

original work published by Van Gorcum (1998) received over two dozen reviews, including one in this journal (James E. Miller, *AUSS* 28[1990]:175-177). Among the most substantial reviews are those by James H. Charlesworth (*PSB* 12[1991]:107-110); Baruch Halpern (*HS* 31[1990]:218-222); James A. Sanders (*JAOS* 111[1991]:374-376); and Carol A. Newsom (*JSP* 7 [1990]:122-126; reprinted in *JSP* 8 [1991]:111-115).

Given the fact that sixteen years transpired before the reprinting, it might have been useful for the work to have been updated. Certainly, an updated edition would have been a more fitting tribute in honor of Mulder. Nevertheless, many who did not buy the book then will welcome this second opportunity to do so.

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Pelikan, Jaroslav. *Interpreting the Bible and the Constitution*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. xiii + 216 pp. Hardcover, \$30.00.

Having formally studied both theology and law, I have been intrigued by the parallels between the interpretation of the Bible and the U.S. Constitution. Both are relatively old documents, written by multiple authors, and infused with broad, and at times apparently conflicting principles; yet both documents are applied to govern specific details of many modern lives. It seems that our experience in interpreting one could shed light on the reading of the other, and vice versa.

However, I had come across no attempt to systematically compare the two worlds of interpretation until Jaroslav Pelikan's recent effort crossed my desk. Pelikan is Sterling Professor of History Emeritus at Yale University and an authority on Christian creeds and tradition. He also displays a broad grasp of the history and practice of constitutional theory and interpretation.

Pelikan's discussion consists of four parts: a comparison of the authoritative role that Scripture and the Constitution play in their respective communities, a comparison of interpretive questions raised by the two documents, a review of the role of original intent in understanding both the literal words and spiritual principles of the documents, and a review of how doctrinal development occurs in the fields of law and theology.

That the Bible and the Constitution play similarly authoritative roles in their communities is not a new thought, but Pelikan proposes that the similarities of the interpretive communities and traditions around each document have been overlooked. Pelikan identifies four interpretive communities for each document: "we the people," academic scholars, professional clergy and lawyers, and the magisterial and ecclesiastical hierarchy. He admits of the importance of all groups, but he views the fourth group, the judges and justices of the courts, and the bishops and councils of the churches, as most authoritative. They can, he asserts, "trump all others" (30). Because of this, he will focus on the interpretive methods and standards of this latter group.

This is the first indication that Pelikan will employ a primarily hierarchical view of biblical interpretive authority, one associated most strongly with the traditional Catholic position, although shared by other traditions that uphold a strong, central interpretive authority. By contrast, there is a strong tradition within Protestantism holding that there is no ultimate earthly interpretive authority for the Bible.

While Protestant churches within this heritage do have doctrinal statements, these differ from Catholic dogmas in that they do not, or at least are not meant to, have equal authority with Scripture. Rather, these statements are subject to Scripture and can be modified and changed in light of further scriptural insight. Thus many Protestant groups

have no equivalent of an earthly Supreme Court to give the definitive doctrinal position on a biblical passage or doctrine.

The focus on a centralized, interpretive hierarchy influences how Pelikan deals with his second section, that of issues, or cruxes, of interpretation. Both the Bible and the Constitution contain ambiguities and puzzling statements that require interpretation. Should you really poke out your eye if you struggle with lust? Can camels really thread needles, or are all rich people lost? Does “due process of law” mean you get a jury to contest a speeding ticket? Does freedom of speech protect all lying, cheating, or obscenities?

These questions raise similar sorts of interpretive issues, such as how literally or figuratively one should read language. It also requires one to decide how much, if at all, one should rely on external sources, such as history and other literature, to understand that language. Also, in both texts, some issues require reference to “contemporary community standards,” rather than absolute values. What is reverent, and even biblically required, for a church in one place and time—e.g., women wearing hats in church—may be ostentatious and inappropriate in another. Similarly, differing local mores mean that what is constitutionally obscene in one community may be acceptable in another.

How should these interpretive questions be handled? And who should handle them? These two questions are of equal importance. Deciding “who” decides can often shape and even determine “how” the deciding is done. And in commenting on the question of “who” is the final arbiter, Pelikan again shows his hierarchical orientation. While he recognizes that there is some ambiguity, both in relation to the Bible and the Constitution, as to who is the final interpretive authority, the ambiguity he allows is a narrow one. Only a few thinkers on the fringe really dispute the final interpretive authority of the U.S. Supreme Court as regards the Constitution. The weight of time and practice have suffocated any meaningful arguments to the contrary.

