

Kees Waaijman

BIBLICAL SPIRITUALITY: AN “OTHER” READING (ALLÈGORIA)

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the communicative dimension and dialogical dynamic of a text, in order to illuminate the relationship of Biblical Spirituality with the Bible. From a pragmatic perspective on the polar tension between author, text and reader, the article reflects on the action of the author-text on the reader, and the action of the reader in relation to the text, as two strategies of reading. The article illustrates these two strategies in terms of seven paradigms. It points out how the essence of pragmatics lies in the fact that the polar tension does not allow for indifference on the reader's part. Thus, a dialogical process is involved. The transition from an awareness of differences in respect of contents to dialogical non-indifference is crucial for Biblical Spirituality, because it marks the progression from a “meditative” way of reading, which is directed towards content (literary history), to an “orative” or prayerful way of reading, which is concerned with the God-human process of transformation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Anyone who walks into a well-stocked theological library will soon be confronted with row after row of books about the Bible. Some books cover a whole Biblical period, whilst others concern themselves with one book, one chapter, one verse – or one word – of the Bible. The shelves abound with words concerned with words. Sometimes the sheer volume of words overwhelms me with a sinking feeling, reminding me that I, too, frequently add to this vast quantity of words about words!

In general – certainly in recent centuries – these myriads of words have attempted, via various (literary and historical) circumscribed movements, to delineate and determine the meaning of a Biblical text. It is as though the text is captured as “prey” and hauled out of its proper habitat, and then surrounded and imprisoned in order to be confined to a specific moment. It then appears

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as a particular dish on the menu of religious practice. Furthermore, new snipers lurk about, constantly on the lookout for fresh prey which can be used to fill up the new menus.

Thus, the meaning of a text is captured, but the captor, or hunter, keeps himself out of harm’s way. He is not struck or imprisoned. This contribution concerns the hunter – particularly at the moment when he himself is indeed impacted and affected. This brings to mind the *Spiritual Canticle* of John of the Cross, in which the divine Bridegroom is compared to a stag which is pursued by the human soul. But the hunter is wounded by the stag (stanza 1):

Bride: Where have You hidden,
Beloved, and left me moaning?
You fled like the stag
After wounding me;
I went out calling You, and You were gone.

(John of the Cross 1973:410-411)

And then – even more wonderfully – the stag who inflicted the wound is himself afflicted by the wound of the doe – the very wound that he himself administered to her (stanza 13):

Withdraw them,¹ Beloved,
I am taking flight!
Bridegroom: Return, dove,
The wounded stag
Is in sight on the hill,
Cooled by the breeze of your flight.

(John of the Cross 1973:410-411)

1 The pronoun “them” here refers to the eyes, and thus the gaze, of the Beloved.

2. PRAGMATICS

From the perspective of hermeneutics, this article falls within the field of “pragmatics”. Pragmatics considers the text from the standpoint of its communicative dimension. Whilst content is considered at the semantic level, the dialogical dynamic is emphasised at the pragmatic level. Pragmatics brings about the transition from the “said” to the “saying”. Whilst the “said” touches on the intrinsic meaning of words, the “saying” concerns the dialogical sign that we give to the other (Levinas 1998b:46). At the pragmatic level, the ascribed meaning is read from the saying. According to Levinas (1998b), the contents that reside within the said, and which are offered for interpretation and decoding, are understood as a result of “the unblocking of communication”, which is not merely reducible to “the circulation of information which presupposes it”, but which “is accomplished in saying”. The resultant understanding “is not due to the contents that are inscribed in the said and transmitted to the interpretation and decoding done by the other”. Rather, it comes about

in the risky uncovering of oneself, in sincerity, the breaking up of inwardness and the abandon of all shelter, exposure to traumas, vulnerability (Levinas 1998b:48).

The pragmatic level of reading brings the said back to the saying, returns the said once again to the breath which opens itself up to the other and which is for another the sign of its abundant significance (Levinas 1998b:181). It directs itself to the said, in which everything is thematised – in which everything presents itself as a theme – returning once more to the significance of saying, returning the said to its signification of saying (Levinas 1998b:181).

Pragmatics views the text as the embodiment of a polar tension: author – text – reader. Within this field of tension the (intended or unintended) action of the author-text on the reader can be discerned: for example, by watching out for the rhetorical techniques by means of which the text endeavours to persuade, mislead or reproach the reader. But, one can also begin at the other side of the polar relationship, i.e., that of the action of the reader towards the text. Both are strategies which the reader develops in order to penetrate the text. However, the essence of pragmatics lies in the fact that this polar tension (the difference between the two poles) does not allow for indifference on my part. Likewise, the differences between me as the reader, and the “said” in the text, do not allow me to be indifferent. Thus, a dialogical process comes into play (Levinas 1998a:passim).

