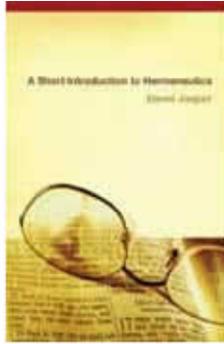


## ○ REVIEW OF DAVID JASPER'S *A SHORT INTRODUCTION TO HERMENEUTICS*

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Robert Paul Seesengood reviews *A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics* by David Jasper (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster / John Knox, 2004).



Engaging writing requires a narrative. Even in non-fiction – and by no means do I preclude here academic monographs, critical essays or textbooks – a narrative thrives, where ‘protagonists’ emerge from concepts and figures representing historical entities and intellectual movements, ‘setting’ is an (albeit reconstructed or highly stylised) historical moment and location, and ‘plot’ is often the sweep of intellectual transformation or the revelation of new perspective. Suspicion of meta-narratives rarely inhibits a drive to produce more; soberly considered, we seem to be doing little more than destabilising structures that prevent or inhibit the production of newer intellectual and epistemological narratives.

An intriguing example, particularly given its subject matter, is David Jasper's *Short Introduction to Hermeneutics*. As a teacher of biblical exegesis, I took on Jasper's book with an eye toward a potential supplemental reading for my students and an opportunity to refresh, re-organise or restructure my own lectures, notes and data. A text designed to train one to read is a classic example of ‘functional reading’. I discovered, however, that Jasper's work is surprisingly engaging (though, I admit, it is engaging to a professional reader and trainer of readers). Jasper has managed to present *Hermeneutics* as a narrative, opening interesting possibilities for pedagogy as well as prompting unique critical assessments.

Jasper (gleefully?) assures his reader at a very early juncture that his book is designed for introductory students. In his preface, he outlines the ‘very modest... aims and objectives’ of his work:

Its scholarship is, I trust, well founded, but makes absolutely no claims to originality. Indeed, quite the opposite, for my aim is to give the reader a good grounding in the basic issues and historical information on which further thought and reading may be built. It is limited very largely to the Western Christian tradition and its roots in the interpretation of the Bible (xi).

He both reiterates and elaborates this intention on the very first page of his introduction:

This small work is intended only as a brief introduction to [the] hermeneutical minefield, but I hope a useful one, inasmuch as it seeks to provide the reader who has little or no prior knowledge of the subject with a map that will enable him or her to get around a little more easily... It's background is limited to the Western Christian tradition and its ways of reading the Bible... It makes no claims to be more than a beginning... It must be made clear from the start... [that] there are no final or correct answers (1).

Jasper has written this book from his own course lectures. Readers are often reminded that this book's *raison d'être* is the introductory classroom. It is organised into seven, evenly balanced content chapters (with introduction and conclusion) which would easily be adaptable by expansion into an ordered progress of lectures across an academic term or consumed as a beginning survey text for a more ambitious curriculum. Each chapter concludes with several reflection questions; nearly every chapter also contains a final summary section with an enumerated listing of the chapter's major arguments or ideas. Heavily theoretical chapters include recommendations for further reading, organised by major theme or topic. The final bibliography (though brief and neither guided nor annotated) is reasonably select. The volume includes both an index of proper names and titles as well as a general index that includes functional vocabulary ('Greek philosophy,' 'epistemology,' 'reader-response'), strikingly technical expressions ('*Dasein*', '*histoire*', '*regula veritatis*'), and words that reflect very modern modes of reading ('cyberspace', 'frictionality', 'suspicion').

*A Short Introduction* makes no assumptions of prior experience apart from general (and I very much mean 'general') literacy. Jasper defines 'hermeneutics' or 'hermeneut' on the very first page; his definition is thorough, resurrecting connections with the Greek god Hermes. He deftly outlines the now familiar triad of author-text-reader; he foregrounds particular concerns for Bible reading ('hermeneutics of faith' and 'hermeneutics of suspicion'). Jasper sees these distinctions as fundamental to all reading, not simply to reading the Bible. Clearly, though, his categories and terms reflect biblio-centric reading and hermeneutical history. I have seen many advanced students in English literature (and not a few faculty) furrow brows at the word 'hermeneutic' while 'interpretive approach' makes everyone's eyebrows arch in recognition. Further, one can scarcely imagine any modern (or even medieval) readers who would approach Homer or Aesop with a 'hermeneutics of faith' that would in any way resemble Bible reading.

Jasper argues that hermeneutics is neither absolute nor static. From the beginning Jasper defamiliarises his readers and destabilises any fixed notions of 'reading'. Reading and hermeneutics, he argues, are culturally and historically conditioned programs. There is no single, correct approach and what the naïve may assume to be 'natural' or obvious (or 'wrong') is often neither. All (serious, sincere and educated) readers of all times and places have not all read in the same ways.

The balance of *A Short Introduction* is little more than an extensive historical survey of previous literature. Rather than present hermeneutics isolated from historical and cultural influences, Jasper organises his material historically, crafting what is essentially a narrative of the historical / referential development of hermeneutical theory, particularly as it applies to European biblical

interpretation. The problems, potentialities and interests of varied hermeneutical approaches take on the role of discrete arguments offered in an on-going, millennia long ‘conversation’ about reading (and, more, a conversation rooted in social and intellectual culture).

Jasper opens with a chapter on ‘Midrash, the Bible, and the Early Church’ which opens with a survey of hermeneutics within the biblical text itself (often a neglected topic). Jasper treats Rabbinic interpretation and Midrash. Using both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament examples, he argues that early Christian use of Jewish Scriptures – even in the New Testament writings – demonstrates a particular hermeneutical theory. Jasper briefly addresses the question of the canon before outlining the Alexandrian / Antioch models of early Christian exegesis, culminating in Augustine.

