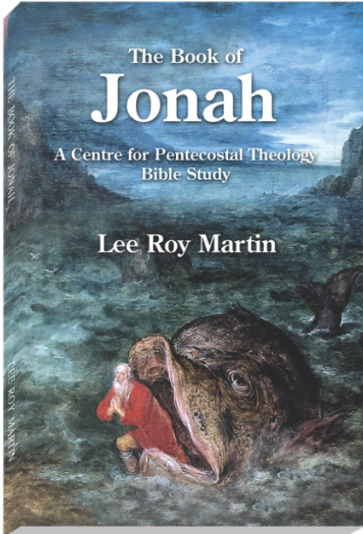
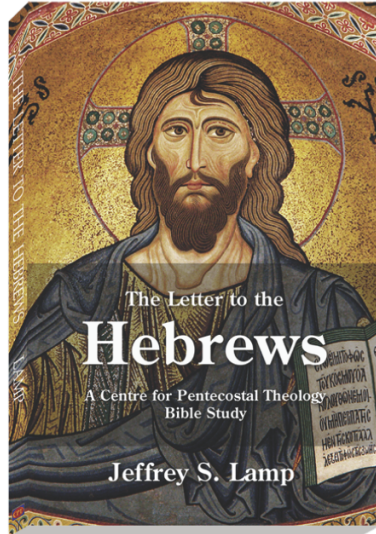


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# WHITHER PENTECOSTAL HERMENEUTICS?

## A RESPONSE TO CRAIG KEENER'S "THE SPIRIT AND BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION"

JEFFREY S. LAMP

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### Introduction

It is certainly an honor to respond to Craig Keener's paper. I have been reading his books since I was a doctoral student back in the 1990s and have had numerous occasions to interact with his work in my own research and writing. His presentation, focusing on his book *Spirit Hermeneutics: Reading Scripture in Light of Pentecost*,<sup>1</sup> touches upon a topic I have been involved with lately, namely, the role of the Spirit in interpreting Scripture. Moreover, as a recent convert to Eastern Orthodoxy from Wesleyan Protestantism, and as a biblical scholar by training and vocation, I have been forced to reassess how it is I approach the Bible both in my personal and professional lives. On top of this, many colleagues at other Pentecostal schools are on a quest to develop a distinctive Pentecostal hermeneutic, a pursuit that brings their work into direct interaction with Keener's. In this response to Keener's thoughtful and inspiring paper, I would like to focus on three topics, suggested by his paper and my own context as a reader of the Bible. First, I will highlight a crucial aspect of Keener's presentation, his distinction between a grammatical-historical reading of the text, which he advances, and the historical-critical approaches of post-Enlightenment Western biblical scholarship. Second, I will argue that Keener's approach has common ground with how the Bible is read in Eastern Orthodoxy, a point that he acknowledges in his paper (whether he meant to do that or not!). Third, I will briefly discuss how Keener's Spirit hermeneutic in conjunction with

the Orthodox approach to the Bible may inform the current quest for a distinctive Pentecostal hermeneutic.

## **Keener's Appeal to Historical Context**

In this paper, Craig Keener accepts the daunting challenge of navigating a Spirit hermeneutic between the Scylla of the highly rationalistic approach of the historical-critical schools of biblical studies and the Charybdis of unbridled subjective appeals to the Spirit in interpretation characteristic of many within Pentecostal<sup>2</sup> circles. Keener argues that careful attention to the contexts of Scripture—literary, historical, socio-cultural, etc.—is necessary to determine the “plain meaning of the text,” work that must be done before, or at least in conjunction with, the process of hearing the Spirit’s voice in the text. This work, as any theological student engaged in academic biblical studies will attest, requires a great deal of knowledge to perform. Biblical languages, a wide array of background material (and here I must say that no one has done more than Craig Keener to make this material accessible to a wide audience), familiarity with the leading critical methodologies of the day, and so forth, are required to assure that one is paying due attention to the original setting of the text. Only when one has done so can one be confident that a firm foundation has been laid upon which to seek a spiritual sense in the text. An interpreter must pay due diligence to perform this task to the best of his or her ability to frame the sense of the text in its original context in order to have a benchmark against which to test potential moments of spiritual inspiration regarding a text’s meaning. In this regard, Keener is quite in keeping with the hermeneutical approach of another prolific Pentecostal scholar, Gordon Fee, whose co-authored text on hermeneutics has found popular reception among a wide, varied audience.<sup>3</sup>

This is not to say that Keener advances uncritically the post-Enlightenment historical-critical approaches that hold sway in much Western biblical scholarship. While not denying the value that studies in this vein may produce, Keener here proposes an approach that pays careful attention to the historical setting of the text and indeed the very words that authors employed in their writing. Citing such exemplars as