This transition from difference in respect of content to dialogical non-indifference is crucial for Biblical spirituality. Why? Because this transition marks the crossing over from a “meditative” way of reading which is directed towards content (literary history), to an “orative” way of reading which is

concerned with the God-human process of transformation. Here, we enter the arena of a prayerful relationship with God.

The God of prayer – of invocation – would be more ancient than the God deduced from the world or from some sort of *a priori* radiance and stated in any indicative proposition (Levinas 1981:79).

3. METHODOLOGY: PHENOMENOLOGY

Methodologically, this contribution is an exercise in what Levinas refers to as the “paradigmatic” way of thinking. This methodology does not function on the rational-deductive or conceptualised level. Rather, in concrete models, aligned closely to the variation technique and intuitive essence as elucidated by Husserl (1985:409-443), it constitutes an attempt to grasp the meaning of something. Paradigmatic thinking involves looking attentively at models in order to look through them and – although perhaps only for a moment – to understand what they are about. Levinas compares this way of thinking to trampolining:

Notions remain constantly in contact with the examples or refer back to them, whereas they should have been content as springboards to rise to the level of generalization (Levinas 1994:103).

The thinking returns repeatedly to the model on the basis of which it originally sprang up, and once again returns to it.

The paradigmatic way of thinking should be distinguished from the actions of spiritual figures such as Buddha, Christ, or Mohammed. It should also be distinguished from the lives of saints whom people aspire to emulate, or from a way of life to which people attempt to conform, and which they endeavour to appropriate inwardly (Adnès 1960:1878-1885). It also does not refer to an approach which was used especially by mendicant monks to make the great truths of faith accessible to simple believers (Cantel & Ricard 1960:1892-1896), and which was considered by the advocates of rational philosophy (Wolff, Lessing, Kant) to be merely an illustration (added evidence) of an already-acquired concept (Buck 1971:820-822). Rather, the term “paradigm” is used here to denote a form which is understood as a particular case of a general rule functioning within a cognitive process, which leads from sensory knowing (*nosse*) to intellectual recognition (*intelligere*) (Buck 1971:819).

This idea was more fully developed in phenomenology. Edmund Husserl sees the “model” as a cognitive form which offers insight into the basic structure of a region of reality. This cognitive process undergoes three stages: (1) a concrete given is taken as an example; (2) arising from this example, all

sorts of variations are introduced alongside of, or in juxtaposition to it; (3) in and through the differences between the variations, the invariable comes to light: i.e., the basic structure (essence, *eidōs*). The paradigms presented in this contribution are intended as examples in the Husserlian sense: in their concreteness, they disclose the area of Biblical spirituality.

4. SEVEN PARADIGMS

In this article, seven paradigms will be discussed: two from Scripture (one from the Old and one from the New Testament); two from the context of Patristic spirituality (East and West); two from the writings of mystics of the Middle Ages; and one from a poet of our time. In each case, the question is: where and how does the “other” reading appear?

4.1 Paradigm 1: Nathan and David

After King David had spotted the beautiful Bathsheba and sent her husband Uriah to his death in order to be able to take her for his lawful wife, the prophet Nathan was sent by Yahweh to David. Nathan told the King the following story:

“There were two men in a certain city, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had many sheep and cattle; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meagre fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveller to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man’s lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him.” Then David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, “As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no compassion.” Nathan said to David, “You are that man”. (2 Sam.12:1-7)

This story plays out at two levels: at the level of content (narrative) and at the pragmatic (dialogical) level. At the level of content, the story describes two men who live in the same city. One is rich and the other is poor; and so forth. When we restrict ourselves to the narrative content, we ask particular questions: What was the name of the town? How old were the men? What did it mean to be rich or poor in those times? How many sheep and cattle did the rich man have? Was it usual for a lamb to be raised alongside of children? Did lambs often eat and drink from the same cup and plate as their owner did? Did travellers always receive such an abundant meal from their hosts? What kind of man was the traveller? Also, from the literary perspective, there

are many aspects to consider and compare in terms of the striking contrasts between rich and poor: the rich man with his many (mature) sheep and cattle, compared to the poor man with his only lamb; the chilly, impassive attitude of the rich man with his many possessions, as against the warm relationship of the poor man with his only lamb, which is like a child to him. And then there is the dramatic high point of the story, with an amazing twist: the rich man, who receives a visit from a (rich?) traveller, suddenly becomes highly devoted to his many sheep and cattle! Instead of slaughtering one of them, he opts for the only, not yet mature, but precious lamb of the poor man. The rich man remains attached to his own possessions, but is completely unmoved with regard to justice for the poor. How does this story progress? Did the poor man take revenge? Did the rich man see the error of his ways? What happened to the traveller?

