THROUGH THE EYES OF A HISTORIAN: WILLEM VORSTER ON HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION

PIETER F CRAFFERT

ABSTRACT
The historical interpretation of the New Testament is an important theme in Willem Vorster’s publications. In an attempt to argue that due to his embeddedness in the theoretical slipstream of New Criticism and its successors in reader-response criticism, Vorster never really grasped the full implications of either the historical distance of the New Testament documents or the construing of those texts in their pastness, at least three aspects are treated in this study: (1) what Vorster thinks historical interpretation of the New Testament is about; (2) which theoretical approach shapes his viewpoints; and (3) what some of the shortcomings of such a definition of historical interpretation are.

1 INTRODUCTION

As a student and friend of Willem Vorster I learned that he had greater appreciation for original mistakes than for old hat certainties. He was furthermore never afraid to cut some of the holy cows which grazed on the green pastures of New Testament study fields (see, for example, Vorster 1980b:31). In fact, his career stands in the sign of controversy, discussion and dialogue. Since Willem never thought about any viewpoint as the final one, he would certainly not have claimed his own to bear that stamp. Therefore, this attempt at both critical and constructive dialogue on the historical interpretation of the New Testament stands in the spirit of Vorster’s practice over many years.

The title of this article is ambiguous in that Vorster’s view on historical interpretation is situated and evaluated historically. It thus goes without saying that my attempt to present Vorster’s view on historical interpretation is but an invitation to further discussion and dialogue not only about my interpretation of his views, but also about historical interpretation of the New Testament as such; a challenge he certainly would not have let slip past.

It is to be argued that due to his embeddedness in the theoretical slipstream of New Criticism and its successors in reader-response criticism, Vorster never really grasped the full implications of either the historical distance of the New Testament texts or the construing of those texts in their pastness when it comes...
to matters such as their meaning and communicability in a modern world. A very definite picture of the shortcomings of traditional historical interpretation of the New Testament together with a definition of historical interpretation shaped by an either-or dichotomy and the ahistorical insights of New Criticism, convince him that the search for the meaning and communicability of the New Testament rests in a text-immanent approach. With these remarks one of the central issues in Vorster’s career has been introduced: how does an old book communicate in a modern world?

2 AN OLD BOOK IN A NEW WORLD

An old book in a new world is not only the title of Vorster’s inaugural lecture as professor in New Testament at the University of South Africa (see 1977a), but also represents a main concern throughout his academic career.

On the one hand Vorster acknowledges the problem caused by the historical nature of the New Testament, namely, that the meaning and communicability of an ancient text in a modern world is a serious problem which can neither be denied nor should it be underestimated (see 1977a:3). He claims that ‘[t]here are many reasons why the New Testament and aspects thereof should be interpreted and explained historically. In fact, historical interpretation of the New Testament is necessitated by the very nature of these writings’ (Vorster 1991c:15). The origin, contents, transmission and canonisation of the New Testament all contribute to making it an object of historical interest and therefore of historical explanation, interpretation and reconstruction (see Vorster 1984a:105).

It is precisely the strangeness of these documents and the distance between modern readers and the ancient documents which convinced him that they cannot be used in a direct way for promoting any present-day socio-political agenda. A sensitivity for the ‘fact that Biblical texts are ancient texts’ and for ‘the “garstige Graben” of Lessing’ (Vorster 1984b:211) prevents him from using the New Testament as a book of norms for contemporary problems. Since the New Testament’s cultural situation differs to such an extent from contemporary cultural situations, one realises the otherness of the biblical material (see Vorster 1979:205). This recognition keeps at bay the misuse of the Bible in sanctioning and supporting mere human socio-political ideas and decisions (see Vorster 1984b:213).

On the other hand, despite these strong reservations against misusing the New Testament for contemporary solutions and answers, Vorster maintains a strong passion for the communicability of the New Testament. In fact, it is one of the driving forces in his academic career.

As a direct solution to the problem of the communicability of the New Testament faced by people who are searching for divine answers to con-
temporary problems, Vorster proposes a contextual theology. That is, doing likewise to the first Christians, namely, that of making theological decisions 'in your own name' which is less dangerous than making them in the name of and on behalf of the living God (1984b:217). Decisions can be taken on the basis of human insights (see 1979:206) and instead of transmitting theological wisdom, a 'contemporary theology of making' (1984b:217) may work towards the transformation of society.

A passion for the communicability of the New Testament also preoccupies Vorster's thoughts in a more indirect way. Already in one of his very first publications (see 1971b) it becomes clear that his interest in modern linguistics and concern for a synchronic approach to texts are motivated by the ineptitude of historical critical methods to bring the New Testament to communicate in a modern world (see 1977a:10-11). In this situation the need for text-immanent exegesis becomes all the more important (see 1977a:16). Vorster's career is therefore characterised by a search for a (the) method which will bring the New Testament to communicate without the help of some or other hermeneutic stance (see 1977a:10-11; 1984a:114), such as Bultmann's existentialism (see 1977a:16). This passion leads Vorster to narrative and reader-response criticism.

His concern for the communicability of the New Testament is closely connected to the realisation that the historical nature of the New Testament causes a problem for its communicability (see also 1982:94). Therefore, both concerns are in one way or another involved in his attempt to come to grips with historical criticism. Given the presence of both aspects in Vorster's publications, especially in his inaugural lecture as professor in New Testament studies, it is a pity that he was totally misunderstood by the New Testament community in South Africa, that is, in so far as they contributed to his public stoning and hesitated to stand up in support of his views.1

While both these concerns, an old book in a new world, occupy his mind, it says nothing about the way in which the historical distance between the modern day reader and the New Testament documents is bridged or about the way in which those documents can communicate in a modern world. Since our aim is to understand and evaluate Vorster's remarks about historical interpreta-

---

1 As far as I can see from the newspaper reports (see, for example, De Villiers 1977; Coetzee 1977a; 1977b; 1977c) following the public out roar against the views expressed in his inaugural lecture, none of his New Testament colleagues supported him. The possible exception being Van Aarde who couched his support in the rhetoric of further criticism of the central issue Vorster addresses (see Van Aarde 1977:14). The irony is that today, less than 20 years later, most New Testament scholars in South Africa practice the approach advocated by Vorster.
tion, we should look more closely at those aspects which shape his view. At least three aspects can be identified: firstly, a fundamentalist concern with a one-to-one correspondence between text and reality in South African New Testament studies. Secondly, traditional New Testament historical criticism’s preoccupation with textual history. Thirdly, the ahistorical position from which Vorster describes historical interpretation.

