The Use of Matthew in the South African Context during the Last Few Decades

H J B Combrink

ABSTRACT

This study is an attempt to investigate which sections of Matthew have been used during the last few decades, by whom and how. It therefore focuses on the different kinds of reception of Matthew, as it is often said that it is basically the Gospel of Luke which is used for the contextualisation of the Gospel.

One kind of reception is in the typical scholarly research being done in South Africa. Although many interesting shifts in the methodology can be documented from the Matthew research, it remains true that in this kind of reception relatively little contextualisation has taken place so far. Recently a certain correction could be detected in this respect, and in different articles the South African context is clearly beginning to play a role.

In a recent dissertation attention is directed to the possibility of viewing the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew as an example of engaged literature. There are also other contributions dealing with issues such as the challenge of fugitives, the concept of comrades, the relevance of the Beatitudes, etc. Another genre of contribution in which contextualisation can also be detected is the series on exegetical and hermeneutical guidelines for preaching.

Some of the most obvious forms of contextualisation have do with the legitimising of or opposition to the policy of separate peoples and churches. But obviously more than this receives attention. Issues such as love and compassion, human rights, reconciliation, the permissive society and the ethical challenges of economic life, war and peace and love of one's enemies, violence, wealth and poverty are discussed. As might be expected, the same text(s) often function(s) in different ways according to the context of the reader.

1 INTRODUCTION

This study is an attempt to investigate which sections of Matthew have been used during the last few decades, by whom and how. It therefore focuses on the different kinds of reception of Matthew, as it is often said that it is basically the Gospel of Luke which is used for the contextualisation of the Gospel.

The reason for concentrating on the last couple of decades in this article follows from a preliminary biographical survey. In the period 1929-1960 there were only 13 publications on Matthew, after which it gradually increased to a real explosion of 109 titles between 1982-1991. It must be realised that this is a one-sided view of the reception of Matthew based on more academic or theological...
publications. If one wants to deal with the reception of Matthew on a broader basis, other types of documents should also be taken into consideration.

One should keep in mind that probably one of the first documented receptions of Matthew in Africa was that of the Augustine, who stated that Matthew was the first and most important Gospel, later abbreviated by Mark. This African reception of Matthew was influential for many centuries, and has again been influential in the recent resurgence of the so-called Griesbach hypothesis championing the cause for Matthew as the first Gospel.

One kind of reception is in the typical scholarly research done in South Africa. This can be seen in the traditional approaches to the questions of Introduction to and Theology of the New Testament that are utilised in the *Guide to the New Testament*. In these contributions the influence of literary criticism and narratology can already be detected, although not as consistently as, for example, in the contribution by Vorster on Mark in the same volume.

Whereas the influence of redaction criticism can be detected in these contributions, a real grappling with consistent historical criticism only gets under way at a much later stage. The influence of the South African discourse analysis on Matthew, is well documented for example in *Neotestamentica*. This has been enriched in recent years by consideration of the issues of speech acts, pragmatics and the implementation of rhetorical criticism.

Recently two multi-author volumes on the theology and ethics of the New Testament also appeared in South Africa which also contained contributions on Matthew. To a certain extent one might say that much of this research could have been done elsewhere in the world, with very little specific attention to the implications of the research for the South African context.

Over the last couple of years the South African context has clearly begun to play a role in different contributions. In a recent dissertation attention is drawn to the possibility of viewing the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew as an example of *engaged literature*. There are also other contributions dealing with issues such as the challenge of fugitives, the concept of comrade, the relevance of the Beatitudes etc. Another genre of contribution in which contextualisation can also be detected, is the series on exegetical and hermeneutical guidelines for preaching.

As I have made comments concentrating more on recent scholarly research on Matthew in South Africa elsewhere (1994), I shall here deal with the more general reception of Matthew witnessing to a contextual interpretation, whether consciously or not.

2 THE INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW RHETORICALLY DETERMINED

It has been rightly argued that the rhetorical situation has to be taken into account as the basis of all interpretation (hermeneutics) of sacred Scripture (Scult 1983:221ff). It is the very acceptance of the capacity of a sacred text to speak
beyond its immediate situation which explains why audience predispositions must also be taken into account in the interpretation of such texts.

When the interpretation of Matthew is traced in the recent South African context, this close link with the interest of different audiences is very obvious. I would disagree, however, with Scult's claim that the alienation of the original rhetorical situation is a necessary prerequisite for the text to be rhetorically interpreted again in the present (1983:226). It is of the utmost importance to have as clear a grasp as possible of the original rhetorical situation in order to be able to interpret the text again in a responsible manner with a view to a new rhetorical situation.

It is important to draw attention to the fact that the reception of Matthew by various individuals and groups was always contextually determined, the only difference being that certain groups took their departure from an explicit contextual hermeneutics, whereas other readers of the Bible, while claiming that they were only reading the Bible in an objective manner, were just as contextually involved in their hermeneutics.

