

CONRAD'S ALLEGORICAL READING OF 1 SAMUEL 14: AN ANALYSIS OF A SERMON BY CONRAD OF SAINT GEORGE ON THE WORTHY RECEPTION OF THE BLESSED SACRAMENT¹

ABSTRACT

The sermon on 1 Samuel 14 is a paradigm for the allegorical mode of reading in the Middle Ages. This mode of reading first of all relates the Bible text to our life and in doing so places the relationship with God in a central position. The text is an expression of a divine address. Subsequently the whole of the text is read from the perspective of the mystagogic moment as the reader's personal transformation process. In this way the historical context falls away and the development of the spiritual path becomes central. This shows that the allegorical mode of reading has its own logic and cannot be dismissed as human fantasy. This mode of reading is characterized by a great precision and a pure orientation on God's action. Modern readers will have to discover anew the divine address in the text, again and again.

1. INTRODUCTION

Conrad of Saint George wrote a collection of five sermons in which he, through a biblical story rich in imagery, wants to get through to the divine meaning of the Blessed Sacrament (Ampe 1964; Blommesteijn 1996; 2002). In this paper I will discuss the sermon based on Jonathan's victory over the Philistines. In

1 A traditional Catholic concept indicating the Eucharistic presence of Christ in bread and wine.

Dr Jos Huls, Research associate, Department of New Testament, University of the Free State, South Africa. E-mail: jos.huls@TitusBrandsmaInstituut.nl



this sermon Conrad uses the allegorical mode of reading. The allegoric mode of reading forms a part of the fourfold sense of Scripture which tied in with Origen's mode of reading elaborated in Alexandria as an 'exegetical program'. In fact the Alexandrian exegesis has profoundly influenced through Origen the Christian reading praxis (Waaïjman 2002:694-696). The point of departure of this reading is the literal sense of the text (*pros rëthon*). This is the dimension explicitly articulated in the text and discovered in a careful and attentive reading (Guigo II, *Scala claustralium* 2). Closely related to the literal sense is the historic dimension (*kat'historian*), articulating not only events which happened but particularly the history of God's action among men (Waaïjman 2010:XX). Gregory of Nyssa writes about this aspect:

We may take the words allegorically, and so penetrate to the inner sense of the history, without losing sight of the truth of its facts (*Answer to Eunomius' Second Book*, 258).

We are focusing on the allegoric reading (*kat'allegorian*), which introduces the reader in the ascent to the union with God (*kat'anagogen*) (Waaïjman 2010:XX). This mode of reading, with its various layers, blossomed mainly in monastic environments.

Decisive for the allegorical mode of reading is the personal relationship with God and thus the question what God has to say to us in Scripture. In order to answer this question, we will have to let go of the material and historical dimension of the passage before us, and place it in the 'present' of our personal reality. This does not mean that we abandon the material text. In fact each word in the text remains important, but is now considered as an expression of a divine address and a directive for our inner journey to God. This personal exposure to the text is at the same time a condition and an opportunity that God might speak in our life and we be introduced into his reality hidden for the objectifying eye.

Little is known of Conrad of Saint George, beyond the three manuscripts that we now know.² The Vienna manuscript states that he was born in Cologne. He was prior of the Carmelite monastery of Cologne, which was founded in the second half of the thirteenth century. One manuscript states that he died in Cologne in 1305, the other that this did not occur until 1316 or 1317. His

2 Ms The Hague, KB, 73 H 30, previously K 40, f 106v-122v: *Dat van den heiligen sacrament*. Ms. Tilburg KUB, UB I, 20 (KHS 20, olim PGNB 647), f 20v-52v: *Een seer devoet sermoen vanden werden heijligen sacrament*. Ms. Vienna OeNB 15419, f 39vb-51rb: *Hier beghint een glorioes sermo vanden heylighen sacramente dat maecte broeder coenraet van sent iorijs gherborent van cuelen der ordenen onser liever vrouwen*.

writings are preserved in miscellanies, together with great names in the history of spirituality and mysticism.

2. CONRAD'S INTERPRETATION OF 1 SAMUEL 14

In Conrad of Saint George's abovementioned sermon the central theme is the Blessed Sacrament. He makes a distinction here between the sacrament as a material given and the sweet flavour of God's presence in this sacrament. The latter refers to *communio* or communion with God. This *communio* is not a matter of course and is not automatically obtained by partaking of the Blessed Sacrament. First we must acquire a taste for God by freeing ourselves from the world and its idle pleasures. If we do not do this, and keep holding on to the sweet flavour of all that is visible and tangible, this reality that is hidden for the eye will remain out of the reach of our spiritual powers of perception. However, if in receiving the Blessed Sacrament we open ourselves for God's loving presence, this can also open our eyes for God's action in the totality of our life. Significant here is the story of Jonathan, who in his battle with the Philistines places the entirety of his personal fate in God's hand and in this way gives God the possibility of freeing Israel from its enemies. In the same way we, by acquiring a taste for God in the Blessed Sacrament, can be freed from all that hinders us from losing ourselves in God.

