

Scripture as Story

A scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven, Jesus once said, is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old. The last few years of biblical scholarship have witnessed many such scribes producing many such treasures: some are new, some are old, and some, perhaps, are both at the same time. Narrative criticism is a new approach to the Bible, but it is based on ideas that have been used in the study of other literature for some time.¹

THE BIBLE AND LITERARY CRITICISM

In a sense, the Bible has always been studied as literature because, after all, that is what it is—scriptures or writings. The field of biblical criticism knows no methodology that circumvents the act of reading or hearing the text. Nevertheless, the Bible's literary qualities themselves have not been a typical subject for investigation. Rather, the Bible has been read as a record of significant history, a compendium of revealed truth, or a guidebook for daily living. The considerations that caused its various books to become regarded as canonical in the first place were no doubt diverse, but there is no evidence that aesthetic appreciation was among them. Indeed, St. Augustine bemoaned the low literary quality that the biblical writings evince when they are compared to the pagan works of Greece and Rome, a circumstance that he could accept only as indicative of divine humility (*Confessions* 3.5).

The discovery of literary criticism by biblical scholars, then, is something of an innovation, for it involves a self-conscious reading of the Bible in a way that it has not usually been read. The reasons for

this sudden convergence of biblical and literary studies must be understood in terms of recent developments in both fields.²

The dominant mode of biblical studies for more than a century has been the historical-critical method.³ Actually a conglomeration of approaches, this method seeks to reconstruct the life and thought of biblical times through an objective, scientific analysis of biblical material. Source criticism, for example, attempts to delineate the sources that the evangelists used in the composition of their Gospels. Form criticism concentrates on defining the *Sitz im Leben* (setting in life) that individual units of tradition may have had before they came to be incorporated into the Gospels. Redaction criticism seeks to discern the theologies and intentions of the evangelists themselves by observing the manner in which they edited their sources and arranged the individual units of tradition. These disciplines share a common desire to shed light upon significant periods in the transmission of the Gospels: the period of the historical Jesus, the period of oral tradition in the life of the early church, or the period of the final shaping of the Gospels by the evangelists.

The major limitation of all these approaches, as documented by Hans Frei in 1974, is that they fail to take seriously the narrative character of the Gospels.⁴ These books are stories about Jesus, not compilations of miscellaneous data concerning him. They are intended to be read from beginning to end, not dissected and examined to determine the relative value of individual passages. In focusing on the documentary status of these books, the historical-critical method attempted to interpret not the stories themselves but the historical circumstances behind them.

The need for a more literary approach to the Gospels had been sounded in 1969 by William A. Beardslee.⁵ Decrying the sharply historical cast of most biblical scholarship Beardslee suggested that analysis of biblical forms should provide insight not only into the character of the communities that shaped these texts but also into the literary meaning and impact of the texts themselves. Form criticism should include attention to how particular literary forms work, that is, how they invite the reader to participate in the passage under consideration and attempt to evoke a particular response from that reader. The first literary forms in the New Testament to be examined in this way were the parables; some of the most important studies were those of Robert W. Funk, Dan O. Via, and John D. Crossan.⁶

Another concern voiced by Beardslee was the need for greater attention to the larger form of Gospel itself. The development of redaction criticism partially met this need by focusing on the role of the evangelists in assembling various traditions into coherent wholes. Whereas form criticism typically regarded the evangelists as mere collectors, redaction criticism insisted on their status as editors who were personally responsible for the finished product. As this discipline matured, appreciation for the role of the evangelists increased still further and they came to be described not only as editors but as authors. Finally, Norman Perrin was led to write, "This means we have to introduce a whole new category into our study . . . the category of general literary criticism. If the evangelists are authors, then they must be studied as other authors are studied."⁷

The desire for a more literary approach to the Gospels, then, was first expressed by historical critics themselves, in recognition of the limitations of an exclusively historical approach. The prevailing sense was not that historical criticism had failed or that its goals were invalid, but that something else should also be done. The Bible was not being studied in the same manner as other ancient literature. At most colleges and universities, for example, the works of Homer are studied by at least two different departments. Classical historians hope to extract information about the ancient world, such as how people dressed, ate, married, and went to war. But scholars of literature employ a different set of questions: What is the plot? How are characters developed? What effect does the story have on its readers and why does it have this effect? Under the dominance of historical criticism, biblical scholarship found itself limited to the concerns of a single division. New Testament professors became, in effect, an extension of the church history department. The Gospels were regarded as resources for learning about Jesus and the early church, but not as narratives that have significant stories to tell. The question, as phrased by Norman R. Petersen in 1978, was whether these texts should not first be comprehended on their own terms before they are treated as evidence of something else.⁸

