

SECOND EDITION

# The Fall OF Interpretation

Philosophical Foundations

for a Creational Hermeneutic



James K. A. Smith

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There is a kind of striving that is appropriate to a human life; and there is a kind of striving that consists in trying to depart from that life to another life. This is what *hubris* is—the failure to comprehend what sort of life one has actually got, the failure to live within its limits . . . the failure, being mortal, to think mortal thoughts. Correctly understood, the injunction to avoid *hubris* is not a penance or denial—it is an instruction as to where the valuable things *for us* are to be found.

Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 381.

I was doing a lot of different things at every moment. Even as I was crying, I was also scanning the ground for the missing piece of my tent, and taking my camera out of my pocket and trying to capture the celestial beauty of the light and the landscape, and damning myself for doing this when I should have been purely mourning, and telling myself that it was O.K. that I'd failed in my attempt to see the rayadito in what would surely be my only visit to the island—that it was better this way, and that it was time to accept finitude and incompleteness and leave certain birds forever unseen, that the ability to accept this was the gift I'd been given and my beloved dead friend had not.

Jonathan Franzen, "Farther Away: *Robinson Crusoe*, David Foster Wallace, and the Island of Solitude," *The New Yorker*, April 18, 2011, 93.

All practice divination, however intermittently, erroneously, dishonestly, or disappointedly; most of all, disappointedly. For whether one thinks that one's purpose is to re-cognize the original meaning, or to fall headlong into a text that is a treacherous network rather than a continuous and systematic sequence, one may be sure of one thing, and that is disappointment. It has sometimes been thought, and in my opinion rightly, that the world is also like that. . . . In any case, a sense of mystery is a different thing from an ability to interpret it, and the largest consolation is that without interpretation there would be no mystery. What must not be looked for is some obvious public success. To see, even to perceive, to hear, even to understand, is not the same thing as to explain or even the same thing as to have access. The desires of interpreters are good because without them the world and the text are tacitly declared to be impossible; perhaps they are, but we must live as if the case were otherwise.

Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 126.

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## Preface to the Second Edition

All of the debts acknowledged in the preface to the first edition still hold—indeed, my indebtedness has only accrued interest. I remember with gratitude the communities that supported me during the formative period that produced this book. But I did neglect to acknowledge one debt at that time, and I'm glad to rectify it now: Rodney Clapp took a risk on me, recruiting this book while he was still an editor at InterVarsity Press and while I was an upstart first-time author. Returning to this book after a number that have followed, I'm grateful for Rodney's help at the beginning of my career. I'm also grateful to Bob Hosack, Jim Kinney, BJ Heyboer, Jeremy Wells, Wells Turner, Paula Gibson, Caitlin Mackenzie, and Dwight Baker for all of the ways that they support and encourage me as an author—not least in welcoming *The Fall of Interpretation* to join my other books in the Baker Academic catalog. It is an honor to partner with them. Thanks are also due to Coleson Smith, who helped me with the indexes at the eleventh hour.

Finally, I'm grateful for two little treats of providence as I finish this second edition and dispatch it to my editor. First, I write this from a room at Trinity College at the University of Toronto (with thanks to Dean David Neelands for the opportunity to serve here as a visiting professor), in the environs that gave rise to the first edition when I was a graduate student at the Institute for Christian Studies, just a block away from my window. Across the street from my room is Wycliffe College, where I spent many an afternoon holed up in

the reading room, and around the corner is Knox College, whose stained-glass library space was a veritable sanctuary of thought for me while I was wrestling with the argument of this book. The ominous architecture of Robarts Library at the University of Toronto towers over the spires of Trinity College, and combing through the footnotes of *The Fall* reminds me of the books housed in Fort Robarts. Like Proust's madeleine cookie, the sights and smells of my education in Toronto have wafted back into my imagination while I was working on this revised edition, so it is a special blessing to be able to once again cast the argument upon the waters from here in Toronto. The second birth of this book is taking place in its original delivery room.

Second, I pen this final page on Pentecost Sunday—the feast that commemorates both the sending of the Spirit and the founding of the church. While the first edition of *The Fall of Interpretation* was “Pentecostal” insofar as it was pneumatic, I hope this second edition is “Pentecostal” by also being ecclesial.

University of Trinity College  
in the University of Toronto  
Pentecost 2011

## Preface to the First Edition

In many respects the *telos* (purpose) of this book lies beyond its scope, outside the margins, as does its *archē* (origin). In good Pentecostal fashion, and following the model of Augustine, the project of this book is born out of my own experience of interpretive difference, or more specifically, the experience of having interpretations that differed from the interpretations of those who thought themselves to be in possession of the one true interpretation—which was not an interpretation at all but simply what God said. (Augustine has something to say about them in his *Confessions*, book 12.) While it may not be immediately evident, this book has an ecclesial destination grounded in its ecclesial genesis. As those closest to me would know, it reads as something of an apologia on behalf of difference within the community. And, as has become increasingly evident to me, it is a book that has been penned with wounds. Having been at times excluded from my own tradition for being *too* different, I have aspired through this book to make space for difference within our communities.

But while the book's impetus is found in this experience of exclusion, its writing has been made possible by the welcoming and healing communities that my family and I have since been a part of—one during the book's conception and gestation, the other during its labor and birth. I would like to say a special thank you to Rev. Charles Swartwood, Patrick and Dorothy St. Pierre, and the saints at Bethel Pentecostal Tabernacle, who embraced us as we made our way up to

Pentecost. Thanks also to Rev. Ron Billings, Rev. Al Wise, David and Stephanie Burton, and our brothers and sisters at Horsham Christian Fellowship and Del Aire Assembly of God, who have encouraged us to keep the feast. It will be a surprise to many, but not to us, that these Pentecostal communities have been a source of unflinching support for my academic endeavors.

