Vanhoozer, Kevin J., *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1998. 496 pp.

Carlos B. Smith

Introduction: Theology and Literary Theory
Chapter One - Faith Seeking Textual Understanding
Chapter Summary: In this chapter, Vanhoozer introduces the modern problem of seeking meaning in the text in contemporary hermeneutics in light of postmodernism. This problem has traditionally been understood by examining the "three ages of criticism:" The Age of the Author, The Age of the Text, and the Age of the Reader. This chapter outlines the book and the methods that Vanhoozer will utilize in answering the question: "Is there a meaning in this text?"

Outline & Notable Quotes from Chapter One
- Three Parables on Reading and Reflection
    - "To put it another way, do readers project themselves *onto* the text or discover themselves *in* the text…In order to avoid seeing themselves in Scripture as they really are, some readers prefer either to look at the mirror or to project their own, more flattering, images" (15-16).
- Philosophy and Literary Theory: From Plato to Postmodernity
    - "From the perspective of literary theory, we may no longer limit interpretation to the *practical* task of getting meaning out of texts, but must include the *political* task of situating the interpreter" (19).
    - "Reality is a text to be interpreted, mediated by language, history, culture, and tradition" (20).
    - "Philosophy, says Derrida, has long persuaded people of its authority by pretending to rely on logic and reason, but in fact the appeal to reason is really only a rhetorical ploy. Philosophy maintains its illusion of disciplinary grandeur only by systematically repressing the rhetorical and metaphorical aspects of its own discourse" (21).
- Meaning and Interpretation: The Morality of Literary Knowledge
    - "I have decided to employ the term 'meaning' in order to stake the claim that literary knowledge – knowledge not only about the text but of what the text is about – is indeed possible" (23).
- The Three Ages of Criticism: The Plan of the Book
    - The Age of the Author: Hermeneutic Realism and Non-Realism
    - The Age of the Text: Hermeneutic Rationality and Relativism
    - The Age of the Reader: Hermeneutic Responsibility or Freeplay
- Augustinian Hermeneutics
    - "The present work thus tries to answer a single question: 'Is there a menacing in this text?'…philosophers, literary critics, and biblical exegetes are today finding it increasingly difficult to answer this question with a simple affirmative…Because theology has an interpretive dimension and because interpretation has a theological

dimension. 'Is there a meaning in this text?' is, as we will see, a thoroughly *theological* question" (29).

- "I defend the belief that we come to know something other than ourselves when we peer into the mirror of the text" (31).
- The Interpreter's Credo
  - I believe in hermeneutic realism
  - I believe in hermeneutic rationality
  - I believe in hermeneutic responsibility

Undoing Interpretation: Authority, Allegory, Anarchy
Chapter Two - Undoing the Author: Authority and Intentionality
Chapter Summary: Vanhoozer examines postmodernism's deconstruction of the author. By removing authorial intent and authority, Derrida and other postmoderns remove the basis for any objectivity in interpretation. By loosing the text from the intent of the author, postmodernism makes the text a canvas upon which the reader projects themselves onto the text.

Chapter Outline
1. Authorship and Authority: The Birth of the "Author"
   a) Is There an Author Behind the Text
   b) "Maker of Story and Verse": The Author as Origin of Meaning
   c) The Father-Author and the Stable Home of Meaning
   d) The The Author in Premodern and Modern Biblical Exegesis
2. Undoing the Author's Authority
   a) Hermeneutical Non-Realism: Undoers, Users, and Unbelievers
   b) The Undoers: Deconstruction
      (1) Undoing Structures
      (2) Undoing Philosophy
   c) The Users: Neo-pragmatism
   d) The Unbelievers: Nihilism with a Human Face?
   e) A Gospel of Marks? The Voice of the Author
   f) Undoing Logocentrism: Speech Versus Writing
      (1) Voice: A Speaking Presence
      (2) Writing: A Silent Absence
   g) Undoing the Subject: The Ghost in the Machine
      (1) "There is nothing Outside the Text"
      (2) Différance and Dr. Johnson's Dictionary
      (3) Signatures and Signing Off: The Vanishing Subject
   h) "The Death of God Put Into Writing"
   i) Authors Anonymous?
      (1) Masters of Suspicion: The Turn from the Subject
      (2) Implied Authors
   j) The Death of the Author

