FORM AND REDACTION CRITICISM WITHIN
THE FRAMEWORK OF GOSPEL RESEARCH:
WILLEM VORSTER’S CONTRIBUTION

ANDRIE DU TOIT

ABSTRACT
Vorster’s views on form and redaction criticism should be
gleaned mainly from his comments within the context of
his extensive gospel research. His insistence on method-
ological soberness is his most abiding bequest to biblical
research. At the same time this led him to evaluate
these methods in terms of an either-or scheme: either the
diachronic or the synchronic approach; either evolution or
creativity, etcetera. Vorster consistently chose for the lat­
ter against the former. It is argued that it would be more
correct to think in complementary terms and to use dif­
ferent approaches to enrich one another, provided that
they are soberly distinguished and applied correctly.

1 INTRODUCTORY REMARKS
Willem Vorster’s work on form and redaction criticism should be understood
within the context of his gospel research, more specifically his study on the
gospel genre and the Gospel of Mark. He certainly was no stranger to these
two sub-disciplines of the historico-critical approach. He contributed an article
on both of them to Klijn’s Inleiding tot de studie van het Nieuwe Testament
(Vorster 1982). Also one of his doctoral students applied redaction criticism
extensively in his study of the Markan miracle narratives (Engelbrecht 1983).
But, as his impressive array of articles makes clear, his own scientific
sympathies and interests lay elsewhere. That does not imply, however, that he
did not reflect on or evaluate these methods. He certainly did that extensively,
and with no lack of parresia, but then within the context of their contribution
towards a better understanding of the gospels.

My intention is, first, to present a concise overview of Vorster’s position.
Secondly, the undoubtedly positive aspects of his contribution will be
highlighted. And finally some critical observations will be made.

2 VORSTER’S POSITION
Our author held very strong and consistent convictions about form and redac­
tion criticism, and these were repeated throughout his publications which are

Reproduced by Sabinet Gateway under licence granted by the Publisher (dated 2010).
relevant to our present theme. I shall present them in the form of five major theses.

2.1 Methodologically diachronic and synchronic study of the New Testament should be distinguished and practised separately to serve the distinctive goals for which they were developed.

This conviction, which constitutes Vorster’s basic point of departure, resulted from his acquaintance with such influential scholars as Jannie Louw, Eugene Nida, James Barr and Wolfgang Richter. These four made a profound impact on his scientific development. His MA-dissertation (Vorster 1967) and his doctoral thesis (Vorster 1979) already reflect his strong linguistic bent and capability, and these remained a decisive factor in all his work.

Vorster was convinced that the synchronic approach provided the only legitimate key towards understanding the gospels. He never advocated a monism of methods (cf 1977:34). A diachronic approach was in his view perfectly legitimate, but then as a historical study of the change of meaning, the genesis and development of utterances. Vorster’s concern was methodological correctness. Different methods can be applied in their own right, but the researcher should have clarity on the type of legitimate answers a certain method could generate. A favourite dictum of his was one borrowed from Richter: ‘Die Wahl der Fragestellung bestimmt das Vorgehen’ (Vorster 1985: 14). His problem with much that was offered in the market of biblical research was the naive blurring of inherently incongruous methods: ‘To my mind’, he says, ‘one can trace back most of the problems in New Testament scholarship to this one single phenomenon’ (1977:28). In a subtle earlier article (Vorster 1975) he had pointed out the inconsistencies of scholars expounding the Parable of the Sower and its Markan explication (Mc 4:3-8, 14-20):

Due to the fact that the history of the meaning of Mc 4:3-8 is taken into account,...meaning and history of meaning both feature in a mixed form in commentaries based on the historico-critical point of view. This is methodologically unsound. It is absolutely necessary to distinguish between diachronic and synchronic matters in discussing the meaning of a given text’ (Vorster 1977:32).

What he reacts against is not the historico-critical methods as such, but their indiscriminate application for purposes for which they are not suitable, and the implicit claim that they can elucidate the meaning of a gospel text in its final form. Form and redaction critics have made the gospels ‘a tell of which the different layers had to be excavated in order to be understood correctly’ (1977:34; cf 34-35). The legitimate procedure to understand the final phase in the history of that tell would rather be to explore the content of the top layer horizontally in order to relate the different artifacts found there to one another.
This is what the synchronic approach does. It takes seriously the internal network of the final text as an autonomous semantic entity.

