

BUT THEN AGAIN, PERHAPS NOT...¹

Douglas G Lawrie
Department of Religion and Theology
University of the Western Cape

Abstract

This review primarily examines the hermeneutical principles Nürnberger uses to bridge the gap between biblical theology and systematic theology. It argues that Nürnberger correctly identifies the task and problems facing theologians who wish to construct a critical, contextual theology without abandoning the biblical witness completely. He offers a suggestive metaphor, but his hermeneutical principles do not quite establish his conclusions. Instead, the review suggests, the conclusions owe their plausibility to the metaphor – and to the considerable wisdom and faith Nürnberger brings to the project. Perhaps we have no better resources when we deal with intractable problems.

Key words: Biblical Theology, K Nürnberger, Systematic Theology

Some questions, no matter how often they are evaded or reformulated, necessarily arise again – in many different fields, but with particular pertinence in Christian theology. It is to the credit of Nürnberger that he addresses two of these questions, just as it is to my discredit that I tend to evade them.

The first question in its simplest form is: “How can the past in its uniqueness provide guidance for the present in its uniqueness?” What, if anything, survives sheer eventuality to mediate between the two apparently contingent contexts? Lessing (sd [1777]:85f) spoke of the “broad ugly ditch” that separates “contingent truths of history” from “eternal truths of reason”, arguing that the former can never provide the basis for the latter. Although we use a different terminology today, his question has not lost its edge. If everything constantly changes and each context is in some ways unique, what belongs to a different time and context can in principle never apply to me, guide me or have authority for me *directly*. If, however, the mediating principle inheres in my context, it is unclear to what extent the “other context” makes any contribution. If, for instance, I recognize revelation in the past simply because it corresponds to what I experience as revelation here and now, I might as well dispense with any talk of past revelation. What is needed to bridge the gap is a principle underlying the pattern of permanence and change, similarity and difference.²

Nürnberger relies on an evolutionary hermeneutics to solve the problem. He is aware of both the “dynamic character of biblical tradition” and the need for “laying foundations, defining identity, granting acceptance, bestowing authority and giving direction to life” (2002:12). Therefore, theology should neither abandon the Bible completely nor attempt to apply the Bible directly to our context. He uses the metaphor of the gun used to shoot a

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

² According to a plausible reading of him, Derrida has this problem in mind when he introduces terms such as *différance* and iterability. See, for instance, Derrida 1998:385ff.

buck to clarify his position. The shot is effective only if the bullet leaves the gun behind, yet the shape and angle of the barrel directs the path of the bullet. So too study of the Bible reveals the direction in which God's dealing with humanity was and is moving, not a set of eternal truths. When Christians today extrapolate the evolutionary line that can be detected within the biblical witness, they "leave the Bible behind" and "stay in line with the Bible" at the same time.

The second question in its simplest form is: "Why is what is not what should be?" Why, if either God or a natural chain of cause and effect absolutely determines what is the case, do we not say that whatever is, is good (as Pope said)? Traditionally theology asked how suffering is possible if God is both almighty and good and answered by constructing various theodicies.

Cast in a secular mould, the question returns today in a split form, as the twin questions of gnoseology and critiology. Gnoseology, the justification of our knowledge, tries to explain why we are justified in saying of *some* things that they simply are as they are and cannot be changed. Critiology, the justification of our critiques, tries to explain why we are justified in saying of *some* things that they can and should be changed. In both cases one may ask, in the spirit of Derrida (cf Derrida 1978), by what authority we terminate play by asserting either that some possibilities are actually excluded or that some possibilities should be excluded.

Again, Nürnberger is aware of the difficulties. As basis for knowledge, he takes the evolutionary model accepted by modern science – without making extravagant claims for it. It may not provide us with final answers, but it is the most powerful explanatory model in the field today. A theology that does not come to terms with it will be unable to address a world in which this model dominates (cf 2002:70ff). In a separate section (2002:18-38), Nürnberger provides a justification for critique, arguing that the necessity of critique can be deduced from human fallibility and from the biblical witness itself (reason and faith being in accord here!).