3 HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION IS CONCERNED WITH THE FACT-LIKENESS OF TEXTS

The first aspect which shaped Vorster’s views on historical interpretation is the fundamentalist and orthodox context within which he works. Perhaps more than any other New Testament scholar in this country at the time, Vorster exorcises the fundamentalist viewpoint of a one-to-one correspondence between text and reality, that is, that everything written in the texts happened as described or was said as written down.

His reaction should be seen against the background of what he calls *historical exegesis*—a broad term which includes the historico-grammatical and historico-critical approaches where the interests vary ‘from research in what actually happened to how the Gospels, for instance, came into existence’ (1977b:34). The New Testament documents are considered a source of information on the message of the individual books or as a historical chronicle of the life of Jesus or the history of the early church (see 1977b:34; 1980b:31). The South African reaction to Vorster’s inaugural lecture confirms this point. De Villiers is concerned that without the actual historical events (such as the virginal conception) one’s faith becomes ‘floating’ (1977:19). Jesus’ virginal conception, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension are historical facts without which the kerugma is impossible (Coetzee 1977c; Van Aarde 1977:14). This tendency is, for example, also to be seen in the work of Du Plessis (see 1985) who assumes that the New Testament presents us with different versions of the same event and our main task as historians is to unravel which one is probably correct. The actual historical question, what actually happened and what the relationship between the culturally perceived events and the culturally mediated accounts is, does not occur to him.

Vorster thinks that historical critics are preoccupied with the ‘fact-likeness’ of much of the information in the texts and therefore fail to realise that ‘these texts are narratives and that the world they present is a narrative construction’ (1986:58; see also 1977a:18-22). A distinction between the real world and the narrated world is of prime importance (see Vorster 1980b:27) since the gospels, in the first instance, refer intertextually (see 1980b:46): the worlds of the stories are narrated worlds and not descriptions of how things really were and how they really happened (see 1986:59).
4 TRADITIONAL HISTORICAL CRITICISM IS CONCERNED WITH TEXTUAL HISTORY

The second aspect which shapes Vorster’s views on historical interpretation is the picture of traditional historical criticism. He is not only convinced that historical interest in the New Testament ‘is necessitated by the very nature of these writings’ (1984a:105) but is also concerned about historical criticism, or the historical paradigm as he at times referred to it (see 1984a), in more than one way. While acknowledging its necessity, he also expresses concerns about its ability to bring the New Testament to communicate in a modern world. Therefore it is important to establish what he has in mind regarding traditional historical criticism.

Despite his insistence that it is ‘necessary to distinguish between historical interpretation, historical understanding (Verstehen), historical explanation (Erklärung) and historiography’ (1991c:17), only a distinction between historical interpretation (or understanding) on the one hand and historiography on the other hand is made by him.

Historiography of the New Testament has to do with two aspects: the New Testament as history and the New Testament as a source for history. Both aspects have to do with the status and character of the New Testament texts as sources for reconstructing the history of Jesus and the early church (see 1984a:114-118; 1991c:34-38). In a different form these issues have occupied Vorster’s mind as the questions of text and reality (see 1985) or as text and reference (see 1971a; 1980b). Although these issues are not the focus of the present discussion, they are parallel to his views on historical interpretation. These aspects can hardly be separated in a hard and fast way since he claims that historical study of the New Testament is very much determined by presuppositions on historical interpretation (see 1990:201).

My present concern, however, is not with historiography, but with Vorster’s views on the other part of historical criticism, namely, historical interpretation. What does Vorster understand by traditional historical interpretation which he refers to as the ‘dominant paradigm’ or the commonly accepted approach in New Testament studies (see 1977a:6; 1984a:107; 1987:378)? The answer, in short, historical criticism is concerned with the origin and growth of the New Testament texts. Before this is illustrated from his publications, it is, however, necessary to pay attention to a matter of terminology.

4.1 Historical interpretation is synonymous with historical understanding and historical explanation

Although Vorster insists that historical interpretation should be distinguished from historical understanding and historical explanation (see 1984a:107), it is
clear that he uses them interchangeably. This can be seen on at least three levels.

Firstly, historical interpretation, explanation and understanding are used synonymously between publications while arguing the same case. In one publication he argues that historical interpretation of the New Testament 'is necessitated by the very nature of these writings' (1984a:105) while in another the same argument is attributed to historical understanding (see 1988:40). The very same thing happens when he mentions the basic flaws in the underlying theory of historical critical interpretations. 'The next flaw is the assumption that historical interpretation is understanding and leads to appropriation and application....The problem of “what the text says” and “what the text means”...cannot be addressed by historical explanation' (1984a:113, italics mine).

Secondly, these concepts are used synonymously within particular publications. Following the previous argument on the historical nature of the New Testament which necessitates historical interpretation (or understanding), he concludes that these conditions necessitate the historical explanation, interpretation and construction of the New Testament (see 1984a:105; 1991c:15).

The same thing happens in another publication. After giving some information which emphasises the historical nature of the documents and which necessitates them being understood historically, he continues in the same paragraph: ‘Whoever maintains that historical interpretation [italics mine] is a luxury, or even unnecessary, has to reconsider these observations seriously’ (1988:40). In the very next paragraph Vorster again switches to historical interpretation; ‘[t]o interpret something historically, simply means to attempt to interpret it within its own time and circumstances’ (1988:40).

Thirdly, he explicitly puts them together as one way of going about texts. On the same page as warning to keep them apart, he refers to ‘historical explanation and interpretation of texts as one of many possibilities [italics mine] of interpreting texts’ (1984a:107). In another publication he uses the words to ‘understand and explain the New Testament historically’ (1988:40) together.

It should be apparent that despite the warning to keep them apart, they all designate the same activity (the term historical interpretation will be used to describe this activity). It is to be argued that Vorster has a very definite and specific kind of activity in mind, namely, the historical explanation of the origin and growth of the New Testament documents.

