

# RHETORICAL CRITICISM IN BIBLICAL STUDIES\*

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Following a brief introduction to the rediscovered, if not reinvented discipline of rhetorical analysis in biblical exegesis, section 1 offers a quick overview of the long and chequered history of rhetorical criticism and its relation to biblical hermeneutics. Section 2 highlights the main features of the modern theories and practices of rhetorical criticism that differ in various degrees from rhetorical traditions since late antiquity; this section will conclude with brief comments on why the new rhetorical criticism presents itself as more than only one method among others, its relation to other exegetical methods, and why it has its own integrity. Sections 3 and 4 examine the two sides of one coin: in section 3, the constitutive relation between rhetoric and religion; in section 4, the inescapable relation between rhetoric and shared scholarship. In these final two sections the focus is on the ubiquity of rhetoric not only in all parts of sacred scriptures, but also at the core of critical scholarship: in exegesis and theology no less so than in all forms of shared and responsible scholarship.

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*Introduction: Rhetoric as the Trojan Horse Inside the Gates of Biblical Exegesis*

Since early Patristic times rhetoric and biblical exegesis coexisted uneasily; at times in harmony; at other times in conflict. Only at the end of the 20th century, the end of the modern era and the beginning of the postmodern era, do we witness, for the first time in Christian history, the application of rhetorical analysis and interpretation to (a) whole biblical documents; (b) the Bible (the canon) as a whole, facing up to what modern literary theory calls attention to as the rhetoricity of the Bible; and (c) the rhetorical nature of shared scientific biblical scholarship.

Modern rhetorical criticism came into its own mainly in the USA about the time James Muilenburg (1969) gave his presidential address in 1968 before the Society of Biblical Literature in praise of rhetorical criticism as method. We witnessed the rise of a Muilenburg school of rhetorical criticism, mainly in studies of the Hebrew Bible. Betz's SNTS lecture of 1974, followed by his commentary on Galatians (Betz, 1975, 1979), and Wuellner's (1976) early work on Paul, generated a similar interest in rhetorical criticism as method for New Testament studies. Despite his declared openness to new methods, Berger (1977:42–58) approached rhetoric in exegesis also in generally traditional terms. The studies of Kennedy (1984), Classen (1991), and others seek to anchor the method in some rhetorical theory arising from the rich cultural matrix of the history of rhetoric in western culture(s). By comparison, there is still relatively little attention paid to rhetoric traditions in nonwestern cultures, such as early Jewish rabbinic rhetoric. The rhetoric features in the Hebrew Bible have been well explored, at times even more so than the New Testament, but that has finally balanced out.

In its revitalized form, rhetorical criticism today is not the same as we know it throughout most of Christian history. Traditional rhetorical criticism was mostly concerned with method – a concern still very much with us and widely used, oftentimes synonymously with, and indistinguishable from, literary criticism, stylistics, form criticism, discourse analysis, text linguistics, speech act theory, reader response criticism, and the like. But only in our generation has rhetorical criticism come to be applied systematically to whole documents, moreover assuming a central place and focus in scholarly commentaries, rather

than playing the more or less marginal role to which nearly all exegetes had become accustomed. In the early 19th century one could still witness the publication of monograph-size handbooks on New Testament rhetoric designed as complements, or supplements, to handbooks on grammar and syntax. But by the end of the 19th century only books on grammar and syntax were on demand, with rhetorical aspects of the biblical texts subsumed under syntax. Rhetoric was in a veritable exile.

By the end of the 20th century rhetoric returned from its centuries-long exile. Rhetoric has returned, but with force and with stealth. The Trojan Horse inside the gates of the exegetical establishment confronted us with a critical study of texts as rhetoric, or textual, literary rhetoric. As we will see in the following section, this confrontation had a long history which reaches back to the early Common Era. This newly confronted study was determined by the basic perception of the discipline of rhetoric, ancient or modern, as the critical study of two interrelated aspects: (a) the text's discursive techniques, and (b) the functioning of these techniques employed to provoke, or to increase, the support of minds, on the part of the readers, to the action presented for approval. What has paralyzed and nearly obliterated rhetorical criticism is the preoccupation with the first of these two aspects at the expense of the second. It may be necessary to distinguish the two aspects in theory; but it is disastrous to separate the two, in theory or practice. The same disaster overcame biblical hermeneutics when it first distinguished between interpretation and application, and finally separated the two, to the detriment of both. Hermeneutics and rhetorics suffered from the same cultural malaise.

