

# The Contribution of Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation to the Reformed Interpretation of Scripture\*

H.J. Bernard Combrink  
(University of Stellenbosch)

## 1. 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.<sup>1)</sup> 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

---

\* This article is an adapted version of Combrink, H.J. Bernard, "The Contribution of Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation to the Reformed Interpretation of Scripture", in W.M. Alston & M. Welker (ed.), *Reformed theology: Identity and ecumenicity II: Biblical Interpretation in the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans, 2007), 91-106. Reprinted by permission of the publisher, all rights reserved.

1) See e.g. H.J. Bernard Combrink, "Die krisis van die Skrifgesag in die Gereformeerde Eksegese as 'n Geleentheid", *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 31 (3), 325-35.

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.<sup>2)</sup>

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.<sup>3)</sup> 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

---

2) Herman N. Ridderbos, "God with Us: Evaluation of Comments", *RES Theological Forum* 9 (3&4), 54.

3) See Dirk J. Smit, *In Diens van die Tale Kanaäns? Oor Sistematiese Teologie Vandag* (Stellenbosch: Universiteit van Stellenbosch[Stellenbosch Inaugural lectures], 2000).

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.<sup>4)</sup>

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*.<sup>5)</sup>

## 2. Methodological shifts

In the past decades one methodology after the other passed the revue in Biblical interpretation.<sup>6)</sup> Biblical interpretation moved from an almost exclusive historical paradigm to literary criticism, pragmatics, sociology and rhetoric. One of the most significant phenomena was

---

4) David S. Cunningham, *Faithful Persuasion: In Aid of a Rhetoric of Christian Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press: 1991), 220.

5) Smit, *Theology as Rhetoric?*, 395.

6) Cf. Combrink, “The Changing Scene of Biblical Interpretation”, in Johan H. Petzer & Patrick J. Hartin. (ed.), *A South African Perspective on the New Testament: Essays by South African New Testament Scholars presented to Bruce Manning Metzger during His Visit to South Africa in 1985* (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 9-17.

there discovery by Biblical scholars of the value of rhetorical interpretation.<sup>7)</sup> 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.<sup>8)</sup> The approach coined by Vernon Robbins as socio-rhetorical interpretation explicitly claims to be challenging the fixation of boundaries in traditional exegetical approaches.<sup>9)</sup> 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.<sup>10)</sup> Yet, this approach is also unwilling to bow too deeply before any set of boundaries created by humans. The emphasis in this approach is on the integration of interdisciplinary analysis and interpretation moving toward a broad-based interpretive analytics.<sup>11)</sup> 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.

---

7) Cf. Jan Botha, *Subject to Whose Authority? Multiple Readings of Romans 13* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994); Burton L. Mack, *Rhetoric and the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

8) Daniel Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995).

9) Vernon K. Robbins, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse: Rhetoric, Society and Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1996); *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996).

10) Robbins, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse*, 20.

11) Robbins, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse*, 12.

What is so appealing 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.”<sup>12)</sup> 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. 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, as well as the argumentative and persuasive nature of the text. The challenge of interpreting the Bible is to give adequate consideration to all the relevant relations of texts to society, culture and history. Robbins challenges us that socio-rhetorical interpretation is not a method, but an interpretive analytic that presupposes genuine teamwork with people from different locations and identities working

---

12) H.J. Bernard Combrink, “The Challenge of Making and Redrawing Boundaries: A Perspective on Socio-Rhetorical Criticism”, *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 40 (1999), 20.

together with different cognitive frames for the purpose of getting as much insight as possible on the relation of things to one another.<sup>13)</sup>

### 3. 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’(2Cor. 5:11).<sup>14)</sup>

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

---

13) Vernon K. Robbins, “Where Is Wuellner’s Anti-Hermeneutical Hermeneutic Taking Us? From Schleiermacher to Thistleton and Beyond”, in James Hester & D. Amador (ed.), *Rhetorics and Hermeneutics: Wilhelm Wuellner and His Influence* (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 105-25.

