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**The Rhetorical Full-Turn in Biblical Interpretation:
Reconfiguring Rhetorical-Political Analysis**

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The issue is not *whether* we enact rhetorical practices from the literature we interpret;
the issue is *what* rhetorical practices from that literature we enact.
(Gnomic paraphrase of Moore 1992: 93)

In her address at the Rhetoric and Religion Conference held at the University of South Africa, Pretoria, August 15-19, 1994, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza asserted that those who have reintroduced rhetoric into biblical interpretation during the last quarter of a century have ‘become stuck in a rhetorical half-turn’ (Schüssler Fiorenza 1996: 29). Her assertion is that in the context of the revival of rhetorical criticism ‘biblical scholarship has not yet made the full epistemological turn to a rhetoric of inquiry insofar as it has barely recognized the contributions which feminist and liberationist scholarship have made to the New Rhetoric’ (pp. 29-30). She provides both a rationale and a rationale for the rationale to explain the situation. The reason rhetorical biblical scholarship has not incorporated feminist and liberationist scholarship, she asserts, is that interpreters remain in ‘captivity’ to ‘empiricist-positivist science.’ This captivity takes the form of spending ‘much of its energy in applying and reinscribing to Christian Testament texts ancient rhetorical methods, disciplinary technology, terminological stylistics and the scattered prescription of oratorical handbooks in antiquity’ (p. 32). Then she explains the reason for this captivity. Rhetorical interpreters, she asserts, find themselves unable or unwilling to acknowledge ‘their feminist and liberationist critical partners’ because of ‘the contested character of the field.’ This means that ‘The “fear” that it could be seen as “unscientific” prevents engagement with such critical political intellectual discourses’ (p. 47).

1. Oppositional Rhetoric as a Half-Turn in Schüssler Fiorenza's Analysis

Schüssler Fiorenza equips the stage for her argument with two steps. First, she mentions Margaret Mitchell's *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation* and describes how '[f]ollowing in the footsteps of Hans Dieter Betz she defends the antiquarian approach and technological method still prevalent in biblical rhetorical studies with a spirited attack on the practitioners of the so-called New Rhetoric' (Schüssler Fiorenza 1996: 32). Second, instead of illustrating her thesis with work by either Betz or Mitchell, she presents a critical discussion of the socio-rhetorical analysis and interpretation I presented to organize a discussion at the 1992 session of the Society of Biblical Literature of the various versions of the story of the woman who anointed Jesus. She chooses this illustration because, as she says 'his [Robbins's] is one of the few Christian Testament studies that attempt to take rhetorical and feminist theoretical insights seriously' (Schüssler Fiorenza 1996: 33). She begins with a critical discussion of my presentation of ideological criticism, since, in her view, my discussion implied that my own approach was free from any ideological orientation (Schüssler Fiorenza 1996: 33). I have always understood that my approach has an ideological grounding, but Bruce J. Malina had a similar opinion about my approach prior to 1996. It has been natural to presume, I suppose, that anyone who works with ancient rhetorical manuals and seeks a programmatic approach to interpretation must consider their work to be grounded in scientific objectivity rather than in ideological orientation. Moreover, placing ideological texture fourth in the sequence of analysis and interpretation led some people to think I held the opinion that my analysis of inner texture, intertexture, and social and cultural texture was free from an ideological orientation. I hope that the introductions and the chapters on ideological texture in my two books have clarified my position in this regard (Robbins 1996a: 24-27, 192-236; 1996b: 1-6, 95-119). The proper description of my position is not scientific or scientistic, but interactionist (Robbins 1998: 286-88; Lawson and McCauley 1990: 15-31). This means that, in the context of scientific explanation versus humanistic interpretation, my position is that both approaches yield important information about our understanding and interpretation of texts. It is important, in my

view, to set scientific and humanist procedures of analysis and interpretation into energetic, interactive dialogue on an equal playing field in our work.

