A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF AN INTELLECTUAL JOURNEY: ON WILLEM VORSTER’S QUEST FOR UNDERSTANDING

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ABSTRACT
This article is devoted to a brief description of Willem Vorster’s intellectual journey. As a New Testament scholar Vorster exerted a great influence on the study of the New Testament in South Africa. Since the beginning of the nineteen seventies New Testament studies took a different direction and Vorster’s contributions in this regard were decisive. To illustrate this development in South African New Testament scholarship this article focuses on Vorster’s preoccupation with method and related issues. He introduced a new kind of approach to the New Testament which was constantly changed or remodeled. Vorster changed or at least shaped the thoughts of a generation of New Testament scholars regarding method, the nature of the text, the reference to outside realities, the intentions of the original authors, et cetera. His approach also reflects his lifelong struggle to come to grips with history and historical criticism.

1 INTRODUCTION

Vorster changed his world: the scholarly world in which we worked since the beginning of the seventies; the way in which people talked about texts, their meaning, history, et cetera. His literary remains are extensive and his contribution many-faceted and later generations will indeed highlight other aspects of his life and work. This article briefly examines Vorster’s thinking about some important issues which contributed to the changing of our world. It is also an attempt to depict Vorster’s intellectual quest for understanding the writings of the New Testament. The text for our little scholarly meditation is taken from the last paragraph of an article dedicated to a Dutch friend. In that paragraph Vorster refers to his development as a critical scholar ‘since the days of historico-critical study of the New Testament through structuralism and reception theory’ (Vorster 1989b:26). Something of this development is summarised below.
Beforehand it must be stated that this article is a very personal one. I drew not only from Vorster's literary work but also from experience: the many discussions we had and the many things he taught me. And it was written while something of Vorster's scholarly presence was felt. I can even hear his judgment on my rendering of his thoughts: it is all your remaking of my world. That is true. There is, however, no other way of understanding our reality or Willem Vorster's world than to make it 'in our image, in our likeness'. But before we commence an important question must be posed:

2 WHY THIS MAN?

After the reading and rereading of nearly all Vorster's work one is still perturbed by one question: Why? Why this man? Why was he such an important figure in the South African context? Why did Vorster and not someone else cause a renaissance in the study of the New (and Old) Testament? Why were New Testament scholars so easily and decisively influenced by this man? Why was he so respected as a scholar both in and outside this country? Why was he so feared by many at congresses and in dialogue? Why did young New Testament scholars want to study with him? Why did young people treasure his comments on the things they wrote or said? Why did his remarks as well as his views on New Testament scholarship receive 'canonical status' among certain sections of the New Testament establishment? Why was his untimely death experienced by many as an irreparable loss leaving his 'flock' without a shepherd. Why was his name so often linked to a specific approach in the study of the New Testament? Many answers can be given to these questions. Although a future generation will be more capable to supply the answers I would nevertheless venture an opinion. Three short answers are given but the last is the decisive one; the first two focus on the person and the time but the last touches maybe on the essence.

Perhaps we must look for these answers in his personality. First of all then some remarks about the person, the man Willem Vorster. In many ways he was very different: he formulated things in a different way, he approached the New Testament differently, he looked at life differently, he understood God and the Bible differently and he had the guts to accept whatever happened as a result. Vorster was a critical scholar: nothing was just accepted and no view propagated without critical scrutiny; this critical attitude was already nurtured as a young student and later strengthened by his study in the Netherlands and contacts with New Testament scholars all over the world; without fear he vented his critical thoughts and was always ready to explain the 'critical faith' he believed in.

Vorster had a capacity for hard work: as head of the Theological Institute at Unisa he had to work office hours and his research work had to wait till night; for the greater part of his life he got up very early in the morning in
order to work before going to the office; at the office it was striking how he utilised every moment—very little (if any) time was wasted during coffee and tea breaks, and he seldom joined groups gossiping about many things.

He was a man of great intellectual powers: he could grasp things faster, see clearer, understand better, respond quicker and formulate the essentials more efficiently than most of us ordinary earthly creatures; this intellect overwhelmed one and rendered you powerless.

Another outstanding feature of Willem Vorster was his greatness as a scholar: renowned as a scholar his vast knowledge of the New Testament commanded respect from every one; his work opened up new venues for scholars and encouraged the young; he discussed things which were hitherto forbidden and uncovered untold issues; he introduced us to strange questions and even stranger answers; he taught us to venture on risky roads and never to be afraid; he taught us boldness to speak our mind and to take the consequences; he taught us respect for erudition and scholarship; he led us on many a strange and dangerous path without forsaking the true search of knowledge; he was the scientific model which inspired us all. No wonder that the man Vorster was always surrounded by a group of 'disciples': he was respected by so many of all ages who took his words seriously, appropriated his views and applied them in their own way.

The era in which Vorster lived also 'contributed' to his greatness as a scholar and teacher. It was a time ripe for change: generally speaking the theological context was conservative. In Biblical scholarship the insights and results of historical criticism could, however, not be ignored any longer, but people did not know how to deal with critical scholarship. Vorster stepped onto the scene and offered a new way of looking at the New Testament. He showed them a way of escaping from the pressing questions posed by the historical critical method and thus filled an important gap. Vorster also benefited from the great increase in numbers of scholars and students since the end of the sixties; this increase supplied him so to speak with a greater 'audience'.

But there is an even more important reason for Vorster's achievements: he gave his generation a tool with which to study the New Testament. Although this tool has many forms (a method, an approach, terminology, etc) it was nevertheless extremely effective. It enabled people to approach Scripture in a totally different way than before, to obtain a firm grip on the text, to analyse texts in a scientific manner, to say things which were unheard of before, to rejoice in a feeling of doing something really new, to sidestep in a scientific manner many historical and other problems, et cetera. Once again: this 'tool' must be understood in a broad sense. It comprised methods and approaches, terminologies and analyses, and many other things, all of which strengthened the hand and sharpened the eye of the New Testament scholar. For all this our generation is grateful and will always remember Willem Vorster with respect and love.
3 SOMETHING FIXED IN VORSTER’S THINKING: THE TEXT

To understand Vorster’s quest, one aspect of his intellectual framework must be stressed. To speak about his mental make-up is of course an extremely difficult undertaking. He resisted any classification into a theological or a philosophical tradition. He followed his own mind and no one would dare prescribe to him. He was an extremely independent scholar constantly speaking his own views on matters. He was very much the intellectual loner pursuing scientific excellence his own way. To define Vorster intellectually is therefore somewhat tricky. There is, nevertheless, something in his thinking or intellectual make-up which is very interesting, but cannot easily be depicted. It is something firm and hard, something fixed and definite, something inarguable and incontestable which shaped his thinking in many ways. Perhaps we can describe this by means of terms borrowed from philosophy: the search for an Archimedean point and a Cartesian anxiety (Bernstein 1983:8-10, 16-20).

Vorster’s work reflects something of his search for an Archimedean point. There is (or so it seems) a basic conviction that some kind of permanent, ahistorical matrix or framework exists to which the New Testament scholar can appeal in determining the nature of a text, its meaning and communication. There are thus fixed points of knowledge and firm scientific beliefs to which the New Testament scholar can constantly refer and which will warrant his research. This can be seen in many aspects of Vorster’s work. We mention but three.

One has to do with method. Vorster creates the impression that certain approaches are just better than others: they are more suitable to ‘discover’ the text’s meaning or the way in which it communicates. Of course he often (especially in his earlier years) referred to Richter’s dictum, ‘Die Wahl der Fragestellung bestimmt das Vorgehen’, in an attempt to be open to many and different approaches (cf Vorster 1977a:11; 1982b:496), but in the final analysis it boils down to the inclusion of some and the exclusion of other methods.

The other has to do with meaning. He would deny that meaning exists in an objective sense and he often (especially in later works) states that meaning does not exist. But in the ‘deep structure’ of his text Vorster reflects the belief in meaning: there is something like meaning, it can be known and the right tool (method) must just be employed.

A last example refers to his views on presuppositions. The existence of presuppositions is not denied but they must be identified, bracketed and controlled. In short: they must not be allowed to cause scientific havoc and to destroy the objective search for understanding, meaning, et cetera.

Closely related to the aforesaid is Vorster’s Cartesian anxiety. What is meant by this? It is a device to solve epistemological problems with regard to the text and its understanding; it is the quest for a fixed point, some stable rock without which we sink into all kinds of intellectual nonsense and without
which we cannot secure our scholarly lives against the academic vicissitudes that constantly threaten us. In the whole process Vorster confronts us with an either-or situation: either there is some scientific support for all our scholarly endeavours, a fixed foundation for our knowledge of the New Testament (as well as the Old Testament) or we will not escape the forces of intellectual chaos. This anxiety Vorster bequeathed to us and even today the impact of this either/or option has not lessened its grip.

How did Vorster deal with his Cartesian anxiety and his endless search for an Archimedean point? Perhaps there are different answers but I would like to single out one of them: his emphasis on the text. In the thinking of Vorster the text, that is, the visible form, the multitude of letters, the many and different words, the typographical arrangements, et cetera, receives a special status: it becomes the starting-point for all our endeavours; the fixed basis for all our knowledge; the immutable foundation of New Testament science; the endless source for all our information. In one of his works Vorster discusses the shift from ‘historical’ to more ‘literary’ approaches and then hints at the change in the understanding of the notion ‘text’—an understanding which also depicts his own conviction:

This concept of texts and the meaning of texts have undergone radical changes among text theorists....Text has become a totally different reality than it used to be....In short, the phenomenon text received a totally new epistemological status (Vorster 1988c:37—italics mine).

4 A PAPER THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

Let us start our intellectual journey at a specific date: 3rd March 1971. I still vividly recall that day. Some of the Transvaal members of the New Testament Society of South Africa assembled at the boardroom of the University of the South Africa in Visagie Street in Pretoria. It was hot in the small room and about thirteen of us sat around a table. Among those present were professor Evert Groenewald, the doyen of New Testament scholarship in South Africa at that time. He was a much respected scholar whose presence was also clearly felt that morning. As far as I can remember only two papers were read during the morning session. One was on a proposed project for Bible research (Roberts 1971:149-150). The paper was discussed and certain proposals were made. Then Willem Vorster was called upon. He wore a brownish suit and even then his hair was standing in all directions. With one hand in his pocket and the other holding his speech Vorster read his paper. There was some applause when he finished and a lively discussion began. The discussion was followed by a meal at a restaurant at the Fountains. Next to me sat another New Testament scholar, Cornelis van der Waal, who expressed some concern. On the opposite side was a church historian who wondered how this speech
would affect his field of study. A few seats further was an Old Testament scholar and also a member of the New Testament Society, Ian Eybers, who expressed some doubt about the implications of Vorster's views for the study of the Old Testament. Further down other New Testament scholars could be heard debating the consequences of what Vorster said, reiterating the main trend of the speech, repeating De Saussure's distinction between _le langage, la langue_ and _la parole_ or just poking fun. After the meal we returned and the discussions were continued. At the end of the day I had a feeling that I had witnessed something great which would have far-reaching consequences.

But what was it all about? Willem Vorster read a paper wherein he urged the New Testament scholars to take cognizance of the results of _modern linguistics_ (Vorster 1971b:139-148). He described it thus: ‘Dit gaan in hierdie stuk om die sinchroniese strukturele metode van taalondersoek wat kenmerkend is van die moderne linguistiek’ (Vorster 1971b:139). Synchronical structural analysis of language was of course not the only possibility but since much had already been accomplished by means of this approach Vorster was positively inclined to it (Vorster 1971b:139, 144, 147). His views were based on that of Jannie Louw, at time professor in Greek at the University of Orange Free State, who had already explored the possibilities of the newer linguistics (Vorster 1971b:142, 143, 147), and who later became renowned for his great work in collaboration with Eugene Nida (cf Louw & Nida 1988a & 1988b).

Vorster's lecture was like a trigger which was pulled and which brought a whole movement about. It was a movement which stood in great contrast to the preceding period. Important work had of course been done before that date. One need only refer to the excellent theses of Andrie du Toit, Tjaart van der Walt, Johnnie Roberts, Isak du Plessis and many others. But things now took a different direction: a scientific method of exegesis, structural analysis, was accepted by a great number of scholars belonging to the New Testament establishment; they appropriated the method with great enthusiasm, refined it in many ways and 'made' it the dominant method of exegesis. A new _esprit de corps_ developed around this method and there was a feeling of excitement among many scholars. And all can be traced back to Vorster's paper on that day in March.

Vorster's paper already reflected a specific approach (concentration on the final text and the rejection of information about the text's historical growth) as well as the terminology (diachrony, synchrony, structural analysis) which would be decisive for the future development of Biblical science in South Africa. Something really new was introduced which set New Testament scholars into motion and which resulted in the establishment of a new approach which subsequently received the status of a 'normal science' (in the Kuhnian sense). Just how new Vorster must have sounded on that warm day in March 1971 can be gathered from the following abstracts from his paper:
Dat die moderne linguistiek egter nog nie behoorlik deurgedring het tot die gebied van Bybelnavorsing nie, blyk uit die feit dat daar in die jongste tyd reeds stemme opgaan wat die aandag daarop vestig.... Die feit dat Bybelnavorsers van ons tyd nog in so 'n groot mate onbekend is met die tegnieke van die moderne linguistiek....Daar bestaan nog 'n ander belangrike onderskeiding wat ook op De Saussure teruggaan te wete die tussen sinchroniese en diachroniese taalkunde....Sinchroniese taalbeskrywing kan egter onafhanklik van die diachroniese onderneem word...Maar dit is nie so dat die voorgeskiedenis van 'n taal betrek moet word as 'n taal beskryf word nie. Die sinchroniese aspekte is baie belangriker vir die verstaan daarvan....Struktuuranalise het al noemenswaardige resultate opgelever....Iets wat nie uit die oog verloor moet word nie, is die belangrikheid van die sinchroniese ondersoek waarby die diachroniese nie 'n rol hoef te speel nie (Vorster 1971b:141, 143-145, 147).

5 SOME DISTINCTIVE RECURRING CHARACTERISTICS

The wording of this subsection is used somewhat ironically. Vorster rejected the possibility that genre study could be based solely on ‘some distinctive recurring characteristics’ (Vorster 1988b:103-123). It is, however, interesting to note that his further reflection and elaboration of the 1971-paper do indeed reflect some typical features (cf Vorster 1974:21-41; 1975a:39-44; 1975b:87-97; 1975c:127-135; 1978:89-102; 1977c:130-138; 1988a:917-933; 1989a:53-63). They cropped up constantly in his work and conversations and influenced the study of the New Testament. Put differently: they exerted great power on the course of New Testament science, steered the debate in a specific direction, provided a definite approach, contributed to the vocabulary of the scholarly establishment and supplied stock phrases which could be used to describe the process of understanding. Below only a few characteristics of this new perspective are mentioned.

An era of reflection on method and methodology unprecedented in the theological history of South Africa was introduced. That is Vorster’s legacy to the South African theological establishment. From now on certain definite questions with regard to method and the study of a text are posed which each one has to answer. To be allowed to the distinguished community of New Testament scholars the right method has to be followed. To become an acknowledged Biblical scholar the right method has to be followed. To be able to take part in the theological discussions of the day the right method has to be followed. Seen from a theological historical point of view it remains fascinating why an entire theological establishment (especially New and Old Testament scholars) has fallen prey to the endless discussions on method and methodology since the seventies. Be that as it may, one thing is sure: Willem Vorster’s initiatives provided the spark which has caused this great fire.

He often focused on the important shift from a historical understanding of a text to the so-called text immanent approach: ‘Toch kan nu gesproken wor-
den van een verschuiving van geschiedenis naar literatuur of beter van een historische naar een literaire of tekstimmanente benadering van de bijbel' (Vorster 1982c:128). This idea of a change in perspective formed an integral part of Vorster's scientific vocabulary. Put differently: it dominated his thoughts on method and text approach.

The above-mentioned shift was (partly) due to a change in philosophy. Initially historical criticism was based on positivism and later a more 'geistesgeschichtliche' philosophy was adopted. In this view of historical criticism texts are windows allowing the exegete to obtain information about the origin, development, author's intention, et cetera (Vorster 1982c:127). With regard to structural analysis, phenomenology plays an important role. This philosophy focuses on the text as such: 'Hieruit blijkt de invloed van de fenomenologie volgens welke een zaak, een fenomeen an sich verstaanbaar moet zijn en verklaard moet worden'(Vorster 1982c:128).

Language now becomes extremely important. Language is an interconnected system and the signs are related to each other (Vorster 1974:22); the smallest section to be investigated is the pericope; the structure of the language units is determined and their function described; the structure of a language system is always 'fundamenteel-logies' (Vorster 1971b:145); for the interpretation of language and texts knowledge of structures is of vital importance; the process of understanding also implies a distinction between deep and surface structure (Vorster 1977a:13).

In his 1971 paper Vorster (1971b) refers to a Copernican revolution in linguistics: the distinction between synchronical and diachronical linguistics. This distinction also formed an integral part of the scientific apparatus of South African Biblical scholars (cf Vorster 1974:21-41). Synchronical philology describes and explains language of a specific era: the form of language as expressed here and now (cf Vorster 1975c:127-135). Diachronical philology on the other hand describes and explains the changes of a language in different periods: the historical changes are taken into account. According to Vorster the latter is preceded by the first: diachronical research is based on synchronical philology and not vice versa: 'Sinchroniese taalkunde is dus sonder diachroniese taalkunde moontlik terwyl sinchroniese taalkunde vir die historiese taalkunde onontbeerlik is' (Vorster 1971b:144).

A change took place in that the emphasis moved from the word to the text. The text in its final form became the point of departure: 'The main character-
istic of a synchronic approach, however, is that it takes the work (read: ‘final text’) as a complete text seriously’ (Vorster 1980a:57). Among scholars the term ‘final text’ is now frequently used and it accentuates a very important exegetical maxim: exegesis starts with the final text and not its history; exegesis focuses on the ‘Endgestalt’ and not its origin and historical growth. Put differently: the difference between synchrony and diachrony is the difference between ‘the growth of a text (collection and redaction) and the text as a final product, an autosemantic unit which is in itself meaningful’ (Vorster 1980a:57—italics mine; cf 1982c:136).

A different understanding of the notion meaning arises. To begin with the historical critical view of ‘meaning’ is undermined. According to this paradigm meaning is assigned diachronically: the history of a word’s usage constitutes its meaning. Everything, however, now changes. Firstly the meaning of a word is now linked to its literary context. Secondly, the semantic aspect of language is closely related to a system which is structured. Thirdly, the semantic aspect of a word is not limited to the different meanings notated in dictionaries but is also determined syntactically (cf Vorster 1974:21-41).

Vorster warns against two fallacies. On the one hand one has to guard against the intentional fallacy: the attempt to reconstruct the intentions of the original author. This is impossible and must not even be attempted. Furthermore: since the text is autosemantic ‘authorial intention’ does not contribute in any way to the meaning of the text (cf Vorster 1974:39; Vorster 1980c:35-36). On the other hand one has to avoid the referential fallacy: texts do not refer to realities outside the text (Vorster 1977b:27-40; 1980a:46-61; 1981b; 1982c:132; 1983c:87-95). This is such an important aspect of Vorster’s hermeneutics that it cannot be overemphasised: it forms part and parcel of his mental make-up. To quote but one example:

In...1977 (het ek) betoog, dat ons in die geval van verteltekste soos die evangelies te make het met geslote tekste wat intertekstueel verwys. Daar word in hierdie tekste ’n vertelde wêreld geskep wat as sodanig, dit wil sê as vertelde wêrelde geïnterpreteer behoort te word wanneer daar na die kommunikasie van die soort tekste gevra word. Die probleem “teks en werklikheid” is ten opsigte van hierdie vraagstelling irrelevant (Vorster 1980c:27).

6 AN IMPORTANT SHIFT: TEXTS MUST ALSO COMMUNICATE

In his inaugural address as professor at the University of South Africa in 1977 Vorster ‘announced’ a shift in his thought. In the course of time he discovered the limitations of structural analysis and therefore wanted to make some adjustments to the dominant model of exegesis. His paper caused some public outcry and the matter was even recorded in a sensational Afrikaans Sunday newspaper, Rapport. Vorster caused quite a stir among scholars and for many months his views were heavily debated and criticised. Many condemned him
and accused him of undermining the authority of the Scripture. After a while things settled down and the matter was soon forgotten. Some time later the case was laid before a presbyterial executive of the Dutch Reformed Church but was settled amicably. Looking back it is difficult to understand the reason for all the fuss. To my mind this was not the best or even the most provocative paper ever to be read by Vorster. To a large extent the reaction reflects the uncritical and fundamentalistic understanding of the Bible which prevailed in that period. Put differently: the whole debate must be understood in the context of the intellectual and spiritual tradition (which was anti-critical) which dominated the seventies.

By 1977 (or earlier) history became interested in the communication of texts. Initially he was influenced by the views of Anderegg (1973). I still recall the many hours Vorster and Ferdinand Deist devoted to a close scrutiny of Anderegg’s work. Vorster saw this ‘model’ as an important way of describing text communication and focused on Anderegg’s distinction between texts dealing with facts and those dealing with fiction (‘saaktekste en fiktiewe tekste’) (cf Vorster 1987b:203-224; 1991d:39).

*Factive texts* deal with accounts, reports and letters and these communicate when certain requirements are met. Firstly, the reader’s frame of reference must conform with that of the author on the reported matter. Secondly, reader and author must share the same view on the meaning of words; their experience of language must concur in order to enable the reader to understand the author’s message. Thirdly, the reported matter must be relevant to the reader and enlarge his frame of reference. Fourthly, when something becomes relevant it becomes fascinating and gripping to the reader. In short when these requirements are met texts dealing with facts (‘saaktekste’) will communicate. Even ancient texts ‘speak’ when these conditions are taken into consideration (Vorster 1977a:18).

The letters of the New Testament can be understood as matter-of-fact texts. Concrete matters are addressed some of which can still be ‘recovered’ from the text. Communication between these ‘ancient’ letters and the ‘modern’ reader can, however, still be accomplished if the above-mentioned preconditions are taken into account: if the modern reader is prepared to acquire the skills to understand these letters and to conform to the frame of reference of the sender which can be deduced from the text. We must, however, take into account that not all letters can be important for our day: only those things which are relevant to the sender as well as the modern reader can communicate and be of some value (Vorster 1977a:18).

*Fictive texts* communicate in a different manner. But first a word on the nature of these texts. They are not fakes, untrue or mythological. These texts constitute their own reality and that narrated reality must be taken seriously; this reality does not concur with the real world outside; reference takes place
within the text and the outside world is totally excluded; historical people may be referred to but history is not taken into account. To summarise: ‘Verwysing geskied binne die teks self wat ’n geslote geheel is….Binne die geslotenheid van die teks verwys die teks na die werklikheid soos wat dit in die teks self funksioneer’ (Vorster 1977a:19).

How do fictive texts communicate? Much depends on the kind of text: is it an I-You text or a He/She-text (in the third person)? In the case of the first the frame of reference of the ‘I’ of the text or the fictional sender is important. This frame of reference can be construed from the text itself; in the text the ‘traces’ of this framework can be found. The reader takes cognizance of this but he must accomplish more: the reader must tune in (so to speak) to the the world of the ‘You’ in the text; he must listen carefully and allow his own presuppositions to be questioned. Real sender (‘I’) and real receiver (‘You’) do not play any role whatsoever. It is the fictional sender and fictional receiver that are important: communication takes place between them and only the skilled reader trained in the nature of meaning (‘betekeniservaring’) can fathom something of this process (Vorster 1977a:19-20).

Perhaps this address was important for two reasons. Firstly, serious criticism against the dominant method of exegesis (discourse analysis) was uttered at just the right time. Some scholars came to think of structural analysis as the one and only method of exegesis. Vorster’s critical remarks were thus pronounced at a moment most opportune. It must, however, be noted that he did not reject structural analysis—he never did that! He merely indicated its defects with regard to the communication process: ‘dit [word] duidelik dat die sogenoemde teksimmanente modelle van eksegese…weinig daaraan kan doen om die Nuwe Testament eietyds te laat kommunikeer’. He nevertheless stated the valuable service structural analysis can render with regard to communication: ‘[B]laie van die teksimmanente benadering [is] van wesentlike belang…[vir] die kommunikeerbaarheid van die Nuwe Testament (Vorster 1977a:17). Secondly it contained the essence of a future exegetical program. Once again: it was not a definite break with the ‘old’ but only a new emphasis on things like the narrative character of the New Testament, a new look at the genre problem, the importance of intertextuality, et cetera (Vorster 1991d:16-43). This ‘new feature’ we are now about to discuss.

7 ANOTHER SHIFT: FROM AUTHOR TO TEXT TO READER

In the course of time another shift took place in Vorster’s mind. It was a change which he called ‘necessary and meaningful’. The ‘reader’ (or the New Testament scholar for that matter) now received a new status: ‘(t)he meaning of the text is never self-formulated; the reader must act upon the textual material in order to produce meaning’ (Selden 1986:108—italics mine). According to Vorster reader-response criticism is ‘a neglected aspect of textual
interpretation in New Testament scholarship' (Vorster 1991c:1106). Vorster therefore emphasises the impact of the reading act on the ‘creation’ of meaning. Reading is an interactive process between reader and text. And since meaning is not inscribed in the text but is assigned to it, this interaction between reader and text is vital.

It is, however, important to note that Vorster does not reject the text as something superfluous: the text remains his Archimedean point. Readers just respond to the codes and strategies in the text and the text does something to the reader; the text ‘operates’ on the reader which ‘causes’ him to respond (Vorster 1991c:1099). In short: ‘the text does something to the reader. It directs the reader and initiates certain responses’ (Vorster 1991c:1101).

To illustrate we refer to Matthew 24:3-28. According to Vorster an acute eye must be developed to detect the operations of the text. One question must be asked continuously and rigorously: ‘what do the words, the sentences, the sections of the text, and the speeches of Jesus do?’ (Vorster 1991c:1101). An important aspect of Matthean speech acts is reader education. To understand Matthew 24:3-28 it must be realised that this section forms a very small fragment of the gospel as a whole and a fragment of Jesus’ speech in Matthew 24-25. Everything which is said in the preceding chapters is imperative for the understanding of Matthew 24. These preceding chapters constitute the education of the reader: he is equipped to read Matthew 24; a variety of codes and strategies supplies him with essential information in order to understand Matthew 24; by the time he reaches Matthew 24 the reader is already well-informed about characters and events. A reader can even be re-educated by the story: his expectations or views can be changed in the process of reading (Vorster 1991c:1100).

In Matthew 24:3-28 references are made to the future and their acceptance by the reader (!) are dependent on the authority and reliability of the speaker. And this is exactly what happens in the text (and in the preceding chapters): Jesus is depicted as a reliable character. And because of this ‘literary construction’ the reader accepts Jesus’ references to the future. In terms of the speech acts in Matthew 24:3-28 ‘the Matthean Jesus wishes his disciples to share his beliefs about the future’. Jesus ‘performs a speech act by what he communicates....the text...prompts a response from the disciples’. Something similar is expected of the reader: since Jesus is depicted as reliable and the one who has the power to speak about the future, the narrator rightly expects of the reader to appropriate this message (Vorster 1991c:1102-1106).

8 WHAT DOES THE NEW TESTAMENT SCHOLAR READ? NARRATIVES!

The narrative character of the New Testament was of extreme importance to Vorster. According to him this ‘involved a paradigm switch both in terms of
research methods and results' (Vorster 1987a:57—italics mine). This 'narrative paradigm', as he calls it, enables him to move away from a static view of the New Testament, to treat the New Testament as a narrative and not as a historical document, to respect the authors of the New Testament as narrators and not as collectors or redactors of a specific tradition, to focus on the written texts and the way they are organised, and not the origin and growth of texts (Vorster 1986c:60; 1987b:203-204). In short: the narrative nature of the New Testament sheds some new light on the text and its understanding (Vorster 1981a:62). When treated as narratives some exciting insights into the art of storytelling in ancient times are offered; this narrative paradigm confronts the reader with some challenging problems and offers some challenging possibilities in the interpretation of these narrative texts (Vorster 1987b:203-224).

Vorster stresses the fact that Jesus was a storyteller and that the early church transmitted their belief by retelling the stories of Jesus. This was a mighty instrument to propagate and establish their new religion. Narratives in the New Testament can be found in the gospels, the Acts of the apostles and the Revelation of John (Vorster 1981a:68, 69). In the gospels a variety of short narratives (parables, legends, miracles, etc) can be found: the material they contain is presented through narrative means and their messages are narrative messages; in Acts the efforts of the apostles to propagate their faith are narrated; in Revelation narratives are told in order to strengthen the faith of the believers (Vorster 1977a:18-23; 1981c:7-28; 1983b:123-130; 1985a:148-163; 1986c:56-57; 1987a:57-75; 1987b:204-213; 1989c:28-36).

Of extreme importance are Vorster's views with regard to a 'historical' and a 'narratological' approach (cf below). As expected he stresses the fact that a narratological approach offers a respectable way out of all the historical problems (Vorster 1991d:18-21). For many years New Testament scholars believed certain 'fixed truths': that the gospels present the reader-historian with valuable information with which to write a history of Jesus or the early church; that the text is nothing more than a window through which the real world behind the text can be studied; that a history of the early church can be reconstructed, et cetera. Once the narrative nature of the gospels was realised these 'historical views' were radically changed; texts are now viewed as 'man-made representations of narrative worlds and works' (Vorster 1986c:57; cf 1982b:491-500).

One very important aspect of narratology is the phenomenon of the storyworld: the New Testament contains narrative worlds; they are not real worlds but narrative constructions (Vorster 1982b:491-500; 1991b:32-61). According to Vorster this is 'a very important discovery for historically-minded people who tend to focus on the fact-likeness of much of the information in these texts' (Vorster 1986c:57). To many it is, however, 'a frightening
idea' to abandon the historical nature of the New Testament and they therefore cling to the notion of the 'historical narrative'. Vorster is positively inclined towards this possibility but stresses that this 'history' is primarily a narrative and its 'reality' a remaking of life. In other words: they are fiction because they are man-made (Vorster 1986c:59). This view has caused a total rethinking of the historical paradigm: any history of early Christian literature must pay less attention to the origin and the growth of the texts (Vorster 1991d:38-40). This conviction naturally has serious consequences for the historical-critical scholar (Vorster 1987b:205, 206, 207).

With regard to the interpretation of the New Testament, the narrative nature of the gospels, acts and the apocalypse has far-reaching implications. For people who are historically-minded and who care for so-called 'facts', the discovery of the narrative nature of the New Testament writings often poses major problems (Vorster 1986c:61).

Because the narrative character of the New Testament was neglected much effort was therefore wasted to recover the original form and wording of (for instance) the utterances of Jesus (Vorster 1983b:107-122). A case in point is the historical critical investigation of the parables during the past century (Vorster 1985a:148-163). Historical research attempted to determine the original wording and context of these parables. This procedure becomes superfluous when the parables are viewed as metaphorical narratives, short stories which were told in order to resocialise their hearers in terms of religious thinking (Vorster 1990b:33-51). These parables went through various changes and were retold in different contexts (Vorster 1986c:59).

9 ON IMPLIED AUTHORS AND IMPLIED READERS

The effects of the text on the reader must thus be studied. And to enhance this process a distinction is made between 'real author' and 'implied author' on the one hand and 'real reader' and 'implied reader'. This offers Vorster an escape from historical questions pertaining to origin, authorship, growth, original listeners, historical reconstruction and many other pressing issues (cf Vorster 1987b:209-213). There is no need for historical information about an original author or reader. Once again: historical information is superfluous and peripheral and does not constitute meaning in any way. On the other hand emphasis on the implied author and reader highlights the nature of texts and the way in which they operate. It has great significance for the understanding and the meaning of a text. Or as Vorster has said: 'I only wish to stress the fact that the profile of a reader in the text is constructed in the first place to enable the reader to attribute meaning to a text, and that it is an intratextual construct. In this respect the New Testament narratives are similar to other narratives' (Vorster 1989c:27).
With regard to the implied author the 'first thing to notice' is that 'he' must never be confused with the real author. Since attempts to reconstruct the time and thoughts of the original author fail utterly the notion of an implied author seems a more viable option. And since authorial intention in the historical critical sense can never be determined the notion 'implied author' becomes important to Vorster. Influenced by Booth, Iser, Eco, Chatman and Brink with regard to the implied author, he emphasises the following: such an implied author is a literary construct—'he/she' is created by the real author; 'she/he' is furthermore implied in the text as an image; the implied author's presence is suggested by means of personal traits—'he/she' is a person of strong beliefs, values and interests; these 'traits' are inscribed in the text by means of linguistic, literary, rhetorical and other signs and traces (Vorster 1989c:23). An important function is also assigned to the implied author who functions as a governing and organising principle; is the source of judgements; embodies certain values; chooses what we read; determines how we read. In short: 'the implied author' exerts great power over our reading of the text (Vorster 1989c:22). Although 'the implied author does not tell, at least it instructs the reader how to read...This is done, for instance, by way of the order of material, opposing perspectives, and other correctives which are encoded in the text' (Vorster 1989c:24; cf 1987b:204-209).

Vorster also pays much attention to the reader in the text. 'He/she' is also a literary construct and the counterpart of the implied author, whose profile and image are constructed by the real reader. Once again Vorster accentuated that this reader in the text must never be confused with 'the original, first flesh-and-blood readers' (Vorster 1989c:24).

The importance of the real reader must not be underestimated. In all the New Testament narratives, authors and readers are implied in the text. And from the many codes the actual reader must construct these implied authors and readers (Vorster 1989c:29). It thus seems as if the reader, the flesh-and-blood reader has some hard work to do. He/she approaches the text with the preconceived idea that this text was compiled with a specific reader in mind. She/he must search on levels of the structure and the functions of the narrative for traces to reconstruct this reader in the text. The real reader must look for signs like pro- and retrospection, gaps and indeterminacy, selection and organisation, et cetera which will enable him to make a construct of the implied reader. All narrative features like plot, characterisation, point of view, narrative commentary are important clues to the real readers in their attempts to construct an image of the implied reader. In short: every aspect of the text matters 'because the reader in the text is the ideal decoder of the complete text and not only of an aspect of it' (Vorster 1989c:32; cf 1987b:205-206).
At a certain stage intertextuality becomes very important to Vorster. It is an indispensable device to determine meaning. Texts do not exist on their own so to speak but are related to others in many ways: ‘Hier gaan dit oor die siening dat ’n teks sy sê nie alleen sê nie, maar...met ander tekste in verband staan’ (Ohlhoff 1989:49; cf Malan 1989:20). To illustrate his views of intertextuality Vorster compares it to ‘Redaktionsgeschichte’. Intertextuality as well as ‘Redaktionsgeschichte’ are interested in the interrelatedness of texts but they reflect different views of a text.

‘Redaktionsgeschichte’ highlights the redactor’s activities and describes the way in which the final editors arranged and composed their material. Put differently: ‘Redaktionsgeschichte’ is interested in the way traditions were manipulated to suit the intentions of the editor (Vorster 1980b:22-24; 1983b:103-104). And since text production implies the usage of sources (oral and written) the relationship between tradition and redaction thus becomes extremely important. The manner in which the redactor utilised the traditions is of vital importance. Was he creative, did he transform the tradition and did he fabricate a new text? Or was he a conservative compiler who was dictated by the sources and therefore rendered a rather literal version of tradition (Vorster 1982a:94-111)? Notwithstanding the answer, it is clear that ‘Redaktionsgeschichte’ is ‘a form of source-influence study’ which is ‘author- and not text- or reader-oriented’ (Vorster 1989b:16, 17).

Underlying this ‘Redaktionsgeschichtliche’ approach are firm convictions and domain assumptions concerning texts, their growth and development: a text is compiled of citations embedded in or assimilated by the new text; it is the inscripturation of written and oral sources or traditions (Vorster 1986c:52-55; 1991d:29-32). There is a close relationship between the final text and its precursor; by comparing the final and the precursor text the authorial intention can be determined (Vorster 1982a:94-111; 1989b:18, 19). The purpose of ‘source-influence studies is to prove the use of sources and to demonstrate the debt of the authors of these texts to the precursor texts, be they actual or presupposed texts’ (Vorster 1989b:20).

The above-mentioned procedure is unacceptable to Vorster: once again he returns to the safe harbour of the text (as defined by himself). The text and nothing but the text is important. Intertextuality is significant to Vorster because it ‘is based on a new notion of what a text is’ (Vorster 1989b:20): it is defined as a network of references. The text must not be approached as sources for other texts (as in the case of the synoptic problem). The text is a network of traces; each sentence creates intertextual patterns; each section is embedded in a number intertextual connections. These relationships are infinite and the text as a network calls for reaction by the reader. To assign meaning the readers depends on his/her ‘repertoire of intertexts’. Compared to the tradi-
tional historical critical approach textual relationships 'have been blurred' (Vorster 1989b:21, 22). Intertextuality is thus a reading strategy which never focuses on source-influence and never reconstructs contexts; intertexts 'form the context of interpretation because they are uttered in contexts similar to the focused text'. This meaning 'is assigned to the text by intertextual reading in accordance with the function of the interests of the focused text' (Vorster 1989b:26).

11 A NEW LOOK AT GENRE: THE IMPORTANCE OF LINGUISTIC AND LITERARY THEORIES

Vorster contests the 'common argument' that four text types or 'Gattungen' can be found in the New Testament: gospels, a historical monograph, letters and an apocalypse (Vorster 1983a:11). He wants to reformulate the problem and to steer genre study in a different direction. First of all he laments the lack of definite criteria. Although genre study forms an integral part of New Testament studies, fixed criteria for the identification and description of genres are still lacking (cf Vorster 1980c:36-46). All attempts to clarify and to define more exactly have been hampered by especially two approaches to genre study: on the one hand the traditional analysis of genre with its emphasis on the universal and transhistoric elements by which texts are classified on the ground of universal characteristics and the literary history of a particular genre (Vorster 1988b:105-108). On the other hand there is the stress on the conventional or historic attempt to relate genres to their origin and growth: genres as signs of communication in different types of situations and their social settings. Genres originated in a specific context, reflect that social situation, change due to social pressures and take on new forms (Vorster 1992a:1078-1079). These approaches dominated genre studies for many decades preventing the formulation of definite criteria. Vorster expects something more of genre study. He wants to utilise the insights of literary theory and linguistics and to put genre study on a firmer basis. To illustrate his point we refer to his work on Revelation of John and 1 Enoch (cf Vorster 1987b:213-222).

Vorster takes the distinction between 'apocalypse', 'apocalyptic eschatology' and 'apocalypticism' very seriously (Vorster 1986d:166-168). According to some the existing confusion with regard to conceptualising apocalyptic must be ascribed to a negligence of these distinctions. Vorster rejects this conception: 'it is artificial and responsible for the creation of a separate genre which does not exist'; he thinks 'it wrong to classify the so-called "apocalyptic" literature as a separate "genre"'; the 'existence and character of the genre "apocalypse" is debatable' (Vorster 1983a:2).

Vorster especially launches his attack against the notion of 'distinctive recurring characteristics' which constitute the genre of a text (cf Vorster 1986d:177-181). Normally the text type or genre 'apocalypse' is defined in
terms of form and content. The ‘distinctive recurring characteristics’ with
regard to form are things like the following: pseudonymity, revelatory dis­
courses or visions, symbolic language, the unveiling of the meaning of
obscurities, the systematisation and ordering of phenomena, et cetera. Scholars
usually attempt to refine this list and to define more precisely. On the ground
of these recurring features texts are classified. He criticises these attempts and
concludes: ‘This is just to show how relative taxonomy is’ (Vorster

In particular, Vorster had the SBL group under the guidance of John Col­
lins in mind. According to him the ‘distinctive recurring characteristics’ listed
by the SBL group concern only the sign system or code of writing under dis­
cussion and not the text type. These ‘distinctive recurring characteristics’ can
also be confusing in another way. Do they refer to the text type or a perspec­
tive? According to Vorster this type of classification of texts into genres is not
very useful with regard to the understanding of these texts (Vorster 1983a:5).

A radical change is, however, noticeable: a new interest in the study of the
genre and the New Testament ‘has emerged during the past few decades’ (Vor­
ster 1988b:111). And an important aspect of these developments is the
incorporation of important developments in literary theory and linguistics.
Genre study must therefore now be defined in terms of some theory of genre
(Vorster 1992a:1077-1079). Vorster takes this development seriously and ven­
tures to formulate ‘criteria’ for the determination of genre. He accentuates the
significance of the mode of writing, content and function.

To Vorster the mode of writing or the way in which a text is organised is
extremely important. According to him it is ‘the most distinctive criterion in
the study and the classification of genre’ (Vorster 1988b:112). For the estab­
ishment of the genre of the Revelation of John this remark is very important.
The usage of the word ‘apocalypse’ in the name of this book is somewhat
strange: in the history of literature this was the first time that the term
‘apocalypse’ was attached to a revelatory message. But does this imply that a
separate genre, ‘apocalypse’, really exists? Vorster is convinced differently
(Vorster 1986d:173-177). With regard to genre study a different way must be
followed. There are only a few ways in which information can be organised:
narration, argument, exposition, description and listing. From this point of
view only a few text types or genres can exist: narratives, argumentative texts,
expositions, descriptions and lists. Each text type has its own ‘distinctive
recurring characteristics’. With regard to the text type ‘narrative' features like
plot, characterisation, setting and so on are important (Vorster 1987a:57-76). It is thus important to note that Vorster's 'distinctive recurring characteristics' involve much more than those of the SBL group (Vorster 1983a:6).

In the light of the above-mentioned it is clear that the Revelation of John and 1 Enoch must be treated as narratives. In other words these apocalyptic works cannot be classified as 'apocalypses' just because of typical genre features. There must be 'something else' (Vorster 1986d:169-172). According to Vorster this is the particular perspective displayed in these texts: 'The only real unique feature of these narratives is the perspective from which they are told: the perspective of apocalyptic eschatology....All these are written from an apocalyptic eschatological perspective, which clearly shows that "apocalyptic" is not a characteristic of genre' (Vorster 1983a:9; cf Vorster 1991b:50).

Thus the mode of writing of the so-called apocalyptic texts is that of a narrative—written of course from the perspective of apocalyptic eschatology (Vorster 1987b:213-222). And in the case of the Revelation of John the text is organised in the form of an autobiographical narrative. The Revelation of John does not have any peculiar or distinctive feature as regards its mode of writing 'to enable one to classify it in a separate class of texts'. For the greater part it is a first-person narrative (Vorster 1988b:116). It may well be asked whether the letter framework (1:1-8; 22:6-18) and the seven letters can modify the genre. Vorster answers: 'This letter frame does not, however, change the genre code of the text at all'. There is still another problem: does the fact that it was intended to be read aloud to the audience have genre implications? Put differently: does orality and textuality affect the genre and Vorster answers: 'This can clearly not be done' (Vorster 1988b:115). In short: the Revelation of John is not a separate genre which can be called 'apocalypse' but is (due to its mode of writing) a narrative in the first-person.

Content is also extremely important: the 'what' that is described has implications for the 'way' in which it is depicted (cf Vorster 1987b:203-213). With regard to the Revelation of John future matters which are also related to the present are described. The content deals with events which are important for the present as well as the future (cf Vorster 1991b:50-53). To enable the author to speak about these things everything is pictured in terms of visions and dreams. Mythos, apocalypse, et cetera are only names for texts which speak about the transcendental world from an apocalyptic perspective (Vorster 1990b:33-51). But note: they are not separate genres but only classificatory tags for a submode of a broader mode of writing. We can indeed speak of 'apocalyptic texts' and 'apocalypses' but then it must be done in the right way: they are subgenres similar to 'picaresque novel as a subgenre of novel' (Vorster 1988b:117). The typical features displayed by the so-called 'apocalypses' can be understood in the light of the typical apocalyptic understanding of
reality (Vorster 1986d:177-179).

“What”, as described in the Revelation of John, is to be related to “how” it is described, with regard to the genre of the text. In addition to the narrative code of the genre, the code of imagination or fantasy...is obviously important concerning “what” is communicated (Vorster 1988b:117).

Genre study must also take function into account. Language is used to some end: ‘When one is using language, one is doing something with it’ (Vorster 1986d:181). This pragmatic function of language in sociolinguistics is of extreme importance. New Testament scholars realised this very long ago and therefore much attention was paid to the construction of contexts. But the search for a ‘Sitz im Leben’ lost its original purpose ‘and became a means of speculation about a concrete historical situation or context’ (Vorster 1988b:118).

Context is nevertheless important. Even a conceptual framework of the social context ‘as the semiotic environment in which people exchanged meanings’ (Vorster 1988b:118) can be helpful. Note, however, that such a conceptual social and communication context does not refer to a particular historical context: it is a theoretical device and it must serve to illuminate a text’s function. To reiterate: since social factors determine the construction of a message and the use of language is related to these matters a theoretical construct of the context can be useful (Vorster 1986d:181-184). To be more specific: communication between the members of a group can only be established by the symbols they share socially and which are reflected in their use of language. A text such as Revelation can thus only be meaningful to a group of people sharing a common system of meaning: ‘thus a close-knit unit with a strong concern for the beliefs of the group’. Vorster concludes that if any progress ‘is to be made with the definition of the genre of texts written from an apocalyptic perspective in terms of function, these texts need to be studied from a sociolinguistic point of view with the framework of a theory of genre’ (Vorster 1988b:119—italics mine).

12 AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT: VORSTER ON HISTORICAL CRITICISM

Our intellectual journey now reaches an interesting ‘spot’: a description of Vorster’s views on historical criticism. Up to now we have only referred to this theme sporadically. The following section is therefore more specifically devoted to Vorster’s evaluation of this approach. In his thoughts this was an extremely important subject. It is indeed another ‘distinctive recurring characteristic’ in his work (cf Vorster 1975a:23-39; 1975b:95-96; 1977c:130; 1978:89-99; 1981b:36-56; 1982a:94-111; 1983b:103, 137-140; 1986c:48-58; 1987b:205, 206, 207, 221; 1988e:31-48; 1990a:216-218; 1991d:16-43).
To define Vorster’s attitude towards the historical paradigm in definite terms is, however, extremely difficult. His views were rather ambivalent. Although he encouraged historical inquiry of the New Testament he was nevertheless acutely aware of its shortcomings and limitations (Vorster 1987d:374-394). At times he launched severe criticism against the historical paradigm and the impression is gained that historical investigation of the New Testament is either superfluous or insignificant. And then suddenly he would accentuate its importance. Any attempt to depict his attitude towards a historical approach is thus a difficult undertaking (cf Vorster 1988e:31-48). Perhaps we can refer to his views in dialectical terms: he ‘hated’ historical criticism but also ‘loved’ it; he was critical but also emphasised its usefulness; he depicted its value but also vehemently criticised its deficiencies.

In general his critical attitude was dominant. To commemorate the 100th anniversary of Rudolf Bultmann’s birth he wrote an important article on the ‘historical paradigm’ (1984:104-123). According to Vorster the historical critical approach to the New Testament reached its peak in the work and thought of Bultmann. His work highlighted the possibilities and the weaknesses of historical investigation. Tremendous efforts were invested to reconstruct the history of the synoptic tradition, the life Jesus the Jew, the era of early Christianity, et cetera. All his toil, however, not only accentuated the advantages but especially the limitations of historical criticism (cf Vorster 1987e:138-161). In this mature article Vorster formulated after many years of reflection his own views on the historical paradigm. Once again he admitted the importance of historical critical investigation and would not dispense with it. But on the other hand he vehemently criticised it, identified its insufficiencies, described its shortcomings in detail and elaborated on its limitations. He often and emphatically states that the historical paradigm represents only one manner in which text and reality can be approached and understood; it is based on contemporary theories and philosophies; it is a man-made attempt to manipulate textual and social data for the purpose of explaining the past (cf (Vorster 1987d:378-380; 1988e:34-36). Vorster’s critical evaluation was representative of many South African scholars. Put differently: Vorster actually epitomised the convictions of many scholars with regard to historical criticism.

Despite his criticism it must, however, also be said that Vorster was never against a historical investigation of the New Testament and he never rejected historical criticism as a means of constructing early Christianity (cf Vorster 1975b:90-96; 1981b:36-56; 1986d:166-185; 1990a:216-218; 1990d:38-51; 1992b:629-632). He even swam against the tides at the beginning of the nineteen seventies when he advocated the importance of the historical critical method (cf Vorster 1971a:223-235). As a member of a subgroup of the New Testament Society studying the background of the early church he often
delivered papers and made valuable contributions. Thus: Vorster encouraged the historical investigation of the New Testament era. His views are excellently summarised in the following quotation:

(My) thesis...is that the historical interpretation of the New Testament is necessary to provide information for setting the parameters of valid readings of the New Testament. Such interpretation serves the purpose of alienation between reader and text and enables the interpreter to ask critical questions about the communicability and relevance of these texts (Vorster 1984:105—italics mine).

13 EXEGESIS AS A HISTORICAL UNDERTAKING IS A FAILURE

Although he has encouraged historical investigation it has never been a dominant trend in his thinking. In the final analysis the historical critical method is a historical undertaking neglecting everything Vorster stands for with regard to text, genre, intertextuality, et cetera. He often muses over the communicability of the New Testament within a historical critical paradigm. He frequently wonders whether historical critical exegesis can indeed contribute to the interpretation and understanding of the New Testament text. His rather negative answer is closely linked to this historical critical treatment of texts. According to him historical exegesis is insignificant because it focuses on things irrelevant for text understanding. To illustrate we highlight the two aims of the historical critical scholar. Firstly, the aim is to read the New Testament as ancient writings, to determine their origin and to describe their historical growth. Secondly, the aim is to bridge the gap between past and present, then and now. An understanding of a text in the present implies a vast knowledge of the world in which it originated. Consequently exegesis is a historical undertaking: the original meaning in the original context must be determined and translated into ‘modern’ terms. And to accomplish this the exegete must displace himself from his present situation to the original context (Vorster 1987d:385-388).

According to Vorster this is impossible to achieve. No exegete can ever crawl into the skin of an ancient in order to determine meaning. And in the light of the above-mentioned it is also unnecessary. Understanding is linked to the world of the text and not that of the ancient world (cf Vorster 1988e:42-45).
14 SO DROP THIS STRANGE AND OUTDATED METHOD

Vorster is in constant dialogue with previous generations and the method they used: ‘It is...important to take the findings of historical investigation of the preceding two centuries seriously’ (1975b:95). Especially the historical critical method is often scrutinised and criticised (Vorster 1977c:130). The reason is evident: the impact of historical study has been so enormous and decisive that it can never be ignored. Views and insights of historical critical scholars have dominated New Testament science for decades and must therefore be taken into account. It is, however, interesting to note what Vorster highlights in this method, how he formulates its typical features and just how he evaluates it. He approaches the historical critical method from the vantage point described above. We can illustrate this with reference to his account of the Formgeschichte—one ‘stage’ of the historical critical method (Vorster 1982a:94-111).

Before the rise of Formgeschichte and Redaktionsgeschichte the study of Mark was characterised by a historistic approach: it was viewed as a chronicle of the ministry of Jesus; it was believed that this gospel provided vital historical facts; it was praised for vividness of presentation, realism and other important historical characteristics; it was treated by many as the main and the first historical account of the life and times of Jesus. ‘Formgeschichte’, however, brought an end to this historistic attitude. K L Schmidt’s last sentence in his 1919 publication, ‘Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesu’, marks the end of an old and the beginning of a new era. Schmidt maintained: ‘Aber im ganzen gibt es kein Leben Jesu im Sinne einer sich entwickelnden Lebensgeschichte, keinen chronologischen Aufriss der Geschichte Jesu, sondern nur Einzelgeschichten, Perikopen, die in ein Rahmenwerk gestellt sind’ (Vorster 1980a:49). According to Vorster this sentence introduced an entirely new approach to the genre and the literary activity of the author of the gospel of Mark.

This new approach displayed a few characteristics (Vorster 1981c:10-13). Firstly, genre study now became very important and mainly focused on the gospels. The ‘literary’ character of the gospels had to be described and their place in the history of early Christian literature determined; then the history of the traditions in the gospels had to be established. Secondly, questions pertaining to origin were then posed (Vorster 1991d:24-29). With regard to the origin of the gospels Vorster supplied a very succinct formulation: ‘The Gospels were unanimously regarded as collections of traditions fitted into a framework by a collector or editor who stood at the receiving end of a sociological process of transmission of tradition’ (Vorster 1980a:49). Thirdly, a definite view on authorship was propagated. According to Formgeschichte the units constituting the gospel genre were transmitted orally by illiterate and unknown people who were not regarded as authors in the true sense of the word (‘Schrift-
stellerspersönlichkeiten'). This kind of approach to the Gospels forged the very unhappy distinction between 'Kleinliteratur' and 'Hochliteratur'. Since the gospels belonged to the first category the possible literary activity of the evangelists as authors was totally disregarded (Vorster 1981c:9; 1983c:88; 1991d:25). Fourthly, the gospel text was viewed as a collection of loose units of traditions compiled by a collector or an editor and fitted into a certain framework. Although the notion of a 'final text' was important to Formgeschichte it functioned, however, in a particular way: the text in its final form served as a point of departure for analysing its constituent parts (Vorster 1981a:67).

Vorster levels some severe criticism against the formgeschichtliche approach: although the final author and the final form of the text apparently seems important elements in the understanding of the text they receive 'a definite secondary place in this model of interpretation' (Vorster 1980a:49; 1980b:18); Formgeschichte is thus regarded 'as a step backwards and in the wrong direction' (Vorster 1980a:52; 1980b:19); it has 'in principle an anti-individualistic view' of the gospels because an anonymous community (and not an individual author) created a tradition; the final product thus becomes the result of collective forces (Vorster 1980a:52); the evangelists are reduced to collectors and compilers who merely edited the material 'in a scissors and paste manner'. This evolutionary view effectively excludes any possibility of creative authorship (Vorster 1980a:52; 1980b:20-21).

15 THIS STRANGE METHOD 'PRODUCED' A STRANGE NOTION OF MEANING

Vorster is also extremely critical with regard to the 'meaning' which was produced by the historical critical method. Three things must be kept in mind according to him. Firstly, the meaning of a text is confused with historical investigation. Put differently: the mere study of a text's origin and growth does not disclose a deeper understanding; historical analysis is totally ill-suited to determine text meaning (Vorster 1984:114). Secondly, 'meaning' becomes something multiplex. Interpretation of texts is nothing more than a historical investigation into the 'original' horizons of meaning: 'Dit kom daarop neer dat die betekenis van 'n teks multiplex is en die interpretasie derhalwe 'n veelvlak-kige historiese ondersoek van betekenishorisonne is' (Vorster 1977a:9). Different layers of meaning thus exist without any attempt to explain their mutual relationships. Thirdly, it seems as if meaning is nothing more than a process of adding up the different results of the different methods of the historical critical method. As Vorster puts it: 'die indruk word geskep asof eksegese 'n pluriforme onderneming is waar wording en syn saam die betekenis van tekste konstitueer' (Vorster 1977a:10).
16 HISTORICAL INFORMATION DOES NOT COMMUNICATE TO MODERN HUMANS

Another flaw of historical criticism has to do with the *appropriation* and *application* of texts. Historical interpretation cannot shed light on the problem of 'what the text says' and 'what the text means'. Or: 'What the text says cannot be explained by historical explanation or reconstruction' (Vorster 1984:113). In the thought of Vorster this is such an important point that it must be repeated: historical understanding implies the application of the results of the historical critical method; the mere application of this method does not necessarily constitute communication between ancient text and modern man. To accomplish communication something more is needed. Put differently: historical criticism must always be supplemented in order to 'provide' the message; something must be 'attached' in order to become meaningful.

To illustrate a few examples can be mentioned. One important insight of Bultmann deals with the closing of Lessing's 'garstiger Graben', between historical text and modern interpreter. Historical criticism only emphasizes this gap but cannot bridge it. Bultmann experienced this as an acute problem and therefore introduced existentialism to 'salvage' the New Testament message for modern man (Vorster 1987e:145-154). Although viewed by some as a viable option to make ancient texts relevant for twentieth century society this procedure merely illustrated the limits of historical criticism (Vorster 1984:104).

Karl Barth also accepted historical criticism but supplemented it by means of theological interpretation. Peter Stuhlmacher used Gadamer and Ricoeur to avoid Troeltsch's scepticism (Vorster 1984:114). In short: 'Historical interpretation... is supplemented by “hermeneutical” understanding. The assumption is that hermeneutics is something (a “deeper” understanding) that is added to historical interpretation' (Vorster 1984:114).

17 REMEMBER: TEXTS CAN NEVER BE USED AS WINDOWS ON THE PAST

Texts are not *windows* through which ancient reality can be studied. The world of the New Testament is not accessible by means of texts. Such a view only leads to speculation and hypotheses and is vehemently rejected by Vorster (Vorster 1984:113). According to Vorster some important fallacies form the basis to this view.

Firstly, the belief that historical interpretation implies a relationship between a *knowing subject* and a *knowable object*. A New Testament scholar studies the New Testament historically in order to reconstruct the past. In other words the historical event, word or deed has to be reconstructed in the sense of reality remade. According to Vorster this causes some problems: no historical interpretation can claim to be a reflection of what really happened; by their...
nature historical judgements ‘are not objective descriptions of what really happened’; these historical descriptions ‘are products of the mind built on presuppositions and perceptions of a great variety’ (Vorster 1990c:202).

Secondly, there is the conviction that objective historical facts about the past exist and that they can be extrapolated from the text. Vorster rejects such a view: historical facts just do not exist.

Thirdly, the view that a continuity between the oral and literary phases exists and that the first can be recovered by means of the last mentioned (Vorster 1980c:36-38) is a fallacy. There is absolutely no shortcut from the text to its oral phases; it is virtually impossible to recover the preliterary forms and their meanings. Inscripturation changed everything: ‘oral’ meaning changed when it was written down. Put differently: ‘In a certain sense it is stripped of its past because all that remain in the written text are the traces of (units) tradition without their preliterary contexts’ (Vorster 1984:113).

Fourthly, the idea that language and history are closely related needs a closer look. To a certain extent language is a distortion of reality, a deformation of the past. Words, sentences and texts can therefore never describe how things really were and what really happened. Once again: language cannot render historical truth, cannot reflect the past and cannot reconstruct history (Vorster 1984:115).

Fifthly, the notion that texts refer to an extra-textual world has to be examined. In this regard Vorster accuses historical critics of a failure of nerve: the ‘garstiger Graben’ was not taken seriously enough (Vorster 1990a:218-222). Only the gap between text and reader was taken into consideration while neglecting the one between the text and what it refers to. According to Vorster it is of far greater importance to concentrate on the communication of the New Testament than to become engaged in all kinds of historical inquiries (Vorster 1980c:27-35).

18 WATCH OUT FOR PRESUPPOSITIONS: RATHER BRACKET THEM

Nearly at the end of his life Vorster published an article on presuppositions. It is an illuminating contribution highlighting an important aspect of Vorster’s intellectual framework: his pursuit of preciseness, accurateness, exactness, objectivity, et cetera. Writing the history of the early church is either impossible or to be avoided. And one reason for this state of affairs is the existence of presuppositions. They are ‘omnipresent’ and must be dealt with cautiously. When reading works on the history of New Testament times the presuppositions of the authors must be identified. Once again there is something of the Cartesian anxiety: the historian of the New Testament era must purify oneself of presuppositions; one must bracket or suspend judgement in matters pertaining history; one should rather discover the Archimedean point
that can serve as the proper foundation for New Testament studies.

According to Vorster presuppositions are a reality. He even states that the historical Jesus 'is the product of historical judgements which depend on many and different presuppositions' (Vorster 1990c:202): interpretation without presuppositions is impossible; every interpretation is based on presuppositions; interpreters never approach their objects empty-headed but are influenced by many and different presuppositions. Knowledge of presuppositions is important because it can assist scholars in determining the validity of their scientific work. If the presuppositions of certain scholars or community of scholars can be depicted they can be validated, challenged or rejected (Vorster 1990c:195-198).

On the other hand Vorster shows some uneasiness with regard to presuppositions: they do exist but must be treated with caution; they indeed shape the scientific process but one must be aware of their influence and try to control them; they cannot be ignored but it must also be taken into account that they can cause great confusion and complicate matters to the extreme. In short: for the sake of objective historical investigation Vorster wants presuppositions to be articulated and bracketed. Scholars must be aware of their existence and make them explicit: 'it would be very helpful if they were willing to articulate their presuppositions'. It can help scholars to evaluate 'the validity of presuppositions and the influence they have on interpretation'; knowledge of the function and influence of presuppositions 'might lead to progress in our search for images of who Jesus was and what he intended to do'. It is therefore of the utmost importance 'to develop a set of criteria to judge the validity of presuppositions in historical study of the New Testament' (Vorster 1990c:209).

19 HISTORICAL INQUIRY NEVERTHELESS HAS A PLACE UNDER THE SUN

As said before, Vorster never rejected the historical investigation of the New Testament. Such a step would be disastrous. And in 1988 he emphatically stated: 'Whoever maintains that historical interpretation is a luxury, or even unnecessary, has to reconsider these observations seriously' (Vorster 1988e:40). But the point which Vorster wanted to stress was that things could not be continued in the 'old' historical critical way; the New Testament has to be investigated from a different 'historical' angle; the history of early Christianity must be approached from a different route. And this 'other' historical approach comprises at least three aspects.

Firstly, history and narratology can be linked. Vorster emphasises the narrative character of historiography and hopes to open new possibilities for historical inquiry. Usually history writing is perceived as a description of past events in a manner which can be verified. This is unnecessary because no one-to-one relationship can ever be obtained between fact and reality, historical
event and linguistic description. Linguistic signs are unable to depict facts realistically. Historical events and people only acquire meaning within a language system. History must therefore rather be treated as a narrative and an attempt to remake reality. Put differently: 'Historical description is nothing more than a narrative, human construction of past events and persons' (Vorster 1984:115).

Secondly, studying the New Testament from a religio-historical point of view (cf Vorster 1989d:159-175) is important. In this regard the focus shifts from questions pertaining to origin and growth to thought patterns prevalent in early Christianity (Vorster 1991d:32-33). It is an inquiry into the beliefs of people who lived in the times of the genesis of the New Testament writings; it is all about the typical and distinctive elements in the reasoning of early Christianity on many themes; it is a study of the thought world of New Testament times and how 'foreign' ideas penetrated the thoughts of the early believers; it is an examination of the different literary, theological and philosophical influences which shaped the world of early Christianity (Vorster 1989d:162). Once again: to Vorster a religio-historical investigation seems to be an excellent substitute for the one-sided historical critical understanding of a text (cf Vorster 1981b:36-56).

Thirdly, sociological and anthropological models are to be taken seriously (Vorster 1987d:388-392). This approach is also 'an improvement' of the historical critical manner of research with its emphasis on the reconstruction of contexts to illuminate the origin and growth of texts. A sociological and anthropological approach is an attempt to construct possible social relationships of meaning; historical investigation (according to this model) rather focuses on socio-historical and social meaning systems; the reality which is being studied in this approach is not the 'bruta facta' or people of blood and flesh 'but the relationships of meaning between "facts", deeds and persons'. Quite rightly Vorster remarks: 'This involves a new look at history as science' (Vorster 1988e:41).

20 A LAST WORD

We have reached the end of this intellectual journey. Along the road we have indicated a few typical Vorsterian 'spots' in an attempt to penetrate his thoughts and to elucidate his quest for understanding. In the process his views with regard to the text, its communication, its narrative character, its genre, et cetera have been accentuated. Attention has also been paid to his lifelong struggle to come to grips with history and historical criticism. On the whole the picture is one-sided and very incomplete. One aspect of Vorster's work that has virtually been left untouched is his contribution to the study of the language of the New Testament as well as his linguistic approach (cf Vorster 1972a:19-27; 1972c:39-48; 1974:21-41; 1979; 1982d:32-42; 1985b:138-156;
Our journey has nevertheless convinced us once again of the greatness of our dear friend Willem Stefanus Vorster.

WORKS CONSULTED


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