

THE BIBLICAL LEGITIMIZATION OF ETHNIC DIVERSITY IN APARTHEID THEOLOGY¹

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Abstract

Within the framework of a research project on "The influence of different contexts of social transformation on Biblical interpretation" the use of Genesis 10-11 in the document "Ras, Volk en Nasie en Volkereverhoudinge in die lig van die Skrif" is examined. This document which was accepted by the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa in 1974 played an important role in the legitimization of Apartheid Theology. In this article the socio-historical and theological road to RVN is described. Thereafter, the use of Genesis 10-11 in RVN is discussed. An analysis of the dominant heuristic keys and interpretative strategies is subsequently made, and the mode of Biblical interpretation in RVN is characterized.

1. Introduction

The relationship between social transformation and Biblical interpretation (or for that matter, any interpretation) is an intricate one. I have indicated elsewhere (LC Jonker, 2000) that this interaction is indeed reciprocal. That means that processes of social transformation not only influence the way in which people (and communities of faith) read the Bible, but also that processes of social transformation are often thoroughly influenced by the Biblical hermeneutics practised by that community.

The background of the present study is a wider research project funded by the National Research Foundation of South Africa (NRF) on the theme: "The influence of different contexts of social transformation on Biblical interpretation". In another study (LC Jonker, 2000) I have reflected on the methodological issues involved in such a study. I have indicated there that four case studies have been selected to study the dynamics between social transformation and Biblical interpretation. Two of these case studies deal with the different reactions to the policy of Apartheid in the South African contexts. The one case study (which is also the focus of this article) deals with the theological legitimization of Apartheid by the Dutch Reformed Church (which has its constituency among the white people of the country). The other case study focuses on the resistance to Apartheid theology by the (then) Dutch Reformed Mission Church (which had its constituency among the coloured and black people of South Africa).

In the biblical and theological legitimization of Apartheid by the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) the document "Ras, Volk en Nasie en Volkereverhoudinge in die lig van die Skrif" (RVN)² played a very important role. This document which was endorsed by the

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 2. The official English translation of this document (from which will be quoted in this article) is called: "Human relations and the South African scene in the light of Scripture".

General Synod of this church in 1974³ was in a certain sense the culmination of theological thought and biblical reflection among the white people of the DRC on race relations. In another sense, the document also played a role to shape the values and thoughts of people for many years after its acceptance.

The present study will focus on the argumentation from Genesis 10-11 in the document in particular. The hermeneutic mode of this argumentation will be determined, and the exegesis will be evaluated in the light of Biblical scholarship. Subsequently, the dominant heuristic keys and strategies⁴ use in this document will be identified from this investigation, and the interaction with the social understanding of the interpretive community will be described.

2. *Ras, Volk en Nasie* (RVN)

The socio-political and theological road to the formulation of RVN is well documented⁵ and there is no need to provide an elaborate description here. This section will rather provide a cursory indication of the most important landmarks along this road, as well as of some of the most important reactions to the document.

2.1 Approaching RVN: Socio-historical changes

- The Second Liberation War (or Anglo-Boer War as it is also called) of 1899-1902 was a traumatic experience for Afrikaner⁶ people in South Africa. During this period many Afrikaner men had to do military service to fight against the English invaders. Many women and children were detained in concentration camps where many of them died. This war not only aggravated the relationships with people from British origin, but also provided an important impetus for the emergence of Afrikaner nationalism (see later).
- The economic position of the Afrikaner people during the first third of the twentieth century was unfavourable, to say the least. The economic depression of the late twenties and thirties caused many Afrikaner people to live in absolute poverty, and job opportunities to be rare.
- During these years Afrikaner Nationalism started emerging. The Afrikaners were desperate to save themselves from poverty. The DRC that had its constituency among the Afrikaner people mobilized its structures to play an important role in the upliftment of Afrikaner people. Many ministers of this church, for example the revs. G Boshoff and CR Kotzé, were well-known for the “people's sermons” during these years.
- The emergence of African⁷ Nationalism among black people with the founding of the African Native National Congress in 1912 (which became the African National Congress in 1923) posed a threat to the awakening of Afrikaner Nationalism among white people. Afrikaner people started experiencing black people as a threat to their own economic upliftment.

3. Cf. the *Acts of the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church of 1974*.

4. For a description of these terms, cf. Jonker (2000).

5. Cf., *inter alia*, Smith *et al* (edd.) (1981), O'Brien Geldenhuys (1982), Serfontein (1982), De Gruchy & Villavicencio (edd.) (1983), Nordholt (ed.) (1983), Kinghorn (ed.) (1986), Loubser (1987) and WD Jonker (1998). For the description which follows here, cf. also these publications.

6. The term “Afrikaner” here refers to the white, Afrikaans-speaking people of South Africa.

7. The term “African” came to be used as reference to black people in South Africa.

- Many political decisions were taken during these years to entrench the position of white people over and against that of black people. The political power of non-white people was gradually reduced. Among the laws that were passed during these years that limited the power and freedom of black people are laws that limited the right of black people to own property to more or less 14% of South Africa, laws that limited the freedom of association of black people and their membership of trade unions, and laws that limited the freedom of movement of black people in order to keep them out of areas where they could be in competition for jobs.
- The victory of the National Party (which, like the DRC, had its constituency among the Afrikaners) in 1948 was for many Afrikaners a sign of the providence of God. The NP government feared that the already imposed racial laws were not enough to secure the position of the Afrikaner in society. A definite policy of racial segregation was followed with resultant laws such as the race classification laws, laws forbidding racially mixed marriages, laws that segregated towns and cities into racially separated neighbourhoods, and laws implementing the so-called "Christian National Education" in racially separated schools.