4.2 Historical interpretation focuses on the growth and origin of texts

Traditional New Testament historical interpretation, as one way of assigning meaning to New Testament texts, operates within a framework where 'meaning
is constituted by authorial intention, genetic contexts, extratextual reality and also by the original readers’ (Vorster 1984a:108; and see 1991c:18). Or, as he describes it in more detail: to interpret the gospels historically according to traditional historical critical methodology means

1. to restore the "original" text; 2. to explain the relationship between the gospels; 3. to reconstruct the history and original form and meaning of the separate units of tradition in their preliterary forms, and 4. to explain the historical and theological input of the final redactor by analysing his redaction of tradition. The assumption is that if one understands the history of the gospel tradition, the meaning is also clear (1984a:112).

There can be little doubt that historical interpretation for Vorster is something very specific, namely, the study of the origin and growth of New Testament texts (see 1980b:32; 1982:99). This belief, he thinks, is based on a positivist view of literature, namely, that a study of the origin and growth of a text brings one to its meaning (see 1982a:94; 1984a:112; 1986:54; 1991c:17).

Under the influence of a variety of historistic and positivistic assumptions, biblical writings came to be studied in view of their origin and evolution and as part of the current conviction of their time of origin. The history of literature, especially the history of early Christian literature, became the history of the growth and evolution of early Christian writings, that is the study of the sources upon which the final texts were presumably based (Vorster 1986:54).

There can be little doubt that a large part of the activities of New Testament historical criticism has to do with the literary history of those documents (see Krentz 1975:48-51). However, it cannot be denied that part of its task has always been to recognise and describe the meaning of the New Testament documents within their historical and cultural context (see Krentz 1975:52). This is the aspect which goes unnoticed in Vorster’s argument.

4.3 Some preliminary remarks about the possibilities and limitations of Vorster’s view on historical interpretation

There is little doubt that historical interpretation in Vorster’s mind indeed has value, but it has very limited value. Historical interpretation creates a distance, not communication, with an ancient text and this gap need not be bridged since meaning is created in the process of reading (creating) a text.

There is a strange ambivalence in Vorster’s thought on what historical interpretation really can achieve. On the one hand he insists that by reading the New Testament historically, ‘the interpreter realizes how human the New Testament and its message are’ (1984a:119). The value of historical interpretation is that it provides a context within which valid readings of the ancient texts can be made by modern readers. By creating a distance between reader
and text the strangeness of these ancient texts is not only emphasised but the opportunity of opening up this strangeness in the process of (re)constructing the world of the texts, is created (see Vorster 1984a:118). It should be emphasised that Vorster considers this alienating effect of historical interpretation positively (see 1987:380; 1988:36).

However, on the other hand and in the same breath, he insists that a text-immanent methodology is needed to determine the meaning and communicability of the New Testament (1984a:119); if "we are interested in what a particular text wants to communicate, we shall have to apply a method that will enable us to analyse that aspect of the text and that aspect only" (1977b:31). The communicability of the texts and their meaning are, in his view, not dependent on the author's intention or the historical setting of the text but can and in fact should be determined independently of those aspects.

What, one could ask, would a historical reading of the New Testament be other than construing its historical meaning (and its communication) with a modern-day interpreter? It should be pointed out that he acknowledges the historical nature of the New Testament documents but not necessarily an appropriate way in which to bridge the historical gap between them and modern readers. Or, as shall be argued later, there is a huge difference between construing a text (from a present day perspective) in its pastness and construing a past text for its present-day relevance.

It is ironic that when confronted with the theology of Mark in context (which should, according to his argument, have been constructed from the narrative world and a text-immanent reading) he falls back on the possible historical situation within which the text was written (see 1991a:36-39). If only persons involved in positivist research (see 1991c:17) are concerned with the background of a text, why insist that historical interpretation is necessitated by the historical nature of those texts? Furthermore, if, as Vorster argues over and over, the nature of the New Testament documents necessitates historical interpretation, why then argue that a text-immanent approach can do the same job (see 1977b:35)?

Answers to some of these questions are locked into the specific theoretical viewpoint from which historical interpretation is evaluated by Vorster. This brings us to the third and dominant aspect which shapes Vorster's view on historical interpretation.

5 HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF NEW CRITICISM

In order to understand Vorster's view on historical interpretation it is necessary to take a few steps back in identifying the dominant theoretical features shaping his view. They present, to my mind, an ahistorical and anti-historical
perspective which comes to expression in the dichotomous structure (the either-or schema) which in different versions dominates his view over many years and his indebtedness to New Criticism or developments from that theoretical pool in some versions of reader-response theories.

5.1 The dichotomous structure of his thoughts

A dichotomous structure finds expression in Vorster’s work over the years in at least three different versions. The synchronic-diachronic distinction, historic versus text-immanent approaches and the in/determinacy of textual meaning are all seen in terms of contrasts.

5.1.1 Synchronic versus diachronic interpretation

Following the distinction made in linguistics between synchronic and diachronic linguistics, Vorster suggests that the methodology of biblical interpretation should follow that example (see 1971b:144). Synchronic linguistics describes a language in a particular time period while diachronic linguistics is concerned with the change in a particular language over time (see :144). While applauding James Barr’s criticism (which is based on the synchrony-diachrony distinction) of the Kittel dictionary, Vorster maintains that ‘one can trace back most of the problems in New Testament scholarship to this one single phenomenon’ (1977b:28). It is ‘absolutely necessary’ (:32) he says, to distinguish between them in matters of the meaning of a text.

Of further importance is the relationship between these two modes of interpretation. Synchronic linguistics is possible without diachronic linguistics while diachronic linguistics is impossible without synchronic linguistics (see 1971b:144). The same is true for the relationship between historic and text-immanent exegesis; ‘[b]oth are justified on the condition that a diachronic approach is dependent on a synchronic approach and not the other way round’ (1977b:35).

