

THE THEOLOGICAL AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE AND ECOLOGICAL THEOLOGY

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Abstract

Can the bible function as a theological authority for eco-theology given its conflicting messages concerning the earth and humanity's relationship to it and in particular the deeply anthropocentric character of some passages? This article critically examines five approaches to the Bible that seek to affirm its theological authority while recognising its problematic character. It then proposes criteria for an alternative model.

Keywords: Biblical Authority, Eco-theology, Canon, HP Santmire, J Moltmann, K Nürnberger, NT Wright

Eco-theology¹ has a troubled relationship with the Bible. Selected biblical passages have been a significant source for the development of eco-theologies yet, eco-theologians have recognised that the Bible has legitimated the exploitation of the earth. The problem does not lie only with interpretation of the Bible but with the Bible itself. While there are many biblical passages that deal with the earth, eco-justice is not a central biblical theme.² Further, where the biblical writings do address ecological issues they provide conflicting messages. Many passages are deeply anthropocentric reinforcing human domination of the earth.³ This problem is particularly acute for those who affirm in some form that the Bible is an authoritative source and norm for theological reflection. What criteria can be used to select passages to be regarded as authoritative and those to be critiqued or rejected? Is there not a danger that instead of seeking to interpret the meaning and significance of the biblical texts one will end up merely using it to promote a predetermined goal? Further, what do we do with the biblical texts that promote problematic attitudes toward the earth?

This article examines some significant proposals that can contribute to the development of such a model. Not all of the theologians discussed would consider themselves eco-theologians but all address eco-theological issues and have developed creative understandings of biblical authority.

¹ By eco-theology I mean theology that is done critically and constructively in the light of the challenge posed to Christian theology by the ecological crisis and which are directed toward the development of a praxis of earth healing. Such theologies involve the recognition of the validity of the ecological critique of Christianity, the retrieval of neglected insights within the Christian tradition, and the reformulation of Christian theology.

² See Wink 1993.

³ While this is not a new issue (see Santmire 1985:189-218) it has been brought into sharp focus by the Earth Bible Projects attempt to read the bible with the earth in order to hear the (suppressed) voice of the earth, see Habel (2000 & 2001), Habel and Wurst (2000 & 2001), Habel and Balabanski (2002).

The Ecological Motif as the Canon Within the Canon – H Paul Santmire

H Paul Santmire works within the context of classical Christian theology but seeks “to reclaim it, and then to re-envision it, for the purpose of serving the worship, the teaching, and the public witness of the church in our time of global environmental and existential crisis” (Santmire 2000:9). He gives “the highest priority to biblical interpretation” (Santmire 2000:8).

In his study of the history of Christian attitudes towards the earth, Santmire identified two motifs that can be discerned within the Bible, the earth affirming ecological motif and the earth denying spiritual motif. Santmire argued that these two motifs arise out of two primal human experiences. The first is the “almost universal ... experience of overwhelming mountain” this gives rise to two religious root metaphors those of “ascent” and of “fecundity”. The second is the less common, experience of “the promising journey” which gives rise to the root “metaphor of migration to a good land” (Santmire 1985:16). The metaphor of ascent gives rise to the spiritual motif in which one’s identity and religious experience are located beyond or above the earth. One is always seeking to transcend the earth and its finitude to enter the higher “spiritual” realm. The metaphor of fecundity locates one’s identity and religious experience in the earth. One looks back from the heights of the mountain to admire and appreciate the earth – the mountain is experienced as the source of the fertility the earth. In the metaphor of the migration to a good land one’s identity and religious experience is always land related and takes place in the presence of the rest of the earth community. The metaphor of migration to a good land can lead to both positive and negative ethical responses to the earth depending on how the relationship between humanity and the earth is understood. The clustering of the metaphors of fecundity and migration to a good land gives rise to the ecological motif.

