



Reviews

THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT edited by Kevin J. Vanhoozer with assistance from Daniel J. Treier and N.T. Wright *SPCK* London, 2008, pp. 240, £10.99 pbk

This ‘book-by-book survey’ of the New Testament asks in its introduction, ‘what, then, could possibly justify adding one more item to an already well-stocked inventory?’ (p. 13), and this is a good question. The book presents an anthology of exegesis of each book of the New Testament (there is a companion volume for the Old Testament) with contributing authors each tackling a specific text. And its aim is clear: ‘our hope is that this work will encourage others to recover biblical studies as a properly theological discipline’ (p. 16). This takes on an even more particular veneer: ‘theological interpretation of the Bible, we suggest, is biblical interpretation oriented to the knowledge of God’ (p. 24). It is a confessional interpretation, of use to the church. Praiseworthy enough, yet the question that is posed at the outset hangs over the whole work: what justifies one more book asking for a theological approach to Scripture?

Part of the answer, Vanhoozer describes, is leading by example. The academic theologians contributing to the volume are seeking to demonstrate what is meant by theological interpretation of scripture and so begin a “recovery” of such an approach. So, not only should the book bring its readers to assess the Bible in terms of its object, namely, God and his salvific actions in history, but these chapters will also suggest what results this approach might yield for each book of the New Testament.

Since such an anthology with diverse authorship is always likely to be diverse in approach, it is not an ideal format to provide a clear example of what is thought to be missing in other interpretative methods, which is the very goal of the book. This problem is noted for, ‘the present volume is less a manifesto for a single way of interpreting the Bible theologically than it is a call to theological interpretation and a display of “best practice”’ (p. 23). Yet, already, the purpose is weakened it seems to me. Is the gap between theology and biblical criticism really so large that any foray into theological interpretation is enough to plug it? Surely there are already approaches to exegesis that seek to receive the text as one leading to a greater knowledge of God? (One thinks of canon criticism, pioneered by Brevard S. Childs.) The unity is presumably found in the interpretative goal, rather than the specific approach. The authors here are seeking to interpret the scripture as revealing God and leading them towards God, but this is a far-reaching goal indeed.

Even so, there needs to *be* a goal or a structure that the editors want explored when looking at a specific biblical text, to exemplify the type of interpretation or interpretations the book supports. So Vanhoozer gives us the brief that was presented to the authors of the chapters:

Each author was asked to discuss something of the history of the interpretation, the theological message for the book, its relation to the whole canon, its unique contribution to the people of God, and to provide a brief bibliography for readers who may wish to probe further (p. 23).

This is quite a task in just the few pages each New Testament book is given. The purpose, then, is to begin (or begin *anew*) the project of the theological interpretation of Scripture, and to encourage others to take it on in similar vein as a method seeking knowledge of God and so of use to the church.

So, does the book justify its contribution in this regard? As noted, the first problem for the project is one of space. All 27 books of the New Testament are scrutinised yet the volume extends to just 250 pages. The lack of room to explore interpretations must be the reason for the summary exegesis, each chapter only giving a snapshot into what scripture might offer us were we to open it in this way. It can be said that the point of the book is only to *introduce* such an approach, but without sufficient space all the authors can do is summarise some of the theological exegesis that has been achieved, choosing what seems most important to them and drawing some conclusions. There is little space in which to present an example of “best-practice”.

Also, as Vanhoozer notes, ‘not all authors answered this editorial call in the same way’ (p. 23). There is no unified example of theological interpretation with which to recover biblical theology. As mentioned, the apparent unity in an interpretative goal of ‘growing in knowledge of God’ is far too vague to cope with the format of many contributors. While there are of course different approaches to the Bible as God’s Word, the intention to display “best-practice” – leading by example in the (new?) field of theological interpretation – results, it is acknowledged, in *diverse* interpretations. Not then a clear example. However, as is explained, “(t)his is intentional; we are only at the beginning stages of recovering this complex practice” (p. 23).

And this is the underlying difficulty – the unexplained assumption that theological interpretation of the New Testament needs recovering at all. I do not see that we are at the beginning stages of recovering such a practice. Indeed in 1992 Childs wrote a work entitled *Theological reflections on the Christian Bible* while already in 1980 James Barr published *Historical Reading and the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (in *The Scope and Authority of the Bible*). If these and the many other past examples of engagement with and exercise of theology in scriptural interpretation are not adequate we are not told why. If these are examples of the type of practice this book seeks to recover, we are not told this either.

Although the authors here offer valuable theological insights and useful summaries of biblical thought what is missing is a demonstration that existing interpretation lacks such a theological imagination or purpose, that current scholarship requires to be shown what is meant by theology in the Bible, and even that a trajectory of biblical theology has actually been stifled and needs to be recovered. The assumption is that such theological approaches are few and far between among students of the Bible but there is no argument or evidence to show that this is the case.

One clue as to the precise need identified by the editors is in the confessional purpose of such interpretation. It is clear that what is meant by theological interpretation from the editors’ point of view refers to an appreciation of its subject and source – God. And this highlights another mistaken presupposition of the book: that interpreting the Bible as a believer for the church is a uniform concept; that everyone understands the same thing by ecclesial authority and even by theological interpretation.

This work certainly has value as a textbook for those studying the Bible for the first time and is very useful as a good summary of Christian thought on the texts of the New Testament. However, the book is too diverse and too brief to realise its desire to be a starting point for ‘biblical scholars, theologians, pastors

and laypeople' (p. 22) entering into theological interpretation. I am not at all sure it can answer adequately the question with which it began.

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WISDOM IN THE FACE OF MODERNITY: A STUDY IN THOMISTIC NATURAL THEOLOGY by Thomas Joseph White OP, *Sapientia Press of Ave Maria University*, 2009, pp. xxxiv + 320 and \$32.95 pbk

In its decree *Optatam Totius* (On Priestly Training) Vatican II required that 'In order that students for the priesthood may illumine the mysteries of salvation as completely as possible they should learn to penetrate them more deeply with the help of speculation, under the guidance of St. Thomas [Aquinas], and to perceive their interconnections' (§16). In his encyclical *Fides et Ratio* John Paul II also stressed this point, qualifying it by saying 'the Church has no philosophy of its own'. Yet in this twenty-first century with its post-foundationalism there is still radical disagreement among scholars, even Catholic ones, about the validity of Thomistic metaphysics, the very heart of St. Thomas' philosophical thought.

A major effort to meet this problem has recently been supplied by a theologian at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington D.C., Thomas Joseph White. In his Introduction and Part I White explores the accusation by Martin Heidegger that any 'metaphysics', such as that of Aquinas, finally collapses into a Kantian 'ontotheology', in which all concepts and principles are purely mental inventions. (This view is supported by and supports the current popularity of such atheistic books as Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* (2006) and the physicist Victor J. Stenger's *God: The Failed Hypothesis* (2007)). White's book, with its extensive bibliography, is a very penetrating Thomistic defense of the existential validity of metaphysics and of a metaphysical natural theology.

Part II deals with Aristotle's break with Plato and concludes 'In contrast to Heidegger's characterization of ontotheology... the logos of Aristotelian metaphysics is not reducible to the techné of rhetoric — a discourse constructed for merely instrumental and political ends' (p. 66). White then asks whether Thomas, although he certainly follows Aristotle, differs from him (1) in thinking always in a theological context; (2) in denying that, as Aristotle seems to think, since the universe exists necessarily, God is not truly a Creator in the biblical sense; (3) in emphasizing that there is not only an analogy of proportionality (A is to B as C is to D) between imperfect creatures and a perfect First Cause, and also a causal analogy of attribution of creatures to God of the *multa ad unum* type, but also of the *ad alterum* type. Analogy of attribution *ad unum* is a set of relations of many effects to a single cause such as the ten Aristotelian categories have to *ens commune*, but is *ad alterum* when nine categories of properties other than substances are considered as the effects of the single category of substance. If for Aristotle the relation of lesser beings is only one of the attribution *multa ad unum*, then for him God again is not, as for Aquinas, strictly speaking the Creator. (4) 'How can a Thomist attain demonstrative knowledge of God that is analogical, based upon a causal study of the beings we experience?' (5) Can the human person supply an analogy to God with respect to intelligence and will? Some historians think that Aristotle held that since God is 'Thought Thinking Itself' God does not know the universe that he causes. White admits these obscurities in the Aristotelian texts as we have them, but holds, as I would do, that Aquinas clarifies them in important ways.

Moving in Part III to twentieth-century interpretations of Thomas, White deals very effectively with the existentialist views of Etienne Gilson, known for his