Inhabiting the world in front of the text: the New Testament and reception studies

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ABSTRACT

Recently the 'world in front of the text' has been much in focus, concerning the role of the reader in the interpretive process. The role played by the 'third world' in the interpretive process is accounted for in different ways and with distinct emphases by various scholars, yet the importance of reception history for interpreting the New Testament is often neglected. This contribution focuses attention on both the prospects and problems of reception studies for biblical hermeneutics. Certain difficulties, problems and deficiencies, as well as the value of reception studies are briefly considered: an emerging, yet largely neglected, concern in biblical interpretation is the formative influence of the history or tradition of interpretation of texts on its contemporary understanding. A final concern is related to criteria for evaluating different traditions of interpretation.

1 INTRODUCTION

Philological-historical critics try to look behind the text, while formalist critics try to look inside it. Their eyes are focussed to miss what is happening in front of the text—their encounter with the text in the act of reading (Aichele et al 1995:24).

Our presuppositions about these [biblical] texts mediate our experience of them. And our presuppositions have been formed by historical, social and cultural processes. We read these texts as members of particular socio-historical communities. We read these texts as people who participate in particular interpretive traditions (Smit 1994a:309).

It is traditionally, and generally, emphasised that it is important to take the background or situation or context of a text into account in order to facilitate the inter-
pretation process. However, to construct and investigate the contexts contemporary to biblical texts is, alone, not adequate as these investigations and (re-)constructions of such contexts have been shaped—at least to some extent—by the concerns, ideologies, and so forth of the readers and interpreters of the Bible through the centuries. Therefore Segovia (1995a:31) argues that according to his interpretive model of choice—cultural studies—in the end all methods and models of interpretation, all meanings based upon texts, and all historical reconstruction are first and foremost ‘constructions’. Or, perhaps less sharply, Smit (1994b:274) argues that the study of the ‘Bible in history’ is an important part of the historical study of these texts.

Although it cannot be denied or minimised in any way that ‘Scripture has functioned as a “living voice” and...has informed the character of witnessing communities of faith during almost two millennia’ (Burrows & Rorem 1991:xi, cf Froehlich 1991a:13), the inverse is also true. The very same witnessing communities have established readings of Scripture which in turn have influenced—and still do—subsequent readings of the biblical texts. It implies, therefore, that what interpreters of the Bible through the centuries believed these texts to ‘mean’, becomes even more important in many ways and on different levels than the, supposed and coveted, ‘original meaning’ of the biblical texts (cf Sawyer 1990:316; 1995:164).

With the realisation of the influence of traditions of interpretation on the reading of the Bible, reception history becomes all important. The need to take the tradition of interpretation into account becomes pronounced when it is accepted that the reader—interpreter is—to whatever extent—involved in the production of the meaning of the text, on the one hand, and that this person is the product of his/her culture and traditions, on the other—a relationship characterised by what Lategan (1997:118) calls the ‘interactive nature of the communication process’. As far as the relationship separate and distinct—from the text—aspect in the interpretation process.

4 The latter term will be used in conjunction with ‘tradition of interpretation’ and ‘history of interpretation’ to refer to those processes of the reading and interpretation of texts as indissolubly connected to and influenced by earlier readings and interpretive traditions. The terms cannot summarily be seen as synonyms and are not always used with reference to the same concept; and, at times a particular term seems more applicable: e.g. at times the particular notion of a tradition being called into existence by a certain interpretive line might be more appropriate than the particular historical development of such a tradition, or even the circumstances and motive for a specific reception of the texts. However, all three terms refer to the connection between text, ‘real’ readers and the interpretation(s) of the texts already in existence. It is important to note that the term ‘history of interpretation’ (Auslegungsgeschichte) is not used simply as a history of exegetical methods—and/or hermeneutical theory—through the ages, as e.g. in Rogerson & Jeancon (1992:424–443).

5 Sawyer (1990:317) states that reception history has recently claimed a place for itself as a legitimate avenue of investigation in biblical interpretation, alongside others such as textual criticism and the like. Cf Lategan (1997:116–121) on the discovery and growing importance of reception studies in hermeneutics—although he emphasises the study of the current reception of biblical texts in the (South) African context, his point can be extended to include reception history as well.
between text and history is concerned and this relationship is stressed within the interpretive process, it will be argued that it is at least equally as important to take the history of the interpretation of a text into account, that is, the history unfolding after the final form of the text was consolidated.

