THE ETHICS OF NEW TESTAMENT INTERPRETATION

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ABSTRACT
This study is an attempt to develop and illustrate the concept of an ethos of responsible interpretation within the broader context of an ‘ethics of historical reading’ and an ‘ethics of public accountability’ in New Testament scholarship. It is argued that an ethos of responsible interpretation of the New Testament ‘compels’ the interpreter to take reading seriously. This implies that the implications of the linguisticity, literariness and rhetoricity of the text, as well as the social phenomena of the world created by the text, ‘must’ be honoured and studied with all possible methodological sophistication and rigour. Such a study has to precede any inferences about the possible relation between the literature of the New Testament and text-extrinsic matters such as God, society, history or the self.

1 INTRODUCTION
It is important to distinguish between the ethics of interpretation and ethical themes in literature, or what Miller (1989:90) calls ‘thematic ethical meaning’.

For example: the exhortations ‘everyone should submit to the governing authorities’ (πᾶσα ψυχὴ ἐξουσίας ὑπερεχύσας ὑποτασσέσθαι, Romans 13:1) and ‘pay your taxes’ (φόρους τελείτε, Romans 13:6) are examples of ethical themes in the New Testament. This theme could be formulated as: How must a person behave with regard to rulers? Or: What is the right/good conduct in the relation of governed and rulers? The questions of ‘what must’ and ‘the good’ is what ethics is all about. A possible criterion in terms of which one can decide what is good or what is right, is to ask what is responsible within a given situation.

An ethics of interpretation, on the other hand, asks ‘what must’ or ‘what is good/right’ or ‘what is responsible’ with regard to the act of interpretation as such. What is it that ‘must’ be done or what is ‘good’ when we read these exhortations in Romans 13:1-7 or any other text?

The ethics of interpretation asks that people take responsibility for their acts of reading. It calls for an interpretation with a view to life. It provides for different modes and methods of reading demanding methodological sophistication and rigour in accordance with the best of what is available on the scientific market. The method of reading as such is not ethical or unethical. Only
people can act ethically or unethically. The interpretational acts of people, or how people use methods of interpretation, therefore, are subject to ethical reflection. If an interpretive community use methods of interpretation in such a way that it remains an esoteric ‘pure’ academic endeavour, isolated from life, or if an interpretive community tolerates such practices, it becomes an ethical problem. Thus, the ethics of interpretation asks (i) who (that is, which individual or group) reads (ii) which Bible (that is, what view of the text does the interpretive community hold, what authority does it grant the text) (iii) how (that is, using which methods) and (iv) why (that is, whose interests are at stake, what does the interpretive community want to achieve with their acts of interpretation)?

Miller (1987:4) phrases this question as follows:

My question is whether ethical decision or responsibility is in any way necessarily involved in that situation and act of reading, and if so, how and of what kind, responsibility to whom or to do what, decision to do what?

In this study the ethics of the interpretation of the New Testament is at issue and not the ethics of the New Testament.¹ The aim of this article is to develop a particular notion of an ethics of (New Testament) interpretation, namely an ethics of reading.

The first section consists of a discussion of important developments in the current debate on the ethics of New Testament interpretation. The seminal 1987 SBL presidential address of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is used in a programmatic way to introduce the current debate on the issue (§2). Responses to this essay in the USA and in South Africa are then considered (§3). Against this background, I proceed to develop my own (theoretical) understanding of an ethics of New Testament interpretation (§4). This concept is of such a nature that it cannot be dealt with only at a theoretical level. What is presented in this article serves only as the theoretical point of departure for a conceptualisation of the ethics of interpretation which has to be developed through the practical reading of a specific text in order to be satisfactorily.

2 A CALL FOR AN ETHOS OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY IN BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP

In the context of biblical scholarship the questions regarding an ethics of interpretation were most pertinently asked by Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1988)
in her presidential address at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Boston in December 1987. Smit (1990a:16-28) surveys the contributions of three other scholars who emphasise the importance of a shift in the ethos of scholarly interpretation, namely Anthony Thiselton (an evangelical) and David Tracy (a Roman Catholic), both working from a hermeneutical tradition, and Wilhelm Wueflner, reintroducing or ‘reinventing’ rhetorical criticism. I will limit my discussion here to the contribution of Schüssler Fiorenza.

She refers to the 1908 SBL-presidential address in which Frank Porter charted three shifts in the dominant ethos of biblical scholarship: (i) The first stage, out of which biblical scholarship have just emerged at that time, was a period in which the Bible’s records were imposed upon the present as an external authority. (ii) The second stage, through which biblical scholarship was passing in 1908, was that of historical science, which brings deliverance from dogmatic bondage and treats biblical history like all other histories, and the Bible like all other books. (iii) Porter envisioned a third stage at which, while the rights and achievements of historical criticism are freely accepted, the power that lives in the book is once more felt’ (Schüssler Fiorenza 1988:3). According to Schüssler Fiorenza, much of what has been done in the past fifteen years in biblical studies, particularly in the adoption of insights and methods of literary studies and philosophical hermeneutics, has followed Porter’s lead — the Bible is read like any other great book whose greatness does not consist in its accuracy as records of facts, but relies mainly on its symbolic power to transfigure human experience and reality. She maintains that this third literary-hermeneutical paradigm seems at present to be in the process of decentring into a fourth paradigm that inaugurates a rhetorical-ethical turn. This fourth paradigm relies on the analytical and practical tradition of rhetoric in order to insist on the public responsibility of biblical scholarship (1988:4-5):

Since the socio-historical location of rhetoric is the public of the polis, this emerging rhetorical paradigm situates biblical scholarship in such a way that its public character and political responsibility become an integral part of our literary readings and historical reconstructions of the biblical world...Critical theory, reader response criticism, and poststructuralist analysis, as well as the insight into the rhetorical character and linguisticality of all historiography, represent the contemporary revival of ancient rhetoric.

Schüssler Fiorenza (1988:5) defines the ethics of interpretation as a reading which respects the rights of the text and assumes that the text being interpreted ‘may say something different from what one wants or expects it to say’.
With regard to the ethics of biblical scholarship as an institutionalised academic practice she maintains that (1988:4)

[B]iblical interpretation, like all other scholarly inquiry, is a communicative practice that involves interests, values, and visions.

The thrust of her argument is that the dominant 'scientist' ethos of biblical scholarship should be decentred in the scholarly community of the SBL and re-centred to become a critical interpretive praxis for liberation. Interpretive communities such as the SBL are not 'just' scholarly investigative communities, but also authoritative communities: 'They possess the power to ostracise or to embrace, to foster or to restrict membership, to recognize and to define what "true scholarship" entails' (1988:8). She characterises that which is currently perceived as 'true scholarship' in the SBL as 'scientist'.

