



Textual Criticism: Influence and Application

By E. Christian Kopff
University of Colorado

Presented at the LCA Conference on Monday, January 20, 2025

The concept of *Sola Scriptura* has been central for Lutheran thought since Luther's Leipzig Disputation with Johannes Eck (especially July 4–13, 1519). It was while debating Eck that Luther was driven to formulate the principle that the Bible is the only source of doctrine, but Luther's 95 *Theses on Indulgences* (October 31, 1517) began by explicating a quotation from the Bible: *Domini et magister noster Iesus Christus dicendo, "Penitentiam agite," etc. [Mt.4:17], omnem vitam fidelium penitentiam esse voluit.* "Our Lord and master Jesus Christ, when he said, 'Repent,' etc., wanted the whole life of the faithful to be repentance." The Latin idiom for "repent" is *paenitentiam agere*, literally "do penitence." When Erasmus's *editio princeps* of the New Testament was published the year before (1516), Luther saw that the Greek word was μετανοεῖτε, literally "change your mind." Jesus was not commanding his disciples to "do penance," or to do anything, but to change their attitude, to live their whole life in repentance. The Reformation began with explaining a key concept from a single word in the Greek text.

T. S. Eliot's Sweeney says, "I gotta use words when I talk to you." There is more to Christian theology than vocabulary, but texts are made up of words. Textual criticism begins with getting the words of a text right. The text of the New Testament has been controversial since Erasmus published his Greek text with Latin translation in 1516. The collapse of what we call the Byzantine Empire (Constantinople fell to the Turks in 1453) was attended by a stream of more or less educated Greeks into Europe, bringing with them hundreds of Greek manuscripts. Major works of Aristotle had been translated into Latin as early as the thirteenth century by scholars like William of Moerbeke. Thomas Aquinas used these translations for his commentaries on Aristotle and his great theological summae (*Summa Theologiae*, *Summa contra Gentiles*). Cosimo di Medici founded the Platonic Academy in Florence in the fifteenth century. Its head, Marsilio Ficino, translated the entire Platonic corpus into Latin. "The Latin Plato was completed in 1477 and printed in 1482, well before Musurus's Greek Aldine text of 1513." (Rudolf Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship 1500-1850* [Oxford, 1976] 57)

There was less pressure for a Greek text of the New Testament because European Christians already possessed a Latin translation of the entire Bible, made in the fourth century by Saint Jerome. In the sixteenth century the Spanish scholars of the University of Alcalá (Complutum) began work on a Bible with *inter alia* Hebrew,

Continued on page 9, right column

What is Narrative Criticism and How is it Being Used Today?

By Rev. Philip Hale

Zion Lutheran Church, Omaha, NE

Presented at the LCA Conference on Monday January 20, 2025

Narrative criticism, an American phenomenon, first appeared in the early 1980s among biblical scholars. On the surface it is quite simple and straightforward. Its most basic definition is innocuous and does not seem critical. Only a deeper exploration of its background, purpose, and reactionary origins reveals its significant flaws.

The first narrative studies of the Gospels were hailed as holistic, non-technical, and accessible. Their arrival was billed as "a breath of fresh air" for those suffocated "by historical-critical scholarship."¹ The first theorists, including Hans Frei, longed for the simplicity and realism of precritical interpretation—like that of the early church. Precritical interpretation, it was observed, "again and again emphasized the simplicity of style, the life-likeness of depiction, the lack of artificiality or heroic elevation in theme in such stories as the first three chapters of Genesis, the story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, and the synoptic gospels."²

Narrative interpretation focuses on the work itself—it does not get lost in archaeological digs of unanswerable historical questions. It uses non-complex terminology that most high school students can understand:

Narrative criticism focuses on how the New Testament works as literature. The "what" of a narrative (content) and the "how" (rhetoric and structure) are analyzed as a complete tapestry, an organic whole. Narrative critics are concerned primarily with the literariness of New Testament narratives or the qualities that make them literature. It is a shift away from traditional historical-critical methods to how the text communicates meaning as a self-contained unit, an undivided whole. Of the three main components of a literary work—author, text, reader—narrative criticism focuses primarily on the text. It attends to the constitutive features of narratives, such as characterization, setting, plot, literary devices, point of view, narrator, implied author, and implied reader.³

The reign of historical criticism was declared exhausted—at least, that was the attitude of the new narrative upstarts. By bracketing off the intentions of the author and any attendant historical questions, they broke with the evolutionary source model for an-

Continued on page 2, left column

In this issue of the *Lutheran Clarion*

What is Narrative Criticism and How is it Being Used Today?	1
Textual Criticism: Influence and Application	1

Narrative Criticism and How is it Being Used Today?

Continued from page 1

alyzing biblical material. The dismemberment of the Bible into constituent parts and hypothetical sources was recognized as not beneficial for the Church. The biblical books “are intended to be read from beginning to end, not dissected and examined to determine the relative value of individual passages.”⁴ The accessible story approach, at face value, seems more useful and productive than the tedious tomes of critical historical commentary that were of dubious value to practicing Christians.

What Kind of Story?

The Bible does relate stories, but not all stories are the same. The initial goal of narrative-minded exegetes was simply to deal with the text itself—a worthy goal. Its primary aim is to read “the Biblical text for what it is.”⁵

The underlying basis for narrative criticism came from secular literary theory. The terminology is derived from fictional literature like novels, fables, and myths. “Scholars can simply employ the rules generated by literary critics, rules that were not initially formulated for use in biblical studies but for the investigation of the novel.”⁶ The academic and hermeneutical understanding of narrative runs deep—it is a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

In order to avoid questions of historical accuracy or origin, the story approach brackets off external reference—even from the author and his original intentions—by designating a stand-alone story world. For example:

“Narratee,” coined by Gerald Prince (1971), designates a fictive audience—the person or persons to whom the narrator addresses the narrative. The narratee does not exist outside the text and is reconstructed from the text proper. ...For example, the narrator of Matthew creates a fictive, idealized audience—the narratee—to whom the narrative is addressed. This narratee is familiar with Jewish customs, the scriptures, and the norms and conventions of the first-century Jewish world.⁷

The narrator is artificially isolated from the author and the addressee of the story is likewise abstracted from the actual reader.

The human reader is said to not be directly addressed by the story. “The implied reader of Revelation is not an actual flesh and blood reader; this reader is a fictive, idealized reader of the first-century that is in the implied author’s mind when he creates the narrative.” Here the radical nature of narrative theory is shown: “All parties within the narrative are reconstructed from the text itself and do not exist as entities apart from the text.”⁸

The Theory of Narrative Criticism

It is not so easy to precisely define narrative criticism, besides its general focus on singular biblical books as stand-alone literary works. One major influence was the American school of New Criticism, dating to the mid-20th century, which “rejected the view that the author’s intended aims and means in writing a literary work are relevant for interpretation, which they called the intentional fallacy.” So the author of a text is ruled out beforehand as irrelevant in deciding what the work means. Content, meaning, and truth have been severed from their source—the author has been exiled from interpretation. “New Critics pay close attention to the words on a page. New Critics focused exclusively on the text without regard for the author or the reader of a work.”⁹

Since God, by His personal inspiration, is the ultimate author

of Scripture and the source of all truth, there is a serious theological problem with narrative theory. In order to read all literature alike—history or fiction, myth or revelation—significant assumptions must be made. Frei writes: “a realistic or history-like (though not necessarily historical) element is a feature, as obvious as it is important of many of the biblical narratives.”¹⁰ That will have great practicality for the academic field of biblical interpretation, decimated by historical investigations, but shows it is not an about-face. Instead, the narrative approach is a clever short-cut to avoid debates about historical truthfulness entirely. A nonjudgmental, open-ended narrative, as with myth, is not true or false—that is not the point of this category of literature. A fable, though of course not historically true, cannot be dismissed as untruthful or deceitful. Narrative criticism uses the radical approach of exegeting without prejudice as to what is true in potentially historically false narratives.

Consequences of Fictional Approaches

In the academic arena, though not the pastoral, the “Scriptures for the exegete are fenceless prairies where he may roam, and so he is the envy of those whose goals are predetermined by tradition and official boundaries.”¹¹ So theory and novel approaches were readily received by professional exegetes, since doctrine and dogmatics no longer ruled over scholarly interpretation, which had become secularized and Enlightenment-minded. Scripture and its divine authorship had already been separated from the formal doctrine of the Church in the main.

