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BOOK REVIEW

The Return of Oral Hermeneutics: As Good Today as It Was for the Hebrew Bible and First-Century Christianity.

By Stephen, T.A., & Bjoraker, W.
Wipf & Stock, 2020

Reviewed by Regina Manley author of Bible StoryFire audio/video series. Regina lived overseas for 18 years serving with Mission Aviation Fellowship (MAF). She worked as MAF's orality consultant which included training through Bible story and discussion workshops for 12 years in 17 countries and the USA. She is now with Paraclete Mission Group, a doctoral candidate at Boise State University (Curriculum & Instruction), and holds degrees in Spanish (BA, La Verne University) and Applied Linguistics (MA, Biola University).

In *The Return of Oral Hermeneutics* Steffen and Bjoraker claim the oral approach is the best fit for studying Scripture because of its ability to maximize communication and impact. They consider it a “crucial complementor” (p. 304) to traditional, or what they term, “textual hermeneutics” which relies on propositional-based textual analysis, grammar and word studies, and systematic theology (pp. 14-18).

Steffen worked among the newly literate Ifugao in the Philippines. Influenced by Trevor McIlwain, he replaced propositional teaching and outlines for a story-centric model. Bjoraker's ministry was to highly educated Jews. At first, he considered using stories as irrelevant.

He now recognizes biblical narratives and discussion as “the best approach I have ever discovered for engaging Jewish seekers with the Word of God” (p. xxii). The wide applicability of oral hermeneutics (OH) makes this book a must-read for anyone working cross-culturally, across generations, or training others for ministry.

The book is divided into three parts. In the first and last parts the authors present an experiential dive into two Bible stories. Bjraker demonstrates OH in action with a group of professionals. These transcribed sessions are each followed by reflections. The reflections in Part One highlight how OH engages the whole brain by activating the emotional, relational, imaginative, experiential, visual and sensory areas through narrative and dialog.

Part two, the largest portion, elucidates the propositions supporting this radical shift. First, the authors challenge common biases formed through school culture by introducing us to the world of orality that influenced the formation of the Old and New Testament texts. They document oral-communal-liturgical processes customary to instruction through the centuries prior to the printing press.

Next, they describe the parameters of OH. Narrative is capable of embodying meaning in ways people can identify with, be challenged by, and remember. It can be powerfully enhanced by artistic expression. The metanarrative of Scripture acts as a boundary, with the whole informing the parts and the parts informing the whole. Then they explain how making narrative central and prioritizing participants’ insights leads to an alternate way of theologizing.

Traditional hermeneutics analyzes and systematizes, culminating in abstract principles such as God is love. In comparison, OH invites listeners to identify with and discuss the stories of God interacting with people. Character theology recognizes that anyone who can understand a Bible story can discover the truths it entails. This middle section ends by focusing on questions including how to form character-centric questions that encourage “relational-building dialogue” and lead to “application, memory, and reproducibility” (p. 207). In fact, questions feature prominently in the entire book.

The Return of Oral Hermeneutics is an entertaining read. The writing will appeal to the lay reader but also contains extensive footnotes for the

more serious exegete. This book is feasible as a seminary or Bible school textbook.

Readers would have benefitted by including more examples of varieties of OH currently practiced which the authors alluded to in chapter four. In addition, there is much to be explored about facilitating discovery learning. How does one manage the unpredictable dynamics that can occur in group dialog? Assess progress? Cover aspects missed by the group?

Adopting an OH will be difficult for those accustomed to a central role as lecturer or teacher. It will be an easier fit for those who mentor and are keen listeners, skilled at “reading” and interacting with people.

The orality movement has gained many advocates in Christian work and mission over the last decades, but Steffen and Bjoraker have produced the most comprehensive apologetic I have seen to date. They both demonstrate OH and describe the principles behind why it is a robust, viable tool. Going far beyond those who cannot, do not or will not learn from reading, they explain why OH is effective for widely diverse audiences including highly-educated professionals, digitally-preferenced moderns, and post-millennials. As a reader, *be prepared for a paradigm shift*; some of those stones Steffen and Bjoraker upturn, may be supporting your foundation.