

AN APOLOGETIC FOR STYLISTICS IN BIBLICAL STUDIES

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"There was never a more nimble mind than that of Paul, and he knew how to adapt himself to every mood of his readers or hearers without any sacrifice of principle." So A. T. Robertson captures what so many other people have also sensed about Paul's writing style. He continues: "It was no declaimer's tricks, but love for the souls of men that made him become all things to all men (1 Cor. 9:22). He could change his tone because he loved the Galatians even when they had been led astray (Gal. 4:20)."¹

Paul's style does seem to change. Robertson aptly describes his style as "abrupt, paradoxical, bold, antithetical, now like a torrent, now like a summer brook."²

But how do we go beyond merely expressing our intuitive and subjective reactions to the style of a text to having more objective and quantitative data with which to test our intuitions?

Stylistics (as a secular discipline) is a very helpful tool for Biblical scholars in order that we might realize the potentiality of style to disclose meaning. This essay will introduce stylistics, discuss why stylistics is appropriate for both NT and OT studies, and suggest why stylistics is a viable methodology for evangelicals.

I. WHAT IS STYLISTICS?

"Stylistics" denotes the use of linguistics as a tool of literary criticism by which to investigate the aesthetic effects of language. Both literary and linguistic studies are interested in the study of language and, more particularly, style. Linguistics, however, may employ a literary work only as a source or document by which to compose a history of a language. Linguistics becomes a tool of literary criticism when it too studies the aesthetic effects of a language. To be part of literary criticism, "style itself must be the object of contemplation."³

1. *A brief history of stylistics.* The English term "stylistics" first appeared

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¹A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (4th ed.; Nashville: Broadman, 1934) 1199.

²Ibid., p. 129.

³R. A. Lanham, *Style: An Anti-Textbook* (New Haven: Yale University, 1974) 13.

in 1882–83. Interestingly its introduction was in NT studies, when Philip Schaff wrote in the *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* about “giving proper place to New Testament stylistics and rhetoric.”⁴ “Stylistics” as a discipline is new, but it has extensive roots in ancient rhetoric, criticism, grammar and philology.⁵ At times it has been made into a subdivision of linguistics, at times a subdivision of literary studies or rhetoric.

The history of stylistics can be traced either through literary studies or through linguistics. From the perspective of the discipline of literature, stylistics (the application of linguistics to literature) may be seen as one of the developments of the “new rhetoric” commonly associated with such scholars as Ivor A. Richards and Kenneth Burke.⁶

From the perspective of the discipline of linguistics, stylistics is one of many new disciplines that have arisen as a result of the interdisciplinary interests of linguistics. In the United States, Archibald Hill, Samuel Levin and Richard Ohmann were most prominent among linguistic scholars who sought to combine the studies of language and literature.⁷

Hill’s 1955 study⁸ has now become famous as a stellar example of a proper movement from linguistic analysis to literary value. Levin’s contribution was to make a generative-transformational grammar a useful tool for studying poetry.⁹ Ohmann was probably the first scholar to suggest the feasibility of using generative-transformational grammar as a model to analyze prose style. According to Roman Jakobson, the 1962 Ninth International Congress of Linguistics is the first linguistics congress to apportion a special section to deal with stylistics and poetics. At a paper delivered at this congress M. A. K. Halliday coined the term “linguistic stylistics” to signify “the description of literary texts, by methods derived from general linguistic theory, using the

⁴H. Bradley, “Stylistic,” *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles* (1919), 9, part 1, 1208.

⁵For a survey of rhetoric from the fifth century B.C. through twentieth-century stylistics see E. P. J. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* (2d ed.; New York: Oxford University, 1971) 594–630. F. C. Grant surveys early rhetoric and its influence on the NT in “Rhetoric and Oratory,” *IDB*, 4, 75–77. G. A. Kennedy discusses “Judeo-Christian Rhetoric” in *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1980) 120–160. Kennedy has a book-length history of Greek rhetoric in *The Art of Persuasion in Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1963). For a history of literary criticism beginning with its ancient Greek roots see R. Wellek, “Criticism, Literary,” *The Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (1973), 1, 596–607.

⁶Corbett, *Classical* 627–630.

⁷C. W. Hayes, “Linguistics and Literature: Prose and Poetry,” in *Linguistics Today* (ed. A. A. Hill; New York: Basic, 1969) 175–183.

⁸A. A. Hill, “An Analysis of *The Windhover*: An Experiment in Structural Method,” *Publication of the Modern Language Association* 70 (December 1955) 968–978; included also in Hill, *Constituent and Pattern in Poetry* (Austin: University of Texas, 1976) 28–38.

