Stanley Porter and Jason C. Robinson


When I was in graduate school in the mid-1980s, hermeneutics was thought to provide New Testament scholarship with its proper theoretical grounding. This elevated status seemed to get swept away with the ensuing explosion of feminist, literary, postmodern, and social-scientific criticism. With this splendid introductory volume, Stanley Porter and Jason Robinson seek to restore hermeneutics to its rightful place, to make the largely persuasive case that current forms of scholarship would benefit from serious engagement with this rich tradition, and to produce a clear and accessible introduction to this fascinating theoretical tradition.

Their book moves through the major figures in the philosophical tradition before situating a number of recent scholarly trends within this tradition. The brief introductory chapter defines some difficult terms and identifies major hermeneutical trends, providing the reader with helpful road signs for the journey ahead. The authors repeatedly stress that hermeneutics is more concerned with structures of meaning than with methodological precision.

The volume then turns to the philosophers who forged the hermeneutical path. Each chapter includes a brief biographical sketch, analysis of the philosopher’s major arguments, and a critical evaluation. Chapter 2 offers a clear analysis of the appearance of philosophical hermeneutics in the work of Schleiermacher and Dilthey. The tradition emerged by separating itself from older traditions of rules-based Scriptural interpretation, while refusing to submit to the hegemony of the natural sciences. The challenge was to carve out an autonomous space for hermeneutical reflection. This problem was taken up by philosophical phenomenology, best represented by Husserl’s phenomenology and with Heidegger’s phenomenological hermeneutics. In a move that I find to be overly influenced by the standard New Testament construction of this enigmatic figure, the authors argue that Heidegger’s primary concern was to construct an Existentialist Analytic.

If I was somewhat disappointed with the materials on Heidegger, the chapters on Gadamer, Ricoeur, Habermas, and Derrida are uniformly excellent. The
authors’ analysis of *Truth and Method*, the landmark text of philosophical hermeneutics, is worth the price of admission. Gadamer’s thought represents the hermeneutical tradition at its most pure, and they recognize both its appeal and its weaknesses. For Gadamer, the fusion of horizons means that a great work of art can communicate across the ages. The individual, uncontaminated by stultifying Enlightenment rationality, brings pre-understanding to the profound work of art, but, in a spirit of open dialogue, puts these pre-understandings at risk. Out of this spirit of openness, genuine but incomplete dialogue with the great works of art becomes possible.

If Gadamer represents the pure ideal of hermeneutical dialogue, his thought can seem astonishingly naïve. Later hermeneutical thinkers (e.g. Ricoeur, Habermas, the structuralists, Derrida) may possess varying degrees of sympathy with Gadamer’s vision, but they all recognize its weaknesses and all seek to move beyond him. Critical theory can no longer be pushed to the side with a grand philosophical gesture. Ricoeur famously protested that Gadamer asked us to choose either truth or method, while the thinkers who occupy many of the remaining chapters seek to go through, rather than around, method. Porter and Robinson nimbly work their way through what proves to be an increasingly complex maze, as various hermeneutical thinkers work their way through a range of critical questions. The authors do an admirable job of helping the reader make sense of the critical theory while never losing sight of the hermeneutical issue of the structure of communication. I am impressed by the large number of critical questions they are able to raise, although I do wish that attention had been paid to the critical question of gender and to feminist hermeneutics.

The final third of the book looks at hermeneutics as mediated through New Testament scholarship and theology. There are clear and concise chapters on biblical scholarship’s engagement with structuralism, on dialectical theology, and on theological hermeneutics. Most provocatively the authors argue that the recent literary turn in New Testament scholarship is itself a form of hermeneutics, and they conclude by calling for further dialogue between hermeneutics and these diverse literary methodologies.

The authors advocate ongoing debate between critical theory and hermeneutics. In this spirit, I offer the following reflections, which are less about this very fine textbook and more about the discipline of hermeneutics itself. A surprisingly large number of hermeneuts were profoundly shaped by the Nazi era. Heidegger, arguably the founder of philosophical hermeneutics, was famously a member of the party, but he was hardly alone in being forged by the Nazi years. The authors, in the biographical section of each chapter, do an outstanding job of identifying the ways that Nazism touched the lives of many of these