2.2 Approaching RVN: Reflection in the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC)

- In 1857 the Synod of the DRC, being one church for all races at that stage, took the decision that separate communion services should be held for members from the different race groups in the church. This decision was not motivated by any scriptural arguments or references, but by the practical argument "as a result of the weakness of some". Although this decision did not constitute different churches for different race groups, colour now began to function as a criterion for church membership. These circumstances formed the background for the developments during the next century.
- In 1935 a missionary policy was formulated for the DRC. An ironic ambiguity characterized this policy statement, namely the strong plea that missionary work has to be furthered among the people of colour of South Africa, but simultaneously the insistence on segregation.
- At the Transvaal Synod of the DRC in 1948 a report by EP Groenewald in which the scriptural basis for racial segregation was argued was tabled and discussed. Because of criticism of this report (especially from B Marais) a commission was given the responsibility to study the matter further.
- In 1957 the Federal Council of the DRC synods, and later on also the constituent synods, accepted the Brink report in which the history of the DRC's missionary work was sketched, as well as the scriptural principles for racial segregation were discussed.
- The General Synod of 1962 appointed a commission that received the instruction that they should work out the scriptural justification of racial segregation. The first attempts that were discussed at the synods of 1966 and 1970 were criticized on many points. The so-called Landman Commission was then asked to table a report at the General Synod of 1974. This report formed the basis of what became to be known as *Ras, Volk en Nasie*.

2.3 The acceptance of RVN (1974)

- The General Synod convened in Cape Town on 16-25 October 1974. During this meeting the report of the Landman Ad hoc commission was submitted and thoroughly discussed. The recommendations and statements in the report were discussed, and decisions were taken on them. The explanations and motivations at each point were, however, referred to the executive body of the synod. Comments and criticism on these parts could be submitted to the executive body for consideration in the final formulation of the document.
- The final report was structured in six chapters. After some introductory remarks on the need for constant reflection on human relations, and after definitions of a few concepts have been provided, Chapter 1 continues with an explanation of the hermeneutic approach that is followed. The remainder of this chapter (which forms the backbone of the scriptural argumentation) is dedicated to discussions on Old and New Testament data concerning human relations. The principles that are deduced from Scripture in the first chapter are then applied to different issues in the next chapters. Chapter 2 deals with the Church, the Kingdom and ecumenic relations. Chapter 3 reflects on the role of the Church in social justice, while the next chapter formulates the view on the Church and missions. Chapter 5 contains a argumentation on mixed marriages, where after a last chapter offers some concluding remarks.
- The report RVN was immediately after finalization translated into English. The introduction to this translation (“Human relations ...”) states explicitly that “... the report is presented ... in its final processed form in the hope that it may contribute to a better understanding of the Dutch Reformed Church and serve as a profitable basis for discussion in the Church as well as for discussions with other Churches and Christians within and beyond the borders of our country” (1975, 6). The Director of Ecumenical Affairs of the DRC, dr. F.E. O'Brien Geldenhuys, was commissioned to present RVN to the churches in England, the Netherlands, Germany and Switzerland with the invitation to study the report and to react to it.

2.4 Reactions to RVN

- Already at the beginning of 1974 tension developed between the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (GKN) and the DRC on the issue of the GKN's contributions to the “Programme to Combat Racism” of the World Council of Churches. After the General Synod of the DRC in October 1974, dr. Geldenhuys presented RVN to the GKN. The GKN then requested that they should hold a conference with the family of DR Churches (which also included *inter alia* the DR churches among the coloured and black people). The executive body of the DRC refused this invitation, but agreed to a meeting where only the executive body and the GKN delegation would be present. This discussion took place in January 1978. The DRC executive body defended the policy of RVN that a political system built on the principle of separate development could be legitimated from Scripture. The GKN delegation, however, reacted as follows: “... de Kerk in Zuid-Afrika (mag) niet berusten in en zich nog veel minder kan identificeren met een bewind, waaronder de blanke minderheid soewerein beschickt over het wel en wee van de meerderheid van de bevolking en hun het recht onthoudt zelf mede te beslissen over hun eigen woonplaats, arbeidsmogelijkheden en toekomst ... Inzake het fundamentele punt van de rassenverhoudingen bestond hierin overeenstemming,

dat de handhaving van eigen identiteit nooit in stryd mag komen met de eis van Evangeliese gerechtigheid” (quotations in Geldenhuys, 1986, 82-83). After the discussions the GKN decided to continue with their contribution to the PCR, which prompted the DRC to sever its ties with the GKN.

- The Swiss Church reacted with a thoroughly formulated answer to RVN. This answer was published under the title “Theology - Advocate or Critic of Apartheid?” Amongst other points, the Swiss Church also reacted to the scriptural foundation of RVN. They had appreciation for the hermeneutic principles that were formulated in the report, but criticized the fact that principle and practice did not correspond. It also criticized the fact that church and people were often confused in the report. The Swiss Church summarized the problem of the report that the DRC fought on two extremes: They did not want to absolutize apartheid, but they certainly also did not want to advocate unqualified resistance against this policy. At the beginning of 1979 a delegation of the DRC consisting *inter alia* of professors of the two theological faculties, went to Switzerland for a conference with the Swiss Church. This delegation returned to South Africa with suggestions to the executive body of how some statements in RVN could be reformulated. However, the executive body did not want to accept these suggestions.
- Already in the early years, even before the official acceptance of RVN, there were certain critical voices from inside the DRC. The names of Ben Marais and Bennie Keet come to mind in this regard⁸. The reactions of other people like Beyers Naudé and Nico Smith is also well documented⁹. However, these reactions remained minority voices. The interaction between Church and State created the fertile ground in which Apartheid theology could flourish, despite certain reactions from within.
- It is well known that the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (one of the constituent churches of the present Uniting Reformed Church of South Africa) declared a *status confessionis* at the General Synod of 1982, and that the first draft of the Confession of Belhar was tabled. This confession that became one of the most influential forces against Apartheid theology, was officially accepted at the synod meeting of 1986. The formulation of this confession was the culmination not only of the theological reflection in the circles of the DR Mission Church, but also of several discussions in these circles which exposed the problematic hermeneutics of the DRC’s document, RVN¹⁰. As one of the other case studies of the present research project is devoted to the Confession of Belhar, no elaborate discussion of this reaction against Apartheid theology will be presented here.

