

BOOK REVIEW

Biblical Hermeneutics: Five Views by Stanley E Porter & Beth M. Stovell, editors; Craig Blomberg; F. Scott Spencer; Merold Westphal; Richard B. Gaffin Jr and Robert W. Wall, contributors. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2012, 224 pages.

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Biblical Hermeneutics approaches have greatly expanded in recent years even within conservative Christianity. This book, *Biblical Hermeneutics: Five Views* begins with a helpful introduction from Stanley Porter and Beth Stovell, the editors. The introduction considers the trajectories in biblical hermeneutics. It also offers questions that need to be answered when attempting to outline one's own hermeneutic. The editors' introduction clarifies that this work, unlike many overviews of the science of biblical interpretation, does not focus on procedure, history, or even the perspective of a single viewpoint or author.

The book is made up of ten (10) chapters divided into two parts: in Part one each contributor presents his/her position and then applies it to a biblical text (they apply their methodology to an interpretation of Matthew 2) that is hermeneutically both challenging and rich. Part two offers their responses. The editors provide each part with an Introduction and Conclusion to help set the context for the essays and try to synthesize the multitude of views. The editors selected five prominent hermeneutical views and assigned a scholar to them. Each scholar takes a stand to defend and critique the other four views. The book closes with Porter and Stovell offering a synthesis of the five views showing that though each perspective has a different emphasis there is a way to synthesize and use each of these methods to have a faithful hermeneutic.

Craig Blomberg explains the Historical-Critical/Grammatical view. He seeks to discover the original meaning of the biblical text and then makes application to the current readership. He describes his view as both analytical and evaluative, based on common ground shared with the skeptic. Blomberg argues that, grammatical analysis is necessary because the biblical text does not come to us in our own native tongue; for it has come through a long chain of languages before approaching our various languages. Such careful examination of Scripture helps all believers to better understand and apply the Scriptures. While Blomberg claims to appreciate the other approaches, he sees his view as foundational to all others (p.28). He does so because he sees the importance of form, source and redaction criticism of the text. Richard Gaffin Jr, in his response to Blomberg, takes him to task for the use of the hyphenated word Historical-Critical (pp.178-182).

F. Scott Spencer defends the Literary/Postmodern approach. Much of what he offers is highly complicated and virtually incomprehensible, but when all the dust has settled he indicates that interpretation is determined more by the reader than by the original author, and in fact; different readers will find different meanings (p.67). Spencer writes, the last few decades have witnessed an explosion of distinctive New Testament readings from various grass-roots as well as in academia from Asian, Latin American and African perspectives, complementing and often counterpointing more traditional Western viewpoints. Such 'other' readers tend to lay their social and ideological cards on the table and respectfully insist that others do the same. However, if everyone interprets the Bible using this method it would be hard to be objective about anything.

The Philosophical/Theological view is explained by Merold Westphal. It finds its grounding in Friedrich Schleiermacher and the dominance of pre-suppositional thought (pp. 70-73). Westphal opines that, there are three things that philosophical hermeneutics is not. (a) It is not just about interpreting the Bible; (b) is not restricted to interpreting text; and (c) is not a method of strategy for interpreting. Westphal further argues that Gaffin's claim of interpretive continuity between the New Testament authors and

contemporary readers must be set in tension with the historical-cultural-linguistic diversity among them as well. He adds that Gaffin has not given the finitude of our perspectives on the totality of God's redemptive and revealing activity their due (p. 168).

Richard B. Gaffin Jr. articulates a Redemptive-Historical view in the tradition of Geerhardus Vos (1862-1949) as he seeks to build up on Vos' theology. Here, the understanding Christ is "either explicitly or implicitly: its [scriptures] ubiquitous focus throughout" (p.92); and the Old Testament is interpreted in light of the New Testament. Gaffin says that in one way or another, all of Scripture references Christ. Blomberg critiques Gaffin's essay by pointing out that while Luke 24:44 confirms that everything in the Old Testament that speaks of Christ has been fulfilled, not everything written in the First Testament is about Jesus (p.142). For example, what particularly distinguishes the Redemptive-Historical from the Canonical-Critical approaches in this volume is that the former understands Scripture to be divine revelation and the latter understands Scripture to be a witness to divine revelation. The point is, there will be many things overlooked if the Scriptures are interpreted through the Prism of one single event in human history.

Robert Wall offers a Canonical-Critical approach to Scripture. This approach is framed by three important practices: (a) that exegesis is constrained by the so-called "rule of faith; (b) the "effects" of Scripture when "received" is an important witness to its full meaning; and (c) the spiritual authority of the interpreter who is seeking new meaning yet within the guardrails of the historical church (pp.115-117). He also implies that the Scriptures are understood best when read chronologically. Wall keeps referring to teachers in his essay. There seemed to be an implication that the responsibility of hermeneutics has been given to certain people. This violates the truth of 'priesthood of all believer' and personal anointing (teaching) of the Holy Spirit for individuals. Spencer and Gaffin critique this approach warning that, the rule of faith can restrict interpretation in a negative way (pp.152-153) and can become "a canon above the canon" and thus will have ultimate authority over Scripture (p.183).

In synthesizing five views of biblical hermeneutics, all the contributors approach shares four major foci of discussion, around which their treatments take place. These are: (a) the world(s) external to the biblical text; (b) the biblical text itself; (c) the author(s) of the text and (d) the current readers.

Major strengths identified in the book is that, students and scholars alike struggle to differentiate between the meaning of terms like biblical exegesis, interpretation and hermeneutics. This very tension in defining the concepts of biblical interpretation, hermeneutics and exegesis leads to one of the major debates in this book, which in turn justifies its creation and the authors seems to have done a significant work on that. The book can assist readers of Scripture in reflecting with greater precision and self-awareness in doing what they already do in interpreting the Bible.

Again, reader(s) is/are able to see how different hermeneutical starting points yields different interpretations, leading to different applications. It is also important to appreciate that each of these perspectives can offer a little more insight into doing hermeneutics. It might be helpful for really deeper study to consider a text from each of these perspectives. Anyone interested in the ongoing quest to responsibly interpret Christian Scripture for the church will find this wonderful informative and constructive dialogue relevant.

Biblical Hermeneutics: Five views, is also a good introduction to these five approaches to Scriptural interpretation, however it is overly complicated, difficult to read and at times obscure. Even though the editors' introduction clarifies that the work at times seemed like the authors go out of their way to explain their views in ways that actually resists clarity, yet it is an interesting book for all, though quite laborious for those not already introduced to the world of hermeneutical discussions. It is a book for advanced hermeneutics students and not for an introductory course. The book also gives us a wide coverage but pays little attention to Spirit hermeneutics.

Biblical Hermeneutics: Five Views has been written to provide new insights into biblical hermeneutics and how such interpretive models might aid in biblical understanding and interpretation. The book accomplishes its aim quite nicely, describing the complex landscape of hermeneutics for the interested reader. This is one of the few good books that sets the stage for a broad understanding of biblical hermeneutics. The essays are clear, insightful, and paint a helpful picture for those less familiar with the changing and complex landscape of hermeneutics. These are also helpful contributions and students

needing bibliographical help will appreciate the large footnotes and data gathered at the index. While it has its weaknesses, it functions well in a classroom setting and will spark plenty of conversation.