

WELCOMING THE NATIONS

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# INTERNATIONAL VOICES IN BIBLICAL STUDIES

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WELCOMING THE NATIONS:  
INTERNATIONAL SOCIORHETORICAL  
EXPLORATIONS

Edited by  
Vernon K. Robbins and Roy R. Jeal

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## Abbreviations

|              |  |
|--------------|--|
| BDAG         | Danker, Frederick W., Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. |
| BibInt       | Biblical Interpretation Series   |
| <i>BR</i>    | <i>Biblical Research</i>   |
| BZNW         | Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft  |
| <i>DTT</i>   | <i>Dansk teologisk tidsskrift</i>  |
| ESEC         | Emory Studies in Early Christianity  |
| GPBS         | Global Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship  |
| <i>HvTSt</i> | <i>Hervormde teologiese studies</i>  |
| <i>Int</i>   | <i>Interpretation</i>  |
| IPCC         | Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change  |
| IVBS         | International Voices in Biblical Studies   |
| <i>JBL</i>   | <i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>  |
| <i>JECH</i>  | <i>Journal of Early Christian History</i>  |
| <i>JSNT</i>  | <i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>  |
| JSNTSup      | Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series   |
| <i>Neot</i>  | <i>Neotestamentica</i>   |
| <i>NovT</i>  | <i>Novum Testamentum</i>   |
| NovTSup      | Supplements to Novum Testamentum   |
| NRSV         | New Revised Standard Version   |
| <i>NTS</i>   | <i>New Testament Studies</i>   |
| RRA          | Rhetoric of Religious Antiquity  |
| SAC          | Studies in Antiquity and Christianity  |
| SBL          | Society of Biblical Literature   |

|              |  |
|--------------|--|
| <i>SBLSP</i> | Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers                          |
| SNTSMS       | Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series                     |
| SRI          | Sociorhetorical Interpretation   |
| SymS         | Symposium Series   |
| WUNT         | Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament                   |
| <i>ZABR</i>  | <i>Zeitschrift für altorientalische und biblische Rechtsgeschichte</i> |

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# Introduction

*Vernon K. Robbins and Roy R. Jeal*

The idea for this volume emerged after a Society of Biblical Literature session in 2017 featuring responses to *Foundations for Sociorhetorical Exploration*,<sup>1</sup> which appeared in 2016 as a twentieth anniversary celebration of the publication of *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse* and *Exploring the Texture of Texts* in 1996.<sup>2</sup> During the session, there were presentations by Duane F. Watson, Malone University; Shively T. J. Smith, Wesley Theological Seminary (now Boston University School of Theology); Raj Nadella, Columbia Theological Seminary; Alex Hon Ho Ip, Chinese University of Hong Kong; and Michael Trainor, Australian Catholic University. The report of Jione Havea, editor of the SBL Press International Voices in Biblical Studies series, at the SBL Press Book Series Editors meeting on the following morning prompted Vernon Robbins to consult about the possibility of expanding on the presentations of the day before to create a volume of essays on the international emergence of sociorhetorical interpretation (SRI).<sup>3</sup> The result is this volume, which contains three parts.

Part 1 focuses on the development and emergence of sociorhetorical interpretation. Duane Watson, who learned rhetorical interpretation of the New Testament from George A. Kennedy,<sup>4</sup> is the author of the initial essay, “Retro-

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<sup>1</sup> SBL Rhetoric of Religious Antiquity Seminar, Retrospect and Prospects for Sociorhetorical Interpretation, S19-146, Boston, November 19, 2017. Vernon K. Robbins, Robert H. von Thaden, Jr., and Bart B. Bruehler, eds., *Foundations for Sociorhetorical Exploration: A Rhetoric of Religious Antiquity Reader*, RRA 4 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Vernon K. Robbins, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse: Rhetoric, Society and Ideology* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Robbins, *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to the Socio-rhetorical Interpretation* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> SBL Press Book Series Editors, S20-102, Boston, November 20, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

spect and Prospect for Sociorhetorical Interpretation.” Watson was instrumental in prompting Robbins and Samuel Byrskog, University of Göteborg, Sweden, to organize a five-year seminar in the *Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas* (1999–2003), which created an international presence for sociorhetorical interpretation in several nations outside the United States.<sup>5</sup> In his essay, Watson describes the vibrant emergence of multiple approaches in biblical studies that were enriching the field of New Testament interpretation and were incorporated into sociorhetorical interpretation by Robbins and colleagues with whom he met regularly.

