Scriptura 79 (2002), pp. 106-121

THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF A SOCIO-RHETORICAL COMMENTARY[1]

HJ Bernard Combrink
University of Stellenbosch

Abstract

Implementing a socio-rhetorical approach in the writing of a commentary can be a challenging endeavour. Such a multidimensional approach should take seriously some of the questions that are not always dealt with explicitly in the writing of commentaries. Interactionist hermeneutics should be acknowledged, as well as the ideology of the interpreter, together with taking into account the creativity and reception of the intended readers of the text and the commentary. The challenge for such an approach would be to identify the multiple modes of hermeneutical rhetoric that functioned in early Christian discourse and to elucidate the manner in which this played a role in the renewing of traditions.

1. Introduction

In one way or other the writing of a commentary on a book of the Bible seems to be an ultimate challenge to the Biblical interpreter and the final test to a specific methodological approach to Biblical interpretation. In 1982 a special issue of the journal *Interpretation* dealt with the issue of Biblical commentaries (Andersen 1982:341). Almost a decade later (Bruner 1990) in another journal, *Theology Today*, also put this issue on the agenda. And in the meantime Biblical commentaries are still being published individually and as series.

It is interesting that whereas Jewish religious authorities generally frown upon translations, "commentary became the standard universal mode of relating to the sacred texts" (Sarna 1990:5). The 2nd century Rabbi Judah stated: "He who translates a (biblical) verse literally is a falsifier, and he who amplifies it blasphemes and defames" (Sarna 1990:2). Actually, it has been stated that translations is essentially a Christian enterprise, while commentaries is essentially a Jewish enterprise. As is well known Christian translations of the Bible often tend to receive, virtually at least, almost a certain degree of canonicity. This, in turn, often encourages a fundamentalist attitude to Scripture. Jewish commentaries, on the other hand, are characterized by the basic conviction that a multiplicity of meanings is embedded in the text.

Due to differences between source and receptor languages, translations often run the danger that metaphors get lost in translation. In this manner modern translations have often been transformed into virtual commentaries. Over against this it is typical of Jewish hermeneutics and exegesis to refuse to absolutize any single stance.

The intrinsically endless variety of interpretation, often internally contradictory and replete with antinomies has always confronted the literate Jew with a vast array of exegetical texts not one of which is authoritative but each of which commands attention and calls for concentration of thought and continuous study (Sarna 1990:7).

This is an important aspect to keep in mind when considering the possibility of a socio-rhetorical commentary.

1. The financial assistance of the *National Research Foundation: Social Sciences and Humanities* towards this research is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed and conclusions arrived at are those of the author and are not necessarily to be attributed to the National Research Foundation.

Theology has the calling to say new things under new circumstances about new issues, and for this it needs grammar, dialectic and rhetoric (Smit 1996; 2000). In this respect rhetoric, and specifically socio-rhetorical interpretation, can play an important role. It has been recognized that in the formative period of Christian theology rhetoric played an important role. Not only is the rhetorical and persuasive character of the Old and the New Testament generally acknowledged, but Scripture is also employed rhetorically by Christian believers (Cunningham 1991:32). In this respect the role of commentary can be extremely significant. This is even more so if the unhealthy division of labour between systematic theologians and exegetes is resisted and Biblical interpretation is recognized to have a central task in Christian theology. Cunningham strikingly highlights this unhealthy division:

Separating exegesis from theology suggests that the essence of Scripture somehow resides among the highly codified marks on a page of text. This would assume that technical experts could be assigned the task of breaking the code, and that their results could be appropriated by those who need the encoded information (Cunningham 1991:220).

In this respect the Reformed theologian Calvin is an interesting historical example. It is evident that he made use of the rhetorical insights of Cicero and Quintilian in a creative manner, refining and even stretching the rhetorical rules he was taught in law school thus arriving at a quite original presentation (Jones 1995:25). His goal in doing this was to persuade particular audiences and move them toward very specific kinds of Christian actions, beliefs, and dispositions. Jones remarks that Calvin's theological discourse has a double purpose, as "it seeks to witness to the revelation of God in scripture, and it seeks to do so in language capable of moving the hearts, minds and wills of its audience toward an ever-deepening life of faith" (Jones 1995:187). As God's word is inherently persuasive and accommodative, these two goals are closely interrelated.

A factor that is also relevant to the scope of a socio-rhetorical commentary is Calvin's insight that in order to shape his audience's disposition, he ought to take the political context of his audience seriously. As his audience often consisted of different groups of readers, not only friends and believers, but also foes and sceptics, it is actually remarkable that Calvin responds on almost every page of the *Institutes* so readily to the political figures, tensions and ideologies of his time (Jones 1995:5,189f). Calvin wrote to and sought to shape communities marked by both the conflicts and hopes of his age. But he not only had as goal to influence them but he himself was shaped by the practices of the various communities with whom he had contact during his life (Jones 1995:207f).

