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Review: Is There Meaning in this Text?

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Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader and the Morality of Literary Knowledge. By Kevin J. Vanhoozer. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998. 496 pages. \$29.99.

How does one review the Encyclopedia Britannica? With some hyperbole, that is how this reviewer felt after reading this large and remarkable book—for which the moral/ethical reading of texts is so central. More to the point is the title of Kevin J. Vanhoozer's work, i.e., is there indeed a meaning in this text? and so the subtitle, true reading, the possibility of literary knowledge and, above all, the relation of all such to Holy Scripture (as well as to all texts).

Vanhoozer is concerned, on the one hand, with crucial aspects of postmodernity in general and reader response interpretation of texts in particular, along with the consequences resulting from such upon reading and culture in general and upon Christian reading of Scripture in particular. On the other hand, Vanhoozer is just as concerned to critique and reform evangelical perspectives on hermeneutics and culture toward a more faith-full reading of the Scripture text, i.e., that such be true interpreters, and so followers, of the text of Scripture and thereby Jesus Christ, the object of Scripture's inspired witness. In this way, it is rightly hoped that evangelical Christians would enter, contribute to and, by the Spirit, really influence the currents of postmodern literary theory, and, so, true relation to all "others" as well as the "other" of the text and the text's author. To this end, Vanhoozer brings to the task a critical appreciation for postmodernity's and deconstruction's properly "critical" cultural purpose a recognition of the theological nature of all hermeneutics, biblical and general, the usefulness of contemporary Reformed epistemology (e.g. Plantinga, Wolterstorff) to understanding texts, the foundational nature of trinitarian theology for Christian understanding, the wisdom of Augustine's approach to Scripture (*credo ut intelligam*, negate faith seeking textual meaning), and the forceful insights of "Speech Set Theory" and Jürgen Habermas as applied to texts. All such is meant to have both negative and positive outcomes. Vanhoozer exposes and brings to light the philosophical and ultimately theological bases which underlie and pervade current debates regarding meaning. He also sets a chastened evangelical Protestant hermeneutics and, thus, theology, proclamation and ministry of the enscripturated Word of God, on much firmer ground. In this way, too, Vanhoozer wants to be part of the cure of Western civilization's deadly addiction and entrapment to the self, the self as center and creator of all meaning, that we may be turned out to the "other," to that which transcends the isolated self in restored relatedness to external meaning in texts as reflective of authorial intention, and above all in the divine-human text of Holy Scripture, the written Word of

God and there, by the Holy Spirit, the Author of life and meaning, the ultimate communicative Other.

Structurally speaking, how does Vanhoozer set out to accomplish his formidable goal? *Is There a Meaning in this Text?* falls into two major (and lengthy) parts. The first, "Undoing Interpretation," is an exceedingly detailed and yet quite clear presentation of the contemporary dilemmas facing all interpretation, pointedly of texts, and then the effect of such on interpretation of the text of the Word. It is important to note that throughout this section, and well into the second, Vanhoozer's own affirmation of Scripture as written Word of God (as reflected in the Westminster Confession) is usually more implicit than explicit until that point in his argumentation where such is of constructive significance, i.e., not clouding earlier developments with what could be a distractive assertion to many today. The primary interlocutors in the chapters of the first section are as central to the "postmodern turn," and Jacques Derrida, Richard Rorty, Stanley Fish, and Michael Foucault, among prominent philosopher-literary critics who, in reaction to modernity's "totalizing" claims to absolute objective knowledge and its consequent oppression of the "other," have rejected (indeed "killed") the author and his/her intentional authority. The claim is that there is no literary knowledge beyond the self-contained reader.