Even after the need for a truly literary study of the Gospels was recognized, uncertainty persisted as to how to proceed. There are significant differences between the Gospels and the works of Homer. The problem with treating a Gospel "just like any other book"⁹ is that the Gospels are not like other books. In some respects, they resemble modern novels more than modern biographies and yet it is obvious that their writers did not intend them to be viewed as fiction. To many

scholars, the Gospels do not appear to fit into the category of "self-consciously imaginary literature," which, according to Rene Wellek and Austin Warren's classic textbook on literary criticism, is the only type of literature subject to genuine literary analysis.¹⁰

This perception of the Gospels, however, had been challenged as early as 1946 by the publication of Erich Auerbach's landmark study, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*.¹¹ One of Auerbach's conclusions was that biblical narrative can be studied according to the canons of general literary criticism. In choosing narrative discourse as their medium, the biblical writers inevitably selected a form of expression that presents a narrative depiction of reality. This is a feature that biblical texts share with other literary works (including Homer). The representation of reality in narrative form, Auerbach proposed, is a basic element of literature that transcends traditional distinctions between aesthetic and historical purposes. What an author wishes to say about the things reported in a narrative—real or imaginary—may be discerned by observing the style of expression that is used.

The 1940s generated other developments that would prove fortuitous for biblical scholars. Prior to 1940, secular critics also paid a great deal of attention to establishing the identity, circumstances, and intentions of a work's historical author. It was considered important, for example, to know the order in which the plays of William Shakespeare or the novels of Charles Dickens were written. Any interpretation of a work by one of these masters would be expected to take into account the circumstances of its writing: the life and personality of the author at this point in his career, and perhaps the condition of English society at the time. In the 1940s, however, this manner of interpretation was by and large replaced by an approach that came to be called the New Criticism.¹²

The New Criticism rejected the notion that background information holds the interpretive key to a text. It is not necessary, for instance, to know that John Keats was caring for his dying brother when he wrote "Bright Star," a sonnet replete with themes of love and death.¹³ When this knowledge is imposed upon the sonnet, in fact, it becomes a distraction, an intrusion that prevents the work from being read on its own terms. The New Critics held that the author's intention is "irrelevant to the literary critic, because meaning and value reside within the text of the finished, free-standing, and public work of literature itself."¹⁴ Most literary critics today have moved beyond the

initial concerns of New Criticism and many would regard the position just stated as extreme. Even so, it is now accepted as axiomatic in literary circles that the meaning of literature transcends the historical intentions of the author.¹⁵

Literary critics today prefer to speak of an *implied author*, who is reconstructed by the reader from the narrative.¹⁶ When a person reads a story, he or she will inevitably form some impression about that story's author. The story itself conveys a sense of the author's values and worldview. For example, anyone who reads John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* or Dante's *Inferno* will no doubt conclude that the authors are Christians. Impressions like these define what literary critics refer to as the implied author of a narrative. The goal of such a definition, however, is not to arrive at a partial understanding of what the real author might have been like, but to elucidate the perspective from which the narrative must be interpreted. The implied author's point of view can be determined without considering anything extrinsic to the narrative. Thus, literary critics may speak of the intentions of the implied author without violating the basic principle that narratives should be interpreted on their own terms. When hermeneutical preference is given to a work's implied author over its real, historical author, the narrative is allowed to speak for itself. The interpretive key no longer lies in background information, but within the text itself.

The development of this concept of the implied author has led to many important conclusions for the study of literature. For example, when an author produces a work that espouses values at variance with his or her actual point of view, most scholars agree that the perspective of the implied author still determines what the story means. A critic may recognize by way of historical footnote that the person who wrote this story did not actually think this way, but, nevertheless, the story means what the story means. Again, the distinction between implied authors and real authors becomes significant when more than one work by the same writer is to be considered. Even though Robert Louis Stevenson wrote both *Treasure Island* and *Dr. Jeckyl and Mr. Hyde*, the implied authors of these two novels are not identical.

