MODERN NEW TESTAMENT INTERPRETATION[1]

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HOW IS THE STUDENT OF THE BIBLE supposed to interpret the text of the New Testament? This central issue has occupied the attention of New Testament scholars increasingly in our century. With the rise of the modern era came a new interest in the biblical text. The growing number of translations into various languages vis-à-vis the large number of Bible societies has sought to make the New Testament text more understand-able to the untrained Bible reader. Protestantism has centered itself on the authority of the biblical text, thus making correct interpretation of the text more crucial. The adoption of a method of interpretation — the "reading" of the text—has increasingly been scrutinized. Our interpretive conclusions will be largely determined in advance by the method of reading adopted, consciously or unconsciously.

Describing the method(s) to be used unavoidably creates an artificial arrangement. Written description moves from point to point somewhat in a linear progression, but the actual reading of the text will never take place this way. The dynamics of reading are more like a spiral than an arrow. Interaction with various methods will occur repeatedly in the process, hopefully with forward movement leading to solid interpretive conclusions.

Interpreting the New Testament in the last half of the twentieth century has become more challenging with the increasingly diverse ways of reading a text. European approaches remain largely centered in probing the historical background and meaning of a given passage in the New Testament. Alternative American approaches, however, have mushroomed in our pluralistic culture with increasing focus on the literary aspects of the text. The goal of interpretation has also been a topic of vigorous discussion. Is it exclusively to determine the historical meaning of the text? Or to move from that perceived meaning to modern application? Or, is the division between what it meant and what it means an artificial and false separation? Many argue that the two are so interrelated that they cannot be separated.

The discussion below attempts to underscore both the historical and literary dimensions as well as the emergence of the methods, but not necessarily in chronological order. Rather, a more logical basis is adopted with the intent of moving from historical to literary aspects.

With the Renaissance came renewed interest in ancient history, and subsequently the development of the historical method, as opposed to the dominant "dogmatic" method that had been the justification of horrible abuse in the name of Christ. For the last two centuries some form of historically oriented approach to New Testament interpretation has dominated Protestant New Testament scholarship in the Western world.

Canon Criticism

A logical starting point in exegesis is with the determination of what constitutes sacred Scripture as an authority base for faith and practice. In the 1960s and 1970s the Old Testament scholar Brevard Childs began advocating an approach that has come to be termed canon criticism (or canonical criticism). James A. Sanders, who coined the term *canonical criticism*, like-

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wise has promoted this approach. The core aspect of canonical criticism is to emphasize the context of the biblical canon as a foundational clue to interpretation. Childs advocates the canon as "final product" as adopted by the early Christian community of faith, whereas Sanders insists on the "canon as process" as his canonical context. Both, however, want to interpret a given New Testament passage in the context of the canon in both its literary and historical aspects. How early Christianity came to regard certain documents as authoritative, while rejecting many other documents, is important background understanding. Literarily, the existence of four Gospels in a *specific sequence* is based on the hammering out of theological issues in early Christianity and provides helpful clues to the interpretation of each document.

Christianity has four diverse interpretations of Christ that have a fundamental unity but likewise present different portraits. We are the beneficiaries of this rich perspective. On the one hand, this powerfully reminds us not to harmonize the life of Christ in only one dimension. The early church rejected such efforts as simplistic. On the other hand, the existence of four Gospels with fundamental unity stresses the solidarity of the church's understanding of its founder. In this unity-amidst-diversity perspective of canon criticism, we have interpretive clues for contemporary understanding of Christ. This approach is not without its weaknesses, as James Barr has ably pointed out (*Holy Scripture*, 1983), but it does emphasize that exegesis is only *one* stage of the process leading to theological understanding.

Textual Criticism

Once certain documents come to be regarded as sacred Scripture, the next task is to determine as far as possible the exact wording of the original writing. Since no original text of any New Testament document is now available, the Bible student needs to "establish the text" before any exegesis of this text can be attempted. Ultimately, this is accomplished by the careful comparison of all existing Greek manuscripts and early translations containing the New Testament passage under consideration. Evaluating the over five thousand Greek manuscript portions now available requires the implementation of highly technical procedures with the intent of determining the "original reading of the text." In contrast to the classical scholar who has to work with few and very late manuscripts, the New Testament scholar is faced with a huge amount of material to evaluate.

