Treasures New and Old:

Literary Approaches to Biblical

Interpretation

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I. Introductory Reflections: Out With The Old And In With The New?

1. Author—Text—Reader

Like many Brits in my age bracket, I was brought up on a diet of Enid Blyton's 'Famous Five' books. In one book, the Famous Five (for those who don't know: a group of children and a dog always involved in a mystery adventure of one sort or another) discover treasure at the bottom of a lake. But not without difficulty. Only when several landmarks—a church steeple, a boat house, a hill—are lined up and synchronized at exactly the same time, is the treasure directly beneath them.

Good biblical interpretation is somewhat like this. Several items must be kept in view at the same time: a text, an author, and a reader. For any book that we read—Clancy, Chaucer, a cookery book, a computer manual, Corinthians or Chronicles—may be viewed as a *text* or a *message* addressed by an *author* to a *reader*.

The project of biblical interpretation can be seen as a kind of conversation between the *text* and its *author* on the one side, and the *reader* on the other. Like any dialogue, it needs to be understood *as a whole*. We cannot ignore the role and contribution of any individual element, or we risk misunderstanding; each aspect needs to be taken into consideration.

This means that responsible biblical interpretation will focus on a whole cluster of issues associated with the *author*—what did the writer intend to say when he or she penned this particular text? Responsible biblical interpretation will focus on a whole cluster of issues associated with the *text*—what do these words mean in the flow of this text, bearing in mind the historical and cultural context?[1] Responsible biblical interpretation will also focus on a whole cluster of issues surrounding the *reader*, the interpreter.[2]

Traditionally, evangelical scholarship has focused mainly (and quite rightly) on the author and the text. Only more recently have we come to the realization

that we've largely ignored the reader, and the *relationship between the reader and the text in the reading process*. This sets the stage for the introduction of 'literary criticism'.

2. From Historical Criticism to Literary Criticism

For many years, interpreters have acknowledged that we begin with a specific historical text, written in a specific historical and cultural situation. Under this vision, historical-critical exegesis has sought to understand the meaning of the text within several different contexts: the words and grammar in the original language; the text in its immediate textual unit; the text in its place within the cultural millieu in which it was written and received.

There has, however been an increasing unease with the historical-critical method—mainly because it is feared that the method 'locks' the text into the past. This has led to what has sometimes been called to a 'paradigm-shift' or 'revolution' in biblical interpretation. (In this case, we are using 'paradigm' in a technical sense to describe a set of ideas that provides a framework within which given phenomena are understood by a certain group of individuals). Many scholars do still operate and research within the historical-critical 'paradigm' or model. Others, however, and with increasing frequency, are adopting newer perspectives.

One significant 'revolution' in interpretation is that associated with literary approaches to biblical texts, especially Old Testament narrative and New Testament gospels. Several methods can be included under the general rubric of 'literary criticism'; they are often quite diverse (even incompatible), and include structuralism, rhetorical criticism, narrative criticism, canonical criticism, reader-response criticism, and deconstructionism.[3] However, there is general agreement among the various approaches that the Bible should be considered primarily as a *literary* document, rather than a *historical* document. The various disciplines are generally concerned with a 'synchronic', as opposed to a 'diachronic', approach to the text. That is to say, historical questions and concerns, such as textual history and sources, theories about the original situations against which a text was written, historical authenticity, and the like, are not really raised. The literary text is studied as it stands.

Thus, while historical criticism analyzes the development of the text through its various stages (diachronic analysis), literary criticism focuses primarily on the text in its final form (synchronic analysis). Historical criticism investigates the way the writer has edited sources in the text; literary criticism studies the text as a unity, perhaps without even asking the questions of source and redaction criticism. For historical critics, the key to interpretation is often assumed to lie *outside of the text* itself in its origin or background. By contrast, literary critics focus on features of *the finished text* itself, with

little concern for how the text got to be the way it ended up.

II. Literary Criticism and the Gospels: Some Features

In the rest of this essay, we will focus on literary approaches to the gospels, though it should become clear that much of what we have to say could apply also to other narrative portions of the Bible.

