

RHETORICAL CRITICISM AND THE AFFECTIVE DIMENSION OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT

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ABSTRACT

In the years since James Muilenburg challenged biblical scholars to move beyond form criticism, rhetorical criticism has become an accepted method within Old Testament studies. Biblical scholars, however, have been hesitant to examine the affective argument of biblical rhetoric, what Aristotle called *pathos*. This article suggests that the biblical documents advocate for certain agendas, and they use both logical and affective proofs to form their arguments. Therefore, what is offered here is a critical approach to examining the affective content of the biblical text, not as a new method, but as one part of the larger hermeneutical strategy.

INTRODUCTION

More than 45 years have passed since James Muilenburg's presidential address at the 1968 meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, in which he challenged biblical scholars to move beyond the methodology of form criticism and to pursue what he called "rhetorical criticism" (Muilenburg 1969:1-18). Muilenburg, himself an accomplished form critic, argued that form criticism had produced impressive results, but by creating a typology of forms and focusing on commonalities, form criticism tended to ignore the particularities and specificities of each individual text (Muilenburg 1969:5). He insisted that the meaning of the text is not exhausted by identifying the forms and their functions within the community but that each text

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deserves to be studied as a unique piece of rhetoric in which the biblical writer advocates for certain ideologies, beliefs, and values. Muilenburg anticipated the likely charge of subjectivity, but he claimed that by staying close to the text interpreters could reach valid critical readings of biblical rhetoric.

Although Muilenburg was not the first scholar to study biblical rhetoric, his stature in the academy guaranteed that his proposal would find acceptance within biblical scholarship. Thus, rhetorical criticism grew quickly in its appeal and is now recognised widely in the academy as a valuable approach to biblical studies (Davies 2013:107-112). However, despite the contemporary plethora of rhetorical studies, one area of rhetoric continues to be undervalued and generally avoided. That neglected component of rhetoric is the affective argument of the text, what Aristotle called *pathos*. Textbooks on exegesis and hermeneutics virtually ignore the affective aspect of the text. For example, Grant Osborn's massive volume, *The hermeneutical spiral* (1991), Douglas Stuart's *Old Testament exegesis* (2001), and Gordon Fee's *New Testament exegesis* (1993) all lack instruction on interpreting affective language. Surprisingly, the volume devoted to biblical rhetoric in the Hebrew Bible, edited by de Regt, de Waard, and Fokkelman (1996) also lacks any noticeable attention to affective rhetoric.

It is my contention that the shaping of a community's worldview, ethics, opinions, and theology is influenced by both logical reasoning and affective desire. The basic affections of humanity – love, gratitude, hope, hate, fear, belonging, intimacy, purpose – are instruments that are used in all types of media to produce a change of attitude, will, or behaviour in the implied audience. Advertisers, for example, use their advertisements to create desire. Apple CEO Steve Jobs remarked that “people don't know what they want until you show it to them” (Jobs & Beahm 2011:1997). I posit further that the biblical writers adopted a rhetorical approach that took advantage of what they knew to be true about human dependence upon pathos as a constituent of the decision making process. Ancient rhetoricians such as Demosthenes and Cicero made extensive use of pathos in their speeches. Modern leaders who were skilled in the use of pathos changed the course of history. Affective appeal was a key component

of arguments advanced by Nelson Mandela, Mohandas Ghandi, Winston Churchill, Martin Luther King, Jr., John F. Kennedy (and, on the negative front, Adolf Hitler). Inasmuch as affective argumentation has been utilised by many effective rhetoricians, is it not possible that it was also utilized by biblical writers? Therefore, I argue here that the affective dimension of biblical rhetoric should be taken seriously as a necessary ingredient of a complete exegetical and hermeneutical approach to the biblical text. This is not an affirmation of non-critical approaches, nor is it a move to create a new interpretational method, but only to suggest that no matter what methods are used, an examination of the affective component of the text must be included as a part of the holistic interpretational process. Part of my concern is to clarify and bring to the foreground an element of interpretation that heretofore has been lurking foggily in the background. If we are to be truly critical, in the best sense of the word, we must be comprehensive in our goals and methods.

