

1-1-2000

Book Review: Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture

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Recommended Citation

Wimbush, Vincent L. Rev. of Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture by Elizabeth A. Clark. *Theological Studies* 61.3 (2000): 548-549.

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correction of *aberrations* which had crept unnoticed into existing method” (236). Still, because of his lucidity and concern to report accurately, the reader is able to grasp with ever increased clarity B.’s own concept of biblical theology situated in its intellectual context. This book does for the canon of modern biblical scholars something close to what its author would have biblical theology do for the Bible.

Concordia University, Montreal

SEAN MCEVENUE

READING RENUNCIATION: ASCETICISM AND SCRIPTURE IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY. By Elizabeth A. Clark. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 1999. Pp. xiii + 420. \$21.95.

This book is the serious, thoughtful, and mature work of a serious and mature scholar. It is, as always the case with Clark’s work, wonderfully written, thoroughly researched, tightly yet creatively conceptualized. It is a major contribution to research on and general thinking about early Christian asceticism and Scripture and a complex of related topics and issues. The book will surely be well received and will be much discussed and drawn upon by scholars in religious and theological studies in general (especially those interested in religion and culture, religion and theory), and by those who study early Christianity in particular (especially early Christian asceticism).

C.’s critical command of and balanced judgments about the complex and vast scope of primary and secondary interpretive literature and theoretics are most impressive. The book reflects her erudition and critical acumen, but without the all-too-typical attendant pedantry. The writing is for the most part clear and crisp; reading it is a most pleasant esthetic experience.

The book adds much to patristic scholarship in general and ongoing studies in early Christian asceticism in particular yet also challenges, stretches, and modifies such studies, making them even more complex. The volume reflects both continuity with a tradition of scholarship and in some respects a dramatic break from such tradition. It models the best of patristic scholarship even as it models to some degree an important turn away from it—from philological and historical-theological methods and their agenda to an open if measured embrace of critical sociohistorical and literary-rhetorical theory and power analysis.

The very conceptualization of the book—a reading of the readings—represents a critical turn. For too long studies in asceticism have been fairly flat readings, viz., they have been about the pursuit of the (historical-theological) “facts,” seemingly oblivious to the artful, sometimes veiled power strategies employed in order to define and win the (social-theological-political-discursive) battles. C. is not the first scholar to signify in this regard, but her book, as far as I can determine, is the first fully comprehensive single-book treatment of the phenomenon with focus upon asceticism and Scripture. With its appearance no serious student of early

Christian asceticism can avoid addressing the issue of the politics and the rhetorical-exegetical artfulness involved in the construction of late ancient Christian ascetic theologies, ideologies, and institutions.

After surveying the history of the study of asceticism and the history of reading for asceticism, C. discusses the exegetical and hermeneutical strategies employed by a number of patristic authors in their readings of selected Old Testament and New Testament texts, primarily those associated with Paul and his school. These reading strategies reflect different ascetic ideologies and orientations, focused mainly upon celibacy. C.'s reading of the late ancient Christian authors' readings—creatively informed by a number of modern and contemporary reading theories—opens a window onto facets and dynamics of early Christian life. Her sensitivity to the power and politics of rhetorical formations is sharp and sharply worded and makes her book all the more honest and poignant. She is also rather convincing on all the major arguments.

Although C. makes it clear that her primary focus in the book is asceticism and how ascetic ideologies are constructed, the nonetheless double focus upon asceticism and Scripture makes the book most fascinating and, for further work on the issues, most promising. The double focus represents an attempt to illuminate the one complex phenomenon through attention to the other. This approach seemed to promise the possibility of pushing the thinking about each phenomenon onto a higher level of sophistication and self-reflexivity, far beyond the usual interminable angst over or settling for rather simple definitions. Here these two rather complex phenomena are explained not in frozen isolation, but in relationship to each other, the one opening windows onto aspects of the dynamics of the other. The ascetic politics and orientations of certain individuals and groups in a certain cultural context are explained in relationship to certain "scripturalizing" practices, ideologies, and politics, including the privileging of certain texts and stories; the phenomenon of Scripture is explained in terms of certain ascetic practices, ideologies, and politics. Although not consistently balanced throughout the book—there were discussions that seemed to take for granted the meaning and politics of references to "the Scriptures"—this double focus on the whole was brilliantly argued and, I predict, will make a significant impact on the way we think about the invention of asceticism and the Scriptures.

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VINCENT L. WIMBUSH

THE SHEPHERD OF HERMAS: A COMMENTARY. By Carolyn Osiek. Herme-
neia. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999. Pp. xxi + 292.

Osiek translates Whittaker's critical text of the *Shepherd of Hermas* and bases her commentary upon it. Her translation is clear and accurate, and her commentary masterful. O. rejects the recent theories of multiple au-