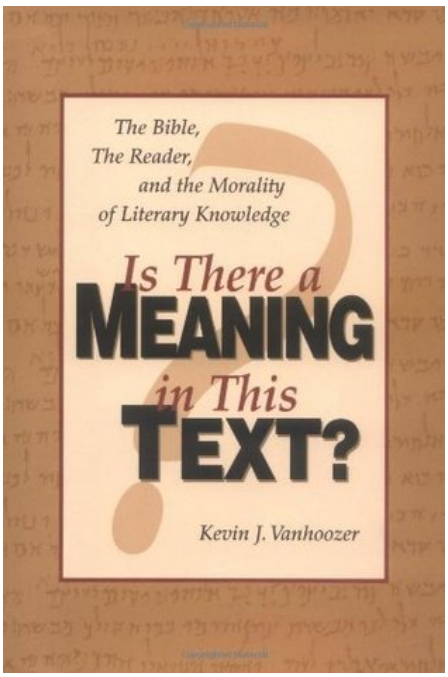

Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge

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Is there a meaning in the Bible, or is meaning rather a matter of who is reading or of how one reads? Does Christian doctrine have anything to contribute to debates about interpretation, literary theory, and postmodernity? These are questions of crucial importance for contemporary biblical studies and theology alike. Kevin Vanhoozer contends that the postmodern crisis in hermeneutics - "incredulity towards meaning, " a deep-set skepticism concerning the possibility of correct interpretationis fundamentally a crisis in theology provoked by an inadequate view of God and by the announcement of God's "death."

Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge Details

Date	:	Published July 28th 1998 by Zondervan
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From Reader Review Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge for online ebook

Cathy says

This is a scholarly book, so ....not really for leisure reading (unless you're the type who reads Foucault or Habermas or Derrida for pleasure, in which case this book is right up your alley.) It takes effort to read and comprehend the book, but I am glad I did because the book communicated something very meaningful. Essentially the author is examining the postmodern view that meaning in texts is fluid and entirely constructed by the reader, who in turn are constructions of social forces/ideology. The author presents an alternative view, based on Christian theology, that 1) Readers have an obligation to humble themselves before the text, which is the author's speech act, out of respect and love for the author; 2) While it is difficult to understand the "exact" meaning the author tried to communicate, and we will probably never get there in this life because we are corrupted and the world is corrupted, God has created humans as communicative beings and allows us to achieve "adequate" understanding of the author's meaning, so we should have faith in that there is a meaning, and hope that we can achieve adequately understand it; 3) Meaning is multi-leveled, so interpretations made from different perspectives can complement each other rather than pressing for the reader to choose a "right" one as dogma. As a Christian who loves reading, I love that this book provides a framework, based on the trinity (God is creator/author, Jesus is the Word that becomes tangible to humanity, Spirit guides us into attending and following the author's meaning), on how to read books!

Jordan says

Vanhoozer argues that hermeneutics is essentially theological. He learns from postmodernism while laying bare its shortcomings, ultimately echoing a basically Augustinian approach to interpretation. Four stars because as well written and profound as the work is, it could have been about 100 pages shorter without suffering - lots of repetition.

Ethan Hardin says

Exhausting, exhaustive, and worth every word. Readers beware. Vanhoozer masterfully dialogues with the most threatening philosophies to the biblical community, sees their redemptive value, and redirects their insights in an incredibly thorough dialogue with some of the world's most critical minds. You will become aware of the hubris of modernity, the rebuke of postmodernism, and the role of the reader in a way you may not be able to recover from. I wrestled with this book and walked away with Jacobean limp: an encounter that has changed me and that I won't soon forget. It is nourishment to the deep thinker and wisdom to the exegete. We must be reminded of the relationships involved in our task: ethical attentiveness to the author, the text, and fearfully, ourselves. Vanhoozer, thank you for modeling these with patience and grace. You are a breath of fresh air for those fatigued by the feud of grumpy modernity and its rebel child.

Scott says

Essential reading for any would be interpreters. Fantastic!

