Writing and Reading Commentaries

Commentaries, defined in the singular as "a treatise consisting of a systematic series of comments or annotations on the text of a literary work; an expository treatise following the order of the work explained" (Oxford English Dictionary), are needed by readers of a text they have not written themselves. Authors who read their own texts do not need an explanation—their readers do, if and when the text is difficult to understand, thus requiring explanation for a wider readership, or if and when the text is removed in time and culture from the original context, thus requiring explanation for readers who live at a later time and in a different place. Modern readers of the New Testament live two thousand years removed from the original authors of the New Testament texts, and they live in a different culture.

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1. Origins of Commentary Writing

A. Latin and Greek terms

The Latin term *commentarii* denotes continuous records in the form of note-books, memoranda, or minutes which document the activities of official bodies and their representatives, such as city councils, *collegia* (e.g. priestly orders) and commercial businesses (e.g. large households). By the late Republic, the term *commentarii* was used in the sense of written "memory aid" or *memorandum* for drafts of speeches, notes for public lectures, or reports that took the place of oral delivery. This sense of *commentarii* was derived from the Greek term ὑπόμνεμα ("memory," then also "notice, memory aid, record") which was used for works with historical, geographical, medical, philosophical, rhetorical, and mixed content. Since the Hellenistic period, the term ὑπόμνεμα designates a running commentary on literary texts.

B. Greek scholarship and the Athenian schools of the fifth century B.C.

The practice of writing philological commentaries on texts can be traced back to the Athenian schools of the fifth century B.C. The beginning of Greek scholarship in the modern sense of the term is connected with the foundation of the library and the Museion in Alexandria in the early third century B.C. The Alexandrian philologists consolidated the commentary genre. They presented texts on the basis of a systematic comparison of manuscripts, complete with text-critical comments and explanations of difficult passages with references to learned authorities, mythology, antiquarian traditions, sources, parallel texts for unusual forms, and rhetorical figures. Not surprisingly, Aristotle was the philosopher whose work was commented on most frequently, beginning in the first century B.C. Arguably the greatest of all ancient scholars was Aristarchus of Samothrace (ca. 216–144 B.C.) who wrote *hypomnemata* (independent commentaries) on numerous poetic and prose works.

C. Early Christian tradition of commentary writing

In the Christian tradition, commentary existed right from the beginning: according to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus began his public ministry in the synagogue of Nazareth by reading and commenting on Isaiah 61:1-2 (Luke 4:16-30). The earliest Christian commentary was, probably, the five volume work λογίων κυριακῶν ἐξήγησις ("Exposition of the Logia of the Lord") by Papias of Hierapolis, written at the beginning of the second century. Apparently Pantaenus, head of the catechetical school of Alexandria, wrote many commentaries, none of which survive. Origen (185-254) wrote several commentaries, among them multi-volume commentaries on Matthew, John, and Romans. The commentators of the Antiochene tradition, among them Theodor of Mopsuestia and John Chrysostom, rejected the allegorical method as technique to consistently find a deeper meaning.

D. Rabbinic commentary traditions

In Jewish rabbinic tradition, there are three major ways of linking the text of Scripture with commentary. There is the Targum (e.g. the *Targum Onqelos*), the Aramaic translation of the Jewish Scriptures which provides an explanation of the Hebrew text in the wording of the translation, either by choosing Aramaic words that interpret the Hebrew words, or by adding paraphrastic expansions. The second major form of rabbinic commentary is Midrash. The exegetical Midrashim quote a portion of the biblical text (lemma) and then provide a commentary of varying length (e.g. *Genesis Rabbah*). Deuteronomy. The third main form of Jewish commentary is the *Mishnah*, a commentary on the legal material of the Hebrew Bible which is presented independently of the biblical text.

2. The Form of Commentaries

A. Greek commentaries

In Greek commentaries the logical and temporal posteriority of the commentary to the text is often signaled typographically by the use of diacritical signs which refer the reader to a commented passage (*lemma*), and by the arrangement of the commentary above, below, or beside the reference text, or in separate notes below the text or after the text, or in a separate volume.

B. New Testament commentaries

New Testament commentaries, not surprisingly, use different formats.Few modern New Testament commentaries print the Greek text. Academic commentaries generally have different sections in which text-critical, source-critical, redaction-critical, form-critical, and structural questions are addressed, before each verse of the text is explained. Commentaries written for a wider readership sometimes, albeit briefly, provide explanations of sources, redaction, genre, and structure; more often than not such "technical" discussion are omitted as irrelevant for non-academic readers: instead, the focus is on explanations of the context, difficult words and historical details, the flow of the text or argument, and the theological emphases of individual statements or paragraphs.

C. The length of commentaries

The length of commentaries has been a problem for a long time. One line of Aristotle triggered more than twenty lines of commentary by the ancient commentators. Averroes (Ibn Rušd) wrote 758 lines of commentary on four lines of text in Bekker's edition of Aristotle's *De anima*. Erich Koestermann needs 400 pages of commentary for the 100 (smaller) pages of Tacitus' *Annales* 14–16 in the Teubner edition. Theodor Heinze's commentary on Ovid's 12th Heroid letter is more than 70 times as many words as the Latin text. The increasing length of academic commentaries of the New Testament reached new dimensions with Wolfgang Schrage's nearly 2,000 page commentary in four volumes on Paul's first letter to the Corinthians Christians, a text that comprises 30 pages in the Nestle-Aland edition of the Greek text, and with Raymond Brown's over 800 page commentary on the three Johannine epistles comprising 13 pages of Greek text.

