

# FROM APARTHEID READINGS TO ORDINARY READINGS OF THE BIBLE

## Has the ethics of interpretation changed?

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### Abstract

*The battle for the Bible in religious and public discourse in South Africa is one with many faces. Therefore, it is not surprising that such a high premium is placed on ethically sound interpretations of the Bible. An evaluation of some of the features of the current ethics of interpretation debate is followed by a discussion of an alternative basis for claims about ethically responsible readings. Some implications for teaching Biblical studies is spelled out, while both apartheid readings and ordinary readings of the Bible are evaluated in terms of this alternative view.*

### 1. The battle for the Bible

The *battle for the Bible* as the 'stealing back and forth of symbols' (Chidester 1991:25 and in this case, the most powerful symbol for most Christians has a long and colourful history in South Africa. Therefore, the search for proper ways of interpreting the Bible in the new South Africa, is not surprising. Not only does this battle have a long history, but it includes disputes from wide areas of the social, political and ecclesiastical life. Examples abound of which only a few, where the Bible was included in such debates, are to be mentioned.

Perhaps the best known example in recent times is the scriptural support of apartheid. As early as 1947 prominent members of the Dutch Reformed Church argued that the Bible fully supported the policy of the separation of nations and the system of apartheid in all its forms. From Jesus' words in Matthew 28:19, that the gospel should be preached to all nations, Groenewald, for example, concludes that the Bible presupposes the separate existence of nations (see Vorster 1979:184-187). Noticing the different areas from which people gathered in Jerusalem at the first Pentecost (Acts 2), Du Preez argues for 'the preservation of racial distinctions between people' (Hartin 1988:22). The tradition of scriptural support for race segregation is perpetuated in the report, *Ras, volk en nasie en volkererehoudinge in die lig van die Skrif*, accepted at the 1974 general synod of the Dutch Reformed Church (see 1977:10-38). It, for example, maintains that the story of the tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-19) supports a policy of separate development (1977:16). It is hardly necessary to refute this highly selective and *proof-texting* method again.

The battle for the Bible in the political arena was not only conducted in Afrikaner circles. Walker (see 1989) gives a clear insight into the support for apartheid from English speaking evangelical circles in the country. A similar sin (a selective and proof-texting method) was committed in these circles: 'a literal textualism divorced from historic and human context' (Walker 1989:54) can for example be seen in the way Romans 13 was used for ordaining governmental authority.

The supporters of apartheid were also not the only ones guilty of a selective and oracular-like<sup>1</sup> use of the Bible. Smit one of the prominent anti-apartheid scholars, argues that in a situation where an oppressive system like apartheid is religiously legitimated, and where present-day opponents of it draw from religious sources, values and traditions, it is 'extremely ideological to deny them [the opponents] that possibility' (see 1990a:43 n 14). In his view the Bible can and should be used for liberating people from an oppressive situation. After an evaluation of the use of scripture by anti-apartheid scholars (for example, their selective and biased exegesis of Ephesians 2:18), Vorster concludes:

...there is no difference between the use of the Bible or appeal to it by apartheid or anti-apartheid theologians. The Bible serves one purpose: it has to afford authority to a person's viewpoints... Let it be said that it is as naive to interpret ancient texts like the Biblical ones with a view to upholding an ideology like apartheid as it is to read it on the lines of underdog/poverty ideologies (1984:211, 212; and see 1983).

Legitimizing religious as well as socio-political and economic ideologies is also apparent in the practices of rightwing fundamentalist Christians. For example, from the landowner's remark in the parable in Matthew 20:15, ('Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own?'), it is concluded that 'our Lord demonstrated that Christianity supports a free enterprise economic system' (quoted by Wanamaker 1989:26).

The battle for the Bible is also fought on the level of ordinary<sup>2</sup> readers' right to carry their experiences, interests and concerns into the reading process. The Bible should be used as a weapon of liberation and the epistemological privilege of the poor and oppressed should be encouraged as a responsible way of reading the Bible. By means of ordinary readings South Africa has to be transformed and biblical studies as academic enterprise should serve the poor and oppressed communities in doing exactly that (see, e.g. West 1991:162-173).

These examples confirm that the Bible has always been and still is an important book and a source of inspiration for many people in South Africa. Therefore, it is not surprising that from many sides the question is posed, how the Bible is to be interpreted in the new South Africa. It is furthermore not surprising that a search for the ethics of interpretation has reached such prominence in South African Biblical scholarship (see e.g. De Villiers 1989, Smit 1991a, 1991b, Botha 1992, Oosthuizen 1993, Craffert 1996b).

