

BOOK REVIEWS

Richard B. Hays, *Reading with the Grain of Scripture***(Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2020), pp. xi + 467.
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Stephen Fowl

Department of Theology, Loyola University Maryland, Baltimore, MD, USA (sfowl@loyola.edu)

This volume pulls together a number of Hays' previously published essays. Many of these may not have garnered the attention they deserve. Moreover, putting them in a single volume makes them more accessible.

The first part of the book contains four essays that focus on aspects of interpretation. The first of these examines questions around how one establishes the unity of scripture while also recognising the manifest diversity of the texts that comprise the Christian Bible. Hays rightly argues that the unity of scripture cannot be discerned, presented or assured by virtue of a particular interpretive method. Instead, the church's rule of faith provides the framework within which scripture can be read as a coherent dramatic narrative. This essay is followed by one that offers twelve markers that should characterise theological exegesis. The penultimate essay in this section reflects on reading scripture in the light of the resurrection. Again, Hays offers a numbered list of thoughts about what such reading entails. This tendency to rely on enumerated characteristics has the great strength of making Hays' points clear to readers and would make these essays very useful in classroom contexts. The final essay in this section looks at the importance of figural reading. This is one of the more recent essays, and in it Hays offers some reflective responses to critical evaluations of his 2016 volume *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels*. The essay does not require one to have read the prior volume to engage Hays' ideas. Hays concludes this essay and this section by arguing that, ultimately, both he and his critics are, or should be, primarily interested in the Gospels as witnesses to the triune God.

Two points emerge from reading this section where I would love to hear more from Hays. First, although the enumerated lists are pedagogically helpful, I wonder if they may also leave students wishing for more guidance about how to fit the pieces together in their own interpretive practice. Secondly, because these essays so deeply locate theological interpretation within ecclesial contexts, it would have been wonderful to hear some reflection on the importance of listening to voices from outside the *ecclesia* and the importance of engaging such voices as gifts to the church.

The next part of the book deals with the historical Jesus. Almost all of these essays respond to the work of others on the historical Jesus: the Jesus Seminar, N. T. Wright and Benedict XVI in particular. The section concludes with a chapter that does offer a brief historical sketch of Jesus of Nazareth, a sketch that is largely congruent with the distinct versions of Jesus rendered in the canonical Gospels. It is fair to say that the historical Jesus was not an enduring focus of Hays' scholarly endeavours and this section reflects that.

The essays on Paul (chapters 9–15) form the heart of this volume. Here Hays is at his best as a scholar, expertly moving back and forth from large-scale insights about Paul to sharp and detailed exegetical observations to sophisticated interactions with a variety of scholarly viewpoints. If one emerges from the first section of the book feeling that some of the theoretical moves are not as strongly developed as they might be and uncertain about how the various members of the numerous lists interact and relate to each other in practice, then this section is where Hays can point and simply say, ‘Taste and see’. My personal favourite here is the 2012 essay on apocalyptic. Hays shows how readers of Paul can take seriously the dual truths that, in Christ, God has invaded the cosmos to reconcile all things in a manner that is surprising and unanticipated *and* that ‘Paul’s understanding of the new age in Christ leads him not to a *rejection* of Israel’s sacred history but to a *retrospective hermeneutical transformation* of Israel’s story in the light of God’s startling redemptive actions’ (p. 186).

The final section of the volume is titled ‘New Testament Theology’. There is a bit of sleight of hand here (from the publisher?). The typical *topoi* of New Testament theology are listed at the head of each chapter – ‘Christology’, ‘Covenant’, ‘Humanity’, etc., but the reality is that each of these contains a single essay that only addresses a relatively narrow element. Thus, the section on christology does not produce Hays’ views on the christology of the New Testament. Rather, there is an essay on how to read the various images of Jesus in the Apocalypse. I am not complaining about the quality of each essay. Rather, the packaging is a bit misleading.

In addition to the essay on the Apocalypse, there is an essay on Hebrews and the new covenant; a criticism of Bultmann’s views on Pauline anthropology; an essay on law and religion; an essay on Romans and the Nicene Creed; and an essay on eschatology, which was written at the turn of the millennium. To my mind, the essay on Hebrews is the star of this section. Hays begins with the question of whether Hebrews is supercessionist. Historically, it is clear that Hebrews has been read by subsequent Christians in supercessionist ways. Instead of treating Hebrews as an assertion of Christianity over Judaism, however, Hays argues that ‘it is better described as a form of Jewish sectarian “New Covenantalism”’ (p. 307). Rather than pursue this argument directly, however, Hays asks, ‘How does the letter’s New Covenantalism engage and carry forward the heritage of Israel?’ (p. 307). Not surprisingly, this question is pursued through a numbered list of exegetical points that lead Hays to argue that Hebrews should be read as a self-consuming artifact that leads readers beyond the words of the text to an encounter with God.

The book wraps up with a conclusion and an epilogue. The conclusion is an essay arguing for a hermeneutic of trust. When it was first written in 1996, it made a lot more sense to contrast hermeneutics of trust with hermeneutics of suspicion. Such a sharp distinction today seems harder to maintain. The Epilogue is Hays’ retirement lecture from 2018. It movingly couples scholarly insight with the wisdom of a cancer survivor and serves as a truly edifying end to the volume.

Two final points as markers to potential readers. First, for students, pastors and scholars this volume pulls together a lot of Hays’ work that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. Such a gathering is a great service. Secondly, by not editing or revising anything very much, Hays has put the burden on us readers to separate the wheat from the chaff. There is, however, little chaff.