

DIALOGUE IN AND WITH THE BIBLE

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Abstract

According to Bakhtin dialogue is the essential symbolic medium through which all social relations are necessarily constituted. This must be seen against the background of a literary approach which is not comprehensive enough. There are different forms of dialogue in and with the Bible. The dialogics of the New Testament is more complex than that of the poetics of the Hebrew Bible. The New Testament develops a new form of dialogue when compared with the poetics of the Hebrew Bible. The dialogue within the Bible should also be situated in the context of intertextuality. Interpretation is also a practical affair with a political element in it. Dialogue with the Bible is not only a one way movement to the Bible, but the Bible can also contradict and surprise the reader.

Dialogue as precondition for communication

When dealing with the issue of the wide variety of diverse meanings of the term dialogue, *the dialogue with and between the writings of the Bible* is obviously of great importance. Over against the preference by some for narrative as the leading category in a literary reading of the Bible, it can be argued that it is more appropriate to use a *dialogic model* acknowledging the heterogeneous textuality of the Bible where narrative segments and other forms like laws, songs, proverbs interact in the form of a dialogue, statement or response.

This approach finds an important exponent in *M Bakhtin* whose work also has a religious dimension and is definitely relevant to the polymorphous character of the Bible. He clearly rejects the logic of positivism as irrelevant for the relationship between living persons. While positivism seeks to avoid a dialogical encounter with the text, Bakhtin sees all forms of human interaction and cultural-linguistic practice as decisively influenced by our dialogic relations to others. According to Bakhtin *dialogue* is not merely descriptive of two people interacting with one another in a communicative manner, but 'it is the *linguistic precondition* for all communication whatsoever, and its interactive awareness of the utterances of others, before and after' (Reed 1993:13). He observes that all speech can be seen as a social possession, and that one could state that most of a person's speech derives from other people. One could even speak of the many voices in our speech, the phenomenon of *heteroglossia*. This entails that much of our speech is formed by the interaction with the speech of others, representing and transforming it. This results in an 'interpretative frame' through which we are able to hear, put into context, understand and respond to the words of others. This must also be seen in the context of Bakhtin's views on *ideology*. He sees ideology not as the distorted representation of reality, but 'as the essential symbolic medium through which all social relations are necessarily constituted' (Gardiner 1992:7).

Applicable to the Bible?

It must be admitted that Bakhtin's theory does not seem to be directly applicable to the Bible, as he says very little about the Bible., though he does stress its public, institutional role in dominantly Christian cultures and periods. Gardiner underlines the points of contact between Bakhtin, Gadamer, Habermas and Ricoeur. Yet the differences are also of importance. To mention just the fact that Bakhtin is much less optimistic about the possibility of an objective reading of a text.

Bakhtin strongly argues that all texts are constructed with a particular audience in mind (even if an 'ideal' one), which he feels radically alters the nature of the communicative process itself. This is true not only of verbal dialogue, where the addressee's role *vis-à-vis* the utterer's total speech plan is admittedly at its most apparent; it is also an important feature of even the most complex and internally stratified written genres... 'the work, like the rejoinder in dialogue, is oriented toward the response of the other (others), toward his active dialogic understanding' (Bakhtin, in Gardiner 1992:135).

Historian, theologian, literary critic

One of the important contributions by Bakhtin is to distinguish between three different types of reading positions: the position of the reader as historian, as theologian and as literary critic. The literary reading should be seen as positioned between the 'fragmenting referentiality of the historical view and the consolidating authority of the theological perspectives'. (Reed 1993:ix). Yet at the same time it is important to see the striking convergence between biblical scholarship, so often characterised by historical and theological approaches, and literary criticism, traditionally concerned with secular texts.

The importance of the contribution in this respect of the most significant precursor of the renaissance of a true literary interpretation of the Bible, *E Auerbach*, may not be overlooked. He shifted the emphasis in a literary dealing of the Bible from poetics to narrative and historical realism. It must, however, be realised that his reading of the Bible was still too narrowly focused. In the Bible, one is dealing with a text which resists any single determinant as explanation of its heterogeneous and shifting authority. In *a literary approach to the Bible* there is need for a more comprehensive approach which can deal with the concentrations of authority but also the dispersions of power which can be seen in the past and present of its ongoing communication.

