

SHARING THE BIBLE WITH THEOLOGIANS: SOTERIOLOGICAL TEXT-BOOK, OR LITERARY DEPOSIT OF GOD'S FAITHFUL?¹

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Abstract

Reviewing Nürnberger's Theology of the Biblical Witness, and amidst appreciation for his project, it is criticised for its presuppositions and subsequent claims. The complexity of the biblical materials disappears in service of a theological grid.

Key words: Biblical Theology, Canon, K Nürnberger, Systematic Theology

Introduction

Dispensing with detailed appreciative comments on formal and substantial aspects Nürnberger's *Theology of the Biblical witness: An evolutionary approach*, this brief review offers *some* critical comments to contribute to the broader debate. Suffice it to say that Nürnberger's crossing-over from systematic theology to biblical theology, if not biblical studies, is admired for the amount of interdisciplinary rethinking and adjustment it entailed. His scope and the inclusivity of his synthetic project, aimed at an encompassing approach to Scripture through some six undercurrents, paradigms or trajectories, is appreciated, but at the same time also implicated in criticism of his project.

The perception that the Bible is no longer sufficiently involved in human society (ch 2),² appears to be the major motivation for the book. The diversity and complexity of the biblical materials seem to pose less of a problem for Nürnberger than the need for an encompassing theological approach. In fact, he expresses reservations about the ability of biblical scholars – academic theology, as well – to contribute to “biblical faith” or “congregational spirituality”: “Much of biblical scholarship moves about in a maze of conjectures and trivialities” (2002:5). The impression is created that a critical myopia accompanied by a contrived theological reading is tolerated and even encouraged, in the interest of the ability to provide a comprehensive grid for understanding the Bible!

On Trajectories and Related Terms: Uncovering Presuppositions

“My specific contribution is to enhance the awareness of larger contexts”, claims Nürnberger (2002:13), and to achieve this goal, he construes “trajectories”.³ For him, the Bible shows that

¹ A review essay on Klaus Nürnberger's *Theology of the Biblical witness: An evolutionary approach* (Hamburg: LIT Verlag, 2002).

² Cf also, “To make an impact on the modern world, the Word of God must be incarnate in a frame of reference which makes sense to our contemporaries” (2002:70).

³ A concept he probably borrowed from scholars such as Brueggemann (1983), or Koester and Robinson (1971). In NT-studies, FC Baur anticipated the notion of trajectories in early Christianity with his focus on the

as God responded to various situations of human need through the centuries, “paradigmatic narratives” emerged, but also evolved. As a form of “collective memory”, redemptive events shared with contemporaries are handed on to the next generations, and eventually the originally “independent narratives merge into a sacred story” (2002:14). However, these trajectories⁴ do not so much exist in themselves, as they are linear constructs that exhibit varying levels of cohesive resemblance; at the same time, they do not generate the centripetal force, which is envisaged and claimed for the narratives. Moreover, some tensions between the individual narratives in the same trajectory remain, not to mention the elimination of the episodic in favour of the “whole”.

In the end, it is not first and foremost Nürnberger’s trajectories that are problematical, but the accompanying claims and presuppositions. This forms the focus of this review of Nürnberger’s book, giving particular attention to the first part of the book.

Hermeneutical presuppositions

A first set of concerns with the author’s hermeneutical presuppositions stem from the “*hermeneutical approaches*” (2002:39-69) Nürnberger identifies, and lists from a reader’s perspective: Four (apparently) more familiar approaches, reading behind-the-text, before-the-text, above-the-text, and in-the-text are relegated to the superiority of a below-the-text reading. Various questions spring to mind: Is this a matter of horses for courses? Systematic theology may benefit from an all-encompassing approach to the characteristic diversity of the Bible, although it calls forth notions of harmonising and indifference to particular historical, theological and other contexts, relative arbitrary choices for particular theological paradigms (depending more on particular theologians and their theologies than on the biblical materials) and invokes notions of a return to imperialistic designs in biblical studies. However, it is a question whether systematic theology itself is served by the identification of secondary reading-grids which tend to assimilate various, different biblical notions and patterns into a supposedly integrated whole?