Santmire argues that the ecological motif dominates the Old Testament while the New Testament contains a mixture of both motifs. However, the spiritual motif has been dominant within the history of the Christian tradition and has shaped the interpretation of both Testaments. Historically theologians have reflectively or naively selected either the spiritual or the ecological motif as an interpretative framework shaping their theologies and their attitudes to the earth. The development of an eco-theology is dependent on the self-conscious selection of the ecological motif as the normative interpretative framework. This motif then functions as a canon within the canon. Hermeneutically it shapes the interpretation of biblical texts allowing us to perceive their ecological potential where this was obscured by the hermeneutical dominance of the spiritual motif. It further influences the exegesis of texts that are often perceived to be unfriendly to the earth. Normatively, it determines what is and what is not normative within the bible

In a more recent study, Santmire designates this canon within the canon as a hermeneutic of “the future and fullness thereof” that is theme that God’s creative and redemptive purpose encompasses all creation. (Santmire 2000:31). Three developments are significant. First, he argues that this is a canon of *justice* and fecundity. Second, he explores the development of this theme christologically arguing that Christ is to be understood in the light of the hermeneutic of the “future and fullness thereof”. Third, he notes that the choice of this hermeneutic while it is self-conscious it cannot be justified beforehand but only in terms of its exegetical results.

The significance of Santmire’s argument can be seen in relation to three areas. The first is his affirmation that there can be no prior justification of his canon, thus rejecting a foundationalist approach to theological authority. Yet, he demonstrates the exegetical and

theological fruitfulness of his canon. Second, his canon of “the future and the fullness thereof” provides normative criteria for evaluating biblical passages that arises from within the Bible. Third, this canon suggests that there may be earth friendly ways of interpreting passages that are often interpreted as anthropocentric.

There are however three significant problems. First, the earlier analytical framework of two primal experiences and three root metaphors leading to two major motifs does not adequately cover the diversity and complexity of the biblical material. It obscures various ways in which different biblical writers address the issues of humanity and the earth, and of God’s purpose for creation. This diversity is shaped by the complex interrelationship of different theological motifs with particular contexts. Further, the use of a particular metaphor does not determine a writing’s approach to the earth. Santmire himself notes that the book of Hebrews uses the migration to a new land metaphor in an earth-denying context.⁴

Second, the predominance of the ecological motif does not solve all the ecological problems presented by the Bible. It is not sufficient to argue that the Bible predominantly understands human identity and religious experience as earth related. The issue is how the relationship between humanity and the earth is understood. Thus, there are biblical passages encompassed by the ecological motif that promote human domination of the earth.

Third, what do we do with those parts of the biblical witness that embody the “spiritual” motif? Do we ignore them or reject them? Do they contain other insights that are relevant to other contexts? How do we maintain their normative authority in some but not other areas?

The Promise of Life as the Canon in front of the Canon – Jürgen Moltmann

Jürgen Moltmann has sought to develop a theology that “is resistingly and productively concerned about the future of life in the whole earthly creation” (Moltmann 2000:xxi). It is a theology that “springs out of a passion for God’s kingdom and its righteousness and justice... In that passion, theology becomes the imagination for the kingdom of God in the world, and the world in God’s kingdom” (Moltmann 2000:xx).

What is the role of the Bible? First, Moltmann describes the relationship between the Bible and his theology as a “post-critical and ‘naive relationship’” (Moltmann 2000:xxi). The Bible is not “an authoritative blueprint or a confining boundary” it is rather a “stimulus to ... theological thinking”. (Moltmann 2000:xxii). Yet as a Reformed theologian he argues that theology “is grounded in the ‘reformation’ of the church ‘according to the Word of God’ attested in Holy Scripture which is confessed anew in each new situation”. (Moltmann 1999:120). We take “seriously the Word of God attested in Scripture” when we ask “for the binding and liberating Word in one’s own contemporary situation” (Moltmann 1999:124). Thus, the Bible stimulates our theology through its attestation to the Word in its context inspiring us to discover what God’s Word is for us in our context.