One of the advantages of such an approach is to free the critic from choosing between different positions in the debate over differing interpretations of Scripture. It becomes possible to see differing interpretations as symptoms of centripetal and centrifugal tendencies in the text itself, of a struggle for dominance in the text itself. Such an approach has the possibility to make sense of the struggles acted out within the text, but it also allows one to see that the Bible as fixed canon can be subject to new interpretations in new situations because it makes one aware of different levels of formal ordering and shaping of the canonical text. This can be very significant in the process of being open to dialogue with different readers of the Bible. Another advantage is to draw

attention the close correlation between the dialogical form of the Bible and one of its most central themes, i.e. the ongoing dialogue between God and His people to which the Bible testifies.

Dialogue in the Scripture

This concern with dialogue can be seen in many ways in the Scripture. This occurs on the level of the repetition of *Leitwörter* and words and phrases, the extensive renarration of sections of e.g. Genesis through 2 Kings, the phenomenon of the so-called 'inner biblical exegesis' (Fishbane 1985). But such dialogic revoicing also takes up extra-biblical material such as the oral Torah, the oral sayings and stories of Jesus. One can also note the many repetitions with differences in the New Testament itself, e.g. in the Synoptic Gospels. Robbins distinguishes between the *inner texture* as the dialogue between different voices in a discourse (1994:176), and the *intertexture* where the dialogue with other texts can occur in the form of reference, recitation, recontextualisation, reconfiguration and intertextual echo (:179ff). In what follows, attention will be given to these aspects of texture, although Robbins also draws attention to the social texture and ideological texture of discourse.

Reed draws attention to *three different types of dialogic communication between God and human beings in Genesis*. A first cycle of dialogues occurs in the so-called 'primeval prologue' in Gen. 1-11 and can be seen in the narratives of a. Adam and Eve, b. Cain and Abel, and c. Noah. These three different types of verbal encounter between God and human beings are repeated in the 'patriarchal prologue' (Gen. 12-50) in expanded and modified form (Reed 1993:19). Now the same themes are addressed, but in the narratives of a. Abraham and Sara, b. Jacob and Esau, and c. Joseph. 'In this repetition of similar verbal encounters between God and people, a sequence of dialogic situations takes shape' (Reed 1993:19). In the first cycle of dialogues emphasis is on the disobedience of the human characters who take things into their own hands. In the second cycle of dialogues it becomes clear that the human characters are increasingly successful in accomplishing God's higher purposes. There are important similarities but also differences between these two cycles of dialogues. There is a possibility that the series of dialogues in Genesis may reflect an Israelite answer to a Mesopotamian myth, an answer in which the most dramatic change has been to introduce Israel's 'one Lord' into the conversation.

According to Reed the correlation with narrative genres from outside the Bible 'is less distinct than the resonance between the primary 'speech genres'.. within the biblical book.' According to Bakhtin each different utterance is individual, but 'each sphere in which language is used develops its own *relatively stable types* of these utterances. These we call *speech genres*' (Reed 1993:22). These resonances can be illustrated by the following.

The account of the building of the Tower of Babel can be seen as a parody on the creation account in Genesis. Each one of the three dialogue sequences is to be seen as a response to a preceding act of creation, to the primeval sequence beginning with Adam and Eve and the patriarchal sequence beginning with Abram and Sarai. The city and the tower of Babel is a parody on the creation of heaven

and earth. 'Thus in terms of the double sequence of three dialogic situations .. in Genesis .. the first creation account and the Tower of Babel function as two beginnings: a positive sacred beginning..; and a negative, secular beginning..' (Reed 1993: 29).

The incident of the denial of Jesus by Peter in Mark is another interesting example of a dialogical situation. In the light of the testimony by false witnesses and by Jesus to who He is, Peter's denial of Jesus is particularly shocking. Here again the dialogic contradiction between Peter's testimony and the preceding testimony of Jesus is highlighted by the narrative structure. It is, therefore, significant that the communication between God and humans is so often depicted in the Bible in the form of divine and human dialogue. Yet the human characters in the Biblical narratives can talk back to God, can disagree as well as agree with his words to them.

It is important that Bakhtin points to the *similarities between early Christian writings and Graeco-Roman novels* as both groups of literature exemplify a radical mixture of traditional generic precedents. The important aspect in this is to see the way they bring together spheres of experience previously considered separate and distinct. In the New Testament the convergence of the opposite extremes of degradation and exaltation, of exclusivity and inclusiveness remains remarkable - this also applies to the new form of dialogue between God and his people known as 'the Gospel'.

