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Rhetoric, society and ideology

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THE CHALLENGE OF SOCIO-RHETORICAL CRITICISM

The appearance of the New Hermeneutic during the 1960s was simply the beginning of a succession of challenges for biblical studies during the last half of this century. Liberation theology, feminist criticism and African-American interpretation have followed on its heels with exceptional vitality and persistence. In the midst of these vigorous movements, biblical interpreters have been applying new literary, rhetorical, structuralist, linguistic, sociological, materialist and ideological methods to biblical texts (Detweiler and Robbins 1991). It is no surprise that these movements and methods have given rise to an environment fragmented by individual interests and insights rather than an environment unified by issues they have in common with one another. The emergence of so many movements and methods in such a short span of time has produced a scientific revolution in biblical studies, and revolutions are times of disunity rather than widespread co-operation (Kuhn 1970). For both personal and professional reasons, I have viewed this situation as a challenge to integrate major strategies of the new movements and methods through a rhetorical approach that focuses on literary, social, cultural and ideological issues in texts. From my perspective, the issues exhibit the common ground among these movements and methods – namely, a growing perception that texts are performances of language, and language is a part of the inner fabric of society, culture, ideology and religion.

Amos N. Wilder's views have had a profound influence on me as I have analyzed these issues and brought strategies together for an integrated mode of analysis and interpretation of texts. Already in 1955, Wilder presented an embryonic form of my approach in his presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature. In his address entitled 'Scholars, Theologians, and Ancient Rhetoric', he discussed the nature of religious symbol and symbolic discourse, referred to New Testament eschatology as 'a tremendous expression of the religious imagination, an extraordinary rhetoric of faith', and encouraged the use of insights from the fields of cultural anthropology and folklore to interpret biblical literature (1956: 1–3).

It has taken nearly forty years for systematic strategies of analysis and interpretation to emerge that can reach the goal envisioned by Wilder's address. His focus on both ancient rhetoric and symbolic discourse was a way of merging the project of proponents of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (Räisänen 1990: 13–31; Riches 1993: 14–49) with analysis that was grounded in and attentive to the rhetorical, literary and linguistic dimensions of early Christian texts. New Testament texts are, from this perspective, products of a living religion. They contain 'expressions of a common developing religious and cultural heritage' (Boers 1979: 50). Wilder's appeal to cultural anthropology and folklore, therefore, is based on a perception that language itself is a rich and thickly configured historical, social, cultural and ideological phenomenon. The inner workings of language presuppose that words, phrases, clauses and sentences stand in an interactive relation not only with thoughts, convictions, attitudes and values but also with trees, rocks, buildings, people, institutions and events.

During the years since Wilder's address, biblical interpreters have worked diligently to fulfil many of the challenges he set before them. Interpreters have developed many new strategies for exploring the inner nature of New Testament texts and for exhibiting social, cultural and ideological aspects of New Testament discourse. But the years have also brought intense struggle. There is no agreement on an approach that would reach the goals evoked by Wilder's assertions. Some interpreters, it appears, are unsure that such an approach can be scientific; others, perhaps the same ones, question whether such an approach will stay in touch with issues they consider to be central to New Testament interpretation. Nevertheless, there is a growing number of interpreters who are calling for serious dialogue among interpreters who focus on literary and rhetorical

phenomena and interpreters who focus on historical, social, cultural, ideological and theological phenomena.

In 1984, I introduced the term 'socio-rhetorical' in *Jesus the Teacher* to describe a set of integrated strategies that would move coherently through inner literary and rhetorical features of the Gospel of Mark into a social and cultural interpretation of its discourse in the context of the Mediterranean world. With the publication of the paperback edition, I introduced a four-arena approach to socio-rhetorical criticism that programmatically addresses inner texture, intertexture, social and cultural texture and ideological texture in exegetical interpretation (1992a: xix–xliv; 1992c; 1994b). This systematic approach asks the interpreter to develop a conscious strategy of reading and rereading a text from different angles. When certain strategies prove to be exceptionally fruitful, the interpreter should programmatically develop them to produce a richly textured and deeply reconfigured interpretation for this moment in time and space in the known inhabited world. The approach in this manuscript is to display a wide range of strategies programmatically with 1 Corinthians 9. Few studies will, and perhaps few should, set a goal of explicitly displaying with any one text the full range of strategies displayed in this manuscript. Focusing programmatically on such an extensive range of strategies runs the risk of burying the text in a morass of theory and method. The purpose for displaying such a wide range of strategies with 1 Corinthians 9 is to give an initial perception of the manner in which a socio-rhetorical approach generates multiple strategies for reading and rereading texts in an integrated environment of interpretation. Since this chapter of Paul's letter to the Corinthians contains such richly textured discourse, it is hoped that the text itself will not only maintain its own prominence in the discussion but will, in the end, begin to give the reader a glimpse of its incredible far-reaching horizons of meaning.