We shall never know, because the story is interrupted at the pragmatic (dialogic) level. The listener – the king – burns with anger: “The rich man deserves to die!” Clearly, the listener/king is so taken up with the story that he believes it to be real, despite the first words indicating that it is a story – “There were once”. This story has gripped David to such an extent that he has become part of it; and consequently, he becomes realigned in his kingship: as the judge over the city in which both rich and poor live, he must speak justly on behalf of both. “The man who has done this is beyond the pale. Moreover, he must restore the lamb four-fold!” As the motivation for his sovereign judgment, the king says that the rich man could not “find it in his heart” (v. 4) to slaughter one of his own animals, but robbed the poor man of his one precious lamb and had no pity on him (v. 6). When the listener (in this case David) steps into the story, and takes up his role as king within that context, the prophet’s judgment follows: “You are that man”! This is a dramatic denouement at the pragmatic-dialogic level: the man who has summoned up his own sovereignty as king and judge in relation to the story (i.e., as king and judge over the city where the rich and poor men live), is now judged. David is unmasked as the merciless king.

The moment at which the “other” reading becomes effective can be pinpointed. It is when the listener-king is no longer indifferent to the intrinsic “differences” which are created in and through the story. The reported positions do not allow the listener-king to remain indifferent: “Then David’s anger was greatly kindled against the rich man” (v. 5). In terms of the pragmatic-dialogic perspective, David is touched through the story and becomes part of it. Consequently, the prophetic-pragmatic can now come into play. If David had merely asked questions such as: “What were the names of the rich man and the poor man? Precisely how great was the difference in their possessions? Did they both have a house?”, and so forth, he would have remained untouched and unperturbed by the story. And this is precisely what often happens in exegetical

education and training: the reader remains unperturbed, completely unmoved by the dialogic dynamic which, in and through the text, waits to be unlocked.

We have pointed to an exact moment in the Biblical text when the transition from story to communication was made: that of David's rage. Yet, for the perceptive reader, the prophetic communication is present from the very beginning. In the opening sentence – “There were two men in a certain city, one rich and the other poor” – King David (with his extensive harem) and the subordinate servant Uriah (with his beloved wife) are actually already present. With retrospective insight, all the pieces of the puzzle fall into place ... arising from the “other” way of reading.

4.2 Paradigm 2: The Good Samaritan

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is part of an instructional spiritual dialogue between Jesus and an expert in the law (Lk. 10:25-37). This dialogue consists of two rounds (vv. 25-28 and 29-37), both of which follow the same format: the expert in the law poses a question (v. 25 and v. 29), Jesus poses a counter-question (vv. 27 and 37a) and Jesus confirms the response of the expert in the law (v. 28 and v. 37b). The two rounds will be discussed separately.

4.2.1 Round 1

An expert in the law, or rabbinical scholar, stands up to test the limits of Jesus' interpretation of the *Torah*: “Rabbi, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (v. 25). Rabbis were accustomed to testing the limits of their interpretation of Scripture in this manner. The question of the expert in the law concerns human conduct in relation to the reception of eternal life: “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (v. 25). “Doing” is praxis: what kind of life-praxis gives access to participation in God's life? Jesus replies with a counter-question and thereby tests the scholar: “What is written in the law? And how do you read that?” (v. 26). Two questions are posed. The first question relates to the choice of a passage from Scripture: “According to you, which text or texts give the answer to the question you posed concerning a suitable life-praxis?” The second concerns the interpretation of the selected Scripture passage: “How do you read that text?”

Initially, the expert in the law only replies to the first counter-question. In his reply, he combines two passages from Scripture. The first passage, from Deuteronomy, is universally known to all Jews: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind” (Deut. 6:5). The second text is from Leviticus: “And your neighbour as yourself” (Lev. 19:18). Through his choice of texts, the expert in the law positions the deeds or acts (praxis) of a person within a triangle of

love: love of God, love of neighbour, love of self. Jesus confirms the answer of the scholar: “Do this, and you will live” (v. 28). Jesus emphatically repeats the key words of the question: “What must I *do* to receive eternal *life*?” (v. 25). For the rabbinical scholar, the repetition constitutes an affirmation: “*Do* this, and you will *live*” (v. 28). However, this does not end the discussion. A second round follows.

4.2.2 Round 2

Jesus had initially posed two counter-questions: “Which text from Scripture forms the foundation?” and “How do you read that text?” (v. 26). The first question has been answered, the second has not: how should the texts from Deuteronomy and Leviticus be interpreted? So the expert in the law asks: “Who is my neighbour?” (v. 29). The aim of this question is to penetrate the cited texts more deeply. The scholar is looking for an interpretation (v. 26). Often, the interpretation begins with a word which is considered to be problematic, and which requires an explanation or solution. “Who is my neighbour?” The scholar also could have asked: “Who is God?” or “What does it mean to love?” But he selects the term “neighbour”. Does “neighbour” mean a fellow citizen? A next-door neighbour? A fellow believer? However, Jesus does not reply with a brief definition. Instead, he poses a counter-question (v. 26), which is introduced by a story consisting of five brief scenes.

Scene 1. A man is travelling down from Jerusalem to Jericho. He falls into the hands of robbers, who take everything they can from him, and leave him lying beaten and half-dead. The attackers go on their way as if nothing has happened.

