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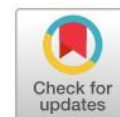


# Reading Manna and Quail in the Exodus: A Reader Response Criticism Perspective

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## Abstract

*Reader Response Criticism is a postmodernist interpretation approach. The spirit of postmodernism greatly influences the interpretive activities carried out by this method. The philosophy of postmodernism is apparent in the characteristics of reader response criticism. The author explains how the Reader Response Criticism approach works in this study. In the research framework, the author uses the literature study method to obtain research data and the biblical hermeneutic method to find news from the Bible. From this research, it can be concluded that Reader Response Criticism considers that manna comes from several proposals, both animals and plants, which tells that the event did not happen miraculously but something normal based on the availability of manna in the area, as well as the quails they came usually because of fatigue so that no visible action of God in the event. But biblically speaking, both of these events were God working miraculously to do His providence for the Israelites who had been freed from slavery and had to pass through the wilderness for 40 years, and God provided food for them.*

**Keywords:**

Reader Response Criticism, Hermeneutics, Biblical criticism, Manna, Quail, God's providence.

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## Introduction

In understanding a biblical text, there are several essential elements: the author, the text, and the reader. Understanding the biblical text requires an activity called hermeneutics or interpretation. This activity dramatically influences how we understand the meaning of God's word. There are two categories of biblical criticism: low and high.<sup>1</sup> Low criticism works to find the meaning of the author's original intent through exegesis. High criticism is a modern criticism where to obtain the meaning of this criticism works using research that pays attention to various literary elements because this approach places scripture only as a literary work.<sup>2</sup> In the 20th century, new thinking emerged in the postmodern era, where the approach used in interpretation was a new way of working. This approach is called Reader Response Criticism. Reader Response Criticism is criticism whose focus lies on the reader or interpreter. Previously, there has been research related to reader-response criticism, namely "Epic" and "Success" Theory for Sermons to Postmodern Audiences by Chandra Koewoso, which discusses communication theory in the Implementation of Sermons to Postmodern Audiences.<sup>3</sup> Then, "The Influence of Postmodernism on Biblical Hermeneutics" by Pancha Yahya discusses where Postmodernism has had a bad influence on biblical interpretation.<sup>4</sup> In this paper, the researcher will carry out a study of the reader response criticism approach that will specifically be applied in the book of Exodus 16, which talks about God's providence for the Israelites in their wilderness wanderings and, more specifically, leads to two things that God

provided for the Israelites regarding their food needs, namely Manna and Quails.

## Method

Methods are tools used to guide research; therefore, the author uses methods to achieve the expected results in this paper. In this paper, the author uses the literature study method, which, according to Zaluchu, is also called the literature study method. Using this method, researchers collect data and information from literature relevant to the research topic.<sup>5</sup> In this case, the data related to Reader Response Criticism and those associated with God's providence through God's provision for the Israelites in their wanderings. In addition to the literature study method, the author combines it with the biblical exegesis method, namely biblical hermeneutics, to discover the meaning of the text on which the book is based. Therefore, the sequence in discussing this material is information about Reader-Response Criticism, then the biblical analysis of God's providence through the provision of needs for the Israelites, which is more specific about manna and quail, and then how the Reader-Response Criticism perspective on the text of God's providence or provision for the Israelites in Exodus 16.

## Result & Discussion

### Reader Respons Criticism Perspective

In the 20th century, a contrasting approach to low and high criticism emerged: reader response criticism (RRC). Reader Response Criticism is a purely synchronic approach that looks at the text's final form and does not

<sup>1</sup> Sonny Eli Zaluchu, *Biblical Theology: Pembahasan Metodologi Dan Pendekatan Biblika Dalam Membangun Teologi PL Dan PB Yang Alkitabiah* (Semarang: Golden Gate Publishing, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Sonny Zaluchu, "Pendekatan Reader Response Criticism Terhadap Narasi Tulah Di Mesir Dalam Peristiwa Keluaran," *Religious: Jurnal Studi Agama-Agama dan Lintas Budaya* 4 (December 2020): 267–276.