Relation Old Testament and New Testament (Intertexture)

In this respect the intimate intertextural *relation between the NT and the OT* is very important. The writings of the NT exemplify a peculiar combination of authoritative discourse and internally persuasive discourse. Between the New Testament and the Jewish Scripture a nuanced dialogue takes place especially as the Hebrew Bible was already interpreted by contemporary Jewish groups and schools of interpretation. But the New Testament authors also made liberal use of the discourse of apocalyptic literature as it re-articulates the discourse of the Law, the Prophets, and the 'other books' of the Jewish Scriptures. This - even though extra canonical - literature was much more authoritative for New Testament writers than the Greco-Roman literature on which they also drew.

According to Reed (1993:85) the dialogics of the NT is more complex than that of the poetics of the Hebrew Bible. This is on account of the greater amount of written material preserved from previous centuries and in the communities related to the public ministry of Jesus. Some groups in Judaism did not accept all the parts of the Hebrew Bible, whereas others also accepted some of the so called deuterocanonical writings. Another approach was apparent in apocalyptic circles where a public canon of twenty four books was accepted, as well as another canon for the elite.

Also very important are the *interpretative frameworks used by Jewish groups* in the interpretation of canonical writings. The Oral Torah focuses on the Law, whereas the Law and Writings are considered as tradition commenting on the revelation given in the Law. The tradition of Qumran interpreted the canon as a whole in the light of prophetic eschatology. In Rabbinical Judaism the emphasis

was on the Torah as the most important dimension of wisdom; while in Hellenistic Judaism a more comprehensive tradition was taken into consideration as being distinctively but uniquely expressed in the Torah.

It is realised more and more that the *New Testament is in fact quite close to the Pharisaic precursors of Rabbinical Judaism*. But in comparison to other Jewish groups the NT exemplifies a radical movement away from seeing religious authority as vested in the Jewish Scriptures, but rather in a specific historic figure. Thus a new form of dialogue develops in the New Testament in which God speaks anew to his people. This unique dialogue takes place almost exclusively through his Son, the historical Jesus of Nazareth. This is a type of communication for which the Hebrew Bible has not prepared its readers.

In Jesus the discourse of prophet, lawgiver and wise man meet. This really means that the *Christian message transformed its Hebraic heritage*. This amounts to a redefinition not only of Biblical titles but also of personalities. Jesus becomes a new Moses, David and Elijah. The transformation also applies to the views of the people of God.

In the Hebrew Bible the people of God is seen as a single group of common ancestry. But in the Gospel the people of God is a heterogeneous group chosen from ethnic Israel together with people from an ethnic diversity. While the Hebrew Bible has three big sections, an interesting dialogue between the Christian view of the New Testament and the view of the Hebrew Bible eventually led to the four-part canon of the Christian Old Testament: the Pentateuch, the historical, poetic, and prophetic books. The Christian view of the Old Testament as a single narrative of Israel's salvation history developed as result of the church fathers' efforts to harmonise the two Testaments.

One should also differentiate between the books of the New Testament rather than treat it as whole. In the Old as well as the New Testament the first part recounts the original giving of divine instruction. After that the religious community's development is historically related, with a third type of literature dealing with theological reflection and moral instruction. In the fourth part of the Testament a prophetic vision of the future is provided (Reed 1993:111). One could say that the totality of the Christian Bible is the result of the dialogue between the New Testament writings and the Hebrew Bible.

Dialogue in the New Testament

The New Testament *dialogue* with the Hebrew Bible is *continued in the New Testament itself*. 'But a dialogics of the New Testament according to Bakhtin must also consider the dialogue within, the way in which the New Testament canon itself is organised in different generic patterns of similarity and difference' (Reed 1993:98). *The Gospel of Matthew* is a prime example in the New Testament of dialogic engagement with the Hebrew Bible in dealing with the categories of law, wisdom and prophecy. As is well known, the Hebrew Bible is handled in distinct fashion by the different evangelists. The internal dialogue of the New Testament is not only relevant in the case of relationships within a specific book of the New Testament, but also refers to the revoicings of different passages in different

books and by different writers. One has to take into account the dialogue within the broader dimensions of the canon.

According to Bakhtin the literary dimensions of the canon are to be taken into account when dealing with the canon of the New Testament. The *canon of the New Testament* is organised according to certain rudimentary notions of genre. Reed also draws attention to the fact that the *historical Paul* is reshaped in the Pastoral epistles as a figure of canonical authority speaking to his apostolic successors (1993:105). The letters to the seven congregations in *Revelation* also act as a link to the epistolary collection preceding it. The canon of the New Testament is an illustration of the conviction of early Christians that the message of God to his people in Jesus Christ could be broken down into different types of testimony as well as by different apostolic personalities.

