

## THE ETHICS OF INTERPRETATION - NEW VOICES FROM THE USA<sup>1</sup>

D J Smit  
University of the Western Cape

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### Abstract

*Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, in her 1987 SBL Presidential Address, argued for a paradigm shift in the ethos and rhetorical practices of biblical scholarship. In this article, recent contributions by four important spokespeople from the USA, all of them with influence in South African scholarship circles, are compared, to show that all of them, although in different ways, emphasize the importance of such a shift, in which the ethos of scholarly interpretation itself comes under focus. Two of them, Thiselton and Tracy, come from the tradition of hermeneutics, and the other two, Wuellner and Fiorenza herself, from the tradition of rhetorical criticism. They agree that the ethos of biblical scholarship must not be that of value-free scientism, but that of responsible, life-orientated human praxis, aware of its own socio-political role and function of power. Acknowledging this would involve nothing less than a revolutionary change of paradigm in many circles, with serious effects for institutionalized biblical scholarship itself.*

### A paradigm shift in the ethos of biblical scholarship?

‘... I have argued for a paradigm shift in the ethos and rhetorical practices of biblical scholarship ...

... Since the socio-historical location of rhetoric is the public of the *polis*, the rhetorical paradigm shift situates biblical scholarship in such a way that its public character and political responsibility become an integral part of our literary readings and historical reconstructions of the biblical world ...

... I am interested in decentering the dominant scientist ethos of biblical scholarship by recentering it in a critical interpretive praxis for liberation ...’

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<sup>1</sup> This is the first in a series of two articles. The second, which follows directly, deals with ‘The ethics of interpretation - and South Africa’.

With these words, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza addressed the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in her Presidential Address during December 1987 in Boston, MA.

She spoke on 'The ethics of biblical interpretation: decentering biblical scholarships' and in the process analyzed and criticized the ethos of biblical scholarship reflected in the rhetoric of previous SBL presidential addresses since 1880.<sup>2</sup>

For South Africa this debate is of extreme importance.

For many Christians in South Africa, which immediately also means for many South Africans, the Bible has been and still is a very important book. Especially in the Reformed tradition the Bible has been highly regarded and widely used.

Because of the influence of this form of Reformed spirituality in South African society, one can say that the way in which the Bible has been read, interpreted and used in the socially powerful Reformed circles, has also fundamentally influenced the lives of all South Africans, up to this very day.

Recently, this role of the Bible has been described by a South African New Testament scholar, J A Loubser, in a book aptly called *The apartheid Bible*.<sup>3</sup>

Of special importance is the role biblical scholarship has played, and still plays, in this process. When one focuses specifically on Reformed biblical scholarship - because it is from the Reformed circles that the influential socio-political readings have been forthcoming - one can distinguish, broadly speaking, three important stages:

\* In a first stage, prominent scholars played an important role in legitimating apartheid and opponents were ostracized from the South African scholarly scene.

\* In a second stage, the socio-political interpretation of the Bible has been strongly rejected, in the name of the ethos of scientific research.

\* At present, in a third stage, the debate between scientific, historical scholarship and committed, socio-politically involved reading, is urgent but diffuse, since it is being argued at so many different fronts.

Before returning, in a second article, to the South African scene in order to make some remarks on the three stages, and especially on the issues at stake at present, it may be useful to look at four important contributions from the USA, in order to shape some conceptual tools with which to describe the issues more carefully.

## **Hermeneutics from the USA: Thiselton and Tracy**

The four positions reflect different, although related, traditions, all of them represented in South Africa as well. The first is the hermeneutical tradition,

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<sup>2</sup> *JBL* 107/1 (1988) 3-17.

<sup>3</sup> Johannesburg: Maskew Miller, 1987.

represented by the evangelical Anthony Thiselton and the Catholic David Tracy, the second tradition is the reintroduction of rhetorical criticism, represented by respectively the well-known Wilhelm Wuellner and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza herself. All four of them have recently dealt explicitly with the ethics of interpretation.

Thiselton's authoritative study on hermeneutics, dealing i a with Gadamer and Wittgenstein, *The two horizons*, is well-known in South Africa. In 1985 he co-authored a collection of essays called *The responsibility of hermeneutics*, written during a sabbatical at the Reformed Calvin Seminary in Grand Rapids MI, with historical ties to the DR Church family, and published by William Eerdmans, who has published some very important South African material. Once again, this book has received widespread attention in South African circles.

