

A BOOK REPORT  
ON  
"THE RETURN OF ORAL HERMENEUTICS"

TITLE: "THE RETURN OF ORAL HERMENEUTICS/As Good Today As It Was for the Hebrew Bible and First Century Christianity"

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I) FIRST IMPRESSIONS: As one might expect of a Book Published by Wipf & Stock, this Book is not one which is quickly or easily read. In fact, unless one has a real interest in Biblical Hermeneutics or in the need to somehow present/teach same to a truly interested Small Group of Christians, or to somehow bring Christians, young and adult, from a position where they find the Bible to be ponderous, difficult to read, and frankly boring, to a position of true love of the Bible, he or she would likely be inclined to skip large portions of this Book, or to simply read its Introductory and Closing Summary Sections, and to put the Book on the shelf for future reference, where it will likely just gather dust.

One thing this Book is not is an "easy read." It cannot be read in one sitting, or even multiple sittings. It needs to be read, and contemplated and hopefully digested, slowly, over a number of sittings. However, if the reader will make this investment in time and effort, he or she will find that, while parts of this Book seem to be unduly ponderous and almost repetitive to the point of "All Right Already", its pages are absolutely filled with invaluable thinking and suggestions for the implementation of Oral Hermeneutics into one's small group or class teaching methods for students who are at least somewhat serious about trying to understand the Bible. This Book is exceptionally well researched. While its authors state that it is but an entry level text into Oral Hermeneutics, it is much more than that. The authors' conclusions are supported, not just by their individual experiences but by voluminous research into the literature of a large number of qualified academics, pastors and church leaders. The foot notes alone contain hugely valuable information. The Appendices provide real, down to earth instructions and help in the proper use of Oral Hermeneutics as a complement to our Western Culture's strong bias for Propositional, Textual Hermeneutics based entirely on what we have called "the grammatical, historical, literary hermeneutic" or a "propositional hermeneutic."



Pastors, particularly those who fall into the category of "Teaching Pastors." But I make such recommendation with a caveat. That is "don't undertake this Book unless you are serious about it, and are willing to make a very serious commitment to it and investment of time and effort in reading it and absorbing it". This is not a casual read.

## II) OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK'S CONTENTS (WHAT IS IT DOING WITH WHAT IT IS SAYING):

The Authors' main thesis is that we, as Bible teachers, need to return to the oral teaching methods of those Authorities who originally created the "Oral Traditions" (Orally related, orally presented and preserved Stories or Proclamations, if you will) which were eventually set forth in scrolls and which, eventually, after centuries, became the Books of the Bible. The authors' thesis and argument is that oral teaching, preaching and proclamation methods, not textual centered teaching methods, were used by the ancient authorities, rabbis, Hebrew teachers, and by Jesus himself, as well as, later, by the original evangelists, the eye witnesses to Jesus, and even later by the Epistle writers, including Paul and his collaborators (who obviously wrote written letters, but letters which were based on oral conventions and were intended to be presented to their addressees orally). The authors propose that many, if not most of the Biblical Books (particularly the narrative portions thereof, which they contend make up about 60% of the Bible) were created, orally, by their originating Authorities, and were intended to be presented orally to their original audiences, and that much of the essence of these Books (or at least the narrative portions thereof) is lost by the Western, Enlightenment, Modernity, Foundationalist driven bias for Textual Hermeneutics, or what they refer to as "The Historical, Grammatical, Literary" Hermeneutics which seek to over analyze, and pick apart, and reduce to "Propositions" Biblical texts which were not designed to be treated in this fashion.

The Authors further opine (if not in fact observe, and confirm by their personal missional experiences, both abroad and in the U.S.) that many people of nations other than the U.S. and Western Europe, and many people of the U.S., particularly younger people and adults who want to be advised how to live, not discover sometimes disconnected "Biblical Propositions" learn orally (and not textually). The authors submit that people who fall into these classifications learn from the "power of story", not from lectures or textual analysis, and that they experience character change and growth and life change through hearing and extensively discussing the "characters" of the Biblical stories, including the "Main Character", God, who might not even be mentioned in such a story.

So, perhaps in summary, the authors strongly urge that we recapture the power of story, and the power of character development and life change which can arise from the oral presentation of (and I would submit that this has to be in small groups or classes) and dialog about the Biblical Narratives and stories, and their characters, including the Main Character, God.

