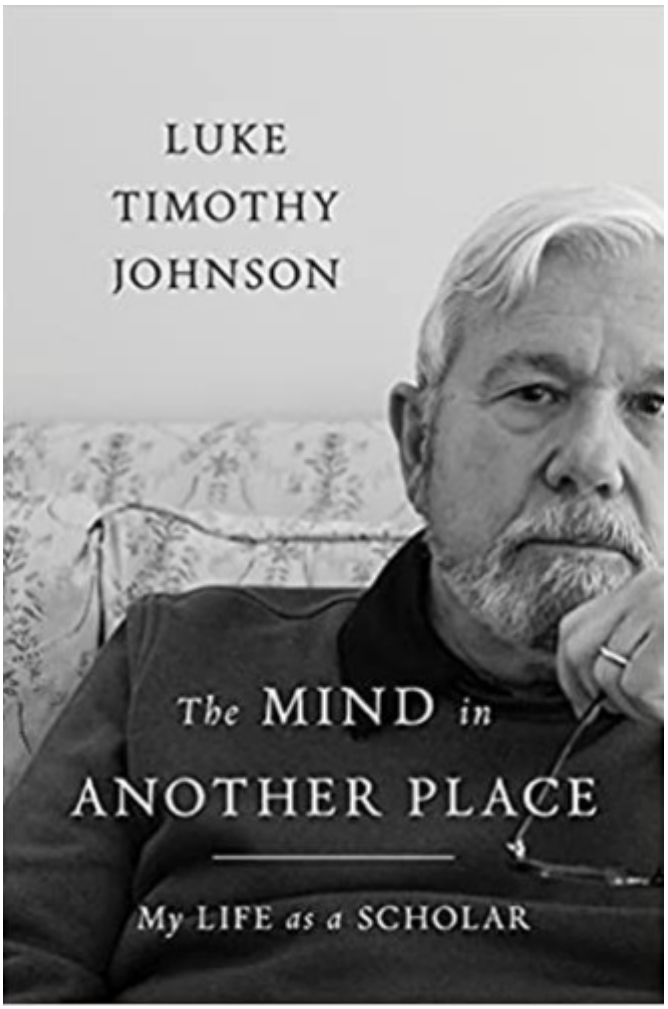
Luke Timothy Johnson’s scholarly life

The prolific biblical scholar offers an engaging account of his career—and of the spiritual journey that helped shape it.

by David Heim in the June 29, 2022 issue

In Review



The Mind in Another Place

My Life as a Scholar

By Luke Timothy Johnson
Eerdmans
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Besides being a wide-ranging and prolific New Testament scholar, Luke Timothy Johnson is a pastorally minded teacher and writer. In numerous sermons and church forums and in books such as *Faith's Freedom* and *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why It Matters*, he has taken up fundamental issues of faith and religious practice in response to the pressing needs of students and the wider church. In the 1990s he wrote in this magazine (among other places) a crucial critique of the much-publicized Jesus Seminar, whose participants claimed to have located the historical Jesus lying behind the Gospels and outside the confessions of the church ("The Jesus Seminar's misguided quest for the historical Jesus," January 1, 1996). Operating from within the guild of historical-critical scholars, he effectively rebutted the seminar's overblown claims.

In this memoir, Johnson offers an engaging account of his rich and varied professional career. Along the way he offers an equally engaging glimpse of the spiritual journey that helped shape it.

Johnson describes growing up in small-town Wisconsin as the youngest child in a large, devout Catholic family. The death of his mother when he was 11 (his father died when Johnson was just two months old) led to a painful relocation with relatives in Mississippi and then, with the guidance of priests and nuns, entry at age 13 into a "minor" or junior seminary, an institution now all but extinct in US Catholicism.

Setting a 13-year-old on the track to the priesthood might today seem almost a form of child abuse, but Johnson looks back on the event as providential. The seminary was "the perfect place for me to navigate adolescence," he writes; it "restored to my world all the values I had treasured in my Wisconsin family: pervasive faith, wonderful music, wit and humor (mostly from other students), and the freedom to do wide reading."

When a seminary teacher discovered how voracious the teenage Johnson's extracurricular reading was—60 books in one two-month period, including works by G. K. Chesterton, François Mauriac, and Graham Greene—the teacher started giving

him special assignments. “Suddenly, this unprepossessing and slightly raggedy boy discovered a way of being in the world: I was, and could be, an intellectual.”