Scene 2. By chance, a priest happens to be travelling down the same road from Jerusalem to Jericho, and on the way, he comes across the half-dead traveller. The priest makes a point of avoiding the man, and goes on his way. There is no priestly excuse (i.e., the law in terms of which a dead body must not be touched) for this behaviour, since the traveller is half-dead, and not dead. After the priest, a Levite comes to the same place. His aversion towards the half-dead man is depicted in precisely the same words as those describing the actions of the priest: “A Levite, when he [...] saw him, passed by on the other side” (v. 32).

Scene 3. Now a Samaritan comes along. Like the traveller, the priest and the Levite, he is “passing through”. Like the priest and the Levite, he comes across the half-dead man. The exact parallelism between the priest, the Levite and the Samaritan (who are all on their way to the same destination) makes the difference all the more acute: “He was moved to the very depths of his being” (v. 33). The plight of the half-dead man impacts at an instinctive level

on the Samaritan. The latter is moved from within to go to the aid of the victim. Unlike the robbers, he does not make a dash for it (v. 30); and he does not pass by on the other side like the priest and the Levite (vv. 31-32). Instead, he goes to the man and bandages his wounds, after having poured oil and wine on them (v. 34).

Scene 4. The Samaritan found the half-dead traveller in the inhospitable area between Jerusalem and Jericho, which is no place to care for a sick person. So the Samaritan puts the injured man on his mount and takes him to the nearest inn, so that he can take care of him there.

Scene 5. During the rest of that day, and perhaps for part of the night, the Samaritan cares for the critically ill man. But at daybreak, he transfers the care of the sick man to the innkeeper with the words: "Take care of him" (v. 35). As recompense for this care, the Samaritan gives the innkeeper two denarii. A denarius is a Roman silver coin with the approximate value of a day's wages (Matt. 20:2-13). Clearly, the Samaritan is confident that within a few days, the sick man will have recovered. However, as a precaution, he adds: "If his stay should cost more, I will repay you when I come back."

The story of the Good Samaritan comprises an extensive preamble to the counter-question of Jesus (v. 36) which follows the opening question of the expert in the law: "Who is my neighbour?" (v. 29). Jesus' counter-question is: "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" This counter-question turns the opening question around completely. The opening question is externally focused: "Who is, and who is not, my neighbour?" It enquires into the identity of the neighbour who is external to me: Who precisely falls into this category of "neighbour"? My next-door neighbours, my relatives, my fellow citizens or my fellow believers? How must I interpret the word "neighbour" (v. 26)? Jesus' counter-question reverses the direction of the opening question. The question is no longer: *Who* is my neighbour? Instead, it is: Whose neighbour am I? Which one of these three men was open to being given – or to offering himself – to the needy man as a "neighbour"?

The scholar's reply is: "The one who showed mercy to him". Here, showing mercy implies an action, a deed – *doing* something. The key notion of "doing" is the concept that implicitly – and explicitly – shaped the conclusion to the first round (vv. 25 and 27) of dialogue. Jesus confirms the answer of the scholar: "Go and do likewise." Again, and now as the last word, the key word is "do": Go and *do* as the good Samaritan did. Another key word that arises at this point is "go". It calls to mind the "going" down from Jerusalem to Jericho at the beginning, the "going away" of the robbers (v. 30), the "going by" of the priest and Levite (vv. 31-32) and the Samaritan's "going to" the aid of the victim: "Go and *do* likewise" (v. 37).

One of the counter-questions of Jesus was: “How do you read it [the Law]?” The parable and the spiritual dialogue seem to make it clear that Jesus teaches one to read “otherwise”. His rabbinical colleague appears to be inclined towards a way of reading that is objective and directed externally: Who, out of all the people whom I know or encounter, falls under the category of “neighbour”? Jesus reads “otherwise”: Who among all the people (paradigmatically represented by the priest, the Levite and the Samaritan) offers himself as a “neighbour” by going to stand “next” to someone in order to help him?

Via the parable and the spiritual dialogue, Jesus points to where this “other” way of reading originates: at the point where the very core of the Samaritan is touched. The “neighbour” is not a category, but “someone” who is moved to the very depths of his being. Just as the Samaritan interprets the concept of a neighbour “otherwise” than the way in which the priest and the Levite interpret it, so Jesus understands “neighbour” in a manner that is different from, or “other” than, the interpretation of the expert in the law. Jesus reads the “neighbour” in Scripture with his inmost being. In terms of this reading, the neighbour is the one who is moved to the very depths of his being for the sake of the destitute and needy fellow human being.

