Deconstruction and biblical texts: Introduction and critique

J.H. Hunter

ABSTRACT
Starting with the main premises of post-structuralism, this paper explains some of the focuses of the deconstructionist activity in literature. It aims at describing and criticising, but also at finding the relevancy of deconstruction for biblical interpretation. The paper suggests that deconstruction should be taken seriously within theological circles, but that it should uphold its claim to be realistic, also in the field of practical interpretation.

INTRODUCTION
The point of departure from which to describe deconstruction is post-structuralism. The latter came as a reaction against the search for objective meaning in structuralism in terms of a metalanguage, which, in its turn, consists of a structured set of relationships which possesses all meaning in languages. It is the task of the structural analyst to uncover meaning by studying the relationships in a text which are always the adumbration of the metalanguage. But, as much as it is a reaction, post-structuralism is also the opposite of the structuralist position: "The word post-structuralism itself shifts the emphasis from any single meaning or theory towards an unbound movement through time and space, suggesting that there will never be, and can never be, any theory of post-structuralism" (Young 1981:6; cf. Jefferson 1982:104).

1 THE POST-STRUCTURALIST POSITION
Post-structuralism shares with structuralism the notion that meaning can only be found in differences (cf. Jefferson 1982:104). The problem with structuralism is that it advanced from this notion the idea of a stable science which is exactly what is not possible (cf. Ray 1984:141). From "meaning in differences" it should rather be deduced that language is not stable - at least much less than what
is considered to be the case as far as structuralism is concerned (cf. Eagleton 1983:129).

Post-structuralism calls criticism back to thinking, reflecting on that for which interpretive methods are created, namely criticism. In doing so, post-structuralism constantly reflects upon itself and its presuppositions, thus avoiding becoming another fixed, completed method serving to study any text according to the principles of the method. Post-structuralism does not superimpose a pre-established theoretical model on every text, irrespective of the text in question. Rather, every text is seen as unique and therefore different, and is treated in its difference from other texts. For this reason post-structuralism is against a set definition of itself: It guards against becoming another theoretical model on metalevel imposing itself upon texts and becoming prescriptive as a model of interpretation for all texts (cf. Young 1981:7). Every text is rather interpreted according to its own principles and not according to a theoretical model from outside the text. Thus, the reader becomes not an imposer of a model to extract implanted meanings (from the viewpoint of a set of relationships on the metalevel), but he becomes an active participant in the text, performing active meaning finding, instead of consuming given meanings from established relationships (cf. Young 1981:8; Belsey 1980:104).

2 DECONSTRUCTION

2.0 The author Jacques Derrida is "often associated most closely with post-structuralism, precisely because it is he who has most carefully investigated and exposed the contradictions and paradoxes upon which structuralism is formed" (Young 1981:15). Derrida made his breakthrough in the English-speaking world in 1967, achieving international acclaim (cf. Lentricchia 1983:60) for his rigorous criticism against Western metaphysical thought on which structuralism was also built. His application of post-structuralist principles to language and criticism is called "deconstruction".

2.1 On the relationship between speech and writing
Derrida criticises Western metaphysics for the fact that it assigns to philosophical truths an absoluteness outside and in opposition to that which can be found in the language of literature. These truths
are absolute and have such status until the obscuring and dissimulating effects of literature disrupt them (cf. Norris 1983:3). With his deconstructive rigour Derrida questions the roots of metaphysical and self-supportive concepts or "transcendental signifiers" outside and above language (cf. Norris 1983:6; Schneidau 1982:13). This privileging of philosophical truths or thought leads to a subjugation of language to thought, rhetoric to logic (cf. Norris 1983:17). Western metaphysics is challenged for its preference of speech, the *logos* or original utterance, over literature.

