

**A Description and Critique of Narrative Criticism:
The Relation of Biblical Interpretation, History, and Theology**

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Introduction

A narrative is a story, not a particularly academic or revolutionary subject. Yet the word narrative seems to be everywhere in contemporary theology. There are story approaches to Christianity (narrative theologies), story approaches to pastoral counseling, and story approaches to interpreting the Bible (narrative criticism). Narrative criticism, a biblical studies phenomenon, is a new way of interpreting the Scriptures, especially the gospels, which is rapidly gaining adherents among interpreters of the Bible, the professional exegetes. Due to very different presuppositions and goals, this form of literary criticism as practiced by biblical scholars clashes with historical criticism, which has traditionally been prevalent in academic circles. The older historical-critical methodology itself has undergone evolutionary developments that have brought it closer to a purely literary approach. Though narrative criticism was not the first modern literary-critical approach to the Bible, it has been the most widely accepted.

What is narrative criticism? Essentially, it is the treatment of biblical books holistically as works of fiction, using techniques and terminology from secular literary studies. Narrative criticism is not difficult to understand, but the linguistic ideas, literary theories, and theological movements that led to its inception are more so. Therefore, Part I will trace the background, influences, and contexts of narrative criticism in the secular and theological realms. After it is situated, a more precise definition will be given, along with examples from narrative-critical commentaries. Following its description, a thorough critical and systematic analysis of narrative criticism will be given in Part II, relating it to the methods of critical exegesis that have gone before it. Lastly, its presuppositions and weaknesses will be highlighted in relation to the theological task as a whole, normed by the Holy Scriptures.

Part I

Background and Influences of Narrative Criticism

The history of biblical studies in the last few hundred years has largely been the story of secular ideas, attitudes, and methods delayed by some time before entering the church. It is certainly the case with biblical historical criticism, as will be detailed later, but it is also true of narrative criticism, though with very different influences. Therefore, the unintuitive world of literary theory and some key movements influencing literary approaches to biblical study will be sketched.

Literary studies in the twentieth century, leading up to the adoption of some of its ideas by Christian scholars, is not simply the study of the Bible as literature. Narrative criticism is not the aesthetic study of biblical language—its effectiveness, style, or beauty of form. Theories of meaning and the inner-working of language itself play the lead role in modern literary studies, in contrast to the benign aesthetic appreciation of literature's beauty and power. In America the content of traditional English and literature classes is far different than the strange turns and multidisciplinary approaches of post-World War I literary studies. To fully grasp biblical literary criticism, it is necessary to briefly describe major movements and prominent thinkers of the secular academic world. Due to its eclectic and interdisciplinary nature, the story of literary studies as it is now practiced, begins not with a literary critic, but with a Swiss linguist. Literary theory, which rose to dominance late in the twentieth century, is preoccupied with words, meaning, and interpretation. Therefore, the starting point will be a man widely considered to be the father of modern linguistics.

1 Saussure and Linguistics

Linguistics, the formal study of language as a distinct discipline, had its origins in nineteenth century Germany. Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) studied in this tradition.¹ Late in the nineteenth century the study of language was historical. Linguists compared languages ancient and modern, and sought to classify their evolutionary changes. Saussure was one of the first to try to change the way linguists thought about language. His ideas would eventually reach far beyond his own field of study.

1.1 Saussure and History

Saussure was a professor of Sanskrit and Indo-European languages. The main area of linguistic research during Saussure's time was to compare ancient languages in order to account for their evolutionary mutations. The overarching goal was to reconstruct the hypothetical Indo-European language, the "common prehistoric ancestor" of Greek, Latin, Gothic, Sanskrit, and others.² Known as a brilliant scholar, Saussure furthered this goal with a comparative and systematic grammar, published in 1878 when he was only 21 years old.³ This book showed he was not afraid to break with tradition and think non-historically.⁴

As it turned out, his innovative book was not well received, though it is considered a masterpiece today. Saussure, though trained in the historical methods of his day, was somewhat self-taught and developed many of his insights independently of the scholarly establishment. Perhaps due to the cool reception his book received, it would be the only book he published.⁵

Given these facts, what is so important about Saussure, especially for the latter part of

¹Roy Harris, *Language, Saussure and Wittgenstein: How to Play Games with Words*, in *Routledge History of Linguistic Thought*, ed. Talbot J. Taylor (London: Routledge, 1988), 130.

²*Ibid.*, 39-40.

³Anna Morpurgo Davies, "Saussure and Indo-European Linguistics," in *The Cambridge Guide to Saussure*, 9-29, ed. Carol Sanders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 10. Without any evidence, he postulated a "mystery sound" for the Indo-European language that was neither a vowel nor a consonant, but could act as both. This ingenious solution went against all commonly held thought, but "this hypothesis turned up trumps nearly 50 years later with the decipherment of cuneiform Hittite." Harris, 39-40.

⁴Davies, 15, 19. He foreshadowed future disillusionment with the evolutionary model and the historical method in general. In several areas he showed a strong propensity to break with tradition and think beyond his generation's thought, 'forecasting' later intellectual fads.

⁵After his masterpiece, he did his doctoral dissertation on the genitive case in Sanskrit. *Ibid.*, 14-15, 23.

twentieth century? From 1907-1911 he taught three courses in general linguistics, the study of a language in its present state.⁶ Students' notes from these lectures were synthesized, compiled, and published in 1916, three years after Saussure's death, as *Course in General Linguistics*. Due to dissatisfaction with his field of historical linguistics, he used these lectures to 'blueprint' modern linguistics. Saussure only becomes an intellectual giant with the rise of multidisciplinary structuralism after World War II, which has direct connections to his thought.⁷ The reason that Saussure is often the starting point for current thought is because he defined a clear terminology and articulated general principles which are foundational in many fields today, including literary studies. The next section introduces the contents of the *Course in General Linguistics*, which establishes the terminology necessary to comprehend literary theory.

1.2 *Course in General Linguistics*

Against the prevailing currents of his day, Saussure stated that language needed to be studied as a system. In contrast to the historical and diachronic (through-time) method of comparative linguistics, he declared in the *Course in General Linguistics* that language should also be studied synchronically. The synchronic approach is to take a snapshot of an object at a moment in time and study it as a complete system, ignoring evolutionary or historical questions. This anti-historical approach to language is not the study of language as it is spoken or written, but as a "complete and internally coherent system," prior to any human articulation.⁸ To distinguish between language as a socially normed system and language as utterance, he used two French words. *Parole* is performed language, written or spoken, as it is studied historically (diachronically). On the other hand, the *langue* is the linguistic system that represents "the interactive functioning of elements of language as a system in a virtual state."⁹ Together these two aspects form language as it is commonly thought of, though this novel separation has important

⁶Carol Sanders, ed., introduction to *The Cambridge Guide to Saussure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1; John E. Joseph, "The Linguistic Sign," in *The Cambridge Guide to Saussure*, 59-75, ed. Carol Sanders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 59.

⁷Ibid., 2. Cf. section 2.3 (page 12).

⁸Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 115.

⁹Sanders, 5; W. Terrance Gordon, "*Langue and Parole*," in *The Cambridge Guide to Saussure*, 76-87, ed. Carol Sanders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 78.

consequences.

Saussure's distinctions did not end here. Next, he looked at words, though 'word' is an inadequate descriptor in his thinking. What is commonly thought of as a word, the physical utterance and what it means, is separated by Saussure. He states: "The linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image."¹⁰ This idea attacks nomenclaturism, the idea that words name what they mean. Instead, Saussure spoke of psychological sound-images referring, not to objects, but to mental concepts. The sound-image is called the signifier and the mental concept the signified. Together they combine to describe what a 'word' is, its letters or sounds and its dictionary meaning. A signifier is defined as "a sound, image, written shape, object, practice, or gesture invested with meaning," or bluntly described in written form as "marks on the page."¹¹ The signified is what the marks or sound of the signifier refer to. The signifier does not point to things in the world, but recalls an idea in one's mind (the signified), which is commonly called the 'meaning' of a word.

This distinction was made to set up Saussure's first principle, "that the bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary."¹² There is no "natural connection" between the signifier and the signified, which he established by showing that the same mental concept is described by different words in different languages.¹³

Now the idea of the *langue*, or linguistic system, is ready to be developed. If the sign is divided into the signifier and the signified, the "linguistic system is a series of differences of sound combined with a series of differences of ideas."¹⁴ He concluded that, "in language there are only differences *without positive terms*."¹⁵ For Saussure signifiers do not 'contain' a positive meaning, but possess value only in relation to all the other signifiers in the *langue*. In the differential system, "whatever distinguishes one sign from the others constitutes it," so that only

¹⁰Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin, eds. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1959), 66.

¹¹Catherine Belsey, *Poststructuralism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 114; James W. Voelz, *What Does This Mean?: Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Post-Modern World*, 2nd ed. revised (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1995; revised, 1997), 367.

¹²Saussure, 67.

¹³*Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 120.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

in a network of relationships do the elements condition one another and possess positive value.¹⁶ This means that the linguistic sign has no positive value or meaning in itself; in the *langue*, a signifier's "most precise characteristic is to be what the others are not."¹⁷ The interconnecting differential relationships within the system give signifiers linguistic value. Signifiers, which were arbitrary cultural products to Saussure, can describe any form of communication—pointing to the broad implications Saussure's ideas contain.

The ideas in the *Course in General Linguistics* form the basis of a theory of language (and implicitly of any cultural product), which cannot be empirically validated. Two fundamental assumptions of Saussure's theory are that: (1) words do not have absolute definitions, the 'meaning' of a word can be changed by merely changing other elements in the relational system; and (2) linguistics is "essentially the study of social facts."¹⁸ Saussure did not draw firm conclusions regarding his theorizing, but instead outlined a new science (semiology) and gave new directions for scholars in many fields.¹⁹ The consequences of Saussure's theoretical thought were left for later thinkers to develop.

1.3 Language as a Game

To clarify the abstract thought he outlined, Saussure compared language to the game of chess.²⁰ The rules of chess are arbitrary, social convention says that each player starts with 16 pieces which can only be moved in prescribed ways. Theoretically, chess could have 20 pieces or pawns could move like queens, though practically speaking one person cannot change the rules (that would be cheating). The reason Saussure chose a game to represent language is that man-made games are self-contained and have no reference outside themselves. Saussure introduces his analogy: "But

¹⁶Ibid., 121.

¹⁷Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 57.

¹⁸Grenz, 116-117.

¹⁹Semiology is now generally known as semiotics, the study of signs. Saussure and the American Charles Sanders Peirce are credited for developing semiotics independently. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 87.

²⁰A similar analogy also using chess was worked out slightly later by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951). He used the specific phrase 'language game.' In the literature Wittgenstein is more associated with the 'language game' terminology than Saussure, though they both had similar views regarding language. The initial influence of Saussure's thought was slight, while Wittgenstein had an immediate audience. Harris, xi, 131.

just as the game of chess is entirely in the combination of the different chesspieces, language is characterized as a system based entirely on the opposition of its concrete units.”²¹ This represents a radical change in the view of language—that nothing outside the *langue* (or the game itself) is needed to describe it.²² For perhaps the first time, language began to be studied apart from its purpose (communication) and words apart from their definitions.

The bond between signifier and signified is said to be arbitrary, like a particular chess piece in relation to the actual playing of the game. A shorter wood knight, representing the signifier, may be substituted for a lost ivory knight with no change in the game play. The value of a knight is due to the system and its internal rules. Apart from the game board a chess piece has no value, but in the game system it does, like the signifier. Saussure remarks: “but if I decrease or increase the number of chessmen, this change has a profound effect on the ‘grammar’ of the game.”²³ This is what is meant by saying that the signifier is arbitrary in the *langue*: even a scuffed quarter could represent the lost knight in a dire situation.

Saussure held that thought and language (the *langue*, but not *parole*) are mutually interdependent, meaning that ideas are not formed prior to or outside of the linguistic structure.²⁴ A speaker does not use language like a tool or instrument; if thought is inseparably linked to language, one is trapped inside the game. One is stuck within society’s version of the language game in his speech and thought. An individual must speak and think according to his society’s specific *langue* or instance of the language game.²⁵ In the synchronic view, each real spoken language at a particular time is a separate ‘game,’ constituted by the sum of the relations in the *langue*.²⁶ In splitting the *langue* and *parole*, the synchronic ‘games’ of *langue* are seen to have no diachronic relation—all language games are abstracted from actual speech and any historical continuity. Synchronically, there is only a series of unrelated ‘games,’ each one is individually a *langue* or self-sufficient system. Synchronic study is a purely ahistorical abstraction. In it

²¹Saussure, 107.

²²Harris, 24-25.

²³Saussure, 22-23; Harris, 24-25.

²⁴Harris, 29-30.

²⁵Saussure’s thought was geared toward seeing the *langue* as a product of society as a whole, though one can easily and radically extend the analogy to say that every individual’s *langue* is an unrelated language game. This extension becomes key for later thinkers.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 65.

language games are not genetically related, though historically they appear to be. One can sense the strong attack on the diachronic study of language Saussure made, which parallels the later movement of acceptable research methodology from an evolutionary account to describing relationships within the timeless web of a system.²⁷

2 Literary Theory

Modern literary theory began in Russia around the time of the Bolshevik revolution (1917). After the publication of his *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure's influence was felt in Russian literary circles and manifested by a literary interest in linguistics.²⁸ Starting with the Russian formalists, there was a conscious effort in literary studies to make literary criticism less subjective and more scientific. The general focus of literary studies moved from the interpretation of specific literature to its form, hence the derogatory label 'formalist.' The dominant question was no longer, 'is this good literature,' but 'what makes literature literature.'

"Formalism was essentially the application of linguistics to the study of literature."²⁹ Literary studies shifted from looking at a text's surface qualities to how language functions. This represented a move much like Saussure's shift from the study of superficial *parole* to the embedded *langue*. To some extent, the content or reference of the work was bracketed out, so that literature was not seen as practical, but self-referential and autonomous.³⁰ A corollary of this was a deepening mistrust of history and origins in interpretation, including the author's background, environment, and purposes in writing. Literary critics became critical of their traditional task of dealing only with 'literature,' which implies a subjective delineation of literature from non-literature. No longer did literary critics want to describe and appreciate great art, they sought to uncover how words come to mean. Differing literary movements dealt with these philosophical

²⁷In other words, the question became which model constitutes respectable academic knowledge: the evolutionary model which is interested in origins and genetic relationships, or the systemic model which ahistorically describes the complex interlocking network of relationships. These two paradigms are best labeled diachronic and synchronic. *Ibid.*, 87-89.

²⁸Eagleton, ix, 85.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 3.

³⁰This is similar to the linguistic focus on the signifier, to the exclusion of the signified. Edgar V. McKnight, *Meaning in Texts: The Historical Shaping of a Narrative Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 92.

questions in common fashion, as they became increasingly ahistorical in stance and synchronic in method.

2.1 Russian Formalism

The emerging interest in synchronic linguistics provoked radical Russian artists to analyze literature in new ways. Russian critics deemphasized the author's significance and the meaning of a work. The result was that the literary form itself became paramount. The slogan of the Russian formalist movement was that "the device is the only hero of literature."³¹ They claimed that the devices of a literary work make language 'strange,' so that literature draws attention to itself in comparison to everyday conversation.³² Their theory was that language was made literary by talking about itself, by being self-referential. An example of a literary device worthy of study by a Russian formalist is the difference between the plot, the order in which story events are presented to the reader, and the story, the order in which events chronologically occur in the text's internal world.³³ In stressing the autonomy of the literary work, they claimed that it was the context the work was read in, rather than the work itself, that made it literary.

The formalists, using Saussurean concepts, said that literature is contextual; there is no such thing as pure 'literature.' Only in the right context would a text be appreciated as literature. Literature is a language that is differentially related to other language. Its 'strangeness' or literary quality is established in opposition to other kinds of 'normal' writing and speech to make it literature.³⁴

In 1928 the Russian formalist Vladimir Propp came out with an influential book, *Morphology of the Folk Tale*. In this study he analyzed approximately one hundred folktales and found universal common denominators in them, including seven 'spheres of action' and thirty one functions. He found that regardless of the characters in the tales, they performed only one of thirty one possible functions or actions, such as leaving home or receiving information about a

³¹Culler, 122.

³²Eagleton, 2-3.

³³Ibid., 91.

³⁴Ibid., 5.

victim. The seven spheres of action are equivalent to different types of characters, for example: villain, helper, or princess. In this way, all folktales were reduced to a mathematical sequence. Stories with disparate content were shown to be structurally similar. This text would later be influential for the structuralist study of narrative and is considered a seminal text in literary studies.³⁵

Formalism would not extend much beyond the 1920's, though one figure carried its influence far beyond Russia: Roman Jakobson. Jakobson was a linguist who propagated Saussure's ideas extensively. He can be considered the evangelist of Saussure's theory, because it is largely due to his efforts that the name Saussure is important today. After leaving Stalinist Russia, he carried Saussure's theory into new territories and movements.³⁶

2.2 American New Criticism

Independent of Russian literary pioneers, American literary critics imbued with a scientific spirit also embraced a formalist approach. The American literary movement of 'new criticism' arose in the 1930's and became the dominant method of criticism in the 1940's and 1950's.³⁷ The author and critic T. S. Eliot was associated with this movement.³⁸ Like the Russian critics previously, the new critics sought to ground literary criticism on objective norms. They were tired of subjective "value judgments," and wanted to evaluate literature by "a criterion of rational coherence."³⁹ New criticism found its values within the form of the text itself, in coherency, resolution, and unity—not subjective values outside the text, like morality, beauty, or feelings. Paradox, conflict, and irony were the paramount textual devices explored in new criticism.⁴⁰

³⁵Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott, rev. and ed. Louis A. Wagner, 2nd ed. (Austin: University of Texas, 1968); McKnight, *Meaning in Texts*, 92, 155-158.

³⁶In 1920 Jakobson left Russia and was a founder of Czech structuralism. Later, he was key in the rise of post-World War II structuralism. He was also influential for communication theory. Cf. section 2.3 (page 12) and footnote 160 (page 37). Eagleton, 2, 85.

³⁷American new criticism is to be distinguished from French new criticism of the 1960's which was more radical. McKnight, *Meaning in Texts*, 151-153.

³⁸Eagleton, 39-40.

³⁹Philip D. Wiener, ed., "Criticism, Literary," in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), 603.

⁴⁰Hans Frei, "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does it Stretch or Will it Break?" in *The Bible and Narrative Tradition*, 36-77, ed. Frank McConnell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 44.

New criticism broke with the prevailing emphasis on the historical aspect of a work. The new critics disagreed with the established assumption that the author's life and times were of great importance in interpreting a work. They proposed the 'intentional fallacy,' which said that the intentions of the author are irrelevant to understanding the work itself. On the other side, the 'affective fallacy' said that the reader's response to a work was not a factor either. By bracketing off questions that dealt with the author and reader in the study of a work, new critics objectified literature—usually poetry, which is not a particularly historical genre.⁴¹ “The American new critics found fault with the historian of literature because of the desecration of the purely literary by a reduction of literature to biography, history, and human events—to facts of the environment.”⁴² The way in which these critics reacted strongly against the historical cast of scholarship, one is reminded of Saussure's own vigorous reaction.