Understanding the proposed reading or hermeneutic categories is hampered by Nürnberger’s tendency to mix hermeneutical and theological considerations, his neglect to do justice to the characteristics of the current array of exegetical and hermeneutical methodologies and approaches, and the failure to account for the considerable overlap and harmonising among them. *Below-the-text* reading is the preferred option⁵ for Nürnberger: “It assumes that there is a broad multi-faceted but continuous current of meaning moving through biblical history “underneath” the different texts, manifesting again and again, partially and provisionally, in the sequence of meanings intended by these texts” (2002:57). This hermeneutical stance unsurprisingly fits hand-in-glove with his notion of “undercurrents of

evolutionary development of Paul’s theological ideas. Cf Mount (2002:7) for criticism of Baur’s disregard for the high level of complexity in the evolution of Pauline Christianity.

⁴ Three paradigms are given special value: exodus-conquest; covenant-law and royal-imperial (2002:204).

⁵ The others are: *behind-the-text* described in exegetical terms (using historical-critical tools to unearth the history leading to the final forms of texts, 2002:42); *before-the-text* reading described in quasi-theological terms (“revelation happens here and now”, 2002:45) with some hermeneutical spice (“the meaning which the authors tried to put into the text cannot claim a privileged position over against the meaning which a reader reads out of the text”, 2002:45), and while admired for its reach, is discounted for its failure to operate in terms of “an objective criterion of truth” (2002:54-56); *above-the-text* described more in theological than hermeneutical terms (“impose preformulated structures of meaning on texts and their interpretations”, 2002:51); and, *in-the-text reading* described in theological (“[the text] has its own dignity as a catalyst of the truth”, 2002:53) and quasi-hermeneutical terms (“the literary factuality of the existing formulation, produced by end redactors, is taken to be inspired, inerrant, thus canonical”, 2002:53).

meaning”, “soteriological paradigms” and “trajectories”. For Nürnberger, an added advantage is that it offers an “objective criterion of truth” unlike in-the-text readings. The difference between his “below-the-text” and the rejected “above-the-text” reading, reside in the claim that the former version does not impose a preformulated grid upon the texts. Can the veracity of the claim depend on showing that the proposed trajectories are textually-generated rather than theologically imposed, given the impossibility of presuppositionless reading, and that the presence of similar themes in different texts does not necessarily constitute an (intended) trajectory of meaning across geographies and timelines?⁶

Secondly, the *theory of meaning* assumed in the book is never made fully explicit. Nürnberger appears content to work with a notion of meaning as textual deposit, governed by authorial intention. The author seems to insist that a text has only one meaning; at least, only one layer of meaning; a text cannot have, for example, both a literal and a metaphorical meaning (cf 2002:85, n. 10). Questions arise when the New Testament is considered, for example, how are the different historical and metaphysical levels in the Fourth Gospel to be accounted for? What about a decidedly allegorical trend in some of the Pauline materials?⁷

Thirdly, the insistence upon an *evolutionary process*, with “soteriological paradigms” developing over many centuries, complete with notions of (monolithic) *linearity* and (uncontested and continuously improving) *progression*, betrays a modernist approach.⁸ Moreover, using biological procreation as model for explaining developments in theological thinking over many centuries (2002:76) leads to distortion, since it presupposes unmediated developments of meaning: “Truth claims can merge with each other in a way which is not entirely dissimilar to sexual procreation. The result is a new integrated entity, whose “genetic stock” is still visible to a greater or lesser degree, but which nevertheless forms a new entity” (2002:74).

Fourthly, Nürnberger argues that *critique* is theologically necessary: “Far from being a sign of rebellious and callous attitudes towards the Word of God, biblical critique is an indispensable prerequisite of the communication of the Word of God to contemporary audiences” (2002:32). It is not, however, altogether clear what is meant by critique and how far and deep its reach is conceived to be. Is Nürnberger’s ideological baggage – at least his idealism – not showing in the claim that such critique “does not lead to relativisation and cynicism, but to a renewed struggle for, and commitment to, the truth” (2002:35)?

⁶ Ironically, although it is the behind-the-text reading which offers little if anything theologically significant, it is praised for its “semblance of critical and constructive authority for the biblical text itself” (2002:54; cf 2002:58). This is in contrast to the “inevitability of before-the-text reading” with its deliberate attempt to establish theological rapport between the text and the reader, which Nürnberger rather grudgingly accepts as “inescapable and ubiquitous” (2002:54).

