

New Testament, Patristic Sources, Visual Arts and Jews

“Picturing” Professor Reidar Hvalvik

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IT IS A PLEASURE to have this opportunity to honour a long-time friend and colleague, Reidar Hvalvik. Reidar celebrated his 65th birthday on August 22nd.¹ Today, we – his school, his colleagues, students, the New Testament fellowship of scholars, and friends – join the ranks of congratulators. I have known Reidar since we were both students of the MF Norwegian School of Theology (Det teologiske menighetsfakultet, abbreviated MF). Both of us were members of Philobiblica, a group of students who met regularly to discuss exegetical papers. I still remember Reidar’s excellent paper on the prologue of John’s Gospel. It set an example for all of us: skilfully done, as everything Hvalvik does. It was excellent in all possible ways. As his colleague through many years, I have had the pleasure of following closely his academic achievements. With no intention of providing a complete presentation of his bibliography, it is my aim now to sketch *some* of his most important contributions, and thereby to portray Reidar Hvalvik from an academic point of view.

In his doctoral thesis, *The Struggle for Scripture and Covenant: The Purpose of the Epistle of Barnabas and Jewish-Christian Competition in the Second Century*,² Hvalvik delves into the *Epistle of Barnabas*, from both a historical and rhetorical perspective. The epistle is read against the backdrop of how Judaism represented a challenge to the emerging Christian movement. Here, Reidar puts together material that is very relevant to issues related to what has been labelled “the parting of the ways,” i.e. the process in which synagogue and church parted. This study is helpful in construing a context that makes sense of this very special epistle. Hvalvik demonstrates that the rela-

tionship between Judaism and the nascent Christian movement was marked by both “closeness and competition.” He adds, “Strong feelings are usually a consequence of nearness.”³ Barnabas, whoever he was, turns against the idea that the covenant ever belonged to the Jews; they broke it once they received it at Sinai. Hence, they never had it. This hostile interpretation of the giving of the Law at Sinai, rather idiosyncratic in early Christian literature, makes historical sense in the context portrayed by Hvalvik. However, the bulk of this study is devoted to the epistle itself. While previous research on the epistle focused on the author’s use of traditions, Reidar’s approach is more literary, rhetorical and pragmatic. He really delves into the *function* of the material found in this epistle. Hvalvik’s study on the epistle of Barnabas is a milestone in this field of research, and it has been recognized as such. The way he brings together literary observations and the historical backdrop is an example in how approaches both “behind” and “in” the text can mutually benefit each other: how historical background and literary observations may be mutually illuminating. Certainly, an aspect of being “in front of the text” (a reader perspective) is also at work in this thesis, namely Reidar’s unwavering interest in issues pertaining to the Jews.⁴

Therefore, the doctoral thesis may be read as a guide when we are picturing Reidar Hvalvik’s academic contributions; this applies to him as a scholar as well as teacher. To be pointed out first is the nascent early Christian movement’s relationship to its Jewish roots. Reidar addressed this in an article published in 1989 in *Tidsskrift for Teologi og Kirke*: “For jøde først og så for greker’: Til betydningen av Rom 1,16b.”⁵ He argues that “for the Jews first” implies more than a temporal priority; it is a prerogative based on their election, which does not come to naught in the gospel. Following this, in 1990 he published in the *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* an article entitled “A Sonderweg for Israel? A Critical Examination of a Current Interpretation of Romans 11:25–27.”⁶ This article is very often cited in commentaries, and seems to have become almost commonplace in the debate on how to interpret this mysterious passage in Romans 11.

Together with Oskar Skarsaune, Reidar edited the monumental *Jewish Believers in Jesus: The Early Centuries*.⁷ Skarsaune writes about Reidar’s role in the preface: “I soon realized that the organization part was completely beyond my capacity, and I was happy to be joined by my good and close colleague Reidar Hvalvik, who has carried the main burden of organization, and also increasingly as the work went on, acted as co-editor. Without his administrative, organizational, and editorial talent, this project would never have been realized.”⁸ In addition to this editorial role, Hvalvik wrote three articles in this volume: “Paul as a Jewish Believer – According to the Book of Acts,” “Named Jewish Believers Connected with the Pauline Mission” and “Jewish

Believers and Jewish Influence in the Roman Church until the Early Second Century.” These 100 pages together uncover the Jewish roots and heritage at the beginning of the history that eventually led to a Christian Church. Reidar collects pieces of evidence, puts them together and comes up with a picture of Early Christianity much more Jewish than often assumed. Although the pieces of evidence were known, his way of putting them together has contributed immensely to alter a picture where the Jewish heritage was simply left behind.

