

RICHARD S. BRIGGS

Getting Involved: Speech Acts and Biblical Interpretation

Much interesting and helpful work has been done in recent years in understanding how Scripture can function as 'speech acts' in the life of the reader. Richard Briggs offers a guide to this area and shows its relevance to Bible reading and exposition today.

The conviction that the Bible is God's Word written invites us to explore ways in which that living and active Word might be rendered to us through the words of the text. The printed page, of course, is largely a post-Reformation issue. For the vast majority of pre-Reformation believers, the Word of God was encountered as a spoken voice, the preached word of the sermon. In such settings it seems to make more evident sense to describe the biblical text as living and active than it does today when the Bible is more bought than read, more repackaged than received, and more often gathering dust on the shelf than either living or active. That the words of scripture themselves could be living and active puts us in the area of 'speech act theory': a speech act being an act performed in (or by) speech.

Speech act theory today has become something of a fashionable option, if it is appropriate ever to describe any hermeneutical approach to scripture as 'fashionable', but most of the works using it remain complex and forbidding territory. Indeed, if the general subject of hermeneutics is all too often the preserve of jargon and obscurity, then speech act theory threatens to heighten to new levels of abstraction the rarefied philosophical terminology and conceptuality, rendering itself all but inaccessible to the average Bible reader in the process. This article is therefore a brief attempt to mediate to a wider audience some of the current thinking about 'speech acts' which seems to offer new and helpful ways forward in looking at how scripture functions in the life of the reader.¹

The hermeneutical problem

To refresh our thinking: hermeneutics is the science or art of interpretation, and the challenge facing Bible readers today is to hear the voice of God across the immense gap which separates our modern and/or postmodern world from the 'world of the text', by which we may be referring to one of two things. Either we may have in mind the world in which the biblical text was produced (such as first-

1 An earlier version of some sections of this article was published as 'A Good Investment? Speech Acts and Biblical Interpretation', in the *Whitefield Briefing* 5.3

(2000), pp 1-4, and is adapted here by kind permission of the Whitefield Institute in Oxford.

century Corinth), or we may envisage the world which unfolds before us in the biblical text, which might be the apocalyptic drama of the book of Revelation, or the make-believe world of a parable, or the hand-held camera documentary style of Mark's gospel. For one brief moment, at the moment of production, the worlds of text and reader are the same thing. For the rest, time marches on and the task of interpretation interposes itself between ourselves and the text. In common parlance: there's a big gap between the Bible and today.

The names of this gap are legion: history, culture, worldview, language, and, depending on one's theological stripe, theology. Across the gap lie various bridges, or, perhaps more accurately, bridges in various states of completion. These bridges, to stretch the image, can be understood as different 'hermeneutics', and indeed sometimes as 'biblical hermeneutics', depending on their point of departure.

What makes a good bridge? A good bridge links the reader with the text, allowing a two-way traffic of dialogue across it. In Gadamer's terms, the reading of the text invites a logic of question and answer by which the reader may be led to a satisfactory understanding, or 'hearing', of the text.² For some, perhaps for many if the typical 'how to read the Bible' book is to be believed, the bridge is a matter of transporting ethical principles away from various unpromising narrative work-sites, a process which involves all manner of unlikely structuring and restructuring of the biblical text in order to turn the story into three points all beginning with 'P'.

Many bridges appear to develop structural faults at the level of their basic assumption: they suppose the text to be an unproblematic string of assertions, and thus think that the hermeneutic involved is simply one of trying to 'apply' or 'contextualize' these assertions into today's world. Preachers will be familiar with the experience of finding this approach deeply problematic with many different types of text, and at the same time finding that it seems to reduce all manner of biblical genres to some basic list of 'things we should all be trying to do'. It is certainly debatable whether such words of ethical exhortation are always adequate to the task of rendering the living and active Word of Life to the congregation.

There are many ways of addressing this issue, both theological and homiletic, but one way which is perhaps worth considering is to ask whether there isn't a basic mistake in thinking that the text is all assertions in the first place. Here I want to argue that we should adopt a different approach to understanding what makes up a text, considering it rather as a series of 'speech acts', performed by an author or at the very least a narrator,³ and that involve the reader. In response, readers of the text invest themselves in it, and the resulting bridge we could call a 'hermeneutic of self-involvement'. To this end I will introduce speech acts and speech act theory, outline this hermeneutic and then offer some illustrations of how it may help us to explain what is going on in biblical interpretation. A speech

2 So Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2nd edn), Sheed & Ward, London 1989, pp 362-79.

3 Or technically an 'implied author', following Wayne Booth, and defined by Wolfgang Iser as 'the prestructuring of the potential meaning by the text', *The Implied Reader*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1974, p xii.

act hermeneutic is not the only bridge in town, but in certain cases, for particular types of text, it might be the high road from there to here.

What are speech acts?

The subject of 'speech act theory' is neatly captured in the offbeat title of its first and most famous discussion: J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words*.⁴ Language, says Austin, is fundamentally 'performative'. It does things. More precisely, when we speak or write, we do things with it – performing acts such as promising, hinting, arguing, blessing, condemning, announcing, evoking, praising, praying, telling, and joking. This simple insight has far-reaching implications. One study of speech acts painstakingly classifies over 270 'performative verbs' and analyses how the speaker and hearer are related in them, according to whether the speaker is performing one of the five basic categories of speech act:

- 1) declaring something ('declaratives')
- 2) committing themselves to some course of action ('commissives')
- 3) directing the hearer in some way ('directives')
- 4) asserting something ('assertives')
- 5) expressing some psychological state ('expressives')⁵

Once we accept that language is irreducibly dynamic in this way, it is a short step to realizing that 'the meaning of what a text states' is one dimension only of its significance and relevance to us today.

So far so good, but some people like to suppose that such a view of language is best labelled 'postmodern', and this is potentially misleading enough to require a brief clarification. On the one hand, whenever X labels Y as postmodern it often tells us more about X than Y, and there are enough definitions of postmodernism around to make it possible to either classify or declassify almost any thinker with this label, but to my mind there is no obvious reason why Austin's view has anything to do with postmodernism. The confusion seems to rest in a misreading of his basic argument. Austin starts by proposing a difference between statements and performatives, and then explores the fact that it is impossible to draw a rigid distinction between them. His conclusion: a statement is a kind of performative too. To state something is, in other words, to do something. But, in Austin's view, a statement is still a different kind of act from, say, a promise or an exclamation. Those keen to find some kind of performative pay-off from speech act theory rush to suggest that Austin has reduced stating a fact to the act of trying to convince somebody. Truth becomes rhetoric, and all prose turns out to be persuasion. It is no use denying that one can take this path with speech act theory: it has been

4 Posthumously edited by J. O. Urmson & Marina Sbisa (2nd edn), OUP, Oxford 1975 (orig. 1962).

5 Daniel Vanderveken, *Meaning and Speech Acts, Volume 1, Principles of Language Use*, CUP, Cambridge 1990, pp 166-219. The influential five-fold categorization, adopted

by Vanderveken, was first developed by John R. Searle, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts*, CUP, Cambridge 1979, pp 1-29. Searle's *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, CUP, Cambridge 1969, ranks alongside Austin's work as a basic text of speech act theory.

taken, and indeed has sometimes seemed to be its noisiest development.⁶ But it would be a great pity to let it obscure other hermeneutical options.

Although Austin died before developing anything like a full theory of speech acts, various of his collaborators and students have continued his work. Thus, building on a proposal by Geoffrey Warnock, one may distinguish between 'strong' and 'weak' types of speech act depending on whether we have in view the performative (strong) act as Austin discusses it, or the descriptive (weak) act.⁷ There are conventions involved in both types, but in the latter case these conventions are mainly linguistic ones, concerning the conventional nature of meaning or language use in a given context. In the former case, all kinds of non-linguistic criteria are relevant. The Queen is to name the ship 'The Titanic', but I steal in the night before and, smashing the champagne bottle on the hull, name it the 'Manchester United'. Alas, I am not so authorized, and the ship remains the 'Titanic'. That's a fact: it's the kind of fact philosophers call an 'institutional fact', i.e. a fact created by the agreement of certain relevant parties (so that a marriage contract, for example, as one of the most well-known of all examples of speech acts, creates the 'institutional' fact of a marriage by the uttering of the words 'I do' in the appropriate context(s)). As a matter of brute fact, the ship, unlike Man United, goes down anyway. Speech acts can create institutional facts, but not brute ones, a distinction which postmodern approaches in turn ignore to their (ocean-going) peril.⁸

In short: all speech acts are performative, but some are more performative than others. Philosophers who wish to sound a little more like Austin than Orwell render this claim as: some are more *interesting* than others. Either way, this again clarifies the point that appealing to speech act theory does not involve a new grand-unified hermeneutical theory of everything, but is rather a way to highlight certain 'performative' uses of language.

Speech act theory as a model for biblical interpretation

Acts performed by written texts are subject to at least the same array of interpretative possibilities as spoken ones. The above claims carry over to the written case: all texts may be speech acts in written form, but speech act theory will be an interesting hermeneutical option in those cases where 'strong' speech acts occur, and where the facts in view are correspondingly institutional.

One further possibility is perhaps introduced by the written form of speech acts: the notion that in construing a text we are basically being called upon to make some kind of interpretative judgement concerning the nature of the speech act. 'I am with you always' says Jesus at the end of Matthew's gospel. Do we read this (or construe it) as a statement or a promise? The two look the same of course,

6 Prominent figures on this path include Stanley Fish, *Is There A Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, Harvard UP, Cambridge MA 1980, especially pp 197-245 and 268-92; and Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* (ed. Gerald Graff), Northwestern University Press, Evanston Illinois 1988.

7 G. J. Warnock, 'Some Types of Performative Utterance', in Isaiah Berlin et al., *Essays on J. L. Austin*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1973, pp 69-89.

8 The clearest discussion of this whole topic is John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, Penguin, London 1995.

and in this case it hardly seems controversial, in context, to see the words as a promise. On reflection, many disputes of biblical interpretation turn on precisely this issue of construal: the text may be agreed but its performative force, or the kind of speech act which it is, remains disputed. 'It is good for a man not to marry', says the NIV Paul (in 1 Corinthians 7:1). But is it Paul who advocates this? Is it irony? Is it a quotation of the Corinthians? The words of the text are clear (although in fact they are not as the NIV has them, being better taken as 'It is well for a man not to touch a woman' (NRSV) with the reference evidently being to sex), but which speech act is Paul performing?⁹ In general, cases where the text itself invites or requires some kind of interpretative decision of this nature we may describe as cases of 'strong construal', to distinguish again from the more general point that all words on a page require construal of some kind before they can be read or heard.

We are now in a position to make a proposal concerning a speech act hermeneutic: texts which are strong speech acts need to be interpreted with reference to the various conventions they require, and these conventions will typically relate to non-linguistic states of affairs. In terms of biblical interpretation: biblical texts which operate as promises, blessings, praises, and so forth, invite a speech act approach, which will involve a strong notion of construal. In particular, I suggest that they require the reader to be invested in the states of affairs that lie behind the speech act. It is not that this is an option for those who would like to feel particularly influenced by such texts. Rather, it is in the nature of the speech act concerned that it simply fails to function if the conventions are not satisfied.

For example, the confession that 'Jesus is Lord' (Romans 10:9; Philippians 2:11), while it may perhaps function as a description of a state of affairs, is fundamentally doing much more than that. It is reflecting the conviction of the speaker, that the speaker takes a public stand on the issue of who Jesus is. As a confession, it is a performative speech act which creates (or recreates, or sustains, or modifies) the world in which the speaker stands under the lordship of Christ. Creeds perform the same function in churches today. Creeds do not (at least primarily) recite facts. They provide public testimony that the one reciting the creed adopts a stance in the public sphere of commitment to the consequences of confessing this faith. That this is true for creedal and confessional language, which remains a paradigm case of performative language, has often been recognized in what was generally the one theological area to be explored with reference to speech act theory, the area of liturgy and liturgical language.¹⁰ The use of scripture in liturgy, and indeed the reading of scripture as a liturgical act in the setting of the worship service, suggests that we are approaching here the area in which our interpreting of the Bible will overlap with such concerns. In fact, the wider concerns of the general theory of

9 For a satisfactory approach see for example Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (Interpretation), John Knox Press, Louisville KY 1997, pp 113f.

10 Among many studies which have used speech act theory to analyse liturgical

performance we might note J. J. Schaller, 'Performative Language Theory: An Exercise in the Analysis of Ritual', *Worship* 62 (1988), pp 415-32, and G. Wainwright, 'The Language of Worship', in C. Jones *et al* (eds.), *The Study of Liturgy* (2nd edn), SPCK, London 1992, pp 519-28.

speech acts invite us to see liturgy as sitting at the 'strong' end of the performative spectrum, and thus as one special case of what can be called a 'hermeneutic of self-involvement'.

The logic and hermeneutics of self-involvement

Donald Evans, one of Austin's own students, investigated the various logical conditions of possibility for successful performative language in religious and biblical contexts, in his 1963 work entitled *The Logic of Self-Involvement*.¹¹ In it he examined the kinds of commitments called forth by the requirements of performing a successful speech act such as 'God is my Creator' in what he termed the 'biblical context'. Such a speech act involves the self in all manner of behavioural and attitudinal commitments, far removed from the prosaic utterance of a sentence such as 'Jones built the house'.

More honoured in the neglect than the observance, it has sometimes been supposed that Evans said all there was to say on the subject. In fact, since his work pre-dates almost all the well-known development of speech act theory, the time seems ripe to explore once again the points he made. With the benefit of hindsight, and in particular with some such view of strong and weak speech acts and construal as I have sketched above, I suggest that what Evans boldly claimed to be a logical inference concerning self-involving speech acts is best understood as a hermeneutical link between speaker and speech act. The link is not always there. In the case of weak speech acts, for instance, it is not going to be particularly illuminating, if it is present at all. It is rather a function of particular types of speech act which involve conventions that, as it were, draw the speaker into the three-dimensional world of the text.

Similar claims have been made before, but despite an increasing range of voices claiming that speech act considerations of these various kinds may be helpful in illuminating the task of biblical interpretation, little progress has been made in actually working out how speech act ideas or categories can make headway with particular biblical texts. Meanwhile, hermeneutical discussion persistently reduces to a polarized debate. On the one hand there are those who like to see an objective text unrelated to a subjective reader, and who pursue the kind of 'application' or 'contextualization' hermeneutics mentioned earlier to get from one to the other. On the other hand, there are some who, in the face of apparently overwhelming odds, seriously propose that the self is entirely 'constituted' by the act of reading the text, and that we do not know who we are until we are revealed to ourselves in the act of reading. Mediating between these two extremes comes a hermeneutic of self-involvement: we invest ourselves in the text and in the process we are changed; acted upon by its speech acts. When the speech acts are strong, and when the conventions are in place, the reader who wishes to understand the text has no option but to get involved.¹²

11 Donald D. Evans, *The Logic of Self-Involvement. A Philosophical Study of Everyday Language with Special Reference to the Christian Use of Language about God as Creator*, SCM, London 1963.

12 For a full discussion of a 'hermeneutic of self-involvement' see Richard S. Briggs, *Words in Action: Speech Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh 2001, pp 147-82.

Investing ourselves in the text and its world: forgiveness

As an example of how a hermeneutic of self-involvement might operate, let us consider the speech act of forgiveness. We may tell ourselves that 'sticks and stones may break our bones/but words can never hurt me', but we clearly do so precisely because words possess just such a power.¹³ However we are hurt, words similarly possess the potential for healing. But what act is performed when we say 'I forgive you' and what conventions are to be in place for such a (speech) act to be successful?

We will all be familiar with the difficulties of saying 'I forgive you'. Typically we psychologize the issue and suggest that if we *feel* angry or bitter then we need to forgive, but who in such a situation has not experienced the frustration of working themselves up to utter the words 'I forgive so-and-so', only to find that the feelings of anger and bitterness are unchanged the next day? Even to say 'I forgive you' face to face does not guarantee resolution. The key difference between a performative act such as saying 'I forgive you' and an utterance such as 'Today I will go for a walk' is that the first needs a strong degree of self-involvement in order to be successful. Even more so, anyone who successfully forgives must in fact be changed in who they are, or rather in their inter-personal relationships in the world, and this can only be effected through the performance of the speech act by being 'self-involved' in the performance. As I consider how I am to forgive, I realize that I must allow myself to be changed in the act of forgiving, otherwise I remain holding on to who I currently am, anger and all.

Thus the struggle and the reluctance to say 'I forgive you'. It is an act which can only be performed by renegotiating one's social world and readmitting to it the one who has offended. Arguably this is a price too high to pay in some cases, but it is nevertheless what is at issue in many of the biblical discussions of forgiveness. Here the discussion is couched in terms of (re-) admitting the sinner into 'membership' of one's community, whether this be an official community such as a church or an informal one such as 'the group of people with whom I am on speaking terms'. In the case of the speech act of binding and loosing in Matthew 16:17-19, for example, Peter is given the 'keys' which are, perhaps, to regulate precisely this aspect of forgiveness. But prior to the issue of 'membership' is that of the stance of the one who is to forgive. A successful speech act of forgiveness requires the forgiver to re-construe the world and in particular the relationship with the one to be forgiven. Various speech act discussions of forgiveness have concluded that fundamental to the act is the overcoming of resentment on the part of the forgiver. When Matthew 6:14-15 offers us the words of Jesus,

'If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses'

13 The example comes from James Wm. McClendon Jr and James M. Smith, *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism*, Trinity Press International, Valley Forge PA

1994, p 19. Their discussion of speech act theory and religious language demonstrates another area again where there are benefits for theological concerns.

what is at stake in the text is the willingness to waive one's right to be 'repaid'. To forgive I must reconstrue the world and my relationship with the offender. By learning this ability, I am moved from a world ruled by repayment and invested instead, through this self-involving speech act of forgiveness, in a different world, where my heavenly Father will construe my own deeds with the same reconfiguration of debt and pardon. It is not that God's forgiveness is offered after human forgiveness has taken place. Rather, I am myself remade in my involvement in the act of forgiveness, remade to be the kind of person who is forgiven by God.¹⁴

The hermeneutical bridge holds in this case, if hold it does, because forgiveness is a 'strong' speech act. If I am not willing to invest in this text, then it will not change me, and I am back on the other side of the hermeneutical question, wondering how to 'apply' or 'contextualize' these words of Jesus. When the words themselves are performative acts, then speech act theory articulates for us a better way, through a 'hermeneutic of self-involvement'.

The significance of speech acts in the biblical narrative

Forgiving is just one speech act among many in the biblical narrative, but on reflection it is startling just how many highly significant speech acts there are, and in fact how much of the biblical story turns on 'things done with words'. The Eden story already involves acts of naming, commanding, interpreting, blaming and cursing, all of them acts performed with words.¹⁵ Before the book of Genesis is over, language has played a central role in the Babel story, in the negotiation of blessing between Isaac, Jacob and Esau, and in the form of covenantal promise to Abraham, with blessing and promising being almost the archetypal speech acts. Indeed, Anthony Thiselton has suggested that it is the notion of the biblical text as divine promise which best highlights the role that speech act theory can play as central to the nature of biblical hermeneutics.¹⁶

Beyond Genesis, words and their power continue to predominate. The ten commandments are of course the 'ten words'; the psalms are acts of praise or lament, blessing or invocation; the words of the prophets announce judgment or vindication; the parables of Jesus spin their perplexing web around those with or without ears to hear; and early Christian preaching places speech once again central to the nature of Christian discourse. In all these contexts words occur in action, and not idling, left inactive in propositional statements. For too long biblical interpretation has been dominated by a model which has seen the biblical text as sentences carrying (static) meaning, meaning which then needs to be explained and applied in order to be understood. If my argument about self-involvement is correct, then we need to learn to see all these actions achieved by words as dynamic performances which require the reader of the Bible to be involved in what is going on.

14 This example is considered in more detail in Briggs, *Words in Action*, pp 238-55.

15 An account which emphasizes 'word plays in the garden', including a use of speech act theory as it does so, is Beverly J. Stratton, *Out of Eden: Reading, Rhetoric, and Ideology in Genesis 2-3* (JSOTS 208), Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield 1995, esp. pp 109-68.

16 Anthony C. Thiselton, 'Communicative Action and Promise in Interdisciplinary, Biblical, and Theological Hermeneutics', in Roger Lundin, Clarence Walhout, and Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Promise of Hermeneutics*, Paternoster, Carlisle 1999, pp 133-239, especially pp 223-39.

Such involvement puts me in mind of the so-called 'magic eye' pictures which were so popular a few years ago. These were typically brilliantly coloured sheets of swirling and apparently inconsequential patterns, but once the viewer had learned to focus on the picture in a certain way it would become apparent that there was a three-dimensional object 'hidden' within the pattern. The free-form shapes and swirls would give way to reveal a dolphin, or an oasis, or an aeroplane. But to a viewer who had not learned how to see the object, it remained an incomprehensible mystery. The ability to 'see' the dolphin was at least in part a characteristic of the viewer, and required a kind of self-involvement with the picture. Crucially, to wring one more point out of this image, the 'a-ha!' moment of 'getting' the picture, the moment at which the construal of the object falls into place, is itself the moment of understanding, and no further translation of this understanding is necessary in order to apply it to the viewer.

To get involved with the speech acts of the biblical text is therefore a matter of learning how to be a reader or hearer who can construe these texts as performative actions. The potential pay-off of such an approach correlates directly to the predominance of speech acts in the biblical narrative, and is therefore considerable. The risen Jesus in Acts 1:8, for example, promises (speech act) that 'you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth'. This is not basically evidence that Jesus had predictive power, and nor is it the obvious point that Luke wrote later on to reflect what ended up happening. Rather it relies on the idea that to witness is to perform a speech act of testifying to (in this case) Jesus: both reporting on what has been seen, heard and experienced as well as taking a public stand on it, vouching for its reliability, relevance, and so forth. Who will do this? It is the kind of people who have understood who Jesus is, an understanding which will fall fully into place only 'when the Holy Spirit has come upon you'. At that point, Acts 1:8 suggests, Jesus' listeners will have construed Jesus according to the way he wished to be understood, and in articulating this new understanding they will be testifying to its truth. Jesus' speech act is thus a promise to all those (self)-involved in paying attention to who he is, whereas to all those standing back and watching the propositions process by, it appears to be some form of statement with a future reference. Preached in such a way today as a biblical text it threatens to reduce to the kind of sermon which turns the gospel word of life into simply a commandment to 'go out and evangelize', a work the weight of which hangs heavy on most of its hearers as anything but the word of life. And there is an abundance of such examples where a speech act analysis draws out the inner 'logic' (or as philosophers often say the 'grammar') of what is going on.

The word in action: God's involvement with creation

Finally it is worth noting that all that has been said so far really pertains to the speech acts performed in and by the biblical text in terms of human authors and characters in the narrative. In addition to all the various possibilities opened up by speech act theory in such cases, there is also the wider issue of the performative nature of the Word of God itself, and the extent to which speech act considerations can help us to reflect on the nature and doctrine of scripture *per se*. Indeed, this is

arguably the trend of the moment even more so than working with the particular speech acts which occur within the Bible, and does, contrary to what has been claimed for the hermeneutical approach outlined above, tend towards being put forward as a general all-purpose model for a theological hermeneutic of the Bible.¹⁷

The two approaches meet in the area of specific divine speech acts in scripture. Francis Watson has even drawn attention to creation as a speech act: what he calls 'the *speech-act model of divine creativity*'. At least on days 1 and 3 (vv. 3, 9 and 11) of the Genesis 1 account, there appears to be no intermediate act between God commanding 'let there be...' and its being so.¹⁸ Such a divine speech-act suggests God's own self-involvement with the resultant creation, and as the Christian doctrine of creation has always maintained, it is on our own parts a self-involving act to construe the world in which we live as creation.¹⁹

To see biblical texts as performative actions, and to see the biblical text as the Word of God in action: two different reasons for getting involved with speech act theory in the many and various hermeneutical tasks of biblical interpretation.

Dr Richard Briggs is Tutor in NT and Hermeneutics at All Nations Christian College in Ware.

17 See for example the various proposals of Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks*, CUP, Cambridge 1995; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics*, Apollos, Leicester 2002; and Timothy Ward, *Word and Supplement: Speech Acts, Biblical Texts, and the Sufficiency of Scripture*, OUP, Oxford 2002.

18 Francis Watson, *Text Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1994, pp 140-51, especially pp 140-42 where he compares this model with 'fabrication' and 'mediation' models.

19 See for example the survey of Colin E. Gunton, *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study*, Edinburgh UP, Edinburgh 1998.

How is the biblical text understood and how does it function in the life of the reader today? Richard Briggs first provides an illuminating introduction to the nature and claims of speech act theory. This seeks to extend our understanding of both spoken and written means of communication by seeing them not as merely representational or 'reality-depicting', but as acting or causing acts to be performed through the words themselves. Briggs goes on to discuss to what extent the application of speech act theory might be helpful in the interpretation of biblical texts. [Words in Action: Speech Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation](#) more. by Richard Briggs. More Info: Edinburgh: T&T Clark & New York: Continuum, 2001. [More Info: With Nathan MacDonald; in Richard S. Briggs and Joel N. Lohr \(eds.\), A Theological Introduction to the Pentateuch: Interpreting the Torah as Christian Scripture \(Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012\), 177-85.](#)