A South African response to
The postmodern Bible — a time to break
down or a time to build up?

J Botha, D F Busakwe, H S Gungadoo, J Uys

ABSTRACT
In this review article of The postmodern Bible: The Bible and culture collective (Yale University Press, 1995), four African authors present their response collaboratively in the form of a 'summary' of the argument of the book; some critical questions are raised about the six approaches to Biblical interpretation discussed. The article concludes with a general assessment of the book. It is suggested that a vision (or visions) for church and society and for the practice of Biblical criticism in postmodernist fashion is not made out clear enough in The postmodern Bible. Specifically in the context of South Africa, it is important to go beyond de(con)structing the traditional sources of inspiration and action and commitment. It is a situation calling for the courage to build, to say, to do, to put into practice, to commit and to actually deal with power structures (and not only unmask and criticise it) in order to make the country a better place for all its citizens.

1 INTRODUCTION
Indeed, there seems to be no end to the making of books. This is particularly true in Biblical Studies. New books continue to be published at an astonishing rate. Truly remarkable and important books, however, are not coming along every day. To our mind The postmodern Bible: The Bible and culture collective (Aichele et al 1995—henceforth PMB) is such a book. The four of us have met once a week for four months to discuss this book chapter by chapter. We were challenged and inspired to such an extent that we have decided to write a response to this product of a North-American group of scholars.

For various reasons PMB is a remarkable book.

The proliferation of new methods in Biblical criticism, taken over from various disciplines (literary theory, social sciences, anthropology, rhetoric, cultural studies, feminist studies, et cetera), has created a need for introductions to and evaluations of these methods. Various books introducing, explaining, illustrating and evaluating new methods of Biblical interpretation have been published in recent years (see, amongst many others, McKim 1986, Hartin & Petzer 1991, Thiselton 1992, Anderson & Moore 1992, McKnight & Struthers Malbon 1994, Robbins 1996). PMB is such a
book. However, the intellectual depth, scholarly rigour and the radical challenges presented by this book, as well as its radical and consistent postmodern inclination, puts it in a class of its own.

* PMB was written by ten North-American Biblical scholars: George Aichele, Fred W Burnett, Elizabeth A Castelli, Robert M Fowler, David Jobling, Stephen D Moore, Gary A Philips, Tina Pippin, Regina M Schwartz and Wilhelm Wuellner. However, it is not a collection of separate essays by ten different scholars. All ten scholars take responsibility for every aspect of the book. They claim that the writing of PMB was in all respects a collective endeavour. It is a conscious effort to contest the 'individual modern self, an authorial ego replete with will, intention, and the desire to possess the text and control the process' (:16). PMB, therefore, does not have an individual author. No single person claims to be the author of this book. This is quite unusual in the humanities.

* PMB represents a very marked effort of scholars to engage with the intellectual, epistemological, political, ethical and cultural challenges of our current late- or postmodern cultural epoch. The scope of the argument is breathtaking. Its consequences, if taken seriously, are radically life transforming. This book might prove to be one of the important landmarks in the transition of Biblical scholarship from the presumed certainties of modernity to the 'restless landscapes' of postmodernity.

* The basic impulse for the writing of PMB was to bring the current practices of biblical criticism into the fullest possible critique with the practices of current literary criticism. Literary criticism, in its turn, has transcended its traditional bounds (namely to deal with literary texts) and has developed into a general cultural critique. Similarly, PMB expresses the hope of moving Biblical criticism in the direction of a broad and general cultural critique.

Each of us takes responsibility for specific sections of this response. We did not write it as a collective. Thus, we do not claim unanimity about all the views expressed here. In this response we therefore indicate which person takes primary responsibility for which sections. By doing so we wish to fully acknowledge the different voices in our group. However, we can all 'live with' what is presented in this response article as a whole.

Given the postmodern recognition of difference, a brief explanation will put our response into context. We are four very different people. In addition to the normal differences in personality and personal ideals of four individuals, we are also from very different social, cultural, geographical and denominational backgrounds—and all quite different from the North American PMB collective. One of us (Botha) is a white, male, Afrikaner academician, living in a radically changed South Africa where the once
privileged and powerful Afrikaners are now reduced to merely one of various minority groups and where this group now has to come to grips with its history of racism and oppression and find its place in South Africa. One of us (Busakwe) is a young black man from a rural, underprivileged background, trained for the ministry in the Baptist Church, now a graduate student. Having been on the receiving end of a most brutal system of discrimination during the apartheid era, he has since the dawn of the Mandela era entered a bright future of enormous opportunities and responsibilities. One of us (Gungadoo) is a native of the island state Mauritius, a male of Indian-Christian background with Creole as mother-tongue, trained for the ministry in the Seventh Day Adventist Church, recently married to a South African woman and currently a graduate student in pastoral theology in South Africa at a time when ex-patriots are not everywhere equally welcomed. One of us (Uys) is a white Afrikaner woman, sharing the ambiguous experience of Afrikaners in post-1994 South Africa. She has been trained for the ministry in the very woman-unfriendly Dutch Reformed Church. All of us, however, consider ourselves to be Africans. We share a strong opposition to all forms of oppression and to any discrimination on the basis of race, gender, class, and cultural, sexual or social identity. We continue to be enriched by our shared interest in the scholarly study of the New Testament in the open context provided by the Department of Religion at the University of Stellenbosch.

As part of a graduate course in New Testament hermeneutics where we have studied PMB, we devoted the greater part of our time trying to understand the wealth of insights and the sometimes very complex technical detail presented in the book and to follow the overarching argument of the book. In this response, we report this effort of ours in some detail under the heading ‘our rewriting of their argument’. This is not merely a summary of the book. Any summary or rewriting necessarily exposes one’s own interests and preferences. Our selections and presentations reflect our interests. Furthermore, ‘summarising’ this tightly written and highly technical book, bursting with insights and thoughtful observations, has proven to be a very difficult if impossible undertaking. Therefore, what we have chosen to mention in our rewriting and the way in which we present the material, is indicative of what we consider important, striking and worthy of special mentioning. As such our rewritings of PMB’s argument in itself constitutes the majority of our response. Through interacting and even playing with the text of PMB, we have created our own text. Following our rewritings or brief retelling of the argument of each chapter, we present the gist of the critical questions and/or appreciative comments that we made in our discussions of the different chapters. We conclude with our general response to the book as a whole.
2 THE INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER OF THE POSTMODERN BIBLE

2.1 Our rewriting of their argument

The authors of PMB present their introductory chapter under four headings. First they explain one of their most passionate concerns and motivations for writing the book: the need for transformative readings of the Bible in a postmodern context. Following that, they describe their understanding of 'postmodernity' in some detail and then they indicate how postmodern concerns could impact on Biblical scholarship. In the final section they explain their notion of a 'culture collective'.

It is rather obvious to say the Bible has had more cultural influence on the Western culture than any other single document. According to PMB this presents a crucial methodological challenge to scholars of the Bible. Historical-critical methods have been both the foundation of modern biblical interpretation and the major obstacle to making sense of the Bible's ongoing formative influence on culture and society. Historical criticism excludes the contemporary milieu of the critic and it isolates the text and its criticism from the reader's cultural setting, values, interests and expectations. The authors of PMB have this to say about much of modern Bible criticism:

The pervasive modern emphasis on the objective recovery of the ancient context in which biblical texts were produced had the double effect of obscuring the significance of the Bible in contemporary Western culture and turning the Bible into an historical relic, an antiquarian artefact. It has also produced a modern biblical scholarship that, for many, has become a curatorial science in which the text is fetishized, its readings routinized, its readers bureaucratized (2).

The critical theoretical assumptions as well as the cultural conditions that produced, sustained, and validated those assumptions, are usually left unexamined.

In reaction to this the authors of PMB argue for a transformed biblical criticism. They want to focus on the ongoing impact of the Bible on culture in contemporary thought, specifically on such issues as the complexity of language, epistemology, self-reflexivity, method, rhetoric, power, ideology and reading technique. For PMB the political differences such as gender, sexuality, race, class, and religion have to continue to occupy centre stage in public discourse and in the academia.

PMB (3) finds an adequate description of postmodernity in the words of Zygmunt Baumann:

---

1 This section (§§2.1 and 2.2) was written by Busakwe.
Postmodernity is no more (but no less either) than the modern mind taking a long, attentive and sober look at itself, at its conditions and its past works, not fully liking what it sees and sensing the urge to change. Postmodernity is modernity coming of age: modernity looking at itself at a distance rather than from inside, making a full inventory of its gains and losses, psychoanalysing itself, discovering the intentions it never before spelled out, finding them mutually cancelling and incongruous. Postmodernity is modernity coming to terms with its own impossibility; a self-monitoring modernity, one that consciously discards what it was once unconsciously doing (Baumann 1991:272).