### 3 MATTHEW AS A CONTEXTUAL DOCUMENT

It is interesting to note that a traditional approach, such as redaction criticism, already implicitly dealt with the Gospels as documents of contextual interpretation. This is underlined when the question of the motive of the redactional alterations of for example Matthew to Mark is discussed in redactional critical studies. Whereas in the past this question was often answered on the basis of the theology of the author, the close relationship between the author and his own community, as well as the community he is addressing, is taken into consideration much more thoroughly in recent research. But this already implies interpreting the source text (Mark) with a sensitivity to the context of the interpreter (Matthew). This is then often interpreted in differing manner, as is noted, for example, by Balch. He complains about the 'imposing, unexplained social gap between Segal, Saldarini, and White's Matthew embedded in formative Galilean Judaism and Schoedel's Hellenistic Antiochan Ignatius on whom rabbinic Judaism left no real mark' (1991:xxii). Actually this alludes to the question as to how it is possible that Ignatius, who was so deeply indebted to Matthew, could be so unaffected by his form of Christianity. This underlines the methodological problem of drawing conclusions about the social situation of the community of Matthew from the text of the Gospel.

It has been pointed out often enough that the handling of the Old Testament by Matthew and Mark can, on occasion, even be contrasted with each other. The radical statement on the Sabbath in Mk 2:27 is left out in the Matthean version where Matthew is transforming the tradition in order to show that Jesus and his disciples did not break the law. This is again to be understood from his context,
as Matthew wants to point out that his community is not breaking away from the laws and traditions of Israel in a radical fashion (cf. Overman 1990: 81f).

This trend can be illustrated by means of yet another example concerning the gospel of the poor in Luke and Matthew. According to Lk 6:20f, the gospel of good news comes to the poor and oppressed as prophecy, preserving the more original form according to many scholars. But in Mt 5:1-12 this has been adapted into an exhortation for readers who were not literally as poor and needy as those in Luke.

He has extended the blessings and promises to anyone who is poor at heart or one in spirit with the poor, anyone who hungered and thirst for justice, anyone who imitates the meekness or lowliness of the poor, anyone who is also sad and depressed, anyone who is persecuted for his faith in Jesus, in fact anyone who is truly virtuous (Nolan 1976:46).

In discussing different approaches using the text as a vehicle for getting at the social situation of the community of Matthew, Kingsbury challenges the principle of ‘transparency’ for moving from text to situation. He furthermore states that many reconstructions of the social situation of a text like Matthew are based on random selections of texts, without really taking into consideration the sweep of the narrative as such (Kingsbury 1991:269). This would also be a fair criticism of many South African contributions dealing with Matthew in a contextual manner.

4 THE SOCIAL AND IDEOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY READERS

In recent years the social-scientific approaches to Scripture have made a big impact on Biblical interpretation. Without going into the detail of the different approaches such as the social historical approach or the more consistent application of social-scientific theories here, it must be acknowledged that these approaches have made us much more sensitive to the social dimensions of the text. This applies not only to the author and the origin of the text, but just as much so to the contemporary readers and interpreters of the text. This can then take many diverse directions (cf. West 1991).

These approaches have also made us more sensitive in respect of distinguishing between our own sociological matrix and that of the New Testament. They can also help us to understand how the different lenses of readers in different contexts in South Africa led to different receptions of Matthew, or at least specific sections in Matthew. It also sensitises us to the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. ‘This fallacy refers to the illegitimate application of the presumed meaning of a term or syntactical unit in antiquity to present-day problems’ (Van Staden & Van Aarde 1991:82).
West (1992:4) underlines the fact that the ideological nature of all Biblical interpretation cannot be ignored any longer. This statement presupposes the universalistic use of ideology as perspective rather than the critical definition as a particular case of contextually induced distortion. When he therefore affirms 'on the one hand, that there is no innocent interpretation, no innocent interpreter, no innocent text, and on the other hand, that interpretation is still possible' (West 1992:5), this of the utmost importance for the purpose of this paper.

What we are becoming more and more aware of is the reality of the issue of power being put on the agenda once a plurality of readings and audiences in different contexts are accepted (Lategan 1991:4). In looking back from our present vantage point, it will be interesting to see in what manner current insights concerning contextual hermeneutics can enlighten the use made of Matthew in the past.

**5 MOTIVATION FOR MISSIONARY WORK**

The well known text in Mt 28:18f was functional as motivation for missionary work in South Africa from very early on. This can be shown to be the case from the first Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in 1824 onwards, as well as in sermons by ministers such as Andrew Murray and others. This is interesting when seen from the perspective of the remark by Bosch (1991:56) that it was not until the 1940s that Biblical scholarship started to pay serious attention to this pericope in Matthew.

It must, however, be stated immediately that in the South African context this text was very rarely, if ever, treated in a thorough exegetical manner and with due reference to the Greek text. Even the missionary studybooks by Du Plessis, Gerdener, Du Toit and even Van der Merwe did not enter into a thorough exegetical discussion of the pericope Mt 28:16-20 (Robinson 1986:87-91). The first thorough and scholarly discussion in the context of missions was by Bosch in 1979, followed by other more exhaustive exegetical treatments from different perspectives.

**6 MATTHEW IN THE CONTEXT OF LEGITIMISING APARTHEID**

A certain way of reading texts from Matthew can be seen in the context of the legitimising of the policy of separate peoples and churches in the Dutch Reformed and other Afrikaans churches. The phenomenon of the handling of the Bible in this respect has been discussed extensively in the last decade or two (cf inter alia Bax 1987a; Vorster 1987; Loubser 1987).

