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# Intertextual Reading, *Relecture*, and Conversion<sup>\*</sup>

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This article has resulted concretely from a debate that began five years ago among the editors of a proposed "International Catholic Bible Commentary." We agreed to two principles: first, that biblical commentary should not be paraphrase not only because paraphrase is boring and useless, but also because it becomes an alternate text replacing the biblical text; second, that commentary is more than supplemental information, since it should point to meaning. There agreement stopped, because meaning is a very elusive item.

In the work of exegetes one sees several tendencies coming together that could lead to a new hermeneutic for biblical commentary: (1) the growing despair over the possibility of believable history regarding the times and texts of the Hebrew Bible, and a growing gap between theology on the one hand and the ever-more-secular discipline of Near Eastern studies on the other; (2) the articulation and success of canonical criticism, which inevitably asks anew about New Testament reinterpretations of the Hebrew Bible; (3) the development of reader-response theory, which suddenly makes even the subjectivity of implied readers a factor in the meaning of the text—including readers in subsequent centuries in so far as they are truly implied; (4) the rediscovery of patristic exegesis as valuable in itself, as formative of the canon, and therefore as determinative about the meaning of biblical texts. All of this presupposes, but also remains very remote from, a historical-critical search for "original meaning," and the academic ideal on which recent generations of scholars have broken their teeth.

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\* This article is based on a paper presented to the Society of Biblical Literature International Conference, Dublin, July 1996.

This bright new hermeneutical world is indeed bright and new, but it is exquisitely difficult to state in clear concepts just what a useful biblical commentary would consist of. It was easy to define an extension of familiar methods into what is called *Wirkungsgeschichte* (effective history), but even the best of this has produced an almost amusing series of historical misunderstandings of earlier texts. French scholars have pioneered in writing about and experimenting in the *relecture* of biblical texts, and this notion, as an improvement on *Wirkungsgeschichte*, professes a contemporary theological focus. On the other hand *relecture* often depends heavily on French structuralism and is enculturated in a world that not everybody is prepared to enter. At times we end up admiring the scholarly ability of biblical exegetes, but fail to experience a presence of God in the biblical text. What the commentary editors wanted to recover is the original meaning in the sense of the original power of the biblical text, the meaning that operates religious conversion and transforms reality. What are the rules for heading readers in that direction?

To take the Bible itself as our guide, it is clear that most of the Bible is, in fact, a *relecture* of other biblical texts, a commentary on their meaning. How does it proceed? Two brief examples may be recalled.

### The Flood Story<sup>1</sup>

The original Yahwist flood story ends in Genesis 8 with God admitting that the flood had not helped as a remedy for sin, since humans are sinful by nature. The Yahwist account (J) consistently sees God as improvising such remedies as unforeseen needs occur: in Genesis 2, Yahweh gets the idea of making a woman as a remedy for Adam's loneliness; in Genesis 3, Yahweh sets an angel to guard the tree of life as a remedy against the new powers of humans who have just gained the quasi-divine knowledge of good and evil; in Genesis 4, Yahweh establishes the system of vendetta and the sign of Cain as a remedy against the astounding occurrence of murder; in Exodus 34, Yahweh sets the cultic rules as a remedy against idolatry. With regard to the flood Yahweh oversees a remedy against the extinction of humankind; in the building of an ark Yahweh intervenes to open the hatch and let Noah out afterwards. At the end, in Genesis 8, Yahweh remedies the newly created terror of floods by establishing a system of times and seasons that will recur perpetually. What is all of this about? I would say that it is about an important trust in life. This trust is argued for etiologically on the basis of institutions that readers could observe in nature and culture, institutions that God has invented and put into place.

After J, in 598–587 B.C.E., there occurred the destruction of Jerusalem, and the quasi-annihilation of the Jewish people and culture through

exile. There ensued a terrible religious depression, which we can experience in intimate detail in the book of Ezekiel. During the following decades, the Priestly Writer (P) wrote a *relecture* of the Yahwist flood story, changing it radically. Where J tells a story about too much rain and rising waters over forty days, P tells a story about a cosmic event in which the work of creation is reversed and original chaos returns. There is one exception: a sacred ark is preserved from chaos with its selected passengers. For the saved, a new creation is established, signed with the rainbow to remind God of the divine promise that chaos would never occur again.

