
SCRIPTURE AND CONTEXT.

The use of the exodus theme in the hermeneutics of liberation theology.

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Abstract

In the first part of this paper, liberation theology's use of Marxist analysis in its programme of ideology critique is briefly discussed. It is argued that Althusser's development of Marxist theory can help to elucidate liberation theology's hermeneutic position. Subsequently the discussion concentrates on the understanding of the exodus theme that is generated by this hermeneutic stance. Particular attention is paid to the thought of Croatto. Finally the paper poses the question of whether our respective ideological commitments still allow for meaningful discussion between Christians. It is suggested that Scripture, as the canon of the church, should be allowed to exercise a critical function over against our hermeneutical commitments.

What hermeneutical criteria clarify (endorse or refute) the use of the exodus narrative by anti-Sandinista 'contras' in the Honduras, who see the Rio Coco as the Jordan they must cross to reoccupy the land given to them by God but taken away by the Sandinistas? (Stam 1986:177)

The above quotation was one of the questions asked by a study group on exodus during a conference on 'context and hermeneutics in the Americas' held in Cuernavaca, Mexico, in November 1983. It goes to the heart of liberation theology's concern that Scripture, in this case the exodus narrative, should speak a meaningful and relevant word to the concrete situation of oppression and disenfranchisement that is experienced by so many people, not only in Latin America but pertinently, amongst other places, also in South Africa.

In this paper I intend to focus on Latin American liberation theology, and especially on the thought of certain leading exponents of this movement such as Gutierrez, Bonino, Segundo, Miranda and especially Croatto. This is therefore by no means an exhaustive analysis, although I believe that the salient points that emerge from such an analysis are relevant to similar forms of liberation theology in other parts of the

world. References to liberation theology in this paper should therefore be understood against this background.

1. The hermeneutics of liberation theology

1.1 A contextual hermeneutic

Sundermeier has remarked that Black Theology does not belong to the theological discipline of exegesis but rather to that of hermeneutics (Bosch 1974:112). This remark applies equally well to liberation theology. A major concern of liberation theology is, in the words of Nunez (1977:343), 'to provide a theology which they trust will serve as the base for the 'liberation of oppressed peoples'. In order to do this it is claimed that a redefinition of the meaning of theology from within the context of liberation is required (Assmann 1975:57). 1

As an essential correction to the traditional emphasis on 'orthodoxy' by the church, emphasis is now placed on the necessity of 'orthopraxis' Gutierrez 1974:10). 2

This decisive epistemological change lies at the basis of Segundo's well-known book on the 'liberation of theology', in which he takes over the concept of the 'hermeneutic circle' that was elaborated by Bultmann as the method of interpreting the Scriptures, and claims to give it a more consistent application than the latter (Segundo 1976:8). This aspect of Segundo's thought has been the object of extensive discussion and needs no further elaboration here (cf Segundo 1976:9, Wells 1981:28-29).

Liberation theology shares Bultmann's emphasis on the primary importance of the present situation in all Scriptural interpretation (Wells 1981:27-28). What is decisively new, however, is that liberation theology addresses completely different questions to the modern situation than Bultmann did. The meaning of the Bible for modern man does not unfold itself via the philosophy of Heidegger, but via the question of poverty and the critical analysis of societal structures (Herzog 1974: 400).

Segundo's 'hermeneutic circle' provides a handy basis for the ensuing discussion, which must attempt to understand (i) liberation theology's use of Marxist analysis as a tool for ideology critique, (ii) the criticism of traditional methods of exegesis that this implies, and (iii) the understanding of the exodus theme, and especially Exodus 1-15, that is generated by this new hermeneutic approach.

1. Gutierrez (1974:29) himself refers to the 'epistemological break' brought about by Marx, namely that the ability 'to know is indissolubly linked to the transformation of the world through work'.

2. A useful discussion of what liberation theology understands under the term 'praxis' can be found in Mackie (1978:32-33).

1.2 Marxist analysis as ideology critique

It is an essential part of liberation theology's hermeneutic programme to engage in ideology critique, and specifically in the 'identification of the ideological frameworks of interpretation implicit in a given religious praxis' (Bonino 1986:350). It is for this purpose that liberation theology makes use of the critical tools of Marxian analysis (Bonino 1986: 348).

Because the use of Marxist analysis by liberation theology has been frequently discussed, I will pay particular attention in this section to some aspects of Althusser's development of Marxist theory. My specific interest lies in the contribution that his thought may make to the clearer formulation of liberation theology's hermeneutic position.

