Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation from its Beginnings to the Present

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As the twentieth century ends and the third millennium begins, socio-rhetorical interpretation has become a multi-dimensional approach to texts guided by a multi-dimensional hermeneutic.¹ Rather than being another method for interpreting texts, socio-rhetorical interpretation is an interpretive analytic – an approach that evaluates and reorients its strategies as it engages in multi-faceted dialogue with the texts and other phenomena that come within its purview.² The approach does not claim to be comprehensive. Rather, the claim is that the approach uses the insights of sociolinguistics, semiotics and ethnography in an interactionist mode that sets ancient, modern and post-modern systems of thought in energetic dialogue with one another.

At present, three major essays and the results of a multiple review session at the 1997 SBL meeting have been published on socio-rhetorical interpretation,³ in addition to various book reviews. Yet recently another dimension of the approach has begun to appear. Guided by the metaphor of a text as a tapestry rather than a site of windows and mirrors, socio-rhetorical interpretation has begun to focus not only on multiple textures of a text but also on multiple discourses that interweave with one another within those textures.⁴ The interweaving of multiple textures and discourses within a text creates an


environment in which signification, meanings and meaning effects interact with one another in ways that no one method can display. Only an approach that is highly programmatic, complexly variegated and readily adaptable can begin to engage and exhibit the rich world that texts bring into the life of humans as they live, work, struggle, suffer, die, celebrate and commemorate together.

While other essays have focused in various ways on socio-rhetorical interpretation, the goal with this essay is to describe the current state of socio-rhetorical interpretation through the medium of almost all the bibliography that socio-rhetorical interpretation has produced to the present. The essay begins with a short history of the emergence of the approach to the point where it received the name of socio-rhetorical interpretation. The next step in the essay explores the emergence of the focus on multiple textures of a text. The third step introduces various hermeneutics that people have used to activate social and rhetorical strategies of interpretation and to explain the difference between a socio-rhetorical hermeneutic and a literary, historical or social-scientific hermeneutic. The essay ends with a discussion of the interest in multiple discourses that has emerged only recently, and of what this interest promises for future socio-rhetorical analysis and interpretation.

Initial Socio-Rhetorical Studies

Socio-rhetorical interpretation began with analysis and interpretation of social and cultural dynamics in written works. The first sustained socio-rhetorical study was an analysis of the relation of the we-passages in Acts to ancient Mediterranean sea voyages. As I observed in a later study, ‘This study in 1975 revealed that traveling in a boat on the sea with other people created a social environment that made it natural for some authors in antiquity to use first-person plural “we” for literary accounts of sea voyages’. This common social environment became a well-known cultural phenomenon in Mediterranean literature. In a recent article, Dennis R. MacDonald emphasizes that the cultural intertexture of the sea voyages in Acts goes back to Homer’s *Odyssey*, and he argues that Acts is reconfiguring basic scenes in that widely-known tradition. Other interpreters have been so intent on historical intertexture in the sea voyages in Acts that they have missed the broad social and cultural intertexture of the accounts. Robbins’s

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1975 study was an initial interpretation of social and cultural intertexture among the sea voyages in Acts and other Mediterranean accounts of sea voyages.\(^9\)

The second sustained socio-rhetorical analysis concerned the teaching-learning cycle in the Gospel of Mark. The first steps of this appeared in studies of Jesus’ calling of his disciples and of repetitive-progressive summoning in the Gospel of Mark.\(^10\) The full-scale study of these phenomena in Mark, which appeared in 1984, appealed to the works of Kenneth Burke and the *progymnasmata* for analysis of rhetorical repetition and progression. It also appealed to the works of Clifford Geertz, William Bascom, Roger D. Abrahams, Roger M. Keesing, Theodore R. Sarbin and Vernon L. Allen for social, cultural and social-psychological analysis.\(^11\) This study revealed evidence of a Mediterranean teaching-learning cycle in Plato’s *Dialogues*, Xenophon’s *Memorabilia*, ancient comedy, Philostratus’ *Life of Apollonius*, the Abraham story, the Moses story, the Elijah-Elisha story, the Israelite prophets, Philo of Alexandria, Josephus and rabbinic literature. Subsequent studies have built on the analysis and interpretation in this book.\(^12\)

