

Berlin, R. A. Culpepper, D. Gunn, and others listed in the section on further reading at the end of the book. Following a review of basic principles in chapter 3, I turn in part 2 to a discussion of several specific examples.

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BASIC PRINCIPLES

Thus far we have surveyed the history of literary approaches to the study of the Bible and have analyzed their positive and negative features. Along the way we have pointed to a positive program for literary readings of biblical texts. Before applying literary insights to particular prose and poetry texts, however, it will be advantageous to summarize and explicate more fully some of the major theoretical premises upon which the studies in part 2 are based. I consider, then, the act of literary communication and several functions of biblical literature.

THE ACT OF LITERARY COMMUNICATION

Communication involves a message that a sender directs toward a receiver. Different media may be used to send a message. A message may be (1) oral in face-to-face conversation, a phone call, or a radio show; (2) sent by signals of one sort or another; or (3) written. Literature is a subset of this third type of communication between a sender and receiver.

In the act of literary communication, the sender may be referred to as the author or the poet. The message is the text or literary work, and the receiver is the reader, the critic, or the audience. We have already observed that the various schools of

thought concerning the interpretation of literary texts may be distinguished on the basis of which aspect of the act of literary communication (if any) they emphasize. Traditional interpretation emphasizes the author and his or her background; New Criticism and structuralism focus on the text; reader-response theory concentrates on the reader; and deconstruction questions the very idea of communication through literature.

While it is dangerous to generalize, we could suggest that this proliferation of approaches is the result of loss of faith in the act of literary communication. Since it is impossible to be absolutely certain and completely exhaustive about the meaning of a particular text, scholars have often abandoned the notion of determinant meaning in literature.

Such a loss of faith is unnecessary if we realize that our interpretations of any text, and biblical literature in particular, are partial, hypothetical, probable, and contextualized. Said positively, our interpretations may never be dogmatic, because the texts are rich in meaning, the mind of God (the final author) is ultimately unfathomable, and, recognizing that interpretation necessarily includes application, the situations that readers confront are various.

Many of our interpretations will be highly probable to the point of being nearly certain, but we must always retain a certain level of humility in our interpretations because of our inability to read the mind of the author of a text. Such an understanding of the interpretive process not only allows us to regain faith in the interpretive process but permits us to understand why there are legitimate differences of interpretation between readers. The position advocated in this book is that the biblical authors communicated to readers through texts. By way of summary and explication, I briefly review each of the elements of the communicative process.

Author

If literature is an act of communication, then meaning resides in the intention of the author. The author has encoded a message for the readers. Interpretation then has as its goal the

recovery of the author's purpose in writing. The difficulties involved in such a position have been recognized in chapter 2. The hypothetical and probable nature of interpretation enters the picture because we cannot read minds and thus cannot be absolutely certain that we have recovered the correct meaning of a text. This fact should not lead us to throw up our hands in despair. As the next section indicates, there are constraints imposed on the meaning that an interpreter may impute to the author. The view that the author is the locus of the meaning of a text provides theoretical stability to interpretation. Our interpretation is correct insofar as it conforms to the meaning intended by the author.

When speaking of the author in the Bible, a number of questions arise that cannot be fully discussed here. One issue involves the composition of various books of the Bible and the issue of the use of sources and the levels of redaction. Here I use "author" to refer most pointedly to the final shaper of a canonical book. When I read Chronicles, I am interested in the intention of the author/redactor of that book and not in the intention of the author/redactor of his sources (say, the canonical Deuteronomistic History). In other words, I am interested in how and for what purpose the final author uses his source.

A second issue concerning the intention of the author is the relationship between the human author and the divine author. God is the ultimate author of the Scriptures, so it must be said that final meaning resides in His intention. Of course, He condescended to reveal His message to the biblical authors, who did not write in a trance but had conscious intentions of their own. But it is wrong to equate fully the intention of God with that of the human author. For instance, the application in the New Testament of an Old Testament text frequently exceeds the obvious meaning intended by the author of the latter.¹

¹Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology*, pp. 108–14, in his legitimate concern to restrain eisegetical tendencies inherent in *sensus plenior* and other readings that appeal to God's ultimate authorship, swings the pendulum too far in the other direction by denying that there is any difference between the human and divine