“New Criticism treated poems as aesthetic objects,” or autonomous works to be judged by “intrinsic criteria such as coherence, integrity, equilibrium, complexity and the relationships of the parts of the work to each other and to the work as a whole.”⁴³ New critics were formalist because they saw meaning as “indissolubly bonded with form,” and not something to be extracted from it.⁴⁴

‘Close reading’ is a technical term describing the new critical method of reading a work. It means to pay attention to the text itself, to the “words on the page,” not their historical context.⁴⁵ A literary work was assumed to be a self-sufficient object of study, a unified whole or “organic unity.”⁴⁶ New criticism offered freedom from the baggage of questionable historical information, by offering an engaging and fresh “line-by-line, sometimes word-by-word analysis.”⁴⁷ ‘Close reading’ was more practical and accessible than the methods of the Russian formalists or their later structuralist descendants.

⁴¹James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 22-23.

⁴²McKnight, *Meaning in Texts*, 153.

⁴³Culler, 122; Elizabeth Struthers Malbon and Edgar V. McKnight, introduction to *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 16.

⁴⁴Resseguie, 23.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 22.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 11.

The movement of new criticism is essential for understanding narrative criticism. Many of the new critical emphases, including the ‘intentional fallacy,’ ‘close reading’, and the anti-historical attitude, were taken up wholesale by the first narrative critics. Yet they are different. First, because there is no direct historical connection. New criticism starting fading in the late 1950’s, while narrative criticism does not begin to emerge until right before 1980. Secondly, while narrative criticism borrows heavily from new criticism, it developed within biblical studies, not in secular literary circles.

Despite the lack of direct influence, narrative criticism is heavily indebted to new critical thought. Geography was an important link. Narrative criticism, like new criticism, developed in America. Many of the new critical ideas were inherited by narrative critics through the lens of later literary theories.⁴⁸ Before narrative criticism itself can be discussed, other literary movements must first be examined.

2.3 Structuralism

The peripatetic Roman Jakobson moved to America during World War II. With Jakobson’s help, Saussure’s ideas finally come to academic fruition in a full-blooded structuralism.⁴⁹

In collaboration with Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jakobson helped Saussure’s work become an intellectual fad. Lévi-Strauss, born in 1908, was an anthropologist who studied undeveloped tribal cultures and their behaviors. By 1945 he reasoned that most practices of society had an underlying structure behind them. Saussure’s influence should be obvious in Lévi-Strauss when he says that “terms never have any intrinsic significance,” instead “their meaning is one of ‘position.’”⁵⁰ Like Saussure’s chess game, the rules invest the societal practices with value. The synchronic approach of structuralism was applied far beyond linguistics to a range of cultural facts. Lévi-

⁴⁸Joel B. Green and Max Turner, “New Testament Commentary and Systematic Theology: Strangers or Friends?” in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology*, 1-22 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 7.

⁴⁹In contrast to the semi-structuralist ideas of the formalists (like Propp) and later Czech structuralism, this structuralism fully applied Saussure’s linguistic theory to a wide range of cultural facts, not just literature. McKnight, *Meaning in Texts*, 126.

⁵⁰Quoted in: Dan O. Via, Jr., *Kerygma and Comedy in the New Testament: A Structuralist Approach to Hermeneutic* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 10.

Strauss proposed to account for economics, art, myth, and religion with the structural method of linguistics—starting nothing less than a synchronic revolution in the social sciences.⁵¹

In essence, structuralism “is an attempt to apply [Saussure’s] linguistic theory to objects and activities other than language itself.”⁵² Diverse entities, such as a “myth, wrestling match, system of tribal kinship, restaurant menu, or oil painting,” were studied by academic structuralists. In structuralism these are studied synchronically to find the underlying differential system (the equivalent of the *langue*), disregarding any historical factors or extrinsic meanings. A text’s structure is not on the surface, neither is it the meaning or table of contents of a work. “Structure properly speaking is the hidden or underlying configuration that can offer some explanation for the more or less visible or obvious pattern in the text.”⁵³ A work’s meaning is not found in the author’s intention or historical circumstances, but “beside it, at its limits, at the point where the text is joined to its structure.”⁵⁴ No longer does a text mean what the words say, because the structure (*langue*) itself is said to be underneath or behind the text, unconsciously motivating the words (the tangible *parole*). The ‘cause’ of a text is the deep structures of the author’s societal *langue*, not in the intentions or thoughts he had when he wrote the words.

Myth is where Lévi-Strauss made his mark. In analyzing ancient myths, he found ‘binary oppositions’ which supposedly reflected man’s mental structure. Heaven and earth, man and woman, land and water, are examples of binary oppositions in myths. Myths were important to Lévi-Strauss because they are not consciously made-up stories, but unconsciously reflect a deeper structure within man.⁵⁵

What does Lévi-Strauss have to do with narrative criticism? A myth is a narrative. On the secular front, Lévi-Strauss highlighted the centrality of stories and promoted the idea that they represent something deeper than the superficial fiction they appear to be. The roots of narratology, the science of narrative, and academic interest in narrative, stem from Lévi-Strauss’ nascent structuralism. Scholars searched for “narrative competence,” or the narrative *langue*

⁵¹McKnight, *Meaning in Texts*, 126.

⁵²Eagleton, 84.

⁵³Via, *Kerygma and Comedy*, 7.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵McKnight, *Meaning in Texts*, 126.

embedded in the human mind, just as linguists searched for the linguistic *langue*.⁵⁶ The synchronic approach of structuralism allowed scholars to find deep significance in things without clear historical value or roots.⁵⁷

Due to Lévi-Strauss' ground-breaking work, structuralism became "the intellectual fashion in the Paris of the 1960s."⁵⁸ A key player in later, more radical French structuralism was Roland Barthes, a French professor of semiology (the discipline Saussure forecasted), who was part literary critic and part cultural analyst.⁵⁹ He accepted most of the assumptions of structuralism, but he did not have the scientific objectivity of earlier structuralists. A revolutionary spirit pulses in Barthes' thought. He was prominent in 1960's French new criticism.

In the turbulent year of 1968, Roland Barthes published an essay entitled "The Death of the Author."⁶⁰ This work disseminates an idea similar to the 'intentional fallacy' of new criticism, though he turned it into a literary war cry.⁶¹ For Barthes, "there is no objective text, no 'neutral' or 'innocent' position from which to read the text."⁶² Barthes viciously divided the signifier and signified. In the author's wake, the reader takes on a new positive role in reading. "Barthes' position is an assertion of the human right to create meaning and a rejection of the view that such meaning lies ready-made."⁶³ He emphasized the difference between the author and the reader, that synchronically they are using different *langues* or language games. In Saussure's terminology, he placed the signified clearly in the reader's mind, so that meaning is not linked to the author's signifiers.⁶⁴ The aim to eliminate subjective literary values found a paradoxical end: there are no objective or absolute positions from which to read a text.⁶⁵

⁵⁶This can be seen as a reaction against the scientific, factual, and logical mindset which came to be seen as unnatural. In contrast man was 'preprogrammed' for narratives according to the narratologists. Culler, 82-84.

⁵⁷Mythical is precisely how these scholars viewed the Christian Scriptures. McKnight, *Meaning in Texts*, 133.

⁵⁸Via, *Kerygma and Comedy*, 1.

⁵⁹Barthes designated himself with this new title.

⁶⁰in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, 142-148 (Fontana Press, 1977; new ed., 1993).

⁶¹Belsey, 18-19.

⁶²McKnight, *Meaning in Texts*, 153.

⁶³Ibid., 153-54.

⁶⁴Reading is then like a picnic: the author brings the words and the reader the meaning. Saussure would find this idea strange. Though he separated the word for linguistic study, he insisted that the signifier and signified were like two sides of a sheet of paper—not to be divided. "The linguistic entity exists only through the associating of the signifier with the signified. Whenever only one element is retained, the entity vanishes; instead of a concrete object we are faced with a mere abstraction." Saussure, 102-03.

⁶⁵McKnight, *Meaning in Texts*, 153-54.

The newly introduced role of the reader as meaning producer led to reader-response criticism in biblical studies. It is this innovation and twist, applied to the new critical methodology, that decisively shapes narrative criticism.⁶⁶

2.4 Post-Structuralism

The later work of Barthes started with the general principles of structuralism, that meaning is differential and signifiers are cultural products. However, he and other structuralists began to despair of actually finding the underlying structure. They denied that there is an appropriate metalanguage above language to describe the *langue*. Though they retained other aspects of Saussure's thinking, the controlled chess game of language morphed into a rowdy free-for-all, where every player plays by his own self-determined rules. The focus of these later structuralists shifted to discourse, language as it is spoken, though from the perspective that the arbitrary nature of language is unconsciously influenced by power-asserting ideology. As this current of thought reached America in the 1970's, it was called post-structuralism because it had discarded the scientific pretenses of previous structuralism.⁶⁷

Without confidence in a *langue* to anchor language, what happens? Enter Jacques Derrida, who began writing in the late 1960's. He carried Barthes' thought to new extremes. For him, the signifier and signified are completely disassociated—"there is no one-to-one correspondence between them."⁶⁸ As for Saussure, language elements are without an inherently positive content. Signifiers only have value differentially. Derrida seized this idea and made it central.

He saw signs as referring to "what is absent, so in a sense meanings are absent too."⁶⁹ Meaning is entirely contextual; signifiers never match up with signifieds in quite the same way. The

⁶⁶Green and Turner, "New Testament Commentary and Systematic Theology," 7.

⁶⁷In a 1967 article entitled "From Science to Literature," in *Times Literary Supplement*, Barthes wrote that structuralism must "call into question the very language by which it knows language." Quoted in: N. Katherine Hayles, *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), xiii. Post-structuralism went beyond denying the existence of a metalanguage, it implied the inability to access any object apart from language. Eagleton, 100; Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*, 2nd ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 10.

⁶⁸Sarup, 33.

⁶⁹Ibid., 33.

signified is said to actually be another signifier.⁷⁰ If signifieds become signifiers, the signification process never ends. Signifiers ultimately only refer to themselves in an infinite, differential chain. Meaning is unstable and cannot be pinned down in this configuration, because signifiers are always floating above signifieds. A text's meaning changes more quickly than the weather or one's mood.⁷¹ Context determines meaning and no context is ever the same, so meaning is not static but depends on each instance of the language game one is playing.⁷² Saussure's initial proposal for a new linguistic paradigm was turned into a new way of looking at everything by Derrida and the post-structuralists. This structuralism was not out to neutrally describe structure, but sought to actively subvert order within language.

Derrida is best known for his way of unraveling texts, called deconstruction. This 'event' of literary criticism begins by examining a minor point of the text and showing how language itself destructs or undermines the work's own argument. Since all signifiers are related differentially, every signifier contains a 'trace' of what it is not—the very thing it depends on for value.⁷³ Drawing on Lévi-Strauss' 'binary oppositions,' Derrida said that man always privileges one signifier over another. The dominant binary partner contains a trace of the 'oppressed' signifier, because ultimately it depends on it for value in the linguistic system.⁷⁴ It is the reader's job to undue and demote the unduly privileged signifier. Reading became a "violent act of mastery over the text."⁷⁵

⁷⁰A common object lesson for post-structuralists is the dictionary. One looks up a signifier, and finds more signifiers, which lead to even more signifiers. In this view words do not have static meaning. Signifieds then fluctuate in the fragile web of signifiers. One writer says that dictionaries "were always, first and foremost commodities, manufactured to be sold in the market place, and so more akin to toasters and CD-players than to judges or schoolmasters." Notice the severe distrust of the 'authority figure' of dictionaries, which are primarily "ideological texts," with a conservative, power-maintaining agenda. David J. A. Clines, "The Postmodern Adventure in Biblical Studies," in *Auguries: The Jubilee Volume of the Sheffield Department of Biblical Studies*, 276-93, eds. David Clines and Philip R. Davies (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 282.

⁷¹Sarup, 33.

⁷²Grenz, 144-145.

⁷³The technical term 'trace' is defined as, "the residue of the *signifier* of the excluded, differentiating term which constitutes the only source of its meaning." Belsey, 114.

⁷⁴Saussure's thought has seemingly merged with Marx's oppressive ideology and Freud's unconscious to create an entirely new theory.

⁷⁵Grenz, 150. Derrida's work *Of Grammatology* is a "deconstruction of Saussure," using his terminology and concepts, but undermining the stability of language and meaning. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976). Craig G. Bartholomew, "Before Babel and After Pentecost: Language, Literature, and Biblical Interpretation," in *After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation*, 131-70, eds. Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene, and Karl Moller (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 141.

Though this sounds quite abstract, every reader should be familiar with one instance of literary deconstruction in popular culture. Feminist deconstructive theory seeks to undue the man/woman binary opposition. This plays itself out in gender inclusive language. To use ‘he’ as a gender neutral pronoun is declared to be an oppressive power-play or misogynistic ploy. For example: ‘A reader has text. *He* reads the text.’ Contrary to traditional English, post-structuralist feminists do not see the word ‘he’ as neutral, so they seek to undue this assertion of power. It might be translated: ‘A reader has a text. *She* reads the text.’ No change in meaning is expressed in the translated phrase, but the signifier, which implies a linguistic hierarchy, has been subverted. The signified, any generic male or female reader, has not been changed. Deconstructionists value the sub-conscious power of language which resides in the signifier, not in carefully articulated thought (the signified).

If one assumes ‘man’ has meaning only in reference to what he is not, then “woman is the opposite, the ‘other’ of man, defective man, assigned a chiefly negative value in relation to the male first principle.”⁷⁶ Some feminists believe that ‘he’ relies on and contains a trace of its binary opposite ‘she,’ which the word ‘he’ oppresses unfairly.⁷⁷ Words are not containers of meaning and are never neutral or objective in this new world of language games. The ultimate concern resides in the outward signifier, rather than any internal meaning.⁷⁸ In the post-structuralist differential system, elements are pitted against each other in a class struggle, signifying ultimately that language is at war with itself.⁷⁹ No longer is language naively thought of as an instrument which man controls or masters—it actually dominates him.

Can texts have meaning in destructive post-structuralist thought? Meaning is produced by the reader, but to speak of a text ‘containing’ meaning statically would not make sense. To say that a text ‘has’ meaning implies that there is one meaning which is independent of any reader.

⁷⁶This assumption pits man against woman as mortal enemies locked in a cosmic battle. Eagleton, 115.

⁷⁷Culler, 126.

⁷⁸Post-structuralist-inspired political correctness is not really about judging the moral content of speech. It seeks to undermine traditional evils or unfair binary oppositions. It is more about *how* something should not be said (the attention is on the signifiers), rather than *what* content one expresses (the signifieds which the signifiers refer to).

⁷⁹Christians who value biblical language and precedent have reason to disagree with the man/woman binary opposition: “So God created man in His own image; in the image of God he created him: male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27; All Bible passages quoted are from NKJV). In biblical thought man and woman are not two distinct species, but both are created by the one God as one mankind.

The preferred way to speak, apart from a reader, is that “a text consists in no more than the linguistic play of signifiers.”⁸⁰ A text has multiple or even infinite meanings in post-structuralist thought. It became problematical in post-structuralism to say that there are any normative rules or guidelines in language games.

We have traveled far from the idea that good literature should be praised for its admirable literary qualities. No longer is the author of a text determinative in deciding what it means. Not only does the reader have a role in making meaning, there is no meaning apart from him, only signifiers. With the residue of some of these more radical ideas, new criticism filtered into narrative criticism.

3 Historical Criticism

Narrative criticism is a form of synchronic study of the Bible. This literary method brackets off historical questions such as authorship, origin, and dating. It affirms the ‘intentional fallacy,’ though not the ‘affective fallacy,’ of new criticism. Literary criticism appeared quite late on the biblical scene, due to the dominance of the historical-critical method. A strictly historical study of the Scriptures thrived in ecclesiastical circles well after the evolutionary model had been discarded in the secular realm.

In religious studies the term ‘literary criticism’ before the 1970’s generally meant historical background information and investigation into the literary sources of Scripture. This is secular literary criticism as it was practiced in America before the rise of new criticism. As modern literary theory made its way into biblical studies, literary criticism began to mean an exclusively synchronic study of the Bible. Older historical-critical writings use the term ‘literary criticism’ in a strictly diachronic way, while now it means the opposite. These approaches are incompatible, in so far as they cannot be used together at the same time—so a tension exists between the old and new approaches. Despite their initial staunch antagonism to synchronic literary theory, historical-critical scholars have unconsciously inched in the direction of synchronic study through

⁸⁰Grenz, 146.

the evolution of their own methods. After the secular sphere saw a series of revolts against history, biblical critics began to dabble in synchronic study.

3.1 The Rise of the Historical-Critical Method

The Bible was viciously attacked from outside the church during man's self-proclaimed enlightenment of the 17th century. Its supernatural elements were perceived to be too difficult for 'modern man' to believe. Beginning late in the eighteenth century with Johann Semler, who is said to be the "father of historical-critical theology," the church began to listen to and borrow from the Bible's modernist critics.⁸¹ The traditional doctrine of inspiration was no longer useful for Semler. He explains: "The root of evil (in theology) is the interchangeable use of the terms Scripture and the Word of God."⁸² Except for a few conservative church bodies, the majority of Christianity embraced historical criticism. The story of historical criticism is the unending quest to locate a new authority to replace the Bible's lost authority, that which was previously accorded to the Holy Spirit.

What replaced the dogmatic approach to the Scriptures? History—though this in itself was not new. Christians have always considered the historical nature of Scripture important—both past and future events. The 'critical' aspect of historical criticism was the innovation. Reason was thought to be too much oppressed by the exterior authority of the inspired Bible. Therefore, it was up to man to decide which parts were really true.⁸³

The critical science of history used the biblical books as evidence to rationally determine the truth. Authoritative doctrine interfered with scientific objectivity and the pure light of reason. History as scientifically objective and verifiable facts became the goal of exegesis.⁸⁴

For the critical biblical scholar, objective historical knowledge was the goal, not what one

⁸¹Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method*, in *Guide to Biblical Scholarship: New Testament Guides*, ed. Dan O. Via, Jr. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 18-19.

⁸²His four volume work, *Abhandlung von freier Untersuchung des Kanon*, was published 1771-76 and has not been translated into English. Quoted in: Gerhard Maier, *The End of the Historical-Critical Method*, trans. Edwin W. Leverenz and Rudolph F. Norden (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1977; reprint Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 15, 104.

⁸³Maier, 12-13; A. K. M. Adam, *What is Postmodern Biblical Criticism?* in *Guide to Biblical Scholarship: New Testament Guides*, ed. Dan O. Via, Jr. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 3.