2. Questions concerning commentaries

It is commonly acknowledged that the commentary genre is a difficult form. In the past commentators often restricted them to commenting on words and sentences and extracting hidden truths from words and sentences. The unity of the interpretation is often located in the dogmatic world constructed by the theologian. Nevertheless, the genre commentary does not normally elicit much discussion. From time to time attention is, however, given to the writing of commentaries. This happened for example in 1982 in a special issue of *Interpretation* (Andersen 1982), as well as in of *Theology Today* in 1990 (Bruner 1990). Some recent commentaries have incorporated new approaches from a structural, rhetorical, narratological, social (Overman 1996) and even engaged perspective, while in some cases attention has been given to the effective history of interpretation (Luz 1985).

In his illuminating article on the proposed narrative commentary series, Moore discusses the new holistic context due to amongst other literary critical approaches and narrative criticism, indicating that different types of narrative commentary are even

possible (1987:34). In contrast with the traditional attention on a lot of detail in the text resulting in a "flattening" effect (cf Tannehill 1986:5), attention is now given to plot, characterization, action and interaction in the narrative. In this manner narrative commentary "in the style of Tannehill is essentially a retelling of a gospel designed to draw attention to its plotted qualities of "flow" or forward movement (the aspect of temporal succession) and to the integration and interrelation of its parts ("causality", in the broad sense)" (Moore 1987:43). By this second plotted narrative of the commentator herself, "commentary thus regains a narrative, which is to say midrashic, form" (Moore 1987:43). Another way in which a narrative commentary can be written is from the perspective of the initial situation of the reading where much of the text is still unknown and reading is seen as a cumulative process (Edwards 1985:9). Moore in essence underlines the pluralistic and eclectic avenues open for a narrative commentary series in which the emphasis might be on the story, the reader, the point of view or even a self-interrogative reading (Moore 1987:54f).

When this has been said, some basic questions still remain, such as how far the following issues have to or can be addressed: a window on the tradition of interpretation of the text (Perkins 1990:393); an outline of the text; the opinions of others; the relation to the culture of the author, the first readers, the readers of today; the theology (Fee 1990:389); the contemporary relevance of the text; the purpose of the commentary and the audience of the commentary envisaged (cf Best 1996).

Very few commentators, however, in the past paid attention to the questions by whom and for whom the commentary is written, and most of the newer contributions are still one-sided in their approach. Obviously the person of the interpreter is also relevant as (s)he cannot be divorced from a community and the interactive context in which a specific interpretation originates. One of the issues receiving perhaps more explicit attention recently, is the issue of the audience addressed by the commentary. Though some may list students, colleagues, or the academy, most commentaries would also admit to have the goal of being relevant for the church and the preacher in the pulpit.

In the past one did not often encounter the explicit acknowledgment by a commentator of the importance of social considerations in the writing of her/his commentary. But this has changed. Interpreters have been challenged to be much more self-critical[2] and Bruner for example acknowledges taking the revolutionary and counterrevolutionary context in the Philippines into consideration in writing his commentary (Bruner 1990:400f). He also emphasizes the role of practical teaching and exposition in the process of the birth of the commentary. One should also mention engendered readings and the sensitivity to the audience of women and other (often marginalized) groups to which feminist Biblical interpreters have been challenging us[3]. Here one should also mention *The Women's Bible commentary* (Newsom & Ringe 1998) as well as *A Feminist commentary* (Schüssler Fiorenza 1994).

It is interesting to take note of the historical audiences Calvin had in mind in his *Institutes*. Serene Jones identifies four audiences: Calvin's students, first in Strasbourg, then in Geneva; the persecuted French evangelicals in the churches; the community of French humanists and members of the aristocracy giving support to the French Reformers; as well as the segments of the French Roman Catholic clergy hostile to the French evangelical community (Jones 1995:107ff). It is also acknowledged that in his exposition of Scripture he basically contended with two opponents, the Roman Catholic Church and the

2. Patte, 1995; Schüssler Fiorenza, 1988.
3. Blount, 1995; Schüssler Fiorenza, 1984:1-22; Schüssler Fiorenza, 1992:131f.

Anabaptists (Floor 1970:4). In the case of his commentary on the Synoptic Gospels it is also noteworthy that he is sensitive to the reader's respect for Scripture that in reality may be literal and superficial, and causing a rigid handling of Scripture.

Calvin leitet seine Leser nicht zu eine flächenhaften Ehrfurcht vor den Schriften an, sondern lehrt sie, sachlich zu werten, und befreit sie von den Skrupeln einer Buchstabenverehrung, die keine Wertungen vollziehen kann. Und: Er muss sich gegen den Vorwurf verteidigen, zu liberal mit der Bibel umzugehen (CR 45,4; CR 24, Praefatio). Nicht *er* is ängstlich, sondern er muss Rücksicht nehmen auf die Ängstlichkeit seiner Zeitgenossen und muss ihnen zur Entkrampfung helfen. *So* ist seine Stellung zur heiligen Schrift innerhalb seiner Zeit (Schellong 1969:97).

