

THE RHETORIC OF SACRED SCRIPTURE

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1. INTRODUCTION

In an interesting essay dealing with the relationship between rhetoric and hermeneutics, Scult takes issue with the point of view of Hyde and Smith that as all hermeneutical acts are rhetorical, the hermeneutical act has to be accorded prior ontological status in this relationship. Especially when dealing with sacred texts, the impulse to interpret the text is rhetorical.

The interpreter sees the text, properly interpreted, as a fitting response to an exigence, something that needs doing, in the rhetorical situation of the interpreter's audience. In this formulation, *interpretation is a species of rhetorical invention chosen by the rhetorician-interpreter when there is warrant to extend in time and space the meaning of a sacred text.*

(Scult 1983:223).

Even though some do not want to differentiate between texts with reference to their capacity to speak beyond their own immediate situation, there can be no doubt that once a text is acknowledged as a sacred text, it assumes that power. Even though the events and experiences described in the sacred text might be bound to a specific situation and context, it becomes the task of the interpreter "to enable the text to speak to future audiences - audiences that are just as significant to the meaning of the text as was the 'original audience'." The rhetorical situation as perceived by the interpreter calls out for response from the text" (Scult 1983:224). The interpreter has to respond to new and different rhetorical situations. It is therefore important to see that in the case of sacred texts rhetoric affects the interpretation because interpretation is actually a part of the rhetorical act.

When one is interested in an integral and a transformative interpretation of the Bible as a sacred text, one has to be aware of the "interaction

between a self-aware reader open to the truth claims of the text and the text in its integrity, that is, an interaction that adequately takes into account the complex nature and multiple dimensions of the text and the reader" (Schneiders 1991:3). Schneiders is especially interested in the relationship between the Bible and the believing reader.

But is this relationship unique to the Christian Bible, or can analogies be pointed out in the case of other sacred texts? Does this mean that one is again constructing a special hermeneutics of the Bible, or can it be shown that there is a rhetoric of sacred texts/scripture which has to be taken into account in the interpretation of the text of the Bible too?

In fact, Schneiders puts the question on the agenda whether the faith convictions of readers can function legitimately in Biblical scholarship, or conversely how sound biblical criticism can be incorporated into the context of a faith-filled and faith-enhancing reading of the New Testament (1991:13). The scope of her question can be extended to ask whether the acknowledgement of the (faith) presuppositions of readers of the Bible applies only to the Bible, or whether analogous presuppositions apply to other sacred texts as well.

The interpretation of the New Testament and other sacred texts has as object to understand the meaning of the text. But meaning can be interpreted differently according to the objectives of the reading. One can read the text for *information*, or for *transformation*. When one is interested in *information*, the questions asked from the text deal with historical issues, the production of the text, the world of the text and even the theological position of the text. Reading for *transformation* is an existential project in the religious sphere belonging to the field of spirituality. However, when one is interested in transformation, the text cannot be read without getting involved in its informational dimension too.

When the Bible is seen from a faith perspective as sacred scripture and as the *Word of God*, this is an affirmation which can be taken as a root metaphor. This metaphor embraces a whole range of God's symbolic self-disclosure in prophets, priests and kings, in temple and cult, and in Jesus as the promised Messiah. The root metaphor *Word of God* is the linguistic evocation of the reality of this symbolic revelation. Schneiders says that

"the referent of the metaphor 'word of God' is, then, a complex reality much broader than the written scriptures. Indeed, for the Christian the primordial reference of the term is Jesus himself, because all other

symbolic forms of the divine self-gift find their integrating reference point in him" (1991:39).

The special relationship of the Bible to the divine self-communication is formulated in the concept *revelation* - this is relevant for those who accept this in faith. The affirmations that the Bible is the Word of God, revelation, and inspired, are faith affirmations of things that can be perceived but does not have to be. But faith can be seen as an objective, non-necessary response to phenomena that can be, but need not be experienced as disclosive of the divine (cf Schneiders 1991:50f).

Can the Biblical inspiration be seen as unique and different from that operative in other classics?

"The Bible is unique, not because it is inspired or inspired in a way that other works are not, but because of a combination of notes (of which inspiration is one) ...Biblical inspiration is unique because the Bible is special; the Bible is not special because its inspiration is unique" (Schneiders 1991:52).

When one acknowledges that there are many works and sacred texts claiming to reveal the divine, it does not imply a denigration of the Bible. The mode of inspiration actually implies a phenomenology of the human experience of the divine revelation mediated by Scripture.

2. RHETORIC AND RELIGIOUS TEXTS

In accordance with Aristotle rhetoric can be seen as a universal phenomenon , an universal facet of human experience. (Jasper 1993:16). Rhetoric deals with persuasion, power and authority. It can be described as the author's means of controlling the reader.