After Watson’s essay, Robbins presents an account of the emergence of sociorhetorical interpretation outside the United States. Robbins has been in some of these locations, but many people who came into contact with the developing approach began to teach, adapt, and contribute to SRI in multiple international locations that reached far beyond Robbins’s presence. Beginning in the 1990s with publications in Denmark, Canada, New Zealand, and the Czech Republic, SRI spread throughout South Africa with lectures and workshops by Robbins in nine universities during the summer of 1996. Then the five-year seminar on sociorhetorical interpretation in the *Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas* mentioned above brought it to Israel, Great Britain, and Germany during 1999–2003. In the midst of this activity, the seven Pepperdine Conferences organized by Thomas H. Olbricht (1992–2002) brought significant interaction among sociorhetorical interpretation and neoclassical and feminist rhetorical interpretation in many international locations.<sup>6</sup>

Sociorhetorical interpretation gained further traction in Canada during the first decade of the twenty-first century through Rhetoric of Religious Antiquity meetings during a number of summers at Saint Paul University in Ottawa, where L. Gregory Bloomquist’s students were writing PhD dissertations using sociorhetorical interpretation. During this time Roy R. Jeal at Booth University College, Winnipeg, became an active participant and author producing sociorhetorical publications. Also during this decade dissertations and books using sociorhetorical interpretation appeared in Hong Kong, Norway, Great Britain, and India, and during the second decade further works have appeared in Indonesia and Finland.

Robbins’s essay ends with an account of the remarkable production of BD, MTh, and PhD theses in Samoa and Fiji by students using sociorhetorical interpretation. SRI was introduced in Oceania by Vaitusi Nofoaiga in 2007 following his studies with Professor Elaine Wainwright at the University of Auckland, New Zealand.

After Robbins’s essay, Shively T. J. Smith brings part 1 to a close with an

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<sup>5</sup> Pretoria, South Africa (1999), Tel Aviv, Israel (2000); Montreal, Canada (2001); Durham, UK (2002); Bonn, Germany (2003).

<sup>6</sup> Heidelberg, Germany (1992); Pretoria, South Africa (1994); London (1995); Malibu, California (1996); Florence, Italy (1998); Lund, Sweden (2000); Heidelberg (2002).

essay on strengths and gaps in the presentation of sociorhetorical interpretation in *Foundations for Sociorhetorical Exploration*. From her perspective, strengths are especially present in the approach to textures and the “ever-flowing streams of literary and historical, social and ideological, symbolic and semantic explorations of evolving Mediterranean religious discourses.” What she perceives as a gap in the presentation in the volume is “its limited definition and use of what it considers anthropological and sociological resources for understanding the rhetorical nature of specific religious texts and its reverberating influences throughout history.” In this context, she refers to Miranda Pillay’s PhD dissertation that presents a sociorhetorical reading of the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25–37 in relation to stigma in the context of HIV/AIDS in South Africa.<sup>7</sup> Smith considers this to be an example of the potential of sociorhetorical interpretation beyond its particular focus on Christianity during the first centuries of its emergence in Mediterranean society, culture, ideology, and religion. She proposes that SRI has a unique opportunity to broaden its uses of sociological and anthropological resources to make important contributions “in a global world at odds with itself because of ethnic discords, ever-growing suspicions of strangers and xenophobia, as well as unstable ecological systems, uneven distributions of global wealth, limited healthcare access, and ongoing failures to provide the basic needs necessary to ensure all humanity can live in dignity and flourish.”

Part 2 focuses on particular applications of sociorhetorical interpretation in Australia and Oceania. The first essay in this section, written by Michael Trainor, describes how Elaine Wainwright reconfigured social-cultural texture in SRI into *ecological texture* to address the current threat of climate change on our world. Trainor focuses specifically on the Great Barrier Reef as a microcosm of this threat. He proposes that sociorhetorical interpretation should participate robustly in the ecotheological shift occurring in important circles in biblical studies by reclaiming interpretations like Saint Bede’s (ca. 672–735 CE) who asserts that “every creature senses the Creator” in contrast to the majority of humans in the twenty-first century who have become “insensible” to the Creator. Trainor develops his essay with an account of “The Earth-Bible Project” and explains how Wainwright reworks Robbins’s sociorhetorical model to create an “ecological climate” for interpretation of texts. Then he explains how Jon L. Berquist’s essay on critical spatiality in the *Foundations for Sociorhetorical Exploration* volume can be used as a springboard for spatiality as “an eco-systemic reality” and Claudia Camp’s essay on the temple can be used to focus on the temple as “an ecological firstspace.” He ends his essay by using Bart Bruehler’s essay in the volume on “social-spatial analysis of Luke” to introduce a summary

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<sup>7</sup> Miranda Pillay, “Re-visioning Stigma: A Socio-rhetorical Reading of Luke 10:25–37 in the Context of HIV/AIDS in South Africa” (PhD diss., University of Western Cape, South Africa, 2008).