⁸⁴Krentz, 11.

source claimed to present as history. The Bible became one set of sources among many. All sources, because none are inherently more authoritative, became evidence for the history of early Christianity and its systematic reconstruction.⁸⁵ “The historian does not accept the authority of his witnesses; rather he confers authority upon them, and he does this only after subjecting them to a rigorous and skeptical cross-examination.”⁸⁶ Objectivity to the historical critic means the primacy of reason and methodological doubt.

Without the guarantee of inspiration, there could be no doctrinal truths valid for all time—the historian’s truth was time-conditioned.⁸⁷ To understand the original meaning of religious texts, the historical gap had to be bridged through the specialized research of the scholar. Reading the Bible to find truth as an untrained layman became precarious—just as only a trained engineer should design a suspension bridge, it became potentially injurious to interpret God’s Word without the scientific methods of historical criticism. Truth in historical terms was no longer accessible to the general populace. Instead it was assumed that “appropriately educated experts have privileged authority to interpret texts whose historical setting is so remote from us as to be virtually unintelligible, and that these experts should conduct their inquiries without biases from their particular theological standpoints.”⁸⁸

What are the questions of historical criticism? Following the evolutionary model, the dominant questions are ones of origin: what causes led to Christianity’s development and the formulation of the Bible?⁸⁹ Technological advancements, scientific approaches, and the hubris they created, formed a condescending attitude towards the Bible. Historical criticism caused the Scriptures to be seen as from a historically distant world, completely different from the modern one. Therefore, the Scriptures became “in a real sense, foreign documents.”⁹⁰

⁸⁵Ibid., 33-37.

⁸⁶Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), 107.

⁸⁷Joel B. Green, “Scripture and Theology: Uniting the Two So Long Divided,” in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology*, 23-43, eds. Joel B. Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 29-30.

⁸⁸Adam, 4-5.

⁸⁹Euan Cameron, *Interpreting Christian History: The Challenge of the Church’s Past* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 180; Bernard C. Lategan and William S. Vorster, *Text and Reality: Aspects of Reference in Biblical Texts* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 18.

⁹⁰Krentz, v.

Although there has generally been much scholarly agreement since Semler in the substance of historical-critical methodology, its results have widely varied without any real consensus among scholars. Different periods of biblical historical criticism show different interests and preoccupations. Eventually though, it moved closer to synchronic literary criticism. After a brief sketch of early historical criticism, redaction criticism, which has significant connections to literary criticism, will be discussed.

3.2 Source and Form Criticism

Source criticism in the nineteenth century led scholars to search for the origins of biblical texts, especially the gospels. Much effort was spent trying to figure out which synoptic gospel was written first and how it influenced the others. This is called the ‘synoptic problem.’ The majority opinion was that Mark was the least developed and therefore the earliest. Eventually this first gospel ‘evolved’ into Matthew and Luke with help from various hypothetical sources, such as the proposed Q source. Because Mark was thought to be older, it was assumed that it might be more accurate, since its origin was closer to Jesus’ day. The underlying motivation of historical-critical study was to obtain a scientific basis for Jesus’ life—not the Jesus of literal Scripture, but the ‘historical Jesus’ obtained from objective and unbiased research.⁹¹

By the beginning of the twentieth century there was widespread skepticism among theologians as to whether the gospels were truly histories of Jesus. The critical approach which distrusted the plain words of Scripture ruled out any positive knowledge of events so long ago. Instead of the gospels relating directly back to the ‘historical Jesus,’ it was posited that these documents tell more about the situation they arose out of, their environment or *Sitz im Leben*. Massive doubt concerning the synoptics’ historical character meant that scholars were a step removed from the historical Jesus. The gospels were produced, it was assumed, a generation or so after Jesus. How could these critics go beyond Mark and even Q?⁹²

⁹¹Janice Chapel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore, “Introduction: The Lives of Mark,” in *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, 1-22 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), 5-6; Edgar V. McKnight, *What is Form Criticism?* in *Guide to Biblical Scholarship: New Testament Guides*, ed. Dan O. Via, Jr. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 4-6.

⁹²McKnight, *What is Form Criticism?*, 7-10.

The next stage of historical criticism is known as form criticism. In the earliest written sources, scholars conducted excavations for even earlier oral traditions. Prior to being written and collected in a source, individual units of tradition were said to have their own history and context. Form criticism atomized and dissected the Scriptures in the search for pre-written, oral sources.⁹³

Rudolf Bultmann and others pioneered the form critical approach after World War I. The gospels were subdivided into forms or genres, such as sayings of Jesus, legends, and miracles. One conclusion important to later historical-critical approaches is the emphasis on the parables, which were said to be the earliest and most reliable tradition reflecting Jesus' actual words. Form criticism moved away from the content of the gospels (Jesus' life), to explorations of their *Sitz im Leben*.⁹⁴

3.3 Redaction Criticism

Despite the new focus of form criticism, it also reached a historical impasse. It was extended into redaction criticism by Bultmann's disciples after World War II. Without certainty regarding Jesus or the earliest oral sources, the focus shifted to the editor or redactor of each gospel as the church has it in its final form. The redactor was seen as more than just a collector of sources, he edited them in accordance with his specific theological concerns. Redaction criticism took a second step away from the historical Jesus, to the redactor and his unique environment.⁹⁵

Redaction criticism built on form and source criticism. Without knowledge of what the editor

⁹³Ibid., 10-11.

⁹⁴John R. Donahue, "Redaction Criticism: Has the *Hauptstrasse* Become a *Sackgasse*?" in *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament*, 27-57, eds. Elizabeth Struthers Malbon and Edgar V. McKnight (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 45; McKnight, *What is Form Criticism?*, 25-56; Lategan and Vorster, 58.

⁹⁵An early redaction critic writes: "If Joachim Jermias differentiates the 'first situation-in-life' located in the unique situation of Jesus' activity, from the 'second situation-in-life' mediated by the situation of the primitive church (which form history [i.e. criticism] seeks to ascertain), we are dealing here with the 'third situation-in-life.' With this approach, the question as to what really happened is excluded from the outset. We rather inquire how the evangelists describe what happened. The question as to what really occurred is of interest only to the degree it relates to the situation of the primitive community in which the Gospels arose." Willi Marxsen, *Mark the Evangelist: Studies on the Redaction History of the Gospel*, trans. James Boyce, Donald Juel, and William Poehlmann (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969), 23-24; Norman Perrin, *What is Redaction Criticism?* in *Guide to Biblical Scholarship: New Testament Guides*, ed. Dan O. Via, Jr. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 1; Via, *Kerygma and Comedy*, 3.

took from his sources, it is impossible to say which material was redacted for what purposes. This means that the gospels are not really historical documents, since they were edited to fit a later context. Redaction scholars found contradictions or differences in the synoptic gospels useful for explaining what distinctive theologies and historical environments lay behind them. The Scriptures are more theologically motivated products of the church, than historical or factual documents, in redaction criticism.⁹⁶

Hans Conzelmann, an early redaction critic, promoted St. Luke as less of a historian than a “self-conscious theologian.”⁹⁷ To an orthodox believer this may sound strange—that history and theology are mutually exclusive. Yet redaction criticism builds on form criticism, which has distanced even the gospel sources from Jesus’ life.⁹⁸ If Luke was a redactor with express theological purposes, then he cannot also be trying to relate what happened in Jesus’ life and ministry. Redaction criticism holds that theological concerns are evident *only* in the places where the editor changed or modified his received and presumably historical sources. In this scheme editorial (i.e. theological) activity becomes falsifying in the historical sense, so that the redactor “is in no way motivated by a desire to exercise historical accuracy.”⁹⁹

Redaction criticism led to differing Lukan, Markan, Johannine, and Matthean theologies. Each gospel was written for a different community and its individual theological needs.¹⁰⁰ While this sounds closer to the traditional dogmatic view of one author (the Holy Spirit), it is assumed that these theologies are different, making one unified and normative theology impossible.

Another Bultmann disciple, Günther Bornkamm, explained that Matthew the redactor is “not only a hander-on of the narrative, but also its oldest exegete, and in fact the first to interpret the journey of the disciples with Jesus in the storm and the stilling of the storm with reference to discipleship, and that means with reference to the little ship of the church.”¹⁰¹ The gospels

⁹⁶Perrin, 7-9.

⁹⁷Ibid., 29. As an author and theologian, “when [Luke] has discovered the redemptive significance of an event, he can go on to deduce from it the ‘correct’ chronology, which means, among other things, that he can begin to modify Mark.” Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St Luke*, trans. Geoffrey Buswell (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 33.

⁹⁸“We must make it plain, however, that our aim is to elucidate Luke’s work in its present form, not to enquire into possible sources or into the historical facts which provide the material.” Conzelmann, 9.

⁹⁹Perrin, 29.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 31.

¹⁰¹Quoted in: Ibid., 26.

have become seen as primary theological interpretations, with all underlying references stopping at the redactor's context. Since the biblical sources were supposedly invested with theological significance by a much later redactor, redaction interpretation does not ask what Jesus meant by his sayings and actions. Redaction criticism does not allow movement beyond the editor's *Sitz im Leben* to a theology based on Jesus or historical events. Theology became tied to a particular evangelist's thinking or perspective, with no authoritative or historical anchor.

One famous example comes from Willi Marxsen, who coined the German word *Redaktionsgeschichte*, which is translated 'redaction criticism.' He described John the Baptist in Mark's theological perspective.

The wilderness is not a geographical location. It is not permissible to reflect as to where it could lie. This reference is not intended to give a location for the work of the Baptist . . . rather "in the wilderness" qualifies the Baptist as the one who fulfills Old Testament prophecy. It might almost be said: The Baptist would even be the one who came "in the desert," even if in his whole life he had never once been anywhere near the desert. . . . we must assert that Mark uses a datum which in itself is geographical but with theological intent.¹⁰²

Marxsen finds weighty theological significance in the biblical text at the cost of undermining the historical basis of the gospel, as evidenced in John the Baptist's case. A secular historian faulted Marxsen's procedure as ahistorical because "what is historically false in the gospels may be nevertheless theologically significant."¹⁰³

Redaction criticism itself evolved. One redactional approach called composition criticism carried redaction criticism further by eschewing the theological significance of solitary pericopes to discern the redactor's "unity of theological perspective" throughout the gospel.¹⁰⁴ In these advanced redaction studies the evangelist is considered more of an author, not simply a cut-and-paste redactor. Each gospel presents a unified theology as the redactor invested the individual

¹⁰²Marxsen, 37-38.

¹⁰³Quoted in: Harold Bult, "Redaction Criticism and its Implications" (Fort Wayne: faculty study paper, 1973), 32. Is redaction criticism less scholarly? No, it brackets out questions of historical accuracy "quite deliberately, in order to be able first of all to grasp fully the evangelists' purpose in producing their account and what they intended to impart." That this deliberate ignoring of history occurs within *historical* criticism is significant. Perrin, 33, 36; Krentz, 79.

¹⁰⁴Mark Alan Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?* in *Guide to Biblical Scholarship: New Testament Guides*, ed. Dan O. Via, Jr. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990), 111.

units of tradition with consistent symbolic meaning. At this point it is possible to speak of gospel-wide “themes or motifs,” giving the evangelist new-found authorial status.¹⁰⁵

Geographically, redaction criticism mutated differently. In Germany, where it originated under Bultmann’s students, it remained more historically oriented (with concern for the original environment). America proved more fertile ground for its continued transformation. Here redaction criticism became more literary and less historical. Some American biblical critics who began doing redaction studies in the 1960’s and 1970’s, became true narrative critics by the 1980’s.¹⁰⁶

4 A Paradigm Shift

Redaction criticism, especially in its later stages, represents an important turning point in modern biblical interpretation. Historical critics suddenly found themselves interested in ahistorical matters, such as what theological significance the biblical texts had for a second-generation Christian community. The ascendancy of redaction criticism was crucial for the acceptance of synchronic literary criticism. Other factors, such as new theological perspectives, philosophy, and literary theory also influenced the first biblical critics who experimented with literary approaches.

4.1 The *New Hermeneutic*

While many of Bultmann’s disciples concentrated on developing redaction criticism, other students of his were going in different directions, though with similar motivations. The theology of Rudolf Bultmann is a good starting point to introduce the new directions of theological thought in Post-World War II theology. In contrast to most theologians of his day, he was not content with simply a historical analysis of Scripture. His own form criticism had cast doubt on the ability of Scripture to say anything meaningful about the historical Jesus. Because this was not theological in his mind, he wanted to address present Christians and their concerns in a way that historical criticism could never do. The dominant theological concern was no longer to un-

¹⁰⁵Donahue, 31-32.

¹⁰⁶One prominent example is Jack Dean Kingsbury, who left all historical concerns for narrative criticism. *Ibid.*, 33-35.

cover past history, but to overcome the historical gap by making biblical meaning contemporary. Except for those few who denied historical-critical methodology, the basic problem to occupy theologians for the remainder of the century was how to relate modern faith to the historical Jesus.

Bultmann's innovative program of demythologizing sought to overcome the negative results of historical criticism. For him the Bible was entirely mythical, which meant that its understanding of the world was not applicable to scientifically-advanced 'modern man.'¹⁰⁷ The gospel would only become meaningful after it was translated from its mythical worldview. Borrowing from existential philosophy, he asserted that Scripture was not about facts of history or doctrine but affirming an authentic existence in the world.¹⁰⁸ The myths and history of the Bible are not meaningful today, but philosophically they still have something to offer—a self-understanding.¹⁰⁹

Two of Bultmann's disciples offered a different attempt to bridge the historical gap. Unlike their teacher's demythologizing, Ernst Fuchs and Gerhard Ebling's program achieved moderate acceptance.¹¹⁰ Labeled the *new hermeneutic*, it was an effort to make the Bible relevant to 'modern man.' Still existentially based, these two theologians focused on language as the key to the hermeneutical problem of modern faith and a time-conditioned truth. Hermeneutic does not mean a collection of interpretive rules, but a philosophy or "theory of understanding" that

¹⁰⁷In his thought, the Bible speaks in myth embodying an ancient worldview that has nothing to offer 'modern man.' He explains: "The whole conception of the world which is presupposed in the preaching of Jesus as in the New Testament generally is mythological; i.e. the conception of the world as being structured in three stories, heaven, earth and hell; the conception of the intervention of supernatural powers in the course of events and the conception of miracles, especially the conception of the intervention of supernatural powers in the inner life of the soul, the conception that men can be tempted and corrupted by the devil and possessed by evil spirits." He asks rhetorically: why should man make the intellectual sacrifice necessary to believe in conceptions "of eschatology, of redeemer and of redemption, . . . merely because such conceptions are suggested by the Bible?" Obviously, there is no room for the miracle of the incarnation of Christ in his thought. Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1958), 15, 17.

¹⁰⁸Existentialism is defined as, "the view that man has no essence or nature imposed on him, but that he constitutes himself by his free choices." William A. Beardslee, *Literary Criticism of the New Testament*, in *Guide to Biblical Scholarship: New Testament Guides*, ed. Dan O. Via, Jr. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 84.

¹⁰⁹Faith is not concerned with knowledge or historical facts in Bultmann's version of Christianity: "There is no difference between security built on good works and security built on objectifying knowledge. The man who desires to believe in God must know that he has nothing at his disposal on which to build his faith, that he is, so to speak in a vacuum." Objective knowledge and historical certainties are no better than hypocritical good works. Bultmann, 84; Cameron, 191-193; Paul J. Achtemeier, *An Introduction to the New Hermeneutic* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 55-59.

¹¹⁰All three used elements of the philosopher Martin Heidegger's thought.

bridges the historical gap of different contexts.¹¹¹ It is arguably more abstract than literary theory, since it borrows from the dense German philosopher Martin Heidegger.

Revelation in the so-called *new hermeneutic* is a present day event, not a past event which occurred in the writing of Scripture. The gospel is not about content, historical or dogmatic, but it is a ‘language-event’ that affects the hearer and changes the way he looks at the world. More than that though, since language conditions how man looks at the world, it actually changes or creates one’s ‘reality.’¹¹² Faith is not about believing something, but acquiring a “new self-understanding” or reality which the language-event imparts.¹¹³

According to Fuchs, Jesus’ parables provide the best context for the language-event. The primacy of parables is a link to form criticism’s insights. Heavily clothed in continental philosophy, it is hard to see the relation of the *new hermeneutic* to historic Christianity. In spite of existentialist language, they do speak of Christ. Faith in Him is seen as a radical giving up of all claims or grounds—including objective facts or history. Conveniently, considering the destructive results of historical criticism, it is considered faithless to have security based on the past.¹¹⁴ True faith in the *new hermeneutic* is a “void, a not-knowing.”¹¹⁵

The language-event is not about understanding or holding onto something. It is a world or reality that one enters, much like the self-contained game in Saussure’s analogy. “The player participates in this world, rather than simply observing it, by accepting its rules, its values, and its presuppositions.”¹¹⁶ There is no escaping language—one is trapped in the game until it is changed by the language-event.

As obtuse as the *new hermeneutic* is, it provided a rare escape from the historical problem. It spoke in a positive way of God’s Word and the Christian faith. This attempt to solve to the historical problem of faith was not universally accepted, though many began to recognize the

¹¹¹Anthony C. Thisleton, “The New Hermeneutic,” in *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics: Major Trends in Biblical Interpretation*, 78-110, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 82; Beardslee, 84.

¹¹²Achtemeier, 71, 82. Behind this is the view that objectivity is not possible, because language conditions and colors how the world is seen. This view is similar to later post-structuralism. Compare to this description of Heidegger’s thought: “The very concept of ‘reality,’ implying a coherent structure, is the result of the organizing capacity inherent in language.” Thisleton, 93-95, 104.

¹¹³Achtemeier, 67, 135.

¹¹⁴Thisleton, 83; Achtemeier, 109, 135.

¹¹⁵Harvey, 132.

¹¹⁶Thisleton, 86.

validity of the question. The *new hermeneutic* provided the impetus to go beyond basic historical criticism and formulate a coherent theology, without denying historical criticism and reverting to a precritical, dogmatic position.

4.2 The Decline of the Historical Model

The *new hermeneutic*, along with dialectical or neo-orthodox theology,¹¹⁷ moved away from historical criticism. This did not entail a reversal or denial of its methodology. It was simply the realization that historical-critical results are not in themselves useful or practical for Christians. It was actually pastoral concern that motivated theologians to overcome the negative, time-conditioned character of historical criticism's results.¹¹⁸ One scholar described the theology of the twentieth century, "as a series of salvage operations, attempts to show how one can still believe in Jesus Christ and not violate an ideal of intellectual integrity."¹¹⁹ The desire to move beyond historical criticism and its entirely negative and skeptical program was balanced by the deep-seated belief that the dismissal of historical criticism is intellectually unethical and academically dishonest. The *new hermeneutic* shows this tension well by refusing to ground faith at all.

Outside of faith and formal theology, the critical and systematic probe of biblical history did produce some positive results. It can claim to have written impressively detailed grammars, theological dictionaries, lexicons, and concordances. It also established the critical text of the Bible.¹²⁰ These show forth the original presuppositions of historical criticism. They display impeccably detailed and systematic scholarship. No sources concerning the early church have been left unturned by scholars.