The starting point for Conrad's interpretation of the story of Jonathan's victory over the Philistines is the question of the distinction between the Blessed Sacrament and *communio*, which is indeed mediated by the Blessed Sacrament, but does not result from it as a matter of course. However often we receive communion, as an external act it can only truly affect us if in doing this we open ourselves for God's hidden action. This action does not limit itself to the Blessed Sacrament, but rather concerns the totality of our life. Conrad's most important message is, therefore, that – when we receive the Blessed Sacrament – we do this with the desire actually to meet God. Only in this way can we acquire a taste for the hidden sweetness of the Blessed Sacrament and in this surrender ourselves more and more to God's hidden action in our life.

For Conrad Jonathan is an example of someone who in everything focuses solely on God. God tells him what to do and not to do. All other voices – even those of his father and king – are relative in regard to this divine address. Based on this, Conrad reads Jonathan's victory over the Philistines primarily as a story of faith. Because of this, for him the emphasis does not lie on Jonathan's victory over the Philistines, but rather on the adventure that he embarks on with God. Despite the plight that Israel finds itself in, he does not let himself be led by human considerations, but dares to trust purely and

simply on God's liberating force, and to enter into battle with the Philistines against all odds. Conrad goes further, however, by letting go of the historical perspective of the text and reading the whole story of Jonathan as a personal path of faith that we also can imitate. This sheds a different light on Jonathan's story and makes other matters important as well.

2.1 The image of tasting the honey

In Conrad's sermon the leitmotiv of the story is neither the fact that Israel has defeated the Philistines, nor the personal conflict between Jonathan and Saul. Both themes are touched on, but merely form the background for an event in this story which is much more important for Conrad: the fact that Jonathan, after he has defeated the Philistines, eats honey and by eating this honey begins to see clearly again. It goes without saying why precisely this passage catches Conrad's eye. His interest is after all the hidden sweetness of the Blessed Sacrament and the question how we can come to taste this sweetness.³

Besides the fact that Israel is often called the land of milk and honey, in Scripture the image of honey is also often used to indicate the sweet flavour of the divine word. The practice of reading Scripture was directed towards acquiring a taste for the divine source of inspiration behind the words of Scripture, so that this can become efficacious in our life as well. This is called the honey of the Scriptures. This honey is sweeter than natural honey could ever be. In the same way, Conrad indicates that the honey that Jonathan eats has a spiritual meaning and is an expression of his intimate relationship with God. The path that Jonathan has travelled, has ultimately brought him to tasting the sweetness of God.

2.2 Jonathan's path

In describing Jonathan's path, Conrad concentrates on four moments in the story of 1 Samuel 14. He writes:

Jonathan did four things before he partook of this honey:
First he had to climb a high mountain.
He had to defeat the Philistines.
He had to have a rod in his hand,
and he had to bring his hand to his mouth.

3 It is notable that neither in 1 Samuel 14:27 nor in 1 Samuel 14:29 the sweetness of the honey is mentioned and only the illuminating effects of the honey are brought up. The honey brightens Jonathan's eyes. Conrad connects this brightening with the natural sweetness of honey. Thus he connects this text with other texts in the Scriptural tradition that prize honey mainly for its sweet quality.

Thus a person who wants to approach the sacrament worthily and with Jonathan taste the sweetness of the honey must do these four things.

2.2.1 The shift in perspective

Conrad begins his sermon with Jonathan's initiative to defeat the Philistines. He places this initiative in the perspective of what he sees as the goal of enterprise, that is, the tasting of the honey. In doing this he changes the perspective of the Bible story he is commenting on. After all, in the story Jonathan does not advance on the Philistines in order to taste the honey, but in order to defeat them. That he will eat honey on this journey and that this honey will open his eyes, is due more to coincidence than to a preconceived plan. The superficial perspective of 1 Samuel 14 is indeed of a historical nature. The writer of this chapter sketches the plight of the Israelites who because of the Philistines' military superiority are in danger of coming off worst. Their only choice is to resign themselves to their power politics, or – as Jonathan does – resist their politics in a life-and-death struggle, by seizing the few weapons they have in their possession.

However, Conrad sees another perspective in the story. This is the perspective of God who is going His own hidden way in and with humanity and beyond their own goals wants to open him for His awesome mystery. The two perspectives are in line with each other. For Jonathan would never have tasted the honey, had he not – obedient to God's voice – advanced on the Philistines. The fortuity of the discovery however shows that there is a discontinuity between what people see as their own goal from their perspective and what, in travelling this path, is brought about in them by God. Classically we call this difference the distinction between *telos* and *skopos*. The *skopos* is the working goal of the person who wants to enter into contact with God, the *telos* is the final goal of the path, or the goal that comes from God. The latter cannot be brought about by human manipulation, but is received from God. In Conrad's sermon however, this does not mean that we cannot keep our sights on this objective. On the contrary, it is precisely the *telos* that gives our working goals their inner orientation. In the *telos* it becomes visible what our aim is in everything that we do, that is to open up for God who approaches us from beyond. For this *telos* of our actions Conrad uses the image of tasting the honey. Just as Jonathan, obedient to God's voice, went to battle against the Philistines and so came to taste the honey, so we also must travel this same path to come to taste God. Here Conrad leaves the historical perspective of the text, and makes the story an image of our own ascent to contemplation or seeing God.