Moltmann develops this further by distinguishing between the form and the matter of scripture. It is the matter that is authoritative. The matter is found in the promissory character of the biblical traditions. In the Old Testament it is God’s covenant with Israel whose promises “point beyond Israel to the salvation of all peoples and the peace of the whole creation” (Moltmann 2000:135-136). In the New Testament it is “the unconditional endorsement and universal enactment of God’s promises through and in Christ, and the

⁴ See Santmire 1985:214-215.

beginning of their fulfilment in the experiences of the Holy Spirit” (Moltmann 2000:136). While Christ enters “into Israel’s promissory history, bringing it to its final eschatological history for the peoples of the world” (Moltmann 2000:126). He is not the centre of Scripture as a centre presupposes closure. Christ points to the future coming of the kingdom and thus opens reality for that coming. Hence the canon within the canon is not found in “‘the center of Scripture,’ but in the future of Scripture. Scripture, having a center outside itself, points beyond itself toward the future of Christ and the future of the kingdom of God” (Moltmann 1999:133). Thus the Bible must be read “in the light of God’s coming to his whole creation” (Moltmann 2000:128).

A promise reaches beyond itself into the not yet; it anticipates what is promised and opens up the present for the future. The divine promises have a surplus beyond what is experienced in any given situation, in particular, a surplus arising from the eschatological resurrection of Christ. Thus with God’s promise there is no absolute knowledge but there is an awareness of the new possibilities and inexhaustible potential. The past witnessed to in God’s promissory history is important because of its impact on the future. Because God’s promises are not confined to the past but impact the present and the future they draw us into the promissory history, inviting us to live in accordance with it and motivating us to proclaim it.

The promissory history that is ‘matter of scripture’ precedes the writing of scripture. The form of scripture is the written expression of the matter of scripture. It is the product of the communities of God’s people indwelt by the Spirit who sought in diverse ways and contexts to respond to and express God’s promise. The form is shaped and constrained by the context in which it was written. The matter of scripture is that which goes beyond the contextual constraints pointing to God’s future. On this basis the canon remains open for we can reject passages that are contrary to the matter of scripture and “preach from non biblical texts if they accord with ‘the matter of scripture’” (Moltmann 2000:138).

Theological interpretation of the Bible thus becomes a “dialogue with the text for the sake of the thing it is talking about, provided that this is a thing we share” (Moltmann 2000:124). This entails a listening to the text and a consideration of what it has to say about the matter of scripture. It does not stop with this listening for we must move beyond the form of scripture. In certain cases we must engage in “objective criticism” of the text in the light of the matter of scripture. Moltmann develops this using two Reformation concepts. First, scripture is its own interpreter – scripture must be interpreted in the relation to the “matter of scripture”. Second, the witness of the Spirit – the Spirit who opens the future to God’s coming reign is the Spirit of life hence a spiritual interpretation is one which promotes the fullness of life. All texts which are hostile to life in all its forms must be subjected to criticism.⁵

Scripture partakes in the coming of the promise as it retells the promissory history. But it cannot constrain it, the promissory history “thrusts and ferments” within scripture and “‘wills’ to issue from scripture and go beyond it” (Moltmann 2000:129). It draws its hearers and readers into the coming future. Hence “our own experiences of liberation, of raising up, and the birth to new life becomes the key to an understanding of the words and texts which witness to God’s promise; for with such experiences the new creation begins”. (Moltmann 2000:130). Our interpretation of the promissory history of God’s promise arises through our participation in the contemporary history of God’s promise.

⁵ See Moltmann 2000:149 & 150.

From the perspective of the eschatological experience of the Spirit scripture is open to be reread and reinterpreted. The theological task entails more than listening to and critiquing the text. We must seek to express the matter of scripture in relation to new and changed circumstances. This includes transforming the form of scripture in order to express the matter. A theological use of the Bible entails a critical freedom as the theologian seeks to give form to the promise of the eschatological reign of God in our contemporary socio-historical contexts.

Moltmann's proposal has significant strengths. First, it identifies a locus of critique that arises out of a significant portion of the Bible. Second, his recognition of the manner in which the socio-cultural context obscures the "matter" of scripture provides greater scope for dealing with the ambiguous character of particular texts in which some elements can be affirmed while others are critiqued. Third, his notion of the canon as lying in front of scripture, his recognition of the contribution of contemporary experience to our understanding of that canon and his affirmation of the present work of the Spirit open the possibility of moving with scripture beyond scripture to address the contemporary world.