5.1.2 Historic versus text-immanent exegesis

The distinction (relationship) between historic and text-immanent exegesis is basically the same as that between diachrony and synchrony. Text-immanent exegesis is a term used ‘for methods that take the text as it stands seriously’ and is based on the discovery ‘that one can understand any piece of literature in itself as it stands without referring to or investigating its origin, history or growth’ (1977b:35; and see 1982:104). A diachronic approach, as was said above, is dependent on a synchronic approach but not the other way round. Therefore, historical interpretation does not belong to exegesis (see 1977b:35) but is a fore-phase in the process of determining the meaning of a text (see
Exegesis is a text-internal affair where either the frame of reference in the case of argumentative texts or the narrative world in the case of narrative texts need to be consulted (see 1977a:21; 1986:58).

It is one thing to explain the writings of the New Testament historically, he says, but 'it is another to address the problem of communication of the New Testament' (1984a:114). The meaning and communicability of the New Testament, he maintains, 'cannot be explained by the use of historico-critical methodology...[w]hat is needed is a text-oriented methodology' (1984a:119). In such an approach it is possible to understand a text from within without taking into account its origin or any historical evidence (see 1982:104). Meaning and communicability are not dependent on bridging the gap between ancient texts and modern readers, but depend on modern readers making use of narrative criticism (and other literary critical insights) to create the meaning of those ancient texts. In fact, he says that it is 'not so much that the events and existents of these stories are foreign to a modern reader, as the idea that these worlds are narrated worlds that often cause problems' (1986:58). Once it is understood that these texts (the gospels) are narratives and that they have meaning in narrative worlds, the reader is invited into the storyworld where the text's meaning is disclosed in the process of reading (see 1986:59; 1989c:27, 35).

This brings us to the third set of dichotomous concepts in his work.

5.1.3 The in/determinacy of textual meaning

Although I shall return to this issue shortly, it is important to realise that it fits into the dichotomous structure which characterises Vorster's work over a long period of time.

Vorster ascribes to the idea that there has been a shift of interest in theoretical thinking from the author to the text and then from the text to the reader and the act of reading in an attempt to get to the meaning of texts (see Vorster 1989a:56; 1989c:35). The result is that reading is no longer seen as the decoding of an encoded code of signs, but reading 'is an active process of attributing meaning' (1988:38). Similarly the phenomenon text has received a totally new epistemological status. Texts are no longer seen as objects which can be known because they contain meaning or that authors create meaning which has to be sought within the boundaries of the text. Texts are merely seen as spots on paper while the reader creates meaning by filling in the spots with meaning (see 1989a:57). A particular view on texts and on the way in which texts mean supersedes traditional views on these issues in New Testament studies.

This argument is even extended to history.

One can compare history with a written text. Texts do not have meaning. Meaning is something which the interpreter ascribes to a text on the ground of an interpreta-
tion which is based on different presuppositions. Historians also ascribe meaning to history and that explains why there are different images of the same person or event (Vorster 1990:202).

Deist, when criticising Vorster’s distinction between synchronic and diachronic interpretations, points towards the ahistorical tendency in this distinction. In a synchronic approach a text receives a static and timeless character (see Deist 1978:262). Therefore, when the historical reality of the text itself is neglected, a synchronic reading is but a one-sided and incomplete interpretation of a text (see Deist 1980:50).

The question remains whether the theoretical position from which this dichotomous structure originates, can be identified more precisely.

### 5.2 Vorster in the slipstream of New Critical theories

Besides the dichotomous structure of his thoughts, Vorster’s indebtedness to the theoretical insights of New Criticism shapes his view on historical interpretation.

Although Vorster never explicitly describes himself as a New Critic, there are enough indicators pointing in that direction. Despite a remark early in his career that primary exegesis consists in discovering the intention of the original author (see 1975:28, 41), his taking side with New Criticism on the issue of the author’s intention (see 1980b:35; 1984a:109-110), overwhelmingly situates him in that camp. Furthermore, his insistence that a text can be understood ‘in itself as it stands’ apart from its context of origin, leaves no doubt about his New Critical orientations.

However, it is especially in siding with reader-response criticism together with his arguments about the creation of textual meaning by a reader that he is pulled into the sphere of New Criticism and its related theoretical ideas. This remark needs further explanation.

Though hardly a homogeneous movement, New Criticism is generally associated with

- doctrines of the text’s objectivity, its self sufficiency and “organic unity”; with a formalist, “intrinsic” approach to the text; with a resistance to paraphrase and to the separation of form and content; and above all with the technique of “close reading”—a mode of exegesis that pays scrupulous attention to the rich complexity of textual meaning rendered through the rhetorical devices of irony, ambiguity and paradox (Freund 1987:40-41).

In New Criticism the text itself provides meaning and the authority to settle interpretive disputes (see Rabinowitz 1989:86). The leading assumption is that a literary work is, by definition, ‘a totality of values which constitutes its very essence’ (Rabinowitz 1982:30).
While New Criticism 'reflects the fundamental assumptions about literary activity that have dominated criticism since the Romantic period, together with distinctively twentieth-century shifts in that tradition' (Poland 1985:460), it is not surprising that what is called reader-response criticism 'is actually formalism, in other words the first step in reaction to historical criticism' (Porter 1990:287). In fact, Porter points out that reader-response criticism as well as a number of other reading strategies 'grew up in direct and conscious reaction to what was perceived to be the ahistorical or exclusivistic characteristics of the New Criticism, although it may very well be recorded later as simply a fine-tuning of this method' (1990:287; and see Freund 1987:41-42). Many critics who have theoretically abandoned the principle of textual autonomy, Rabinowitz points out, find that they still in practice award primacy to the text (see 1989:85). Or as Freund suggests, they are still 'exploring and bringing into the open the suppressed margins of its native New Critical tradition, still learning to read even more closely' (1987:64).

