A STORY OF CONTEXTUAL HERMENEUTICS AND THE INTEGRITY OF NEW TESTAMENT INTERPRETATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

D J SMIT

Und sie wollen nicht, daß man die Geschichte der Geschichtsforscher schreibt...
(C Péguy, L'argent, suite)

Ziel der...Analyse...ist es, den Homo academicus, diesen Klassifizierer unter Klassifizierenden, den eigenen Wertungen zu unterwerfen.
(P Bourdieu, Homo academicus)

Do not ask a fish about water.
(Paulo Freire)

ABSTRACT
In a first part, the article tells the story of the Hermeneutics Group of the NTSSA. It is a story with three phases. In the first phase, interpretation was seen as more than the application of methods. In the second phase, the active role of the reader became more important. In the third phase, the importance of interpretative communities became more apparent. In a second part, some of the issues resulting from these developments are discussed under the rubric 'Why do we interpret the New Testament?' In a third part, the question is raised whether the Hermeneutics Group (and the NTSSA?) may be entering a new phase in its scholarly activity of dialogue with other reader-communities.

Historians, including biblical critics, are not known for exposing themselves to the same kind of historical criticism that they apply to everything and everyone else. The historical situation of contemporary exegetes and their social conditions usually remain uninvestigated and thus—from a historical-critical and socio-historical perspective—unquestioned.'

With these words Dieter Georgi opened his plenary address at the Annual Meeting of the SBL in Kansas City, MO, in November 1991, in which he made an appeal for a 'social history of biblical criticism' (Georgi 1992).

These words could also serve, I believe, as the summary of a growing awareness in the Hermeneutics group of the NTSSA. We are becoming increasingly convinced that 'the historical situation of contemporary exegetes and their social conditions' are important, that we should consciously reflect on them and should seriously consider their implications for what we are doing. The same may be said of members of
several other scholarly groups in South Africa, including Old Testament scholars and members of the Society of Biblical Studies.

These convictions gradually became more obvious and more important over a period of time. The story could almost be reconstructed as a development through three—albeit logical, rather than clear-cut chronological—phases. In what follows, I first remind us briefly of this story. In a second part I attempt to describe one of the issues we are currently facing as a result of this development. In a final part I ask whether we are possibly entering a next phase in our reflections and activities.

1 A STORY OF CONTEXTUAL HERMENEUTICS

Apparently, real readers behave differently from what they are supposed to do. (Lategan)

The first phase of the story can perhaps be called Emphasizing interpretation versus method. During this phase the conviction became widespread that interpretation was more than merely the application of methods. Understanding was more than exegesis. The horizons had to fuse. The horizon of the reader's existential pre-understanding had to meet the horizon of the meaning of the text.

New Testament scholarship in South Africa was faced with the classical problem of Wahrheit und Methode. The Hermeneutics group was established to reflect on this problem. The proliferation of methodologies available on the international exegetical market and exhibited in rapid succession at the annual meetings of the local society offered the challenge (see especially Neotestamentica volumes 4, 1970; 14, 1981; and 18, 1984).

The cluster of issues in 'responsible hermeneutics' at this stage included questions such as: How do we deal responsibly with this plurality of available exegetical methods in interpreting the New Testament texts? What is the relationship between historical, linguistic and structural approaches to the texts? When do we really understand? What is the relationship between what the text 'meant' and what it 'means'? How do we best establish what it meant? What does the Bible have to say to mankind today? Which exegetical methods are better, in the sense of more responsible, more adequate, more legitimate? Is it necessary and possible to find an integrated approach that can combine the different methodologies into a coherent holistic way of interpretation (e.g. Lategan 1970, 1974a, 1974b, s j, 1978a, 1978b, 1978c, 1979, 1982, 1992a)?

The 1988 conference of the NTSSA was dedicated to the challenge. It represented a kind of empirical experiment in order to get some clarity on this issue. A particular Lukan pericope was interpreted according to a variety of methodologies and the questions were asked: What should we say about this? Which are more and which are less responsible methodologies? (Neotestamentica 22, 1988.)
At this stage, the expressions 'reader' and 'context' were used almost exclusively in connection with the text itself, with its (historical) production, its (literary) strategy and its (semiotic, pragmatic, communicative) function. 'Reader' (still) referred primarily to the so-called implicit or implied or supposed or encoded or anticipated or potential reader in the text, in short, the 'textually defined' reader. According to Combrink's influential 1984 paper, '...author and reader function as a textual strategy'. And according to his equally important keynote address at the 1988 meeting, 'A responsible reading of the text implies taking the text as a speech-act functioning in a communicative context. The role of the author and the context therefore becomes important again'. 'Context', in both cases, refers to an original, historical context of text-production and -reception.

The theme for the 1988 conference, 'Readings, readers and authors', was therefore a misnomer, since the papers did not deal with readers, but with methods, not with 'real readers' and 'real readings', but with 'the concrete problem of the multiplicity of meanings and interpretations of texts' (Combrink 1988:189), that is with the multiplicity of methodological approaches available to critics. In this sense, the 1988 conference still dealt with exactly the same issue as the 1984 conference: 'But what was rather a theoretical discussion at that stage, is now illustrated concretely' (Combrink 1988:189).