        (1) Two French Epitaphs
        (2) Between Atheism and Humanism
  3.   Undoing the Author's Intention
     a)   Meaning Defined: The Author's Intention as Ground, Goal, and Guide of
         Interpretation
        (1) Ground
        (2) Goal
        (3) Guide
     b)   Interrogating Intention
     c)   Whose Intention? Which Consciousness? What Context?
     d)   Can Intentions be Recovered?
        (1) Against Reconstructing
        (2) Against Verifying
        (3) Against Totalizing
     e)   Should We Try to Recover the Author's Intention
     f)   Intentional Fallacies
        (1) The Fallacy of Relevancy
        (2) Fallacy of Transparency
        (3) Fallacy of Identity
        (4) Fallacy of Objectivity
  4.   Has the Bible Lost it's Voice
     a)   Biblical Interpretation and Authority
     b)   Jesus as Author of Faith: Is Christology Logocentric?
     c)   After Authorship: Whither "the Meaning fo the Text?"
        (1) Postmodern Biblical Criticism
        (2) Unless an Author Dies
           (a) If "the author" dies, so too does human agency
           (b) If "the author" dies, so too does the possibility of speaking truly about
               texts
           (c) If "the author" dies, so too does the possibility of meaning in texts
               i)   "The short answer – to be developed in chapter 4 – is that the author is
                   never really absent. The reader has simply taken his or her place" (90).

Notable Quotes from Chapter Two
- "The author, as the one who originates and guarantees authenticity, also commands and controls meaning. Authorship implies ownership. The rise of authorship and the rise of capitalism in the modern world is no coincidence, for both are based on the concept of private property" (46).
- "Strictly speaking, a sequence of words means nothing in particular until *somebody* means something by them. It is the author who determines verbal meaning" (47).
- "It is the author's exercise of his or her sovereign subjectivity that remains decisive for meaning. The stability of a text's meaning is therefore grounded in the will of its father-author" (47).

- "The main point I wish to make, however, is that beliefs about human authors are tied to beliefs about God. The unbelievers find it impossible to accept either the traditional picture of God or that of the author, for both pictures assume a kind of agency and intelligence that stands outside language and controls it, making sure that words correspond to the world and guaranteeing the reliability and truth of speech" (71).
- "Derrida's deconstruction of the author is a more or less direct consequence of Nietzsche's announcement of the death of God" (48).

Chapter Three - Undoing the Book: Textuality and Indeterminacy

Chapter Summary: Chapter Three explores how Derrida's deconstructionist hermeneutical approach completely undoes the concept of the 'book,' which is a fixed text with intention, beginning, and end. After Derrida's deconstruction, there is no 'book' left, but only a text that has no author, meaning, reference, or context.

1. Demeaning Meaning?
   a) Demeaning Metaphysics
      (1) Demeaning Aristotle
      (2) The World Well Lost
   b) Demeaning Method
      (1) Demeaning Objectivity: Discovery or Invention
      (2) Demeaning Interpretation
2. What is the Text?
   a) The Book of Books
   b) From "Closed Book" to "Open Text"
      (1) The Horizon of the Text: Gadamer and Ricoeur
         (a) Explanation or Understanding? Fusing Horizons
         (b) The World and the Work of the Text
         (c) The Role of the Reader
      (2) Empty Text Syndrome
      (3) Interpretation or Grammatology
         (a) Textuality
         (b) Contextuality
3. Meaning in Antioch and Alexandria
   a) Letter and Spirit
      (1) Alexandria: Looking Beyond the Letter
      (2) Antioch: Looking Through the Letter
      (3) The Rabbis: Living in the Letter
   b) The Literal and the Figural
      (1) The Literal Sense
      (2) Literal Versus Figural Interpretation
         (a) Augustine
         (b) Aquinas

