

generally regard the Greek Fathers of Orthodox thought as valuable sources for thought, Orthodox Christians generally regard Augustine, the Latin Father of Catholic thought, as being the deeply problematic source of the errors of the West. Zizioulas is no exception, but Cohen shows that many of his criticisms of Augustine are based on misunderstandings, especially of the Trinitarian doctrine of Augustine, where Cohen deftly shows Augustine to hold to the same principles that Zizioulas champions “against” Augustine and Western thought. Similarly, Zizioulas’s charge that Augustine is the fountainhead of an inwardly turned Western solipsism, as opposed to a communion-founded identity, is dispelled, with the aid of Phillip Cary, by pointing to the way Plotinus’s inward turn becomes a turn “in and up” in Augustine. N&V

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**Dark Passages of the Bible: Engaging Scripture with Benedict XVI and Thomas Aquinas** by Matthew J. Ramage (*Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2013*), vii + 303 pp.

FIFTY YEARS AGO, the German Jesuit and exegete Norbert Lohfink bemoaned the rumor that the fathers of the Second Vatican Council were considering removing the cursing psalms from the breviary, asking if such a move “might not be throwing the baby out with the bath water.” His fear was confirmed when Psalms 58, 83 and 109 were omitted from the psalter cycle because of “a certain psychological difficulty.”<sup>1</sup> Despite the specification of the doctrine of inerrancy as pertaining to truth “for the sake of our salvation” in *Dei Verbum* §11, as well as the doctrinal commitment of *Dei Verbum* §12 to the necessity of a holistic reading of the biblical text in the light of Sacred Tradition, this pastoral decision regarding the Divine Office seems to indicate a lack of magisterial confidence that a proper interpretation of these psalms could be readily put into practice among those praying the official prayer of the Church.

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<sup>1</sup> A.M. Roguet, trans. Peter Coughlan and Peter Purdue, *The Liturgy of the Hours: The General Instruction on the Liturgy of the Hours with a Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1971), no. 131.

This gap between conciliar teaching and application has become a hallmark of post-Vatican II biblical interpretation, which has been marked, on the whole, by a radical instability in which the use of modern methods of analysis and the hermeneutic of faith are rarely integrated. Current attempts at interpretation often swing wildly from one to the other, from historical-critical homilies that never seem to reach the point of preaching to strained attempts to domesticate the Bible by reference to one or more controlling concepts that promise to “unlock” it as a perspicuous sourcebook for faith and morals. In this confusion, the really difficult, even demoralizing, passages in the Bible are very often simply overlooked, so much so that Benedict XVI felt it necessary, in his apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini*, to encourage scholars and pastors to avoid neglecting these “dark passages” and even “to help all the faithful” to understand them “in the light of the mystery of Christ” (§42).

In response to this call, Matthew J. Ramage undertakes an encounter with the “dark passages” of the Bible and does so with candor, depth, and profound attention to the Catholic tradition of reading Sacred Scripture. His work, the published version of his doctoral dissertation, comprises a thorough synthesis of historical-critical exegesis and dogmatic interpretation that greatly respects and draws upon both approaches, bringing them into a fruitful synthesis that he applies, with great benefit, to some of the most unsettling passages of Sacred Scripture.

Ramage introduces his work by expressing his goal: “to elucidate a theology of Scripture” that remains true to Catholic doctrine, but at the same time, contains an “inductive dimension” in which theory is confronted by reality in the historical-critical analysis of “the most difficult texts of Scripture” (3). To this end, he endeavors to wed the perspective of “Method A” exegesis—the patristic and medieval approach that emphasizes the unity and harmony of Sacred Scripture—with the practice of “Method B” exegesis—the unsparing scientific approach of the modern historian that seeks not to unite texts, but to distinguish them as products of unique human authors writing in specific historical and cultural situations. The product of this union is “Method C exegesis,” which Ramage hopes can synthesize such perspectives by relating unique texts through attention to development in light of the Catholic Faith, understood as the mature fruit of this development, never compromising, but carefully nuancing the doctrines of inspiration and inerrancy. These doctrines serve the Method C exegete not as rigid confines that commit the exegete to obscurantism,

nor as a substitute for encountering the Bible as a historian. Instead, they comprise the *modus vivendi* that enables the Christian exegete to have the courage and confidence to be unsparingly historical, to deal honestly with imperfect and even demoralizing passages as representing not themselves, but as one stage of a movement toward Christ. In the words of Benedict XVI, quoted by Ramage, “For the Church the Old Testament represents, in its totality, an advance towards Christ; only when it attains to him does its real meaning... become clear” (6). That movement *is* their real meaning for the Christian, a meaning that can be known only in the light of faith.