Yet, his approach also raises a number of questions. First, it is necessary to determine what is normative and to emphasize the role of context, the categories of form and matter are problematic. There is no way to recover acontextual matter – all that we have is deeply bedded in context. Thus what both that which Moltmann wants to affirm in the Bible and that which he wants to reject are only available to us as they address and are shaped by their context. The proposal that the matter is to be found in what points beyond the context is not sufficient.

Second, the identification of the matter of scripture with "promissory history" is problematic. It is not comprehensive enough to encompass the diversity the biblical traditions. While it is a dominant theme in some biblical traditions it is not present in all and in particular in some whose emphasis on creation has a significant contribution to make to theologies of eco-justice. It use this prevents reduces or eliminates the contribution of some traditions.

The Evolving Canon beneath the Canon – Klaus Nürnberger⁶

Klaus Nürnberger has sought to develop a theology arising from a holistic understanding of redemption shaped by three basic propositions:

God's ultimate intention is the comprehensive wellbeing of all his creatures; God's immediate concern is any deficiency in comprehensive wellbeing, thus any need arising in any dimension of human or non-human existence; and God's redemptive activity is mediated through earthly events and human agency (Nürnberger 2000:284).

The Bible is a means of grace, an instrument through which God acts redemptively in response to human need and to bring about comprehensive wellbeing.

Nürnberger argues that this understanding of redemption emerges through a process of evolution that can be uncovered through a critical reading of the Bible. The roots of the biblical faith are to be found in Israel's concrete experiences of need and redemption from that need. These experiences of redemption were remembered and described in "prototypical narratives" (2003:14) that were enacted ritually. When the people encountered new situations of need and had new experiences of redemption, they either retold or reinterpreted the narratives in relation to the new situation or created new ones.

⁶ See my review article Field 2005 and Nürnbergers response in Nürnberger 2005.

The new narratives were retold and reinterpreted in response to other situations. The different situations of need prompted new understandings of God's intention. This takes place within the complexities of human social relations so that the witness to God's activity is partial and subject to correction. The result of the process is the development of streams of tradition or soteriological trajectories. The trajectories are characterised by "considerable adaptations, mutations, jumps, and in the end, the inversion of their original meaning" (2002:14). The trajectories interact with each other merge into the larger story of God's relationship with Israel. Out of this process, particularly as it culminates in the Christ event, arises a vision of God's purpose for "the comprehensive wellbeing of all his creatures" (Nürnberg 2000:284).

Four features of this process should be noted. First, the perception of God's vision is always in process as new situations of need prompt new perceptions of comprehensive wellbeing. Second, the biblical authors did not repeat old messages of salvation to new situations they developed new understandings of salvation that addressed their situations. Third, the trajectories contradict and critique as well as complement and enrich each other. Fourth, the emergence and development of these trajectories is explained by evolutionary theory. Mind sets, ideas, norms and visions are part of reality hence they also "consist of emerging and evolving networks of interaction determined by time, space and energy differentials" (2002:71).

Underlying the trajectories are streams of meaning. Texts, motifs and traditions are particular expressions of the underlying stream of meaning as it encounters particular situations of need. In response to particular situation, the streams mutate and develop in new directions. They encounter alternative streams of meaning, in some cases, these are rejected and in others, they are modified and incorporated. The shape of the trajectory emerges as a consequence of the interaction between the stream of meaning and various contextual factors. As this is an historical evolutionary process, the underlying stream of meaning must be understood to have a uni-directional flow toward a fuller expression of God's purpose of comprehensive wellbeing. This flow of meaning is not to be identified with the historical progression of ideas or biblical exemplars but with the progression of redemptive insight underlying the text. The historical transformation of ideas and exemplars is a complex process of progression, stagnation, retrogression, and, in some cases, collapse.