The production of this book has also spanned several academic communities. Its deepest roots lie in the tradition of the first, the Institute for Christian Studies, where I learned to think as a Christian. In particular, I would like to thank Jim Olthuis, who was truly a mentor, granting me the freedom to be creative and guiding me through a period of academic growth with deep existential roots. Thanks also to Richard Middleton for his constant encouragement and model of Christian scholarship, and to Shane Cudney, who is not only a colleague but a cotraveler with me on this journey. I count it a blessing to call him my friend. For several years I was nourished by my colleagues in the department of philosophy at Villanova University. In particular, I want to thank Dr. James McCartney, OSA, for his encouragement and interest in my work and for permitting me the opportunity to explore these matters in courses on Augustine. One of the wonderful privileges of moving from ICS to Villanova is that John Caputo, whose writing has had significant impact on my thought, has now become a personal mentor. I deeply appreciate his openness and encouragement and continue to value his work, but most of all I am grateful for his friendship. Finally, my colleagues at Loyola Marymount University have welcomed me and provided encouragement during the final stages, and my assistant Bil Van Otterloo provided much help with the proofs and index.

Without my family this work would never have been accomplished. Thanks to my parents, Pat and Dale, for their interest and encouragement, and to my wife's parents, Gary and Gerry, for their support and understanding. Jennifer and Jessica have been there for us whenever we needed them; I hope they know how much we love and appreciate them. It is also a special treasure to call my brother, Scott, my best friend. And I would be amiss not to mention the steady prayers and support of my wife's grandmother, Doris Currie, who exemplifies for us Christian devotion and love for her family. She has helped us in more ways than one.

Finally, I owe a special debt to my wife and children. Often when my colleagues learn that we have four young children at home, they

ask, “How do you ever get anything done?” The fact is, I could never have done it without them. Deanna, your love and support are nothing short of astonishing. When I think of all that you give for me, I stand as Gomer stood before Hosea, awed and wondering how someone could give so generously and selflessly. Grayson, Coleson, Madison, and Jackson—you are everything to me: it is in your smiles that I find God every single day. It was a hard lesson to learn, hardest for you, but I would drop everything for those smiles.

Loyola Marymount University  
1999

## Acknowledgments

Portions of chapter 1 have been adapted from my earlier essay “How to Avoid Not Speaking: Attestations,” in *Knowing Other-Wise: Philosophy on the Threshold of Spirituality*, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy, ed. James H. Olthuis (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 1997), 217–34, and are included here by permission. An earlier version of chapter 4 was published as “Originary Violence: The Fallenness of Interpretation in Derrida,” *Concept* 19 (1996): 27–41, and is included here by permission of the editors. Selected sections of chapter 5 are developed from “The Time of Language: The Fall to Interpretation in Early Augustine,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, Supplement: The Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association 72 (1998): 185–99, and are used here by permission. A version of chapter 7 was originally published as “Limited Inc/arnation: The Searle/Derrida Debate Revisited in Christian Context,” *Hermeneutics at the Crossroads: Interpretation in Christian Perspective*, ed. Kevin Vanhoozer, James K. A. Smith, and Bruce Ellis Benson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 112–29. Thanks to all of the editors and publishers for their permission to use these materials here.

Part of the original research and writing of this book was made possible by a generous fellowship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, whose support is gratefully acknowledged.

# Abbreviations

- A Jacques Derrida, "Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion," in *Limited Inc*, trans. Samuel Weber (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 111–60.
- BT Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).
- CSA Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).
- FL Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" trans. Mary Quaintance in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell et al. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 3–67.
- FT Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).
- HCU Jürgen Habermas, "On Hermeneutics' Claim to Universality," in *The Hermeneutics Reader*, ed. Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (New York: Continuum, 1985), 294–319.
- JG Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, trans. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).
- MB Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michel Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- MIG Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Metaphysics and the Idea of God*, trans. Philip Clayton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

- OBBE Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being: Or, Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981).
- OG Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).
- OHF Martin Heidegger, *Ontologie (Hermeneutik der Faktizität)*, ed. Kate Bröcker-Oltmanns, vol. 63 of *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1988).
- OLOF Rex A. Koivisto, *One Lord, One Faith: A Theology for Cross-Denominational Renewal* (Wheaton: Victor Books/BridgePoint, 1993).
- OS Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).
- PC Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
- PIA Martin Heidegger, *Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles: Einführung in die Phänomenologische Forschung*, ed. Walter Bröcker and Kate Bröcker-Oltmanns, vol. 61 of *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1985).
- PIRA Martin Heidegger, "Phenomenological Interpretations with Respect to Aristotle: Indication of the Hermeneutical Situation," trans. Michael Baur, *Man and World* 25 (1992): 355–93.
- PMC Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
- R John R. Searle, "Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida," *Glyph: Johns Hopkins Textual Studies* 1 (1977): 198–208.
- SEC Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 309–30.
- ST Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vols. 1 and 2, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991 and 1994).
- TB Jacques Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel," in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, trans. Joseph F. Graham, ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 244–53.
- TI Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).
- TM Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 1989).