One of the finest and fullest studies in the area of literary criticism and the gospels was Alan Culpepper's *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*.[4] His published work on John's gospel has undergone a shift in perspective and approach. In his 1975 doctoral dissertation, Culpepper pursued a historical study, investigating the components of ancient schools and analyzing the nature and history of the Johannine 'school-like' community. Less than ten years later Culpepper had produced a thoroughgoing literary approach to the narrative of the Fourth Gospel, starting from the notion that 'meaning is produced in the experience of reading the text as a whole and making the mental moves the text calls for its reader to make, *quite apart from questions concerning its sources and origin*'.[5]

1. The Text: Window or Mirror?

In literary-critical approaches, the emphasis is placed on the text as a whole, how the story is told and its effect upon the reader. Culpepper borrows the images of 'window' and 'mirror' from secular literary theory to illustrate his concern. The text of John has traditionally been treated as a 'window' *through which one looks* at the history *behind* the text, be it the life of the historical Jesus or the situation of the Johannine community. If, however, the text is conceived as a 'mirror', meaning lies between the mirror and the observer, the text and the reader; in the text, we are able to see ourselves and the world in which we live.

2. From Author to Reader

Culpepper's main model of communication is again borrowed largely from the work of secular literary theorists. This model diagrams the transmission of a story from author to reader. Culpepper also utilizes the terms found in literary theory for distinguishing between the *real author*, the *implied author*, and the *narrator* (and their reading counterparts).[6]

The 'real author' is the flesh and blood person who lived in the first century and penned the gospel. But the only way this author can be known is by *inference*. The evangelist, in so far as he can be inferred from the document, is known as the 'implied author' (what the text *implies* about the author). Furthermore, as one reads the text, one hears the voice of a 'narrator' telling

the story. The narrator guides the reader through the narrative and provides the perspective, or the 'point of view', from which to view the action. This has several sides to it which may be explored briefly.[7]

First, there is the narrator's *psychological* point of view; the narrator is 'omniscient' to the extent that he provides readers with inside information to which no observer could ever have access (e.g. John 1:1; 2:24; 6:61; 13:28; 19:8). Second, there is the narrator's *spatial* point of view, or omnipresence; the narrator is not confined to a particular locale or group of characters: the narrator is present when Jesus prays the prayer of chapter 17, and appears to know his very thoughts (cf. 13:3). Third, there is the narrator's *temporal* point of view; it is retrospective (illustrated in John 7:39, cf. 2:22; 12:16). Fourth, the narrator has an *ideological* point of view, one which is reliable, and which we implicitly (most of us, at least!) trust.

Parallel to this understanding of authorship (real author—implied author—narrator), is the understanding of readership. The narrator tells the story to the 'narratee'. The narratee is within the text, and in John's gospel, largely stands in for the 'implied reader' who is the reader as he or she can be inferred from, or reconstructed on the basis of, the text. The implied reader is the product of the text itself; the kind of reader demanded by the text, or the reader as the writer imagines him or her. Finally, beyond the text stands the 'real reader', whether that be a first or a twentieth century flesh-and-blood person.

3. Plot

When defining plot, literary critics generally underline the importance of *time and causality*. A plot has a beginning, a middle, and an end (time); things happen as a result of other things (causality).[8]

Thus, when we come to John's gospel, we find that it extends over three passovers (2:14; 6:4, 13:1), yet the year between 2:14 and 6:4 is represented by events which would hardly cover more than a few weeks; John 12–20 deals with a period of two weeks; and chapters 13–19 with a single twenty-four hour day. As the narrative approaches the final climactic event, it slows down. Culpepper also distinguishes between *story time* (time during Jesus' ministry as recorded in the Fourth Gospel) and *narrative time* (order, duration, and frequency of events in the narrative). John refers backwards in the gospel to things already said and done ('analepses', e.g. 1:'9–34; 7:21–23) and forward to events still to transpire ('prolepses', e.g. 7:39). These are all aspects of the 'plot' of the whole piece which we need to be careful to watch out for.