The second phase can perhaps be called 'Acknowledging the active role of the reader'. During this phase the conviction became widespread that the reader played a more important role in interpretation than most of us normally realised or readily admitted. Reading was now understood to be a more creative process than that which the imagery of the fusion of two static horizons might perhaps have suggested. The reader actually created meaning. The reader constructed the text, filled the gaps, produced associations.

The Hermeneutics group of the NTSSA was now for the first time seriously challenged by Bernard Lategan's analysis of 'Current issues in the hermeneutical debate' (1984), in which he had already convincingly argued four years earlier that 'a gradual shift of focus—first from text production to text mediation and finally to text reception' had taken place, so that 'the present hermeneutical debate is dominated by questions relating to the interaction between text and reader'.

The provisional theme for the 1994 Annual Meeting and accordingly for the subgroup meetings between 1988 and 1993 therefore became 'Contextual Hermeneutics'. The circular suggesting possible topics to the members pointed to methodological and philosophical, as well as empirical and descriptive questions related to this role of the 'contextual reader in the actual reading-process'.

In his keynote address at the HSRC Conference on Theology in the Nineties, 'Aspects of a contextual hermeneutics for South Africa', Lategan explained this move:
Why 'contextual' hermeneutics? Why not 'hermeneutics' pure and simple? Contextual hermeneutics represents a sustained attempt to include the situation of reception in both the theoretical reflection on and pragmatic implementation of the process of interpretation. To be sure, concepts like the 'fusion of horizons' (Gadamer), which played an important part in the development of theological hermeneutics, always did presuppose the role of the reader. However, hermeneutical reflection remained focused almost exclusively on the author and the text, while in the practice of exegesis, application was understood as a subsequent action which did not form part of the interpretation proper. Reception, therefore, played a small if any role in hermeneutical reflection (Lategan 1994).

The cluster of issues in 'responsible hermeneutics' now included questions such as: How does reading take place? What happens during the reading process? Can the reading process as 'an interactive process' be described? To what extent is the reader creating meaning? What does the 'context' of the reader refer to? How does one analyse and describe a 'context'? What is the influence of this reader context on the text? Does it necessarily lead to 'unlimited indeterminacy' (Combrink)? Are 'counterreadings' of a text possible? Can they be regarded as legitimate and responsible? Is it still possible to claim that a text 'has meaning', independent of the active role of a reader (Botha 1991, 1992; Combrink 1984, 1988, 1990; Lategan 1984, 1985a, 1985b, 1986a, 1986b, 1988a, 1988b, 1989a, 1992b)?

In his introductory article, 'Coming to grips with the reader', in Reader perspectives on the New Testament, Semeia 48 (1989), Lategan made these distinctions exceptionally clear:

It is not surprising that long before the rise of reception theory in literary studies, the reader did feature in various hermeneutical frameworks developed for the interpretation of biblical texts. The existential hermeneutics of Bultmann takes as its point of departure the present-day reader who wants to make sense of the ancient text. The question of existentia, which forms an integral part of this exegetical technique, presupposes a link with the self-understanding of the reader. In the New Hermeneutic, the concept of a Sprachereignis or a 'language event' is indicative of the involvement of the reader in the process of understanding (1989a:4).

'Despite this long-standing (if diffuse) interest in the reader', Lategan argues, there has lately been a 'surge in reader-oriented work in biblical exegesis'. He then points to the distinction between 'the intratextual and the extratextual aspects of the reading-process' and adds that both require special attention, 'the text-internal problems' and 'the interaction between text and context'.

In the field of reader-oriented studies, the most basic distinction is that between theoretical and empirical reader research...This goes back to the difference between Wirkung and Rezeption as understood by Jauß - a distinction which is not unproblematic, but which basically understands Wirkung as referring to the aspects determined in the text and
Rezeption to those determined by the reader. This distinction is linked to the idea that the text only offers a potential reading, which a real reader has to actualize...

Obviously, a study of actual reception is only possible where a record of such a reading or readings exists. Records of all kinds present themselves, both from the past and the present. This has led to a further distinction between historical and contemporary empirical research...

Empirical research...presupposes real readers, or rather: evidence of their reading in some form or another. An example would be the first readers of biblical texts...The problem is that very little evidence of these readings exists. Other examples are the past readers of the text, whose successive readings constitute the reception history of the text. By far the most accessible are contemporary readers of the Bible, who offer examples of a wide variety of readings...

At this stage, the contemporary empirical research of biblical material is still virtually unexplored territory...

The distinction between real and implied readers is closely linked to what has become known as the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of the text...The studies in this volume concentrate on the ‘inside’ of the text. The concern is not with real readers of flesh and blood, but with how readers are anticipated by and in the text...

In order to make quite clear that ‘the reader in the text’ is a literary construct and not a real reader, Schenk...proposes that we avoid any talk of a ‘reader’ and replace it with ‘addressee’ when dealing with the ‘inside’ of the text... (Lategan 1989a:5-7).

While the Semeia-issue was still exclusively concerned with the reader in the text, with Schenk’s addressee, this gradually changed in the Hermeneutics group of the NTSSA. The members became interested in real reading, in ‘the interaction between text and context’. The notions of ‘reader’ and ‘context’ now took on new meaning. They no longer (only, or primarily) referred to aspects of the texts, but instead to the active role of a present-day reader and the influence of his or her ‘context’ on the interpretation process. The focus now shifted to the philosophical, theoretical questions caused by this potential ‘unlimited indeterminacy’, to the methodological issues related to ‘reading’, ‘contextuality’, ‘reception theory’.

