THE CONTRIBUTION OF SOCIO-RHETORICAL INTERPRETATION TO THE REFORMED INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE[*]

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Challenges to Reformed views on Biblical interpretation

Different discussions in recent times witness to the unease in Reformed communities to the use of Scripture by exegetes and theologians (see e.g. Combrink 1990a). We shall not elaborate on that now. This may be due to the fact that for a long time in there has been an unfortunate gap between scholars and church members. The problem is that there often has been a similar gap between Biblical scholars and systematic theologians too. There is awareness that exegetes are often struggling to reconcile their careful reading of the text of the Bible with the commonly accepted perceptions about the way that Reformed theologians ought to read the Bible. In this regard a statement by Ridderbos is illuminating

> "It is the steadily growing conviction that the Bible is different and wants to be read differently than we for a long time were inclined to (have to?) believe on the basis of a certain theory of inspiration" (Ridderbos 1982:54).

This is the case in many sections of the Reformed world.

It is further important to acknowledge that the task of theology is not just to repeat what has been said before – but to have the ability to say new things under new circumstances about new issues. This needs grammar, dialectic and rhetoric (Smit 2000). A critical reflection on one's tradition implies the ability to reformulate what has been said before anew in the light of Scripture. This means we have to take seriously the historical and contextual, but also the metaphorical nature of Scripture.

Unfortunately there has often been an unhealthy division of labour between exegetes and systematic theologians. While it is true that Biblical interpretation has to be seen as a central task of Christian theology, this separation has led to the view that the interpretative task could be left to Biblical scholars since

> The essence of Scripture somehow resides among the highly codified marks on a page of text. This would assume that technical experts could be assigned the task of breaking the code, and that their results could be appropriated by those who need the encoded information" (Cunningham 1991:220).

While the Biblical scholars have to decide 'what the text means', the systematic theologians would then apply it to doctrinal and ethical issues. This division of labour often led to unfortunate results.

An illustration of this division can be seen in the hesitation with which Smit decided to join the dinner of the *1994 Pretoria conference on rhetoric, Scripture and theology* (Smit 1996:395).

Methodological shifts

In the past decades one methodology after the other passed the revue in Biblical interpretation (Cf Combrink 1986b). Biblical interpretation moved from an almost exclusive historical paradigm to literary criticism, pragmatics, sociology and rhetoric. One of the most significant phenomena was the rediscovery by Biblical scholars of the value of rhetorical interpretation (Cf Botha 1994, Mack 1990). In many ways this was the rediscovery of skills and strategies, well known through the ages since classical times, but which became obscured in the last century or so for various reasons.

At the same time there has been a decisive shift towards an acknowledged multidimensional approach to Biblical interpretation (Patte 1995). The approach coined by Vernon Robbins as socio-rhetorical interpretation (Robbins 1996a, Robbins 1996b) explicitly claims to be challenging the fixation of boundaries in traditional exegetical approaches. On the one hand this approach deals with the necessity of creating and dismantling boundaries in and around texts as a necessary step in the interpretation of texts (Robbins 1996a:20). Yet, this approach is also unwilling to bow too deeply before any set of boundaries created by humans (cf Combrink 1999). The emphasis in this approach is on the integration of interdisciplinary analysis and interpretation moving toward a broad-based interpretive analytics (Robbins 1996a:12). In this manner a text is treated as discourse being part of a larger field of power in which different paradigms can be seen functioning.

What is so appealing to me about socio-rhetorical interpretation is its explicit goal of bringing together various approaches to the interpretation of texts that are so often separated from one another. "Strangely enough (at least when seen in the light of the reigning ethos in the guild of New Testament scholars) the (idealistic?!) goal of socio-rhetorical criticism is not so much mutual agreement, but rather co-operation in the analysis and interpretation of data even among people who disagree" (Combrink 1999:20). The explicit goal of socio-rhetorical criticism is to bring different disciplines into dialogue with one another by creating space around and among areas of speciality normally functioning in a strictly disciplinary manner (Robbins 1996a:42). This is the reason why to my mind socio-rhetorical interpretation has much to offer to Reformed theology.

