Dr. Dave Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Lecture 14
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Structuralism and Rhetorical Criticism

The main topic we’ve been discussing in relationship to hermeneutics and biblical interpretation has been text-centered approaches. We looked at how hermeneutics, hermeneutical theory, and methods of interpretation move from more historically oriented approaches that focused on the history behind the text, the author’s intention, the sources and forms that gave rise to the text and the author utilized in the text, and focused on author’s intention as the main determinant of meaning in author centered approaches. Given some of the questions raised by such an approach, historically and logically, the focus shifted to literary approaches or text centered approaches. We looked a little bit at literary criticism, formalism, and also looked at narrative criticism specifically; what that is, what that does, and how that might be useful in interpreting biblical texts?

I want to continue looking briefly at two more text centered approaches to interpretation. Ones that do not, at least one of them does not ask questions of, or focus on, the author, but finds meaning solely in the text. Another one does often take into account the author, the historical readers and background, but still focuses on the text not sources and forms behind the text, but focuses on the text, its workings, its persuasive techniques, and things like that. It is known as rhetorical criticism. So we’ll talk about these two final text centered approaches, structuralism and I’ve included rhetorical criticism as a text centered approach and ask: what they are, what they do, and how they might be helpful, or not, for biblical interpretation, and interpreting the text of the Old and New Testament?

Introduction to Structuralism

The first text-centered approach that I want to look at is known as structuralism. I don’t want to spend a lot of time discussing it for reasons that we’ll see, but structuralism seems, generally, to have run its course. Actually, it’s been replaced by a movement known as post-structuralism that we’ll talk about in the next session, and it’s given way to other methods. Structuralism in some respects is difficult to define, especially when
you start reading about it. It appears to be more of a philosophy or an approach to a text than a specific method or a collection of methods or principles. Structuralism, again, was a movement, or an approach, that ranged far beyond biblical texts and even written texts. It was utilized in the humanities, psychology, sociology, et cetera. But it did have its day in biblical studies. It developed quite early, beginning in some movements back in the 1920’s, but again also eventually made its way into biblical studies.

According to structuralism, what it is, the most profound and important part of a communication, and for our purposes the communication is the text, and more specifically the text of the Old and New Testament, the most important and profound part of communication is not at the surface level of a text. So when one reads a text, the most important part of it, and the most significant part of meaning and understanding, is not in the surface structure of the text, not what lies on the surface of the page, but instead meaning is found in the deep structure that underlies the text. So those two terms, the surface structure and the deep structure, are often important for structuralism. Simply what that means is the surface structure again would be what I find on the surface of the text, the words, the grammatical constructions, what we would often call the outline of the text, and how the text is structured and put together. The deep structure would be the deep underlying structure that actually gives rise to what’s on the surface.

What structuralism does then is tries to penetrate below or behind the surface structure, what one finds in the text, to recover the deep structures the deeper meanings that have given rise to that. It is a deep structure that even the author was probably not aware of. So structuralism again has moved away from author’s intentions. The primary goal of interpretation is not to uncover the author’s intended meaning, because it is the deep structures that have created the surface structure. It is the deep structures that have determined what the author has written, and may not be available, or may not be known, at all by the author. These deep structures of meaning are inherent in human thinking itself, and in the human mind, and so generate the surface structures, what again we often associate with the wording, the grammar, how the text is put together and arranged, and its outline. So the goal is to map the deep structures that lie behind the surface structure
of the text and what structuralism does, it often works with oppositions, for example, between light and darkness or good and evil, et cetera.

One example of structuralism, and then we’ll look briefly at one individual who, at least in North America and especially in biblical studies, has championed structuralism, and then briefly look at where it has gone by way of evaluation. One example of structuralism, at least some who have worked with structuralism and applied it to the biblical text, have often used, is a model called an actantial model. That is it looks at narrative particularly, in terms of the primary actives, the primary structure that seams to be the universal structure of narrative that gives rise to all the different narratives and the different surface structures. For example, this actantial model consists of six different actors within the narrative, and again we’re not talking, although it doesn’t always work out this way I don’t think, but at least for those that would advocate this model, they’re not so much talking about what one sees on the surface and the order of the narrative, but the underlying structure.

