

FOREWORD

by Stephen E. Fowl

ONE OF THE VERY first tasks I took up as a newly minted PhD was a review of Clifton Black's *The Disciples According to Mark: Markan Redaction in Current Debate*. I do not recall why I was asked to review the book or why I even agreed to do it, since I am not a specialist in Mark. The book was an absolute delight to read. Even though the material was quite technical, Black had a graceful writing style that made the material accessible without oversimplifying and distorting it. The book is a gentle but devastating criticism of the attempts at redaction criticism of Mark's Gospel. My only complaint was that the book might have been too gentle. As a much younger scholar I longed to read a concluding chapter where Black would complete his domination of his scholarly foes, send them packing, and stand alone victorious on his patch of scholarly terrain. What Clifton Black already knew, and I had yet to learn, was that not only are Christians called to practice interpretive charity as part of their discipleship; it is also good scholarship, too. Even when there may be flaws, sometimes significant flaws, in the works of others, there are still things to learn. If you seek to annihilate your scholarly opponents, you will not only do them a disservice; you will rob yourself of the opportunity to learn what they have to teach.

Over the subsequent years I have continued to delight in reading Black's work; to learn from him about both matters of theological substance and scholarly style. Hence, when I was asked if I would write a foreword for this volume, I was eager to accept.

Black describes this book as a small museum, and it is written as if he were guiding you on a tour through it. You can leave the tour at any

time to wander in a different direction, to return to one gallery or to skip over another. Your guide will not censure you. He is far too gracious. Allow me, however, to offer some firmer direction for your tour.

To begin, although Black presents us with a small museum our tour is not a purely antiquarian adventure. As modern scholars have rekindled an interest in interpreting Scripture theologically, they have in various ways and to various degrees developed an appreciation for premodern approaches to interpretation. For many students trained as professional biblical scholars, premodern Scriptural interpretation is often foreign territory. It is often taught to young biblical scholars as simply a series of exegetical errors from which we have happily advanced to our current historical-critical habits. If the rich history of premodern Scriptural interpretation is to be resource for contemporary theological interpreters, we will need guidance to learn where the real jewels are and how to recognize less valuable baubles. Following Clifton Black's tour through his museum is a good way to begin.

This volume attempts to introduce us to a host of accomplished readers of Scripture from the past. These readers are accomplished in two senses. First, they all exercise great care and discipline in their reading. They read closely and with sharp attention. This is not always evident to us because their forms of attentiveness, their manner of care over the texts, are often quite different from ours. They are often different from each other, too. We modern readers often need a guide to help us appreciate their different forms of textual devotion. Secondly, these readers are accomplished readers of Scripture, because in their particular ways, and in their specific contexts, they sought to have their lives formed by their reading of Scripture. In some sense, Scripture accomplishes something in them. For the majority of the figures exhibited here, that formation happened with and within the Church. For some of the more intriguing figures in this book, such as Shakespeare, George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, that formation manifested itself in the worlds of drama, poetry and politics. One might take issue with the inclusion of such figures in a book entitled *Reading Scripture with the Saints* and Black offers us reasons for why he included them. One cannot take issue with the extraordinary breadth of learning required to include figures such as Irenaeus, Origen, William of St. Thierry and Julian of Norwich in the same volume with Shakespeare, Washington and Lincoln.

To appreciate these figures we will need to listen carefully to our guide. He is well versed in the concerns of contemporary Bible readers.

He often shares those concerns. Nevertheless, he is also a sympathetic curator and conservator of the riches left to us by these accomplished interpreters of prior times. He can help us understand what animated their interpretive practice. He can discern the skills those interpreters put on display and show them to us in their best light. At the same time, he recognizes that modern interpreters may find fault with these accomplished readers. His concern is not to gloss over failings, and naively reprimand the interpretive past. He is deeply concerned, however, that we criticize actual failings rather than imagined or misperceived failings. To my mind, we can ask nothing more from a guide.

To be truthful, however, our guide is more than just a guide. He is himself an accomplished reader of Scripture in both of the ways noted above. Although he would never point to himself, I at least can. Moreover, visitors to this museum can get a sense of his positions and commitments by reading chapters 2 and 4. In these chapters our guide attractively displays the benefits available to modern readers if they attend not only to Scripture, but to its accomplished interpreters.

At various points as I read through this volume, I hoped that it might culminate in something of a manifesto. This could have taken the form of full-throated cry for the importance of attending to pre-modern interpreters for any contemporary person seeking to become an accomplished reader of Scripture, accompanied by detailed strategies for how to do this. That is not here. The discerning visitor to this museum can find the lineaments for such a manifesto discretely laid out in the various exhibit halls and galleries. Rather than a manifesto, the conclusion of this volume is Clifton Black at his best: charitable, understated, graceful and wise.