Volume VI Number 1

Spring 1983

KING'S Theological Review

IS STRUCTURALISM CHRISTIAN?

GLENN FULCHER

As the use of structuralist techniques becomes more popular in the realm of biblical studies many voices are being raised in warning against a trend which is seen as a challenge to Christian scholarship, and a Christian understanding of the Bible. These warnings all take one theme as their starting point, the frequent claim of structuralist writers that 'meaning' can be nothing other than the 'structure' of the text which is being examined.[1] Not only is a new exegetical method imported into biblical studies, but an ideology and philosophy which a recent article in the King's Theological Review described as 'fundamentally anarchic' and un-Christian.[2] Seen also as a 'modern form of agnosticism' Paul Ricoeur (who has condemned the structuralist analysis of the New Testament) would join with Dr. Horne's assessment to claim that structuralists are 'in despair of meaning', and merely submit works of literature to structuralist analysis because, although they do not mean anything, they express their meaninglessness remarkably well.[3]

Two fundamental issues are at stake in the current debate about Structuralism and its relationship to Christian theology. In their treatment of structuralist hermeneutics many writers make absolutist claims which exclude the possibility of all non-structuralist interpretation. Secondly, within the structuralist interpretation the value of historical study is said to be so relativised that it becomes of no importance. Within these new assumptions the place of God can appear uncertain at the least.

1. *Absolutism*

Structuralism is a holistic system of interpretation which claims to possess the key to understanding not only language, history, and the biblical text, but all existence everywhere and at all time. If this is true, it is obvious that in biblical exegesis 'methodological eclecticism . . . is not compatible with structural analysis.'[4] All other tools of scholarship would have to be discarded. At the ideological level too, structuralism is not one theory among many, but the 'master-theory' by which all others must be interpreted. Consequently, Kovacs argues that 'one can elicit no argument in favour of structuralism, strictly speaking: its basis is the absurdity of non-structuralist assumptions.'[5] It has been pointed out on a number of occasions that structuralism is thus removed from the realm of debate about its 'truth' for it is not open to either verification or falsification;[6] it is a closed system, but according to Kovacs rightly so, for only in taking this particular position can its universal relevance and claims be maintained.

2. *History*

Structuralism is a 'synchronic' discipline; that is it operates without reference to history (the 'diachronic'), which separates it off from all the other tools of the biblical scholar.[7] This ahistorical approach makes Christian meaning impossible for Horne because of the essentially historical nature of Christianity.[8]

When structuralist critics have turned their attention to the issue of history a number of different approaches have been developed. Some have seen the abstract structural descriptions of the text, meaning itself, to be all that is relevant to understanding the literature of the bible in an 'aesthetic' way;[9] some have simply rejected the relevance of the historical-critical method without further comment,[10] whilst others have claimed that structuralism actually presents a new theory of history.[11] Admittedly, the latter view is not prominent amond biblical structuralists at the present, but as this issue comes to the fore more are slowly taking a more liberal and eclectic stance. However, if history is no longer relevant the Christian Church can no longer claim to find the meaning that it wishes to proclaim from its religious texts, and once again Christianity is said to suffer.[8]

Together, absolutist claims with an ahistorical approach are said to 'ban not only the possibility of the existence of the God of the bible, but also the possibility of meaningful discussion about him.'[12] For structuralism only deals in a complex semiotic of endless signifiers and signifieds with no 'absolute signified'. For scholars who follow Poythress God can have no place within such a model of the world.

At this stage it becomes necessary to point out that the 'structuralism' which is attacked by its critics is only one branch of the structuralist movement, albeit a branch which has the largest press. Structuralism is not a single discipline, nor do all practitioners have a common methodology or unified theory. For the present purpose only two broad trends need be distinguished. On the one hand there are those who hold the absolutist principles and reject the relevance of history, who may be said to come from the stable of Lévi-Strauss, and take inspiration from Chomsky's theory of universal grammar.[13] It is this position which is most often described in general introductions to structuralism and so has been taken as the norm.[14] However, another trend which may be perceived within the structuralist movement is potentially both much more useful and less offensive to those who do not wish to abandon either the historical-critical method or their Christian commitments. H.C. Kee correctly points out that whilst the universalistic approach of Lévi-Strauss tends to obliterate all other considerations, the structuralism espoused by Piaget allows for a variety of cultural forms and even contradictory structures.[15] Whilst Lévi-Strauss tries to find the universal pattern underlying the individual text or society, Piaget looks for a specific structure underlying each individual text or society. Indeed, history and sociology can even effect the structure, rather than the reverse always being the case.[16] For those who follow the Piagetian school, structuralism is neither absolute in its claims, nor a-historical in its approach. Structure and history interact. Thus, 'structure' can no longer be said to constitute 'meaning' on its own, and the charges of Ricoeur cannot be applied to this branch of structuralist thought.[17]

As such, it is misleading to ask whether or not the concentration on the 'code' rather than the 'message' leads away from the central concern with 'meaning',[18] because the increasing number of scholars who realise that the Piagetian line is much more fruitful acknowledge that the 'message' along with the historical criticism is just as important as the new discovery of the 'code'.[19]

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A structuralist approach to the biblical text need not be incompatible with the more traditional methods of study and theological concerns (despite E. Güttgemanns). They are not mutually exclusive and no 'break' is necessary because whilst the questions posed by the structuralists are new and relevant they are also limited, and used alone can hardly do justice to the richness of the material with which it is concerned.[20] It is possible to benefit from a useful distinction drawn by Norman Peterson between extrinsic study of a text dealing with historical and sociological evidence, and intrinsic study which is concerned with a text-centred literary system.[21] The former is the world of potential proofs, and the latter the arena of the elucidation of the semantic world of the text. The question of 'truth' in this latter area has hardly been explored, except in that structuralists are producing analyses of texts, some of which are impressive (notably those of J.D. Crossan) and most of which are ingenious, but unconvincing.

To conclude, structuralism is not always done with mirrors, and its concerns are really nothing more than a logical extention of redactional-critical interests. The introduction of structuralism to biblical studies, received with a healthy critical attitude, will aid the scholar to read the bible as literature if only by expanding his horizon to include alien or unfamiliar aspects of modern literary hermeneutics. If such an alien method could be combined with the older ways, François Bovon is correct to say that then 'there is a way to give a sharper consciousness to our faith and a firmer foundation to our confession of faith.'[22]

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