

Lundeen, Erik. *The Reformation of the Literal: Prophecy and the Senses of Scripture in Early Modern Europe*. T&T Clark Studies in Historical Theology. New York: T&T Clark, 2025. 219pp. + 12pp. (front matter) + 30pp. (back matter).

The Reformers famously emphasized literal interpretation and rejected the allegorical approaches common in earlier eras of the church, or so the popular history goes. In the past half century scholars have pushed back against this narrative by arguing that the Reformers stood in greater continuity with their medieval predecessors than many think. Eric Lundeen, a pastor at Village Church of Gurnee (IL) and a fellow with the Center for Pastor Theologians, steps into this discussion with a detailed analysis of what the Reformers practiced when they claimed to interpret according to the literal sense.

Lundeen approaches the issue of Reformation interpretation by examining Johannes Oecolampadius's commentary on Isaiah (1525) in conversation with commentaries by Jerome, Cyril of Alexandria, Chrysostom, Thomas Aquinas, Nicholas of Lyra, Martin Luther (lectures given from 1527–1530), Conrad Pellican (1534), Johannes Brenz (1550), John Calvin (1551; 2nd ed., 1559), Wolfgang Musculus (1557), and Lucas Osiander (1578). As the earliest Reformation commentator on Isaiah, Oecolampadius is a key transitional figure.

The first chapter introduces readers to Oecolampadius. He worked with Erasmus on his famed Greek NT. Nonetheless, Oecolampadius broke with Erasmus over his controversy with Luther. Oecolampadius sided with the Swiss reformers against the Lutherans in the Eucharistic controversy. He was highly regarded for his facility with the Hebrew language.

Chapters 2 through 4 compare Oecolampadius's exegesis of Isaiah with select interpreters who preceded him. At the end of each of these chapters, Lundeen briefly looks at how the six Reformation-era commentators handled the same passages. Chapter 2 compares Oecolampadius's exegesis of Isaiah 5:1–7, 13:1–14:23, and 21:1–10 with that of Jerome, Cyril of Alexandria, and Chrysostom, with an eye to how they handle figures of speech and extended metaphors or literary allegories (that is, allegories written by the author). Chapter 3 turns to the medieval period and compares Oecolampadius with Thomas Aquinas and Nicholas of Lyra on Isaiah 7:14, 8:1–4, 9:7, 11:1, and 49:1. The chapter examines how Christological passages in Isaiah are read in their OT context. Chapter 4 demonstrates that Oecolampadius was shaped by medieval Jewish exegesis. Whereas patristic and medieval exegesis tended to take passages piecemeal and to read them Christologically, medieval Jewish interpretation tended to read the prophets as literary works to be interpreted in light of the whole and as relating to the prophet's own time. Lundeen summarizes these two tendencies with the words "coherence and contemporaneity." Oecolampadius adopted both emphases in his commentary on Isaiah while also advocating for Christological readings of the prophets. Lundeen proposes that Oecolampadius may have been attracted to Jewish exegesis due to a Renaissance emphasis on the interpretation of texts as literary wholes.

Chapters 5 and 6 turn to Isaiah 40–66 and place Oecolampadius in more detailed conversation with the six Reformation commentators on Isaiah. Chapter 5 focuses on three issues: the interpretation of metaphors, the interpretation of texts quoted or alluded to in the NT, and the "coherence and

contemporaneity” of Isaiah’s prophecies in these chapters. Chapter 6 looks at the issue of referentiality, particularly with regard to the Cyrus oracle in Isaiah 44 and 45.

A few examples of the comparative work that forms the heart of this book will give the reader a sense of the similarities and differences among the various interpretive traditions. Isaiah 5:1–7 is, in Lundeen’s terminology, a “literary allegory.” Notably, Chrysostom recognized the difference between literary allegory and allegorical interpretation while Jerome and Cyril did not. Jerome and Cyril also identified symbolic significance in each detail of Isaiah 5:1–7, while Chrysostom simply took the main point of the metaphor as found in v. 7. Oecolampadius warned against finding a symbolic meaning in each detail of the passage, but in the end he did just that. In this he was followed by five of the six Reformers Lundeen surveyed, with Calvin alone adopting the approach of Chrysostom.

