

Bell, R H 2007 – *Deliver us from evil: Interpreting the redemption from the power of Satan in New Testament theology*

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Reviewer: Prof Dr P H R van Houwelingen (Theologische Universiteit Kampen – the Netherlands)

The New Testament idea of deliverance from evil or from the power of Satan has posed particular problems for interpreters since the time of the Enlightenment. Often the Gospel exorcisms were rationalized or a demythologizing agenda was pursued, divorcing the Biblical concept of redemption from the world in which we live.

Richard H Bell (born in 1954; 1979 PhD in Theoretical Atomic Physics; 1991 DrTheol in Protestant Theology), reader in Theology at the University of Nottingham (UK), is the author of three well-known monographs on the exegesis and theology of Romans. In his latest book, *Deliver us from evil*, he stresses that if the deliverance from Satan is understood within an appropriate understanding of myth, then it does not only lead to an enrichment of New Testament theology, but also to a deeper understanding of the world in which we find ourselves.

Bell, thus wants to develop a theory of myth which has to do justice to both the world of “narrative” and to the mysteries of the “physical world”. This is accomplished by building on a distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal world as introduced by Kant and further developed by Schopenhauer. The resultant theory of myth is subsequently applied to two different examples of redemption from Satan found in the New Testament: first, Jesus’ exorcisms and second, the redemption of human beings from the power of satanic power through the cross and resurrection of Christ as found in both what he calls the Pauline tradition (I would prefer the term Pauline corpus) and in the epistle to the Hebrews.

What is significant about Jesus’ exorcisms, according to Bell, is that through Jesus the afflicted persons undergo an existential change. Apart from being healed, they are taken into the reality of God. This means that their soul is brought into the reality of his Kingdom. Put in Kantian terminology, it means that any change in the noumenal world (Jesus rebuking a demon), implies a corresponding change in the phenomenal world (Jesus healing a patient).

As far as the second case, redemption from the satanic power through the death and resurrection of Christ, is concerned, the idea of participation is central to Bell’s view. He speaks of “existential displacement of the believer” in the Pauline tradition. The outer person refers to the earthly life as opposed to the heavenly life for the inner man (2 Cor 4:16). Believers find themselves in the heavenly realms with Christ and their life is hidden in heaven with Christ (Eph 2:6; Col 3:3). Although the author of the epistle to the Hebrews does not support the idea of existential displacement, he is considering the redemption of Christ as the result of his exaltation in heaven.

For Bell, 2 Corinthians 4:16 is a key text in the whole argument. His interpretation of this complex Pauline phrase about the difference between our outer nature and our inner nature will, however, be controversial. He wants to follow Calvin, who not only rejected the notion that the outer person is the old person (in this instance Calvin undoubtedly was right), but also that the outer person is the physical person. According to Bell, the outer person rather refers to our earthly life (phenomenal), as opposed to our heavenly life (noumenal). Yet, most contemporary commentators agree that in this text Paul is contemplating the human existence on earth from two opposing angles (e.g. Martin, Thrall, Harris). The “outer self” is the physical aspect, the whole person from the viewpoint of the person’s mortality (2 Cor 4:10-11; cf Phlp 3:21). The “inner self” is the spiritual aspect, the whole person as a renewed being in Christ (2 Cor 5:17; cf Col 3:9-10). Everything takes place during our earthly life, but of course in eager expectation of the resurrection. Incidentally, this reviewer is not

convinced that Bell interprets 2 Corinthians 4:16 in exactly the same way as Calvin did, because he (Calvin) wrote that God calls us back to meditate on a better life (*meditatio vitae melioris*), and by this Calvin could very well have referred to our life in the future world. This is exactly how he interpreted verse 18: we have to carry our thoughts forward to the eternal kingdom; there is nothing for us to rest upon but to have confidence in a future life.

After having distinguished between these two forms of redemption, namely redemption through the exorcisms of Jesus and redemption from satanic power through the death and resurrection of Christ, Bell makes an attempt to relate them to each other. Is there such a thing as a “truth of myth”? Bell answers in the affirmative. The next question is how the truth of myth can be discovered. Despite the differences in the New Testament pertaining to redemption from Satan’s power, Bell states that in all cases their truth can be discerned only through faith. For Paul, faith is related to the existential displacement the believer undergoes. For Hebrews and the synoptic gospels, faith is related to our embedding ourselves (or being embedded!) in the myth.

Towards the end of his book, Bell makes some interesting concluding comments. First, it can be said that the devil and his demons do exist. They have an ontological status which can be compared to that of Adam, but not to the existence of God. Second, the devil and his demons can be disembodied, as some texts in the New Testament seem to indicate (Eph 2:2; 6:12; 2 Cor 4:4). The disembodied spirit is a combination of some entity in the noumenal realm together with a subject on the boundary of the phenomenal world. Third, the devil and his demons have a personality of some kind. They are definitely not to be considered as mere invented mythical figures, for the world of the demonic is nothing else but the real world in which we live. In his “concluding pastoral postscript”, Bell highlights the extraordinary nature of our world. The world is truly mysterious and demonic activity is part of that mystery.

This is surely a thought-provoking book, even when it has not convinced this reviewer as far as some of the author’s exegetical decisions are concerned. Furthermore, the structure of the book is not as logical as it could have been (e.g. why is a philosophical framework constructed in ch 3-4, between the two main examples of redemption?) and the author does tend to occasionally repeat himself (e.g. the discussion of 2 Cor 4:16 on pp 223-226, repeated on pp 286-291). Nevertheless, Bell’s contribution deserves serious consideration, in particular his concluding comments on the reality of evil and the power of Satan in our present world. Is it not time to abandon the rather closed worldview that we have inherited from the age of Enlightenment?



Brownson, J V 2007 – *The promise of baptism: An introduction to baptism in Scripture and the Reformed tradition*

Publisher: Eerdmans. Pages 223. Price \$16.00.

Reviewer: Rev N J S Steenekamp (Middelburg)

In this well researched book, Prof Brownson clearly outlines the meaning of baptism from a Reformed perspective. He uses the questions and opinions about baptism from the church and the community at large to form the framework within which he discusses this sacrament.