

## INTRODUCTION

Kevin Vanhoozer in a massive recent work, *Is there a Meaning in this Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*, makes the plea for an ethic of interpretation that can adequately respond to the “present pluralistic situation.”<sup>1</sup> At the foundation of his response lies the claim that interpretation is fundamentally a theological issue. Vanhoozer believes that trinitarian theology, expressed within a model of speech-act theory, can provide the premise for the metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics of interpretation. His book consists of mainly theory with limited applications. My intention in the present work comes in asking whether Vanhoozer’s contribution to a Christian ethic of reading actually equips readers of the Bible in the determination and production of “good” or “bad” readings.

The test case to which his theory will be applied comes from Isaiah 6:9-10,

[God] said, “Go and tell this people:  
 “‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding;  
 be ever seeing, but never perceiving.’  
 Make the heart of this people calloused;  
 make their ears dull  
 and close their eyes.  
 Otherwise they might see with their eyes,  
 hear with their ears,  
 understand with their hearts,  
 and turn and be healed.”

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1998), 416.

There are two important reasons supporting the appropriateness of this passage as a test case. First, recent Isaianic studies reflect the need for positive contributions to the ethics of reading. Melugin adopts the work of Stanley Fish as a paradigm for the reading of Isaiah.<sup>2</sup> Vanhoozer rejects Fish's model outright as one advocating the indeterminacy of meaning, the disregard for attending to intentional meaning, and ultimately the inability of the text to speak from beyond the interpretive community. The second reason for choosing this passage comes from the content of verses themselves. This passage stretches our understanding of God's sovereignty and the responsibility of his people. The difficulty in reading and understanding this passage has resulted in various and nuanced interpretations.<sup>3</sup>

The scope of this paper can in no way accommodate the entire history of this passage's interpretation. My attempt will be an evaluation of the oldest and also most recent attempts at interpretation. The passage's earliest interpretation will be sought in a text-critical examination of the DSS (Dead Sea Scrolls), the LXX (Septuagint), the Targum, and the New Testament (NT). It must be noted at the outset that Evans has accomplished a formidable history of the early textual representations of Isaiah 6:9-10.<sup>4</sup> I am in no way attempting to add a competing account of this history. I wish only to build off his strengths, critique any weaknesses, and apply the findings to Vanhoozer's methodology. I will limit the recent contributions to the interpretation

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<sup>2</sup> Roy Melugin, "The Book of Isaiah and the Construction of Meaning," in *Writing and Reading the Isaiah Scroll*, ed. Craig Broyles and Craig Evans (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 39-56.

<sup>3</sup> Rodney Hutton, "Confessions of a Recovering Historical Critic: The Question of What Constitutes 'Competent Reading,'" *TSR* 20 n.2 (1998): 91-97, has raised some of the hermeneutical issues revolving around traditional historical criticism and the message of Isaiah 6. However, he offers no articulated way forward other than "mutual correction." My work sympathizes with his contribution and will hopefully develop some of the ideas implicit to his work.

<sup>4</sup> C. A. Evans, *To See and Not Perceive: Isaiah 6:9-10 in Early Jewish and Christian Interpretation* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989).

of Isaiah 6:9-10 to those coming from the scholarly community in roughly the past 50 years.

Chapter one will establish Vanhoozer's contribution to hermeneutics in light of two recent and influential models of interpretation. I will include a brief summary of Vanhoozer's metaphysics and epistemology of language from which he bases his work. This will be followed by a detailed presentation of his ethic of reading which will stand as the working model for the subsequent chapters.

Chapter two will attempt to define, establish, and defend the "original" Hebrew text of Isaiah 6. This text will stand as that to which all other translations and interpretations will be compared. The remaining chapters will systematically work through the above mentioned readings of Isaiah 6:9-10. Chapter three, four, five, and six will examine the earliest interpretations of this passage. This will include investigating the DSS, LXX, Targums, and NT respectively. C. A. Evans' argument for a drastic shift in meaning will receive close attention in these chapters. Chapter seven will address the recent contributions made in the interpretation of Isaiah 6:9-10. Both aspects of discerning the genre of Isaiah 6 as well as the interpretation of verses 9 and 10 will be addressed here. Each chapter will conclude with a brief critique of their handling of the Hebrew text as we have it. The framework of Vanhoozer's model of ethical interpretations will guide these discussions throughout.

My conclusion will offer two elements. First I will summarize the work achieved in this study and evaluate the manner in which the *meaning* of Isaiah 6:9-10 has been handled. This will include the implications of applying Vanhoozer's model and whether or not criticism of bad or unethical reading needs to be levelled. The

second aspect of the conclusion will contain a brief assessment of Vanhoozer's model and the strengths and weaknesses of its contribution towards the pursuit of ethical reading.