

On biblical interpretation

Evolutionary Hermeneutics – A position paper

Klaus Nürnbergger

Abstract

Biblical texts are outcrops of a multi-faceted undercurrent of meaning. Its defining component is God's creative power and redemptive intention towards his people. This motive emerged in response to certain human needs, such as a lack of progeny, enslavement, lack of agricultural land, the need for a centralised authority to ward off hostile incursions, etc. Such redemptive events formed traditions which evolved in response to ever new constellations of need (such as the confrontation with a series of great Ancient Near Eastern empires) and frames of reference (such as the Canaanite fertility cult, Babylonian mythology, Persian religion, Hellenism, Roman law, etc.). Trajectories of these traditions over a millennium of biblical history reveal a fairly consistent pattern: becoming ever more profound and universal in redemptive content, their meaning gradually turned on its head. This process culminated in the Christ-event and is oriented towards God's vision of comprehensive well-being.

The task

To write a theology of the biblical witness is a tall order. There is no single theology in the Bible. It can be debated whether there is an explicit theology anywhere in the Bible at all. There are countless motifs and traditions from many different eras and situations, sometimes loosely strung together into stories, sometimes not even that. The biblical authors had no interest in formulating a cohesive system of theological propositions. Their motive was to reassure their fellow believers of the strict but benevolent commitment of their God to his people in their tribulations and predicaments in concrete situations of need. And they utilised any means towards this end. Truth for them meant reliability or righteousness, rather than empirical fact or metaphysical plausibility.

If that is the case, the question is whether the attempt to construct a theology of the biblical witness is at all appropriate, or whether such an attempt can only distort the intrinsic character of the Bible. This paper seeks to give an answer to that question. We argue that there is an underlying rationale which holds the vastly divergent materials found in the Bible together. This rationale is certainly not a dogmatic system, but an evolutionary process, powered by an overriding conviction, namely, God's redeeming response to human need. We also argue that this fact must determine the hermeneutical approach to the biblical witness, just as much as it must determine the attempt to account for the implicit theology found in this remarkable collection of Ancient Near Eastern documents.

The question must be asked, finally, why we engage in this exercise at all. My answer is that a theology of the biblical witness must empower us to do for our times what the biblical authors did for theirs: formulating God's response to human need. Having spent most of my career on socio-economic challenges facing the church in modern times, culminating in my book *Prosperity, Poverty and Pollution* (Nürnberg 1999), I felt that it was about time that I gave attention to the other side of the equation: the relevance of the primary sources of the biblical message for the pressing problems of today.

Why we need a theology of the biblical witness

The biblical faith has one central thrust: God's redeeming action in the world. Theology is soteriology, that is, a reflection on redemption. It has no other theme. The task of theology is to discern and clarify God's intentions and actions in the world, as proclaimed and enacted by the community of believers in biblical times. The purpose of this endeavour is to enable the community of believers of today to proclaim and enact God's intentions and actions with conviction and authority in its various contemporary situations.

According to the biblical witness, God's redeeming action is found in human history. The biblical witness is, essentially, a series of accounts of redemptive experiences. The "Word of God" is, therefore, always God's response to human constellations of need. Such accounts of divine redemption are handed over from generation to generation. This happens for one reason only, that is, to reassure the community of believers of God's ongoing commitment to his people and his redemptive intentions for his people.

Redemptive experiences thus become collective memories which form a living tradition. We speak of a living tradition because the memories of God's redeeming actions in history are constantly retrieved and applied in new situations of need. This is an ongoing process which can be observed throughout a millennium of biblical history, which continued in post-biblical times and which has to continue today. If that were not the case, biblical theology would lose its essential character and degenerate into historical curiosity or theological speculation.

To put it bluntly, therefore, we are engaging in this enterprise because contemporary humanity is confronted with pressing, if not overwhelming, predicaments, and God's response to human needs is more important now than ever before. There is no other valid theological reason. The community of believers shares the predicaments of the world in which it lives. It is in need of redemption as much as anybody else in its environment. It has to discern, appropriate, proclaim and enact the message of God's redemptive intentions for this world. This is the very rationale of its existence. Theology in turn has only one function, that is, to serve the community of believers in this task by retrieving, clarifying and formulating the message of God's intentions for contemporary situations of need.

