
Much ado about nothing? In discussion with the study of Evert-Jan Vledder: 'Conflict in the miracle stories in Matthew 8 and 9: A sociological and exegetical study'

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Abstract

This essay is a brief evaluation of Evert-Jan Vledder's study of conflict in the miracle stories in Matthew 8 and 9. His use of his own conflict model to interpret the conflict between Jesus and the leaders of Israel which is reflected in Matthew 8 and 9, and which at the same time serves as a transparency for the conflict between the community of Matthew and the Pharisees in the post-AD 70 period, is discussed critically in terms of his epistemological perspectives and methodological procedures.

1. INTRODUCTION

Evert-Jan Vledder's study on Matthew 8 and 9 (1994) is the third doctoral dissertation completed under the supervision of Andries van Aarde on the social-scientific approach to the New Testament. Together with Piet van Staden (1991) and Ernest van Eck (1993), who also focused their social-scientific research on the Synoptic Gospels, Vledder establishes himself with this dissertation as part of a rising generation of biblical scholars who are well grounded in the complexities of the interpretation of the New Testament.

In his study Vledder develops a conflict model from a synthesis of different conflict theories, particularly those of Ralff Dahrendorf and Lewis Coser (chapter 2). This model serves as the framework to interpret the conflict between Jesus and the leaders of Israel, which is reflected in the miracle stories in Matthew 8 and 9, and which at the same time also serves as a transparency for the conflict between the Matthean community and the Pharisees in the post-AD 70 period (chapter 3). Owing to the very generalized nature or high level of abstraction of Vledder's conflict model, he is also forced to construct a socio-historical framework for the Gospel of Matthew. In this regard the social location of the Matthean community is highlighted in terms of their stratification, composition, and the so-called *intra muros/extra muros* debate between

that community and Judaism (chapter 4). Matthew 8 and 9 is then analysed from a narratological perspective, in particular from the perspective of Bremond's sequential model, in order to explain the causality or process of events in the narrative (chapter 5). In the final chapter the findings of the study are implemented in terms of Vledder's own conflict model (chapter 6).

Vledder's provocative analysis of Matthew 8 and 9 is a methodological *tour de force*. His theoretical discussion of conflict theories in chapter 2, in particular, is probably the most thorough analysis of this sort by any biblical scholar up to date. His insight into the various schools of thought on conflict, each with their own ideological framework, and his knowledge of the basic assumptions and dynamics of conflict theories should impress even those who are of the opinion that New Testament scholars generally apply sociological theories to biblical data without being aware of, or sensitive to, the intricated epistemological issues underlying them. However, this study also confronts us with a few questions which need to be addressed. The aim of this article is then to enter into dialogue with Vledder's study on one or two of these statements.

2. TERMINOLOGICAL CONFUSION?

2.1 Sociological and exegetical?

As the subtitle of this dissertation suggests, Vledder views sociology and exegesis as two complementary facets of the analytical process. It is not clear why he makes this distinction, since exegesis forms an integral part of social-scientific criticism, as Elliott (1993:33) has pointed out in his recent theoretical reflection upon this approach. As a matter of fact, social-scientific criticism does open up the possibility for the understanding of biblical texts as social products, as encodings of social information and as vehicles of social interaction which, to my mind, is precisely what Vledder is trying to achieve in his investigation of the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leaders in the miracle stories. Therefore his distinction between sociology and exegesis is unnecessary. At best he could have changed the subtitle of his dissertation to something like 'A socio-narratological study', which would have been a more valid reflection of the nature of his 'exegetical' endeavours in chapter 5.

2.2 Social-scientific analysis or sociological analysis?

Vledder's remark in the first chapter that his sociological analysis forms a subsection of the social-scientific approach (p 15), is also somewhat problematic in the view of recent developments in this field. Vledder finds support for this statement from an impressive line of scholars (pp 12-17), who again base their views on the distinction of Scroggs

(1980:164-179) between so-called socio-historical and sociological analyses of the New Testament. According to this distinction, socio-historical investigations concentrate on the description of social data in order to form a picture of the history, social organisation, roles, institutions and symbolic universes of early Christianity, whereas the sociological approach or, as Vledder calls it, social-scientific criticism, makes use of theories and models from the field of the social sciences in order to explain certain phenomena in the New Testament in terms of these epistemologies.