As we have already stated, Vorster was not opposed to the use of diachronic methods for the purpose of studying early Christian history. In fact, during the last years of his academic career he gave increasing attention to historical matters, as was shown by his participation in the study group on the resurrection of Jesus and the historical Jesus.

2.2 The emergence of the gospel genre is not the final stage of an evolutionary process, but is due to the activity of a creative mind

Vorster constantly attacked the proponents of the historico-critical approach for understanding the gospels as the product of a genetic process with its own inherent causality (1980a:34, 37; 1980c:17-19; 1981:10-13 and especially 1982:94). This faulty premise maximised the role of the early Christian community and minimised the contribution of the evangelists, and especially of Mark. The contribution of the evangelists has been degraded to that of mere collecting and editing. Renewed studies of folklore have shown that such a self-propelling, evolutionary process, ending up with the final gospel texts as its inevitable climax, is an illusion. Creative personalities play an important role in the transmission of oral tradition. This would also have been the case with the production of the Gospel of Mark. In addition, linguistic research has proven that the gospels are self-contained, auto-semantic entities, displaying the creative activity of individual authors. Once a gospel text has come into being, it constitutes a new text with a life and intra-textual significance of its own, the communicative output of which cannot be equated with the sum-total of traditions it contains.

One of the strong influences behind these insights was Eberhard Güttgemanns, whose seminal book (see Güttgemanns 1970) was studied by a sub-group of the New Testament Society of South Africa of which Vorster and the present author were members. After that Vorster worked for a while with Güttgemanns in Bonn, and in this period he quoted him approvingly (1980:23; cf also 1977:35-36).

Vorster's convictions regarding the creative role of the evangelists remained unchanged throughout his academic career. As a matter of fact they seem to have grown stronger in the course of time. In his very last article, published posthumously, he asks almost defiantly:

How one should picture Mark editing tradition in written or oral form by changing a word here and there, adding a sentence or two, rearranging the order of material, putting the traditional material into a narrative frame and joining separate units or episodes—as redaction critics make us believe—is difficult to imagine. There is much more to the production of a text than traditional views would allow. As long
as the Gospels are perceived mainly from the perspective of their growth, the process of production is blurred (1993:389).

2.3 To understand the gospels as the collective product of the Christian community, as held by the historico-critical paradigm, is unwarranted. The Gospel of Mark can be properly understood only as the work of an individual author.

The historico-critical approach views the emergence of the gospels as primarily a social phenomenon, the product of the church. According to Vorster, this anti-individualistic approach, which makes an anonymous community responsible for the creation of the tradition and sees even the literary phase of the gospels as part of an ecclesiastical process, cannot be maintained (1980a:37; 1981; 1983a:88; 1985:21; 1993:389). One of the erroneous results of this view is the characterisation of the gospels as ‘Kleinliteratur’; another is the conviction that there exists very little difference between the oral tradition and the gospels, and, closely related to this, that the evangelists had only to collect, combine and edit the traditions, and that their editing was not at all that thorough a process. This boiled down to a situation where Mark was ‘simply...a conduit through which a stream of tradition flowed’ (1993:391). The collective view militates against what had already been discovered by forerunners of redaction criticism—W Wrede, R H Lightfoot, E Lohmeyer—and later endorsed by the exponents of redaction criticism as such, namely, that Mark impressed his own theological views on his material. Marxsen even called Mark an author in a certain sense (Marxsen 1959:99; cf Vorster 1980a:37). In this respect Vorster has made some really positive statements about redaction criticism (1980b:15,19-24; 1981:14; 1993:388). What must be deplored, however, is the fact that, in spite of these insights, the majority still seems to cling to the view that the evangelists were exponents of their congregations (Vorster 1980a:37). Vorster finds the following statement of Strecker unacceptable: ‘Die Evangelien sind aus der Gemeinde und für die Gemeinde geschrieben. Die Redaktoren sind nichts anderes als Exponenten der Gemeinde und ihrer Funktionen’ (Strecker 1979:23; cf Vorster 1980a:37-38). He is of opinion that this ecclesiastical characterisation of the work of the evangelists does not tally with another statement in the same context: ‘...durch die Sammlung, und durch die Komposition, durch eine umfassende und eindringende Redaktion des gemeindlichen Überlieferungsgutes prägt sich eine je spezifische, individuelle, theologische Konzeption aus’ (Strecker 1979:23). While an oral narration is multi-dimensional in the sense that the narrator remains free to place the accents according to his predilections and the needs of the occasion (cf Vorster’s excellent elucidation 1993:393), Mark’s choice for a written document implied a decision for a one-dimensional version which
could not be reversed once it had been written down.