The individual texts provide exemplars of how the stream of meaning was understood and related to a particular context at that time and place in history as such they are not normative for us today. Nor is the canonical arrangement of texts and traditions, it too is merely a part of the process. The theological task is to discern the stream of meaning underlying the texts by making use of the best critical tools available to us recognising that not all exemplars contribute to the development of the stream of meaning; retrogressive exemplars must be rejected. Responsible theological decisions have to be made as to what contributes to the normative stream and what does not.

Bible provides the record of the past from which we come as such it is indispensable for understanding what God is doing but we must not get stuck in the past. "The "biblical God is a God of the future; the risen Christ is the coming Christ; the Spirit anticipates the reality which is definitely ahead of us – and which offers direction, critique and inspiration for us now" (Nürnberg 2000:317). This is important for two reasons. First, the evolution of the trajectories did not fully mature within the Bible. Post biblical socio-historical developments have led to a fuller understanding of the streams of meaning to which the biblical

trajectories bear witness. We cannot simply repeat the ancient exemplars; to do so will lead to the church taking positions that are contrary to the will of God for us today. Second, the biblical exemplars are responses to their socio-cultural context. The issues that we encounter today are very different. The thrust of the interacting streams of meaning needs to be extrapolated beyond the Bible to address new situations of need in order to understand what God is doing to bring comprehensive wellbeing to all God's creatures. In encountering new situations of need we gain a fuller and deeper understanding of God's purpose of comprehensive well-being.

For Nürnberger it is the interacting streams of meaning underlying and moving beyond the biblical texts that together form the canon beneath the canon, the Word of God. What is normative is the evolving understanding of "God's vision of comprehensive wellbeing which translates into God's concern for specific deficiencies in wellbeing" (Nürnberger 2002:109). It is a Christological norm as God's salvific response is "manifest in extreme form in the Christ event" (Nürnberger 2002:109).

Nürnberger's model has a number of significant strengths. First, it emphasises the contextual character of the biblical traditions, emphasising that both the positive contribution and the problematic features of a text or tradition arose out of and in response to a particular context. Second, it emphasises the significance of the internal dialogue, debate and contradictions amongst the biblical traditions. Third, the notion of the evolving canon focused on comprehensive wellbeing that culminates in Christ provides for a unity to emerge out of the diversity and debate within the Bible. Fourth, the concept of extrapolating the trajectories enables us both to recognise and move beyond the problematic features present in the texts and to address contemporary issues in the light of the biblical texts. Fifth, he emphasises the importance of responsible theological judgment within the critical and constructive tasks of theology.

Significant questions arise in relation to the applicability of evolution theory to the development of religious insights underlying a body of literature; particularly when evolution is described as a uni-directional linear progression. This is complicated by the relationship between what Nürnberger understands to be the progress of redemptive insight and the complex history of the trajectories within the biblical corpus. His interpretation of the flow of meaning displays considerable ambiguity. He insists on the importance of historical investigation and reconstruction to determine the flow of meaning as the historical changes reveal the direction of the flow of meaning. He implies that the later supersedes the earlier. Yet at the same time he argues that later developments might be retrogressive, that the canonical shape of the documents obscures the direction of the flow and that later redactors "cannot carry greater weight than the insights gained by the original authors in actual, often agonising situations of need. (2003:76). Thus while Nürnberger argues that the biblical traditions are shaped by the process of evolution this primarily applies to the underlying stream of meaning which is in the end his theological construction. Further, it is questionable whether the notion of unidirectional evolution deals adequately with the diversity that one finds within the Bible even within a particular trajectory.

There is a lack of conceptual clarity as to what constitutes a soteriological paradigm. He refers to them as "prototypical narratives" (2003:14) describing a redemptive event. Such narratives are then retold and ritually re-enacted. Yet his examples cover a variety of literary types. Some are narratives (e.g. "Exodus and conquest") others (e.g. "Priesthood and Sacrifice") are not. Further, it is questionable whether it is possible to isolate the paradigms from each other in the manner that Nürnberger does. Rather the biblical

traditions present us with complex clusters of motifs, narratives and concepts even in their earliest traceable forms. These clusters relate to each other in multifaceted ways.