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Later in her essay, Schüssler Fiorenza describes the task of rhetorical biblical scholarship in the following manner:

How meaning is constructed depends not only on how one reads the social, cultural, and religious markers inscribed by the text but also on what kind of 'intertexts', preconstructed 'frames of meaning', common sense understandings, and 'reading paradigms' one utilizes when interpreting linguistic markers and textualized symbols (Schüssler Fiorenza 1996: 40).

I agree fully with this description of our task. One of my purposes in the session at the SBL, therefore, was to assess the use of intertexts in the analysis and interpretation of the various versions of the woman who anointed Jesus. In the essay I criticized the limitation of the intertexts for the Markan version of the story to 1 Samuel 10, where Samuel anoints Saul as king. I called for a reading that places the story in a broader context of 'social values and dynamics in Mediterranean society' (Robbins 1992: 311). This procedure means that one observes the presence of Jesus at a meal in a house and asks about the function of oil in that kind of context in Mediterranean society.

Rather than opening a conversation about how one might negotiate a disagreement about the intertextual construction of a particular context for interpretation, Schüssler Fiorenza closed down a discussion of the issue with oppositional rhetoric that implied that her construction of a Jewish scriptural context is not a scholarly construct, but that my construction of a broader Mediterranean context is based on 'a twentieth-century theoretical fabrication that needs to be seen as "story" rather than as "social scientific" objective description of reality' (Schüssler Fiorenza 1996: 34).

The point I was making in that essay is that, as Bruce Malina has pointed out, we are 'low context readers' when we face a text like the story of the woman who anointed Jesus. We do not know the social and cultural context that provided the distinctive meaning effects of the various versions of the story. As a result, we 'construct' a context. If Schüssler Fiorenza had admitted that she also had constructed a context for

interpretation, she could have opened a most interesting discussion about ‘creating contexts’ for interpretation of the variant versions of the woman who anointed Jesus. Instead, she closed the door with oppositional rhetoric that reached a conclusion in the following statement:

Again, let me repeat. I am not interested here in arguing for the superiority of my own interpretation of this text in *In Memory of Her*. Rather I want to illustrate my contention that rhetorical criticism in biblical studies remains in captivity to an empiricist-positivist scientism which it shares not only

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with literalist biblicism but also with its brother discipline, classics. Both biblical studies and classics were institutionalized as modern ‘gentlemen’ disciplines dedicated to the study of philology, text and history – pure and simple (Schüssler Fiorenza 1996: 35).

I want to acknowledge that Schüssler Fiorenza did not have my *Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse* to consult at the time, since it did not appear until 1996. This may have caused her to moderate a few of her comments, but I am not sure. Rather than choosing a strategy that put both of our constructions of the context on an equal playing field for discussion, she chose an oppositional strategy that closed the door to that discussion. In the essay she refers to her book *Discipleship of Equals* and calls for ‘a political rhetoric of inquiry in biblical studies’ grounded in ‘the *ekklesia* as the public assembly of free and equal citizens in the power of the Spirit’ (Schüssler Fiorenza 1996: 36). Instead of enacting a procedure of ‘equality’ that would have invited a full rhetorical turn in an assessment of the contexts of interpretation for analyzing and interpreting the various versions of the story, she used oppositional rhetoric containing inner attributes of domination and separation that she claims she would like to move beyond. Characterizing my work as objectivist, scientific, empiricist, and malestream, versus her work as open, free, and based on equality, she took a political half-turn that set her work in opposition to mine in a manner that did not invite any further deliberation about the issues involved. Thus, there is a deep antipathy in Schüssler Fiorenza’s essay between

what she says and what she does. She says many excellent things about the manner in which rhetorical scholarship should proceed, but her discourse enacts a dominating, alienating, oppositional mode of rhetorical argumentation.

