

**A BOOK REVIEW**  
**“MERE CHRISTIAN HERMENEUTICS/TRANSFIGURING WHAT IT MEANS TO READ THE BIBLE  
THEOLOGICALLY”**

**FEBRUARY 6, 2026**

**TITLE OF BOOK:** “Mere Christian Hermeneutics/Transfiguring What It Means to Read the Bible Theologically”

**AUTHOR:** Kevin J. Vanhoozer, (PhD. Cambridge University) who is research professor of systematic theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and theological mentor for the Augustine Fellowship of the Center for Pastor Theologians, and who formerly served as a member of the 2024 Seoul Lausanne theology working group on hermeneutics. He has authored or co-authored over twenty books, including *Is There a Meaning in This Text?; First Theology; The Drama of Doctrine; and Remythologizing Theology.*

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**FIRST IMPRESSIONS**

In the interests of full disclosure, I have to say that this is a very difficult book for me to Review. I have wrestled with it. I have become constantly frustrated with it. I have forced myself to finish my reading of it. Candidly, I have not found this book to be helpful to me in my capacity as a co-teacher of an ECLI (Emerging Church Leadership) hermeneutics class for TEI (Theological Education Initiative, Columbia, Missouri). I cannot recommend this book to the Pastors, Church Leaders and Teachers and other Patrons of TEI. I do not believe that this book will be helpful for any of these Patrons of TEI in their pursuit of their efforts to improve their knowledge and competency for the performance of their duties in their respective roles.

I am embarrassed to make these statements. I regret reaching these conclusions because, while I do not know our author, Dr. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, I recognize and respect the huge respect which he has earned among the theological community. I am in no position to debate him on any theological subject. I am also awed by the magnificent quality of his writing, scholastic scholarship and research which is evidenced in this book, and the huge efforts which he has expended in writing this book (which must have taken countless hours of research and writing) in his effort to try to bring some theological method unity to the various groups of theologians and Bible interpreters who have argued, for centuries, over the proper ways in which the Bible should be read and interpreted. His courage in trying to move the people of these various, competing, “Reading Cultures” (as he describes them in this book) to adopt some paradigm for reading divinely inspired canonical Scripture within a Christological, historically attuned, respect the text-oriented manner must be saluted.

How can I, your Reviewer, have such respect for our author and such admiration for his writing, scholarship and research which are exemplified by this book, and such respect for his courage in addressing the subject matters of this book, and, nevertheless, conclude that I have not found this book to be personally helpful to me in trying to improve my competency in teaching hermeneutics, and have also not found that I can recommend this book to the Patrons of TEI who I try to serve by my various book reports (which I hope that some of them read)? I think that the conflict between these apparently opposing views and conclusions arises from my conclusion as to Who Make Up The Desired Audience or Readership for this book. I believe that this book is directed to those of the Academy, those of the

Academic Theological Community. If you look at the highly positive, and praising Reviews which appear at the outset of this book under the heading “Praise for Mere Christian Hermeneutics” you will note that the individuals providing those short Reviews are (or at least the huge majority of them are) those who have achieved some distinguished academic rank in a number of Seminaries and other Theological or Academic institutions. They are individuals of the Theological Academy. I think that these individuals, and the Academy in general, will benefit from this book. As they and the Academy are benefitted, then the rest of us will also benefit from their future writings and scholarship. In the meantime, my judgement is that those of us of the ECLI/TEI community will be better served by other books and literature, some of which I have had the opportunity to read, study and occasionally review. I apologize to our hugely respected author for reaching this conclusion.

### **WHAT IS THE AUTHOR DOING OR TRYING TO DO WITH WHAT THE AUTHOR IS SAYING?**

I don't know if it is the proper way for me to try to respectfully speak for what our author, Dr. Vanhoozer, is saying by this book, but it is the only way I know to proceed in an attempt to do so. I am going to try to state, in my words (not those of the author) what I think that I have learned from this book, what my take-aways are from this book, and hope that, in doing so I at least captured some of the essence of what our author has intended to say. So, I will state my personal take-aways from this book, hoping that in doing so I will do some justice to our author's magnificent scholarship. My statement of my Take-Aways are as hereinafter stated in this Section of this Review.