3. Genesis 10-11 in RVN

3.1 Hermeneutic presuppositions of RVN

The authors of RVN dedicated an extensive part of the first chapter to their hermeneutic presuppositions. The impression is created that this document does not want to use the Bible haphazardly by merely quoting prooftexts. Its intention is to

8. Cf. Kinghorn (1986, 111ff.).

9. Cf. e.g. Kinghorn (1986) and Loubser (1987).

10. Cf. e.g. Durand’s discussion of the problem of the hermeneutics of RVN (1978). Incidentally, Durand was one of the co-drafters of the Confession of Belhar.

proceed from a sound hermeneutic basis, and to approach Scripture from this basis in determining some principles for race relations.

RVN explicitly accepts the Word of God as premise and norm. In the introduction the following statement (in italics) and motivation occur: "*In its consideration of relations between races and peoples, the Church of Jesus Christ must accept the Word of God as premise and norm.* The object of this study is to focus the light of the Scriptures on relations between races and peoples. Hereby we profess the conviction that the Holy Scriptures contains the principles normative for all spheres of life, therefore also for relations between peoples and races, and that the Church of Jesus Christ must unconditionally and obediently bow to these principles. In this connection the Church of Jesus Christ must maintain unflinching honesty and be prepared to look critically at itself. There is a very real danger that the Church, imagining itself obedient to the Scriptures, may in reality bow to some other authority, for example some humanistic-liberalistic ideal; the voice of a specific people or political party; the pressures of economic or emotional factors, etc. Only when our convictions and actions are founded on the rock of the World will they be able to weather the storms ..." (7)¹¹.

This quotation shows that the authors of RVN were (at least in theory¹²) sensitive to the fact that ideological biases and other factors could potentially endanger the use of the Bible as premise and norm. It is therefore also important to the authors that one should "correctly interpret and utilise the Scriptures" in order to "truly discern what the Scriptures teach on relations between races and peoples" (9). The following presupposition is therefore formulated: "The Bible was never intended to be used as a scientific text-book for sociology and anthropology. Also, one must avoid the danger of allowing the 'historic situation' to function as a hermeneutic principle according to which the Scriptures are interpreted. Although the Bible is not a scientific textbook, it nevertheless presents fundamental data and principles which are of normative significance in all spheres of life. In its handling of Scriptural data the Church will constantly have to be aware of the central theme of its preaching, i.e. proclaiming the way of salvation in Christ and the coming of the Kingdom of God to His glory. This means that the Church will indicate and proclaim the norms applicable in all spheres of life, commend that which accords with this theme in given circumstances and give warning when the way of salvation is blocked in some or other way and the ethical norms of Scriptures for all spheres of life are not being honoured" (9-10).

In accordance with these presuppositions the following hermeneutic principles are then presented¹³ (11):

- i. "The Bible must be interpreted in accordance with recognized, reformed, scientific, hermeneutic principles in keeping with its actual intention - it is not a scientific text-book for empirical sociology or anthropology.
- ii. The Scriptures must not be used biblicistically - texts must be interpreted in their own context and in the context of the entire history of salvation.

11. References to RVN in this section will only contain the page number of the English translation.

12. The document even refers to John Bright's book *The Authority of the Old Testament* in which he warns against the danger of a selective use of the Bible in order to link up an understanding of the Bible with current tradition (10).

13. Reference to these principles is often confusing. They are not numbered in the published documents, and are separated only with paragraph divisions. They are therefore often divided differently.

- iii. Although the Bible is not a scientific textbook, it does nevertheless present fundamental data and principles of normative significance in all spheres of life, and this applies to relations between races and peoples as well.
- iv. In dealing with Scriptural data the Church will constantly have to be aware of the central theme of its preaching - i.e. the way of salvation in Christ and the coming of the kingdom of God - and it will have to indicate and extol the norms that coincide with this theme in all spheres of life.
- v. On the other hand the Church has a prophetic function in respect of the state and society when the Scriptural norms that should apply in all spheres of life are not respected. In the implementation of this function the Church must guard against two extremes: on the one hand it must guard against a lack of daring, and on the other hand against a lack of discretion. The Church must not adapt itself to such an extent as to forfeit confidence, but neither may it act without pastoral compassion and understanding."

Although the soundness of these hermeneutic principles has been lauded by many, it has also been indicated sufficiently¹⁴ that theory and practice did not correspond in this document. When it came to the practical execution of these principles in the South African society, it often happened that the self-same principles were inverted to justify the ideology of apartheid. In section 3.3 this issue will be discussed further.

3.2 The argumentation from Gen. 10-11

In sections 8 ("Unity of mankind", 13-14) and 9 ("Ethnic diversity", 14-21) the main thrust of the argument is derived from an interpretation of the primeval history, with Genesis 10-11 as a cardinal text¹⁵, in particular. Many discussions have already been devoted to the way in which RVN uses these texts¹⁶. According to Bax (1983, 117-118) RVN attempted to answer two questions with regard to Gen. 11:1-9, namely (i) "What sin does it portray mankind as having committed on the plain of Shinar? (ii) What did God intend in His reaction to this sin?"

With regards to the first question the report refers to Gen. 1:28 where God gives the command (which is repeated to Noah in Gen. 9:1,7) that man should replenish the earth¹⁷. According to the report this command meant that mankind should divide into separate peoples ("volke") with different cultures. The sin of man on the plain of Shinar then, according to RVN, was that man deliberately attempted to defy God's command in Gen. 1:28. The unity of the people, and man's deliberate attempt to convene on one spot, was already itself contrary to God's will. According to the report it was "artificial" and "a humanistic attempt at unity based on the arrogance of man".

With regards to the second question, namely "What did God intend in His reaction to this sin?" the report RVN interprets God's reaction "as reasserting His original command that mankind should split up into different *volke* with different languages and therefore different cultures" (Bax, 1983, 118). The report even asserts: "That the differentiation of humanity into various language groups and 'nations' was extended further to give rise to race differences is not, in fact, mentioned in the Scriptures in so many words, but is nevertheless confirmed by the facts of history" (1974, 16-17). The

14. Cf. e.g. the Swiss reaction in 1977 (*Theology - Advocate or Critic of Apartheid?*), as well as Du Rand (1978).

15. Bax (1983, 117) calls Gen. 11:1-9 the cardinal text in the document's argumentation.

16. Cf. e.g. Bax (1983), Vorster (1983), Kinghorn (1986) and Loubser (1987).

17. Cf. Bax (1983, 114ff.)

report thus argues that God in re-establishing this process of 'differentiation' now extended it by dividing mankind into different races as well.

