



Creative trends in biblical hermeneutics

by Craig G Bartholomew

Why hermeneutics? What on earth could justify the ten-year Scripture and Hermeneutics project established in 1998 by Bible Society and Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education? The only worthwhile answer, in Craig Bartholomew's opinion, is that biblical hermeneutics, rightly understood, can help us better to hear God's Word.

I remember as an undergraduate student, coming to the realisation that however much I confessed a high view of Scripture, that was not necessarily the same as knowing how to approach Scripture so as to hear God speaking to me and to my community.

Hermeneutics, which is all about how we understand, and in our case how we read and interpret texts and especially the Bible, can, at its best, be very helpful in sensitising us to how to listen to Scripture so as to hear its powerful and relevant message.

I have already said of hermeneutics, "rightly understood" and "at its best". These qualifications are necessary because, in my opinion, not all that parades under biblical hermeneutics nowadays is that helpful. There

are some trends in hermeneutics that make the reader/s so powerful that the meaning of texts, including the Bible, is regarded as constructed by the reader rather than discovered in the text. Thus a text comes to have as many meanings as readers and it does not take much imagination to see the consequences for an authoritative text like the Bible. Hermeneutics rightly stresses the role of the reader in interpretation of the Bible, but something has gone seriously wrong when readers simply hear echoes of their own voices when they read it. This happens. But it should not be encouraged – alas, what we used to call *eisegesis* is often celebrated in our postmodern times!¹

One of the best articulations of the sort of

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healthy hermeneutic I envisage is that by George Steiner in his stunning book *Real Presences*. Steiner is talking about literature and art, but so much of what he says is directly applicable to reading the Bible. He outlines, in contrast to the nihilistic excesses of postmodernism, what I call his “courteous hermeneutic”. Steiner thinks of an encounter with great literature or art as welcoming a guest, and in order to articulate a vision of interpretation which does justice to our experience of “the other”, he invokes the metaphor of *courtesy*:

“We lay a clean cloth on the table when we hear the guest at our threshold. In the paintings of Chardin, in the poems of Trakl, that movement at evening is made both domestic and sacramental.”²

“What we must focus, with uncompromising clarity, on the text, on the work of art, on the music before us, is an ethic of common sense, a courtesy of the most robust and refined sort.”³

Steiner is critical of so much discussion and criticism that gets in the way of us encountering art works and literature directly. Current criticism has become like a “Secondary City” obscuring the art work and vying for its position. He wants to privilege the text or artwork as *the* focus of attention and reception. Steiner’s stress on a courteous reception of the word evokes, in a powerful way, how Christians ought to receive God’s Word. Unfortunately, much that has gone on in biblical studies over the past 150 years has not always been helpful in facilitating a reception of the Bible as Scripture. This is not to suggest that historical criticism has been a waste of time – in many areas immeasurable gains have been made. But even where these gains have been accrued, very often the focus has not moved beyond the history underlying the text. Fortunately there are some very creative developments in biblical hermeneutics and interpretation that make it easier nowadays to receive the word courteously.

The rediscovery of the Bible as literature in the 1970s focused attention on the text of the Bible itself, and helped us to see that the Bible is made up of 66 books which have a literary shape in their own right, and which we ignore at our peril. At its best, the literary turn continues to produce highly creative and fresh readings of biblical books.

Let me outline a few examples from the Old Testament. In the last twenty years, there has been a growing body of scholarship emerging on the book of Psalms as a book. *Inter alia*, this approach argues that Psalms 1 and 2 are deliberately placed at the outset of the Psalter as its introduction, that the centre of the Psalter is found in the kingship Psalms of the 90s and that the Psalter concludes with the praise Psalms of 145–150. The discussion has become far more detailed than this, and is a most fertile area of biblical scholarship today.⁴ Old Testament wisdom literature has been experiencing a revival recently – no less than five major commentaries have appeared on the book of Proverbs in the last two years. The debate about how to read Proverbs continues, as with the Psalter, but some very creative studies are emerging from an examination of the book of Proverbs as a literary whole.⁵ This approach argues that Proverbs 1–9 is the hermeneutical key for the book and thus the necessary background against which the individual proverbs of 10 and following ought to be read. Such an approach sheds light on the difficult issue of the act–consequence structure in Proverbs and has illuminated interesting literary structures in 10 and following. Conceived as a whole, Proverbs moves from instruction about the fear of the Lord as the beginning of wisdom to that amazing vision of the fear of the Lord incarnate in the Proverbs 31 hymn to the heroic woman.⁶