None of these accomplishments, however, speak of an actual interpretation of the biblical text. In the latter part of the century, a disillusionment with diachronic research settled over theologians, because of historical criticism's "alienating" effect.¹²¹ This is clearly seen in "increasingly detailed and methodologically complex" historical-critical commentaries, which are

¹¹⁷Including Karl Barth. Cf. footnote 141 (page 33).

¹¹⁸Krentz, 73.

¹¹⁹Harvey, 104.

¹²⁰Krentz, 63.

¹²¹Lategan and Vorster, 75.

“so exhaustive that they are virtually inaccessible to all but the most well trained.”¹²² A 1991 review of a respected “quintessentially redaction-critical” commentary by a narrative critic illustrates this. Jack Dean Kingsbury lambasted the “encyclopedic proportions” of volume I of a commentary, because it had over 700 pages just on Matthew 1-7.¹²³ This honest reflection on the results of historical criticism came not because scholars thought that the presuppositions of historical criticism were unbiblical, but because its results were not matching the character of the Bible itself or the needs of Christendom. This “exhaustion of historical criticism in the late 1960’s and 1970’s” did not lead directly to narrative criticism, but to the first exegetical attempts at biblical literary study.¹²⁴ In the U.S. later redaction criticism led students to do a ‘close reading’ of biblical texts and experience a certain joy in discovering the distinctive emphases of each gospel.¹²⁵ No longer was it possible to take a pericope out of its wider literary context—redaction criticism made each pericope coherent only within its own gospel’s literary framework.¹²⁶

A paradigm shift was happening or at least desired by some biblical critics. In the nineteenth century historical criticism was viewed as liberating from restrictive dogma because it allowed an objective, scientific analysis of Scripture. Two hundred years later the roles were reversed, with historical critics occupying the ‘orthodox’ and ‘dogmatic’ position that the doctrinal theologians once did. History became the new dogma and scholasticism of the church. Given the underlying discontent with historicism, it is “not surprising that there [were] calls for a new reformation to free the scriptures once again, this time from the papacy of the scholar.”¹²⁷ What would fill the void of diachronic study? Synchronic approaches and eventually accessible story or narrative criticism.

¹²²Green and Turner, “New Testament Commentary and Systematic Theology,” 2.

¹²³A review of W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew. Volume I: Introduction and Commentary on Matthew I-VII* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988); Anderson and Moore, 11.

¹²⁴Malbon and McKnight, 16.

¹²⁵Redaction criticism dovetailed well with the newly introduced three year lectionary, with its literary focus on one synoptic gospel for an entire year. Donahue, 39.

¹²⁶Even parallel passages in the gospels claiming to speak of the same historical event were seen as having entirely different meanings, due to a later redactor’s editing. Ibid.

¹²⁷Maurice Wiles, “Scriptural Authority and Theological Construction: The Limitations of Narrative Interpretation,” in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation: Essays on the Occasion of the Sixty Fifth Birthday of Hans W. Frei*, 42-58, ed. Garrett Green (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 44; Powell, 86.

4.3 Biblical Literary Criticism

The first American biblical studies incorporating literary techniques were done in the mid-to-late 1960's. For the most part, they were a synthesis of secular literary theory and *new hermeneutic* theology. Amos N. Wilder, a poet and theologian, signaled a change with his book, *The Language of the Gospel: Early Christian Rhetoric*, which was published in 1964. Drawing attention to the parables as language-events through which reality comes, he borrowed from the *new hermeneutic*.¹²⁸

A couple years later, Robert Funk confessed in a similar venture that “Ernst Fuchs’ effort to grasp the parables as language-events is the underground spring which nourishes my own approach to the parables.”¹²⁹ The title of his 1966 volume reveals his influences: *Language, Hermeneutic, and Word of God: The Problem of Language in the New Testament and Contemporary Theology*. Funk addressed the “problem of language” and summarized the effects of historical criticism: “it has become problematical whether the Christian message can be addressed to contemporary man in meaningful terms.”¹³⁰ Borrowing from Fuchs, Funk explicitly countered the critical posture of historical study when he declared that the Word of God interprets man, not the other way around. Despite this reversal of stance, Semler’s distinction has still not been overcome; the words of the Bible are time-conditioned and not to be identified with the timeless word of God.¹³¹ Funk’s contribution to literary study was in line with the *new hermeneutic*.

One year later Dan O. Via approached the historical problem from a slightly different angle. In *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension*, Via starts by questioning whether the *Sitz im Leben* of the parables truly helps to understand them. In contrast to the heavy existentialist bent of Funk, Via sees the parables as “genuine works of art, real aesthetic objects,” having autonomy and “internal coherence.”¹³² Via drew on new criticism and its theory of literature. The theological dimension of Via’s thought is that all literature, including the Bible,

¹²⁸Robert W. Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic, and Word of God: The Problem of Language in the New Testament and Contemporary Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), ix, 124; Malbon and McKnight, 16.

¹²⁹Funk, 128.

¹³⁰Ibid., 6.

¹³¹Ibid., 11.

¹³²Dan O. Via, Jr., *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), ix, 25.

contains “a world view or understanding of existence.”¹³³ The practical American spirit was at work in simplifying difficult existentialist thought and combining it with the less intimidating literary program of new criticism.

What does faith look like in Via’s scheme? He clearly states that “the decision of faith in a sense is free of historical considerations,” though the believer will have to wrestle at some point with historical matters.¹³⁴ Following the path of Bultmann, faith is without content, it is a self-understanding or worldview. Via describes his position: “The parables confront man as a language event, calling him to decision and opening up the possibility of a new world—a real present, moving toward a real future, in which there is time to gain a unified existence under the gift and demand of God.”¹³⁵ The ‘world’ which the language-event opens became an emphasis also in narrative criticism.

The literary-critical approach in the late 60’s was still based on form and redaction criticism, hence the tendency to apply literary techniques only to individual units of tradition, usually the parables. Other literary approaches quickly came and went, before the holistic method of narrative study appeared. Structuralism made a brief appearance in biblical studies in the late 1970’s, though it never caught on. Following the lead of Saussure and Lévi-Strauss, structural exegetes sought synchronic meaning in the deep structures of the biblical text, not in its evident surface meaning. In self-conscious, synchronic fashion they excised any reference outside the text, including the question of how the work’s content relates to the real world. This marks the first attempt to provide a complete alternative to diachronic historical criticism.¹³⁶

Structural exegesis is radical, yet still in some sense scientific and text-based. The problem with it is the tendency to reduce a text to mathematical equations—structural exegesis is an alien in the historical-critical world. One of the few recognized structural studies is *Narrative Space and Mythic Meaning in Mark*, by Elizabeth Struthers Malbon. In this book all 288 spatial references in Mark are studied, not with historical or geographical concern, but to understand their “system

¹³³Ibid., 71.

¹³⁴Ibid., 185.

¹³⁵Ibid., 194.

¹³⁶Donahue, 43; Daniel Patte, *What is Structural Exegesis?* in *Guide to Biblical Scholarship: New Testament Guides*, ed. Dan O. Via, Jr. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 9-17.

of interrelations” in the narrative world.¹³⁷ She explored “the mythic pattern of opposition and mediation” between spaces such as the “Jewish homeland” and “foreign lands.”¹³⁸ Structuralism does not care what a text says, but seeks to reduce its elements to an underlying system, as if a text were solely the product of the unconscious structure (*langue*) in the author’s mind. Secular structuralism morphed quickly into post-structuralist forms, while biblical structuralism was almost over by the time it started.¹³⁹ Different forms of literary criticism would carry the synchronic day.

5 Narrative Criticism

The structuralist approach came and quickly went in the 1970’s. It is noteworthy not in itself but because it represented a reaction against the diachronic nature of biblical studies. A younger, more adventurous generation of American scholars were searching for a new synchronic method to apply to Scripture. The answer for some would come in seeing biblical books as narratives. Narrative was in the air; secular interest in narrative by structuralists such as Lévi-Strauss had made stories academically respectable.

5.1 The Rise of Narrative Criticism

It is easy to pinpoint the origin of interest in biblical narrative: 1974. Most every narrative critic and theologian acknowledges some debt to Hans Frei and his ground-breaking book, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*.¹⁴⁰ It is an odd book in that it is a historical account of philosophical and theological hermeneutical presuppositions without a single reference to a Bible passage. Unlike earlier literary critics, Frei completely dismissed the *new hermeneutic* with an offhand comment about “the contorted and to my mind unsuccessful efforts of certain phenomenologists

¹³⁷Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *Narrative Space and Mythic Meaning in Mark*, in *New Voices in Biblical Studies*, eds. Adela Yabro Collins and John J. Collins (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 1-2.

¹³⁸*Ibid.*, 13, 38-39.

¹³⁹David C. Greenwood, *Structuralism and the Biblical Text* (New York: Mouton, 1985), x.

¹⁴⁰Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

and philosophers of ‘Existence’ and ‘Being’ to tackle a similar dualism.”¹⁴¹ The ‘similar dualism’ is the one created by historical criticism, whose rise he documents.

Frei ambitiously documented the move from precritical exegesis to the ecclesiastical acceptance of historical criticism, though unreservedly critiquing the latter. He had little use for historical criticism and does not go out of his way to defend its validity as Bultmann, Fuchs, and Ebeling did. Frei opens his book by casting a longing eye at precritical exegesis in the “days before the rise of historical criticism in the eighteenth century which was usually strongly realistic, i.e. at once literal and historical.”¹⁴² Before scientific historicism and rationalism robbed exegesis of its power, people “envisioned the real world as formed by the sequence told by the biblical stories.”¹⁴³ He was enamored with the simplicity, clarity, and profundity that the biblical stories possessed for Christians in the precritical period.

What did Frei propose? A return to theological orthodoxy and a strong doctrine of inspiration? No. Instead he laid out a framework for reading the narratives in a ‘literal’ and precritical way, without the burden of dogma or history. He writes: “a realistic or history-like (though not necessarily historical) element is a feature, as obvious as it is important of many of the biblical narratives.”¹⁴⁴ Precritical exegetes “again and again emphasized the simplicity of style, the life-likeness of depiction, the lack of artificiality or heroic elevation in theme in such stories as the first three chapters of Genesis, the story of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac, and the synoptic gospels.”¹⁴⁵ To summarize, he saw biblical stories as representing reality closely (history-like) and believably (realistic), though they need not be totally historical or factual. Frei tried to safeguard the Bible from the skeptical acids of historical criticism by suggesting a fresh precritical-like, literal reading.

The Bible was put into the category of realistic fiction; Frei made the biblical form inseparable from its meaning. Although Frei had a distaste for historical criticism, he had an equal disdain

¹⁴¹He credits a dialectal theologian other than Bultmann, Karl Barth, who “distinguishes historical from realistic reading of the theologically most significant biblical narratives, without falling into the trap of instantly making history the test of the *meaning* of the realistic form of the stories,” in his *Church Dogmatics*. Ibid., vii-viii.

¹⁴²Ibid., 1.

¹⁴³Ibid., 10.

¹⁴⁴Ibid.

¹⁴⁵Ibid., 11.

for any conservatism which insisted that the Bible is an authoritative, true record of things. He asserted that biblical meaning is tied to the way the story is told, not to historical factuality. The error in Frei's mind is not to deny the historicity of the Bible, but to make the comparison to reality in the first place.¹⁴⁶ The theoretical foundation was laid by Hans Frei for narrative criticism: a fictional, non-critical, holistic reading of Scripture.

True narrative work on the gospels began in the late 1970's. 1980 is a crucial turning-point.¹⁴⁷ David Rhoads and Don Michie, a biblical scholar and a general literature professor, published their joint effort, the first major narrative study, in 1982. Their work is entitled *Mark as Story*. Appropriately, Mark is the favorite gospel of narrative critics, because it was so long viewed as simply a literary source for Matthew and Luke by historical critics.

One year after *Mark as Story*, Jack Dean Kingsbury's *The Christology of Mark's Gospel* came out. Also published in 1983 was Alan R. Culpepper's *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design*. Two other major narrative-critical works are Kingsbury's *Matthew as Story* (1986) and Robert Tannehill's two volume *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*.¹⁴⁸ For the first time entire biblical books were treated as unified narratives, without interest in their factuality or accuracy.

5.2 A Definition of Narrative Criticism

Narrative criticism may be described as new criticism with the theological basis of Frei and a slight infusion of reader-response criticism. It is formalist and quite approachable compared to the *new hermeneutic* and early literary biblical criticism. Its terminology is, for the most part, from a junior high-level English class—consisting of words like plot, story, character, event, and setting. This simplicity is a major part of its appeal. It does not require the specialized academic tools of historical critics, nor the strange reductionist methods of structuralism. Narrative criticism

¹⁴⁶Ibid., 4-5.

¹⁴⁷This was the last year of the Society of Biblical Literature seminar on Mark, where many of the attendees worked out the theory behind narrative criticism. Shortly after this, experimental narrative work became more concrete and mainstream. The 1980 seminar also marks the first use of the term 'narrative criticism,' in a paper by David Rhoads. Powell, 110.

¹⁴⁸Ibid., 6, 110-111.

fits in well with an anti-scholarly ethos, since it requires very little advanced theory. Unlike historical criticism, narrative analysis is immediately understandable to the untrained. The compliant lodged against historical-scholasticism has been addressed by making biblical study understandable outside the academy.

The favorite analogy of narrative critics is that a text is either a window or mirror. One can use a text as a window to look through it, to its origin, environment, or authorship in a diachronic way. On the other hand, the text can be treated as a mirror, an autonomous artistic object without reference to the outside world. In narrative criticism biblical texts are mirrors showing a lively, understandable internal world, which is best observed synchronically, not by comparing it to the real world.¹⁴⁹ Narrative critics allow the text to fully become a mirror, so that all distracting ‘behind-the-text’ issues are bracketed out.¹⁵⁰ This includes authorial intent as decisive for the interpretation of a text—the new critical ‘intentional fallacy’ is fully affirmed in narrative criticism.

“When a story is told by a text, a story-world is created for the real reader to experience.”¹⁵¹ Coherency, unity, and understandability characterize the text’s “hypothetical world,” and the text itself.¹⁵² These properties are assumed, rather than proved. The self-contained narrative world is described in terms of standard literary devices, especially irony, conflict, and resolution. In a new critical manner, this formalist approach presents itself as a positive alternative to historical criticism and its associated problems. The new critical term of ‘close reading’ is even used to describe the careful text-based analysis of narrative criticism.¹⁵³

Narrative criticism’s deviation from new criticism shows itself in two technical terms: ‘implied reader’ and ‘implied author.’ The implied author is not the real author who wrote the text, but one “who is reconstructed by the reader from the narrative.”¹⁵⁴ In fiction an author does not

¹⁴⁹The mirror/window analogy comes from the literary critic Murry Krieger in his 1964 book, *A Window to Criticism*. McKnight, *Meaning in Texts*, 249.

¹⁵⁰Max Turner, “Historical Criticism and Theological Hermeneutics,” in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology*, 44-70, eds. Joel B. Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 45.

¹⁵¹Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Jerusalem and Parousia: Jesus’ Eschatological Discourse in Matthew’s Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 15.

¹⁵²Ibid.

¹⁵³Turner, 45; Resseguie, 11-12.

¹⁵⁴Powell, 5.

necessarily believe the standpoint he writes from, his personal beliefs may differ. The implied author is a textual construct that allows critics to speak of a text's point of view without violating the 'intentional fallacy.' In this respect, the narrative approach is more conservative than the structural.

Reader-response criticism shows its influence in the 'implied reader.'¹⁵⁵ Narrative critics generally use the term without expounding upon reader-response theory, since it is not crucial for understanding the story itself. Interpretive difficulties are avoided by devising an implied or ideal reader who is an "imaginary person in whom the intention of the text is to be thought of as always reaching its fulfillment."¹⁵⁶ This is not the same as the historical audience who first read the text. Commentators use the concept of the implied reader to guide interpretations by the text, while not ruling out the hermeneutical problems of advanced literary theory. The reader must read like the implied reader, meaning he must appropriately use his imagination to fill the story's 'gaps' in the way the text directs and have the correct presuppositions, vocabulary, and knowledge, to deduce the textual meaning. The implied textual devices limit meaning and interpretations, without resorting to extra-textual information or reference.¹⁵⁷

Stories are non-confrontational and do not take an authoritative stance against the reader, telling him how to think. In fact, it is not usually the implied author who relates the details of the story. The indirect telling of the story is accomplished by the device of the narrator. When the characters and their actions within the story-line are described, it is the textual device of the narrator at work. A device of every story is the narrator, "the voice of the implied author used

¹⁵⁵ "This term incorporates both the prestructuring of the potential meaning by the text, and the reader's actualization of this potential through the reading process. It refers to the active nature of this process—which will vary historically from one age to another—and not to a typology of possible readers." The term and theory originates from Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), xii. It is reader-response oriented in that the reader has an active role in producing meaning (he 'actualizes the text'), especially in his reading competence and the presuppositions he brings to the text. "The meaning of the text, [Iser] argues, is not inherent in it but must be produced or actualized by the reader." R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design*, in *Foundations and Facets: New Testament*, ed. Robert W. Funk, foreword by Frank Kermode (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 209. "The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence, and this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, but must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader." Iser, 275.

¹⁵⁶ Definition from Kingsbury, quoted in: Powell, 20. Resseguie, 30-31.

¹⁵⁷ Powell, 19-21. Resseguie, 30-31.

to tell the story.”¹⁵⁸ The narrator does not speak to the real reader or even to the implied reader, but to the ‘narratee.’ The implied author may bypass the device of the story-teller (narrator) and directly address the implied reader.¹⁵⁹ Both the narratee and narrator are contained in the story-world—they are features of the text. See Figure 1 below for an illustration of the layers of the narrative communication model.¹⁶⁰

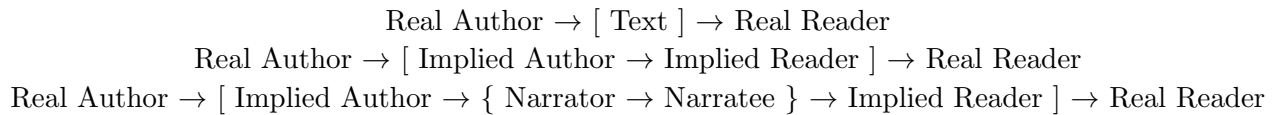


Figure 1: Narrative Communication Model

Standard fictional devices are studied in narrative criticism, corresponding to the academic study of fiction. Characters, mostly notably Jesus and God in the gospels, are observed, along with the events in the plot against the background of the setting. The narrative critic does a ‘close reading’ of the text, pays attention to textual clues, relates the story’s parts to the whole, and contrasts initial conflict with final resolution. The goal of this study is not to teach narrative methodology, but to introduce its presuppositions and principles to be able to accurately critique it.

¹⁵⁸Powell, 25-27.

¹⁵⁹This happens, for example, when the biblical author says “let the reader understand” (Matt 24:15). Gibbs, 21.

