BIBLICAL EXEGESIS

A Beginner's Handbook

REVISED EDITION

JOHNH.HAYES

CARL R. HOLLADAY

32430

JohnKnox Press
ATLANTA

STRUCTURALIST CRITICISM:

The Universals in the Text

═══════════════════════

Most of the methods we have considered in the preceding chapters are primarily historical in orientation. They are employed as an aid in reading and analyzing the text, as the means to understanding the author and the author's thought and intention in terms of the author's time and place or historical context. This is the case even if a text is not considered the product of a particular author but rather the result of a communal effort or process. The goal still remains the same, namely, the desire to understand the text in light of the temporal process or historical/personal developments that produced the text.

In terms of our diagram on page 25, these historical methods focus on (1) the originator of the text, (2) the original audience, and (3) the universe of ideas and events (the historical conditions and circumstances) the two shared. Exegesis is seen as the process through which the reader reads, examines, and listens to the words of the text as a medium communicating the author's message. The text serves as a conduit or vehicle for the author's thought. The exegete asks, "What did the author intend to say to the reader(s) through the text?" The text serves as the means through which the reader understands the author. However much the text lies in the forefront, ultimately the reader's task is to "get through" or "get behind" the text to the author's intended message. The text serves not as an end in itself but the means to a "more important" end-understanding the author and the author's intention. The various forms of historical criticism tend to use the text as a window through which the interpreter looks at other referents (the author, the author's intention, the setting, the context).

Within the last few decades, a method for studying texts in non-historical and atemporal fashion has developed. This approach is "structuralist criticism." The name derives from a methodology developed for analyzing any type of human and social phenomena and activities. Structuralism has been applied in a wide variety of fields including general anthropology, linguistics, and literature.

Several basic assumptions underlie all structuralist studies. Structuralist research assumes that all social activity is governed by abstract conventions, convictions, and rules. These constitute the foundational structures of all cultural systems and manifest themselves in all forms of human social activity. Humans have an innate capacity both for structuring existence and for creating patterns of meaning. Polarities and binary oppositions play important roles in the structuring process. That is, patterns and structures are conceived in such categories as left/right, good/bad, up/down, subject/object, light/darkness, male/female, and so on. These structures need not necessarily be perceived consciously but may function at the unconscious or subconscious level. Some structures and structural patterns are universal and thus are shared across diverse cultural and linguistic boundaries. All social activity, even art and literature, embody and reflect numerous structures. The structural features that are easily perceived are referred to as "surface structures." Speech, for example, reflects certain surface structures that the ordinary person associates with proper use of language and correct grammar and syntax. The use of any language, however, is based also on very complex linguistic structures. Such complex structures are referred to as "deep structures." Thus a person may use and recognize proper speech and be aware of the "surface structures" associated with a language but have no knowledge of the complex grammatical and linguistic structures-the "deep structures"-that underlie the proper use and function of language.

Structuralists assume that literature reflects both surface structures and deep structures. The "deep structures" are reflective of structural patterns that transcend time and space but can be abstracted from specimens of literature. In structuralist interpretation, a text is viewed more as a mirror than as a window. As a mirror, the text reflects universally shared structures and concerns. Thus texts have an integrity of their own apart from the circumstances in which they originated. In structuralist interpretations, a text stands on its own regardless of the text's origins or past and is to be interpreted without concern for the author's assumed original intention. Generic considerations dominate over genetic considerations, not so much because structuralists deny genetic factors but because historical/genetic issues can blur the perception of generic features.

Structuralists are as interested in how texts communicate and have meaning as in what they communicate and mean. They emphasize such questions as the following: How does a particular text produced under particular cultural constraints embody and give expression to universal concerns? How does a reader decode the text or how does the text communicate its deep structure to resonate with the deep structures of the reader? For structural literary critics, emphasis falls on the text and the reader and the process of reading and understanding rather than on such matters as writing and the author's intention.

It is important for us not only to note the differences between structuralist and other kinds of interpretation, but also to understand more fully some of the underlying exegetical assumptions of structuralism. Two major emphases are especially important.

