

**Tom Steffen and William Bjraker, *The Return of Oral Hermeneutics: As Good Today as it Was for the Hebrew Bible and First-Century Christianity*, foreword by R. Daniel Shaw (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2020), paperback, xxx+357 pp.**

Tom Steffen and William Bjraker offer oral hermeneutics, complementary to textual hermeneutics, that is both defensible in approach and instructive in demonstration. As their volume title indicates in *The Return of Oral Hermeneutics*, the central thesis of the book explicitly states that: “This book builds the case for *the return of oral hermeneutics* to better understand, interpret, and teach the Bible (‘the book’) in the twenty-first century at home and abroad, using oral means” (xvii). Hence, this well researched academic work identifies the fundamental question that they are attempting to answer in the pages of their book. “Why is it important to know and practice oral hermeneutics in order to ascertain and communicate biblical meaning?” (xxiii) The quick answer is notable in the words of the subtitle: *As Good Today as It Was for the Hebrew Bible and First-Century Christianity*. The case for oral hermeneutics that was familiar across the ancient socio-cultural context in the world behind the text of the Old and New Testaments should still be beneficial for us today.

R. Daniel Shaw provides a perceptive foreword by introducing the authors’ viewpoint for “the power of story” since “the power of story [could] move human beings to reflect on what they can learn about God and about themselves” (xi). Shaw’s foreword also introduces the missionary experiences of Steffen among Ifugaos in the Philippines and Bjraker with Jews around the world. He also shares his own experience with Samos of Papua New Guinea. The foreword likewise explicitly conveys a disclaimer that: “None of this is designed to eliminate literacy, books and all things textual” (xiv). Rather, the books appeal is “as old as the biblical record and as relevant and contemporary as the latest news report on a smartphone. It is a story of human beings in intimate relationship with God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit” (xv).

Steffen and Bjraker preface their awareness that “majority of the people learned God’s word through . . . interpreting the interactions within and between characters, the recitation of laws and the poetry, and the retelling of the stories . . . ” (xvii). “Textual hermeneutics” is legitimate. “Grammatical approach” has its proper place in understanding the meaning of the Scriptures. However, culturally speaking, “over the centuries . . . a shift from oral dominance to textual dominance” in understanding the Bible developed (xvii). An affirmation of the “Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy” is noted. (See xxiv-xxv, especially footnote 13.) The authors are upholding divine

inspiration and scriptural authority. Their commitment to biblical inerrancy is observable in the manner they developed and expounded their central thesis. But to understand, interpret, and teach the Bible should not be limited to the sole manner of textual approach. There are other valid interpretive opportunities.

*The Return of Oral Hermeneutics* is outlined in three parts, with the first and third having only two chapters each. Part I is designated as “Demonstrations.” Its first chapter presents how oral hermeneutics in a small group Bible study setting is done. The story of “Elisha and the Widow’s Oil” is employed in chapter 1 to demonstrate the story telling interaction accomplished in the oral hermeneutical approach. Understanding the biblical story is something dynamic. Meaning is discovered by how the storyteller or the Bible study facilitator and the rest of the people in the Bible study group interact with each other and the text. Chapter 2, the “Reflections on the Elisha Story,” acts as follow-up evaluation of chapter 1. This explains the nuances in the oral hermeneutical interactions in the previous chapter. It highlights the relational reasoning that creates full group engagement of everybody with the biblical text on hand.

Part III which is the book’s last part is entitled “Echoes.” It has also two chapters. The former which is about another story “Elisha and General Naaman” is chapter 9; and the later which is chapter 10 is a “Reflections on the Elisha Story.” The first part and the third part of the content outline of this book are parallel in nature. Chapter 9 “echoes” the storytelling experience that was related by the authors in chapter 1 but in another period with a separate narrative, “Elisha and General Naaman.” The last chapter is similar in title to chapter 2, “Reflections on the Elisha Story.” Chapter 10, through reconsideration and reiteration of various oral hermeneutics principles and components, resonates what were already considered during the course of the development of the whole volume. And thus, the “Concluding Reflections” as the volume’s very last chapter highlights the reaffirmations of oral hermeneutics as naturally consolidative, innate, and sensible.

