

READER-RESPONSE CRITICISM AND NEW TESTAMENT HERMENEUTICS

EDGAR V. MCKNIGHT

Reader-response criticism approaches to biblical literature in terms of the values, attitudes, and response of readers. The reader, therefore, plays a role in the „production” or „creation” of meaning and significance. This role of the reader relativizes the conventional view that the text is an achieved structure of meaning. Radical reader-response approaches also challenge conventional views concerning the autonomous critic and the scientific objective process of reading and criticism. Insights and strategies of reader-response criticism valuable for New Testament hermeneutics are in danger of being neglected today because of radical deconstructive moves and because of a reactionary suspicion of and retreat from non-conventional approaches in light of the perceived threat of deconstruction.

The question of language is at the center of the different varieties of reader response criticism. Three positions may be observed in the work of Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser: (1) the early Fish emphasized the temporal dimension of reading rather than the spatial form of the text as the essential factor in meaning, but he also maintained the integrity of language and the text with the result that „informed readers” come to basically the same evaluation of literary texts; (2) Iser advocated a phenomenological approach which maintains the integrity of poetic consciousness and intention with the result that readers’ intentions are determined by the text and are in continuity with the intention of the author; and (3) the later Fish seems to question all that the New Critics and the phenomenologists assumed concerning such matters as the nature of reality, the autonomy of the self, the stability of literary texts, and the independence of fact and meaning from value and interpretation. Can room be made for the substantial contribution of actual readers in the actualization of biblical texts (contributions in which the different national and faith communities of readers make a difference, for example) without denying the integrity of language. The pioneering work of early East European Formalists will be explicated as providing ways of conceiving of language and the language of literature so as to maintain the integrity of language and to take account of culture and individual valuation.

How can the insights and strategies of the deconstruction of Jaques Derrida be incorporated? One way would be to interpret Derrida as intending what East European Formalists discovered, the fact that discourse is not simply governed from without by some nondiscursive atemporal ground. Discourse is always governed in part by rules which are subject to historical transformations. Truth and rationality are always constrained within historical determinations. Knowledge, language, meaning, and interpretation, however, are set by Derrida not just within a dynamic cultural context but at the same time within a context of power and authority. Deconstruction, then, is

concerned with the examination of the desire for mastery – the mastery of knowledge through language and meaning through interpretation – and the subversion of that desire through the very nature of the language itself.

How can a reader enter into the world of the text on the condition set up by the text and construct a unified piece out of the structures offered by the text and yet give conscious attention to the impulse toward and result of the synthesizing and saturating in order to break its „domination“?

The paper examines the values and challenges of reader-response insights and strategies for New testament hermeneutics and illustrates the approach with a reading of Luke 5:1 – 11.

RHETORICAL CRITICISM IN NEW TESTAMENT INTERPRETATION: AN APPRAISAL AND A PROPOSAL

DENNIS L. STAMPS

The recent plethora of rhetorical critical analyses of New Testament epistles suggest that G. E. Kennedy's proposal in his brief book, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism*, is having a significant impact on New Testament studies. On a smaller scale, other scholars are exploring the social-rhetoric and the literary dimensions of New Testament epistles. What are we to make of these rhetorical and literary approaches to the New Testament?

In order to appraise these interpretative strategies, their recent development and application will be chronicled. For rhetorical criticism, the development from James Muilenburg's 1968 SBL Presidential address to W. Wuellner's provocative article: „Where is Rhetorical Criticism Taking Us“, (CBQ 49 (1987) 448ff.) will be traced. With respect to literary approaches to N.T. epistles, the work of N. Petersen and his sociological-narratology, the text-linguistic approach of the Uppsala School, plus structuralism in its various guises are examined.

After surveying the interpretive landscape for the interpretation of N.T. epistles, a number of the underlying assumptions which are operative in literary and rhetorical criticism will be explored. First, a basic understanding of textuality is examined as the major premise for these critical approaches. Textuality, while defined in many ways, suggests that texts are a distinct kind of language discourse from spoken language with a particular understanding of context. Next the way in which interpretive goals are set in the various critical approaches are analyzed in order to relate them to this understanding of textuality and context.