Groenewald (1947:45ff) on the one hand appeals to Mt 19:4 to substantiate the unity of the human race. But from Mt 28:19 and 24:14 he concludes to the continued existence of different peoples up to the endtime. Other texts used in this respect are 24:7; 25:32. It is significant with what ease dogmatic conclusions...
concerning the continued existence of peoples and nations could be deduced from texts such as these. As late as 1990 Potgieter could still appeal to 28:19 to underline his claim that a nation has certain prerogatives that may not be taken from it (Potgieter 1990:38).

With reference to social segregation it was concluded from Mt 18:17 that the existing separation between Jews and gentiles, accepted by Jesus, was the paradigm for the prohibition of integration between nations, in other words social apartheid (Groenewald 1947:53f).

Concerning religious segregation the same author concludes from Mt 15:26 that there is an insurmountable barrier even between Christians from different peoples (1947:56). On the basis of this principle the establishment of ‘national’ Christian churches, such as the Jewish-Christian congregation in Jerusalem and the National Syrian Church, can be explained (1947:57). To Loubser this handling of Scripture is an indication of a hermeneutic in which the believer in the New Testament is really interpreted as a ‘believer within his own national context’ (Loubser 1987:67).

What was really lacking in these years was an emphasis on the critical voice of Matthew challenging the church to the exceeding righteousness of the Sermon on the Mount, and a listening to other readings of Matthew. Although principles of thorough grammatico-historical exegesis were already operative in those years, it evidently did not restrain readers from arriving at such slanted readings of Matthew.

One of the interesting things that happened with regard to the way in which a text such as Mt 7:12 functioned in the process of legitimising apartheid, was that the clear thrust of this saying (do unto others) in effect was changed to grant to others.... (Kinghorn 1986:170). This must be seen in close conjunction with the fact that the other clear sayings in the Sermon on the Mount, to mention only this section of Matthew, did not really function in a critical manner to unmask the lack of the exceeding justice and perfection which is so central in the message of Matthew. There is a tremendous difference between the position of granting to others everything which one is claiming for oneself when compared with the clear message of Matthew.

The phenomenon of pluriformity in creation was another line of approach often taken in legitimising aspects of apartheid. It was then stated that this implied maintaining one's own identity and self-preservation. Potgieter claimed that this was not against the law of love of Mt 22:39 (1978:15). The parable of the talents in Mt 25:14ff was cited as an illustration of the inequality amongst men before the Fall, and that it was therefore to be expected in the regeneration too (Potgieter 1978:34).

The failure to take adequate notice of the main thrust of Matthew must be seen in the light of the random way of quoting texts and making use of the Bible.
Nevertheless, other readers of the Bible, not always with a much more responsible attitude towards reading the Gospel of Matthew as a whole, did succeed in taking from Matthew for the South African situation what was relevant and applying it to the context.

7 MATTHEW IN THE CONTEXT OF OPPORTION TO APARTHEID AND LIBERATION

In the meantime, the Gospel of Matthew received a totally different reception amongst other readers in South Africa. These different readings of the Bible have also been documented fairly extensively over the years. In this respect we shall concentrate on some examples of other receptions of Matthew in totally different situations in South Africa.

In his treatment of texts which militate against apartheid, Bax draws attention to Mt 8:5-13 where Jesus is flouting the Jewish rules about apartheid between Jews and Gentiles by going into the Roman centurion's house, commending his faith as superior to the Jews' and stating that such Gentiles will be gathered into the Kingdom while Jews will be excluded (1987a:136).

Kretzschmar (1988:85) refers to the way Matthew is read by black theologians. In their discussion of 'the poor', black theologians have, understandably, greatly stressed material poverty and political oppression. For them, passages such as Matt. 25:31-46 are not merely the subject of speculative inquiry, but speak with great force to their situation.

An example of the emergence of a contextual reading of Matthew is to be seen in the writings of Albert Nolan. In his Jesus before Christianity: The gospel of liberation, he spells out his urgent and practical concern for the daily suffering of millions of people. He also makes the important methodological observation that ‘our present historical circumstances have quite unexpectedly provided us with a new perspective on Jesus of Nazareth’ (Nolan 1976:9). This means that in the light of our own context we may also look with new eyes at even the miracles of Jesus.

His one and only motive for healing people was compassion. His only desire was to liberate people from their suffering and their fatalistic resignation to suffering....Consequently, although Jesus did not set out to prove anything, his miraculous success did show that God was at work liberating his people because of the faith that Jesus had engendered in them (Nolan 1976:36).

He is also sensitive to the liberating implications of Jesus' words and deeds, with reference to texts such as 6:25,27,28,31,34; 9:2,22; 10:19,26,28,31; 14:27.

Reproduced by Sabinet Gateway under licence granted by the Publisher (dated 2010).
Jesus not only healed them and forgave them, he also dispelled their fears and relieved them of their worries. His very presence had liberated them (Nolan 1976:42).

