

S O U T H E A S T E R N

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Introduction to the Volume <i>STR Editor</i>	1-2	God, Plurality, and Theological Method: A Response to Kevin Vanhoozer's <i>Remythologizing Theology</i> <i>John R. Franke</i>	41-51
A Generous Reformer: Kevin Vanhoozer's Place in Evangelicalism <i>Mark Bowald</i>	3-9	Honest to God, a Voice from Heaven? Communicative Theism in Vanhoozer's <i>Remythologizing Theology</i> <i>Fred Sanders</i>	53-65
A Critical Appreciation of Kevin Van- hoozer's <i>Remythologizing Theology</i> <i>Stephen J. Wellum</i>	11-29	Vanhoozer responds to the four horse- men of an apocalyptic panel discussion on <i>Remythologizing Theology</i> <i>Kevin J. Vanhoozer</i>	67-82
Remythologizing, Projection, and Belief: A Reply to Vanhoozer <i>Oliver D. Crisp</i>	31-40	Book Reviews	83-112

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# CONTENTS

## ARTICLES

Introduction to the Volume.....	1
<i>STR Editor</i>	
A Generous Reformer: Kevin Vanhoozer's Place in Evangelicalism .....	3
<i>Mark Bowald</i>	
A Critical Appreciation of Kevin Vanhoozer's <i>Remythologizing Theology</i> .....	11
<i>Stephen J. Wellum</i>	
Remythologizing, Projection, and Belief: A Reply to Vanhoozer.....	31
<i>Oliver D. Crisp</i>	
God, Plurality, and Theological Method: A Response to Kevin Vanhoozer's <i>Remythologizing Theology</i> .....	41
<i>John R. Franke</i>	
Honest to God, a Voice from Heaven? Communicative Theism in Vanhoozer's <i>Remythologizing Theology</i> .....	53
<i>Fred Sanders</i>	
Vanhoozer responds to the four horsemen of an apocalyptic panel discussion on <i>Remythologizing Theology</i> .....	67
<i>Kevin J. Vanhoozer</i>	

## BOOK REVIEWS

Rodney Stark. <i>The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion</i> .....	83
<i>John D. Wilsey</i>	
J. Patout Burns (translator and editor). <i>Romans: Interpreted by Early Christian Commentators</i> .....	84
<i>Christoph Stenschke</i>	
Allen P. Ross. <i>A Commentary on the Psalms. Vol 1 (1-41)</i> .....	88
<i>Robert Cole</i>	
Kelly James Clark and Raymond J. VanArragon. <i>Evidence and Religious Belief</i> .....	90
<i>Allen Gebring</i>	
C.E. Hill. <i>Who Chose the Gospels? Probing the Great Gospel Conspiracy</i> .....	91
<i>Nathan A. Finn</i>	
Robert Kolb. <i>Luther and the Stories of God: Biblical Narratives as a Foundation for Christian Living</i> .....	93
<i>Mark S. Gignilliat</i>	

Timothy S. Goeglein. <i>The Man in the Middle: An Inside Account of Faith and Politics in the George W. Bush Era</i> .....	94
<i>Brent J. Aucoin</i>	
Goldingay. <i>Key Questions about the Christian Faith: Old Testament Answers</i> .....	96
<i>Kevin Chen</i>	
Ronald J. Sider, ed. <i>The Early Church on Killing: A Comprehensive Sourcebook on War, Abortion, and Capital Punishment</i> .....	97
<i>David W. Jones</i>	
R. Reed Lessing. <i>Concordia Commentary: Isaiah 40-55</i> .....	99
<i>Jason T. LeCureux</i>	
Stephen J. Chester, Grant R. Osborne, Mark A. Seifrid, and Chad O. Brand. <i>Perspectives on Our Struggle with Sin: Three Views of Romans 7</i> .....	101
<i>Marc A. Pugliese</i>	
James K. A. Smith. <i>The Fall of Interpretation: Philosophical Foundations for a Creational Hermeneutic</i> .....	103
<i>Ian Rottenberg</i>	
J. Stevenson and W. H. C. Frend. <i>Creeds, Councils, and Controversies: Documents Illustrating the History of the Church, AD 337-461</i> .....	105
<i>Stephen Brett Eccher</i>	
Kevin Hector. <i>Theology Without Metaphysics: God, Language and the Spirit of Recognition</i> .....	106
<i>Mark Bowald</i>	
Dave Earley. <i>Pastoral Leadership Is... How to Shepherd God's People with Passion and Confidence</i> .....	108
<i>Tony Merida</i>	
Victor P. Hamilton. <i>Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary</i> .....	110
<i>Randall L. McKinion</i>	

