INTERPRETING LUKE WITH THE CONFESSION OF BELHAR

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Abstract

This article is part of a larger research project that wrestles with the following question: 'What influence do different contexts of social transformation have on the use of the Bible when Reformed Christian Churches respond to social issues?' The hypothesis is that different contexts of social transformation lead to different modes of Biblical interpretation. These modes range on a spectrum from legitimization to resistance (with accommodation and apology somewhere in between). In order to test this hypothesis four case studies are done from different contexts of social transformation. One of the case studies focuses on the Confession of Belhar (from now on just 'Belhar'). The issue tackled in this article is how this Confession interpreted the Gospel of Luke in its particular context. The article intends to be mostly descriptive.

1. Introduction

The contents of the Confession of Belhar can be described in terms of three basic theological statements namely *unity, reconciliation* and *justice*.[1] The *first* of these (article 2) focuses on the unity of the church, that unity must be visible and that our 'natural' divisions should not threaten it. The *second* statement (article 3) discusses the reconciliation work of Christ between people and the church's role in society to reconcile people to each other. The *third* statement (article 4) proclaims God's heart towards the vulnerable and is usually referred to under the heading of 'justice'. It is in this article where one finds the (only) four OT texts referred to in this confession. These texts are Dt 32:4, Is 1:16-17, Amos 5 and Psalm 146. It is also in this article where we find six texts from the gospel of Luke. These texts are Lk 2:14, Lk 1:46-55, Lk 6:20-26, Lk 7:22, Lk 16:19-31 and Lk 4: 16-19. The following questions therefore emerge: 'Why were these texts used?' and What do they have in common?'

These six Lucan texts are evaluated as follows: In the *first* instance I try to answer the latter question: What do these texts have in common? *Secondly* I intend to determine how Belhar interprets them. This is usually determined by looking at the coherence between the content of the confession and the content of the particular text. It is not always that clear, but in some cases one finds repetition of certain words from a specific text. In the other case studies one usually has exegesis, i.e. people interpreting texts and motivating their interpretations.[2] This kind of substantiation is not present in Belhar. There is the text of a confession with 'prooftexts' added to it in the margin. *Thirdly* a very brief summary is given of the comments from some Biblical scholars on these texts. In the *last* instance the question is asked whether the interpretation of Belhar were in line with these interpretations by exegetes. But before we do this we need to say something more on the content of article 4 of Belhar.

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1. For an overview of the events that led to this Confession, see Horn (1984), Kotzé (1988) or Meyer (1997).
2. The only published work in this regard is that by Smit (1984: 145-157) (who is one of the original authors) where he discusses his understanding of these texts making extensive use of some of the most important exegetical works available then.

2.   Content of article 4 of Belhar

In the following table is a copy of article 4 of this confession. I divided it into smaller units in order to get a better 'grip' on the content.[3]

Content		Text
1.	*We believe*	
1.1	that God has revealed himself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among men; *(Dt 32:4?, Lk 2:14, Jn 14:27, Eph 2:14)*	Dt 32:4; Lk 2:14
1.2	that in a world full of injustice and enmity He is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that he calls his Church to follow Him in this; *(Lk 1:46-55?)*	Jn 14:27
1.3	that He brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry; *(Lk 4:16-19, Lk 7:22, Ps 146)*	Eph 2:14
1.4	that He frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind; *(Lk 4:16-19, Lk 7:22, Ps 146)*	Is 1:16-17
1.5	that He supports the downtrodden, protects the stranger, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly; *(Ps 146)*	Jas 1:27; Jas 5:1-6
1.6	that for Him pure and undefiled religion is to visit the orphans and the widows in their suffering; *(Jas 1:27)*	Lk 1:46-55
1.7	that He wishes to teach His people to do what is good and to seek the right; *(Is 1:16-17)*	Lk 6:20-26
1.8	that the Church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things,	Lk 7:22
1.9	that the Church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream; *(Am 5: 24)*	Lk 16:19-31
1.10	that the Church as the possession of God must stand where He stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged;	Ps 146
1.11	that in following Christ the Church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others.	Lk 4:16-19
2.	*Therefore, we reject*	
2.1	any ideology which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel.	Rom 6:13-18
		Am 5

3. The texts in the right hand column are in the same order as they are quoted in the text of Belhar. The texts in brackets are my interpretation of which a Biblical text belongs with what part of Belhar. I have attempted a similar analysis elsewhere (Meyer 1998: 296-297), but that one differs somewhat from this one.