# Reconsiderations

## *An Introduction to the Second Edition*

Late in his life Saint Augustine did what almost no human being has been able to do since: he read his entire sprawling corpus, from the earliest dialogues to his later magisterial treatises. The work he penned as the fruit of this re-reading, *Retractationes*, has been variously translated as *Retractions*, *Revisions*, or *Reconsiderations*. The first translation is surely too literal, and as many of Augustine's critics and enemies would emphasize, the Bishop of Hippo wasn't retracting very much—regrets about a few infelicitous phrases here, a couple of concessions there, with a few embarrassments sprinkled along the way. But the *Retractationes* was nothing like that (perhaps apocryphal) final evaluation from Saint Thomas Aquinas when he looked back on his life work and sighed, "All that I have written seems like straw to me."<sup>1</sup> No, Augustine's retrospective consideration of his own corpus is more positive: the aging bishop sees room for growth and development, but he sees no great "turn" in his thought (unlike Martin Heidegger's account of his own turn, or *Kehre*).<sup>2</sup> Any "revisions" were minor points of clarification rather

1. On this episode at the end of Aquinas's life, see James A. Weisheipl, OP, *Friar Thomas D'Aquino: His Life, Thought, and Work* (New York: Doubleday, 1974), 321.

2. As James J. O'Donnell notes, "Though [Augustine] says often, both in the *Reconsiderations* and elsewhere, that he believes that he has learned and progressed as

than tectonic shifts in his thinking. So the *Retractationes* are probably best understood as “reconsiderations.”

The republication of my first book is microscopic compared to Augustine’s monumental corpus and importance. Nonetheless, I hope the reader will indulge me if this is an occasion for my own reconsideration of its argument and reception. No doubt I will exhibit some of Augustine’s stubbornness in my continued commitment to the core argument of *The Fall of Interpretation*—the Thomistic mystical experience that would suggest otherwise has so far eluded me. But I’m also grateful for the opportunity to take stock of the argument after a decade and am happy to offer these reconsiderations, even making a few concessions. Indeed, I hope this book is not just another edition, a mere second edition, but a *revised* edition that reframes and recontextualizes the argument, thus making it a new book.

## Biography of a Book

*The Fall of Interpretation* is, in a sense, a brief on behalf of particularity, an affirmation of difference and plurality as goods inherent in God’s good creation. It is a celebration of the conditions of creaturehood—conditions that include and demand the inescapability of interpretation—eschewing both a gnostic identification of finitude with fallenness, as well as a more philosophical rendition of finitude that simply equates it with violence. So it would be a performative hypocrisy to pretend that this book emerged from the cool objectivity of a scholarly program—as if this were an argument without a genesis at a particular time and from a particular place. To the contrary, as I already hinted in the preface to the first edition, this book was “penned with wounds.” Learning something of that background might then help the reader understand what I see as the shortcomings of the first edition of *The Fall of Interpretation*.

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he has grown older (“Whoever reads my books in the order they were written in will likely find out how much progress I have made with my writing”), he is loath to admit that he was ever distinctly *wrong* on a point of substance.” See O’Donnell, *Augustine: A New Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 318. On Heidegger’s *Kebr*, see William J. Richardson, SJ, Heidegger: *Through Phenomenology to Thought* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1962); and John D. Caputo, *Demythologizing Heidegger* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

The bulk of *The Fall* was written as my master's thesis at the Institute for Christian Studies in the spring of 1995 when I was twenty-four years old. A lot had happened to me in the previous five years: I had converted to Christian faith when I was eighteen and then set off for Bible college less than a year later, expecting to enter pastoral ministry. Somewhat surprisingly, while at this staunchly dispensationalist Bible college in the Plymouth Brethren tradition, I discovered both philosophy and the Reformed tradition (combined, in different ways, in the writings of Francis Schaeffer and Alvin Plantinga).<sup>3</sup> Little did I realize that these twin discoveries would generate the wounds that would eventually issue in this book.

Immanuel Kant famously said that David Hume woke him up from his "dogmatic slumber." My experience in discovering the Reformed tradition within Christian theology was a similar wake-up call.<sup>4</sup> Hermeneutically, this was not first and foremost because of the substance of the Reformed tradition but more basically because, in discovering the Reformed tradition, I was awoken to the reality of *traditions*. My portal to Christian faith had been through the Plymouth Brethren: through preaching at a small assembly in southern Ontario (often focused on prophecy and end-times) coupled with the loving outreach of my girlfriend's (now wife's) family, who attended that chapel (and were themselves converts to the Plymouth Brethren from a Pentecostal background). Not surprisingly, then, I simply identified Christianity with what I knew of the gospel through these "people of the Book." And the habits, practices, and self-understanding of this community certainly encouraged a perception that what I was learning and imbibing was simply the pure gospel, straight-up, unfiltered, and untainted by "the traditions of men."<sup>5</sup>

What I would come to realize, after discovering other sectors of Christendom like the Reformed tradition, was that by entering the church through the Plymouth Brethren I had been inducted into a

3. I have narrated this autobiography a bit more in my little book *Letters to a Young Calvinist* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010).

4. I recognize that some readers will find this suggestion ironic, as they might tend to identify Reformed theology as just the sort of soporific to *induce* dogmatic slumbers. On that point, see *ibid*.