## A Generous Reformer: Kevin Vanhoozer's Place in Evangelicalism

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### Introduction

In the Spring of 1986 Kevin Vanhoozer, a young Ph.D. student at Cambridge, concluded a book review of Clark Pinnock's *The Scripture Principle* suggesting that:

*The Scripture Principle* is not the modern counterpart to the ninety-five theses, but perhaps its not least valuable service in sorting out interpretation and inerrancy in the evangelical household is its issuing a clarion call for a similar Reformation in our own troubled times.<sup>1</sup>

Later that year Vanhoozer confidently entered evangelical hermeneutical debates, pursuing the questions of reform orbiting around scriptural hermeneutics that he saw engendered in Pinnock, publishing the article "The Semantics of Biblical Literature: Truth and Scripture's Diverse Literary Forms" featured as chapter 2 of the collection *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon* edited by D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge.<sup>2</sup>

Vanhoozer's contribution to that volume is unusually mature for someone at that stage of his career in that it already bears all the marks of his writing voice as well as concerning itself with the issues that continued to animate his research and writing. These all reach something of a watershed in his recent book which is the focus of this special edition of the present journal: *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion and Authorship*.<sup>3</sup>

### Characteristic Features of Vanhoozer's Research in *Remythologizing Theology*

First among these characteristics is his commitment to affirm and promote that quintessential feature of evangelical theology: the unrivalled author-

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, "Review of *The Scripture Principle*," *WTJ* 48/1 (1986), pp. 192-198.

<sup>2</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, "The Semantics of Biblical Literature: Truth and Scripture's Diverse Literary Forms" in *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon* (eds. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), pp. 49-104.

<sup>3</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion and Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

ity of Scripture and the appropriate and fitting practices of its reading. He concludes “Semantics” mounting the argument that speech act theory actually better serves and supports the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture better than theories which are founded on notions of propositional truth.<sup>4</sup> In *Remythologizing* he employs concepts drawn from speech act theory, drama theory and others, in order to reframe Scripture and its reading within the purview of the doctrines of the Trinity and theology proper. Nearly all of his work in the intervening 25 years, in some way, contributes to the development of this theological arc.

The second feature on display early on is his fearless and insatiable appetite to explore and read broadly and engage positively with diverse traditions and authors. Aside from the predictable evangelical authors, he also interacts in “Semantics” with a broad range of philosophers and hermeneuticians associated with speech act theory as well as both analytic and continental thinkers. He cites David Tracy, David Kelsey, Cleanth Brooks, Hans Frei, William Wordsworth, Augustine, Wittgenstein, Aristotle, C. S. Lewis and many others. His engagement is here, and throughout his writing has always been, broad ranging; it is in the spirit of a fearless, joyful and winsome engagement with other authors and thought worlds that Vanhoozer looks to build bridges. The joy of this process of discovery and engagement permeates all his writings.

Third, he displays a unique confidence in drawing from this great breadth of material, integrating and weaving it creatively and humorously into dialogue with evangelical thought. Anyone who reads Vanhoozer will immediately recognize the playful spirit in the word play signaled in the title of section II of “Semantics”: “Propositional Paradise Lost? Some Problems with the Concept of Revelation.”<sup>5</sup> It would be a mistake to dismiss this dimension of his writing too quickly, as only cute or entertaining. There is a confidence behind this in his writing style; a confidence rooted in his evangelical roots, and, ultimately, in the conviction that evangelicalism faithfully and uniquely serves the truth of the Gospel and her Lord, that it continues to have a vital role in the work of the Kingdom of Christ. And that, therefore, evangelicalism has equal or greater title claim to the truths found in the broader culture.