One of the goals of a socio-rhetorical approach is to set specialized areas of analysis in conversation with one another. While this may clarify certain issues, it will continually raise others. The goal is not so much to attain agreement among interpreters as to nurture cooperation in the gathering, analysis and interpretation of data, even among people who disagree with one another. In order to understand what some of these areas and projects might be, it will be helpful to identify some of the places where it has been difficult,

if not impossible, for us to reach some mutual understanding during the last quarter of a century.

THE RELATION OF CHRISTIANITY TO CULTURE

First of all, Wilder's appeal to cultural anthropology implied that New Testament texts have something to do with culture. But it has been, and remains, a highly challenging task to describe the relation of Christianity to culture. H. Richard Niebuhr's classic work *Christ and Culture* articulated important insights for us when it described good Christianity as *against* culture, *above* culture, *paradoxically* related to culture, or as a *transformer* of culture (1951). Yet the underlying implication of this approach is that culture is something bad. Since culture is at least implicitly bad, 'good' Christianity separates from culture – hopefully, as oil separates from water. In our best moments, we have known that this underlying dualism is not entirely true. 'Good' Christianity creates a particular kind of culture with the hope that its adherents will steadfastly choose this mode of conviction, belief, attitude, feeling, action and thought as their 'primary' culture. But what kind of terminology can we use to describe the kinds of culture we would consider to be positive forms of Christianity?

The initial step in activating a cultural analysis of Christianity must be a working definition of 'culture'. From my perspective, culture is 'a system of patterned values, meanings, and beliefs that give cognitive structure to the world, provide a basis for coordinating and controlling human interactions, and constitute a link as the system is transmitted from one generation to the next' (Smelser 1992: 11; based on Berger and Luckmann 1967). Another insight into the nature of culture can be gained from describing it as 'simultaneously a product of and a guide to actors searching for organized categories and interpretations that provide a meaningful experiential link to their rounds of social life' (Smelser 1992: 11; based on Geertz 1973).

Still another angle can be to perceive culture as a system that arises in 'the game of social control, social conflict, and social change' (Smelser 1992: 25). Culture is a product of a human game, and religion is an ingredient of that game. It is most helpful, however, not to use the concept of culture simply as a 'global entity' – a concept that covers all things. Rather, culture has 'discrete parts

(values, beliefs, ideologies, preferences)' that can help us to investigate and display a range of different 'cultural' manifestations of Christianity throughout all periods of its existence (Smelser 1992: 24). The particular range represented by New Testament texts can appropriately be referred to as the 'cultures' of 'New Testament Christianity'. The symbiosis and tension among these cultures, in turn, represent the 'culture' of New Testament Christianity as it may be contrasted with the 'culture' of Christianity in other times, places and manifestations.

Fortunately, a number of anthropologists and sociologists have been helping us to find the terminology with which to investigate and describe Christianity as a cultural phenomenon. The work of an anthropologist like Clifford Geertz helps us to understand that some form of Christianity is 'the primary culture' in which many people live (1973). Also, his work helps us to understand the function of 'local cultures' and their relation to national and international cultures (1983). Thus, concerning early Christianity we must ask questions like the following:

(a) What kinds of local cultures did Christianity create during the first century?
(b) What kinds of coalition cultures, groups working together in temporary alliances for limited purposes (Elliott 1993: 127), emerged during first-century Christianity?
(c) What kind of culture is 'New Testament culture', the culture transmitted by canonical New Testament literature? What is it that characterizes 'New Testament Christianity' as a culture in the midst of other cultures?

