CURRENT TRENDS IN BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS
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Introduction

No other area of biblical studies is changing as rapidly as hermeneutics. Within the scope of traditional hermeneutics alone, the increase in specialized texts may be described as a publishing explosion. With the addition of studies based in rhetorical, literary-structural, semiotic, social-scientific, and special interest approaches, it is impossible to keep up with the literature in the field. Some of these new methodologies are helpful, some are destructive, and many contain both positive and negative elements.

All interpretive systems must necessarily *emphasize* one of three factors related to written texts: the mind of the (human) author, the text (in isolation from the author and reader), and the mind of the reader. In actual practice, no interpreter is able to exclude any of the three, but all interpreters favor one of them. The differences are extremely important, since all of the approaches mentioned above develop out of one of these emphases, while including aspects of the others.

1. The Mind of the Author

The traditional approach of conservative interpreters of the Bible, though often unexpressed, has been to emphasize the mind of the human author. This method assumes that the author understood what he was writing, that under the direction of the Holy Spirit he shaped his text for a particular audience, and that he expected his audience to understand what he was communicating. For that reason, biblical hermeneutics normally deals with the historical-cultural context of the author to determine from what perspective the statements of the text were made by the author and understood by the audience. The lexical and syntactical information is studied to determine how words and expressions were used by that author, in distinction from other authors. Also, figures of speech are studied both within the historical context of the period and within the body of texts by a given author. In recent studies, as will be noted below, attention has been focused on the literary styles and genres chosen by authors as a major factor in determining authorial intent. This approach assumes that the author of a text determines its meaning.

2. The Text in Isolation

Treatment of a text in total isolation from both the author and the reader is probably impossible, but various attempts have been made to separate the text from all external factors. This approach detaches the text from its historical source and setting and frees the text to mean what it will in any given time and culture. Therefore, the meanings of words are taken as what would be normative in the time and place of reading, not of writing. Obviously, figures of speech and other literary factors would also vary with context of reading. This approach assumes that meaning is a factor of written sentences, not the intention of the author nor the bias of the reader. (Interestingly, this emphasis often insinuates itself into the hermeneutics of readers who assume that the biblical authors wrote in the same linear fashion as modern, western writers. Typical sermon outlines reflect this bias.)

3. The Mind of the Reader

Largely as a result of postmodern influences, the most rapidly developing trend within biblical hermeneutics emphasizes the role of the reader in determining the meaning of a text. This emphasis ranges from simple admission that all readers bring biases (presuppositions) to the reading of a text, to assertion that the only meaning in a text is that which the reader gives it. Words and sentences have no meaning until they are processed by a mind. The degree to which that act of processing determines meaning is the question which this approach attempts to answer. Whereas the method that seeks to determine the original intention of the author lends itself to a separation of original meaning and present application, reader-centered interpretation tends to blur that distinction. (As an informal approach, this hermeneutic is assumed in the assertion heard in many Bible study groups, "This verse means to me that….") In its most extreme form, this hermeneutic becomes purely a matter of identifying the fluctuating meanings of words across semantic ranges. Deconstruction is another extreme form of this approach. This emphasis on the mind of the reader assumes that meaning is determined by the reader, not by the intention of the author nor by the shape of the text.

Trends

1. Literary Approaches

In recent decades, various forms of literary approaches to the texts of Scripture have become very popular. Most of these mark a movement of interpreters from both liberal and conservative camps toward a greater emphasis upon authorial intent, but that emphasis varies greatly between specific methods and individual interpreters. In all cases, there is a tendency to minimize questions of history, thus producing a secondary emphasis on the text itself. At the very least, in liberal circles, it evidences a willingness to treat the texts as valid literary compositions. This is in opposition to the older form/literary/structural studies which tried to uncover the supposed historical development or editing of diverse texts into a single text. Many of the more liberal scholars still pay lip-service to form criticism, but in practice adopt something akin to the canonical criticism popularized by Brevard Childs.

a. Rhetorical Criticism. Although the term, *Rhetorical Criticism,* was coined by James Muilenberg in 1968 in his presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature,[1] the movement had been growing for some time. Over a rather short period, however, the approach was popularized by a number of both liberal and conservative scholars. To name only a few, such writers as Robert Alter, James Kugel, Meir Sternberg, Adele Berlin, and Frank Kermode from the liberal side and Leland Ryken, Tremper Longman, and Richard Patterson from the conservative side, have introduced this emphasis to a wide range of scholars.