Taylor Rollo says

The Bible is the Word of God. The Bible, the Scriptures, primarily teach us what man is to believe concerning God—His nature and His acts—and what duty God requires of man. The Westminster Confession of Faith says this in its first chapter:
The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture…. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word…. All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary… for salvation are so clearly propounded… that not only the learned, but the unlearned… may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.

Implicit in that confessional statement is the belief that there is meaning in the Bible, meaning that God intended and inspired, and that the meaning is accessible and understandable by man. Certainly, it is acknowledged that the illumination of the Spirit is necessary for a “saving understanding” of Scripture, however, that sill assumes that the text itself has meaning that man is meant to perceive. This conviction did not need to be specifically stated in the confession because it was simply understood by the Westminster divines to be a given.

Several centuries later, that conviction is no longer a given. Prominent postmodern literary and hermeneutic theory believes the exact opposite, i.e. meaning is relative to the encounter of the reader and the text. There is no meaning that is independent of our attempts to interpret anything—the text only reflects the reality of the reader. Nietzsche once said, “Ultimately, man finds in things nothing but what he himself has imported into them.” For postmodern philosophers this axiom not only holds true for written texts but for the world itself. Everything is a text, yet there is no inherent meaning in any text. Postmodernism, tersely stated, is “incredulity towards meaning.”

The Christian reader can easily see where this philosophy takes Biblical interpretation. Under these assumptions, Scripture has no inherent meaning, therefore meaning is not dependent on what God said but what the reader brings to the text. How can Christianity possibly function in this philosophical environment? Is there a meaning in the text, the Bible? As one can see by the title, that is the big question that Vanhoozer sets out to answer. Vanhoozer says, “the project for the present work: to articulate and defend the possibility, in the vale of the shadow of Derrida, that readers can legitimately and responsibly attain literary knowledge of the Bible.”

Vanhoozer takes on a difficult but necessary task in this work. He goes up against the postmodern “giants” of this age—Derrida, Rorty, Foucault, etc.—to show that there is a meaning in the text and that readers can get to it. In a charitable and extensive way, Vanhoozer exposes and brings to light the theological and philosophical foundations which undergird the present debate over meaning. He then produces a better literary theory that is inherently more plausible, coheres with Biblical truth, and shows that with humility and conviction interpretation can produce adequate (but not absolute) knowledge of the Bible.

The bulk of this work is divide into two large, well-organized sections—"Undoing Interpretation" and "Redoing Interpretation." In each large section there are three chapters about the author, the text, and the reader, respectively. These three chapters form sectional parallels of "undoing" (attacks on the three elements) and "redoing" (resurrection of the three elements)—i.e. two parallels five, three parallels six, and four parallels seven. This is a formidable work to summarize, to say that least. Using Vanhoozer's parallel framework, we will do our best to briefly state the key aspects of his argument, but no summary can do justice to the exhaustiveness of this work.

The First Parallel: In chapter two, Vanhoozer describes Postmodernism's "case against the author." It might surprise readers who are used to modernism presuppositions, but many postmodern literary theorists deny the author's existence altogether. "How can someone get there?" one might ask. Vanhoozer shows how deconstructionists have followed Nietzsche in denying God's existence. When one denies God's existence, there is no foundation for believing that there is a mind-independent reality to which "true" descriptions must correspond. To put it another way, without God there is no metaphysical reality to which meaning can correspond, so meaning is not fixed for anything. So deconstructionists have denied the idea of a "fixed" meaning in texts; therefore identifying the "author" becomes difficult. "Who is the author?" becomes a metaphysical question that depends on the definition of "intention," accessibility of intention, and whether a text's meaning should be defined in terms of who wrote it or who reads it. "Why should the text's meaning be defined in terms of the intention of the one who wrote it?" postmodern theorists ask. This is the result of the postmodern case against the author. In chapter five, Vanhoozer "resurrects" the author by challenging these philosophical assertions. He shows that the concept of "author" is really a theological issue. It is an issue dependent on the existence of God as a communicative agent who places the imago Dei in humanity, making them communicating agents as well. Therefore, the doctrines of God and creation are of paramount theological importance in the case for the author. In addition, by use of contemporary philosophies of common-sense realism and speech-act, Vanhoozer lays the groundwork for correlating the author's intention and communicative action.