(1) According to structuralist criticism, a text is to be considered *ahistorical* or perhaps more accurately *atemporal*. The structuralist critic reads a text without reference to the element of time; in fact, every effort is made to exclude the dimension of time unless it is a particular concern of the text. This is in sharp contrast to earlier methods we have discussed, where we have come to a text tacitly assuming that we can and should distinguish between an ancient text and a modern reader. This fundamental assumption, which gives rise to efforts to distinguish between what the text meant and what the text means, is simply not a concern of the structuralist critic. Rather, when we read a text, we should assume nothing more than that it exists. In this sense, any text we read is timeless. The text exists in its own right and is to be interpreted on its own terms. Whereas traditional form-criticism, for example, asks questions about origin and original function, structuralism asks questions about the text's underlying assumptions, universal concerns, and its present function in the reader-text relationship.

Those accustomed to interpreting texts according to more traditional methods of exegesis may find this atemporal approach difficult to appreciate, yet it is fundamental in explaining certain basic features of the structuralist critical approach to a biblical text. Two such features should be noted.

First, structuralists are interested only in the final form of the text. It is the text as a finished product that sets the agenda for the structuralist critic. Structuralists have no interest in inquiring into the pre-history of the text, distinguishing between earlier and later forms of the text, or trying to identify parts of the text that might be later interpolations or the work of later redactors or editors. Obviously, structuralist critics recog-

nize that a text may exist in different recensions or versions, as we saw in our dicussion of textual criticism, but this is inconsequential. The basic exegetical move is to accept a text and work with it as a finished piece. How it came to have its present form is immaterial; what is important is what lies before us as a finished work, awaiting interpretation.

Second, the atemporal or timeless view of a text also explains why structuralist critics interpret a text without any reference to its historical setting. Obviously structuralists assume that a text was written by someone, at some time, in some place and setting. But these are of no concern in structuralist criticism. In structuralist criticism, author, original audience, and historical setting are bracketed out. There is no attempt made to answer, or be concerned with, the traditional questions: "Who wrote it?" "To whom was it written?" "When? Where? How? Why?" "Under what circumstances?"

This emphasis on the text itself without regard for its original historical setting means that we must reconstrue how we understand a text to convey meaning. Whatever meaning is being conveyed through the text is not being conveyed from an author through the text, but from the text itself.

This concern for the text in and of itself is described as structuralism's preference for *synchronic* over *diachronic* analysis. Literally, these two frequently used terms mean "with or at the same time" and "through time" respectively. Diachronic analysis presupposes that we can conceive of a text as having existed and developed "through time." It presupposes a historical perspective in which time is a central element. If we do a diachronic word study, for example, we look at such things as etymology, and trace the use of the word, its development and meaning historically, or through time. Diachronic analysis implies a linear model of investigation, one that allows us to chart development and progress along a time line. Synchronic analysis, by contrast, is atemporal or ahistorical and considers a literary work to possess its own meaning. When we compare things synchronically, we do so without any reference to time. For example, if we engage in synchronic analysis of two literary motifs or themes, one from Genesis the other from Acts, we do so not as if one is earlier and one later, but as if they were both "together in time." It has been noted that a better designation than synchronic might be achronic, that is, "without time" or without reference to time.

(2) Structuralist criticism, as we have noted, is based on a view of reality that seeks to understand all forms of human experience and behavior as concrete manifestations of certan ordering principles or

structures that are considered universals. Several things follow from this.

First, the structuralist critic operates with an expanded understanding of the concept "language." Rather than seeing language as communication through words, structuralists understand "language" to include any set of ordered symbols, verbal or non-verbal, through which meaning is conveyed. It is in this sense that they understand all forms of social behavior to reflect underlying "languages" or patterns of language. To the degree that customs of dress are uniform within a given society and conform to well-established, well-accepted rules, we can speak of a "language of dress." The rules governing what to wear and what not to wear, and when to wear it, are comparable to the rules of grammar and syntax that govern what, when, and how we speak or write. We might conceive kinship patterns in a similar fashion. Within a given society, family or tribe, relationships between persons are based on certain established, accepted principles. On the basis of these, persons within a given social group relate to each other and make basic decisions, such as whom they can and cannot marry. In one sense, the persons within this social group may be thought of as the "words" of a language whose arrangement and placement are based on certain principles of "social syntax and grammar."