Additional socio-rhetorical studies between 1983 and 1991 focused on Luke-Acts,\(^13\) pronouncement stories, miracle stories and sayings.\(^14\) During the same period of

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time, specific discussions of rhetorical interpretation and specific strategies of analysis using insights from classical rhetorical treatises on the chreia and its elaboration appeared. In 1993, Willi Braun completed a Ph.D. dissertation that included a substantive socio-rhetorical analysis and interpretation of Luke 14, and it appeared in the SNTS monograph series in 1995. In 1994 David B. Gowler, who had independently developed a socio-narratological approach to New Testament literature, wrote a programmatic essay on the development of socio-rhetorical interpretation showing the manner in which it developed out of literary, rhetorical, social and cultural studies during the 1970s and 1980s. These studies were precursors to the organization of socio-rhetorical interpretation on the basis of multiple textures of signification, meanings and meaning effects in texts.


18 Gowler, ‘The Development of Socio-Rhetorical Criticism’.
The Emergence of Multi-Texture Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation

The paperback edition of Robbins’s *Jesus the Teacher*, which appeared in 1992, contained an introduction that launched the organization of socio-rhetorical strategies of analysis and interpretation according to inner texture, intertexture, social and cultural texture, and ideological texture. Then Robbins displayed how this multi-textural approach could work in essays on the Woman who Anointed Jesus and on the Magnificat. In 1993, Wesley H. Wachob produced the first full-length Ph.D. dissertation containing multi-textural socio-rhetorical analysis, working in detail on James 2:1-13, and this study appeared as a published book in 1999. Subsequently, many insights in this work were incorporated into Luke Timothy Johnson’s commentary on the epistle of James, and Wachob and Johnson co-authored a socio-rhetorical essay on sayings of Jesus in James. Russell B. Sisson produced the second multi-textural Ph.D. dissertation on a New Testament text in 1994, working on 1 Corinthians 9, and subsequently he has produced a socio-rhetorical essay on the Sermon on the Mount. In 1996, Robbins produced two book-length presentations of socio-rhetorical interpretation, organized according to textures of a text. To display the approach, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse* explored 1 Corinthians 9 from the perspective of inner texture, intertexture, social and cultural texture, and ideological texture. Sisson’s earlier work contributed significantly to the sections presenting the socio-rhetorical interpretation of 1 Corinthians 9. Mark 15 served as the sample text throughout *Exploring the Texture of Texts*, and insights from two previous publications by Robbins, some of which appeared in Raymond E. Brown’s *The Death of the Messiah*, contributed to the sections interpreting this chapter of the second Gospel. *Exploring* included the addition of sacred texture to the four textures included in *Tapestry*.

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25 Robbins, *Tapestry*.
The best current examples of integrated multi-textural interpretation can be found in the works of David A. deSilva. These studies regularly observe where different textures converge with one another in a text, and the interpretation proceeds on the basis of the convergences. H. J. B. Combrink, in turn, has written a series of essays that assess socio-rhetorical interpretation in the present climate of NT interpretation, probes the Gospel of Matthew from a socio-rhetorical perspective, and enacts a multi-textural approach in an analysis of religious dynamics in the new South Africa. During this period of time, Robbins has produced additional socio-rhetorical studies of various kinds. In addition to the Ph.D. dissertations of Braun, Wachob and Sisson, four additional socio-rhetorical dissertations were produced by 1997. Then recently two


more full-scale multi-textural dissertations have been written, one by H. Stephen Brown on two second-century Christian martyr texts and another by Thomas J. Bell on two medieval musical sequences attributed to Peter Abelard. 33 Also recently, Jon Ma Asgeirsson has produced a series of studies on the Gospel of Thomas that contain significant socio-rhetorical dimensions. 34 During the 1990s, other people also have produced studies that contain significant use of socio-rhetorical strategies of analysis and interpretation. 35 It also has been exciting to see the use of socio-rhetorical interpretation


Socio-Rhetorical Hermeneutics Versus Other Kinds of Hermeneutics

As various interpreters have begun to integrate social and rhetorical strategies of interpretation during the 1990s, it has become obvious that different hermeneutics guide interpreters in different ways. One obvious mode is a historical or historical-theological hermeneutic. Randall C. Webber perhaps was the first person to use the term socio-rhetorical in a context guided by a dominantly historical hermeneutic. After him, Ben Witherington has produced four commentaries that use social and rhetorical strategies of interpretation within a historical-theological hermeneutic.