Reader-response critics or 'audience critics are united more by their questions than by the directions they follow in trying to answer them' (Rabinowitz 1989:83; and see Ryan 1985:20ff). More accurately it might perhaps be called 'audience-oriented criticism' (Rabinowitz 1989:81), and more technically one should distinguish between a theory of response rooted in the text and a theory of reception which is more concerned with readers' judgment of texts (see Rabinowitz 1989:84). Audience criticism is used as an umbrella term to designate those approaches which focus on the 'text-reader pole'. It includes scholars such as Iser who, strictly speaking, is a reception critic (see Holub 1984:xii). Broadly speaking, two extremes can be identified: on the one hand those who have, 'to use a James Bondian phrase, license to fill—but that license is ultimately granted by the authority of the text'. The construe metaphor would suit this position best. On the other hand, there are those who insist 'that readers construct the meaning of the text' (Rabinowitz 1989:87). Between these two poles, many have tried to define the locus of meaning as residing neither in the text nor in the reader but either in 'intertextuality' (that is, in the way texts find meaning in their relations with other texts) or in 'community norms' (see Rabinowitz 1989:87).

Two conclusions seem warranted from this short exposition. Firstly, many reader-response critics, despite all their concerns, seem to be firmly rooted in the theoretical tradition of New Criticism. Secondly, the ahistorical and anti-historical tradition of New Criticism (see Weimann 1969:92) and its allies seems firmly established. In fact, an important assumption they share is that the historicity of the text is of no concern (see Rabinowitz 1982:25). Consistent with its roots in Romanticism, a fundamental assumption of this tradition can be summarised by the metaphor of continuity: 'the tendency to ignore
or disbelieve all discontinuities in nature, history, or personality' (Poland 1985:461). New Criticism and reader-response criticism belong in the same basket because they subscribe to the same theory on texts and textual meaning—a so-called pragmatic theory (see further §6).

Given his preference for a text-immanent approach, a disregard for the historicity of the text, the primacy of the text/reader in construing the meaning of a text and viewing the dichotomies in terms of contrast, it seems fair to say that Vorster’s ideas matured in this pool of theoretical thinking. That does not mean that it is an easy task to situate him on the above map. At times he uses the construe metaphor (see 1991a:1099-1100) just to switch to a construct metaphor (see 1989a:59; 1989c:22). At times he prefers intertextuality as a metaphor (see 1989b:21). Of significance, however, is the fact that in one way or another a pragmatic text theory informs his viewpoint. Therefore the spotlight will turn to the nature of and the relationship between different theories on texts and textual meaning.

6 DIFFERENT THEORIES ON TEXTS AND TEXTUAL MEANING: ALTERNATIVES OR COMPETITORS?

The heuristic value of the so-called shift from author to text to reader is rather limited. As a designation of the focus of literary theories it might be useful to point out that some theories focus on the author, some on the text and some on the reader. However, if one asks the epistemological question, that is, how the text conveys meaning, broadly speaking only two alternatives are possible: a reader can construe a text to have meaning with the explicit aim of capturing its historical meaning, or a reader can construe a text to have meaning with any other aim in mind. To the question about which norm (cultural system) will govern a reader’s construction of textual meaning, there are thus only two possible answers (see Hirsch 1984a; 1985:17): either that of the author (obviously to be constructed from the past) or any norm decided on by the reader (which also needs to be constructed if it does not coincide with the reader’s taken for granted norm). The distinction made by Thompson between substantialist and pragmatic text theories perfectly illustrates this point.

The substantialist theory focuses on the text as constructed by the author. What a text means is restricted to what the author could have intended it to mean....Pragmatic text theory focuses on the text as read by various readers. The meaning of a text is literally created in the act of its being read....The theory is pragmatic in that it posits that the meaning of any given text varies according to the practical circumstances in which it is read (Thompson 1993:251).

The insights generated by each theory are also significant.

The insights of the substantialist theory are clear. Texts are created by specific authors at specific times and bear a limited range of meanings which the authors
could have intended and which were, in principle, open to the texts' first readers or audience.... The insights of the pragmatic theory are equally clear. The meanings of texts and their critical assessment vary with time, with place, and with the specific characteristics of readers. No reader reads a text without some experience and some expectations; what is got out of a text is always in part a function of them (Thompson 1993:252).

There can be no doubt that Vorster supports a pragmatic theory of texts and textual meaning. He clearly states that ‘[r]eadings, and for that matter interpretation, creates a radical new text’ since reading ‘becomes an active process of attributing meaning’ (1989a:59). It is also clear that in his mind a pragmatic theory supersedes substantialist theories: Texts can no longer be seen as objects containing meaning but are merely occasions for creating meaning and texts do not have meaning, meaning is created in the process of reading due to the social location of the reader (see Vorster 1987:388ff; 1988:42ff; 1989b:21-22). It has already become apparent that the two (closely related) aspects constituting this dichotomy (that is, notions of what a text is and how texts mean) are essential to Vorster’s views about historical interpretation. There are to my mind, however, several weaknesses in both a pragmatic text theory and in overemphasising the idea of contrast between the different theories.

6.1 Rival or alternative perspectives?

In following one stream of literary critics in postulating a contrast between the different theories, the relationship between them becomes confused. As has become clear above, both the distinction between them as well as the supremacy of a pragmatic theory, actually collapse into two different ways of reading a piece of literature. They are not the product of different objects which demand two different modes of inquiry, but arise from the reader’s decision to address different sorts of questions to the same object of inquiry. When readers do this, they constitute different objects of inquiry. Thus,

the limits of what come to be considered as appropriate interpretations of texts do not arise from texts acting in the world. Rather, they arise from the questions readers address to texts and the availability of what those readers’ readers consider appropriate evidence for answering them (Thompson 1993:259).

Therefore, they do not offer competing but different perspectives on the character of texts (see :272). They are alternatives in the sense that texts can indeed, if one accepts that there is no meaning without an author of meaning (see Hirsch 1984a:90), be construed in any number of ways, be it in accordance with the original historical meaning or in terms of any reader/creator of meaning acting as author.

Besides the fact that a decision for any of the two theories is determined by a certain set of values (see Hirsch 1982), the question remains whether or not a
pragmatic theory, which stands in defence of a reader-made, non-objective text (see MacDonald 1985:36) in contrast to a substantive theory is, theoretically speaking, defendable. Although some good reasons (or preferences) may be listed why an interpreter should in the first instance be concerned with the historical meaning of texts, the notion of alternative theories should be investigated in more detail.