⁷ Instances of Pauline allegory include Paul and his co-workers as the ox of the threshing floor in 1 Cor 9:9, Jesus as spiritual rock in 1 Cor 10:11 and Israel as the olive tree in Rom 11:17. Wan (1995:163) claims that *pneumatikon* (1 Cor 10:4) could mean, besides spiritual or supernatural, also allegorical. Boyarin (1994:96) argues that Paul’s *theology* is characterised by allegorical hermeneutics, with dualism at its basis. Paul is charged with spiritualising the (Jewish) particular, historical into “an ahistorical, abstract, and universal human ‘truth’, the very essence of allegory”, e.g. circumcision (Rom 2:25-29); Abrahamic lineage (Gal 4:21-31); “Israel according to the flesh” (1 Cor 10:18); and, the Jewish interpretation of the scriptures (2 Cor 3), and of course 1 Cor 9:8-11 (Boyarin 1994:154-157).

⁸ Cf Nürnberger’s reproach of postmodernism (2002:17, note 13; 48, etc), a blunt, negative stance which makes it into a scapegoat for all that is unacceptable (to the left-hand side of the spectrum) in contemporary hermeneutics. However, is the anthropological model presupposed in Chapter 4, typical of the modern or postmodern human being: introspective, tradition-evaluating individual, challenging the status-quo affirming group and in the interest of evolutionary development?

Theological presuppositions

The soteriological paradigms that the author constructs across “the biblical witness” centre on what he perceives to be a dialectic of *human need and divine response*. The notion of human need is a heavily invested theological concept. However, when the Bible is seen *in toto* to be a six-fold narrative of divine response to human need, it results in an immense narrowing of the biblical materials. For example, the difficulty with casting all of the Bible in terms of need-response, apparently underwritten by soteriological paradigms, renders a Paul on the Damascus road having a “redemptive experience” (2002:13), which begs the question about his status before God before this event, as well as for clarity on the bigger picture of the relationship between Second Temple Judaism and nascent Christianity? (cf Chapter 10,11).

The grand narratives that Nürnberger identifies are trajectories of “soteriological paradigms” (2002:14), which betray the specific nature and content he imputes into his “awareness of larger contexts”, and with what purpose in mind he then construed and constructed them. How Nürnberger thinks that he can avoid being grouped, theologically certainly, within the “above-the-text” approach, is not immediately evident.

Notions of Scripture

“These insights [*sc. the thrust of the undercurrent of meaning which provides a dynamic criterion*] lead to a new concept of canonicity, a concept which does not need to avoid the fact that the biblical witness is subject to historical flux, situational relativity, and social power games, and which can empower us to proclaim and enact the Word of God among our contemporaries in a truly contemporary way” (2002:16). Is such a response not too unnuanced, leading to a situation that amounts to having one’s cake and eating it? Theological, hermeneutical and historical challenges to a particular paradigm are sideswiped with an appeal to “dynamic” moment in the history of its development. While the concept of an “undercurrent of meaning” (2002:16ff) as “an evolving thrust” (2002:60) and a dynamic criterion for constructing a biblical theology, is the driving force for much of the book, it conjures up images of “vague principles” (cf 2002:60) decided upon by the need and social location of the interpreter rather than the biblical texts.⁹ The problem is not with the contextual nature of interpretation, but the failure to admit to it!

The “*need-response* pattern of the Word of God” has implications also for how the Bible is conceived: Is the “Word of God” in all its forms divine response (cf 2002:86) to human need? What about the difficult passages, the “texts of terror”? Nürnberger then qualifies: “It must be possible to show that the emergence and evolution of narratives expressing divine responses to human needs were themselves driven by faith perceptions concerning God’s responses to human needs” (2002:86). Does this in fact admit that divine response is mediated by humans? Human needs are later described as requiring critique: “Specific needs must be seen in the context of the needs of the whole system of relationships for comprehensive wellbeing” (2002:108). And later still, needs which are “interpreted in terms of an accepted system of meaning” form interests; “[i]nterests are interpreted and prioritized needs” (2002:125). But can (harmless) needs and (ideological, self-affirming) interests be so neatly separated and systemically accounted for? However, the attempt to capture its dynamics in a needs-response pattern, amounts to a truncated approach to the Bible, which is the deposit of

⁹ The danger of mirror-reading is also present; cf for example the comments re Hebrews: the author “wanted to show that the priesthood was a thing of the past” because “a powerful hierarchy has emerged in the church which based its legitimacy on priestly functions” (2002:78).

people's interaction with God, the two-way responses as well as the experiences of such responses – all mediated by socially located humans.

