

Duquesne University

Duquesne Scholarship Collection

François-Marie-Paul Libermann Collection

Spiritan Collection

12-1-1986

Realistic Expectations of Libermann's Commentary on Saint John

Michael Cahill

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dsc.duq.edu/libermann-collection>

Recommended Citation

Cahill, M. (1986). Realistic Expectations of Libermann's Commentary on Saint John. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/libermann-collection/32>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Spiritan Collection at Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in François-Marie-Paul Libermann Collection by an authorized administrator of Duquesne Scholarship Collection.

DECEMBER 1986



SPIRITAN

PAPERS

n° 20

SPIRITAN RESEARCH AND ANIMATION CENTRE

GENERALATE C.S.Sp.
CLIVO DI CINNA, 195
00136 ROMA

**CONCERNING
FATHER LIBERMANN'S
COMMENTARY
ON ST JOHN'S GOSPEL**



CONTENTS

Preface – Concerning the Commentary on St John’s Gospel: Research and Animation Centre	5
Father Libermann’s Preface to his Commentary	8
Knowledge of Judaism and Spiritan Spirituality: by Roger Le Déaut, CSSp	10
Father Libermann and the reading of Sacred Scripture: by Claude Tassin, CSSp	22
Realistic expectations of Libermann’s Commentary on Saint John: by Michael Cahill, CSSp	39
THE MARRIAGE FEAST AT CANA in the Commentary on St John: by Félix Gils, CSSp	45
Father Libermann’s commentary on Chapter 10 of the Gospel of saint John, THE GOOD SHEPERD: by Felix Porsch, CSSp	66
Father Libermann’s Commentary on Chapter 1 of the Gospel of saint John, THE CALL OF THE DISCIPLES: by James Okoye, CSSp	88
Spiritan Bibliography 1986	96

REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS OF LIBERMANN'S COMMENTARY

by Michael Cahill, CSSp.

Our expectations condition our responses to a great extent. What follows is designed to help confreres to have realistic expectations of Libermann's Commentary on John. I propose to outline what we may reasonably expect to find in the Commentary. Libermann wrote it in 1840 and it belongs to the era of pre-critical exegesis. This at first sight creates a big gap between our "horizon" and the "horizon" of Libermann. On the other hand there is, very recently, a new interest among scholars in pre-critical exegesis so that this gap may be bridged more easily than we imagine. Some of our expectations inevitably derive from our knowledge of the author's life up to 1840. This life falls into two periods. The first 24 years spent as a Jew and as a student for the rabbinate, and following his conversion he spent the next 12 years with the Sulpicians and the Eudists at a time when they were promoting a renaissance of their "French School" roots. He went from the ghettos of Alsace-Lorraine to the cloisters of St. Sulpice. These two experiences can be expected to influence anything he composed in 1840. I will proceed by describing first of all what we do not find in Libermann's Commentary and then what we actually do find.

WHAT NOT TO EXPECT

Do not take up the Commentary as you would a modern commentary on a gospel. While there is a consistent attempt by Libermann to explain the literal sense of the text and to elucidate difficulties arising from historical, geographical and cultural elements in the gospel story, yet this aspect is brief and undistinguished and you will find much more information in the standard commentaries of Libermann's own time and in the

standard studies of today. By 'information' I mean all the things you need to know about John's gospel in terms of story line and in the areas of Palestinian geography, historical background and the customs of the Jews at the time of Jesus.

It is commonly pointed out that Libermann's Jewishness equipped him to comment on the Jewish matters in the story of Jesus. This is strange. One might as well assume that a modern Christian historian should have some special competence in the area of, for example 4th century Christianity simply because he was a Christian. In any case do not expect much from Libermann on this level. He does offer the occasional explanation but ironically enough he can be shown to have erred at times!