Narrative approaches allow the utmost isolation by neglecting the historical author and, at least initially, the flesh and blood reader. One retired LCMS professor, Dr. Jeffrey Gibbs, who did his dissertation under one of the first narrative critics, states in his CPH-published narrative study: “In passing, I may note my own conviction that the story related in Matthew’s Gospel is, in fact, historical.”¹² That is a highly revealing statement. The historical truth is not denied—no, even worse, it is declared of no consequence in Scripture’s interpretation as pure fiction. The faults of this critical theory are not so much in what it does, but what it does not do. If reference is excised from the biblical text, the Bible’s content is distanced as well. The chronological distancing of historical criticism has become totalitarian—all outside reference has been deemed a narrative transgression in this redefinition of truth. The Bible is put in the category of fiction, quite tellingly.

“Initially, New Testament narrative criticism focused on the four canonical gospels and Acts, but later turned its attention to the narrative features of the book of Revelation.”¹³ The Gospels are the primary field of play for narrative critics. It is obvious that the epistles of Paul and historical books of the Old Testament will not admit narrative tactics so easily. The text of the Bible addresses real people and readers directly with authority. It also makes foundational historical claims, especially in regard to the bodily resurrection of Jesus (1 Cor. 15). It is highly doubtful “that the evangelists wanted to create a gap between themselves and the implied author.”¹⁴ We must say that a flesh and blood Jesus is quite different than a fictional and historically-irrelevant story-savior. This makes the narrative approach a highly defined game of pretend—and most inappropriate, even blasphemous, when applied to God’s Word.

The Battle of History and Fiction

Narrative criticism began in a definite context and has distinctive scholarly aims. “Early biblical narrative critics read vis-à-vis

historical critics.¹⁵ To illustrate: researching a particular passage as a seminary student, I pulled a comprehensive critical commentary from the library shelves. For the passage in question I found a list of about 8 possible meanings, all conflicting, with no attempt to reconcile the insights of petty scholars who had published their confident academic opinions, which had then been methodically collated into one exhaustive critical resource. That sort of impractical result was the motivation for narrative criticism. Historical criticism was suddenly painted as the new dead orthodoxy, just as stifling, stilted, and restrictive as dogmatics was previously declared.

“Under the dominance of historical-critical scholarship, books of the Bible were often treated more as resources for historical reconstruction than as works of literature in their own right.”¹⁶ Scholarship had its own secular standards, shaped by the intellectual values that gave rise to the critic. As the Enlightenment gave “birth to modernity, so also the exegetical methods developed in line with the main fundamentals of modernity, namely the search for objective verifiable facts by neutral scientific subjects.”¹⁷ History, defined as scientifically objective facts, became the goal of exegetical investigation. This eventually caused an anti-historical reaction—in the form of narrative criticism. Notably, the critic, as noted by the word “criticism,” is left alone.

Redaction criticism, the last stage of historical criticism in the 1960s and 1970s, is the bridge to the highly formalized narrative approach. The evangelist is called a “redactor,” meaning editor. He supposedly arranged and selected the various (assumed) sources at his disposal—but with theological intent. In this scheme editorial activity is theological activity, but becomes falsifying in the historical sense, presumably deviating from the existing sources, so that the redactor “is in no way motivated by a desire to exercise historical accuracy.”

This means that the gospels are not really historical documents, since they were edited to fit a later context. Redaction scholars found contradictions or differences in the synoptic gospels useful for explaining what distinctive theologies and historical environments lay behind them. The Scriptures are more theologically motivated products of the church, than historical or factual documents, in redaction criticism.¹⁸

Redaction criticism tries to get to the author’s intentions and speculates about the original readers’ community and circumstances. But what was “theological” was changed or altered from the received sources, so theological meaning started to be distanced from historical accuracy.

The general historical approach had pulverized the Scriptures in the eyes of those who embraced the critical view, completely subverting the task of preaching and teaching. “One cumulative effect of historical-critical work throughout the 19th and 20th centuries was to undermine assumptions about the unity of the Bible’s witness.”¹⁹ “The more the focus was on the historical distance of the texts of antiquity the less the focus was on the theory and praxis of interpretation of those texts for today.”²⁰ Redaction criticism is sandwiched between the waning of historicism and the beginning of pure story interpretation.

One example of a redaction-critical approach—in contrast to a purely narrative one—is this summary of a study on Luke:

Most provocatively, [Peter] Scaer contends that the third evangelist drew specific motifs from the Socrates story in order to show that the founder of the new Christian movement was a

noble and just man, deserving of the utmost respect. In using these Graeco-Roman sources as he fashioned his narrative of Jesus’ death, Luke reveals himself as a masterful author in the classical tradition, intent on portraying Christianity as a world class religion.²¹

This thematic approach aims to be theological; yet, by suggesting Luke used the pagan Socrates as a model and source, the narrative critic would respond with incredulity. The origins of a text are unknowable by critical standards and baseless speculation at best. The narrative critic goes further in making all historical concerns a distraction from the task at hand.

Narrative critics may say the following: you do not need to know who really wrote ...the Gospels and Acts in order to study them. You have the texts and the implied author who leads you in how to read those texts: read and learn! The point, then, is that we can engage the claims, constructions, and effects of the text in the present even if we lack information about the origins of the text.²²

In my seminary days at Fort Wayne, it was often posed: ‘What was the author thinking when he wrote this?’; ‘What could have been the historical occasion that gave rise to these theological emphases?’ These questions go behind the text and its actual words—to things that are unknowable and unprovable. To go behind the human situation of the biblical author is to attempt to psychoanalyze—not just a human author, but the true author—God Himself who breathed out the words infallibly for our certainty. Notice the interpretive leeway dismissing inspiration gives: “Redaktionsgeschichte [redaction criticism], puts the emphasis on the writer, somewhat in the sense as apostolic authority,” which takes the place of divine inspiration.²³

The narrative critic has a distaste for such extra-textual matters. He wants to deal with the words themselves—but has to change the understanding of truth to do so. Narrative criticism is not a turning away from the errors of historical criticism. It is a prejudgment to avoid them entirely—and not get bogged down in those divisive concerns. Therefore, narrative exegesis is not a return to an earlier idyllic, precritical time, but a further drifting away from the truth of Scripture. When speaking of Jesus (the character in the Gospel of John) a writer notes: “we are dealing with Jesus as he is portrayed in the story, not the historical person.”²⁴ The consequences of this fictive approach are monstrous.

The concluding paragraph of an early narrative study on the Gospel of John begins with the following sentence: “When art and history, fiction and truth, are again reconciled we will again be able to read the gospel as the author’s original audience read it.”²⁵ Narrative unity is not real unity, but an artificial category so broad it allows anything to be called a story, no matter how false or untrue.

In truth, only the Spirit’s original historical inspiration makes it possible to have true unity between biblical books, since we have writing from various men in disparate times and multiple languages. Narrative criticism does nothing to achieve unity between the Gospels, let alone the non-narrative parts of the Bible.

The shift from redaction to narrative criticism required rejecting the part we should care about—the historical—while still preserving the critical aspect. In neither case does the original inspiration of God’s written Word play a large part—in fact, that biblical doctrine must be downplayed—to give the critic room to play his critical games. When all the words of the Bible are truly believed to

be God's own words—there is no room for reading the Scriptures as fiction and refusing to submit to them as divine, eternal truth.

So the change in mood in the academy—the desire to move beyond using the Scriptures as a mere object for historical scrutiny—is not a repentance or turning against criticism but a further evolution of it, as witnessed by the rise of redaction criticism.

The Radicalism of Narrative

The “intentional fallacy” which narrative theory seized upon allows a wide-range of outcomes in practice. Narrative biblical studies are still being done. The approach is salutary for those who do not want to be bound by past concerns—including what the author meant when the text was written. It is a peculiar philosophical approach—not a precise method, though narrative theory has evolved on the side of the reader. “There is no basic agreement about the specifics of the method of narrative analysis.”²⁶

The theory and hermeneutical side of language and writing has been much discussed in our era. For example, a former professor at both LCMS seminaries wrote: “I am not contending that a text may be seen simply as a container, so that meaning is simply the content of a text. I fully recognize that the meaning of a text may well be the experience one has while reading”²⁷ The bracketing off of behind-the-text issues eventually raised significant problems in front of the text—in regards to meaning and understanding itself. The reader's interaction with the text became a noteworthy focus. There was a “shift in perception about how texts make meaning that narrative criticism facilitated—a shift from power vested in the author to power vested in the reader.”²⁸ The authority of the author departs to make room for new theory about the reader's involvement in creating meaning.

