

Narrative Criticism as a Hermeneutical Key for Interpreting the Gospels in the African Context

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Introduction

“Hermeneutic” comes from the Greek noun *hermeneia*, which corresponds to the Greek verb *hermeneuein*, which means “to express, to explain, to translate, to interpret”.¹ It is a term which is traditionally used to express a theory of interpretation and a phenomenology (description) of understanding. Hermeneutic, therefore, seeks “to establish the principles, methods, and rules needed in the interpretation of written texts”.² In line with its etymology, biblical hermeneutics (with “s”) is concerned about the principles, methods and rules which are needed for the interpretation, explanation and translation of the sacred written texts, the word of God, the Bible. There is need for biblical hermeneutics, given the fact that the texts of the Bible relate experiences and material from a world-view different from that of today’s reader in terms of language, geography, history, as well as socio-economic, religious, political and moral realities.³

A survey of the hermeneutical methods and approaches to biblical studies in Africa would reveal that on the whole, African biblical scholarship, especially in English speaking Africa, “uses various methods of the historical critical scholarship in analyzing the biblical text, and aims at showing some correspondence between the experience of Christianity in its early history and in Africa today”.⁴ The historical – critical method of biblical hermeneutics has as its hermeneutic principle that the meaning of a biblical text can primarily be

¹ Bauer, W., Gingrich F., Danker, F., eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 310.

² Soulen, R. N., *Handbook of Biblical Criticism* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 82.

³ Soulen, R. N., *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, 82.

⁴ Ukpogon, J. S., “Models and Methods of Biblical Interpretation in Africa” *JIT* 4/1 (1997), 3-31; here 9. See also, 13, 15, 16.

found “in the author’s intention, which was formulated in terms of the social, political, cultural, and ideological matrix of the author”.⁵ Thus, the interpreter of the word of God must focus on many issues that can usually be known only from extra-biblical sources. In this regard, the historical-critical method routinely researches into the world behind the text, in order to discover the historical life setting (*Sitz im Leben*) of the text, and investigate the historical circumstances which inspired the author, the sources used by the author, the place the author wrote from, the date of writing, the author’s purpose in writing, and the audience of the author. The interpreter has to unearth the socio-cultural and religious environments of the author in relation to the text, and the history of the development of the text.⁶ This process is carried out with the help of a number of historical-critical theories such as Textual Criticism, Source Criticism, Form Criticism, Redaction Criticism, and History of Traditions Criticism.

The multiplicity of scholarly debates and disagreements, and the often widely divergent scholarly views on historical issues, such as the history of the transmission of a text, an author’s date of writing and purpose of writing, and the nature of the recipients of a text have sometimes made results from historical-critical studies to appear highly hypothetical. Questions have also been raised on the difficulty, if not impossibility, of assuming that a text can convey undistorted, an author’s original intention, given the natural limitations of space and time from the original author. Furthermore, historical criticism has been queried on the grounds that too much attention is usually paid on investigating the origins and historical background of a text, without a corresponding amount of time spent on analyzing the text itself. Many of the biblical texts, to be sure, were not written primarily as histories, but as theologies, and so, one would appreciate the difficulty of going out in search of or totally depending on historical reliability in them, as the experience of the *Life of Jesus* research showed. With these, the appropriateness of the historical-critical method for arriving at meaning has, therefore, come into question.⁷ This does not mean that meaning cannot be arrived at through the historical-critical method. It is an indication rather, that meaning cannot *always* be arrived at, in *every* biblical passage, *only* through the historical critical method.

⁵ Tate, R. W., *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), xvi.

⁶ Tate, R. W., *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach*, xvi.

⁷ Tate, R. W., *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach*, xvii.

On the basis of these observations, some modern interpreters of the word of God are exploring with some measure of success, text-centered approaches to biblical hermeneutics. Narrative Criticism (Narratology) is one of such text-centered approaches. Other text-centered approaches include Structuralism (or Structural Analysis, *not Literary Structure of a text*), Rhetorical Criticism and Reader-Response Criticism. It is the thesis of this paper that for a more dynamic interpretation of the word of God, especially the gospels in the African context, the hermeneutic principles of Narrative Criticism would be quite helpful, alongside the historical-critical theories, given the fact that the gospels are basically stories or narratives about Jesus Christ, written from oral traditions; and Africans are a story telling people.⁸

Narrative Criticism

Having as basis literary theory, Narrative Criticism, like other text-centered approaches, is synchronic not diachronic. It has as hermeneutic principle, “textual autonomy”. Accordingly, “the text is a literary entity which can stand on its own. Interpretation is limited to the text, meaning that the role of the author is for all practical purposes denied, or at least given no prominent role in interpretation”.⁹ This means that in order to arrive at meaning, much attention has to be paid to the literary and linguistic elements which exist within a text. Just as in many if not all African stories, the author is more or less “dead” after having told the story. The story has a life of its own. In no African story is there an investigation into the original story-teller, his or her social background, and even the original recipients of the story. There is also no investigation into the history of the redaction of the story over the years or even centuries. Rather, the story is accepted without questions as currently told by the contemporary storyteller. Indeed, every narrator of the same story brings in his or her own narrative artistry in order to drive home the point of the story.