The ethics of interpretation occupies itself with the search for responsible ways of going about the Bible in academic, public and ecclesiastical spheres of life. It is very much concerned about the way in which the Bible is (often) misused in support of (all too fallible) human decisions. Not only the proof-texting method and the oracular kind of use of biblical documents, but also the socio-political impact and effect of reading biblical texts are of great importance in this debate.

To be sure, the ethics of interpretation is not an academic issue which can be discussed in the ivory towers of university and college seminar rooms without having any effect on the way people employ the Bible in their private and public lives. Current ways in which the Bible are read are very much the product of the way people have been taught and encouraged to read. Furthermore, it confronts each and every teacher of Biblical studies with the question whether

1 An oracle book is one which consists of 'a repository of words that will answer our questions even where no answer to our questions was intended' (Barr 1984:136) and an oracular-like use is one which takes the Bible to be an oracle book.

2 The term 'ordinary readers' is used 'to designate a particular sector of pre-critical readers, those who are poor and oppressed' (West 1993:168).

the students delivered year after year are prepared to deal with the Bible in a responsible manner. Do we succeed in training students who will not repeat the mistakes from the past, or will we discover, in the decades to come, that false prophets have again been trusted in that they have convinced us with their claims of ethically responsible practices?

## **2. The battle for the ethical high-ground**

A surprising unanimity characterises the current ethics of interpretation debate. General agreement exists on what can be considered ethically responsible readings and responsible ways of using the Bible. While one should appreciate the seriousness amongst biblical scholars to reflect on and to indicate that their readings are ethically responsible, it does not mean one should necessarily endorse their conclusions. This is so because two features of this debate, to my mind, cast serious doubts over such claims.

### **2.1 The dominance of the ethics of accountability over the ethics of reading**

Not only does the viewpoint of Schüssler Fiorenza (see 1988) play a significant and central role in many scholarly debates on the ethics of interpretation (see, for example, West 1991:66-68, Botha 1992, Smit 1991b, Patte 1995:6-12), but the ethics of accountability<sup>3</sup> overshadows the ethics of historical reading<sup>4</sup> in her account. Since the Bible is perceived as a classic of Western culture, it is not enough to give readers only an account of the 'original intentions' of biblical writers, but it must include 'the elucidation of the ethical consequences and political functions of biblical texts in their historical as well as in their contemporary sociopolitical contexts' (Schüssler Fiorenza 1988:15).

Many studies, endorsing the assumptions in her study, not only acknowledge the social and political functions of texts but argue for an advocacy stance when reading biblical documents. Contextual readings, addressing the issues of our times, are no longer to be avoided, Loubser says, but are in fact a matter of ethical necessity (see 1994:165). Given the reader's social location in interpreting a text, it is impossible to escape the pressing issues of one's society and one's interpretations by necessity reflect socio-political choices, De Villiers says (see 1989:123).

In the case of West (see 1991:66-68; 1992:9) who maintains that the biblical scholar should actively embrace or advocate a particular socio-political perspective, the readings of poor and oppressed people receive epistemological privilege. That is to say, accountability stretches towards the ordinary reader, and particularly the poor and oppressed reader who should be served and liberated by reading these texts.

Patte (who is not a South African scholar but claims to have been influenced by the South African debate and very much stimulates this debate), acknowledges the existence of both aspects (ethics of reading and of accountability) but finds the ethics of accountability more important because reading the Bible should lead to an alteration of critical practices (see 1995:6-9). In his view, any critical reading (ethics of historical reading) which does not conform to the experience and interpretation of Christian feminists, African-Americans, Third World churches, Jews and any other potential group (other than white males) should be

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3 By the ethics of accountability Schüssler Fiorenza means that an interpreter 'stands responsible not only for the choice of theoretical interpretive models but also for the ethical consequences of the biblical text and its meanings' (1988:15).

4 The ethics of historical reading admits that the number of interpretations that can legitimately be given to a text is limited by the historical setting of the text. It seeks 'to give the text its due by asserting its original meanings over and against later dogmatic usurpations' (Schüssler Fiorenza 1988:14).

abandoned (see Patte 1995:21, 42-43). Any such critical reading, he claims, is sexist, racist, classist and colonialist (see 1995:6).<sup>5</sup>

It should be noted that proponents of the view that contemporary issues are by definition included in every reading of a text, take the relevance of the text for granted. The Bible is forced to speak, even if it does not and the reader not only can but also should advocate a particular position in reading a text.