“Narrative criticism is the incarnation in biblical studies of New Criticism and reader-response theory.”²⁹ The reader is not passive, but now a key component of narrative theory. “Nor has narrative interpretation remained static. Instead it has been a springboard into feminist, postcolonial, post-structural, and other recent critical trends.”³⁰ “The narrative criticism that is currently practiced in NT studies is an eclectic discipline that borrows from a number of areas, including rhetorical criticism, structuralism, and reader-response criticism.”³¹

In technical terms, “the text gains autonomy from its author; it becomes itself a ‘reservoir of meaning’ opened to multiple possible readings. ...no writing is complete without a reader.”³² Here meaning is not a static property of the text to dig up and distill, rather it is to be found in the interaction with the present reader, and so ever-new in each reading. This makes the reader at least equal to text—and in the case of the God's Word, God Himself.

One influential narrative critic states that “The goal is to determine the effects that the stories are expected to have on their audience.”³³ The “effect” is purely literary, not the revelation of authoritative, binding teaching. The modern perceives this as a benefit, so that reading can even be a “violent act of mastery over the text.”³⁴ Incongruent, unscriptural theory is idolized with abandon.

Redaction and narrative criticism share a similarity: the quest for themes and hidden sub-plots. I personally call the tired baptismal exegetical theme: “I see water, I see Baptism.” In the same vein, these sacramentally-minded scholars insist on finding the Sacrament of the Altar under every rock and Bible verse. But subterranean sacramental themes merely hint at and inspire creativity and theological contortion—they do not prove anything. Consciences

cannot be directly instructed by motifs; they simply reinforce what is assumed—but do not establish anything of substance. These are fancy, yet superficial, exegetical games that will not convince one opposed or doubting. Like proof by analogy, nothing is ultimately established. Without authoritative and divinely breathed-out words, there is no real authority.

If meaning is dependent on the reader, the upshot for the critical scholar is that no interpretation (or deconstruction) of the text—no matter how wild, unchronological, or absurd—can be called wrong. Narrative continues to have prevalence because it allows conflicting views and interpretations of the same text. In simple terms, though the story is the same, my story (or truth) can be different than yours, and so the interaction of each person with a text is unique. But God's story is His action in Christ for all humanity of all time. We do not define Christ, and “christology” is not a normative judging principle—but a word that must be defined. All attempts to replace Scripture's verbal authority end in elevating the sinner above the holy oracles of God and their Author. Christ communicates information, and in more than just narrative form. His scriptural revelation is monergistic—not dependent on us. In fact, our sin makes it necessary that we do not bring significant authority to the table, so we do not stand over the clear text we have been given.

Implications for Revelation

Most narrative critics,

share in common ...the denial of a fixed determinative meaning embedded within the text. Therein lies the problem for evangelicals. Non-evangelical practitioners of literary methodology in biblical studies do not hold to a fixed meaning in the text, nor any notion of a single discoverable correct interpretation. Yet the problem does not lie with the methodology but in the basic presuppositions that separate evangelicals from mainstream biblical scholarship. Our understanding of revelation and inspiration sets us apart. For us, there is a fixed meaning in the biblical text, one that is placed there by the author, an author who ultimately is God himself, working by his Spirit through chosen human agency.³⁵

Narrative approaches are superficially simple, but complex in their interpretive theory.

Theology of the modern epoch has wrestled with the significant question of how God reveals Himself. The theorist Frei credits the dialectical theologian Karl Barth, who “distinguishes historical from realistic reading of the theologically most significant biblical narratives, without falling into the trap of instantly making history the test of the meaning of the realistic form of the stories.”³⁶ “Frei's theological instincts concerning the concept of revelation were essentially Barthian.”³⁷ That move puts the Bible in a different category of truth.

Narrative criticism's weakness is not revealed in bad interpretation of passages; rather it redefines the entire truth of Scripture. Frei's colleague at Yale, George Lindbeck,

proposed that religious doctrines are neither objectively true facts (as dogmatists and fundamentalists would have us believe), nor mere encodings of subjective experience (as classic liberalism would put it), but function like rules of a game, shaping how we live and find understanding and meaning within life. This is attached to the idea of narrative because, far more than anything else, our worldviews are shaped by the

stories we tell and how we tell them.³⁸

Scripture, doctrine, and Christ have been altered to fit the new narrative.

Revelation in the last century has been a hot topic of theological discussion because of the Enlightenment revolt against the bare communication of binding, rational information. This is why the doctrine of inspiration is so bitterly despised by scholars. If revelation is “Truth as encounter” instead of “divinely revealed doctrine,” then it is “not a doctrine or book.”³⁹ Revelation is redefined in terms of dynamic activity, but not language or truth which can be reformulated and confessed.

Historical distance reaches its apex in radical hermeneutical theory:

The understanding of the text remains open because the meaning of the Scriptures discloses itself anew in every future ...since the exegete exists historically and must hear the word of Scripture as spoken in his personal historical situation, he will always understand the old word anew. Always anew will it tell him how he, man, is and who God is⁴⁰

Narrative, while reacting against particular aspects of historicism, is really a continuation and further outgrowth of the critical paradigm.

As modern academic exegesis is not concerned with proving or being bound by dogmatic tradition, which Scripture reveals, that leads to a redefinition of the way in which God relates to man.

The theologian is interested in narrativity because he or she believes that this is a more fitting way of describing God’s interaction with humanity. In contrast to modernity, where theological communication was viewed as more amenable to the rational proposition, narrative theologians believe that the story is just (if not more!) as universal as the proposition.⁴¹

“Propositional” is a key word defining rational truth. This means that it can be communicated and reformulated in true/false statements. Doctrines are defined, expressed, and applied in different contexts across time. Stories, in the modern understanding, don’t have to be correct, universal, or authoritative—indeed, that is what the critical scholar likes about them.

For all its realistic claims, the narrative approach is merely a self-contained academic exercise. The story world has no intrinsic reference to the real world of flesh and blood sinners. Narrative scholars relate that any historical reconstruction is an “exercise of imagination,” because “these verses do not describe events that actually took place, or could have taken place, in the life of the historical Jesus.”⁴²

Narrative critics are not satisfied with the results of historical criticism, but in principle reject none of it. Peter Nafzger, a current St. Louis Seminary professor, takes the modern view that “Authority is not so much an ontological property of the biblical writings ...it is an activity of the Triune God.”⁴³ Potential activity cannot define or judge, and is conveniently (for the critic) not limited by specific words or doctrines. Therefore, in this Barthian scheme, human words might “become the Word of God,” but truth itself is not something to be grasped or communicated. The attendant claim, of course, is that “The doctrine of inspiration was significantly flawed.”⁴⁴ Or in the words of a longtime Fort Wayne professor: “The work of the Spirit in giving us the Scriptures is not, strictly speaking, a direct or immediate work.”⁴⁵ In truth, there is no tension between the work of the Spirit in inspiration (divine author-

ship) and the working of the Spirit today through the words that reveal God’s own saving message. They are inextricably connected. To play God’s revelation in Christ against His Scriptures is a false dichotomy made to give space to the critic. Jesus cites Scripture, not the historical fact of His incarnation, to refute Satan (Matt. 4).

To buttress his claims, Nafzger makes an immense error. He speaks of Barth’s “rejection of the critical side of the modern debate.”⁴⁶ A better scholar observes Barth’s own words: “The critical historical people are not critical enough for me.” “The critical historical method of research is right enough: it aims at a preparation for understanding, and that is never superfluous” as “a first primitive step.”⁴⁷ David Scaer also confuses the a-historical neo-orthodox emphasis with a purer theological intent: “Citing the older Reformation-era and post-Reformation-era Lutheran and Reformed orthodoxies,” Barth “actually did theology and avoided the rationalist historical criticism that has reinterpreted supernatural events as ordinary ones.”⁴⁸ Historical facts cannot be the aim or foundation though, if theological truth has been divorced from reality. The presuppositions of narrative criticism, much like the program of Karl Barth, are more radical and subjective than the passé historical agenda of past critics. There is no repentance or condemnation of historical criticism in the further progression of biblical criticism; rather, history itself has been deemed inconsequential.

If stable communication and fixed words are not conveyors of truth, then in the words of one theologian: theology “has nothing to do with timeless truth.” That is why the category of fiction has become so embraced. It dovetails with the modern view of theology that does not want to be limited by eternal doctrines revealed from heaven. So behind the narrative gloss is still the same corrosive criticism. “No responsible and eminent theologian today ignores historico-critical research and its questions, dismisses evolution with an ‘It is written’ or sets forth a doctrine of revelation without facing historical relativism.”⁴⁹ The problems of historicism have not been addressed but further retreated from in the narrative redefinition of revelation and theological truth.