In treating the well known texts in Matthew dealing with the love of one's enemies (Mt 5:39,43f), the concept of solidarity is to the point. Although it may be a term which is not found as such in the Bible, it can be taken to refer to the basic Biblical notion of collectivity. With reference to these texts from Matthew, Nolan declares that ‘the kingdom of Satan differs from the kingdom of God not because they are two different forms of group solidarity, but because Satan's kingdom is based upon the exclusive and selfish solidarity of groups, whereas God's kingdom is based upon the all-inclusive solidarity of the human race’ (1976:60). This new universal solidarity should supersede all previous group solidarities (cf Mt 10:34-36; 25:40,45).

Govender (1986) also objects against a privatised interpretation of Mt 5-7 and highlights Jesus' iconoclastic intentions in his ethical teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. The coming of the Kingdom, so central in the Sermon on the Mount is not to be seen as an other-worldly reality but as the presence of righteousness upon earth and among human beings. Govender states that Jesus' references to economic matters would have outraged the wealthy, and delighted the poor. In contextualising the Sermon on the Mount, Govender comes to the interesting conclusion ‘that both white Christian obedience [from a position of power] and black Christian obedience [from a position of powerlessness] are in the final analysis forms of disobedience’ (1986:183).

It is also important to realise that certain issues which in our day would be classified as political, would in the time of Jesus have been seen as being related to their religion. Jesus also expected a change in the life of his followers which would affect every department of life. Actually, Jesus' criticism of certain groups such as the Zealots, Essenes and Pharisees was not that they were too political, but that they were too religious.

One of the basic causes of oppression, discrimination and suffering in that society was its religion—the loveless religion of the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes and Zealots...Jesus soon discovered that it was the dutiful religious man, rather than the sinner or pagan Roman, who was an obstacle to the coming of the kingdom of total liberation (Nolan 1976: 98).

Therefore Jesus wanted to bring about radical changes in every sphere of life: political, economic, social and religious—something which can be illustrated by Mt 20: 1-15. Even more surprising is the fact that these religious people would be excluded from the Kingdom, while tax-collectors and prostitutes would enter (Mt 21:31); and while many from the east and west, the pagans and the sinners would enter, the ‘sons of the Kingdom’ would be left outside (Mt 8:12). According to
Nolan, this shows that Jesus was not busy with a religious revival, 'he was busy with a revolution—a revolution in religion, in politics and in everything else' (1976:100). Yet Nolan continues to state that Jesus was a pacifist in practice, that the Kingdom could not be established by violence but by faith alone.

When the Bible treats the theme of suffering, it is very often from the perspective of the sufferer. In this respect Nolan refers to Mt 11:28 and states that the poor in South Africa experience their oppression in the same way (1989a:63). With reference to the upholders of a system of injustice and oppression, Nolan refers to 23:13-32. Yet he sees those people who are responsible for the system and oppression are the real sinners (Mt 12:34).

Contrary to an individual notion of sin, the corporate concept of sin and the notion of Beelzebub or Satan, prince of the demons and the embodiment of all the forces of evil and injustice, is linked to Mt 12:24-27 (Nolan 1989a:42,44). This implies that 'the struggle is the opposite of the system...."You are either with or against us" (Mat. 12:30). "You cannot serve two masters" (Mat. 6:24) (Nolan 1989a:157). It is illuminating that the danger of retaliation is also addressed. Nolan states that although the principle of non-retaliation is accepted by the 'struggle', this may never be an excuse to be passive and apathetic (Nolan 1989a:166).

The other side of the picture is the witness of the New Testament to salvation and the power and authority of Jesus. Salvation is linked to power and the conflict between Jesus and Satan, and in this respect Nolan refers to Mt 28:18; 10:28 and 4:1-11 (1989a:113).

Once the issue of retaliation has been raised, it is, therefore, inevitable that the question of violence as a last resort has to be discussed in the light of Scripture. In this respect Tlhagale says the following:

From a township perspective the logic does seem to support the just violent struggle as a last resort at a rational level. The gospel imperatives on the other hand seem to challenge the moral principles of a just violent struggle' (Tlhagale 1987:87).

The imperatives he refers to are Mt 5:9,38-39,44; and Lk 23:24. He continues to question the validity of these citations and the entire Sermon on the Mount in the face of continuing repression and the 'barbarous behaviour' of the servants of the state. Texts such as these 'tend to cultivate fatalistic attitudes among the oppressed' (Tlhagale 1987:87).

This is, of course, a question which has been debated through the ages. What interests us here is Augustine's reading of these texts in the light of the claims based on them being made by pacifists. Bax (1987b:154) then shows that Augustine distinguished between the inward disposition of the heart which should be in accordance with the command of Mt 5:39, and the outward deed of the soldier
who strikes down the enemy from benevolence and pity as an act of love, just like the father who disciplines his son even with some sternness as an act of love. Therefore the command of Christ in Mt 26:52 does not apply to taking up arms at the command of a superior, though any other use of arms for private purposes or revolution would be prohibited (Bax 1987b:155f; cf De Villiers 1987:32).