Definition: Rhetorical Criticism is the study of a biblical text to determine the structural patterns[2] used by the author in order to communicate his intended meaning. These patterns include matters of parallelism, chiasm, inclusio, hook words, thematic development, etc. It is largely a matter of bringing the tools of conventional literary criticism to the text of Scripture.

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[1]James Muilenberg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," Journal of Biblical Literature 88 (March 1969): 1-18.

[2]This is not to be confused with Structuralism or Post-Structuralism, which deal with underlying universal concepts, whether in literature, social constructs, science, or any other aspect of human thought.

This method has tremendous positive value, in that it helps the reader set aside modern, western ideas of the development of a text and attempt to see it as the author and his original audience understood it. The reality that the form of a text shapes, indeed is part of, its meaning is properly recognized and utilized for exegesis. This approach also directs one's attention to the text as a whole and reduces the atomization all too common in non-literary methods.

The primary negative factor is that there is a tendency to ignore or slight the important work of lexical-semantic-syntactical investigation. Either task is immensely time-consuming, and one will almost always dominate the other. Also, until considerable skill in methodology is attained, it is very easy to foist one's own idea of the structure onto a text—for instance, chiasms may be discovered where the original author intended no such structure.

b. Narrative Criticism. Narrative Criticism is a specialized form of Rhetorical Criticism, dealing with the unique characteristics of narrative texts. Although narrative is only one of the many literary genres to be found in the Bible, gross misinterpretation and misapplication of narrative texts are all too common.

Definition: "The interpretation of narrative has two aspects: poetics, which studies the artistic dimension or the way the text is constructed by the author; and meaning, which re-creates the message the author is communicating. The 'how' (poetics) leads to the 'what' (meaning)."[3] The poetics includes the way in which the implied author or narrator communicates the "story" to the implied audience, by means of plot development within the narrative world.

The values and dangers of Narrative Criticism are about the same as those for Rhetorical Criticism. Large portions of the Bible are in some form of narrative text and tools which help discover the authors' intended messages are very valuable. At the same time, it is easy to miss some of the authors' literary clues and so read in one's own culturally-conditioned ideas.

c. Redaction Criticism. Because of its unfortunate beginnings in the work of liberal critics, Redaction Criticism has long had a bad reputation among conservative biblical scholars. In the hands of extreme liberals and neo-orthodox scholars, it has been used as a tool to deny the historicity of the gospel accounts, particularly, but also of the deuteronomic history. The term *redaction,* however, merely refers to a process of editing and is not inherently a negative concept.

Definition: Redaction Criticism is the study of the editorial choices made by biblical authors, in choosing from all the information at their disposal what they would record and in what literary form they would record it. This includes such matters as how to order events, what events to place in juxtaposition, and what aspects of each event to emphasize. This is primarily a task of historiography and is particularly related to the study of the Synoptic Gospels.

In recent decades, conservative scholars have begun to use a form of Redaction Criticism to considerable benefit. This has helped greatly in such areas as comparisons of the Jesus infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke, to determine what the theological point of each is. The contrast

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[3]Grant R. Osborne, The Hermeneutical Spiral (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 154.

between the two, both in content and in literary style, contributes to an understanding of the purpose of each.

Negatively, it is very easy for the historical errors of the discipline to spill over into the newer usage. Particularly common is the temptation to suggest that various synoptic problems may be resolved by assuming the non-historicity of some events reported in the Gospels.

d. <u>Intertexuality</u>. The study of the intertexuality of literary texts has recently entered the field of biblical studies as a discipline which cannot be ignored. Long a tool of general literary criticism, this concept is most popular in liberal circles, but is gaining interest among conservatives, as well. The basic concept of intertextuality is that all literature is interrelated so that texts develop meaning in a collective manner.

> <u>Definition</u>: Intertexuality is the necessary relationship between literary texts by which the meaning of a single text is at least partly determined by the meaning of other texts.