Second, not only is language understood in a very broad sense, but also the language of any given text is seen to contain varying levels of meanings. Accordingly, structuralists distinguish between "surface structures" and "deep structures" in the reading of a text. Beneath the surface structure, a text reflects deep structures of conviction and world-ordering. These deep structures are understood as being encoded so that the exegete must understand that the language of a text is functioning as a code. It should be read and analyzed not with a view to determining the referent in any given case, but with a view to determining the "deep structures" from which it ultimately stems and to which it points. Surface structure refers to those contours of a text or piece of writing we can visibly trace, such as the outline of an argument or the flow of a story. Deep structures, by contrast, are those underlying, ordering principles and features that come to concrete expression in the text, but are not actually stated in the text. To return to our earlier example, we may use good principles of grammar as we speak without ever being conscious of the rules of syntax by which we are arranging our words. Or we may choose not to wear a bathrobe to work without ever thinking consciously of the underlying "social syntax" we are following. And yet the under-

lying principles of grammar and syntax that govern what we say and wear can be deduced from our actual use of language and our customs of dress.

Third, one of the fundamental structuralist principles used to interpret all empirical forms of social behavior and their deep structures is the principle of binary opposition. In analyzing texts, structuralist critics work with categories of opposites, especially those they have observed in a wide variety of texts. Certain pairs of opposites are considered fundamental to all human experience and may be at work in producing any given text. This would include such binary opposites as light/darkness, good/evil, reconciliation/alienation, divine/human, male/female, and others.

The principle of binary opposition applies not only to deep structures but to structuralist method generally. Thus, even in analyzing the surface structures of a text, we can be especially alert to pairs of opposites in the arrangement of the text.
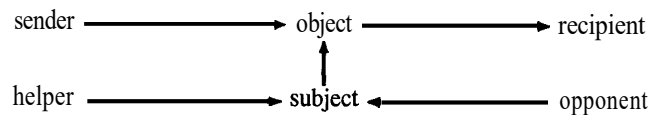
Now that we have considered some of the general perspectives and principles of structuralist criticism, we can examine some examples of how it has been applied to biblical texts.

A classical example of structuralist exegesis as applied to the Old Testament has to do with the creation story in Genesis 1-2. Instead of analyzing the opening chapters of Genesis in terms of classical source criticism and the theory of two creation accounts (1:1—2:4a [P] and 2:4b–25 [J]) with their respective theologies, one structuralist approach concludes that Genesis 1:1—2:1 should be the basic unit in interpretation. This analysis is based on the following structuralist observations: (1) The unit is naturally defined this way since it begins with a reference to God's creating the heavens and earth (1:1) and concludes by noting that the "heavens and the earth were finished" (2:1). (2) The phrase "and God said" occurs ten times (verses 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26, 28, and 29). (3) The unit divides into two roughly equal parts with five uses of the expression "and God said" in each: 1:1-19 (containing 207 Hebrew words) and 1:20—2:1 (containing 206 words). The first part describes the creation of the world's inanimate order; the second part describes the creation of the world's living beings. (4) Each half moves toward a similar climax: the first part concluding with a reference to the sun, moon, and stars to rule over the heavens, the second part with humanity to rule over the earth.

Here we see illustrated some of the principles of structuralist exegesis. First, the structures of the text reflect the subject matter and theology of
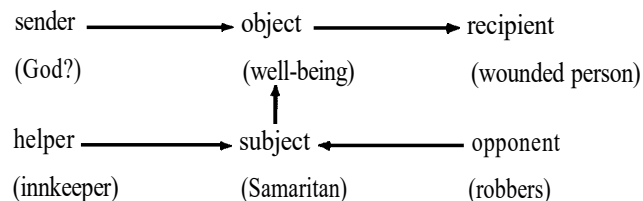
the material. Second, the principle of binary opposition is evident throughout: two roughly equal literary units, inanimate orders/animate orders, rule of luminaries over the inanimate world/rule of humans over the animate world. Third, the focus is on how one reads a text instead of how the author writes a text. How the reader perceives meaning in the text is more important than what the author originally intended.