In the Authors' opinion we, Bible teachers and theologians, have abandoned, or greatly subordinated to the Textual, Propositional Hermeneutic approaches, these oral presentation and teaching methods for which large



portions of the Biblical Texts were originated and designed. They do not argue that "Oral Hermeneutics" is a new hermeneutic or that it should be used to the abandonment of Textual Hermeneutics, which they agree is still very much needed in order to keep Oral Hermeneutics within the rails or boundaries of the texts and in order to eventually give more substance to what is learned from Oral Hermeneutics. Rather they submit that the two types of hermeneutics, Oral and Textual, should coexist, but that, at least as to the Narrative portions of the Biblical Texts (which they submit make up at least 60% of the Bible) Oral Hermeneutics should be used first in the approach to such texts, with such approach to then be followed up with and supplemented by Textual Hermeneutics (which we sometimes refer to as "Propositional Hermeneutics").

I think that a rough outline or breakdown of the Book might be helpful in my, perhaps inadequate attempt to give it an "Overview." Such a breakdown (admittedly quite incomplete) is as follows (these are my summary statements of the authors' propositions, observations, opinions or suggestions for the reader):

1) Most of the Biblical Books and Texts were originally created orally, as orally presented traditions, and were not reduced to writing, even in scribe generated scrolls.

2) The narratives, stories and other materials contained therein were, for large periods of time, transmitted to their audiences, orally.

3) The narratives, stories and other materials therein were preserved, with accuracy, at least with respect to the essential contents and points thereof by the memories of countless hearers who, under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, memorized what they heard and would challenge any incomplete or inaccurate retelling or presentations of such stories, narratives and other materials.

4) These "oral texts", if you will, were God Breathed and inspired and preserved orally by various communities of faith through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

5) Jesus, God Incarnate and obviously speaking the Word of God, never wrote anything. He did not need to do so. He orally preached and taught large numbers of people, throughout Palestine, and mentored his disciples, all of whom, collectively, (again with the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit), through memory and oral telling and retelling preserved all of the essential essence of Jesus's teachings, if not word for word restatements of same.

3

6) A period of at least 20 years transpired between the death of Jesus and the production of the first Synoptic Gospel or first written preservation of the events and teachings of Jesus, and during this period of time the accuracy of the memories of such events and teachings was assured by the collective memories of the hearers and original evangelists, again under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

7) Jesus spoke, primarily, in Aramaic (and some Hebrew) and the Synoptic Gospels were written in Greek. So it is probable that the Gospels do not contain "word for word" restatements of the specifics of given events or of Jesus's teachings or statements. So, while there might be various "alleged inconsistencies" among the Gospels, including their various chronologies, the essence of what they convey about the life and teachings of Jesus is set forth in such Gospels with complete accuracy.

8) As the Apostle John stated in his Gospel "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written." So the Gospel writers were not trying to relate every single event of the life of Jesus, or set forth a "word for word" restatement of His teachings.



However the Gospels became, with the protection of collective memories of many hearers and observers and of the eye witnesses and apostles (and even though they used a language different than that used by Jesus) a completely accurate account of the essence of the events of the life of Jesus and of His teachings.

9) Jesus used, completely, oral teaching and story methods, relying on Parables, Stories to reach audiences (most of whom were textually illiterate) with what He wanted to teach them about the advent of, and the nature of the Kingdom of God, and of the Nature and Character of God.

10) For centuries after the death of Jesus, the Gospel and all Biblical Books were presented to audiences, many of whom were illiterate. Any sort of textual literature (including the Epistles) were produced on scrolls which were rare and prohibitively expensive. So the audiences heard the teachings orally. Even the Epistles, letters, were intended to be read by trusted presenters, and heard, orally. At least some of Paul's Epistles were a part of an ongoing dialog with the recipients. Paul, therefore, followed some conventions of oral rhetoric in his Epistles. One of such convention of oral rhetoric would be to restate the statement or argument of the recipient, and then refute it. So, unless the Epistle is read orally to an audience which understood such convention it could be grossly misunderstood in that one of the arguments or contentions of the recipients of the Epistle, restated by Paul and then refuted by him could be taken as being some "doctrinal truth" stated by him. So, even with the Epistles (which we oftentimes consider to be highly "propositional") "Oral Hermeneutic" might well lead to a conclusion that is far different than the conclusion we "text bound" individuals might reach pur from a purely textual analysis.

11) Prior to the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg, almost all teaching of the Gospels and of Scripture generally, was directed, orally, to individuals who had no text available.