Pelikan’s view of the “ambiguity” of biblical interpretive authorities seems equally narrow. They are: church councils, the papacy, and the Holy Spirit. But as the Holy Spirit lacks an earthly corporeal presence, and as church councils are notoriously conflicted on almost any question of theology, one can sense which entity Pelikan may view as having the strongest claim to interpretive authority. But whether the answer is the church council or the papacy, the point is that Pelikan places the authority for interpretation at the top of the church hierarchy, and not as diffusely lying within the body of Christ.

One may disagree with Pelikan’s emphasis on church hierarchy. But it must be admitted that the question he raises is important, and not simple to answer. It is easy for Protestants to say that God reveals truth to the individual believer, studying his or her Bible under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. But how does that individual truth become part of the truth of the community of believers? How is group orthodoxy maintained when the unit of truth is found at the personal level? How does the community not disintegrate into a disparate collection of subjective and personal truths, with no uniting Truth?

In the final two sections, Pelikan responds to these questions using principles of doctrinal development set down by the Catholic theologian John Henry Newman, and comparing these with constitutional doctrinal development. He discusses the search for original intent, using the unwritten traditions of the church to choose the correct biblical interpretation, much as the Supreme Court appeals to the founding fathers and *Federalist Papers* to guide their opinions. He touches on principles of doctrinal continuity and progression and creedal confession that he believes preserve ultimate truth for the community of believers, despite the interpretive problems posed by the Bible.

But these answers assume a commitment to a priestly and papal interpretive authority

that most of the Protestant world, at least historically, has denied. Is there no possibility of maintaining a commitment to absolute moral and spiritual truth in the absence of some worldly spiritual interpretive authority, such as a pope or council of bishops?

A constitutional analogy, appropriately, comes to the rescue. Pelikan opens his book with a quote from Edward Hirsch Levi, a legal scholar. Levi wrote that “the influence of constitution worship . . . gives freedom to a court. It can always abandon what it has said in order to go back to the written document itself. . . . By permitting an appeal to the constitution, the discretion of the court is increased and change made possible” (iv). In other words, when the court treats the broader language of the constitution as ultimately authoritative, rather than its own particular opinions, it is freer to respond to changing circumstances and to explore new dimensions of existing constitutional principles. It is freer to get it more right in the end than if it was bound by its earlier mistakes.

Similarly, a denial of earthly spiritual authority does not prevent the careful collection of doctrinal statements by groups of believers. Nor does it prevent these believers from forming voluntary associations in which a respect and adherence to these statements becomes a requirement for leaders and teachers. But it does, or should, prevent those statements from taking on an authority equal to the Bible. A denial of any ultimate earthly spiritual authority is a safeguard against particular human applications obscuring the divine principles.

The confessional statements are, or should be, continuously compared to the broader principles and teachings of Scripture. Time, circumstances, and growing understanding of the body of believers may reveal that a particular doctrinal statement is inadequate, incomplete, or even incorrect. Dissenters should not be dismissed out of hand for disagreeing with a confessional statement, but their dissent should be compared with the Bible itself. The true freedom, and the freest way to truth, is to be able to assert the authority of the Bible as a corrective to what are merely human constructs of truth.

Constitutional scholars are fond of saying the Supreme Court is not final because it is right, but it is “right” because it is final. But on this side of eternity, there will be no “final” statement of spiritual truth, outside the Bible. We have no other creed. Thus we should resist labeling any earthly body as always and ultimately “right” in matters of doctrine. For all their similarities, the Bible and the Constitution are ultimately different in this point, which Pelikan fails to acknowledge—one is of earthly origin, and subject to earthly authority; but the other is of heaven and knows no final authority here below, other than the Holy Spirit moving on the individual believer’s conscience.

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Resseguie, James L. *Spiritual Landscape: Images of the Spiritual Life in the Gospel of Luke*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004. 195 pp. Paper, \$19.95.

James Resseguie, Professor of New Testament at Winebrenner Theological Seminary in Ohio, brings together the disciplines of NT exegesis, literary theory, and spiritual formation to take a fresh look at the Gospel of Luke. The title’s description of the book as “images” is an apt one, for the scope and size of the book dictate that the Lukan passages covered be treated more as “snapshots” than with any of the elaboration of a feature presentation. Despite, however, the sometimes-frustrating brevity with which individual passages must be treated, the approach offers a creative way of seeing that makes available an abundance of fascinating insights. Resseguie organizes the images in his “album” by using the concept of “landscapes”—not only physical, but also social and economic. Within each chapter, he