This structuralist interpretation of Genesis 1: l-2: 1 tends to remain at the surface level of the text. Texts may be analyzed to reveal deeper structures, namely, universal patterns of values and convictions. On the basis of folklore studies, a narrative grid has been developed for use in interpreting narrative structures. The grid may be used to determine the structural relationships that appear in narratives (how many appear in any single narrative depends on the story's complexity). Based on this grid, the following chart diagrams the typical roles (called **actants** by structuralists) present in the narrative structures of most stories, although not all roles are reflected in every story:

```
sender ──────────► object ──────────► recipient
                      ▲
                      │
helper ──────────► subject ◄────────── opponent
```

The sender is the originator of an action meant to communicate or transmit some object the recipient needs, to ensure the latter's well-being. The subject is the one sent by the sender to transmit the object to the recipient. The opponent attempts to frustrate the action while the helper assists the subject in carrying out the action.

An analysis of the narrative structure of the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–35), for example, shows the following actants in the narrative:

```
sender ──────────► object ──────────► recipient
(God?)             (well-being)        (wounded person)
                      ▲
                      │
helper ──────────► subject ◄────────── opponent
(innkeeper)        (Samaritan)         (robbers)
```

In most narratives (and one can experiment with typical modern plots such as the American Western or TV situation shows), the characters

and plots possess a remarkable consistency. In most narratives, life's normalcy or equilibrium is disturbed in some fashion and anarchy or trouble develops. Some subject is sent or takes action to restore order/well-being, is opposed by the creator of the anarchy or other opponents, and is assisted by a helper or helpers.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son consists of two parts, the first focusing on the prodigal son, the second on the elder brother. Interpreters have often wondered about the relationship between these two parts, even speculating that the story originally ended with the return of the prodigal and that the elder brother episode might have been added later as a way of addressing the Pharisees, or some other group of opponents of early Christianity.

As we have seen previously, structuralist critics eschew approaching the text this way. Their concern is with the story in its present form, the final form of the text. Since it now exists with the elder brother episode, it must be interpreted in that form. In this form, the story may be seen as reflecting a basic folk tale plot, or it may be seen as the story of a character who moves through a sequence of "at home," "away from home," and "at home." Binary oppositions may be seen in various sets of opposites: lostness/foundness, alienation/reconciliation, presence/absence. In fact, one way of structuring the story is to trace the movement from presence (the young man at home) to absence (the young man away from home) to presence (the young man back at home) to absence (the elder brother ironically not "at home" with the father). In this way, the younger brother would typify "presence" or "foundness" while the elder brother would typify "absence" or "lostness." The important point to note is that we are not concerned with how the story functions in the Gospel of Luke, nor with how it reflects the theology of the author of Luke, but rather with how the structures of the story itself function to express meaning in universal categories.

On occasion, plots and characters may startle the reader by their departure from the expected. For example, in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the Samaritan is the outsider, the heretic, the opposite of what ancient Jewish culture would assume to be the ideal religious person, yet in the story the Samaritan is the subject who brings aid to the recipient (the wounded). In the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22), God plays two major roles: the deity is the opponent who demands the sacrifice of Isaac and thus produces anarchy and simultaneously the subject who provides the substitute and alleviates the tension. In the narrative of Jacob's wrestling with the angel (God) at the ford of

the Jabbok River (Genesis 32:22–32), Jacob is the hero on a quest. In the story, God appears not only as the originator of the quest but also as Jacob's opponent. In the overall structure of the Christ story, God is not only the sender and, in the son, the subject who brings salvation to the world, but also the world's opponent since humankind has to be reconciled to God.