of his own approach to the story of Zacchaeus and the sycamore tree, which resonates with his ecological publications on the Gospel of Luke.<sup>8</sup>

After Trainor's essay, Vaitusi Nofoaiga describes how he is enacting socio-rhetorical interpretation in Oceania. Explaining how he uses SRI within a hermeneutic from his island nation of Samoa, he introduces readers to his approach to discipleship in the gospels with special focus on his interpretation of Matthew. Using Samoan words related to Samoan social and cultural values, beliefs, practices, and institutions, he refers to the hermeneutic of *tautuaileva* (serve in-between spaces) and *fiaola* (opportunity seeker) as two means by which he has recently interpreted discipleship in the Gospel of Matthew.<sup>9</sup> Then he describes the special ways he uses "the interdisciplinary, multifaceted, and self-conscious practices of interpretation and reflection." This includes exploring the four primary textures of sociorhetorical analysis and interpretation, *topoi* with their special orientation to *place* in relation to the special rhetoric of place in Samoan oral traditions, rhetoricography with its special visual radical rhetoric, and the cognitive turn to conceptual blending in SRI.

Part 2 ends with an essay by Fatilua Fatilua on a Samoan SRI interpretation of Rom 13:1–7 in the context of the vote of the Samoan legislature in 2017 to declare American Samoa a Christian nation under a Triune God. Using the Samoan word *fāiā* (bridge), which conveys a sense of connection or relation, he describes the communal responsibility for Samoans to embody interconnectedness in all they do. Adding the concept of *upu* (word, text, speech language), he emphasizes the usefulness of language and the function of *fatua'iupu* (keepers of myths) for transmitting traditional knowledge in chants, songs, and other traditional compositions among the people. A major responsibility of the keepers of myths is to show tolerance to change while insisting on connecting it to "life justification proof, the life sources or *lagisoifua*" and the institution of *fatua'iupu*, which is built up from the word *fatu* (heart, core) and means to compose or construct in the sense of laying up in the memory or composing and committing to memory. In a context of the recognition that knowledge and language traverse both space and time, the *fāiā* approach "connotes exploring relations and connections in words, word constructions, and meaning." Once Fatilua has introduced this overall hermeneutical approach for his interpretation, he describes how his work for almost a decade in the gridlock and stalemate in the US Congress and his occupation of ongoing thirdspace in a hybrid world currently inspires him to employ this approach in recent events in his homeland. After analyzing and interpreting inner, progressive, argumentative, and social

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Trainor, *Voices from the Edge: Luke's Gospel in Our World* (North Blackburn, Australia: Collins Dove, 1991); Trainor, *About Earth's Child: An Ecological Listening to the Gospel of Luke*, Earth Bible Commentary 2 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Vaitusi Nofoaiga, *A Samoan Reading of Discipleship in Matthew*, IVBS 8 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017).

and cultural textures in Rom 13:1–7, he uses *feagaiga*, which has a range of meanings including “to be opposite to each other,” “to correspond,” or “to dwell together cordially,” to explore challenges, opportunities, and responsibilities he perceives to be present in a context where the church is becoming marginalized by being placed outside of the political realm and disempowered within society.

Johnathan Jodamus’s essay on gender critical frameworks opens part 3, which features uses of SRI in Africa and Asia. With a focus on reconfiguring SRI in the South African context, Jodamus describes challenges of being a black scholar among the majority of white scholarly interpreters of the New Testament in South Africa. Out of his experience of using SRI to interpret gender frameworks in his Master’s thesis and PhD dissertation, and then teaching graduate courses during recent years, Jodamus proposes intersectional texture as an addition to sociorhetorical interpretation. *Intersectional texture*, a term coined during the 1990s by analogy to an intersection of streets where vehicles may be traveling in many directions, strives to analyze multiple forms of oppression and marginalization in a matrix of structural, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power that involve race, gender, class, ethnicity, and nationality. This approach, he proposes, moves beyond the positionality of ideological texture in SRI into a “thinking technology” that focuses on the multiplicity and interdependence of social factors that participate in creating and sustaining power relations that function as discourses in the making of normativities, identities, and social relations. Identifying types of bodies and *bodiliness* that are constructed and cultivated in contemporary society, Jodamus considers this analytical tool an advance to Robbins’s own focus on relationalism in his emphasis that SRI is an interpretive analytics rather than a method with limited research objectives.