4

12) Martin Luther considered the oral superior to the written stating: "The gospel should not really be something written, but a spoken word brought forth from the Scriptures, as Christ and the apostles would have done. This is why Christ himself did not write anything, but only spoke. He called his teaching not Scripture but gospel, meaning good news or proclamation that is spread not by pen, but by word of mouth....So it is not at all in keeping with the New Testament to write books on Christian doctrine. Rather in all places there should be fine, goodly learned, spiritual, diligent preachers without books, who extract the living word from the old Scriptures and unceasingly inculcate it in the people, just as the apostles did."

13) So Christianity started and existed and thrived, for extended periods of history without reliance upon texts or textually driven propositional hermeneutics. Then what happened? First the printing press came along. Eventually, written texts became somewhat publicly available. Then came the Enlightenment, and the so called "Age of Reason" and "Foundationalism", where it was believed that "truth could be reached through human reason, and the scientific method." This search for reasoned truth led to the evolution of "Textual Hermeneutics" or the "Grammatical, Historical, Literary" approach to Hermeneutics, where "experts", learned academicians or theologians, sought, and continue to seek, through the application of "scientific rules and models," Propositional Truths. The bias among theologians became one of seeking to systematically analyze and reduce Scripture to Propositional Statements of Truth; the belief being that, in some instances, if not many or all instances, texts or passages of Scripture have but one Godly truth and meaning (i.e. "Proposition") and that any other truth or meaning results from Eisegesis (i.e. "This is what this means to me") or misinterpretation, not proper Exegesis.

14) In the case of some texts, such a conclusion might be



warranted, but in others, particularly the narrative portions of the Bible (which the authors contend occupy at least 60% of the Bible) this conclusion is not warranted, and true character change and life change results, not from somewhat isolated propositions, but rather from hearing about, analyzing and discussing in group discussions, with a learned facilitator and story teller, the Biblical characters and their relations with each other and with the Main Character, God, who might not even be mentioned in the Biblical story (e.g. the Book of Esther and the Book of Ruth).

15) So the Authors urge a return to Oral Hermeneutics, where a gifted and learned story teller will (hopefully even without the benefit of reading from the Bible, but rather from memory) describe the back story (the historical situation) leading up to a Biblical story/narrative, and then relate and repeat the story/narrative, and then, through the use of pretty free flowing, generally unscripted questions, initiate and engage in, and to some extent direct and control (in order to avoid conclusions which go outside of the text and its lessons) a dialog with the group which he or she is leading. The goal is to consider, analyze and discuss the characters in the story/narrative, and their relations with each other, and their relations with the Main Character, God, thereby causing the audience to come to conclusions as to what pleased or displeased God. The authors' thesis is that this type of approach will lead to character development among the participants, and, hopefully to life change, and that conclusions as to how what has been learned can be applied in daily life and by the church or Christian Community.

5

16) The authors refer to this approach as "Character Theology", a Theology centered on the characters in the Biblical stories and narratives, and their actions and their relations with other characters and with the Main Character, God, whether God is mentioned or not, and on their failings and successes, with the goal being to cause "character development" and "life change" among the participating audience (who will actively participate in the dialog and discussion), and conclusions by them as to how what they learn might be applied in their every day lives or in the life of the church. "Character Theology", an Oral Theology, is one centered not on derived propositions but rather on the Power of Story and analysis of and dialog about the "characters" in the Biblical story.

17) The authors further urge that a correct presentation of and dialog about each Biblical narrative or story will also incorporate a discussion of the manner in which the particular narrative or story is a part of, or weaves into the overall grand narrative, the meta narrative of Scripture, the history of the interactions of God with humanity and of His ongoing efforts to redeem His creation and of the ultimate outcome of these efforts.

18) The authors further submit that the Oral Hermeneutic/Character Theology which they describe, will be much more appealing and attractive to large parts of the earth's population, which has an oral bias or concentration as opposed to a textual concentration, as well as to younger Americans who are orally oriented and adult Americans who are looking for wisdom (not abstract propositions) which will enable them to properly live life. At least the Oral Hermeneutic will "bring them to the Bible and open their hearts and emotions to the Biblical Story" which might then better enable them to open their minds to Textual Hermeneutics. We need to first involve the right sides of their brains (where emotions lie) before trying to engage the left sides of their brains (where analytics rest).

(Admittedly, This outline/breakdown of this Book, as presented above, is far, far too long for any book report, but I, quite simply, cannot find a way to do any justice to this Book with a shorter discussion.)

