‘My Kingdom for a method’:*  
Methodological preoccupation in areas of South African New Testament scholarship

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ABSTRACT
There is a tendency among South African New Testament scholars to participate enthusiastically in the methodolomania which have recently emerged in New Testament scholarship worldwide. A number of reasons which are suggested by scholars for the particular South African emphasis on methodology are critically surveyed. Some neglected aspects related to methodology are mentioned.

1 INTRODUCTION
The scene of New Testament studies is notably characterised in South Africa by a quest for methods and methodology, especially as far as methods for the interpretation of texts are concerned. In recent years particularly there has been a proliferation of new methods and theories of interpretation. It would

* Or, to quote Schwartz (1990:12)—referring to the role of methodology in biblical studies today—‘theory as theology’. This is an edited version of a paper read at the annual New Testament Society of South Africa conference at Stellenbosch, April 1-4, 1997.

1 Goldingay (1995:2) states that the ‘hermeneutical problem’ is ‘intrinsic to the Christian faith’, a faith which has its origins in the various attempts to understand Christ in terms of the Scriptures (of Israel), and a faith whose continued existence is determined by its ongoing and successful interpretation of ‘its own experience in the light of the story of Jesus’. Cf Croatto (1987:x): ‘the more the Christian life and therefore theology are—a life and theology that renew—the more they involve hermeneutics’; Jeanrond (1991:159-182): text interpretation is and must be a basic Christian activity—elsewhere he calls the participation in the debate on adequate methods of interpreting texts theologically enriching (1992:219).

2 More generally, Schüssler Fiorenza (1991:117) argues that ‘the crisis of modern theology’ can be seen as a ‘crisis of interpretation or, more specifically, as a crisis of the conception of theology as hermeneutical.’

3 Every discussion of NT interpretation is grounded in a particular chronological and socially determined moment (Green 1995:6). In this regard then, Segovia (1995:1) refers to the ‘incredible diversity in models of interpretation’, which he attributes to the ‘demise of the historical-critical model’ during the last three decades; so also e.g Caldwell (1987:315-316); Harrisville (1995:206); Schneiders (1991:23); Soards (1996); Yee (1995:109-111. Segovia & Tolbert (1995:ix) ascribe the ‘major and momentous developments taking place in the theory and practice of biblical criticism’ towards the
not be rash to describe the current trend in New Testament studies or at least a major section within it as, à la Sandmel, methodolomania. The methodological emphasis is particularly noticeable in South African New Testament scholarship—in the words of Hartin and Petzer (1991:1): 'Questions on how to interpret the New Testament, ... have up to now and are still dominating South African New Testament scholarship'.

Although it is certainly a generalisation which does not include all South African New Testament scholars, methodology has arguably become such a preoccupation among a number of South African scholars that little is done on the theological nature and content of the texts and especially the societal relevance of the texts on which the methods are tried out. Furthermore, the study of method in isolation has given rise to a new 'elite with its own vocabulary' with the result that conversation on the New Testament texts becomes increasingly difficult and (perhaps) even more importantly, the restraining of participation in discussions on the New Testament artificially creates a group of 'super-readers' with the accompanying ideological and other trimmings and trappings.

The methodological shift to synchronic approaches has become dominant in the South African context. Lately some attempts have surfaced trying to incorporate the 'world behind the text' through a variety of sociological approaches, and the 'world in front of the text' by means of various reader-response, reception, speech-acts and rhetorical approaches. Although Fowl and Jones' contention that the argument is not about methods but about different notions of meaning (1991:15) may be true, the argument is nevertheless seen clearly on the level of methodology.

The multiplying of interpretive methods in the field of the New Testament can be and is accounted for in various different ways. What follows end of the 20th century, to two factors: the realisation of the importance of 'perspective or standpoint' in interpretation; and, the 'increasing diversity and globalisation' in the field of biblical studies. Still other reasons can probably also be advanced for the multiplying of methods in NT scholarship!

As, e.g., argued by for in the work edited by Fowl (1997). A plea for a renewed, postcritical theological appropriation of the Bible in the academy aims to reestablish the role of hermeneutics as one of 'service' to a theological understanding of biblical texts, and to challenge the notion of both autonomous as well as impartial and unbiased hermeneutics.


For the 'worlds of the text' typology, cf e.g. Barr (1995:2-18); Green (1995:6-9); Schneiders (1991); Tate (1991), West (1991). Variations in their positions do exist but the common denominator is reference to three textual worlds, emphasising three relationships with the text: author (and historical context) and the text; text as (literary) text; and the reader (within his/her historical context) and the text.
refers primarily to the South African scene, but some of this will have bearing on the wider Anglo-American or North Atlantic context as well. This contribution finds itself amidst a very wide and lively field of research, but is not intent on providing an exhaustive description of the various methods used by South African New Testament scholars, neither is this an attempt to account for all the various methods, and their use and relevance in contemporary scholarship. This paper concerns the preoccupation of South African New Testament scholars with methodology generally, and briefly refers to their (our?) general lack of self-critical reflection on this emphasis and its implications and results. 

As will be clear from what follows, this contribution does not negate the need for sound and accountable methodology either in South Africa or in New Testament studies, or in both. As argued above and in what follows, this contribution is also not intent on viewing the hermeneutical discussion acontextually, as if it does not indeed have its roots within the texts and the different contexts themselves. Therefore, although this discussion is not bent on surveying the need for hermeneutics, it accepts the inevitability of hermeneutics for any biblical reader and scholar (cf Jeanrond 1991:181).

2 SOUTH AFRICAN NEW TESTAMENT SCHOLARS: ACCOUNTING FOR METHOD

South African New Testament scholars have generally not pursued methods ignorant of their efforts, but in addition to the discussion of proposed and preferred methodologies also attempted to explain and account for their particular methodological choices, and in doing so, to justify them as well. Sometimes South African New Testament scholars, in an attempt to account for and justify their particular methodological choices, implicitly—and at times explicitly—criticise the methodology of other scholars. In the end, it seems as if the statement of Jeanrond (1992:219), that due to the debate on methods of interpretation of texts scholars have 'become more careful about their claims and more self-critical altogether', is applicable. 