<sup>3</sup> Chandra Koewoso, "Teori 'EPIC' Dan 'SUCCESS' Untuk Khotbah Kepada Pendengar Postmodern," *Jurnal Teologi Stulos* 16, no. 12018 (n.d.).

<sup>4</sup> Pancha W Yahya, "Pengaruh Pascamodernisme Terhadap Hermeneutika Biblika," *Veritas: Jurnal Teologi dan Pelayanan* 10, no. 1 SE-Articles (April 2009): 117–133.

<sup>5</sup> Sonny Eli Zaluchu, "Metode Penelitian Di Dalam Manuskrip Jurnal Ilmiah Keagamaan," *Jurnal Teologi Berita Hidup* 3, no. 2 (2021): 249–266.

consider its development or history.<sup>6</sup> Reader response is not a single method but rather a set of less correlated methods, sometimes conflicting assumptions, strategies, and practices that essentially focus on the reader rather than the author or the text.<sup>7</sup> According to Holland, as cited by Osborne, reader-response criticism is a response that includes a fusion between the writer and the reader when the reader integrates himself with the text.<sup>8</sup> For Moore, Reader Response Criticism explores the reader's contribution to the meaning of a text. Truth is created when the reader reads, not when the author writes. Readers can "play" with the text and import culturally appropriate meanings to contemporary society.<sup>9</sup> It can be concluded that reader-response criticism is an approach whose interpretive activities focus on the formation of meaning by the reader or interpreter whose truth is determined by today's readers and not the author.

Reader response criticism is one of the hermeneutical approaches that emerged in the postmodern era. Postmodern is the era after modernism. Postmodernism creates a new idea as the antithesis of modernism. The modern era holds the view that truth is absolute and objective, but in contrast to postmodernism, truth is subjective because the meaning of interpretation comes from humans.<sup>10</sup> Reader Response Criticism is one of the branches of the spirit of postmodernism, so there are various ways postmodernism works that lie in reader-response criticism. In the postmodern era, there is a shift towards the principle of scriptural hermeneutics. The scriptures interpreted in the postmodern perspective are

no longer in the low-criticism or high-criticism approaches that still make the text and author the focus of interpretation but instead ignore the text and are more oriented to the meaning produced by the reader.<sup>11</sup> Reader response criticism focuses the emphasis of interpretation on the authority of the reader or interpreter. Here, the interpreter has an essential role in proposing new meanings that are more actual in all aspects of life.<sup>12</sup> The interpreter's role is very active because they assume that the text is never complete and thus requires active action from the interpreter to complete it. After all, the text is still a "raw material" that requires processing from the interpreter.<sup>13</sup> So, this critique is an approach that emphasizes the formation of meaning by the reader and not from the author or text. Naturally, the reader's role is essential in the interpretation process here. Hence, the meaning depends on the experience and condition of the reader. The reader response criticism method is divided into two groups: the conservative PRC group and the radical PRC group. Conservative reader response criticism holds that the interpreter's job is to produce meaning by filling in the gaps in the text with their meaning. The second radical reader response criticism works by readers producing their meaning by overriding the author's message.<sup>14</sup>

The way conservative response criticism works comes from the mind of Wolfgang Iser, who prioritizes texts over interpreters.<sup>15</sup> In other words, it is a more text-centered approach.<sup>16</sup> This dismisses the notion that there are no limits to the reader of a text.

<sup>6</sup> Kateřina Kočí, "Interpreting the Bible against Postmodern Biblical Hermeneutics: The Role of Time and Tradition," *AUC THEOLOGICA* 4 (December 2014): 219–231.

<sup>7</sup> B Green, "An Interpretation Map: Finding Paths to Reading Processes," *Acta Theologica* 35 (July 2015): 59–79.

<sup>8</sup> Grant Osborne, *Spiral Hermeneutika*, 2nd ed. (Surabaya: Penerbit Momentum, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Mark Moore, *Hermeneutical Criticism*, n.d.

<sup>10</sup> Johan Setiawan, "Pemikiran Post Modernisme Dan Pandangannya Terhadap Ilmu Pengetahuan," *Jurnal Filsafat* 28, no. 1 (2018).