The underlying assumption of modernity that meaning is automatic and a natural given is radically challenged. Postmodernism is highly suspicious of the notions of universality, completeness and supremacy over other interpretations. Postmodern readings demonstrate that traditional interpretations are themselves enactments of domination or, in simpler terms, power plays. However, throughout their book the authors of PMB argue that this suspicion of postmodernity does not insist upon the rejection of modernity but exacts a thorough self-reflexivity and inspires transformation. Thus, contrary to some popular perceptions of postmodern criticism, PMB claims a very marked and distinctive political agenda.

Postmodernism is, among other things, about resistance and transformation.

Until recently (and still now to some extent) historical critical methods dominated the terrain of biblical studies. However, for PMB the new critical wave offered by literary theory demonstrated historical criticism’s intellectual and moral bankruptcy. Disturbing questions were raised such as: Whose history does historical criticism relate? Who is doing the telling? What role does it play in changing the social fabric or failing to change it? What is its role in the effort to achieve social justice?

In reaction to positivism, PMB is concerned about issues such as systems of power (be they ecclesiastical, institutional, cultural) that authorise or block what can be said or written about the Bible. PMB exhibits a passionate concern for the politics of inclusion and the rejection of any exclusivist positions that want to determine whose readings of the Bible do or do not count. PMB is eager to make explicit the ideological stances, ethical positionings, self-critical and self-reflexive consciousness, and affirmations of the positive values of difference and multiplicity. The aim of this effort is to make the Bible sensible in a cultural context.

That the PMB is a product of collective authorship is not accidental. It is precisely a challenge to the modernist desire to possess, monopolise and con-
trol the process of the interpretation of texts. It is furthermore an effort to contest an epistemology and a set of disciplinary practices that privilege the autonomous self, an ideology that values private ownership, and a professional discursive practice that legitimates the production and dissemination of knowledge in one form at the expense of another.

The authors of PMB admit that the corporate project has had its own frustrations such as the fear of co-optation and compromise of their distinct individualities and the danger of homogenising their distinct voices in the interest of collective culture. They grant that their individual critical concerns might be dulled in the effort to reach consensus and that the nuances of their personal positions might be lost in the group’s voice. They concede that the risk of a culture collective could mean sacrificing plurality of thought in the interest of collectivity. Nevertheless, they maintain that the sum is greater than the parts.

2.2 Our response

The idea of culture collective is an attractive one for it challenges the desire and temptation of many scholars who want to be the owners and possessors of textual meaning, where ‘truth’ is kept and guarded like a museum piece by a curator. However, does this idea of culture collective not militate against Postmodernity as a discourse that strives not only for inclusivity, but more so for complexity, multiplicity, divergency, deviancy and plurality? Is postmodernity not, as Lyotard argues, a ‘time of many language games’? Is the urge for consensus not one that excludes that which you cannot reach consensus about, but which is nonetheless very pivotal for the system of meaning(s)? Is deconstruction not, among other things, about identifying points of failure in a system, points at which a system is able to feign coherence only by excluding and forgetting that which it cannot assimilate, that which is ‘other’ to it? Derrida asks: ‘What if what cannot be assimilated, the absolute indigestible, played a fundamental role in the system, an abyssal role rather?’ (quoted in PMB, :120). Does this culture collective not orientate towards pragmatism? If so, there are two major conceptual difficulties in identifying this work as postmodern.

(1) Deconstruction, which is a pivotal means of critique in postmodern discourse, cannot be content with the pragmatic conception of meaning. The appeal to consensus and convention (truth and meaning as what is validated by our accepted methods of validation) works to treat the norm as a foundation, and as Derrida’s discussion of Austin and Searle suggests, norms are produced by acts of exclusion. Speech acts theorists exclude the nonserious examples so as to ground their rules on consensus and conventions. For example, moralists exclude the deviant so as to ground their
precepts on a social consensus. Objectivity is constituted by excluding the views of those who do not count as sane and rational men: women, children, poets, prophets, deviant and the mad. Therefore, since deconstruction is interested in what has been excluded and in the perspective it affords on the consensus, there can be no question of accepting consensus as truth or restricting truth to what is demonstrable within a system. And since deconstruction attempts to view systems from both the outside and the inside, it tries to keep alive the possibility that the 'eccentricity' of women, poets, deviants, prophets, and the mad might yield truths about the system to which they are marginal.

(2) Deconstruction differs from the idea of consensus in its attitude towards reflexive inquiry. In its most rigorous form, consensus/pragmatism argues that we cannot get outside our institutions and beliefs to evaluate them, and because of this they resign to what is practical. Deconstruction is highly sceptical about the possibility of solving epistemological problems or of actually breaking out of the Western logocentrism of Western thought, but it repudiates the complacency to which pragmatism may lead. Postmodernism makes reflection upon one's own procedures and institutional frameworks a necessary task.

On a more mundane level: looking at the photo of the North American culture collective on PMB's cover, we see ten white middle class scholars standing happily smiling on a beach. Although they have some gender (three of the ten are women), religious (one Jew), denominational (various Christian denominations) and institutional (more or less senior college or university professors), generational and possibly sexual identity differences in the group, the more crucial cultural, racial, class and geographical diversities are lacking. Their excellent book, especially the emphasis on diversity, would have been more credible if their collective was really constituted of a diverse group. Their book might have looked quite differently. Obviously their collective also does not include an old style German male professor doing historical critical criticism. If so, consensus would have been out of the question! It seems that even PMB's emphasis on inclusivity and difference has its limits.

3  CHAPTER 1: READER-RESPONSE CRITICISM

3.1 Our rewriting of their argument

PMB views reader-response criticism as a force to be reckoned with in current biblical studies. They include it in the book in order to criticise it. They
suspect that the claim to mastery lurks under the surface of such studies and want to question the concept that meaning has stable foundations. They doubt that one could achieve clarity about the meaning of a text and make it clear: what a text means and how it means is inseparable from what we want it to mean and how we will it to mean.

Reader-response criticism focuses in front of the text on the encounter with the text in the act of reading. For PMB everyone has this encounter—whether they acknowledge it or not. Reader-response criticism, in the way that it functions in secular literary studies, can provide biblical critics with the words with which they can talk about their experiences.

Because of the variety within reader-response criticism, PMB holds that it is difficult to find an adequate definition. During discussions critics regularly employ this double gesture: 'reader-response criticism is impossible to define, but I shall define it for you' (:25). Despite the 'undefinability' reader-response criticism is at least an identifiable cluster of theories and critical practices. It moves beyond the formalism of the new criticism, it rejects the validity of the affective fallacy, it denies that texts make meaning and it affirms that readers make meaning (:25). PMB provides a 'map' to situate the variety within reader-response criticism and its important representatives:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psychological or subjective</th>
<th>Interactive or phenomenological</th>
<th>Social or structural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Norman Holland</td>
<td>(early) Stanley Fish</td>
<td>(later) Stanley Fish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Bleich</td>
<td>Wolfgang Iser</td>
<td>Jonathan Culler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wayne Booth</td>
<td>Gerald Prince</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Seymour Chatman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hans Robert Jaus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Judith Fetterley</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PMB admits that this taxonomy (their adaptation from that of Steven Mailloux) has limits and is predominantly American, white, male, and academic, but insists that it is nonetheless helpful. Three major theoretical questions are being asked in reader-response criticism. (1) Is reading primarily an individual or social experience? (2) Which dominates the reading experience, the text or the reader? (3) Is 'the reader' an expert reader or an ordinary reader? To each question those represented in these three categories give different answers.

PMB surveys the work of North American New Testament scholars who claimed to take reader-response criticism seriously. PMB concludes that the work of these New Testament reader-response critics must seem very strange
to secular literary critics because of the predominantly *historical* questions that occupy them. Biblical reader-response critics appropriate Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory more than any others do, perhaps because some elements of Iser's theory have been amenable to appropriation by historical critics—especially the notion of a stable text with determinate meanings. Iser's view of the interaction between text and reader enforces a *limited* pluralism, because it allows for the traditional pluralism of historical criticism to continue.

PMB looks at the work of biblical reader-response critics and concludes that these critics share at least three tenets with historical critics. (1) They see the text as a 'thing-in-itself', controlling the reading process. It is then possible to discover meaning *in* the text—whether it is one determinate meaning or an acceptable range of meanings. The epistemological conviction that underlies both views is that the text has a determinate meaning. (2) Biblical reader-response critics maintain the theological agenda that biblical narrative criticism has inherited from historical criticism. There are certain pre-conditions that the implied author has put into the text, which are required of the implied readers. The guild (churches, colleges, universities, theological seminaries, etc) unravels the implied author's pre-conditions and finally acts as the *master reader* who regulates the proliferation of aberrant readings. Thus the ideological barriers that historical critics have placed around the biblical texts are firmly in place for biblical reader-response critics. (3) Biblical reader-response critics seem to share historical critics's view of meaning. Meaning occurs when real readers actualise the roles proffered by the text-as-object (Iser's meaning as *(is) reference*). In this process biblical reader-response critics tend to replicate the results of historical critics. The reader's personal reading is guided by the reading protocol of the professional guild. They instruct how referential connections should be made in order to surmount the difficulties (e.g., the indeterminacies) that are posed by the text.