14) Cunningham, *Faithful Persuasion*, 5.

analytical instrument to analyse but not to be used for persuasion.<sup>15)</sup> See also his emphasis on the argumentative nature of the text, as well as of Calvin's exposition of it.<sup>16)</sup>

#### 4. 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 1996a; Kort 1988; 1996; Schneiders 1991).<sup>17)</sup> 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, and institution has Scriptures.<sup>18)</sup>

---

15) Smit, *Theology as Rhetoric?*, 401.

16) Smit, "Rhetoric and Ethic? A Reformed Perspective on the Politics of Reading the Bible", in Jr. Alston & Alston. Welker (ed.), *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity II: Biblical Interpretation in the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 385-418.

17) Combrink, "The Changing Scene"; Wesley A. Kort, *Story, Text, and Scripture: Literary Interests in Biblical Narrative* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988); Wesley A. Kort, "Take, Read": *Scripture, Textuality, and Cultural Practice* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996); Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1991).

18) Cf. Kort, "Take, Read", 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. According to Beverley Gaventa Scripture is also “a location in which God is glorified and enjoyed.”<sup>19)</sup> 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 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:

O[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.<sup>20)</sup>

It is true that from a faith perspective (also in Reformed theology)

---

19) Beverley R. Gaventa, “To Glorify God and Enjoy God Forever: A Place for Joy in Reformed Readings of Scripture”, in Jr. Alston & Welker (ed.), *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity II: Biblical Interpretation in the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 109.

20) Kort, “Take, Read”, 7.



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.<sup>21)</sup>

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.<sup>22)</sup>

In the dialectical relationship between tradition and Scripture, the Reformation has given priority to Scripture. Yet one has to realize 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

---

21) Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 52.

22) Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 71.

uniquely privilege written formulation of apostolic tradition.

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. But according to Robbins socio-rhetorical interpretation has accepted a special challenge: to analyze and interpret how early Christians adapted biblical, Jewish, and Greco-Roman modes of discourse to become the distinctive discourse of early Christianity. One could say that in the New Testament writings Hebrew Bible discourse actually invaded Mediterranean biographical historiography, epistle, and apocalypse. But seen from another angle the Mediterranean biographical historiography, epistle, and apocalypse invaded Hebrew Bible discourse. This resulted from a dynamic interaction of multiple oral and written discourses in the Mediterranean world during the first century CE.

## 5. Calvin

According to Kort, Calvin's doctrine of Scripture is more a doctrine of *reading* than a doctrine of the *text*.<sup>23)</sup> 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

---

23) Kort, "Take, Read", 15.

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.<sup>24)</sup>

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.<sup>25)</sup>

This familiar characteristic of the Reformed view on revelation, is

---

24) See Bernard C. Lategan, “History, Historiography and Reformed Hermeneutics at Stellenbosch: A Case Study of an Unsolved Problem and Possible Alternatives”, in Jr. Alston & Welker (ed.), *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity II: Biblical Interpretation in the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 157-71.

25) Kort, “Take, Read”, 22.

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.

## 6. 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 detailed attention given to each of these aspects.

In dealing with this texture, one may be under the impression that the inner texture is the most 'neutral' or 'stable' dimension of the text where no other 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.<sup>26)</sup> 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 dimensions of the text such as the intertexture, social and cultural texture and ideological texture of the text are already exerting some influence on the inner texture of the text.<sup>27)</sup>

Especially the discussion of the argumentative texture is an important contribution. In *Exploring the textures*, Robbins makes a case that even the passion narrative of Mark 15:1-16:8 is argumentative in character.<sup>28)</sup> 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 New Testament, can be analysed to great benefit. Here one may take

---

26) Vernon K. Robbins, *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1996), 37.

27) Robbins, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse*, 92.

28) Robbins, *Exploring the Texture*, 23, 29.

note of a growing tendency to incorporate insights from rhetorical interpretation into the study of the New Testament. We shall return later in more detail to the multiple ways in which argumentation occurs in the different New Testament 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."<sup>29)</sup>

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.<sup>30)</sup> 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.