In so presenting the highly varied cultural reaction to Enlightenment claims to knowledge and truth known as postmodernism especially as reflected in hermeneutics, Vanhoozer grapples and interacts with a breathtaking wealth of material. As a result, the postmodern interpretive issues with which he deals are manifold. But two foci stand out as of central developmental concern. He divides those who have rejected all claims to objectivity and knowledge as being illusory and oppressive into the "Undoers" (the deconstructionists, e.g., Derrida) and the "Users" (the neo-pragmatists, e.g., Rorty and Fish). Further, he explains the central "reasons" that have led to the death of authorial intent and of possible knowledge of truth. Two stand out. There is first the post-Enlightenment epistemological crisis wherein modernity's claims to (at least potential) absolute knowledge have been eroded away; we do not have nor can we have a "God's-eye point of view." All human perspectives are by nature finite, fallible, culture bound and related to one's own interests. Second, as noted, postmodern literary critics have taken full note of the recent totalitarian effects of all claims to absolute knowledge, the oppressive outcome of all absolute truth claims (e.g. Nazism as experienced by Derrida, an Algerian, French speaking Jew, during WWII). Thus, since there is no proper human claim to absolute knowledge, there is none. And since all truth/knowledge claims are oppressive to those standing outside, all truth/knowledge claims are, by nature, immoral. Then the only "ethical" claim must be a rejection of truth and meaning external to the self, the reader. Only in this way, it is thought, can we free the "other."

All of this is rightly set within the post (Nietzschian) modern context of the "death of God."

Vanhoozer's second major section, "Redoing Interpretation," reconstructs the possibility of meaning by paralleling and reversing the three central interpretive "undoings" (or deconstructions) of the first, i.e., the author, the text and the reader. In faithful keeping with his acknowledged Augustinian, Reformed and Christological-Trinitarian bases, Vanhoozer "resurrects" the author, "redeems" the text, and "reforms" the reader. He accomplishes this with the help and careful use of a critical realist view of epistemology and language and the insights of prominent literary theorists (e.g.) Jurgen Habermas, George Steiner, Paul Ricoeur, Karl Barth and especially the "Speech Act Theory" of J. L. Austin and John R. Searle. Of interest is Vanhoozer's yes-no response to the important hermeneutical work of E. D. Hirsch, though on the whole he finds Hirsch to be proper in his arguments and affirmations regarding the possibility of literary knowledge.

In so working strenuously against the postmodern suspicion of hermeneutics and all knowledge claims as will-to-power, Vanhoozer is actually seeking a middle ground. He is both insightful and critically penetrating in his exposure of the destructive inadequacies of the Undoers and Users, including the contradictory emphases, arguments and claims throughout the deconstructive, neo-pragmatist (et.al.) program of "liberation." In fact, the very "other" that those denying literary meaning and knowledge are seeking to liberate from "immoral" truth claims is finally isolated and lost, all possible relationality killed, in the cocoon of the all-creative self/reader. Yet Vanhoozer affirms the "intent" of, say, deconstruction to "undo" the totalizing claims to absolute knowledge of modernity. In its proper place deconstruction has a corrective, chastising effect upon all absolute knowledge claims, whether regarding knowledge of the external world, literary texts, or, centrally for Vanhoozer's concerns, the text of Scripture. No human interpretation, even (especially?) of the written Word of God, can claim finality or fullness, to have exhausted the possibilities of the text.

But Vanhoozer also wants to show how and why we can properly, but not absolutely, affirm the cruciality of authorial intent (the author as true "other") and the text as external to the reader and as having meaning which must be sought. There is need, then, for readers to be true readers who acknowledge the otherness of the author and the author's intent as known only in the text, and who "follow" the text's direction (at least as far as is appropriate to be faithful to it). In light of such purposeful "redoing", of textual meaning and understanding, Vanhoozer makes constructive use of many elements (c.f. above). Noteworthy among these are his analysis and use of literary genres and "Speech Act Theory." For Vanhoozer, proper recognition of genre is the key to interpretation. It places the parts within the whole. It is nothing less than the controlling idea of the whole (337ff). "Speech Act

