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TIME AS SALVATION HISTORY. A COMPARISON OF THE CONCEPTS OF KARL RAHNER AND ARNOLD A. VAN RULER

1. Introduction

If time is to be discussed theologically, then approaches which understand time as qualified by certain acts of God in human history, in other words as salvation history, offer themselves for consideration. It is in this area that this article intends to make its contribution¹.

It was Oscar Cullmann who – although his primary interest is not in a theological discussion of time – expressly connected the time concept with a concept of salvation history². His theology has been made known in Poland through the habilitation thesis of Krzysztof Góźdz, professor in Lublin³. Cullmann's christocentric salvation history is probably the Protestant approach which comes closest to the present-day Catholic understanding of the concept. This is due also to the influence his theology had on the 2nd Vatican Council, which officially introduced a concept of salvation history into the Catholic Church⁴.

In the Council's dogmatic constitution on God's revelation (*Dei Verbum*) the salvation-historical approach is most clearly visible. Here we observe also the contribution of one of the most influential Catholic theologians of the 20th century, namely Karl Rahner. His approach can be said to serve as an important pattern for Catholic salvation-historical thinking until today⁵.

¹ Translations of German and Dutch texts in this essay are mine unless indicated otherwise.

² See O. Cullmann, *Christus und die Zeit: Die urchristliche Zeit- und Geschichtsauffassung*, Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag 1948, pp.55ff.; K.-H. Schlaudraff, „Heil als Geschichte“? *Die Frage nach dem heilsgeschichtlichen Denken, dargestellt anhand der Konzeption Oscar Cullmanns*, Beiträge zur Geschichte der biblischen Exegese 29, Tübingen 1988, pp.54ff.

³ K. Góźdz, *Teologia historii zbawienia według Oscara Cullmanna*, Lublin 1996.

⁴ See *ibidem*, p. 205. The Protestant scholar Cullmann was invited to the Council as an observer, and his works on salvation history were being read by theologians and council fathers.

⁵ Rahner's thinking has strongly influenced the salvation-historical approach in the standard Catholic dogmatic work *Mysterium Salutis: Grundriss heilsgeschichtlicher Dogmatik*. In this work the approach is introduced by Adolf Darlap, who cooperated with Rahner very closely, so that it is possible

Also in evangelicalism, a concept of salvation history as a basis for doing theology has generally been favored in distinction from existentialist theologies like Bultmann's, or actualist neo-orthodox theologies like the early Barth's⁶. However, regarding the inner structure of salvation history, there is a large spectrum of possible concepts. It seems worthwhile to present two views which find themselves at quite opposite poles of this spectrum.

In this article, I have chosen Rahner together with a Dutch theologian, Arnold A. van Ruler, who is as yet scarcely known in Poland, but seems to be gaining attention in Protestant theology lately⁷. A comparison of both may cause additional interest in the work of van Ruler as a Reformed theologian. It may also show how such different constructs of salvation history depend on decisions in fundamental theology which generally lie at the bottom of theological differences between Protestantism and Catholicism.

2. Karl Rahner's salvation-historical approach

2.1. Salvation history as part of human history

In Rahner's approach the concept of salvation history is theologically constituted by human existence and God's grace⁸. Human existence is indissolubly placed into history with its contingency, while at the same time humans are searching for the wholeness of their existence, which Rahner calls salvation. God provides for man the freedom which opens his existence despite his past decisions for the possibility of this salvation which can through grace be realized in history.

God has always been at work in human beings, giving them His self-revelation as belonging to their human constitution as such, even if this revelation is not consciously grasped⁹. Therefore salvation history is not limited to the biblical history since Abraham or to the people of Israel. Its chronological extent equals that of the whole human history from its very beginning, which, as Rahner accepts, dates some hundreds of thousands of years in the past¹⁰.

to speak of an interdependence of Darlap's contribution and Rahner's work. Darlap adapted an article of Rahner on the OT as a salvation historical period (pp.147-153 in MySal), whereas Rahner's exposé on salvation history in his „Grundkurs des Glaubens“ adapts much from Darlap. See A. Darlap, *Fundamentale Theologie der Heilsgeschichte*, in *Mysterium Salutis vol. 1: Die Grundlagen heilsgeschichtlicher Dogmatik*, Einsiedeln/Zürich/Köln 1965, p. 147 footnote 125; and K. Rahner, *Grundkurs des Glaubens: Einführung in den Begriff des Christentums*, Freiburg/Basel/Wien 1984, p. 144.

⁶ See e.g. the statement of Helge Stadelmann: *Whoever wants to do theology in an evangelical sense, will find a large field of activity in reflecting on the meaning and nature of salvation history*” H. Stadelmann, *Grundlinien eines bibeltreuen Schriftverständnisses*, Wuppertal 1985, p. 132; also E. Lubahn, *Heilsgeschichtliche Theologie und Verkündigung*, 2nd edition, Stuttgart 1989, pp.17ff.