A thorough discussion of the negative as well as positive responses in the Gospels concerning the question of violence is given by Mosothoane (1987). In his discussion of the negative response to violence, he deals with a number of important sections in the Gospel of Matthew, namely 5:21-26; 5:38-42; 5:43-48; 26:47-56. He deals thoroughly with all the relevant questions of interpretation, including the differences between the various Gospels in the parallel sections. His conclusion is ‘that the New Testament does not have one single consistent attitude and response to violence’ (1987:118). When trying to explain the specific approach taken in Matthew, he correctly links this to the important emphasis of this Gospel on the surpassing righteousness which requires from the followers of Christ unexpected, unconventional, moral responses even when confronted with situations of violence. In his rejection of retaliation and his demand to love one’s enemies, Jesus’ ethical requirement is therefore unexpected, unconventional and unparalleled (Mosothoane 1987:121). The rationale for this is to be found in the redefining of the concept of the Kingdom of God and Matthew’s understanding of the nature of God as a God of mercy, love and forgiveness. It is, however, interesting that Mosothoane's conclusion regarding the total picture of the Gospel is that ‘while maintaining the negative response, the greater the intensity of the violence a Christian community suffered the more inclined it was to wish its persecutors at least a taste of what it suffered’ (1987:125).

In dealing with the ‘church theology’, the Kairos document comes to the conclusion that ‘no reconciliation, no forgiveness and no negotiations are possible without repentance’ (Kairos theologians 1986:10). Loubser is of the opinion that in this manner the message of Mt 18:23-35 is neatly reversed by the document. ‘The actual meaning of this passage is that God forgives man infinitely more than he is able to atone for, and therefore people should forgive one another likewise’ (Loubser 1987:155). The document’s theology of direct confrontation with forces of evil (rather than reconciliation), as well as Loubser’s comment on it, does not do sufficient justice to the rhetorical function of this important section in the Gospel as a whole. In this case it is clear that complex theological issues are at stake in dealing with the problem of evil and injustice and the issue of forgiveness and reconciliation in such a context.

The purpose of this article is not to discuss liberation theology as such, but rather the manner in which the reading of Matthew was affected by this approach. For Nolan it is important that at long last theology and the implications of our Christian faith are seen to be relevant to the political crisis in which we find our-
Nolan makes a very strong case for the legitimacy of theology being practised with full consideration for its cultural and political context. An important line of reasoning for liberation theologians is to describe their hermeneutical approach as circular. It is based upon the very close interrelationship between orthodoxy and orthopraxis, but without simply reversing the position of the past and arguing for a movement from practice to theory. But it has to be realised that Christian practice is in reality the lived experience of faith. 'Faith is not primarily a way of thinking, it is a way of living. Our real beliefs are not the ideas that we play around with in our heads but the beliefs and doctrines that are implicit in what we actually do or don't do' (Nolan & Broderick 1987:25). For this very reason theology is to be seen as the 'second act', the critical reflection following upon the first stage of Christian praxis. This means that practising theology without living a life of faith as Christian in your own context is just not possible.

This is not now the occasion to enter into detailed discussion of how Nolan defines contextual theology. Yet, it is important to see that for him contextual theology implies a “re-reading” of the Bible from their political context and from their experience of faith, that is to say, from the perspective of the poor and the oppressed' (Nolan & Broderick 1987:30). It is, however, a question whether theology as the second stage should follow on a social analysis of society as such, or on the specific Christian praxis in society. This does not imply that the realities of society should not be critically analysed, but one should be very much aware of the fact that this social analysis can be done from radically different and varying presuppositions and points of departure.

In his book, God in South Africa: the challenge of the gospel, Nolan contextualises the message of the Bible in the South African context in an unmistakable manner. In this respect he often refers to texts in Matthew to substantiate his case. He declares that God is being crucified in South Africa, and refers to Mt 25:40,45 in this respect.

He also deals with different aspects such as idolatry, sin and guilt, anger, day of salvation, and more often than not illustrates this from Matthew. He furthermore claims that the same principles which were active during the 'struggle', should also be operative in a new dispensation.

Nolan's publication gave rise to a debate. According to Degenaar (1989), Nolan's discourse resembles that of politics rather than theology. He finds his analysis of the situation extremely one-sided, as he sees the struggle of the poor and oppressed against the system as in essence the struggle of God against the system of apartheid. 'The struggle is the opposite of the system...You are either with or against us (Mt 12:30). You cannot serve two masters' (Mt 6:24; Nolan 1989:157). Time and again Nolan refers to texts from Matthew and calls attention to Jesus' amazement about so much faith outside the 'system' (Mt 15:28; 8:10;
The problem is, however, that in this manner God becomes identified with the human opponents of apartheid (Prozesky 1989:14). This leads to the reductionistic and exclusivistic point of view that the only way to God is through the 'struggle'. This testifies to the illusion of identifying the kingdom of God with a specific political situation (Degenaar 1989b:38).

What happens here is that the reality of the hermeneutical circle is denied by someone like Nolan. It seems as if he is not subject to the hermeneutical circle in the same manner as others. ‘In the final analysis the reason why my theological reflections do not find an echo in Degenaar or Nicol, is that I am trying to reflect theologically upon an experience that is significantly different from theirs’ (Nolan 1989b:10). So we once again have here an illustration of the fact that the context reigns over the interpretation of Scripture, as has happened so often through the ages and just as effectively in the other readings of Matthew dealt with above. It is in fact really the struggle that is directing Nolan's theology rather than a case of theology directing the struggle (Nicol 1989).