2.2.2 The four steps

2.2.2.1 Jonathan climbs a mountain

Conrad begins his story with Jonathan's initiative to climb the mountain where the Philistines are encamped. What is striking here, is that in doing this he leaves out a number of details that are important for the story line. For instance, he does not state that Jonathan does not inform his father and king about his plans and in this way shirks his duty to place himself under his father's authority. Conrad also fails to mention Jonathan's awareness that he can do nothing outside of God and will only advance on the Philistines if he knows for sure that God will fight along with him. Not surprisingly, these points are not important to Conrad's argument and are in a certain way even undesirable. His concern is that we surrender ourselves unconditionally to our desire to taste God and not doubt the source of this desire. For it is God himself who placed this desire within us. Thus also in this matter the distinction between working goal (*skopos*) and final goal (*telos*) plays an important role. From the perspective of God's liberating action in our life, the question is not whether we have to climb the mountain; we are being asked actually to commence this climb that will confront us with our enemy.

By reading Jonathan's victory over the Philistines as an ascent to savouring God in the Blessed Sacrament, the elements of this story are also detached from their historical context and related to the reality of our soul. In this way Conrad's allegorical reading seems to be an attempt to think about this inner reality on the basis of the visible path that Jonathan followed. In the classical view this path begins with the life of virtue. By practicing the virtues we are gradually transformed into people who live from God's strength and in this immediacy learn to have an eye and an ear for the unimaginable reality of God's love. It is therefore unsurprising that practicing the virtues is compared to climbing a mountain. Just as Moses climbed the mountain to approach God, the life of virtue is directed towards our ascent to God. By practicing them we get to know God from within.

2.2.2.2 Jonathan defeats the Philistines

In the book of Samuel the story of Jonathan is placed in the light of Israel's victory over the Philistines. Jonathan's brave action made it possible for the Israelites to drive the Philistines off their land. Conrad however lets go of this perspective and shifts the emphasis to the honey that Jonathan gets to eat, more or less coincidentally, on his campaign against the Philistines. The whole of Jonathan's enterprise should be seen in the light of this higher purpose. This also holds true for Jonathan's victory over the Philistines. In Conrad's

sermon Jonathan does not defeat the Philistines in order to free himself from them, but in order to come to the tasting of the honey. With this transposition Conrad makes it clear that Jonathan's victory too should be read against the background of the distinction between *skopos* and *telos*. To acquire a taste for God's sweetness (*telos*) we will have to go to battle against the "armed people" keeping us from truly opening up to God. According to Conrad this enemy concerns our sins and temptations. He subsequently elaborates on these sins and temptations with the help of the psalm verse:

Thou shalt walk upon the asp and the basilisk: and thou shalt trample
under foot the lion and the dragon. (Psalm 91:13)⁴

Once again, Conrad understands this verse allegorically. The four animals that are mentioned in this verse refer to four types of sin: sinful thoughts, sinful intentions, pride and sloth. He discusses these four sins in the light of the *telos*. They prevent one from acquiring a taste for God and thus must be trampled with all one's might.

2.2.2.3 Jonathan's rod

1 Samuel 14 tells elaborately how Jonathan, after his battle with the Philistines, reaches a forest with honey, together with the people. The people did not dare stretch out a hand to the honey, because the King had forbidden it. Jonathan was not aware of this prohibition. He took a stick, dipped it in the honey, brought it to his mouth and ate of the honey. We could easily overlook this detail, that Jonathan did not eat with his hands but with a stick. After all, it hardly seems significant, unless Jonathan is here being symbolically indicated as a prophet. For Conrad however it is essential, because it expresses the indirect or mediated character of our ascent to the Blessed Sacrament. Once again the distinction between working goal and final goal is important. We can only acquire a taste for the Blessed Sacrament, if we truly open ourselves for God's action and are aware that we cannot bring about this gift of love ourselves, but can solely receive it by grace. And so it is not strange that Conrad connects Jonathan's rod with the role of Mary. Mary is in his eyes the mediator between God and man. In her the discontinuity becomes visible between our own activities and the ultimate objective of these activities. In order to illustrate this further Conrad quotes four other passages from the first testament, besides the above, in which according to him Mary is portrayed as a rod.

4 Psalm 90:13 in the vulgate numeration: super aspidem et basiliscum ambulabis et; conculcabis leonem et draconem.

2.2.2.4 Jonathan brings the hand to his mouth

The fourth and last act before Jonathan tastes the honey, is that he brings the hand to his mouth. For Conrad this means that we ought to have a well-ordered life, both interiorly and exteriorly. Also in this last step the distinction between working goal (*skopos*) and final goal (*telos*) is important. Our life is orderly when we have so lost ourselves in God, that He has become our will and we want nothing other than to do His will. This form of perfection is however not a prerequisite. We do not need to be perfect before God will deign to let Himself be tasted in His sweetness. Far more important is that we, in doing God's will, come to realize that God is entering into us and so can transform us from within. This form of reciprocity ultimately brings us to the sweet taste of God. Thus here – just as in the previous steps – the final goal is hidden in the working goal. This is symbolically expressed by the hand that is brought to the mouth.

