

## ***Three Horizons: Hermeneutics from the Other End—An Evaluation of Anthony Thiselton's Hermeneutic Proposals***

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

In 1963 Dennis Nineham requested that, 'we should have some biblical scholars whose expertise is.... in the modern end of the problem... What they might produce.' he goes on to say, 'would be of inestimable value to all serious students of the Bible'.<sup>2</sup> Anthony Thiselton has devoted his academic life thus far to illuminating this modern, and we might add 'postmodern'<sup>3</sup>, end of the problem of biblical interpretation. And he has done so with extraordinary and exemplary thoroughness<sup>4</sup>, and must be ranked as one of the major contemporary Christian authorities on hermeneutics.

If Nineham and Thiselton are committed to the *understanding of the modern* as playing a key role in biblical hermeneutics, that remains untrue of most biblical scholars. Thiselton's quest

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for the 'modern end of the problem' takes him straight into the heavy seas of modern and postmodern philosophy; Hegel, Heidegger, Gadamer, Derrida and Habermas become his terrain, and well might the biblical scholar wonder what this has to do with biblical studies. Few biblical studies courses insist on courses in philosophy—what has Jerusalem to do with Athens after all? Or we might say, what have Jerusalem and Athens to do with Vienna, Frankfurt and Paris?<sup>5</sup>

Thiselton is however unrepentant! In many respects his *The Two Horizons* is an apologetic for taking *philosophy* seriously in biblical studies. His introduction ends with the question, 'Why, then, is our study concerned with philosophy?'<sup>6</sup> Chapter one begins, 'Why philosophical description?'<sup>7</sup> and the entire volume ends on this note:

At the beginning of our study we claimed that the use of philosophical description would serve the interpreter of the New Testament in three ways ... If these three aims have been

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of a paper delivered to joint MA groups at Trinity College Bristol, November 1995.

<sup>2</sup> See Dennis Nineham (ed.), *The Church's Use of the Bible Past and Present* (London: SPCK, 1963) 168. This is referred to by Anthony Thiselton, *The Two Horizons. New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) xx.

<sup>3</sup> See Anthony Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self. On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> For an example of this thoroughness see Thiselton's review of Barr: 'Barr on Barth and Natural Theology: A Plea for Hermeneutics in Historical Theology', *SJT* (1994) 519-528.

<sup>5</sup> By these two questions I am indicating that both conservative biblical scholars, who often wish to keep Jerusalem and Athens well apart, and liberal biblical scholars, who often wish to consign Jerusalem and Athens to the past, tend to ignore the role of philosophy in biblical interpretation. Nowadays it is generally theologians rather than biblical scholars who address philosophical issues.

<sup>6</sup> Thiselton, *ibid.*, xx.

<sup>7</sup> Thiselton, *ibid.*, 3.

fulfilled to any extent, this means that the introduction of philosophical considerations into the hermeneutical debate, far from leading to a one-sided or distorted interpretation of the New Testament, will provide the interpreter with a broader preunderstanding in relation to which the text may speak more clearly in its own right.<sup>8</sup>

Fundamental to Thiselton's work on hermeneutics is the conviction that thorough attention to philosophical hermeneutics will help the biblical text speak more clearly in its own right. Although Thiselton's two major texts on biblical hermeneutics have been widely reviewed there has been surprisingly little thorough interaction with his work. This paper is an attempt to map out the overarching sweep of Thiselton's proposals and to provide a preliminary critique from this perspective. There is a distinct disadvantage in getting a picture of the whole but of course it easily loses sight of the immense amount of detail that Thiselton's texts contain. We will begin with a look at Thiselton's view of how philosophy can help biblical hermeneutics, and then see how he develops these different means of help. Thereafter we will examine his proposal for a pastoral hermeneutics, which emerges in the postmodern context, before evaluating his work from this overarching perspective.

## 2. PHILOSOPHY AND BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Ebeling has rightly suggested that, 'For theology the hermeneutic problem is therefore today becoming the place of meeting with philosophy'<sup>9</sup>. As the slightest familiarity with Thiselton's work reveals, hermeneutical issues are deeply philosophical. Philosophical hermeneutics has become an inescapable context in which biblical interpretation takes place today, but the relationship between theology and philosophy remains controversial<sup>10</sup>. Much Evangelicalism, for example, remains Tertullianesque in its suspicion of philosophy, if not in theory at least in practice. Thiselton justifies his philosophical focus in a number of ways<sup>11</sup>:

1. It is a fact that New Testament scholars use philosophical categories in their work<sup>12</sup>. Thus any kind of dialogue or critique of such scholars will involve philosophical considerations, if that dialogue is to be taken seriously.
2. Philosophy is helpful in describing (the nature of) and appraising the hermeneutical process. Here Thiselton is thinking in particular of Gadamer<sup>13</sup>, who has articulated the hermeneutical process as the fusion of two horizons. We will explore this in more detail below; let it suffice here to note that Thiselton finds Gadamer's analysis of understanding as the fusion of horizons persuasive, and it is the source for his title *The Two Horizons*.
3. Philosophical hermeneutics bears on a host of issues directly relevant to biblical interpretation, and we simply cannot ignore these. Interpretation inevitably carries with it

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<sup>8</sup> Thiselton, *ibid.*, 445.

<sup>9</sup> Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith* (London: SCM, 1963) 317.

<sup>10</sup> See Craig Bartholomew, 'Philosophy, Theological and Biblical Interpretation: Vanhoozer, Dooyeweerd, Wright and Watson', 1995, publication forthcoming.