One of the manifestations of this scientist ethos is the tendency in formalist literary criticism to emphasise text at the expense of the context. A critical theory of rhetoric insists that context is as important as text, and that one's social location or rhetorical context is decisive for how one sees the world, constructs reality, or interprets biblical texts.

Her analysis of the rhetoric of previous SBL-presidential addresses reveals interesting information about the social location of the SBL and its scientist ethos of scholarship (1988:9):

(In the past forty years, no president of the SBL has used the opportunity of the presidential address for asking the membership to consider the political context of their scholarship and to reflect on its public accountability. Since 1947 no presidential address has explicitly reflected on world politics, global crises, human sufferings, or movements for change. Neither the civil rights movement nor the various liberation struggles of the so-called Third World, neither the assassination of Martin Luther King nor the Holocaust has become the rhetorical context for biblical studies. Biblical studies appear to have progressed in a political vacuum, and scholars seem to have understood themselves as accountable solely — as Robert Funk puts it — to the vested interests of the 'fraternity of scholarly trained scholars with the soul of a church'.

She refers to Bultmann's observation in a letter that the Second World War had not influenced his theology at all, since the internal discussion with the theology of their teachers played a far more important role in the formation of their theology than the war or some other external factor. This brings her to question the role of teachers of biblical studies today: 'Do we ask and teach our students to

3 Following Schüssler Fiorenza (1988:10) I use the term 'scientist' throughout this article in stead of the term 'scientistic'.
ask in a disciplined way how our scholarship is conditioned by its social location and how it serves political functions?' (1988:11).

Schüssler Fiorenza (1988:10) criticises the stance taken by Enslin in his 1945 SBL presidential address that biblical critics should be 'emotionally detached, intellectually dispassionate, and rationally value-neutral'. She explains (1988:10-11):

This scientist ethos of value-free detached inquiry insists that the biblical critic needs to stand outside the common circumstances of collective life and stresses the alien character of biblical materials. A-political detachment, objective literalism, and scientific value-neutrality are the rhetorical postures that seem to be dominant in the positivistic paradigm of biblical scholarship.

In its struggle to free itself from dogmatic and ecclesiastical controls, biblical scholarship adopted the nineteenth-century positivist view of history and ignored its own socio-political location by covertly advocating an a-political reality without assuming responsibility for their political assumptions and interests. The question of power, therefore, becomes central to the interpretive task: Whose interests are served? What kind of worlds are envisioned? What roles, duties, and values are advocated? These questions, Schüssler Fiorenza (1988:14-15) maintains, requires a double ethics, an ethics of historical reading but also an ethics of accountability.

* An **ethics of historical reading** asks what kind of readings can do justice to the text in its historical context. It illuminates the ethico-political dimensions of the biblical texts in this context. It **insists that the number of valid interpretations is limited** — although it is aware of the pluralism of historico-critical and literary-critical methods and the pluralism of interpretations appropriate to the text. The diachronic reconstructions practised by these methods of reading serve to distance us from the texts in their symbolic worlds in such a way that they relativise not only them but also us. It allows us to relativise through contextualisation the values and authority claims of the biblical texts and to critically evaluate them. An ethics of historical reading requires that biblical studies continue its descriptive analytic work, utilising all the critical methods available for our understanding of ancient texts and their historical location.

* An **ethics of accountability** holds the biblical interpreter responsible not only for the choice of theoretical interpretive models but also for the ethical consequences of the biblical text and its meanings. If biblical texts serve to nurture anti-Judaism, justify the exploitation of slavery or to promote colonial dehumanisation, biblical scholars must take the responsibility to interpret them in
their historical contexts and to evaluate the construction of their historical worlds and symbolic universes in terms of a religious scale of values. This kind of evaluation is of particular importance, given the growth of right-wing political and theological fundamentalism and biblicist literalism which feeds anti-democratic authoritarianism and fosters personal prejudice. The elucidation of the ethical consequences and political functions of biblical texts in their historical as well as in their contemporary socio-political settings forms part of the task of the responsible biblical scholar.

Schüssler Fiorenza (1988:15) concludes that

(1)he careful reading of biblical texts and the appropriate construction of their historical worlds and of their symbolic universes need to be complemented by a theological discussion of the contemporary religious functions of biblical texts which claim scriptural authority today in biblical communities of faith.

This provocative address soon evoked responses from fellow scholars. I shall review briefly some of these responses since they provide an important background for the development of my own position.

3 RESPONSE TO THE CALL FOR AN ETHOS OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY IN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

3.1 An American response: a call for an ‘andro-critical liberation theological process’

During 1989 and 1990 Daniel Patte and Gary Phillips launched a long-range project entitled ‘Ethical responsibilities and practices in biblical criticisms’. They define the purpose of the project as follows (1991:1):

The purpose of the long-range project is to clarify the ethical nature of biblical criticism and the significance such an understanding might have for scholarship and teaching... Important results of the long-range project include: developing a new understanding of the purpose or mission of biblical studies appropriate to our present time and culture; fostering an understanding within and between different communities of interpretation of the ethical character of biblical study, research and teaching; identifying and developing alternative models of research and teaching that promote an ethically responsible critical practice within the academy, the church, and other communities of interpretation.

According to Patte and Phillips the project was prompted by the appeal of Schüssler Fiorenza, in particular the need to acknowledge and account for the
fact that biblical study takes place in different ways in the context of different communities of interpretation. For two reasons they deem such a project necessary, namely (i) the fact that feminist and minority scholars in the USA continue to underscore the exclusionary effects of the current critical practices of biblical criticism, and (ii) the fact that biblical criticism is commonly experienced as indifferent to or irrelevant for addressing issues of ethical, social, political, and even of religious importance (Patte & Phillips 1991:1).

They envisioned the project to be spearheaded by a core group of American biblical critics (drawn from different ethnic, gender, religious and institutional backgrounds, including, inter alia, African-American, Feminist and Hispanic-American scholars) working in collaboration with a number of consultants from other fields (especially ethical and pedagogical experts) and also benefiting from the contributions of correspondent participants from around the world, particularly from Africa, Asia, Latin-America and Eastern Europe (Patte & Phillips 1991:2).

Already in their planning proposal, Patte and Phillips have emphasised what they call the ‘alienating patterns of thought and action in liberal and conservative male dominated European-American interpretive communities’ — patterns which alienate ‘marginalized communities which include Feminist, African-American, Jewish, and Third World interpretive communities’ (Patte 1991:3). This notion seems to dominate their conceptualisation of the ethics of biblical interpretation.