Rhetorical criticism still faces the same challenges it has faced throughout its checkered history: how to combine and balance these two aspects. For the last four hundred years we have seen in Western culture mostly gross imbalance and witnessed the devastating results of breaking up the combination of the two aspects. Without a clear position on rhetorical *theory*, the currently revived interest in rhetorical criticism as *method* will not help us in freeing rhetoric within biblical exegesis from the debased state it endured for so long, oftentimes unwittingly.

But the Trojan Horse inside the gates of the exegetical establishment forces us also to re-evaluate the very foundations of modern critical exegesis as a scientific enterprise, as scientific scholarship in the context of the validating communities of our modern learned societies and their

supportive agents: the literary industrial complexes of publishers and computer technologies. At this level, rhetorical criticism is focused not on the biblical text, but on the texts of biblical scholarship and their claims of objective, neutral, rationally convincing truth.

The rhetoric *in* the Bible, and *of* the Bible, challenges us to think in new ways of the constitutive relationship between religion and rhetoric, which means for Kennedy (1984:158): "All religious systems are rhetorical" (see also Warner, 1989). The rhetoric *in* biblical scholarship, and *of* biblical scholarship, challenges us to think in new ways of the constitutive relationship between the truth claims of modern sciences and their critical accountability to the validating society and culture (Stamps, 1989; Jasper, 1993). It was Gadamer's verdict (1967:117) "Erst durch (Rhetorik) wird Wissenschaft zu einem gesellschaftlichen Faktor des Lebens(only through rhetoric does science become a social factor in our lives)."

### *1. The History of Rhetoric in Relation to Biblical Hermeneutics*

There is a long and chequered history to the close relationship between rhetorical criticism and biblical exegesis ever since the beginning of the common era. During this history one can observe many continuities of rhetorical critical conventions, especially in the area of rhetorical criticism as method or stylistics. But one can note also significant discontinuities and new beginnings. The history of rhetoric in Western culture (and presumably also in nonwestern cultures) has been, on the whole, "the history of a continuing art undergoing revolutionary changes" (McKeon, 1987:20). How the history of these revolutionary changes impacted the history of biblical exegesis has just begun to be studied in more systematic and less haphazard ways, by both Christian and Jewish scholars, and will require many more critical studies in years to come.

#### *1.1 Late Antiquity*

Beginning with the very first generation of Christian writings we witness competing representatives of the faith, each side being informed by competing rhetorical traditions (Betz, 1986; Forbes, 1986; Quaquarelli, 1971; Young, 1989; Cameron, 1991).

(1) One of the most important contributions of recent scholarship in the history of rhetoric is the realization that, contrary to all appearances,

especially those in ancient rhetorical textbooks (or of modern interpretations of ancient textbooks, such as the often quoted Lausberg, 1960; cf. the synoptic history of classical rhetoric by Murphy, 1983 [revised 1994]), there never did exist a homogeneous system of classical rhetoric. Instead, we find an ongoing and unresolved struggle in the role of rhetoric in the institutional structures of society, in education, in the courts, in politics, in religious communities. Isocrates' fight against the sophists on the one hand, and the Academy on the other (Cahn, 1987), or Cicero's efforts of vindicating anew the merits of rhetoric (Classen, 1985; Swearingen, 1991:132–174), are two examples from antiquity; but the struggle continued right up to modern times.

The institutionalization of rhetoric as part of the educational system (*paideia*) as one of the three "liberal arts" (the *trivium* of grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric) encouraged the notion, consolidated by centuries of scholarship, that classical rhetoric was a more or less fixed "system." Rhetoric was taught, if not practiced (as grammar and philosophy were so taught), namely as a closed system whose rules were easily teachable and passed on, like dogmatic truths in a catechism. However, only recently have we come to appreciate the realization that "classical" rhetoric and its legacy consisted of a wide diversity of theories and practices, each "more or less defined by ... values and functions of culture" (Kennedy, 1980:8). This is an important observation when it comes to the developments of Judaism and Christianity in the light of changes from Greek to Roman culture, or from Republican Rome to Imperial Rome.

(2) Another important contribution of modern scholarship in the history of rhetoric is this very point just quoted from Kennedy. That rhetoric could depend on "a common value set as criteria for selecting .. the ... means for resolving common problems" confronting society (Cushman–Tompkins, 1980:51), was valid for Hellenistic and Roman cultures. But that common set of values was challenged in the cultural conflict between "Athens and Jerusalem," for Judaism and Christianity alike. Despite their respective cultural accommodations and acculturations, both Judaism and Christianity, each in its own way, and as legacy of their loyalties to their respective Scripture and its rhetoric, cultivated a critical counter-rhetoric (Robbins, 1993). This conflict was partly one between Hellenistic–Roman antiquity and Judaism or Christianity respectively; it was partly also a clash of indigenous national cultures resisting the homogenizing forces of imperial (cultural, political,

racial) ideologies (Cameron, 1991; Wuellner, 1994). The later reform movements in medieval and modern Christian and Jewish traditions extend this conflict down to our times. The modern rhetorical critic of biblical texts has learned to discern the common value sets embodied in biblical texts as premises of arguments for the vindication and affirmation of divine truths, but not of cultural ideologies. It is this aspect which forces rhetorical criticism to be genuinely, and constructively, *critical* (see also below on rhetoric and religion, and rhetoric of biblical scholarship).