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7 This matter will be addressed more fully elsewhere. Another delimitation which needs to be mentioned from the outset is that in my references to methodolomania, I do not distinguish between 'interpretive or hermeneutical theory' (nature and criteria of human interpretation and understanding) and 'methodology' (study of methods) and 'method' (heuristic devices)—naturally I do not deny either the existence or necessity of any of these aspects of interpretation, but question the preoccupation of SA NT scholars with (only certain aspects of) interpretation. In another context the finer explanations of and contrasts between e.g. 'explain' and 'interpret' (Morgan & Barton 1988:2), 'read' and 'interpret' (Croatto 1987) and so on might be of value.

8 However, although some South African New Testament scholars are indeed often self-critical as far as accounting for the method qua method is concerned, the same can-
What follows is not an exhaustive but rather a brief typology of some of the explicit hermeneutical considerations of certain South African New Testament scholars, who expressed themselves on methodological considerations and in whose contributions an attempt to account for methodology can be detected.  

2.1 Disciplinary accountability

After what seems an initial attempt to deny the perception that South African New Testament scholars busy themselves almost exclusively with methodological questions (1993:790), Andrie du Toit admits that in South Africa contributions on methodology have, since 1965, received comparatively more attention.  

In Du Toit’s discussion, his own predilection for methodolomania also becomes clear when he considers the crop of New Testament studies from the perspective of methodology, and he even offers an apology for his failure to consider the ‘theological-content studies’ as these studies are in the long term decisively influenced by methodology (1993:790-797).

Du Toit (1994:532-533) eventually names four factors in view of which the South African stress on methodology should be understood: pursuit of methodological accountability, dissatisfaction with the results of historical criticism, the view of the new hermeneutic that life itself is hermeneutical, and the rise of the new linguistics.

For Du Toit this boils down to what can be called disciplinary accountability: the challenge to offer theoretical well-grounded exegesis according to the best available methodology.  

Even the presence of the new hermeneutic and the new linguistics merely induced South African New Testament scholars not always be said for some of their views on matters pertaining to the function and ideological implications of methodology in the interpretation of texts.

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9 This is by no means an exhaustive, definitely not extensive and perhaps not even a representative, survey of methodology and methodological accountability in South African New Testament scholarship. Such a study would require a much wider scope, including the evaluation of Masters and Doctoral dissertations and so on. The surveys of Du Toit (1993; 1994) approach a more comprehensive survey, albeit more general than what is done here.

10 He refers to the many articles in Neotestamentica (the journal of the New Testament Society of SA), Scriptura (a journal carrying many biblical studies contributions), several dissertations, as well as other publications which concern themselves with methodological matters (1993:791).

11 Morgan & Barton (1988:282-283) equally argue for biblical interpretation making the best use of contemporary methods in other disciplines. They add that biblical interpretation contributes to ‘secular culture’ with their discussions on the ‘scope and methods of interpretation’.
scholars to critically account for their work in view of these broader movements.

2.2 Interdisciplinary awareness

Combrink (1986b:10), admittedly writing a few years ago, claims that a significant component of scholars in the New Testament discipline have moved through ‘various phases of renewal in methodology’, and that the debate on issues of methodology has only really started. He argues that, although there were initial though unsuccessful and half-hearted attempts at utilising the insights of other disciplines, of late a greater willingness to acknowledge and engage other disciplines exists.12

According to Combrink this is especially true for the influence exerted by literary critics, whose insights are playing an increasingly important role in the methodological strategies of New Testament scholars.13 This is prompting scholars to concentrate not so much on what lies behind the text and how the text can help uncover that aspect, but on the text itself.14 The move has been, and still is, away from the diachronic to the synchronic approach to a text.

Within the new synchronic methodological approaches one should really make a functional, though not absolute, distinction between an emphasis on the ‘message’ or the ‘means’ of the text, that is, the content or the form of the particular text. Combrink (1986b:10–12) refers to narrative and rhetorical studies as examples of these two respective lines of focus. The fixation on the text alone did not last long, and was soon subsumed by a more inclusive approach, involving three aspects identified as ‘key concepts’ of literary theory by Combrink (1986b:12), following Iser: structure, function, and communication.

In the attempt to bring the semantic15 and pragmatic16 aspects of texts together, reader-response criticism, although hardly a uniform approach in

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12 Bal (1988:7) argues that women’s studies should get the credit for showing ‘the need of interdisciplinarity in order to counter the arbitrary or biased limits of scholarship when confronted with “real life”’.
13 Cf also De Villiers (1989:121).
14 Combrink here comes close to associating ‘synchronic’ with ‘text-immanent’ approaches, the former referring to the study of texts within the context of a specific period of time, and the latter entailing the study of texts according to linguistic systems only. Cf Deist (1994:328–332).
15 ‘...the study of meaning in the sense of the interrelation of signs’ (Combrink 1986b:13).
16 ‘...the relation between sign and the concept, as well as between the sign and the interpreting subject’ (Combrink 1986b:13).
form, and reception theory,\textsuperscript{17} embodies an approach where both the text and the role of the reader, 'textually defined'\textsuperscript{18} but also in 'extratextual context', are viewed as important. Although pragmatics can concern itself with the 'denotations' of the text alone, that is, its 'intensional pragmatics' and remain locked up in the text, Combrink (1986b:12–14) finds the novel contribution of pragmatics in its emphasis on also the extralinguistic aspect of the text: the 'connotations' of the text, or 'extensional pragmatics'. To underline the need of retaining both the intensional and extensional dimensions side by side, Combrink invokes the well-known model of Hernadi with its two axes: communicative and mimetic.

Finally, in the prolongation of the emphasis on the extralinguistic dimension of texts, Combrink (1986b:14) refers to the 'growing awareness' of the importance and influence of sociological factors in the communication process. The sociology of knowledge initiated the increasing concern for dealing adequately with the conviction that 'ideas can only be understood properly in terms of the social context'. This leads not to a mere revamping of the historical-philological approach in all its various manifestations, but a 'complete rethinking and designing' of an adequate method.\textsuperscript{19}

Combrink (1986b:15) concludes his study with a call for the integration of methods in a 'well-motivated and adequate' way.