Before going on to the next closely related topic, I mention the importance of background studies. The study of the historical context of an author is helpful, since it places constraints on interpretation and helps to elucidate the meaning of a text. About the author Nahum, for example, we know only that he came from Elkosh, a town that we cannot now locate. But we do know that he lived and ministered in the seventh century B.C. To understand his message, it helps to understand the political, military, and religious situation in that part of the world at that time.²

Text

The author sends a message, which is the text. In the case of biblical literature, the author is known only through the text. The intention of the author is hypothetically reconstructed through interaction with the text. Later we will see that this reconstructed author is the "implied" author. Interpretation thus calls for a close reading of the text. It calls for an acquaintance with the conventions and strategies of communication that guided the composition of the text.

I have noted Alter's comment that each culture or time period has its own conventions of literary communication. The primary task of the reader/critic is to recover these conventions and to learn their intended effect on the reader. Since the Bible did not come to us with an explicit analysis of its literary forms, we are frequently left to infer those conventions from our interaction with the text and must use *etic* rather than *emic*

intention of a particular passage of Scripture. This position further manifests itself in Kaiser's unwillingness to read Old Testament texts in the light of further New Testament revelation. Kaiser infers (p. 111) that true revelation must involve a complete and full disclosure on the part of God. In the light of 1 Peter 1:10-12, however, it is clear that the prophets wrote better than they knew (contra Kaiser). Since the reality of the New Testament relates to the shadows of the Old Testament, at some stage of their reading of the Old Testament, Christians appropriately avail themselves of that clearer revelation.

²See my forthcoming commentary on Nahum, to be published by Baker as part of a new series concentrating on the Minor Prophets.

categories. Chapters 4 and 6 will discuss these conventions for prose and poetry respectively.

Reader

From the standpoint of the reader we recognize that our readings are partial and contextualized. Application is part of the exegetical task. It is unwise and indeed impossible for readers to divest themselves completely of personal interests and concerns while reading. Indeed the Scriptures encourage readers to come to the text with their wholehearted commitment and needs. E. D. Hirsch and W. Kaiser wish to separate textual meaning from application, or significance. Although such a view may be fine in theory, it is impossible to implement fully in reality.

It is appropriate to make some distinctions when referring to the reader of the text. One may speak of the original reader, the later reader, and the implied reader. Traditional interpretation has concentrated on the original audience. How was the Gospel of Mark received by its first readers? This type of question is important and helps us to understand the ancient conventions of writing and the original intention of the author. The later reader refers to the history of interpretation and contemporary interpretations. The implied reader is a New Critical category and distinguishes the actual original readers from the readers addressed in the text itself.³ The Book of Nahum once again provides a good example. The original readers of Nahum's prophecy were the inhabitants of Judah who were living under the vassalage of Assyria. The later readers include all subsequent commentators, including ourselves. The implied readers, then, were the Assyrians (though it is extremely unlikely that any Assyrian actually read it). Nahum addresses his prophecy to them, using taunt and satire.

In conclusion, literature is an act of communication

³G. Prince, "Introduction to the Study of the Narratee," in *Reader-Response Criticism*, ed. J. P. Tompkins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), pp. 6-25.

between author and reader through a text. These three aspects of literature are interlocking and may not be abstracted from one another. Proper interpretation does not neglect any of the three.

FUNCTIONS OF BIBLICAL LITERATURE

As discussed in chapter 2, literary critics of the Bible all too frequently reduce the meaning of the biblical text to an aesthetic meaning. Literature, they say, does not refer outside of itself to external reality. Other scholars restrict the meaning of the biblical texts to their historical references.

Such positions result from a misunderstanding of the functions of literature in general and biblical literature in particular. The Bible is multifunctional. When viewed as an act of verbal communication from a sender to a receiver, the message of the text may be described as having many different purposes. With M. Sternberg, we may say, "Like all social discourse, biblical narrative is oriented to an addressee and regulated by a purpose or a set of purposes involving the addressee"; and with R. Jakobson, "Language must be investigated in all the variety of its functions."⁴ While not intending to be exhaustive, I discuss here six major functions of biblical literature: historical, theological, doxological, didactic, aesthetic, and entertainment. Although I have isolated these functions from one another for the purpose of analysis, in the text they are all intertwined. Also, it is important to remember that the Bible contains a variety of literary types that vary in terms of the dominance of one or more of these functions.

