Socio-rhetorical interpretation in practice: Recent contributions in perspective[1]

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Abstract

Socio-rhetorical analysis of the gospels focuses on a specific text's strategy and situation. As such, it is interested in what any given text wanted to communicate (ideology) in its original socio-historical and socio-cultural situation. In this article attention is given to contributions in a recent publication entitled **Gospel interpretation: Narrative-critical and social-scientific approaches** ***(with Kingsbury as editor) that has as focus what can be described as a socio-rhetorical analysis of the gospels, that is, readings of the gospels that aim to integrate narrative-critical and sociological readings of the gospels. After a few introductory remarks, some of the contributions in the above-mentioned publication are summarized and then evaluated in terms of their own explicitly stated aim, that is, to read the gospels from a socio-rhetorical perspective. Finally, a few remarks are made concerning both the necessity for a socio-rhetorical reading of ancient texts and the possibilities that a socio-rhetorical analysis of ancient texts holds for gospel interpretation.***

1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The term "socio-rhetorical" is currently used in significantly different contexts, and different scholars are pursuing somewhat different goals with various strategies they

[1] The socio-rhetorical readings of the gospels to be focused on in this article are the contributions that can be found in Kingsbury, J D (ed) 1997, *Gospel interpretation: Narrative-critical and social-scientific approaches*. Harrisburg: Trinity Press International.

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consider to be socio-rhetorical in nature (Robbins 1998:284). This can also be said to be the case with regard to terms such as "social-scientific criticism" – which is sometimes referred to as "sociological analysis", "socio-historical analysis" or "cultural studies" – and "narrative criticism" ("narratology") – which is sometimes referred to, *inter alia*, as "rhetorical analysis" or "structural analysis" (see Van Eck 2001:594).

In order to make a substantial contribution to socio-rhetorical readings of the gospels, a clarification of what is meant by a socio-rhetorical analysis of texts is therefore necessary. In an attempt to bring some structure to the jargon relating to the term "socio-rhetorical analysis", the following definition/description of what is meant by a socio-rhetorical analysis is put forward as a working hypothesis[3]: Socio-rhetorical interpretation of narrative biblical texts (e g, the gospels), methodologically speaking, consists of an energetic combination of a narratological and a social-scientific reading of the text, concentrating respectively on the text's *strategy* and *situation*, as well as on the intended communication of the text as a social force and social product. Socio-rhetorical readings of the gospels emphasise the different worlds (contextual, referential and narrative) of the gospels, as well as the relationship between these worlds. Socio-rhetorical analysis thus studies the gospels as a "world of worlds". One of the premises of socio-rhetorical interpretation is that the ideology or theology of the narrator (as a specific understanding of the contextual world of a specific audience) leads to "new" narrative worlds (gospels). Because of this, the situation and the strategy of the gospels should come under scrutiny if any attempt is made to explore what the gospels intended to communicate (see Van Eck 2001:593-611).

From this working definition of what a socio-rhetorical analysis of narrative biblical texts entails, it is clear that, for socio-rhetorical interpretation, the question of the audience(s) of the gospels is very important. Should the audience(s) of the gospels be seen as (an) imaginary persons who respond(s) to the story in a way called for by the text (Powell 1997a:10-11), or must the audience of the gospels first and foremost be seen as real flesh-and-blood readers that are socio-historically situated and socio-culturally

[3] This definition of socio-rhetorical analysis does not pretend to be the *only possible* or *only correct* understanding/definition of what can be understood as a socio-rhetorical reading of a text. It is a definition, however, that wants to take seriously the *strategy* and *situation* of a text (see Elliott 1987, 1989), as well as its (the text's) intended communication as social force and social product.

conditioned (Segovia 1997: 213)? As a matter of principle, socio-rhetorical analysis opts for the latter. Only when a text's strategy (as form-giving principle of its narrative world), as well as its situation (the social/contextual world in which it was produced), is taken into account, can we start to grasp something of the intended communication of the text as social force and social product. Moreover, such a reading of the gospels at least intends closing the door on the fallacy of ethnocentrism.[4]

With this working definition of what is meant by a socio-rhetorical interpretation of texts in place, we can now turn to the respective contributions in the book which forms the focus of this essay, *Gospel interpretation: Narrative-critical and social-scientific approaches*. How, and what, according to the different contributors to this book, do the gospels communicate when they are analysed from a socio-rhetorical perspective?

2. EVALUATING SOME OF THE CONTRIBUTIONS IN *GOSPEL INTERPRETATION: NARRATIVE-CRITICAL AND SOCIAL-SCIENTIFIC APPROACHES*

2.1 Summary of contents

The aim of the above-mentioned book, according to its editor (Kingsbury) is "to showcase ... the potential that *narrative criticism* (the strategy of the text – EvE) and sociological and historical inquiry hold ... [for] gaining new insight into the meaning and significance of the gospel stories [and] the circumstances (the situation of the text – EvE) in which they were first narrated (Kingsbury 1997d:5)[5]. Apart from a final section on the issue of the historical Jesus, the book consists of four sections (one on each gospel) which all follow the same basic outline: in the first essay the recent history of narrative criticism (in regard to the gospel in question) is touched upon, or a narrative analysis of the gospel is given. In the second, third and fourth essays attention is given to the matters of plot,

[4] The term ethnocentrism, or anachronism, relates to the problem of not recognizing the 'distance' between the culture embedded in the text and that of the reader of the text.

