

FALLING IN LOVE WITH THE BARREL, OR CRITICALLY INVESTIGATING IT?¹

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Abstract

In this article Nürnberger's project to develop a theology of the biblical witness² is lauded for its insistence on the dynamism of the biblical text that cannot be captured in any one specific historical context. However, it is also indicated in this article that Nürnberger often falls prey to those dangers that he himself has indicated. It is argued that his approach imposes "from above" a heuristic framework onto the biblical witnesses which is too selective, optimistic and linear.

Key words: Biblical Interpretation, Biblical Theology, K Nürnberger, Systematic Theology.

Introduction

Nürnberger's book is certainly an ambitious project, because it takes "biblical interpretation" seriously. Its aim is to discern from the diversity of biblical witnesses the kind of "theology" which the authors and compilers of these witnesses have produced over a millenium of ancient history. The Bible is for Nürnberger "not a static system of propositions, but a dynamic witness to the redeeming presence of God in space, time and power relations" (2002:vi).

There is much to be lauded in this book. However, there are also points of serious criticism. When reading the book, it is not an easy task to identify the strong and weak aspects of this project. The strong points are often also the weaknesses. The real dangers in biblical interpretation that are indicated so clearly, are often those pitfalls into which this very study falls. Although I support the general approach of Nürnberger's book,³ I simultaneously disagree on many key points.

But let us start with those aspects that I evaluate positively.

'Dynamism' in Biblical Interpretation

Nürnberger indicates already in the first chapter of his study that "the challenge of our study is, therefore, to find a way to do justice to the dynamic character of the biblical tradition..." (2002:12). This is certainly one of the most important aspects that should be addressed in our present hermeneutical reflections. In many Christian traditions (certainly so in great

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

² Cf. Nürnberger, K 2002. *Theology of the Biblical Witness. An evolutionary approach*. Münster: LIT Verlag. All page numbers indicated in this article refer to this book. Other bibliographical references are provided in full.

³ Cf. e.g. Jonker (1996) as well as Jonker & Lawrie (2005, chapter 8).

parts of the reformed traditions from which I come) the Bible is seen as a deposit of timeless and eternal truths about God which should be scrutinized in order to glean those principles of faith for our day. This view often regards the biblical tradition as static, linear and one-dimensional. The introduction of the category of time into our hermeneutical reflection on the biblical tradition, criticises such a static and linear understanding of Scripture. When historical consciousness characterises one's hermeneutics, the dynamic and multi-dimensional character of the biblical tradition is focused upon. The multiplicity of traditions included in the Bible, as well as the long and intricate process of the origin and transmission of these traditions are then recognised and appreciated.

Nürnberger's study certainly falls in this last category. He indicates as the first hermeneutical task of his "evolutionary hermeneutics"⁴ that time should be taken into account. "The tradition depicts a sequence of events in time... There is no reality we know of which is not subject to time. Religious convictions are no exception... Time implies change. Time is a dynamic continuum which spans ancient documents and contemporary realities..." (2002:41). By focusing on the long history of origin, compilation and transmission of the biblical traditions, Nürnberger is able to discover the dynamism which characterises the Bible itself, and which creates the possibility and opportunity of extrapolating these traditions into our own world and faith experiences.

Nürnberger complements his insistence on the factor of time with his awareness of how space and power relations influence our hermeneutical endeavours. "Space implies difference in situations" (2002:42), and "power differentials lead to differences in interests, and the legitimation of such interests" (2002:42). Following the continuum of time in the reconstruction of the biblical traditions, one should be well aware of the fact that changes in time always bring about changes in situation and power relations. This certainly applies to our modern-day efforts to interpret, but also to those different contexts within which the biblical traditions originated and were compiled and transmitted. One could, however, ask the critical question whether Nürnberger succeeds to keep these three factors in balance in his hermeneutical proposal.

Because historical flux is the backbone of Nürnberger's evolutionary hermeneutics, he uses the category of "paradigm"⁵ in his study of the biblical traditions. Although his understanding of paradigm/trajectory will be criticised in the next section, it should be acknowledged (together with Brueggemann in the foreword) that this notion "serves well both constancy and dynamism" (2002:viii). Nürnberger himself indicates that the trajectories that he identifies in his evolutionary hermeneutics, are called "paradigms" as they "...have assumed paradigmatic significance for the biblical faith" (2002:58). In his discussion of "six soteriological paradigms" in Part II of his study, he then shows how these paradigms move through the main phases of Israelite, Jewish and early Christian history.

With his paradigmatic approach, Nürnberger stands in continuity with the tradition-historical approach that was mainly developed by Gerhard von Rad and Martin Noth in Old

⁴ Part I of Nürnberger's book is an exposition of the principles of the evolutionary approach that he advocates.

