

Pneumatic Interpretation in the Renewal Tradition: The First 50 Years (book review)

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I asserted that pneumatic interpretation is holistic and cannot be restricted to interpretation of scripture's written words because the Spirit always works through and beyond scripture interpreting and appropriating scriptural truth in our lives in ways that align with scripture and transform and draw us holistically into knowledge of God as Father, Son, and Spirit. (149)

Hannah R. K. Mather became known to Pentecostal readers firstly thanks to her contribution to the roundtable discussion about Keener's *Spirit Hermeneutics* in Pneuma 39/1–2. Her dissertation was supervised by William P. Atkinson at London School of Theology and submitted at Middlesex University in 2018. Mather's objective here is to chronologically summarize developments in pneumatic hermeneutics since 1970 in the wider renewal tradition and to foster a constructive way forward specifically for the renewal tradition.

In the **Introduction**, Mather asserts that “central to pneumatic interpretation in the renewal tradition is priority placed on personal experience of and intimate relationship with the triune God through pneumatic encounter” (1) and that “pneumatic interpretation is holistic and cannot be restricted to interpretation of the scriptural text because the Spirit always works *through* and *beyond* the written words interpreting and appropriating scriptural truth in our lives in ways that align with scripture and transform and draw us holistically into knowledge of God as Father, Son, and Spirit” (1–2). After some terminological remarks, Mather quite interestingly states:

Finally, whilst my focus lies within the renewal tradition (as understood in this study's terms), I also recognise that in broadest form, pneumatic interpretation, whilst characteristic of renewal thought, cannot be limited to the renewal tradition but recognised as an ‘interpretive method’ knowingly or unknowingly employed by all Christians. (5)

Mather also sufficiently explains the relationship between pneumatology and affective dimension. She makes it clear that she wants to caution prioritization of community-centered or history-centered approaches, for those should “assist, and not overwhelm” (10).

The second chapter is about **Beginnings: 1970–1989** and refers to thinkers in evangelical, charismatic, Catholic and Pentecostal traditions. According to Mather, there are three principal dimensions to these debates right from the start: affective, ethical, and cognitional. Among the pioneering **evangelical** thinkers, Mather lists Arthur Pink, Zuck, J. I. Packer, Dunn, Richard Hays, etc. Evangelicals generally warn against partiality in interpretation and individual pride. Voice of the Spirit in evangelical thought aims at adaptation of Scripture to new situations. Mather notes that only Dunn, Pinnock, and Hays began to “consider ways the Spirit speaks through scripture in personal situations outside those presented in scripture” (30). Early **charismatic** theorists of interpretation suggested the need for holistic interpretation that engages actively with the Christian community in finding the intersection between academia and real concerns of the community. As James W. Jones suggests, we must put our reflections at the service of spiritual experience. As for the Pentecostal hermeneutics, Stronstad identifies its first advocates in Fee, W. Menzies, and H. Erwin. Mather adds Rickie Moore, who as early as in 1987 thought of Scripture as of “a living Word which interprets us and through which the Spirit flows” (39) that should not be subdued to the dictate of non-Pentecostal interpretive frameworks. Fee still emphasized grammatical-historical principles as something that Pentecostals should not depart from, W. Menzies held to the opposing view according to which it was necessary to define a distinct Pentecostal theology. H. Erwin was the first who suggested that what is needed is not just pneumatic hermeneutic, but a new pneumatic epistemology that would be “firmly rooted in the biblical faith with a phenomenology that meets the criteria of empirically verifiable sensory experience (healing, miracles etc.) and does not violate the coherence of rational categories” (41).

In his attempt to balance rationality of grammatical-historical exegesis and personal dimension of the experience of faith, Erwin suggests that “[i]t is only as human rationality joined in ontological union with “the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16) is quickened by the Holy Spirit that the divine mystery is understood by man” (43). Erwin and Moore with their ontological connection with the mind of Christ (Erwin) and the idea that Scripture interprets *us* thus were two key thinkers in paving the way outside the rational categories of evangelicalism.

The third chapter is about **Seeking Identity: 1990–1999**. It begins by declaring Steven Land's thought in *Pentecostal Spirituality* as its framework. Land defined Pentecostal spirituality as an ongoing integration of beliefs, affections, and actions, or in other words, a specific integration of orthodoxy, orthopathy, and orthopraxy. If the Spirit works within us, Land suggests that He is the light and the Bible is the path. The Spirit affectively forms the life of God in us, which subsequently transforms our ethics. Spirit is therefore superior to Scripture and only chooses to be bound to it, although pneumatic hermeneutics thence transcends beyond Scripture. As Moltman says: “The Spirit is the subject of determining the Word, not just the operation of that Word. The efficacies of the Spirit reach beyond the Word” (52). In Mather's own words, pneumatic interpretation is hence reaching beyond and through Scripture and the Spirit may thence reach *through* Scripture and interpret *us*.