The prominent work of the so-called 'Context Group' during recent years, as a clearly identifiable group within the field of social research on the New Testament, to my mind necessitates a new, more nuanced evaluation of the nature and contents of the social-scientific approach than that which Vledder offers us. In this regard especially Bruce Malina's publications paved the way for the development of a coherent social-scientific research tradition among a group of North American scholars with their own models, 'problem-solving' apparatus, academic universe, and even accompanying technical jargon (cf in this regard the social-scientific 'dictionary' edited by Pilch & Malina [1993]). The work of this Context Group, which at present also includes some European and South-African scholars, is characterized by the consistent use of models and theories from the field of the social sciences, in particular from the field of cultural anthropology, which facilitates comparisons between different groups and factions in the first-century Mediterranean world, as well as intercultural comparisons between this world and modern Western communities. Knowledge of the impact of (and interaction between) the meaning systems and social structures of the Mediterranean world on New Testament documents are considered crucial to the interpretative process within this approach (cf Joubert 1994:34-35).

On a methodological level, Vledder's social-scientific approach (p 15) does not fit into the framework of the social-scientific work of the Context Group, but rather within a more general social angle of incidence to the New Testament. Scholars outside the circle of this group make use of a wide range of models and theories from the field of the social sciences to come to terms with the social dynamics of early Christianity. Due to the various degrees of articulation of social-scientific theories in these studies to describe and explain particular social phenomena, it is difficult to categorize them in terms of Vledder's so-called 'social descriptions' and 'social-scientific analyses' (pp 14-17). Therefore he should have drawn a clearer distinction between different social-scientific epistemologies within the field of New Testament research. This, in turn, would have enabled him to replace Scroggs's outdated classification with a new explanatory framework which is more representative of the present state of social-scientific research on the New Testament.

Although the above-mentioned remarks may sound like an unnecessary technical quibble, it is important that scientific terminology should be precise. Therefore, clear articulations of the different approaches within the social study of the New Testament would have contributed to a more nuanced use of social-scientific terminology in this study.

3. A PREOCCUPATION WITH METHODOLOGICAL

3.1 A methodological power display

When reading through the first three chapters of Vledder's study, one cannot but be impressed by his theoretical insight. For example, in his search for what he calls 'a research gap' in chapter 2 to demarcate his own field of study with regard to Matthew 8 and 9, he presents us with an exhaustive overview of the viewpoints of the major themes or 'exponents discussed in these chapters'. At the same time, as already stated in the introduction, Vledder's theoretical study of the dynamics of conflict in chapter 3 can hold its own in any academic circle. Over against the generalized and often sloppy manner in which some exponents of social-scientific criticism apply certain models to New Testament data, which elicits increasing criticism from other biblical scholars (cf Sanders 1993:99-114), he presents us with a solid discussion of conflict theories.

3.2 An esoteric venture?

Although Vledder's methodological endeavours are quite impressive, I fear that it has become a bit of an esoteric undertaking which has not really had much impact on the actual discussion of Matthew 8 and 9 (cf section 4.1). At the same time his summaries of various sociologists' views of, among other things, the causes of conflict (pp 107-142), the units of conflict (pp 143-148) and the functions of conflict (pp 149-156), on which he based his own conflict model (pp 165-167), is also a bit excessive. He probably enjoyed unravelling small bits of information in this regard to such extent that he lost track of his primary task, since he definitely did not need or, for that matter, make use of all this information to draw up his own one-paged conflict model.

Vledder's voluminous engagement with methodological issues will undoubtedly impress biblical scholars who are interested in intricate theoretical detail, but I doubt whether it will persuade other would-be practitioners of social-scientific criticism to study the New Testament from a conflict perspective. If one has to go through an exercise of this magnitude in order to come to any sort of an understanding of the dynamics of conflict, I cannot foresee many new 'converts' to this paradigm; even more so if the payoff is not all that clear-cut.