Our author describes, throughout this book, the various “Reading Cultures” for biblical reading and interpreting which have arisen over the centuries of church history and which have given rise to constantly “recurring tensions” as to just how Christian Biblical Readers and Interpreters should approach Scripture. He identifies, at length, these various Reading Cultures, and Tensions. These Cultures are sometimes referred to as “Interpretive Communities”. When one becomes a member of one of these Cultures or Interpretive Communities one acquires certain spiritual and Bible reading values, practices and ideas which have a huge effect on the ways in which one approaches, reads and interprets Scripture. While we like to think that we approach our attempts at Biblical interpretation with free and unbiased minds, and are taught that we are to try to do so, it is in fact impossible for us to do so. That which we learn from, and are sometimes inculcated by our respective Reading Culture, our Interpretive Community, will impact the manner, ways and conclusions in which we read and interpret Scripture. To quote our author: “Here is a universal truth: every Christian reader belongs to some reading culture. Reading cultures differ from one another, at least in part, by the way they understand and relate to *grammar*” (meaning, as I understand Grammar in an expanded sense, the words on the page, the words of the text and what they mean and to whom or what do they refer). The author goes on to state that in the Middle Ages people read texts aloud, and in doing so heard voices which conveyed the voice of God. In monastic reading cultures, some monks searched for God in Scripture, so fervently, that they sometimes bypassed the letter of Scripture, the “Grammar” to find Christ in every text. The Protestant Reformers were equally devoted to Christ, but they were unwilling to cut ties with the biblical letters, the “Grammar”. “In modern times, the pendulum has swung to the other side. Pride of place in biblical studies today goes to getting the grammar right” (i.e. in my words, what do the words of the text, giving privilege to the text and the words of the text, mean in their literary context, what we sometimes refer to as *exegesis*).

Our author, and other learned individuals (both current times and ancient times) cited by our author, argue that a purely reductionist grammatical reading of a biblical text (meaning just reading its words and its literary contexts, and trying to reach a conclusion as to what those words mean in those contexts) forms readers who do not do justice to the Word of God. So, what is the overriding question? It is, in our

author's words: "What *other* kinds of attention to letter of the text are necessary to do justice to the Bible as the word of God in human words?" The author goes on to state that his book is "an extended answer to this important question."

So, in my words, not those of our author, if we do, as we are taught to do, "Respect the Text" as it was written by its human authors, and Respect the Words of that Text, and don't look to "What was Behind the Text", or perhaps, "What Is In Front of the Text" (all of which, I submit, we are, in our Reading Culture taught to do) to what extent can we find in the Text some "Referent" to which God intended that the Text actually refer, but which would seem to be something or someone to which or to whom the original human author of the text could not have possibly had any intention to refer to by the words of the text? That is to say, how can we find that the actual Referent of Texts of the Old Testament (the "OT") was Jesus, someone who would have been entirely unknown to the OT authors? For example, how can we read the stories of the Old Testament ("OT"), particularly the Biblical Prophets, to refer to Jesus, to Christ, when the OT authors could not have had any knowledge of Jesus? Did God, the "A"uthor who inspired the human "a"uthors of the OT text, establish a "Divine Discourse", a Discourse between God and humans, which had meanings beyond those to which the "a"uthors could have had no intention to refer to?

1) Our author proposes (as I understand his thinking) that the answers or responses to these dilemmas lie in the way in which we look at, or view Scripture. In this respect, he refers to the woodshed metaphor of C.S. Lewis. Lewis described an individual who enters a woodshed, which has a hole in the roof that allows for a beam of sunshine to shine through the roof and onto the floor of the woodshed. One can either stand back and look at the beam of sunlight, or he or she can actually enter into that beam and look along it and see through the roof to tree leaves outside of the woodshed. Applying this metaphor to Biblical Reading, you can either stand back and look at the words of Scripture, or you can seek to enter into the "Light" of Scripture (God's Divine Discourse") and look along the Light of Scripture (I would state, "the path or narrative of Scripture) and see where the individual books and passages of Scripture are leading or pointing. In other words, a reader of Scripture can just look at its words, and, perhaps, follow its path from roof to floor, by just looking AT Scripture, or one can enter the beam of Light of Scripture ("Light" being a critical word for our author who views Scripture as being "God's Light" of God's Self Revelation of who God is) and look along its Light from beginning to end. To our author, Scripture is a part of "God's Economy of Light".

2) God is, among other things, "Light", and God, by God's Light, God's Economy of Light, desires to reveal Himself, and His Nature, Character, and Desires for how we are to relate to Him and others. In Scripture, that Economy of Light began with the Creation story of Genesis: "Now the earth was a formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the water, And God said, 'Let there be light', and there was light. God saw that the light was good...". That Light was spoken into existence by God before He spoke into existence "lights in the expanse of the sky...(Genesis 1:14), meaning the sun, moon, stars, etc. In the author's view and the view of the church fathers and other noted individuals cited by the author, that "Light" was the Light of God, and God's desire to make himself know to His creation. Looking along that Light, we, at the conclusion of Scripture, again see God's Light, without sun, moon or stars, in Revelation 21:22-27 where the new city, the Holy City, is lighted by the presence of God: "The City does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light and the lamb is the lamp."

