

Overcoming the World offers a helpful resource in multiple contexts. Its accessibility and relevance would make it ideal for a Bible study series in a local church or an up-to-date companion to *The Cost of Discipleship* in a seminary course, for example. Those seeking a biblically informed perspective on the war in Ukraine may find value in reading this work alone or in a group discussion setting. In the end, through faithful study of the Gospel of John and genuine fervor, Ustinovich has achieved his goal of offering encouragement to disciples from various backgrounds who identify with the torn Savior.

Jeremy Bohall

Kevin J. Vanhoozer

Mere Christian Hermeneutics: Transfiguring What It Means to Read the Bible Theologically

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“Hermeneutics” is a scholarly, and somewhat technical term for interpretation. While its precise use may vary among the scholars who employ it, a book that includes the term in its title would appear to most observers at first glance to be either a technical methodological manual, textbook, or perhaps an abstract philosophical discourse on interpreting texts. However, the primary aim of the author, leading evangelical theologian Kevin Vanhoozer, is quite different. While he no doubt considers interpretive methods and reflects on the philosophical underpinnings of interpretation, his major aim is to help Bible readers—whether scholars, clergy, or lay Christians—to “read rightly,” that is, not merely for “intellectual assent but wholehearted consent to God’s communicative intentions” (p. 21). This is evident in the introduction where Vanhoozer lays out what the Bible is, what it is doing, and what it is for, before then presenting who readers are in relation to the Bible: “answerable persons,” what they are to do with the Bible: “bear faithful witness,” and what the purpose of reading scripture is, “communion with God and training in godliness.” These words reflect Vanhoozer’s understanding of the Bible as a divine speech act, and readers as those to whom that speech act is addressed, who are therefore responsible to “follow the way the words go” for their understanding, including self-understanding, and discipleship.

Part 1, chapters 1–3, of Vanhoozer’s three-part treatise deals with the historical divisions of biblical interpretation. As a systematic theologian who has also been one of the foremost proponents of the resurgence of theological interpretation, Vanhoozer recognizes the “ugly ditch” that emerged between scholarly exegesis and theology at the advent of the critical period. While he affirms important gains

and insights of the historical-critical approach to biblical interpretation, he asserts that a Christian hermeneutic cannot be limited to a merely historical frame of reference, and within an immanent and secular “social imaginary.”¹ But Vanhoozer does not restrict his critique to historical-critical Biblical scholarship, lamenting that modern theologians too are complicit, often adopting frames of reference “from somewhere other than the biblical text” (p. 92). Division over how to interpret the Bible did not begin in the critical period. Even in pre-critical Christian interpretation, there were competing approaches: the Alexandrian and Antiochian schools in the patristic period, monastic and scholastic approaches in the medieval period, and of course the differences that unfolded at the reformation—though Vanhoozer is keen to point out the agreements between the reformers and their “premodern forebears” (p. 75). Vanhoozer’s intention, however, is not to provide a full-fledged history of exegesis, but rather to focus on two “polarized reading cultures,” biblical scholarship and theology. He calls for reform in both reading cultures “insofar as in the one, biblical studies, theology comes too late, while in the other, systematic theology, Scripture figures too little.” The title of the book thus encapsulates the hope of reconciliation of such disparate interpretive approaches, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*, a phrase that recalls C. S. Lewis’s *Mere Christianity*, and refers, according to the author, “to those basic principles espoused by all Christians, everywhere and at all times, for reading the Bible as the church’s scripture.” West and east, premodern and modern, exegetical and theological, ecclesial and academic are all opposing “reading cultures” Vanhoozer hopes to call for reform and reconciliation into one reading culture, “the one holy, catholic and apostolic church,” marked by a “reformed catholicity” (p. 24, 179).

It should be reiterated that Vanhoozer does not suppose by this to offer an exhaustive and overarching hermeneutical method. After all, he proposes a “mere” Christian Hermeneutics, one that, like Lewis’s “mere” Christianity, supposes a commonality that does not suppress the uniqueness of times, cultures, denominations, traditions, and people groups, “it takes many exegetical methods, and many interpretive communities from different times and different places to achieve a plenary understanding of scripture” (p. 181). Even so, the unifying goal of the project remains ambitious, but it is a goal worthy of pursuit, a pursuit rooted in scripture itself.

Crucial to the author’s project in part 2 (chapters 4–5), wittily entitled “Figuring Out Literal Interpretation,” is to examine the “criteria for right reading” by parsing out the meaning of “literal sense” and “literal interpretation.” The idea of literal interpretation is, of course, fraught with misconceptions and misappli-

1 Vanhoozer appropriates Charles Taylor’s (*A Secular Age* [Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007], 539) concept of the secular social imaginary to explain the immanent frames of reference for biblical interpretation in the modern world. Taylor’s social imaginary is defined as “the set of storied assumptions that underlies our shared understanding of reality and undergirds our everyday practices” (p. 80).

cations, especially when readers are taken aback by seemingly bizarre premodern allegorizing or blatant forms of contemporary *eisegesis*. However, reactions to irresponsible allegorizing and *eisegesis* might unfortunately engender a “literalistic” approach that sees only the letter without recognizing what it signifies. Vanhoozer thus warns that such a literalistic interpretation must also be distinguished from a proper literal interpretation. For Vanhoozer, “the literal meaning of Scripture is the meaning of the letter, viewed as a human-divine authorial discourse when read in canonical context with an eschatological frame of reference” (p. 178).² What should be clear from this definition is that for Vanhoozer, literal interpretation may go beyond the initial historical context within the framework of the entire biblical canon and its eschatological promise.

