

PARADIGM CHANGES IN THE BIBLE SCIENCES AND THE TEACHING OF BIBLICAL STUDIES IN THE NEW SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

In 1991 a paper was read by Professor Canaan Banana of Zimbabwe in which he called upon biblical scholars to rewrite the Bible in order to make it more relevant to the people of Africa of the twentieth century. He substantiated this call by arguing that the Bible could easily be used by some to oppress others when we ignore the fact that it is the product of humans. This article endeavours to support Banana's call, indicating that since the Reformation three paradigm changes have occurred in the field of Biblical Studies. These changes led to a new understanding of how the Bible came into being and how it should be read and applied to our circumstances. There is no need to rewrite the Bible if cognisance is taken of these paradigm shifts. Biblical scholars should ensure that these shifts are reflected in the new curricula of Religious Education and Biblical Studies in post-apartheid South Africa.

1. Introduction

The viewpoint of Thomas Kuhn (1970) that growth in scientific knowledge does not take place through accumulation, but by means of revolutions, exerted a stimulating influence on various disciplines. Theology is one such area. Both Hans Kueng (1984a, 1984b) as well as Wentzel van Huyssteen (1983, 1987:63-87) indicated convincingly that systematic theology (dogmatics) also reflects such revolutions and therefore paradigms and paradigm changes are also encountered within this discipline. With regard to the Bible Sciences, a number of local Old and New Testament scholars have endeavoured to indicate paradigms and paradigm changes. The late Willem Vorster (1987:375, 1988:32) mentioned a pre-critical, a critical and a post-critical paradigm in the area of New Testament studies, while Bernard Lategan (1984:3-4, 1988:73) also distinguishes three paradigms. However, he links this to the communications model (author -- text -- reader). In his inaugural lecture in 1988 Philip Nel paid attention to 'the new paradigm' (the theory of the literature paradigm) and pointed out that this paradigm has influenced the study of biblical texts since the seventies. However, he neglected to circumscribe clearly the paradigm which preceded the theory of literature. He only mentions 'the dogmatic paradigm' (Nel 1988:3, 6), but he does not explain its origin and why a new paradigm emerged.

A decade before the above-mentioned Bible scholars, the American, David Robertson (1977) referred to four paradigm changes which can be distinguished in the reading of the Tanakh/Old Testament. He (1977:4) expressed himself as follows on this matter:

The first occurred when the Jewish people began to read it [the Tanakh] not simply as diverse writings in Hebrew but as scripture, as writings which, when taken as a whole, represent a canon of religious doctrine and practice. The second happened when Christians read it not as Jewish but as Christian scripture. The third, the shift brought about by modern critical investigation of the Bible, represented in one way a return to the first point of view, the Old Testament as applied writings in Hebrew; the new element was the study of it according to the criteria of critical historiography. Reading it as literature is now another and fourth major paradigm shift.

Thus the abovementioned Bible scholars are not in agreement about the different paradigm changes which took place. Moreover, no attention has been given as to how the paradigm changes impact on peoples' understanding of the Bible. It is for this reason that I provide a brief historical survey of the paradigm changes which have already occurred since the Reformation in the area of the Bible sciences. Thereafter I shall proceed to discuss the different outlook on the Bible which resulted from these. In my opinion we may learn something of value from this for the teaching of Bible and Religious Education in the *New South Africa*.

2. Brief historical survey of paradigm changes since the Reformation

There are a number of historical surveys on the study of the Bible since the Reformation (cf i a Greenslade 1963; Kraeling 1969; Kraus 1988; Rogerson, Rowland & Lindars 1988), but none were written on the basis of the insights of Kuhn (1970). When one studies the history of research of the Old and New Testaments since the Reformation, then, in my opinion, three clear paradigm changes can be identified (cf Spangenberg 1994).

2.1 The first paradigm change

The paradigm change which took place during the Reformation is sometimes described by the statement: 'The reformers dethroned the pope and enthroned the Bible' (Bainton 1963:1). However, this is a misleading circumscription of this revolution, since the Roman Catholic Church also accepted the authority of the Bible. The revolution was only situated in the fact that the Reformers accepted that the individual can also be a legitimate interpreter of the Bible. It was simply not so that only popes and councils could claim the guidance of the Spirit and therefore interpret the Bible correctly (cf Bainton 1963:4); the individual believer can also claim the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In order to support their viewpoint on this matter, the Reformers emphasised the clarity of Scripture and furthermore asserted that believers need not

turn to all kinds of devices of understanding (for example the fourfold meaning of Scripture) in order to interpret the Bible. The historico-literal way of interpretation and the guidance of the Holy Spirit is sufficient for a correct understanding of Scripture.

