

Robbins, Vernon K. *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996. 148 pp. \$29.95.

Numerous critical methods are at the disposal of the New Testament Interpreter. Is there one that is better than all of the others? Is there a way which the different methodologies can be combined? Vernon K. Robbins, Professor of Religion in the Department of Religion at Emory University answers yes to the second question in *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation*.

Summary

Robbins presents what can be described as an eclectic critical methodology. He compares a given text to a richly layered tapestry. Socio-rhetorical criticism is presented as a means by which to explore and identify the different layers of the text. The layers are innertexture, intertexture, social and cultural texture, ideological texture, and sacred texture. Innertexture analysis is essentially looking at the text in and of itself through the eyes of stylistics and literary criticism. Intertexture involves looking at the relationship of the text to other texts: both within and without the biblical canon. Social and cultural texture explores the text as part of a cultural and social setting. The ideological texture explores the ideology of the text through several different ways of exploring for ideology. The sacred texture involves looking for the divine, both from the divine and human perspective, in a text.

Critique

Robbins attempt at integrating a number of different critical methodologies, namely

literary criticism, social-scientific criticism, rhetorical criticism, postmodern criticism and theological criticism (1-2), is by no means an easy task. His call for interpreters to avoid the limitations of using only one of any of the above methodologies is welcomed. Rather than attempting to re-invent the wheel, Robbins often takes a compilation approach. He cites several representatives of the different critical schools in summary or near verbatim form in expounding the different layers of analysis. He avoids being too novel while at the same time having originality, though there may be some who might take issue with not modifying the critical methodologies.

The intertexture and the social and cultural texture are especially useful tools. It is here where Robbins shines. His analysis of the the different ways of exploring intertextuality is thorough and well demonstrated. He does not limit intertextual analysis to the more direct quotes and allusions to other texts but challenges the interpreter to look deeper for reconfigured and re-contextualised uses of other texts. His frequent and specific examples help the reader to see what he is addressing. The social and cultural texture amounts to integrating elements of anthropological studies social-science into the analysis. The emphasis upon and examples of social topics for which the reader can look helps take what can be an intimidating topic and makes it into a finite analysis.

While Robbins work is indeed helpful and a great contribution, there are some areas that could use some improvement. The first of which is the innertexture layer. As mentioned earlier, it is largely literary criticism and stylistics. While these are indeed indispensable to the interpreter, limiting (even unintentionally or due to page limitations!) this foundational level of analysis to stylistics does not fit with the spirit of the work. It would be helpful to demonstrate

the place of neo-structuralism (a la M. A. K. Halliday or the “South African” school of thought in linguistics) and different forms of grammatical analysis in this layer. Robbins’ treatment of the sacred texture is lacking in the thoroughness of the other textures. Although he gives different categories, he lacks the specific examples of the other textures.

Recommendation

For the interpreter interested in a multi-dimensional and thorough interpretive method, Vernon Robbins presents an excellent analysis. Those with a background in linguistic and grammatical analysis will be disappointed to see that they have not been included, however, it would seem that such approaches can easily be integrated. Overall, this unique and eclectic contribution should be welcomed.

Mark H. Bahr
Dallas, TX
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