Meaning is always the meaning of the presence of someone who speaks. This conception is grounded on the fact that being (of a text) is the same as the presence of an author; being is presence. This "presence" cannot be true of writing in the same way as the statement "I am dead" cannot denote presence. The "true act" of language is to signify without the presence of the author or in spite of the lack of an object, and by still keeping true to the rules and logic of language, such as the example "the circle is square" (cf. Derrida 1972:156; Schneidau 1982:11). The subjugated role of literature or writing to speech Derrida calls "phonocentrism" which is only another effect of the meta-orientated thought system of Western metaphysics which he calls "logocentrism" (cf. Derrida 1978:279ff.; Jefferson 1982:105; Riddel 1979:233ff.; Eagleton 1983:131), whereby he means the focusing on the word, on speech in the Western thought system, where philosophical thinking and speech are seen as the true means of communication. Putting speech into writing, is to take away its immediacy or presence, and to exchange this presence for "represence", because writing only represents what is present in speech, and can never be speech itself. Writing becomes only the shadow of speech and does not have an own right of existence, apart from speech. For its existence, it is always thought of as being connected, in a subjugated way, to speech. In this critique of Western metaphysics as "the metaphysics of presence" Derrida shares his views with Heidegger who called Western thought "onto-theological" (cf. Riddel 1979:233ff.; Garver 1977:668). Rousseau's writings are especially criticised as an example of such Western thought (cf. Derrida 1976:27ff.; De Man 1983:114; Garver 1977:669). Derrida quotes Rousseau as follows: "Writing is nothing but the representation of speech; it is bizarre that one gives more care to the determining of the image than to the object" (1976:27).
2.2 On structuralism

In his critique of structuralism, Derrida starts with De Saussure himself. In *Of grammatology* (1976) he uses De Saussure's own notion of difference to criticise his theory of signs. De Saussure remained within the Western tradition of metaphysical thought with his distinction of *langue* and *parole*, thereby privileging speech over writing, presence over distance (cf. Norris 1982:24ff.). Signs for De Saussure are only signifiers, or, in other words, meaningless labels that refer to ideas which hold meaning - the actual suppliers of meaning outside language. Furthermore, the sign can only be assigned this meaning, which in any case lies outside itself, in a structure or set of relationships and cannot possess meaning on its own apart from these relationships. The sign receives meaning in its relationships to other signs. Meaning is only established by assessing the differences in which a sign appears; and whenever a sign is allocated a certain meaning, it also plays a role in establishing the meaning of another sign - therefore, because of its difference from another sign. This process is never-ending. Signs receive meaning in a constant play of differences (cf. Crossan 1982:36ff.).

2.3 On differance

This very notion of meaning in differences is taken up by Derrida to create his own conception of *différance*. *Différance* is a word created by Derrida because of its non-existence in speech. It is a non-signifying sign or an ambiguous sign and is as such undecidable (cf. Riddel 1979:246). Writing displays the ever-undecidability of a sign because it is used in its difference from other signs. Meaning is never possessed by a sign, but the sign gets its meaning from other signs. Meaning is thus always deferred (arrived at by assessing other signs), instead of being part of the sign itself. *Différance* is used because it always defers the presence of the signified (the actual idea with meaning which does not exist in writing according to Western metaphysics), but it is also used to show that signs can never be that for which they are the signifiers: they are indeed only signs (cf. in this regard e.g. Derrida 1973:129ff.; Derrida 1982:3ff.; Blank 1985:10; Jefferson 1982:105). With the use of *différance* Derrida illustrates that language is not to be regarded as subservient to ideas or referents.
outside itself, thus becoming only a conveyor of something (an idea, concept or even content) outside itself, a mere "medium", "form" or "vehicle". Language does not belong to a secondary category as opposed to the privileged category of ideas or content, but should be regarded as self-sufficient and autonomous.

Derrida's critique against Western metaphysical thought is therefore aimed at the very basics of thinking. The Western metaphysical system of thought is built on a false assessment of language as a mere signifier, thus preventing language to develop independently and preventing the interpretation of language to develop into an independent endeavour apart from the system of ideas which is supposed to support its existence. Deconstruction mainly aims at being a critical position (Donoghue 1980:37). It urges a rethinking of the assumptions that governed interpretation in the past: Firstly, the fact that, whenever a poem is read, it is thought of as listening to a voice, not necessarily that of the poet. Secondly, the illusion that the poet's sense of the poem is understood when trying to understand the poem, and finally, a poem is read to experience something, to enrich experience, knowledge, outlook. The assumptions basic to the interpretation of writing in the past, could be called "an orthodoxy of understanding" (cf. Donoghue 1980:37).