## 7. Intertexture

It is generally acknowledged that the Bible is an intertextual document.<sup>31)</sup> In Reformed theology the relationship between the Old

---

29) Kort, "Take, Read", 23.

30) Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Louisville: John Knox, 1993).

31) Sipke Draisma (ed.), *Intertextuality in Biblical Writings: Essays in Honour of Bas van Iersel* (Kampen: Kok, 1989).

and New Testaments has always been acknowledged as 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 1996b).

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 sacred texture.<sup>32)</sup> 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 Mark 15-16.

An alternative form of oral-scribal intertexture to *narrative amplification* (as in Mark) is thematic elaboration, a well-known strategy in rhetoric to construct a complete argument. This can clearly be seen in 1 Corinthians 15.<sup>33)</sup> Here a complete argument is

---

32) Robbins, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse*, 33.

33) See Burton L. Mack, *Rhetoric and the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress

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.<sup>34)</sup>

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.<sup>35)</sup> 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.

## 8. 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.<sup>36)</sup>

---

Press, 1990); Duane F. Watson, "Paul's Rhetorical Strategy in 1 Corinthians 15", in Stanley E. Porter, & Thomas H. Olbricht (ed.), *Rhetoric and the New Testament: Essays from the 1992 Heidelberg Conference* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 231-49.

34) Robbins, *Exploring the Texture*, 57.

35) Robbins, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse*, 99.

36) Cf. Elna Mouton, "Surprised by New Contexts? Challenges of Reformed Exegesis from within Liminal Spaces", in Jr. Alston & Welker (ed.), *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity II: Biblical Interpretation in the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 230-41. See also



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 rather 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. This also implies taking seriously the final cultural categories in the text in analysing and interpreting the cultural location and orientation of the readers. As Blount stated: “The cultural space one occupies will therefore be a critical factor in determining how and what text language *means*.”<sup>37)</sup> Many contemporary Reformed exegetes and interpreters agree with this position. One should also point out that the interpretative strategies of Reformed exegetes were fundamentally influenced by their own contexts. Blount remarks that we are now in a position to recognize that Reformed interpreters were always cultural interpreters, whether consciously or unconsciously. Not that they did acknowledge the fact. “Indeed, Reformed history and practice do not show a specific openness to the contextuality of faith. That the theology of the West

---

D.R. Sadananda, “The Johannine Logos: Interpreting Jesus in a Multi-Religious Context”, in Jr. Alston & Welker (ed.), *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity II: Biblical Interpretation in the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 349-72.

- 37) Brian K. Blount, “Reading Contextually as Reading Reformed”, in Jr. Alston & Welker (ed.), *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity II: Biblical Interpretation in the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 43-57.

is itself just a contextual theology was beyond their view.”<sup>38)</sup> Their conclusions, contextually influenced as they were, were seen to be “objective” conclusions.

This awareness of the cultural dimension of texts and our interpretation of it, is indeed a challenge to Reformed exegesis to be taken seriously as much work still has to be done along these lines. Here Robbins also draws our attention to the development in early Christian discourse.<sup>39)</sup> Whereas classical rhetoric was based on the speech in courtrooms, political assemblies, and civil ceremonies, the early Christians expressed themselves in terms of the institutions of the Mediterranean world. Their discourse was determined by the decisions and declarations of God concerning bodies, households, country-villages, synagogues, cities, temples, kingdoms, and empires. And as interpretation starts dealing with bodies and geophysical locations, it necessitates taking account not only of the logic of rhetorical reasoning(rhetology) but also with the graphic picturing in rhetorical description(rhetography).

## 9. 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

---

38) Karel Blei, “Introduction to the WARC Study”, in H.S. Wilson (ed.), *Gospel and Cultures: Reformed Perspectives* (Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1996), 14-16.

39) Vernon K. Robbins, “The Social Location of the Implied Author of Luke-Acts”, in Jerome H. Neyrey (ed.), *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991), 305-32.