Kennedy (1984:8–19) found historical justification for approaching the New Testament in terms of Greek and Roman ideas of rhetoric in the ubiquity of rhetoric in antiquity. But other critics point out that "classical rhetoric was developed to account for discourse in a different, and perhaps simpler, social context" (Miller, 1989:112); they challenge us to reevaluate efforts that would simply aim at restoring the original domain of classical rhetoric (for critical comments, see Spira, 1989; Wifstrand, 1967; Young, 1989).

(3) Modern scholars are increasingly aware of the intimate relation between rhetorics and hermeneutics since late antiquity through the Middle Ages down to the early stages of the 16th century Reformation — and counter-reformation (Eden, 1987; Evans, 1980, 1984, 1985; for more on this intimate relationship, see Gadamer, 1967; Hyde/Smith, 1979; Magass, 1985; Mailloux, 1985; Mosdt, 1984; Rickman, 1981; Schrag, 1986; Todorov, 1975; Wuellner, 1989).

### 1.2 *Middle Ages, Humanism, Renaissance, Reformation, Counter-Reformation.*

Rhetoric continued to play a crucial role in the interpretation of the Bible, whether as part of the traditional *lectio divina*, or as part of the *via moderna* cultivated by the emerging European universities beginning in the 12th century (Evans, 1980, 1984, 1985).

(1) One of the developments that affected sacred and secular hermeneutics was the virtual identification of poetics and rhetorics in the Renaissance (Vickers, 1987). Kennedy called this phenomenon "letteraturizzazione" which signifies "the tendency of rhetoric to shift its focus from persuasion to narration, from civic to personal contexts, and from discourse to literature, including poetry" (Kennedy, 1980:5).

This shift and subsequent bifurcation into what Kennedy calls "primary" and "secondary" rhetoric is still operative in distinctions between "'rhetoric' as a *kind* of text and 'rhetoric' as a *function* of texts of any kind" (Chatman, 1989:48).

(2) Another development, with consequences still affecting us today, is the emergence of (a) the study of culturally indigenous rhetorics in the wake of the vernacular movements in the late Middle Ages, and (b) the ensuing conflict between Western rhetorics (whether Greek or Latin, or the vernacular versions) and non-Western rhetorics. The latter was experienced in two ways: In the clash between (a) Greek or Latin and Hebrew (Rabinowitz, 1985), and (b) European cultures (including the Jewish diaspora) and the conquering Arab, Moslem culture (Vickers, 1988:473 n 44 and Hamori, 1988:348 for literature). Colonial and missionary expansion led to the imposition of Western rhetorics on non-Western cultures, but also the first awareness of alternative theories and practices of rhetoric (Garrett, 1991).

(3) A third and fateful development of rhetoric in the 16th century — anticipated by the 15th century humanists (Vasoli, 1968) — was the educational reform advocated by Peter Ramus which affected exegesis profoundly for centuries (Meerhoff, 1986). Ramism influenced biblical exegesis at the very time that missionaries went world-wide to found Western centers of learning. Ramism's effect was the institutionalization of the bifurcation, i.e. the separation of the study of thought or content from the study of form or feeling. Ever since we have remained preoccupied in the West with theology (and ethics) at the expense of religion and imagination.

(4) During this period a fourth development became influential and has remained so ever since: alongside the prevailing traditional concerns with the rhetoric of the Bible as a whole, there arose, as early as the second half of the sixteenth century, an interest in the distinctive features of the rhetoric to be found in individual books or authors. The rhetoric of Paul was compared and contrasted with that of the Paulinists or of John; with the rise of historical criticism the rhetoric of primitive Christianity was contrasted with that of early Patristic age.

