This anthology began in a Calvin College Seminar in Christian Scholarship, held in the summer of 2002. The title of the book is taken from the longer title of the seminar, “Hermeneutics at the Crossroads: The Disciplines of Text Interpretation.” The image of crossroads that is employed presupposes an ultimate crossroad, “the charged intersection between God and humanity in general, and divine and human authorship in particular” (xviii). All other intersections, and so all approaches to interpretation, are understood, at least by the editors, as attempts at finding pathways to this ultimate intersection. When understanding takes place along these pathways, it is viewed as miracle and gift. Within this Christian framework, the essays are sincere attempts to examine various disciplinary approaches to hermeneutics as well as questions of historicity and cultural diversity. The twelve essays included in the volume were presented at a conference in May 2003, and include contributions from seminar participants as well as from two invited guests who participated in specific sessions of the seminar (Caputo and Lundin) and from an added voice (Wolterstorff) who was not able to participate in the seminar.

The essays are organized into four parts along thematic lines. Part 1, “Philosophical Hermeneutics Revisited: Miracles, Resuscitation, Questions” includes four essays, all of which engage the thought of Hans-Georg Gadamer. Kevin Vanhoozer’s article, “Discourse on Matter, Hermeneutics and the ‘Miracle’ of Understanding,” sets a theological tone for the volume. He begins by asking if focusing on the text rather than on the author is really an attempt to avoid responding to a text’s “real address and subject matter” (4). Vanhoozer works through readings of Descartes and Barth in order to pose what he sees as problems for Gadamer’s hermeneutics. His major criticism of Gadamer is that Gadamer uses theological concepts, but allows them to have only

P. A. Johnson (✉)  
College of Arts and Sciences, University of Dayton, Dayton, OH 45469-1546, USA  
e-mail: patricia.johnson@notes.udayton.edu
notional, rather than operational, force. He maintains that Gadamer uses concepts such as ‘miracle’ and ‘incarnation,’ but does not appeal to a “sovereign speaking God” (24). Gadamer is accused of secularizing theological categories by removing them from a theological anthropology. Vanhoozer argues that this requires a corrective. He calls for the replacement of a “sub-Christian, secular ontology presupposed by philosophical hermeneutics” with “a distinctly Christian ontology of understanding” (27). Such an ontology will recognize that the Christian interpreter is “not simply in a conversation; he or she is ‘in Christ’” (29). Nicholas Wolterstorff continues this critique of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics in “Resuscitating the Author.” He asserts that textual interpretation “consists of an engagement with a person, which is mediated by the artifact” (36). He argues that most of us, most of the time, practice “authorial discourse interpretation” (47). What we try to determine is what the author says. Given this approach, the theological implication is that any other approaches to interpretation of scriptural texts are simply actions on an artifact and not attempts to engage God, to attempt to understand what God says. In “Gadamer’s Hermeneutics and the Question of Relativism,” Eduardo J. Echiverria defends Gadamer against the charge of relativism, arguing that he is a kind of realist. Echiverria wrestles with the claim that to be human is to be historically conditioned, moving through Gadamer to arrive at a realist metaphysics and an epistemology that returns to Aristotle for a theory of truth. This part of the anthology concludes with Christina Bieber Lake’s thoughtful essay, “‘The Knowledge that One Does not Know’ Gadamer, Levertov, and the Hermeneutics of the Question.” Lake presents a reading of Gadamer’s development of the hermeneutic priority of the question. She then shows how the concepts that Gadamer develops are also central to the poetry of Denise Levertov. She concludes, “For Levertov as well as for Gadamer, true understanding requires that we stand in awe of the vast otherness of experience” (90). The poem opens us to the otherness of being and the otherness of God. It shows us the possibilities, not the inevitabilities, of experience.

Part 2, “Derrida and Deconstruction: Haunted Hermeneutics and Incarnational Iterability” includes two essays, both of which relate to the work of Jacques Derrida. John D. Caputo’s “Hauntological Hermeneutics and the Interpretation of Christian Faith, On Being Dead Equal before God” makes use of both Kierkegaard and Derrida. He advocates a theory of interpretation that is a conversation with the dead and so must deal with the ambiguity that arises from the “ever soft and low, almost absolutely silent” voices of the dead (95). Caputo observes that there are many ways to love God, have an absolute passion, and to worship. He challenges the Christo-centrism of some of the contributors by focusing on the equality of all before God. James K. A. Smith also calls on the work of Derrida in “Limited Incarnation, Revisiting the Searle/Derrida Debate in Christian Context.” Smith argues that Derrida’s semiotics can be understood as consistent with an incarnational logic. He maintains that what Derrida demonstrates is not the impossibility of communication, but the risk of communication. Any time a person speaks or writes, there is risk of misunderstanding. Because God must function in finitude, both linguistically and physically, God too risks misunderstanding. Smith argues for a special hermeneutics for scripture, one that presupposes an ecclesiology.