

A QUESTION OF THEORY OR EXPERIMENTALITY?

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As a response to the three papers that have been submitted to me, I will offer brief summaries and then a fundamental question that goes to the issue of the mandate of *Semeia* itself, for, as far as I can see, I have before me three truly fine but utterly conventional papers that puzzle me completely as to what might be considered experimental about them and therefore lead me to query their place in *Semeia* or perhaps even the continued relevance of that rubric. For reasons having to do with my rhetorical structure, I will begin with the paper on the New Testament and continue with some brief remarks on the two papers on the Hebrew Bible together.

Peter Tomson offers us the unexceptionable thesis that the writings that were to become the New Testament were originally the documents of various groups that may be defined as Judeo-Christian. These documents were received, however, into an anti-Jewish Gentile and "apostolic" context, the New Testament canon, in which they came to be read on (and as) the basis for "an anti-Jewish self definition." This paper strikes me as particularly interesting for the way that it invokes contemporary historical situations of reading and canonization as a heuristic model for the interpretation of past situations. Thus, Tomson writes:

It is hardly coincidence that the anti-Jewish gentile apostolic Church manifests itself in sources from the Bar Kochba war onwards such as Pseudo-Barnabas, Justin, and Irenaeus [although whether Barnabas is indeed a document of the gentile church seems at least open to question, and this is perhaps not merely an instance but a crux]. Surely there is much more reason to speak of a growing rupture powered by socio-political factors than of a "parting of the ways" on mere theological grounds. Similarly it is no coincidence that endeavours to shed age-old fetters and find means to re-join company arise only recently, in a generation shocked by the horrors of human destruction.

In a generally convincing analysis, Tomson shows that within the gentile Christian interpretation of both Hebrew Bible and earlier "Judeo"-Christian materials, confusion reigns between systems that are distinct in the earlier texts and practices, namely the categories of permitted and forbidden foodstuffs and the category of purity and impurity. (I am quite puzzled, however, at Tomson's statement that "dietary laws are hardly developed in postbiblical

Jewish law." Anyone studying these laws for years on end in order to qualify for the rabbinate would find this assertion nothing short of astonishing. I can't think what Tomson means by it.)

In Diane Sharon's paper we are offered close readings of two biblical texts in which eating and drinking figure as a semiotic element within the narrative that serves as a hermeneutical key, or, perhaps better put, unexpected refusal to eat in one situation and unexpected eating in another provide such hermeneutical keys. Sharon provides us with a methodologically traditional and completely convincing analysis of these semiotic materials via appeal to parallel instances within the biblical corpus and then to the "literature of the nations surrounding Israel." Her methods of close literary reading, fundamentally "new critical" at its best in their presuppositions and results, contribute much that is new and interesting to our understanding of these familiar narratives.

Athalya Brenner's paper strikes me as particularly interesting for a new twist that it presents on what would be traditionally referred to as a "gendered" analysis of a biblical text. Not so much in this case an experiment in the impact of "gender" on the reading of a text where that category had been ignored before second-wave feminism; in this case, we find rather a practice in which close analysis of the text from a semiotic-semantic point of view significantly shifts our understanding of the gendered meanings of a text in which gender as a category of analysis was always painfully obvious. What Brenner has done is to perform a kind of case study of food as a gendered semantic field in the Song of Songs, in order to test Carol Meyers's earlier conclusion that "the Song of Songs contains depictions of the female that are counter to stereotypical gender conceptions." And indeed, Brenner's conclusions from the study of the food semantic field suggest strongly that the gendered representations of the Song of Songs run precisely with and not counter to certain cultural conceptions of gender (it is not clear to me what the generic "stereotypical" would mean in this context). I have very little to criticize in this convincing paper.

I find it distressing to see "intertextual" being used in both of these last two papers as a synonym for "cognate" or "parallel" or "context" with no value-added over those "old-fashioned" terms. Notwithstanding its usage in recent work in biblical studies, "intertextuality" was not coined as a fancy way of naming the investigation of lexicographical or semantic parallelism with a view to further specifying meanings, a type of research that could have been and indeed was done regularly a century ago. What, for instance, is added by Sharon's "an intertextual reading of this narrative," that would not be better served by "comparative" (or in the case of her splendid reading of the David/Absalom narrative, simply "close reading")? I write, of course, not as one hostile to "theory" nor certainly to new and precise technical terms, but in strong protest at the collapse of those new terms into standard and tra-

ditional acceptations that in no way add to older terminology and thus debase, as well, the new terms and their critical purchase. Indeed, it should be emphasized that to a not inconsiderable extent, the presuppositions about textuality that are manifest in the notion of "close reading" and those that are evoked by the term "intertextuality" are not only not easily exchangeable for each other, they may very well be incompatible with each other. "Close-reading," such as that which Diane Sharon performs so well (following in the methodological wake of such critics as Robert Alter and Meir Sternberg, *inter alia*) invokes an authorial voice for the text, or perhaps "the work." The author, for close-reading, is decidedly not dead. It is "he" who necessarily provides the controlling hand that allows for the subtle interpretation of detail in the text as signs of inner-textual allusion productive of interpretative and rhetorical moments such as irony. "Intertextuality," on the other hand, refers to the anonymous codes, the ruptures and registers of language itself, as it speaks through the text, and, as a famous critical essay would have it, engages precisely the "death of the author." (We are given, perhaps, some clue to the source of this theoretical muddiness in Sharon's evocation of Michael Fishbane's work, which is allegedly both "close reading" and "intertextual" in the words of that author.) If we are not to be even roughly precise in our invocation of critical terms, methods, and schools in what is intended as a "cutting edge" venue such as *Semeia*, then wherewith, indeed, will the earth be salted?

This, indeed, allows me to segue into my final question about this enterprise as a whole. In what sense do we find here "experimental"—as the mandate for *Semeia* requires—or even particularly theoretically informed scholarship? It should be clear that I found these papers, in themselves, illuminating, but all the more compellingly raising for me, therefore, the question of theory or experimentality as an issue for thematization.