

THE USE OF THE BIBLE IN DUTCH CHURCH DOCUMENTS ON HOMOSEXUALITY: ITS BACKGROUND AND SETTING

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Abstract

The use of the Bible in documents about homosexuality, produced by two Reformed churches in the Netherlands in the early eighties (the 'Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk' and the 'Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland'), will serve as a case study within the project, entitled 'The influence of different contexts of social transformation on biblical interpretation'. In this (first) article the focus is on the background (developments in the study of the Bible since the 18th century in Western Europe) and the setting (social and cultural dynamics in the last forty years in the Netherlands and abroad) of the biblical interpretation as presented in these documents. At the end, the two church documents are briefly described and characterized.

1. Introduction

In my contribution to the project, 'The influence of different contexts of social transformation on biblical interpretation', I will deal with the interaction between social and cultural transformation on the one hand, and the role of the Bible in church documents, on the other, in the Netherlands in the past forty years. The issue of homosexuality will serve as a case study in order to see in which way Reformed Christian churches in my country, the 'Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk' (NHK) and the 'Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland' (GKN), used the Bible in their response to this social and pastoral issue. In this (first) paper the focus will be on the background and the setting of the use of the Bible in the documents of these churches on homosexuality, of which, in the final paragraph, a brief description and characterization will be given. The use of the Bible itself, both from the exegetical and from the hermeneutical point of view, will be discussed in more detail in a later (second) article on the subject.

2. Background

For a clear understanding of (the discussion on) the role of the Bible in religious communities in the Netherlands today, it seems to me appropriate to give, first of all, a rough picture of the developments in biblical research in Western Europe since the 18th century.

Humanism, with its strong emphasis on man and his individuality - the result being a relativizing of tradition, and of official authorities like that of the Church - created in the 16th and 17th centuries a climate of a profound interest in ancient sources, both biblical and classical. The Bible became object of study on the level of its own languages; hence an exegetical approach emerged with a great emphasis on philological matters. The official interpretation by the Church was no longer taken for granted.

The 18th century, the century of the Enlightenment, marks a major shift in the study of the Bible: the biblical sources themselves, the Old Testament and the New Testament, became the object of *critical* research. The interpretation of the biblical texts (and of other

ancient sources as well) is no longer a matter of philology and theology (dogmatics) only; a strong historical interest was to become part of the mode of research. The biblical text was no longer considered to be timeless or super temporal, but as having been written in a particular period of time.

A nice illustration is the work of Johann Salomo Semler (1725-1791), theologian and exegete in Germany. Characteristic of him is his critical view on the canon and the canonicity of the Bible. The canonization is to be seen, he argues, not as something supernatural (inspiration), but as the outcome of a historical process. Consequently, a Christian is free to study the Bible in order to find out which parts, or in which respects, it is for him or her 'the word of God', the truth. Semler is of the opinion that one should apply as the basic criterium the following idea which is typical of the Enlightenment: the truth must meet the condition of being 'universal(istic)'. It means that, since the Old Testament is mainly 'particularistic', i.e. oriented towards one people only (Israel), this part of the Bible is creating a problem for Christians.¹

The views as expressed by Semler and others of his era are to be understood as a response to very critical questions about Bible and Christianity, put forward by a growing group of sceptics and atheists. On the other side of the spectrum, there is the response of those who aim at defending the authority of the Bible and of their theology without making any concessions. Reacting to liberal ideas concerning the inspiration of the Bible and in order to defend its authority as strongly as possible, conservative theologians developed a doctrine of inspiration that was stricter than ever before, the effect being the risk of a shift from an authoritative to an authoritarian status of the Bible.

In the 19th century the study of the Bible became more and more dominated by an interest in the reconstruction of history, so typical of that period. It led, among other things, to a search for the history of the religion of ancient Israel which in turn implied the critical question of whether, from a historical point of view, the biblical text offers reliable information. As a result, this historical critical approach led to a critical analysis of the text regarding its literary unity and its dating.