This interpretation of Gen. 11:1-9 in RVN is then bolstered with a remark on the sequence of the "events"¹⁸ which we have in the primeval history. Under the sub-heading "The event itself" the following is noted: "It is important to note that the situation presupposed in Gen. 11:1-9 goes back beyond Gen. 10 and in reality links up with the end of Gen. 9. The descendants of Noah's three sons remained in the vicinity of Ararat for a few generations ... before they decided to move in a (south-) easterly direction to (the later) Babylonia ... In the first verse these people are described as 'the whole earth' in the sense of 'all the inhabitants of the earth'. It is important to note this. At the time, therefore, there were no other people on earth! It is also said that at that time they all spoke the same language. This state of affairs existed after their arrival in Babylonia and the commencement of their building program" (1974, 15-16). Kinghorn (1986, 130ff.) remarks that this inversion of the order of the so-called "events" should not be viewed as being an innocent remark. He argues that a strong creation element is hereby imported into the Babel account. According to the view of RVN the Babel event really constitutes humanity as it should be, namely differentiated into different peoples and races. With this creation element been attributed to Babel the RVN report thus constitutes the story in Gen. 11 as the norm according to which human reality should be viewed. As Kinghorn (1986, 132) puts it: "Wat van die mens of van die struktuur van die menslike werklikheid gewees moet word, word hiervan afgelei. Hier is die norm gegee wat onderliggend is aan alle ander."

This argumentation obviously made it possible for RVN to find a Scriptural basis for a policy of autogenous/separate development ("afsonderlike ontwikkeling"). The report says: "For the purpose of our report the question arise as to whether Gen. 11:1-9 can serve as a Scriptural basis for a policy of autogenous development? Our answer is a qualified yes. The diversity of races and peoples to which the confusion of tongues contributed, is an aspect of reality that God obviously intended for this dispensation. To deny this fact is to side with the tower builders" (1974, 18).

3.3 Evaluation of exegesis in the light of Biblical scholarship

Bax's remark (1983, 118) is appropriate here: "This ... is neither the traditional nor the usual present understanding of Gen. 11 in the Christian Church as a whole." To determine whether Bax is correct it is now necessary to evaluate the exegesis of RVN in the light of Biblical scholarship¹⁹. The following comments should be observed:

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18. By referring to the Genesis 9 account as "events" the report RVN probably indicates that one of its presuppositions is that the Bible is a historical record. Vorster (1983, 103) remarks as follows: "It (Gen. 1-11) is undoubtedly not 'history' in the sense of a logical story based on the weighing and selection of facts. It is a theological interpretation of *prehistory*. That is why both the motivation and the explication in paragraph 9 of the report are so problematic. One does at least expect interpreters who regard the Bible as a history-book to use an historical method when they make historical statements. What is found in the report points to the contrary."
19. The present discussion does not pretend to be an in-depth and exhaustive exegetical study of the mentioned passages. It will, however, indicate which exegetical issues are relevant for the evaluation of the exegesis of RVN. For elaborate studies on these passages (Gen. 11:1-9 in particular), cf. Frenz (1969, 183ff.), Von Rad (1972, 139ff. and 1987, 174ff.), Fokkelman (1975, 11ff.), Anderson (1978, 69ff.), Brueggemann (1982, 97ff.), Westermann (1983, 707ff.), Wenham (1987, 209ff.), Uehlinger (1990), Soggin (1991, 371ff.), Wittenberg (1991, 46ff.), Berges (1994, 37ff.), Cloete & Smit (1994, 81ff.), Krasovec (1994, 5ff.), Van Wolde (1994, 84ff.) and Smith (1996, 169ff.).

- With regards to the two questions that Bax asked, namely ‘What was the sin committed on the plain of Shinar?’ and ‘What did God intend with the confusion of language?’, the views of commentators are varied. Certain commentaries, older commentaries in particular, support Bax’s point that the exegesis of RVN is not the traditional Christian interpretation. However, more recent commentaries and exegetical studies support the interpretation of RVN.
- Already patristic interpretation set the Christian trend with its focus on hubris as the sin that was committed. The traditional view is then that this hubris was actually man desiring to be like God. The tower building is then traditionally interpreted as the symbol of man’s attempts to climb up to heaven. Man’s hubris is thus constituted on a vertical level, namely man in relation to God. Some of the modern, but older, commentaries, such as that of Westermann and Von Rad, caution the reader not to overemphasize the indication in the text that man planned to build a tower “with its top in the heavens”. Von Rad (1972, 149), for example, comments: “The statement that the tower should reach to heaven must not be pressed; it is only an expression for the special height of the building. That man wanted to storm heaven, God’s dwelling place, is not said. Rather, one will observe a subtlety of the narrative in the fact that it does not give anything unprecedented as the motive for this building, but rather something that lies within the realm of human possibility, namely, a combination of their energies on the one hand, and on the other the winning of fame, i.e., a naïve desire to be great.” However, Von Rad (1972, 149) in the end concludes that the sin had a vertical character²⁰: “... in the penetrating judgement of our narrator, is rebellion against God, a concealed Titanism, or at least, as v. 6 will show, the first step in that direction.”
- Some of the more recent studies, for example that of Van Wolde (1994) criticizes the view that the hubris should be interpreted exclusively on a vertical level²¹. She argues (1994, 100)²²: “In Christian tradition associated with Gen 11:1-9, attention

20. Cf. also Westermann (1983, 737-738): “J will offenbar mit der Entsprechung von 3:5 (Subj. der Mensch) und 11:4 (Subj. Die Menschen) am Anfang und am Ende seiner Urgeschichte sagen, daß der von seinem Schöpfer sich selbst überlassene Mensch am schwersten gefährdet ist durch das Bestreben, seine geschöpfliche Grenze zu durchbrechen, das Gegenüber zu Gott nicht mehr anzuerkennen, sondern sein zu wollen wie Gott oder mit seinen Werken bis zum Himmel zu reichen. Hier liegt ein entscheidender Punkt im Menschenverständnis des J: Wenn er seiner Geschichte des Werdens Israels von Abraham bis zur Landnahme eine Urgeschichte voranstellt, die nicht nur Israel, sondern Welt und Menschheit mit Gott in Beziehung bringt, dann ist ihm an der Gottesbeziehung des Menschen, an seinem Geschaffensein, dies wesentlich, daß der Mensch in den ihm gegebenen Grenzen bleibt, in denen allein sein Menschsein sich erfüllen kann, die zu überschreiten aber das Menschsein gefährdet.”