At 19, Johnson decided against becoming a parish priest and instead took vows as a Benedictine monk. At the age when most students are just starting to figure out their vocational interests, Johnson was living by the rhythms of monastic prayer and service, immersed in biblical studies and the riches of ancient and modern Catholic theology.

After ten years as a Benedictine, however, Johnson left the order to marry Joy Randazzo, a divorced mother of six whom he met through his involvement in the charismatic movement. Johnson writes sparingly of all that went into discerning this path, but it’s clear that it was for him another instance of responding to God’s call. “Joy’s love was the most important thing in my life,” he writes; “everything I knew about grace I learned from Joy.”

These and other elements of spiritual memoir are likely to be among the most interesting parts of the book for many readers, and they provide essential context for the rest. Being a scholar was secondary to living a life before God, Johnson writes. Scholarship is only “a game,” one that, if played, must be played seriously and intently but “with the scholar never forgetting that it is only a game, whose stakes are not ultimate.”

Johnson indeed played the game intently. The bulk of the book is an account of what an investment in the scholarly life demanded of this former monk as he moved from doctoral student to junior faculty member at Yale Divinity School, professor at Indiana University, and finally senior scholar in an endowed chair at Emory University, where he is now emeritus professor. The subtitle is accurate: this book is at heart neither spiritual memoir nor intellectual biography but an inside account of the skills, energy, and resilience required to be a New Testament scholar in a university setting.

Accordingly, the second half of the memoir, titled “Being a Scholar” (the first part is “Becoming a Scholar”) enumerates in detail the practical life of an ambitious scholar—developing courses, responding to student concerns, serving on faculty committees, cooperating or contending with colleagues, devising research projects, negotiating with publishers, producing articles, reviews, and books, all the while managing to stay financially solvent (not as easy as one might think) and be a

responsible husband and father.

Amid the set of triple demands on a professor—the classroom, faculty service and governance, and individual research and publication—Johnson says he was fortunate to find the alternation of activities energizing rather than enervating: one task whetted his appetite for the next one. He extols the benefits of compartmentalization—the ability quickly to put "the mind in another place" in order to finish the immediate task, which at times meant writing notes for an article with one hand while rocking a cradle with the other. He touts the benefits of speed-reading, especially in staying current with the secondary literature.

Despite disappointments at the frequent inertia of institutions and the occasional intellectual lethargy of colleagues, Johnson found the university a hospitable place for his gifts and energies. The satisfactions of scholarly life are harder to communicate than the struggles. Johnson comes closest when describing his work on biblical commentaries, of which he's written several. Admitting that he once found the genre atomistic and unfriendly to his own interest in the literary shape of New Testament texts, he says he came to find joy in employing the range of linguistic, exegetical, and theological skills required for the task:

> Precisely the commitment to absolute attentiveness—of having one's mind truly in this place and no other, in order to see the language clearly and without bias, and to hear the voice that speaks through the text from long ago and far away—is thrilling. The mind that engages with complete honesty the gnarly character of an ancient text experiences a sense of elevation, even liberation—although the bondage to the text is total!

Given this vision of scholarly work, it's not surprising that Johnson is troubled by self-consciously ideological scholars who adopt a specific posture toward ancient texts on behalf of a particular political or sociological identity. He cites the example of one scholar who described herself to him as "an Asian, feminist, postcolonial scholar in the Gospel of John." This stance strikes Johnson as needlessly self-limiting, tending to close down scholarly discussion rather than keeping it open to the otherness of ancient writings.

Johnson concludes the book with a summary of the intellectual virtues that he believes scholarship demands. One of these is "mastery of the subject," and in some ways mastery is the implicit theme of the entire book, which is about the lifetime

project of gaining command of early Christian writings, their content and context, and the critical questions raised about them.

The scholarly ideal of mastery has come under scrutiny in recent years, especially in Yale theologian Willie Jennings's book *After Whiteness*. Jennings suggests that the ideal of intellectual mastery can be a dehumanizing force in theological education by encouraging postures of domination and exclusion that undermine the ethic of human solidarity.

Johnson's care for students over the years reflects his own awareness of this danger, and he implicitly addresses it through the analogy of scholarship as a game. Aiming for mastery is a virtue for those pursuing the scholarly life, he suggests, but the game itself is secondary to one's life with God and others. As Chesterton puts it, scholars should be serious about their work but not take themselves too seriously. Johnson's effort to follow this directive makes his book compelling reading for anyone who seeks to join the love of God and the love of learning.