In broad terms one can divide this article in two parts, the part entailing that which 'we believe' and the part entailing that which 'we reject'. If we have a closer look at the 'we believe' part it is clear that we can divide it into 11 'that-sentences' or 'object-sentences'. In the first one (1.1) God reveals himself as a God 'who wishes to bring about' particular things among men ('justice' and 'peace'). The second object sentence (1.2) proclaims Gods heart towards vulnerable people (which has caused a lot of debate in church circles) and the fact that the Church should follow his example. From 1.3 to 1.5 we find references to certain deeds of God which is usually quoted more or less directly from particular texts. The first 5 object sentences (with the exception of 1.2) could be described under the rubric of 'theological'. They tell about God, what kind of character he has and what he has done. From 1.6 (which is a quotation from Jas 1:27) the content starts to change more in the direction of 'ethics'. 1.7 states that God wishes to teach us 'what is good and to seek the right'. From 1.8 to 1.11 it specifically formulates the churches responsibility. In other words there is some kind of movement from who God is and what he does (theology) in the direction of what we as the church should do (ethics). In 1.2 you already have both. In this light I understand 1.2 as the central statement in this article.

3.   What do these texts have in common?

The *first* text we find in the margin is Lk 2:14. It is a verse from the scene where angels appear to shepherds and this is what the angels sing (NIV): 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.'

The *second* text is the so-called Magnificat (Lk 1: 46-55). One of the important features in this text is the reversal theme that is very important in the gospel of Luke (as we shall see later under 5). This is especially seen in verses 51-53 which recall the great deeds of God and the fact that he changed the status of people. He has lifted up the humble (ταπεινός), but he brought down rulers (δυνάστης) from their thrones. The term ταπεινός was also used to describe Mary's status in verse 48.

The *third* text is Lk 6:20-26 the so-called 'sermon on the plain'. Once again we have the 'reversal' theme in this passage. The poor (πτωχός) are blessed, but woe to the rich (πλούσιος)! We have the same opposition in the hungry (participle of πεινάω) and the well fed (participle of ἐμπίπλημι) and again in those that weep (participle of κλαίω) against those that laugh (participle of γελάω).

The *fourth* text consists of only one verse namely Lk 7:22. In answer to the question of Johns disciples concerning the identity of Jesus he answers them as follows (NIV): 'Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.' Here we are presented with the concept of the good news (εὐαγγελίζω) to the poor (πτωχός) and all the other terms associated with people in need (τυφλός, χωλός, λεπρος, κωφός and νεκρός). In Luke we already had this term in Luke 4, but Belhar has not quoted it up to now.

In the *fifth* text we have the reversal motif for the third time. In Lk 1 Mary praises God for this reversal, in Lk 6 Jesus preaches it and in Lk 16:19-31 he tells a parable concerning this theme. The story is referring to a rich (πλούσιος again) man and Lazarus a poor (πτωχός again) man and how their 'fortunes' were changed after death.

The *last* text is Lk 4:16-19. This text is part of the pericope of 4:16-30 which scholars usually say functions in a programmatic way (Siker 1992: 75). Belhar only refers to the first part where Jesus reads from the scroll of Isaiah. The important concept of the 'gospel of the poor' (εὐαγγελίσασθαι πτωχοῖς) occurs here for the first time. We also find other important concepts like the 'prisoners' (αἰχμάλωτος) and the 'blind' (τυφλός).

In three of these texts (1: 46-55, 6:20-26 and 16:19-31) we have the theme of reversal. The relation between 4:16-19 and 7:22 is also clear since the latter is usually understood as confirmation of the first. The only problem here is that Belhar quotes 7:22 first and then 4:16-19. Why this is the case, is not clear. The other text is 2:14 which proclaims peace (εἰρήνη) to all humankind.

