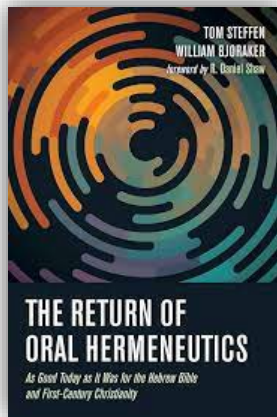


BOOK REVIEW

The Return of Oral Hermeneutics: As Good Today as it was for the Hebrew Bible and First-Century Christianity

By Tom Steffen and William BJORAKER

Reviewed by Daniel Baker



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In *The Return of Oral Hermeneutics*, Steffen and BJORAKER argue that orality must regain its primacy as a central factor in biblical interpretation. They do not argue for a novel hermeneutic approach, rather they demonstrate throughout the book that oral hermeneutics has been a significant interpretive strategy from ancient times. Further, oral hermeneutics was not only incredibly relevant to the past, it also remains so today and deserves our closest attention.

Steffen and BJORAKER lean heavily on the interpretive practices found both in Judaism and early Christianity in order to develop a definition of oral hermeneutics. Steffen and BJORAKER write,

Textual hermeneutics, a grammatical approach to hermeneutics, always had a place among the Jewish custodians of Scripture, but it was the specialized task of few, the literate scribes and scholars. The

majority of the people learned God's word through oral hermeneutics, i.e., interpreting the interactions within and between characters, the recitation of laws and the poetry, and the retelling of the stories in the annual feast cycle of Israel. (20)

This same sort of oral hermeneutics, which depends heavily on the grand narrative of the scriptures, also took place as a primary form of teaching and learning among the disciples of Jesus and in the early Christian community (i.e. Luke 10:25-37; Acts 7).

Steffen and BJORAKER's book is intended to be very practical and focuses on helping a textually dependent readership rediscover the power of story as well as a compelling way to draw a much greater audience into impactful learning from the Bible. The book begins with an orientation chapter, but moves quickly to Part 1 which details a full description of an oral storytelling event (Elisha and the Widow's Oil from 2 Kings 4:1-7), followed by group discussion and the outworking of oral hermeneutics. In Part 2, the authors begin to flesh out the theory behind and basis for oral hermeneutics as well as their argument for the absolute necessity of taking an oral approach seriously in our increasingly oral and digital world. Finally, the authors provide a book end to their argument in Part 3 with an additional description of an oral storytelling event echoing the earlier event from Part 1 which serves to incapsulate and demonstrate in practice their theoretical discussion.

The book is atypical and there are few books that it can easily be compared to. This is due to both the authors' clear understanding of the need for resources on this newly reemerging approach that are concrete and practical rather than abstract and difficult to utilize.

This clear understanding has emerged from the authors' own experiences: fifteen years of cross-cultural ministry in the Philippines for Steffen, and thirty-five years of ministry to the Jewish people for BJORAKER. During these years of ministry, both men realized that heavily text dependent hermeneutical models and teaching strategies did not fit well with the needs of their audiences. A change was necessary in order to ensure that their teaching and communication would be as effective as possible for those they were hoping to reach, and this led to the discovery and utilization of an oral based approach.

One of the characteristics of the book is the frequent use of questions. This reflects the practices of oral hermeneutics—that our aim should not be to know all the answers, but rather to engage with the learning journey that draws us deeper and deeper into discovery. This disposition for frequent and numerous questions also reflects the outcomes the authors are seeking for the book. Steffen and BJORAKER write,

The authors seek three outcomes: (1) an equal place at the table for oral hermeneutics, (2) user evaluation of the various oral hermeneutic models in use today around the globe, and (3) the beginning of a conversation between professors, pastors, and practitioners as to the rightful role of orality in hermeneutics. (52)

Although the practice of oral hermeneutics is shown to be ancient, it has been all but lost for much of the Western world for centuries. With this in mind, it is important to understand that the primary purpose of the book is to reintroduce this important topic and to raise its priority for discussion among Christians.

This does lead to a small critique of the usability of the text. Even though the authors may not have intended to cover in complete depth every element of oral hermeneutics which is touched on in the book, it sometimes feels like a window is quickly being opened and then shut before you have time to capture clearly what is being said. This is clearly due to the sheer multitude of relevant topics and ideas that are demanding to be discussed in the realms of orality and hermeneutics. Still, the discussion might feel disorienting at times for someone who is unfamiliar with the landscape of this field. My hope is that this incredibly timely and relevant book will encourage much more discussion and even specialization in order that the many important topics touched on by Steffen and BJORAKER might be explored more thoroughly.

Even though some of the more theoretical discussion needs further exploration, the book stands on its own as a very helpful and practical resource for learning how to utilize a form of hermeneutics that aligns with the learning and communication needs of our increasingly oral and digital world. Steffen and BJORAKER have made a significant contribution to the fields of orality, anthropology, communications, education, and many others. This book is for everyone and will be a major help to those rediscovering the power of storytelling and orality in our modern day.



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