In addition, the work of the Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth raises the possibility that Christianity nurtures 'attitudinal boundaries' in ways that create distinctive forms of 'ethnic identity' (1969). This means that group members in the first century nurtured strong convictions about one, two or three major values or behaviors that defined them over against other groups with whom they had close contact (Østergård 1992: 36–8; Gourdriaan 1992: 75–7). In other words, they did not emphasize, or even regularly admit, the things they had in common with these other groups. Rather, their attitudes were deeply informed by a few basic convictions and behaviours that set them apart from other groups with whom they shared many things in common. These differences in attitude and behavior created clear boundaries that separated them

from other groups and gave them a special identity (Barth 1969: 9–10). Perhaps this insight into the manner in which a group can form a distinct boundary between itself and other groups on the basis of a few deeply felt convictions can help us to describe the boundaries that Christianity persistently creates between itself and other cultures and between 'local cultures' in Christianity itself. The challenge lies before New Testament interpreters to describe the kinds of local and extended cultures that are visible in the discourse available to us in New Testament texts, and many resources now are available to meet this challenge (Robbins 1993c, 1994d).

THE RELATION OF TEXTS TO SOCIETY, CULTURE AND HISTORY

Second, as we face the challenge of describing the relation of first-century Christianity to culture, how do we deal with integrity with the inner nature of New Testament texts themselves? In the midst of his address, Wilder asserted that '[o]ur task must be to get behind the words to what semanticists call their "referents"' (1956: 3). This means that he presupposed that words in texts are always in some way interacting with phenomena outside of texts as they interact with words in that particular text. This, as it turns out, is another thorny issue for us (Lategan and Vorster 1985). In order to drive home the insight that a text creates its own world with its own words, many interpreters have taken the position that written discourse has no clearly definable relation to cultural, social and historical phenomena outside itself. Perhaps, then, the 'referents' are simply firmly held values, beliefs and convictions that an individual creates out of emotional and psychological needs and desires. Maybe, in other words, the referents are primarily psychological phenomena related to biologically driven desires to survive, feel secure and procreate in an environment that, if left unencountered, naturally produces starvation, loss of physical strength and death within humans.

The relation of texts to phenomena outside themselves is an especially pertinent issue in New Testament study, since this is the arena in which many interpreters enact their most deeply held convictions about the nature of humans, God and the world. Is it the 'true nature' of humans that they are not 'actually' an internal

part of this world we see, feel, touch, hear and smell each day? Are humans really 'foreign' to this world? Do New Testament texts show a person 'another world' – a world in which our true nature 'lives', rather than the world in which we dwell on earth for the purpose of dying? Are New Testament texts a kind of literature that creates a world in which no one, in the final analysis, truly can 'live' as an earthly human being? Could it be, therefore, that no one ever really enacted the historical, social and cultural assertions we encounter in the New Testament, since all of these are reconfigured in terms of a world other than this earthly world? To put it still another way, is it possible that the all-encompassing nature and function of New Testament texts is to introduce the Word of God as a reality that can exist only outside any earthly human reality? Is it possible, then, that New Testament texts are not at all reliable as a resource for understanding the cultural, social and historical nature of first-century Christianity? Is it possible that New Testament texts are completely a 'world unto themselves' – a world in but not of the world?

Amos Wilder himself began to tackle this issue in his remarkable book *Early Christian Rhetoric*, which appeared less than a decade after his presidential address (1964). After discussing New Testament language as 'The New Utterance' in the first chapter, he programmatically explored the rhetorical nature of dialogue, story, parable and poem, and he ended the book with a chapter on 'Image, Symbol, Myth'. Yet Wilder's aesthetic conceptualization of literature evoked a limited ability to work with the manner in which language persistently interacts with phenomena outside itself. Aesthetics concerns beauty, pleasure, fulfilment and creativity – the imaginative resources of humans. Yet interpreters activate aesthetic analysis in ideologically different ways in interpretation (Eagleton 1990, 1991). Most biblical interpreters who responded to Wilder's call considered the goal to be an explanation of the imaginative resources of the mind at work in the writing and reading of the text. Many of these interpreters have included in their purview the concrete circumstances of the body that are embedded in these texts. Many of these same interpreters, however, have approached the workings of the mind as though they existed outside the body and its functions. Particular social and historical aspects of the body, they have reasoned, are 'outside the text' rather then 'inside the language', because they are outside rather than inside the mind. This is a result of approaching literature as a product of the mind

alone rather than the product of interaction between the body and the mind (M. Johnson 1987).