In the case of the *Gospel of Matthew*, some innovative commentaries are already available[4]. Although a number of socio-rhetorical commentaries on other New Testament books have been published and others are in preparation, it appears that there is definitely scope for research into the possibilities and problems associated with writing such a commentary on Matthew.

The point of departure is taken here that a socio-rhetorical approach is an appropriate method to use in the writing of a commentary that will in a responsible way deal with the for example text of the Gospel of Matthew and all the dimensions incorporated in it, such as the historical, social and symbolical world in which the text (in all its richness) and its author and readers were situated. It is furthermore accepted that reading and interpreting a text in such a manner cannot be a safe and so-called disinterested reading, but one that will challenge the interpreter as well as the readers with a message which will surely be most relevant to our own situation.

3. Socio-rhetorical interpretation, hermeneutics and commentary

Socio-rhetorical interpretation as a methodological framework has developed a long way since 1984 when Vernon K Robbins introduced the term "socio-rhetorical"[5]. He has outlined this approach in full in his 1996 publications in which he also implemented the metaphor of *tapestry* and the *texture* of a text[6]. He also gives credit to the impetus given by Amos Wilder in 1955[7]. Elsewhere, I have drawn attention to another metaphor which functions in this approach, that of the making and redrawing of boundaries (Combrink 1999). What remains so appealing in this approach is the fact that while remaining true to its basic points of departure, it has been continually in transition and by continuing to incorporate interdisciplinary insights from others it challenges us "to nurture an environment of interpretation that encourages a genuine interest in people who live in foreign cultures with values, norms, and goals quite different from our own" (Robbins (1984) 1992a).

In asserting that a socio-rhetorical commentary is a viable option, one should be clear about the implications of such a position. In associating socio-rhetorical interpretation with socio-rhetorical hermeneutics, one must acknowledge the rhetorical challenge against hermeneutics from Wuellner who claims that hermeneutics suppresses the rhetorics of texts by paying attention to the meaning, but not the power or other possibilities of the text (Wuellner 1988:286f). Socio-rhetorical hermeneutics is to be seen as dynamically interactionist in nature (Robbins 1998c:6,15). It fosters a dialogical and dialectical relation

4. Davies, 1993; Patte, 1987; Weren, 1994;Keener, 1999.
5. See *Jesus the teacher* (1984) 1992a.
6. Robbins, 1996a; Robbins, 1996b.
7. See Robbins 1996a:2 and Wilder 1956.

among multiple disciplinary modes of analysis and interpretation. It is not exclusivist in nature, but rather interactionist. No strategy of reading a text is excluded, yet we should also realize that it does not imply that "anything goes" in the interpretation (Robbins 1998c:6).

In using the strategies of socio-rhetorical interpretation in order to write a socio-rhetorical commentary we are actually enacting hermeneutical rhetoric, which can be seen as the counterpart of rhetorical hermeneutics. In this regard remarks by Leff are relevant. He claims that socio-rhetorical hermeneutics can offer descriptions of interpretive changes taking place. But socio-rhetorical commentary as rhetorical hermeneutic can explain how traditions are altered without their identity being destroyed (Leff 1997:203f). We shall return to this hermeneutical rhetoric of a socio-rhetorical commentary again later as this is also related to the overall purpose of such a commentary.

As socio-rhetorical interpretation is characterized by its attention to the various textures of the text, the challenge is whether it is feasible to write a commentary on a book as a whole discussing all of these dimensions of a text in detail. In his commentary on Hebrews, deSilva (2000a:xiv) chooses for a more reader-friendly format by integrating all the insights gathered from the different perspectives into a single discourse.

In order to deal with those dimensions of socio-rhetorical interpretation which ought to function in a socio-rhetorical commentary, we shall take our point of departure from the text situated within a specific context, mediated to the reader within a specific context and interpretive situation and community. In this manner the relevant textures will receive attention where applicable. To decide where to begin is obviously a very important decision as an interpretive project usually begins with the proper formulation of the questions one wishes to ask of the text (Schneiders 1991:152). Although a feminist rereading (Wainwright 1998) of the text is not proposed here, it has to be accepted that such a reading (for example) is legitimate, as long as its own location is also acknowledged. This obviously holds true for a self-conscious and critical male reading too.

4. Reading the text

Attention to the text itself should always be the basic point of departure in the process of interpretation. Here we are dealing with the inner texture of the text. Yet the text – as read by a reader - is not as objective or neutral as is often assumed. We should realise that people in different sociological environments make use of different linguistic forms, and this has implications for the interpretation of texts. As is the case today, different people in the time of the New Testament experience the same language differently. A text should be considered sociolinguistically as we ought to "recognize that the language in the text can legitimately have different meanings for persons from distinct sociological and linguistic backgrounds" (Blount 1995:6). This underlines what is also claimed in socio-rhetorical interpretation that even the most technical sections of the inner texture are already unconsciously influenced by the intertexture, social and cultural texture and ideological texture (Robbins 1996a:102).