4.3 Paradigm 3: With Thanks to Origen

In his *Logos Charistèrios*, Gregory Thaumaturgus, one of the many pupils of the school of Origen of Alexandria, expresses abundant thanks to his teacher. Via this letter of thanks, we receive some insight into the training programme (*paideia*) that was applied in Alexandria. Philosophy, literature and history formed the foundation of the programme; and training in literary history was considered to be essential for reading Scripture:

entering into each word, barbarian or Greek, mystical or political, divine or human; they looked at and explored it in full freedom and from all sides. They took advantage of everything and rejoiced in the richness that this meant for the soul (*Logos Charistèrios* 15).

For Origen, being conscious of words and of the historical dimension formed the foundation of the entire learning process (*Homelia in Genesis* 2.1, 2.6). Even so, the actual meaning of the text lies hidden in and behind the literary-historical meanings. In order to discover this, assistance from God – who unfurls himself from out of the deeper meaning – is needed:

Let us now entreat God to help us (...) to discover the mystical sense which lies hidden as a treasure in the words (*Commentarium in Johannem* 1.15).

The mysteriousness of the mystical sense arises from the fact that this meaning lies beyond the literary-historical sense and, because of its mystical dialogic, cannot be immediately objectified. It is mystery (*mustèrion*). Therefore, in his commentary on Genesis, Origen says:

I think that no-one with some affinity could doubt that these stories (*historias*), by means of apparent but not real factual events, yield up in images a number of secrets (*De principiis* 4.3.1).

By means of careful reading and re-reading and with a sensitivity towards the *mustèrion*, the “other” reading gradually begins to take shape.

Decisive for the transition to the “other” reading is a conscious awareness of being personally drawn into what is written in Scripture. Concerning John’s sojourn in the desert and his spiritual growth, Origen says:

Let us not think that what is written down here is a simple story (*muthos*) about John from which nothing can be rendered (*Homelia in Lucam* 11.3).

The clue lies in the last words: “From which nothing can be rendered”. Of decisive importance here is a personal, spiritual interest. In response to the story of Moses at the burning bush, Origen remarks:

So, as I have already said, do not think that stories (*fabulae*) from bygone times are being told here. These texts teach you the meaning of life, principles for your behaviour, and concern the struggle for strength and trust (*Homelia in Exodum* 2.3).

The spiritual meaning of Scripture (behaviour, motivation, vocation) reveals itself when the reader enters into it with spiritual questions. Concerning the wells in Genesis, Origen says,

Try also to find your own well and penetrate your own stream so that when you take Scripture into your hand you can put forward an interpretation which is intuited out of your own self (*Homelia in Genesis* 12.5).

By responding along the way to the hints of the “other” reading (the allegorical), the pupil is continually attuned to God’s voice in and through Scripture,

not that of a human being, even when people declare that he is the wisest of men, but that of God and the Prophets (who speak God’s word) (*Logos Charistèrios* 15).

Here, Scripture has become the mystagogue, guiding the soul’s ascent to transformation in God (*theosis*) and the community through God’s Spirit (*Logos*

Charistèrios 15). Origen – so Gregory Thaumaturgus asserts – continued this “ascent in the divine” (his *anagoge*) until the end, when he “surpassed human ways of existence for a better condition” (*Logos Charistèrios* 2.10).

4.4 Paradigm 4: Augustine is Inconvenienced

Again and again, people asked Augustine of Hippo to interpret Psalm 119, just as he had interpreted the other psalms; but he was reluctant to do so. Why? According to Augustine himself, “the reason is not so much the length which is widely acknowledged, but the depth which only a few are acquainted with” (*Ennarationes in Psalmos CI-CL* 118. Prooemium).

What does Augustine mean by “depth”? And why is this depth only recognised by a few? He does not give a straightforward answer to these questions. Instead, he shares his experience of reading with us, and in doing so, the edge of the veil is only very slightly raised: “Indeed, the clearer the Psalm seems to be, the deeper it appears to me” (*Ennarationes in Psalmos CI-CL* 118. Prooemium). According to Augustine, clarity and depth appear to go hand in hand: the clearer, the deeper. For Augustine, Psalm 119 is so transparent and clear, “that I myself am unable to show (*demonstrare*) how deep it is” (*Ennarationes in Psalmos CI-CL* 118. Prooemium). Transparency and depth hang together; but Augustine would not be able to demonstrate – even if he wished to – how the depth imparts itself. According to him, the “how” and the “what” of the depth are intangible. When an attempt is made to define its depth, the Psalm offers no foothold. It is so transparent that it comes across as a cloudless blue sky, the depth of which one is unable to determine – it is transparent and therefore intangible. According to Augustine, this is also the reason why the interpretation of Psalm 119 “surpasses the powers of our efforts” (*Ennarationes in Psalmos CI-CL* 118. Prooemium). Augustine desired and resolved to interpret the Psalm, and made an effort to do so, but was never able to grasp it completely. In Augustine’s view, this intangible depth that immediately reveals itself (*apertus*) is precisely what makes this Psalm so unique.

