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READING THE NEW TESTAMENT FROM A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

ABSTRACT

This article argues that, from the perspective of the faith community, it is not enough to read the Bible only from a "technical" point of view; a theological perspective is also required. Subsequently the article deals with what a theological reading entails: A reader-orientated and a text-orientated view are presented.

1. STATING THE PROBLEM

It has always been an interest of mine not only to be "technically" involved with the matter of interpreting the New Testament, but also to bear in mind that the latter, together with the Old Testament, is the book of faith for the church, and that whatever method one may apply to the text, ultimately the theological subject matter of the text should come into play. Since this issue of *Acta Theologica* honours our colleague, Dr. David Keta, whose professional life has been devoted to making church members understand that the Bible is the life blood of the church, I considered it appropriate to offer some thoughts on reading the New Testament from a theological perspective.[1]

First, the prominent words in the title will be clarified. The focus is on the word "theological", which is highlighted by the other terms. Thus the concept "New Testament" suggests the existence of an "Old Testament". Together they form the literature referred to in the Christian community as the Bible, or the Christian canon. In turn the latter refers to the authority and normativity which this Book enjoys within the believing community. In some circles "theological" may evoke thoughts of a strict academic approach to the Bible, but "reading" qualifies it by hinting at an activity not taking place dispassionately, but rather in an involved, engaged manner.[2] Indeed, the context in which I teach New

1 Although this article is aimed at the New Testament, many of the aspects discussed may be equally applicable to a theological reading of the Old Testament, or the Bible for that matter. Therefore "New Testament" and "Bible" will be used alternatively.

2 For an overview of what the act of reading involves, see Tate (1991:145-164).

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Testament implies that students do not become clinical, objective researchers of the Bible, but remain part of the believing community and still expect to be nurtured by these documents.[3]

We are thus confronted with the task of explaining how the New Testament as part of the Christian canon may be understood and interpreted in order to address the convictions, beliefs, expectations and needs of the believing community.[4] Indeed this body of people forms the interpretative community of the New Testament. This does not imply that the New Testament is imprisoned within the confines or predilections and prejudices of this community[5] (the opposite will be argued below), but rather that this body of believers determines to a great extent the predisposition towards this literature in terms of expectations and aims of interpretation. And this brings us back to the term "theological" in our title. What do we mean by "theology"?

This is not the place to indulge in lengthy discussions about definitions of theology. However, it is necessary to explain in a few words the kind of agenda I have in mind when referring to a *theological* reading of the New Testament. In my mind theology has to do with matters concerning the universe and, more specifically, the human race *sub specie Dei*. It involves the ultimate questions of and about humankind and its environment. Of necessity this also involves the Bible, since for Christians this "God's eye view" of humankind is expressed in these writings and stamped with divine authority.[6] Thus theology and the Bible cannot be separated. Furthermore, theology defined as posing ultimate questions in the light of the Bible does not mean cancelling, ignoring or postponing other legitimate questions, but it focuses the attention on the ultimate meaning of human beings — in the essence of their being and in all their relationships — as portrayed by the Christian tradition, of which the Bible and, in particular, the New Testament form the origin. Theology therefore addresses a wide scope of issues, and it should not, as is often the case, be equated with or confined to dogmatics or church doctrine. Theology is primarily about humankind seeking and giving answers to ultimate meaning.

3 For a similar point of view, see Tucker (2004). The theme of Donfried's book (2006) is that the Bible belongs to the church. Anyone can read and interpret the Bible, but it is the faith and life of the church that created the Bible as a book. There is thus a reciprocity of the church and the Bible (2006:3). The church therefore has the responsibility to nurture its members from this book.

4 These concerns tie in with what Thiselton (1990:344) calls the role of de-objectification in Biblical interpretation.

5 There is a fine line between involved, engaged reading and tripping into the pitfalls of extremism. Smith (1993) wrote a fine book about how Scripture can operate positively and negatively in various religions.

6 This is similar to what Shneiders (1999:44-53) calls the revelatory or inspirational aspect of the Bible.

This leads to the following question: How does one read the New Testament with these issues in mind? What does a "theological" reading consist of? Is it different from ordinary reading? I will attempt to answer this question in the following section. Two points need to be emphasised at the outset: 1. Because of the limited scope of this article, the style adopted is one of proposition rather than fully-fledged argumentation with elaborate illustrations. 2. A theological reading of the New Testament cannot be pinpointed to or guaranteed and proved by a specific method or technique (cf. Green 2004). It can only be *argued* within the framework of certain premises and parameters. It is up to the reader to decide whether it is a valid way of presenting the case for a theological reading of the New Testament.