Instead of affirming our orthodox conceptions of language, like structuralism, deconstruction challenges these presuppositional conceptions of the way in which language works. Instead of confirming the logical part, the structure and relational basis in the establishing of meaning, deconstruction shows the "abnormalities" in the functioning of language. As Bloom (1979:1) says: "I will try to show that the lustres of poetic meaning come rather from the breaking apart of form, from the shattering of a visionary gleam". Deconstruction demands a radical rethinking of the terms in which we formulate the world (Donoghue 1980:37).

3 DECONSTRUCTION AS LITERARY CRITICAL PRACTICE

3.0 On complicating the finding of meaning
In its critical practice, deconstruction has as object to examine in the text its process of production. This does not mean, however, that it focuses on the intention of the author, but rather it investigates the arrangement of materials in the work (Belsey 1980:104).
The text is seen as composed of contradictions which have to be uncovered (cf. Culler 1983:213; Johnson 1980:5). The contradictions are akin to language which, in writing, is always open to a plurality of meanings. By uncovering these contradictions and pluralities of meaning, the text becomes an open affair regarding its meaning. Whenever the text is re-read, new meanings are uncovered. The establishment of meaning in the text thus becomes a complex matter, rather than the simplifying logic of structuralism. "A deconstructive reading tries to bring out the logic of the text's language as opposed its author's claims. It will tease out the text's implied presuppositions and point out the (inevitable) contradictions in them" (Jefferson 1982:110; cf. Ray 1984:141).

Language is not seen as a stable scientific object which can be studied by applying a logically premeditated method, but rather language and literature are seen as unstable (Jefferson 1982:110; Eagleton 1983:129). "Language displays a surplus over exact meaning and is always threatening to outrun and escape the sense which tries to contain it" (Eagleton 1983:134). Eagleton goes so far as to suggest: "Literature is the ruin of all reference, the cemetery of communication" (1983:146).

As a critical position, then, deconstruction calls the interpretational business back to the roots of language and signification of language. Language "acts" differently whenever it is re-read because it is made up out of differences. Difference is the only language language knows. Interpretation cannot act as though it should be the stabiliser, bringing logic and scientific preciseness to language and the finding of meaning. "The scandal of deconstruction, simply put, is its habit of uncovering a disjunct relationship between logic and language, the order of concepts and the order of signification" (Norris 1983:7). Deconstruction complexifies rather than simplifies. In this "complicating" of the text deconstruction often concentrates on marginal elements and issues, thereby trying to resist the generally accepted readings and those issues thought to be central in the text by other readings. By concentrating on these elements, deconstruction is verifying the validity of previous readings and what they thought to be central in the text (Culler 1983:215). But not only does it focus on marginalities, but also on the themes of texts - their contents - or what is thought to be the contents of texts. These themes are studied to see whether they do not obscure the finding of meaning.
once they are identified (cf. Culler 1983:206ff.). In addition, deconstruction concentrates on structures which resist the "normal" and unifying narrative or poetical scheme of the text. Those that are not complying with the thought-to-be usual in the text (cf. Culler 1983:251).

3.1 On context
In conjunction to the above, the matter of context should be considered. Context is seen by the structuralist as the stabilising factor in language. Context is a constraint on the plurality of meanings of words. But, how stable is context? Are the conditions of context absolutely determinable? Can the concept of context be defined in exact, rigorous, scientific terms (cf. Derrida 1977:174)? In the case of a text, context involves "a certain 'present' of the inscription, the presence of the writer to what he has written, the entire environment and the horizon of his experience, and above all the intention, the wanting-to-say-what-he-means, which animates his inscription at the moment" (Derrida 1977:182). "As far as the internal semiotic context is concerned, the force of the rupture is no less important: by virtue of its essential iterability, a written syntagma can always be detached from the chain in which it is inserted or given without causing it to lose all possibility of functioning, if not all possibility of communicating, precisely. One can perhaps come to recognise other possibilities in it by inscribing it or grafting it onto other chains. No context can entirely enclose it" (Derrida 1977:182).