The last noteworthy feature indicated in this early piece, and indeed an aspect of Vanhoozer’s work which emerges from the foundation of these first three, is his willingness to hold on loosely to method. In this he bears debt to the postliberal theologians George Lindbeck, Hans Frei and David Kelsey.<sup>6</sup> Thus in “Semantics” he is not so much interested in *replacing* propositional

<sup>4</sup> Vanhoozer, “Semantics,” pp. 101-104.

<sup>5</sup> Vanhoozer, “Semantics,” p. 56.

<sup>6</sup> The title of his book *The Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005) acknowledges something of the debt as a play on the title of George Lindbeck’s *The Nature of Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984).

truth categories with those of speech act theory so much as *supplementing* them. His comfort level employing theories in an *ad hoc* manner is perhaps one of the most maligned and misunderstood dimensions of his writing. There often is a tendency for Vanhoozer's readers to see with myopia and think in too monolithic terms about the relationship of method to theological articulation in his work and to judge the generous and humble way he employs methods to be symptomatic of a weakness, rather than a strength.

He has not always been his own best ally in demonstrating his *ad hoc* commitment to method. It is arguable, for example in the case of his book *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*,<sup>7</sup> that the categories of speech act theory are presented in such a way that they seem to have a pride of place and permanence that supplants and orders the use of any other method. Whether or not he was intentional or conscious of this tendency, he subsequently has made it clear that he is committed to the idea that the use of speech act theory, like any method or theory, is always subject to the *ad hoc* limitations of the pursuit of knowledge in general, and the particular limits and foibles of the theologian.<sup>8</sup>

The features we have named above are uncommon to find in one evangelical theologian. For those who are familiar with the evangelical terrain one will recognize that, historically, it would place him in an uncomfortable moderating position. Moderating in that the *ad hoc* employment of method has allowed him to be enormously generous in his engagement with others, but uncomfortable, in large part, due to two tendencies that are particularly strong among *American* evangelicals: the expectation that theology should both assume and demonstrate a high degree of certainty, clarity, and/or resolution; also, the tendency for evangelicals to be introverted in theological engagement and style.

Evangelicals have always been better at building moats than bridges. Evangelical theology tends to be insular and centripetal; Kevin Vanhoozer's approach to theology is porous and centrifugal. He has perennially made his evangelical theologian counterparts uncomfortable in these terms. Tellingly, from the first, his aforementioned paper on "The Semantics of Biblical Literature" immediately caught the attention and concern of Carl F.H. Henry. Upon its publication, the young new professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School was called upon to visit the office of the evangelical patriarch. Vanhoozer recounts:

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<sup>7</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> He insistently and publicly acknowledged this in a question and answer session which reviewed Kevin J. Vanhoozer (ed.) *The Dictionary of the Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Press, 2005) at the annual meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature in 2005 in Philadelphia, PA.

Well, he had read my article and was worried about the role I assigned to literary genre in my understanding of biblical authority. He thought that what was most important was the propositional truth that the various forms conveyed. I was worried for my part about what literary critics termed the ‘heresy of propositional paraphrase.’ [In the end] he made me a grilled cheese sandwich and encouraged me to focus on propositional truth.<sup>9</sup>

The same methodological discomfort is on display (albeit in various ways) as a central common theme in the responses to *Remythologizing Theology* included here.

### The Present Volume

These papers are edited versions of presentations given at a special session of the “Method in Systematic Theology” section at the annual national meetings of the Evangelical Theological Society on November 18, 2011 in San Francisco, CA. The four respondents were selected with great intention. They represent different and significant centers of gravity in the present evangelical world: Fred Sanders is a Wesleyan teaching at Biola University; Stephen Wellum is a Baptist teaching on the faculty at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; John Franke represents the Emergent wing of evangelicalism; Oliver Crisp is a British Evangelical who teaches at Fuller Seminary.