It is significant to note that Segundo (1976:58-61) points to two negative factors that, in his opinion, impede the possibility of collaboration between Marxist sociology and liberation theology. In the first place, he refers to what he regards as an inconsistency in Marx's thought, namely the conception that religion is nothing but an error. This representation of religion is contradictory to another concept of religion that Segundo claims to find in Marx, namely that corrected and improved, just as the state would be, religion would seem to have a role compatible with the revolutionary process- at least with its early stages'. (Segundo 1976:58-59). Needless to say, Segundo finds the official interpretation that has been given to Marx's concept of religion incompatible with a theology that seeks to play an effective role in the liberation of the oppressed.

The second flaw in official Marxist sociology is that it proceeds from economic determinism, in that it assumes that economic factors are the sole determining element of societal structures. ³ Because the relative autonomy of the superstructural levels is not recognized, the ability of these levels, including religion, to hinder the process of liberation is not appreciated.

Despite Segundo's reservations concerning the deficiencies of classic Marxism, one can agree with Leech (1981:258) when he remarks that the choice for Segundo remains between two ways of doing theology, namely 'theology as an academic profession, versus theology as a revolutionary activity'. ⁴ It is precisely because of this that the question of an adequate methodology is so crucial to liberation theology.

In my opinion Latin American liberation theology may benefit from some of the methodological insights that have been developed by materialistic exegesis, a

3. Segundo (1976:60) believes that Marx did not proceed from a rigid economic determinism. While he regarded economic factors as the ultimately determining factor, they were not the only determining element.

4. It is important to note that the concept of 'revolutionary praxis' has a variable content for differing Marxist groups. For Latin American Marxists it has a broad connotation, referring to 'any activity aimed at political, economic and social liberation, at the overcoming of alienation and oppression and at the creation of a new man in a new society' (Mackie 1978:33).

movement that has emerged under the seminal influence of three European scholars, Belo, Clévenot and Casalis (Füssel 1983:134). It appears that the aims and concerns of the groups that are engaged in this type of exegesis are the same as those of similar groups in Latin America (Füssel 1983:138). Zuurmond (1978:114) goes as far as linking materialistic exegesis not only to the concerns of critical congregations and base-groups in Southern Europe, but also to those of similar groups in Latin America. 5)

However true this may be, it does seem as if materialistic exegesis has worked out a more comprehensive methodology in which insights from Marxist analysis and from literary structuralism are employed (Füssel 1983:134; Zuurmond 1978:109). In my opinion, materialistic exegesis finds a partial solution to the deficiencies in classic Marxist sociology that Segundo points out, by appealing to French Marxism from the school of Althusser (Zuurmond 1978:109). For this reason I propose to discuss briefly Althusser's views on the ideological apparatus of the state, because this can help us to understand what liberation theologians mean when they point to the ideological function of religion.

Althusser's distinctive contribution to the development of Marxian thinking lies in the theory of the state. Accepting the traditional distinction in Marxist theory between the power of the state and the apparatus of the state, Althusser argues that a further distinction should be made, namely between the repressive apparatus and the ideological apparatus of the state. The repressive apparatus mainly manifests itself in public forms, and it only has a secondary ideological function. The ideological apparatus, however, extends to various private forms of life, such as the church, family and school, and functions to support the dominant ideology of the ruling class (Althusser 1976:93-101).

It is the primary function of the ideological apparatus of the state, assisted by the repressive apparatus, to ensure the reproduction of the relationships of production, something which is essential to the continued existence of any social formation (Althusser 1976:82,101-103). The ideological apparatus achieves this, claims Althusser, by providing people with an 'imaginary' representation of their relationship to the real conditions of existence. He thus differs from Marx who describes an ideology as providing an imaginary representation of the actual conditions of existence, or relationships of production (Althusser 1976:114-117).

Althusser illustrates this process by referring to the Christian religious ideology. In the first place there is the One, Unique, Absolute Subject (in this case God), who calls to Himself a vast number of subjects. This Subject addresses the subjects through the whole system of Christian rituals and traditions, to assure them that in assuming their assigned place in the world they are in fact being obedient to the call of God (Althusser 1976:129-130).

5. Contrary to what Zuurmond states, groups engaged in a materialistic reading of the Bible are found all over Western Europe. It is interesting that in the Romance-language countries this movement has primarily taken root amongst lay groups, while in the German-speaking countries it is promoted by university-based groups (Füssel 1983: 134-135, 139).