It is not that this has not been happening in the past already. In various ways Reformed biblical scholars have been keeping abreast with the various shifts taking place in biblical research. But in this approach the interpreter is challenged to take into consideration all possible relations of the text to history, literature, society and culture in a systemic manner.

The challenge of interpreting the Bible is to give adequate consideration to all the relevant relations of texts to society, culture and history.

Argumentation

Not only Biblical scholars are emphasising the role and contribution that rhetoric has to make in theology. Someone like Cunningham has strongly been underlining the persuasive dimension of Christian theology.

> Specifically, I want to claim that Christian theology is best understood as persuasive argument. Theologians are involved.... in debates, disputes, and arguments. Theologians are always seeking to persuade others - and to persuade themselves - of a particular understanding of Christian faith. The goal of Christian theology, then, is faithful persuasion: to speak the word that theology must speak, in ways that are faithful to the God of Jesus Christ and persuasive to the world that God has always loved. This has been the goal of Christian theology since the days of one of its earliest practitioners, St. Paul.

'Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others' (2 Cor. 5:11) (Cunningham 1991:5).

Smit asks whether the church can still use with integrity religious language and documents to persuade people that there are things worth living and dying for? Or is rhetoric primarily a critical and analytical instrument to analyse but not to be used for persuasion (Smit 1996:401).

Scripture (sacred texture)

One of the developments in socio-rhetorical interpretation is the identification of the sacred texture of texts. For Reformed theologians this is a basic presupposition in their approach to the text. But it is nevertheless important that this dimension has been receiving more attention in different ways in recent years (Combrink 1996b, Kort 1988, Kort 1996, Schneiders 1991). Kort correctly draws attention to the phenomenon that the category of Scripture is important not only for individuals but also for groups and institutions. This testifies to the fact that people have a sense of living in a significant world. Actually, whether people are aware of it or not, every person, group, institution has Scriptures (cf Kort 1996:4).

According to Kort, Scripture should be located as somewhere between "writing" (being non-specific and dislocated) and "canon" (implying autonomy and transcendence). Scripture enables people to have worlds and act meaningfully in them. But Scripture is not only functioning in a supportive way, but it also constrains, inhibits, creates fears, and sets limits while it can also interrogate the behaviour of people inhabiting those worlds (Kort 1996:5f).

Kort draws attention to the fact that the category of Scripture should not be taken as confined to religious contexts only. It should be acknowledged that it is a part of a general textual and cultural theory. This does not imply that the role of the Bible functioning as Scripture in Western culture should be minimized in any respect. Yet one should keep in mind that the textual location of Scripture is situated between two alternatives:

"on the one side stands the denial that there can or should be a category of scripture in textual and cultural theory, and on the other stands the claim that

the Bible as scripture has nothing to do with the general topic of scripture in textual theory and cultural studies" (Kort 1996:7).

It is true that from a faith perspective (also in Reformed theology) the Bible is seen as sacred Scripture, as the Word of God. Acknowledging that there are many works and texts claiming to be Scripture entails no denigration of the Bible.

> "The Bible is unique, not because it is inspired or inspired in a way that other works are not, but because of a combination of notes (of which inspiration is one) ...Biblical inspiration is unique because the Bible is special; the Bible is not special because its inspiration is unique" (Schneiders 1991:52).

An aspect which should be kept in mind too is the role of tradition in the interpretation of the Bible as the Scripture of the church. The role of tradition in a community is to make the past come alive again in the present.

> "Tradition is the primary form and norm of effective historical consciousness, which is the medium of ongoing community experience. It includes deliberately formulated belief, that is, dogma, but is by no means limited to dogma. It includes liturgy, spirituality, the lives and teachings of exemplary believers, historical experiences, legislation, artistic creations, customs, and much more" (Schneiders 1991:71).

In the dialectical relationship between tradition and Scripture, the Reformation has given priority to Scripture. Yet one has to realise that whereas the tradition is the context for the interpretation of Scripture, the norm for discerning the true and living tradition is Scripture. Written and unwritten tradition points to Scripture as the uniquely privilege written formulation of apostolic tradition (cf. Schneiders 1991:81-86).

Like other approaches, socio-rhetorical interpretation is now also calling our attention to the sacred texture of different texts, but therefore also of the Bible, realising that the Bible is not unique in this respect.