This actantial model consisted of six parts, or six actants within the narrative. Number one, there was a sender; the first element was that there was a sender in the narrative who functions to communicate an object to a receiver. So you have the sender who is trying to communicate an object to a receiver. When he does so, the sender communicates that object to a receiver through a subject, that subject is helped by certain helpers, which would be the fifth category, and opposed by certain opponents, which is your sixth and final category. So you have those six actants in what is known as an actantial model. We have a sender trying to communicate an object to a receiver, and he does so through a subject, who is aided by helpers, and who is opposed by opponents. And, the goal then is to look at narrative and how it follows the structure, and to see this underlying structure behind the stories and narratives. For example, and this has been applied to Old Testament texts, and New Testament texts as well, it’s been applied to the parables, and we’ll see an example of that later, smaller narrative units like the parables, smaller stories, but also entire narratives.
One intriguing example, at least in my field of interest, the book of Revelation, is that Revelation has often been subject to this actantial model. They try to look at the primary actants, the primary structure behind the narrative. For example, the sender of Revelation, according to one analysis, the sender of Revelation is God himself, the object that he’s trying to communicate is salvation or judgment, the receivers of that object, the recipients or the receivers, would be the seven churches that are addressed, or the entire world, the subject through which the sender tries to communicate this object, that is salvation or judgment. The subject is Jesus Christ, who is helped by angelic beings in the text, and who are opposed by a number of opponents, especially Satan in chapter twelve. Sometimes, that model of those six actants is applied to individual chapters, and other times the entire book of Revelation is analyzed according to that model. My intention is not necessarily to evaluate that, although it could help to expose who the primary characters are, and what role they play in narratives, but just to give you an example of how biblical texts are sometimes analyzed according to structuralism, or looking at the deep structures of the text. Now as we’ll see a little bit later on, one of the difficulties with the method is that at times, those that claim to be analyzing the deep structure seem to actually be analyzing what is on the surface. But we’ll return to that.

**Daniel Patte and the Good Samaritan: A Structuralist Approach**

I want to talk very briefly about one of the primary figures behind structuralism in biblical studies, an individual named Daniel Patte. Most know him as the one who has made structuralism popular, or had made structuralism popular among North American scholars in biblical studies as well as elsewhere. Daniel Patte was influenced by a movement called French Structuralism. He produced a number of publications in book and article form, from the mid-1970’s on, where he demonstrated the value of his structural approach to biblical interpretation. He taught at Vanderbilt University in the United States for years, and again popularized among scholars structuralism as an approach to understanding the biblical texts. What Patte did is, he suggested a synchronic approach to the text, that is looking at the text as it stands, as it is, uncovering the various structures of the text, the linguistic structures, the narrative structures, as well as the
mythical structures that underlie the text itself, that underlie the structures of the text. These underlying structures, these linguistic and mythic and narrative structures under the text are complex, and not necessarily known to the author, according to Patte. But these underlying structures are what determine the meaning of the text, not the author’s intent. So again, when I’m reading the biblical texts, the goal is to be able to map and uncover the underlying structures that gave rise to what I see on the surface that may or may not have been in the author’s mind at all. So, once again, according to Patte, the author’s intention is not significant when it comes to interpreting a biblical text because you’re dealing with the structures that the author may not have been aware of.

So, for example, Patte frequently analyzed narrative structures in much of his writing, and also in his commentaries on biblical texts. He analyzed narratives according to the actants, that actantial model that we just talked about, where you have a sender who sends and communicates an object to a receiver, through a subject; the subject is helped by helpers, and opposed by opponents. So for example, he analyzed the parable of the Good Samaritan according to this model, and again my purpose in providing this is not to suggest agreement with it, but to demonstrate how one parable could be analyzed according to the structure. So in the parable of the Good Samaritan, which is a story of a traveler who is on the road to Jericho, gets jumped and attacked by thieves and robbers and is beaten. The priest and Levite come by and do nothing. Then a Samaritan comes by and helps him, and tries to restore him to his health. Patte said in that parable, the receiver of the action was that traveler, the person who is on the road. The object that the receiver is communicating is his health, the subject is the Samaritan, and the helper is the provision that is made for the traveler. The opponents would be the robbers, the ones that beat him up. So one can ask the question, what’s the implication of such an analysis? but at this point I just want to demonstrate how he used that model to understand one parable.

