

CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES: TEXTUAL ANALYSIS - ROMANS 1:18-32

This assignment will give a brief overview of the history and key methodological features of narrative criticism before applying the approach to the text Romans 1:18-32. It will critically evaluate the narrative-critical approach to reveal its main strengths and weakness by comparing it to historical criticism, and consider briefly the extent to which these two approaches might be applied in a complementary way.

Introduction

Narrative criticism is a relatively new approach to interpreting the Bible. Its core tenet is to treat biblical writings as literature rather than as history or doctrine, enabling them to be analysed using literary critical approaches to discover the meaning of the texts. Since the nineteenth century historical criticism was the dominant approach to biblical criticism and it sought to reconstruct the original environment 'behind' the text, often to give insight to the 'historical' Jesus and the early church.

Marguerat notes that "every reading defines itself by the questions that it addresses to the text"¹ and since the 1970s there has been a shift away from the historically-based "What does the text mean?" to a more literary-based "How does the text mean?".² Literary criticism searches for internal rather than external meaning and it considers how literary patterns and literary characteristics such as plot, relationship of characters, setting, tone, style, point of view etc. communicate meaning to an audience of readers or hearers.

Powell refers to Hans Frei's work when he states that the key weakness of historical-criticism is that it minimises the narrative character of the biblical text by focusing primarily on the historical circumstances behind the text, rather than recognising that narratives are meaningful stories in their own right.³

1 Daniel Marguerat, Bourquin Yvan, and Marcel Durrer, *How to Read Bible Stories: An introduction to narrative criticism* (London, SCM Press, 1999), p. 4.

2 Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, "Narrative Criticism: How Does the Story Mean?" in *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. Janice Capel Anderson and Stephenn D. Moore (Minneapolis, Fortress, 1992/3), p. 24.

3 Mark Allan Powell, *What is narrative criticism?* (London, SPCK, 1993), p. 2.

Resseguie notes that the phrase 'Narrative Criticism' was first coined by David Rhoads.⁴ Its origins were strongly influenced by developments in secular literary criticism such as New Criticism and Structural Criticism where the text itself is the primary focus.⁵ Powell⁶ suggests the main features of Narrative Criticism are: i) its focus on the final form of the text; ii) the text is considered as a unified, coherent whole with individual texts being interpreted in terms of connection to the whole; iii) understanding the narrative as an end in itself, through a close reading both in terms of its contents and how it is told; iv) its basis on speech-act theory in which an implied author and implied reader are constructed from within the text; the implied author being identified from the values or worldview embedded in the text and the implied reader is the 'ideal' reader the author intended the narrative to be read by, who would respond and be effected by the text as the author intended.

Although biblical literary critics initially analysed small passages such as the parables or sayings of Jesus, New Testament narrative critics have also focused their attention on complete books where narrative was evident such as the historical narratives (the Gospels and Acts) and Revelation.⁷

Since the 1980's there has been interest in attempting to apply a narrative critical-approach to Paul's letters⁸ and there have been suggestions that a narrative substructure to Paul's writings may reveal a single overarching story of salvation or several individual yet interrelated stories.⁹ However, although it is acknowledged that Paul's letters contain narratives and that there is benefit in applying the approach to provide insights into Paul's writings, significant questions remain about the extent to which it can helpfully be applied to identify a single story to Paul. As Watson notes, Paul is not a story-teller but is arguably offering reinterpretations of narratives rather than actually retelling stories.¹⁰

4 James L. Resseguie, *Narrative criticism of the New Testament: An introduction* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2005), p. 18.

5 Malbon, p. 26.

6 Powell, pp. 7-9.

7 Resseguie, p. 25.

8 See for example, A. Katherine Grieb, *The Story of Romans: A Narrative Defense Of God's Righteousness* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

9 See Bruce W. Longenecker, "Narrative Interest in the Study of Paul" in *Narrative Dynamics in Paul*, ed Longenecker, Bruce W. (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), p. 12. (pp. 3-16)

10 Francis Watson, "Is There a Story in These Texts" in *Narrative Dynamics in Paul*, ed Longenecker, Bruce W. (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), p. 232 (pp. 231-239)

Narrative criticism involves the analysis of a narrative which can be described as a series of statements (or events) joined together in a chronological sequence connected with a causal link.¹¹ David Rhoads describes narratives as having their own “story-worlds”¹² and narrative criticism explores these worlds in terms of both its story (its contents for examples, events, characters, settings, plot etc.) and its discourse (its structure and rhetoric).