Although from the perspective of the development of biblical criticism, of late the 'worlds behind, of/in and in front of the text' are to a certain extent and at least theoretically taken into account, very slight regard is still given—to coin a phrase—the 'text according to the world', the textual product produced in, or by, 'the world in front of the text': the resultant reading and interpretation of the text as influenced by assumptions and presuppositions of generations of readers, leading to a 'rewritten' or reconstituted text. The 'world in front of the text', it is argued, implies and should include the concerns the interpreter should have with the interpretation of the particular text through the ages. It also implies that this 'history of interpretation' has

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6 Unfortunately, scant attention is generally given to the history or tradition of interpretation; cf recently Pregeant (1995), who devotes only 2 pages—of an almost six hundred page-book—to a discussion of matters 'after the New Testament'. Granted that one can hardly expect authors who write introductions to the New Testament to provide full-fledged historical accounts of the post-first-century historical developments, one can certainly expect some broad outlines of the development of determinative interpretive lines or frameworks which to this day still influences the reading of the New Testament. Perhaps a serious problem in this regard is that these 'lines' or 'frameworks' mostly escape recognition due to their unreflective and general acceptance by interpreters. Although different in scope and aim, cf the attempts by Babcock (1990) and Beker (1991) to account for aspects of the Pauline legacy through the centuries. For the same venture applied to Matthew's gospel, cf Luz (1994).

7 Cf Fowl (1995:401) who in denying the possibility of ahistorical interpretation, and in opposition to creating a contrast between historical and ahistorical readings, wants to wrest away interpretive control from historical critics and accuses them of absolutising only a part of the history of texts, viz. what lies behind these texts: 'by the time one gets to exploring issues regarding how subsequent generations read these texts, historical critics have largely fallen by the wayside'. Cf also Lategan's insistence that the 'biblical text is historical in a double sense of the word—in itself a historical phenomenon with its origin, transmission and interpretation part of human history' (1988:69). The emphasis here will be on the latter historical aspect, as elucidated by Fowl above.

8 E.g., Barr (1995); Conradie et al (1995:91–196); Moloney (1995:319–321); Schneiders (1991); Tate (1991); West (1991). Cf Green (1993a:6–9). Variations in their positions do exist but the common denominator is reference to three 'textual worlds', emphasising three relationships to and with the text author (within its situation) and text; text as (literary) text; and, the text and reader (within his/her situation). Lawrie furthermore suggests that one might identify another equally important world: the world beneath the text. This would refer to the range of equally possible interpretations, to alternative interpretations. The emphasis here will be on the latter historical aspect, as elucidated by Fowl above. However, not everyone who employs the 'world in front of the text'-concept identifies it in that way, e.g. West (1993:36) for whom this world rather indicates a thematic-canonical reading of texts. Different ways of understanding this 'world' will be discussed elsewhere. Conradie (1995:25–29) identifies the following six elements as indicative of ways in which biblical interpretation is influenced by tradition: 'the history of the early church as an interpretation of the core gospel; the process of canonization; the role of creeds; the role of confessional documents; the influence of theological schools; and, the influence of con-
a bearing on the way the text is understood or interpreted currently, in a normative sense. Eventually it could lead to the establishment of a ‘traditional’ reading which is not only normative but even ‘generative’: fixing a paradigm which guides the reader or interpreter in such a way so as to predispose the eventual reading. ¹⁰ In such a situation a secondary reading can become the primary if not, ultimately, the exclusive interpretive key applied to the text—and eventually displaces or, at least, effectively subsumes the text.¹¹

The discovery and increasing awareness of the importance of reception history should be attributed to the broader concern of accounting for various avenues of investigation in biblical hermeneutics.¹²

temporary church praxis.' Naturally many more elements of influence can—and should—be tabulated, but space does not allow for it; suffice it to say that the recently emphasised role of the ‘ordinary readers’ in the history of interpretation is still unaccounted for! Cf Draper on the ‘great and little traditions’ (1996:1-2); however, one should not too easily assign a liberative function to the ‘people’s’ ‘little traditions’ (Punt 1997:144 n 15). In addition, to equate the notion of the tradition of interpretation with that of Christian tradition in general will not do, even though Christian tradition naturally exercises influence on the interpretation of the Bible by creating a horizon of understanding or context of pre-understanding which allows the understanding of the Bible (cf Conradie 1995:29-31). Although this role of Christian tradition is creative in enabling interpretation, it can also be delimiting in allowing interpretation only within the confines of a particular tradition. This naturally requires dialogue between various strands of Christian (and other) tradition(s), as well as between various interpretive traditions, and ultimately stimulates the need for continuing interpretation. Finally, the relationship of the Bible and Christian tradition resembles that of the renowned (to some, reputed) hermeneutical circle: the Christian tradition which allows for particular interpretations of the Bible is itself the product of, and participant in this process (cf Conradie 1995:29).

In a related way, the moulding of particular ways of interpretation is called ‘frames of reading or registers of interpretation’ by Schüssler Fiorenza (referred to in Karris 1994:5 n 12 as ‘meaning frames’). She has in mind the almost set ideological traditions or patterns—androcentric and kyriocentric—according to which the role of women in the Bible is understood. These frames have been fashioned by the influence of scholarly, secular and ecclesial schooling through the centuries, and these frames clearly allow for certain readings only; those which fit the frame! However, whereas Schüssler Fiorenza’s concern lies with the ideological incarceration of the portrayal of women in the Bible, the goal here is somewhat broader. Acknowledging the very important ideological concerns present in this tradition, the emphasis is more on the reciprocity of tradition and interpretation.