The character of the biblical witness

The question is whether we can speak of a theology of the biblical witness at all. There is no theology in the Bible which resembles the character and structure of conventional Christian dogmatics. The Bible does not begin with a theory of revelation; it does not continue with a definition of the concept of God and the Trinity; it has no single doctrine of creation and providence; it does not theorise about human sin; it does not speculate about the two natures of Christ, his states and his offices; several views co-exist concerning the Holy

Spirit and the Church; there is no unified concept of the eschatological future.

To look for a dogmatic system in the Bible is a futile exercise. To impose a dogmatic system on the Bible is a violation of its very character. The biblical witness tries to make sense of human predicaments and tells stories of how God responds to these predicaments. That is all. God is never defined in terms of a metaphysical theory; God is defined by his promises to the Patriarchs, by the liberation of Israel from Egyptian slavery, by the covenant and the law he granted to Israel, by his gift of the land, by his institution of a centralised (royal) authority to ward off the threat of hostile neighbours, by his judgment and his grace proclaimed by his prophetic messengers, by his punishment of Israel's sins through the great empires of the time, by the new beginning he granted after the exile, by the prophetic words, redeeming actions, death and new life of Jesus of Nazareth, by his ongoing presence through the Spirit in the community of believers, by the prospect of a transformation of reality as a whole. There are no speculative games in the Bible, there is only a deep-going struggle to understand what God is doing and for what reasons.

An appropriate approach to biblical theology

A theology of the biblical witness must reflect the character of the biblical witness. It must unearth the historical dynamics underlying its formation. It must discern what made it unfold into the large body of documents that we call the biblical Canon today. There are many precursors to such an approach, for instance in Kittel's dictionary of biblical concepts, von Rad's tradition history and Brueggemann's trajectories. But our approach goes substantially beyond what they have done.

What I propose to do in this book is that we trace the emergence and evolution of the narratives which served as paradigmatic accounts of God's redemptive intentions and actions in biblical times. The trajectories of these paradigms of salvation are woven into the fabric of faith through a millennium of biblical history like a set of golden threads. We explore the trajectories of six such paradigms: God's promises to the Patriarchs, exodus and conquest, king and empire, covenant and law, priesthood and sacrifice, and the meta-narratives of the creation and transformation of reality as such.

These paradigms emerged some time in history as responses to the concrete needs of concrete people in concrete situations. Abraham happened to be without male progeny; the Israelites happened to be enslaved by the Egyptians; they happened to be moving through the semi-desert as nomads in need of land; they happened to be harassed by neighbouring people like the Philistines; they happened to be overwhelmed by the great empires of the times; there happened to be paralytics, lepers, prostitutes and political sell-outs along the way Jesus of Nazareth walked; the Jewish and Roman authorities happened to be intolerant of challenges to their authority and wanted to get a troublesome dissident out of the way, the disciples of Jesus happened to meet with hostility when they proclaimed Christ to be the designated messianic ruler of the universe and his death on the cross a divinely ordained act of redemption.

Historically speaking all this could have been quite different. The story could have begun in Central Asia or Southern Africa and involved totally different ethnic groups; the forefathers of the Israelites could have gone to Mesopotamia rather than Egypt in search for food; the predicaments encountered on their way back could have been marauding hordes like the Huns, or epidemics like small pox; the Israelites could have been merchants rather than herdsmen; the Philistines could have settled in Asia Minor and left the Israelites in

peace. The Babylonians could have driven the elites of Jerusalem into the desert, rather than taking them to Babylon. Pilate could have taken Jesus to Rome rather than crucifying him.

Then the entire story of God's redemptive action would have looked different. But this is how history functions. Experiences are made by concrete people in concrete situations. What happens first determines what happens thereafter. It is within the flow of history that Israel encountered the benevolence and power of this God. And it is the history of this encounter which determined the faith and the reflection of the biblical witnesses.

In retrospect believers claim that all this happened by the will of God. We do not need to dispute this, but the fact that we are confronted here with a very specific stretch of human history, involving very specific people in very specific historical situations, among thousands of other such people, each with their own historical experiences, prompts us to reflect on what precisely we mean when we speak of the will of God. The final answer of the biblical witness is clear enough on this point: Israel was nothing special; it was only privileged to become the chosen witness to God's redemptive intentions for humanity as a whole, the people with whom this particular God had begun his redemptive action in human history.