Resseguie identifies six key elements utilised in applying the narrative-critical approach: i) rhetoric (the way the story is told to influence the implied reader’s understanding, for example, by using repetition, symbolism, intercalation, framing etc.); ii) settings (for example spatial, temporal, social); iii) characterisation; iv) point of view (reflecting the implied author’s or narrator’s “norms, values, beliefs and general worldview”); v) plot and vi) implied reader.¹³ These will be utilised in the following textual analysis of Romans 1:18-32.

Analysis of Romans 1:18-32

The story in Romans 1:18-32 is told by a narrator who is not identified but who throughout the story clearly communicates a perspective on the nature and behaviour of other characters from the start. This point of view is that which the implied author intends the implied reader to be influenced by and adopt. No characters speak or reveal anything about themselves in the narrative rather the narrator’s telling controls and guides the story.

Longenecker¹⁴ notes that commentators have suggested a variety of ways to try and structure this narrative including using the repeated phrases “they exchanged” or “God gave them over” or the inferential conjunctions (such as therefore, because) as the basis. However, he notes there is no consensus on such structuring and rather suggests a topical approach where the introductory theme statement in verse 18 is followed by a description of the people’s idolatry (vv. 19-23), their resulting immorality (vv. 24-31) and consequent judgement (v. 32).

11 Marguerat, p.21.

12 David M. Rhoads, *Reading Mark: Engaging the Gospel* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2004), p.24.

13 Resseguie, pp. 242-244.

14 Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans. The New International Greek Testament Commentary (NIGTC)* (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2016), p. 199.

This proposed structure is similar to the ‘inverted U-shaped’ plot pattern common for a tragedy, a narrative which usually ends in disaster, hardship and unhappiness.¹⁵ A plot in narrative criticism provides a unifying structure in which events are ordered and linked together by a causal connection describing how characters act or are acted upon. In an inverted U-shaped plot a conflict commonly occurs (known as a ‘complication’) which develops and leads to a ‘transforming action’ which subsequently results in the downfall (‘denouement’) of key characters.¹⁶ A plot is a key device in which the implied author’s message and intent (potentially through a narrator) is transmitted to the reader.

In Romans 1:18-32 this plot outline and causation can be constructed: i) God has revealed himself to people who do not worship or acknowledge him (‘complication’, vv. 19-22); ii) as a consequence “God gave them up” (‘transforming action’, vv. 24,26, 28); iii) resulting in people behaving immorally and being identified for judgment (“denouement”, vv. 24, 26-32).

The damning statement made by the narrator in verse 18 is the unifying theme of the story, setting the tone and direction of the remaining narrative. This type of opening content seeks to impact the reader’s expectations of the subsequent text and is known as the ‘primacy effect’. The narrator introduces the protagonist, God, whose anger and judgement is being made known as a present reality, the source of which is from heaven, suggesting there is a universal and cosmic characteristic to God’s wrath (within the story-time and world).

The objects of God’s wrath are described as ‘ungodliness’ and ‘wickedness’.

Longenecker¹⁷ notes that although some have suggested these are two separate domains of sin (that is, firstly against God and secondly against others) he, along with others¹⁸, argues that they are in fact synonymous and are put together to emphasise their importance which is similarly reinforced by the use of the adjective ‘all’.

15 Resseguie, p. 204.

16 Based on Larivaille’s ‘Quinary Scheme’, Marguerat p.43.

17 Richard N. Longenecker, p. 203-204.

18 Douglas J. Moo, *The letter to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2018), p. 102.

These sins are being perpetrated by the other characters in the story, who are described as those who “by their wickedness suppress the truth” (v. 18). The narrator never identifies these characters as a specific people group or locates them in a geographical setting. They are referred to only by plural pronouns (‘they’, ‘them’) or gender (‘men’, ‘women’) although they are seen as multi-dimensional and dynamic in the story. This could possibly be the narrator’s way to indicate his story is universally relevant, although by referring to characters in this way he is also clearly differentiating himself from the people he is describing in his story.