¹¹ Thiselton’s complaint (1992-266) that secondary historical reconstructions are sometimes mediated in the Christian community without adequate investigation, holds true especially in the case of Pauline interpretation with regard to the influence of the Lutheran legacy on the understanding of the historical context and the letters of Paul in general.

¹² Sawyer identifies three reasons for recent and current interest in the history of biblical reception: literary studies with its emphasis on larger documents, reader’s responses, and polyvalent meaning of texts; interest in the ordinary readers of the Bible; and, the study of versions of the Bible as ‘literature in their own right’ (1995:154–156).
2 PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF RECEPTION HISTORY

...biblical studies has not yet begun to attend seriously to the reception history of biblical texts. As long as biblical reader-response critics concentrate on the implied reader and narratee in the biblical texts, they will continue to neglect the reception of biblical texts by flesh-and-blood readers (Aichele et al 1995:36; emphasis in the original).

Stowers (1994:6) has in a recent commentary on Paul’s letter to the Romans referred to the refusal and general failure of New Testament scholars to view ancient manuscripts and critical editions of texts as interpreted texts rather than ‘given, or uninterpretive texts’, as a ‘blind spot’.13 From a literary perspective Stowers wants to persuade readers that ‘texts belong to languages and therefore also derive their meanings from social practices’ (1994:6). Unfortunately the blind spot increases not only in size but also in intensity with the realisation that so far the vast majority of New Testament scholars have been very reluctant to incorporate a study of—or even acknowledge the importance for biblical interpretation of—the influence of ‘traditional’ interpretive practices in their attempts to do exegesis of and explain biblical texts.

Generally then, the importance of reception studies and its sad neglect in New Testament studies until now, can perhaps best be understood—amongst other reasons—with reference to the ‘due recognition to the reader-mediated nature of texts’: ‘It became clear that every statement about a reader, a text, a meaning was dependent on a prior reading. All meta-language, all theory, all understanding is reader-mediated’ (Lategan 1992:8).

This does not mean, however, that texts become mere contentless points of orientation for readers, and ‘it does not mean that (texts) lose their identity, completely subjected to the whim of interpreters’ (Lategan 1992:9). But, it does mean that the ‘methodological deadlock’ between subject (reader, or ‘interpretive act’, or ‘reader’s construction’) and object (‘author’s text) is relativised and eventually broken through—at least theoretically.14 Lategan argues that text and reader ‘do not belong to the same order’, do not operate on the same level and therefore need not stand in ‘unresolved tension with each other’: reader and (reader-mediated) text ‘no longer represent conflicting positions’, but different perspectives on reality (1992:8).

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13 Bockmuehl (1995:58,60) calls it a ‘forgotten factor’ and ‘an unknown blank on the map of New Testament scholarship’. In a related way, Aichele et al (1995:35 n13) calls the neglect of the ‘flesh-and-blood readers’ in favour of identifying the implied reader or narratee a ‘blindspot’: ‘most biblical reader-response criticism remains resolutely formalist—what counts is supposed to be already there in the text—and neither the psychological/subjective nor the social/structural dimensions of the reader-response critic’s own agenda is given consideration’.

14 Lategan (1992:8) quotes Freund in saying that the dichotomy of reader-subject and text-object continues ‘in practice’—this ensures the emerging of ongoing and renewed readings: ‘Reader-response criticisms are at once generated and undone by this unresolved tension’. A plea to discard the object-subject dichotomy in biblical reader-response criticism—because it ‘has collapsed under the weight of poststructuralist and postmodernist theory, especially deconstruction’—is entered by Aichele et al (1995:51-87, esp 52-55).
2.1 Reception history: difficulties, problems, and deficiencies

History also illustrates the prevalence from time to time [sic] of interpretations that are tendentious and false, baneful in their effect—such as, for example, those that have promoted anti-semitism or other forms of racial discrimination or, yet again, various kinds of millenarian delusions. This serves to show that this approach cannot constitute a discipline that would be purely autonomous. Discernment is required (Pontifical Biblical Commission 1995:32).

Advocating the need to account for the interpretive history of texts, does not mean that it is such—or the consideration thereof in the interpretive process—is straightforward or without problems. Recently, Long (1996:288) argued that ‘a history of interpretation may be construed as persistent impulse to override textual indeterminacy in the interests of ideological (theological) conformity’. On the other hand, Fowl (1995:402-403) claims that the simple ‘repeating’ of the traditional reading of a text will not necessarily result in continuity as situations change over time. Even more importantly, interpretive traditions are often ‘exceedingly diverse and sometimes wrong’. In the words of Smith (1993:216), ‘(a) new conception of scripture for our day will be continuous with and will extrapolate from what has gone before ... Despite this, it will be critical of all, and must move well beyond them, to supersede.’

The notion that concern with the reception history of texts would imply that one should ascribe a controlling or regulative function to the interpretive tradition seems not only to miss the point but is actually a contradictory notion. Far from allowing another straitjacket to be fitted onto the texts and their interpretation to provide the rigid boundaries of appropriating such texts, the value of reception history is to be found in its illustration of different interpretations of the same texts in different contexts and, perhaps, showing a continuing relevance of these texts.