2. READING THE NEW TESTAMENT FROM A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

One might say that a theological reading of the New Testament implies putting the Bible on a pedestal, setting it apart from and assigning to it a special place among other literature not imbued with sacred authority. This immediately opens the debate as to whether there is such a thing as theological hermeneutics and, if so, what the difference is between this and a so-called general hermeneutics.[7] One way to portray the difference is to state that there are certain universals pertaining to linguistics, history, philosophy and ideology which play an important role in interpreting literature (literature being one application of hermeneutics). The scientific study of these universals may be called general hermeneutics. However, there are additional rules when it concerns the Bible. Criteria such as authority, infallibility, historical reliability, inner harmony, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, *et cetera*, also come into play. These may be regarded as theological hermeneutics.

One might object to the above in that it distorts the subject by drawing a caricature of the distinction between theological and general hermeneutics — the dividing lines being too crass, and hermeneutics being too narrowly defined. However, this was done on purpose in order to reflect the basic sympathies involved in this discussion. Thus, in order to formulate a provisional definition, we might say that theological hermeneutics focuses on the search for ultimate

7 In this article "hermeneutics" is used in two ways: in a broader, philosophical sense, describing the "ideological" stance adopted *vis-à-vis* interpreting life, and in a narrower sense, referring to strategies followed in interpreting literature in general and the Bible in particular. It is not always possible (or desirable) to separate these two senses. The reader should be aware of the distinction, and alert as to which of the two is referred to. However, by and large the former view of hermeneutics dominates in section 2.1, and the latter in section 2.2.

meaning in close encounter with the specific constraints of the interpretive community's view and interpretation of the Bible,[8] whereas general hermeneutics may also be involved with ultimate questions, but not necessarily so, and definitely not necessarily in dialogue with the Bible.

I first draw attention to three schools of thought in this debate (cf. Jeanrond 1991:163-165). *First,* there is the hard-line approach of evangelical orthodoxy. One might also call it a staunch dogmatic view. According to this approach, general hermeneutic insights and (critical) interpretative techniques and methods are rejected as alien to the nature of the Bible as the Word of God. The underlying motivation is that the Bible is clear in its intent, meaning and ability to guide the reader towards ultimate wisdom; it is its own interpreter and does not need human (read: secular) devices or insights to promote understanding. Only those filled with a spirit reborn and guided by the Holy Spirit will grasp the proper meaning of the Bible, and will discover the wisdom of God which is tantamount to ultimate meaning. Needless to say, in such an approach hermeneutics is not really an issue, because it is regarded as superfluous, the Spirit being the hermeneutic *par excellence*. On the other hand, some may portray this view as the hallmark of theological hermeneutics. This approach inevitably leads to a position where dogmatic certainty and assured results are being defended.

Secondly, one may identify a somewhat less rigid view than the previous one, namely closed hermeneutics. Although attention is paid to general hermeneutical insights, only those corresponding to the nature of Biblical theology are allowed right of passage. These then become an approved hermeneutic which will work best for Biblical texts and theology. Innovation is allowed only insofar as it may lead to the best theory and methods for understanding Biblical theology. It thus becomes a closed hermeneutical circle which feeds on itself and allows little creative input. Once a "sound Biblical hermeneutic" is advanced, the only dialogue possible is an intra- and intertextual one, namely an inner-Biblical debate.

A *third* approach may be called an open-ended dialogue between Christian/Biblical concerns and other thinkers interested in hermeneutics. A dialogue is initiated when a particular Christian or Biblical vision of the world is compared to and brought into play with all the views that care for the world. A theological mode of interpretation gradually develops in conversation with other (secular) modes of text and world interpretation.

8 This "definition" more or less ties in with Fowl's view (1997:xiii) that the theological interpretation of Scripture is that practice whereby theological concerns and interests inform and are informed by a reading of Scripture.

I would like to operate within the ambit of the last approach. From my definition of theology above, this option almost follows naturally. As theology has such a wide angle (humankind and the universe *sub specie Dei*, in conversation with the Bible), it is a matter of course that it should dialogue with all views pertaining to ultimate meaning. A theological reading, thus defined, cannot be separated from the general hermeneutical debate on the meaning of human life and only confine itself to an inner-Biblical discussion of the matter.[9] The following paragraphs will elaborate upon this position in two phases, namely a reader-orientated and a text-orientated view of the problem.