Theory," as applied to texts, and particularly the text of Scripture, is also formatively central to Vanhoozer's reaffirmation of meaning and literary knowledge. Via Habermas and others, Vanhoozer shows how and why one ought to affirm the inherent intelligibility of language, of texts, and "critical" (as opposed to "naïve") realism. But Speech Act Theory in particular and its understanding of the locution (text), illocution (meaning), and perlocutions (effects, applications) are at the heart of Vanhoozer's argumentation and construction of a proper hermeneutic for understanding the text of Scripture (and all texts, for all interpretation is ultimately theological because of God as creator of meaning). God, the Creator-Redeemer, is the absolute communicative agent. God, as triune and as ultimately communicating himself in the Word made flesh, has sought to reclaim and reform fallen humanity. But as creator, God has also given to humanity the dignity of being, though finite, a communicative agent as well. But, given human fallenness, this gift has been distorted. Therein lies the centrality of both Holy Scripture as divine-human text and written Word of God, and the effectual working of the Holy Spirit. The authorial content and intent of God as Author of Scripture—are not altered by the Spirit in the interpretive process. The Spirit's primary role in relation to the faithful disciple—interpreter is perlocutionary, i.e., in manifold applications. Yet, though Spirit-led in terms of application, no human interpretation, is absolute. Thus Vanhoozer points to a "hermeneutics of the Cross," i.e., to simultaneous hermeneutical humility (and thus teachability by others) and yet conviction within the truth of the gospel.

In response to Vanhoozer's massive answer to his question "Is there a meaning in this text," it is important to become clear regarding at least *some* of Vanhoozer's many notable accomplishments in this dense and carefully argued work. There can be no question that this text, *in* which there is meaning and sure authorial intent, must be a painful but needed slap in the face of many interpreters who have become giddy and chaotic, intoxicated by despair and nihilism, the reversed will-to-nothing of reactionary deconstruction and/or neo-pragmatism. But Vanhoozer has also led the way back, brought correction and initiated reconstruction for a proper claim, a firmer claim, to literary knowledge, knowledge that is responsible to the communicative action of the other. As Paul showed Timothy, Vanhoozer has shown the way not only for reproof but for teaching, for correction and for training/discipleship for righteous ethical interpretation of texts. Only in this way can the other as other and the self as true self be maintained, for, as onto-relations makes all too clear, we are what we are only in and by our effective, knowing, interactive relations to others. We are true subjects only as we stand in true relation to others and above all to the True Subject who has given himself to be known objectively as Lordly Subject in Jesus Christ (Kierkegaard). By thus affecting the contemporary hermeneutical debates

on meaning and understanding, showing that all interpretation is in fact theological, Vanhoozer's formulation of the place, role, and ultimately nature of Holy Scripture is of first order potential significance to a contemporary evangelical understanding of Scripture within the revelatory/communicative actions of God in Christ and by the Spirit. In relation to Vanhoozer's recognition that, in the redemptive-kingdom purposes of God, biblical hermeneutics is not only theological but trinitarian, Holy Scripture as the written Word of God is found to be absolutely crucial. As Trinity, as Creator, as Redeemer, God is by nature communicative Agent. The living God is a speaking God, centrally in the Word made flesh, to whom Scripture witnesses. By his application of "Speech Act Theory" to texts, and particularly to the text of Scripture in the context of divine revelation, Vanhoozer has given needed clarity to the multi-leveled nature of divine revelation and the role of historical textuality *within* the self-disclosive acts of God to be known as he is in the world. In ways somewhat parallel to recent work by Wolterstorff, he concludes that divine discourse (like all discourse, including texts) is the enactment, even embodiment, of authorial intent. Again, God is the speaking God, the communicative Agent, and by revelation and inspiration he has given a Word, a divine-human text, wherein his intentions can be known from the locutions and hence illocutions (meaning) of that text, i.e., by faith-full following of the intended directionality of that text. Herein, Vanhoozer's strong pneumatology, both in divine-human production and applications of Scripture's illocutions, brings forth the full intent of the reformational emphasis on *sola Scriptura*, the Holy Spirit being the effectual *energeia* of Scripture's truth. By the Holy Spirit, the singularity of divine intention at the level of illocution is unfolded and applied in a plurality of ways, "Pentecostal plurality" (unity of a plural kind, i.e., trinitarian), at the level of significance (perlocutions). Thus Holy Scripture, as divine-human text, as communicative act of God, as written Word of God, as witness to Jesus Christ, its proper object throughout, is found to be a place wherein resides meaning, meaning reflecting divine intention, meaning for which the disciple-interpreter is ethically responsible, morally bound to follow in accord with that enscripturated redemptive intention. In all, then, Vanhoozer has set both classical evangelical hermeneutics (interpretation, application) and the nature and role of the text of Scripture as written Word of God under Christ the Word, within the larger postmodernist controversies, on clearer, firmer Ground — ground from which the consequent call to humility and conviction for proclamation becomes all the more focused.