Although Nürnberger makes a strong *prima facie* case, it may be noted that his accounts, even in his own terms, do not quite balance. Certainly, evolutionary theory is too powerful to be dismissed lightly, but he feels that the equally dominant current of modernity should be challenged in the name of what should be. Then again, he pleads for critique without restrictions (2002:33), having previously stated that not all critique is justified. "Much critique is meant to circumvent the challenge of the gospel" and arises from "questionable assumptions ... which are the causes of the current economic and ecological crises" (2002:32). Thus his knowledge of what is allows him to disqualify some assertions about what should be.

That I happen to agree with Nürnberger on both counts is surely not the point. Like him, I wish to acknowledge "that reality is in flux and infinitely complex" (2002:33) and that our insights are perspectival (2002:32). Like him, I do not wish to succumb to a "general relativisation of the truth" or to suggest that "reality ... is nothing but a construct of our mind which we are entitled to deconstruct and reconstruct at will" (2002:33). Having been unable to give adequate theoretical shape to my wishes, I must, somewhat ungenerously, state that Nürnberger has not persuaded me that he has a solution.

Of course, I agree with much of what he says. For instance, Louis Jonker and I have also advocated an exegetical model based on extrapolation (2005:241f) and I have defended historical criticism, in spite of its limitations, for reasons similar to the ones he advances (Lawrie 2001). In a series of articles on history (in preparation), I take a line similar to his. That all reading is inevitably "reading before the text" I do not deny. As a rhetorician, I

endorse fully his view on the primacy of communication (2002:287ff), though I would have placed it earlier in the book. His section “entropy and sacrifice” drew my applause: I discovered a similar view, cast in a different terminology, in Kenneth Burke (cf Burke 1955:260-267). In matters of detail, I found sentences that I not only could have written, but, give or take a word or two, have written.

I also disagree with Nürnberger frequently. Most often, it seems to me, my disagreement stems from what I regard as his underestimation of “reading in the text” – reading that takes all aspects of the linguistic form seriously. For instance, he seems to have a narrow understanding of polysemy and not appreciate the role of metaphor (and other tropes) in the Bible and his own text fully. A few examples (from among many) will have to suffice:

Nürnberger asserts that the priesthood tried (in general and particularly in Deuteronomy) to “usurp and replace the prophetic charisma” (2002:258). Perhaps so, but his examples do not convince. Deut. 13:1-5 states that the call to “serve other Gods” may come from prophets (1-5), the family circle (6-11) or a large section of the community – a whole city (12-18). The list clearly deals with factors that could aggravate the temptation to apostasy: prophetic authority, loyalty to the family and solidarity with fellow Israelites. In all of these cases, not only in that of the prophets, the guilty parties should be killed. Nürnberger says that the people are warned to “beware of prophets”. Are they also warned to beware of family members? It is disingenuous to say that prophets “should even be killed, *if need be*” (2002:258), since the verse in question pertinently talks about prophets who teach “rebellion against Yahweh”. Nürnberger ignores the literary context, which was already perfectly plain to Von Rad (1966:96ff).

Deut. 18:15ff can hardly be read as an attempt to make Moses, already a priest, a prophet as well, thereby joining the offices of priest and prophet. First, most commentators believe that the concern of the whole section on the “offices” is to keep them separate and independent from one another (cf Miller 1990:142). Secondly, Yahweh promises to “raise up” a line of prophets (verse 15), while priestly tenure is inherited. Thirdly, the test for “false prophets” (and false prophecy was a *prophetic* concern since the time of Micah) is historical (verse 21f). In a priestly test one would have expected reference to “this torah” (the preserve of the priesthood). Fourthly, the prophetic *word* stands in contrast to the “technical” means of gaining knowledge employed by various other groups (verse 10f; cf Miller 1990:152). This can hardly be a priestly concern, since priests themselves used technical means.