5. This bit of background should explain why, in chapter 1, I open by engaging Rex Koivisto, who works out of the Plymouth Brethren tradition. Ironically, Koivisto was interested in showing his Brethren colleagues that in fact they *were* interpreting the Bible from within the horizons of a tradition. The problem, on my critique, is that Koivisto thought he could still distill some pure, un-traditioned "gospel."

tradition that didn't think it of itself as a tradition—indeed, I had been steeped in a hermeneutical tradition that regularly decried “the traditions of men” and thus championed a “back to the Bible” primitivism that took itself to be a reading rather than an interpretation of Scripture. In sum, I had been unwittingly and covertly initiated into what I describe below as a “hermeneutics of immediacy,” which, of course, does not think it is a hermeneutic at all. So it was precisely my initial experience of Christian difference—difference *within* the body of Christ—that woke me up to the realities (yea, inescapability) of interpretation and hermeneutic traditions. As you might imagine, I felt somewhat duped, as do many who emerge from fundamentalisms that have effectively hidden aspects of reality. Once those aspects of reality are discovered (or, in this case, once it's discovered that “reality” is always already *mediated*), it's hard not to ask: What were you trying to hide?

This discovery was not, as we sometimes say, “merely academic.” There were existential layers that would be complicated in the ensuing few years as I started preaching among the Brethren assemblies in southwestern Ontario. You can imagine how the story goes: as I absorbed this hermeneutic insight, my preaching began to suggest that various Brethren distinctives were the fruit of a hermeneutic *tradition* (and a relatively recent and novel tradition at that).<sup>6</sup> Soon, I became less and less welcome in these pulpits. I have vivid memories of being brought before councils of elders—including one harrowing experience where the elders from a congregation came to our house and grilled me and my wife together. What was at issue here was not so much the *substance* of various theological positions but rather the *status* accorded to those positions. What upset the elders was my suggestion that “our” theological positions were perhaps not simply a pure distillation of “the way things are” but rather the fruits of interpretative traditions and habits. This culminated in several alarmed letters from my professors at the Bible college I had attended—letters which I keep in my office as a kind of relic of this experience. One of them describes me as “a student of Judas Iscariot.”

6. For example, the dispensationalism and creationism of my Bible college education were pretty much unheard of in Christendom before the late nineteenth century. For relevant discussion, see Larry V. Crutchfield, *The Origins of Dispensationalism: The Darby Factor* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991); and Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists: The Evolution of Scientific Creationism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

There is one more layer to this story. As I was coming to appreciate this array of interpretive traditions *within* the body of Christ, I was also being immersed in the philosophical hermeneutics of Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur—and their “radicalization” in figures like Jacques Derrida and John Caputo. This philosophical framework helped me to name and analyze what I had already experienced in my encounter with interpretive difference within Christianity. The stage was thus set for writing *The Fall of Interpretation*.

### Where Do We Go after *The Fall*?

With this biographical background, one can understand just how and why *The Fall of Interpretation* is very much a postfundamentalist book. There is just a hint of “recovery” in the book; its opening line should have been, “Hi, my name is Jamie Smith, and I *am* a fundamentalist.” It doesn’t take too much psychoanalytic acumen to see here a kind of therapeutic exercise.<sup>7</sup> If this book carries a tinge of deconstructive interest in debunking, and if it takes more than a few opportunities for snide asides, I hope the reader will chalk this up to a mix of youthful brashness and still-fresh pain. I have not tried to erase those aspects in this revised edition. They are the temporal and spatial markers of the book’s genesis.

But, of course, there are different ways of being postfundamentalist. If one of the conditions for emerging from fundamentalism is a recognition of our hermeneutic situatedness—owning up to our finitude and the inescapability of “traditioning” in how we encounter the world and interpret texts—that recognition does not specify just where one goes from there. The postfundamentalist has come to recognize that the Bible wasn’t dropped from the sky and that our “takes” on the world are handed down to us by communities and traditions of interpretation—and that such interpretations are contested and contestable. Okay, *then what?* So you’ve recognized the inherent particularity of your take on the world—even the inherent particularity of the gospel as a take on the world. And you’ve

7. In this sense, the book is not unlike Brian McLaren’s therapeutic exercise in *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001). However, as I’ll note below, McLaren and I end up taking our projects in two very different directions.

absorbed the argument of *The Fall of Interpretation*; where do you go from there?

It seems to me that there are two paths. One is a path of false humility in being resigned to a mediated reality; this path is still hypermodern precisely because it remains haunted by the ideal of pristine purity and immediacy. Lacking that, but still haunted by its ghost, we are cast adrift, uncertain, without knowledge, and thus timid. Recoiling from the scandal of particularity, and just a bit embarrassed by the contingency of our traditions, we become unwilling to stake much of a claim. Rejecting René Descartes's identification of knowledge with mathematical certainty, it seems we can only follow the skeptic Pyrrho and believe that we can't *know* anything.<sup>8</sup> A second path recognizes the ubiquity of interpretation and owns up to it without nostalgia or embarrassment. Refusing to be haunted by the Enlightenment ideal of "objectivity," this path does not require us to think we are resigned to subjectivism and timidity under the banner of a false humility. Without resentment for our embodiment and finite particularity, and recognizing the hermeneutic particularity of our "tradition," this second path embraces the scandal of particularity by owning (up to) a tradition and identifying with a particular community of interpretation without guilt or embarrassment.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, there are two ways to be postfundamentalist: emergent or catholic.<sup>10</sup> The former, I have argued, remains haunted by the ghost of immediacy and thus can never quite be comfortable with the particularities of a hermeneutic tradition in all of its specificity. The latter, in contrast, is a postcritical affirmation of the particularity of the "catholic" orthodoxy of the Nicene tradition, and of even more specific renditions of that (such as Reformed or Anglican or Pentecostal streams as particular interpretive traditions within catholic Christianity). Both are postfundamentalist stances, but the former—still haunted by the modern dream—tends toward a liberal trajectory as

8. See the work of Peter Rollins, such as *How (Not) to Speak of God* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2006).