<sup>11</sup> See Thiselton, *Two Horizons* and 'The Use of Philosophical Categories in New Testament Hermeneutics', *Churchman* 87 (1973), 87-100.

<sup>12</sup> Bultmann is a classic example. See Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, 205ff for a discussion of Bultmann's hermeneutic.

<sup>13</sup> See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1989 2nd revised ed.). Thiselton discusses Gadamer's approach in *Two Horizons*, 293ff.

philosophical issues, as Paul Ricoeur, for example, recognizes: 'In what way do these exegetic debates concern philosophy.' 'Hermeneutics...

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relates the technical problems of textual exegesis to the more general problems of meaning and language.'<sup>14</sup> Consequently, according to Thiselton, we simply cannot leave philosophical concepts out of account when we are attempting to formulate the task of biblical hermeneutics. If this is true of biblical hermeneutics, it is also true of theology. Thiselton quotes Bultmann with approval when he says: Every theology is dependent *for the clarification of its concepts* upon a *pretheological understanding of man that, as a rule, is determined by some philosophical tradition.*<sup>15</sup> This, according to Bultmann and Thiselton, does not compromise theology but makes it more critically self-conscious.

A powerful example of the way in which philosophy shapes biblical interpretation is philosophy of language. In the second half of this century the impact of philosophy of language upon biblical studies was mediated via modern linguistics. James Barr's work on semantics is well known, and especially its implications for Kittel's Dictionary! No contemporary Old Testament scholar would promote word studies in a naive, etymological manner. Synchronic study, and not diachronic analysis is the key to the meaning of a word, as we now know. What is less well known, but helpfully pointed out by Thiselton in a very useful article, is that in his work on semantics Barr mediated the linguistic revolution of the French linguist Saussure into OT studies<sup>16</sup>. Thiselton notes that,

The traditional view received two death-blows, one from linguistics and one from philosophy. From the direction of linguistics, Saussure pointed out the arbitrary character of grammatical forms. More sharply and decisively still, in his philosophical discussion of logic Russell showed in his Theory of Descriptions that 'the apparent logical form of a proposition need not be the real one.'<sup>17</sup>

It is commonplace now for Old Testament scholars to be alert to the syntagmatic and paradigmatic aspects of a word in trying to determine its meaning, but these insights are the legacy of the philosophy of language and linguistics.

More recently Thiselton has attended to the effect of current philosophies of language and their implications for theology<sup>18</sup>. He rightly observes the presence of Nietzsche behind much postmodern understanding of language and recognises that the sort of perspectives upon the language of 'truth' stemming from Nietzsche's influence

constitute the most serious and urgent challenge to theology, in comparison with which the old-style attacks from 'common-sense positivism' appear relatively naive. Theology has more at stake than perhaps any other discipline because, although philosophy and some

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<sup>14</sup> See Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations, Essays in Hermeneutics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974, edited by D. Ihde) 4. Thiselton quotes these references from Ricoeur in *Two Horizons*, p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> See Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, 227, 228. The quote is from Rudolph Bultmann, *Existence and Faith* (London: Collins, 1964) 114.

<sup>16</sup> See Thiselton, 'Semantics and New Testament Interpretation', in: I. H. Marshall (ed. ), *New Testament Interpretation, Essays on Principles and Methods* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1977) 75-104.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>18</sup> See especially Part I of Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self*.

other disciplines share the same loss of truth, theology serves to establish critically-informed trust, whereas the postmodern perspective rests on suspicion.<sup>19</sup>

The effect of postmodern philosophy of language upon theology is readily observed in the theological work of a postmodern theologian like Mark Taylor.<sup>20</sup> Within biblical studies postmodern philosophies of language underlie the emphasis on indeterminacy and deconstructive methodology. Much of David Clines' recent work on the Old Testament is rooted in this type of philosophy of language. An urgent need among Christian academics is some sense of the contours of a Christian philosophy of language. Thiselton argues that the biblical understanding of truth resists Nietzsche's indictment of the language of truth as necessarily a disguise for manipulation, and he suggests that the philosophy of language of the later Wittgenstein provides a position more compatible with Christian theology than that mediated via Nietzsche.<sup>21</sup>

4. Philosophy provides conceptual tools for the interpretation of parts of the biblical text. Thiselton's use of speech-act theory to interpret the parables is well known in this respect<sup>22</sup>.

5. Thiselton agrees with Bultmann and Gadamer that neutral, non-presuppositional interpretation is impossible. Every

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interpreter operates with a pre-understanding.

Part of the relevance of philosophical considerations to NT interpretation emerge when we begin to ask what questions, and what conceptual frame, the interpreter brings with him to the text.... Every interpreter approaches the NT from the standpoint of a particular perspective. This is not necessarily to accuse him of undue prejudice. It is to stress that he approaches it with 'a way of raising questions'. But are our questions the right questions? Should our own questions be encouraged, modified, suppressed?<sup>23</sup>

Philosophy helps the interpreter to detect her own presuppositions and enlarge her critical capacities.

But did Tertullian not have a point about the dangers of Athens? What about the danger of defilement by secular philosophy? Thiselton acknowledges the central and comprehensive importance of Christian revelation but defends his concern with philosophy along two lines: philosophical issues have to be argued philosophically, and his concern is not to adopt the worldview of particular philosophers but to borrow conceptual tools for the exegetical task. We might say that his philosophical approach is *eclectic*. Commenting on some of the problems with Bultmann's use of Heidegger, Thiselton says, 'The answer is not to abandon philosophical inquiry, for on this basis the positive side of Bultmann's work would have been lost. The answer is, rather, to draw a variety of conceptualities from other traditions, and

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>20</sup> See Mark Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A / theology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984).

