

EXTRAPOLATING THE BIBLICAL TRAJECTORIES ON 'HOPE FOR THE EARTH'

Ernst M Conradie
Department of Christian Studies
University of the Western Cape

1. Introduction: the hermeneutical tension between Biblical scholarship and Christian doctrine and ethics

For the purposes of Christian theology, the historical reconstruction of Biblical perspectives on the theme of 'hope for the earth' cannot be an aim in itself. In the introduction to these essays it was suggested that such a reconstruction could form part of an investigation into the viability of an eschatological approach to an ecological theology, spirituality and praxis within the South African context. This call for clarity on the complex hermeneutical question as to how Biblical material could or should be used for systematic theology, ethics and practical theology.

This is certainly not a new problem. It may be helpful to remind ourselves of the uneasy relationship which exists between Biblical Studies and Christian theology and ethics in this regard, also in South Africa.¹ This tension is well illustrated in the following 'understanding' which I have reached with a New Testament colleague and friend. 'Christian theologians may continue talking about contemporary Christian faith and praxis as long as they stop pretending that what they say is in any way related to the Bible.' Likewise, 'Biblical scholars may continue with historical reconstructions of Biblical texts as long as they stop pretending that this is in any way relevant for understanding Christian faith and society today.'² Can this intolerable tension be resolved?

This 'understanding' seems to indicate at least two important requirements for a more fruitful cooperation between Biblical Studies and Christian theology.

On the one hand, Christian theologians need to develop a greater sensitivity for the plurality of Biblical texts and their historical contexts. Biblical scholars have demonstrated through careful reconstructions and sustained literary analyses that there is a radical and at times conflicting plurality of perspectives within the Biblical canon itself. All Biblical texts simply cannot be easily harmonised or brought under the same umbrella (or trajectory!). Christian theologians have all too often been guilty of simply quoting Biblical texts as proof for their own theological constructions.³ A deliberately *selective* use of Biblical material may, however, be difficult to avoid whenever theologians wish to show that a constructive and imaginative (and perhaps rather urgent) reinterpretation of the Christian tradition remains, in some or other way, in continuity with the Biblical roots of Christianity.⁴

1 On this debate in South Africa, see Botha (1993), De Gruchy (1997), Deist (1992), De Villiers (1989), Mosala (1986), Smit (1988, 1991, 1992).

2 See the comment by Smit (1992:317) on the relationship between Biblical exegesis and Christian ethics: '... om Skrifgegewens te benut in 'n etiese argument ... is 'n veel ingewikkelder proses as ... 'n blote 'lees'van die Bybelse gegewens en dan 'n 'benutting' of 'toepassing' daarvan in die etiek.'

3 See Smit (1991b).

4 See my suggestion (Conradie 1994) that Biblical scholarship primarily has a *critical* and not necessarily a *constitutive* function in theological interpretation. On the basis of the exegetical thrust 'from text to context' it is often assumed that the Bible should play a constitutive role in theological constructions, i.e. that systematic theology and ethics should build on exegetical foundations laid by Biblical scholarship. However,

Nevertheless, a more honest and careful use of exegetical studies by Christian theologians would be necessary to do justice to the results of critical Biblical scholarship.

On the other hand, Biblical scholars need to develop a greater sensitivity for the inevitable role played by Christian doctrine in contemporary theological interpretation. Biblical scholars have, understandably, become very reluctant to acknowledge any positive contribution of Christian doctrine in Biblical interpretation. References to doctrine in theological reinterpretations have all too often been used to constrain the otherness of the results of critical Biblical scholarship - results which simply did not always fit doctrinal preunderstandings and expectations.

Nevertheless, a sophisticated understanding of Christian doctrine, ethics and the complexities of social theory remains vital for the task of relating the results of Biblical scholarship to the needs of, e.g., the contemporary South African society. It is simply not possible to 'jump' directly from Biblical texts to contemporary contexts through often all too superficial thematic comparisons. Biblical scholars have duly recognised the inevitable role of contextual factors in Biblical interpretation. This has underlined the need for an in-depth understanding of the tools of social analysis. However, the inevitable role played by Christian doctrine has not always been acknowledged with the same enthusiasm.

In the next section I will argue that certain 'heuristic keys', often based on doctrinal concepts, play a crucial role in contemporary theological interpretation.

2. The role of heuristic keys in theological interpretation

One of the most intriguing aspects of theological interpretation is the very possibility of relating Biblical texts in all their plurality and ambiguity to an equally complex contemporary context.⁵

David Tracy has suggested that this is *de facto* possible through the power of what he calls an analogical imagination.⁶ Interpretation can only take place when some analogies, that is similarities-amidst-differences, are identified, in the case of theological interpretation between the Biblical texts, the Christian tradition and a contemporary context. Tracy (with Paul Ricoeur) refers to the classic axiom of Aristotle in this regard: 'To spot the similar in the dissimilar is the mark of poetic genius'.⁷ The ability to identify these similarities and to express them in an accessible form (image) is based on the power of the imagination.⁸

The identification of such similarities does not take place in a coincidental way. Such similarities are discovered through long-standing theological traditions that have formulated and developed the necessary conceptual tools to facilitate this process. I would like to argue that *heuristic keys* play a crucial role in this regard.