Preserving the False God of Identity

Narrative suffers from the same root issue as historical criticism: a lack of authority. In the narrative scheme an artificial barrier is erected between the reader and the Word of God. It is worse than Gospel reductionism because it isolates all authority in the Word from the reader (via the implied reader) in hermeneutically-sealed story worlds.

What is the power of story? Creativity and imagination enlarge one’s horizon or self-understanding. A text does not sit in judgment, but offers a new way of looking at oneself. “A horizon is not a rigid frontier, but something that moves with one and invites one to advance further.” If everything is perspectival and a matter of complex hermeneutical interaction, there is a “Merging or fusing of horizons ...always in motion ...between past and present, text and interpreter.”⁵⁰ This preserves the autonomy of one’s own horizon or story. It can be impacted (activity!) but not corrected or judged (propositionally) as false or sinful.

“Each narrative has a way of constructing its own fictional world or universe.”⁵¹ As recent films have embraced the multiverse system in which there are contrasting parallel worlds, each person is safely encapsulated in a textual world.

Perhaps the most striking feature of narrative theology is that it renders the questions of historicity of the Bible, which were

so important throughout the modern period, completely irrelevant to biblical interpretation. Their truth is not dependent on how well they correspond to ‘outside’ events, but on their capacity to change lives.⁵²

The outlawing of outside reference preserves the critic’s personal authority. It is the absolutizing of the critical principle of historical distance.

In the words of a retired St. Louis seminary professor:

If the narrative critic does not think that the story-world corresponds to the real world, then the significance of the narrative for the critic’s own life may be minimal or nonexistent. If, on the other hand, the narrative critic (on other grounds) regards the story-world as a faithful representation of historical events (as I do), then the narrative-critical description of the “story-world” becomes normative for life and faith.⁵³

The narrative impact of Scripture is up to the individual. The Bible’s fixed communication is not allowed to trump my personal (sinful) story in the fictional scheme. Like art and mythological literature, it may inspire (if so chosen), but it does not determine right or wrong.

This manner of doing [narrative] theology is viewed as more fitting for the disclosure of personal identity: “A ... great advantage of narrative is that it is well suited for articulating a person’s identity. ... a person’s identity comes into focus more sharply not by listing various attributes or character traits but rather by recounting typical things that the person has done.”⁵⁴

Identity may be described as one’s self-story—the one we tell ourselves. “Identity and personhood ... are constructed via our personal narratives.”⁵⁵ Identity has become a sacred cow, which Scripture is not allowed to transgress. That is why modern interpretive methods do not deny or condemn—quite unlike the confessors and confessions of the Reformation.

The reader has his own context, that is, story. By removing God’s direct, unimpeachable authority, there is suddenly an unlimited field for meaning production. So the interpreter—as the creator of meaning—may be as god, the supreme text, ruling over all other divine texts. And the Christian Scriptures are simply one springboard among many to magnify one’s horizon. How far we have come from the reformational insight of prioritizing the literal meaning of the Bible.

Safely isolated in a “safe space,” or in the language of Concordia, Texas, “brave space”—each person is allowed to speak own one’s ‘truthy’ story.⁵⁶ This allows no real divine Law or condemnation. Real people are not addressed in the narrative scheme, so there is no possibility of being wrong. Repentance is the ultimate taboo. Narrative elevates personal identity by removing God’s ability to say ‘no.’ After all, everyone has his own story, and that story creates its own world; therefore, each person has their own world— independent of every other world. This is where narrative theory leads—directly into the postmodern abyss.

Postmodernism

“Whereas intellectual movements of the past have been worked out in fields of metaphysics or science, postmodernism as a coherent intellectual discipline has developed out of literary criticism (of all things).”⁵⁷ So the basis for narrative theory is also the source of postmodern subjectivism. The perspective of story fits in well with the mood that despairs of scientific, objective truth.

“It is important to remember that by narrative or story is not

meant ‘myth’ or untrue tale. The narration of the narrative world to the ‘real’ world is a separate step.”⁵⁸ Truth judgments—which are still critical—are held in abeyance in the intellectual playground of narrative. “Narratives do not only point to realities, but create realities and are therefore highly suited for the development of new identities and hope.”⁵⁹ Made-up stories do not impinge on a self-chosen reality. In the same way novels do not lead to rigid doctrinal systems. The story world is fertile soil for new realities—that do not rule out other story-realities. “A text does not only describe a reality, but in a certain sense creates or re-creates such a reality. Discourse has the ability to manifest a reality to the interpreter/reader.”⁶⁰ Stories are transformative, but not determinative.

The person is even described as a text shaped by other stories. “The self is best understood in the form of being a narrative.”⁶¹ According to a postmodern hermeneutics text used in both LCMS seminaries: “She [the reader] is, as it were, a ‘text’ herself—a complementary ‘second text,’ which is always a factor in textual interpretation.” These two texts combine in the “matrix” of understanding, also called the “fusion of two horizons” by hermeneutical scholars.⁶²

The entire mood of postmodernism is a conceit built upon the false scientific assumption that neutral understanding is achievable. “It is because of the presence and activity of the interpreter’s own person/self as text that there is no possibility of ‘objective’ textual interpretation.”⁶³ But Scripture says we know only in part (1 Cor. 13:9)—communication can occur without complete or verifiable objectivity. Understanding God’s communication is not about being as omniscient as God, but trusting His communication is reliable. Saving knowledge is not a rationally verifiable fact, but a gift of the Spirit’s enlightenment in which faith is created through the Gospel of Christ.

The great irony is that these people who claim Scripture is not clear and cannot be understood as timeless are the ones writing books, papers, and articles. Theorists even seek to communicate, usually poorly, how we can’t really communicate at all. But in the quest to dethrone all authorities outside the conscious self, even the self was undermined. Post-critical modernism (postmodernism) is parallel to narrative criticism. It declares itself after (post) but continues along the same path.

Fitting in with the postmodern mood, “Narrative criticism is therefore generally more open to polyvalence (plurality of meaning) than is historical criticism.”⁶⁴ Derrida, the formative postmodern philosopher, “insists that once something is written down, the author disappears completely; the text is in the world and has a life of its own, like a child set loose in the world by an aloof parent: ‘The written marks are abandoned, cut off from the writer, yet they continue to produce effects beyond his presence and beyond the present actuality of his meaning.’”⁶⁵ Despite the turn against the historical aspect, in narrative the Holy Spirit is still not in the privileged position. All communication, texts, and authorities are deprived in reference to the self. Nothing is allowed to interfere with the right to determine one’s own understanding or story—even if it is concluded the story is correct—it is just a story. No primacy is accorded to the divine Scriptures in relation to one’s safe-guarded horizon.

God’s story is minimized and meaning is left open-ended to uplift the individual in the telling of his own story of identity. Narrative criticism is rooted in, and supports, postmodern theory—par-

taking of the same artificial conceit.

Effects upon the Church

Stories are non-confrontational; they do not oppose the reader or call him to account with authority. While the actual exegesis of narrative criticism is not always terrible, the basic posture towards Scripture must have an effect upon the church in which it is tolerated.

The story paradigm—influencing the horizons of others—is far different than preaching the Word of God which demands unconditional obedience. “It is not uncommon these days to be shown a movie clip or to be reminded of a best-selling novel in a sermon as the preacher uses these to elucidate a biblical text.”⁶⁶ Because the clarity of the Bible has been implicitly denied, sermon illustrations have largely overtaken the inspired words and content of Scripture in the sermon, so that preaching becomes harmless story time. The critical distancing of Scripture from sinners has made the sermon’s impact as pointed as romantic fiction or a child’s fable. Flowery language and clever phrases, which do not say much, replace the binding of consciences with “thus saith the Lord.” The authority of the keys to call to repentance and absolve the guilty is described eloquently but not exercised decisively.

Quite simply, there is a lack of trust in God’s Word. We as a church are scared to use its authority. So we use man’s words and frivolous stories to prop it up. Scholars, and the pastors they lead, worry more about how to say things than what they say. This is exposed in the fetishism of questionable theologians who can turn a nice phrase and tickle the imagination, but teach little. The distaste for using the words of Scripture with finality will allow nothing solid to be said or concluded.