In the same way, Narrative Criticism allows the text to speak for itself, and does not attempt to bring the author back to life, so as to give meaning to the text. The meaning of the text must be derived by the reader from narrative

⁸ For more details on this, see Healy J., and Sybertz D., *Towards an African Narrative Theology* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications, 1996).

⁹ Tate, R. W., *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach*, xviii.

hermeneutic principles. These hermeneutic principles include, after a *Delimitation of the Text* according to certain dramatic and stylistic criteria (change of locus, time, character, action; use of repetitions, inclusions, shift in vocabulary), a careful analysis of *Time* (narrative time, narration time, gaps, duration, frequency); *Plot* (unified plot, episodic plot, scene, different moments of the plot: exposition, inciting moment, complication, climax, turning point, resolution, denouement); *Point of View* (narration or focalization through whose “eyes”: from without, from within, or from behind?); *Characters* (dynamic, static, flat, round); and *Narrator and Reader* (real and implied; reader response).¹⁰ In these principles, the aim is to observe how the text is dynamically constructed as a narrative, how all the narrative and literary elements are systematically and progressively employed by the narrator to drive home certain points whether at the micro (events, scenes) or macro (narrative, story, discourse) levels, and how all these affect the real reader today.

The hermeneutic pre-understanding of Narrative Criticism is, therefore, that the text is an interactive and unified whole, even where redaction-critical studies may have seen in the text different layers of redactions. Narrative Criticism does not deny the possibility and importance of these redaction layers, but it does not pay much attention to them. This it does in the same way as the reader and interpreter of a communiqué, any other modern official document, or even a paper presented at a conference today does not insist on recovering different layers of the redaction or editing of the document from its original manuscript form, in order to determine the meaning of the final text. Neither does the reader today insist on investigating the background of the composer(s) of the document and their historical circumstances, although all these may be quite useful and important. It is taken for granted that the document must have passed through several redactions before being found in its final form; and it is the document or paper in its final form that deserves attention and analysis.

¹⁰ See J. L. Ska, “*Our Fathers Have Told Us*”: *Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narratives* (Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1990); Alter, R. *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); Sternberg, M., *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Tannehill, R. C. “Narrative Criticism” in Coggins, R. J. and J. L. Houlden, eds., *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* (London: SCM, 1990), 488-489; here 488.

Following upon this hermeneutic pre-understanding, a text analyzed using text-centered theories invariably discovers, oftentimes to the surprise of historical-critical analysts of the same text, that a text hitherto regarded as disjointed and incoherent was actually a carefully threaded literary unit, possibly even by the same author. In this way, the holistic and integral natures of many biblical texts have been unearthed, and their dominant literary and theological concerns made to emerge. According to Tannehill,

Focusing on one or more dominant purposes is a principal way of unifying a story. The reporting of unconnected events does not make a story, for a story is more than a string of incidents. In stories of the traditional kind, events take on meaning because they reveal purposes at work and represent movement toward the fulfillment of a major purpose or obstacles which block fulfillment.¹¹

Narrative critics also pay much attention to the use of narrative patterns and literary devices within a story. These features may be grammatical such as morphology and syntax, or stylistic such as the use of repetitions, contrasts, suspense, comparisons, summarization, generalization, pivot, hyperbole, irony, inclusion, chiasm, interchange, intercalation, interrogation and preparation. These are used to organize the narrative in a way that attention to such details would reveal meaning in the text.¹² Narrative patterns and literary devices are intended create certain effects in the reader, who is being subtly invited or persuaded by the narrator to participate in interpreting the text in a particular way.

Narrative Criticism of the Gospels

¹¹ Tannehill, R. C., *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation Volume One: The Gospel According to Luke* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1991), p. 2.

¹² See Sternberg, M., *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Powell, M. A. *What is Narrative Criticism? A New Approach to the Bible* (Cambridge: University Press, 1993), 32-34.

A complete Narrative Analysis of any particular Gospel text would be beyond the scope of this paper, which is simply trying to draw attention to the need and importance of doing New Testament exegesis, especially Gospel hermeneutics in the African context using the principles of Narrative Criticism. As mini test of the narrative critical model, however, the paper will here present the conclusions of Powell's narrative analysis of Matthew's plot.

Powell on Matthew's Plot¹³

Matthew's gospel is basically the story of its central character, Jesus. However, Matthew's story about Jesus is set in the broader perspective of a story about God. In this way, the narrator's temporal perspective is not limited to the events in the life of Jesus, but extends from creation to the close of age. It is, therefore, God's point of view that the narrator establishes as normative for the story. Based on this, the analysis of the narrative plot reveals that the primary concern or main plot of the narrator is to establish that Jesus is the Son of God, and as such, comes to save God's people from their sin and from Satan. The narrative, therefore, focuses on fostering the divine plan by which God's rule will be established, and God's people will be ultimately saved from sin and evil.