When it comes to Jesus and the Samaritan woman, Jesus’s interaction with the Samaritan woman in John 4, Patte analyzed according to oppositions within the text. That’s another important part often of structural analysis and Daniel Patte’s analysis seeks to uncover the deep structure in terms of the oppositions that are in the text. So, for
example, he found as in the parable of the Good Samaritan, opposition between Jesus and
the Samaritan woman, opposition between Jesus’s identity versus lack of knowledge of
who Jesus was, opposition between spiritual water and literal water. The point is the
meaning of this narrative is found in the deep structure that lies behind the text not in the
author’s intention.

Now, one thing to be said that we’ll return to in making a final statement about
this method, is that structuralism, as I have already indicated, seems to have run its
course. You don’t find very much anymore, as I see it at least, you don’t find too much
work done on biblical texts from a structuralist perspective. Maybe once in a while, but
again it’s basically given away to the approach that we’ll look at in the next section, and
that is post-structuralism.

**Evaluation of Structuralism**

Several observations about this method; first of all, we have moved beyond
structuralism then. Again you don’t hear much about it. Even Daniel Patte has move
away from structuralism into more sociological approaches, or cultural approaches to
interpreting the text. Second, one of the difficulties that some have highlighted with
structuralism is the complex nature of the vocabulary, and the technical nature of the
vocabulary used to describe it. One often has to master a highly technical vocabulary, to
understand or utilize the method.

Third, one observation I’ve already hinted at is that often the insights that
structuralism reportedly gives are more based on the surface structure of the text and not
so much on the deep structure. So there’s the question of what’s the relationship between
the two. At times, some of the insights from structuralism appear to be not much different
from insights one could gather from simply analyzing the surface structure itself. So, it’s
often not much different from literary criticism at times.

Number four, should we ignore the surface structure of the text, for an underlying
deep structure? Again, what is the purpose then of the surface structure? Should that be
ignored since that’s all we have? It’s the only evidence that we have of any type of deep
structure. Certainly the surface structure itself shouldn’t be ignored.
A fifth one is, how do we validate a structural exegesis when all we have is the
text itself? So for some, based on these reasons and others, structuralism is no longer
really a major player in hermeneutics. Again, you don’t hear a whole lot about it, you
don’t see a lot written on it, although it still has some influence and it was an important
method and played an important role historically which is why I have touched upon it.
But, I will leave it at that because it’s basically an approach that has sort of run it’s course
and given way to other hermeneutical theories and approaches to interpreting the biblical
texts.

**Introduction to Rhetorical Criticism**

So, having said that I want to move on to the last text centered approach that I will
consider, and that is rhetorical criticism. As I’ve already mentioned this is not exclusively
a text-centered approach in that it does not necessarily bracket the author or what is often
called the rhetorical situation, that is, what some of us might call the historical
background, or the occasion of the biblical text. Those items are often still of interest to
rhetorical critics. But again, since it focuses on the text as a whole, since it focuses on the
structure and the working of the text, I have placed it here. By the way, given what we’ve
just talked about, from now on when I talk about structure I’ll be referring to the surface
structure, I won’t be using it in the technical way that structuralism used it, of the
underlying deep structure. When I talk about structure, I’ll be using it to talk about how
the text is put together, the surface structure of the text. So, because rhetorical criticism
then focuses on the text as a whole, the structure of the text, I’ve placed it in the category
of text centered approaches, though again one could quibble about that.

The primary feature of rhetorical criticism seems to me to be to analyze text in
terms of text as a means of persuasion. It analyzes the text from the standpoint of its
persuasive techniques, and it’s ability to persuade an audience. The classic expressions of
at least ancient rhetoric go back to Aristotle and other ancient Greek and Roman
rhetoricians, and how they conceived of rhetoric. They have left us with many writings
that at least exposed us to the theories of rhetoric and how that was done. Many have
mined those works for the value that they have for trying to come to grips with the
persuasive aspects or the rhetorical dimensions of biblical texts as well. So, in light of rhetorical criticism then, biblical texts are analyzed rhetorically, or how they are structured and put together, in order to persuade, and how they contain persuasive argumentation. Again, rhetorical criticism has played a significant role in both Old and New Testament interpretation. We’ll see especially in the New Testament there are a couple of figures that are particularly associated with analyzing New Testament documents from almost an exclusively rhetorical approach.

