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LITERARY CRITICISM FROM 1975-PRESENT

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By

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INTRODUCTION¹

Following the development of the Historical- Critical method, Literary criticism began to develop in the mid 1900s. This relatively new way of interpreting scripture brought new ideas as well as old ideas to the forefront of biblical scholarship. Brevard S. Childs describes literary criticism as:

One of the most important aspects of biblical study during the last several decades, especially in the English-speaking world, has been a new focus on the literary approach to the Bible. Interests revolves about the study of the Bible as literature when it seeks to apply the common tools of comparative literature in understanding the text.²

Literary criticism had been present long before being used to interpret Scripture. This form of interpretation developed after the historical-critical method was used because of the focus of the historical-critical method did not always capture the complete meaning of the text. However, this form of interpreting literature has been in place since Aristotle but has not been used to interpret the Bible until Erich Auerbach began to compare the Bible with other literary works. Both Raymond E. Brown as well as Dan O. Via Jr., followed to have impacts on how scholars would study the Bible through literary criticism.



¹Some editing of the format has been done in order to bring the paper into greater conformity to the Turabian Style Guide requirements. Dr. Cranford

²Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 18.

DEVELOPMENT OF LITERARY CRITICISM

Literary criticism has been present since Aristotle but has only recently been emphasized as a way of interpreting the Bible. It seems that this form of interpreting Scripture began to occur because of the lack of studying the literary principles within the Bible. The Historical- Critical Method of interpretation focused primarily on the culture surrounding the Bible as it was written. This left much out of the interpretation of God's word. Norman R. Petersen speaks to this by writing:

From the eighteenth century on, both literary and biblical studies were dominated by historical or otherwise causal approaches to the interpretation of the written word. But by the nineteenth century, historical method itself had become identified with an ideology known as historicism or historicism. Exceeding the legitimate historical-critical tasks of establishing and interpreting the written word as evidence, historicism reduced the possible meaning of such evidence, historicism reduced the possible meaning of such evidence to what it meant and construed what it meant as the product of its immediate historical and cultural context, of which authors were more or less representative. In this way the spirit of the culture became the primary perspective from which its products could be construed. As the understanding of texts became a matter of understanding the culture that produced them, the critic increasingly worked from the culture context to the text rather than vice versa, as historical method requires.³

The way of interpreting scripture that was being used the most was not interpreting scripture with the highest degree of sensitivity to the text itself. Petersen also points out that the "literary criticism" that was spoke of during the time of historical criticism was not really the literary criticism one would think about today. During the time dominated by historical criticism interpreting scripture, literary criticism was normally referred to the study of the culture surrounding

³Petersen, Norman R. *Literary Criticism for New Testament Critics*(Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1978), 25.

the literature instead of the literature itself. If following Petersen's assertion, one would recognize what is now labeled literary criticism as a scholarly movement in response to the scholarly movement that dominated the earlier 1900s.

William A. Beardslee defines literary criticism as: "Literary criticism, in its broadest sense, means the effort to understand literature. If a work of literature is to be understood, it must be placed in some kind of larger framework; it must be tested in one way or another."⁴

Taking into account both Petersen's framework of how literary criticism came about along with Beardslee's definition one can see how the new form of literary criticism focuses on dealing with the text itself more than dealing with the surrounding culture that produced the literature. The larger framework to which the text would be placed would be within the rest of the Bible instead of the framework of the culture. Beardslee continues to move forward in his defining literary criticism by writing about how the method began with Aristotle by writing:

With some oversimplification one can say that there are two main lines of tradition in literary criticism, using the term now in its narrower sense of studies of literary form. One of these lines, descending from Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, treats the form as the vehicle for a content which can stand in its own right, apart from the form. Within studies of literature, however, a second line of tradition, descending from a very much more important work of Aristotle, the *Poetics*, has been more influential than the rhetorical tradition. This type of criticism regards literary form as an essential part of the function of the work, and not as separable, instrumental addition to the intellectual content.⁵

This enables one to trace this way of interpreting a text back to Aristotle's own writings. This helps to show how long ago these ideas surfaced and how long it took for these ideas to be applied to biblical scholarship, which was actually a response to the dominating form of interpretation at the time.

⁴William A. Beardslee, *Literary Criticism of the New Testament*, (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1970), 1.

⁵Beardslee, 3-4.