Historical

As argued above, the Bible intends to impart historical information to its readers, primarily concerning the acts of God

⁴M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 1; R. Jakobson, "Metalanguage as a Linguistic Problem," in *The Framework of Language* (Michigan Studies in the Humanities 1; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, 1980), p. 81.

for and among His people. What I am calling the historical function of biblical literature may roughly be equated with what Jakobson terms the referential function of language.⁵ Though most scholars today would not agree, I believe that this purpose is dominant in most biblical literature. The other functions are subsidiary in that they depend on the historical function.

In his recent volume on the poetics of biblical narrative, Sternberg provides a stimulating discussion of the historical function of biblical literature. He rightly points out that, ultimately, "nothing on the surface . . . infallibly marks off the two genres [fiction and history]." Nonetheless, he persuasively concludes that "the narrative is historiographic, inevitably so considering its teleology and incredibly so considering its time and environment. Everything points in this direction."⁶ Sternberg's point stands whether the history is true or not. Biblical narrative, for the most part, *intends* to impart historical information.

Theological

The second function is closely related to the first. The Bible is not historical in a positivist, neutral sense; rather, it has a message to convey. What I am here calling theological, Sternberg labels ideological and Jakobson refers to as the emotive or expressive function of language. Jakobson describes the emotive function of language as that which "aims a direct expression of the speaker's attitude toward what he is speaking about."⁷ The biblical storyteller as well as the biblical poet attributes the great events that happen in Israel to God. It intends to interpret that history in the light of the reality of God and His interaction with the world.

Doxological

Closely related to the theological function is the doxological purpose of the biblical text, a function that we could describe

⁵Jakobson, "Metalanguage," p. 82.

⁶Sternberg, *The Poetics*, p. 30.

⁷Jakobson, "Metalanguage," p. 82.

as partly theological and partly didactic. In short, the biblical authors intend to offer praise to God and to encourage the community to praise Him in response to the historical and theological truths that the text presents. Often this call to praise is implicit; at other times it is explicit (e.g., Exod. 15; Judg. 5).

Didactic

Biblical stories are often structured in order to shape the reader's ethical behavior. Jakobson similarly speaks of the connative function of language, which has its "orientation toward the addressee" and "finds its purest grammatical expression in the vocative and imperative."⁸ Genesis 39, the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, is an excellent illustration. In this chapter Joseph is a virtual embodiment of the many proverbs that explicitly teach that young men should resist the advances of the strange or adulterous woman. A proper response to the story of Genesis 39 includes a chaste character on the part of the reader.

Aesthetic

In this book I concentrate particularly on the aesthetic function, but it is only one of many. Jakobson refers to the poetic function of all verbal communication as that function that is "set toward the message."⁹ In other words, it concerns verbal self-reference. The aesthetic nature of the biblical text is observed in its self-consciousness about structure and language—about how the message is conveyed. It is seen in the indirection of the message (above also called *distanciation*). As Ryken comments specifically on the Gospels, "Instances from the life of Jesus such as these suggest a literary [or aesthetic] approach to truth that frequently avoids direct propositional statement and embodies truth in distinctly literary forms."¹⁰

⁸Ibid., p. 83.

⁹Ibid., p. 84.

¹⁰L. Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), p. 9.

Entertainment

Biblical texts are shaped in a compelling way. They are enjoyable to read. This function is best seen in connection with the aesthetic function of the text.

It is essential to keep in mind the multifaceted nature of biblical literature. The danger of reducing the Bible to one or two functions is that it radically distorts the message as it comes from the ultimate sender (God) to us as its present receivers. The thrust of this book, however, is on the aesthetic function. Overall, then, my presentation is a partial analysis that must be supplemented by other forms of study.

Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation

Biblical scholarship has until recently paid little attention to the field of literary criticism. Conservative exegetes have, not without reason, feared that the use of literary criticism might lead to a downplaying or even the denial of the historical worth of Scripture. Indeed, there are dangers in emphasizing the literary aspects of the Bible at the expense of its historical content. But it is equally hazardous to minimize or ignore the Bible's literary nature. "The Bible as literature or history is a false dichotomy. It is both and much more."

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