**Rhetorical Criticism Methodology**

There are actually two approaches, especially in New Testament studies, to rhetorical criticism. First of all, one could simply study the rhetorical techniques of a document, focusing on things like style, figures of speech, or rhetorical argumentation, and look at rhetorical units, or again rhetorical style, or how argumentation works in the text. One common method or model applied to both the Old and the New Testament would include these steps. Number one is identifying the rhetorical unit, that is, simply identifying the unit of the text, by isolating the beginning and the end of the unit. Second is asking the question of the rhetorical function, how does this unit function in its broader context? Then third, analyzing also the rhetorical setting, that is, the situation that this unit is addressing and how it is functioning, what it is trying to do. Then finally, analyze the teaching style of that unit and things like proof and argumentation. So in that regard, rhetorical criticism has been utilized rather broadly to look at certain sections as far as the rhetorical techniques, their function, their means of argumentation, et cetera. Again you can find numerous examples of that in both the Old and the New Testament.

However, a second, especially in New Testament studies, approach to rhetorical criticism has really caught on, and that is to analyze New Testament texts, whether large sections of text, especially speeches, or more particularly to analyze epistolary literature, the letters and epistles by Paul and the other New Testament writers, according to ancient rhetorical speeches and ancient rhetorical speech patterns. Usually, ancient patterns that are discussed and outlined in some of the ancient rhetorical handbooks such as written by
Aristotle and others, and then to take those categories and take those rhetorical speech forms and patterns and analyze the New Testament documents in light of that.

Two prominent individuals that have done the most, at least among evangelical scholars especially, but even outside of Christian evangelical scholarship, first of all was an individual named George Kennedy, who did much work in classical Greco-Roman literature and was one of the first, to advocate and make popular the application of Greco-Roman rhetoric to New Testament texts and analyze texts such as the Sermon on the Mount, and other documents according to Greco-Roman rhetoric. Probably the most influential scholar to popularize among New Testament scholars, rhetorical approaches to the New Testament doctrines, where you would take, not just analyzing the figures of speech and persuasive means of text, some of the things we’ve often associated with rhetorical criticism, but taking entire rhetorical speeches from the Greco-Roman rhetorical text handbooks and applying them wholesale to biblical text is Ben Witherington. Ben Witherington has written commentaries on virtually every New Testament document. The majority of them are labeled something such as A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Romans, A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Galatians, A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Philippians, et cetera. So he’s produced, and a couple others have as well, he’s been influential in contributing to this series of social rhetorical commentaries that analyze the biblical text in light of ancient conventions of rhetoric.

According to those who analyze speeches, for example, you find the speeches in Acts Greco-Roman speech patterns, or even the speeches of Jesus such as the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospels. You find them analyzed often according to rhetorical techniques, but we said the epistles, Paul’s letters in particular, have provided a lot of fruitful material for applying rhetorical criticism. In doing so, a full blown rhetorical speech, according to first century and earlier conventions of Greco-Roman speech patterns, might contain most or all of the following. Number one, a rhetorical speech would include what is known as an *exordium*. An *exordium* simply states the cause, it’s kind of the introduction that states the cause. It states the issue and it tries to gain the empathy of the audience, and tries to get the audience sympathetic with the person trying
to argue his case. Second, is what is known as the *narratio*, which is basically a narrative of or an account of the facts, or of the background and facts of the case. Third, is what is known as the *propositio*, which is basically what is agreed upon, or the main point that is going to be argued, or the main thesis that the author will argue for. This is followed by number four, the *probatio*. The *probatio* is proofs and arguments that the author appeals to. The proofs are often of two types in the *probatio*. The *probatio* is often a longer section that includes all the arguments and the proofs for the *propositio*, or what the person is trying to argue for. There are often two types of proofs, one could often appeal to a *pathos*, or emotion, or one could appeal to *logos*, that is a kind of logical argumentation. So you’ll see in the *probatio* those two types of argumentation and proofs. Fifth is what is called the *refutatio*, and this is a section that refutes the opponent’s arguments. And then finally what is known as a *peroratio*, which simply summarizes the arguments, kind of the final appeal on the part of the speaker.

So those six parts, the exordium, narratio, propositio, probatio, refutatio, peroratio, you’ll find those discussed in most New Testament introductions to historical criticism, or most approaches within New Testament scholarship to rhetorical criticism. Again, most or all of those could be found in the New Testament documents which are often analyzed then according to these types of categories.