<sup>21</sup> Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self*.

<sup>22</sup> See Thiselton, 'Reader-Response Hermeneutics, Action Models, and the Parables of Jesus', in: Roger Lundin, Anthony C. Thiselton and Clarence Walhout, *The Responsibility of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, Carlisle: Eerdmans, Paternoster, 1985) 79-113.

<sup>23</sup> Thiselton, 'The Use of Philosophical Categories', 87, 88.

critically to compare what each may achieve or fail to achieve.<sup>24</sup> This eclectic approach is underscored by a later comment in relation to the new hermeneutic which drew heavily on Gadamer: 'One of the central arguments of the present study is that *particular* hermeneutical insights come through *particular* philosophical perspectives. No single philosophy provides a comprehensive theory of hermeneutics, even that of Gadamer.'<sup>25</sup>

### 3. BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AS THE FUSION OF TWO HORIZONS

As we mentioned, Thiselton appropriates this notion from Gadamer; it provides the framework of Thiselton's hermeneutic proposal:

The hermeneutical goal is that of a steady progress towards a fusion of horizons. But this is to be achieved in such a way that the particularity of each horizon is fully taken into account and respected. This means *both* respecting the rights of the text *and* allowing it to speak.<sup>26</sup>

Obviously Thiselton regards Gadamer as of fundamental importance in hermeneutics. Indeed it is Gadamer who really focuses the need for hermeneutics and attention to the 'modern end of the problem', since one cannot see the need for a fusion of two horizons if one is unaware of their existence, and it is this that Gadamer makes crystal clear in his analysis of the *historicity* of interpretation.

The following are two traditional definitions of biblical hermeneutics<sup>27</sup>.

- hermeneutics... is only another word for exegesis or interpretation
- hermeneutics formulates rules and methods to get from exegesis (meaning of text for its original readers) to interpretation (meaning for today)

Thiselton's understanding of hermeneutics differs from these in its recognition and integration of the historicity of the interpreter/s as well as the historicity of the text<sup>28</sup>. It is the recognition of this *second horizon* in interpretation that undermines the naive realism that has dominated much of modern biblical interpretation, and problematises the process of 'correct' interpretation. As Thiselton, under the obvious influence of Gadamer, says, 'hermeneutics in the more recent sense of the term begins with the recognition that historical conditioning is two-sided: *the modern interpreter, no less than the text, stands in a given historical context and tradition.*'<sup>29</sup> Palmer identifies the same issue when he writes, 'meaning is a matter of context; the explanatory proce-

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<sup>24</sup> Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, 292.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 354.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 445.

<sup>27</sup> These are taken from Thiselton, *ibid.*, 10.

<sup>28</sup> See Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, 10-12, on the difference between this understanding of hermeneutics and the traditional one of hermeneutics as the method of biblical exegesis.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

ture provides the arena for understanding.... Significance is a relationship to the listener's own projects and intentions... explanation is contextual, is "horizontal."<sup>30</sup>

From this perspective interpretation involves the fusion of the horizon of the text and of the reading process, and it is this process which hermeneutics seeks to understand.

In order to make it clear how this differs from traditional understandings of hermeneutics as mentioned above, we will briefly consider the example of the hermeneutical circle. Traditional hermeneutics understands the hermeneutical circle to refer to the interpreter's responsibility to interpret the part of the text in the light of the whole, and vice versa. Understanding develops through a dialectical relationship between part and whole. To leave the hermeneutical circle there is to have failed to grasp the implications of the second horizon, that of the interpreter. As Thiselton says,

In addition to this understanding follows a spiral... in a further sense. To begin with, the interpreter brings his own questions to the text. But because his questions may not be the right ones, his initial understanding of the subject matter is limited, provisional, and liable to distortion. But this provisional understanding, in turn, helps him to revise his questions and to ask more adequate and appropriate ones.... The process continues until he is in a position to ask questions which have clearly been shaped by the text itself; so that he achieves a progressively more adequate understanding of its subject matter.<sup>31</sup>

Heidegger raises the question of whether there is a right way in which to enter the hermeneutical circle<sup>32</sup>, and of course, once the second horizon is recognized as a vital element in the process of interpretation, the role of pre-understanding is fore-grounded. Gadamer gives detailed attention to this and remarkably revives the role of prejudice and tradition as essential elements in the hermeneutic process. The Enlightenment had a prejudice against prejudice, and this deeply affected its interpretation! Our pre judgements and traditions in which we stand ought to be consciously acknowledged, so that we might better understand what is going on in our interpretation. Thiselton develops this in terms of the role that systematic theology might play in Christian biblical interpretation<sup>33</sup>.

Thiselton, as we have seen is quite clear that all interpretation brings with it preunderstanding. He quotes the Church of England Doctrine Report with approval: 'No one expounds the Bible to himself or anyone else without bringing to the task his own prior frame of reference, his own pattern of reference, his own pattern of assumptions which derive from sources outside the Bible.'<sup>34</sup> Thiselton provocatively suggests we might see systematic theology as the end-process to date of the process of tradition in which the Christian community seeks to understand the biblical text. Thiselton refers to Turner who argues that the pre-understanding involved in exegesis embraces, 'a whole conceptual world which the exegete brings to the text', including concepts about history, revelation, eschatology, miracle etc<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics. Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press) 24.

<sup>31</sup> Thiselton, *The Use of Philosophical Categories*, 93.

<sup>32</sup> See Martin Heidegger, 'Understanding and Interpretation', in: Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (ed.), *The Hermeneutics Reader* (New York: Continuum, 1992) 221-228. On p. 226 Heidegger comments, 'What is decisive is not to get out of the circle but to come into it in the right way.'

