

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

THEOLOGICAL REVIEW



Vol. 4, No. 1 Summer 2013

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Southeastern Theological Review

is published biannually for the faculty of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

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Unsolicited article submissions to the journal are welcomed and should be directed to the editor. All submitted articles to *Southeastern Theological Review* are evaluated by double-blind peer review. All articles that are submitted to STR should present original work in their field. Manuscripts should conform to the *SBL Handbook of Style*.

This periodical is indexed in the ATLA Religion Database® (ATLA RDB®), a product of the American Theological Library Association, 300 S. Wacker Dr., Suite 2100, Chicago, IL 60606, USA. Email: atla@atla.com, www: http://www.atla.com.

This periodical is also indexed with Old Testament Abstracts®, The Catholic University of America, Washington, DC 20064, USA. Email: cua-ota@cua.edu. This periodical is typeset and indexed electronically by Galaxie Software®; http://galaxie.com.

Annual Subscription Rates: \$30 (regular) \$15 (student)

(both for ebook and hardcopy)

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Note: The views expressed in the following articles are not necessarily those of the STR editorial board, the faculty, or the administration of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. Individual authors are responsible for the research and content presented in their essays.

ISSN 2156-9401

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A Critical Appreciation of Kevin Vanhoozer's *Remythologizing Theology*¹

Stephen J. Wellum

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Introduction

In this ground-breaking work, Kevin J. Vanhoozer turns his attention from his self-professed preoccupation with hermeneutical theory and theological method to the application of these areas to constructive theology, specifically theology proper.² Vanhoozer is convinced that current discussion in the doctrine of God is weak, evidenced by the rise of the “new orthodoxy” in non-evangelical theology (what he labels “kenotic-perichoretic-relational-panentheism”) and current debates within evangelical theology (e.g., open theism), and as such a “new” approach is needed. Throughout his work, Vanhoozer weaves together and unpacks two major points. First, our methodological approach to Christian theology must follow the path of “remythologization,” and second, vis-à-vis theology proper, a better way of conceiving the entire God-world relation is in terms of communicative action, not causal relations.

In regard to theological method, i.e., moving from Scripture to theological conclusions, Vanhoozer labels his approach, “remythologization.” He clearly defines what is meant by this provocative term by contrasting it with the “soft” and “hard” demythologizing projects of Rudolf Bultmann and Ludwig Feuerbach respectively (RT, pp. 3-5). Both Bultmann and Feuerbach viewed biblical language as “myth.” Bultmann’s “soft” approach was to translate biblical statements about God into existential pronouncements (RT, pp. 13-16), while Feuerbach’s “hard” approach went all the way and rejected the truth status of theology by arguing that biblical language about God is merely a human projection. In the end, both projects undercut historic Christianity by turning theology into anthropology (RT, pp. 17-23). Current discussion regarding the status of our God-talk has a difficult time escaping the ghost of

¹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Hereinafter, cited in the body of the text as RT, followed by page reference.

² For example, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*, second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009); idem., *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), plus numerous other books, essays, and articles.

Feuerbach unless it turns from its demythologizing ways and learns anew how to “remythologize” theology.

In contrast, Vanhoozer proposes that our theology begins with God’s own self-presentation, namely Scripture. For him, Scripture is God’s authoritative Word; it is triune discourse, a product of divine authorship and hence a form of divine action. Scripture, instead of being viewed under the rubric of “myth,” is best viewed as *mythos*, a term borrowed from Aristotle to refer to the idea of “dramatic plot: a unified course of action that includes a beginning, middle, and end” (RT, p. 5). Unlike myths, *mythos* applies to this-worldly rather than other-worldly events and the meaning and truth of *mythos* is linked to the way the action is rendered. *Mythos*, at the human level, is a mode of discourse that configures human action so as to create a form of wholeness (i.e., a unified action) out of a multiplicity of incidents. “Poetics” refers to how authors create meaningful wholes (viz., stories) that allow one to make sense of what would otherwise be a chaotic jumble of unrelated events. *Mythos*, then, in the broad sense, “therefore stands for all those forms of discourse that may be employed in the course of a story or drama to render an agent or patient, a unified action or a unified passion” (RT, p. 7). It is a form of “world-projection,” a cognitive tool to project a sense of the world as an ordered whole. It renders human and divine reality by depicting persons in act and at rest, speaking and silent.

In application to theology, Vanhoozer proposes that Scripture is best viewed as *mythos*, i.e., the written form of God’s self-presentation and as *mythos* it “renders intelligible the field of triune communicative praxis” (RT, p. 7). Vanhoozer refuses to reduce *mythos* merely to its narrative form. Instead all of Scripture’s diverse literary forms render the divine drama and thus who God is (RT, p. 7). In this way, biblical *mythos* is one and many: *one* in that there is an overall plot, the story of God’s self-presentation in the history of Israel and Jesus Christ, and *many* in that there are diverse literary forms that comprise Scripture and which render God’s action in diverse ways.