When propositions are not made, sermons become cozy story time and the conviction of divine authority is lost. A proposition is “a statement that affirms or denies something.” A non-propositional Scripture says nothing that can direct or reprove the thoughts and lives of men. Non-propositional doctrine and sermons can only tickle the imagination. Authority is exercised in words and commands, not in creative thoughts [or themes].⁶⁷

The fact that the holy God is the author of the Bible limits the supposed academic freedom of the scholar, but that very fact should determine how we read it. Without certainty in using God’s Word, preachers will be afraid to apply the authority of God’s voice in divine proclamation. That means less declaration and proclamation without apology and more deference to personal perspectives and sinful identities. As academic theology strove to limit God’s authority, power, and ability to communicate true, propositional information, the retreat has been made to pure emotional effect. Story techniques derived from fiction and myth do not encourage pastors to use the Word of God in a doctrinal and authoritative way.

For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. (2 Timothy 4:3–4).

The methods and techniques of narrative analysis are rooted in the secular study of mythology and fiction, but now are superimposed upon God’s written Word in these latter days.

It has been noted, “How resistant the modern mind has become to the Christian message.”⁶⁸ Theory has ruled out absolute truth by

presuming in advance that no authority can upset the stories we tell ourselves, making everything mythological. The literal use of specific Bible passages—the seats of doctrine (*sedes doctrinae*)—to establish unimpeachable divine precepts is despised by historical and narrative practitioners. This sentiment is endemic among critical scholars, even in the LCMS: “Single passages of Scripture are frequently used as isolated truisms to support ideas that have little to do with the Gospel.”⁶⁹ But the question remains—what is the Gospel and who, if not God in Scripture, establishes it? Hell, homosexuality, and the murder of abortion are realities not defined by some abstract idea of Gospel, but precious, clear Bible verses—dealing with real sinners in the real world.

The theory of so-called self-referential “language games,” taken from linguistics, billed as self-contained worlds, has been carried over to Bible games in narrative criticism.⁷⁰ A story world that never intersects with sinners in need of redemption is useless to kill and raise to salvation. The unvarnished, soul-shattering truth of Christ is not permitted to break through the story world into reality.

The altering of one’s horizon can only occur after the fact—but only in so far as the reader allows it. The author—in the case of Scripture, God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit—is dominated by man-made theory by prior assumption. The text is used against its author, and the reader is set up over its words and intentions. So the narrative approach is Satanic in its presumption, since the Author of the Bible is unlimited by nature. Any attitude that starts with limitations upon the authority of Scripture (and therefore the Lord of heaven and earth) sets itself up in opposition to its Author, Christ.

The basic attitude toward Scripture sets the foundation for preaching and teaching. We must use the Scriptures as the sole authority above all academic dalliance and theory. The basic attitude of all criticism—not its technique—says: “prove it to me, I’ll be the judge of that.” Narrative theory goes further: no one can be the judge of my horizon; I’ll define and write my own story without undue interference.

Corrective

One of the earliest Lutherans to write a hermeneutics text, Matthias Flacius Illyricus (1520–1575), provides a helpful counterpoint to Enlightenment-induced theory. “Interpreters, who indeed ought to be the greatest help to the unlearned for learning the Sacred Scriptures, often darken them more than they explain them.”⁷¹ We should not be afraid to say that not only are critical works unhelpful, but the very starting point is contrary to the nature of Scripture, and therefore inappropriate. One who cannot say what Scripture is by defining inspiration positively has no business professing God’s Word publicly.⁷²

It is schizophrenia to assume a contradiction between the dynamic and static properties of the Scriptures. There is no opposition between what Scripture is and what it does. In fact, they are intimately connected—in the eternal Holy Spirit, who is fully God with the Son and the Father. Modern theory puts Scripture on the same level as the writing of sinners. Note that Voelz compares the task of interpreting Scripture to interpreting the U.S. Constitution.⁷³ Yet, traditionally the subject of theology necessitated a holy, that is sacred, hermeneutic. But the critical principle means that “theology is secular like every other academic subject.”⁷⁴ God’s writing through St. Paul contradicts the flattening of all knowledge

to man's viewpoint:

So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned (1 Cor. 2:11–14).

“What God says is true. That needs no proving. It is indeed the foundational principle of all theology deserving assent of every creature.”⁷⁵ We must not act like the fallible words of scholars are clearer than God's own words. Indeed, without the correspondence of biblical truth to reality and the divine propositions of Scripture that can be translated, reformulated, and confessed in human words, there would be no confessional Lutheranism. “The propositional property of truth says that essential meaning can be handled and reworked by man.”⁷⁶ God's Word can be translated, preached, and taught as the power for salvation—though not in some imagined, objective scientific vacuum without the Spirit. It can be communicated, however imperfectly, well enough for the Spirit to work through it as the revealed doctrines of the Gospel are taught. If only we would actually use the Scriptures, instead of theorizing academically about them.

God has chosen to speak only in Scripture to this adulterous generation: “They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.” “We must know imperfectly,” as in a mirror dimly now. “The Sacred Scriptures must be read in the fear of God.” The Scriptures assert that “affliction gives knowledge” (Ps 119:71), but do not mention academic degrees.⁷⁷ Martin Luther did not have to deal with theory imprisoning the Scriptures, yet confessed: “For he who despises a single word of God certainly prizes none at all.”⁷⁸ Any notion that puts all the words of God in a lesser position must be judged harshly.

Modern and post-modern man is the authority to be preserved at all costs. We should not be surprised, since “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9). The answer to a lack of confidence in God's Word is not more human texts, but to use the Bible with authority, since all authority belongs to Christ.

Scholars must do the methodology and techniques of the academy to survive and fit in. But in doing so, they soak up hostile presuppositions and fundamental attitudes like a sponge. Christians must judge all scholars and professors, not treating their pronouncements or writings as better than God's Word. While academic theologians often bemoan literalism and proof-texting—“Idolaters ... can make a god out of ideas [theory] as truly as the heathen make a god out of wood or stone.”⁷⁹ “The only answer is to preach what is most hurtful, that man is not a god and his life is not his to live as he sees fit, otherwise he must face the wrath to come.”⁸⁰ God's authority in the Law breaks down all idols of identity and our self-comforting narratives.

Conclusion

Narrative criticism will achieve nothing substantial. It rejects the objective, inherent power of the Scriptures. In fact, it denies any potential authority in its own methodology. It makes interpretation a game, as harmless as a make-believe story. The solution is

repentance—not to avoid the hard questions of historical reality by a narrative affect, but to allow Scripture to judge all theory, starting points, and people.

The Reformers broke with the allegorical method, though unlike the narrative approach it did not deny beforehand the historical, truthful meaning of the literal sense. Yet the Scriptures were not allowed to reign supreme—which is a prime work of Satan. If Scripture is clear and direct, the professional exegete is not the gatekeeper and pope over God's Word, since theology is a relatively simple task every Christian is qualified to do. Narrative critics hate *sedes doctrinae*—explicit passages which establish doctrine—as much as historical-critical practitioners. We can't build a real life on fiction or games or fables. Eternal life must have a timeless doctrinal foundation. Faith needs a divine Word on which to depend—a holy, unshakable Word.

Kurt Marquart condemned contemporary theology as “fundamental frivolity, which endlessly weaves, unweaves, and reweaves various word-patterns, which, however ingenious, do not ultimately bind anyone to anything.”⁸¹ We are unable to settle controversies and achieve doctrinal unity because we do not respect the divine authority that has been revealed to us in Scripture. “I am convinced that unless and until Synod, or an overwhelming majority of its members, arrives at a consensus on the doctrine of Scripture, Synod will more and more become a divided camp, doctrinally speaking.”⁸² Only divine words with divine authority can bind us. Note that in the introduction to Nafzger's book previously quoted, another St. Louis Seminary professor ominously laments that the Seminex-era problem of Scripture has not been satisfactorily addressed: “In the 1960s and 1970s, Concordia and the Missouri Synod endured a bitter conflict over the Scriptures. The conflict was ended more than it was resolved.”⁸³

Our language and communication are imperfect and clouded by our sin. But “language and speaking existed before man and creation.”⁸⁴ Jesus is the Word (Jn. 1:1). To question the propositional truth of words is to play our Creator against His communication. This created world, spoken into existence, which our Lord Christ entered, is not ours; therefore His Word has the ultimate freedom to convict, correct, and instruct—even if it limits the creativity of exegetical scholars.

A fictional Jesus confined to a story world cannot save. We need more than a fictitious call out of sin. We need a talking, communicating Jesus to fully submit to in faith—and not just in our imaginations. Luther teaches us to humble ourselves before the Word as before Christ Himself: “Give the Holy Ghost the honor of being wiser than yourself, for you should deal with Scripture that you believe that God Himself is speaking.” “I must bring my own ideas into captivity and assent to the Word even if I do not understand it.”⁸⁵ To paraphrase G.K. Chesterton, “The Christian [doctrine of the divinely inspired Scripture] has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.”

