<Book Review>

Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics:

A Comprehensive Framework for Hearing God in Scripture

Craig G. Bartholomew,
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Craig G. Bartholomew, the current H. Evan Runner Professor of Philosophy at Redeemer University College, has authored an impressive volume on biblical hermeneutics, written from an evangelical perspective (p. 40). Educated in both South Africa (Potchefstroom) and Europe (Oxford and Bristol), the author skillfully weaves together his wealth of insights on biblical interpretation, one of the most rudimentary aspects of Christian inquiry, into his work, *Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics*. Overall, Bartholomew's text is a welcome relief for modern readers of the Bible who have been looking for an integrative survey on the various interpretative approaches to Scripture. Bartholomew credits Meir Sternberg for having encouraged him to venture out to produce a "positive, constructive work" in the likes of *The Poetics of Hebrew Narrative*, "rather than trying to follow all the current fashions" (p. 408). The author succeeds remarkably in achieving this goal with his accessible writing style,

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albeit his dense treatment of various topics in Christian philosophy and theology ranging from Thomas Aquinas to Hans-Georg Gadamer in this volume.

Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics is divided into five parts, and each part addresses relevant subjects within the field of biblical interpretation: *Part 1 Approaching Biblical Interpretation, Part 2 Biblical Interpretation and Biblical Theology, Part 3 The Story of Biblical Interpretation, Part 4 Biblical Interpretation and the Academic Disciplines, Part 5 The Goal of Biblical Interpretation*. From the outset (chap. 1), Bartholomew explicitly articulates what he deems as central to biblical interpretation, in terms of the so-called "trinitarian hermeneutics," which fall under eight subcategories (the major parts of which are unfolded in later chapters). According to the author, trinitarian hermeneutics gives due respect to the authority of the Bible as a whole (sec 1, 2), with "ecclesial reception" (sec 3) as its primary objective over "academic interpretation" (sec 4). As a result, a truly biblical hermeneutic supposes a Christocentric interpretation with careful attention to the "discrete witness of the Testaments" (sec 5). By citing Bruce Marshall's reference to Thomas Aquinas's exposition of the Gospel of John (i.e., *Ille homo esset ipsa divina veritas*), the author explains the concept of trinitarian hermeneutics as essentially focused on Jesus Christ, who is "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). As the interpretative enterprise is about "this person" (p. 9), through his "unique relationship" with the Father (John 5:30) and the Spirit (John 16:13 - 14), the critical aim of a trinitarian hermeneutic is "hearing God in Scripture"; this involves an "initial receptive listening" as well as a "final receptive listening" (pp. 12 - 13; e.g., by means of *lectio divina* and preaching). In the spirit of *coram Deo*, we are called to be in God's presence through the reading of His Word. According to trinitarian hermeneutics, our priority before Scripture is listening rather than seeing, as the

Shema, the core message of the Torah, illustrates. The author frankly bemoans that "both conservatives and liberals" alike "have fallen prey" to an obsession with the "Enlightenment legacy" of idolizing methodology and analysis before "*respectful listening*" to the Bible (author's emphasis; pp. 24 – 25). Echoing the words of Brevard Childs, the author admonishes his readers that modern exegetes of Scripture are ever more in need of "spiritual formation" amidst the "rampant secular humanism and hubris" of academia (p. 46). Ultimately, the author claims that "from a Christian perspective a trinitarian hermeneutic is the right and truthful way to read Scriptures, the way that will yield a truthful understanding of the Bible" (sec 7; p. 13), encompassing the whole aspect of the created world (sec 8).

By and large, Bartholomew's focus on biblical theology (part 2) and Christian philosophy (part 4) is informed by his vision of the "ecology of Christian scholarship," in which the two disciplines are subsumed under both Scripture and a Christian worldview (see the pictorial representation of "a tree of knowledge," pp. 474 – 75). First, the author addresses biblical interpretation in light of biblical theology (part 2), arguing that biblical scholarship must respond to the most urgent imperative of a "narrative biblical theology" (p. 82), as apparent in the field of practical theology, theological ethics, and missiology on both "hermeneutical" and "homiletical" grounds (p. 70). Second, the author examines Brevard Childs's canonical biblical theology, Charles H. Scobie's thematic biblical theology, and R. Feldmeier and H. Spieckermann's biblical theology on the doctrine of God, concluding that these "complementary approaches" (p. 85), despite the limitations imposed by their post-Enlightenment assumptions, are conducive to unveiling "a grand narrative" of the Bible (p. 82).

Bartholomew duly notes the significance of our tapping into the Bible's reception history (part 3) to navigate "creative ways

forward" in biblical hermeneutics (p. 114), since "we the readers" are "embedded in history as is the text" (p. 114). The author's discussion of the various interpretive traditions, especially those of Christian and Jewish leading figures during Renaissance, Reformation, and Modern Era (chaps. 5 – 7), ends with a list of poignant reminders for his readers to cope with the "prejudice" inherent in the "radicality of the modern Enlightenment" in their interpretations of the Bible (pp. 249 – 50). Most importantly, Bartholomew calls his readers to be proactive in the face of the challenges wrought by the "contaminants" in the feast of Scripture (pp. 247 – 50): we are to "reengage historical criticism and recontextualize its insights in a healthier paradigm" (p. 249). The author also notes that if we take the historical claims of the Bible seriously (e.g., the Sinai event and eyewitness testimony in the Gospels), much of the discussion regarding the canonicity of Scripture will be realigned to emphasize the *terminus a quo* rather than the *terminus ad quem*, invalidating some of today's unconventional conclusions about the canonical boundaries of Scripture (chap 8).