The last page of the third article shows two pictures of a mosaic in Santa Sabina (Rome) that were taken by Reidar, depicting “The Church of the Circumcision” and “The Church of the Gentiles.” His point is that even as late as the 5th century in Rome there was a consciousness of the Church as consisting of both Jews and Gentiles. His use of this mosaic illustrates another main interest of his: the importance and relevance of pictures and art for biblical interpretation and the reception history of biblical texts. I will come back to this shortly.

Furthermore, Hvalvik’s dissertation demonstrates his long time interest in Patristic studies. Again his scholarly achievement is coupled with being the editor of a major work, *De apostoliske fedre i norsk oversettelse med innledninger og noter*, edited together with Ernst Baasland.⁹ In this volume, Reidar has translated *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, as well as contributed to introductions and notes to other texts. We shared an office at the time when this work was about to be published. It is therefore more than honorary words when I say that his editorial work and skills really saw the project through. I know how much work and time he invested in that project, from which so many have benefitted later.

Another example of how Hvalvik in a fruitful way makes use of patristic sources is his article “In Word and Deed: The Expansion of the Church in the pre-Constantinian Era,” published in a WUNT volume on the *Mission of the Early Church to Jews and Gentiles* (2000).¹⁰ There Reidar delves into the growth and expansion of the Church in the pre-Constantinian era, and relies heavily on his familiarity with patristic sources. The major factor in this growth was, according to Reidar, the conduct of believers. This expansion happened in spite of the view held by many early Christ-believers that “pearls ought not to be thrown to the swine” – certainly a view not conducive to Gentile mission. Nonetheless, the Church grew, thanks to the ability of its message to change people’s life.

In the recently published *Early Christian Prayer and Identity Formation*, Reidar addresses the nonverbal aspects of early Christian prayer, such as the significance of direction (in what direction to pray), time (when to pray), postures and gestures (bodily aspects) during prayer.¹¹ These often-neglected aspects, not at all irrelevant to the formation of Christian identity, come to life as

he guides us through biblical texts and patristic sources. Hvalvik often turns to patristic evidence.¹² As I see it, he has a *con amore* relationship to these sources, and he knows how to make use of them. Reidar has been drawn to work with these sources, not only out of historical interest in the past, but also by his identity as a scholar doing theology in dialogue with early Christian tradition more widely, not only the biblical texts.

In addition to being a theologian, Reidar is also trained as an art historian, with a special focus on Christian art. For some fifteen years his research and teaching has gradually accommodated these two perspectives – theology and art history. His competence has generated new courses that have attracted numerous students to MF. His favourite activity is, as I see it, to bring these students to Rome, literally to walk them “from church to church” in Rome, and to guide them among the early Christian sarcophagi in the Vatican Museum.

During the academic year 2006–2007, Hvalvik served as a visiting scholar at the Norwegian Institute in Rome, working on the earliest Christian art in the Roman catacombs. A major work in progress is Hvalvik’s long-time occupation with the motif which has been named *Traditio Legis*; a motif showing the transmission of the law by Christ, which is found on several early sarcophagi. Reidar has (with a few exceptions) literally visited all the places where the motif of Christ occurs, and his camera has recorded and Reidar has catalogued all relevant data for the interpretation of the motif. His work will become the most detailed work on this motif, and Reidar argues that this motif was originally located in the Constantinian basilica of St. Peter in the Vatican.¹³

A special field of interest – especially in recent years – has been the religious paintings of Caravaggio, a topic to which Reidar has added fresh perspectives, in terms of both theology and ecclesiastical context, due to his competence as a theologian and biblical scholar.¹⁴

Hvalvik’s interest in Christian iconography has also led him to several Norwegian medieval churches. For instance, he has lectured on the cycle of pictures from the Acts of Peter and Paul in Nes church in Telemark and made an iconographic analysis of the pictures taken from Genesis 1–3 in the ceiling in Ål stave church (Hallingdal; now in the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo).¹⁵

He has also written on the altarpiece and other 17th century paintings in Fjære church in Grimstad. Contrary to common opinion, he argues that the altarpiece originally was a catechism board, modelled on *Theatrum Biblicum*, which provides graphic illustrations on key stories taken from both the Old and New Testaments in chronological order.¹⁶