In the spirit of Method C, Ramage goes directly to the text to engage some of the “dark passages” of Scripture. In chapter 1, he considers three themes of central importance to Christian Faith: the nature of God, the nature of good and evil, and the afterlife. In regard to the first theme, Ramage considers many OT passages that mention the Lord as only one of many gods; in regard to the second, many OT passages in which God commands the killing of the innocent and/or tempts and hardens human hearts to their destruction; and in regard to the third, many OT passages that deny the blessedness for the righteous dead and resurrection. Many of these passages are well-known, but their cumulative weight presses the issue inescapably: “How can the Bible be God’s word if it is rife with problems in so many areas?” (49).

Chapter 2 begins Ramage’s extended answer to this question by elaborating on the nature and origins of Method C exegesis and the principles of Catholic biblical interpretation. The idea and phraseology (“Methods A, B, and C”) come from Joseph Ratzinger, and it is he who is held up as primary theoretician and the working model for its actual practice. Ramage begins by explaining the nature of Method A and then notes its shortcomings, such as neglect of the literal sense. These defects are counterbalanced in Method B, but new shortcomings arise there as well, especially the tendency toward reconstructions of sayings and events based on *a priori* philosophical assumptions such as metaphysical naturalism. From a Catholic perspective, each approach is valid but needs the other, with Method B coming first in execution, but with the motive and faith hermeneutic of Method A. It is through the practice of Method B that, with Method A’s principles as rationale and guide, a deeper understanding of the Bible’s dark passages can be achieved.

Ramage recognizes that this approach requires more than papal enthusiasm and commendation in order to be accomplished well; it needs a theology. It is here that he draws upon the thought of

St. Thomas Aquinas to qualify the assertion that there is development in the Bible (chapter 3) and to offer a careful interpretation of the doctrines of inspiration and inerrancy (chapter 4). Chapter 3 approaches the matter diachronically, showing that the idea of development is not a discovery of Method B, but one already envisioned by one of the most successful and influential practitioners of Method A. Thomas's distinction between the "substance of the articles of faith" and the "number of the articles of faith" allows Ramage to highlight the integrity of the earliest strata of the biblical corpus as truly revelatory, while allowing for the full flowering of God's self-disclosure in later texts, culminating in Christ. Thomas's doctrine of the divine pedagogy roots this process in God's condescension to humanity that allows for growth in understanding, illuminating the previous distinction. Finally, Thomas's doctrine of the three ages of man (before the Law, under the Law, and the time of grace), marked as it is by progress in knowledge of God, gives a working schema for approaching the various strata of biblical texts to see this development. In this way, Method B provides an opportunity to see in moving color what Aquinas had already perceived but could not see with acuity. His theology provides Ramage with a way to relate biblical unity (the emphasis of Method A) to biblical change (the emphasis of Method B).

Chapter 4 approaches the matter synchronically, exploring Thomas's theory of the divine act of revelation, by which God gave human minds perceptions of divine things, and inspiration, the elevation of the mind that makes the former possible. Ramage is on difficult terrain here, but with the help of numerous commentators (Synave, Benoit, Congar, et al.) he does an admirable job of presenting the complex relationship between the perfect Divine Author and the many imperfect human authors of Sacred Scripture. He adopts Benoit's distinction between "revelation in the broad sense," in which authors are given the ability to perceive natural realities (things and events) from God's perspective, and "revelation in the strict sense," in which authors receive supernatural ideas. This distinction is crucial for Method C because it requires neither a verbalistic conception of inspiration nor a propositional claim-by-claim application of inerrancy. When this insight is combined with the insights of Chapter 3 regarding the divine pedagogy, it becomes clearer how a biblical author could be inspired but, at the same, time limited by his own milieu in his expression of divine truth. Ramage posits a distinction between a formal error (an "error of rationality" *a la* Stephen Wykstra) and a material imperfection