3) As we proceed along the beam of Light of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, we are passing along God's Light, His Economy of Light, by which He reveals Himself, and we encounter the narratives of The Transfiguration which appear in three of the Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, and which, in the

view of the author and others, is the subject matter, the essence of the Gospel of John, even though it is not specifically mentioned in John. To the author, the Transfiguration of Christ becomes the very key to a proper reading of Scripture, along God's Economy of Light. It reveals who Jesus was, God in human flesh, and it reveals who Jesus will be as King of God's Kingdom on Earth, and as the lamb who will rule after the eschaton. The author declares that, in view of the joinder with Jesus on the Mountain at the Transfiguration of Moses, who received the Law, and Elijah, the Transfiguration joins, ties together, the Law and the OT with Jesus and His work and words and teachings. The Transfiguration, the very essence of God's Economy of Light, demands that we view the OT, including the Law and the Prophets and many of the events of the OT, in a "Transfigured" way, as referring to Jesus, to Christ, and the perfect revelation of God in human form in Christ. The Transfiguration also requires that we look along the beam of the light of Scripture in an Eschatological Manner, viewing what was seen of the Transfiguration of Jesus as a revelation of the times of Jesus and of the present in an "already but not yet manner", with the full revelation of God and the consummation of God's Plans yet to be fulfilled.

4) So, as I understand the author's views, Scripture is to be read in a "TRANSFIGURAL MANNER". Candidly, I am not sure that I can accurately describe just what is meant by "Transfigural Reading of Scripture", but let me take a shot at doing so.

First: We must view Scripture as what we believe it to be, which is GOD'S WORD. While God has chosen to communicate His Word through the human words of the human biblical authors, who were inspired to speak or write what they wrote or spoke by God through the Holy Spirit, those human words actually spoke God's Message, God's Revelation of Himself.

Second: While the words of Scripture are human words, they contain a Divine-Human Discourse, Discourse meaning "what someone says/writes about something to someone at some time, in some way, for some purpose".

Third: While the words of the Scriptural Text are what they are, and are human words of the human authors, those words (which are to be respected, we must respect the text) are a part of God's Discourse with the human readers of Scripture, and are a part of God's Revelation of Himself, and are intended by God to help bring the human reader into the status originally intended by God at Creation, that being as Image Bearers of God.

Fourth: We must view Scripture as being a "Divine Address" of God to the Reader which is intended by God to transform the Reader into God's desired Image, the Image of God, which is most perfectly revealed by Jesus Christ.

Fifth: While Jesus might well have not been known to the human authors of OT, their words, as a part of the Divine Address, had, as their referent, Christ.

Sixth: We cannot read Scripture, in a proper Transfiguring manner, without the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit will not change the words, but will help the reader to see the words as a part of the Divine Address, with their divinely intended referent and purpose.

Seventh: Obviously, we want to read Scripture Theologically, meaning we want to engage in a Theological Reading, a reading, an effort to Know God or More About God, Who God Is, and What God's Nature and Character and Desires for us are, all of which are most perfectly revealed for us, in human form, by Jesus. To so read Theologically requires that we read Scripture in a Transfigural manner. That means that we will find Christ and the Light of Christ as the proper referent of the Discourse of Scripture.

Eighth: In reading Scripture Theologically, in a Transfigural manner, we do not change the words of the human authors. We respect the text. We respect the words of the Text. We read those words "literally", but we do so in an expanded manner, a manner which identifies the true referent of those words as a part of God's Divine Discourse, God's Divine Address which is what Scripture, in fact, is. To do

this we need the aid and enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, and we must prayerfully seek that aid and enlightenment.

5) The author urges that the advocates of the various Theological Methods which are being currently espoused for Scriptural interpretation (i.e. *exegesis*, Biblical Theology, Canonical Theology, Systematic Theology, etc.) must start out with an agreement that a Theological Reading of Scripture in the manner described above is one which has, historically, been used in one way or another, and that its goal of Hearing the Voice of God in Scripture is the ultimate goal, in fact the only goal of proper Scriptural reading and interpretation, recognizing, however, that different methodologies and differing Reading Cultures can lead to or reach differing or diverse conclusions. I might be wrong in so stating, but my conclusion as to what one of the points being made by our author is that: reading Scripture, theologically, in order to try to best know God and to try to hear the voice of God and God's Revelation in Scripture is the important thing, the essential thing, the fact that differing conclusions might be reached as to the interpretation of any pericope of Scripture is not important, but that said, if we start out with the goal of reading theologically (meaning in a Transfigural Manner), and then apply all of our methods of Scriptural interpretation (each of which is important and should be used), meaning exegesis, Biblical Theology, Canonical Reading, Systematic Theology, Historical Theology, etc. we might well find that many of our differences will pass away.