While many more points of admiration and affirmation of Kevin Vanhoozer's textually and massively manifested thinking and study of the theological problem of contemporary hermeneutics could be mentioned, at least a few of this reviewer's concerns ought to be stated. Often Vanhoozer seems to acknowledge or affirm a bit too much of, e.g., deconstruction. This

may be necessary for real entrance into the contemporary discussions, but, while *rightly* acknowledging certain postmodern correctives, a little too much may be given away in terms of rationality. Along those lines, modernity, the Enlightenment, is often cast by Vanhoozer as the ultimate example of rationality claims run wild. But to what extent is postmodernity's condemnation of Enlightenment rationality something of a caricature. Emphases on rationality hardly began there, and was not the core problem more a strong rationalism coupled with human autonomy? Also, while eventually giving proper place to the objectivity of the Word of God, Vanhoozer often misunderstands and hence mishandles the nature of proper scientific objectivity, confusing it with long outmoded Newtonian notions. Rather, objectivity in the Christian faith is not, contra Bultmann, et al., other than or different from proper scientific (post-Newtonian) objectivity. Like physics, faith "follows after" the way in which its own proper object (God in Christ by the Spirit) discloses itself to be. Only in this way can we faithfully know God objectively as he has given himself to be known, i.e., as Lordly Subject (cf. T. F. Torrance, versus Kantian agnosticism). Vanhoozer harnesses and uses a remarkably wide number of sources. Yet in his use of, e.g., Steiner, Habermas and others, there arises a concern for the potential irony of such use, given Vanhoozer's concern for authorial intent. Near the end of the work he even admits a sense in which he is "over-standing" rather than under-standing his source. Vanhoozer also has too great a concern at points for "balance" ("horrible self-conscious word," said J.I. Packer). Too much concern for "balance" (e.g. humility-conviction) will actually lead to paralysis of analysis, or simply paralysis. This is interestingly manifested, too, in Vanhoozer's endeavor to place his position somehow in the middle of contemporary lines of debate. Not too much of this and not too much of that. No doubt in terms of Aristotelian ethics ("the mean") this is fine. But like the earlier dialectical interplay of poles and extremes by "centrist" Reinhold Niebuhr, and all others who can find this one to the left and that one to the right (and who cannot?), Vanhoozer seems urgent in his desire for center ground between deconstruction and neo-pragmatism (skepticism) on the one hand and fundamentalism (certainty) on the other. He appears fearful that his affirmations of authorial intent and meaning in language/text will lead some (e.g. James Barr) to accuse him of "fundamentalism." Vanhoozer is not a "fundamentalist," with all the cultural baggage that term reflects. But to disengage himself from that accusation he portrays fundamentalism in a way that, with one important exception, does not often exist in reality. I have never met any who would fit Vanhoozer's description. The one great exception is the tendency of "fundamentalists" to confuse the authority of the text of Scripture with particular interpretations of the text. This is right on the mark. But do we not all do this at times, e.g., with our use of the ecumenical creeds and denominational confessions?

While other questions/issues could be mentioned, all fall far short of the great contribution Kevin Vanhoozer has made to evangelical Protestant hermeneutics. This reviewer has interacted with some who wonder whether *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* really breaks new ground. First, why is “new ground” as such a virtue? That sounds a bit too “Athenian” (Acts 17). But I would still answer Yes and No. On the one hand Vanhoozer’s work is restorative. He has advanced healing to the postmodern dualisms and their isolationist self-deification, showing much of it to be diseased and why, thereby restoring the proper bases of literary knowledge. But by means of such restoration, he also shows the falsehood resident in earlier (orthodox) understandings of such literary, biblical knowledge of meaning external to the self. Real advance has been made. If we would be properly responsive to Vanhoozer’s directives, and thus finally to the text of God’s enscripturated Word, much excellent Kingdom fruit will surely be produced. Highest recommendation.

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