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BOOK REVIEW

Stanley E. Porter and Jason C. Robinson. *Active Hermeneutics: Seeking Understanding in an Age of Objectivism*. Routledge New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology and Biblical Studies. London: Routledge, 2021. vii + 190 pp. Hbk. ISBN 978-0367028909. $128.00.

In the past several decades, truly original proposals in the literature on hermeneutics have been exceedingly rare, with most volumes content to survey key thinkers or issues from the past. This ground has already been covered by Porter and Robinson in their 2011 work (*Hermeneutics: An Introduction to Interpretive Theory* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011]). They now look ahead and, in *Active Hermeneutics*, contribute a constructive framework that offers a new vision of human understanding and its goals, with implications that reach far beyond the narrow corridors of theology or biblical studies.

Prior to the main body chapters, Porter and Robinson provide a roadmap of sorts with their brief introduction, entitled "Introduction to Another Volume on Hermeneutics and Why This One is Different." Here, they articulate the place of *Active Hermeneutics* within the spectrum of types of works on hermeneutics, offer some brief reflections on the important influence that Gadamer had on their argument, and outline the essential points of each chapter. At the end of the introduction, they concisely summarize their case: in contrast to the obsession with a mythical objectivity present in most endeavors of human knowledge today, they instead "offer an active hermeneutics of transcendence in the face of the divine, in which human beings pursue the question self-consciously as they empty themselves of their dogmatism and pursue the good in dialogue with the other" (9). Many readers will immediately notice that this choice of "objectivism" as a

key conversation partner immediately places *Active Hermeneutics* beyond the rigid boundaries of the discussions within the continental tradition that have come to be the familiar subject matter of books on hermeneutics (see, e.g., the range of scholars covered in Bradley H. McLean, *Biblical Interpretation and Philosophical Hermeneutics* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012]). Some will also sense that this impetus to "pursue the good" is an affront to historically based methods that stay within the realm of description, and that it also differs significantly from the ethical impulses found in both patristic retrieval and current ideological criticisms. As a result, the degree to which readers find the succinct argument in *Active Hermeneutics* convincing will largely rely on the extent to which they can construct for themselves the myriad conversations that could potentially spring out of this fertile book. As will be seen in the summary below, Porter and Robinson focus on stating their case (and expositing its historical antecedents) as clearly as possible, without polemicizing against every potential competing platform. While this makes for a stunningly refreshing reading experience, it does mean that some of its audience will remain curious as to how the approach of *Active Hermeneutics* overlaps with, or implicitly critiques, other schools of thought today.

Chapter 1, "Objectivity and the Legacy of Epistemic-Foundationalism," reviews the various understandings of objectivity that have appeared in scientific discourse, a topic that will likely be uncharted territory for many readers coming from the world of biblical studies. Porter and Robinson note that definitions of objectivity have historically involved ontological, epistemological, and semantic claims, although in practice at least one of these parts ends up being softened when anomalies arise. The concept of "objective" knowledge also inevitably idealizes a scenario in which the inherent subjectivity of human understanding does not affect the act of interpretation. No matter how clear it is that true objectivity is impossible to achieve in execution, thinkers from many disciplines continue to assume that it is a worthy goal. However, objectivity is defined in several different and mutually incompatible ways (23), and, ironically, "the instilled value of objectivity resides chiefly in its ability to secure value-free un-

derstanding" (22). After a brief historical review reaching back to the ancient Greeks, Porter and Robinson examine the problematic subject/object distinction and note that the definition of "truth" as something isolated from the observer is a relatively recent development. They also review the generally accepted process of the "scientific method" and note that each step involves significant interpretive work on the part of the human operator (29–32). Porter and Robinson next survey the history of logical positivism, arguing that some of its key assumptions (chiefly the desire to "possess meaning that is noninterpreted" [36]) are generally accepted even though it has been discredited as a general theory, and that the more promising way forward is "to be open to existence as interpretive creatures that must wrestle with incomplete, changing, and distorted ideas and experience" (38). The final major section of the chapter looks at some specific problems that objectivism creates for the philosophy of science. Porter and Robinson conclude the chapter by asserting that theory and practice should not be kept distinct (as in traditional conceptions of objectivity) but should instead be allowed to "co-determine one another" (50).