This initiative was developed much further in particular at the conference of the group at Vanderbilt Divinity School during March 1991. In a paper read at the Workshop on Contextual Hermeneutics of the University of Stellenbosch in September 1991, Patte (1991) shared some of the results of this conference with South African scholars. According to him scholars from feminist and other traditionally marginalised interpretive communities have strongly objected that white male scholars (that is, Patte and Phillips) are (once again) patronising and wanting to act on behalf of the marginalised, without consciously reflecting on the specificity of their own white male perspective. Consequently, they have changed the original and generally formulated title of their project, to ‘Teaching the Bible in Pluralistic Contexts: Ethical Accountability and White Male Exegesis’ (Patte 1991:23). According to Patte (1991:24) they have realised that white male exegetes need to acknowledge that they themselves must practise a ‘liberation theological exegesis’ and that their mode of this exegesis must be quite different from that of other liberation theologians. It is necessary to define what ‘liberation’ means in ‘white male liberation exegesis’. He argues that (1991:25)

(F)rom our theological perspective, patriarchalism and racism can be seen as resulting from an idolatry that absolutizes the white male perspective. But the white male per-
perspective per se (i.e., insofar as it is recognized as partial and incomplete) is, if not ‘holy, just, and good,’ at least ‘alright,’ so much so that white males can claim ownership of it, provided that we recognize it for what it is in context.

This context implies that white males must, of necessity, assume responsibility for their role as oppressors. To take this responsibility will be a step toward becoming accountable by developing strategies for avoiding alienation and oppression of others. It will only be possible to do this if white males recognize structures of oppression and their manifestations for what they are (Patte 1991:28). To accomplish this the specific ‘story’ of white male exegetes needs to be told, since story-telling is an essential part of the conscientising process (Patte 1991:29-30). Similarly, each group (women and other oppressed groups) should tell their individual stories without having them rendered as idiosyncratic, worthless and without legitimacy by the patriarchal structure. Patte (1991:31-32) indicates that the characteristics and results of the process of affirmation by means of telling their story, have been playing an important role in the liberation of the feminist group. The same should happen in order to liberate the white male group.

In the latter half of his paper, Patte (1991:35-39) tries to bring this closer to biblical interpretation. He argues that, for example, the conclusions of the white male guild in Matthean studies — in spite of their methodological and exegetical rigour — should no longer be presented (in exegetical classes and by the publications of ‘respectable’ presses) as if they were the only legitimate interpretations of this gospel. The legitimacy of the differences between the guild-affirmed interpretations should be affirmed. Through this affirmation, the entire structure of affirmation has to be transformed. This will bring to the fore questions such as: Why were the Matthew interpretations of Strecker and Luz affirmed by the guild in the first place? This type of question should have the effect of ‘bringing up to consciousness more precisely that which is common to white male exegesis, including norms, criteria, and epistemological (methodological) presuppositions that transcend the array of exegetical methods used in the works affirmed in one way or another by the guild’ (Patte 1991:35).

As for the future, Patte (1991:38) envisages an ‘andro-critical liberation theological process’ in order to correct the oppressive practices of the past and the present so that white male exegetes would become truly accountable in pluralistic contexts. At a concrete level, this project would entail tasks such as:

* focusing on the concrete practice of ‘teaching the Bible’
* gathering data about teaching the Bible by white male exegetes (textbooks, syllabi, narrative explanations of the rationale for courses given in educational settings)
* elucidating how and why these diverse forms of teaching the Bible are ‘affirmed’ by the white male-dominated academic and religious institutions
and the guild
* elucidating the ‘differences’ among these forms of teaching the Bible and affirming the legitimacy of these differences on the basis of methodological and theological premises shared by white male exegetes, and
* evaluating these forms of teaching the Bible (both what they have in common and their differences).

The aim is that, through this process, white male exegetes will be in a position to ‘hear’ feminists and other liberation theologians. Feminist and other liberationist interpretive communities, as well as the white male interpretive community, will then be in a position to compare their practices and strategies in order to evaluate the ethical accountability of all of them.

Regarding this specific development in North-American reflection on the ethics of biblical interpretation, a number of remarks need to be made.

Firstly, I agree that for too long the white male perspective has been (and still is) dominating biblical exegesis, religious communities, and society in general. This is a timely development and a worthy response to Schüssler Fiorenza’s call for public accountability in biblical interpretation.

Secondly, this project seems to emphasise the ethics of accountability (Schüssler Fiorenza’s second category) without sufficient reflection on her first category, the ‘ethics of historical reading’. Patte’s (1991:35-39) consideration of the epistemological and methodological implications of their project for biblical interpretation remains at a general level. Over-emphasising the ‘ethics of accountability’ at the expense of the ‘ethics of historical reading’, or, as I prefer to put it, the ethics of taking the textuality (or linguisticality or literariness or rhetoricity) of the text seriously, will result in another form of unethical interpretive praxis. In a nutshell: reading the Bible in terms of the scientist ethos in a political or social vacuum is not ethically responsible. On the other hand, claiming all sorts of ethical implications for biblical texts and for interpretations of these texts without taking the linguisticality of the text — in all its complexity — seriously and respecting its ‘otherness,’ will result in yet another form of ethically unacceptable acts of interpretation. In §4 I come back to this remark and develop it further.

Thirdly, although the project shows an acute awareness of contemporary contexts and the power of interpretive communities, the focus is on issues which dominate the North-American scene and which need not necessarily be the case in other parts of the world, as Patte and Phillips (1991:2) themselves indicate. Therefore, it is important to look at a South African response to Schüssler Fiorenza’s presidential address.

Two scholars have so far addressed the issue of an ethos of public accountability in biblical scholarship in South Africa, namely Pieter de Villiers (a biblical scholar) (1988; 1989) and Dirk Smit (a systematic theologian) (1990a; 1990b, 1991).


De Villiers (1989:121) observes that none of the essays in this book with its ‘South African perspective’ written by South African New Testament scholars, refers to matters African or South African. Furthermore, there is little discussion of the social function of biblical texts or historical material from biblical times. All the essays seem to reflect the common interest of these scholars in a close reading (in a literary sense) of the New Testament (1989:120), which is by nature a-political and ‘contextless’. He ascribes this phenomenon to what he calls the ‘social vacuum’ in which South African New Testament scholarship operates (1989:122):

> We live in a country where poverty has for some years now been the focus of popular and scientific research... How does it happen that New Testament scholarship in this publication reflects nothing of this and other pressing socio-political and ethical matters?

He argues that the lack of discussion of these issues in the publication is in itself an indication of a specific context and is a result of the social position of its contributors (1989:122):

> The selection of contributors, the nature of the topics and the context of this book reflect the privileged context in which it originated and indicates to what extent scholarship can be incarcerated in an ivory tower.