<sup>33</sup> Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, 314-326.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>35</sup> See Geoffrey Turner, 'Pre-understanding and New Testament Interpretation', *SJT* XXVIII (1975), 227-242. Thiselton refers to Turner's article in *Two Horizons*, 315.

Thiselton in this respect is attracted to the Reformers, whose approach facilitated a fusion of horizons while respecting the otherness of the biblical text<sup>36</sup>. Thiselton promotes the role of theology in shaping pre-understanding provided the fusion of horizons does not obscure the particularity of the biblical texts.

#### 4. CONCEPTUAL TOOLS FOR EXEGESIS

Philosophy, according to Thiselton, also provides conceptual tools that are exceedingly helpful in interpreting some biblical texts. The central examples of this in Thiselton's work are his use of Wittgenstein and the speech-act theory of Austin and Searle.

##### 1. *Wittgenstein and Biblical Hermeneutics*

Thiselton notes four connecting points between hermeneutics and Wittgenstein's

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later writings<sup>37</sup>. Firstly, for Wittgenstein philosophy helps us to see what was always there. Philosophy involves learning to see *as*. Secondly, Wittgenstein is concerned with the particularities of language-situations which are, thirdly, grounded in human life. Fourthly, there is no logical *a priori* behind our life worlds.

Wittgenstein's notion that philosophy helps us to ask the right questions is central to Thiselton's assertion that philosophy provides us with conceptual tools. It can help us to look in the right direction and with nuanced precision. Thiselton particularly applies points two and three above to aspects of NT interpretation. Following Wittgenstein, for example, he discerns three classes of grammatical utterances in the NT and indicates how helpful it is if we are alert to this NT grammar.

An intriguing example of this is Thiselton's application to the NT of Wittgenstein's discernment of a special class of statements which are foundational in the sense of being the 'hinges' on which other statements turn. These are statements which give expression to the scaffolding of our thoughts.<sup>38</sup>

Wittgenstein seems to suggest that in any culture, including our own, 'all enquiry... is set so as to exempt certain propositions from doubt... They lie apart from the route travelled by enquiry' In due course an axiom may become 'fossilized.! 'It is removed from the traffic. It is so to speak shunted onto an unused siding.' But it does not thereby lose its significance; rather its significance has changed into that of a grammatical proposition. 'Now it gives our way of looking at things, and our researches, their form... Perhaps it was once disrupted. But perhaps, for unthinkable ages, it has belonged to the *scaffolding* of our thoughts. (Every human being has parents.)'<sup>39</sup>

Thiselton finds examples of such utterances in Romans 2:4, 5b, 6:9:14-24; 1 Corinthians 12:3 etc. These sorts of statements expose the tacit presuppositions of their authors and their

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<sup>36</sup> Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, 316, 317.

<sup>37</sup> See Thiselton, *71vo Horizons*, 357-438, for his detailed discussion of Wittgenstein.

<sup>38</sup> See Thiselton, *ibid*, 392ff for his discussion of this class of grammatical utterances.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 393.

communities. Thiselton argues that these bedrock statements are not just cultural but theological.

Although a comprehensive grammatical analysis of the NT along Wittgensteinian lines would be a mammoth task, the potential of such analysis is apparent. If, for example, we could identify the statements that expose the scaffolding of the NT, this would give us one way of discerning the world view/s or theology that underlies the NT. Although more indebted to Reformed philosophy than to Wittgenstein Ray van Leeuwen has used this type of approach to great effect in understanding the book of Proverbs.<sup>40</sup> This type of analysis could be of great help in discerning the different levels of the authority of Scripture by showing how, in Scripture itself, there is the non-negotiable foundation which is developed and applied in relation to particular contexts.

Wittgenstein stresses that language has meaning only in the context of the language game in which it is used. In this respect Thiselton argues that several key NT themes are polymorphous and misunderstood if this is not taken into account. An analysis of 'faith' in the NT, for example, must take account of the particular language games in which the word is used in the NT. Such an approach would account for the different nuances of faith in Paul and James<sup>41</sup>. Thiselton also applies the idea of language games to the thorny problems of justification<sup>42</sup>. He argues that as regards justification the framework from which the believer's redemption is *seen* as, is crucial. From an eschatological perspective the believer's redemption is complete: she is justified. From a historical perspective the believer is not righteous; justification is still future.

I should mention that Thiselton has an intriguing additional note B, on Wittgenstein and biblical authority<sup>43</sup>, concerning *inter alia* some of the differences between B. B. Warfield and James Barr. Wittgenstein, in Thiselton's view, helps us to be aware of the danger of picturing the problem of biblical authority in terms of

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only one model, for example the model of one-to-one correspondence (certain types of inerrancy), or exclusively the model of a Chalcedonian Christology. The Bible is more than a handbook of information; the language of the Bible expresses a whole range of dynamic speech-acts: commanding, promising, asking, blessing etc. However, 'the dynamic and concrete authority of the Bible rests, in turn, on the truth of certain states of affairs in God's relation to the world'<sup>44</sup>, and Thiselton argues that Jesus and the apostolic writers' assumption of the authority of the Old Testament cannot just be disregarded as a cultural assumption. In

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<sup>40</sup> See Ray van Leeuwen, 'Liminality and Worldview in Proverbs 1-9,' *Semeia* 50 (1990) 111-144. It should be noted that Thiselton points out that his first class of grammatical utterances which function to expand the horizon of the reader's understanding, rather than the special class of 'scaffolding' statements, are common in OT Wisdom literature. See *Two Horizons* 397-399. However Thiselton relates this to the purely rational and open appeal to all humans of wisdom literature. Van Leeuwen's work demonstrates that the scaffolding and tacit element characterised by Wittgenstein's second class of statements are as present in Proverbs as, for example, in Romans. Van Leeuwen focuses upon Proverbs 8:22-31 in particular.

