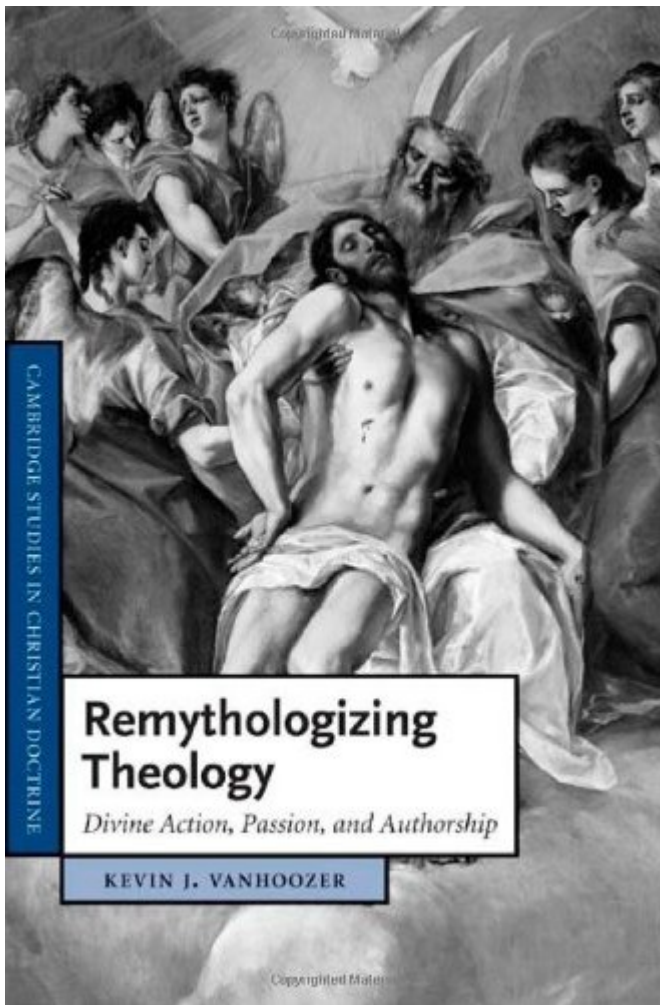


Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship

reviewed by [D. Stephen Long](#) in the [August 10, 2010](#) issue

In Review



Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship

Kevin J. Vanhoozer
Cambridge UP

Imagine that after you read scripture and proclaim, "This is the Word of the Lord," someone greets you with the question, "Were you really identifying your words with those of God?" What would you say next? Kevin Vanhoozer's *Remythologizing Theology* helps answer this question. It does what theology should do best—it speaks well of God. It identifies who God is and how God communicates so that it is neither foolish nor arrogant to say, "This is the Word of the Lord."

This is no small accomplishment. Nearly every name and concept traditionally used to name God and God's relation to creation has been critiqued for the past century. Many of what are often considered God's attributes—simplicity, perfection, impassibility, immutability, eternity, infinity, aseity—have been challenged, rejected or revised by process theology, open theism, Barthian theology and other theological movements. These critiques are so commonplace that Vanhoozer acknowledges that they constitute a new orthodoxy.

Yet Vanhoozer queries whether this new orthodoxy is warranted. Its rejection and revisions of the tradition often arise from a noble impulse—to be more faithful to scripture and to overcome the Christian tradition's (supposed) captivity to an outdated Greek metaphysics. Vanhoozer carefully addresses these criticisms and presents a compelling argument that could, if we are wise, provide a consensus for how Christians speak about God. It is a consensus we desperately need if theology is not to spiral into solipsism, where every individual gets to name God for herself or himself. What is at stake is the identification of a common object of our worship. Without this, Christianity deteriorates into unintelligibility; communion disappears.

Vanhoozer approaches his task as an exercise in remythologizing. It begins with God's communicative action, God's drama. We know God only because God speaks. Vanhoozer had already laid out this approach in his *The Drama of Doctrine*. What *Remythologizing* contributes beyond that work is the ontology or metaphysics that renders intelligible God's communicative action. "The task of the present work," he writes, "is to explore the ontology of the one whose speech and acts propel the theodrama forward."

This remythologizing, which Vanhoozer defines with ten theses, is neither a stand-alone metaphysics beginning from causality nor a myth in need of demythologization. It is a recovering and attending to the triune God who communicates. Thus it rethinks metaphysics through drama as a "form of biblical

reasoning” through the “means” of “faith seeking understanding.”

Vanhoozer’s argument unfolds in three parts. In the first part he begins with scripture, exegeting those places where God speaks: creation, God’s negotiation with Abraham over Sodom, the giving of the divine name to Moses and God’s speaking with Moses “face to face.” He then responds to the critiques found in the new orthodoxy.

