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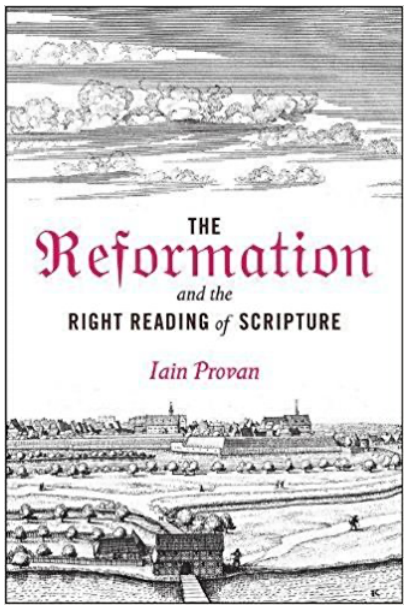

Iain Provan

The Reformation and the Right Reading of Scripture

Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017. Pp. xii + 712.
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Iain Provan's large monograph on how to read the Bible argues for what he calls "seriously literal interpretation," a big-tent approach to biblical meaning focused on the communicative intent of the text's authors. He presents a Protestant (or reformed with a small *r*) way of reading the Bible that he thinks coheres with the approach of Luther and Calvin (and patristic authors, to some extent), and his book will find its most welcome audience among other conservative Protestants. Provan argues against especially two approaches to interpretation advocated by other conservative Protestants: those who tend to use words such as *inerrancy* to describe the Bible and those who want to retrieve for the modern church patristic exegetical methods broadly under the label *allegory*. Against these two approaches, Provan advocates essentially a plain-sense reading of the text—easier said than done, as he recognizes—that takes full account of the advances (not the excesses) of modern biblical scholarship. Readers who do not share Provan's theological convictions are not the primary audience here, but they will still gain a great deal from Provan's book, which is largely a history and critique of biblical interpretation for the past two millennia.

After the introductory chapter, the book has three sections. The first section (ten chapters, 250 pages) treats the period before the Reformation, with two chapters on the canon of Scripture, six chapters on patristic and medieval biblical interpretation, and two chapters on the text of Scripture. The second section (five chapters, 175 pages) covers the period from the Reformation to the twentieth century, with the particular concern to narrate how the Bible was displaced as the source

of the Great Story within Western culture. The concluding section (six chapters with a brief concluding postscript, 190 pages) introduces and critiques a variety of critical approaches to the Bible (e.g., source criticism, form criticism, structuralism, feminist criticism), offering appreciation for the ways that these approaches aid Christian biblical interpretation and explaining how that is not always the case.

This is a good book. Provan's writing is clear, he introduces subjects in a way that upper-level undergraduates should be able to understand, and he quickly progresses beyond introductory concerns. Students will gain from this book a valuable understanding of a range of interpretive issues, and it will skillfully guide them in evaluating those issues, particularly if they are the right kind of Protestant students—either those predisposed to agree with Provan's approach or those who have not yet given such matters sustained reflection. I am unsure how well the book works as a persuasive essay. I doubt those Protestants who appreciate allegory or those who talk about Scripture in terms of inerrancy will think that Provan has given them a fair shake or has quite understood the issues or their concerns. Perhaps Provan was not really trying to persuade those opposed but to provide a robust account of his own approach for the benefit of those more amenable.

Though most of the book is historical survey, Provan constantly has in mind four Protestant approaches to interpretation that he introduces in the first chapter (13–19). (1) Historical criticism investigates what the text meant in the original language and context, without much concern for how the Bible might address the modern church. (2) Postmodern readers emphasize "the independence of texts from their authors and the role of the reader in *constructing* meaning out of texts" (14, emphasis original). (3) The Chicago Constituency are those readers who emphasize the inerrancy of Scripture as defined by *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* (1978). (4) Counter-Reformational Protestantism includes those who wish to recover allegory. None of these approaches is sufficiently Protestant, Provan thinks. In contrast to these ways of reading, Provan argues for a fifth way that appreciates the insights of biblical scholarship, stands in some degree of continuity with the church's reading practices throughout history, but especially coheres with the genuine insights of the Reformers in terms of scriptural interpretation.

My own expertise falls in the earlier (patristic) period that Provan surveys, so my critique will focus on Provan's opening set of chapters. He starts off with two chapters on the biblical canon, particularly the Old Testament canon, and he essentially argues for the legitimacy of focusing on the smaller, Jewish canon, omitting the deuterocanonical books. Chapter 2 argues that, regardless of whether a fully closed canon preexisted Christianity, the church did inherit from Judaism some sort of canon, not a closed list of books but a (perhaps fluid) collection of Scripture with normative authority. The point can hardly be disputed, though that has not stopped scholars from trying. Chapter 3 covers the development of the Christian biblical canon and covers the usual territory.