Now it is important to note that Althusser (1976:133) points to a certain ambiguity in the term 'subject'. On the one hand, this term refers to a centre of initiatives that is responsible for its own acts. On the other hand, it denotes a submissive being, stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission. Thus the functioning of the Christian religious ideology can be described as a process by which people are called to become (free) subjects so that they can freely accept their submission, and see it as their divinely designated lot. All of this, of course, has the effect of securing the continuation of the relationships of production, and therefore the continued existence of the particular social order! (Althusser 1976:134).

The preceding discussion paints a very negative picture of ideology. Althusser however rejects the illusion, which seems to have been part of an earlier phase in Marx's thought, that ideologies can be rendered redundant with the help of science. Science can only help one to articulate one's ideological position clearly! (Althusser 1976:127; Kossen 1981:159). This means that the commitment to some or other ideological position is inescapable. For Althusser, contends Kossen (1981:159), the choice lies between the acceptance of the dominant ideology or the commitment to the proletarian ideology which seeks to call people to engage in a liberative praxis.

Kossen proceeds to draw out the positive possibilities that he believes are inherent in Althusser's concept of ideology, by comparing it to Breukelmann's view of 'history' as a theological concept. He argues that it is possible to synthesize these two concepts into what he calls a 'Messianic ideology'. In this 'ideology' people are called to become subjects by participating in the liberating history of God, and by breaking decisively with the dominant ideology with its inherent continuation of the oppressive structures (Kossen 1981:160-164).

The value of this outline of some of Althusser's views, as well as the interesting thesis on a 'Messianic ideology' presented by Kossen, is, as was previously mentioned, that it helps to throw liberation theology's stance on ideology into clear relief. I am not suggesting that Latin American Liberation theology consciously works with Althusser's model. Segundo (1976:61), for instance, makes only a passing reference to Althusser as one scholar who has a more satisfactory appreciation of the role of the ideological superstructure than Marx himself.

The point is that Althusser's powerful analysis of the ideological function of religion helps us to understand why Segundo (1976:25) can vehemently reject 'a certain type of academism which posits ideological neutrality as the ultimate criterion'. A theology that fails to understand the ideological mechanisms of established society, warns Segundo (1976:39), will degenerate into a mere spokesman of the status quo. At the same time, however, the possibility that the term ideology can be used in a positive sense helps us to understand how Segundo (1976:98-102) can maintain that faith must necessarily manifest itself in the choice for an ideology, which can help one to participate effectively in the revolutionary process. The development of this liberating ideology will receive further attention in the ensuing discussion of liberation theology's use of the exodus theme.

1.3 Implications for biblical exegesis

Croatto criticizes traditional exegesis for working with an 'explicatio - applicatio' model of scriptural interpretation. He rejects the belief that 'correct' exegesis must start from some type of 'disinterested' or 'objective' explanation (explicatio) of Scripture, which is performed by the historical-critical method, and which is then followed by its application (applicatio) to the present situation (Kirk 1979:77).

It is important to note that liberation theologians do not deny the validity of the historical-critical method as such. Bonino (1986:356) emphasizes the necessity of this critical approach for gaining access to the text, and insights of a historical-critical nature are freely used by scholars such as Croatto and Miranda.

What liberation theology criticizes is the fact that the practitioners of historical-critical exegesis have adhered to the ideal of an 'objective exegesis, which by virtue of its detachment is unable, or unwilling, to draw out the implications of the biblical text for contemporary society (Fiorenza 1986:365). The effect of this is that historical-critical exegesis can appeal to its 'scientific' approach in order to conceal the fact that it is mainly used in terms of the interests of the *status quo* (Herzog 1974:392-393).

Liberation theologians dismiss this facade of objectivity and demand that all exegetes should admit their ideological commitment. Segundo (1976:7) launches a scathing attack on Schillebeeckx for appearing to 'hold the naive belief that the word of God is applied to human realities inside some antiseptic laboratory that is totally immune to the ideological tendencies and struggles of the present day'. There can be no hope for any positive discussion with liberation theology if we are not prepared to face the issue of our ideological commitment honestly and openly.