What, then, is “remythologizing theology?” Three points may summarize this approach. First, methodologically it starts “from above” and not “from below.” Instead of beginning with unaided human reason apart from God’s own speech, which assumes that everyone has a set of shared categories that may be applied both to the world and to God (i.e., onto-theology), “remythologizing” starts with the biblical *mythos* as God’s self-attesting Word, i.e., God’s own true and authoritative self-projection and triune presentation. In other words, it starts with the God who speaks and acts. Its starting point is the conviction that only God can make God known. Second, it seeks to take into account the significance of the Bible’s diverse literary forms, each of which is a distinct form of God’s communicative action. It is a form of biblical reasoning, a way of thinking about the subject matter of Scripture along the grain of the various forms of biblical discourse that present it. Third, it seeks to move from Scripture to ontology and not the other way around. It

seeks to *think* about *who* God is on the basis of his acts, especially his communicative acts. God is as God does, and God does as God says. As Vanhoozer states: “The task of the present work is to explore the ontology of the one whose speech and acts propel the theodrama forward” (RT, p. xiv), to unpack a “communicative ontology (i.e., a set of concepts with which to speak of God-in-communicative action)” and to sketch “the contours of a theodramatic metaphysics (i.e., a biblically derived set of concepts with which to speak of the whole of created reality)” (RT, p. xv). To avoid the Feuerbachian reduction, theology must first begin with Scripture and speak about God’s *being* on the basis of his own speech and action. We are not to derive our understanding of the being and attributes of God from analyzing the idea of infinite perfection; we are to do so by describing and detailing the predicates and perfections of God’s communicative activity.³

What is the basic outline of the book? After an introductory chapter introducing “remythologizing theology,” it is broken into three parts. Part 1, which consists of three chapters, is more descriptive discussing the current scene, problems, and issues in theology proper with a preliminary critique of the “new orthodoxy”—a view Vanhoozer will seek to counter in the remainder of the book. Part 2 (two chapters) and 3 (four chapters) consist of Vanhoozer’s constructive proposal of “Triune communicative theism” for theology proper, which unpacks his *via media* between classical theism and the “new orthodoxy.” Many important issues are discussed (e.g., Trinity, relation of immanent to economic Trinity, eternity/time relations, etc.), but specific attention is given to the God-world relation construed in terms of communicative agency and not impersonal causal action with special application to the divine sovereignty-human freedom relation, the problem of evil, and divine impassibility.

Positive Commendations

This work is very helpful on many issues; it is hard to know where to begin. Specifically, let me highlight three areas.

1. Perceptive Critique of Various Theological Positions.

One of Vanhoozer’s many strengths is the ability to describe and critique well current theological positions, including their methods. I will list some of his more helpful critiques.

³ It is important to note that Vanhoozer uses the term “communication” in a broad sense. To communicate is not merely “to transmit information” but “to make common” or “to share.” Thus God in his communicative activity communicates himself: his light (truth), life (energy), and love (relationship).

Rudolf Bultmann (RT, pp. 16-18).

Vanhoozer perceptively notes that Bultmann was unwilling to accept the “objective” speech act of God recorded in the Bible, yet he had no problem affirming that God acts on me, or speaks to me in the here and now—i.e., Bultmann’s understanding of the “act of God.” In this way, Bultmann is critical of *mythos* but *not* critical of his own speaking of God’s acts. All this demonstrates, as Vanhoozer notes, is that Bultmann substitutes one system of projection for another without argument. “He ignores the biblical *mythos* in his haste to reach the existential *logos* and, in so doing, fails to recognize the forms of biblical discourse as themselves indispensable means for articulating and thinking the reality of God. Demythologizing consequently de-narrativizes and generally de-forms the biblical rendering of God and his acts” (RT, p. 17).

Ludwig Feuerbach (RT, pp. 18-23).

Vanhoozer effectively utilizes throughout the book the “hard” demythologizing approach of Feuerbach as a foil by which to challenge all theologies which do not begin with God’s own speech, whether they can escape the charge of reducing theology merely to anthropology. Feuerbach, as Vanhoozer nicely develops, raises crucial questions—all of which are central to theological method—such as: Which system? Whose projection? Does theology begin “from below” or “from above?”

Classical theism (chapter 2).

On the one hand, Vanhoozer nicely debunks the view that classical theism was infected by Greek thought by appealing to the work of such people as Richard Muller, Paul Gavrilyuk, and Thomas Weinandy. As he rightly concludes:

[T]he legacy of patristic, medieval, and post-Reformation Protestant theology is not as captive to Greek philosophy as the ‘standard account’ suggests. We should therefore feel free to draw upon what these theologians actually said—about divine personhood, the love of God, and divine suffering – as we navigate our way through current debates (RT, p. 93).

On the other hand, he shows: (1) that classical theism’s dependence upon a perfect being theology, unless it is first canonically derived, is problematic since intuitions about perfection differ greatly (e.g., Anselm vs. Hartshorne vs. open theism); (2) a generic theism is not sufficiently Christian; and (3) it does not escape the Feuerbachian critique. In the end, “perfect being theology” gives too much weight to human ideas about God at the expense of Scriptural reasoning.

The “new orthodoxy” (chapters 2 and 3).

Vanhoozer’s description of the “new orthodoxy,” what he labels “kenotic-perichoretic-relational-panentheism” (i.e., a hybrid of process panentheism and open theism; a process-like theology which embraces *creatio ex nihilo* so that what results is a freely willed divine kenosis), is very insightful. He nicely captures the heart of this “new” view in three statements: (1) Divine persons are seen in not substantial but *relational* terms; (2) God’s love for the world is seen as *perichoretic* relationality; and (3) God’s suffering is seen as a necessary consequence of his *kenotic* relatedness (RT, p. 140). Furthermore, just as helpful as his description of this view is his critique.

(1) The “new orthodoxy” tends to collapse the “nature-person” distinction by making “persons” mere relations. However, how can one have relations without some notion of substance?

Relationality alone does not exhaust what we want to say either about God’s being or about God’s triune personhood. It is unnecessarily reductionist to collapse God’s essence or deity into his interpersonal communion or onto-relationality. If God’s being is communion, then divine unity becomes conceptually indistinguishable from divine threeness, and it consequently becomes difficult, if not impossible, to maintain the full divinity of each person in himself (RT, p. 143).

It is true that one can only be a person in relation to other persons but it does not follow that persons are nothing but relations. Persons cannot be reduced to their relationships with others. Relationships do not constitute persons, rather persons have relationships. By contrast, it is best to argue that the divine *person’s* distinct identities are relational and that communicative agency is the prime mode of personal existence, not that divine persons are nothing but relations (RT, p. 144). Persons are basic particulars who have the capacity to relate to other persons in various ways and as such, we need to distinguish the *what* from the *who*.

