

characters the meaning of actions and people and happenings in the story-world. This device, putting on the lips of the protagonist riddles and quotations that explain the story-world, also serves to reveal Jesus' knowledge and understanding while at the same time exposing the ignorance and blindness of other characters, especially the opponents and disciples.

Conclusion

Based on an analysis of these many narrative features, the critic is readily able to see the many themes and motifs running through Mark's story. And putting the narrative back together, story and discourse, form and content, in order to show just what the story is about represents a great challenge. Perhaps in terms of narrative criticism of Mark's Gospel, we are not yet ready to make these kinds of integrative conclusions. While reporting on Markan scholarship, our discussion has emphasized the need for further study of Mark's narrative. And since literary criticism of narrative encompasses so many resources and approaches (I have discussed here only some of the standard areas of investigation), we can draw upon further methodological procedures in order to broaden what we look for in the narrative.

David Rhoads

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Narrative Criticism:

Practices and Prospects

Narrative analysis of New Testament writings had its beginnings in the 1970s with the seminal works of Norman Perrin, Thomas Boomershine, Joanna Dewey, Werner Kelber, Norman Petersen, Robert Tannehill, and Mary Ann Tolbert. It came into its own in the early 1980s with efforts to produce narrative analyses of each of the Gospels as a whole. Since then it has become popularly known among New Testament scholars as narrative criticism and has generated many fine studies of the narratives of the New Testament.¹

The purpose of this chapter is to consider the practices and prospects of narrative criticism. After a brief introduction, I will proceed (1) by reflecting on critiques of narrative criticism (2) followed by some ways narrative analysis of the New Testament is being sharpened and broadened, (3) then by showing how some traditional disciplines and (4) some newer methods in biblical studies are being incorporated into the practice of narrative criticism, and (5) finally by dealing with the relationship between narrative interpretation and the ethics of reading.

Introduction

Narrative criticism has come to be understood as the analysis of the story-world of a narrative along with the analysis of its implied rhetorical impact on readers. First, the analysis of the story-world focuses on the world inside a narrative with its own times and places, its own characters, its past and future, its own set of values, and its series of events moving forward in some meaningful way. This story-world is neither the historical world depicted by the story nor the historical world of the situation in which the story was first told.² Rather, it is the imaginary world created by the narrative in its telling. Second, the analysis of a narrative's rhetoric focuses on the implied impact of a narrative both from the *story itself* as well as from the *way* it is told—with its distinctive style and point of view, set of literary techniques, and order of recounting.

Narrative criticism has been one of many new methodologies to arise in biblical studies in the last several decades. Narrative criticism has recovered the text as a story to be experienced, an experience that had been all but lost during the last two centuries of biblical studies.³ As such, narrative criticism has recovered the story as a whole, instead of the fragmented pieces of historical criticism. In this way, narrative criticism has opened up new questions and areas of analysis of the text. It has helped to establish literary rhetoric as a legitimate way to study New Testament narratives and to pave the way for the development of reader-response criticism.

Narrative criticism's major contribution to biblical scholarship in general has been the establishment of the surface narrative of the text as a legitimate object of study. Many writers of monographs, commentaries, and articles now regularly deal with the narrative in its final form and of the story-world of the New Testament narratives without sorting out tradition and redaction or engaging in historical reconstruction from the text.

Critiques of Narrative Criticism

Narrative criticism arose in the context of the predominance of traditional historical-critical methods employed in Gospel studies—source criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism. These methods generally explored the text for layers of tradition in order to construct the history of the early church from the time of Jesus to the time of the evangelists. Narrative criticism provided an alternative approach by shifting the focus from the world outside the Gospel to the world of the story itself. It involved other shifts as well: from the study of brief form-critical units to the study of a Gospel narrative as a whole; from reconstructing the layers of tradition and redaction to the analysis of the single surface layer of the final story; from the author as redactor to the author as creator of a story; and from how the author may have constructed the Gospel to how the readers may have experienced it.

In general, these shifts have meant the bracketing of earlier methods, because treating the reader's experience of the narrative in the integrity of its final form was methodologically incompatible with the layering of the text into redaction and tradition. Because the several methods could not easily be mixed into one method, there was need for narrative critics to embrace the new method as a discrete discipline.