The work is an explicit attempt to situate the interpretation of texts in the broader context of human life itself, and therefore of human responsibility. His co-authors, professors of English, argue for a kind of paradigm-shift from the traditional orientation of Western interpretation theories, and Thiselton himself relates reader-response hermeneutics and action models with the transformational power of the parables of Jesus in arguing for responsible hermeneutics.

They say:

We have tried to explore new models for interpretation, and have been drawn especially to those built upon concepts of *action* and *responsibility*. We believe it essential to acknowledge that *speaking and writing and interpreting are human actions that arise within specific contexts*. When we view the composing and interpreting of texts as actions or sequences of actions, we are more likely to introduce *the concept of responsibility* into hermeneutics that when we are concerned only with correctness or validity. *To compose and to interpret texts is to engage in responsible action* (my italics).

Then they oppose the human desire to know the truth with the concern for right action:

The literature on the subject of hermeneutics often implies that what makes interpretation so important is our human desire to know the truth .... We wish to claim, however, that *no less fundamental than our concern for true knowledge is our concern for right action* .... Because understanding is itself an action ... it is closely related to all of our other actions and the purposes we have for them. We organize our activities in relation to the goals we want to achieve, and the means we use to reach those goals we regard as responsible action .... (my italics).

The category of the interpreting community and its interests is introduced to explain much of the strife in the history of interpretation:

The failure ... to acknowledge the role of ethics in hermeneutics account for much of the strife we discover in the history of interpretation. Anyone ... will discover debates in which the issue is not really the interpretation itself but

the nature of the interpreter's goal or the effects of a given interpretation on a community of people who have an interest in the text being interpreted ....

Precisely because of this, a scientific ethos has developed in interpretation theory, trying to separate ethics and interpretation:

... (M)odern educated people tend to be put off by 'moralism' and attempt to separate ethics and hermeneutics. Literary critics, for example, have often made disclaimers about the ethical implications of their work.

In biblical studies, too, a sharp division has emerged between those who believe that the biblical 'sciences' are free of questions of value and those who believe that a prior 'faith' attitude is a necessary hermeneutical principle ....

They, however, disagree with those making such sharp divisions and try to relate ethics and hermeneutics:

Hermeneutics is not simply a cognitive process whereby we determine the 'correct meaning' of a passage or text. Questions of truth and universality are important, but so are questions of cultural value and social relevance ..., questions of ethics and responsible interpretation are as germane to hermeneutics as questions of validity and correctness .... Instead of trying to isolate ethics and hermeneutics, we should strive to understand the relationship between them ....

To explain this relationship between ethics and hermeneutics is, of course, extremely difficult, and it needs some careful qualifications:

The interpretation of texts might not, of course, and need not, determine behaviour directly; in fact, *it is better to conceive of behaviour and responsibility as the context within which formal understanding is pursued*. Yet understanding does exist in a reciprocal relationship to behaviour, and the *importance of hermeneutics is precisely that interpretations influence actions even as actions establish the contexts within which interpretations are made* .... These effects may be indirect and may be filtered through layers of academic discussion and cultural prejudice, but the difference they make it to be seen in the final analysis in their role, small or large, in the shaping of human actions. If it were not so, we would care little about how anyone interpreted a novel or a sacred scripture (my italics).<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, interpretations influence actions, even as human responsibility and actions establish the contexts in which interpretations are made.

Tracy's work, of course, is widely read in scholarly circles in South Africa, especially *Blessed rage for order* and *The analogical imagination*. He does not only show strong affinity for the work of Gadamer and Ricoeur, but in fact combines a manifold of theories, traditions and scholarly positions with amazing ability. In recent years, he has edited, with Hans Küng, two important volumes on new paradigms in theology,

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<sup>4</sup> All these references from Lundin, R, Thiselton, A C & Walhout, C, 1985, *The responsibility of hermeneutics*. Grand Rapids: W M Eerdmans.

in which mainly theologians of Chicago and Tübingen were involved.<sup>5</sup> In 1986 J C B Mohr published a dissertation, written in Chicago under Tracy himself, by Werner G Jeanrond, *Text und Interpretation als Kategorien theologischen Denkens*, in which the author discusses Gadamer, Ricoeur and Tracy, and points to the responsibility of hermeneutics.