Matthew's gospel uses numerous episodes that may at first sight appear unrelated. However, these numerous episodes serve to develop the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders and to explain how it happens that Israel rejects Jesus and puts him to death. Within the plot, there is a sub plot which comprises of a separate set of episodes or events that develop conflict between Jesus and his disciples and serve to explain why they ultimately desert him. Other sub plots are also discernible in the plot of Matthew. All of these plot lines, however, find their resolution in the events surrounding the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus.

Accordingly, the divine plan is introduced in the first part of the gospel, where Jesus is presented as the Son of God, by whom God is "with us" (1:23), and will save God's people from sin (1:21). God is pleased with Jesus (3:17). In an inciting moment, the reader is later presented with a direct threat to frustrate the divine plan, through a conflict between God's plan and Satan's plan. Satan challenges Jesus as the Son of God (4:1-11).

¹³ Powell, M. A. *What is Narrative Criticism? A New Approach to the Bible*, 48-50.

The narration then shifts its focus from a direct presentation of conflict between God and Satan to a complication, which involves the development of conflict between human characters, especially Jesus and the religious leaders. These religious leaders indirectly represent Satan and evil (9:4; 12:34, 39, 45; 16:4; cf. 13:19, 38), and are indirectly opposing God's plan. They put Jesus to the test and challenge his divine authority. As Jesus goes about his mission of liberation through teaching, preaching, and healing, they seem determined to thwart his efforts to bring salvation to God's people. Indeed, the narrator presents in the climax of the plot that they are apparently successful, since Israel rejects Jesus as Son of God and the salvation which he came to offer them, by putting Jesus to death. The narrator however, presents other sub plots such as one involving Jesus and his disciples. The characters in this sub plot are not agents of Satan, but representative of the human up and down efforts or struggles to belong to God's camp.

The reader has come to fear that God's plan has been successfully thwarted by Satan and Satan's human agents. Yet, with Jesus' first passion prediction (16:21-23), the narrator presents a prolepsis which begins to reveal that ironically, the religious leaders' rejection and eventual crucifixion of Jesus is part and parcel of God's plan. After its climax of the death of Jesus, there is a turning point with the news about the resurrection of Jesus (28:1-10). The plot thus ends with the resolution that it is actually through Jesus' rejection and death that God's plan of saving God's people in all the nations from sin and Satan is fulfilled (20:28; 28:16-20). This resolution acts as denouement of the plot of Matthew, untying all the knots of the plot, and indicating that in the final outcome of the gospel narrative, God's plan has through Jesus, been fulfilled "ever after", with the defeat of Satan and Satan's agents.

Powell's conclusions presented above on the plot of Matthew's gospel has exposed the gospel narrative in a new light, unifying the entire narrative.

Narrative Criticism of the Gospels in the African Context

Africans love stories. They patiently listen to stories, are caught up by the elements of the story, and respond appropriately to the elements in any story. They do not merely have an intellectual involvement with a story, wondering whether the story is true or not, or seeking to determine how it actually happened. They rather prefer to take the story as a whole, and having gone through its

moods and swings, make resolutions for their lives from the lessons of the story. When Africans listen to a story, they cry, laugh, clap, moan, jump up, become gripped by fear, shout, etc., while listening to the story. All their attention is on the plot of the story, until the resolution of the conflicts in the story. Little wonder that the Nigerian Home video market is experiencing a big boom not only in Nigeria but in all of Africa. A story is forever remembered and narrated to others in turn.

On this basis, the interpretation of the gospels using the hermeneutical key of Narrative Criticism would definitely excite Africans. It would make the gospel stories become alive, and the characters become more real. The African response to the gospel within the African's individual and social contexts would be part and parcel of the hermeneutic, since the reader or listener cannot be personally uninvolved in a story. Therefore, if the story of the good news of salvation is to have meaning in the African context, the Historical Critical method should be complemented. Little wonder that some up coming biblical students in Africa are often shocked beyond their wits and faith when they learn for the first time that certain historical assumptions that they held about the Bible have been roundly questioned. Having come to such knowledge, many of them simply respond by stating that they must never tell their people "this truth" which they have come to discover about the Bible, or the people's faith will be destroyed. Yet historical critical studies do not intend to destroy faith but build it. The only difference is that it cannot adequately serve as a tool for building the faith of Africans, who have a different contextual dynamic. The dynamic of the African context appreciates unity and wholeness, incidentally the twin hermeneutical keys of Narrative Criticism.

Conclusion

This paper sought to establish that although the Historical Critical method of biblical interpretation is quite popularly used among African biblical scholars, it is not the only method appropriate for interpreting narrative texts, especially the gospels, in the African context. Given the nature of Africans as a story loving people, and the impact that story telling has among Africans, it is strongly suggested that African biblical scholars think about employing the principles of

Narrative Criticism as one of the tools in trying to unearth meaning in the gospel narratives.