New Testament scholarship in South Africa

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ABSTRACT
This article discusses the need to investigate the social world of the reader in the interpretation of Biblical texts in the light of a recent publication on New Testament studies.

Literary analyses in New Testament scholarship are no longer the curiosity they were a decade ago when the Scandinavian works of Olsson (1974) and Hartman (1979) and the now widely read work of Petersen (1978) represented a small island in the ocean of New Testament studies. This first phase of literary scholarship coincided with a comparable movement, namely structuralism. Both these movements represented a close reading of the text by focusing on the form of the text. But today structuralism is not nearly as influential as literary criticism, even though there are some vociferous scholars working in this field. Examples of recent publications in this field are the works of Patte (1987) and Greenwood (1985). Perhaps the most obvious reason for the limited influence of structuralism is the inherent limitation of this approach: while literary criticism complements historical criticism, structuralism is by nature ahistorical and as such represents a break with traditional scholarship.

The extent to which literary criticism is considered to be in line with traditional scholarship becomes clear when one considers the revised works in the Proclamation series (cf e g Achtemeier 1986) and Kingsbury (1986). The works of American scholars like Gundry (1982), Tannehill (1987) and Culpepper (1983) are other well known examples of how the literary approach has been appropriated. That this appropriation is not accidental, is illustrated by the following quote of Achtemeier (1986:41):

Another reason for investigating the Gospels as literature is provided by the logical outcome of the kinds of methods that have been used on the Gospels during the past decades.

In the case of someone like Luke T Johnson, who has written a popular introduction to the New Testament, the tables are turned to such an extent that his chapter on Mark only consists of a literary analysis. A comparison with the traditional introductions (Kümmel etc) indicates to what extent the usual introductory questions have been abandoned in favour of literary work. He writes (1986: 148):

Two main preoccupations characterize the study of Mark's Gospel today. The first takes seriously Mark's ability to reveal something of the historical clues for the deciphering of history.... The second preoccupation has been generated by the allusive character of Mark's narrative.... Mark is therefore
the subject of purely literary studies, often carried out in conscious dialogue
with contemporary models of literary criticism.

The first preoccupation is clearly not the one Johnson favours. In fact, he
seriously doubts whether one can know much about the historical situation
of this gospel. Compare his remarks on 148-149:

*We do not know who Mark really was or where he wrote. We do not know
Mark's readers, although they were certainly already Christian and obviously
read Greek.... We can no longer reconstruct Mark's motivation for his writing
or even determine when he did it. The absence of anachronism in his de-
scription of the temple's end... suggests a time before the end of the Roman
War...; how long before, and whether connected to those hard
circumstances, we do not know.*

This change is almost miraculous in the light of the extensive historical work
done not so long ago (e.g. by Weeden with his detailed reconstruction of the
groups behind the Gospel of Mark). These remarks illustrate how literary
criticism has in some instances become even more fashionable than tradi-
tional Biblical scholarship!

South African New Testament scholarship has always been strong on lite-
rary criticism. This is aptly proven by a recent publication on South African
New Testament scholarship which appeared in 1986 with the publishers E J
Brill in Leiden under the title: *A South African perspective on the New Tes-
tament. Essays by South African New Testament scholars presented to Bruce
Manning Metzger during his visit to South Africa in 1985.* It was edited by
Patrick J Hartin and J H Petzer. It contains two introductory articles on
methodology (by H J B Combrink and J H Petzer) with ten articles on the
Gospels and eight on the letters (sic). The articles vary from a lengthy
discussion on plot as mediated through point of view (by A G van Aarde) and
P J Maartens' technical *The Son of Man as compound metaphor in Mark 14:
62* to the short, lucid and tantalizing article by J N Suggit on the perils of
Bible translation: an examination of the Latin versions of the words of insti-
tution of the eucharist, which ends with the question: "Was the lack of a
present participle passive in Latin a contributory factor to the Reformation?"

This publication is certainly not a definitive work on literary studies of the
New Testament. It encompasses many divergent approaches to literary analy-
ses - varying from strict narratological readings to very general text immanent
analyses and finally to rhetorical readings in the technical sense of the word.
It is a collection of essays from scholars who share not only the same geogra-
phical area, but also a general common interest in their interpretative work,
namely that of a close reading (in a literary sense) of the New Testament.

I would like to draw attention to a wider framework within which this
publication could be discussed. The literary interest reflected in this
publication and in New Testament scholarship in general did not really de-
velop unexpectedly. Significant new trends in other textual disciplines have
prefigured and determined what has happened in New Testament scholarship
(and for that matter reflect the growing interdisciplinary nature of the discipline). This is also true of subsequent developments in literary approaches to the New Testament. There were, for example, some important New Testament publications which indicated that one should move beyond determining the so-called internal structure of the text and pay attention to the way texts functioned in the social sense of the word. One such publication was the highly technical but cogent work of David Hellholm (1980). Hellholm decisively influenced several scholars to focus attention in a more comprehensive manner on such seminal aspects of a text as the social function thereof. His model (that of Gülich and Raible) was far advanced beyond that of the New Critic one and as such it represented an important new step forward in the textual approach to New Testament documents.

These later developments are important in the light of recent critiques on literary analyses of the New Testament. They are also important because they address a fundamental problem in the South African publication. Stephen Moore, in some important articles (e.g. 1987) indicates clearly how literary readings like those of Petersen and Culpepper assume a New Critic model, which is very dated and has been superseded (in literary circles) by other models for quite some time. He indicates that these developments had not influenced literary approaches to the Bible. Moore delineates some new avenues that need to be explored in order to continue the fruitful interaction between New Testament studies and literary scholarship.