Hvalvik has special skills in editorial work, as already mentioned. For instance, in 1994, together with Hans Kvalbein, he edited a volume in honour of Edvin Larsson, the long-standing professor in the New Testament at MF.¹⁷

Together with John Kaufman, he also edited a Festschrift for his church history colleague, Oskar Skarsaune: *Among Jews, Gentiles and Christians in Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (2011). In this volume, he wrote a presentation of the jubilant,¹⁸ and an article on Paul's so-called collection.¹⁹ This contribution is related to an article he wrote to honour another colleague of his, Hans Kvalbein, on Paul's "ecumenical" aim in his mission.²⁰ Reidar focuses on aspects of unity among Pauline churches: how churches located at different places still had an awareness of belonging together. Paul's project aimed at this idea of togetherness. Reidar has written several articles on this topic, thus making it a major in his academic contributions. Worth mentioning in particular is his opening lecture given at the 7th Nordic New Testament conference in Stavanger in 2003, published in the conference volume.²¹

Presently, Hvalvik is co-editing with David Aune a volume in memory of the late Kvalbein.²² His editing role in many projects is a sign of an unselfish and serving attitude towards colleagues. Furthermore, Reidar's knowledge on literature and bibliographies is extra-ordinary. He is really our living "New Testament Abstracts," a tool with which New Testament scholars are familiar as the helping hand to find relevant literature on almost any topic pertaining to the field.

Reidar's list of publications is impressive and covers a vast area of topics.²³ I make the claim that outside the academia, and particularly among common Christians, he is one of the best-known New Testament scholars in Norway. This claim is based on the fact that he has composed a substantial amount of books and in-house productions at MF, used by undergraduate students. He has written on Acts,²⁴ Matthew, Romans and 1 Corinthians. Thus, he has become a much-used source for New Testament studies among undergraduate students and lay people. Worth mentioning in particular is *Den store fortellingen: Om Bibelens tilblivelse, innhold, bruk og betydning*, published together with colleague in Old Testament Terje Stordalen.²⁵ This volume has for many students become an encyclopaedia on the Bible.

The celebration of 65 years gives an opportunity to look backwards, and to ask: what came out of these years? In this context this question is, of course, limited to his academic career. If I were to summarize his contributions, I would mention four key words: Bible, Christian tradition, reception (particularly in visual arts), Jews.²⁶ Most of his works evolve around what these words stand for, in one way or another. Taken together they clearly convey that Hvalvik as a biblical scholar aims at more than being a historian. The New Testament and the traditions that grew out of these texts are not sufficiently accounted for as belonging to the past. They have a lasting and present effect on Church, culture and life in faith. On behalf of many, I like to congratulate him heartily. We thank you for all your contributions, and

your colleagues at MF in particular thank you for the amicable fellowship we have enjoyed. We have benefitted from you in all possible ways.

Ad multos annos!