Moreover, plot analysis can be carried out with no reference to relating the gospel to its historical setting. Its investigation is confined to the 'story world' which the text creates. Even when referring to real events,

authors choose where to begin and end a narrative. The narrator decides which events to mention and which to leave out, and orders the narrative accordingly.

4. Characterization

Characterization is also an essential element in the theory of narrative.[9] Plot and characters are wedded together in the narrative of the gospels. Culpepper concludes that John's plot development can be understood as the ways in which Jesus' identity is either successfully or unsuccessfully recognized by those he encounters. Characters appear to have two major functions in John's gospel: (1) to draw out various aspects of Jesus' character, and (2) to represent alternative responses to Jesus. Figures tend to personify one trait, and the key to each character arises out of their encounter with Jesus. The narrator is not interested in the psychology of the characters, only in whether they believe in Jesus or not. Jesus remains constant throughout the gospel, and other characters have significance highlighting Jesus' character or representing various responses to him from which the reader is meant to learn.

The drama of the various encounters prompts a response from the reader. We cannot be mere spectators. We become involved in the text; we take an active role in working things through. The writers of the gospels are subtle in their control of the reader. Like good authors, they know when to keep us in the dark about certain aspects and also when to place a particular slant on an episode so as to control our judgement. Characterization recognizes that we have a *selective* account, and that there is an advantage in recognizing how the story is shaped. (Note the selectivity does not necessarily impinge on the truthfulness of an account; cf. John 20:30–31; 21:24–25.) Nicodemus is a good example. In John's gospel, he appears in 3 scenes, a total of 17 verses, and speaks only 63 words (under half as much as this paragraph!)—yet he is still individual and representative, which shows that John is selective, and subtle, and challenging.

We can note further how characters are *juxtaposed* in the gospel. John 3:1–4:42 presents a striking contrast between Nicodemus, a Jewish man of position who came to Jesus at night, and a Samaritan woman of doubtful morals who encountered Jesus in the middle of the day. Both encounters contain dialogue and the device of 'misunderstanding' (see below) is utilized. The *difference* is that Nicodemus fades out of the picture after 3:9, while the woman engages in active conversation with Jesus. The characters function as 'types' of persons who respond (or don't respond) to Jesus. Returning to Nicodemus, it may be suggested that John deliberately leaves Nicodemus an *ambiguous* figure in the places where he appears (3:1–21; 7:45–

52; 19:38–42) in order to force the reader to wrestle with the issues of belief and rejection. The reader is prompted to ask, How will I respond to Jesus?

'Characterization', rigorously handled, might be a useful tool for reaping benefits in the pulpit or Bible-study situation.

5. 'Implicit' Commentary
'Implicit Commentary' refers to the way the narrative communicates *silently* with the reader. Culpepper includes under this rubric misunderstanding, irony, and symbolism.[10]

(a) Misunderstandings
Misunderstandings abound in the Fourth Gospel! Most frequently, they contain a statement of Jesus which is ambiguous in some way ('. . . unless a man is born again . . .', 3:3), followed by a response which shows misunderstanding (' . . how can a man be born when he is old?', 3:4), concluding with an explanation by Jesus or the narrator (' . . unless a man is born of water and Spirit . . .', 3:5). Culpepper tabulates eighteen 'misunderstandings', the majority of which are connected with 'the Jews'. This shows a possible relation to characterization in the gospel: they are the ones who represent complete lack of understanding with respect to Jesus. Moreover, the *theme* that appears most frequently in the misunderstandings is Jesus' death, resurrection and glorification. It is the event of the cross and its significance which lie at the centre of the narrator's ideological point of view.