In a book with such wide-ranging interests, one would expect that the author might display a lack of complete familiarity with some of the issues discussed. He seems to hold to some form of the what has been called the classical theory of the formation of the Hebrew Bible, that it was achieved in three stages corresponding to the canonical divisions Law, Prophets, and Writings. He thinks the Law and the Prophets, as canonical sections, were closed in the period prior to Jesus, and probably also the Writings. This is a position I associate especially with conservative evangelicals (usually in reliance on Roger Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church*), but I regard as more compelling John Barton's arguments in *Oracles of God* that the Prophets section was not settled in the pre-Christian period. Provan cites 4QMMT as evidence for a tripartite conception of Scripture, and he cites Jubilees as possibly attesting a twenty-two-book canon (both on 61), but neither of these pieces of evidence should be used in this way without significant qualification. Provan (62) rehashes the old argument (citing Earle Ellis, *The Old Testament in Early Christianity*) that Josephus in *Against Apion*, when he limited the Jewish Scriptures to twenty-two books, "could not afford to indulge in careless misstatements that could be thrown back at him." I have never found this kind of argument compelling. Provan (58) presents unproblematically the list given by Origen as Origen's own Old Testament rather than, as Origen presents it, the list "according to the Hebrews."[1] When discussing the canon list of Melito of Sardis (65–66), he ignores the presence of the title "Wisdom" and focuses exclusively on Melito's omission of Esther, taking pains to ensure that his readers do not connect this omission with any Jewish doubts about the book. He mentions only in a footnote (69 n. 70) the absence of Esther from the Dead Sea Scrolls, and he implies that its failure to appear among the modern finds is merely accidental. In all of these cases, an argument could be made for Provan's position, but I would have preferred more acknowledgment of the difficulties presented by the available evidence.

More problems attend Provan's lengthier discussion of biblical interpretation. After an introduction to the subject (ch. 4), Provan uses two chapters to lay out the New Testament interpretation of the Old Testament (chs. 5–6) and two more chapters to cover patristic interpretation (chs. 7–8) before drawing some conclusions about how Protestants today should interpret Scripture (ch. 9). The main goal here is to discourage Protestants from interpreting allegorically in the manner of the fourth way Protestants. I myself am attracted to the kind of approach against which Provan is arguing.[2] I found his discussion here at times frustrating.

Provan promotes a literal reading of the Bible, and he defines *literal* for us:

> My argument, in the present chapter [= ch. 4], will be that to read Scripture "literally," in line with the Reformation perspectives on this topic, means to read it in accordance with

1. See the discussion in Edmon L. Gallagher and John D. Meade, *The Biblical Canon Lists from Early Christianity: Texts and Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 83.
2. For a recent, helpful example of the type of approach criticized by Provan, see Keith D. Stanglin, *The Letter and the Spirit of Biblical Interpretation: From the Early Church to Modern Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018).

> its various, apparent communicative intentions as a collection of texts from the past now integrated into one Great Story, doing justice to such realities as literary convention, idiom, metaphor, and typology or figuration. (86, emphasis removed)

Defining literal in this way helpfully distinguishes it from literalitistic reading, which fails to properly interpret figures of speech and metaphors and such. Defining literal in terms of the communicative intent of Scripture also creates problems for Provan's criticisms of allegory. It seems to me that Origen's allegories were another form of literal interpretation according to Provan's definition, for Origen was certainly attempting to arrive at the communicative intent of the author. An example of what not to do, according to Provan, is provided by Michael Graves's *The Inspiration and Interpretation of Scripture*, which laments that modern exegesis is too focused on the literal sense of the Bible, which cannot provide a meaningful message to the modern church (93). I wonder if Provan has failed to follow his own advice here by not reading Graves literally enough, specifically by misinterpreting what Graves means by literal.

Provan needs to show that the New Testament authors were already reading Scripture literally according to his definition, and this he attempts to do in chapters 5–6. Therefore he cannot accept the argument of Richard Hays, in *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness*, that the apostles teach Christians how to "read backwards," a formulation that implies that the apostles are seeing something new in the Old Testament, something beyond what was the communicative intent of the author (122–25). Paul always interpreted the Old Testament literally, even when he says that he is interpreting allegorically. Of course, Provan has to work hard to get Paul's allegory of Sarah and Hagar in Gal 4:21–31 to be a good, literal reading of Genesis, and I am left wondering whether equal hard work would allow Provan to present Philo's allegories as literal readings. Provan does not think so; regarding Philo's exegesis: "Evidently it departs in a serious manner from anything that could reasonably be described as the literal sense of the text" (143). But would Philo admit that he was not seeking the communicative intent of the text (= Provan's definition of literal)? Of course, Philo says he is interpreting allegorically, but so does Paul, and that will not settle it for Provan. As for the specific example of Philonic exegesis analyzed by Provan, where Philo identifies the serpent of Gen 3 with desire (*Opif.* 157–159), could we not say that the communicative intent (or one of the intentions) of Gen 3 is to highlight human desire and its sometimes-destructive consequences and to paint the serpent in the role of human desire? Perhaps there is a way of reading Philo's allegory such that it is helpful at illuminating something actually in the text.