There is no particular interest shown by Libermann in the OT background to the gospel text nor any predilection for OT events or texts. The statistics show that in his references to other books of the Bible the ratio of NT/OT references is that of 3/1. Neither should one expect to find much trace of Jewish rabbinical exegesis in the Commentary text. It has been frequently suggested that the Commentary is distinctive by reason of Libermann's Jewish background but surprising as it may seem, a close scientific analysis reveals only a handful of tiny details of a rabbinical nature most of which will be apparent only to the prepared scholar. It must be emphasized that given the length of the Commentary the demonstrable rabbinical influence does not distinguish it either quantitatively or qualitatively. This fact is highlighted when comparison is drawn between the work of Libermann and the standard commentaries of his time which draw much more on semitic scholarship, and even more so in the case of the writings of Libermann's professors and mentors at St. Sulpice who were much more interested than Libermann in what Jewish scholarship had to offer the Christian exegete.

Do not expect to find Libermann developing the hints and allusions of the evangelist and portraying Jesus in function of the Old Testament events and liturgy along typological lines. There is a basic figurative sense repeatedly underlined by Libermann in which the OT prefiguring is contrasted with the infinitely superior NT reality. However these references are brief and no Christological typology such as is found in the patristic writings is found elaborated in the Commentary.

It is disappointing for the modern reader of ecumenical

disposition to find so little feeling for the "Jews" of the gospel text reflected in Libermann's meditations. There is a basic difficulty of course concerning the precise meaning of "Jews" in the Fourth Gospel and scholars continue to squabble over this. Libermann does not distance himself from the evangelist's standpoint in the slightest. On the contrary Libermann enthusiastically endorses the anti-Jewish rhetoric of the text and even gratuitously offers further evidence to support the unfavourable mentions of the "Jews" whom he identifies with the historical Jewish people including those of his own time.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Although Libermann in his preface claims to have composed these meditations for his own use and not for publication yet it can be demonstrated clearly from the text that he was writing for a "public", i.e., for those involved in pastoral work. You will find regularly occurring bits of advice of a practical nature concerning the best pastoral policy. (Pastoral being taken in a very spiritual sense). What we have in his Commentary is an attempt to penetrate to the deepest meaning of Our Lord's words in the Fourth Gospel and to bring out this meaning for a later generation of his disciples.

Patristic exegesis has been described as basically a "homiletic exegesis" and this can be said of Libermann's work also. The "four senses" of Sacred Scripture so typical of the Middle Ages were still current in Libermann's milieu. While there is no systematic use of the four senses approach in the Commentary such as one finds in the typical commentaries of the time, yet Libermann's exegesis is to be located in this medieval tradition. We find a certain amount of attention paid to the literal sense. There is a regular and frequent mention of the allegorical sense, understood as a technical term, i.e., the various components of the OT world are interpreted as prefiguring the NT realities. Most of the material of the Commentary can be classified under the tropological (moral) sense. This sense is often loosely referred to as the spiritual sense. The fundamental position of Libermann in this regard is expressed towards the end of his treatment of John 8:12.

In a manner reminiscent of talk today of hermeneutical horizons he addresses himself to the issue of how the words

of Jesus addressed to one particular audience can be profitable for us today. Jesus, he says, spoke to the Jews at the time he lived on earth. But his words are also addressed to the potential followers in the future, those who can no longer follow him physically but only in spirit. Generally, he asserts, in the case of the words which Our Lord spoke while on earth, when one penetrates to their deepest meaning one will see that they have a significance for the future as well as for then. He suggests that fundamentally the words of Jesus addressed to the apostles have the same significance for our time. The divine promise is accomplished in a soul today as fully as in an apostle. His explanation is geared to demonstrate this. Every word of the text is to be carefully weighed and no effort spared to deepen our grasp of it and to seek out the closest and deepest sense of each word. Thus Libermann's commentary style has more in common with medieval exegesis than with the modern critical variety. In the former there is a predominating urge to nourish the faith and actualise the text for the reader or listener, whereas in the latter the major interest has been to determine the alleged "objective" meaning of the text.