Heuristic keys are typically derived from the dominant beliefs, doctrines, values,

theological constructions are precisely free, creative and imaginative constructions which serve the needs of contemporary Christian faith and praxis. These theological constructions may use a point of departure in the Biblical texts or in the tradition but cannot and should not simply repeat such a position. The task of Biblical scholarship (on a reflective level) is primarily critical, i.e. to investigate the continuity between such theological constructions and the Biblical roots of Christianity.

5 The Gadamerian metaphors ('game', 'conversation', a 'fusion of horizons') to describe this process are well-known. For an attempt to articulate the strategies used by ordinary readers to relate text with context, see Rossouw (1980:21f), Conradie et al (1995:42f).

6 See Tracy (1981).

7 Tracy (1981:410).

8 For a detailed analysis of the notion of an 'analogical imagination', emphasising the identification *and* imaginative expression of analogies, see Conradie (1992).

customs, and habits of interpretative communities. They are not directly derived from either the Biblical texts or the contemporary world but are precisely the product of previous attempts to construct a relationship between text, tradition and context.

Heuristic keys have a double function in theological interpretation. They provide a key to unlock the meaning of *both* the contemporary context *and* the Biblical texts. They therefore (and simultaneously) enable the interpreter to establish a *link* between text and contemporary context. Heuristic keys are not only employed to *find* similarities but to *construct* similarities, to *make* things similar (*idem-facio*), if necessary.⁹ The scope of such heuristic keys are often quite comprehensive: they purport to provide a clue to the core meaning of the contemporary context *as a whole* and the Biblical text *as a whole*.

The following well-known examples of such heuristic keys may be mentioned: the victory over the powers of death (Eastern orthodox), justification by faith alone (Lutheran), the kingdom of God (Calvin), sin-grace (Augustine), nature-grace (Thomas), the imitation of Christ (Thomas a' Kempis), the notion of a new covenant, Christian love (*caritas*), the incarnation, the cross-resurrection dialectic, the ongoing work of the Spirit, the duty of Christians as 'prophets, kings and priests', liberation from oppression, ecological wholeness, mission and witness, hope, etc. In each case, these heuristic keys not only provide an explanation of the historical meaning of the Biblical texts; they also provide the parameters for contemporary Christian living in the continued presence of God.

To illustrate this claim with the example of 'liberation from oppression': When this heuristic key is used, the Bible is read to find support for the notion that the God who is reflected in many Biblical texts is, in a special way, a God who cares for and liberates the poor and oppressed. This soon becomes a strategy for reading the whole Bible; it is identified as a persistent theme throughout the Bible. At the same time 'liberation for the oppressed' may also be used to highlight the most salient features of a contemporary context, e.g. as a context of desperate poverty, oppression and marginalisation in need of God's liberative concern. The message follows clearly: the same God of the Bible is still present to liberate the poor and oppressed in present circumstances.

This heuristic key thus provides a strategy for establishing a link between text and context. When such a heuristic key is used persistently and pervasively, a plurality of connotations is likely to be attached to, in the above mentioned example, the notion of 'liberation.' This would call for a systematic clarification of this particular heuristic key and its relationship with other core Christian symbols.¹⁰ Inevitably, it becomes the contribution of Christian (systematic) theology to provide such a clarification and perhaps also an imaginative reconstruction of the content of such heuristic keys.

One implication of this analysis is that it is simply not possible to 'jump' from the Biblical text to a specific problem in the contemporary context without the use of such

9 According to Ricoeur (1978:148), the creation of metaphorical meaning does not only involve the identification of existing similarities. It also involves an association of semantic fields which have hitherto been considered as quite different from one another. It is thus necessary to *make* these semantic fields similar:

But we miss entirely its semantic role if we interpret it in terms of the old association by resemblance ...
The assimilation consists precisely in *making* similar, that is, semantically proximate, the terms that the metaphorical utterance brings together.

10 The dominant heuristic keys of an interpretive community may sometimes remain hidden, unarticulated, taken for granted. Any attempt to define these may even be regarded as sacrilegious since the meaning should be 'obvious' to everyone. To mention one example: I have argued elsewhere (Conradie 1993) that there is a tendency in West's work on a *Biblical hermeneutics of liberation* (1991) to ontologise and absolutise the notion of 'liberation'. It thus becomes self-explanatory, all-inclusive, and mystified.

heuristic keys. While some interpreters may prefer to avoid or even to resist traditional doctrinal distinctions at all costs, newly constructed doctrines surface in emerging theological traditions through the persistent use of heuristic keys.¹¹ This analysis therefore confirms the pervasive, if often highly ambiguous influence of Christian doctrine and values in the process of interpretation.

Two further comments on the role of heuristic keys may be helpful:

- a) The identification of the role of these heuristic keys may clarify the sometimes diffuse use of the word 'hermeneutics'. It is often used to describe the products of a particular interpretation of the Bible - instead of a theory of interpretation (at a meta-level). It has, for example, become customary to talk about a feminist hermeneutics, a 'black hermeneutics of liberation' an 'ecological hermeneutics' or even a reformed, Pentecostal, African or a Lutheran hermeneutics. Technically, these uses of the concept hermeneutics do not indicate a new or a different theory of interpretation but refer to the use of specific heuristic keys, e.g. 'the oppression of women', 'liberation for the poor and oppressed' or 'the struggle of the black working class'. A discussion of the implications of the use of such keys for an adequate understanding of text, tradition and context usually forms an integral part of such an analysis.
- b) These examples indicate that heuristic keys have both a constructive and an ideology-critical function. They enable interpreters to identify and construct the meaning of the text (and the context) but they also provide a tool to evaluate the available evidence and to unmask (in terms of that particular perspective) any distortions in the process of interpretation (in the world behind the text, in the text itself, in the history of interpretation of the text and in the contemporary context).