3. The Function of Commentaries

A. The function of a philological commentary, beyond the fundamental concern of establishing a reliable text and explaining difficult passages, can be illustrated with Servius' commentary on Virgil, written in the fifth century. Servius begins with a life of the poet and a discussion of the quality and intention of the poem, followed by an explanation of the text line by line, often word by word, elucidating passages whose sense might be obscure, the structure of the text, variant readings, references to Homer and other poets, to rhetorical and historical matters, and to the philosophical and religious teachings of the author. In the period of Humanism, when writing commentaries was particularly popular, Juan Luis Vives draws the following distinctions: the *commentarius simplex* provides notes in the style of Caesar's *Commentarii*, while the *commentarius in aliud* elucidates the meaning of the author and his text; the latter form is further divided into the *commentarius brevis* which analyses a text in a very focused manner, and the *commentarius diffusus*, the long commentary, in which the commentator seeks to make a contribution to the field.

4. Challenges of Commentary Writing

A. Common problems

1. The problem of completeness

2. The problem of amplification

3. The problem of the "Hydra procedure"

4. The problem of a "labyrinth of references"

5. The problem of "arid style"

6. The problem of the segmentation of the text

7. The problem of the quest for novelty

B. **Aridity of Style**

1. As regards the problem of aridity of style, an example from a classical commentary are the first two sentences of Bruce Braswell's comments on the first word of Pindar's *Nemean Nine*:

> Κωμάσομεν: not future (Fennell, Bury, Sandys, Bowra), but subjunctive (sch. 1b, cf. below) as is ἀνὰ . . . ὄρσομεν in 8 below (cf. sch. 18b); on the form v. Schwyzer i, 790f., R. Arena, *Helikon* 6 (1966), 125-73, esp. 131, Wathelet, *Les traits éoliens*, 307-10, and on short-vowel subjunctives in Pindar v. D. E. Gerber, *HSPh* 91 (1987), 83-90, esp. 86f., and further Hummel, *La syntaxe*, §§3300-32. Pindar's request is the equivalent of the normal epic invocation of the Muse (cf. Herbert Meyer, *Hymnische Stilelemente*, 62 n. 58); for his use of the hortatory subjunctive v. Weilbach, *Die Formen der Aufforderung*, 53-55, esp. 54 (adding *Ol*. 6.3 and present example). Bruce Karl Braswell, *A Commentary on Pindar Nemean Nine* (Texte und Kommentare 19; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1998), 45.

2. A comparable density of information can be found in the *Handbuch zum Neuen Testament* series, whose format challenges readers to cope with in-text parentheses which constantly interrupt the flow of the text, and with very long paragraphs which can run to over six pages. Hans Conzelmann's commentary on Acts 17:16-32 is an example. The "aridity" of style can be illustrated with his comments on the second line of Acts 17:27 (εἰ ἄρα γε ψηλαφήσειαν αὐτὸν καὶ εὕροιεν):

> εἰ ἄρα γε mit dem selten gewordenen Optativ läßt das Finden in der Schwebe; Philo Spec Leg I 36: ἄμεινον γὰρ οὐδὲν τοῦ ζητεῖν τὸν ἀληθῆ θεόν, κἂν ἡ εὕρεσις αὐτοῦ διαφεύγῃ δύναμιν ἀνθρωπίνην. ψηλαφᾶν: Philo Mut Nom 126; zur Sache Corp Herm V 2; Dio Chrys XII 60: ἐγγύθεν τιμᾶν καὶ θεραπεύειν τὸ θεῖον, προσιόντας καὶ ἁπτομένους . . . eine Spur des Poseidonios (Theiler, Hommel)? Die Frage stellt sich auch weiterhin. Hans Conzelmann, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (Zweite Auflage; HNT 7; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1972 [1963]), 105-11.

3. The translators of the English edition of Conzelmann's commentary include paragraph breaks (the single paragraph of comments on Acts 17:16-32 in the German edition is presented in twenty-two paragraphs); they translate long German sentences as shorter sentences, they place references to secondary literature in footnotes (augmenting the references with titles, and adding new references), and they provide translations of the Greek phrases:

> εἰ ἄρα γε, 'in the hope that,' with the infrequently used optative, leaves the finding in suspension; Philo *Spec*. *leg*. 1.36: 'For nothing is better than to search for the true God, even if the discovery of him eludes human capacity' (ἄμεινον γὰρ οὐδὲν τοῦ ζητεῖν τὸν ἀληθῆ θεόν, κἂν ἡ εὕρεσις αὐτοῦ διαφεύγῃ δύναμιν ἀνθρωπίνην). For ψηλαφᾶν, 'to feel after,' compare Philo *Mut*. *nom*. 126. On the subject, compare Dio Chrystostom 12.60: '[all men have a strong yearning] to honor and worship the deity from close at hand, approaching and laying hold of him . . . ' (ἐγγύθεν τιμᾶν καὶ θεραπεύειν τὸ θεῖον, προσιόντας καὶ ἁπτομένους); also compare *Corp*. *Herm*. 5.2. Do we detect here a trace of Poseidonius? [Footnote 55: Hommel, 'Areopagrede,' 169; also see Pohlenz, 'Paulus,' 90; Gärtner, *Areopagus Speech*, 183.] The question arises later as well. Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles* (trans. J. Limburg, A. T. Kraabel, and D. H. Juel; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 144. (The last sentence mistranslates the German, which means "the question continues to arise.")

5. Canonical Texts and Commentary

A. Commentaries on classical texts

B. Biblical commentaries