

✓

*Reading the Synoptic Gospels*, O. Wesley Allen, Jr. (Chalice Press, St. Louis, MO) 2000.

O. Wesley Allen has provided the reader with an uncluttered introduction to some basic tools for exegesis. Though he doesn't address the synoptic problem in particular, he does include tools that are relevant to narrative sections absent in the Epistles. Readers will find that these techniques are useful for other parts of the Bible as well.

For the newcomer to biblical interpretation the book's great strength is its brevity. His stated objective is not to be exhaustive, but rather "to narrow the gap between the Church and the Academy" (p. 4) by introducing methods used in the academy and accessible to beginning students of exegesis. One academic assumption that may be disconcerting to some readers is his unqualified acceptance of Q and the primacy of Mark. For the beginning student it would be helpful to know that there are other, even older, assumptions concerning which Gospel came first.

Each chapter is thorough enough to provide adequate explanations, yet enticing enough to encourage further reading which he provides after each chapter. His explanations are clear and uncomplicated, and he avoids or explains enough technical jargon to promote ease of reading. He has also greatly simplified his explanations by applying each method of interpretation to a single passage of scripture, Matthew 12:46-50. This removes some of the clutter by allowing the reader to concentrate on only one passage. However, a final chapter in which he summarized his concluding exegesis would have been helpful. It is not altogether clear how he expects the exegete to piece together all the conclusions from previous chapters into one united interpretation. In fact, Allen seems to believe that there may not be a conclusion to be drawn.

Though he warns against reading the text only for "what it means to me," the mistake of imposing one's own personal meaning on the words of scripture, Allen insists that every reading of scripture is somewhat subjective. A summation of his findings on the text in question might have demonstrated how these tools might help the reader rise above his own subjective interpretations. Allen does not assume that the purpose of these exegetical methods is to discover

the truths expressly stated in the biblical passage and to overcome the personal prejudices of the reader.

In particular his last chapter on reader-response criticism reinforces the need for a summary chapter. Correctly noting that readers sometimes construct their own meaning *out of* the text rather than discovering the meaning *in* the text Allen could have done a more thorough job of explaining how to prevent this by summarizing his own findings on the passage in question. Simply acknowledging as he does that the reader is prone to his own prejudices and subjective meanings could leave the student of his book wondering whether he could ever arrive at any objective truth. Allen clearly doesn't believe that "any interpretation is a valid interpretation" (p. 125), but fleshing out the entire process and demonstrating how to avoid such subjective interpretations would have made it easier to recommend this book to beginning students.

Some discussion relating to the philosophical assumptions of certain techniques of interpretation along with a summary chapter demonstrating how these methods draw some exegetical conclusions would have been a helpful supplement to this introduction.

(Published in Stone-Campbell Journal, Spring 2001, Vol. 4, no. 1, p. 149.)