One of the few voices in this debate trying to hold both the ethics of reading and the ethics of accountability together, is Jan Botha. There is, in his view, and rightly so, an undeniable under-emphasis on *reading*. By that he understands that a rhetorical study of literature which respects the textuality of the text through a serious reading of the text, needs to precede any claims about text-external matters, be they ancient or modern day matters of history, society or the self (see 1992:190). He says:

Over emphasising the *ethics of accountability* at the expense of the *ethics of historical reading*, or, as I prefer to put it, the ethics of taking the textuality (or linguisticity or literariness or rhetoricity) of the text seriously, will result in another form of unethical interpretive praxis. In a nutshell: reading the Bible in terms of the scientist ethos in a political or social vacuum is not ethically responsible. On the other hand, claiming all sorts of ethical implications for biblical texts and for interpretations of these texts without taking the linguisticity of the text *in all its complexity* seriously and respecting its *otherness*, will result in yet another form of ethically unacceptable acts of interpretation (1992:177).

Although I do not fully agree with his solution (see below), Botha has identified one of the serious shortcomings in the present debate. Is it possible to claim ethically responsible practices in interpretation without serious consideration of the ethics of reading?

To my mind, there is a second reason why the current position on the ethics of responsible interpretation should not necessarily be endorsed.

## 2.2 The domination of a philosophical dualism

To my mind, more important than the domination of the ethics of accountability is the dichotomous foundation on which it is based. My first concern is to show that the dualisms employed in the debate are based on the burning of straw men and are not without embarrassments. Secondly the aim is to suggest an alternative strategy for dealing with the theoretical assumptions.

Claims for occupying the ethical high-ground in reading biblical texts are based on at least three common arguments. Firstly, texts do not have fixed, single meanings but multiple meanings (see Oosthuizen 1993:169; Patte 1995:42, 111 n 27, 123). Since one has to allow for the plurality or multiplicity of meaning, one has to accept not only that different audiences will read the biblical texts differently, but also a variety of meanings for any single text (see Lategan 1994:19-20). Secondly, reading is not the discovery of meaning but the construction of meaning. The recognition that reading is an active process of attributing meaning to a text has led to the belief that the 'reader actually creates meaning' (Smit 1994:267; and see De Villiers 1989:123; Lategan 1984:10-13, 1994:24). Thirdly, no reading is value-free and disinterested but represents the interests of the reader (see Patte 1995:50ff).

5 Patte was accused of being a racist because his teaching did not endorse the experience of Afro-American's in their local churches (see 1995:21). I find his definition of racism difficult to understand because there is a longer list of complaints from white, male church-goers against the critical reading of the Bible (see, for example, Barr 1984).

Once you have erected a straw man, it is easy enough to burn it. By overturning the notion that texts have fixed single meanings which are to be discovered in the process of reading, the solution of multiple meanings created by the reader and dependent of the social location of the reader, is suggested. If anything, such oppositions confirm that the current ethics of interpretation debate is firmly established in a polar dualism and the content of each assumption is established by rejecting its alleged opposite. The warning lights should already come on when such simple dualisms are employed. One wonders, if the so-called scientific position (single, fixed meanings to be discovered) is that easily refutable, why spend so much time refuting it again and again? The reason, it seems to me, is because there is some truth there which cannot be denied. Put differently, the opposite position (the acceptance of multiple meanings and advocacy readings by interested readers), is just as uncomfortable and embarrassing. Since I have elsewhere argued why these individual assumptions cannot be accepted as they stand (see Craffert 1996b) only a few examples will suffice.

If the words of the texts, which are trying to convince us that readers create meaning and that texts do not have meaning, are truly without meaning, then those texts fail to communicate that message. Furthermore, if texts do not have meaning, how did they succeed in establishing the value-free disinterested stance in those scholarly texts? Against the 'dogma of the powerless work' Booth reminds us 'just how nearly overwhelming' the testimony, 'on the other side' is (1989:59). On the insight that human beings are caught in their perspectives, how can it ever be argued that objective truth is impossible if all that can be obtained by means of language (and if truth is relative to the subject or community), is perspectival insights. How can it be demonstrated such claims are not true if the argument by means of which it is done, is only perspectival? Finally, the stronger one's insistence on socially constructed meaning and reality and on the reader's social location when reading a document, the stronger the commitment should be towards a recognition of the text's historical cultural system and social location. This theme, is unfortunately, practically absent not only in the arguments of the advocacy position in interpretation, but also from the ethics of interpretation debate as such.

