The Word Made Flesh

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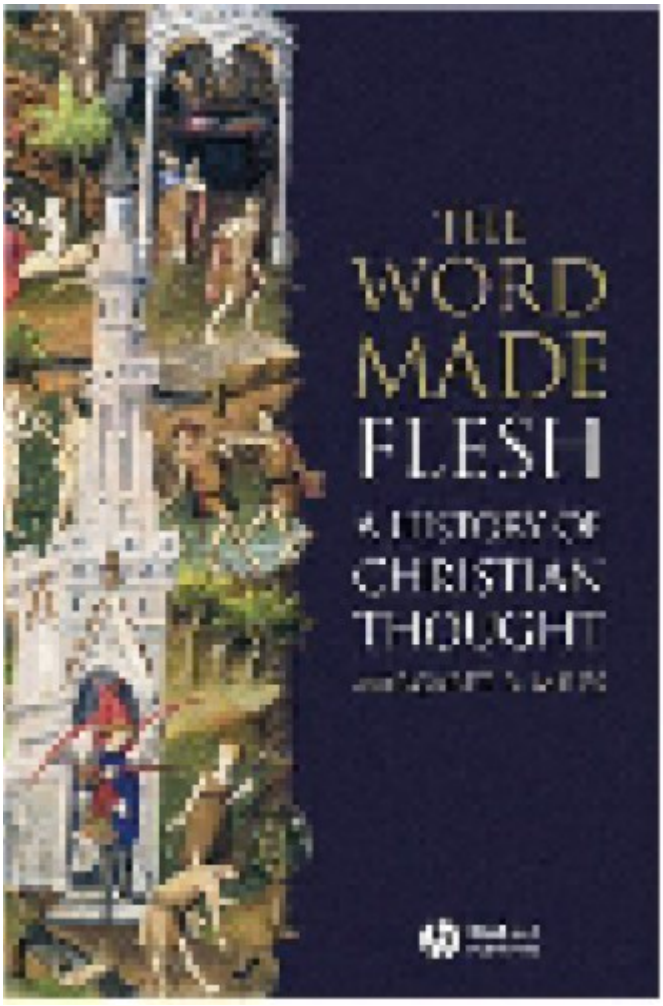
In Review



The Word Made Flesh: A History of Christian Thought

Margaret R. Miles
Blackwell

All too often the story of theology has been told as though it were purely cerebral. “Brains on a string,” as someone once quipped. The flesh and the mind of the

church are sundered. Margaret Miles gives us a picture of the whole thinking, breathing, gendered ecclesial body. The history of Christian thought and the social and cultural history of Christians cannot, after Miles, be readily chronicled apart from one another. Attempts to do so will likely be found wanting in comparison with this monumental work.

The fault line between church history and historical theology is well known by those who map these disciplines. The former deals with context, the latter with the evolution of ideas, often with scant attention to sociohistorical questions. So a church historian may tell us about Constantine's rule and its effects on the development of the church, and a historical theologian may discuss how Platonism shapes theological ideas over time and among different theologians. Although there is purpose in this conventional division, Miles shows us the danger of tearing the Word out of its flesh. You end up with the historian's equivalent of bad Christology, something like Docetism's ghostly Jesus.

Miles puts the ecclesial body back together, using "the Word made flesh" as a key to unlock some familiar rooms. Architecture, music, painting—Christianity is embodied in each of these "texts." Art is not window dressing in an incarnate faith; it is a theological medium. Yes, read Aquinas carefully, but also take a close look at the Mérode Altarpiece, or listen to Gregorian chant. Only then will you know something about medieval theology.

Of course, the human body is the Word's flesh, too. Miles points to the triumph of orthodox belief in the incarnation over gnostic rejection of any role for the body in salvation. With that in mind, she provokes us to ask whose bodies have produced theology and what theologies those bodies have signified. She points us to what was done with Christian bodies in practices like asceticism and experiences like martyrdom. Ascetic bodies were signifiers of resurrection faith, of release from the heavy hand of daily drudgery and slavery to passions.

And the flesh is made word. Miles observes that language-making has always been socially located, done by women and men in varying states of power and influence. To understand the words, we must know something about the flesh that produced them. To Miles, Christian thought is not an orderly procession of ideas moving from mind to mind through the ages. Rather, we have "clusters of volatile excitement, different in different times and places," consisting of art, discourse and practices. Theological vocabulary and practices wax and wane, and we should not attempt to

impose order on this lively conversation. For good or ill, theological questions and answers are relative to their time and place, so Miles wants us to ask an overarching question that is constant: What does it mean "to participate in the religion of the Word made flesh”? Diverse theologies have articulated the answers, leaving no single determinative answer and revealing no single authoritative locale.

Miles tells her story sympathetically and critically. She’s sympathetic toward Christianity’s aesthetic and practical achievements, but critical of the “power, social location, and the institutional affiliations that authorized some and ignored and persecuted others.” She explains that “a more accurate history is simultaneously a more ambiguous history, a history of the gains *and* losses of the Christian past.” In writing that more accurate history, Miles attempts to reconstruct the whole of the Christian life of the past: its culture, its triumphs and its miserable failures.

The chapters, divided by century, are long and thorough. In some places the discourse is very familiar, offering no new perspective on well-known figures and ideas, but Miles’s style is always lively and entertaining. Her book will be useful to instructors looking for fresh ways to conceptualize an era without the artificial separations among institutions, social history, and ideas. Reference needs are served by a detailed index and short bibliographies within the chapters. Teachers, students, curious readers and pastors may find that the accompanying “Image Bank” CD is a useful tool. It features 154 color pictures from all periods covered in the book, including images of catacomb frescoes, church-floor mosaics, medieval altarpieces, and plates from Reformation-era books.

Miles is emeritus professor of historical theology at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, and a veteran scholar at Harvard Divinity School. Her 14 books on themes of the body and historical theology show that she has been working up to this magnum opus for a long time. As the first female historian to produce a lengthy account of the subject, Miles joins an august array of scholars who have drawn a variety of maps through this familiar territory in the past 30 years. She gives us a valuable tool for telling a story that is much too complex for intellectual or social history alone to narrate, painting a picture of historic Christian thought that is adequate for the inquiries of 21st-century readers.

If students complain of boredom in a historical theology class, it may be because the words they learn have been stripped of their intriguing, artful, colorful, gendered flesh. Miles can help them see the whole body.