The final essay in the volume is written from the perspective of living in Hong Kong for many years, which the author of the essay Alex Hon Ho Ip calls the world’s most capitalist economy. Using New Institutional Economics (NIE), developed in recent decades by Douglass North, Ip presents a critique of past uses of economic theory by Karl Polanyi, Michael Rostovtzeff, and Moses Finley to interpret economic factors at play in the ancient Mediterranean world. Rather than focusing on markets, NIE concentrates on multiple institutions that constrain rules and regulations on the basis of moral and ethical norms. This creates a framework for Ip to introduce *economic texture* within sociorhetorical strategies of analysis to interpret nuances of the Apostle Paul’s argumentation with Philemon about his slave Onesimus. His approach includes household relationships in the context of Roman values and beliefs to interpret the value of Onesimus to Philemon and to exhibit the special force of Paul’s rhetoric in the Mediterranean world of the first century CE. Most of all, Ip’s goal is to open greater space to read the rhetoric of New Testament texts in relation to different layers of economics. In particular, this helps interpreters understand how metaphorical and figurative language are embedded in the economic realities of life

in the ancient Mediterranean world and are internal to values and beliefs promoted by the authors of New Testament writings and in our world today.

The international voices heard in this volume tell us that many wonderful and unexpected things have been generated in the work of scholars literally from around the world through their sociorhetorical interpretations. We could scarcely have guessed at the innovative ideas and interpretations that have risen up through thinking about the rhetoric of textures, topoi, cultural geography and critical spatiality, conceptual blending, modes of discourse, and visual imagery that emerges when people in diverse places and cultures use SRI analytics in their readings of biblical texts. It reminds us of the importance of always being conscious that many things are unforeseen. The products of SRI amaze because they take us beyond what we know to new surprises of meaning. They press on us to expect to learn more than what was previously imagined. The voices heard here point us toward new and valuable varieties of interpretation and biblical commentary that use interpretive analytics rather than method derived from classical or modern rhetoric. They envision the reshaping and renuancing of the practice of interpretation that takes into account the multiple textures of texts.

The aim of sociorhetorical analytics is not to come to direct and clear answers to historical, sociohistorical, structural, ethical, or theological questions, most of which are not fully or clearly answerable. The goal is to identify, analyze, and interpret what the texts *do* and how they go about *doing* it. The concern, in other words, is about understanding the rhetorical force of New Testament and early Christian documents as they emerged, about how they are powerful in moving humans toward belief and wise behavior. So the SRI analytics are heuristic rather than being designed in the first place to define historical and theological truth, provide apologetic, or offer pastoral counsel. Questions of historical truth are crucial and we do not disparage what has been done. But they are not the only questions. The aim of SRI is not the determination of final knowledge (see 1 Cor 8:1b–3). The interpretive analytics are not a kind of scientific method where hypotheses anticipate the domains of conclusions in repeatable experimentation. Their goal, rather, is to find information and discover how it works. Discovery leads to more seeking, not to final definitions or, as Sirach tells us, “When human beings have finished, they are just beginning, and when they stop, they are still perplexed” (Sir 18:7). Discovering how texts work along with the vast range of their implications goes a long way toward understanding their more elusive theological and religious truth and power. They not only say things, they move people to think and act. They cause things to happen. The essays in this volume lead readers in this direction.

New textures of discourse are inevitable when new cultural and religious phenomena appear and when new ways of seeing ideas emerge. People develop new terminology and new language to talk about the beliefs and ways of life they encounter. The texts of the New Testament themselves offer reconfigured and even new textures and topoi as ways of talking about the new Christian



faith. They employ wisdom, prophetic, precreational, priestly, apocalyptic, miracle and other religious textures. The history of interpretation demonstrates that this sort of thing has happened many times. The new textures reveal new knowledge certainly to interpreters and also to those taught by them, or, better, they reveal things previously *unknown* or *unrecognized*. These essays do the same thing, particularly in the ways the new analytical textures move us away from what Trainor correctly names as “anthropocentric” to consideration of places, persons, and ideas outside of ourselves. So we recognize ecological texture, intersectional texture, economic texture, and more localized Samoan linguistic and cultural textures of family, community, and politics, all of which have implications for anthropological and sociological world issues. This means that New Testament texts have things to say and meanings to impart about what goes on in our world, even if they sometimes speak in subtle ways. All this points out that the New Testament is not a book of propositions and narrow moralistic directives, but is a rhetoric of life in God’s creation. The intellectual work of authors of the New Testament had a higher purpose than providing a rule book for believers. What they wanted to do was win over the hearts and minds of people, to change their lives. The New Testament aims to stir the imagination. To see it as less than this is reductionistic and anthropocentric.

So this volume offers some unexpected ideas revealed by SRI, some surprises of analysis. Who would have predicted the kinds of textures that have emerged? Yet, after all, perhaps we should not be so surprised, because careful readers of the ancient books know to expect more from the texts than they bring to them. The essays in this book point to the richness and ever-expanding possibilities for sociorhetorical commentary and the learning that enriches all of us.

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