



Farag, Lois M.

St. Cyril of Alexandria, A New Testament Exegete: His Commentary on the Gospel of John

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth
New Jersey

There's an abundance of material that has been written on St. Cyril of Alexandria the polemicist, or apologist, or champion of orthodox Christology, but surprisingly there's a dearth of material on St. Cyril the exegete. This is where Lois M. Farag, Assistant Professor of Early Church History at Luther Seminary in Minnesota enters the picture. Influenced in part by the illustrious Brian Daley, S.J., Farag decided to undertake an examination of St. Cyril's *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, a work that she believes to be the first in his long line of exegetical writings.

Chapter 1 recounts the years before Cyril's episcopal career in which he received his formal education under the oversight of his uncle Theophilus, the pope of Alexandria. He began his primary education at the age of 7 and his secondary education at the age of 14 which he completed in a mere 3 years. At this time Theophilus sent him to the Nitrean desert to complete his 'moral' and 'spiritual' education under the tutelage of Serapion the Wise among other monastic teachers. It was here that Cyril learned the importance of Scripture memorization for the purpose of internalizing the message and applying it to his life. Throughout the course of his education Cyril was trained in rhetoric which qualified him for the position of reader in the church. This duty required much interpretation of the text which prepared Cyril to write his later exegetical works, works that would dominate his writing until the rise of the Nestorian controversy in 428.

Chapter 2 covers an oft neglected aspect of Cyril's writing, i.e., his Trinitarian theology. So often the focus is on his Christology because of his debates with Nestorius but Farag rightly and helpfully highlights the Trinitarian background to Cyril's writing. Beginning with a general sketch of Cyril's Trinitarianism and then moving onto the more specific attention that Cyril paid to each Person individually, Farag shows that Cyril was very much in line with Athanasius in arguing that for Jesus to be the savior of the world he must be of one substance with the Father, fully and equally God, because a mere creature cannot save a fallen creation. For Cyril to speak about God was to speak about the Trinity. He carefully highlighted the distinction of the three Persons while always keeping a close eye on their unity. Also in line with Athanasius' thought was Cyril's contention that the Incarnate Word bestows "the newness of life to those who

believe in him. The Word grants a new creation through the vivifying power of the body that he took as his own." (145)

Chapters 3 and 4 address Cyril's exegetical method, dealing with his literary exegesis and his spiritual exegesis respectively. Farag outlines "the rhetorical aspects of 'arrangement' and 'style' in Cyril's work." (197) She shows how Cyril followed the standard format of commentary writing by first citing a verse and then following it with detailed word-for-word commentary. His commentary on John was divided into 12 books and the majority of the deeper theological issues were addressed in the earlier books which made them much longer than the later books. Cyril's training and position as a reader equipped him especially for the art of text division, grammatical analysis, and historical interpretation which paid close attention to geography. His writing style was complex, his arguments lengthy, but this bears witness to the care that he gave to the matters he discussed. Cyril was engaged in a defense of the faith from the text of Scripture. He was at odds with various heretics (mainly Arians) and he needed to make sure to present as clear and precise a refutation as possible. And it is with these things in mind that one realizes that Cyril's literary exegesis cannot be separated from his spiritual exegesis. For Cyril the "text was a sacred text and its aim was to reveal the nature of the divine and to lead believers to a spiritual and moral life." (253)

Farag rounds out the book with a helpful appendix of a reconstructed Greek text of the Gospel of John similar to the one that Cyril would have worked with. The most interesting feature of this appendix is the chapter and verse division which Cyril would have used as it is quite different than modern critical texts and which also show the weight that Cyril gave to certain texts, e.g., he takes 9 chapters to interpret John 17:1-20 while only taking 1 chapter to interpret 17:22-18:23. Following this appendix is a detailed 23 page bibliography and a 10 page subject index. Detailed footnotes are maintained throughout the volume but if there is one lacking feature it's a Scripture index. There were also a number of typographical errors throughout this book ranging from misspelled English words to improperly accented Greek words to a lack of spacing between words. A detailed list would make this review longer than it need be.

My final assessment of Farag's work is that it is fascinating even if not entirely clearly directed. For example, her opening chapter sets the stage by recounting Cyril's education which gives a lot of information about Cyril and the Hellenistic educational system of antiquity. This provides a background in which we can recognize Cyril as being competent to offer an exegetical commentary. So far so good, but then chapter 2 discusses his Trinitarian theology, which is fascinating in its own right, and admittedly this was my favorite chapter of the book, but it's not clear as to how chapter 1 led to chapter 2 or how chapter 2 led to chapters 3 & 4. We're not told if Cyril's exegesis lies at the foundation of his Trinitarian theology or if his Trinitarian theology lay at the foundation of his exegesis. Chapter 2 gives us good information, just not particularly relevant information. Perhaps this chapter could have been set aside and expanded into a separate monograph. There is also the problem of redundancy in the second chapter as Farag repeats things multiple times with no clear reason for doing so, other than perhaps because Cyril did the same in his writing. This chapter could have benefited from some more editing, as could the book in general. But don't let this detract from the positive contribution that Farag's work had made to Cyrillian studies. If nothing else we've been treated to an aspect of Cyril of Alexandria that is not often highlighted in patristic scholarship: his exegetical prowess.