9. For an example of someone who takes the argument in the direction of this latter trajectory, see the work of Robert Webber, such as *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999).

10. I have discussed these two options in more detail in James K. A. Smith, "The Logic of Incarnation: Towards a Catholic Postmodernism," in *The Logic of Incarnation: James K. A. Smith's Critique of Postmodern Religion*, ed. Neal DeRoo and Brian Lightbody (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2009), 3–37.

the only other option within the modern paradigm,<sup>11</sup> whereas the latter “catholic” option is postliberal precisely insofar as it refuses to be haunted by the modern myth of immediacy. Thus I have argued that the “catholic” option is actually more persistently *postmodern*.<sup>12</sup>

In this respect, the first edition of *The Fall of Interpretation* was underdetermined—susceptible to being taken in two different directions. The argument concludes that interpretation is essential and inescapable, but the book never quite articulates where one goes from there—which is why some have received the argument as the basis for an emergent skepticism and anti-institutionalism. But the other, “catholic” trajectory also remains open, though obviously unarticulated. This ambivalence leaves open two paths from *The Fall*, and one couldn’t guess from that edition which direction my own work would go.<sup>13</sup>

The first edition of *The Fall* left open both possibilities precisely because of what the book left out. Indeed, as I look back after a decade, I’m struck by what’s missing: Scripture, revelation, and the church. This is not to say that “theology” is absent from the argument or that it lacks a specifically Christian rationale.<sup>14</sup> And the task

11. Fundamentalism and liberalism are mirror images of each other, both generated within modernity (for an account, see Nancey Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism* [Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 1996]). If one’s critique and rejection of fundamentalism is inadequate or insufficient, then the only option left is to pursue the “liberal” option—which I think we can see in the further development of the “emergent” conversation. (“Liberal” here is not primarily a theological epithet hurled at those who disagree with conservatives; it is meant to name a distinct methodological, epistemological, and theological *paradigm*.)

12. Smith, “The Logic of Incarnation.”

13. Indeed, it is certainly the case that, for a time at least, I flirted with the “emergent,” anti-institutional trajectory (before it ever would have been described as “emergent”!). However, that flirtation is not to be found, as some might guess, in my later book *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006). In that book I had already settled on the “catholic” trajectory as evidenced by the final chapter, “Applied Radical Orthodoxy: A Proposal for the Emerging Church” (a chapter roundly disliked by more typical “emergent” folks). Rather, my toying with the anti-institutional trajectory would be found in an obscure journal article that originated during the same time I was writing *The Fall*: “Fire from Heaven: The Hermeneutics of Heresy,” *Journal of Theta Alpha Kappa* 20 (1996): 13–31. In fact, in the penultimate draft of the manuscript version of *The Fall*, this article was included as a concluding chapter of the book. I’m very grateful to Rodney Clapp, my editor at the time at InterVarsity Press, for recommending that the chapter be cut.

14. I find that this is a criticism often leveled at my work by a certain stream of theologians, often emerging from Scotland, who have a certain predilection for Swiss

of the book was not the articulation of a theological hermeneutic for biblical interpretation; rather, my goal was to articulate a Christian general hermeneutic that I describe as a “creational” hermeneutic, drawing on a specifically Christian theology of creation.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, the absence of the *ecclesia* is, from my vantage point now, a glaring omission. While I vaguely and generally emphasized the role of community and tradition, the argument in the first edition never got around to particularizing the community as the church. Furthermore, while the interpretation of Scripture hangs over the whole project, the first edition did not adequately address—or even hint at—the concrete implications of the argument for biblical interpretation. And perhaps most surprisingly, there is no constructive account of revelation at work in the argument, despite the fact that the linchpin is the *revelational* claim that creation is good (Gen. 1:31).

These gaps in *The Fall of Interpretation* were rightly noticed by Mark Bowald, a close reader of the book and of my subsequent work. Or perhaps better: Bowald pointed out to me the curious absences in *The Fall*, given the subsequent trajectory of my work.<sup>16</sup> Noting

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Reformed theologian Karl Barth. I suspect the charges stem somewhat from the Barthian tradition that does not entertain the possibility of a *Christian* philosophy, so my critics conclude that any argument or analysis that is philosophical is *not* theological *de jure*. But I reject the premise. My work, from *The Fall of Interpretation* to *Desiring the Kingdom*, should be understood and evaluated as Christian philosophical theology. However, I would also grant that Christian philosophy needs to be more robustly theological and not just minimally “theistic” if it is going to constitute a genuinely *Christian* philosophy. I argue this point in James K. A. Smith, *Thinking in Tongues: Pentecostal Contributions to Christian Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 10–11.

15. Let’s head off one knee-jerk criticism at the pass: rooting a Christian general hermeneutic in a theology of creation is *not* an exercise in “natural theology.” Those who hear every theological appeal to “creation” as if it were an appeal to some “nature” outside of Christ lack theological imagination and are locked in a (Barthian?) binary that I would refuse. For relevant discussions, see J. Richard Middleton, “Is Creation Theology Inherently Conservative? A Dialogue with Walter Brueggemann,” *Harvard Theological Review* 87 (1994): 257–77; and D. Stephen Long, “The Way of Aquinas: Its Importance for Moral Theology,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 19 (2006): 339–56.