### *1.3 Neglect and Death of Rhetorics in the 18th–19th Centuries*

It may be more than coincidence that with the rise of historical (i.e. scientific or modern) criticism rhetoric became marginalized to the

point of near extinction or at least increasing irrelevance, in contrast to its 1500 year-long central importance to exegesis. From Melanchthon in the early 16th century to Johann August Ernesti, the German Cicero, in the 18th century, some distinctive professors of biblical exegesis came to occupy simultaneously also university chairs in rhetoric. But not any more in the late 18th century and beyond! Other towering figures of the 18th century were Rollin in France, Vico in Italy, Mayans in Spain, Campbell in Scotland. But with the Age of Enlightenment rhetoric became a problem (Göttert, 1991: 170–77).

Vickers explained the near eclipse of rhetorical studies since 1750 as due to the post-Romantic hostility to rhetoric (see also Barilli). Whatever the cause(s) of this eclipse, the records of studies published speak for themselves: for more than two centuries, down to the 20th century, publications of exegetical works dealing with Scripture's rhetoric became increasingly sporadic, despite the lingering realization that the Bible was full of rhetoric (see e.g. Alkier, 1993, Index: Rhetorik).

It may also be more than coincidence that, at the very time we hear pronouncements about the decline and end of the hegemony of historical criticism, we witness the renaissance of rhetoric.

#### *1.4 Renaissance and Reinvention of Rhetoric Today.*

In our generation the renaissance of rhetorical studies in biblical exegesis was greatly influenced by four distinguished classicists: A. Wifstrand in Sweden, W. Jens and C. J. Classen in Germany, and G.A. Kennedy in the USA. There have been more books, dissertations, and essays published related to rhetorical criticism of biblical texts in the decade of the 1980's than in several centuries prior to this! But the legacies of the past are still with us and haunt us. All is not well with rhetorical criticism today as it faces up to its massive task of defining, or redefining, its proper domain.

(1) One of the main features of modern rhetoric is its focus on the practical intentions, or practical force with motivating action, as constitutive of rhetorical discourse. This is the concern for the text's "rhetorical situation" or its intentionality or exigency (Brinton, 1981; Scott, 1980). Biblical texts (like any other text or rhetorical discourse) are approached as having arisen in response to practical problems, i.e. problems about what to do (Cushman/Tompkins, 1980:52–3), or the problem of the disposition toward action to be taken.



(2) Another feature is the recognition of the text's rationality. Kennedy spoke of the "striking result" of his study of New Testament rhetoric which was the "recognition of the extent to which forms of logical argument are used in the New Testament" (Kennedy, 1984:159). For Cushman and Tompkins this rationality of rhetorical discourse makes readers/interpreters "recognize the rhetorical exigencies confronting them (and) understand the relationships between such exigencies, audiences, and the constraints involved." Moreover, such rationality lets readers/interpreters not only discern the possible ends and all the available means for achieving the ends, but also examine "the best ends and the most efficient means for achieving them" (Cushman/Tompkins, 1980:53–4). Modern rhetoric, which is more than the revival of classical or traditional rhetoric, had one of its pioneers in Perelman and his school (Perelman, 1969; Meyer, 1986) with a strong focus on the rationality employed in rhetorical argumentation — including the rationality of emotion (De Sousa, 1987) — as distinct from logical demonstration. Another pioneer, indigenous to the USA, is Kenneth Burke, a towering figure strangely ignored by Barilli's otherwise excellent study. Unlike Perelman, who emphasized the rationality in rhetorical argumentation, i.e. the *convincing* aspect (see also Toulmin's work), Burke emphasized more the *persuasive* aspects, i.e. the audience's experience of identification through transformation (see Conley, 1990: 268–77 on Burke; 291–95 on Toulmin; 296–99 on Perelman).

(3) A third feature that distinguishes modern rhetorical criticism belongs to the efforts of what Eagleton (1983:205–6) sees as the reinvention of rhetoric, or what Bakhtin (1981:267) saw as part of the mandate of restoring rhetoric "to all its ancient rights." This feature focuses on the biblical "discursive practices" and "grasping (them) as forms of power and performance" or "as forms of *activity* inseparable from the wider social relations between writers and readers" (Eagleton).

## 2. Rhetorical Criticism: Theory and Method

### 2.1 Theories of Rhetorical Criticism

(1) A theory based on *traditional* rhetoric was outlined by Kennedy (1985:3–38). It features some diachronic and one or two synchronic or holographic aspects of rhetorical criticism (see outline in Wuellner, 1987:455–58).

Its main features are: (a) Definition and selection of rhetorical unit(s); (b) identification of the intentionality or the rhetorical situation(s) and of rhetorical genre; (c) discernment of the argumentative arrangement or disposition; (d) the analysis of the techniques of argumentation, i.e. the stylistic means employed for the intended action; and (e) assessing the interaction of all these elements and components as a whole which is supposed to be argumentatively and persuasively coherent, and as a whole said to be more significant than the sum total of its parts. A similar traditional theory of rhetoric is operative in the works of Betz (1979), Jewett (1986), Hughes (1989), Watson (1988), and others.