¹⁶⁰Modified from Powell, 27. It is derived from the classic communication model, which has been influential for modern hermeneutics and communication theory. The basic model is attributed to Roman Jakobson. Lategan and Vorster, 6.

Part II

An Analysis of Narrative Criticism

Now that the influences, background, and methodology of narrative criticism have been sketched, Part II will seek to draw conclusions concerning its usefulness, suitability, and theological character. Specific narrative-critical works will allow a detailed study of its typical results. The problems of narrative criticism will be related to cultural patterns at large. Literary postmodernist theory will be helpful in situating narrative criticism in its intellectual context. The aim is to gauge how this form of literary criticism measures up theologically. The norm of theological judgment will be Holy Scripture, since any method of interpretation applied to it must not contradict its stated purposes or content.

1 An In-depth Look at Narrative Criticism

A brief history and bare-bones definition of narrative criticism do not do justice to it. Narrative criticism's appeal is on the surface, not in its unusual presuppositions or in offering earth-shattering conclusions. Its 'close reading' of the biblical text stands in stark contrast to historical-critical research. Attention to the text itself and not extra-textual issues, describes narrative criticism well. Therefore, several narrative-critical works will guide the discussion and suggest questions about narrative criticism's methodology and assumptions.

1.1 The Appeal of Narrative Criticism

Three narrative-critical studies will provide concrete examples for observing how narrative criticism works in practice. The first commentary is Jack Dean Kingsbury's *Conflict in Mark*, which is exclusively concerned with the gospel narrative itself.² The second is Jeffrey Gibbs' *Jerusalem and Parousia*, originally a doctoral dissertation under Kingsbury. Compared to *Con-*

²Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark: Jesus, Authorities, Disciples* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989).

lict in Mark, it is more thorough and scholarly, as would be expected. The third commentary was one of the first narrative approaches to a gospel, Culpeppers' 1983 *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*. Culpepper delves deeply into the theory underlying the narrative study of Scripture.

Kingsbury's *Conflict in Mark* is a quintessential narrative study: accessible, short, and textual. It came out in 1991, when the definitions and theory of narrative criticism had been firmly established. The main text consists of 117 pages, a very manageable size, perhaps even small enough to read in one sitting. He focuses on three main plot lines in Mark: Jesus' identity as perceived by characters before and after His death, the disciples' struggle to comprehend Jesus, and the religious authorities' ironic lack of authority.³

Conflict in Mark admirably fulfills the original aims of narrative criticism. In contrast to historical-critical works, it is very readable, even without knowledge of the Greek language or Jewish culture. A few secondary materials are listed in the endnotes, but none intrude upon the commentary's text. Kingsbury is wholly unconcerned with traditional historical questions, he lets the story of Mark drive his commentary. It is a 'close reading' which uses the words of the Mark to narrate the story. The biblical text is referred to constantly and there is great attention paid to the narrator and characters. From even a casual glance at this book, it is evident that this is a different sort of work than most commentaries of the twentieth century.

The second commentary is by Gibbs. After a technical introduction to narrative criticism, 128 pages are spent covering the entire gospel of Matthew, then 55 pages on Gibbs' primary topic: the end times or eschatological discourse of Matthew 24-25. Although this work is more detailed and somewhat concerned with secondary sources, it is unusually clear and concise for an academic treatise. It is a 'close reading' according to the back cover. Gibbs engages redaction-critical studies to emphasize where narrative exegesis differs. Matthew's use of irony comes to the forefront in this book.⁴ Textual details explicit in Matthew are the main concern of this work.

Culpepper's well-researched book draws heavily on the secular study of narrative. As one of the pioneering narrative studies, it naturally develops an apologetic case for the application of

³Ibid., 1, 38-39, 89-90.

⁴Gibbs, 32, 111.

narrative techniques to biblical material. He often interacts with historical-critical scholars and their results in the main text. This work concentrates on John's story time, plot, and characters. Culpepper draws attention to the devices of "character misunderstanding," subtle irony, and variegated symbolism. The implied author of John uses these as "silent or implicit commentary" to the implied reader.⁵

All three of these works reflect the simplicity of the biblical narratives. They do a 'close reading' of the text and strive to be clear in conveying the story. Secondary material is used sparingly and does not overcloud the story itself.

Against the backdrop of historical criticism, narrative criticism is fresh, vivid, and inviting. Narrative-critical offerings are a world apart from the voluminous tomes full of tedious historical details of the text's *Sitz im Leben*. If historical criticism alienated and distanced the text from the reader, narrative criticism reverses this by allowing the narrative form to stand front and center on its own merit.

1.2 The Limits of Fiction

Now the intention is not to praise narrative criticism, but to expose its peculiarities and weaknesses. Exegetical anomalies and revealing statements will be selected from the three example commentaries to raise questions about the narrative methodology. After problems are raised they will be systematically addressed later. Though the positive elements of the narrative approach are fairly obvious, it is only through an exploration of its limits, where story borders truth, history, and reality, that it collapses.⁶

⁵Culpepper, 149-199.

⁶Because Kingsbury's book is solely story-oriented he does not discuss the fictional limitations of narrative at the edge of reality. Culpepper is very honest and shows he has no moral qualms about radical historical criticism and to a large extent would agree that John's gospel is false by objective historical standards, as will be seen. Gibbs provides a nice contrast because he has a very conservative view of the Bible, including its historical accuracy—though this makes little difference for his ahistorical narrative exegesis, as detailed below.

1.2.1 Implied—Not Real

Although the real author of the story holds no sway in narrative exegesis, the implied author becomes an all-powerful being, the creator of the story-world. “One of the most important features of Mark’s story is the world it conjures up.”⁷ The literary devices under the implied author’s control, of which the narrator is foundational, constitute the story-world and determine its past, present, and future. The gospels are said to use the device of an ‘omniscient narrator,’ because they present more than any man could naturally know. Gibbs goes so far to say that in “Matthew’s story, even the ‘characters’ of God and Jesus are, in a sense, ‘at the mercy’ of the narrator.”⁸ We are not to trust Jesus because of His own truthfulness or divine nature, but because “he is so closely aligned with the narrator.”⁹ A very different procedure of interpretation is at work, where doctrine or facts outside the story-world hold no sway.

Even the concept of God is imaginary and at whims of the narrator to characterize as he wishes. “Mark establishes God’s understanding of reality as normative within his story.”¹⁰ Is it acceptable to speak of the narrator, who is a textual device, as one who determines God’s fate, as if he could make Him do as he wished? Because the gospel narrative has been relegated to an artificial story-world, “the reader knows far more than any character in the story,” even when those characters are endued with divine characteristics.¹¹ The reader stands outside and over the narrative world. He is more the creator than the author, since the story-world exists in his imagination only. When compared to the reverent doctrines of Christ’s divinity and God’s omniscience which historic Christianity has always treasured, these flippant and irreverent statements are borderline blasphemy. Here is the first indication that narrative criticism uses the familiar words and concepts of the Bible in a wholly new and strange way.

The very idea of an implied author is stretched beyond its literary capabilities, when applied to Holy Scripture. Inconsistencies or ruptures in the narrative world occur when the text directly addresses the reader outside the narrator or when the narrator is identified with the

⁷Kingsbury, 1.

⁸Gibbs, 16.

⁹Ibid., 18, 25.

¹⁰Kingsbury, 5.

¹¹Gibbs, 25.

implied author. Scriptural ‘devices’ exceed the boundaries of fictional story, causing havoc for the narrative critic who believes reference to the real world is an enemy. Culpepper has trouble dealing with the beginning and end of the John in which the ‘narrator’ is not so abstract or imaginary. The consistent use of unobtrusive third-person narration in John’s gospel is “not maintained uniformly, however, since the first person plural ‘we,’ is used in John 1:14, 16 and 21:24.”¹² The last of these ‘we’ references (21:24¹³) baffles Culpepper: “Virtually every part of John 21:24 is open to multiple interpretations except ‘this disciple’ who must be the Beloved Disciple.”¹⁴ Because by definition the narrative is enclosed in a separate world, this affirmation of the gospel’s truth and historicity plagues the fictional status bestowed upon it. Culpepper eventually identifies ‘we’ as a literary device to help the reader “re-enter the ‘real’ world,” before speculating about the Johannine community in classic redaction fashion.¹⁵ If the gospels were truly fiction, perhaps these breakdowns in narrative techniques would not occur. As they read though, the gospel stories take great pains to touch and connect with the real world.

1.2.2 History

The story-world of a narrative has its own sense and speed of time. Some narrative critics study the pace of a story as it is told versus the story-world’s concept of time. As an example, in the gospel passion accounts many words are used to describe the events of only a few hours; story time slows way down. Time is also a device under the implied author’s control. “While these prolepses [descriptions of future events] may tell us something about the history of the Johannine community, interpreters should remember that they actually tell us about the future of John’s story-world, which may or may not correspond to historical reality.”¹⁶ Here Culpepper stresses the fictional assumptions of narrative criticism in order to make clear that the story-world is in no way the actual world of reality. He frequently crosses the historical divide between redaction and narrative criticism, as a pioneer would have to do to make his new method understandable.

¹²Culpepper, 21.

¹³It reads: “This is the disciple who testifies of these things, and wrote these things; and we know his testimony is true.” This is the second to last verse in the gospel.

¹⁴Ibid., 45-46.

¹⁵Ibid., 46-48.

¹⁶Ibid., 68.

Future events which the Bible foretells are points at which the narrative strategy shows its true nature. Because of this, Jesus' predictive speech about the sheep and the goats will be studied in section 1.3, as a comprehensive example of narrative exegesis.

Since characters are defined only in the narrative world, they are confined to the story's time. Culpepper makes it clear in his commentary what the signifier 'Jesus' does not refer to. When speaking of Jesus (the character in the Gospel of John) he forcefully states: "we are dealing with Jesus as he is portrayed in the story, not the historical person."¹⁷ Though he is writing a biblical commentary, the signifier 'Jesus' in his work refers to the imaginary figure, the story character. This gives a glimpse at just how radical narrative criticism is, behind its simplistic and lucid veneer.

Gibbs, who would not agree with Culpepper on the validity of historical criticism, approaches the historical aspect of the Bible not much differently. Gibbs confesses: "In passing, I may note my own conviction that the story related in Matthew's Gospel is, in fact, historical."¹⁸ Relegated to a chapter endnote, this statement is highly significant because it discloses the role of history in narrative criticism. Though Gibbs and Culpepper are on opposite ends of the spectrum concerning the historical accuracy of Scripture, their exegetical methods and results may be perfectly compatible within the narrative-critical framework. Signs of a mental divorce or compartmentalization are evident. The ugly specter of historical criticism has not been excised by the story-based approach, it has simply been pushed into the category of temporarily irrelevant.

The implied reader does not read as a twenty-first century person. He lives in the narrative, according to the clues the implied author gives him. In Matthew's gospel "the implied reader stands at a time when the field purchased with Judas' blood-stained money is still called 'field of blood' (27:3-10) and when the lie that Jesus' disciples stole away his body from the tomb is still being circulated among the Jews."¹⁹ The implied author lays out the story-world as well as the correct pretend perspective with which to read from.

The pretend perspective of the implied reader does not necessarily match the reader's real

¹⁷Ibid., 105-106.

¹⁸Gibbs, 24.

¹⁹Gibbs states that his commentary does not address the "Christian appropriation of the Gospel of Matthew's message by real human readers." Ibid., 15, 152.

view of the world.

“A narrative critic temporarily sets aside his or her view of the correspondence between the story-world and the real world of human experience in order to perceive and describe the world created by the narrative. If the narrative critic does not think that the story-world corresponds to the real world, then the significance of the narrative for the critic’s own life may be minimal or nonexistent. If, on the other hand, the narrative critic (on other grounds) regards the story-world as a faithful representation of historical events (as I do), then the narrative-critical description of the “story-world” becomes normative for life and faith.”²⁰

By excluding reference and substituting a textual implied reader for a flesh and blood reader, narrative criticism is powerless to speak directly to humans rooted in history. A permanent buffer is established to keep the story in the story-world. This buffer is useful to ‘modern man’ according to Culpepper: “For the contemporary reader, reading the gospel may become an exercise in pretense, pretending to know and think what the evangelist assumed his first-century readers knew and thought and pretending to believe that water could be changed to wine and a man born blind could be given sight by obeying the command to wash clay and spittle from his eyes.”²¹ This felicitous ‘pretense’ seems to not match Gibbs’ apologetic argument aimed at historical criticism: “Narrative criticism in itself is no more subjective than any other methodology in biblical studies.”²² This weak endorsement of narrative criticism shows that it is not capable of healing the wounds caused by historicism in biblical studies. It appears to be as ‘neutral’ a methodology as the faith-destroying method of historical criticism, which has torn Christendom apart. Narrative criticism is neutral to the degree that a radical historical critic like Bultmann and a Bible-believing fundamentalist could theoretically agree on what the Bible says within the narrative framework.

1.2.3 Truth

In his commentary’s conclusion, Culpepper helpfully examines theological issues from a narrative perspective. After referring to Hans Frei, he echoes the sentiment of *The Eclipse of Biblical*

²⁰Ibid., 23. One may wonder on what extra-scriptural ‘other grounds’ the historicity of the Bible can be established.

²¹Culpepper, 207.

²²Gibbs, 24.

Narrative. Culpepper laments the “modern divorce of truth from fiction and fiction from truth.”²³ This statement shows a non-traditional definition of truth—that truth can be historically false. Culpepper hits the nail on the head: “The real issue is whether ‘his story’ can be true if it is not history.”²⁴ Narrative criticism arose as a methodology to break the theological impasse caused by rational historicism. The new avenue of story interpretation progresses by redefining truth: “The choice has been either that the world of Jesus is accurately depicted by the narratives, in which case the narratives also tell us that our world is not at all as it is commonly understood today; or else since the world must be as we know it, Jesus’ world could not have been like that depicted by the narrative, in which case the gospel is not ‘true.’”²⁵ Reminiscent of Bultmann’s attack on the Bible’s worldview, narrative criticism devises a new category: truthful fiction, unencumbered with modern historical problems.²⁶

1.3 An Example of Narrative Exegesis: The Sheep and the Goats

Jeffrey Gibb’s exegesis of the climax of the end times discourse is illustrative of narrative criticism’s inability to deal with historical reference.²⁷ Matthew 24-25 speaks of “the end of the age” and future events (24:3). Starting at Matthew 25:31, there is a switch to literal speech, no longer is Jesus speaking in parables. The Son of Man returns to earth with His angels where “all the nations” will be gathered before him on the last day. Jesus tells what will happen on Judgment day.

²³Culpepper, 236.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶In narrative criticism, “the presence of mythological and supernatural elements, which has troubled modern interpreters for decades, ceases to be a problem.” This is further explained in a footnote: “Narrative criticism deals with this problem in exactly the opposite manner than did Bultmann’s program for demythologizing.” Bultmann discarded the literal sense by translating the ‘myths’ into philosophical categories, while narrative criticism says the literal sense is another world to live in. Powell, 88, 120.

²⁷This is not to imply that Gibb is any worse than other narrative critics or that he would deny the historicity of Judgment day. The aim is to compare the limitations of narrative exegesis itself, not the personal beliefs of a particular critic. This interpretation of the sheep and the goats is not original to Gibb, many have taken this position, especially literary critics—pointing to the fact that the synchronic approach is the problem, not an individual’s personal opinion. Gibb credits several works from the 1970’s for his understanding of this passage and a work of Theodor Zahn from 1903. Gibb, 251.

1.3.1 Gibb's Presentation

Gibbs' first assumption is that "all the nations" is metaphorical, that is, "all the peoples of the world among whom the missionary heralding of the Gospel has taken place."²⁸ Jesus will receive those who feed, give a drink to, visit, and clothe the "least of my brothers." Gibbs defines 'brothers' as Christ's disciples, linking them to Christian missionaries in view of 28:8-10, 16-20. Jesus says to the sheep that they have done well in helping "these, the least of my brothers" (25:34-40). Gibbs contends that 'these' are "a group separate from either 'sheep' or 'goats'" — they are the disciples standing with Jesus.²⁹ Jesus is pointing to them as he speaks, as visual proof. "All the nations" are those whom missionaries direct their evangelism to (the sheep and the goats), while the disciples (Jesus' brothers) are the original missionaries (neither sheep or goats).³⁰

Overall, this story relates the positive "deeds done for the missionary disciples of Jesus," which corresponds to an acceptance of their message.³¹ Because 'brothers' has been defined as disciples, Gibbs makes Matthew 10 the context for this account. He cites Matthew 10:40 where Jesus says, "he who receives you receives me." "Note that it is in receiving the persons of the missionary disciples that the person of Jesus is also received."³² Those who reject the messengers by not performing deeds of mercy for them, have rejected the message. In the context of the story "the implied reader will participate in the mission."³³ In summary, the eschatological discourse "ends, not with words of challenge . . . but words of comfort," so that the reader will be "empowered with the importance and significance of the worldwide mission."³⁴ There is no negative or unsettling dimension to this "direct description of the judgment scene" for Gibbs, its "intended effect . . . is not paraenetic, but rather encouraging and validating."³⁵

²⁸Ibid., 217-18.

²⁹Ibid., 218.

³⁰Ibid., 218, 251.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid., 217, 220.

³⁵Ibid., 214.

1.3.2 Exegetical Value and Biblical Truth

Gibbs' churchly interpretation of this pericope is full of gospel comfort and theological significance regarding the christological character of missionaries. He conducts a theological reading, highlighting the church's understanding of the proclamation of the gospel. Yet the fact that a biblical interpretation is useful or theologically valuable does not mean it is right. Any exegesis claims implicitly to be speaking from and for the biblical text. Therefore, it must not contradict the clear words of the account itself or other parts of Scripture that relate to it. Also, biblical interpretation should not alter doctrine derived from the Scriptures.

The account of the sheep and the goats is about a future historical event—which the Bible makes clear is the last day, final Judgment, and the end of the world. This account is unique in the Bible in that it is a clear and direct description of Judgment day; Jesus even gives the words and actions of the saved and the damned. The details and non-metaphorical explanation of Jesus make this an especially vivid account. Does Gibbs' explanation, despite however appealing on the surface or theologically rich it might be, square with the scriptural understanding of Judgment day? When his exegesis is probed one can see that it is driven by the ahistorical presuppositions of narrative criticism, not by the clear words of the Bible.

Surprisingly, Gibbs does not delve deeply into the division of sheep or goats, nor does he focus on the judgment of those who reject the "least of my brothers." In the story-world, "the implied reader will participate in the mission," meaning that the reader would surely not want to identify with the damned.³⁶ There is a reality of difference between an implied reader and a sinner who will stand before Christ's judgment throne. Narrative criticism's theory has predetermined that this passage can only have a *literary effect* on the reader, not the ability to objectively describe what will happen when Jesus returns to judge the world. This passage will be understood differently if it is considered as referring to a future historical event that will happen in real time, rather than in a story-world.

³⁶Ibid., 220.