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.<sup>40)</sup> 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.<sup>41)</sup>

It is generally acknowledged that Calvin's Roman Catholic and Anabaptist opponents largely determined his doctrine of reading Scripture.<sup>42)</sup> 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 brought Calvin to the central position he gave to Scripture.<sup>43)</sup>

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.<sup>44)</sup> It is also illuminating to realize how important the role of Calvin's Prefaces to the *Institutes* is. Jones shows that the 1536

---

40) Robbins, *Exploring the Texture*, 95.

41) Smit, *In Dien van die Tale Kanaäns?*, 13 n.37.

42) L. Floor, "Calvyn se Hermeneutiek in Vergelyking met Ebeling en Fuchs", *Neotestamentica* 4 (1970), 94.

43) Kort, "Take, Read", 25.

44) Serene Jones, *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 2.

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.<sup>45)</sup>

But there are 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. 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 and so on. 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 cultural, subcultural, or a counter-cultural context. It also possible to discover that one may be determined by a certain multiplicity of cultural and social locations. It is therefore interesting to see how Naudé elaborates on what a Reformed confession consists of. It is in a sense a commentary on Scripture, a common proclamation in the name of the universal church. But it is further “a proclamation of the church in a *specific situation* which requires an interpretation of a specific location (geographical) at a specific moment(reading the signs of the time) about a specific issue(determinant of the content of the confession)–

---

45) Jones, *Calvin and the Rhetoric*, 51.

bringing the confession into the political, cultural and economic realities of society.”<sup>46)</sup>

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 organizations.

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. Balla draws attention to the way the overall views of an exegete can influence her exegesis. He then pleads “to remain open to other possibilities in the exegesis as well as the formulation of the larger theses.”<sup>47)</sup>

Taking the ideology of texts into consideration is dealing with more than ideational or theological content or religious ideas in a text.<sup>48)</sup> The task is to see how the discourse of a text is presenting

---

46) Piet J. Naudé, “Reformed Confessions as Hermeneutical Problem: A Case Study of the Belhar Confession”, in Jr. Alston & Welker (ed.), *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity II: Biblical Interpretation in the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 246-47.

47) Peter Balla, “Why Biblical Scholars Have a Different Jesus when Exegeting the Same Jesus Tradition”, in Jr. Alston & Welker (ed.), *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity II: Biblical Interpretation in the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 34-42.

patterns of cognitive and moral beliefs about humans, society and the universe functioning in the social order.<sup>49)</sup> Ideology therefore deals with discursive and non-discursive practices and the impact of power on texts.<sup>50)</sup> 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."<sup>51)</sup>

## 10. 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.<sup>52)</sup> It does seem, however, that ongoing research may be

---

48) Denise M. Ackermann, "Tamar's Cry: Re-Reading an Ancient Text in the Midst of an HIV/Aids Pandemic", in Jr. Alston & Welker (ed.), *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity II: Biblical Interpretation in the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 1-33.

49) John H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless: A Social-Scientific Criticism of 1 Peter, Its Situation and Strategy* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1990), 267.

50) Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991), 219, 223.

51) Kort, "Take, Read", 27.

52) Robert A. Culpepper, "Mapping the Textures of New Testament Criticism: A Response to Socio-Rhetorical Criticism", *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 70 (1998), 71-77.

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.<sup>53)</sup>

In a contribution to the Lund 2000 conference on rhetoric, Robbins elaborates again the contribution of socio-rhetorical interpretation concerning the six major modes of discourse in early Christianity.<sup>54)</sup> 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

---

53) Vernon K. Robbins *Enthymemic Texture in the Gospel of Thomas* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998).

54) Vernon K. Robbins, "Argumentative textures in Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation", in Eriksson, Anders, Olbricht, Thomas H, Übelacker, Walter (ed.), *Rhetorical Argumentation in Biblical Texts: Essays from the Lund 2000 Conference* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2002), 27-65.

