The study of the historical-liturgical context of the Bible: A bridge between ‘East’ and ‘West’?

Klaas Spronk

1. Introduction
In the history of modern biblical research emphasis is often laid on the different views and approaches that oppose or exclude each other. Diachronic research, which explains the questions that arise when reading the text by looking at the history of the text, is opposed to synchronic research that focuses on the literary structure. As a rule scholars on both sides accuse each other of not doing the text justice and of being subjective or speculative. In historical research of the Bible and the ages it covers, the controversy exists between those who accept the Bible as a reliable source of historical information and those who only accept external archaeological evidence as a valid source for argumentation. These seemingly never-ending controversies sometimes say more about the methods used and the users themselves, than about the Bible as the object of their research. In many cases, the personal history of the researcher proves to be decisive for the choices made and explains why one reacts against other approaches in the way one does.

A better approach – and luckily many colleagues will agree – is to use the different methods complementarily. Every text raises its own questions, and different approaches are required to find the answers to these questions. A simple criterion for selecting the most suitable approach is to choose the one which will bring the most satisfactory results. This, however, sounds too good to be true. For, before starting any exegesis, it should be clear what the character of the text we have before us is. Here another controversy may arise: readers of the Bible may differ in their attitude towards the text. Do they feel that they have the freedom to treat it like any other text? Or should it be treated as a sacred text? Or should one at the very least take into account that this text functions as such?

We may note a further controversy which plays an important role in the often complicated relationship between Western and Eastern ways of reading the Bible. In the Western scholarly world of exegesis there is a great reluctance to handle the Bible as a book of faith that plays an authoritative role in the Christian church. This is illustrated very well by contemporary discussions within the Society of Biblical Literature. Some members criticise the tendency among confessional colleagues to introduce matters of faith and ethics into scholarly discussions. One Jewish member was shocked when a Christian scholar even attempted to convert him to Christianity. He saw this, as other scholars with him, as a return to a situation that existed before the Enlightenment, when biblical exegesis was subordinated to the study of the dogmas of the church. These scholars do not want to lose their freedom to study the Bible as they would any other object of research and they are convinced that their method – that of remaining an ‘outsider’ – is also the best one to uncover the Bible’s secrets. One of the fruits of the Western historical critical approach is that it helps the modern reader to differentiate between the text’s message and the way in which the text was formed under the influence of its own time and culture.
On the other hand, if we take a more serious look at the way the Bible is studied in Eastern (Orthodox) circles, we encounter more than a return to pre-Enlightenment orthodoxy. The Eastern exegesis of the Bible as a book of faith, which should be read within the framework of the church and its tradition, allows the modern reader to realise that the Bible cannot be understood without the commitment of the reader. A very important argument for this approach is that exegesis is not something brought in from outside. It is something that emerges from the Bible itself. The Bible itself teaches us that its meaning cannot be grasped if the reader does not have some kind of relationship to the subject matter. It certainly goes too far to state that only someone who believes in God and Jesus Christ can really understand the Bible, but it can (at least) be seen as an advantage if one has an affinity with it. This implies that one knows what it means to be inspired by a text and, therefore, leaves open the possibility that the Bible is part of a living and on-going tradition.

For far too long scholarly research of the Bible in the East and in the West has been two worlds apart. Only recently have more serious and persistent attempts been made to bring these two worlds together, or at least into serious discussion with one another. Pioneering work has been conducted in this regard by, among others, scholars such as James Dunn, Ulrich Luz and Anatoly Alexeev. Since 1998 they have regularly organised conferences dedicated to this dialogue between East and West and have published the proceedings. The volumes containing the lectures and summaries of the discussions are very helpful in gaining a better understanding of both sides, from each other’s perspective. They also make clear, however, that it is still very difficult to really interact. One not only comes across different opinions about the interpretation and authority of biblical texts, but one also notices that the fields of interest are very diverse. This is especially clear when it comes to the study of patristic literature, which is dominant in Eastern studies and only marginal in modern Western exegetical literature, and also where the evaluation of historical-critical methods is concerned. From the orthodox point of view it is still customary to state that this modern approach to the biblical texts lacks a fitting respect for the Bible, has added very little to the application of the texts, and has primarily caused confusion. Recently some cautious attempts have been made by orthodox scholars like Theodore Stylianopoulos, to