All religious systems are rhetorical: they are attempts to communicate perceived religious truth, just as political discourse is an attempt to communicate perceived political doctrine and is necessarily rhetorical. (Kennedy 1984:158)

The Bible can therefore be seen as rhetorical, in the sense of "purposeful" communication between God and man. In the classification of rhetoric, primary rhetoric is oral, primarily an art of persuasion, and used in civic life. Secondary rhetoric usually refers to the apparatus of rhetorical techniques, discourse or art forms when not used for primary oral purposes. Primary rhetoric has to do with moving an audience; secondary rhetoric is occupied with entertainment, various patterns of

emphasis, style or images (Kennedy 1980:4-5.) Secondary rhetoric is also often called decorative rhetoric.

Following Grassi, Kennedy describes the distinctive religious rhetoric of sacred language as having a purely revealing or evangelical character; with immediate statements formulated without mediation; being imagistic and metaphorical; with absolute and urgent assertions; and with pronouncements outside of time (1984:6).

According to Burke rhetoric and religion are related because rhetoric is the art of persuasion, and in religion men are also persuaded with a view to certain ends. "To persuade men towards certain acts, religions would form the kinds of attitude which prepare men for such acts" (Burke 1970:v). Although most modern scholars of rhetoric seems to agree that authoritative proclamation and not rational persuasion is the heart of religious rhetoric, Jasper does not agree. Not only Paul, but also Mark "tends towards an absolute claim to truth without evidence and without recourse to logical argument" (Jasper 1993:51).

According to Jasper what is presented by Paul as an argument gives a misleading impression. One must be open to the possibility of Paul exploiting and manipulating the reader (Jasper 1993:41). Due to the intimate relation between persuasion and power, people was very suspicious about rhetoric despite it being so popular (Litfin 1994:126).

We shall endeavour to determine what the relationship between rhetoric and sacred texts of other religions are to see whether that can shed some light on the way in which rhetoric can be used in the case of the New Testament.

3. SACRED SCRIPTURE IN RELIGIONS

a. Scope

Understanding the way in which Holy Scripture functions in other religions, can be helpful to know more about what is unique or specific about the Bible's message. It is important to define what is understood when mention is made of *sacred* Scripture. The terms *holy* or *sacred* are often used with reference to religious matters. It must be noted that the opposite of *sacred/holy* is not *unholy*, but *profane*. Profane denotes everything which is not related to the relationship between man and the other world (Mulder 1970:10).

Holy or sacred words can be divided in two groups. The one group are words coming from the other side to man, while the second

group consists of those being addressed by man to the other side. No sharp distinction should be made between these two groups, because also the words used to communicate with the other side have already been revealed to man.

It is further important to note two *basic functions of words*: calling into being (creation) and regulative words (naming of animals by Adam). It is a well-known fact that the name of a deity also represents the god himself. One could also continue living after death if he had ensured the continued use of his name. Conversely the names of certain deities or kings were sometimes removed from official lists in Egypt. One can also note the perlocutive function of language - blessings can cause blessings in the lives of people while oaths, magic formulas and swearing could be effective for many generations (Mulder 1970:16).

In the sacred narratives one often can find an articulation of the deepest motives of the community acquiring normative character. These narratives not only tell how things happened, but also want to show how things should be by telling stories from the past - especially by myths (Mulder 1970:23f).

So far mention has been made of words by men to the other world or by men among themselves concerning the other side. But there are also sacred words *from the other side to man*. Here mention can be made of the *word of creation*, and the *word of revelation*. This is the case not only in the Old Testament and higher religions, but also in more primitive religions.

In the case of *sacred sounds* and *sacred language* the totality of language is religiously determined. In this case specific language is used for communication with the gods. It is well known that not any type of language is used in prayer (Mulder 1970:28). Where a specific culture has acquired the signs to write down words and sentences, the phenomenon of Sacred or Holy Scripture can be found. But this inscripturation does not automatically entails the reliability or correctness of the words. Nevertheless, there are more to the Sacred Text than just this.

Two further dimensions can be distinguished. On the one hand writing represents words, and words represent reality. With a limited number of signs one can represent an unlimited number of words and represent reality. On the other hand, one can manage written words, recite them, and comment on them.

In the large corpus of works which can be considered to be considered as sacred texts, we can restrict ourselves to Holy Writings in the narrower sense of word, that is,

scripture accepted to be revelation of a deity and accepted as authoritative by members of a specific religion (Mulder 1970:33). But even this scope could be too large, therefore the discussion will be restricted to the five so-called large world religions.

When attention is given to the divine origin of sacred texts, there is also variety in this group. It can be either by one author (Qur'an, or more recently the Book of Mormon and holy books in recent Japan), or a whole collection as in Hinduism, Buddhism, and the Bible. In the case of the Qur'an (and the Book of Mormon) the book as a whole is given by the deity, while in the case of the other sacred texts we shall be dealing with, the authors were inspired by the Holy Spirit and then produced the sacred texts.

