

## Review

Justo L. González, *The Bible in the Early Church*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022. ISBN 9780802881748

By Joshua Coutts, PhD

This is a well-organized, accessible, informative introduction to the Bible in the early Church. Historian Justo L. González has compacted a wealth of informative material into a relatively short book that serves both to illustrate the importance and value of Scripture for the earliest Christians, and thus also to underscore its ongoing significance today, such that “we study, preach, and live by this Bible that our ancestors have bequeathed to us and that today we bequeath to our descendants in faith” (p3).

In the first part, González discusses how the Bible came to have the “shape” it did in the earliest centuries. He points out key factors in early discussions of the Christian canon, citing the liturgical setting in which Scripture was read, the inclusion of deuterocanonical texts only in Greek Bibles, and the catalyst provided by heretical ideas in the second century. In addition to the content of Christian Bibles, material aspects of early Bibles are also described, such as writing materials used and both textual and extratextual features (e.g., the absence of punctuation or versification in early Bibles). The section concludes with two chapters on the transmission of texts by copyists leading up to the printing press.

Part two considers ways in which the Bible was used by early Christians. González rightly notes that in the early Church, the Bible was encountered primarily in the context of worship, where it was read by designated “readers” and expounded. Unsurprisingly, scripture was a foundational source in the training and formation of Christians as well as a catalyst for Christian attempts to affect the social order in the Roman Empire. Yet, González posits that as the Christian movement became more multi-lingual, there was a shift from Word to Sacrament, such that by the scholastic period, scripture was studied intensively largely by academics alone.

In part three, González describes three primary ways in which the Old Testament was interpreted in the early Church: texts were taken as predicting Christ, or read typologically, or allegorically. Such interpretations of scripture were used at times apologetically – either over against Jewish interpretations, or in dialogue with pagans. To limit this vast area, González furnishes readers with three key examples of Christians interpreting scripture: the creation narrative was crucial in debates with heretical ideas in the second century; the exodus narrative was typologically fertile for articulating the work of Christ; and John’s concept of the “logos” both derived

from Jewish wisdom literature and functioned as a bridge to wider Greek philosophical ideas.

González succeeds in disclosing the crucial role played by scripture in the early Church, and along the way inviting readers to restore scripture to this place. Indeed, one understated thread that runs through portions of the book is a celebration of the recovery of scripture during the Protestant Reformation. The book also succeeds in being accessible to a wider audience, uninformed by the minutiae of scholarship. Thus, for example, in a discussion of the manuscript tradition, González explains that “lower criticism” does not mean a “negative approach” to the text, just as “lower” is not pejorative, but distinguishes it from “higher criticism” (p40). His purpose is not to engage in the various debates in the scholarship in areas he touches upon; consequently, the book is free of footnotes. Nevertheless, González’s discussions are often punctuated by citations from early Church leaders such as Justin, Cyril, and Augustine. And he demonstrates awareness of scholarly debates at points. For instance, he notes there are various theories for early Christian adoption of the codex form, none of which he finds convincing (p30). And he rightly observes that it is overly simplistic to pigeon-hole early Christian commentators into one method of scriptural interpretation (p138).

At the same time, on some minor points, González makes assertions without evidence or reflects outdated or even incorrect ideas. For example, he asserts that the two books of Maccabees are really or originally "one" book (p12). And he claims without evidence that the Gospel of Truth was composed by Valentinus (p18); that the closing of the Jewish canon was a response in part to Christians (p10), who were officially expelled from the synagogue at Jamnia (p123); that early worship gatherings featured Scripture reading that could last “several hours” (p66); and that early “testimony collections” were used in polemics against Jews (p126).

One other minor quibble with the book is that, although it focuses on the Bible within the “early Church,” the time period in view is not clearly defined. In many chapters, the focus is on roughly the first three centuries. However, González often moves into the fifth and sixth centuries, or beyond to the Scholastic or Reformation periods, as for instance, when he traces the development of punctuation and versification, the evolution from papyrus to the printing press, and the formation of universities.

These minor points aside, the book is a rich introductory invitation to the early Church period with a unique focus on *the Bible*. The literature on early Christianity is vast, and the place of Scripture within that period ubiquitous. Thus, González has done a great service in producing this volume. In the process, he reminds of the treasure the church has received from those who read, copied, heard, and lived the scriptures in the past.

Joshua Coutts, PhD, is Associate Professor of New Testament at Providence Theological Seminary, Manitoba, Canada. He specializes in early Christology, Johannine literature, and theological interpretation. He is the author of *The Divine Name in the Gospel of John* (Mohr Siebeck, 2017), and co-editor of *It's About Life: The Formative Power of Scripture* (Regent, 2023).

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