(2) We must not construe the God-world relation in terms of *perichoresis* since this ultimately surrenders God’s transcendence and limits God’s sovereign freedom which is inconsistent with the biblical *mythos*. Vanhoozer rightly avoids what he calls an “illegitimate Trinitarian transfer”—i.e., the application of categories that properly pertain to Christology (*kenosis*) and the Trinity (*perichoresis*) to the God-world relation. *Perichoresis* and *kenosis* are not helpful in thinking through how God relates to the world in general terms. The former is unique to the immanent Trinity, while the latter is unique to the incarnation (RT, pp. 150ff). In terms of the former, the divine persons indwell human beings in a qualitatively different way than they do one another (RT, p. 153). In regard to the latter, we must be very careful to make the incarnation become the entire pattern for the God-world relation.

(3) The “new orthodoxy” has devastating consequences for other theological doctrines. For example, sin and atonement is not our alienation from

God if “in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28) is conceived of ontologically; there is little place for judgment conceived of something external to God; our union with Christ is conceived of cosmically not covenantally; and eschatologically speaking, there are little grounds to think that everything will finish well (RT, p. 164). Eventually the “new orthodoxy” cannot account for the biblical *mythos*, especially the category of special divine communicative action that the Bible everywhere depicts (RT, p. 159) and, in the end, runs the risk of reducing theology to anthropology.

(4) Ultimately the “new orthodoxy” undercuts the Creator-creature distinction and as such, it cannot account for the Bible’s rendering of God as Creator and covenant Lord. It wrongly views the divine-human relation as operating on the same level which is a fundamental mistake. Furthermore, the biblical categories describe the God-world relation in covenantal terms not ontological ones.

2. The Overall Methodological Approach.

Taken as a whole, Vanhoozer’s “remythologizing” approach is very helpful, even though the label may create communicative problems depending upon one’s context and audience. Basically, “remythologization” is a species of “faith seeking understanding,” which starts with Scripture and works from the biblical text to theological formulation, something which is basic to the theological method of traditional Reformed theology.

Vanhoozer rightly acknowledges that the crucial question in theological method is “how do we move from the biblical depiction of God’s speech action (and apparent passion) to theo-ontology?” (RT, p. 78). His solution is to start with the canon as God’s authoritative speech and self-presentation which discloses for us the Triune God in communicative action. In this way, the biblical *mythos* has priority, which is simply the application of *sola Scriptura* to the doing of theology. Furthermore, Vanhoozer rightly notes that biblical reasoning takes place not by “simply abstracting and ordering statements about God into a cognitive-propositional system” (RT, p. 478), but by “reading Scripture *along the grain of the text*” (RT, p. 189) in order to reflect upon the “subterranean metaphysic” that is there (RT, p. 190). In our theologizing about God we begin with the biblical depictions of God as a personal agent who speaks and acts. The biblical *mythos* calls for and gives rise to theo-ontological thought (RT, p. 183) as it thinks through the diverse ways that God presents himself in Scripture. However, “the *logos* of remythologizing has only a ministerial authority that takes it marching orders from the magisterially authoritative biblical *mythos*” (RT, p. 477). In addition, Vanhoozer nicely discusses how to discern whether biblical language about God is anthropomorphic (RT, pp. 480ff). He rightly acknowledges that “behind every approach to biblical anthropomorphism there lurks a metaphysics, namely, a set of assumptions about how human-like God really is (or is not).” “To move from surface grammar to ontology one must take the long way of bibli-

cal reasoning,” which he attempts to do by laying out some important criteria for reading Scripture (RT, pp. 482-86).

It may legitimately be asked whether Vanhoozer is doing anything “new” in his method. Certainly the way he describes his approach is “new” and he develops more robustly God’s communicative action and the ontological entailments of the fact that “God is a speaker,” even though others have said something similar (e.g., John Frame, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Michael Horton). He also wants to understand God’s relation to the world *not* primarily in terms of causality—e.g., God is the First Cause or the Unmoved Mover—but in terms of communicative action, but even here I suspect that this is not entirely “new” (e.g., see Christological discussion of the *communicatio idiomatum*). Yet, his discussion of these areas is very helpful, engaging, and highly useful in the current debates in theology proper.

In addition, his “eclectic” use of diverse viewpoints is helpful as a model of how to incorporate “extratextual” data in theology without surrendering the priority of Scripture. For example, his use of Bakhtin, Balthasar, Ricoeur, theories of emotions, and so on, nicely provide conceptual elaboration and illuminate theological matters as long as these concepts do not overturn the biblical *mythos*. He states, “Theologians are free, however, to employ various concepts in an ad hoc manner insofar as those concepts serve a ministerial role” (RT, p. 408). Of course, this only works if one starts with Scripture and Scripture serves as the basis by which we evaluate whether these various concepts are helpful. But if utilized in this way, extratextual material can aid theology. Vanhoozer serves as a fine role model in this regard.

3. Specific Theological Proposals.

What is most commendable about the book is Vanhoozer’s constructive theological work, especially his development of the ontological implications of God as a triune speaker and divine communicative action. His refiguring the doctrine of God in the light of God’s being a communicative agent: a speaker; an author; a being-in-communicative act is very insightful. Even though previous theology has discussed this point, it certainly has not been developed to the extent he does. Three areas are most helpful.

Trinitarian Discussion.

The entire work places the doctrine of the Trinity center stage, which is where it should be. Vanhoozer rightly makes the following points.