A further question would be whether the deity speaks in human language? The Qur'an has been revealed in Arabic as a sign of the mercy of Allah. This revelation in Arabic is the final and conclusive revelation of Allah. For this reason Arabic became a holy language for Muslims. In the case of the Vedas it is accepted that they have no human or divine origin, that is they are eternal. The recitation and writing of the verses of the Vedas make their eternal being manifest (Mulder 1970:42).

b. Oral Sacred Texts

1. The primacy of oral scriptures. In modern Western thinking most people simply take "Scripture" to refer to "holy writ," "holy writing," or "sacred book." Very little appreciation is usually given to the fact that it can also refer to the spoken word or that which was heard. "Indeed the very words 'scripture' (from the Latin *scriptura*, 'a writing') and 'bible' (from the Latin *biblia*, 'a collection of writings' or 'book') have led us to think of divine revelation as a written or printed object" (Coward 1988:ix). And even though this is typical only of the most recent period in the West, the situation is still different in most of the world religions. It is therefore important to regain the oral experience of Scripture. Scripture has in fact been understood by more people in most times and places to include both the oral and the written word. For this reason one can use text and scripture in a generic sense to denote the oral as well as the written sacred word. Of the two manifestations, it is the oral word that can be expected to have the greater power to transform lives.

Not only is the primacy of the oral scriptures in Judaism and Christianity to be emphasised, but the spoken word is seen to have

creative power. This holds true not only for Judaism and Christianity, but also for Hinduism where the art of rhetoric is to be taken very seriously "for, as a manifestation of divine power, it can evoke either evil or good" (Coward 1988:164). On the other hand in Buddhism the creative power of the word is mostly seen as having a negative effect in obscuring the truth. When one is free from the use of words, the mind can directly reach the truth or reality. Nevertheless, the oral word of scripture is usually experienced as eternal. "In all religions, then, there is some notion of an eternal and uncreated *logos* (void or *sunya* in the Buddhist case) of which the earthly scriptures may be taken as manifestation" (Coward 1988:166).

2. Interpretation of scripture. But also the interpretation of Scripture is often presented as being oral in nature due to the fact that interpretation took place in dominantly oral cultures. This interpretation developed from a constant dialogue between the recited oral scriptures and the real life context and questions of the students through the mediation of the teacher. The value of oral exegesis is that enables oral scripture to remain relevant despite changing times and contexts.

The oral form of the parable that was used by Buddha, Jesus, and the rabbis is an especially good example of how oral scripture blends into exegesis that changes with changing times and places. (Coward 1988:170)

The parable can be seen as an open-ended speech act which can give rise to new experiences in new contexts.

3. The need for a written text. One of the important reasons for the writing down of the oral texts, was fear of the loss of the oral scripture. Another concern was the controlling of divergent traditions and disputes. Kelber maintains that in the oral tradition it was not possible to produce a complete presentation of the life of Jesus and that the written form of the Gospel developed for that reason (Kelber 1983:220). This presupposition can be questioned as in the Indian tradition there apparently was no problem to construct oral synthetic overviews of a high order (Coward 1988:173). Interestingly enough Hinduism seems to be the one religion which did not experience the need for a standardised and authoritative version of its oral scriptures (Coward 1988:173).

4. The continuing oral performance of scripture. Even when the need for the text to be written down develops, the written text still functions

as a script for oral performance. In all five great world religions it is important to learn scripture when one is young, and continue chanting it even in adult life. Yet in the modern West (especially in the Protestant tradition), memorisation of texts has been given up and at present usually more time is spent in reading about scripture as a literary object than in reading scripture itself, let alone memorising Scripture. There is a grave danger that when scripture is learned only through written materials without being immersed in an oral culture and context, the written scripture will be empty of power. It is like a poem read from time to time, but without becoming part of the experience of the reader and without the power to move her. Paul also stated in 2 Cor 3 that words must be written on the heart and not only on stone or paper to have transforming power. Even Luther with all his concern for the written Word that has to be translated, also emphasised that the law written on tablets can be a dead scripture whereas "the gospel is given from a live voice to the ears" (Coward 1988:179f).

In almost all religions it is in the oral form of scripture that the full spiritual power to transform lives is present. Coward makes a strong case that the recent emphasis on the "reader-response" approach to texts, should be supplemented by a study of text reception as "hearer-response" (Coward 1988:182). This has implications for the use of written and oral Scripture in the worship of the church, religious education and private devotion.