What is this "retelling" about? The story in P<sup>8</sup> (for *priesterliche Grundschrift*, "basic priestly narrative") is not about disasters in nature. It is about breakdown in culture, meaning, and faith: the disappearance of all divine interventions and all transcendent light. The "chaos" to which the story refers is a religious wasteland. In writing this *relecture* of J, P is neither embroidering on nor forgetting the powerful faith of the Yahwist story. P invokes it, rather, in all its power and extends it to a new horizon of meaning. P enhances it with hyperbole and a new rhetoric, but more importantly P connects it directly to the terrible despair that was experienced by the newly exiled Jews, evoking a totally new faith in a sacred order of things described later in his text. P is not just recalling a trust in the continuance of nature; P is informing that trust with a vision of theocracy. If one reads P<sup>8</sup> in isolation, it can be heard as a thin voice of a prissy and childish fairy tale, as indeed it has been described by classical source critics (McEvenue 1971, 1–21). But if one reads P<sup>8</sup> as a focused recovery of J in a time of despair, it sounds like the roar of Niagara Falls. In fact P forges the basic faith of Judaism for the exiles by a powerful *relecture* of the stories of the monarchical period. This is a foundational expression, an instrument of momentous conversion in Israel, the results of which are still powerful in history today.

None of this is new. All of it remains a message in the past tense and in the third person, a discourse about what others have believed and experienced in bygone days. This is commonly identified as "theology *in obliquo*." More is needed for contemporary interpretation. Reader-response criticism, for example, would invite us to identify a contemporary faith experience to which this text speaks. The text is about some thing, about trust, specifically a trust that God brings life and transcendent meaning into our world. The question for us is: What concept in the mind of contemporary readers expresses or needs that knowledge? Without that connection Bible reading is antiquarian diversion and little more. Obviously we hear and know a lot today about the end of an era and the imminent collapse of Western civilization. Surely that will do for the flood part. There remains to identify the ark. I will only say that this

question must be answered. Facing this challenge is demanded of exegetes, because the reality of that ark in some sense is precisely what the biblical text means. P's *relecture* discovered salvation in the Jerusalem cult. Contemporary *relecture*, if we are up to it, will discover salvation in some present reality. This, I contend, will be the simple or elemental meaning of the text today.

### **"Out of Egypt I Have Called My Son"**

This famous text is, of course, from Hosea 11:1: "When Israel was a child I loved him, / and out of Egypt I have called my son." It is metaphorical language that constitutes only a part of Hosea's extensive use of relational imagery between lovers and members of the family, including that of farming and the love of animals, all of which express his grasp of God's involvement with Israel. Through this earthy and passionate language Hosea expresses his faith in God, and gives it a vital character of personal trust and commitment. He also expresses an understanding of divine involvement with Israel as dynamic and vital. This is a universe of powerful feelings within which Hosea's account of Israel's infidelity enables readers to know evil for what it is. All of this is the elemental meaning of Hosea 11:1.

When we read Matthew's *relecture* of this text (2:15), it comes after the story of the magi visiting King Herod, and before the tale of the massacre of infants, which is followed by an angelically inspired trip of the holy family to Egypt, Herod's death, and finally the settlement in Nazareth. Every New Testament interpreter will reference Hosea as the textual source of the text, but often without much helpful comment. The discussion may be focused on the context of literary structures in Matthew, or on degrees of historicity, or historical elements, and so on. It is difficult for contemporary commentary readers to avoid dismissing this text as a slightly awkward metaphor taken from Hosea (i.e., Israel as God's son), artificially tagged on to a barely excusable fable by Matthew. It is not "the stuff" of conversion. If it touches faith, it touches it only as a test: Can one take Matthew seriously here?

What is needed here is a strong *relecture*. When the New Testament cites the Hebrew Bible, why should this be perceived as some kind of cleverness or even argumentative polemic, rather than a breakthrough to new faith? Why should commentary be reduced to showing where the precise point of contact is between Matthew and Hosea, and to discussion about textual questions such as whether the Massoretic or Septuagint text or some Targum was the immediate source? Surely interpretation of Matthew 2:15 should include a discovery of the passionate faith experience that Hosea intends. In other words, interpreters should ask what

Matthew thinks Hosea 11:1 is about, and only then proceed to examine what faith experience of the New Testament is appropriately connected to it.

In this case, as we have seen, Hosea is about the grounded devotion of God to Israel. Matthew, if one re-reads the whole infancy narrative, is intent on putting together a collection of stories to glorify the newly born Jesus, inviting the reader to perceive the full dimensions of Jesus' life as already present in the infant. By citing Hosea, Matthew has the reader perceive, in the person of the infant, the nation of Israel defined as a people called out of Egypt, that is, redeemed from slavery by Yahweh so that it might serve Yahweh alone in total freedom. If Matthew chooses to depict the infant Jesus by repeating this Egyptian mystery, it is to invite readers to understand Jesus as one born to embody the essence of Israel's redemption and vocation. By citing Hosea, Matthew wants the reader to understand the infant son Jesus as the center of divine intervention in the world, the instrument of salvation for the Jews and the nations, and as the embodiment of many religious traditions. This, and nothing less, is the elemental meaning of Matthew 2:15.

