New horizons in hermeneutics: a review article

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Twelve years after the publication of The Two Horizons, which became a classic work in biblical hermeneutics, Thiselton has produced a major synthesis of the issues and people involved in the questions of interpreting texts. The importance of the work for readers of Themelios justifies a longer review, which can consider the content and some of the theses of the book.

Following an introduction which summarizes the contribution of the study, Thiselton investigates how texts function, both (1) to transform readers, as in speech-acts where texts carry the reader into their own world and may provide a reversal of expectations, and (2) to be transformed themselves through techniques such as intertextuality with changing language functions and pre-intentional backgrounds as well as through semiotics and deconstruction. The difficulties of grasping an area of research so heavily laden with jargon should not be minimized (i.e. this is not a text for the beginner), but the discussion of its various usages and implications is one of the book’s strengths.

The chapter ‘What is a Text?’ surveys the developments in hermeneutics following on the traditional ‘classical-humanist’ paradigm which emphasized the author’s intention and its possibility of recovery through a study of the text and the context of its origins. The New Criticism challenged the recoverability of authorial intention and turned to a focus on the text itself. Northrop Frye introduced the postmodernist emphasis on the context of the reader or audience for understanding the text. The American development of reader-response theory suggested that the readers themselves create meaning from the text. Reader interests became dominant. In his application of these ideas to biblical studies, Thiselton considers the sense in which promises are given to Israel and to the church but it remains for the hearers to believe and to appropriate them. Further, books such as Job and Ecclesiastes are written without a specific answer to the problems which they address. These texts invite the reader to participate in the problem, to wrestle with the issues. Thiselton argues that these approaches do not ‘foreclose questions’ about interpretations. However, he also affirms that the role of the authors and the biblical contexts must not be sacrificed in any reading and that these provide guidance to the interpreter.

In the chapter ‘From Semiotics to Deconstruction and Post-Modernist Theories of Textuality’, Thiselton provides a survey of the present landscape of how people deal with texts. Semiotics refers to the way in which texts presuppose a code or sign-system as a means to communicate. The ideas of Ferdinand de Saussure represent the foundation of semiotics, especially the principles that all signs are arbitrary in their value or meaning, that meaning is based on the differences or relations within the system, and that the form of speech (parole) are to be distinguished from the language system (langue) which is abstract and not found in the external world.

Thiselton goes on to trace the development of structuralism by Claude Lévi-Strauss and its Marxist application by Roland Barthes. He describes its successor, deconstructionism. However, Thiselton argues that deconstruction is not a logically necessary consequence of semiotics.

Jacques Derrida argues for the absence of both signatory and referent in texts. The text is a mark of what has gone before and a trace of what is to come. However, the mark itself must be erased in an onward movement. Derrida suggests that writing has priority over speech. Even more, it has priority over the human psyche. At this point the discussion moves beyond a theory of textuality and into philosophy. Thiselton will allow for the use of deconstruction as a method in the interpretation of certain biblical texts, particularly those which are subversive, i.e. texts such as Job, Ecclesiastes, and the parables of Jesus, all of which challenge the accepted tradition. However, the method cannot function as an iconoclastic philosophy which denies any connection of self with the text and allows for any interpretation as equally valid. Thiselton comments (p. 122):

... what would or could count as counter-examples or as falsification in the face of such a theory? Once again, when deconstructionist and post-modernist insights of iconoclastic method become inflated into some world view which is allegedly anti-metaphysical but in practice comes to function as a metaphysic, the whole system becomes self-defeating, a mere negative against someone else’s positive. To set this up as a model of textuality as such is to imperil all humankind within a single system, while superficially rejecting any notion of system.

Thus deconstruction can be a useful method when applied to particular biblical texts, providing new insights and dispelling illusions that reading a text once provides mastery of it. However, it is a method and not a world view. As such it cannot lose contact with the speaking subject and the surrounding world of thought and life, which both reintroduces the possibility of misinterpretation and provides the social effect of its interpretation into life. Thiselton concludes the section with a caution regarding concepts of textuality and emphasizes that it is important to recognize the purpose of a text. Some texts may serve such purposes but this is not an argument that all texts must. The multi-purpose nature of the biblical text must be recognized (pp. 131-132):

... the biblical texts transcend any single goal: they teach, but they also invite us to celebrate with joy the deeds of God. They make truth-claims about the world and reality; but they also make us uncomfortable recipients of judgment and comfortable recipients of grace. They subvert our idols, but they also address us, heal us, build us, and transform us. Any theory of textuality which cannot make room for these textual functions cannot be given a paradigmatic place in biblical interpretation.