⁷ See e.g. the dissertation of A. J. Janssen, *Kingdom, Office and the Church: A Study of A.A. van Ruler's Doctrine of Ecclesiastical Office*, Eerdmans 2006: see the review of Christo Lombard on the back of the cover.

⁸ See K. Rahner, *Grundkurs des Glaubens...*, pp. 145ff.

⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 149f, 156f.

¹⁰ Rahner accepts the concept of evolution from the nature sciences and integrates it into his christology as well as into his theology of history, see footnotes 27 and 28.

However, there are qualitative differences in the progress of this salvation history. Rahner distinguishes in pre-Christian times a general transcendental and a special categorial salvation history¹¹. All human history is salvation history in the transcendental sense, because man is ontologically always already in a relation to the purpose of his existence, even without being consciously aware of this. The distinguishing feature of special salvation history is the explanative Word of God which interprets elements of general history and shows their salvific quality, making it an element of conscious awareness. Through this interpretative Word God makes salvation history categorial, which means in Rahner's terminology that God's salvation-historical acts take place immanently, in history, and can also be recognized in history by humans as God's acts, they manifest themselves *quoad nos* as God's acts. Without the interpretative Word the salvific quality of the respective historical events – though they be part of God's salvific activity – would not be recognizable to the human community. Therefore Rahner can speak about a general salvation and revelation history during the whole human history, and about a special salvation history, constituted through the official interpretation of history through God's Word in the time of the Old Testament. The climax of salvation history is, however, reached only in the self-revelation of God in Christ. To the understanding of the position of Christ which explains also the position of the Church in Rahner's salvation-historical approach we turn next.

2.2. Salvation History as christocentric and ecclesiocentric

In spite of the distinction between a general and a special history of salvation in pre-Christian times, the incarnation of Christ is for Rahner the one true *caesura* in salvation history¹². *The new and eternal covenant in Jesus Christ is the fulfilment and the end of all salvation history...* because in Christ the question of salvation for man is once and for all decided from God's side¹³. This makes the incarnation also the interpretative standard for all previous salvation history. A theological interpretation and delimitation of OT salvation history which would be valid for us was therefore not possible before Christ.¹⁴

This perspective of Rahner receives a deeper explanation in the more detailed contribution of Adolf Darlap concerning salvation history, which Rahner refers to in his *Grundkurs des Glaubens*¹⁵:

¹¹ See K. Rahner, *Grundkurs des Glaubens...*, pp. 157ff. The meaning of the concept „categorial“ as distinguished from „transcendental“ in Rahner's terminology may be explained as follows: *Transcendental means that which is given together with the being itself (a priori, originally, necessarily, from the inside, always already there, from the beginning, and not afterwards and only de facto); it shows itself implicitly, not concretely, it is not reflected upon, not thematic, it is not known, but you are aware of it. Categorial denotes that which encounters you from the outside, a posteriori, in space and time; it is explicit, concrete, reflected upon, thematic, and known.* B.-J. Hilberath, *Karl Rahner: Gottgeheimnis Mensch*, Mainz 1995, p. 116.

¹² See A. Darlap, pp. (pp.147-153 in Darlap's presentation are taken directly from Rahner, see above footnote 5).

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 152.

¹⁴ See K. Rahner, *Grundkurs des Glaubens...*, p. 170.

¹⁵ See footnote 5.

The purpose and at the same time the source of salvation history is God's definitive Yes to humanity in the incarnation of Christ. Earlier periods of this history are to be understood as preparatory phases which must not be detached from salvation history as a whole, they can not be considered separately. For in themselves they do not constitute a revelatory event of the same kind as the coming of Christ. Why is that so?

Salvation history is the history of one single revelation, namely the revelation of God in Christ. Revelation as a whole therefore does not consist of a series of singular revelatory acts, which would formally realize the same concept of revelation in each case anew, and distinguish themselves from each other only in their content¹⁶. Salvation history is not to be conceived of as a reality which has one and the same shape and structure at every point of time. Rather, its various periods and acts are processes and partial moments of one singular event which is completed only at its very end¹⁷.

With the incarnation of the *logos* this end, or rather the insuperable culmination, of the salvation-historical development has been reached. For the incarnation is the hypostatic union of man and God in Christ which can never again be undone. It is the reality of the self-revealing God Himself, and at the same time the irrevocable revelation of the general salvific will of God¹⁸.

The previous forms of salvation history are deficient compared with the fullness of this history which is Christ¹⁹. They belong to salvation history only because they are directed towards Christ. The fact that they are directed towards Christ becomes completely manifest only with His appearance. Accordingly only then does the salvation-historical quality of pre-Christian historical acts become recognizable. The self-revelation of God in Christ, however, is infallibly conscious of itself and does not need additional verification besides the statement of Christ about Himself²⁰.