In The road to Damascus: Kairos and conversion, (Institute of Contextual Theology 1989:9) it is said that we encounter in Mt 25:31-46 in the face of the 'poor Jesus’ God as listening to the suffering of the poor and the suffering, but also as the God who will judge man according to his actions towards these poor and suffering.

Other issues addressed here in the light of Matthew are the idolatry of the worship of Mammon in #49 (6:24), and the sin of hypocrisy (#76) with reference to 23:24; 7:5) with the challenge that we must be converted again and again to the worship of the true God. This document concludes with a reference to Mt 10:17-22 in pointing out that nothing in the life of faith and obedience 'can happen, however, without pain, suffering, and many deaths' (Institute of Contextual Theology 1989:21).

8 REREADING MATTHEW IN THE DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH

In Ras, volk en nasie (Algemene Sinode 1974) an explicit section in #5 (1974:7f) on hermeneutical points of departure of the report is an important signal of the conscious reflection being given to the way in which Scripture functions in the report. In this respect it is significant that the report accepts the warning note being sounded by the Reformed Ecumenical Synod of 1963 against an incautious use of the term 'principle' for a rule of conduct revealed in Scripture and expressing God's will for every time, place and circumstance. This can then also be seen in the way Matthew is treated. This does not mean, however, that this report was consistent enough in its correction of former use of the Bible in similar reports.

In #13.1 Mt 28:19 functions in a different manner than previously. Now it is stated that the New Testament accepts the equality of all nations and peoples, as the salvation in Christ is offered to all. But in #13.4 the reality of the continuation
of different peoples is again deduced from 28:19.

In #13.8 the love command, as norm for relations between different people, is based on texts such as 25:35; 7:12. In the light of 23:23 the practice of the love commandment is also put in the context of social justice. In #13.9 the fact that love also implies justice, is substantiated on the basis of Mt 20:1f; 5:20; 25:14f; 5:43-48. It is significant that important texts, central to the message of the Gospel, are receiving more attention now than in previous reports.

In the report submitted to the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in 1986 (Kerk en samelewing) reference is made in 12.3.2 (#138) to 5:6,10,21; 6:1,33 with a view to the call to Biblical righteousness. In 12.3.3 (#153) the importance of Christian compassion and service for relations between groups and people is also underlined with reference to Mt 5:7; 25:34-46. It must, however, be noted that references to texts in this report are placed in the margin. This has the effect that the reference is regarded as the intertext, but perhaps in a somewhat less direct manner than the way in which references were used in the past to substantiate certain points of view.

It is interesting that the view of ‘granting to others’ everything one group expects for itself, is here again founded on 7:12 (#300 in 15.1). This is further qualified by underlining that when that which is of oneself is emphasised to the exclusion of the possibilities of other groups, this amounts to racial discrimination which has to be condemned.

In the revision of the report on Church and Society submitted to the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in 1990, the report starts with the warning that the Bible is not to be used as a manual for politics or economics (#19), and that texts such as Mt 24:7 are not to be used as a Scriptural basis for political models (Algemene Sinode 1990:4, #22).

The trend to use texts which are more representative of the thrust of the message of Matthew, is continued in this document. In #30 (2.2.2) Mt 5:21-25 is referred to when the priestly office of the church is being discussed. Whereas 28:19 was often used to prove the continuing existence of different peoples, it is alluded to here (#45 in 2.4) in connection with the missionary calling of the church to bring the message to all nations and peoples.

As in previous reports, love for one’s neighbour as ethical norm is related in 3.3.1 (#130) to Mt 22:37-39 and Mt 7:12, while in 3.3.2.1 (#140) the call to Biblical righteousness and justice is discussed with reference to Mt 5:6,10.

For the rest, many of the references to texts from Matthew in the 1986 edition are repeated again.

It is significant that the report concludes on a humble note by stating that the church is committed to the glory of God and the well being of all people, and with the prayer that God may free the church to be concerned above everything else with the kingdom of God (Mt 6:33). That this report concludes with this very
crucial statement from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthev, is an indication of
the extent to which the 1990 report was influenced by the Gospel of Matthew.
In this respect reference should also be made to the contributien by Van
Aarde of the 'Nederduitsch Hervormde' Church (1986) dealing with the inter­
pretation of 28:16-20. He puts the issue of particularism versus universalism as an
issue of Matthevian theology on the table. According to him, this section does not
have a gentile mission in mind and a volkskirchliche missiology can be condi­
tionally validated. One has to conceden that the mission according to Matthew was
focused primarily on his own church with a view to strengthening and trans­
forming the church's perception of itself. But it also flows from Matthew's mis­
sonary ecclesiology based on his Christology that the church of Christ will—like
Jesus—be operative and witnessing in the world (cf Combrink 1991:28).

9 ALTERNATIVE READINGS FOR A NEW SOUTH AFRICA
In recent years Matthew has been read and interpreted with a view to the
changing situation in South Africa. One example is the work of M Cassidy. He
appeals to the lordship of Jesus Christ over heaven and earth on the basis of 28:18
as an important reality which has to be reckoned with (1991:66). In the light of
the fact that humans are frail and prone to fail, he appeals to Mt 5:6 and 6:33 to
underline what kind of people God meant us to be.

