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BOOK REVIEW

Craig G. Bartholomew. *Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Framework for Hearing God in Scripture*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015. xiv + 623 pp. Hbk. ISBN 978-0-801-03977-5. \$44.99.

In a marketplace flooded with evangelical books that have the word “hermeneutics” in the title, works such as this one are absolutely necessary. Why is this the case? The term “hermeneutics” has been utilized by many in the Christian academic sphere as a generic synonym for “biblical interpretation,” an unfortunate trend that has doubtlessly caused great confusion for many seminary students when they first encountered the broader, theory-laden world of philosophical hermeneutics. Craig Bartholomew’s credentials in this area are indisputable. He has a long track record of publishing in the area of hermeneutics, both as a solo author and as a collaborator with the Scripture and Hermeneutics Seminar. This comprehensive yet highly accessible work orients the reader to the domain of hermeneutics proper—the general problem of human understanding—by relating biblical interpretation to a variety of different fields.

Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics is coherently organized into five parts. Part 1 comprises two chapters, and chapter 1 is entitled, “Biblical Interpretation *Coram Deo*,” in which Bartholomew sets the stage by emphasizing the crucial task of biblical interpretation, that is, to bring the redemptive message of the living God to a broken world. To this end, he forthrightly presupposes the God of the Bible, whose truth is revealed in Jesus Christ. For him, this necessitates the adoption of a Trinitarian hermeneutic, concerning which Bartholomew isolates eight key points: it (1) “approaches the Bible as authoritative

Scripture”; (2) “approaches the Bible *as a whole* as Scripture”; (3) “views ecclesial reception of Scripture as primary”; (4) “exalts and humbles academic interpretation”; (5) “attend[s] to the discrete witness of the Testaments”; (6) “rightly discerns the goal of reading the Bible”; (7) “does not close down but opens up interpretation of the Bible”; and (8) “takes God’s address for *all of life* seriously” (8–15). Chapter 2, “Listening and Biblical Interpretation,” contains a bold challenge to recover the strengths of the *lectio divina* tradition as a means of truly facing a text with a posture of humble receptivity, in contrast to the attitude of domination that characterizes much of academic biblical criticism.

Part 2 is entitled “Biblical Interpretation and Biblical Theology.” Chapter 3, “The Story of Our World,” argues for the significance of a *narrative* biblical theology by articulating the importance of narrative in fields as varied as philosophy, theological ethics, and missiology, before commending the work of N. T. Wright on understanding the Bible as an overarching story that the church is invited to enter. Chapter 4, “The Development of Biblical Theology,” provides a history of biblical theology with special attention paid to summarizing the work of Childs, Scobie, and Feldmeier and Spieckermann, and ends by repeating the summons to base biblical theology on the narrative of the Bible itself.

Part 3, “The Story of Biblical Interpretation,” begins by noting the immense benefits of acquainting oneself with the fruits of previous generations of interpreters; one such advantage is that it inevitably makes the interpreter far more aware of his or her prejudices. In this section, separate chapters are devoted to unpacking the development of Christian biblical interpretation from the patristic to the medieval period, Jewish biblical interpretation through the medieval period, and interpretive trajectories from the Renaissance through Modernity. Interestingly, this part closes with a chapter on the development and theological meaning of the canon.

Part 4, “Biblical Interpretation and the Academic Disciplines,” is clearly the heart of the book. The five chapters in this section attempt to constructively develop the ways in which

biblical interpretation is informed by philosophy, literature, history, theology, and the world of academia. Finally, Part 5, “The Goal of Biblical Interpretation,” contains two chapters of sample interpretation geared towards *lectio divina* reading and homiletics respectively.

The vast range of scholarship this book addresses makes it impractical or even impossible to comprehensively survey the book in its entirety. The following section will, accordingly, interact with some of its central contentions and provide some critical reflections. Perhaps most importantly, Bartholomew repeatedly (and correctly!) stresses the foundational role philosophy plays in setting the guiding assumptions that one will employ in the reading process. With this in mind, his treatment of the subject (chapter 9, “Philosophy and Hermeneutics”) is, surprisingly, lacking in a clear articulation of his chosen metaphysical framework. After describing the rationalism of Spinoza’s and Kant’s limitation of knowledge on the structures of the mind, he moves to Hamann’s theological critique of the enlightenment’s optimism about the capabilities of unaided human reason. From here, the figures covered are Herder, Kierkegaard, Schleiermacher, Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur, Habermas, and Rorty. Nevertheless, while some may raise their eyebrows at this section (for example, the complete absence of thinkers such as Levinas or Deleuze, or his assertion that nothing “groundbreaking” [312] has been done since Gadamer), it does provide a somewhat broader historical survey than many comparable works (which tend to start with Schleiermacher). In the final paragraph of his historical review, he states, “In my opinion we need to draw on the tradition of Hamann, Herder, Kierkegaard, Gadamer, and Ricoeur to articulate the contours of a Christian hermeneutic for today” (325).

