CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

READER-RESPONSE, REDESCRIPTION, AND REFERENCE: ‘YOU ARE THE MAN’ (2 SAM. 12:7)

... reading a text narratively (reading it ‘for the story’) means asking above all questions that have narrative relevance—questions generally referring back to the proairetic dimension and the story line—and finding answers to them. If attempting to read a narrative maximally involves questions and answers about any and all of its meaningful aspects, reading it minimally involves questions and answers about what happens (Price 1982:110).

Notwithstanding the following remarks in connection with reception, redescription, and reference of the parables of Jesus, Lategan (1985:67) finds my views on reference too restrictive and limiting. I wrote:

From the perspective of the reception of a narrative text, it may be said that the text invites the reader to participate in the narrative world of that text. Since reality is remade, it offers new perspectives to the reader. The participation of the reader in the text is stimulated by the way in which the message is structured. It creates a new world of reference, namely, a narrative world (cf. p. 138 above, also Lategan & Vorster 1985a:62).

In his reaction to that essay, Lategan maintains that reference should be related to all aspects of the communication act, including sender, text, and receptor. In this way, he says, the context in which reference functions is appropriately widened. ‘This wider context has an important role to play when determining the more immediate reference of a story or statement’ (Lategan 1985:67). He argues that the referential status of a text is not restricted to ‘what it refers to’ immanently, or outside the text (backwards), but also in front of the text.

To avoid unnecessary misunderstanding, and also to further our discussion, I have decided to analyze the story of Nathan and David in Samuel 12 with a view to reader-response, redescription, and reference. Lategan refers to this story twice in his two chapters in Lategan & Vorster (1985:3–25; 67–93) as a case in point. In the latter he offers us his reception of the parable and its application.
The thesis I wish to propound in this essay is the following: *The referential status of a sentence, or for that matter of a cluster of sentences like a story, is directly related to its semantic function.* An adequate response to what a text (a sentence, for example) refers to depends on its semantic function. It makes quite a difference whether a language unit is descriptive or nondescriptive (social, expressive, or instrumental; cf. Lyons 1977:50). The thesis will be argued by (1) discussing different (modern) receptions of Nathan’s parable and its application in 2 Samuel, and (2) by analyzing reception, redescription, and reference with regard to the story as embedded in 2 Samuel. In addition, the thesis will be worked out by discussing some theoretical aspects of the problem and applying them to the text under discussion.

1. *Modern Receptions of Nathan’s Parable*

The story of David’s affair with Bathsheba and the consequent rebuke by Nathan has captured the imagination of many a student of the Old Testament. The parable of Nathan and its application in the David, Uriah, and Bathsheba episode is most revealing when it is studied from the perspective of reception, redescription, and reference. It reads as follows (*NEB* translation):

The Lord sent Nathan the prophet to David, and when he entered his presence, he said to him, ‘There were once two men in the same city, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had large flocks and herds, but the poor man had nothing of his own except one little ewe lamb. He reared it himself, and it grew up in his home with his own sons. It ate from his dish, drank from his cup and nestled in his arms; it was like a daughter to him. One day a traveller came to the rich man’s house, and he, too mean to take something from his own flocks and herds to serve to his guest, took the poor man’s lamb and served up that.’ David was very angry, and burst out, ‘As the Lord lives, the man who did this deserves to die! He shall pay for the lamb four times over, because he has done this and shown no pity.’ Then Nathan said to David, ‘You are the man. This is the word of the Lord the God of Israel to you: “I anointed you king over Israel, I rescued you from the power of Saul, I gave you your master’s daughter and his wives to be your own, I gave you the daughters of Israel and Judah; and, had this not been enough, I would have added other favours as great. Why then have you flouted the word of the Lord by doing what is wrong in my eyes? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword; the man himself you murdered by the sword of the Ammonites,