Distinctions of this sort become less important in studies of the New Testament Gospels since no two of these works have the same author¹⁷ and there is no reason to believe that the real authors did not fully accept the ideas expressed in their books. Of more significance is the premise that identification of the implied author provides all that is needed in order to comprehend the literary meaning and impact of

the narrative; thus it is possible to understand works that are anonymous. All narratives have an implied author, even if the real author is unknown. Even stories that have no real author—such as tales that have developed over a period of time by being passed down from generation to generation—can be studied according to the standards of narrative criticism.¹³ This is true because, regardless of the process through which a narrative comes into being, it will have a single implied author, which can be identified and described.

Secular literary critics themselves did not show great interest in studying the New Testament Gospels as literature,¹⁹ but the consensus among them by the early 1970s seemed to be that there was no good reason why such a thing could not be done. It seemed inevitable, then, that the need for a literary approach to the Gospels felt in biblical circles and the possibility for such an approach recognized in secular circles would eventually come together. They did so, among other places, in the classroom. At Carthage College in 1977 a young Bible professor named David Rhoads invited a colleague from the English department to show his students what it would be like to read one of the Gospels the way one would read a short story. The presentation by Don Michie was eye-opening not only for the students, but for Rhoads as well. Ultimately, it led to the publication in 1982 of *Mark As Story*,²⁰ a collaborative effort by these two scholars that, more than any previously published work, demonstrated the possibilities of reading a Gospel in this way.²¹ The next year saw the publication of Jack D. Kingsbury's *The Christology of Mark's Gospel*²² and R. Alan Culpepper's *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*,²³ two works that consciously followed the approach Rhoads had decided to call "narrative criticism."²⁴ A few years later, Kingsbury also produced a major narrative study of Matthew and Robert C. Tannehill contributed a similar analysis of Luke-Acts.²⁵ Although the method is practiced by many scholars today who are making significant contributions, these four—Rhoads, Kingsbury, Culpepper, and Tannehill—deserve recognition as pioneers of the discipline; they have provided the first comprehensive treatments of the New Testament's five narrative books.²⁶

LITERARY CRITICISM AND HISTORICAL CRITICISM

The relationship between modern literary approaches to the Bible and traditional historical-critical methodology is somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, the literary approaches may be viewed as logical

developments within and extensions of form and redaction criticism. On the other hand, these newer literary approaches incorporate concepts derived from movements in secular literary criticism that repudiate the significance of historical investigation for the interpretation of texts.

The major differences between literary criticism²⁷ and historical criticism are worth noting here.

1. *Literary criticism focuses on the finished form of the text.* The objective of literary-critical analysis is not to discover the process through which a text has come into being but to study the text that now exists. In historical-critical research, the compositional history of the text is usually significant. Source criticism, by definition, is devoted to defining and evaluating the materials that preceded our current Gospels and served as sources for them. Form criticism is interested in the traditional form that a pericope assumed before being incorporated into the framework of a particular Gospel. Redaction criticism maintains both these interests in order to better assess the role of the evangelist in the text's final stage of composition. Literary criticism does not deny these observations regarding the development of the text, but it does ignore them. Ultimately, it makes no difference for a literary interpretation whether certain portions of the text once existed elsewhere in some other form. The goal of literary criticism is to interpret the current text, in its finished form.²⁸

2. *Literary criticism emphasizes the unity of the text as a whole.* Literary analysis does not dissect the text but discerns the connecting threads that hold it together. The Gospels are viewed as coherent narratives and individual passages are interpreted in terms of their contribution to the story as a whole. In historical criticism, the Gospels are viewed as compilations of loosely related pericopes, and these individual units of tradition are most often the subject of analysis. In source criticism and form criticism, an attempt is made to interpret particular sayings or stories apart from their context in the Gospel as a whole. Even in redaction criticism, sometimes more attention is paid to comparisons between a passage and its parallels in the other Gospels than to the internal connections it may have to other passages in the same book.²⁹

3. *Literary criticism views the text as an end in itself.* The immediate goal of a literary study is to understand the narrative. The story that is told and the manner in which it is told deserve full scholarly attention. Historical criticism inevitably treats the text as a means to

an end rather than as an end in itself. The "end" for historical criticism is a reconstruction of something to which the text attests, such as the life and teaching of Jesus, the interests of the early Christians who preserved traditions concerning him, or the concerns of the evangelists and their communities.

