Patte, Daniel, and Eugene TeSelle, eds.

*Engaging Augustine on Romans: Self, Context, and Theology in Interpretation*

Romans through History and Culture Series


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This volume is actually a series of arguments that supports the critical position of “scripture criticism.” Eugene TeSelle’s introductory essay opens the book with the tripolar approach to reading the biblical texts. The tripolar perspective takes into consideration the analytical, contextual, and hermeneutical reading of the biblical text and its interpretive force throughout history. TeSelle states that most postmodern approaches to the use of typology and allegory are too “relativistic or historicist in the conclusions they draw” toward the earlier patristic interpretations, as we find, for example, in Augustine (14). TeSelle distinguishes between allegory as more universal in its scope than the historically restrictive typological method of interpretation.

The book argues that the demarcation between universal tendencies and more individual interpretations is a false dichotomy that can be diminished by applying the tripolar interpretive method. Daniel Patte, in the last essay in the collection, continues the same concept of tripolar framing to conclude that the reader learns to read *with* Augustine, for example, and not read the biblical text or Augustine’s interpretive work as an object. Thus readers of this book will find the essays sandwiched between the opening essay of TeSelle and Patte’s closing essay (this also applies to TeSelle’s internal essays) are material meant to prove the value of “scripture criticism.” This is the danger, though, of
confusing tripolar methodology with scripture criticism. It does not seem that the essays support the mingling of the two.

Those who have enjoyed the move toward a historicist renaissance that Gerd Lüdemann called for in his controversial work *The Resurrection of Jesus* in biblical studies will be sorely disappointed, if not frustrated, by the above conclusions of the editors of this collection. The historicist is portrayed as a reductionist who has forgotten that a text is not just an object that is studied in isolation but a living work that “involves ‘reading with’ others who come to the table with different interpretations” (258). All reasonable interpretations of the text in engaging with the text itself have value, since scholars are engaged with the author(s) they are reading. In this sense, I have not found much difference between canon criticism as championed by Brevard Childs and the scripture criticism supported in this work. Some readers will find some of the same problems with this approach when applied to the biblical text. The problem is that it begs the question: Which scripture or what canon is under discussion, and how are its contents to be agreed upon? This is ultimately the problem with the book’s method as it is put forth.

Notwithstanding this problem suggested, the work does present a refreshing approach to reading interpretive texts. My criticism is restricted to the use of scripture in the phrase “scripture criticism.” When the work deals with interpretations of an artificial sacred framing of a text, the value of engaging the text becomes apparent. The work on Augustine and his interpreters does not necessarily pose the problem of an agreed upon sacred text, and this maintains the interest and strength of the work.

In the first essay by TeSelle, “Engaging Scripture: Patristic Interpretation of the Bible,” the author points out that the *regula fidei* for Augustine is always contingent, since absolute knowledge is not attained until we see God face to face in the afterlife (19). The lack of certitude is both epistemological and historical. The latter is demonstrated from the first to the last essay by correctly reminding the reader that Augustine would change his mind, as he does on his early and later views on the topic of free will and predestination. Augustine then is open to diverse interpretations of Scripture outside of faith and love (23). The latter two virtues are strangely not defined in the opening essay of the work, but the insight is made that Augustine’s own epistemology and historical exigencies lead him to the open waters of interpretation and become a model for modern biblical interpretation. Hosea could be told to marry a prostitute, but Augustine was able to separate the event from its meaning. In other words, the text does not always call the reader to repeat the event but to discover its true meaning and apply that new meaning for contemporary application. Augustine thus could understand the Bible *ad litteram*, but his understanding of how metaphor can operate in a sacred text allows him the latitude to search for deeper meanings in the text.
This operation of growing while reading with the author(s) of a text, sacred or otherwise, is again another strength and weakness of this book. It opens readers up to appreciate the complexity involved in biblical criticism and clearly shows how Augustine was always seeking and finding the deeper layers of the text. But how do we know we are “growing” and not just “changing” in our interpretative role?

One of the better features of the work is the thorough summary by TeSelle of the essays that follow in the book. However, one does feel set up before reading the other essays. The reader is invited to read the essays in light of the tripolar approach, and this is reinforced by the scripture criticism model at the end. Are the essays apart from TeSelle and Patte worth reading in this book? Yes. The essays provide evidence that the patristic period is as potentially illuminating for the biblical critic as the period following the reformation—a lesson that many biblical scholars need to learn.

The essays by Thomas F. Martin, Paula Fredriksen, Simon Gathercole, John Riches, and Peter J. Gorday were indispensable additions to the essays by the editors of this collection. They are less interested in scripture criticism than in the tripolar suggestion. These authors provide contextual content that does help readers to feel that they are, in fact, reading with Augustine. The authors mention the rhetorical education of Augustine, the debate with Jerome over the interpretation of Paul’s conflict with Peter at Antioch, and Augustine’s writings in view of his controversy with both the Manicheans and Pelagians. All of this is done well in concert with passages from Romans. A section even on Rom 2:14–15, not the typical Rom 7 and 9–11, is addressed and helps to elucidate Augustine’s thought in a historical context to the extent that the reader is able to think with Augustine even if one does not agree with his conclusions.

The book also deals with the criticism of Krister Stendahl that Augustine has plagued the Western world with his “introspective consciousness.” By citing Kasemann’s objections to Stendahl in addition to comparing the early controversy between Augustine and his own contemporaries, one is left with the conclusion that perhaps this stigma attached to Augustine has been overplayed. Paul and Augustine are both seen as thinkers who move from one world of thought and its implications for cosmology into another cosmic world. The book describes well the historical circumstances for both and drives home convincingly the point that, though Augustine may not have rediscovered Paul, his reading of Paul is not merely a path toward introspection but a way to understand the cosmos differently.

This multicontextuality, as Gorday depicts it, complicates the matter in a positive manner. Augustine must be read within his circumstances, and by doing so his critics must rethink older theological tags that have been labeled on Augustine. Thus, the book
offers insightful contextualized interpretations of Augustine on Rom 7. Some of the authors are quick to mention the universalistic trends in Augustine’s thought that are apparent in his discussions of the conflict at Antioch (Gal 2) and Rom 9–11. Augustine is aware of the universal message for both Jew and Gentile: it is a response to Stendahl and the “Scandinavian school” that read Augustine almost entirely as a proponent of a consciousness of individual versus collective guilt that is rooted in Western culture as the legacy of Augustine.

In summary, the book has strengths and weaknesses. The editors have compiled an illuminating assortment of essays about Augustine and Romans. It may change the way modern scholarship reads Augustine. The tripolar methodology is pertinent to reading Augustine’s treatment of biblical texts. Where it is weakest is in the move toward a scripture criticism. I am not able on this account to reconcile the essays with the conclusions in Patte’s final essay and find the quite short last word by Stendahl to be extraneous. Scholars can always benefit from works that draw us into appreciating interpreters from the patristic era and may find valuable help in these essayists’ contemporary contribution to the dialogue with biblical studies.