Each of the four authors pursues different methodological and material theological concerns with *Remythologizing Theology* and with Vanhoozer’s larger corpus. These responses to Vanhoozer also represent something of a microcosm representation of the present status quo within evangelicalism and provide an opportunity to reflect briefly upon it.

The evangelical methodological anxiety indicated in Henry’s early response to “Semantics” is seen in similar ways in the responses from Stephen Wellum and Oliver Crisp. Wellum’s response begins with an excellent overview of the main argument of *Remythologizing*. He then goes on to summarize the strengths of the book and finishes with some critical reflections. Aside from some minor quibbles about substantive doctrinal elements, the main concern that Wellum raises has to do with theological method, specifically: whether Vanhoozer has adequately established a proper foundation for Christian truth claims. Interestingly enough, Wellum raises this issue by suggesting that the problem is that Vanhoozer has left out the critical dimension of *apologetics* in the book. Wellum asks: “Is it enough to propose ‘remythologizing’ theology without *first* giving some justification for why we accept the

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<sup>9</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, Personal email correspondence with Mark Bowald, April 22, 2013.



canonical Scriptures a fully authoritative and God's own self-presentation?"<sup>10</sup> Wellum's comment is interesting, and telling, insofar as he prescribes the task of apologetics both as a *necessary* component to theology and as an activity which should take place *prior to* theological articulation. Both of these are contestable and may, in the end, say more about the uniquely modern character of evangelical theology than the firmness of Vanhoozer's theological ground. It is not the place in this introduction to pursue the point, but for our purposes they do helpfully begin to illustrate that tension over method we named above that Vanhoozer has perennially produced in his evangelical counterparts.

Oliver Crisp, despite coming from a very different stream of evangelicalism, a British-Fuller Seminary axis, raises similar questions about the adequacy of the methodological footings of Vanhoozer's theological structure. Indeed it is this methodological question which is the singular focus of his response. Crisp turns one of Vanhoozer's interlocutors in his book against him, building the case that Vanhoozer has not properly or adequately escaped the problem of projection which is at the heart of the Feuerbachian criticism. Crisp echoes Wellum, remarking that

Vanhoozer's attempt to block the Problem of Projection does not appear to have the resources in order to show that his own 'story' about divine self-communication is *more* than another sort of mythologizing project, one theological myth among others, so to speak.<sup>11</sup>

Crisp goes on to offer some suggestions about filling this void, but concludes, more forcefully, that, whatever Vanhoozer's options might be, that

He still needs to provide his readers with some reason, *independent of* this remedial argument, for adopting his remythologizing story about God's 'projection' of himself in the speech acts of Scriptural drama rather than that offered by the demythologizers like Bultmann or Feuerbach.<sup>12</sup>

Crisp, like Wellum, insists that the spadework of establishing proper foundations for Vanhoozer to make the claims he does, is woefully lacking.<sup>13</sup> They

<sup>10</sup> Wellum response, p. 22 in this journal. Emphasis mine. Two pages later he also names how "underneath massive differences in theological method are entire worldview structures which need to be articulated and defended...[that] more needs to be said before his 'remythologizing' project will be accepted today."

<sup>11</sup> Crisp response, p. 33 in this journal. And concludes, more pointedly, that "He has not provided an adequate means by which we can adjudicate whether his canon-linguistic approach to doctrine, or his more recent Remythologizing approach to theology, is closer to the truth than either Bultmann or Feuerbach." P. 37 in this journal.

<sup>12</sup> Crisp response, p. 39 in this journal. Emphasis mine.

<sup>13</sup> Crisp describes this as a clinging "to the rather frail reed of the Barth-inspired appeal to revelation." P. 40 in this journal.

both see this activity as *necessary* to establish the truthful possibility of theology. Crisp does not associate this overtly with apologetics but does see the establishment of the footings as needing to be provided from reasons “independent of” the practices of theological articulation.

