

# BEFORE THE COCK CROWS

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL  
REFLECTION IN THE STUDENT  
CHRISTIAN MOVEMENTS  
IN EUROPE TODAY

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## PREFACE

The theological work among European Student Christian Movements in recent years has aimed at a new understanding of the Bible. An awareness of one's own political and personal interests in reading and studying the Bible in groups has helped to unmask an allegedly impartial scientific use of the Bible through academic or ecclesiastical theology. Reading the Bible from the point of view of individuals and groups who are involved in the conflicts of their societies in different parts of Europe has meant re-appropriating biblical language and theology for involvement in the ideological and political struggles of the seventies. In doing this the liberating call from the old texts was to be heard again—before the cock crows (Mark 14 : 30). The experience of SCM groups in Europe in past years, has shown that it is liberating to apply the same methodological tools to understand one's own society and one's own life as one applies to the understanding of biblical texts. A materialist approach commends itself to this process.

The Theological Commission of the World Student Christian Federation, Europe Region, decided in January 1980 to collect a series of biblical and theological studies from the different SCMs in European sub-regions in order to show each other the results of several years of theological exchange. This had been achieved through the Materialist Bible Reading Seminars held since 1976. At the same time this collection gives a picture of present biblical and theological reflection in European SCMs. The approach has been contextual. The Commission saw that doing theology and Bible reading is shaped by one's personal and political involvement. Thus a geographical pattern for the collection was decided: Scandinavia, GDR, FRG and Netherlands, France and Portugal, Italy. The reader will be able to see the possible inner coherence of these 'sub-regions'. For most of the sub-regions we have presented one theological study to reflect on the current work, and two Bible studies to give exegetical examples. In addition to SCMs we have asked two resource persons of the Materialist Bible Reading Seminars to contribute to this collection.

At the beginning is a Danish study on the hermeneutical discussion underlying the work of the last few years. It is a product of Scandinavian co-operation in theological reflection and is followed by a contribution from the SCM work in Norway, Denmark,

## NETHERLANDS

### ROCHUS ZUURMOND

#### WHOEVER HAS EARS TO HEAR BIBLE STUDY OF MARK 4 : 9-12

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*Translation from the Dutch by Annebeth Mackie, St. Andrews, Scotland.*

And he said,  
'He who has ears to hear, let him hear.'  
And when he was alone,  
those who were about him with the twelve asked him concerning the parables.  
And he said to them,  
'To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God,  
but for those outside everything happens in parables; so that

they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand;  
lest they should return, and be forgiven.'

## I

### Biblical Hermeneutics

Though we would not really want to say that here we have been given a complete biblical hermeneutic, it is nevertheless clear that these words of Jesus hit the problem with which we are concerned in hermeneutics.<sup>1</sup> It seems that within a certain circle of people, the conditions are fulfilled under which the words of Jesus are comprehensible, or at least may become comprehensible, while outside this circle there can only be incomprehension.

Naturally, this text is only concerned with the *parables*, and it remains to be seen in how far the parables can be said to put up a hermeneutic standard for the whole of the biblical message. That Mark 4 : 11 however looks beyond the explanation of a few difficult New Testament passages (as the parables undoubtedly are, exegetically speaking), is made clear at once from Jesus' words that 'for those outside everything (or : *the whole*) is in parables.' Within the framework of the Gospel 'everything' must be understood as : the whole of the history of God-with-us, in particular the manner in which this has entered on its decisive phase with the coming of the Messiah (cf. the expression used in Matt. 5:18, Luke 21:32, Mark 13:30). Anyone who does not understand the parables will soon

<sup>1</sup> Hermeneutics is the science concerned with the explanation of (mostly) written documents, particularly documents originating in a different culture or period of history. Hermeneutics is therefore not concerned with the provision of an explanation as such (that is provided by the exegesis), but with the various *methods* of explanation, and considers their *presuppositions*.