The genre of the text is also an aspect of textuality that seems to be stable and objective. Even so, Ricoeur stresses the deep interconnection between following and understanding a story (Ricoeur 1980). Readers of a narrative or viewers of a film are constantly involved in making sense of the story as a whole by ordering particular plot elements. Reading or looking for the plot is a skill that we can develop and practice with generic texts as well as with non-generic texts (Knight 1994:2).

One has to take into account the possibility of the reader having knowledge of a genre leading her to make and test certain hypotheses about how the course of events in the

narrative may develop. The fact of different constructions of genre within diverse audiences can lead to different constructions of meaning by the audiences (Wainwright 1998:22). In this manner the reception of Jesus in 1st century is not a single and unitary event but plural and shattered where genre choices would also have determined the rhetorical effects of the genealogy of Matthew on the reader (Wainwright 1998:57). Furthermore, if Matthew is read as an encomiastic biography, the genealogy and the story of Jesus' birth furnish important data to affirm the ascribed honour of Jesus (deSilva 1999a:39f).

Another dimension of the narrative and inner texture that can be influenced by the reader and the context is the aspect of characterization. Here previous knowledge particularly about Jesus and his context is also brought to the text and invariably plays a role in the process of constructing the character of Jesus (Wainwright 1998:25f).

In discussing the inner texture of the text, another aspect to take into account, is the argumentative nature of the text, or in Robbins's terminology, the argumentative texture of the text (Robbins 1996b:21ff). As far as this aspect is concerned, Robbins has been continuing to flesh out what the challenges are of the multiple ways in which argumentation occurs in the writings of the New Testament. He acknowledges building on and modifying insights from Burton Mack, Mikhail Bakhtin, sociolinguistic theory, cultural anthropology, Clifford Geertz, Paul Ricoeur, Walter Brueggemann and Karen Jo Torjesen[8]. It is also clear that although one takes as point of departure the argumentative texture in the inner texture, all the other textures will continually "intrude" and play a role as one is giving careful attention to the different discourses of the text. This aspect will also be an important dimension of and a great challenge to a socio-rhetorical commentary and much work is still to be done in this respect. The important thing to realize is that we have to understand not only the literary but also the rhetorical process at work in 1st century Christianity.

The importance of this continuing research is that it underlines the nature of early Christian discourse as consisting of different kinds of rhetoricity or different rhetorolects, to use a term originating from Benjamin H Hary. Six major rhetorolects appear in early Christian discourse: wisdom, miracle, apocalyptic, opposition, death-resurrection, and cosmic discourse. (Robbins 1996d:356). The assumption is that early Christians may have been primarily at home in certain of these rhetorolects or discourses, or they may have been able to integrate various discourses in their own discourse. There is further a definite interaction and interweaving taking place between different discourses and in this manner new discourses emerge. An illuminating insight is that in the broader context of culture as system, the different discourses contain reasoning that presupposes certain major and minor premises supported by rationales, clarified by contraries and further elaborated by analogies and examples. In the light of our reference to genre above, it has also to be kept in mind that these discourses can contain multiple speech genres (Robbins 1996d:356).

In giving careful attention to the inner texture of the text in a socio-rhetorical commentary, the value of focusing also on the various discourses must be underlined. It must be clear, however, that dealing with different discourses will inevitably lead to attention to the other textures, such as intertexture, social and cultural texture and ideological texture.

Robbins has recently redefined the six major rhetorical modes of discourse in New Testament literature as *wisdom, miracle, prophetic, suffering-death, apocalyptic*, and *pre-creation discourse* (Robbins 2002:3). The mapping out of a discourse is done by the identification of rhetorical topics in the text, then analysing the rationales, conditional and adversative clauses of the rhetorical topics, enabling one to do an enthymemic analysis of

8. Robbins, 1996d:355; Robbins, 2002:1-3.

the argumentative texture. The reason for this is that the early Christians interwove different *topoi* from Biblical, Jewish or Mediterranean backgrounds into enthymematic and amplificatory-descriptive discourse that was able to function persuasively as discourse. Linking on to insights by Wilhelm H Wuellner (1978), attention to the role of *topoi* is becoming more and more important in analysing persuasive argumentation because *topoi* reside at the base of enthymemes, since *topoi* function persuasively in descriptive and explanatory discourse on the basis of pattern recognition.