Many commentators even feel that the prophet’s position among the office bearers is that of *primus inter pares* (cf Miller 1990:151f). This would make sense if the Deuteronomic authors were under the influence of prophetic preaching, as many have argued (cf Miller 1990:5f). In any case, Deuteronomy was hardly written to support a priestly agenda. The very distinct differences between the Deuteronomic and the priestly traditions are carefully listed by Weinfeld (1991:25-37).³

The chapter on the exodus paradigm seems to be driven by polemical intentions and often suffers on account of that. For instance, the comparative needs analysis of the exodus and the covenant paradigms (2002:165) is tendentious. The right to existence and to social life cannot be separated that easily from the rights to identity (why “authority”?), freedom and economic sufficiency. Nürnberger separates the Sinai tradition from the exodus

³ Nürnberger (2002:259) also cites Ex. 4:13-16, claiming that this is an attempt to turn Aaron the priest into a prophet as well. But he might as well have said, keeping the context in mind, that it is an attempt to turn Moses into God! See Houtman (1993:416ff) and Schmidt (1988:204ff) for more sensible suggestions. Both point out that Aaron remains subordinate to Moses.

tradition – rightly from a traditio-historical viewpoint – but he insists on maintaining the link between exodus and conquest, although these two traditions are at least as far apart as the other two.

To prove that “the exodus motif did not go through history as a versatile, powerfully evolving paradigm of socio-political liberation with ever new political applications and adaptations”⁴ (2002:197), Nürnberger deals harshly with some texts. He rightly says that Josiah’s reform was “not the same as a popular liberation struggle aimed at human rights” and equally rightly notes that the reform trampled on certain human rights (2002:179). But so have all “popular liberation struggles” that I know of. He denies what most commentators acknowledge, namely that Deutero-Isaiah uses the exodus as a paradigmatic example of God’s acts of liberation (2002:181). If he had argued that the exodus paradigm is imperfect *as all paradigms are* and that it contains inherent dialectical possibilities for abuse *as all paradigms do*, he would have provided a valuable corrective to *one-sided* forms of exodus theology.

So what? Others would undoubtedly agree and disagree as often, but at different points. If Nürnberger’s hermeneutical principles yield good results in main, disagreements about minor points of exegesis would not invalidate his project. If, however, his principles cannot be shown to generate his conclusions in a broad sense, one has to conclude that he has either used other principles in practice or has sometimes hit the target by chance. One therefore has to scrutinize the principles and their application.

The evolutionary principle, being the one advertised in the subtitle, may be placed first. The principle seems clear enough to provide unequivocal guidance, but Nürnberger is far too clever to think of evolution as a unilinear process of “progress” (cf 2002:79ff). But because, as he admits, evolution sometimes moves backwards or sideways, we are not able to approach the past in the secure knowledge that we, being at a “higher” level, can comprehend and surpass the “lower” level. In spite of what others have said, Nürnberger is not in practice a supercessionist in his interpretation. This is plain from his predominantly negative view of, for instance, the post-exilic priestly “theocracy” (shades of Wellhausen!), Greek influence on the early church, and modernity. Evolutionary theory as such did not mediate these insights.

Moreover, a form of strictly evolutionary hermeneutics would find itself forced to say that the benighted inhabitants of that other country called the past could not but think and speak as they did. However mistaken they were, they chose the best options available to them. One would, for instance, have to say that Herbert Spencer rightly – for his time – believed in “the survival of the fittest” and in “free enterprise” capitalism. But is it not possible that Spencer was mistaken, not merely in hindsight, but even in terms of the resources available at that time? Nürnberger would, I feel sure, wish to say that that he was. In order to do so, he would have to introduce a principle not inherent in evolutionary theory itself.

The second principle to which Nürnberger appeals regularly is that of needs. “Needs analysis” allows the exegete to distinguish God’s redemptive actions in history from mere “events”. Again, the principle promises much but delivers rather less. Nürnberger wisely refrains from taking humans needs at face value: not all perceived needs are authentic human needs and not all authentic needs are perceived by those involved (cf 2002:9f). Quite so, but then once more the needs analysis performs its task only in conjunction with another principle extraneous to it.

