

BOOK REVIEWS

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Steffen, Tom and William Bjoraker. *The Return of Oral Hermeneutics: As Good Today as It Was for the Hebrew Bible and First-Century Christianity*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2020. Pp. xxx + 357. Paperback \$45.00, Hardback \$63.00, eBook \$42.00.

Tom Steffen and William Bjoraker both have experience working missiologically with non-Christian and non-Western groups. Fifteen years Steffen worked among the animistic Ifugao in Luzon, Philippines, while Bjoraker served as a missionary to the Jewish people for over 35 years. Therefore, they both come to the topic with practical experience. Their ministry made them rethink their approach as they saw more clearly the deficiencies of traditional textual-teaching models and the utility of more oral-teaching models (pp. xvii–xxii). They vocalize a disturbance with the apparent discrepancy between how the Bible is taught in Seminaries and what students seem to need for the work in the field (pp. 1–4). *The Return of Oral Hermeneutics* is an argument for the need of oral hermeneutics to be included—not to the exclusion of textual and literary approaches—but as an essential

ingredient in the proper training of theologians and pastors. As R. Daniel Shaw writes in the foreword, “the book models the authors’ intent to help nonoral processors rediscover the art of storying on the one hand, and hearing God’s word on the other” (p. xii).

I remember when we were asked to go and do rural ministry in Vesterålen, North of Norway. Traditionally, farming and fishing have been the central sources of income, and the population is rather pragmatic in its outlook on life. I experienced having to hide my academic background, since this distanced me from the people I was supposed to work with. I also experienced that my academic training had poorly equipped me for work in this setting. Those who performed decently in school often left for higher education in other cities, never to return, and it was not uncommon for individuals to struggle with dyslexia. While here we invited Svein Tindberg. Tindberg is an actor who was a non-believer turned a believer when he prepared a performance of the Gospel of Mark. Today, he is one of the foremost Bible communicators in Norway, and it is fascinating to see how he again and again can fill the seats in urban and rural secular settings by simply retelling the Bible stories using oral techniques from the theatre. *The Return of Oral Hermeneutics* is a more systematic reflection of such effects and how oral teaching models appeal to persons in various settings.

The Return of Oral Hermeneutics consists of three parts: Part 1 “Demonstrations,” Part 2 “Propositions,” and Part 3 “Echoes.” The first and last parts consist of examples in the form of transcripts of oral teaching of the narratives about Elisha combined with further reflections on oral hermeneutics. Part 2, the main section of the book, “lays out [their] *propositional proposals* on oral hermeneutics” (p. xxvi, italics original). The chapters in this section discuss how orality influences text and teaching, suggest corrections to textual hermeneutics, Hebrew hermeneutics, attempt to present a more holistic model that does not discard systematic theology, biblical theology, or narrative theology, but tries to go beyond these, and discuss different models for communicating the Bible.

The authors state the purpose of the book as follows: “The book builds the case for *the return of oral hermeneutics* to better understand, interpret, and teach the Bible (‘the book’) in the twenty-first century at home and abroad, using oral means” (p. xvii, italics original). They formulate the book’s central question: “*Why is it important to know and practice oral hermeneutics to ascertain and communicate biblical meaning?*” (pp. xxiii, 105, and 294, italics original).

While it is often assumed that a text-oriented analytic and methodological approach should be the privileged approach in biblical studies, they find

that it tends “to elicit shallow content, abstract ideas, and be driven by the legal value-moral system of innocence and guilt generally preferred in the West” (p. xx). They summarize “textual hermeneutics” (TH) as it “tends to focus on fixed documents, preferably the earliest Hebrew and Greek manuscripts, grammatical analysis, lexical tools requiring linear, line-by-line, word-by-word studies, definitions. This is then packaged clearly and crisply in systematic categories after hours of often private study and little immediate feedback.” It privileges “trained professionals” as needed for the proper elucidation of the Bible and a spectator role, “values rigid rightness anchored in specificity and preciseness, often separated from events in which they are embedded,” and favor “rigid modes of investigation that are highly informed by Western culture.” It “prefers to define and explain rather than describe and portray.” And transformation, internal change and spiritual formation, “may or may not transpire” (pp. 15–16).

In contrast, they define oral hermeneutics (OH) as tending “to focus on the communal oral telling, demonstration, discussion, interpretation, repetition, and application of the biblical grand narrative and all the smaller stories that compose her. There is (un)planned collective telling, interpretation, with various applications, all unfolded and unpacked through discussion of the Bible characters. Interaction in the group tends to be extemporaneous, experiential, intuitive, verbal, and visual.” The Bible stories are heard through performance, and witnessed as an interaction between text and audience, with a focus on the characters of the story and discoveries unfolding nonsequentially. It “champions collectivism, volunteerism, the big picture, comprehensiveness, fulsomeness, and the progressive repetition of repeated themes.” It “advances shades of ambiguity, the affective and intuitive, and the subjective.” It invites participation, and “those who exit the stage are changed people; they are never the same because they just lived someone else’s life” (pp. 16–18). On pp. 133–34 they provide a summary of “the multiple components that comprise orality,” as the authors see it, and p. 307 for the oral-textual hermeneutic continuum as they outline it. On pp. 224–28 they list helpful questions focusing on the character and their values in narratives as they can be used in oral teaching.