Researchers in various fields have shown both that the concrete circumstances of the body are 'inside' language itself and that language is 'inside' the concrete circumstances of the body (Geertz 1973: 55–83; M. Johnson 1987; R. H. Brown 1987). Biblical scholars, in turn, are bringing these insights into analysis and interpretation of biblical literature (Meeks 1986a; Krondorfer 1992). Language always emerges out of particular locations of the body in social, cultural and historical circumstances. Yet language is also an ingredient that 'makes' these circumstances social, cultural and historical. In other words, language is an integral, constitutive and cognitive feature of human society, culture and history. This means that language is always simultaneously interrelated to speech, writing and actions of particular people, to social and cultural meanings and meaning effects that concern groups of people, and to particular phenomena that people see, feel, touch, smell, fear and desire in particular regions of the world (Roger Fowler 1986: 85–101).

But how do we enact these insights in exegesis, the central practice of New Testament interpretation in which we read meanings 'out of' texts (ex-egesis) rather than simply read our meanings 'into' them (eis-egesis)? The multiple methods of historical–critical exegesis are subdisciplines of historical method. Therefore, they emphasize historical and theological referents in biblical texts rather than symbolic, rhetorical and narratorial referents. Historical–critical methods create the context for biblical interpretation to be a liberating venture in Western culture. These are the methods that make the biblical text available to us with its variant wording in different manuscripts and invite us to the challenges this variation communicates to us about Christianity in the world. But historical methods have their limitations (L. T. Johnson 1986: 8–11). They were not designed to explore the inner nature of texts as written discourse. Their role was, and still is, to answer a comprehensive range of historical and theological questions about people who can be identified as Christians and about events, institutions and beliefs that exhibit the history of the growth and expansion of the phenomenon we call Christianity. The goal is always to draw some conclusion about phenomena outside the New Testament texts themselves, even when there is significant focus on the internal wording of the text. On the other hand, formalist literary and rhetorical methods and the New Criticism were

designed specifically to explore the relation of words to one another in texts. Interpreters did not generate these methods for the purpose of exploring the manner in which texts referred to phenomena that exist outside of texts. The purpose was to gain a clear understanding of the nature of written discourse in contrast to spoken discourse and in contrast to other kinds of visual communication.

Fortunately, a number of interpreters have been working both from texts to society and culture and from society and culture to texts. The earlier interests of proponents of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* are being supplemented by the work of a number of sociolinguists and literary interpreters who have been analyzing the social and cultural nature of language in texts at the same time that a number of cultural anthropologists, sociologists of culture and social philosophers have been analyzing the nature of society and culture as text (Lentricchia and McLaughlin 1990). Society, culture and texts are all environments in which meanings and meaning effects interact with one another. The challenge, then, is to develop strategies of analysis and interpretation that exhibit the multiple networks of meanings and meaning effects that the words in our texts represent, engage, evoke and invite.

The question stands before us, then, whether we are able to develop a systematic approach that brings specialized arenas of biblical interpretation into a productive working relation with one another. Can we find a way, without violating the nature of texts as particular kinds of written discourse, to investigate the phenomena with which texts interact as they participate in multiple networks of meanings and meaning effects? Can we develop practices of exegesis that explore multiple contexts of meanings and meaning effects without establishing insurmountable boundaries between them? Socio-rhetorical criticism has evolved as a systematic approach that sets multiple contexts of interpretation in dialogue with one another. Both literary and rhetorical interpreters have begun to explore social and cultural aspects of New Testament texts. In turn, social science critics are engaging in conversation with literary and rhetorical critics to find ways to join ranks wherever possible in the exegesis of New Testament texts (Robbins 1995). The challenge is to use these dialogues and activities to explore the relation of texts to society, culture and history at the same time as we are negotiating our understanding of the relation of Christianity and Christian

belief to society, culture and history. We need the best efforts of many people to meet these challenges.

THE RELATION OF NEW TESTAMENT INTERPRETATION TO THEOLOGY

Third, most New Testament interpreters have wrestled mightily with dogmatic theology, but can we engage in a kind of exploratory theology that contributes to constructive or systematic theology? Despite the all-pervasive use of the terms 'theology' and 'Christology' in New Testament interpretation, most theologians pay little attention to the specific results of New Testament exegesis. Many, perhaps most, New Testament methods of exegesis produce specialized results that theologians consider to be of interest only to people inside the boundaries of biblical interpretation. In fact, the boundaries are so noticeable that specialists in Old Testament interpretation regularly have nothing to do with specialists in New Testament interpretation, and even within the two major fields many interpreters either ignore or avoid one another.