Currently, two significant methods of text criticism dominate: (1) Rigorous Eclecticism, advocated by G. D. Kilpatrick and his student J. K. Elliott, and (2) Rational Eclecticism, whose chief advocates include Kurt Aland, Bruce Metzger, Gordon Fee, and E. J. Epp.

The basic difference between these is the weight given to internal evidence over external evidence. The internal factors have to do with discernable tendencies within the content of the Greek manuscripts themselves. Included are *transcriptional* probabilities, that is, tendencies of those who made copies of the New Testament text. Four guidelines (sometimes called "canons") are followed: (1) a shorter reading is to be preferred to a longer reading; (2) the reading different from its parallel is to be preferred; (3) a difficult reading is to be preferred to an easy one; (4) the reading that best explains the origin of the others is most likely the original.

The other internal aspect is *intrinsic* probability. This category analyzes the text from the perspective of authorial intent by examining the New Testament author's grammar, style, vocabulary, theology, rhetorical purpose, and so forth. The reading in a specific text most in line with these factors of an author is preferred. Rigorous eclecticism, favored by Kilpatrick and Elliott, gives overwhelming weight to these internal factors.

Rational Eclecticism seeks to give adequate consideration to both internal and external factors. These include the dating and geographical origin of Greek manuscripts, and especially the family relationships, or text types. Three text types—Alexandrian, Western, and Byzantine—arose in the process of copying the New Testament. The greatest external weight of evidence is

given to the reading with the earliest date, widest geographical distribution, and concurrence among text types, especially the Alexandrian and Western text types. These are then considered along with the above mentioned internal factors in coming to a conclusion about the most likely original reading. This more balanced approach is reflected in the two most popular printed editions of the Greek New Testament, the United Bible Societies fourth edition text (UBS[4]) and the Nestle-Aland twenty-seventh-edition text (NA[27]). The Greek text in these two is virtually the same; the major difference is in the organization of the critical apparatus of each that enables quick assessment of the various readings found in the manuscripts.

While years of training and experience in analyzing manuscripts is required to become an expert, the serious Bible student can become sufficiently familiar with the procedures so as to understand better the reasons for the adopted reading in a printed Greek New Testament. Additionally, the *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* by Bruce Metzger (1975) provides notes explaining the reasoning behind the adoption of the readings in the UBS[3] Greek text. The results of careful evaluation lead to confidence in the accuracy of the adopted reading, which then provides a solid basis for exegeting the wording of the passage. Working through the procedure also creates humility and appreciation for those who so laboriously copied the New Testament text by hand in order to preserve the message of the gospel.

Historical Criticism

At this stage the Bible student is ready to begin analyzing the statements found in the New Testament passage being studied. Arising as a distinct exegetical method in the early nineteenth century, historical criticism presupposes the view that Christianity is a history-based religion. The evolution of historical criticism in the last two hundred years has taken different turns, some of which have been destructive, but biblical scholars of all theological persuasions today use some form of this method to interpret Scripture. The "history" implied here is of two varieties: the history in the New Testament text and the history of the New Testament text. The latter, which one usually finds discussed in the introduction of commentaries and in New Testament introductions, has to do especially with how the text came into being, as well as with its transmission and interpretation in Christian history. The former has to do with the history implicit within the New Testament text itself. The New Testament interpreter has to take the bits of historical reference within the text, add to them the data available from other contemporary sources, and then attempt to reconstruct a history as a background to facilitate better understanding of the text itself.

With gaps in the available data, such reconstruction often deals in historical probabilities rather than certainties, but this is important even if absolute certainty is impossible. Paul's confrontation with Peter in Galatians 2:11–14 is an example. If this took place after the Jerusalem council meeting in Acts 15 (cf., Gal. 2:1–10), then Peter's hypocrisy is all the more culpable and Paul's stinging condemnation of it all the more understandable. However, if it took place before the Jerusalem council then Peter's actions are easier to understand and Paul's harsh words less comprehensible. The chronological conclusions drawn here impact the details of the passage. Thus historical criticism, positively applied, can aid the interpretative process as well as call attention to important questions arising from the text.