4. METHODOLOGICAL PITFALLS?

4.1 Is the sociological analysis of Matthew 8 and 9 really that sociological?

Vledder ends chapter 1 with the promise that his own conflict model will be used as a heuristic tool to illuminate the conflict in Matthew 8 and 9 (pp 27-28). However, when he eventually gets down to the exegetical discussion of these chapters in chapter 5 of his study, he does not keep his promise. Although, at the beginning of this analysis, he states that the categories of his sociological model will be used to determine the plot of the text, and that these categories will be explicated as they unfold in the text (pp 227-228), the plot of Matthew 8 and 9 is actually developed in terms of the literary categories of time and causality (pp 230-296). Vledder's explanatory remark in this regard that 'change and tension' as vital aspects of the plot are also an integral part of conflict theory, since they are caused by conflicting interests (p 229), is not really convincing. Why did he then bother to draw up a sociological conflict model in chapter 5 if he preferred to apply literary concepts to explain the conflict in the plot?

The question which I asked myself, after reading chapter 5, is whether Vledder could have arrived at the same conclusions too without a long discussion of conflict theories and the development of his own conflict model in chapter 3? To this question my answer is 'yes'. A discussion of conflict from a literary perspective (as an integral part of the plot of Matthew 8 and 9) would probably have led to the same results. To my mind Vledder used his conflict model only to illuminate certain aspects of conflict in Matthew 8 and 9, but not as the heuristic tool for understanding it.

Chapter 4, which deals with the social location of the Matthean community, and which serves as a sort of a bridge between Vledder's general conflict model and Matthew 8 and 9, is probably more 'sociological' than chapter 5. For example, he offers a valuable overview of the most recent 'socio-historical' research on the different social classes in his discussion of the social stratification in Palestine during the first century AD (pp 177-187). His discussion of the social location of the community of Matthew is even more impressive, especially his social-scientific analysis of marginality (pp 193-196), and his analysis of group boundaries and self-definition (pp 213-219).

In spite of these fascinating analyses, Vledder's methodology in chapter 4 is not entirely sociological. His discussion of the environment of the Matthean community (pp 188-191), and early Christian-Jewish relations (pp 196-212), methodologically fits better into the framework of general historical (*redaktionsgeschichtliche*) approaches to the New Testament. The rest of the chapter would probably fit into the category of so-called socio-historical studies.

4.2 Too high to come by?

Chronologically this study seems to be moving effortlessly towards an analysis of the conflict in Matthew 8 and 9, right from Vledder's own search for a 'research gap' in chapter 2 to the eventual textual analysis in chapter 5. However, because of the very high level of abstraction of Vledder's conflict model, and the fact that it leaves him with only a very basic framework and a few categories which could fit on nearly any text, in his own words he has to fill the historical gap between his model and the text in question with other data (p 27). However, what actually happens is that Vledder's investigation of the social location of the Matthean community in chapter 4 becomes the interpretative framework against which Matthew 8 and 9 is analysed. This is also clear from the summary of his findings in chapter 6. In other words, his (re)construction of, among other, the highly stratified first-century society, the tension between the Matthean church and the synagogue, and the former's siding with the 'marginalized' over against the Pharisees who represented the interests of the governing classes, not only legitimizes his conflict approach, but also provides the scenario within which Matthew 8 and 9 is approached in chapter 5.

The high level of abstraction of Vledder's model still haunts him in chapter 5, where he analyses Matthew 8 and 9 from a literary perspective. Apart from his discussion of the temporal development of the plot (pp 230-279), he also makes use of Bremond's sequential model to explain the causality in the text, since his conflict model is too general to be of any real assistance in this regard.

