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Review: Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology

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recent books on hermeneutics that I have read). He never loses sight of his goals: to equip his reader with information and insights necessary to help aspiring preachers and teachers determine what the Biblical writers intended to convey by means of language, and how to relate that message to present-day audiences.

Even a volume as masterful as this contains a few points meriting mild critique. The first appendix, for example, places R. Bultmann on the same side of the hermeneutical divide with K. Barth over against the Schleiermacher-Dilthey tradition, whereas Barth himself placed Bultmann within that tradition. And Osborne's discussion of Gadamer is one of the few places where he does not make his basic point clearly—namely, that Gadamer viewed interpretation as revolving not around the author's intended meaning (which is in any event inaccessible for Gadamer) but rather around the subject matter (*Sache*) of which the author speaks. In this regard Gadamer is not unlike Barth in certain respects, as Gadamer himself acknowledged in his *Truth and Method*. Finally, the first appendix lacks the clear definition of certain technical terms that so characterizes the rest of the book.

Another minor point: Osborne begins his book by endorsing Hirsch's distinction between "meaning" and "significance," and then later on (p. 268) he speaks of what a text "meant" to the original audience and what it "means" to us today. This sort of terminology (presumably borrowed from Stendahl) tends to be confusing, in that it uses the verb "to mean" in two different senses (what the original writer intended to communicate *versus* how that original message relates to other people or situations). Why not simply retain Hirsch's terminology?

Finally, at least three editorial changes are needed for the next printing of the book. On p. 35 Osborne's diagram (fig. 1.8) shows how to depict visually the relationships between the propositions of Eph 1:5–7 via D. Fuller's method of "arc-ing." Yet the arcs drawn here do not conform to Fuller's methodology. If they did, Osborne would not have to say, "There is no easy way to arc a passage like v. 5." It can be done. On pp. 235–236 we read of "Nathan's parable of the ewe lamb, which dramatically demonstrated his own injustice to Uriah." And on p. 273 a typo appears ("parallemomaia" instead of "parallelomania").

The Hermeneutical Spiral is the best introduction to the practice of Biblical interpretation to come along in years, perhaps ever. If you have been wondering which one of a plethora of recent books on hermeneutics to add to your bookshelf, make it Osborne's.

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Biblical Narrative in the Thought of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology. By Kevin J. Vanhoozer. New York: Cambridge, 1990, \$49.95.

Paul Ricoeur has exercised much influence upon theology and philosophical hermeneutics for the last generation, but the potential positive impact of his thought upon evangelicalism, particularly his hermeneutics and his recognition of texts for the understanding of human existence, has not been given significant attention. The reason may well be the use made of his philosophy by what Vanhoozer calls "left-wing interpreters." But Vanhoozer has found and shown here that Ricoeur's general hermeneutical theory, especially in relation to the gospel narratives, has much potential for Christology if some significant correctives are brought to bear upon it.

Vanhoozer's book is a much-revised form of his doctoral dissertation at Cambridge University. It carefully builds and narrows its focus from the Kantian,

Heideggerian bases into Ricoeur's own original, fruitful thought about language, especially texts, as these are shown to open new possibilities for modes of being. While Kantian and Heideggerian influences can be seen herein, Ricoeur transcends them, says Vanhoozer, for he is a "believing" philosopher—that is, one who believes that texts and language can make a positive difference and open ways of being in contrast to the masters of suspicion (e.g. Marx and Sartre).

From the beginning Vanhoozer establishes the goal and ground of Ricoeur's hermeneutical theory, which is more basic than Sartre's "dread" and Heidegger's "being toward death." Ricoeur recognizes in human existence and its existential dilemma an overabundance of meaning. Literary texts not only express this but also recall that which has been "forgotten" by humanity. To such a perspective Vanhoozer rightly gives limited agreement. The nature of Vanhoozer's "yes and no," especially the potentialities arising from a proper, critical "yes" to Ricoeur, make up the direction of the work in relation to Biblical narratives.

By means of comparison and contrast with Bultmann, Frei, Tracy and, to a lesser extent, Barth, Tillich, Pannenberg, Moltmann and others, Vanhoozer methodologically spirals around and back on critical contemporary concerns regarding the propriety and usability of Ricoeurian thought for orthodox theological expression.

