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To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application

Stephen R. Haynes and Steven L. McKenzie, Editors

Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993

256 pages \$12.99 U.S. paper

Northrop Frye describes an emerging trend in biblical interpretation in this statement about the German author Jacob Boehme, "His books are like a picnic to which the author brings the words and the reader the meaning" (quoted in E.D. Hirsch Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* [London, 1967] p. 1). This book, *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application*, jointly edited by an Old Testament scholar and a professor of Religion and Literature, provides a clear road map through the labyrinth of traditional and newer methods of biblical interpretation.

If "everyone interprets the Bible in their own way" and the "experts" cannot agree on how the Bible is to be read, then how can the non-specialist hope to find meaning? This text goes a long way in answering this question. Its target audience is the reader who is not an expert, "students, educated members of the clergy, and the non-specialist who teaches the Bible" (p. 1).

The editors have carefully chosen authors who are competent practitioners of the particular method they are describing. The methods are organized in three parts. The first part, "traditional" methods, includes Historical, Source, Tradition-Historical, Form, and Redaction Criticisms. The second part, "expanding the tradition", includes Social-Scientific, Canonical and Rhetorical Criticisms. The third part, "overturning the tradition", includes Structural, Narrative, Reader-Response, Poststructuralist and Feminist Criticisms. Each chapter defines the method, its assumptions and history of development along with an illustration of the method in action with texts selected from either Genesis or Luke/Acts.

David Gunn's chapter on Narrative Criticism is clearly written, engaging, and invites a response. He defines Narrative Criticism as "interpreting the existing text in terms primarily of its own story world, seen as replete with meaning" (p. 171). This approach is in direct opposition to methods which attempt to reconstruct a text's earlier written or oral sources, editorial history, the original setting, audience or the author's intention in writing the text. Gunn attacks the claims of historical critics as "imperialistic" and charges that their data is "a matter of mere speculation" (p. 193).

Although one may use the results of narrative criticism to glean fresh insights into some texts, rhetorical criticism provides a more balanced approach which Yehoshua Gitay defines as a "pragmatic method of analysis that integrates the three dimensions of a literary work: the author, the text itself, and the audience" (p. 136).

If you strive to be a competent reader of the Bible, you will want to get your hands on this volume. Gunn delivers a penetrating reading of the story of Lot at Sodom (Genesis 19; pp. 178—192). Surprise and delight await you with insights for teaching and preaching generated by the varied methods. Students in my seminary classes have found this book both stimulating and challenging, even though some chapters are not as helpful as others (e.g. Form Criticism).

Errors are few. "Son of my father" should read "Son of my people" (p. 186) and there is a typo on p. 178, (t)his daughter.

The act of reading and the reader's imagination are taking on a new prominence in biblical studies. Is reading the Bible like a picnic in which the biblical authors bring the words and you (the reader) bring the meaning?

John H.C. Neeb
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The Covenant Never Revoked: Biblical Reflections on a Christian-Jewish Dialogue

Norbert Lohfink
New York: Paulist Press, 1991
96 pp.

Improvement in Jewish-Christian relations stands out as a bright spot in a century filled with unbelievable violence and suffering. But it was not until Christians acknowledged the full horror of the mass extermination of Jews during the Nazi period that representative bodies of Christians began to express strong and concrete interest in making amends for past wrongs and offering assurances of a better future.

Beginning with the First Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1948, dozens of ecumenical and denominational statements concerning Jewish-Christian relations have been issued. Among the most recent is *The Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to the Jewish Community*, adopted 18 April 1994, which repudiates "Luther's anti-Judaic diatribes and violent recommendations of his later writings against the Jews". It also deplors the teaching of hatred toward Judaism or toward the Jewish people in our day. "Grieving the complicity of our own tradition within this history of hatred, moreover, we express our urgent desire to live out our faith in Jesus Christ with love and respect for the Jewish people," says the ELCA declaration.

This may seem like a long step for some Christians, but is it enough? Can one renounce the causes and forms of anti-Semitism on moral grounds without going on to a theological position which gives full recognition to the reality of Judaism as a living religion? Is it possible to declare respect