2.2.3 The effects of the honey

Although Jonathan's four steps describe the whole of the spiritual path, they show only the perspective of the human involvement on this path. In fact the four steps are only meant as four activities that aim at pulling us out of the world of ourselves and so creating the possibility of becoming sensitive for God's reality. For Conrad this is tasting the honey or the sweetness of the Blessed Sacrament. He subsequently shows the effects of this honey in our concrete life. He distinguishes four aspects:

1. honey brightens the eyes;
2. honey unleashes the sweet flavour of a growing desire;
3. honey spurs on to good works
4. and honey makes us die to ourselves.

2.2.3.1 Honey brightens the eyes

That honey brightens a person's eyes, follows directly from the story as it is told in 1 Samuel 14. Twice it is stated there that Jonathan's eyes were brightened after eating the honey. Considering the theme of the sermon, it was probably this passage that brought Conrad to read this story allegorically. It shows, in an image, that with respect to God we are in a permanent state of blindness. We do not see what *is*, and it is only by God that we can be healed of this blindness. He makes the scales fall from our eyes and in doing so shows us that before everything we live in the light of His countenance. Conrad illustrates

this with a quote from the gospel of John, in which Christ or God is called the light of the world (John 8:12). This light illuminates us from within.

2.2.3.2 Honey unleashes the sweet flavour of desire

The second point in Conrad's argument starts from the natural fact that honey is sweet. Although in the story of Jonathan the honey only brightens the eyes and nothing is said about its sweet property, here Conrad does place himself in the tradition of the Scriptures, that compares the sweetness of honey with the hidden sweetness of God's action multiple times. In doing this he is in fact elaborating on the illuminating effect of the honey. One who acquires a taste for the sweetness of the honey, in other words one who opens up for the reality of God, will experience this as being drawn into a dynamic of love that only strengthens the desire for God.

2.2.3.3 Honey spurs on to good works

Next Conrad indicates that honey spurs on to good works. He reads this mainly in 1 Samuel 14 verse 31. It is said here that after eating the honey Jonathan once again takes up arms against the Philistines and defeats them from Machmas to Ailon. In this Conrad reads that the battle with the enemy is not decided with the tasting of the honey. We will have to continue to apply ourselves to progress in virtue and combat our temptations. The difference is, however, that through the honey we receive the strength to resist the movements that close us off from God more energetically. In other words, there is a subtle concerted action of *skopos* and *telos*. The working goal wants to orient us on God in our activities, while the final goal, or the activity of God's love, makes us conscious of the fact that the force that frees us ultimately does not come from ourselves, but from God.

2.2.3.4 Honey makes us die in God

The fourth and last point shows the mystical perspective of the divine effects. This commences in the realization that the actual source of our good works lies not in ourselves, but in God. He is the one who enkindles us in His love and in this way lets us transcend ourselves and participate in His divine life. This 'taste' for love make us lose our taste for everything that keeps us from this love. In this respect Conrad speaks of people who have died to all earthly things, because they have lost themselves in the things of God. He connects this with Jonathan's readiness to die at the moment when the divine judgment points to him as the guilty party (1 Sam. 14:43). He had after all – without being aware of it – transgressed his father's commands. This readiness to face death and not defend himself by wanting to prove his innocence, makes

Jonathan someone who has given himself away completely to God, in the same way as Jesus. Entirely in the hands of human beings, only God can handle his defense. In the end this Voice comes from the people, that – contrary to Saul’s verdict – acquits Jonathan because they have seen God Himself at work in him. Thus we see that the readiness to die refers to a ‘tasting’ that so absorbs us into the reality of love that we ourselves become irrelevant. In this hiddenness for ourselves, God becomes the space of love.

3. THE MYSTAGOGIC FUNCTION OF CONRAD’S SERMON

The preceding analysis of Conrad’s interpretation of 1 Samuel 14 shows that his primary interest is in the spiritual path. Humanity is inwardly apt to acquire a taste for God’s sweetness. As the story of Jonathan shows, this happens through the vicissitudes of our life. In this a distinction must be made between the goals that we strive after with our actions, and the hidden action of God within this. For instance, Jonathan wants to free the people from its plight by advancing on the Philistines. Although he does not inform his father about this, he explicitly places himself under God’s direction. He knows that if God is not with him, his action will be in vain. He is the liberating force of Israel and only by entrusting himself to Him can he actually free the people from its enemy. At the same time the story shows that God’s liberating dynamic does not end with this historical reality. God wants to open Jonathan’s eyes for the infinite reality of His love. This finds its expression in the honey that Jonathan chances to discover on his path. By eating this honey his eyes are illuminated and he realizes that God gives Himself to us in everything. This is why he criticizes his father who lets himself be led by his fear and so deprives the people of the option truly to place themselves in the movement of God. This incongruence between the human perspective and God’s perspective is the leitmotiv in Conrad’s sermon. In a mystagogic light he continually wants to direct us towards the *telos* of our actions. However important it may be that Jonathan defeated the Philistines, in the end the point is that he, in this seemingly unrelated action, was brought by God to the tasting of the honey.

