CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

THE READER IN THE TEXT:
NARRATIVE MATERIAL

The notion 'reader in the text,' however ambiguous and paradoxical, has become part of the jargon of New Testament scholars. Because of the many ways in which the concept is used by literary theorists and the variety of applications in literary and New Testament studies, it is necessary to review the theoretical background of the notion as well as its potential for analyzing and interpreting narratives in the New Testament.

The purpose of this essay is to address the following problem areas concerning narratives in general and narratives in the New Testament in particular: Is there a reader 'in' the text? Who or what is the reader in the text? And, how is the reader in the text? Since every text is constructed with specific readers in mind, the question arises whether heuristic devices like the 'implied,' 'encoded,' or 'model reader' can help the flesh-and-blood reader to follow the contours of the text presentation and to actualize the text? I will confront these problems theoretically and methodologically with a view to the interpretation of narratives in the New Testament. In order to achieve this, I will first pay attention to the problem of the reader in the text in literary theory. Against this background, the second major part of the essay will address the phenomenon of the reader in the text in New Testament narratives.

The theme of the essay will be treated in terms of structural semiotic literary theory, keeping in mind the rhetorical and phenomenological background out of which the notion of 'reader in the text' developed. It is assumed that in the context of reception theory, the phenomenon 'text' is not simply an object which has an immanent meaning, but that it is part of a communication transaction in which both the generation of meaning by the author of the text and the attribution of meaning by the consumer of the text (the reader) are significant.
1. A Reader in the Text?

1.1 The reader

The reader is said to be 'in the text' because of his/her/its presence as an image, created by the author, and because of his/her/its encoding in linguistic signs and textual strategies. This image has to be constructed by the real reader. What does this mean?

The idea of a reader in the text originated with Wayne Booth's concept of an implied author in 1961 and its counterpart, the so-called implied reader, which he and others later developed. According to Booth (1983:138): 'The author creates... an image of himself and another image of his reader; he makes his reader, as he makes his second self, and the most successful reading is one in which the created selves, author and reader, can find complete agreement.' This view is seminal to numerous developments by Iser (1974) and others (cf. Chatman 1978 and Suleiman & Crosman 1980). In order to come to grips with the theoretical implications of the reader in the text, it is necessary first to look at its counterpart, the implied author.

The first thing to notice is that the implied author is not identical with the real author, even if there may be an occasional overlap (Rimmon-Kenan 1983:87). According to this view (cf. Booth 1983:420–31) the implied author is the governing and organizing principle in, or implied by, the narrative text, the source of the judgments and values embodied in the text. It chooses what we read and how we read, and exerts power over our reading process. It is the implied author that chooses the detail and quality that is found in the work or implied by the work. Its function is to instruct the implied reader how to read by the signs of its presence in the text. It knows what is invented and that all the work's norms may not hold in 'real life.' An implied author may embody totally different views and values in a narrative than the author who created the implied author. That is why implied authors in different works of the same author need not be and often are not the same. The implied author is created by the real author, but as the term says, it is implied in the text. How? According to Booth (1983:70–71) as an image:

As he writes, he creates not simply an ideal, impersonal 'man in general' but an implied version of 'himself' that is different from the implied authors we meet in other men's works.... Whether we call