4.   How does Belhar interpret these texts from Luke?

It is important to remember that Belhar was written in a specific context. This specific context embodied a context of social injustice.[4] The Confession wanted to proclaim the Dutch Reformed Mission Church's vision of a different world and of their faith in a God who changes the world; a God who changes injustice into justice. Article 4 of Belhar starts with: 'We believe that God has revealed himself as the One who wishes to bring about *justice* and *true peace* among men ... ' The first three texts quoted in the margin are Dt 32:4, Lk 2:14, Jn 14:27 and Eph 2:14. Dt 32:4 is probably quoted for the term 'justice'[5] while the term 'peace' occurs in all three the NT passages (in all three instances the Greek εἰρηνη is used). This whole article is about a God who cares for the vulnerable. He is a God who has brought about justice and peace in the past and he asks his church to follow him in this (see 1.2 above). A society of justice and peace implies a place where the vulnerable are cared for.

This was how they probably understood εἰρήνη in Lk 2:14. For the same reason they probably quoted texts like the Magnificat, Lk 6:20-26 and the story of Lazarus. This is also why we find echoes of Lk 4:16-19 and Lk 7:22 in parts of the confession (see 1.3 and 1.4 above). Concerning the Magnificat Smit (1984: 147) writes that God is proclaimed as the one who wants to restore disproportioned relationships which includes social maladjustments. For people living under an oppressive system like Apartheid the Gospel of Luke offered hope and helped them to formulate a vision for what society should be like. They used these texts to proclaim that God cared for vulnerable people and that the salvation that Jesus offered included the changing of their unjust circumstances.

We indicated above that there is a movement in article 4 from theology to ethics. The texts from Luke would mostly fit into the first part. Other texts (like Amos 5, Isaiah 1 and James 1) were used to motivate the ethical appeal of the confession. *Thus the Gospel of Luke is used to make certain theological claims about the character of God.*

5.   Some important exegetical issues

Many commentaries, books and academic articles have been written on the Gospel of Luke. What follows is not a thorough exegetical study, but simply a *very* brief overview of a selection of the exegetical issues that one would find in some of the most important commentaries. The texts are not discussed in the order in which Belhar quotes them, but in their numerical order in the Gospel itself.

5.1   Luke 1:46-55

Of course a lot has been written on the Magnificat or the Song of Mary.[6] In terms of genre the song is usually regarded as a song of praise with some resemblance to the

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4.   See Smit (1984: 60-73) for a discussion on the content of this article. He describes how their vision for a just society grew in the Dutch Reformed Mission Church. This developed in the years of Apartheid when the members of the DRMC felt the brunt of an unjust society.

5.   See my discussion of the use of this text (Meyer 1998: 299-300).

6.   An issue that usually receives some attention is the text critical issue of verse 46, but most scholars would agree with the 'Mary' reading today (Marshall 1978: 78, Scheffler 1988: 44, Du Plessis 1995: 62).

canonical Psalter such as 33, 47, 48 and 113 (Fitzmeyr 1981: 359, Scheffler 1988: 48). The song of Hannah (1 Sam 2:1-10) is a suitable model in the OT for this song (Marshall 1978: 78, Fitzmeyr 1981: 359).[7] The song probably did not originate with Luke but was inserted by him, since it fits rather loosely into the current context (Fitzmeyr 1981: 359, Scheffler 1988: 44). There are many opinions as to its actual origin (see Scheffler 1988: 45).

According to Green (1997: 98) the Song of Mary functions as a pause in the narrative by means of which 'Luke is able to provide his readers with a foretaste of the salvific theme he will develop throughout Luke-Acts, …' Furthermore (1997: 101) the song is full of OT echoes[8] which 'clearly extend the activity of God celebrated by Mary far back into the past, making transparent the Lukan notion that what he is now narrating is continuous with that story.' Related to this is the fact that the fulfillment of prophecies and divine promises in the OT is an important theme in Luke (Johnson 1991: 43, Stein 1992: 95). One of the single most important themes in this song which most of the consulted commentaries accentuate, is the concept of reversal (Tannehill 1986: 29, Johnson 1991: 44, Stein 1992: 94-95, Green 1997: 104-105). As previously indicated, this concept is found in most of the quoted Lukan texts. Some scholars would argue that it is one of the most important themes in this Gospel (see Stein 1992: 49-50).

Tannehill (1986: 29) notes that the characterization of God forms an important part of this song. On the one hand he is the God of awesome power who does 'great things' and on the other hand he is the God of mercy who looks upon the lowest of servants, the humble and poor (Tannehill 1986: 29, Green 1997: 102). This is the character of the God who is praised in the Song of Mary and in the Confession of Belhar!