1.3.3 Definitions

Definitions are key in theology and exegesis, they set the stage and pre-determine conclusions to a large extent. Gibbs assumes that the ‘brothers’ are disciples or Christian missionaries, and ‘all the nations’ are those evangelized. These definitions allow the distant chapter 10 of Matthew to be the context of Judgment day. Is there scriptural warrant for these definitions?

‘All the nations’ is metaphorical for Gibbs, it does not mean literally all people past and present who have ever lived in God’s created world. He explains how he arrived at a metaphorical definition of ‘all the nations’:

The implied reader stands prior to the time when God’s Judgment will come upon Jerusalem and the temple. To be sure, the mission to “all the nations” has begun in time between the Gospel’s ending and the temporal location of the implied reader. Yet that mission has not yet taken place in its fullest expression, for its fullest expression will occur only after Judgment comes upon Jerusalem. Accordingly, Jesus’ words in 25:32 speak to the implied reader and direct his or her attention to the mission that will continue from his or her own temporal position until the end. It is still true for the implied reader, in large measure, that “all the nations” are those to whom the Gospel of the reign of heaven will be heralded in the future. With respect to the disciples on the Mount of Olives and the implied reader, “all the nations” are the peoples of the world to whom the Gospel of the reign of heaven will be preached before the end will come. The arrival of the end in 25:31-46 signals the fact that the mission task that began in 28:18-20 has been carried to completion.³⁷

Gibbs’ reasoning, though not biblically based, is decisive for his interpretation. Notice that the implied reader reads as if the temple and Jerusalem have not been judged, even though the destruction of the temple occurred historically in 70 A.D. The reader stands within the story-world at a time before Jesus’ Great Commission (Matt 28). According to Gibbs, the mission (described three chapters after Matthew 25) is an entirely future event to the implied reader. Judgment day does not involve ‘all the nations’ past and present, but only those who are evangelized after the Great Commission. Therefore, this Judgment day account about the sheep and the goats becomes a literary device that achieves its effect when the reader reaches the end of the gospel story. It promotes and encourages missionary activity. Fictional theory, in trying to simplify the account, actually muddies the clear reference of Jesus’ words. A fictional

³⁷Ibid., 217.

story references only the imaginary story-world and the textual device of the implied reader. The historical, but not critical, perspective asks different questions of a biblical text like this one.

1.3.4 Canonical Reference

Narrative criticism refuses to go outside the object of its study. Reference to other biblical books is ruled out by definition. The Judgment day description in Matthew 25 does have significant parallels though. St. Paul in II Thessalonians 1:6-10 speaks of Christ returning to judge with His angels also:

Since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes, in that Day, to be glorified among all those who believe

The Judgment day scene is comforting for believers, but quite terrifying when the prospects of unbelievers are considered. Paul does not downplay the horrific nature of it; he mentions the angels, flaming fire, vengeance, destruction, power, and glory of Christ. Does Gibbs' definition of 'all the nations' fit in this passage? Yes, "those who do not obey the gospel," sound like people who have rejected the missionaries of Christ. But that is not the only class of unrighteous people that Paul lists. He speaks of "those who do not know God." This group of unrighteous does not fit so well into a metaphorical definition of 'all the nations.'

All people will be judged, not just those who come into contact with Christian missionaries. Romans 1-2 makes the argument that even the Gentiles have some natural knowledge of God (His invisible attributes, eternal power, and Godhead). Therefore, they are without excuse before God, despite lacking the written law given to the Israelites (not to mention the Christian gospel). "But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, 'who will render to each one according to his deeds': . . . indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish on every soul of man who does evil" (Rom 2:5-9). When the Lord comes in power, all will be

judged; ‘all the nations’ in Matthew 25 cannot be metaphorical if the same event is referred to by these biblical passages. Paul takes great pains in Romans to show how those Gentiles without God’s special revelation will be condemned for their unrighteousness. They have the law written on their hearts and their conscience also bears witness, so that even those without the law “will perish without the law . . . in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ” (Rom 2:12, 16).

Gibbs says that the distinction between the sheep and goats is based on the works of mercy done for Christian missionaries. How do these works relate to the gospel? Doing helpful works for a missionary is said to be receiving him, which is also to receive Christ. There is certainly an element of truth to this, but where is faith in Christ in this simplification? Bare works of mercy, without faith, even if done for missionaries, cannot justify: “Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in his sight” (Rom 3:20). How does faith relate to works of mercy? The sheep are called “the righteous” (Matt 25:37). “But now the righteousness of God apart from the law has been revealed, . . . even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ” (Rom 3:21-22). Does the ultimate author of Scripture, the Holy Spirit, contradict Himself in Matthew and Romans?

Theologically, it is problematic not to relate the righteous verdict upon the sheep to faith in Christ. To neglect faith robs Christ of His glory and honor, by making Him an extra appendage to the Gospel. Missionaries are important, but not like Christ is. Either man is saved through faith in Christ’s death, or solely for doing works for missionaries—it cannot be both. In exploring Paul’s two kinds of righteousness, Jesus’ foretelling of the last day blossoms. There are two standards of judgment: the righteousness of the law which man earns, and the righteousness of faith which Christ gives. The sheep and goats are judged by different norms.

Christ in Matthew 25, when He gives His verdicts, speaks of works: clothing, feeding, and visiting. These are activities the sheep have done and the goats have not done. The opportunity was present for all people to do works in their lives, or else Christ lied when he said, “inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me” (25:45). All the damned will have had this opportunity to do good works. It would not be fair for Christ to damn some

goats based on the fact that they did not have the gospel preached to them—some would then have an excuse on Judgment day. Instead, there will be wrath and judgment “on every soul who does evil” (Rom 2:9). This is why Paul stressed the natural knowledge of God from creation and the law written on man’s heart (Rom 1-2). Christ cannot condemn the wicked without the law, because “sin is not imputed when there is no law” (Rom 5:13). The law is the standard of judgment for the goats.

Paul and Christ agree that the wicked goats will be damned by their works according to the law; the gospel does not enter into the equation on Judgment day for the unrighteous. Do the sheep’s works of mercy relate to the biblical teaching of faith? Gibbs says that doing works of mercy implies a reception of the missionary, which is also a reception of Christ. Though this logic is sensible in a symbolic understanding, it is not how the Bible speaks. It says that the righteous are saved by faith. The person of the missionary himself cannot save, it is rather the gospel he preaches. How beautiful are the feet of those who bring the gospel; missionaries are significant for the message they proclaim, not in themselves. One can receive a missionary by clothing or feeding him without believing the Word of God he brings.³⁸ “So then faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God” (Rom 10:17). The sheep are righteous not based on the law or works of mercy, but because “God imputes righteousness apart from works” (Rom 4:6). The Bible is clear on how missionaries are to be received: with faith in the Word of God they proclaim.

Yet Christ mentions the works the sheep have done: “For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink” (25:35). Study carefully the response of the sheep: “Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink?’” (25:37). The sheep are ignorant of their good works, which indicates that they did not trust in their works. They did not think that they would be vindicated based on works at all. Instead they trusted and believed in another righteousness, that of Christ.

³⁸Matthew 10 might seem to go against this, but not if the towns received men based on their message. Chapter 10 ends with: “And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward.” The cup of water is not given to a disciple, but in a disciple’s name.

While both the sheep and goats are judged by works, the standards are different. The goats are told: “inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me” (25:45). But the sheep are told: “inasmuch as you did it to the least of these brethren, you did it to Me” (25:40). When the goats failed to do *one* work of mercy, they neglected Christ and merited everlasting punishment. On the contrary, *any* works of mercy the sheep did are counted as proof of their righteousness. The goats are judged by the strict spiritual understanding of the law, which requires perfection—one evil deed damns under the law. The sheep are judged by a different standard. Even Paul, the apostle of faith, says that the righteous will be judged based on works: God “will render to each one according to his deeds: eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality” (Rom 2:6-7). This is not at odds with Christ’s account of the sheep and the goats.

There must be a connection between works and faith. The sheep are not better, nor have they attained perfection, according to the holy law: “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). By faith the sheep have received the righteousness of Christ. Paul describes what follows faith and regeneration in the Christian’s life: “But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life” (Rom 7:22). A fruit of holiness is love and “he who loves another has fulfilled the law” (Rom 13:8).³⁹ While Christians with faith are sinners, they walk in newness of life and fulfill, to some extent, the spiritual demands of the law by performing works out of love for God. They do not trust in their works and will be surprised by Christ’s verdict that they have done works, counting all along on the righteousness that comes from faith in Him. In this way, judgment is based on works: unbelievers will be fairly judged by the law, while believers will be positively credited for any righteous deeds they have done, because their works have been made righteous by faith. Only a righteous person can perform a righteous deed that pleases Christ.

The account starts with the division of the sheep and goats in verse 32: “All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats.” This is a fundamental distinction, one that determines which standard of

³⁹Paul quotes Proverbs 25:21-22 in Romans 12:20, which suggests Christ’s verdict on the last day: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink.”

justice Christ will use and which verdict each man will receive. The sheep, whose righteousness is invisible and whose works are hidden, will be revealed for who they are on the last day. The goats, whose wickedness is covered up by the external, loveless works of the law they trust in, will be revealed as unrighteous. This distinction between the sheep and goats must be tied to faith, for the Spirit cannot contradict Himself in the words of Paul and Christ.

Gibbs' exegesis also implies that the disciples, or even Christian missionaries, will be excluded from Christ's verdict of righteousness or guilt. The 'brothers' are neither sheep nor goats in his interpretation. This is not possible if faith is the standard for judgment and all men are to be judged. A missionary or even a disciple (such as Judas) will not be saved because of their evangelistic efforts. Each one is either a sheep or goat and will be sent to heaven or hell. Clearly, even a missionary can lose faith. Paul warns Timothy to continue in the doctrine so that he will save himself and those who hear him (I Tim 4:16). Paul disciplined his body so that the gospel he preached would not be ineffectual for him also (I Cor 9:27). Even those who initially receive a missionary's message with faith are not automatically sheep when Christ comes—faith can be lost. The narrative interpretation of Gibbs sidesteps many theological issues which the Bible itself raises. The consequences of scriptural interpretation are significant; exegesis is important for what it teaches.⁴⁰ Exegesis should not be an academic game; people's eternal fate is at stake.

There is no indication in the text that 'all the nations' means only some people. Neither can 'brothers' mean only disciples or missionaries, for there must be a universal standard of judgment.⁴¹ Not all people who have ever lived on earth have come into contact with Christian missionaries. The Old Testament provides ample proof that few Gentiles of that time had

⁴⁰Gibbs also takes the reference to "all the nations" in Matthew 28:18 as metaphorical. This could have weighty significance for Christian evangelism, if Christ tells the disciples to baptize and teach only those who will be confronted with Christian missionaries. It would then be at best a tautology with no mandate. God's gracious will is that all, in the literal sense, hear the gospel and receive Christ's righteousness.

⁴¹The 'brothers' of Jesus are not clearly defined in the text, though it must be a fairly wide reference, since all pagans also encountered brothers and refused to do works for Christ. It seems appropriate to take 'brothers' as referring to all people, so that when Jesus says 'these,' he indicates all those at Judgment day (all people). This would not be unscriptural either. Jesus became incarnate and partook of flesh and blood so that he could die and redeem from death all men. Hebrews 4:17 speaks of brothers in a universal sense, as those He came to save: "Therefore, in all things he had to be like *His brothers*, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people." Perhaps 'brothers' is all-inclusive, referring to all the sons of Adam. Christ would then be a brother to all, since the Son of God also became a human son of Adam. Brother in this understanding is analogous to the biblical idea of one's neighbor.

knowledge of the promises and law revealed to the Israelites. But that is not relevant to the condemnation of the goats—ignorance of the gospel is no excuse on the last day.

These doctrinal and historical questions must be asked if Jesus is talking about and referring to a future historical event. The wealth of holy treasures throughout the Bible and its incredible unity of teaching help elucidate what otherwise might be misunderstood. Therefore, one should make use of them and not artificially cut-off biblical reference outside the book or passage he is studying.

1.3.5 Literary Effect and the Word of God

Under the presuppositions of narrative criticism, the Bible can only produce a literary effect on the reader. In a narrative world the reader is the only real person to participate, but in the real world all people will participate in Judgment day. Jesus, the disciples, the sheep, and the goats are all fictional story characters, not true realities, in narrative theory. To interpret Judgment day as a literary device of the narrator, whose purpose is to influence one to be kind to missionaries, is to not take Jesus' words seriously. Accepting or believing missionaries does not guarantee acceptance by God, the question of faith must also be addressed. Rather, the Bible says that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation, which is received by faith in Jesus and His words. Taken as a literary device this section of Scripture can only affect the reader to be favorably predisposed to Christian missionaries. But as such, it is incapable of addressing anyone outside the story or objectively describing actual circumstances. The affective quality of the account should not overshadow the plain descriptive words of Jesus.

The theological significance narrative exegesis offers pales in comparison to the power Jesus' words have when they are allowed to refer to reality. The literary effect writing may have is quite limited. Narrative exegesis sets up a buffer between Scripture and the real world. Fiction can merely expand one's horizon of understanding—it cannot authoritatively correct or repudiate the erring. Martin Luther will serve as a example of someone who interpreted this passage literally, seriously, and referentially, with great verve and vigor.

What aspect of this account does not fit into narrative exegesis? All people who take the wide

path in this world and are not won by the gospel will be told: “Depart from Me, you cursed, into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (25:41). Even believers are warned that falling away is a real possibility, for the battle of faith is not won until death. Hebrews 6:4-6 has perhaps the strongest warning for believers: “For it is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, . . . if they fall away to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.” Damnation is neither comforting, validating, nor encouraging. It is shocking, earth-shattering, and eye-opening.

Everyone will hear one of the two verdicts spoken to him—Jesus will say the very words recorded in Matthew 25. Everyone will be judged as either a sheep or goat—everyone who has ever lived or will live. This makes these words more significant than the words of any fictional account. Every person will hear: “Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world”; or “Depart from Me, you cursed, into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (25:34, 41). Matthew gives us the dramatic script describing exactly what will happen on the Day of the Lord.⁴² Everyone who dies will stand before Christ and it will be a frightful scene. “What a terrible sight it will be, when the ungodly shall see not only all God’s angels and creatures, but also the Judge in his divine majesty, and shall hear the verdict of eternal destruction and hell fire pronounced upon them forever!”⁴³ The mighty angels will be there in their frightening might. Christ will be seen in glory as He was at His transfiguration, where even the disciples could not stand His presence. How much less will the wicked, who will be publicly exposed before all in their unrighteous actions, evil thoughts, and wicked hearts, bear the presence of Christ’s glory!

The thought of Judgment day cannot be completely smoothing, even for Christians. Christians before death have not attained the righteous verdict at the last day yet. Also, they must consider people they know who might face never-ending darkness and pain. If ‘all the nations’ is literal, one’s family, friends, and enemies will be before Jesus, either on His right or on His left.

⁴²“Now had it not been told us we should be inquisitive beyond measure to know what would happen on the last day, and what Jesus would say and do on that day. Here we are now told, and have set before us first of all, death, which no one can escape; but after that the day of judgment.” Martin Luther, *Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, vol. 3.1 of 7, ed. and trans. John Nicholas Lenker (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 238.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 381-82.

The account of the sheep and the goats describes what is real, hence its impact is shattering and massive. If the wicked and unrighteous “would consider that they must die, and appear before his judgment seat,” the world would be quite different.⁴⁴ Revelation 1:7 describes this day in another way: “Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him, even they who pierced Him. And all the tribes of the earth will mourn because of Him. Even so, Amen.” This is the day Christians long for, the day when the unrighteous will be revealed for who they really are. It is the day of vindication and victory for believers who have patiently suffered ridicule, persecution, and shame, in faith during their earthly lives.

Luther made a powerful application of this text to those who will be manifested as hypocrites on the last day:

What do you think Christ will say on that day, seated in his judgment throne, to such unmerciful Christianity? “Dear sir, listen, you have also pretended to be a Christian and boasted of the Gospel; did you not also hear this sermon, that I myself preached, in which I told you what my verdict and decision would be: ‘Depart from me, ye cursed?’ I was hungry and thirsty, naked and sick, poor and in prison, and ye gave me no meat, no drink, clothed me not, took me not in, and visited me not. Why have ye neglected this, and have been more shameless and unmerciful toward your own brethren than the Turk or heathen?”⁴⁵

Like Judas, it would be better to have not been born than to hear Jesus’ striking and unpardonable verdict of damnation. When the reference of Jesus’ words is fully considered, the impact and significance of this text is far-reaching.

There is also great comfort in this text, to be sure. Believers know what Jesus will say to them and can be certain Jesus will graciously receive them based on the standard of faith. This gives powerful incentive to walk in the newness of life, doing good works in faith and love. The separation of sheep and goats is real in this lifetime, though it has yet to be revealed. Jesus informs us that everyone we meet is either a sheep or a goat—though humanity must be ignorant of this until the last day. God’s word is a double-edged sword, living and active—as this account certainly shows.

The story of the sheep and the goats does more than affect one’s thinking, though it does

⁴⁴Ibid., 391.

⁴⁵Ibid., 385-86.

do that too. It relates objective history—something that will happen, regardless if one reads Matthew or not. The elaborate narrative-critical framework will not allow for the objective narration of events that have happened or will happen in the real world. The real reader of Matthew should instead take Jesus at His word and understand this passage as what will happen “when the Son of Man comes in His glory.”

1.3.6 Implications for Theology

Falsely bestowed fictional status robs Scripture of its power. Contrast Gibbs ‘words of comfort’ to Luther: “whoever is not moved by these words can certainly never be moved by anything,” because everlasting fire is a horridly real threat.⁴⁶ The great impact of this pericope comes from the statement of inescapable fact that “all the good and bad will appear, so that we shall all stand exposed before him, and no one will be able to conceal himself.”⁴⁷ The objectivity of this text extends beyond the reader, to every person who has ever been. This passage has direct implications for all, not just those who come into contact with missionaries. To rob it of its objectivity and tangible history is to extract its power. If exegesis is to be faithful to God and His Word, then it must be about more than finding theological significance, it must clearly speak what God has said.

2 Postmodernism and Narrative Criticism: The Problem of Language

What is postmodernism and does it have anything to do with the biblical study of narrative? Narrative criticism developed within biblical studies using the methodology of literary studies. Literary critics since World War I have been infatuated with literary theory, or just plain theory. Postmodernism was worked out in theories of interpretation and language within post-structuralism. Narrative criticism, because it was influenced by post-structuralism and wider

⁴⁶Ibid., 381.

⁴⁷Ibid.

cultural values, shares many of the same assumptions and problems of postmodernism. The presuppositions, truth claims, and results of narrative criticism become more defined against the backdrop of postmodernist thought.