In this view of salvation history, the Church – as the mystical continuation of the incarnation – becomes an “eschatological entity”²¹. This now is again Rahner's own formulation. What does he mean by this term?

Before Christ's coming, the acts of God in history could still be revoked or undone. The positive outcome – Rahner calls it an outcome “in grace” – of God's conversation with humankind was not yet finally decided. Only in Christ and the Church do God's historical acts acquire a definitive and final character as an affirmation of grace towards the world. Only Christ and the Church are *the definitive presence of God's grace in the world, the eschatological event of mercy, the end of history*²². Because pre-Christian salvation history did not yet have this eschatological character, there is a difference between Judaism and the Church concerning their recognition of God's revelation. Only the Church is infallible, the Synagogue could defect from God, it could *make the No towards God and His Christ its own official 'truth' and in doing so abolish itself as*

¹⁶ See A. Darlap, pp. 91f.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 94.

¹⁸ See ibidem, pp. 66; 102.

¹⁹ See ibidem, p. 106.

²⁰ See ibidem, p. 125.

²¹ See K. Rahner, *Über die Schriftinspiration*, Quaestiones disputatae 1, Freiburg 1958, p. 50.

²² Ibidem, p. 49.

*God's establishment for the future*²³. Only after Christ – this is: in the Church – do we see an infallible teaching office which can recognize with certainty also those historical acts of God which took place in pre-Christian times.

Obviously, such a view of the pre-Christian salvation history leads to the question of the position of the Old Testament in this approach.

2.3. The place of the OT and Israel in salvation history

The “plus” of the OT salvation history over against the pre-Biblical salvation history – as was already mentioned – rests on the conviction that God in OT times gave His explanative Word concerning this history, and in doing so He made this history recognizable as *salvation* history, thereby enabling a reflexive knowledge of it. But – as we have seen – because OT salvation history is salvation history only insofar as it is directed towards Christ, it can not be recognized as such with full certainty until the self-revelation of God in Christ actually has happened. In effect the Church becomes the entity which can properly recognize God's acts in past history.

This bears certain consequences not only for OT hermeneutics (which are to be designed strictly christologically and with an ecclesial purpose – the OT is a book of the Church), but also for the quality of the recognition of revelation and therefore of theological knowledge in OT times. An example may suffice:

When Rahner discusses the inspiration of the OT systematically, he does this in an annex to the discussion of NT inspiration, and he applies the results of the NT discussion rather directly to the OT. His systematic explanation of NT inspiration is an ecclesiocentric explanation:

... by the fact that God wills and creates the Apostolic Church ... and thereby so wills and creates her constitutive elements ... God wills and creates the Scriptures in such a way as to become through his inspiration their originator, their author. ... the inspiration of Holy Scripture is nothing else than God's founding of the Church, inasmuch as this applies to precisely that constitutive element of the Apostolic Church which is the Bible²⁴.

The explanation of the OT inspiration follows the same ecclesial lines:

... To the extent that God produces for the Church the Old Testament as the authentic crystallization of her prehistory and of her experience with God and his dealings with men in that prehistory, God inspires Scripture and makes it his own as its author ... as an element in God's formally predefining production of the Church these Scriptures are inspired²⁵.

The OT is therefore directed towards the Church also regarding its inspiration. A recognition of this inspiration in Judaism may then be seen as deficient, because before the arrival of Christ an unailing recognition of God's salvation historical acts

²³ Ibidem, p. 59; See also *ibid.*, p. 54 footnote 28.

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 58; english text from K. Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, transl. Henkey Ch.H., New York 1961, pp. 52f.

²⁵ K. Rahner, *Über die Schriftinspiration*..., pp. 61f.

was not yet possible. The proper recognition not only of NT, but also of OT inspiration and canon belongs in this salvation-historical model to the Church alone²⁶. When it comes to the recognition of God's revelation in history, the Church as an eschatological entity has an epistemological superiority over against previous periods of salvation history, also over against the OT time and its representants, the Jews.

2.4. Salvation history as a continuum

In Rahner's approach, salvation history is seen as strictly continuous, without breaks or interruptions. This continuity is first of all a result of the view of God's self-revelation as one event culminating in Christ, from which the particular phases can not be detached. If salvation history is one event which progresses dynamically towards Christ, then it seems evident that interruptions of this process are not thinkable. Otherwise the unity of God's revelation in Christ would be dissolved. Also the previous and in themselves deficient acts of salvation history would be disconnected from Christ in such a way that one might question whether their salvation-historical quality would still be recognizable.

A second reason for a strictly continuous view of salvation history can be seen in Rahner's integration of the concept of evolution with its enormous chronological extension of human history into his theology of history and his christology. For Rahner

the whole biblical time from Abraham to Christ shrinks to a short instant in the rising of the Christ event, and we have the right and the duty – as far as we are Christians – ... to view it as the final moment before the Christ event and in unity with this event²⁷.