⁹E.g. S. R. Levin, “Poetry and Grammaticalness,” in *Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of Linguists, Cambridge, Mass., August 27–31, 1962* (ed. H. G. Lunt; The Hague: Mouton, 1964) 308–315.

categories of the description of the language as a whole; and the comparison of each text with others, by the same and by different authors, in the same and in different genres."¹⁰

Stylistics has come to be an independent science of inquiry: the science of style. It includes more than literature or rhetoric, because stylistics investigates all language devices that aim at a specific expressive end, thereby securing emphasis or explicitness. Yet as in literature the fundamental process is a close examination of the words themselves.

2. *Overview of stages in a stylistic study.* A thorough stylistic study will normally include five stages, some of which are interchangeable. First, at least two comparable samples are chosen. The secondary text(s) serves as a control to hold constant whatever are to be the critical variables. Each text should have from 300 to 1000 words. One work of an author may be compared to another work by the same author but with a different topic, purpose, audience, or time period. Or one author's work can be compared to the work of another writer writing on a similar topic or purpose from either the same or another period.

The second stage of the study may in practice precede all other stages. Stylistics supplements what a person intuitively feels. The literary critic, like the scientist, will have a creative response to a work of literature, which becomes a kind of hypothesis and a basis for further observation and testing. Leo Spitzer writes:

This first step is the awareness of having been struck by a detail, followed by a conviction that this detail is connected basically with the work of art; it means that one has made an "observation"—which is the starting point of a theory, that one has been prompted to raise a question—which must find an answer.¹¹

Of course an initial response will be developed and may be modified.

The third stage is the gathering of data and the objective description of the language employed in the texts. Nils Enkvist calls this stage "stylo-linguistics," "the linguistic description, inventory, and distributional as well as statistical analysis of stylistic features."¹² Any number of data can be gathered from a work: inversion of word order, repetitions of sound, construction of clauses, sentence length and complexity. Words may be abstract or concrete, polysyllabic or monosyllabic, literary or colloquial, referential or emotive, active or passive. Words may indicate an author's period, milieu, range of interest, education, bias. Sentences may be studied grammatically (as simple, compound,

¹⁰R. Jakobson, "Results of the Congress," in *Proceedings*, p. 1139; M. A. K. Halliday, "The Linguistic Study of Literary Texts," in *Proceedings*, p. 303. For bibliographies on linguistic stylistics see L. T. Milic, *Style and Stylistics: An Analytical Bibliography* (New York: Free Press, 1967); G. Miller, "Stylistic Rhetoric and the Analysis of Style: An Annotated Bibliography," *Style* 14 (Spring 1980) 75-102; A. Garbett *et al.*, "Annual Bibliography for 1978," *Style* 14 (Spring 1980) 138-159.

¹¹L. Spitzer, *Linguistics and Literary History: Essays in Stylistics* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1948) 26-27.

¹²J. Spencer, N. E. Enkvist and M. Gregory, *Linguistics and Style* (London: Oxford, 1964) 47.

or complex) or rhetorically or functionally.¹³ Only a thorough knowledge of the traditional grammar of the language studied may be necessary or a particular knowledge of some aspect of linguistics may be used.

If the third stage is called "stylo-linguistics," the fourth stage in contrast is "stylo-behavioristics" or "the study of the correlations between stylistic stimuli and the reader's response."¹⁴ Gathering the data is a prelude for the more important and more difficult task, which is to relate the data to the author's rhetorical strategies. For instance, if sentence length is studied, then the critic needs to ask: "What contribution does this sentence length make to the effect that the writer was seeking to produce?"

The fifth and final stage of a study is to relate the conclusions from the gatherings of the stylistic data to the context of the writing—the subject matter or the occasion of the genre or the author's purpose or the nature of the audience or the ethos of the writer.

II. IS STYLISTICS APPROPRIATE AS A METHODOLOGY FOR BIBLICAL STUDIES?

In assessing the appropriateness of stylistics as methodology for NT or OT studies, two questions are involved. First, have any such methods been previously employed in NT studies? Second, is stylistics appropriate to the study of an ancient Greek or Hebrew language as in the NT or OT?

Stylistics as a discipline benefited and developed from a number of concepts in NT studies. As mentioned earlier, the *Oxford English Dictionary* credits the NT scholar Philip Schaff with first employing the term "stylistics."