During these years, a variety of South African New Testament scholars worked and published on these methodological issues. Jan Botha did interesting work on the reading process, and Lategan on reception theory, reader response theory and audience criticism.

Far less work was, however, done in the field of ‘empirical reader research’. These scholars were interested in ‘real readers of flesh and blood’, but in a philosophical, theoretical way. Neither past nor present readings of the texts were studied, with only a few exceptions (Lategan & Rousseau 1988; Smit 1989).
An interesting aspect of this phase was that the ‘contextual’ character of interpretation was sometimes almost seen as something prescriptive, instead of descriptive. The title of Lategan's 1991 paper still clearly suggested this: 'Aspects of a contextual hermeneutics for South Africa'. On the first hearing it almost sounded like a plea that a contextual hermeneutics had to be developed, for a particular context, namely South Africa, in general.

In the third phase, much of this changed. What Lategan had called 'empirical reader research', 'a study of actual reception', now became important. In the process, the realisation grew that (the abstract) 'contextual reader' in the singular had to be replaced by (the real) 'institutionalised readers' in the plural. The expression 'contextual' henneneutics was no longer used prescriptively, but descriptively, as an acknowledgement of what always happens, inevitably.

The third phase can perhaps be called 'Becoming aware of interpretive communities'. During this phase it became increasingly obvious that real readers were formed in reading communities. They were not primarily creative and imaginative individuals, but they read according to conventions they had learnt in particular communities of interpretation. Reading was a discursive practice, a social act of participation in a discourse; a public discourse constituted by what Foucault had called 'rules', operating 'according to a sort of uniform anonymity, on all individuals who undertake to speak in this discursive field' (1972:63).

Within the NTSSA, members of this subgroup in particular became increasingly aware of these ideas. At the 1993 NTSSA meeting the theme for the 1994 meeting of the NTSSA was accordingly changed to 'Hermeneutics in the South African Context' and it was explained as follows:

The focus is on the constitutive role of readers and reader communities, their social contexts and their reading-conventions.

Special attention is given to

i) philosophical, epistemological and methodological questions;

ii) a variety of empirical studies (e.g. the Wirkungsgeschichte of a particular New Testament document in a particular South African discourse; the use of the New Testament in well-known and influential South African documents; the reading of the New Testament in the context of a South African Art Faculty or Theology Faculty; the reading of the New Testament in poetry or visual art in South Africa; the reading of the New Testament in specific South African church or social groups; etc.);

iii) questions related to responsible reading of the New Testament in South Africa (the ethics of interpretation);
given this constitutive role of a variety of reader-contexts (Report of Hermeneutics Group to 1993 Annual Meeting).

This brings us to the present (1994) NTSSA meeting. The cluster of issues in 'responsible hermeneutics' which we now face include questions such as: Who are 'we'? What is our social location? In whose interests are we reading? What are we doing with our interpretations? What are the social effects of our readings? What are the power relations involved in reading? Who has the power to read and the power to say what the texts mean? Which moral and ethical responsibilities are given with this power-to-read (J Botha; De Villiers; Smit 1990a, 1990b, 1991a, 1991b, Lategan 1989b, 1990a, 1990b, 1991, 1992a, 1992c, 1992d, 1994)?

The so-called 'ethics of reading' or the 'ethics of interpretation' has now become a popular theme (J Botha; Smit). Rhetorical studies, analyzing readings as social activities, have become important (Combrink, J Vorster, P Botha, J Botha). Empirical studies of the ways in which specific reader groups are using the texts have become fascinating (Loubser; J Botha). Historical research into the ways the Bible was read in other periods by specific social groups are on the agenda. Comparative studies, looking at the ways in which different groups read the same text, have become necessary.

The categories of 'reader' and 'context' have once again passed through a shift in emphasis, if not in meaning. Reading has become something different from interpretation. 'Readers', in the plural now, refer primarily to so-called 'real readers', to particular institutionalised groups of Bible-users. Real readers or 'ordinary readers' are now distinguished from 'critics'. 'Context' now refers to the concrete socio-historical life-contexts of these groups of readers (a Bible-study group in a particular township—Cochrane, Wittenberg & West; 'the workers'—Mosala; a particular gold-mine—Lategan; etc), or to institutionalised contexts (religion in the public media—Müller & Smit; theological faculties—Van Zyl; African Independent Churches—Müller, Loubser; Africa—Combrink; scholarship—De Villiers, Combrink; etc), or to particular discourses (religious documents on peace and violence—Robinson & Smit; ethical writings—Smit; sermons in Die Kerkbode—Cilliers; etc).

What Lategan calls 'the demand for the democratization of interpretation' has been put on the agenda:

This (demand) comes from two opposing corners—from the growing democratic movements all over the world, from the base-communities of the church in the Third World and from the venerable principle of Reformed theology, the office of the believer. In South Africa this issue has assumed even greater urgency as theology is more and more entering the public debate. Reading, interpreting and appropriating the Bible is no longer the exclusive domain of a privileged few (Lategan 1994:26).
Again, the phases are not so much chronological in nature. One has not replaced the other. The topics and issues of earlier phases remain unresolved and on the agenda. And yet, it is clear that the discourse has changed. Key expressions have taken on new meanings. New problems have become interesting. The ultimate reason is that these scholars have become more aware of 'their own historical situation and their social conditions'. They have been reminded of this by a growing awareness of the importance of the reading process and the presence of other reading communities.