(2) A theory based on *modern* rhetoric would follow one of several lines: 1. the Anglo-American theories of argumentation, sharpened by the reception of Perelman's *New Rhetoric* (for application to Pauline studies, see Wuellner, 1986:54–72; Wire, 1990); 2. the Continental theories of literary rhetoric (for Bakhtin, see Reed, 1993; for Genette see Harlos, 1986); 3. the largely American theories of rhetoric as part of social science hermeneutics (Dillon, 1986; Lachmann, 1977; Podlowski, 1982; applied to exegesis, see Robbins, 1993). More eclectic in their approaches are Mack (1989) and Moore (1989). Johanson (1987) works with a combination of text linguistics and rhetoric, as advocated also by Siegert (1985).

The impact of Western theories of rhetoric, old or new, on non-Western rhetoric (and vice versa) began first to be explored in the wake of World War Two (see Oliver, 1971). Biblical exegetes in non-Western cultures have yet to face the task of relating their work to the rhetorical traditions of their own respective cultures in addition to the equally taxing task of freeing themselves from the shackles of a Western "rhetoric restrained". We have, at long last, numerous studies available on the challenges of non-Western rhetoric to students familiar only with Western rhetoric (on Asian rhetoric, see Garrett, 1991), but to this day only a few books or essays are in print that explore the relation of biblical rhetoric (Jewish and Christian) to an established rhetorical non-Western culture (for Asian rhetoric and exegesis, see Yeo, 1994).

## 2.2 *Four Features of Modern Theories and Practices of Rhetorical Criticism*

Before outlining the features, it may be helpful to distinguish the two senses in which rhetorical criticism has come to be used: (1) the

rhetoric *in* a given biblical text as the overt and discernible intentionality and appeal of the text, regardless of the text type or literary genre, but fully cognizant of the difference between *literary* genres and *rhetorical* genres; and (2) the rhetoric *of* a given biblical text, where rhetoric stands for that aspect of the text which readers experience as a whole which is more than the sum total of its parts. It is here, in what Eagleton called the text's discursive practices, that biblical texts get experienced as forms of power, or text as an integral act of communication and appeal to action (or disposition to action). In the latter sense, rhetoricity becomes synonymous with textuality (Winqvist, 1987; Wuellner, 1993) and with literacy (Swearingen, 1991).

I have selected the following features of modern theories and practices of rhetorical criticism:

(1) "The turn toward argumentation" (Mack, 1989), defined not just in terms of its persuasive intent, but more pointedly in terms of argumentation's practical force, i.e. in terms of commitment or action (Perelman, 1969: 11–62), and in religious rhetoric as "the goadings of mystery" (see below on rhetoric and religion). The designation of arguments as a text–type distinct from narrative and description, with each of the text–types ready to be "of service" to each of the others (Chatman, 1991), is misleading, for we have come to analyze even, indeed especially, religious narrative as narrative rhetoric, or as rhetorical narrative (Sternberg, 1985; Fisher, 1987), as well as religious poetry (Alter, 1985; Fisch, 1988), prayers and liturgies (Palinkas, 1989; Quaquarelli, 1960). The same goes for legal texts (Fish, 1989; Lenchak, 1993).

(2) The social, cultural, ideological values imbedded in the argument's premises, *topoi*, and hierarchies (e.g. old and wise as superior to young and foolish; civilized vs. primitive; culture vs. nature; maleness as strong and rational vs. femaleness as weak and emotional; etc). It is in this area that rhetorical critics operate as culture critics, whether conceived as imaginative criticism, practical criticism, or ideological criticism (Bible and Culture Collective, 1995).

(3) The rhetorical or stylistic techniques (Perelman, 1969:185–502) are seen as means to an end, and not as merely formal, decorative features, or ends in themselves. Alter (1989:77–205) calls them the modalities of literary expression which are accessible to analytic

attention. This includes the concerns for the work's structure, disposition, and argumentative coherence. The *functional* aspects of these "techniques," as the formal resources of literary expression in the service of intentional writing and reading, are highlighted in recent works on linguistic criticism (Fowler, 1986). For applications to New Testament grammar and syntax, see Snyman (1988), Porter (1989), and others.

### *2.3 The Dialectic between Modern and Postmodern Rhetorical Criticism*

One way of characterizing the difference between modern and postmodern approaches to rhetoric is the perception of texts. In most traditional and modern rhetorics, texts merely express and transmit knowledge, social relations, and the self, in contrast to the postmodern notion of texts by which knowledge, social relations and the self get *constituted*. In the latter case rhetoric is more concerned about the substance of social belief; in the former more about the forms of the text.

