

Reader-Character Interaction in Matthew

John A. Barnet. *Not the Righteous but Sinners: M.M. Bakhtin's Theory of Aesthetics and the Problem of Reader-Character Interaction in Matthew's Gospel*. JSNTS 246. London: T & T Clark International, 2003.

Barnet's revised Duke Ph.D. dissertation deals with how one "reads" the characters in a gospel narrative. Redaction critics have tended to read the characters as exemplars of the community to whom a gospel was written. Literary critics – especially reader-response critics – focus on the internal dynamics of the act of reading; the implied reader positively identifies with the disciples, and negatively evaluates the other characters based on their interaction with Jesus. What Barnet proposes is a more nuanced approach to the reading process that sees the readers participating in an "authoring" role relative to the characters in the reading/re-reading process.

The methodological wedge that Barnet brings to his reading of reader-character interaction in the First Gospel is provided by Mikhail Bakhtin's approach to the aesthetic construction of characters. Bakhtin argued that a truly aesthetic experience is only produced when the character is seen from the author's external viewpoint. Barnet argues, then, that readers co-experience the aesthetic activity of the author by participating in the authorial process: by sympathetically co-experiencing the characters in dialogue with their own lives they thus produce a form of active aesthetic contemplation of their own situation.

What intrigues Barnet is the important role that the various characters play in Matthew's narrative. The disciples are the closest to Jesus, but they fail to fully grasp Jesus' authority or nature. They are, then, deficient and cannot serve fully as a model for the reader. What is needed is for the reader to participate with the disciples in their interaction with other characters, principally the supplicants and the Pharisees. The supplicants in Matthew are positively portrayed as recognizing their need for Jesus. The Pharisees, however, demonstrate that they have no need of Jesus. The Pharisees present the danger of a lack of need for salvation that serves as a warning to the reader. The reader then engages in a dialogic process of accepting the positive and negative traits of characters, and actively assembles or authors his or her own response to the narrative.

Barnet, using Bakhtin's approach to literary theory, has added a significant perspective on how Matthew's narrative function works. This is a dense book, with some difficult literary theory. But it is well worth the effort to move through the methodology section and see the rewards of a more nuanced narrative theory on a reading of Matthew.

Mark A. Matson
Milligan College, USA