

2002 Theology of the Biblical Witness: An evolutionary approach. For detail see List of Publications below.

[Key terms: Biblical theology – biblical hermeneutics – evolutionary hermeneutics – relevance of the biblical faith]]

In my work on socio-economic processes, I painfully recognised the irrelevance of traditional forms of the Christian faith for this highly complex cluster of problems – a cluster of problems which will determine the very future of humankind. Is the Christian faith indeed, as it claims to be, a redemptive faith? If not, is the cause really to be sought in its foundational traditions, the biblical scriptures, or in out truncated views of what the biblical faith is all about?

For over a decade I struggled with this question. Eventually I came up with the following picture. The Word of God has been, and always is, God's redemptive response to human situations of need. Beginning with the modest needs of a nomadic clan, this response had acquired universal dimensions by the end of biblical history. God's vision of comprehensive well-being for his entire creation had become the overriding metanorm: a new heart, a new body, a new community, a new family of nations, a new natural world, a new heaven and earth. This vision implies that any deficiency in well-being in any dimension of life is the target of God's immediate redemptive concern, thus of our concern as his representatives and instruments in this world. Jesus tackled human needs as they presented themselves and expected us to do the same.

What then happened in biblical history? The Bible does not provide us with an abstract dogmatic system, but contains a series of narratives of God's redemptive interventions. These narratives formed traditions which were remembered in new situations of need. Having to adapt to these ever different situations over a whole millennium of ancient history, they were lured into a process of evolutionary change. This process is ideally headed towards an ever more appropriate conception of God's redemptive intentions, but it does not always work out that way. There are also setbacks.

This discovery has profound consequences for biblical hermeneutics and the canonicity of the Scriptures, which I spell out in the first part of the book. Single texts, for instance, may not be absolutised. They are provisional manifestations of an ongoing and evolutionary undercurrent of meaning which culminates in the Christ event and which is heading towards God's eschatological future.

In the second part I analyse the trajectories of 6 paradigms of redemption on the basis of these insights: the promise to the Fathers, exodus and conquest, king and empire, priesthood and sacrifice, covenant and law, creation and new creation. In each of these cases the original meaning gradually turns on its head: human sacrifice of the first-born to God, for instance, changes into God's sacrifice of his only-born to humanity. Similarly, the legitimation of authoritarian rule found in Psalm 2 turns into the servanthood of the messianic king in Mark 10:35-45. This again has immediate implications for contemporary society: authoritarian rule is no longer legitimate on the basis of the biblical faith. Rulers are meant to be servants of the ruled – a demand that finds institutional expressions in a democratic system of governance.

Theologically one can say that God entered human history to transform it from within. The Word of God became flesh, human reality, part of human history, not only in Christ, but also in the events leading up to the Christ event and in the events following upon the Christ-event.

For hermeneutics this means that single texts taken out of their historical contexts cannot claim to be canonical. One always has to ask what has gone before and what has followed – and what is therefore the direction we have to follow into the future if we want to remain true to the ongoing dynamic of the undercurrent of meaning. This approach makes it possible to account for the immense diversity and the constant flux of insight found in the Bible, without losing the underlying thrust of the message. It also gives us the courage to do for our times what the biblical authors have done for theirs. What is God's redemptive response, for instance, to world poverty and the ecological crisis?

Assessors have deemed this to be one of the most challenging approaches to biblical interpretation to have emerged in recent years.