

Antwoorden op het lijden. Een bijdrage aan de discussie over contextueel bijbellezen: Job 4-5 in het licht van opvattingen van Nicaraguaanse pinkstergelovigen

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Nijmegen: Theologische Uitgeverij Narratio
2000
p. 252
ISBN: 90 5263 912 4
Price unknown

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This book is the publication of a doctoral dissertation completed under the promotorship of Prof Dr Henk Leene of the Free University of Amsterdam (with Prof Dr A Droogers and Dr JH de Wit as copromoters). Hans Snoek, the author, is one of the numerous Dutch biblical scholars and theologians who spent some time working in Latin America. Snoek taught Old Testament studies from 1989 to 1998 on behalf of the Reformed Dutch Churches at the Baptist Seminary in Nicaragua. This exposure to contexts of poverty and suffering played a determinative role in Snoek's hermeneutic reflection. This experience introduced him concretely to the trend of the last three decades in Latin America to read the Bible from the perspective of the poor.

This hermeneutic interest provided the problem statement for Snoek's dissertation. Is contextual reading of the Bible scholarly justified? If so, does it yield interesting results? In addressing these questions, he presents a test case which examines the feasibility of a dialogue between various explanations for suffering given by Nicaraguan Pentacostals on the one hand, and Job 4-5 on the other hand.

After introducing his problem statement in Chapter I, the next chapter continues with a general survey of the opinions of Gadamer, Iser, Schüssler Fiorenza, and a number of third-world hermeneuts. He indicates that the current hermeneutic trend is to believe that the reader plays an important (if not the most important) part in the process of understanding. This focus on the role of the reader poses, however, various complicated questions. What is the relationship between text and reader? What role does the professional exegete play? What type of reader is eligible for a dialogue with the text? With regard to the first question, namely the relationship between text and reader, Snoek discusses the ideas of Paul Ricoeur, who is very influential in Latin America. It is emphasized that the interaction serves the interests of both text and reader, and that the interaction is not linear, but dialectical. With regard to the role of the professional exegete in a dialogue with naïve readers, Snoek refers to Clodovis Boff who argues that a hermeneut holds two diverse positions, namely a social position resulting from communal involvement (resulting in relevant knowledge), as well as a scholarly or epistemic position (resulting in pertinent knowledge). These positions also stand in a dialectical relationship. Subsequently, Snoek justifies his selection of readers in this study.

Chapter III starts with a description of Nicaraguan Pentacostalism, followed by an explanation of the method of field study and an overview of the respondents. Chapter IV

contains the report on a field study of Pentecostal explanations for suffering. The field study showed that these explanations show a marked similarity with the views of the friends in the Book of Job. Based on these apparent similarities, Snoek arrived at two hypotheses: (a) the first address of Elifaz contains explanations for suffering familiar to Pentecostals, and (b) the audience of that day and age was supposed to respond critically to Elifaz's words. Chapters V-VIII then test these hypotheses. The discussion starts with an exegetical-historical investigation, followed by a chapter which offers a number of reasons why the exegesis in this study focuses mainly on Elifaz's address. Chapter VII contains linguistic and prosodic analyses of Job 4-5, followed by the rhetorical analysis presented in Chapter VIII. The central premise in the rhetorical analysis is that the persuasive character of an address is determined by 'logos', 'ethos' and 'pathos'.

In Chapter IX the two avenues of this research, namely the Pentecostal explanation for suffering and the Elifaz discourse, converge. It is then concluded that the previously formulated hypothesis is correct, namely the explanations for suffering in Job 4-5 are recognizable to Pentecostals. However, certain differences between text and readers are also indicated. Chapter X investigates whether the exegesis confirms the hypothesis that the audience of that day and age were expected to respond critically to Elifaz's words. Snoek comes to the conclusion that designations such as 'Streitgespräch' or 'Redestreit' presented by scholars do not do justice to the versatility of Job 4-5. The role of Elifaz is much more profound than Bible scholars suggest. This reduces the probability that the audience of that day and age was supposed to respond critically to Elifaz's contribution. The final chapter (XI) summarizes the methodological insights gained from this study.

In many respects Snoek's book is an important study. Not much scholarly research has been devoted to the interaction between academic exegesis and the reading of the Bible by naïve readers. Although it is customary nowadays also in South Africa to emphasize this relationship, not much study has been done on this dynamics. In this respect Snoek makes a valuable contribution. Furthermore, his study has also indicated the value of empirical hermeneutics when dealing with this relationship. Without empirical observation, scholars will never have an understanding of the dynamics of naive Bible reading.

However, the study can also be criticized for its vagueness in defining some of the categories used. The problem statement, for example, asked the questions whether contextual reading of the Bible can be justified scholarly ('wetenschappelijk te verantwoorden'), and if so, whether it yield interesting results ('belangwekkende resultaten'). However, the norms of 'scholarly justified' and 'interesting results' are of course no absolutes. These norms are ideologically dependent. The question 'For whom?' should be added to each of these norms. Although Snoek is quite explicit on his own position as Western biblical scholar, these norms are treated vaguely.

The above criticism, however, does not restrain the reviewer from recommending this book strongly. Anybody with a keen interest in contextual hermeneutics, as well as in the contextual reading of the Book of Job, will find it a stimulating publication.