\subsection*{2.3 A paradigm shift}

After centuries of grammatico-historical or historical-philological interpretation of the New Testament and the Bible as a whole, which found its inception at the Reformation\textsuperscript{20}, the historical critical method became the dominant method since the scientific study of the Bible, roundabout the eighteenth century. To this day, and even among the most ardent opponents

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\textsuperscript{17} Combrink treats these two as synonyms, but see Lategan (1991:146) for a distinction at least in origin and form: reader-response criticism as an 'umbrella term' from North America indicating opposition to new criticism's fixation on the text in autonomous isolation, compared with reception theory as a 'much more coherent movement' from the Continent.

\textsuperscript{18} Deriving the reader from the text by referring to the 'implicit reader' and other devices, is criticised by Aichele et al (1995:36, 38–51) who argue that the 'real' or 'flesh-and-blood' reader is silenced in this way, or his/her role in the production of meaning is at least diminished to the extent that the text controls the real reader.

\textsuperscript{19} Naturally, sociological analysis of texts has spawned various different approaches, which can be categorised as descriptive and explanatory. Cf Combrink (1986b:15).

\textsuperscript{20} Heick (1965:348) lists the establishment of this 'methodology' as one of Luther's contributions to the renewed interest in and interpretation of Scripture. Even today, a historical critical approach is still a very dominant way of reading Scripture.
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of this method, historical criticism is an important orientation point in the discussion of methodological developments in New Testament studies.

In an attempt to explain the methodological emphasis in South African biblical studies some scholars have presented the notion of paradigm changes or shifts, à la Kuhn.\(^{21}\) For example, Lategan’s threefold typology of different interpretive paradigms rests on three elements which are usually agreed to be present in human communication. These three elements, namely the sender (author), message (text), and receiver (reader), are presented as points of orientation within the larger scope of biblical interpretation (Lategan 1984:1-17; 1988:65-78).\(^{22}\) These shifts reflect the changing emphasis also in South African New Testament studies from text production, to text mediation, to text reception (cf Smit 1994a:267).

The influence of Lategan’s notion of these three paradigms can be seen in the essays edited by Hartin and Petzer (1991) where the categories of sender, text, and receptor are used. While the notion of paradigms and paradigm shifts in interpretive theory is widely accepted, Lategan’s particular paradigm-typology was criticised and dismissed by another South African scholar Spangenberg (1994:156-157) for his reliance on a communications model for the three paradigms.\(^{23}\)

Kourie also sees a ‘paradigm shift’ as the best way to account for the proliferation of interpretive methodologies both locally and abroad—for her the shift is from premodern to modern to postmodern biblical interpretation.

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\(^{23}\) Spangenberg’s paradigms are chronological: firstly, the emphasis on the individual as biblical interpreter during the Reformation; secondly, the emergence of the historical critical paradigm subsequent to the Copernican revolution, Cartesian philosophy, and the historical consciousness of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; and finally, the literary turn in biblical studies, occasioned by the ‘modern science of literature’ and linguistics (1994:145-162; 1995:2-4). On Spangenberg’s first paradigm, cf Brown (1995:1167-1170) who stresses the development of ‘personal theology’ during the modern period. Spangenberg’s views will have to be discussed elsewhere, but his preference for a historical approach—with the danger of seeing these ‘phases’ as independent and self-contained—both to textual interpretation and his historically based version of the paradigm shifts is obvious. Why this would necessarily be a ‘better’ approach than Lategan’s more literary approach is never explained!
She argues that with the advent of postmodernism and its influence on the traditional study of the Bible—that is, in a historical critical way—an all important realisation regarding the nature of texts was reached: texts are dynamic mediums rather than static objects. This realisation stimulated approaches to texts which attempted to deal with ‘the power of symbolism; a greater understanding of the constitutive function of imagination; and an increased aesthetic appreciation and spiritual sensitivity’ (1996:173; cf Keck 1996:138). This new awareness has led to ‘an explosion of heterodox methodologies’ in order to find methods most suitable to deal with the Bible in the postmodern world. In Kourie’s view, this translates as nothing less than a paradigm shift. 24

2.4 Objectivism and foundationalism

According to JN Vorster (1994b:470-493) the problem of the multiplicity of methods is due to a foundationalist quest for the ultimate and only and thus eternally valid method: 25 ‘Within South African New Testament circles the craving for sound methodology illustrates the desire for objectivity by scientific method’ (Vorster 1994b:473). Thus, referring to South African New Testament scholarship, Vorster (1994b:487) argues that ‘(t)o a certain extent one has to agree that we have become “rotten” with methodological perfection’.

Vorster localises his plea for the epistemic status of rhetoric (cf Stamps 1992:268-279) within the South African New Testament circle(s) of scholarship. His appeal for the relevance of rhetoric—ironically also, although not exclusively, as method—for the study of the New Testament is based on the intersubjectivist possibilities of rhetoric.


25 Cf Aichele et al (1995:13-14) who stress the often held (modernist!) assumption among biblical scholars, fuelled by a ‘consuming missionary desire for a one-way history’, that ‘the progressive refinement of historical methods promises to lead to ever more certain knowledge about not only the original contexts and meanings of the biblical text but their theological truth.’ Cf the comment by Deist (1982:11) that the search for methods is guided by the notion of the ‘ideal’ reading pattern; Le Roux (1995:171-172) refers in the same context to the Cartesian dream.
Vorster argues, however, that in South Africa New Testament scholars were (are?) preoccupied with methodological concerns due to the ‘belief in a real, objective meaning which could be extrapolated from Scriptures’. In this regard, the historical critical method leaves no doubt about its ‘foundationalist principles’, but especially the ‘darling’ of the South African New Testament scene, discourse analysis, with its calculatory nature ‘very visibly portrays the characteristics of objectivism’ (Vorster 1994b:473). The objectivist presuppositions of the methodological ‘madness’ of New Testament scholars are fermented—and cemented—by a belief in the Bible ‘as document of absolute truth’ (Vorster 1994b:490).

