Lehnert, Volker A.

Die Provokation Israels: Die paradoxe Funktion von Jes 6,9-10 bei Markus und Lukas: ein textpragmatischer Versuch im Kontext gegenwärtiger Rezeptionsästhetik und Lesetheorie

Neukirchener Theologische Dissertationen und Habilitationen 25


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Lehnert’s book is a slightly revised version of his 1998 dissertation accepted by the Kirchlichen Hochschule in Wuppertal; what has been revised or added is mainly an update of the literature appearing at the end of the dissertation stage and before publication. In this book Lehnert utilizes various pragmatic approaches to re-examine the reception and interpretation of Isaiah 6:9-10 in Mark and Luke-Acts (i.e., Mark 4:10-13, Luke 8:9-10, and Acts 28:25-27). Reader-response criticism - especially Wolfgang Iser’s model of reception theory (Rezeptionsästhetik), rhetorical criticism, and speech act theory are all called on to demonstrate how these texts paradoxically intend the opposite of what they say.

In Isa 6:9-10, God tells the prophet when he is commissioned to command his people to “listen but not comprehend, look but not understand,” in order that they do not “repent and be healed.” This command to obduracy, like others in the Book of Isaiah, is remarkable in that it is directed to God’s own people at large, and not to foreigners or to specific unrepentant individuals. In the NT, the Isaiah text is quoted, paraphrased, or alluded to in several places, and its use in new contexts is still provocative. Is the goal of the obduracy command to pronounce judgment, or to encourage repentance? If, in Isaiah, it is directed to the people of Israel, to whom is such a command directed and to what purpose when it is placed in the mouth of Jesus or Paul? (Is it still directed to Israel, i.e. to Jewish non-Christians?) Lehnert’s methodology permits some new perspectives on these familiar questions. Particularly interesting is his concept of “paradoxic intervention,” which he sees as a common ancient rhetorical strategy, and his proposal...
that Luke’s theology concerning Israel is not as pessimistic as has sometimes been thought.


His next section (B) turns to the exegetical problems of the individual texts to be considered in Isaiah, Mark, Luke, and Acts. In regard to his examination of the Hebrew text of Isa 6:9-10, one might note that Lehnert does not include all of the variant readings from 1QIsaiaha, nor does he remark on the fact that some commentators such as W. H. Brownlee (The Meaning of the Qumran Scrolls, New York, 1964) and Evans (above), have suggested those variants are deliberate scribal alterations to soften the meaning of the text, making it a warning to the righteous rather than a judgment condemning them to obduracy. This is a peculiar omission, since the task of Lehnert is to look for indications of how the obduracy motif was received and interpreted by various audiences; and indeed, a discussion of 1QIsaiaha would have fit well in his section (E-II), “Wirkungsgeschichtliches,” which deals with the interpretation of Isa 6:9-10 in later chapters of Isaiah and pre-New Testament texts.

Lehnert next defines aspects of text pragmatics and his own methodology (section C and D-I). He most prefers Wolfgang Iser’s model of reception theory (Rezeptionsästhetik, aesthetic response) for describing the interaction between text and reader, text levels, and the “Wirkung” of the text as the reading process unfolds. He enlists the help of speech act theory and rhetorical criticism to demonstrate that the illocutionary act of a text often includes using indirect speech forms such as irony, parody, or satire to signal to the implied reader that it is the opposite of a locution that is really meant. He calls this “paradoxical intervention,” after the “reverse psychology” of psychotherapy, in which individuals are told one thing in order to provoke them to do the opposite. This helps ground why Lehnert thinks the command of Isa 6 to “not see or hear is not to be believed; readers are to “see” and hear, that is, to repent.

Lehnert proffers the Jonah story as the example par excellence of paradoxical intervention (section D-II). Jonah is told to announce that Nineveh would be destroyed in 40 daysno conditions, no maybes. However, the people do not “believe” the prognosis, they disbelieve it as they were supposed to and hope that by repenting they will be forgiven and their doom averted, which, indeed, is what happens. The proclamation of doom has a didactic function.
In the last three sections of his book (E-G), Lehnert turns to a new pragmatic reading of Isa 6:9-10 in Isaiah (E), Mark (F), and Luke-Acts (G). While Isa 6:9f MT is understood as paradoxical intervention at its earliest, Lehnert also attempts to show that classical writers such as Quintilian and Cicero among others utilized the same strategy. Mark 4:10-13 is seen as central to the Book of Mark’s narrative and christology, since the mystery of Jesus’ identity is a major theme in the book’s macro-context. Placing the paraphrase of Isa 6:9-10 after Jesus’ parable of the sower and before its interpretation to the disciples, leaves open to the implied reader not only the question of whether s/he belongs to those who “see and hear” the meaning behind the four kinds of “soil” upon which the “seed” of the word is sown in the parable, but also the question of whether s/he understands the mysterious identity of the “sower” himself. This last is left un-interpreted for the disciples and for the reader; the reader’s in/ability to comprehend is placed beside that of the disciples.

With regard to Luke-Acts (section G), Lehnert proposes that by employing the obduracy text of Isa 6:9-10, the Lucan author combines Jewish themes and prophetic rhetoric with classical rhetorical strategies. In Acts 28, the last chapter of Acts, Paul’s preaching to the Jews from his prison is met with some conversions but some refusals; his response is to quote the Isa 6:9-10 text and proclaim that “the Holy Spirit was right in saying [this] to your ancestors through the prophet Isaiah,” declaring finally that now “the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles.” This rather open-ended conclusion to Acts is frequently understood as early Christian anti-Judaism. Lehnert proposes instead that the intended perlocution of Acts 28 is to provoke the Jews to jealousy of the Gentiles, in a manner similar to that in Rom 9-11. It is paradoxical intervention once again: Gentiles were given salvation because of Israel’s obduracy, y et, if Israel were to believe, the obduracy of Israel would be annulled and the Jews would be saved as well. Thus, the alleged Lucan anti-Judaism for Lehnert is understandable as a rhetorical strategy “im Stil der Binnenkritik altisraelitischer Gerichtsprophetie... und frühjüdischer Polemik” (“in the style of the internal critique of ancient Israelite judgment prophecy and early Jewish polemic,” p. 298). According to Lehnert, the author of Luke-Acts was an insider in the inner Jewish or inner Jewish-Christian controversy of his day, and his addressees have to have been partly Jewish.

There are a certain number of proofreading and typographical errors in the work, not limited to the bibliography but most especially apparent there, since several entries are out of alphabetical order. However, the book in general is a fine example of pragmatics at work in biblical scholarship.