There have been many scholars who have disagreed with the idea that literary criticism is a correct way to interpret scripture. John P. Newport gives perspective into some of the Baptist believers opinions by writing:

According to some fundamental-conservatives the wholesale adoption of recent literary approaches tends to undercut the historicity of the Bible and thus undermines its infallibility. The moderate-conservatives respond by stating that literary approaches do not necessarily undermine the Bible's reliability. Rather, they can help us to better understand the Bible and, in many cases, disclose new and relevant meanings of the Bible for contemporary persons.⁶

As Newport gives readers these opinions, it is important to understand that each scholar and each person will have a different opinion about the strengths and weaknesses of this form of biblical interpretation.

George Eldon Ladd actually gives an even better working definition of literary criticism by stating: "Literary criticism is the study of such questions as authorship, date, place of writing, recipients, style, sources, integrity, and purpose of any piece of literature."⁷ This will be the definition used for the rest of the paper since some of the earlier formations of literary criticism have been discussed.

Erich Auerbach

Erich Auerbach is given credit for beginning to compare the Bible to other literary works. However, Auerbach was not a biblical scholar, but a secular literature professor of Romance languages at Yale. Robert Morgan, with the help of John Barton describes Auerbach's work in *Mimesis* by stating:

⁶John P. Newport, *Beyond the Impasse? Scripture, Interpretation, & Theology in Baptist Life* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 64.

⁷George E. Ladd, *The New Testament and Criticism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), 112.

It starts by comparing a scene from Homer's *Odyssey* with the realism of the Abraham and Isaac stories in Genesis 22. Auerbach shows how the biblical narrative is "fraught with background" and how the human beings in the biblical stories "have greater depth of time, fate and consciousness than do the human beings in Homer."⁸

Auerbach also compared the story of Peter's denial to two other earlier writings. Beardslee deals with this by stating:

Erich Auerbach, in his important study, *Mimesis*, has chosen the story of Peter's denial to show the method of the Gospel writers at work in this regard. He contrasts this story with two pieces of ancient writing produced in Hellenistic- Roman culture. They are selections from Petronius' *Banquet* and from Tacitus' *Histories*. By analyzing these sections, Auerbach shows that the ancient tradition of the separation of tragic and comic styles was much more than a stylistic convention.⁹

This idea of comparing the Bible to secular text was relatively unknown until Auerbach's work. However, Auerbach has been criticized for treating the Bible as any other book without spiritual importance.

Auerbach compared the Bible's element of suspense within different narratives, as the story of Peter's denial, to other literature and their literary elements. Throughout his writing of *Mimesis* one can see how affluently he brings out the literary elements that for years had been left out of critical study of the Bible. His use of the Bible, however, was not out of any kind of spiritual beliefs but out of simply using it as a text to compare to other works. Beardslee presents Auerbach's outline of Jesus by stating: "The overall outline of Jesus' work is created by putting him in the framework of a story of deliverance, a story that, as noted above, expresses both past-oriented reenactment and future-oriented hope. The materials went into the story were

⁸Robert Morgan, with John Barton. *Biblical Interpretation*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1988), 222.

⁹Beardslee, 22.

quite varied.”¹⁰ This statement helps to put Auerbach’s literary perspective of Jesus as He would be defined by one searching the Bible seeking to put everything into a literary perspective.

Auerbach also had an interesting way in how he dealt with the Bible as literature. Robert Morgan states that Auerbach’s analysis “insists that the literary effect owes much to the religious seriousness of the narratives. They “produce lively sensory effects only because the moral, religious, and psychological phenomena which are their sole concern are made concrete in the sensible matter of life.”¹¹ Auerbach’s analysis of the Bible had a significant effect on how the Bible has been viewed over the last half century since his work was published in 1946 in German.

Raymond Brown

Raymond Brown, a Catholic scholar is widely known for his work on Johanne literature.

Bray gives further background by stating that:

He studied under W.F. Albright and became Professor of New Testament at Union Theological Seminary in New York(1971). He is the leading American Roman Catholic scholar in New Testament studies, and a pioneer of biblical criticism in those circles. His main work has been on the Johanne literature. His two-volume commentary on the gospel and his commentary on the epistles are classics.¹²

Raymond Brown’s classic commentary of John shows up in the Anchor Bible series.

It is interesting to note that in the preface of Brown’s commentary on the gospel of John he states that he does not think the John’s writings can stand by themselves. His reasons for this as he states them are: “I cannot agree that the Epistles(the gospel as well as the other 3 letters of John) really stand by themselves as masterpieces of early Christian teaching. No other epistle in

¹⁰Beardslee, 24.

