

Dockery, David S., *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992. 247 pp. \$25.00.

Dr. Dockery constructs this historical survey of biblical hermeneutics in order that the church may, “look at the present by looking at the past, the approach being to employ a historical examination of the use of the Bible in the early church to elucidate the contemporary hermeneutical task in order to help us unfold the meaning of Scripture for the contemporary reader” (17). In seeking to accomplish this task the author will begin his survey with the hermeneutical practice of Christ and his relationship to Jewish rabbinical interpretation and end it with the hermeneutical methods of modern day interpreters such as E.D. Hirsch and Paul Ricouer.

Each chapter will assess three critical issues that lead to the development of a representative group of interpreters from specific time periods within specific schools of thought. The issues that are assessed is the influences, cultural philosophies, theologies, and church traditions that are unique to each period. The second area of relevance that will be observed is how the subject’s particular approach was informed by the practices and practitioners of those who came before. These two areas will then allow the reader to observe the continuity or discontinuity of progression as the church has moved into the present day practice of hermeneutics.

However, Dockery will not be satisfied simply with a survey of those who have come before. He ends the book by proposing a synthesized hermeneutical approach with the hopes that the tension of biblical interpretation may be lessened. The preceding pages of historical information serve as a spiral staircase leading the reader to a point where he

is ready to look behind and see the necessity of such an approach.

The author says that the New Testament writers followed Christ by using a Christological interpretation of all texts. The authors were “dependent upon hermeneutical practices established in late Judaism, but they adapted the methods to the church with the addition of the Christological focus” (44). This was an approach that moved the Torah from being a book of laws into being a book of the Messiah.

The second century would see many different groups enter the stage that would challenge the interpretive practices of the toddler aged church. An up and coming diversified group that became known as Gnostics would seek to rob the church of her divine heritage by claiming a secret knowledge of God. There would also develop various groups, perhaps related to the Gnostics, which would posit sub-biblical teachings of the humanity or divinity of Christ. Dr. Dockery would show how the church would miss the point by spending her time doing “functional hermeneutics” (45) in which the theology of Christ was not supreme, but a push for moralism became the norm. Such men as Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Justin Martyr would rise to the occasion and seek to unveil Scripture as a divine depository of God’s self-revelation. Although these three would use different hermeneutical practices, they would regain a few inches of lost territory by introducing “a normative canon, an authoritative bishop, and an accepted rule of faith” (72).

However, this act of preservation would lead to another difficulty, namely, the development of two differing schools of hermeneutical practice. The Alexandrian school would come to resent the loss of freedom of interpretation that the ‘rule of faith’ seemed to imprison the biblical reader with. Clement of Alexandria and Origen would seek to

loose the chains that bind by the often uncontrollable practice of allegory. In response to the often fancied commentary that this school of thought offered, the Antiochene school would organize a philosophical approach to combat the Platonic philosophies that the Alexandrians had embraced.

Adherents of this rescue effort included the overly historical and wooden approach of Theodore of Mopsuestia, the golden mouthed Aristotelian preacher John Chrysostom, and the earlier father-like influence of Diodore of Tarsus. This group succeeded in bringing back the historical focus of Scripture to Christ, but allowed for some fluidity of interpretation by offering the sometimes inconsistent practice of *theoria* (127).

This set the stage for the catholic interpretations of such notable giants as Augustine, Jerome, and Theodoret of Cyrus. These three formed a sort of *via media*, each in their own way, as they sought to escape the diametrical snares of either a cold literalism or an amoebic allegorical approach. It was during this time that, “a balanced and multifaceted hermeneutic emerged that influenced hermeneutical practices in the Middle Ages as well as in post-Reformation times” (154). This balanced hermeneutic was capable of addressing theological concerns, it was centered in faith, and it edified the saints by encouraging love for God (154).

Dockery now brings his survey into the contemporary time frame with an encouragement to the modern day interpreter to learn from the cloud of witnesses in whom he is surrounded. Showing that the earliest failure of the church was a functional, or moral hermeneutic, he offers encouragement for the readers of today to look to the theological, or Christocentric nature of Scripture. However, even Marcion would affirm

this, hence the necessity of a modern day rule of faith, or confessional reading.

One must also realize that he can neither divorce the original meaning of the text from the significance in which it seeks to speak a solid word about God to man during the present day. “While the church must interpret the Bible in light of its current philosophical milieu, the goal of interpreting Scripture for the church must remain primary” (157). The author narrows modern day options of interpretation to three. First, the “author- oriented” option has been the dominant approach through the mid 20th century. This approach has sought to rely solely upon the literal-grammatical or the historical-critical methods of interpretation. Prominent in this movement has been Walter Kaiser’s distinction between meaning and significance. “Perhaps his major contribution in his vast writings has been the development of the principle that no additional meaning can be understood in any text than the meaning that would have been available to the author through the previous revelation” (173). However, this approach leaves no room for a fuller sense, or a *sensus plenior*.

This is the gap that a “reader-oriented” approach would seek to fill. This approach tends to capitulate that the reader does not have the ability to get into the mind of the author, as Schleiermacher would try to do. Therefore, there is no sense in trying. In order for a text to have meaning, the meaning must be found in the reader. Obviously, this is not an option to the conservative commentator, though it has been embraced by feminist and liberation theologians.

The third option is that of the “text-oriented” approach. “The goal of a text-oriented approach is not so much to discover the ‘author’s intention,’ but the ‘author’s results.’ Text-oriented hermeneutics concerns itself with what the author achieved” (174).

This invites the reader into the world of the text such that it is not the author that is important, nor is it the reader. In this approach, the goal is the text itself. This method brings understanding to all levels, including the author, the reader, and the text.

Dockery would invite a convergence of the above three options to form what he calls a “canonical synthesis” (182). This forms a two-fold phase for hermeneutical practice. The first phase is a literary-historical analysis in which the context is discovered. Second, is the canonical-theological analysis of how the text relates to believers, past and present, as well as the inner life of the Canon itself. “Our task then is to go ‘there and back again,’ to go to the text’s meaning in the historical situation before coming back again to speak to the present” (180). To Dockery, Augustine and Theodoret have been the closest to this model in history. Dr. Dockery encourages the present day interpreter to adopt this approach and thus give full justice to the revelation of God in Christ to the church.