The power of prayer (6:6; 7:21-27) is underlined, but he also emphasises that
prayer without action is of no avail (7:21-27) and the vain repetition of words
superstitious (6:7; Cassidy 1991:207).

The issue of violence is also addressed with reference to Mt 26:52. In this
respect Cassidy emphasises that the law of the sword is a total law, and that 'Vi­
olence creates violence, begets and procreates violence' (Cassidy 1991:183).
When the option of violence becomes a temptation, the example of Jesus on Cal­
vary and Mt 5:44 should be kept in mind, as it rules out the option of hate
(Cassidy 1991:187). The call to reconciliation of Mt 5:23f is also important in
this respect.

In this respect the National Initiative for Reconciliation also points to Mt 5:9
and states that everyone '...will have to refuse co-option by the oppressive forces,
but our solidarity with the poor will have to be critical as their struggle is also not
free from sin' (Rossouw 1989:280ff). Reconciliation is not something cheap, but
God can work wonders through the suffering of his children (Mt 5:9-11).

Cloete underlines the structural and theological significance of 5:10 in the
composition of the introduction to the Sermon on the Mount. He furthermore
(1985:47) calls attention to the fact of persecution for the sake of righteousness as
a dominant concept in Matthew:

The paradox now is that their (disciples'). HJBC) efforts of peacemaking are met with
the very evil they are trying to overcome, namely, violence.
He then makes the prophetic statement in 1985 that the undeniable fact that South Africa is on its way to a new future is to be deduced not from superficial policy changes, ‘but in the persecutions that God’s people have to endure, of whom Beyers Naude is but one’ (Cloete 1985:48).

The issue of detention and imprisonment in South Africa is also a matter of utmost importance. In this respect the example of Jesus’ statements in this regard are also taken more and more seriously. Cassidy refers to the Biblical challenge of Mt 25:34,35,45,46 (Cassidy 1989:175).

The question of the relation between church and state is also discussed with reference to the issue of the rendering of taxes in Mt 22:21. From this text Cassidy deduces that we should render to Caesar all that is appropriate, on condition that it does not compromise what we owe to God (Cassidy 1989:358). It is also important that he interprets Romans 13:1-7 along the same lines as Mt 22:21.

When dealing with the politics of love as a way of facing the ultimate national challenge of working out what we profess as a Christian nation, Cassidy challenges the reader with the vision of the spirit of love taking hold of South Africa resulting in the phenomenon of different groups being concerned about others rather than fending for themselves in the first place and embracing the love imperative of Mt 7:12 (Cassidy 1989:433). ‘In South Africa the key lies in blacks surrendering the black position and whites surrendering the white position and both coming to God's position’ (1989:434).

Another section of the Sermon on the Mount, Mt 7:26-27, is referred to when Nolan challenges Christians to a life of faith which has to become visible in action: ‘Protestations of love and concern that do not bear fruit in action are no longer credible in South Africa’ (Nolan 1989a:203).

A section of Matthew which is obviously very relevant to the situation in South Africa, is 25:34-46. When confronted with the horrific true story of a Sipho Mazwana, Cassidy was challenged by Mt 25:40 and 45 to obey the demands of the love of God and Christ in that concrete situation (1989:167). This pericope also had relevance for the situation of detention and imprisonment in South Africa.

Another important aspect of the Gospel of Matthew which is appealed to, is the emphasis on the comprehension/incomprehension of the disciples. Proceeding from texts such as Mt 13:51 and 15:16, Cassidy (1989:200) underlines the concern of Jesus with the fact whether people understood what He was saying. In this respect it can be noted that (as with many other references made) he does not show any awareness of the narratological importance of the comprehension or lack of comprehension of the disciples in the narrative of Matthew.

In an important contribution on liberating ecclesiology, Villa-Vicencio (1988) deals with the theological identity of the alternative church. This entails a detailed discussion of Mt 25:31-46 as of central importance to the church as it challenges
the church to a new vision of itself as the church of the oppressed and repressed. But this section also emphasises that Christ is present incognito among the poor.

The mystery of God's self-revelation in one emptied of all glory, taking the form of a servant, continues, according to Matthew 25:31-46, in the poor of succeeding generations who have servitude and deprivation imposed on them (Villa-Vicencio 1988:197).

The church of Mt 25 is on the one hand the recipient of the Spirit of God residing among the poor and on the other hand a channel or means of God's redeeming grace extended to humankind (Villa-Vicencio 1988:201).

In the National Initiative for Reconciliation Mt 5:24 plays an important role with regard to denouncing the phenomenon of Christians in South Africa seeing one another as enemies. 'In South Africa this means that Christians in particular—who have many grievances against one another—should continually be "going" across the boundaries for the sake of reconciliation' (Rossouw 1989:279ff).

10 BUSINESS ETHICS

An interesting development is the contributions concerning labour and business ethics dealing with the issues of Christian norms within the business and administrative context. This is a promising sign of a growing trend in other disciplines of an earnest desire to seek guidance concerning values and norms.