By this point in the book, Vanhoozer has already explained the importance of frames of reference and how diverse frames of reference characterize opposing reading cultures. He has also helpfully distinguished between sense and reference. “While *sense* is ‘what someone says,’ the *reference* is that about which that something is said” (p. 123). This distinction is important because it allows for interpretation within a widening, transcendent, and future-oriented frame of reference without departing from the grammatical *sense* of the letter. So, Vanhoozer’s proposed “grammatical-eschatological frame of reference” within a sacramental or scriptural social imaginary is quite different from a merely historical frame of reference whose social imaginary is immanent and secular (pp. 128-129). The grammatical-eschatological frame of reference thus allows for spiritual or figurative interpretation that extends the literal sense of a text toward its already-not-yet eschatological-christological meaning, an extension necessitated by the Bible’s divine authorship. This is what Vanhoozer calls the “trans-figural literal sense,” where “trajectories *cut across* (‘trans’) times and testaments, linking biblical persons, places, and events (‘figures’)” (p. 24). Such “trans-figural interpretation thickens, extends and deepens the literal sense, precisely by following the way the words go, from figure to what is figured” (p. 170). Later, he states the same idea from the other direction: “Scripture’s literal sense necessitates a properly *theological* interpretation and hermeneutical strategy that aims to follow the divine figuration where it leads” (p. 180). It most often leads to Christ, what Vanhoozer prefers to call a “Christoscopic” focus. It seems to me that there is much overlap with typology, a kind of figurative interpretation that Biblical scholars find to be most prevalent within the scripture. Vanhoozer’s view of typology is somewhat ambiguous. On one hand, he seems to include typology with other figurative approaches like allegory (pp. 160-167), while later it is affirmed as a biblical figuration in the way many biblical scholars have asserted (p. 168). In any case, Vanhoozer stresses that it is not the kind of figuration that is most important, but rather whether it is a good or bad figuration:

2 Throughout this review, italics are original to the author.

My claim is that what people often refer to as the spiritual sense (i.e., “good” figuration) is actually the *eschatological fullness* of the literal-historical sense. It is not the bare historical but the historical-eschatological frame of reference that enables the literal sense to come into its own—or rather, into all its glory (p. 168).

Vanhoozer calls this *trans-figural* literal sense the “formal principle” of mere Christian hermeneutics. The use of the term *trans-figural*, of course, is also a wordplay on the transfiguration of Jesus, a wordplay that will make the most sense to English Bible readers. But it is not just a wordplay, because the author finds in Jesus’ transfiguration in the synoptic Gospels the climactic narration of “the ‘material principle’ of mere Christian hermeneutics: the light of Christ, or, more expansively, the knowledge of God in the face of Christ” (p. 194), building on Jerome’s likening of the spiritual sense of interpretation to ascending Mount Tabor to see Jesus transfigured into his shining appearance (p. 226). And so, in part 3 (chapters 6–9), entitled “Transfiguring Literal Interpretation” the author pursues and tests this material principle through several biblical texts: the creation of light in Genesis 1:3, the synoptic accounts of the Transfiguration (Mt 17:1-8; Mk 9:2-10; Lk 9:28-36), Paul’s interpretation in 2 Corinthians 3 of the fading radiance of Moses’ face in Exodus 33–34; and Jacob’s wrestling with God in Genesis 32:22-32, which is under the chapter 9 heading “Transfiguring the Reader.” In the concluding chapter, Vanhoozer attends to a transfigural interpretation of the Song of Songs.

In Part 3, Vanhoozer provides a fitting capstone to his three-part work by practicing the trans-figural interpretation he preaches in the earlier sections, combining historical-grammatical exegesis with canonical-theological insight in conversation with interpreters from across church history and traditions. In chapter six, his aim is twofold: to give a literal interpretation of Genesis 1:3 where God speaks “let there be light,” and “in so doing, to illuminate literality. The passage in question is more than fitting for Vanhoozer’s explorations of literal interpretation since the narration of God speaking provides an excellent test case for the literal sense, and because the image or concept of light will be crucial to his idea of transfigural interpretation.

Vanhoozer explores the question of whether God *literally* speaks or takes action. Here is a good example of literal versus literalistic interpretation. A literalistic understanding of “speaking” would require that God had a mouth, lips, and vocal cords. Vanhoozer goes on to cite philosopher William Alston, who argues that God’s speaking is a “literal but analogical claim,” but “not a metaphor, because the performance of illocutionary acts belongs properly and primarily to God and only derivatively... to human creatures.”³ As Vanhoozer aptly puts

3 Vanhoozer, 204, citing Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 96.

it, “God’s ‘speak-acting’ is less an anthropomorphic description of God’s agency than a theomorphic description of ours” (p. 204). God’s speech is action, because through it “God forms and enacts intentions, thereby making a difference outside himself” (p. 204).