3. The role of trajectories

Heuristic keys are used, transmitted, amplified and refined in interpretive communities and through long-standing theological traditions. *Any new act of interpretation may be regarded as a further extrapolation of some of the trajectories in such a tradition.*

The notion of 'trajectories' and the role of heuristic keys in a particular theological trajectory calls for some further reflection.

- a) Walter Brueggemann's article on trajectories in the Old Testament represent perhaps the most well-known use of this notion.¹² Brueggemann's analysis is rooted in the tradition history approach to Old Testament studies. Two features of this approach are important for the present analysis: i) The emphasis on a particular stable social location in which a trajectory is developed (e.g. a particular local shrine). ii) The emphasis on one particular symbol which becomes the root metaphor for theological reflection at that particular social location (e.g. the house of David, the law of Moses, the exodus, the temple). A trajectory is constituted when the same symbol is continuously being reinterpreted in the same social location in and for changing circumstances.
- b) Brueggemann analyses two dominant trajectories in the literature shaped and energized by the Mosaic and Davidic covenants: i) the trajectory of 'Mosaic liberation' which emerged in an early Israelite peasant revolt, in the Mushite priesthood of Shilo and Nob,

11 The replacement of former doctrines by new heuristic keys based on the doctrines of emerging theological traditions is again well illustrated by West's (1991) use of the notion of 'liberation'.

12 Brueggemann (1993).

in prophetic critiques, in the Deuteronomistic circle and in the displaced Levitical priesthood after the exile. ii) The 'royal consolidation' trajectory surfaced in the Davidic-Solomonic state coup, in the Aaronid priesthood of Hebron and Jerusalem, the institutions of the monarchy and the Priestly writings and in the post-exilic Zadokite priesthood.¹³

- c) In several recent articles Klaus Nürnberger followed a somewhat similar approach which also traces the development of certain 'trajectories'.¹⁴ He focused on soteriological trajectories, i.e. the memory of certain redemptive experiences which becomes a 'soteriological paradigm' for a subsequently evolving tradition. Nürnberger cites the following examples of such soteriological paradigms: the promise to the patriarchs, exodus and conquest, the divine order established by the rule of kings, covenant and law, creation and eschatological transformation, priesthood and sacrifice.

In an article on the 'royal paradigm,' Nürnberger¹⁵ traces different notions of political rule in the history of Israel, in the New Testament era and throughout the history of the Christian tradition. He shows how this trajectory has, at times, been influenced by new theological insights but that these insights were distorted through ideological legitimization in subsequent times. Nürnberger then extrapolates this trajectory to reflect on the notion of democracy in the contemporary South African context. In an essay on eschatology¹⁶ Nürnberger follows a similar approach. He traces developments and distortions in the notion of hope throughout the history of the Jewish-Christian tradition and extrapolates these developments towards a contemporary Christian eschatology.

A few features of Nürnberger's approach are important. Although he does not use the notion of trajectories explicitly, there is a clear attempt to trace historical developments. He does not focus on a particular social location nor on a particular symbol but on a particular theme or problem to which people in different social locations, using different root metaphors responded. He shows how aberrations of a trajectory occurred within the canonical texts but also how these aberrations were often redirected in subsequent developments. The Biblical canon is regarded as a primal and prototypical period in the history of a larger tradition which includes further deliberations in the history of Christian doctrine.¹⁷

The extrapolation of these traditions is in both cases crucial. The task of contemporary interpretation is not to select texts which can be appropriated (directly?) within contemporary contexts. Instead, the task of interpretation involves an attempt to trace the history of a trajectory (in all its aberrations and innovations) carefully in order to identify the direction or underlying thrust of its developments, and, on that basis, to extrapolate this dynamic towards the future. Nürnberger comments:

The hermeneutical cycle should not focus, therefore, on the translation of a particular text into a particular situation, but on extrapolating the dynamic and direction of the evolutionary process of a soteriological paradigm or tradition into present

13 Brueggemann (1993).

14 See Nürnberger (1992, 1993, 1994, 1997).

15 See Nürnberger (1992).

16 Nürnberger (1994).

17 See Nürnberger (1992:17): 'The rationale of the closure of the canon was to demarcate a primal and prototypical period of evolutionary history, which could act as a criterion for the acceptability of subsequent developments.'

constellations of need.¹⁸

- d) The value of the notion of hermeneutical trajectories is that it puts the use of heuristic keys in a historical perspective. It emphasises that the world of interpretive communities is dynamic and is continually being transformed through the process of ongoing interpretation. It has to be remembered, however, that the very identification of a trajectory remains a construction by contemporary scholars which can never do full justice to the plurality of voices in the Biblical canon. Although the task of selecting, prioritising and organising these voices (into a trajectory) is unavoidable and necessary, it remains open to ideological abuse and the danger of coercing marginalised voices.
- e) But what does this act of extrapolation really entail? The notion of extrapolation suggests both an element of continuity and of critical innovation in a trajectory. Such extrapolation therefore indeed requires something like an analogical imagination. Interpreters have to identify some aspects of the tradition which could be build upon to address the needs and questions of a present context. These analogies have to be expressed in a concrete material form which will be accessible within the particular context. There are no clear-cut rules for an act of extrapolation. It requires both an in-depth understanding of the tradition and the imagination to construct new, creative interpretations. It requires the prophetic ability to read the 'signs of the time' and speak an appropriate word for a particular context. It requires a priestly consciousness to find an appropriate way of living in the presence of God in changing circumstances.

