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Exegesis in the works of Julian of Norwich

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To Julian of Norwich, the 14th century anchoress and the earliest known woman writer (Watson and Jenkins ix), exegesis was more than solving a literary puzzle: it was a lively conversation with God Himself. Several critics, such as Nuth (33-34), Windeatt (110-111) and Jenkins and Watson (164) have pointed out that in her two accounts of her visionary experience, Julian uses modes of exposition derived from Biblical exegesis. I'd like to take that one step further and claim that in the works of Julian of Norwich, exegesis is not a static application of fixed principles but rather an interactive and dynamic process (reflecting a theme central to both her works, the theme of "mutual indwelling" in which God and humankind are seen as "enclosed in each other" (Watson and Jenkins 154).

Before discussing this, it should be pointed out that Julian of Norwich produced two works: the shorter and earlier one is a text referred to as *A Vision Showed to A Devout Woman*, or the Short Text, the other one is *A Revelation Showed to Divine Love*, or Long Text. The latter is almost four times as long and containing more exposition. It incorporates the Short Text, and it can therefore be seen as Julian's own new edition, or as Windeatt calls it "an authorial re-edition... a pondered commentary upon and exegesis" (102, 108) of the earlier text. Several elements in both works suggest that Julian most likely was aware of contemporary biblical exegesis, having been either a nun or a devout laywoman.

The most common method of Biblical interpretation used at that time was the *Quadrigena*, or the "fourfold sense of scripture" (McGrath 113). This distinguishes between the literal or historical sense and three spiritual senses: the allegorical, the moral and the anagogical (McGrath 144). The allegorical sense looks for statements of doctrine, the moral sense interprets passages to produce ethical guidance about how Christians should behave, and the anagogical sense deals with Christian hope and future, including Christ's return (ibid).

Other methods Julian seems to have been aware of are discussing a bible text by the words or phrases, called *divisio ab intus* when used in preaching, or by the concepts distinguishable in it, *division ab extra* (Wenzel 12). Even more modes of exposition Julian may have known are glossing, analytic paraphrase by means of attributed speech (Watson and Jenkins 164) and "quoting what was not said instead of what was" (196). Yet another is structuring the exposition around topics such as expression, clothing, gesture and action, as recommended by rhetorical manuals (276).

The most striking difference between traditional biblical exegesis and Julian's form inspired by it, is the following: traditional biblical exegesis discusses a more or less fixed text, Julian's exegesis discusses an open one. As said in that other book of Revelation, no one is allowed to "add unto these things" or "take away from the words of the book of this prophecy" (KJV, Rev. 22:18. 19). An example is Bernard of Clairvaux's moral exegesis of Song of Songs 1:17 (1:16 in the Vulgate) "The beams of our house are cedar, and our rafters of fir". (KJV).

By ‘houses’ we are to understand the great mass of the Christian people, who are bound together with those who possess power and dignity, rulers of the Church and the state, as ‘beams’. These hold them together by wise and firm laws; otherwise, if each of them were to operate in any way that they pleased, the walls would bend and collapse, and the whole house would fall in ruins. By the ‘panels’ which are firmly attached to the beams and which adorn the house in a royal manner, we are to understand the kindly and ordered lives of a properly instructed clergy, and the proper administration of the rites of the Church.

(Quoted in McGrath 114)

In this exegesis, the text can be said to be an unchangeable entity, distant in time and space from the exegete. Julian however, applies the same modes of exposition to a text heard and experienced by herself, written or dictated by herself, that is, the Short Text. Even her own new edition she does not consider finished: she states in the last chapter of the Long Text that “[t]his boke is begonne by Goddes gifte... but is not yet performed” (379), meaning “[t]his book has been begun by the gift of God ...but has not yet been fully perfected” (Jenkins and Watson 378). The dynamic, interactive nature can be seen from that she not only provides exegesis of Christ’s words and the images given by him, but also of her own replies, impressions and emotions. For instance, in both the Short Text and the Long Text, Julian provides exegesis of her own changing emotional responses during a vision (the non-italicized lines occur both in the Short Text and the Long Text; the italicized lines occur only in the Long Text, that is, these have been added by Julian).