In general, there are three types of hermeneutics to be distinguished : (i) the kind where the emphasis falls on the *object* which is to be studied (from Aristotle up to, and including, present-day Anglo-Saxon schools, but it also includes French structuralism, more or less). (ii) the kind where the emphasis is on the *subject* which is doing the research—the school of Kant (Schleiermacher, Dilthey and largely also Bultmann). (iii) the dialectical type, which sees the understanding of the text as a process which alternately questions the text, and is questioned by the text (the best known modern representatives are Gadamer and Ricoeur).

We shall here leave to one side the very important philosophical question whether hermeneutics are a part of ontology (Heidegger : 'hermeneuo ergo sum').

understand *nothing* of Jesus. Understanding, or not understanding the parables is obviously of basic significance for the understanding, or the blocking of the understanding of the entire Messianic proclamation.

## II

### The Parable

In the Bible, a parable (Hebrew : *mashal*, Greek : *parabolè*) is a short story or proverb, in which something is said which contains a comparison with a certain event or state of affairs. The first purpose of the parable is to provide an explanation or clarification.

As such, however, the parable is a detour, which is apparently necessary under certain circumstances — a detour via an image. The rabbis had grasped the matter well when they made an appreciative distinction between speaking face to face and speaking in parables.<sup>2</sup>

Generally speaking, there are three different levels in the parable :

- (a) the level of the spoken or written text ;
- (b) the level of the reality to which a reference is being made ;
- (c) the level of the event or state of affairs of which (b) is the image.

The listener understands a parable if he makes not only the transition from (a) to (b), but also that from (b) to (c). If this second transition is not made, then it is indeed true that the listener 'sees, but does not perceive, and hears, but does not understand'. Even though the parable is primarily intended to clarify, it may, under certain circumstances, achieve precisely the opposite, so that an event or a state of affairs put into the words of a parable, is in fact *concealed*.

The question now arises whether this — crucial — transition from (b) to (c) is a matter of just an explanation, the provision of minor intellectual assistance, or whether *there is more at stake*. Anticipating the outcome of the exegesis, I am of the opinion that understanding here is not an intellectual Aha-experience, but that it has to do with the *position* in which the person addressed finds himself. Not everyone has, always and everywhere, 'ears to hear' ; on the contrary, that kind of ear you only get by being in a certain place.

<sup>2</sup> 'With Moses HE would speak face to face... but with Balaam HE only spoke in parables' (with references to Ex. 33: 11 and Num. 23: 7).

or when you are involved in a certain history, or, to use the language of the Bible, when you belong to Israel.<sup>3</sup>

Theologians will realise that here we enter the field of what has been called 'pre-understanding' in hermeneutics since Heidegger and Bultmann.<sup>4</sup>

There is no reason why we should not adopt this *term*, but in my opinion the contents given to this word by Heidegger is not usable from the point of view of biblical theology. Much more suitable is the term basis or infrastructure, which is familiar from dialectical materialism.<sup>5</sup> The understanding of the parables — and therefore of the entire messianic proclamation — has to do with the 'materialist basis' of the hearer. This thesis will have to be explained in further detail from an exegetical and a biblical/theological point of view.

## III

### Outsider — Insider

There are two groups clearly distinguished in vv. 10-12 : 'those who were about him with the twelve', and 'those outside'. Neither of these two groups can understand the parables without further help. The parable of the seed, for instance (4: 3-9), has to be explained (4: 13 ff.). But the characteristic difference is that the *question* about the parables is raised exclusively by the first group. From the fact that Jesus takes up this question it may be concluded that 'those who were about him with the twelve' have the hermeneutical horizon within which a meaningful explanation of the

<sup>3</sup> This statement opposes implicitly a point of view taken by many Dutch theologians who consider the biblical 'Israel' to be in some metaphysical way identical with the modern State of Israel.