The central theme in Conrad’s sermon is the dignity of the Blessed Sacrament and the way in which we receive this sacrament. It is striking in this context that Conrad does not let himself be tempted to a theological discourse on the Eucharist. For him the Blessed Sacrament is simply a symbol of encounter with God and a moment of condensing of that which is in fact the reality of our life. However much we try to consider life as something of our own, the ground of our life is God. He is the source of our existence and it is of Him that we live, move and are. The Eucharist expresses this in the signs

of bread and wine. God is the bread and the wine of our life and in these signs of love completely gifted away in us. It is essential for Conrad that we enter into contact with this divine reality of our life, for only herein will we begin to discover that we in everything live of the sweetness of His love. And so, in receiving the Blessed Sacrament, we must open ourselves in longing for the sweetness that is hidden in it. If we receive the sacrament in a purely material sense, it will not be able to do its work in us and will never be able to let us share in this divine sweetness which is the source of our life. This is why we must look for ways to open ourselves for God, so that life can reveal its hidden sweetness to us. Here the Blessed Sacrament functions as a continual reminder of the sweetness of God's total gift of self in the life of man.

Aware of this divine reality of our life, Conrad looks for ways of opening us to this reality, so that it can become active in our life as well. In this light the remarkable thing about the story of Jonathan is that it makes clear that tasting the honey does not follow immediately from our own actions. Jonathan discovers the honey by chance. At the same time, from God's perspective it is not chance but a preconceived plan. In the paths that Jonathan has travelled in obedience to God's voice, God ultimately brought him to the tasting of the honey. In the same way we also should take into account that the ultimate goal of our activities should not be sought along the same line as these activities. We can prepare ourselves for the encounter, but not bring about the encounter itself. This can only take place in the open space of seeing and being seen. This does not mean that we should let go of this *telos* as something that is out of our reach. On the contrary, Conrad places the encounter with God in the centre of our attention. In everything we ought to be oriented towards the tasting of the honey. The reason for this is that otherwise we lose sight of the ultimate goal of our actions and begin to consider these as independent activities.

3.1 The image of the honey

Before expanding on these activities, Conrad first focuses our attention on the special character of the honey that is tasted in the Blessed Sacrament. He makes a distinction between the perspective of the person who opens himself for the divine reality, and God's action itself that takes shape in the 'nothing' of the human being.

In the first case Conrad uses the image of the 'sweet bee Mary' who flew diligently from virtue to virtue to draw the sweetness of God to herself. Because of this she could ultimately, by the power of the Holy Spirit, receive the sweet honey of the living Son of God. Conrad here explicitly indicates that the honey has a transforming function. Mary not only brought the honey together in her hive in order to collect it, but was also – by eating of it – illuminated by it from within. In the same way the life of virtue does not stand alone, but is, as a

place where the sweet honey of God is found, the path by which we from within are made receptive for the birth of God in us.

In the second case Conrad distinguishes between the 'matter' that the honey is made of and the 'nothing' of God's creative power that gives the honey its ultimate sweetness. For this he uses the image of the sun that with its warmth (the power of the Holy Spirit) transforms the moisture that is present in 'the flower Mary' into honey and so makes the body of our Lord be born in her. With this image Conrad shows that the sweetness of the Blessed Sacrament is not situated in its materiality. There is nothing that makes the Blessed Sacrament 'sweet' other than the immediacy of God Himself who addresses us in the 'nothing' of our being and so makes us be born in His love.

In describing both these characteristics of the honey Conrad indicates the tension in which the spiritual path is situated. We can practice ourselves in the virtues and so let ourselves be transformed by the sweetness of God's grace, but ultimately it is only God Himself who above and beyond our own nature unites us with His love. In this the Blessed Sacrament functions as a form of awakening to the sweet flavour of the divine love that will ultimately consume us to the bone.

3.2 Jonathan's four steps

Before Jonathan could take the honey, he had to do four things. All these four steps are aimed towards enlarging our receptiveness for God and are thus placed in the perspective of the *telos*, that is of acquiring a taste for God.

3.2.1 Jonathan climbs a mountain

In the Bible the mountain is often the place where God is approached. Moses for instance climbs Mount Sinai to speak with God. Conrad associates the image of climbing a mountain with our works of virtue. By practicing ourselves in the virtues, we ascend to God. From the life of virtue of Mary that Conrad mentioned earlier, we know that the practice of virtue serves the purpose of gaining the honey. Mary flew from virtue to virtue in order to receive the sweet honey of the living Son of God by the power of the Holy Spirit. In this she serves as a model for the person who, like Mary, wants to become receptive for God. In this way the life of virtue is seen mainly in the perspective of the encounter with God. The practice of virtue is not a form of self-perfection, but the opening of a space that enables God to work in us. This is why Conrad can say that the works of virtue clothe us with God's power and will ultimately lead to our seeing God. With the latter he refers to the total losing of oneself in God. We see God, when we have so lost ourselves in God's love, that He has become the source of our virtuous works.

3.2.2 Jonathan combats the enemy

A second point that Conrad considers important in acquiring a taste for the sweetness of the Blessed Sacrament, is that we must defeat our enemy. He connects this image with the battle against our sins and temptations. The precise interpretation of this battle remains unclear, however. The only thing he stresses, is that we must wage this battle with all the strength we have in us and must not yield to our temptations. Even when he elaborates on these sins and temptations with the help of a verse from Psalm 91 (v. 13; according to the Vulgate numeration Psalm 90:13), he does not get any further than general terms such as “evil thoughts”, “evil or impure intentions”, “pride” and “sloth”. The first two aspects are dealt with most elaborately in Conrad’s sermon and show that Conrad places his comments within the context of people who in one way or another have left the world for love of God. The battle they have to wage therefore does not lie in the area of morality, but on the level of their vocation. Conrad calls on them to remain true to that which deeply moves them, and not to make compromises with this by seeking their satisfaction in the “pleasures of the world” again anyway. In doing this they poison their vocation and no longer give God the chance to transform them in the unconditionality of His love.

