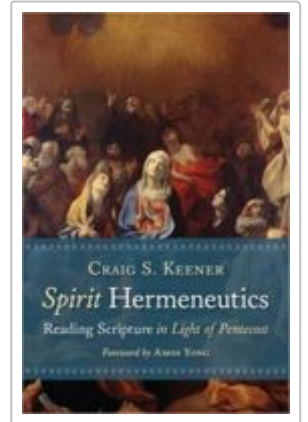


Spirit Hermeneutics: Reading Scripture in Light of Pentecost (book review)

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Craig S. Keener (born 1960) is professor of New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary. He is well known for his lifelong and prolific writing career, which most notably includes titles such as *Paul, Women & Wives* (1992), *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, or *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, which appears to be the largest and the most elaborate commentary on a biblical book ever written. (I heard it counts over 5×10^6 words. Yes, five million!) Keener's commentaries and other publications are usually accessible for wider audience and I have personally benefited from them on more than one occasion.

Importantly, Keener is a self-defined charismatic scholar, which always sparkled my further interest in his work. And by a sheer coincidence, Craig S. Keener was present in the Czech Republic as the main guest on four day pastoral retreat in September 26th to 29th.



When I learned about Keener's upcoming visit (at which I was present), it occurred to me to read his latest book named Spirit Hermeneutics: Reading Scripture in the Light of Pentecost. And given that it is in the field of my possible doctoral studies, reading this book seemed simply mandatory.

Short summary

The main purpose of Keener's book is to establish a robust explanation of the processes governing Christian reading of the Bible. This is not a philosophical treatise of reading theories or a historical study of the canon. In 18 chapters the author merely explains instead how Christians should approach their Scripture and how the Scripture should define Global Christianity. Although Keener's distribution of themes tends to be repetitive and the book's overall length is bigger than usual, his style seems to be accessible to the vast majority of English readers and chapters easy to navigate through section headings and subheadings dividing material into more easily digestible pieces.

(1) Chapters 1 and 2 explain the importance of experiential reading with eschatological and missional aims. Pentecostals read Scripture “dynamically, as stories of how the God with whom one has a relationship has worked with his people throughout history.” (54e) This kind of reading, as Keener insists throughout his book, follows directly from the New Testament and from “the voices of many subsequent movements of the Spirit” (Keener, *Hermeneutics*, 304e).

(2) In chapters 3 to 6, Keener expands more on those movements in question. He notes that “if we read from the vantage point of Pentecost, we recognize that God speaks all languages and reaches out to all cultures.” (91e) But different cultures, particularly those in Global South, may see things differently than the western reader and “may hear different aspects of the Spirit’s voice more readily.” (91e) Hearing from the global church is thus essential part of Christian reading of Scripture. Westerners, as Keener surmises, have often “supposed indigenous cultures inferior” (107e). Keener's argument is that their insights may at times contribute more to the reading process, because their cultures are closer to those of the biblical author. (110e) “Today some peoples least equipped to read the Bible in terms of basic reading skills are best equipped to understand it culturally.” (125e) (3) The third part is named “Connection with the Designed Sense” (chapters 7–10) and it tries to balance the previous part by emphasizing disciplined grammatical-historical reading. To Keener's utmost horror, there are “interpreters who, lacking understanding of historical or even literary context, produce interpretations wholly disconnected from the sense in the text.” (131e) He makes a quick case in favor of E. D. Hirsch, a literary critic and philosopher, who “contends that the meaning the author invested in a text does not change” (162e) and is not dependent upon the reader. Of Hirsch's critics and their positions, however, there is no mention.

(4) Chapters 11–13 focus on epistemological foundation of the outlined Spirit hermeneutics. Instead of trying to vindicate foundationalism on purely philosophical grounds, Keener takes refuge in the words of Jesus, who in the Synoptics

suggested “a revelatory epistemology that transcends exclusive dependence on human intellect.” (184e) Keener introduces Hume as the main representative of epistemological unbelief, whose “definition of miracles as violations of nature prevents us from recognizing most of God’s activity.” (193e) Modern atheists and more sophisticated responses to Hume’s argument (which originally stood on purely theistic ground!) are left aside.