<sup>4</sup> Heidegger's train of thought goes something like this : a proper understanding of any matter can only be achieved by posing adequate questions ; the questions must be more or less the right ones. But this implies a certain understanding of the matter already contained in the questions. This dormant understanding is called 'pre-understanding'. This pre-understanding determines the angle (the *woraußhin*) of the questioning, in default of which no understanding can develop. The sum-total of pre-understanding of any individual or group is called his 'hermeneutical horizon'.

<sup>5</sup> Marx calls the (material) base : the socio-economic structure of a society on which a politico-legal structure is erected, with corresponding forms of specific social awareness (*MEW* 13, pp. 8, 9). I am using the word rather freely, particularly with reference to *social praxis* imposed by that structure, which corresponds to a religious theory present in the religious consciousness. Fernando Belo proceeds in the same way, formally, though not theologically, in his book *Lecture matérialiste de l'évangile de Marc*, Paris, (du Cerf) 1974.

parables is possible. In the same way, we see that Jesus explains the parables only 'to his own disciples' (v. 34b; cf. 4:11, 13, 21, and 24 'He said to them'). The two new parables (26-29 and 30-32) are again spoken for the ears of all (v. 26 and 30, 'And he said'). The first group — gradually — gets ears to hear, but the second group certainly does not get them.

The 'mystery of the Kingdom of God' we must in the first place understand as the figure of the Messiah Jesus himself (the Lord as servant) with everything that this figure embodies: that the naked are clothed, the hungry are fed, the dead are raised and that those who exalt themselves shall be put down, and those who humble themselves shall be exalted (by God). To the 'insiders', to whom the messianic mystery has been given in the figure of the Messiah himself, the parables of the Kingdom of God (and, directly or indirectly, that means all the parables) will become clear as explanations of this messianic mystery. But the 'outsiders', who cannot hear from within this messianic mystery, will receive the parables — yes, and even 'everything that happens' — as strange and insignificant tales, or they may not notice them at all. They are not capable of asking adequate questions, and so they are prevented from understanding the gospel.

According to the text, this is Jesus' intention. They are not even permitted to understand. I suspect that we must see this against the background of a number of preceding passages in which several attempts are made by various forces to turn the defenceless Messiah into a tool that will serve their own ends: they want his power, but not his service, they want his image as king, but not that of the servant, (see in particular 3:7-12). But in that way, the messianic mystery is destroyed. In chapter 4 we have obviously arrived at a point where the messianic proclamation must, even if the formal characteristics of this are absent, take on the figure of the parable, even when this happens spontaneously.

For the outsiders, after all, 'everything is in parables'.

#### IV

##### 'Teaching as one who had authority' (1:22)

Mark 4:1, the beginning of the pericope in which Jesus 'taught them many things in parables' (v. 2), says that 'again he began to teach beside the sea'. When did he teach first then, and what was the difference? To answer this we must go back via 2:13 to 1:21, 22. In 1:21 ff; we have the first reference to Jesus' teaching. Here it becomes clear that to 'teach' is equivalent to explaining Moses and the prophets (the so-called Old Testament).

This is exactly what the scribes did. By deduction and combination they laid down the 'halakha' (literally: the 'walk' or 'way') of Israel. But Jesus teaches differently. He teaches 'as one who had authority, and not as the scribes'. That is to say that his explanation of Moses and the prophets is immediately concrete and convincing. Obviously, he speaks directly from the same Spirit ('spirit' is concrete, material movement in history) as Moses and the prophets. This is particularly clear from the signs which accompany his teaching. 'Teaching' and 'healing' are closely connected in the proclamation. There is no 'teaching' without 'healing', and no 'healing' without 'teaching'. It was the same with Moses. In the Gospel according to Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount is immediately followed by ten healings. In Mark it is basically the same: his 'teaching' is 'immediately' accompanied by a number of healings (1:23 ff., 29 ff., 32 ff.).

All this could only have one meaning for Jewish ears and eyes: the day of the Messiah has dawned and the Kingdom of God is at hand.