⁵ Nürnberger's use of "paradigm" comes close to Brueggemann's (1993) use of the category "trajectory" (a concept that Nürnberger occasionally uses as synonym for "paradigm"). However, whereas Brueggemann asks attention for the diversity in biblical traditions with his reference to trajectories, Nürnberger emphasises the linear continuity of redemptive experiences witnessed in the biblical traditions. Brueggemann, in the foreword to Nürnberger's book (2002:iii) indicates that Nürnberger's use of the concept "paradigm" comes close to the use of this concept by Eric Vogelín who defines it as "...an act of interpretive imagination that is not held in thrall by positivistic data".

Testament studies, and which was further developed and adapted in the compositional-historical studies of Rolf Rendtorff and Erhard Blum.⁶ The lastmentioned studies, in particular, reacted against an overly-analytical approach to biblical interpretation in which the focus is so strong on the underlying sources of biblical literature, that the unity and unifying transmission processes of the biblical literature is neglected. Nürnberger's criticism against overly-analytical approaches in biblical scholarship is harsh (and rightly so if this is not meant to be a general assessment of biblical scholarship!) when he says: "Much of biblical scholarship moves about in a maze of conjectures and trivialities" (p. 5-6). He finds support for this criticism in Dirkie Smit's view (1998:295) that "...in scholarly circles, biblical interpretation took place in a scientific, analytical, rational, historical way – without much impact on or relevance for the church and Christian living, or for public life at large" (quoted in Nürnberger 2002: 16, n. 2). This criticism should certainly be taken seriously by biblical scholars who remain detached from communities of faith in their scholarship.

Nürnberger's evolutionary approach allows a very dynamic view of the biblical canon. The closure of the Canon is for him only a particular stage in a process. He uses the metaphor of the barrel of a gun⁷ to explain how he views the biblical canon: "I have found a rather appealing picture for the function of the Canon: It is the role of the barrel of a gun in relation to that of the bullet. The barrel stands for the Canon, the bullet for the rationale of the Word of God... Note that the barrel of the gun is strictly limited in length, but open in front. Its rationale is to give direction to the thrust of the bullet, which is to fly to a distant destination..." (2002:115). Again Nürnberger succeeds in balancing the constancy factor and regulatory function of the canon with its continuity and dynamism.

Central to Nürnberger's argument is, however, the exposition of his hermeneutics in chapter 3 of his book. He starts his discussion with an indication of the hermeneutical problem that he detects in our interpretive endeavours. "For main line Christianity the divine message is no longer conveyed through oracle, dream, ecstasy or inspiration, but through tradition. The Word of God does not drop from heaven here and now as needed; it emerged and evolved in past history and must be channelled from there into ongoing history. In this process it acquired a distinctive identity. To be authentic, the proclamation of the Word of God and the response of faith must be in line with the tradition" (2002:40). Nürnberger thus emphasises that our hermeneutical task is performed between the historical tradition and the present reality. The historical gap between the tradition and the present situation aggravates our task. It is in the context of this problem statement that Nürnberger then argues that time, space and power should be factors that are taken into account in our hermeneutical models.

In a next sub-section Nürnberger then discusses the common hermeneutical approaches, namely "behind-the-text reading", "before-the text reading" and "in-the-text reading".⁸ He rightly indicates how dangerous and misleading it can be when any one of these approaches are absolutised in our hermeneutical endeavours. He also warns against those "above-the-text readings" which "...impose preformulated structures of meaning on texts and their interpretations" (2002:51).

⁶ Cf. e.g. Von Rad (1961), Noth (1967), Rendtorff (1977) and Blum (1984 and 1990).

⁷ One could argue that a gun, which is mostly associated with aggression and violence, is not a good metaphor to refer to the Bible. However, the focus is here rather on the function of the metaphor.

⁸ I am not sure that Nürnberger is using "in-the-text reading" in the way it is normally used in scholarship, namely concentration on "the texts themselves". His discussion (2002:53-54) deals with issues that are not central to this perspective on biblical texts (as it is traditionally understood in scholarship).

In the formulation of his own approach Nürnberger argues that “before-the-text reading” is inevitable, and that it in fact has taken place throughout the history of transmission of the biblical traditions. He also relates “behind-the-text reading” to this view. Behind-the-text reading is nothing but a series of before-the-text readings. This view of Nürnberger should be lauded. He succeeds to steer away from the unjustified dichotomy that often characterizes hermeneutical discussions, namely that synchrony and diachrony are actually two opposite strategies of interpretation. This dichotomy is indeed unjustified, because a diachronical description of the biblical traditions is nothing more (and nothing less) than a series of synchronical observations on these traditions. An integration of synchronical and diachronical perspectives should therefore be achieved in our interpretation. Nürnberger makes a valuable contribution in this regard.⁹

Many of the points mentioned above turn, however, against Nürnberger when he elaborates on and illustrates his evolutionary hermeneutical approach. The following section will introduce a few points of criticism.