Leo Spitzer, an Austrian scholar and one of the great predecessors to contemporary stylistics, filled his works with theological allusions and perceived Friedrich Schleiermacher as his mentor. Spitzer considers that the philologist, like the theologian, will "continue the pursuit of the microscopic because he sees therein the microcosmic." Like the theologian, the student of style should be "wont to harmonize the discordant, to retrace the beauty of God in this world." He should also "believe in the existence of some light from on high." Spitzer explains that "there are hidden beauties which do not reveal themselves at the first exploratory attempts (as the apologetic theologians know); in fact, all beauty has some mysterious quality which does not appear at first glance." A "quasi-meta-physical urge toward solution" is needed to find the appropriate conviction or observation about each work.¹⁵

A number of the steps in a stylistics study are already being employed in NT studies. NT scholars have expended much interest in, and developed extensive tools for, comprehending the historical context of a text. Furthermore in exegetical studies much attention is usually given to the cognitive message of a verse (propositional reduction). Since stylistics relies heavily on grammar,

¹³E. P. J. Corbett, *Style in English* (ed. J. Nist; New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969) 25–26.

¹⁴Enkvist, *Linguistics* 47.

¹⁵Spitzer, *Linguistics* 24, 27, 30 n. 1, 36 n. 14.

NT reference grammars will be very helpful for the stylistician. A number of stylistics operations have already been employed in NT grammatical study. For instance, the recognition and noting of the effect of various figures of speech is often included under "figures of speech" or "syntax."¹⁶ Types of clauses are given much attention in traditional NT grammatical study. Allusion is often made to tone. The use or limit of conjunctions to connect thoughts in various manners, whether hypotactic or paratactic, is also important in NT grammatical discussion. Grammarians will refer at times to the effect of rhetorical devices. Robertson has directly indicated the importance of adverbs as marks of style.¹⁷ Paul W. Hollenbach devoted his dissertation simply to the identification and analysis of imagery.¹⁸ Andrew Q. Morton and Michael Levison have studied sentence length distributions (measured by number of words) as a criterion of authorship in ancient Greek prose.¹⁹ Walter Bujard has also studied participles, infinitives, relative clauses (total number or frequency of each), progression of thought, and tone in order to determine whether Paul wrote Colossians. Both George B. Caird and Moisés Silva, among others, have introduced their readers to style questions in a close reading of the Bible text in the process of applying semantics to Biblical studies.²⁰

Thus elements of stylistics have been employed in NT study, and NT scholars already have developed certain tools that will aid them in stylistics. Because of its input from linguistics, stylistics aids the study of style in the NT because it tends to be more objective, accurate and quantitative. It enables the study of style to become more exact, clear and thorough.

Is stylistics appropriate, however, to the study of an ancient Greek language? Yes. Linguistics theories and methods upon which stylistics relies were developed to describe the language of any text. On the other hand, the goal of a stylistic study is not to prove which ancient rhetorical methods a person such as Paul consciously employed. That would more properly be the goal of a purely historical study. As long as the grammatical categories of an operation are found in *koine* Greek, the goal of stylistics is to discover the style that Paul employed irrespective of whether it is conscious or subconscious. A stylistician studies style rather than rhetoric.

¹⁶E.g. BDF 262; G. Winer, *A Grammar of the Idiom of the New Testament*, pp. 636–637.

¹⁷Robertson, *Grammar* 548–549.

¹⁸P. W. Hollenbach, *Paul's Self-Understanding as Ascertained Through an Analysis of Certain Dramatic Figures of Speech* (dissertation, University of Michigan, 1953).

¹⁹A. Q. Morton and M. Levison, "Some Indications of Authorship in Greek Prose," in *The Computer and Literary Style: Introductory Essays and Studies* (ed. J. Leed; Kent: Kent State University, 1966) 145–148; Morton, *Literary Detection: How to Prove Authorship and Fraud in Literature and Documents* (New York: Scribner's, 1978); Morton and J. McLeman, *Paul, The Man and the Myth: A Study in the Authorship of Greek Prose* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1966).

²⁰W. Bujard, *Stilanalytische Untersuchungen zum Kolosserbrief als Beitrag zur Methodik von Sprachvergleichen* (SUNT 11; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1973); G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London: Duckworth, 1980); M. Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983).