(1) We must distinguish between the immanent and economic Trinity (RT, pp. 69-72). He rightly critiques “Rahner’s Rule” and those who follow it. He acknowledges that the danger of Rahner and the “new orthodoxy,” is to say that the divine economy defines God’s eternal being and thus reduce God to the history of his relationship to the world thus making God’s being and identity dependent on world history. “The world here becomes an integral part of God’s life, resulting in a loss of the divine freedom, transcendence,

and the Creator/creation distinction itself" (RT, p. 71)—something which cannot account for the biblical *mythos*. Vanhoozer correctly argues that the economic Trinity is not the immanent Trinity thus reducing God's being to what he does in history; rather, "the economic Trinity *communicates* the immanent Trinity" (RT, p. 294).

(2) In terms of the Triune life, Vanhoozer suggests that we think of the dynamism between the persons in terms of communicative activity oriented to communion. The three persons are distinct communicative agents that share a common communicative agency and what they share is their light, life, love.

(3) The re-working of divine simplicity (RT, pp. 274-77), both preserving the doctrine and helping make sense of it in terms of communicative action.

(4) Explaining how creatures participate in the triune life in terms of communication and covenant relations insightfully illuminated the discussion of a proper meaning of "union with Christ" (RT, pp. 283-94) in contrast to those who interpret participation more ontologically.

The Divine Sovereignty-Human Freedom Relationship.

Vanhoozer's re-working of this relationship in terms of communicative action is also helpful. By employing the model of "Authorship" (RT, pp. 298-99), he is able to preserve the Creator-creature distinction (God authors the world, transcendence); God is a being-in-communicative action (God dialogues with the world, immanence); and that God authorially governs and cares for the world dialogically (triune providence). Vanhoozer's wager (RT, p. 304) throughout is that viewing the God-world relation and particularly the divine sovereignty-human responsibility relation in terms of *analogia auctoris* is an improvement upon viewing it in impersonal causal ways. He views his proposal as a re-working of Austin Farrer's "causal joint" but now in terms of communicative action. God's speech is efficacious and brings about change in the world precisely by non-coercively bringing about understandings in human hearts and minds, which has the advantage of understanding God's action *personally* not impersonally (RT, p. 297, footnote 3). Thus, as Vanhoozer contends, "fully to understand the God-world relation means coming to grips not with a generically causal but with a specifically *communicative* joint: *God's relation to the world is a function of his triune authorial action, the self-communication of God the Father through the Word in the Spirit*" (RT, p. 302). A number of helpful points follow from this discussion.

(1) It preserves a strong sense of divine Lordship. God, as the Author, is the efficient cause of the world who retains his authorial rights even as he enters into the story as a character.

(2) God authors answerable agents and our freedom is best viewed in terms of our answerability, which sounds a lot like a defense of a compatibilist view of freedom. God addresses each person and each person freely responds and, in so doing, freely realizes the voice-idea of the Author (RT, p.

335). God's plan includes a covenant commitment to every creature, to fulfill the role of that creature (RT, p. 336). God as Author is not a coercive cause pushing against our freedom that interferes with our integrity, rather he is the interlocutor who interrogates and tests our freedom, consummating our existence in the process (RT, p. 336). My capacity for self-determination has its ground not in my own monological existence but rather in the potentially infinite dialogue with the Author God who alone calls me into being and who consummates my life and gives it meaning (RT, p. 336). It is in response to the dialogical situations that comprise my life, especially my dialogical relation to God, that I exercise the freedom to realize my own voice-idea (RT, p. 336).

(3) There is, then, no contradiction between and Authorial determination of a character's "idea" and the character's own self-determination. Freedom is not the power of self-authoring. We can realize our essential nature but we cannot make ourselves into something essential different. We act according to our natures, freely pursuing what we desire, but we lack the ability to reorient ourselves that we can change our own natures and desire something different (RT, pp. 336-37). Freedom of self-determination is not genuine Christian freedom. That freedom is the freedom to say "yes" to the divine call and which corresponds with the Author's own voice-idea for humanity revealed in Christ (RT, p. 337).

(4) God's sovereign interventions are *interjections*—calls, for example—that are efficacious but not coercive. God authorially consummates his characters without manipulating them. The divine author works according to our natures, via Word and Spirit (RT, pp. 316ff). Vanhoozer's discussion is particularly helpful in regard to effectual calling and the elect (RT, pp. 363ff). The effectual call is internally persuasive, but it is not from without. God convincingly persuades people by Word and Spirit so that they freely choose on their own accord in a way that corresponds to God's will. "Triune dialogical consummation is a matter of God's acting not *on* persons but *within* and *through* them in such a way that, precisely by so acting, God brings them to their senses and makes them into the creatures they were always meant to be" (RT, p. 370). Yet, as helpful as this is for understanding God's relation to his people (elect), one wonders if it is as helpful in relation to the non-elect. Why does God fail with some and not others? I will return to this point below.

Discussion of Divine Impassibility (chapters 8-9).

Vanhoozer's discussion of divine impassibility is some of his best work. He nicely upholds God's dialogical interaction with humans while preserving the Creator-creature distinction as he wrestles with the question: "Does God suffer change as a result of his dialogical interaction with the world?" (RT, p. 388). He rightly notes that divine impassibility serves as an excellent test case for his remythologizing approach since he has to justify how he moves correctly from the biblical *mythos* to theological metaphysics via the Bible's own theodramatic system of projection rather than by projecting human values

onto God (RT, p. 388). This requires a careful discussion of biblical language which attributes repentance, grieving, and emotions to God. How should we interpret these texts and what are they saying about the nature of the God-world relation? Should we interpret these texts as the “new orthodoxy” does, namely, as an expression of divine self-limitation in order for God to maintain a genuine relation with creation (RT, p. 391), or does this interpretation fail to do justice to the biblical *mythos*? Vanhoozer, against the grain of most theology today, even evangelical theology, vigorously defends a nuanced understanding of divine impassibility in a very persuasive fashion. Here are some notable points of his discussion.