2.2 The second paradigm change

The paradigm change brought about by the Reformation had hardly taken place, when a number of crises (cf Kuhn 1970:66-91) arose which seriously threatened this paradigm.

The first crisis came about with the Copernican revolution. The point of departure of the Reformers, just as that of contemporary Roman Catholic theologians, was the presupposition that the cosmology based on biblical data was fixed, namely that the earth stood still and that the sun revolves. This presupposition was challenged when Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) propounded the viewpoint of Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543), namely that the earth revolves around the sun, no longer as a hypothesis, but as a fact. Those who espoused the new ideas were condemned because they (according to the prevailing interpretation) relegated the Holy Spirit to a liar and undermined the authority of the Scripture (cf Scholder 1990:55). After all it was the Holy Spirit who caused the Bible writers to write that the earth stood still while the sun revolves around it (cf Jos 10:12-13, Ec 1:4-5). This new theory did not only affect the Protestant view of Scripture, but also the Roman Catholic view. Scripture was also authoritative to Roman Catholicism, and for this reason they condemned Galileo Galilei (cf Spangenberg 1993:121-123).

A second crisis was caused by the philosophy of Renè Descartès (1596-1650). He introduced a new way of thinking with his view that man can doubt everything except the fact that it is he who doubts. By means of this statement he wanted to stress that man can only obtain certainty about a matter by means of his reason. In this way Descartes created a new concept of truth. Truth was no longer that which was guaranteed by one or other institution of authority, but that which is very clear to reason (cf Scholder 1990:111-113). Church traditions and viewpoints were challenged since reason could doubt everything -- even the truths that were formulated on the basis of the Bible.

Church circles reacted fiercely against this philosophy. Some theologians asserted emphatically that they would rather err along with Scripture than adhere to these new ideas (cf Scholder 1990:120). Protestant orthodoxy is an example of this counter reaction and in Kuhnian terms, one may say that the Orthodoxy attempted to formulate rules to protect the biblical scientific paradigm of the Reformation (cf Kuhn 1970:47, Van Huyssteen 1983:304).

The third crisis emerged when scholars developed a stronger historical consciousness during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They began to ask all kinds of questions about history and historiography, and shortly a revolution began to take place in the area of historiography (cf Richardson 1964:47-49, Krentz 1975:22-30). Soon it was clear that the chronology drawn up on the basis of biblical data (viz Adam was the first person and creation took place 4 004 years B C E) just did not agree with new discoveries and opinions. Furthermore, the principles

according to which historical documents were evaluated, were now also applied to the Bible and this had serious implications for theology. Edgar Krentz summarises this revolution: 'The Bible was no longer the criterion for the writing of history; rather history became the criterion for understanding the Bible' (1975:30). The realisation that the Bible books were written by people who had a different culture and maintained other religious convictions, gradually increased.

On account of these crises a new paradigm emerged: the historical critical paradigm. Several biblical scholars began to work on the basis of this paradigm, but were however, often accused of heresy and condemned. (The following scholars can be mentioned in this regard: John William Colenso [1863], William Robertson Smith [1881], Charles Augustus Briggs [1890], J G Geelkerken [1926] en Johannes J du Plessis [1930].) In the course of time churches began to accept this paradigm and reformulated their dogmatic grounds for the authority of Scripture (cf the working document of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands: *God met ons* [God with us], 1981).

2.3 The third paradigm change

Since the seventies a new paradigm in the area of the Bible sciences announced itself (Nel 1988:1, Powell 1992:14). This paradigm is linked to the modern science of literature and the paradigm changes which took place in this area. In the modern science of literature the emphasis moved from the author to the text and eventually to the reader (Powell 1992:6). Old and New Testament scholars found these shifts sufficiently interesting to apply to the biblical texts. Literature scientists themselves produced publications in which they applied new insights to the biblical texts (cf Jauss 1985; Graube 1986a, 1986b, 1990). It was therefore not on account of a failure on the part of the historical critical method, but because they realised that the historical approach is not the only approach to literature (cf Powell 1992:14). Presently scholarly journals literally teem with articles in which newer insights are applied to the literature of the Bible. Articles with headings in which words and phrases appear such as 'narratological analysis', 'a rhetorical analysis', 'deconstruction', 'intertextuality', 'reception-critical approach', are no longer strange (cf Powell 1992).