21. Harland (1998) is of the opinion that the different interpretations of this narrative (vertical or horizontal) should be understood against the background of different methods of reading biblical texts. “If read just as part of the Yahwist’s narrative, the story is one of hubris, of proud rebellion against God and an attempt to overstep the limits of creation. If read with the whole of Gen. 1-xi with the Priestly strand, the people sinned by an attempt to prevent themselves being scattered over the face of the whole earth in rebellion to the commands of Gen. 1 28 and ix 1. The complete text is more than the sum of its parts. This study has illustrated how particular ways of reading the text can lead to different interpretations. Those who focus on the story as part of J such as von Rad and Westermann see this as a story of human pride. Those who read Gen. 1-xi as a canonical or literary whole, such as van Wolde, Cassuto and Brueggemann tend to interpret the sin of the people as a desire to avoid being scattered” (Harland, 1998, 532).

22. Cf. also her comment (1994, 94): “... I would want to express my surprise at the ease with which these modern exegetes settle on what has hitherto been regarded as the heart of the story. The fact that people in community build a city and a tower with an ideal of unity in mind is viewed negatively, while God’s reaction in destruction, in which human community and unity is annihilated, is positively valued. It seems as if the

has been focussed one-sidedly on the hubris of humanity, which is then supposed to consist in the desire to penetrate the divine realm. The primary basis for this has been the theme of the tower with its 'head in the heavens' and the name the humans were supposed to be striving after. But on closer inspection the human strivings seem not to be directed vertically but rather horizontally. The humans do not want to penetrate into heaven but to stay together on the earth in one place. The city and the tower are the representatives of this horizontal ambition. In part this is evident from the fact that the concluding verses of Gen 11:1-9 give not attention at all to the "tower or to the 'vertical' Verse 8 says that the people 'ceased their building of the city'; the tower is not even mentioned again. In v. 9 also, all attention is focused on the city and the name Babel, and there is no mention of the tower. In short, the human aspirations lie in a horizontal direction, in opposition to horizontal dispersion."

- The possible horizontal direction of the human aspirations is also confirmed in other recent studies, such as that of Uehlinger (1990)²³. He has examined some of the motives found in the Gen 11 narrative which have parallels in the Assyro-Babylonian literature. Motives such as one speech, building and making a name are there associated with world domination through the subjugation of the diversity of peoples in an empire built on military power. According to this interpretation, then, the sin of the tower builders on the plain of Shinar has been the urge to dominate society and the world with power. The narrative then certainly has a polemic character against the world domination of the Assyro-Babylonian rulers²⁴. This is also how Berges (1994, 55) interprets the narrative: "Was in Gen 11,1-9 im Zentrum steht, ist der Gegensatz zwischen der Grossreichbewegung, mit der Israel erstmalig durch die Assyrer in Berührung kam und die im neubabylonischen Reich ihren ersten Höhepunkt erreichte, und der gedemütigten exilischen Notexistenz der Söhne Sems. Wer sich in imperialistischer Manier einen Namen machen will, wird im Staub der Geschichte untergehen."
- Some of the recent studies confirm the relationship that RVN sees between Gen. 1:28 and Gen. 11:1-9. Wenham (1987, 242)²⁵ argues that "mankind is seen organizing and arrogating to himself essentially divine prerogatives: he builds a tower to reach to God's dwelling in heaven; he tries to make himself a name and he schemes on his own account. *Whereas God want man to fill the earth*, he seeks to

hubris of humans is being magnified in order to justify the destructive actions of a pedantic God. I wonder whether this is really the sin that the people commit and even whether they are committing a sin at all."

23. Cf. also Smith's (1996) usage of and support for Uehlinger's interpretation, as well as Van der Kooij's (1996) reaction to Uehlinger's point of view.
24. Wittenberg (1991) has argued that the curse passage at the end of the Flood Story (Gen 9:18-27), as well as the Table of Nations (Gen 10) should be viewed against the socio-political background of the time. He refers to Oded's study of the Table of Nations in which he argues that the classification principle in this table is not geographical or ethnographical, but rather socio-political. The division was done according to social and economic practices in all fields of culture – the political organization, the social hierarchy and stratification, the economic basis and sources of maintenance and mode of life. Wittenberg (1991, 55) then comes to the following conclusion: "We have seen that the descendants neither of Shem nor of Ham represent ethnic groups or races. Canaan, and Ham with him, represents a social and political system. It is the system that became incarnate in the absolute states of the Ancient Near East. A system which depended on ruthless exploitation of the countryside and the domination of fringe groups and outsiders on the periphery of the city, the centre of political power." This interpretation is thus along the same lines as the socio-political interpretation of the Gen 11 story proposed by Uehlinger. These interpretations pose interesting comparative possibilities, a task that cannot be done here.
25. Cf. also Brueggemann (1982, 98) Krasovec (1994, 32-33) and Van Wolde (1994, 102).

congregate in one town, Babel. And it is in Babel that the Lord confuses human speech ...”