After sections that helpfully explain the exegetical methods of the patristic and Reformation eras, Thiselton moves to the modern period, with Schleiermacher. He identifies the contributions of Friedrich S. Nieweide, who was the first to set hermeneutics in the context of theories of knowledge, to ask how we know as part of the interpretive process. He brought questions of who the author was and what was the language-world relationship. He wrote: However, his theories were more comprehensive than only concern for the ‘generic’ aspects of hermeneutics. In addition to the author of the text, Schleiermacher took account of the original audience, the later reader, and the effects of the text upon each. His approach to the Bible was one which saw these hermeneutical questions as applicable to the Bible, just as they were to other texts. His distinction between grammatical and psychological interpretations argued that both are necessary and that the goal of hermeneutics is always an approximation of certain understanding. There is the whole context and the specific elements of it. Both inform one another, and together they constitute Schleiermacher’s hermeneutical circle. He believed it was possible to understand a text as well and even better than the author. The first phase of interpretation implied a commitment to historical and grammatical inquiry. The second considered elements behind the text, which may not have been conscious to the author. Thiselton concludes that Schleiermacher’s idea of background, like his other emphasis on psychology, is one aspect of hermeneutical theory, rather than a comprehensive theory.

Thiselton considers existentialist approaches to interpretation. He critiques them as inadequate in their lack of concern for the interpreting community and their polarisation between descriptive and proclaiming transformative functions of language. The existential categories limit the NT’s confessions of ‘Jesus is Lord’ and of the kingdom of God. These have an element evoking personal response but they simultaneously point to something more than the divine reign which is yet to come. Without the latter reality, the former would be meaningless or idolatrous. This leads to Thiselton’s discussion of the speech-act theory of J.R. Searle and others. Restoring a praxis to the theory of words magically to perform actions, Thiselton recalls his previously published arguments that the irrevocability of blessings by Jacob and Balaam are grounded in generally recognized institutional functions of the world of the Bible. Just as
in Western Christendom there is no service of 'ubaptism', so in the biblical world there is no operation of 'unblessing'. Speech-act distinguishes between assertions in which the words match the world and promises or commands in which the world is made to match the word. Thiselton notes various biblical statements which operate in both directions. In the OT this is especially true of promise and covenant, e.g. in God's promises to the patriarchs and in the covenantal language of Hosea. Pre-eminently, it is in the dispensation of the divine Word and its ongoing reality through the mediation of the Holy Spirit.

Thiselton finds Pannenberg more satisfactory than Gadamer, and critiques both. He follows his student Luckmann in recognizing a third horizon of interpretation in Pannenberg, that of the eschatological. The text, and especially that of the NT, must be understood in the context of the future, as well as the past and the present. This distinction between the present and the future removes these texts from the arena of the mythological. Thiselton finds justification for this eschatological emphasis upon interpretation in the Epistle to the Hebrews and its hope for a city with foundations (4:1-11; 6:13ff).

Paul Ricoeur's theory is the next one to fall beneath Thiselton's lens of examination. The symbols of the text have the power to produce thought but also to generate idols. There is a strict separation between existentialism and interpretation in Ricoeur's biblical interpretation, in which religious language is understood primarily to redescribe the human experience. Hermeneutics becomes a struggle against the idols of ideology and a form of self-reflection. Thiselton points out that Ricoeur's model is not adequate in the sense that it fails to make religion and language a part of our shared reality.

Thiselton's analysis of liberation hermeneutics begins with a chapter which explores the theories of Habermas, Rorty and Apel. Habermas sought the foundations of social science in the theory of communication. In so doing he emphasized the social context of speech-acts. Rorty represents American liberal pluralism with its abandonment of any truth values outside of social contexts, other than a pragmatic universal of 'success'. However, Thiselton criticizes Rorty in this approach in (1) a concealed authoritarianism in Rorty, which uses liberal rhetoric to define an authoritarian message of its own; and (2) the absence of any means to challenge the status quo. Apel and Habermas: as Rorty acknowledges, there is no answer to the question, 'Why not be cruel?' Apel follows Habermas in his recognition of transcendent rational norms.

Chapter 12. 'The Hermeneutics of Liberation', offers 80 pages of analysis and criticism of liberation hermeneutics approaches found in liberationist traditions of Spanish American, black and feminist theologies. The common elements which Thiselton finds in all of these are those which Gutiérrez outlined in his The Theology of Liberation — an empathetic understanding of the oppressed, a critique of the status quo, the centrality of scriptural themes of liberation such as the exodus, and the biblical language of promise and eschatology as a means of transformation of the world. Thiselton identifies three corresponding categories of objections (pp. 462): critiques of frameworks of interpretation found in the dominant traditions, reinterpretations of biblical texts from the standpoint of a particular context of experience, and the use of criticism to expose and challenge readings which serve social interests of domination and oppression. In all this, Thiselton constantly asks whether the critiques are socio-critical and therefore part of a larger critique with universal significance, or whether they are socio-pragmatic, designed to serve the interests of the particular group concerned. A second key question is whether the method used is made into a unified philosophical interpretation or world view, or whether it is seen as a new contextual paradigm, philosophical system, or a series of different explanatory hypotheses which might account for the same textual and historical data.