Our analysis suggests that the traditional approach of emphasizing the oral experience of scripture in early education and then continuing to nourish that early experience through repeated oral practice in adult worship and devotion is essential if scripture is to continue to have transforming power in human lives (Coward 1988:189).

c. Judaism

The origin of Judaism has to be seen in the context of the pluralistic religious context of the Ancient Near East. Israel was separated out from the vast array of different religions that characterized that area. Just as God entered into a special covenantal relationship with Israel, so He could have entered into special relationships with other people. "Thus, from the Jewish Biblical perspective, the various religions and their scriptures may be seen as the expression of the relationships obtained between other peoples and God" (Coward 1988:29).

Since the end of the Babylonian exile and their return to Palestine, a more exclusive approach to other religions and scriptures gradually

developed. During the classical and medieval period the relationship between Judaism and other religions was discussed. Moses Mendelssohn (1729-86) argued that "the truth of religion was not dependent upon supernatural revelation but was immanent in human reason and thus available to all. No one religion or scripture can be the sole instrument through which God has revealed his truth" (Coward 1988:31). According to him the Torah is unique and valid for the Jewish people alone. While the ancient Rabbis also held to a universalistic view of the Torah, the modern Jewish acceptance of other scriptures as manifestations of the Word of God seems to be returning to the ancient position.

The authority of the Bible for Judaism centered in the words of God in the mouth of the prophet. "Such words from God were experienced as timeless ... Authority, for the written Torah, meant the authority given by God's spirit in commissioning someone to speak his word - the role Moses filled in a supreme way" (Coward 1988:5).

Oral Torah is paradoxical in nature, as it is not fixed but is alive and constantly evolving. Judaism claims that there is an unbroken chain in the oral tradition and that a progressive interpretation of the revelation is also important.

Neusner (1985) deals with the Mishnah as the first document of that part of the Torah that according to Judaism came to Israel in oral form. He is interested in the question how the formulation of the document facilitates the remembering of its exact words. He discovers in the Mishnah a logic, topic, and rhetoric which in the deep structure is responsible for generating patterns which facilitate the memorisation of the text of the Mishnah. The Mishnah was not published in writing, but was "a regular oral *ekdosis*, edition, ... a fixed text recited by the Tannaim of the college" (Neusner 1985:112).

In his quest for the criteria for the collection of material into intermediate divisions, he finds that one obviously is thematic, whereas another has to do with the literary, grammatical and syntactical patterns, in other words theme and form (Neusner 1985:30). His conclusion concerning the systematic demarcation of the Mishnah's principal divisions, the tractates, into intermediary divisions ('chapters') is that it is demanded by the Mishnah's internal evidence. "Shifts in distinctive theme coincide with shifts in formulary pattern" (1985:67).

When dealing with the Mishnah's smallest whole units of discourse, or cognitive units, he states that they also are the result of careful formulation. This is interesting because the language of the Mishnah is like ours

in morphology and syntax. It can be translated word for word in an intelligible fashion in a modern language. But for that very reason it is important to pay attention to the far from random and far from broad, that is remarkably limited range of formal linguistic possibilities utilised by the formulators of the Mishnah. "Whatever ideas people had therefore are shaped to conform to a readily discerned set of literary conventions, grammatical patterns applicable to thoughts on any subject and accessible to all of the Mishnah's themes" (Neusner 1985:70). It appears that the work of formulation and redaction go together in the lumping together of cognitive units dealing with a specific theme.

Neusner also deals with the relationship between rhetoric and reality. In the Mishnah one encounters a system of grammar and syntax which is intelligible to the members of that particular community, although it employs the well known phenomena of syntax and abstraction. The Mishnah's language is geared to the formation and transmission of specific conceptions to those addressed in a special way. "The predominant, referential function of language, which is to give verbal structure to the message itself, is secondary in our document. The expressive function, to convey the speaker's attitude toward what he is talking about, the conative function, to focus upon *who* is being addressed, and other ritualized functions of language come to the fore" (Neusner 1985:113f). The Mishnah's language therefore has a non-referential function.

The relationship, rather than the thing or person which is related, is primary and constitutes the principle of reality. It is therefore interesting that the formal rhetoric of the Mishnah is really empty of content - almost all the themes and issues discussed can be reduced to the same few formal patterns. This abstraction of recurrent syntactical patterns is obviously to facilitate the memorisation of the Mishnah as such. But the audience heard not only abstract relationships but also principles conveyed along and through these relationships.

"Accordingly, what they could and did hear was what lay far beneath the surface of the rule: both the unstated principle and the unsounded pattern...their mode of thought was attuned to what lay beneath the surface, their mind and their ears perceived what was *not* said behind what *was* said, and how it was said" (Neusner 1985:115).

The teaching of the Mishnah is not contextualised in such a manner as to be applicable only in a specific situation. A world of discourse is created separate from the concrete reality of real life. The Mishnah deals with basic truths and it has the aura of universal application. The

temporal or worldly authority of the speaker of the Mishnah is also left unspecified. "In this sense the Mishnaic rhetoric, while anti-contextual, creates its own context of meaning" (Neusner 1985:119).