Calvin

According to Kort (1996:15) Calvin's doctrine of Scripture is more a doctrine of *reading* than a doctrine of the *text*. But to understand this doctrine of reading, one should keep in mind not only the similarities and differences between Calvin's culture and our own, but also the fact that his doctrine of reading should be assessed against the background of the practises of reading Scripture in his culture. Yet he relates reading not only to the eyes, but also to hearing Scripture and the preaching of the Word. He also relates reading to eating and ingesting the words and nourishment. The 'as if' language that Calvin uses for the reading of Scripture allows him to replace the central role of receiving the Sacrament in the medieval church with the central role of reading Scripture.

An important link between Reformed theology and socio-rhetorical interpretation is the fact that the contemporary interest in classical rhetoric and style forms part of the discursive context of Calvin's theory of reading. The careful attention being given to the rhetorical dimensions of the text in socio-rhetorical interpretation is therefore in line with this very basic characteristic of Calvin's approach as well as of the strong tradition in Reformed exegesis of careful attention to grammatical and historical issues. This heritage should now, however, be strengthened and developed further.

Calvin, however, extends the act of reading beyond written texts to nature and history.

> "This extension of reading accounts for Calvin's placing his doctrine of Scripture in the *Institutes* in the context of a general discussion of the relation of people to events and things around them and the knowledge of God that they could derive from reading the texts of nature and history" (Kort 1996:22).

This familiar characteristic of the Reformed view on revelation, is also well corroborated by socio-rhetorical interpretation with its emphasis on a multidimensional approach to the Bible as in the case of other texts, including an emphasis on the historical intertexture of texts. The reading of nature as text may be an area into which socio-rhetorical interpretation could still venture to supplement the multidimensional approach.

Inner texture

The metaphor from the domain of weaving determining the different phases of socio-rhetorical interpretation, that of the text seen as a thick tapestry, is being used to highlight different aspects of the approach. This tapestry can then be looked at from different angles and in the process different textures can be highlighted in turn.

The first aspect is the inner texture, the language of the text being used as communication. This is an area where Reformed theology and exegesis has traditionally been very strong. The focus is here on aspects such as repetition and progression in the text, the narrational structure, the opening-middle-closing of the text, the argumentative dimension and the sensory-aesthetic phenomena in the text. Many of these dimensions customarily received careful attention in Reformed exegesis. But the contribution of socio-rhetorical interpretation is in the concerted attention given to each of these aspects.

In dealing with this texture, one may be under the impression that one is dealing here with the most 'neutral' or 'stable' dimension of the text where no external aspects are relevant. This is, however, not the case. Robbins has consistently shown that for example the effect of the patterns of repetition and progression is to persuade and convince the reader (Robbins 1996b:37). The same also holds true for other aspects of the inner texture like the narrational texture and pattern and even more so for the argumentative texture. Here too one has to keep in mind that the other aspects such as the intertexture, social and cultural texture and ideological texture of the text are already exerting some influence in the inner texture of the text (Robbins 1996a:92).

Especially the discussion of the argumentative texture is an important contribution. In *Exploring the textures.* Robbins (1996b) makes a case that even the passion narrative of Mk 15:1-16:8 is argumentative in character. Not only speeches but stories too make use of argumentative devices to persuade readers to think and act differently. One can distinguish between logical and qualitative reasoning. As is known, the ancient rhetoricians already identified the argumentative "topics", the major argumentative devices commonly made use of. Narrational discourse can also be analysed in the light of the argumentative texture as the arguments give the

reasons for events to happen as they did and persuade the reader to accept the outcome of the discourse. At the moment there is a lively discussion still going on about the way in which syllogisms and enthymemes can be seen to function in the argumentative texture.

This texture of narrative texts, but also of the other genres in the NT can be analysed to great benefit. Here one may take note of a growing tendency to incorporate insights from rhetorical interpretation in the study of the NT. We shall return later in more detail to the multiple ways in which argumentation occurs in the different NT writings.

As part of the inner texture, socio-rhetorical interpretation also gives attention to the sensory-aesthetic texture of the text, the range of senses the text evokes or embodies. In this respect there is an interesting link to the influence on Calvin of the monastic practice of *lectio divina*. "(I)it was a way of reading intended to allow the texts to have maximum effect on the reader, even to be inscribed on the reader's body. The language used for this act is that of eating. The text is taken as though by mouth" (Kort 1996:23).