Another, overlapping danger which is to be avoided, and which is perhaps flowing from subject-object thinking, is the attempt to derive the ‘world in front of the text’ from the text itself (Aichele et al 1995:28-33; 38–51), or at least, from the text only. Such an understanding of this ‘world’ effectively paralyses the notion of a living and continuing history accompanying the text. That readers construct the world in front of the text should not be seen as an optional or additional feature of the reading process, but has to be acknowledged as an integral element of all reading. Distinguishing between ‘text’ and ‘work’, Petersen’s notion that in the reading process readers

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15 Smith refers to precisely these two problems as ‘decisive deficiencies in most of these inherited interpretations’: a failure to account for the plurality of views of scripture, and the sometimes disastrous consequences of a community’s involvement with its scripture (1993:217).

16 Cf in this regard Luz’s criticism of Gadamer’s notion that ‘the effective power of the tradition precedes the interpreting subject’ (1994:81 n5). Luz suggests certain criteria to ‘avoid the preponderance of the tradition, which again leads its victims into sheer heteronomy’ and argues that ‘the imposing character of a tradition is no guarantor of its truth, because there are many and contradicting traditions’.

17 ‘Works’ are created from the text by readers, and are ‘subjective in the sense of being mental phenomena, and are in us’ (Petersen 1984:42).
create works from the texts being read, leads him to argue that not only do ‘works’
derive from and are ‘in’ readers, but that readers also inhabit the ‘worlds of our
works’: ‘while reading we build up a world around us’. In reception studies attention to
the relationship between readers and texts should therefore be accompanied by the
relationship between ‘readers and the worlds they create from texts’ (Petersen

The ‘world’ which a reader creates from the text cannot be seen in isolation from
the reader’s own culture, ideology and ‘social place or location’. Failure to account for
this aspect of reading as well as the almost consistent disregard for the history or tradi-
tion of interpretation of the text and this tradition’s role not only in the ‘production’
of the meaning of the texts but also in one’s choice of methodology,18 will eventually
petrify and domesticate that tradition to the extent of rendering it invisible but no less
active in its continuing influence on contemporary interpretive practice. The
unrecognised and therefore unchecked influence of such a tradition can paradoxically
lead to the contradiction of other and perhaps contextually and contemporary more
adequate readings, to the extent of not tolerating any such divergent (from this tradi-
tion) readings.19

The danger in the modern world is indeed, as Cormie (1991:190) argues, that inter-
pretive traditions can readily become powerful tools for controlling the meaning of
texts, especially by ‘professional middle-class culture and sensibilities’. It has to be
remembered that the available history of interpretation, especially in so far as it is
available today in written form, represents the interests and thoughts of the powerful
in the church and society: ‘those who have won and not those who have lost in the
course of history’. This means that the history of the interpretation of the Bible can
easily become or function as

nothing but a legitimisation of successful historical processes or, even more cynically, nothing
but a secondary hermeneutical legitimisation of secondary biblical legitimations, which have
been used in the history of the church to justify the acts of the rulers of the church, or,
sometimes, of the rulers of the world (Luz 1994:64).

2.2 Positive value of reception history

The history of the influence of the Bible...can help us see the difference between the situa-
tions [where people make different interpretations of the same texts, JP] and thus prevent
premature theological condemnations of other Christian’s decisions (Luz 1994:27).

18 Aichele and his co-writers argue for much more than these three issues, which can be sum-
marised 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.

19 Related to Räisänen’s plea for methodological accountability (1992:303-324), Thiselton
(1995:10-36) pleads for a more adequate ‘hermeneutical’ approach to the ‘history of inter-
pretation’ (cf his criticism on hermeneutical grounds, of James Barr’s reproach of the Barthian
reaction against natural theology).
In general it can be pointed out that the study of the reception history of a text, inclusive of its ‘effective history’, enables the recovery of many more and a larger variety of readings of the text than would have been possible otherwise.\(^\text{20}\)

In an evaluative article by Davies (1986:43–64) on the last thirty years of biblical studies, he argues for two factors being characteristic of this period of time: the explosion of knowledge and the new pluralism. Discussing the latter in the second part of his article (see 1986:54–59) he has to contend with another, equally pervasive realisation: the influence of religious or confessional traditions on biblical studies in general and on exegesis in particular.\(^\text{21}\) Religious and/or interpretive traditions have had a guiding and thus formative and determinative influence on the way the Bible is read and understood.

The ‘world in front of the text’ is a phrase that is used predominantly to refer to the area of investigation where the final textual product’s relationship to its readers or audience is dealt with. Again, however, one should in this regard be careful of not being subject–object oriented.\(^\text{22}\) Apart from the tenability of the subject–object scheme being increasingly questioned, and although from a certain (decidedly modernist) perspective the reader is perhaps more often subject and the text object, these roles are interchangeable. At any rate, attention to reception history in biblical interpretation ‘highlight[s] the reality that interpretation is not foremost the passing on of objective information from text to reader’ and thus emphasises and takes into account that ‘[d]ifferent reading communities are situated in distinctive cultural settings and work from diverse presuppositions, and therefore “hear” or construe the same text differently’ (Green 1995:8; cf Segovia 1995a:29–32).

Or to quote Luz (1994:20):\(^\text{23}\) ‘The biblical writings are not objects to be investigated, but rather companions on the path of humanity to new lands through the centuries...’ and,

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\(^{20}\) Whether one can argue that ‘all the dimensions of meaning contained in such a writing’ are therefore ‘uncovered’ (so Pontifical Biblical Commission 1995:32), is doubtful.


\(^{22}\) Cf the debate between Luz (1994) and Raisanen (1992) (and, to a certain extent, Bockmuehl 1995) on whether confessional traditions can be viewed as part of the ‘effective history’ of the Bible.

\(^{23}\) With reference to Gadamer, cf Luz’s (1994:25) insistence on human beings’ connectedness to history: our uncomfortability with and even protesting and fighting against the ‘burden of history’ do not absolve us from our complicity in history—the ‘absolutized subject of modern times’ has to be unmasked!
History of effects brings together the texts and us, their interpreters; or better: the history of effects shows us that we are already together and that it is an illusion to treat the texts in a position of distance and in a merely ‘objective’ way (cf Fowl 1995:401–402).

Morgan and Barton (1988:14) views the tradition of interpretation of a given text in analogy to ‘legal precedent’. In a way similar to what happens with authoritative interpretations (by judges) in the legal system, the tradition of interpretation of the Bible is taken into account not for providing certainty in interpretation but because of its capacity to reduce uncertainty. It is also true that the interpretive tradition of texts can become so overpowering that it can virtually drown out ‘non-traditional’ readings of these texts. Interpretive traditions always face the danger of claiming or receiving such authoritative status, that they drown out other possible readings and define which readings are ‘right’ and which are ‘wrong’. However, because of the potentially suffocating and imposing nature of such conformism, Benjamin (quoted in Rowland and Comer 1989:46) argues that rather than forsaking tradition altogether, it has to be wrested away from conformism.

Luz lists six contributions made by the history of effects to biblical interpretation in the European context:

• avoiding ‘premature pronouncements derived from the Bible about life, society, and church’
• serving as encouragement to all Bible readers to formulate their own readings
• renewing interest in history and historical research
• liberating the Bible from its relegation to a normative document from the distant past, and its perceived irrelevance
• liberating the Bible as sourcebook or prooftext for abstract and theoretical theological doctrines
• highlighting the ecumenical nature of our interpretation: aiming to contribute ‘toward an open church that lives in dialogue because its members are aware of the contextuality of their own interpretations and do not claim to possess absolute truths’ (1994:100–102).

To these can be added the reintroduction of the ‘subject of interpretation into the process of interpretation’ (Luz 1994:28). In as much as the reception history of the biblical texts reveals the confessional and cultural biases of the earlier interpreters of the Bible, it makes us equally aware of the need to account for our own specific interpretations.

If it is true, as form and redaction critics have often demonstrated with remarkable skill and technical dexterity, that texts have histories which precede their canonical form, it is also

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24 Jobling and Rose (1996:381–417), for example, therefore propose a ‘Philistine reading’ to mitigate against the exclusivity of systems of exclusion promoted by such authorised readings!
25 Cf Punt (1998) on the need to consider the particular locations and ideology of the biblical interpreter seriously.
true that texts continue to have living ‘histories’ insofar as their reception in communities shapes their common life (Burrows & Rorem 1991:xii).

An important but often unrecognised ‘added value’ of reception studies is its valuable if so often unutilised potential to integrate two elements so commonly operated in isolation in biblical interpretive theory and practice today: the concern for the historical development of certain ‘ideas’ and often called a ‘history of ideas’ approach; and, the concern for the influence of cultural contexts on the textual traditions, its formation and continuing negotiation, and eventually on the readers of the text. Reception history allows for the integration of the ideas and cultural context through its concern for the fuller picture of readers’ interactions with texts, where the meaning or idea of the text is viewed as co-constituted by the cultural context as much as the cultural context is, to some extent at least, understood, described and presented—that is, constructed—according to developing ‘ideas’.

2.3 Reception as reading and ‘writing’

Reception studies, however, entails more than ‘comparative interpretation’ (Sawyer 1995): failure to account for the world in front of the text, from a reader orientated approach, may result in the inability to account for the formative influence of a particular interpretive tradition on subsequent interpretation. Furthermore, such failure will render it unlikely for readers to perceive and appreciate that a whole new text—in the sense of a distinct ‘entity’ as such—is called into existence in a formative way within and because of the particular interpretive approach or process. It is important then to account for reception history because the transmission of an interpretive tradition forces certain changes on the tradition: the traditum (or original tradition) is never the equivalent of the traditio (or tradition-ing process) (Beker 1991: 13–16).

Addressing the tremendous influence of the biblical texts in the formation of many aspects of African American religious and cultural identity, worldviews and experience, Wimbush (1993:130–132) argues that within the history of African American appropriation of the Bible, the text as something ‘out there’, with a separate existence and ‘assumed universal authority’ is changed into ‘a language and image world’. The Bible is no longer a ‘text’, a ‘static source of eternal truth that required a certain authority to be engaged’, but a ‘language world that could easily, freely, with

26 Cf. e.g. the Pontifical Biblical Commission (1995:32). Naturally, interpretation as creative venture is present even when the importance of the history of interpretation goes unacknowledged—acknowledgement thereof, however, allows this aspect to be accounted for. E.g, Farris (1997:366) argues with reference to the historical process of canon formation and the contextualised use of the biblical texts by communities of faith, that ‘history is not determinative of meaning’. However, although he approvingly admits to canonical criticism’s appreciation of the history of interpretation, he neglects to point out that the latter history (of interpretation) can be, and indeed is, in many instances, determinative—and even constitutive—of meaning.
much creative play, be engaged “from below”, or from the margins” (139). Although
his concern is not so much with interpretive traditions as such, 27 in his analysis of
African American hermeneutics Wimbush acknowledges the formative power of inter­
pretations for understanding everyday life and experiences, but moreover for the
interpretation of the texts themselves.

In such a context as described above, the importance of the ‘worlds’ of the text
becomes equal, or perhaps even subordinate—pragmatically—to the (newly created)
‘text of the (interpreting) world’, the ‘text according to the world’. A reader is then not
only capable of creating a new reading of the text, but virtually a new text, which in
time can even become canonised in tradition: not only providing the lenses with which
to read the original text, but displacing and capable in the most radical sense of even
replacing the original text 28 to such an extent that a tradition contradictory to the
‘general sense’ 29 of the text is given birth to and allowed to supersed the common or
traditional understanding of the text. 30 

Boone (1989:78–80) explains, with reference to Foucault, how the interpreted text
gradually replaces the text to be interpreted, that is commentary replaces text. Again,
although commentary itself also necessarily recasts the texts themselves, the unwilling­
ness to account for this process almost inevitably leads to a cover-up of how com­
mentary is prejudiced to the ‘finalisation’ of the text. Although Boone is at pains to
explain how in fundamentalist discourse the interpreters attain an almost ‘inerrant’
status, which is required in order to interpret the ‘inerrant Bible’ correctly, it should
not be left out of consideration that the history or tradition of interpretation has
played as much an (in)formative role in fundamentalist, as in other (especially)
reformed traditions.

We should never underestimate our predisposition to believe what is presented under the
 guise of an authoritative report and is also consistent with the mythological structure of a
society from which we derive comfort, and which it may be uncomfortable to dispute
(Kermode, quoted in Boone 1989:80).

Eventually, Boone (1989:95) argues, the interpreted text constitutes the authority

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27 Wimbush does, however, emphasise that the liberative approach of early African American
bible reading formed the ‘phenomenological, socio-political and cultural foundation’ for sub­
sequent readings. The implication, one can argue, is that the foundation provided the perimeters
within which the texts could be appropriated.

28 The Jewish notion of the ‘rewritten Bible’ is perhaps one the best examples of how this hap­
+Iins, cf e.g Hayward (1990:595–598) and Loewe (1990:349)—this process should not be con­
 fused with the call by Banana (1993) and others to ‘rewrite’ the Bible (cf Punt 1997:132–134).

29 Which now becomes little more than the traditional or dominant way of understanding the
text, which has excluded the genesis of new or different readings by virtue of its hegemonic
existence and therefore formative influence on all readings.

30 Stegemann (1996:273ff) cites the development and promotion of anti-Semitism with
reference to the NT as an example of an interpretive tradition going beyond NT statements on
the issue.
which is to be found within Fundamentalism. Hence, the accepted or traditional way(s) of interpreting the Bible becomes or replaces the Bible.31

Segovia has recently pleaded for the adequacy, indeed, the necessity of ‘intercultural criticism’ as a hermeneutical approach to the biblical texts. He characterises this approach to interpretation as one where the text is viewed as ‘construction’. With this expression Segovia wants to express the notion that interpretation and meaning is the result of an interactive process between reader and text, but never in a neutral way: the text is ‘filtered by and through the reader’ (1995c:296, cf 1995a:28–31; 1995b:7–17). However, as much as Segovia rightly stresses the interactive involvement and constitutive role of the reader in the interpretive process, he tends to minimise32 the influential role which the interpretive traditions have to play in the ‘real readers’ construction of the text. Although Segovia’s concern with the real readers of the texts within their social contexts—historical, cultural, political, economical and so on—is applaudable, the emphasis on the reader as a social and historical individual and/or part of a social and historical community, and the neglect to account for the tradition of interpretation’s control over current reading of the text seems dangerous.

Not to account for the way in which an established traditional reading or interpretation virtually ostracises—if then not supplants—the original text,33 is to run the risk of uncritically reinterpreting the tradition—embalmed text, that is, interpreting the text without regard and accounting for the tradition and its influence.34 What happens particularly in midrash, can probably be found in all interpretation, but is, however, not always consciously recognised as such:

31 Again, this practice is not restricted to fundamentalist groups. Cf e.g Goulder (1994:4) ‘When people have been brought up in a long and unchallenged religious environment, the community’s interpretations of its traditions have all the authority of the Bible itself’.