The challenge is now to identify the different types of discourses present in a particular text in the light of the typical features of a specific mode of discourse and the major forms of argumentation occurring in that discourse. *Wisdom discourse* normally deals with the relation of the created world to God, of humans to God and of humans to one another. In this discourse the primary rule generating enthymemes is that God is Father and Mother, He is beneficent and just (Robbins 2002). In the case of *miracle discourse*, primary topics are human illness, and personal crises. Here the major Rule would be that al things are possible with God. *Prophetic discourse* focus on people called by God to be instrumental in the establishing of righteousness, combining the emphasis of wisdom discourse on the relationship of humans to God and to one another with the power of the word of God of miracle discourse. Here a major rule is that God has chosen people to be responsible for righteousness, and that He will bless them if they fulfil their calling (Robbins 2002:16). Good examples are the beatitudes in Mt 5 and the woes in Mt 23. *Suffering-death discourse* is related to wisdom, prophetic and miracle discourse. This mode of discourse often makes use of direct quotations from Scripture to support the argument. Carey underlines that *apocalyptic discourse* should not be limited to formal apocalypses, apocalyptic eschatology or apocalyptic movements[9]. It can be found in different books of the New Testament. This discourse reconfigures all time and all space in terms of good and evil, holy and profane. Detailed information is given concerning beings, places and events. The whole story of the Bible, past, present and future, becomes Scripture. The final mode is *pre-creation discourse*[10]. The significant aspect here is that in contrast to apocalyptic discourse, pre-creation discourse focuses particularly on what God is doing "through Christ". But the emphasis is here on the attributes of Christ and the redemptive effect of his activity prior to creation and in the present. Whereas in the *rules* reference is made to actions of God, the *cases* focus on the attributes and actions of Christ, *resulting* in what God has done for humans through Christ.

In writing a socio-rhetorical commentary the challenge will now be to discern the multiple modes of argumentation at work in a specific text. Departing from the argumentative dimension of inner texture, such an analysis will inevitably involve the intertexture and social and cultural texture and other textures in the argumentation too. In the case of the Gospel of Mark, Norman Perrin asserted that this realistic narrative should be seen as apocalyptic discourse (Perrin 1974:144). In contrast Richard Horsley has proposed that wisdom discourse actually drives the Gospel of Mark (Horsley 1993:242). This implies that Mark's enthymematic reasoning would turn the readers away from "apocalyptic signs" and encourage them to do justice. In his commentary Robert Gundry takes the position that Mark is not about apocalyptic codes or a messianic secret, but is "a straightforward apology of the Cross, for the shameful way in which the object of Christian faith and subject of Christian proclamation died, and hence for Jesus as the Crucified One" (Gundry 1993:1). According to Robbins this means that Mark basically presents suffering-

9. Bloomquist, 1999b; Carey, 1999a:10.
10. This was previously termed "cosmic" discourse in Robbins, 1996d:360f.

death enthymematic argumentation and that we encounter in Mark the atonement mode of suffering-death discourse. His own thesis is that there is not only one major kind of discourse in Mark, but that Markan discourse has prophetic discourse as basis, but interwoven into it apocalyptic, miracle, wisdom and suffering-death discourse (Robbins 2001b:33f).

The challenge will now be not only to identify the different modes of reasoning operative in a text, but also to establish relationships between different writings of the New Testament on the basis of the presence of similar discourses in them.

5. The context of reading

Traditionally commentaries give adequate attention to the historical background and the context of the text concerned. The contribution of a socio-rhetorical commentary will consist of the broadening of the scope, and the refining and integrating of the dimensions of the text and context. Although nothing new, it should be constitutive of a socio-rhetorical commentary to take the context not only of the ancient reader, but also of the modern reader into consideration[11]. This is easier said than done, as there is little control over the readers of a commentary. Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind. It is in this respect that the social and cultural textures of the text are relevant.

The writers of New Testament texts aimed at forming communities based on values and ideology that differed from the social and cultural values of their society. How did they do it? One of the strategies that can help us in understanding this process is the role played by honour and shame discourse in for example Matthew and how this can open up the meaning of the text for the 1st century readers. In an honour culture a person is brought up to seek the approval of the important members of the community and to avoid falling into disgrace. Honour is like an umbrella extending over all the behaviours and attitudes that preserve the culture. Individuals will furthermore see adhering to the values of the group as self-fulfilling. This becomes more complex in a world where there are competing or at least alternative cultures which then may lead to the author having to reinterpret those other values and to show how they are opposed to the divine order and to reaffirm one's own values (deSilva 1999a:4).

David deSilva shows how honour discourses function rhetorically in the context of persuasion with reference to appeals to *logos* by demonstrating that a course is honourable if it embodies one of 4 cardinal virtues (1999a:16). The vocabulary of honour can also function persuasively by appealing to *ethos* – by being positive with a view to the speaker, and negative to the opponents (deSilva 1999a:20). The appeal to *pathos* can also be used to arouse emotions like anger or fear in the audience. There should also be an awareness of the definitions of what is seen to be honourable and the "court of reputation", the group sharing these definitions. This implies being sensitive to the language that establishes the court of reputation and the honour of the members of the group, as well as language censuring outsiders (deSilva 1999a:27). Being sensitive to this line of inquiry can open up new insights into the rhetorical strategy of the text.