THE AFFECTIVE COMPONENT OF RHETORICAL CRITICISM

According to Aristotle (384-322 BCE), “Rhetoric may be defined as a faculty of discovering all the possible means of persuasion on any subject” (Aristotle & Welldon 1886:10). Similarly, rhetorical criticism as practiced by biblical scholars examines “the literary artistry of a biblical book or biblical passage and ... the techniques that they used to manipulate their readers, to argue their case, and to persuade their audience of the validity of their argument” (Davies 2013:108).

Aristotle’s rules of classical rhetoric call for affective argumentation in addition to rational proof (Garver 1994:104-138). Aristotle “knew that practical life required rhetoric and that rhetoric could not be reduced to logic” (Booth 1974:144). Aristotle taught that once the rational argument has been presented, “the next thing is to work upon the emotions of the audience, such as compassion, indignation, anger, hatred, envy, jealousy and contentiousness” (Aristotle & Welldon 1886:301). Therefore, the rhetorician must “study the nature and quality of the several emotions, the sources from which they spring and the methods of exciting them” (Aristotle & Welldon

1886:12).²

Even before Aristotle, the Greek rhetorician Gorgias (c. 485-380 BCE) argued that “the function of an orator is not logical demonstration so much as emotional presentation that will stir the audience’s will to believe” (Kennedy 1999:36). Kennedy argues that the use of “emotional impact” was present in the rhetorical approaches of Socrates and Plato as well (1999:69).

A number of classical rhetorical critics have called for a new appreciation of affective rhetoric. Michael Hyde (1984:120-132), Barbara Warnick (1989), Thomas Conley (1984:168-187) and others have lamented the failure of contemporary rhetorical theorists to develop an appreciation for the affective dimension of rhetoric. Garrett suggests that the neglect of affectivity “is due to the stigmatization of the emotions ... The conflict between emotion and reason, the heart versus the mind, echoes the conflict between the subjective and the objective” (Garrett 1993:19). She points out that there has always existed an unhealthy dichotomy between reason and emotion and that it is the “privileging of *logos* [i.e., reason] that is largely responsible for the historically recurring fragmentation of rhetoric’s wholeness” (Garrett 1993:20). Even representatives of the natural sciences are recognizing the interconnectedness of *logos* and *pathos*, and they acknowledge the need for an integrated approach to scientific proof (Waddell 1990:381).³

The use of affective argumentation is found outside of classical rhetoric as well. Garrett writes that Chinese rhetoric from the period of 500 to 200 B.C.E. was more holistic than Western rhetoric, in that it assumed an anthropological “interdependence” of human faculties of reason and emotion, and it did not privilege one over the other (Garrett 1993:33). It might be argued that the rhetoric of the Hebrew Bible depends upon a similar non-Western anthropology that does not allow for a dichotomy between rational and affective argument. Although it is helpful for the sake of argument to distinguish between rational proofs and affective proofs, that distinction must not

² For more on classical rhetoric, see Golden (2003), Porter (2001), and Spengel (1854).

³ The field of rhetorical inquiry is very broad and cannot be fully engaged in this short paper. The question of affect (*pathos*) as a rhetorical device in the Bible is worthy of an entire thesis or monograph.

become absolute because *logos* always includes an element of emotion and *pathos* is in part rational. Booth asserts that “evidence and emotion” cannot be separated; thus affective considerations constitute “good reason” for beliefs and actions (Booth 1974:158-163; cf. Haidt 2012:52-56).