The *nature* and *authority* of the Bible remains somewhat obscure. While it is admitted that the Bible did not drop from heaven (2002:39), the impression is created that it – or at least the unmediated divine responses contained in it – appeared at the drop of the human needs-hat.¹⁰ And when *authoritative* “means that only God's Word can create, sustain and empower faith” (2002:39), is this not simultaneously claiming too much (role of the Spirit, of the community, of creation) and too little (the normative sense of Scripture)?

A Truthful Canon

Nürnberger uses “truth” as reference to “fact, authenticity or validity”, while admitting that all three are subject to “historical flux, situational specificity and social power play” (2002:101). Is the author not here struggling to chew after having bitten off too much? Do we find some double-speak here on truth? Out of the blue, a theological – and mysterious – notion is used to describe truth as “nothing we search and check and choose. Truth seeks us out...” At the same time, he castigates postmodern unease with claims to truth, and argues for the viability of operating with a strong notion of truth today. Yet, on the other hand, Nürnberger talks of truth amounting to no more than “a system of signposts which guide us through our daily lives” (2002:103-107). Unsurprisingly, it is the “thrust of the underlying rationale of the tradition” which forms the criterion of truth (2002:108) – that is “God's vision of comprehensive well-being which translates into God's concern for specific deficiencies in wellbeing” (2002:109). However, this category is so broad and all-inclusive to be of little help in criterion-formulation.

The biblical documents were according to Nürnberger collected into a Bible as a “means of grace” for *liturgical use*, rather than a criterion of truth functioning like a dogmatic set of propositions (2002:111). However, that the historical flux found in the canon therefore means that canonicity becomes dependent on “the rationale which leads the tradition in a particular direction” seems to be a preconceived position, and merely presupposes a *regula fidei* to be superimposed on Scripture. This “rationale” is formulated and not found! In fact, the history of the biblical canon was much more checkered and intensely contested, so that the proper investigation of the origin and establishment of the biblical canon would require attention far beyond the liturgical, and has to include *inter alia* socio-political power-issues and social-cultural rivalry in and around the early Christian church. When the author admits, “It is all the more remarkable that the early church [except Hebrews] saw in Jesus neither a prophet or a priest, but a king – the messianic king promised by God in the Old Testament” (2002:204), other questions emerge. Can the New Testament glibly be equalled to “the early church”, as though it is an uncontested, monolithic concept? And how is the process of canonisation to be accounted for in this?

Nürnberger feels compelled to counter the understanding of canon as identity with his insistence upon the truth claims of the canon and their public relevance, while conceding that a vital link exists between canon and the identity of the believing community (2002:118-121). Within Scripture itself, the insistence on the “*truth*” *claims*¹¹ of the Bible is as absent as the insistence upon the *closure* of its canon, but only the latter notion is stressed – perhaps canon

¹⁰ Although Nürnberger earlier asserts, “We have no access to a divine revelation which bypasses human observation and reason” (2002:23).

¹¹ Truth appears to be a static, positivistic concept for Nürnberger, and creates havoc in his approach which wants to allow for textual polysemy, dynamic movements in tradition, evolutionary paradigms, and the like.

as identity-defining measure requires more attention in Nürnberger's approach? Listing and explaining a hierarchy of canonicity (2002:121-122) results in assigning priority to foundational and prototypical paradigms over individual texts and subsequent readings, although the divine rationale of the tradition, as well as the tradition as a whole, are of still higher order – the danger of theological *eisegesis* looms even larger here!

