

NOTE

READER-RESPONSE CRITICISM AND THE ALLEGORIZING READER

In his Preface to the Pontifical Biblical Commission's document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger refers to the present-day "methodological spectrum of exegetical work," among which he lists "new methods and approaches" along with "new attempts to recover patristic exegesis."¹ I am proposing in this note that the former can be utilized to achieve the latter.

One feature of the new approaches is the willingness of exegetes to take over methods that literary critics have fashioned and apply them to the biblical text. Successful attempts to recover patristic exegesis have been less in evidence. The historical approach, illustrating the influence of neo-Platonism, and explaining the evolution of the "four senses" is helpful but remains within the problem, so to speak. As the Introduction to the Commission's document acknowledges, it is "quite impossible [for biblical scholars] to return to a precritical level of interpretation, a level which they now rightly judge to be quite inadequate."² Later in the document, the Commission allows that a particular problem is raised by allegory: "The allegorical interpretation of Scripture so characteristic of patristic exegesis runs the risk of being something of an embarrassment to people today."³ Indeed, allegorical reading gets little respect among biblical scholars although, somewhat paradoxically, it is a popular medium and perfectly at home in modern culture.⁴

¹ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993) 26, hereafter cited as *The Interpretation of the Bible*; also published in *Origins* 23 (January 6, 1994) 497–524. The document presents an overview of contemporary trends in biblical scholarship and attempts to see the positive value in the various initiatives. In his introductory address on the occasion of the publication of the document, Pope John Paul II said: "It is comforting to note that recent studies in hermeneutical philosophy have confirmed . . . the need to interpret each biblical text as part of the scriptural canon recognized by the Church, or being more attentive to the contributions of patristic exegesis" (*The Interpretation of the Bible* 16). The pope seems to misread one element of the contemporary scene. More prominent in modern hermeneutics and in exegetical practice are the blurring of the canonical boundaries and the recognition that extracanonical works have a decisive contribution to make. This trend is noteworthy because it is of a piece with the trend to affirm the importance of the history of exegesis which compels the scholar to attend more to patristic exegesis.

² *The Interpretation of the Bible* 30.

³ *Ibid.* 97.

⁴ The comment of Othmar Keel in his fine study of the Song of Songs can be taken as representative of biblical scholarship: "Yet allegorizing is nothing other than an elegant way of despising the text; like a pack mule, the book is laden with every conceivable

I suggest that one of the modern methods, reader-response criticism, provides a perspective on the process of interpretation which allows the allegorical component in patristic exegesis to be viewed with greater sympathy.⁵ I come to this position as a result of working in two fields which I gradually came to see could be brought into relation. I have been engaged with the critical edition of the text of a early medieval Latin pseudo-Jerome commentary on Mark.⁶ This was the first Markan commentary and, because it was long regarded as Jerome's, it exercised wide influence on the history of exegesis.⁷ It is a good test case for analysis because it is thoroughly traditional. It is an allegorical commentary and thus gave me occasion to ponder the place of allegorical reading. This spurred me to pay more attention to contemporary proposals to do with the application of literary theory to reading the Bible.

Types of Allegorical Reading

It is necessary to delimit the field of inquiry and to stress that I use the terms "the allegorizing reader" quite literally, that is, taking the verb "allegorize" in its fully active sense. I am speaking here not of the allegory as a literary form as such but of the allegorizing reading of a nonallegorical text. Some parts of the Bible are written as allegories; these need to be read allegorically, and I am not addressing this matter. Neither am I considering here the case of the Old Testament read allegorically because of a key theological belief that the Old Testament is to be taken as a foreshadowing of the New Testament. For all practical purposes, from this perspective, the Old Testament text becomes an allegory. I am taking the case of a reader who takes a text such as Mark's Gospel and records an allegorized reading. In his Prologue, the

meaning, but in the process its own voice and its own meaning are suppressed" (*The Song of Songs: A Continental Commentary* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994] 31). The writings of C. S. Lewis, the speeches and sermons of Martin Luther King, and many popular hymns demonstrate the viability of allegory in the field of religion, while one has to think only of *The Wizard of Oz* to see that allegory is a popular medium in our culture.