'n Geskrewe evangelie is "'n enkele kyk" op Jesus en die teks bied homself aan as 'n bepaalde siening van die lewe en werk van Jesus. Markus was nie maar 'n eksponent van sy gemeente nie. Hy was ook 'n individuele verteller-skrywer. So gesien, bestaan daar 'n diskontinuitéit tussen FG en RG (Vorster 1980a:38).

2.4 The view that the gospel genre developed out of the kerygma of the early Christian community and is therefore sui generis, is incorrect. Mark should rather be understood as a narrative, and therefore narrative criticism would be one of the most promising paradigms for studying Mark

Vorster’s negation of the kerygmatic approach (1980b:27; 1981:7; 1982:100-101; 1983a:88-89) is intrinsically related to his argumentation as reflected in §2.2 and §2.3. The historico-critical approach accepts that the early Christian communities transmitted the traditional units in order to proclaim the Good News, and this self-same functional factor explains the emergence of the gospels from these units. As a matter of fact catechetical, polemical and apologetical needs also played a role (cf Vorster 1982:100-101). But form criticism goes still further: it sees the kerygma as the basic grid on which the gospel genre as such was formed. If that is true, it implies that the gospel genre is unique, sui generis. This Vorster denies, not only because he refuses to accept the evolutionistic and collective approach, but also because he sees the Gospel of Mark as a literary product for which antecedents and analogies should be sought in the Greco-Roman and Semitic world (cf also his substantiation in 1981:26). In considering the different Greco-Roman biographies, aretalogies, tragedies and tragi-comedies, as well as different Semitic narrative texts, including texts of a biographical nature, the Easter Haggada, the midrashim literature, etcetera (1981:13-26; 1983b:103-104), Vorster could not really find a satisfactory antecedent. This problem kept him busy, as is shown by the fact that in his very last publication he came back on the midrashim theory (1993:393-394). Although he considers this position sympathetically, he is still not fully convinced by this hypothesis (1993:393). The finding of a convincing analogy was not, however, a prerequisite for accepting the narrative character of Mark and thus concluding that the gospel genre was not unique. If, however, Mark should be read as a story, narrative criticism, in conjunction with other accepted synchronic procedures, would certainly be the responsible way to study the meaning of the gospel texts (1980a:38-46; 1993:388-389).
2.5 The historico-critical paradigm fails to differentiate sufficiently between meaning and reference

The liberal Jesus interpretation of the nineteenth century saw the gospels as a direct description of the historical life of Jesus. The historico-critical approach in turn does not sufficiently separate from one another the narrative world, as created by the text, and the real world in which the actual church and the real author figured. Therefore grave mistakes are prevalent, such as the referential fallacy which sees the Gospel of Mark as a window through which one gets a view on the church of Mark's time, as well as the intentional fallacy, which draws directly on the narrative text to identify the intentions of the author (cf especially Vorster 1980a:27-48; also 1982:107-108). In this context it is revealing to note Vorster's reluctance, in his introduction to the Gospel of Mark (1983b:102-122), to draw historical conclusions about its writer, date, purpose, first readers, etcetera (cf also 1991:36-39). He restricts this to the absolute minimum and declares, quite consistently, that for the understanding of Mark it is much more significant to devote attention to the author as narrator and the document as narrative (cf 1983b:108-109 and especially 1991:38-39).

3 POSITIVE ASPECTS OF VORSTER'S CONTRIBUTION

The merits of Vorster's contribution towards a better understanding of the gospels, as well as his contribution towards identifying the fallacies committed in applying form criticism and redaction criticism as hermeneutical tools for studying the gospels as written texts, are beyond dispute. The international recognition he gained for this contribution was well-deserved. It was, then, somewhat disappointing to note that his contribution was omitted not only in Powell's overview of narrative criticism (Powell 1990), but also in the recent volume edited by Anderson and Moore under the title Mark and method (Anderson & Moore 1992).