3.2 On intertextuality
3.2.0 Derrida's own strategy in deconstruction is to approach one text through another, whether the second text is a reading of the first or not. This indirection or detour in the reading of texts is consistent with the nature of all textuality, that is, a text is never self-sufficient or self-present. It is never in itself a totisation of meaning (cf. Riddel 1979:239).

This statement on meaning does not mean that there are no individuality in texts. To the contrary Bloom (1979:9) says, "No strong poem merely alludes to another, and what look like overt allusions and even echoes in strong poems are disguises for darker relationships." But texts do not enclose all the possibilities, even of their own meanings, only in themselves. "One text reads another.
Each text is a machine with multiple reading heads for other texts" (Derrida 1979:107). Derrida continues and says that there are no border lines in texts. A text is never about "what happened". It never stops at "what happened". It never starts there either. This notion of intertextuality fits very well into the Derridean concept of texts: "There is nothing outside the text. There is no outside the text: If language is not governed by something outside, nor are individual texts" (Jefferson 1982:107; cf. Blank 1985:10). Texts are thus at the same time autonomous, because of their textuality, and also dependent on other texts, because of intertextuality. This does not pose a contradiction in the deconstructive conception of texts. In fact, for Derrida all "experience" is interpretation, which is also text, and even we ourselves are "texts" in a sense (Schneidau 1982:15; cf. e.g. how Derrida speaks about "text" in 1973:34).

3.2.1 Intertextuality and repetition
Reading texts through other texts, poses the question of sameness in texts. Can a text be seen as the repetition of another? Is any text ever the same as another? Does sameness necessarily mean repetition, given the undefinability of signs and of context? De Man (1983:108) says the following, "Repetition is a temporal process that assumes difference as well as resemblance." "Texts cannot repeat one another exactly, precisely because they are caught up in the process of temporality which is creative even in repetition. In the same way, and because they are texts, interpretations can never "say the same". Interpretation could be called the description of understanding, but "narration" would be better, because of the fact that description is often understood as "saying the same" (cf. De Man 1983:108). De Man (1983:109) goes so far as to say that "the critic, when reading a work, says not only what the work does not say, but he even says what he himself does not mean to say". This, of course, does not mean that the critic leaves the text "untouched". The text is always in discussion with its criticism inasmuch as the reverse of this statement is true.

3.3 On Itself
For this very reason deconstruction does not want to impose itself on the text or pretend that it is a scientific model and the final word about criticism. "The language of criticism is subject to exactly the same limitations and blind alleys as the language of the
work it reads" (Hillis Miller 1979:230). Criticism should never be satisfied with its own method and never use the term "scientific" to finalise thinking about method. The critique of criticism is as important as the criticism of texts.

Deconstruction, then, to conclude this descriptive part, may have some misleading overtones. It may suggest a nihilism towards language and therefore towards texts. It may suggest fragmentation and demolishing, but this is not the aim of deconstruction (cf. Gashé 1979:180).

Deconstruction aims at constructing meaning, but doing so by exploring all the possibilities - even the now unaccepted possibility of etymology - without accepting the old orthodox thinking of texts per se, and by accepting its own finiteness without fleeing into the ivory towers of established methodology and logic. Deconstruction urges thinking and rethinking to the point of being a "style of accusation" (Donoghue 1980:37). "Derrida obviously is not saying that any statement is as correct as any other, or that meaning is purely arbitrary. He is simply trying to call our attention to the immense problems involved in concepts we take for granted, and to show that there is a metaphysical momentum behind these notions that makes them seem natural to us and prevents us from thinking critically about them until we are shaken by startling new propositions" (Schneidau 1982:21).