Notes

- 1 The style and form of this paper is the presentation given at the occasion of celebration, MF August 29th.
- 2 Reidar Hvalvik, *The Struggle for Scripture and Covenant: The Purpose of the Epistle of Barnabas and Jewish-Christian Competition in the Second Century* (WUNT II/82; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996).
- 3 *Ibid.*, 321.
- 4 Note also his entries on the two Jewish Jesus scholars, Joseph Klausner and Geza Vermes in *Encyclopedia of the Historical Jesus* (ed. C. A. Evans; New York: Routledge, 2008), 358–60, 669–71.
- 5 Reidar Hvalvik, “For jøde først og så for greker”: Til betydningen av Rom 1,16b,” *Tidsskrift for Teologi og Kirke* 60 (1989): 189–96; English version: “To the Jew First and also to the Greek”: The Meaning of Romans 1:16b,” *Mishkan* 10 (1989): 1–8.
- 6 Reidar Hvalvik, “A Sonderweg for Israel? A Critical Examination of a Current Interpretation of Romans 11:25–27,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 38 (1990): 87–107, doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0142064x9001203807>.
- 7 Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalvik, eds., *Jewish Believers in Jesus: The Early Centuries* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2007).
- 8 *Ibid.*, xi.
- 9 Ernst Baasland and Reidar Hvalvik, eds., *De apostoliske fedre i norsk oversettelse med innledninger og noter* (Oslo: Luther, 1984).
- 10 Jostein Ådna and Hans Kvalbein, eds., *Mission of the Early Church to Jews and Gentiles* (WUNT 127; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 265–87.
- 11 Reidar Hvalvik, “Praying with Outstretched Hands: Nonverbal Aspects of Early Christian Prayer and the Question of Identity,” in *Early Christian Prayer and Identity Formation* (ed. R. Hvalvik and K. O. Sandnes; WUNT 336; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 57–90.
- 12 See most recently Reidar Hvalvik, “Ignatius av Antiokia: Gud åpenbart i menneskelig skikkelse,” in *Gud er alltid større: Kirkefedrenes teologiske språk* (ed. S. J. Kristiansen and P. K. Solberg; Oslo: Novus, 2015), 43–57.
- 13 See Reidar Hvalvik, “Christ Proclaiming His Law to the Apostles: The *Traditio-Legis*-Motif in Early Christian Art and Literature,” in *The New Testament and Early Christian Literature in Greco-Roman Context: Studies in Honor of David E. Aune* (ed. J. Fotopoulos; NovTSup 122; Leiden: Brill, 2006), 405–37, doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004143043.i-465.109>.
- 14 Reidar Hvalvik, “Light from the Outside: The Paintings of Caravaggio in their Theological and Ecclesiastical Context,” in *New Caravaggio: Papers presented at the international Conferences in Uppsala and Rome 2013* (ed. M.-B. Andersson; Florence: Edizioni Polistampa, 2016), 9–42. See also his forthcoming “Caravaggio as an Interpreter of the New Testament” in a volume to honour his long-time friend Don Hagner.
- 15 Reidar Hvalvik, “Skapelse og syndefall i tekster og bilder: Ikonografiske merknader til Genesis-bildene i Ål stavkirke,” *Kunst og kultur* 91 (2008): 34–49.
- 16 Reidar Hvalvik, “Katekismetekster, profeter og patriarker: Altertavlen og galleribrystningene i Fjære kirke,” *Kunst og kultur* 94 (2011): 2–15.
- 17 Reidar Hvalvik and Hans Kvalbein, eds., *Ad Acta: Studier til Apostlenes gjerninger og urkristendommens historie; Tilegnet professor Edvin Larsson på 70-årsdagen* (Oslo: Verbum, 1994).
- 18 Reidar Hvalvik, “Church Historian, Biblical Scholar and Apologist: The Scholarly Profile of Oskar Skarsaune,” in *Among Jews, Gentiles and Christians in Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Studies in Honour of Professor Oskar Skarsaune on his 65th Birthday* (ed. R. Hvalvik and J. Kaufman; Trondheim: Tapir, 2011), 9–29.
- 19 Reidar Hvalvik, “Fellowship between Jews and Gentiles: The Impact of the Pauline Collection and Collection Delegation,” in Hvalvik and Kaufman, *Among Jews*, 93–111.
- 20 Reidar Hvalvik, “The Churches of the Saints: Paul’s Concern for Unity in His References to

- the Christian Communities,” *Tidsskrift for Teologi og Kirke* 78 (2007): 227–47.
- 21 Reidar Hvalvik, “All Those Who in Every Place Call on the Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ: The Unity of the Pauline Churches,” in *The Formation of the Early Church* (ed. J. Ådna; WUNT 183; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 123–43.
- 22 David Aune and Reidar Hvalvik, eds., *The Church and Its Mission in the New Testament and Early Christianity: In Memory of Professor Hans Kvalbein* (forthcoming in the WUNT series; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck).
- 23 Including, e.g., Reidar Hvalvik, *Drømmen om det tapte paradiset: En bok om Jehovas vitners lære* (Oslo: Credo, 1990; 2nd, enlarged ed., 1992).
- 24 Reidar Hvalvik, *Fra Jerusalem til jordens ender: Hovedtrekk i Apostlenes gjerninger* (Oslo: Credo/Luther, 1986; six reprints).
- 25 Reidar Hvalvik and Terje Stordalen, *Den store fortellingen: Om Bibelens tilblivelse, innhold, bruk og betydning* (Oslo: Det Norske Bibelselskap, 1999; 5th printing 2013).
- 26 It is worth mentioning that Hvalvik has written the entry on “Jew, Jews: New Testament” in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, vol. 14 (forthcoming at Walter de Gruyter, Berlin), doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/ebr>.