[5] Note that this aim of the work under discussion agrees with the working definition of socio-rhetorical analysis given in Section 1 above. This commonality in point of departure directed my choice of this work for evaluation in this essay.

characterization or some theological theme or topic that is prominent in the gospel under discussion. In the respective fifth essays the first four essays are rounded out by treating aspects of the social and cultural world in which each gospel arose. The contents of the above described outline are as follows:

2.2 The Gospel of Matthew

A narrative-critical analysis of Matthew (and all the gospels) views Matthew as a unified and coherent document, focuses on its finished form and deals with the poetic function of the text to create meaning and affect readers: Matthew as gospel is a form of communication that cannot be understood without being received and experienced. Narrative criticism does not focus on historical and theological questions, but rather concentrates on literary concerns (Powell 1997a:9). Matthew's gospel is not the product of a redactor, it is a story told from the perspective of a narrator that only exists within the world of Matthew's story, it is a literary creation of the gospel's real author (Powell 1997a:10).

Narrative criticism also does not attempt to discover or describe the community in which the gospel was first received, but prefers to describe the work from the perspective of the implied reader, an imaginary person who always responds to the story in a way the text calls for (Powell 1997a:10-11). Whereas redaction criticism concentrates on a gospel's compositional structure, narrative criticism focuses on the gospel's plot structure. When a gospel's plot is focused on, the following aspects of the text *inter alia* receive attention: features that preserve the continuity between episodes, rhetorical patterns, which episodes or events mark key turning points in the story, the analysis of the development and resolution of conflict and the tracing of the story lines of the most significant characters in the story (Powell 1997a:12). Finally, narrative criticism, although recognizing that the people described in the gospel are real people that once lived in history, claims that the people in the gospels are characters whose function must be understood within the world of the story that is told (Powell 1997a:13).

Turning more specifically to the plot (consisting of a beginning, middle and end) of Matthew's story, it is described by Kingsbury (1997a:16-25) as follows: the story of

the Matthean Jesus is a story of conflict between Jesus and Israel (religious authorities). In the beginning of the story Jesus is introduced as the Messiah, the Son of God, while the religious authorities are introduced as "evil" (see Mt 3:7-10). Through this characterization the narrator leads the reader to anticipate that somewhere in the narrative Jesus and the authorities will become entangled in bitter conflict.

Matthew divides the middle section of his story in two parts: Jesus proffering salvation to Israel (Mt 4:17-11:1), and Israel's response to Jesus' ministry, which is that of repudiation (Mt 11:2-16:20). The anticipated conflict between Jesus and the authorities occurs for the first time in Matthew 9, a conflict that is only preliminary in nature, which can be seen by the fact that Matthew avoids three features that are part and parcel of Jesus' conflict with the authorities later in the gospel: the conflict is not to "the death", it is not acutely confrontational, and its focus is not the Mosaic law (Kingsbury 1997a:19-20). In the second part of the middle section of Matthew (Mt 12), intense conflict however erupts: the immediate issue that sparks the debate is the Mosaic law; it is acutely confrontational, and it is a conflict "to the death" in that the Pharisees take council how to destroy Jesus. Moreover, at the end of the middle section it is clear that the conflict between Jesus and the authorities is beyond reconciliation.

The end of Matthew (Mt 16:21-28:20) consists of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and tells of his suffering, death and resurrection. In this section of the gospel Jesus' conflict with the authorities is no less intense, and Matthew makes use of five literary devices to indicate the conflict: all the controversies occur in the temple; they are acutely confrontational; they revolve around the important question of authority; all the groups in Jerusalem together make up a united front of adversaries; and the atmosphere in which the controversies take place is depicted by Matthew as extremely hostile. The cross is finally the place where the conflict in Matthew reaches its culmination. From the standpoint of the authorities the cross attests to Jesus' destruction and their victory. In raising Jesus from the dead, God shows that, ironically, the victory has gone to Jesus (Kingsbury 1997a:24)[6].

[6] Since Kingsbury's description of the plot of Luke (see Kingsbury 1997c:155-165) is more or less similar to his description of the plot of Matthew, I will not consider chapter 14 of the book in further detail.

Following Kingsbury's description of the plot of Matthew, Bauer (1997:27-37) turns to a description of the function and significance of the major characters (i e, Jesus, the disciples and Israel) in Matthew's story. Bauer (1997:27) is of the opinion that, since Jesus is the central character in Matthew's story, all the other characters in the gospel should be understood in terms of their relationship to him. The Gospel of Matthew falls into three main units, each one focusing on a dimension of Matthew's presentation of Jesus. The first unit (Mt 1:1-4:16) involves the *preparation* of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, for the ministry he will undertake and the passion he will endure. This is done by introducing the reader to a string of reliable witnesses who give testimony about him (Matthew himself, by means of a genealogy of Jesus; the angel; the wise men; John the Baptist; and God). The second main unit (Mt 4:17-16:20), centres upon Jesus' *proclamation of the kingdom to Israel*, a proclamation that consists of three specific activities: Jesus' teaching, healing and preaching. These three activities show Jesus as being authoritative and evocative, as well as self-sacrificial in character. Moreover, Jesus is pictured as being a person of integrity: there is a complete congruence between the behaviour of Jesus and the behaviour he commends in his teaching. This ministry of Jesus prompts opposition and conflict, which lead to the third main section of the gospel (Mt 16:21-18:20), which centres upon the *passion and resurrection* of Jesus. The three main elements of Jesus' passion and resurrection are those of condemnation, crucifixion and resurrection (see Bauer 1997:27-31).

Turning to the disciples as characters in Matthew's story, three components of the character of the disciples (and also discipleship in general) and their relationship to Jesus are important to understand their character as portrayed by Matthew: their *nature and expectations* (i e, submission to the authority of Jesus, discipleship entails genuine cost, the embarking on a mission, the creation of a community around Jesus, and the following of Jesus), *the actual performance of the twelve* (on the positive side the disciples forsake everything, do the will of the father, worship Jesus and obey him, but on the negative side they show a lack of understanding and weakness of faith), and *the future of the disciples in the period between the resurrection and the parousia* (endurance and aggressive mission). From this analysis the disciples thus possess conflicting traits (Bauer 1997:32-33).