D. A. Carson has argued that the misunderstandings are rooted in the life-setting of the historical Jesus. They are not merely a literary technique to portray conflict between Christians and 'the Jews' in the early church (as some have understood them).[11] The reason for this is because of John's approach to *history*. Misunderstandings attributed to people during Jesus' ministry could not have occurred in the same way when the gospel was penned. The misunderstandings show that a distinction can be made between 'back then' and 'now'. What makes the difference is the death and resurrection of Jesus. It was this that shattered the enigmatic aspects of much of Jesus' teaching (cf. 2:22; 12:16; 20:9). Those who misunderstand are on one side of Jesus' death, and the implied author and the implied reader stand on the other. The latter are in a position to interpret and understand the true meaning of what is said. This has the effect of drawing the reader into a circle of 'insiders', those in the know!

(b) Irony
Irony is but one example of many literary aspects of the Fourth Gospel which breathe ambiguity. As with the 'misunderstandings', so with irony, we are like spectators with the best seats in the auditorium, engaging with the characters on stage and the unfolding of the plot, knowing what they don't know, and seeing what they don't see. That is to say, irony tends to assume a dynamic relationship between author and audience. The reader shares the elevated position with the author of looking on with the knowledge of Jesus' resurrection. Those reading the gospel understand that Jesus is talking not about natural birth, but about birth from above; not about natural water, but about living water; not about material bread, but spiritual food.

And once again, irony functions to draw us into the narrative. In John 4, for example, the reader is made aware of two levels of dialogue occurring simultaneously. Though Jesus is thirsty on one level, his request for a drink is made to a woman who is thirsty on another level. This 'higher' level does not remove the lower level; the two work together. If we are to read the narrative aright, we must not merely observe it, but participate in it and move with it. It is only as we actively engage with it that we are led to an understanding of the significance of Jesus for our needs. John 'recreates' this experience for the reader by engaging us in the text—in much the same way as Jesus engaged those he encountered.

(c) Symbolism
Like irony, symbolism depends for its success on the relationship established between an author and an audience. The metaphors and symbols in John (e.g. water, bread, shepherd, vine) are largely utilized from the Old Testament, which may suggest that the gospel is making use of thought-forms which were familiar to those for whom it was written.

III. Literary Criticism and the Gospels: Some Issues Arising

At this juncture, we could list both the ways that literary-critical approaches can enrich biblical interpretation, and also the cautions that need to be sounded.[12] Unfortunately, this may appear artificial: as if one could simply total the positive and negative points to arrive at a decision concerning the legitimacy or otherwise of the approach. Moreover, some starting points which might be selected are double-sided, giving with one hand and taking back with another, and thus require careful balance. We propose to select some broad areas for further discussion which have a direct bearing on the topic.

1. Literary-Critical Categories
As we have seen, the approaches utilize the categories of secular literary theory. Of course, it has to be said that *any* interpretation of the Bible draws on the

insights of secular theories of understanding literature. But we have to reckon that not all the categories of contemporary fiction will be relevant to biblical narratives, especially to those which (like the gospels) have *historical* claims. So, it's not that comparison of the gospels with modern fiction is necessarily improper; our criticism has to do with which work of literature has *priority* in setting the categories. Literary-critical categories might *inform*, but we must not allow them to dictate our analysis of the gospels.

2. Narrative Unity

The emphasis on the *final form* of a narrative and its *unity* is important. Some types of evangelical preaching have been too often guilty of so atomising the text and focusing on a few verses, that the force of the work *as a whole*, is lost.

Literary criticism raises such issues, and they are worth our consideration—a narrative ought to be read on its own terms. It is only as we read the gospels as wholes that we can really make sense of them. Of course, we must focus on the individual stories, parables, teachings, and so on; but we must also, at some stage, relate the smaller parts to the work as a whole. We need constantly to be asking, How does this bit fit into the overall picture? How does this paragraph fit into the chapter as a whole and the gospel in its entirety?