Christologically, the whole history of creation from its beginning to the Christ event is a history of the self-transcendence of creation in cooperation with God until it reaches its culmination in Christ²⁸. Also here, because of the evolutionary character of this process, interruptions seem unexplainable.

2.5. Evaluation

Rahner has (in partial cooperation with Darlap) developed a full-blown concept of salvation history. It is based on the incarnation as a fundamental theological datum and can explain salvation history as extending over the whole of human history. His

²⁶ It may be remarked that this is for Rahner also a theological justification for including the deuterocanonical writings, which the Jews rejected, into the Christian OT canon, see *Über die Schriftinspiration...*, p. 61 footnote 33.

²⁷ K. Rahner, *Grundkurs des Glaubens...*, p. 169. See also L. Hauser, *Logik der Theologischen Erkenntnislehre: Eine formale und transzendentaltheologische Systematik in Auseinandersetzung mit Matthias Joseph Scheeben und Karl Rahner auf dem Hintergrund der mengentheoretischen Wissenschaftstheorie*, Altenberge 1996, pp. 571ff.

²⁸ See K. Rahner, *Die Christologie innerhalb einer evolutiven Weltanschauung*, in *Schriften zur Theologie*, Einsiedeln/Zürich/Köln 1964, pp.183-221; also B. Weissmahr, *Selbstüberbietung und die Evolution des Kosmos auf Christus hin*, in *Die philosophischen Quellen der Theologie Karl Rahners*, *Quaestiones disputatae* 213, Freiburg/Basel/Wien 2005, pp. 143-177.

approach is christocentric and therefore also ecclesiocentric, and it sees salvation history as a strict continuum. This strict continuity of salvation history seems to be open to criticism. Cullmann, for example, whose approach is also strictly christocentric, sees salvation history as characterized by interruptions, because God chooses only certain historical events for performing His salvific deeds and others not²⁹.

However, a more important aspect of Rahner's approach is that it ascribes the ability of complete and unfailing recognition of God's salvation-historical acts to the Church alone. Jewish theological knowledge is depreciated, which becomes especially obvious in Rahner's explanation of OT inspiration. This feature of his approach has been criticized also by various Catholic authors,³⁰ and indeed this depreciation of Judaism and its recognition of revelation seems to be highly problematic after the redefinition of the relationship of the Church to Judaism as formulated by the 2nd Vatican council. The following points which result out of the declaration on non-Christian religions *Nostra aetate* strongly question Rahner's salvation-historical considerations which result in a location of the valid recognition of revelation in the Church alone³¹:

- o The Jews are still loved by God, whose gifts and calling are not recinded, so the Jews did not cease to be the people of God.
- o The Church waits together with the Jews for the final redemption of the world, therefore the Church can no longer be seen as the sole „eschatological entity“.
- oo The remaining salvation-historical advantages of Israel according to Rom 9:4-5 (and therefore also Rom 3:2) are acknowledged. The revelation of the OT salvation history remains therefore entrusted to the Jews. This is in line with the statement of *Nostra Aetate* that the church received from the Jews the Old Testament revelation³².

In the light of these statements, the question may be asked whether Rahner's approach would not require a revision. A comparison with an opposing view may provide the appropriate stimulus.

3. Arnold A. van Ruler

Because van Ruler is scarcely known in Poland, a few biographical notes seem in order³³. Arnold A. van Ruler (1908-1970) was a Dutch reformed pastor and theologian.

²⁹ See O. Cullmann, *Heil als Geschichte: Heilsgeschichtliche Existenz im Neuen Testament*, Tübingen 1965, pp. 135ff.

³⁰ See e.g. C. Dohmen and M. Oeming *Biblischer Kanon warum und wozu? Eine Kanontheologie*, Quaestiones disputatae 137, Freiburg/Basel/Wien 1992, p. 46; P. Brandt, *Endgestalten des Kanons: Das Arrangement der Schriften Israels in der jüdischen und christlichen Bibel*, Bonner Biblische Beiträge 131, Berlin/Wien 2001, p.410; P. Grelot, *Zehn Überlegungen zur Schriftinspiration*, transl. Lubinsky A., in *Glaube im Prozess: Christsein nach dem II. Vatikanum*, Festschrift für Karl Rahner, Freiburg/Basel/Wien 1984, p. 576.

³¹ See DH 4198, and also the explanation of the declaration in F. Mußner, *Traktat über die Juden*, Munich: Kösel 1979, pp. 338ff.

³² See DH 4198: *Quare nequit Ecclesia oblivisci se per populum illum, quocum Deus ex ineffabili misericordia sua Antiquum Foedus inire dignatus est, revelationem Veteris Testamenti accepisse ...*

³³ See A. J. Janssen, *ibidem*, pp. 24ff.