16. See Mark Alan Bowald, *Rendering the Word in Theological Hermeneutics: Mapping Divine and Human Agency* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007); and idem, “Who’s Afraid of Theology? A Conversation with James K. A. Smith on Dogmatics as the Grammar of Christian Particularity,” in *The Logic of Incarnation*, ed. DeRoo and Lightbody, 168–81. I’m grateful to Mark for these published contributions as well as for personal conversations along the way.

shifts (and inconsistencies) in the movement from *The Fall of Interpretation* through *Speech and Theology*<sup>17</sup> and into *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?*<sup>18</sup>—particularly on issues of ecclesiology, Scripture, and revelation—Bowald proposes a couple of different explanations:

There are two ways, I would suggest, we can account for this. One possibility is that there is a largely heretofore unarticulated way that Smith sees he can hang all these variations and themes together; an explanatory scheme or principle of pragmatism that permits the robbing of his thinking in any variety of sets of terms, functionally defining them as he goes. The other is that we are witnessing a fertile and substantial process of development in Smith: an intense *fides quarens intellectum* [faith seeking understanding] in which there is, in fact, a substantial changing of his mind.<sup>19</sup>

In response, I would say the shift is a version of the latter: there has certainly been development and growth in my thinking on these matters (and no doubt much more is still needed!). In particular, one could suggest that at an earlier stage, I was still probably locked within the binary possibilities of (modern) fundamentalism or liberalism, whereas shortly after writing *The Fall* I began to absorb the implications of *postliberalism*.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, one might say that the shift and trajectory Bowald notes is something like the postliberalization of my thinking, which has been attended by an increased “ecclesial” emphasis and appreciation.<sup>21</sup> However, as I’ve already noted above, I don’t think this quite requires “changing my mind” from the basic argument of *The Fall of Interpretation* as much as clarifying an

17. James K. A. Smith, *Speech and Theology: Language and the Logic of Incarnation* (London: Routledge, 2002).

18. Idem, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?*

19. Bowald, *Rendering the Word*, 160. Bowald’s helpful analysis of these three of my books can be found on 148–60.

20. Bowald already suggests this in his commentary on the role I accord to the ecclesial community in interpretation in *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?*: “Here [Smith] emphasizes the role of the particular community, within a historic confessional bearing. This way of talking by Smith sounds very similar to Frei’s later work” (*Rendering the Word*, 160).

21. There is a seed of this already articulated in chapter 1 of the first edition of *The Fall of Interpretation* when I affirm “the contributions of postliberal discussions that have renewed our appreciation for biblical interpretation as an ecclesial task” (see “Overcoming [the] Tradition: Lints” in chap. 1 below).

ambivalence in my argument there.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, my later work very much assumes the basic argument: that interpretation is an essential aspect of creaturely finitude; that our very being-in-the-world is conditioned by tradition and intersubjective debts; and that all of these are features of a good creation. But my later work also clarifies where I think one should go with that conclusion—in the direction of an ecclesial or catholic stance that owns up to the particularity and “thickness” of confessional communities and sees catholic (Nicene) orthodoxy as the community of practice that nourishes and governs interpretation.<sup>23</sup>

So in this second, revised edition I have included a new chapter that resolves that ambivalence. Chapter 7, “Limited Inc/arnation: From Creation to *Ecclesia*,” rounds out the incomplete argument of the first edition by addressing questions of authority, community, church, and canon. However, rather than being simply an authoritarian assertion of communal “policing” of interpretation, my argument from Derridean resources shows that even for Derrida, the deconstructive insights affirmed in chapters 5 and 6 do not entail a sophomoric relativism or skepticism. With these new bookends for the argument—this new introduction and a new concluding chapter—I hope this second edition of *The Fall of Interpretation* can be read as a creative repetition and faithful extension of my original argument.



In the body of the text below, I have largely resisted the temptation to update everything with the benefit of hindsight. However, I have tried to clarify points of development and departure in my later work, and points on which I would now demur, even a few points on which I’ve changed my mind. In footnotes I have marked new material [within square brackets] in order to help those readers who might be rereading the text and will be attuned to developments and additions.

22. Bowald is correct, however, that I *do* need to concede that I’ve simply changed my position on some matters in *Speech and Theology*, parts of which still assume the possibility of some kind of a-theological disclosure of the “conditions” of theology. I’ve conceded this point, in response to Bowald, in James K. A. Smith, “Continuing the Conversation,” in *The Logic of Incarnation*, ed. DeRoo and Lightbody, 216–18.

23. I also see the argument in my *Desiring the Kingdom* further extending this point, now rooting the formation of our “horizons of expectation” in our participation in the liturgical practices (generously conceived) of the Christian community, which—as affective, narrative rituals—shape our “social imaginary.” That social imaginary then conditions our most fundamental construal of our world.

I have not tried to undo the temporal stamp of this book. Reading it now I can recall how I was in the thrall of a certain playfulness, learned largely from Caputo, who was then my intellectual idol and would later be my dissertation advisor and friend. The tone and snide asides tend to be inside jokes for a certain conversation in continental philosophy, and I have not excised them in this second edition. There are even a few points that make me cringe just a bit, but I have left them largely as is in the name of a sort of archival fealty. I hope the subsequent unfolding of my work functions as a recontextualization of the argument and, hence, of even my blunders and false starts.

# Introduction

## *Interpretation and the Fall*

However one wants to characterize it—whether as finitude, limit, mortality, opinion, partiality, mutability, or immanence—the first topic of philosophy has generally been taken to be something to be overcome.