John Franke like Crisp, also chooses to focus with near exclusion on Vanhoozer’s methodology. At first glance, Franke’s concerns are nearly the opposite of those of Crisp and Wellum. Franke argues that Vanhoozer’s theological method is too exclusive in the way that it posits the idea of God as a communicative agent is employed in the book; that Vanhoozer commits the well known postmodern sin of the “pretensions of either/or metaphysical assertions about God.”<sup>14</sup> He goes on to argue at length for theological plurality which he sees mirroring more faithfully the plurality seen in Scripture itself and holds up Elizabeth Johnson’s *Quest for the Living God* as the example of what Vanhoozer’s theology should emulate.<sup>15</sup>

Like Crisp and Wellum, Franke sees an inadequate theological framework in *Remythologizing Theology*. For Franke, theology needs to be overtly and intentionally plural and diverse in its articulation. Again, at first glance, this appears to be the opposite concern of the first two responses. It might, however, rather be the case that Franke’s criticisms are not so much at the opposite to those of Crisp and Wellum, but rather mirror them, being rooted in similar concerns for methodological correctness and universality. For Crisp and Wellum these are indicated by singularity and clarity in theological foundations, for Franke it is measured in plurality; Vanhoozer, in choosing one, or only a few, models for articulation commits the sin of exclusion and colonization; by not representing all voices, he oppresses the voices not heard.

One might ask, however, how it is that one would ever avoid this problem in doing theology? Franke’s prime example, Elizabeth Johnson, does not. There are innumerable voices and perspectives that she does not account for in *Quest for the Living God*, not least of which is evangelicalism. The standard of universally representing the fullness of plural perspectives is a quintessentially modern epistemological quest. Franke’s proposal may share more in common with the foundationalist and (quintessentially modern?) methodological preoccupations of Crisp and Wellum than appears at first blush.

Finally, the fourth response, of Fred Sanders, is the only one of the four which gives significant attention to the material theological contours of *Remythologizing Theology*. Sanders is more accommodating of the intention in Vanhoozer’s *ad hoc* method, the playful and joyful way he explores select themes and resources, seeing how far they can take us in understanding the character of God as the communicative agent who speaks perennially in, with and under the Word of God. He helpfully summarizes: “One could describe

<sup>14</sup> Franke response, p. 42 in this journal.

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Continuum Press, 2007).

*Remythologizing Theology* as a ‘higher evangelicalism,’ in that evangelicals are only supposed to attend to what God says, but Vanhoozer attends to how God says it.”<sup>16</sup> Sanders also helpfully points us in directions of further theological development and implication in *Remythologizing Theology*.

### Conclusion

Taken together, these responses illustrate well the unique place that Vanhoozer occupies within the evangelical landscape as well as the character of that landscape presently. These responses to Vanhoozer’s *Remythologizing Theology* serve as something of a bellwether for contemporary evangelical theology. If we were to map them, we could draw a series of axes representing the various concerns of the respondents, axes along which Vanhoozer would consistently be mapped in a moderating position. Apart from Sanders, the responses to a person call for more methodological intentionality, more apologetics (Wellum), more epistemological grounding (Crisp), more universal plurality (Franke).

The impulse behind Jeffrey Stout’s famous complaint that the modern preoccupation with method amounts to a continual throat clearing without actually speaking shares the chastening of method in postliberal theology and, arguably, a theology that is truly post-modern. The question bears more weight and significance today insofar as the pressures and tensions that the respondents in this volume represent are a microcosm of pressures pulling and pushing evangelicalism. Regarding method, for Kevin Vanhoozer: less is more.

Chicago is the quintessential “middle” city of the United States. Likewise, the center of American evangelical gravity falls somewhere on the I-294 in Chicago between Wheaton College and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Kevin Vanhoozer, in his travels back and forth along this highway, symbolizes the consummate moderate evangelical theologian of our times. Vanhoozer’s own theological interlocutions are emblematic of both the diversity present within, and the present challenges for, evangelicalism. Can the center hold? Will it? The tensions are not insignificant.

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<sup>16</sup> Sanders response, p. 62 in this journal.