2 WHY DO WE INTERPRET THE NEW TESTAMENT?

An important feature of contextual hermeneutics is therefore the reappraisal of the biblical text, not its abolition... (Lategan).

If 'reading, interpreting and appropriating the Bible is no longer the exclusive domain of a privileged few', whose domain is it then? Who are the 'real readers' of the Bible? Who are the interpretive communities reading the Bible in South Africa? Is it possible to name them, to describe them? Is it possible to find a suitable set of categories to distinguish between and to analyse and describe possible communities of real readers of the Biblical documents in the South African context? What are the real differences between diverse communities reading the Bible?

Obviously there are many ways of answering these questions, each of them highlighting different features.

I would like to consider briefly just one possible approach, suggested by Stephen Fowl and Gregory Jones in their recent Reading in communion (1991). They use Jeffrey Stout's notion of 'interpretive interests' to argue that different groups or readers have different reasons why they read the texts.

Until now, they say, Biblical scholars have concentrated so much on the 'how' question with regard to their interpretations, that they often forgot about the 'why' question.

So: Why do Biblical scholars (in South Africa) interpret these texts? ‘Interpretation’ is already different from ‘reading’. Why, then, interpret? And why these Biblical, New Testament documents?

Asking why different reader communities have interpretive interests in the same documents may reveal something of the differences between them. Therefore, why do Biblical scholars interpret these texts? Why do they regard these documents as worthwhile and important? How do they view these texts?

Lategan (1988b:68), in his ‘Paradigms’ paper, remarks:

(W)e have lost sight of the real purpose of our exegetical trade. There is an urgent need to change the order of our questions. Instead of asking: 'What is the best method to use?', the first question ought to be: ‘What is the “object” to be interpreted?’ (1988b:68).
Who are this ‘we’ that we are speaking about, this ‘we’ that Lategan is referring to when he says that ‘we’ have lost sight of the real purpose of our activities, of our interpretive interests? About whose ‘interpretive interests’ are we inquiring? What is our ‘social location’ and ‘why are we reading from this place’ (Patte & Phillips)?

Primarily, it is the guild of academic New Testament scholarship, particularly in South Africa. It refers to the people ‘in the exegetical trade’ (Lategan 1988b:68). This guild both shares characteristics with similar institutions elsewhere and shows its own typical, i.e., contextual, South African history, composition and features.

However, as Paulo Freire reminded us, we should not ask a fish about water. The fish takes the water for granted. The fish lives in and from the water. The fish knows no other reality and no other means of existence. For the fish water is not something that can be compared to something else, but the only reality, the only world, there is. The fish has no perspective on the water, no viewpoint from outside the water in order to see the water.

The same applies here. Inside a guild, everything seems obvious. Everything is taken for granted. The historical and social nature of the problems, the methods, the priorities, the activities, the procedures are lost. The very particular, contextual social construction of reality is equated with reality itself. The paradigm is no longer seen as merely a paradigm.

The best, if not the only way to debunk these ideas is therefore to be confronted with other viewpoints, with different social constructions of the same reality, with the paradigms of other groups, also historically and socially constructed.

In order to achieve this, a brief typology may be helpful. Just over a decade ago, Scholars Press published some of the papers read during a major conference at the University of Chicago, under the title The Bible as a document of the university. Edited by Hans Dieter Betz, the papers published were ‘The Bible as a document of the university’ by Gerhard Ebeling, ‘The Bible as a document of believing communities’ by James Barr and ‘The Bible and the imagination’ by Paul Ricoeur. This division suggests a useful typology. Perhaps one should, however, replace the third topic with the title of another article by James Barr, ‘The Bible as a political document’ or the title of John Yoder’s paper during the same conference, ‘The Bible and civil ordering and reordering’. In order to emphasise the role of the reading communities, I suggest we speak of ‘The Bible as a document of society’.

This leaves us with a broad outline for a threefold typology of reading communities with different interpretive interests, with different reasons why they read, interpret and use the texts we call the New Testament, with different views of these documents: The Bible as document of believing communities, the Bible as document of society, and the Bible as document of the university.

Broadly speaking, this reflects the historical order in which these communities with their diverse interpretive interests developed: At first, Christian believing
communities used these documents, in a variety of ways, for religious purposes. When and where Christianity became a dominant or official religion, more and more groups used these documents, in a variety of ways, for public, social, political purposes. Since the founding of universities, and through the successive radical philosophical and institutional changes that universities experienced, groups within these universities have read these documents, in a variety of ways, for scholarly purposes.

Georgi's plea for a proper 'social history of biblical criticism' would indeed include that we take these developments much more seriously than before, that we do not merely study 'the history of interpretation' in the sense of the historical developments of 'methods' or 'approaches' (cf e.g Grant & Tracy, A short history of the interpretation of the Bible, as one example amongst many), but that we take the social conditions into proper consideration, that we ask who read the Bible, where, under which material conditions, and why, in whose interests, that we inquire into the 'soziale Genese der Probleme' (Bourdieu), that we write 'die Geschichte der Geschichtsforscher' (Péguy). There are, of course, many detail studies available on particular periods within the history of Biblical interpretation, but much still remains to be done. To mention just a few well-known examples: The Bible and its readers, Evans; The language and logic of the Bible: The earlier Middle ages, J LeClercq; The love of learning and the desire for God. A study of monastic culture, J Romer's Channel Four Book; Testament. The Bible and history, The study of the Bible in the Middle Ages, B Smalley; and recently H Karpp, Schrift, Geist und Wort Gottes. Geltung und Wirkung der Bibel in der Geschichte der Kirche—von der Alten Kirche bis zum Ausgang der Reformationszeit. Studying the New Testament as historical document should include studying the New Testament in history.

For our present purposes, a few general reminders must suffice. For these, the threefold typology may be a useful heuristic device. Within each of the three categories of reading communities, a wide variety of more particular interpretive interests can obviously be distinguished. I would therefore simply like to remind us of some of the diverse positions within each of the three, and to mention briefly some of the best-known defences of that approach available at the moment.

It is immediately clear that amongst believing communities reading the New Testament with religious interpretive interests, there exists a wide variety of viewpoints: There are many Christian communities confessing the Bible to be the Scriptures (but they may have widely divergent ways of reading these Scriptures, see e.g The Bible in the churches. How different Christians interpret the Scriptures, edited by Hagen). There are people claiming that the Bible is the Word of God (and they themselves represent a wide spectrum of viewpoints, from, on the one extreme, Protestant fundamentalism, with claims about an inspired, inerrant, literal and authoritative text, as described by Kathleen Boone in The Bible tells them so. The discourse of Protestant fundamentalism, to far less fundamentalist claims and no-
tions). There are people who regard the Bible as a sacred and revelatory text (see the extremely clear and useful *The revelatory text. Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, by Sandra Schneiders). There are people who appeal to the Protestant sola scriptura principle (see the useful collection of studies in *Sola Scriptura. Das reformatorische Schriftprinzip in der sakularen Welt*, edited by Schmid & Mehlhausen). There are people who call the Bible the book of God (see e.g. the proceedings of a recent Arnoldshainer conference, published as *Das Buch Gottes: elf Zugänge zur Bibel*). There are people who approach the Bible as the book of the Church (see Phyllis Bird's popular but instructive *The Bible as the Church's Book*). There are people who regard the Bible as canon (see e.g. Childs and his supporters, or G. Meier et al). There are many people who appeal to the authority of the Biblical texts in all kinds of contexts, particularly ethical and doctrinal discussions, saying 'The Bible says...' (see Kelsey's well-known and still very helpful analysis in *The uses of the Bible in Christian ethics*, and Smit 1991a and 1991b; as well as Gunton's 'Using and being used ...'). There are people who appropriate the Bible in the first place as a resource book for worship (in lectionaries, hymns, litanies, prayers) and specifically as a book to preach from (see e.g. the very interesting discussion of Bultmann's convictions in this regard in Hammann 1993); or as a resource book for spiritual reading, mostly private and meditative (see Muto, *A practical guide to spiritual reading*).

A very strong and instructive defense of this kind of interpretive interest is to be found in Fowl & Jones's *Reading in communion*. They argue that, in order to be able to read and understand the Scriptures, 'Christians need to develop the moral and theological judgement which enables faithful discernment of Scripture’s claims on contemporary life', and in order to develop such judgement, 'requires the formation and transformation of the character appropriate to the disciples of Jesus'. To be very clear: 'This requires the acquisition of a very different set of skills, habits and dispositions from those required of the professional biblical scholar... Christians develop such character in and through the friendships and practices of Christian communities' (1991:1-2).

The important point for our present purposes is that, in spite of all the obvious differences between these approaches, often causing fundamental differences in the reasons why and therefore also the ways in which these respective groups read the same Biblical documents, they share the same basic set of interpretive interests, namely that some kind of faith, belief, commitment or religion is necessary in order to read and understand these documents properly.

*Amongst communities reading the Bible primarily as a document of society,* one finds similar radical differences in perspective and emphasis. Representatives of a variety of liberation theologies want to read and appropriate the Bible in the service of socio-political liberation from real oppression. In order to do this, the Bible is seen as a weapon in the ideological power-struggle (see Mosala, and his explicit
rejection of the bourgeoisie and oppressive view of the Bible as ‘Word of God’), or as belonging to the poor (see Croatto’s study, of which the title is aptly translated into German as *Die Bibel gehört den Armen*). There are people who emphasise the importance of ‘popular’ readings of the Bible, in a limited, technical sense of readings by ‘ordinary’ people with a class consciousness. There are people who read the Bible from a particular collective experience, such as feminists (see *Ad femina*) or black people. There are people who read the Bible from the perspective of a particular nation (see the fascinating analysis of the Bible in American experience, formative American discourse and American religion by Mabee, *Reimagining America*; as well as Hauerwas’ rejection of this in *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from captivity to America*), or race, or ethnic group (see Cilliers’ fascinating study of Afrikaner sermons *God met ons*). There are people who claim the Bible to be and read it as primarily a cultural document, a formative document in Western culture, history and society (see Frye’s *The great code*; *Words with power*, and *The double vision*; or works by Kermode, Alter and Sternberg). The Bible is therefore often called a ‘classic’. There are people who appropriate the Bible as a source of inspiration for literature, theatre, art, poetry, cultural expression. There are people who emphasise the role of (both receptive and creative) imagination in reading the Bible. A powerful example of this approach is Josipovici’s *The Book of God. A response to the Bible*, with the premise ‘we have to trust the book itself and see where it will take us’.

