Hermeneutics: An Introduction

Anthony C. Thiselton

A textbook on hermeneutics by Anthony Thiselton raises great expectations. After a great number of important works in this field, such as The Two Horizons and New Horizons in Hermeneutics and The Hermeneutics of Doctrine, a summary of Thiselton’s scholarship for the beginner in hermeneutics would have been a significant contribution. Alas, while Hermeneutics indeed bears witness to Thiselton’s great scholarship, it falls far short of the requirements of a textbook for the novice in the art of understanding.

Hermeneutics can be divided into three parts. The first three chapters comprise an extended introduction. This is followed by the history of hermeneutics up to biblical criticism in the Nineteenth Century, excluding Schleiermacher (chapters 4–7). The third and largest section discusses hermeneutics from Schleiermacher to the present, including chapters on a broad range of current hermeneutical theories (chapters 8–16). The book closes with some very brief concluding comments.

By and large, Thiselton presents the material clearly. The range of material at his disposal is truly amazing — although the sheer amount of authors cited can be intimidating and distracting. Thiselton clearly tries to be as comprehensive as possible in his coverage. But, unfortunately, this is at the expense of depth. In particular the chapters on the history of hermeneutics up to Schleiermacher suffer from his desire to mention every possible author. This leads to long lists of authors with extremely short and not very helpful descriptions of their work, which are too often not explicitly related to the history of hermeneutics. The section on Alcuin of York is a case in point. It reads as follows:

Alcuin of York (ca. 735–804) was an educator. He compiled extracts from the Church Fathers for those students who had no direct access to patristic literature, and used these in his biblical commentaries. His second achievement was the standardization and correction of the biblical text, which he presented to the emperor Charlemagne on his coronation in 800. (118)

This is the whole section on Alcuin. In my opinion, it is doubtful how this will help a beginner to gain an understanding of the history of

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hermeneutics. And yet, this is quite typical. As a consequence, in exchange for the inclusion of every possible author, Thiselton had to compromise the thorough discussion of key figures. For an introductory textbook, the latter would have been preferable.

We can see this weakness at work also in the discussion of Augustine of Hippo, whose work is introduced in a mere two pages. This is far from sufficient, and does not allow Thiselton to explain the key features of Augustine's contribution to hermeneutics. For example, his theory of signs is mentioned in passing, but not explained at all.

The tone changes significantly in the chapters from Schleiermacher to the present, where Thiselton clearly comes into his own. He presents substantial sections on the key authors and discusses their works in depth. However, Thiselton tends to move into critical discussion of the protagonists too quickly. This is interesting to read for the advanced student of hermeneutics, but not for the beginner, who would require more explanation and less discussion.

An extreme example of this is the chapter on Bultmann. This is divided into five sections. In the first, Thiselton presents a short explanation of Bultmann's hermeneutics and the influences on his thought. Then Thiselton presents a highly critical and excessively negative discussion of Bultmann's demythologisation programme in the next four sections. I believe that students would have benefited more from a longer explanation of Bultmann's approach and a shorter critical section. This would also have enabled students to form their own judgement on Bultmann.

Some of these problems may originate from the competing ambitions. On the one hand, Thiselton describes his book as "a textbook on hermeneutics for the student and general reader" (xiii). On the other hand, he states that he "avoided repeating what I have said in other books" (ibid.). Assuming that the beginner will not have read Thiselton's excellent other works on hermeneutics, the second ambition is very unhelpful. As a result, Thiselton often does not explain relevant aspects of authors under discussion, but merely says that he has discussed it elsewhere.

The attempt not to repeat himself also leads Thiselton to write some unnecessarily awkward chapters. For example, the chapter on Gadamer consists of a chronological retelling of *Truth and Method*. Given Thiselton's significant work on Gadamer in *The Two Horizons*, he could easily have drawn on his earlier work and concentrated on an explanation of the main themes in Gadamer's work that would have been more helpful for the student reader.
A great surprise is the absence of two chapters. First, Martin Heidegger is frequently mentioned and aspects of his work briefly explained in passing, but there is no chapter or large section that explains Heidegger's hermeneutics in detail. Given the significance of Heidegger's contribution to hermeneutics and his importance in Thiselton's book, this omission is difficult to understand. Second, Ludwig Wittgenstein looms large and is clearly a key source of Thiselton's own thinking, but has not been allowed his own chapter or even section. Given Thiselton's intention not to repeat his earlier writings, I can only guess that he did not want to state again what he had written on Heidegger and Wittgenstein in *The Two Horizons* and elsewhere. However, for the benefit of the student reader, who will not have read *The Two Horizons* or studied Heidegger and Wittgenstein in any detail, some repetition of the excellent discussion of Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer and Wittgenstein in *The Two Horizons* would have been of great benefit.

Finally, Thiselton's *Hermeneutics* seem to be composed of a number of shorter writings and notes that were originally written for different contexts. For example, the chapter on Liberation Theology contains a substantial section on the history of Liberation Theology from the 16th century onwards (255–260). As interesting as this may be, Thiselton fails to show its relevance for theological hermeneutics. Similarly, the chapter on Paul Ricoeur contains a substantial section on Ricoeur's writings on ethics, which does not make any obvious contribution to the discussion of hermeneutics. There are many other sections which are not clearly related to the task at hand.

Having said all this, there are excellent passages in Thiselton's *Hermeneutics*, such as the chapters on Ricoeur and on Postmodernism. One would wish that the whole book would have been of that quality. But it appears to have been written in a hurry, with a number of unpublished older notes included without sufficient editing. As a result, I was not able to identify the overarching narrative about the 'perennial questions' of hermeneutics (60), and did not find that the parts of the book came together to a single whole. This is, in my opinion, a great disappointment, because I would have liked to have seen Thiselton's great scholarship made available to the student reader.

Alexander S. Jensen

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