Bauer (1997:34-36) describes Israel as character in the gospel as consisting of two groups: the people as a whole (the crowds) and the religious leaders. Matthew portrays the crowds as recipients of the ministry of Jesus (his healing, preaching and teaching). To this ministry the crowds respond by expressing amazement, by glorifying God and by following Jesus. Yet this response is inadequate: it falls short of accepting that the kingdom has come in Jesus; they do not repent and, above all, do not recognize Jesus as the Son of God. This leads them to ultimately side with the religious leaders in crucifying Jesus. Matthew throughout the gospel pictures the religious authorities as standing solid against Jesus. They are evil (in collusion with Satan) and human-centered, and therefore condemned.

Following Bauer's description of the major characters in Matthew, Snodgrass (1997:38-48), in a well-written essay, touches upon Matthew's understanding of the law. Snodgrass argues that, in Matthew, one cannot understand the law apart from the prophets or prophetic writings. Matthew describes Jesus, as prophet, as one who imparts the proper understanding of the law in terms of mercy and love. The Matthean Jesus neither set aside any of the law nor interpreted it the way many of his contemporaries did. For the Matthean Jesus the law cannot be understood by just studying and focusing on individual commands: the key to understanding the law is mercy and love. Because of this Jesus, for example, substitutes the holiness code of the Jewish leaders by a mercy code. Holiness is indeed important, but then only when holiness is understood as being merciful and loving towards other.

The last contribution on Matthew is that of Stanton (1997:49-64), which consists of a description of the communities for which Matthew wrote. According to Stanton (1997:50-51) it is not possible to know either when or where the gospel was written, or even to assume that the gospel was written in an urban setting. Certain inferences in the text itself, however, make it possible to at least postulate the following social setting of the communities for which Matthew wrote: the wide gulf between scribes and Pharisees on the hand and Jesus on the other reflects that in Matthew's day synagogue and church had parted company[7]; for Matthew the synagogue has become an alien institution. Over against *synagogue* stand the *ecclesia* founded by Jesus himself: entrance was through

[7] See Stanton (1997:53) for a discussion of the relevant texts that lead to this conclusion.

baptism in the triadic name, Jesus' commands took precedence over the reading of the Torah, gentiles were welcome, and an own pattern of worship and community was developed. It was a people that were coming "to terms with the trauma of separation from Judaism and with the perceived continuing threat of hostility and persecution" (Stanton 1997:55).

2.3 The Gospel of Mark

In an essay called "Toward a narrative-critical analysis of Mark", Powell (1997b:65-70) indicates how the narrator of Mark applies specific literary devices (i e, the secrecy theme in Mark, Mark's portrayal of the disciples, and Mark's abrupt ending) to make a specific theological point in his gospel. In Mark's gospel, Jesus is frequently portrayed as trying to maintain an element of secrecy with regard to his own person and work (e g, he prevents demons from revealing his identity, he commands silence from his disciples and people that are healed). Historical-critical scholars have sought historical explanations for this motif, of which the classic hypothesis of Wrede is well known (the secrecy motif in Mark allows the narrator of Mark to present a messianic portrait of Jesus that is not historically accurate). Narrative critics, however, take a different cue when analysing this literary motif in Mark. If it is a literary motif, it must have a literary function: the narrator reveals significant information to the reader that is not known to characters within the story. The effect of this device is twofold: it bonds the reader to the narrator of the story (accepting the narrator's point of view), and draws the readers into the story as they wonder whether any of the characters in the story will come to know the truth of Jesus' identity.

As the story progresses, Mark's readers observe that neither Jesus' exorcisms, miracles, nor teaching can reveal his real identity as Son of God. Only when he dies, the Roman centurion reveals the secret: Jesus is the Son of God (see Mk 15:39). Thus, Mark uses a literary device to score a theological point.

The same can be said of Mark's portrayal of the disciples and its abrupt ending. While redaction critics try to explain Mark's negative portrayal of the disciples as indicative of specific historical concerns of the evangelist (e g, the well-known theories of Weeden and Kelber), narrative critics focus on the literary function that Mark's

characterization of the disciples serves within the narrative. In such an analysis, texts like Mark 14:28, Mark 16:7 and Mark 13:14 not only play an important role, but also portray the disciples in a positive light. Once again, Mark uses the literary discourse of his narrative to score a theological point. The same can be said of Mark's abrupt ending (Mk 16:8). While most historical critics understand Mark's abrupt ending (Mk 16:8) as part of its negative casting of his disciples, narrative critics understand the end of Mark as "open-ended": it invites the readers' participation in the drama.

The second essay on Mark is that of Tolbert (1997:71-82), which touches on character building in Mark. Tolbert's analysis of the characters in Mark is built on two presuppositions in regard to Greek and Roman (ancient) writings: First, ancient writers always build their characters by either particularizing the universal or individualizing the general (Tolbert 1997:72), and second, all ancient writing was rhetorical in the sense that it was an attempt to persuade or move people to action (Tolbert 1997:73). To put it differently: all the characters in Mark are fashioned to promote the one goal of the gospel, that Jesus is the "good news", the Messiah, the Son of God that proclaims to each person the way to God's coming kingdom. Why, however, is Jesus' mission so unsuccessful? According to Tolbert this question is answered by Mark's parable of the Sower, a parable that gives the particular characterizations of the people and groups around Jesus.