As far as the setting of the audience of Matthew's Gospel for example is concerned, views seem to have reached an impasse. Due to the refinement and integration of approaches taking place in socio-rhetorical interpretation, this approach may be able to make a contribution as far as the world behind and around the text is concerned. Factors like the intertextual witness, symbol fields, social and cultural textures and the assumptions behind argumentative discourses, can help us to see "who stands to gain what" in this text.

11. More attention will be given to this below in section 5.

Bauckham and others recently challenged the idea of identifying the audience for whom the gospel was written with the local community of the evangelist[12]. Yet it seems as if interpreters highlighting the Jewish-Christian character of the Matthean community, can adduce the evidence of the honour discourse to under gird their views. After investigating the rhetorical and social effect of the honour discourse upon the audience of Matthew's gospel, deSilva concludes that the fact that Matthew preserves so much material challenging the Pharisees' ability to recognize what God really expect from them, suggests a tension between the church and the local Jewish communities. "Matthew promotes among the churches that read his work (however broad that audience becomes) a subcultural relationship to emerging Pharisaic/Rabbinic Judaism, claiming to fulfill a commonly held set of values (Torah) better than the Jewish ethnic subculture" (deSilva 1999a:65).

Wainwright, however, is of the opinion that the Matthean community does not consist of one coherent group, but that it has some variety in its house churches with some dissenting voices in the Matthean group itself. "The cultural voices and languages within the Matthean narrative are heteroglossal rather than monoglossal, and it can be assumed that this heteroglossia was evoked within the complex Matthean 'reading community'" (Wainwright 1998:42). One can suspect that different members of the audience received the story of Jesus differently. "It will become clear that in the early stages of inception and reception of the Matthean gospel the Jesus character of this story was interpreted in a variety of ways" (1998:40). In this heteroglossal context the way the stories were told and received in an oral context often reflect their own socio-cultural situation. Socio-rhetorical interpretation as an interactionist approach therefore ought to make the commentator sensitive to the dialogic character of interpretation and to the diversity of contexts in which the Gospel was received.

In listening to the dissenting voices we are dealing with the ideological texture of the text. The issue of the hidden and even repressed ideologies in texts, language and interpretation, which was lacking in traditional Biblical hermeneutics, was forcefully underlined by Wuellner already in 1988[13]. He furthermore extended rhetorical criticism beyond ideology into a politics of interpretation (Wuellner 1987:463). Most recently Robbins has been contending that besides the issue of the politics of interpretation, we should develop a transcultural rhetorical criticism that addresses ethnocentrism as a major topic (2001c:12). Transcultural rhetorical criticism involves a moving across boundaries and is relevant in early Christian discourse, as well as in the rhetoric of the modern interpreter as according to Mailloux our judgments are always ethnocentrically located within the culture where we are (1997:387f). The issue of the ideological analysis of texts is now an integrating part of socio-rhetorical interpretation and will have to be a characteristic feature of such a commentary. The question remains what the *modern reader* will hear in text. We shall return to this again.

Another dimension deserving attention will obviously be the theology of the text. Robbins proposes doing this but in a less direct manner than customarily by discussing theology in the context of social, cultural and ideological phenomena. "In other words, we should not stack the deck theologically at the beginning, like I think we so often have. This is the reason for bringing theological categories in through the agency of the sacred texture in writings" (Watson & Robbins 1998:111). This is a deliberate effort to put theological issues on the table in more general categories of history of religions and not explicitly in terms of Christian theology. Each commentator will have to take her/his own position in

12. Bauckham, 1998b:21,31,46.
13. Wuellner, 1988:283. See also Elliott, 1990; Gager, 1975.

this respect in the light of the purpose and audience of the commentary. To me it seems advantageous to situate the discussion of the theological texture of Matthew within the broader context of the total social and cultural environment that has to be taken into account.

6. The creative power of the reader

In concentrating on the text as such, we have already seen that the other textures inevitably keep encroaching on the text. This does not invalidate the importance of concentrated attention to the textuality of the text. But adequate attention should be given to the role of the reader (Lategan 1992) in constructing the text, and being constructed by the text. In the writing of a socio-rhetorical commentary this will obviously be of great relevance. There are multiple factors in the text and in the context of 1st and 21st century readers influencing the manner in which the readings of these readers are influenced. Reference was made already in section 2 to the different types of readers that a narrative commentary can presuppose.