6.2 In which way are they alternative theories?

Given the fact that documents can be interpreted in multiple ways, the question is whether it is reasonable (as is the case with pragmatic theories) to part from the view that they also have fixed and stable meanings. It is to be pointed out that pragmatic theories which exclude the fixed or determinate meaning of texts fail on various grounds. Obstacles to such theories include fundamental objections as well as objections about the misrepresentation of the programme of poststructuralism.

6.2.1 Looking at some of the fundamental objections

The fundamental objections to theories which totally part from the fixed and stable meaning of texts are of two kinds. Firstly there are objections which point out the problematic consequences of such theories—calling them ‘suicidal’ or ‘a deliberate exercise in ultimate futility’ (Abrams 1979:568, 574). If readers create meaning, it would appear that we no longer need poets (see Spikes 1990:332).

And these theories are indeed problematic. De Beaugrande, for example, points out that

[w]hereas western metaphysics overstresses the monological, deconstructionism overstresses the dialogical. A totally dialogical world-model would “deconstruct” the world (i.e., our vision of it) by blurring distinctions, denying orientation, and precluding relevance; communication would cease because the necessary decisions and selections would be perpetually suspended (1983:120-121).

All projects of deconstruction therefore fall short of the absolute stage, the totally deconstructed world-model. Also Abrams (see 1977:437) argues that deconstruction critics themselves are not serious about deconstruction in the sense of consistently committing themselves to the consequences of their premises since they are quick to insist that their texts be properly understood (see also Norris 1982:127).

This difficulty with pragmatic theories can be illustrated on another level too. Taking his clues from Wittgenstein’s appeal to ordinary language, Norris remarks that deconstruction fails to notice the variety of possible ‘fits’ between language, logic and reality (see Norris 1982:130). A moment’s reflection lets
one realise that in terms of communication, different kinds of texts\(^2\)—which can be extended to include different modes of communication—should be distinguished (see Searle 1977:200). Brink is reasonably confident about the solid state of the table he is sitting at, but less certain about words (see 1985:23). But imagine the following scenario: South Africa 1987, a Wimpy Bar in the city of Johannesburg. Someone screams: A limpet mine! I am quite sure that nobody (Brink included) will in uncertainty about words, finish his/her coffee. What this example displays is the limits of reader-made theories in the practice of interpretation. As Harty correctly reminds us, no one who insists on deconstructing polite conversation will long retain his/her reputation for sanity, and there is little sense in the infinite play of deferred meaning in one's motor car manual (see Harty 1985:11).\(^3\) Or in the words of Ryan, 'some texts co-operate or submit to deconstruction to a greater degree than others' (1982:107).

Secondly there are objections which focus not on the problematic consequences but on the inherent deficiencies in these theories. MacDonald (see 1985), referring specifically to Fish's version of reader-made meaning versus fixed and stable meaning in texts, points out that there is a contradiction in Fish's theory which invalidates the major thrust of it.

Fish's assumption that the ability to interpret is given while the particular way of interpreting is acquired, is problematic (see MacDonald 1985:34-35). Interpretation is non-inferential in Fish's theory because a reader does not observe a text \textit{out there} which is given but constitutes the text in interpreting it. This is, however, inconsistent with the simultaneously held view that the ability to interpret is given while the particular way of interpreting is acquired. If a specific interpretive strategy is learned or acquired then learning any such way of interpreting necessarily involves being shown some \textit{thing} (see also Cul-ler 1982:74). Similarly Spikes points out that

if language can be meaningful only in virtue of its being filtered through some interpretive strategy, then how can the interpretive strategy or interpretation itself

\footnote{I am fully aware that for Derrida not only texts are stripped from their being in the sense that they can only be seen in terms of intertextuality, but that also the distinction between different kinds of texts disappears (see Ryan 1982:105). This is because of the idea of infinite textuality where a text is only 'present' via intertextuality. Despite that Derrida admits that texts differ from one another 'so that one cannot prescribe one general method of reading' (in Kearney 1984:124).}

\footnote{Although it is possible in principle to deconstruct any text and allow the play of deferred meaning in intertextual relations, the truth of our experience of reality outside and opposed to us, often demands interpretation rather than deconstruction (cf Harty 1985:11).}
be meaningful? Since there is no meaning in language, the language of the inter­
titive strategy will contain no meaning and the language of the interpretation will
contain no meaning (1990:332).

The problem lies with Fish’s notion of interpretation as a non-inferential act:
‘If the text exists in some objective sense, if it has some given, fixed properties
or characteristics, then interpretation is inferential...Meaning m is logically
and ontologically prior to being interpreted as meaning m...’ (MacDonald
1985:36). Interpretation must, in the end, be of something (see Spikes
1990:331).

This by no means suggests ‘an absolute, eternally stable “text-in­
 itself”...which contains or embodies meaning in such a way that that meaning
could be “extracted” or fixed once and for all’ (MacDonald 1985:37). Instead,
any critical theory must examine the relationship between the text out there
and the perceptions of readers in here. The valuable insights of pragmatic
theories should help us to move away from the deficiencies of an absolute
stable text-in-itself without totally abandoning the idea of fixed meaning.

6.2.2 Derrida misrepresented?
The question to be addressed in this section is whether the idea of an acute
contrast between these theories advocated by Vorster is in agreement with Der­
rida’s understanding. Without claiming to be an expert on these matters, I do
think it is possible to indicate that at worst Derrida is misrepresented in such
arguments and at best that if there is an ambiguity in his position, a supple­
ment to his viewpoint is a more appropriate response.

Derrida feels that there are several misinterpretations of what he is trying to
do.

It is totally false to suggest that deconstruction is a suspension of reference....I
never cease to be surprised by critics who see my work as a declaration that there
is nothing beyond language, that we are imprisoned in language; it is, in fact,
saying the exact opposite....Every week I receive critical commentaries and studies
on deconstruction which operate on the assumption that what they call “post­
structuralism” amounts to saying that there is nothing beyond language, that we are
submerged in words—and other stupidities of that sort....Certainly deconstruction
tries to show that the question of reference is much more complex and problematic
than traditional theories supposed (in Kearney 1984:123).

In view of these remarks the use of his (philosophical) arguments in support of
methodological challenges in New Testament textual interpretation might just
fall in this category of misrepresentations.