A structuralist interpretation of the book of Psalms has shown that the psalms can be understood in terms of their deep structures. Practically all the statements in the psalms cluster around four **actants.** These are: A = the protagonist/the psalmist/the just/the community/the king; B = the opposition/the enemy/enemies/the wicked/the nations; C = God; and D = others/witnesses/the faithful/the just/the nations. In individual psalms these four elements assume various roles, generally with A as the recipient, B as the opponent, C as the helper and sender (although sometimes the opponent), and D as the co-recipient. Various binary oppositions run throughout the psalms in the description of persons, states of being, and expectations: life/death, joy/sorrow, lament/praise, weeping/dancing, blessing/curse, and so on. Using such structuralist insights, particular psalms may be analyzed without recourse to actual life situations, biographical consideration, or historical contexts. Paradoxically, references to disorder/evil/sin/anarchy in the psalms and thus to the disruption of normal equilibrium, along with petitions for resolution and redemption give the psalms a strong biographical/narrative flavor. It is our ability to understand and identify, even subconsciously, with these universal structural components in the psalms which has given them their widespread and enduring appeal.

Some biblical narratives lend themselves to even greater abstraction and generalization reflective of mythical structures and symbolism. Mythical structures are found at an even deeper level of abstraction from the text than narrative structures. We noted above how structuralists analyze the narrative structure of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. At a deeper structure or deeper level of abstraction, the parable reflects mythical or paradigmatic structures. The story can be seen as reflecting polar opposites: life/order/health/kingdom of God—death/disorder/woundedness/kingdom of Satan. At the surface level, the Samaritan as a religious outcast would have fit into the camp of the disordered, and the Levite and priest in the arena of the ordered; but well-being in the story is produced by the Samaritan. The reader is thus challenged to venture outside the established order and the ordinary religious boundaries and become, like the Samaritan, a "truly religious person." Thus in the story Jesus

challenges the normal mythical pattern by making the antihero into the hero. (One should note the parallels between such structuralist interpretations and medieval allegorical readings: see pp. 20-2 1.)

The examples we have cited are brief and of only limited value in illustrating the various principles of stmcturalist criticism. Rather than serving as detailed examples of structuralist exegesis, they are intended to illustrate the general approach. In experimenting with structural exegesis, we need to resist asking historical questions such as who, when, where, and how and instead look for general structures in the text, for examples of binary opposition, and for deep structures reflective of universal interests and concerns.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

General

Barthes, R., Writing Degree Zero and *Elements of Semiology* (London/Boston: Jonathan Cape/Beacon Press, 1967/1970).

Calloud, J., *Structural Analysis of Narrative* (Philadelphia/Missoula: Fortress Press/Scholars Press, 1976).

Calloud, J., "A Few Comments on Structural Semiotics: A Brief Explanation of a Method and Some Explanation of Procedures" in *Semeia* 15 (1979) 5 1-83.

Culler, J. D., *Structural Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Story of Literature* (Ithaca, NY/London: Cornell University Press/Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), especially pp. 2-54.

Culler, J. D., *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (London/Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).

DeGeorge, R. T. and F. M. DeGeorge (eds.), *The Structuralists: From Marx to Levi-Strauss* (Garden City/London: Doubleday & Co., 1972).

Detweiler, R., *Story, Sign, and Self: Phenomenology and Structuralism as Literary Critical Methods* (Philadelphia/Missoula: Fortress Press/Scholars Press, 1978).

Greimas, A. J., *Semiotics and Language* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

Kermode, F., *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1979).

Kovacs, B., "Philosophical Foundations for Structuralism" in *Semeia* 10 (1978) 85-105.

*Lane, M. (ed.), *Introduction to Structuralism/Structuralism: A Reader* (New York/London: Basic Books/Jonathan Cape, 1970).

Leach, E. R., *Claude Levi-Strauss* (rev. ed.; New York/London: Viking Press/Fontana Press, 1974).

*Propp, V., *Morphology of the Folktale* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968; first published 1928).

Ricoeur, P., *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), especially pp. 27-96.

Ricoeur, P., *Essays on Biblical Interpretation/On Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia/London: Fortress Press/SPCK,1980/1981).

*Robey, D. (ed.), *Structuralism: An Introduction* (London/New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

Scholes, R., *Structuralism in Literature: An Introduction* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1974).

Biblical Structuralism

Barthes, R. et al., *Structural Analysis and Biblical Exegesis: Interpretational Essays* (Pittsburgh/Edinburgh: Pickwick Press/T. & T. Clark, 1974).