2. The exodus theme in liberation theology

While it is my intention to focus on Exodus 1-15 and the way in which especially Croatto understands the event and its interpretation, I think it is important to note the concern of liberation theologians that the impact of this event on the rest of Scripture should be appreciated. Croatto himself traces the unfolding of the meaning of the exodus through the creation account, prophecy, Christ and Paul. What is more, he provides clearly formulated hermeneutical considerations for this whole process.

The same kind of endeavour, although less well formulated, can be found in the works of Gutierrez and Miranda. The theme of creation is understood in the light of the pivotal, primary fact that Yahweh is the liberator God (Miranda 1974:77-78,89; Gutierrez 1974:153-154).⁶ For Gutierrez (1974:158), the 'memory of the Exodus' pervades the Old and New Testament. Liberation from exploitation and oppression

6. Gutierrez (1974:154-155) refers to creation as part of the salvific process, while Miranda (1974:77-78) emphasizes the fact that the depiction of the liberator God as the creator lends a tremendous force to his demands for justice.

lies at the heart of the formation of Israel to be God's holy nation which is entrusted with the mission of establishing justice in the world.

The 'eschatological horizon', remarks Gutierrez (1974: 157), 'is present in the heart of the Exodus', and it is this that leads Israel forward to establish a just society in the promised land. It is this theme that pervades the eschatological message of the prophets and makes it impossible to divorce the expectation of the kingdom of peace from the transformation of unjust social structures (Gutierrez 1974:160-168). In a similar way, the work of Christ must be understood as a complete liberation from sin which is a social fact and which is evident in oppressive structures. The salvation that Christ brings is a gift that frees man to work for a new society characterized by complete communion of men with God and of men among themselves (Gutierrez 1974:163-178).

In similar vein, Miranda (1974:78) contends that 'the intention of saving from injustice and oppression is the determinant of the entire description which Yahweh makes of himself'. The programmatic formula 'I am Yahweh', is presented as the basis for God's liberating intervention from Egyptian bondage by the priestly tradition in Exodus 6:6-8 (Miranda 1974:78). It is this crucial fact that Yahweh is the only saviour that is pointed to by Hosea, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and which forms the basis of his response to the cry of his oppressed people in Deutero-Isaiah. Here as well the central concern of Yahweh's epiphany, condensed in the formula 'I am Yahweh', is for justice (Miranda 1974:81-88).

The Yahwistic formulation of God's decisive intervention in Exodus 3:7-9 presents Yahweh's commitment to wipe out structures of oppression -sin- not only in the life of Israel but also in the world (Miranda 1974:88-89). This is the concern of Yahweh not only in the Yahwistic narratives (cf especially Gen.18:17-33), but also in the Psalms, and on into the New Testament (Miranda 1974:89-107). Miranda (1974:96) can therefore say, 'Yahweh is the God who intervenes in history to destroy the unjust ...and to save the oppressed from the injustice which they suffer and which unfailingly cries out to heaven. This is the only God whom the Bible knows, from Gen. 4:1-11 to Matt. 25:31-46'.

Liberation theologians are frequently criticized for a certain inconsistency in their thought. Although both Miranda and Gutierrez are concerned to read Scripture from the vantage point of commitment to the liberation of the oppressed, it is also true that they both convey the impression that the Bible itself on its own terms consistently presents God as the liberator.⁷ This is after all precisely what Miranda implies when he says that the 'only God that the Bible knows is this one who saves the oppressed from injustice. Mosala (1986:177-179) correctly criticizes this type of argument for its enslavement to what he refers to as the 'neo-orthodox theological problematic that regards the notion of the 'Word of God' as a hermeneutical starting point'.

7. Segundo (1976:83) points to a statement by Gutierrez which, isolated from the rest of the book, could convey the impression that the straightforward words of the Gospel on their own can convince Christians of the inacceptability of the oppressive societal structures.

It is precisely this type of problem that Segundo (1976: 97-124) addresses in his discussion of 'Ideologies and Faith'. Distinguishing between faith which is abiding and ideology which is necessarily relative, he points out that faith answers the demands of a specific context by expressing itself in the form of an ideology, which in this case amounts to a commitment to a specific programme of action (Segundo 1976:102,106-108). The fact that the Bible addresses so many different situations logically entails that it contains a record of various ideologies or, in other words, relative, time- and context-bound expressions of faith (Segundo 1976:108). The Christian is by no means compelled to accept every ideology contained in the Bible as equally relevant to his situation (Segundo 1976:116-117).