Some critiques of narrative criticism, then, have come from those who use traditional methods. Other critiques have come from those who have moved beyond narrative criticism to postmodern literary methods. I would like to reflect briefly on four critiques of narrative criticism.⁴

Coherent Narratives?

Some scholars using traditional methods have argued that the Gospels are really such a patchwork of embedded traditions and authorial redactions that they cannot legitimately be treated as whole cloth. They argue that narrative criticism emphasizes too much the coherence of the narrative or assumes a unity that is not really there.

Therefore, although redaction criticism is itself far from exact, some scholars will continue to use redaction criticism as the primary basis for recovering the purposes of the Gospel writers, in some cases combining it with composition analysis. This is an important enterprise that will allow for helpful comparisons of the results of the two methods.

Narrative critics have used the coherence of the text as a working hypothesis, a heuristic device to discern fully the coherent patterns of storytelling on the surface level of the final narrative. In the case of Mark, some narrative critics have been so impressed with the pervasive signs of the coherence of the narrative world as to argue that it will be difficult now for scholars to distinguish tradition from redaction. Narrative critics might say the same with regard to Matthew or Luke, except that, with the Markan source in hand, they can see how these authors have changed their traditions. Nevertheless, narrative criticism does not necessarily weigh differently what authors of the Gospels have kept from their traditions and what they have added from their own hand. Matthew's free editorial hand, for example, could have omitted any part of Mark; as such, the author of Matthew may have kept parts of Mark precisely because they served his purposes every bit as much as his own redactions of that material. At a minimum, the evangelists have included or omitted material, modified it to a greater or lesser extent, and ordered it into a consecutive narrative. In the end, then, both tradition and redaction combine together to create something that is more than the sum of its parts, the narratives of the Gospels as the subject matter for interpretation.

Narrative analysis can certainly be aided by information about an author's redaction of sources. In many cases, such observations will confirm and inform a narrative analysis. We would be foolish to ignore insights that come from an integrated approach with form and redaction criticism. And attention to tradition and redaction can help to reconstruct the trajectories in the tradition.

Nevertheless, the shift in narrative criticism from author to reader/hearer makes the study of redaction somewhat limited in value, for narrative criticism seeks to recover the final story the author

has created for the reader. A first-century audience hearing a Gospel would have experienced it as a whole and not as pieces of earlier tradition. Readers/hearers of a Gospel were surely not listening to sort out tradition from redaction. Nor does the narrative reveal what its author rejected of its sources. Rather, hearers were absorbed in the story as it was being presented to them. And, in general, the Gospel writers succeeded in creating rather coherent reading/listening experiences for their audiences.

So, narrative criticism deals with how a reader experiences the story in its final form, even when there are places in which the story does not cohere so well. Thus, narrative critics may show where they find the narrative to be coherent and at the same time be open to its lack of coherence as a narrative. We see the problem most clearly, for example, in the Gospel of John, where there are awkward breaks in the narrative and where some characters are first mentioned as if they had already been introduced. Nevertheless, instead of returning to redaction criticism, narrative critics still take seriously the final form of the narrative as an audience might have experienced it—with all its faults and failures as a narrative. We need to develop a narrative poetics for each Gospel so as adequately to take into account all the peculiarities of that narrative without forcing it into a straitjacket of coherence.⁵

Detached from History?

Some critics argue that narrative criticism, by focusing on the story, has detached the narrative from its historical moorings. After all, the Gospels were about historical events, and the Gospels indirectly reflect historical events and circumstances at the time of their writing. As we have noted, before narrative criticism, the literary methods of source, form, and redaction criticism were pursued primarily in the service of historical reconstruction. Narrative criticism has succeeded in showing the value of the narrative in its own right, without serving as a handmaid to historical reconstruction. Nevertheless, narrative criticism affirms that a Gospel narrative is a historical artifact, a first-century contextual document fully conditioned by its time and place

and representing one person's (one community's) conception of the world. More than ever, interpretations of the Gospel narratives are drawing upon our knowledge of the history, society, and cultures of the first-century Mediterranean world as a means to help us understand the story better.

