
This book is a translation of Oeming’s *Biblische Hermeneutik: Eine Einführung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1998). The author is Professor of Old Testament Theology at the Ruprecht-Karls-Universität, Heidelberg; the translator appears to be his *Wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter* (Teaching Fellow). The book was originally written for the German theological context, and its author hopes to ‘bridge the gap’ to English-speaking readers with this English translation (p. x).

Oeming begins by outlining what he calls the hermeneutical rectangle of authors, texts, readers, and subject matter—a useful visual image (7) which in itself quite effectively demonstrates the necessity of the topic as well as the structure of the book. This is followed by a very short historical overview (17 pp) of theological and philosophical hermeneutics from Plato to Lyotard—in fact, it is so concise that one wonders how much a reader who is not familiar with the matter will be able to follow the essence of the overview.

The introductory section is followed by part II on the ‘plurality of current approaches to the Bible’, which constitutes the major part of the book. Oeming maintains that we do not need to be afraid of such a plurality of approaches to interpretation since no single method or approach can fully explore the text, or rather, the hermeneutical rectangle: a point no doubt particularly important in the German theological context, which perhaps continues to be more strongly influenced by the historical-critical mindset than others. Rather than trying to follow the historical sequence of the development of different interpretive tools, Oeming discusses different approaches to interpretation under four headings relating to the hermeneutical rectangle.

Chapter 4 begins with historical-critical methods, historical sociology, historical psychology and ‘new archaeology’ under the heading of ‘methods focused on authors and their worlds’. Chapter 5 discusses linguistic-structuralist methods, new criticism, canonical interpretation and exegesis as speech-act / word-act as ‘methods focused on texts and their worlds’. Chapter 6 analyses history of effect approaches (though not reader-response criticism as such), psychological exegesis, symbolic exegesis, bibliodrama,
liberation theology/exegesis, and feminist exegesis as ‘methods focused on readers and their world’. Finally, chapter 7 looks at dogmatic, fundamentalist, and existentialist interpretation as ‘methods focused on the reality behind the text’. Obviously, there is a certain element of ‘pidgeonholing’ in this, and one could argue with some of these allocations, but in principle this strikes me as a sensible way of outlining the field. A concluding section brings the discussion to its end, and is followed by a short summary statement on the plethora of methods, a structured list of works for further reading, mostly in German, and indices of authors, biblical names, and scriptural references.

On the whole, Oeming’s discussion of individual tools of interpretation is well done. He offers good introductions, comments on advantages and disadvantages of each approach, and offers mostly helpful examples from a variety of biblical texts. His own position is fairly clear from the beginning, though it is most explicit in the final section. Oeming affirms the classic distinction between ‘the original sense of the text and its later reception’ (145), where ‘the meaning of the text at the time of its production, or at least at the time of its canonisation, must remain at the centre of the academic study of the Bible’ (ibid., emphasis retained). Yet while the historical-critical method is to maintain its position at the top of the hierarchy of academic methods, ‘in the context of understanding as a whole... [it] cannot lay claim to any kind of monopoly’.

Furthermore, Oeming maintains that in order to ‘bridge the historical abyss between ancient texts and modern readers ... we must recognise the pre-eminence of existential interpretation’ (ibid.). Such views are hardly unconventional in a German theological context. Nevertheless, I would have expected Oeming to argue for his claims at the end in more detail. Given that he did not spend much more time on historical approaches and ‘existential interpretation’ than on other approaches, making such broad claims did not strike me as terribly convincing, even though I am partially sympathetic to the first point.

It seems odd that in this English translation of a German book, hardly any attempts were made to update the book and prepare it for the English reader. The literature used has not been revised, and the range of works consulted is still geared towards the German scene, with only occasional references to studies in English or French. I found this very disappointing, given that the book styles itself as an ‘introduction to biblical hermeneutics’, and this diminishes its value for the English reader, especially students.
There are also some surprising omissions in the discussion as well as the bibliography offered. For example, Oeming does not mention Jeanrond’s *Text und Interpretation als Kategorien Theologischen Denkens* (Mohr Siebeck 1986; English: Gill and Macmillan 1987), nor his more introductory text-book *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (Macmillan 1991, reprinted SCM 1994). Other relevant significant works that Oeming does not appear to mention include Anthony Thiselton’s *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Zondervan 1992), and Kurt Mueller-Vollmer’s *The Hermeneutics Reader* (Continuum 1992).

In spite of the sometimes very critical tone of this review, I should like to stress that Oeming makes good, persuasive points in his discussion of a number of interpretive approaches. In my view, the only really unsatisfactory sections are those on feminist interpretation and liberation theology approaches. There are accurate points in Oeming’s discussion of these approaches of course, such as his discussion of the diversity of views within a feminist paradigm (not that this insight is particularly novel, of course). And yes, of course there are writings in both in these areas that, with hindsight, perhaps have gone ‘too far’ in the sense that they are no longer persuasive to most. But that is true of all approaches. On the whole, it seems to me that Oeming’s discussion of feminist interpretation is too overtly characterised by tired old liberal stereotypes to be of much use.

It is typical for his discussion that he invokes the classic 19th century historical claim of *sine ira et studio* (107) as a side-dig at moderately feminist interpretation. I also could not help but notice the embarassingly persistent mistake in his attribution of Phyllis Trible’s classic work on the Hebrew Bible, *Texts of Terror* (Fortress Press, 1984), to the New Testament scholar, Elisabeth Schüessler Fiorenza—an error in the German original (1998, p.131) which his translator did not correct (2006, p.106), and which two sets of editors in the respective publishing houses did not pick up on either. When such an elementary mistake is allowed to persist, it is hard to take Oeming’s critique of feminist exegesis seriously. In fact, one should certainly question whether the reference to *Texts of Terror* is really a good example for one of three types of feminist interpretation, as Oeming claims, namely that of a ‘hermeneutics of condemnation’, as he calls it. Trible’s book does not, in my view, suggest this kind of hermeneutic (and, incidentally, Trible’s book is not on ‘the role of the [sic] women in the Old Testament’ either). One could go on about other problems with Oeming’s
treatment of feminist and liberation approaches, but limitations of space precludes this.

To conclude: my insistence on the shortcomings of parts of Oeming’s book should not detract from the useful aspects of his work. His basic structure for the book is didactically attractive: it will engage people who already have some clue about ‘methods of interpretation’, but who need to reflect on the hermeneutical underpinnings of the tools they employ. Does Oeming’s book really help to bridge ‘the Anglo-American and German scholarly traditions’, as the ‘blurb’ on the back cover puts it? Only in the sense that it exposes English readers to the German theological scene; but there seems little interest on Oeming’s part to understand the other side of the debate, which is surely necessary for any attempt to ‘bridge’ the divide, real or perceived. Still, I greatly appreciate the fact that Oeming tries to present a book that addresses the hermeneutical assumptions and implications of different approaches to interpretation which a theology student is likely to encounter.

In spite of its limitations, I can envisage teaching with it, perhaps in tandem with, say, Jeanrond’s Theological Hermeneutics (McGill 1991; SCM 1994), Gerald West’s Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation (2nd ed., Cluster Publications & Orbis 1995), and Sandra Schnieder’s The Revelatory Text (2nd ed, Liturgical Press 1999). As such, it should find its place in theological libraries and ‘recommended literature’ lists for courses on biblical hermeneutics.

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While recent Matthean research focused heavily on the relationships between Matthew and Judaism, this volume aims to redress this imbalance. In his Introduction John Riches, one of the editors, sketches an admittedly hypothetical scenario of a largely united quietist Jewish community near the