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The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse: Rhetoric, Society and Ideology [Review]

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editor. Professor Perkins sees this as ingenious, but dismisses it as lacking explicit evidence in the text (84). Yet, the evidence she presents for her dating of the epistles is no more explicit in the text than Professor Martin's.

What is important to Perkins, however, is not the debate as to who wrote what. It is the fact that first-century Christians accepted these documents as examples of true apostolic faith (3). They must, then, be accepted and interpreted with that perspective in mind.

The strength of the commentary is its solid, exegetical interpretation. The author also offers excellent insights from social-scientific studies by scholars such as John Elliot and Jerome Neyrey (particularly in Perkins's commentary on 1 Peter). Yet, there is very little reference to other social-descriptive studies that could bring added perspectives on the settings of the epistles. The weakness of the commentary is its homiletical exposition. There is almost none in the study on Jude! The intent of the editors and writers of the Interpretation series is for each volume to explain and then to apply, thereby meeting the needs of students, teachers, ministers, and priests. This volume emphasizes exegesis over application. The preacher will find good, exegetical insights, but little extrapolation to make the text come alive to the congregants in the pews. Professor Perkins has written an important addition to the growing number of tomes on the General Epistles. However, her commentary is better suited to an exegetical series than to a series which combines teaching and preaching, academics and liturgics.

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PEDRITO U. MAYNARD-REID

Robbins, Vernon K. *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse: Rhetoric, Society and Ideology*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996. xiii + 278 pp. Paper, \$22.99.

In this book Vernon Robbins, Professor of Religion at Emory University, provides the most in-depth and systematic discussion to date of the method of Biblical interpretation known as socio-rhetorical criticism, a method he has been developing through numerous articles and books since the publication of *Jesus the Teacher: A Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation of Mark* in 1984. It should be noted that his *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation*, a book similar to the one being reviewed, also appeared in 1996. Although both books contain a very similar outline, *Exploring the Texture of Texts* is intended to guide readers through the steps of actually applying socio-rhetorical methods, while *Tapestry* lays the theoretical and methodological foundations for the approach.

Through socio-rhetorical criticism Robbins seeks to find an alternative for dominant modes of Biblical interpretation that focus on a single aspect of the text, be it historical, social, theological, etc. By systematically placing several specialized areas of analysis in dialogue with each other, socio-rhetorical criticism reads and rereads texts using multiple strategies of interpretation without favoring one over the other. It should be noted that Robbins' method relies heavily on rhetorical-critical and social-scientific modes of interpretation.

In chapters 1 and 2 Robbins discusses some of the theoretical presuppositions

of the method and introduces the four arenas of texture that the socio-rhetorical method explores: inner texture, intertexture, social and cultural texture, and ideological texture. Basic to Robbins' methodology is the notion that texts are performances of language, and language is simultaneously related to people's speech, writings, and actions. Traditional metaphors of language as windows and mirrors are viewed as problematic, since they overlook the nature of language as a social product. For the purposes of socio-rhetorical analysis, these metaphors are replaced by the metaphor of "texts as thick as tapestry" (18). This understanding allows the interpreter to explore a wide range of meanings through the process of creating or dismantling boundaries to create various meanings that interact dynamically with one another. Helpful diagrams accompany the rather complex introductory discussions of each of the textures in chapter 2.

Chapters 3 through 6 develop each of the four arenas of interpretation in depth. These chapters proceed primarily by reviewing previous studies that have in some way been important to the development of the socio-rhetorical method. Each of these chapters ends with a helpful section in which the strategies for reading discussed in that chapter are applied to 1 Corinthians 9.

Chapter 3 develops the idea of the inner nature of texts. Here Robbins analyzes the relation of signs (words) in the text to one another. Utilizing primarily rhetorical critical methods, the interpreter is asked to look at the repetition of words, the opening-middle-closing structure of texts, the narratorial characteristics, and the argumentative and sensory-aesthetic features.