2.1 A reader-orientated view

A reader's perspective of interpretation could mean many things. This section will concentrate on how theological concerns may be combined with broader hermeneutical insights from a reader's perspective, the position adopted above.

Reading the New Testament from a theological perspective demands a focused reader. From the background of the believing, interpretative community s/he focuses on theological concerns (ultimate meaning in the light of the Bible). This is serious reading; there is nothing innocent or playful about it; it is a matter of life and death; it is ultimate reading.

However, focused or serious reading also has its hazards: It inevitably becomes selective and prejudiced. Therefore, when reading the New Testament from a theological perspective it is esential to acquire reading skills, to become an informed and educated reader, specifically concerning theological issues. This implies that the reader should simultaneously be engaged by and loyal to, as well as critical of the theological tradition purported to have been generated by the New Testament. (Whether either loyalty or criticism dominates differs from reader to reader, from issue to issue, and from time to time.) Thus, being a theologically informed reader implies acquiring a two-pronged reading strategy: adopting tradition and viewing it critically. One might call it a hermeneutic of retrieval and one of suspicion.

There is always a "generation gap" between tradition and the present time of the reader. Therefore transmission of tradition is never an obvious and automatic

9 In this regard Watson (1994:45) makes a very important remark, namely that even though theological hermeneutics locates the Biblical text within its proper ecclesial setting, that context is not a

> … self-contained, autonomous space isolated from the world. In fact, the world permeates that space, and the "truthful witness" offered by the canonical text cannot simply be read off its surface but must be given and discovered in the midst and in the depths of the conflict-ridden situations in which it is inevitably entangled.

event; it must be newly appropriated by each generation of readers. This always occurs within the framework of the reader's own understanding of what the task and importance of Christianity/theology is in the modern world.

This brings us to the notion of abiding meaning. Only when theological tradition and interpretation of the New Testament are regarded as still producing meaning in an ever changing world, will they be appropriated. Thus theological meaning is always linked to the wider debate among human beings about fundamental issues concerning humankind and its environment. In my opinion, there is no alternative to combining theological hermeneutics with general hermeneutics. Any other option is to avoid the inevitable: Sooner or later issues and questions on the world's agenda will also become items on the theological agenda.

Appropriation of tradition is not a new phenomenon. In fact, it lies at the root of thinking and writing as such. Humankind is always positioning itself in relation to what others have done and said in previous times. The Bible is no exception. The Bible entails the re-interpretation of tradition. It comprises rejection of tradition (hermeneutic of suspicion), adoption of tradition (hermeneutic of retrieval), as well as contemporary creative events and experiences added to and incorporated into the retrieved tradition (the revelatory aspect). This is evident in the life of Jesus: He rejected the legalist piety of the Jews, retrieved the love command from Scripture as the original purpose of God, and incorporated it into a new revelatory event through his death and resurrection.

In essence, this structure of dealing with tradition has remained the same. It highlights important principles concerning the relationship between theological and general hermeneutics. In spite of our deepest religious convictions about the nature of the Bible, in the latter we always encounter ultimate questions about humankind through the thought patterns, acts and language of ordinary human beings. This in itself warrants the need for a combined effort of theological and general hermeneutics. In addition, we must relate to this thoroughly human revelation in the Bible from the vantage point of our world today. This fact inevitably leads to the notion that there is interplay between the theological concerns encountered in the Bible and the broader existential life issues of our own time. Only a theological hermeneutic sensitive to the issues, questions and needs of the present world, and engaging in a dialogue with the broader search for meaning in the universe, has a chance to survive. From the reader's point of view, then, theological hermeneutics is closely linked to general hermeneutics, so much so that in a theological reading of the New Testament there is no need for a different interpretation theory as far as textual hermeneutics is concerned. However, the fully-fledged application of a general hermeneutics is required. If the term "theological hermeneutics" is to be kept (and I think it should, lest we loose this focus), it will emphasise the distinguishing character of theological hermeneutics, namely its focus on ultimate

meaning, and stress the fact that in the Bible this focus has been incarnated in human form (cf. Jeanrond 1991:181).