During the last four decades, many biblical interpreters have been developing methods of interpretation they think should contribute to constructive and systematic theology. Redaction criticism was designed to explore the theology of biblical texts in the settings in which they were produced. This paved the way for various kinds of structural, literary and rhetorical methods that were designed to explore coherence, consistency and tension in texts; and interpreters considered these approaches to be much more congenial to the articulation of constructive and systematic theology.

The challenge of bringing theologians and biblical interpreters into a cooperative relation, however, appears to be very difficult. A growing number of interpreters are seeking ways to explore deep theological and ideological issues in biblical scholarship. Yet theology itself is a wideranging and changing field with its own interests and concerns. For many theologians the Bible is an essential but minor phenomenon in a large arena of concerns. Biblical interpretation, therefore, is informative only if it engages this larger arena in a manner that challenges it and contributes further insight and information to its projects.

Socio-rhetorical criticism is grounded in a pragmatic approach to language and interpretation that functions in a manner related to

the theological project of the feminist theologian Rebecca Chopp. The goal is to weave a discourse of judgment and transformation that shows 'the relation of language, politics, and subjectivity in the dominant social–symbolic order and, standing on the margins and in the breaks of that order, to glimpse and whisper possibilities of transformation' (Chopp 1989: 102–3). One of the goals of socio-rhetorical criticism is to bring the margins and boundaries into view, to invite the interpreter into the discourses that dwell in those marginal spaces, to criticize the dominating interpretive practices that exclude these marginal discourses and to seek discourses of emancipation for marginalized, embodied voices and actions in the text.

A major goal, then, is for socio-rhetorical criticism to function as a prolegomenon to a constructive theology guided by discourses of emancipatory transformation (Chopp 1989: 107–15). As it enacts this role, it regularly takes the form of exploratory rather than constructive theology. In accord with this, the method moves from highly intricate and detailed analysis of language in texts to broad, complex and controversial issues concerning subjectivity and politics (Chopp 1989: 101–7). The final goal is to explore not the private and political arenas of life in and of themselves but the religious dimensions of life in a world constituted by language, subjectivity and politics. In the end, then, socio-rhetorical criticism as it is presented in this book focuses on language about God and Christ, subjectivity in the context of both private and public religious practice and speech, and politics both among and within different religious groups and between and among religious people and various kinds of historical, social, cultural and ideological phenomena in the world they inhabit.

THE RELATION OF DISCIPLINARY METHODS TO AN INTERPRETIVE ANALYTICS

As a guild of interpreters, our forebears and we ourselves have been good at creating specialized disciplines of study. Are we capable now of using the tools of 'a "grand theory", a broad-based interpretive analysis that moves across discursive and nondiscursive practices of the present' (Chopp 1989: 103) to bring our different kinds of specialized knowledge into dialogue and to create a context for generating new insights, new areas of research and new

specialties that lead to a new account of first-century Christianity? To fulfill this task, the field of biblical studies needs an interpretive analytics rather than a method or theory in the usual sense. An interpretive analytics approaches texts as discourse and 'sees discourse as part of a larger field of power and practice whose relations are articulated in different ways by different paradigms' (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983: 199). The rigorous establishment of the relations of power and practice is the analytic dimension. The courageous writing of a story of the emergence of these relations is the interpretive dimension. The interpretive task moves through these steps:

1) the interpreter must take up a pragmatic stance on the basis of some socially shared sense of how things are going; . . .
2) the investigator must produce a disciplined diagnosis of what has gone on and is going on in the social body to account for the shared sense of distress or well-being; . . .
3) the investigator owes the reader an account of why the practices he [or she] describes should produce the shared malaise or contentment which gave rise to the investigation.

(Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983: 200)

Socio-rhetorical criticism does not present a program for a full-scale interpretive analytics, but it is a step toward it. Among other things, resources from the discipline of psychology are noticeably absent from the socio-rhetorical practices of exegesis in this book. I began to incorporate social and developmental psychology in socio-rhetorical exegesis during the 1980s (1992a), but so many other challenges lie at the interface between the historical–critical methods and social, rhetorical and modern literary methods that it has been necessary to exclude psychology from this presentation. Other resources as well will steadily emerge for interpreters of religious texts. One of the goals of socio-rhetorical criticism is to provide a beginning place for inviting these resources into an environment of systematic exegesis of texts.

A beginning place for psychological analysis and interpretation in a new mode has already begun in the context of social, cultural, ideological and theological dimensions of New Testament texts (e.g. Theissen 1987). But significantly new work will be necessary to bring the resources of cultural and cognitive psychology into

analysis and interpretation of the psychological texture of the literary, historical, social, cultural and ideological phenomena in New Testament texts (e.g. Lawson and McCauley 1990). Some initial explorations of Pauline texts with the aid of insights from the work of Wilhelm Dilthey hold promise for analysis of the psychological texture of texts in a socio-rhetorical mode (Na 1995). A reason for mentioning this here is to emphasize that one of the goals of socio-rhetorical criticism is to nurture a broad-based interpretive analytics rather than simply to introduce another specialty into New Testament interpretation. An interpretive analytics invites the development of specialties that will programmatically explore aspects of human reality that have heretofore been unexplored. Of special concern during this era in our history is the relation of power, practice and self-perspective. Since socio-rhetorical criticism is a textually based method, the goal is to explore the inner phenomena and nature of power, practice and self-perspective in the context of exegetical practices with texts.

CONCLUSION

Socio-rhetorical criticism challenges interpreters to explore human reality and religious belief and practice through multiple approaches to written discourse in texts. As an interpretive program that moves toward a broad-based interpretive analytics, it invites investigations that enact integrated interdisciplinary analysis and interpretation. At present, interpreters are practicing many multiple approaches, but they are often practicing them either without knowledge of one another or in contexts where animosity is articulated with an absence of an understanding of the profound interrelation between the respective projects and their results. The specific texts under discussion in this book are in the New Testament. The approach, however, is applicable to any texts anywhere. Since my own specialty is New Testament literature, I have accepted this task in the context of the challenges that currently face interpreters of New Testament texts.

As I began the task, I had hoped that historical–critical methods could simply be reformed to meet the challenges that lie before us. My experiences during the past quarter of a century in the field, however, suggest that historical–critical methods in the form in which they have developed during the last fifty years are not well

equipped to perform all the tasks that face us as we look toward the beginning of the twenty-first century. A number of current historical–critical methods still do not seriously incorporate literary, rhetorical and semiotic modes of analysis. To the extent that these methods avoid these new modes of criticism, they regularly reduce New Testament texts to forms of historical and theological discourse that exclude meanings and meaning effects that are highly pertinent for addressing the issues of our day. Methods that overemphasize a single dimension of a biblical text, like structuralism or linguistics, have also not been sufficient for the task. New Testament texts are not simply historical, theological or linguistic treatises. Rather, their written discourse is a highly interactive and complex environment. Interpreting a biblical text is an act of entering a world where body and mind, interacting with one another, create and evoke highly complex patterns and configurations of meanings in historical, social, cultural and ideological contexts of religious belief. Rhetorical argument, social act and religious belief intertwine in them like threads and yarn in a richly textured tapestry. By renewing many of the interests of proponents of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* with insights from literary, rhetorical and semiotic practices of interpretation during this last decade of the twentieth century, it is possible to explore in quite new ways the nature of New Testament texts as religious discourse. In this new context, a well-tuned interdisciplinary approach that explores the relation between rhetorical argument and social location and action can merge programmatic, systematic investigation with multiple insights into language, subjectivity, politics, belief and practice in a more satisfactory manner than methods limited to the practices of a single discipline of investigation.