<sup>11</sup> Zaluchu, "Pendekatan Reader Response Criticism Terhadap Narasi Tulah Di Mesir Dalam Peristiwa Keluaran."

<sup>12</sup> Febriaman Lalaziduhu Harefa, "Analisis Kritis Terhadap Hermeneutika Kaum Postmodernis," *SCRIPTA: Jurnal Teologi dan Pelayanan Kontekstual* 1, no. 1 SE- (May 2016): 11–24.

<sup>13</sup> Yahya, "Pengaruh Pascamodernisme Terhadap Hermeneutika Biblika."

<sup>14</sup> Yahya, "Pengaruh Pascamodernisme Terhadap Hermeneutika Biblika."

<sup>15</sup> Green, "An Interpretation Map: Finding Paths to Reading Processes."

<sup>16</sup> Osborne, *Spiral Hermeneutika*.

However, he believes that within a text, there are clues for the reader to gain new insights, which activate the interpreter's imagination unexpectedly.<sup>17</sup> He believes there are gaps in the text that force the reader to be actively involved in filling these gaps to derive meaning; for Iser, the themes in the Bible guide the way for the interpreter to build his interpretation.<sup>18</sup> So, the interpreter is required to place himself to complement the textual meaning of a text with his work pattern of reading the text, after which the interpreter tries to get a gap of determination and enter into the world of narration to complement the meaning of the text read.<sup>19</sup>

The workings of radical reader-response criticism come through Stanley Fish's thinking. Radical reader-response criticism overrides the author's intent, and readers are entitled to fill the text with their meaning.<sup>20</sup> Harefa quotes from the writings of Kevin J. Vanhoozer, explaining that this approach is very radical because this practice tends to carry out "violence" in the interpretative process (interpretative violence). This is because their emphasis is on the wild individual.<sup>21</sup> So, the way radical reader response criticism works emphasizes the reader to produce meaning from reading the text. Yahya said this reader response criticism, specifically radical PRC, will always produce subjective meanings. Therefore, this subjectivism gives birth to various ideological critiques, namely liberation critique, feminist critique, black theology, and homosexual critique.<sup>22</sup>

Overall, the postmodernist thought pattern that underlies reader response criticism is to make the reader the determinant of truth. Thus, personal truth (individual truth) makes the workings of this approach subjective

and relative because truth is based on one's experience and background. In interpreting the text, the interpreter has included elements of personal experience and presuppositions. In simple terms, this approach makes the text subject to the interpreter.<sup>23</sup> Thus, subjective and relative will always exist in this approach because the standard of truth is set individually. Osborne says that subjectivity in interpretation is no longer something to be avoided but accepted and supported.<sup>24</sup> In other words, the message or meaning obtained in interpreting scripture depends entirely on the interpreter. So that the interpreter can obtain a meaning that follows the reader's context situation, perspective, and presuppositions, thus trivializing the message of the text or the author of the text. The reader is the determinant of meaning and is autonomously free to determine the meaning. Therefore, the background and situation of the interpreter greatly influence the interpretation, producing new meanings, although they may differ from the author's original intention.

### **An Analysis of God's Providence Toward the Israelites in the Context of Exodus 16:1-31**

#### ***Text Background Exodus 16:1-31***

The book of Exodus is motivated by the oppression of the Israelites by the Egyptians, which occurred when Joseph died, and the king who ascended the throne was a king who did not know Joseph (Ex 1:8).<sup>25</sup> After this event, the Israelites began to be colonized in Egypt. The Israelites were held in slavery in Egypt for 400 years. Their torment prompted God to move to rescue them, beginning with sending Moses to lead the people out of Egypt to the

<sup>17</sup> Green, "An Interpretation Map: Finding Paths to Reading Processes."

<sup>18</sup> Osborne, *Spiral Hermeneutika*.

<sup>19</sup> Zaluchu, "Pendekatan Reader Response Criticism Terhadap Narasi Tulah Di Mesir Dalam Peristiwa Keluaran."

<sup>20</sup> Yahya, "Pengaruh Pascamodernisme Terhadap Hermeneutika Biblika."

<sup>21</sup> Harefa, "Analisis Kritis Terhadap Hermeneutika Kaum Postmodernis."