THE AFFECTIVE NATURE OF HUMANITY

Recent studies have demonstrated that human beings are not primarily rational creatures. Jonathan Haidt has published his findings from many years of clinical psychological research in a book entitled *The righteous mind: Why good people are divided by politics and religion*. He argues that David Hume was correct in his insistence that “reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to be any other office than to serve and obey them” (Haidt 2012:29). He also concludes that reasoning is utilized not as people search for truth, but rather reasoning is used “in support of their emotional reactions” (Haidt 2012:29, 61). According to Haidt, “Western philosophy has been worshipping reason and distrusting the passions for thousands of years” (Haidt 2012:34). He insists that “the worship of reason, which is sometimes found in philosophical and scientific circles, is a delusion” (Haidt 2012:107, 34, 103). Because humans do not make choices on the basis of reason, he declares that people cannot be convinced to change “by utterly refuting their arguments” (Haidt 2012:57). Convincing someone to change his or her mind is achieved much more easily by appealing to deep-seated affections.

James K. A. Smith offers a similar assessment but from a philosophical and theological perspective. In his book *Desiring the kingdom* (2009), Smith argues that humans are fundamentally affective rather than rational creatures, and that human behaviour is ruled by the affections rather than by the mind. He writes that the rational model, “as old as Plato but rebirthed by Descartes and cultivated throughout modernity, sees the human person as fundamentally a thinking thing” (Smith 2009:41). The rationalist picture of the human person as a thinking animal, however, has been contested with a second view of humanity: “the human person as believer” (Smith

2009:43). This view emphasizes the fact that underneath all human thought is the belief in a certain worldview. Smith describes “both the person-as-thinker and the person-as-believer models as reductionistic” (Smith 2009:46). He argues convincingly that the way humans “inhabit the world is not primarily as thinkers, or even believers, but as more affective, embodied creatures” (Smith 2009:47).

The conclusions of both Haidt and Smith demonstrate that Aristotle was correct to include *pathos* as one element of rhetorical argumentation. I would suggest that what Haidt, Smith, Aristotle, and others have discerned through careful study, others have observed by common-sense observation of human nature.

THE AFFECTIVE DIMENSION OF BIBLICAL RHETORIC

Effective communicators (including the biblical writers) understand that holistic argumentation includes both logical and affective proofs. The modest argument of this paper is that the interpretation of the biblical text should include an investigation of the affective argument of the text. Words carry meaning, and that meaning extends beyond the bounds of the rational and into the realm of the emotive. I argue that a holistic interpretation of biblical literature must include attention not only to the ideational/rational content of the text but also to its affective/emotive dimension. I suggest that one function of literature, and especially of biblical rhetoric, is to evoke the passions. That is, the ideological agenda of biblical texts is to convince the readers not only of what they should think (orthodoxy) and what they should do (orthopraxy) but also what they should desire (orthopathy). To say it another way, the text contributes to both intellectual and affective learning, which aims to develop emotional and moral sensitivities and to achieve a deep commitment to certain values. Every text includes an affective dimension, which may involve hope or despair, love or hate, trust or fear, admiration or scorn, pride or shame, joy or despondency, to mention but a few examples. The study of biblical literature, therefore, can benefit from an exegetical approach that appreciates the affective dimensions of the text. Muraoka writes, “one ought not to dissociate form from meaning, for literary and

rhetorical devices constitute part of the meaning and message” (Muraoka 1996:x).

I posit that the affective dimension of the text has been overlooked and underutilized in the academic study of Scripture. It might be argued that the affective dimension is too “subjective” and “slippery” to be included in academic study, and for this reason biblical scholarship has given little attention to this dimension of the biblical literature. In response to the charge of subjectivity, I would state that my proposal should not be confused with spiritual meanings, allegory, confessional interpretations, or reflections on how one “feels” about the text. Instead, I am arguing for a critical evaluation of the affective dimension of the text, based not on how we feel about it, but based upon the content of the text itself. Moreover, to seek to understand the ideational/rational content of a text without also seeking to examine its emotive potential is to “skew the text’s message” (Baker 1995:34-38). I echo the sentiments of Rickie Moore who writes that “the prominent presence of passion in the biblical writings themselves, a presence which has been long overlooked or dismissed by the *dispassionate* modes of scholarship which have until recently monopolized modern biblical study” (Moore 1997:37, original emphasis). Also, I admit that assessing the affective mood of a biblical text may be a difficult process, but the fact that it is slippery makes it no less important.

Scholars have attended to the rational approach and rightly so, because as scholars and proponents of critical methodologies, they are by definition rational practitioners. Critical methods are rational by definition; however, I would suggest that biblical scholars should attend also to elements of the biblical text that are artistic and emotive. Critical methods are a necessary corrective to the precritical dependence on spiritual and allegorical interpretations, but now critical scholars must be reminded that a critical approach will consider every dimension of the text. Newer approaches such as socio-linguistics, speech act theory, *Wirkungsgeschichte*, narrative criticism, and other reader-oriented approaches all beg for something more than a hermeneutic focused on rational, logical ideas. My point is that every aspect of the text should be considered, and the affective dimension is one aspect of the text. Walter Brueggemann advises, “The texts of the Old Testament characteristically have an affective dimension, and to

look only for cognitive content will most often miss the point” (Brueggemann 2008:36).

A CRITICAL APPROACH TO AFFECTIVE LANGUAGE

Ideas are propelled not only by reasoned argument but also by emotive packaging. To ignore either the reasoned argument or the emotive package, I would argue, is to be incomplete in one’s interpretation. Biblical interpretation allows for, even demands, the utilization of a variety of methods and approaches. Therefore, within a holistic biblical hermeneutic, the affective dimension of Scripture is only one of the many dimensions of the text that should be investigated as a part of sound exegesis.

A critical approach to the interpretation of affective language might be described in two steps. First, the interpreter must acknowledge and identify the affective dimensions of the text; and second, the affective language should be interpreted with the same care that is afforded to propositional or rational content.

The acknowledgement of affective language is by no means automatic or common for scholars, who tend to concentrate their attention upon ideational/rational content. Every text includes an affective dimension, but the level of affective content varies from one text to another, depending upon the genre of the text in question. The highest concentration of affective language will be found in the poetic literature such as that found in the psalms, the prophets, and the apocalyptic literature. The message of psalmic or prophetic poetry cannot be described by examination of the logical argument alone; in fact, there are times that poetry contains no logical argument. “The poet ... will not do a political analysis or an economic assessment ... he means to cut underneath such analysis that permits an argument” (Brueggemann 1986:36). In addition to the critical focus on historical settings and backgrounds, biblical studies can profit from a study of the rhetoric of the psalms.

Like the psalms, prophetic rhetoric also depends heavily upon affective proof. Abraham Heschel observes, “the aesthetic literary quality of biblical writing as well as the kinship of Hebrew prophecy and poetry have long remained unnoticed ... students

paid little attention to the sheer poetry and beauty found in it” (Heschel 1962:2.148). He adds, “The prophet’s words are outbursts of violent emotions” (Heschel 1962:1.4). Heschel notes that the language of the prophetic text “is luminous and explosive, firm and contingent, harsh and compassionate, a fusion of contradictions ... His tone, rarely sweet or caressing, is frequently consoling and disburdening; his words are often slashing, even horrid – designed to shock” (Heschel 1962:1.7). Walter Brueggemann concurs; he writes, “The hope-filled language of prophecy ... is the language of amazement ... The language of amazement is against the despair just as the language of grief is against the numbness” (Brueggemann 1978:69). Commenting further, Brueggemann argues that prophetic rhetoric “is an invitation to seek for language that is passionate, dangerous, and imaginative enough to make available the passion, danger, and freedom of God who summons us to God’s own conflict” (Brueggemann 1986:15).

Wisdom literature also contains a high concentration of affective language, though the subject matter is different from that of the psalms and the prophets. The fact that the Proverbs are initially addressed to “my son” (1:8) is an affective device. Furthermore, individual proverbs often appeal to affective language in order to influence the behaviour of the hearers. In Chapter One alone, we find reference to those who are “greedy for gain” (v. 19). We read that “fools hate knowledge” (vv. 22, 29), and they “despise” wisdom’s rebuke (v. 30). We learn that wisdom will “laugh at” and “mock” the foolish when their calamity comes (v. 26).

The New Testament epistles often contain high concentrations of affective language, but those concentrations vary from one epistle to another. In one of the few studies of affective rhetoric, DiCicco describes Paul’s rhetorical use of *pathos* in 2 Corinthians 10-13 (DiCicco 1995:36-77, 113-64, and 188-241). Sumney, in another important piece (2002:339-354), applies the classical categories of “pathos, ethos, and logos” to his study of the rhetoric of Colossians. In summarizing Paul’s use of *pathos*, Sumney argues that Paul evokes “love and pity”; he “arouses fear”; and he evokes “shame” (2002:342). I would argue further that the familial and affectionate tone of Paul’s epistle to the Philippians must be contrasted to the more formal tone of

Romans, the accusatory tone of Galatians, and the corrective tone of First Corinthians.

The lowest concentration of affective language will be found in the narrative texts, but even the most simple narrative creates a certain tone to which the reader responds unconsciously. Regarding the language of Genesis 22, for example, in which Abraham and Isaac address one another as father and son (vv. 7-8), carry on an intimate conversation, then proceed “the two of them together” (vv. 6, 8), “the pathos could scarcely be greater” (Edgerton 1992:80).

Because the level of affective content varies from one text to another, the importance of examining the affective dimension also varies. When interpreting the psalms, the prophets, and other highly emotive texts, an investigation of the affective language and tone is crucial. These texts simply cannot be understood if the affective dimension is overlooked.

The process of identifying the affective content of a text begins with locating any words or phrases whose content is explicitly affective. Words that signify “love”, “hate”, “anger”, “desire”, “fear”, “hope”, and “gratitude” are affective by definition and are easily located. In addition to naming the explicitly affective terminology, the passage should be examined for more subtle indicators of affective tone. Even without explicitly affective terminology, the literary shaping of the text creates an affective dimension that can be evaluated (though with more difficulty). For example, an examination of the Samuel, Saul, and David stories reveals that Samuel is presented in such a way that the reader develops confidence in Samuel’s integrity and authority. The reader, therefore, does not question Samuel’s actions in regard to the deposing of Saul and the choosing of David. Furthermore, Saul is presented in ways that make the reader distrustful of him. Finally, David enters the story as a humble, faithful, and brave youth who is the ideal leader. However, when David commits adultery and murder and when David fails to protect his daughter Tamar, the reader is confronted with a depiction of David that is dark and troubling.

Once the affective content of the text has been identified, it should be interpreted with the same care that is afforded to propositional or rational content. The goal is to determine how the tone may contribute to shaping the reader’s perceptions of the text,

that is, to determine how the implied reader (and/or readers from any specific reading community or context) might be influenced by the affective dimensions of the text.

CASE STUDIES

Any number of biblical passages might be used as case studies for the significance of affective language. Let us look very briefly at three examples:

Jonah

In an article devoted to the puzzling final verse of the book of Jonah, Rickie Moore calls attention to the passionate language found in the book (Moore 1997:35-48). The message of the book of Jonah emerges in part from those elements that are hidden in the first half of the book but which rise to the surface in the second half. Jonah's motive for fleeing, which is hidden in the beginning, becomes clear in the second part of the book. Jonah's feelings, his passions, are subdued in the first half of the book, but they burst forth in the second half. At the beginning of Jonah's story, he is dispassionate, apathetic, and indifferent to his own fate. Even during the storm, "when life and death were at stake, he remained withdrawn" (von Rad 1962:292).

In the second half of the book, Yahweh relents on his threat to destroy the Ninevites, and Jonah explodes in anger. He is so angry that he prays to die. Apparently he no longer desires to live in a world where his enemies are offered a reprieve and where evil is so quickly pardoned. The passions of Jonah are further explored in the dialogues between Yahweh and Jonah in chapter four. Is it possible that by highlighting the animosity of Jonah towards the Ninevites, the story may provoke the reader to examine his or her own hostilities towards the "other"?

