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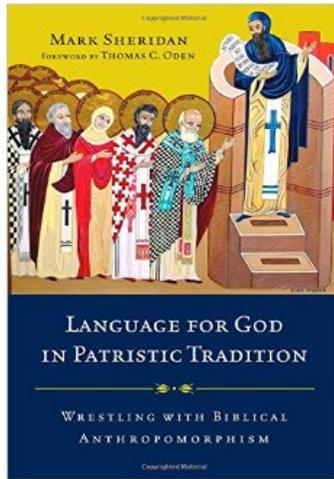
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Mark Sheridan

*Language for God in Patristic Tradition:
Wrestling with Biblical Anthropomorphism*

Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2015

Pp. 254. ISBN: 978-0-8308-4064-9. \$26.00
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“God is not as man to be deceived nor as the son of man to be threatened” (Num 23:19).

“As a man he takes on the manners of his son” (Deut 1:31).¹

One of the most recent publications on the interpretation of Scripture by ancient Christian writers is Mark Sheridan’s *Language for God in Patristic Tradition: Wrestling with Biblical Anthropomorphism* published by IVP Academic. This text engages with ancient Christian writers and their interpretation of biblical anthropomorphisms, as well as the broader discussion of modern interpretation methods and the call to recover the theological interpretation of Scripture.

¹ These two verses appear at the beginning of chapter one. According to Sheridan, they are cited as cited by Origen (27fn1).

The introduction sets the framework for the book by discussing the hermeneutic of ancient philosophers and theologians regarding passages that attribute human attributes to divinity. Like the Greek philosophers with Homer's works and Jewish commentators with the Pentateuch, ancient Christian writers sought to avoid any literal interpretation of anthropomorphisms that was not "worthy of God." Such interpretations could have disastrous effects on a Christian's spiritual life and should be avoided (p.19). Passages that consisted of anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms ought to be interpreted theologically. Sheridan points out that "theology" in ancient writings refers to any discussion on the nature of God or of divinity. Ancient Christians interpreted Scripture from the point of view of a certain understanding of God (p.19-20); any interpretation ought to fit within a proper view of God and his nature.

Chapter one sets forth the interpretive guide for ancient Christian writers as illustrated in Origen, who "left an indelible mark on all later patristic exegesis" (p.29). With Num 23:19 and Deut 1:31 in mind (quoted above), Origen claimed that any anthropomorphic language used of God signified his taking on the manner of humans for pedagogical reasons. That is, God speaks of himself in ways to which man can relate so that he can understand. Any passage that is not in accord with God when interpreted literally is to be explained by virtue of God's condescension and accommodation to man.

The theological interpretation of Scripture involved the use of allegory, a method rooted in Greek philosophy and employed by Hellenistic Jewish theologians. Chapter two introduces the development of allegory in Greek thought. Though Homer's *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* were staples of Greek culture for centuries, later generations viewed the portrayal of the gods as scandalous. Philosophers such as Xenophanes, Plato, Pseudo-Heraclitus, and

Cicero developed allegory as a means of interpretation so as “to remove the scandal” (p.46). Chapter three focuses on the use of allegory by Hellenistic Jewish interpretation of Scripture. By at least the third century B.C., Mosaic Law began to be translated into Greek by the Jews in Alexandria. As the Pentateuch began to be read by a “cultured, philosophically oriented, non-Jewish public,” Jews saw the need to defend and explain its teachings (p.61). Jewish interpreters such as the author of the *Letter of Aristeas*, Aristobulus, and Philo of Alexandria defended the interpretation of what is “worthy of” or “fitting for” God. According to the author of the *Letter of Aristeas*, God’s prohibition of certain animals in the Law is not due to the mere concern about “mice and weasels”; rather, such prohibitions “represent higher moral principles with which the supreme power is concerned” (p.63). Aristobulus defended Moses from the charge of *alogia*—“unreasonable or senseless interpretations” resulting from the literal translations of anthropomorphisms found throughout Scripture (p.63). Deeper meanings are to be found in these passages. Finally, Philo of Alexandria states that some statements about God are not to be accepted if not interpreted allegorically. Further, allegory is to be used on those passages that depict holy people exhibiting unholy behavior (e.g., Sarah giving her maid, Hagar, to Abraham).

Chapter four illustrates how certain New Testament interpretations of Old Testament passages were later viewed by ancient Christian writers as models for further interpretation of Scripture (p.81). Sheridan specifically focuses on Matt 5:31–32 where Jesus appears to change OT teaching on divorce, particularly in light of v. 17 wherein Jesus claims that he has not come to change the Law. Other passages include Matt 15:11 in which Jesus criticizes the dietary laws and those in which Jesus is said to be greater than Moses and the prophets. For early Christian thinkers, these passages highlighted that

Jesus Christ is the key for understanding all of Scripture, particularly the OT. Paul was also used as guidance for interpretation, particularly his use of allegory in 1 Cor 9:8–10 and 10:1–11, 2 Cor 3:15–18, and Gal 4:22–26.