Moving beyond criticism, De Villiers (1989:123) calls for an awareness of the determining role of the South African society in the interpretive task. This does not imply, however, that New Testament scholars must always and exclusively

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4 Their pioneering word has prompted reaction from a number of South African scholars. One example is the 1990 Annual Congress of the Biblical Studies Society of Southern Africa, which dealt with the theme *The Actuality of the Bible in a new South Africa*. Some of the papers read at that congress were published in *Scriptura* 37.
ask socially relevant questions of the text (1989: 123):

Literary investigations are important (as means to an end!), but if the scientific enterprise and ‘a South African perspective’ consist of such questions and writings only, and that in a country and in a time such as ours, it becomes another matter.

Being myself a contributor to the Metzger-book, I have to confirm the validity of De Villiers’ observations. During the seventies and eighties a scientist ethos of scholarship dominated in the guild of South African New Testament scholars. Many of us tended to ‘hide behind’ our literary and structural analyses, hiding from the pressing social realities of our country — even if it was not a conscious choice to do so and even if it was generally not consciously perceived as such by the members of the guild. Much has happened in South Africa since these essays were written in 1985. Some of this has begun to influence South African New Testament scholarship. More exegetes have become interested in ‘contextual exegesis’, a development which can in part be attributed to the emerging interest in the social-scientific study of the New Testament. Yet the new awareness of the role of contemporary context among South African New Testament scholars cannot be ascribed only to the theoretical awareness and methodological implications of the ‘role of the reader in interpretation’ or the emerging social-scientific paradigm. The contribution of especially Dirk Smit was of decisive importance in focussing attention on the ethical dimension of South African New Testament scholarship.

Smit, a systematic theologian, joined the NTSSA as a member in 1987 and delivered a remarkable paper at the 1988 annual meeting (Smit 1988). Reacting to thirteen different readings of Luke 12:35-48 presented at the meeting by New Testament scholars, all from different perspectives and in terms of different methodological frames, Smit (1988:441) calls for a ‘responsible hermeneutics’ in three senses. (i) Are these readings responsible in terms of their own presuppositions?

5 As a sequel to their Metzger-Festschrift, Hartin and Petzer (1991) edited a book, Text & Interpretation: New approaches in the criticism of the New Testament. Some of the essays by South Africans are noteworthy for their explicit contextual awareness, for example, ‘For the Kingdom is inside of you and it is outside of you: Contextual exegesis in South Africa’ (by J A Draper), ‘Reading Luke from the perspective of Liberation Theology’ (by E H Scheffler), ‘Historical materialist exegesis’ (by W R Domeris), ‘Reception: theory and practice in reading Romans 13:1-7’ (by B C Lategan). In fact, ten of the sixteen essays in this volume are grouped under the heading ‘receptor’ and only five under the heading ‘text’. This clearly illustrates the shift in interest which has taken place in recent years.

Of particular importance to illustrate this shift in interest are the recent book by Gerald West (1991) and the forthcoming special edition of Scriptura, edited by B C Lategan and C Breytenbach (1992), entitled ‘Geloof en opdrag’ in which a whole range of South African New Testament scholars deal with a number of ethical themes in the New Testament.
tions and goals? (ii) Is it possible to choose between reading strategies and/or to integrate some of them into a responsible hermeneutics? (iii) How can this particular text, namely a pericope in the Christian New Testament, be read most responsibly by New Testament scholars? He calls attention to the focus on the text which characterises these readings and observes that (1988:477)

The concentration on the text in the papers may be because of the preference in the believing community for the text, but could it not also be because of the ideological nature of such a society, and of the fear for the doctrinal and ethical implications and responsibilities, once this Lucan text was read against its sociohistorical backdrop, or with a view to church policy and Christian practice (that is concrete reader responses) in the present South Africa?

Smit emphasises that (1988:478)

After the methods of interpretation have had their day, the results must be organized in some way so that people can believe, hope and act — and someone must do the job.

Although the practice of established exegetical methods still continues, there can be no doubt that Smit’s contribution in conjunction with recent developments in the methodology of New Testament studies (in particular reader-response criticism and the emergence of social-scientific approaches to interpretation), did bring about a new dimension and a new awareness of determining influence of the contemporary South African context among members of the guild.

In a more recent essay, Smit has again addressed the issue of the ethics of New Testament interpretation in South Africa (Smit 1990b). This essay is a direct response to the 1987-presidential address of Schüssler Fiorenza.

He (1991a:17; 1991b:30-41) indicates that three stages can be distinguished in the role biblical scholarship has played in South Africa, namely (i) a stage during which scholars used the Bible to legitimise or criticise apartheid, (ii) a stage during which such socio-political interpretation of the Bible was strongly rejected ‘in the name of the ethos of scientific research’, and (iii) the present stage, characterised by the urgent but diffuse debate between proponents of scientific historical scholarship and a ‘committed, socio-politically involved’ reading of the Bible.

In the first stage prominent scholars played an important role in legitimising apartheid and opponents (like Ben Marais, B B Keet and later, Albert Geyser) were ostracised from the South African scholarly scene. During this stage the Bible was read for direct socio-political purposes. The role of the influential New Testament scholar, E P Groenewald, and other theologians, like J D du Toit, in legitimising apartheid during the forties and fifties is well documented (see

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Kinghorn 1986; Loubser, J A 1987). Of particular importance in this regard is the article of Groenewald in 1947, ‘Apartheid en voogdyskap in die lig van die Heilige Skrif’ (see Breytenbach 1988 for a penetrating criticism of this report). One quotation from a 1957-article ‘Rasseverhoudinge in die Skrif’ of the New Testament scholar, W J Snyman (1957:172), will suffice as illustration here:

‘Apartheid’ moet egter nie (soos gewoonlik) net gesien word van hierdie negatiewe kant nie. Dit het sy positiewe aspek, ook in hierdie opsig: As 'n volk, afgesien van bostaande oorwegings, nie bereid is om te vermeng nie en sy so-syn prys te gee nie, dan het hy daarmee God aan sy sy, wat die verskeidenheid van nasies wil. Meer nog, hy moet in die getuienis van sy geskiedenis en tradisie, in sy gevoel en wil, hierin beluister die wil van God wat deur hom gehoorsaam moet word en deur ander nasies gerespekteer moet word.

In short, Snyman says that those practising apartheid have God on their side since the continued existence of a ‘variety of nations’ (understood in terms of the apartheid philosophy) is the will of God. To reach this conclusion Snyman surveyed a number of ‘revelational historical lines’ through Scriptures (both the Old and the New Testament) (Snyman 1957:161-173).

Smit (1991b:31) maintains that two factors were responsible for this type of socio-political reading of the Bible, namely, (i) the important role of religion and especially the Bible in Afrikaner society made it imperative to find a ‘Scriptural basis’ for the policy leading Afrikaners were advocating at the time, and (ii) the fact that the biblical basis of apartheid was explicitly refuted by scholars like Ben Marais and B B Keet. This challenge has prompted many theologians, biblical scholars, church leaders and synods to expand on and defend the biblical legitimation of apartheid. Both the defenders and the opponents of apartheid, however, were convinced of the legitimacy of reading the Bible in an ethical and socio-political context.

