

Klein, William W., Blomberg, Craig L., Hubbard, Robert L. Jr. *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*. Dallas: Word Publishing, 1993. xxiii + 518 pp. \$28.99 cloth.

Introduction

There are many hurdles to discovering the truth of God's Word, the Bible. The Bible was written by several different authors who lived centuries apart. It was written in three different languages and in many different genres, or forms of literature, each with their own guidelines to proper understanding. Further, a proper interpretation of Scripture is made even more difficult by various cultural issues that cloak the ancient text. In light of these hurdles, it should be easy to understand that gaining an accurate interpretation of the Bible can be a challenging task. So how can one learn what the Bible says? How can its resources be mined? What is the reader to learn and how is he or she to respond? These challenging problems and questions are just some of the issues addressed by a trio of professors from the faculty of Denver Seminary. Dr. William W. Klein, Professor of New Testament; Dr. Craig L. Blomberg, Associate Professor of New Testament; and Dr. Robert L. Hubbard, Professor of Old Testament, have combined their years of expertise and devotion to Scripture to provide a concise, logical, and practical *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*.

Summary

Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard (hereafter referred to as KB and H) offer this volume "to advance the practice of Biblical interpretation—also called hermeneutics—in this generation. A comprehensive yet readable text, it covers all the key issues in

interpreting the Bible” (ixx). The goal, according to KB and H, is “to show students not merely what interpretation is all about, but *how* to interpret” (ixx). Admirably, each of the three authors stresses “the need to know not only *what* the Bible says, but also what the Bible *means* by what it says” (xx). In sum the basic goal of this book is “to establish, explain, and demonstrate precepts and methods to guide those who want to understand Scripture correctly” (5). In so doing, they assist in unraveling some of the mysteries of biblical interpretation (xxi).

KB and H divide the book into five main sections. Those five sections deal with topics such as: the task of interpretation, the interpreter and the goal, understanding literature, understanding Bible genres, and the fruits of interpretation.

In Part I, KB and H underscore the need to understand the definition of biblical interpretation. Thus, attention is devoted in Chapter 1 to defining hermeneutics and demonstrating the crucial need for careful and valid hermeneutical principles (xxi). The authors appropriately define hermeneutics as the art and science of biblical interpretation. They also address the role of the interpreter and the meaning of the message. KB and H speak to some of the challenges of Bible interpretation, such as: the distance of time (12), cultural distance (14), geographical distance (15), and the distance of language (15). Despite all of these challenges, the authors note that as God’s Word to His people, the Bible has “eternal relevance” (16). At the conclusion of the chapter, the writers affirm that the basic goal of the book is to help readers discover God’s message to Christians “today” from the teachings and stories “back then” (20).

In Chapter 2, KB and H explore the history of interpretation. The authors posit that “to understand how to interpret the Bible today requires an appreciation of our

predecessors in the Biblical faith” (xx). With that philosophy in mind, KB and H review the history of Jewish interpretation, including Rabbinic Judaism, Hellenistic Judaism, and the Qumran Community. They also trace developments in the Apostolic Period, and the Patristic Period, paying particular attention to the apostolic fathers, the contrast between Alexandria and Antioch, and the various church councils. KB and H continue by rehearsing developments during the Middle Ages, the Reformation, and the Post-Reformation period. While assessing the Modern Period, the authors highlight approaches during the nineteenth century, the twentieth century, Post-World War I, and Post-World War II. Throughout this chapter, the goal remains to learn from history—appropriating what is valid and valuable while avoiding mistakes and pitfalls (xxi-xxii).

The focus of Chapter 3 is the canon and various Bible translations. The authors define the canon of Scripture as the collection of biblical books that Christians accept as uniquely authoritative (53). Within the chapter, KB and H sketch the rise of the canon of the Old Testament, development of the canon of the New Testament, the criteria of canonicity, and the implications for hermeneutics in the discipline of canon criticism (53). Particular attention is also paid to modern critical editions of the Old and New Testaments and the various translations that have been produced. The reader is introduced to the subjects of textual criticism and translation techniques. He is also acquainted with the major English translations and given tips for choosing a translation.