The authors use, as examples of the use of Oral Hermeneutics or



Character Theology, storyteller presentations of, and then led discussions of the characters in the Biblical stories of "Elisha and the Widow's Oil" as found in 2 Kings 4:1-7, and "Elisha and General Naaman". These examples provide excellent guidance as to how the Oral Hermeneutic/Character Theology approach might be used in a small group or class discussion. A lot of very helpful suggestions are presented by these examples. In addition, a whole lot of very practical and helpful suggestions as to how one might proceed with the use of Oral Hermeneutics or Character Hermeneutics appear in the Book's substantial Appendices.

Again, the authors do not suggest an abandonment of Textual or Propositional Hermeneutics, but suggest that it should be used in conjunction with Oral Hermeneutics, which will be more appealing (at least initially) to oral learners, young people and adults who want help in "living life". Textual Hermeneutics (which should probably be a part of the educational learning of the Oral Facilitator) can keep discussions within the boundaries of Orthodoxy, and can help to flesh out what is at least initially learned through the oral process. However, the authors do suggest, absolutely, that with respect to the narrative portions of the Bible Oral Hermeneutics should come first. It should be given priority, thereby appealing to the heart and emotions of the group before the, perhaps less emotional and (forgive me) "boring" propositions of Textual Hermeneutics are derived.

(Note: My Apologies for this extended discussion of the contents of this Book, but I did tell you that this Book is not a quick or easy read. It should be undertaken only by one willing to make a substantial investment in time and effort in its reading and digestion.)

### III) PERSONAL MUSINGS (HOW DID THIS BOOK BENEFIT ME):

While I will make a more personal comment in a moment, I candidly believe that the authors have oversold their Oral Hermeneutics/Character Theology approaches. I readily agree that those approaches are likely the best (or the best first or initial) approaches to many of the Biblical Narratives, and, very likely, the Parables of Jesus and Biblical Poetry. Arguably (perhaps strongly arguably) these approaches will allow for a much better understanding of some of the Epistles which were intended to be presented orally, particularly considering the then in use oral rhetorical device which it appears that Paul used in order to restate, and then rebut the contentions or arguments of the intended recipient group of an Epistle. (Particularly consider 1 and 2 Corinthians and Galatians). At least personally I find that the Oral Approach presents a superior approach to Revelation, as compared to the Propositional Textual Hermeneutics approach. In my view one can get totally lost in Revelation (and God's intended purpose for same) if one gets totally wound around the axle trying to decipher all of the numbers, symbols and strange passages. The original audiences who heard (not read) Revelation would have, I think, gotten the important big picture of this Book and would not have been overwhelmed by it.

So, I think that the Oral Hermeneutic and its related Character Theology urged by the authors is an appropriate theology for some, perhaps most of the narrative portions of the Bible, and one might well conclude the Poetic parts of the Bible which were clearly designed to appeal to the heart



and emotions, and not necessarily human reason and logic. It is not, however, at least in my view, a proper approach to other portions of the Bible such as the Books of the Law, parts of the Epistles and parts of the Books of the Prophets. Perhaps the proper conclusion is that "one type of hermeneutic is not a one size that fits all Books or pericopes of the Bible."

Let's look, for example, at the very troubling War Texts, the Total Wipe Out Texts, the War Rape text, the Slavery Texts and Slave Beating Texts and Corporal Punishment Texts. Certainly just orally reading these texts is not going to enable one to provide some satisfactory explanation about why we find these texts, which are hugely bothersome, in the Bible which is the Word of a Loving God.

My point is not one of an intention to be critical of the authors' approach. I celebrate it. I just do not want the reader of this Book to be oversold, from the beginning, on a conclusion that Oral Hermeneutics has to be the dominant Hermeneutic at the complete expense of Textual Hermeneutics which are properly culturally, historically and grammatically implemented. Furthermore, when it comes to some of the "hard issues", such as the slavery texts, the War Texts, the Total Wipe Out/Genocide Texts, the Corporal Punishment Texts, I don't think a reliance (or at least a total reliance) on the Narrative Theology will work. It is my judgement, for what it is worth, that the Redemptive Movement Hermeneutic explained by William Webb will have to be used in these instances, as well as when it comes to dealing with issues that are not even mentioned in the Bible or are incompletely or somewhat ambiguously dealt with in the Bible (e.g. the roles of women in the church, home and marketplace). A reasonable overall conclusion would be that Oral Hermeneutics and Textual Hermeneutics each has its strengths and weaknesses, and that there are certain Biblical Genres where one might be superior to the other. In most instances, they can be used to complement one another.