In this respect the emphasis of Bakhtin (1981) on the dialogic dimension of all communication is relevant. According to him dialogue is not merely descriptive of two people interacting with one another in a communicative manner, but "it is the linguistic precondition for all communication whatsoever, and its interactive awareness of the utterances of others, before and after" (Reed 1993:13). He observes that all speech can be seen as a social possession, and that one could state that most of a person's speech derives from other people. One could even speak of the many voices in our speech, the phenomenon of heteroglossia. This entails that much of our speech is formed by the interaction with the speech of others, representing and transforming it. This means that intertextuality will also be one of the important aspects influencing the creative role of the reader. "The role of the reader, selecting and ordering the many codes and conventions offered by the text, is significant in building the narrative and constructing the character of Jesus" (Wainwright 1998:29). One should realise that different readers from different historically situated positions will definitely actualise different readings. It is, however, important to be aware of these dynamic possibilities and the factors determining the intentional and involuntary choices of readers in this respect (cf Weren 1993:28). We have to acknowledge, however, that in the past gender has not been taken into account in this respect (Wainwright 1998:37). This also reminds us of the possibility of counter-discourse in the text which marginalized readers pick up much more readily.

To take Matthew again as example - it is probable that the beginning of Matthew suggests a rereading of Jewish scriptures. One could even say that a Jewish reader is constructed by the opening verse of the Gospel of Matthew. What would the effect of the genealogy in Matthew be on its readers? It is a rereading of an old story, creating a new story about God's participation in the lives of people. "The opening of the gospel story shapes community identity among its readers and constructs new kinships, a new household that gives identity" (Wainwright 1998:55). But Wainwright points out that the new beginning hinted at in "the book of the origin" involving male and female, may function to subvert the maleness of the metaphors and titles ascribed to Jesus. Yet the breaks in the genealogy cry out for the mothers and daughters in Israel. It can be said that the reception of the birth narrative in the 1st century would not have been single and unitary but plural and shattered. Genre choices would have determined the rhetorical effects of the genealogy on the first readers of Matthew (Wainwright 1998:56f).

Wainwright further sees in the reception of Mt 11:1-19 by the first-century readers an intertextual weaving of prophetic and wisdom traditions imputing meaning to the text. She concludes her discussion of Mt 11 by saying:

This chapter … offers the contemporary feminist interpreter a prototype for interpreting Jesus. The narrative tension between identity and works, between concealment and revelation, acceptance and rejection, closed categories of comparison and open-ended processes of understanding provide the reader with those fissures in the text that invite creative ongoing interpretation rather than closed cohesive meaning that is established once and for all. The contemporary feminist reader is invited into the reading process, bringing rich layers of intertextuality from present reading sites as well as the history of reception of this narrative critically evaluated (Wainwright 1998:83).

Giving attention to the role of intertextuality and other factors in the process of constructing the meaning of a text by a reader, reminds us of the broadening of the concept of intertextuality in socio-rhetorical interpretation. It is not only the relationship to other texts in the form of oral-scribal intertexture, cultural intertexture, social intertexture and historical intertexture that is important, but also the awareness of the influence of the social and cultural texture, the ideological texture and the sacred texture which will eventually influence the reader of the 1st and 21st century.

One should also be aware of the fact that the honour and shame discourse discussed above may still be relevant in our day, even though most of us may be living in very individualistic societies. Nevertheless, acceptance by and honour in the guild remains relevant even in the writing of a commentary. But our readers live mostly in an honour culture of perhaps another kind where success may be measured socio-economically, or with reference to physical strength, or even sexual conquest (deSilva 1999a:208). In this respect Brett Miller (1999) makes an interesting distinction between Christian apologia and what has been known in Christian scholarship as apologetics[14]. *Apologia* is seen as rhetorical discourse that addresses specific cases and specific audiences, while *apologetics* defines dialectical discourse addressing general questions and universal audiences. He makes use of the theory of image restoration (Blaney & Benoit 1997) to deal with the self-defence of Paul and Jesus in John. Whereas Paul employs the strategies of bolstering, transcendence and attacking his accusers (Miller 1999:69), Martin Luther's defence consisted only of the strategies of denial and transcendence, but not attacking his accusers (Miller 1999:128f). Giving attention to honour discourse may be relevant and illuminating for the author of a socio-rhetorical commentary and worthwhile taking into account, also with a view to the intended audience.

There should also be clarity whether the readers are envisaged to be a popular or a specialist audience and what the goals are in writing the commentary for this audience.

7. Ideology of the interpreter

What has been discussed above has implications for the ideological texture of texts. Ideology has to do with the relations between people, and especially its systems of beliefs and values reflecting the need of people to understand and even to control one's place in the world[15]. Ideology also has to do with power relations and how that power affects the text. To analyse the ideological texture of a text one has to give attention to the social and cultural location of the implied author, the ideology of power in the text as well as the well as the ideology of the mode of discourse in a text.

14. He is building on a distinction by Sullivan, 1998.
15. Eagleton, 1991:223. See also Carroll R, 2000; Elliott, 1990:268; Robbins, 1996b:96.