The great value of this approach is that it correctly recognizes that an author writes out of a mindset which has been shaped by the literature which he has read. In the case of the biblical authors, this particularly emphasizes progressive revelation. That is, an author will build upon all the canonical revelation (and also non-canonical prophecies, history, etc.) which has preceded his own writing. It also recognizes that literary motifs are repeated by authors in order to add depth of connotation to their writing. A clear example would be the literary shape of the event recorded in Judges 19 (the Levite and his concubine among the Benjamites), which draws the reader's mind back to Genesis 19:1-11 (the angelic guests of Lot in Sodom) and implies that the Benjamites have become as morally corrupt as the men of Sodom.

Perhaps the greatest danger in this method is that there is a tendency to deny originality in revelation and to view all literature as mere repetition of a convention or tradition. It also may lead to a treatment of historical narrative as fiction.

e. <u>Discourse Analysis</u>. Discourse Analysis may be treated as a subset of semiotics (discussed below). There is also a degree of overlap with Rhetorical Criticism. However, Discourse Analysis emphasizes the linguistic aspect of literary construction in such a way that it is worth distinguishing from both of the other disciplines.

> <u>Definition</u>: Discourse Analysis is the study of the way specifically linguistic phenomena are joined within a literary work to communicate the author's message. It is therefore similar to the parallels and repetitions that are intrinsic to rhetorical study of biblical texts, but is more specifically concerned with the way the words, phrases, clauses, and sentences are constructed and connected to achieve the overall effect of the text. It looks beyond the elements of grammatical and syntactical phenomena to the net effect of their combination within a literary work.

Discourse Analysis is particularly useful for drawing attention to the way in which the presentation of time factors, placement of persons and events, recording of direct and indirect discourse, and development of plot, as well as other significant factors, produce the meaning of a text. Of particular interest in this discipline is the analysis of conversations (discourse). Such conversations as that between Jesus and Nicodemus (John 3:1-15?/21?) may be examined

profitably by this method.[4]   An excellent source of careful application of this method may be found in articles in the Journal of Translation and Textlinguistics, published annually by the Summer Institute of Linguistics.

Perhaps the greatest danger in the method is that human imagination may find nuances or even major constructs that the author never intended. Use of this technique should be done cautiously and, if possible, under the guidance of an experienced scholar until sufficient skill has been acquired to avoid major errors. For many people, the required level of linguistic knowledge will be a barrier to independent work. (However, a general knowledge of the subject will make works by scholars accessible and verifiable.)

2. Linguistics/Semiotics

In modern times, the study of linguistics has become a complex discipline, with many different schools of thought concerning the nature of language and linguistic functions. Beginning with the issue of how written or oral symbols (letters and words) relate to meaning and continuing on to how sentences and paragraphs communicate complex concepts, scholars argue many different viewpoints. Of special interest in biblical studies has been the issue of lexical semantics. Ever since James Barr[5] refuted the approach of European lexicographers, who assumed that words in the Bible took on fixed, single meanings with theological import, liberals and conservatives alike have been at work to define the semantic ranges (varieties of meanings) of significant words in the Hebrew and Greek Testaments. This has been a particularly fruitful area of study among conservative scholars, with the two-volume lexicon by Louw and Nida[6] as one obvious result.

More specialized work has also been done on figurative language in Scripture. Much acrimony between supporters of theological systems (especially Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism) has centered on the issue of whether certain statements in Scripture are intended as plain language or figurative. Conservative scholars of all theological positions have been slow to work in this field, but recently there have been encouraging signs of progress. Especially noteworthy is the publication of the Dictionary of Biblical Imagery[7] in 1998.

3. Feminist Hermeneutics

Of all the liberation theologies which are being produced today, the best biblical scholarship has resulted from feminist studies. This is probably due to the fact that several significantly qualified scholars have emerged to provide technical expertise for the movement. Feminist interpretation takes something of a postmodern position on the biblical text, viewing Scripture as a product of male domination of women. Thus the text is not seen as neutral in its treatment of the genders, but as actually embodying misogynist agendas.

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[4]Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 278-287.

[5]James Barr, The Semantics of Biblical Language (London: Oxford University Press, 1961).

[6]Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains, 2d ed, 2 vols. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989).