(1) He carefully describes how the Patristic era defined “passion” and why they argued for divine impassibility given that passions were viewed as passive and involuntary, while affections were viewed as active and voluntary. In this light, the church argued that God’s feelings are not passions but affections (RT, p. 404), i.e., intentional affective attitudes that God eternally chooses to take towards his creatures (RT, p. 404).

(2) He also nicely discusses the term “emotions” and notes how it is too often conflated with passion/affection. As a result, he proposes a view of emotions which is consistent with the biblical *mythos*, i.e., emotions as intentional, concern-based construals that perceive an object as having a certain import. As such, emotions should not be viewed as passive passions; rather they are active affections. As applied to God, his emotions are real, covenantally concern-based theodramatic construals reflecting his covenantal affection for his people, which because he is the Creator, are known from eternity as complete and unified (RT, p. 414). They represent God’s true construal of the theodramatic situation and express God’s legitimate (and constant) concern to preserve an exclusive relationship—covenant set-apartness—with Israel (RT, p. 415). God’s emotions/feelings are always true and his concerns constant, so it follows that God’s feelings are as impassible as they are infallible: the impassible feels (RT, p. 415).

(3) His discussion of God’s love, compassion, and patience is excellent. He takes on the “new orthodoxy” by questioning whether God’s love and compassion is intrinsically vulnerable by his own self-limitation for the sake of interpersonal relations. He responds by picking up the *mythos* of divine promise, which stresses the reliability of God’s speech act, hence effectual communicative action which assumes divine power and covenant Lordship, or what Vanhoozer coins—*kyriotic compassion* (RT, pp. 444ff). Since compassion is an emotion, it is an active affection, not a passive one; it is a demonstration of God’s Lordship which must also be viewed in light of the entire theodrama (*sub specie theodramatis*). In this way, divine compassion is not a commiserating but a commanding, effectual compassion that does not share but transforms the sufferer’s situation (RT, p. 446). God’s compassion is his disposition to communicate his goodness (RT, p. 446) and share his own life and his patience is best viewed as his enduring love (RT, pp. 448ff). Viewed

in this way, when the biblical text says that God “responds,” he is not “responding” in the sense of re-acting, much less changing, to the moment-by-moment lives of his human creature. Rather God is at every moment being fully himself as he faithfully accompanies time and his speech and action reflect the appropriate covenantal-concern based construal of the theodramatic situation (RT, pp. 454-55). Seen in this light, divine impassibility should be understood as God’s covenantal steadfastness (RT, p. 457). Divine impassibility is God’s capacity to endure (i.e., remain constant despite external pressure to change). God’s love is best viewed as his disposition to communicate his goodness (RT, p. 457); his free self-determination to share his life (i.e., truth, goodness, and beauty) in Christ through the Spirit. Why is God love? Because he is the one who gives himself wholly to those who are wholly other (RT, p. 457).

(4) Vanhoozer then applies this entire discussion to the question of the *crucified* God. He carefully avoids two common pitfalls in contemporary theology: a Christological reductionism and the collapsing of the immanent into the economic Trinity. In regard to the former, he does not allow the person and history of Jesus to define God completely since: (a) Jesus does not reveal God *de novo* nor *ex nihilo* due to the OT Scriptures. God remains the same throughout redemptive-history; (b) If Jesus’ history completely reveals and constitutes God’s being then it becomes difficult to identify which properties are human and which divine (e.g. Does God sleep, eat?, etc.). (c) Scripture shows us what is revelatory of God in Jesus’ life which is Jesus’ being-in-communicative-act. The primary purpose of Jesus’ suffering is not to reveal God’s suffering, but to bring about salvation. Parallel to this discussion Vanhoozer has a very helpful discussion of the *communicatio idiomatum*. He rightly distinguishes “person” from “nature” (i.e., person is the *who* and nature is the *manner of the who’s existence*). As applied to Christ’s suffering, it is important to stress that it is neither the divine nature nor an abstract human nature *who* experiences suffering but the divine *person* and the manner he experiences suffering is as a man (RT, p. 423). This classic way of stating it rightly preserves: (a) the Son’s identity prior to Jesus’ history; and (b) Jesus’ history does display the very being of the eternal Son in human form. Vanhoozer concludes his discussion by noting that if the cross is *the* paradigm of divine suffering, then it must be stated that

God never suffers because he is overtaken by worldly events, but only because he uses them for his own authorial purposes... If God suffers, then he suffers in a divine manner, that is, his suffering is an expression of his freedom; suffering does not befall God, rather he freely allows it to touch him. He does not suffer, as creatures do, from a lack of being; he suffers out of love and by reason of his love, which is the overflow of his being (RT, p. 430).

(5) In regard to the latter, Vanhoozer does not collapse the immanent into the economic Trinity. In the biblical *mythos*, the cross is not a symptom of

God's general metaphysical relationship to the world but the climax of God's particular relationship to Israel that began with a divine promise to Abraham. Only the canonical, covenantal *mythos* can hope to make intelligible the God-world dynamics of the cross (RT, p. 461). The cross of Christ, then, does not constitute, much less change God, but rather it demonstrates who God (already and always) is:

God is always, everywhere, and at all time fully himself. His being love—communicative action oriented to communion—is fully realized in the immanent Trinity before the economic Trinity actualizes it in history. The pouring out of the Son's life on the cross, in time, reflects the Father's outpouring of love into the Son in eternity... As the resurrection makes plain, nothing can stem the inextinguishable overflow of God's light, life, and love (RT, p. 462).

(6) Instead of discarding impassibility, Vanhoozer rightly argues that it should be embraced, if probably defined and argued. It is a truth which emphasizes the perfect fullness of the triune life and love, not a static indifference to the play of the world (RT, pp. 462-63). It is the guarantee of God's utterly reliable being-in-communicative-activity (RT, p. 463).