Social Scientific Exegesis

In recent times the application of sociological principles to interpreting ancient texts is proving its value. Western individualistic culture increasingly recognizes the community aspect of the ancient world in which Christianity was born. Awareness of this has prompted the attempt

to apply modern social science insights to the interpretation of the New Testament. Key individuals leading this effort include Gerd Theissen, E. A. Judge, Howard Clark Kee, Richard A. Horsley, and Wayne A. Meeks. Sociological approaches range all the way from simple social description to sociological analysis. In Galatians 2:11–14, social science insights would probe conflict resolution between individuals and groups in the ancient Jewish and Hellenistic worlds. Ancient strategies and models of leadership could also provide understanding. Implicit in this method is extensive comparative studies of ancient texts with relevant New Testament passages. The most questionable aspect is the application of modern social paradigms to the New Testament, both as to whether such can be done and then, if so, which model ignore appropriate to apply. The social history reconstruction phase of the method is proving to be quite helpful; only time can tell whether the sociological analysis aspect will be helpful. Liberation theology's use of the latter often raises questions here.

Grammatical Criticism

"If textual criticism is concerned with establishing the wording of the text, and historical criticism with investigating the history in and of the text, grammatical criticism is concerned with analyzing a text through its language" (Hayes and Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis*, 59). Several aspects of such analysis emerge. First, the grammar of the text must be studied. This includes the parsing of Greek words, and study of phrase and clause patterns. In this activity legitimate parameters of possible meaning can be determined. Once conclusions are drawn, then a provisional translation of the text should be made; this will serve as the basis for subsequent revision and further understanding. Second, sentence structure should be analyzed both internally as well as how sentences "fit together" to establish progression of thought within a paragraph. This can he set forth schematically in a block diagram, as illustrated in Galatians 2:11–14 below. Third, key words and phrases need to be examined more closely after being isolated by the diagram. In statement (1) below, this especially has to do with the words *opposed* and *self-condemned*. This necessitates consulting Greek dictionaries and concordances. (The following is my translation.)

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        2:11       But
                when Cephas came to Antioch,
                to his face
   (1)       I opposed him
                because he stood self-condemned.
        2:12       For
                before certain ones came from James
   (2)       he was in the habit of eating with the Gentiles;
                but
                  when they came
   (3)       he began to withdraw
                  and
   (4)       he separated himself from them,
                  because he feared those of the circumcision.

        2:13       And
   (5)       the rest of the Jews played the hypocrite with him,
                               so that even Barnabas was carried away
                                     /-------|
                                  by their hypocrisy.
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2:14        But
        when I saw
                that they did not follow the true path
                                        of the gospel,
(6)        I said to Cephas
        before them all,
                                although a Jew,
                Since you live like a Gentile
                        and
                --- do not live like a Jew,
        how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?
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In statement (1), Paul's opposition to Peter is qualified in three ways: time, "when Cephas came to Antioch"; manner, "to his face"; reason, "because he stood self-condemned." The historical identification of "when . . ." has been alluded to in the discussion of historical criticism. The manner and reason for Paul's opposition are important aspects. Thus analysis of individual words and phrases is crucial. But how do these six statements fit together to establish a progression of thought? Careful study reveals a pattern. The "for" between statements (1) and (2) suggest that statements (2) and following give a reason for statement (1), primarily as an elaboration of the "because . . ." expression. Statements (2)–(4) relate to Peter's contradictory actions before the delegation from James arrived (statement [2]) and afterward (statements [3] and [4]). The impact of Peter's action is set forth in statement (5). Statement (6) essentially repeats statement (1) by recapping Paul's words of opposition to Peter as a response to statements (2)—(S). One can detect Paul's concern to recount his opposition to Peter by stating it and then defending it.