The Return of Oral Hermeneutics is a helpful challenge and reflection around the need of oral hermeneutics. They argue that it is an essential element together with other traditional approaches. Oral hermeneutics places the prime emphasis upon reliving and experiencing the Bible characters in our own lives. They claim that we often read Bible passages abstractly rational and analytical, while they are essentially presented as character-oriented and calling for a response first and foremost with our hearts. They

ask: “*Why do we Westerners usually assume philosophical and systematic theology is the most profound expression of truth?*” (p. 9, italics original).

For Steffen and Bjoraker it should be a continuum between oral and textual hermeneutics. Both are needed. They write: “OH is *not* a rival to TH, rather it is its *source spring of living water*. OH is *not* a substitute hermeneutic, rather it has a *signature shared role in a specific sequence*. OH is *not* a supplemental hermeneutics, rather it serves as a *catalyst*. OH is *not* just an addition to TH, rather it is its indispensable *bedrock and cornerstone*. OH is *not* a simplistic hermeneutic, rather it is as *complex as TH*. OH is *not* an inferior hermeneutic, rather it is a *different type of hermeneutic that fills in missing gaps found in TH*” (p. 298, italics original). Undoubtedly, Steffen and Bjoraker challenge how we often think about biblical studies and theological training. Working at an institution that trains students who will work in cultures that are more oral than textual, I find myself pondering how I can better prepare my students so they can more effectively communicate the Bible in such settings. But it also leaves me reflecting on how we can use oral hermeneutics to better reach people in Western post-Christian societies, where many no longer read longer texts.

A classical dichotomy is between theory and practice, often ending with practitioners not solidly grounded in the Bible and preachers entertaining the audience with stories that do not transform character. Here, I find the tension between textual and oral hermeneutics presented by Steffen and Bjoraker more helpful and constructive. Theirs is not an argument for simplification and conveniently avoiding deeper reflections. On the contrary, they embrace the complexity and offer a model that has the potential to stay clear of the pitfalls the church often suffers from. While it is easy to see how this may work for teaching biblical narratives, and their point is well taken that other biblical texts also operate in the more oral register, there is still a need to reflect on how more abstract reflections in the Bible should best be communicated.

I felt the text was repetitive and redundant at several points in the reading. They frequently give questions in italics throughout the text, and it feels very much like basically the same questions are asked again and again. I am unsure whether the circularity and repetitions were intended or not, as I did not see the authors reflecting on their own style of writing. Are they trying to demonstrate how orality can be done in written texts? At points in the text, we are given serial quotes from various authors without any deeper engagement with the secondary literature. In my studies of repetition with variation in the Bible, it seems that the biblical authors were fond of repetition, but it is typically combined with creative variation. I would suggest

that the use of the oral register in writing should not lead us into simple repetitions, but we should simultaneously seek creative repetition with variation, so as to drive the reflection forward, as is frequently seen in the biblical text.

Further, while the significance of the Gutenberg printing press is obvious, I also feel they “blame” the shift too much on the poor man (pp. xviii, 11). The general move towards our current textual mindset was gradual and took place over centuries.

It seems evident that oral teaching is a good way to communicate the Bible stories to children, and engage them with the biblical characters. However, I did not see reflections on how oral hermeneutics should be adapted for children. More reflection around this would be helpful, and *The Return of Oral Hermeneutics* will be a valuable resource for those willing to do so.

I found *The Return of Oral Hermeneutics* to be a refreshing read that challenged me as a biblical reader and teacher of the Bible. Steffen and Bjoraker call their book an introduction, and it requires more thinking around how we can incorporate oral hermeneutics in our studies and teaching of the Bible. They have given us a good starting point for such a reflection.

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Mueller, Ekkehardt, and Elias Brasil de Souza, eds. *Sexuality: Contemporary Issues from a Biblical Perspective*. Silver Spring, MD: Review and Herald, 2022. xvii + 608 pp. ISBN 978-0925675-34-7. Paperback, \$25.00.

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Sexuality: Contemporary Issues from a Biblical Perspective, edited by Ekkehardt Mueller and Elias Brasil de Souza, offers a thorough examination of sexuality through a Seventh-day Adventist biblical framework. As the second volume following *Marriage: Biblical and Theological Aspects*, this