



WELCOME

THE BOOK YOU ARE holding is a small museum. That should be obvious by thumbing its pages. Study the portrait of disciplined, gentle Abbot Benedetto—Benedict—patron saint of Europe and of students. Nearby, in the center of things, is Maximus the Confessor, lifting his right hand before it was hacked off for his allegedly heretical writings. That verdict was overturned by the Sixth Ecumenical Council (680–81), two decades after his death: a grim reminder that the church has a history of getting things terribly wrong before God helps it put them right. Turn a few more pages: there's bluff, no-nonsense Martin Luther, Dr. theol., who escaped execution by the threads of his floppy *Barett*. Those illustrated are but a few of the *éminences chrétiens* whose paths you'll cross in this volume: Irenaeus of Lyons, Origen of Alexandria, Anthony the Great, Basil the Great, Hilary of Poitiers, John Chrysostom, Theodoret of Antioch, Pope Leo I, Alcuin, the Venerable Bede, Hugh of Saint Victor, Symeon the New Theologian, William of St. Thierry, Bernard of Clairvaux, Faber Stapulensis, Nicolas of Lyra, Gregory Palamas, and Julian of Norwich—and those take us only as far as the fourteenth century. One of this volume's aims is to reacquaint, or introduce, a new generation of biblical exegetes and their brilliant grandparents.

In this museum you'll find arresting tableaux from the Christian Bible. If you tire of David's repeated wailing in the fifty-first psalm, don't fret. Soon I shall bustle you over to Moses' encounter with the LORD on Mount Horeb, the disciples' vision of Jesus transfigured on Tabor, Ecclesiastes' meditation on human decrepitude, Luke's parable of the Good

Samaritan, John's incarnate Word *vis-à-vis* 1 John's words to the church, and serene wisdom juxtaposed against Job's anguish. Although my tour is brief, I wish to remind my visitors of Scripture's sheer expanse. Moreover, I have done my best to pair great interpreters with texts that mattered to them, while building constructive arguments on unexpected foundations that I judge secure. Predictability is the bore's first refuge.

All is not haphazard, however. Throughout this book you may linger in four salons.

- Many of these chapters (3, 6, 7, and 9) are straightforwardly descriptive: we watch as a consummate interpreter wrestles with a complicated text. What issues excite his interest? What conclusions does he draw? How does he arrive at them? If he returned to the same passage more than once in his career, did his exposition remain the same? How did he change his mind or readjust his attitude to the text?
- Another gallery (chap. 5) is dedicated to a single passage, which the Bible presents in multiple versions. Moving backward in time, we trace lines of development in that text's exegesis across twenty centuries.
- In a third salon (chaps. 8, 9, 10) we muse on biblical commentary transposed into realms of discourse within the church and beyond: theater, poetry, and politics.
- A fourth gallery (chaps. 2 and 4) offers some of my own theological reflections on the task of Scripture's interpretation, formulated in dialogue with expressions of the church's rule of faith.

Before we begin, a word about "saints" is in order. Strictly speaking, in Eastern and Western churches only some of the commentators we shall consider were canonized: Irenaeus, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Leo the Great, Benedict, Maximus, and Thomas Aquinas. Not so Origen of Alexandria or William of St Thierry. Gregory Palamas is venerated in Eastern Orthodoxy and Byzantine Catholicism. Pope Leo X excommunicated Luther, "the wild boar from the forest" (*Exsurge Domine*, 1520). No church recognizes Shakespeare, Charles Wesley, or Washington as "saints." Lincoln never publicly professed Christian belief.

In a more flexible sense, however, all the figures in our museum have been "set apart" (*pefer*: Exod 13:12; *hēgiasmenois*: 1 Cor 1:2) in the cultural imagination. Apart from Isaac Watts (1674–1748) no modern

hymn-writer has been more lionized than Wesley. Among dramatists (certainly) and poets (probably) none is more venerated than Shakespeare. America's first and sixteenth presidents enjoy a stature unlikely ever to be surpassed. All the interpreters in this book are magisterial figures with much to teach us. Attention must be paid.

And now, if you are ready, kindly step this way.

SAMPLE