Vorster limits his evaluation of an objectivist approach to four (interrelated) levels of criticism. Objectivist interpretation creates the image of ‘ideational’ knowledge, leading to contextlessness in interpretation. Within objectivism language becomes a mere vehicle for the transportation of information, disregarding the ‘creative’ and active possibilities inherent to language. Objectivistic knowledge is also institutionalised and thus controlled and manipulated. Finally, the position of the New Testament scholar as detached researcher releases the scholar from and obviates the need to involve ‘values, morals and attitudes’ in deliberating on the meaning of the New Testament texts.

Vorster does not so much plead against methodological multiplication as for the relinquishing of the dominant objectivist attitude present in South African New Testament scholarship and in methodological choices in particular. ‘To retain scholarly integrity we have to move away from objectivism and will have to embrace some kind of postmodern inquiry’ (490). This is found by Vorster in rhetoric, of which the epistemic status especially con-

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26 Cf Schneiders (1991:144) who especially sees the search for the author’s intention to be ‘...motivated by a concern for objectivity of interpretation’. She thus concludes ‘...there is no such thing as the one correct interpretation of a text’ (Schneiders 1991:153, her emphasis). On the other hand, Lategan (1988:69) reckons that historical criticism’s popularity can be ascribed to its [perceived, JP] ability to produce results.

27 It is not clear why the view of the Bible as a ‘source of truth’ is necessarily exclusivist and thus leads to the ‘neglect’ of ‘other aspects important for understanding the Bible and the Bible’s position in our society’ (e.g. the body and its relationship to society, and the role of language), and the ‘restricting’ of ‘ourselves to the writings of the New Testament only’—unless, of course, the Bible is seen as only or absolute source of truth!

28 Vorster (1994b:473) argues that the problem is not so much a ‘denial of presuppositions’, as ‘dismembodied, desocialised, devalued, “cultural-less”’ knowledge presented as truth.

29 Indeed, Vorster (1994b:487) comments that ‘the insistence on correct methodology should rather count to our credit than to our discredit’, and ‘(t)here is little doubt that methodologies must remain...’
cerns him: the ‘power of language to create’, within the ‘symbolic nature’ of human existence.\textsuperscript{30}

\section*{2.5 ‘Detached inquiry’\textsuperscript{31}}

Another South African theologian and prolific writer, Dirk Smit, has made a number of comments on the state of New Testament scholarship in South Africa, especially as far as it concerns the influence of this scholarship on the ‘third public’ (Smit 1990a, 1990b, 1991, 1994b). He reproaches New Testament scholarship for its scientifically-disinterested research and study of the Bible. Smit (1991:63) accuses South African New Testament scholars of an inability to influence the ethos or moral world of South Africans, which according to Smit, is due exactly to this mode of ‘detached inquiry’:

In fact, at least as far as South African New Testament scholarship is concerned, one may generalize and say that its own dominant ethos has been, for many years, the scientific ethos of detached inquiry, and that it has deliberately stayed clear from the corridors of power in both church and society, thereby influencing ecclesial and public ethos only in the negative way that it did not really contribute much (Smit 1991:63).

In an attempt to transform this mode of enquiry, some South African New Testament scholars sought out ways to relate their scholarship to the church and society at large. For example, in another contribution Smit (1994a) describes and illustrates the—logical more than chronological—phases of development of the Hermeneutics Subgroup of the New Testament Society of South Africa (NTSSA). In their striving to engage

\textsuperscript{30} Stamps (1992:277) formulates it as follows: ‘The truth and power of the text becomes its performance to effect social identification and transformation at each reading of the text’. Others argue for the necessity of rhetorical criticism on other grounds. E.g., Walton (1996:4–9) argues that rhetoric was a ‘pervasive perspective of antiquity’ and sees the value of rhetorical criticism more on the level of casting light on the particular way of composition of Pauline Letters and thus aligns rhetorical criticism closely to form criticism. Tolbert (1995:316)—in reaction to Morgan’s suggestion that ‘objective knowledge of the past’ should be understood as its ability and value to persuade in the present—argues that attempts to persuade readers through interpretation should be named for what they are: rhetoric. The implications are threefold: disclosure of the power of language; the need ‘to situate a politics of location in communities of accountability and structures of responsibility’; the need to develop ‘critical languages and critical practices’.

\textsuperscript{31} This description of SA NT scholarship fits snugly between the previous description of a positivistic quest for objective meaning in texts, and the following description of ‘aloofness’ in terms of ability to communicate with ‘the people’, and also the next one: unwillingness to participate in the socio-political realm of SA. However, the notion of ‘detached inquiry’ does allow the further—than Vorster—distinction of how SA NT scholars not only applaud ‘objectivity’, but also attempt to live by it.
society through ‘contextual hermeneutics’, interpretation through the fusion of horizons was initially stressed, followed by acknowledgement of the active role of the reader in the process of interpretation, and in the third phase the role of interpretive communities’ formation of ‘real readers’ as a factor in the interpretive process.

How much impetus will be generated by the (renewed) call for ‘contextual hermeneutics’ is uncertain. Whether such calls—and their results?—will provide enough reason to change the perception that New Testament scholars in South Africa is methodologically preoccupied, is yet to be seen.

2.6 ‘Ivory tower’ scholarship

In his discussion of the 1986 publication on methodological issues written by South African New Testament scholars,32 De Villiers attempts to explain why the concerns of the broader society are not addressed in the studies of these scholars. According to De Villiers (1989:119–123) this is ‘...an indication of a specific context and is the result of the particular social position of its contributors.’

Sounding an altogether negative note on the above mentioned publication with its emphasis on the value of literary interests on New Testament texts,33 De Villiers isolates two other negative aspects about this book: with reference to the insights of Moore, a truncated ‘New Critical’ style of literary criticism seems to prevail, and the ‘lack of reference to matters African or South African’ is apparent. De Villiers emphasises the need for South African New Testament scholars to realise that they are in a ‘social vacuum’ and that their studies are reflective thereof. The ‘objective theoretical’ studies are not without value for De Villiers, but are questionable in the contemporary South African situation. These theoretical studies should remain a ‘means to an end’, and not become constituent of the total effort of New Testament scholarship.