Showing that the so-called scientific ethos of value-free research and claims of a single fixed meaning of texts is misguided, is a cheap victory if, because of that, one does not seriously deal with the issues they represent. The strategy of pointing out such embarrassments as the above, is just as cheap if that is one's only response. However, it is done in order to indicate that in the debate on textual meaning and determinacy there are embarrassments on both sides of the polar division which makes the whole strategy of operating with such opposites questionable. The real challenge, to my mind, is moving beyond such dualisms.

### 2.3 An ethical position beyond dualisms

In response to the anti-foundationalist narratives in the history of philosophy, Bernstein remarks: 'One begins to wonder if there ever was a *foundationalist* thinker, at least one who fits the description of what Rorty calls *foundationalism*' (1991:252). His problem is that Rorty's caricature of the history of philosophy is rapidly running itself into the ground. My question is whether the same thing is not happening in the ethics of interpretation debate in biblical studies where caricatures form the background against which ethically responsible practices are painted. To my mind, that is exactly what is happening in the current ethics of interpretation debate.

number of theories in other disciplines are indeed suggesting alternatives beyond the polar opposition in which insights from both sides are taken into account. I think about Graff's

suggestion in literary studies of a 'dialectical theory' (1989:5),<sup>6</sup> about Hanson's suggestion in anthropology that truth and knowledge 'are doubly rather than singly contingent' (1979:518) and the philosopher, Bernstein's argument of a Both/And instead of an Either/Or logic in the modernity/postmodernity debate (see 1991:201). He says: 'The *logic* of my allegory has been an unstable tensed Both/And rather than a determinate fixed Either/Or' (1991:225-226). As biblical scholars we can get much further once we start participating in the discourse beyond the dualism of the discovery of fixed single meanings versus the creation of perspectival multiple meanings. That does not mean the differences between these positions will immediately be taken away, only that they will be dealt with in a different manner.<sup>7</sup> What all these suggestions have in common is that they deal with textual meaning or cultural analysis and human subjectivity in a different manner from the polar subject/object schema. This does not mean an abandonment of the subject/object dualism but an alternative way of going about it. These suggestions concentrate more on the *in between* (where meaning is mediated between reader *and* text), than on trying to argue that meaning resides with either the reader or the text.

## 2.4 The ideology of truth

The final, and most serious point to be argued, is that it is a mistake to settle the issue of the locus of textual meaning and textual determinacy on the epistemological plain because it is a political issue. Although it is a truism to say that all interpretations originate in values (or social location), it does not necessarily follow that the final answer is also dictated by values or, as it were, an ideology or social location. This is the case, because as Hirsch argues, one's main interest might be in having the answer right rather than that the answer come out one way or another (see 1982:235). It is admittedly also an ideology, and therefore political, to care more about getting it right than fostering a particular result. The 'ideology of truth', as he calls it, is structurally different from any other ideology: 'Under other political ideologies, we desire and sometimes pre-determine a particular result. Under the ideology of truth, our desire for a particular result is subordinate to our desire to be right' (Hirsch 1982:236). The same sentiment is expressed by Jarvie in advocating a sceptical attitude in science: it is scepticism which 'allows one to be ruthlessly critical not only of the ideas of others, but, more especially, of one's own pet ideas' (1986:243).

The ideology of truth, of which many are afraid, knocks away the foundations (see Jarvie 1986:167) since it contains a never ending urge for truth. It is, therefore, this ideology which reveals the naivete of claims that objective truths have been reached. As Orr says: 'The continuous quest for truth provides the basis for a sustained challenge to self congratulatory claims for absolute knowledge' (1978:269). In fact, as Hirsch confirms: 'Whether or not an interpretation *is* telling the historical truth is a question nobody can answer. Nonetheless, the interpreter's decision to try to tell this truth is a genuine political decision, too important to be yielded by default to the rhetoricity of interpretive theories' (1982:247). There is thus a clear distinction made between truth as an ideal and the claim to know truth self evidently (see Orr 1978:268). The latter is consistently challenged by the former.

More important than making any claim about truth, is the willingness to consciously and explicitly submit both one's personal and cultural subjectivity to the test of critical evaluation

6 Amongst the many examples one can add that of Spikes who argues that while much literary theory is devoted to explaining how readers are able to interpret works in multiple ways, very little seeks to confirm or explain the text's fixed and stable meaning (see 1990:327). This kind of dialectical approach, I have argued (see Craffert 1996c:46-47), is also present in some other studies.