The study of the intertextual features of texts, discussed in chapter 4, builds on recent studies of intertextuality that recognize that texts, like words, acquire meaning in relation to other texts. Two aspects of Robbins' approach to intertextual studies are worth noting: Unlike some studies of intertextuality, Robbins does not limit comparison to Hebrew Bible texts; rather he includes all the literature of the Mediterranean world, including Greco-Roman traditions. Robbins makes a distinction between oral-scribal intertextuality (the way in which the words of one text are reconfigured in another), social intertextuality (the relationship between the social practices of two groups), historical intertextuality (how a particular event or period of time is reconfigured) and cultural intertexture (the interaction between symbolic worlds), analyzing each separately.

The analysis of social and cultural texture, explored in chapter 5, relies heavily on social and anthropological theory in order to explore the nature of the voices in the text. Here the interpreter is asked to locate the stance of the text according to a typology of seven major responses of religious discourse to the world, among which are conversionist, revolutionist, thaumaturgic, and other responses. Another aspect of social and cultural texture is understanding the social and cultural systems and institutions that texts presuppose and evoke.

The starting point for the analysis of ideological texture, discussed in chapter 6, is that all positions reflect a particular ideology. Here Robbins draws on recent work done in cultural studies. He advocates careful analysis of the ideologies underlying texts as well as the ideologies underlying dominant methods of interpretation, groups, and individuals.

Robbins concludes the book with a brief discussion of what he sees as the

promise of socio-rhetorical criticism, including a brief outline for the rewriting of earliest Christian history that socio-rhetorical readings will make possible.

Socio-rhetorical criticism's potential for redefining our understanding of early Christian history is an important underlying theme of the book. Although Robbins proposes socio-rhetorical criticism as a way of bridging hermeneutical and historical approaches to early Christian texts, he clearly stays closer to historical concerns. Socio-rhetorical criticism is a demanding and complex method, requiring of the interpreter that he or she go outside of the rather self-contained world of NT studies and engage some of the developments that have taken place in the field of semiotics, cultural studies, and other fields that have not traditionally been the playground of interpreters of the NT. Because of this, readers may find the book somewhat difficult, even though it is well organized and well written.

While not every reader (particularly those of a conservative bent) will be able to follow all of Robbins' presuppositions, most readers, especially those interested in hermeneutical issues, will find Robbins' attempt to systematize an interdisciplinary approach challenging and enlightening.

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Russell, Jeffrey Burton. *A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997. 230 pp. Hardcover, \$24.95.

Jeffrey Burton Russell has devoted much of his scholarly career to writing about the devil and hell. Such volumes as *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity* (1977); *Satan: The Early Christian Tradition* (1981); *Lucifer: The Devil in the Middle Ages* (1984); *Mephistopheles: The Devil in the Modern World* (1986); and *The Prince of Darkness: Evil and the Power of Good in History* (1988) have been leading scholarly contributions in the field.

With *A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence* Russell has set a new direction for his scholarly endeavors. He intends this volume to be a prolegomenon to a detailed, multivolume study of the topic that one presumes will follow somewhat the pattern laid out in his work on the devil.

It is probably no accident that Russell's history of the evil side of the supernatural received priority in treatment. After all, as he perceptively notes, "to the modern mind heaven often seems bland or boring." Thus, "evil and the Devil seem to get the best lines" (xiii). That appears to be true in both history (e.g., destruction) and the daily newspaper, where good news seems to be no news at all.

But Russell has come to the place where he sees another viewpoint. In the tradition of Dante he desires to show how nothing could possibly be as exciting as heaven itself. Thus the purpose of *A History of Heaven* is to deepen his readers' understanding of heaven as a blessed otherworld by examining the Christian tradition on the topic. His central theme "is the fulfillment of the human longing for unity, body and soul, in ourselves, with one another, and with the cosmos" (xiii).

The book's title is somewhat misleading, since it seems to promise a comprehensive history of ideas about heaven but only takes its readers from about