**The Canon as the Unfinished Biblical Metanarrative – NT Wright,
J Richard Middleton and Brian J Walsh**

J Richard Middleton and Brian J Walsh have developed a theological response to some of the issues raised by the postmodern context including ecological destruction.⁷ As part of this, they argue for a model of the canon as an unfinished narrative using of a proposal made by NT Wright who has since developed his model further.⁸

At the heart of Wright's proposal are two theses. The first is that the authority of the Bible refers to "the authority of the triune God, exercised ... *through* scripture" (Wright 2005:17). As God's authority is directed towards the healing and renewal of creation, scripture is a Spirit empowered agent through which God works to bring about this healing and renewal. Through it, God addresses us, to transform and equip us so that we might participate in God's action to renew creation.

The second is that our concept of biblical authority must do justice to the dominance of narrative within the Bible. This dominance is not accidental, for narratives "are one of the most basic modes of human life" (Wright 1992:38). We perceive and relate to the world through the stories that we tell, as such they are both a component of and give expression to a person or communities basic world view. Such stories are normative as they claim to describe reality. Different stories reflecting different world views will be conflict with and subvert each other. God exercises authority as the "people of God tell and retell *their* story as the true story of the world, telling the covenant story as the true story of creation" (Wright 1991:18). This story contradicts and subverts alternative stories and leads to an alternative praxis.

Significant features of Wrights model include the following. First, the biblical authors tell and retell the story of God's interaction with the people of God as they encounter new and different situations. The biblical traditions develop through this process as the old stories are retold, new stories are added and these stories interact with each other. This process further unfolds the significance of the stories. The diverse expressions given to the story of God and Israel within the Bible are in principle compatible though they might use different terminology, symbols and concepts. However, not all possible retellings are valid. Thus the difference between "false" and "true" prophets can be understood as different retellings of the story. Second, the stories are retold not merely as the story of Israel and its god, but as the story of the creator God and creation, thus the story of Israel is the key to understanding God's relation with creation. Third, narrative underlies the non-narrative components of the Biblical material, which refer to, assume or are shorthand expressions of the story of Israel and God. Fourth, the canon's linking of the stories together provides an overarching narrative framework in which the various stories find their place. Not all of the stories form integral components of this narrative framework, some serve to illustrate or develop particular themes or ideas from the main narrative. The New Testament retells of this story of God and Israel "redrawn around Jesus" (Wright 1992:79). Yet the story of

⁷ See Middleton & Walsh 1995:152-165.

⁸ Wright has acknowledged the significant contribution of Walsh to his own thought. See Wright 1992:xix and Walsh & Keesmaat 2004:89.

God and creation focused on Israel and Jesus is incomplete. It points to and gives glimmers of a final resolution to the plot.

The unfinished character of the biblical narrative is the key to understanding its authority. A possible way of imaging biblical authority is to construe it as an unfinished play. Wright proposes that the most appropriate way to perform such a play would be for actors to immerse themselves in the acts that have been completed and then to faithfully and creatively perform the final act. The completed acts provide the authority for the final act but without prescribing what has to be done. The actors must act consistently with what is known from the previous acts but with creativity and innovation as they seek to bring the various narrative threads together. Wright suggests that the Bible be imagined as a multi-act play; the New Testament gives us a description of the beginning of final act and hints as to how it will end. We live between the first scene and the last scene, and must now act out the play with consistency and innovation.

For the church to live under the authority of scripture is not to obey every command and detail in the Bible but to immerse itself in it and to communally and in dependence on the Spirit, work out what faithful praxis is in the contemporary context. In particular, there is a need to recognise that what God required in earlier acts is not necessarily what God requires of the church today. The task of theology is to grapple with the questions posed by the symbolic universe of the biblical story in its encounter with the world in order to facilitate a faithful and innovative performance. It thus entails the retelling of the story in new ways, following the example of the biblical writers.

Walsh and Middleton's *Truth is Stranger than it Used to Be* is an attempt to retell the story in response to the postmodern context. They recognise the Bible has been used to dominate and oppress and thus attempt to develop a reading of the Bible as a non-totalising metanarrative that provides a "comprehensive vision of and for life" (Walsh 1996:212). They develop Wright's model in important ways.

