

**THE PROMISE OF NOT-KNOWING: A NEW NEW TESTAMENT READING**, by David E. Fredrickson, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022. 234 pages. \$34 paperback.

With his latest book, David Fredrickson, teacher of Early Christian Literature, has produced a work that resists wrangling. As I sought to review *The Promise of Not Knowing*, it kept changing meaning and theme on me like Proteus shifting shape in the grasp of Menelaus. If I were to describe it in the traditional terms of a book review, it would go something like this: With the help of the philosophers Derrida and Caputo and through his own deep engagement with the Greco-Roman literary tradition, Fredrickson rereads a series of texts drawn from throughout the New Testament. He proceeds, in turn, to interrogate the hermeneutics of the author of Luke-Acts, read the emotion of Paul against the discipline of pseudo-Paul and contrasts the views of history that underly the so-called “little apocalypses” of Mark and Matthew. In each instance, he challenges the certainty of the received tradition and asks the question: in what way can (or should) we understand the “new” in the New Testament? Thus, I have neatly taxonomized his book (it is a work of New Testament scholarship) and dissected his book (it reads from poststructuralist/deconstructionist principles) and can safely file it away.

However, to taxonomize and reduce the book in that fashion would be to engage in the same hermeneutics of mastery that Fredrickson himself critiques. While the above summary can claim to summarize the contents of the book and to elucidate its subject matter, reducing the book to a simple re-reading of texts circumscribes its efforts to subvert the process of reading and hermeneutics itself. Fredrickson’s critique of the “master of hermeneutics” in his first chapter stands as a warning to his implied readers: do not think of this book as something to be mastered, categorized, and filed away for citation in a later argument. What then is this book?

Fredrickson’s choice to write with all of the traditional apparatus of New Testament scholarship gives his work the flavor of an optical illusion. Its footnotes and learned translations beckon the educated reader to seek understanding and useful takeaways for reading the Bible, but the contents of the book continually chide the reader for seeking the book’s utility: “*usefulness*,” Fredrickson says, “[should not be] the touchstone of truth and meaning and the primary reason for reading” (24, *italics original*). This headfake places the reader on trembling ground. If I leave *The Promise of Not Knowing* having learned to deconstruct my habituated practices for reading the biblical text, have I simply turned the book

into another useful lesson and thus misunderstood it? This question of whether Fredrickson's biblical hermeneutics apply to his own writing pervades the book. Perhaps an example will help clarify the challenge: In the second chapter of the book ("Penelope's Tears"), Fredrickson reads the so-called "Christ Hymn" in Philippians against the backdrop of Greco-Roman depictions of divinity. He argues his point quite persuasively: the Greek god, especially the male Greek god, was characterized by his violence towards humanity and Christ turns that on its head: "... the one in the form of theos, Christ Jesus, utterly rejects such violence. He refuses to act like a theos in the way gods were understood to act..." (70). As a reader trained in the classics, I applaud Fredrickson for his attention to the religious context of Pauline vocabulary and I will use this example the next time that I teach a class on Paul. And yet, once again, Proteus leaves me grasping; have I turned Fredrickson into a "master of hermeneutics" by assenting to this argument that he makes with all the rhetorical flourishes of the academy? Should I revolt against this reading that makes so much sense to my brain habituated to utility?

In the end, though I am still uncertain of my ability to wrangle it, *The Promise of Not Knowing* is recommended reading for all those who are interested in how we make meaning of texts. For those in well-worn ruts of interpretation, it will come as a welcome surprise. Despite the author's protests, for those interested in reading the New Testament within its Greco-Roman context, it will furnish much utility.

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