Moore's comments are directly applicable to much of the work in the Metzger Festschrift. To name but one or two examples: there is little discussion of the social function (so important in literary scholarship in the post-New Critic era) of Biblical texts, although it may influence modern readings of Biblical texts in quite a decisive manner. At the same time I find it disconcerting to note how little discussion there is of historical material from Biblical times. I do not only refer to general background material that is necessary to interpret Biblical texts, but also to literary material and conventions from Biblical times. Surely if one wishes to read a text narratologically, one needs to be informed about narratological techniques and devices of Biblical times in order to avoid anachronistic work.

But the Metzger Festschrift displays, as a South African publication, another remarkable feature, namely its lack of references to matters African or South African. In a recent publication on political readings of the Bible, Bauckham (1989:14) discusses the hermeneutical issues involved in the political interpretation of the Bible. He points out that there are constantly changing historical, cultural, liturgical and theological contexts in which the Bible must be understood and within which it functions. He writes (1989:14):

*Its (a biblical text) meaning for us depends, then, on its original context (so far as we may be aware of it), on its wider literary contexts in the canon (so far as we take these into account), on traditional contexts (such as its interpretation in a particular theological tradition or its traditional place in a*
liturgy) which may influence our understanding of it, and on the contemporary context within which we read it. What this contemporary context amounts to depends, of course, on the interpreter's particular relationships to the world in which he lives.

Now while it is true that for Bauckham the original context of the text retains a determinative role in the text's meaning, he adds that those who limit their investigation of the Bible to what it meant to the first readers, should be reminded of the way "in which all great literature constantly transcends its original context and achieves fresh relevance to new situations" (1989:15).

I would like to draw attention to this role of the contemporary context in our reading of the Bible and its far-reaching implications for the function of New Testament studies. When one considers the collection of essays contributed by various South African New Testament scholars to the Metzger Festschrift, it indicates how South African scholarship operates in what we might for the moment call a social vacuum. We live in a country where poverty has for some years now been the focus of popular and scientific research. The second Carnegie report is a good example, not only of the socio-political crisis in this country, but also of research on this issue. How does it happen that New Testament scholarship in this publication reflects nothing of this and other pressing socio-political and ethical matters? One need not be a fundamentalist to ask what Biblical perspectives are relevant to these issues. The recent publication of Bauckham, who refers to the analogical or model character of asking the Bible questions about modern issues, contains some very sensitive and responsible insights into the relevance of the Bible today and is an excellent example of how Biblical scholarship can indeed address the issues of our time and have a contextual nature.

To my mind, the lack of discussion of these issues in this Festschrift is in itself an indication of a specific context and is the result of the particular social position of its contributors. An awareness of the role of the modern reader in the process of understanding the Bible, will illustrate the socio-political implications of the Metzger Festschrift. Let me expand on the above quoted remark of Bauckham: The relationship of the New Testament scholar to contemporary society does not only ultimately influence one's scientific pronouncements on a text. This relationship already determines in a decisive way the very questions one asks the text. My contention is that this is the only way one can explain the very particular (and peculiar) "South African perspective" of New Testament scholarship offered to us in this publication. The selection of contributors, the nature of the topics and the contents of this book reflect the privileged context in which it originated and indicates to what extent scholarship can be incarcerated in an ivory tower. Positions of power, as we have learnt from Foucault, explain why scholars allow themselves the luxury of asking certain questions or escape the responsibility of facing the issues. I believe that this is not only true of local New Testament scholarship, but that it is often valid of much of the work done internationally.
on our field of research. It is for this reason that I find the idealistic nature of New Testament scholarship so problematic. I would like to continue this argument with the thesis that an awareness (and consequently an explicitising) of the determinative role of our society in our interpretative task, will incisively change our theological enterprise.

In saying this, it does not imply that one must always exclusively ask socially relevant questions to the text. Literary investigations are important (as means to an end!), but if the scientific enterprise and "a South African perspective" consists of such questions and writings only, and that in a country and in a time such as ours, it becomes another matter.

In order to become more sensitive to the way we, as readers of the text, are determined by our modern contexts in understanding and questioning Biblical texts, we need to develop a responsible method of analysing our relationship as readers to our world. We often ask whether and how the text directs the construction of meaning. We have also investigated the world behind the text. But more attention is needed for a theoretically founded analysis of who the meaning-constructing reader is within his or her world and how it influences his or her understanding of and questions to the text. This implies a very specific social analysis of particular readers and would inevitably focus the attention on socio-political matters.

Sociological exegesis has made us sensitive to the important role of societal structures in the formation of Biblical texts. But we should focus more on the fundamental influence of society on the reader who interprets Biblical texts. Of course this is no easy task. It does imply to some extent a fundamental rethinking of theology. Here context in many ways is not the hidden assumption, but becomes the conscious point of departure in theology.

We are not only moving from the text, but we are also moving to it. We in this country are Africans when we interpret the text. An awareness of this will explain our questions to and understanding of the text - and will finally also determine the way we theologise. This way of doing theology is in line with postmodern thinking, in the sense that we focus on the particularity of the text, but especially on the particularity of the reading and reader of the text (which makes it so difficult an enterprise).

Once we are aware of the fundamental role of the reader's social position in his or her interpretation of the text, we can not escape the pressing issues in our societies. We then realise that our so-called "objective theoretical" work reflect socio-political choices and positions. In the light of the thrust of the Christian Gospel we need then to ask ourselves how moral our theologizing is, especially in a context of deep and serious conflict and injustice.

WORKS CONSULTED
Bauckham, R 1989. The Bible in politics. How to read the Bible politically. London: SPCK.


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