For this sight I laught mightily...for I understode that we may laugh in comforting of ourselfe and joying in God for the feend is overcome. I felle into a sadhede, and saide:

“I see thre thinges: game, scorne and ernest. Game that the feend is overcome. And I se scorne, that God scorneth him, and he scale be scorned. And I se ernest, that he is overcome by the blisseful passion and deth of oure Lorde Jhesu Chrst, that was done in fille ernest and with sad traveyle.”

And ther I saide “he is scorned,” I ment that God scorneth him: that is to sey, for he seeth him now as he shall do without ende. For in this God shewde that the feende is dampned. And this I ment there I saide “he shall be scorned”. For I saw he scale be scorned at domesday generally of all that shal be saved.

(171, italics added)

First she gives a moral interpretation of her own laughter at seeing God scorning the devil:

“Because of this sight I laughed greatly...for I understood that it is pleasing to God that we laugh to comfort ourselves, and that we rejoice that the devil is overcome” (Colledge and Walsh 138). Her mood then shifts to a state of seriousness. Of this shift in emotions from laughter to seriousness Julian gives a *divisio ab extra* exegetic analysis, which can be described as both anagogical and allegorical: “After that I became serious again and said “I see three things: sport and scorn and seriousness. I see sport, that the devil is overcome; and I see scorn, that he is scorned and he will be scorned, and I see seriousness, that he is overcome by the Passion of our Lord Christ Jesus, which was accomplished in great earnest and with heavy labour” (Colledge and Walsh 138). In the Long Text, these words, spoken by Julian herself, are in their turn interpreted: “And when I said that he is scorned, I meant that God scorns him ...and I meant this when I said he ought to be scorned” (Colledge and Walsh 202). Therefore, it can be claimed that the visions very strongly resemble a dialogue, and that all aspects of this interaction, both human and divine, are included in the exegesis.

A formal feature that similarly suggests a dynamic, interactive process is the frequent use of attributed speech for exegetic analysis. This is often both a paraphrase and an interpretation of something Jesus has said during the visions, signaled by a form of “to mean”, “as if he had said,” and sometimes a shift in tense. As pointed out by Jenkins and Watson, this is derived from biblical exegesis (164). However, this kind of exposition is used in a creative and skilled way: first of all, the paraphrase often is longer than Jesus’ original utterance. An example of this is the following passage from the Long Text: For instance,

Also, to more understanding, this blessed worde was saide “Lo, how I loved thee,” as if he had saide “beholde and see that I loved thee so much, or that I died for thee, that I wolde die for thee. And now I have died for the, and sufferd wilfully that I may. And now is all my bitter paine and alle my harde traveyle turned to endlesse joy and blisse to me and the. How shulde it now be that thou shuldest anything pray that liketh me, but if I shulde fulle gladly grante it the? For my liking is thine holinesse and thy endless joy and blisse with me.”

(203)

And for my greater understanding, these blessed words were said: See how I love you, as if he had said, behold and see that I loved you so much, before I died for you, that I wanted to die for you. And now I have died for you, and willingly suffered what I could.

And now all my bitter pain and my hard labour is turned into everlasting joy and bliss for me and you. How could it now be that you would pray to me for anything pleasing to me, which I would not very gladly grant to you? For my delight is in your holiness and your endless joy and bliss in me.

(Colledge and Walsh 221)

Here Jesus' brief statement "See how I loved you" is followed by a paraphrase consisting of five long sentences of attributed speech: the paraphrase can be said to be more than five times longer than the original statement, suggesting an interpretation rather than a straightforward rephrasing of the original statement.