It is hard to say this meaning in scholarly language, or in any language for that matter. Matthew uses a special technique of *relecture* to do so. Modern exegetes will not have interpreted this text adequately, will not have uncovered the direct meaning of this text, until they and their readers have understood this simple yet complex idea, having felt its import as Matthew did writing it.

This takes care of "meaning," now what about "reality"? Is what I have mentioned a rhetorical trick or is there a theological basis for it? Is there some one divine reality that is an object common to both Hosea's and Matthew's meditations? Is the sonship of Israel and that of Jesus about the same thing, or is the connection purely verbal? One might suggest that there is something common to both sonships, and that Matthew, who could never have formulated it in philosophical (as opposed to literary) language, wants to evoke that common reality in the reader.

In the Hebrew Bible the relationship of father and beloved or first-born son, is related to death. We are made aware of this in Genesis 22, where Abraham tries to kill Isaac. The topic recurs in Exodus 4:22-3, where Moses returns from Midian to Egypt and is told by Yahweh to tell Pharaoh: "Thus says the Lord: Israel is my firstborn son. I said to you, 'Let my son go that he may worship me.' But you refused to let him go; now I will kill your first born son." Mysteriously the text goes on in verses 24-5: "On the way [to Egypt], at a place where they spent the night, the Lord met him and tried to kill him. But Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched Moses' feet with it." I will not try to make

logical sense out of this difficult text. Obviously a structural analysis would yield many complex relationships and substitutions latent in it (Kunin 1996). But, without demanding belief in any systematic relationships, the simple juxtaposition of elements signifies—here as in all literature—an attempt to suggest an underlying reality that is difficult to name. The outstanding elements in the passage are: Israel in Egypt; danger of death/salvation from death; Israel as God's son; and circumcision of a son.

Hosea's text, "out of Egypt I have called my son," is also not without danger. In this text the son does not answer the call and so death as a result comes to the son. Hosea 11:6 reads: "The sword rages in the cities, / it consumes their oracle-priests, / and devours because of their schemes." God is again the killer. In verse 10 of the same chapter, Yahweh is a roaring lion: "when he roars, / his children come trembling from the west." When we reflect on all of this together, we see that God's call is one that brings to mind the flight from famine, the slavery and oppression of Egypt, the terror of flight through the Reed Sea, and the call to covenant on Mount Sinai. Threat, death, suffering, and liberation are all part of God's call to a son and/or daughter. Whether we are reading Genesis 22, Exodus 4, Hosea 11, or Matthew 2, such texts are to be understood as commentaries on that hard-to-define reality or paradox of divine love expressed simultaneously as violence and peace, a paradox that we find in ourselves at a level of consciousness where death and life come from the same vital source.

At this point it would be easy to cite many more texts dealing with the mystery of suffering that is both caused by and cured by divine intervention, all the way from suffering as reprimand inflicted by a parent on a child, as in Proverbs 3:11–12, to the Suffering Servant of Second Isaiah. For example the prophetic call narratives regularly place those who are chosen in danger and hardship. "Fear not," they are told. In Jewish tradition, from Job to Tevyah in *The Fiddler on the Roof*, we find that the beloved son or chosen one asks God to forget him for just a moment, so he can have some peace. But sticking more narrowly to Father-calling-Son texts, it is clear that the love of the Father is dangerous, and being chosen and preferred by God is close to dying. In Matthew 2, Jesus flees to Egypt to escape death at Herod's hands; he returns only when he is called, after the infants have been slaughtered and Herod himself has died. "Out of Egypt I have called my son." In the end, Jesus' own death in obedience to the will of his Father is that which is said to give us life more abundantly. Before Jesus, God was seen as rescuing from death; in Jesus, God is seen as rescuing through death.

On what reality is this literary suggestiveness based, this intertextual

affirmation of a common mystery? What reality is common to all these texts? Should we say that it is a literary superficiality? Or is it an archetype, a natural neural urge toward an image by which we humans are led to interpret a range of diverse events in a unified way? Or is it a recurring structure of human experience that can occasion the recurrence of an identical religious experience? Or is it a constant in the Word (the second person of the Trinity), which enters diverse moments of history to the same effect? These are legitimate theological questions. They may need better formulation or a different approach. They arise out of *relecture*. They disappear if one refuses conversion.

### Conclusion

Study of the Bible includes both the historical task of establishing material facts about language, text, and historical contexts of writing, and the literary task of uncovering meaning. Historical-critical scholarship, as the working through of *Einleitungsfrage*, is the indispensable first step in taking the biblical text seriously. *Relecture* and conversion are indispensable second steps in uncovering the simple, elemental meanings of biblical texts and in writing contemporary biblical commentary. *Relecture* and conversion lead inexorably to theological questions.

### Endnotes

1. For present purposes, we may follow the hypothesis that J is a separate source, dating it very tentatively some time before the exile.

### Works Cited

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