
Thiselton’s felicitous endeavor to provide an overview over the principal methods, positions, and developments in the field of hermeneutics for the student and general reader covering two thousand years of Bible interpretation is based on a life’s work on the subject and shows the author’s undisputed expertise and mastery of the field. The textbook on hermeneutics is the didactic fruit of Thiselton’s oeuvre and an impressive introductory read for anyone who is interested in finding his way through an extremely diverse and complex subject.
Thiselton’s textbook is divided into seventeen chapters, with the first two chapters serving as an introduction. Thiselton’s definition of hermeneutics, and especially of biblical hermeneutics over against philosophical hermeneutics, reads: “Hermeneutics explores how we read, understand, handle texts, especially those written in another time or in a context of life different from our own. Biblical hermeneutics investigates more specifically how we read, understand, apply, and respond to biblical texts” (1). Thus, biblical hermeneutics addresses the basic questions of “Can the Bible mean anything we want it to mean? How can we agree about norms or criteria for the responsible or valid interpretation of Scripture?” (2) and sets out to explore “the conditions and criteria that operate to try to ensure responsible, valid, fruitful, or appropriate interpretation” (4). In chapter 1 (1–16), the subject is introduced as an interdisciplinary endeavor engaging biblical, philosophical, literary, social, and linguistic aspects. In stressing the multidisciplinary nature of hermeneutics and in presenting a variety of hermeneutical positions, it is the expressed aim of Thiselton’s study to enable the reader to acquire a habit of respect for different views and arguments, to encounter the integrating dimension of the subject, and thus to evaluate critically his or her own way of reading texts. The second chapter (17–34) engages in the differentiation between the influence of the individual and the community on the interpretation and sets the traditional approaches of biblical hermeneutics based on the understanding of the rootedness of text in time and place in an exemplary way against more recent influences in hermeneutical thought from philosophy, social sciences, as well as literary theory such as New Criticism and reader-response theories. Thiselton includes several figures that serve to illustrate the theories discussed. This opening of the book documents the author’s conviction that hermeneutics as an academic and practical discipline is inevitably a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary endeavor.

Chapter 3 (35–59) employs Jesus’ parables as a test case for different hermeneutical methods. After summarizing some important characteristics of parables, such as their figurative and metaphoric form, their openness to the readers’ interpretation, and their existential dimension, the chapter presents a series of approaches to the interpretation of parables, for example, the strictly historical approach (Jülicher, Dodd, Jeremias) and its limits, the rhetorical approach and literary criticism (Amos Wilder, Robert Funk, Dan Otto Via, John Dominic Crossan, Bernard B. Scott), the New Hermeneutic (Ernst Fuchs, Gerhard Ebeling), narrative criticism (Paul Ricoeur), reader-response (Stanley Fish) and redaction criticism (J. D. Kingsbury), the semiotic approach (Mary Ann Tolbert) and the general influence of postmodern thinking. Thiselton concludes that, concerning the interpretation, the genre of parable cannot be generalized but has to be approached multidimensionally—one single approach will not be sufficient to present the key to all the parables of Jesus.
While following a historical trajectory in chapters 4–16, Thiselton’s priorities are clearly set out in the proportional allocation of space conceded to hermeneutics up to the nineteenth century (chs. 4–7: 60–147) and hermeneutics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (chs. 8–16: 148–348)—more than half the study is dedicated to the more recent developments in hermeneutics; its roots and early tendencies are addressed in rather brief, cursory references.

In chapter 4 (60–75) Thiselton gives an overview of “A Legacy of Perennial Questions from the Ancient World.” First he surveys the roots of hermeneutics in rabbinic Judaism and introduces midrash, pesher, and allegorical and symbolic interpretation, all of which are marked as approaches that Christianity inherited. Then the literature and methods of interpretation of the Greek-speaking Jewish community are summarized (e.g., LXX, Philo and Josephus, wisdom and apocalyptic literature); the Greek roots of interpretation, especially in the Stoic philosophical tradition, are referred to with a particular focus on the development and evaluation of the method of allegorical interpretation. Chapter 4 demonstrates that the roots of hermeneutical methods discussed up to today can be traced back to approaches originating in antiquity.