The second stage is characterised by the domination of the ethos of scientific historical and literary research. According to Smit (1991b:31) the most prominent representative of this ethos is W S Vorster. Vorster was among the first to criticise the apartheid-scholarship in its initial crude form but also in its refined version in the famous 1974-document of the Dutch Reformed Church, Human relations and the South African scene in the light of Scripture (see Vorster 1983). However, Vorster has also strongly criticised anti-apartheid scholarship. Vorster (1984b) argues that the new wave of Afrikaner biblical scholarship critical of apartheid and reflected in new documents, decisions of churches meetings and synods since the middle eighties, does not really represent a new paradigm or ethos of scholarship. It is the same kind of socio-political scholarship, only this time from an anti-apartheid perspective. What remains the
same are the assumptions that 'the Bible has something to say about race relations in a plural society' and that 'on the grounds of the authority and so-called all-sufficiency of Scripture it is believed that the Bible is a guide for all times and all problems of all natures' (Vorster 1984b:208, 210-211; Smit 1990b:32). His point is that this assumption is not valid since it is the result of a history of uncritical hermeneutics among Afrikaners, a hermeneutics of acceptance in which the relevance of the Bible is not questioned but simply accepted and confessed. This hermeneutics resulted in a highly selective — and thus, ideological — use of the Bible among Christians, be they defenders of apartheid, opponents of apartheid, or feminist, materialist, or liberationist biblical critics (Vorster 1983:97-99; 1984b:212-213; Smit 1990b:32). Vorster (1984b:212) writes:

Let it be said that it is as naive to interpret ancient texts like the Biblical ones with a view to upholding an ideology like apartheid as it is to read it on the lines of underdog/poverty ideologies.... The Bible is just not that kind of book. 'Biblical message' can stand for an ideology in the same way as 'liberation theology' or 'apartheid theology' can stand for an ideology.

Smit (1990b:33) correctly emphasises the fact that Vorster is not criticising or defending apartheid, but the way the Bible is being abused (1991b:33):

...one can say that he [Vorster] is interested, as New Testament scholar, in defending the ethos of scientific biblical scholarship, against a selective, uncritical and ideological appropriation of the Bible for reasons of socio-political expediency.

In his analysis of Vorster's position, Smit (1990b:35) argues that it seems as if 'the ethos of a strong historical awareness is somewhere beneath the surface' since Vorster emphasises that the Bible is a collection of ancient books which have to be interpreted in the light of their own character, that is, 'religious writings of different kinds which were written long ago over a long period of time'. Smit (1990b:36-37) is highly critical of the implications which Vorster draws from this emphasis on the historical nature of the Bible. His question is: If the relevance of the Bible for present-day political matters should not be taken for granted, and if the Bible does not possess meta-historical norms, and if the historical nature of the Bible is taken fully seriously, what then? (1990b:35-36). He objects that Vorster's answer to this What then? is 'tentative and extremely confusing' (1990b:36). In fairness to Vorster, it must be remembered that Vorster's aim with these articles was not to present a methodology for contextual exegesis, but to criticise the apartheid and anti-apartheid use of the Bible. In a sense, therefore, it is unfair to ask the What then? question to Vorster only with reference to these two articles.
Smit speculates that two reasons may be given for Vorster's position, namely that Vorster either wants to serve the interests and ethos of institutionalised biblical scholarship or that he wants to serve direct socio-political purposes in the public South African context by taking the apartheid-debate out of a religious context (1990b:37). It would seem as if Vorster's position may be primarily motivated by this second reason, but Smit maintains that although Vorster often refers to Schüssler Fiorenza in his more recent publications, 'he does not commit himself in any way or make evaluation comments of any sort' (1990b:38):

Perhaps it is therefore fair to say that Vorster is arguing from the ethos of scientific historical biblical scholarship, convinced that this second phase or paradigm has not even succeeded in replacing the old ideological way of reading within South African scholarship.

In the final part of his paper, Smit (1990b:38-41) discusses the third stage in biblical scholarship in South Africa, namely, the ethos of the anti-apartheid theologians. This group is not homogeneous. Much of anti-apartheid theology and biblical scholarship is done outside the circles of biblical scholarship. A number of black and feminist theologians have completed doctoral degrees in New Testament studies. Among Afrikaner biblical scholars themselves, particularly from the Reformed tradition, a growing number of people have come to the fore, criticising the way the Bible has been used to legitimise apartheid. Among these scholars, Smit calls attention to the recent work of H J B Combrink (Stellenbosch) and A B du Toit (Pretoria) — serving perhaps in the two most influential academic positions in Afrikaner New Testament circles — and two collections on social issues in the New Testament, both edited by C Breytenbach (Eenheid en konflik 1987, and Church in context, 1988). The first volume was written in the context of the dispute on church unity in the Dutch Reformed family of churches (Breytenbach 1987:1). These collections do not share a homogeneous socio-political view nor a single theory of interpretation: 'Both are noteworthy, however, since, as Smit puts it, 'For many of the authors, this is already a big step, merely to get involved in such a present-day ecclesiastical conflict, with socio-political overtones' (1990b:39). Yet Smit criticises the essays for being 'reserved, general and non-committal'. They leave the impression that the authors are so aware of being New Testament scholars - working in a scientist, historical ethos of biblical scholarship — that 'they are almost apologetical of the mere fact that they write with a view to a specific present-day conflict' (Smit 1990b:40). Be that as it may, Smit still finds comfort in the new willingness, particularly in the more recent works of South African New Testament scholars such as Breytenbach (1988), Nicol (1988), Combrink (1986) and Lategan (1989, 1990), to focus directly on socio-political issues and because
of the particular way they use Scripture in this regard.

Smit argues that the stage where Afrikaner reformed biblical scholarship served the apartheid ideology has been replaced by one in which a scientist ethos has dominated, 'in which the scholars tried to carry on as if nothing was happening in society' (1990b:41). This was not only a reaction to socio-political use of the Bible but also to dogmatic and ecclesiastical control. The historicico-critical paradigm was — with the exception of a few, like Vorster — never practised seriously in South Africa. This is the reason why the literary-aesthetic paradigm was so enthusiastically accepted in South Africa (1990b:42):

It allowed the [Afrikaner Reformed New Testament scholars] the opportunity to operate within the scientific ethos, and to steer free of both socio-political and ecclesiastical conflicts, and yet not find themselves in the difficulties brought about by the historical-critical paradigm.