- With regards to Bax’s second question, namely “What did God intend with the confusion of languages?” the interpretations could roughly be divided into two groups. The first group²⁶ argues that God’s intention solely was punishment. Von Rad’s view is representative: “The story about the Tower of Babel concludes with God’s judgment on mankind; there is no word of grace. The whole primeval history, therefore, seems to break off in shrill dissonance ...”²⁷ Other scholars²⁸ are, however, not in agreement with this point. Van Wolde (1994, 102-103), for example, argues strongly that the outcome of the Genesis 11 story should not be evaluated negatively: “... in Gen 11:1-9 the dispersion is not presented as a punishment. Differentiation, from the point of view of the earth, is not a punishment for sins committed, but a necessity. It is as if the obstacle of dispersion, namely the single language, is removed because YHWH now sees the the consequences for the earth that the action of the humans will have. ... there is no question of a sin or a fault at all, and even less question of a punishment ...”
- Van Wolde (1994, 102-103) also links the story in Genesis 11 with creation: “With the dispersion of humans over the surface of the earth YHWH continues the execution of the creation he began in Genesis 1: after the earth and humanity are created, people are given the task of multiplying and filling the earth (1:28). ... In fact, God is executing something that belongs to creation and in that sense the story of the Tower of Babel concludes the history of creation.” This view of Van Wolde (which corresponds with the exegesis of RVN) is representative of the more recent exegetical views on the Tower narrative.
- Kinghorn (1986, 103ff.) has pointed out that the deliberate inversion by RVN of the order of the story in Genesis 11 and the Table of Nations in Genesis 10 should not be regarded as innocent. With this inversion, according to him, the report has given “creation status” to the Tower narrative. The previous point has indicated that the same point is also argued by recent studies, but on totally other grounds. With regard to the order of the chapters, the following could be mentioned from the view of critical biblical scholarship: The traditional critical view²⁹ is that the story in Gen 11:1-9 belongs to the J account. The Table of Nations in Gen 10 is, however, traditionally attributed to the P account. If the traditional view on the dating of these accounts is held, namely that P is later than J, it would indeed be so that Gen 11:1-9 precedes the genealogy in Genesis 10.
- Some scholars argue that the narrative in Genesis 11 should be read as an overture to the patriarchal stories. Berges (1994, 55) in his accentuation of the pragmatic dimension of Gen 11:1-9 remarks: “Die Turmbaugeschichte ist ... einer programmatische Festlegung israelitischer Identität innerhalb der Völkerwelt, in negativer Abgrenzung zu Babel, aber auch in positiver Hinwendung zu Abraham. Die

26. Cf. e.g. Westermann (1983), Von Rad (1972) and Wenham (1987).

27. Cf. also Wenham (1987, 242): “The tower of Babel story is the last great judgment that befell mankind in primeval times. Its place and function in Gen 1-11 may be compared to the fall in Gen 3 and the sons of God episode in Gen 6:1-4, both of which triggered divine judgments of great and enduring consequence.”

28. The following scholars are all in agreement that the confusion of languages should not be viewed only negatively, but it should be noted that this differentiation also had positive effects in some or other way: Brueggemann (1982, 98-99), Berges (1994, 55), Krasovec (1994, 32-33) and Smith (1996, 178-179).

29. Cf. Von Rad (1972) and Westermann (1983).

Turmbaugeschichte mit ihrer Stellung innerhalb der Genealogie der Semiten hat programmatischen Charakter für die nachfolgende Patriarchenerzählung. Israels Stellung innerhalb der Völkerwelt ist gekennzeichnet durch die Betonung des Einzelnen mit seiner Familie, die unter der besonderen Fürsorge Jahwes steht.”

3.4 Observations

The variety of exegetical views which was presented in the previous section leads to the following observations:

- i. Bax is indeed correct that the interpretation of RVN is not in accordance with the traditional Christian interpretation of Gen 10-11. The older commentaries, for example Von Rad and Westermann, confirm this point.
- ii. However, there are many recent exegetical studies that have argued along the same lines as RVN with regards to Gen 11:1-9. These recent studies affirm the view that the sin of humankind on the plain of Shinar should be seen in connection with Gen 1:28, namely the resistance to fill the earth. They also affirm the positive view of RVN on the intention of God with the diffusion of languages, as well as the creation motif in this story.
- iii. Important is, however, to observe that none of these recent exegetical studies makes any conclusions about ethnicity, diversity or a political policy of separate development. Those studies could, of course, be used to make similar conclusions than that of RVN³⁰. The point to be noted, however, is that the exegetical results on its own do not lead to such conclusions³¹. Certain heuristic keys and interpretative strategies lead to those conclusions, and these keys and strategies are formed in the interaction processes with social transformation.

The next section will therefore examine these keys and strategies that probably played a determining roll in the formulation of RVN.

4. Dominant keys and strategies of interpretation in RVN

4.1 The concept ‘people’ (‘volk’)

It could not be denied that the concept “people” (“volk”) plays a central role in the report RVN. Already on the second page of the report (1974, 8) the concepts “race”, “people” and “nation” are defined. A people, according to the report, is “a group of individuals who are classified as belonging to a particular group on the basis of a common culture, i.e. a group of individuals who share a common language, habits, general lifestyle, etc.”³² “People” is thus a cultural concept, in contrast to “race” which has a biological connotation.

Kinghorn (1986) has indicated that the importance of the concept “people” among the Afrikaner people during the middle of the twentieth century could be traced back to a philosophy in which this concept became romanticized. According to this philosophy the diversity of peoples is the primary level on which humanity is manifested. A

30. One could, of course, ask whether the processes of social transformation in present-day Europe with regards to ethnicity could again lead to a similar usage of these exegetical results. These exegetical studies certainly do not aim at the legitimization of any social policy. However, these exegetes should certainly take note of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of these exegetical results in the South African society.

31. This comment does not suggest that any method could be practised objectively without any ideological influence. However, one should note that the same method could be used in the service of different ideologies. This then leads to different applications of the exegetical results.

32. It is noteworthy that language is the first constitutive criterium of culture to be mentioned.

people, according to this philosophy is constituted by its own culture, with language as the most important factor³³.

In the light of this observation it is therefore not surprising that RVN poses the problem of the report in the introduction. "A balanced and careful analysis of the nature of relations in the context of the world situation is of vital importance for a correct insight into the manner in which *the problem* should be solved. The fact that *the problem of relations* originates in racial contrasts cannot be denied ... (my italics – LCJ)" (1974, 9). From this paragraph it is clear that "people" and "race" is already intermingled. It is also clear that the relationship between different peoples or races is regarded as a problem, without any reflection on the reasons why these relationships are experienced as problematic.