As the fruits of narrative criticism become evident, it will be important to reassess traditional historical-critical disciplines in light of the results of narrative criticism. Rethinking redaction criticism and source criticism will be appropriate. It may also be possible for narrative criticism to contribute to historical criticism by finding some new ways to make inferences from the Gospel narratives and their rhetoric about the authors, audiences, and circumstances of the Gospels.

Narrative critics treat the Gospels as discrete "fictionalized versions" of the events they are depicting. At some level, therefore, the accuracy or inaccuracy of the events as recounted is not essential for an appreciation of the Gospels as first-century narratives. Nevertheless, it is an important part of the rhetoric of the Gospels that they do in fact make implied or explicit claims to be faithful depictions of actual people and events. Consider, for example, the explicit claims to historicity made by the Gospels of Luke (1:1-4) and John (21:24). As such, we can only fully understand the rhetorical impact of the Gospels when we see them as narratives presented as being about real events.

An Autonomous Narrative World?

Narrative criticism arose when New Criticism was prevalent among secular literary critics. New Criticism argued for the study of the text in its own right apart from authorial intention or reader responses. Texts were seen to have an independent autonomy, a kind of life of their own. However, even though we cannot recover the intentions of an author,⁵ subsequent literary studies have made clear that there is no story-world apart from social context, and there is no story-world apart from the reading experience. This is equally true of ancient readers and modern readers. Apart from the reading experience, the text is only a series of marks on a page.

Hence, readers who are engaged in the act of reading give meanings to words, use their imagination, attribute emotions, fill in gaps, make connections, among many other tasks. For example, the sparseness of language in characterizations by the Gospel writers especially invites reader participation.⁷ One of the results of such reader participation is that there is no single authoritative reading, only various readings. As such, narrative critics will deal with the role of a reader in analysis and interpretation—both in the construction of ancient readings as well as in the readings of modern readers, including critics. At the same time, it is important to remember that when narrative critics are constructing the reading experience of a hypothetical "ideal reader" or the imaginative reading experiences of ancient audiences, it is, of course, the narrative critics themselves as readers who are constructing these imaginary reading experiences of the first century.

Unified Narratives?

While the earlier critique about coherence comes from traditional historical critics, a somewhat different concern about unity comes from literary postmodern critics. As we have said, narrative criticism tends to look for the unifying patterns of a text as the basis for interpretation. Each line is interpreted in the context of the whole. Where paradoxes and contradictions occur, the narrative critic seeks to relate them to each other in light of the whole. However, postmodern critics point out that by its very nature, at a fundamental level, narrative is not unified—not just ancient Gospels, but even carefully crafted modern fiction.⁸ Narratives overflow with a surplus of meaning, and they are full of gaps, fissures, contradictions, ambiguities, multiple meanings and connotations, and a lack of connection between possible causes and consequences. Therefore, any effort to provide an airtight unified interpretation of a writing will be illusory; indeed, it may do violence to the complexity and multi-valence of that narrative. So, postmodern critics read and interpret "against the grain" of standard interpretations in order to expose the gaps and contradictions in texts and interpretations.

Narrative critics will do well, therefore, to acknowledge the complex nature of narrative. Perhaps the goal of narrative criticism is not so much to discern the unity of a text as it is to assess its impact—to see in what ways a narrative coheres adequately to give a satisfying reading experience. With this more modest goal in mind, narrative critics will continue to look for patterns of coherence and at the same time be aware of what they notice and also learn from reading against the grain. They will continue to interpret portions of narrative in light of the whole, seeking to avoid imposing unity where it does not exist and with the recognition that the goal of finding total unity in texts are clearly illusory.

Sharpening and Broadening of Narrative Criticism

The parallel to narrative criticism in secular literary criticism is the discipline of narratology—the theory and practice of narrative analysis. There are many works in narratology dealing with narrative as a whole, and there are works that represent particular developments in the understanding of character, plot, setting, standards of judgment, point of view, and literary-rhetorical analysis.⁹ These developments in narratology will continue to be of benefit to narrative critics of the Bible.

