

EDITORIALS

STRUCTURALISM AND BIBLICAL STUDIES

Biblical studies are exceptionally open to new methodologies and approaches developed within other disciplines. It is not surprising therefore to observe biblical scholars turning to fields such as anthropology, linguistics and comparative literature in order to learn from them regarding structuralism or structural analysis.

Structuralism has been associated with names like Claude Lévi-Strauss, Ferdinand de Saussure, Roman Jakobson, Milman Parry, Albert Lord and others whose work has been outside biblical scholarship. Their terminology and way of handling a text seems foreign at first to readers who are accustomed to the jargon of form, literary and historical criticism as well as discussions of historical influence and theological intention.

Since the structuralists within the biblical field claim they are not adopting or developing a new methodology (some even protest that they are not structuralists!), it is difficult to summarize their work or to define or describe it accurately. It is fair to say, however, that they are continuing the search for the meaning of the biblical text, the meaning that was intended by the speaker or author. They approach the task by searching for patterns or sets of motifs within a passage that may indicate a genre or even the deeper structures of the human mind. The structuralist's interest in the meaning behind the surface meaning leads him first to the general laws that make communication between speaker and audience possible, and thus control the manner of speech, and secondly to the mental structures that have been pointed out through comparative and anthropological studies. These too may dictate the arrangement of what is said and will be reflected in the written text. The transition from oral to written stages is important for the structuralist, and he is sensitive to the changes that the transition may cause.

Clearly, structuralists are building upon the work of their predecessors in many disciplines rather than starting anew. The same can be said for the biblical scholar who employs structural analysis. He depends upon the work of literary and form critics even though his interest takes him further in the direction of the psychology of the speaker who stands behind the biblical text. The stage has been set for such studies (or something like them) for some time. Led by the so-called Scandinavian School, biblical scholars are unanimous in recognizing an oral stage in the development of biblical literature. In addition, studies on the literature of the Bible have been demonstrating more and more clearly that the writings were composed

around intricate structures. Much of the recent work done on Hebrew poetry and prophecy, especially by the Albright students, has uncovered distinctive patterns which characterized poetic and prophetic expression. Studies on the Hebrew wisdom literature and on the New Testament writings have revealed the complexity of lengthy pieces which have been literally built around a detailed plan rather than simply written. My own work on historical narratives convinces me that the earliest Hebrew narratives were rigidly constructed and that much can be learned if we are open to recognizing that the biblical mind was conditioned to express itself according to certain set patterns.

The structuralists are not simply repeating what has been said by those who work at the literary level, nor are they merely retracing the steps of the form critics. Instead they are attempting to go beyond these and to shed new light upon what seems to be an emerging consensus among biblical scholars: structure plays a major role in understanding the meaning intended by the biblical author. They must be supported and deserve the serious and careful reading which is required to understand what structuralism has to say.

The structuralists are themselves aware of the difficulties encountered in their approach, but one deserves mention because of its importance for religion teachers. Biblical literature arises out of a historical faith; in the biblical faith, revelation is communicated in and through history, and it derives meaning from the history in which it is embedded. Paradoxically, this ties interpretation to all the ambiguities which accompany human history while at the same time it gives it a concreteness that is lacking in a philosophical or mythological faith. The abstractions and generalizations that characterize the latter are not tolerated by a historical religion, *a fortiori* one which is rooted in an incarnation. This must be maintained even though the historical religions have at times degenerated into such abstractions. Hence, even the structures of a narrative do not alone tell us what the speaker intended by using them. He may have meant what others who used the same structures meant, or he may have meant the opposite. The prophetic nature of the biblical faith suggests that the transfer of a concept or a form from non-biblical to biblical usage can be understood only when its function within the religious complex is fully weighed and interpreted. Without this, the religion becomes lost in the history around it.

If religion teachers are careful to observe the historical nature of the biblical tradition and its contrast with other religions, the contributions of the structuralists can be well used. They will provide another common ground for dialogue among members of religious studies departments and with peers in other disciplines.

—JAMES W. FLANAGAN