The level on which adverse readings of texts is challenged is not meth­
odological but epistemological. Texts (and reading texts) certainly came to
occupy a different epistemic status, but then not in the sense of 'how to read a text' as a challenge to other methods. Deconstruction is neither a replacement of other methods of interpretation nor is its principle function to contribute something to literature (see Kearney 1984:124). To quote Derrida again:

I am not sure that deconstruction can function as a literary method as such...deconstruction is not a method....It does, of course, contribute to our epistemological appreciation of texts [italics mine] by exposing the philosophical and theoretical presuppositions that are at work in every critical methodology, be it Formalism, New Criticism, Socialist Realism, or a historical critique. Deconstruction asks why we read a literary text in this particular manner rather than another (in Kearney 1984:124).

Given this clarification of Derrida's intention, what are we to make of the many voices, especially poststructural readings of texts, which champion the indeterminacy of textual meaning (cf Culler 1982:37, 64-65; Leitch 1983:103)? The answer is twofold. Closer attention should be paid firstly to the aim of deconstructionists, and secondly, to the possibility of an adjustment to some of Derrida's arguments.

Firstly, to Derrida a reader is not free to construe a text in any number of ways (see Culler 1982:131-132; Harty 1985:6). He objects to the accusation

4 Derrida's philosophy (deconstruction) cannot easily be described. What follows is merely an indication from his own and others' summaries (most of which were approved by Derrida) of what deconstruction implies. Looking at the academic influences in his career opens interesting vistas (in his own words): 'Husserl, whom I studied...taught me a certain methodical prudence and reserve, a rigorous technique of unravelling and formulating questions'; Heidegger's influence was different: 'here my interest was not just methodological but existential'; 'My discovery of the genealogical and genetic critique of Nietzsche and Freud also helped me to take the step beyond phenomenology towards a more radical, "non-philosophical" questioning, while never renouncing the discipline and methodological rigour of phenomenology' (in Kearney 1984:109). For Derrida deconstruction is both questioning and affirming: 'I would say that deconstruction is affirmation rather than questioning, in a sense which is not positive: I would distinguish between the positive, or positions, and affirmations. I think that deconstruction is affirmative rather than questioning; this affirmation goes through some radical questioning, but is not questioning in the final analysis' (in Salusinszky 1987:20). Referring to deconstruction and literary criticism Derrida says: 'In short, deconstruction not only teaches us to read literature more thoroughly by attending to it as language, as the production of meaning through difference and dissemination, through a complex play of signifying traces; it also enables us to interrogate the covert philosophical and political presuppositions of institutionalized critical methods which generally govern our reading of a text' (in Kearney 1984:125).
that deconstruction allows reader-based meaning as opposed to author-based meaning:

No-one is free to read as he or she wants. The reader does not interpret freely, taking into account only his own reading, excluding the author, the historical period in which the text appeared (in Kearns & Newton 1980:22).

In fact, he denies being a pluralist:

I am not a pluralist and I would never say that every interpretation is equal [italics mine]...I would not say some interpretations are truer than others. The hierarchy is between forces and not between true and false. There are interpretations which account for more meaning and this is the criterion (in Kearns & Newton 1980:21).

Furthermore, Derrida does not deny (such as many of his American followers and reader response critics) the category of intention: ‘it will have its place, but from that place it will no longer be able to govern the entire scene and system of utterance’ (1977:192). He adds

are authors, there are intentionalities, there are conscious purposes. We must analyse them, take them seriously. But the effects of what we call the author's intentions are dependent on something which is not the individual intention, which is not intentional (in Kearns & Newton 1980:21).

Meaning is not determined by the author, but meaning is equally not determined by the person who reads the sign. Meaning, according to him, is determined by a 'system of forces which is not personal' (:21). Although he would say that neither intention nor convention can determine the meaning of a text, it turns out that Derrida has to rely on convention (determinacy) in his argument against intention.5

If his concern is to warn against the possibility of governing the meaning of a text or of preventing the meaning of a text or a sign to be captured, it is worth attending to him: 'At best, pre-Derridean formulations of the text will learn a little humility and continue in a less confident manner' (Ryan 1982:108). Derrida does not propose an end to distinctions but doesn't advocate an indeterminacy which makes meaning the invention of the reader either (see Culler 1982:134).

5 Knapp and Michaels (1987:62) point out that 'Derrida's denial that meaning can be determined by intention thus depends on the claim that language is essentially conventional'. Writing, to be writing, must be readable or as Derrida says 'iterable' (1977:180) even when 'what is called the author of the writing no longer answers for what he has written' (:181). The identity of a mark is iterable because it is 'organized by a code' (:180). Knapp and Michaels conclude: 'the principle of iterability, understood as the condition of the identity of any mark, makes it impossible for meaning to be determined apart from code' (1987:61).
Secondly, there is the possibility of an ambiguity in Derrida’s position on matters of textual determinacy (see LaFargue 1988:352) and it is exactly this ambiguity which allows the possibility of interpreting him as accepting textual determinacy.6 LaFargue (see 1988:352-353) distinguishes between the immediate understanding and the reflective explication of a text’s substantive content.7 The first is when one grasps a joke or understands a simple sentence. Reflective explication is when the implicitly understood content is explained or analysed. Such reflective explication has the function of grounding implicit understanding in some absolute, universal knowledge. LaFargue argues that Derrida’s objection is to this grounding of explication and controlling one’s thought. Therefore he says: ‘it would be a mistake to conclude that, if reflective explication cannot provide complete control over one’s thought, or ground implicit meaning in something outside all differential systems, this meaning itself cannot have a definite content’ (1988:353). It is important to notice that it is possible to distinguish between the fact that texts may be determinate and the basis on which such determinacy is built or justified.

