

John L. Thompson. *Reading the Bible with the Dead: What You Can Learn from the History of Exegesis That You Can't Learn from Exegesis Alone*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.

John Thompson, a professor of historical theology at Fuller Theological Seminary who specializes in the history of biblical interpretation, is convinced that “we don’t fully know what the Bible *means* until we know something about what the Bible *has meant*” (11). Contemporary interpretation of scripture is most insightful and faithful when “the teachers and preachers of the early church, the Middle Ages, and the Reformation era – are invited to join us in a conversation” (216).

To illustrate these convictions Thompson focuses on some of the Bible’s problematic texts of violence, vengeance, and abuse (especially of women) that are typically omitted by our sanitized lectionary and sermons but were of great concern to earlier interpreters. Because “members of our own churches bear many of the same scars and open wounds as the characters in the Bible’s hardest tales” (5), attending to these characters can be a pastoral act of honoring and addressing the woundedness in our own midst.

The bulk of the book consists of nine free-standing chapters bearing provocative titles such as “Hagar in Salvation-History: Victim or Villain? Symbol or Saint?,” “Psalms and Curses: Anger Management, on Earth as It Is in Heaven,” and “Gomer and Hosea: Does God Approve of Wife Abuse?”

Each chapter summarizes why a text or topic is problematic, surveys how pre-critical commentators dealt with it, and concludes with reflections on contemporary implications for faithful interpretation. One of the more fascinating chapters is “Patriarchs Behaving Badly: How Should We Follow Saints Who Lie, Cheat, Break Promises, Commit Insurrection, Endanger Women, and Take Extra Wives?” This chapter explores how interpreters have grappled with the “sins” of key biblical characters often championed as exemplars of the faith.

Some of the proposed explanations include these: God granted Abraham special permission to lie about Sarah not being his wife; Jacob’s deceptive acquisition of the blessing intended for Esau was appropriate

because he was only taking what God had promised him; Lot's offering of his daughters to the depraved men of Sodom was not sinful because Lot knew that divine providence would intervene. Interpreters struggled with two competing impulses, not wanting either to condemn the heroes of the faith or to encourage copycat offences.

Problems resulted when the latter impulse was relaxed. Based on the precedent of polygamy among biblical patriarchs, Martin Luther reluctantly approved the bigamy of his patron Prince Philip of Hesse, who threatened to withdraw his political support for the Protestant Reformation.

The contemporary lessons Thompson draws from this discussion are that: not all of the Bible is a model for us; there is no need to fabricate hidden scenarios to let biblical heroes off the hook; when the actions of biblical characters clash with the teachings of the Bible, then the latter should prevail; and interpreters must avoid the mistake of Luther and others who made special concessions to people in power and allowed political concerns to determine interpretation. While these are valuable lessons, I am not totally convinced that we need lengthy discussions of the history of interpretation to arrive at what are fairly common-sense insights in our time.

In the concluding chapter "On Cultivating the Habit of History: Reading the Bible in the Presence of the Past," Thompson encourages Christians to nurture a sense "for how the essentials of the gospel have come to us already much considered and much digested, through centuries of reflection and controversy within the Christian church" (215). Surely this is a valuable insight for us contemporary Christians prone to amnesia about our forebears in the faith and thus tempted to act as if we are the first generation of believers. Thompson suggests that a pastor imbibe history in small doses by consulting what older commentators say about the text the pastor is studying in preparation for preaching or teaching. To facilitate access to such resources Thompson provides a finding guide of printed and electronic versions of old commentaries.

Thompson's passion for the history of biblical interpretation is infectious, and the author has a gift for bringing together academic study of history and pastoral needs of the contemporary church. Pastors and others interested in the history of interpretation will find this an engaging book. Those not yet interested in such history will do well to read it also, as a way

to develop an appreciation for both the wisdom and the short-sightedness of those who have gone before, and to learn practices to imitate and pitfalls to avoid.

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Waldemar Janzen. *Growing Up in Turbulent Times: Memoirs of Soviet Oppression, Refugee Life in Germany, and Immigrant Adjustment to Canada*. Winnipeg: CMU Press, 2007.

Waldemar Janzen is no stranger to many across Canada and beyond, given the decades that he spent on the faculty of CMBC (now part of Canadian Mennonite University). He has now added to an already rich legacy as a respected scholar and teacher with this absorbing account of, essentially, his life before Winnipeg. The book's title is apt, as Janzen did live in turbulent times during his earliest decades, for how else to describe a life shaped by Stalinist repression in the 1930s and the terror and carnage of World War II?

Indeed, if there is anything to quibble about in this book, it may be its designation as a memoir. It is often a memoir in some places but not in others, and this adds to the considerable richness of the whole. For Janzen was also a diarist and faithfully recorded much of his life in his *Braunes Büchlein* (followed by his *Schwarzes Büchlein* after 1950).

Now, years later, he often engages with both of these diaries as he writes his memoir. This allows him to be a memoirist at times and a historian at other times, and it is to his great credit that he can move back and forth between these roles with ease. For example, Janzen decided to enroll at Waterloo Lutheran College in the early 1950s in order to study theology. He first recalls this memory (238); then he produces his diary account of the momentous decision; whereupon he reflects on what had made it the logical next step in his life. The same interchange occurs in a moving account of his twentieth birthday and the intense loneliness that enveloped him on that