It is likely the “truth” mentioned in verse 18 refers to the knowledge people had of God and over which they had agency either to live within or to suppress; the narrator makes clear they selected the latter.

In the following verses the narrator states that it is God who has chosen to reveal what is knowable of himself (v. 19) and that this is through his creation (v. 20). (The narrator makes no comment about the apparent limit on what can be known about God or to suggest any additional ‘special revelation’ to know more¹⁹).

The narrator states that this general revelation by God has been ongoing since the beginning of the world, enabling all people throughout time to perceive God’s invisible qualities of “eternal power and divine nature” (v. 20). It is possible that the word “seen” refers to an external observation of God’s attributes in creation and that “understood” refers to an internal appreciation of them²⁰, however the narrator gives no further clarification on how this happens and does not address questions about how destructive aspects of creation, animals or humans, reflect this truth²¹ other than to say it is evident to all people because God has made it so (v. 19). Thus, the narrator concludes with the judgement that people “are without excuse” (v. 20) and as Brooten asserts ‘this universal accessibility [to God’s truth] means universal accountability’.²² This judgement is an

19 Richard N. Longenecker, p. 207.

20 Richard N. Longenecker, pp. 208-209.

21 Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses To Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 229.

22 Brooten, p. 228.

example of the narrator communicating a view of his own values and encouraging the implied reader to agree with him.

In the verses that follow (vv. 21-31) the narrator further develops his point of view and describes how people have turned away from God, towards idolatry, resulting in their current experience of the wrath of God. Although this is described in the past tense, commentators generally believe it is unlikely to be referring to a single, one-off circumstance that leads to the decline of people, rather as the tense can also indicate continuous, repeated actions, it is more likely to refer to people in any time continually turn from God's truth.²³

To emphasise the importance of the different roles played by the characters in the remaining story the narrator introduces two sets of repeated phrases: "they exchanged" (vv. 23, 25, 26) describing how people's behaviour volitionally degenerated and "God gave them up" (vv. 24, 26, 28) highlighting God's active role in handing them over to the consequences of their actions. Repetition is a powerful rhetorical device and enables an implied author (through a narrator) to build on the dramatic tension of their argument.²⁴ It also allows the reader's (or hearer's) attention and understanding to be directed onto what the implied author/narrator thinks is important.

The narrator states that though people knew God (through creation) yet they refused to worship him for who he is or for what he had done for them (v. 21). In not relating to God appropriately their lives became pointless, directionless and without understanding or purpose (v. 21). Further, the tragedy is that they appear unaware of this, the narrator stating that they claim "to be wise" and yet they are "fools" (v. 22).

This led them into idolatry as "they exchanged" the majesty and splendour of the "immortal God" for the infinitely inferior man-made images depicting humans or animals (v. 23). They further "exchanged" the reality and knowledge of their creator God and embraced a "lie" (v. 25). These "exchanges" imply that worship was an essential aspect of life to these people and if not God, then their independence resulted in them creating false gods. In

²³ Moo, p. 98.

²⁴ Marguerat, p. 52.

contrast the narrator interjects with his own praise of God, indicating his own opinion to the implied reader and again signalling a separation between himself and the people he describes. The narrator further continues his damning accusations later in narrative by asserting the people did not recognise but intentionally ignored God (v. 28). As a consequence God's reaction to this idolatry is that he "gave them up" to the behaviours described in verses 24-32 which Brooten refers to as "wretched deeds"²⁵.