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 New Testament, but claims to investigate every writing of the New Testament. 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 New Testament. In the process, valuable basic data will become available to construct the theology of the New Testament 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 New



Testament on the basis of these six discourses. It appears to be 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. 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.

In this respect it is important to note the broadening of the scope of socio-rhetorical interpretation to incorporate the insights of Fauconnier and Turner on conceptual blending and cognitive mapping between mental spaces.<sup>55)</sup> Robinson raises the question how it was possible that Christian discourse could gradually become a dominant discourse in the Mediterranean world, when other religious discourses did not. He sees the key to this question in the way people appropriated different discourses like prophetic, apocalyptic, priestly, miracle, precreation through the frames and modes of wisdom argumentation which they learnt from childhood by way of “overmapping.”<sup>56)</sup>

## 11. 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

---

55) Gilles Fauconnier & Mark Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

56) Robbins, Forthcoming(2008).

apocalyptic rhetoric.<sup>57)</sup> 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,<sup>58)</sup> a definitive socio-rhetorical commentary still remains a major challenge. The contribution by David deSilva 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.<sup>59)</sup> DeSilva also deliberately takes up the challenge to bridge the horizons between the New Testament 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.

---

57) L. Gregory Bloomquist, "Methodological Criteria for Apocalyptic Rhetoric: A Suggestion for the Expanded Use of Socio-Rhetorical Analysis, in Gregory Carey & L. Gregory Bloomquist (ed.), *Vision and Persuasion: Rhetorical Dimensions of Apocalyptic Discourse* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999), 181-203.

58) Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995); *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

59) David A. DeSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle "To the Hebrews"* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 58.

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.<sup>60)</sup> 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.<sup>61)</sup>

---

60) Smit, *Theology as Rhetoric?*, 407.

61) Wesley A. Kort, *Bound to Differ: The Dynamics of Theological Discourses* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 54.

Rhetoric (and socio-rhetorical interpretation) could therefore also be useful in analysing our preaching.<sup>62)</sup> 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.<sup>63)</sup> 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.

---

62) Smit, *Theology as Rhetoric?*, 411.

63) Smit, *Theology as Rhetoric?*, 415.

◇ 초록

## 개혁주의 성경해석에 끼친 사회수사학적 해석의 공헌

H.J. 버나드 콤브링크  
(스텔렌보쉬대학교 교수)

사회수사학적 해석은 개혁주의 신학 안에서와 개혁파 성경학자들 사이에서 중요한 역할을 수행할 수 있다. 그 해석의 분명한 공헌은 성경 본문에 대한 우리의 해석을 도전하고 풍성하게 한다는 점이다. 그 해석은 또한 성경에 대한 우리의 학문적 해석들을 분석하는 데 비평적으로 기능할 수 있으며 성경 외의 다른 신학적 본문들을 분석하는 데 사용될 수도 있다.

수사학이 조직신학의 과업의 한 부분이라면, 누구든지 다른 사람들의 신학을 그들 시대의 담화들(discourses) 속에서 이해할 뿐 아니라 자기 자신의 입장을 더 잘 이해할 수 있을 것이다. 수사학은 전통들 사이에 존재하는 신학적 차이들을 더욱 잘 이해하는 데 공헌할 수 있다. 신학적인 담화들은 기본적으로 차이(difference)와 반대(opposition)에 의존하고 있기 때문이다.

그러므로 수사학(과 사회수사학적 해석)은 우리의 설교를 분석하는 데도 유용할 수 있고 우리의 신학 교육을 개선하는 데에도 도움을 줄 수 있다. 사회수사학적 해석의 공헌은 우리로 하여금 균등화되기 쉬운 모든 관련 요인들에 대하여 훨씬 더 자기 비판적이며 반성적이 되게 하는 것이다.

주제어 :

사회-수사학적 해석, 개혁주의 신학, 성경해석의 방법론, 담화, 텍스트 간의 관련성(간본문)

Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation, Reformed Theology, Methodology of Biblical Interpretation, Discourse, Intertexture