Smit (1990b:43) ends his essay with the pointed remark that he is fully aware that his appeal ‘to reclaim the power of Scriptures for systematic, ecclesiastical and socio-political purposes’ is just as ideological as the pre-critical readings and facile applications of biblical texts (characteristic of work of the apartheid theologians) have been. Vorster’s criticism of the way in which anti-apartheid theologians use the Bible reflects also an ideology — particularly in the South African context. He warns that the new claims of rhetorical criticism and public accountability in biblical criticism may, contrary to their own intentions, be used to serve new ideological purposes.

As could be expected, the debate on the ethics of interpretation in the South African context is dominated by views on apartheid. As is the case with the American response to Schüssler Fiorenza’s appeal, in particular the work of Patte and Phillips, Schüssler Fiorenza’s second category (‘an ethics of public accountability’) is also the most prominent in the South African debate on the ethics of interpretation. There is, however, in the work of both De Villiers and Smit, a more explicit consideration of methodological issues regarding Schüssler Fiorenza’s first category (‘an ethics of historical reading’) than is the case in the work Patte and Phillips have done until now. De Villiers 1989:123) emphasises the potential of sociological exegesis to make New Testament scholars aware of the fundamental position of the reader’s social position and the fact that, because of that, the pressing issues in our societies cannot be escaped. Smit (1988) enters into a sophisticated debate on methodological issues, even when he writes in the context of an appeal for a ‘responsible hermeneutics’.

Against this background, it is now possible to develop my own position on the ethics of New Testament interpretation.
I believe that it would not be very helpful if New Testament scholars, in an attempt to become ethically responsible in their interpretive activities, all of a sudden leave theoretical and methodological issues aside and opt for an activist mode of conduct.

It is important to note that, although in the context of an appeal for public accountability in interpretation, Schüssler Fiorenza calls for a double ethics, an ethics of public accountability in interpretation and an ‘ethics of historical reading’. She redefines the ‘ethics of historical reading’ in such a way that it may be liberated from the confinements of the scientist ethos of biblical scholarship. Of particular importance is her emphasis that historical reading will allow us to relativise through contextualisation the values and authority claims of the biblical texts and to assess and critically evaluate them. She acknowledges the consequences of what she calls the ‘linguisticality’ of the material which biblical scholars have as their object of study. In her explanation and redefinition of the ‘ethics of historical reading’, however, she concentrates on the ‘historical’ and she does not reflect explicitly on ‘reading’. It is at this point that I wish to enter the debate and present my own contribution.

I concur with Schüssler Fiorenza’s view on the importance of an ethics of public accountability in interpretation. I also agree with her redefinition of the aims and nature of historical reading within such a new ethically responsible ethos of biblical scholarship. I have full sympathy for the American responses of Patte and Phillips and the South African responses of De Villiers and Smit. They all emphasise important and long neglected issues. My own position, therefore, is not in conflict with the sentiments they have expressed. I do believe, however, that an undeniable and under-emphasised aspect of ethically responsible biblical interpretation is that New Testament scholarship must take reading seriously, allowing for all its complexities and respecting the textuality of the text with all its consequences.

It would be ethically irresponsible to treat the text lightly and to oversimplify the reading process only to make all sorts of claims about possible implications of biblical material for modern social and ecclesiastical contexts. This may happen if Patte and Phillips were to continue to focus exclusively on the contemporary issues of feminism and the alienation of minorities and De Villiers and Smit deal exclusively with apartheid and poverty in their reflection on the ethics of interpretation. On the other hand, it would also be ethically irresponsible to hide behind structural analyses and all kinds of literary-aesthetical modes of reading and never dare to draw consequences for contemporary contexts from these interpretational activities, or not to realise that
the practice of such modes of reading is of necessity a reflection of the social context and ideology of the interpreter. This may happen (and does indeed happen) when a scientist ethos of biblical scholarship continues to dominate South African New Testament scholarship.

To develop this line of argument further, I take my cue from a literary theoretical context, in particular the work of J Hilles Miller (1978, 1987a, 1987b, 1989).

In the introduction to his latest essay on the ethics of reading, Miller (1989:79) makes the following observation about developments in literary studies, an observation which is directly relevant to my own reflection on the ethics of New Testament interpretation:

"Since 1979, there has been a massive shift in focus in literary study away from the 'intrinsic', rhetorical study of literature and toward study of 'extrinsic' relations of literature, its placement within psychological, historical, or sociological contexts. To put this another way, there has been a shift away from an interest in 'reading,' which means a focus on language as such (its nature and powers), to various forms of hermeneutic interpretation, which means focus on the relation of language to something else (God, nature, society, history, the self), something presumed to be outside language.

Examples of this shift in interest are the increase in the appeal of psycho-analytical (in the wake of Holland, Lacan — in particular Lacanian feminism) and sociological theories of literature (such as Marxism and Foucaultianism), accompanied by a widespread return to pre-New Critical biographical, thematic and literary historical methods of reading. Abrams (1978:19-46) has identified four major conceptions or general theories of literature since the time of Aristotle, namely (i) mimetic theories, (ii) pragmatic theories, (iii) expressive theories and finally, in the twentieth century, (iv) objective theories of literature. The first three of these theories have always shown a lively interest in matters 'extrinsic' to the text (the self, society, history, God). Therefore, there is an old and venerable tradition in literary studies to focus on the relationship of language or literature to something else, something presumed to be outside language. It is only with the twentieth century's 'objective' theories (in particular New Criticism, Formalism and Structuralism) that interest in text-external matters ceased to be of direct interest for many literary theorists. The massive shift in focus in literary studies Miller is talking about, is the reaction against these so-called objective theories. What he indicates here as characteristic of the most recent trend in literary studies, is in fact a revival of the tradition of many centuries in literary studies to focus on text-external phenomena or in the relation of literature to 'something else'.
This trend which has already become a ‘massive shift in focus’ in literary criticism, is now also reaching the guild of respectable and institutionalised academic New Testament scholarship. The qualifications ‘respectable, institutionalized; academic’ are necessary here, since, as in literary studies in general, there is a centuries’ old tradition in the study of the New Testament doing exactly this: focusing on the relation of the language (or text) of the New Testament to ‘something else’ — God, the self (for example, theological reflection on salvation), history, and society. Respectable academic New Testament scholarship (other than much of traditional ‘church’ New Testament scholarship — which remains more or less insulated from broader secular intellectual developments), usually tends to be somewhat behind developments in literary studies. In respectable, institutionalised and academic New Testament scholarship, the dominant focus still seems to be on the ‘objective’ theories — as Schüssler Fiorenza has convincingly pointed out. What Miller observes as a recent shift in focus in literary studies now also, through the work of Schüssler Fiorenza and others, seems to reach New Testament studies. The kind of ‘social relevance’ of the academic study of the New Testament which Schüssler Fiorenza and Smit, among others, call for is already the dominant focus in literary studies in general.

