

# Three's a Crowd: Pentecostalism, Hermeneutics, and the Old Testament (book review)

Books | 23/10/2018 @ 23:53

Jacqueline Grey, *Three's a Crowd : Pentecostalism, Hermeneutics, and the Old Testament* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011).



As I was getting ready for my classes on the Old Testament literature and as I was putting together preliminary ideas in Pentecostal hermeneutics, it did seem like a good idea to join these efforts into one and to pick Jacqueline Grey's study on the convergence of these two. Grey wants to ask how should conscious Pentecostals read Old Testament texts that sometimes feel so distant and not really... Pentecostal.

By the way, Jacqueline Grey is an ordained minister of ACC and associate professor of Biblical Studies at Alphacrucis College, Australia.

**My reading notes are a little bit bulky again. You are welcome to jump to the assessment below. Please note that page numbers refer to an electronic copy with a pagination different from the printed version.**

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**Chapter 1: Beginning the Conversation.** “The purpose of this book,” says Grey right at the start, “is to introduce three friends, and so potentially produce a three-fold fellowship of Pentecostalism, hermeneutics, and the Old Testament” (7). Discussion in Pentecostal hermeneutics has been primarily focused on the New Testament, but hermeneutics has long relationship with Old Testament studies, too. Lay Pentecostals may attest a “simply believing” approach to the Scripture, but their reading strategy is, in fact, not so simple. It is a specific blend of Spirit experience and literalism. Now “**to engage with and contribute to the broader dialogue of biblical studies (and eventually scholarship in general, including philosophy), Pentecostals must seek first to understand their own tradition and current values in biblical readings and, secondly, locate their own reading within existing methodological frameworks**” (9, emphasis added).

Grey wants to see a triadic relationship (“triune fellowship” in her own words) between Pentecostalism, hermeneutics, and Old Testament studies. She chooses Isaiah as her test case. She also wants to pay attention to homiletical situation in Pentecostal churches, because Pentecostal sermons are very strong expressions of the community's interpretive values.

**Chapter 2: Introducing Pentecostalism.** In this chapter, Grey identifies Pentecostal distinctives and unveils its tendency toward counter-intellectualism resulting in its lack of self-reflection. Pentecostal world view maintains tension between “rational cognitive and the affective experiential” (24, citing Poloma). Its epistemology can be characterized by Hebrew term *yada*, which entails knowledge that comes through experience. Its liturgy is driven by biblical images and presupposes pneumatic experiences.

This presupposition of pneumatic experience or encounter with God through the liturgy and worship of the community includes the reading of biblical texts. As Pentecostal readers bring this presupposition of charismatic experience to their reading of biblical texts, there is also an expectation that the Spirit will be encountered in the reading process. They anticipate being challenged by the text for personal transformation and change, as well as to experience God. The Spirit speaks through the text beyond the original meaning or original context of the biblical passage to the contemporary situation of the Pentecostal reader. (26)

The anti-intellectualism of Pentecostals is partly given by the experiential nature of their religious expression and partly by the fact that denominations have seldom required degree in theology for granting the credentials. The center of this anti-intellectual orientation may be recognized in the emphasis on tongues.

Grey then takes a lengthy detour describing distinctives of Pentecostals in the Americas, Asia, Africa, etc. As a common mark she notes “an emerging scholarship that is reflective of the upward social and economic mobility of its adherents” (41).

While the charge of syncretistic irresponsibility is generally directed towards Third World Pentecostals, these latter can rightly object to the competitive and market-driven elements of their Western counterparts as equally irresponsible. After all, do they not syncretize their spirituality with the “success” ethic of capitalism? (42)

To adequately speak for Pentecostalism in this developing friendship with hermeneutics and the Old Testament, and to ultimately develop a reading model of the Old Testament that reflects the values and practices of the Pentecostal community, it is necessary that the voice of the community be legitimately heard. Even among the emerging scholarly discussions of a viable Pentecostal hermeneutic (explored in chapter 3), there has been little attempt—apart from academic hypothesizing upon what Pentecostal scholars think the community might say—to determine the practices of actual readers. (44)

**Chapter 3: Pentecostalism, Hermeneutics, and the Old Testament in Dialogue** “introduces the role of Scripture, particularly the Old Testament texts, to the recent conversations of Pentecostal hermeneutics in order to expand the discussion to a three-fold ‘fellowship’” (18).

