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WHAT IS STRUCTURAL EXEGESIS?

by DANIEL PATTE

Structural exegesis is a major recent development in biblical studies and is related to simultaneous currents in other fields of academic study. Here at last is an introduction to structuralism and structuralist methods which does not presuppose advance knowledge of linguistics or anthropology.

Traditional exegetical methods follow a historical paradigm; structuralism follows a linguistic paradigm. These two approaches thus involve significantly different attitudes toward the biblical text. Through clear analytic explanations illustrated by application to specific texts, Professor Patte shows how structuralism and traditional scholarship must go hand in hand so that together they can carry the exegetical task to its end—opening the possibility for fresh insights based on clear understandings.

DANIEL PATTE is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Vanderbilt University and coauthor, with Aline Patte, of Structural Exegesis: From Theory to Practice.

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by

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Editor's Foreword

The first three volumes in this series dealt respectively with form criticism, redaction criticism, and literary criticism. And now we come to structural exegesis (or interpretation or criticism), which has been intensively used in France for some years and is being employed increasingly in other countries, including the United States. It might be helpful at the outset to relate structural exegesis to the other three disciplines in a very sketchy way.

Form criticism has been to some extent a literary discipline because it has concerned itself with the formal patterns in the pericopes of the Gospels (or other New Testament literature). But I would judge that it has been more strongly historical than literary because of its interest in the development of a given unit or form, and in the influence of the setting in life on both the origin and the development of both the form and content of the units of the Gospel tradition. Redaction criticism has likewise been both literary and historical, but again I would deem the historical concern to be the dominant one, although some recent redaction-critical studies have manifested a more genuinely literary-critical approach. Redaction criticism is literary in its intention to observe and analyze how the final author of a Gospel (or other document) shaped and modified his source materials (tradition) and put them together. How does the author give expression to his theological interpretation of Jesus through his stylistic and compositional techniques? But redaction criticism is also fundamentally historical in nature because it wants to separate tradition from redaction (the author's contribution)—rather than looking at the text as a unified whole—and to assess the connections and tensions between the two as well as to investigate the historical relationship between the author and his community and the history-of-thought relationships among the Gospels. I believe that most form and redaction critics have operated, implicitly or explicitly, with the assumption that the language of their texts was exercising primarily the referential function. The texts refer beyond themselves to events, situations, conflicts, ideas—and meaning is not really available apart from this reference.

The volume on literary criticism gave some attention to the kind of inquiry that biblical scholars have traditionally called literary criticism—such as the search for sources behind the Gospels. This is, however, really a kind of historical criticism because it is concerned with the temporal process through which the Gospels came into existence. Nevertheless, this volume was devoted principally to what we might call aesthetic literary criticism (although I do not want to impose that term or exactly this understanding of literary criticism on Professor Beardslee).
EDITOR'S FOREWORD

Aesthetic literary criticism sees its texts as exercising primarily the poetic linguistic function, or at least it is able to throw this function into relief. Language exercising the poetic function attracts attention intrinsically to itself and does not refer it to some object beyond the text. Poetic language (using the term poetic broadly to include narrative and various kinds of imagistic language) is able to grasp the attention in this way because the various linguistic elements are locked into each other centripetally so that attention does not escape easily to the outside. This internal organization makes the text an organic unity and gives it a semi-autonomy. The text is grasped as a whole or totality, as people read it, rather than as something to be analyzed (into tradition and reduction), and meaning is seen to be a function not of the relationship between text and historical setting, but primarily of the union of form and content in the text itself. Form is not a separable container for the content but is itself the shaping or patterning of the content. All of this is to say that aesthetic literary criticism is concerned with the surface structure of the text, the manifest union of form and content.

Structural criticism I take to be a mode of literary criticism, but its object is not primarily the surface structure of the text. It focuses rather on the relationship between the surface structure and the "deep" structures which lie implicitly or unconsciously beneath, around, or alongside of the text. Structural criticism wants to articulate the larger implicit structure which in some way generates the text under consideration. How and to what extent does the given text manifest the reservoir of formal possibilities that belong to literature as such? There is a sense in which structural criticism is referential, but it does not derive the meaning of a text from its reference to something nonliterary, that is, something historical, sociological, or idealational. It discloses rather how the text "refers" to the reservoir of formal literary possibilities. I should like to add that all "structuralists" cannot be pressed into the same mold, and surely not all of them would agree with my brief formulation here.

It should not be thought, in my judgment, that historical and literary disciplines mutually exclude each other. But one thing that structuralism has taught us is that the two must be kept distinct, separate, and unconflated. This is because the meaning which an item has in its own meaning system (its synchronic connections) is not the same as the meaning which it has as part of a historical process (its diachronic connections). For example, the prologue of the Gospel of John, which foregrounds the divine pre-existence of Jesus, receives a part of its meaning from its relationship to the story of the foot washing which belongs to the same larger narrative. But in the history of christological thought, which we may see developing from one Gospel to another, the pre-existence of Jesus is a substitute for the virgin birth and/or baptism of Jesus. The picture is further complicated by the fact that items which do or might belong to the same diachronic process may be treated synchronically, as related to each other in the same meaning system. But that carries us beyond the purposes of this brief foreword.

Preface

Structuralism is necessarily an interdisciplinary endeavor. Structural methods can only be developed by a team of specialists in several fields. The interdisciplinary project "Semiaology and Exegesis" at Vanderbilt University, a project supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, provided this necessary interdisciplinary context. The preparation of this book has benefited from the collective methodological research of two interdisciplinary seminars and a colloquium, at Vanderbilt University, and of a three week international colloquium on Biblical Semiotics (Annecy, France, July 1974).

The following colleagues at Vanderbilt University have participated in the seminars: W. von Raffler Engel (professor of Linguistics), J. Kaplan and D. Thomas (both professors of Anthropology), L. Crist and R. Poggenburg (both professors of French Literature), J. Engel (professor of German Literature), J. Post (professor of Philosophy), F. Krolak (professor of Systems and Information Sciences), C. McCorkel (professor of Fine Arts), J. Crenshaw (professor of Old Testament), C. Hambrick (professor of Religious Studies), and L. H. Silverman (Hillel professor of Jewish Studies). The colloquium at Vanderbilt University featured two speakers: S. Wittig (professor of English Literature, University of Texas at Austin), and D. Via, Jr. (professor of Religious Studies, University of Virginia). The international colloquium on Biblical Semiotics included twenty-eight scholars, the majority of whom belonged to the Association for the Structural Study of the Bible (a group of French scholars also known as ASTRUC), a group from Vanderbilt University, and scholars from various European Universities. J. Delorme and J. Calloud (both professors of Biblical Exegesis, Catholic University, Lyon, France) were the conveners; J. Geninacou (professor of French Literature, University of Zurich, Switzerland) was a guest speaker; and M. Rengstorf (assistant of Professor A. J. Greimas, University of Paris) was a consultant.

Each page of this work reflects this collective research. It is with