

# IGNATIAN CONTEMPLATION AND MODERN BIBLICAL STUDIES

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IN RECENT DECADES, DISCUSSIONS ABOUT HOW TO INTERPRET the Bible have been marked by an increasing openness to different methods. There was a time when the historical-critical method was the only one allowed, but now people accept a certain pluralism. An example of this can be found in the document 'The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church', issued by the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 1993.<sup>1</sup> This gives a full, sympathetically critical survey of the different methods of scriptural interpretation. Gradually it is being recognised that the interpretation of the Bible is not exclusively a matter of scholarship and analysis; there is also a place for meditative and creative approaches.

As yet, however, no real attention has been paid to a way of handling the Bible that has been highly influential over the last four centuries: Ignatian scriptural meditation. Over the last decades there has been a rediscovery of the Ignatian Exercises in their original form as an individually directed experiential process. They have acquired a high reputation, and many believers have found them helpful—there is considerable demand for them well beyond the boundaries of Catholicism, especially when offered in daily life.

Now, these Exercises embody a particular way of dealing with Scripture. The literature about the Exercises, however, is largely

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<sup>1</sup> The full text is most easily available on the internet, for example at [http://myweb.lmu.edu/fjust/Docs//PBC\\_Interp.htm](http://myweb.lmu.edu/fjust/Docs//PBC_Interp.htm).

concerned with practical details and with the implicit systematic theology. But there is seldom any discussion of how the Ignatian method of scriptural meditation relates to other styles of scriptural interpretation. It is not that other methods of dealing with Scripture, notably the historical-critical method, are being undervalued or rejected—most of those who are leading Ignatian programmes are theologically educated and have internalised modern biblical scholarship. What is lacking, rather, is a conscious reflection on how the Ignatian way of handling Scripture relates to other methods, notably the more analytic approaches pursued in the academy.

What follows is an attempt to stimulate reflection of this kind. I shall try, so to speak, to build a bridge from both ends. After giving an account of what we might call the Ignatian method of scriptural interpretation, I shall look at Ignatius' use of Scripture from the standpoint of modern biblical scholarship, and then see how Ignatian spirituality might help us understand what is currently happening in academic biblical exegesis. And I will try to draw out some implications for our own prayer, for spiritual direction, and for the training of directors.

### ***Ignatius' 'Method'***

There is almost a resistance to talk of method when it comes to Ignatius' handling of Scripture. After all, Ignatius is not trying to come to terms with an objective text out there; his concern is to facilitate an event of encounter that cannot be manufactured or forced. Nevertheless, the process does depend on a method, even if 'method' here has rather different connotations from those of the 'methods' used in the academy.

Ignatian scriptural meditation takes place within the process and dynamic of the Spiritual Exercises, in an experiential process culminating in a decision. Exercitants are trying to discover God's will for their lives, and to be ready to respond to what they discover. Everything emerges from a relationship to which exercitants entrust themselves—one in which the creator will communicate Himself directly to His devout soul (Exx 15).

We find the method of what is called 'Ignatian contemplation' principally in Ignatius' indications for prayer around the figure of Christ in the Second, Third and Fourth Weeks. There is always a

preparatory prayer, that ‘all my intentions, actions and operations may be directed purely to the service and praise of His Divine Majesty’ (Exx 46). There follows a first prelude, of ‘composition, seeing the place’. Exercitants seek somehow to place themselves alongside the reality on which they are meditating—the process is something like a day-dream.<sup>2</sup> Ignatius then invites us to name what we desire, something which varies according to the different stages of the process. The aim is thus never detached factual knowledge, but rather encounter: a loving, personal, existential self-incorporation into the story.