---


incorporate less offensive methods and results. Not many Western scholars, however, will take him seriously when he speaks of the ‘virtual bankruptcy’ of critical academic biblical studies, which,

... can be overcome only by vigorous self-criticism that leads to serious regard for the authority and theological claims of Scripture, the legitimacy of traditional approaches to the Bible, such as kerygmatic, devotional, liturgical, and doctrinal approaches, and an epistemological humility according to which autonomous reason and imagination do not necessarily have the last word regarding what the Scriptures are all about.5

Simon Crisp is probably right when he notes that this may only bring a scholar like Stylianopoulos close to conservative evangelical writers6 and not to Western scholars who are convinced that they can only conduct their work free from clerical authority.

2. An alternative, third way: the study of the Bible as a liturgical text

It is clear that when it comes to biblical exegesis, building a bridge between the Eastern and Western approaches will not be easy. Asking Western scholars for some kind of ‘conversion’, as they might interpret the appeal by Stylianopoulos, or stimulating Eastern scholars to perform sacrilege, as they might consider the invitation to use critical methods, will not bring us closer together. There may, however, be an alternative, third way. Taking seriously the best of the Eastern and Western approaches to the Bible, has brought me to the idea that both can be combined in a scholarly approach that studies the Bible as a liturgical text, not only today, but also at a very early stage in its transmission. This idea is based on work being carried out on a new catalogue of Byzantine manuscripts. In Western exegetical research the Byzantine manuscripts comprise only a small part where textual criticism is concerned. Their relevance is regarded as being marginal. They are dated relatively late and variant readings are not usually taken into account when trying to reconstruct the original biblical text. The manuscripts are merely regarded as testimonies to the early history of reception, or associated with conservative debates about the rehabilitation of the textus receptus. To this is added the problem that there are so many Byzantine manuscripts and that there is no consensus among scholars about the way that these should be classified, in families or lines of transmission. ‘It is customary’, David Parker remarks, when it comes to the topic of Byzantine manuscripts and especially the lectionaries, ‘to note the paucity of material’.7 In his opinion the lament is justified. There is certainly no lack of material. The problem is the classification. And in the conclusions to her survey of the Greek lectionaries of the New Testament Carroll Osburn remarks:

1. A critical edition of the lectionary is greatly needed, based on full collations of all lections and direct comparisons of texts rather than variants from a printed

42 T. STYLIANOPOULOS 2006, p. 333.
43 S. CRISP in J. D. G. DUNN 2000, p. 127.
text. 2. It is vital that a history of the lectionary text be produced, based on adequate textual data, especially accounting for the various pre-seventh-century lectionary forms and the relationship with lections in early Church Fathers such as Chrysostom. 8

Although there appears to be a tendency today to take the Byzantine manuscripts more seriously, scholars seem to accept that it is simply impossible to work through this huge mass of poorly (?) preserved and inadequately classified material. Telling is the remark by Detlef Fränkel in his introduction to the new edition of Rahlfs’ list of Greek Old Testament manuscripts. He speaks of the ‘fast unübersehbaren Bereich der liturgischen Literatur’, which made it impossible to include the many lectionaries in this list. 9 For the New Testament they are included in the Kurzgefasste Liste by Aland, but most experts agree that, when it comes to the Byzantine manuscripts, this list is far from complete. (Cf. Dr Daniel Wallace’s rediscovery of more lectionaries)

The new project takes as its starting point the manuscripts themselves and does not, as is customary among Western scholars, focus only on text critical research. It takes the manuscripts more seriously, that is, as liturgical texts. Up until now the Byzantine manuscripts have mostly been used in their capacity as records of the biblical texts. The fact that these biblical texts were reproduced as parts of lectionaries or together with homilies was not taken seriously. The only information provided in summaries such as the Kurzgefasste Liste [of Greek manuscripts of the New Testament- with the full title the limited information is understandable] is which biblical text is found in which manuscripts. This testifies to a one-sided view on the function of these texts (but their mandate was to reconstruct the history of the New Testament text). In fact, one can consider this an anachronism. It concerns the idea that biblical texts can be studied separately from ecclesiastical tradition and ignores the fact that these texts have always been handed down as part of this living tradition. This is also indicated by the close coherence of biblical and patristic texts within one codex, made visible in the composition and structure of the codex. In many codices biblical texts and patristic commentary texts are found side by side or beneath one another (is there an exact number available from the online Liste?).