A positive evaluation of Vorster's work should, in my opinion, contain the following salient points:

3.1 At a time of methodological naivety and slovenliness, when everybody seemed to do his own exegetical thing as he deemed fit, Vorster was one of the first to heed the call for methodological sensitivity. In the first instance historical questions had to be investigated by diachronic methods and the meaning of texts by synchronic ones. At the same time the application of synchronic methods should be determined by the genre of a specific text. In the case of the gospels, which belong first and foremost to the narrative genre, narrative criticism would be one of the appropriate methods. Nobody exposed the fallacy of mixing diachronical and synchronical features, as happened in the
application of form criticism and redaction criticism to the gospels, more uncompromisingly and with sharper critical acumen than did Vorster.

3.2 To Vorster’s credit it must also be said that he had correctly pointed out that a gospel and the gospel genre as such cannot simply be seen as the product of an evolutionary, collective process, with the kerygma as the shaping force. He rightly asserts the creative contribution of the evangelists as individual authors, who did far more than collect and edit their traditions, and in this way produced new, autonomous and autosemantic textual entities, the semantic significance of which far exceeded the sum total of the traditions incorporated in them.

3.3 Vorster also correctly exposed the danger of not clearly distinguishing textual world and real world clearly from each other, that is, the problem of naively drawing historical conclusions from the gospels, fallacies which were committed in applying the historico-critical paradigm, though not, of course, only there.

4 SOME CRITICAL OBSERVATIONS

In offering some critical remarks and devoting more space to them than to what I have mentioned as positive aspects of Vorster’s contribution, I wish to stress that the latter were so self-evident that it was not necessary to dwell on them extensively. Here, too, we should weigh rather than count.

In considering Vorster’s evaluation of form and redaction criticism and their contribution towards gospel research, one cannot escape the impression of an element of overkill. I would like to illustrate this from the following perspectives:

4.1 In his correct insistence on methodological sobriety and the difference between the diachronic and the synchronic approaches, Vorster seems to rule out, or at least gives the impression of ruling out, the possibility that in certain instances, when applied with the necessary caution, these two approaches can complement and enrich one another. In this regard Powell illustrates how narrative criticism can contribute towards historical understanding (1990:97-98, 121; also Kingsbury 1988:458-460). But the process can also work the other way round: redaction criticism, which is traditionally a diachronic venture, can also help us towards a better understanding of the meaning of the gospels on the synchronic level.

To explain this statement, some remarks on the relationship between the synchronic and the diachronic approaches are necessary. To say that the former studies the meaning of a text and the latter its growth, is certainly correct, but not sufficient. We have to realise that, in order to create a diachronic model, it
is first of all necessary to establish a series of synchronic studies at various historical stages. A diachronic model is in reality a vertical axis, combining various synchronic studies, and determining change of meaning by comparing the various synchronic levels along this axis. What actually happens in instances where the diachronic and synchronic approaches are confused, is that the differences between the various synchronic cross-cuts on the vertical axis of history get muddled. What is important for our present argument is the fact of various intersections between the vertical and the horizontal axes. These represent as many meeting-points between the synchronic and diachronic axes. If we view the written gospels as occupying the uppermost end of the vertical axis and redaction criticism as a movement towards that end, there comes a point where redaction criticism and synchronic analyses will meet. We may even say that redaction criticism, in identifying, by means of historical reconstruction, the theological intention and accents of the different gospels, and especially in eventually becoming composition criticism, not only provides helpful material towards understanding the text on the synchronic level, but actually starts to function on that level. In this sense redaction criticism can indeed complement the different synchronic approaches. That this can be a truly enriching symbiosis has been clearly demonstrated by the doctoral dissertations of three South African scholars, namely those of Engelbrecht (1983) and Breytenbach (1984) on Mark, and that of Van Zyl (1987) on Matthew. Also, amongst others, the commentary of Gundry on Matthew, which draws so heavily on redaction criticism, should be mentioned. One has of course to accept that in the case of Mark redactional criticism is hampered by the fact that we do not have older written sources to compare it with. It is in this regard interesting that Gundry declares redaction criticism ‘relatively useless’ in the case of Mark (Gundry 1993:20-22). But in spite of Gundry’s arguments various other studies (cf inter alia above) have shown that redaction criticism is not impossible and can make a contribution also in the case of Mark.