In the parable of the Sower, four "universal" reactions to the message of Jesus are described. First, seed is sown on the path, and the ground is so hard that the seeds not only stay on the surface, but the birds (Satan) come and eat it. This universal reaction to Jesus' message is individualized in the gospel by the Pharisees, the scribes, the chief priests and other religious leaders in Jerusalem (including the Herodians). The second type of ground that is sowed upon is described as rocky ground, where the seeds spring up immediately, but because it has little root, it withers when the sun comes up. This universal reaction is particularized by the disciples in the gospel. The third type of ground upon which the seed falls is full of thorns, and although the seed begins to grow, the weed finally chokes it out. Three characters in the gospels particularize this reaction: the rich man (Mk 10:17-22), Herod and Pilate. The final ground that is sowed upon is good, and brings forth an extraordinary yield. The particular characters that fit this general description in Mark are the ones that are healed by Jesus in the story: anonymous

individuals from high and low stations in life, Jews and Gentiles, men and women. What they have in common is their faith that Jesus can change lives, a faith that empowers healing, but also empowers them to go forth spreading the gospel of the "good news". In Mark, therefore, faith for healing becomes faith for discipleship.

In a next essay Rhoads (1997:83-94) examines the standards of judgment in Mark's gospel, that is, those values and beliefs that implicitly govern Mark's narrative world. A study of standards of judgment shows that the Gospel of Mark is a tightly woven narrative reflecting two contrasting ways of life: that of "saving one's life out of fear", and that of "losing one's life for others out of faith" (Rhoads 1997:83). According to Rhoads (1997:92), the purpose of Mark inferred from a study of the standards of judgment fits well with the generally accepted historical context of Mark's gospel. It is generally accepted that Mark wrote to followers who faced persecution in their mission to bring the good news of Jesus the Messiah to the world. The time of the war (in or just after which Mark was written) was difficult for the followers of Jesus. On the one hand they were the targets of persecution by other Jews because they opposed the war, and, on the other hand, gentiles suspected them, because their leader was executed as a revolutionary. In these circumstances they must often have failed to speak and act because of fear. Mark addressed this situation of persecution and fear.

In a penultimate essay on Mark, Kingsbury (1997b:95-105) touches on the significance of the cross in Mark. Although it is the case that in all four canonical gospels the scene of Jesus' death on the cross is climactic, Mark stands out in a special way as the gospel of the cross (Kingsbury 1997b:95). The reason for this is that two major motifs in Mark (which run for the length of the story), reach their culmination in the scene of the cross. The one motif is the so-called "messianic secret" (see above), the unfolding of the identity of Jesus as the Son of God: not until after Jesus has died on the cross does any character in Mark's story world (except for the implied reader) perceive Jesus as the Son of God, the suffering Messiah or Christ. The second motif focuses on Jesus' ministry, especially his conflict with the religious leaders. This conflict is only resolved when Jesus dies on the cross: the one that was crucified, the one that was stripped from all authority, won: he is Jesus, Messiah-King, God's own Son (Kingsbury 1997b:102).

The last essay on Mark is that of Rohrbaugh (1997:106-122), entitled "The social location of the Markan audience". In describing the social location of Mark's audience, Rohrbaugh uses the by now well-known work of Lenski & Lenski (1974) on the social stratification in advanced agrarian societies, opts for southern Syria as the place of origin, and sees the audience of Mark as fitting the profile of an ancient village (most of the inhabitants of which would have been illiterate). On top of the social ladder in Mark was the urban elite (e g, Pilate, Herod, the high priest, the chief priests, the scribes, the elders and Jairus). Although only making up 2% of the population, the elite controlled writing, coinage, taxation, the military and judicial systems, as well as politics and economics. In Mark, it should be noted; all Jesus' opponents come from this group. Lower on the continuum of the social ladder were the retainers (e g, the Pharisees). The retainers worked primarily in the service of the elite by extending governmental and religious control to the lower strata and village areas. They thus depended for their position on their relation to the urban elite. The third group playing a role in Mark is the urban non-elite (e g, the crowds). This group of people's health and nutrition were often worse than the peasants in the villages, and their life expectancies were shorter. The urban poor play a very small role in Mark's story of Jesus, since Jesus seldom visited the cities and other urban settings. The largest group in Mark's gospel is the rural peasants and other villagers. This group of people consisted of the freeholders, tenant farmers, day labourers, slaves, and various landless groups such as the fishermen, artisans and other craftsmen. At the bottom of the social ladder in Mark we find the unclean, degraded and expendables: the lepers, deaf, blind, sick, the "unholy types" and those who were possessed by unclean spirits.

According to Rohrbaugh (1997:117) the narrative world of Mark accurately re-creates the sharply stratified peasant society of his day. Mark, however, states very clearly that Jesus redefines the social stratification of his day: his family is a surrogate family made up of believers. By including all the "unholy types" in his story, as those people with whom Jesus especially interacts, Mark's way of telling his story therefore functions to create social cohesion in the Markan community, vis-à-vis the social world in which it existed.

2.4 The Gospel of Luke

In the first essay on Luke, Powell (1997c:125-131) touches upon a narrative-critical understanding of Luke. The literary quality of Luke has long been appreciated. The gospel, however, also has theological value (Powell 1997c:125). The contributions of historical-critical scholarship have helped, for example, to define what Luke teaches about the earthly Jesus, the early church or the evangelist himself. Narrative criticism, which concentrates on literary quality, however, does not presuppose a dichotomy between literary and theological understanding. To assess the theological worth of a gospel, we therefore ought to determine not only what the gospel reveals about history, but also what effect it intended to have on its readers (literary criticism). Narrative criticism and historical criticism are therefore theoretically complementary. In practice they are, according to Powell, quite distinct. To illustrate his point, Powell examine three key issues in Lukan studies: the purpose of the gospel, the role of the infancy narrative, and Luke's relationship to Acts.