Another example of the dialogue between the New Testament and Old Testament is the book of *Revelation*. Revelation is a deliberate attempt to communicate the Christian gospel in the scenes and images of the Law and Prophets. The very fact that there are so few direct quotations from the Old Testament, but such a pervasive influence of the Old Testament in Revelation, is very important. According to Reed 'within the context of New Testament literary forms, Revelation may be more accurately described as a dialogic appropriation of an earlier collection of writings that it treats as a monologic authority.' (Reed 1993:145). This can be said despite the fact that Revelation with its internal complexity can be taken to be a very monologic document. One could therefore say that this apparently monologic book with its centripetal and unifying tendencies, remains a remarkable example of the biblical ethos of dialogue.

Intertextuality

This dialogue within sections of the Bible should be situated in the broader context of the discussion of *intertextuality*. This concept can refer in a very broad manner to the relationship between a text and the universal intertext of all texts; or in a more limited way to the relationship with specific and intended texts. The research in this respect enables one to look at the function of the relationship between a text and other texts or group of texts. Besides the relationship between author, text and reader, one also has to take into consideration the pretext(s), and the historical and situational context of the author and readers. (Weren 1993:18) In the past intensive research has already been conducted on the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament. But recent research in intertextuality has shown that when the New Testament is seen as the transformation of Old Testament texts, the meaning of the New Testament can be seen in a new light. But this entails that this dialogue does not only take into account only individual words or sentences recurring in the New Testament, but also the dynamic relationship between the two literary units. These can be units on the *micro, meso* or *macro niveau*, with in each case a context on the next broader level. Attention should also be given to the pragmatic effects intended for both the pretext and the text itself.

It should be admitted that in this way the *intertextual dialogue can be broadened* to include an *intertext encompassing centuries of texts*. It should be obvious that in such a dynamic interrelationship, a specific reader will only be

able to survey a fragment of the possible readings from such an intertext. Different readers from different historically situated positions will definitely actualise different readings. It is, however, important to be aware of these dynamic possibilities and the factors determining the intentional and involuntary choices of readers in this respect (Cf Weren 1993:28ff).

Dialogue with the Bible

So far not much has been said about the dialogue *with* the Bible. Bakhtin can be relevant in this respect too. Although he shares with Ricoeur the recognition of the importance of the cultural-historical distance of the text from our own situation and the recontextualisation of such a text causing it to speak to our own concerns and situation, one could say that in many ways he is a more 'sociological' thinker than Ricoeur (Gardiner 1992:136). Interpretation is for him a very practical affair with a decisive political element included in it. Not all discourses are equally valid for him because all discourses do not have the same real effects in society. He therefore wants to 'rescue' a given text 'from the dead weight of sedimented dominant meanings, and to challenge this ideological closure by 'opening up' the text to a plethora of different readings or 'reaccentuations' which 'strive to expose and develop all the semantic possibilities embedded within a given point of view' (Gardiner 1992:137).

It is when dealing with the possibility that the text does not contain any absolute or fixed meaning, that his views on the *dialogic character of language* is of importance. On the one hand he rejects dogmatism as it makes dialogue impossible. On the other hand he equally rejects relativism because this position essentially makes true dialogue unnecessary as it assumes the incommensurability of different views. Bakhtin is willing to defend the notion of a 'unified truth' which can be expressed through a plurality of perspectives, departing from the premise that the integrity of different people collectively searching for the truth in dialogic interaction, has to be accepted. One should here also keep in mind that *another dialogic partner is the tradition of the church*. Tradition is the medium of the ongoing community experience and is the way in which the past is being actualised in the present. This includes not only formulated belief in the form of dogma, but also the lives and teachings of other believers, material objects art, customs and so forth.

It should also be noted that dialogue with the Bible is not only a one way movement of readers dialoguing with the Bible, but that *the text of the Bible can also contradict, surprise or reverse one's horizon of expectations*. In this respect it is easy to refer to the parables which can shatter our expectations. Even though the horizon of the world of the text can be influenced by the reader, the reader will always be modified by the text on entering the world of the text. 'Appropriation of the meaning of the text, the transformative achievement of interpretation, is neither a mastery of the text by the reader... nor a mastery of the reader by the text ... but *an ongoing dialogue* with the text about its subject matter' (Schneiders 1991:177 - italics mine). This is a dialogue which will never end for believers who have the faith that this text is the mediator of the transformative divine revelation. What this dialogue entails in its totality, is still to become clearer to us in the course of this seminar.

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