32 Perhaps in reaction to a rigid ‘history of ideas’-approach, which understood ‘the early Christian movement...exclusively in terms of theological positions, conflicts, and developments’ (1995c:282). Cf Lindbeck’s critique of the ‘cognitivist’ model of viewing the history of doctrine as ‘informative propositions or truth claims about objective realities’, and therefore relegates religion to ideas (Meeks 1986:177).

33 From a religious studies perspective, Bloom (1992:16) senses the actual displacement of the biblical texts when he argues that the traditional notion of Christianity as a ‘religion of the book’ is inaccurate: Christianity is ‘the religion of the Church Fathers and the Protestant theologians who broke with the Church’.

34 Segovia entertains the idea of the text as ‘construction’ as a particular paradigm (another major development) for the study of the Bible, but reaches his somewhat different conclusion (the readers as constructors of textual meaning vis-à-vis my emphasis on the reception historical framework fitted onto the text), from another direction (the ‘role’ assigned to the text in biblical hermeneutical paradigms vis-à-vis my questioning of the ‘three worlds of the text’-typology losing sight of the formative or generative role of the ‘world in front of the text’). He points to the significance of ‘cultural studies or ideological criticism’ in biblical hermeneutics where ‘flesh-and-blood’-readers’ activity with regard to the text is taken into account, and all their interpretive attempts are acknowledged as constructions (1995a:7,28–32).
The words of the wise are not added to the text; they are the text as well, linking its words to another form, not an integrated, hierarchical system, but an ongoing tradition, a structure of mutual belonging (Bruns 1990:202).

The text can become the palimpsest onto which the interpretation is copied, with the text soon and increasingly fading out of the background-position it already assumes. To put it bluntly, readers soon end up reading their own texts and not the texts which they purport to read (cf Fish, referred to in Boone 1990:65).

2.4 Reception histories and 'truth'

A problem that naturally issues forth from the notion that interpretation is not merely the 'reproduction of old meaning, but the production of a new meaning in a new situation out of the old text (Luz 1994:63)' and actually precedes the discussion above, concerns what is nowadays commonly referred to as the ethics of interpretation: when multiple interpretations are not only allowed but their relevance and validity confirmed, does that mean a relativistic condonement of all such interpretations? The issue therefore concerns answers to the questions as to which interpretations are correct, who decides which interpretations are correct and on what terms or criteria these decisions are made.

Luz (1994:71–74; 82–85; 91–97) proposes two criteria by means of which he wants to defend the variety of new and different interpretations of the biblical texts emerging from new and different historical experiences and concerns, today. Although the establishment of one single meaning of Scripture always becomes hegemonic (cf Luz 1994:71), allowing a variety of meanings as the product of contextual interaction with the same text(s) raises the question of validity and truth of such interpretations or meanings.

The first criterion to adjudicate the plurality of meaning offered by Luz is 'formal', oriented to the text’s historical context and author: 'correspondence with the original meaning of the texts'. Contemporary interpretations need to take ‘the whole or center of the biblical message’ into account and not a single text only. For Luz, this whole of the biblical message is summarised in ‘the essentials of the history of Jesus’, and

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35 Genette refers to the reworking of texts in different genres and languages as a process similar to the creation of a palimpsest—a new text is written on top of another (or more), previous layer of text which remains visible to some extent. He refers to his theory as ‘hypertextuality’ and the older layers of text as ‘hypotexts’ (cf Van Zyl-Smit 1996:5). The similarities of my argument on the creative force of the interpretation of texts with Genette’s hypertextuality is clear to see—my emphasis is, however, on the interpretation or hypertext blurring out the original, to such an extent that the interpreted text displaces the original.

36 Segovia (1995b:16) concludes with saying that all eisegesis is in the end eisegesis.

with reference to the church fathers and Protestant reformers, he argues that understanding the Bible entailed more than reason and criticism, but was ‘primarily an act of faith’. After a rather emphatic earlier denouncement of historical criticism (1994:5–13), Luz thus advocates the relative value and significance of historical study to ascertain as best as possible, and in dialogue with as many as possible other historical interpretations, the history of Jesus Christ:38 Jesus Christ is not a defined truth, but a starting point and a goal (Luz 1994:91).

A second criterion for deciding on the validity or truth of, and among the plurality of interpretations, is functional or pragmatic and concerns the contemporary readers or hearers: truth as an event of love.39 In reaction to a spiritualised and internalised interpretation of Scripture such as which emerged from a ‘Reformational’ dichotomy between gospel and law, faith and ethics, and its emphasis on the first aspects—the gospel and faith—Luz chooses for a functional criterion capable of keeping faith and practice together. This criterion he finds in love: both the receptive dimension or love humans receive from God, and the active side or the love humans are to show and do to others.40

Although Luz does not offer it as such, a third criterion is constituted by the need for dialogue on the validity of the interpretation of texts, a middle way ‘between relativity and absolute truth’. ‘Therefore theological dialogue, based on the model of truth as a way, has the character of sharing experiences, of questioning and counselling, of common searching, but rarely, if ever, the character of condemning’ (1994: 89–91).

