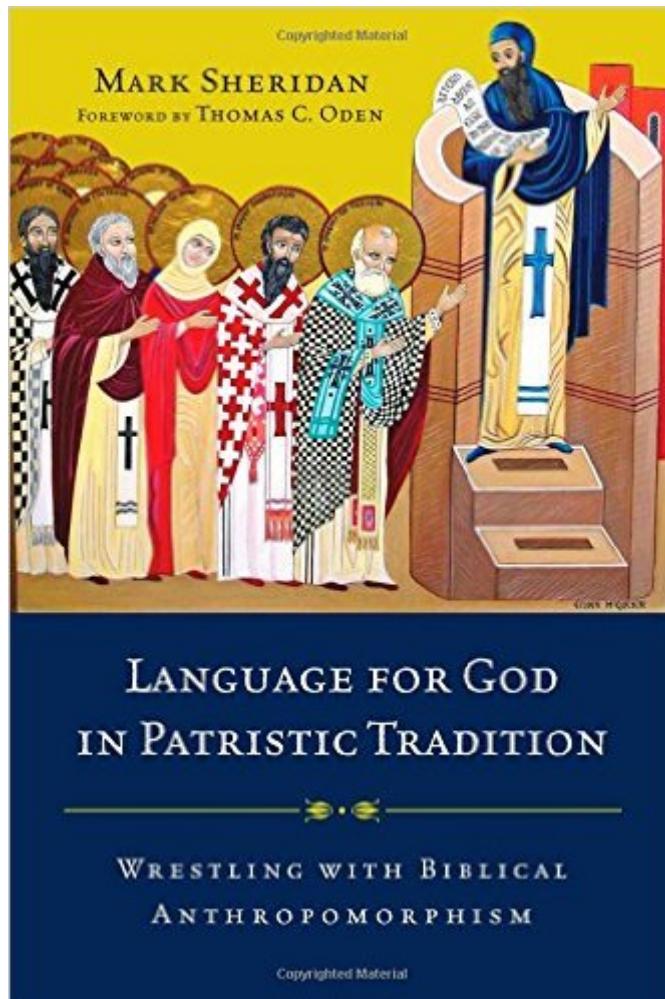


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Language For God In Patristic Tradition: Wrestling With Biblical Anthropomorphism



Synopsis

Criticism of myth in the Bible is not a modern problem. Its roots go back to the earliest Christian theologians, and before them, to ancient Greek and Jewish thinkers. The dilemma posed by texts that ascribe human characteristics and emotions to the divine is a perennial problem, and we have much to learn from the ancient attempts to address it. Mark Sheridan provides a theological and historical analysis of the patristic interpretation of Scripture's anthropomorphic and anthropopathic language for God. Rather than reject the Bible as mere stories, ancient Jewish and Christian theologians read these texts allegorically or theologically in order to discover the truth contained within them. They recognized that an edifying and appropriate interpretation of these stories required that one start from the understanding that "God is not a human being" (Num 23:19). Sheridan brings the patristic tradition into conversation with modern interpreters to show the abiding significance of its theological interpretation for today. Language for God in Patristic Tradition is a landmark resource for students of ancient Christian theology. Wide-ranging in scope and accessible in its analysis, it demonstrates that those engaged in theological interpretation of Scripture have much to gain from studying their forebears in the faith.

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Customer Reviews

One of the challenges of biblical interpretation is the way that the Bible describes God. In some places in the Bible, God is above the heavens and there is none like him. In other places, God seems like any other earthly ruler--sitting on a throne, waging war, standing, laughing, getting

angry. The difficulty of sorting out God's godhood from his human descriptions has been an issue that theologians have wrestled with from the early centuries of Christianity. We have a lot we can learn from the Ancient theological approach to Scripture. Mark Sheridan is a Benedictine monk and vice rector and dean of the faculty of theology at the Pontifical Athenaeum of St. Anselm in Rome. He has written several monographs and edited the Genesis 12-50 volume of the ancient Christian Commentary on the Scripture. In *Language For God in Patristic Tradition: Wrestling with Biblical Anthropomorphism*, Sheridan examines ancient biblical interpretation, exploring what the church fathers have to teach us about reading Scripture and their theology of God. One of the hallmark's of patristic tradition is the commitment to interpreting the Bible in a manner "worthy of God" and "useful for us." Anthropomorphism and anthropopathism in the Bible, make God seem "too human." Sheridan demonstrates that the general patristic consensus was that God was wholly unlike humanity; however where the Bible involves human matters, 'it carries the human intellect, manners and way of speaking' (30). Thus the otherness of God is preserved, but the fathers had a way of parsing those places of scripture where God seemed all-to-human.

Language for God in Patristic Tradition: Wrestling with Biblical Anthropomorphism. By Mark Sheridan. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015. 254 pp. \$20.80. ISBN 978-0-8308-4064-9. As the authors of the recently published book, *Reformed Catholicity*, point out in the introduction to their book, there is a growing interest in the writings and theological ponderings of early church theologians. This book is another example of that interest, and will most likely contribute to maintaining that interest. For many Protestants the writings of the early church fathers are seen as corruptions of the gospel, or as the useless writings of old and overly mystique thinkers. It should be kept in mind, however, that many of the early church fathers were disciples of the followers of Christ himself, and many of the early church fathers grew up in similar cultural and historical environments as those to whom the apostles were witnessing and ministering. This fact would seem to imply that they, more than us, were better qualified to understand and interpret the writings of the New Testament. Perhaps it would be best, prior to passing judgment on their interpretations, to consider their way of approaching sacred scriptures, in light of their historical and cultural environment, and their particular concerns. In this book review we will consider the purpose of this book, provide a brief overview of the contents of the book, and consider the relative worth of this book. The Bible contains many different types of descriptions of God, some of them predicate seemingly human characteristics of God, others predicate emotions of God, others predicate qualitative or quantitative change of God.

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God does not behave like humans.
(215) How is one to speak of God? The church has often looked at the question of talking about God and arrived at interesting conclusions. In *Language for God in Patristic Tradition* (henceforth *Language for God*) Mark Sheridan presents a comprehensive look at how the early church fathers approached passages in Scriptures that contained difficult descriptions of God. Sheridan's writing is fluid and easy to read. His explication of the fathers provides consistently valuable and historical insights. An appendix is even added for those unacquainted with ancient methods of interpretations. (26). Before addressing the Patristic content of *Language for God*, it is worth noting the expressed opinion of the author. In multiple places Sheridan expresses clear disdain for evangelical literalism (149-151, 200-205, 213-215), and he depicts New Testament revelation as used to correct, complement or complete Scripture. (104). Despite spending a lengthy amount of time addressing the allegorical methods of the early fathers, these approaches are dismissed on the basis that Hebrew was not the original language of mankind and hidden meanings within words are not real (213-214). After nearly two hundred pages contemplating the details of the early church fathers, their instruction and advice are swept aside within a few paragraphs, aside from retaining a principal idea of theological interpretation. (215). Apart from the author's opposition to evangelical literalism, the patristic elements of *Language for God* are phenomenal.

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