5.2 Luke 2:14

As previously indicated Belhar's interpretation of this verse implies a certain understanding of the Greek term εἰρήνη. Someone like Stein (1992: 109) would argue that εἰρήνη is a synonym for salvation and refers to the 'fullness of blessing which the Savior/Christ/Lord brings'. A scholar like Breytenbach (1994: 272, 277) would add that εἰρήνη refers to the person of the messiah who embodies God's 'ωλ{. Green (1997: 137) states that it 'meshes with hope for shalom, peace with justice, universal healing found in the Scriptures'. He continues to argue that the Isaianic (Is 52:7) hope of universal healing lies behind this text. According to him it is already clear in this verse that shalom is intended for the whole cosmos (καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς εἰρήνη) and not only for the select group of Israel.[9] The perception of salvation as being inclusive in Luke is important when discussing the next text.

5.3 Luke 4: 16-19

As already indicated this text is part of a much larger pericope namely 4:16-30.[10] It is generally accepted that this text, the first time Jesus speaks in public, functions in a programmatic way in Luke (Stein 1992: 153, Siker 1992: 75 and Bosch 1994: 100). Two

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7. From an OT perspective it is very unfortunate that Belhar does not quote this song. It would have been very appropriate.

8. These include the other hymns of praise like those by Moses (Exod 15:1-18), Miriam (Exod 15:19-21), Deborah (Judg 5:1-31), Asaph (1Chr 16:8-36), Judith (Jdt 16:1-17) and especially Hannah (1 Sam 2:1-10) (Green 1997: 101).

9. An important text critical issue is the whether the term should be a genitive or a nominative. For a discussion of these issues see, Fitzmeyr (1981: 411-412) or Kilpatrick (1988: 472-475).

10. It would have made more sense if they had at least quoted till the end of verse 20. Some scholars identify a chiastic structure in verse 16-20 which makes it a very logic unit (Siker 1992: 77, Du Plessis 1995: 147).

texts from Isaiah is quoted (Is 61:1-2 and Is 58:6) with the purpose of pointing out, that Isaiah's promises, are now fulfilled by Jesus (Fitzmeyr 1981: 532, Tannehill 1986: 64 and Siker 1992: 86). Green (1997:212) interprets Lk 4 in line with the traditions of Isaiah 58 and 61 and comes to the following conclusion:

> 'This interpretative tradition encourages a reading of Luke 4:18-19 as the announcement of the eschatological epoch of salvation, the time of God's gracious visitation with Jesus himself presented as its anointed herald.'

Thus Luke 4 is the introduction of a new epoch of God's salvation.[11] We already had hints of it in the Magnificat, but now Jesus himself proclaims it.

One of the main problems in this pericope is what the exact relationship is between 16-22 and 23-30. In the former it appears that Jesus is accepted, but in the latter he is clearly rejected. What has brought about this turn of events? Most scholars would identify the issue of inclusive salvation not only intended for the Jews but for Gentiles as well.[12] But this latter part is not quoted in the confession, although it might have been very relevant to the article on unity.

5.4   Luke 6:20-26

The salient feature or this text is once again the reversal theme (Stein 1992: 20, Bosch 1994: 100, Green 1997: 264). The sermon clearly continues this theme from Mary's song.[13] It is the second sermon by Jesus and is addressed to his disciples (Stein 1992: 197). It differs considerably from Matthew's sermon on the Mount[14] and consists of four beatitudes and four woes. Green (1997: 266) understands these beatitudes and woes as 'words of hope and comfort to people like those who have already been the recipients of Jesus' ministry: lepers, sinners, the demonized, toll collectors, women, and so on.' In other words the social outcasts of that world.

An important issue is of course what is understood by the 'poor'. Stein (1992: 200) argues that the poor 'has more of a theological than an economical sense here'.[15] Tannehill (1986: 208) thinks that poor refers to economically 'poor' and so does Scheffler (1988: 57-60), while Green (1997: 267) describes 'rich' and 'poor' as 'socially defined constructs'. I think that Belhar interpreted 'poor' along the same lines as offered by Tannehill, Scheffler and Green. Green's concept of 'marginalised' would also be very relevant here (1997: 267).[16]

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11. A scholar like Scheffler (1988: 57-108) would argue that salvation in Luke has many dimensions, which includes economic, social, political, physical, psychological and spiritual. In Lk 4: 16-30 he detects economic, physical, psychological, spiritual and political dimensions (1988: 39-42).