7 have elsewhere (see Craffert 1996a, 1996b) tried to explore some of these issues.

and to adopt the desire of listening to the otherness of the other. The search for otherness or another's constructed subjectivity should not merely be directed by one's own desired results. If this is valid, the ethics of interpretation starts with the decision to submit (or not to submit) to the codes and norms of the other instead of fostering one's own preconceived wishes. Instead of an advocacy stance for the intellectual, it promotes a sceptical and critical stance.

To summarise this final point. The insight that a distinction can be made between the search for truth and truth claims as such, confirms that one's desire of a particular result can be subordinate to the desire of respecting otherness. This is no epistemological decision but one that is determined by values. Only if the desire for respecting otherness is rated highly enough, does the ethics of interpretation start first and foremost with an ethics of reading and not the other way round.

### 3. Resituating the beacons in the ethics of interpretation debate

If my argument on the domination of the ethics of accountability and the dualistic pattern in the debate is valid, it goes without saying that a different view on the ethics of interpretation is inevitable. Furthermore, if it is true that to say that all interpretations originate in values but that their final character is not necessarily dictated by these values or, as it were, a social location, then we have to face another set of issues in the ethics of interpretation debate. The first of which is what exactly the nature of the ethical decision entails.

#### 3.1 The reader's ethical decision

For Jan Botha the ethics of responsible interpretation remains a matter of respecting the textuality of the text. The problem is that if one believes that the reader somehow construes meaning, most readers will claim that they are indeed respecting the textuality of the text. That is because a text does not exist prior to being construed by a reader. A document (dots on paper) only becomes a text once it is construed by a reader to have meaning and therefore it has to represent 'somebody's meaning, if not the author's, then the critic's' (Hirsch 1967:3). Graff (1990:166) reminds us that without 'the codes that enable us to determine the context, *the words on the page* of a text would tell us nothing'. Apart from a cultural system within which people organise themselves and experience meaning in life, speech is inactive noise and documents are mute dots on paper and deciding what an utterance means remains an impossibility. Thus, instead of suggesting that multiple readings are the result of different readers merely occupying different socio-political locations, it is suggested that texts allow multiple readings in so far as readers can also choose different codes when construing them.

The real question in interpretation is whose interpretive norm or meaning system should be used when construing biblical texts. If it is possible to learn a new set of codes (or cultural system) and to change perspectives and if readers can indeed choose to read from the point of view of the original cultural system of a text (after all, if a text can be read from any reader's perspective, why not from a reader retrained in the social system<sup>8</sup> of the text's origin?), the actual question is whether it should be done. This is the ethical decision interpretation forces on us. The decision of being vigilantly against either denying or suppressing the otherness of

8 It goes without saying that all social systems are constructed. Even one's taken for granted social system of everyday living is but a social construction. Interpretation always takes place by means of a constructed social system. And as is the case with all conversation, one can never be sure that one has truly understood a text from the past in its otherness, just as one can never be sure one has understood someone from one's own time (see Hirsch 1967:44). Construing a text in its pastness merely opens the possibility of various constructions of such a text in its pastness, and hence, to critical discussion and dialogue.

the other (in this case the voice of ancient documents), is an ethical one (see Bernstein 1991:336). Similarly, the choice of listening to the voice of the text in its historical context is an ethical one.

The ethics of interpretation is therefore not about respecting the textuality of the text, but its *historicality* and *culturality* (its historical and cultural embeddedness). In taking the ethics of interpretation as being predominantly concerned with the effect of reading on an audience (ethics of accountability), the point is missed that the ethics of interpretation is first and foremost about the desire (or lack of desire) to grasp otherness in its strongest possible light. Applied to biblical interpretation, if our textual ancestors and the literary conversation partners from the past cannot be respected for their contribution to human discourse, why will those conversation partners who are our contemporaries, be respected? Is the tendency, one wants to ask, of claiming overall creative power for the human subject (also in reading) not some kind of craving for becoming like the gods of old? Searle points out that it is 'somehow satisfying to our will to power to think that *we* make the world, that reality itself is but a social construct, alterable at will and subject to future changes as *we* see fit' (1995:158).

However, a decision to submit to otherness is not only the result of an ethical decision, it also has some serious implications for the practice and teaching of biblical studies. Although the first three aspects have been discussed elsewhere (see Craffert 1996b), they are repeated in order to elaborate on them and to add a fourth aspect.