The dialectic between modern and postmodern rhetorical criticism is determined by two forces at work in our midst: on the one hand, the continuing commitment to scientific scholarship (employing whatever "science" seems suitable for the various components of a science of rhetoric); on the other hand, the discontinuous effect of postmodernism's critique of presumed objective scientific neutrality, and the effects of the politics of scientific interpretation (P.J. Rabinowitz, 1987:173–231; Wilshire, 1990. See also below on the rhetoric of biblical scholarship; Stamps, 1992).

The area where this dialectic has been felt most keenly is in the difference with which feminist criticism has been handling the subversive power of such rhetorical text-types as narrative or argument (Johnson, 1980; Bal, 1987; for a critique, see Alter, 1989:221–227). For Alter, as for Frye (1981:199–233), the Bible's rhetoric accounts for "multiple readings and the bog of indeterminacy" (Alter, 1989:206–238). The postmodern approach to rhetoric offers ways of dealing critically with the Bible's subversive power.

### *2.4. Why Rhetorical Criticism is More than only Method*

As method, rhetorical criticism comes into focus primarily on *one* issue: The text's potential to persuade, to engage the imagination and

will, or the text's symbolic inducement. The appeal of rhetorical criticism over other methods lies in its promise of explaining the text's power (Kennedy, 1984:158). Two interrelated aspects inform the practice of rhetorical criticism. The method has to account for *two* constraints: the constraints which the text imposes on the reader, and the constraints which the reader and the very materiality of reading impose on the text.

(1) There are the two interrelated aspects of rhetorical theory — the text as artifact and its textual function(s) — at the level of the text as analyzable object, with all its textual constraints. This includes the materiality or technology of its medium: oral or visual; cheirographic, typographic, or electrographic, holographic. What distinguishes rhetorical theory from text theory and literary theory is the priority of concerns for the text's intentionality to "move" the reader.

Rhetorical criticism as method approaches the text, at *this* level, as a construct with a persuasive intentionality that has its own integrity, coherence, and textual constraints as a rhetorical unit, with a discernible beginning and ending, connected by some argument (Kennedy, 1984:34). The textual strategy or argumentative coherence of a given text reflects the chosen embedded rhetorical situation(s).

The multifarious context in which every text is embedded is only partially analyzable in terms of social and cultural codes to be found in every text–type, as in all language use. Rhetorical criticism redefines the problem of reference by virtue of "its reliance on community, convention, and persuasion" (Miller, 1989:114). What distinguishes rhetorical criticism as a method from literary criticism is this context–factor.

Traditionally rhetorical criticism as method is almost exclusively concerned with the textual constraints *while* reading. This is the indispensable "rhetorical analysis of the most vigilant and patient sort" (Miller, 1989:81). Vigilance and patience with the text have led us to distinguish between text and context. We are facing the task of "mediation between the rhetorical study of literature ... and the now so irresistibly attractive study of the extrinsic relations of literature." Like the interpretation of any other imaginative literature, exegesis of Scripture brings us to an encounter with something which, though embedded within a *literary* (as distinct from *ordinary*) language, cannot be reduced to historical, sociological, or psychological methods of interpretation

(Miller, 1989:81). These methods have their own validity, but the realm of rhetoric has its own integrity which became increasingly compromised during the last 2 to 3 centuries.

Traditionally rhetorical critics distinguished between the convincing and persuasive dimensions of texts as argument (Perelman, 1969:26–31). For biblical exegesis that means the distinction between convincing textual argumentation that presumes to gain the adherence of every believer (with belief defined by norms of culture) and persuasive textual argumentation which only claims validity for believers/readers in special rhetorical (not just *historical*) situations.

The experiential dimension, on which most literary works turn (Alter, 1989:206), or the text's power (Kennedy), cannot be reduced then to the study of the textual constraints through which that power, that experiential dimension, is expressed. But what rhetorical criticism as method can do is to rule out what Alter calls weak or wrong readings (e.g. misjudging irony; failing to note the subversive quality of the text; etc). On the other hand, what rhetorical criticism cannot rule out is that critics working on the same text come up with different interpretations of the text's intentionality or rhetorical genre, as in Betz's reading of Galatians as forensic, Kennedy's plea for the deliberative genre, and now proposals for the epideictic genre, and finally and not surprisingly the rising discontent with the whole legacy of the three Aristotelian genres (Classen, 1991; Olbricht, 1990; Wuellner, 1991:112–18; for Old Testament studies, see Gitay, 1991; Lenchak, 1993; Patrick/Scult, 1990).