A Few Critical Reflections

Overall, my appreciation for Vanhoozer's work is greater than my criticism yet I offer three areas of critical reflection which hopefully will lead to further clarification and discussion.

1. The Absence of the Crucial Discussion of Apologetics.

Let me first acknowledge that this work is *not* an apologetics book; it is a constructive work in theology, specifically theology proper. Why, then, do I raise this point? For this reason: most of Vanhoozer's conversation partners do not accept the same view of Scripture and orthodoxy that he accepts and assumes. Is it enough to propose "remythologizing" theology without first giving some justification for why we accept the canonical Scriptures as fully authoritative and God's own self-presentation? Certainly this has been the historic position of the church and maybe that is reason enough to start here. Even better, as Vanhoozer acknowledges, Scripture is self-attesting and as such, "It follows that the various biblical texts are forms of divine discourse and should thus be counted as figuring among the divine repertoire of communicative action" (RT, p. 205, footnote 100). Yet, is this not what is precisely at dispute? Why do some (e.g., Bultmann) read Scripture as a *myth* instead of as *mythos*? Is it not because they do *not* believe Scripture is true, reliable, and accurate in what it communicates? How does one adjudicate this point which lies beneath one's entire approach to Scripture and theology? In other words, the reason why people disagree on the theological interpretation of Scripture, whether Scripture should be viewed as *myth* vs. *mythos*, or whether

all of the *mythos* reliably communicates who God is, is due to the larger truth question tied to entire theological/philosophical viewpoints.

Let me be clear as to what I am *not* saying. I am *not* saying that Vanhoozer should have written another book, viz., an apologetics work. However, I am saying that it is *not* enough to say that we simply need to “remythologize” theology since what is at dispute is whether such an approach to theology is even possible. Something more has to be said about the truth of the entire Christian position over against many of these conversation partners. Let me give some examples.

In the preface, Vanhoozer begins with this statement: “Some readers will no doubt regard this entire project as a retrograde development...” (RT, p. xv). He gives the example of John Robinson’s *Honest to God*. But in order to respond to Robinson we must say more than that we need to “remythologize” theology; ultimately what is at stake is an entire defense of Christianity, including its view of God and Scripture as an entire package. Vanhoozer continues: “Theology is ultimately irresponsible if it fails either to attend to what God says or to think about the nature of the one who addresses us” (RT, p. xvi). I agree, but is this not the precise point at dispute with people such as Robinson, Bultmann, Feuerbach, et. al.?

Or, on p. xvii, Vanhoozer gives his wager: “My wager is that we will come to a better understanding of God’s being by examining biblical accounts of God’s communicative action (i.e., naming promising, declaring, etc.)” Or, in RT, p. 181, he acknowledges that contemporary critics of metaphysics are legion. However, one alternative to the myth of metaphysics is the metaphysics of *mythos*. To “remythologize” is to put our discourse of *what is* under the discipline of the biblical accounts of God’s speaking and acting. In this regard, in RT, p. 8 he discusses the difference between theology “from below” vs. “from above.” He claims that onto-theology fails to attend to God’s own self-communication. Metaphysics has more of the fragrance of *logos* than *mythos*. This may be true, and I think it is. But why does onto-theology argue this way? Is it merely that they have failed to recover a proper understanding of metaphor and biblical language, hence to view Scripture as *mythos* instead of myth? Or is it due to their conviction that the Bible cannot be trusted in its *mythos* and that human reflection about God is a far more reliable guide in discerning the being of God? Is it not due precisely to their rejection of Vanhoozer’s view of Scripture on extratextual grounds such as philosophy, science, human experience, etc.? Why not accept a “myth” view of the Bible? Is it merely a fideistic choice?

Once again, my purpose in raising these examples is *not* to chide Vanhoozer for what he has *not* written. It is simply to observe that this issue cannot be avoided. I agree with his basic approach, but underneath massive differences in theological method are entire worldview structures which need to be articulated and defended. The dividing line between those who view theology only as talk about God-talk and those who believe in the possibility

of true talk about God eventually comes back to the truth question. Obviously Vanhoozer is fully aware of this, but more needs to be said before his “remythologization” project will be accepted by many today.

2. Two Methodological Issues: Literary Forms and the Use of Scripture.

A Question about Literary Forms.

Anyone familiar with Vanhoozer’s hermeneutical work, especially his emphasis on the importance of literary forms, will think it strange that I begin with this question: Are literary forms overblown? I am *not* asking this question to downplay the crucial role that literary forms play in hermeneutics, which is made abundantly clear in *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* In order to grasp authorial intent, discerning the illocutions of the author is directly linked to their use of specific literary forms. However, in Vanhoozer’s writings, including this one, he says much more than this.

In his writings, Vanhoozer argues that diversity of literary forms (i.e., canonical plurality) ought to lead to *theological* plurality on the level of interpretative traditions. He writes:

The plurality on the level of the canon may call for an equivalent plurality on the level of interpretative traditions. If no single conceptual (read, confessional) system is adequate to the theological plentitude of the canon, then we need a certain amount of polyphony *outside* the canon, too, in order to do justice to it. The church would be a poorer place if there were not Mennonite or Lutheran or Greek Orthodox voices in it.⁴

In fact, in *The Drama of Doctrine*, he applied this point to the atonement arguing that penal substitution, relational restoration views, and basically most theories of the atonement “typically privilege one set of metaphors, one idea complex, one conceptual scheme” (RT, p. 385), but a *remythologizing* approach will acknowledge all the biblical metaphors and not “reduce the variety of the biblical metaphors to a single conceptual scheme” (RT, p. 385). This same point is reiterated in *Remythologizing* but now vis-à-vis theology proper. Given the many literary forms of the canon, he concludes, “The reality of God outruns any one theologian’s attempt to conceptualize it, just as Scripture outruns the attempt of any one interpretative scheme to capture its meaning (RT, p. 474).” Theology “requires more than one set of concepts or a single consciousness to express it—even while professing truth to be one, holy, catholic, and apostolic (RT, p. 474).”

I have tried hard to understand Vanhoozer’s point but I do not see how canonical diversity leads to *theological* diversity. No doubt as we read and interpret Scripture, “Biblical reasoning, the formal principle of remythologizing, involves the conceptual elaboration of the form and content of the Bible,

⁴ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, p. 275.

itself a means of divine communicative action. This involves not merely thinking *about* but *with* and *through* the various voices and forms that constitute the Bible” (RT, p. 477), but why does this lead to *theological plurality*? Our conceptual elaboration must do justice to Scripture in all of its diversity, but does this entail that there is no single conceptual system which accurately understands the Scripture, or at least, in terms of the areas that are central to an understanding of the Gospel? Our theological formulations of the Trinity, Christology, the atonement, and so on, are formulated in light of the diverse canonical voices, but ought we not to contend that they are true if they correspond to what Scripture says, and that in spite of the canonical diversity, there is an overall way to think of God, Christ, sin, atonement, etc.? For example, in atonement theology, we must not privilege one set of metaphors, but when one puts all the canonical metaphors together and seeks to do justice to how the metaphors are worked out along the grain of the canonical text, does not Scripture itself give us a view of the cross that explains the heart of what it achieves which some interpretations simply do not get right?

Furthermore, within Scripture itself, especially thinking of the New Testament use of the Old Testament and intertextual development within the canon, is the main issue literary forms giving us a plurality of readings or how those various texts (which assumes diverse literary forms) are interpreted in light of the progressive unfolding of God’s plan across redemptive history? For example, think of how the author of Hebrews appeals to the OT (quoting from the Psalter [Pss. 2, 8, 22, 45, 95, 110], the Prophets [Isa. 8:17-18; Jer. 31:31-34], the narratives [Gen. 2:1-4; Gen. 14; Exod. 25:40; Num. 12; 2 Sam. 7:14; 1 Chron. 17:13-14]) and draws his theological conclusions. The author’s conclusions have less to do with how literary forms function than where those texts are placed in the unfolding plan of God (see Heb. 3:7-4:13; 7:1-28; 8:1-13).

Questions Regarding the Use of Scripture.

Related to the above discussion I have some questions regarding Vanhoozer’s use of Scripture. Does he really demonstrate how different literary forms are used to draw the conclusions he draws? The only place this occurs is in his discussion of apocalyptic literature and the problem of evil (RT, pp. 346-56). However, one could draw similar conclusions regarding multiple levels of “powers” in other literature other than apocalyptic. Why cannot one speak of different levels of communicative action (i.e., divine, human, Satanic) from narratives or other literary forms? In the end, I do not see how his theory of literary forms is worked out in practice in this work. More examples of how literary forms allow us to think differently about God’s being, character, attributes, Triune relations, providence, would help and especially help to clarify exactly how literary forms are informing his theological conclusions. This would also be instructive in seeing how “remythologization” works in practice and how it is different from other evangelical approaches which

simply appeal to the text of Scripture, acknowledging that literary forms are crucial for discerning authorial intent, but then go about the task of thinking through how the canon puts all the pieces together.

In addition, for all the emphasis on the biblical *mythos* and moving from *mythos* (i.e., Scripture) to metaphysics (i.e., systematic theology), I do not see much interaction with Scripture in the sense that the biblical *mythos* is first unpacked text after text, in light of these texts placed in the theodrama of the canonical text, and brought to canonical fulfillment in Christ. For the most part, Vanhoozer *theologically* and *conceptually* develops the implications of the biblical portrayal of God as a “speaker” (which he rightly derives from the *mythos*) but his use of Scripture in its full canonical context is fairly spotty and it is especially so in relation to biblical genres and literature. This is *not* to say that Vanhoozer does not use Scripture well throughout the book and draw correctly from the biblical storyline. In a number of places his discussion is very insightful (e.g., use of “rest” in Hebrews and linking it throughout the canon [RT, p. 462]; what “mystery” is in Scripture vs. metaphysical mysteries [RT, p. 472]; his treatment of the Father-Son relation in John 5 [RT, p. 252], and so on). Rather, it is to say that his use of Scripture is fairly sparse in the full exegetical to biblical theology sense, and it does not delve into discussions of genre, redemptive-historical context, and how entire theological conclusions are drawn from the biblical *mythos*.

If the truth be known, throughout most of the book Vanhoozer assumes a specific theological viewpoint, viz., Reformed theology (which I basically agree with), and then seeks to provide a *theological* accounting for it given his construal of God’s Triune communicative agency. For example, in his discussion of the problem of evil Vanhoozer asks: “If God is the author of the “person-idea” that heroes freely (though necessarily) work out, does it not follow that God is ultimately responsible for what the evil-doing villains do as well?” (RT, p. 338). He answers: “Not according to the Westminster Confession, which states that God ordains whatsoever comes to pass in such a way that ‘neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures’” (RT, pp. 338-39). But it is important to point out, in this chapter he never really substantiates this point. He takes it as a given and then gives a *theological* accounting for it given his model of God’s Authorship. However, what he does not do is demonstrate from the biblical *mythos* why someone ought to accept the Westminster Confession’s understanding of divine providence as the biblical given. What he should say is this: I am assuming the exegetical and biblical-theological work of Reformed theology and my task in this work is to theologize about it by employing new analogies, such as communicative agency, as I demonstrate that this theology is a better alternative to the “new orthodoxy.”

3. Some Questions Regarding Specific Proposals.

The Analogy of God as Author.

The analogy of God as Author is utilized to harmonize God's transcendence, immanence, and providence (RT, pp. 298-99). Vanhoozer appeals to Bakhtin's work and employs the concept of dialogic authorship to help explain the God-world relation. The model of dialogic authorship allows Vanhoozer to affirm the Lordship of the Triune God as well as the freedom and responsibility of human characters within the theodrama. The Triune God relates to his "heroes" more in terms of "interjection" than intervention or influence (RT, p. 316) and our human freedom lies in our answerability, i.e., our ability to be in dialogue with God (RT, p. 335).

All of this is very helpful but I question whether dialogical authorship accounts for the improvisation that happens on stage when an actor embodies a role? If one takes improvisation of the human hero seriously, does this explain how God is able to maintain sovereignty (control) over characters without removing their freedom? I realize that ultimately the divine sovereignty-human freedom relation is not one that can be conceptualized easily, but I do question whether dramatic authorship can account for the sovereign rule of God over the stage of human history and the improvisation of human beings, or at least account for it better than previous attempts in the history of theology.

Divine communicative agency and the non-elect.

Vanhoozer's treatment of effectual calling is very helpful. God's communicative agency works outside, alongside, and inside us, efficaciously persuading us, not to act against our wills but to bring our wills into alignment with the will of the Author (RT, p. 494). "The divine-human dialogue is actually a divine authoring, that is, an asymmetrical communicative process by which a hero is theodramatically consummated" (RT, p. 494). In a form of "divine soteric dialogue," God guides interlocutors in a non-coercive, but internally persuasive (and hence efficacious) manner. God deploys a panoply of covenantal forms of discourse—prophetic, lyric, narrative, parabolic, etc.—in order to communicate not only his mind but his affections, namely, his covenant-concern-based theodramatic construals. He employs these forms of discourse to transform minds, wills, and imaginations. The efficacious inner persuasive discourse of word and Spirit ultimately moves the heart, but in a properly communicative rather than manipulative fashion. Regeneration changes the whole person. God uses these means to bring about certain ends in a guaranteed fashion. Furthermore, for the elect, divine communicative action is ultimately oriented to communion, a divine-human fellowship that effects sanctification: the transformation of human communicants into the image of Jesus Christ (RT, p. 495).

However, does this explanation make sense of the non-elect? Does God work in exactly the same way in them and if not, why not? If God can communicate to humans, why does he neglect to do so in situations where such communicative acts could prevent innocent suffering (RT, p. 502)? In fact, Vanhoozer raises this question but he leaves the question unanswered. He rightly admits that the existence of evil remains a mystery, but concludes that the Triune God is not indifferent or powerless (RT, p. 503). I agree with this conclusion and maybe this is all we can say this side of eternity. God has not given us an exhaustive revelation of himself and his ways, even though he has told us enough. We must learn to live with what we have received and view everything in terms of what he has actually said and done for us in Christ. Yet, if one is going to make effectual calling the paradigm or pattern which explains the entire God-world relation (which Vanhoozer seems to do), he needs to explain more why it is that God does not universally consummate all creatures in a redemptive sense, or even how communicative agency works in relation to the non-elect.

To be fair, Vanhoozer does address this question in relation to his discussion of Pharaoh (RT, pp. 339-42) and Satan and the powers (RT, pp. 342-56). Much of it is helpful but it is interesting what is left unsaid: (a) Why and how did Adam fall since he was a good creature in communion with God? (b) Why and how did Satan fall, assuming he was created good and upright? Both of these issues are not addressed. The discussion of Pharaoh basically assumes an already *fallen* hero so that the explanation for Pharaoh's hardening is that God withholds his Spirit (RT, p. 340). God's word dialogically consummates Pharaoh by effectively soliciting his free response, "No." Through God's dialogical interaction to Pharaoh through Moses, God communicates information but not the light, life, and love that God communicates to his people. God's communicative agency falls short of personal communion so that in the case of the non-elect, they are consummated by a word of judgment, a word bereft of the Spirit's work. They remain hard-hearted, disposed not to respond to God's Word, uncommunicative and unwilling to comply. But in this explanation, how do we explain the first choice of an *unfallen* hero such as Adam? Or, in regard to Satan, how do we explain his fall? Vanhoozer nicely explains how Satan helps make sense of sin's entrance into the human realm. He unpacks Satan's lies in a reworking of the privation theory. Satan's speech, as the manipulator, is defective; it does not correspond to reality. But in his entire discussion he leaves unexplained Satan's fall, let alone Adam's.

His possible response to these questions may be that the biblical *mythos* does not address the issue and this is fine up to a point. But if one wants to place the doctrine of divine providence and divine action under the rubric of effectual calling (RT, p. 371), then I think something more has to be said about these issues, especially given the fact that one of the main reasons for

the “new orthodoxy” is due to their attempt to address the problem of evil better than classical theism.⁵

Concluding Reflection

Overall, I am very appreciative of this work. It is thoroughly orthodox and evangelical and it was a delight to think through and digest. Even though I have raised some critical comments, I agree with its basic direction, including the challenge for theology to begin with God’s authoritative work and rightly and faithfully to draw our theological conclusions from Scripture according to the Bible’s own presentation of itself. Much work is to be done as we stand on the shoulders who have come before us, and Vanhoozer’s work is a helpful step in that direction, even though it needs a more thorough exegetical grounding. We can all eagerly wait to see how Vanhoozer will continue to “re-mythologize” in other doctrinal areas.

⁵ In a recent essay, Vanhoozer he has sought to address God’s apparent “failed” communicative action. See “Ezekiel 14: “I, the Lord, Have Deceived That Prophet”: Divine Deception, Inception, and Communicative Action” in *Theological Commentary: Evangelical Perspectives* (ed. R. Michael Allen; London: T & T Clark, 2011), pp. 73-98.