The danger of having thoughts that keep us from staying true to our vocation, is that they can lead us down false tracks that can ultimately bring us to being unable to find the way back. Even more treacherous however, are our evil or impure intentions. To be sure, they make us do good works that are respected by others, but in fact we do them more for ourselves than for others. Conrad calls this self-love the root of all evil. However agreeable these works may be in the eyes of others, they displease God and thus miss their actual purpose. Conrad shows here that our good works such as prayer, fasting, giving alms and such do not stand alone. They are spaces of encounter with God, and are aimed at tempting us to lose ourselves in God. In this perspective every time we direct our focus back towards ourselves, we do damage to this love that wants to flow out in us.

The last two vices, pride and sloth, that we as human beings are to combat, can be called classic in the monastic world and both refer to the tension between the person who is closed in upon himself, and the one who surrenders himself in God.⁵ Pride here concerns the human tendency to exalt ourselves and appeal to our own exertions. This attitude must be combated, because in doing this we maintain the myth that we are something in ourselves, and do not need others and God. This is why Conrad says that God cannot enter a proud heart. Someone who is proud closes himself off from God’s grace in complacency and self-conceit. Sloth concerns our attachment to ourselves.

5 The above vices belong to the seven cardinal sins.

To be sure, we begin enthusiastically on the path of our vocation, but at the moment that this truly asks us to let go of ourselves and our attachments, we refuse to respond. And so we remain locked in our own world and will never acquire a taste for the love of God, which is not anchored in our own world (Cf. Cassian, *Institutiones* 10.1-2).

3.2.3 Jonathan takes a rod in his hand

The third point that Conrad brings up, is that Jonathan – when he reaches a field with honey – does not reach for the honey with his hand, but takes a stick to taste of the honey. According to the author this image shows the mediating role of Mary in our relationship with God. However relevant it may be that we exert ourselves to progress in the life of virtue and combat our sins and temptations, these remain human activities that can indeed open us for the encounter with God, but cannot command this. In other words, the spiritual path is characterized by a discontinuity. With all our activities, we cannot sanctify ourselves. We can only be sanctified by God. In this way Mary shows the field of tension between *telos* and *skopos*. The various examples in which Conrad attempts to clarify Mary's role, chiefly show us the countenance of unconditional love. In Mary we may come to realize that God loves us not for our actions but in the fragility of our existence. In this way Mary gives us the possibility unconcernedly to entrust ourselves to God. In this our sins do not count and we can trust that God gathers us up unconditionally in His love. The figure of Mary here indicates the perspective in which to see the care for ourselves that characterizes the first two steps of Jonathan's path. However important it is that we exert ourselves to open ourselves for God, in this we ultimately have to forget our care for ourselves and may trust that before all else we are secure in His love. At the same time Mary – as image of the unconditional love of God – gives one the possibility of acknowledging one's own unworthiness in this offer of love. We have nothing to offer God. Our work is nothing compared to the love with which He ultimately adorns us. This comes to the fore most clearly in the example of queen Esther who has to change the mind of king Assuerus. She knows that she has nothing to offer this terrifying king. And yet she does not avoid the confrontation and thus wins the golden staff of his affection.

3.2.4 Jonathan brings the hand to his mouth

The last act that Jonathan performs to taste of the honey, is that he brings the hand to his mouth. Conrad connects this with the ordering of our life. As human beings we are well-ordered when we do the will of God in everything. Here the author makes a distinction between the external and the internal side of life. Both our behaviour and our mind must conform themselves to this will.

With this Conrad seems to be returning to the level of our self-activation as it is described in the first two steps of Jonathan's climb. It is therefore justified to ask what distinguishes this fourth step from the first two. Both our works of virtue and our battle against sins and temptations are after all aimed at doing God's will. To understand the difference, we must draw a distinction between the transformation in conformity and the transformation in love (Waaajman 2002:455-481). The first two steps depart from the perspective of human beings who, in their desire for God, attempt to subject themselves to His will and thus make themselves conform to God. The final step on the other hand departs from the realization that God is the innermost will of our love and in this love we are united with God. This is why Conrad calls on us to surrender ourselves to this divine love in everything, and to let this be the guide of our life. For those who have lost themselves in this love hears only God's voice and will want to obey this voice in everything. In this way God orders us from within and His sweet flavour ultimately will entirely fill both body and mind.

3.3 The effects of the honey

Besides the four steps that characterize Jonathan's path and that should lead us to tasting the honey, the honey also affects us in four different ways.