⁵ The Commission considers elements of reader-response criticism under the heading of "Narrative Analysis" (*The Interpretation of the Bible* 45–46). One could take issue with the way it explains how a text functions as "mirror" (ibid. 46); the essential feature of a mirror is to reflect the person looking into it; a mirror does not project anything else.

⁶ *Commentarius in Evangelium secundum Marcum* (PL 30:589–644). I have completed a critical edition of the text (forthcoming).

⁷ The author of this Markan commentary is unknown. It seems to have been written by an abbot of a monastery in Europe in the first half of the seventh century. Jerome's name was attached in the early ninth century and this led to its wide diffusion. Renaissance scholars rejected it as Jerome's and it became neglected. In 1954, the German scholar Bernhard Bischoff suggested an Irish provenance for the work; this led to a renewal of interest, though Irish provenance is disputed. For bibliography and further details see my "The Identification of the First Markan Commentary," *Revue biblique* 101 (1994) 258–68.

Markan commentator says explicitly that he will explain the mystical sense of Mark. In the first two cases, the result is a commentary or reading which is a decoding; in the last case we have an encoding.

The following passage will illustrate the allegorizing reading of the Markan commentator:

"He found them asleep" [Mark 14:37]. As they sleep mentally, so they sleep bodily. "Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation" [Mark 14:38]. Whoever neglects to pray, enters into temptation. Three times the disciples sleep and three times the Lord prays and wakes them up. The three periods of sleep represent the three dead persons that the Lord awakened; the first in the house, the second near the tomb, and the third from the tomb. The three periods of vigil teach us to keep the Three Persons in mind when we pray. It also teaches us to ask pardon for past, future, and present things. Judas comes "with swords and clubs" [cf. Mark 14:34]. He who despairs of the help of God relies on this world's power.⁸

While the immediate locus of my reflection is this particular Gospel commentary, my considerations have a nuanced application across the board of allegorical reading of the Bible in general. The allegorizing that I identify here is one manifestation of a larger phenomenon.⁹ For much the greater part of the existence of the text of Mark's Gospel the typical reader has been the allegorizing reader. Within the perspective of ecclesial faith this phenomenon took place in a Spirit-guided community; while this last point has its interest and importance, it is not my primary concern here. Rather I am intrigued by the quantity of allegorical commentary—enormous in terms of quantity but also in terms of authority. Like Mount Everest, it is there. What is to be made of it?

Reader-Response Criticism

The reader-response school of thought focuses on the act of reading and on the activity of readers as they read.¹⁰ This trend can be distin-

⁸ From my forthcoming annotated translation.

⁹ For an excellent treatment of the general topic of allegory, see Jon Whitman, *Allegory: The Dynamics of an Ancient and Medieval Technique* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1987), particularly Appendix I, "On the History of the Term 'Allegory'" (263–68). A compact and simple treatment of allegorical interpretation of the Bible is found in Robert Grant with David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); see particularly chap. 6 ("The School of Alexandria") and chap. 9 ("The Bible in the Middle Ages"). See also the papers presented at the Second Patristic Conference, Maynooth, Ireland, *Scriptural Interpretation in the Fathers: Letter and Spirit*, ed. Thomas Finan (Dublin: Four Courts, 1995).

