

# Foreword

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*Reading Scripture as a Political Act.* This title invites us to focus our attention in specific and promising ways. In particular, we are invited to focus on the ways that reading scripture *is* a political act. Such an invitation, however, requires us to focus our attention in several respects.

For example, there already is a significant amount of biblical scholarship devoted to aspects of the Bible and politics. In this regard, there are numerous volumes that seek to display the various political forces at work in the shaping and editing of the texts that comprise the Christian canon. In their own ways, Norman Gottwald and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza pioneered this type of work. With varying degrees of precision and accuracy, scholars now talk about the politics behind the formation of biblical texts, how ideological and political interests shaped (and were shaped by?) the processes that led to the production of biblical texts. In addition, there are a variety of works that seek to describe the political nature of the formation of these texts into the Christian canon.

To the extent that such works have established levels of consensus, all readers are invited to recognize that the production of both specific texts and the canon as a whole is the work of human hands. This is not to say that is merely the work of human hands. Rather, it recognizes that theologians and Christians more generally have no stake in denying the obvious here. Christian attention to scripture will always depend on fairly strong convictions about the Spirit's providential role in ensuring that this fully human scripture also provides believers all they require to live faithfully before God and one another.

In addition, there are numerous volumes, typified by John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus*, that persuasively make the case that Jesus and Paul in particular offered visions of the Christian life that were ineluctably political rather than merely private and individual. The message of scripture has political implications, implications to which Christians have often been inattentive. Of course, even when believers do attend to these political implications, they often do so in ways that simply read current partisan positions back onto favored biblical characters. In this case, reading scripture is less a political act, than an occasion for scripture to become a rhetorical tool to advance political agendas determined on other grounds.

Although this volume can be seen as an heir to these two movements, it is equally important to see in *Reading Scripture as a Political Act* the convergence of recent movements both to read scripture and to think of politics, in its various forms, theologically. Efforts to reinvigorate the practice of reading scripture theologically seem to have now borne material and institutional fruit. There are now a number of journals and commentary series devoted to theological interpretation in various forms. Several groups within the Society of Biblical Literature regularly focus on theological interpretation and their sessions are well attended. It would be wrong

to say that theological forms of biblical interpretation are dominant; they are not. Nevertheless, theological interpretation seems to have established itself as an academic enterprise and it is beginning to influence graduate and seminary education.

One clear, but under recognized, aspect of theological interpretation is its deep dependence on communities of interpreters. Theological interpretation thrives in community. This truth is widely recognized even if it is not always practiced. Such recognition invites further reflections on the habits and practices, on the shape and contours, of the communities who see theological interpretation of scripture to be essential to the health of their common life.

At the same time, the common life of these communities shapes their interpretation of scripture. Indeed, within the ecclesial contexts in which most theological interpretation takes place, scripture is already embedded in their liturgical, ascetic, practical and moral life. Moreover, these liturgical, ascetical, practical and moral aspects of ecclesial common life already work to constitute particular types of communities. Scholarly work on “the theopolitical imagination” has been articulating, displaying and analyzing this dynamic for some time now.

Given the great amount of overlapping concerns between those working on the “theopolitical imagination” and those advocating for a renewal of theological interpretation of scripture, it is certainly time for a more direct and directed conversation between these two spheres of work. This volume aims to get that conversation off the ground.

This volume will demonstrate that such a conversation is incredibly wide ranging. For example, readers will encounter here an analysis of the revival of spiritual interpretation of scripture and the beginnings of the monumental *Sources chrétiennes*, which ties these events to resistance to fascism in France during World War

II. They will learn that Augustine's pastoral care of women who were victims of the Visigoths' sexual violence is deeply tied to his reading of scripture. In addition, this volume contains deep analyses of biblical texts and themes that provide apt and life-giving ways of participating in such varied political practices as lament and friendship. There is much more beside these essays, too!

The richness and the diversity of these essays attest to the fact that there is much to talk about here. I see it along the lines of a very large dinner party with conversations going on with people seated next to each other, but also conversations going on across the table. It is a happy tangle of voices and views. Over time, smaller, more directed and more intense conversations can begin. It is too soon, however, to prescribe or even predict where these will go. If this initial dinner party is anything to go by, we should have high expectations.