Tradition Criticism

One of the first areas of examination, once basic grammatical analysis is completed, is to probe whether the author has used pieces of tradition in the creation of the New Testament text under consideration. In the Gospels careful comparative study of double or triple tradition materials reveals that much of the material in the Synoptic Gospels was passed along in a relatively fixed form, most likely in both oral and written form, from the time of Jesus' ministry (A.D. 27–30) until the Gospels were written in the 60s and 70s. How much was passed down orally and how much in written form is considerably discussed among New Testament scholars, but probably a combination of both forms best accounts for this so-called "oral period" of the Synoptic Gospels.

Regarding the remainder of the New Testament, the concern of tradition criticism is to trace out the use of early Christian tradition in the New Testament texts and how the author incorporated them into his writing. The most obvious type of material used was Old Testament texts, but early Christian hymns (Phil. 2:5-11), confessions of faith (1 Tim. 3:16), and words of Christ (*verba Christi*) not contained in the Gospels (Acts 20:35), among others, were used by New Testament writers. As far as possible the history of each detected piece of tradition should be probed. How the New Testament author applied it to his subject can then be better understood.

Source Criticism

Source criticism and form criticism are very closely linked to tradition criticism. As applied to the Synoptic Gospels, source criticism attempts to understand the literary relationship

among the first three Gospels. They have basically the same structural outline, in contrast to the Fourth Gospel. The vast majority of the text of Mark is reproduced almost word-for-word in either Matthew or Luke or both. Yet both Matthew and Luke differ in sequential arrangement of *pericopes*, sometimes in agreement with one another against Mark. Occasionally they contain together episodes in Jesus' ministry not found in Mark while at other times they go their own separate ways.

Two perspectives dominate modern scholarship today. First, the two-document hypothesis sets forth the view that Mark was written first, then Matthew and Luke independently used Mark as well as a common second source (called Q after the German word Quelle, meaning "source"). On the other hand, the two-Gospel view reverses this sequence of literary dependency. Mark was written last and was something of a condensation of Matthew and Luke. Both viewpoints assume a literary dependency, that is, that the later writer(s) had access to a written form of the earlier Gospel(s). In all likelihood, a dependency on both written and oral sources can best account for the similarities and the differences among these three Gospels.

Elsewhere in the New Testament, source criticism is concerned with the author's use of sources to write. For example, the so-called "we" section in the latter chapters of Acts may indicate that the author was drawing from a personal diary in recounting his story.

Form Criticism

As pioneered in New Testament studies by Martin Dibelius and Rudolf Bultmann in the early part of the twentieth century, form criticism was concerned with two areas: to trace out the existence of discernable fixed forms of material, and then to analyze how those forms functioned in early church life. Some forms are easily detectable, such as parables, miracle stories, and sayings of Jesus. Commonality of literary structure is one important aspect. For example, miracle stories begin with some need, describe the miraculous action of Jesus, then detail the results of the miracle. In comparative studies one learns that this pat-tern characterized the telling of miracle stories in ancient life generally. Comparisons of those miracle stories in the Gospels with those in the surrounding literature can provide helpful insight into the approach of the New Testament writers.

However, detecting the literary form of New Testament material was for Dibelius and Bultmann only the preparatory step to probing the *Sitz im Leben* (setting in life) of a particular form. This had to do with the so-called "oral period" between Jesus' earthly ministry and the writing of the Gospels some thirty or so years later. Because the stories were told widely in early Christian circles and applied to different situations and needs, this had a shaping effect on the stories that eventually were incorporated into the written Gospels. Thus one can understand some-thing of why the differences in narrative details show up in the particular Gospel writers. This way of accounting for these differences has proven to be the most problematic part of Dibelius' and Bultmann's use of form criticism. The detection of literary forms and comparative studies with similar forms outside the New Testament has proven to be the most enduring aspect for Gospel studies.

For Acts and the New Testament letters, form criticism has focused on the detection of different forms used by the author. In Acts, insight is to be gained by studying the way Luke used different types of speech material (defense speeches, missionary speeches, etc.) and types of narrative material, ranging from episodic narrative describing a single event to narrative summaries (e.g., Acts 2:43–47) describing long periods of time by characterization of tendencies. For the epistles, the recent comparative work in ancient letter-writing is proving quite fruitful, as the work of William Doty illustrates.

