INTERTEXTUALITY AND THE "FINAL FORM" OF THE TEXT

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In the English-speaking world, there has been in the last twenty years or so a clear drift in the direction of exegesis of the "final form" of the text as the preferred style for biblical interpretation. There are at least two different conceptual bases for this shift. One is theological, and is associated with so-called "canonical criticism". The other is literary, and rests on the argument that the interpreter of any text, biblical or not, has a primary duty to interpret the text that lies before us, before (or instead of) being concerned with putative earlier stages underlying that text. Where we are told in the Gospels that the disciples, as they go out on their preaching mission, are to eat what is set before them, the motto of current biblical studies might be "Read what is set before you". The drift has been so marked that it is now sometimes described as a paradigm shift, using Thomas Kuhn's controversial term from the history of science. It has produced a sharp cleft between the English- and the German-speaking worlds in biblical studies.

One of the common features of "final form" exegesis is an interest in reading holistically, that is, reading the text in its final form as an aesthetic or communicative unity. Lack of interest in possible

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underlying sources issues in a suspicion that there never were any underlying sources anyway, or at least that they are irrelevant to the text as it now is. This produces a tendency to interpret the text as the kind of unity that older, “historical-critical” interpreters would have denied to it. Consequently “final form” exegesis makes common cause with something like rhetorical criticism, the attempt to show how the text is articulated as it stands.4 “Final form” interpreters, like rhetorical critics, see their task as being to provide an account of the text which explains as part of its communicative intent even those features which in historical criticism were taken as evidence of disunity. We trace a progression of ideas which integrates every part into the greater whole. The result is that we perceive a single, coherent Gestalt in the text, to which every part of it contributes. There are no loose ends, nothing superfluous or confusing.

Once one sets out on this route, there is no logical reason to stop at any particular level within the biblical text. To take a now familiar example, Robert Alter has tried to show how Genesis 38, the story of Tamar and Judah, is not the erratic block within the Joseph story that generations of commentators have believed, but can be read as perfectly well integrated into its narrative context.5 The clue is the theme of recognition: Judah “recognizes” (in a technical, legal sense) the items he left with Tamar, just as he forced his own father Jacob to “recognize” Joseph’s blood-stained coat. The theme of the brothers getting what they deserve through the way events unfold is thus present here just as much as in the rest of the story of Joseph, and there is no need to posit an interpolator who has inserted chapter 38 after the Joseph narrative was complete.

But clearly such an argument, which depends on verbal connections as well as on connections of theme, need not stop at the level of the (supposed) “Joseph narrative”. It can be applied, and Alter does apply it, to Genesis as a whole, or to the historical books as a whole. Thus he traces connections between widely separated narrative texts, established by identifying Leitwörter and “type scenes”. Along similar lines, other scholars have sought to find patterns that show the unity of the book of the Twelve,6 or the prophetic corpus as a


3 See Alter, Art of Biblical Narrative.

6 See J. Nogalski, Redactional Processes in the Book of the Twelve, BZAW 218 (Berlin,