As an example of this type of research, one may refer to Abraham Kuenen in Leiden (1828-1891). As an Old Testament scholar, he was the first who wrote a history of the religion of ancient Israel based on a detailed historical-critically oriented study of the Old Testament writings.² Typical of his method of research are the following three elements:

- (a) biblical texts should be studied scientifically;
- (b) this research must be free from the church;
- (c) this research is basically a search for the religious truth by means of reason. Fully in line with the ideas of the Enlightenment (see above), he considers to be the 'ethical monotheism' of the classical prophets and of Jesus the ultimate religious truth for modern men. By this he means belief in one God and in the ethical values and norms in so far they are 'universal', i.e. to the benefit of mankind (in contrast to values and norms that are 'particularistic', i.e., to the benefit of one people [Israel] only, as is, in his view, the case with the so-called Priestly document in the Pentateuch, and with 'nomistic' Judaism).³

1. See A Lüder, *Historie und Dogmatik. Ein Beitrag zur Genese und Entfaltung von Johann Salomo Semlers Verständnis des Alten Testaments* (BZAW 233), Berlin 1995.

2. A Kuenen, *De godsdienst van Israël tot den ondergang van den Joodschen staat*. Vol. I en II. Haarlem 1869-1870.

3. For the ideas of Kuenen see e.g. A van der Kooij, *Abraham Kuenen (1828-1891): De Pentateuch en de godsdienst van Israël*, NTT 45 (1991), pp. 279-292; MJ Mulder, *Kuenen und der 'ethische Monotheismus'*

3. Setting

The modern theological ideas of Kuenen and others did evoke strong reactions from conservative circles. In this regard, the name of another Abraham, Abraham Kuyper (once a student of Kuenen) should be mentioned (1837-1920). A neo-calvinist theologian, he took the lead of a conservative movement which led to the so-called 'Afscheiding' ('separation'), from which the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland emerged. He also founded the Free University at Amsterdam (1880).

Up to and including the fifties of our (20th) century, in the Netherlands a modern view on the Bible was only to be found in small, liberal circles in Dutch Protestant churches (liberal wing of the Hervormde Kerk and the Remonstrantse Broederschap). Since the sixties, there is a growing openness and acceptance of modern points of view in matters of Bible and theology, as well as in other respects of religion and worldview. This openness and change of mind is, among other things, typical of the theological faculty of the Free University at Amsterdam.⁴

This new climate was part of a broader development in the Dutch (and Western-European) society of the time. An element which is of particular interest for our topic is the marked shift in the attitude towards 'authority'. As an example, I refer to the student revolts in cities such as Paris and Amsterdam at the end of the sixties. The authority of leading persons, parents, boards and the like, is no longer taken for granted. The same is true for the authority of traditions and institutions, including religious traditions and institutions to the effect of secularizing tendencies. The period of around 1970 was also the time of the 'sexual revolution', as it is called; the taboos of the past were no longer accepted by a growing number of people.

In this period of a critical attitude towards everything that claimed authority, one can imagine that the issue of the authority of the Bible was also to become a matter of dispute in the churches. At a rather early date, in 1967, the Synod of the NHK published a document, entitled

*Klare wijn. Rekenschap over geschiedenis, geheim en gezag van de Bijbel.*⁵

The GKN did so at a later date; their publication came out in 1981, entitled,

*God met ons ... Over de aard van het Schriftgezag...*⁶

In both documents, one senses clearly the circumstances of the time on the one hand, and the influence of ideas of modern biblical scholarship, on the other. Crucial issues dealt with are: the notion of the historical-cultural context in which the Old Testament and the New Testament were written, and questions concerning the historical reliability of the Bible. Since both elements do relativize, nuance and/or complicate the matter of the authority of the Bible, the latter issue is the basic concern in both reports.

der Propheten des 8. Jahrhunderts v. Chr., in P.B. Dirksen and A van der Kooij (eds.), Abraham Kuenen (1828-1891): *His Major Contributions to the Study of the Old Testament*, Leiden 1993, pp. 65-90.

4. Compare Tj Baarda, *De betrouwbaarheid van de evangeliën*, Kampen 1967; H Kuitert, *Verstaat gij wat gij leest*, Baarn 1968.
5. Pure wine. Account of history, secret and authority of the Bible. Aangeboden door de Generale Synode der Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk. 's-Gravenhage 1967. 268 p. For critical remarks see AS van der Woude, *Wijnproeven op synodaal verzoek*, Kerk en Theologie 18 (1967), 189-198.
6. *God with us ... On the authority of the Bible*, Kerkinformatie 113, Leusden 1981. 128 p.

