

Words & The Word: Explorations in Biblical Interpretation and Literary Theory. Edited by David G. Firth and Jamie A. Grant. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008, 317 pages, \$32.00 paper.

In *Words & the Word*, David Firth and Jamie Grant have brought together a diverse group of scholars to present an overview of the way various literary theories contribute to biblical interpretation.

Grant R. Osborne opens the volume. He discusses rhetorical criticism and discourse analysis noting the benefits as well as some difficulties with each. He explores exegetical analysis, making a strong case for synchronic rather than diachronic word studies. He treads carefully through the minefield of meaning and authorial intent. Acknowledging the importance of the reading community, Osborne nevertheless believes that ‘the attempt to elucidate the original meaning is a viable goal’ (30) and presents a “dialogue between *author, text* and *reader*”(31) as a way forward. He then demonstrates these theories with an examination of the Gospels. Throughout his chapter, Osborne offers a nuanced presentation of some highly debated topics.

S. D. (Fanie) Snyman’s South African perspective is especially appropriate in a book that inevitably discusses the importance of community in interpretation. He presents the academic shift from diachrony, such as historical-criticism which tends towards an “atomization” (56) of the text, towards synchrony, which views the text in its current form. Snyman offers a “structural-historical approach” (61) which values both. The translator begins by questioning the text but also allowing the text to ask questions in turn. A “text-internal” (63) study includes pericope, textual criticism and structure. “Text-external” (67) elements follow with genre, intertextuality (Snyman does not use this term) and “redactional activity” (69). Finally, the text is subjected to a detailed exegesis, and theological conclusions are drawn. Evangelical readers may want to interact with some of Snyman’s reader-response presuppositions. In addition, the chapter would have benefited from more examples.

In the third chapter, Richard S. Briggs proposes speech-act theory as a way out of the “false polarization” (76) between alternatives for the locus of meaning. He shows various ways words in the Bible accomplish things, from God’s “Let there be light” (76) in Genesis to the parables of Jesus. He offers explanations of some of the key terms in speech-act theory and shows their value in biblical interpretation. Finally, Briggs offers a “hermeneutic of self-involvement” (98) which uses speech-act theory to describe the way “readers are drawn into the transformative effects of texts as they construe textual illocutions” (106). One of the joys of this chapter is the hint of humor that Briggs weaves throughout.

Jeannine K. Brown presents “Genre Criticism and the Bible.” She starts with a history of this approach, noting the way emphasis has shifted from genres as archetypes into which authors pour content (117-118) to genres as more loosely defined guides which authors use or combine for effect. She defines genres, noting their arrangement of features which are formal and thematic, socially constructed to communicate. She points out the way genre is communicated to the reader, and the way authors use the ensuing expectations to foreground elements of the text. She also attends to the complexity and fluidity of genre. She elucidates the process of categorization in which readers inevitably engage and also the preference for certain genres which an individual or a community might hold.

In chap. 5, David G. Firth presents the concept of ambiguity. After noting the preponderance of translators for resolving ambiguities, he describes three different kinds: those

intended by the author, those an author creates unintentionally, and those brought to the text by the reader. The first is intrinsic to the text and can be examined exegetically. After wrestling briefly with the locus of meaning issue, Firth presents five helpful types of ambiguity drawn from Empson's work. An author may choose to make "details within the text effective in multiple ways" (160) before finally offering a resolution. An ambiguity might have only one possible resolution, or diverse simultaneous ones. Meanings may combine to enhance communication or they may appear contradictory and force readers to re-examine the text as well as previous assumptions. These types are explained with the help of examples, and then the theory as a whole is illustrated through the life of Saul, showing the way ambiguity is used to elucidate Saul's character.

Jamie A. Grant offers a study of poetics, beginning with the canonical approach. Here, books such as Psalms and Proverbs are assumed to have been collected purposefully. In the Psalms, for example, an examination of the first, last, and central psalms in each book shows connections and contrasts otherwise unnoticed. Themes and semantic repetition reveal interplay and organization among the poems. Grant suggests using David Howard's "lexical, thematic, structural and genre connections" (195) to allow the context to emerge. After working through examples from Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, Grant moves on to discuss Hebrew parallelism. He presents and critiques Lowth's categories (synonymous, antithetic and synthetic) and proposes instead an analysis which recognizes the interplay between both lines of a bicolon. The chapter concludes with a brief recognition of the importance of the analysis of the poem itself and the poetry present in the NT.

Peter M. Phillips begins the chapter on rhetorics by disproving any dichotomy with reason. He traces development of this discipline through Plato and Aristotle and points out the tendency to move too quickly to textual elements. He therefore adapts Kern's "hierarchy of levels" (236). Level 1 examines authorial intent, context and goal. Level 2 looks at the choice of expression as an attempt to foreground the author's worldview. Level 3 examines the effects of culture. Phillips lists possible ways of categorizing "preconceptual" (251) OT rhetoric but offers instead the category of "biblical rhetoric" (255), a form of Grassi's "sacred discourse" (254). Finally, in levels 4 and 5, specific expressions of rhetoric are discovered and analyzed. The value in Phillips' presentation is his focus on the importance of the primary levels of discussion. Along the way, he offers many examples and notes the overlaps with other methods of analysis.

The final chapter consists of Terrance R. Wardlow, Jr.'s introduction to discourse analysis. This is a broad category which analyzes a text "from various viewpoints from the level of the morpheme up through the social environment" (267). It includes many of the approaches featured in previous chapters but combines them to reach its conclusions. A thorough demonstration using the Marah incident and the Beatitudes follows. Wardlow concludes that the strengths of discourse analysis are its broad approach, its attention to all three loci of meaning, as well as the historical and the present social contexts, and its focus on current applications. Technical language and the need to learn at least the basics in such a variety of disciplines are potential drawbacks. Nevertheless, Wardlow presents this approach as one which offers "an array of tools for engaging the text and attempting to hear it speak on its own terms to us today" (311).

The introduction to *Words & the Word* suggests that these are "explorations in literary theory and biblical interpretation" (14) designed to "stimulate discussion" (15). The book thus succeeds admirably in what it set out to do. It presents a wide array of topics in an introductory yet thorough manner, engages current scholarship outside of the boundaries of evangelicalism

while showing the benefits and applicability of these resources to those within that interpretive community, and points the way towards further research for those whose interest has been piqued by the discussion.

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