In regard to the reason why Luke was written, historical critics for example suggest that the gospel was written to present a theological scheme of salvation history or to further peaceful relations with the Roman Empire. Narrative critics, on the other hand, refrain from identifying the purpose of a work with precise reference to the readers. The purpose of Luke, instead, may be to preach to the reader or to engage the reader to inspire faith. The same principle comes to the fore in regard to the infancy narrative and Luke's relationship to Acts: in historical critical scholarship the infancy narrative is treated by using, for example, *Redaktionsgeschichte* or *Literarkritik*, while narrative critics see the infancy narrative as an introduction to the whole plot of the gospel. In regard to Luke's relationship to Acts, historical critics' main interest is the question whether Luke and Acts come from the same author, while narrative critics ask the question whether Luke and Acts should be seen as one story or two.

Historical critics thus concentrate in their reading of the gospels on the basic distinction between tradition and redaction, while narrative critics prefer to analyse the text with reference to story (content of the narrative) and discourse (rhetoric, the way the story is told).

The second essay on Luke is an enticing contribution by Tannehill (1997:132-141) in which he construes two "readers" in Luke-Acts: "Cornelius" and "Tabitha". Tannehill's methodology is based on two concerns: the desire to recognize the value of reader response criticism, and the need to integrate literary approaches with social-scientific criticism. The guiding question that enables Tannehill to bring these two concerns together is as follows: how would two first-century persons, who differ in social location, understand the character Jesus as they follow a public reading of Luke?

As said above, the two readers that Tannehill concentrates on are "Cornelius" (modelled after the character of Cornelius in Ac 10:36-43) and "Tabitha" (modelled after the character of Tabitha in Ac 9:36-49). Cornelius is pictured by Tannehill as follows: Cornelius lives some time after 70 CE outside the Jewish homeland somewhere in the Roman east (not Caesarea). He is a centurion, a middle-rank officer serving Rome as a professional soldier. He thus has considerable military and social status and wealth. Cornelius has been strongly influenced by diaspora Judaism, knows some essentials of the Jewish faith, and has been a patron of the Jewish community, yet has remained a gentile. Recently, however, he has joined the community that proclaims Jesus as Messiah. Tabitha, on the other hand, was born of a Jewish family, and lives in Syrian Antioch. She has also joined the community that proclaims Jesus as Messiah, for two reasons especially: she has experienced healing in the name of Jesus, and she lost her husband a few years ago. She has found that the followers of Jesus offer support to widows in the community, has joined this group and since has become one of their leaders, providing clothing for other widows and the poor.

How would these two "characters" build a consistent picture of Jesus when hearing Luke's story of Jesus, taking into account their respective socio-historical locations?[8] Luke's depiction of Jesus as the one that will restore the throne of David and the one who will reign over the house of Jacob (Lk 1:32-33), for example, will create problems for both Tabitha and Cornelius. For Tabitha this announcement will be the joyous fulfilment of an ancient promise to her people. Her recent experiences, however, do not support this belief, since Jesus has come and gone, and the Romans are still in

[8] Owing to limits of space, what follows is less than a summary of Tannehill's reading of Cornelius and Tabitha's "reading" of Luke. It would be more than worthwhile to read this interesting reading of Tannehill (1997:135-140) in full.

power. For Cornelius, on the other hand, the promise that Jesus will rule over the house of Jacob means nothing, since he is not a member of the house of Jacob. Furthermore, being a professional Roman soldier, the emphasis on Jesus as the promised Jewish king would have been disturbing, since it leaves him open to charges of disloyalty to Caesar brought against believers in Acts 17:7. Tabitha, however, would easily identify with the humble Mary, Luke's promise that through Jesus the lowly will be exalted and the hungry be filled (Lk 1:52-54), Luke's stories of Jesus' healings, and Jesus' compassion for the widow in Luke 7:11-17. Cornelius, on the other hand, would be challenged by the story of the centurion in Luke 7:1-10, in which Jesus praises the centurion's faith as an outstanding example. This story speaks a soldier's language, especially when the centurion attributes to Jesus an authority similar to that of an officer commanding his troops.

This outstanding essay of Tannehill is followed by that of Beavis - which, it may be noted, is just as interesting. In her essay entitled '"Expecting nothing in return": Luke's picture of the marginalized', Beavis takes as point of departure that the community of Luke included both elite (rich) and non-elite (poor) members. In Luke's world the rich and powerful despised "their socio-economic inferiors and took pains to preserve the gulf between them and the majority of the population" (Beavis 1997:149). Inspired by the prophetic denunciation of injustice Luke, according to Beavis, instead of merely condemning the rich, calls on the rich to practice negative reciprocity, that is, to share with those who have nothing and to expect nothing in return. In Luke's world this message would have been heard with shock, since it in effect criticized Greco-Roman values in their core. Luke, however, in face of adversity, forged "a vision of community in which both rich and poor are spiritual equals" (Beavis 1997:142), an equality that implied that all other inequalities should vigorously and conscientiously be addressed.

The last essay on Luke is that of Moxnes (1997:166-177), and consists of a description of the social context of Luke's community. Instead of opting for a specific setting like Ephesus or Antioch, Moxnes places the community of Luke in a typical Hellenistic city where the distinctions between elite and non-elite, men and women and citizens and noncitizens played a major role. The major structures of power and forms of social relationships that characterized life in these cities were honour, patronage and

reciprocity. Since meals especially demarcated those with honour and those without, meals were directly linked to implied reciprocity and had to do with patronage. Because of this, this kind of ceremony was of great importance for the urban elite.

Within this city culture of the Eastern Mediterranean, Luke's community existed as a group of non-elite people (with some from the elite) that differed culturally and ethnically. The community's life centered on meals that served as a means of integration between Jews and non-Jews, and members from various status groups and social positions. The purpose of these meals was dual: they forged a common identity for a socially and ethnically diverse community, and functioned as a criticism of urban culture (i e, the city ideals of patronage, benefactions and the quest for honour).