A ‘Reading from Above’?

In Chapter 3 of his book where Nürnberger introduces the common hermeneutical approaches of behind-the-text, before-the-text and in-the-text readings, he warns against certain aberrations of these positions. One of the points of criticism against certain before-the-text readings that he raises, deals with the role of ideology in interpretation. “Most disturbing is the problem of ideology. In this case the meaning gained by before-the-text reading is not the meaning intended by the author, but also not a meaning inherent in the alternative world of the text (as assumed by Ricoeur), but a new meaning which is, essentially, derived from the *needs of the situation* (my emphasis – LCJ). These needs include, for most people, the legitimization of their ambitions, desires and interests. While not inevitable, *these presuppositions will normally determine what the text actually says* to that reader (my emphasis – LCJ). In how far can it still convey the ‘Word of God’ to the reader?” (2002:49). This is certainly a good summary of uncritical before-the-text reading strategies.

However, it then remains unclear why Nürnberger does not apply this criticism to his own approach. Throughout his work he insists that “... the ‘Word of God’ is, in all its forms, divine response to *human need*” (2002:4). According to Nürnberger, “only a *needs-based approach* to the biblical witness will lead us to a redemptive message for today.” The dynamism of his evolutionary approach is then also found in the ongoing constellations of human needs that develop as time goes by. “New needs constantly prompt new perceptions of what ought to be in concrete situations” (2002:9). Although Nürnberger qualifies that “... felt needs are not necessarily genuine needs” and that “(g)enuine needs are deficiencies in comprehensive wellbeing, not mere wants” (2002:9), it remains a question how these human needs differ from those needs that he has indicated to be the basis of ideological distortion. Does the presupposition that human needs are actually the driving force behind Nürnberger’s evolutionary approach also determine what the text actually says to him? To what extent can such a needs-based approach remain the “Word of God”?

⁹ See my own contribution in Jonker (1996). I opted for the term “multidimensional” to indicate the integration of synchronical and diachronical perspectives.

Closely related to the above issue, is his criticism of forms of above-the-text reading. He defines these readings as those that "...impose preformulated structures of meaning on texts and their interpretations" (2002:51). It remains unclear how these above-the-text readings then differ from ideological before-the-text readings. However, this is not the main point of criticism in this regard. Two of Nürnberger's examples of how above-the-text readings can go wrong, are relevant here. The first of these is a "canon in the canon" approach. According to Nürnberger, this means that "...a particular theological concern is elevated to the status of the essential content of the Word of God" (2002:51). Is this not the case with the "soteriological paradigms" that form the backbone of his hermeneutics, and which reach its culmination in the Christ event (2002:15)? Is this notion not a preformulated structure of meaning that is imposed onto the texts?

A second aberration of above-the-text reading is found, according to Nürnberger, in what is traditionally called "biblical theology". "Here a seemingly coherent narrative is constructed out of the disjointed biblical material. It smoothes over the disparities and ignores the incongruences. Although it tries to revitalise the biblical tradition itself, one cannot claim it to be an objective depiction of the biblical tradition as history has presented it to us" (2002:52). Should one assume that this also applies to Nürnberger's reconstruction of six soteriological paradigms – "which are central to the biblical faith" (2002:vi) – in part II of his study? Are these descriptions in part II also smoothing over the disparities and ignoring the incongruences in the texts?

The coherence of these paradigms, according to Nürnberger, lies in the needs-constellations that drive God's redemptive response into the future. As Nürnberger puts it: "The Christian faith indeed has a central theme, which constitutes its identity and its criterion of truth, namely the ever changing response of God's redemptive concern to ever changing situations of human need" (2002:56). Nürnberger argues that over time these individual instances were bundled, and that together they produced an awareness of the underlying rationale. "It is called *shalom* in the Old Testament and the *Kingdom of God* in the New Testament (his emphasis). These concepts stand for God's vision of the comprehensive wellbeing of all human beings in the context of the comprehensive wellbeing of their entire social and natural environments. This is the meta-criterion of the truth of both the biblical tradition and its current interpretations. Both texts and readings of texts which contradict this basic thrust are not legitimate expressions of the biblical truth" (2002:56).