⁴ The philosopher and political theorist Michael Walzer, writing without a theological axe to grind, reaches the opposite conclusion in this regard. See Walzer 1985.

Nürnberger (2002:57ff) calls his reading practice “reading below the text” (although he does not claim that his practice excludes or invalidates other reading practices). Since reading below the text seeks to uncover the thrust of the biblical witness, his idea is attractive. But exactly how can reading below the text be distinguished from reading above the text, the practice of which Nürnberger says that it imposes “preformulated structures of meaning on texts”? “Where texts or interpretations do not fit, they are made to fit, marginalised or excluded” (2002:51). Nürnberger, it seems to me, does this himself at several points. Indeed, he admits that we cannot completely avoid above the text reading.

Somewhat discreetly Nürnberger introduces another principle – that of experience (cf 2002:12f). Obviously mere personal experience cannot be presented as an interpretative criterion without inviting accusations of precisely the relativism that Nürnberger wishes to avoid. But then, what exactly is this experiential basis of theology? Is it the communal experience of the church, the shared experience of certain needs common to humanity, or perhaps the experience to which the evolutionary process has brought humanity at a given stage? Much of the appeal of Nürnberger’s experiential principle resides in its vagueness. It seems to draw strength from its subterranean links with a specifically Christian tradition (the ongoing redemptive intervention of God in history), the notion of shared human needs and the process of evolution, but the links remain wrapped in obscurity.

Moreover, Nürnberger makes it clear that not all experiences have the same guiding function. Modernity, itself presumably an aberration, has saddled people with false needs and the church seems unable to gain the experiential insights demanded by this situation. This modernity is, among other things, wedded to empiricism: this is one of the criticisms levelled against it (2002:103). But who can tell the etymological twins, “experiential” and “empirical”, apart and on what basis?

Nürnberger does offer another suggestion that might cast light on the specifically Christian experience to which he appeals. If, as Galatians 4 suggests, we are no longer little children in God’s household, but “mature sons and daughters of God”, we are “given both the authority and the responsibility to take decisions” – for which we would be accountable (2002:314). “Humans are put in charge of the universe and expected to ascertain for themselves what is good and acceptable in the eyes of God, namely the comprehensive wellbeing of the entire creation.” This, Nürnberger argues, means that the “modern concern for emancipation and empowerment is the valid outcome of a process rooted, at least partly, in biblical history” (2002:315). Here, it seems, evolutionary history and the thrust of the biblical witness join forces to validate a perceived (experiential) need – at least for Christians.

All is in order until one notes that Nürnberger explicitly opposes “genuine human sovereignty” to the human autonomy promoted by secular humanism (2002:316). The distinction works as long as one defines autonomy so that it invariably implies selfish and irresponsible individualism – as it often does in practice. But the distinction becomes thoroughly blurred if the word “autonomy” is used as it was used by that archetypical secular humanist Kant. Kant’s “humanity come of age” lives according to a vision of a “realm of ends” in which humans are never treated merely as means but always also as ends, in which autonomy is the very basis of responsibility. Nürnberger’s vision is certainly not Kant’s, but the pertinently theological differences cannot be derived from Nürnberger’s overt argument. They stem, apparently, from the biblical witness, though in a way that bypasses Nürnberger’s principles.

The tensions mentioned above work through to individual parts of the book in which decisions are taken that are not clearly principled ones. Perhaps the Davidic and Solomonic Empire – if it existed – represented a fairly typical oriental despotism (2002:209). But then it

is quite likely that the imperial imperative also necessitated a theological justification of a form of universalism that clashed with tribal exclusivism. Certainly, the principles of free enterprise and free trade are “as remote from the principles of popular mandate and popular accountability as can be” (2002:236), but “It is God who gives a mandate to rule on behalf of nature and who demands accountability on behalf of nature” (also 2002:236). For the policies that Nürnberger (and I) wishes to see implemented to protect nature (including reduction in the human population) there is as yet no popular mandate either. Of course, like the priests of old we believe and want others to believe that we are speaking on behalf of God.