Dennis J. Schmidt, *The Ubiquity of the Finite: Hegel, Heidegger and the Entitlements of Philosophy*

Interpretation has long been a sin. Understood as a postlapsarian phenomenon (occurring after the Fall) from which humanity must be redeemed, hermeneutics has traditionally been linked with the curse and banishment from the Garden. Interpretation, in short, is a result of the Fall, is itself a fall—from the intelligible to the sensible, from immediacy to mediation, from reading to hermeneutics. As the medieval poet Dante tells the story, the nature of the Fall itself was the transgression of the sign (*il trapassar del segno*),<sup>1</sup> a lawless semiotic act that initiated the tragic history of interpretation and corrupted the previous immediacy Adam enjoyed in Eden. Hermeneutics is something to be overcome by redemption, whereby

1. Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso* 26.117 (in *Paradiso*, Temple Classics [London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1899]).

the curse of interpretation will be removed in a hermeneutical paradise where interpretation is absent.

Having been banished from the Garden, Adam and his progeny were plagued by the curse of interpretation and the interpolation of a hermeneutical space, but when paradise is regained, it is hermeneutics itself that will be banished. Thus Adam in *Paradise* can proclaim to Dante, “Even if thou tell it not to me, I can discern thy wish, with greater ease than thou canst know what seems to be most sure. For I can see it in the Glass<sup>2</sup> of Truth, which is Itself reflector of all things, but which itself can never be reflected.”<sup>3</sup> The redeemed Adam stands as the towering master hermeneut who is in fact no hermeneut at all precisely because his knowledge is not vexed by the mediation of interpretation but rather is immediate access.<sup>4</sup>

Or so the story goes. It should be noted, however, that this comedic tale does not unfold only within the works of medieval philosophers and poets. In many ways it is as ancient as the origins of Western philosophy. Further, it continues to be told in our own era, by traditions as diverse as Christian theology and contemporary continental philosophy.<sup>5</sup> In sectors of both of these traditions, I will argue, interpretation remains inextricably linked to the Fall and fallenness: interpretation arrives upon the scene *after Eden* as a curse, a postlapsarian disease (or perhaps an originary lapse). The task of this book is to explore various understandings of interpretation in light of these common categories of “creation” and “Fall.”

As such, the book is characterized by two movements: the first movement is a critical analysis of the way in which interpretation has

2. Or “mirror” (*specchio*), likely an allusion to 1 Corinthians 13:12a: “For now we see through a mirror [*esoptrou*] enigmatically, but then we shall see face to face” (my translation). I turn my attention to “dim-mirror hermeneutics” in chapters 1 and 2.

3. Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso* 26.104–8 (in *The Divine Comedy: The Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso*, trans. Lawrence Grant White [New York: Pantheon, 1948]).

4. These themes are masterfully traced by Kevin Hart in *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 3–39. [For a fascinating account of how something like this story of the Fall and interpretation informed the emergence of early modern science, see Peter Harrison, *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).]

5. Traditions, of course, are by no means monolithic, and so this should be qualified to say that *some aspects* of the Christian and continental traditions characterize hermeneutics as fallen. This is important since I will retrieve alternative aspects of both traditions for my critique and constructive proposal.

been linked to the Fall in the theological and philosophical traditions. Throughout this critical exposition I will argue that such a link between hermeneutics and fallenness contradicts an integral Christian understanding of human finitude and language. Drawing on alternative aspects within evangelical theology and continental philosophy, the second, constructive movement (in part 3) involves sketching the contours of a philosophical hermeneutic that considers finitude and language on the basis of an affirmation of the goodness of creation. Two initial points in this regard should be noted: the first is about my use of models to uncover the status and role of interpretation used by the philosophers and theologians who will be considered in this book, and the second is about the legitimacy of the categories of “creation” and “Fall.”

### Models of Interpretations of Interpretation

First of all, I must emphasize that my task is not to examine how various authors or traditions interpret; that is, I am not interested primarily in their hermeneutics. My focus is how these authors and traditions understand interpretation itself: What status do they accord to the act of interpretation? What does an author understand to be happening in the process of reading? What valuation is accorded to interpretation? In brief, my question is *not* “How does a philosophical and theological tradition interpret this text?” but rather “How does the tradition interpret *interpretation* itself?” My goal is to disclose not the hermeneutical processes of the authors below but rather their construal of interpretation as a human activity—their “interpretations of interpretation.”<sup>6</sup> The project of this book is, if I may use such a prodigious prefix, *metahermeneutical*, which, of course, remains hermeneutical.

In a sense my aim is to expound each author or tradition (corresponding to chapters below) as *models* of how interpretation is

6. See Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 293; and Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 178–79 (hereafter cited in text as *OG*). See also John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Deconstruction, Repetition, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 95. The present book owes an incalculable debt to Professor Caputo and to his *Radical Hermeneutics*.

understood. This employment of models is now commonplace, particularly in theology<sup>7</sup> and specifically in discussions regarding hermeneutics. A now-classic work is David Kelsey's *The Use of Scripture in Recent Theology*,<sup>8</sup> which describes how the Bible is read or functions in the works of various authors by encapsulating their interpretive processes in seven models. In a similar vein John Goldingay proposed four models for Scripture<sup>9</sup> and more recently has attempted to outline similar models for the interpretation of Scripture.<sup>10</sup> The work of Kelsey and Goldingay, however, remains at the level of hermeneutical principles, constructing models of how various traditions and theologians interpret and employ Scripture in theology. Neither of these authors really addresses how interpretation itself is construed in these contexts.

My goal, then, is to take one further step back and analyze (1) how various philosophers and theologians understand the role of interpretation in "knowing," (2) what status they assign to the result of interpretation, and (3) how they conceive of the relationship between hermeneutics and human "be-ing."<sup>11</sup> These matters will be uncovered, for instance, in considering the scope that each author attributes to interpretation, or how someone understands the relationship between reading and interpretation, or the way in which "interpretation" is

7. For instance, see Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); and idem, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987). Avery Dulles has employed models as a theological tool and in some sense is a pioneer in this regard: see his *Models of the Church* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974); idem, *Models of Revelation* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983); and more recently idem, *Assurance of Things Hoped For: A Theology of Christian Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). I would also note Stephen Bevans's *Models of Contextual Theology* (New York: Orbis, 1992), which provides further references (see notes on pp. 120–21).

8. David Kelsey, *The Use of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975); see also his addendum and update, "The Bible and Christian Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 48 (1980): 385–402.

9. John Goldingay, *Models for Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989). His focus here is actually a doctrine of Scripture and not hermeneutics per se.

10. John Goldingay, *Models for the Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

11. The expression *be-ing* is employed for philosophical reasons (similar to Søren Kierkegaard's) in attempts to avoid essentialist language such as human "nature." By *be-ing* I mean human life or existence, being human. It may be considered a rough translation of Martin Heidegger's *Dasein* (discussed in chap. 3) as "being-there" or "being-in-the-world."

contrasted with or related to “knowledge.”<sup>12</sup> What I am attempting to uncover is something that remains largely un-thought in most theologians and, I will contend, a number of philosophers. To construct models of such interpretations of interpretation, one must work at a level of indirectly discernible assumptions and commitments. This method should become clearer in later chapters.

Let me say another word about my use of models. Each chapter considers one or two theologians and/or philosophers and attempts to piece together how they understand the role and status of interpretation. I have chosen to focus on representative works that flesh out several models that I see operating in much of traditional and contemporary thought. In this book, each *part* represents a model, and each *chapter* within the part depicts a variation of that model, a model within a model, if you will.

Chapter 1 considers Rex Koivisto and Richard Lints as representatives of certain aspects (but not the entirety) of contemporary evangelical theology where hermeneutics is understood as originating in the Fall. Interpretation, from this perspective, is a mediation that is to be overcome, restoring a prelapsarian (pre-Fall) immediacy. Eden, which was lost (but is now regained), was a paradise of perpetual connection: a hermeneutical paradise because of the *absence* of hermeneutics. Koivisto and Lints, then, represent what I will call a *present immediacy model*, which is something of a realized eschatology: the curse of interpretation is lifted here and now (for the evangelical Christian, that is). Though I focus on Koivisto and Lints, many others could be located in this model; these others will often be referred to in footnotes, but they will not be discussed extensively.

In chapter 2, I focus on the work of German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg as representative of a “dim mirror hermeneutic,” or an *eschatological immediacy model*. For Pannenberg also, interpretation is a state of affairs from which humanity must be redeemed. However,

12. Kevin Vanhoozer’s prodigious and groundbreaking work, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, came into my hands too late for me to engage it extensively in this book. However, it seems to me that Vanhoozer tends to *oppose* interpretation and knowledge, remarking, for instance, that “instead of making robust claims to absolute knowledge, even natural scientists now view their theories as interpretations” (*Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998], 19). However, he also offers what he describes as a “more positive sense (call it *realist*)” of interpretation, which is a “mode of knowledge” (*ibid.*, 11n1). What remains for us to consider is whether this is in fact interpretation at all.

this overcoming does not occur until the eschaton, until the end of time, at which time immediacy will be restored. In this model I will also refer to Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics and Jürgen Habermas's critical theory as further examples.

In both of these chapters, which compose part 1, we see theologians and philosophers who consider hermeneutics to be a result of the Fall and who understand interpretation as somehow fallen. In addition, both variations of the model posit a time when this state of affairs is overcome. These thinkers express the confident hope of overcoming and escaping human finitude, and they represent yet another chapter in a long philosophical story of ascent to the Absolute and Unconditioned.

In part 2, we will engage two philosophers who also understand hermeneutics as fallen but who have no desire or dream of overcoming or escaping this condition. They have no memories of a prelapsarian paradise nor any expectations for an eschatological heavenly city. For Martin Heidegger (chap. 3), hermeneutics is always violent because it constantly struggles against the pull to everydayness, the everyday temptation of being-in-the-world. Further, human being-in-the-world is "essentially" fallen for Heidegger, and it is characterized by a structural "concern" that St. Paul (whom Heidegger is drawing on) connects with absorption in the world—letting one's concerns be entirely consumed with "this world" (1 Cor. 7). However, Heidegger effects an essentialization of this absorption in the world, understanding it as a structural aspect of finite, human existence.

Jacques Derrida, I will contend in chapter 4, operates within a similar model. According to him, interpretation is always already a violent act, an incision, a cut, which necessarily excludes and amputates. The fall is not *from* presence but always already *within* presence.<sup>13</sup> Misunderstanding and misinterpretation are built into the structure of the sign and system of signifiers. Every interpretation is a decision; every decision is "structurally finite" and, as such, "structurally violent." Hermeneutics, which is constitutive of human being, is always already violent and a violation; thus to be human is to do violence.

Both Heidegger and Derrida represent a model that I describe as a *violent mediation model*. Again, many others could be situated in this description, particularly Emmanuel Levinas, whom I will discuss only briefly.

13. For a helpful discussion of this point, see Hart, *Trespass of the Sign*, 14–30.