2.5 The Gospel of John

Fourth-Gospel scholarship in the middle 20th century was shaped by the work of Rudolf Bultmann. His focus was on matters relating to the history of religions, the sources behind the text and the history of ideas (O'Day 1997:181). Dodd, on the other hand, could be seen as the transitional figure in Johannine scholarship. In Dodd's first study on John, he also concentrated on the history of ideas, but in his later study of John (*Historical tradition in the Fourth Gospel*) he broke with scholarly consensus about the written sources behind the gospel by focusing on the oral tradition that shaped it. This move from a strict focus on written sources to a consideration of the oral tradition opened up the place for the role of the community and its practices in the formation of the gospel (O'Day 1997:182).

The heuristic value of concentrating on the role of the community is illustrated by the work of Brown and Martyn. Brown (by concentrating on the oral traditions about Jesus circulating in the community) and Martyn (taking the community's conflict with the synagogue as the decisive factor in the life of the community), indicated how the circumstances of the struggling Christian community of John shaped the gospel's traditions. Since the work of Dodd, and especially Brown and Martyn, John is no longer treated simply as a historical artefact, but as a witness to the life and faith of a developing, struggling community. According to O'Day (1997:184), this new emphasis

in Johannine studies paved the way for yet another new way of looking at John: the world in the text, or, to put it differently, the story world created by the text.

Culpepper, in his well-known *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, built upon the insights of Brown and Martyn in analysing John from a narrative-critical perspective. Culpepper (1997:188-199) reads the Gospel of John as an ancient biography in dramatic form. "Based on the pattern of Wisdom's descent and return, it tells the story of Jesus as the Word incarnate who fulfils his commission to reveal the Father, take away the sins of the world, and empower the 'children of God'" (Culpepper 1997:188). John (as story) unfolds in a series of recognition scenes, and up to the end of the gospel the question is whether the reader has recognized the eternal Word in Jesus.

The plot of a narrative is that which "explains its sequence, causality, unity and effective power" (Culpepper 1997:189). Guided by this understanding of plot, Culpepper examines the relationship between Jesus as the central character and the basic conflicts that propel John as narrative. The prologue announces the coming of the Revealer, and episode after episode develops the story of Jesus, the Revealer, who is met by various responses of belief and unbelief. Although John's plot is episodic, it is governed by thematic development and a strategy to bring the reader to an acceptance of the gospel's interpretation of Jesus. This analysis of the plot of John's narrative exposes some of the vital features of John's narrative: Jesus' mission, the episodic quality of the narrative, the conflict between belief and unbelief, as well as the purpose of the gospel (Culpepper 1997:189).

In a third essay on John, Collins (1997:201-211) touches upon the characters in John's narrative. According to Collins, John is a unique story about Jesus since it tells the story about how the Word becomes flesh. The chief protagonist in the story is Jesus, around whom the whole story revolves. With Jesus different groups of people (e g, the Pharisees, Levites, priests, Jesus' own people), anonymous individuals and other named personalities (John the Baptist, Simon Peter, Nicodemus) appear in John's story. Whereas some characters are constitutional to the unfolding of the plot, others are simply decorative.

In a penultimate essay on John, Segovia (1997:212-221) focuses on the significance of the social location of the community of John when interpreting the gospel

as a text stemming from Jewish and Christian antiquity. The question of social location, according to Segovia (1997:213), has to do with real, or flesh-and-blood readers, that is, the readers of the Fourth Gospel as "socio-historically situated and socio-culturally conditioned" (Segovia 1997:213). To pose this question of social location, Segovia (1997:213-218) examines how, in Johannine researches, the readers of the gospel are construed in the three paradigms of historical, narrative and cultural criticism.

From the 1850s up to the 1970s the readers of John's gospel were studied by using historical criticism (including sub-disciplines such as textual, source, history-of-religions, tradition, form, redaction and composition criticism) as a heuristic tool. In this discipline the emphasis was on the text as evidence for the time of composition of the gospel: a means by which to arrive at the world in which the gospel was composed (the historical context), the author who composed it (authorial intention), or both. True to its nature, historical criticism exhibits a strong positivistic or empiricist foundation. Johannine studies abound with scholarship of this nature, and has typically focused on issues such as the process of the composition of the gospel from its earliest layers to the final redaction, the search for historical contexts reflected in the layers of the tradition, the theological message of the various layers and the relationship of the Fourth Gospel to the wider religious world of the ancient Mediterranean world.

Around the mid-1970s a shift occurred in biblical studies, in that a number of biblical critics began to look to the study of literature rather than history in studying the Fourth Gospel. Literary criticism (comprising of such critical practices as narrative criticism, structuralist analysis, rhetorical criticism, psychological analysis, reader-response criticism and deconstructive criticism) focuses on the text as text (the text as message from the author to the reader). The text is seen as a medium worth analysing in its own right. Literary criticism has had a major impact on Johannine studies, with key areas of interest such as, for example, questions of plot, levels of narration, point of view, characterization, analysis of the implied author and reader of the gospel and an analysis of the rhetorical strategies of the gospel.

Also in the mid-70s, however, a number of scholars (likewise stymied by particular methodological shortcomings of historical criticism) began to look to the social sciences to study the Fourth Gospel. Cultural criticism (the term used by Segovia: see

1997:216), which is concerned with critical practices grounded in sociological theory (e g, the sociology of knowledge), neo-Marxist theory (e g, class and ideological analysis) and anthropological theory (e g, Mediterranean studies on honour and shame, personality and purity), focuses on the text as message from the author to a reader in a specific socio-cultural context. The text is thus regarded as a medium by which the world in which the text was produced, can be examined. Cultural criticism also has had a major impact on Johannine studies, with subjects of study such as the sectarian nature of John's message and community, analysis of the categories of "pure/impure" and group/grid, the Mediterranean categories of honour and shame and the ideological message of the gospel.