The flow of this narrative moves through the following great eras and transitions:

1. The pre-monarchic period
 - The patriarchal component
 - The "nomadic" component: exodus, desert, conquest
 - The component of settled existence: patriarchs, judges, etc.
2. The monarchy
 - the united monarchy: David and Solomon
 - Israel up to 721, ending with the great dispersion
 - Judah up to 586, ending with the Babylonian exile
3. The post-exilic restoration: the theocratic satrapy in Jerusalem
 - The Persian period
 - The Hellenistic period
 - The Maccabean period
4. The Roman period
 - Judaism - ending with the two great wars against Rome
 - The Christ-event and early Jewish Christianity
 - The shift to a largely Hellenistic constituency

Redemptive narratives and paradigms did not only emerge in human history, they also evolved in human history. My research shows that, once the people of God had discerned God's redemptive intentions in a particular situation of need, the memory of this experience was called upon to reassure them in new situations of need. However, to comfort, strengthen and give direction, the old paradigm had to cover the new situation. This means that it had to be adapted, reinterpreted and reformulated so as to express its underlying rationale more adequately for every new situation at hand. The ancient authors had no qualms in changing such sacred stories, moral norms or ritual procedures because, for them, the criterion of truth was not historical correctness, but divine reliability in the face of human predicaments.

The case studies offered in this book will show that, over a millennium of biblical history, this process led to drastic changes. In most cases the original meaning was turned on its head. Male progeny played a fundamental role in the beginning; it played no role in the end. Abraham needed a son, while Jesus and Paul were not even married. In the beginning Israel

felt called upon to drive out the pagan inhabitants of Palestine; in the end all people were invited to become part of the people of God. In the beginning the king was a brutal dictator, in the end he was a suffering servant. In the beginning, humans offered their first born to God; in the end God offered his first born to humanity. It is this dynamic thrust of the tradition which we set out to explore.

The significance of biblical theology for us today

It is a most remarkable, intensely exciting phenomenon. Theologically it implies that in his redemptive pursuits God meets the people where they are, not only in terms of their concrete historical predicaments, but also in terms of their levels of understanding. He takes them by the hand and, through a whole series of historical experiences, leads them not only to a higher level of well-being, but also to a more appropriate understanding of his intentions. One could say that God himself became, as Paul formulated it in 1 Cor 9:19ff, a Jew to the Jew and a weak person to the weak, so as to save them all.

In consequence, it is the thrust of the rationale underlying the evolution of these narratives which we should heed when we read the biblical Scriptures. What seemed to be redemptive in one stage of history, for instance the rigid exclusiveness of the Jewish nation, no longer appeared to reflect God's redemptive will in a subsequent situation. A particular text is bound to be misunderstood if it is not seen in the context of what happened before and what happened thereafter.

Let me quote a drastic example: in Ex 21:2-11 we find an ancient Israelite family law, according to which slavery was not only entirely legitimate, but a father was entitled to sell even his own daughter into slavery. Fortunately this was not God's last word on family relations! In Gal 3:23ff the insight dawned that in Christ, that is, in the new redeemed humanity, we are all set free. So we all share the same level of dignity, whether Jews or Greeks, male or female, slave or free.

Unfortunately there were setbacks, where Paul and his disciples reverted back to patriarchal assumptions. It took some time - an awful lot of time! - for Christians to discover that the very institution of slavery was incompatible with this new insight. And it took even more time to discover that women are of equal dignity with men. If we mistook Ex 21 as God's Word for us today, we would seriously misunderstand God's will and commit terrible injustices in the name of God.

Once we have understood what the motivation is that drives the underlying current of meaning forward, that is, God's redemptive response to human needs, we are able to extrapolate it into contemporary situations of need. Each of the trajectories which we trace in this book, therefore, ends with a reflection on what its message could imply for us today.

We can say, for instance, that responsibility before God overrides parental and ancestral authority (patriarchal paradigm); that oppressed population groups should not have to flee from the country of their birth, but enjoy freedom, dignity and prosperity where they are (exodus and conquest); that rulers are not entitled to conquer and oppress, but to serve those entrusted to their care (royal paradigm); that God does not demand sacrifices from us for himself, but invites us to join the sacrificial life of Christ to the benefit of others (priesthood and sacrifice); that conditional acceptance leads to exclusion and enmity, while unconditional acceptance leads to growth and maturity (covenant and law); that while the stability of reality (expressed in creation) is important, the transformation of reality (expressed in eschatology) may be of greater importance.

