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Not the Righteous but Sinners: M. M. Bakhtin's Theory of Aesthetics and the Problem of Reader-Character Interaction in Matthew's Gospel

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This contribution to the Journal for the New Testament Dissertation Series is a revision of the author's 2001 doctoral dissertation, which was submitted in the Department of Religion in the Graduate School at Duke University. Approaching characterization in the Gospel of Matthew from the standpoint of expressive aesthetics—as formulated by Mikhail M. Bakhtin—John A. Barnet aims to pinpoint the character group from which readers construe the narrative discourse. Contra other scholars who suggest that the disciples, supplicants, or even Jesus serve as model disciples with whom readers affiliate, Barnet contends that all of the characters—including the Pharisees and scribes (representing the Jewish leadership)—fulfill that role.

Chapter 1 begins with an overview characterization in Matthew, with Barnet concluding that four distinct taxonomies exist: (1) Jesus, (2) disciples, (3) supplicants, and (4) Pharisees. He subsequently structures his analysis, following establishment of a methodological approach in chapter 2, to coincide with these four groups: chapter 3—Jesus; chapter 4—disciples; chapter 5—supplicants; and chapter 6—Pharisees. Barnet includes a synthesis of his argument in a final chapter (ch. 7).

Redaction critics typically envision characters as an embodiment of the historical readership—the community to which Matthew was written—whereas literary critics construe characters as positive and negative examples for the implied reader. Barnet stresses that none of the approaches, whether redaction or literary, concur as to which character group stands as the exemplar for readers, with views ranging from Jesus to the disciples to the supplicants to an amalgamation of the disciples and supplicants. An aesthetic co-experiencing of the narrative allows for the removal of this disagreement; all

of the characters, regardless of their group membership, serve to reshape the understanding of readers. The “co-experiencing” process is twofold: readers project, on the one hand, themselves into the narrative in order to co-experience characters with all of their limitations with respect to time and space, and, on the other hand, readers reenter the literary plane of the narrator—a privileged position that resides above the world of the narrative audience (viz., characters).

A major criticism that Barnet levels against literary approaches concerns their faulty assumption that actual historical readers experience the reading process in the same way as the implied reader, namely, complete acceptance of the value system of the implied author and a virgin (“first-time”) hearing of the narrative. Readers in this model dismiss character perspectives that do not coincide with those of the implied reader. In contrast, Barnet contends that an important facet of understanding characterization is that of co-experiencing the limited horizons, whether good or bad, of all characters. He argues further that the actual historical readers of Matthew were already familiar with the narrative story. As such, the methodological inclination of literary critics—particularly reader-response critics—to impose a sequential-temporal dimension on the interpretive process is replaced with an approach outside of the narrative, whereby readers seek to co-experience the inner lives (viz., “limited perspectives”) of characters.

In chapter 3 Barnet argues that Jesus does not serve as the model of discipleship in that he functions on a different plane than other characters; he is privy to information beyond the knowledge of those operating within the narrative world. Further, as characters other than Jesus are limited in their knowledge of him, readers—privy to that knowledge—construe Jesus’ characterization through the interaction of other characters.

On a whole, redaction critics envision the disciples as a mirror image of the Matthean community and/or its leaders. Nevertheless, Barnet points out in chapter 4, assuming this is the case, that only those values and attributes—as expressed by the disciples—become exemplary for the actual historical readers. Additionally, not all the words and actions of the disciples are exemplary, with the disciples displaying both positive and negative behavior and exhibiting a limited perspective in embracing the pattern of discipleship as delineated by Jesus. Likewise, if the disciples represent the Matthean historical readership, readers do not embrace positive characterizations beyond the circumference of disciples (e.g., Joseph, the Roman centurion, the Canaanite woman). Within the context of expressive aesthetics, co-experiencing the failure of the disciples to adhere completely with the words and ministry of Jesus prompts readers to experience the limited perspective of the disciples, an activity that prods readers to discover the underlying reasons for the failure of the disciples.

The supplicants, for both redaction and literary critics, are generally understood as a narrative means for the Evangelist to communicate discipleship values to readers. In chapter 5, building on the work of Jack D. Kingsbury, David Howell, and others, Barnet identifies a defining trait exhibited by all of the supplicants: recognition by each that they are in need—physically and spiritually. This need is exemplified by the fact that supplicants are outsiders and, in particular, neglected by the Jewish leadership.