In a last essay on John, Von Wahlde (1997:222-233) gives a concise description of the history and social context of the Johannine community. The gospel of John is a heterogeneous document, consisting of three stages of composition. The earliest version of the Johannine community's written tradition (*circa* 80 CE) was a complete gospel (rather than simply a collection of miracles), extending from the scene of the Baptist's meeting with Jesus to the scene of Jesus' resurrection. In this first version of the gospel the Christology is low, the word signs denotes miracles, and the terms Pharisees, chief priests and rulers identify the religious authorities. It is primarily through the signs that people believe in Jesus. The community of this first version of the gospel was probably located in Judea, was Jewish Christian in character, and included former members of John-the-Baptist movement as well as Samaritans.

In the second version of John's gospel (*circa* 90 C E), the author changed the character of the first by adding discourse and dialogue material to focus in a new way on the identity of Jesus and the purpose of his ministry. Typical of the second version of John are the references to the religious authorities as "the Jews" and the naming of Jesus' miracles as "works". Belief in Jesus is no longer based on miracles; eternal life becomes the focus of the community's hope and the possession of the Spirit is deemed very important. The community depicted in this second version was probably Jewish, and tension with the parent Jewish body (synagogue) increased to breaking point. The parent body expelled those who believed in Jesus from the synagogue, and John's community now had become a minority persecuted by a "Jewish" majority.

In the third revision of the gospel, apocalyptic dualism was added, as well as an emphasis on future eschatology. In regard to the Spirit, the question no longer was whether one had the Spirit or not, but which Spirit one had: the Spirit of truth or deception. Also added in the third revision is the emphasis on the role and permanent validity of the words of Jesus, and the image of light as the symbol of Jesus' ministry. Some time after the completion of the second version of John's gospel, an internal dispute arose in the Johannine community about the interpretation of its tradition. This provoked another crisis, this time within the community itself, and a crisis that had two aspects to it: conflict with dissidents within the community, and a movement toward the Great Church. In regard to the dissidents in the community, the split centered on divergent opinions about Christology and ethics. Also at issue were matters of pneumatology and soteriology. The root issue in the community, however, was how to read the Old Testament promises about the eschatological outpouring of the Spirit in such a way as to preserve fully the soteriological role of Jesus (Von Wahlde 1997:226). The community's affirmation of its tradition over against the dissidents in their midst, however, had another function: it was a move toward clearer unity with other Christian communities. The Johannine community, once a maverick among early Christian communities, was now moving in the direction, not of sectarianism, but of increased harmony and unity with the Great Church (Von Wahlde 1997:20).

2.6 Evaluation

As indicated above, Kingsbury formulates the "idea" or aim of his book as the showcasing of the potential that narrative criticism and sociological inquiry hold for gaining new insight into the meaning and significance of the gospel stories and the circumstances in which they were first narrated (Kingsbury 1997:5). Kingsbury's intended "program" of reading the gospels thus concurs with what was above described as a socio-rhetorical analysis of texts: a reading of texts that is interested in both the text's communicative features (the meaning and significance of the gospel stories) and the *social context* in which such communication takes place (the circumstances in which the gospels were first narrated). In short, what Kingsbury set out to achieve is a reading of

the narrative texts of the gospels in terms of their *strategy* (narrative world) and *situation* (contextual world).

The bulk of the contributions in the book fall short of the above aim stated by Kingsbury in his introduction (see Kingsbury 1997d:1-5). As a first example, the contributions of Powell (1997a:9-15; 1997b:65-70; 1997c:125-131) can be referred to. According to Powell, Matthew (and all the gospels) should be seen as a unified and coherent document (with a finished form) that has a specific poetic structure that functions to create meaning and affect readers; it is a form of communication that cannot be understood without being received and experienced. In studying the gospels from a narrative-critical perspective, the focus is therefore not on historical and theological questions, but rather on literary concerns (Powell 1997a:9). The reason for this is that the story (Matthew) is told from the perspective of a narrator that only exists within the world of Matthew's story; the narrator is a literary creation of the gospel's real author (Powell 1997a:10).

From this definition of what a gospel is, it is clear that Powell is not interested in the circumstances in which the gospels were first narrated (their contextual world). To put it even more sharply: since, for Powell, the narrator of a gospel only exists in the narrative world of the story, an analysis of the contextual world of a gospel is actually not possible. Scholars reading the gospels from a socio-rhetorical perspective would obviously differ with Powell on this point. The fact of the matter is that all the gospels (like all other texts) originated in a specific context for a specific reason or intended effect. This is exactly the reason why socio-rhetorical analysts place emphasis on a text's situation and strategy. If the gospels are only read in terms of their intended effect on modern readers, as Powell proposes, what constraints would be left to limit all the possible meanings of a specific text?

At least two contradictions in Powell's argument can also be indicated. Firstly, Powell (1997a:9) states that a gospel, as a form of communication, cannot be understood without being received or experienced. If this holds true for the modern reader of the gospels, it is all the more true for the gospel's first intended addressees! Moreover, if the narrator of the gospels exists in the world of the gospel stories only as a literary creation of the real author (Powell 1997a:10), what about the social location and social world and

social circumstances of this real author? These are exactly what a socio-rhetorical analysis of the gospels intends to analyse by means of social-scientific theories and models.

The second contradiction in Powell's approach to reading the gospels lies in his conviction that narrative criticism does not focus on theological questions in the text. However, in reading Mark, Powell (1997b:65-70) argues that the narrator of Mark uses the secrecy motif in Mark, his specific portrayal of the disciples, as well as Mark's abrupt ending to score theological points in his gospel[9].