The kind of speech preserved in the Mishnah furthermore does not allow for change by the imposition of conventional and highly patterned syntax. It is remarkable that in the Mishnah a common speech has been transformed to sacred language, not by using divine names, but by the formalisation of structures and patterns (120). Not that the sentence structure is so remarkable as such, but it is the recurrent use of such sentence-structures in cognitive units. (121).

The ethos of the Mishnah is characterised by the formal and formulaic sentence. Ethos is the medium for the expression of the world-view, but this occurs through grammatical formalisation. "The bridge from ethos to world-view is the form and character of the sentence which transforms the one into the other" (Neusner 1985:130). The language of the Mishnah speaks of ordinary things, but testifies to the sacred within the ordinary. Mnemonic patterns are not neutral, but actually convey a message to the memorisers. Through the patterns employed for memorisation is conveyed a sense of reality which embodies the teaching of the oral Torah.

The listeners also play a specific role in drawing conclusions. "It is the mind of a hearer, which already knows Scripture and is intensely concentrated, that makes sense of the otherwise superficial incompleteness and disorder of the Mishnaic sentences" (Coward 1988:16)

d. Christianity

Although Christianity from the very beginning had the Hebrew Scriptures as its Scripture, their faith was focused on the person of Jesus who was known through missionary preaching, oral tradition and charismatic experience. The Hebrew Scriptures were used only in a secondary role to confirm and defend the Christian experience of God through Jesus Christ.

Although Judaism and Christianity made use of the same Bible, each used different oral traditions to develop the truth of the Hebrew Bible. The early Christians had a preference for the prophets and Psalms and ignored other books of the Hebrew Bible. "By such means Christians used the Jewish scriptures but for their own purposes, giving them a different meaning" (Coward 1988:34).

Concerning the New Testament writings the important oral nature of

the early Christian scriptures has to be taken into account. The oral rhetoric of the Greco-Roman world and the oral practises of the rabbis came together in the propagation and transmission of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. When information is preserved in an oral medium, this has an influence on the data to be selected and the values to be preserved and by implication the kind of Jesus to be transmitted. This selection of material is influenced by the ability of words and deeds to be remembered and repeated in the propagation of the Gospel.

"Unlike the modern mind, oral tradition frequently does not value preservation of the personal or historical elements of a person's biography. In the oral tradition, stories and sayings are validated not by virtue of their historical reliability, but on the authority of the speaker and in the existential reception of the hearer. From the totality of Jesus' life, the oral tradition made its selection based on the principles of mnemonic transmission and immediate relevancy. The transformation of people's lives in an oral tradition was the immediate goal". (Coward 1988:45)

Although rhetorical criticism can be seen as a comparative newcomer to the field of Biblical interpretation, the claim has now been made often enough that the Biblical text wants to persuade its readers to accept the world of text as their own world and that the techniques and ethos operative in other texts are also applicable to the Bible. Without belabouring this point now again, the important oral background which is also relevant for treating the rhetoric of the New Testament, has been highlighted here.

An important issue needing to be addressed, is the question whether the persuasive procedures of Biblical writers undermine or reinforce their concern with the truth (Warner 1990:5). This issue will be addressed again below.

e. Islam

The function of Scripture in Islam is even more central than in other religions. The Qur'an is seen to be superseding all other sacred texts and determines the whole life of Muslims: community, law, art, literature and religion. Muslims are a new "people of the Book".

The Qur'an is a direct revelation by God to Muhammad which he then recites to others. The meaning of *qur'an* is 'recitation', or 'something to be recited' (Coward 1988:82). For Muslims the Qur'an is a recited and memorized oral text even though modern Western scholars may have other views about this. The oral tradition has been

established as the standard by which the written text has to be judged.

The death of Muhammad led to the need to compile a written edition of the Qur'an. It is accepted in orthodox view that the written text can be presented through variant versions without internal conflict or inconsistency (Coward 1988:94).

Islam is sensitive to the unity of all religions under God. For that reason other scriptures are accepted as offspring though corrupted copies of the "Mother of the book" in heaven, while the Qur'an is the only uncorrupted version of the revelation of God (Coward 1988:103).

f. Hinduism

Despite the fact that Hinduism has also been called a "religion of the Book", there are great differences with other religions. In Hindu thought the idea of an absolute beginning for creation or scripture is inconceivable. Another characteristic is that some Hindu schools take the Veda as the basic Scripture to be authorless (Coward 1988:105).

