

Pneumatic Hermeneutics: The Role of the Holy Spirit in Theological Interpretation of Scripture (book review)

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Leulseged Philemon Tesfaye's 2018 [dissertation](#) was supervised by [Joel B. Green](#) and submitted at the Fuller Theological Seminary. It bears a generous title, *Pneumatic Hermeneutics: The Role of the Holy Spirit in Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, and it indeed tries to meet expectations which this title may raise. In his attempt to fill the gap in understanding of the Spirit's role in the theological interpretation of Scripture (TIS), the author tries to place pneumatic hermeneutics in a wider dialogue across Christian historical traditions. The dissertation is forthcoming at CPT Press.

Although Tesfaye acknowledges in **chapter 1** that a serious discussion may be made of the Spirit's role in origination and preservation of Scripture, his primary interest in this work rests in nothing else but the TIS. Tesfaye affirms the divine (not merely anthropological) character of Scripture as a notion basic for understanding the Spirit's role in interpretation (10). (Here I would probably want to ask, why does TIS, which operates with the final form, need a strong doctrine of inspiration? Does it matter how have we got Scripture if we can affirm that it is Scripture through which the Spirit works today?)

TIS tries to read the Bible as “God’s means of communication in the present to guide, edify, correct, and transform reader(s)” (12). It is also perceived as “a reaction against modernism and the prestige given to historical criticism in biblical studies for more than two centuries” (12). But apart from these general features, it is somewhat difficult to tell what exactly it is. After interviewing key TIS theorists, e.g. Fowl, J. B. Green, who says that historical criticism “is not an end in itself; rather, it serves the purpose of forming faith and practice of Christians today” (21), Watson, Vanhoozer, Treier, Moberly, Hays, and Billings, Tesfaye comes up with his own definition of TIS. Firstly, it must acknowledge the exclusive character of the Bible as an axiom, not approach it “like any other book”. Secondly, TIS must work toward communion with God.

Reading Scripture oriented toward a specific purpose of communion and intimacy with God (Fowl) that leads to experiential knowledge of him (Vanhoozer and Treier) and transformation (Moberly) or Christian formation (Green) is another theme that runs throughout the discussions. (38)

Thirdly, TIS shapes and is shaped by the rule of faith, i.e. shared presuppositions of interpreters. Four, the canonical approach is one of the central presuppositions of TIS, or at least its assertion that OT and NT must be understood together. Five, TIS takes place in the church. After these remarks on definition, Tesfaye ponders its implications:

If theological interpretation assumes the biblical texts to be treated as Scripture, namely as God’s means of self-revelation and self-communication, and designed to shape and transform readers who approach them faithfully to have a meaningful encounter with the living God, the proper implication is that interpretive exercise is not predominantly an academic human enterprise. Demanding and primarily involving the actions of the divine agent, that is, the Holy Spirit, this consideration shapes the direction of biblical and theological scholarship to practices performed to hear the voice of the Spirit through the written texts of Scripture. This makes a thorough reflection on *pneumatic hermeneutics*, or the role of the Spirit in the theological reading of Scripture, inevitable. (40)

Chapter 2 is concerned with review of literature on the Spirit's role in reading Scripture. He reviews Fowl, according to whom “in order to read the Spirit within Scripture, Christians need to understand first how the Spirit reads Scripture” (52), which is a maxim which includes ecclesial, spiritual, and biblical-theological aspects. Next one is Green, for whom the Spirit operates more closely in line of the existing biblical revelation. Billings claims that “the variegated cultural manifestation of the Christian message is in fact the work of the Spirit” (68) and that “the New Testament teachings maintain that there is no culture that is beyond the need for the transforming power of the Spirit through Scripture” (70). Tesfaye then goes on to review some of the key voices in Pentecostal and renewal traditions. He mentions Arrington, for whom biblical interpretation is not only achieving the best of grammatical-historical analysis, but also “a practice of existential continuity with apostolic believers through which believers draw experiences from biblical models and patterns”

(81), then obviously Archer, Thomas, Yong, Oliverio, C. E. W. Green with his christocentric proposal, Keener, and Moore. In the end, Tesfaye observes:

The notion of the Spirit's interpretive role in the Pentecostal tradition goes far beyond the evangelical concept of illumination and focuses on the interpretive community and its experiential presuppositions as a means that the Spirit inspires biblical interpretation. (94)

In **chapter 3**, Tesfaye takes up the question of Spirit's relation to Scripture in Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions. According to Lossky, intellectual understanding in EO tradition "is to be experienced mystically through contemplation that generates profound change and inner transformation of the human spirit" (101). Tradition, according to Bulgakov, is the "living memory" of the church that contains the true doctrine of God manifested in history and transmitted from generation to generation" (106). Roman Catholic view is connected to the conclusions of the Second Vatican Council, namely to the document called *Dei Verbum*. Through the work of Henri de Lubac and the Ressourcement theologians, RC theory of interpretation is returning to the fourfold model of biblical meaning: Literal, allegorical, tropological and anagogical. Another RC practice is *Lectio Divina* developed by the Benedictines. *Lectio, meditatio, oratio, contemplatio*, those are the four stages in biblical interpretation. Tesfaye observes that both RC and EO traditions strongly affirm the need of the Spirit's role in biblical interpretation.