Having set the background for the use of allegory in the interpretation of anthropomorphisms, Sheridan turns his focus to ancient Christian writers such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen of Alexandria, Eusebius of Caesarea, Didymus the Blind, Augustine, and John Cassian. Chapter five introduces what these particular writers averred the theological interpretation of Scripture and the use of allegory. The idea that God adapts to human ways of speaking serves as a common thread among these writers. Chapters six and seven focus on specific problematic passages in the OT, passages that posed an interpretive challenge regarding the transcendence of God; it then related how these Christian writers interpreted them in a way “worthy of” God. Chapter six deals with Gen 1–4 (creation and the Fall), Gen 16 (the story of Sarah and Hagar), and the passages in Deuteronomy and Joshua that tell of Israel’s wiping out the nations. For difficult passages such as these, the early Christian writers insisted that their real meaning must be something useful “for us”; that is, it must be edifying and convey useful teaching “on the level of faith and morals” (p.127). Chapter seven focuses on the book of Psalms, particularly those that entreat the Lord to rise against the psalmist’s enemies. Sheridan points out that there are seventy such psalms that have given Christians—both past and present—difficulty. To interpret them in a manner “worthy of” God, ancient Christian writers used various strategies of interpretation, including identifying the original speaker, reading the psalm as prophecy, and interpreting the psalm allegorically.

After surveying the use of theological interpretation of Scripture in the early church, chapter eight applies the study to the twenty-first

century by comparing and contrasting the concerns of theologians throughout the ages. Using chapter six as a point of reference, Sheridan surveys interpretive approaches modern theologians in Gen 1–4, Gen 16, and passages in Deuteronomy and Joshua on Israel’s wiping out the nations. He concludes that while such approaches have value, they fail to consider the theological problems of the texts. Determining the original meaning of the text, albeit helpful, is insufficient for the believer. Modern thinkers would do well by recovering the method favored by ancient Christians for a fuller grasp of Scripture’s meaning for Christians—an issue that *always* involves theology. Sheridan closes out his book with an appendix in which he discusses the presuppositions of ancient Christian writers about the nature of the text of Scripture, their criteria for a correct interpretation of Scripture, and some rules of interpretation.

Sheridan’s *Language for God* is a must-read in ancient Christian studies. Though it is a survey of ancient Christian interpretation of biblical anthropomorphisms (as opposed to an in-depth study), Sheridan’s narrow focus allows him to provide example interpretations of Scripture from a large sample of early Christian writers. The end result is that the reader gains a clear picture of the prevalent method of interpretation of Scripture by Christians of the early church. Furthermore, the appendix in which Sheridan expounds upon the presuppositions underlying the theological interpretation employed by ancient Christians. Here Sheridan grounds the examples provided in earlier chapters, illustrating how early Christian thinkers arrived at their interpretations of biblical anthropomorphisms.

Two weaknesses can be noted in Sheridan’s work. First, chapter two’s discussion on how Greek philosophers handled anthropomorphisms is helpful inasmuch as it illustrates that the problem is not isolated to Christians alone. However, Sheridan seems

to imply that ancient Christian writers were influenced by Greek philosophers regarding the use of analogy in theological interpretation. This notion in turn might imply that early Christianity is only an extension of Greek philosophy. Whether this is Sheridan's intention or not, his work could be strengthened by explicitly explaining the link he seeks to make. If Christianity indeed borrowed their interpretative method from the Greeks, does this taint Christian interpretation of Scripture or injure Christian witness? If there was no borrowing by ancient Christian writers, then what significance is there in the similar interpretive approaches, and where does the difference lie?

Second, Sheridan's attempt to connect the past with the present in chapter eight is limited: while it can offer an understanding of different interpretation methods, it is less helpful on the value of theological interpretation today. The contrast between ancient and modern interpretations of various passages is illuminating as he clearly notes the difference of concerns between ancient and modern writers. However, in his concluding reflections, Sheridan only states the need to recover theological interpretation. Furthermore, he fails to link his work to the modern Theological Interpretation of Scripture movement (TIS). What connection is there, if any, between ancient theological interpretation and TIS? His work would be clearer if it showed how theological interpretation helpfully speaks into the pressing issues of interpretation today.

Despite these weaknesses, *Language for God in Patristic Tradition* helps to root contemporary discussion on the nature of Scripture in the wider discussion that spans Christian history. Though specific concerns faced by Christians change over time, the nature of these problems remain the same; it behooves modern Christian thinkers,

then, to discover how the ancient Christian writers can inform today's
their work.

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