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Williams' "Matthew: Interpreted by early Christian commentators" (book review)

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Book Reviews



Williams, D. H. (Ed.). (2018). *Matthew: Interpreted by early Christian commentators*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. 570 pp. \$51.00. ISBN 9780802825780

D. H. Williams has translated and edited, *Matthew: Interpreted by Early Christian Commentators*, which is the latest volume from The Church's Bible series. Williams is Professor of Religion in Patristics and Historical Theology at Baylor University.

Robert Louis Wilken, the series editor, asserts that The Church's Bible is "designed to present the Holy Scriptures as understood and interpreted during the first millennium of Christin history" (p. ix). The series holds a foundational belief that the biblical text is the starting point for discussion of theological topics, moral issues, and Christian practice (p. ix). He notes the distinctive mark of The Church's Bible is that each volume draws from "lengthy excerpts from the ancient commentaries and from series of sermons on specific books" (p. x). It is Wilken's desire that the various volumes will be a valuable study aid, particularly that the "longer passages will be suitable for private devotional reading and for spiritual reading in religious communities, in Bible study groups, and in prayer circles" (p. x). In addition, the aim of the series "is not a comprehensive survey of early Christian exegesis of the books of the New Testament, but commentaries that we hope will be interesting, theologically significant, and spiritually uplifting to readers of the New Testament today" (p. xxi).

For D. H. Williams, early Christian interpreters believed the Gospel of Matthew "helped Christians understand how the Church emerged out of the people of Israel" (p. xxiii). For the early church, "Christ was the interpretative key to unlock its meaning and to link the two Testaments" (p. xxvi). Thus, the early church employed the principle that Scripture interpreted Scripture, which demonstrated a united book held together by Christ (p. xxvi). Williams also observes that the church fathers did not follow one method of interpretation, which was evident in the abundance of "figurative (or 'spiritual') interpretation found in the text" (p. xxiv). He also prepares the reader for the vast amount of allegorical interpretation, which is not limited to the parables (p. xxv). Another key characteristic of exegesis for early Christian commentators was a commitment to interpretation that "was intended for the body of believers," and "was closely linked to the Church's faith and practice" (p. xxvi). For Williams, this ecclesiological focus within patristic exegesis is in contrast to modern scholarly practices (p. xxvi).

Williams selected texts for this volume that clearly illustrated patristic methods of interpretation and were also “edifying to contemporary readers” (p. xxviii). He also purposefully chose texts that demonstrated the diversity of interpretation of the same text. In addition, he has “drawn from doctrinal or homiletical writings,” and not only from commentaries (p. xxviii). He also warns the reader that in those cases where there is little or no commentary, “I simply followed suit” (p. xxviii). As a result, the reader will notice certain portions of the Matthean text with “only one or even no remark, where there may be an abundance for another” (p. xviii).

This volume is well documented throughout. Appendix 1 provides a helpful annotated list of each author excerpted in this volume. Appendix 2 lists the sources of texts translated, which is broken down by each chapter from the Gospel of Matthew. Also, there is an index of the various authors and especially helpful is the index of subjects. This book achieves its purpose and provides the reader with long excerpts from the Gospel of Matthew, which demonstrate early approaches to biblical interpretation. In addition, the excerpts link the reader to the Church’s faith and practice. This book will be a great resource for students interested in the gospels, patristic exegesis, and theology.

Reviewer

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