

3-1-2003

Review of "Catholic Principles for Interpreting
Scripture: A Study of the Pontifical Biblical
Commission's 'The Interpretation of the Bible in
the Church'" by Peter S. Williamson

William Kurz

Marquette University, william.kurz@marquette.edu

Phrygian cult marked by *Rosalienfest* of roses and wreaths placed at a co-worshiper's grave by night—disapproved in 1 Thessalonians 5:7 (114–128).

A major warning is 1 Thessalonians 2:3–6.13 against “sophists and charlatans” (148, *Goëten*) who beg a living by flattery, as in Lucian's satire—unlike Paul's self-support by manual labor. Allusion to “holding out against *symphylétai*, persecutors like their Judean coreligionist victims of the Jews” (1 Thess. 2:14), is no parallel to Acts 17:5, as is shown by a lengthy analysis of the four local phylae to which Paul's converts had belonged (153–65). Also criticized in 1 Thessalonians 5:3 are political slogans like “Peace and security!” (174).

Canonical 2 Thessalonians is nowhere mentioned in the index or perceptibly elsewhere, though perhaps “*the* Thes.-letter” is a lapsus (167). This tacit cry is doubtless justified by concern only with the city known to Paul's visit around 50 A.D. (141). But an explanation would not have been amiss, since secular data around 200 are freely cited (77–85, examples). Recently claimed deutero-Pauline authorship (from around 50 to 100) is irrelevant insofar as a quasi-secretary or “pious forger” would have sought factually to gain credibility.

B.'s final chapter, entitled “Lukas,” is dominated by the Via Egnatia, with a lucid map and king-size facsimile of the 260th milestone (post-150 A.D.) near Thessalonica, warrant of the Via's creation by the proconsul Gnaeus Egnatius (145–120 B.C.) (189, 191). Yet the Via is not related explicitly to Paul in Acts 17:1 (191). Acts 17:10 on Paul's nocturnal flight to Berea by land would involve a turnoff south from Egnatia near Thessalonica (203 map; 269); the audacious view of A. Suhl that Paul really took Egnatia all the way to (a western) Apollonia on the Illyrian gulf and then turned southwest to Athens (199) leaves Berea hanging (205).

The final inquiries concern the possible relation of Thessalonian Jews to the famed *theòs hýpsistos* inscription (220) and Paul as house guest of Jason, involved with him in attacks on the “Jesus trouble-makers” (1 Thess. 17:7). The second *Anhang* on the night flight (204, 269) might well have been replaced by a final summation in which the book's data judged most new and useful could have been interrelated. There is, however, a bibliography of 350 current authors, plus 80 Greek titles and inscriptional/ancient materials and indexes.

Marquette University, Milwaukee (retired)

ROBERT NORTH, S.J.

CATHOLIC PRINCIPLES FOR INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE: A STUDY OF THE PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION'S *THE INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE IN THE CHURCH*. By Peter S. Williamson. Preface by Albert Vanhoye, S.J. *Subsidia Biblica*, 22. Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico / Chicago: Loyola, 2001. Pp. xvii + 400. Paper. \$28.

Williamson's book will probably be controversial but needed. He persistently emphasizes the Pontifical Biblical Commission's (PBC) recom-

mentation that Catholic biblicists add spiritual and pastoral interpretation and application to their exegetical tasks. His frequent complaints about historical-criticism's failures to meet the needs of Catholics will surely upset many Catholic exegetes. Yet his principles seem adequately grounded in the PBC's text, even if he is more vocal than the PBC concerning both their reservations regarding historical-critical methods and their reaffirmation of *Dei Verbum's* commissioning Catholic biblicists to add spiritual interpretation to literal exegesis.

Whether or not the PBC envisaged it, an attempt like W.'s to extract from their document "principles of Catholic interpretation"—which W. defines as "*the presuppositions and procedures appropriate to interpreting Scripture in the life of the Catholic Church*" (3, his emphasis)—is timely and desirable. However, because so many Catholic exegetes have striven so long to be accepted within the exegetical mainstream, this focus on an explicitly Catholic interpretation is likely to jar some sensitivities. Nevertheless, after wrestling with the issues W. raises, I judge his effort to be an urgent pastoral necessity in view not only of communication failures between Catholic exegesis and pastoral catechesis but also of the many Catholics leaving the Church because "they are not being fed" with Bible teaching as rival congregations are.

At the very least, W.'s book provides a competent initial articulation of a desirable characteristic for contemporary Catholic exegesis. It is not only the first book-length analysis of the PBC's *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (IBC, 1994), but a proficient one. Its thesis, principles, and arguments complement some concerns and proposals raised by Luke Timothy Johnson and myself in *The Future of Catholic Biblical Scholarship: A Constructive Conversation* (2002)—which might prove no less controversial, although the two books are different in scope and approach.

Following the introductory material, W.'s book has 20 chapters, one for each of his principles, which he divides into six groups: (1) his foundational principle, that Scripture is "the word of God expressed in human language" (7); (2) Scripture's "human language" and its scholarly interpretation (7); (3) relating the interpretation of Scripture as "the word of God" to Christian faith (7–8); (4) the senses of Scripture, typology, and "fuller sense"; (5) principles for human exegetical methods and approaches; and (6) principles for biblical interpretation in the life of the Church (8). W. aims to facilitate both lay and professional Catholics' finding in Scripture God's message (10).

W.'s conclusion recommends further discussion in four areas: the dual nature of Scripture as divine and human; the meaning of biblical theology for the Church; problems of biblical historicity and consequent scandals to the "little ones"; and the relationship of Catholic exegesis to the secular academy with its very different presuppositions (331–32). He also lists three challenges that require clarification from Catholic biblicists: principles of Catholic interpretation; Catholic exegesis as a theological discipline in service of faith (he refers to a growing generation gap among

exegetes on this issue, and the need for a different training of exegetes, 335–36); and how to make Scripture spiritually nourishing.

Countering claims of some Catholic exegetes, the book tellingly critiques the tenet that historical criticism is neutral, especially in view of its anti-dogmatic and rationalist origins and purposes. W. also makes a defensible case that the historical criticism recommended so strongly in the IBC is a sanitized version, filtered from presuppositions incompatible with faith (328–29). Even if some Catholic exegetes, such as those on the PBC, use historical criticism without harmful effects, many other contemporary practitioners continue to exploit presuppositions detrimental to the faith of ordinary Catholics (154–56). W.'s concern for “the little ones” vs. the mindset of professionals (“scribes”) helps explain several tensions between W. and some other Catholic exegetes.

Overall, W. deals competently with many diverse issues in Catholic interpretation of Scripture (from historicism, to preunderstanding of faith, to literal and spiritual senses). Even his controverted positions invite a Catholic approach to biblical interpretation more attuned to the needs of ordinary Catholics (with analogous promise for other Christians). This readable book is important not only for exegetes but for all who are concerned that biblical interpretation more directly address the lives of contemporary believers.

Marquette University, Milwaukee

WILLIAM S. KURZ, S.J.

THEOLOGEN DER CHRISTLICHEN ANTIKE: EINE EINFÜHRUNG. Edited by Wilhelm Geerlings. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2002. Pp. 226. €29.90.

This introduction to the major thinkers of the early Church gathers together twelve essays by Germany's leading patristic scholars. Each entry begins with a helpful biography, treats the major themes of each theologian, and concludes with very useful bibliographical information. Wilhelm Geerlings (University of Ruhr, Bochum) opens by tracing the various understandings of theology, with a special emphasis on the major differences between East and West, during Christianity's first five centuries.

In “Theology as Law” Eva Schulz-Flügel (Eberhard-Karls University, Tübingen) presents Tertullian's theological approach as the continuation of Paul's understanding of faith as *skandalon*: Christian theology must not rely on human reason but on the *regula veritatis* (the essential content of faith). Examples of this reliance on the Church's nascent tradition are given in Tertullian's explication of the Trinity, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. In “A Theology of Episcopal Authority,” Andreas Hoffmann (University of Lüdinghausen) treats Cyprian as one whose thinking is derived more from the importance of ecclesial unity than from theological principles. Hoffmann clearly explains both how Cyprian's ecclesiology allowed him to leave his diocese during times of persecution and the schism between Carthage and