There is little consensus concerning reading method among Pentecostals. Some are following evangelicals with their historical criticism (Fee, Menzies), some have adopted postmodernism with Ricoeur's “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Davies, Moore). Poloma notes that “in order to improve their status and respectability, North American Pentecostalism tended to adopt the theology and forms of their closest cousins, Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism” (52). Pentecostal interests, however, are not so much in defending Scripture, but in “affirming the active role of the Spirit in illuminating the text” (55).

“Since Gadamer, the bubble of the Evangelical approach has begun to deflate.” And even if Pentecostals still choose to adopt Evangelical approach, they must count with loses it might bring. Grey names for example dispensationalism, which is “in direct conflict to the values of the Pentecostal community” (56). Cargal, on the other hand, encourages Pentecostals to engage postmodern theories of meaning, which could allow to better recognize the dynamic God's word between text and the Pentecostal reader. “It allows for faith to be based not exclusively on historical viability but also in the function and meaning of the text to the Pentecostal reader” (58). Similarly Ellington or Israel & Albrecht & McNally. Byrd suggests that Ricoeur “is an appropriate theorist for Pentecostal readers to adopt as he goes beyond Gadamer in the modern debate, but remains pre-deconstructionist” (60).

Harrington and Patten consider subjectivity in appropriation of the text legitimate and inevitable. At the same time, “Harrington and Patten and Clark are nervous of divorcing the biblical text from its historical context because of the inherent relativization and extreme subjectivity of multiple meanings it produces” (61). Pinnock emphasizes illumination of the Holy Spirit, but at the same time he alas still holds in the center the evangelical emphasis on the authorial intention. Cargal, Sheppard, and Byrd, on the other hand, “persistently oppose the imposition of Evangelical concerns onto Pentecostal readings” (62). On the other hand, Pentecostals should not engage postmodern theories without careful considerations of their own distinctiveness, lest the new marriage shall be worse than that with evangelicalism. Pentecostals have emerged within the Enlightenment project as a sub-modern or para-modern group.

Rick D. Moore recounts his story as a beginning Pentecostal academician as navigating between the feared label “pre-critical” and the gloriola of criticism. Eventually he found a refuge in narrative criticism. Larry R. McQueen argues that “what the text meant to its original community and context cannot contradict the “claim of the Spirit” (70)! McQueen interestingly writes:

Before I began the process of research for this work, I did not ‘know’ the claim of the text of Joel because I had not been claimed by the Spirit the way the book of Joel presented that claim. In Joel’s words, I did not know how to lament. In Pentecostal language, I did not know how to pray through. I was not made aware of this until several months into reading commentaries, monographs, and articles on the book of Joel but without a clear sense of ‘knowing’ the text of Joel itself. (70, quoting McQueen, *Joel and the Spirit*, 109)

Grey, however, objects that “this is not generally representative of the reading processes of the Pentecostal community at large” (70). For Arden C. Autry, the focal point of Pentecostal reading is preaching and reading. Understanding is not the end itself. The goal of hermeneutics is “the goal identified by the canon itself: knowledge of (not simply about) God” (71). Archer suggests, similarly to Moore, that narrative criticism will serve as a fitting vehicle for Pentecostal hermeneutic.

**Chapter 4: The Old Testament Speaks Up.** Fourth chapter is devoted to analysis of Pentecostal readings of Isaiah. Grey wants to ask “how a christological lens may hamper the discernment of the original historical witness” (18). Isaiah is

generally very well known among Pentecostals, although for some of its sections Pentecostal resources are scarce. That's because, as Byrd notes, "communities read the Bible selectively, giving attention to what is most congenial to their own faith" (86). Now the question is whether Christian / christological reading of the Old Testament can uphold its own unique value or not. Since Marcion, the Church can't just let Old Testament to be absorbed into the New. There must be some continuity, both theological and historical.

In Pentecostal communities, this continuity is not difficult to imagine. Moral stories, testimonies and examples such as Isaiah's calling become "normative for all believers to emulate" (90). At this point Grey reiterates several Pentecostal readings of Isaiah 6, which tend to blend their New Testament experience of salvation and sanctification with Isaiah's experience of God's presence. "This is that" mentality is present in typical readings of Pentecostal ministers. Grey notes this tendency also in Pentecostal worship, which is usually designed to stimulate specific emotions. She mentions Lift Up Your Eyes by Planet Shakers. "The association of the "train of the robe" with God's glory", which in this song specifically occurs, "suggests the spiritualization of the vision and its definite removal from any physical or temporal setting" (95). Similar motif with similar hermeneutical practice could be found in the song Send Me by the same worship group.