In the meditation proper, what is striking in Ignatius’ directives is that they are more concerned with the inner readiness of the person than with the working over of the texts. The one giving the Exercises should be brief (Exx 2); Ignatius relies more on the exercitant’s own dispositions and on divine enlightenment. The meditation is an event of grace, of encounter between the creator and the one meditating, between Christ and the exercitant. The Gospel passages are thus reduced to three brief points. By contrast, Ignatius gives the exercitants rather fuller instructions. He invites them quite deliberately to include the body within the process by attending to posture (Exx 76). Attention should be paid to one’s biorhythm, to the weather, and to the level of light (Exx 128-130). All three of the Augustinian ‘powers of the soul’—memory, understanding and will—should play their part (Exx 50). Ignatius invites one to see what the people look like, hear what they are saying, imagine what they are



<sup>2</sup> The phrase comes from a comment in Peter Knauer’s German translation of the *Exercises* (Würzburg: Echter, 1998), 48.

doing—and indeed to bring oneself within the scene. So, in the account of Christ's birth, we find:

... I making myself a poor creature and a wretch of an unworthy slave, looking at them and serving them in their needs, with all possible respect and reverence, as if I found myself present. (Exx 124)

What happens is something like an interior bibliodrama.<sup>3</sup> The concern is always with the connection between the event being meditated and my own person—'and thereafter to reflect and draw profit', as Ignatius says repeatedly. The scriptural meditation is supposed to bring about something within me, something which I am meant to notice and to deepen through the 're-seekings' (repetitions) and the prayer of the senses.

Ignatian meditation is a holistic event: the whole human person should be involved. And every meditation ends with a prayer of colloquy, 'speaking personally, as one friend speaks to another, or as a servant to his master' (Exx 54). The text is meant to be drawing me into relationship with Christ, and therefore also with God.

### ***What Biblical Scholarship Might Find in Ignatian Contemplation***

It might seem that this way of dealing with Scripture is a rather eccentric one, with no place at all on the contemporary academic scene. It might seem that there is an unbridgeable gulf between Ignatian contemplation and the analytic approaches now taken by biblical scholars. Whereas scholarship is methodical and objective, Ignatian contemplation depends on some nebulous talk of relationship and event. Whereas scholarship is strictly rational, Ignatian contemplation involves all kinds of irrational forces.

The temptation to think in this way is particularly strong if one sees contemporary biblical scholarship as offering the truest and closest approach to biblical texts. However, the discussions about method over the past decades have shown that approaches centred on the original authors and on how texts came to be put together, for all the

<sup>3</sup> *Trans*: on this style of engagement with the Bible, better known in German-speaking countries than in Britain or the US, see Eckhard Frick, 'Psychodrama and the Spiritual Exercises', *The Way*, 42/3 (July 2003), 151-160.

indisputable gains and the irrevocable, indispensable advances they have achieved, also have limitations and biases.<sup>4</sup> Linguistic and structural methods have made it quite clear that there is more to a text than what the author intended to say with it. Once the text has been written, the author lets go of it, and it comes to stand between the author and the readers with a life of its own. It has a kind of surplus of meaning over and above what the author intended; what the text means is more than what the author meant. Thus other methods of approaching Scripture have developed, besides those which ask about the author's intention and how the text was put together—methods which set aside questions about composition history, and instead focus on the text we have before us, on the text functioning as a whole.

These methods pay more attention to the text's readers and to their encounters with the text. This concern is taken further by other methods: so-called reader-response criticism, expressly, but also depth-psychological or symbolic interpretations, feminist and liberationist exegesis, and bibliodrama. All of these question the ideal of objectivity latent in methods centred on the author and on the text. All of these take seriously the claim that interpretation always is shaped also by readers and their concerns—admittedly often in ways that are just as one-sided and exaggerated as what one finds in some historical-critical work. Some time ago, the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer showed that all understanding depends on a fusion of horizon between the one understanding and what is understood, and that the preconceptions of the person seeking to understand play an important role. For all that such methods have a tendency towards subjectivism and arbitrariness, it can hardly be disputed that readers' preconceptions, situations and contexts play an important part in any event of interpretation. It follows that methods focusing on the reader have made an important contribution to the discussions about exegetical method.