Segundo (1976:118-120) however also addresses the problem of the appropriation of these 'relevant' ideologies for today, and introduces an important distinction between 'proto-learning' and 'deutero-learning'. Applied to the question of Scripture, proto-learning would merely amount to an acceptance of the ideological responses found in biblical situations similar to those of today as the correct response of faith in the present situation (Segundo 1976:117). If faith is to be applied to new contexts, it must submit itself to a process of deutero-learning in which it can use the ideologies offered to it by Scripture to work out the ideologies needed to address changing situations (Segundo 1976:120-121).

Despite all Segundo's careful formulations, Fiorenza (1986:371) criticizes him because his model does not take into account the fact that some biblical ideologies may themselves be based on a 'false consciousness'. What this criticism amounts to is that it is not enough to engage in a critical analysis of the present praxis with the help of the tools of Marxist analysis, and to demand that Scripture should be interpreted from this ideological vantage-point. The biblical texts themselves should be examined to determine the type of praxis that they support.

Against this background, the contribution of Croatto is particularly significant. In a brilliant essay on 'The Gods of Oppression', Croatto (1983:27) addresses the question of what the determining factor is in the presentation of the biblical God as a liberator-God.

An analysis of two Ancient Near Eastern myths, namely the Enuma Elish and the Atrahasis epic, leads Croatto (1983:36-37) to the thesis that these myths are used to give divine legitimation to a specific social order on earth. Both myths rest upon what he terms the 'cosmicization of the gods' (Croatto 1983:29-30). The gods are associated with the cosmogony, while the cosmogonic order itself assumes a sacred character. This means that the continuation of the present world order is dependent on the perpetual maintenance of the pre-determined divine order. Human beings are relegated to a secondary status, and basically exist to work for the gods who are represented on earth by the king and his court circle (Croatto 1983:30-31).

The implications of all this for the development of a valid biblical hermeneutics is that there must be a 'decosmicization' of the divine, so that the world can be left as the province of humans (Croatto 1983:42-43). This process is at work in the biblical traditions that speak of a liberating design of God in history. At the same time it must be recognized that there are also biblical traditions that are permeated by the

mentality of the 'oppressor god', and that 'the biblical "god of liberation" does not correspond to 'all the forms of Yahweh within the tradition' (Croatto 1983:39-41). Croatto concludes that the Bible cannot be treated as if all its traditions are of equal value. Insisting on the 'hermeneutical method', he states:

What is important to discover in the Bible is this semantic axis of liberation, which constitutes the Bible's true 'reservoir-of-meaning' and allows one to recognize the specifics of biblical faith.

(Croatto 1983:41)

It is this 'hermeneutical method' that Croatto elaborates in his book *Exodus: A Hermeneutics of Freedom*. At the heart of his view of the exodus lies the consideration that as the 'foundational event' of Israel, it possesses an inexhaustible 'reservoir-of-meaning' (Croatto 1981:13). Certain events, explains Croatto (1981:1-3), acquire a 'historical effect' (Gadamer's term) by virtue of the fact that other subsequent events are understood 'in their semantic axis'. As a result, a process of mutual illumination occurs between the foundational event and the new 'founded' event. The new event generates the 'word' of interpretation that draws out something of the 'surplus-of-meaning' of the foundational event. It is only from the vantage-point of the new event, from which a new question is addressed to the text, that the 'first contextual meaning' is superseded so that the 'surplus-of-meaning' of the text can be disclosed (Croatto 1981:3).

The contemporary appropriation of the exodus must be understood in this light. Today people are first called to discern the presence of God in this world, in the modern event, but are then also called to go back to the 'foundational' event and the message that has grown up around it, as 'a guarantee of the fidelity of the meaning of the event and as a summons from the perspective of one's own faith' (Croatto 1981:8). There is therefore a certain 'attunement' between the new event and the exodus event that helps one to discern the 'surplus-of-meaning' of the exodus for the contemporary situation (Croatto 1981:8).

How, then, does Croatto understand this exodus event that retains such contemporary relevance? I must admit that reading through Croatto's discussion of Exodus 1-15, I find it hard to resist the feeling that the narrative 'fits' too well into the liberation mould that is required of it by this type of committed reading, but perhaps that is because I am a bourgeois exegete!