[7]Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., Dictionary of Biblical Imagery (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998).

While conservatives will not be very receptive to the hermeneutics of suspicion inherent in the approach, the observations of feminist scholars do assist in making a close reading of the biblical texts. For example, feminist scholars have pointed out that references to "the people" of Israel, may well exclude women (Exodus 19:14-15; Judges 7:2). Recently the issue of gender-neutral language for Bible translation has divided even conservatives. The prior scholarly work of some of the feminist interpreters has been of help in attempting to determine when texts are referring to both genders under male grammatical forms and when the authorial intent is to indicate men only. If the goal is to find authorial intent, then all such help has value. Also, merely being faced with some of the interpretive issues is an aid in working through previously unexamined presuppositions which have been brought to the biblical text.

4. Social-Science as Hermeneutical Tool

The rapidly expanding use of the social sciences as an aid in biblical interpretation holds both promise and danger. Properly applied, this discipline helps to recreate the world of the author of a text, as well as the narrative world of narrative texts. Assisted by the findings of biblical archaeologists and anthropologists, those who use this method are able to explicate the unexpressed (assumed by the author and original audience) social forces at work in the historical contexts. In one sense, this approach is merely an extension of the old study of biblical customs, but in many ways is developing into a whole new discipline.

The value of such studies is obvious to the extent that they help locate the original author and audience in their historical and cultural setting. The equally obvious danger is that an inexact science will be used too freely and invent social structures that never existed. Recreating ancient social settings is at best difficult, so many of the suggestions being offered are suspect or patently false. This is an area to watch carefully as the method matures and develops.

5. Postmodern Hermeneutics/Deconstruction

Even less attractive to conservative interpreters is the work of determined postmodern scholars. The basic assumption of most forms of postmodern hermeneutics is that it is impossible to know the intention of the author of a text, because it is impossible to communicate messages effectively. Therefore, all understandings of texts are subjective and individual. Only the reader can know what he or she thinks a text means, and that meaning cannot be made normative for other readers.

In the form of deconstructionist interpretation, the element of suspicion is emphasized. Any text is viewed as an attempt at self-empowerment by the writer. All communication is, in some way, subversive. Therefore the text must be analyzed (deconstructed) to show the real motives and goals of the author. Although many philosophers have pointed out that the opinions of the deconstructionists can also be deconstructed, the chief proponents of this approach have not been receptive to that criticism.

Although the various forms of postmodern hermeneutics are generally not acceptable, they do serve the very useful task of reminding readers that there is a strongly subjective element in all interpretation. It is impossible not to mix much of one's own thinking with the perceived intention of the original author. Therefore we must be continually reexamining our interpretations to sift out the subjective elements as much as possible.

6. Reader-Response Criticism

There are two basic forms of reader-response criticism. The more radical form rejects any idea of a normative or correct reading of a text. The reader does not seek to find meaning, but rather reads the text to create meaning. This very postmodern form of interpretation also includes the idea of observing multiple meanings in a single text and "playing" with the interchange between those meanings. Words and sentences are constantly shifting between the various meanings, so that it is impossible to fix a meaning at any given point.

The more conservative form of reader-response criticism has valuable elements to contribute to the hermeneutical task. In this approach it is admitted that all texts contain ambiguity. The reader is not free to create meanings to fill the gaps arbitrarily, however. Rather, the hints and directions that the author builds into the text through various literary devices are to guide the reader in finding appropriate understandings of the meaning. For example, an interpreter may find that there are indeed multiple ways a single passage could be interpreted (lists of these are found in most critical commentaries). The task of making the appropriate choice is a necessary response on the part of the reader.

Not all readers are created equal for this latter task. North American cultural concepts of egalitarianism, coupled with a faulty view of the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit, have led many Christians to believe that anyone's interpretation is as valid as anyone else's. However, that simply isn't so. The ability to fill in the gaps varies greatly with training, experience, and even natural ability. Whereas all are invited to read the text, there is an important role in local churches for what has come to be called the "ideal reader". The ideal reader is the person who has mastered the text sufficiently to be able to give an informed reading for the benefit of those who are less qualified. This act of reading is a response to the ambiguities inherent in all texts.

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