Longenecker suggests the phrase "God gave them up" is most likely to mean that God withdraws his influence, or abandons people to the consequences of their own choices²⁶. However, Moo (using the interpretation "God handed them over") suggests that this understates God's more active role, in taking the initiative to "hand people over" to an ever-increasing cycle of sin²⁷. However, this does prompt the question as to how a just God would seem to actively encourage people to act in ways that would deserve death (v. 32)? Dunn, more in support of the former understanding, suggests that "handed over" is to be understood as to "hand over control of, responsibility for"; however, possibly more aligned to Moo, he also acknowledges that this is a punitive action, God's wrath enacted.²⁸ Dunn also mentions that the purpose of this "handing over" may be "potentially redemptive".²⁹ However, Moo notes that this is rarely the effect³⁰.

The narrator mentions "God gave them up" three times building the dramatic tension as he reveals the ever-expanding impact of this action: i) individual sexual impurity (v. 24); ii) on intimate relationships (vv. 26-27) and iii) to the others (vv. 29-30).

Initially the narrator identifies that God gives them up to sinful (likely sexual) desires that lead to "impurity" or "uncleanness" and the "degrading of their bodies with one another" (v. 24). The narrator does not describe in detail what this "degrading" (or alternatively "dishonouring") involves and, although the activity involves more than one person, the "degrading" would appear to impact each individual participant.

25 Brooten, p. 221.

26 Richard N. Longenecker, p. 216.

27 Moo, p. 111.

28 James D.G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary: Romans 1-8. Vol. 38A*. (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1988), p. 62.

29 Dunn, p. 63.

30 Moo, p. 111.

The second reference the narrator makes is that “God gave them up” to “degrading passions”. These “passions” led to the third “exchange” from “natural” sexual relations to homosexual behaviours (v26).

It is interesting to note that the narrator mentions women first and describes them as “Their women”, these are possibly the wives and daughters owned by the men in the narrative who may have been expected to behave only in relation to them. The narrator does not give details of the newly adopted behaviours of the women but the decision to mention them first may be a device to surprise the reader and then to shock them with the revelations to come. The narrator proceeds to describe more explicitly how men “in the same way” gave up “natural” relations with women and i) became “consumed with passion” or “enflamed with desire”³¹ for other men and ii) acted indecently with other men (v. 27). The narrator notes a consequence to this behaviour for men (though interestingly not for women) which is that they “received in their persons the due penalty for their error” (v. 27). It is unclear exactly what this means, but Brooten identifies three possibilities: i) receiving a sexually transmitted disease; ii) becoming effeminate; iii) that the “unnatural” sexual behaviour is the penalty itself.³²

The narrator does not specifically define what “natural” means but appears to assume the reader will understand. From the text “natural intercourse” appears to be that which would involve opposite genders but does not indicate the type of sexual acts this includes. However, the words “exchanged” and “giving up” imply that the people referred to had the capacity and preference to participate in “natural intercourse” but volitionally chose not to do so. It may have been that “natural intercourse” meant what was “natural” to them, however, there is no indication in the narrative of women and men for whom “natural intercourse” would mean same-sex behaviours. It is likely that as the narrator is speaking of an entire people-group in the narrative who suppress the truth about God and who become idolators, that they also change their sexual behaviours.

The narrator’s third and final use of “God gave them up” includes to a “debased mind”. Dunn comments “When God leaves [the mind] to itself it is not adequate, insufficiently

31 Brooten, p. 255.

32 Brooten, p. 258.

qualified for its task of informing relationships with others and with the rest of creation”³³

The narrator connects this malfunctioning mind with their affected behaviour, identifying the second aspect of God giving them up is to “things that should not be done” (v. 28).

What follows is a long and broad-ranging “vice list” of attitudes and actions that are enacted by people to one another (v. 29-31).

In the final verse the narrator returns to the present tense to state that people know they are doing wrong (which even includes the applauding of others who do wrong) and deserve death. Given the earlier reference to the general revelation of God’s truth it is likely “God’s decree” is a reference to what people can know of God’s moral requirements. This verse mirrors the opening verse (v. 18) with them acting like a pair of bookends to the narrative with the narrator describing the condemnation people are under and deserve, and encouraging the implied reader to adopt this view (notably excepting the narrator or potentially themselves). However, although the narrative is ended, the story actually remains unfinished. This is a “trick of narrative suspension”³⁴ as the implied reader is left to consider what happens next and whether the final judgement described is actually carried out.