This observation should not be interpreted as a fall-back towards the mixing of methods. At all costs that should be avoided. The different methods should be kept apart, applied each in its own right and answering the questions they are suited for, thus using them in a complementary fashion. If this proviso is constantly kept in mind, I can endorse the conclusion of Powell: ‘a symbiotic relationship exists between narrative and historical approaches to texts. Although the two methods cannot be used simultaneously, they can be used side by side in a supplementary fashion. They might even be viewed as necessary complements, each providing information that is beneficial to the exercise of the other’ (1990:97-98).

4.2 Vorster’s rejection of the idea of an evolutionary process as such is, in my opinion, carrying the argument too far. He is correct in the sense that the
gospels display the creative activity of their authors and that the tradition has not evolved almost automatically into the gospels. But that some kind of organic development did take place can hardly be denied. Vorster himself accepts that small units of tradition have been formed and that the grouping of traditions into oral or written collections did take place (inter alia 1980a:34-35, 41; 1980b:24-25). In his introduction to Mark (1983:106-107) he reckons with the existence of seven such larger tradition-units prior to Mark’s gospel: the passion narrative, the record of the institution of the Lord’s Supper, a series of miracle-stories, etcetera. One can hardly visualise this other than as a process of growth: first the formation of traditions, then the selective grouping of specific individual units into larger collections. In this sense even the coming into being of the gospels could be seen as part of a development. Such a development does not necessarily exclude deviations and creative leaps, and to accept this view need not therefore subtract from the creativity of the gospel writers themselves. Neither does it deny the folkloristic insight that the switch from the oral to the written is a metabasis eis allo genos with drastic implications (cf Gütgemanns 1970:119-161).

4.3 Our author’s rejection of what he calls the anti-individualistic stance of form criticism also seems to be an overstatement. Again, he is correct in stating that the individuality of the evangelists as authors should be respected. But that does not necessarily exclude a sociological development to which groups of believers as well as individuals contributed, the latter experiencing themselves as being part and mouth-pieces of those groups, and articulating, as they believed, the most inner and legitimate driving forces behind and within those groups. These groups were not anonymous, faceless, incognito communities as Vorster refers to them (1985:21; 1993:389), but the Christ-people, for whom the traditions conveying the works and words of their Master were important, and in relation to them the evangelists were not outsiders, but insiders. If standing within this ecclesiastical stream was not of decisive importance to Mark, why can his gospel not even be visualised without the broad spectrum of traditions it incorporates? It is true that the investigations of Parry and Lord into folkloristic tendencies have restored the importance of individuality, and certainly the role of individuals in the development of the gospel tradition should not be minimised, but the belief in the authoritative character of the latter would have created a healthy dialectic between collective belief and individual creativity. To recognise the latter is not to deny the former. The importance of the ecclesiastical factor in the production of Mark’s gospel should be fully recognised (cf Deist 1980:49-50).

4.4 Vorster’s strong rejection of the kerygmatic approach also needs qualification. His denial that the kerygma would have been the direct source of
the gospel genre and that the gospels are for that reason *sui generis*, should be accepted. It has become clear that we should rather look for literary analogies among the different types of narrative in the Semitic and Hellenistic worlds. That the gospels belong to the same overall category as these cannot be denied. As a matter of fact many of the small traditional units incorporated in the gospels were already of a narrative character. It is, however, another matter to deny that the kerygma played any role in the formation of the gospel tradition, as Vorster’s rejection seems to imply (see also his vehement remarks in 1991:56). The term ‘kerygma’ should be understood in a broad and functional sense. The early Christian communities definitely saw the proclamation of the Good News as their main task, and were therefore a kerygmatic community. Dibelius’ *cum suis* would hardly have been wrong in accepting that the main purpose of the small traditional units was primarily to serve the kerygma. And there can, in my opinion, be little doubt that the kerygma was the main driving force towards the forming and collecting of traditional units and bringing them together into collections, especially when we understand catechesis, missionary preaching, apologetics and even polemics, each in its own way, as forms of kerygma. Likewise also the gospels were the result of the kerygmatic concern of the early Christian communities. The proclamation of Jesus as Son of God plays an important role in Mark. When Vorster says that Mark wrote his gospel ‘to involve his readers and keep them involved with Jesus as the Son of God’ (1983b:123), that indicates an intention to propagate the Good News (= the kerygmatic concern). We should therefore accept that the kerygma played an important role in the prehistory as well as in the formation of the gospels, although it was not the template on which the gospels were formatted. In this sense it would not be wrong to call the gospels kerygmatic narratives.