4. Biblical trajectories on hope for the earth

The extrapolation of trajectories is clearly a daunting task. It should be approached with the necessary caution. In the light of the uneasy relationship between Biblical scholarship and Christian doctrine discussed in the introduction this is indeed of crucial importance.

One of the most amazing aspects of theological interpretation is that interpretation is, at the same time, also a very simple task. We are continually transmitting and extrapolating our own traditions simply by continuing to be part of them. We are therefore perhaps well advised to enter into the exercise of extrapolation by trying to articulate how we are already involved in acts of extrapolation, to articulate our own preunderstanding in this regard.¹⁹

In the light these comments, I would therefore prefer not to attempt identifying the basic thrust of the Biblical trajectories on hope for the earth. That would require an accumulated knowledge of all the papers presented in this volume and will always be in danger of forcing the plurality of voices into a single historical framework. Instead, I would like to articulate my own (present) preunderstanding of the notion of 'hope for the earth'. This preunderstanding will have to remain provisional in the discussion below. It expresses a clue that will guide further research on the theme of hope for the earth. In the context of the volume, the question whether and how such a notion of hope for the earth forms part of Biblical trajectories may be redirected to Biblical scholarship for critical investigation.

a) Confusion and conflation

My impression is that contemporary notions of Christian hope respond to, but often conflate and confuse, three distinct aspects of the human predicament.²⁰ In reading

18 Nürnberger (1992:17).

19 See the method of articulation, critical testing and renewed interpretation proposed in Conradie (1995:33f).

20 Virtually every book on eschatology provides some form of typology. The most important line of demarcation

Augustine's *Confessions* recently, I was struck by his sustained attempt to grapple as a Christian theologian with the Manicheist dualism of good and evil on the one hand and the Platonic duality of ideas and the material world on the other. For Manicheism the human predicament is that of coming to terms with *evil* (or sin) whereas the escape from *ignorance* (of the One) is the quest of Platonic and neo-Platonic philosophy. Augustine shared the Manicheist awareness of the pervasive problem of evil, rejected its dualism by appropriating the integrated Platonic worldview but, against the thrust of neo-Platonism, also affirms the goodness of the created order together with the Jewish-Christian tradition.

b) Three human predicaments

When these reflections are related to the theme of Christian hope, I would like to suggest that an adequate Christian eschatology needs to respond to *three* distinct aspects of the human predicament.²¹

- i) The predicament of human *limitedness* (in space). Humans are limited by their own bodiliness. Their sphere of control (and power) remains confined. Likewise, human knowledge remains limited. Unlike God, we are not omniscient. The quest of neo-Platonic philosophy is precisely to transcend these limitations in order (through the powers of reason, memory and insight) to comprehend the One. Likewise, the quest of many exponents of the mystical tradition is to reach beyond the qualitative difference between the finite world and God in order to attain, if for one fleeting moment, the *visio Dei*.²²
- ii) The predicament of human *finitude* (in time). Humans not only have limited power, they are also mortal. We are nothing but dust, grass which withers away quickly (Gen 3:19, Ps 90:5-6, Is 40:6-7). We live for seventy or eighty years and these pass by quickly (Ps 90:10). We can control neither our own futures and destinies nor those of society after our deaths (see Eccl 2). The lifespans of humans, the human species, the earth and probably the universe itself are indeed limited. This also constitutes an ultimate boundary to the scope of any notion of hope for the earth. In numerous religious traditions the problem of finitude in time still provides the stimulus behind the quest for life after death.

This predicament of finitude is closely related to but not identical with the classic (philosophical) problem of coming to terms with change. While many of us may wish to appreciate and celebrate, history, time, and a more dynamic worldview, it should be remembered that temporality implies transitoriness. And transitoriness also involves a sense of loss - of every precious moment and opportunity just gone by and of the always

between different notions of hope is, for example, defined as this-worldly or other-worldly hope, eschatology or apocalypticism, futurist or realised eschatology, the personal, historical or cosmic dimensions of hope, the doctrine of the 'last things' or of Jesus as the Eschatos, an emphasis on the things that are hoped for (physics) or on the phenomenon of hope itself (anthropology), evolutionary or revolutionary forms of hope, etc. See, e.g. Berkhof (1967:79f), Braaten (1985), Hayes (1983:5-20), Macquarrie (1978:88f), Moltmann (1979:18f), Nürnberger (1994) and numerous others. The analysis here is a provisional attempt to find another angle for such a typology.

21 The notion of 'human predicament' is used here not merely as a synonym for 'worldview', 'horizon', or 'life experience'. The three predicaments suggest more concrete, material and therefore to some extent *fixed* restrictions to human life. These limitations will, of course, be interpreted in different ways in different historic periods and in different contexts. For another attempt to provide a typology of interpretations of Christian hope, see Macquarrie (1978:86f).

22 For the Augustinian notions of the *visio Dei*, see the *Confessions* Book 7.xvii and 9.x.

imminent threat of the loss of life itself.