These explanatory paraphrases of Jesus' words are often in their turn interpreted as well, which in a sense adds new material to the visions. The most significant aspect, however, of how Julian uses this technique, is the following: at several points it is unclear whether the direct speech is Jesus' statement or Julian's paraphrase of it. Not only do the manuscripts lack quotation marks, the signal phrases mentioned earlier are sometimes lacking, or the phrase introducing the direct speech does not make clear whether the direct speech is a paraphrase or not. For instance, in the Long Text it is said: "And farthermore he gave special understanding and teching of working and shewing of miracles, as thus: "It is knowen that I have done miracles before...And so as I have done, I do now continually, and shall do in coming of time" (233 - 235). This is translated by Colledge and Walsh as "And furthermore, he gave me special understanding and teaching about the working and revelation of miracles, thus 'it is known that I have performed miracles in the past...and what I have done I always go on doing, and I shall in times to come.'" (240). The most striking example of this ambiguous direct speech can be found in one of the last chapters of the Long Text, where it even is hard to tell who the personal pronouns refer to:

"And thus by the mekenesse that we get in the sight of our sinne...we plesse him. "I love the and thou lovest me, and oure love shall never be deperthed on two, and for thy profite I suffer": and this was shewde in ghostly understanding" (375).

This has been translated as Colledge and Walsh as "And so by the meekness which we obtain in seeing our sin...we please him. 'I love you, and you love me, and our love shall never be divided in two, and it is for your profit that I suffer.' This was shown in spiritual understanding" (338, quotations marks added). Instead of suggesting that Julian ascribes words to God which he did not actually utter, this ambiguity can be said to imply a sense of equality between the words directly spoken in the visions and the words resulting from years of meditating upon the experience: both are seen as having the same divine origin. As a matter of fact, Julian explicitly states that "oure reson is grounded in God" (303), that is "[o]ur reason is founded in God" (Colledge and Walsh 290): God is seen as the foundation of human reason. The interactive and dynamic quality of Julian's use of exegesis reflects one major theme in her works: this is theme of "mutual indwelling", which Jenkins and Watson describe as "in which God and humankind are seen as enclosed in each other" (Watson and Jenkins 154). A sub-theme of this is a similar union between Julian and her fellow Christian, with whom she wishes to share her experience, even to such an

extent that she explicitly invites all her fellow Christians to interpret references to herself as referring to them as well: *Alle that I saye of me, I mene in the person of alle my evenchristen*” (*A Revelation* 153).

This mutual indwelling is often referred to by Julian. For instance, she states that “for in man is God, and in God is alle” (155). This can be seen as reflected in Julian’s exegesis in the following way: techniques derived from Biblical exegesis are applied to the interaction between God and Julian, suggesting an equality between God’s words (the Bible), the words from God (Julian’s visions) and responses inspired by both of these (Julian’s replies, emotions and insights). Similarly, the use of paraphrasing suggests that God not only speaks directly to Julian (by means of visions), but also indirectly (by means of her years of processing the visions and giving her further illuminations). This can be said to imply a union between God and Julian, and it is exactly this union between God and the believer that Julian often refers to. The sub-theme is a similar union between Julian and her fellow Christian, which is often explicitly stressed “We be alle one in love” (153).

By sharing a process and an interaction rather than a finished product, a dialogue rather than a monologue, Julian allows her audience to become part of her experience, as if it had happened to themselves, which Julian states in the Short Text is her wish: “it is Goddes wille and my desire that ye take it with als grete joye and liking as Jhesu hadde shewed it yowe as he did to me” (73): “It is God’s will and my desire that you will accept it with as much joy and delight as if Jesus had shown it to you as he did to me” (Colledge and Walsh 134). The reader is included in the interaction between God and Julian, because Julian writes that she trusts that God will show the reader “more ghostely and more sweetly”, i.e. “more spiritually and more sweetly”, the things which she cannot show as openly or fully as she’d like to (157). The use of direct speech and extensive discussions of Julian’s own input in the conversation are only a few aspects of the exegesis in these works, and several others could be mentioned, but, hopefully these two by themselves sufficiently not only show that Julian’s skill as an exegete, but also as an author and theologian.

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