4.5 I have already pointed out that one of the many merits of Vorster’s work has been his insistence that textual world and real world should be clearly distinguished. Only in this way can the so-called referential fallacy, of which the intentional fallacy is one specific example, be avoided. Although on occasions Vorster conceded that it would not be wrong to ask historical questions of a gospel text (1980a:27 cf 1977:31-32), he formulated this caveat in strong terms. In his contribution to Hahn’s volume he states with reference to the problem of author’s intention: ‘Es ist ein Trugschluss anzunehmen, dass man durch das Studium eines Textes auf die Gedanken seines Verfassers schliessen könne’ and then continues: ‘ebenso ist es ein Irrtum, wenn man glaubt, dass die Botschaft eines Erzähltextes wie des Markusevangeliums die Kommunikation zwischen dem historischen Autor und dem Leser widerspiegelle’ (Vorster 1985:15-16). These remarks would be true of many narratives, but in the case of the gospels they should be qualified carefully. We must beware of drawing straight lines from the narrative text to the outside world. But if Vorster’s
denial is correct, one has to ask why Mark bothered to write his gospel at all. What sense would there be in writing a gospel about Jesus if his readers could not infer what message he wanted to convey to them? Tannehill, also an expert on narrative criticism, expresses a directly opposite opinion: ‘Der Erzähler wählt die für seine Absichten geeignete Erzählweise... Daher spiegelt eine Geschichte die Absicht ihres Erzählers wider’ (Tannehill 1985:41). That Vorster overstated his position becomes clear when elsewhere he himself came to the conclusion, albeit hesitatingly, that Mark wrote in order to involve his readers with Jesus (1983b:123). In his 1991 article, where he was forced, as it were, to expand on Mark’s theology within its historical context, the same dilemma becomes visible. On the one hand Vorster realised clearly that one cannot write a theology of Mark without reconstructing some kind of historical context. On the other hand he had serious theoretical problems with the feasibility of such a reconstruction. To lessen this dilemma he now conceded that the narrative implicitly presented us with information about the first readers and their context (Vorster 1991:36). As hypothetical reconstruction he accepted that the first readers were Greek-speaking Galilean Christians. The writer was a bilingual Jewish Christian. He wrote in a critical period before the destruction of the temple. He and his readers shared a very strong eschatological expectation: the parousia was imminent (Vorster 1991:36-38). It is somewhat ironical that in Vorster’s exposition this imminent expectation eventually became such a dominant aspect of Markan theology that he found himself forced to conclude that Mark had in fact little to say to modern Christians. Mark cannot convince us at all, unless we revise his understanding of Jesus (1991:58). As a consolation he added that Mark’s gospel ‘was nevertheless a strongly persuasive message for people who were in need and experienced fear due to the fall of Jerusalem and the war against Rome’ (1991:1958). What actually happened here is that what Vorster originally warned against as a referential fallacy eventually became, in his own work, a shibboleth obstructing the relevancy of the message of Mark for today, unless it was drastically reinterpreted. (In saying this I do not deny that Mark’s eschatology needs reinterpretation. What I want to deny is that Mark’s expectation of the imminent parousia should be seen as the single dominant hermeneutical key for understanding his gospel. Mark’s christology and ethics, for instance, are certainly still important for today in spite of the delay of the parousia.)

Kingsbury’s theoretical position (1988) concerning the problem of the relationship between textual and real world is more convincing: he first rejects the historical-biographical reading of the gospels and then the redaction critical model of readership with its notion of transparency, the textual world of Matthew, for instance, being understood as a transparency through which the world of Matthew’s church can be seen and reconstructed. Thereupon he motivates the appropriateness of the narrative mode to analyse the gospels, but
emphatically denies that the distinction between the ‘world of Matthew’s story’ and the ‘real world of the first evangelist’ implies ‘a retreat from history’ (:458). One should definitely not move directly from the act of reading Matthew’s story to that of historical reconstruction, but to ‘scrutinize the “world of the story”…can be seen as essential preparation for reconstructing historically the “world of the evangelist”’ (:460).