Indeed, with other psalms which are difficult to understand, even where the meaning is darkly veiled, the darkness is, in each case, apparent. But with this psalm that darkness is in itself not present. For such is the surface that it displays that people consider that only a reader and listener, and not an interpreter, are required (*Ennarationes in Psalmos CI-CL* 118. Prooemium).

In order to understand what Augustine is saying here, it is important to be aware of the fact that the prevailing exegetical methodology of that time comprised an attempt to retrieve the “deeper” meaning of the text via a standard exegetical step-by-step plan. This entails, firstly, reading aloud and listening

(*lectio*), then through research of words and facts (*meditatio*), followed by the “other” reading (*allègoria*), which understands the text as a divine-human relational process (*oratio*), and finally the ascent (*anagoge*) to union with God (*contemplatio*). In terms of this approach, the moment of “deeper” meaning (*allègorèse*, *oratio*) is crucial, and becomes visible against a background of “darker” passages: unintelligible words, strange phrases or terms, inexplicable facts and circumstances, contradictions, and so forth. But in the case of Psalm 119, according to Augustine, exegesis is superfluous. Thorough research (*meditatio*) and allegorical interpretation are not necessary. Immediately visible on the surface of the text itself is that which is elicited, with difficulty, by the allegorical interpretation: the divine-human relationship (*oratio*). Only *lectio* is required here. The lucid exegete (*expositor*) – the commentator, such as Augustine himself – is redundant here. Whoever “reads” the Psalm is immediately, “openly and nakedly” (*apertus*) confronted with the “depth”: the endless stream of I and You and of You and I. There are no dark, obscuring clouds in the sky. The clarity clearly and immediately reveals its depth, which is beyond interpretation, because no darkness is present, against which the depth can become visible.

Do Augustine’s reflections on Psalm 119 really belong in this series of paradigms? Is *allègoria*, an “other” reading, really of concern here? My answer in response to this is: The “other” reading is precisely what his reflections on this Psalm are all about! In this respect, Augustine is an outstanding example. When it comes to defining what *allègoria* is, Augustine’s reading of Psalm 119 is the paradigm *par excellence*. This Psalm is the epitome of the God-human relationship. What the allegorical strategy extracts with difficulty is, quite simply, open and exposed here in abundance. There are, as it were, no clouds in the sky; no hint of darkness – only depth. Exegesis is not needed here; only a reader is required.

In particular, this example of Augustine demonstrates just how difficult an exegete’s task becomes when he has nothing to do; when there are no difficulties, when the “depth” immediately yields itself up. As a result, he is deprived of his grip on the text. He can “demonstrate” nothing. All he is required to do is to “breathe” with the text. He feels “inconvenienced”. He does not need to write a commentary, because in the Psalm there is insufficient “darkness” – it is not obscure enough. There is no honour to be gained here!

Without a doubt, what this superb example demonstrates is that when the “other” reading elicits and exposes the dialogical depth of a text, a great passivity is required of the exegete: humble acceptance, a yielding, an inability to say anything more about the text. The text explains itself. All that is needed is a reader. The text gives itself away and immediately announces itself. However, what is *not* needed here is indifference.

4.5 Paradigm 5: William of St Thierry

William of St Thierry provides a comprehensive commentary on these words from the Song of Songs (*Expositio Super Canticum Canticorum*): “The voice of my beloved, here, there he comes” (Song. 2:8). The Vulgate reads: “*Vox dilecti mei; ecce iste venit.*”

William’s commentary is built on two axes of tension. The first is the binomial “word-voice”. William understands “word” (*verbum*) as a linguistic form: a collection of letters and syllables, the literary dimension. The “voice” (*vox*) is of another order: the order of dialogue, namely: touching, imparting oneself through oneself, “face” (*Expositio* 141). Therefore William cites “voice” and “face” in one breath: the bride yearns for “his voice, his face” (*Expositio* 147). We could say: the “word” is the literal and referential, literary-historical dimension of Scripture. The “voice” is the word, understood as divine-human dialogue. The “word” is the external (*lectio* and *meditatio*), whereas the “voice” is intimacy, pure affection (*affectio*).

At this point, William highlights the second axis of tension: *ecce-iste*, here – he there (“this one here – the one there”). “Here” means: where the voice has touched the bride at the deepest part of her selfhood, more intrinsically than her self-constructed inner-self. “He there” (he who is there) means the Beloved outside of me, offering himself to my gaze, my understanding, my judgment, my recognition. Thus we grasp the mystical commentary of William:

Therefore, when the Bride hears the voice of the Bridegroom who comes, she says: ‘Here!’ When she hears the word which is already there and speaks to her (as if she is pointing to someone who is there, outside) she says: ‘He, there!’ (*Expositio* 149).

The commentary brings us to the place of transformation in love. As long as the reading of Scripture is directed towards the “word”, as literal and factual content, the contact is merely external. At the moment when, in and through the “word”, the “voice” in which the Beloved announces himself is heard, transformation in love begins. The Bride sighs for an immediate response to the contact – *Here*. This “here” is the voice of the soul which is immediately touched to the core. Therefore, says William,

she sees Him coming when she experiences for herself the work of his mercy, (...) when she comes to experience in herself all things – both real and instinctive (*Expositio* 149).