Again, in spite of all these crucial differences, there remains a common interpretive interest: In terms of these approaches, people read the Bible in the first place neither for religious nor for scholarly purposes. They all have some other interest, whether personal or social, whether political or aesthetic, in reading the Bible. Neither faith nor academic tools are necessary for the reading the Bible. In fact, they may often be a hindrance.

Finally, between communities reading the Bible as a document of the university, there are equally fundamental differences. It is not necessary to deal with them in our context. We all know that both the institutional setting (seminary; department/school/faculty of religion or theology or divinity; department/school/faculty of religious studies; faculty of arts or social sciences; departments of languages, history or culture) and the methods or approaches towards the text lead to important differences. Still, the interpretive interest shared by these communities is a scholarly one, the conviction that neither religious convictions nor social interests should determine objective, scientific interpretation.

We are all aware of the unlimited number of conflicts that are caused by the tensions between these three types of reading communities. Some of us experience some of these conflicts in very personal ways: as ministers of religion, as teachers of theology, as people involved in social and political struggles, as scholars.

To the members of the Hermeneutics group these tensions and conflicts have
increasingly become an urgent problem to be faced. One example can suffice: Recently, Phil Robinson and myself analyzed a large number of South African religious documents on war, violence and peace, to see how the Bible, and specifically Luke-Acts, is used in these documents (Robinson & Smit 1991). The results were remarkable: These public documents use references from Luke-Acts with total disregard of everything that scholars, both from historical and literary perspectives, and religious exposition, may say about the role of these issues in Luke-Acts. The question we face is: Is this acceptable, or is some kind of dialogue between the different communities or discourses necessary, and possible?

3 INTERPRETING IN DIALOGUE, OR NOT?

Practising contextual hermeneutics is of necessity a collective task... Our own discourses can become enslaving and restrictive... (Lategan)

I have started the paper with the suggestion that the prevailing mood in the Hermeneutics group of the NTSSA can be summarised in the recognition that 'the historical situation of contemporary exegetes and their social conditions' are important, that we should consciously reflect on them and should seriously consider their implications for what we are doing.

What is at stake is the integrity of what we are doing, the integrity of New Testament interpretation in South Africa. In their influential Final Report on the Future of Theological Education Research in the USA, Barbara Wheeler and David Kelsey use the expression 'integrity' in their proposal for revisioning. They say: ‘We suggest the theme of integrity in the hope that it will force... the asking of important questions about vocation, focus and the good of the whole that are likely to be suppressed in the current competitive market’. They explicitly affirm that ‘these questions will take different forms at different levels, but... all point to the same ultimate goal’. Amongst other things, integrity means that fragmentation must be avoided, that coordination becomes important, that the goal of comity and mutual support must be restated, that integration and coherence are necessary, that a clear sense of purpose and direction is needed. In their words: ‘“Integrity” leaves room for difference, but it does imply the commitment of a community to some guiding principles, as well as some deliberate effort to bring the various parts and facets of an institution’s life into relationship with each other’ (Wheeler & Kelsey 1990:44).

Perhaps we are currently challenged to make decisions on these issues as well. Precisely the fact that we have gradually become more aware that other communities of interpretation are reading the same texts that we are engaged in, in ways that differ from what we are doing and from what we often take for granted, challenges us to respond to them. We are involved in ‘New Testament interpretation’. The expression itself reminds us of the existence of other communities that read the same texts. The expression ‘New Testament’ reminds us of the Bible, of the church, of
communities of faith, of the Christian tradition, of worshipping communities, of other groups of Christian theologians, etc. The expression ‘interpretation’ reminds us that other people are reading, using, meditating, appropriating, studying, loving, quoting these same texts with other ‘interpretive interests’ than we are. ‘Interpretation’ may seem to many of them a secondary, even an unnecessary exercise.

The present challenge is: How are we going to respond to the existence of these other reading-communities?

Obviously the challenge should also be put to the other communities of interpretation. How do groups with (diverse) religious interpretive interests respond to the presence of scholarly interpretations and public appropriations of the same texts in South Africa? And how do groups with (diverse) public interpretive interests respond to the presence of religious readings and scholarly interpretations of the same texts in South Africa? These questions are extremely important. They can be broken down into detailed questions with serious implications for church, academic and public life in South Africa today. But they are not—for the moment—directed at other audiences. We should concern ourselves with the questions as we face them: How are we going to respond?

Generally speaking, there are three types of responses possible, each of them representing a wide-ranging variety of positions: to ignore the other communities, to regard one's own group's work as somehow superior, or to enter into serious dialogue with the other.

The first possibility is simply to ignore the existence of other communities of interpretation, to continue with business-as-usual, to take the conventions, the practices, the questions, the methods and the results, of one's own interpretive community for granted and as sufficient.