I confess and understand that this summary of the author's book might well not withstand the author's scrutiny, and I am sure not equipped to debate him. That said, however, I think that any author has to have an intention that his or her readers will Take-Away from his or her book certain understandings. Those set forth above are my personal Take-Aways from this book.

Personal Note: I am going to add a Personal Note to this analysis of the author's book. To me, if you do away with some of the author's metaphors (e.g., reading along the beam of light) and terminology (e.g. Reading in a Transfigural way), and try to cut to the core of what he is saying (which sure is not easy and is really sometimes frustrating) you come away with a conclusion that the author has provided a very academic, scholarly defense with the Academy of Theologians of the motto or stated belief of *BIBLE PROJECT*, that being: "*We Believe That The Bible Is a Unified Story That Leads to Jesus.*" I think that Jon Collins and Tim Mackey of Bible Project would agree that the Bible presents a Unified Story, a Unified Metanarrative of God's Plan to redeem His Creation from the destruction initiated upon that Creation by the introduction of human sin at the Fall, and that this narrative leads to (or points to) Jesus and His teachings (which are the perfect revelation of God) and His ultimate role at the end of these times, the Eschaton. I think that we can all agree, that, whatever the human authors of Scripture might have known or not known, or intended or not intended, their words, as inspired by the Holy Spirit, are intended by God to Reveal God and God's Plans, and that those words, therefore, truly reveal God and God's Plans and Workings in a completely unified way. Jesus, when He spoke with the two disciples as they walked along the road following Jesus's resurrection, pointed out how the words of Scripture pointed to or referred to Him and His Crucifixion and Resurrection. The Apostle Paul, at his Road to Damascus experience and thereafter in Arabia, was convinced that the Scriptures and their references to a Messiah referred to Jesus, and that Jesus was the fulfillment of God's Promises. To me, at least, these things are obvious, and are beyond debate. While the author might have been trying to somehow convince the Academy that, regardless of whatever Theological Method or approach you use to seek to interpret and apply Scripture, these obvious truths must be given priority, I am not convinced that the reading of this book is hugely helpful in achieving this goal, at least in a clearly coherent manner. Have I personally benefitted from my reading of this book? Yes. I have been impacted by much that is in it. I just have not been helped by it in my trying to better myself as a teacher of hermeneutics. I don't think that the Patrons

of TEI will be benefitted by the huge, sometimes frustrating efforts, it takes to read this book. I apologize to our very learned and skilled author in reaching this conclusion, which, frankly, I did not want to reach.

### **HOW SHOULD ONE TRY TO READ THIS BOOK?**

I honestly don't know how to answer this question. I will say that those of you who consider yourselves to be speed readers (and, in some ways, I so consider myself), just forget it. There is no way to speed read this book. You would not try to speed read the Bible, and, if you want to read this book you cannot speed read it. If you want to read this book (and, if you do, I think that you will be personally, if not professionally or vocationally helped by it), then there are no shortcuts. You are just going to have to sit down, in a number of sessions, and read it. You will, I think, find that you cannot read this book in one or two or three sessions. Each session will wear you out, and probably leave you somewhat frustrated (as was the case with me) as you will probably be constantly asking: "Where Are We Going With This?". I wish I could tell you to just read the Introduction, and the Table of Contents, and the Conclusion, but, if you just do that I don't think that you will get any benefit from this book.

### **IS THIS BOOK SUITABLE TO BE RETAINED IN THE TEI LIBRARY? WOULD THIS BOOK BE USEFUL IN ANY TEI/ECLI CLASS?**

Yes, this book should be in the TEI library, with other books on hermeneutics and theological methods. It could well be useful to those TEI patrons who want to do a deep-dive research into the histories of Reading Cultures, and the ongoing Tensions and Disagreements about whether or not any divergence from the written words of Scripture is appropriate. I think that this book can be a useful academic research tool. I do not think that this book would be useful in any TEI/ECLI class. I do not think that it will our Pastors, or Church Leaders or the everyday Christian Bible Reader.

With Apologies to our author, Dr. Kevin Vanhoozer, who I respect and whose work and books I appreciate, I am your Reviewer:

Dan Simon