Moltman further argued that the western decision for *filioque* has led to an “over-emphasis of the redemptive aspect of the Spirit’s work at the expense of the creational aspect” (53). So if Vanhoozer used *filioque* to explain the Spirit's relationship to the Bible, which logically implies that the Spirit merely serves the Scripture to the church and does not alter its meaning, Moltman suggests, with his negative understanding of *filioque*, “that the Spirit does convey something new over against the content of scripture” (55). Moltman's (and von Balthasar's) contribution can, therefore, help to establish a framework in which the Spirit may communicate new things over against scripture's content.

Obviously, this bold assertion needs further qualifiers. Paul Lee, for example, points to graduality and to holistic transformation within us. Vanhoozer even asserts that part of pneumatic interpretation is the combat against evil spirits that might want to distort our understanding. In short, ethical conduct influences and is influenced by pneumatic interpretation. Pinnock similarly underlines that immoral behavior affects not only our relationship to God but also our pneumatic interpretation. Rickie Moore and Larry McQueen moreover observed how the personal relationship to God can control their reading so that the text is not only a subject to be interpreted but also a stimulus for re-evaluating one's relationship with God. Thomas emphasized the role of community in pneumatic interpretation, Cargal goes in a postmodern direction and is criticized by Robert Menzies.

Mather observes these developments with constant reference to her developing proposal. She states that “[a] framework of pneumatic interpretation should primarily draw us towards intimate relationship with God, not into a medley of interpretive techniques and concepts” (76).

In chapter four named **A Growing Conversation: 2000–2009**, Mather begins by stating that the conversation about hermeneutics in Pentecostal circles has hindered focus on pneumatic interpretation by restricting attention to Pentecostalism. This misfortune is illustrated on Archer, Lee Roy Martin, and Davies. For example, in Archer's triadic framework of interpretation, community is made to rule as *the* cognitive interpretive framework. Approaches of Martin and Davies are, on the other hand, usable also for the renewal community which Mather represents.

Pneumatic interpretation must be trinitarian. It must involve “relationship with the triune God, and those in our community frameworks, through the written words of scripture” (92). Mather takes up works of Amos Yong and Stanley Grenz to ponder the perichoretic character of Spirit's role in hermeneutics and continues by suggesting once again that pneumatic experience and pneumatic interpretation, i.e. affective and cognitive processes of Christian life, influence each other. Fee, Grenz, and Pinnock quite interestingly understand this process as a pneumatic transportation “into the scriptural text and its surrounding historical framework, and through it into our own personal and contemporary situations (or vice-versa), which will always cohere in some way with those scriptural passage(s) and their surrounding frameworks” (98).

But how to discern whether an interpretation is pneumatic? Mather's solution is not just to follow common sense.

The solution offered through this study, lies with prioritising intimacy with the triune God through whom pneumatic discernment and interpretation comes. To interpret and appropriate scripture pneumatically, intimate relationship with God is required, and this relationship involves affect, ethics, and cognition. (101)

Immoral behavior, sloth, or even prejudice that is sometimes present in historical-critical exegesis (according to Francis Martin) are hindering pneumatic interpretation. Believed pneumatic experience must be incorporated into the interpretive work (not like with Waddell) and discerned by the community.

Chapter 5 is concerned with “The ‘Regent School’ and the ‘Cleveland School’: 2010-present”. Mather begins by returning to Yong's concept of pneumatic imagination, which in Yong's own words is an “aspect of cognition that is holistically

imbued with affectivity, and driven volitionally [ethically] toward the beautiful, the true and the good” (116). Mather then continues with identifying the Regent school and the Cleveland school as two complementary currents in contemporary discussion. The Regent School would include “Mark Boda, Jacqueline Grey, Craig Keener, Jack Levison, Kevin Spawn, and Archie Wright” (121), but also potentially Cartledge, Herms, Yong, and Vondey. The Cleveland school is associated with Pentecostal Theological Seminary and is typically represented by “Cheryl Bridges Johns, Chris Green, Lee Roy Martin, Rickie Moore, John Christopher Thomas, and Robert Wall” (122). The Cleveland school emphasizes final form over historical exegesis and focuses, in words of Waddell and Althouse, on “the spiritual experience of reading Scripture with an expectation of encountering God in and through the text” (122) while the Regent school consists of mainly biblical scholars with expertise and emphasis in historical studies.

Mather then presents individual works of Keener, Levinson, Archie Wright, Boda, Grey, etc. These scholars from Regent school prevalently deal with Spirit's role in appropriation of the ancient biblical text. Authors such as Rickie D. Moore, Wall, Cheryl Bridges Johns, Chris E. W. Green, Lee Roy Martin seek to discover how the scripture interprets us, or, in my own words, how can the Spirit appropriate us to the scripture. Mather concludes her detailed presentation of various positions by encouraging cooperation and focusing on similarities.