And so we come back to the first word which we heard Jesus speak in the Gospel according to Mark: 'The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel (which is hereby proclaimed)'. In order to underline and elaborate these words Jesus 'teaches'. First he teaches as 'one who has authority', completely in the open (so that he is also completely vulnerable) but when all sorts of powers, out for their own ends, and not in any way prepared to follow Jesus on his messianic path, attempt to make this proclaimed kingdom of God serve their own purposes, (Mark 3:7-12 cf. Mat. 11:12 and Luke 7:16), then Jesus withdraws. The text has already programmatically prepared for this in 3:9, where he arranges to have a boat ready, lest 'they should crush him' (prematurely). The healings, as signs of God's Kingdom breaking through, may only underline the need for repentance, and only in that way may the messianic secret be revealed (see further under V). Any other ways of revealing this secret must be rejected, and where possible prevented (3:12). The logical consequence of this is that now, in 4:1, he begins to teach differently, after something like a foretaste in 3:23, no longer openly, as one who had authority, but in 'parables'. The parable is the literary form in which the messianic mystery is concealed.

#### V

##### Conversion

In the Old Testament, the word conversion is connected with the image of the road. The road is the praxis of the Torah (= law, or better 'Weisung', the so-called five books of Moses). This was

regarded, not as an ideal which Israel should translate into practice, but as a given *reality* in which the people, freed from slavery, may join, and which carries the people, bringing them to their destination — a concept which is much clearer when referring to a road in antiquity, than in connection with our network of roads. The Torah is a *road*, a given praxis, a social reality which is connected with this nation of liberated slaves. 'Sin' is — quite literally — to step off this road, a doubtful diversion from this road, a desertion which is followed by disintegration. The very first thing which a sinner ought to do therefore is : to turn round and to go back to his place on the road of the covenant.

That is what is meant by '*conversion*' : to go back to the road (or roads) of the Lord, the way of justice and righteousness, of life and peace in the perspective of his Kingdom. If things are as they should be, then Israel walks on these paths, and if this is not the case, then there must be a conversion first. If there is no conversion, then the whole of Israel's religion becomes a mockery of the covenant, a (religious) lie without equal. This is also the message we hear constantly from the prophets, loud and clear, for instance, from Amos. When the praxis of the covenant with the Lord is denied, then the entire religious 'superstructure' does indeed become the opium of the people ! Any form of service of God must therefore *begin* with conversion, which has a clear social form.

It is therefore not surprising that Jesus' preaching from the beginning (1:15) is a direct exhortation to this. And here we should remember that now, in the days of the Messiah, this conversion is more narrowly defined as *following the ways of the Messiah*, that is to say : *to follow Him*.

Here is the origin of the two groups which we found in 4 : 11. We can follow their development in the course of the story. In 1 : 16-20 we encounter the first small group which leaves its own paths, and now follows Jesus. At the same time we see how the opposition increases against this conversion, and against Him who personifies it. In 3 : 6 we have the first reference to preparations to 'kill Jesus'. It is becoming clear — and they could have known this from Moses and the prophets — that the messianic way will be a path through humiliation and death. For the demonic powers, this is a meaningless detour, for they prefer to seize power directly. This is also what constitutes their 'uncleanness' (3 : 11). To encounter this violence Jesus, as a new Moses, now constitutes the new Israel (3 : 13 ff.). As soon as this takes on a public form, the other side also begins to take concrete action. They form themselves into two groups: His relations and friends (3 : 21 and 31 ff.) and the scribes (3 : 22), the groups of His family, and the groups of His fellow believers. Over against this is the group

which surrounds Jesus (34) : 'around' — Greek : '*peri*' — is here the key word. When 4 : 10 refers to 'those who were about him' with the twelve', this is the sum of 3 : 14 and 3, 34. Their common mark is that they do the will of God (3 : 35). 'Those outside' (3 : 32 and 4 : 11) are the official circles — the in-groups of state, church and family. For them, any understanding of the messianic way is blocked, and their attempts to grasp it all the same can only cause a major historical error (which could be given the name of 'Christianity').