Strengthening Narrative Criticism

Thus, narrative critics of the Bible may continue to sharpen their capacity to do narrative analysis. For example, narrative critics continue to grow in the discernment of patterns of storytelling, such as parallelism, forms of repetition,¹⁰ and irony.¹¹ Work is being done with the symbolic language of the Gospel of John.¹² Style could become a greater focus of attention. Point of view can be informed by a treatment of the narrator's tone in addressing the audience. The concept of standards of judgment is yielding many insights into the moral world of a narrative. The study of setting is taking greater

account of all the structures of the narrative world, including the sociopolitical ethos and the cosmology.¹³ The analysis of character can enable critics to clarify an author's view of the human condition.¹⁴ There could be greater efforts to understand the interrelation between plot, conflict, setting, and tone as a way to see more clearly the "world" offered by the narrative to the reader.¹⁵

In general, narrative critics have tended to aim their work at the whole narrative of a Gospel.¹⁶ However, there are now also appearing detailed and careful treatments of particular episodes, as they can be understood in their context in the whole Gospel.¹⁷

Reader-Response Criticism

Narrative criticism will continue to give greater attention to the reader by combining its treatment of narrative with *reader-response criticism*.¹⁸ Reader-response critics range across a spectrum, from a text-centered approach (the text determines the reading experience) to reader-centered approach (the reader determines the reading experience). Narrative critics lean toward the text-centered approach, because they want to understand the narrative better as a means to assess what impact the narrative might have had on first-century readers. In this regard, various theories about ideal readers have become useful—the ideal reader being not a real reader but a construction of the possible implied responses of an ideal reader through the course of the narrative.¹⁹ The ideal reader represents what the author wants the real reader to become in the course of reading. Reader-response critics can help us to revise our understanding of the ideal/implied reader, because we have tended, inappropriately, to construct these imaginary readers as readers without a social location.

Thus, text-centered reader-response criticism is interested in the *literary rhetoric* of a story. Initially, relying on the work of Seymour Chatman, narrative critics limited the definition of rhetoric to the style of discourse an author used to tell the story, distinguishing the "what" of a narrative (story) from the "how" of a narrative (discourse or rhetoric). Now, however, there is reason to rethink this approach:

the rhetoric of a narrative refers to the overall impact of a story in its telling. As such, rhetoric is more than the impact of the events of the story. It is more than the stylistic features and literary devices by which the story is told.²⁰ Rhetoric is a combination both of the content of a particular story and of the literary style and devices used to tell it—in the diachronic experience of the narrative by the readers. Thus, rhetoric has to do not only with what the story *means* but also with what the story *does* to the hearers in the course of its telling. A narrative like one of the Gospels affects the readers in the process of reading so that readers are led to become something different as a result—people who embrace certain beliefs or values, become faithful followers of Jesus (Mark) or disciples who teach what Jesus has taught (Matthew) or followers who will share their wealth (Luke) or people who believe and have eternal life (John).

The New Testament narratives offer a significant challenge to critics seeking to understand the dynamics and power of their rhetoric, for they were composed as part of an effort to create and shape communities, to make available divine resources for transformation, and to announce judgment and salvation. One of the tasks of narrative criticism, then, is to deal with these questions: What are the New Testament narratives doing? And, literally, how do they do it?

Reception Criticism

Also, *reception criticism* can be of assistance here as a helpful way to discern how actual readers from ancient times to the present have reacted to a particular writing. Reception criticism can thus be seen as a branch of reader-response criticism, because it looks at the way in which readers down through the ages have received, understood, and appropriated a Gospel—often evident in the history of commentaries on a particular writing. For example, insights into the Gospel of Mark come by seeing how Matthew and Luke reacted in their reading of Mark—as implied by their revisions of Mark. In a time when so many international scholars are entering biblical studies, reception criticism can now expand to encompass not only reception of a bibli-

cal writing through Western history but also the diverse receptions of it in contemporary global arenas.

Speech-Act Theory

Further insights about the impact of a narrative on the reader may also come from the literary branch of study called *speech-act theory*. Speech-act theory assesses the whole range of performative functions of language in the interaction between speaker and receiver.²¹ This approach began in the philosophical analysis of language. In literary criticism, it has been applied to interpret whole pieces of literature as speech-acts. Speech-act theory has many important implications for the study of biblical narrative and dialogue.