On the one extreme this might either mean that South African New Testament scholarship is not interested at all in other ways of reading the Bible, or on the other extreme that we accept their existence as given, perhaps even as necessary and important, but that we do not think that it should influence our conventions and practices in any significant way.

For individual scholars that might even imply a double—(or triple) kind of life, an almost schizophrenic existence as reader and interpreter of the Bible. They may be diligently playing the role of Biblical scholar, while at the same time they may be preaching on Sundays according to completely different conventions from the same pericopes, or quoting the Bible in ecclesial or socio-political documents and debates again according to a different set of discursive practices. A minister and well-known member of the NTSSA recently told me that he never preaches from the Gospel on which he is writing his dissertation, because he knows too much about it and is no longer able to preach from it with intellectual honesty.

Ignoring the other communities of interpretation might mean that we train our students to become Biblical scholars themselves, that we teach them the skills of our
trade, expect of them to understand the institutional problems and to use the conventional methods of the establishment of Biblical scholarship, without seriously considering the possibility that they may be studying to read the Bible primarily in religious communities or in public life. It might mean that we focus in our research on whatever problems suit and serve our scholarly interests, that we take seriously only those ways of interpreting the Biblical texts that conform to our currently accepted scholarly paradigms. It might mean that we publish primarily to keep the scholarly establishment going; in jargon that only we understand; in journals and other genres that only we read; papers read at conferences which only we attend; on questions of such sophistication that only we are interested in them and which can, luckily, never be solved; in present-day South Africa perhaps primarily as offerings to 'the god of the subsidy', in Eben Scheffler's famous words. It might mean that the only community service we render is to our own community, that the only public we address is the circle of our own specialized colleagues and the only future we are interested in is the future of our own trade.

For the establishment of Biblical scholarship, such a view of 'contextual hermeneutics' might imply: We have our own context. We are scholars, reading the Bible for our own reasons. We are happy with that. We are not interested in what people in other life-contexts or social locations do with the Bible and we do not expect them to be interested in what we are doing.

This description is not at all meant to be pejorative or insulting. It is simply a factual description of the present state of affairs in many academic disciplines, of what Habermas calls the 'pathology of modernism'. According to him, this pathology manifests itself in a double alienation: specialists are increasingly alienated from their colleagues in other fields, even closely related ones, and the academic world as such is increasingly alienated from everyday life.

Perhaps it is fair to say that the NTSSA as such has, in recent years, become increasingly aware of the problematic nature of such a situation. There are many indications of this awareness in the Society. One example may suffice: in 1992 a special session of the Annual Meeting was committed to having an open and in-depth discussion on the future of New Testament scholarship in South Africa and of the Society itself. At the 1993 meeting the Executive served a report, based on this discussion, in which a sixfold alienation (i a from students, colleagues, and society at large) was described as a major challenge to the Society.

Part of this alienation that must be faced and overcome is the alienation from other reader communities. This brings us to the second and third types of possible responses. If the establishment of New Testament scholarship no longer ignores the presence of these communities, how could they relate to them?

The second possible response is to regard one of the social locations, one of the communities, as primary, as superior, as better, as more legitimate. Again, this kind of preference can take many different forms.
One option is to regard ecclesial and religious contexts as primary and more legitimate. In the extreme, this could imply that scholars want to challenge the conventions and practices of scholarship so that it will once again regard itself as in the service of religion, faith, the church, tradition, theology, or even a particular denomination. ‘Faith’ is contrasted with ‘criticism’. Faith, either in an institutional-hierarchical, or a traditional-doctrinal, or an inspirational-individualistic way, serves as epistemological privilege. Those with faith are the proper and legitimate interpreters of the Biblical documents.

A second option is to regard social, cultural, political or economical contexts as primary and more legitimate. In the extreme, it could then be expected of scholarship to serve the interests of apartheid, or the struggle, or the New South Africa. The socio-political ‘relevance’ of the scholarship guarantees its legitimacy. A particular community of readers amongst the poor, constituted of so-called uninformed or lay readers in a township, might for example almost come to be regarded as normative for legitimate usage of the Bible. The epistemological privilege then belongs to the poor. Those who are poor are the proper and legitimate interpreters of the Biblical documents.

A third option is to regard the scholarly context as the proper and most legitimate context. That is where the Biblical documents are read responsibly. That is where the true meaning is found, where the legitimate reading procedures are followed, that is where proper exegetical methods are employed. The scholarly impimatur guarantees the seriousness and the quality of readings. The epistemological privilege then belongs to the Biblical scholars. They are the legitimate interpreters of the Bible. They are expected to try their utmost to influence the religious and public discourses whenever the Bible is being used there. They do this primarily by criticising the improper and irresponsible ways the Biblical documents are used, but also by trying to change the discursive practices in these contexts, by teaching the ecclesial and public theologians, the ordinary believers and the ordinary citizens how to read the Biblical documents responsibly.

It is clear that this second possibility represents what has been called an advocacy stance. Not conversation, but commitment is needed; not dialogue, but persuasion. In all its variations, the superiority of one social location is accepted and the conversion of the other communities expected.

For the establishment of Biblical scholarship, this view of ‘contextual hermeneutics’ could either imply that the scholarly conventions and discursive practices are criticised in the name of ecclesial, religious or political interests, or that vice versa continuous attempts are made by the scholarly community to influence church, religion and society.