(5) Chapters 14–16 further explains how the Bible itself teaches us to read it. New testament authors used parallels and theological message of the Old Testament to explain and understand Jesus’ identity and the New Testament realities. It is important that we accept narratives as models for our own life, that we bridge horizon of the biblical story with our own present situation. Here Keener agreeably states:

Exegesis in the usual sense focuses on the text’s original horizon; reader-oriented approaches focus on the present horizons. The former without the latter is informative but requires the life-giving breath of the Spirit to transform us. Exclusive attention to a present horizon without attention to the original one can lead to overwriting the original, inspired meaning with an unrelated one.

[...]

Connecting the two horizons, without obliterating either of them, is often considered the role of hermeneutics. (279e)

(6) Chapters 17–18 asks an important question, which follows from the previous matters. If we are to bridge world of Scripture with our own world, how do we discern solid bridge from a weak one? Keener calls Pentecostals to return from naivity to biblical sensitivity. “The lower-class west coast Azusa Street with its roots in Methodism and the Holiness Movement” should take advantage of “the highly educated, ‘elite east coast Old Princeton’” (284e). Bible teachers should not devote more time to carefully marketing their message as they do to deeply engaging Scripture. (285e) On many places Keener takes particular issue with Word of Faith teaching as an example of bad exegesis, some other charismatic phenomena, such as the Toronto blessing, remain virtually untouched.

In the end, Keener’s Spirit hermeneutics may be defined as a dynamic process, which takes place between our present inculturated experience of relationship with God through the Holy Spirit (world in front of the text) and deep study of the Bible (world within the text) and its historical background (world behind the text). But although our contemporary experience does play an important role in our daily reading, it has to be corrected and defined by the message of Scripture. Keener contends: “Rather than wrapping Scripture around our experience, we should be so full of the biblical message—not simply its wording but its *message* and theology—that we read our experience in light of Scripture.” (140e) This is the most important statement, which will become helpful for understanding the book’s shape and purpose.

Whose cultural reading?

Probably the biggest difficulty that I stumbled upon in Keener’s discourse is his conception of cross cultural reading. Keener correctly observes that “believers from other cultures can help us in the areas where our assumptions reflect cultural blind spots” (114e). As Oliverio has put it, this is “in line with the ‘many tongues’ principle for which Amos Yong advocates throughout his works, where a Christian plurality of voices and interpretations in the global church better speak the truth and meaning found in and revealed to us through Scripture.” (Oliverio, 136) In other words, bridging some biblical passages is easier in some cultures than others. The question which remains unanswered throughout the book is who decides which cultures are better equipped to read what. This question is apparent in the recent *Pneuma* reviews by L. William Oliverio, Jr. and Ben Aker. Oliverio suggested that “a theological hermeneutics of culture is a necessary complement to Keener’s biblical hermeneutics” (Oliverio, 144) and Aker noted that “the principle is that all cultures are equally fallen and in need of the divine revelatory intervention” (Aker, 166). These comments indicate that Keener’s open and welcoming stance towards global readings needs some further refinement.

Pietists believed that theology could be only done by regenerated persons. Schleiermacher believed that it is German nation, where true religion (and thus also true understanding of Scripture) must “find a refuge from the coarse barbarism and the cold earthly sense of the age.” (Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible*, 233). Keener believes that we should embrace readings from the Global South. But how to tell who is right? One could for example argue that contemporary Bedouins can help us understand patriarchal narratives (Bailey, *Bible Review* 7.4, 24–36), because they maintain similar way of living as the patriarchs did. The problem is that such a surmise could prove completely wrong. Even Bedouins did change over three millennia. They do not share with Abraham the cultural heritage of the middle bronze age, they’re not familiar with ancient

codes, they don't do ancient tribal treaties, they don't understand circumcision, and so on. A Bedouin reading of patriarchal narratives might therefore be misleading. Should one prove that Bedouins are better equipped for reading the patriarchal narratives, he would have to analyze the text, its cultural background and only then to tell why exactly are bedouins better equipped to read it (e.g. because they understand well why Abraham divorced Hagar or why did he allow Lot to choose the land first). **But by the very fact of making the case in favor of a Bedouin reader, one would actually become better reader himself, because while the Bedouin reader wouldn't know why his reading “wins,” the analyzing scholar/reader would!**