After his promotion under Th. L. Haitjema in 1947 he became professor for biblical theology, Dutch church history and missiology in Utrecht, Netherlands, and in 1952 for dogmatics, ethics and history of the *Nederlands Hervormde Kerk*. Being first attracted to the theology of Karl Barth, he took an ever more critical stance towards him, especially towards the “christomonism” of Barthian theology. He was recently called *the most sparkling and original theologian in Dutch protestantism after World War II*³⁴.

Van Ruler’s approach is not a full-blown theology of history as we may find in Rahner. He does, for example, not directly address the question of a salvation history in pre-Biblical times and the possibility of salvation-historical acts in extra-biblical religions. His approach is more sketchy and has not created a theological school of its own. Some aspects of his theological thinking, however, can be seen as a challenge to the christocentric as well as ecclesiocentric view of Rahner. It is an attempt to formulate an alternative to what van Ruler sees as an improper over-emphasis on Christology in fundamental theology, an imbalance which he observes not only in Catholic theological thinking. According to van Ruler, theology should rather be construed on a trinitarian than on a purely christological basis – this means with a proper consideration of the Spirit and His distinctiveness from Christ.

In the following section, certain characteristics of van Ruler’s thinking in the area of salvation history will be outlined.

3.1. The kingdom of God as the eschatological foundation of salvation history

Also for van Ruler history is qualified by the revelatory acts and promises of God³⁵, therefore it is proper to call his approach “salvation-historical”. The margin which surrounds history is for van Ruler the kingdom of God. It is *nothing else but the penetration of God into the reality of the world and of history*³⁶. It is transcendent, because it is eschatological, and the Spirit of God comes towards us from the future, from out of the eschatological kingdom, encounters our reality and the world, and creates history. This means that no tendencies or inner qualities of the present reality lead in themselves towards the kingdom – in this respect it remains the sole work of God. The content of the kingdom is nothing else than created reality redeemed, i.e. separated from its negative elements and fulfilled in its potentiality. Salvation history is therefore the result of the penetration of God’s saving and sanctifying Spirit out

³⁴ L. J. van der Brom, A.A. van Ruler, *Theoloog van de aardse werkelijkheid*, in *Vier eeuwen theologie in Utrecht. Bijdragen tot de geschiedenis van de theologische faculteit aan de Universiteit Utrecht*, Zoetermeer 2001, p. 277; quoted in C. Legemaate, *Brandend Herfstbos in de Zon: De visie van A.A. van Ruler op het Oude Testament*, seminar paper, University of Apeldoorn 2002, p.2, Internet: <http://www.geocities.com/coenlegemaate/vanruler.doc>, (16.03.2007).

³⁵ See A. A. van Ruler, *Die christliche Kirche und das Alte Testament*, Beiträge zur evangelischen Theologie 23, Munich 1955, p. 22.

³⁶ See A. A. van Ruler, *Het koninkrijk Gods en de geschiedenis*, in *Verwachting en voltooiing: een bundel theologische opstellen en voordrachten*, Nijkerk 1978, p.35. Compare also A. J. Janssen, *Kingdom, Office and Church*, pp.47ff; and Hodnett G., A.A. van Ruler’s *Doctrine of the Messianic Intermezzo, and its Implications for Understanding the Old Testament*, Internet: http://www.althausis.net/theology/Messianic_Intermezzo/Messianic_Intermezzo.html (16.03.2007).

of the eschaton into the world, and the kingdom is the eschatological subsumation, preservation and completion of this salvation history.

For van Ruler, the revelation of the kingdom in history takes place in various forms or *gestalten*: ... in the Messiah and the Pneuma, in the gospel and the law, in the OT and the NT, in the Bible and the Church, in the sacrament and in the christianized culture³⁷. All these different appearances in salvation history have a historical and relative character, this means: they do not rise for their own sake, but they are means towards a goal. This goal of salvation history is the realization of the kingdom of God on earth. So van Ruler does not construe salvation history from its center, Christ, but from its goal – the kingdom. The incarnation is an instrument in the realization of the kingdom; van Ruler can see the appearance of Christ and His work as a “messianic intermezzo”, an emergency measure with which God has waited as long as possible³⁸.

The following lines of reflection show several applications of this theological thinking in the context of the perception of salvation history.

3.2. The place of the OT and Israel in salvation history

For van Ruler the OT has an advantage over against the NT: it is concerned with the earthly kingdom of the Messiah, with God's lordship over the world, which appears in the NT only spiritually.³⁹ God's kingdom is exemplified first in Israel, and the nations which are reached by the mission of the Church also become Israel in a pneumatic sense: they are christianized, which means their societies are penetrated by the lordship of God. Therefore the result of missions is not only the Church as *corpus Christi*, but also society as *corpus Christianum*, which corresponds to OT Israel. Exactly at this place the OT is of meaning for the Church without being interpreted christologically. A strictly christological interpretation of the OT tends to miss this important application.