Aberrant reading experiences can thus be tightly controlled by professional critics. Readers are not so much submitting to the authority of the biblical text as they are submitting to the authority of the professional critics. They are free to have a transforming experience, but only within expected limits. It seems that Iser's theory has helped biblical reader-response critics keep their positivistic and pluralistic reading strategies in place, and has not undermined traditional pluralism.

It is PMB's conviction that the biblical-critical guild should face up to their approved (and disapproved) reading practices. The historical question, as traditionally posed in Biblical studies, should be bracketed (if only temporarily). If not, reader-response criticism will never have a genuine opportunity to contribute to New Testament studies, but will be reader-
response criticism in name only. Ideological self-reflection is much needed (especially about the ideological approbation of the theories of reader-response criticism) in order to unmask the ideological ends and material effects of their readings. The lack thereof make critics blind to both the oppressive and liberating power of its critical discourses. PMB makes suggestions as to how reader-response theories can be utilised more fully as opposed to being truncated by the ideology of historical criticism.

Firstly, they are convinced that poststructuralist and postmodern literary theory can bring about the necessary ideological self-reflection. The subject-object dichotomy of the text versus reader has collapsed theoretically with the advent of poststructuralist and postmodernist literary theories, and holds that it is no longer a viable practical model for biblical critics to use. This collapse reveals that both text and critic are constituted by interpretative conventions. Meaning must be seen as a hermeneutical relation to the reading practices of one's own discipline. Hermeneutical relations entail political power. The ideology of mastery characterises traditional readings of texts (including modern biblical scholarship) and constitutes power plays. There is no innocent reading of the Bible, no reading that is not already ideological. To read the Bible in the traditional scholarly manner has all too often meant reading it, whether deliberately or not, in ways that reify and ratify the status quo, and an ideological analysis should be an integral part of any critical reading strategy.

Secondly, and flowing from a poststructuralist approach to reader-response, critics will have the means to see more clearly that critics within the same reading community do not have egalitarian socio-political relations to the text. If this is acknowledged, there is a chance that readings from every socio-political location could play a role in how the assured results of biblical criticism are adjudicated. Those on the margins and outside the status quo would thus also have a fair chance to judge results without being at a disadvantage precisely because they are outside the status quo. Critics do not necessarily reflect on how they read, and many readers make meaning within a set of particular reading conventions.

Thirdly, biblical critics tend to identify 'implied readers' from the text as if the text can clearly instruct them as to the nature of these implied readers. The step that biblical critics have not yet taken is to admit that the implied reader for whom they are reading is themselves, and that the implied readers whom they construct are reading strategies by which to verify their own readings. The interpretive communities in which different critics function, are often too reified, vague and homogeneous (according to their analysis). It does not require critics to take into account the many different readers of texts and their localised interests. PMB rejects any 'egalitarian' approach that
gives equal status to everyone in an interpretive community consisting of *unequals*, because it entails an ideology that obscures the fact that textual power is political power. Different readers of biblical text stand in asymmetrical relationships concerning power and their ability to speak about the text *even in the same general interpretive community*.

As biblical reader-response critics become more self-reflective, their work will be enhanced by many other reading strategies already at work within biblical studies, such as deconstructionist, feminist, womanist, black African and liberationist strategies. Each of these enters the struggle for transformation and change in different ways. They challenge the *status quo*, as well as political and social hierarchies that those in power took for granted for a long time. Each group is diverse in itself, something that will become even clearer as we continue with PMB, and each represents different voices that the hegemony oppressed in one way or another.

3.2 Our response

This chapter on the use of reader-response in Biblical criticism is enlightening both in its mapping out of tenets and schools in reader-response criticism and in its critical observation that much of Biblical reader-response criticism remained comfortably at home within the power structures of the guild and the views on language and meaning cultivated in historical criticism. It was a revealing and honest moment to follow PMB’s appreciative and affirming discussion of Fetterley’s position—and then see them undermining it at the end (:38). Indeed, if one rejects the possibility of stable and fixed meanings in texts independent of readers and reading activity, against which grain (to be found where?) are readers then suppose to read? PMB leaves the issue open. This also puts the issue of the (im)possibility of a political agenda in postmodern cultural and literary criticism into sharp focus. PMB’s call for a more radical follow-through of the implications of reader-response criticism in Biblical studies and its pointing to various liberation and liberatory reading strategies as the way to follow, do not really help. The chapter leaves us with an unsolved, uncomfortable and perhaps unattractive contradiction: there is no fixed meaning in texts, we must celebrate and accommodate radical plurality and yet we must oppose on political and ethical grounds some readings and reading practices. The ‘political correctness,’ sometimes (unfortunately) associated with intolerance and even hate, often found among proponents of those very reading strategies hailed by PMB as pointers to transformational and liberatory postmodern readings of the Bible, undermines those positions. What is the difference between the powermongering of, say, a leading Biblical feminist critic and the power-
mongering of the stereotypical archenemy, the white male North-European historical critic working with positivist-modernist assumptions?

4 CHAPTER 2: STRUCTURALIST AND NARRATOLOGICAL CRITICISM

4.1 Our rewriting of their argument

This chapter consists of four sections: (1) two brief examples of structuralist readings of biblical texts (the Ahab and Elijah story in 1 Kings 17-18 and the Tamar and Judah story in Genesis 38), (2) a survey of the impact and technical terminology and distinctions of various forms of structural and narratological studies of the Bible, (3) a critique of structuralism and (4) a brief consideration of the possible value of structuralist and narratological approaches in postmodern readings of the Bible. The overarching argument continues to be a radical and thorough challenge of any conservative program that wants to find fixed and unchanging structures or patterns in Biblical texts.

This chapter is perhaps the most difficult to follow for anyone uninitiated in the jargon of literary studies and biblical studies since the 1970's. Fleeting introductions to seemingly endless and highly complex categories, distinctions, and technical terms are interspersed by surveys and brief discussions of a breathtaking array of the work of scholars who have used these approaches in studies of the Bible during the past three decades. The inaccessibility of the chapter is by no means to be blamed on the authors of PMB. Anyone who has tried to keep apace with the details and technicalities of structural and narratological criticism knows that it is no easy reading matter. Nevertheless, without having previously read much of that literature, this chapter in PMB remains almost unintelligible.

In the story of the introduction of postmodern reading strategies to biblical scholarship, the impact of structuralism is crucial. PMB makes a helpful distinction between structuralism (which encompasses formalism and semiotics) and narratology (which encompasses poetics). They define structuralism as a general theory of 'the intelligibility of the products of the mind based on the view that what makes things intelligible is their perceived relatedness, rather than their qualities as separate items' (70-71). 'High structuralism' (as exemplified by Lévi-Strauss) concentrates on the deep structures (the logical relationships among elements) and 'low structuralism' (as exemplified by Genette's narratology) is more concerned with the modalities of 'surface structures.'

This section (§§4.1 and 4.2) was written by Botha.
Chatman's story-discourse, as well as other important narratological terms like implied reader, point-of-view, plot, setting, et cetera. Following this, they survey the use of various studies under the rubric of 'narrative criticism' by New Testament scholars such as Davis Rhoads, Norman Petersen, Alan Culpepper and under the rubric of 'poetics' by Old Testament scholars such as Meir Sternberg, Shimon Bar-Efrat, Robert Alter and Hugh White. Accompanying their discussion of these works, is PMB’s consistent rejection of biblical narrative criticism's (new critical) notion that the narrative text is a 'world in itself' which should be understood as unified story independent from all 'extrinsic' approaches to literature (biographical, historical, sociological, philosophical).

The reason for their rejection of a separable 'world of the text' becomes clear when PMB moves on to their longest section in this chapter—a very informative critique of structuralism (:95-110). Structuralism is accused by Brooke-Rose of being 'fundamentally positivistic, holding out the promise of the right answer to problems, claiming a point of reference that gives mastery over texts' (:99). Following Peter Caws, PMB does not disregard this criticism, but nevertheless holds that structuralism can be seen as a defence against relativism and pragmatism, and hence against fundamentalism and superstition. Therefore PMB discerns powerful critical impulses in the development of structuralism, from aspects of the work of Saussure and Lèvi-Strauss through to Derrida's assessment of the impact of structuralism on his own work. The starting point for Derrida's deconstruction is, in fact, the structuralist category of binary opposition. From here it is a small step for PMB to the realm of the political: to recognise and deconstruct the oppositions fundamental to culture is to expose how culture is constituted by the systematic valuation of one term of the opposition over the other.