<sup>41</sup> See Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, 422-427.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 415-422.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 432-438.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 437.



this respect some of Warfield's arguments about the status of the OT in the NT should still command respect.

## **2. *Speech Act Theory and Biblical Hermeneutics***

Thiselton finds the speech-act theory of Austin, Searle and Recanti particularly helpful in exegeting texts which call for a hermeneutic of self-involvement, such as the parables<sup>45</sup>. He finds that as a tool this avoids one of the problems with a reader-response approach to the parables, namely that the meaning of a parable is in danger of becoming what the reader cares to do with it. The advantage of an *action model* is that it, 'allows us to separate out different levels and dimensions of language use without necessarily opening the door to the mistaken view that the 'meaning' of a text is simply what any reader cares to do with it.'<sup>46</sup> 'This model allows us to see that a variety of actions may occur in a text at the same time and that recontextualization affects the relative priority of these operations in relation to one another.'<sup>47</sup>

Austin distinguishes between perlocutionary language, which is performative by saying somethings, and illocutionary language, which is performative *in* saying something. This distinction is crucial<sup>48</sup>. Thiselton applies this action model *inter alia* to the thorny issue of the function of parables as elucidated in Mark 4:11-12<sup>49</sup>. An action model helps us to see the parables as used, 'in order to prevent premature understanding unaccompanied by inner change.' This includes judgement *and* mercy since a parable operates at different levels of understanding. The text performs a variety of actions upon its readers, and speech act theory thus enables us to get at these nuances of the text in a way that traditional interpretation has often been unable to. An action model

allows us to see that a variety of actions may occur in a text at the same time and that recontextualization affects the relative priority of these operations in relation to one another. This does not mean, however, that the Bible becomes the nose of wax about which Luther warned, as if that could be pushed into any shape that the reader may fancy. Nor does it mean that action or speech-acts provide a comprehensive model for the solution of all hermeneutical problems. No theoretical model provided by hermeneutical theory can obviate the need first and foremost to look at the text itself in its linguistic and historical particularity.<sup>50</sup>

Thiselton also uses speech-act theory to elucidate the propositional element in the biblical texts. A text may perform a number of actions at the same time so that, for example, it is often unhelpful to set the self-involving nature of a text against its referential aspect. Thiselton uses

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<sup>45</sup> J. L. Austin's seminal text is *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: OUP, 1962, 1975). See Thiselton, *Reader-Response Hermeneutics*, and *New Horizons* especially 283-312 and 597-604. For bibliographical details of the main works, see pp. 283-312.

<sup>46</sup> Thiselton, *Reader-Response Hermeneutics*, 107. See Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 282-304, for a discussion of the developments in speech act theory.

<sup>47</sup> Thiselton, *Reader Response Hermeneutics*, 113.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 109. See Austin, *ibid.*, 94-132, for a discussion of the distinction between locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary. On pp. 101-102 Austin uses the following example: 'He said to me "Shoot her!'" On p. 110 he comments about this example that 'we must distinguish the illocutionary from the perlocutionary act: for example we must distinguish "in saying it I was warning him" from "by saying it I convinced him, or got him to stop.'"

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 111-112.

<sup>50</sup> Thiselton, *Reader-Response Hermeneutics*, 113.

the example of the confession, 'Jesus is Lord.'<sup>51</sup> In its Pauline use this statement is clearly self-involving, but this self-involving aspect depends upon certain assertions about Christ being true. 'Jesus is Lord' expresses both institutional truth and self-involvement. This is a good example of Thiselton's argument that

The point which is correct behind the so-called 'non-propositional' view of revelation is that the Bible is not merely a handbook of information and description, along the lines of propositions in the *Ractatus*. But the point behind the so-called 'propositional' view is even more important, even if it is badly expressed in the traditional terms which are often used. It is that the dynamic and concrete

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authority of the Bible rests, in turn, on the truth of certain states of affairs in God's relation to the world. As J. L. Austin succinctly puts it, for performative language to function effectively, 'certain statements have to be true.'<sup>52</sup>

Thiselton has also used speech-act theory to illuminate the problem of the supposed power of words in the Bible<sup>53</sup>, and recently he has applied it to Christology in Luke and the problem of dualism in Christology after Kant<sup>54</sup>. It should be noted that a number of other scholars have also used speech-act theory in biblical studies and theology<sup>55</sup>. Donald Evans has used it in relation to language about God as creator<sup>56</sup> and more recently Nicholas Wolterstorff has creatively developed his use of speech-act theory in relation to Scripture as divine discourse<sup>57</sup>.

## 5. THISELTON'S HERMENEUTIC OF PASTORAL THEOLOGY

Interestingly, it is in the context of his more recent work and 'the postmodern turn' that Thiselton develops his pastoral analogy for hermeneutics<sup>58</sup>. As we mentioned above Thiselton regards the postmodern context as a very serious challenge to Christian theology; more serious than was positivism, for example. The closest we get in either of Thiselton's two volumes to a comprehensive outline of a unified hermeneutic are chapter XV and XVI in *New Horizons*. Here Thiselton outlines his 'Hermeneutics of Pastoral Theology'. In his latest book, 'Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self', Thiselton also uses the pastoral analogy for biblical interpretation<sup>59</sup>. However, latterly he applies the analogy slightly differently; the listening and openness and respect for the Other that characterise good pastoral counselling ought to characterise biblical interpretation as well. In *New Horizons* the analogy serves, by

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<sup>51</sup> Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 283ff.

