

One New Book for the Preacher

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BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS: TOWARD A THEORY OF READING AS THE PRODUCTION OF MEANING, by J. Severino Croatto. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987. Cloth, \$19.95; Paper, \$9.95.

Any book that unravels the complexities of modern biblical hermeneutics is welcome. Severino Croatto's *Biblical Hermeneutics* is particularly laudable because it is short, readable, and provocative. The author, a professor of Old Testament at the *Instituto Superior Evangelico de Estudio Teologicas* in Buenos Aires, writes clearly and frequently provides examples from Scripture to demonstrate his points.

Croatto's central thesis is that the "production" of meaning after the biblical text is more important than the uncovering or clarification of what comes *before* the text. "What is genuinely relevant is not the 'behind' of a text but its 'ahead,' its 'forward'—what it suggests as a pertinent message for the life of the one who receives it or seeks it out" (p. 50). Croatto argues against both traditional and modern views of biblical interpretation which allow only one single and eternalized message. Interestingly, this criticism not only applies to fundamentalist hermeneutics, but to many of the higher critics as well, insofar as a "priority is finally assigned to the referent (the event about which the text speaks) . . . over the meaning and import of the text itself" (p. 26). These restrictive interpretations often seal out the explosive liberative force of texts which generate revolutionary social and political meanings.

Agreeing with Ricoeur, Croatto argues that the biblical text contains a surplus of meaning unknown in its original setting. Therefore, biblical hermeneutics must not be restricted to illuminating the original message—a linguistic updating, as it were. Rather, the message of the Bible must be "recreated." Biblical texts are dynamic, living, and generative. Even in the very moment they are written, the original author begins to recede into anonymity and the inscribed text, by entering the ongoing life of the faith community and the public domain, generates meanings unanticipated by the first inscriber. Likewise, even in the closure of the canonization process, and in the formulation of later authoritative traditions about what the text says, unanticipated (polysemous) meanings lie in wait, being generated by the very act of closure itself. Make no mistake, Croatto does not argue against closure. Meanings must be *defined* in order for the Word to be coherently proclaimed. But in the very defining of a contemporary meaning of a text, new meanings beyond this definition begin to break out, reshaping the developing meaning in a constantly changing social context. Thus, Croatto argues, *the further the distance the reader is from the text in time, the greater the available meaning of the text.*

This is quite a reversal, of course, of historicist hermeneutics, which seek to cut back through time to reduce the distance of the readers from the text.

Discerning readers will ask why this hermeneutic is not subjective and pelagian. Against the accusation of subjectivism, the author begins by asking his critics where one might find a truly "objective" hermeneutic. There is no such thing. But, he continues, the advantage of his position is that it recognizes that a true hermeneutic is governed by the text itself. One cannot say just *anything* based upon a particular text. The text itself sets limits for possible and impossible meanings, even if it does not establish only one exclusive meaning. Croatto does affirm canonical boundaries for the Bible and argues forcefully, moreover, that this single text has as its fundamental referent God's liberative action on behalf of the oppressed.

The accusation of pelagianism is more troubling, however. The strength of the notion of "producing" meaning is that it turns our attention to the active side of the process of praxis. In addition, it affirms the right of those who have been denied the right to make meaning in Latin America, for example, to become part of the process of establishing meaningful life.

But Croatto goes on to say that while God grounds saving events, *we* produce their meaning. The author divides too sharply divine liberative action and the human creation of meaning. Would it not be more helpful, however, to speak of the divine *praxis* as grounding Scripture and its meanings? Divine praxis necessarily includes not only God's action but God's speaking or imparting of meaning as well. Perhaps Croatto restricts God's revelation to event in order to guard against the univocal, historicist interpretations which he resists. But cannot the divine Word generate new and redemptive meanings as well as the divine event (even if they are, perhaps, inseparable)? Putting it another way, is it not crucial to *discern* the Word in the text as well as to recreate it or produce it? Croatto does not dismiss such discernment entirely, but his emphasis suggests to the reader that redemptive action and reflection in the present are more of a human process than a divine-human covenantal partnership.

With this one qualifying query, I enthusiastically applaud this important and incisive book.