This texture is to be seen in the light of the thought-world of the Mediterranean culture in which a taxonomy of the three body zones and their related phenomena existed. By giving attention to this dimension of the text, the reader's emotions, conceptual configurations and will are challenged. Taking up this challenge of socio-rhetorical interpretation can enrich Reformed exegesis.

Intertexture

It is generally acknowledged that the Bible is an intertextual document (Draisma 1989). In Reformed theology the relationship between the Old and New Testaments has always been of great importance. One could even say that the totality of the Christian Bible is the result of the dialogue between the New Testament writings and the Hebrew Bible (Combrink 1996c).

The contribution of socio-rhetorical interpretation is to unpack the concept of intertextuality even further into the separate areas of intertexture, social and cultural

texture, ideological texture and cultural texture (Robbins 1996a:33). There is no doubt that the relevant issues here concerned will on the whole be deemed to be familiar in Reformed circles. The value of socio-rhetorical interpretation is the detailed and sustained manner in which these issues are put on the agenda.

This can be seen for example in oral-scribal intertexture (as subcategory of intertexture). Besides discussing recitation, recontextualization and reconfiguration of previous biblical events in new contexts, the treatment of *narrative amplification* and thematic elaboration is very helpful to become aware of the extent to which oral scribal intertexture can be functioning in Biblical texts. Here mention can be made of the manner in which the narrative amplification of *chreiai* about the passion and resurrection of Jesus in Mark (8:31; 9:31; 10:32f) contributes to the passion narrative of Mk 15-16.

An alternative form of oral-scribal intertexture to *narrative amplification* (as in Mk) is thematic elaboration, a well-known strategy in rhetoric to construct a complete argument. This can clearly be seen in 1 Corinthians 15 (see Mack 1990, Watson 1993). Here a complete argument is developed from a theme and the confirmation of the rationale, which is then elaborated with arguments from the contrary, from ancient testimony, from example, from analogy, followed by the synthesis of the argument and the conclusion (Robbins 1996b:57f).

It has also been agreed that the phenomenon of intertextuality has broader implications. Robbins underlines the fact that the boundaries of intertextual studies should be broadened to include not only the Hebrew Bible and Jewish literature, but also the Hellenistic-Roman world (Robbins 1996a:99). In Reformed Biblical studies this is not all that strange, although one could ask whether this has always been done consistently enough and in how far this has really made an impact on exegesis.

Social and cultural texture

This dimension of socio-rhetorical interpretation is an area where socio-rhetorical interpretation can be used to great advantage. While Reformed theology typically paid ample attention to historical issues, it is not true to the same degree for social and cultural issues.

Attention to the specific social topics in the texts calls for recognition of the different types of religious responses to the world. Acts has for example often been seen as a standard history of the early church. The question can now be asked whether it should not be rather seen as a reformist or conversionist response to the world. Or should Acts be seen as a contracultural discourse in relation to Jewish leaders who are embedded in a subcultural discourse with reference to the values of peace and salvation in the Roman Empire (see Robbins 1996a:174). This also implies taking seriously the final cultural categories in the text in analysing and interpreting the cultural location and orientation of the readers.

This is indeed a challenge to Reformed exegesis to be taken seriously as much work still has to be done along these lines.

Ideological texture

Here the issue is the social, cultural and individual location of and perspectives of texts, authors and readers of texts. But people are really the primary point of interest here while the texts call for our attention as the object of the writing and reading of the people (Robbins 1996b:95). This means that the focus is on individuals, on authoritative traditions of interpretation, on different modes of intellectual discourse as such, and on the ideology in texts as such.

This may be the aspect of socio-rhetorical interpretation about which there may be the most unease among Reformed scholars. But the reality is that most biblical scholars acknowledge the fact that no interpreter/reader is detached from his/her own context (cf Smit 2000:13 n37).