While he grants Ricoeur qualified approval, Vanhoozer's affirmation goes far beyond the fact that Ricoeur has put existential theological thinking on much more firm—that is, literal/textual—footing. In numerous ways Ricoeur's "secular" hermeneutics is said to approximate the Christian faith. He speaks of and uses concepts like revelation, resurrection, creation, call, justification, etc., as these are said to be "given" to the reader from beyond the reader via poetic, metaphoric or narrative texts. But finally Ricoeur's hermeneutic philosophy lacks an approximation for Christian teaching on the role of the Holy Spirit, a role taken by what Ricoeur calls the "creative imagination" or by imaginative appropriation. Ultimately, then, Ricoeur misses the very point of the gospels, which emphasize that it is "only thanks to a divine initiative of deed and word that the power of the possibility of resurrection freedom becomes ours." In his rightful concern for texts and for the mediation of oppositions, Ricoeur loses his balance, says Vanhoozer, who then puts the question in words Ricoeur himself has used in response to K. Jaspers: If all human experience is a "cipher" of transcendence, then what, if anything, is *unique* about the story/history of Jesus and the subsequent history of the Church?

Vanhoozer believes Ricoeur has opened up the world of the text and its role in the transformation of the reader's world or mode of being. For Ricoeur the Biblical narratives of Jesus are of preeminent importance for such transformation. Ricoeur has restored to the text its ability "to speak" and to the modern reader the ability "to hear" the text as text. The possibilities for Biblical exegesis and for a theology that avoids the error of immediate conceptual categorization are many. He has shown that hope, that "passion for the possible," is more basic to human existence than Sartrean dread and that this points to the whence of human dependence. We are not autonomous.

But as Vanhoozer carefully explains, Ricoeur's thought is in need of "correction," only after which can the full positive effects of his insights be made usable for orthodox, evangelical thought. Is this then to say that Ricoeur is at cross purposes with himself, incoherent finally? No, says Vanhoozer. Ricoeur's lapses are better dealt with, and the coherence of his larger program more readily recognized, by means of his ongoing desire to mediate opposites—in this case the particular and historical Jesus to his general universal significance.

While somewhat expensive, Vanhoozer's volume is a most helpful analysis of Ricoeur, a philosopher whose literary theory is yet too little known by evangelicals,

especially exegetes. Though I agree with Vanhoozer's positive assessment regarding the possibilities here, I would not be quite so affirmative as he is. Vanhoozer deepens our understanding not only of Ricoeur's rich thought but also of the role of text in the theological enterprise. He deserves much thanks for so effectively undertaking such an immense task.

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Creation and the History of Science By Christopher B. Kaiser. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991, 316 pp., \$17.95 paper.

In this third volume of the History of Christian Theology series Eerdmans has produced a fine, well-focused study of the idea of creation in the historical development of the physical sciences. Five lengthy chapters treat separate periods from the early Church through the emergence of post-Newtonian mechanics.

In the exposition of each of the periods Kaiser assesses the interaction of important figures with four distinct ideas in the creation tradition: (1) the comprehensibility of the world, (2) the unity of heaven and earth, (3) the relative autonomy of nature, (4) the ministry of healing and restoration. He traces the roots of these concepts to early Babylonian religion in which Marduk, king of the gods, ordained laws for the stars and for the forces of nature, which were identified with lesser deities. Thus Yahweh's sovereignty over all of creation is assumed to be an extension of earlier Mesopotamian concepts. This seems questionable since even an early text such as Genesis 1 appears to be a polemic against pagan mythology rather than a development of it. The Biblical and patristic data covered under the heading of the early Church, however, are normally helpful and suggestive.

The late medieval period was a time of transition in which Aristotelian physics challenged and then was wed to traditional creation concepts. The marriage introduced a bifurcation into the creation tradition. The image of God as the First Mover made nature seem more autonomous. This tendency provoked a conservative reaction that stressed the absolute power of God to contravene the ordinary workings of nature. Whereas many histories of science see Aristotelianism and medieval theology as stultifying influences, Kaiser points out the fruitfulness of their interaction for the progress of science.

Kaiser's treatment of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is equally perceptive. His assessment of the relative contributions of Protestants and Catholics to the scientific revolution strikes a better balance than have some more polemical studies. Newton, the brightest star of that era, is placed in his proper philosophical context, and his theological views (including his Arianism) are shown to have a bearing on his scientific presuppositions. Although Newton was concerned to leave room for God in the working of the cosmos, his discoveries encouraged others to adopt the more mechanistic view of the world that had begun to develop during the late middle ages.

In the century following Newton there was no consensus on the relationship between matter and spirit. Kaiser discusses the full range of opinions. Some followed Newton by imposing supernatural principles (such as gravity) on passive matter. Others attributed energy, life, and even thought to matter. At the opposite extreme were the antimaterialists, including Berkeley and Edwards. The view that triumphed at the end of the century is epitomized by the nebular hypothesis of Laplace.



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