

*From History to Narrative Hermeneutics*. By Han Young Lee. Studies in Biblical literature 64. New York: Peter Lang, 2004.

While not an easy read, the present volume provides an intriguing and ultimately persuasive discussion of the history of biblical interpretation since the Enlightenment. The author, assistant professor of Old Testament Studies at Ashin University, Korea, takes his point of departure from the prime paradigm shift in biblical hermeneutics from “divine Word Revelation” to human reason brought about by René Descartes. Lee contends that later developments, such as Wellhausen’s documentary hypothesis, were implications of this prime paradigm shift rather than constituting paradigm shifts of their own. Hence, “the development of biblical hermeneutics from historical criticism up to the new literary hermeneutics involves no radical new paradigm shift beyond the *prime paradigm shift*” (p. 6, emphasis original here and below). Those who view the shift from a historical to a literary paradigm in recent decades as an actual paradigm shift on the same level as the one brought about by Descartes, according to Lee, are responsible for what he calls “the eclipse of the paradigm shift” (p. 7).

In his analysis of Wellhausen’s contribution to OT studies, Lee contends that problems arose when Wellhausen and others “rejected the Word-Revelation in its final form of canonical texts as their ultimate point of reference” (p. 107). On a philosophical level, these scholars are said to have indulged in a belief in the universality of methodologies (see chart on p. 107). Lee urges a clear distinction between the primary, paradigmatic level; the secondary, philosophical level; and the third, methodological level. He contends that primary shifts lead to formulations of a secondary nature, which in turn lead to developments on the third, methodological level. His major example is the adoption of certain methods in Old Testament studies subsequent to the primary paradigm shift from divine Word-Revelation to human reason brought about by Descartes. The problem, according to Lee, is, however, that people today fail to realize that current developments are still a result of this primary paradigm shift, thinking instead that several other subsequent paradigm shifts have occurred, hence obscuring the significance of the primary paradigm shift.

Lee’s solution is as follows: “As far as biblical hermeneutics is concerned, there is a need for a more inclusivistic definition of what comes to be a *historical awareness* in our biblical exegesis. That is, *historical awareness* is not necessarily an equivalent term for *history*, in the modern sense, but it is a reflection of biblical *Dasein*, i.e., the integral coherence of all modal aspects of temporal experience. Therefore, to be *aware* of the *historical* dimension of the Old Testament means to experience the totality of all modal aspects of temporal experience and beyond, which in its final synthesis is the *Word-Revelation* in its final form of canonical texts, the ultimate supra-theoretical reference for *Dasein*. Again, because this *Word-Revelation* is expressed in a written *human language*—in that sense, our historical awareness may then be substantiated within the concept of the *Bible as literature*, and this may then be termed a *divine narrative*” (pp. 132–33).

Lee proceeds to discuss the new literary structural approach: historical and redaction criticism, literary structuralism, and deconstructionism. He observes that the primary paradigm remains unchanged; what has taken place is merely a secondary, methodological shift. Hence there is essential continuity (the Enlightenment rationalistic paradigm) underlying the discontinuity of hermeneutical interests and scholarly methodologies. According to Lee, new literary criticism is therefore not a “final solution” but a “mere escape” (p. 156). What is needed

instead is “a *revolutionary paradigm shift*, i.e., a critical *new paradigm shift*, a *critical shift of ultimacy* from theoretical *human reason* to the supra-theoretical *Word-Revelation*” (p. 157).

One of the problems introduced by the movement from historical criticism to narrative hermeneutics, from historical reconstruction to literary configuration, is that of “ahistory” (p. 224). Yet, according to Lee, “because a divine narrative already presupposes *history*, it is mainly focused on the narrative configurations that seek a *basic meaning* of the text whereby one’s own context meets *dialogue*, *confrontation*, and *decision* in the light of the Word-Revelation in its final form of canonical texts. The concept of divine narrative rejects the fixed idea of a static meaning. Instead, it attempts to expose the very dynamic process involved in the decoding of the biblical texts whereby the Divine (God) interacts with the Narrative (the literary configuration and the reading strategy)” (p. 218).

The above summary of the author’s development of his thesis has to a significant relied on quotations to provide a first-hand exposure to his ideas in his own words. Lee’s English is not always clear, and the formulation of his theses not always crisp and lucid. Yet there is much that is penetrating in this work that will repay careful reading. The volume is written at a fairly high level and will be primarily of interest to specialists in the history of biblical interpretation. Certainly, Lee’s thesis that the turning away from divine revelation as the ultimate reference point in biblical interpretation must be reversed by a renewed turning back to divine revelation is welcome and appropriate. Will we live to see such a “revival” in biblical hermeneutics, or will the field continue to be mired in secondary methodological quagmires? Overlooking the landscape of biblical studies today, it is hard to be optimistic. Nothing less than an act of God would be required to open the eyes of scholars and practitioners in the field away from themselves to the One who in the past “spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days has spoken to us by his Son” (Heb. 1:1–2).

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