3. Harmonization

Following on from the previous point, an approach which deals with the final form of an individual gospel narrative as a unity will have implications for harmonization. We must beware of a kind of harmonization whereby elements from all four gospels are combined with no thought for the incongruity which results. In fact, to do anything less than this is not truly biblical, for it does not deal fairly with the phenomena of the gospels' themselves. It is incumbent upon us as Christian interpreters to study the gospels in their *fourfoldness* of witness to Jesus, rather than simply trying to get down to the lowest common denominator between them, assuming that that is somehow the focus of authority. Each of the gospels is an inspired and authoritative interpretation of the significance of Jesus, presumably written to met the needs of a variety of circumstances in the early church. A meaningful doctrine of the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures *must* do justice to each of the gospels *on their own terms* as we have them, and not to a reconstruction that attempts (and invariably fails) to do justice to all four! Literary approaches can help us here as well.

4. Redaction Criticism

There are some similarities between literary criticism and redaction criticism, in that they both study the final form of the text. Even so, redaction criticism still focuses on the author primarily. The evangelists are seen as theologians whose theology can be detected through studying changes they have made to their sources. The literary critic views the text as an end in itself, whereas the redaction critic sees the text as a means to a further end: an understanding of the situation of the early Christian community or the theology of the author.

5. Genre

Literary criticism opens up the important question of genre. Since literary criticism is concerned with the conventions of biblical literature, renewed concern for the genre of the gospels could be an important and valuable out-growth of the discipline.

6. Readers and Reading

Literary approaches are concerned not with actual readers as such, but with readers created by the text itself. Traditional historical scholarship on the gospels has been largely concerned to look for evidence in the text which may tell us about the first Christian communities. But literary-critical studies can avoid all such questions, examining the gospel as a narrative 'world' into which the reader is drawn.

Those who read a narrative depend on the narrator's viewpoint for how they perceive the story. The narrator tells the story in such a way that will involve *us* in it. When we read the gospel from these specific interpretations we are encouraged to come to an orientation on Jesus. As readers, we are subtly drawn into what is described. Thus, in 1:35–51, with repeated expressions used for 'seeing' (1:35, 38, 39, 42, 46, 48, 50–51), the implied reader is implicitly exhorted to join the first disciples and follow Jesus, to 'see' who Jesus is. The readers (that's you and me) are invited to respond to Jesus. The gospel's statement of purpose (20:30–31), its plot, characterization, misunderstandings, irony, symbolism, and the like, work together to lead the reader to accept its understanding of Jesus and to embrace authentic faith.

7. Story and History

One of the largest areas for concern and discussion must surely be that of the relationship between literary criticism and history. In these approaches, as we have hinted throughout, there is frequently a self-conscious stance against historical methods. Culpepper, for example, asserts that since the gospel interprets events by placing them into a *narrative* world, the actual events are secondary to the story or message which gives them meaning. He maintains that in an age when 'thoughtful' and 'intelligent' people cannot (for various reasons) accept the gospel history, we should beware of restricting truth to that which can be shown to be

historically true, and that the *truth of narrative* has to be recognized.

Unfortunately, Culpepper offers no clear criteria for distinguishing between *story* and *history*. What, then, might be said? On the one hand, we should be careful not to reduce the issue by saying that a story is true only if it can be shown to be historically factual. Some of the best stories in the Bible—the parables—are historically not true in that sense. Having said that, it is nevertheless important to stress that narratives which are fundamentally historical are not merely dry chronicle. In fact, *any* writing of history involves the bringing together of data into some kind of sequence with a beginning, middle, and end. Material is selected and arranged in the *form* of a story. It is important, therefore, not to force a false dichotomy, or an either/or polarization between the truth of 'story' and 'history', when it is probably a both/and case.

Still, it cannot be denied that literary criticism does largely move away from historical considerations, from the window to the mirror—such is the nature of the revolution! While this brings some benefits, as we have hopefully seen, it is, we contend, a major weakness of the various approaches. We must not underestimate the importance of the *historical* nature of the New Testament. Thinking historically means taking seriously the difference and distance between our own world and that of someone who lived and wrote at an earlier point in time. The *contextual* nature of the biblical documents has to be emphasized. The Christian message is of a personal God who has intervened in history and revealed himself in time. Our study of biblical narrative, while it can and should utilize insights from literary analysis, cannot be divorced from the facticity of what it refers to. The gospels contain literary elements, but they refer beyond themselves to a world which is not limited to their pages.[13]