The middle part of this volume is that which contains the bulk of the materials with a total of six chapters. Part II is where the theoretical description of the methodology of oral hermeneutics is offered by Steffen and Bjoraker. Hence, this part of the book is appropriately designated as “Propositions.” The theories of orality and literacy are discussed thoroughly in dealing with the growth of the Gospels’ tradition in chapter 3, appropriately entitled “Orality’s Influence on Text and Teaching.” First-century Christianity’s tradition of Jesus Christ went into a course of oral composition during a process of transmission. Here, the strength of their theoretical contribution rests. “A significant

component of orality is narrative or story” (93). Poetry is a further element of oral tradition. At this point, the undercurrents of the interplay between the oral and the textual of the Gospel traditions, as well as the orality of the written epistles of Paul, and the oral role of the symbolic imageries in Revelation are adequately tackled. The resulting conclusion is that: “Just as orality influenced text and teaching in the past, so it should influence interpretation and communication of biblical truth in the present” (101-102). Steffen and Bjoraker clarify their point further:

For the first-century oralists, the incarnation of Jesus trumped (not denied) manuscripts that transcribed his life, authenticity trumped words, speech trumped writing, rhetoric trumped reading, reverence trumped rules, memory trumped manuscripts, and meaning trumped words. This requires something beyond textual hermeneutics. *What then is needed to complement textual hermeneutics?* We believe the answer is oral hermeneutics (102).

Chapter 4 on “Oral Hermeneutics” naturally follows. This appropriately builds on the previous chapter and works its way up to the parameters of the approach within the grand narrative of the Holy Scriptures. Now, an essential question is asked: What is the substance of a healthy character of the narrative form or story telling in association with oral hermeneutics? The answer is an appealing one to Pentecostals and Charismatics. It is something related to experiential interpretation of the Bible! This is an altered type of selecting a sensible approach in accomplishing the task of biblical interpretation. This chapter applicably expounded on the principles and process of doing oral hermeneutics as an experiential interpretation. Oral hermeneutics “encourages laity participation,” “utilizes the imagination,” utilizes the emotions,” “allows for multiple boundaried truths,” and “aids long-term memory” (121-130). Hence, it is fitting to call for the recalibration of the hermeneutical assumptions in terms of the role of orality, community, participation, and multivalency in textual analysis.

Chapter 5 is designated as “Hebrew Hermeneutics.” It explains that “Israel was hearing-dominant society and that true hearing and heart-transformation correspond” (135). Through the use of the *Shema*, the festivals, the Psalms and songs, the stories of Israel have been orally interpreted and reinterpreted in “concrete,” “relational,” and “experiential” form of knowledge (136-146). The orality of the rabbinic teachings and the prophetic utterances as well as Jesus’ traditions strengthen the case advanced by Steffen and Bjoraker. And so, in Chapter 6, the authors are able to focus on “Character Theology” wherein the biblical personalities provide the anchor in regulating the course of the storyline that could be

used to articulate theological concerns. Chapters 7 and 8 offer appropriate rethinking of contemporary hermeneutics chapters. Chapter 7, “Questioning Our Questions,” is about contemplating the kinds and forms of questions we ask in biblical interpretation and shift to “the form of character-centric questions” (196). And Chapter 8 is thoughtful “Reflections” rehearsing the questions raised already in the previous chapters of the book about the need of doing oral hermeneutics. This thoughtful and engaging reading is for anyone involved in biblical interpretation in order to teach it and make its message sensible to the attentive audience. Textual hermeneutics serves its purpose. Oral hermeneutics opens new possibilities. With the “Concluding Reflections” and other chapters meant for reflective purposes, this book achieves its objective to not only addressing alternative hermeneutical approach but also providing insightful contemporary application. An engaging and lively read that is indeed beneficial. Highly recommended reading for Pentecostals and Charismatics!

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