

## BOOK REVIEWS

BROWN, ANDREW J. *Recruiting the Ancients for the Creation Debate*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023. Pp. xviii + 348. Hardcover. US\$49.99.

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In his second book, Andrew J. Brown presents the views of ancient Christian theologians on the first account of creation in Gen 1:1–2:3. Brown demonstrates the importance of critically evaluating the writings of these ancient interpreters to avoid anachronistic and misguided attempts to use their works to support modern stances on creation in Genesis. Brown, a lecturer in Old Testament and Hebrew, has written an accessible book, which both tertiary educators and post-graduate students will find helpful and stimulating.

The book comprises ten chapters. The first six chapters explore the interpretation of Genesis 1 by a diverse range of church fathers, with a particular focus on Augustine of Hippo. The remaining chapters are dedicated to mediaeval interpreters, Martin Luther, John Calvin, authors associated with the Westminster Confession, and John Wesley. Brown refers to all these influential figures as “the ancients,” which may raise eyebrows among some readers. However, he explains that “in some ways the Christian writings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that wrestled with some of the most serious of these changes [in biblical interpretation] are just as important to read as those of the church fathers” (286). Brown emphasises that none of the ancients authors should be hastily “recruited” to support modern ideas about creation in Genesis. Instead, the ancients should be “revisited” and understood correctly.

Brown outlines the methodological framework underlying his project. First, he differentiates between the history of interpretation and reception history, explaining that his study belongs to the former category, i.e., to a “subfield of biblical studies that analyses and looks for patterns in the ways in which human interpreters have understood the biblical texts” (12). Second, towards the end of the book, Brown presents a list of rules guiding the correct interpretation of the ancient works. Inspired by Quentin Skinner’s work on intellectual history and Laura Bartels Felleman’s analysis of the modern reception of John Wesley, Brown writes that the correct interpretation of the ancient commentaries involves establishing their content, genre, historical context, intellectual and literary context, communicative intention, and theological-spiritual context and value (284).

The book’s discussion spans eighteen centuries, from Philo to Wesley, which is both its major strength and limitation. Readers will appreciate the overview of the ancient writings, presented in an engaging manner, as well as Brown’s encouragement to study the ancients in their original socio-historical context. On the other hand, however, the treatment of major figures like Augustine,

Luther, or Wesley is necessarily very general. Readers should be aware of this limitation of Brown's book.

As mentioned above, Brown's methodological framework is inspired by the works of renowned historians, such as Quentin Skinner. However, Skinner's concept of communicative intention may not be the most effective approach to reconstructing the original meaning of ancient texts. Brown is aware of the methodological problems associated with this concept, but writes that "the reality remains that such a thing as 'communicative intention' exists, or else writers and speakers would never correct a listener's understanding of their meaning" (283). Nevertheless, the intentional fallacy remains a possibility in this case, and speculating about the ancient author's intention seems unnecessary. Other constituent elements of meaning, analysed by Brown on many pages of his book, such as content, context, and genre, are sufficient to establish the original message of the analysed texts.

Brown's exposition of the church fathers' views on creation should be understood in the context of the principle of textual self-referentiality, which underpins patristic exegesis. Paradoxically, for the fathers, the meaning of a particular biblical passage is usually established in light of other texts of the canon, rather than in relation to historical events (real or fictional) the text recounts, or in relation to theological propositions the text communicates. While patristic exegesis does occasionally use reading strategies resembling the referential models of modern exegesis, they are rarely "modern" upon closer examination. In principle, the church fathers are seldom interested in establishing the meaning of biblical narratives in relation to historical events or theological truths. As Hans W. Frei argues in his seminal study on biblical hermeneutics, this reading mode began to decline towards the end of the seventeenth century and was gradually replaced by a referential theory of meaning, which some modern interpreters project onto earlier periods. Brown does not seem to explicitly highlight the principle of self-referentiality when discussing the church fathers, but he certainly warns his readers against simplistic or anachronistic interpretations of the ancient writings.

Minor quibbles aside, Brown's book, written in a lively and conversational style, is an excellent reference work for lecturers and postgraduate students interested in the interpretation of Genesis 1. It includes a helpful index that allows readers to quickly locate specific interpreters and their views on creation. Towards the end of his study, Brown once again argues that "there is a problem with superficial recruitment of leading Christian interpreters of the history of the church" (282). This book serves as an effective remedy for this issue, teaching readers to interpret the ancients with an open mind and a critical attitude.

KRIS SONEK

Catholic Theological College, University of Divinity