For van Ruler, Christ is *not* the last goal of God's ways with Israel, as Barth once formulated⁴⁰. It is not that in choosing Israel, God is interested in sending Christ. Rather, in sending Christ God is interested in Israel. And in choosing Israel God is interested in all the peoples of the earth, and in the salvation brought by Christ God envisions all created reality as such. Having dissolved the strictly christological orientation of the OT, Israel becomes an independent entity in the realization of God's kingdom in salvation history.

3.3. The place and function of Christ in salvation history

Whereas the OT unfolds a reality which surpasses and encompasses the NT, namely the kingdom of God, in the NT we find the resolution of a decisive problem in the implementation of this kingdom: the guilt question is resolved by Christ. This consideration

³⁷ van A.A. Ruler, *Het koninkrijk Gods en de geschiedenis*, p. 35.

³⁸ See *idem*, *Die christliche Kirche und das Alte Testament*, p. 65.

³⁹ See *ibidem*, pp. 31f.

⁴⁰ See *ibidem*, p. 34.

places Christ and the totality of His work into the larger horizon of the kingdom of God. If, as already mentioned, the Old Testament's main theme is the kingdom of God on earth, then consequently Christ and the NT are seen here as appearing in a larger context, which was already unfolded by the OT. Therefore van Ruler can formulate a provoking question: *Or is there only one canon in the sense that the OT is canon and the NT is but an explanatory vocabulary, added at the end?*⁴¹

Of course, van Ruler is aware that the NT also contains an advantage over against the OT. The deed of God in Christ constitutes an unprecedented "intensifying" of God's activity in history, which leads to the resolution of the guilt problem and makes the kingdom of God finally take constant hold in this world. The salvation-historical meaning of the incarnation therefore is for van Ruler not on the same level as that of the previous acts of God in the OT history. Christ is for him not just an element in the tradition of "eternal Israel"⁴². Rather, there are a number of incongruencies compared with OT salvation history: In Christ God does not "only" encounter humans, He Himself becomes a human, thereby leading His own case towards completion. God sends His Son and in an analogous manner also the Apostles – a mission the OT does not yet know⁴³. Therefore the NT salvation history is more than just a phase in God's dealings with Israel. In Christ salvation and the kingdom are given over also to non-Jewish nations and consequently the kingdom acquires world-wide dimensions⁴⁴. However, the eschaton has not yet appeared in Christ in its full sense, for if it had, the goal of salvation history – the kingdom – would have to be present in its fully developed form, and the problems of the visible world would have to be resolved. Rather, in Christ the "midpoint of time" has come, not the end⁴⁵. In this view, the church is no „eschatological entity“ as in Rahner's sense; it is rather – together with Israel – on the way to the eschaton, to the kingdom.

The incarnation is to be understood „anselmian“⁴⁶, it is exclusively a reaction to the fall of mankind and has a purely soteriological purpose. *In Jesus Christ no supernature is added to nature, in him only – excusez du peu! – guilt is reconciled and all existence is saved in the countenance of God*⁴⁷. This strictly anselmian understanding of the incarnation dissolves any exclusive theological connection of incarnation and revelation. Here Christ can be understood as the Revealer, but He is not an immediate revelation of God⁴⁸. His revelatory activity is *mediated* – van Ruler speaks of a mediating activ

⁴¹ Ibidem, p. 88.

⁴² Van Ruler is referring here to an idea of Martin Buber, see van A. A. Ruler, *Reformatiorische opmerkingen in de ontmoeting met Rome*. Hilversum/Antwerpen 1965, p. 75.

⁴³ See idem, *Die christliche Kirche und das Alte Testament*, pp. 46f, 49.

⁴⁴ See ibidem, p. 40.

⁴⁵ See ibidem, p. 38.

⁴⁶ Van Ruler names his understanding of the incarnation „anselmiaans,“ see idem, *Reformatiorische opmerkingen*, p.76; idem, *Hoofddinien van een pneumatologie*, in *Theologisch Werk* 4, Nijkerk 1973, p. 11. He means by this an understanding along the lines of Anselm of Canterbury's „Cur Deus homo“, unfolding a purely soteriological motivation for the incarnation, a thought which is also part of the Reformed tradition.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, p. 64.

⁴⁸ See idem, *Reformatiorische opmerkingen*, p. 76.

ity of the „Word“ regarding revelation („openbaringsmiddelaarschap“)⁴⁹. The relative independence of revelation from the incarnation opens then the way for a direct, immediate revelatory activity of the Holy Spirit.

Here we see one of van Ruler's basic theological motives at work: he intends to approach every aspect of theology, and also salvation history, in a trinitarian manner, this means: with a relative independence of the Holy Spirit as the third person of the Godhead. If, however, revelation is worked through the Holy Spirit in a relative independence of the incarnation, then a revelation to Israel and a sufficient recognition of this revelation in OT times is possible without a need to anchor these processes theologically in the incarnation.