1 David R. Beck, “Review of *Anatomies of Narrative Criticism: The Past, Present, and Futures of the Fourth Gospel as Literature*,” in *Journal of The Evangelical Theological Society* 52/4, 862.

2 Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), 11.

3 James L. Resseguie, “A Glossary of New Testament Narrative Criticism with Illustrations” in *Religions* 10:3 (2019).

4 Néstor Medina, “What's Missing? Theological Musings on a Hermeneutics of Absence” in *Ex Auditu* 31 (2015), 133–134.

5 Osvaldo Padilla, “Narrative Criticism in the Gospels and Acts” in *Southeastern Theological Review* 12:2 (Fall 2021), 35.

6 Padilla, “Narrative Criticism in the Gospels and Acts,” 35.

- 7 Resseguie, "A Glossary of New Testament Narrative Criticism."
- 8 Resseguie, "A Glossary of New Testament Narrative Criticism."
- 9 Resseguie, "A Glossary of New Testament Narrative Criticism."
- 10 Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 10.
- 11 David P. Scaer, "Reformed Exegesis and Lutheran Sacraments: Worlds in Conflict" in CTQ 64:1 (2000), 5.
- 12 Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Jerusalem and Parousia: Jesus' Eschatological Discourse in Matthew's Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 24.
- 13 Resseguie, "A Glossary of New Testament Narrative Criticism."
- 14 Padilla, "Narrative Criticism in the Gospels and Acts," 44.
- 15 Richard Walsh, "Review of Scott S. Elliott, *Reconfiguring Mark's Jesus: Narrative Criticism after Poststructuralism* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011)" in *The Bible and Critical Theory* 8:2 (2012), 73.
- 16 Mark Allan Powell, "Narrative Criticism," in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, ed. Joel B. Green (Eerdmans, 2010), 239.
- 17 R. Meylahn, "Narrative-critical Approach as Hermeneutical Framework for a Creative Dialogue between Biblical Sources and Secular Extra-biblical Sources: The Lord of the Rings as an Entry into the Book of Revelation," in *Verbum et Ecclesia* 30:1 (2009), 183.
- 18 Norman Perrin, *What is Redaction Criticism?* in *Guide to Biblical Scholarship: New Testament Guides*, ed. Dan O. Via, Jr. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 29, 7–9.
- 19 Richard B. Hays, "Can Narrative Criticism Recover the Theological Unity of Scripture?" in *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 2:2 (2008), 195.
- 20 Meylahn, "Narrative-critical Approach as Hermeneutical Framework," 178.
- 21 Peter J Scaer, *The Lukan Passion and the Praiseworthy Death* (Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2015).
- 22 Padilla, "Narrative Criticism in the Gospels and Acts," 45.
- 23 David P. Scaer, *The Apostolic Scriptures* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), 62.
- 24 R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design*, in *Foundations and Facets: New Testament*, ed. Robert W. Funk, foreword by Frank Kermode (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 105–106.
- 25 R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*; quoted in: Gail R. O'Day, "Review of *Anatomies of Narrative Criticism: The Past, Present, and Futures of the Fourth Gospel as Literature*," in *Biblical Interpretation* 18 (2010), 515.
- 26 "Narrative Criticism," *An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church*, <https://www.episcopal-church.org/glossary/narrative-criticism>.
- 27 James Voelz, "Multiple Signs, Levels of Meaning and Self as Text: Elements of Intertextuality," in *Semeia* 69/70 (1995), 159.
- 28 O'Day, "Review of *Anatomies of Narrative Criticism*," 516.
- 29 Padilla, "Narrative Criticism in the Gospels and Acts," 39.
- 30 Beck, "Review of *Anatomies of Narrative Criticism*," 863.
- 31 Mark Allan Powell, "Narrative Criticism," 240.
- 32 Medina, "What's Missing?," 130.
- 33 Mark Allan Powell, "Narrative Criticism," 239.
- 34 Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 150.
- 35 Beck, "Review of *Anatomies of Narrative Criticism*," 863.
- 36 Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, vii–viii.
- 37 Padilla, "Narrative Criticism in the Gospels and Acts," 37.
- 38 Matthew Root, "The Power of Story: Narrative Criticism" (June 3, 2022), <https://matthew-root.ca/2022/06/03/the-power-of-story-narrative-criticism/>.
- 39 Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason: The Christian Doctrine of Faith and Knowledge*, trans. Olive Trad Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1946), 8, 9.
- 40 Bultmann; quoted in: Meylahn, "Narrative-critical Approach as Hermeneutical Framework," 192.
- 41 Padilla, "Narrative Criticism in the Gospels and Acts," 36.
- 42 Beck, "Review of *Anatomies of Narrative Criticism*," 862.
- 43 Peter H. Nafzger, *These Are Written: Toward a Cruciform Theology of Scripture* (St. Louis: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 135.
- 44 P. H. Nafzger, *These Are Written*, 21, 37.
- 45 D. P. Scaer, *Apostolic Scriptures*, 65. "Inspiration is not an autonomous act of the Sovereign God, but an extension of the incarnation." David P. Scaer, *An Introduction to the Method and Practice of Lutheran Theology* (Fort Wayne, IN: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1990), 27.
- 46 P. H. Nafzger, *These Are Written*, 37.
- 47 Quoted in: Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, trans. James W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 309.
- 48 David P. Scaer, "Gospel Reductionism: Then and Now" in CTQ 88 (2024), 326.
- 49 Helmut Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith: Prolegomena: The Relation of Theology to Modern Thought Forms*, vol. 1 of 3, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1978), 24, 36.
- 50 Anthony C. Thisleton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 303, 307.
- 51 Giovanni Moretta, "Postmodernism and Aesthetic Pluralism: Representation and Resistance in Multiverse Films," Research Paper (Ohio State University, May 2024), 2.
- 52 Matthew Root, "The Power of Story: Narrative Criticism."
- 53 J. A. Gibbs, *Jerusalem and Parousia*, 23.
- 54 Padilla, "Narrative Criticism in the Gospels and Acts," 38.
- 55 Meylahn, "Narrative-critical Approach as Hermeneutical Framework," 193.
- 56 <https://www.concordia.edu/about/equity-team-charter.html>.
- 57 Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994), 51.
- 58 James W. Voelz, *What Does This Mean?: Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Post-Modern World* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1995; 2nd rev. ed., 1997), 198.
- 59 Meylahn, "Narrative-critical Approach as Hermeneutical Framework," 193.
- 60 Meylahn, "Narrative-critical Approach as Hermeneutical Framework," 191.
- 61 Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20th-Century Theology: God & the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 279.
- 62 J. W. Voelz, *What Does This Mean?*, 209.
- 63 J. W. Voelz, *What Does This Mean?*, 210.
- 64 Mark Allan Powell, "Narrative Criticism," 242.
- 65 Matthew Root, "The Power of Story: Narrative Criticism."
- 66 Meylahn, "Narrative-critical Approach as Hermeneutical Framework," 174.
- 67 Philip Hale, *Confessing the Scriptural Christ against Modern Idolatry: Inspiration, Inerrancy, and Truth in Scientific and Biblical Conflict* (Mercator Press, 2016), 228.
- 68 Veith, *Postmodern Times*, 16.
- 69 P. H. Nafzger, *These Are Written*, 151.
- 70 Veith, *Postmodern Times*, 45.
- 71 Matthias Flacius, *How to Understand the Sacred Scriptures*, trans. Wade R. Johnston (Saginaw, MI: Magdeburg Press, 2011), 49.
- 72 Just as one who cannot define 'woman' biologically should not be making or judging laws pertaining to them.
- 73 J. W. Voelz, *What Does This Mean?*, 13.
- 74 E. Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, 391.
- 75 M. Flacius, *How to Understand the Sacred Scriptures*, 70.
- 76 Hale, *Confessing the Scriptural Christ against Modern Idolatry*, 29.
- 77 M. Flacius, *How to Understand the Sacred Scriptures*, 62, 69.
- 78 Luther, *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper* (1528), LW 37:308.
- 79 Chester E. Tulga, *The Case against Modernism* (Chicago: Conservative Baptist Fellowship, 1949), 24.
- 80 Hale, *Confessing the Scriptural Christ against Modern Idolatry*, 283–284.
- 81 Kurt Marquart, "The 'Realist Principle' of Theology," in *Doctrine is Life: Essays on Justification and the Lutheran Confessions*, ed. Klemet Preus (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 369–70.
- 82 Elmer Moeller, "The Meaning of Confessional Subscription," *Springfield* 38:4 (1974), 209.
- 83 Joel Okamoto, Foreword to P. H. Nafzger, *These Are Written*, x.
- 84 Veith, *Postmodern Times*, 65.
- 85 Johann Michael Reu, *Luther and the Scriptures* (Columbus: Wartburg Press, 1944); reprint, *Springfield* 24:3 (1960), 51, 52.