3.3.1 Honey brightens the eyes

The image of the honey that brightens our eyes is pre-eminently suitable for showing us that we are blind to the divine reality we are living in. For Conrad the spiritual path is in the first place a path of realization. This path wants to open us to the light of God that illuminates the whole earth but is not seen, due to our being closed in on ourselves. The realization of this inner light causes Jonathan to exclaim that he has truly come to 'see'. At the same time this light maintains its hidden character for humanity and we can never see it in all its brilliance. In this sense this light affects our life like a paradox. On the one hand it enlightens one, on the other hand it makes us realize in this enlightenment that the light that we see as mortal human beings is always subdued. Conrad gives two reasons for this. In the first place humanity cannot bear this light in its unveiled form: their hearts, which are love's centre, would be broken. In the second place the light sets us in motion. In other words, it awakens the dynamic of our desire, that we may see God with countenance unveiled. The same is true of the sweet honey of the Blessed Sacrament. When we begin to savour it, it will only awaken a greater desire in us. This is further expanded upon in the continuation.

3.3.2 Honey unleashes the sweet flavour of desire

Just as the divine light of love is hidden from the eye of the world, the sweet flavour of the Blessed Sacrament is hidden for the person who because of their attachment to the world fail to open themselves for God. However when we do acquire a taste for this sweetness, it eases us away from these attachments, that in the light of its sweet flavour become bitter. This dynamic shows that, although Conrad will always emphasize that we as humans must detach ourselves from worldly matters, this is no more than a preliminary stage of the actual detachment that is worked in us by the taste of the divine sweetness. This draws us into an insatiable love that can only find its rest in God and thus remains dissatisfied in everything.

As a guide in the spiritual life Conrad knows, however, that we do not always experience this divine sweetness. Sometimes we lose our taste for the spiritual life and everything around us becomes barren and cold. This barrenness is not caused by absence, but by an attachment that we have a hard time letting go of. At the same time he immediately puts this causal connection into perspective and indicates that it can also be a way of making us aware that the sweetness of God's love is given us for naught and not because of any merit of ours. Conversely God can let us experience his sweet flavour to keep us from despairing. With this comment Conrad shows that, even though we know that we should let ourselves be led by God, this does not mean that we are able to do this by our own strength. Even in our surrender to God we have to let God do the work in us. Here God Himself is the caring master who unites us with Himself on His conditions.

3.3.3 Honey spurs on to good works

However hidden the divine light may be for the world, it does visibly affect people. Thus the well-known saying holds true here: "A tree is known by its fruit." But for Conrad these effects do not mean that we have once and for all said goodbye to our self-love or concern for ourselves. As long as we live, we are situated in the field of tension between the voice of ourselves and that of God, and we must be continually alert that we not close our ears to God's liberating word. Only in this way can we successively let go of ourselves in God and come to life in Him. Here Conrad also indicates that true transformation lies in this surrender. The more we acquire a taste for God's sweetness, the more we will also begin to realize that true liberation does not come from ourselves, but from God who regards us with the eyes of love. Thus during the course of the process of transformation the attention shifts from ourselves to God. He is the liberating force of our existence and causes us to be born in His love. Conrad closes this paragraph with the words of David: "God is my strength, I will not be daunted by what my enemy does" (Psalm 46:2-8; Psalm 45:2-8 in

the Vulgate numeration). He considers the Blessed Sacrament in the same way, which by its sweet flavour successively unites humanity with God's love.

3.3.4 Honey makes us die in God

As we saw in the previous paragraph, our good works are not based on our own effort, but flow from the influence of God. This shift of perspective leads us into a growing self-forgetfulness. By tasting the honey in the Blessed Sacrament we become more and more hidden for ourselves and are only aware of the divine love that is taking effect in us. Dead to ourselves, we enter the life of God. Fear and worry about ourselves no longer play a part here. This is what in later tradition is called transformation in glory. When all ego dynamics fall away, the whole of the centre of our will is shifted into God (Waaijman 2002:910).

4. CONCLUSION

The text by Conrad of Saint George that is discussed here belongs to the literary genre of the sermon. This genre is a form of interpretation of Scripture that has as its primary focus the spiritual path of the reader or listener. This makes it the pre-eminent place where allegoresis finds its natural channel. After all, this is aimed at leading us into the ascent towards union with God. The point of departure is the address that is hidden behind the words of the scriptural text. In the case of Conrad and his interpretation of 1 Samuel 14 this address lies in the moment that Jonathan's eyes are brightened by eating of the honey (1 Sam. 14:27 and 29). In Conrad's eyes this moment of realization shows God's offer of salvation that wants, in a manner that is hidden to human beings themselves, to unite with His love. It is also this moment that determines the whole of the structure of Conrad's sermon, which falls into two parts. The first part describes – after an introduction on the special character of the honey – Jonathan's ascent to tasting its sweetness, the second part describes the effects of this honey in the rest of Jonathan's life. With this Conrad sketches a path that is exemplary for every person who wants to come to taste God. In this the Blessed Sacrament is the central symbol of our life. Just as God is the hidden sweetness of the Blessed Sacrament, so He is also active in our life in a hidden way. By developing a taste for His sweetness in the sacrament, we can also begin to trace this sweetness in our own life.

Before Conrad describes the steps that brought Jonathan to tasting the honey, he pauses to consider the special character of the honey that we can trace in our life of virtue and that, in tasting it, opens us on an ever deeper level for the action of God's love. He emphasizes that its action has an immediate character and cannot be traced back to anything in created reality. This is why

tasting it equals being consumed (transformed) by it. This action from within indicates the tension between working goal (*skopos*) and final goal (*telos*). However much we may want God to become active in us, we cannot force Him to this by our activities. We can only hope that in our activities we will be broken open by God for His love. This demands of us a form of discernment, by which in our works we come to the realization that we are being regarded by God.