And sometimes it is difficult to believe the human speaker. “It has often been argued that the claim of the people to sovereignty is in conflict with the sovereignty of God. But this is an ideological argument designed to legitimate authoritarian rule” (2002:234). Really? Although I reject the slogan *vox populi, vox dei*, I do not feel a desire to legitimate authoritarian rule.

Then again, Nürnberger (2002:292) says that Brueggemann’s criticism of Protestantism⁵ for its bias against cultic mediation cannot be applied to him. “I hope I have come to my conclusions not on the basis of dogma, but on the basis of textual analysis!” Since both Brueggemann (in his analysis of Protestant theology’s dealing with the cult) and Nürnberger (in his analysis of the relevant texts) rely on ideological criticism, one has to decide whose suspicion is best founded. Given the high regard in which cultic mediation is held in most religions and the relatively isolated position of Protestantism (which does not reject cultic mediation outright) in this matter, the scales tip against Nürnberger.

Certainly, Nürnberger’s metaphor of the gun (a canon loaded with grapeshot?) is striking and useful. But is his evolutionary approach decisively better than other attempts that follow roughly the same line? Is it, for instance, clearly superior to George Adam Smith’s attempt to identify “the Spirit of Christ in the Old Testament” more than a century ago (Smith 1901)? Smith too employs a striking metaphor (which he restricts to the relationship between the two testaments, but which he could have employed more widely): the Old Testament is the “hinterland” of the New. The “rivers which grew to their fullness in the new dispensation” flow from the “ampler areas and wider watersheds” of the hinterland (1901:4).⁶

But Nürnberger’s concerns can also be found in Lessing, whose famous words on the ugly, broad ditch were quoted at the beginning of this review. In his *Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*, Lessing also envisages an evolutionary process. That he picked the term “education” was probably as typical of the middle of the 18th century as Nürnberger’s

⁵ Brueggemann is echoing a view expressed long ago by Mowinckel. “The modern critical Protestant interpreters, in fact, have no real understanding of the cult either in Biblical religion or in religion in general. More or less consciously they all share that contempt of ordered ecclesiastical worship which was common to pietism, revivalist movements, rationalism and liberalism” (Mowinckel 1972:13).

⁶ Among the many other points of contact, note the following: Smith also deals with the necessity of critique (1901:5-28). The canon itself was “the result of criticism” and that “what was the decision of the Church’s criticism at the beginning is not beyond the Church’s criticism now” (1901:6). Effectively he pleads for an open canon in Nürnberger’s sense. He derives the right and duty to criticize from the critique found in the biblical witness itself, citing the New Testament and the prophetic preaching (1901:11-23). See also his attack on theories on inerrancy and verbal inspiration (1901:23ff), stating that these doctrines have been “fertile in casuistry, bigotry and cruel oppression of every kind” (1901:25). Like Nürnberger (90), Smith believes that many biblical narratives without any historical base “are still true in terms of the contents of faith” (cf Smith 1901:107f). For Smith the Bible essentially reveals God’s “ethical character and will for men” (1901:113) – in other words, God’s vision for humanity. Although Smith sometimes sounds more “orthodox” than Nürnberger, he is perfectly willing to call 1 Kings 2:5-9 “horrible words clothing a horrible spirit”, the spirit being that of post-exilic legalists (1901:175).

preference for the term “evolution” is of the early 21st century. Lessing regards *both* Old and New Testament as “Elementarbücher” – primers for children (1982:306). Their value does not lie in what precisely they say, since they are *designed* to be surpassed; their purpose is to direct the way forward. To this end they contain “Fürübungen”, “Anspielungen”, “Fingerzeigen” (1982:302) and “Richtungstossen” (1982:306), because “Die Erziehung hat ihr Ziel” (1982:311). When the purpose has been served, when the truths of revelation are finally recognized as truths of reason, the primers can be laid aside.