In chapter 6 Barnet argues that readers are cast in a position of need by co-experiencing the role of the Pharisees (viz., Jewish leadership). Scholars unanimously concur that characterizations of the Pharisees—both words and deeds—serve as an antithesis to the mode of discipleship propagated by Jesus. Barnet contends that the values and behavior of the Pharisees are not necessarily contra the principles of discipleship espoused and embodied by Jesus; rather, their good deeds are not set in the context of good words, and their good words are not set in the context of good deeds. Consequently, Jesus' accusations of hypocrisy on the part of the Pharisees are a "form of incongruity" in a contradiction between the inside of a person and the outside of a person—or inconsistency in word and deed. Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees serves as a warning for readers of the Gospel, a remonstrance against a divided heart ("hypocrisy"). Association with the Pharisees—as well as the disciples, whose divided heart is the very condition for which the author condemns the Pharisees—guides readers to the recognition that they are in need, like the supplicants, and thus awaiting divine forgiveness and eschatological knowledge of the law.

Barnet challenges Matthean scholarship to reexamine literary and readerly dimensions regarding characterization. He argues that the Pharisees, traditionally interpreted as narrative foils, play a more pivotal role in the reading process. Expressive aesthetics require readers to co-experience the horizons of all characters—both those with positive and negative traits. Barnet's conclusion that the disciples' failings correspond with the failings of the Pharisees (incongruity between actions and words and vice versa), which in both instances prompt readers to assume a position of need as represented by the characterization of the supplicants, is a novel approach that warrants further attention.

In approaching the reading process, Barnet rightfully disputes the predilection of literary critics to assume a sequential-temporal reading strategy and first-time reader without prior knowledge of the narrative story (or even Matthean narrative itself), an interpretive decision that coincides with recent queries into the four Gospels and their readerships. Dissolution of this framework opens up new ways of appropriating meaning, specifically, readerly interest in looking at characterization from multiple vistas.

Barnet provides readers with an in-depth dialogue with the literary and structural approaches of Dan O. Via (*Self-Deception and Wholeness in Paul and Matthew*) and Daniel Patte (*The Gospel according to Matthew: A Structural Commentary on Matthew's Faith*), two works neglected by many Matthean scholars. Notwithstanding, he restricts his investigation to bibliographical works written in English, an omission that will certainly disappoint many readers interested in following an expansive scholarly dialogue. The monograph contains indices for authors and scripture citations, quick and helpful research guides for readers. On a different note, the copy exhibits significant detail to proofing and editing, though a few discrepancies exist, such as an extra space in the middle paragraph on page 80.

Despite its various attributes, the overarching methodological approach of Barnet is problematic in that it does not account for the narrative differences that exist between antiquity and modernity. Indeed, Barnet quickly dismisses Aristotle's contention that characters have a fixed essence, suggesting instead that characters function as individuals and exhibit changing roles as formed in their responses to other characters (14). While it is valid to propose a mode of characterization that differs from Aristotle's formulation of characterization or melds theorization from antiquity and modernity, it requires justification and explanation, something that is absent from Barnet's discussion. On a different note, there are places in his exegetical discussion for specific passages connected to each of the four different character groups that divorce from the larger argument related to reader and character interaction; that is, the larger focus of the study is temporarily lost ("forest through the trees").

Potential implications on the Matthean historical community are not within the purview of Barnet, though analysis of such is the next logical step. Namely, if readers co-experience both positive and negative characterizations, this implies a much more diverse Matthean community—perhaps one including the noninitiated—than typically admitted by scholars. In particular, Barnet's approach assumes a readership willing to co-experience characterization that stands in contradistinction to the values and beliefs of the implied author. As a result, this assumption demands justification and discussion as to how such fits into Matthean scholarly discussion.

Setting aside the above deficiencies, the monograph provides a unique entrée into the different roles of characterization and how readers interact with the different perspectives represented by each constituent. As such, Matthean and Gospel scholars alike will find the monograph a thought-provoking study and an important point of interaction on issues of characterization, reading, and the four Gospels.