Instead of reaching a dead end by siding with those who champion the case of reader-made, non-objective texts, textual theories that more explicitly account for the fact that texts, while they may be interpreted in multiple ways, in some way or another also have fixed and stable meanings seem more acceptable. Therefore, Spikes suggests a revision of or supplement to the unquestionable insights that texts have multiple interpretations by arguing that texts indeed contain and convey meaning and that their authors are indeed necessary (see 1990:333-340). As alternative to the contradiction in the notion that meaning is never self-present and the admission that there is no doing without the concepts of logocentric metaphysics, Spikes argues that ‘the sign designates an absence, but this absence is a self-present, clearly structured potential for definite, self-present meanings’ (1992:350). He maintains that a type of absence does constitute the basis of a sign’s meaning and reference, but

6 Ryan confirms this ambiguity in Derrida’s position. He argues that Derrida ‘is conflicting with his own broader principles’ (1982:108). If every reader is not entitled to his/her own reading of a text, there is something, either ‘in the text’ or in the author’s intention which restricts meaning to what counts as a better reading.

7 ‘Substantive content’ is what one ‘gets’ when one grasps a joke. It differs from the meaning of the text (see LaFargue 1988:355). The substantive content consists of ‘a deferential system, whose key elements are: (a) the words of the text, in a determinate relation [to] each other [sic] and to (b) the determinate life-world of the text authors; (c) the mind-set of the author, including his word- and image-associations, the linguistic and literary conventions governing his speech, the shape of his existential concerns, and his mode of engagement with his own text’ (LaFargue 1988:354).
this absence is a highly structured one, a particular present absence. Without abandoning the insights of Derrida, he supplements them in a way which will account for the fixed or stable meaning in texts.

The insights generated by pragmatic theories do not mean that such theories can that easily supersede substantialist theories. Secondly, one cannot depart from the fixed or stable meaning of texts without running ashore on the practice and theory of interpretation and without serious loss of an important facet of textual meaning. Thirdly, the so-called epistemic change in the status of texts does not bring an end to either historical interpretation of a text or the historical meaning of texts in favour of the reader's preferred meaning. In fact, the nature of historical interpretation also resists such a notion.

7 HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT: A CONCERN WITH ITS PASTNESS

It has already been suggested that Vorster supports a view on historical interpretation of the New Testament which merely recognises the historical nature and distance of those documents but not their pastness. While either text-immanent or reader-created readings ensure the recovery of the meaning and communicability of those texts, their pastness contributes very little. Vorster also emphasises the reader's social location in construing textual meaning. Texts inevitably speak to the reader's needs and historical interpretation has but a secondary function to him. With these insights Vorster unfortunately contributes to the idea that the historical meaning of the New Testament is either unimportant or impossible to reach. However, the importance of historical interpretation is emphasised by Derrida: 'I think that one cannot read without trying to reconstruct the historical context but history is not the last word, the final key, of reading' (in Kearns & Newton 1980:22).

What then, is historical interpretation about? It has already been suggested that pragmatic theorists are right in asserting that the linguistic meanings we find in texts are relative to the interpretive strategies employed. To read is to construe meaning—and that can be done in at least two ways (see above §6). Therefore, it is not the same as saying that the creative process of reading excludes the possibility of construing (discovering) the historical meaning of a text or that reading entails a creative process which can only be conducted from the perspective of the reader (see Abrams 1979:587; Hirsch 1983; 1984b). A document can indeed, if the reader wishes, be created or construed in terms of its historical context of origin—that is what historical interpretation is about.

The objection that historical interpretation is inevitably done from a present perspective is well known but of a specious nature (see Hirsch 1985:17). All readings are done from a present position, but not necessarily from a present-
day perspective. Constructions from a present-day viewpoint differ from present-day constructions in terms of others' viewpoints. Put differently, there is a huge difference between construing a text in its pastness for its historical meaning and construing a past text to have present-day meaning. It is the difference between historical interpretation and other kinds of interpretations of the New Testament. Construing a text historically is indeed but one possible activity amongst others when dealing with texts.

The constitutive principle in doing history, Thompson reminds us, is pastness.

The activity of historicizing materials is the activity of doing history. It is an activity designed to answer questions about a past which is construed in terms of its pastness and hence in terms of its difference from the present. As such it is an activity of a different kind from that of doing literary criticism (of eliciting and evaluating meanings for the present from materials of the past that are nevertheless present). To historicize literary works is to place them in a world which is different from the world of current literary practice (Thompson 1993:262).

A twofold implication of historical interpretation defined thus is rather obvious.

Firstly, historical interpretation of ancient texts (doing history) is not a matter of studying reified things, but is a matter of historicising documents and other evidence from the past. Historical interpretation in this definition, it should be emphasised, has nothing to do with either objectively reconstructing the past or with discovering a single objective meaning from an ancient text. On the contrary, trying to recover the historical meaning of the New Testament documents merely opens up the possibility of various interpretations of a document which all aim at historicising that document in terms of its pastness (see Thompson 1993:251). Whether or not an interpretation is in fact telling the historical truth is a question that nobody can answer (see Hirsch 1982:247). The best one can hope for when different readers claim to construe a text historically, is the possibility of debate and discussion about a text's historical meaning. The words of MacDonald on texts' fixed meanings are applicable to the historical meaning of texts:

it will be possible to discuss, compare, approve, or dismiss varying interpretations on very solid grounds: firstly, because some readers will have followed the instructions or otherwise observed what is observable more carefully and accurately than others; secondly (and this is particularly important), because some readers will have brought richer resources than others to the act of reading (MacDonald 1985:40).

Secondly, defined in this way the aim in historicising material from the past 'is to offer explanations of past activities in terms of their pastness' (Thompson
1993:264). Historical interpretations construe documents in terms of their pastness and differences lead to a discussion in terms of their pastness.

Neglect of, if not total disregard for, the historical meaning and pastness of documents is unfortunately a hallmark of Vorster’s work. In view of my apology for the historical meaning and a different view on historical interpretation of the New Testament, it is apparent that he never moved beyond a recognition of the historical nature of the New Testament documents. The quest for an old book in a new world remains for Vorster how to read an old book to have meaning in a modern world and not how to appreciate in a modern world the meaning the old book has. He therefore also never moved beyond the epistemology of those scholars who argue for a one-to-one relationship between what is in a text and the outside reality, or of those scholars who are concerned with the fact-likeness of the New Testament documents. They all assume, although in different ways, that historical documents are transparent to modern readers and they all fail to recognise the pastness of such documents.

WORKS CONSULTED


Dr P F Craffert, Department of New Testament, Unisa, P O Box 392, PRETORIA, 0001, Republic of South Africa.