De Villiers then pleads for a socio-linguistic approach to biblical texts which should alert scholars to the need for a socio-critical analysis, not only of the texts they work with, but of themselves and specifically in relation to


33 ‘...certainly not a definite work on literary studies of the New Testament’ (De Villiers 1989:120).
their social context(s). Such an approach is not only in line with current post-modern concerns, but rightfully stresses the importance of recognising the identity and social location of the 'meaning-constructing reader', and the role of these factors in the reader's questions to and understanding of the text. For De Villiers (1989:123) this would imply 'a very specific social analysis of particular readers' and 'attention to socio-political matters'.

The insistence on 'objective theoretical' studies, as exemplified in the 'testing of methodologies on texts', provides firm evidence of the 'socio-political choices and positions' made and assumed by the scholars. However, the 'awareness...of the determinative role of our society in our interpretive task, will incisively change our theological enterprise' (De Villiers 1989:123).

2.7 South African socio-political interests

According to Hartin and Petzer, quoted above, questions on the interpretation of the New Testament texts revolved particularly around its role in a 'polarised and changing society'. Probably contrary to the 'intentions' of the editors, one can understand this to mean that societal concerns led to the proliferation of methodologies in a positive and negative way. Societal concerns can on the one hand be said to have led to the search for and focus on the creation and adoption of adequate methods allowing biblical scholars to engage and address the contemporary situation more effectively. This concentration on method implied keeping abreast of contemporary developments, especially in philosophical hermeneutics and literary theory. However, in the negative sense one can argue that in order to escape the necessity of pronouncing on issues of societal injustice—especially regarding Apartheid as an institutionalised system of oppression and a dehumanising policy—methods were adopted that emphasised the Stendahlian 'meant' of the text, 'neutral' in content and 'packaged' by the isolated autonomous individual. 34

West (1991:32-34) argues that biblical scholarship contributed to the 'interpretive crisis' concerning the reading of the Bible in South Africa. He reasons that the academy's concern with the historical-critical paradigm bracketed out the need to address societal concerns and reserved the Bible as 'property of the academy'. The awareness of the plurality and ambiguity of interpretation also led to the acknowledgement of and preference for a con-

34 Cf e g the discussion on methodology in Hartin & Petzer (1991) which, with the exception of one or two contributions, omits all reference to and ignores the pre-April 1994 South African society of Apartheid-injustice. For the use of the New Testament in Apartheid South Africa, cf the perspectives of Combrink (1986a:211-234).
cern with 'interesting'\(^{35}\) as opposed to 'interested' or committed readings within the academy. In the end, 'in the South African context the pursuit of "neutral", "scientific", or "interesting" readings means fiddling while South Africa burns' (1991:34).

Draper similarly deals with what can be seen as the reason for South African New Testament scholars' reluctancy, and the means they devise to avoid any pronouncements with socio-political implications. In the academy Draper suggests the historical approaches of the traditionally white English-speakers\(^{36}\) and the text-immanent approaches of the traditionally white Afrikaans-speakers as reasons for the Bible's 'Babylonian captivity' in South Africa (Draper 1991:235-240).

At best there seems to be a general reluctancy to deal with controversial issues in biblical studies in South Africa (Turner 1980:9-11). In this way methodological intensification with its resultant oversupply of methods also arguably became a deliberate strategy to avoid interpretations which would reflect a committed addressing of the South African socio-political context and which ultimately could have led to a confrontation between the scholars and the authorities, political, ecclesial and otherwise. Although the particular methods chosen by New Testament scholars have arguably contributed to the relative irrelevance of biblical scholarship to the broader South African society and socio-political concerns, the perceived peripheral status of New Testament studies in South Africa was also supported by these scholars' preoccupation with methodology.

2.8 Scholarly inbreeding

The methodological fixation of South African New Testament scholars has not been commented upon by local scholars only. In a report of the South African Human Sciences Research Council on Malherbe's visit to South Africa in 1992, it was reported that Malherbe, apart from other evaluations, was disturbed by the level of the 'methodological passion' he discovered: '...numerous methods and approaches have been applied in the study of the NT, and South Africans have struck at this like a trout strikes at a fly.'

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\(^{35}\) Cf Even-Zohar (1990:5), who also refers to Gould: 'For it seems very often nowadays that scholars and students are no longer interested in "solving riddles" by "doing work". For them, science is not dedicating themselves to fruitful doing, but to clever thinking, not to research, but to the exciting thought that inspires no activity'.

Malherbe levels this accusation especially at South African scholars of universities of first rank, adding that those visiting scholars from abroad with a similar methodological passion are very often from universities not even awarding doctorates (1992:18).

The obsession with ever-multiplying methods of reading the New Testament creates a problem not primarily in the sense of multiple new methods, but in the sense that the emphasis is on the characteristics of the methods, and the text is generally used to demonstrate the method. To put it bluntly: 'the goods are not delivered' and that in a deprived socio-political, economic and ecclesial context which could benefit immensely from an engaged and sustained effort at reading and studying the Bible with the purpose of having the results address the South African situation directly.

3 METHOD IN NEW TESTAMENT SCHOLARSHIP: THE INTERNATIONAL SCENE

Perhaps the South African situation concerning methodology in New Testament scholarship, at least initially, seems to be not so much different from the international scene. Stamps (1992:268ff) refers to the 'current interpretive landscape of New Testament studies' as pluralist and describes the quest for the 'allusive goal, meaning' in New Testament interpretation as a war, and as continuous fighting between different interpretive strategies. 'Behind this

37 It is not clear what is meant by this: probably 'historical white universities'? The underlying ideology of Malherbe's remark, and implicit juxtapositioning and evaluation of South African universities probably also needs attention but falls beyond the scope of this discussion.

38 Cf Perkins (1988:5-23) for some theological implications of this pluralism: awareness of the hermeneutical circle (spiral) without neglecting either the pastness of the Bible or modern presuppositions; cultural-linguist (Lindbeck) expressions of theology are the most appropriate; reading texts with a 'narrative realism' which insists on the believing community's retelling, expanding and reshaping of its (biblical) narratives to interpret its own experience; and, using texts to establish 'universalistic rather than sectarian praxis'.