Socio-rhetorical criticism is part of a context at the end of the twentieth century where people in every area of life face the challenge of relating 'specialized' knowledge to larger contexts than those to which the specialists who produce that knowledge regularly relate it. On the one hand, it behooves anyone who is engaged in such an enterprise to build on previous knowledge rather than to discard it. It would be a mistake, therefore, for a socio-rhetorical approach to bypass insights attained by the wide range of historical–critical approaches that currently exist. Historical–critical methods have yielded treasured insights into biblical literature, and they will continue to do so. The methods of text, source, form and redaction criticism bring the details of ancient

manuscripts into view in a manner that deserves, and must continue to receive, support and respect. In addition, history of religions, tradition criticism and canon criticism each add additional data and understanding. On the other hand, each method limits its interest in texts as written discourse, because its focus is first and foremost on 'historical' interests. This means that the texts themselves do not, in the final analysis, receive primary attention. Rather, the focus lies on 'the historical world' to which the texts, in the mind of the interpreter, point. The common practice of referring to New Testament texts as 'documents' exhibits this focus. In the context of much historical–critical interpretation, the value of New Testament writings lies in what they 'document' in the world outside the text, not in what they contain as texts, as written discourse that has its own inner nature and meanings. The second interest lies in 'theology', the 'beliefs' that arise out of the historical world in which people produced these texts. Socio-rhetorical criticism accepts the challenge to move beyond modes of historical and theological analysis that limit the resources of the text. It brings dynamics of religious belief into view by establishing a dialogical environment for analytical strategies from widely different arenas of investigation. The dialogue invites a wide range of historical, social, cultural, ideological and psychological phenomena into the project of theological reflection and construction. Again, the possibilities for this lie in the merger of new modes of textual analysis with broad interests in religion that were characteristic of proponents of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (Boers 1979; Räisänen 1990; Riches 1993).

Amos Wilder, who died after a long and full life in the year in which this manuscript began to emerge (1993), introduced a vision already in 1955 that can inform us as we attempt to move toward a new interpretive analytics. Yet Wilder's focus itself caused him to limit the resources for new insights into the nature and function of image, myth and symbol in biblical texts. As a result, it has taken New Testament interpreters nearly four decades to begin to integrate analysis of the inner imaginative and argumentative nature of early Christian texts with analysis of the social, cultural and historical nature of their discourse. Beginning around 1970, many biblical interpreters began to read the works of scholars outside the field of biblical studies whom they had never read before, and they began to include references to these scholars in footnotes and comments as they wrote their articles and books on the Bible. The

scholars to whom they referred were not simply philosophers or theologians about whom people had not yet heard. They were literary critics who read novels, structuralists who made detailed diagrams, linguists and sociolinguists who created difficult words in order to study language, anthropologists who studied a wide variety of people and sociologists who developed long lists of different types of groups, alternative kinds of activities for producing goods and services, and multiple systems for distributing and trading items that people valued. The new roll call was bewildering, but the new names and the new diagrams just kept coming. The purpose was to expand the field of biblical studies so it included the rich resources available from the fields of literary study and the social sciences as well as history, philosophy and theology.

Socio-rhetorical criticism was born in this new environment, and it uses the works of many people outside the field of biblical studies, various kinds of diagrams, and many strategies and techniques to invite the reader into its practices, purposes and goals. The chapter after this introduction is a case in point. Socio-rhetorical criticism identifies four arenas of texture in a text. These arenas have appeared gradually as I have gathered strategies of analysts and interpreters both outside and inside the field of biblical studies to create an approach that brings new aspects of interpretation into a form that not only my scholarly colleagues but also college, seminary and doctoral students as well as lay people and clergy can regularly use as they interpret the Bible. The task is not especially easy, since the new names and the new words can be bewildering for the most eager reader. But within time the new names become familiar, even if a person has not read the writings of the people, and with a little care the new words can acquire meanings that are helpful as a person interprets a biblical text. The purpose, in any case, is to bring biblical studies forthrightly into the world of thought, activity and belief at the end of the twentieth century so it can meet the challenges of the twenty-first century as they come quickly and relentlessly into our lives.

At this point in New Testament study, interpreters who responded to Wilder's call but at first resisted the insights of social scientists into myth, the social construction of reality and the ideological nature of culture now have new resources at their disposal. Socio-rhetorical criticism has been designed to help interpreters to use these new resources. The purpose of the strategies and techniques in the approach is to move us into new forms of dialogue,

exploration and cooperation that will fulfil the potential that lies in the robust field of biblical study today. Socio-rhetorical criticism does this by bringing insights from literary critics, linguists, sociologists and anthropologists into an organized frame of understanding and activity. The works of about twenty people outside the field of biblical studies contribute significantly to the diagrams and discussion in the next chapter. In the interest of communicating as clearly as possible to the reader, however, only a few of their names appear in the references in parentheses.