Deciding between different social locations with opposing interpretive interests then becomes a question of authority, a question of power, in short, a political issue, a question of commitment, advocacy and persuasion. In the words of Fowl and
Jones (1991:16):

It is clear that a generalized theory or method of interpretation is not going to provide an answer. Rather, our claim is that an answer (to the important question, ‘What interpretive interest should one pursue in any given situation’) will only be found within the political constitution of the various contexts in which interpretation takes place. There is no interpretive practice which is free of some kind of political presumptions. Hermeneutics is inevitably, though not restrictively, a ‘political’ discipline.

There is, however, also a third possible response, namely that of dialogue, of conversational listening, sharing and learning. This seems to be e.g. the direction of Lategan’s thinking. In ‘Aspects’ (1994) he includes at least three different references in this vein. He comments on ‘Exegesis as an ecumenical challenge’:

It is clear that a contextual hermeneutics can only succeed within an ecumenical context...in daring to become specific, it needs the control and correction of other situations and interpretations. Practising contextual hermeneutics is of necessity a collective task. This applies especially to the South African situation, where our worlds are so far apart that we often despair in bridging them (1994:28).

He also mentions the ‘plurality of audiences’ as one of the challenges facing South African theology in the nineties:

It is not only the first readers, but also the present readers that confronts us with the issue of plurality. The insights of audience criticism and reader response theory have still not been fully exploited for the South African situation, especially their significance for sociological variations and class distinctions. The concept of the ‘interpretive community’, which was developed by Fish primarily with a literary purpose in mind to find an instance of stability in view of the perceived instability of the text, has analogical possibilities when reading in a context of ideological conflict’ (1994:19).

When he situates this in an even wider cultural context and addresses what he calls the ‘challenge of post-modernism and its rejection of any form of foundationalism’, he claims:

What we have to realize, is that our critical activity depends on the prior acceptance of codes and rules within a particular interpretive community. Every reading can be challenged by a counter-reading if the reader uses some ingenuity. It is only when there is a will to a constructive reading of the biblical text that a constructive dialogue becomes possible (1994:24).

Whether one sees the situation in terms of ever-widening concentric circles of ecumenism, a plurality of audiences or post-modernism, the basic challenge remains
the same: How do we respond to the presence of other interpretive communities reading ‘our texts’ with completely different interpretive interests and according to completely different discursive strategies? One possibility is that of conversation, of listening and learning, and dialogue.

Perhaps the most relevant present question is: Do we have this will to a constructive reading of the Biblical text? And are we interested at all in a constructive dialogue with other reader communities of the same text?

It is not only South African Biblical scholars that are taking these challenges seriously. In the circles of systematic theology, especially amongst Catholic and evangelical scholars, critical voices have been raised for a long time. Recently, particularly scholars working in Latin American, black, feminist and African contexts have put these questions on the academic agendas. Carlos Mesters has almost popularised the challenge in his well-known work, e.g. in his delightful parable on the beautiful but uninhabited house (see Dawsey 1990). In Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's SBL presidential address she made a powerful plea for the ‘de-centering’ of Biblical scholarship. The theme of the 1993 meeting of the SBL's 'Bible in Africa, Asia and Latin America' group, initiated and co-chaired by Phyllis Bird, was ‘Popular and academic interpretations of the Bible: What meeting place and whose terms?’ Daniel Patte and Gary Phillips have been involved in a major research project ‘Ethical responsibilities and practices in Biblical criticism’ (1993). Vanderbilt University hosted a conference on ‘Reading from this place: Social location and Biblical interpretation’.

The programme of the 1994 meeting of the NTSSA also reflects these sentiments: We have invited Phyllis Bird to introduce us to the issues by addressing us on the topic of ‘Authority and context in the interpretation of Biblical texts’ and Gerald West to do the same by speaking on ‘The Bible and the ordinary reader’.

A number of methodological and epistemological papers will be presented: Johannes Vorster will discuss the epistemic status of rhetoric, Andries van Aarde the epistemic status of the New Testament and the nature of ‘engaged hermeneutics’ and Helena Glanville feminist hermeneutics. Jan Botha will ask how we ‘read’ a context and Daan Cloete will raise some questions and make some suggestions regarding the widespread awareness of the contextual nature of Biblical interpretation in South Africa today.

A few empirical studies are also included: We have asked Rensia Robinson, who completed a doctoral dissertation on the diverse ways in which Biblical material is used by well-known Afrikaans poets, Poësie en bybelse intertek, to illustrate this by using Antjie Krog’s ‘Die Jerusalemgangers’. Bernard Combrink will look at the use of a particular New Testament document in South Africa during the last few decades.

Some members will reflect on the influence of particular institutional contexts on our readings and on the relationship between reading and ethics: Hermie van Zyl
will raise the issue of reading the New Testament within a theological faculty and Welile Mazamisa oral transmission and appropriation as contextual hermeneutics. Ben du Toit will discuss the issue of the ethics of reading a text from the New Testament and Elna Mouton and Wim Vergeer respectively will address the question of reading Ephesians and Colossians ethically and legitimately. Finally, Bernard Lategan will provide some directions in his discussion of an integrative approach.

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