### 3.2 Doing Biblical studies in an ethically responsible way

As indicated above, the choice for a particular code when reading a text is a matter of values. There are, to my mind, some very good reasons why the historical and cultural codes of the biblical documents should be preferred to any other modern code when reading them.

#### 3.2.1 It fosters the ethical principle of respect for the person and words of other human beings

We should not use an author's words for our own purposes any more than we should use another person for our own ends (see Hirsch 1976:90-91). The dialogical nature of interpretation carries some ethical responsibilities. As Bohman argues:

many interpretations are dialogical and not merely relative to the purpose of my community; true interpretation requires that the interpreter take up a moral responsibility towards others, such that the rendering of their beliefs will be as correct and accurate as possible. True interpretations require this moral responsibility, if others are to be disclosed for their own possibilities, not for their possibilities relative to my purposes (Bohman 1991:152 n 35).

'False interpretations' of others, in short, are not only incorrect but irresponsible. 'True interpretations' on the other hand, require in the first instance this moral responsibility of respecting the otherness of the other irrespective of whether one agrees with it or not.

In reading any biblical document, we can no longer expect the authors to be considerate authors - that is towards us as late twentieth-century readers. Instead, to use Malina's term, we will have to become 'considerate readers'. That is, readers who have been retrained in the cultural systems of the ancient Israelite and First-Century Mediterranean worlds. Such an ethical decision creates the possibility of dialogue which discloses their point of view.



### 3.2.2 The possibility of dialogue with the *other*

The second reason why the historical meaning of biblical documents is of importance, is that it creates the possibility of dialogue with those who are our ancestors in the Christian tradition. The moral responsibility of interpretation, Bohman says, 'demands that interpretive dialogue with others be disclosures of their point of view, not the imposition of purposes or norms upon them' (Bohman 1991:152 n 35). A dialogue which correctly interprets 'others' beliefs and desires' (Bohman 1991:154) is not structured to answer our deepest questions and solve our pressing problems but confronts one with the answers others have given to their problems and makes available their contribution to human discourse. Engaging in true dialogue often demands a self-conscious broadening of the purposes and norms we cherish selfishly.

On the one hand, the investigation of alien systems of belief, as text or culture, allows us to stand back from our own prevailing assumptions and structures and to discover their contingency. This paves the way for a greater degree of understanding, hence tolerance, of cultural diversity. The greatest advantage, however, is the possibility of acquiring a perspective from which to view *our own* in a more self-critical way, thus enlarging our present horizon instead of simply 'fortifying local prejudices' or degenerating into 'uncritically accepted ideologies' (Skinner 1988:287).

On the other hand, historical study in the humanities 'shows us directions we might have missed, and can spare us stupidities that others have already committed' (Hirsch 1985:197). Described in this way, learning from them, that is, from the biblical documents, is somewhat different from what Schüssler Fiorenza wants to gain. She says that in an age of atomic annihilation, 'the moral resources and ethical directives of biblical religions' (1988:13) should be made available. While I think the situation Miller addresses when discussing the ethics of reading, is somewhat different from that faced by the biblical scholar, I think his warning is equally applicable:

I have argued that the proper ethical decision that a teacher of literature should make...is to teach the irrelevance of the thematic assertions of even the most apparently morally concerned literature for the making of moral decisions, since the moral decisions and judgments within the work are only an allegory of the way language works (1989:98-99).

To really respect the contribution the biblical documents can make to our world, as I have argued elsewhere, requires engaging them in cultural dialogue (see Craffert 1995:173-178). It is in such dialogues that we encounter ourselves as others to our ancestors in the faith tradition and that we encounter them as other human beings engaged in life like we are. That a number of dialogues are possible and that students themselves should be encouraged to engage in such dialogues goes without saying. But then those student dialogues should not be turned into arrogant monologues by the all-powerful social location of the readers, but should be dialogues which search for a disclosure of the viewpoints in and the otherness of the ancient documents we call the Bible. Students and ordinary readers who want their social locations to be respected, should be taught that such respect is a two-way affair. As said, the stronger one's commitment towards one's own social location, the stronger one's commitment should be towards respecting the social locations of all other human beings.

### 3.2.3 Historical interpretation challenges a consumer orientation in biblical studies

It should be clear that this argument does not imply a single, fixed or final reading of a text once one chooses to read it within its cultural system of origin. At issue are historically and culturally alien meanings which are encountered once the biblical documents are referred back to their codes of origin. What this does exclude is the proliferation of readings from the point of view of whichever cultural system a reader might find interesting or might occupy at a specific point in time. It challenges the purely 'consumer-oriented' (Skinner 1988:272) studies of reader responses. When starting with the ethics of interpretation position as argued in this study, it indeed causes serious problems for anyone interested in satisfying society's need, which is as Botha says, to know what the Bible says for us today, here and now (see 1993:15).

Defending critical practices is not the same as endorsing their results. Doing critical research, which is given by the historical and cultural nature of the biblical documents, will probably enlarge and not reduce the experience of cultural shock when reading the Bible. But that also opens the possibility of true dialogue with those documents in a way which does not merely twist them in order to suit our purposes.

Nothing less than the kind of society one wants to foster is at stake in the ethics of interpretation debate. Far from being value neutral or scientifically objective, dialogue with the texts in their otherness and datedness is driven by the values of respecting the other for its otherness. To *save a text*, especially a traditional text, from becoming extinct, by '*making it true according to our current beliefs...lowers the value and credibility of humanistic scholarship*' (Hirsch 1984:218) and reflects badly on the kind of society one strives for. This position thus challenges the taken for granted assumption that the Bible, as the book of the church, has to provide all our answers. I can endorse the conclusion Willem Vorster reached in his evaluation of the use of scripture in apartheid dialogues: 'The risk of making theological decisions in your own name is less dangerous than making them in the name and on behalf of the living God' (1984:217). To be sure, it does not *deny* the possibility of reading biblical texts from the point of view of the socio-political problems of modern readers; it questions the *ethical appropriateness* of such readings.

### 3.2.4 Education: discipleship or apprenticeship

A logical conclusion of the emphasis on the ethics of accountability is that teaching biblical studies can no longer consist of a teacher challenging students' ignorance, lack of knowledge or prereflective reading. Patte maintains that such practices merely confirms structures of oppression such as racism, sexism, economic and cultural exploitation and anti-Semitism (see 1995:42), since students can all contribute equally legitimate and equally authoritative readings of texts. Instead of a master, the teacher becomes a fellow disciple.

I am, however, suggesting a different pedagogical situation. This is motivated firstly by the fact that all readings have their foundations in socialisation and very few such socialising processes are serious about historical meaning. That is to say, very few students or ordinary readers start off with the aim of respecting the social location of the texts. Biblical scholars, by and large, have been contributing to a way of reading which disregards the original cultural systems of the biblical documents. The suggestion of resocialisation to a position where those systems are taken seriously will indeed come into conflict with the ordinary reader's (learned) experience of a text. To use the words of Barr from a different but related judgment, critical teaching and true dialogue challenge 'the human conservative prejudice of a particular tradition' (1984:82). The suggestion that resocialisation should take place in order to read

these ancient texts, claims no greater validity than the (learned) practices of the ordinary, poor or oppressed reader, but merely claims to represent different values.

Secondly, if it is true that white male teachers do not possess the ultimate and final truth in academic activity (as Patte suggests), it is equally true of students of whichever colour, sex or orientation. Critical scepticism ought to be a component of every approach in intellectual affairs. We should furthermore keep in mind that if truth is prescribed by social location or consists of mere agreement with the group, community or particular tradition (even religious tradition), then the rebel or prophet must by definition speak falsely. For in rejecting the agreement of the group, community or tradition, he or she rejects truth (see Orr 1978:270). Instead of claiming epistemological privilege for, or just placing the blame on, whichever group, I am suggesting a pedagogical condition where a variety of dialogues exposes us all to the otherness of the biblical documents and to one another. In this exposure each and every reader's preconceived notions may be challenged.

Therefore, it is not the case, as Patte suggests, that a one-dimensional critical practice is forced onto uninitiated students (see 1995:41-45). As said already, such dialogue is not selective when it comes to class, race, gender or other particulars. Instead, all students are encouraged and equipped to develop their own intellectual autobiographies which contains a number of elements such as subject content and a sceptical attitude, neither of which the average student necessarily carries around when arriving at an institution of higher learning (see Kurtz 1983:267). Weber lists at least four aspects where science or academic teaching can contribute to human life. It contributes to the technology of controlling life; secondly, it provides methods of thinking or the tools and the training for thought; thirdly, it aids the gaining of clarity and finally it helps individuals achieve an account of the ultimate meaning of his or her conduct (see 1948:150-152). What we should work towards, also in Biblical studies courses, is, to use the words of Smith from a different context,

*the empowering of a student so that she or he gains possession of an intellectual autobiography.* This sort of mastery requires a trained self-consciousness, the acquisition of skills in public discourse, the capacity to negotiate complex materials, and occasions for representing one's ownership in focused products (1988:738).

