

Unit 4

Literary Approaches

The narrative art of the Bible has always been appreciated in popular culture. Biblical stories were represented in sculptures and stained glass windows of churches, and Western literature has been deeply influenced by characters, themes and symbols of the Bible. In both Judaism and Christianity the reading and retelling of the stories is part of the spirituality of these religions. Yet even though biblical Hebrew poetry had been the subject of academic study since the 18th century little attention had been paid to the poetics of biblical narrative, both of the Hebrew Scriptures as well as of the New Testament.

But until the early 1970's, as we have already seen, historical-critical approaches dominated Biblical Studies almost entirely. There is no reason to dispute from a literary critical perspective the important insight that much oral tradition does lie preserved in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the written Gospels. And the sociological setting of any piece of language, whether oral or written, also cannot really be ignored. But literary critics are trying to put together the pieces isolated by the historical-critical methods (i.e. source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism) to see what the narrative looks like when viewed as a whole.

Thus literary approaches differ from historical-critical studies in significant ways. Whereas historical-critical study tends to be concerned with the prehistory of the text (oral traditions and written source materials), the history behind the text, and with its development through successive redactions, literary studies focus on the final form of the text. Whereas historical-critical studies are interested in the world referred to by the text, literary approaches are interested in the world of and in the text.

This approach pays attention to literary features like key words or themes that are repeated throughout a passage (or an entire book), the type of literature being read (for example, law, prophecy, Gospel, letter), the use of unique or unexpected words, the literary context of the passage (what happens immediately before and after it), and how the plot or storyline is developed. In addition, the literary approach is interested in the characters of the biblical text.

Parallel to literary approaches reader-response criticism emerged as a separate method. It has been realized that the text often contains "gaps" which the reader, consciously or unconsciously, fills in (e.g., details concerning characters, aspects of motivation or causality connections between events). The reader becomes actively involved in the process of reading, and he or she engages not simply in issues of plot and character but in the process of reading norms and values, come to the fore which the reader may embrace or resist. Reader-response criticism particularly emphasizes the different understandings of and reactions to the "same" text by different readers by claiming a necessary place for the subjective element

in reading and the hermeneutical presuppositions which pre-shape interpretation. The subjective element is limited, however, by the reader's community. It is not so much individual readers as "interpretive communities" who set the presuppositions and parameters according to which interpretation takes place.

One of the consequences of the focus on the role of interpretive communities has been a renewed appreciation for the forms of interpretation practised by contemporary Jewish and Christian communities, as well as in centuries prior to the Enlightenment. Instead of seeing such faith guided readings as naïve or simply wrong, interpreters now ask about the assumptions and values that govern the reading practices of Christian typological and allegorical exegesis and of Rabbinic midrash. Contemporary literary scholars are particularly interested in Midrash, because some of its interpretive practices bear an intriguing resemblance to forms of post-modern interpretation. (on this see especially unit 5.4)

Essential Reading:

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| **V.George Shillington | ‘Other Ways of Reading the Same Scriptures’
In V.George Shillington, <i>Reading the Sacred Text: An Introduction to Biblical Studies</i> . London, New York: T&T Clark 2002, pp.253-266 |
| **Mark Powell | ‘Scripture as Story’
In Mark Powell, <i>What Is Narrative Criticism ?</i> Minneapolis,MN: Fortress Press 1993, pp.1-11 |
| **David Rhoads | ‘Narrative Criticism: Practices and Prospects’
In David Rhoads, <i>Reading Mark: Engaging the Gospel</i> . Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press 2004, pp. 23-43 |
| **Daniel Marguerat | ‘How Luke Wrote History’
In Daniel Marguerat, <i>The First Christian Historian: Writing the ‘Acts of the Apostles’</i> . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002, pp.1-25 |
| David Jasper | ‘Literary Readings of the Bible’
In Barton J. ed., Barton J. (ed.), <i>The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation</i> . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998 chapter 2, pp.21-35 |
| Elizabeth S.Malbon | ‘Narrative Criticism’ in Gooder P., <i>Searching for Meaning</i> . London: SPCK 2008, pp. 80-87 |
| Robert M.Fowler | ‘Reader-Response Criticism’, in Gooder, P., <i>Searching for Meaning</i> . London: SPCK 2008, pp. 127-134 |

Further Readings:

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| Patricia K. Tull | 'Rhetorical Criticism and Intertextuality'
In S.L.McKenzie, S.R.Haynes eds., <i>To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application</i> . Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox 1999, pp.156-180 |
| David M. Gunn | 'Narrative Criticism'
In S.L.McKenzie, S.R.Haynes eds., <i>To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticism and Their Application</i> . Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox 1999, pp.201-229 |
| Edgar V.McKnight | 'Reader-Response Criticism'
In S.L.McKenzie, S.R.Haynes eds., <i>To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticism and Their Application</i> . Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox 1999, pp.230-252 |

Question to consider:

How does the literary approach to the Bible differ from historical-critical and social-scientific approaches ?

Text reading

From the insights gained in this unit try to formulate an interpretation of a biblical text applying insights gained from narrative approaches following the grid below:

- Who is involved ?
- What is happening/ is said ?
- When do things happen – the question of time – past-present-future
- Where do things happen ?
- How do things happen ?
- Why do things happen ? Explanation 'behind' the text