The Second Parallel: In chapter three, Vanhoozer tackles the postmodern problem with meaning itself. This is an epistemological problem about the nature and method of literary knowledge, i.e. interpretation. Postmodern philosophers ask questions about the nature of interpretive reality itself—"What methods, if any, enable us to gain knowledge of the text?" Are there criteria that can be used to judge one interpretation with respect to another and show its meaning? The postmodern deconstructionists answer, no. "There is nothing outside the text," is Derrida's most famous phrase. This brings hermeneutics to a state of complete relativism, killing the text and meaning. In chapter six, Vanhoozer "resurrects" the text and meaning. Since the problem is an epistemological problem, we need a solid epistemological foundation. Here Vanhoozer primarily builds on the foundation set by Plantinga in his famous work, Warrant and Proper Function. This (and the progress made in the first parallel) gives him the foundation to argue that there is meaning in the text—enacted communicative intention. He then goes on to discuss interpretation itself and argues that meaning can be adequately known by viewing the text as a communicative act, respecting the various levels from word definition to canonical setting. He holds that one should take the Bible literally, but this does not mean simply taking note of the locutions (dictionary definitions strung together), as many often do. One must consider the locutions and the illocutions (actions performed by saying something) of the author's speech, i.e. the whole communicative act. He undergirds this with a Christological analogy—the person of Jesus cannot be reduced to His physical, visible humanity (just as the literal sense cannot be reduced to the locutions), but one must take into account His humanity and His divinity (just as the literal sense must take into account the whole communicative act). Through the process of using the literal sense as the interpretive norm and taking into account the various levels of the communicative act, the meaning of the text can be adequately known.

The Third Parallel: In this final parallel of chapters, Vanhoozer takes on the problem of the reader and the ethics of meaning (the problem in chapter four and his solution in chapter seven). Postmodern theorists now see the text as largely (or completely) inactive and the reader as active in the meaning of the text. Since, as described above, there is no "fixed" meaning, the reader takes part in the meaning. Some "conservative" theorists say the text draws the reader into participate in the elucidation of meaning. The "radical" theorists, like Derrida, give the reader complete reign. The reader being active, then, brings up the question of interpretive obligations? Is there an ethical or moral reader stance/constraint? Most postmodern theorists would answer, no. In chapter seven, Vanhoozer builds on his previous chapters and argues that communication requires regulation. He argues that the reader must normally understand the text, being a servant to the text and asking questions that it invites, but occasionally can "overstand" the text, acting as a lord and asking questions of it that it does not invite. One can only overstand, however, after one has sufficiently worked to understand and then only insofar as one aims to uncover the text's significance, e.g. contemporary application. Into this discussion Vanhoozer brings the doctrine of the Spirit. He argues that ethical interpretation is a spiritual exercise that ultimately requires the Holy Spirit to be done rightly.

In his three sets of parallel chapters, Vanhoozer has engaged the postmodern critics and shown that the author can have communicative action and intent, that the text can be adequately understood, and that the reader has an ethical obligation in interpretation. In all this he uses Trinitarian theology as his foundation. In his final chapter, Vanhoozer describes what he calls the "hermeneutic of the cross." He holds that there are two interpretative "deadly sins": sloth and pride. Pride encourages us to think we have the correct meaning before we have adequately and ethically attempted to interpret the text. Sloth encourages us to think there is no meaning in the text and, therefore, should not attempt uncover any. The cross, however, gives both the hermeneutic of humility and conviction. In all his argumentation with postmodern critics, Vanhoozer has been charitable and also humbly accepted postmodern chastisement, when it is warranted. One of those is the danger of bringing our bias to the text and making our interpretation an idol, but humility reminds interpreters that we can get it wrong. Humility, however, must be balanced by conviction, or we end up treating the text like a postmodern critic. Vanhoozer summarizes, "While there may be more light on the Bible's meaning to come, we have a firm enough grasp of the overall story line as to encourage boldness in our witness. Only such confidence, commitment, and conviction about what can be known can serve as the corrective to interpretive skepticism and sloth. The uncommitted interpretation is not worth hearing."