This is why Miller’s comments on the ethics of reading are so important. Although by no means a proponent of the pure ‘objective’ ideals (which characterise New Criticism and Formalism), he nevertheless protests against this all-overwhelming emphasis on matters ‘outside language,’ at the expense of due consideration of the linguistics of the text. It is important to remember that Miller launches his criticism from a deconstructionist background. Tongue in the cheek he writes (1989:80):

It is as if a great sigh of relief were rising up from all across the land. The era of ‘deconstruction’ is over. It has had its day, and we can return with a clear conscience to the warmer, more human work of writing about power, history, ideology, the ‘institution’ of the study of literature, the class struggle, the oppression of women, and the real lives of men and women in society as they exist in themselves and as they are ‘reflected’ in literature. We can again ask pragmatic questions about the uses of literature in human life and society.

Miller protests against this false perception of ‘deconstruction’, as if taking seriously what deconstruction says about language causes an indefinite delay or postponement of our desire to turn our attention to history, to society, to the self; as if all deconstructionists are concerned only with language cut off from the real world of history and of living women and men. He quotes extensively from the work of Paul de Man to underscore his view that there is a ‘fully elaborated theory of the historical, psychological, and ethical relations’ already present in De
Man's work. He maintains that De Man's work and his own are in fact examples of the almost universal shift to politics, history and society that marks the specificity of the current moment in literary study (Miller (1989:82-83). As far as Miller (1987a:10-11; 1989:80ff) is concerned, deconstruction is not opposed to the newer sociological methods which are pragmatically engaged in the 'real world outside language'. I do not intend to enter here into the debate whether deconstruction is politically relevant or not, whether it necessarily always remains an esoteric language game without any 'reality touch' or not, or whether 'everything is language' or not (see Van Tilborg 1991). Instead, I shall rather define my own position as a modification of what Miller proposes.

The gist of Miller's argument is that the study of literature has a great deal to do with history, society and the self, but that this relation is not a matter of thematic reflection within literature of these extralinguistic forces and facts; rather it is a matter of the way that the study of literature offers perhaps the best opportunity to identify the nature of language as it may affect what De Man calls "the materiality of history" (1989:81). It is important to understand this concept of 'materiality' in the broader context of the work of De Man, Miller and other (American) deconstructionists. For them language is the material 'thing(s)'. The material 'things' which function in life are not merely reflected in language, but actually create language. Language, on the other hand, creates reality, that is, the material 'thing(s)' themselves. This notion of language and reality has brought Miller to reflect on the ethics of reading.

Miller (1987b:284) writes:

I have been working lately on what I call 'the ethics of reading.' If that phrase means anything, it must have something to do with respecting any text discussed, with accepting an obligation to read — to read carefully, patiently, and scrupulously, under the elementary assumption that the text being read may say something different from what one wants or expects it to say or from what received opinion says it says. The blatant and consistent violation of this basic ethical obligation is another major symptom that much is at stake here.

Later, in another context, Miller (1989:81) formulated his insistence on reading and his reservations about 'what received opinion says a text says' as follows:

Here 'reading' in the sense of a rhetorical analysis of the most vigilant and patient sort is indispensable. How else are we going to know what a given text is and says and what it can do? This can never be taken for granted beforehand, not even after that text has been overlaid by generations of commentary.

If there ever was a text 'overlaid by generations of commentary' it is the text of
the New Testament. And precisely there lies a problem. Why this ‘generations of commentary’ is a problem, may best be explained again by looking at the same issue within the context of literary studies.

In a very provocative essay, Graff (1989) has outlined the consequences of what he calls the ‘unofficial interpretive culture’ of the reading, interpretation, and teaching of literature. As could be expected from a culture dominated by mass-communication, Graff argues that it has become almost impossible to distinguish between ‘texts in themselves’ and the ‘always ready’ way in which their interpretations are pre-screened by the media. The mass-communications environment surrounds texts with ‘a secondary interpretive text comprised of published reviews, publicity, rumour, gossip, and advertising hype’ (1989:5). The result is that ‘we unavoidably know so much about texts before we read them that often we do not need to read them at all in order to talk fluently about them and even to write about them’ (1989:5).

This is to an even greater extent true of the text of the New Testament. I can think of many people (for example many of the American televangelists) who ‘talk fluently’ about the text of the New Testament, while one often has reason to doubt to what extent such a person has really read the text. Many New Testament scholars were brought up in some or other religious community in which the New Testament was taught to them in Sunday School classes, youth camps, sermons over many years, and so forth. In addition to this, particularly in South Africa, religious broadcasting forms an important part of the state controlled radio and television services. Most important, however, I believe is the influence of Religious Instruction as compulsory subject for all South African school children. Everybody whether personally involved in a Christian community or not, learns and hears a lot about the Bible during their formative years. All this makes it possible to know a lot about the text of the New Testament, without ever having to read it seriously. And in almost all these encounters with the New Testament some ethical imperative is derived from the New Testament. In the scholarly milieu, an even greater culture of secondary reading surrounds the text of the New Testament. After many years of lectures on the New Testament, and after having read through many commentaries and scholarly articles on the New Testament, most New Testament scholars know a lot about the New Testament. Why should this be a problem?

This brings me back to J Hillis Miller. Do we really read the text of the New Testament itself seriously before we start to talk and write fluently about it? Do we fully recognise that reading is ‘indispensable for any responsible concern for the relations of literature to what is outside it’? (1989:81). For Miller, therefore, the ethics of reading is that reading should be taken seriously, that the concern for rhetorical study of literature (or the ‘literariness’ in any piece of language as soon as it is taken as a text) is non-negotiable. In other words, precisely in order
to say something about the relation of a text to society, history or the self (that is, text-external matters), the text should first be taken seriously. Miller formulates this notion of the primacy of the text (or, as I would phrase it, the 'textuality' or 'linguisticality' or 'literariness' or 'rhetoricity' of the text) as follows (1989:82):

In order to understand how a certain kind of language would make history happen, it is necessary first to understand what it means to speak of a given text as a textual allegory with a high level of rhetorical complexity. It is necessary, that is, to read the Social contract or whatever other text is our concern (no easy matter, nor one that happens as often as one would like) BEFORE going on to study with confidence those extrinsic relations. [The capitalisation of 'before' is mine].

In the light of this observation of Miller, with which I agree, it is now possible to formulate my conception of an ethics of responsible New Testament interpretation. It hinges on this 'before'. I submit that a rhetorical study of literature6 which respects the textuality of the text as it manifests itself in its linguisticality (see Botha 1991:43-100), its literariness (see Botha 1991:101-165) and its rhetoricity (see Botha 1991:166-240) through a serious reading of the text needs to precede any claims about text-external matters — be they ancient or modern day matters of history, society or the self. Yet this preference does not imply that the New Testament scholar can remain oblivious to such text-external phenomena. One should not always stop short of facing the realities of modern-day ecclesiastical and societal issues. Such a 'premature' stop is characteristic of the scientist ethos of biblical scholarship. Nevertheless, without a preceding rhetorical study of literature, allowing for and trying to understand its nature, how it works, what it can do, we cannot understand the role that the New Testament literature may have in society, history, the church, and individual life. An ethos of responsible interpretation of the New Testament implies that reading must be taken seriously — not only as understood by Schüssler Fiorenza with her notion of an 'ethics of historical reading' but also in the sense of an 'ethics of reading'.