John H. Elliott began in the 1980s with a historical hermeneutic influenced by sociological and rhetorical strategies of analysis and interpretation, and during the 1990s he has nurtured these strategies in ways that are more directly social-scientific in nature. Beginning in 1988, many publications by Jerome H. Neyrey exhibited an integration of social-scientific exegesis with rhetorical analysis and interpretation, and in some instances his strategies have become explicitly socio-rhetorical.

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time, Robbins participated actively in the Context Group, which uses a social-scientific hermeneutic to guide its work, and he has produced two essays that explicitly use aspects of social-scientific analysis and interpretation. In addition, Robbins incorporated many insights and interpretive strategies from the works of Bruce J. Malina in *Tapestry* and *Exploring*.

A noticeable alternative to a social-scientific hermeneutic during the 1980s was a literary hermeneutic. Robert C. Tannehill developed a literary hermeneutic during the 1970s that was deeply rhetorical in nature, and his approach was deeply influential on socio-rhetorical interpretation. After explicit dialogue between Tannehill and members of the Context Group during the early 1990s, in 1996 Tannehill produced a socio-literary commentary on the Gospel of Luke that contains significant socio-rhetorical dimensions. One of the people with which Tannehill had dialogue was Richard L. Rohrbaugh, a member of the Context Group, who integrated social-scientific exegesis with literary readings that were essentially rhetorical interpretations during the 1990s.

Some interpreters, in contrast to Tannehill and Rohrbaugh, have interacted appreciatively but critically with socio-rhetorical interpretation from the perspective of a literary or a social-scientific hermeneutic. Robbins has written an essay on the relationship between social-scientific and literary hermeneutics, from the perspective of a socio-rhetorical

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L. Gregory Bloomquist, in turn, has written a series of studies that probe the inner nature of socio-rhetorical interpretation in the context of sociological, philosophical, and theological systems of thought and practice. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza activated a political hermeneutic in a direct criticism of socio-rhetorical interpretation in her address at the first South African Rhetorical Conference in 1994. Robbins responded in the Florence Conference in 1998, analyzing the oppositional rhetoric Fiorenza used in the address and recommending ways the discussion could move forward using socio-rhetorical strategies of dialogue and discussion. Priscilla Geisterfer Nyvlt also has written a substantive response to Fiorenza’s essay from the perspective of feminist criticism. David Hester Amador has written a full-length critical assessment of socio-rhetorical interpretation, as well as other modes of rhetorical interpretation, in a book that has just appeared.

The Emergence of Multi-Discourse Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation

The latest phase of socio-rhetorical analysis and interpretation concerns different kinds of discourse within earliest Christianity and the Mediterranean world. Robbins’s initial attention to differences between miracle and wisdom discourse appeared in the publication of his lecture at the 1993 annual Exegetiska dagen at the University of

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Uppsala. This means that attention to multiple textures in early Christian discourse began to emerge prior to the publication of the books that presented the multi-textural approach in 1996. In 1996, Robbins delivered a lecture on the dialectical nature of multiple early Christian discourses at the second annual South African Rhetorical Conference at the University of Stellenbosch. Robbins’s listing of oppositional discourse as one of these types has changed. Opposition is characteristic of every kind of discourse, but different strategies and dynamics of opposition exist in different discourses. Thus, Robbins now sees five kinds of socio-rhetorical modes of discourse within earliest Christianity: wisdom, apocalyptic, miracle, suffering-death-resurrection, and pre-creation. Each form of discourse has its own kind of oppositional strategies. Also in 1996 Robbins published an article on the game-like nature of the wisdom discourse in the Epistle of James, using insights from the anthropologist Bradd Shore.

As Robbins began to analyze wisdom discourse more extensively in Q and the Gospel of Thomas, socio-rhetorical analysis of enthymemes began to become more prominent. The result was a conclusion that enthymemes work with social, cultural, ideological and theological topics and values, using some as a context for reconfiguring others. L. Gregory Bloomquist has argued in an unpublished paper that enthymemes work especially at a cognitive-psychological level.