Another important feature of rhetorical criticism that seems to be revealed from ancient rhetorical handbooks is that there are three types of historical or rhetorical speeches. Again you can find these three discussed in virtually any treatment of rhetorical criticism of the New Testament. First of all, a rhetorical speech could be classified as judicial. That is, a judicial rhetorical speech would argue for the rightness or wrongness of a past action. As the name implies, the setting for this type of rhetorical speech was naturally the courtroom. So a judicial type of rhetorical speech would argue that a past act was either right or wrong. A second type of rhetorical speech is what is known as deliberative rhetoric. What deliberative rhetoric did is argue for, or try to persuade or dissuade, the audience from a future course of action. So judicial rhetoric focused on a past act, weather it was right or wrong, and deliberative rhetorical speeches either
persuaded or dissuaded the audience from taking part in or participating in a future course of action. So presumably a course of action that was desirable, the speaker was trying to persuade them to engage in that, or a course of action that was undesirable, the author then would dissuade them form following that course.

Then finally, the third type of rhetorical speech was known as epideictic, again you can find these names and titles in just about any treatment, that deals with the rhetorical criticism of the New Testament. Epidictic rhetoric was basically the use of praise or blame to affirm a point of view, or to affirm a set of values in the present. So, either praising or blaming, using the techniques of praise or blame, whether directed to a person or again a belief or set of values in the present. So those three types of rhetoric, again judicial rhetoric, a past act: a judgment of the rightness or wrongness of a past act, deliberative rhetoric, focusing on persuading or dissuading the audience about the correctness or incorrectness of a future course of action: and then epidictic rhetoric, affirming something in the present.

**Rhetorical Criticism and Galatians**

Now the starting point, or one of the most significant landmarks, I guess is the way to put it, for rhetorical criticism’s entry into New Testament studies was an individual named Hans Dieter Betz, who wrote an article, but wrote a commentary too, a significant commentary in a series called the Hermeneia Commentary Series. In it he argued that Galatians was an apologetic or a judicial piece of rhetoric. And so, he was one of the first in New Testament studies to analyze a New Testament letter according to the techniques of rhetorical speeches. What he did is, he took those six features of a full blown rhetorical speech, *exordium, narratio, propositio, probatio*, et cetera, and also, starting with those three types of rhetoric, he concluded that the book of Galatians functioned primarily as an apologetic or judicial piece of rhetoric, that is, convincing the readers of the rightness or wrongness of a past act.

For example, you can pick up his commentary and see a more detailed treatment of what he does, but he saw chapter one, six through eleven of Galatians as an *exordium* that sort of establishes the cause. It’s meant to gain a sympathetic hearing from the
readers, then chapter one verse twelve through chapter two verse fourteen, he labeled as the *narratio*. This is that section in Galatians halfway through chapter one into chapter two you find Paul discussing his life before Judaism and his interaction with the Jerusalem apostles, and particularly with Peter at Antioch. So Betz labeled it as the *narratio*, giving the background and the facts of the case. Chapter two verse fifteen through twenty-one, was the *propositio*. This was the main thesis, this is what was agreed upon, the main thesis that would be argued for in the rest of the book. Number four, the *probatio* Betz identified with chapter three verse one through the end of four. So chapter three and four are basically a long series of proofs or arguments that Betz saw Paul using to establish his case. Then finally he labeled chapter five through six, he labeled as paraenesis, that is, exhortational material, which really doesn’t fit with that sort of a rhetorical speech pattern, but he saw the last two chapters as paraenesis or exhortational, commanding type of material.

Now many actually reacted to Betz, and suggested that Galatians isn’t really an apologetic. If you look at the last two chapters Paul is certainly persuading his readers to obey, to obedience, and when you read Galatians he’s trying to dissuade them from taking the course of action that the Judaizers are perpetrating, and persuading them to live out life in the Spirit. So, for that reason, most, more recently, those who have analyzed Galatians from a rhetorical perspective have analyzed it as a piece of deliberative rhetoric. Some have combined it to suggest that it has features of both apologetic and deliberative rhetoric. For example, Ben Witherington, in his commentary on Galatians, argues that Galatians is a piece of deliberative rhetoric, and he also analyzes it according to those same categories of *exordium* and *narratio*. Though it’s interesting when you compare Betz and Witherington, and even others who have analyzed Galatians sometimes they differ significantly as to where they divide the text, or what sections belong to the *propositio* or what sections belong to this or that.