Vanhoozer then considers light, the object of God’s spoken act of creation in Genesis 1:3. He asks, is the light physical or spiritual? A canonical reading also generates the question of how created light differs from “God’s own uncreated light” (1 Jn 1:5; 1 Tim 6:16; Jn 8:12, cf. Isa 60:19; Rev 21:23). Vanhoozer distinguishes being God’s intrinsic light, *ad intra*, meaning that God is the source of his own being,” and his creation of light, *ad extra*, as “an external publication of the internal perfection God is” (p. 219). Light illumines, making both itself and other things known. Thus, Vanhoozer’s understands the creation of light, *ad extra*, as “literally about divine action, namely, the creation of conditions of intelligibility, actualizing the possibility of *creaturely knowing and God’s making known*” (p. 222). This “economy of light” becomes a framework for biblical interpretation pointing ahead to the transfiguration of Christ.

Chapter seven on the transfiguration of Jesus is the pivotal chapter of the book. The transfiguration is, in Vanhoozer’s words, “arguably the most important event between creation and consummation in the biblical story of light,” relating soteriology and eschatology, and heaven and earth, a “space-time preview of end-time consummation” (p. 227). Vanhoozer delves into the extensive exegesis of the synoptic transfiguration accounts, highlighting the important exegetical question as to the nature of the transfiguration itself, that is, what happened to Jesus? Three exegetical possibilities are offered: (1) a change of nature (myth); (2) A preview of future status (apocalypse); and (3) A revelation of present status (epiphany). Vanhoozer concludes that both the second and third options are at once true in accord with the already-not-yet eschatology of the New Testament witness so that the transfiguration overcomes both the present/future temporal divide and the earthly/heavenly spatial divide (p. 239).

An important implication of this understanding is that Jesus does not change but rather reveals his glorious light (*ad intra*), which is both what is already true of himself, and also the future glory that will be made manifest in the eschaton. Further, Vanhoozer understands the transfiguration, based partially on the presence of Moses and Elijah as representatives of the law and prophets, and Jesus as the living Word, to “suggest an analogy between the human body of Jesus and the letter of the biblical text.” So, in the same way, the transfigured Jesus is still the human Jesus, though revealed in the transfiguration in full glory, so too transfigural interpretation “does not change, but, rather, glorifies the literal meaning,” so that “transfigural reading discerns the splendor of the literal sense” (pp. 268-269).

After practicing transfigural interpretation and parsing out its implications through additional biblical texts in chapters eight and nine, the author concludes

the study by circling back to his beginning concerns and reflecting on the need to transfigure reading cultures, namely, that of the church and seminaries. He concludes that “transfiguring biblical interpretation refers both to a *transfiguration of the process* of biblical interpretation... and to an *interpretive process that transfigures*” readers and reading cultures. Vanhoozer reiterates many of his most important points including the necessity of exegesis and theology working in partnership using historical, literary, and eschatological frames of reference, retrieval of the reading practices of earlier Christians, and the need to practice a set of practices (mere Christian hermeneutics) that have been held by “large swaths” of the historic Christian tradition. Vanhoozer finds this commonality grounded and exemplified by the transfiguration of Jesus. In short, “to read the Bible theologically is to bear witness to the light of Christ in the letter of the text,” and a reading culture that participates in the economy of light, “is a means by which God’s word and Spirit are even now overcoming the darkness, transfiguring the world” (pp. 370-371).

Summarizing this work is not an easy task, but that is not meant as a negative comment. Rather, there is a richness to the book that will require readers to be fully immersed in its logic and transfigural persuasiveness. In addition, multiple terms and concepts are either freshly formulated by the author or used distinctly. Thankfully, there is a helpful glossary at the end of the book that will assist the reader in understanding these carefully nuanced ideas (i.e., the difference between “trans-figural interpretation” and “transfigural interpretation”).

For which readers is this book most relevant? While the author hopes to impact reading cultures in both church and academy, at least an intermediate level of hermeneutical and theological background is essential. Scholars, theologically trained pastors, and students will be both challenged and encouraged to their benefit. Certainly, there will not be wholesale agreement or clarity on the entirety of Vanhoozer’s proposal. Biblical scholars may still struggle with a perceived lack of controls for contemporary interpreters, even if “transfigural” interpretation is understood to extend the literal sense. Nevertheless, Vanhoozer is convincing in demonstrating that much of the so-called spiritual interpretation thought to be detached from the literal sense of the text can often be shown to emerge and be extended from the literal reading. His tracing of the “economy of light” is convincing in that regard. Perhaps a more and closer exegesis of premodern biblical interpretation will find further confirmation. Vanhoozer has helpfully provided the language and sets of practices that can help shape Bible reading cultures from “across the whole communion of saints and scholars” and this book should prove to be a trustworthy and encouraging resource for those saints and scholars for generations until, as he concludes, “the great transfiguration yet to come” (p. 372).

Gregory S. Thellman