In the introduction it is already clear that this report wants to scrutinize the Bible to determine what should be done with relationship problems³⁴. From the outset the report therefore utilizes an inductive approach³⁵ in which the context of interpretation (the South African society from a white Afrikaner perspective, in this case) is taken as point of departure³⁶. The problem of relations between different peoples and races stands at the beginning of this exegetical scrutiny. "People" forms a heuristic key with which the Biblical texts could be scrutinized.

4.2 Understanding of diversity

Another key for the unlocking of Biblical meaning that the report uses, is "diversity". The report says: "The diversity of races and peoples, to which the confusion of tongues contributed, is an aspect of reality which God obviously intended for this dispensation. To deny this fact is to side with the tower-builders. Therefore a policy which in broad terms (as distinct from its concrete implementation) bears this reality in mind, is biblically realistic in the good sense of the word. We must not forget that Gen. 11 also tells us of man's attempt to establish a (forced) unity of the human race" (1974, 18). In a passage in which the New Testament perspectives are scrutinized the report comes to a similar conclusion: "From the fact that the existence of a diversity of peoples is accepted as a relative, but nevertheless real, premise, one may infer that the New Testament allows for the possibility that a given country may decide to regulate its inter-people relationships on the basis of separate development – considering its own peculiar circumstances, with due respect for the basic norms which the Bible prescribes for the regulation of social relations and after careful consideration of all possible solutions offered" (1974, 32).

33. Kinghorn (1986) also indicates how the romantic philosophy with regard to "people" and "race" was bolstered with Kuyper's view of "sovereignty in own sphere". Cf. the next section. Van Wyk (1976, 100) has indicated that the report concedes that the concept "people" occurs in the Bible without being a central concept.

However, this concept becomes the central issue in the report. Van Wyk is of the opinion that other latent motives should be seen behind the centrality of this concept in the report: "Wat is die latente motief wat tot hierdie isolasie of prominensie van die volkebegrip bygedra het? Dit kan o.i. gesoek word in die Afrikaner-besef van volksidentiteit. In die historiese ervaring van die Afrikaanssprekende gemeenskap het volksidentiteit 'n sentrale en toonaangewende waarde gekry, en dit is hierdie ervaring wat in die kerklike verslag meespreek." Cf. also Combrink (1986, 219).

34. The question at the outset is therefore not how these diverse relationships should be regarded. The presupposition is that they are problematic, and that a way should be found to solve the problem.

35. Cf. Conradie *et al* (1995) for a description of this hermeneutic approach.

36. Vorster (1983, 104) remarks in this regard: "Gn. 11:1-9 is read from the perspective of the current 'historical situation' in South Africa in order to find a Scriptural basis for that situation."

Durand (1978) indicated that the report's understanding of diversity does not function only relatively as the report says, but that it becomes the central issue in the practical implementation of this principle. Two issues that illuminate this fact in particular, are the report's views on mixed marriages and separate church affiliations. In the final version of the report³⁷ the view on mixed marriages is formulated as follows: "Factors which impede the happiness and full development of a Christian marriage and those which would eventually destroy the God-given diversity and identity, would render such marriage undesirable and impermissible" (1974, 99). With regards to separate church affiliations the report says: "The existence of separate Dutch Reformed Church affiliations for the various population groups is recognized as being in accordance with the plurality of church affiliations described in the Bible. These enable each individual to hear and preach the great deeds of God in the context of his own language, culture and national affiliation" (1974, 82).

From these quotations it is clear that diversity (with regards to race, language, culture, etc.) has become the lense through which reality is viewed by this report. "Separate development" in society, "separate church affiliations" in religion, and the impermissibility of "mixed marriages" are the conclusions drawn when reality is viewed through this lense. Or to put it the other way round: The lense of diversity and separateness led the report's compilers to find this "principle" attested in (and even proclaimed by) the Bible. Van Wyk (1976, 103ff.) has indicated how the issue of diversity has been changed into a principle of "separateness/division"³⁸ by the report. Diversity is a concept well attested in the Bible, but the report has understood these indications on diversity as proclamations of "separateness", or (to use the well-known word) "apartheid".

Kinghorn (1986) has indicated how the philosophy of "sovereignty in the own sphere" (formulated by Kuyper) has again contributed to this understanding of diversity. According to this philosophy creation could be divided into different societal spheres. These spheres are in constant interaction and are part of the same society, but in each sphere the principle of sovereignty applies which allows for own decision-taking and own principles. Kinghorn (1986) has indicated how this philosophy has already played an important role in the earlier history of the Dutch Reformed Church. The compilers of the report therefore continued this train of thought when they applied this philosophy to race differences and differences among "peoples".

To conclude this section: it is again clear that the report followed an inductive approach in their interpretation of the Bible. Their views on and evaluation of the reality of racial differences formed the point of departure in the interpretation process. The problems of their view on society formulated the questions that were posed to the Bible.

37. With regards to the report's section on mixed marriages, a drastic change to the original wording was decided by Synod. The final version emphasized more strongly that the "God-given" ethnic diversity and identity ought to be protected by declaring that mixed marriages are impermissible. Cf. Durand's discussion (1978, 8) of this changed wording.

38. Van Wyk (1976, 103) says: "Wat het hier gebeur? Naas die goedgefundeerde verskeidenheidsmotief het 'n ander motief werksaam (en selfs beslissend) geword: die motief van skeiding. Dit is die motief: onderskeie volke (veral by kleurverskille) leef in onderskeie (en geskeie) kerke. En dié kerke is die bolwerk van die onderskeie/geskeie bestaan van die volke."

4.3 Identifying eternal norms for society

The fourth hermeneutical principle of the report reads as follows: "The Church has a prophetic function in respect of the state and society when the Scriptural norms that should apply in all spheres of life are not respected." According to this principle the report endeavours to search for the principles and norms that are eternal and that should apply to the South African society (the relations between different peoples and races, in particular)³⁹. This strategy makes the Bible a book of overt and hidden norms.