When the reader has finally arrived at the point in which the author formulates his own position (appropriately titled “An Augustinian Hermeneutic”), the lone four pages devoted to this proposal are mildly anticlimactic, and two of the four pages are devoted to one of his six points. His “Augustinian Hermeneutic” has a number of distinctive features. The first is that all knowledge is “traditioned,” and he works within the

“Augustinian” rather than the “Aristotelian-Thomistic” framework (326). Another is that theology and the broader Christian tradition as well as philosophy must shape one’s hermeneutic. Third, fundamental is the belief that the world is “creation” (326). This point is then elaborated in terms of the implications that it may have for a Christian view of language, and a corresponding philosophy or theology of language. Here, his suggestions that language does not create reality wholesale, and that it ordinarily functions perfectly well, would be controversial to only the most radical of postmodern thinkers. Fourth, the reader is embedded in history (understood as God’s “dynamic creation” [329]). Fifth, the reality of ideology should be recognized. Last, biblical hermeneutics needs to be based on this general hermeneutic.

Given what Bartholomew has set out to accomplish in this book, these suggestions are lacking in specificity to an astonishing degree. Furthermore, it is unclear why he has drawn such conclusions. While an ontology of Augustinian idealism is an entirely defensible metaphysical option, he fails to provide any line of reasoning—philosophical, theological, or otherwise—as to why this choice is preferable to any other. The implications he draws from his emphasis on the reality of creation (and humans’ finitude within it) are hardly self-evident; as proof, one need only compare the far more “postmodern” results achieved from a similar starting point by James K. A. Smith (who does not appear) or John Caputo (who is mentioned only in passing). His brief point about “oppressive ideologies” (329) seems to assume a pejorative definition of the term, a highly questionable move that does not demonstrate awareness of the alternative definition of “ideology” as a fundamental aspect of the unconscious of social reality (see Slavoj Žižek 1989). Additionally, treating ideology as “false consciousness” can serve directly to mask the concrete oppression embedded in a society.

The final section of chapter 9 only heightens the confusion. Entitled “Philosophy of Language and Biblical Interpretation,” it provides a specific interpretive example of the issues generated by studying the meanings of individual words. Not only is this

the domain of lexical semantics, the only source he cites as offering a correct articulation of principles for lexical study, besides vague references to different “views of language” (which are left unspecified), is James Barr’s 1961 *Semantics of Biblical Language*. While Barr is often cited as a standard text for avoiding lexical fallacies, this does nothing to acknowledge the broader debate within linguistics concerning the proper criteria for lexical meaning (for example, monosemy versus polysemy). Additionally, it simply operates on a different level than the philosophy of language proper, which is more concerned about what language *is* and how it interacts with reality. The questions raised by the various figures in the history of philosophical hermeneutics have far more to do with what the reader does with the results of his or her interpretation (and the factors influencing the process as a whole) than the specifics of the technical details of lexical and grammatical analysis, which lie outside the arena of philosophical hermeneutics (see A. C. Thiselton 1980).

A couple of further issues are worth noting. While the history of biblical interpretation from the Renaissance through Modernity in chapter 7 is heavily biased towards Old Testament studies, his analysis of the influence of Kant upon de Wette, and the subsequent transmission of this viewpoint to his student Wellhausen under the guise of an objective approach free from the impact of philosophy is highly insightful. Also to be praised is his sympathetic reading of Barth as a biblical exegete. Conversely, his assertion that postmodern approaches are dwindling overall is plausible only if the most stringent definition of the word is adopted. But he does not provide the reader with the raw data from which to make this assessment; the four pages devoted to the “Postmodern Turn” (242–45) in biblical studies do not provide *a single example* of scholarship performing postmodern interpretation of the Bible, except for a footnote reference to one of the survey books on the subject by A. K. M. Adam (whose last name is erroneously spelled “Adams” both here and in the author index).

Taken in its entirety, *Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics* functions best when treated as a survey book. For example, in an excursus discussing what it would mean to read the Pentateuch

as accurately reporting the work of a “creator God, acting in history,” Bartholomew simply states, “What would such a theistically shaped criticism and exegesis look like? That is the million-dollar question, one that I hope to address in a future work” (367). Such a concession is disappointing in a book whose subtitle promises “a comprehensive framework for hearing God in scripture.” In his chapter on literature, he states, “Feminist and materialist critiques, to mention only two, can *follow* such a reading [the horizon of the implied author] but should not—indeed cannot—precede it” (420–21), a move of sheer disciplinary (not to mention sexual and economic) colonialism that seems to reinforce the perceived objectivity of traditional historical criticism that he elsewhere chastises. Finally, there is no concluding chapter to wrap up the main points of the book, leaving the reader to lurch to an abrupt end after a chapter on application to the task of preaching.

Any book that touches on this many issues cannot fail to raise many questions and possible criticisms. However, the important point to note is that Bartholomew is asking the right questions. Readers at all academic levels will benefit from his thoughtful probing of the vast and multifaceted world of biblical interpretation. In a world of strict disciplinary specialization (the consequences of which cannot but trickle down to the church), his insistence that philosophy inevitably shapes our most foundational assumptions—whether consciously or unconsciously—is a much needed wake-up call.

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