Thus, in order to come to any sort of an understanding of the dynamics of Matthew 8 and 9, Vledder has to rely upon his social construction of the location of the Matthean community and on his literary analysis of Matthew's plot. At best, his conflict model only provides the theoretical jargon and the general direction of the study. His statement that he does not assume commensurability between the phenomena under discussion and his model (p 27), which is supposed to immunize him against this type of criticism, is therefore not such a safe escape route, particularly because it contradicts his own definition of what a model is, namely 'a presentation of a general framework of complex social data, simplified into a pattern in order to understand' (p 25).

• 5. THE STATUS OF SCIENTIFIC STATEMENTS

5.1 Between uncritical acceptance and further refinement of scientific statements

Scientists sometimes build important theories on small bits of information. Especially in the case of the New Testament, where we do not have much socio-historical data at our disposal, scholars have to make frequent use of hypotheses and theories to fill in all

the 'gaps'. In this regard, those hypotheses and theoretical angles of incidence which show the most promise with regard to the opening up of new fields of knowledge usually gain prominence and provide the academic framework within which research takes place.

In chapter 4, Vledder links up with some popular theories and theses within the field of Matthean studies to provide the framework for his (re)construction of the social location of the Matthean community. For example, he uncritically accepts 'the widely acclaimed consensus that Matthew originated in an urban environment' (p 191). He also applies some of these theories to the data in Matthew. For example, he uses the popular division of the first-century world into the social strata of the urban elite; retainers; urban non-elite; the degraded, unclean and expendable class; and the rural peasants (pp 177-187), and then identifies some members of each of these groups in the Gospel of Matthew.

As already stated, Vledder mainly draws on the theories and findings of some well-known exponents of Matthew to locate the Matthean community socially. In spite of his valuable overviews of major trends within this field of research, and some further refinements in this regard, I feel that he could have enhanced the scientific value of his own contribution by challenging some of these hypotheses which are sometimes built on tiny bits of data.

5.2 How transparent is the window?

One has to face the question of the transparency of historical documents when an issue such as the location of the Matthean community is addressed. In other words, is this document a 'window' through which we can look into the world behind the text, or is it an auto-semantic interpretation of reality which is not transparent at all? Vledder, however, does not really address this problem in his study. Judging from his methodology in chapter 4 and his remarks to this effect in chapter 6 (pp 304; 311-312), he obviously accepts the fact that Matthew is more or less directly transparent with regard to the social stratification and location of the Matthean community. Since his 'model' in this regard is based mainly on other scholars' research (cf section 5.1), it seems as if Vledder is of the opinion that their epistemology and methodological procedures have been so successful (that is, favourably received) within New Testament circles that it is unnecessary for him to ponder over the transparency/intransparency of Matthew. I, for one, feel that this is a lacuna in his study. The correct procedure in a controversial issue of this nature should at least be clearly to demarcate one's viewpoint over against other theoretical perspectives.

6. CONCLUSION

'Much ado about nothing?' Yes and no! On the one hand, Vledder placed so much emphasis on methodological aspects in his study of conflict in Matthew 8 and 9 that it lead him a bit astray. His discussion of conflict theories in chapter 3, in particular, did not have the impact on the rest of the study that one would have hoped for. His own conflict model was also drawn up at such a high level of abstraction that it did not really serve as the interpretative framework for the analysis of Matthew 8 and 9. For this he had to rely upon his 'model' of the social location of the Matthean community in chapter 4, as well as on his narratological analysis in chapter 5. At best his conflict model only provided the general 'alignment' or direction of the study, but it did not really function as the heuristic tool (as any model that fits the data in question should!) to explain the dynamics of his text.

On the other hand, Vledder's socio-historical investigation of the Matthean community and his narratological analysis of the conflict in Matthew 8 and 9, are really impressive. His insight into the spiral of conflict in the narrative, from its escalation to its de-escalation, to its resolution in Matthew 9:34, and his analysis of the conflicting interests of the community of Matthew and the post-70 AD Jewish leadership, among other things, should prove an important direction for further study.

In conclusion, I have some ambivalent feelings about Vledder's study. Although it provides us with some challenging theoretical analyses which definitely enhances our understanding of the Gospel of Matthew, I fear that his 'methodological preoccupation' could eventually become the Achilles heel of this type of social scientific study, especially at local level.

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