John Chrysostom, Martin Luther, and John Calvin—chosen precisely because these interpreters predate the modernist historical-critical project—Keener argues that the fact that divine revelation has been given and preserved in textual form requires that readers pay “common courtesy” to the biblical authors by first reading their writings as just that, writings. This is not to suggest that the “other author” of the Bible, the Holy Spirit, is neglected. Rather, a direct appeal to an experiential spiritual encounter must not supersede the work of reading a written text. History matters, words matter, genre matters, for these are all appropriated by the Spirit in the inspiration of the biblical writers. A Spirit hermeneutic must work with all that the Spirit used in communicating God’s revelation to human beings.

## Keener and Eastern Orthodoxy

Keener’s appeal to John Chrysostom opens the way for inquiry into the similarity of Keener’s approach to the larger Eastern Orthodox approach to the Bible. While no one doubts at all that Craig Keener is familiar with the Bible, such an opinion is not often held regarding the Eastern Orthodox, at least among Protestants. This caricature holds because the place of the Bible in Orthodox life is substantially different from that of Protestants. In Orthodoxy, there is no equivalent for the Protestant doctrine of *sola Scriptura*. Scripture for the Orthodox is an integral and enervating aspect of the “tradition,” which is the unbroken chain of teaching and practice from Jesus through his disciples and apostles and transmitted through the Fathers of the Church, or “the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3, NRSV). That is, Scripture does not stand above tradition as with the Reformers, nor does it function as the primary source of authority in conversation with tradition as found in my once-beloved Wesleyan Quadrilateral. Rather, Orthodoxy’s approach to Scripture is inextricably connected with the role of liturgy in Orthodox life. Revelatory to me upon becoming Orthodox was the thoroughly biblical language and imagery employed in the wide range of liturgical services in Orthodox worship, especially in the Divine Liturgy. This

“delivery system,” if you will, is actually derived from Scripture itself. The Orthodox have long observed that the Bible itself contains liturgy within it, from prescriptions for Tabernacle and Temple worship, the Psalter, the orders for Eucharistic observance, and the creedal fragments found within Scripture. Liturgy and Scripture are inseparable at their roots. While Keener is correct that Fathers such as John Chrysostom were concerned with the grammatical-historical reading of Scripture, they were also capable of typological, allegorical, Christological, and creedal readings of Scripture, approaches that took into account the words and settings of Scripture, but go beyond those readings. From Gregory Palamas’ fourteenth-century controversy with the anti-Hesychast Barlaam, the Orthodox preference of mysticism over against rigid scholasticism worked its way into the Orthodox mindset. All of this is now broadly the way of the Tradition, and current Orthodox hermeneutical methodologies tend now to read Scripture in the way of the Fathers, but also through the Fathers, experienced directly in the liturgical life of the Church.<sup>4</sup>

So how does this intersect with Keener’s approach? As he has noted, there is a broad area of common focus, as his appeal to Chrysostom illustrates. But I think there is more here than just an incidental common methodological concern. Given its own methodological preferences, Orthodox reading of the Bible may be termed a Spirit hermeneutic in its own right. The words and settings of Scripture matter to the Orthodox, if in no other way than the words and images are appropriated for its very liturgical life and the tradition provides something akin to a historical setting with which Orthodox readers are very concerned. Moreover, Orthodoxy would heartily endorse Keener’s distinction between a contextual reading and the modern manifestation of scholasticism: historical-critical approaches. And given the deeply ingrained presence of Scripture in the prayers, worship, and hymnography of Orthodox liturgy, this would surely constitute an engagement with the Spirit in the encounter with Scripture toward appropriating Scripture for faithful living in the world.

## Keener, Orthodoxy, and the Quest for a Pentecostal Hermeneutic

Given the title of his book, it is no surprise that Keener has drawn the attention of many Pentecostal scholars engaged in the quest to develop a distinctive Pentecostal hermeneutic. Keener seems to have this group in mind when he argues for an approach that would make available a Spirit hermeneutic for the larger ecclesial world and not just one segment of the church. However, many Pentecostals are dissatisfied with the more scholastic approaches to Scripture that they have by and large inherited from evangelicals. The result has been a growing number of studies that offer a distinctively Pentecostal approach to Scripture that ostensibly derives from and contributes to life in Pentecostal communities.<sup>5</sup> Another result has been conversations, sometimes quite passionate, between Keener and these Pentecostals.<sup>6</sup> While many Pentecostal responses to Keener's book have been quite positive, some have been less so, bringing to my mind reminiscences of a few responses to Gordon Fee's hermeneutic some time ago that assessed his approach as not "Pentecostal" enough. So how does Keener's book contribute to this quest?