It has been of interest to me that Kathleen E. Corley, taking a feminist approach, has proceeded in a manner very similar to mine to establish a context of interpretation for the Markan account of the woman who anointed Jesus, and with highly similar results (Corley 1993). The issue in all of this is not, after all, a male-oriented, scientific approach versus a feminist approach of equality in public assembly. The issue is what kind of full rhetorical turn we make as we construct a context of interpretation for a particular text. The scholarly issues at stake become lost when oppositional rhetoric takes the stage. Schüssler Fiorenza claims a goal of enabling ‘biblical scholars to investigate the discursive arguments which perform particular kinds of actions in particular historical situations and at particular political sites’ (p. 36). I agree. The

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question, then, is the particular historical situation and political site that caused Schüssler Fiorenza in 1994 in South Africa to use oppositional rhetoric in her essay rather than rhetoric that would invite discussion and debate among equals.

2. Oppositional Rhetoric in the New Testament

Schüssler Fiorenza’s adoption of oppositional rhetoric as a preferred mode of discourse in a context where she was pleading for a full-turn in rhetorical biblical scholarship presents an opportunity to reflect on the nature of oppositional rhetoric not only in our own personal discourse but in New Testament discourse. Stephen D. Moore has made the point that as we interpret literature we reenact certain rhetorical practices present in that literature (Moore 1992: 93). Feminist scholars have helped us to understand how easy it is to reenact certain male rhetorical practices in the literature we interpret. In an address I delivered at the University of Stellenbosch at the 2nd African Symposium on Rhetoric, July 11, 1996, and subsequently published in *Scriptura*, I briefly described oppositional rhetoric in the New Testament as follows:

Central to opposition discourse is the reasoning that people to whom God has given a tradition of salvation in the past currently enact a misunderstanding of God's saving action that must be attacked and replaced by an alternative system of belief and behavior ... It presupposes an alignment of the speaker with God, against people who claim to understand God who really do not know the will and the ways of God (Robbins 1996c: 360).

Oppositional rhetoric is present in many places in the New Testament. One immediately thinks of Jesus' controversy with 'the Jews' in John 8:43-47, which reaches a point where Jesus asserts that the Jews are sons of the devil:

⁴³ Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot accept my word. ⁴⁴ You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. ⁴⁵ But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. ⁴⁶ Which of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? ⁴⁷ Whoever is from God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them is that you are not from God.'

This is not the time and place to present a socio-rhetorical analysis and interpretation of this oppositional discourse. Gail R. O'Day has many

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excellent observations about it in her New Interpreter's Bible commentary on it. Among them is the following:

John 8 presents the reader of the Gospel of John with some of the Gospel's most difficult interpretive issues. The Jesus who emerges from these verses speaks with staggeringly sharp invective to his opponents and holds nothing back in his attack on his theological adversaries. It is very difficult to harmonize this picture of Jesus with the images of him that shape our theological imaginations: Jesus as the one who eats with outcasts and sinners, who cares for the lost sheep, who is the model of how we are to love....

The virulent language of chap. 8 must be read against this backdrop of being cast out of the synagogue, of being excluded from the religious centers that once helped to define one's religious and communal identity. The language of this chapter is the language of the minority group spoken in protest to the majority culture. The Johannine Jewish Christians had no way to back up this language – that is, they had no power to take any actions comparable to

their own exclusion from the synagogue. They were outnumbered by the Jewish community and had no political resources at their disposal. Their only 'power' rested in the force of their rhetoric, in their ability to denounce those who had excluded them (O'Day 1995: 647-648).

With her commentary O'Day speaks directly to one of the major pleas made by Schüssler Fiorenza, namely 'to investigate the discursive arguments which perform particular kinds of actions in particular historical situations and at particular political sites' (Schüssler Fiorenza 1996: 36). Many New Testament scholars join with O'Day in a view that the Johannine community was a minority group speaking out in protest against a majority culture. She expresses concern about this kind of rhetoric and explains the difficulty of reconciling it with other discourse in the New Testament. In other words, she does not herself wittingly or unwittingly enact the oppositional rhetoric in the text. The discourse attributed to Jesus introduces strong polarities to separate Jesus fully from 'the Jews.' For various reasons which she explains in her commentary, she does not wish to enact this kind of rhetoric in her commentary.