It is these clues which allow us to develop a more comprehensive soteriology (concept of redemption) for our times. Our trajectories show that, according to the biblical witness, God has a vision for his world, the vision of comprehensive well-being. They also show that any deficiency in well-being in any dimension of life is the target of God's immediate concern.

There are immanent needs, such as physical, emotional, cultural, social, economic, political and environmental needs, and there are transcendent or spiritual needs, namely the need for meaning, acceptance and authority. The spiritual needs are rooted in the immanent needs. It is when we contract AIDS, when our marriage breaks down, when we are unemployed, when we are oppressed, or when our land gets so eroded that it no longer feeds our families, that we begin to doubt the meaning of life, our acceptability and our authority to change the situation.

Moreover, the biblical witness shows that God's redemptive action is always mediated through earthly events and human actions. God uses his creation as instruments for his purposes. Those who are reached by God's love become involved in this love. We can never say that when God acts, we do not have to act and vice versa. On the contrary, God's action prompts and empowers our action. If God would not act, we would not be able to act in the first place. Conversely, because God is at work, we can get involved in his work - fully confident that God will use whatever we try to do in his name for his purposes.

A theology of the biblical witness would remain deficient if these extrapolations into our times were neglected. Throughout biblical history the message was formulated as God's response to ever new situations of need. If we want to remain truly biblical, we have to reach beyond the biblical texts and do for our times what the biblical authors did for theirs. That is why the last chapter of this book draws out the historical findings of our research towards the formulation of a contemporary soteriology.

The inadequacy of alternative approaches

This then is the approach that I have spelt out in considerable detail in a volume entitled *Theology of the Biblical Witness: an evolutionary approach* (Berlin and Münster: LIT, 2002). I also wrote a more accessible and popular version entitled *Biblical Theology in Outline: The vitality of the Word of God* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications / Pretoria: CB Powell Bible Centre, 2004). For clarity's sake let me contrast it briefly with the most common ways of reading the Bible. We can distinguish at least four of these:

Above-the-text reading. Here a pre-conceived doctrine, or an entire dogmatic system, is imposed on the biblical Scriptures. The dogma is taken to be the truth of God. This system is first developed in terms of its own internal logic. Then particular texts are selected from all over the Bible which seem to back up the doctrinal contentions, irrespective of their historical contexts. It should be clear that this approach does not listen to the voice of the biblical witness but imposes its own insights on the texts.

Behind-the-text reading. This is the historical-critical approach to the Bible. It tries to establish which historical developments have led to the texts. The assumption is that God has revealed his truth in biblical history once and for all, and that it is our task to establish what exactly the texts wanted to say when they were first formulated. We cannot do without historical research if we want to take the biblical witness seriously. But historical research alone is certainly not enough to reveal the inner thrust of the biblical witness.

Before-the-text reading. Here the believers assume that God speaks to them within their

own contemporary situations. The texts are used to clarify what believers expect God to say to them here and now anyway. To put it differently, believers allow biblical texts to throw light on their current situations. What their authors once wanted to say to their ancient audiences, is of no consequence. The only function of the texts is to mirror the life of the readers. As far as they seem to have nothing to say here and now, they are deemed to be irrelevant.

In-the-text reading. Many Christians assume that the biblical Canon is God's Word as it stands, because God has spoken and is speaking through these chapters and verses. Scholars belonging to this school have argued that the history which led to the canonical body of documents is unimportant for the truth contained in the Canon. The needs of the present situation, too, cannot be decisive. If it is God's Word, it remains the same forever and is valid at all times and in all situations. This approach is akin to above-the-text reading because it imposes a-historical assumptions on a historical body of literature.

To contrast it with these four alternatives, the approach I developed in my books can be termed **below-the-text reading**. It unearths the undercurrent of meaning moving below individual texts in the direction of God's vision of comprehensive well-being. It aims at retrieving the relevance and the power of this undercurrent of meaning for us today.

Critique of conventional approaches

It is clear that none of the conventional approaches are able to do justice to the historical character of the Word of God as we have depicted it above. We read in the prologue to John's Gospel that the Word became flesh (Jn 1:14). This verse obviously refers to Jesus Christ, but it is also applicable to God's self-communication before and after the Christ event. Flesh means human reality - and human reality is in historical flux. Jesus lived a human life, and this life was located within the context of the history of the people of Israel. The biblical faith is firmly rooted in this world.