In 1987 Tracy himself published a new 'philosophical groundwork for a *practical* application of hermeneutics' (his italics), *Plurality and ambiguity. Hermeneutics, religion, hope*, in which he introduced the element of socio-political responsibility in a more radical way than ever before in the hermeneutical tradition. At the 1988 Annual Meeting of the New Testament Society of South Africa, this work will be discussed in one of the groups. It is impossible to go into detail here, but some remarks may be helpful.

He regards interpretation as conversation and deals specifically with the conversation with religious classics. This conversation is 'interrupted' in several ways. The two important interruptions he discusses is the radical plurality intrinsic to language, brought to the fore especially by deconstructionism, and the radical, terrifying ambiguity of history, brought to the fore especially by the critique of ideology.

In order to deal with these interruptions of the conversation, leading to conflictual interpretations, human beings need, on occasion, argument, which means method, explanation, theory. Argument, using method and theory, however, is not the conversation itself, and must never replace the conversation, as is the case in scientism, masking its own hermeneutic character and its own historicity.

The effects of all scientific models remain powerful, even pervasive, forces in the culture at large despite the intellectual bankruptcy of its reigning ideology.

In particular, he analyses the role and limitations of historical critical methods and literary critical methods.

He wants to situate scientific method and argument within the more comprehensive context of human life itself, as the continuous project of interpretation and action.

Argument ... is not a replacement for exploratory conversation. Rather, argument is a vital moment within conversation itself that occasionally is needed if the conversation itself is to move forward.

What is important, he stresses, is responsible human life itself. 'All theory worth having should ultimately serve the practice of reflective living.'

On the whole, his book is a defence of the claim that 'at times, interpretations matter'. Especially in times of crisis interpretation is necessary to be able to act well.

In this process he is very much aware of the ethical and socio-political implications of interpretation, including the conversation with the religious classics, and time and

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<sup>5</sup> *Theologie - wohin? Auf dem Weg zu einem neuen Paradigma*, 1984, and *Das neue paradigma von Theologie*, 1986, Benziger Verlag/Güthersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn.

again stresses the relationship between knowledge, method, interpretation and power.

Especially when discussing the radical ambiguity of history, this ethical dimension is extremely important, and here he draws heavily on Foucault, the Frankfurt school, *et al.* Expressions like resistance, terror, suffering, domination, violence, responsibility, guilt, great good and frightening evil, hope, power, and so forth, abound, illustrating the ethical context in which he discusses the issue of history and historical studies.<sup>6</sup>

### **Rhetorical criticism from the USA: Wuellner and Fiorenza**

From the hermeneutical tradition, although already expanded in many ways by Tracy beyond the point of recognition, we go to Wuellner, eloquent and prolific advocate since 1976 for rhetorical criticism instead of hermeneutics. During 1987, he spoke on several occasions within the context of the NTSSA on 'Hermeneutics and rhetorics: From "Truth and Method" to "Truth and Power"'. This is a full-scale attempt, not merely to introduce categories of ethics, responsibility and power in hermeneutics, but in fact to replace hermeneutics with rhetorical criticism.

He emphatically denies the claim that rhetorics is currently being rediscovered for biblical hermeneutics, as if rhetorical criticism can be subordinated to the hermeneutical enterprise. The two approaches are categorically different. The unity of hermeneutics and rhetorics has been taken for granted for too long, he says.

Rhetorical criticism ... takes the exegetes of biblical literature beyond the study of the meaning of texts to something more inclusive than semantics and hermeneutics ... (R)hetorical criticism is taking us beyond hermeneutics and structuralism to post-structuralism and post-hermeneutics,

is the claim he wants to elaborate. In his argument, the concept of power plays a key role, although he uses it in diverse ways.

In a historical sketch, he shows the relation between hermeneutics and rhetorics through the ages, arguing that the changes in rhetorical and hermeneutical theories reflect important social and cultural transformations in ancient and modern Western history. His specific concern is to show how hermeneutics has gained hegemony, and rhetorics has either been subsumed as mere stylistic studies, or totally disregarded.