4 CRITIQUE
Criticism of deconstruction is of course difficult, as is the case with any methodological activity acknowledging its temporality and inviting such criticism and in fact turns criticism on itself as well (cf. Leavey 1982:44). Donoghue (1980:41) is quite expressly dissatisfied with the method. "Deconstruction bears approximately the relation to reading that Robbe-Grillet's theory bears to the writing and reading of fiction: it is cogent enough to induce an occasionally felt scruple, but not a determination to change one's ways". He accuses deconstruction of being an arrogant cell which only appeals to the graduated clerisy feeling themselves superior to "common readers" (1980:41). Unfortunately he is not very specific in his criticism, which is always the downfall of critique.
4.0 The problem of communication
The first point of criticism against deconstruction is a practical matter: communication. However much texts are deconstructed, they still communicate. True enough, Derrida also asks whether "communication communicates a determinate context, an identifiable meaning, or a descriptive value" (Derrida 1979:172f.). However, although communication could be deconstructed, it still "communicates" and we still understand something, somehow, of meaning from a text. If the notion of paradoxes or contradictions in a text must be accepted, why do we still understand meaning from a text? Some texts are even more easily understood than others. Is it not because, although their meanings are found in differences, these differences are understood well enough to be readable? Is differential meaning and contradictory finding of meaning in independent writings (Derrida's literature) sufficient proof for uncommunicability?

Derrida offers the solution of universal textuality, but the question is whether this universality is real or just a proposition on the metalevel trying to establish proof for his notion of universal textuality before defining all writing as literature. Is Derrida not establishing his own metalanguage to label non-texts as texts? The suggestion here is that it is not realistic and therefore true to Derrida's own philosophy of realism to make everything and everyone texts rather than recognising that there are factors beyond textuality which also play a part in the determining of meaning and the uncommunicability of texts. In this respect deconstruction is even more subject to the criticism raised against structuralism inasmuch as it tries even more to stay within the borders of the text (after establishing everything as text) as the interpretive context.

4.1 The distinction between speech and writing
It is an open question whether Derrida's fear of language as the "underdog" does not introduce a false distinction. Can speech and written language be separated in the way Derrida proposes and are his own thoughts not expressed in writing? Is there ever writing without thinking or denotation other than that thought of? If communication is possible there must be meaning and if meaning is understood, there must be denotation, albeit in differences. Even the differences are understood in positive terms. One can
then speak of positive difference and go even further to speak of a Hegelian synthesis! Derrida's criticism of structuralism and in fact of the whole of Western metaphysics is probably based on a false distinction. Or should one perhaps propose speech, writing and language as separate entities, accepting the latter as a bridging term? Can writing preserve itself and serve itself and in the final instance even propel itself? If so, writing can be treated totally independent from speech.

4.2 The Western metaphysical tradition
A third point of criticism concerns Derrida's critique of the Western metaphysical tradition. The writers of texts produced their texts in the same tradition as the one against which Derrida directs his critique. If in the production of texts writers consciously used structure or consciously ignored structure but still contemplated structure in this production, then this notion is not to be ignored in the interpretation process. If poets used the typical elements of the poetical tradition built on the assumptions of a Western metaphysical tradition, these traditions cannot be ignored or deconstructed to understand the text better. The tradition should rather be analysed for this purpose. If it is deconstructed, is this not imposing a different way of interpretation on texts created in the way of thinking of the Western metaphysical tradition? Are texts and criticism not controlled by the same tradition?

4.3 The finding of meaning
Criticism can also be raised against deconstruction's refusal of finding meaning. In spite of the assurance that the aim of deconstruction is not destruction, it tends to exclude judgment upon (a) meaning. In the interpretational business the finding of meaning is the goal of that business, however much this can be shown to be within a Western metaphysical tradition. However much deconstruction can help in being critical about meanings which are found in the text, a critical position is not the final word about the establishment of meaning in interpretation. If deconstruction is afraid of meaning, it is not worth much in the interpretational business other than being a critical position and a hypocritical style of accusation, as Donoghue (1980:37) points out.
5 POSITIVE ASPECTS

5.0 Definition of literature
On the positive side, it is of the utmost importance that the deconstructionists reflect on the question of literature. Although they have various definitions of literature, these urge the contemplation of the definition and function of literature. Derrida calls all writing literature and criticises De Man who sees literature as filling the gap between the signifier and the signified.