Application to Other Genres

Finally, narrative criticism is broadening its scope and proving to be useful in analyzing literary works that are not primarily narrative in nature but which have narrative dimensions. For example, it is possible to analyze the occasional letters of Paul by reconstructing the chronological story of the past events that are portrayed or mentioned in the letter and the potential future events projected by the letter, and then to see the letter as a moment in the story surrounding the letter—with its own plot, characters, settings, point of view, tone, standards of judgment, and rhetoric.²² Also, writings such as the book of Revelation may be analyzed for the same formal features of narrative.²³

Incorporating Some Traditional Disciplines

Ancient Narrative

Narrative critics enhance their analysis of biblical narratives by comparison with other ancient literature. They begin by consulting treatments of narrative in ancient literary handbooks, such as Aristotle's *Poetics*, and then they study the features of narrative expressed in

ancient writings that are parallel to the New Testament narratives.²⁴ Also, the presentation of characters in ancient biographies and novels can be an important means for understanding New Testament narratives.²⁵ Not only analogies with Greco-Roman literature but also recent narratological studies of the Hebrew Bible should be explored more extensively as ways of enhancing our understanding of the dynamics of New Testament narratives.²⁶

Genre Criticism

In addition, genre criticism is increasingly important for narrative analysis. Seeing a Gospel as representing a particular genre—whether tragedy or biography or romance or apocalypse—helps to identify an implied audience, the social ethos, the issues being dealt with, and the expectations that an audience brings to a story.²⁷ Thus, genre studies help to imagine contexts for the reception of the Gospels in antiquity. Genre studies are complex, because narratives seldom fit into a single category of genre. One may decide that a Gospel represents a mixed genre or a subversion of a familiar genre or even a new genre. Nevertheless, any comparisons and contrasts with other similar writings of the time can be helpful in clarifying the nature of a Gospel.

For example, a recent approach to genre analysis of the Gospel stories deals with rhetorical criticism and employs classical, Greco-Roman rhetoric of argumentation.²⁸ Critics take individual stories from the Gospels and analyze them as the narrative equivalence of speeches—representing species of argumentation, showing an order of argumentation, and manifesting techniques of ethos, pathos, and logos.²⁹ Such analyses may be a helpful way to inform an understanding of plot and character, point of view, standards of judgment, and the narrative rhetoric of persuasion. The fruitfulness of this approach is just beginning to be apparent, and it is not yet clear if the approach can be sustained over the narrative of a whole Gospel.³⁰

Incorporating Some New Disciplines

While narrative criticism has many parallels to narratology, narrative criticism is taking its own unique shape because of the particular nature of the literature under study. For example, the Gospels are examples of oral/aural literature that was designed to be heard and not read. Also, the Gospels originated from a culture very different in time and place from our modern world. In addition, the Gospels were all shaped by their political context under the aegis of the Roman Empire. As a means to take full account of such factors, narrative critics are incorporating insights and approaches from other fresh disciplines in New Testament studies.

Orality Criticism

Orality criticism focuses on the aural reception of oral performances of literature in an oral culture. It is clear that the Gospels were written to be performed to audiences in a predominantly nonliterate culture. Considerable work has been done on the qualities and features of oral literature and on the context and impact of the aural reception of it.³¹ Most of the work has been done on the Gospel of Mark,³² but all the narratives of the New Testament were written to be performed aloud to a listening audience.³³

The connection with narrative criticism (and reader-response criticism) is immediately obvious. Critics are reframing narrative criticism by conceiving of the narrator as a performer, of a temporal rather than a spatial (on the page) experience of a Gospel, of forecasts and echoes rather than foreshadowings and retrospections, of hearers (probably in a group as an audience) rather than private readers, of type scenes rather than forms, and of diverse examples of repetition with variation.