This new approach, of studying the complete codex and not merely a selection of texts removed from the codex, raises the question as to the influence of the liturgy in the formation of the codex. There can be no doubt about such an influence in the Byzantine tradition, but how far does this tradition reach back? Can we also learn something from this tradition in finding the right approach to the biblical texts themselves?

Among Eastern orthodox scholars the liturgical context of the Bible is more or less taken for granted. For Western scholars the liturgical context is usually strictly separated from emphasis on the text alone? Textual criticism endeavours to get as close as possible to the original (initial?) text. Historical criticism endeavours to find out how and when this text came into existence. Literary methods analyse how the text is structured. Scholars are accustomed to the idea that text as part of liturgy is something completely different. This no

longer belongs to the field of scholarly analysis, but to the communities of faith in which the
Bible is read as a sacred text and applied in sermons. This is a realm that can be described
and analysed by church historians, or by people studying the history of interpretation of
certain (why certain?) biblical texts. There may be reasons, however, to question this almost
arrogant opposition to the liturgical approach to the biblical texts. The strict literary and
historical approach probably says more about the scholars using it than about the texts they
are studying. One should at least take seriously that the traditional manner in which the
biblical texts function in the Byzantine liturgy certainly stands closer to the way these texts
were used in their original context.

A large gap remains between what we know of the beginnings of the Byzantine liturgy
and the time in which the biblical texts were reaching their canonical status. There is much
discussion about the origin of the Greek lectionaries. Gregory assumed that the system of
Sunday lessons dates from the first half of the second century (isn’t the origin of the
lectionary system and the origin of the lectionaries two different quests?). Until now,
however, this date cannot be supported with hard evidence. Most scholars do not want to go
back further than the fourth century. Some of the contributions in the present volume enter
this discussion. Anatoly Alexeev makes some interesting remarks about traces of ‘a Judeo-
Christian liturgical symbiosis’ in Jerusalem in the fourth century and about its relationship
with Byzantine lectionaries. Gerard Rouwhorst indicates that one should be very careful
with bold theories about an early liturgical setting in which certain biblical manuscripts
might have functioned. Some scholars [such as...] assume a relationship between the
Byzantine lectionary and the Jewish lectionary system of the synagogues. The Gospels
would have been structured according to this system of readings. The problem, again, is
that we simply do not have evidence for this. There can be no doubt that in New Testament
times the Jews had their lectionaries and there are also references to lectionaries in an early
phase of the Christian church, for instance in Antioch and Jerusalem, but every region seems
to have had its own system. It is, therefore, hardly fruitful to pursue this path, running the
risk of projecting our own desired system onto the scarce evidence.

It is more beneficial to consider whether it is useful to approach and interpret the biblical
texts themselves as liturgical texts. Of course, it is clear that many biblical texts find their
origin in the liturgy, especially that of the Temple in Jerusalem. Perhaps we could go one
step further and assume a situation comparable to the way biblical texts function in the

47 Cf. T. STYLIANOPOULOS 1997, who not only acknowledges the success of Western academic biblical
studies, ‘clarifying innumerable literary, historical, and theological issues’ (p. 74), but also remarks
that after the liberation of the Bible from the tyranny of the church as one of the fruits of the
Reformation we are now facing ‘the tyranny of the academy over the (living) voice of the Bible’ (pp.
159ff).