¹⁰ I have found the following two books particularly helpful: Edgar V. McKnight, *Postmodern Use of the Bible: The Emergence of Reader-Oriented Criticism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988); Robert M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991). Also useful is the entire issue of *Semeia* 48 (1989), entitled *Reader Perspectives on the New Testament*. Commentaries on the Gospels reflecting reader-response theory are now commonplace.

guished from methods which focused on the text in itself (e.g., as studied by structuralism) and on the author (what was the writer's aim? what was the mind of the author?). This latter has been the predominant critical literary school up to modern times.¹¹ In biblical scholarship we have now entered a phase of self-awareness as readers.¹² Northrop Frye's tongue-in-cheek remark about Boehme emphasizes the role of the reader unforgettably: "It has been said of Boehme that his books are like a picnic to which the author brings the words and the reader the meaning."¹³ *Prima facie*, these words describe the activity of the allegorizing reader. More restrainedly, McKnight comments: "Readers *make* sense. . . . Readers play a role in the conception of functions of biblical texts that match their experiences and needs."¹⁴ Fowler outlines the program: "Now is the time to make the text's impact on the reader an object of careful, critical study."¹⁵ Exercises in this mode of criticism display a wide variety of results. Fowler writes: "The spectrum of reader-response critics is so broad that whether they can all be categorized under that one heading is questionable."¹⁶ Is the spectrum broad enough to include the effect of the text on the allegorizing reader?

¹¹ Reader-response criticism belongs to a wider cluster of literary theories that can be labelled "postmodern." See Terence J. Keegan, "Biblical Criticism and the Challenge of Postmodernism," *Biblical Interpretation: A Journal of Contemporary Approaches* 3 (1995) 1-14; Keegan remarks: "Both reader and text are part of a larger cultural system Meaning, however, emerges in the encounter between reader and text" (7).

¹² Reader-response criticism is one example among many of a movement in general literary theory which comes to be acknowledged and adopted by biblical scholars. As Stephen D. Moore remarks: "From being an observer in the wings or at best a minor participant, the reader gradually acceded to the role of protagonist in literary studies through the 1960s and 1970s" (*Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge* [New Haven: Yale University, 1989] 71. Part 2 of Moore's book provides excellent examples of reader-response criticism).

¹³ Quoted by Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand* 25.

¹⁴ McKnight, *Postmodern Use of the Bible* 161 (his italics). Fowler's comments are worth adding: "No longer can meaning be understood to be a stable, determinate content that lies buried within the text, awaiting excavation. Rather, meaning becomes a dynamic event in which we ourselves participate. . . . No longer can the language of the gospel be regarded as primarily referential or informative; it has become rhetorical, affective, and powerful" (*Let the Reader Understand* 3). In his introduction to *Semeia* 62 (*Textual Determinacy: Part One*), Robert C. Culley writes: "In choosing the term 'textual determinacy' the editors wanted to raise the question of the relationship between texts and reading and the extent to which meaning is determined by texts or by the reading process" (vii).

¹⁵ Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand* 15. Robert Tannehill puts it similarly: "Reader-response criticism studies the effect of a writing on its readers" (Review of John Paul Heil, *The Gospel of Mark as a Model for Action: A Reader-Response Commentary* [New York: Paulist, 1992], in *Interpretation* 48 [1994] 416).

¹⁶ Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand* 25. Tannehill comments in a similar vein: "While this approach is quite new in biblical studies, it is already apparent that it will not lead to a single set of results" (in the review of Heil cited in n. 15 above).

Reader-Response Theory and the Allegorizing Reader

My thesis is that by situating the assessment of the allegorical commentaries precisely in the area of the role of the readers, we can begin to view the products of their readings with greater sympathy. Reader-response criticism can be used to cope with the fact that the dominant reader in the tradition—the majority reader—has been the allegorizing reader. To pose the question somewhat crudely: If the responding reader is so important according to reader-response criticism, what is wrong with the response of the allegorizing reader? Do allegorizing readers have any rights?¹⁷

A common image used to explain the reader-response approach is to suggest that the text functions as mirror instead of window. Certainly in the case of the Markan commentary, we have a fine example of an author describing a perfect reflection of his own world of Christian living. The reader lived in a particular milieu; he was most likely an abbot of a monastery in which a particular idiom of Christian living was in vogue. The text is presumed to have a message for the “today” of the reader. The gospel text has to be translated into that day’s idiom in order to be intelligible and applied. That the Markan commentator actualized the gospel text is beyond question. What remains a problem is that the method used appears too distant and foreign to us today. That this reader was informed and sincere is beyond question, but the question is how we can come to respect his method.

The essential thing we have to accept is that the idiom into which the gospel text is being translated represents a version of Christianity which claimed to be derived from the Bible and which saw itself in continuity with the biblical story. To show respect for the allegorizing readers, it is not required that we rate their idiom of Christianity as perfect without qualifications. What seems to be required is that we allow them to invoke the entire biblical tradition when face to face with one particular verse, or indeed one phrase or word. The Markan commentary I am concerned with is a tissue of quotations from, paraphrases of, and allusions to the text of the Bible: the Bible commenting on itself. The Biblical Commission identifies a key factor:

Within the broader current of the great Tradition, the particular contribution of patristic exegesis consists in this: to have drawn out from the totality of Scripture the basic orientations which shaped the doctrinal tradition of the Church, and to have provided a rich theological teaching for the instruction and spiritual sustenance of the faithful.¹⁸

The key word here is “totality.” The totality of the Bible is always relevant and applicable. This is the reason why we can find a commen-

¹⁷ I mean this retrospectively; it is not my intention to plead for a revival of the method.

¹⁸ *The Interpretation of the Bible* 95.

tary on any verse of the Bible anywhere—literally! Anyone who has searched for the opinion of any particular Church Father on any particular verse will understand. Allegorizing serves the totality of biblical truth in a way that transcends the particular text being read. The variety of results of the readings shows that there was no agreement about a deeper meaning and thus no objective and uniform content was there awaiting discovery. The more influential force was to find a teaching outlet for a religious syllabus which was itself derived from the biblical text, and about this syllabus there was agreement backed by authority.

The element of reference to something “other” pertains to the essence of allegory, including texts composed as allegories and allegorical commentaries. The commentator uses the text to make a statement of another kind. The agenda for the medieval commentator was the teaching of the Christian faith as it had been formulated in the creeds and traditional catechesis of the Church. The biblical text became the imaginative vehicle for such teaching. But the teaching itself was fundamentally biblical in the sense that it had been derived from some other part of the Bible, or at least was judged to be. So the total resources of the Bible became available to the commentators as they taught. They did not see any incongruity in the procedure. For them, Scripture (both Jewish and Christian writings) was a seamless robe, and all parts were organically linked so that one part was easily put at the service of another. This sense of the interpenetration of texts triggered a lively associative quest.

What we have in the tradition of allegorical commentary is a catechetical and preaching enterprise, which was seen as profoundly biblical in the sense that it was always understood to be at the service of the Word. The commentary was always presented as the secondary part of the task of the proclamation of the Word, seen in the very fact that, formally speaking, it is always preceded by the public reading of a passage of Scripture or by the quotation of the biblical lemma.

The “Fit Reader”

One of the issues much debated by reader-response critics is the competency of the reader. Are all readers equal? Is one reading better than another? To adapt Northrop Frye’s quip, can the reader bring simply any meaning to the picnic? Is the allegorizing reader excluded? There is agreement that reader-response criticism does not validate every reader.¹⁹ McKnight shrewdly points out that “when readers be-

¹⁹ See Fowler’s convenient summary treatment of the “implied reader,” “the ideal reader,” “the competent reader,” “the fit reader,” etc. (*Let the Reader Understand* 36–37). Fowler speaks of offering a “critical model of reading” (ibid 58). Cf. McKnight: “The reader cannot be neutral” (*Postmodern Use of the Bible* 242–44).

come conscious of their role, the process of reading is altered."²⁰ There is no doubt that much of the contemporary debate concerning the "fit reader" is strictly "postmodern" in character and does not easily relate to the situation of the early medieval commentators. Yet, although the Markan reader-commentator may not have had our degree of self-awareness, he is no less a reader. His naïveté does not disqualify him precisely because of the culture in which he was doing the reading.