One probably understands by now that Vanhoozer's work is both compelling and demanding. His knowledge of the postmodern landscape is far-reaching and that is one of the greatest gifts of this work. He charitably, extensively, and readably works through the postmodern attacks on meaning and interpretation, showing the philosophical and theological issues with those philosophical theories. The engagement of the culture in which our preaching and theology exists is alone reason enough to read this book. His "redoing" of what Postmodernism has undone is, on the whole, exceptional as well. From a Trinitarian framework he builds a theological foundation for authorial intent, textual meaning, and ethical reader interpretation that is very helpful when engaging a postmodern world. Some may say it is too dependent on Christian theology, but we think that Vanhoozer is simply being faithful to his Reformed Presuppositionalism roots. Besides, if there is one thing that Postmodernism expects everyone to bring to the table, it is presuppositions.

Now comes the task of assessing any weaknesses of the work. We will give two that stood out while reading this work. First, we can hardly fault Vanhoozer for being charitable to the postmodern critics, for charity is a virtue that many of us lack. However, we do believe that he has given too much affirmation to Postmodernism. It is humble and wise to acknowledge certain postmodern correctives, but one cannot give away the proverbial farm when it comes to rationality. For example, Vanhoozer casts the Enlightenment as the ultimate example of rationality run rampant. However, rationality was integral to philosophical thought long before the Enlightenment, and was it not the coupling of rationality to human autonomy that gave rise to

the central flaws of the Enlightenment? Second, Vanhoozer does not separate hermeneutics of Scripture from general hermeneutics but makes the former paradigmatic of the latter. Yet, one is not going to read Shakespeare and Paul in the same way, at least one should not. Does one really need a Christian theology to interpret Shakespeare's intended meaning as one does with Paul? No. Vanhoozer would undoubtedly agree, however the emphasis on common ground downplays the differences between Scripture and all other texts. To emphasize the theological dimension of general hermeneutics seems to either raise human texts to a height they do not deserve or lower Scripture below is inspired right.

In conclusion, the two flaws mentioned above pale in comparison to the usefulness of this book as a whole for the case for Biblical meaning and interpretation, and we are overall very impressed with this book. It is not for the faint of heart, however. While readable, it is philosophically heavy and complex. It, of course, has to be given the subject matter of the book. We would not recommend this for the average Joe in the Church. We do think that pastors, theologians, and seminary students need to read this book. The cultural landscape that we preach and teach in is thoroughly entrenched in many of the presuppositions and ideals of Postmodernism that Vanhoozer describes. We need to learn to interact with those presuppositions, expose them to our people in understandable ways, and offer them a strong alternative so they can go to their Scriptures with humility, conviction, and confidence. In a postmodern world, our people need to be able to trust that "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."

Jacob Aitken says

Kevin Vanhoozer focuses on the metaphysical implications of "meaning." His work surveys the collapse of foundationalisms, their postmodern alternatives, and his own speech-act hermeneutics that paves the way forward from the postmodern morass, albeit sympathetic to some of Jacques Derrida's criticisms.

Risking some oversimplification, Vanhoozer sees the three eras as the Age of the Author (we can know the author's meaning in a text), the Age of the Text (e.g., late Modernity; we can't know the author's psychological intentions, but we can find meaning by focusing on the structure of the text), and the Age of the Reader (there is no transcendent meaning in the text; we create meaning).