Hearers of a Gospel can listen to the narrative for its sounds and rhythms.³⁴ Here careful attention is given to word order—foregrounding, backgrounding and elision, as well as to synonymous and antithetical parallelism and chiasmic patterns. The development of “sound charts” to identify repetitions and alliteration help to bring

out the aural experience of the text.³⁵ The Gospel of Mark, for example, offers a hearing experience of verbal echoes both within and between episodes. The teachings in the Sermon on the Mount reveal parallel and chiasmic patterns of sound and rhythm. The alliteration and lilt of the Gospel of John may be part of a rhetorical aesthetic designed to draw hearers into the experience of eternal life. Also, *hearers* of narrative will have a different experience of characters in a Gospel than *readers* do. Because the performer addresses the hearers directly with the speech of each character, hearers are led to identify with as well as be addressed by *all* the characters. In this way, the story also becomes an emotional experience (similar to viewing a film), rather than simply a source of information.

Performance Criticism

The interpreter may also relate to narrative in terms of *performance criticism* and may even practice being the narrator as performer.³⁶ Preferably, this is done in the Greek language, but the experience also bears much fruit by performing translations that attend to the oral/aural features of the narrative.³⁷ Such an experience of performing recovers a new level in the analysis of narrative, because oral performers must make interpretive decisions not only about what a line *means* but also decisions about *how* a line is to be delivered. Every line has a *subtext*—the message that is being conveyed by *how* the line is said. Every subtext is determined from the lines themselves in the context of the episode and of the story as a whole, as if one were discerning stage directions in the script of a play. Oral performance can be a test of interpretation, because it is difficult to find a way to deliver some lines with the meanings attributed to them in some interpretations.³⁸

One can readily see the applicability to character analysis, for example. Performers will place themselves in the position of each of the characters and clarify the differing points of view in a narrative. Performers will notice the distinctive speech patterns of the different characters and will attempt to identify subtexts for the lines of the

characters that are suggested by the text. Also, the interpreter as performer will bring out emotive dimensions of the text in new ways, because characters speak with amazement or fear or surprise or irony. Recently, efforts have been made to construct the manner of an ancient performance of Mark, based on suggestions culled from rhetorical handbooks from antiquity.³⁹ It remains to be seen how this may help us in the interpretive process.

Social-Science Criticism

Narrative critics can also benefit from the discipline of *social-science criticism*. The world of the story represents one example from antiquity of a social construction of reality. It is crucial, therefore, to use all the tools we have to understand the nature of that social construction. Because the narrative worlds of the Gospels reflect ancient society, interpretation becomes a cross-cultural process. The question is, how can we begin to construct the shared cultural assumptions that enabled ancient readers to understand the story and to fill in the gaps of the texts? In order to address this question, narrative critics turn not only to the knowledge we have about the first century from literary and material artifacts but also to the use of cultural models that help to organize and interpret the ancient cultural information in the narrative—thus helping us to avoid imposing the conceptions of the world we bring from our experiences in the twentieth century.

Social-science criticism employs models from sociology and anthropology as heuristic devices to enhance our understanding of ancient biblical cultures.⁴⁰ The Mediterranean societies of antiquity had parallels to current Mediterranean cultures. Therefore, models based on studies of contemporary Mediterranean cultures—models dealing with honor and shame, dyadic personality, purity and defilement, economy of limited goods, patron-client relations, kinship patterns, among others—are helpful in understanding ancient society. Because a Gospel narrative is a relatively coherent slice of life from cultures that these models reflect, it is possible to use these models to unpack the dynamics of the story-world. The use of the models helps

to articulate reading scenarios, representing the framework of assumptions and expectations that first-century readers might have brought to their experience of the story.⁴¹

The social-science approach has been employed fruitfully to illuminate the narratives of the Gospels.⁴² Issues of honor and shame illuminate the conflicts in the plot.⁴³ An understanding of ancient economy informs the standards of judgment regarding wealth and poverty.⁴⁴ Studies of purity and defilement help to clarify the ethos of the setting.⁴⁵ So also do cross-cultural treatments of sickness and healing.⁴⁶ Models about the importance of eating and food shape our understanding of meal settings. Models of social change distinguish the features of the Jesus movement depicted in the various Gospels.⁴⁷ Social-science commentaries on the Gospels have helped to integrate many of these models into a greater understanding of the narrative.⁴⁸ Especially in relation to characterization in the Gospels, the social-science approach is helpful as a means to understanding the dyadic cultures of ancient Mediterranean societies, that is, cultures in which people depend on the group to which they belong for their identity. Features of dyadic cultures include the tendency to stereotype, the importance of kinship (both natural and fictive), a contrasting treatment of insiders and outsiders, the lack of introspection—all of which provide important heuristic insights into the portrayal of characters in the Gospel narratives.