The following chapter (76–99) raises the question of hermeneutics within the Bible and in the second century in general. Problematic issues concerning methods of interpretation within the New Testament are raised in chapter 5: in Pauline literature and the Gospels, the Old Testament was considered a frame of reference for the events recorded in the New Testament; Hebrews, 1 Peter, and Revelation employ references to and quotations from the Old Testament for the preunderstanding of New Testament events—concerning 1 Peter 1:18, for example, “an understanding of redemption from Egypt in the Old Testament provides their fullest pre-understanding of redemption by Christ” (81). Another New Testament paradigm that Thiselton considers in much detail and cautious precision—in order to avoid misunderstandings as to its definition and use—is the use of an allegorical or typological interpretation of the Old Testament. This overview over models of interpretation within canonical early Christian literature is followed by a cursory presentation of the first approaches to the interpretation of the New Testament by Marcion, gnostic writers, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Aristides, Ignatius of Antioch, and Clement of Alexandria. In chapter 5 Thiselton demonstrates that from the beginning a wide range of hermeneutical approaches co-existed within Christianity and was accepted in order to meet specific situational and theological needs.

Chapter 6 (100–123) covers biblical hermeneutics from the third century to the thirteenth century. Starting with the theologians of the Latin West, Hippolytus, Tertullian, Ambrose, and Jerome, who developed their very individual hermeneutical approaches interwoven with apologetic and theological-dogmatic concerns with a view to the use of the Bible by
heretics, the chapter sets the Alexandrian theologians Origen, Athanasius, Didymus, and Cyril over against the Antiochene school of Diodore, Theodore, John Chrysostom, and Theodoret, opposing the allegorical with the historical or literal interpretation of the texts. Thiselton leads on to Augustine and Gregory the Great and into the hermeneutics of the Middle Ages, where some central figures are mentioned (e.g., Bernard of Clairvaux, Hugh of St. Victor, Peter Lombard, Thomas Aquinas). Each hermeneutical approach is presented with references to biographical data, embedded within the complete works of the respective theologian as well as the historical context and theological debates of the time and evaluated concerning the position’s heuristic gain and relevance. Extensive quotations from the sources texts—such as from Origen’s De principiis (106)—and references to the Greek terminology (in transcription) give substance to the author’s argumentation and offer the reader a multifaceted insight into the debate.

Chapter 7 (124–47) expounds on hermeneutics in the time of the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the rise of biblical criticism. With regard to the Reformation, Wycliffe, Luther and Melanchthon, Tyndale, and Calvin are discussed; Protestant orthodoxy, represented by Newman, Flacius Illyricus, Christian Wolff, J. M. Chladenius, is set against the pietistic view of (among others) Spener, Francke, and Bengel. The general outline of Enlightenment thought is represented with reference to particular thought leaders such as Kant, Hobbes, the Deists, and Hume; Semler, Ernesti, Michaelis, Lessing, Eichhorn, Griesbach, and Gabler are introduced in view of their contribution to the rise of biblical criticism; the nineteenth century is represented by, among others, de Wette, Lachmann, Hengstenberg, Strauss, Baur, Jowett, Gore, Wellhausen, Westcott, Lightfoot, and Hort. The plurality of positions adequately demonstrates the diversity and pluriformity of methods and approaches especially within sophisticated eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholarship and their influence on biblical interpretation until today.

Where some accounts remain very brief in relation to the respective scholars’ influence in the field of hermeneutics, Thiselton refers to his previous works (for Luther, e.g., to New Horizons in Hermeneutics) or secondary literature to compensate for the brevity of presentation. Repeatedly Thiselton draws parallels between the major exponents and additional representatives of an approach and traces the historical development of the hermeneutical endeavor, thus—despite the inevitable brevity of the survey—developing a thorough and highly differentiated overall picture of the historical and theological situation at the time.

Chapters 8–12 (148–254) explore individual hermeneutical conceptions, each time considering the influences, career, and major works of the scholar discussed in order to focus on the innovative potential of the individual contributions and closing with a critical assessment. Thiselton introduces the reader to the hermeneutical program of Schleiermacher and Dilthey (ch. 8, 148–65) and Bultmann (ch. 9, 166–84) as well as some
mid-twentieth-century approaches such as Barth’s hermeneutics, the New Hermeneutics of Fuchs and Ebeling, structuralism, poststructuralism and Barr’s semantics (ch. 10, 185–205); against the backdrop of these theological-hermeneutical approaches, the philosophers Gadamer (ch. 11, 206–27) and Ricoeur (ch. 12, 228–54) are presented as “the two most significant theorists of hermeneutics of the twentieth century” (228).