Literature can be defined as creative writing. Of course, once one has agreed that every text is unique, one also has to acknowledge that all writing is creative. This in the end leaves Derrida's definition as an all-encompassing definition in the briefest of terms: Literature is writing. Then only the demarcation of literature poses a problem. The question is whether text and writing are the same or at the least equivalent. Definitely not from Derrida's point of view. If everything is text, then not every text can be writing. Because of the problems posed by the definition mentioned above, the suggestion is then made here that literature should be taken as written text. Then the problem of figures is still left undiscussed. Suffice it to say that these must be incorporated in a literary context, which can be qualified according to the definition of literature accepted here. They then qualify as literature.

5.1 The search for meaning
Furthermore, in spite of what has been said about the denotation and communicability of texts, Biblical studies is itself built on a certain "discomfort" with denotation (cf. Schneidau 1982:22-24). The fact that meaning is not deduced from the text and then left to be a timeless proposition is evidence enough that denotation is not a simple deduction of meaning which can be established. It is still looking for meaning in spite of a great number of efforts made on every single verse of the Bible. Deconstruction as a serious approach from a different angle can only contribute to the finding of meaning in Biblical texts. Every interpretation, whether contributing to confusion or clarification of the text, helps in reaching more clarity, however contradictory this may sound.
5.2 Meaning and textuality

Biblical scholars have to take seriously the fact that their interpretation of the text does not start with something before the text (Holy Spirit, God, Moses, prophets, evangelists, etc.), but with a text in which the characters are part of textuality. The textual performance of the Bible (the way in which the text urges its interpretation) has been seen as dependent on the reality of its writers and in the final instance, the reality of its writer who not only wrote the text but protected the interpretations thereof. Deconstruction urges the serious approach to the text itself and its characters who are all part of textuality and not realities outside the text. Meaning is thus not conveyed through the text from outside the text, but has to be discovered by considering their "performance" in textuality.

5.3 Biblical studies and intertextuality

Perhaps the most important contribution of deconstruction to Biblical interpretation is the notion of intertextuality. Texts in the Bible are constantly re-written and re-used in new contexts, so much so that it is not always possible to distinguish the original text from these. Rather than, for instance, the form-critical solution of trying to establish fixed forms and then interpret these always in the same way irrespective of their context, deconstruction urges the originality of re-writing. Re-reading and re-writing also means "re-texting". A new text is created whenever another text is re-written and should be interpreted in its originality. The interpretational process even plays a part in repetition. Whenever this process comes into play, originality and individuality appears in texts. In Biblical texts the examples of re-writing and therefore re-texting are numerous. These texts, however much they are re-written, should be treated in their originality.

6 CONCLUSION

Deconstruction did not have the last word about interpretation. In fact, it does not claim to be the last in the endless row of interpretational activities in the field of literary criticism. In a way, it even contributes to the confusion. But its contribution lies in the fact that it urges the rethinking of the roots of interpretation. More than that: It takes interpretation back past its roots to its object: writing.
Not only should Biblical scholars build on the tradition of interpretation of the past by criticizing and extending this tradition, but they have to go back behind the tradition and, in fact, contemplate anew their text, the Bible. This probably means a rethinking and, if necessary, a re-defining of some of the most basic questions in the field of Biblical studies, like canonicity, authority of the text, inspiration, textual development and textual context, to only name a few.

* This essay is based on research for a D.Lit.-thesis, completed as part of my doctoral program at the University of Stellenbosch. Financial assistance from the University of Stellenbosch and the Human Sciences Research Council is acknowledged.

WORKS CONSULTED


Dr. J.H. Hunter, Department of Biblical Studies, University of Namibia, P/Bag 13301, Windhoek, Namibia.