We cannot easily compare an individual reader today with an individual reader then. Readers then were reading in the control of a tradition. These were guided readers. These were skilled readers. These were trained readers. One can see this control being exercised in the *Glossa ordinaria* which is the supreme instance of the tradition guiding readers by the very physical lay-out of the page. This is still seen today in the comparable Jewish usage of the *Biblia rabbinica*.

A key issue is where the reader is getting the meaning. The allegorizing readers were bringing not just any meaning to the text. It is not a matter of arbitrary willful reaction to a text. The skills of the reader are guaranteed by the fact that those who could read were the educated few and these were educated to be readers precisely in the tradition. The allegorizing readers were professional theologians who knew the Church's tradition in terms of formulated doctrine and asceticism, and who believed that the accumulated body of knowledge which they had acquired was ultimately based on the Bible. They possessed the skill to relate imaginatively the teaching of the Christian faith to the text. In adopting the stance of deriving their formulations from the text read allegorically, they were adopting a technique which they saw as releasing the meaning of the Bible in its totality. To understand their stance is not to approve but to permit ourselves the liberty of evaluating their findings as to their biblical authenticity. A comment on a biblical text can be truly biblical even when not derived from the text in a manner which we would accept as valid.

Mention must be made of the importance of the association of ideas, or perhaps, more accurately, the association of ideas and of images. The allegorizing readers gave this "law" full play. There is always something in the text which triggers an association with another text of the Bible or with some element of doctrine and asceticism which has the support of some other passage in the Bible. A kind of analogy is frequently at work. In fact, we can readily see in much of the allegorizing, the principle of the "analogia fidei" operating in microcosm.²¹ Along these lines, one could invoke another of the new approaches, that of "intertextuality" or "allusion." Allan Pasco defines "allusion" as "the metaphorical relationship created when an alluding text evokes and uses another independent text"; he goes on to describe it as "the image produced by the metaphoric combination that occurs in the

²⁰ Ibid. 161.

²¹ Cf. *The Interpretation of the Bible* 97.

reader's mind."²² It is clear that intertextuality and allusion are intrinsic to the procedure followed by the allegorizing reader. The Markan commentary is a tissue of biblical quotations and paraphrases and material allusions which are called into service in an effort to apply the text in a concrete way.

Conclusion

By our standards, allegorizing readers bring too much meaning to the picnic. In a sense, they are the extreme illustration of the amount all readers bring to a reading of a text. In the case of the allegorizing readers I have focussed on the fact that they bring totality to bear upon each single verse of the gospel text: totality of their knowledge of the Bible, their theological knowledge, and the ascetical life they were attempting to live. Theirs is second-stage reading; a first-stage reading is presumed, and this is what the great tradition brought them. The Markan commentator drew on a tradition that had already read this text many times along with the rest of the Bible. The totality of the biblical message has been extracted, formulated, and communicated. This represents in his case the first phase. He tells us in the Prologue that he wants to pass on what his *majores* have taught him. It is noteworthy that he adopts the stance of the commentator. He does not independently write a new book. Why read and re-read? Why not re-write? Why not simply make one's own statement? Instead he wrote a commentary; he provided a reading of a text, and all because of the authority of the text being commented on. Thus he is to be classified in the first place as a "reader"; secondarily, he is a writer. Allegorizing readers are colleagues, members of the reading club; perhaps not to be admired nor indeed imitated, but certainly not to be disowned. Once we understand their special circumstances as second-stage readers we can understand why they responded to the text as they did. Then, we, in turn, become fit readers of their commentaries. Fit readers can recover the great tradition.

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²² Allan H. Pasco, *Allusion: A Literary Graft* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1994) 12.