Style is largely subconscious, unique and felt but not readily observable, whereas "rhetoric" is a conscious mode of persuasion. Would stylistics also be appropriate to study the ancient Hebrew language? The ancient Hebrews certainly employed sentence changes. Gesenius uses the categories "sentence," "clause" and "syllable"²¹ in analyzing the language. Hebrew, like Greek, has nouns, pronouns, finite verbs, participles, infinitives, active and passive conjugations, adjectives, adverbs, and compound and complex sentences. The concept of a nominal and verbal style would be especially appropriate to the contrast between a verb stem and noun stem from the same root. Nouns in the construct state would parallel the Greek adjective as an inflected genitive. As in Greek, a clause (in Hebrew, a "noun clause") may have ellipses of the verb "to be." The concept of an abstract or concrete noun is also very appropriate in Hebrew. The feminine form of the noun is usually employed for abstract—including inanimate and collective—ideas, while conversely the masculine form is usually employed for concrete and specific ideas.²²

Of course one needs to avoid the pitfalls of misinterpretation common to the study of the literature of the past. The critic has to avoid fallacies of addition and omission. An error of addition is to see an expressive image in something that, to the contemporaries, was only a cliché, to see a pejorative or comical connotation in a word that may have had neutral or positive connotations (or vice versa), to see a phrase as vulgar or substandard that was grammatically correct in its time. An error of omission is to see a word as having neutral connotations that may have had vulgar connotations, or to fail to recognize a neologism, a foreign word, an archaism, or the stylistic connotations of a whole grammatical category.²³

Nevertheless it is well worth remembering that many of the stylistic operations are considered to have originated with the ancients. Tzvetan Todorov calls stylistics "rhetoric's most direct heir."²⁴ Stephen Ullmann writes that in fact it would not be altogether wrong to describe stylistics as a "new rhetoric" adapted to the standards and requirements of contemporary scholarship in the linguistic as well as the literary field.²⁵ Contemporary definitions of rhetorical terms rely extensively on Greek and Latin works such as Aristotle's *The "Art" of Rhetoric* (book 3), Demetrius' *On Style*, Longinus' *On the Sublime*, Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* (books 8 and 9), Cicero's *De Oratore* (book 3) and *De Partitione Oratoria*, and *Rhetorica Ad Herennium* (book 4). In *The "Art" of Rhetoric* Aristotle writes: "It is not sufficient to know what one ought to say, but one must also know how to say it" (book 3.1, 3).

The ancient Greeks were interested in clause arrangements, word order,

²¹GKC, pp. 85, 450–506.

²²Ibid., pp. 100, 450, 241, 393–394.

²³S. Ullman, *Language and Style* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1964) 154–173.

²⁴O. Ducrot and T. Todorov, *Encyclopedia Dictionary of the Sciences of Language* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1979) 75.

²⁵Ullmann, *Language* 130.

rhythm, and the sequence of an argument.²⁶ Aristotle in *The Poetics* and *The "Art" of Rhetoric* discusses syllable, noun, verb, metaphor, simile, hyperbole, asyndeton, clause arrangement, and lexical and morphological substitution.

Demetrius, who probably lived in the Greco-Roman period, in *On Style* discusses syllable, phrase, and sentence length, word order, metaphor, simile, hyperbole, anaphora, asyndeton, imagery, repetition, and lexical substitution. For instance, a period (a sentence of one to four clauses or phrases) has a well-rounded unity. It tends to have elegance of style. Demetrius explains:

The members in a periodic style may, in fact, be compared to the stones which support and hold together a vaulted dome. The members of the disconnected style resemble stones which are simply thrown about near one another and not built into a structure (*On Style*, book 1.10–29).

However, Demetrius considers that the period does not contribute to force of style. It is not appropriate to outbursts of passion or to delineations of character. Quintilian similarly adds:

For example, when a man is accused on a capital charge, and, above all, if he is defending himself before his conqueror or his sovereign, it would be quite intolerable for him to indulge in frequent metaphors, antique or newly-coined words, rhythms as far removed as possible from the practice of everyday speech, rounded periods, florid commonplaces and ornate reflexions. Would not all these devices destroy the impression of anxiety which should be created by a man in such peril, and rob him of the succour of pity, on which even the innocent are forced to rely? (*Institutio Oratoria*, book 11.1.49).

Longinus, who may have lived in the first century A.D., explains the effects of images, apostrophe, asyndeton, metaphor, hyperbole, redundancy, and word phrase inversion. In *On the Sublime* he compares the effect of two sentences. In one, the speech against Meidias, asyndeta are interwoven with repetition and vivid presentation: "For the aggressor may do many injuries, some of which the victim could not even describe to anyone else—by his manner, his looks, his voice." In the second sentence, in the style of Isocrates and his school, the connecting particles are inserted: "And yet one must not overlook this too, that the aggressor may do much first by his manner, then by his looks and then again by his mere voice." Longinus considered that the use of connecting particles "fines down" and "smooths out" "the rush and ruggedness" of the emotion, thereby causing the sentence to fall flat and lose all its "point and fire." He goes on to say:

For just as you deprive runners of their speed if you tie them together, emotion equally resents being hampered by connecting particles and other such appendages. It loses its freedom of motion and its effect of coming like a bolt from a catapult (*On the Sublime* 20.1–21.2).

