CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT AND A DESCRIPTION OF WIRKUNGSGESCHICHTE

Introduction

It is a symptom of our uncertain postmodern times that established methods or procedures in any discipline are increasingly questioned. New Testament Studies has not been immune from this process, with a renewed interest in hermeneutical issues giving rise to a proliferation of new methods. The main areas of criticism are now historical, literary and sociological. These are supplemented by a number of methods which explore the questions raised by a particular group of readers, such as feminist, marxist, post-colonial or queer theory readings. We have reached a point, however, where plurality may become pluralism; where rival and irreconcilable readings of a text will exist side by side without hope of the kind of discussion across methods which could lead to more holistic and coherent interpretations.

Some critics look back nostalgically to the time when New Testament scholars were asking the same questions at least, even though they arrived at different answers. The questions asked are now so diverse that a great deal of friction is generated in the defence of a particular set of questions as primary for interpretation and the condemnation of another set as irrelevant. The conflict is often most intense between literary critics on one side and sociological and historical critics on the

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1 I use the broader term ‘sociological’ as opposed to the narrower ‘social-scientific’ on the basis that not all critics with a sociological outlook espouse the model-based social-scientific approach commended by the Context Group, e.g. Esler, 1995:4–8. For a wider view, see especially discussion in Horrell, 1996:10f.
2 See Kingsbury, 1985:85, who despairs of further discussions with David Hill (who criticized Kingsbury’s literary approach), and says that the matter must be left for others to judge. Also Bockmuehl, 1998:273–275.
3 E.g. see Ashton, 1994:186–187.
4 E.g. see Ashton, 1994:203 on ‘deconstruction’, “—the real thing is no bogey; it is rather a demon…” see also Malina and Neyrey 1988:136, “We argue that a social science approach is vitally important, if only because it frees biblical study from the tyranny of the spuriously obvious and self-evident.”
other, because sociological and historical methods are more closely allied in approach.\(^5\)

This conflict is often marked by exasperation,\(^6\) as if both parties were staring at the classic optical illusion of the young woman and the old woman and one was saying, “It’s a young woman!” only to hear the other reply, “How can you say that? It is obviously an old woman! Look, there is her nose!” Rivalry occurs because the same black line within the total drawing is seen by both observers, but is claimed as evidence for a different picture. In the same way, a variation in style in a Gospel passage, for example, may be observed by a historical critic and a literary one; to the first it will appear to be a sure indication of a change of source, to the second it will be a sign of stylistic skill and subtlety.\(^7\) The same evidence is cited to defend different conclusions: the literary critic sees the evangelist as a consummate artist presenting a story, the historical critic sees a significant part of the evangelist’s work as compiling and adapting sources which are still detectable as an earlier layer of tradition within the finished Gospel.\(^8\)

Who is right? The argument continues fiercely because the very bases of these two approaches are at stake here: the literary critic relies on the Gospel being a coherent narrative in order to justify a close examination of the Evangelist’s literary art;\(^9\) the historical and indeed the social-scientific critic rely on the gospel being a considerably less well-polished artefact, so that evidence of earlier sources and concerns, of which the Evangelist was not conscious\(^10\) while writing, can be discovered behind the text.

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\(^5\) E.g. see Horrell, 1996:26 who asserts that there is no essential difference in method between sociology and history. He therefore opposes the distinctions made by some critics between historical and social-scientific criticism. See also Esler, 1995:3, commenting on interpreting the NT, “—we must comprehend their contexts, the particular social scenarios… This inevitably means that New Testament interpretation will be historical in nature.”

\(^6\) E.g. Ashton, 1994:141, “—narrative criticism is more of a fad than a fashion.”

\(^7\) E.g. comments on John 6; see Culpepper, 1983:91, “The conflict with unbelief escalates in chapter 6.” vs. Ashton, 1993:200, “Chapter 6 is a later insertion… This view can be supported from internal evidence.”

\(^8\) E.g. see Kermode, 1979:68, commenting on different views of the ending of Mark’s Gospel, “The conclusion [of Mark] is either intolerably clumsy; or it is incredibly subtle. One distinguished scholar, dismissing this latter option, says it presupposes “a degree of originality which would invalidate the whole method of form criticism.” [from W.L. Knox, quoted in Taylor, St. Mark]

\(^9\) See e.g. Howell, 1990:33.

\(^{10}\) See e.g. White, 1986:85–88.