The problem with allegory, according to Provan, is that it is an easy out; it renders Scripture nonauthoritative in that it spiritualizes any passage that, read literally, calls on readers to change their thinking or behavior. In fact, according to Provan, "throughout history and down to the present time, one never finds readers allegorizing genuinely authoritative texts to which they ascribe primary authority, even if they pretend otherwise" (207). Provan illustrates the "unseen

depths of the problem" of allegory through a discussion of anthropology (210–13), which, in the Platonic system influential among the church fathers, led to a disdain for marriage. Marriage "was certainly widely regarded as a less spiritual vocation than the monastic, single life" (211). What does this have to do with allegory? The church fathers "can simply assume that the Song of Songs *cannot* be part of the canon of Scripture and at the same time a book that celebrates not only marriage, but also erotic love" (212). The problem was that people were not reading the Song of Songs literally.

In response, those wishing to exalt the monastic life over marriage could cite certain scriptural passages, read quite straightforwardly (e.g., 1 Cor 7; Mark 3:31–35; Luke 18:29). It is not clear to me what lessons Provan wants us to take from Song of Songs; even on what Provan would call the literal level there are various ways of interpreting the book and various applications that might be found in it. Does the book celebrate marital sex, premarital sex, something else? Readers often determine such questions a priori; they bring commitments to the text. Many readers now do with Gen 1 what Provan accuses the church fathers of doing with the Song of Songs. That is, they already know that it should not be read literally—or, let us say, literalistically—so they read it in some other way. In this case, something outside the text (science) predetermines what meaning the text can have, assuming that it speaks truth. Readers are still looking for the communicative intent. Origen was looking for the communicative intent of the Song of Songs. He thought the author intended to communicate about souls rather than sex. He assumed the biblical authors consciously wrote in allegories (*Cels.* 4.49–50), and he did aim for their intent (βούλημα; *Cels.* 1.42; 3.74). For Nicholas of Lyra, the literal sense of the Song of Songs was the allegorical sense.[3]

Provan asserts that "whereas texts read literally can, like dogs, 'bite back' at the reader—challenging his or her current ideas—texts read 'spiritually' cannot" (213). Provan thinks this is a serious problem for allegory; he highlights it again in his conclusion (225): allegorized scripture has no teeth; it only says what you want it to say. But listen to John Chrysostom's letter to his friend Theodore due to the latter's decision to leave the monastic life and get married, quoted by Provan (211) and contingent, according to Provan, on an allegorical approach to the Bible, especially the Song of Songs.

> He who had already mounted to the sky, who was laughing to scorn the vanity of this life, who regarded bodily beauty no more than if it had been in forms of stone, who despised gold as it had been mud, and every kind of luxury as mire, even he, having been suddenly overwhelmed with the feverish longing of a preposterous passion, has ruined his health, and manly strength, and the bloom of his youth, and become a slave of pleasure. Shall we

3. See further Stanglin, *Letter and the Spirit*, 52, 62, 108.

> not weep then, I pray you, for such a man and bewail him, until we have got him back again? (*Ad Theodorum lapsum*, NPNF 1/9:92–93)

Is there not a bite in this approach to Christianity? Even if we disagree with Chrysostom's stance, it is hard to say that he is trying to make the Christian life devoid of hardship, to file down Scripture's sharp teeth. If this is an example of Provan's criticism of allegory, "the Holy Spirit can be found affirming what the reader wishes to have affirmed" (220), then I suppose one could criticize anything in the same way.

As I said earlier, I doubt Provan's criticisms of other Protestant ways of reading Scripture will prove persuasive to those attracted to such reading strategies. But reading Provan would help to improve the quality of the arguments of even his opponents.

The rest of the book contains, from my perspective, less about which to raise an objection. The two chapters closing out the first section, on the text of Scripture, arguing basically for an emphasis on the original languages, I found helpful. Sections 2 and 3, briefly summarized earlier, will probably find their way into my course reading assignments.

Provan's book is a wonderful guide to biblical interpretation, to sustained reflection on what the literal sense is and what it is not, and to how Christians in the Protestant tradition might faithfully engage Scripture five centuries after Luther and Calvin.