Thus stylistics is rooted in both the ancient study of Greek and Latin rhetoric and the modern study of language, lending its tools equally to a study of both contemporary and ancient texts. Stylistics surely is appropriate as a methodology to understand the Hebrew and Greek Bible.

²⁶H. Thesliff, "Notes on the Rise of Rhetoric as a Stylistic Genre," in *Style and Text: Studies Presented to Nils Erik Enkvist* (ed. H. Ringbom; Stockholm: Sprakfoerlaget Skriptor, 1975) 285–586.

III. WHY IS STYLISTICS A VIABLE METHODOLOGY FOR EVANGELICAL BIBLICAL SCHOLARS?

Evangelical scholars particularly are equipped to benefit from stylistics. As a literary discipline, stylistics takes the text as given. The primary aim of stylistics is not to determine authorship by style. In 1918 Maurice Jones wrote:

There is, however, a growing tendency among scholars of the present day to discount the argument based upon similarity of style, and it is being increasingly recognized that the style and language of any particular Epistle depend mainly upon the local conditions of the Church addressed.²⁷

The tendency among scholars that Jones saw in the early part of the century did not come to fruition. Decisions concerning the authorship of the pastoral epistles, Colossians, Ephesians, and the Petrine letters, among others, are still being based upon dissimilarity of style. According to several linguists, 100,000 words are needed to prove authorship. The disputed work itself must have 10,000 words and the author must have extant 100,000 words.²⁸ The whole NT has only about 180,000 words. Thus although it may be almost impossible to decide authorship by style, it is possible to find out whether the style and language of a particular epistle does "depend mainly upon the local conditions of the Church addressed."

The primary aim of stylistics is the close reading of a text. Inerrancy scholars are particularly equipped to lead others in the literary study of the Bible because of their reverence and appreciation for the specific words, phrases and clauses. God inspired an author to write. Stylistics will aid scholars in their in-depth grammatical study of the Bible.²⁹ They will have more quantitative, precise and clear results. Stylistics affords a supplementary objective way to draw out the meaning of a text. Grounding in stylistics will also help evangelical scholars evaluate the stylistic criteria employed in the study of authorship. How exact, anyway, as a criterion of authorship is the number of words as a measure of sentence length? At least Biblical scholars should examine the number of syllables as a more exact measure of sentence length.

²⁷M. Jones, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (London: Methuen, 1918) xxxiv.

²⁸F. I. Andersen, *Style and Authorship* (Australia: Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical Studies, 1976) 22; N. E. Enkvist, *Linguistic Stylistics* (The Hague: Mouton, 1973) 137. In the classic study of the *Federalist* papers by Alexander Hamilton, John Jay and James Madison (1787–1788), F. Mosteller and D. L. Wallace had 94,000- and 114,000-word samples of undisputed authorship with which to compare the disputed writings. "Inference in an Authorship Problem," *Journal of the American Statistical Association* 58 (June 1963) 275–309.

²⁹For an example of a stylistic study in the NT see A. B. Spencer, "The Wise Fool (and the Foolish Wise): A Study of Irony in Paul," *NovT* 23 (October 1981) 349–360. Chapter 2 also has an introduction to stylistic operations in *Paul's Literary Style: A Stylistic and Historical Comparison of II Corinthians 11:16–12:13, Romans 8:9–39, and Philippians 3:2–4:13* (ETS monograph; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1984). I found the most helpful stylistic textbooks to be M. A. Leaska, *Virginia Woolf's Lighthouse: A Study in Critical Method* (New York: Columbia University, 1970) 124–158, 170–208; L. T. Milic, *Stylistics in Style: A Handbook With Selections for Analysis* (New York: Scribner's, 1969) 11–19; R. A. Lanham, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms: A Guide for Students of English Literature* (Berkeley: University of California, 1968); W. Gibson, *Tough, Sweet and Stuff: An Essay on Modern American Prose Styles* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1966).

Thus every Biblical scholar, and certainly every evangelical Biblical scholar, who is inclined to study style would be well advised to learn about stylistics. Paul's opponents called his letters "weighty and strong" (2 Cor 10:10). Do we know why?