Situation with Pentecostal perception of Isaiah 9,1-7 is similar. It is usually associated with the coming of Christ, who will put an end to all the political inconvenience of this world. "It is quite remarkable therefore," Grey notes, "that the Pentecostal community—which highly prizes the prophetic ministry and immediacy of God's word (forth-telling)—have tended to see the prophetic activity of the Old Testament as only christologically driven (foretelling)" (105).

In the case of Isaiah 53 the typical Pentecostal reading is again christological. Moshe Elijah, a convert from Judaism, writes:

I asked them [Pentecostal evangelists] to prove to me logically and objectively, without any emotionalism or faith in the New Testament, but using only the Jewish Old Testament, that Jesus (Yeshua) is the Jewish Messiah of Israel as foretold by the Jewish prophets. I chuckled to myself with an attitude of arrogance and skepticism, as I thought I had given them an impossible mission.

To my amazement, they opened the Old Testament to Isaiah 53 and asked me to read it. I read it three times. The first time I noticed a mist before my eyes hindering me from seeing the words properly. The second time, as I began to understand the meaning of the scripture, holes started to appear in this hindering mist. The third time, when I fully understood the scripture, the mist disappeared.

I was shocked by what I read. This scripture stated the gospel story! Here, before my eyes, was a passage by one of the great servants of God, the prophet Isaiah, pointing to the death of Yeshua, the "arm of the Lord," as a human sacrifice for the atonement of the sins of others—the sacrificial Passover lamb of God. . . (106)

The text here has capacity to transform, to lift the "mist" and enlighten the reader. Now faith in the transforming power of the biblical story can be understood as one of the same sort as the saving faith. Mulhorn preaches:

If you've got faith to be saved, you've got faith to be healed. It's that same faith . . . The last phrase of this verse says this: "By his wounds we are healed." Friends, if you have come tonight and you have come in seeking healing, I want you to look at the cross, and I want you to look at your savior. (113)

**Chapter 5: Common Interests with Hermeneutics.** Chapter five seeks for common interests between Pentecostal readings and semiotics. Grey purports to demonstrate that "Pentecostal readers project themselves and their experience onto the text in order to discover themselves (and their experience) within its story" (19). Grey's starting point is that "Pentecostal readings share a presupposition with postmodernity that the text is autonomous and meanings are multivocal." At the same time, Grey contends that "The Pentecostal community identifies Scripture as providing the authoritative description of reality through which they can understand their own experience" (133-4). Isaiah 25:7 for example serves as an impetus for spiritual warfare, where the goal of missionary activity is to pray away the veil. The text is again associated with contemporary experience from the mission field and not understood in the historical context of the original prophetic utterance to Judah. Verse 25:6 can be similarly understood as gastronomic event – eschatological feast and verse 25:8 is understood as referring to eschatological salvation. Grey points out that none of her reviewed examples of Pentecostal readings "highlighted the historical or cultural context of the passage, suggesting the value of meaning over context in Pentecostal hermeneutics" (139). Grey then summarizes:

The Pentecostal reader recognizes in the event or experience of the text a similarity or resonance with their own present experience which they can appropriate for themselves. The "pay off" for such an appropriation may include comfort for the

reader in the similarity of experience; a new direction which the symbolic text reveals through the example of the historical situation; or, new insights into the reader's own personal development. This reading act divorces the event in the text from its historical-cultural context which is no longer exclusively necessary for the creation of meaning. (145)

This “dynamic reading experience” enables Pentecostals to encounter God in the “text event”. This encounter is also “the end point of reading experience” (146). Relationship between reader and the text is reciprocal, because “[w]hile the experience of the reader resonates with the symbol of the text and the worldview that symbol points to, the symbol of the text also questions or challenges their theological worldview and experience” (147). The difference is made between *logos* (actual content of revelation) and *rhema* (the aha moment, the actual message) and stress is being put on the Hebrew *yada* which purportedly refers to knowing by heart rather than by mind.