Redaction Criticism

Whereas tradition, source, and form approaches concentrate on the "microscopic" view (the small picture) of texts, redaction criticism focuses on the "macroscopic" view (the big picture). In fact, this tendency of earlier approaches to slice up the text into small pieces prompted New Testament scholars like Gunther Bornkamm, Hans Conzelmann, and Willi Marxsen in the 1950s and 1960s to advocate looking at the Gospel in its entirety in order to assess its theological message. Increasingly, recognition has been made that the Gospel writers were more than historians describing the life of Jesus. They were theologians espousing an interpretation of the significance of Jesus to their targeted readership. This author-perspective can be traced in the differences of narrative where two or more writers describe the same event in Jesus' ministry and in how each writer incorporates his sources and weaves together his story of Jesus.

Mark is more action-oriented, containing very little speech material, whereas Matthew builds much of his gospel story around long speeches given by Jesus. Another distinctive is Matthew's more extensive use of Old Testament reference to support Jesus' ministry. In redaction criticism the attempt is made to allow each Gospel writer to "tell his story" and not harmonize the separate accounts into a flat modern biography of Jesus.

Literary Criticism

In the middle of this century, New Testament scholars increasingly began questioning whether the historical approach to the New Testament was adequate for gleaning the needed insights from the texts. This has led to attempts to apply modern literary analysis techniques to the New Testament texts. The term *literary criticism* has been around for a long time, but its meaning has shifted repeatedly. Thus one has to ask what is intended by this label. Earlier it tended to refer to pursuit of authorship, time, place and date of composition — the things normally treated in New Testament introductions, or else it referred to the literary aspects of tradition, source, and form criticism.

In American circles the rise of the movement to study the Bible as literature, mostly due to the separation-of-church-and-state heritage forcing state universities to literary approaches, has given impetus to a new understanding of literary criticism. Dissatisfied with the inability of historical approaches to provide a consensus reconstruction of New Testament history, scholarly interests shifted to the literary aspects of the New Testament. Pivotal in this shift has been the work of Amos N. Wilder, a literary critic and New Testament scholar. Additionally, the dry rationalism often controlling historical methods has prompted many to investigate the text's aesthetic and imaginative qualities, as well as its formal literary dimensions.

The emergence of the "new criticism" movement in literary circles beginning in the 1940s helped provide the tools needed for New Testament application. Areas such as the relationship of content to form, the significance of structure for meaning, the capacity of language to direct thought and to mold existence itself have become points of concern in these newer methods. As a method distinct from those listed under the label "literary criticism," several investigative procedures will be followed. Included in them should be (1) classification of genre, (2) identification of major themes, (3) determination of structure, and (4) concern for distinctive features of the narrative. In Galatians 2:11–14, one would recognize this as an episodic narrative, falling as the last narrative proof (1:13–17, 18–24, 2:1–10; 11–14) of the independency of Paul's gospel preaching from human authorization (1:11–12). The structure and distinctives have been alluded to above in the block diagram discussion.

Structuralist Criticism

Structuralism attempts to probe the structures of thought that lie below the surface-level language of the text, especially in narrative texts. New Testament structuralist scholars like Daniel Patte, John Dominic Crossan, and Dan Via build on the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, Algirdas Julien Greimas, Vladimir Propp, and other French and Russian literary critics. The key presupposition of structuralism is that certain "deep structures" of thought are embedded in the human brain for all time. Language then functions at two levels: the surface level and the deep structural level. The surface-level structure has to do with easily perceivable rules of grammar and style. But as we understand English, there are several ways of "saying the same thing." That "same thing" points to the deep structure, without which only one way to express an idea would exist. These structures shape the formation of human existence and expression, both consciously and unconsciously.