Vorster (1983, 106ff.) discusses this strategy elaborately. He finds two problems with it:

- (a) In the first instance Vorster questions the strategy as a whole. According to him "this approach has its background in the doctrine of authority of the Bible. Already in the seventeenth century a distinction was being made between the 'historical' and 'normative' authority of the Bible. Even a person like the Reformed systematic theologian Bavinck, however, asserted that everything in the Bible does not have normative authority." Vorster therefore concludes on this strategy: "It is, however, difficult to expel the impression that they handle the Bible in a rabbinic manner, seeming to think that what Christians need is a Mishna and a Talmud. Their search for norms and what I have called a 'deeper' meaning makes the Bible a new book of law" (1983, 108).
- (b) The second problematic issue for Vorster is the application of these norms in the report. It seems that, although these norms are regarded as eternal and meta-historical, there is a willingness to apply these norms differently in a changing situation. In this regard Vorster observes: "There is a remarkable difference, as far as the application of the Bible is concerned, between chapter one and chapters three and five, which deal with 'social justice' and 'marriage and mixed marriages' respectively. The situation in the latter chapters is much more 'open', perhaps because the 'Scriptural commandment of neighbourly love' is decisive, and the policy of 'separate development' is partly shifted into the background. The result is that different adjustments are made to matters that had previously been regarded in the NGK tradition as matters that are based on scriptural grounds. In a changed situation these matters are interpreted in a different manner in the light of Scripture. The norms of Scripture are in other words applied differently in a changed situation with regard to the same problems (e.g. mixed marriages)." Although Vorster appreciates the willingness in the report to take changing situations into account in their interpretation of the Bible, he finds that the report is not honest in its presentation of the principle of normativity.

4.4 The DRC's history as sequel to Biblical salvation history

It seems as if the report follows the strategy of interpreting the Bible from their own context that they regard as a sequel to the history of salvation of the Bible⁴⁰. One of the hermeneutical principles that the report presupposes is the following (1974, 11): "In dealing with Scriptural data the Church will constantly have to be aware of the central theme of its preaching – i.e. the way of salvation in Christ and the coming of the kingdom of God – and it will have to indicate and extol the norms that coincide with this theme in all spheres of life." Although the report in section 10 explicitly

39. Cf. Conradie *et al* (1995) for a description of this strategy.

40. Cf. Conradie *et al* (1995) for a description of this strategy.

emphasizes the unique position of Israel⁴¹, and that direct lines could not be drawn between Israel's situation and any modern context, it qualifies this view in the second chapter on "The Church, the Kingdom and Ecumenism". Again in this section (par. 24) the report concedes that "church" and "people" should not be identified. However, the report says, the church may never be ignorant of a people, because the church finds its mode of existence within the realm of a people: "It is characteristic of the message of the Old Testament that the individual is corporately included in the various community associations to which he belongs. This premise is also of importance to the church. On the one hand, it means that the church must exert itself to give substance to the blessings of the Gospel in the life and social structure of the people. On the other hand the church should avoid the modern tendency to erase all distinctions among peoples" (1974, 11).

The people about whom the report speaks, is obviously the Afrikaner people, an per implication the Dutch Reformed Church (which consisted solely of white Afrikaner people). Albeit in a subtle way, the report indicates here that this specific people and church has a special relationship which corresponds to the God-willed "spheres of sovereignty" within which the Kingdom of God is manifested. Salvation history therefore does not only find its manifestation in humanity in general, but most particularly in the life of the people, the Afrikaner people and DRC in this case.

5. Conclusion: the use of the Bible in RVN

In my methodological reflection on the broader context of this study, namely a research project on the relationship between social transformation and Biblical interpretation, I have stated the following: "The most interesting would ... be (and that is the aim of this investigation) to determine the influence of these social processes on the selection of heuristic keys and interpretive strategies. Questions such as the following should be asked: Are there any correlations between the measure in which social transformation processes affected the interpretative community and the concepts they chose to unlock meaning from Biblical texts? What function did Biblical interpretation according to the selected heuristic keys and interpretative strategies have for the interpretative community?" (2000). With regards to these questions the following conclusions could be drawn from the present study:

5.1 Interaction with social understanding

It is clear from this study that there was strong interaction between the processes of social transformation during this period in the history of the DRC and the strategies of Biblical interpretation that were followed. The heuristic keys and interpretative strategies that were identified in this study show how deeply involved this report was in the social processes. These keys and strategies not only reflect the underlying philosophies and views on society, but they also reveal the strong tendency towards localization⁴² among one sector of the South African society, namely the white Afrikaner people.

It should, however, be noted that the interaction between these social processes and Biblical interpretation operated in a twofold way. On the one hand, the processes of

41. Cf. Basson's contribution (2000).

42. Cf. C. Groenewald's (2000) contribution to the interdisciplinary discussion within the context of the present research project.

social transformation in the apartheid society of the 1960's and 70's influenced the thought structure of the Afrikaner people in such a way that their heuristic keys and strategies in Biblical interpretation were affected by those processes. On the other hand, however, their Biblical interpretation also provided the theological legitimization for the practical implementation of a political and sociological model of society.

5.2 The mode of legitimization

In my methodological reflection I have indicated that different modes of interaction between social transformation processes and Biblical interpretation strategies could be distinguished⁴³. It is clear from the report of the Dutch Reformed Church *Ras, Volk en Nasie* that Biblical interpretation was done according to the mode of legitimization. The present order of political apartheid was accepted uncritically, and Biblical interpretation served the purpose of reinforcing and strengthening this order. The report consciously or unconsciously wanted to provide Biblical "proofs" or "arguments" that could legitimize this policy, as well as the practical implementation of it in society.

43. I have distinguished four modes: (i) *The mode of legitimization*: The present social order is accepted uncritically, and Biblical interpretation serves the purpose of *reinforcing or strengthening* this order; (ii) *The mode of accommodation*: The present social order is accepted as norm, but Biblical interpretation serves the purpose of *including others* into this order; (iii) *The mode of apology*: The present social order is accepted with cognisance of alternative social orders. Biblical interpretation then functions as *explanation* of the present order over against other social orders; (iv) *The mode of resistance*: The present social order is rejected, and Biblical interpretation serves the purpose of *criticising* the present order and advocating an alternative order.

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