It is generally acknowledged that Calvin's Roman Catholic and Anabaptist opponents largely determined his doctrine of reading Scripture (Floor 1970:4). While the one group subordinated Scripture to the institution of the church, the other group subordinated Scripture to religious experience and claimed to have direct access to the Holy Spirit apart from Scripture. This leads Calvin to the central position he accords to Scripture ((Kort 1996:25f).

Calvin's extensive training in rhetoric had a profound effect on his own writings which resulted in the fact that his writings itself became a new standard by which the quality of rhetoric could be measured (Jones 1995:2). It is also illuminating to realise how important the role of Calvin's Prefaces to the *Institutes* is. Jones shows that the 1536 preface remained rhetorically relevant even in the 1559 edition.

"But in addition to the 1536 context, it is also crucial that the letter be interpreted with reference to what it would have meant to the 1559 reader in his or her own context, for it is clearly this reader, not the reader of 1536, to whom the preface speaks in this final Latin edition of the *Institutes*" (Jones 1995:51).

But there is more than only the ideology of the reader to be taken in to account. The question is whether Reformed scholars in the past have been frank and self-critical enough about all aspect of their own individual ideological location (cf. e.g. Patte 1995). In order to do this, it is helpful to determine one's own social location in terms of the specific social topics as basically conversionist, reformist, revolutionist etc. It can be just as interesting to determine one's own cultural location in the light of the final cultural categories – whether one is situated in a dominant, a subculture, counterculture etc. It also possible to discover that one may be determined by a certain multiplicity of cultural and social locations.

One also has to be aware and self-critical of one's relation to various groups. In socio-rhetorical interpretation a taxonomy of different kinds of groups (such as clique, gang, action set, faction, corporate group etc) is helpful to come to terms with this dimension of ideology too. In the field of theology different historic traditions in which a scholar can be situated, can be identified. Here one's own Reformed tradition will definitely be relevant, as well as membership (official or unofficial) of scholarly guilds or organisations.

Another level of ideology is the intellectual mode of discourse used by an interpreter in dealing with a text. Here the obvious examples are historical-critical discourse, social-scientific criticism, history of religions discourse, new historical discourse and post-modern deconstructive discourse (cf Robbins 1996b:105ff).

Taking the ideology of texts into consideration is dealing with more than ideational or theological content or religious ideas in a text. The task is to see how the discourse of a text is presenting patterns of cognitive and moral beliefs about humans, society and the universe functioning in the social order (Elliott 1990:267). Ideology therefore deals with discursive and non-discursive practices and the impact of power on texts (Eagleton 1991:219, 223). To analyse the ideological texture of a text one has to deal with the social and cultural location of the implied author of the text, the ideology of power in the text as well as the ideology in the mode of intellectual discourse in the text and its interpretation. In this regard it must be noted that Kort is of the opinion that the power of a text is an important consideration for Calvin. "Power for Calvin is both personal, the power to penetrate the reader's hart, and cultural, the power of the text to endure and to influence diverse cultures" (Kort 1996:27).

Theology and Early Christian discourse

Socio-rhetorical interpretation has already been criticised for not giving adequate guidance with a view to the constructing of a theology (Culpepper 1998:76). It does seem, however, that the ongoing research may be making some basic contributions in this respect too.

From research into the way enthymemes are functioning in discourse, it is becoming clear that careful analysis of enthymemes in a text may be a formative factor in the constructing of a theology of the text. Because enthymemic reasoning presupposes a certain context, it invites the reader to fill out its meaning in the light of the social, cultural and ideological context it enacts in one way or another. Different modes of reasoning such as enthymemic, social, cultural and ideological argumentation can configure topics in such a manner as to contribute to the formation of a new social, cultural and ideological world, but also a new theological and Christological world for the reader (Robbins 1998d).

In a contribution to the Lund 2000 conference on rhetoric, Robbins (2000) elaborates again the contribution of socio-rhetorical interpretation concerning the six major modes of discourse in early Christianity. He acknowledges the contributions concerning different kinds of discourses in the Old Testament by Ricoeur (1980) and Brueggemann (1997). He sees as the major challenge of socio-rhetorical

interpretation to deal not only with the literary processes at work in the first century, but to broaden the research to deal also with rhetorical discourse. But then the attention is focussed not only on the three traditional modes of rhetoric, judicial, epideictic and deliberative. The research so far has identified six major rhetorical modes of discourse in the New Testament: wisdom discourse, miracle discourse, prophetic discourse, suffering-death discourse, apocalyptic discourse and pre-creation discourse. This is apparently a large project as it aims to investigate not only certain sections of some books in the NT, but claims to investigate every writing of the NT. The idea is to determine the relationship between the various modes of discourse and the literary modes of biographical history, epistle and apocalypse in the NT. In the process, valuable basic data will become available to construct the theology of the NT writings.