Though starting with intra-biblical hermeneutics, the balance of the book addresses modern, post Renaissance European hermeneutics. Chapter three pursues hermeneutics ‘From Scholasticism to the Age of Enlightenment’. Medieval hermeneutics is limited to Aquinas, Eckhart and Kempis. The chapter moves rapidly to Erasmus, Luther and Calvin. Chapter four surveys the eighteenth century (featuring Semler, Kant, Coleridge and Schleiermacher). Chapter five covers the nineteenth century (noting Strauss, the Historical Jesus quest, Wilhelm Dilthey and the tensions between ‘science’ and ‘religion’); chapter six covers the twentieth century (stressing Barth, Bultmann, Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur, and hinting at Derrida). Chapter seven points toward ‘postmodern’ hermeneutics. In this chapter there is less stress on ‘pivotal’, exemplary figures and more presentation of themes and issues in contemporary critical theory (liberation, responsibility, Bible as literature, politics, postcolonialism, intertextuality, film / aesthetic studies, and body / subjectivity).

Jasper is presenting hermeneutical theory as a narrative very much in line with traditional narratives of the shaping and evolution of western intellectual culture. In some sense, the pedagogic value of his organisation is obvious, and its limitations are readily excused. The book is overt in its intention to be a cursory, brief introduction. It would be easy to point out simplifications, over-generalisations and omissions and to myopically focus on minutiae in place of an evaluation of the quality and sensibility of what is actually presented. In truth, Jasper presents an engagingly written story that covers a very wide range of sophisticated and difficult ideas in ways that novices can grasp. Further, presenting the material as an evolving discourse parallel to the frequent narrative presented in ‘Western Civilisation’ courses offers students reasonable hand-holds.

However, the historical narrative is ‘top heavy’; far more close attention is devoted to our most modern antecedents. Once again, a familiar caricature is presented, his dramatically swollen head perched atop the most ridiculously small torso and legs. We are certainly familiar with this grotesque and comic figure – revolting in ways, endearing in others, a ‘bobble-head’ doll of intellectual history. Still, given the machinations of curricular structures and pressures which are all too familiar to most of us (‘in this course, we will cover Jewish and Christian thought across 1000 years’) there should be some ameliorating familiarity – if not forgiveness – for Jasper's efforts.

Yet, familiarity with the problem ought not blind us to critique. Just as Jasper's goal (in *A Short Introduction*) is in some ways both the strength and shortcoming of the book's scope, his organisation – his narrative – is both compelling and limiting of the work's effectiveness. Returning to who is ‘left out’ of the survey, one must ask about the disappearance of Rabbinic commentary or the omission of Hugo de Groot. Why so little attention to F. C. Baur, or Walter Bauer, or Benedict, or Francis, or Chrysostom, or Basil, or Gregory? Why pick the Enlightenment (and, in

particular, post-reformation) hermeneutics as the point at which to slow down so precipitously? Why focus on Western European modes of reading? If the text intends to survey Biblical hermeneutics, why omit the standard treatments of source, form, and textual criticism? If, as the book argues<sup>1</sup> in its introduction, biblical hermeneutics is parallel to literary criticism in general, why omit Blake, Nietzsche, Bloom, Shaw, Lawrence, Joyce or a hundred others? Where is Eco? Where is Freye? Where is Formalism?

While Jasper's historical treatment has clear advantages, it has a fundamental risk as well. His method admirably provides a useful hammer to crack the nut of acritical reading and the assumption of many students that the mode of reading found in 'their' community is logical and 'common sense'; in historical survey, Jasper dissolves illusions of unique hermeneutic theory. Implicitly, however, his narrative arrangement treads very close to the presentation of hermeneutical change as an evolutionary process, where each subsequent generation 'fixes' problems posed by its antecedents. Though no one hermeneutic is 'necessary', the progress itself becomes a necessary element; we are inevitably led to our modern moment.

Jasper's narrative itself is not neutral. It is decidedly a narrative of biblical interpretation. More, however, it is very much a narrative of European hermeneutics that is set to a particular protestant soundtrack. Furthermore, there is a tendency to present our final, postmodern moment as the inevitable result of western history. As a poststructuralist biblical critic very much interested in issues of subjectivity, body, and the aesthetic, I could not be more sympathetic with Jasper's positive assessments of our modern moment in hermeneutics. Yet, for precisely the same reasons, I am unnerved, I must admit, by the presentation of that moment as organically derived or inevitable.

That said, I am likely going to include this text in reading lists for my own courses. It is admirably suited for introductory courses and provides a challenging survey of literature. It is well-written and engaging. It is a narrative, true enough, but a narrative that 'works', at its base, as the beginning of conversation. True, it has omissions and limitations that I will feel a need to critique. It will also function best when supplemented with readings that demonstrate the actual hermeneutic Jasper often only describes. Yet those critiques will themselves function as teachable moments. What more can we ask from *A Short Introduction* but that it provide the necessary over-view and stimulus for further study? Jasper has certainly accomplished this goal and, in its execution, been much more original than he lets on.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> 'This book therefore serves a very different function from that of a standard work like Robert Grant's *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, being at once more limited and at the same time more comprehensive... My concern is much more interdisciplinary and rooted in my fundamental interest in the relationship between literature and religion, which is about how texts function, about the process of reading, and about how these questions impact immediately on religious and theological questions' (3–4).