Perhaps returning to our earlier discussion of the Eastern Orthodox approach to Scripture may be of some help here. Orthodoxy appears to share Keener's regard for Scripture as a textual revelation as well as the concern of many Pentecostals for the function of Scripture in its own ecclesial context. Perhaps Keener's concern for context may be enlarged to include ecclesial context, as we saw with Orthodoxy's organic understanding of tradition as a context for reading Scripture. And perhaps Pentecostal interpreters (as many already do) may take seriously Keener's distinction between serious grammatical-historical reading of Scripture and the scholastic approaches many regard with suspicion, a view also found in Eastern Orthodoxy. The historical connection between evangelicals and Pentecostals is something that some may not particularly celebrate at all points, but it is a reality that cannot be ignored. Keener seems content to salvage the evangelical interest in Scripture as a written text, an interest shared among many Pentecostals, and to employ it in its best sense with the reality of Pentecost.

Perhaps Eastern Orthodoxy may serve as a broker in the conversation between Craig Keener and those in pursuit of a distinctive Pentecostal hermeneutic.

## Conclusion

So whither Pentecostal hermeneutics? The current interest among some Pentecostal scholars in developing a distinctive Pentecostal hermeneutic arises, in part, from a disaffection with modern critical approaches and their perceived inability to speak fruitfully to Pentecostal experience. They now wish to explore possibilities for reading Scripture that align with how they see Scripture functioning in their Spirit-empowered communities. The result is a variety of experimentations into how distinctive Pentecostal theology and experience might shape their readings of Scripture. Craig Keener's approach will not fully satisfy Pentecostals such as these. Nevertheless, his work in *Spirit Hermeneutics* will appeal to many other Pentecostals, and non-Pentecostals alike, standing as an exemplar of a hermeneutic that balances rigorous scholarship and fervent spiritual devotion. Though I am sympathetic with the impulse to define a distinctive Pentecostal hermeneutic, I doubt there will ever be one widely adopted hermeneutic to satisfy all—there may end up being as many Pentecostal hermeneutics as there are Pentecostalisms. Given this prospect, Keener's contribution deserves an honored seat at the table in discussions of Pentecostal hermeneutics.



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## Notes

1 Craig Keener, *Spirit Hermeneutics: Reading Scripture in Light of Pentecost* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

2 I will use the term “Pentecostal” to refer broadly to classical Pentecostal, neo-Pentecostal, and Charismatic traditions.

3 Douglas Stuart and Gordon D. Fee, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014). The first edition of this text was released in 1981.

4 Fr. John Breck is perhaps the foremost Orthodox voice in the recent revival in interest in the study of Scripture. For more popular, and brief, positions, see his articles, “Bible and Liturgy,” 1 January 2003, n.p., <https://oca.org/reflections/fr.-john-breck/bible-and-liturgy> (4 April 2018); “Bible Study Resources,” 2 October 2003, n.p., <https://oca.org/reflections/fr.-john-breck/bible-study-resources> (4 April 2018); and “Revival in Scripture,” 16 November 2004, n.p., <http://www.orthodoxytoday.org/articles4/BreckScripture.php> (4 April 2018). For more substantive treatments, see his *The Power of the Word in the Worshiping Church* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1986); and *Scripture in Tradition: The Bible and Its Interpretation in the Orthodox Church* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001).

5 A sampling includes: Kenneth J. Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic: Spirit, Scripture and Community* (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2009); Kenneth J. Archer and L. William Oliverio, Jr., *Constructive Pneumatological Hermeneutics in Pentecostal Christianity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Chris E. W. Green, *Sanctifying Interpretation: Vocation, Holiness, and Scripture* (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2015); Lee Roy Martin, *Pentecostal Hermeneutics: A Reader* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); Bradley Truman Noel, *Pentecostal and Postmodern Hermeneutics: Comparisons and Contemporary Impact* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010); L. William Oliverio, *Theological Hermeneutics in the Classical Pentecostal Tradition: A Typological Account* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Kevin L. Spawn and Archie T. Wright, eds., *Spirit and Scripture: Exploring a Pneumatic Hermeneutic* (London/New York: T & T Clark, 2013); and Amos Yong, *Spirit, Word, Community: Theological Hermeneutics in Trinitarian Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002).

6 E.g., Robby Waddell, Peter Althouse, et al., “Roundtable Dialogue of Craig S. Keener’s Spirit Hermeneutics: Reading Scripture in Light of Pentecost,” *Pneuma* 39:1–2 (2017), 123–240.