Narrative criticism and social-science criticism work well together.⁴⁹ Social-science criticism helps to clarify the common assumptions made by author and hearers in the act of communication. At the same time, the detailed attention to the text offered by narrative criticism helps to give specificity and qualification to the abstract and generic nature of the models. And it applies social-science criticism to the narrative as a *narrative world*.

Social Location

One of the most helpful aspects of the social study of the narrative worlds of the Gospels is the identification of *social location* within the structure of ancient society and its cities.⁵⁰ Pre-industrial, agrarian

societies were organized hierarchically with (1) a small ruling elite (2–3 percent) along with (2) their scribal and mercantile retainers, below which were (3) the masses of peasants (about 95 percent) living at a basically subsistence level, in addition to (4) a small percentage of “expendable” people comprised of unclean and other marginalized groups.⁵¹ This economic and political ordering of an honor-shame society, without a middle class, becomes an important framework for interpreting the narrative world of a Gospel—the ethos of the settings, the nature of the conflicts that comprise the plot, and the social location of the various characters.

In studying the narrative world, attention to social location especially helps to amplify character analysis, because characters can be identified by their cultural origin, social status, economic level, kinship identification, gender, honor rating, state of purity or defilement, health, occupation, education, religious allegiances, urban/rural origin, and so on. The idea is not simply to identify the social locations of the characters, but to use what we know of the society as tools to interpret better the narrative and the characters and conflicts in it.

Analysis of social location and power relations can also helpfully be applied to the authors and audiences of the New Testament narratives.⁵² Rather than simply identifying geographical origin and date of a biblical writing, scholars can seek to infer from each Gospel a range of factors that help to identify the social location of the narrator/author and the implied audience of a writing. Where does this writing fit into ancient society? Whose interests do the beliefs and values promoted by the narrative serve? What power or rhetorical force does the narrative use to have its way? What kind of society does the narrative serve to subvert or reinforce or shape or generate? All these questions increase our capacity to clarify the rhetoric of a Gospel in relation to its audience.

In addition, a model of social location in antiquity may be a helpful heuristic device to imagine the responses of imaginary readers from many different social locations in the society of the audience—elites, a slave, peasants, a Roman soldier, a leper, and a Pharisee. Placing oneself in such imaginary roles of reading will better show how

the text might have worked rhetorically in its ancient context—that is to say, what values and beliefs does the narrative reinforce and which ones does it seek to subvert and replace.

Ideological Criticism

Ideological criticism goes hand in glove with the identification of social location,⁵³ because it asks questions of power. Ideological criticism assesses the power relations between and among the characters from different social locations as the plot develops. What are the values and beliefs of the different characters? What access to differing kinds of power does each character and character group have? Who oppresses and who is being oppressed? Whose interests are served by the beliefs and values and the exercise of power of the different characters? These questions have led to studies that recover the political dimensions of the Gospel narratives.⁵⁴ Feminist critical studies in particular have unpacked the power dynamics between females and males in the world of the story and asked whether the plot works to overcome or to reinforce patriarchy, and in what ways.⁵⁵

Postcolonial criticism

From the larger number of international scholars active in biblical studies has emerged *postcolonial biblical criticism*. At first, the focus was on the ways in which interpretations of the Bible have served the interests of colonial powers in their domination of colonized societies and the ways in which people from colonized countries can now find their voices in biblical interpretation after a long history of colonization. More recently, the focus has shifted to show how the biblical texts themselves are colonial or anti-colonial documents (or a mixture of the two) in relation to the imperial domination of the Roman Empire in the first centuries. Initial studies have shown the ways in which biblical writers seek to subvert the empire by adopting the dynamics of empire and depicting God as a superior imperial force. Such an analysis of the political dynamics of the Gospels will sharpen and make more complex our grasp of the narrative depic-

tions of the kingdom of God. In this way, narrative criticism can deepen its understanding of the imperial and anti-imperial dynamics within the narrative worlds of the Gospels as well as in regard to the overall rhetorical impact of the Gospels vis-à-vis the audience as subjects of the Roman Empire.