Consistently throughout the Commentary we find Libermann engaged in a honest grappling with the literal sense of the text. He attempts first of all to make sense of it in terms of the inner consistency of John's Gospel and of the Gospel story in general. After this usually brief initial explanation there is the further application to the Christian life today, sometimes using allegory, and always using the language and categories of the "French School" tradition. He is aware that this can lead him often very far from the text and we find him calling himself to order. What we have then in the Commentary is an *actualised* exegesis, to use a term that is coming to be in vogue. It is a devotional writing designed to facilitate meditation on the Gospel text with a view to promote union between Jesus and his disciples of a later age.

The spelling out of the spiritual moral sense that is suggested to Libermann by the text is accomplished by the use of the language, concepts, images and categories of the system of spirituality that is known as the "French School". It needs to be stressed that the "French School of Spirituality" is not synonymous with "French Spirituality" — an identification which is common but mistaken. The "French School" is that tradition emanating from Cardinal de Bérulle, J. J. Olier, and

St. John Eudes in the first half of the 17th century. Libermann learned Christianity in this idiom at St. Sulpice. Like every other system of spirituality or "school" it has its merits and defects. An evaluation of the Commentary inevitably involves an evaluation of the "French School". A correct and sympathetic interpretation of Libermann's Commentary demands that account be taken of his use of language and ideas which in many cases has a code-like quality in that he is using terms in the technical and rhetorical usage of the Berullian tradition. Generally speaking I find that much present-day interpretation of Libermann is conducted with a flagrant disregard for elementary rules of exegesis of texts. A notorious example is the best known "Thought of the Venerable Father", "God is all, man is nothing" which is a distillation of French School thought and which is nonsense unless read within the semantic universe of which Libermann's Commentary is a typical expression.

A feature of the Commentary is the use of the paraphrase as a way of commentating. The paraphrase, usually distinguished from the original text by the use of italics, had become established in France as a technique of commentary by Libermann's time. You will find Libermann amplifying the words of Jesus or some other speaker and in the course of this development a type of translation is taking place as the original text is read and applied to the circumstances of his time.

It is to be noted that these circumstances are perceived in an extremely limited manner by today's standards. The focus is on the interior spiritual life of the Christian, particularly of the minister of the Gospel. There is scarcely an echo of the social, political and ecclesiastical world of mid-nineteenth century France. Considering that Libermann had just finished writing the Provisional Rule with gloss for his nascent Society, it is even more astonishing that there is practically nothing that one could regard as indicating any missiological bias. The admonitory outward-facing style of the framer of a Rule does surface however.

I know that some readers find a strong biographical content in the Commentary, finding echoes of Libermann's personal experience in his treatment of the characters. For me the most incontestable message for the biographer of Libermann is that the Commentary shows us a man eschewing his Jewish and rabbinical past and adopting wholeheartedly the

Christian uniform of St. Sulpice. He is at pains to distance himself from the Jews more than anything else.

Reading Libermann's Commentary involves a fascinating blending of horizons, that of the evangelist, that of Libermann and that of the reader today. These are distinct and different but as Libermann suggests there is a deep sense – what Jesus wants to say to his disciples "today" – to be sought and found in the Gospel text. The reader today with a certain amount of preparation, adjustment and (most of all) a sense of "pietas" can allow Libermann to guide us in our meditation on the text of the Fourth Gospel.

Ultimately it is this sense of "pietas", regard of and love for our Venerable Father, which will enable us to read him in a sympathetic though not uncritical way. In his Commentary on John we have his most extensive and sustained piece of writing, carefully corrected and revised and never repudiated. It merits our interest. There has been much harmful exaggeration in respect to the quality and importance of Libermann and his writings, harmful because leading to unrealistic expectations. What we have here is no spiritual classic in absolute terms, but we do have a Spiritan classic. It is a valuable statement of the mind of Francis Libermann and a model as to how to read the religious classic of the Fourth Gospel in a manner which engages us, "through faith for faith".*

Note: In this essay I have confined myself to summary simple description. Elsewhere I have provided the evidence and arguments for the opinions expressed here.

Michael Cahill, CSSp.