that is the result of some calculus of the author's position in salvation history and his use of reason that makes the imperfection inevitable, even obligatory in some cases (131–146). What Catholics are committed to by their faith is that the biblical authors “wrote precisely what God wanted them to write at their respective points within the divine pedagogy” (146). He concludes by adding an additional dimension not found in St. Thomas, the role of the practical judgment and purposes of the biblical authors, whose purposes were not always doctrinal, but sometimes exhortative, liturgical, narrational, or archival, and so on.

Chapters 5–6 complete the process with an application of these insights to the “dark passages” regarding the nature of God, good and evil (chapter 5), and the afterlife (chapter 6). Ramage is not interested in offering new exegetical insights here, but draws upon the work of well-known biblical scholars, Catholic and Protestant, ancient and modern, to work out on the ground what a Method C approach might look like in regard to these themes. His application of the various Thomistic distinctions explored in chapters 3–4 is impressive for its balance and its respect for both the faith of the ancient exegetes and the acuity of the modern exegetes upon whom he relies. Since it traces a process of development, it is necessary for Ramage to take a summary approach. Because his aim is not to recapitulate the meticulous work of others, but rather to show how they can be brought together fruitfully, his brevity is justifiable. While it would be impossible within the scope of a review to evaluate every claim, in my opinion, Ramage is quite successful overall in showing how a faithfully Catholic exegete can remain one while never compromising his scholarly honesty. The chapter on the afterlife is particularly well-developed and insightful, and both chapters (5 and 6) justify Ramage's confidence that Method C exegesis is eminently practicable, thus demonstrating “the reasonableness of Catholic magisterial teaching on the inspiration and inerrancy of scripture” (274).

Ramage's work is an excellent contribution to a project that is only beginning and was indicated by Ratzinger himself as a work that would take at least a generation to realize. One major benefit is that the work draws together manifold examples from Joseph Ratzinger to show how he interprets the Bible and illumines why he takes modern exegetical methods and their fruits so seriously while never compromising his commitment to the Bible as the word of God. The courage of Ratzinger to carefully work in obedience to conciliar teaching on biblical interpretation has a subtle but powerful lesson for Catholic

scholars and preachers. It is not simply a moral lesson about the virtue of obedience, but a lesson about the very relationship between faith and reason itself. In its use of Ratzinger and Aquinas, but also in Ramage's own careful and responsible conclusions, *Dark Passages* is particularly helpful for revealing Catholic biblical exegesis as one very important function of that relationship. It will be an important resource for all Catholics who wish to bridge the gap into which the cursing Psalms have fallen and out of which the criticisms of the New Atheists resound incessantly. N.V

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**Dynamic Transcendentals: Truth, Goodness, & Beauty from a Thomistic Perspective** by Alice M. Ramos (*Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2012*), 256 pp.

OVER THE LAST TWENTY OR SO YEARS, various studies have been published on St. Thomas's doctrine of the transcendental properties of being. Particularly noteworthy among these studies is Jan Aertsen's *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals: The Case of Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996). In the introduction to her book, Alice Ramos notes that, according to Aertsen's analysis, Thomas's doctrine of the transcendentals brings together both theological and anthropological considerations, as well as pointing to the connection between the transcendentals and morality. Ramos is concerned not only with these connections made by Aertsen, but more specifically with the intensification, as it were, of truth, goodness, and beauty effected by the human person as he contributes to the perfection of the universe and, thus, to the return of all things to their Source, namely God. Her appreciation of the intimate connection between Thomas's metaphysics, anthropology, and ethics enables her to pursue this theme and ably and insightfully to show forth the dynamic nature of Thomas's conception of truth, goodness, and beauty. And yet, given the debate about whether beauty is, properly speaking, a transcendental property of being, and given that Aertsen has argued that it is not, one wonders why this issue is not addressed by the author.

The book is not a systematic treatise, but rather a collection of essays that approach truth, goodness, and beauty from various perspectives. These essays are, nevertheless, organized into three sections: Part I,