This is Scripture as the voice of the Beloved. This voice is his face, because both immediately announce the Beloved himself. This is the fulfilment which the allegoric joyfully anticipates.

In this article, we have engaged in a quest to find the turning point to the “other” reading. At what point does the *allègoria* become manifest in the literary-historical task of reading? According to William, the transformation from “word” to “voice/face” takes place when, in and through the reading, *affectio* occurs: at the moment when one is touched and moved. In contrast to the literary-historical perspective, this is a sudden experience of non-indifference. Consequently, *iste* (the one there) to *ecce* (this one here) means: being touched in that region of my heart where, as the reader, I can no longer hide away, but find myself personally affected. The soul “experiences within herself the work of his mercy”.

4.6 Paradigm 6: the Mystical Antiphrasis of Guigo

For Guigo II, the Carthusian, the reading of Scripture is a four-step programme: *lectio, meditatio, oratio, contemplatio*. Reading, the foundational act, comes first. After offering the necessary material, it urges us on to meditation. Meditation comprises a diligent search for what the soul is yearning for; and during this quest, it finds and reveals the hidden treasure. But, unable to acquire that treasure of its own accord, it spurs us on to prayer. With all its might, prayer directs itself to God and appeals for the fiery, longed-for treasure: the sweetness of contemplation. On its arrival, contemplation abundantly rewards the labours of the preceding three exercises, saturating the driest soul with the dew of heavenly sweetness. Reading is an outwardly directed exercise. Meditation happens internally through the intellect. Prayer arises out of desire. Contemplation goes beyond all the senses (*Scala Claustralium* 12).

The decisive moment in this spiritual reading process is that of the onset of prayer, which flares up as desire (*desiderium*) at some point during the process. “The soul burns with desire” and “through this and similar lamentations her desire is aroused” (*Scala Claustralium* 5 and 7). The act of prayer is born of, and supported through desire – indeed, prayer *is* desire. This desire is instinctive: “aflame with love”, “lamentation”, “tears”, “pleading”, “craving”, “a heart-rending sense of loss”. These are the tones and colours which describe prayer (*Scala Claustralium* 6-8 and 15). Desire sustains the beseeching and seeking of oration. “Prayer inquires into the longing.” Desire reaches out imploringly to God: “Prayer is the devoted alignment of the heart to God, a devotion which, with all its might, is directed to God” (*Scala Claustralium* 2-3 and 12-14).

At a certain moment, this desire turns around and is experienced by the one who prays as a glorious event. Guigo calls this reversal a mystical antiphrasis. An antiphrasis is a figure of speech in which the usual meaning of a word is used in a contrary sense. For example, one may say: “You are a fine example of diligence and hard work”, while actually meaning: “You are unbelievably lazy!”

Guigo uses this figure of speech in order to clarify the transition from prayer to contemplation. Whoever prays, reaches out with longing. The Bridegroom does not wait for this longing to reach a conclusion. With sovereign authority, he enters into this stream of desire in order to penetrate its very heart. Whilst the soul is flooded with prayerful longing, the Beloved enters it: “Now the Lord, whose eyes see the just and whose ears belong not only to their prayers but in their prayers, does not wait until the address has reached its end but speedily enters into it and hastens towards the longing soul itself”.

This involves two opposite movements (the pleading which arises out of the soul and the gracious entry of the Beloved), which Guigo cites as a specific case of antiphrasis (*nova est antiphrasis ista et significatio inusita*). What is the connection between consolation and lamentation, between joy and tears (or what people refer to as tears), other than a rich abundance of inner dew pouring down from above; external cleansing as a sign of inner purification? Whenever “lamentation and tears are the messengers and witnesses of consolation and joy”, two opposite meanings are housed in a single sign: “a new antiphrasis and an unconventional meaning” (*Scala Claustrarium* 7-8). According to Guigo, the “other” reading makes its appearance at the moment when, during meditation, desire is ignited: in the attentive search for meaning, a fiery beseeching occurs which involves intense feelings.

However, this is only the first burgeoning of the “other” reading. At the point when the longing is mercifully turned around in a mystical antiphrasis, the “other” reading arrives in full bloom. In ways which cannot be explained, the Beloved makes his presence felt in absence: He enters into the stream of desire. Meanings are turned around: tears of mourning become tears of joy; absence becomes fulfilment.

4.7 Paradigm 7: the Breath-crystal of Paul Celan

The Jewish poet Paul Celan (a pseudonym for Paul Antschel) was born in 1920 in Chernivtsi (Romania). From 1942, during the Second World War, he endured forced labour in a labour camp. In 1948, he took up residence in Paris. As a survivor of the Holocaust, he was racked with feelings of guilt, despair, depression and stress. In 1970 he took his own life.

