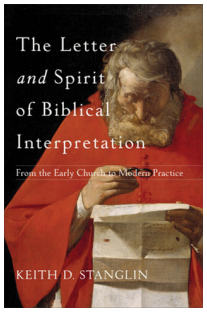
Book Review



Keith D. Stanglin.
The Letter and Spirit of Biblical Interpretation: From the Early Church to Modern Practice.
Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018.
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Keith D. Stanglin, professor of Scripture and historical theology at Austin Graduate School of Theology, joins a growing field of scholars in the field of history of biblical interpretation with his book *The Letter and Spirit of Biblical Interpretation*: From the Early Church to Modern Practice. Stanglin's goal is to build on the work of David Steinmetz, in showing how the premodern exegesis of the past can inform the church today. While covering academic topics, Stanglin's work is not directed at specialists within the field, but rather is aimed at students, ministers, and scholars not well-versed in the field of the history of interpretation. As such, this book serves as a primer on the history of interpretation. At the same time, Stanglin is not only aiming to teach the history of interpreting the Bible, he also desires to set forth an alternative to the pure historical-critical method.

Stanglin admits that past voices *have* been brought to the table. For example, the recent publications of the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, The Church's Bible, and other selections of premodern interpretation, have made the interpretations of past readers more accessible to modern readers. What is missing, Stanglin argues, is an *understanding* of these past voices. For example, while we may be able to read the interpretations of Origen and Augustine, we may not understand *why* these theologians wrote as they did. Stanglin aims to help the reader better understand the context and mindset of premodern readers, and also to explain the reasoning behind the shift to modern exegesis.

The book is divided into two major parts. The first—and lengthiest—part of the book gives an overview of the history of exegesis, from the New Testament writings through the rise of the historical-critical method. This first half is divided into six chronological chapters, each treating biblical interpretation in a particular time era. The second part of the book examines the application for today, with a chapter diagnosing the problem, and a second chapter proposing a way forward.

After his opening introductory chapter, Stanglin's second chapter provides an overview of the earliest Christian exegesis—focusing on the New Testament, Epistle of Barnabas, Irenaeus, as well as the formation of the Christian canon. The third chapter is devoted to later patristic exegesis, with the bulk of attention paid to Origen. Here, Stanglin follows the typical Alexandria-Antioch division of interpretation, while admitting the complexities involved in each school of interpretation.

Stanglin gives an overview of medieval exegesis in the fourth chapter. He begins with Augustine, then moves on to John Cassian, Gregory the Great, Thomas Aquinas, and Nicholas of Lyra. Along with highlighting the interpretative methods of these individuals,

Stanglin also examines scholasticism and the quadriga. In the fifth chapter, on early modern interpretation, Stanglin focuses on humanism, Erasmus, Luther, and Calvin, also noting the key place of the perspicuity of Scripture in the eyes of the Reformers.

In his sixth chapter, Stanglin concludes his overview of the history of interpretation, by examining the rise of historical-critical exegesis. Particular attention is paid to the abuses of spiritual interpretation, namely the problem of allegory—and how an *overreaction* to extremes of allegory is also problematic. Stanglin aims to "describe the underlying assumptions of modern exegesis to explain how they came to be, and ultimately to contrast these assumptions with premodern exegesis." (155-156) Stanglin accomplishes this goal by discussing the contributions of major players in the rise of historical-critical exegesis, such as Spinoza, Lessing, Jewett, Baur, Wellhausen, and Strauss. Notably absent from this list of shapers of modern-interpretation is any discussion of Friedrich Schleiermacher. Along with an overview of the key figures in the rise of the historical-critical method, Stanglin also covers the role of the Enlightenment, the division of biblical and theological studies, and a shift from the *Scriptural* Bible to the *academic* Bible. Stanglin concludes this chapter by listing principles of historical-critical exegesis, and responses to the method by conservative and postmodern approaches.

Stanglin's shorter second half of the book moves from describing the past to prescribing a way forward. Here, Stanglin aims to show that both the premodern and modern methods in their extreme forms are incompatible, but if they are brought together with the proper controls, the two can work together. Stanglin argues that abuses and extremes of both the literal and spiritual senses should be avoided, but that neither should be dismissed. Both allegory and historical criticism should be maintained, within proper limits. In his call for retrieval exegesis, Stanglin is not calling us to replicate past methods, but instead "to learn from history" and "to take the best of the past and allow it to inform Christian faith and practice today." (212)

In his final chapter, Stanglin closes the book with examples of his proposal at work. This aspect of the book is particularly appreciated. Stanglin does not merely set forth a theory for interpretative practice, he also gives practical examples of this theory by giving exegetical cases from Genesis 1-11, Psalm 137, Isaiah 7 and Matthew 1, and finally, a sample sermon on 1 Peter 3. In these examples, Stanglin furnishes examples of the principles of both the letter *and* the spirit at work in interpretation.

Overall, Stanglin provides an excellent introduction to the history of biblical interpretation. He also makes a strong case for ways in which to retain the best practices and impulses of past interpreters, without adopting unhelpful abuses or extremes. Stanglin's audience is the non-specialist, and this audience will be pleased with the helpful summative sections at the end of each chapter, along with his footnoting of English translations. Evangelicals can welcome this book, particularly Stanglin's alternative to the extremes and abuses of both the historical-critical method and premodern interpreters. Particularly appreciated is Stanglin's view that the interpreter should be a person of virtue, indwelt by the Spirit, informed and regulated by the rule of faith, and that interpretation should lead a person to faith and obedience. The book also has a useful bibliography of the key primary and secondary works on the history of

interpretation, as well as useful Scripture, name, and subject indexes.

This book is recommended to three groups of readers. First, those who wish to grasp a general overview of the key players, movements, and turning points in the history of interpretation. Second, those struggling to embrace certain modern principles, wondering if there are other paths. Last, those who value past readers of the Bible and wonder how they can contribute to present-day readings.