***The ideal of objectivity in biblical interpretation is now widely questioned***

<sup>4</sup> This cannot be the place to give a full review of the literature regarding spiritual interpretation of the Bible. The classic work is Henri de Lubac's *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, translated by Mark Sebanc and E. M. Macierowski, 2 volumes (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1998 [1959]). English-speaking readers may find helpful the anthology *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, edited by Stephen E. Fowl (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

If we follow Manfred Oeming<sup>5</sup> in making a distinction between methods centred on the author, on the text, and on the reader, then Ignatian contemplation is a reader-centred method. The central point is not how the different passages were written and put together in a particular situation, nor the structure of the text in the form in which we have it, but rather the reader's encounter with it. What I bring to the text—a prior belief that God encounters me in the Bible as my creator and redeemer, that God calls me personally through Jesus and gives me a mission—is taken seriously, and deliberately evoked at the outset of every meditation. 'Reader' here means 'reader opening themselves in faith, reader convinced that Christ meets people in the texts of the Gospels, and, through Christ, God, reader convinced that this encounter will help people to make appropriate decisions for their situations'.

But we can also follow Oeming further, and put forward a fourth kind of method alongside those centred on the author, on the text and on the reader: a method centred on the biblical *reality*, on that to which the texts bear witness, the reality of God.<sup>6</sup> If so, then Ignatian contemplation can fit here too. For Ignatius is always concerned with the reality to which texts point, and Ignatian contemplation is simply impossible unless there is a recognition of God's reality and an explicit openness to it, whereas the other methods can all be used by a non-believing researcher or reader. Ignatian contemplation is not about an objective confrontation with what the text somehow conveys or describes; it centres on a personal encounter with this reality, implicating the reader.

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For his part, Thomas Söding writes of four kinds of approach to the Bible: those which break down the text into its constituent pieces, those which reconstruct the intention of the biblical author, those which try to put together an overall historical account out of biblical materials, and those concerned with what the New Testament means in the present. Under that last heading, Söding includes the preached

<sup>5</sup> This classification comes from Manfred Oeming, *Biblische Hermeneutik: Eine Einführung* (Darmstadt: Primus, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> Oeming, *Biblische Hermeneutik*, 140-174.

word, contextual interpretation, and spiritual interpretation. A contextual interpretation serves,

... to interpret one's own life-situation in the light of a word from Scripture, and to draw consequences from this for how one's practice of the faith should change. ... Individual words and texts, and indeed also whole books and bodies of Scripture, are set within personal, ecclesial or even political current situations.

Spiritual interpretation serves,

... as a way of finding one's way to encounter with God. ... You read Scripture not so much in order to free up your own ideas and associations, but rather to see the Spirit's truth in the letters on the page.

Within this classification, Ignatian contemplation is both contextual and spiritual. Its primary goal is encounter with God: readers entrusting themselves to Scripture's reality and becoming permeated by it. But for Ignatius this never happens independently of the reader's context, without reference to their personal situation. The goal is not some kind of timeless sinking into God's eternal mystery, but rather a feeling for God's will as it bears on the decision I am making. To put it another way: the context in which I do contextual interpretation is that of my own life. I look at the passage as a person who needs to make, to ratify or to deepen a decision, who wants to do this in accord with God, and who is therefore exercising themselves in order to become more sensitive to God.

It is in this that we find what is specific to Ignatian contextual interpretation, where other forms of contextual interpretation have different concerns. A liberationist interpretation would take as its context a socio-political situation of oppression; a feminist one would start from women's struggles for emancipation; a depth-psychological interpretation would look at the individual's process of maturation and individuation. None of these contexts are in any way excluded by Ignatian contemplation—a Latin American liberationist will make the Exercises in a liberationist way; a feminist will be influenced by their feminism. Ignatian contemplation is open to all of this, because the personal situation of any exercitant will be coloured in different ways, and will be conditioned by different social settings. Nor is Ignatian contemplation in any way individualistic, for all that it is primarily



*St Matthew from the Lindisfarne Gospels*

done by an individual in personal relationship to God. There is always a social connection present, through the contact with the one giving the Exercises, or with a faith-community. The sense of mission that one comes to recognise always sends one out to one's ecclesial, social or political surroundings.

In general, Ignatian contemplation thus appears as a very open method, one that is hospitable to other approaches, and excludes none of them from the outset.



