Book Reviews


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Cross-cultural settings are common in Asian seminaries, where classrooms are often ethnically, socially, and nationally diverse, which is to say, reflective of the mission field in Asia. Anybody who has taught the Bible in such a setting will have experienced the significant role that culture plays in shaping one’s interpretation of Scripture. Such teachers know that it is essential to engage with cross-cultural hermeneutics in order to help one’s students learn a hermeneutical approach that appropriately engages with differences in culture while maintaining interpretive faithfulness to the biblical text. Will Brooks, a seminary lecturer teaching mission and New Testament interpretation in Asia, is one such teacher. In this short volume, he seeks to provide “a cross-cultural model for biblical interpretation that upholds authorial intent … [and] present some principles for interpretation that can be used in any cultural context” (5).

The book is divided into three major sections. In the first section, comprising chapters 1–4, the author addresses the various challenges that arise when biblical interpretation is undertaken in cross-cultural contexts and outlines some of the key concerns that must be addressed by a cross-cultural hermeneutical method. Critically, in chapter 2, the author champions an author-oriented approach to biblical interpretation. By drawing upon the works of E.D. Hirsch, Kevin Vanhoozer, and Robert Stein, Brooks argues that authorial meaning is both determinate and reproducible. Therefore, Brooks argues that, regardless of one’s cultural setting, the unifying goal of biblical interpretation is to determine “what
the original author was seeking to communicate with his original audience” (36). In the second section of the book (chapters 5–9), Brooks outlines and evaluates a range of approaches related to cross-cultural hermeneutics by discussing some representative proponents of those approaches. These include postcolonial hermeneutics (Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah); cross-textual hermeneutics (Archie Lee); rhetorical-interactive hermeneutics (Yeo Khiok-Khng); and ethnohermeneutics (Larry Caldwell). By doing so, Brooks provides a critical survey of existing methods used in cross-cultural hermeneutics. The third section of the book (chapters 10–12) begins with Brooks introducing his own model for cross-cultural interpretation (chapter 10). This model comprises ten interpretive principles (quoted from p. 149):

1. Consider our own cultural influences.
2. Study the target culture.
3. Learn the biblical culture and historical context.
4. Study the grammar and syntax of the text.
5. Consider the literary structure of the text.
6. Examine the literary genre of the text.
7. Evaluate theology of the text.
8. Display openness to other cultural perspectives.
9. Apply the truth of the word to the local context.
10. Communicate the text in culturally appropriate ways.

Chapter 11 then applies these principles to several biblical texts for illustration purposes (namely, Jgs 3; Ps 24; Lk 15:11–32; 2 Cor 12:7–10). Finally, in chapter 12, Brooks explains how the model can be applied among oral learners, a common demographic encountered in cross-cultural missions.

While the book’s intent is to be commended, I found the book to be unbalanced. Despite its purported goal of providing a model for cross-cultural biblical interpretation, Brooks’s interpretive model was introduced only in the third section of the book (approximately two-thirds of the way through the text). The model itself only occupied one chapter. In contrast, an excessive amount of focus was placed on the first two sections, which was essentially an extended literature review. Moreover, despite the space devoted to these sections, insufficient attention was given to the merits of
opposing viewpoints. This was especially notable, for instance, in chapter 2. Although the author argued for the superiority of the author-oriented approach over text- or reader-oriented approaches, there was little in-depth engagement with the merits or demerits of the latter approaches. This is a pity since without significant engagement with alternative approaches, the case for the author-oriented approach is significantly less convincing. This in turn weakens the case for the authorial intent being the common telos for cross-cultural interpretation—the linchpin of Brooks’s model for cross-cultural biblical interpretation.

Moreover, when Brooks does introduce his model for cross-cultural interpretation, the model is introduced in far too brief a fashion to be usable. Based on my several years of experience teaching biblical hermeneutics, I believe that most of my students would struggle to apply this model as it simply does not provide enough practical guidance. For example, Brooks argues that interpreters should consider their own cultural influences (Principle 1). However, how should this be done? What does it even mean to consider one’s own cultural influences? After all, one of the major challenges of cross-cultural interpretation is being unaware of one’s own cultural blind spots. In fact, as the book itself highlights, it is the very act of biblical interpretation in a cross-cultural setting that often leads one to become aware of such blind spots. Likewise, Brooks states that interpreters must study the target culture (Principle 2) by engaging with the culture’s norms, values, and beliefs. However, which norms, values, or beliefs should be studied? All of them? Which should be prioritized? How should the interpreter meaningfully undertake this process of study? What sources should the interpreter draw upon? Without a concrete applicational framework to engage with one’s own cultural influences or that of the target culture, Brooks’s model would be of very limited practical use in the classroom or church.

Another criticism of Brooks’s model is that it is excessively individualistic. Insufficient attention is paid to the role that community plays in biblical interpretation. While this is a criticism that might be levelled at most modern hermeneutical approaches, such criticism is particularly justifiable for this volume since Brooks himself argues that “interpreting the Bible with those of different cultural backgrounds makes us better interpreters of Scripture” (24). Moreover, Brooks also argues for the importance
of developing indigenous interpreters. Yet, one wonders how such development might take place in a holistic way without a hermeneutical method that emphasizes the nurturing of interpretive communities where missionaries and indigenous leaders grow together in their interpretive skills. Furthermore, it also appears to this reviewer that several of the challenges associated with cross-cultural interpretation (such as cultural blind spots) can be ameliorated if biblical interpretation was engaged with as a communal rather than an individualistic activity. Therefore, the lack of a communal orientation in the proposed interpretive model is a glaring lacuna in light of Brooks’s own concerns.

Despite these criticisms, I can imagine this volume playing a meaningful role in an Asian seminary classroom. It would be especially helpful in an introductory class on cross-cultural hermeneutics. In particular, the first two sections of the book provide a clear survey of the major issues, historical developments, and main proponents in the discipline. However, the third section of the book will need to be complemented with substantial additional guidance by the instructor in order to be practically usable by students. In addition, Brooks writes clearly and in an accessible fashion throughout the volume, which also makes it suitable for an introductory class. This is a book that I will be adding to my recommended reading list for such classes.

About Reviewer
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