Vanhoozer characterizes postmoderns as either "Undoers" (Derrida, deconstruction) or "Users" (Rorty, pragmatism). Vanhoozer goes to great pains to understand postmodernism, even if he doesn't affirm it. Derrida is correct there is no pure realm of meaning and presence of which we have hermetic access. All such knowings and readings are situated knowings and readings. But that doesn't mean we can't know. Derrida himself admits he is not a relativist. He simply says if all meanings are situated meanings and that there is no Transcendental Signifier, what privileges one reading over another?

Vanhoozer's answer is along the lines of the Trinity. God is first and foremost a communicative agent. Being and Speech is not reduced to a monad. It is indeed deferred. There is differance (though not ontological difference) but not violence in the Trinity. His very being is a self-communicative act. Trinitarian hermeneutics affirms both the One and the Many. There is meaning and unity in the text, but arrived by a plurality of literary methods.

With Paul Ricouer Vanhoozer agrees that metaphor is not simply literary window-dressing. It has ontological significance. The goal of Matthew is not to get to Romans. Metaphors can actually "break" deconstruction:

they are determinate enough to convey stable meaning without being exhaustively specifiable (130). With Derrida we agree that all language is ultimately metaphorical (and thus problematic for metaphysics). But with Ricoeur and against Derrida, we believe that metaphors are meaningful and do communicate truth, even if they don’t exhaust the truth.

Pros

This book is magnificent. I sing its praises. Aside from the brilliant crash course in continental philosophy, Vanhoozer introduces readers to speech-act philosophy. He has a sensitive reading of sola scriptura which nicely rebuts communitarian claims.

Cons

Many of the chapters were excessively long (several were 300+ endnotes).

Andrew says

Excellent philosophical and theological defense of a realistic metaphysics of authors and text, a common-sense realist epistemology of texts, and an objective ethics of reading.

Timothy Gatewood says

Tremendously helpful book. Pertinent for anyone interested in hermeneutics, worldview theory, or postmodernism. 4 out of 5 because of the sheer length – the book could be shortened a good bit without suffering.

Jo says

Summary: Jacques Derrida is like a dementor, Thanos, and The Cat In The Hat rolled into one, with his ability to unravel textual reality and his radical insistence on play in the absence of authority. But readers of the Bible (or anything else) should not despair, because the pursuit of adequate knowledge rests on a rational understanding of communication as action. Armed with humility, the Holy Spirit, and a sensitivity to genre, readers can enjoy the abundance available within the determinate meaning, which really is there in the text.

A few comments:
-Vanhoozer's writing can be like a verbal arabesque (for example: *"doing things with words involves intersubjective linguistic conventions and individual intentions as well as literary inventions"* or *"a text is both a completed communicative project and a projectile..."*) which is delightful, but also sometimes hard to sort out.

-Because this is meant to be a textbook, Vanhoozer repeats, repeats, repeats concepts. It's very helpful for dull-witted people like myself, but on the other hand it can be hard to tell when he's adding something new to the argument.

-Vanhoozer is eminently quotable, but again this becomes a liability because one is tempted to spend too much time writing down beautifully expressed ideas.

Nathan Douthit says

I am highly recommending this to anyone interested in a philosophy of interpretation. It takes seriously the claims of deconstruction and postmodernism and discuss appropriate responses. It has been very helpful to me in my reading of scripture and discussion of all texts.

Samuel Bierig says

meh...it was pretty good.

Mayowa Adebiyi says

Critically engages with almost everyone that has said something about reading. Complex but well worth the time

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Jeremy says

KV's title intentionally echoes Fish's *Is There a Text in This Class?*.

Josh says

A profound and stimulating book. In part one, Vanhoozer demonstrates how postmodern philosophy destroys confidence in the author, text, and reader in what he calls the three ages of criticism. In part two, he returns to each of these areas (author, text, reader) to demonstrate how only Trinitarian theology can undergird the possibility of hermeneutics. Difficult reading at times, but only because of the breadth of material he covers. Vanhoozer is an excellent writer and gives an intellectual and theological tour de force here.

Also read in July 2017.

Steven Wedgeworth says

A very important book that is unfortunately in a field that will put most readers to sleep. Someone's got to do this sort of work, but I'm glad that it ain't me.