<sup>52</sup> Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, 437.

<sup>53</sup> See Thiselton, 'The Supposed Power of Words in the Biblical Writings', *JTS* 25 (1974) 282-299. This article is a fascinating account of how linguistics can correct a wrong direction in biblical theology.

<sup>54</sup> See Thiselton, 'Luke's Christology, Speech-Act Theory and the Problem of Dualism in Christology After Kant', in: Joel B. Green and Max Turner (eds.), *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ* (Grand Rapids, Carlisle: Eerdmans and Paternoster, 1994) 453-472.

<sup>55</sup> See Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse. Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995). Wolterstorff's approach would seem to run counter to Thiselton's insistence that, while speech-act theory is helpful with some texts, it cannot provide a comprehensive hermeneutical model. Wolterstorff, and Kevin Vanhoozer (in discussion), argue for the use of speech-act theory to shape a biblical hermeneutic comprehensively.

<sup>56</sup> Donald Evans, *The Logic of Self-Involvement* (London: SCM Press 1963; New York: Herder & Herder, 1969).

<sup>57</sup> Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*.

<sup>58</sup> See Thiselton, *New Horizons* and *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self*.

<sup>59</sup> Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self*, 51, 53-58.

comparison, to stress the importance of maintaining the balance between universals and the particular. He begins chapter XV of *New Horizons* by comparing the pastoral situation to biblical interpretation: both are intensely hermeneutical and if historical critical interpretation has tended to focus on the past at the expense of the particular present, pastoral theology is in danger of the reverse. Thiselton is particularly concerned that biblical hermeneutics should do justice to the diversity and particularity of the biblical texts. Different genres of texts perform different, though often overlapping, hermeneutic functions, especially in relation to different reading-situations<sup>60</sup>.

Paradoxically, the one place where we anticipate a unified hermeneutic, the pastoral model serves to remind us that Thiselton, like Gadamer, will not outline a unified method. Thiselton's pastoral hermeneutic turns out to be an overview of the positive insight that the contemporary smorgasbord of hermeneutical approaches bring to certain (particular) texts. In his words he proposes 'optimal/paradigmatic reader-situations' in relation to which the most distinctive hermeneutical functions of the different models that he has examined become apparent<sup>61</sup>. Thus a hermeneutics of understanding (Schleiermacher<sup>62</sup>, Dilthey, Betti) is especially helpful where texts serve primarily as transmissive and communicative vehicles to express the thought of an author toward a given directedness. Examples of such texts are 1 Cor 11:17-22, 8:1-11:1. Narrative hermeneutics assist in getting at the various functions that narratives perform: 'Textual narrative cats await the varied mouse-situations which re-activate them.'<sup>63</sup> Reader-response approaches are particularly useful in unmasking natural readings, speech-act theory is particularly relevant to self-involving and believing reading, and so on.

## 6. HERMENEUTICAL PLURALISM

According to Thiselton, socio-critical theory, with its concern that biblical interpretation should be relevant to social issues, raises in an acute form the issue of hermeneutical pluralism because, once it is allowed that 'the world' can/should absorb the text, and a plurality of worlds

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is acknowledged, a plurality of diverse interpretations will inevitably be generated<sup>64</sup>. Thiselton argues that while hermeneutical pluralism is inevitable, since we cannot assess one reading model in terms of another, this is, 'not the same as the belief that each life-world is self-contained, and incapable of metacritical ranking in terms of trans-contextual theory'<sup>65</sup>. 'Would it be the same', asks Thiselton, 'in principle, to *de-centre the present situation as a criterion* of theological relevance and truth as to *de-centre the biblical texts and their witness to Christ and to the cross as a criterion* of relevance and truth?'<sup>66</sup>

The answer, from a Christian perspective, is of course 'No!', and Thiselton concurs at this point with those scholars who appeal for the Bible to absorb the world; we understand the

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<sup>60</sup> Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 557, 558.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 558.

<sup>62</sup> Thiselton's particularly positive approach to Schleiermacher emerges most clearly in his *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self*, 53ff.

<sup>63</sup> Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 575.

<sup>64</sup> See Thiselton, *ibid.*, 602-619 for his discussion of these issues.

<sup>65</sup> Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 613.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 606.

present by incorporating it in some larger frame. We need to approach this issue via Christian theology, or as Thiselton puts it, 'from the other end.' Thiselton pleads for 'a critique of the cross' as the larger frame: *'The cross transforms present criteria of relevance: present criteria of relevance do not transform the cross. Salvation is pro-active, not re-active, in relation to the present.'*<sup>67</sup> Scripturally the cross is universal in its relevance; the biblical texts witness to a universal horizon of eschatological promise, and the Bible is most appropriately read in a believing fashion. *'Christian theology would move into self-contradiction if it ceased to evaluate the prohibition of idolatry, the message of the cross, and the universality of eschatological promise as merely context-relative, as the product or construction of a particular social culture with no claim to offer a universal critique of life and thought, and even a metacritique of other criteria of thought, understanding, and action.'*<sup>68</sup>

## 7. EVALUATION

The immense scope of Thiselton's work will be obvious from our examination thus far. Detailed evaluation of it would require many more articles than this one!

In accordance with our aim of mapping out the overarching sweep of Thiselton's hermeneutic proposals, our brief evaluation will focus on the total shape rather than the individual details.