(2) The other constraint imposed is that by the readers and the interpretive communities to which they belong, and they may belong to several interpretive communities simultaneously (e.g. religious community, academy, political, social, cultural, ethnic, and gender groups). The constraints assert themselves at different times in the three temporal moments in the act of reading or interpretation: *before* reading (Rabinowitz, 1987); *while* reading (Alter, 1989); *after* reading, such as when communities, scholarly or ecclesial, adjudicate among interpretations by individuals or groups (Bleich, 1975:80–95). Even *while* reading within the textual constraints we are nowadays aware of constraints more refined, more subtle, more conducive to full *interaction* with the text than merely "understanding," i.e. standing under, the text's message. Textual constraints make readers more passive, submissive to the constraints; reader constraints make readers assume active

responsibility and accountability. This leads to the large area of the constitutive connection between rhetorics and ethics (Cunningham, 1991:98–147; Fiorenza, 1988; Mailloux, 1989; Smith, 1983; Weaver, 1953/1985).

Modern theory has widened the scope, beyond the temporal limits *while* reading, by emphasizing the inescapable constraints imposed both *before* and *after* reading. Miller sees here "the implications of a rhetorical study of literature for our political and ethical life" (1989:84). So does Booth in his study of *The Company We Keep* (1988), though both work from different premises.

### 2.5 *The Realm of Rhetoric in Relation to Other Exegetical Methods*

The history of rhetoric has shown that the reduction of rhetoric to poetics has been but one of the ways of getting and keeping rhetorics restrained and degenerate. The same tendency reappears today in the Muilenburg legacy of reducing rhetorical criticism to stylistics or literary criticism, or in bringing rhetorical criticism in conjunction with textlinguistics (Johanson, 1987; Patte, 1990) or with discourse analysis, as the authors of *Style and Discourse* do (Nida, 1983). Likewise, rhetorical criticism as method cannot be reduced to serving only, or even mainly, the study of the text's semantic contents or message (the text's *logos*), nor, of course, the author/speaker's *ethos* component, nor, of course, only the *pathos* components. The realm of rhetoric is all of that, and more!

Nor is rhetorical criticism reducible to social description, as tends to be the orientation in Mack (1989) and Robbins (1993), for whom one of the promises of rhetorical criticism is its contribution to the analysis of social formation. This is not to deny that social factors are very important for rhetorical criticism. Indeed, beyond the social there is also the larger complex of the ideological, which appears equally unavoidable and inescapable for rhetorical criticism, if with Ricoeur (1986) we perceive ideology as the rhetoric of basic communication, as the rhetoric of what "goes without saying" in the choice of *topoi* and in the premises and warrants of the argumentation. But rhetoric cannot be reduced to a social science, nor to linguistics, speech act theories, or a communication science. Rhetoric does indeed overlap with one or the other sciences, but the realm of rhetoric has its own integrity and its own constraints. It is devoted not merely to an analysis and description

of the processes of argumentation, but also, and crucially so, committed to a critique of the very discursive practices as forms of performance and power. As Eagleton emphasized, these are forms of activity which writers and readers, producers and consumers of cultural commodities, initiate and perpetuate within social relations of a given organizational society, ancient or modern, past or present.

### 3. *Rhetoric and Religion*

In this section we focus on the close alliance between rhetoric and religion which existed long before rhetoric was recognized as also an integral part of Christian religious cultures as it was of Jewish religious culture. For Aristotle the very origins of rhetoric (in Western culture) are linked with religion.

Three features characterize the convergence of rhetoric and religion in Western antiquity: (1) the numinous and sacral cast of certain categories of Hellenistic rhetoric; (2) the importance of the crucial correlation between the techniques of argumentation, the stylistic features, and the emotions to be evoked in sacred texts; (3) the vital role which the imagination (*phantasia*) played in generating both thoughts and emotions, which in sacred texts are the knowledge and love of God, or will and devotion. On the canons of ancient Western religious rhetoric see Norden's (1913/1956) pioneering work; their uses by certain biblical authors have long been noted (Thielman, 1991).