- iii) The predicament of human *self*-enclosure (cf. sin as *incurvatus in se*). Humans are not only limited in space and time; they also have to come to terms with the problem of sin, evil, injustice, oppression, conflict, corruption, destruction, degradation, suffering, and untimely death. These problems are caused by human beings themselves. They are manifested either in the form of sinning (one's own sins) or of being sinned against. Christianity, like many other religious traditions, has grappled with these problems throughout the centuries and has indicated a way towards salvation from sin and evil.

c) Eschatology and the three human predicaments

Christian soteriology has traditionally focused (although not exclusively) on the third problem, that of salvation from sin. By contrast, Christian eschatology has, to my mind, traditionally conflated and often confused these three aspects of the human predicament. This may help us to identify some of the main ingredients in the trajectories of hope in the Jewish-Christian tradition:²³

- i) Christian hope may, in its very roots, be regarded as predominantly a response to the predicament of evil or sin.²⁴ The vision of *shalom* in the pre-apocalyptic prophetic tradition includes a vision of a society where pervasive evil will be restrained, transformed, conquered. This prophetic vision (e.g. Isaiah 65) is concerned with the future of life on this earth, a new golden age of *shalom*, and not with a world beyond the annihilation of this one.²⁵

In this vision, the re-orientation of faith towards the future (instead of affirming the stability of the past) is instigated by an unacceptable present.²⁶ In this form, Jewish-Christian eschatology is a protest statement, a form of resistance against present forms of oppression, evil, ideology, idolatry and also despair.²⁷ It is a form of defiance against seemingly overwhelming powers, based on the promises of God for a better future and the provisional fulfilment of these promises in Israel's experiences of salvation and liberation.²⁸ Because such redemptive experiences remain limited and provisional, never comprehensive and final, Christian eschatology maintains a tension between the 'already' and the 'not yet'.

- ii) Sometime during the Persian period, the scope of this orientation of hope on the predicament of sin was broadened to incorporate the problem of finitude in time: the problem of mortality.²⁹ This coincided with a radicalisation of the problem of sin, which

23 My aim in this section is certainly *not* to provide a historical overview of this trajectory, but to show how a focus on one of the three predicaments have an influence on Christian eschatology. Nevertheless, the two switches in the understanding of Christian hope which are described below (from hope for salvation to cosmic apocalypticism and to the epiphany of God's eternal presence) do have historical roots. These switches should also be understood as a change in emphasis and not as an exclusive concentration on one or another of the predicaments.

24 Although one predicament may be emphasised in a particular period or tradition the others usually continue to play a minor role.

25 Moltmann (1996:275).

26 Nümberger (1994:139) explains the 'inner logic' of eschatology: 'At the root of eschatology lies the common human awareness that what reality is does not correspond with what reality ought to be. Such an awareness emerges and grows in times of suffering and need.'

27 Moltmann (1979:125) explains that Christian hope is both a 'negation of the negative' (see the previous note) and an anticipation of the positive, rooted in the God's promises and the fulfilment of these promises.

28 Nümberger (1994:149).

29 The belief in some form of life after death was widespread in the Ancient Near East and in Israel also before

was now understood to have cosmic ramifications. The prophetic 'Day of the Lord' became an event with apocalyptic proportions in which the forces of evil would *finally* be eradicated. Beyond this catastrophic event, a new cosmic dispensation was envisioned in which both the power of evil *and* of death would be conquered.

The quest for hope was thus broadened to include a search for immortality after death (both personal death and the end of the world). In the time of Jesus, this was formulated by the Pharisees as the belief in the resurrection of the dead. In the theology of Paul the predicaments of sin and of mortality was merged into one another, because 'death itself is regarded as the wage of sin' (Rom 6:23). Since then, and until very recently, the view that human beings would not have been mortal if the fall did not take place dominated the Christian tradition. Death (the predicament of finitude) affects the human condition only as a result of sin. Subsequently, Christian hope anticipated salvation from sin *and* life after death simultaneously.³⁰

- iii) The influence of Platonic philosophy, neo-Platonic philosophy and Gnosticism on Christianity led to a further broadening of the scope of Christian eschatology.³¹ It now also had to address the predicament of human limitedness (in space), i.e. the limits of human knowledge. Christian hope became the quest to return to the eternal presence of God.³² To be in the presence of God is to experience the eschaton.³³ In terms of the neo-Platonic cosmology, baptised by many Christian theologians, the separation of human beings from the presence of God was not merely regarded as the result of sin. The distinction between humanity (incarcerated in the material world) and God became an ontological separation. The quest for the knowledge of God therefore had to follow the neo-Platonic route of transcending the material world to attain the ultimate *visio Dei*. This led to the dominance of what Paul Santmire has called the 'metaphor of ascent': the quest to escape from the confines of the material world in order to experience the presence of God.³⁴
- iv) In the medieval theological synthesis, an eschatological response to each of these three human predicaments were integrated with one another. The Christian hope was understood as 'going to heaven one day'.³⁵ This implied firstly an escape from the material world, the earth and the ontological separation between God and humanity to

the Persian period. However, such earlier notions of life after death were reinterpreted through the emergence of Jewish apocalypticism (see McDannell & Lang 1988:15f, also Ruther (1983:237f). See also Moltmann's view (1967:132) that it was an intensification of God's promise that led the prophets to regard even death itself as a transformable possibility.