In consequence, these approaches are also not capable of discerning the inner dynamic of the Word of God. As we have seen, there is a powerful thrust in the development of the meaning which the texts convey. The biblical scriptures do not constitute a static mosaic of individual truths. They document faith in God's continuous action to overcome human depravity, error and suffering from within. The Word of God is a dynamic force moving through space and time to achieve God's redemptive purposes. There is nothing static about the Word of God.

These approaches are, therefore, also not able to account for the progression from the Old and the New Testament. Most of them leave the inter-testamentary period out of account - as if God was not at work between the exile and the birth of Christ. Many Christians, theologians and laity alike, ignore the Old Testament altogether, or read it very selectively, or spiritualise it beyond recognition.

Many Evangelical theologians, for instance, concentrate on the New Testament and read the gospel of Christ back into the Old Testament. The liberation from Egyptian slavery then becomes the liberation from evil desires; the conquest of Palestine becomes the mission to evangelise the world; the Israelite king becomes Jesus as Lord of your heart. But the Old Testament never says all that. Many liberation theologians, in contrast, find their clues in the Old Testament and project the exodus, interpreted as a liberation struggle, into the New Testament. Then Jesus becomes a new Moses who overpowers oppressors and exploiters. The fact is, however, that the New Testament hardly utilises the exodus paradigm at all.

In search of contemporary relevance

These approaches are also not able to bridge the "ghastly historical gap" between antiquity and the contemporary situation. Biblical imagery no longer seems to fit our experience of reality. Many of our urbanites have never seen shepherds and sheep. Modern armies no longer fight wars with swords and shields, but with submachine guns and ballistic missiles. Travellers no longer use horse-drawn carriages, but cars and jet liners. The range of parallels between our world and their world becomes ever smaller. We no longer seem to be living on the same planet.

Our tools for understanding and interpreting reality have also changed dramatically. We know that the earth is not a platform resting on pillars, surrounded by a huge canopy to keep out the ocean above, but a tiny planet circling one of the minor suns in a universe of billions of galaxies. It is futile to try and harmonise the accounts of creation found in the Bible with the scientific theories of quantum physics, evolution and entropy. Similarly, if somebody had told the contemporaries of Jesus that diseases are caused by tiny creatures called viruses and bacteria, they would have thought he/she was dreaming. On the other hand, if you tell secularised people today that diseases can be healed through exorcising demons, they pity you for your ignorance and superstition.

Our value system has also changed dramatically. For this reason the ancient paradigms no longer seem to work for us - at least not in so far as the world is dominated by the modern worldview. We no longer depend on progeny to establish our right of existence, as the patriarchal paradigm suggests, but on technological expertise and economic achievement. In fact, modernity rejects the very principle of a patriarchal order and insists on gender equality. We no longer escape from an oppressive system into a desert, as the exodus paradigm suggests, but try to democratise such a system. We hopefully no longer drive people off the land when we need economic resources, as the conquest paradigm suggests, but enter into trade relations with them. We no longer expect authoritarian kings to safeguard political stability, as the royal-imperial paradigm presupposes, but entrust our politics to democratically elected parliaments. Looking for answers to modern problems in the Bible can be thoroughly misleading!

It can also be futile. Most of our contemporary problems have no precedents in the biblical Scriptures. Examples are the conflict between capitalism and socialism; the role of trade union movements and multinational corporations; a globalised market which marginalises great masses of people; the rampant growth of the world population; the depletion of scarce resources; the pollution of the environment; a technology which is able to manipulate human genes and blow the earth to pieces with nuclear warheads; an advertising and entertainment industry which glorifies sex and violence through mass media such as television and the internet for the sake of profit.

Conversely, many of the problems that people had in biblical times are no longer our problems and to busy ourselves with such issues is a waste of time. What does it matter, after all, whether milk and meat are served in the same dish! Deities like Ba'al and Marduk, whom the Israelites were told to shun at the peril of death, have long disappeared from the scene. We no longer believe that menstruation or bleeding at child birth makes a woman unclean. We no longer think that the blood of cattle must be sprinkled on altars to achieve the purity of the nation. And so we could continue.

The danger is, then, that the imagery used by the Christian tradition becomes so far removed from the reality we experience today that it is no longer able to communicate the

precious and indispensable message of the biblical witness. To outsiders, it sounds like the language of a fairy tale. To insiders, it suggests that the realm of God is a realm completely distinct and removed from everyday life, a realm which you can enter only through spiritual exercises and Sunday services.