In the main thrust of his argument, he then employs categories from especially Foucault and Jameson to challenge this hegemony of hermeneutics.

Already in his description of historical developments, he emphasises the role of political and social power time and again:

Discussing the spreading fashion in the first century of using allusive style, necessitating the use of *suspicio* which makes the signs used signify more than they

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<sup>6</sup> All these references from *Plurality and ambiguity. Hermeneutics, religion, hope*, 1987. San Francisco: Harper & Row.

say, he says that to ask after the cognitive or esthetic meaning is to use hermeneutics as interpretative science, as exercise in truth and method; to ask, however, after the motives of these practices, e.g. fear of political reprisals in times of ideological conflict, is to use rhetorics as exercise in truth and power.

Discussing the fragmentation of rhetoric during the fourth century, already present in Augustine's theory and practice of rhetorical criticism, he calls for an analysis of 'the material base' of antiquity's theories of literature.

Discussing the emergence of three modes of exegesis in the early Middle Ages (namely *lectio* or commentary; *disputatio* or controversies; and *predicatio*, whether as homiletics or as spiritual exercise), as extensions of the three traditional liberal arts (namely grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric), he points to the way rhetorics was gradually neglected in the social context of the nascent universities of the 12th century, with biblical exegesis becoming more and more an academic discipline, and to the power struggles between exponents of this academic exegesis and those of the monastic *lectio divina*, related to the religious, moral and political power struggles of Middle Age Western society at large.

Discussing the growth of the new Renaissance humanist rhetorics of the sixteenth century, he explains that in terms of two cultural contextual developments, namely the vernacular movement and the associated rise of national states, and the print-culture movement.

Discussing the Protestant hermeneutical principle, rejecting in theory (although not in practice) the multiple meaning of Scripture and defending analysis of the grammatical and socio-historical contexts as semantically constitutive, so that Scripture should interpret itself, he argues that this principle itself was political and not hermeneutic, and, in fact, 'that all Bible scholarship is dogmatic and that all Bible scholarship is political'. In spite of the terminology of *sola scriptura*, in practice Protestants depend upon communities of definition to interpret the Bible as much, if not as openly, as Catholics, quotes Wuellner with approval. Biblical scholarship, like other enterprises of the academia, ancient and modern, is intensely political, since questions of power form an intrinsic part of it.

Discussing influential Protestant interpreters, like Melancthon and Mathias Flacius, he relates the importance of rhetorics for the early Reformers to the sources of conflict and strategies for coexistence among universities and seminaries, both Protestant and Catholic, and tries to explain it by means of Foucault's distinction between three types of relationship, namely power relations, systems of communications (e.g. printing or rhetorics) and objective capacities, which relate and establish themselves in diverse ways in the form of educational and research institutions, religious institutions, and a variety of social and political institutions. He argues that the public, political, practical dimension of rhetorics was restored and revalued because the reformers sought to replace scholastic philosophy by rhetoric as the means of education for the emerging bourgeoisie of 'the common man', so that it again became the system of communication of a universally applicable body of practical social knowledge, with the necessary institutional and political setting as power base.

Discussing the all-pervasive influence of Ramism from the 16th century, leading to a reign of method and stylistics and a total neglect of traditional rhetorics, he relates this to the desire to defend the cause of the French vernacular and its popularity with widespread popular establishments of Anglicanism, resulting *inter alia* in the rhetorical views of the Puritans and the early Quakers. Now reason, logic and dialectic were opposed to pathos, and rhetorics relegated to 'mere' rhetoric, synonymous with irrational talk and emotional effect only.

Wuellner sees these same social and political dichotomies, and the same triumph of method and logic, reflected in the struggles between orthodoxy and pietism, main-line Protestantism and its radical wing, and Jesuits and nationalistic gallicans in France.

Discussing the effects of the triumph of the scientific and industrial age on publications on hermeneutics and rhetorics in America, he makes the important socio-political observation that, whereas until the end of the 19th century, it has been mainly ministers, and religious scholars who wrote these books, it now became the professionally academic, purportedly disinterested, self-consciously nonsectarian or secular scholar in the university.