Textual Criticism: Influence and Application

Continued from page 1

Greek and Latin texts, the Complutensian Polyglot (*Complutensis*). Although the New Testament was finished in 1514 and the Old Testament in 1517, the whole work was not published until 1521-1522 in a limited edition of 600 copies. Erasmus's publisher, Froben in Basel, saw his chance. Instead of waiting for the carefully prepared *Complutensis* to become available, he persuaded Erasmus to prepare a Greek New Testament that would dominate the market to accompany his Latin translation. Erasmus had been working on his Latin version to replace Jerome for some time, but he rushed to prepare the accompanying Greek text using whatever Greek manuscripts he could lay his hands on in Basel. The temptation was irresistible. The edition would augment Froben's purse and Erasmus's reputation as the Great Humanist. No modern scholar, but Erasmus himself wrote, *Novum Testamentum praecipitatum verius quam aeditum* (P.S. Allen, ed., *Opus Epistolarum* (Oxford, 1910) 2:226 ("My New Testament was rushed into print more truly than edited"); cf. 2:248: *aeditum est pro temporis angustia satis accurate* ("Considering the shortness of time [I spent on it] it was edited rather accurately") with F. H. A. Scrivener, *A Plain Introduction to the Criticism of the New Testament* [London, 1894] 185: "the most faulty book I know.")

It is not just a question of misprints. Since his single mediocre manuscript of Revelation lacked its last six verses, Erasmus translated his own Latin translation into Greek. "Three centuries were to elapse before it was discovered that there was no authority for the Greek wording except Erasmus's knowledge of the Greek language." (Pfeiffer, *History*, p. 77). "The retranslation contained several words unknown to the Greek New Testament, and, indeed, to the Greek tongue." (Adam Fox, *John Mill and Richard Bentley* [Oxford, 1954] 45) Erasmus also translated Vulgate interpolations at Acts 9:5-6. He did refuse to print the Vulgate interpolation at 1 John 5:7 (The Three Holy Witnesses). He responded to critics by promising to include the interpolation in his text if a Greek manuscript were found containing it. So, a Catholic forged a manuscript with the Latin words translated into Greek. Erasmus was flum-

moxed by a basic editorial issue solved in the previous century by his hero, Lorenzo Valla, who showed in his work on the Donation of Constantine that the text of the Donation “was missing in the earliest manuscripts of the *Decreta*.” (Pfeiffer, *History*, p. 39)

Erasmus corrected many misprints in the new editions of 1519, 1522, 1527 and 1535, taking little account of better manuscript readings. In the third edition of 1522 he added the Vulgate interpolation of the Three Heavenly Witnesses at 1 John 5:7. (Martin Luther understood the textual situation and never translated the interpolation, although he commented on it in his lectures.) Erasmus’s text was used by Robertus Stephanus (Robert Estienne) for the third edition of his folio Greek testament of 1550 with variant readings from fifteen manuscripts printed in the margin. In the fourth edition of 1551 he divided the chapters up into verses. Theodore Beza reprinted Stephanus’ text with some 176 different readings in the text and variant readings from an additional ten manuscripts in the margin. The publisher Elzevir reprinted this text many times. In the second edition (Amsterdam, 1633) a preface contained the fateful words, *Textum ergo habes nunc ab omnibus receptum*. This text became known as the *Textus Receptus*.

This situation continued with more and more variant readings printed in the margin of the same received text and culminated in John Mill’s *Novum Testamentum* (Oxford, 1707), which listed an estimated 30,000 variant readings. The nascent Deist movement in England seized upon the number of variant readings in Mill’s *magnum opus* to cast doubt on the reliability of the supposedly inerrant text of the Bible. Anthony Collins used this strategy effectively in his witty *Discourse of Free-Thinking* (1713), which attracted prominent opponents. Jonathan Swift composed a mock simplification of Collins’s work aimed at simple-minded Free-Thinkers. Classicist Richard Bentley took seriously the parts of Collins’s book that discussed the large number of variant readings. Bentley showed that the fact that there was more evidence for the text of the New Testament than for any classical author was a good thing.

Answering Collins led Bentley to examine the text of the New Testament. He began collecting evidence for a new edition that would take advantage of the earliest witnesses. He saw the importance of the Old Uncials of the fourth and fifth centuries, especially codex Vaticanus, known nowadays as B and 03. Bentley promised a text using Vaticanus B, along with the oldest manuscripts of Jerome’s Latin Vulgate and the Biblical quotations from early Church Fathers, which had been ignored. His goal was to restore the Greek text of the fourth century AD, which was a thousand years closer to the time of the composition of the Gospels and the Pauline Epistles than the manuscripts of any classical work of the fifth and fourth centuries BC, known from medieval Greek manuscripts from the ninth and tenth centuries AD or even later.

Bentley never ended up publishing his edition and his ideas were largely ignored in England, but they were valued in Germany and led the great German classicist, Karl Lachmann, who also edited an important edition of the Latin poet Lucretius, to produce a New Testament text on the lines of Bentley’s proposal. This project was picked up by the German scholar Tischendorf and the English scholars Westcott and Hort, whose texts aimed at replacing the *Textus Receptus* with the fourth century witnesses favored by Bentley. This led the German scholar, Eberhard Nestle, to edit his *Novum Testamentum Graece*, using the editions of Tischendorf and Westcott and Hort. Where these two texts differed, Nestle

used the Greek text of Weymouth to settle disagreements between them for his first two editions (1898, 1899). From the third edition (1901) on he used the text of Bernhard Weiss to settle disagreements. After his passing his son Erwin Nestle continued his father’s design with a real *apparatus criticus* appearing in the 13th edition (1927) through the twenty-fifth edition (1963), by which time Kurt Aland had joined him. The text was called Nestle-Aland (NA). For the twenty-sixth edition Aland joined a committee of textual scholars who were working on *The Greek New Testament* (UBS). They settled the text by voting on the readings. Meanwhile Aland collected at the University of Münster copies and collations of the papyri and ancient and medieval manuscripts of the New Testament, along with the evidence of versions (translations), quotations by Church Fathers and lectionaries. The decisions of the committee were presented and explained by the American Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on The Greek New Testament* (1971; Stuttgart, 2000).

By the twenty-eighth edition a new editorial committee had taken over editing Nestle-Aland and *The Greek New Testament*. Both were printing essentially the same text. Over the past quarter century, the new committee accepted what they called a radically new method for editing the New Testament, named the Coherence-Based Genealogical Method (CBGM), which was used to establish the text of the Catholic Epistles for NA²⁹ = UBS⁵).

Scholars seeking to establish the text of the New Testament face two major problems. One is the large number of New Testament papyri and manuscripts, which contain an even larger number of variant readings. Even the 30,000 variants in John Mills’s edition of 1707 are only a sample of all New Testament variant readings. The Institute for New Testament Textual Research (Institut für Neutestamentliche Textforschung=INTF) in Münster has computerized the readings of key New Testament papyri and manuscripts. Scholars there developed a program that allows researchers to investigate readings and their distribution in different witnesses.

For many manuscript traditions this is not an unsolvable problem. Manuscripts are copied from earlier manuscripts. When this is done carefully, scholars can draw up a map or stemma (the technical term) showing how later copies are related to earlier ones. The difference of one generation of manuscripts from the next is merely the occasional miscopying, which is inevitable in any human enterprise. *Errare humanum est*. Karl Lachmann applied this method to the text of Lucretius and it is still called Lachmann’s Method. The method is fully but briefly presented in Paul Maas, *Textkritik* (Leipzig, 1927; 31957 = *Textual Criticism* (Oxford, 1958).