3. A changing view of the Bible

In his discussions of paradigm changes in the area of the natural sciences, Kuhn (1970:52-65, 111-135) points out that these changes are usually connected to the fact that researchers obtain a different perspective on matters. Like their colleagues, they study the same matter, and yet they simply see it differently. A 'Gestalt switch' took place. The Copernican revolution aptly illustrates this change in outlook. Astronomers who accepted this change in viewpoint, simply described the earth and its moon differently from their colleagues who did not accept it. They all studied the same objects, but some observed them from a different viewpoint. To some the earth was the center around which the moon and the sun revolves, whilst to others earth was merely a planet with a moon which revolves around the sun.

The paradigm changes in the area of the Bible sciences mentioned above can also be described in terms of the changes in the outlook on the Bible. During the phase of the Reformation the Bible was considered as a text which comes from God whereby God reveals himself -- for this reason the Bible was referred to as the Word of God. As time passed it became apparent that these texts were written by people. Some researchers transferred the revelation of God to the history behind the text. According to them the authors of the Bible books merely related revelations in history. Since developments in the area of religion could not be denied, some preferred to speak of an ongoing revelation of God in history and stated that we have God's word in human language. Presently, various scholars accept that the Bible is a collection of religious texts in which different peoples' reflection about God was deposited. What we do have in the Bible are different viewpoints, opinions and statements about God. These religious texts may be read as ordinary literature and we may discuss and analyse the different characters in the biblical story, the way they are portrayed and their relationship with one another. We may even look upon God as a character and discuss his portrayal in a specific narrative (cf Nel 1988:12, Oosthuizen 1989).

In summary, the changed view may be presented as follows: Bible scholars who work within the paradigm of the Reformation see the Bible as the Word of God; Bible scholars who work within the framework of the historical critical approach view the Bible as God's word in human language, and Bible scholars working from within the third paradigm (linked to modern literary theory) view the Bible as words about God.

4. Consequences for the teaching of Biblical Studies as Religious Education

Professor Canaan Banana (1993) in a paper already read in 1991 in Zimbabwe, made a plea that the Bible should be rewritten. This plea set the cat among the (theological) pigeons in Zimbabwe (cf Mukonyora, Cox & Verstraelen 1993:x-xiii). He made a number of statements which are also relevant for Biblical Studies and Religious Education in the *New South Africa*. I am of the opinion that his paper and my exposition of paradigm changes in Biblical Studies have a number of things in common and therefore I wish to discuss a number of these.

4.1 Should we rewrite the Bible?

Banana's arguments why the Bible should be rewritten are clearly directed against viewpoints and opinions related to the first paradigm, namely that the Bible is the infallible Word of God. There are still many Christians in our day which cherish this view about the Bible and who want to substantiate their viewpoint simply by means of one or other verse from the Bible. Banana (1993:23), among others, refers to the role of the woman in modern society as something affected by this view of Scripture when he says the following:

The Bible has been and continues to be used to relegate women to a second class status in society, overlooking the liberating themes in the gospels in favour of the neo-legalism of Paul...

The Bible, moreover, frequently is quoted to keep major church bodies from ordaining women into professional ministry. Statements such as Paul's to the Corinthians exemplify this.

When the Bible is used in this manner, it becomes an instrument for suppression and not for liberation. According to him it is important that people should realise that the Bible contains human writings and the canonisation of the books of the Bible were the result of human decisions (cf Banana 1993:24). Therefore, we should not ascribe higher authority to the Bible books than what they themselves claim. To refer to the Bible as 'divinely inspired' and a 'holy book' is to exalt it to a unassailable position. Therefore he also says: 'To suggest that the Bible is the sole source of God's revelation limits God and God's potential in the continuing creation of the world' (Banana 1993:18).

I would reinterpret Banana's plea as a plea that people should take the second and third paradigm shifts in the area of the Bible sciences seriously. After all it was these shifts that made people realise that the Bible is a human book. Rather: that the Bible consists of books written by people and which reflect people's convictions of faith. A year or so ago in a paper on the teaching of the Old Testament, Ferdinand Deist (1993:22) expressed some ideas which are surprisingly close to those of Banana, when he maintained :

We shall have to make major adjustments in our theological hermeneutics if we want to really serve our society. To begin with, we shall have to move away from this overemphasis on dead texts to a more thorough understanding of the vibrant religious world to which these texts witness and the living religious views transmitted by them. We shall have to place much more emphasis on the process than on the product. This will not only bring our approach to Old Testament studies in line with the common hermeneutic of the community in which we live, it will help protect us from the dangers inherent in the 'proof text' method of theologising so popular in this country and in which the Bible also functions as some sort of oracular fetish (my emphasis).