39 Various descriptions of and explanations for the many and diverse methods are offered: cf Aichele et al (1995:12) who refer to 'a diverse host of literary and cultural criticisms' which have in recent years 'migrated into the land of modern biblical studies'—later they mention that some may view the migration as 'an invasion'; Beuken (1994) ascribes the 'still increasing plurality of methods' to the 'spiritual climate of postmodernity'; Clines (quoted in Perkins 1993:91) ascribes the 'rapid proliferation of methodologies' to 'the larger academic context in which scholarly work is conducted'; Rosenblatt refers in a book review to the 'methodological logjam' (1992:553-554); Schneiders (1991:153) argues along literary lines that the realisation of the 'surplus' of meaning in texts leads to methodological pluralism; Segovia (1995:1) writes about the 'incredible diversity in models of interpretation' (cf above); Wright (1992:xvi) who, in the preface of the first volume of an envisaged five volume work, refers to 'so many confusions of method...'.

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pluralism exists competing and uncomplimentary ways of understanding texts, meaning and truth' (Stamps 1992:268; cf Fowl & Jones 1991:15).

There is an uncanny resemblance between reasons offered by international and local New Testament scholars for the concerns with and exhausting emphasis on method: for example, like Vorster, Schüssler Fiorenza (1991:127–128) and Schneiders (1991:20,154) argue that a Cartesian anxiety initiates many methodological pursuits; and, Kourie (1996) from South Africa and Beuken (1994) ascribe the proliferation in methods to postmodernism.

Methodolomania is by no means restricted to sections of South African New Testament studies only, but is also found internationally: "(p)luralism of goals, methods, and interpretations shows biblical studies to be thriving among the "sciences"" (Perkins 1988:14). However, whereas the international concern with method ranks amongst other preoccupations, it characterises South African New Testament studies to a large extent.\(^4\) Although no serious attempt will be made here to investigate the supposed, suggested or 'real' reasons for the international interest in methodology, it is important to situate the South African methodolomania within this context.

Davies (1986:61) views the increasing attention to 'the language, the literary forms, the symbols, myths, and stories' in the Bible (i.e. to methodology) rather than to theology in the Bible (i.e. to content-theological results) at least to some extent as 'a result of despair at ever reaching historical and theological certainty about the central moments of the Bible'. Davies finds the distinctive character of current biblical study in two factors: the explosion of knowledge, and a new pluralism. Both of these contribute to a situation in biblical study which is simultaneously exciting and positive as well as inhibiting and choking. According to the metaphor of explosion, Davies expands upon the dangers of the explosion of knowledge: senseless noise (as opposed to informing sound), blinding (as opposed to illuminating) light, scattering debris (as opposed to 'removing useless encumbrances'). The 'explosion' of knowledge can potentially create a 'logjam' of knowledge.

Grant (1984:151) in his preface to Tracy's short overview on modern interpretation of the Bible, bemoans the fact that '...much modern scholarship in biblical interpretation is devoted to methods and inferences...' The reason for much of the proliferation of methods can be found in the quest of

\(^4\) Cf Du Toit (1993:790–797), and above. As another, randomly chosen, example of how methodology weighs up in SA in contrast to the international scene, cf e.g Soards' article (1996) on 'key issues' in biblical (New Testament) studies which refers to the recognition of the value of using a 'multiplicity of methods', and attempts at syntheses and comprehensive studies on methods. However, the key issues identified by Soards are all concerned with the 'content matter' of the New Testament.
New Testament scholars to retain the status of valued contributors to the theological debate. Houlden (1989:405-408) in his argument on the future of New Testament studies, reasons that the perception often exists that this field of studies is travelling the old paths, following the interests of its 'well-known teachers', and to top it all, is irrelevant and too esoteric. However, in its quest to become more theologically 'user-friendly' and escape its relative interdisciplinary isolation, Houlden finds two broad approaches or movements attempting to achieve this: literary approaches to the New Testament and the sociological investigation of the New Testament.

4 SOUTH AFRICAN NEW TESTAMENT SCHOLARSHIP AND METHOD: A PRELIMINARY EVALUATION

Although there are many South African New Testament scholars who have expressed themselves on methodology in their field, many seem not only to account for both the plurality of and emphasis on method, but also to condone and justify this malaise of methods. The methodological emphasis in New Testament studies in South Africa correlates well with the notion of the 'universality of interpretation', the view that 'all aspects of human history, knowledge, and experience' are continually in need of interpretation (Schüssler Fiorenza 1991:122). However, the question remains whether hermeneutics should be ascribed the position of 'over-arching and universal cadre' (Van Zyl 1992:159) for practicing New Testament studies in particular and theology in general (cf Jeanrond 1991:182).

Nevertheless, the very same emphasis on the all embracing nature of interpretation which rests upon the realisation of human subjectivity, similarly requires recognition of the limits of interpretation. Indeed, some dissenting voices from within—and without—the guild of South African New Testament scholars have voiced concerns, if not criticisms, of this methodolomania for a variety of reasons. Vorster, for example, feels uncomfortable with what he perceives to be a foundationalist quest for objective truth, and De Villiers argues against what he sees as a prolongation of irrelevant, 'ivory tower' matters. Ironically, criticism of the preoccupation with method often seems to be supplanted with arguments in favour of other, different methods; for example Vorster wants to promote rhetorical criticism and De Villiers social-scientific methods.

Another suggestion with which to break out of the methodological malaise, is to opt for a multidimensional or integrated approach which boils

41 Houlden (1989:407) finds in the latter the 'most significant...offering' of NT studies to the broader theological scene. However, one should agree that this term includes also socio-scientific and cultural-anthropological and kindred approaches.
down to a 'if you can't beat them, join them'-approach. Rousseau (1988; cf Mouton 1995) and Jonker (1993; 1996) recently advocated such a multi-dimensional approach to the New and Old Testaments respectively.\(^{42}\)

Although no attempt was made to account for the availability or origin(s) of the multitude of methods or methodologies present in New Testament scholarship, it is however clear that the majority of these (especially the more recent) methods derive from sources other than the New Testament guild itself.\(^{43}\) Although this 'interdisciplinary—even if one-sided—effort is applauded, it naturally raises questions on taking seriously the ideological baggage which accompanies borrowed methodologies—but this matter will have to be addressed elsewhere.