The position is taken with reference to 6:19-21; 24-34 that material wealth may never become the primary driving force in the life of the believer (Van Jaarsveld, in Van der Walt 1990:31). Even in the economic sphere a believer should subject everything he does to the will of God. In this respect Van Jaarsveld refers to 18:21-25 and 5:17-20.

Issues such as just wages are also addressed (with reference to Mt 10:10) as well as the rest and recreation of the labourer (cf 11:28) (Petersen, in Van der Walt 1990:181f). When the issue of the survival of the fittest and the methods being used in the business world are discussed, De Vries refers to 22:37-40 as the norm in this respect (Van der Walt 1990:207). According to him, the Christian entrepreneur is someone who is willing to serve God and his neighbour on the basis of his faith commitments. It is even explicitly stated in the light of Mt 6:24 that the biggest profit should not be the norm for the Christian businessman (Van der Walt 1990:211). It is remarkable to read that for businessmen wealth should not be the most important value, but rather the Kingdom of God (cf 4:4, 8-18; 6:33; 10:37; 13:44-46 etc; Van der Walt 269ff). Even businessmen can trust God to supply in their needs (6:25-34; 14:15-21). Concerning labour relations, clear guidelines are drawn from Mt 7:12; 20:1-15; 23:12-12; 20:1-15.

It is remarkable that in the sphere of business and commerce people are really
willing to take a critical look at their vested interests in the light of Scripture, and in this case the Gospel of Matthew.

11 SERMONS

Many of the deficiencies, even in recent contributions to the interpretation of Matthew, are rectified in the sermon proposal for 28:16-20 by Smit in the *Göttinger Predigtmeditationen*. He correctly states that the whole Gospel as narrative has to be interpreted in the light of this final section and the contributions made by narrative theology and ethics (1991:301). He underlines that it is characteristic of Christian ethics that believers are able to determine their lifestyle in every new context in the light of the stories told in Scripture of other believers and faith witnesses. It is, therefore, important to realise that it is the crucified but risen Christ who is present in our present historical contingent contexts. Smit reminds us in the gloomy light of the history of the interpretation of this section of the need to be very critical of oneself and one's own ideologies and its influence on one's interpretation. Some examples of this are:

- die Herrschaft Christi (Machtmissbrauch der Kirche); der Missionsbefehl (Kolonisation); das Hineingehen unter die Völker (Apartheid); die Nachfolge Christi (viele beunruhigende Gestalten) (Smit 1991:304).

In my recent contribution on Matthean research other contributions on the parables and the Sermon on the Mount are also treated, as well as some published sermons in the series *Woord teen die Lig* (cf Combrink 1994). There are still noteworthy differences in the degree of contextualisation between different contributors. It can nevertheless be stated that there is a marked increase in sensitivity for the South African context. This is to be seen especially in the contributions dealing with the Sermon on the Mount.

12 THE UNFOLDING OF BIBLICAL INSIGHT

The use of Matthew in recent times in South Africa gives witness to the fact that people has interpreted and interpret the Bible in diverging ways. This has to do with a certain view of the Bible. It also has to do with the social conditioning of the readers. K Nümberger underlines this when he draws attention to the fact that even though the Bible has been used in these ways, there is a certain thrust which inevitably tends to transform our own distorting of its message. When one compares the view of kingship implied in Psalm 2 with that implied in Mt 20:25-28 where real greatness is to be seen in service, it is clear that one cannot simply take certain texts of Scripture in isolation, but has to deal with them in their historical and literary context, as well as in the context of the Bible as a whole (Nümberger 1991:78f).
This is the implication of accepting Scripture as canon. This takes into consideration that texts are located in their historical context, but must also be viewed in relation to the thrust of the canon as a whole. It must be realised that the particular form of Biblical witness can be influenced by the historical circumstances of the origin of the text of the Bible. As it is possible to quote the Bible against the true intentions of God, it is the task of the theologian to assist the church in determining the relevance of Scriptures for church and society in our times (Nürnberger 1991:79,84).

This can be illustrated from the Old Testament by the well known phenomenon of the voice of the false prophets. ‘In using Old Testament texts, therefore, we need to discriminate. Nevertheless, the fundamental thrust of the Biblical witness is clear’ (Wittenberg 1991:95).

When one follows the story of the unfolding reception of the Gospel of Matthew in the South African context, it is the exciting story of how the dialogue between Christians and the influence of progress in hermeneutics contributed to divergent readings drawing closer to one another. This does not mean that we are at the end of the road of differing readings. But it does give rise to the hope that it is possible to read a Gospel, such as Matthew, contextually in a responsible and justifiable manner.

WORKS CONSULTED


Domeris, W P 1990. ‘Blessed are you...’ (Mt 5:12). *JTSA* 73, 67ff.


Fortna, Robert T 1990. ‘You have made them equal to us!’ (Mt 20:1-16). *JTSA* 72, 66ff.


Laporta, Japie 1989. ‘...whatever you did for one of the least of these...you did for me’ (Mt 25:31-46). *JTSA* 68, 103ff.


---

Prof Dr H J B Combrink, Theological Faculty, University of Stellenbosch, 171 Dorp Street, STELLENBOSCH, 7600 Republic of South Africa.