The volume under consideration merits attention for a number of reasons. First, generally speaking, it is worthwhile to review a volume that purports to present “Byzantine Christianity” as a whole. Second, the particular perspective of the series of which Krueger’s volume is a part, A People’s History of Christianity, that is, a history “from below,” makes the book an interesting subject. Third, the question of how biblical interpretation figures in such a work on church history makes reading it for the particular interest of this journal particularly exciting. The publication in which this review is to appear also determines its focus, as, while honoring both the general scope as well as the particular methodology of Krueger’s volume, specific attention will be given to the place that (reflection on) biblical interpretation plays in it.

Krueger’s Byzantine Christianity consists of ten chapters written by various experts on the subjects describing this particular realization of Christianity between 324 and 1453. Thus, the volume’s scope runs from the foundation of Constantinople until its fall (see 1). Apart from introductions by the series editor, Denis R. Janz, and the volume editor, Derek Krueger, outlining the scope of the series (A People’s History of Christianity) and the particular scope of this volume, respectively, the ten main chapters are divided into three sections, containing the following elements. Section 1, entitled “Congregations and Preachers,” contains chapters on “Lay Piety in the Sermons of John Chrysostom” (Jaclyn Maxwell), “The Cult of the Martyrs and the Cappadocian Fathers” (Vasiliki Limberis),...
and “Romanos and the Night Vigil in the Sixth Century” (Georgia Frank). Section 2, entitled “Places, Spaces, and Rites,” has chapters on “Shrines, Festivals, and the ‘Undistinguished Mob’” (James C. Skedros), “The Layperson in the Church” (Sharon E. J. Gerstel), and “Death and Dying in Byzantium” (Nicholas Constas). Finally, the third section, entitled “Devotional Life and Artifacts,” features chapters on “Icons, Prayer, and Vision in the Eleventh Century” (Charles Barber), “Objects of Devotion and Protection” (Brigitte Pitarakis), “The Religious Lives of Children and Adolescents” (Peter Hatlie), and “The Devotional Life of Laywomen” (Alice-Mary Talbot). Maps (between xv and 1), plates (108–9), and an index complete the volume. As the names of the various authors show, many write from within the Byzantine tradition, which is without doubt an asset.

The approach of the People’s History of Christianity is to provide a “history from below,” that is to say, to write the history of the ordinary people, not so much of the elites. In doing so, the series, and also the volume reviewed here, contributes to a broader historiographical project that has emerged since the mid-twentieth century that aims at doing justice to all involved in history, not just the elites (see Janz’s introduction, xii–xv). For the study of Byzantine Christianity, this means, among other things, a focus on religious practice rather than on the development of theology (see, e.g., the comments of Krueger, “Practice”). For the biblical scholar, this leads to some interesting encounters with the use of the Bible in religious practice, which, to a certain extent, does not so much make Byzantium “strange” as it makes contemporary scholarly use of the Bible “strange.”

When turning to the first group of chapters, another feature of a “history from below” becomes apparent. While sources such as the sermons of John Chrysostom (see Maxwell) remain to a large extent the same, the questions that are asked are different. Maxwell contextualizes the great preacher eloquently by showing how he interacts with everyday life and in that way becomes a source for writing the history of everyday life in Byzantium. Something similar happens to the writings of the Cappadocian fathers in Limberis’s treatment of them in the context of the cult of the martyrs. Frank’s discussion of Romanos in the context of the night vigil is for biblical scholars of particular interest, as it not only demonstrates Romanos’s (narrative and liturgical) interpretation of biblical narratives but also places them in the context of the liturgy and with that in the life of the people.

In the second section, Skedros’s chapter is a helpful overview of the role holy places and holy time played for average Byzantines, illustrating how public and official religion permeated everyday life. In a similar way, Gerstel shows what the role of church buildings would be in a layperson’s life, as well as the liturgical effect of the architectural space, in terms of making the connection between earthly and heavenly realms. Constas, discussing the treatment of “Death and Dying in Byzantium,” can, in contrast to other
authors, draw on a plethora of sources: wills, eulogies, inscriptions, and other documents. As death is common to both the "masses" and the elite, it is a helpful vantage point for a history from below. Constas shows how death, perceived as a transition of the soul to another realm, was surrounded with practices to ensure that the soul would be received in paradise, such as becoming religious at one’s deathbed, the use of elaborate rituals, and so forth.

In the third section, dedicated to “Devotional Life and Artifacts,” Barber does not so much outline the theology of icons but focus on their role in lay piety in making the sacred visible. In this way, it should be noted, biblical stories and persons, such as King David, were made present immediately to the faithful. A similar, and for contemporary Western readers rather unusual, approach to the Bible surfaces in Pitarakis’s chapter on “Objects of Devotion and Protection,” as it discusses at some length the use of biblical texts in various amulets, among other devotional objects, that permeated the life of everyday believers as well as the elite in Byzantium. The two final chapters of the volume deal with two groups that have been neglected in more traditional historiography: children, adolescents, and women. Hatlie shows how infancy and childhood were beset with the fear of an early death, not to speak of the dangers of giving birth, and how these, just as adolescence, were in Byzantium encapsulated in practices that were both religious and practical in nature. Finally, Talbot offers a view of the religious life of laywomen (i.e., not religious) and gives an outline of the way in which they could and would participate in public and private religion and also traces their relationship to religious institutions such as churches and monasteries and their endowments.

In general, the volume is an informative account of many aspects of religious life in Byzantium that are often not touched upon in other introductions. In this way it constitutes a helpful addition to the available textbooks on Byzantine Christianity, which often focus on theological and political developments rather than on the lives lived in the context of these development. In spite of all its merits, the work seems to be most useful in a supplementary role rather than as the main textbook for a course on the history of Byzantine Christianity. One reason for this is that the work is thematically rather than chronologically organized (the various chapters are not clearly organized chronologically either). Only in Krueger’s introduction (5–7) and in a series of maps of the various stages of the empire (xv–1) does one get a timeline. Furthermore, the thematic organization of the work also leads to the impression that developments of, for example, the fourth and fifth centuries (e.g., the preaching and practice of John Chrysostom) is representative for the entire period from 324 until 1453. Therefore, the volume gives in the end more the impression of a collection of illuminating essays on Byzantine Christianity than a history of Byzantine Christianity, which it purports to be. Nevertheless, because of its specific approach, the volume is a welcome addition to any textbook on Byzantine Christianity.
For the biblical scholar, it may be retained, Krueger’s volume offers a helpful window on the way in which the Bible was part of the life of ordinary Christians in the Byzantine world—through reading, preaching, liturgy, art, and amulets—that may serve to increase one’s awareness of the contextuality of mainstream contemporary Western approaches to the Bible.