



LSG

Christian Literary
Studies Group

DAY CONFERENCE

The Glass of Language

Knowing and acting with language and text

Saturday 4 November 2000

The Seminar Room
Corpus Christi College
Merton Street
Oxford
OX1 4JF
Tel. (lodge) 01865 276700

Visit the new CLSG website

www.clsg.org

Programme

- 10.00 Arrivals and coffee
10.30 Introductions
10.45 **Mary Douglas**
*Language in Distorting Mirrors: Shandean Parallelism Compared with
Antique Models*
- 12.00 **Antony Billington**
Christian Cartography: Mapping Biblical Literature and Theology with Kevin Vanhoozer
- 1.15 Lunch
- 2.15 **Jo Carruthers**
Reflections of the Word: Language and Text in the Book of Esther
- 3.15 Tea
Work in progress
Plans
Prayer

Avalon Foundation Professor Emerita in the Humanities at University College, London, **Mary Douglas** is the author of *Purity and Danger*, 1966 and *In the Wilderness, the Doctrine of Defilement in the Book of Numbers*, 1993. Her most recent book, *Leviticus as Literature*, was published by OUP last autumn.

Mary Douglas' paper has only indirect bearing on theology, except in so far as it will focus upon analogical reasoning. Some modern readers have difficulty in recognizing parallelism and chiasmic forms.

Her particular interest is in the analogical style of the Pentateuch. Why has the twelve point ring structure of the Book of Numbers has never been noticed over two millennia? If a work has been composed in this analogical style that brings the beginning and the ending together, with matching rungs all the way, it will not make sense if read as a linear sequence. Hence some enormous problems of interpretation of Biblical writings, often ending in the commentator confessing defeat. Wellhausen consigned Numbers to the junk room of the Bible, Martin Noth and many others consider it to be incoherent and confused. The paper compares the structure of Numbers (c. 5th cent. BC) with that of Tristram Shandy (18th cent.), and with Zoroastrian hymns (13th cent. BC).

What was it about the 18th cent. literary scene that enabled them to be so interested in poetic structures? Or about our own period in that we are not? Are these chiasmic styles, with their repeated echoing, deepening and transforming of analogies, able to express thoughts which would lose their richness if the text be cut down to fit rational instrumental reasoning? Are there some theological ideas inexpressible in linear syllogistic statements?

Antony Billington is lecturer in Hermeneutics at London Bible College. He is currently pursuing PhD research in the theological significance of Biblical narrative.

There are a few signs that the 'iron curtain' between Biblical studies and systematic theology (long divided in the theological curriculum) is beginning to lift. Increasing numbers of Biblical scholars are becoming aware of the need for theological reflection, and theologians are likewise looking for more engagement with the fruit of colleagues in Old and New Testament departments.

In a number of his publications, Kevin Vanhoozer offers a way of looking at the relationship from the perspective of the Bible's diverse literary genres, their different ways of 'rendering' God, the world, and humanity, their function in putting together a Biblical theology (of the whole and the parts), and then in moving from 'canon' (Biblical theology) to 'concept' (systematic theology). Christian theologians who are also interested in literature and critical theory will want to reflect, with Vanhoozer, on the relationship between speech acts and literature, and on genre theory more generally. How might these areas contribute to the interpretation of Biblical texts and the 'doing' of Christian theology in today's world?

Jo Carruthers is currently studying for a doctorate at Manchester University under the supervision of Gerald Hammond. Her area of research is the Book of Esther and its appropriation and interpretations.

Jo writes: For my PhD I am looking at appropriations of the Book of Esther and their relation to Esther itself. Theories of reading, interpretation, intertextuality and communication are inevitably of central concern. For this paper I will therefore be considering questions regarding the transparency of language as a communicator of 'meaning' and/or 'reality' by looking at examples of language use within the Book of Esther itself.

My main focus will be the conversation between Ahasuerus and Haman in chapter 6 and the two edicts sent out, in the name of the king, regarding the genocide of the Jews. These considerations will then inform my approach to reading Esther, one of the most problematic books in the Bible, and its appropriations. For example, in what ways do rewritings of Esther relate to, and affect subsequent readings of, Esther itself? To what extent does analysing interpretations inform our understanding of reading, text and language?

With regard to suggested reading, I think that just reading Esther itself will be the most helpful thing. I will be drawing on various theories as well as other texts that appropriate Esther – *Bleak House*, George Eliot's last three novels, other Victorian writing, Jewish midrash, holocaust accounts, Hitler.

Select Bibliography

Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998).

Antony Billington comments: a briefer way into Vanhoozer's project can be found in his essay: 'Language, Literature, Hermeneutics, and Biblical Theology: What's Theological about a Theological Dictionary?' in Willem A. VanGemeren (ed.), *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, Vol. 1 (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997), 15-50.

Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999).

David Duff (ed.), *Modern Genre Theory*, Longman Critical Readers (London: Longman, 2000).

John Goldingay, *Models for Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).