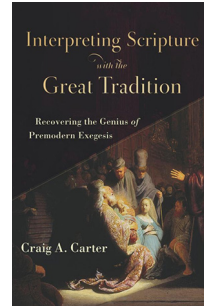


Book Review

Craig A. Carter.

*Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition:
Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis*
Grand Rapids, MI: BakerAcademic, 2018. 279 pages.
\$27.99. ISBN: 9780801098727.

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Craig A. Carter, professor of theology at Tyndale University College and Seminary, offers a stinging rebuke of Enlightenment historical-critical biblical interpretation and calls on Evangelicals “to recover the approach to biblical exegesis that characterized the Great Tradition” (xii). Carter’s book, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis*, names the problem of the departure from Christian Platonism, and shows how views of metaphysics, exegesis, and doctrine affect one another. The modern abandonment of Christian Platonism leads to an abandonment of the underlying philosophy that formed Nicene theology.

The book opens by posing a problem in contemporary interpretation: How should the suffering servant in Isaiah 53 be interpreted? Carter here shows the chasm between the academy and the church, and argues that the church is more in keeping with Great Tradition teaching, while the academy has drifted from this teaching. After showing the problem of modern interpretation in chapter one, the bulk of Carter’s book is divided into two major parts.

In the first part, Carter critiques modern biblical interpretation by examining classical views of Scripture and God, metaphysics and Christian Platonism, and the Enlightenment rejection of Christian Platonism, ending with

a call to retrieve Christian Platonism. In his second chapter, Carter relies on John Webster and Hans Boersma as he argues for a sacramental nature of the Scriptures in keeping with the Great Tradition, writing: “On the issue of the sacramental nature of Scripture, there is no disagreement between the early church fathers and Protestant Reformers” (36). In chapter three, Carter draws extensively from Augustine to explain and defend Christian Platonism. He also carefully distinguishes Platonism from the *Christian* Platonism that the modernists rejected. In chapter four, Carter lays out his argument that the narrative of the history of biblical interpretation needs to be told more accurately to highlight the “skill and spiritual insight” of this history. (93) The “modern myth of progress,” which divides history into “precritical” and “critical” needs to be rejected. (93-94) Carter, explaining the consensus of interpreting Scripture in the Great Tradition, draws on and critiques Brevard Childs’s views of the common features of Christian exegesis from the patristic era to the twentieth century.

Particularly helpful in this first half is Carter’s explanation of how the metaphysics of Christian Platonism formed the theology of the Great Tradition, and its relationship to biblical interpretation. Key to Carter’s argument is that historical criticism does *not* enhance biblical interpretation. While there are positive elements in modern interpretations, much of what is good is not new; it is a continuation of the past.

Carter bluntly writes: “as a general rule, *what was good in the Enlightenment was not new, and what was not new was not good*” (126, emphasis original). For example, textual criticism, history, and reason were not developed by the Enlightenment—these elements appear in the writings of Origen, Augustine, and Aquinas.

In the second part Carter shows practically what we should learn from the church fathers in interpreting Scripture. Chapter five argues that reading the Bible is a spiritual practice and that the Bible’s unity is centered on Christ, giving examples from the writings of Ambrose of Milan, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus. Chapter six deals with the literal sense and views of history. Carter helpfully explains how the term *literal* can be misused, giving as an example Genesis 1 and the creation account. In this section Carter shows Calvin drawing on Augustine to argue that spiritual meaning comes from the Bible’s literal sense. Carter further shows the tradition of deriving meaning from the plain sense—which includes Christological interpretation—from interpreters ranging from Origen to Calvin. Last, in chapter seven, Carter shows how the fathers interpreted the Old Testament christologically. Carter uses Augustine’s interpretation of the Psalms to show examples of Christological exegesis. He also defines prosopological exegesis, and points out problems with the discussions surrounding typology.

In his conclusion chapter, Carter takes up the problem posed in his introduction—how to interpret the identity of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53. He dialogues with Evangelical scholars D.A. Carson and Kevin Vanhoozer, and then examines interpretations of this passage by three contemporary interpreters. Carter’s example of a sermon on Isaiah 53 is helpful in seeing what retrieval of Great Tradition hermeneutics might

look like today. After closing the book with reflections on Evangelicals working together, Carter includes a brief appendix on criteria for limiting the spiritual sense in interpretation.

While a strength of Carter’s writing is his blunt and to-the-point nature of his argumentation—leaving no question as to his position—this bluntness and directness takes a polemical tone that may not be helpful to all readers. For example, writing that “new atheists” are “hotheads,” (110) and that poststructuralists “are emotivists with a persecution complex,” (125) might either amuse or bother some readers, but would hardly be persuasive for a reader who has sympathies for the concerns of the new atheists or poststructuralists. In this way, Carter limits his audience. His writing is geared toward Evangelicals who value the Great Tradition—this is a book for insiders.

Carter accomplished his goal well. He insightfully not only shows the strengths of the Great Tradition, he carefully explains the importance of philosophical underpinnings of Nicene Theology. Instead of merely arguing against the historical critical method, he shows how the philosophy behind it is not in keeping with Christian tradition, and also explains well how the Enlightenment shift changed both the methods and results of biblical interpretation.

Readers unacquainted with nuances of the historical critical method, Enlightenment philosophy, and contemporary dialogues of interpretation may find parts of the book difficult, but will also benefit from Carter’s clear and direct writing. This book is recommended to students and scholars interested in the methodology and philosophy of biblical interpretation. Carter’s work also aids greatly in putting language to naming the problems associated with aspects of Enlightenment thinking on the church.