The interpretation of Isaiah 13–14 is likewise intriguing. Jerome and Cyril understood Isaiah 13–14 to be about the fall of Babylon to the Medes and Persians according to the historical sense, but about the devil’s fall, the church’s present triumph over Satan, and yet future eschatological judgments according to the spiritual sense. In broad strokes Oecolampadius agreed, but he sought to link tightly the historical and spiritual senses and to justify the spiritual sense from the letter. He noted that the language of Isaiah 13 in the historical sense had to be understood as hyperbolic. In addition, the details of Isaiah 13 did not match historical events precisely. Thus, Oecolampadius proposed that Babylon served as a type, with the text partially fulfilled historically (the literal sense) and partially fulfilled eschatologically (the anagogical sense). The six Reformation interpreters were not inclined to recognize a spiritual sense, and they universally rejected the fall of Satan interpretation of Isaiah 14. Interestingly, those interpreters who distinguished between a literal sense and a spiritual sense read the text metaphorically when reading according to the literal or historical sense and non-metaphorically (one would say *literally* except that term has already been applied to the historical reading) to arrive at the spiritual or eschatological sense.

Isaiah 16:1–5 serves as an example of a shift from patristic and medieval readings of Scripture toward readings that valued coherence. In his comments on Isaiah 16:1, Jerome proposed that Isaiah shifted sharply away from a historical prophecy about Moab to speak of Christ (the Lamb) descended from the rock (Ruth the Moabitess), shifted back to an oracle regarding Moab in verses 2–4, and then shifted back to Christ in verse 5. This became the dominant Christian reading, and this is the view found in the commentaries by Thomas and Lyra. Medieval Jewish interpreters understood Isaiah 16 to be a continuation of Isaiah 15. The sheep in 16:1 referred to tribute that Moab paid to Israel. Verse 5 referred to the rule of Hezekiah. Oecolampadius followed the Jewish reading, but he then claimed that Hezekiah was a type of Christ. He applied the passage to Christians by paralleling the tribute paid to Hezekiah with the requirement that Christians offer themselves up to Christ. The other Reformers also followed the Jewish interpretation of verse 1, but they divided regarding verse 5. Luther read verse 5 as about Hezekiah alone. Brenz and Osiander followed Jerome and the tradition in holding it was about Christ alone. The Reformed interpreters, Pellican, Musculus, and Calvin, followed Oecolampadius in seeing Hezekiah as a type of Christ.

Isaiah 65:25 provides a case study in the handling of metaphor. Luther, Osiander, and Musculus followed the traditional interpretation that understood the wild beasts as metaphors for the wicked;

their gentling referred to conversion. Oecolampadius adopted this symbolic reading, but he also argued that it was fulfilled literally in Christ's first coming (cf. Mark 1:13; Acts 28:3–6; Mark 16:18; Luke 10:19). He posited, "Any harm from animals that happened in this life, he wrote, could surely only be due to their unbelief" (169). Calvin opted for a nonmetaphorical reading and a fulfillment at the Second Advent, but he also taught that the main point of the text was a metaphor about sinners brought to obedience in Christ. Brenz rejected these metaphorical readings and read the text to teach that the beasts who became ferocious due to Adam's sin could not ultimately harm Christians who have eternal life in Christ.

The Cyrus oracle in Isaiah 44 and 45 provided an opportunity to examine different approaches to referentiality. The patristic and medieval commentators held that the literal sense had only a single referent but that additional referents could be found in the spiritual senses. Oecolampadius is aligned with the preceding tradition on this point. The Lutherans, however, rejected the spiritual sense while maintaining that the literal sense could only have one referent. They saw Cyrus as the only referent of this prophecy. The Reformed interpreters who followed Oecolampadius likewise rejected spiritual senses, but they were willing to see multiple referents and fulfillments in the literal sense, often due to their view of typology.

Lundeen concludes from this survey that the Reformers had a complicated and diverse understanding of what it meant to read a text literally. However, it seems instead that a variety of generally valid interpretive strategies were deployed by the Reformers. Each of these could be valid depending on the passage. Recognizing this deflates, in my opinion, Lundeen's emphasis on the diversity of literal interpretation.

Lundeen is not opposed to the scholarly trend of finding Reformation hermeneutics in line with the preceding tradition. For instance, he observes that Calvin is to a certain extent the outlier in refusing to make any use of multiple senses. I confess that I don't see this entirely borne out in the preceding text. Oecolampadius seemed unique among the Reformers in admitting a spiritual sense, and his spiritual sense in Isaiah 13–14 is arguably getting at the literal sense of the passage. In addition, Lundeen also notes that his chapter on the influence of medieval Jewish exegesis "bucks current scholarly trends by pointing to significant discontinuities between the exegesis of the reformers and that of their patristic and medieval Christian predecessors" (126). He also observes that those who claim that Calvin engaged in non-literal exegesis operate with a narrower conception of the literal sense than Calvin did. He does not reject their definition of the literal sense, but he does hold that they ought to make this fact clear in their discussions.

At the end of this volume Lundeen suggests other avenues for extending his research. The avenue that would most interest me would be a similar study on biblical books of genres other than prophecy. It would also be worthwhile to advance this study into the post-Reformation era. If those projects go forward, this learned, informative, and clearly written work will provide an excellent model.

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