First, they develop the ecological significance of the understanding of God's purpose in more detail. They emphasise that God's purpose is the liberation of creation and that human beings are called to the service of creation. They argue for necessity for a deep awareness of our essential kinship with all creation; that all creatures in their own way both praise God and groan in their suffering, and hence human beings are called to listen to and stand in solidarity with creation its praise and lament. The authority of the Bible is directed toward the liberation of all creation.

Second, they give greater attention to the diversity between different texts and traditions recognising that texts do not merely compliment but also correct and contradict others, yet they emphasise the significance of the canonical process for determining the shape and ethical thrust of the overarching story. Middleton thus argues that the placing of Genesis 1 at the beginning of the canon relativises passages that employ the motif of creation through conflict and critiquing the violence that pervades the biblical stories.⁹ The final canonical shape provides the normative framework for interpreting the diversity and debates within the Bible.

Third, while affirming the significance of the canonical shape they argue that those elements that do not fit in neatly with its main story line have particular importance. Some of which correct or contradict earlier retellings of the story, others express the cries of those to whom God did not respond with saving deeds. These dimensions of the text critique any

⁹ Middleton 2005:266.269.

triumphalistic or totalising reading of the Bible. In particular, they address the problem of texts that are offensive and which run against the ethical thrust of the overarching story including holy war, genocide, slavery, and patriarchy. They highlight texts that portray violence against women in a way which appears to be “approved by the other characters in the story, by the story’s narrator or the editor of the biblical book ... or by later biblical commentators on the story. (Middleton & Walsh 1995:177). They argue that these texts cry out for resolution, for a response that is not part of the story and lies beyond the biblical text. As such, they illustrate the unfinished character of the biblical story and call us to respond beyond the text to these stories in a manner that is consonant with the ethical thrust of the overarching story. Faithfulness to this overall ethical thrust will entail the ethical critique of elements within the biblical tradition while maintaining their significance in preventing a totalising view of the biblical metanarrative.

Finally, they emphasize that praxis which is faithful to the unfinished character of Bible, the processes which gave it birth, and which is in accordance with the overall thrust of the metanarrative must be “creative, innovative and flexible” (Middleton & Walsh 1995:183). Merely repeating the biblical texts would be an act of unfaithfulness. Faithful theology entails a careful study of the biblical texts and then the creation of “dynamic analogies” (Walsh & Keesmaat 2004:136) that address the contemporary context. Such analogies are always open to critique and revision. Importantly they argue that in some cases innovative faithfulness “means we must not only go beyond the biblical text but sometimes even *against* the text” (Middleton & Walsh 1995:184).

This proposal has a number of strengths. The first is the understanding of the Bible as a means by which God acts to renew and heal creation. The second is the stress on the importance of narrative. Third, it recognises the problematic character of some biblical texts yet attempts to incorporate them in its portrayal of the Bible as a non-totalising metanarrative. Finally, it opens the possibility of going beyond and against the text in contemporary theology through the idea of faithful improvisation.

There are however significant problems. First, the emphasis on narrative tends to obscure the contribution of the non-narrative material. Second, the overarching narrative is a theological construction that does not arise directly out of the texts even in their canonical arrangement. Not only is it possible to construct other overarching schemes but that different biblical writers indicate different possible ways of construing the significance of key narrative events depending on their theological interests and contexts.

Contours of an Alternative Model

Each of the models analysed above have significant strengths and weaknesses. The challenge in developing an eco-theological approach to biblical authority is to develop a model that incorporates the strengths but avoids the weaknesses. Such a model would include the following:

- It must be self-critically aware that that we approach the Biblical documents with particular interests and commitments. The interest of a Christian eco-theology has propose three components. The first is an affirmation that God has revealed Godself in the history of Israel and in Jesus Christ as testified in the Bible. The second is a commitment to the healing of the earth. The third is the conviction that the faith commitment and the commitment to the healing of the earth are integrally and mutually related.