¹¹Morgan, 222-223.

¹²Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), 472.

the NT, with the possible exception of Hebrews, tells us less about its author than does 1 John.”¹³ This is interesting because literary criticism is seeking to locate the author is an important aspect to the discipline. Just as stated before: “Literary criticism is the study of such questions as authorship, date, place of writing, recipients, style, sources, integrity, and purpose of any piece of literature.”¹⁴ Brown also mentions the elementary grammar as well as some cloudy sentence structure present within the Johanne letters that are brought into question. Of course, one can see how Brown approaches these epistles as he quickly points out the lack of identifiable authorship as well as some structure issues occurring within the texts. However, Robert Morgan is very complimentary to Brown by stating:

Raymond Brown’s more recent account of the trial and execution of Jesus in his standard Anchor Bible Commentary *The Gospel according to John*, shows that appreciation of the evangelist’s art is perfectly possible within the historical paradigm of biblical scholarship, and even compatible with great caution on questions of historicity.¹⁵

In delving further into Brown’s commentary of the Gospel of John one can see how Brown deals in a literary critical manner with the passion narrative as he places divisions as well as sub divisions into the text. This is important to understand because Brown is looking at this in a literary structure in order to present the text as a dramatic passage of literature. Raymond Brown has been a definite proponent of literary criticism as he has studied the Bible with literary criticism.

Dan O. Via

¹³Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, in the *Anchor Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1982), X.

¹⁴Ladd, 112.

¹⁵Morgan, 228.

Bray introduces Via by stating that he was: “an important representative of structuralist hermeneutics.”¹⁶ Via has written several books, included are *The Parables, Kerygma and Comedy in the New Testament*, and has been an editor for a New Testament series of guides to criticism. In his book *Kerygma and Comedy in the New Testament* Via places some passages into the genre’s of kerygma and comedy. This was an important aspect of literary criticism as he placed these passages into genre’s just like a critic would any other book. However, Via did not treat the Bible simply as any other book, but understanding that the Bible could be placed in genre’s is important to literary criticism. In his book *Parables*, Via deals with the problem many scholars have caused because they do not treat them as artistic or literary works. He states that the parables: “are usually treated as if they were not artistic or literary works, and sometimes it is explicitly denied that they are, at least that they are primarily.”¹⁷ Via continues as he states: “Occasionally it is positively remarked that Jesus’ parables are of an artistic nature, but the full implications of this have not been worked out in dialogue with aesthetic and (non-biblical) literary critical thought.”¹⁸

Via draws most of his ideas out of a structuralist perspective of the Bible. This discipline draws from the structure of the literary text. This is how Via would be able to take passages either written by Paul or within Mark, as he did in his book *Kerygma and Comedy in the New Testament* and placed these passages into identifiable genre’s within literary criticism. Raymond Brown defines this term within literary criticism as:

¹⁶Bray, 472.

¹⁷Dan Otto Via, *Parables, Their Literary and Existential Dimension*, (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1967), ix.

¹⁸Via, x.

Structuralism concentrates on the final form of the NT works. Although overall structure as guide to the intention of the author has long been a feature of interpretation, and it is almost de rigeur that biblical introductions supply an outline of every NT book, “structure” in this approach is far more than a general outline.

With this definition one is able to understand how Via could take the final form of the New Testament writings and then begin to break them down from there. Via contends that “the second generation of structuralists literary critics grants that structuralist literary criticism is still very much in the beginning stages, that it is yet defining and formulating itself.”¹⁹ This statement would mean that Via believes that structuralism is still in its developmental stages of which Via has been a part of.

¹⁹Dan Otto Via, *Kerygma and Comedy in the New Testament* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1975), 7-8.

Application of Methodology

In the Gospel of John, chapter 20, verses 24-31; Jesus appears to his disciples after His resurrection only to find Thomas still doubting. The author of this is usually regarded to be the apostle John, however, the author is not given within the text. The date has been given to have probably have been written between 85-90 A.D. Many believe John has written his letters and gospels as well as revelation from the isle of Patmos late in his life. There is not a particular church that the author seems to be writing to. The purpose of this Gospel seems to be to prove that Jesus was the son of God. Throughout the entire Gospel, the author seems to be pointing to Jesus' deity.

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