### 1. *Philosophy and Biblical Interpretation*

Thiselton has rightly alerted us to the important relationship between philosophy and biblical interpretation, as this is focused in hermeneutics. In all theoretical work epistemological, ontological and anthropological presuppositions provide, as it were, the scaffolding for our theory construction. Such scaffolding is not neutral, and it can only help if we are conscious of the philosophical presuppositions and theories informing and shaping our scholarship. Prior to Wellhausen it was not unusual for an Old Testament scholar to devote a large portion of a published work to explaining and defending his understanding of religion, *before* going on to apply this to the Old Testament<sup>69</sup>. Wellhausen retained many of the results of such research, but decontextualised his results; he hid the scaffolding, as it were! We are heirs to a great extent of that legacy, so that now it would be extraordinary if an OT scholar felt it necessary to devote a third of her text to explaining her view of religion and philosophy before applying it to the OT. The postmodern turn has of course gone a long way towards exposing hidden scaffolding, which I welcome, but the myth of neutrality in Old Testament scholarship remains widespread. However, as Levenson has recently reminded us, such neutrality is itself a philosophical position, and one which has come to be seen as increasingly problematic<sup>70</sup>.

Taking the scaffolding seriously will involve looking at issues like philosophy of history, philosophy of language and the relationship between theology and philosophy, all issues which Thiselton has addressed. Ernest Nicholson, for example, argues that the historical

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 610.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 612.

<sup>69</sup> For documentation of this see John Rogerson, *Old Testament Criticism in the Nineteenth Century, England and Germany* (London: SPCK, 1984).

<sup>70</sup> See Jon D. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox, 1993). For an extended discussion of this book see my review in *Calvin Theological Journal* 30, 2 (1995) 525-530.

critical method is rooted in enlightenment philosophy of history applied to the biblical text<sup>71</sup>. If this is true, how should we as Christians

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think of history? And would this affect our handling of the OT? This is not to suggest that OT scholars should become philosophers and theologians. It is to suggest that OT scholarship requires solid philosophical (and theological) input if it is not to work with hidden philosophies shaping it. Thus, I suggest, we desperately need scholars like Thiselton who will do the hard philosophical work, and biblical scholars need regular dialogue with such people<sup>72</sup>. Especially in the USA in recent years there has been a renaissance of Christian philosophy under the leadership of scholars like Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff. The growing corpus of work that this 'movement' is yielding, and the work of scholars like Thiselton, provide a ready starting point for such dialogue.

I do however have a question about Thiselton's *understanding of philosophy*. Nowhere, at least as far as I am aware, does he explain precisely what he understands philosophy to be, or how he sees faith as relating to reason, and hence to philosophy. I agree with Thiselton, for example, that every theology is dependent upon philosophy for an anthropology, but upon what is philosophy dependent for its view of the human person? The answer which Thiselton generally seems to presuppose is critical reason, and one gets the impression from his work that reason is the final court of appeal in philosophy, compared with revelation in theology. To be sure, this is held in tension with his 'critique of the cross,' and his insistence that Christian faith and revelation are comprehensive and embrace all of life. However it is precisely this dichotomy between reason and faith that I detect in Thiselton's work that is, I think, problematic.

This kind of tension is not unusual among Evangelical theologians. Paul Jewett, for example, although he favours the use of an existentialist framework in his theology,<sup>73</sup> is quite open about the fact that

The wisdom the philosopher seeks is quite different from that of which the theologian speaks. Philosophy is the human quest for truth... For philosophy, humanity's unique powers of rational transcendence, ... are autonomous.... By contrast the truth of which the theologian speaks is truth given by revelation and received by faith.

And Kevin Vanhoozer, when he develops a typology of the relationship between theology and philosophy, types theology as 'Christ' and philosophy as 'Concept'!<sup>74</sup> The problem with this type of approach is that it appears to manifest a nature-grace dichotomy at its root<sup>75</sup>. On these

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<sup>71</sup> See Ernest Nicholson, *Interpreting the Old Testament: A Century of the Oriel Professorship* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981).

<sup>72</sup> It would be most helpful if some conferences could be organised in which biblical scholars could enter into serious dialogue with the works of Thiselton.

<sup>73</sup> See Paul K Jewett, *God, Creation and Revelation. A Neo-Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

<sup>74</sup> See Kevin Vanhoozer, 'Christ and Concept: Doing Theology and the "Ministry" of Philosophy,' In: J. D. Woodbridge and T. E. McComisky (eds.), *Doing Theology in Today's World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991) 99-145.

<sup>75</sup> Roy Clouser characterises this type of understanding of the relationship between faith and reason as 'Religious Scholasticism.' For a discussion and critique see Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality. An Essay on the Hidden Role of Religious Belief in Theories* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991) 82-88.

complex issues let it suffice to say that I think that Newbigin's and Wolterstorff's type of understanding of reason is more consistent with the claim of Christianity to be public truth; reason always operates within some perspective or worldview and Christian scholarship, including Christian scholarship in philosophy, should operate as faith seeking understanding.<sup>76</sup>

Newbigin and Wolterstorff are arguing that we should build our scholarship unashamedly upon the foundations of a hermeneutics of the cross, or a hermeneutics from the other end, to use Thiselton's expressions. By contrast, Thiselton invokes a hermeneutics *from the other end* only at the end of the seven hundred pages of *New Horizons*, and then to stave off the problem of the implications of sociocritical hermeneutics. But if such an approach can be invoked at this stage one might well wonder why it could not have been invoked at the outset and been consciously allowed to shape the entire project. As I understand Newbigin and Wolterstorff, their plea is precisely that we seek to do scholarship 'from the other end.'

