9574-9

Reviewed by Zachariah S. Motts

Micah M. Miller provides a critical reading of Origen of Alexandria's body of work in search of a clearer view of Origen's pneumatology and a nuanced understanding of the Holy Spirit's place within the Trinity. Exegesis of Origen's writings, though, present several challenges from this side of the Council of Nicaea and the Cappadocian Fathers. One of these, of course, is the embattled status Origen's writings have had within Christian history, being often declared heretical. This reception history led to interpolated versions of Origen's works which were meant to bring them into more orthodox alignment. Therefore, any critical exegete will have to identify and separate out these interpolations, while being careful not to read post-Nicene trinitarian assumptions into these decisions or the interpretation of the text. A difficult task, but a challenge to which Miller rises. His meticulous parsing of extant Greek and Latin texts and careful comparisons of relevant passages show a studied command of the subject.

The book is based on Miller's dissertation work, which is evident in the approach and the structure. There is not much by way of background, historical context, or easing the non-specialist into the material. If the reader is looking for colorful legends about self-castration, details about Origen's geographical and cultural world, or even much of an overview of Origen's corpus, the reader should look to other books on the subject. This is a book that assumes familiarity with the sources and, after an introduction that mostly describes the goals of the project, jumps very quickly into an explication of "auto-X" phrases in Greek. None of this is surprising for a dissertation, but slowing down a bit and improving the readability of the discussion for a slightly wider audience would have been possible.

Even so, Miller does succeed at approaching Origen's theology on its own terms. He moves back and forth through texts as he develops the chapter topics. These chapters build on one another, from an exploration of the relationship between the persons of the Trinity toward chapters specifically focused on the unique features of the Holy Spirit within the

texts. Miller compares passages critically and exegetes Origen in a way that shows why his work was so important in the development of Christian theology, and why it became such a point of contention after Nicaea. Origen's theology of the Trinity shows a marked hierarchy, which makes sense in the context of his opposition to the Monarchianism of the time. On pneumatology, Origen's theology of the sevenfold Spirit connects earlier Jewish thought to the later Christian thought as it spread beyond Palestine. The strength of this study is in the elucidation of real difference and change in Christian theology before the orthodox consensus. Origen is shown here as a seminal and innovative thinker, asking questions and working his own theology out over time. The picture of the Trinity and pneumatology that is drawn from the internal dialogue of these texts has a different, but not exaggerated, feel from post-Nicaean theology, which lends an air of authenticity to Miller's reading.

Origen of Alexandria and the Theology of the Holy Spirit is a monograph for theological specialists and scholars of Christian church history. It has narrowly defined goals and advances the conversation regarding Origen's theology in an academic way, as dissertations do. Though this approach succeeds at what it sets out to accomplish, is not an accessible book for a wider audience.



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