The present narrative was formed by recharging the first exodus 'with fresh meanings by successive hermeneutical re-readings up to the time it was fixed permanently as expressing a whole world-view in the Exodus account in its present form' (Croatto 1981:14). To a large extent, Croatto (1981:25) claims that his reflections are on the level of the 'event', although he also claims to take for granted the present account of the book of Exodus. It seems that he is quite content to use elements from the textual world of the exodus account to support his reconstruction of the original event, something which I find problematic. If I understand him correctly, Croatto attaches a certain primacy to the 'event', and implies that successive re-readings cannot contradict the basic thrust of the event.

Croatto (1981:16-18) sketches the original situation of oppression in Egypt, referring, *inter alia*, to Exodus 1:11 which mentions the forced labour to which the 'Israelites', as members of Semitic (*Hyksos*) groups were subjected. This type of historical reconstruction is, of course, fraught with difficulties. 8 In this context, Exodus 6:9 assumes a tremendous significance, because it highlights the fact that the Israelites have internalized the oppressive situation as their proper state.

In this situation we find the 'word' of the oppressed, the liberator and the oppressor. The word of the oppressed is the 'cry' (Exodus 3:7, also 6:5) that they utter from within their context of alienation. Croatto (1981:18-20) argues that that this 'cry' may not be understood as a mere passive lamentation. Rather it reflects the process of 'conscientization' that arises from the Israelites' intention to set in motion a programme of liberation. The fact that the present account emphasizes the divine initiative of the liberation process, is the result of the use of religious language. The actual historical process was rather one in which the people took the responsibility for their own liberation (Croatto 1981:20).

The 'word' of the liberator, the announcement of Yahweh's saving intervention, therefore means that the people become aware of the transcendent implications of 'their own vocation to freedom' (Croatto 1981:20). Croatto implies by this that it is illegitimate to call on oppressed peoples today to wait patiently for some or other miraculous intervention by Yahweh. Today, he remarks, 'there is a very clear consciousness that there is no power superior to that of a united and committed "people"' (Croatto 1981:22). It is however legitimate for those who engage in such a liberation process to interpret their activity as the will of God (Croatto 1981:23).

What of the 'word' of the oppressor? Referring to the familiar theme of the 'hardening of the heart', Croatto argues that the oppressor is the only one who cannot be conscientized. Croatto's Pharaoh is one who 'cannot provide any solution from within himself. The oppressor can never free' (Croatto 1981:22). The upshot of all this is of course that Yahweh has no choice but to free his people through a miraculous manifestation of his power.

The message of the exodus account is in the first place that the arena of God's activity is human history, and that it is his activity in this realm, which includes the political and social sphere, that characterizes him as a saviour (Croatto 1981:27). Furthermore, the exodus experience becomes the most decisive event in Israel's history, but through a process of hermeneutical reflection and re-appropriation it

8. The problem of the historical reconstruction of the events that may lie behind the Exodus accounts is extremely complex. Attempts to correlate the migrations described in the Bible with those of groups such as the Hyksos rest on very shaky foundations (Thompson 1977:150-160). Any talk of the 'Israelites' at this stage also runs contrary to the weight of evidence concerning the formation of Israel that only occurred in Canaan. Although it must be conceded that the precise reconstruction of this process of formation remains uncertain, it is at least commonly accepted that the biblical picture of a "pan-Israelite" exodus is not historically verifiable (Miller 1977:262-279).

also becomes a message for all mankind, 'the enunciation of the exemplary event' (Croatto 1981:28-29). This has implications for our view of violence. Rejecting the notion of 'peace at any price', Croatto contends that the oppressive situation left God with no other choice but to act violently. The nature of the power struggle makes a similar use of violence in the contemporary situation unavoidable (Croatto 1981:29).

Leaving aside the question of whether this conclusion does justice to the complex narrative of Exodus 1-15, one might ask whether it is legitimate to maintain that the exodus account can retain this type of implication in the modern context? It is obvious that Croatto's concept of the 'attunement' between the modern event and the exodus event allows him to claim that it does. Some might however ask if the message of peace that Christ brought allows us to engage in violent liberation movements and then to appeal to exodus to claim that this is the will of God? This is, of course, a very acute question for the church in South Africa today.