Another passage of oppositional rhetoric is in Matthew 23. Luke Timothy Johnson wrote what is considered by many to be a classic article on the discourse in this chapter, entitled 'The New Testament's Anti-Jewish Slander and The Conventions of Ancient Polemic' (Johnson 1989). Distinguishing his approach from censorship, argument against the historical accuracy of the polemic, claims of mistaken attribution, and a critic's strong 'misreading' of the text to make the author an anti-Semite, Johnson

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sketches the historical and social context which generated the language and places the polemic within conventional rhetoric of slander in the Hellenistic world (pp. 421-423). Johnson describes the first generation of messianists as 'a persecuted sect' and suggests that '[t]he primordial experience of suffering deeply influences all the NT rhetoric' (p. 424). He explains that '[t]he messianic sect was diverse from the beginning' (p. 425). As a result of these pressures of diversity within the sect, 'NT polemic is mostly turned inward against fellow members of the movement' (p. 426). Judaism itself was diverse at the time, with the result that

When the NT writings were composed, neither Christianity nor Judaism had reached the point of uniformity and separation that would characterize them in later centuries. The messianists were part of a much larger debate within Judaism, a debate with many parties, concerning the right way to read Torah, the text that shaped the people (p. 428).

As Johnson explores and describes the historical circumstances that produced the NT's anti-Jewish polemic, he suggests that such a description is helpful, 'but the rhetoric itself still appears excessive and filled with dangerous power' (pp. 428-429). Two more qualifications, he suggests, can lead to a proper assessment: (1) one 'must understand the social context within which such slander was at home'; and (2) one 'must appreciate the conventions of the language itself.' He then proposes that 'the slander of the NT is typical of that found among rival claimants to a philosophical tradition and is found as widely among Jews as among other Hellenists.' Then he adds: 'I further suggest that the way the NT talks about Jews is just about the way all opponents talked about each other back then' (p. 429). Asserting that the proper way to think about first-century Judaism is as a philosophy, he suggests that philosophical groups and Judaism were both highly concerned about morals, and the best way to pursue and reach their goals was through fierce disputation. Analyzing the rhetoric of philosophical polemic, he observes that typical actions, not specific actions, are the subject of the disputes and that people were able to strike back, returning abuse with attacks on those who called themselves philosophers. Listing the topics of the philosophical debates, Johnson suggests that a person 'find(s) the same language everywhere.' The 'charges became standardized and formed a *topos*' (p. 432). NT literature, he suggests, represents a secondary, 'literary' use of such polemic. The literary and rhetorical function of Matthew's attack on scribes and Pharisees is 'to frame the

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positive instructions of messianist disciples ... in 23:8-11' (p. 433). He completes the article with a survey of this kind of polemic in Jewish literature and concludes with the proposal that 'the NT's slander against fellow Jews is remarkably mild.' In addition, he suggests that 'Nothing relativizes plausibility structures like pluralism. Knowing that all parties to a debate spoke in a certain way forces us to relativize our party's version' (p.

441). Oppositional rhetoric, then, is a significant phenomenon in NT literature, and Johnson's proposal is that it was pervasive during the time of the beginnings of Christianity.

3. Oppositional Rhetoric in Recent Writings of Luke Timothy Johnson

Following Moore's proposal that interpreters regularly reenact rhetorical practices in the literature they interpret, one might suggest that Schüssler Fiorenza's adoption of oppositional rhetoric as a central mode of discourse in her essay has a strong precedent in NT literature itself. It is also instructive that Luke Timothy Johnson recently has enacted a similar oppositional mode of discourse both in a recent book (Johnson 1996) and in a lecture before the Catholic Biblical Society of America during 1997 (cf. Johnson 1998a).