48 Cf. the survey of the scholarly research by B. M. METZGER, ‘Greek Lectionaries and a Critical Edition
of the Greek New Testament’, in Die alten Übersetzungen des Neuen Testaments, die Kirchenväterzitate

49 Cf. C. OSBURN 1995, p. 64.

50 A recent example of this theory which had a number of supporters in the last decades of the
previous century, but has now been mainly abandoned, is D. MONSHOUWER, The Gospels and Jewish
Worship: Bible and Synagogal Liturgy in the First Century C. E., Vught, 2010. Cf. also his article ‘The
ROUWHORST, ‘Continuity and Discontinuity between Jewish and Christian Liturgy’, Bijdragen, 54
(1993), pp. 72-83.
Byzantine manuscripts, namely as part of a liturgy. As a consequence they are best interpreted together with the other texts to which they are related. This would also imply a new view on and even a solution to the often-mentioned dilemma between a living tradition and the Bible as an unchangeable collection of written texts. Recently this problem was brought to our attention by Karel van der Toorn in his book on the scribal culture of ancient Israel. He describes the shift from the oral to the scribal culture as something that had a huge impact on the character of Israel’s religion. No longer was the living word authoritative. The written record took over, with scribes taking the place of the prophets. Van der Toorn has been criticised about the way he describes the role and methods of the scribes. He also seems to have a too negative view on the religion of Israel, which, having become a religion of the book, was something static. In his study on authoritative scriptures and scribal culture Arie van der Kooij rightly notes ‘that the ancient books, Scriptures, would not have been seen as carrying authority if their teachings had not been brought into force and if they had not been studies by the appropriate authorities – the scholar-scribes’. They were part of a process in which the community reacted to the text and in which the text was explained, applied to certain situations, and perhaps sometimes also supplemented even corrected. Probably the best example of this is the story of the public reading of the Law of Moses, followed by an explanation, as recorded in Nehemiah 8, 1-8. It is told that Ezra reads the book of the law of Moses aloud ‘from daybreak till noon’ to the people gathered on the square before the Water Gate. Ezra is supported by a number Levites. It is their job to instruct the people after the reading: ‘They read from the book of the law of God, chapter by chapter, giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.’

One can speculate about the relationship of this text with the origin of the synagogal liturgy, but what is more important, and also more clear, is the way the authoritative text is handled. The holy text itself being read by the important leader Ezra is not enough in itself. An important role is also played by the thirteen Levites, who are all called by name. Their number indicates that their explanation is more than a simple translation of the text into Aramaic. Apparently they had to work in smaller groups, leaving room for questions and perhaps even discussion. According to Acts 15, 21 this event with Ezra and the Levites at the Water Gate became a regular custom. It is stated that ‘Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath’. It is interesting to note that this is said as a conclusion to a discussion in which it is decided that non-Jewish Christians do not have to follow all the commands of the Torah. That is a new insight based on the good

---

experiences of Paul and Peter. Although it cannot be based on a specific passage in the books of Moses, it could be presented as being in line with it, as an example of an on-going living tradition.

The famous passages in the Pastoral Letters about the Bible as holy scripture can be interpreted in the same manner. According to 1 Timothy 4, 13 the writer of this letter calls upon the readers: ‘Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching’. There is a clear parallel with the story of Ezra: the reading of the Bible should be conducted in public and accompanied by its application to the present situation. Something similar is indicated in 2 Timothy 3, 16: ‘All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness’. The Bible can only function as holy scripture when it is not only read, but also interpreted and applied.

3. Conclusion
We started with the insight that to describe the Byzantine manuscripts in their liturgical context does them more justice than when the biblical texts are simply extracted from them (can we do both? Extract texts in their liturgical context). This raised the question whether it may be useful to pay more attention to the fact that, already in a very early stage of their transmission, many biblical texts functioned within a liturgical framework. With ‘liturgical’ we do not mean that we have to reckon with early forms of lectionaries, but that the biblical texts formed a coherent unity with other elements of religious practices. This manner of looking at the biblical text may benefit from a closer cooperation between the Western and Eastern ways of exegesis. It could very well be incorporated into the approach advocated by Eep Talstra, who describes biblical exegesis as describing the long process of the transmission of the texts from the old to the new readers.19

Bibliography