Part II is dedicated to familiarizing the reader with the interpreter of Scripture and the goal of proper interpretation. Chapter 4 is dedicated to discussing the qualifications and presuppositions of the interpreter. The authors note that interpreters are not blank slates or empty sponges; who they are contributes greatly to the enterprise of

understanding (xxii). Therefore, KB and H discuss the following qualifications of the interpreter: faith, obedience, illumination, and membership in the church—which guards against individualism (85). Further, the appropriate methods for interpretation include diligence and commitment, hard work and discipline. Following this, consideration is given to the necessary presuppositions and the nature of preunderstanding. The authors define preunderstanding as “what the interpreters bring with them to the task of interpretation” (xxii) (however, “preunderstanding” sounds much like “presuppositions”).

Having developed the profile of the interpreter, Chapter 5 addresses the goal of interpretation. In this section, KB and H communicate that the goal of interpretation is to discover the message that is already in the text—whether consciously or unconsciously intended by the authors or editors (118). To assist in establishing an accurate method of interpretation the writers consider four strategic questions that relate to the meaning of the text: “Does the text have one fixed meaning or several levels of meaning?”; “Is textual meaning the singular goal of interpretation?”; “Can we achieve a legitimate reader-response interpretation?”; and “How can we validate our interpretation?” The authors contend that these are foundational questions which have enormous implications for the task of interpretation (xxii).

Part III is dedicated to establishing accepted principles for understanding how the literary forms of prose and poetry function. The focus of Chapter 6 is the set of general rules for interpreting prose. In order for the intended meaning of any prose passage to be understood, it must be understood within its literary context. The literary context helps to provide the proper flow-of-thought, an accurate meaning of words, and an understanding of correct relationships among units. Further, the writers point out that in order for an

interpretation of a biblical passage to be correct, attention must be given to the historical-cultural background, the proper meaning of words, and the grammatical-structural relationships of the passage. KB and H do an acceptable job of explaining the reasons behind and the methods for attending to these details.

In Chapter 7, the focus is directed toward general rules for interpreting Old Testament poetry. The authors highlight the fact that poetry is the second most common literary feature in the Bible. They also declare poetry's dynamic to be a language of images that the reader must experience as a series of imagined sensory situations (217). Attention is also given to rhyme and meter (218), the sounds of assonance (221), alliteration (222), and onomatopoeia (224). The structure of Hebrew poetry is also highlighted with emphasis placed upon parallelism (225), chiasm (237), merismus (239), and inclusio (240). In addition to unique structure and sound, biblical poetry also uses distinct language, rich in imagery and poetic device. While these details may appear complicated, the stated goal of the authors is to equip the reader to achieve better understanding. Since languages function according to specific rules and principles, interpreters must understand these rules in order to study the text properly (xxii).

While Part III focuses on prose and Old Testament poetry specifically, Part IV is structured to explain Old and New Testament genres in general. Beginning with biblical narrative, Chapter 8 explains the various genres of the Old Testament. Surprisingly, narrative makes up 40 percent of the Old Testament. The various forms of biblical narrative include reports, heroic narratives, prophet stories, comedies (not in the traditional sense—but narratives whose plots have happy endings), and farewell speeches. These narratives also include popular proverbs, riddles, fables, parables, songs,

and lists. Understanding the distinctives of these narratives is a necessary first step in developing biblical, literary competence (261). The remainder of Chapter 8 is given to defining and directing toward a proper interpretation of the genres of Old Testament Law, poetry (although the topic was previously addressed in Chapter 7), prophecy, and wisdom literature. The stated goal of the chapter is to cultivate in the readers a “literary competence”—the ability to read a text in light of its own background and purpose (322). The definitions and directions given by the authors assist in meeting this goal.