It is possible to argue that the considerable preoccupation with methods is the proverbial tip of the iceberg when it comes to New Testament studies. Not only is proper evaluation of the interpretive scene in New Testament studies scarce, it may even be lacking altogether. More importantly, what is lacking in the above attempts to account for and justify South African methodolomania in the study of the New Testament is the ethical component: not so much an ethics of reading (accounting for one's handling of texts) as an ethics of accountability (accounting for the relevance of one's reading) as well as an ethics of the reader (cf Beardslee 1990). The realisation of the importance of the reader's 'perspective or standpoint', his/her location\(^{44}\) (Lategan

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\(^{42}\) Cf Robbins' attempt to integrate the various elements involved in textual interpretation according to a socio-rhetorical model based on texture: inner texture, inter-texture, social and cultural texture, ideological texture, and sacred texture (1996; and an earlier version 1992:302–319); also the attempt of Even-Zohar (1990) to offer 'Polysystem Theory' as the solution to the interpretive malaise. As a variation of such an integrated method, Goldingay (1995:7) argues in favour of an 'eclectic open methodology' which implies a 'critical pluralism', not 'unprincipled and casual eclecticism that makes method simply a matter of taste'—he then suggests a genre approach with which to interpret the Bible. For genre and method in interpretation, cf also e.g. Young (1995). Schneiders (1982:53) blames biblical scholarship's inability to integrate new approaches to texts for the 'disarray of hermeneutical foundations' of the 'vastly improved methodology'.

\(^{43}\) Many of the newer methods derive from (what can be called broadly) literary theory. Selden (1985:1) argues that since the late 1960s 'students of literature have been troubled by a seemingly endless series of challenges to the consensus of common sense' (my emphasis). Common sense, however, is not some indeterminate and neutral entity, but a 'cultural system' (Geertz, quoted in Meeks 1993:217 n 5).

\(^{44}\) Tolbert (1995:311–317) argues cogently for the need to replace a 'politics of identity' with a 'politics of location' because the latter 'attempts to acknowledge both the complexity and mutability of each person's relation to world society by carefully analyzing the 'facts of blood and bread' and also the highly contextual nature in which those 'facts' are lived out in daily experience. We all create 'reality' from a particular perspective, but that perspective itself changes and shifts as one moves from one context to another, as we focus on one aspect or another of our very fluid and multiple
1995:945; cf Hartman 1990) is not only reason for methodological development (Segovia and Tolbert 1995:iix), but also requires the asking of some other questions.

Although one can hardly say that readerly approaches dominate South African New Testament scholarship, there is an increasing awareness and emphasis on the role of the reader in the interpretive process. However, the ‘world in front of the text’ is frequently shortcircuited by deducing this ‘world’ from the text itself (cf Aichele et al 1995:28–33, 38–51): failure to account for the reader’s own culture, ideology and ‘social place or location’, as well as the almost consistent disregard for the history or tradition of interpretation of texts and this tradition’s role not only in the ‘production’ of the meaning of texts but also in one’s choice of methodology.46

In addition to the perceived lack of ethical considerations regarding South Africa New Testament methodology, it also remains to question whether there is a strong enough realisation that ‘theories’ and ‘formal patterns’ ‘are never merely given’, but ‘constructed by interpreters and maintained by communities’ (Perkins 1993:89). South Africa is a country with massive human diversity, a diversity which is also experienced in religious terms and ultimately in biblical studies—indeed, in South Africa the Bible has become a ‘site of struggle’ (De Villiers 1993; Smit 1991:61, 1996:169; West 1995:3; cf Rowland 1993:244–245). It becomes increasingly important to account for the various communities and institutions which (attempt to) exert power and control over the interpretation of the Bible.

Of the many considerations which are to be raised in relation to the preoccupation with methods, it seems as if the following areas of concern especially need attention:47 the ethics and accountability of reading; the issue...

“selves”. In a related way, ‘a poetics of location’ attempts to account for the way that ‘the site of reflection, its specificities, power dynamics, and goals, invite appropriate perspectives and dismiss others’.

Cf Georgi (1992) and Smit (1994a:274) on the importance not only of seeing the history of the interpretation of texts as more than mere historical phases, but in a rezeptionsgeschichtliche fashion to account for the socio-historical conditions and settings of these historical interpretations. Another equally important element, is to recognise and account for the lasting influence of (some of) these entrenched or traditional interpretations—which, because of their general acceptance by scholars, prove very difficult to dislodge, or to read against the grain.

Aichele and his co-writers argue for much more that these three issues, which can be summarised as their insistence on dissolving the ‘reader-text dichotomy’: the reader and interpretive conventions assume the status of autonomous controlling agents of ‘meaning’—texts no longer exist autonomously as deposits of meaning to be retrieved.

I am cognisant of the fact that these concerns are uppermost in my mind, and are as such reflective of my own position—in society, the church and academy—for which I make no excuses. Naturally I regard these concerns as the primary issues to be addressed. Other concerns would include the need for a feminist and womanist reading...
of the relevance of New Testament studies; ideological matters related to the power exerted on and control of interpretation; and, finally, the neglect of the African context in New Testament studies.

The three matters mentioned (ethics, audience and ideological/power issues) are found contracted in one common denominator which has so far received comparatively very little attention, if at all, in the South African guild of New Testament scholars: our shared African context.\(^{48}\) The position of the interpretation of the Bible in Africa is of course a complex and multifaceted issue\(^{49}\) which needs to be addressed, and it is important to indicate within the methodological debate the need for a broader hermeneutical approach which will facilitate the reading—and (for those of us who still believe in it) the understanding—of the Bible in Africa.\(^{50}\)

In the end one is left with the overwhelming notion that many South African New Testament scholars have an undeniable preoccupation with methods. In this one should be extremely careful not to glorify or absolutise methods, as methods are ‘based on contemporary academic divisions of disciplines’ and thus ‘they also tend to cut off the analyses where the material proves more recalcitrant to these divisions’ (Bal 1988:6).