Chapter 4 focuses on the Protestant tradition. The Protestant reformation insisted that "the meaning of biblical texts can be clear to the ordinary reader without seeking the interpretive framework of church tradition" (125). Role of the Holy Spirit is understood as an illumination of truths that are already revealed and available in the Bible. Tesfaye observes this view in Ramm, Osborne, Packer, and Klooster. Then he goes on to review three figures that are formative to Protestant views. For John Calvin, "There is no purpose in reading or hearing Scripture unless the Spirit in his illumination 'effectually pierces into our hearts'" (138). John Owen even states: "There is an efficacious work of the Spirit of God opening our eyes, enlightening our understandings or minds, to understand the things contained in the Scripture, distinct from the objective proposition of them in the Scripture itself" (141). John Wesley understands the role of the Spirit in the same way as the Reformers: As an internal witness of the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 5 continues with a discussion about Pentecostal biblical interpretation. Tesfaye points to Jacobsen and Wariboko, who consider Pentecostalism as a tradition in its own right. According to **Kenneth Archer**, early Pentecostal theology has been controlled by the Latter Rain narrative. Archer, however, develops his own proposal for a suitable Pentecostal hermeneutics when he claims that "the Pentecostal community's understanding of the Bible as a grand story or metanarrative and the testimony of personal experiences—combined with the willingness to hear and discern the voice of the Holy Spirit, creates a meaningful theological interpretation of Scripture" (177). **Amos Yong** comes up with broad understanding of theological hermeneutics, with its own epistemology, metaphysics, and anthropology. In his reasonings about pneumatology, Yong arrives at this epistemological thesis: "There is a pneumatological dimension to knowing without which rationality is itself undermined. Such an imagination is thereby at once theological and philosophical—at once pneumatic and trinitarian" (183). According to Yong, Scripture makes the Word of God living and present through Jesus Christ, not on its own. As Tesfaye observes, Yong's "trinitarian approach is permeated by the fundamental traits of modern Pentecostalism, which can well be perceived in a renewed consideration of the apostolic spirituality and practice in light of the outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost" (189). **L. William Oliverio** joins the discussion by distinguishing four categories (or stages) of Pentecostal hermeneutics: "The original Classical Pentecostal hermeneutic, the Evangelical-Pentecostal hermeneutic, the contextual-Pentecostal hermeneutic, and the ecumenical-Pentecostal hermeneutic" (190). Oliverio further calls for hermeneutical realism in *theological* hermeneutics, because "Approaching Pentecostal hermeneutics as theological hermeneutics allows for theological convictions to permeate one's general hermeneutics, even while it allows one to learn from the findings and approaches of other disciplines" (191–92). Oliverio hopes that his hermeneutical realism will signify that "theories of correspondent, coherent, and pragmatic truth can operate together, recognizing the significance of context, tradition, and culture in a manner that experience and belief are not intrinsically disconnected" (200–1). Regarding Pentecostal view of Scripture, Tesfaye interestingly observes that

in a similar way to the Wesleyan tradition that prefers the broader sense of inspiration as an ongoing work of the Spirit to illuminate readers, the Pentecostal doctrine of inspiration has an organic extension of the Spirit's inspirational work beyond its historical affirmation of the origin of Scripture. This continuity of the Spirit's inspirational activity is explained in terms of the worshipping community's interpretative engagements and its proclamation of the Scripture. (205–6)

Chapter 6 attempts to determine a way forward. Tesfaye stresses the role of the community in Pentecostal pneumatic hermeneutics, but also the ambiguity in its understanding. Cartledge, for example, suggests that community's role in the Spirit-Word-Community proposals often overshadows the role of the Spirit and the Word. Keener also fears circularity, if the community retains its authority in biblical interpretation. It is therefore important that "the Spirit's interpretive role is actively perceived through the dynamic engagement of the ecclesial community as it carefully reads and attentively listens to what the Spirit says through the sacred texts" (213). This is the ideal and in further section, Tesfaye logically chooses to be concerned with ecclesiology.

Tesfaye quotes EO theologian Zizioulas according to whom the Church's communion is same in kind as the communion within the Godhead. Moltman's vision of the church as an eschatological messianic community is another building block, for it is the Spirit who creates the hope and "living remembrance of Christ" (221). Next approach to ecclesiology is that of Land, for whom the Spirit causes the future-oriented longing within the Church. "Approaches like this," writes Tesfaye, "pertaining to Christian community in relation to the active presence of God through the person and works of the Holy Spirit, carve the identity of church in a way that it is recognized by its experience of the Spirit's manifestation" (222).

