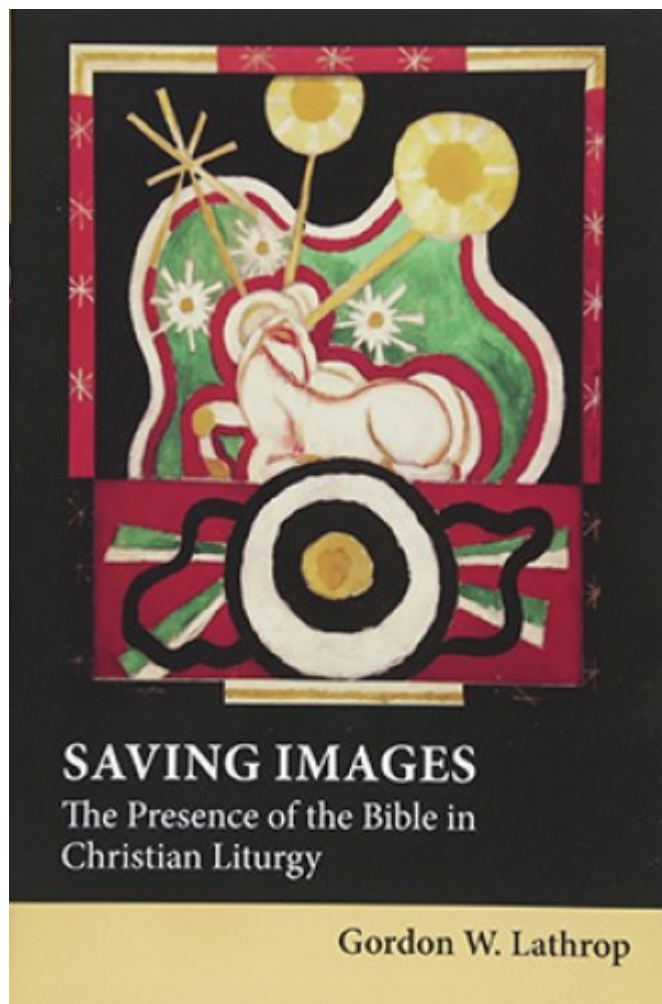


The Bible in conversation with the liturgy

Biblical images and stories don't just give us information about Jesus, says Gordon Lathrop. They also give us something more.

by [Paul E. Hoffman](#) in the [May 9, 2018](#) issue

In Review



Saving Images

The Presence of the Bible in Christian Liturgy

By Gordon W. Lathrop
Fortress

Gordon Lathrop asks Christians to consider the multifaceted and richly revelatory relationships that occur when scripture and lectionary-based eucharistic liturgy interact with one another. His language echoes the relational, interactive motifs that stand at the center of his thesis.

Lathrop speaks of calculations and polyphony. He contends that there is never just one voice but always two—at least two—in the assembly's weekly lectionary texts that speak to one another. He shows how texts and images resonate back and forth between the ancient scriptures and the Sunday's weekly service in conversations that are as complex and beautiful as the mandated rituals in Leviticus and Amos's rejection of the same. Sometimes the voices are complementary and sometimes contradictory. Either way, they illuminate the deep mystery of Christian faith: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Lathrop takes readers on a tour that I found akin to liturgical algebra or sympathetic motion. What happens in one sphere has implications for the other. The saving images of the Bible and the liturgy converse with one other, and when they are thus engaged, the assembly experiences Christ most fully present—crucified and risen from the dead.

Lathrop's language is sophisticated and his arguments are complex, but none of it is overwhelming. Scholarly discussions give way to the bright light of insights that will enrich the worship of any congregation. Respect for tradition as well as curious, creative proposals intertwine in an imaginative fugue.

The Bible's images and stories, Lathrop argues, have a larger purpose than we often imagine. They were not intended simply to give us information about Jesus. Their gift is fuller. "In, with, and under" the Bible's images (to use Luther's phrase), the gift of faith comes alive for us when the Jesus-*then*, as Lathrop calls him, becomes a life-giving encounter with the Jesus-*now*. As our assemblies are shaped by the images and stories of Jesus, we are equipped to go into the world to serve it in the manner of Christ. Worshipers are not simply told Bible stories to learn who Jesus was. We are invited to an encounter with the images of scripture to learn who we are in the sight

of an infinitely compassionate God.

Lathrop makes a strong case for the use of all four Revised Common Lectionary texts at each Sunday eucharistic celebration, and he goes to great lengths to explain the lectionary's history and logic. However, he also continually points beyond any specific scriptures to show how the lectionary—and, more generally, the Bible—reveals Christ. He makes it clear that in the lively conversation between the four texts and in the resonance of the images, whether they coalesce or contradict, Christ comes to life among those who gather around word and meal. And he is quick to extinguish any thought that the lectionary or even the Bible is the focus of our worship. It is always and only Christ:

The center of the assembly is thus seen to be the crucified and risen Christ, found in the biblical images made alive in preaching and in the supper. The preacher is not the center. Neither is the Bible. Neither is the assembly itself. The crucified and risen Christ, by the power of the Spirit present in word and sacrament, is.

Lathrop never takes us to a place where any one image equals any one insight. Rather, he beckons us to an ongoing conversation that is grounded in the ancient texts of scripture, runs like the river of life through the baptismal Red Sea and down the aisle of every congregation, and carries us into the future.

The church's interpretive task is ongoing, enriching, and revelatory. One day perhaps all the mysteries of this conversation will be revealed. But in the meantime, Lathrop illuminates the mysterious and complex interplay of images, words, and liturgical actions—eating, drinking, washing, and speaking—through which we are found by the One who is host and guest, shepherd and lamb, crucified and risen.