In the Hindu view of language, all words are seen as manifestations of the Divine and therefore have meaning and power (Coward 1988:116). Because language is only fully alive when spoken, the oral form of language is the most important. While in Form Criticism the period of oral transmission is judged to be unreliable, the opposite is true in Hinduism. It is basically through oral exposition that the Hindu scriptures are transmitted from generation to generation.

g. Buddhism

In Buddhism the notion of scripture as revelation is rejected. Yet, Buddhism has the largest scripture - some of the books extremely long - in many different languages. But scripture has no special status, it comprises of conventional words. The doctrines of Buddha have been written down, but there is no precise recollection of words of Buddha. But once the divine revelation has been written down, it is important to retain the text carefully (Mulder 1970:45).

The common language scriptures of Buddhism have not been preserved as carefully as for example the Vedas. But whereas the mere memorisation is not to be deemed the most important part of the oral tradition, the chanting of scripture is a psychological experience which also can act as a mnemonic device (Coward 1988:147).

4. INTERPRETATION OF HOLY BOOKS

a. Interpretation

When oral traditions are written down and become canonised, this calls for the activity of interpretation. This flows from the diverse nature of the canon itself, but also from the need to make a closed canon relevant to the changing conditions of the ongoing church (cf Coward 1988:56).

To do this, a plurality of approaches is necessary, each involving a plurality of methods, because the text is literary-historical in form and historical-theological in content; because the text itself has multiple aspects, each of which demands (p.127) attention at different times; and because it addresses readers who approach it as political-psychological-spiritual subjects for whom this text is a privileged revelatory locus of encounter with Jesus as the Christ' (Schneiders 1991:128).

Holy Books are also interpreted dogmatically and meditated on. Each translation and interpretation bears the risk of distortion of the original. (No commentary allowed in Christen Science on book by Mary Baker.) A text then becomes supra-temporal with no contact with ordinary life. To be relevant, it has to be interpreted.

There are thus many parallels between the Bible and other Holy Books. The Bible also contain challenging and regulative functions. There are many similarities, but also many differences with the scripture of other religions. The uniqueness of the Bible is not to be found in formal aspects, but in the material contents.

The God of Bible is an acting and speaking God. It is his Word that creates and addresses man. This movement through history culminates in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The Bible is furthermore a historical rather than a doctrinal book. Islam critiques the Bible for the fact that humans are speaking and narrating stories and God is only speaking "directly" in certain sections of the Bible (Mulder 1970:60). One has to realise that the primary manifestation of God is his acts and speaking (especially in Jesus Christ), the inscripturation thereof is the secondary manifestation.

b. Entering the World of the Text

A text incorporating the testimony of participants in the originating events becomes a work which is an artistic entity in a specific texttype with the capacity to project a world into which a reader is invited. The

result of being invited into the world of a good work is that the reader can become totally absorbed and "lost" in the world of the text. The everyday world of the reader is replaced by the new space, the new relations, the new reality of the work. The world projected by the text is not "the imaginative, fictional world of the work... The fiction is the vehicle that carries the reader into a possible alternative *reality*" (Schneiders 1991:167). The New Testament as a whole, and each of its parts individually, projects such an alternative world. To be drawn into the world before the text "is to be changed, to 'come back different,' which is a way of saying that one does not come 'back' at all but moves forward into a newness of being" (Schneiders 1991:168).

The final phase of interpretation is the fusion of the horizons. "The reader enters into and is transformed by the world before the text even as his world...is modified by the reader's critical interpretation" (Schneiders 1991:172).

This can take place by an aesthetic surrender to the text by participating in the text as a work of art in order to live in the world projected by the text. This can happen when one experiences the immediacy and transparency of the text as part of a believing community. In this respect Schneiders makes the following provocative remark:

"I would question whether someone who has never felt the religious power of the gospel text, no matter how learned her or his biblical scholarship might be and regardless of whether she or he actually comes to share Christian faith, is competent for New Testament research" (1991:173).

Besides the total surrender to the work, there is the further need for a critical existential interpretation. But this remains an enterprise in spirituality, a conscious effort of integrating one's life with the world projected by the work, a fusion of horizons. This is the transformative interpretation the text intends to elicit from the reader. Although different New Testament texts address different aspects of our life, they do pose questions relating to the ultimate significance of life. "The question is whether Jesus is in truth, as the text claims, the Savior and what the implications of my answer are for me and for the rest of the world" (Schneiders 1991:174f).

This kind of transformative interpretation is neither a mastery of the text by the reader nor a mastery of the reader by the text, but it rather entails an ongoing dialogue with the text. The rationale for this continuing dialogue rests in the faith that this text mediates the transformative divine revelation.

c. The Bible as Book of the Church and of Faith

This is an early and a very consistent claim, that the Bible is the book of the church and therefore has to be interpreted in and by the church for the interpretation to be authentic. What are the implications of this for New Testament interpretation?