Judges 10

In a previous article (Martin 2005:731-732) I proposed that the God of the book Judges is vulnerable to internal conflict. In Judges 10, Yahweh is angry; he is so angry that he refuses to save his covenant people from oppression. "I have saved you seven

times,” declares Yahweh, “but I will not save you again” (v. 13). Yes, God is angry; he is so angry that he speaks with broken grammar (v. 11) (Martin 2008:204-206). He is so angry that he becomes sarcastic: “Go and cry out to the gods that you have chosen. They will save you” (v. 14). He is so angry that when the Israelites repent for the second time, he remains silent. However, the anger of Yahweh, though genuine and intense, is not enduring.

Yahweh can be angry, but he also can be moved with intense compassion; he is grieved by Israel’s suffering; he suffers with them. The narrator tells us that “Yahweh is grieved by Israel’s suffering” (v. 16). The words of v. 16 indicate a draining, depleting, diminishing, exhausting compassion. Yahweh appears to be torn in two directions (Pressler 2002:198). According to Fiddes, this inner conflict is “the torment of God’s desire for his people, a longing which is suffused by a sense of failure and disappointment. ‘Struggle’ within God” is an expression of his pain (Fiddes 1988:23-24). Yahweh will not be manipulated and exploited, but he suffers when his people suffer. It is a tension that remains unresolved in the book of Judges (Martin 2009:356-372).

Psalm 1

In an article published in 2010, I argued that the common interpretation of Psalm 1 as a call for obedience does not quite capture the emphasis of the text (Martin 2010:708-727). Specifically, the psalm affirms the person who “delights” (יִפְתֵּחַ) in God’s instruction (1:2), thus pointing to the affections rather than to behaviour as the key element of the righteous person. The ideological agenda of Psalm 1 is to persuade the reader to delight in and meditate upon the Torah (Gitay 1996:236). Overstating the demand for obedience ignores the important affective dimension of the psalm. That the word “delight” (יִפְתֵּחַ) has reference to the affections is discerned from its usage and is confirmed by the lexica, which define the Hebrew word as “joy, delight” (Köhler 2001:340; cf. Clines 2009:127), “delight, pleasure” (Brown 1979:343). It denotes “the direction of one’s heart or passion” (Van Gemeren 1997:231), a pleasurable emotional attraction (Harris, Archer, & Waltke 1980:310-311).

Instead of calling for obedience to the Torah, Psalm 1 evokes affection for the Torah. As Craig Broyles notes, “The blessed one is thus identified not ... by mere behavior but by attitude” (Broyles 1999:42). Psalm 1:2 suggests that delight in the Torah “is the determining and effective disposition of the truly happy life” (Kraus 1988:117). The entire Psalm includes no commands or injunctions, and it includes no language that falls within the semantic range of “obey”. The language is that of affirmation (“Blessed is the man”), which evokes a desire for righteousness by means of the indirect and subtle effect of the poem’s inviting and hopeful mood. The hearer of Psalm 1 is told that the person who delights in the Torah will flourish like a well-watered tree. Therefore, the emphasis of Psalm 1 is not upon deeds but delight, not on duty but desire, not on obedience but on affections that are rightly oriented towards God.

CONCLUSION

While I acknowledge that historical-criticism is a valuable method of biblical scholarship, I have argued that the affective dimension of the biblical text should not be neglected, particularly when the method of rhetorical criticism is employed.

It was James Muilenburg who marked out the beginning of the rhetorical path of interpretation, and it is one of his students, Walter Brueggemann, who has followed that path to a fruitful field of biblical study. Although he never refers to his own work as an affective reading, Brueggemann has acknowledged as much in his published response to my recent review (Martin 2013) of one of his books. Brueggemann responds, “Martin writes of ‘the affective dimension of prophetic imagination’, ... I resonate completely with that view ... I have no doubt that an honest affective articulation is urgent” (Brueggemann 2013:183).

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