Johnson's book *The Real Jesus* reenacts the oppositional approach he analyzed in his earlier essay. In his book he claims there was diversity in earliest Christianity, and there was vigorous disputation. He criticizes every scholarly endeavor to display that diversity and to display opposition, however, as engaged in an impossible task. The overall pattern of diversity and opposition in NT literature, he asserts, is widespread. This pattern, however, is only literary technique. Walter Bauer successfully showed that there was diversity and conflict in early Christianity, but there is no ability on the basis of NT literature, Johnson claims, to identify specific opponents or to locate specific diversity. Therefore, scholarly endeavors during the past quarter of a century to identify specific opponents and to locate specific diversity are misguided. In his words:

There is no new evidence, and there are no controls. All that has happened is that, on the basis of subjective literary judgments, compositions have been disjoined, anointed as sources, and then appointed to their respective roles in a hypothetical community drama. It is a paper chase, pure and simple (Johnson 1996: 99).

The similarity between the style of this prose and Schüssler Fiorenza's prose in the essay discussed above is noticeable. Issues are described in

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wholesale terms, ‘pure and simple.’ The remarkable thing in the context of Johnson’s argument is that there is new evidence: Qumran literature and archeology; extensive archeology in Judea and the Galilee; and new early Christian literature in the Nag Hammadi library. But Johnson disregards these phenomena as evidence for ‘historical’ reconstruction. He criticizes Dieter Georgi for bringing a discussion of opponents into the pages of the NT itself (pp. 97-98), and he criticizes Raymond Brown for his analysis of diversity with the Johannine tradition, saying that ‘his entire reconstruction of Johannine “history” rests upon no more solid basis than a series of subjective judgments and suspect methodological presuppositions’ (p. 100). His strategy is remarkably like the strategy he describes among philosophical groups during the first century. If Christianity is one more philosophical group, then the topics of its literature is morals, not history. Johnson adopts the position of one who disputes on the basis of ‘typical’ actions, just as he says philosophical and religious groups did during the first century – accusing people in categorical terms rather than picking up specific pieces of evidence and entering into a discussion on an equal playing field. In this book the tone is not deliberative; it is epideictic, engaging in invective against groups of people who are ‘misguided,’ a term he uses in the title of the book.

Both Johnson and Schüssler Fiorenza, then, engage in political rhetoric, and when they do they enact oppositional rhetoric that closes off issues rather than moves them into a context of free exchange among equal partners in dialogue. This kind of political discourse, then, is a rhetorical half-turn rather than a full-turn. Turning away from serious scholarly deliberation, it attacks typical rather than specific actions to establish a frame for instructing disciples rather than engaging seriously with colleagues in scholarly investigation, exchange, and debate.

4. Making the Rhetorical Full-Turn

The question, then, is how to make a rhetorical full-turn that includes political debate and confrontation. Johnson presents an overview of the interpretive practices and goals he envisions in ‘Imagining the World Scripture Imagines’ (Johnson 1998b). Detailed assessment of his program will have to await another context. Here I will recall that underlying Johnson’s approach to interpretation is a correlation of anthropological

(human), social-historical (Jewish), literary, and religious (experiential) dimensions of early Christian texts (Johnson 1986: 5-18; 1998c). The