Notable Quotes from Chapter Three

- "Undoers and Users insist that no human individual or group enjoys a privileged standpoint (not even the philosopher) because no one can see the world as it 'really' is (i.e., apart from the mediation of some linguistic scheme)" (101).
- Obviously, there can be no 'God's-eye point of view' after the death of God. There can be no authorized version of reality, only a plurality of alternative, sometimes competing, versions" (102).
- "The 'book' is therefore a theological idea, insofar as it implies that there is a single unified meaning and a comprehensive order. Any claim that a text can be totalized (e.g., interpreted as a unified whole) is thus a 'theological' claim" (105).
- While acknowledging the role of the reader in producing or realizing meaning, these critics insist that the text – by virtue of its autonomy and integrity – continues to exert some influence over its interpretation" (105).

- "The text is merely the adventure playground of interpretation, the site of verbal slides, swings, and sandboxes that afford the reader the means to exercise his or her imagination" (105).
- "In short, the text has a potential, but actual meaning is the result of an encounter with the reader" (106).
- "In grammatology, the ink is just about the only thing that does not disappear; author, meaning reference, even context – all vanish. In contrast to the bound book, a structured and determinate whole, the text is a network of signs and of other texts, radically open and indeterminate" (111).
- "Instead of being one figure of speech among others, then, metaphor is for Derrida the clue to language and reality in general. Deconstruction exposes the metaphorical 'is and is not' at the bottom of metaphysical 'is'" (130).
- "No thought, no idea, no concept is allowed to break free from writing and establish a non-linguistic beachhead from whence it can make superior truth claims…Metaphor thus stands for the inescapable captivity of thought to language. Derrida's maxim – 'there is nothing outside the text' – means here that there is no non-metaphorical way of speaking about the world" (131).

Chapter Four - Undoing the Reader: Contextuality and Human Interests
Chapter Summary: This chapter examines how in postmodern hermeneutics, because all meaning rests with the interpretation supplied by the reader, the reader of a text functionally becomes the author. Thus, there is no true loss of authority in interpretation, but it is transferred from original author to reader. Vanhoozer argues that this approach is does interpretive violence to the texts and is immoral.

1. The Birth of the Reader
   a) What is a Reader?
      (1) The Place of the Reader
      (2) Is There a Reader in the Text?
      (3) Is the Reader a Writer?
   b) The Work of the Reader
      (1) Determinate Reading
      (2) Indeterminate Reading
      (3) Centrifugal Reading
2. The Aims of Reading: Literary Knowledge and Human Interests
   a) The Aims and Ethics of Interpretation
      (1) The "Critical" Aim: Description
      (2) The "Ethical" Aim: Evaluation
      (3) The Utilitarian Aim: Using Texts
   b) Towards Which Criticism?
      (1) Whose Interest, Which Partiality?
      (2) How Readers Respond to Interpretive Pluralism
         (a) Interpretive Dogmatism

Notable Quotes from Chapter Four

- "The reader is no *tabula rasa* or blank slate; on the contrary, what the reader finds in a text is largely a function fo what one brings to it" (149).
- "Undoers and Users alike attack the myth of the objective reader. Reading is not about accumulating knowledge but about transmitting culture and satisfying desire" (149).
- The claim to see texts as they are is illusory. Every reader sees what one can see from one's position in society, space, and time. Reading is a dialogue between text and reader, between the discursive strategies inscribed in the text and those that shape the culture of the reader. Reading, then, is no exception to relativity theory. Like it or not, what we find in texts is a function of who, and where, we are" (151).

- "Rorty, Fish, and Derrida all agree that 'meaning' refers not to something 'in' texts but rather to what happens in the experience of reading. Meaning is less about some fixed nature of the text-in-itself as it is about the function of the text-for-me" (158).
- "Christian orthodoxy believes that God is essentially the one who communicates himself to others in trinitarian fashion. A trinitarian theology of the Word of God conceives God as author, as message, and as power of reception: 'In the beginning was the communicative act.' The God of Jesus Christ is the self-interpreting God" (161).
- "The scene Taylor describes is not the bliss of the wedding bed – there is no marriage of two minds in deconstructive criticism – but rather the pain of interpretive rape" (162).
- "The text in the age of the reader resembles a ventriloquist's dummy: it serves as an opportunity for projecting one's own voice" (164).
- "I wish at this point to commend deconstruction as a standing challenge to interpretive pride" (184).