Still more examples can be given, but the point is clear. Time and again, shifts in the theories of interpretation were influenced, if not caused, by the material base, by different forms of institutionalized social power, and by the power struggles between these interpretive communities. What Wuellner is trying to argue is that the role of pathos must again be restored, to (re)join logos and ethos, but now including the collective, the social, the cultural side of pathos. This is made possible, he argues, when categories are explored like ideology, as the rhetoric of basic communication (Ricoeur), rhetoric as social imagination (Dillon), the social grounds of knowledge affecting rhetorics (Willard), the power of the text (Kennedy).

He obviously prefers two definitions, one by Wayne Booth and the other by Terry Eagleton. Booth's definition comes close to what Thiselton *et al* are saying: 'Rhetorical study is the study of use, of purpose pursued, targets hit or missed, practices illuminated *for the sake not of pure knowledge, but of further (and improved) practice*' (my italics).

Eagleton's definition introduces the social and ideological aspects of discourse and reading: Rhetorics must be concerned with *'the kinds of effects which discources produce, and how they produce them; ... (it is) the theory of discursive practices in society as a whole with special attention to such practices as forms of power and performance; ... (it sees) literary forms as forms of activity inseparable from the wider social relations between writers and readers; ... rhetorics (has a) preoccupation with discourse as a form of power and desire'* (my italics).

Wuellner explains the different aspects of power involved in literature and reading in terms of Miller's discussion of the 'material base' of literature, 'the name for the



whole region of what presumably exists outside language'.<sup>7</sup> Wuellner discussed five important aspects, of which one must be mentioned here:

The material base of the 'day-to-day life of those who are writing the theory, their social, class, institutional, professional, familial situations'. Luther and the religious reformers had a material base different from the Ramists and the educational reforms; books on hermeneutics and rhetorics written by salaried university professors (of what faculty? and department on which political or ecclesial patronage?) has a material base different from those written by those outside of the ecclesial or educational 'system'. Noll refers here to 'the Bible as a concern of the academy', and 'the Bible as a standard for competing ideological groups'.<sup>8</sup>

The material base, therefore, does not only apply to the text-producer/author in the one-time act of production/writing; or the text's own, autonomous discursive field; but also to a third terrain, namely that of the text-consumer, the reader/s and the processes and institutions of reading.

It is in the light of these remarks that Wuellner pleads for rhetorics over against the hegemony of hermeneutics, for method and power against method and trust. Traditional Western hermeneutics is essentially a discipline or theory devoted to 'excavation' or extraction of meaning; it is the methodological search for the essence in the diversity, of the universal in the particular, of the one in the many, the coherent in the contingent, the logic in the rhetoric, the topics in the argument. Hermeneutics offers methods for discovering, excavating, extracting what works really mean. This holds true also for the modern version of a hermeneutics of suspicion, operating on the assumption that some hidden or universal truth has been deflected or distorted by some historical or linguistic contingency, but can still be uncovered, argues Wuellner.

Although the claim is made, in modern hermeneutics, that exegetical practice is subordinated to exegetical and hermeneutical theory, the opposite is really the case, namely that these methods and theories are, in fact, subordinated to very powerful social practices and institutions. Practices as institutionalized Hellenistic and Roman *paideia*, Rabbinic 'schools', Christian exegetical 'schools' (Alexandria) and monasteries, courts of law, and so forth, still determine and use theories, but it is often not acknowledged, when the attention has so-called shifted to the 'text' and to neutral methodology, and the factors which condition, limit and institutionalize discourse formation are overlooked.

Wuellner, again quoting Noll, points to one important example, namely

... the socially privileged position of the academically trained hermeneut (the professor of exegesis, the professor of literature, the professor of law) controlling the social practice of 'interpretation .... The scientific scholarly

<sup>7</sup> Miller, J Hiller, 'The triumph of theory, the resistance to reading, and the question of the material base,' *PMLA* 103/3 (May 1987), 281-291, his MLA Presidential Address 1986.

<sup>8</sup> Noll, Mark A, 'Review essay: the Bible in America', *JBL* 106/3 (1987), 493-509.

hermeneut offers prescriptive interpretations which delimit the boundaries of normal science every bit as effectively as papal pronouncements did ....

Academic experts of the theory and methodology of exegesis ... while insisting that the truths they uncover (with their very 'scientific hermeneutics'), lie outside the sphere of power ... seem fated to contribute to the strategies of power. They claim a privileged externality (academic, scientific objectivity and neutrality), but they actually are part of the deployment of power.