*Barton, J., *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (London/Philadelphia: Darton, Longman and Todd/Westminster Press, 1984) 104-39.

Bovon, F. et al., *Structural Analysis and Biblical Exegesis: Interpretational Essays* (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1974).

Doty, W., "Linguistics and Biblical Criticism" in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion 41* (1973) 114-21.

Greenwood, D. C., *Structuralism and the Biblical Text* (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1985).

Jacobson, R., "The Structuralists and the Bible " in *Interpretation* 28(1974)146-64.

*Keegan, T. J., *Interpreting the Bible: A Popular Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1985) 40-72.

Patte, D., *What Is Structural Exegesis?* (Philadephia/London: Fortress Press/SCM Press, 1976).

Polzin, R. M., *Biblical Structuralism: Method and Subjectivity in the Study of Ancient Texts* (Philadelphia/Missoula: Fortress Press/Scholars Press, 1977).

Robbins, V. K., "Structuralism in Biblical Interpretation and Tlneology " *The Thomist 42 (* 1978) 349-72.

*Rogerson, J. W., "Recent Literary Structuralist Approaches to Biblical Interpretation" in *The Churchman 90* (1976) 165-77.

Tollers, V. L. and J. R. Maier, *The Bible in Its Literary Milieu* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979).

Old Testament

Alonso-Schökel, L., "The Poetic Structure of Psalms 42–44" in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 1 (1976) 4-11; 3 (1977) 61-65.

Bar-Efrat, S., "Some Observations on the Analysis of Structure in Biblical Narrative " in *Vetus Testamentum 30 (1980) 154-73.*

Buss, M. (ed.), *Encounter with the Text: Form and History in the Hebrew Bible* (Missoula/Philadelphia: Scholars Press/Fortress Press, 1979).

*Collins, T., "Decoding the Psalms: A Structural Approach to the Psalter " in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament 37* (1987) 41-60.

Culley, R. C. (ed.), *Classical Hebrew Narrative (Semeia 3;* Missoula: Scholars Press, 1975).

Culley, R. C. (ed.), *Perspectives on Old Testament Narrative (Semeia 15;* Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979).

Fokkelman, J. P., *Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1975).

Fokkelman, J. P., *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: A Full Interpretation Based on Stylistic and Structural Analyses* (4 vols.; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1980–).

Jobling, D., *The Sense of Biblical Narrative: Three Structural Analyses in the Old Testament* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978).

Leach, E. R., *Genesis as Myth and Other Essays* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969).

Leach, E. R. and D. A. Aycock, *Structuralist Interpretations of Biblical Myth* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

Patte, D. (ed.), *Genesis2 and 3: Kaleidoscopic Structural Readings (Semeia 18;* Chico: Scholars Press, 1980).

Roth, W., "Structural Interpretations of 'Jacob at the Jabbok' (Genesis 32:22-32) " in *Biblical Research 22* (1977) 51-62.

New Testament

Calloud, J., "Toward a Structural Analysis of the Gospel of Mark" in *Semeia 16* (1980) 133-65.

Crespy, G., "The Parable of the Good Samaritan: An Essay in Structural Research " in *Semeia 2* (1974) 27-50.

*Crossan, J. D., "Structural Analysis and the Parables of Jesus " in *Linguistica Biblica* 29/30 (1973) 41-5 1.

Kodjak, A., *A Structural Analysis of the Sermon on the Mount* (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1987).

Patte, D. (ed.), *Semiology and Parables: An Exploration of the Possibilities Offered by Structuralism for Exegesis* (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1975).

Patte, D. and A. Patte, *Structural Exegesis: From Theory to Practice. Exegesis of Mark 15 and 16. Hermeneutical Implications* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978).

Patte, D., *Paul's Faith and the Power of the Gospel: A Structural Introduction to the Pauline Letters* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

Via, D., *Kerygma and Comedy in the New Testament: A Structuralist Approach to Hermeneutic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).

Via, D., "Parable and Example Story: A Literary-Structuralist Approach " in *Linguistica Biblica* 25/26 (1973) 21-30.