Croatto pays attention to this problem when he discusses the interpretation and re-appropriation of the exodus in the portrayal of Jesus by the evangelists, as well as in Paul's elaboration of the significance of Christ in terms of the paschal mystery. Referring to the message of Jesus, Croatto (1981:62) notes the significance of the fact that he makes it possible for the exodus to become a symbol of liberation for all peoples. This is the basis for Croatto's ingenious explanation of the fact that, as has so often been pointed out in criticisms of liberation theology, Jesus' message does not contain a strategy of political liberation. Precisely by concentrating his work on liberation from the oppressive religious ideology that is manifested in the law and the "traditions", and also by establishing a new praxis of love of the other, Jesus makes possible a liberation "from every structure of death" for all human beings (Croatto 1981:63-64). Had he concentrated on revolutionary activity on the socio-political level, his activity would have merely amounted to a liberation of the Jews but could not provide the foundation for a liberation theology for all peoples (Croatto 1981:62-64). Today, however, in a different situation, Christians are called to work out the reservoir-of-meaning of the Gospel for the political and socio-economic realm (Croatto 1981:64).

The same line of reasoning is applied to the paschal liberation of Paul's theology, which deepens that of the exodus. In the present situations of oppression, the marginalized groups 'are called to liberation, to their own "Easter" that will enable them to rise up like new peoples with full recognition of their rights' (Croatto 1981:78). The interpretative continuum that proceeds from the exodus therefore by no means ends with the apostles (cf Kirk 1979:80). History is a 'project' in which the warp and woof of God's plan of salvation is being weaved together, and we are called to prolong the exodus event which is still unconcluded (Croatto 1981:8-9,14-15).

In Croatto's work we have an excellent illustration of what it means to read the Bible from the perspective of the commitment to a liberating praxis. To my mind, he has at least also addressed the problem of discerning an authentic line of liberating praxis in Scripture itself. Whether he is judged to have succeeded or to have gone far

enough is a different question. What his work does illustrate is that it is an unfair generalization to accuse liberation theologians of merely taking over the hermeneutic assumptions of western theology and applying them uncritically to the Bible. Furthermore, his work provides an excellent demonstration of how the process of 'deutero-learning', that Segundo calls Christians to, can be meaningfully implemented.

3. A critical appraisal

I now turn to what must necessarily be a cursory appraisal and a few suggestions for further thought. Within the confines of this paper, I shall not discuss the actual exegetical implications that liberation theology draws from the exodus theme. This has of course already been the object of much debate, and must continue to be so. Rather, I will put forward my own thoughts on a possible basis for further discussion, with all of the ongoing exegetical work that this will necessitate.

It is essential that the question of the inescapable ideological commitment of the interpreter should be honestly faced (cf. Lockhead 1976/77:81-82; Fiorenza 1986:380). Scripture is not interpreted in a vacuum, but from within a social context which must necessarily influence the way in which it is read. Krüger (1979:20-22) points to the difference between a 'reflective' and a 'reflexive' theology. Reflective theology does not realize how intricately it is bound to its social context and can therefore claim to be 'passing on divine truth', or to be conducting an unbiased exegesis. Reflexive theology is critically aware of its attachment to a given situation and takes this into explicit account. If there is to be any discussion with liberation theology, it will have to be based upon this reflexive type of theological stance.

The question is whether all that remains to be done is the clarification of our respective ideological positions, and of the consequent divergent appropriations of Scripture? It is significant that many liberation theologians are not prepared to rest their case with the simple statement of their ideological pre-commitment. As has already been pointed out, they frequently present their particular interpretation of the exodus theme as one that can lay full claim to the authority of the Bible. Loader (1987:3-11) has pinpointed this problem incisively, showing how liberation theology oscillates between awarding authority to the situation or context from which it operates, and the Bible.

If I understand Croatto correctly, he makes this same type of assertion. For he implies that in setting the Bible free to speak along its true axis of liberation, in discovering this canon within a canon, he is somehow presenting us with the true ethos of the Bible itself (cf Croatto 1983:41). In my opinion this development of a canon within a canon, or a true axis of liberation, amounts to a rationalization of a preconceived position. Rather than presenting us with the authoritative and normative ethos of the Bible itself, we are confronted by a reduction of the plurality of the biblical traditions to those that can be used to support the liberation struggle.

The solution that Loader (1987:13-16) suggests to this dilemma, is that liberation theology, and all theology for that matter, should admit that it is using Scripture as part of a theological argument. In this way liberation theology could justify its type of reductionism by stating that it is perfectly entitled to use those parts of Scripture that can support its argument. This is an important insight which is sorely needed in the current discussion, and yet it raises the question whether Scripture should not be allowed to function in a more comprehensive way if there is to be any meaningful discussion.