The intentional fiction of presuppositional neutrality (in any of the professional biblical societies, whether SBL, or SNTS, or NTSSA); their extraordinary respect for integrity of underinterpreted data, and their careful cultivation of civility, make us realize that the really interesting work for the politics of American, European, African, Asian biblical scholarship is not that which has been done, but that which has not been done.

Hermeneutics, says Wuellner pointedly, generates commentary, but rhetorics generates action.

The commentary genre is generated by the hermeneutical effort of recovering *meaning* and *truth* from other person's or other people's past practices. It is neither impossible, nor wrong, to paraphrase and explicate the surface meaning of the text or practices being interpreted .... What is problematic about both the commentary and hermeneutics is not any failure in understanding 'the surface significance of what actors are saying and doing', but rather their inability of giving any reply to the question: 'What is the effect of what they are doing? All commentary can do is further elaborate the background meanings shared by the actors'.

For Wuellner, agreeing with Jameson,<sup>9</sup> literature must again be seen as socially symbolic acts, with built-in political unconscious aspects, the power of social transformation.

He concludes by saying that feminist criticism deserves special mention, since it has been one of the most powerful forces in contemporary criticism, arguing for the reintegration of rhetorics, for an awareness of socio-political and ideological aspects in interpretation, and for an openness to the power of transformation in literature and reading. Of special importance is the fact that he calls their contribution 'a far cry from the familiar practice of mere social description or even social hermeneutics of sexual and social roles in biblical literature', and also distinguishes it from 'the both objectifying and subjectifying approaches used by advocates of sociological criticism', like Norman K Gottwald and John H Elliot, *et al.*<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Jameson, F, *The political unconscious. Narrative as a socially symbolic act*, 1981, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

<sup>10</sup> All the references to Wuellner come from the paper 'Hermeneutics and rhetorics: "From truth and method" to "truth and power"', *Scriptura* S3, 1989, 1-54.

This leads quite naturally to the very instructive address by Elisabeth Fiorenza. Feminist criticism, and for that matter black theological reading, has not as yet really become part of New Testament scholarship in South Africa, although, paradoxically, it is a very important, albeit absent, discussion-partner for many. Fiorenza's work is especially well-known through two publications, namely a collection of essays, *Bread not stone: the challenge of feminist biblical interpretation*, and an impressive monograph, *In memory of her*, to be published in German in 1988, as *Zu ihrem Gedächtnis ...* (Chr Kaiser/Matthias Grünewald Mainz).

She refers to the presidential address of 1908, in which Porter (Yale) distinguished three subsequent shifts or stages in biblical scholarship. The first stage, out of which it had just emerged at the time, was one 'in which the book's records (had been) imposed upon the present as an external authority. The second stage was that of historical science, 'which (brought) deliverance from dogmatic bondage and (taught people) to view the past as past, biblical history like other histories and the Bible like other books'. He envisioned a third stage at which 'while the rights and achievements of historical criticism are freely accepted, the power that lives in the book (will be) once more felt'. Fiorenza explains that Porter likened this third stage to the reading of great books, whose greatness do not consist in their accuracy as records of facts, but depends chiefly on their symbolic power to transfigure human experience and reality.

According to her, biblical studies has followed this lead during the past fifteen years and has indeed adopted insights and methods from literary studies, but, 'it has, to a great extent, refused to relinquish its rhetorical stance of value-free objectivism and scientific methodism'.

At present, she argues, this literary-hermeneutical paradigm seems in the process of decentering into a fourth paradigm, that inaugurates 'a rhetorical-ethical turn'.

This fourth paradigm relies on the analytical and practical tradition of rhetoric in order to insist on the *public-political responsibility* of biblical scholarship. It seeks to utilize both theories of rhetoric and the rhetoric of theories to display how biblical texts and their contemporary interpretations involved authorial aims and strategies, as well as audience perceptions and constructions, as political and religious discursive practices.

This means that the fourth paradigm seeks to engender a self-understanding of biblical scholarship as 'communicative praxis'.

Biblical interpretation, like all other scholarly inquiry, is a communicative practice that involves interests, values, and visions.