Pentecostal readers experience the truth represented in the biblical text through self-involvement; entering its world through engagement with the story and imagery of the text. The initial adoption of the imagery by the Pentecostal reader appears to work against reason. (150)

But it may not. Grey contends that truth can be asserted in dynamic interaction between the text, experience, and Pentecostal worldview. It has been suggested that historical criticism can aid in anchoring interpretations in *objective* meanings instead of *subjective* ones. That may be correct, but the question is whether we need *objective* and whether historical criticism “can be expected to disclose the full richness and depth of meaning in a text” (151). On the other hand, “If Pentecostal readers do not consider the text on its own terms (culturally and historically) then ‘a premature fusion of horizons’ will occur” (152).

True faithfulness to the text rests in appropriation of the symbol of the text, which illuminates its rest and leads to a universal principle, which in turn is adopted by the community. The text informs the reader through its symbol, which rests it situation of the text, the reader informs the text through its symbol, which is perceived through experience. “The reader could not bring any experience to the text—it had to be one that connected to or could be symbolized by the event in the text in the mind of the reader” (158).

Grey openly denounces E. D. Hirsch and his followers (e.g. Menzies) for questioning role of the Spirit in interpretation and asks whether Pentecostal use of the text as a symbol and acontextual reading practices makes it postmodern. Bridges-Jones for example claims that Pentecostal worldview is “para-modern” and “counter-modern” and that “[d]econstruction and Pentecostalism “are consummatory, apocalyptic movements which dismantle the ‘cathedral of modern intellect’ and mock all forms of anthropological reductionism” (160). But Pentecostal readings are not postmodern, because whereas “[i]n postmodernity everything has the potential to become a symbol,” in Pentecostalism this symbol points to a principle or truth beyond the symbolic realm (162). The biblical text emerges from a specific context. But just as it had specific meanings for communities of faith then and there, it can bear specific meanings to communities here and now (164–5).

**Chapter 6: When Pentecostalism and Hermeneutics Disagree.** Sixth chapter discusses dissonance between Pentecostalism and usual hermeneutics when it comes to cultural historical context of the text. Where Pentecostalism wants to adopt imagery of the biblical text without recognizing its historical distance, hermeneutics can aid in discerning significance of the text for the original community.

Pentecostals tend to literalize the text. Affirmation of the 8th century Isaiah's authorship is connected to belief in Spirit's ability to inspire prophetic activity. At this point Grey interestingly retreats back to the need to remind readers of “the significance of the text to the original community” in order to “provide boundaries of reasonable interpretation” (172). Its because when Pentecostals adopt Old Testament texts directly, they tend to adopt ancient imagery of status and privileges of marriage partners, which is not what Grey deems appropriate.

Pentecostal readers simply search “the book of Isaiah in order to find those passages which would corroborate with their faith” (180). Their readings tend to be ahistorical, unconcerned with the original language and other issues. Everything becomes an issue of personal spirituality. This may be an issue, because “[i]f we do not consider the text on its own terms—culturally and historically— then ‘a premature fusion of horizons’ will occur” (183), which *eo ipso* tends to deny the relevance of God's message to the original community. “Why should Pentecostal readers deny this experience to previous communities of faith” (184)?

How does the Pentecostal reader contemporize the Old Testament texts while still respecting the historical-cultural location of the text? Boundaries of reading are provided by recognizing the historical and cultural context and allowing the voice of the text to be heard for its own unique contribution. The text can be contemporized as long as the historical-cultural differences between the text and reader are recognized. (190)

**Chapter 7: Resolving the Conflict.** Seventh chapter is an attempt to resolve the conundrum. Grey acknowledges continuity of the Pentecostal community as God's people. She wants, however, to achieve hermeneutical balance through three axes of three conversation partners: reader (me), Pentecostal community (them) and New Testament Christians (us). Grey suggests that “[t]he impetus for reading biblical texts in the Pentecostal community is to obtain transformative encounter with God” (196).

As Pentecostal readers approach the Old Testament text with the desire to hear God speak to them they do in a vibrant relationship of forming and informing meaning through the interaction of the significance of the text to these three entities: “me,” “them,” and “us.” Each entity (of “me,” “them,” and “us”) is important and cannot be ignored or isolated. (201)

The significance of the text to “them”—the older covenant people of God—does not uniquely preference the veracity of the historical account (as discussed previously) but rather hears the voice of their “testimony.” (207)

The voice of “us” belongs to the Christian community. This presupposes recognition of a difference between the community of “them” and the community of “us”.