<sup>22</sup> Yahya, "Pengaruh Pascamodernisme Terhadap Hermeneutika Biblika."

<sup>23</sup> Harefa, "Analisis Kritis Terhadap Hermeneutika Kaum Postmodernis."

<sup>24</sup> Osborne, *Spiral Hermeneutika*.

<sup>25</sup> Yohanis Kaleb Nua and Andrew Scott Brake, "Kajian Naratif Keluaran 17:1-7 Tentang Pertenggaran Bangsa Israel Dengan Musa Disamakan Dengan Mencobai Tuhan Dan Implikasinya Bagi Orang Percaya Masa Kini," *Repository Skripsi Online* 3, no. 1 SE-Articles (February 2021).

promised land.<sup>26</sup> The book's early chapters recorded how God had worked to bring them out of Egypt. They went through several challenges, including the hard-hearted Pharaoh. Then, after they were freed from Pharaoh, there were reports of how they had a difficult time in the wilderness, with the need for water being paramount, but what they encountered was bitter water. But in God's providence, there was a miraculous event at Mara when the bitter water turned sweet. On their journey, they finally arrived in the desert of Sin, where there was an event where God showed His mercy to the Israelites with God's providence in the form of providing food.

Exodus 16 can be divided into several main thoughts in the text, as follows. 16:1-3 Contains a report of Israel's wanderings when they were already in the wilderness of Sin and their retribution. After many miraculous experiences with God through their exodus from Egypt and the accompanying miracles, they finally arrived in the wilderness of Sin. But there were complaints from the Israelites, who thought that Moses had brought them there to starve to death. Bawaulu and Handoko said being in a difficult situation about food made the Israelites grumble and look back at the past events in Egypt. They remembered the food in Egypt but forgot about the forced labor suffered.<sup>27</sup> Today's Bible Commentary says the people preferred food to the great thing God was doing, which was their deliverance from slavery in Egypt.<sup>28</sup>

*16:4-5: God promises to provide food as a form of His providence.* In this verse, God showed mercy to the Israelites in the context of His care for them, so God prepared food for them. God had noticed their grumbling and then promised Moses that God would provide food in response to the Israelites' complaints. In this verse, God promises to rain down bread from heaven. Then these verses also contain instructions on how to obtain the manna, and the purpose of the presence of this provision is

as a test of their obedience to Allah.

*16:6-12: Moses and Aaron announced God's message to the Israelites.* God used Moses and Aaron to inform the Israelites of God's answer to them, that He was the God who had brought them out of slavery; he also heard the people's murmuring; they murmured not against Moses and Aaron but against the Lord. God gave notice that He would take care of them by giving them meat in the evening and bread in the morning.

*16:13-15: Realization of God's Promise to Israel.* This was an answer to their complaint signaled by the quail's arrival and the manna bread's descent. The quail covering the camp signaled the arrival of food supplies in the form of meat. Covering the camp indicates the number of quails that came was large. After that, there is information about the coming of the manna, which is from the dew that fell around the camp, and when the dew evaporated, there appeared something smooth and scale-like, like frost on the earth. They did not recognize the "manna," but it was what God had provided for them, which, in verse 31, they call "manna."

*16:16-31: Commandments and rules in their gathering of the manna.* In this text, God tells them how they were to gather manna every day according to their needs, which was a handful. This text reports that those who gathered much did not have too much, and those who gathered little did not have too little. However, there were Israelites who violated this rule. Then, there was a rule to collect manna on the sixth day; they had to collect twice as much in preparation for the next day's sabbath because manna was unavailable on the Sabbath.

### **God's providence and provision**

God's providence through provision has the theological term *Providencia*, which comes from Latin, from the verb form *Pro-oitlare*, which means to look ahead, take action first, to

<sup>26</sup> Sabda Budiman and Krido Siswanto, "Implikasi Kronologi Bangsa Israel Keluar Dari Mesir Dalam Kitab Keluaran Bagi Orang Percaya," *Shema, Jurnal Teologi dan Pendidikan Kristen* 1, no. 1 (2021).

