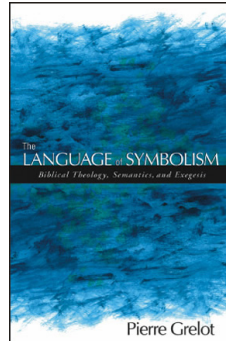


○ REVIEW OF PIERRE GRELOT, *THE LANGUAGE OF SYMBOLISM*

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George Aichele reviews Pierre Grelot's *The Language of Symbolism: Biblical Theology, Semantics, and Exegesis*. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006. Pp. x + 238. \$19.95 (paper)



I ask the students in my freshman-level introduction to biblical studies course the question, ‘do some people (such as Christians) have more right to say what the Bible means than other people (non-Christians) do?’ Nearly all of these students respond, ‘no’, even though the vast majority of them are Christians. Almost at the beginning of this book, Pierre Grelot asserts that,

[w]e are taking it as a given that we believe in the revelation of the one true God, the living God, in a specific place and time, within a particular human community, within a people and a culture chosen by God in keeping with a secret design that God does not have to explain to us, and supremely in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, heir of this community’s tradition (pp. 7–8).

As Grelot’s book nears its end, he raises the question, ‘What is the value of observing the symbols that abound in the language of the biblical writings, if not to draw out their implications for Christian faith? (p. 199)’. For those of us (including this reviewer) who do not share the givenness of that belief or who see some other value in observing the symbols within the Bible, this book will necessarily have somewhat limited value. Nevertheless, the publication of this book gives strong indication that ‘biblical theology’, for better or worse, is still very much with us, and it indicates that for some at least (and I suspect they are more than a few), the answer to my question is ‘yes’.

Grelot’s book is divided into six chapters, plus a brief introduction and conclusion. Although it is never expressly indicated, much of the book appears to consist of summaries of other books by Grelot, which are cited in a great many of the book’s footnotes. Also included are a ‘selected’ bibliography and a subject index. Unfortunately, there is no index of biblical or related texts. The first chapter discusses the use of language in the Bible and describes in general terms the

functions and types of symbols involved. The next four chapters analyse in some detail and with numerous examples the four major types of symbols that Grelot finds in the Bible: analogical, mythical, figurative, and relational (which he also sometimes calls 'existential', p. 20). The final chapter distinguishes between 'literal exegesis' and 'symbolic exegesis', and the short conclusion elaborates the relation between the Bible and Christian theology.

Analogical symbols are much as one would expect. Grelot sharply distinguishes between the Bible's mythical symbols and the 'mythological' symbols of other religions, even though they may be superficially quite similar. For both analogical and mythical symbols, Grelot's distinction between monotheistic biblical narratives and polytheistic pagan ones seems altogether uncritical. Figurative symbols, he says, are unique to the Bible (p. 103); this claim also is problematic. Figurative symbols arise when historical events or figures such as the exodus or David are interpreted to have symbolic (e.g., messianic) value. Finally, relational or existential symbols concern the 'interior' relation of the individual human being (especially the believer) to God. However, it seems that this last category is simply a subset of the analogical symbols.

Grelot makes it clear that the 'history' narrated in the Bible is 'related', not 'lived' (p. 104) – that is, it is history as meaningful construct, not necessarily an accurate record of actual occurrences – but at the same time, his historical understanding of the Bible is not particularly critical. He is aware of different strands within the Torah and of other questions regarding the formation of the Jewish scriptures, and his discussions of Canaanite and Babylonian mythology are nicely nuanced. However, Grelot seems to believe that many of the stories in the Bible, at least from David on, are historically reliable. He rejects the idea that the NT stories might be fictions, but he notes that the Tanakh contains at least some fables and legends. He takes Paul as the author of the pastoral epistles (as well as Colossians and Ephesians), Peter as the author of the Petrine letters, and a single John as the author of the gospel, all three epistles, and the Revelation, among other things. Whether this 'Peter' and 'John' are Jesus's actual disciples is not clear, but the Acts of the Apostles is historically reliable, according to Grelot, and Luke was written by a physician. Nevertheless, Grelot repeatedly claims that his approach is a 'literary' one, which seems to mean mainly that he is not particularly interested in matters of history (e.g., p. 169).

'Biblical theology' appears to be at work in each of the four symbol types, for they all point for Grelot to the unique God of Nicean Christianity and to the Christ of Chalcedon. Although the Bible uses the ordinary languages of human beings, it uses them in extraordinary and unique ways. Allegory lurks behind much of this book, and although it is not exactly the same as classical allegory, informed as it is by modernist historical-critical and phenomenological (this may be what Grelot means by 'literary') sensibilities, it is nevertheless a traditional, profoundly Christian allegory, by no means the poststructural allegory of someone like Paul de Man.

Perhaps the greatest strength of this book lies in Grelot's discussions of how the New Testament absorbs and reuses symbols from the Jewish scriptures, continuing the traditions but also transforming them. Grelot introduces this theme in relation to his analyses of each of the four types of symbols and then makes it the central focus of his final chapter, where his understanding of allegory is most explicit. In effect, the New Testament rereads but also rewrites the Tanakh, turning it into an 'Old Testament' (Grelot prefers 'First Testament') in which the unchanged words of the texts acquire 'deeper' (i.e., further allegorical levels of) meaning. While from some points of view this might serve a powerful criticism of the Christian canon, for Grelot it vindicates the closed canon of the Christian Bible as 'the revelation of the one true God' and thus the basis

for the Christian theological tradition (of Nicea, Chalcedon, etc.), as he makes clear in his conclusion. The biblical canon is an ‘organic whole’ which clarifies and completes its component texts (pp. 204–205), even as the theological traditions of the church and the Bible clarify each other.

While Grelot has many insightful things to say about different types of symbols, and although he clearly is familiar with the Bible and the ancient languages in which it was written, he comes across as a theologian and historian of religion, and a rather old-fashioned one at that. Although he never explicitly uses the discourse of ‘critical theory’ (however we specify that), Grelot does oppose his own use of ‘critical interpretation of symbolic language’ to those who hold to ‘preconceived theories’ (p. 45) and to ‘totalitarian rationalism’ (p. 200, n.1), which I take as *ad hominem* construals of ‘the hermeneutics of suspicion’. Nevertheless, Grelot’s ‘critical interpretations’ never challenge the message of the Bible as an unambiguous representation of a traditional Christian understanding of God and Christ. ‘When I study the biblical texts, even if I must use biblical criticism to see clearly, I seek nothing less than a correct understanding of the sacred Scriptures. The work of the critic is necessary, but it is not an end in itself. The end that we should pursue is a living relationship with the Holy God revealed definitively in Jesus Christ’ (p. 5). Indeed, Grelot appears to be a rather traditional believer masquerading as a critical scholar.