Through the testimony of the community of faith in the older covenant, the Pentecostal community articulates their Christian life and pneumatic experience through the symbols, events, and figures of its pages. This kind of analogous reasoning is not limited to identifying Jesus Christ in the Old Testament but in some cases, the Pentecostal community also sees themselves or their situation addressed in ancient Scripture. (214)

Grey's proposed approach thus requires three questions to be asked on encounter with each biblical text: What does this text mean to me / us / them. She then goes on and tests these questions on examples of Isaiah 6:1–8; Genesis 22:1–19 and Deuteronomy 28:1–6.

**Chapter 8: Friends for Life.** Chapter eight articulates implications of this study.

Just as the prophet's lips were touched by the burning coal and his lips seared and life transformed, so also the Pentecostal reader anticipates transformation in their reading of Scripture. This is an inherent value for Pentecostal readers—the transformational encounter of God, identified here in the readings of Isaiah by an actual Pentecostal community. (237)

Pentecostal community is a prophetic community, which sees itself as participant in the outworking of God's plan of salvation.

The Pentecostal values of prophetic transformation can be articulated in this reading model of the Old Testament: what does the text mean for “me,” “them,” and “us”? (238)

Together, the voices of “them,” “us,” and “me” resonate in a harmonious interplay of vibrant song. The model can begin with any “voice.” The reading can start with the significance of the text to either “me,” “them,” or “us,” however, the unity of these voices in reading Old Testament texts should also lead to a concern for the “other.” (239)

Grey hopes that her reading method “can challenge the three-fold areas of church, academy, and society with a legitimate and constructive voice” (243).

## Assessment

I was generally well pleased with literary style and overall tone of the book. Grey seems to wield a great gift of teaching, as she can explain her subject matters clearly and patiently. Her presentation of the examples of Pentecostal readings of Isaiah are instructive and her assessment of Pentecostal view on the relationship between the testaments is entirely convincing, succinct and smooth.

There are, however, some hot potatoes that burned my fingers. I'll now address these one by one.

1. Review of the intra-evangelical debate (chapter 4) is interesting, but a little bit off the track. Grey picks conservative non-charismatics such as Poythress, LaSor, Stuart, etc. Discussion with other schools, e.g. with Oxford (Barr, Barton), which would be much more instrumental at that point, is entirely missing.
2. Some passages could benefit from further editing. Esp. in chapter 5 the author explains deep, valuable, true thoughts by repeating them *ad infinitum*. Several succinct paragraphs instead of long litanies would do. It is not shame to write a short book! It's the clarity of Pentecostal thought that matters!
3. Some specific examples of Pentecostal lay reading practices are very illustrative, some of them are redundant.
4. Grey wants to split Bible reading into three dimensions: me (subjective, reader-response), us (Christian, canonical) and them (historical-critical). That doesn't sound all bad, it's actually a nice and tidy idea! But Grey doesn't make it clear at all how these three dimensions can or cannot inform each other. Can there simply be two equally valid readings, one absolutely subjective "spiritual" reading of a Pentecostal layperson and a historical critical reading, which would disprove the former? Looking at Grey's "field test" of her approach upon Isaiah 6:1–8, it does seem to me that she simply lets the text to "resonate" with experience of her respondents without trying to let the "them" dimension to inform their occasional ignorance or missteps. In fact, import goes rather in the other direction, from "me" to "them", but only in a very vague similarities between laypeople's impressions and historical reconstruction.
5. It is not clear why does Grey dismiss E. D. Hirsch so generally and so decisively. She wants to ask "what does the text mean to me, to them and to us?" and wants to attain "the meaning and significance of the text to the individual reader" (196). Isn't then me-us-them scheme hirschian, rather than gadamerian?
6. Again, I must recommend caution regarding presentation of E. D. Hirsch. He is definitely not an "evangelical", as Grey seems to imply in chapter 5 (158).

Grey has done some good pioneering work in her field research on Pentecostal hermeneutics. I'll mentally bookmark this book for further reference. Some of it's parts could be used as a fair undergraduate introductory readings in Pentecostal hermeneutics.

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