In 1999, Robbins turned to apocalyptic discourse and produced an essay on Mark 13 that contains a significant amount of socio-rhetorical analysis of its enthymemic texture in a context that interprets the passage as transferring the holy from the Jerusalem temple to the bodies of Jesus’ disciples. Bloomquist also has produced socio-rhetorical studies of apocalyptic discourse. During 1999, Newby, who began socio-rhetorical

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analysis in the Quran in 1997, also produced an essay on apocalyptic discourse in Surahs 2, 10, and 18 of the Quran.60 Ironically perhaps, the best multi-discourse socio-rhetorical interpretation to date exists in a final exam on Acts 1:1-11, written by a college student at Emory University.61

An additional, important feature of socio-rhetorical interpretation is its interest in the orality of texts.62 Bernard Brandon Scott and Margaret E. Dean have developed this aspect of the approach into a special area of investigation with its own strategies of analysis and interpretation.63

Conclusion

Two additional interests beyond multi-discourse analysis and interpretation are emerging at present in socio-rhetorical commentary. First, narrational texture is beginning to exhibit two important dimensions in early Christian discourse.64 On the one hand, epic story consisting of narrational summaries of or reference to great moments in the past emerges out of narrational texture. On the other hand, individual episodes emerge out of narrational texture. Different kinds of epic stories and episodes emerge out of narrational texture, depending on the kind of discourse early Christians were generating. A characterization of the nature of the five major epic stories that emerge out of the major discourses must await another context. A brief characterization of the kinds of episodes that emerge out of the discourses is as follows. Parables and example stories based on analogy emerge out of wisdom discourse, past and future scenes that invite symbolic imagery generated by present episodes dominated by speech and vision emerge out of apocalyptic discourse, historical-biographical-mythical stories focused on divine

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60 G. D. Newby, ‘Folded Time’.
power emerge out of miracle discourse, historical-biographical-mythical stories focused on holiness emerge out of suffering-death-resurrection discourse, and reconfiguration of wisdom, miracle, and suffering-death-resurrection discourse into signs that reveal the working of the divine emerge out of pre-creation discourse.

A second dimension that is emerging is emotional-psychological texture. Bloomquist has observed the importance of the emotions in many enthymemes in the NT. Initial probes suggest there is a somewhat different configuration of a particular emotion (like ‘fear’) as well as a different constellation of dominant emotions in each of the five major early Christian discourses. At present, therefore, socio-rhetorical interpretation is moving into multi-discourse commentary, with special interest both in the kinds of epic story and episodes that exist in each discourse and in the constellation and configuration of emotions in each discourse.

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65 Bloomquist, ‘The Place of Enthymemes’.
Socio-rhetorical criticism has established itself as one of the promising new methods of biblical study today. Vernon K. Robbins here provides an accessible introduction to socio-rhetorical criticism. “This delightful book provides a comprehensive but accessible introduction to the practice of sociorhetorical criticism developed by Robbins...an excellent orientation for students at the beginning of their NT studies. Even scholars working in a different hermeneutical tradition will find this a useful introduction to important developments in NT research.”—Johan C. Thom, University of Stellenbosch, South Africa, for Religious Studies Review, October 2000 (Johan C. Thom, University of Stellenbosch Religious Studies Review). Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation. Chapter · February 2010 with 576 Reads. DOI: 10.1002/9781444318937.ch13. The meaning of a text does not reside alone in the creative genius of its author; there is a complex correlation between a text and the contexts in which a text has been read and reread, including various dynamic interrelations between creator and contemplators, past and present. Vernon Robbins’ socio-rhetorical interpretation provides a powerful interpretive analytic to explore these dialogic interrelations among authors, texts and readers/interpreters. As for rhetoric, Croce is the first to see in its classifications a way of identifying a “family likeness” (a fine pre-Wittgensteinian expression) “resemblances, in other words, which reveal spiritual relationships between artists. It is by considering these procedural similarities that we can confer a minimum of legitimacy on translations, not insofar as they are reproductions (which it would be useless to attempt) of the original expressions, but insofar as they are productions of expressions which resemble their originals more or less closely” (p. 81). More embarrassing is the discourse