In Chapter 9, the writers provide support for understanding the different genres of the New Testament. KB and H define the gospels as “theological biographies” (325). After addressing various implications for interpretation and key theological issues within the gospels, the authors deal with interpreting parables, miracle stories, pronouncement stories, and other gospel forms. Acts, in similar fashion to the gospels, is characterized as “theological history” (334). In the remainder of the chapter, attention is given to the Acts, the epistles, and the Revelation, with the appropriate implications being considered for interpreting each genre.

Part V seeks to make accessible the practical wealth of the Bible by investigating, briefly, the various methods by which it ministers to God’s people (xxii). In Chapter 10, the authors deal with the various ways the Bible is used today. Those uses include: gaining information and understanding, worship, formulating liturgy and theology, preaching, teaching, providing pastoral care, spiritual formation in the Christian life, and ascetic enjoyment.

The final chapter is dedicated to the subject of application. Once the proper meaning of Scripture has been established, proper application must be made. KB and H

list three mistakes to be avoided in discerning the proper application of a text: total neglect of the literary context; partial neglect of the literary or historical context; and an insufficient comparison of analogous situations. They go on, however, to give the following four-step methodology for legitimate application: determine the original application(s); evaluate the level of specificity of the original application(s); identify the cross-cultural principles; and find appropriate applications that embody the broader principles. The authors finish the work by placing a much needed emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit in the process of interpretation, “Everything we have taught in this book falls short of the intended goal if interpreters do not simultaneously pray and rely on the Holy Spirit to guide them in the hermeneutical task” (425).

Critical Evaluation

This book is strong in many areas. First, it is strong in its goal of hermeneutics: “We propose the goal of hermeneutics to be the meaning the biblical writers ‘meant’ to communicate at the time of the communication, at least to the extent that those intentions are recoverable in the texts they produced” (98). Rightly, they also consistently endorse a single, instead of multiple, meanings of a text:

Though a text may find a wide variety of significances—both in the original context and forever after—We cannot confuse *significance* with *meaning*. In other words, unless we can demonstrate that the authors *intended* multiple meanings for a text, we can never assume they did. The possibility and presence of multiple applications or significances must be distinguished from what authors or speakers intend to communicate. Apart from clear clues in the context or the genre employed, we must expect that authors intend single meanings (123).

It is also encouraging to see the proper attention given to the importance of the historical-cultural background, the proper meaning of words, and the grammatical-structural

relationships of the passage. All of these assist in training toward proper biblical interpretation.

Another strength of the book is its careful presentation of examples for each point made. The reader is not left wondering how some ethereal hermeneutical principle would be applied. Instead of scholarly ambiguity, the numerous examples given make the book a useful resource for dealing with difficult issues and passages. It should be referenced often by the diligent expositor or anyone desiring to go deeper in their personal study of the Word. Additionally, the footnotes alone provide a treasury of endless opportunities for further, deeper study of any topic or subject addressed.

Another plus is the evangelical stance of the authors. They are forthright with their commitment to the authority of Scripture. For the most part, this is reflected in the way they grapple with the issues.

Further, KB and H are clear in what they want to say and are well organized in the presentation of their material (although there is overlap in Chapters 7 and 8 with Old Testament poetry). In fact, the work seems to be strengthened by the collaborative effort of both Old and New Testament scholars. Further, in contrast to some other works by multiple authors, their style is not choppy to the point of being able to discern the presence of more than one pen.

Concerning weaknesses of the book, there are a few. There are several questionable topics to which the authors appear to be open. For example, the writers seem to endorse the possibility of the reality of “power evangelism” (evangelism that is enabled by the signs and wonders) (342); they also express an openness to the “new perspective on Paul” (364-365). They also seem to allow for the possibility of certain other theological and

practical positions that a responsible hermeneutic would seem to eclipse. Examples would include the book of Acts “legitimately” supporting a Congregational, Presbyterian, and Episcopalian model of church structure and leadership (350), or the embracing of, or at least the allowed pseudonymity of, some of the New Testament epistles (354-355).

