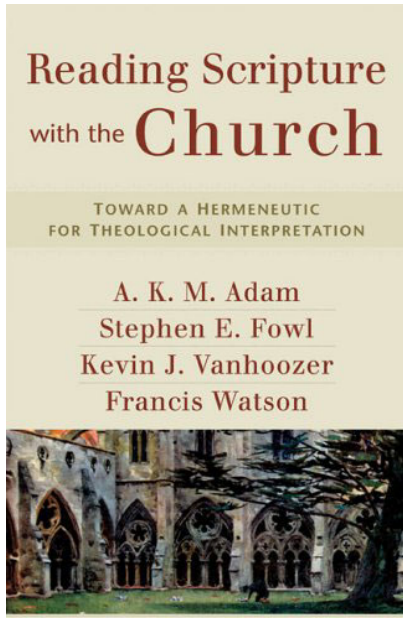


RBL 04/2007



Adam, A. K. M., Stephen Fowl, Kevin Vanhoozer, and Francis Watson

Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation

Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006. Pp. 155. Paper. \$17.99. ISBN 0801031737.

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The significance of this project is its juxtaposition of contributions from four major voices in recent theological hermeneutics. Although the book shows few signs of its *Sitz im Leben*, these essays, we are told, derive from the Winslow Lectures at Seabury-Western Theological Seminary. The result is a collection of four more-or-less coordinated essays reflecting more-or-less disparate approaches to this hermeneutical task; also included is a response written by each contributor to the other three presentations. The anonymous editor refers to the book as a record of conversation, but its pages actually allow for little in the way of the give-and-take on which we might have wished to eavesdrop.

The first essay, written by Adam, emphasizes “biblical theology as signifying practice,” developing an argument found also in Adam’s recent publication, *Faithful Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006). Biblical theology, he insists, is not a cloistered discipline of meaning discovery and translation, as though biblical texts were “cryptograms with a concealed key that, once discovered, will reveal a recognizably definite correct answer beyond any shadow of disagreement” (22). Biblical theology is instead a practice open to all, including especially those lacking scholarly credentials who find in their interactions with scriptural texts an abundance of meaning. “While the privileged interpreters fastidiously redecorate the landscaping inside their gated community, unlicensed readers

of the Bible continue to discover precious meaning in the dumpsters of academic criticism” (24). This remapping of biblical theology does not leave questions of meaning floating hopelessly in the ocean of postmodern subjectivity, according to Adam, because of such structures of hermeneutical accountability as the history of interpretation and the rule of faith, as well as other aesthetic and ethical criteria. Knowing the Bible well and studying it faithfully and steadily in community, he writes, we encounter and embody the ways of God.

Those familiar with Stephen Fowl’s work in theological interpretation will not be surprised to find his introduction here to the exegesis of Thomas Aquinas as a way of discussing “the importance of a multivoiced literal sense of Scripture.” Thomas, Fowl explains, understood Scripture’s literal sense itself to be multifaceted—this in contrast to those later exegetes who would argue for the singularity of the literal sense. For a number of reasons (e.g., because of the nature of the triune God who intends in these texts a plurality of meanings, because of the ever-changing complexity of the world that Scripture must address, because of the polyphonic history of interpretation of Scripture), it behooves us to embrace this view of the meaning of Scripture as underdetermined. With regard to such exemplary interpreters as Aquinas, “the legitimate diversity in their interpretation of Scripture can both open and regulate diversity in our own interpretation. In this way we can more fully plumb the riches intended by the Holy Spirit in speaking the Scriptures in the first place” (50).

In contrast to the manifold significance of Scripture championed by Adam and Fowl, Vanhoozer defends an interpretive program centered on the importance of an author’s communicative intent. Interacting with critics of his earlier book, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), he advances his understanding of theological interpretation as “the process of discerning the discourse, divine and human, in the canonical work.” “Whose discourse counts?” he asks. “I answer: that of the original historical author and the divine author who commissions, enables, authorizes, and accompanies it” (71). By means of a provocative reading of Paul’s Letter to Philemon, Vanhoozer urges interpretive habits that make sense of the drama of redemption (both with reference to biblical text and the church’s contemporary life), that generate right action, and that refresh the heart. Interestingly, Vanhoozer is alone as a philosophical theologian among New Testament scholars in this book and yet is the only one actually to engage in his own theological reading of a New Testament text.

Manifestly, these first three essays position theological interpretation ecclesially. The church is the community within which interpretation takes place and which requires that the Bible be read like any other book as well as *not* like any other book. What is more, in some sense, the church is the community constituted by its engagement with these texts.

Ethical performance or embodiment of Scripture is for each a requisite of theological interpretation. Moreover, all three essayists sit loosely with respect to the hermeneutical constraints of the historical-critical paradigm and avoid the identification of a text's contemporary significance as either the by-product of exegesis or the "application" of its original meaning.

Less easy to locate in relation to these first three essays is Watson's contribution. Indeed, Watson himself observes that his conversations partners are "much exercised over the relation of author to reader" (121), whereas his own essay considers the theological rationale for the fourfold character of the church's canonical Gospel. Connections can be made, of course, since the presence of four Gospels in the New Testament canon all bearing witness to the same gospel, Jesus Christ, attests to a unity-in-plurality. More suggestive, though, is the recommendation he registers in his short response to the other essayists that we may need to expand our hermeneutical repertoire through consideration of Augustine's treatise, *On Christian Doctrine*. It would have been useful to hear more from Watson on this score.

Reading Scripture with the Church thus provides a handy entry-point into the thought of three key players in what is now an expanding conversation around theological hermeneutics of Christian Scripture. Students will need to look elsewhere for Watson's approach to this work, say, in his *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).