There seems to be a reciprocal relationship between scripture and tradition in the actualization of revelation in the Church. Tradition plays a role in the process of interpretation of Scripture and it is important to determine how that happens. But what does tradition in a community really amount to? It has to do with making through language the past to come alive again in the present, especially with a view to the community's experience of itself as it has been selectively appropriated and deliberately transmitted.

"Tradition is the primary form and norm of effective historical consciousness, which is the medium of ongoing community experience. It includes deliberately formulated belief, that is, dogma, but is by no means limited to dogma. It includes liturgy, spirituality, the lives and teachings of exemplary believers, historical experiences, legislation, artistic creations, customs, and much more" (Schneiders 1991:71).

It is significant to realise that in the self-consciousness of the church as community involved in interpretation and tradition, the role of the risen Lord who is actively present through his Holy Spirit, plays a foundational role. But within this tradition the apostolic tradition, the Christ-event as it was experienced by Jesus' disciples and expressed in the text of the New Testament functions as "a touchstone of fidelity to the meaning of the original event that spoken tradition cannot, in the very nature of the case, assure" (Schneiders 1991:77).

When faith is seen just as openness to the transcendent, then faith is a prerequisite for any adequate, responsible interpretation of the Bible, because the text's truth claims are linked to the ultimate reality, that is, the transcendent. But when faith is seen as a personal commitment to and relationship with Jesus as the Christ, faith is not necessary to interpret a text as text but only when the text is seen as symbolic revelation, as sacred Scripture (Schneiders 1991:60).

There is an important dialectical relationship between tradition and Scripture. Since the Reformation priority has been given to Scripture, but this solution has perhaps been too easily made at the cost of destroying the dynamic of both poles. One has to retain a dialectical tension between Scripture and tradition, while underlining the relationship of

tradition, both written and unwritten, to scripture as the uniquely privileged written formulation of apostolic tradition (cf Schneiders 1991:81ff). Tradition is therefore the context for the interpretation of scripture, but the norm by which the true and living tradition can be discerned is Scripture.

For a valid interpretation of the text, there must be at least some extrinsic link with the tradition. If the reader is interested in not just the information of the text but want to be open to the possibilities for transformation, (s)he would have to be open to the invitation of the text to the reader. But the optimal approach to the interpretation of the New Testament would be "that of full participation in the tradition that produced this book, canonized it as its authentic and normative self-expression, and constitutes its integral and authoritative context of interpretation" (Schneiders 1991:90).

d Interpretation in Judaism

In Judaism Scripture includes the written and oral Torah, but the interpretation of Scripture includes a vast range of materials from the Abot and Tosefta to the two Talmuds and the Haggadah (Coward 1988:19). Whereas the emphasis in interpretation was until 200 AD on the written Torah, a shift gradually took place in the period 200-500 to the oral Torah as codified in the Mishnah.

e. Interpretation in Islam

The Qur'an is complete within itself. Yet, as a second source for interpreting the primary revelation the tradition (Hadith) developed. The Qur'an is revealed, the Hadith is inspired.

There are various exegetical approaches in Islam attempting to show that the relevance of the Qur'an in everyday life is illustrated by the use of the Qur'an in daily piety. This culminates in the practice of the recitation of the Qur'an. As the Qur'an is the sacred Word of God, Muslims believe that it should be recited in the original Arabic.

5. CANONISATION

The process of canonisation is important for accepting sacred books as holy and authoritative. In this way they can be distinguished from other books without the same authority. An interesting dimension of this phenomenon is the broader and narrower canon of Old Testament. Even the canon of the New Testament took centuries to be finalised.

The canon of the New Testament was not finalised at once "but grew out of the life of the Christian community as it attempted to understand the role God expected it to play in his plan for the redemption of the world. This process in which the Christian community gave shape to the scripture, and was then shaped by it, is seen in the formation of the New Testament canon" (Coward 1988:51). But after the formation of the canon the written New Testament then claims the 'inspired' status that in the early church was reserved for the oral experience of the word. "It is in this shift of the ontological basis of the New Testament revelation from the oral to the written that the roots of Protestant literalism may be found." (Coward 1988:54).

The more the church moved out of the apostolic period, the more the importance of the written scripture increased. The formation of the canon illustrates the hermeneutical dialectic between scripture and tradition. The canon no longer was just a collection of writings, but a unity in terms of which each separate book had to be interpreted.

The formation of the canon was no problem for ISLAM. But the problem is to determine the canonical tradition, the law and the will of Allah. This is the task of jurists who have to determine which action falls under which category of law. In the course of time a lot of stories about the prophet developed, many spurious. In the third year of the Islamic calendar six great jurists formed a selection of 6 books of the tradition which then became the second source for jurisprudence in order to know the will of Allah (Mulder 1970:47).

In Hinduism certain writings are accepted as canon (shruti) while there are also deutero-canonical writings. In Buddhism too the formation of a canon takes place. Sacred texts therefore always call forward the issue of canonisation and the borders of the canon, even though it may be dealt with differently in varying cases.