<sup>27</sup> Mutiarni Bawaulu and Yudi Handoko, "Tinjauan Teologis Tentang Sabat Berdasarkan Keluaran 16:1-36

Dan Implikasinya Bagi Gereja Bethel Indonesia Hilisondrekha, Teluk Dalam," *Alucio Dei* 6 (March 2022): 37-48.

<sup>28</sup> Hywel R Jones, *Tafsiran Alkitab Masa Kini 1*, 15 Maret 2. (Jakarta: Yayasan Komunikasi Bina Kasih, 2015).

provide something first."<sup>29</sup> This word is not explicitly found in the Bible, but it has a clear implicit meaning in the Bible. When Genesis 22:8,14 is translated into other languages, it gives a clue to God's providence. This is where the concept of providence comes from: God prepared a lamb in exchange for the slaughter of Abraham's son, Isaac. God's providence also belonged to the next generation of Abraham's descendants, the Israelites. In the context of the book of Exodus, it is obvious how God cared for them. In the course of the Israelites' wandering in the wilderness, God had worked to get them out of Egyptian slavery and had guided them with miraculous signs. In particular, in the events of Exodus 16, it was recorded how God's providence became a part of the Israelites' lives and was characterized by the provision of needs. In this text, it is reported that there were two things that God provided for them. In verse 8, Moses reveals what God provided: to eat meat in the evening and bread in the morning.

First, Manna came down from heaven (Ex 16); manna was something God provided to provide bread. Manna is something smooth, something like scales, smooth like frost; when the sun is hot then, the manna becomes liquid, the color is like white coriander and tastes like honey cake; this manna should not be left until morning because it will become rotten except on the sabbath day. Other information about manna can be obtained from Numbers 11, which explains that manna is like coriander and looks like *bedolah* resin, can be ground and pounded, and can also be cooked. Second, the quail. The quail represents the meat food supply. In those days, meat was cooked and eaten immediately after slaughter because there was almost no way to preserve it after the man died. Quail was provided for a single dinner to relieve their hunger.<sup>30</sup> The Bible records in verse 13 that the quails came and covered the camp. No details are given about

the arrival of the quails, but the word covered in the camp indicates that the quails came in large numbers, or in other words, they came in groups. Today's Bible Commentary explains that the miraculous event was that they arrived according to God's promise and plan. Quails are a luxury item.<sup>31</sup> The presence of manna and quails was a confirmation of God's promise to fulfill their food needs, but it was also God's providence for His people through the provision of food.

### **View of Manna and the Quail**

Several views have emerged about manna. First, manna is an insect or plant louse. According to this view, manna is an insect that produces a sweet similar to honey.<sup>32</sup> This type of insect is specialized; Hamilton calls them scaly insects and plant bugs. They live and nest in tamarisk trees or shrubs. They ingest sap from the flowers on the trees and leave it on the branches, which then turn into crystals and glisten like dew.<sup>33</sup> The sweets fall to the ground in solid form, which occurs at night. The sweets remain on the ground but must be harvested in the morning before the sun brings the ants, and they consume them. The shape of this small sweet is small, almost white, sticky, and sweet. It is available for harvest only in late May, June, and July.<sup>34</sup> It is a sweet, transparent substance that turns white, brown, or yellow and is rich in carbohydrates but poor in nitrogen.<sup>35</sup>

Second, manna in the form of grains. The manna that came down from heaven has been scientifically researched in the 20th century. The result is that manna is known to this day in the desert region of Sin (Ex 16:1). People in that area used to pick up tiny yellowish-white seeds. They used it like honey to sweeten their food. Its name to this day is mannun. The grains fall as drops - not from the sky, but from some thicket, which is because the scrub is infested with bugs that suck up its water. They must be picked up in the morning

<sup>29</sup> Parel Tanyit, "Providensia Allah Dan Kehendak Bebas Manusia," *Jurnal Jaffray* 2, no. 2 (2004): 77–85.

<sup>30</sup> Douglas Stuart, *The New American Commentary*, 11th ed. (Nashville: B & H Publishing Grup, 2015).

<sup>31</sup> Jones, *Tafsiran Alkitab Masa Kini* 1.