In the path that should lead to tasting God's sweetness, Conrad distinguishes four steps. With regard to the story in 1 Samuel 14 he proceeds selectively. For instance he does not mention that Jonathan has doubts about advancing on the Philistines and first asks for a sign from God. For Conrad this distinction is unimportant. We need not question ourselves about our desire to taste God. The only thing that matters is *that* we surrender ourselves to this desire. The four steps that the author distinguishes in this show that the path leading to tasting God is situated in the field of tension of our concern for ourselves and our surrender to God. To become receptive for God it is necessary that we practice the virtues (1) and bravely battle against our sins and temptations (2). However, we should not do this in order to justify ourselves in God's eyes, but rather to become open for God's action in us. Here an important role is reserved for Mary, whom Conrad sees as represented by the stick with which Jonathan reaches for the honey and who herself represents the countenance of God's unconditional love. By entrusting ourselves to her (3), we may – despite the awareness that in this gift of love we have nothing to offer God – be assured of His loving faithfulness to us. Ultimately it is this love which orders our life and which makes us realize that the profoundest will of our love is situated in God (4).

The second part shows how the honey, i.e. the love of God, affects our life. Here Conrad distinguishes four aspects in Jonathan's life. The first and most obvious is that the honey sharpens our eyes to see God in the daily reality of our life (1). The paradoxical thing about this contemplative form of 'seeing' is that it simultaneously makes us aware of our blindness and thus only plunges us even deeper in the desire to see God with unveiled countenance (2). The same holds true for the works to which this 'seeing' spurs us on and which make us realize on an ever deeper level that God is the source of our activity (3). It is He who wakes us in His love and by this love causes us to be born in God. The final aspect indicates the ultimate perspective of this transformation in love which does not end with our personal life. With his readiness to die (1 Sam. 14:43) Jonathan states that in love ultimately every ego-dynamic falls away (4). This is what in later tradition is called transformation in glory.

In a broader perspective I put myself the question, in conclusion, what the contribution of the allegorical mode of reading is to modern exegesis. I am aware that Conrad of Saint George's sermon on 1 Samuel 14 is merely a

paradigm for this. In this sermon I attempted to analyze how the process of the allegorical reading can be traced by us. It is striking here that this mode of reading first of all relates the Bible text to our life and in doing so places the relationship with God in a central position. Conrad lets himself be led in this by a moment in the text that according to him is an expression of a divine address. Subsequently the whole of the text is read again from the perspective of the mystagogic moment as the reader's personal transformation process. In this way the historical context falls away and the development of the spiritual path becomes central. By this means Conrad shows that the allegorical mode of reading has its own logic and cannot be dismissed as human fantasy. This mode of reading is characterized by a great precision and a pure orientation on God's action. Because this orientation is presupposed as source of inspiration of Scripture, this mode of reading has not lost any of its topicality. This is not to say that we can adopt Conrad's reading indiscriminately, for we as modern readers will have to discover anew the divine address in the text, again and again. Because of this, in the course of time an endless movement of allegorical interpretations arises. In closing I would dare the proposition, that without allegory it might be difficult to penetrate to the hidden action of God in our existence and that it is therefore useful, that we dare to read both our life and Scripture from this allegorical perspective.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

AMPE, A.

1964. Kritisch onderzoek van enkele aan Ruusbroec toegeschreven teksten. In: A. Ampe (ed.), *Dr. L. Reypens-Album*. (Antwerpen: Ruusbroec-Genootschap), pp. 1-36.

BLOMMESTIJN, H.

1996. De Eucharistie in de vroege Karmelitaanse spiritualiteit. In: A.H.C. van Eijk & H.W.M. Rikhof (eds.), *De lengte en de breedte, de hoogte en de diepte. Peilingen in de theologie van de sacramenten*, (Zoetermeer: Meinema), pp. 39-73.

2002. De reis naar de bron: Koenraad van St. Joris. In: H. Blommestijn (ed.), *Gaan waar geen weg meer is, Verkenningen in de mystiek*. (Zoetermeer: Meinema), pp. 9-27.

GREGORY OF NYSSA

1893. Answer to Eunomius' Second Book. In: P. Schaff & H. Wace (eds.), *A select library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian church. Second series, Vol. 5: Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic treatises, etc.* (New York: The Christian Literature Company; Oxford: Parker). Also available online: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf205>.

GUIGO II

1981. *The ladder of monks. A letter on the contemplative life and twelve meditations (= Scala claustralium)*. Kalamazoo (MI): Cistercian Publications.

JOHN CASSIAN

2000. *Institutes (= Institutiones)*, transl. B. Ramsey. Mahwah, NJ: Newman Press of the Paulist Press.

WAAIJMAN, K.

2002. *Spirituality, Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*. Leuven: Peeters.

2010. *Spiritualiteit als Theologie*. Nijmegen: Radboud Universiteit (English translation: Spirituality as Theology, in: *Studies in Spirituality*, 21 (2011), in print).

Keywords

Conrad of Saint George

Allegorical reading

1 Sam 14

Blessed sacrament

Trefwoorden

Conrad van Saint George

Allegorische lees

1 Sam 14

Geseënde sakrament