Responsible Interpretation

Narrative criticism is also beginning to benefit from reflection on the relatively new field of the *ethics of reading*—reflection on the moral responsibility involved in the process of reading and interpreting as contemporary readers.⁵⁶

Contemporary readers may think of reading as a dialogue—a meaningful exchange between the story and the reader.⁵⁷ Each partner has power and influence on what happens in the dialogue. On the one hand, a story seeks to influence readers—to affect them for good or for ill, to change people, and to shape communities. On the other hand, a reader also has power in this dialogue with the story. Readers can take a story seriously and be affected by it or they can be indifferent or resistant and have strong objections to the story. A reader can also use the story in ways that may be helpful or harmful to others.

In the dialogue with the story, narrative interpreters are responsible to allow the story of a Gospel to have its influence in this dialogue, by reading the story on its own terms and for its own time. In this dialogue with a story, the reader has the responsibility to treat the story with respect, to listen carefully over and over again—seeking to limit our tendency to impose alien ideas and images onto the story. It is important to assume that the story will be different from what we expect it to say or want it to say or fear it might say. Aware of our limited and relative perspective, we can make our social location, our reading communities, our assumptions, and our perspectives explicit from the start,⁵⁸ thereby helping us to avoid inappropriately reading them into the story. Also, it is important to identify the strengths, limitations, and liabilities in the methods we are using.

Of course, every interpretation will be only one interpretation in a range of faithful interpretations.⁵⁹ Given the multivalent nature of language and the limitations of reader perspectives, it is not possible (or even desirable) to provide one correct and objective understanding of a story. The goal is to be faithful to the narrative (given the parameters of the methods and criteria we are using) and to learn from other interpretations as well.

Once we have allowed a Gospel to address us on its own terms, the dialogue can begin to move to the modern reader's side of the equation: How does the story relate to contemporary life? On the one hand, we may resist many parts of a Gospel narrative—certain beliefs, depictions of demons, a compromising duality, an anti-Jewish thrust, patriarchy, or a glorification of suffering. Where the interpreter differs with the story, the idea is not to reinterpret the story to make it look acceptable, but to let the story say what it says and then to object honestly to those aspects of the story we find disagreeable or abhorrent.

At the same time, because this is a genuine dialogue, we need to be open to the ways in which the story as a whole may be potentially transforming for us.⁶⁰ Real dialogue involves risk, the possibility of being changed by our encounter with the text. We modern readers can enter the story-world in imagination and by immersion can allow the story to work its magic on us, as well as be careful not to use the story in ways that can harm others. Thus, whatever our interpretation, readers have an ethical responsibility for their interpretations—to promote the ways in which interpretations may serve the good and to counter those interpretations that will bring harm and oppress people.

Narrative critics are also learning the importance of reading and interpreting with others from different social locations. Every reader has a relative perspective due to national identity, social location within that society, and personal experiences, beliefs, and values.⁶¹ Each perspective has its own angle of vision that will enhance understanding but that may also inhibit understanding.⁶² By reading together we can learn from what others notice, we can correct each

other, and we can guard against universalizing an interpretation. Again the ideological questions apply: Whose interests are being served by this or that interpretation? How can interpreters take responsibility for their interpretations? The recent discipline of *cultural exegesis* recognizes the importance of reading with people from many different cultures and social locations at a round table in which no positions are privileged or no positions are marginalized, with each participant bringing unique insights and understandings from their perspective.

Conclusion

There are many exciting new directions taking place in narrative criticism that are enabling students of biblical narrative to become even better practitioners of narrative analysis and at the same time to have that practice enhanced by integrating insights and methods from other approaches to New Testament. All the writings of the New Testament, as well as many writings outside the canon, provide opportunities to bring narrative analysis to bear upon a better understanding of a wide range of ancient literature.