A number of problems with Luz’s criteria need to be mentioned. In general, it can be argued that Luz establishes these criteria—also relative to time and history—as adjudicating measures, which already presupposes criteria which are external41 to the encompassing scope of interpretive history, and thus to a certain extent purporting to be ‘objective’ in nature, the very notion of which Luz decries. It must be granted though that Luz admits to the subjective and even arbitrary choice of these criteria (e.g. 1994:93). Nevertheless, the criteria, as much as Luz ‘bases’ them on the biblical texts themselves, are also ‘constructions’ and thus equally liable for adjudication. Luz is

38 For Luz, the history of Jesus is decidedly different from doctrinal positions on Jesus, and especially from christological doctrines (1994:83–84).
39 This criterion for example discredits rigid doctrinal formulations of the Church which assume a hegemonic status and insist upon their acceptance by the faithful in ‘total heteronomy’ (Luz 1994:73). This criterion corresponds closely with Sawyer’s suggestion—borrowed from Schüssler Fiorenza—to evaluate interpretations according to a ‘religious scale of values’ (1995:159).
40 These two criteria converge, according to Luz (1994:96–97) in the history of Jesus!
41 This gives rise to Luz’s criticism of Gadamer: Luz argues that in addition to the need for Bible interpreters to develop an ‘effective-historical consciousness’ to prevent ‘us from losing the experience of history’, a ‘historical consciousness’ is also required to prevent ‘us from absolutizing history and tradition’.
ultimately compelled to relaunch the ship of historical study (:85–89) after he scuttled it earlier (:15–22; espec :10–13), in an apparent effort to be able to offer some ‘objective’ criteria. As much as Luz sees his criteria as enabling and not restrictive (‘not in the sense of limiting the truth but in the sense of making the search for it possible’, :90), the criteria do limit the plurality of interpretations; maybe Luz’s emphasis on truth should be determinative for the validity of his criteria.

Arguably, in relation to reception studies as an aspect of biblical hermeneutics, the ‘truth-question’ requires some serious consideration. Perhaps the most pressing need is indeed to develop some criteria for the evaluation of the history of the interpretation of texts. The development of such criteria should, however, not be construed or used to create the impression that the tradition and history of interpretation is anything else but ‘construction’, or that such traditions and histories are at best of times vague and elusive. Nevertheless, the luxury of avoiding the question concerning the adequacy and usefulness of interpretive tradition and histories is one biblical studies cannot afford.

3 CONCLUSION

The exegesis of any text, certainly of a biblical text, needs more than the exploration of its prehistory and its Sitz im Leben in order to allow it to be heard in its full meaning today. “To ask what a text means should also involve the question what it has meant” (Heffner 1991:129).

Interpreting a text is not simply playing with words but an act with historical consequences (Luz 1994:33).

In this paper I attempted to account for the importance of the reception history of texts. In acknowledging the importance of reception studies for interpreting biblical texts, a certain ambiguity, however, remains: although it is acknowledged that ‘we stand inescapably in the shadow of those who have gone before us’ (Bockmuehl 1995:59), that shadow can have a positive as well as a negative effect on interpretation. When a particular interpretive tradition becomes an exclusive or overpowering tradition on how to read a text, it is no less than interpretive imperialism and exclusivism.

It can be argued that the developments in the study of the history of interpretation has done the reading and understanding of texts worlds of good, especially by returning the human or personal dimension to the interpretation of texts while discarding the subject-object polarity of modernism. The history of interpretation is, in the words of Smith (1993:223) restricted to ‘texts’ and fails to deal with ‘scripture’. Whereas the interpretation of scripture is concerned with the interpretation of human life and the universe, texts are only the vehicles for mediating these concerns ‘and in effect secondary’. This notion is particularly relevant when the history of Pauline interpretation is considered, where the Pauline texts have been read more readily as scripture rather than as mere informative texts: the Pauline writings as scripture have been

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interpreted as conveyors of particular ways of understanding life itself, seen nowhere else better than in the interpretations of these writings from the sixteenth centuries.

It has become increasingly more obvious and important to account for the inseparable ties which bind texts, their interpretations and their historical consequences together. Texts and their interpretations simply do not exist in a historical void, but create historical effects, influence history. The inverse is equally true: historical circumstances and contexts give rise to new appropriations and interpretations of Scripture. Naturally, at any given point it is fairly difficult to tell exactly where a certain interpretation is the result of particular circumstances, as much as it is a trying matter to indicate which texts or interpretations thereof led to specific historical effects. Moreover, because (textual or interpretive) cause and (historical) effect often mix in some sort of reciprocality, the clear identification of these two elements as such also becomes difficult to distinguish.

In short—and with due recognition to the many difficulties inherent to the endeavour, but also in appreciation of its possible value—reception studies need a lease of life among biblical scholars.

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