Quite similarly, based on Keener's Spirit hermeneutics, I could argue that Word of Faith teachers do teach a true doctrine, because they managed to bridge their experience of instant healing and financial prosperity with certain biblical passages. I could then rebuke Keener for not being open to the proudly charismatic Word of Faith movement. Keener would object that he does warn against bad exegesis and unbridled subjectivism and indeed, part three of the book is all about sound grammatical historical exegesis. But this only means what Keener probably does not want to contend, but contends anyway, that it is a scholar, not an ordinary “third world female Christian,” who has to take the leading role in biblical interpretation. On the other hand, it is clear that Keener inches toward theological hermeneutics. (Archer, 181) Had he explained, using traditional hermeneutical categories, that historical critical study is the first step leading to understanding and explication while cross cultural readings take place in application, my objection would be silenced, but he does not do so and he does seem at times to think otherwise.

The problem as I see it is that Keener wants to have his cake and eat it. On one hand, he is eager to exclaim that experience of the Christian reader and of his fellow Christians matters in biblical interpretation. As he states, “charismatic experience is an important part of New Testament experience, it provides a much more adequate starting point or preunderstanding for engaging the text than does the lack of such experience.” (32e) However, as Jacqueline N. Grey asks, “why to limit ourselves to noncessationists? Is the Spirit of God not active in cessationists, too?” (Grey, 168) On one hand, Keener wants Christians to “embrace a distinctively Christian way of reading Scripture,” (176e) on the other hand he summons “the best of evangelical exegesis of the text” (307e) to protect charismatics from their antiintellectual havoc. As I indicated earlier, had Keener resorted in the usual hermeneutical framework of understanding, explication, and application, none of this criticism would happen. But Keener mingles these categories, ending up with a hermeneutical proposal, which seems superfluous at best. Archer makes similar objection in his recent *Pneuma* review. (Archer, 188–9) But while Archer would recommend to get rid of the reductionistic grammatical historical method, I would follow steps of James Sanders and James Barr and call for its preservation and expansion at the expense of theological hermeneutics. That is, however, a different story.

Summa summarum, my main objection against Keener's Spirit hermeneutics is that it lacks a solid ground in philosophical hermeneutics. Ricoeur is mentioned once, Gadamer five times, but not even once in the same context as Hirsch! Schleiermacher is mentioned two times, Dilthey three times in some solitary quips. Footnotes betray author's heavy dependence on Thiselton (which is commendable!), but some other hermeneutical theorists and biblical theologians such as Childs, Sanders, Barton, or Barr are not mentioned at all. These lacunae would normally pose a serious disadvantage to a book about biblical hermeneutics. However, I want to contend that Keener's book should be understood in a different light. On many places Keener exclaims that he wants the reader to read Scripture with theologically informed experience in mind. He wants us to be “so full of the biblical message—not simply its wording but its *message* and theology—that we read our experience in light of Scripture.” (140e) But wasn't our experience expected to play its role in reading? It certainly was. Charismatic reader must therefore approach Scripture with an extant charismatic theology validated by his usual religious practice. Keener's Spirit hermeneutics is thus best understood as a guide to application of biblical theology, which he already possesses, to devotional Bible reading, which becomes one part of the religious experience, not so much its external warrant. Hermeneutics as such, however, is a mere prolegomena to biblical theology, not its outcome. Therefore I contend that Keener's Spirit hermeneutics is de facto not about hermeneutics at all. It is about application of the extant evangelical-charismatic biblical theology into devotional context of the charismatic reader. I must admit that this is the goal that this book most fully accomplishes. Keener's deep knowledge of the Bible and his passion for the global charismatic community can stir us to reconsider place of the Bible in our lives. It is a good book on practical Pentecostal reading. Nonetheless, further work in the field of philosophical hermeneutics seems to await us. And perhaps time will show that beginning with application, that is with the end, was not a bad idea, not at all.