- 30 Ruether (1983:239) identifies a 'double scenario' here: a historical millennium fulfilling the demand of justice and a subsequent dispensation of life everlasting where the righteous can achieve immortality.
- 31 See Moltmann (1967:156) who argues that the Greek notion of the timeless epiphany of the eternal presence of God presented itself as the fulfilment of eschatological expectations. The eschatological expectation of what has 'not yet' happened becomes a noetic expectation of the universal disclosure and glorification of what has already happened in heaven' (1967:159).
- 32 Alternatively, the eschaton may be understood in Barthian terms as the revelation 'zenkt recht von oben' of the eternal presence of God in history (in Jesus Christ). For a critique of this notion of eschatology, see Moltmann (1967:40f).
- 33 This is also the theme of numerous earlier Psalms. See König's (1980) argument that the eschaton should primarily be understood as the presence of Christ, the *eschatos* and the comprehensive well-being flowing forth from this presence.
- 34 See Santmire (1985:16f).
- 35 For a detailed and more sophisticated historical survey of Christian notions of 'heaven', see McDannell & Lang (1988).

reunite the soul with God. Secondly, the predicament of human finitude is finally overcome in heaven where the immortal soul enjoys everlasting life in the presence of God. In the medieval synthesis, the immortal soul is to be reunited with the body (through the resurrection of the body) but necessarily only in a very vague sense. The finitude of history and the earth itself is acknowledged and resolved through an apocalyptic and very graphic vision of the 'end of time' when both evil and death will finally be conquered.³⁶ Thirdly, heaven also provides a final escape from the miseries of earthly existence (the predicament of sin). It also provides a just reward for those who were sinned against, who have suffered injustice and oppression.

It is perhaps fair to say that this medieval synthesis continues to dominate the understanding of Christian hope in the popular imagination, also in South Africa.

d) Hope for the earth

How can these reflections aid an attempt to extrapolate the trajectory of hope in the Jewish-Christian tradition towards a notion of 'hope for the earth'? And how can such a notion empower a Christian ecological theology, spirituality and praxis in South Africa?

An answer to this question would require a careful study of subsequent developments in the history of Christian eschatology. The continued integration and conflation of the three human predicaments may perhaps also provide a fruitful angle to approach such a study. However, this is clearly beyond the scope of the present paper. I will therefore restrict myself to the following brief observations:

- i) In the face of the environmental crisis, a notion of 'hope for the earth' urgently needs to respond to the problem of evil, sin, injustice, oppression and degradation. Christian hope is not only based on the (unfulfilled) promises of God for the long-term future. It is also based on previous fulfilment's of God's promises, on previous experiences of salvation and liberation, most notably in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ. The *not-yet* of Christian salvation from sin only becomes plausible in the light of salvation *already* experienced.³⁷ Christian hope therefore expects salvation also within the parameters of history itself.³⁸ It awaits the establishment of 'justice, peace and the integrity of creation' here on earth. To live with a vision of hope for the earth calls on us to pray for the coming of God's kingdom *on earth, now* and not only in heaven, one day. For Christians, the quest for environmental justice is to establish signs of the coming of this kingdom in the face of environmental despair.
- ii) The environmental crisis and the extinctions of numerous species have made us aware of the finitude, the mortality of whole species and not only of individual specimens. The history of species suggests that the present proliferation of a (too?) highly specialised

36 Such apocalyptic visions (often predictions) harbour the danger of rampant speculation on what will happen at the 'end of time.' The current debate between theology and the sciences on cosmology and eschatology clearly indicates that Christians have no privileged knowledge (based on Biblical or theological evidence) to predict the future of humanity, the earth or the universe. Van de Beek (1996:215) indicates that there is a tension between the popular Christian expectation of the destruction of the world at a future apocalyptic appearance of the risen Christ (which he refers to as 'eschatological creationism') and scientific predictions, based on the available empirical evidence, that the earth and the cosmos will endure much longer. Hans Küng (1984:252) adds: '... biblical eschatology is not a prognosis of end-events any more than the protology is a report of events at the beginning.'

37 See Moltmann (1979:20f) for a sophisticated discussion of the question whether Christian eschatology should be understood as 'the future of what has already come' or as 'the presence of what is still to come.'

38 See Moltmann (1996:129f) on the historical dimensions of Christian eschatology.

human species cannot and will not endure forever. This, surely, should sober our natural anthropocentrism.³⁹ We are nothing more than an episode in the history of a cosmic and planetary drama.⁴⁰

The earth (and probably the universe itself) shares in this finitude. The future lifespan of the earth is estimated by scientists to be approximately another 5 billion years (only!).⁴¹ This implies that hope for the earth cannot be understood as the continued existence of the planet *ad infinitum*. An ecological concern for the well-being of the earth has to come to terms with the earth's own ultimate finitude.

Furthermore, the awareness of the earth's finitude has led many theologians to acknowledge that suffering, violence, decay, and death was an integral part of nature from the very beginning.⁴² Although suffering is certainly amplified by evil, it forms an inherent part of God's creation in time.⁴³ From this perspective, creation 'in the beginning' was not paradise but only the promise thereof.⁴⁴ The notion of creation in the beginning only indicates God's original intentions for the world (to achieve the comprehensive well-being of all God's creatures), while the notion of an eschatological new creation articulates the hope that these intentions will materialise in the end.⁴⁵

In this way, Christian eschatology responds not only to the predicament of evil but also to the predicament of the finitude of creation. Eschatology unites the concerns of a theology of salvation and of creation theology in a vision of God's loving, nurturing and *creative* care for the cosmos over billions of years.⁴⁶ Christian eschatology expresses the hope that, after death and decay, my life and the life of the earth itself will somehow be taken up into the loving presence of God.