But the point is Galatians provided a kind of fruitful field for the application of rhetorical approaches to the New Testament epistles. But other New Testament letters, as I’ve already said, have also been subject to rhetorical criticism. For example, and many
of these Ben Witherington has contributed commentaries on, but others have as well. The book of Romans, and the book of Ephesians have been analyzed according to Greco-Roman rhetoric. The book of Philippians has, by a number of scholars, the book of Jude, and others, have been subject to rhetorical analysis, probably with various degrees of success.

**Evaluation of Rhetorical Criticism**

So what should we say about rhetorical criticism then, by way of evaluation? First of all, when it comes to rhetorical criticism, the value is, rhetorical criticism does two things. Number one, it can shed light on the function of different sections of a speech, or a letter, or a prophetic text for example. When certain texts or certain sections of text function similarly to sections of a rhetorical speech, this full-blown rhetorical type of analysis of biblical text can shed light on the function of various sections when there seems to be an analogy and there seems to be a fit in the way that they work.

However, a second one is that rhetorical criticism also focuses our attention more on argumentation and persuasion. It’s a reminder that Galatians is not primarily a theological document or a theological tractate. It’s not primarily Paul’s intention to communicate theological data or theological truth, though it does that. It is a profound theological document, but it’s theology in the service of persuading the readers to adopt a certain course of action. So rhetorical criticism can help us see the documents according to their true intention as persuading reader to adopt a certain point of view, and persuading the readers to pursue a certain course of action, rather than simply seeing them as containers for theological truth, or support for a theological system. Again, although they are deeply theological, they are theology in the service of Paul’s pastoral intent to persuade the reader. So it kind of captures the pastoral intent and function of New Testament letters.

A third value, obviously, is rhetorical criticism’s focus on the whole text, and focusing on the text as a whole, rather than partitioning it up into different sources and forms. Rhetorical criticism helps us focus on the entire text, how it functions and how it works.
In my opinion, there are still a number of limitations to a rhetorical approach. First of all, one of the dangers is forcing a construct on the text, whether it is more modern rhetorical approaches, or even taking the ancient rhetorical speeches, and forcing it on a literary text. We’ll return to that one again. But for example, my impression often is reading through Ben Witherington’s commentaries and other rhetorical approaches, of all the value of that approach, and some of the helpful insight, sometimes what you’ll find is, when it comes to trying to deal with a problematic text or verse, they’ll often survey a number of interpretations but then opt for an interpretation that I think has less support but would seem to fit the type, whether this is an exordium, a probatio, or a propositio, based on what we know about those categories. They’ll often choose an interpretation that best fits. So Witherington will say something like, “Paul deals with this issue because this was a common issue to deal with in deliberative rhetoric,” or something like that, whereas there might be a more suitable explanation for why Paul would have dealt with this issue. Or, “This text means this because this is what it would have been in rhetorical speech or epidictic speech,” whereas there might be a more suitable explanation and interpretation of that text. So it assumes a rhetorical speech form, and then it often interprets the data in light of that, sometimes in ways, at least some examples I’ve seen could be explained more clearly and in a better way by different means.

Second, sort of related to that, is rhetorical criticism, and again I’m talking mainly about the second method, that is applying entire rhetorical speech patterns to large sections of biblical text, whether it’s a speech, or again entire epistle for example. To me, rhetorical speech patterns seem to ignore the clear formal indications in the text itself of the literary genre. That is, in my opinion, the interpretation of a text, and identification of the text, must start with the formal criteria of the text itself. One of the difficulties with rhetorical criticism is that there are no formal controls or formal indicators as far as, where’s the exordium, and how do I know this is deliberative? How do I know this is epidictic? Where are the formal indicators that show, here’s the exordium, now I’ve moved on to the probatio, or the peroratio, or the narratio? Most of the judgments simply, I think, come out of possible analogies and similar functions between the
sections. But there seems to be a lack of clear, in my opinion, formal indicators that would demonstrate that you have an *exordium*, and then a *narratio*, and a *propositio*, and a *probatio*, et cetera. Instead, as I read New Testament letters particularly, and even the book of Galatians, the main formal indicators are grammatical and the different formula that one finds in the letter. The only indicators are that Paul is writing something that resembles a first century letter, or a first century epistle.