Another weakness is an outright rejection of all things dispensational. The authors at times paint with broad brush strokes which can misrepresent those who come to more dispensational conclusions (332). The failure to recognize varying degrees of dispensationalism tends to lump most in the same discounted category. Although later, KB and H do recognize that dispensationalism, as well as covenant theology, have taken great strides away from the excesses of the past to a more “centrist” position (348-349).

The whole prophetic realm takes an interesting turn when the authors declare that “God sovereignly reserves the right to fulfill or not fulfill it (a prophecy) depending on his own purposes and his expectations of his people” (306). Statements such as this build in an unnecessary hesitation when attempting to interpret prophetic predictions. The writers go further still by stating:

We should resist the popular tendency to interpret prophecy as if it were a written script that God was obligated to follow. God’s purposes certainly do not change, and we may expect him to adhere to much of the prophetic design. But as he has in the past, he may ad-lib some unexpected lines. Hence, as we said earlier, Bible students should interpret prophecy tentatively rather than dogmatically. Our God is a God of surprises, and he may still have some left (309).

Unfortunately, that list of surprises, at least according to KB and H, does not include a future for national Israel. Instead of considering a future literal fulfillment of Old

Testament promises to Israel, today’s Bible interpreter is instructed to do the following:

“Unless the New Testament indicates otherwise, the student should relate Old Testament

prophecies about Israel and Zion to those whose fulfillment the New Testament specifically teaches. . . . In most cases such prophecies find their fulfillment spiritually in the church” (310). KB and H go on to ask the obvious question but reply with an answer that is not as obvious:

At this point, some readers may ask, how can New Testament writers interpret apparently literal Old Testament prophecies so nonliterally? We reply with the crucial assumption that, in our view, underlies their interpretation. Indeed, that assumption frames the way we believe readers should interpret prophecy today. Put simply, New Testament writers believed that Jesus Christ and the Christian church represent the fulfillment of Israel’s God given mission in history (309).

It seems more obvious from this statement that perhaps “assumptions,” presuppositions, and preunderstanding have more to do with Bible interpretation than previously believed.

Unfortunately, the blows to a non-covenant perspective continue. In the area of “application,” the aversion of the authors toward dispensational conclusions is evident: “So it is hermeneutically naïve to claim that the largely secular nation of Israel today occupies any privileged position in God’s scheme of things” (421). For a book to be so open toward some of the less supportable, debated issues mentioned earlier and closed to the debate concerning differing, more defensible end-time positions, demonstrates an inconsistency in hermeneutical approach that is less than exemplary to those initially learning this field.

Overall, the book contains a lot of material! While this can be viewed as a “pro,” it can also be a “con.” There is so much here that it appears doubtful that a beginning student would make it all the way through the text.

As far as developing an expository disposition toward preaching, the book has redemptive value. As a result of reading the book, one can become more familiar with some of the main paths leading to the proper exposition of a passage. However, there is

so much material that it becomes difficult to cull the necessary data to clearly guide one through the process of exposition.

Conclusion

Overall, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* seems to be more than an “introduction.” Because of its wealth of examples to illustrate the points and great treasury of footnoted sources for further study, it is a tremendous resource to any student of God’s Word. But, because of the volume and depth of material covered, it is intimidating to the beginning hermeneute! It is the opinion of this writer that KB and H tries to do too much with this *introduction*. Further, for those who are looking to read an *introduction* to hermeneutics, there seem to be too many questionable theological doors left open and too many possible interpretive hallways closed. Bible interpreters who are new to this field may not have the ability to recognize what should be embraced and what should not. *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* remains a resourceful reference for those already familiar with the field, but a daunting challenge for those beginning to learn to interpret the Bible today.