Salvation history itself – the acts of God in history and their recognition – does then not need to be interpreted in the frame of incarnation only. It does not only develop towards the God-man as its necessary goal, and it does not have to wait for the incarnation in order to finally and unfailingly establish the salvation-historical quality of its acts⁵⁰. In this approach, the proper recognition of revelation in OT times is a matter of the people of Israel, and not of the Church. This location of the responsibility for the reception of revelation in pre-Christian times does not, however, diminish the salvific meaning of Christ the God-Man. Van Ruler's concluding question in his work *Die christliche Kirche und das Alte Testament* may summarize the ecclesiological result of this salvation-historical approach:

Does everything end in the Church and does everything – not only Israel, but also history and creation, exist because of the Church? Or is rather the Church only one of many other realizations of the kingdom of God, and does her catholicity not truly consist in this, that she respects, acknowledges and loves all forms of the kingdom, e.g. also the people of Israel?⁵¹

3.4. Continuity of salvation history as the work of the Spirit

As has been indicated, salvation history is the work of God who in the Holy Spirit comes out of the eschaton and penetrates our world. Therefore the characteristics of salvation history must be understood on pneumatological rather than on christological terms. Pneumatology now displays a number of structural differences compared with christology⁵². The Holy Spirit works in humans by way of inhabitation, which needs to be distinguished from incarnation. Revelation strictly christologically understood must constitute one event in Christ which subsumes all preceding and following events. If, however, revelation is considered pneumatologically, this is not the case. There can

⁴⁹ See *idem*, *De verhouding van het kosmologische en het eschatologische element in de Christologie*, in *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 1961, reprinted in *Theologisch Werk* 1, Nijkerk 1969, p. 162.

⁵⁰ See also *idem*, *Die christliche Kirche und das Alte Testament*, p. 51 footnote 70.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 92.

⁵² See A. A. van Ruler, *Structural Differences Between the Christological and Pneumatological Perspectives*, transl. Bolt J., in *Calvinist Trinitarianism and Theocentric Politics: Essays Toward a Public Theology*, Toronto Studies in Theology 38, Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter 1989, pp. 27-46. Van Ruler lists in this essay about 11 structural differences. The explanation of the different understanding of revelation is my own inference of what van Ruler unfolds here.

then be different realizations of revelation in history, linked with another because they are the work of the one Spirit, but not so strictly that they form one single event culminating in the incarnation. Every pneumatic revelatory event can then be seen as an event in its own right. The inhabitation of the Spirit does not establish a continuity of being as the incarnation does, rather, the inhabitation is dependent on the reaction of the human, it may be reversible, particular, and historically limited. Van Ruler says about the Spirit: *He jumps – at the same time He holds us fast!*⁵³

3.5. Evaluation

Van Ruler has developed an original and challenging sketch of salvation history which emphasizes often ignored aspects. He strongly opposes any devaluation of the OT and of the people of Israel. Over against a spiritualization of faith which draws back from an active engagement in and for this world he emphasizes the earthly reality which is displayed in the OT. His approach is able to integrate a sufficient recognition of revelation in OT times in a natural way. He also draws attention to the peculiar person and work of the Holy Spirit which can not simply be absorbed into christology.

Of course, his approach has also been criticized. Some of the major criticisms shall be mentioned here:

1) There seems to be more equality between the OT and the NT than van Ruler sees. The OT may be said to hint already at the divinity of the coming Messiah (see e.g. Mal 3:1), it knows about guilt, substitution and forgiveness (see e.g. the prescriptions for offerings in Lev 1-5), and contains a missiological aspect (see e.g. Gen 12:1-3)⁵⁴. At the same time the NT knows the message of the kingdom (e.g. Mk 1:15; 1Cor 15:24-28) and is also interested in ordering life on earth (e.g. Rom 12-14; Phil 4, Col 3:18-25; James). One may ask whether a systematic idea possibly dominates exegesis and biblical theology in van Ruler's approach. We will shortly elaborate what this idea might contain.

2) The eschaton – for van Ruler identical with the kingdom and theocracy – serves as the point of departure for doing theology and as a standard for assessing the meaning of the different *gestalten* of salvation history. However, the eschaton needs to be understood as a reality after eschatological judgement. The question is therefore whether we can today know the eschatological reality of the kingdom well enough to make it the standard for theology. Our own reality and also the OT reality fall under this eschatological judgement, because they are realities in which sin has caused enmity towards God. Van Ruler seems not to give sufficient attention to this problem. Should we not rather conclude that because of the sin problem we don't know apart from Christ what redeeming existence before the countenance of God might be?⁵⁵

⁵³ Idem, *Reformatiorische opmerkingen*, p. 21.