Nürnberger's appeal to tolerate the inevitable *polysemy of an open canon* (2002:115-117) is a conscious attempt to avoid the otherwise unavoidable proliferation of meanings, which would be brought about by the unscriptural notion of a closed canon. "Rightly understood, the significance of the compilation of the Canon does not lie in the fact that it froze an evolutionary process into a timeless monument. Rather, it demarcated a primal and prototypical period of evolutionary history and declared it to be the source and criterion *for the direction of the intended meaning* in all subsequent stages of this history" (2002:116, emphasis in original). While the prototypical nature of Scripture (a la Schüssler Fiorenza) is appreciated, the link with the truth-claims of the canon is not clear. And, while the rationale and tradition seems to feed off and contribute to the paradigms, the really worrying aspect is that the paradigms eventually displace the biblical materials – or at least limits the appropriation of the biblical material to be within the boundaries of these (arbitrary) constructed paradigms. Polysemy is no longer dependent upon and regulated by texts themselves but by secondary reading grids, which has implications for hermeneutical and theological appropriations of the texts of the Bible – and by truncating polysemy, it is *effectively* invalidated.

Historicity Issues

Nürnberger claims that "[t]his relation [*sc between history, story and truth*] is at the heart of the current hermeneutical debate" (2002:87) – a statement of which the accuracy is not discussed here. He claims that "it is the theological truth expressed by the story which matters, not its historicity" (2002:88). He later adds to this: "Historicity is not decisive for our thesis, historical relevance is" (2002:208). Do such concerns not contradict other claims about the "truth" of the canonical materials? How does what almost amounts to a new historicism-perspective relate to his assertion about "sufficient biblical and extra-biblical residues of historical fact to venture plausible reconstructions of the circumstances leading to the emergence and evolution of the story" (2002:98)? And, the historical (including history of ideas/thought) breaks in the trajectories require acknowledgement and explanation.

A loaded notion of "story" abides: "A narrative form of discourse which (a) expresses a system of meaning that determines the identity and authenticity of the community of believers within a greater whole, (b) confirms or withholds the right of existence of its members according to its values, norms, statuses and roles and (c) grants its members authority to act within the framework of this normative structure" (2002:87). Is the hermeneutical link which is to bridge the historical gap between then and now one of commonality, "a common identity, a common commitment, a common mission" (2002:41)?

Ethical Reading

Nürnberger presents his readers with the ultimate *master-narrative*, given its self-sustaining core: "The evolutionary process" (2002:15-16) he constructs across the Bible's narratives and materials is portrayed as continuously "growing", with *horizons* ever widening ("from clan to tribe, to nation, to all nations, to all gods governing these nations, finally to all cosmic forces"), also in *scope* ("[b]eginning with nomadic concerns for pasture and water, it progressively covered the concerns of agriculture, the concerns of urban life, the national

concerns of the kingdom, international concerns connected with relations to the Ancient Near Eastern Empires, and the cosmic concerns when confronted with Persian and Hellenistic cosmologies”).

The question is, does the end justify the means? Is it in the theological and hermeneutical interest of twenty first-century believers that the diversity, the intricacies – the complexity – of the Bible be traded away for the spiritual ease-of-use in the form of broad “soteriological paradigms”? Is the relevance of the Bible and its riches only accessible with a Bible-spanning framework of interpretation? What is in the end surrendered to comprehensive paradigms, both in terms of particular or unique textual perspectives as well as the disavowal of the literary creativity of the contemporary reader?

Detrimental Effects

The notion of an evolutionary development of “soteriological paradigms” which is offset by the insistence upon “dynamic movement” (2002:16), but nevertheless results in a stable “undercurrent of meaning”, is Nürnberger’s intended contribution to biblical theology.¹² The effects of this approach, unintended or otherwise, are the disempowerment of both the Bible and biblical studies.

Firstly, with the focus on trajectories built upon soteriological paradigms and evolutionary processes, a supercessionist hermeneutic cannot be avoided.¹³ Nürnberger concedes to the later New Testament documents’ reversal of earlier tolerant positions by legislating particularly strongly around certain issues (e.g/ the public role of women in the church), but is it not the Old Testament which is under threat, becoming a foil for the New Testament? Especially if the perception is that “Christ fulfils the Old Testament tradition” (2002:413)?