All of this said, as one who has taught (and strongly, perhaps too strongly supported and urged the use of) Textual, Propositional Hermeneutics where one seeks to analyze Scriptural passages using, for example, the Ladder of Abstraction Model or even the Heart of God Hermeneutic Model in order to find an Abstracted (from the concrete specific) Propositional Truth or Timeless Truth or Principle, I have always wondered how the "normal" (if that is a correct word) Christians we encounter and are called upon to help, and who have no desire to become academic theologians or to immerse themselves in some of our suggested Propositional Hermeneutics Rules and Models could ever be attracted to a true love of the Bible, or to even want to immerse themselves in it daily if they are taught, and feel that they have to absorb and use our taught methodologies. Abraham Lincoln is said to have remarked that "God must have loved the Common Man because He made so many of them." Well I don't want to say that any of the Christian people who we are called upon to help understand and love the Bible are "common", as they are anything but. However, they are people who, by and large, don't want to become "academics". They don't want to have to engage in overly complex Biblical analysis methodologies. They truly need to be engaged (at least at the outset) at the heart and emotional level or their eyes will glaze over and they will become bored to death and they will completely abandon any desire to engage in a true study of the Bible. At worst, they will not acquire a love of the Bible, which causes them to want to know more about it. We cannot let this happen. So I take heart at what the authors of this Book are saying and I agree that we need to use their Oral



Hermeneutic/Character Theology to initially engage people at the heart and emotional level, and really cause them to see the grand scope, meta narrative of the Bible, and to acquire a real love for the Bible. Then, if, as we hope, they are willing to go further and really learn how to properly interpret the Bible and to do the hard work which is required to do so, we can engage them with Textual/Propositional Hermeneutics, or Oral Hermeneutics/Character Theology in proper combination with Textual/Propositional Hermeneutics.. In the meantime, as hopefully somewhat learned teachers and facilitators who know the Textual approaches we can use our knowledge of same to guide (and keep within the rails or boundaries of Orthodoxy) the discussions and conclusions of our class/group participants. Oral Hermeneutics/Character Theology is not an "anything goes, everything is relative, my truth is as good as your truth" approach. It is designed to lead hearers and participants to real Godly Truth. So some boundaries need to be established, or folks can go totally off the rails. I think that Martin Luther had this need in mind when he said that, while the Gospel should be taught orally, it needs to be so taught by learned and dedicated teachers and pastors who are well versed in the Text. I do believe, that, without good guidance from learned facilitators, some groups who engage in pure Oral Hermeneutics/Character Hermeneutics can go totally afield, and truly engage in outright Eisegesis. Some guardrails are essential.

As I consider these matters, I have also become of the opinion that we can really help people who want to really get engaged with the Bible, if not even help ourselves, if we can learn how to really describe the overall meta narratives of (the Grand Story of) Scripture. If we can teach others (and even teach ourselves) how the Bible really hangs together, from beginning to end, we can be of huge help to other Christians (and again to ourselves). The authors of this Book mention, with strong approval, the "Bible Project." I listen to their pod casts weekly, and try to review their other materials. These two guys do an absolutely marvelous job of "tying Scripture together", and showing how themes are repeated throughout the Bible. They truly use Narrative Theology in a superior manner.

#### IV) HOW TO READ THIS BOOK (IN WHAT ORDER OR WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT PARTS)?

These are questions which I am not sure I can properly answer. I have heard, and generally follow a suggestion that "you should not read a book, cover to cover, but rather should start with the Introduction and then go to the ending Summary Conclusions, and then, perhaps, look at the introductions and ending conclusions of each Chapter before you make a decision to read the entire book, cover to cover." I don't think this method will work with this Book. This is a "read it cover to cover, and even the appendices book." However, this needs to be done slowly, and with deliberation over a number of sittings. Even the footnotes should be read. So I cannot make a suggestion for a "quick read or scan of this Book."

#### V) WHAT CONTRIBUTIONS OR BENEFITS WILL PASTORS OR CHRISTIAN LEADERS OR TEACHERS OR EMERGING CHURCH LEADERS TAKE FROM THIS BOOK?



I think that I have really answered these questions in the above parts of this Review. I believe that every Pastor (particularly Teaching Pastors) and Church Leaders or Emerging Church Leaders who are called upon to teach "budding or young in their walk or struggling with the Bible Christians" or those who find the Bible to be intimidating, or boring or to be without relevance to them or their lives, or to be difficult to understand or use should read and absorb the lessons of this Book. They should make the substantial investment of time and effort which is required to properly read and digest this Book and apply its lessons in their work. They need to be able to call upon the hearts and emotions of those they are trying to help and bring them to a true love of Scripture, and a desire to engage in the hard work of properly interpreting Scripture (and, possibly, in the work of trying to help others do so).