⁵⁴ See D. L. Baker, *Two Testaments, One Bible: A Study of the Theological Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, 2nd Revised and Enlarged Edition, Leicester 1991, pp. 128ff. The remaining critical remarks of Baker seem to me not sufficiently established. When discussing the notion that Christ is an emergency measure he seems to misunderstand van Ruler's point (see Baker, *ibid.*, p. 131), maybe because he consults only van Ruler's *Die christliche Kirche und das Alte Testament*.

⁵⁵ See C. Legemaate, *Brandend Herfstbos in de Zon*, pp. 29f.

3) The status of Christ as Lord for whose glory the believer lives seems to be underemphasized. Does the Christian live in the first place in and for the earthly reality redeemed before the countenance of God, or rather in and for Christ? Calling Christ an emergency measure with which God has waited as long as possible seems not to do justice to the enormity of God's deed in Christ and to the position of Christ as Lord. Of course, it should be kept in mind that van Ruler's intention is to provoke and stimulate – his formulations are therefore not always completely balanced.

4) Christ and the Spirit may be held too strongly apart. After all, the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, and He will not speak on His own but glorify Christ and proclaim what is Christ's (John 16:13-14). If we do not keep the christological focus which the Western Church formulated in the *filioque*, we may run the danger of ascribing an independence to the Spirit which He Himself does not desire⁵⁶. Having said this, we see what an important fundamental theological issue is touched upon here: the longstanding question of the proper relationship of the Spirit to the other *hypostaseis* in the Trinity.

4. Conclusion

Time can be seen from the perspective of salvation history which is characterized by God's historical actions. We have looked at two quite opposing perspectives regarding the inner structure of salvation history. Both have their strong sides and their shortcomings, and in comparing them we touch upon fundamental theological questions.

For Rahner salvation history covers the whole of human history. It is to be understood as one revelatory event, the unfolding of God's revelation in Christ. Therefore it is a strict continuum which rises towards its culmination in Christ. In this incarnational view pre-Christian forms of salvation history are defective in themselves and can be properly recognized and interpreted only after the coming of Christ. It is especially this feature of his approach that is today disputed even in Catholic theology on the basis of the Church's redefinition of her relationship to Judaism at the 2nd Vatican Council. An important question raised by this discussion touches the theological understanding of the Church. Is the Church to be understood christologically on the basis of the incarnation, or rather pneumatologically as a result of the inhabitation of the Spirit, and what does this mean for the salvation-historical position of the Church over against other forms, or *gestalten*, of this history?

Van Ruler's view of the inner structure of salvation history is located in quite the opposite camp. Salvation history is the work of the Holy Spirit who penetrates our reality out of the eschatological kingdom. The inhabitation of the Spirit within the human person displays quite different structures than the incarnation. His activity in creating history does not form one single revelatory event which requires us to understand salvation history as a continuum. The pneumatological view of salvation history enables us to see the different *gestalten* of this history as equals. However, the position of Christ in this approach is heavily disputed. Can the coming of Christ be

⁵⁶ See C. Graafland, *De twintigste eeuw, in Geijkte woorden: Over de verhouding van Woord en Geest*, Kampen 1979, pp. 83ff.

seen only as instrumental in bringing about the kingdom? Can we understand the kingdom apart from Christ? In the end, the basic question here concerns the relationship between the Spirit and Christ. How independent can the Spirit be from Christ? Is He the Spirit of the Father, or also – and primarily – the Spirit of the Son? Considering these questions, we may hope that fruitful theological discussion is ahead.

Czas jako historia zbawienia. Podejście Karla Rahnera a Arnolda A. van Rulera

Streszczenie

Koncepcję historii zbawienia można konstruować na wiele sposobów, z użyciem wielu możliwych struktur. Karl Rahner i Arnold A. van Ruler reprezentują dwa przeciwległe bieguny tego spektrum. Koncepcja Rahnera jest ściśle chrystocentryczna, a tym samym eklezjocentryczna. Ujmuje ona historię zbawienia jako jedno ciągle, objawiające wydarzenie, którego punktem kulminacyjnym jest wcielenie. Taka perspektywa prowadzi do swego rodzaju dewaluacji przedchrześcijańskich *historiozbawczych* ujawnień, jak np. judaizm ST. Van Ruler kształtuje swoje podejście poczynając od eschatologicznego królestwa, z którego Duch generuje historię. Każde ujawnienie w historii zbawienia konstytuuje objawienie samo w sobie, a wszystkie, włączając w to Chrystusa i Kościół, są drogami do celu, eschatologicznego królestwa; Chrystus będąc decydującym krokiem do tego celu. Ten model nie koniecznie opiera się na ciągłości, nie dewaluje również a priori przed-chrześcijańskich aspektów historii zbawienia. Można jednak zadać pytanie, czy pozycja Chrystusa w odniesieniu w kontekście zbawczym jest tutaj należycie ujęta. Ostatecznie, różnica między przedstawionymi koncepcjami odnosi się do starego pytania o relację Chrystusa i Ducha w obrębie Trójcy.