**What an Ignatian Exercitant Might Find in Academic Biblical Study**

So far our question has been why a biblical exegete today might want to take Ignatian contemplation seriously. Now we can turn the question round: why should anyone who practises or teaches Ignatian contemplation bother about other approaches to the text, and especially the analytical forms of exegesis standard among scholars? The question could be put more sharply: if I know what God's will is by opening myself in meditation to God's Spirit, and by trusting that the creator deals directly with the creature just as Ignatius says, why do I need anything else?

For one answer, we can begin with Ignatius himself. Nadal tells us:

Ignatius used books and the whole of theological reasoning, at least when he decided to put together those Exercises, so that all the books, theologians, all the sacred writings, could confirm what he had taken more from divine inspiration than from books.<sup>7</sup>

It was a foreign idea to Ignatius to invoke a spiritual experience that somehow went beyond what intellectual reflection and rational efforts could yield. He set all that he experienced spiritually within the theological knowledge of his time. It is therefore not just arbitrary speculation if we assume that Ignatius would have engaged very thoroughly with today's different academic approaches to the Bible, had he known them.

Moreover, there is a good theological justification for this. The spiritual interpretation of scripture and analytical methods cannot be separated, if only because the Bible is God's Word in human words. If you rely simply on 'spiritual' interpretation, you are falling victim to a biblical version of monophysitism, the belief that Christ was a divine being only and not a human one too. Conversely, if you never get beyond the analytical approaches characteristic of contemporary scholarship, you are not taking seriously the inspiration of Scripture: its status as Word of God. What these errors have in common is a sense of contradiction between a supposedly divine spirit that enlightens the one meditating, and a supposedly human one that struggles to understand the Bible with human methods. Against such ways of

<sup>7</sup>MHSJ Pol Chron 3.529-530.

thinking, we must insist that God's Spirit does not stand in any kind of competition with what human beings do of themselves—rather God's Spirit empowers, stimulates and incorporates human initiative. Vatican II spoke of God as the author of Scripture, and at the same time of the human writers as 'true authors'.<sup>8</sup> This way of thinking can be transferred to what happens in meditation. Human meditators are—however much they are dependent on God's leading—'true readers', and everything involved in their being human flows into the process of contemplation. The Spirit inspiring the reader works only in and through the person's mental faculties, and therefore there is no place for fundamentalism or irrationalism. At the same time, the Spirit surpasses anything that human beings can achieve of themselves; that is why we can meaningfully speak of 'spiritual approaches'.

**What happens  
in meditation  
depends on  
what people  
bring to  
the experience**

The basic theological point being made here is rooted in many different kinds of faith-experience, and corresponds to the regular experience of those who give the Exercises. What happens in meditation does not occur independently of what people bring to the experience. Their personal temperament, their historical situation, their theology and spirituality, mediated through how they have been brought up, their personal life-history and faith-history—all of this flows into how they open themselves to God's working, and none of it is removed by the Creator and Lord 'imparting Himself to His devout soul' (Exx 15). The principle applies, too, to what the one making the Exercises brings to them by way of biblical knowledge. If a person knows something about exegesis, and therefore reads Jesus' miracles as signs of God's inbreaking Reign, they will meditate in a different way from a person who has imbibed from old-fashioned apologetics a sense of the miracles as primarily proofs of Jesus' divinity. Moreover, the person with biblical education will be more open to a sense of God's saving and liberating presence in their own life. Again, if you have a person who follows Ignatius himself in identifying the woman who was a sinner in Luke 7 with Mary Magdalen (Exx 282), and another who has learnt better from modern biblical study, meditation will affect the way these two people think about women in correspondingly different ways. It follows that the one giving the Exercises has to be

<sup>8</sup>*Dei verbum*, n. 11.

theologically—and therefore also exegetically—responsible. How a person's meditation goes will be influenced by how the one giving the Exercises presents the material. Anyone writing on Scripture as used in prayer needs an appropriate level of biblical knowledge. And no training programme for those giving the Exercises can afford to neglect basic exegetical knowledge as a fundamental element.