6. THE ROLE OF DIALOGUE

Over against the preference for narrative as the leading category in a literary reading of the Bible, it can be appropriate to use a dialogic model acknowledging the heterogeneous textuality of the Bible where narrative segments and other forms like laws, songs, proverbs interact in the form of a dialogue, of statement and response. This approach finds an exponent in M Bakhtin whose work has a religious dimension and is definitely relevant to the polymorphous character of the Bible. According to

Bakhtin dialogue is not merely two people interacting with one another in a communicative manner, but "it is the linguistic precondition for all communication whatsoever, and its interactive awareness of the utterances of others, before and after" (Reed 1993:13). What we have seen so far concerning the important oral background of sacred texts and their rhetoric, seems to underscore the possible of such an approach.

This concern with dialogue can be seen in many ways in the Scripture. Besides the formal repetition of phrases and the revoicing of narratives, the communication between God and man is so often depicted in the Bible in the form of divine and human dialogue. Yet the human characters in the Biblical narratives can talk back to God, can disagree as well as agree with his words to them.

One could even say that the totality of the Christian Bible is the result of the dialogue between the New Testament writings and the Hebrew Bible. Between the New Testament and the Jewish Scripture a nuanced dialogue takes place especially as the Hebrew Bible was already interpreted by contemporary Jewish groups and schools of interpretation. But the New Testament authors also made liberal use of the discourse of apocalyptic literature as it re-articulates the discourse of the Law, the Prophets, and the "other books" of the Jewish Scriptures (Reed 1993:84).

The New Testament is in certain respects quite close to the Pharisaic precursors of Rabbinic Judaism. But in comparison to other Jewish groups the NT exemplifies a radical movement away from seeing religious authority as vested in Scripture but rather in a specific historic figure. Thus a new form of dialogue develops in which God speaks anew to his people (Reed 1993:87). This unique dialogue takes place almost exclusively through his Son, the historical Jesus of Nazareth. This is a type of communication for which the Hebrew Bible has not prepared its readers.

7. ETHICS OF INTERPRETATION

Attention to the rhetoric of sacred texts should not lose out of sight the need to be critical of the power structures and social contexts which were also operative in these communicative situations. Although adherents of the different great religions may object, thinkers like Habermas and Foucault draw our attention to the real dangers of partners in communication becoming potential victims. Ricoeur wants to be open to retrieval and

real transformation, but also to be radically suspicious of all kinds of distortions which may undermine the hermeneutical process (cf Jeanrond 1991:109f).

The very fact of the transformative power of texts and reading raises the issue of strategies of suspicion concerning the transformation effected by the text. One should ask whether every text should be allowed to transform one's self-understanding as well as when in the process of interpretation the critique of a text should begin.

"Rhetoric - the manipulations of the dualisms and the dislocations of language - is a weapon of power in the constitution and control of communities, and never more radically so than when communities claim to embody and represent the highest good" (Jasper 1993:18). The rhetoric of religious texts of various kinds has to do with persuasion and the exercise of power. One could ask where power resides in the process of textuality. According to Jasper it has to do with a model of a community (the church) looking for its own identity in a process of 'entextualisation' - "engaging in self-reflexive activity in the formation of a text whereby power is wielded and the community enforced" (Jasper 1993:ix).

It is clear that Biblical scholarship did not escape the pitfall of serving other interests (cf Schüssler Fiorenza 1988). This can be illustrated very clearly in the case of Biblical scholarship in South Africa which legitimated specific political policies, or opposed it - often with no real difference in paradigm (Smit 1990b). But it should be acknowledged that the same phenomenon is operative in other religions and sacred texts where one can also ask: whose interests are served, and what roles and values are advocated by the interpretation of the Sacred Text.

It should be remembered that one is dealing with the power of the art of linguistic persuasion and the way it functions in religious communities. When the question is posed concerning the truthclaims by such exclusive communities, and the relation of truth and power to one another we should always remain conscious of the irony of our own insights in this respect.

In our yearning for security and to establish an apparatus of power, in religious documents or ecclesiastical institution, Jasper reminds us that we "will always be undercut by a greater freedom and by the infinite complexity of the rhetoric of the text" (Jasper 1993:5).

8. CONCLUSION

In conclusion it can be stated that the persuasive character of the rhetoric of the Bible is in no way unique, but of a kind with those of other sacred texts. We are dealing with the same rhetorical techniques and constraints as in other communicative texts, whether oral or written, in which persuasion is important.

What is similar to the rhetoric of sacred texts is, however, the very important role of the tradition and faith context from which the texts are interpreted. And in this respect the urge to interpret and communicate these sacred texts for new contexts and situations and times, can distinguish these texts from other in which rhetoric may also be operative, but with less authority involved.

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