The bulk of Bartholomew's central arguments on biblical hermeneutics is found in part 4 (pp. 279 – 484), in which he addresses biblical interpretation in light of philosophy (chap 9), history (chap 10), literature (chap 11), theology (chap 12) and "the ecology of Christian scholarship" (chap 13). According to Bartholomew, our understanding of biblical hermeneutics is much indebted to the foundational ideas of philosophical hermeneutics, specifically to Hans-Georg Gadamer's conception of "fusion of horizons," based on the premise that "all interpretation" is bound to the "effective history" of the text (pp. 310 – 12). The author reiterates his point by evaluating Jacob Milgrom's proposed translation of the technical verb אשם in Leviticus 4 – 5 (pp. 329 – 34) as well as the idea that the

philosophy of language, in particular, impacts the way we interpret the Bible (chap 9). Equally significant is the notion of the historicity of the Testaments (chap 10)—an assumption that is crucial to the Christian faith. Bartholomew alerts his readers of the substantial gap between conservatives and liberals regarding this issue, cautioning us in Mark Noll's words that, ultimately, "our faith does shape our historical work" (p. 336–37). The author's brief literary analysis of Luke 1–24 at the end of chapter 11 aptly demonstrates his contention that we, as readers, are to approach the books of the Bible by giving priority to their "literary and synchronic shape," without quickly resorting to "allegory" or "ideological substructures" (pp. 378–79). Moreover, proper biblical interpretation necessarily entails a thorough grasp of biblical theology and doctrine (chap 12). Karl Barth, one of the most prominent theologians of 20th century, is "the major model" (author's emphasis) of the principle that "Scripture is the primary norm and resource for theology" (p. 432), as *Church Dogmatics*, his magnum opus, amply attests. Bartholomew rightly maintains that the current trend must be overturned: theology should not ever be "divorced" from Scripture, but rather make its final "return" to Scripture (p. 432). The author's discussion of biblical interpretation from various angles illuminates the question of potential correlations between ecclesial and academic interpretations (chap 13), in which the latter enriches the former within the trinitarian, hermeneutical framework (as Bartholomew clarifies from the beginning of his work, p. 9).

In part 5, Bartholomew presents the Epistle to the Hebrews as a test case, applying his earlier claims regarding biblical interpretation to this letter (chap 14). He devotes the final chapter (chap15) of *Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics* to the topic of biblical preaching—a logical closure to this comprehensive volume when we consider Bartholomew's

relentless focus on "*listening and the ecclesial context* as the primary modes for reception of the Word" (p. 525).

Overall, Bartholomew's *Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics* turns out to be much more than a primer—the depth and breadth of his engagement with scholarship is thorough, supported by his extensive citations across diverse disciplines. Bartholomew's readers will especially benefit from his cogent and up-to-date presentation of various philosophical and theological schools of thoughts, which have shaped our perceptions of biblical hermeneutics over the years. The most riveting feature of this text is, in my opinion, the author's realistic and incisive diagnosis of the current state of affairs regarding the reception of Scripture, as well as his restorative prescription for this malady. Bartholomew's repeated emphasis on the primacy of the synchronic and ecclesial reception of Scripture is akin to a prophetic wake-up call for the hearers of the Word in the 21st century, especially when empty church buildings in the West are going on sale now more than ever before. Bartholomew's sober conclusion reminds us that spiritual leaders and interpreters of the Bible need to listen to the Word, which was given to the church, the body of Christ, from whom life overflows. It is commendable that, although Bartholomew forthrightly alerts us to the detrimental consequences the Enlightenment's legacies of historical criticism, as well as those of other academic inquiries, he is not hasty to reject these criticisms' merits, but rather challenges us to adopt these theoretical frameworks creatively to enrich our biblical interpretations. In this regard, Bartholomew's vision of rehabilitation is encapsulated in a trinitarian hermeneutic that accounts for all domains of creation as part of God's realm of sovereignty. As a whole, *Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics* intensifies John Stott's solemn call for "double listening"—"one ear to the Scripture and the other to cultures" (p. 15)—by

casting the sphere of formative influence of Scripture in all disciplines of human inquiry, as epitomized by Bartholomew's conception of the "ecology of Christian scholarship." A lingering question, however, is whether or not the Bible has more to say about what "listening" truly means. For example, does *lectio divina* fully capture the biblical notion of "listening" on practical levels, let alone the "evangelical" concept of hearing the Word? Does not the biblical mandate of the Shema describe the divine expectation of "listening" in a fuller sense of "holistic obedience," as the climax of *lectio divina*, rather than as passive contemplation? Some unresolved questions regarding the comprehensive picture of biblical "listening" notwithstanding, Bartholomew's *Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics* will certainly prove to be a long-lasting contribution to evangelical, biblical scholarship, and will continue to stimulate fruitful discussions within the field of biblical hermeneutics.