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anthropological and religious (experiential) dimensions have notable affinities with socio-rhetorical interpretation of the social, cultural, ideological, and sacred textures of early Christian texts. A significant difference emerges in Johnson's limitation of analysis to the 'complete and finished literary form' of early Christian writings (Johnson 1986: 6). One result of this focus is a limitation of analysis to the 'literary culture' of early Christianity, the products of the 'elite' religious and political leadership. Analysis and interpretation does not, in this approach, get to the interaction of oral and written traditions that give the early Christian discourses their distinctive social, cultural, ideological, and religious dynamics in the Mediterranean world (Robbins 1994, 1996c). To put it another way, limitation of analysis to the complete and finished literary form of early Christian writings bypasses the 'inner workings' of the 'networks of signification' within the texts and fragments of texts available to us (Robbins 1984: 5-6). 'Literary culture' is a limited sphere of culture within early Christianity. The largest sphere of early Christian culture for the first 150-200 years was oral. A major challenge, then, is to identify the interaction of oral and written discourses within extant literary writings (Robbins 1999). Analysis of the interaction among oral and written discourses in multiple early Christian environments as exhibited both by fragments of writings and by complete writings holds the potential to exhibit the inner workings of the discursive cultures that created distinctive modes of reasoning, feeling, believing, and acting among early Christians. Analysis only of the complete and finished literary form of early Christian writings, then, puts the interpreter in a position of a rhetorical half-turn in interpretation. An interpreter must explore the complex world of oral traditions, fragments of writings, and complete literary versions of writings to perform a rhetorical full-turn in biblical interpretation.

Concerning Schüssler Fiorenza's approach, there is a beautiful moment in her essay when she introduces the metaphor of the African American circle dance or the European folk dance to destabilize a binary frame of reference for figuring the practices

of a critical feminist biblical interpretation. Within this description, I suggest, lies an image very close to the one that has guided my development of socio-rhetorical interpretation. Schüssler Fiorenza proposes:

an image of interpretation as forward movement and spiraling repetition, stepping in place, turning over and changing of venue in which discrete methodological approaches become moving steps and artful configurations.

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Clumsy participants in this dance that figures the complex enterprise of biblical criticism may frequently step on each other's toes and interrupt each other's turns but they can still dance together as long as they acknowledge each other as equals conscious of dancing through a political minefield (Schüssler Fiorenza 1996: 51).

This image of movement and spiraling repetition introduces a very different mode of procedure than one that places oppositional rhetoric at the forefront, and I applaud it. It is an image that evokes well the goal of socio-rhetorical analysis and interpretation. The forward movement and spiraling repetition moves through and circles around analyses of inner texture, intertexture, social and cultural texture, ideological texture, and sacred texture. The stepping in place, turning over, and changing of venue describes well the move from wisdom discourse to miracle discourse to apocalyptic discourse, death-resurrection discourse, and pre-creation discourse. Oppositional rhetoric has as its goal to dominate. Striking out against real or imagined opponents, oppositional rhetoric discusses only typical actions and makes generalized assertions and accusations. The good thing is that not all NT discourse is oppositional rhetoric. Widespread throughout NT literature are also patterns of conciliation within wisdom discourse, healing discourse, death-resurrection discourse, and pre-creation discourse (Robbins 1996a). The nature of NT literature is that it interweaves diversity and opposition into a thick configuration of history, society, culture, and ideology. If our rhetorical analyses reenact only one or two rhetorical modes within this literature, then we are making only a quarter or half-turn within its rich discursive texture. To make our task complete, we must engage in political rhetoric and we must do it not only by joining voices and actions with women's voices and marginalized people in wide regions of our global village. We must

engage in dialogical interpretation that includes disenfranchised voices, marginalized voices, recently liberated voices, and powerfully-located voices. In order to make a rhetorical full-turn as we do this, we must learn how to embed our oppositional strategies in many forms and styles of rhetoric so that we enable free and open discussion and controversy in an environment where we keep our colleagues on an equal playing field and keep the issues in an arena of specificity rather than staging them as typical actions to be attacked. Moving forward, spiraling, stepping in place, turning around, and changing venue, we explore with each other, debate with one another, and disagree with each other as equals, inviting other voices into the dialogue in a

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manner that makes a rhetorical full-turn through scientific, humanist, malestream, feminist, ethnic, geographical, racial, economic, and social arenas of disputation, dialogue, and commentary.

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