My own position on the ethics of reading is a modification of what Miller proposes. As I have indicated, I concur with his call for an emphasis on reading and on language. The consequences which he draws (given his deconstructionist sentiments) from this emphasis, however, are in my view an over-statement and an unbalanced view of the implications of (inter)textuality. In Miller's deconstructive view, to study the rhetoric of the text is to uncover the ways in which

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6 ‘Rhetorical' in the sense which Miller uses it, and not in the popular sense of mere stylistic attractive flattering language (see Botha 1991:173-179 for a detailed discussion of this misconception of rhetoric).
the text’s language becomes undecidable. Consequently, to observe the ethics of reading is to respect the undecidability of the text. Paradoxically then, to infer ethical imperatives from the reading of a literary text is to violate the ethics of reading as an activity. For Miller such inferences always and of necessity fail to respect the otherness of the text. As Phelan (1989:xii) has formulated this position of Miller: ‘How can one judge the ethical consequences of the different ways in which minds can meet in the act of reading if rigorous reading continually uncovers the undecidability of the text?’ Miller himself formulates what he calls ‘the law that determines reading’ and the acts that follow reading as follows (1989:92):

...reading as such can never be read, is always hidden or in flight, always the other of whatever act I am performing.

Given Miller’s view of the nature of the text (namely that ‘there is no ascertainable logos outside the chain of signs, above, below, before, or after, which can be shown to determine its meaning’ — 1989:92) and given his formulation of the ‘law of the ethics of reading’, the logical consequence is that no ethical imperatives can ever or in any sense be derived from literature. This is the consequence of a ‘hard’ deconstructionist view of language. But I do not believe that this is all to be said about the issue. Granted that texts are undecidable and ethical imperatives can therefore not be derived from texts and granted that the ethics of reading is precisely to respect this linguisticity of the text, I would still hold that ethical imperatives can be reached, but then located in the interpretive community and the whole process of interaction taking place in the reading process, and not purely in the text.

These notions of the ‘interpretive community’ and of the ‘whole process of the interaction taking place in the reading process’, bring me to the concept of intertextuality. I have found the literary theorist Heilna Du Plooy’s (1990:7) definition of intertextuality balanced and very helpful. She bases her definition on the work of Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva — who differ from the Derridean version of intertextuality. In the Derridean version of intertextuality the text disseminates to almost nothing, merely a ‘trace’. For Barthes and Kristeva, the subject remains relevant in the sense that (and precisely because of the fact that) the subject itself is also an intertext (Du Plooy 1990:5-6). Du Plooy’s description can be summarised as follows:

* Texts do not exist in isolation.
* A text is a translinguistic process, but it remains bound to the collection of words which has prompted the process.
* Since texts come into existence in language, the dialogical nature of the text

...
cannot be denied. This is not merely a dialogue between two poles (text and reader). It is rather a ‘polyphonic discourse’ in and around the text in which non-lingual texts can contribute to meaning. In this recognition of the dialogical/polyphonic nature of the text, the human and communal relevance of language and literature is established.

* The text is one of its own relevant intertexts. This does not imply that a text disseminates into non-existence in its intertext. In a specific discourse a particular text may have the privileged role of ‘the leader of the discourse’ or the ‘prompter’ of the discourse.

* The subject which produces the text is itself a composition of (linguistic, cultural and ideological) intertexts. Nevertheless, if the process of reading is of such a nature that the text takes over as generator and it dominates the whole process, or if the subject is reduced to unselfcritical subjectivity, the discourse becomes for all practical matter unbalanced and closed.

* The ideological implications of this assumption are that a text may exist and may speak. The text is actively part of the dialogical intertextual discourse - precisely because of its allusions to pluralistic linguistic and translinguistic texts, precisely because it activates and stimulates intertexts in the subject. The subject generates the text in the intertextual cultural space of which itself is a product. But the subject must keep the discourse ‘open’. This means that the subject must neither allow itself to be dragged along involuntarily by the ideology of the text, nor does this mean that the subject should impose his or her own ideology destructively on the texts, thereby closing the discourse. The intellectual stimulus, the cultural dynamic and the ideological renewal in which literary texts may play a role depend on this neither/nor.

Du Plooy (1990:8) draws the following conclusion from her description of intertextuality:

Dit beteken dat die teks, leser en gemeenskap almal relevant is en ’n bepaalde status geniet. Die vermo van ’n leesstrategie om die teks te interpreteer as iets wat ander tekste transformeer, beam of ondermyn, inkoporeer die waardigheid en geldigheid van sowel teks as leser. ’n Leeshandeling wat op verantwoordelike en selfkritiese wyse ‘oop’ is, wat soveel as moontlik relevante intertekste bymekaar bring en die subjektiwiteit van die leser ook erken, maak literatuur relevant en waardevol en aktueel.

Interestingly enough, her discussion of intertextuality and its implications, brings Du Plooy to the code-words of an ethics of reading, namely ‘responsible’ and ‘selfcritical’ reading which ends by making literature ‘relevant’, ‘worthy’ and ‘topical’. She brings text, reader and society into a relation in which all have sta-
tatus and play a role. Of particular importance is the status which she attributes to the subject. The religious (and other) convictions of the subject are inextricably interwoven in the act of reading. Therefore the Bible has a different moral authority for Christians than for others. For the ethics of the interpretation of the New Testament, this is of fundamental importance.

To summarise: under an ethics of New Testament interpretation I understand that the text must be read seriously, with all possible methodological sophistication and rigour. This serious reading is not a renewed New Critical call for close reading, since the nature of language and the reading process of necessity involves the text, the reader and the society, giving a certain status and role to all. This ‘ethics of reading’, therefore, does not exclude an ‘ethics of historical reading’ and neither does it stop short of an ‘ethics of public accountability’.

In the final instance I take another cue from Miller. He emphasises repeatedly (1987a:11; 1989:88) that discussion of the ethics of reading can by its nature not remain only on a theoretical level — it is only in the act of reading of a specific text that one is able to explicate one’s conceptualisation of ‘the ethics of reading’. Or as he puts it: ‘reading is doing reading’. I have done that in another study by means of four different readings of Romans 13:1-7 (Botha 1991). In those readings the theoretical observations made in this article are developed, explained and substantiated.

**WORKS CONSULTED**


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