Following Burke, Conley (1990: 276) points out that the liaison between rhetoric and religion serves the "goadings of mystery," or the "rhetorical radiance of the 'divine'." The appeal which rhetorical criticism has over against other exegetical methods is that it explains better the power source, and not just the historical and literary sources, of the sacred texts, according to Kennedy. Sacred texts, as forms of literary mysticism, express and evoke the sublime and ineffable by ways and means of modes and tropes of discourse (Burke, 1950: 324–28; Patte, 1990). For Mainberger (1988: 177–80) rhetoric mediates between *mythos* and *logos*; for Perelman (1969:411–59) all forms of argumentation by dissociation (e.g. dissociating appearances from reality, letter from spirit, etc), especially the dissociative tropes (like irony, katachresis, oxymoron, etc.), play an important role in religious discourse. No less important for religious texts are the uses of metaphor, of negation, of moods, and numerous other grammatical and syntactical devices to serve the rhetoric



of revelation (see e.g. Webb, 1993 on hyperbole). For Kennedy, all religious systems are rhetorical (1984: 158; cf. Bolgiani, 1977): not just in poetry and prophecy, narrative and wisdom, apocalypse and paraenesis, but also in prayer, liturgy, and in juridical codes – both Canon Law and Mishnaic, Talmudic Law (on the latter, see Lightstone, 1994).

#### 4. *The Rhetoric of Biblical Scholarship*

In this section we focus on the hitherto little noticed but recently keenly studied relation between rhetoric and theology, and with it the learned societies and publishing industries, i.e. the whole literary–industrial complex supporting exegetical scholarship (Stamps, 1992). The focus here is on rhetoric's ubiquity and power in all areas of life, not least in the area of shared scholarship (Classen, 1992; Schuster and Yeo, 1986; Simons, 1990; Stamps, 1992).

The *rhetoric* of shared critical inquiry is perceived as different from, and qualitative other than, the *logic* of shared scholarly work. The latter has been characteristic of scientific modernism also in the field of biblical studies, as manifest in the histories of scholarly biblical societies such as the NTSSA, SBL, SNTS, and the like. But the *rhetoric* of shared critical inquiry makes us critically conscious of the complex nature of corporate rhetoric and of the authoritative nature of the interpretive scientific community (Cheney, 1991) which validates the scientific discourse. On this extended level rhetorical criticism is reconceived as rhetorico-political activity (Lentricchia, 1983:145–63; Reck, 1991; Jasper, 1993; Bible and Culture Collective, 1995). Offshoots of the critical concern for this kind of activity are the studies of the effect rhetoric had on the production of letters by professional secretaries (Richards, 1991) and of the manuscript production by professional scribes (Kilpatrick, 1990: 15–32, 53–72).

In conclusion it is worth emphasizing that the new and self-critical discipline of rhetorical criticism has sensitized us to the ever-present tendencies within the literary–industrial complex of exegetical scholarship – ancient or modern – of turning methods of exegesis, including the method of rhetorical criticism, into a reified, commodified product. These tendencies must be resisted in the name and with the power of the very rhetoric that is of the essence of all religious systems. The role of rhetoric in the 16th century Reformation (and Counter-Reformation!), which recently has received critical attention

(Boyle, 1983; Schneider, 1990), was no less effective in the earlier reform movements spawned by the rising tide of social and national-ethnic consciousness (Evans, 1985) in the transformation of the monolithic Middle Ages, or in the very early development of Christian discourse in its various and varying interactions with first the Roman Empire (Cameron, 1991) and then the Byzantine Empire (Kennedy, 1983; Hunger 1991).

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## ABSTRACT

The rediscovered, indeed reinvented, discipline of rhetorical analysis in biblical exegesis should be viewed as part of the long and chequered history of rhetorical criticism and its relation to biblical hermeneutics. The main features of the postmodern theories and practices of rhetorical criticism differ from rhetorical traditions since late antiquity. Emerging rhetorical theories and practices raise such issues as why this approach to biblical exegesis is really more than just one more method among others; what its relation is to other exegetical methods; and why it has its own integrity. The article's final two sections deal with two neglected areas of critical study: the constitutive relation between rhetoric and religion; and the inescapable relation between rhetoric and shared scholarship. Rhetoric is perceived as not only in all parts of Sacred Scripture, but also at the core of all critical scholarship.

## 撮 要

釋經學中的修辭分析法被重新發現（事實上是重新創作），實應視為修辭批判學及其與聖經詮釋學關係之歷史的一部分，這歷史既漫長又盛衰交替。在後現代理論與應用中的修辭批判學的主要特徵，跟晚古時期以來的修辭傳統迥異。新興的修辭理論和應用提出如下問題：為何這方法不只是芸芸釋經法外的又一種而已？它與其他釋經法有何關係？又為何它是一獨立學科？本文的最後兩部分討論聖經研究中兩個批判學所忽略的範圍：一是修辭學與宗教不可分割的關係，另一是修辭學與有關學科的密切關係。聖經每部分都有修辭技巧，運用修辭學來研究聖經是最好不過的，不但如此，修辭學更是所有批判性學術研究的核心。