## 2. Gadamer's Hermeneutic

The attraction of Gadamer's hermeneutic from a Christian perspective is its radical undermining of Cartesian objectivity, its recovery of the role of prejudice and tradition in interpretation, its dialogical model of understanding and its notion of being addressed by the text. It seems to me that

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the insistence that hermeneutics involves two horizons is very helpful; it enables much that shapes biblical interpretation to be brought into the light.

Gadamer's hermeneutic has however been consistently criticised for its inability to discern distorted communication or to be able to distinguish a correct from an incorrect understanding. In Klapwijk's words, 'How can anyone, after the Holocaust, still unreservedly maintain: "In understanding we are drawn into an event of truth.?"' The underlying issue is I think Gadamer's immanentist perspective on reality. The transcendent cannot be taken into account hermeneutically so that, 'It is through the dialectic of a great diversity of interpretations that the universally valid emerges and the thing itself presents itself.'<sup>77</sup> Klapwijk suggests that only the notion of the God who has revealed himself in Christ is adequate to enable us to hold on to a strong notion of truth in language.

Certainly when it comes to biblical interpretation one would want to ask which are the appropriate prejudices to bring to Scriptural interpretations, what is a healthy tradition to inhabit which is most likely to promote a fusion of horizons? It is this type of question that makes Newbigin suspicious of the hermeneutical circle as understood by Gadamer<sup>78</sup>. My suggestion is therefore that a weakness in Gadamer's hermeneutic is its immanentism, and that the faith-reason dichotomy I discern in Thiselton's approach may be connected with his too-ready appropriation of Gadamer. In his 1981 work on 'Knowledge, Myth and Corporate

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<sup>76</sup> See Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence. Faith, Doubt and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (London: SPCK, 1995), and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984 2nd ed).

<sup>77</sup> See L. Klapwijk, 'The Universal in Hans-Georg Gadamer's Hermeneutic Philosophy', *Philosophia Reformata* 50 (1985) 119-129. The quotes are from pp. 127 and 123.

<sup>78</sup> See Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks. The Gospel and Western Culture*, (London: SPCK, 1986) 51-54, 56, 58.

Memory' Thiselton strongly asserts the corporate Christian memory and mindset<sup>79</sup>. It seems to me that if this element in Thiselton's work could be strengthened, then I think a more critical and helpful understanding of Gadamer could be developed.

### **3. Help for the Biblical Scholar**

As we have seen Thiselton's work is full of poignant insights for the biblical scholar. However, my suspicion is that even those biblical scholars (and especially students) who manage to read through 'New Horizons' might not feel terribly helped at the end of the process. What one had perhaps hoped for in the last two chapters was not delivered, namely a positive, albeit tentative, unified, biblical hermeneutic proposal which incorporates the insights of recent development<sup>80</sup>. As we saw, Thiselton comes down on the side of particularity and is ultra-cautious about outlining a biblical hermeneutic. In this he is similar to Gadamer with his distaste for method. While Thiselton's defence of the particularity of texts is a helpful corrective to the imposition of methods that has often characterized historical critical approaches, 'pastorally', one might say, the biblical scholar needs more than a *smorgasbord* of approaches. I suspect that Thiselton's avoidance of a unified hermeneutic may be related to his view of philosophy. A Christian approach to philosophy in which faith seeks understanding would tend to be unified, but since philosophy is never in Thiselton's view distinctively Christian, philosophical insights for biblical hermeneutics tend to be eclectically appropriated.

The OT scholar (student) however needs more than a collection of pieces. We require some unified orientation which indicates how these pieces relate to each other. Bernard Latagan's communicative hermeneutic, and the so-called Tel Aviv school of poetics have done more along this line, I think<sup>81</sup>. And what makes N. T. Wright's work on the New Testament so powerful is his unified critical realist epistemology which he uses as a framework to reshape NT studies<sup>82</sup>. Precisely such a positive framework appears to be lacking at the conclusion of Thiselton's *New Horizons*. As Abraham Kuyper once said, 'What we really need is a seedling of scientific theory thriving on christian roots. For us to be content with the act of shuffling around in the garden of somebody else, scissors in hand [to cut the other's flowers], is to throw away the honour and worth of our christian faith.'<sup>83</sup> It is Gadamer's two horizons that have shaped Thiselton's work on hermeneutics

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to a major extent. Tacitly the third horizon of God and the world as his creation is always present in Thiselton's work, but my suggestion is that this ultimate horizon requires to more consciously integrated into his hermeneutic.

Not for a moment do I raise these critical issues in order to downplay Thiselton's achievement, but precisely in order to take his contribution seriously. Thiselton has left all biblical scholars in his debt with his two major volumes on the intersection between

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<sup>79</sup> 'Knowledge, Myth and Corporate Memory,' in: *Believing in the Church. Essays by Members of the Church of England Doctrine Commission* (London: SPCK, 1981) 45-78.

<sup>80</sup> Compare for example Bernard Latagan, 'Hermeneutics,' in: D. Freedman, (ed.), *Anchor Bible Dictionary* Volume III (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 149-154.

<sup>81</sup> See Alan Mintz, 'On the Tel Aviv School of Poetics,' *Prooftexts* 4 (1984) 215-235.

<sup>82</sup> See N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

<sup>83</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie* (Kampen: Kok, 1902-1905) 3:57.

Craig G. Bartholomew, "Three Horizons: Hermeneutics from the Other End—An Evaluation of Anthony Thiselton's Hermeneutic Proposals," *European Journal of Theology* 5.2 (1996): 121-135.

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philosophical hermeneutics and biblical hermeneutics, and my hope is that this article may in some way contribute to fostering the discussion at that point of intersection.

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