Is it really necessary to incorporate the predicament of finitude into a Christian vision of hope? Will a vision of hope for an earth freed from environmental degradation here and now not suffice?⁴⁷ Is the belief in life after death not (as Marx recognised) a dangerous illusion that could only detract us from our responsibility for this life and for this earth?

My impression is that a response to the predicament of finitude is difficult to avoid. Firstly, human beings seem unable to refrain from asking ultimate questions, e.g. the question, 'What will happen to me after death?' This question is amplified by an

39 Van de Beek (1996:209-210).

40 See Thomas Berry (1988:195).

41 See my discussion of the earth's finitude in this volume, as well as, i.a. the discussions by Haught (1993:115), Peacocke (1979:325).

42 For an extensive discussion of this problem see Moltmann (1996:77).

43 See Moltmann (1981:50-51): 'We cannot say 'if there were no sin, there would be no suffering.' Experience of suffering goes far beyond the experience of guilt and the experience of grace. It has roots in the limitations of created reality itself.' See also the sharp criticisms of Schuurman (1987) and Bouma-Prediger (1997) who both argue that Moltmann fails to distinguish adequately between (in the terms of my analysis) the predicaments of sin and finitude, between the fall and the goodness of the created order. For Moltmann, creation in time is itself fundamentally faulted due to the bondage to transience (*Knechtschaft unter die Vergänglichkeit*) (1985:69). Only a radically new creation can provide a solution to such faultedness (Bouma-Prediger 1997:89).

44 See Haught (1993:112).

45 Nürnberger (1994:141).

46 In this eschatological vision, creation theology encompasses the drama of (human) salvation as the brief episode during which the sins of *homo sapiens* threatened the survival of life on this planet.

47 McFague (1993:197f) and Ruether (1983:214f) focus their discussions on eschatology and ecology on this aspect of hope.

ecological consciousness of the imminent death of whole ecosystems (but not yet of the earth itself). Secondly, if Christian hope is ultimately hope in God and not only in human abilities, aspirations, dreams, expectations or 'the power of positive thinking', this raises the question of the future in the presence of this God. Christian eschatology as hope in the God of Jesus Christ cannot easily relinquish a trust in the continued creative love of God. Christian *theology* is, after all, bold enough to talk about God and not only about human experience, the Bible, the Christian tradition or contemporary society.

The content of this hope for a future with God should be formulated in such a way that it could inspire a Christian environmental praxis and, at the same time, in a way that would be plausible within the context of contemporary cosmology. This problem is indeed urgent but falls well beyond the scope of this contribution.

- iii) If Christian hope for the earth is ultimately a hope in Godself, it will also be difficult to avoid a discussion of the predicament of human limitedness in space. This calls for a reflection on the limitations of human knowledge and power (for knowledge *is* power) and the very possibility of knowledge of God. This also raises the question of the relationship between God, the world and humanity - which, according to David Tracy, remains the classic task of any Christian systematic theology.⁴⁸

Perhaps a few comments on the ecological significance of this problem will have to suffice. The ontological separation between God and the world adopted from neo-Platonic philosophy cannot, to my mind form the basis for an ecological theology. Jürgen Moltmann explains the devastating consequences of such a notion of God: 'In the Western tradition, God kept moving increasingly into the sphere of transcendence, and the world came to be understood in purely immanent and this-worldly terms.'⁴⁹ And further: 'Through the monotheism of the absolute subject, God was increasingly stripped of his connection with the world, and the world was increasingly secularized.'⁵⁰ This correlates with the notion that human beings are the self-appointed rulers over the world: 'As God is the lord and owner of the whole world, so human beings must be concerned to become lords and owners of the earth, in order to prove themselves as the image of their God.'⁵¹

Instead, Moltmann proposes a trinitarian and specifically pneumatological understanding of the *immanence* of 'God in creation' (the title of his major work). The presence of God is evident in the whole creation, most notably in the celebration of the Sabbath. Moltmann explains:

If the creative God himself dwells in his creation, then he is making it his own home, 'on earth as it is in heaven'. All created beings then find in nearness to him the inexhaustible wellspring of their life, and for their part find home and rest in God.⁵²

This implies that the problem of the knowledge of God is not due on either an ontological separation between God and the world or to the limitation of human knowledge. According to the witness of the Hebrew prophets it is primarily sin and not createdness that separated us from God. The apostle Paul also argues eloquently that it is sin that alienated us from God's presence (Romans 3). This acknowledgement of the

48 Tracy (1981:406, 410).

49 Moltmann (1989:54).

50 Moltmann (1985:1).

51 Moltmann (1989:55).

52 Moltmann (1985:5).

problem of sin thus completes the full circle of the three (human) predicaments of finitude, limitedness and self-limitation.