It is on the ethics of biblical scholarship 'as institutionalized academic practice' that she wants to focus.

A first important distinction between formalist literary criticism and a critical theory of rhetoric, she argues, is that the latter regards the context or social location of the readers as important as the text. This has important implications for institutionalized academic practice.

Interpretive communities such as the SBL are not just scholarly investigative communities, but also authoritative communities. They possess the power to ostracize or to embrace, ... to recognize and to define what 'true scholarship' entails.

She defines what 'ethos' means in this respect:

Ethos is the shared intellectual space of freely accepted obligations and traditions as well as the praxial space of discourse and action.

It is because such an ethos, in institutionalized scholarship, shapes the scholarly behaviour and attitudes, that she wants to explore its rhetorical aims, seeking to effect such a common orientation among its practitioners, in the hope of decentering the dominant scientist ethos of biblical scholarship in the SBL and recentering it into a critical interpretive praxis for liberation.

She carries out this exploration in a very instructive analysis of the rhetorics of past presidential addresses, observing:

... (I)n the past forty years, no president of the SBL has used the opportunity of the presidential address for asking the membership to consider the political context of their scholarship and to reflect on its public accountability. Since 1947 no presidential address has explicitly reflected on world politics, global crises, human sufferings, or movements of change. Neither the civil rights movement nor the various liberation struggles of the so-called Third World, neither the assassination of Martin Luther King nor the Holocaust has become the rhetorical context for biblical studies.

It seems, she argues, that biblical scholarship appears to have taken place in a political vacuum, with the scholars understanding themselves as solely responsible to 'the vested interests of the 'fraternity of scientifically trained scholars'.

This ethos reminds her of Bultmann's remark in a letter that the war had not influenced his theology at all, since the internal discussion with the theology of their teachers played a far more important role in the formation of their theology than the war or some other external factor.

Fiorenza asks:

Do we ask and teach our students to ask in a disciplined way how our scholarship is conditioned by its social location and how it serves political functions?

She recalls the 1945 address, in which the demand for something practical in biblical scholarship, and for research to strengthen faith and provide blueprint for human conduct was seen as 'one of the same virus which has poisoned German scholarship and made it liable to Nazi ideology'. The then president called for biblical critics to be 'emotionally detached, intellectually dispassionate, and rationally value-neutral'. Fiorenza explains:

This scientist ethos of value-free detached inquiry insists that the biblical critic needs to stand outside the common circumstances of collective life and

stresses the alien character of biblical materials. A-political detachment, objective literalism, and scientific value-neutrality are the rhetorical postures that seem to be dominant in the positivistic paradigm of biblical scholarship.

She makes the important observation that this scientist ethos arose in the struggle of biblical scholarship to free itself from dogmatic and ecclesiastical controls. In this process, it made the positivist nineteenth-century view of historiography the theoretical context for biblical scholarship in the academy, ignoring its socio-political location and covertly advocat(ing) an a-political reality without assuming responsibility for their political assumptions and interests'. In this regard, she joins Tracy in his criticism of scientism and pleads for a critical theory of rhetoric or discursive practices in which ethical-political and religious-theological questions can be raised as *constructive to the interpretation process* (my italics).

The question of power now becomes central to the interpretive task. Whose interests are served? What kinds of worlds are envisioned? What roles, duties, and values are advocated?, asks Fiorenza. She explains that this calls for a double ethics: an ethics of historical reading, but also an ethics of accountability.

... (T)he careful reading of biblical texts and the appropriate construction of their historical worlds and of their symbolic universes need to be complemented by a theological discussion of the contemporary religious functions of biblical texts which claim scriptural authority today in biblical communities of faith.

She further draws some practical conclusions, *inter alia* that the institutionalized dichotomy between university training and ministerial education in schools of theology must be overcome, that the students must learn to engage in disciplined reflection on the societal values promoted by their intellectual disciplines, that biblical scholarship has the responsibility to make its research available to a wider public, and that

... biblical scholarship must acknowledge the continuing political influence of the Bible in Western culture and society.<sup>11</sup>

It is not necessary to summarize the obvious trend in these four positions. With these remarks, we can return to the role of biblical scholarship in South Africa, restricting ourselves to New Testament scholarships.

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<sup>11</sup> All references to 'The ethics of interpretation', cf note 2.