2.1 Postmodernism

The word ‘postmodern’ itself displays the ambiguities and concerns of postmodernism—as a signifier it seems to conjure a different signified in every context. However, for purposes here, postmodernism is defined as a specific intellectual development—not the vague catch-all word ‘postmodern,’ which can mean anything new or relative. “Whereas intellectual movements of the past have been worked out in fields of metaphysics or science, postmodernism as a coherent intellectual discipline has developed out of literary criticism (of all things).”⁴⁸ Here is a direct connection between postmodernism and modern literary studies, which as shown earlier has been a major impetus in biblical literary criticism. Another scholar writes: “Postmodernism was not the invention of literary critics, but literature can certainly claim to be one of the most important laboratories of postmodernism.”⁴⁹

The following definition of postmodernism, consisting of four negative assertions and one positive, should sound familiar.⁵⁰ First, postmodernism makes a critique of presence—no objects are accessible apart from “signs, language, [or] interpretation.” Derrida’s infamous phrase shows this linguistic turn: “there is nothing outside the text”—meaning signifiers do not refer to things. Language is only self-referential. In postmodern thought man cannot access pure reality. There is only perspectival observation, colored by the unreliability of language. Secondly, it criticizes the quest for origins, the “attempt to see behind or beyond phenomena to their ultimate foundation.” In this vein, the postmodern slogan “every author is a dead author,” corresponds with the

⁴⁸Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994), 51.

⁴⁹Steven Conner, *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 62.

⁵⁰There are several problems in defining even intellectual postmodernism. First, it is primarily a reaction against modernism—though more accurately it is a continuance of modernist thought (the *post* of postmodernism). Secondly, the word was first used as a declaration of a new epoch by those desiring intellectual change, rather than historians looking back and describing a change.

rejection of authorial authority. Thirdly, postmodernism represents a critique of unity, that an object is regarded as existing independently. Instead, “cultural elements—words, meanings, experiences, human selves, societies—[are] constituted by relations to other elements.” In the fourth place, there is a “denial of the transcendence of norms,” so that value judgments such as “truth, goodness, beauty, rationality” are regarded with skepticism. The intention is to ‘demystify’ objective claims, to show that they are not disinterested or neutral. Lastly, there is a consistent aim to “use the *constitutive otherness* in analyzing any cultural entity.” “What appear to be cultural units—human beings, words, meanings, ideas, philosophical systems, social organizations—are maintained in their apparent unity only through an active process of exclusion, opposition, and hierarchization.”⁵¹

All five of these themes are described some detail in Part I: (1) the division of signifier and signified and the language system as foundational for thought; (2) the ‘intentional fallacy’; (3) the differential relation of items in a system; (4) the formalist dismissal of subjective aesthetic norms; and (5) the activity of deconstruction. Ideas that were originally applied to the interpretation of texts have been applied well outside literary concerns. In playful fashion, postmodern thinkers have said: “The world is a text.”⁵² The distinctions of Saussure and the evolution of his thought in post-structuralism proved key to emerging postmodern thought, as language and its limitations became the passionate pursuit of twentieth century intellectualism. Postmodernism is nothing but a theory of language which has become a theory of everything.⁵³

Postmodernism views man as trapped in a game (of reality), which synchronically has nothing in common with the games (realities) of others. In these reality-games language, and therefore human thought, are self-referential. Signifiers only refer internally within the game, not outside to someone else’s reality (a different game). Truth does not exceed one’s private game, so that one’s single vision of perspective is considered to be a complete reality or world. Language is

⁵¹Lawrence Cahoon, introduction to *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 13-15.

⁵²Veith, 52.

⁵³Carl Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 37. Simply put: “Everything is language and language is often considered meaningless.” Gregory J. Laughery, “Language at the Frontiers of Language,” in *After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation*, 171-94, eds. Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene, and Karl Moller (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 189.

not regarded as propositional, so that it cannot make objective statements that are either true or false. These conclusions of postmodernism will be helpful in analyzing the truth claims of narrative criticism.

2.2 Reference

Saussure's original linguistic distinctions have taken on a life of their own and have been extended far beyond what he intended for them. Though his thought was structuralist, the post-structuralist separation of signifier and signified would have been foreign to him. Nevertheless, Saussure's terminology and synchronic approach fueled intellectual postmodernism. The attack on language has wide implications, including problems which have been prominent in literary criticism.

Current hermeneutics start with questions of language, meaning, and reality. "What is meant by reality? . . . when we try to define it it proves to be very illusive. . . . Reality is closely linked to an individual's frame of reference," and "a complete consensus appears to be an unattainable ideal."⁵⁴ There is no agreement on what reality is.⁵⁵ At the heart of multiple, non-intersecting realities is the question of reference. One post-structuralist defined the word 'real' as, "the unnameable; that which is beyond the reach of the *signifier*."⁵⁶ The consequences of splitting the linguistic sign into two separate systems are grave.

It is the *reference* between the signifier and the signified that has been denied in literary postmodernism. Texts have become the 'free play of signifiers,' because words do not refer to meaning or objects. Following the line of literary fallacies, the 'referential fallacy' has been coined, which says that one cannot construe the signifier as referring to the real world, because the mental concept alone is conjured up by it.⁵⁷ This faulty assumption changes or eliminates traditional notions of truth, faith, and theology.

⁵⁴Lategan and Vorster, 85.

⁵⁵To cite a past president, people do not even agree on what the word 'is' is. "One of deconstruction's principal goals is to alert us to the dangers of that most familiar and innocuous word *is*." Adam, 27. If language is not used to communicate effectively, its breakdown would cause people to think they are stuck in their own isolated realities.

⁵⁶Belsey, 114.

⁵⁷Lategan and Vorster, 21-22.

Narrative criticism utilizes the ‘referential fallacy’ of linguistics to escape history. An early narrative theorist spoke of the narrative as the signifier and defined the signified as “the sum of events described or referred to” in the story.⁵⁸ The signified of the narrative is an autonomous narrative world, without reference to anything outside the reader’s imagination. Although originally developed by literary theorists for dealing with fiction, post-structuralists see reality in the same way—a malleable and fluid mental concept applied to the raw, chaotic data of existence. The way literary critics look at fiction has become normative for understanding one’s reality in postmodernism.

The post-liberal biblical critic, such as Frei, has disdain for historical criticism because of its view of language, not because it is at odds with the Bible. “Much of the historical-critical paradigm . . . has often worked with a naive and wooden view of language,” in that it places undue “emphasis on the signified.”⁵⁹ In the new paradigm, the person who defends biblical factuality and the one who denies it, both make the *same* error—understanding the signifier (the biblical text) as referring to objective reality instead of a mental concept (a narrative world). To defend Scripture from being imprisoned in localized narrative worlds, the argument must start at the level of words. If the ‘referential fallacy’ of words falls, so does the higher level ‘referential fallacy’ of narrative criticism.

2.2.1 Playing with Words Before Judgment Day

Modern linguistic theory is entirely theory. It is conceptual and abstract thought with no tie to the empirical world. Starting with Saussure, who mentally abstracted the signifier/signified and *langue/parole* from one another, theories of meaning are very much mind games without any real basis. He studied language (*langue*) apart from speech (*parole*) and words apart from their definitions. In the real world though, language and words are always contextual. True synchronicity is an illusion, a needless abstraction—true *parole* must occur in a context which has a diachronic element. Words are strongly rooted in history, so that diachronically words are

⁵⁸The Russian formalists in a similar vein spoke of ‘story-stuff,’ the story’s “total world of events.” Norman Petersen, *Literary Criticism for New Testament Critics*, in *Guide to Biblical Scholarship: New Testament Guides*, ed. Dan O. Via, Jr. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 47.

⁵⁹Bartholomew, 136-37.

extremely stable. The signifier ‘cat’ has generally not meant an animal that barks (the signified of ‘dog’). Such a shift would be self-defeating, because language is immanently practical—it communicates.

Communication rests on the stability of words and their definitions. Words may not have absolutely fixed definitions, but they certainly do denote a greater or lesser range of stable meanings in a given historical context. Without this property, communication with words would not be possible! It is up to the author to surround and combine words in a context that appropriately limits and focuses the several possible meanings of words and their somewhat fluid denotations. The fact the translations are possible and documents from thousands of years ago are readable shows that signifiers practically are not problematic. Logically, modern linguistics does not match up with how every day people use language. Language is practical; it is something that man uses to convey meaning and usually quite effectively.⁶⁰

Ultimately, any theory which changes the interpretation of Scripture or its contents, must first be judged by the divine norm itself.⁶¹ A good starting point to discuss words, meaning, and the act of communication is Matthew 12:32-37, where Jesus speaks to the Pharisees about man’s words and their role in Judgment day.

Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or the age to come. Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or else make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for a tree is known by its fruit. Brood of Vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. A good man out of the good treasure brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things. But I say to you that *for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment.* For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.

⁶⁰Amos N. Wilder, *The Bible and The Literary Critic* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991), 35. People have always used reference transparently. When reading a weather report there is no doubt about what is being referred to, there is no need to question its reference or meaning (though perhaps its accuracy). Theory usually goes against common sense understanding, sometimes to its detriment. “Theory is often a pugnacious critique of common-sense notions, and further, an attempt to show that what we take for granted as ‘common sense’ is in fact a historical construction, a particular theory that has come to seem so natural to us that we don’t even see it as theory. As a critique of common sense and exploration of alternative conceptions, theory involves a questioning of the most basic premises or assumptions of literary study, the unsettling of anything that might have been taken for granted: What is meaning? What is an author? What is it to read?” Culler, 4-5.

⁶¹If signifiers are arbitrary and meaningless, verbal inspiration seems helpless to say anything meaningful. It would logically be equivalent to saying that random scratches on a desk are inspired, in that words are marks separate from their signifieds. Voelz, 89.

Words are deadly serious to God, as they should be to man. The post-structuralist penchant for playing with words and texts is not becoming for a Christian. According to God's Word, words are used to say good or bad things which reflect whether one's heart is good or bad. Christ Himself will judge men by their words. The issue is not words theoretically, but how they are used in communication. Words can certainly be abused; Derrida is a prime example of someone who often purposely fails to communicate.⁶²

Content and purpose affect the quality of communication. Derrida writes to emphasize the free play of signifiers and the inability of language to offer stable meaning. C.S. Lewis, on the other hand, wrote concise, clear, and purposeful prose which is a not a chore to read. Authorship, despite the 'intentional fallacy,' requires significant ability and thoughtfulness to communicate well.⁶³ Only when texts are badly written do readers become important.

The abuse of language says nothing about its positive use. Words can be spoken in an idle or empty fashion, but that is a misuse, not a indictment of language in general. Those in the church are called to use language carefully, wisely, and referentially—not to participate in idle, 'meaning'-less talk.⁶⁴ "Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience" (Eph 5:6).

2.2.2 Biblical Unity

Reference also has implications for the canonical unity of the Bible. Redaction criticism allowed for theologies of books or authors, but these theologies differed. Narrative criticism heightens the isolation of each book, by creating self-contained narrative worlds in the mind of each reader. Mark's Jesus is a different character than Luke's Jesus—each character belongs to its textual

⁶²He defines deconstruction: "What deconstruction is not? everything of course? What is deconstruction? nothing of course." It is defined as something that happens (the unraveling of meaning) in texts and reality. Derrida seems to write to prove that texts are only signifiers readers impress their meanings upon. Edgar V. McKnight, "A Sheep in Wolf's Clothing: An Option in Contemporary New Testament Hermeneutics," in *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament*, 326-47, eds. Elizabeth Struthers Malbon and Edgar V. McKnight (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 288.

⁶³Much literature in modern times is meant to get people to think in new ways, to express some feeling or creativity that cannot be directly stated. Only rarely does it strive to relay specific content. It is not coincidental that modern theologians with nothing to say borrow theory from a self-referential discipline that ignores content.

⁶⁴The Greek adjective for idle, *argos*, is used in the parable of vineyard workers for those who are standing around the marketplace not working (Matt 20).

narrative world. If the gospels refer to reality, it will not suffice to read one gospel in complete isolation from the others. The critics employing redaction and narrative methods demolish the unity between them by denying they share a common theology (redaction criticism) or a common world (narrative criticism). In actuality, the gospels claim to tell about the same Jesus of Nazareth.

Narrative criticism is rightly textual, but only in a limited sense. Cross-referencing to other gospels is forbidden in narrative study, that would be trespassing the narrative world's borders. For example, Kingsbury's *Conflict in Mark* has only a handful of biblical references outside of Mark, mainly Old Testament passages that are quoted in Mark. Only one combined reference to Matthew and John, where "sickness can be viewed as symptomatic of sin," is listed in an endnote.⁶⁵ Outside of this, no reference is made to the synoptics or any of the epistles.

To sidestep the issue of how the biblical books relate to one another by making light of harmonization is to capitulate to the error of the times. The gospels were given separately, and from four perspectives they relate the one story of the one Jesus. To treat them as hermeneutically sealed worlds is to have four saviors, not one. The traditional and biblical way of understanding the unity of Scripture is according to the doctrine of inspiration. Biblical unity is in the words themselves, for the words did not come from the will of man, but were given as the writers were moved by the Holy Spirit (II Peter 1:21). If the words are related and united in one divine author who does not err or speak carelessly, the content of Scripture is also unified.⁶⁶ Modern biblical interpretation has not been able to resolve the issue of multiple books written by various men over such a long time. Without inspiration one's theological presuppositions seem to determine what the exegete finds.⁶⁷ Reference between biblical books has been a problem since Semler, and narrative criticism has the most non-referential view of the Bible yet.

⁶⁵Kingsbury, 70, 132.

⁶⁶Only inspiration allows a truly meaningful and contemporary Bible. Without a divine author, the Scriptures can only address a particular historical context, not all people of all times. In narrative criticism the Bible only addresses those who read it, while really it makes statements that affect all.

⁶⁷"To be sure, there was a recognized 'canon in the canon' for a time in certain theological schools, but no solution has been acceptable to any church or even to a generation." Even a christological norm such as "what teaches Christ" or justification, must ultimately set itself as a norm above Scripture, because it sifts through the words of Scripture to find the real Word of God. Maier, 16.

2.3 Truth

One's view of language will affect one's definition of truth. If one takes the post-structuralist stance that there is no access to objective reality apart from language, which has different rules in each game, truth becomes "an internal function of language."⁶⁸ To put it another way, truth is contextual, in one language game something might be 'true,' while in a different one with different assumptions it could be 'false.' In this scheme, even facts are considered contextual or relative to one's game, limited perspective, or reality. The 'referential fallacy' makes it impossible to talk of truth in the universal sense. Biblical literary critics share a similar concept of truth. One book's title summarizes the modern problem of truth: *Truth is Stranger Than it Used to Be*.⁶⁹

2.3.1 Precritical and Post-Critical Interpretations

Culpepper, at the conclusion of his commentary, notes that so-called 'modern man' is not able to hear Scripture as Christians did before the enlightenment. The Bible does not seem to possess the same power, weight, or importance for contemporary man. Yet his solution is quite novel: "When art and history, fiction and truth, are again reconciled we will be able to read the gospel as the author's original audience read it."⁷⁰ Hans Frei's first clarion call to the narrative approach was driven by an urge to recapture the pre-modern and precritical spirit without going back on enlightenment assumptions. Because of this desire to move past mind-numbing scientific precision and traditional liberal theology, he is labeled a post-liberal. Many literary critics consciously realize that historical criticism, for all its bold assertions, has failed to do what it intended—to establish truth scientifically. Those who have struggled to resist the poison of historical criticism can agree with post-liberals: historical criticism is a rationalist approach incompatible with Scripture. A change in the spirit of the times has led even those raised in its rationalist assumptions to honestly critique it. "Ironically, the bid for the freedom of biblical studies from

⁶⁸Grenz, 113-115.

⁶⁹J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth is Stranger Than it Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 1995).

⁷⁰Culpepper, 237.

its perceived slavery to dogmatic theology only led to a prison in the biblical past, filled with the clamor of discordant voices.”⁷¹ Many, in opposition to modernist thought, no longer think that the newest exegesis is necessarily better, as witnessed by a resurgence of interest in the early church fathers. Post-liberals and narrative critics who have given up on the modernist myth of progress, are disillusioned with scientific interpretation, where exegesis is a surgical operation to extract precise meaning from each and every word and phrase.

Based solely on its results, historical criticism is judged by post-liberals to be insufficient for the church. There is a wish that the Bible would function as the source and life of the church, as it did before the enlightenment. Moreover, there is a severe distaste for the long-standing feud between liberals and conservatives, who fight over the Bible’s historicity and scientific accuracy. The desire for theological peace and a literal reading of the Bible without refuting ‘modern man’ and his science requires a new definition of truth. Narrative theologians, including post-liberals like Frei and others connected with the New Yale theology (including George Lindbeck), have no intention of completely rejecting historical criticism. They are as uncomfortable with the assertions of the ‘fundamentalists’ which defend the Bible’s accuracy as those of the liberals which dismiss the ancient worldview. They want the Bible and its literal sense paramount, without a rejection of modernist critical presuppositions. To have it both ways, truth must be redefined. Scripture’s truth is changed with Frei’s ‘history-like’ view of the Scriptures. This ambiguous category is not quite fiction and not quite history.⁷²

Post-liberal, or better yet post-critical, theologians assume the “compatibility of pre-modern narrative interpretation and modern historical-critical study.”⁷³ Some have advocated that historical criticism is a *lower* criticism, a useful but subordinate activity to the exegetical task proper.⁷⁴ The emphasis on the literal sense and a distaste for ‘translating’ the Bible into ex-

⁷¹Green and Turner, “New Testament Commentary and Systematic Theology,” 7.

⁷²Garrett Green, “‘The Bible As . . .’: Fictional Narrative and Scriptural Truth,” in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation: Essays on the Occasion of the Sixty Fifth Birthday of Hans W. Frei*, 79-96, ed. Garrett Green (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 81-82.

⁷³George Lindbeck, “The Story-Shaped Church: Critical Exegesis and Theological Interpretation,” in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation: Essays on the Occasion of the Sixty Fifth Birthday of Hans W. Frei*, 161-78, ed. Garrett Green (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 161.

⁷⁴Historical criticism is said to be about ‘behind-the-text’ issues, and merely preliminary to ‘in-the-text’ and ‘in front-of-the-text’ concerns.

istentialist philosophy distinguishes this program from the *new hermeneutic* and early literary criticism. Where does the post-liberal desire to take the literal sense of Scripture seriously, as the place around which the church gathers, lead? It leads to a very narrow truth, a fictional truth.

How does the post-critical man read the Bible at face value and dodge all distracting questions of reference and accuracy? He reads with “a postcritical naiveté or a postcritical holistic understanding.”⁷⁵ The critic does not remain in the “desert of criticism,” but goes beyond questions of reference with a reading of a second naiveté.⁷⁶ A first naiveté reading would take the Bible as perfectly accurate and unproblematic, as was common in the precritical period. The reading of a second naiveté is to read without a foundation, to take the text’s claims on their own terms, knowing that critically it is probably not objectively accurate. By putting aside questions of reference, post-liberals “become ‘literalists of the second naiveté’—readers whose critical awareness of the fiction-like quality of the text does not prevent them from affirming the truth of the story it tells.”⁷⁷ To achieve precritical innocence, Scripture is mangled and twisted into a ‘true fiction.’⁷⁸ It is to read the Bible *as* God’s Word—which is a completely different matter than to say that the Bible *is* the Word of God.⁷⁹

Truth in this scheme is non-referential, it does not claim to be a complete and universal picture, merely a useful one. To read Scripture *as* true is to treat truth as contextual—one need not say it is true for other people. Lindbeck’s use of this principle with doctrine is illustrative. He applies the linguistic insights of language to dogma, by saying that doctrinal statements only

⁷⁵Dan R. Stiver, “Ricoeur, Speech-act Theory, and the Gospels as History,” in *After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation*, 50-72, eds. Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene, and Karl Moller (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 56.

