CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

AFRICAN AND EUROPEAN RELATIONS AT THE WELL: INTERCULTURAL READING OF THE BIBLE THROUGH VISUAL ART

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Introduction

Most biblical scholars know that there is no way of reading biblical texts objectively or without bias. Since Gadamer (1986:270–96) developed the use of prejudices in reading classical texts, professional readers are aware of the influences they undergo in understanding different types of literature. Not only being aware of such prejudices, but using them to discover hidden layers present in the text is the merit of Gadamer’s contribution to reading classical texts. Because biblical texts are amongst the classical texts, they can be read in the same way as Gadamer proposes.

One of the ways to make a reader sensitive to the influences they undergo while reading is to look at a work of art. Hence, an important aspect of reading a text is that of the reader consciously or unconsciously making their own inner images (Jonker 1998:113–18). Looking at an artwork, the reader is confronted with those images that sometimes differ from the given pictures. Hereafter, I will discuss the method with which I read bible texts with art as commentary on the biblical text. Works of art prove to be ways of reading out of the history of reading the bible. Thus, they are part of the Wirkungsgeschichte or history of reception. In the same way, works of art show the reader how culturally-biased a reading of the bible can be.

Upon finishing my dissertation in 1996, I began to study the bible in the arts.1 I have been working at the Theological Seminary of the

1 Being influenced by feminist theology, I have developed the habit of providing some personal background information in my writing. Invariably, this provides a key for the reader in understanding the influences that attend one as a writer, or, in this case, how I developed the method in question.
Protestant Church for some four years and have conducted many bible studies during this time. I have worked in the seminary as a rector and since 2002 as a substitute rector. Each year, I organise a programme consisting of about sixty courses for ministers who have finished their theological education. These courses were and still are post-academic in nature. Attendance is on a voluntary basis. Each year I organise a conference on biblical theology with a group of biblical scholars. I give supervision, courses in homiletics, hermeneutics and art and theology. The courses are attended by students and ministers of the different theological ‘directions’ of the Protestant Church, namely, liberal, (sometimes very!) conservative and evangelical.

Each morning we begin the day with theology students and ministers doing an hour of bible study. Each participant is able to make a choice from about three kinds of bible study. The possibilities include: ‘reading the bible with the commentary of Augustine’, ‘bibliodrama’, ‘reading the bible in Hebrew or Greek’, ‘reading the bible with different catechetical methods’ and ‘reading the bible through the arts’.

Conducting these bible studies with groups of about seven to thirteen people, I have had a few experiences with reading the bible with visual art that I had not previously expected:

- First, I noticed by looking at art, the participants often gained new insights into the possibilities of the bible text. For example, someone noticed a sentence or a detail in the bible text that he or she had previously overlooked. The bible text appears to have many more layers and perspectives than the participants had previously imagined or considered.
- Visual art provides more than an illustration of the bible text, it gives one specific perspectives on the text. Hence, it is a commentary on the text and not an illustration.
- During the first year I read the bible with visual arts as a commentary, I noticed that participants did not use their usual theological language. All the old and well-known words such as redemption, resurrection, cross, reconciliation were gone. In a way, they were replaced by other terms, by other words without people noticing it. Participants did not realise they were using another language for the theological concepts they had in mind. I shall come back to this point later.
- In the bible study groups we took our time to look at the work of art, to discuss what we saw and how we saw it and in the end