In this regard I see a potential significance in liberation theology's appeal to the authority of Scripture, even though their intention in doing this is often just to vest their theological arguments with greater authority. Could the reluctance to stop at the mere delimitation of a particular ideological stance not point to a more extensive role for Scripture, in which the traditions contained in the Bible should be allowed to exercise a critical function over against our theological arguments? Is it not possible that while we admit our ideological commitments and the fact that we all use Scripture with certain preferences and predilections in the presentation of our theological arguments, we can still be sensitive to the critical voice of the diverse biblical traditions? (cf Lockhead 1976/77:83).

This possibility rests upon the recognition of the fact that the Scripture that we are dealing with is the canon of the church. Barr (1973:119) has developed the concept of the Bible as the 'classic model' for the understanding of God. He emphasizes the human process that accompanies the formation of the sometimes conflicting traditions of different traditions into a 'Scripture', as well as the contingency that surrounds the formal delimitation of the canon (Barr 1973:118,120, 156). At the same time, however, the formal constitution of this body of writings as canon 'has the effect of objectifying the classic model of understanding God' (Barr 1973:128). This model therefore expresses the classic structure of Christian faith, and new generations of Christians must appropriate it for themselves (Barr 1973:118,128).

Barr (1973:156-157) recognizes that the classic model is read with all types of priorities and preferences, remarking that the diversity of the traditions in the Bible itself invites this type of reading. Nevertheless he rejects the notion of a canon within the canon, because it elevates a certain portion of the Bible to too high a status. The following remarks are very pertinent to our discussion:

...There is no element, whether we mean a portion of the Bible, or one of the events related by it, or a complex of theological entities believed in, which is so set above all others as to be exempt from critical weighing and measuring.

(Barr 1973:161)

The implication of this is surely that if we take the Bible seriously as a classic model of understanding God, then we should at least allow it to say its full 'word' in this respect.

It is in this context that I find the model of 'canonical criticism' developed by Sanders enormously suggestive. While his approach is similar to Barr's in that he regards the canon as a paradigm of God's words and deeds, he is particularly

interested in discussing how the canon is adaptable for life in the believing communities in which it continues to function (Sanders 1984:20). He points out that the process of the formation of the canon was one of continual interaction between believing communities and the traditions that were perceived to be meaningful in ever-changing contexts. The traditions were characterized by an element of stability and of adaptability (Sanders 1984:22).

An important aspect of this ongoing tradition process is therefore the multivalency of the literary units in the Bible. They can and do mean different things to the believing community in various times and situations (Sanders 1984:22-23).

After the stabilization of this tradition process by the fact of canonization, this interpretive process continues, but the believing community must develop a hermeneutics that can help it to relate to the canonical paradigm (Sanders 1984:32). This hermeneutic does not have to relate only to the final form of the biblical books, as Childs believes, but rather to all the theological currents and undercurrents that accompany the canonical process. For this reason, Sanders is at pains to emphasize the plurality of the Bible, and the self-critical dimension that it records in its varied statements. He remarks that 'the whole Bible...can never be stuffed into one theological box...the canon always contains the seed of redemption of any abuse in it' (Sanders 1984:37).

The believing community may therefore appropriate to itself those traditions that it finds valuable in a given sociological context. It may further read the same tradition in differing ways, depending, inter alia, on whether it is reading with the image of God the 'creator' or God the 'redeemer' in mind, or perhaps is trying to hold the two in balance (Sanders 1984:49-50,70). The choice of which reading is canonically appropriate will be determined by discerning the needs of the audience (Sanders 1984:67). At the same time, however, there is also a need for 'establishing a canonically permissible range of resignification' (Sanders 1984:63). This means that canonical criticism will have to be acutely aware of the need for an ongoing analysis of the texts that have been included in the canon in all their diachronic and synchronic dimensions. It will also have to take cognizance of the way that traditions were resignified in the canonical process itself (Sanders 1984:61-63).

Sanders' model indicates a fruitful avenue for possible discourse. It does not deny that we read the Bible from our positions of commitment to a given situation, but it also does not absolve us from the task of taking it seriously as a canon in all of its richness and diversity. Applied to Exodus 1-15 it would not release us from the responsibility of listening to the theology of each source and allowing it to say its word, while we would also have to be sensitive to the theological dimensions presented by the present text. Only in this way can the Bible remain a meaningful 'paradigm for ways to decline the nouns and verbs of believers in any generation who are called to pursue the Integrity of Reality' (Sanders 1984:70).

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