## VI

### Conclusions

Messianic proclamation contains both an element of *conversion* and an element of *following Jesus*. This order is irreversible. The announcement of the coming of the Kingdom of God, linked to the challenge to be converted, must always come first. Fundamentally, this is an anti-religious word, which, in its simplicity (purity) cannot be misunderstood. One can be opposed to it and consciously distort it, one can suppress it in a complicated (unclean) way, but one cannot say : 'I did not know about it'. The proclamation insists primarily on a realistic location of the way of the Son of Man, close to the spot where He is to be found. And where could this be, other than among the least of his brethren in their oppression: the naked, the hungry, the prisoners, the sick, those who are like the dead. For God knows, and the Christian congregation should know this too, (this is exactly what the biblical word *conscience* means), that there, and nowhere else, we must expect the signs of Easter, the signs of the final liberation. The solidarity with the oppressed leads the way, both in praxis and in theory. I do not say, as Ragaz did for instance, that the revolutionary praxis of the oppressed is *identical* with that of the Messiah ; there always remains a messianic, critical detachment. But surely the result of this cannot be that what happens in this world has a *neutral* position over against the messianic events ! (That is the '*embourgeoisement*' of Barth's theology, with which we are only too familiar in the Netherlands, which now reproaches us with the accusation of 'natural theology' — as Spijkerboer reproached me recently in *Trouw*.—*Trouw* is a Dutch daily newspaper, Tr.).

No, in reality there are indeed some movements which respond to the movement of the Messiah, and other movements which certainly do *not* respond to it. This is the reason why we are socialist, in praxis and in theory. It is also the reason why we *cannot* act as the allies of western imperialism, no matter what unclean arguments are produced.

Whereas the word of conversion, therefore, can be proclaimed and heard everywhere, the word of the Messiah's death and of His resurrection from the dead, the word of the victory concealed in His suffering, the word of the royal form of His shapelessness, in short : the word of the messianic mystery, *that sacred Word is not for everyone*. That word may not be given to the dogs by the Ecclesia (Matt. 7: 6).

It is a dangerous word, because it is at the same time a completely *religious* word ! It is only for those who have in fact become involved in His affliction. It lies open to every religious misunderstanding if we do not insist on the a-religious basis of the conversion. For though we are indeed concerned with conversion, it is not conversion on the basis of *this religious word*. The religion which results from that is far worse than paganism. Therefore Jesus speaks in parables from now on, *in order that* they will not be 'converted' by *that* word. Only those around Jesus, those who — whether consciously or unconsciously — share in the praxis of the Son of Man, will gradually understand the messianic mystery, and be comforted.

The 'hermeneutical' problem is therefore not just an intellectual problem, but primarily a matter of practical obedience. As an intellectual problem, it should be reduced to its social basis. The pre-understanding is not — at least not in the first place — a matter of consciousness, but of social 'being' : 'to be in Christ', to be in solidarity with the least of His brothers and sisters.

## NETHERLANDS

RINSE REELING BROUWER

### ON THE FAST DAY YOU GOAD YOUR WORKERS BIBLE STUDY OF ISAIAH 58

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*Translation from the Dutch by Annebeth Mackie, St. Andrews, Scotland. Translator's note : This whole article is based on the translation of the text Isa. 58 into Dutch by Rinse R. Brouwer, and I have not attempted to render this translation into English. Instead I have used the Revised Standard Version (RSV) and indicated in translator's notes where there would seem to be discrepancies.*

- 1 "Cry aloud, spare not, lift up your voice like a trumpet ; declare to my people their transgression, to the house of Jacob their sins.
- 2 Yet they seek me daily, and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God ; they ask of me righteous judgment, they delight to draw near to God.
- 3 'Why have we fasted, and thou seest it not ? Why have we humbled ourselves, and thou takest no knowledge of it ?' Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers.