READING EPHESIANS ETHICALLY: CRITERIA TOWARDS A RENEWED IDENTITY AWARENESS?

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**ABSTRACT**

By exploring different aspects of an 'ethical' reading of a New Testament document, this paper is concerned with the challenge of an integrated, relevant approach towards understanding the letter to the Ephesians—an approach which would account for its nature as ancient canonised text, as well as the needs of contemporary readers. By way of illustration, the identity and roles of different groups of people referred to in the text are re-examined in terms of the rhetorical function of the letter as a whole.

Why start with 'an ethics of interpretation' when we are actually concerned with the concrete needs of people in South Africa? Why not start with something like 'a Biblical perspective on violence and injustice against women'? The answer is simply because such a 'Biblical foundation' in itself would be no guarantee that what followed would be more Biblical than if such critical reflection were absent. One primary reason being that we all involuntarily read from within a specific socio-historical context, and then project our own convictions back into the Bible (Bosch 1980:43). 'It is true', says Gerald West (1991:6), 'that the point, and, indeed, the cry in South Africa, is not to interpret the world but to change it'. He then quotes David Tracy: 'But, we will change too little, and that probably too late, if we do not *at the same time change our understanding of what we mean when we so easily claim to interpret the world* (italics EM).

Reading the New Testament ethically can refer to a wide range of issues. For the purpose of this paper the focus is on two closely related, yet distinguishable, subjects, viz

* the ethics of responsible New Testament interpretation; and
* (as concrete expression of the former) the implied ethical effect of a New Testament document.

Recent developments in the fields of literary theory, philosophy of science, and Biblical studies, reveal a remarkable interest in the ethics of interpretation. This coincides with a major shift in hermeneutical discussions—from emphasis on origins and text production, via preservation and mediation, to text reception and
interpretation (cf Lategan 1984). The current emphasis could be ascribed to a range of factors, such as socio-political developments, epistemological shifts in the human sciences, and the intellectual and philosophical climate of the late twentieth century. Whatever the causes may be, it is clear that the ethos and integrity of Biblical scholarship is at stake (cf Smit 1988, 1992).

It was especially J Hillis Miller (1987a:3; cf Botha 1991:2) who claimed that the ethics of reading is fundamental to any literary study. To describe the reading process as particularly ethical, refers to the wide range of choices (Biblical) readers continually have to make: Why and how are we using the Biblical text to justify our beliefs and practices? Do we allow the text to speak for itself, and to continually surprise us in its 'otherness' (cf Tracy 1991:96), or is it perhaps used as a mere (unconscious) projection of our fears, hopes and desires?

Furthermore, if we acknowledge it as the canon of the Christian faith, what role should it play in our understanding of reality, and our role in society today? What is its authority (supposed to be) for our theological and ethical explanations? And even more seriously: Should we still use these texts (as embedded in an androcentric Mediterranean setting) to encourage, comfort and empower people in the critical and democratising context of a post-modern society, and if so, how should we do it?

These questions form part of the choices readers always and necessarily make, whether consciously and deliberately or not, before, during and after the reading process. This recognition forces us to consider, and give account of, the basis for our choices—especially in the light of the great diversity which characterises the methodology of New Testament interpretation.¹

The choices readers make are influenced by many factors, as, for example, their personality, abilities, and perception of the nature of the object. Hence, the experience and interpretation of faith (from any specific paradigm) is recognised as relational. Accounting for the complexity of relations involved in reading a text, would (in twentieth-century terms) be synonymous to exploring the communication processes underlying those relations.²

¹ Although these can positively refer to the wealth of different creative and complementing perspectives, it can also be seen negatively as a moral problem of diverging interpretations (cf Rousseau 1986:4,5)—a crisis which has become most acutely embarrassing with regard to ethical questions (cf Lategan 1982, 1984; Rousseau 1986:4-28; Mack 1990:13-14; Botha 1991:3-4).

² If we as Biblical scholars use the Bible to warrant our faith utterances (specifically in terms of Christian ethics), our first methodological responsibility would be to explain the hermeneutical journeys which we (by implication) undertake when we choose the Biblical texts as norm for our lives
* from our (understanding of the) situation, i.e., the context, presuppositions and needs of contemporary readers;
* to the Biblical text (and our understanding of its nature and intention);
* and eventually back from 'then' to 'now', using the Biblical text as criterion for decision-making and problem-solving in a contemporary situation.
In the case of the New Testament genre of letters, the implied pragmatic effect was, generally speaking, to respond to the needs of particular individuals or communities, and to persuade the reader(s) to bring about changes (of attitude and behaviour) in their situations. As the Bible is primarily concerned with a dynamic relationship between the living God and people within the reality of everyday life, it calls (in accordance with its very nature and intention) for an interpretation with a view to life.

1 AN INTEGRATED ETHICS OF READING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

In the context of Biblical scholarship, questions concerning the ethics of interpretation (cf Botha 1991:17-18; Smit 1991) were most pertinently brought to the fore by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1988). She stated (1988:4-5) that much of what had been done during the previous fifteen years in Biblical studies, particularly in the adoption of insights and methods of literary studies and philosophical hermeneutics, resulted in the Bible being read like any other great book, the greatness of which does not consist in its accuracy as a biographical record of facts, but in its symbolic power to transfigure human experience and reality. She was also of opinion that this literary-hermeneutical paradigm was at that stage in the process of decentering into another paradigm which inaugurated a rhetorical-ethical return, emphasising the public responsibility of Biblical scholarship.

Contrary to the tendency in formalist literary criticism to emphasise a text at the expense of its context, a critical theory of rhetoric insists that context is equally important, and that one's social location is decisive for how one constructs reality, or interprets texts (Botha 1991:20). If Biblical scholars assume responsibility for relevant interpretation in relation to the context of contemporary readers, questions such as the following become central: Whose interests are served? What roles, duties, and values are advocated? Such questions, Fiorenza (1988:14-15) maintains, require a double ethics, an ethics of historical reading and an ethics of accountability.³

1.1 An ethics of (historical) reading

According to Fiorenza (1988:14), an ethics of historical reading asks what kind of reading can do justice to the text in its historical context. Botha (1991:38-42) broadens this notion to an ethics of reading. This ties up with Miller (1987b:284) who is concerned with ‘respecting any text discussed, 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

³ For the American and South African responses to Fiorenza’s provocative address, see Smit 1990a, 1990b; Botha 1991:22-33.
wants it to say or from what received opinion says’ (cf Fiorenza 1988:5).

1.2 An ethics of accountability

An ethics of accountability holds the interpreter responsible not only for the choice of theoretical interpretive models, but also for the ethical consequences of the Biblical text and its meanings (Fiorenza 1988:15). As prerequisite for deriving ethical imperatives from a text whilst respecting its linguisticity, Botha (1991:40) suggests that such decisions form part of an active dialogical intertextual discourse, located in the interpretive community and the whole process of interaction taking place in the reading process, not purely in the text.

My own understanding of an ethics of interpretation wishes to pay due respect to both the ‘otherness’ of the Biblical text and the context of contemporary audiences, as well as the conversational relationship between the two (cf Tracy 1991:96; Rousseau 1986:390-424). I agree with Botha (1991:8,38-39) and Rousseau (1986:42) that such an act of careful reading should precede any claims about text-extrinsic relations—be they ancient or post-modern matters of history, society or the self. I do not intend to develop a new method of interpretation. As a theoretical point of departure, I shall use some basic insights from different communication theories and models, and try to integrate them according to the multidimensional nature of textual communication and reality as a whole (cf Lategan 1988:69).

In concurrence with Fiorenza’s double ethics of interpretation, Rousseau (1986:19-28) phrases the main scientific challenges with regard to credible Biblical interpretation, as the search for

* a sufficient hermeneutical theory (and practice!), which would account for the needs and role of readers in the processes of (ancient and later) interpretation; and

* (an) adequate exegetical method(s), which would do justice to the multifacetedness of the Biblical text, and thus respect its unique nature and intention.

The urgent need, as I see it, is to develop these approaches *in tandem* (cf Hays 1990:43). The cardinal realisation that the Biblical documents have to be understood according to their own nature and intention, evidently leads to the conviction that these documents (like any communication event) function on different levels, at least with regard to a linguistic-literary level, a socio-cultural or historical level, and a theological or rhetorical level (cf Lategan 1982:50-52; Rousseau 1986:41-43).  

4 These levels are applicable to the network of relations in any communication process: the linguistic-literary level is represented by the message and medium by means of which it is conveyed, the historical level by the language of the text and its reference, as well as
2 READING EPHESIANS FROM A LINGUISTIC-LITERARY PERSPECTIVE

A linguistic-literary analysis concentrates on the available information within the text, as the author's construction of his/her 'world' and that of his/her readers (cf Ricoeur 1976:36). Although the Biblical text was handed over in a static form, it nevertheless reveals a specific relief of structural markers (themes, metaphors, traditions, etc) and pivotal points. Their occurrence, as well as their underlying coherence and function, needs to be explored.

2.1 Structural coherence

For the identification of major structural elements, the demarcation of pericopes, and the underlying macrostructures of the Ephesians epistle, we are greatly indebted to the detailed discourse analyses by Johnnie Roberts (1991, first edition 1983 in Afrikaans) and his student Richard Lemmer (1988). I chose Roberts' outline (1991:18-19) to serve as basis for further reference to the macrocontext of Ephesians.6

Most scholars who have devoted time to the structure of Ephesians, agree that it can be divided into four sections, namely the opening (1:1-2), the body—consisting of a first and second main section (1:3-3:21 and 4:1-6:20 respectively), and the ending (6:21-24; Roberts 1991:14; Lemmer 1988:addendum). The second main section primarily consists of paraenetic elements, which are interwoven with theological and Christological motivations, and intrinsically linked to, and informed by, the first main section.

Schematically, the broad structural coherence of the letter can be presented as follows:

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the persons and worlds of the senders and receivers, whereas the rhetorical level pertains to the senders' strategy to persuade the receivers, and the receivers' openness to be persuaded by it.

5 Because I shall mainly deal with the author and addressees of Ephesians as enscriptured or rhetorical (and not necessarily historical) categories (cf 2.3), I shall henceforth refer to these as the (encoded or implied) 'author' and (implied) 'readers', written in single inverted commas.

# STRUCTURAL COHERENCE OF EPHESIANS

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The direction of the discourse, the arrangement of units of thought, and the concentration of metaphors and traditional material, thrust—in my view—pericopes IV and VII to the fore as the pivotal points of the two main sections. I briefly substantiate this by dealing with the immediate contexts of these two pericopes.

## 2.1.1 The first main section (Eph 1:3-3:21)

A discourse analysis of the first main section brings a number of primary elements to light (Roberts 1991:15). As indicated in the table above, these form an extended chiastic structure, which emphasises the recurring elements, and in par-

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7 Pericope IV forms the centre of the chiasm in Ch 1-3, and VII functions as a heading for Ch 4-6.

Pericope III, which directly leads to the climax of pericope IV, consists of two intercessory prayers. Of importance is the second prayer (1:18-21) which comprises three petitions linked to the request for inner enlightenment. These petitions summarise the understanding which the 'author' wishes his 'readers' to obtain: the hope God's calling brings, the wealth of glory contained in his inheritance in the saints, and the immensity of his power. Verses 19b-21 elaborate on this last petition (cf the four almost synonymous uses of power in v 19: δυναμις, ἐνέργεια, κράτος, ἰσχύς). Structurally the focus is on Christ's ultimate authority, especially the power of his exaltation (Lincoln 1990:61). In this sense, pericope III fulfils an important strategic function in guiding the 'readers' toward a new vision of God and themselves (cf Mouton 1993).

The structure of 1:22 reveals a remarkable contrast: 'God placed all things under his feet' (ὑπέταξεν ὑπὸ 22a), and 'appointed him to be head over everything' (ὑπὲρ πάντα 22b; cf 'far above all rule', ὑπεράνω—21a). This usage underlines the author's concern to emphasise the supremacy of Christ's heavenly status (cf 1:10). It is noteworthy that the strategic verb ὑποτίσεω (1:22) recurs in the second main section (5:21,24), and seems to reflect not only the essence of the relationship between Christ and the church, but also amongst the members of the body itself (cf semantically related terms such as φοβέομαι—5:33; ὑπακούω—6:1,5; τιμῶ—6:2).

Syntactically, the weight of 1:22 falls on the ἐκκλησία (Lincoln 1990:67,73,77), an emphasis which continues in the two descriptive clauses in v23. Although the triumphant theology and Christology of 1:19-22 appear to be the focal point of the prayer, it is important to follow the direction of the author's thought (cf Barth 1974a:145-210). He stresses that what God has done in Christ is towards those who believe (1:19; 5:25). The rhetorical function of the whole prayer is indeed that the 'readers' may know and experience God in the power of the resurrected and exalted Christ, and redefine themselves in the light of their relation to Him.\footnote{The meaning for πλήρωμα that probably best fits the context, is to consider the church as the community which is filled and completed (in the sense of making complete provision for—Roberts 1991:59) by Christ's dynamic presence (cf 2:21,22; 3:17,19; Lincoln 1990:80; Barth 1974a:183-210).}

In sum, the confession of 1:22-23 deals with two matters: the exalted position of Jesus as resurrected and sovereign lord, and his significance as gift of salvation to the believers. The second aspect defines the first in a surprising way. In the broad context of Ephesians, Christ's power (as lord and head) is decisively, but paradoxically defined in terms of his sacrificial love and care (as servant—cf references to his death, blood and cross: 1:7,20; 2:13,16; 4:32; 5:2,25,29).
This paradoxical nature of Christ's power decisively determines the readers' ethos, which is primarily dealt with in the second main section. Their lifestyle should be characterised by the style of his reign, i.e., by works of service (cf. 4:12). They should be 'kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave (them)' (4:32; cf. 5:2). The metaphors of head, body and fullness in 1:22-23 (cf. 3:19; 4:12-16; 5:29-30) thus seem to function as major 'shifting devices', thrusting the readers' thoughts towards a new understanding of their ethos in Christ.

The confession of 1:22-23 leads to three conclusions regarding the new identity of the (Gentile) readers in chapter two (2:1-10, 11-18, 19-22). Because of what God has done in Christ (1:3-14), those who were formerly dead in their sins, have been made alive with Christ, and seated with Him in the heavenly realms (2:1-10). Those who were previously without power and status, excluded from citizenship in Israel and aliens to the covenant (2:12; cf. Ezekiel 1:5-12; 2:19), have been brought near and became fellow-citizens of God's household (οἰκείοι τοῦ θεοῦ 2:19).

2.1.2 The second main section (Eph 4:1-6:20)
The structural and semantic coherence between the two main sections is inter alia indicated by conjunctions such as οὖν, τούτων οὖν, and διὸ in 4:1, 17, 25; 5:15 (introducing pericopes VII, IX, X and XI). These conjunctions indicate these pericopes as a direct consequence of what was said before. The admonitions which are to follow in chapters 4-6 are indeed motivated by God's redemptive work in Christ, which He had already given to the church (Eph 1-3; 4:32-5:2).

The second main section consists of three major parts, namely

* exhortations, related to the new life in Christ, directed to the church (4:1-16);
* exhortations and conclusions about the principle of the new life on a more personal level (4:17-6:9); and
* a call for armour and victory as conclusions from the previous two sections (6:10-20).

The first pericope, VII (4:1-6), directly links the two main sections by introducing the central theme of this section: παρακαλῶ ὦν ὑμᾶς ἀξίως περιπατῆσαι τῆς κλῆσεως ἡς ἐκλήθητε (4:1).³

The essence of Ephesians 1-3 (a new identity awareness in relationship with Christ) is thus explicated in terms of a life worthy of the implied readers' calling. The very first practical admonitions in this regard are the following: 'Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love' (4:2).

³ Cf. Hendrix 1988 for a very interesting discussion on the form and ethos of Ephesians as a reinterpretation of Greek and Roman honorific schemes.
Throughout this section, Christ’s power, qualified by his humility as sacrificial love, serves as ultimate motivation for their new behaviour (4:32–5:2, etc). The new life is thus characterised by the triumphant Lord’s creative presence (4:6,10; cf 1:23; 2:19,22; 3:17,19), represented by the work of the Spirit (4:3,4,30; 5:17,18; 6:17,18) and the unity of his body (4:1–16).

Pericope XI (Eph 5:15–6:9) illustrates the principle of the new life in terms of three different relationships: husband and wife, children and parents, slaves and masters. These (redescribed) relations reflect the ethos worthy of the implied readers’ new status, and have to be interpreted within that context. Admonitions such as ὑποτασσόμενοι ἀλλήλους (5:21,24), φοβήται (5:33), ὑπακούετε (6:1,5) and τίμω (6:2), to my mind indicate the essence of these relations. All these reflect an attitude of honour and reverence, respecting the other’s authority and status. In this sense the paradoxical example of Christ as servant-lord serves to empower and radically redefine these relationships. As head, Christ—by his paradoxical ethos—created a new body, a new humanity (4:24).

This view inter alia challenges our understanding of the suggested role of women, namely to ‘submit to (their) husbands as to the Lord’ (5:22). Seen in terms of the rhetorical function of the letter, this would refer to a new (paradoxical) status of beloved, empowered servants in Christ (5:21; 6:1,5). ‘Submitting’ to their husbands would therefore refer to the acknowledgement of both their own, and their husbands’ new identity in Christ, and their mutual submission to Him. On the other hand, the new status and ethos would equally apply to all members of Christ’s new community, whether they were Jews, husbands, parents, masters (4:16; 5:21,25,29; 6:4,9). Christ’s example would be to everyone according to his/her previous social status of either power or powerlessness.

2.2 Major identity- and behaviour-oriented elements

Recurring elements in Ephesians can be considered as signals towards understanding its communicative focal point. By implication the author’s choice of language was meant to thrust the ‘readers’ into a specific direction. A multitude of significant personal designations, purpose clauses (cf Mouton 1987:82,89) and other phrases pertaining to the new status and behaviour of the ‘author’ and

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10 As indicated, the nature of all these relationships is illustrated by a remarkable repetition of the expression ὡς/καθὼς/οὕτως...ὁ Θεὸς ἐν Χριστῷ ὁ Χριστὸς—4:32; 5:2,23,25,29; 6:5,6,7). This linguistic device represents a Greek stylistic figure called tertium comparationis, ‘the shared feature on which a comparison is based’ (Deist 1990:255). In Ephesians 4:32 and 5:2 the quality of the mutual relationship among members of the body of Christ is compared to, and substantiated by Christ’s sacrificial love for them. Sacrificial love thus serves as a tertium comparationis. In 5:23,25,29 the Christian husband’s role in the marriage relationship is compared to Christ’s relation to the church. Once again, the common feature is their sacrificial love and care for the ἐκκλησία/wife, which here may be said to serve as a tertium comparationis.
'readers' are found. In this regard, the discourse configuration by Lemmer (1988: addendum) is interesting and helpful.

Metaphors (and traditions as metaphorical expressions) are important elements of rhetorical persuasion in communication. The 'author' of Ephesians uses many potentially influential metaphors and traditions from his surrounding world (the Old Testament, Judaistic and Hellenistic environment) to explain his understanding of the crucified, resurrected and exalted Christ. Among these metaphors, Christological references (occurring in every pericope) stand out as dominant markers in the discourse. In the first main section these focus on different aspects of God's redemptive work, in Christ, for the 'readers' (cf 1:22-23). Their identification with Christ, in turn, was meant to bring about a radical shift in their behaviour.

2.3 The pragmatic function of a linguistic-literary reading
The purpose of a linguistic reading is concerned with the function or intended literary effect of the encoded author's choice and arrangement of specific linguistic and literary devices. These will be of great significance in the construction of the 'rhetorical situation' (4.1).

The letter genre leaves room for a combination of different techniques, e.g. narrative and argumentative (which could appeal to the emotional and cognitive senses of its readers). By identifying metaphors, one can to a large extent construct the encoded author's view of the implied readers' world, as well as the alternative he wanted to communicate (cf Rousseau 1986:246).

The metaphors in Ephesians reflect a sharp contrast between the old and new status of the 'readers', as well as the corresponding ethos of these positions. Therefore the intended literary effect has been established as the readers' focus on Christ (especially the power of his resurrection and exaltation), as well as their corresponding attitude of humility, submission and obedience.

3 READING EPSHESIANS FROM A SOCIO-HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE
A socio-historical analysis focuses on the relation amongst a text's internal elements, its relation to other texts, as well as the socio-cultural world to which it refers.11

The historical nature of New Testament writings presents itself in a variety of facets, namely a traditio- or text-historical, socio-cultural, and historical-literary

11 It is specifically with respect to the extratextual reference of NT documents, that the historical dimension of textual reality challenges later readers with the enormous responsibility to examine the Mediterranean socio-cultural 'world' of 2000 years ago—the ways of thinking and living to which the (for us often foreign) language and actants of the text refer (cf Rousseau 1986:65-66,277; Nida 1964:4-5).
facet (history of canonisation). The exploration of these has far-reaching implications for the understanding of the New Testament in general, and the formation of the early Christian communities' identity awareness and ethos in particular.

As far as the socio-historical macrocontext of Ephesians is concerned, it would be important to determine whether it formed part of the Pauline proclamation (the first written phase of the early church's interpretation of the Jesus event), or whether it belonged to the general proclamation of a deutero-Pauline period, in which case the designation of Paul as the 'author' might be a rhetorical device.

3.1 The 'historical situation' of Ephesians
In order to construct the 'historical situation' (cf Botha 1991:189), if possible, one will (at least) have to explore the socio-cultural circumstances in Asia-Minor during the first centuries CE, and in particular the sociological role and status of Greeks, Romans, Jews, (Jewish and Gentile) Christians, women, children and slaves, and the relation amongst these groups.

Although the position and roles of these groups may have differed in time and place, one can to a large extent assume that all, after joining the Christian movement, had to redefine their identity during the time of transition—a time in which old certainties and structures were being questioned. Ephesians seems to have functioned within this context, and with the intention of supplying people with new direction.12

3.2 The moral world of the early Christians
Before contemporary readers can start asking questions such as: How could or should the ethos of first-century Christians (as reflected in the ancient canonised documents) influence the moral lives of Christians of later centuries? (cf Smit 1991), we first have to ask: What did their 'moral world' look like and how did it work? How were they persuaded towards a new ethos? These are the questions which a sociological, historical and rhetorical analysis seeks to investigate. The emphasis by Wayne Meeks on the processes of reinterpretation as one possible way of dealing with these questions, is referred to here.

In his influential book The moral world of the first Christians, Meeks (1986a: 3,4; 1986b:12-39) discusses the necessity for New Testament scholars to try and understand something of the social processes that shaped the symbolic universe or 'moral world' which the early Christian communities shared with other people. An important way in which this could be achieved, is to look at their treatment of traditions (cf Meeks 1986a:7-8).

12 Regarding the socio-cultural embeddedness of the Biblical documents, it has to be borne in mind that these writings were composed and transmitted in an androcentric and patriarchal world. Its language is overwhelmingly androcentric, and therefore does not (necessarily) openly reflect an implied shift in human relations as advocated in this paper.
By investigating the communication processes within an ancient normative text, we acknowledge the reinterpretation of traditions as a natural and ongoing dialogue between human beings and their environment. Like us, the early Christians were also (consciously and unconsciously) influenced by their cultural-historical contexts, which inevitably determined the way in which they interpreted their world (cf Van Huyssteen 1986:196-202).

The communicative power of a document can be uniquely illustrated by the reinterpretation and creative contextualisation of metaphors and traditions in new circumstances. The early Christians' experience of the Christ event would have challenged their whole life and world view, and in particular their religious traditions. To retell the narrative of the past in such a way that new elements are discovered in the old history, is to utilise those dormant traditions as a shifting device in helping the readers to think of themselves and their world in a new way (cf Ricoeur 1976:51-53).13

3.3 The pragmatic function of a socio-historical reading
Fiorenza (1988:14) emphasises that a historical reading will allow us to relativise, through contextualisation, the values and authority claims of the Biblical texts, and to evaluate them critically. Secondly, it may determine the perspective from which an author selected, arranged and edited transmitted (oral and/or written) material, and from which s/he interpreted and redescribed her/his environment (cf Rousseau 1986:374-380; Rossouw 1980:23). It is therefore vital to the reinterpretation of the text by subsequent readers.

The purpose of a sociological reading would be to identify the dynamic processes of resocialisation underlying the formation of the Christian communities, and in particular the (probable) pragmatic function of Ephesians during these.

However fundamental socio-historical information for the understanding of a text might be (as an essential element of an ethics of interpretation), it would take us too far beyond the immediate scope of this paper. I therefore limit myself to text-internal information and the implied reader competence presumed by the 'author' of Ephesians. It has become clear that the Ephesians perspective is in the first place Christologically oriented, and aimed at the reorientation of the readers' identity awareness and ethos. This brings us to its persuading function and 'rhetorical situation'.

13 Therefore, the 'task of hermeneutical appropriation requires an integrative act of imagination. This is always so, even for those who would like to deny it: With fear and trembling we must work out a life of faithfulness to God through responsive and creative reappropriation of the New Testament in a world far removed from the world of the original writers and readers. Thus, whenever we appeal to the authority of the New Testament, we are necessarily engaged in metaphor-making, placing our community's life imaginatively within the world articulated by the texts' (Hays 1990:45-46; cf Bosch 1980:43-45).
4 READING EPHESIANS FROM A RHETORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The rhetorical dimension is concerned with the dialectic interaction among different elements of the communication process, and specifically as strategy to persuade. The ongoing persuasion and reception of these texts by subsequent readers form part of this decisive stage of communication, and therefore of the ethics of interpretation.

In order to grasp something of the persuasive power of Ephesians, we have to search for further textual evidence which may shed light on 'the issue that mattered' (Mack 1990:20)—the situation and needs which called for such a message.

4.1 The ‘rhetorical situation’ of Ephesians

Lloyd F Bitzer, who first introduced the concept of a ‘rhetorical situation’, defined it as

a complex of persons, events, objects and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence (Bitzer 1968:4-6; cf Kennedy 1984:34-35).

Quite often the exigence behind a document is not mentioned explicitly, simply because it would have been well-known to the original readers. For later readers to reconstruct this exigence would be impossible. The best we can do is to construct the most probable situation from the available sources, realising that such an attempt will always be determined by the reader's perspective, and therefore provisional and open to further discussion. In this regard I agree with Vorster's suggestion (1991:31) that the search for a document's purpose be relocated to the 'rhetorical' instead of the 'historical situation'.

For this reason contemporary readers of Ephesians may find it difficult to construct the exigence of its implied readers. It is nowhere stated explicitly. We simply have to read between the lines. Some linguistic pointers in such a direction have been identified in 2.1 and 2.2.

The possibility that Ephesians functioned as a circular letter (Roberts 1991:

14 According to this definition, the origin of the rhetorical situation (that which generates, creates, actualises it), is the notion of 'exigency' or 'exigence'. Bitzer (1968:6; cf Vatz 1973:156) states: 'Any exigence is an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing that is other than it should be.'

Defining the exigence, is not a matter of merely recognising specific living persons, 'objective' events, objects and relations within a concrete historical situation, and appropriating a specific strategy in solving that situation (an impression which one gets from Bitzer's definition—cf Vorster 1991:53-54; Vatz 1973:156). Epistemologically the 'rhetorical situation' is only possible through the (perspectivistic) perception and choices of a rhetor. The purpose of a letter can thus be described as the author's interest in, and response to such an exigence.
27-28) does not mean that the ‘author’ did not have a specific audience with concrete needs in mind. As a tentative point of departure, I suggest that its exigence be investigated as an imperfection concerning the implied readers' self-awareness. I accept the need as being a rhetorical (and not necessarily historical) reality of tension between Jewish and Gentile Christians, and in particular a disposition of inferiority among non-Jewish Christians (cf Wessels 1990:52-53; Roberts 1991:66-69; 75-76). Other social imbalances are implied by the redescriptions of relations between husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves. If this is the case, one can understand why so much emphasis is put on the work of Christ, and the nature (especially the unity) and ethos of the church.

4.2 Rhetorical strategies in Ephesians

Part of a rhetorical reading is to identify persuading strategies, and to explore how these function within the macro-context of Ephesians. Of all the possible rhetorical strategies which can be identified (cf Vorster 1992), I shall focus on the use of metaphors, and especially of Christ as symbol and model.

The wealth of sociological and religious metaphors and traditions employed by the ‘author’ serves as a window through which the processes of identification and estrangement can be viewed. To persuade the ‘readers’ toward a new identity awareness and ethos implies that they be guided from their everyday experience to a radically new way of thinking and doing. The thrust of this process is Christ's role as metaphor for God.

A linguistic analysis of Ephesians reveals superfluous references to Christ. It is doubtful whether these references were (only) meant to introduce Christ as a theological theme. In nearly every instance the confirmation of the implied readers' status is in focus. Christ's role thus puts into motion the main rhetorical argument, namely that the ‘readers’ have a new status in Him, and that such an honourable position should correspond with a particular behaviour (cf Hendrix 1988).

It is Christ who brought about the new era by destroying the ‘dividing wall of hostility’ through his cross (2:14-22). As the decisive element in creating the distinction between old and new, Christ in actual fact symbolises the power of God (1:5-6,7,9). In the confessional pronouncement of 1:20-23 it is explicitly stated that it was God's power which ensured Christ's position. As symbol of God's power, He is also symbol of the new community's strength and unity (2:20-22; 4:15,16). 'Identification with this symbol means sharing in and interacting with that which the symbol symbolises' (Vorster 1992:7). In this sense the many prepositional phrases identifying the readers' position ἐν Χριστῷ are indeed remarkable (1:3,10,12,15,20; 2:5-7,10,13; 3:6,11,21; 4:32).

However, Christ does not only function as a symbol, but also as a model inducing specific behaviour. While this strategic device confirms their new status
as a counteract of any inferiority they might have experienced, their new position of power should not be absolutised at the cost of the full nature of Christ's example. Ephesians pictures Christ as model particularly in terms of his servanthood.\textsuperscript{15}

The paradoxical aspect of Christ's position of power serves to emphasise the readers' identification with Him as servant. Like Him, they were called to serve, not only by (verbally) making known 'the manifold wisdom of God...to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms' (3:10), but also to live (non-verbally) as 'the theatre of God's works' (Barth 1974b:364). If they were to prove the quality of their new status as body of the resurrected Lord, they were meant to represent Him in the world (literally to make Him present). Thus their new status and conduct is brought into the closest possible relation (2:10; 4:1,17; 5:2,8,15).\textsuperscript{16}

Within the main argument of Ephesians, a life worthy of their calling (4:1) decisively replaces any possible (outward) identity markers which could serve as a 'dividing wall' (2:14) between the members of the one body of Christ.\textsuperscript{17} The practical ethos that would please God (1:6,12,14) and fit their new status, is described in terms of different values and relationships (within the church, society, marriage and family). It has a consistent Christological orientation (1:7; 2:16; 5:2,25).

Therefore, the essential starting point of all text strategies can be described as the delicate interaction between identification, alienation and reorientation, which is an ongoing process during the reading and rereading of a text (Rousseau 1986: 415-416). This is where, I believe, the transforming ability of a Biblical text lies.

5 CRITERIA TOWARDS A RENEWED IDENTITY AWARENESS

How then can an ancient canonised text be used by subsequent readers to direct their self-understanding and behaviour?

A hermeneutics of ethical responsibility challenges Biblical scholars in at least two ways. If we claim continuity with the past, we first have to appreciate these writings as an integral part of Christian tradition. To respond with sensitiv-

\textsuperscript{15} In a paradoxical way God's grace and love is revealed in Christ's blood and death on a cross. The sociologically shameful symbol of a cross is thus reinterpreted and turned into a symbol of honourable status.

\textsuperscript{16} Roberts (1978:169-177) explains how the ecclesiological viewpoint, which underlies the first main section, is perpetuated in the second. The paraenetical section starts with an exhortation (4:1-6) to maintain the unity of the church described in 1-3. From here the 'author' develops a picture of the ascended Christ, reigning over his people from a position of power and authority, and empowering them with certain gifts (4:7-11). This is followed by an exposition of the church's equipment and practical functioning under Christ as head of his body (4:11-16).

\textsuperscript{17} By emphasising the status of Gentile believers to that of Jewish Christians, the 'author' does not wish to induce conflict between the two groups, but to bring about compromise and harmony. The redescription of other roles referred to in the letter should also be viewed within this context.
ity to the rhetorical functions of these texts, is to account for their transformative power amidst their cultural-historical biases.

Our second task is to courageously reinterpret the essence and direction of these texts with regard to the needs of changed and changing societies. For most of us, this means taking one step at a time in refocusing ourselves according to a multi-vocal Biblical perspective. Whilst recognising the limitations and ethical implications of our interpretations, we must not lose sight of the radical and powerful force reflected by these writings. Again, in a paradoxical way, our 'hermeneutic of humility' has to be counterbalanced by 'a hermeneutic of transformation'.

The Bible does not supply direct, simple answers to moral questions. All that we do have, is the analogy of the early believers' wrestling to understand God's will for their lives (cf Lategan 1982:48; Hartin 1994:521-523). To engage in the conversation between 'reading' and 'accountability' is a moral choice. I believe we have the obligation to involve ourselves in the creative tension of the liminal space between the dynamics of biblical texts and the needs of contemporary readers.

The thrust of Ephesians has been indicated as the implied readers' empowerment through a renewed self-understanding and ethos. This is defined in relational terms—to Christ, and the community of believers as the body of Christ. To be in Christ, means to identify with Him in his power as lord, but also in his humility as servant. From this perspective the 'author' relativises past traditions and takes 'one decisive step' beyond the cultural-historical norms of his time.

I believe that Ephesians, in concurrence with the New Testament canon, suggests a dramatic shift in the understanding of God and humanity. Although, for

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18 The husband, for instance, is reminded that he is the head of the wife 'as Christ is the head of the church' (5:23). His position of authority is qualified by Christ's power as servant. The style of Christ's servitude is characterised by the power of his love—power which is paradoxically revealed in the 'weakness' of his suffering. To be submitted to his wife (5:21), and to love his wife 'just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her' (5:25), would imply a transformation in the husband's self-perception.

Likewise, the wife is encouraged to reclaim her primary identity in Christ, and be empowered by his example (as a paradoxical combination of power and 'weakness'). A major problem in the contextualisation of this text though, is that its androcentric language through the ages served to perpetuate patriarchal perspectives—in spite of suggested alternatives. Readings of Ephesians 5:21-33 often overemphasise the submissive role of the wife while underemphasising the nature of the love required by the husband. This occurs to the detriment of the direction and essence of Ephesians as a whole. Hence, Biblical scholars are challenged to account for the socio-cultural bias of a text and its language (i.e. the social superiority of men as cultural norm). Otherwise it will lose its inherent transformative power and continue to create a theological problem by representing both the nature of God and that of humanity in terms of predominantly male references.

This implies that different aspects of Christ's nature (either his power or submission) might have to be highlighted according to the need of different situations. Applications of the text might thus vary from context to context (cf Wessels 1989).
instance, structures of patriarchy and slavery are not directly addressed, radically new attitudes are encouraged. Christ's role as serving head of his body becomes the model for mutual respect and dignity, responsibility and freedom in all relations, which would implicitly replace any domination as the exploitation of authority.

As Christian believers in South Africa today we are challenged to allow the creative presence of God—the paradoxical in Christ experience—to redefine all relations by transcending every barrier. We are encouraged to identify with Christ in the triumph of his resurrection and exaltation, and to grow beyond all limited views of ourselves (in terms of sexism, racism, etc). To respect the transformative potential of Ephesians, would be to dedicate oneself to accomplishing the full potential of the body of Christ. Anything less would confine the God of Ephesians to the boundaries of an ancient canonised text in a way contradictory to its own nature.

At the same time we have to take the limitations of the language in terms of its time and culture seriously. The essence of the Bible's authority is that it contains the words and deeds of a living God in the fragile vessel of human language and interpretation, bound to time and place. Later readers might have to change the culturally-bound language to allow for new experiences in their time (cf Glanville 1991:43). To do this, is not to discard the canonised text, but to account for its underlying processes of redescription in the light of new knowledge and experiences.

Respecting Ephesians in its 'otherness' (inter alia as the product of a patriarchal society) and translating it in terms of the needs of a critical, post-modern society (which resists any form of domination and stereotyping) asks for a double ethics of '(historical) reading' and 'accountability'. As such, reading this New Testament writing celebrates the creative tension of its ongoing dialogue with later readers as the re-membering of their primary identity in Christ.

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