Special note should be made of Thiselton's critique of the approaches of Fineman and of Phyllis Trible's deconstructivist method. In so doing, he reviews the feminist critiques of Elizabeth Achtemeier and of Susanne Heine. Thiselton's own recounting of his earlier analysis and criticism of Bultmann's demythologization forms the basis for a similar critique of deconstructivist hermeneutics. Some feminist applications of Urgtanic and Canaanite goddess-systems to the OT do not refer to the OT or even the NT especially to the church serve to critique 'androcentric' biblical language. But it is clear that androcentric biblical language does not serve ontological purposes of describing the nature of God's relation to creation which have nothing necessarily to do with human masculinity as opposed to the feminine. Such language is often androcentric only if conventional modern stereotypes of masculinity are read into the text. Furthermore, as Heine observes, the usage of feminine imagery for God in the prophetic serves not to deconstructive the texts, but rather to affirm the God of Israel as all-sufficient and therefore to discount any need for a mother goddess in Israel.

Thiselton's introduction to the hermeneutics of reading is an attempt to justify its importance. On the one hand, he refers to Terry Eagleton's comment (p. 472), 'hostility to theory means an opposition to other people's theories and an oblivion of one's own'. On the other hand, he refers to Christian trataher based philosophies which lie behind many literary theories. He notes the tendency to replace meaning with rhetoric, as in Derrida and Fish. But Thiselton also finds some positive contributions in modern literary theories, including the restoration of the importance of the imagination in reading, the greater attention to metaphor, the role of ambiguity and indirectness, and the development of theories of narrative which are not just abstract. As Irving L. Horovitz writes, 'There is no value in dismissing the possibility of meaning; it is not the same as meaning for us. It is not the same as the meaninglessness of the absurd. Our knowledge of the meaninglessness of the absurd does not mean that there is no meaning.').

As Alter, Moherly, and many others have pointed out, literary considerations may suggest that apparent doublets or duplications, for example, may be due not to clumsy editing in conflating dual sources, but to a narrative technique of juxtaposing which may even stand in tension, because the vision as a whole transcends either of the two single strands of narrative as flat statements.

Rising out of Roland Barthes' concerns with how the text is made, structuralism developed in the 1970s. However, Thiselton observes that this method was subject to critique from several directions: (1) it lacked the generally recognized require-ment of a scientific theory, the possibility of falsifiability; (2) it took no account of socio-cultural factors; and (3) for all its efforts it was not very productive in terms of its results. The emergence of intertextuality reasserted the importance of the larger context; indeed, there was no clear methodology to draw boundaries in the search for other texts. This itself created a problem with intertextuality for it seemed to allow an infinite variety of interpretations with no criteria to judge one in relation to another. Indeed, the term 'reading' a text as a replacement for interpreting or understanding a text suggested a loss of communication and judgment in favour of semiotic effect. Texts become 'matrices' from which any of a variety of readings may be developed. Thiselton argues that some biblical texts — poetry, for example — lend themselves more easily to a variety of readings, but other biblical texts, like modern traffic signs, do not so readily leave the matter of meaning with the reader.

Thiselton considers the work of Holland and of Blech. Regarding Holland, who emphasizes the individual reader, he expresses concern over the possibility of creating an idolatry out of the text in which we project our own interests on a text that is external to us. Thiselton finds this in the work of Blech, whom he accuses of a socio-political agenda. In the end (p. 535), 'the most militant pressure-group actually carries the day about what satisfies their pragmatic criteria of "right reading", the example of an interpreter who has carried socio-pragmatism to its final conclusion, that the community alone is the interpretative authority of a text. Therefore, there are no transcultural or universal readings.

Thiselton raises questions about language of pain, remorse, sincerity and lying, all of which he sees as having universal communicative power. Observing the implications of this in biblical studies, Thiselton goes on to identify some 'disastrous emendations of Fish (p. 549-550), of which three may be identified:

(i) If textual meaning is the product of a community of readers, as Fish concedes, texts cannot reform these readers from 'outside'. In this case the Reformation then becomes a dispute over alternative community life-styles.

(ii) Prophetic address as that which comes 'from beyond' virtually against human will is either illusory or to be explained in terms of pre-conditions inner or external.