In chapter 2, "Ancient Wisdom and the Self-Understanding of Philosophical Hermeneutics," Porter and Robinson begin by endorsing Gadamer's understanding of truth as necessarily contingent and not finalizable. As a result, knowledge does not arise from a process of applying a method, but rather through intuitive processing within one's temporal setting. They also review the mutually informative relationship between practical wisdom and theoretical knowledge in Aristotle and explore how Gadamer leveraged Aristotle to develop his merging of self-understanding and striving for virtue, in which recognizing the moral imperative posed by the other is the only means of overcoming human situatedness. Thus, finitude is a valuable starting point, rather than a barrier, for accessing truth. For Gadamer, this access occurs as a sort of "play," in which the subject becomes immersed in an experience, rather than observing it from a neutral vantage point. This leads to a practical call for "mutual understanding" (90) instead of a dehumanizing and delusional quest for objectivity. Porter and Robinson end the chapter by defining the "goal of

hermeneutics" as "to encourage the wisdom needed to bring about a happening of truth for one's own epoch . . . It calls each of us back to our own practical responsibilities as social beings" (94).

Chapter 3, "The Active Hermeneutical Horizon," addresses the question of how thinking can effectively and ethically be carried out within the paradigm sketched out in the previous chapter. It begins with the challenge of defining "thinking," noting that it can only be truly understood through personally engaging in it. Porter and Robinson also review recent trends in interdisciplinarity, concluding that while it has some positive dimensions, it is ultimately insufficient to overcome the problems with objectivism outlined in chapter 1. They challenge readers to earnestly consider options or platforms that may be largely shunned or ignored. Porter and Robinson also endorse Kant's definition of enlightenment as the overcoming of the laziness that simply relies on authorities instead of exercising rationality, although they critique Kant by noting that "a moral drive toward the good" (123) is ultimately the key to challenging faulty authority, rather than reason alone. They then discuss dogmatism and raise the problem of how many claim (and likely sincerely believe themselves) to be open-minded when they are in fact being dogmatic. To avoid being dogmatic, thoughtful hermeneuts must be open to experience, particularly negative experiences, as only this kind of openness makes possible true knowledge of the world.

Chapter 4 is entitled "Transcendence and the Kenotic Person," and it presents the culmination of Porter and Robinson's proposal for the orientation of an "active hermeneutics." They begin with Gadamer's use of the concept of transcendence to describe deep understanding that defies simple reduction to language, yet nonetheless compels us to continue the pursuit of understanding. This results in a "movement into depth [that] interrogates and dissolves prior understanding" and requires "a commitment to an orientation to life and transcendence" (147) that should ultimately lead to strong "conviction" (149). Even something like meaningful interreligious dialogue is possible between two sincere believers when they start with a mutual interest in

each other's humanity and earnestly desire to learn. Next, in what is possibly the most intriguing part of the book, Porter and Robinson offer three short case studies of individuals who experienced "changes in . . . self-understanding" due to transcendence: Thomas Aquinas, Isaiah, and Job. As an example of one of their readings, in the case of Job they interpret the trauma of the encounters with the divine as "a truly radical experience of dialogical transcendence" (167) in which God "invite[s] Job into the play of meaning" (168), resulting in Job "forgetting his finitude" (168) in an experience that defies all "rationalization" (168; cf. the poststructuralist treatment given in Bradley H. McLean, "Deleuze's Interpretation of Job as a Heroic Figure in the History of Rationality," *Religions* 10 [2019], DOI:10.3390/rel10030141). In the final section of this chapter, Porter and Robinson read Phil 2:6–11 as an instructive example of how one can cultivate a posture of openness to transcendence, which they define as "a determined and purposeful way of living, made possible by the exercise of profound virtue and strength of character" (173). They also reflect on the crucial role of forgiveness in the encounter with the other. The book ends with a short conclusion (of less than two pages) and a subject and author index.

Active Hermeneutics is a tremendously *generative* book that is guaranteed to fuel the inspiration of any reader engaged in the field of biblical studies or theology. Its admonitions to actively seek the good and avoid dogmatism should transform even the way that traditional historical questions are investigated, and additionally should remind scholars that personal transformation should be "baked in" to all level of academic inquiry. *Active Hermeneutics* could also serve as a robust "meta-methodology" for the kind of "philosophical exegesis" explored in the work of T. A. Perry (*The Book of Ecclesiastes [Qohelet] and the Path to Joyous Living* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015], xvi–xvii; he interrogates a number of historical sources to elucidate the meaning of Qohelet, although his underlying rationale and process throughout is not always clear). However, as noted in my remarks on the introduction above, many readers will continue to wonder about what range of philosophical anthropologies are compatible with the agenda articulated in *Active Her-*

meneutics. While Porter and Robinson choose not to construct a specific platform on this issue (67), they do indicate belief in the capacity for conscious thought (111–12), which surely eliminates certain models that attribute primary agency to language or some other non-human entity. But perhaps it was wise of the authors to concentrate on developing their framework rather than exploring the endless possible comparisons. A wide variety of research directions have been opened by *Active Hermeneutics*, and its readers will certainly be inspired to further explore the pathways it offers.

David J. Fuller
Torch Trinity Graduate University
Seoul, South Korea