In the final section of the chapter PMB criticises the conservative trends in biblical structuralist and narratological criticism. Quoting Mieke Bal, they talk about the use of structuralist and narratological criticism as ‘a critical escape’. The synchronic view of the text appealed to conservatives because it gave an excuse from both the dominance of historical criticism as well as a means to escape uncomfortable questions altogether. PMB maintains that narratological criticism was particularly popular in gospel criticism (e.g Culpepper, Tannehill, Kingsbury), because its emphasis on wholeness and internal consistency and especially the discourse-story distinction, leaves conservative critics under the illusion that ‘there is after all such a thing as “the gospel story”’ (:112). For postmodernists like the authors of PMB, however, this is an anathema. They see only 'shifting and unstable discourses interacting with other discourses without any stable terms' (:112). The work of Sternberg and even Patte is also criticised by PMB: Sternberg for claiming that the narrative
an anathema. They see only ‘shifting and unstable discourses interacting with other discourses without any stable terms’ (:112). The work of Sternberg and even Patte is also criticised by PMB: Sternberg for claiming that the narrative in the Hebrew Bible is special and thus demands from the critic something ‘perilously close to religious commitment’ and Patte for making global claims about how all narrative works and his conservative working assumption that ‘a self-consistent and noncontradictory belief system underlies each text’ (:115).

4.2 Our response

Having read through their quite exhaustive critique of structuralism (which is in fact for the greater part a passionate defence of structuralism against the criticism of the likes of Brooke-Rose), one is left to wonder why PMB did this. Why are they so emphatically ‘pro-structuralism’ while they have been rather lukewarm about reader-response criticism (and very critical of the reader-response criticism practised by biblical critics) in the previous chapter? Part of the answer can be found in their differences of opinion about the use of structuralism (:117). For some members of the PMB collective (Jobling and Moore?) structuralism was and still is their great moment of liberation from modernist literary criticism and especially historical-critical biblical criticism. These members of the collective seemed to have carried the day. In this chapter PMB thus follows the rhetorical strategy of recovering the radical ‘original intention’ (and thus the ‘truth’?) about structuralism (with Caws as their guru). Other members of the collective seemed to be more inclined to share Brooke-Rose’s critique of structuralism. It seems that a compromise was reached in the strong terms with which PMB distance themselves from the conservative tendencies that underpin much of the work done in biblical structuralism and narratology.

Much of the reason for the popularity of structuralism (particularly a specific variety of ‘low structuralism’ called ‘South African Discourse Analysis’) and narratology among members of the New Testament Society of South Africa during the 1970’s and 1980’s can indeed be ascribed to what PMB calls the ‘critical escape’. Leading South African scholars like Deist (1977) and Vorster (see Le Roux 1994:10, 13) again and again made this point (see also Botha 1992). In South Africa the use of structuralism (and narratology) was for some scholars a way of staying clear of the ‘dangers’ (for the church) of historical-criticism and thus avoiding the uncomfortable historical problems of the Bible. Describing structures and discovering actants and much other technical narratological phenomena in the New Testament texts provided the opportunity for many critics not to relate their scholarly research of the Bible to the possible implications of the New Testament for the socio-political
crisis in South Africa during the 1970's and 1980's. For others (like Vorster 1977 and Lategan 1978), structuralism offered the opportunity to break free from the clutches of the fundamentalism that dominated South African biblical scholarship until the 1970's and to participate in the newest trends in international biblical scholarship. The ambiguity about structuralism identified among the PMB collective is also characteristic of biblical scholarship in South Africa. To make fun today of the hey-day of discourse analysis and structuralism in South Africa is to disregard the radically transformative and liberatory opportunities it has brought us.

5 CHAPTER 3: POST-STRUCTURALIST CRITICISM

5.1 Our rewriting of their argument

Since deconstruction has been the most influential form of poststructuralism, PMB focuses on Derrida in their chapter on poststructuralist criticism, although Foucault and Barthes also feature prominently. Immediately after quoting Derrida ('structures were to be undone, decomposed, disseminated', :119), PMB draws attention to Derrida's remark that deconstruction was not a negative operation, thus 'deconstruction is not destruction' (:120). Given the overall aim of PMB to transform biblical studies and to show that postmodern approaches to biblical interpretation do have a political agenda, this immediate and striking attempt to 'salvage' and 'defend' deconstruction—so to speak—comes as no surprise. This rescue operation is continued by the references to Derrida's anti-apartheid essay (:121) and the mentioning of Derrida being an Algerian-Jew, thereby linking him to the scapegoat role akin to the wandering Jew that writing has suffered in Western tradition (:122). For PMB deconstruction is not the senseless unethical intellectual pastime of academic elite that it is sometimes taken to be by its opponents. Various elements and dimensions of what has become known as 'deconstruction' are introduced and explained by PMB. The way in which PMB introduces such slippery and complex notions as 'logocentrism' has again to be indicated as one of the many extremely valuable contributions of the book.

We found PMB's remark that 'to deconstruct a hierarchical opposition is not simply to argue that the term ordinarily repressed is in reality the superior term' (:123) of particular significance. Merely making oppositions stand on their heads, inverting systems of oppression without changing them, would translate in the South African context to changing a white hand of oppression into a black hand of oppression. Deconstruction, however, wants

---

4 This section (§§5.1 and 5.2) was written by Botha.
to deconstruct all hierarchical oppositions and show how each term in the opposition is joined to its companion by an intricate network of arteries. And if we could believe PMB, the political agenda of deconstruction is to transform all hierarchies and systems of oppression and to change them to egalitarian, democratic networks and relations.

Following the introduction to various dimensions of deconstruction, PMB presents two telling examples of poststructuralist engagements with the Bible: (i) Regina Swartz's depiction of the Hebrew Bible as engaged in a process of loss and recovery, and (ii) Derrida's own essays on the Jewish poet Edmond Jabès. Referring inter alia to the lost-and-found-text of Deuteronomy (e.g., the Torah being rewritten after Moses smashed the tables to pieces and Joseph as lost brother being found again), Schwartz argues that remembering is persistently linked to survival in the Hebrew Bible. However, since such a thing as accurate memory is not possible (and since there is no original to be recalled), remembering as condition for survival in the Hebrew Bible is rather 'interpretation, re-construction, re-membering, re-writing, or simply writing (in the Derridean sense) that enables continuity' (:126). For Derrida and Jabès the situation of the Jew is exemplary of writing because writing is already a matter of exile. 'The fatherland of the Jews is a sacred text surrounded by commentaries' (:126). Commentary is a form of exiled speech. The lost voice is the voice of God. We have only traces. We do not hear the voice in the garden. Having been cast out of the garden, we are forced into the desert, a boundless semiotic book made of sand. 'The garden is speech, the desert writing' (:127). These two texts (already being compressed in PMB and having been further mutilated by this compression of PMB's compression) offers two very illuminating examples of the deconstruction process being 'applied to' biblical material.

In the 'Deconstruction and reading' section, PMB argues that reading is always intertextual. Therefore, 'deconstruction is suspicious of any view that there is a natural fit between language, world, and meaning' (:129). As reading activity deconstruction is not reducible to a single concept, method or technique. Deconstruction is 'resolutely nonsystematic' (:129). Following from this, PMB describes text and its related terms as complex, fluid and powerful metaphors: 'Whatever a text is, it is not a stable, self-identical, enduring object, but a place of intersection in a network of signification' (:130). Intertext 'suggests that each text is situated for each reader in an ever-changing web composed of innumerable texts' (:130). For deconstructionists 'there is no external reality to which texts refer or which gives texts their meaning; meaning or reference is possible only in relation to this network, as functions of intertextuality' (:130). Deconstruction rejects all 'container' theories of meaning. From this very radical inconclusivity, PMB makes a
logical connection with the aggressive role of the reader and from there to reading as a political and ethical act. Since the reader takes an aggressive role in creating meaning, it implies that there are no neutral, innocent readings. Every reading is an ethical and ultimately a political act (:135).

In the next section PMB asks again whether deconstruction is only negative, whether it is nihilistic, whether it is a denial of truth, meaning, intention, reference and reality (:145). They respond by saying that such an understanding of poststructuralism and deconstruction is ‘simplistic sloganeering’ (:145). PMB tries to ‘salvage’ deconstruction from the simplistic sloganeering critics by maintaining that:

* It makes a contribution in concrete ways to the social fabric of what Althusser called ‘lived relations’ (:146). It thus may well influence biblical critics to re-examine the question of history and historical criticism.

* Poststructuralism may prove to be important for biblical studies on the question of ethics since it raises questions about the status of the readings and writings of the church and academy.

* Poststructuralism may give an impetus to a Bultmann-style effort to place historical, theological, literary, and metaphysical discourses in conversation again—however this time not as result of a desire for a global synthesis for the modern world but as a regional and local concern to make the Bible speak to particular postmodern worlds (:147).

5.2 Our response

PMB alludes affirmatively to Derrida’s notion that ‘Every attempt to exit the book only leads back into it’. We are tempted to ponder (tongue in cheek!) the possible similarities and differences between this statement and the classical Reformed notion Sacra Scriptura sui ipsius interpretes (convincingly criticised by PMB, :112). In an ironic twist, might the pre-modern Reformed notion not perhaps find unexpected support from Derrida’s discussions of texts and intertext (??).

Foucault’s notion of ‘pastoral power’ and the criteria to define it are discussed in PMB without raising any questions about its thoroughly modernistic and individualistic Western categories—so very foreign to the world of the New Testament (:142). However, this is perhaps not so surprising, given PMB’s lack of interest for the ancient historical worlds and societies in which the Biblical texts originated.

PMB’s discussion of the possible positive contributions of poststructuralism needs much more unpacking in order to convince readers that it can possibly have a positive function (putting pieces together) after all the destructing (shattering the pieces) in the book. The dominant emphasis of PMB is on ‘the free play of negativity, desire, pleasure, and jouissance’ and
on criticising, challenging, breaking down, turning upside down, and so on of texts, codes, mores, traditions, systems of authorities and so on. The 'putting together again', the building of new societies, the creation of new meanings, systems and traditions, and the establishment of new lived relations are only briefly mentioned but never filled in. For PMB such a vision, as with meanings in texts, can perhaps never be filled in or completed or spelled out, because texts are merely 'shifting and unstable discourses interacting with other discourses without any stable terms' (:112). Nevertheless, even in the purportedly shifting and unstable text of PMB itself, a golden thread can be easily detected: a passionate rejection of everything conservative, a desire for transformation and change and an emphatic statement that postmodernist modes of cultural and literary criticism indeed have a positively identifiable political and ethical agenda. PMB, however, does not tell us what this agenda is and what its vision for society and the world is. PMB does not go beyond stating and restating that there must be such an agenda. We will come back to this concern in our conclusion.

6 CHAPTER 4: RHETORICAL CRITICISM

6.1 Our rewriting of their argument

In this chapter PMB situates rhetoric within a postmodern framework. PMB uses 1 Cor 9:1–10:13 to illustrate five steps for a rhetorical reading of a text:

- Identification of the rhetorical unit, that is, the 'context' which refers to the argumentative and persuasive strategy that is designed to move the audience or reader to agree with the speaker or writer.

- Account for the rhetorical situation that generated the text, that is, the intention in the texts to move readers to action.

- Choice of a rhetorical genre. The genre is related to the rhetorical situation, as it should help the argumentation.

- Rhetorical style. This pertains to 'how the rhetorical choices made create a particular organisation of the argument and how this organisation generates specific stylistic techniques' (:154).

- Rhetorical strategy, that is the way in which the speaker or writer has designed the argument to move the audience or reader to agree with him/her.

---

5 This section (§§6.1 and 6.2) was written by Gungadoo.
6.1.1 A critical view of the new rhetoric

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, rhetorical criticism was relegated to a second class status for a more scientific way of analysing texts. However, with the growing realisation that all texts are signs and encounters with other disciplines, we are now experiencing a renaissance of rhetoric: the so-called new rhetoric.

Although we are now witnessing a new emergence of rhetoric, it is, according to PMB, not without problems. Rhetorical critics are now confronted with the task of redefining rhetoric.

- Postmodernity does not call for total alien features to be imposed on traditional rhetoric, it demands from rhetorical criticism to be more self-critical and self-reflective.
- Especially important is the need to recognise and critically evaluate the part played by the reader in the creation of meaning. The reconstruction of the rhetorical situation and its interests and context is, in fact, a reconstruction of the rhetorical situation, interests and contextualization of the reader.
- The importance of decentering and interdeterminancy. This is to say that the text is not separated from the reader and his/her context. It then opens the text to a multiplicity of readings that is not controllable.
- Since the rhetorical strategy in a text is a theory that is bound up with the reader, all rhetorical theory is bound up with the reader's political and ethical life. In postmodern understanding the new rhetoric should see all discursive practices as forms of power and performance. Thus the new rhetoric should be exposed to political, social and ideological criticisms.
- A postmodern rhetoric will also be a critique of rationality. Since rationality and the conscious are never fully in charge of human interaction, the new rhetoric will be alert to the transaction between the unconscious and rationality in a rhetorical event.
- Finally, the interpretative community (feminist, academic, etc) is the locus of the rhetorical performance.

6.1.2 Rhetoric and religion

In this section, PMB explores the similarities between religion and rhetoric and argues the point that a rhetorical theory that takes into account the relationship between rhetoric and religion is a better guide for biblical interpretation than one that relies merely on secular literary paradigms.
6.1.3 The new rhetorical criticism of the Bible

From the presidential address of James Muilenberg's to the Society of Biblical Literature in 1968, a new impetus was given to rhetorical criticism. New Testament rhetorical scholars initially drew on classical rhetoric. However, many criticised the importance given to the Greco-Roman rhetoric of the Bible. Following Kennedy's line of argument, PMB stresses that cultural values are bound to the art of persuasion. PMB maintains that commentators have often neglected the fact that the early Christian rhetoric was Jewish. Early Christian and Jewish rhetoric was a challenge to the 'homogenising forces of cultural, political, racial or gender ideologies in Hellenistic-Roman culture' (173). In that light, a more appropriate term for early Christian and Jewish rhetoric would be a rhetoric of resistance. Apart from locating the rhetorical features within the interpretative community, the new rhetoric takes note of the canonical character of the Bible.

How can error be excluded if many readings of the text are accepted? PMB tries to answer this question by saying that unlike the objectivist claim of scholarship, interpretation of biblical texts must now be the activity of many participants and all of them should be simultaneously the subject and object of interpretation. Interpreters should not merely comment on a text, but enact the text.

6.1.4 Rereading 1 Corinthians

To illustrate the impact of some of the issues discussed thus far, PMB rereads 1 Corinthians 9:1-10:13 on the basis of the rhetorical work of Antoinette Clark Wire who, with her feminist reading, traces a voice that the argument of 1 Corinthians suppresses. PMB argues that:

- The delimitation of the unit chosen for analysis is always unstable.
- Self-reflexive rhetoric will allow critics to relate their own rhetorical situation to the issues at stake in the first century. Antionette Wire, for instance, seeks a linkage between current feminist praxis and women prophets of the early church.
- A postmodern rhetorical reading will include traces of other answers and will thus subvert the intended persuasion.

6.1.5 The future of rhetorical criticism

For PMB the future of rhetorical criticism lies with the reader. It is his/her 'knowledge experience, taste and sensitivity in his or her given rhetorical situation' (184) that will determine the future development of rhetorical criticism.
6.2 Our response

It is appreciated that PMB does not limit their consideration of rhetorical criticism to theory but actually engages in a rhetorical exercise with their re-reading of 1 Cor 9:10-13. With rhetoric now emphasising the reader's discourse upon Paul's discourse or the link between what is at stake between the reader's rhetorical situation and how they relate to what was at stake in the first century, Africans can now use rhetorical criticism of the Bible to address issues such as poverty and marginalisation in South Africa or famine in Somalia, war in Rwanda, oppression of women in different parts of our continent and other different problems that affect our continent.

A point constantly emphasised by PMB and which emerged again in this chapter is that all criticisms are politically bound. Rhetorical criticism is a tool that can be used for furthering the cause of the dominant systems (:183), or as we have seen with Wire, it can be used for subversion.

Although PMB recognises the influence of Jewish rhetoric in the Bible, is rhetorical criticism as it is generally known and used (classical or new rhetoric) not greatly influenced by the West? In other words, before an African can address issues relevant to them, should we first be well-versed in Western rhetoric? The question we are asking here is: did PMB investigate the possibility that African, Asian, 'Native' American and the rhetoric of other marginalised groups could be different from Greek rhetoric?

PMB seems to convey that 'everything is rhetoric.' Do the exclamation of joy, the tears of sorrow and physical pain also always belong to rhetoric or do they belong to other categories and modes of being human? At some point in our rewriting of PMB's chapter 3, I wondered whether, for Derrida, language is God. This chapter leaves me to wonder if (for Wuellner?) rhetoric is God?

7 CHAPTER 5: PSYCHOANALYTICAL CRITICISM

7.1 Our rewriting of their argument

7.1.1 Freud as a religionist and biblical scholar

PMB defines psychoanalysis as a method of investigation that consists essentially in bringing out the unconscious meanings of words, the actions and the product of imagination of a particular subject. It is that dark realm that governs us but which we cannot govern.

The first part of this chapter is devoted to a consideration of Freud and especially his views on religion. Freud saw religion as a history of mass

---

6 This section (§§7.1 and 7.2) was written by Busakwe.
neurosis that is caused by infantile helplessness. Psychoanalysis has made us aware of the Father complex and belief in God (189).

PMB suggests that a note of anti-Semitism can be detected in Freud: Moses is an Egyptian and was murdered by Jews. In Freud's Moses and Monotheism the Father is a jealous and violent figure who keeps his sons at bay and all the females for himself. One day the sons killed and devoured their father. A deep sense of guilt succeeds the crime; hence the dead father becomes even more powerful than the living one had been (193). But by internalising the Father's prohibitions they created the conditions in which civilisation became possible.

7.1.2 Lacan as midrashist, biblical scholar and theologian

Lacan was a student of Freud as Joshua was a student of Moses. Moses/Freud only glimpsed the promised land because he did not know Saussure (197). For Lacan, Saussure's two components of linguistic signs (the signified and signifier) were capable of bonding together in a stable and symmetrical relation. Once signified and signifier enter Lacan's paper, however, that stable relation is disrupted. 'When signified seems finally to be within reach it dissolves at the explorer's touch into yet more signifiers.' Lacan argues that we are forced to accept the notion of an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier (190). For Lacan the signified is always already a signifier.

For Lacan, differences/distortions emerge most clearly in the lie of Mark 14: 71 because the description of a thing, no matter how accurate, is never the thing itself (201). To speak of something is to put words in place of it, and substitution inevitably entails distortions (201). The modern myth of a dead god is simply a shelter against the threat of castration. Castration is a linguistic affair; it is the process through which the human infant is gradually inserted into a language. The infant achieves individuation through acquisition of language and it begins to symbolise or represent its desires and experiences; it moves through a maze of linguistic substitutions. The world and word becomes a presence made of absence. For Lacan, castration is not only sexual but also linguistic—and according to him we are all castrated of any masterful understanding of language, and can only signify ourselves in a symbolic system that we do not command but that rather commands us. Only this realisation can save us from phallocentrism. All this leaves the Father in a fraudulent position—he is the authority of the Law yet cannot vouch for it anymore than anyone else can—he too must submit to the bar which makes him in so far as is the real, a castrated Father.
7.1.3 Psychoanalysis and feminism

For women in psychoanalysis and for the relationship of feminism to psychoanalysis, the language of seduction, hysteria and lack is often invoked. Women do not share the same feeling about psychoanalysis as a discipline. For some people psychoanalysis possesses useful impulses for a feminist critic in so far as it provides an understanding of the formation of subjectivity and sexual difference that is crucial to feminism. For example, Freud and Lacan's accounts of the institution of sexual difference and gender identity describe how subjectivity formed within an androcentric, patriarchal society. They argue that these are not prescriptions as to how women should be, but that they are merely descriptions of the societal projections. On the other hand, other feminists have pointed out that psychoanalysis tends to marginalise women. The feminist scholar, Luce Irigaray, criticises the entire Western intellectual tradition. She centres on its silences, its repression and its unspoken dimension. For her, these omissions can be traced to a primary repression—that of sexual differences itself. For Irigaray, Christianity has always been intent on disincarnating Jesus, in peeling the flesh away from him, in defeminising him. She sees Jesus as an embodiment of full humanity, a kind of an androgyne. Male religion, she contends, cannot account for female desire except in a distorted, foreshortened way. For Irigaray, women are closed out of religious discourse, just as they have been closed out of philosophy and psychoanalysis.

7.1.4 Looking to the future

PMB contends that the challenge future psychoanalytic work on the Bible faces, is to tread the line between a naive anachronistic imposition of psychoanalytic categories upon the biblical world and the no less naive dismissal of psychoanalysis as irrelevant to the critical reading of literary and religious texts. Biblical texts, after all, are texts that are deeply obsessed with such issues as generation, guilt, confession, and law.

7.2 Our response

Psychoanalysis does provide some impulses for postmodern discourse. Many postmodern thinkers thrive on psychoanalysis in so far as it emphasises the notion of repression. Things are not always necessarily the way they appear to us, but that which we see or describe is a repressed form of the 'real' thing. This point coincides with Kristeva's when she argues that 'woman' is yet to be discovered. Simply stated, what society calls 'woman' is merely a repression of tradition because a woman cannot be completed. And this helps men...
to engage women more in their self-discovery rather than in terms of the stereotypes society has of them.

The idea of repression becomes crucial for the understanding of the complexities and the elusiveness of language (texts). Language is notoriously unstable and we cannot fully possess it. Knowledge of language is always deferred, delayed and sometimes detoured. We mean that language whenever it is used, is also at the same time misused and repressed and that we never achieve complete knowledge of it.

However, the assumption that psychoanalysis is disinterested and is 'merely' describing what is happening 'out there,' raises crucial questions for the understanding of culture, history, situationality and ideological critique of the discipline. This point has been alluded to by Irigaray's argument that psychoanalysis is a phallocentric and patriarchal discipline that stereotypes and misrepresents women in society and that it is not merely describing but marginalising women.

8 CHAPTER 6: FEMINIST AND WOMANIST CRITICISM

Who ultimately benefits from what you claim to know? The politics of reading, by now an obvious focus of PMB, are explicitly present in feminist/womanist criticism and therefore expose the interestedness of both texts and their readings. In this rewriting of PMB's chapter on feminist and womanist criticism, I will concentrate on what PMB sees as the contribution of feminist/womanist criticism and on the hermeneutical orientation within the criticism.

8.1 Our rewriting of their argument

PMB wants to promote within biblical criticism a shift toward a broad cultural critique. For this to happen, theory has to evolve. Methods and strategies that lay interests bare need to be developed, and the insights of feminist/womanist criticism are much needed in this respect.

Feminism contributed to the theory and practice of interpretation because critics started to look at culture and history differently, noting the importance of gender as a way of signifying power. Power, however, also brings about oppression among women, and women of colour started to criticise the feminist movement for being a white, middle-class movement. Womanism observes that the unmarked category 'man' is not conterminous with 'all men', but rather stands for men of particular racial and class privileges. Nei-

---

7 This section (§§8.1 and 8.2) was written by Uys.
ther a universal ‘man’, nor a universal ‘woman’ exists. Different circumstances concerning race, class, ethnicity and so on make these concepts immensely complex. If they are over-simplified, they can uphold dominant modes of thought rather than transform them. ‘Feminism’ should not be universalised, nor left as an unmarked category.

What feminism and womanism have brought to the interpretive scene is a carefully differentiated focus on the problem of ‘woman’ in the text, the ideological uses of language to authorise and sustain certain relationships of domination, and the way gender has often been used across historical periods and cultural contexts to signify and support domination. Feminist and womanist theory both call for a suspicion of methods that claim universalism and objectivity as part of their own production, such as the historical-critical paradigm within biblical studies. But the women that are addressed within feminist biblical criticism should also not be universalised.

In the broader intellectual context in which the work is done (particularly the academy), there is an urgency to think differently about differences. If everyone is different, everyone is the same. The differences among women on the basis of religious identity have only been briefly acknowledged and too easily elided by Christian feminists who dominate the field of feminist biblical criticism. The still-emerging interpretive disciplines of feminism and womanism are oppositional discourses at the margins of power institutionally and should remain there! With their double focus on subjectivity and production of knowledge, they must continue to offer an ongoing, dialogical, and critical process that maintains a kind of edginess and a refusal to settle or to master. If feminists and womanists remain in a process of coming to terms with modes of inquiry, but never arrive, they will not offer a new system of domination, but a continuous critique of all such systems. That makes it possible to rethink and resignify difference.

The relation between theory and practice is another crucial future arena within biblical studies. Much feminist and womanist interpretation takes place in different institutional contexts that, nevertheless, share the work of teaching. How does one use these interpretive strategies in relation to the Bible to teach others about processes of reading? What we teach is not so much the issue any more, but how we teach it has become a highly contentious question.

PMB provides us with an illuminating taxonomy of varieties of feminist and womanist criticisms with similar effects, but the categories ‘overlap’ and ‘leak,’ so that the taxonomy should not be understood rigidly.

The hermeneutics of recuperation: PMB locates this hermeneutics in the various first-wave attempts to redeem biblical traditions by reclaiming the stories about women, but without criticising biblical authority. The retrieval of
strong foremothers, role models and characters with whom contemporary women might identify, seem to many to be incompatible with feminist interests. Isolating a transhistorical image of ‘woman’ and translating it in a simple fashion into other cultural idioms does not account for the complex relationships. Interpretation often takes place as if the correct execution produces an authentic, unchanging biblical truth, while incorrect interpretation results in patriarchal distortions. Often the naive identification of women across traditions, culture and historical periods claims a foundational and essential sameness among women. Religious leadership became reality for some women, but never through directly challenging biblical authority.

The hermeneutics of suspicion: This hermeneutics is most immediately identified with the interpretive strategies of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. Its starting point is outside the text, criticising the structures of male history and theology and wanting to restore women to the centre. It is not limited to historical reconstruction, though. They also use rhetorical and literary methods to rethink theological difficulties raised in the encounter between feminist values and androcentric religious literature. The interpretive key is the experience of women, embracing experience as ground for both interpretation and ethics. The initial ‘images of women’ stage of feminism has been supplanted by a specific focus on discourse and ideology. Thus there is a retrieval of the past (history) through strategies of reconstruction, but it does not leave the structures of male history and theology intact! At the same time, however, the hermeneutics of suspicion maintains a strong theological agenda. On the whole this hermeneutics is committed to liberation.

The hermeneutics of survival: Not all feminist critiques are limited to criticisms of the biblical text and methods of reading the Bible. Some extend to critiquing social and political institutions, forces, and processes of domination as well. The practitioners of this hermeneutics regard the Bible as a meaningful resource for shaping modern existence, but also as something alien and antagonistic to modern women’s experience. This hermeneutics has a complex relation to both authority and truth claims, but these claims are not identifiable with those of the hermeneutics of recuperation. This hermeneutics does not find its starting point with the authority of the Bible, but in the struggle, and may use biblical authority toward its justice-oriented ends. On the one hand it intensifies the self-authorisation also visible in the hermeneutics of suspicion and may even call into question the monolithic character of truth, aligning itself with other postmodern interpretive strategies. On the other hand, it makes straightforward claims to authority and truth on other occasions. Rather than reading this multivalent relation to authority and truth as contradictory, PMB suggests that one understand it as a strategic use of both authority and truth.
Postmodern feminist critique: The previous three categories share an institutional location within religious traditions. Postmodern criticism, however, has been shaped more by limitations imposed from within academic and intellectual disciplines, focusing on resistance to the disciplinary constraints and foundations of those disciplines. Postmodern feminist criticism shares the political interest with the other hermeneutics, but is not very interested in the redemptive or recuperative gestures toward aspects of the texts. They do not claim the Bible to be either a feminist resource or a sexist manifesto. That kind of assumption can be an issue only for those who attribute moral, religious or political authority to these texts. They examine the ideological effects of the biblical texts without these commitments.

8.2 Our response

An aspect that did not receive attention in my rewriting of the argument, but at least deserves to be mentioned, is PMB’s presentation of a diverse range of feminist and womanist readings of Hosea 1–3. Those readings demonstrate how texts construct readers by imposing ideologies of gender and power and how readers can resist those constructions through critical engagement with feminism and womanism. Through the strategy of presenting multiple readings, PMB wants to break down the notion of a singular interpretation and promote the multiplicities of meaning, also highlighting the varieties of feminism at work in interpretation, but without opposing one reading against another. This was very well done.

PMB also points out that feminism is not in itself a reading strategy in the sense of a method. It is rather a set of political positions and strategies - some women’s encounters with institutions (religious, social, or academic) and their interpretations of those encounters. It is also a contested intellectual terrain—it found the intellectual categories of received traditions inadequate for thinking about the meaning of such encounters and provided a new conceptual vocabulary organised around such notions as ‘women’s experience’, ‘androcentrism’, ‘patriarchy’, and so on. These notions are now used hesitantly, because their problematic nature has been perceived. Feminist and womanist critiques of the Bible are situated within this intellectual trajectory. They are not simply a gloss upon the historical-critical paradigm in which most ‘legitimate’ biblical scholarship is grounded. We fully agree: this is feminism and womanism’s strong point.

It took me some time to think through the consequences of the different hermeneutical options and to plot myself somewhere. In our group’s discussion of this chapter the view was raised that a ‘hermeneutics of survival’ might have an un-ethical ring to it: using any means to survive and to reach
the desired end. ('Anything goes for survivors, as long as they survive and get what they want'). However, since I find myself situated in the difficult position of a woman in a conservative religious tradition, I identify strongly with the concerns and sentiments of a hermeneutics of survival. If I were not in this situation my sentiments would have been that of a postmodern feminist critic. Being where I am, however, I have to use the very limited space provided by my church as far as possible. This includes following certain traditions of the church (e.g. recuperating biblical stories about women without criticising biblical authority) even though my personal convictions might be quite different. It is a matter of survival for me, of adopting the rhetoric of my current social location. I find myself living with a hermeneutics of survival and will continue to do so until my religious tradition has changed in such a way that there will be space for me to do differently.

9 CHAPTER 7:IDEOLOGICAL CRITICISM

9.1 Our rewriting of their argument

Definitions of ideology are as many and as divergent (and as political) as ideology itself. This becomes clear from PMB’s references to the definitions of, *inter alia*, Eagleton, Althusser, Barret, Jameson and Gottwald. However, for the authors of PMB ideological criticism generally shares and exposes the following three dimensions in the struggle for the production of meaning:

- It highlights the multiple discourses operating within the text.
- It lays bare the power relations that produce the texts.
- It constructs the institutional contexts and their reception, and affects the readers of those texts in their particular social locations.

9.1.1 Ideological criticism of the Bible: cracking the singular voice

Ideological criticism is highly sceptical of claims by some biblical scholars to privilege their work as ideologically disinterested.

9.1.2 The ideological stances of liberation hermeneutics

Each ideological criticism is potentially different and each marginalised or oppressed group can produce a theology of liberation out of its unique historical context (281). In this section PMB examines four liberationist readings of the Bible.

---

8 This section (§§9.1 through 9.2) was written by Busakwe.
9.1.2.1 Native American reading: Robert Allen Warrior. The effort to decolonise the exodus and conquest narrative is consistent with ideological criticism's aim to recognise the manifold and conflicting interests that must enter the exegetical fray. Liberation reading has generally tended to identify with the ancient Israelites in the story, but what about the indigenous voices (Canaanites) that are there to be heard in this story? Warrior, who is a Native American, gives a reading that conflicts with that of the liberationist tradition. For him a Native American reads the story from an indigenous perspective and this means that he or she identifies not with the ancient Israelites but with the Canaanites. Warrior points out that the myth of the chosen people and the exodus and conquest narratives provided the Puritans and other European settlers in North America with a biblical text whose particular ideological reading justified the destruction of the indigenous peoples (:285).

9.1.2.2 A socio-political reading of the Exodus: Norman Gottwald. Gottwald proposes a peasant-revolt model that attempts to fit into the Marxist analysis of class struggle. The elements of his critical framework are drawn from sociology, cultural anthropology, literary criticism, and a Marxist analysis of history. For him, whatever may have happened in Egypt, the nation of Israel in fact emerged in Canaan in the approximate socio-historical manner attested in the exodus traditions: by resistance to state oppression and by a bold bid to self-determination (:287).

9.1.2.3 African American biblical hermeneutics. An African reading of the Exodus narrative identifies with the Israelite story. The result of this is that their reading of the narrative seeks to recover an African presence in the story. The implication of this reading forces into the foreground consideration of the ideological character of white Eurocentric and often white supremacist exegesis. Renita Weems, a womanist, seeks to recover the voices of African women in the Exodus narrative. The way women and slaves were treated—how race, gender and power interconnect in the reading of Exodus—is both a past and a present concern for African-American biblical hermeneutics.

9.1.2.4 Contemporary Jewish biblical hermeneutics. Michael Walzer argues that there are three contemporary presuppositions undergirding the Exodus event: (i) that wherever we live it is probably Egypt, (ii) there is a better society to aspire to, and (iii), the route to that society is via revolution. Marc Ellis, who is rather a conservative Jewish scholar, argues that the roles of the Exodus narratives have been reversed: the oppressed have become the oppressors. This ideology has proved deadly for the Palestinians over the last thirty years.
9.1.3 Mark and materialism: readings in tension

Like the Exodus narratives, the narratives of the death and the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth also function as central to liberation theology and for the ideological reading of the New Testament. The socio-political situation of the death and resurrection of Jesus becomes crucial for an ideological reading of the New Testament. PMB considers the political readings of Mark’s gospel by Myers and Belo.

The political hermeneutics of Ched Myers. For Myers, class distinctions in the gospel of Mark are political (Roman occupation of Palestine), social (class conflict), economic (conflict over ownership of the land between the rich and the poor), and religious (conflict between the authorities and the disciples).

The materialist reading of Fernando Belo. Belo focuses his attention on the material conditions of first century Palestine that are created by political and economic forces. For Belo the death of Jesus on the cross signify the suffering and oppression of the Roman system on the body. Hence the resurrection of Jesus is also subversive in that it can only be the fruit of insurrection (:298).

A feminist reading of the cross. PMB surveys two radically different feminist readings. The one sees the cross as depicting the brokenheartedness of the suffering of the oppressed created by political systems of patriarchal society. The more radical feminist reading of the theology of the cross by Brown and Parker holds that if one accepts the view that the cross was part of the divine plan of God, then God is a sadistic deity. They conclude: ‘Christianity is an abusive theology that glorifies suffering’ (:301).

9.1.4 Ideological discourses of resistance

Ideological criticism situates itself within the context of interpreting the world (text) from many points of view shaped by many different cultures, experiences, and social locations. The point to be made is simply that concepts, categories and contexts are not simple but complex, not univocal but multivocal. It is for this reason that ideological criticism finds a home today in the postmodern context, which, as Lyotard says, is a time of ‘many language games’. Take, for example, the concept of oppression, which is pivotal for liberation criticism. Oppression is a complex term, as are the categories of ‘oppressed’ and ‘oppressor’. For example, Young identifies five faces of oppression:

- **Exploitation**, which involves class distinctions, dominance and unequal distribution of wealth.

- **Marginalisation**, which means ‘people the system of labour cannot and will not use’, in work or other social structures.
- Powerlessness, which means those people who cannot change their social situation or change the unjust system in which they find themselves suffering.
- Cultural imperialism, which implies dominant and subordinate cultures.
- Violence, mainly systemic violence, which members of oppressed groups experience.

Hence Young suggests that we do not talk of language in a reductionist manner, and it is for this reason that *deconstruction* is an important means of criticising ideology.

### 9.2 Our response

The reading of the contemporary Palestinian scholars struck me as particularly important since, by the ideology of the exodus narrative, they have more experience than anyone else has. It has literally cost them their lives for the last thirty years.

In the attempt to find more multiple and more pluralised ideological readings of the text, I suggest that African-American readings should not be seen as final to all Africans, especially to those of us living on the continent of Africa. This point is raised because the mistake is often made when these experiences are homogenised. Africans and African-Americans may share common experiences of exploitation, oppression, racism, et cetera, but there are significant differences that distinguish them from each other. For example, an ideological reading of an Afro-American of the Exodus narrative affirms and identifies with the Israelites in the story (maybe for reasons of slavery), but an African ideological reading of the Exodus narrative cannot identify with the Israelites, because what happens when the Israelites conquer the indigenous people of the land? Who in the story is indigenous? The Israelites or the Canaanites? With whose voice do I, as an African, identify in the narrative? Is it with the voice of the *conquerors* or the *conquered*? With that of the imperial and colonial powers, or the colonised and powerless?

### 10 CONCLUSION

Having worked through the challenging and highly intricate texts of PMB in much detail and having discussed it many times in a graduate course, two remarks of Johnson come to mind. In an essay about the literary diversity in the New Testament Johnson (1995:277) writes:

---

9 This section was written by Botha.
...a salutary reminder to myself and to my reader: academic exercises such as this one are simply that, academic. People who write essays on hermeneutics are like librarians who worry about the books being properly shelved, or grammarians who fuss over the correct use of verbs. We do no great harm so long as we remember how marginal our efforts must always remain, so long as we do not confuse our library regulations with the business of reading and research, or think of our grammatical regulations as either creating or constraining poetic genius. The pertinence of this reminder? Hundreds of millions of people all about us look to the Bible as a source of power and authority. They incense it, swear by it, parade it around in processions, anoint it, bow before it, sing from it, pound on it, lay it on wounds of head and heart. Sometimes they even read it. Few of these people care about what academicians or theologians think about them or their use of the Holy Book.

Concluding his essay, Johnson (1995:289) remarks on what he calls the ‘Academic captivity of the church’:

Those interested in doing theology within the context of the church would provide the greatest service not by learning ever more elaborate theories of reading (which ultimately are ways we resist the otherness of the text), but by learning the languages, the symbolic worlds, and the literary conventions of the biblical world, so that these texts can, in fact, resist our ever more aggressive attempts at using them for our own ends.

PMB is a very learned and academic book and is therefore due to remain a very marginalised phenomenon in both church and society. Even in the narrow field of Biblical scholarship it moves on the margins of the current dominant interests of the guild. Conservative academicians with a great loyalty to the church will, most probably, simply dismiss or ignore PMB.

However marginal PMB may be, its very aim to be transformative and its insistence on a political agenda make it an uncomfortable book. We both hate and love it! One cannot go on doing biblical interpretation ‘as usual’ (whatever that may be or might have been). Whether PMB has rendered us a service in the process is not immediately clear. A South African colleague teaching systematic theology, once popped into our class and on seeing that we use PMB as text book and were trying to understand issues such as deconstruction, he asked the students what they intend to do on completion of their studies. ‘I hope to get a job at a university in a religion department,’ answered one student (shy, but with stars of excitement in his eyes). ‘You better do that,’ responded the theologian colleague (not altogether teasingly) ‘because after this you will not be able to do anything else.’ For people interested in the church and in serving the church through the exposition, teaching and preaching of the Bible, PMB is a very uncomfortable book and even renders such a person a disservice. It constitutes yet another chapter in the long conflict and uneasy relation between church and academy. How and
what does one preach in a church or teach in Sunday school, (or how can one even remain a Christian!) once you have internalised PMB and its radical views on texts, authority, tradition, interpretation, and so on? How, after all of this, can one muster the guts to actually say anything without immediately radically undermining, doubting and challenging it? Can we perhaps look forward to a book of suggestions for sermons as the PMB collective's next publication?

What is PMB's vision (or visions) for the church and for society and for the practice of biblical criticism? Where should we go? To what should we transform? Where should we aim? What is, in the end, the particular 'truth' that they would like to see turned into reality? Or, is it all in the process (as long as we carry on to radically criticise and challenge and transform culture and church and society, everything is fine)? In a country like South Africa, where we have just emerged from a liberation struggle and a successful transition, the important issue is: what do we do now? What is our vision for our land and all its citizens? How must we now build and reconstruct and put systems, traditions and structures into place and develop them? Where are we heading? What are the truths that we want to make our reality? Where do we find these truths and on what authority do we base our truth claims if we endlessly carry on to radically de(con)struct all our sources of inspiration and action and commitment? There is sometimes a tendency in South Africa that 'it is all in the process' (Botha 1994). The outcome is not always deemed so very important as long as the process is empowering, inclusive and democratic. However, as important as processes and transformations are, they are not the whole story. The challenge to build, to say, to do, and to put into practice, to envision, to commit, to actually deal with power (and not only unmask and criticise it) is inescapable in order to make our country a better place for all of us. PMB (like the nihilistic trends in postmodernism) helps us a lot in the processes but ultimately leaves us without a clearly spelled out vision. But then, of course, PMB will counter that their consistent argument is that postmodernists do have a political and social agenda... To quote from that book that PMB has so thoroughly, radically and finally discredited 'For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven... a time to break down and a time to build up' (Ecclesiastes 3:1, 3). Does PMB urge us to break down, or to build up, or to do both, or to do neither?

With these questions we do not reject the postmodern epoch and yearn back to the certainties, truths and authoritarian traditions of modernism or powerful traditional churches. Reading PMB is similar to losing one's virginity: you can never undo it! A thought once thought cannot be 'unthought'. We affirm the postmodern epoch. We agree with Deist (1994:256), Cilliers (1995:124–132) and PMB that advocacy for postmodern convictions
and practices of criticism does not lead to 'anything goes'. For the very sake of truth we need opposing views. Postmodernism is, in a sense, a return to humanism. It is a reintroduction of rhetoric alongside formal logic, of particularities alongside general principles, practised diversity alongside rationalistic reductions. Deist has the following vision for biblical criticism in a postmodern era:

[In postmodern criticism] the Bible with its wide variety of practised opinion, becomes a contextual conversational partner, rather than a decontextualized collection of norms and truths. An appeal to Scripture can no longer be an appeal to final authority, but a reference to part of a variegated, sometimes even contradictory, tradition of contextual thoughts and actions, that may be helpful in our own practical discussions. It may, of course, also prove to be completely irrelevant for a particular contextual problem (1994:258).

The operative term is 'contextual conversational partner'. Given the predominance of Christianity in South African society and given the role of the Bible in South African Christianity, we will have to deal with this conversational partner in a critical and constructive manner.

By no means is PMB a 'comprehensive' introduction to or treatment of trends in contemporary biblical interpretation. It is also not intended to be that. It lacks any attention to historical, sociological and anthropological approaches to the interpretation of biblical texts. Is the text's ancient history that unimportant for the postmodern mind? Pippin writes in her book on Revelation:

I want to reveal my ideological biases in reading the Apocalypse. My reading is based on certain political and ethical presuppositions regarding the Apocalypse. I am not concerned with recovering the historical context or the 'original audience.' In this way I am challenging the presuppositions of dominant Apocalypse scholarship... I want to play with the polyvalence of the symbols, unanchoring them from any specific historical context (1992:16).

This sentiment also characterises PMB. History and ethics and ideology are all very important for postmodern critics—but then, it seems, only the historical situation and ideological interests of the interpreters of the Bible. The ancient historical situations of the texts in the Biblical world vanish into insignificance or are relegated to the typical concerns of 'traditional' or 'dominant' biblical scholarship against which postmodern biblical criticism (at least according to PMB) is set in continuous conflict. This seems to us to an over-reaction and merely an option for the other side of the coin. What are the implications of postmodern notions of sociology, anthropology and history for the study of the Biblical texts in their ancient contexts? PMB presents us with yet another chapter on the ongoing and increasingly acrimonious dispute between literary and social critics in Biblical criticism.
PMB is an excellent textbook for advanced study in contemporary humanities. Whether one approaches the humanities from the angle of law, philosophy, literary criticism, psychology, religion or some other discipline, does not in the end matter all that much. You soon find yourself dealing with the same issues. This book on postmodern biblical interpretation puts many of the great issues and challenges of our cultural epoch on the agenda. One is continuously confronted to grapple with the great intellectual, ethical, political, cultural and social issues of our time.

WORKS CONSULTED

Aichele, G; Burnett, F W; Castelli, E A; Fowler, R M; Jobling, D; Moore, S D; Philips, G A; Pippin, T; Schwartz, R M & Wuellner, W 1995. *The postmodern Bible: The Bible and culture collective.* Yale University Press.

Dr J Botha; Mr DF Busakwe; Mr HS Gungadoo; Ms J Uys;
Department of Religion, University of Stellenbosch, Private Bag X1, Matieland, 7602 South Africa.