5 CONCLUSION

It is my opinion that very little is done in New Testament studies in South Africa today which can simply be rejected as disinterested studies, at least in as far as religious interest is concerned. Most of the work in New Testament studies in South Africa reflects some kind of implicit concern with the religious community—if not the Church—and society at large, due to a certain

\(^{48}\) A first problem encountered is the difficulty of defining ‘African’, especially with the continuous changes of, and in, ‘culture’ and with the existing ‘syncretic and synthetic culture’ created in response to the twentieth century industrialised society (Speckman 1996:143, 149 n 32).

\(^{49}\) It is perhaps not altogether fair of Kourie (1995:175-176) to characterise the contribution made by African biblical exegesis as a search for similarities between the biblical and African thought worlds regarding the supernatural—it is, however, an important component of it.

\(^{50}\) Recently a number of specific African hermeneutical strategies were proposed: e.g Mazamisa (1995), Ntreh (1990), Punt (1997), Speckman (1996), Ukpong (1995); cf also e.g Onwu (1985), Wambudta (1980).
extent to the location of many New Testament scholars in tertiary institutions. As elsewhere (cf Markham 1991:267) most South African university students in New Testament, expect their studies to be related to their faith.\(^{51}\)

However, the notion that theologically-unfettered interpretation is the ideal, recalls a modernist fetish which New Testament scholarship can do without. Furthermore, in the words of McDonald (1992:423) in his review of Rowland and Corner’s *Liberating Exegesis*, ‘studied neutrality and Olympian detachment are out’. As a biblical or New Testament scholar one has no other option but to desist from continually developing theories of biblical interpretation without linking them to ‘programmes of responsible action’ (Jeanrond 1992:225). This is of course no novel idea, but the expression of an age-old belief among Christians: the importance of linking the ‘theological exercise’ with ‘ethical concerns’ (1992:226).\(^{52}\)

Clearly a plea for less output on methodological ‘niceties’ and ‘eccentrics’ and for forsaking an overemphasis on methods—an abjuring of methodolomania—does not constitute a repudiation of methodological accountability in the scientific, academic enterprise altogether. The appeal is not for methodlessness,\(^{53}\) because uncritical reflection—especially the failure to account for the presuppositions and role of the interpreter and his/her methodology—on biblical texts is at least as futile as overconcentration on method. The sentiment expressed by Marcus Barth (quoted in Villa-Vicencio 1981:15) ‘that hermeneutics is the death of exegesis and methodology the death of theology’ probably echoes some of the frustration experienced by many biblical scholars with the over-emphasis of method experienced, but this statement also has to be criticised for its apparent lack of self-critical reflection and the obscuring of vested interests in the interpretive process.


\(^{52}\) Smit (1996:183) quotes Hauerwas in arguing that the insistence on an objective, abstract and universal sense of Scripture detached from ecclesial life leads to a preoccupation with hermeneutics in theology.

\(^{53}\) Another element of the discussion—and important reason perhaps for the proliferation of theory—is the confidence-loss in theory and method which is so characteristic of the (postmodern) present. Cf already Sontag (1972). In the words of De Villiers: ‘The theological question whether postmodernist thought is in total opposition to hermeneutics will be with us for some time’ (1991:155).
It is indeed true that modern Christian theology is largely characterised by what Schüssler Fiorenza calls 'the crisis of hermeneutics', 'a crisis affecting the conception of the theological task and the very nature of theology' (1991:118). Therefore it is important to stress the need for responsible methodology in reading and interpreting the New Testament, because the neglect of sound methodology can, and in the past indeed has, led to inadequate and unacceptable readings of Scripture. In South Africa the need for methodological discussions will remain, but if all other concerns of the academy, church and society are either subsumed by or dismissed in favour of methodology, questions need to be raised.

Schüssler Fiorenza (1991:126) argues that it is exactly on the notion of the limits of interpretation that a sharp divide sets in between modernism and postmodernism. Whereas the former still attempts 'to complete the project of Enlightenment and modernity' by seeing 'the recognition of the distortion and domination' as a 'reflective step on the way to the emancipation of the subject', postmodernism from the outset accepts the 'indeterminacy of signification'. De Villiers (1991:155) argues that postmodernism requires scholars to 'account for the fact of 'Christianity', as well as for the diversity and pluralism within Christianity, and

...the nature of the hermeneutical enterprise which claims to find continuity in Biblical texts and which wants to reconstruct the uniqueness of Christianity. But postmodernism also calls for the investigation of vested interests in the interpretation of the Bible.

Finally, according to Morgan and Barton (1988:296) '(b)ooks about interpretation are no more a substitute for interpreting than recipes are a substitute for cooking'. To extend the analogy, cooking becomes all the more

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54 In all forms of theology from the so-called revelation theology through hermeneutic theology to contextual (liberation) theology. Cf Villa-Vicencio (1981:6-9).

55 Keegan (1995) also sounds an ambiguous note on the influence of postmodernism in biblical studies: he advocates deconstructing dominant readings in the sense of recontextualising, but feels uncomfortable with postmodernism’s denial of the transcendent. Hinging on a distorted view or caricature of postmodernism’s indeterminacy of meaning and the consequent disavowal of identifying true and false readings, Keegan cautions that postmodernism should not become an excuse for ‘interesting’ readings. For such caricatures of Derrida’s views and of deconstruction, cf Aichele et al (1995:62). At any rate, Porter argues that the ‘heyday of deconstruction’ has already passed (1994:101). The political limits of postmodernism are related to two obstacles according to Tolbert (1995:309): the realisation that postmodern criticism is ‘complicitous critique’—'radical acknowledgement of one’s own collusion in the very structures of power one is attempting to dislocate'; and, postmodernism's challenge 'to the notions of self that have served as the basis of recent identity politics', which connects identity to 'essence'.
urgent with a kitchen and house full of hungry people who will stay hungry or even die from hunger, or who may rather, like children, fill themselves with non-foodstuffs if the (nourishing) food does not become available. And, if no freshly cooked food is on offer people will surely appease their hunger with available scraps and leftovers. As surely as people do not live from bread alone, their hunger will also not be appeased by cooks' promises, glossy recipe-books or well-outfitted and decorated kitchens and appliances!

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