The kind of conclusions emerging are that in *wisdom discourse* inductive-deductive reasoning leads to an understanding of God who is beneficent and just, and who brought forth an ordered and just world. In *miracle discourse*, the major topics are illness and crises and depicting the power of God to whom all things are possible. *Prophetic discourse* highlights the fact that God chooses people with the task to produce righteousness. If they fulfil this responsibility, they are blessed, if not, they will face negative consequences. *Suffering-death discourse* is encountered in a wisdom mode, a prophetic mode and a Christian atonement mode. In *apocalyptic discourse* all time and all space are reconfigured in terms of holy and profane, good and evil. In *pre-creation discourse* the focus is the relation of Christ to God prior to creation, the activities of Christ and the achievements of this for humans and the cosmos.

Robbins sees as a challenge for socio-rhetorical interpretation to determine the relationships between the writings of the NT on the basis of these six discourses. It seems to me a very fruitful place for Reformed theology to take up this challenge to start building a Biblical theology from the basic modes of argumentation and the presuppositions implied in the text itself. It seems to me that this avenue of research can be a valuable contribution to Reformed theology, as it will also illumine the complex social, cultural, ideological and religious environment of thought and action against which early Christianity should be seen.

Socio-rhetorical commentary and preaching

In an interesting proposal, Bloomquist suggests that socio-rhetorical interpretation can be useful not only in the analysis of individual forms or smaller units, but also to deal with a larger body such as apocalyptic rhetoric (Bloomquist 1999b). He applies the socio-rhetorical emphasis on the various textures of apocalyptic literature and identifies certain characteristics for each of the respective textures. This is the kind of application of this approach which can be extended and explored further.

Despite the fact that a number of commentaries claiming to be socio-rhetorical have appeared already (Witherington 1995, Witherington 1998, Witherington 2001), a definitive socio-rhetorical commentary still remains a major challenge. The contribution by D deSilva (2000) is currently the best example in which the different dimensions of socio-rhetorical interpretation are incorporated in a very able manner. He deliberately endeavours to move beyond rhetorics to socio-rhetorical interpretation, and to deal with the ideological and social strategies used to accomplish the goals for the community addressed (DeSilva 2000:58). DeSilva also deliberately takes up the challenge to bridge the horizons between the NT times and our times. While acknowledging that the situation is currently in our secular society completely different with no regular religious persecution, Hebrews nonetheless challenges us on the issue of our values.

It remains, however, a challenge for Reformed theologians to produce commentaries exhibiting the full, rich and varied texture presupposed by socio-rhetorical interpretation.

Conclusion

From what has been said above, it should be clear that socio-rhetorical interpretation could play an important role in Reformed theology and among Reformed biblical scholars. Its obvious contribution is to challenge and enrich our interpretation of Biblical texts.

It can also function critically to analyse our scholarly interpretations of Bible. It can obviously also be used to analyse other theological texts too. If rhetoric is part of the task of systematic theology, one could understand one's own position better, as well as the theology of others in the discourses of their time. This could contribute to understand theological differences between traditions better (Smit 1996:407). This is important as a case can be made that theological discourses basically depend on difference and opposition. In this respect, Kort said:

> "To put it as strongly as possible, one does not understand theology unless one understands why violent relations among Christians are theologically produced and why social, political, and economic factors readily accompany and complicate theological disputes" (Kort 1992:54).

Rhetoric (and socio-rhetorical interpretation) could therefore also be useful in analysing our preaching (cf Smit 1996:411). One can also ask whether rhetoric could aid us to revision *theological education*? We are currently much more aware of the contextual nature of our theological education (Smit 1996:415). The contribution of socio-rhetorical interpretation will be to make us much more self-critical and reflexive of all the relevant factors entering into the equation.

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