

Take and Read!

The value of the Psalms, writes Martin Luther in his "Preface to the Psalter," is that in them "you will find a fine, bright, pure mirror" in which "you will find... yourself"—a criterion that runs counter to Luther's normal principle for evaluating Scripture: whether or not it presents or pushes Christ (*was Christum treibet*). To commend the Psalms not for their christological declarations but rather for their honest presentation of human experience is to commend them as literature. Apparently it was not English 101 that started reading the Bible as literature; Luther's literal reading of texts already pointed him in that direction.

The essays that follow, either explicitly or implicitly, urge pastors and others interested in teaching and proclaiming the faith to read literature. The authors would want to take issue with the popular egocentric notion that one can only understand what one has personally experienced by pointing us to the realm of literature; there our horizons can be wonderfully expanded.

What a hopeful notion!—that through the legacy of literature I can indeed know something of women's experience or black experience or the experience of David or Jesus. Reason enough to read, no doubt, but is it good enough for Scripture? Fine, the Bible is literature, and the Psalms will help me understand myself and you and the people of ancient Israel, but what has that to do with proclaiming Christ? Nothing, I suppose, if the Christian faith is fundamentally otherworldly, if it stands fundamentally counter to human experience. But the incarnation suggests another reality, that wallowing deeply in human experience will place me on the way of the cross. True, human experience will not reveal to me that Jesus is Lord, neither directly nor mediated through literature, but it will surely help me understand what it means that *the Lord is Jesus*. Thus, we maintain that the *raison d'être* of this issue is not merely aesthetic (though that wouldn't be all bad), but theological as well. Take and read!

In separate essays with similar concerns, *David Rhoads* and *Stephanie Frey* encourage pastors and other church leaders to read literature—not as a personal hobby, but as an integral part of their task. They remind us that literature can uniquely provide access to experience that is not our own, deepening our sense of self and others. Hearers of sermons will be grateful for preachers who follow the advice of Rhoads and Frey.

The Bible is literature, too, as *John Holbert* reminds us—a fact which must be kept in mind when we attempt to interpret biblical texts. While many "Bible as literature" exercises ignore the issue of biblical authority, Holbert does not.

In his careful analysis of Samuel Johnson's view of human nature, *Gregory Scholtz* makes clear that Johnson's pessimism was neither anomalous nor extreme but stood firmly in the Christian Protestant tradition. Scholtz's work provides a helpful illustration of literature's contribution to the history of Christian thought.

Robert Goeser takes us inside Charles Dickens's *The Haunted Man* to consider its insights into human memory, evil, and transformation. He is a sure guide, allowing the literature to produce Aha! experiences within us.

As *Robert Nichols* demonstrates in his examination of Dostoevsky, literature (like religion) serves not only a diversionary function but also a prophetic one—which may be why the Soviet revolutionaries sought to suppress and control both. It should be no surprise that ideologues of our culture try to do the same.

Novels, claims *Kent Johnson*, invite conversation between reader and author. Johnson enters into such conversation with Dorothy Sayers on the basis of her mystery novel *The Nine Tailors*; the conversation, he discovers, is not only about murder mysteries but theological ones as well.

Reading *Babette's Feast* as a story about vocation, *Pamela Schwandt* presents a more positive view of the pietistic Norwegian community visited by the French chef Babette than many interpreters. Not only Babette but also the Norwegian sisters Martine and Philippa work divine love through fidelity to their vocations.

Sheldon Tostengard, himself a product of the prairie, finds in prairie novelists a clear and faithful picture of human life and mortality which can counter the present urban culture's denial of death. Tostengard examines works by Ole Rolvaag, Willa Cather, and Larry Woiwode.

Reflecting on Jay Tolson's new biography of Walker Percy, political scientist *Jack Schwandt* describes Percy's dis-ease with the "lunatic consequences" in present American society of the imperial freedom of the self. Schwandt uses Percy's literature to voice a political and cultural critique he clearly shares.

What happens when you try to get a Face to Face argument regarding a book (Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s *The Disuniting of America*) and both authors (*Nancy Maeker* and *Richard Nysse*) agree the book is bad? The question of how to relate national unity and ethnic pluralism remains critical, but apparently we will need other help than Schlesinger's.

In Texts in Context, *Arland Hultgren* guides us through the deep waters of Romans, inviting preachers to do the same for their congregations. *Word & World* shares his view that enquiring Christian minds care about more than Di and Charles and that creative preaching can lead congregations to spiritual and theological excitement. Finally, outside the theme, *Jerry Robbins* draws together both primary and secondary sources to reappraise Martin Luther's view of reason. Is it the "devil's whore" or "the most important and highest in rank among all things"? Not surprisingly, the answer will have something to do with the theology of the cross.

F.J.G.