In this respect something should be added regarding our understanding of the synchronic approach and the relationship between text world and real world. Although the synchronic approach emphasises the autosemantic character of a text, it should not be understood as excluding the importance of the specific real world situation to which the text refers and which the text wishes to affect in some way. It would therefore be wrong to equate a synchronic analysis with a purely text-immanent reading. A gospel is part of real history and in the understanding of a gospel text its dynamic interplay, not only with other texts (intertextuality), but also with history, is of the utmost importance. Synchronic exegesis is a horizontal cross-cut on the vertical axis of history, displaying a cornucopia of meaning, constituted by the dialectic between the text world, as produced by its internal network of signs, and the real world with its socio-political, religious and numerous other realities. Although Vorster did use the term text-immanent exegesis (cf 1977:34-35) he would not exclude the importance of the text’s embedment in the real world. His keen study of the background of the New Testament would otherwise be difficult to understand. In his important article in New Testament Studies he states: ‘This does not mean that the gospels have no evidential value or that I am delivering a plea for an achronistic approach to the gospels’ (1983:92). But it would be true to say that, in pleading his case theoretically, he differentiated so strongly between text world and real world, that the historicity of texts and the importance of history in the understanding of texts were not recognised sufficiently (cf also Deist 1980).

4.6 Vorster’s view that Mark belongs not to Volks- oder Kleinliteratur but, as a literary work, to Hochliteratur is in essence correct, but should, in my opinion, be formulated in a more nuanced way. In a narrative belonging to Hochliteratur, if we stick to this term, one expects that the author would have at least absorbed and reworked his traditional units to such an extent that they would fit in relatively smoothly into the story line. This is clearly not always the case in Mark. Sometimes the traditional units have been so loosely incorporated and still show so much of their original texture, that the borderline between Hochliteratur and Kleinliteratur becomes very thin indeed.

Vorster has more than once criticised Pesch for depicting Mark as a conservative redactor (Vorster 1980a:37; 1985:27-28; 1993:388). I cannot fully agree with Pesch, but Vorster’s argument would have proved more convincing
if he had entered into discussion with Pesch on the basis of a detailed study of some selected sections in Mark.

In this regard it may be helpful to look at one such passage, namely the ‘house scene’ in Mk 9:33-50. As we know the ‘house’ is used in Mark as a place where Jesus gives special instruction to his disciples. The problem with finding a logical progress in this section becomes evident as soon as one tries to subdivide these eighteen verses. There exist almost as many varieties of subdivisions as there are different Greek texts, translations and commentaries, the reason for this being that the internal cohesion between various text segments, and consequently also the breaks between them, are unclear. Should vv 36-37 be connected to vv 33-35 or not? Must v 41 form part of the preceding vv 38-40? Should a new section begin with vv 49-50, or do they belong to the foregoing? Actually this whole house dialogue is filled in with logia which are only loosely connected by the theme of discipleship and by catch-words such as ‘if’ ‘whoever’, ‘(it is) good’, ‘in the name of Jesus’, ‘stumbling’, ‘fire’ and ‘salt’ (see further Gundry 1993:507-508). The meaning and mutual relationship of vv 49-50 are especially an enigma, and their connection with the foregoing verses is awkward, to say the least. The Greek manuscripts already show what hermeneutical problems these verses caused. And Gould declared a century ago: ‘This is confessedly one of the most difficult passages to interpret in the N.T.’ (1896:180). As far as the overall section is concerned, it is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to find a convincing form of cohesion. Apart from Grundmann’s efforts to do this (1968:194-201), Klostermann’s remarks come quite close to the truth:


Schnackenburg in turn declared that we should not look for a neat arrangement or overarching ideas, while the evangelist stood under the ‘Zwang, verschiedenartiges Material zusammenzustellen....Gerade im Belassen mancher Unebenheiten zeigt sich die Gebundenheit des Evangelisten an das Traditions­gut’ (1971:154). Although Pesch finds a little more coherence than do Klostermann and Schnackenburg, he has to conclude, quite in line with his view of Mark as a conservative redactor: ‘In unserem Abschnitt wird drastisch deutlich, dass Markus weniger durch Bearbeitung als durch Zusammenstellung von Traditionen redigiert’ (1977:102).