Tesfaye then takes up the Book of Acts as a source for his further reasoning about the community's function and the Spirit's role in biblical interpretation. In Acts narratives, the Spirit had guiding and empowering role, and also socio-ethical, community-forming role. The Spirit in Acts also works as a hermeneutical force. Peter's inspired speech at Pentecost (2:14–41), Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian Eunuch (8:26–39), the council at Jerusalem (15,1–35) are three Tesfaye's skillfully expounded examples of the Spirit's activity that engages usage and interpretation of the Old Testament. The Spirit must be mediated by Christ and is itself mediating life of the Son and the Father to the Church. This also leads to the fact "that the Spirit's role in theological interpretation is explained in terms of the community's life and practices," but also to knowing that "[a] genuine understanding of the Spirit's work in and through the Christian community enables the voice of the Spirit to be heard through the Scriptures and disallows the community's expression overshadow what the Spirit speaks through the Scriptures" (254).

In conclusion, Tesfaye coins his final word on the subject matter:

Through a critical examination of Pentecostal triadic interpretive approaches that promote vigorous interaction between the Spirit, Scripture, and community, the study maintained that integrating pneumatic hermeneutics in theological interpretation of Scripture remarkably involves the interpretive community. Understanding the Spirit's interpretive role requires a closer look at the way the Spirit creates and sustains the church as a Christian community. The study provides an in-depth analysis of the Spirit's work in relation to the life and experience of the community as people of the Spirit.

[...]

In its effort to identify distinctive Pentecostal approaches to interpretation, this dissertation provides a theological basis for understanding the role of the Holy Spirit in hermeneutics in light of the pneumatological experiences of Christian/Pentecostal communities. (260–61)

My overall impression from reading Tesfaye's dissertation is very good. It is presented in readable style and the argument is clearly and patiently developed. There are no glitches or issues in facts, concepts and their presentations. Tesfaye's narrative, captivating as it may be, is obviously full of particular choices, which are careful, but sometimes quite significant. To briefly assess Protestant biblical interpretation just on three historical personae – Owen, Calvin, and Wesley, feels like a teaser of a further exhaustive study, not as a solid presentation of Protestant view on the Spirit's role in theological interpretation. Tesfaye does good job highlighting important moments and presenting relevant issues in abbreviation. I was pleased, for example, to see quite an apt portrait of Yong's project of theological hermeneutics. But again, there is more to p/Pentecostal hermeneutics than Yong and Archer. I contend that deeper reviewing of the discussion about biblical interpretation could have enriched the final thesis, which suddenly, as though somehow clueless, must have turned to the Book of Acts for some help.

On the other hand, the accessibility to ordinary reader, simple structure, clarity of style and understandability of thought makes this dissertation a perfect adept to an introductory textbook or even a pleasant audiobook. (This is not to say that there's not rigorous depth in this work.)

Here this review should end. I'm adding just few notes and musings that are basically pertaining to the shaping of my own thought and perhaps, someday, a constructive proposal.

My first point of mild and friendly criticism would point to Tesfaye's fast decision to adopt the "theological" qualifier of hermeneutics. Even if he was right about the role of the Spirit in theological hermeneutics, which according to him must be understood simultaneously with the Spirit's community forming role, what does the Spirit do throughout history of formation, canonization and interpretation? Tesfaye does not sin against his main thesis by omitting all the nuances of general hermeneutics. It wasn't his goal to seek the Spirit between the horizons and in theoretical life of texts.

He then rightly answers the question of the role of the Spirit in theological hermeneutics, but what about His role in general hermeneutics or in critical biblical hermeneutics? In other words, must pneumatic hermeneutics be always theological?

My second thought would consider the place of "community" in the holy hermeneutical triad, a concept which Tesfaye adopts from Archer and Yong and which he stresses, for his intuition rightly tells him that it is the most difficult and uneasy concept in the triadic system. There's **Spirit** as a biblical-theological reality, as a dogmatic/orthodox concept and as a perpetrator of the experience of faith. There's **Bible** as a physical historical artifact, as a document of faith and in the Spirit also Scripture, which through the Spirit becomes Word to the believer. But what exactly is community? It seems to me indeed that a good deal of sophistry must be developed at this point to say that since the Spirit is community-forming, the community must be given reins as a place or as a "grid" where the Spirit functions. To me, this reasoning seems unwarranted. Much rather, if I was to make something of Tesfaye's quoted passages in Acts, I would put emphasis on the performative play which the Spirit enacts through Spirit-filled individuals in order to reveal an interpretation. And anyway, what about the Spirit's role in bridging historical barriers? And what about His role in an individual interpreter? Weren't Peter, Philip, and James speaking through their own mouths? Or can I call myself a community when I read the Bible alone?

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