Celan is considered to be among the greatest poets of the German language in the twentieth century. In *Der Meridian*, in acutely discerning ways, Celan offers insight into a way of reading which honours the intentions of the poem. For this purpose, he uses a variety of images, including that of a breath-crystal (Celan 1994). In former times, when window-panes were still very thin, images of flowers – beautiful ferns – appeared on the windows after a severe night frost. When one scratched these images away and blew against the pane, onto the emptied space, one’s breath changed into a crystal: a breath-crystal. Paul

Celan envisaged a poem in a similar way: the breath of the poet is crystallised into the shape of the poem. For Celan, a poem is simultaneously breath and crystal – a dynamic combination, because breath is agile, fleeting and idiosyncratic, whereas a crystal is fixed, permanent, and able to be objectively analysed and described. According to Celan, it is precisely this dynamic unity of breath and crystal which forms the essence of a poem. Or, in other words, the breath is crystallised in the poem. Thus, the art of reading is to feel the breath of the poet in the crystal of the poem. The true reader is someone

who hears the one who speaks, who ‘sees him speaking’, who has simultaneously observed speech and shape – and who in the field of poetry would dare to doubt this? – and at the same time breath; that is to say: direction and destiny (Celan 1994:42).

A poem is a crystal through which a human being, with his life and destiny, addresses himself to a fellow human being.

This requires the reader to adopt a reading stance which is more attentive to the idiosyncratic *saying* which the poem expresses, than to the *said* which must be unravelled from the content. The true lover of poetry is “someone who hears and listens and searches ... and yet does not know what it is about” (Celan 1994:42). Such a reading stance is simple and difficult. It is simple because an undivided attunement of one’s being is needed for this purpose. It is difficult because we are summoned to attend to content and form which we find to be precise or imprecise, correct or incorrect.

Whenever there is talk of art there is someone who, again and again, turns towards, is present and ... does not merely listen (Celan 1994:42).

For whoever grasps them, these last few words contain a beautiful turn of phrase: a receptive presence as distinct from a mere correct listening. A breath-crystal demands a reader who “does not merely listen”, that is to say, who does not, by way of hearing, simply apply the measuring stick of “precise” or “imprecise”. No – with its whole being, the art-loving soul is turned towards the crystal and senses the breath of the one who speaks, “and yet does not know what it is about”. Such a listening soul is not fixated on content. Whoever reads the breath senses the essence of the poem: “speech which is shaped by the individual – according to his innermost actual being and presence” (Celan 1994:55). A human being expresses himself and participates in the crystal of the poem itself: “Whoever writes yields to the poem” (Celan 1994:55). The poem is written “in the mystery of the encounter”; it extends itself to the other, it attunes itself to the other, it lays itself bare: “The poem desires the other, it requires the other, it needs an opposite, it searches for, it speaks” (Celan 1994:55).

In the poetics of Paul Celan, how does the “other” reading reveal itself? Four things strike me. First, texts are personal: they are permanently marked by the “breath” of the writer, through the spirit of him who animates from the inside outwards. Secondly, the breath of the writer is palpable in the form and structure of his texts. Texts are crystals: the breath is crystallised. Finally, the reader must do two things simultaneously: he must decipher the code and make contact; he must allow the crystal to become fluid and feel the breath of the poet or author.

5. CONCLUSION

This article comprised an inquiry into the phenomenon of the “other” reading (*allègoria*). The question is: how does the “other” reading come to the fore within the way of reading which is concerned with content (literary-historical)?

We have seen from the above models that the content-focused way of reading is sensitive to objectively fixed and determined “differences”: similarities and contrasts, incongruities, tensions, structures, re(constructions), complex meanings, and so forth. These “differences” appear in the paradigms in terms of the following aspects, for example: poor – rich; half-dead – able-bodied; passer-by – helper; literary and historical data; insoluble passages; literary structures; passages that demand a meditative “chewing-over” (rumination) – all arising out of a crystallised text.

The “other” reading announces itself at the moment when the fixed and determined “differences” are transformed through “non-indifference”: David becomes furious; the Samaritan shows concern; the expert in the law recognises the “neighbour”; Origen is existentially involved with the text; Augustine the orator is inconvenienced; William hears the voice of his Beloved in the word; Guigo burns with desire and through this experiences the touch of God; Celan senses the hot breath in the ice-crystal.

Biblical spirituality implies the unlocking of constantly new, unexpected meanings, through the phenomenon of the “other” reading. This phenomenon is inwardly bound up with our continuous reading and re-reading, interpretation and re-interpretation.

It emphasises that we see ‘as’. It announces that we read continually; we have to, because we see ‘as’. We read the world; a world in which phenomena are time-bound and therefore never the same from one moment to the next. Creation, in allegory, is a work that is still proceeding; and inseparable from that proceeding is the meaning of and in the world, which is also ongoing and incomplete (Ward 2002:175).

Translated by Susan Verkerk

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