In summary: The reader's focus on *ultimate meaning* is the special contribution from a reader's perspective to the problem of a theological reading of the New Testament, in conjunction with the notion of a *critical appropriation* of this tradition, in light of the interaction between *theological* and *general hermeneutics* concerning ultimate, abiding meaning.

2.2 A text-orientated view

Theological hermeneutics is not only situated in the reader, but it is also a textual category. Theology and literature compliment one another. Even literature which does not intend to contribute to the theological discourse has a theological dimension, insofar as the mystery of life is somehow wrought out in it. If this is true of literature in general, this is even more true of the Bible which overtly carries out this theological discourse.

However, one should be careful as to how this theological dimension in the text of the Bible is articulated. In secular literature this is usually well argued and substantiated by interpreters, because it is not that obvious. In the Bible, however, interpreters deem it unnecessary to be well-founded about this, because it is so obviously present, woven into the very fabric of the Bible; theology cannot be separated from literature. This is where the problem lies: Theology is present in the form of literature; it is not available in an undiluted, distilled form. To extract theology from the pages of the Bible, the entire package with all its wrappings must be taken into account. How is this done, and how does the Bible set free its theology?

This should be done in a hermeneutically sound way, especially with a view to communicating with modern theological concerns, since the theology found in the Bible is not necessarily comprehensible in and transferable to our present time. The previous section emphasised the importance of the close relationship between theological and general hermeneutics from the reader's point of view. This principle also applies when focusing on the text.

From a theological hermeneutical perspective the matter of reference now comes into play. This means that the text creates a symbolic universe referring to intra-, inter-, extra- and supra-textual realities, of which theological issues form part. The four types of reference mentioned cannot be separated from one another; they form a close-knit four-dimensional reference or token system. The intra-textual deals with a specific pericope or book in the New Testament; the inter-textual focuses on relations between books or traditions; the extra-textual refers to all aspects pertaining to background, such as geography, history, persons, events, social relationships, motifs, philosophy, ideology, religion, *et*

cetera; and the supra-textual refers to the specific discourse in the text portrayed by means of the totality of its symbolic universe. These are all text categories. Even extra-textual references which have to be researched as such eventually find their specific meaning within the text in focus. However, the point is that the four categories of reference bear theological fruit in their own way. The question remains as to how they contribute to a theological reading of the New Testament.

2.2.1 Intra-textual category

Since the theology of the New Testament is woven into its text fabric, a theological reading entails scrutinising the text by means of any available valid method and approach. Some of the approaches include historical criticism; structuralism (cf. Patte 1990); discourse analysis; narratology, and rhetorical criticism. As these methods are able to expose the genealogy, structure (deep or surface), story line, and persuasive strategies of a specific text (be it on the level of pericope, chapter, or whole book), they highlight the multiple meanings of the theological text. The collaboration between theological and general hermeneutics is particularly evident in this area, to the extent that the two overlap. Only the reader has his/her special focus, as described in the previous section: this makes the difference. In my opinion, it is an important difference, because it ensures that even in these often technical areas, the theological concerns which will eventually make the theologically interested reader's effort worthwhile, stay in focus. The data remain similar, but the theologically-minded reader absorbs these in a different frame of reference than the reader who is only interested in, for instance, rhetorical criticism.

2.2.2 Inter-textual category

The theological dimension of the text is highlighted in this category, because within the concept of the Christian canon, Scripture is compared with Scripture or, defined from the perspective of text theory, texts (= books of the Bible) are inter-textually related to each other. By means of inner-Biblical exegesis the growth and re-interpretation of traditions, motifs, themes, *et cetera*, are made visible (cf. Kaiser 1981:131-146). A network of meaning is released which may be theologically put to task. This approach is important from a New Testament perspective, since the latter cannot be properly understood without its inter-textual relationship to the Old Testament. All this is controlled by the intra-textual basis mentioned in 2.2.1; otherwise it may result in a new form of "scientific respectable allegory". Furthermore, inter-textuality may also refer to the dialogue between Biblical and extra-Biblical texts. Theologically this is important, in view of the interaction between theological and general hermeneutics

whereby the specific theological discourse or emphasis of the Biblical text may be established more accurately.

