

**AN UNINTENDED READER'S RESPONSE
TO MATTHEW 22.34-40***

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Abstract. The unintended reader (UR) is neither the addressee envisioned by the author nor the abstract readership implied by the text. The UR may or may not share the unstated assumptions the author brings to the text. This article is an interpretation of Matt 22.34-40 from the perspective of an UR. The Greatest Commandment in Matt 22.34-40 is presented as a *summarium* of the Torah, which functions as the criterion for the eschatological salvation in 7.21-23 and 25.31-46. For the intended readers of Matthew's Christian-Jewish community, there would have been shared assumptions about the conditions of salvation that might skew their interpretation of the text. The UR, who does not necessarily share such assumptions, has the liberty to take the text for what it says and the ensuing interpretation leads to an open soteriology that transcends conventional religious boundaries, which will be a hermeneutically distinctive contribution by the UR.

Key words: Reader-response criticism, Greatest Commandment, Matthew, Torah.

It is interesting to note that, in spite of the long reign of authorial intent in the history of hermeneutics as an academic discipline, one of the very first discussions of the theory of interpretation in the western intellectual tradition was indeed highly reader-oriented. In the famous passage on the interpretation of a poetic text in the *Protagoras*, Plato presents Socrates as exercising a fair amount of interpretive autonomy as a reader of Simonides' poem, with which Socrates produces a meaning that most probably goes beyond the authorial intent. The issue at stake is Protagoras' criticism that the author Simonides contradicts himself when he admits in one place, ἄνδρ' ἀγαθὸν μὲν ἀλαθέως γενέσθαι χαλεπὸν, but in another he blames Pittacus for approvingly quoting a sage as saying, χαλεπὸν φάτ' ἐσθλὸν ἔμμεναι.¹ In defense of Simonides against this charge, Socrates gives his own interpretation of these lines to the effect that τὸ εἶναι (ἔμμεναι) and τὸ γενέσθαι are not the same. Human beings can *become* (γενέσθαι) good at times but only gods *are* (εἶναι/ἔμμεναι) good all the time. Thus, the Platonic Socrates as a reader of this poem brings metaphysical speculations onto the text of

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¹ PLATO, *Prot.* 339b-c