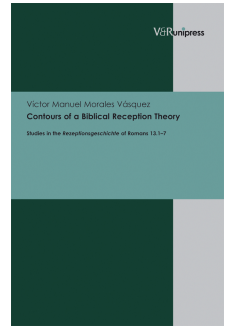
Contours of a Biblical Reception Theory: Studies in the Rezeptionsgeschichte *of Romans 13.1–7*, by Víctor Manuel Morales Vásquez



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The volume is the published version of a doctoral thesis written at the University of Chester, under the supervision of Anthony Thiselton and Eric Christianson. As the book's title makes clear, the aim is to provide both a theoretical account of what might constitute a "biblical reception theory" and a sustained application of that theoretical framework in relation to a specific biblical text. As such, it attempts the same task as Rachel Nicholls's or Moisés Mayordomo's work on the Gospel of Matthew but with the welcome focus on Pauline literature. Romans 13 has been a rich vein for reception history scholars and this work builds on earlier, less obviously theoretically-informed studies by Werner Affeldt and Fritz Hermann Keienburg.

These aims are reflected in a two-part structure. Part 1 (17–80) covers ground that will familiar to anyone acquainted with the philosophical and theoretical background to the rise of reception-focused biblical hermeneutics. Chapter 1 (17–39) begins with Hans-Georg Gadamer and Hans Robert Jauss and provides an overview of their related but differentiated approaches

to reception history. Chapter 2 (41–63) considers the ways in which these theoretical resources have been deployed within contemporary biblical studies, with a focus on Brevard Childs, Ulrich Luz, Thiselton and Mayordomo-Marín. One of the weaknesses of this chapter lies in the nature of the selection. Childs's work is not directly the product of the insights of Gadamer and Jauss, but instead operates from a set of theological convictions about the nature of Scripture in relation to the church, interpretation and history. Luz and Mayordomo-Marín provide related approaches in which the relationship between reception-historical and historical-critical approaches to the biblical text is a dominant focus. The section on Thiselton really only offers a survey of the way that his commentary on 1 Corinthians works rather than a critical analysis of the philosophical and theological assumptions that determine the approach. Morales Vásquez notes that Thiselton's "use of reception theory remains essentially a history of exegesis" (55) or "a history of theological ideas," but in my view the critique lies underdeveloped. In overall terms, the survey of the use of reception theory within biblical studies is unhelpfully narrow. There is little or no consideration of other contributions to the field, such as Christopher Rowland, John Lyons, Christine Joynes, James Crossley, or on other approaches to reception-focused work on New Testament texts that broaden our understanding of what constitutes "reception" beyond the well-known trajectory of historical-exegetical-theological enquiry drawing largely on what Luz calls the "commentary tradition." Chapter 3 (66–80) provides Morales Vásquez's own construal of the appropriate contours for a "biblical reception theory." Such a theory takes seriously the historicity of all understanding, the role of readers in "discursive production" across a range of cultures and media, and the need to reconstruct the readers' horizon of expectations. It generates an exegetical approach that distinguishes between "early" and subsequent reception (helpfully qualifying Mayordomo-Marín's call for attention to "first reception") and is sensitive to the ways in which earlier forms of reception contribute to the "encyclopaedic competence" of subsequent readers. In addition, however, Morales Vásquez affirms the need for evaluative criteria in relation to instances of reception "sorting out legitimate prejudices from illegitimate ones in terms of *productivity*" (77). Interpretations are productive in so far as they provide new ways of opening up the *Sache* of the text in relation to the life-world of the reader.

Part 2 (83–225) moves to the case study of Romans 13:1–7. The study of the reception history of this text begins with an account of contemporary academic treatments of the text (chapter 4, 83–108) before moving on to con-

sider a hypothetical reconstruction of the early reception of the text (chapter 5, 109–57) and subsequent reception in the second to fourth and thirteenth centuries (chapters 6–7, 159–225). It is here that one notices the absence of deep-level and sustained critique of the earlier models of reception exegesis surveyed in part 1. The "complexity of our political life world" is investigated through consideration of "exegetical and theological commentaries and essays" by Herman Ridderbos, C. E. B. Cranfield, Ernst Käsemann, Wolfgang Schrage, Peter Stuhlmacher, Ulrich Wilckens, and James Dunn. Without direct knowledge of the interpretative horizons of these figures (Käsemann being the one who, of all the list, bears these most directly on his sleeve) it is still possible to see that we are safely within the boundaries of the historical-exegetical-theological concerns of the commentary tradition. Scholars whose work on the reception of Pauline texts in general and Romans 13 in particular broadens out to consider instances of reception that are not explicitly textual or theological are not discussed: for example, the work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Neil Elliott. Chapter 4 seems to serve the relatively straightforward aim of demonstrating that post–World War Two scholarship, especially in Germany, was alert to the potentially catastrophic consequences of earlier discourses of reception. The scholarly agenda also dominates chapter 5, where a survey of hypothetical reconstructions of the horizon of the implied audience of Romans is offered along with discussion of generic features of the letter itself. This reconstruction facilitates the "productive comparison with the contemporary horizon of expectation and… horizon of expectation of other historically conditioned readers" (157) attempted in chapters 6 and 7 where the author treats the reception discourses of *1 Clement*, *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, and the writings of Irenaus, Origen, and "Christian Gnosticism" in the first to third centuries, Chrysostom and Ambrosiaster in the fourth century, and Aquinas in the thirteenth century. No arguments are provided in support of these choices beyond the historical argument that they establish important instances of reception that become normative within the interpretative horizons of subsequent readers and problematic for New Testament scholarship after the war.

As in any study of this sort, there is much to be learned in the details of the argument and analysis. The discussions of contemporary scholarship and earlier stages of reception of Romans 13 cover the ground well. There are times when the overall argument being made about what kind of reception history work is appropriate for biblical hermeneutics emerges with clarity. Morales Vásquez seeks a method that "could represent an alternative to post-

structural reading practices, which seem to brush aside and ignore our indebtedness to the effects of history" (227) but which also "undermine objectivist positions" and move things "beyond discussions about the intention of the author and the autonomy of the text" (228). This is a task for which I have some sympathy, but I confess that I did not find Morales Vásquez's proposals about what a "biblical reception theory" should look like to be as clear or as creative as I think necessary. The important comparative work—contrasting different historical interpretations of Paul's parenesis—still remains captive to a limited perception of what constitutes an act of reception, and neglects to give adequate attention to a key question for reception critics: which reception do we choose to investigate and to what ends?

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