The difference between these approaches has been aptly described through the metaphors of a window and a mirror.³⁰ Historical criticism regards the text as a window through which the critic hopes to learn something about another time and place. The text, then, stands between the reader and the insight that is sought and may provide the means through which that insight can be obtained. Literary criticism, in contrast, regards the text as a mirror; the critic determines to look at the text, not through it, and whatever insight is obtained will be found in the encounter of the reader with the text itself.

Literary criticism, it is sometimes said, deals with the poetic function of a text, whereas historical criticism deals with its referential function. This means that literary critics are able to appreciate the story of a narrative apart from consideration of the extent to which it reflects reality. The story world of the narrative is to be entered and experienced rather than evaluated in terms of historicity. In the New Testament Gospels, God speaks audibly from heaven, fantastic miracles are commonplace, and human beings interact freely with spiritual creatures like angels and demons. Such features have sometimes been problematic for historical critics who evaluate the Gospel narratives in terms of their referential function, that is, their ability to refer to the real world. The literary critic, however, is interested in the contribution that these elements make to the story and in discerning the effect that such a story has on its readers.

This does not mean that literary critics question the legitimacy of historical inquiry. It should not be assumed that they naively accept whatever they read as perfectly historical or that they view the Bible as a collection of tales with little basis in reality. Rather, these critics bracket out questions of historicity in order to concentrate on the nature of the text as literature. They do not deny that biblical narratives may also serve a referential function or that it may be rewarding to study them in that regard as well.

4. *Literary criticism is based on communication models of speech-act theory.* The philosophical bases for literary criticism are derived from theories about communication. One of the simplest and yet most profound of these theories is a speech-act model proposed by Roman

Jakobson.³¹ Every act of communication, Jakobson avers, involves a sender, a message, and a receiver. In literature, the sender may be identified with the author, the message with the text, and the receiver with the reader.

Author → Text → Reader

The exact way in which these components interact with each other is understood differently by different schools of literary criticism (see chap. 2). All theories of literature, however, understand the text as a form of communication through which a message is passed from the author to the reader.

Historical criticism, on the other hand, has approached texts on the basis of an evolutionary model.³² The text is viewed as the final form of something that has evolved through sequential stages. The task of interpretation, therefore, involves an analytical process that seeks to identify these stages and to work backward through them in reconstructing a hypothetical pattern of the text's origins. In the case of the Gospels, New Testament scholars have typically postulated an evolutionary process of development similar to the following:

Historical Event
↓
Oral Tradition
↓
Early Written Sources
↓
Text

In this model, as in the communication model diagrammed above, the text may be identified as any one of our New Testament Gospels. In literary criticism, however, this text is viewed as the middle component in an act of communication, whereas in historical criticism it is regarded as the end product of a process of development. Apart from their common interest in the text, the two approaches do not overlap: the one may be regarded as dealing with a horizontal dimension of the text and the other as treating an intersecting vertical dimension.

It is likely that two such different approaches, based as they are on divergent philosophical models, will produce different types of insight. Literary criticism is more likely to describe the meaning of a text in terms of what it communicates between its author and its reader, and historical criticism is more likely to describe its meaning in terms of its origin and process of development. Still, these insights will not necessarily be contradictory and so potential exists for the two models to be used in ways that are distinctive but complementary.³¹

2

Ways of Reading

Literary criticism is a broad field that encompasses a vast array of different methodologies. Just as biblical studies have seen the rise and fall of various approaches to interpretation, the history of literary criticism is replete with movements that favor particular theories. The student who decides to become a literary critic learns about such schools as Formalism, Realism, Imagism, Aestheticism, Decadence, Deconstruction, and so forth.¹ In this chapter, we will compare narrative criticism with other literary approaches being used in biblical studies: How are they similar and how are they different?

A system of categorization devised by M. H. Abrams helps to bring some order to the chaos of literary theories.² For Abrams, there are four basic types of literary criticism and all of the various schools may be understood as representing one or more of these four types.

1. *Expressive* types of criticism are author-centered and tend to evaluate a work in terms of the sincerity and adequacy with which it expresses the views and temperament of its writer.
2. *Pragmatic* types of criticism are reader-centered and view the work as something that is constructed in order to achieve a particular effect on its audience; the work is evaluated according to its success in achieving that aim.
3. *Objective* types of criticism are text-centered, viewing the literary product as a self-sufficient world in itself. The work must be analyzed according to intrinsic criteria, such as the interrelationship of its component elements.
4. *Mimetic* types of criticism view the literary work as a reflection of the outer world or of human life and evaluate it in terms of the truth or accuracy of its representation.