Again, I don’t think I want to go as far and say Paul was not influenced by Greco-Roman rhetorical speech patterns. I don’t want to say he was unaware of that, although that is a debate that impinges on this; to what extent was Paul’s upbringing and education, to what extent would that have included instruction and practice in Greco-Roman rhetoric? That’s an ongoing debate and influences this. But still, when one looks at the New Testament letters it appears that the only formal clues that one finds is that Paul is writing a first century letter. That includes the typical epistolary opening, we’ll return to this when we get to genre criticism in a subsequent session. But when one looks at Galatians, for example, what one finds are typical epistolary conventions. This is true throughout all Paul’s letters, so a typical of opening for an epistle is: “Paul, apostle of Jesus Christ, to someone, greetings.” Then it usually moves on to a thanksgiving, though that is lacking in Galatians. And again, sometimes those who analyze it from the standpoint of rhetorical criticism say that is because this is a deliberative speech, because of rhetorical conventions, the thanksgiving is missing. There are probably other reasons why the thanksgiving is missing here. But again, other than that you find a very typical formula of a first century epistle.

For example, when you read, let me just read a section of chapter four of Galatians. The reason I’m going to do this is, this is an example of where those who analyze the text according to rhetorical techniques often run rough-shot over it and ignore the clear formal indicators. For example, chapter four of Galatians is usually seen to just be part of Paul’s *probatio*, that is, it’s his proof, his argumentation. But what is interesting is the starting of verse eight, “Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God--or rather
are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weakened miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and season and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts in you. I plead with you, brothers, become like me for I came like you. You have done me no wrong. As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you.” I’ll stop right there, but the one thing that is interesting about this section is that is not necessarily revealed in reading an English translation, is that it includes a couple of significant formulas that suggest Paul has a slight shift here and begins a new unit to a request section of the letter. So this is not a *probatio*, a series of proofs, this is now a request section. He actually piles up three or so, typical epistolary type formulas that you would’ve found in first century letters to indicate that something different is taking place. This is kind of a new section or new focus in the letter, or something like that. But my point is, to simply analyze chapter for as a *probatio*, a series of proofs in a rhetorical speech, overlooks a number of important formal features that suggest that Paul is primarily following the format of a first century letter. Again I’m convinced that the primary clues that should guide us in the reading should be formal ones, what the text indicates that it’s doing. If rhetorical criticism helps us understand that, well then good, but to force a rhetorical speech pattern on a text and ignore the clear formal features seems to me to be problematic.

Third and related to that, is the question of whether letters and rhetorical speeches could ever be mixed. Even if Paul did have an education and was aware of these rhetorical speech patterns, which he may have been, some scholars have still questioned whether rhetorical speech patterns, and epistles, or letters were ever mixed. So because of that, my conclusion is, I think we should use rhetorical criticism cautiously. More importantly, I think we should avoid the wholesale application of entire speech patterns to biblical text, particularly in New Testament letters. Rhetorical criticism, again, can be helpful in helping us see the persuasive techniques focusing on the argumentation and some of the techniques Paul may have used. Sometimes rhetorical analysis using entire speeches can help us see the function of text, and how they are working, but at the same
time I think we need to be cautious of taking entire rhetorical speeches and forcing them on biblical texts and analyzing the texts primarily in conjunction with those rhetorical speech patterns.

So, that brings us to the end of text-centered approaches to interpretation, and approaches that focus on the text as the primary locus of meaning. The text is that which determines meaning, whether literary approaches, narrative criticism, structuralism, that we said has sort of run its course, or rhetorical criticism, which without bracketing the author or historical background still focuses on the text and the text as a whole.

**Reader Centered Approaches: Introduction**

One of the difficulties was, with text-centered approaches, was that text-centered approaches still seemed not to yield any objective meaning in the text. And so, text-centered approaches soon gave way historically and logically to the third facet of the communication model, and that is readers, reader centered approaches. That is, looking at meaning in front of the text, and finding the locus of meaning in the reader soon became prominent. Today, structuralism has basically given way to what is known as post-structuralism, which includes a variety of approaches including, and focusing on reader centered approaches, and the fact that it’s readers who make sense of text.

So, in the next session we’ll shift our focus then and look at reader centered approaches, and also move on to talk a little bit about deconstructionism and a couple of other approaches that fall under methods that focus on the reader, and meaning residing in the reader, rather than the text or the author.