The following chapters cover several important hermeneutical tendencies of the twentieth century: chapter 13 (255–78) is devoted to the hermeneutics of liberation theologies and postcolonial hermeneutics, chapter 14 (279–305) to feminist and womanist hermeneutics, chapter 15 (306–26) to reader-response and reception theory. Each hermeneutical approach is presented with the help of extensive quotations from the original works, described with reference to its origin, basic concept, and development, connected with references to the positions of the most important exponents and situated in its historical, sociological, and history-of-thought context. An assessment of the relevance of the approach for biblical interpretation sums up each comprehensive and thorough overview.

In chapter 16 (327–48) the textbook discusses hermeneutical approaches of the present, and readers are confronted with the question of the compatibility of postmodernism and Christian faith. Considering the positions of European and American postmodernism according to Jacques Derrida (and Roland Barthes), Jean-Francois Lyotard (and Jean Baudrillard), Michel Foucault, and Richard Rorty (and Stanley Fish), Thiselton discusses whether postmodernist approaches can be helpful in the biblical hermeneutical endeavor and comes to the conclusion that “some of its insights are of positive value to Christian faith, while other themes and aspects are not only mistaken but also seductive and disastrous” (330). Among the latter he names especially the postmodernist assumption of the indeterminacy of meaning and Lyotard’s work on “the differend,” which asserts the impossibility of suppressing pluriformity in meaning and rejects claims to universal legitimation and authority. The postmodernist relativization of positivism and rationalism, on the contrary, is rather welcomed. Thus biblical hermeneutics “is well served by postmodernity in certain limited respects, but becomes quite impossible in the light of others” (331).

The final chapter contains Thiselton’s apology: because of the unduly abridged way certain subject matters have to be dealt with in the context of an introductory textbook, they should not be considered neglected. The sparing attention that divine agency and authority of Scripture as well as the resurgence of allegory in hermeneutics obtained is countered with a plea for a multidimensional approach and a plurality of methods in the hermeneutics of the Bible. Concerning the latest advances in linguistics and pragmatics, Thiselton argues that they were “too new to include in full detail as part of a textbook,” in case they might turn out to be “a passing fashion” (350, 351). The choice of positions
discussed is justified with reference to the fact of having had to select vigorously in order to obtain a readable textbook. No matter whether the postmodern reader of Thiselton’s textbook shares the author’s opinion concerning the dismissive assessment of the most recent developments in biblical hermeneutics, the scope of an introductory textbook may warrant the rather short overview over those recent developments. The introduction is a landmark work concerning the comprehensive and thorough compilation and presentation of representative positions, their development, and establishment in biblical studies. Hints at the developments of the recent years may result in engaged readers enquiring into those approaches on their own account.

Apart from the masterly way of presenting a complex subject and covering a large range of seminal hermeneutical conceptions, another of the strengths of Thiselton’s new volume on hermeneutics is its engagement with source texts as well as secondary literature. While source texts are quoted extensively in the context of constructing and presenting the hermeneutical conception of an author, various opinions from secondary literature are engaged in the discussion and critique of the position (the latter publications, however, rather often dating back to at least the 1990s). At the end of each chapter of the textbook, Thiselton adds a section of helpful recommended initial reading for further in-depth study.

The superior objective of Thiselton’s textbook is not to set forth his own hermeneutical concept but rather to engage readers with a large spectrum of different approaches and to enable them to understand and evaluate them. However, Thiselton’s concept of biblical hermeneutics plays a dominant role, in that the textbook answers the basic question of biblical hermeneutics concerning the norms, conditions, and criteria for the responsible interpretation of Scripture in a most distinctive way: Thiselton stresses repeatedly—implicitly through the structure of the book, explicitly through his comments—the significance of the multidisciplinary approach and the pluriformity of methods in the process of engendering meaning. The textbook intends readers to engage in the century-old discussion and to find their own position of a responsible handling of the biblical texts. The presupposition that texts have meaning is not debated; the focus is rather on the way of attaining an understanding of a text.

In conclusion, it remains to be underlined that Thiselton’s detailed, large-scale historical overview of biblical hermeneutics is an important contribution to the teaching of biblical and theological hermeneutics and meets a long-standing desideratum.