- An understanding of biblical authority in terms of God's redemptive purpose for the whole creation. The theological authority of the Bible is to be understood of its role as an instrument used by God to achieve God's redemptive purpose for all creation. The Bible must be understood primarily as means of grace for the transformation and equipping people that they can become agents of God's redemptive purposes for creation. Its function as a source and norm for theology is derived from this.
- It must be characterised by the recognition of the diversity, complexity and contradictions with in Bible in general but particularly in the way that the biblical authors address issues of ecological concern. There is no one biblical view of the earth and the role of humanity within the earth community. Nor can any one element of the biblical traditions be identified as the normative source for an ecological theology. Rather the biblical writers in their diversity contribute to how we can understand theologically the earth, God's relationship to it and humanities place within it.
- This diversity and complexity has theological significance. It functions to prevent the development of dominating meta-narratives and rigid pseudo-comprehensive theological constructions. Such constructions stunt our ability to address the demands of our contemporary contexts.
- The recognition that the dimensions of the biblical witness that are considered to have normative significance witness are always embedded within the contingencies of particular contexts and that there is no way of extracting them. This context is not limited to the social, cultural and historical dimensions; it must be understood deeper and broader to include the ecological and socio-ecological dimensions. Contexts function both to reveal and conceal. A particular context will facilitate the development of significant theological affirmations that might be considered to be normative and at the same time obscure, conceal and even deny others.
- The recognition of the diversity requires that we develop a canon that emerges out of the biblical canon. Such a canon will have both a hermeneutical and a normative function. Hermeneutically it will provide a perspective from which we can integrate the diverse biblical material in such a way that can demonstrate its internal relationships and enable us to interpret it to address our contemporary context. As a normative canon it will provide a point of orientation from which we can reject certain dimensions of the biblical writings as contrary to the redemptive purposes of God.
- There can be no prior justification of such a canon. Its validity will be demonstrated by its exegetical, hermeneutical and theological fruitfulness. It must always be recognised that it is a theological construction and be open to critique and change in the light of the diverse complexity of the biblical material and our contemporary experience.
- The use of a normative canon within the canon raises the question of how we should deal with the biblical texts that are subjected to critique and or rejected. One function is to ensure that the Bible is conceived as a non-totalising authority that cries out for resolution beyond itself. Further these texts perform the essential task of guarding the alien character of the Bible preventing it from being domesticated by any theological agenda. They continue to challenge any normative canon within the canon and require us to question whether we are listening to the biblical witnesses or merely using them to promote a pre existing agenda.
- The importance of narrative in understanding the biblical material must be recognised but not through the creation of an overarching meta-narrative. Nürnberger's concept of

“prototypical narratives” that describe a redemptive event and which are subsequently retold and ritually re-enacted holds greater promise. The construction of a canon within the canon should be linked to the recognition of certain key narratives which were ritually re-enacted, retold and reinterpreted over the centuries providing the people of Israel with their sense of identity and mission. It is the interpretation of these narratives that gives rise to the characteristic statements about God and God’s dealings with humanity and the non-human creation.

- Our task is not merely to discern what is normative within the biblical writings but to ask what must we do and say today. Thus we need a way of moving with the Bible beyond the Bible to address the contemporary ecological crisis. This moving beyond the text is grounded in two recognitions. The first is that we cannot simply move from the text to the contemporary world. The second is that the Bible when taken as a whole points beyond itself. This is a consequence both of the orientation to the future in some biblical traditions and of the ambiguities, tensions, contradictions and “texts of terror” (Trible 1984) that cry out for resolution beyond the biblical text. There is an unrealised potential within the biblical witness that can be realised as we bring a critical study of the bible into dialogue with contemporary issues. This potential cannot be realised by simply applying texts or principles deduced from the text to the contemporary contexts. Rather we need to extrapolate trajectories and discover “dynamic analogies” in creative fidelity to the biblical witness which recognises that creative faithfulness will entail going against particular texts. The goal is to develop a praxis which is characterised by innovation, flexibility, and self critique recognising that our theology and our praxis are always incomplete and potentially erroneous.

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