These sayings, although all located within a house scene, really contradict the idea of a closely-knit and logically persuasive narrative web. Each logion has its own, individual thrust, but does this as a separate entity, not as part of
a well-composed whole. It seems as if Mark's main concerns in carrying these sayings were (1) to present his ecclesiastical readers with additional Jesus traditions about discipleship, (2) to let these traditions speak to them each through its individual message, while (3) at the same time preventing some important Jesus traditions from getting lost. This conclusion would still hold water if Mark incorporated a piece of ecclesiastic catechism here, as Bultmann suspected (1970:160-161; cf also Klostermann 1971:92; Grundmann 1968:194).

In this regard Breytenbach's depiction of Mark's gospel as an 'episodic narrative' (Breytenbach 1984:75-84; 1985:157-162), in which Mark may use, as is here the case, a 'scene' as a narrative device to bring diverse episodes or sayings together (cf Breytenbach 1985:65-68), is helpful since his formulation leaves room for a lack of logical narrative flow between the smaller units themselves. At the same time this also allows for parts of Mark to be less 'durchkomponiert' than others, thus being in form closer to 'Traditionsgut'.

Hahn has come to the following conclusion in this regard: 'Gerade im Markusevangelium ist dem Stoff seine Eigenart noch weitgehend belassen und die literarische Konzeption durch konsequente Einbettung in einen Gesamtzusammenhang erreicht worden, weniger durch eine durchgängige stilistische Überarbeitung' (1985:197). I would certainly not go as far as Hahn, but that his statement contains some element of truth, especially regarding certain stretches in Mark, cannot be denied.

To conclude this specific point: Mark should first and foremost be seen as an author, and his gospel as a literary document belonging to what is usually called Hochliteratur. To designate him as a mere collector or editor would do an injustice to his performance. The sensitivity and depth of his authorial and compositional activity is in fact often astounding. But that activity is not always equally intensive. In certain instances it would be fair to say that his text contains elements of Kleinliteratur.

5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

From what has been presented in the preceding section it should have become clear that Vorster tended to evaluate form and redaction criticism, with a view to gospel research, in terms of an either/or scheme:

- Either redaction criticism or synchronic methods (narrative criticism)
- Either evolution or creativity
- Either collectivity or individuality
- Either kerygma or narrative genre
- Either real world or narrative world
- Either Kleinliteratur or Hochliteratur

In my view we should, with the necessary caveats, rather think in terms of a complementary situation—a position I have tried to substantiate.
The nett result of Vorster's position is the perception that he plays down, not only the importance of history, but also the historical reliability of the gospel material. There certainly is no one-to-one relationship between a gospel and its real world, nor between a gospel and its pre-history. One's impression of Vorster's position is, however, that he minimises this relationship. This may be wrong, but that his formulations give rise to this perception cannot be denied.

The remaining question would be why Vorster was inclined to adopt this either/or approach. Fully conscious of the hypothetical character of my attempt, I would venture to make the following suggestions:

In the first instance I want to refer to Vorster's strong reaction against the methodological untidiness which used to characterise, and to some extent still characterises, biblical research. His passion for methodological soundness rebelled against this state of affairs.

Secondly there may have been a rhetorical element at play. To rectify such a deep-seated disposition, a strong counter-attack was probably felt to be the only effective answer. In addition Vorster seemed to relish a polemical situation—and this may have been part of his personal make-up—in which he could test his scientific muscles. With his quick repartee, his critical acumen, his sharp intellect and his broad frame of reference, he more often than not carried the day, although not necessarily always convincing his opponents. It is, however, clear that in such a 'battle of minds' rhetoric would find its place.

In order to erect a new edifice it is often necessary to demolish a defective older one. New Testament research in general, and especially in this country, has for the last two decades been busy deconstructing much of its previous methodology. Through his unwavering critical assessments Vorster has made a major contribution towards identifying and deconstructing the old edifice. Future generations of biblical scholars should constantly heed his call for sound methodology. This will probably be his most abiding bequest to biblical research. We are thankful for that, as we honour his memory.

It was not granted to our respected colleague and friend to do much more than start with the second, reconstructive phase where, in my opinion, the real heart of New Testament research beats. Whether he would have played as prominent a role in this second phase as in the first, sadly remains an unanswered question.

WORKS CONSULTED


Engelbrecht, J 1983. Die funksie van die wondervertellings in Markus. DTh tesis, Universiteit van Suid-Afrika.


Prof Dr A B du Toit, Faculty of Theology, Section B, University of Pretoria, PRETORIA, 0001 Republic of South Africa.