4. Homosexuality

Broadly speaking, it is this setting in which the discussion in the two churches about homosexuality took place. In the past, homosexuality was considered a sin, and homosexual acts as criminal, or as a sickness (thus in the 19th century), but a new step was made in the early sixties when churches used a more positive tone by speaking of 'the homosexual neighbour'.⁷

In the seventies, both the NHK and the GKN appointed each a committee which was commissioned to write a report about the issue of homosexuality. These reports were published in the first half of the eighties:

- *Rapport over gebruik van Schriftgegevens bij vragen rondom HOMOFILIE van deputaten Kerk en Theologie aan de Generale Synode van de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland van Bentheim, 1981.*
September 1982.⁸ (= GKN report)
- *Verwarring en Herkenning. Over gemeente en homoseksualiteit.*
's-Gravenhage 1984.⁹ (= NHK report)

The former, the GKN report, contains a rather detailed discussion of the biblical passages which can be seen as the most important ones: Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 and the Letter to the Romans 1:24-27. These passages are treated in a threefold way:

- (a) their meaning and plain sense are discussed;
- (b) attention is given to the question of their historical-cultural context; and
- (c) the question of their significance for us, Christians (in the Netherlands), is dealt with (pp. 11-22).¹⁰ The last (hermeneutical) matter is also addressed, in more general terms, in the next part of the report (pp. 23-45). Questions that are considered here are, e.g., the matter of the selective use of the Bible, the issue of whether or to which extent the laws of the Old Testament are still valid for Christians (in the Netherlands) today, the matter of the differences between the ancient worldview as reflected in the Bible and the modern Western-European culture in which Christians live and to which they try to respond.

Although more biblical texts are listed (Genesis 19:1-29; Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13; Judges 19:1-30; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, and 1 Timothy 1:3-11) the NHK report concentrates also on the above mentioned passages in Leviticus (18:22 and 20:13). The exegetical approach which is described briefly, is the same as in the GKN report. Different from the latter, however, the NHK report does not offer a detailed treatment of the passages in Leviticus. This may be due to the fact that, in contrast to the GKN committee, there were no professional exegetes on the NHK committee. The emphasis of the NHK report is more on the pastoral aspects and less on that of the study of the Bible.¹¹ As to the use of the Bible, the NHK report lists several opinions, seven in number, about the significance of the Leviticus passages (pp. 48-52), followed by some comments on the

7. *De homoseksuele naaste*, Baarn 1961.

8. *Report about the use of scriptural data pertaining to homophilia ...*, 52 p.

9. *Confusion and Recognition. On congregation and homosexuality*, 72 p.

10. For a discussion between exegetes at the beginning of the seventies see CJ Labuschagne, *De bijbel en het probleem van de homofilie*, Kerk en Theologie 21 (1970), 55-65, and B Maarsingh, *Zegt de bijbel dit over homofilie?* Kerk en Theologie 22 (1971), 147-149.

11. Another characteristic of the NHK report to be mentioned is the fact that it reflects not only a discussion about homosexuality and homosexual persons, but also a discussion with them (homosexual theologians were among the members of the committee).

underlying hermeneutical questions (pp. 53-57). These opinions mirror the great variety of viewpoints among the committee members. They represent a wide range from conservative (e.g., the texts of Leviticus are in line with the creative order and hence to be seen as normative) up to and including modern/liberal views (e.g., the texts in Leviticus attest a religious worldview, with a great stress on fertility and procreation, which is different from modern, Western-European ideas, and hence are not to be seen as normative).

Both reports are not providing clear cut answers to the question how to interpret and to apply the Bible in the case of homosexuality. They are meant as a means to stimulate an open discussion about, among other things, the use of the Bible regarding the sensitive matter of homosexuality. The question arises, however, particularly in the case of the NHK report, whether a more detailed discussion of the Leviticus passages, both exegetically and hermeneutically, would be of a greater help. This and related questions will be dealt with in our second article on the subject.¹²

12. I have in mind here the questions touched upon by LC Jonker in his contribution, such as concerning interpretative strategies and heuristic keys.

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