Evaluation of narrative-critical approach

The narrative-critical approach taken to analyse Romans 1:18-32 has several strengths. Primarily its attention is focused on the centrality of the text in its final form which is assumed to have value in itself regardless of its authorship, origin or history of transmission. The text is treated as a unified coherent whole having its own “story-world” where the parameters for interpretation and meaning are set by the text itself. In essence the text is treated as literature irrespective of whether it is considered to be historically-accurate or not. So this allows, for example, A. Katherine Grieb to describe these verses in Romans as the “story of a world gone wrong”.³⁵

A further strength of narrative criticism is that it involves a close reading of the text where the “story-world” is explored in detail from within itself both in terms of its contents (such as the events, characters and settings) and also in how the story is told (its structure and

³³ Dunn, p. 66.

³⁴ Margueret, p. 48.

³⁵ Grieb, p. 19.

rhetoric). This detailed reading provides insight into the narrative's implied author and implied reader (who are not actual historical characters but constructions from within the text itself) and enables an understanding of the impact the implied author wants to make on the implied reader in terms of their understanding, value set and perspective. In Romans 1:18-32 the implied author uses the narrator to communicate a strong and clear sense of judgement and condemnation on the people group described who have turned away from God. The message is that those who behave in the ways detailed deserve punishment and death (although the narrator is clearly not including himself and implicitly suggest it is not the implied reader either).

A suggested weakness to the narrative-critical approach is that it imposes modern literary approaches to ancient texts, however Powell addresses this by noting that although there are clearly distinctions between ancient and modern literature, the conventions of story-telling are generally simple (that is "events, characters and settings and are told from a particular point of view"³⁶) and remain appropriately applicable.

The narrative-critical approach is ahistorical and internal in approach, but most narrative critics³⁷ believe that to appropriately use the approach it is essential for some awareness of the context and competencies of the implied reader (as this is what the narrative assumes). Powell (referring to Rhoads) notes that there is a significant difference in having some understanding of the first century to assist in interpreting a New Testament narrative than in reconstructing of historical events as carried out by historical criticism.³⁸

In contrast to the narrative-critical approach the historical-critical approach seeks to understand what the text meant in its original context by considering who the historical author was, the historical situation it was written in, when and where it was written, how it came to be in its final form, the purpose of writing and the relationship of the author to the original audience. The focus is primarily about the objective circumstances behind the text (using source, form and redaction criticisms) rather than the text itself. Due to the nature of historical information this is quite often incomplete. However, one of the main criticisms of the narrative approach is that its analysis lacks objective criteria and this potentially

³⁶ Powell, p. 93.

³⁷ See Powell, p. 86 and Resseguie, p. 39.

³⁸ Powell, p. 74.

leads to a range of subjective readings of a text whereas the historical-critical approach seeks more objectively for the original meaning of the author. The historical approach would provide background of the text of Romans 1:18-32 indicating it was written by the apostle Paul (57-59 CE) in a letter prior to his first visit to the church in Rome, the capital city of the Roman empire. The church was likely made up of Jewish and Gentile Christians. The Roman world of the time was polytheistic, class-structured and women were expected to be modest, monogamous and did not have the same rights as men. However, prostitution and pederasty were common place. Understanding this historical context provides greater depth to Romans 1:18-32, in particular to the verses that address sexual behaviours and demonstrates one of the limitations of the narrative-critical approach.

Further criticism of the narrative critical approach is not so apparent in the Romans 1 passage considered as it is a short narrative. However, when an entire book (such as one of the Gospels) is considered in this way it is suggested that a weakness is that in treating in a unified, coherent whole does not reflect the reality that it is likely to be made up of collections disparate sections.

Powell notes that although there are clear limitations of the narrative-critical approach (as is likely true of every approach) that it should not invalidate the contribution it does make.³⁹ Further he argues that although the narrative and historical approaches need to be utilised independently they can be complementary with each providing insight to the understanding and meaning of texts that could enrich and benefit the other.⁴⁰

Word count: 3,672

³⁹ Powell, p. 97.

⁴⁰ Powell, p. 98.

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