In my opinion, we cannot deny that the kind of Biblical Studies and Religious Education which children received at school in the *Old South Africa* propagated the view that the Bible is God's infallible word. The notion which children received at school and still receive, is that the Bible is an exalted book and it may be opened at any place to hear God speaking. Points of view and statements are still often substantiated by means of the phrase: 'the Bible says...' -- as if God directly, by means of Bible verses, provides answers to problems and questions we are wrestling with as twentieth century people.

In the *New South Africa* we shall have to teach children to realise that the Bible consists of religious literature and that this literature did not originate in a different way from any other (religious) literature. We shall have to teach them that these are human interpretations. Some authors tried to provide answers and guidelines to fellow believers (cf Paul's letters), from their religious perspective and from within their frame of reference and world view. Others again, told stories in order to provide meaning to life and to sustain faith in God (cf Ruth and Job). Still others told

historical narratives in order to criticise or to justify political dispensations (cf e.g. the Succession Narrative: 2 Sm 9-20; 1 Ki 1-2). These narratives, stories, guidelines and so on, are important to us as Christians, because they can provide us with incentives for our reflection on and worship of God (cf Snyman 1992:81-82). We sometimes have intense experiences of joy and gratitude; we stand amazed and astounded at life; we also experience feelings of guilt and feelings of powerlessness and defenselessness; are often dismayed at the transience of our existence, or we are overwhelmed by sorrow. These and similar experiences call for the attribution of religious significance or interpretation (cf Vroom 1992:9-10) and the Bible texts may facilitate in this process -- not because they are inspired, but because they can inspire (cf Smith 1992:62).

4.2 Interreligious dialogue and the mystery of God

In his plea that the Bible should be rewritten, Canaan Banana also pleads that the religious interpretations of the people in Asia, Africa, Europe, the Caribbean Islands and Latin America should not be wiped off the table without further ado. The Christian religion should take these peoples' experiences and interpretations into account. After all God did not leave himself without testimony among them, and therefore he says: 'Nothing can be lost by studying how these peoples perceived and worshipped God in their own individual circumstances with the view of drawing from their rich heritage to broaden our understanding of God's activity in human history' (Banana 1993:21).

In the *New South Africa* we shall have to teach our children to respect other people and their religious convictions. Hennie Aucamp (1994:54) makes a terse and pithy comment, when he says:

Wie met 'n ateïs spot, kom 'n medemens te na.

Elke mens het reg op sy soort geloof.

He who with an atheist mocks, offends a fellow human being.

Everyone has the right to their own kind of faith (my translation).

The suggestions of the Independent Forum for Religion in Public Education seems to indicate that the current presentation of Biblical Studies and Religious Education may change at school. In my opinion we cannot deny that Biblical Studies and Religious Education in the *Old South Africa* were primarily aimed at propagating the Protestant form of Christianity and moreover, primarily that form which cherished the first paradigm; namely that the Bible is the Word of God (cf 2.1). Few children obtained an ecumenical perspective of Christianity or encountered viewpoints which were connected to the second paradigm (that is, the Bible is God's word in human language, 2.2). Afrikaans schools were expected to produce good Reformed children. In future schools will be expected to produce children who have learnt to live a meaningful life in a country with a diversity of cultures and religions. The Bible can definitely help us in this endeavour if we realise that it is the product of a long process of origination. The Bible did not originate in one day, but over ages -- for this reason it reflects different conceptions about God (cf Lehmann-Habeck 1993:57). In my opinion, the Bible wants to teach us that the secret of God cannot be formulated by

one generation. Furthermore, people use the Bible wrongly when they use it to '*crush the mystery of God with tongue and tooth into a vomit of statements and decrees*' (my translation of the words of Elizabeth Eybers: '*die geheim van God met tong en tand verbrysel tot 'n braaksel van stellings en dekrete*', cf Wessels 1993:286).

The Bible consists of a treasure of religious literature that invites us to reflect further on the mystery of God and to worship him, along with others, in reverence.

5. A word in conclusion

The *New South Africa* confronts us with tremendous challenges. In my opinion we shall be able to assist our children in making the necessary adaptations if we also take the paradigm changes seriously which have already taken place in the area of the Bible sciences. If we do not heed these changes, our children are doomed to repeat the errors of their parents.

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