The inter-textual category also highlights another phenomenon which has been discredited for its fundamentalist features earlier in the 20th century, but which has pressed forward with new force in recent years, namely Biblical theology. This may be regarded as a synthesising reaction to the fragmentation created by minute Biblical scholarship. However, in its new form it does not present a case against critical scholarship (as in the old Biblical theology movement) but, to the contrary, it rests upon and wrestles with this critical work, trying to establish new ways and means to bring forth unifying themes or trajectories of thought in the Biblical tradition.[10]

2.2.3 Extra-textual category

This category of reference tries to construct a real-world scene for the text. Note that the word is "construct", not "re-construct", the difference being that the latter pretends to discover the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist* ("as it actually was", the famous adage of the 19th century German historian, Leopold von Ranke), whereas the former is a more modest approach: It portrays the past in the light of all the *available* data and the best historical methods, with the knowledge that in the end it still remains a subjective picture, albeit a substantiated subjective picture.

The theological importance of this is that the historically context-bound discourse of the text is highlighted. Theologians often find *prima facie* evidence of theological issues in the New Testament superficially resembling modern-day theological concerns, without realising that even so-called eternal theological truths are "earthbound", and without taking the trouble to establish in what way these Biblical issues still resemble or differ from those of our own time. This area of study exposes the historical contextuality of theological discourse in the Bible, so that apples are compared to apples, and not to pears.

10 Well-known scholars in this field are among others Hans Klein (1991), Brevard Childs (1993, 2002), Peter Stuhlmacher (1992, 1995, 1999, 2002), Hans Hübner (1990-95; 2005) and Gisela Kittel (1993, 1996). It must be noted, though, that the interests of Biblical theology and the theological interpretation of Scripture do not necessarily overlap (at least, according to Fowl 1997:xvi). To him the former is a child of modernity, whereas the latter will be non-modern in several respects, e.g., in that it will shape and be shaped by the concerns of Christian communities rather than the concerns of an academic discipline. However, one need not follow this sharp distinction by Fowl. To a great extent Biblical theology has rectified a host of maladies caused by the historical critical paradigm, an enterprise largely shared by the theological interpretation of Scripture, at least according to my view.

It is also within the ambit of this approach that the special contribution of reading the New Testament lies. The latter has the ability to expose the bedrock of Christianity, to lay bare the complexity of its origins, thereby ensuring that the surprising frankness, otherness, strangeness and originality of Christianity remain in focus. In the light of this, and because of the reader's concern with ultimate and authentic Christian meaning, reading the New Testament may function as a critical interrogator of current Christian beliefs and lifestyles, opening up new avenues of Christian thought and praxis (cf. Van Zyl 1992a:156, 158).

2.2.4 Supra-textual category

This type of reference is closely linked to the concerns and procedures of reader response criticism, because it deals with the impact of the totality of the symbolic universe of the text as manifested by the text as a semiotic token system. Ricoeur (1981:140, 218) refers to this as the "reference" of the text (in distinction of its "sense"). Gadamer (quoted by Ricoeur 1981:62, 94) calls it the *Sache*, which may be described as the subject proper of the text with which the reader has to grapple. From the perspective of this article one may call it the ultimate theological thrust or discourse of the text. Of course this is a "discovery" made by the reader interacting with the text. It never appears absolute, isolated from the reader — particularly so because the reader has to relate to this subject proper from his/her own theological agenda.

Another way of putting it is to refer to the metaphoricity of the text (cf. Jasper 1989:94). Coming to grips with the subject proper of the text in light of all information gained by exploring the other references of the text is another way of stating that theological issues encountered in the New Testament open visions of God and man in a metaphorical way. Metaphor not only in the technical sense of the word (comparisons; parables; etc.), but in terms of the way in which theological discourse is presented in the New Testament. Biblical language evokes images of God and man which only approximate reality. It is thus the metaphoricity of the text which makes theological reading possible, because it transcends the text and invites the reader into a metaphoric dialogue. Likewise, theologising today is always conducted in a metaphoric idiom, because one cannot speak directly about God, about the deepest mysteries of life, about ultimate meaning. Thus, reading the New Testament from a theological perspective implies two metaphors meeting and converging, that of the text and that of the reader.

3. CONCLUSION

It should be clear from the above discussion that reading the New Testament from a theological perspective is, from the point of view of the believing community, a legitimate exercise. Secondly, it is the merging of skills available in all areas of New Testament Studies; no aspect can be dispensed with. Thirdly, and more specifically, it is a combined reader- and text-orientated process. The theology of the text is not easily available; the text only surrenders its theology to those willing to travel the whole distance of diligent study. Reading from a theological perspective is involved reading — of the whole person and the whole text.

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