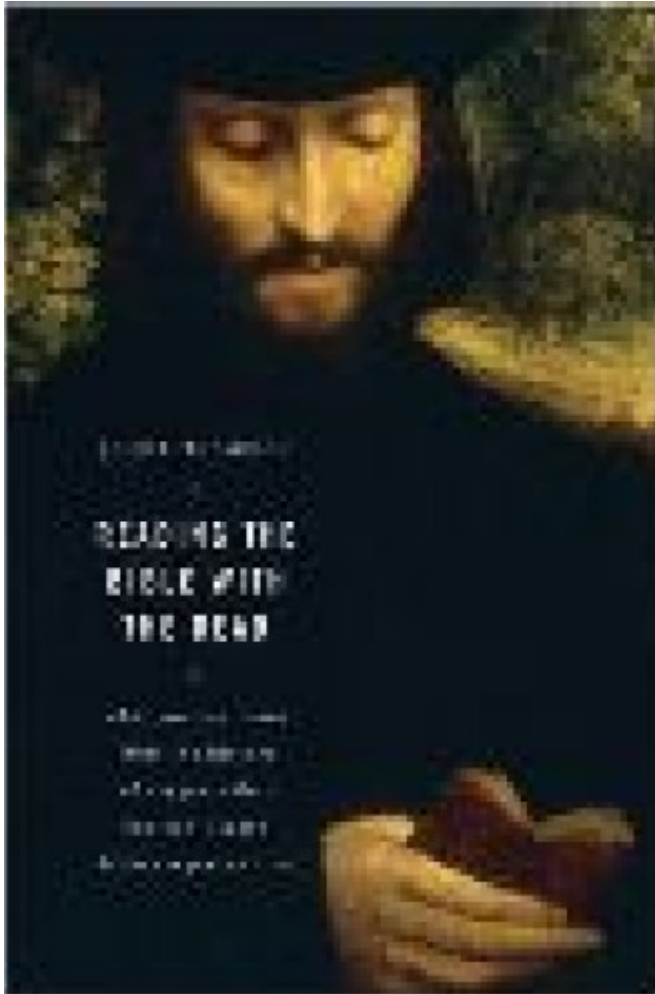


# Reading the Bible with the Dead

reviewed by [J. Todd Billings](#) in the [September 18, 2007](#) issue

## In Review



## Reading the Bible with the Dead: What You Can Learn from the History of Exegesis That You Can't Learn from Exegesis Alone

John L. Thompson  
Eerdmans

Probing questions lie beneath contemporary disputes about biblical interpretation: How can the Bible be used to promote justice rather than to excuse injustice? How can we teach and preach a scripture passage in which a father sacrifices his daughter because of a rash oath he made when scripture fails to condemn the action? How do we pray Psalms that curse enemies rather than show love to them?

On questions like these, there is a temptation to close ourselves off from the church's past. Because the graveyard of abuses in the church's history is so full, we are tempted to find succor only in present-day voices. These voices will not be so naive about sexism, abuse and violence, we tell ourselves. They can move us through the labyrinth of biblical interpretation to a just and proper use of the Bible.

For John L. Thompson, who teaches historical theology at Fuller Theological Seminary, when we marginalize biblical commentators of the past, we are being both too suspicious and not suspicious enough. We are being too suspicious by writing off earlier interpreters as androcentric or otherwise unenlightened before listening to what they have to say. We are not being suspicious enough because we are treating our own hermeneutical priorities as pristine and leaving them unquestioned, as if we were the only readers of scripture that really matter.

In an earlier book, *Writing the Wrongs*, Thompson explored the pre-Enlightenment exegesis of the biblical texts that Phyllis Trible labeled "texts of terror." His results were quite surprising. Thompson found considerable common ground between the struggles of precritical (or pre-Enlightenment) exegetes and modern feminist interpreters in approaching these texts. *Writing the Wrongs* was a groundbreaking book in the history of exegesis, tightly focused for the scholarly guild. Now, with *Reading the Bible with the Dead*, Thompson has made his arguments more accessible to preachers and teachers of scripture.

While a number of recent books call for a partial return to precritical exegesis, Thompson makes a wager that is heavy on substance and light on rhetoric: he proposes that "the Bible is better read and used when traditional commentators—the teachers and preachers of the early church, the middle ages, and the Reformation era—are invited to join us in a conversation about the meaning of scripture for our own day." He demonstrates this by focusing on "some of the Bible's most obscure and difficult texts—the texts lectionaries often avoid, and pastors as well." He discusses the uncondemned immoralities of Old Testament

patriarchs; the tensions among biblical passages about divorce; the place of women in key Pauline passages that appear to subordinate the ministry and role of women; and the stories of sex, power and often violence in the narratives of Hagar, Dinah, Tamar, Gomer, and Jephthah's daughter. There is no shortage of questions and objections raised by these stories, and Thompson refuses to sugarcoat the work of exegetes from the past as if they were a rescue squad to save us from our struggle with the text.

As in *Writing the Wrongs*, the results of Thompson's painstakingly close attention to precritical exegetes are truly illuminating. First, Thompson documents how many of our worries about difficult texts were shared by these earlier scholars. Jephthah's daughter does get a raw deal. She is willing to be sacrificed for Jephthah's foolish vow, yet it is Jephthah, not the unnamed daughter, who makes it into the "heroes of the faith" in Hebrews 11. And isn't there a problem with a prayerbook (in the Psalms) in which enemies are cursed, considering that Jesus calls for loving one's enemies?

There is consolation in knowing that we are not the first to struggle with questions such as these. Past exegetes met these difficulties with worry, but also a rigorous hope that even these texts can be edifying to the church. Nearly all of those that Thompson surveys see Jephthah's daughter as the real protagonist of the story, often even as a Christ-figure. Jephthah's actions are universally condemned, even though all of these conclusions are spoken in the silences of the biblical text. "The church has often filled the silences of the Bible well."

Precritical exegetes insist that the imprecatory Psalms are authoritative—and even useful—all the while being clear-sighted about the danger of their misuse. "The temptation to direct the curses in the Psalms against one's earthly enemies is trumped by scripture's larger, redemptive, divine intent." The curses of the Psalms can be a clear witness that God is concerned for those who suffer unjustly, even though those who belong to Christ are not in a place to deliver curses to their own enemies.

In speaking to the week-to-week practices of pastors, Thompson's book has varying levels of success. Thompson wants pastors to consult the history of exegesis in their sermon preparation, so he has included a very valuable appendix and offers a Web site to guide them to the precritical commentaries available in English. In addition, he comments on pastors' use of lectionaries: "Lectionaries are usually drawn up so

that readers and preachers might *broaden* the scope of their reading and preaching, not narrow it,” yet ironically, Thompson notes, lectionaries frequently omit passages that seem harsh or difficult. While Thompson’s critique is penetrating, he does not advocate any alternatives to the available lectionaries. Suggestions on this practical issue would have been helpful, since the primary audience of this book is not the people who write lectionaries, but the people who use them.

Another weakness of the book is the flip side of its strength. Thompson works as a careful exegete, treating each passage on its own terms and presenting a fresh evaluation of the history of interpretation for each text. He is like a botanist giving a careful, detailed account of wildflowers in a field. The tour is illuminating, but what if we need a general orientation to botany? While Thompson does have a set of themes he seeks to illustrate in his nine chapters of examples, the meat of the book is in the particulars. For general accounts of the logic and trends in patristic, medieval and Reformation exegesis, one will need to look elsewhere.

Thompson makes a substantive case that consulting the history of interpretation makes difficult texts more accessible rather than less so. There is no reason to restrict ourselves to contemporary dialogue partners as we struggle with scripture. “If God has anything to do with the church, there is surely some wisdom to be found in Christian tradition.” Moreover, the topics dealt with in this book—issues of sex, abuse, gender and power—will not go away anytime soon. When we seek to make sense of the affirmations and silences of scripture on these matters, we should not spurn the cloud of witnesses who have come before.