4. Conclusion

To conclude: In these reflections, I have tried to articulate my current preunderstanding of what a contemporary notion of 'hope for the earth' could entail. I do not have the competence to answer the question whether this is, in some or other way, a legitimate extrapolation of the trajectories on hope in the Biblical roots of Christianity. I would, therefore, prefer to refer this question back to Biblical scholars for critical investigation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Augustine, A 1907. *Confessions*. Translated by EB Pusey. London: JM Dent & Sons.
- Berkhof, H 1967. *Gegronde verwachting. Schets van een Christelijke toekomstleer*. Nijkerk: GF Callenbach.
- Berry, T 1988. *The dream of the earth*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.
- Botha, J 1993. Aspects of the rhetoric of South African New Testament scholarship anno 1992. *Scriptura* 46, 80-99.
- Bouma-Prediger, S 1997. Creation ad the home of God: The doctrine of creation in the theology of Jürgen Moltmann. *Calvin Theological Journal* 32, 73-90.
- Braaten, CE 1985. The kingdom of God and life everlasting. In: Hodgson, PC & King, RH (eds) 1985. *Christian theology. An introduction to its traditions and tasks*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Brueggemann, W 1993. Trajectories in Old Testament literature and the sociology of ancient Israel. In: Gottwald, NK & Horsley, RA 1993. *The Bible and liberation. Political and social hermeneutics*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Conradie, EM 1992. What is an analogical imagination? *The South African Journal of Philosophy* 11:4, 103-112.
- Conradie, EM 1992b. Teologie en pluralisme. 'n Kritiese analise van David Tracy se voorstel van 'n analogiese verbeelding. *D.Th-proefskrif*, Universiteit van Stellenbosch.
- Conradie, EM 1993. Review Article: West, GO 1992. *Biblical hermeneutics of liberation. Modes of reading the Bible in the South African context of liberation*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 85, 61-65.
- Conradie, EM 1994. Is the new paradigm in theology still new? In: Mouton, J & Lategan, BC (eds) 1994. *The relevance of theology in the 1990's*, 83-105. Pretoria: HSRC.
- Conradie, EM et al 1995. *Fishing for Jonah. Various approaches to Biblical interpretation*. Bellville: UWC Publications.
- De Villiers, PGR 1989. New Testament scholarship in South Africa. *Neotestamentica* 23:1, 119-124.
- Deist, FE 1992. South African Old Testament studies and the future. *Old Testament Essays* 5, 311-331.
- Haught, JF 1993. *The promise of nature: Ecology and cosmic purpose*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
- Hayes, Z 1983. *What are they saying about the end of the world?* New York: Paulist Press.
- König, A 1980. *Jesus die Laaste*. Pretoria: N.G. Kerkboekhandel.
- Küng, H 1984. *Eternal life?* London: Collins.
- Macquarrie, J 1978. *Christian hope*. London: Mowbrays.
- McDannell, C & Lang, B 1988. *De . Een aardse geschiedenis*. Haarlem: JH Gottmer.
- McFague, S 1993. *The body of God. An ecological theology*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Moltmann, J 1967. *Theology of hope*. London: SCM Press.
- Moltmann, J 1979. *The future of creation*. London: SCM Press.
- Moltmann, J 1981. *The trinity and the kingdom*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.

- Moltmann, J 1985. *God in creation: An ecological doctrine of creation*. London: SCM Press.
- Moltmann, J 1989. *Creating a just future: the politics of peace and the ethics of creation in a threatened world*. London: SCM Press.
- Moltmann, J 1996. *The coming of God. Christian eschatology*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Mosala, IJ 1986. The use of the Bible in Black Theology. In: Mosala, IJ & Thlagale, B (eds) 1986. *The unquestionable right to be free*, 175-200. Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers.
- Nürnbergger, K 1992. The royal-imperial paradigm in the Bible and the modern demand for democracy. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 81, 16-34.
- Nürnbergger, K 1993. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: The trajectory of a soteriological paradigm in Biblical times. *Scriptura* 46, 1-23.
- Nürnbergger, K 1994. Towards a new heaven and a new earth. In: De Gruchy, JW & Villavicencio, C (eds) 1994. *Doing theology in context. South African perspectives*, 139-151. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Nürnbergger, K 1997. The conquest of chaos: The Biblical paradigm of creation and its contemporary relevance. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 98, 45-63.
- Peacocke, AR 1979. *Creation and the world of science*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Ricoeur, P 1978. *The rule of metaphor*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Ruether, RR 1983. *Sexism and God-talk. Toward a feminist theology*. London: SCM Press.
- Ruether, RR 1992. *Gaia & God: An ecofeminist theology of earth healing*. Harper & Collins Publishers.
- Santmire, HP 1989. The future of the cosmos and the renewal of the church's life with nature. In: Peters, T (ed): *Cosmos as creation. Theology and science in consonance*, 265-282. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- Schuurman, DJ 1987. Creation, eschaton, and ethics: an analysis of theology and ethics in Jürgen Moltmann. *Calvin Theological Journal* 22:1, 42-68.
- Schuurman, DJ 1995. Creation, eschaton, and social ethics: A response to Volf. *Calvin Theological Journal* 30, 130-143.
- Smit, DJ 1988. Responsible hermeneutics: a systematic theologian's response to the readings and readers of Luke 12:35-48. *Neotestamentica* 22, 441-484.
- Smit, DJ 1991a. The Bible and ethos in a new South Africa. *Scriptura* 37, 51-67.
- Smit, DJ 1991b. Wat beteken 'die Bybel sê'? 'n Tipologie van leserskonstrukte. *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 47:1, 167-185.
- Smit, DJ 1992. Oor 'Nuwe Testamentiese etiek, die Christelike lewe en Suid-Afrika vandag. *Scriptura* S9a, 303-325.
- Tracy, DW 1981. *The analogical imagination: Christian theology and the culture of pluralism*. London: SCM Press.
- Van de Beek, A 1996. *Schepping. De wereld asls voorspel voor de eeuwigheid*. Baarn: Callenbach.
- West, GO 1991. *Biblical hermeneutics of liberation. Modes of reading the Bible in the South African context*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications.