Vanhoozer, Kevin J. *Mere Christian Hermeneutics: Transfiguring What It Means to Read the Bible Theologically*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2024. 424pp. + 52pp. (back matter).

Few books in evangelical biblical studies can be called a magnum opus, as this book can; few raise readerly expectations to a fever pitch, as this book did; even fewer satisfy those expectations—as, indeed, this book did not.

Those expectations came in part through the promise in the title: Kevin Vanhoozer, the great hermeneutician, was going to deliver to serious believing readers of Scripture a *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*, a hallway where the various denominations and reading cultures (more on that term in a moment) who read Scripture might find some hermeneutical unity amidst our never-ending theological cacophony. "I argue," he says, "that interpreters need to leave their interpretive silos and mingle in the hall to converse with those who read the Bible differently" (xxi). He was going to accomplish this feat via the method in his subtitle: *Transfiguring What It Means to Read the Bible Theologically*. And as any reader of Vanhoozer knows, he was going to use verbal panache unlike that of any other writer. This humble reviewer was very, very eager to read this book.

What came when the volume was delivered was a wide-ranging read of nearly 400 pages. A 2,000-word review must content itself with the high points. And the low points. There were, for this reader, two key promises Vanhoozer made that he failed to fulfill, two expectations which were left unsatisfied. I will discuss these before offering sincere praise for this incredibly stimulating book.

First, Vanhoozer promises to rescue the reputation of the fathers as careful readers of Scripture. This is, admittedly, not an explicit promise but rather a clear implication of the rhetorical structure of the work. Vanhoozer, a leader in the Theological Interpretation of Scripture movement, brilliantly lays bare the two "reading cultures" that are often found fighting in the mere Christian hallway rather than working together: biblical studies and theology. Each of these reading cultures (one thinks of Stanley Fish's "interpretive communities") has its own rules and expectations for the hermeneutical task; "each culture devalues or perhaps dismisses the contribution of the other" (50).

Can the two be unified? Vanhoozer says that his own "transfiguring interpretation," his "grammatical-eschatological exegesis," is "shorthand for the attempt to combine scholarly exegesis, with its philological attention to the letter, and spiritual interpretation, with its concern for reading in such a way that readers understand in ways that conform them to the image of Christ" (25). Vanhoozer continues (25):

> What earlier generations called the spiritual sense is, according to the view set forth here, the "transfigural" sense, namely, the glory of the literal sense. To see Christ in the letter is not to see something "other" in the text, as in "allegorical" interpretation; Rather, it is to see "how much more" there is to the literal referent. Transfigural interpretation stands for the whole hermeneutical process of glorifying the biblical letter for the sake of the reader's glorification.

Perhaps Vanhoozer did not intend this, but his subsequent forays into precritical interpretations and his regular reminders that these earlier readers brought a better frame of reference than so many of us moderns, a reference beyond Charles Taylor's "immanent frame"—all of this led me to expect a

defense of at least some of the fathers' allegorizations. Vanhoozer does helpfully point out that "even Origen distinguished between proper and improper figural exegesis" (166). Augustine, too, had hermeneutical controls. "Mere Christian readers have always worked with some such distinction," Vanhoozer says (166).

But this promise remained unfulfilled for me. I still react to far too many comments in InterVarsity's valuable Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture with the very syllables Vanhoozer uses to describe me: "Nothing bothers seriously literal interpreters more than the arbitrary lists of correspondences that allegorical interpretation apparently licenses ('This means *whaaat?*')" (165). I waited the length of the book to be told what I was missing; I highlighted countless lines full of wisdom, but I did not finally come to a decidedly positive view of the fourfold sense or of ancient Christian allegoristic practices.

Second, Vanhoozer promises to reveal the transfiguration as a kind of hermeneutical key to the "grammatical-eschatological exegesis" he argues for in the text. He makes numerous provocative and insightful connections between the light of Christ's face and the task of reading the Bible; there is a highly pleasing amount of clever wordplay regarding the common "light" metaphor in Scripture. I agree that Jesus' transfiguration showed off the truth of what he was all the time (268), much as moments of illumination while reading God's word only reveal light that was already being shed on our paths whether we saw it or not.

But Vanhoozer raises an expectation that Jesus' transfiguration would unlock all of Scripture. "In looking back to the Law and the Prophets, and forward to Jesus' exaltation, the transfiguration is an interpretive crux of the gospel narratives" (267). I wrote in the margin: "Really?" I admit that Vanhoozer brings forth stimulating quotations in which other writers have seen unexplored depths in the important events at Mount Tabor that all three Synoptics relate (Matt 17 | Mark 9 | Luke 9). But I prefer to see the passage as a profound illustration (note the "lustre" in the middle of that word) of what grammatical-eschatological exegesis can and should do, not a guide for how to do it.

Now, I am eager to agree with Vanhoozer when he says that we ought to engage in interpretation that "starts with the letter of the text and with the way the authors, human and divine, make the words run"—but does not stop there. Such exegesis "gives a thick description of the Bible's literal sense" (179) by reminding us that the "figures" in Scripture have ultimate eschatological referents. The words run to an end point: that God—in Christ, through the Spirit—may be all in all. I agree that the OT prophets could know the sense of what they were saying without necessarily knowing the referents. Vanhoozer sees in Isaiah's Servant Songs, for example, not a *sensus plenior* (a fuller sense) but a *referens plenior* (137) and a *sensus splendidior* (269)—a fuller referent and a "shining sense," namely Jesus Christ. But I found concrete specifics to be somewhat lacking in Vanhoozer's book. Granted, we should read the OT in the light of Christ. And the *sensus literalis* of a divine-human text can include eschatological referents, a spiritual sense, because God can mean more than his inspired writers do. But what makes for bad figural readings? This was left less than fully clear.