The goal of the structuralism is to read the text in a way to perceive these structures, thereby providing a richer understanding of the text. The structures especially include constructs of binary oppositions (good/bad, light/darkness, left/right, etc.). The difficulty of this approach lies in the very technical means used to uncover these deep structures. For this reason, not many New Testament scholars have become adept at utilizing the procedures, although limited application does provide insight otherwise missed.

Discourse Analysis

Much less technical is the probing of the language of the text at its surface level. Utilizing the same presuppositional basis of Saussure and Gremias, Eugene Nita has spearheaded the application of these principles to Bible translation, the most notable product being the "Good News for Modern Man" translations in various languages of the world. Scholars including John Beekman, John Callow, and Robert Longacre have extended this approach of text analysis for exegetical purposes. The best example of this procedure is the handbook series *Helps for the Translator* published by the United Bible Societies. The above analysis of the block diagram of Galatians 2:11–14 represents my own application of these principles to exegesis. This procedure is easier than structural analysis to comprehend and apply, and proves to be a rich source of exegetical understanding of the text.

Rhetorical Criticism

Probing the language of the text is also the emphasis of George Kennedy, who attempts to analyze the rhetorical strategy of an author against ancient principles and patterns of rhetoric. This approach extends beyond earlier efforts which were content to detect devices such as figures of speech in the text. The most influential application of this is found in the epoch-making commentary on *Galatians* by Hans Dieter Betz in the *Hermeneia* series. Betz applied ancient principles of Greek rhetoric to the exegesis of Galatians and has demonstrated how effectively Paul utilized those principles in making his case for the gospel message in the letter. To be sure, Betz's view has been modified and refined, but it stands as the most important English language commentary on Galatians in the second half of the twentieth century. The Galatians 2:11–14 passage in this analysis stands as a pivotal narrative proof demonstrating the independency of Paul's gospel message.

Structural criticism, discourse analysis, and rhetorical criticism concentrate on the language of the text, while reader response criticism and narrative criticism focus on the narrative flow of ideas in the text. Both approaches employ the modern literary paradigm of the movement of thought: (1) *real author* ==> (2) *implicit author* [2a] *narrator* => TEXT => [3a] *narratee* ==> (3) *implicit reader* (4) *real reader*. Each category has significance, but [2]—[3] are especially important, since they pertain to the "fictional" world of the text. Categories [1] and [4] have historical concerns and more properly relate to historical exegetical interests, especially category [1]. For these two literary approaches the world of the text is the center of attention, because from it comes the necessary dynamic to generate meaning.

These two literary approaches are concerned with the text as it stands in its entirety, on the modern literary assumption that a text, once composed, gains an independent existence from whoever first wrote it. Meaning in the text is not found by attempting to reconstruct authorial intention, the impossibility of which has been demonstrated by the failure of historical methods to reach consensus at this point. Therefore, to these literary critics, the text is not a means to the mind of the author, and thus the goal of exegesis; rather, the text is a worthy goal of study in itself, for it has its own existence and can generate meaning(s).

Another distinctive of these approaches is the concept of meaning. Traditionally, both historical and earlier literary approaches assume that meaning lies inherently in the text itself and this meaning (possibly equal to the mind of the author) is to be uncovered by careful analysis of historical and/or literary dimensions in the text. By contrast, these two modern approaches presuppose that meaning is generated in the interaction of the reader with the text in the moment of reading. Thus, meaning is dynamic rather than static. To be sure, the text contains in-built signals of meaning, but these are catalysts for generating meaning, not meaningful in themselves. Two horizons come together in the act of reading: the horizon of the text and the horizon of the reader. Both horizons shape the perception of meaning gained from the act of reading.

The *dichotomous* view of historical methods that sought first "what the text meant" and then "what the text means" is rejected as a false separation of meaning. The dichotomous view assumes that meaning becomes static (to these literary critics: imprisoned) in the moment of writing and serves as the basis of modern application when correctly recovered from the text. But if meaning is dynamic and generated in the act of reading, the "then" and "now" aspects collapse into a unified sense of meaning readily applicable to the situation of the reader, for his/her situation has helped shape that sense of meaning.