Vanhoozer begins by presenting to us the God who speaks. We are treated to brief exegeses of the prophets, the exordium in Hebrews, John 1 and other key passages. This both sets the questions and provides answers to the question, Who is this God who speaks? The answer is: God is the triune One who communicates. Because this speaking is not intrinsic to nature, Vanhoozer denies that we can move directly from it to God. He worries that such a move inevitably is guilty of “ontotheology.” But the triune One who speaks also is, and that requires a careful delineation of a “theoontology.” The God who speaks does so in an “active voice,” appearing anthropomorphically while at the same time always maintaining the “Creator-creature distinction.”

Only after Vanhoozer establishes a biblical and theological basis to present who God is does he critique the new orthodoxy. To speak well of God requires refusing both to reduce God to the “history of his relation to the world” and to render God accessible outside God’s communicative act through a starting point in causality. The latter loses the theodrama—something classical theism is often charged with because of the hellenization thesis, which claims that classical theism is indebted more to Greek metaphysics than to scripture.

Vanhoozer recognizes what most sober theologians and historians have come to recognize—that this historical judgment was inaccurate. As he puts it, “We must conclude, then, that the legacy of patristic, medieval, and post-Reformation Protestant theology is not as captive to Greek philosophy as the ‘standard account’ suggests.” He rightly notes that this hellenization thesis was something of a shell game that allowed a Hegelianization of theology to slip into modern theology uncontested. Feuerbach’s ghost still haunts us. A theory of kenotic relationality stepped into the place that causality had held for the classical theists. For Vanhoozer, this new theory of relationality has lost the ability to speak of the triune God who communicates. It especially loses a theology of the first article, of the “fatherhood” of God. (Vanhoozer tends to let Barth off too easily as one culprit

behind this loss.)

After presenting his compelling critique of the new orthodoxy in the first part of the book, Vanhoozer moves to his development of “communicative theism and the triune God.” If the first part challenges and critiques the new orthodoxy, the second part challenges a metaphysics that begins with logos rather than mythos. In other words, Vanhoozer notes that what the kenotic relationalists oppose is worthy of opposition, but they offer the wrong solution.

The second part begins with two important distinctions. The first is the “real dividing line” among theologians today: between those “who view theology only as talk about God-talk and those who believe in the possibility of true talk about God.” Those still haunted by left-wing Hegelianism represent the former.

This first distinction divides, on the one hand, those who are committed to a modern epistemology that claims to know that the conditions for true speech about God can never be satisfied from those, on the other hand, who recognize the need for metaphysics, or for an ontology that expresses the truth of God. Vanhoozer sides with the latter.

He also recognizes an important second distinction among those within the latter category. Some approach this ontology from nature through causality, while others approach it on the basis of God’s self-communication. In other words, some begin with logos, from which they abstract the drama and the mythos, while others refuse this abstraction, recognizing that it inevitably distorts a proper theontology.

For Vanhoozer, this makes scripture the central authority for theology: “If God is ultimately not unintelligible, it is only because God has spoken and acted in the ways represented *in* the canon and in the ways instantiated *by* the various books that render God’s word.” Clearly Vanhoozer’s Reformed theological convictions are showing here. One might suggest that his work represents the best defense of *sola scriptura* in contemporary theology. However, it never smacks of Protestant triumphalism. The more Vanhoozer makes the canon primary in speaking well of God, the more he opens a rapprochement with non-Reformed theologies.

In his third part, Vanhoozer offers a constructive retooling of classical theism in relation to understanding both God and the God-world relation. To do so, he asserts and defends the claim that “God authorially interacts with human beings in dialogical fashion.” His goal is to maintain the concept of God’s sovereignty in

classical form without losing the reality of the freedom of humans as communicative agents in their own right and the central affirmation that God is love. He gives us a careful parsing of how impassibility functioned in the Christian tradition. It does not mean that God has no affections, but rather that God's affections are not like ours. They are not potentiality or lack; they are the fullness of God's being.

Vanhoozer makes a similar move with kenosis. God's emptying is not a loss; rather, it is God's plerosis, or filling. To explain this he draws upon the importance of the "middle voice" in speaking of God's suffering in Christ. God suffers only in the middle voice, which "has an active form but passive meanings." This suffering then "highlights the Son's situatedness in a medium—Jesus' humanity." God's work, and therefore God's communication, is an "active passion."

Vanhoozer is one of the most interesting theologians working today. His work deserves to be widely and carefully read. It is clearly a Reformed theological project. It could be supplemented with an account of God's communication as vision, drawing on those theophanic biblical texts where God shows God's self without speech. His "post-Barthian Thomism" might make more room for moving from creation to God's existence. And I am still puzzled by his use of Kant's scheme/content distinction; I wonder if it actually works against his communicative theism.

But these are minor quibbles. In an era in which more clergy know their Myers-Briggs score than can explain the doctrine of the enhypostaton, Vanhoozer's work is a breath of fresh air. If you are one of those clergy, obtain and read *Remythologizing Theology*. It will help you boldly proclaim, "This is the Word of God."