But the New Testament is also, if not equally, hamstrung since its value is now situated in the fulfilment or completion of paradigms which originated in the Old Testament, not making a contribution of its own to early Christian theology.¹⁴ And so the argument can become circular: The Old Testament paradigms cannot function properly or adequately without their New Testament complementarities, while the New Testament cannot generate any theological paradigms of its own. Alternatively – and this is in fact what happens – the particularities of the perspectives of both Testaments are bundled together and sacrificed on the altar of a comprehensive approach.

Secondly, what remains of the biblical materials and studying them after the evolutionary paradigms have been identified? Do we have to *re-train* biblical scholars since fewer of them are needed now that the biblical trajectories have been exposed, and because they have to assist theologians in working out the further, contemporary dimensions of these trajectories? I would argue the opposite, insisting that, more than ever, hermeneutically trained biblical scholars are required to allow the biblical texts their own voices, beyond preconceived theological paradigms – and not only to guard against theological hegemony. Because, for all his effort to let the text and not the reader speak (2002:39ff), it is Nürnberger as super-reader that emerges. For all the effort to stop the monopolising of

¹² It seems as if Nürnberger has returned to the early twentieth-century search for the one basic theme, the core or the centre of OT and NT (cf Hasel), albeit this time for the centre of the Bible? Cf recently the disillusionment with such efforts in the Pauline letters, as experienced in the Pauline Theology project of the SBL.

¹³ For example, it is claimed that Ps 2 is superceded by Mt 20:20ff which has “more validity”, and as reason the following is offered: “the latter superceded the former both chronologically and in terms of the evolution of meaning” (cf :76).

¹⁴ This is not to mention that the incorporation and interaction with non-OT material cannot be accounted for in any significant way!

the Bible by biblical scholars and theologians (e.g. 2002:43), allowing believers to read on their own terms, it is Nürnberger the theologian who spells out the boundaries within which such reading is permissible.

Conclusion

Theology of the biblical witness is a valuable book *and* it is a dangerous book, almost for the same reason. It is *valuable* for providing a broad approach to the diversity of the biblical materials, for providing interpretative grids spanning centuries, geographical space and socio-political environments, and for its attempt to construct a comprehensive biblical theology in the best sense of the word.¹⁵ But it is a *dangerous* book since it claims more than it – or any similar attempt or procedure – can deliver (*viz* a comprehensive, all-inclusive interpretative paradigm[s] for the Bible) and since it hides more than it reveals (paradigms obscuring/replacing texts). In the end, its syntheses of the particular, the historical specific, the theological significant, and so forth, effectively delivers a “rewritten Bible”, and a purpose-serving document at that: A soteriological textbook!

It is not clear how Nürnberger imagines that his own approach, which emulates the traditional take on the Bible which he decries (as irrelevant) in his first chapter, will not also be considered by society to be an outdated approach to Christianity. Why is it necessarily so that, “to become relevant to the current situation, we must go beyond hermeneutics to systematic theology” (2002:414)?¹⁶ Although “hermeneutics cannot replace systematic theology” (2002:61) – and I am not convinced that it wants to! – the reverse is seemingly possible, even advised! And why should the Bible, as the literary deposit of God’s faithful, be expected to do theologians work for them?

Should the biblical studies-systematic theology dichotomy – of which the size may differ according to context – be actively promoted, or should we rather be looking for integrating thrusts, for blending approaches? Surely we are not to reverse the hermeneutical cross-flow of the efforts of the last couple of decades to integrate biblical and theological studies, to bridge the divide between descriptive and normative theology (Gabler, Wrede)? Is this a case where the author restates his faith “again and again in response to new situations and do[ing] so boldly” (2002:414)? Alternatively, does the concluding appeal, “after hermeneutics has established the thrust of the undercurrent of meaning which drives the biblical witness forward, it must pass the baton to systematic theology” (2002:415), not amount to theological self-aggrandisement?

¹⁵ The presence of a wholesome threesome in the form of “historical flow, situational specificity and power dynamics” retains something of the dynamic nature of the biblical texts and their reception histories.

¹⁶ With reference to Nürnberger’s earlier symbolism of a gun’s barrel for the canon (2002:115), and subsequent caricatures (2002:133, n 37), the response of biblical scholars could very well be that a gunsmith is not supposed to be out hunting all day. Further, while the hunter relies on the skill of the gunsmith to have success when hunting, and his/her primary purpose is clear, a gunsmith does not necessarily avoid the hunting area!

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