If Powell is correct in regard to the narrator of Mark's usage of the secrecy motif and his specific portrayal of the disciples in the gospel, another question comes to the fore: why would the narrator of Mark pay specific attention to these two "theological" matters? Is it not because a specific understanding of Jesus existed in Mark's community, and that because of this a specific understanding of discipleship, a specific understanding of Jesus' identity and concurrent understanding of discipleship, had to be corrected? If the latter is indeed the case, can one simply ignore the contextual world (situation) in which Mark originated? Powell, by arguing that Mark, for example, uses a specific portrayal of the disciples to score a theological point, actually argues that Mark is using a specific *strategy* in his narrative. And, as Elliott has indicated, the strategy of a text always goes hand in hand with its situation. Or, in the words of Tannehill (1997:132): "[a] text is constructed so as to activate items from the extra text in communicating with the audience. The older historical criticism [and] the newer social-scientific criticism of ancient Mediterranean society...can help us to understand that extra text". If the intention of the gospels, as narrative (oral) texts, was to communicate, then they served as a vehicle of communication to specific people in a specific situation, and therefore with a specific theological message. To try to understand the theological/ideological message of any gospel, an analysis (in any which way possible) of the narrative's situation is therefore necessary.

Not only Powell ignores the contextual world (situation) of the gospels; this is also evident in Kingsbury's (1997a:16-26; 1997c:155-165) analysis of the plot of

[9] This is also the case in regard to Powell's analysis of Luke, where he clearly, in his analysis of Luke, refers to the theological value of the gospel (Powell 1997c:125).

Matthew and Luke. The plot of Matthew, according to Kingsbury, hinges on conflict between Jesus and Israel (religious authorities) over the correct interpretation of the Mosaic law. Social-scientific studies of the Mosaic law (in terms of the concepts of purity and pollution) have indicated, that the religious authorities' interpretation of the Mosaic law could be understood as a specific interpretation of the symbolic universe that resulted in very specific social arrangements, to use Petersen's (1985) terms. In terms of their understanding of the law, the religious authorities classified persons, times, days and things as pure or impure. Only those who were pure or holy, for example, could count on God's presence. Impure (polluted) people (e g, tax collectors, non-Israelites, bastards and the blind and lame), on the other hand, could not lay claim to God's presence. By eating with sinners and tax collectors, for example, Jesus challenged the religious authorities' interpretation of the law. If only this one insight of the social-scientific interpretation of the gospels is taken into account, it becomes clear that the conflict Kingsbury identifies in the plot of Matthew entails more than merely confrontational dialogues between Jesus and the religious authorities. Moreover, since the different interpretations of the law by the religious authorities and Jesus implied totally different social arrangements (social universes), taking into account aspects like purity and pollution makes it possible to understand how intense the conflict between Jesus and his adversaries was.

There are, however, a few contributions in the book under discussion that do take a socio-rhetorical reading (which is stated as the aim of the book) seriously. Rohrbaugh (1997:106-122), in his description of the social location of Mark's audience, indicates how the narrative world of Mark accurately recreates the sharply stratified peasant society of his day (situation). Rohrbaugh also shows how the narrator of Mark, in the way he tells his story of Jesus (strategy), depicts Jesus as creating a surrogate family along new lines that are not prescribed by stratification, but by the act of following of Jesus.

Tannehill's contribution on "Cornelius" and "Tabitha" as two "readers" of the gospel of Luke is a little cameo in Kingsbury's work. Taking into account the respective backgrounds and social standing of "Cornelius" and "Tabitha", Tannehill (1997:132-141), in reading Luke as narrative and concentrating on Luke's strategy, indicates how both these two "characters" come to accept Luke's message of Jesus. The contribution of

Tannehill can also be seen as a direct critique of Powell's (1997a:13) notion that the people referred to in the gospels can only be studied as characters that are part of the narrative world of the gospels. In this regard, the contributions of Collins (197:201-211) and Segovia (1997:212-221) can also be connected by means of a question: What would the results have been if Collins, in his analysis of the characters of John, had taken Segovia's description of the social location of the community of John into account?

The articles of Beavis (1997:142-154) and Moxnes (1977:166-177) are also noteworthy. Although not paying much attention to Luke's strategy, Beavis indicates how important the social practice of reciprocity in the first-century Mediterranean world is for understanding the specific social arrangements and the creation of the social world of Luke. Moxnes (1997:166-177), on the other hand, points to the importance of meals (as ceremonies *vis-à-vis* rituals) in the first-century Mediterranean world. They help one understand the structures of power that were formed along the lines of honour, patronage and reciprocity. Only when these kinds of core values of the world of the gospels are taken into consideration, will the "message" of the gospels become more intelligible to the modern reader.

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the final analysis, the most important question in regard to the interpretation of the gospels is the question of audience. Is the audience of the gospels an imaginary person who responds to the story in a way the text calls for (Powell 1997a:10-11), or must the audience of the gospels first and foremost be seen as real flesh-and-blood readers that are socio-historically situated and socio-culturally conditioned (Segovia 1997:213)? If one opts for the first possibility, the question remains whether any text's strategy (as form-giving principle of its narrative world) could be understood without taking the situation (social/contextual world) in which it was produced, into account. Moreover, does such a reading of the gospels not open the door to ethnocentrism?

Socio-rhetorical readings of the gospels put emphasis on the different worlds (contextual, referential and narrative) of the gospels, as well as the relationship between these worlds. Ideology/theology (as a specific understanding of the contextual world of a specific audience) leads to "new" narrative worlds (gospels). This is the premise of

socio-rhetorical readings of the gospels. Because of this, the situation and the strategy of the gospels should come under scrutiny if any attempt is made to explore what the gospels intended to communicate.

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