Yet Lessing is not eager to dispense with the primers. Even the apparent shortcomings of the primers may not be what we now imagine them to be. The “beigemischten Lehren” may be as yet unrecognized “Richtungstossen” for human reason (1982:306); apparently retrograde steps may take the process as a whole forward, for “Es ist nicht wahr, dass die kürzeste Linie immer die gerade ist” (1982:313). Therefore students who believe that they have exploited the primers to the full should return to them to make sure that what they took for mere didactic strategy is not perhaps something more (1982:307).⁷ Above all, Lessing clearly believes that those who regard the *process* itself will not be blinded by the flaws in the *books*. “Gott hätte seine Hand bei allem im Spiel, nur bei unsern Irrtümern nicht?” (1982:290).

Lessing is not Nürnberger and Nürnberger is not Lessing. For all that the comparison is not unrevealing. Lessing’s rhetoric of reason (Vernunft) may be as misleading as (I believe) Nürnberger’s rhetoric of evolution is. Lessing’s objection to the “contingent truths of history” is not that they do not commend themselves to his reason, but that he has not personally *experienced* them (sd [1777]:83). Throughout he ascribes to “Vernunft” what one might as well ascribe to *religious sense* – his test is experiential, not logical.⁸ Revelation is ultimately dispensable (in principle), because the heart of revealed truth is already in the heart of the religious person.⁹

Conversely, Nürnberger appeals to the experience, but seems to rely on reason in the broad sense as a hidden interpretative principle in practice. When, in the cases I have cited above, his stated principles do not warrant the distinctions he actually makes, his discourse does not become incoherent. The distinctions are plausible, being distinctions a wise person, relying on *phronesis* rather than on *theoria*, might make and could defend rhetorically – albeit by means of examples and metaphors rather than by means of logic. Nürnberger does not include wisdom among his redemptive paradigms, but he might well have done so, in view of both his account of wisdom and his own performance.

Had he overtly appealed to the wisdom of those guided of the Holy Spirit to justify his own account, my questions to him would have been different. I would have asked whether his emphasis on horizontal trajectories does not sometimes blind him – against his own intention – to vertical complexities, to dialectical tensions within particular texts and traditions, to possibilities inherent in metaphorical, polysemic texts, to elements of over-determination that complicate ideological criticism, and so on. I would have asked more pertinently about some debatable views on specific texts and the conclusions he draws from them.

⁷ In a letter to Moses Mendelssohn (1983:216) he expresses similar views.

⁸ This is confirmed in the closing paragraphs of the *Erziehung* (1982:313f), where he toys with the idea of re-incarnation (or palingenesis) – to ensure that everyone will experience the whole of the educational process personally. See also Barth 1972:253f, 261f and Barth’s overall assessment of Lessing – which is not unsympathetic though critical.

⁹ See Barth 1972:255f and Lessing’s *Axiomata* directed against Goeze (sd [1778]). In the latter, Lessing’s arguments often approach those of Nürnberger.

As matters stand, I am haunted, rather, by a statement in Nürnberger's book with which I am largely or fully in agreement. "If reality has indeed evolved ... and if God is the source of reality..., *it is this very God* who has created reality through evolution. It is that simple!" What is is, and we have to "fall in line with a structured process" (2002:406). "God stands for what ought to be against what is." As "mature sons and daughters of God" we must "find valid responses to current predicaments", thereby bearing witness to "the redemptive intentions of God" (2002:415). All of this I also wish to say. That is, I wish to affirm *both* that God is the *source* of what is and that God is our *resource* against what is, but should not be. I could say that the process of evolution (with God as its source) has led me to this somewhat contradictory conclusion. But are those who disagree with me on a higher or a lower evolutionary plane? I could also say that I believe that I also have the Spirit of God. But I would not forget that Paul used this last phrase to defend views that are now generally regarded as mistaken.

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