Thus to some literary critics every reading of the text is valid; no right or wrong interpretations exist because the traditional view assumes static meaning locked up in the text and levels of correctness li uncovering it. For others, the control factor that produces "better informed" readings has to do with the reader's developing self-consciousness of his/her own existence. Sensitivity to personality traits, cultural and ethnic heritage, and so forth, helps produce more influential and life-molding readings of the text. Additionally, growing skills in "reading" the text (such as awareness of literary technique) serve as Controlling factors to produce better readings.

The distinctives between narrative and reader response criticisms surface in the varied application of these literary techniques. Narrative criticism, the earlier of the two to be applied to biblical narratives, gives more room for historical concerns. The pursuit of the real author, while not as crucial as that of the implicit author and narrator, nonetheless it provides helpful clues to developing a profile of the implicit author. The link between real author and implicit author is the difference between a movie and a portrait. The real author is constantly moving and changing through time and space. The implicit author is the real author captured at a specific moment in time, the moment of composition of the narrative. The writing process freezes this author forever

as to what he thought, who he was at that given moment. He was not the same person before this composition moment, neither will he ever be the same person subsequent to this moment.

Thus, narrative criticism endeavors to thaw out this "fictional" author as a major source of generating meaning in the reading of the text. The process is achieved through analysis of the narrative schema. Although differing methods have been adopted, they involve analysis of the narrative act and narrative strategy. The narrative act identifies the implicit author as to his assumption of knowledge and narrational vantage point. Does the implicit author project himself into the narrative to become the narrator? For example, a shift from third person to first person frame of reference signals such a move. Or, does the implicit author create a character who speaks, and is this character serving mainly as the voice of the implicit author? The narrative strategy pertains to the detection of setting, plot, and characters, the elements that together comprise the story line.

Reader response criticism, in contrast to narrative criticism, focuses major attention on the implicit reader in the text. This construct refers to the image of intended readership in mind at the time of composition: what would these people become upon correct reading of the text? Thus these individuals were "fictional" as well, for they existed in their idealized state only in the mind of the author. To be sure, there was some connection between the implicit reader and the initial real reader(s) of the text. But reader response criticism is first concerned to develop a profile of the implicit reader, using many of the same analysis techniques as narrative criticism.

The linkage of the implicit reader to the initial real reader is of little concern; far more important is the linkage of the implicit reader to the modern reader at the moment of his/her reading of the text. How the profile of the implicit reader in the text challenges and molds the modern reader is "the bottom line" issue for reader response criticism. Reading texts, especially sacred texts, should change the reader. The more clearly the implicit reader profile is grasped, the more likely the reading will effect change in the reader. Alan Culpepper's pivotal commentary on the Fourth Gospel represents one of the best and most influential efforts at reading a New Testament text this way.

One encouraging trend in the last decade of New Testament scholarship in American circles is the effort of segments of literary critical approaches to reach out to those oriented to the more traditional Tented to the more traditional methods in an effort to find ways to merge the two perspectives into a more holistic way of interpreting New Testament texts. Currently in the Society of Biblical Literature circles those in social science criticism and in narrative/reader response criticism are working more closely to find a more holistic approach. In the final analysis, only an integrated approach to exegesis will prove most helpful. The nature of the New Testament text seems to demand such, for it contains both historical and literary elements. An adequate interpretive approach must seek to give appropriate attention to both aspects.

Of course, this does not relieve the tension between certain approaches that utilize contradictory and mutually exclusive presuppositions, for example, the differing ways that meaning is defined between historical and literary methods. The presuppositional base of any resulting integrated method must be carefully thought out; its relevance to specific procedures within the various approaches should be carefully scrutinized. Additionally, the compatibility of aspect of the various approaches has to be worked through. The settings of both the composition of the text and the modern reading(s) of the text must be given due consideration. Acknowledgement must be made that individual interpreters will inevitably highlight one or two methods over others simply out of personal preference and/or training.

But this does not necessarily skew the method followed by the interpreter. In fact, this may provide some distinctives that ultimately add to the richness of the community of faith's interpretation of a given passage. Certainly, the belief in the priesthood of the believer supports the diversity of interpretative viewpoint.

For Further Study

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