(iii) It would be impossible to determine what would count as a systematic mistake in the development of doctrine. Pragmatism allows only the view that what gave rise to our past and present must somehow have broadly been right. Social pragmatism accepts only social winners as criteria of truth.

The last 70 pages of Thiselton's text offer the reader a number of directions for the application of what has been surveyed through the book. The book is intended to point to which many who read this work will be likely to turn. Thiselton begins with a defence of reconstruc-tion of the original context of the text and its life-world. He accepts that many biblical texts express a form of address or proclamation, suggesting examination of their original intention without committing the intentional fallacy. He reiterates Schleiermacher's emphasis to preserve both horizons of the text and of the reader. Thiselton moves through various models of reading, illustrating Kierkegaard's existentialist approach in his famous model of the interpretation of Genesis 22, Fear and Trembling. He suggests four sample areas in which narratives can address reality and changing and reversing our expectations, in explaining personal identities (including that of the God who acts), in stimulation of the imagination to
Lemche argues that, unlike the biblical account, extra-biblical texts describe second-millennium-BC Canaan in vague terms and that, for some, the land itself could include areas as far north as Danuna in Cilicia. This interpretation rests upon a single text in an Amarna letter from Abimilki, ruler of Tyre, to the pharaoh (EA 151 lines 49-65). In the text, Abimilki quotes the pharaoh as asking from Canaan. As Lemche notes, scholars have followed A.F. Rainey in interpreting this text as a request of the leader of Tyre, who comes from Canaan, to provide information. This is a plausible interpretation of the preposition followed by a place name (i.e., a similar usage by Abimilki in 149 line 4), but Lemche understands the text as asking Abimilki what news he hears about Canaan. Lemche provides no parallel examples to support this 'evasion'.

This is important because the biblical descriptions of Canaan's borders in Genesis 10:19, Numbers 34:3-6, Joshua 13:19 and Ezekiel 47-48 reflect, in the opinion of many scholars, a definition of the land of Canaan originally used when it was part of Egypt's New Kingdom empire (cf. studies by Y. Aharoni and Z. Kallai). Clearly defined borders of regions such as the land of Canaan were a concern, as attested by second-millennium treaties and contracts from Hittatus, Ugarit and Emar. Thus, Lemche's attempt to sever Pentateuchal and Deuteronomic descriptions of second-millennium-BC Canaan from the contemporary, extra-biblical textual evidence is not proven.

Since Lemche does not regard the Pentateuch as preserving any valid and recoverable pre-exilic historical traditions, it follows that its descriptions regarding Canaan must originate in the first millennium. This extends even to the lists of nations who composed pre-Israelite Canaan (pp. 83-90, 99-100). Lemche discredit any historical value to these lists because: (1) they do not consistently list the same names; (2) Ezra 9:1 includes Transjordanian nations and Egypt; (3) Hitites and Amorites never settled in Palestine to any large extent; and (4) names such as Hivites and Jebusites are not attested in the Bible.

It should be pointed out that (1) is irrelevant since such consistency is not required where a list of some is intended to designate the whole. (2) is explicitly not a list of Canaan's inhabitants but of Israel's neighbours. (3) is wrong in the case of the Hitites who, as a term for northerners, have been increasingly identified as occupying the hill country, both in the personal names of the Amarna correspondence and in the material culture. As for the Amorites, they are attested in the Canaanite texts, so that the term could be used to gloss or to replace the other term. Alternatively, the term may reflect specific regions, as Lemche notes regarding the Amurru kingdom in the 14th century. If this is the case, then the traditional distinction in these passages between Amorites in the hill country and Canaanites on the coastal plains may be preserved. (4) would have been true of the Hitites a little more than a century ago. Given the scarcity of evidence which exists, it is more surprising that so many names in these lists are attested outside the Bible. The lack of external attestation of names in a list where other names are attested is not normally an argument for finding that the list is lacking in historical worth.

The problematic nature of the arguments which characterize the book result in a final concluding chapter whose statements cannot be supported by the evidence. Leaving aside biblical references, the most precise information about second-millennium-BC Canaan does not come from Mesopotamia (p. 154), but from Egyptian Papyrus Anastasi I. Without clear evidence that ideology and literary form have distorted historical statements in the biblical text, arguments that the OT's portrayal of Canaanites has no historical value (p. 155) cannot be sustained. Contrary to Lemche, the ancient and modern distinction is not between scholarly histories and historical novels (pp. 158-160), as though the one is ideologically free and the other is biased beyond hope of finding historical worth. The real difference is between good history and bad history, whatever form it takes, whenever it is written, and whatever its purpose.