Focusing on the books as literary wholes has also sparked fresh investigation of Ecclesiastes. The Jewish scholar Michael Fox redirected Ecclesiastes’ scholarship by suggesting that we attend to the book as a whole and especially

to the inter-relation of the different voices in it. This narrative reading of Ecclesiastes is proving very fruitful and has been picked up by a variety of scholars.⁷

One of the great biblical scholars of our day is Brevard Childs. As a student of Karl Barth’s in Germany, Childs recognised the urgent need for a recovery of the Bible as *canonical* Scripture. Childs, despite experiencing at times strong opposition, devoted the bulk of his career to mapping out such a recovery without letting go of historical criticism. He has produced an amazing corpus of literature across Old and New Testament and biblical theology, and has recently published a major commentary on Isaiah. However, his legacy exceeds his written corpus. Many of his students and readers are now in influential positions and Childs’ influence is a powerful factor in the current renaissance of theological interpretation of the Bible.⁸

Within the UK, Francis Watson and Chris Seitz are major exponents of theological interpretation. Theological interpretation is concerned with getting on with reading the Bible as Christian Scripture for the Church, and Watson’s and Seitz’s work is ample testimony to the value of this. The danger of a “purely” literary approach to the Bible without attending to its divine provocations, as George Steiner has pointed out on more than one occasion, is to fail to encounter it as the other that it is. Certainly the theology of the Bible should be at the forefront of a biblical hermeneutic.

An issue that has emerged in relation to canonical interpretation and the revival of theological interpretation is the relationship between general hermeneutics and theological interpretation. In his very useful *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* Kevin Vanhoozer outlines a general, Trinitarian hermeneutic. Watson and Seitz, by comparison, are arguing for a theological hermeneutic for biblical interpretation in a narrower sense. An excellent example of how attention to general hermeneutics can be brought together with creative interpretation of the Bible as

Scripture is Anthony Thiselton's massive new commentary on 1 Corinthians and the Bible Society playing a key role in helping to fund this massive project.

Some of the most creative work on biblical interpretation has emerged from biblical hermeneutics that integrate the historical, literary and theological dimensions of the Bible. In Old Testament studies, Meir Sternberg has raised the discussion of OT narrative to a whole new level in his *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, demonstrating thereby the value of such an integrative hermeneutic. In New Testament studies, Tom Wright has similarly articulated an integrative model drawing on critical realism.

His *The New Testament and the People of God*, and *Jesus and the Victory of God* indicate the fecundity of such an approach.

I hope that it is abundantly clear from all of this that there are some very exciting things going on in biblical hermeneutics and interpretation. Biblical hermeneutics, at its best, is all about discerning and promoting creative, contemporary ways of listening to Scripture so that we show to God's Word a "courtesy of the most robust and refined sort". ■

Notes

¹ Anthony Thiselton is the leading authority on biblical hermeneutics. For a thorough analysis of current trends see his *Two Horizons*, *New Horizons*, and *Interpreting God*. It should not be thought from this paragraph that I consider postmodernism all bad news. *Inter alia*, it has created the space for some of the creative developments I discuss below.

² *Real Presences*, 149.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ See McCann, Mayes.

⁵ See especially Van Leeuwen, *Proverbs*.

⁶ On Proverbs 31, see Wolters.

⁷ See Longman, Christianson, Bartholomew.

⁸ See, for example, Seitz and McCreight, *Theological Exegesis*.

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