⁷⁶The narratologist Paul Ricoeur is credited with this concept. *Ibid.*, 56.

⁷⁷Garrett Green, “‘The Bible As . . . ,’” 91.

⁷⁸Representing a characteristic of anti-foundational postmodernity, even scientific theories are often considered “useful fictions.” “The naively realistic view of scientific theories as direct descriptions of reality (‘fact’) has given way to positions that frankly acknowledge the symbolic and relative nature of basic scientific concepts.” Newton’s description of gravity is still taught, but only as a useful fiction. Though it is used and has produced wonderful technology, it is ‘false’ since it breaks down at the atomic level. Underlying ‘useful fictions’ is a recognition that the high objective standards of modernity have not been met. *Ibid.*, 87-88.

⁷⁹Green has an illuminating discourse on the word ‘as.’ He comments on its meteoric rise in popularity, since it implies merely perspectival or analogical knowledge. It is to think with a second naiveté, “construing reality according to a particular vision in full awareness of other options.” It is a non-committal way to speak of reality. *Ibid.*, 86-90.

have meaning in a particular context. Within a community other cultural elements differentially invest ‘absent’ dogmatic formulations with meaning. If doctrinal language is inherently empty, it can be true in multiple ways—it would depend on which sphere it was interpreted in. One can see the ecumenical potential for this view of doctrine. An ambiguously worded document can be construed to what each side means theologically, while the two sides speak the same words. One only need to follow the grammatical rules in one’s own context to have the ‘truth.’⁸⁰ Post-liberals want to have the Bible front and center, without having to incessantly defend it from its critics. Narrative criticism provides the ideal interpretive method for the post-liberal who wants to escape the problem of reference.

2.3.2 Biblical Authority and Accuracy

Post-liberal theology carries the hatred for authority beyond that of the first historical critics.⁸¹ The biblical scholars who freed man from the weight of tradition and authoritative doctrine are now the papacy of scholars, who must be disposed of as oppressive authority figures. Objective claims like authorial intention and even scientific interpretations, are the attempt to master someone else, to exercise authority over them. Narrative criticism’s manoeuvre to undercut the authority of historical criticism is eerily similar to deconstruction.

What view of Scripture does the second naiveté of post-liberalism entail? The Bible is seen as a non-binding, indispensable resource.⁸² It is a non-committal affirmation of Scripture’s possibilities, rather than its essence.⁸³

The error of post-liberalism is not a dissatisfaction with the historical-critical method. It is

⁸⁰Cameron, 216-217.

⁸¹The alternative to completely dismissing the Bible is not “the view of Scripture as an archetype binding and confining Christians to patterns of thought and behavior laid down once for all in the past. Certainly this has been a common view—arguably the standard view throughout most of Christian history—and as such, it has done incalculable harm.” Notice that this denial of authority is not an appeal to reason or even its content, but Scripture’s use and functioning. Charles M. Wood, “Hermeneutics and the Authority of Scripture,” in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation: Essays on the Occasion of the Sixty Fifth Birthday of Hans W. Frei*, 3-20, ed. Garrett Green (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 13.

⁸²Wiles, 51.

⁸³“The Bible cannot be considered to reveal God’s Word unless someone receives this revelation. There is almost something blasphemous about calling a book that lies unopened on a coffee table, ‘the Word of God.’ . . . A better formulation than saying, The Bible is the Word of God, would be to say, The Bible becomes the Word of God in those who receive it.” Powell speaks of Iser’s actualization of the text by the reader. Cf. footnote 155 (page 36). Powell, 98.

the failure to repent of it. Just as 'post-' implies a progression, the postmodern theologian will not go back and assertively reject his error. Instead, he tries to be metacritical of the historical program itself, leading to a weak and ineffective 'true' Bible.

Can truth be only a limited perspective? Not according to the Word of God. In a reprisal of the eighth commandment, Zechariah 8:16 says: "These are the things you shall do: Speak each man the truth to his neighbor; Give judgment in your gates for truth, justice, and peace." Without a common and universal truth between people, the eighth commandment makes no sense: "You shall not bear false testimony against your neighbor." Language must correspond to reality. Propositional language is either true or false for all people.⁸⁴ To call the Bible true, while being open to the possibility of errors, is to speak against the Bible.

Narrative criticism ignores a substantial aspect of the Bible's truth: objective history. Though this method does not deny biblical history explicitly, it treats it as unimportant at best. Calling the Bible 'history-like' is equivalent to calling it true, while refusing to believe what it says. Luke wrote his gospel to make historical events certain, not to offer imaginary characters, a make-believe world, or a limited perspective.

Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed (Luke 1:1-5).

Luke's gospel refers to events which have happened. He speaks not from a limited perspective, but from a "perfect understanding of all things." The purpose of the gospel is to establish and found belief on certainty in Jesus Christ.

⁸⁴Norman Geisler, "The Concept of Truth in the Contemporary Inerrancy Debate," in *The Living and Active Word of God: Studies in Honor of Samuel J. Schultz*, 225-36, eds. Morris Inch and Ronald Youngblood (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 226-236.

3 Consequences of Narrative Criticism

Historical criticism's history is full of painful reminders that no method or interpretive scheme is neutral. The exegete is either bound to the words of Scripture or comes with his own pre-suppositions and finds what he looks for. Perhaps the first hermeneutical principle should be a recognition of the authority of Scripture based on its inspiration. When this is lost, Scripture loses its power to correct, instruct, rebuke, and encourage—it becomes an object of study rather than a living and active power.

Exegetical methods are not just academic devices, they fundamentally alter how the Bible is seen. Often it is the secondary effects of exegesis, the perceptions of the Bible that filter down from the ecclesiastical scholars to the laity, that cause the most damage. It seems hard to fathom an interpretive scheme that does not affect theology and faith. Narrative criticism certainly does.

3.1 Faith

Without reference to the real world and a truth that is valid for everyone, what possibility for faith does a narrative approach to the Scriptures offer? Faith becomes an invitation to think differently about the real world, upon exit from the imaginary one. The 'referential fallacy' rules out factual content that speaks directly about reality. The only influence Scripture can have is to invite the reader to see the world (or better, one's own reality) in a new perspective. "The readers are brought into the narratives; it becomes a context for reflection and action."⁸⁵ A narratively interpreted Bible does not tell one what to believe or how to live before God; it invites and encourages one to think in new ways. Creativity and imagination are the primary characteristics of faith for narrative critics.

The loss of history, propositional statements, and universal truth means that faith is essentially content-less. This faith is similar to the *new hermeneutic's* 'self-understanding' and language-event faith. Modern theology is the story of faith without a basis—a leap into the dark. In the old dogmatic terms, faith as *fides quae creditur*, the faith which one believes in (the

⁸⁵Wood, 13.

content) is tossed out. The other side, the active reliance, the *fides qua creditur*, is all that is left.⁸⁶ St. Paul will deal harshly with this later.

What is an advantage to having a faith that rests on nothing? It is unshakable, in theory. Because of the affirmation of the Bible's history-likeness from the outset, how does one criticize the narrative approach? Historical criticism is not dismissed, nor is the Bible's truthfulness—no stance is taken. The results of narrative criticism are particularly appealing for this reason. Unlike acidic historical criticism, whose scriptural denials are for the most part obvious, narrative criticism leaves open the possibility or even the likelihood of error while never highlighting it. It is approachable, though its positive results are quite deceptive. By building on the foundation of historicism and not repudiating it, narrative critics are just as guilty as historical critics, though their exegesis usually hides this fact. A theological program that is only positive without ever denying error has substituted a lie for the truth of God. Truth is exclusive—it does not admit or condone error. The Israelites were unfaithful if any idols were worshiped in Israel; idolatry was still wrong even if they also worshiped the Lord in a positive fashion.

In essence, narrative criticism is to play a game—one may make the story-world his reality, but only if he desires. There is no outside authority, such as God, who is over the real world or real people. One adopts the rules, norms, and grammar of the narrative world, without having it affect him beyond his imagination. In this mental process, one extricates himself from the real world, safely engaging the story and its pretend world. Narrative exegesis refuses to allow Scripture to speak directly to man. “The attempt to immunize theological assertions against hostile criticism by treating the assertions as aspects of particular, self-referential ‘language games,’ world views, or paradigms,” leads to a faith that is based on a signifier without a signified.⁸⁷ If no theological assertion can ever be incorrect and deemed false by Scripture, then how can the Bible ever speak what is true? To deny the possibility of error is simultaneously to deny the possibility of truth. No biblical story can overcome the fictive model and break into reality—it goes against the rules

⁸⁶ “A further result of this [narrative] approach is that it will no longer be possible for the church to pronounce on some issues of traditional Christian doctrine in a way that has seemed important to the church in the past to be able to do. . . . So the understanding of Scripture outlined here makes it impossible to speak of the virginal conception or the bodily resurrection of Christ in the definite way that has been thought requisite in the past.” Wiles, 54-55.

⁸⁷ Garrett Green, “The Bible As . . . ,” 91.

of the game. A better, biblical paradigm is needed.

3.2 A Biblical Foundation: I Corinthians 15

St. Paul has some powerful words of God for these times. He writes in I Corinthians:

¹Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which you also received and in which you stand, ²by which you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you have believed in vain. ³For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received; that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴and that He was buried, and that He rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. ⁶After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. ⁷After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. ⁸Then last of all He was seen by me also, as one born out of due time.

... ¹²Now if Christ is preached that He has been raised from the dead, how do some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. ¹⁴And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. ¹⁵Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up—if in fact the dead do not rise. ¹⁶For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. ¹⁷And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! ¹⁸Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable (15:1-8, 12-19).

Paul preached to the Corinthians, and in his words he delivered the content of the Christian faith and it was received. Modern linguistics does not like to speak of speech transporting propositional content like one would mail a letter, nevertheless it happened in Paul's preaching. Salvation is received by faith, but faith stands on the preached word and its content. Faith without a foundation, here the resurrection of Christ, is "futile" (15:17). Christians stand on the doctrinal content of the faith, the *fides quae*.

In verses three and four, Paul enumerates the content of the Christian faith. These three phrases are propositions, statements of fact that are universally either true or false. His argument later rests on the case that these are non-negotiable, they cannot be denied without also losing salvation. These propositions are objectively valid, apart from anyone's individual observation: that Jesus died, was buried, and rose again. These statements are both factual and historical.

To establish the historical facts Paul lists scores of eyewitnesses, some of whom were alive for verification at the time I Corinthians was written. This passage uses just about every device possible to ensure that it cannot be construed as only an internal literary reference aimed at the imagination.

Paul has no concept of language games. A simple statement, ‘there is no resurrection,’ even if not intentionally meant to undermine Christianity, does in fact destroy faith. As a general proposition, it implies that Christ did not rise, since that is a specific case of the general assertion. The content of the faith, that Christ died for sins and rose, has universal validity, so that it conflicts with any statement by any person denying resurrection in general. Reference is in full force in the Bible.

Paul lays out beautifully the logic of propositions and language’s capability of external reference in verses twelve through nineteen. If the fact of Christ’s resurrection is untrue, if it did not take place and was not observable in time, preaching and faith are empty. Here, the failure of most modern theological language to matter is uncovered by Paul—without a historical basis Christianity has no power or content. Historical and narrative criticism have both failed according to Scripture’s standard. That is not to say history alone counts for everything, Paul here talks of preaching and faith too, but a *denial* of history renders these void.

If certain Corinthians are right, then the character of Paul’s preaching and theology changes also. Though Paul meant well, if the statement ‘there is no resurrection’ is true, then his preaching was in fact false—he was lying about God. His good intentions and efforts were for naught and his words were idle and deceptive, if what he said was not true. Paul makes it abundantly clear that without a physical resurrection on Easter morning, all Christian talk becomes meaningless, as meaningless as post-structuralists with their unstable signifiers.

3.3 Theology

Compare the seriousness of Paul to a modern hermeneutical attempt to synthesize diachronic and synchronic methods: There are three aspects of a biblical text: historical, structural, and theological; “by *theological* aspect is meant that the biblical texts contain statements about God

and man with specific soteriological and theological implications. Whether the interpreter identifies with these implications or not, the nature of the text—or to put it differently, the language game being played here—must be acknowledged and respected if an adequate interpretation is the aim.”⁸⁸ A faulty theory of language and a denial of the content of the Christian faith have rendered most contemporary theological talk play. Paul thought that souls were at stake in his words and that he would have to give an account for them. Theology, the content of preaching, determines the eternal fate of men—a most serious matter.

Kurt Marquart condemned contemporary theology as “fundamental frivolity, which endlessly weaves, unweaves, and reweaves various word-patterns, which, however ingenious, do not ultimately bind anyone to anything.”⁸⁹ Theology was not meant to be a game. It has a practical aim: to save sinners. Modern man has not progressed beyond death, sin, or God.

Theology can almost be judged solely on how it is spoken. The question is: does the significance of a theological statement reside in the signifier only, or are words used to communicate specific content about reality? This is a criterion which cuts to the heart of the issue. Is theology merely a game, or does it have a reference, serve a purpose, and mean something for people in the real world?

One theologian, though fundamentally wrong, should be thanked for his honesty in describing the typical theological approach in postmodern times. John Goldingay speaks of finding theological significance in secular movies and trivial pop songs. He often ponders “about its significance, about its insight on life and God.”⁹⁰ All literature and movies have an “implicit theology,” according to Goldingay.⁹¹ Most theologians probably make these high-level symbolic connections, and it is not wrong.

The interesting thing is that he says interpreting the Scriptures is exactly the same: “The

⁸⁸Lategan and Vorster, 5.

⁸⁹Marquart quotes a physicist who indicts theologians by saying, “I infer that the typical American theologian/religious studies professor has never seriously thought about the resurrection of the dead.” Kurt Marquart, “The ‘Realist Principle’ of Theology,” in *Doctrine is Life: Essays on Justification and the Lutheran Confessions*, ed. Klemet Preus (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 369-70.

⁹⁰John Goldingay, “Biblical Narrative and Systematic Theology,” in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology*, 123-42, eds. Joel B. Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 127.

⁹¹Ibid.

teasing out of their religious and theological implications is inherent in their exegesis.” “Narrative is by nature open-ended, allusive, and capable of embracing questions and ambiguity.”⁹² ‘Teasing’ theological significance out of a movie is the same as biblical exegesis. The basic confusion is in the word ‘theology’—does it mean a acquiring a new worldview, self-understanding, and unique way of looking at the world, or is it speaking God’s words to man? Movies, literature, and art can affect the imagination and widen perspectives, as well as the Bible. But only the Bible contains concrete facts, doctrine, and history which are foundational and non-negotiable for salvation. A deeper or more significant perspective on life is not theological, by the Bible’s definition. Paul’s lofty talk of the significance of the resurrection and the Second Adam for all men becomes cheap lies without the historical fact of Christ’s resurrection.

The theological task is to speak the words of God, following the pattern of sound words, as recorded in Scripture. The words of God are found reliably nowhere else. In Scripture there are direct statements of fact about God, sin, and salvation through Jesus. Theology is to tell how things are from God’s perspective—which is unchanging and objective. It is to speak of reality with assertions. If theology does not correspond to what is real, “then it is false theology.”⁹³ To speak of theological significance and subtle motifs of Scripture is not the same as speaking the truth and being able to buttress one’s theology with ‘it is written.’ Even Jesus was satisfied to simply quote the Old Testament to oppose religious leaders and Satan, He did not need to go beyond the words of Scripture. Theological significance and meaning are easy to toss around, they do not require a commitment to the truth. Biblical assertions, on the other hand, anchor faith solidly on the truth.

⁹²“Authority, revelation, and inspiration are not well suited to bring out the theological status of a body of Scriptures that is dominated by narrative (they suit the Quran and the Book of Mormon rather better).” Ibid., 126-27, 132.

⁹³Klemet Preus, ed., *Doctrine is Life: Essays on Justification and the Lutheran Confessions* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 23. Today a ‘theological’ interpretation of something is code for an explicit denial of reference, usually history. A ‘theological interpretation of Genesis 1-11’ means a non-historical interpretation, a strategy to get meaning from something that is not factually true. This is problematic for theology. For example: original sin is not just a theological concept, it is a reality affecting everyone as a result of the disobedience in Genesis 3. Here this exact point is affirmed, though from the other side: “A mythological understanding of the story of the Fall in Genesis has made it impossible to affirm a doctrine of original sin which will any longer function as an explanation of the presence of evil in God’s world.” Without a historical foundation theology becomes word games. Wiles, 54-55.

Conclusion

Secular “literary critics themselves have rarely treated the gospels as narratives which have a place in the history of western literature.”⁹⁴ They have had better judgment than recent biblical critics, perceiving that the gospels were not intended to be just literature in the strictly artistic sense. The Scriptures are rooted in a specific history and make historical, factual, and absolute truth claims. To ignore all this and treat them as fiction is dishonest and not faithful to the Scriptures’ own purposes.

One’s exegetical method and starting point must also be judged against the norm of Scripture. Before the Bible is prematurely put into the genre of fiction, one must observe its own special claims. Narrative criticism suffers from the same disease as postmodernism: a self-centered hyper-criticism which rules out any authority in one’s reality by definition, though subtly cloaked with an innocent and open-minded second naiveté. This self-absorbed relativism, which revels in words without saying anything, is antithetical to the gospel. It is hard to imagine narrative criticism in an age other than the present one. Narrative critics wish to escape the relativism of prior rational, scientific historicism, without having the courage or resolve to refute it. Narrative criticism solves none of the problems of historical criticism, but builds even higher on its shaky and sandy foundation. This new methodology reminds of the warning concerning those who are always learning, but never able to assert the truth (II Timothy 3:7).

The appeal and simplicity of the narrative approach make it at least as dangerous as historical criticism. That is not to say that the form of Scripture is unimportant. Narrative as a form is significant, there is more to faith than propositional assertions, as displayed in rich Christian hymnody and powerful preaching. Yet there is only one story of Jesus and it is true in the fullest sense of the word—Christianity stands or falls on this. The nuggets of positive narrative exegesis are couched in menacing assumptions; the alteration of reference, truth, and faith all undermine the gospel. If all are to be held accountable for idle words, the man who speaks of God must use his words with the utmost care and consideration. The times call for a confession that the words of Scripture given by the Spirit are true, not in an abstract or limited way, but that they are

⁹⁴Culpepper, 10.

factual, historical, and meaningful for the present day. Only then will the gospel be a powerful story of Jesus, the only true story.

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