The major example of good figural reading that Vanhoozer adduces—at the very end of the book—felt like low-hanging fruit. It was the Song of Songs. But what about the Minor Prophets?

What about Genesis 3:15? Vanhoozer offers helpful categories for understanding these passages but little guidance for how to choose which categories apply.

I struggled to wrap my mind around this book as a whole. Academic reviewers are not supposed to admit such weakness, but I choose to say it this way rather than to criticize Vanhoozer for somehow failing—because I have immense respect for him. *Mere Christian Hermeneutics* is bursting with insight and quotable lines. Because I cannot with honesty point to a clear through-line, I will instead finish this review by simply noting individual instances of insight I appreciated. I will mention five out of literally hundreds. This is an experience I have had with several of Vanhoozer's books: the sum of the parts adds up to more than the whole.

First, Vanhoozer's concept of "answerability" accords well with the morality of knowledge I have already come to see in Jesus' rhetorical question to the Pharisees, "Have you not read . . . ?" Christians are the New Covenant people; when God addresses us in Scripture, we are accountable to respond as young Samuel did: "Speak Lord, for your servant hears."

> Right reading is a [here Vanhoozer quotes Chretien] "process that requires a particular attention, vigilance, and availability." These are not steps in a method but interpretive virtues: dispositions of the mind and heart that arise from a deep desire for understanding and for doing justice to the voice of the author, an author. No single method can guarantee right reading. Right reading requires right-hearted readers. (18–19)

Like his apparent ally, Iain Provan, Vanhoozer calls for "right readers reading rightly." Good interpretation arises from desire, from love.

Second, Vanhoozer makes more brilliant uses of C. S. Lewis than simply echoing his famous book title (itself an echo of a line from Puritan Richard Baxter). Vanhoozer writes, with clear allusion to Lewis's *An Experiment in Criticism,* "Instead of judging 'right readers' or 'right readings' on the basis of the critical methods they use, I propose *judging the rightness of critical methods by the kind of theological readings, readers, and reading cultures they beget*" (5). This point is profound, and it is (I judge) empirically observable in the various Christian communions that Vanhoozer hopes to help bring together through his work. I cannot say that Catholicism and Orthodoxy hold no appeal—clearly, many intelligent people with apparently sincere religious faith find each compelling. And Reformation Protestantism has plenty of flaws, of whom I am chief. But truly evangelical reading methods have produced better Bible-reading cultures than those of Catholicism and Orthodoxy. This feels indisputable to me.

Third, and following immediately on from the previous point, I definitely feel the tension between the two reading communities of biblical studies and theology, and it was helpful to have this tension named—and to have a solution described for me: "I define a *bad* exegetical method as one that forbids, forestalls, or frustrates any theological reading of the Bible, and a *good* exegetical method as one that is open to, facilitates, or necessitates some kind of theological reading" (5). Reading Vanhoozer reminded me to believe that if Scripture cannot be broken, neither can good theology. He pushed me to connect my examination of the biblical trees to the synthesis of the theological forest, and vice versa.

Fourth, Vanhoozer has picked up—perhaps due to his attention to postmodern theorists—some of the cast of mind of Stanley Fish, mentioned above; and one very Fishian point I found highly provocative and insightful came in a quotation Vanhoozer gives about typology and allegory. Vanhoozer quotes Peter Martens in a journal article on that topic: "The emerging consensus is that 'typology and allegory are *competing* forms of non-literal exegesis, the former the successful variety, the latter its unsuccessful, non-literal twin'" (163). This helpfully clarified my still-in-process feelings about the typological interpretations of influential (and clearly very knowledgeable and godly) contemporary exegetes such as Jim Hamilton and Mitchell Chase, both of Southern Seminary. Fish would observe that "typology" is not a neutral category that "sits above the fray, monitoring its progress and keeping the combatants honest." No, typology is "right there in the middle of the fray, an object of contest that will enable those who capture it to parade their virtue at the easy expense of their opponents: we're for [Christological interpretation] and you are for [unfettered hermeneutical flights of fancy]."[1] I believe in the existence of OT types and NT antitypes; it is simply helpful to be reminded that the line between typology and allegory is both blurry and contested.

Fifth and finally, I believe I will from now on style myself a "grammatical-eschatological" interpreter. As with Vanhoozer's provocative self-designation—one I share—of "reformed catholic" (note the lower-case *c!*), Vanhoozer's "grammatical-eschatological exegesis" is a playful and memorable and counter-intuitive pointer to important truths. I am not stuck in Taylor's immanent frame or Schaeffer's lower story. Though it is true that the Bible records the historical intentions of real writers in history who used linguistic forms accessible through historical study, and though it is true that a major aim of my interpretation is to read the Bible as it was read by its intended (historical) readers, the Bible is divine address that can and must be read in light of the future Trinitarian glories to which it has always pointed. Some people read the Bible and come away with their faces dulled by over-attention to historical tabulation: *So and so begat so and so, who begat so and so; yawn.* But I wish to come away from the Bible with my face shining like Moses', shining like someone who has beheld the glory of God in the face of Christ, and who is changed into that same image from glory to glory.

Kevin Vanhoozer is an expert at prolegomena, a genre of theological writing I love. I do think readers need his words to run further: we need some *legomena.* I would like to see Vanhoozer cash out his reading strategies with more exegesis. But till that day, I remain grateful for his work.

A small postscript about Vanhoozer's witticisms: the clever references that only certain people will get, the fascination with metaphor and wordplay—these feel genuine to me, and not ostentatious. They let the reader into the workings of a mind that delights in God's good gifts of allusion and paronomasia. I commend Vanhoozer for writing in this way and his editors for letting him.

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[1] Stanley Fish, *The Trouble with Principle* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 16 (interpolations my own).