In popular traditions such as Homer and the New Testament, scribes remember variant readings. For example, Saul’s vision of Jesus in Acts 6:5-6 is supplemented in many Vulgate manuscripts with words from 26:14 and 22:10 but found in no Greek manuscript in Acts 6. Erasmus added the Greek from 26:14 and 22:10 to his text of Acts 6:5-6. The technical term for this activity is “contamination.” *Gegen die Kontamination ist kein Kraut gewachsen*, Paul Maas wrote. “There is no cure for contamination.” (*Textual Criticism*, p. 49) David C. Parker, *Textual Scholarship and the Making of the New Testament* (Oxford, 2012) 84 believes that the Coherence-Based Genealogical Method is the cure Maas despaired of. INTF does not claim so much. Just apply the program to the variant readings in the computer and the computer will supply the range of variants. At key stages of the complex process INTF has

developed, however, the editor or committee of editors still needs to interpret the raw data. They must employ the rules of judging between (or among) variant readings developed by scholars in the millennia since textual research began in earnest in the Alexandrian Library in the third century BC. As Günther Zuntz wrote, “He who enters the company of workers in this field joins himself to a chain of tradition reaching back, without interruption, to ancient Alexandria.” (G. Zuntz, *The Text of the Epistles: A Disquisition upon the Corpus Paulinum* [London, 1953] 4)

Zuntz’s may be the best book ever published on the textual criticism of the New Testament that is not a critical edition. He is responding to the ways in which the papyri discoveries of the twentieth century have modified the ideas of Bentley, Lachmann and Westcott and Hort. The latter two had divided New Testament manuscripts into “groups” or “recensions” (The CBGM prefers to call them “text-types”) associated with parts of the Mediterranean: Western (Codex Bezae, Latin manuscripts), Alexandrian (the great Uncials and early papyri), Caesarean (Origen, Eusebius, 565 700) and Syrian (later manuscripts). Syrian is now called Byzantine. Editions of Nestle-Aland have treated Byzantine readings as usually wrong, while the great Uncials are often right, but there are true readings in the other groups. Zuntz showed (1) that the Byzantine group contains many true readings and (2) the remaining groups have contamination with one another. “There is in fact hardly any alignment of witnesses imaginable, right across the delimitation of the ‘recensions,’ that does not actually occur.” (Zuntz, *Text of the Epistles*, p. 6)

There is much that is unclear or at least contested about the CBGM to which INTF scholars are committed. At several key points, however, their research agrees or overlaps with Zuntz’s insights. Since the readings of the manuscripts associated with most of the traditional text-types show shifting allegiances, CBGM scholars deny that they are real, with one exception. “Only the Byzantine text is now identified as a clearly unified entity. No other text-type, not even the Alexandrian, emerged clearly from the CBGM’s data.” (Peter J. Gurry, *A Critical Examination of the Coherence-Based Genealogical Method in New Testament Textual Criticism* [Leiden, 2017] 69) CBGM scholars show “a new regard for Byzantine manuscripts which contain a text deemed ‘extremely reliable’...” (Gurry, p. 19)

“The Byzantine text must be reconstructed.” (G. Zuntz, “The Byzantine Text in New Testament Criticism,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 43 [1942] 25-30 = *Opuscula Selecta* [Manchester, 1972] 278-283) Zuntz argues that establishing the text-type of most Greek NT manuscripts would help scholars by [1] giving a clear basis for collation, [2] “defining divergent forms of the text and... [3] relieving the apparatus criticus.” (Zuntz, *Opuscula Selecta*, p. 280).

Zuntz points out that there are cultural and religious reasons for establishing and publishing the Byzantine or what some scholars prefer to call the Majority text. “In the breathless pursuit of ‘the original text’ one may profitably pause to glance at the only universal text of the New Testament that ever existed. This, after all, was the book of books to medieval Eastern Christianity.” (Zuntz, *Opuscula Selecta*, p. 280) One could make a parallel case for the role of the Majority/Byzantine text in the life of Protestant churches since the sixteenth century and for establishing and publishing a form of that text based on the manuscripts and lectionaries. (This will

not satisfy those who prefer the *Textus Receptus*.) My experience is that few Missouri Synod Pastors want to reject the Longer Ending of Mark and even theological liberals and moderates do not want to see the pericope *de adultera* disappear down the textual memory hole.

In fact, the editorial committee for Nestle-Aland and *The Greek New Testament* have largely replaced the pursuit of the “original text” in favor of establishing what they call the “initial text” or *Ausgangstext*, the hypothetical source of the readings of the witnesses. Gerd Mink explains, „ Der *Ausgangstext* is der Text, von dem die gesamte Überlieferung ihren Ausgang nimmt. “ („ Eine umfassende Genealogie der neutestamentliche Überlieferung, “ *New Testament Studies* 30, no. 4 [1993] 482) In CBGM the witnesses are the texts recoverable from Greek papyri and manuscripts, versions, quotations from Church Fathers and Byzantine lectionaries. (Gurry, *Critical Examination*, p. 5) Earlier scholars, like Bentley and Lachmann, knew they could vouch for the New Testament text as it existed in the fourth century AD. Papyrus discoveries have since brought the age of parts of the text down to about 200 AD. As Zuntz saw, it is also worthwhile to establish the New Testament text of Late Antiquity and the Greek Middle Ages, the basis of the great translations of Martin Luther, William Tyndale and the King James Version that still influence translators and move readers. It might even be the original text. I suggest, while we wait for the results of the labors of the editorial committee of Nestle-Aland, that the LCMS follow Zuntz’s suggestion and establish and publish the Majority (*alias* Byzantine) text of the New Testament. I end with a draft of a resolution to the next national convention of the LCMS.

To Publish a New Testament Based on the Majority (Byzantine) Text for Teaching and Worship

WHEREAS, for scholars associated with the standard Nestle-Aland text of the New Testament, “Only the Byzantine Text is now identified as a clearly unified entity.” (Peter J. Gurry, *A Critical Examination of the Coherence-Based Genealogical Method in New Testament Textual Criticism* [Leiden, 2017] 69; and

WHEREAS, the Byzantine or Majority Text is “the only universal text of the New Testament that ever existed. This ... was the book of books to medieval Eastern Christianity.” (G. Zuntz, “The Byzantine Text in New Testament Criticism,” *Opuscula Selecta* [Manchester, 1972] 280; and

WHEREAS, forms of the Majority or Byzantine Text were the basis of Luther’s and Tyndale’s translations and the King James Version of the New Testament; therefore be it

Resolved, “The Byzantine text must be reconstructed.” (G. Zuntz, “The Byzantine Text in New Testament Criticism,” *Opuscula Selecta* [Manchester, 1972] 280; and be it further

Resolved, that the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod commit to establish and publish a Greek text of the Majority or Byzantine text-type; and be it further

Resolved, that a committee be formed to establish this text under the leadership of the President of Concordia Theological Seminary Fort Wayne; and be it further

Resolved, that the committee report to the next national Convention of the LCMS on its progress; and be it further

Resolved, that the resulting text be published by Concordia Publishing House; and be it finally

Resolved, that the LCMS encourage the use of this text when published for teaching and worship in LCMS schools, colleges, universities and seminaries.

Lutheran Concerns Association
149 Glenview Drive
New Kensington, PA 15068-4921



Lutheran Concerns Association
March 2025

Lutheran Clarion

The official publication of the
Lutheran Concerns Association,
a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization
Circulation: 6,200

In This Issue:

**What is Narrative Criticism and
How is it Being Used Today?**

***Textual Criticism:
Influence and Application***

Published regularly to support issues and causes in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod which build faithfulness to the true Confessional Lutheranism and to be a clear voice of Christian concern against actions and causes which conflict with faithfulness to the One True Faith. LCA consents to readers reproducing articles provided the entire article, plus footnotes, is included in the reproduction and full attribution given.

The address for all matters pertaining to the LCA is:
149 Glenview Drive
New Kensington, PA 15068-4921

Editorial Board: Rev. Andrew Preus – Managing Editor
Dr. Christian Kopff Rev. Jerome Panzigrau
Mr. Jim Runzheimer Dr. Bruce Schultz

Layout, Printing & Mailing: Mr. Ronald Kabitzke

Faithful Lutherans who are members of LCMS congregations are invited to submit articles for consideration. Inquires are welcome. Manuscripts will be edited. Views and judgments expressed in articles are the author's own and do not necessarily represent those of LCA. Please email articles to Rev. Andrew Preus, ajpreus@gmail.com (563)329.0943.
The Board of Directors for the LCA:

Mr. Mark Franke (President)
Dr. John F. Lang (Vice-President)
Rev. Jerome Panzigrau (Secretary-Treasurer)

Mr. David Finck Rev. Andrew Preus
Mr. Ronald Kabitzke Mr. James D. Runzheimer
Dr. Christian Kopff Dr. Bruce Schultz
Rev. Dr. Martin Noland

<https://lutheranclarion.org>