In both cases the biblical message is no longer able to unravel the concrete problems we encounter on a daily basis. You do not talk about God at the stock exchange, the conveyor belt, the laboratory, or the soccer field. For all intents and purposes it is irrelevant in the spheres of life that really matter, such as science, technology, business and politics. In short, the Word of God is left without an audience and the world is left without its vibrant and redeeming message.

What is canonical in the Canon?

Ultimately, our task is to formulate God's Word for our contemporaries. Hermeneutics must lead to Theology, Theology must serve the church to proclaim and enact the Word of God. Theology needs at least some guideline to remain on track. Canon means guideline. Other historical guidelines have been: the Creeds, classical dogmatic systems and denominational confessions. Because it constitutes the historical mainspring of the biblical faith, the biblical Canon has always been the most fundamental of these guidelines.

However, our observations in the last section have revealed serious problems connected with the use of the biblical scriptures as a guideline to divine truth. Our approach offers a new understanding of the function of the Canon. The truth of God is not gained by freezing momentary situations into timeless monuments, but by observing the flux of experienced reality in the presence of a redeeming God. The truth is a dynamic power which is at work in human history. Individual texts are like single frames of a movie film. We all know from family photos that snap shots can distort reality beyond recognition. What matters for us is the plot of the movie as it unfolds in all its vivid and differentiated nuances.

In the biblical witness, single narratives merge into a larger story. According to the biblical texts, the story of God with humanity unfolded and reached a climax in the Christ event. It has continued its journey through time and space ever since. Nowhere is it said that God's story with us has come to an end. Christ is always ahead of us, constantly luring us into the future of God. This means that the Canon, as the prime witness to God's story with us, cannot be closed. It has never closed itself; the decision of the church to close the Canon is extra-biblical. The closure of the Canon is like cutting off a living stream by means of a dam wall. The result is that the water dries up for those living down-stream. If it is to witness to the redeeming action of God in history, the Canon must be open.

However, the concept of an open Canon does not imply that we are entitled to add extra-biblical documents, dogmatic systems, or ecclesial traditions to the biblical Canon. That would deprive the Christian churches of their common foundation and the authority of their primary documents. The Protestant Reformation was right in rejecting the dogmatic tradition as a primary norm. An open Canon is rather like the barrel of a gun - limited in length, but open in front. The barrel is indispensable because it guides the bullet in the direction of its target. Without the barrel the bullet could stray off in any direction. But it is the bullet which matters, not the barrel.

The bullet stands for the Word of God, its target for the vision of God, and its range for the future of God. This is a dynamic, historically responsible concept of canonicity. It does not idolise the Canon, nor does it relativise it. It claims neither inerrancy nor timeless validity, yet

retains its function as criterion of truth. It is neither an arbitrary postulate, nor a pious but untenable assumption. But it presupposes mature believers who can observe, think and judge for themselves.

Reaching maturity

A colleague suggested *Biblical Theology come of Age* as a title for this book. Coming of age means reaching maturity. Indeed, we can characterise this approach as a movement towards maturity. This is true at three different levels. In the first place, the biblical witness moved from rudimentary beginnings through many crises towards maturity in the Christ event. In the second place, Biblical Theology as an academic discipline reaches maturity when it weans itself from dogmatic patterns of thought and dares to follow the historical flux of the biblical witness.

In the third place, however, the community of believers reaches maturity when it dares to formulate its own faith assumptions in the context of its own historical situation and does not feel constrained to hark back to parental authority. It realises that without these parents in the faith, it would not exist. It is intensely grateful for, and appreciative of, what God has done through them. But it has now reached the stage where it can think for itself, come to its own conclusions, and take its own decisions in responsibility before God.

All this means that Biblical Theology must lead to Systematic Theology, or it has not reached its goal. All documents are entombed in their own historical situations and must be transcended for their message to retain its relevance. Systematic Theology must not be confused with a static kind of Dogmatics. Systematic Theology is the attempt to make sense of one's faith under contemporary conditions - albeit on the basis of the biblical witness. As mentioned above, I have taken account of this concern by adding a chapter to my books which goes beyond biblical interpretation towards systematic reflection and on to practical application. In another position paper I offer the design of a soteriology (concept of redemption) which could form the basis of a Systematic Theology for our times.