IV. Including Comments: Tools for the Task

It should be clear that the *method* we adopt in our investigation of the Bible will affect the *results* we get. Certain methods determine what kind of data will be obtained and be seen to matter. If we want to study the universe, but our sole method of investigation is a tape measure, the only reality we could measure would be linear dimension. If we used only a set of scales, we would discover that there is more to life than length—we would be able to measure *weight*. However, if we employ no other methods of investigation, over a long period of time, we might conclude that the only things that matter are linear dimension and weight. But we may be missing out on other significant aspects, because we're not using *other* methods, asking *other* questions, raising *other* issues.

As we've already indicated, evangelical scholarship has traditionally focused its attention on the author and the text. Only more recently have we noticed the role the reader plays in interpretation and interaction with the text. In this situation, some have simply got so excited with newness, that they have exchanged one method for another—swapped the tape measure for the scales, or swapped the scales for a thermometer. What we need, in fact, is an approach which is all-embracing, and which combines the best insights from several areas.

We need, to put it another way, to have a well-stocked tool box. Many tasks require tools. Some tasks require *specific* tools. To do a proper job, we need proper equipment. The most brilliant surgeon is helpless without her instruments; the most gifted carpenter cannot work without his tools. (It's been said of some scholars that when the only tool you have in your tool-box is a hammer, everything in life looks like a nail!)

We suggest that the future of the interpretation of the gospels, and biblical hermeneutics generally, should involve incorporating modern approaches into a framework of traditional approaches. One method should not simply be swapped for another. As we hope to have gone some way in demonstrating, it is not that one approach is valid and another invalid; it is rather that each asks different questions of the text, is attempting to achieve different ends, and offers different insights. We need to respect, and can profit from, the richness of various methods in the present diversity of approaches.

In biblical interpretation, as in all things, may we be like teachers discipled for the kingdom, bringing out of our storeroom new treasures as well as old (Matt. 13:52).

Footnotes

1. See the essay by Peter Cotterell in this issue for more on the author and the text.

2. See the essay by Richard Briggs in this issue for a discussion of the role of the reader in interpretation.

3. Tremper Longman, III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Leicester: Apollos, 1987), 19–45 offers an excellent and readable survey of the different approaches. See also Mark Allan Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism? A New Approach to the Bible* (London: SPCK, 1993) for another good introduction.

4. R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983). Before Culpepper wrote on John, it was Mark who enjoyed the spotlight: the publication of

David Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of A Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) is rightly seen as a major landmark for modern literary approaches to the gospels. Since then, books have appeared at an alarming rate. On Matthew, see e.g. Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988 2nd edn). On Luke-Acts, see e.g. W. S. Kurz, *Reading Luke-Acts: The Dynamics of Biblical Narrative* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993).

5. Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 4, my emphasis.

6. The distinctions are now well documented: e.g. Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 15–18; Kurz, *Reading Luke-Acts*, 9–16; Longman, *Literary Approaches*, 83–87.

7. Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 20–34; see also Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, 33–37.

8. For discussions of plot applied to the gospels, see e.g. Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 79–98; Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, 2–9; Kurz, *Reading Luke-Acts*, 17–36; Powell, *Narrative Criticism*, 35–50; Rhoads and Michie, *Mark as Story*, 73–100.

9. Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 101–48; Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, 9–28; Powell, *Narrative Criticism*, 51–67; Rhoads and Michie, *Mark as Story*, 101–36.

10. Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 151–202; also Kurz, *Reading Luke-Acts*, 135–55.

11. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester: IVP, 1991), 98–99.

12. This has been done helpfully by Longman, *Literary Approaches*, 47–62, and Powell, *Narrative Criticism*, 85–101. Those with a background in literary theory or linguistics might like to try the following surveys and assessments: Stephen D. Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (London: HarperCollins, 1992), 471–514.

13. For a recent helpful treatment of these issues applied to Old Testament narrative, see V. Philips Long, *The Art of Biblical History* (Leicester: Apollos, 1994).