It is clear from the above quotations that Nürnberger not only reduces everything in the Bible to the central concepts of "Shalom" and "Kingdom of God", but he also deploys these concepts of coherence as sole judge for the legitimacy of texts and readings of texts. Such an approach that searches for a centre in the Old and New Testaments has been widely criticised as reductionist by biblical scholars over several decades.¹⁰ Such an approach does not give adequate expression to the diversity of concepts, meanings and witnesses included in the biblical texts. One recent publication by Gerstenberger (2001) is even called "Theologien im Alten Testament".

Nürnberger certainly does not deny or ignore diversity in the biblical witnesses. However, certain of his views seem strange against the background of his acceptance of diversity. This is probably best illustrated in his criticism of Brueggemann who "...keeps contradictory statements found in the Old Testament in dialectical tension, suggesting that

¹⁰ Criticism against the idea of a "centre" was first expressed by Von Rad (1961), but later on also by other scholars, such as Gunneweg (1978) and Oeming (1987).

both statements are equally valid. He does not allow for the fact that later insights might have invalidated earlier insights” (2002:35, n. 15, repeated in 2002:69, n. 60). Nürnberger’s criticism of Brueggemann is fierce when he says “Brueggemann, for all his historical-critical expertise still seems to assume that the ‘holy scripture’ contains divine revelation which cannot be questioned, not even from within the biblical tradition itself” (2002:35, n. 15). I do not see it my task to defend Brueggemann on this issue, but Nürnberger’s criticism reveals how static and linear his understanding of soteriological paradigms is. The following quote also illustrates this: “...Reconstruction does not try to read something into the texts, but to gain access to the *sequence of meanings* (my emphasis – LCJ), intended by the authors and editors of the story, in which the undercurrent of meaning manifests itself” (2002:60). Although Nürnberger admits that “...evolution is not always progressive and goal-directed” and that “(t)he flow of history can move sideways, even backwards”, in practice his evolutionary hermeneutics does not convince on this point. If “trajectory” or “paradigm” means for Nürnberger a linear development of undercurrents of meanings (his criticism against Brueggemann suggests this understanding of his notions), it is certainly too reductionistic and one-dimensional to describe the dynamics of the diverse processes of reinterpretation that brought about the Bible. It probably would be better to refer to “intra- and intertextual dynamics”, a description that would not only allow for the diversity of traditions and interaction among traditions, but would also (together with Brueggemann) keep up the dialectic tension between certain traditions without “smoothing” these differences with the notion of superseding traditions.¹¹ It remains unclear, in any case, how Nürnberger would justify the existence of the canon of Scripture while his opinion is that newer traditions superseded older ones within specific soteriological paradigms which found their culmination in the Christ event. Why were these superseded traditions then kept in the canon, and why does the canon not consist of only the latest stages of development of these undercurrents of meaning?

After these critical remarks one could justifiably ask whether Nürnberger’s evolutionary approach is not a good example of above-the-text reading which he is criticising in his work. Is he not imposing preformulated structures of meaning onto the Old and New Testament texts and their interpretations?

Conclusion: Falling in Love with the Barrel or Investigating it Critically?

Although many more points of criticism could have been raised in this discussion, we can conclude with a critical question with regard to how Nürnberger views the contribution of biblical scholarship in this hermeneutical endeavour. Reference has been made above to Nürnberger’s use of the metaphor of a gun barrel to describe the stability and openness of the biblical canon. In this context he continues in a footnote: “A few caricatures – not meant to hurt, but to amuse – may serve to clarify the issue further. Classical Catholicism extends the length of the barrel right up to the buck, but its weight causes it to bend and miss the target. Fundamentalists try to hit the buck over the head with the barrel. *Biblical scholars tend to fall in love with the beauty of the barrel, as collectors do* (my emphasis – LCJ). Critical hermeneutics tries to impress the puzzled buck with the special characteristics of the barrel. Because the Holy Spirit can do marvellous things, a shot may go off in all these cases and kill the buck. But if that happens, it is more by accident than design. In contrast, our hermeneutical approach trains the barrel on the deer and fires” (2002:133, n. 37).

¹¹ Cf. the description of this dynamics in Jonker & Lawrie (2005, ch. 8).

Although Nürnberger calls these descriptions “caricatures”, many a true word is often spoken in jest! Nürnberger should certainly also know that one could force a deliberately chosen bullet into the barrel, without taking notice of the caliber and construction of the barrel. A real danger is then that the shot could backfire into one’s face. To prevent such an accident, it would certainly be advisable to get somebody to critically investigate the barrel, to determine how it was constructed, to describe what caliber ammunition would fit into it. Such a person may certainly not be just an admirer (as Nürnberger rightly points out), but should be well-equipped for the task of critical investigation. Biblical scholars probably do not fire shots, but they are certainly valuable allies for those who want to fire any shot!

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