<sup>32</sup> *Ensiklopedi Alkitab Masa Kini*, 8th ed. (Jakarta: Yayasan Komunikasi Bina Kasih, 2008).

<sup>33</sup> Victor Hamilton, *Exodus, an Exegetical Commentary*, Ebook Edit. (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2012).

<sup>34</sup> *Ensiklopedi Alkitab Masa Kini*.

<sup>35</sup> Walter Jr Kaiser, *The Expositors Bible Commentary, Exodus*, Epub Editi. (Michigan: Zondervan, 2008).

before the sun's heat destroys them and ants eat them.<sup>36</sup> Third, manna comes from moss. Another suggestion for the origin of this material is to equate it with the moss "Leanora Esculenta, which grows on rocks the size of peas and is light enough to be blown by the wind."<sup>37</sup> How about the Quail?

The arrival of the quails is seen in only one light, namely that their arrival is a natural event and a gift of nature.<sup>38</sup> Quail is a well-known migratory bird (*Coturnix Vulgeris*). They usually fly in large numbers in spring to northern regions and return in fall. Due to their prolonged flight over the Red Sea, they landed exhausted on the shores of the Sinai Peninsula.<sup>39</sup> Because they were tired, they were easy to catch, so for Reader Response Criticism, it was natural that these birds came into the camp of Israel without God's work.

### ***Answers to Reader Response Criticism's View of Manna***

None of the proposals about the manna from Reader's Response Criticism match what the Bible says for several reasons: The original manna was given continuously for 40 years; The amount of tamarisk manna produced could not have fed three to four million people every day. The original manna came down from heaven; The original manna could not be stored for longer than a day; the tamarisk manna lasted for months. The original manna could be boiled, ground, pounded, and made into cakes. The nutritional ingredients differed - the original manna nourished one nation for 40 years.<sup>40</sup>

The proposals of this view cannot meet some of the above criteria, as neither animals nor plants can feed the Israelites in large quantities for 40 years. There are several other criteria that the above proposals cannot meet. One special consideration is that the manna does not appear on every sabbath, and this is not possible with the Reader Response Criticism proposal. Therefore, manna is a particular substance God miraculously created

for a special purpose. Answer to Reader Response Criticism's view on quails Quails are one of the animals created by God in God's providence for Israel. What was unique about the quail's arrival was how God miraculously brought him because he came in time for God to feed them meat.<sup>41</sup> It can be interpreted that the supply of quail and manna were supernatural events and supernatural gifts.<sup>42</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Reader response criticism is one of the approaches that emerged in the Postmodern era, whose work pattern is to make the reader or interpreter the main focus in interpretation. This means that determining the meaning of the scriptures is the central role of the interpreter. With his presence, the authority of the Word of God becomes low. This can be seen when this approach is applied to the events of God's providence towards the Israelites, especially the provision of Manna and quails in Exodus 16. In their interpretation, this happened because of natural events without God's supernatural actions. Therefore, this paper answers that these two activities were due to God's miraculous actions, namely providing miraculous manna and bringing quails in large numbers in a miraculous way to preserve God's people, Israel. The presence of Reader Response Criticism is a caution for us in our practical activities because the tendency of their approach leads us to undermine the authority of God's Word. However, the reader approach to response criticism remains one form of criticism that is otherwise value-free. That is, if this approach is used by evangelicals, for example, then the evangelical spirit will color the results of the formation of meaning. Conversely, it depends heavily on the presupposition of the reader. It is undeniable that the reader's presupposition is an important indicator of the PRC's approach.

<sup>36</sup> Christoph Barth and Marie Claire Frommel, *Teologi Perjanjian Lama 1* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2013).

<sup>37</sup> Kaiser, *The Expositors Bible Commentary, Exodus*.

<sup>38</sup> Hamilton, *Exodus, an Exegetical Commentary*.

<sup>39</sup> Kaiser, *The Expositors Bible Commentary, Exodus*.

<sup>40</sup> J Parker, Merryl Tenney, and Wiliam Jr. White, "Ensiklopedi Fakta Alkitab (Bible Amanac)," n.d.

<sup>41</sup> Jones, *Tafsiran Alkitab Masa Kini 1*.

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