CHAPTER THREE

A LITERARY CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF MT 14:22–33

INTRODUCTION

There have been a number of recent studies of Matthew using a variety of literary techniques to analyse the Gospel text.¹ Kingsbury, for instance, bases much of his approach on Chatman’s theory of narrative structure,² and so divides ‘story’ (what happens) from ‘discourse’ (the way the story is told).³ He also uses the categories of ‘implied author’, ‘implied reader’ and ‘narrator’ to analyse aspects of the way the story is constructed. These categories, which are also part of the vocabulary of reader-response criticism, are designed to describe the way in which a particular narrative functions. They focus on the structures which guide a reader into certain attitudes and expectations, such as the role of the narrator in relation to the characters. They attempt to uncover previously unexamined aspects of the relationship between the reader and the text in a way that resembles three-dimensional co-ordinates: they tightly plot the dividing line between the world of the text and the actual world by making a distinction between the real author or reader in the outside world and the implied author or reader within the text.⁴

³ These categories are derived from the Russian formalist terms, fabula and sjuzet. See Lodge, 1992:61.
⁴ Chatman illustrates these distinctions with the use of a diagram, underlining the precision of the scheme, see Chatman, 1978:151. But there are occasions when narrative critics use figures such as ‘the implied reader’ to claim unwarranted authority for their interpretations, see Ashton’s criticisms, Ashton, 1994:160, “Real readers, too, or any who are ready to sip the enchanted potion held invitingly towards them, are liable to be bewitched by this clever rhetoric. But what Staley calls the implied reader of the Gospel is really a surrogate exegete, and those who manage to pierce his clever disguise will continue to respond critically to every stage of the presentation.” See Suleiman, 1980:10, “—the implied author and the implied reader are interpretive constructs and, as such, participate in the circularity of all interpretation.” However, also see Kingsbury’s nuanced and sensitive use of ‘the implied reader’ to carefully
This interest in structures means that narrative and reader-response critics tend to work on whole Gospel texts, rather than on individual pericopae.\(^5\) When they do focus on a particular episode, they tend to be more interested in how it functions within the whole Gospel than on the smaller stylistic features of the particular pericope.\(^6\) A close examination of this sort was the focus of an earlier tradition of literary criticism,\(^7\) but even Chatman makes the point that it is indispensable for an overall critical appreciation of a particular text.\(^8\) For this reason, it seems helpful when studying a short passage to combine some of the insights of narrative theory with a more traditional close literary reading of the text. For instance, this study will include the examination of repetitions and sentence structure, as well as the role of the narrator. The following examination of Mt 14:22–33, then, is intended to highlight certain significant literary features, rather than to analyze the story according to a single rigid scheme.\(^9\)

In fact, to use any metacritical theory on the nature of narrative as if

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\(^5\) E.g. see Rhoads and Mitchie, 1982; Kingsbury, 1988a; Bauer, 1988; Howell, 1990, etc. Literary critics would no doubt defend this ‘whole Gospel’ approach as an antidote to the many historical critical studies focussed on a single pericope.

\(^6\) E.g. see Weaver, 1990. Although this monograph is specifically about Matthew’s Missionary Discourse, a close examination of Mt 9:35–11.1 (Ch. 3, pp. 71–126) is sandwiched between an examination of Mt 1:1–9:34, (Ch. 2, pp. 31–70) and an examination of Mt 11.2–28:20, (Ch. 4, pp. 127–154); suggesting that it is the place of the discourse within the whole Gospel which interests her. See also Anderson, 1994; which, although it focusses on repetitions within Matthew’s Gospel, looks at the repetitions which link different pericopae into an overall ‘narrative web’, rather than on the rhetorical use of repetitions within a particular episode.

\(^7\) In the UK, particularly the tradition of Leavisite Criticism, associated with close reading, practical criticism and the resistance against using abstract theory as the foundation for a critical approach. See Newton, 1992a:9–10. This contrasts sharply with the formalist roots of theories like Chatman’s, as formalism aimed to ‘establish the study of literature on a scientific basis,’ see Newton, 1992b:39.

\(^8\) See Chatman, 1978:118, “As a stylistician, I would be the last to suggest that the interesting configurations of the medium, the words that manifest the character in the verbal narrative, are therefore less worthy of study than other parts of the narrative composite.”

\(^9\) See Chatman’s own comment on rigid procedural categories, Chatman, 1978:166, “Narrative theory has suffered from too great a reliance on categories, so that the full discursive complexities of individual narratives are sometimes missed because they do not ‘fit.’” Also Kermode 1979:136, “—younger biblical scholars have adopted (sometimes, I think, too clinically) structuralist methods.” Also Sherwood, 2000:229, “—here in the ghetto of Biblical Studies we are still working with a mental image of text as a word-search puzzle which can be ringed and solved.”