Discussion Questions
1. Vanhoozer seeks to model in his reading of Derrida charity and understanding and even affirms that Derrida's approach stands as a challenge to interpretative arrogance. In your understanding of Derrida's deconstructionist approach to hermeneutics, what are ways that his approach sheds light upon and sharpens an orthodox hermeneutical approach to Scripture?
2. Derrida was raised Jewish in predominantly Muslim Algeria. He go on to experience much marginalization because of his faith and ethnicity. How do you think these experiences may have informed his thinking and hermeneutical approach?
3. How does the philosophical, "Death of God," affect hermeneutics?
4. In chapter 4, Vanhoozer examines how Derrida situates all interpretative authority with the reader and the function of the text is the "text for me" function. How does this approach mirror the way many Christians approach the study of the Scriptures? How can we address this in our local churches?
5. Vanhoozer argues that we all see the Scriptures from a particular perspective and vantage point. How should that reality inform how we determine what is considered "biblical" within Christian circles that is increasingly hermeneutically pluralistic?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Akker, Robin Van Den, Alison Gibbons, and Timotheus Vermeulen, eds. *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth After Postmodernism.* London: Rohman & Littlefield International, 2017.

Almon, Russell L. "The Postmodern Self in Theological Perspective: A Communal, Narrative, and Ecclesial Approach," *Ecclesiology* 13/2 (2017): 179-196.

Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology.* Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.

Ehret, Verna. "The Courage of Liminality: Tillich and Theological Anthropology in Postmodernity," *International Yearbook for Tillich Research* 11/1 (August 2016): 81-104.

Erickson, Millard J. *Postmodernizing the Faith: Evangelical Responses to the Challenge of Postmodernism.* Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998.

Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences.* New York: Routledge Classics, 2002.

_____ . "Truth and Power," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977.* Translated by Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, and Kate Sopher. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method.* New York: Crossroad, 1984.

Grenz, Stanley J. *A Primer on Postmodernism.* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996.

Helm, Paul. *Divine Commands and Morality.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981.

Hiebert, Dennis. "Toward a Post-Postmodern Christian Concept of Self," *Didaskalia* 16/1 (Fall 2004): 1-24.

Hiebert, Paul G. *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change.* Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008.

Kirby, Alan. *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle The Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture.* New York: Continuum, 2009.

Lewis, C.S. *The Abolition of Man.* New York: HarperOne, 2001.

McQuilkin, Robertson and Bradford Mullen. "The Impact of Postmodern Thinking on Evangelical Hermeneutics," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40/1 (March 1997): 69-82.

Megill, Allan. *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

Miller, James. *The Passion of Michel Foucault.* New York: Anchor Books, 1993.

Moreland, J.P. *"*Truth, Contemporary Philosophy, and The Postmodern Turn,*" Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48/1 (March 2005): 77-88.

Moreland, J.P. and William Craig. *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview.* Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003.

Nealton, Jeffery T. *Post-Postmodernism: Or The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism.* Stanford: Stanford University Press: 2012.

Penner, Myron B. *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn.* Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005.

Smith, James K.A. *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church.* Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006.

Smythe, Luke. "Modernism Post-postmodernism: Art in the Era of Light Modernity." *Modernism/Modernity* 22, no. 2 (2015): 365-379.

Taylor, Mark C. *After God.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Vanhoozer, Kevin J. "Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity: A Report on Knowledge of God," *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Vermeulen, Timotheus and Robin van den Akker. "Notes on Metamodernism," *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 2/1 (2010): 1-14.

Yip, George. "The Contour of a Post-postmodern Missiology," *Missiology* 42/4 (2014): 400-411.