While there is a place for advocacy in teaching, education should also transcend that.

In conclusion, the ethics of interpretation, in my view, is not in the first instance about the effect of our readings on the audience and also not on the right of readers to whichever reading they prefer (due to their social location), but about the way we treat the *other*, be it the other as author of the text or the other as fellow compatriot or student. Ethics of interpretation is about the values we employ when dealing with those who are not ourselves. Far from being a value-neutral or an objective enterprise, it resists the temptation of misusing divine power for one's own ends because the situation of dialogue respects both parties and their otherness towards each other - in the case of the biblical documents it is their cultural otherness and historical pastness.

#### **4. The ethics of apartheid readings and of ordinary readings**

At this point we can return to the battle for the Bible, and especially the battle for the ethical high ground, in South African Biblical studies. The verdict from all sides about the misuse of the Bible in support of the policy of apartheid, is unanimous. The first reactions tried to refute apartheid readings on the basis of their own exegetical assumptions. It has been

pointed out that in terms of sound exegesis, the proof-texting methods cannot withstand critical examination and cannot claim a sound ethical position. Later reactions tried to refute apartheid readings by applying those methods themselves - just with different texts being used. However, as Vorster remarks, it is a pity that 'anti-apartheid theologians find it necessary to use the Bible in the same way as apartheid theologians - to find support and sanction for their own ideas and decisions by an appeal to the Bible' (1984:213).

It has been argued that the liberation of ordinary readers or the endorsement of the locational interests of readers, does not guarantee ethically sound practices. In a recent publication, called the *Postmodern Bible*, the authors remark that 'most forms of liberation readings have little concern for the historical circumstances of the text's production' (Castelli 1995:65). Is it surprising that similar evaluations are being made of apartheid readings and right wing fundamentalist readings (see Hartin 1988:23 and Wanamaker 1989:25)? It is hardly necessary to say that the oracular-use of the Bible, on whichever side, can no longer claim any ethical high-ground. Not because unworthy causes are pursued, but because it cannot be done at the price of disregarding the other in the encounter.

Unfortunately, the end does not justify the means. Neither the rejection of something as awful as the apartheid policy (by anti-apartheid theologians) nor the fight against an alleged communist conspiracy (by fundamentalist right-wing Christians) necessarily gives validity to the abandoning of sound ethical principles. It should be clear from the argument above that all kinds of socio-politically involved readings and advocacy positions in interpretation are the products of certain values and ethical decisions, which in my view, should not be supported unconditionally.

But does my position result in a lack of sympathy for or even an urge to disregard the oppressed and poor people in society? I believe not, because the endorsement of uncritical and prereflective readings of ordinary readers is not necessarily a confirmation of the inherent value and dignity of ordinary people, but a confirmation of practices biblical scholars themselves have contributed to. It is inappropriate to blame ordinary readers for the pre-reflective and uncritical way in which they very often misuse biblical texts for personal and other decisions since it is in part the product of a process of socialisation over many generations.

Perhaps we should start questioning the position of those scholars protecting the *status quo* of scriptural use for personal and socio-political ends. Claims of liberation which do not see the intellectual shackles which tradition and socialisation have placed on us, do not seek real liberation. A concern with the liberation of the poor and unfortunate members of society will also see the psychological exploitation and fear created by the dictatorship of an oracular system. A practice which presupposes its own limitations in that the continuous search of truth (ideology of truth) reveals the naivete of its own claims for truth, can to my mind, not be as harmful as a system which subjects the individual to the positive as well as negative judgments of the oracle and its (often) well paid priesthood. Escaping from such a fundamentalism (see Barr 1984) should, in my view, be part of the programme of any scholar, critical of domination and oppressive practices. A return to an ethics of interpretation as spelled out in this study is a first step in that direction. It is a step which tries to overcome the mistakes made in apartheid readings and one which tries to avoid the same mistakes being repeated by means of other socio-political ideologies.

The philosopher Hegel allegedly remarked: 'What experience and history teach is this - that people and governments have never learned anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it'. Have we learned anything from the fallacious practice of the scriptural support for apartheid?

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