12. Some would say it is because Jesus left out the part on revenge from Isaiah 61:2 (Bosch 1994: 110). Siker (1992: 89-90) argues that Jesus takes the initiative in the narrative and turns the expected interpretation of Isaiah on its head. He calls it the 'reversal' by Jesus at Nazareth meaning that the priority of the Gentile mission (and thus inclusive salvation) is accentuated from the outset in the Gospel of Luke. See also the discussion by Tannehill (1986: 68-73) and Green (1997: 215-219) on the inclusive salvation proclaimed by Jesus and the negative response from the Jews because of their exclusive view.

13. Tannehill (1986: 208) points out that one finds the same vocabulary here as in 1:53.

14. See Marshall (1978: 246-247), Fitzmeyr (1981: 627-632) or Stein (1992: 197-199) for a thorough discussion on the differences and similarities.

15. See also Nielsen (1979: 182) who argues that it refers to people with an attitude of openness towards God. He does not think that there is much difference between Luke's 'poor' and Matthew's 'poor of spirit'.

16. See also another discussion by him (Green 1995: 84-94) of this concept.

5.5 Luke 7:22

In 7:22 it is emphasized that the programme that Jesus implemented in 4:16-20 is running. Once again we find echoes of the Isaianic tradition (Fitzmeyr 1981: 667, Tannehill 1986: 66 and Green 1997: 296-297). What God promised in the OT, what Mary was praising God for in her song and what Jesus announced in 4:16-20 has started and has become a reality.

5.6 Luke 16: 19-31

In last Lukan text quoted in Belhar, we have the reversal theme once more. Now it not sung, or preached of, but it is illustrated in a parable. This song has often been compared with folk tales from the ancient Near East where the reversal motive is also apparent.[17] I have already indicated that we find the repetition of the term 'poor' (πτωχός) and 'rich' (πλούσιος). The parable is about a rich man and a poor man whose fortunes change after death.

Most scholars (i.e. Fitzmeyr 1985: 1125, Stein 1992: 410 and Green 1997: 586-588) interpret this parable along with the rest of chapter 16. The main theme is possessions and wealth and this parable functions as a conclusion.[18] It is also usually accepted that Pharisees are still addressed in this chapter and that this parable is specifically directed at them. They are meant to identify with the rich man. It is clear that this pericope continues the themes already identified in the previous quoted pericopes.

6. Conclusion

To a certain extent this article has stated the obvious. It is obvious that people living in a context of social injustice would focus on texts that proclaim a God of justice, a God that wants to change injustice into justice. It is also obvious that the reversal theme in the Gospel of Luke would offer some comfort for oppressed people. The sensitivity that we find in these texts for marginalised people would also make them a must for this confession.

Furthermore, Belhar does not quote texts in a haphazard manner that have no relation to each other. It is clear that these texts are representative of a very important theme in the Gospel of Luke. The majority of scholars in this field have identified this theme as well. The authors of this confession, however, did take the interpretation of these texts one step further. They applied it to their current context of injustice. In their context (in 1982) they proclaimed theological statements concerning God's character and they rejected ideologies of injustice. It would be possible to describe this mode of interpretation as 'resistance'. These statements about God were actually proclaimed in defiance and rejection of the then current state theology (i.e. apartheid). In these interpretations was resistance. The resistance was directed at an unjust system. But there was also a lot compassion, hope and comfort in these interpretations for the people that suffered under this unjust system. What better texts are there to resist and to comfort that these texts from Luke proclaiming a reversal by a caring just God?

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17. H. Gressman has identified a specific folk tale from Egypt in 1912 as the source of this parable (see Marshall 1978: 633 and Bauckham 1991: 225-226). The story of Setme and his son Si-Osiris has often been compared with the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. There are also Jewish versions of the story (Bauckham 1991: 226-331). Bauckham (1991: 229) questions the idea that the Egyptian story was the source. He argues that one finds these 'folkloric motifs' in many ancient stories and that is not possible to determine a specific tale as origin.

18. Green (1997: 586) discusses this chapter under the heading: 'Kingdom Economics'.

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