In the **Conclusion**, Mather restates her previous points and findings. It is a good chapter to read if one doesn't want to spend hours biting through the previous presentation, but for those who did, this chapter is mainly a repetition. **The overarching message of Mather's argument is this: The Spirit works through Scripture and moves beyond its original meaning to interpret us in and through our cognition, our emotions, and our action. Our understanding of the truth that the Spirit conveys is always penultimate. Pneumatic interpretation can not be understood solely in relation to the biblical text. Central to it is the intimate relationship with the triune God. Cultivating this relationship has a positive effect on our pneumatic discernment. This implies the acute need for inner healing.** In a closing word, after quoting Pinnock endorsement that “it is time for Pentecostals to realize that they have a distinctive doctrine of God implicit in their faith” Mather states that this does not apply “just to Pentecostals, but to all across or identifying with the renewal tradition who prioritise personal experience of and intimate relationship with God as Father, Son, and Spirit through pneumatic encounter” (169).

Mather's dissertation is an important work which I hope will be published soon. It provides not only much information, but also a different perspective on the debates about pneumatic hermeneutics. What must be praised above the sky is the depth and detail of the research apparatus. There is such a wealth of bibliographical information that it would sustain two dissertations of this kind. Every step in her argument is meticulously researched. Maybe only in the introduction did I find the bibliographical apparatus somewhat puffed up (pp. 11–15), for few sentences of a brief and unimportant excursus require 5 pages almost full of footnotes that are populated with bibliographical information on classical works in the intellectual history of biblical interpretation and with references to tertiary sources. This is, however, not necessarily reproachable. In other places, bibliographical information, even though lengthy, is extremely useful for colleague researchers (e.g. on p. 25).

It must also be emphasized that Mather succeeds splendidly in bringing together the most current developments in Pentecostal thought from around the world. Her choices, starting points, and her conversation partners represent the best of the best of the current discussion and her presentation is marked with sharp understanding of the most germane issues within Pentecostal studies today.

My foremost reproach aims at the absence of a connection between discussion among Pentecostals with similar discussions and trends in the field of general hermeneutics. It is no secret that intellectual developments in theology sometimes (and perhaps too often!) follow the *Zeitgeist*. So why is there not, in all those assertions about the Scripture interpreting *us*, the slightest mention about similar concepts in the recent (or not so recent) developments in the field of philosophical hermeneutics? In other words, where did the horizons go? Where is the discussion about modernism and its relation to Pentecostalism? Does Pentecostalism not, in its essence, “[put] forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself” (Lyotard 1983, 81)? It would be useful to see how does the relation to modernism correspond with the emphasis on the community as a voice in interpretation. When I hear, among the recent practitioners of the triadic hermeneutical model, that e.g. “community offers accountability and support that serves both as a guardian for proper interpretation” (Lee Roy Martin, *Unheard Voice*, 78–79), I'm thrilled, for if I hadn't known that the community actually is a Pentecostal congregation, I would ascribe such a statement to Stanley Fish or at least to one of the lobbying groups (feminist, postcolonial, queer, etc.). Clearly

the way out of this misunderstanding is the Spirit, but only in the case of scholars like Gordon Fee, who still acknowledged that the Spirit guards a specific, historical, authorial meaning of the biblical text, which can be understood and – most importantly – explicated to the modern reader in intelligible and authoritative propositions. If the Spirit doesn't guard but instead extends (as the creative Spirit of the Father!) the original meaning, then she really can not be relied on in biblical exegesis and can not serve as a correction to the community's interpretive appetite.

The second sigh that I shall make, although it doesn't necessarily point to a shortcoming, is the absence of any mention of the performative dimension of biblical interpretation. Where is Nimi Wariboko? Mather repeatedly mentions the triadic structure of the Pentecostal doctrine that is made of orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and orthopathy. Or cognition, ethics, and affection. But nothing is said about the function of these pillars in the actual practice of biblical interpretation.

Thirdly, some conclusions seem to be highly provisional. For example, when we read that “the Spirit does convey something new over against the content of scripture” (53) for He is Father's Spirit of creation who works *beyond* the plain meaning of Scripture, we are most certainly reminded of many painstaking issues. For example, what if the “new” that the Spirit brings *through* and *beyond* Scripture, redefines morals and ethics? Or what if it redefines the very conception of an individual's personal relationship with God, which for Mather is probably the most important hermeneutical factor? In that case, discernment by morals, ethics, or personal relationship with God, will not do, for the Spirit may alter their role or their very nature.

For this very reason, I think that pneumatic interpretation must begin with a consideration of the Spirit's role in the origination of the ancient Scriptures. Only the “theological interpretation” of the processes which lead to Scripture's formation and recognition throughout history will give us a clue to the final form. In other words, let us return *ad fontes*, where orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and orthopathy begins.

I must add here yet one observation. By contrasting the renewal community with Pentecostal, I believe that Mather creates a new community. This is not wrong. It is only a culmination of the old rift between Pentecostals and charismatics, which so many ecumenically oriented Pentecostal theologians attempted to fill and so many Pentecostal apologists tried to highlight. In Mather, we have a new scholar in renewal tradition which drinks Pentecostal milk but stands on charismatic feet.

To finally conclude this review, I must emphasize that I was well pleased to read this work and I sincerely hope that it will find its place in good libraries. May Lord bless the renewal tradition!

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