Anyone helping others to do Ignatian contemplation against the background of more recent biblical interpretation will need to take seriously the point that the Gospels are not historical writings in the modern sense, but testimonies of faith. In the way they present the Mysteries of the Life of Jesus, they will make it quite clear that the texts are not simply history. Rather, their principal aim is to express how the evangelists and their communities see Jesus, and what he means to them. Moreover, it is only through these images that we have access to Jesus and to his significance for us. What happens when we meditate on Jesus' life can be compared with what happens as we contemplate a work of art—say an older painting of the Cross or of the birth of Christ—that includes both the artist and the person who commissioned the work. The aim of such a work is to encourage the beholders too to situate themselves within the scene. As Josef Sudbrack has written:

People will have to take on board the new methods of approach to the figure of Jesus opened up by modern exegesis—in the long term, they will not be able to carry on working with the simple 'life of Christ' offered by an older exegesis; people need exegetically justified approaches to the historical figure of Jesus.<sup>9</sup>

One further implication of taking modern biblical study seriously is that a person presenting the so-called meditations on Christ's life needs to be self-aware. I am always working from one particular Gospel and its specific picture of Jesus. If I follow Ignatius in starting with the Annunciation and ending with the Ascension (Exx 261-312), I am being shaped by Luke's account. It would be just as legitimate to follow, say, Mark's account, and start with Jesus' baptism—or Matthew's, or John's. An exercitant may encounter Jesus through the

<sup>9</sup> Josef Sudbrack, 'Mystik des Konkreten: Die Anwendung der Sinne in den Exerzitien des heiligen Ignatius', *Geist und Leben*, 63 (1990), 367-372, here 372.



image presented by any of the four evangelists, and Ignatius himself counsels great freedom with the sequence of meditations he proposes (Exx 162). Ignatius wants the person not to follow slavishly an order laid down, but rather to have an eye open for whatever they can ‘draw profit’ from. The decisive point is that people should keep their eye on the basic tendency informing Ignatius’ image of Jesus, a tendency which governs Ignatius’ choice of gospel texts, and which becomes particularly evident in the key Second Week meditations: the Kingdom and the Two Standards. Ignatius is

always concerned with a tension in Jesus between exaltedness and lowliness, between divinity and humanity, and with a Lord who humbles himself for us, who calls me into his discipleship, who sends me, who gifts me with his love, and who yearns for me to give myself in loving response.<sup>10</sup>

### **Convergences**

It follows from what we have said that the different approaches to the Bible are not in competition—rather they complement and enrich each other.

Analytical academic exegesis in its various forms needs to be supplemented by more personal, experiential methods, more prayerful and faith-shaped approaches—otherwise it will remain a head-trip, something distanced and detached. Conversely, Ignatian contemplation needs to keep an eye on exegetical knowledge—otherwise it will

<sup>10</sup> On this general issue, see Hugo Rahner, ‘The Christology of the Spiritual Exercises’ (1962), in *Ignatius the Theologian*, translated by Michael Barry (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1968), 53-135.

unconsciously perpetuate and solidify conventional patterns of thought and receptivity that have come to be associated with particular biblical passages. What the reader makes of the text needs to refer both to the text itself and to the author's intention as a source from which it can be corrected—otherwise it will fall into either pure subjectivism or else into unreflective dependence on conventional interpretation.

The various forms of creative interaction with the Bible, such as bibliodrama, could usefully allow themselves to be enriched through the more introverted, less exuberant practice of Ignatian contemplation. Conversely, they may be able to give people who regularly meditate in an Ignatian way a new and less conventional kind of stimulus, and to open up some new possibilities for their experience and sensitivity.<sup>11</sup>

We need to avoid playing off the different ways of dealing with Scripture against each other. Instead we need to appreciate and use each one for what it is, and let them come into dialogue. If we can manage that, then we will know the full enlightening power of the biblical texts. They will become for us as a 'word like fire' (Jeremiah 23:29).

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<sup>11</sup> In this context, we need also to consider the relationship between the individual meditating and the community of faith and interpretation that we call 'Church'—one on which Ignatius reflects at some length (for example in Exx 352-370). But this is another topic.