

*New Testament Interpretation Through Rhetorical Criticism*, George A. Kennedy, Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984. 171 pp. \$18.95 pbk.

In *New Testament Interpretation Through Rhetorical Criticism* George A. Kennedy attempts to demonstrate the value and method of interpreting the Bible's New Testament via rhetorical criticism. Summarizing rhetoric's basic elements and purpose along with the structure of rhetorical criticism, Kennedy provides representative results through analysis of numerous biblical texts. Approximately one fourth of *New Testament Interpretation* is devoted to the summaries of rhetoric and rhetorical criticism, with the remainder of its text being an exemplification of the latter.

Defining rhetoric as the "quality in discourse by which a speaker or writer seeks to accomplish his purposes," Kennedy notes that New Testament writings were delivered orally to their audiences, and therefore to understand the meanings of these writings we must try to determine what effects their authors intended to produce (and could have produced) in the audiences who heard them. In biblical texts, what was the speaker's or writer's purpose as his message fell upon the ears of an audience? This determination requires rhetorical criticism, and therein rests the value of New Testament rhetorical criticism. Openly taking the lead from James Muilenburg, Kennedy asserts this value vis-à-vis other forms of criticism such as form-source-redaction and literary, each of which he briefly discusses in the course of the text.

Clearly intending for *New Testament Interpretation* to be utilized by students of the New Testament, Kennedy treats the Bible with a genuine respect that those who consider the Bible to be holy scripture will find comforting. Yet Kennedy is careful to foster the readership of those who might not consider the Bible as such, and his words are therefore vigilantly calculated, helping to make his work acceptable to a wide audience. Accordingly, *New Testament Interpretation* at times strikes the reader as overtly premeditated: "If the Bible is in a sense mythical, it is even more necessary to regard it as rhetorical, again not in the sense of

‘false’ or ‘deceitful,’ but in the sense of ‘purposeful,’ as a form of communication, perhaps between God and man, certainly between biblical writers and ourselves.” Some readers will find such cautiousness admirable, but others may find it patronizing.

A second minor criticism is of Kennedy’s sporadic references to materials that may be difficult for beginning students to associate with their immediate context. As a case in point, when analyzing the sermon on the mount Kennedy inserts, seemingly from a flash of uniquely personal interest, “Albert Schweitzer’s conception that the teaching of the sermon is interim ethics, though not proved, is in no way contradicted by the rhetoric of the speech.” It is likely that the average reader would find such a reference largely meaningless and distracting, a point punctuated by the fact that throughout the book Kennedy patiently describes rhetoric and scripture to the uninitiated. Fortunately cases like this are few in *New Testament Interpretation*, and the overall text remains highly readable.

While *New Testament Interpretation* advertises itself as primarily providing a tool for readers of the New Testament to interpret scripture, it is also equal to—and perhaps more than equal to—the task of providing these same readers with a way of comprehending rhetoric and its associated field of study. While learning classical rhetoric from its primary sources is a typical academic approach, Kennedy implicitly demonstrates that it is highly effective for a student of the New Testament to learn from previously digested information, for example noting that Matthew 23 is superb invective, or that Jesus’ consolation of the disciples in John 13-17 is best described as an example of Menander’s paramythetic. Education is sometimes described as revealing to a student what he or she already knows, and in this sense Kennedy’s work is highly successful at educating students of the New Testament.

All in all, *New Testament Interpretation* functions admirably in two academic directions; a testament to Kennedy’s mastery of material and presentation. It will be appreciated by anyone who enjoys critical analyses of the New Testament texts, and in a broader sense Kennedy’s presentation excels at providing concrete examples of rhetorical principals at work. As for the value of these principles, Kennedy makes no attempt to hide his view that essentially everything is rhetorical and therefore open to rhetorical criticism, as when he

asserts that "...the genre of the Gospels is irrelevant... in that all genres are rhetorical" and later states that religion, politics, philosophy and science are all rhetorical. If these claims are accepted, then Kennedy has done well in leaving us with the idea that rhetorical criticism has its place in helping to chart all discourse. With that journey in mind, *New Testament Interpretation Through Rhetorical Criticism* is a fine place to begin. For students of the Bible's New Testament, it is quite possibly the very best place to begin.