One also has to be aware of the ideology of groups and interpretive traditions. In this respect the ideological implications of different modes of intellectual discourse is also important (Robbins 1996b:100-10). What we have been discussing above concerning the context of reading as well as the creative power of the reader illustrates the impact of interpretive traditions.

Finally, one has to be honest and own up to one's own social, cultural and ideological position and its possible impact on one's interpretation (Patte 1995). Gowler notes that "many New Testament scholars are unwilling - for theological reasons or because of their unfamiliarity with the material – to admit that the Gospels contain appreciable amounts of Greco-Roman social and rhetorical patterns" (Robbins 1994a:33 n.98). Here a tendency to *apologia* referred to above (point 6) may be relevant.

8. Presentation of a socio-rhetorical commentary

It is important to give a clear indication of the scope and characteristics of a socio-rhetorical commentary. This is even more necessary in light of a number of commentaries now already available claiming in some way or other to be socio-rhetorical[16]. Although one has great appreciation for the careful and important rhetorical analyses and wealth of material used for social description and social history by Witherington in his publications, one cannot really define them as socio-rhetorical, in the sense used by Robbins and deSilva.

Such a commentary must be seen to have a different approach from traditional historical critical commentaries, but also from commentaries written from a literary critical or narrative point of view. It is a challenge to use the important insights of other approaches and to incorporate it in an interactionist approach where the emphasis is not on the text as a source for data, but as a means of communication and persuasion. Being an interdisciplinary approach, a socio-rhetorical commentary will incorporate much that is being done in historical, literary and social approaches but it should succeed in making clear what the rhetorical strategy of the writing is, while incorporating the relevant aspects of the different textures into the exposition. In the process the temptation to make the commentary an encyclopaedia of proposals should be resisted, as the commentator should have his own rhetorical goals with a view to his audience clear in mind. In this respect the goal of integration as opposed to the fragmentation that so often occur, should be a priority.

As has been happening already in different modes of commentary, the unit of analysis should not be individual verses, but larger units of the text. This should be done in the light of the social, cultural and ideological types of discourse in the text, and not just in line with traditional literary analyses. An important aid for the reader will then be to devise titles for sections reflecting in an adequate manner the socio-rhetorical modes of discourse. When one remembers that communication can be seen to be problem-solving, aiming at accomplishing something in the audience, not only the text, but also the commentator has to consider the best way to accomplish this (cf Leech 1983:x).

A question will be whether it is necessary and feasible to work through all the different textures one after the other in the commentary itself. This will clearly not be possible and also not necessary. The challenge will be to articulate the aspects that are relevant to the argumentation and rhetorical thrust of the section. In this respect the recent commentary of David deSilva has succeed in dealing in an unobtrusive manner with what was necessary with a view to the way in which he wanted to get the argument across to his audience.

The commentator should therefore be clear about her/his socio-rhetorical goal with this enterprise. On the one hand it will probably be to witness to the revelation of God, while on

16. Witherington, 1995a; Witherington, 1998a; deSilva, 2000a; Witherington, 2001.

the hand it will aim at moving the audience to a deepening life of faith and to accomplish certain things in the life of the audience in a manner relevant to their context (cf Jones 1995:187f). As was the case for example with Calvin, the audience envisaged could also consist of various constituencies.

Robbins has put forward as the major challenge for a socio-rhetorical commentary the task to identify the multiple modes of hermeneutical rhetoric that functioned within early Christian discourse (Robbins 1998c:9) and to use this in socio-rhetorical commentary. In the case of a commentary on Matthew, one has to analyse the manner in which the early Christian discourses (wisdom, miracle, prophetic, apocalyptic, suffering-death and pre-creation) function and interact with one another. It will also be important to see whether shifts in argumentation do occur in the course of the unfolding of the story (and to put that in relief when compared with the other gospels). While the text of the New Testament regularly articulate representational features, socio-rhetorical interpretation highlights the operational mode of transmission and interaction.

The *challenge* for socio-rhetorical commentary is to exhibit and perpetuate the hermeneutical rhetoric at work in the transformation of the earlier operational processes into the later representational processes (Robbins 1998c:15).

This can be done by beginning with the socio-rhetorical features in operational discourse and analysing it with the help of questions, if-then statements, if-when statements, rationales, negatives, commands, aspects of intertexture and narrative texture. It has to continue then from the operational to the representational process. In this manner socio-rhetorical commentary can illumine interpretation as a source of invention and show the way to renewing traditions without destroying their identity (Robbins 1998c:9,15f).

If a socio-rhetorical commentary is able to meet these challenges, it may also be able to contribute in a meaningful manner towards the preacher making use of the commentary, without in an artificial manner trying to tag something on as "application" after the "exposition". The preacher also has to be responsible to the context of his audience by speaking their language and remaining within the confines of the specific cultural or subcultural group of her audience (Blount 1995:71).

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