

## THE ETHICS OF INTERPRETATION - AND SOUTH AFRICA<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*This article looks at the ethos and socio-political role of South African New Testament scholarship during the last four decades, in an attempt to see whether any real paradigm shifts have taken place. Three periods are distinguished: the period of biblical scholarship and the legitimization of apartheid, when a deliberate movement was started in Afrikaner Reformed circles to read the Bible with socio-political purposes; a period during which methodology became all-important, and hardly any attention was given to ecclesial, theological and socio-political issues; and a period during which a new wave of socio-political interpretation can be seen. Reacting to several analyses by W S Vorster, the question is discussed whether this new social awareness represents a paradigm shift in scholarly method and ethos, or not.*

### Introduction

In the preceding article, the voices of four important spokespeople from the USA, with influence in South African scholarly circles, were heard: two of them, Thiselton and Tracy, from the tradition of hermeneutics, and two of them, Wuellner and Fiorenza, from the tradition of rhetorical criticism. It was shown that all four agree that the ethos of biblical scholarship must not be that of value-free scientism, but instead that of responsible, life-oriented human praxis, aware especially of its own socio-political role and functions of power. It became clear that that would involve, in many scholarly circles, nothing less than a revolutionary change of paradigm, with serious effects for institutional biblical scholarship as such.

In South Africa, this is a serious issue as well.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a sequence to the immediately preceding article, 'The ethics of interpretation - new voices from the USA'.

## Biblical scholarship and the legitimation of *apartheid*

Almost fifty years ago, a deliberate movement started in Afrikaner Reformed circles to read the Bible with socio-political purposes. Highlights of this movement have recently been documented and analyzed in the excellent *Die NGK en Apartheid* by the editor, Johann Kinghorn, who teaches Biblical Studies in Stellenbosch. He calls it 'In search of an exegesis'.<sup>2</sup> The need arose at that stage to legitimate the growing socio-political reality of *apartheid* or separate development, not only because of the important role of religion and especially the Bible in society, but also on account of the fact that some theologians, like Ben Marais and later B B Keet, explicitly denied the biblical basis of *apartheid*.<sup>3</sup> Since the beginning of the forties, several theologians, biblical scholars, church leaders and church meetings contributed to provide such theological legitimation. And, of course, for the Reformed mind theological legitimation meant biblical legitimation. In 1948, for example, the Transvaal Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church explicitly said:

T o v die Sendingbeleid merk ons op dat dit die gesonde beleid stel soos dit (a) onder inwerking van die Woord van God op die vrome gemoed, en (b) as vrug van 'n paar eeue van kontak met die naturel tot stand gekom het. 'n *Bewuste aanspraak op die gebondenheid van Skrifbeginsels is daar eger nie, en juis daarom staan die formulering nie so suiwer en sterk as wat dit moes nie* (my italics).

Many theologians and ministers of religion played their part in providing this 'conscious appeal to biblical principles', especially influential amongst them Totius, the well-known translator of the Bible and eminent scholar and poet, and the equally famous E P Groenewald, professor in New Testament at the University of Pretoria, as well as respected scholar and translator.

Of special importance, for example, was Groenewald's report to the then Federal Council, a body in which all four provincial Synods of the DRC were represented, called *Skriftuurlike grondslag van die beleid van rasse-apartheid en voogdyskap*. This report was expanded, and published in Geoff Cronjé's very influential *Regverdige rasse-apartheid*. In 1948, shortly before the general election in which the still ruling Nationalist Party came to power for the first time with the policy of *apartheid*, this report was tabled and accepted at the Transvaal Synod of the DRC.

Recently, this report has been analyzed and criticized by several biblical and specifically New Testament scholars from Dutch Reformed circles, like Kinghorn,

<sup>2</sup> Kinghorn, J (ed), *Die NGK en apartheid*, 1986, Johannesburg: Macmillan.

<sup>3</sup> For the legitimating role of theology, after the growing socio-political and ecclesiastical reality of *apartheid*, see Botha, A J, *Die evolusie van 'n volksteologie*, Bellville: UWK, 1986. For the role of Keet, Marais, and others, see Durand, J J F, 'Afrikaner piety and dissent', in Villa-Vicencio, C & De Gruchy, J W (eds), *Resistance and hope. South African essays in honour of Beyers Naudé*, 1985, Cape Town: David Philip & Grand Rapids: Wn Eerdmans.

Loubser and also, in perhaps the most penetrating treatment, Cilliers Breytenbach, followed by P G R de Villiers and Willem Nicol.

The interesting fact is that this present criticism of what I have called a first phase of overtly socio-political scholarship, is exercised in the context of a criticism of *apartheid*, and its theological legitimation. All of these scholars, and more names can be added, are critical of the *apartheid*-style of reading the Bible, but, in some form or other, from the viewpoint of a new socio-political ethos.

One could say that they already form part of a third phase of New Testament scholarship in Afrikaner Reformed circles, again - or still? - convinced of the legitimacy of reading the biblical message in an ethical and socio-political context, but critical of the way in which it was done by the *apartheid*-theologians.

The crucial methodological question lies in the 'again - or still?'. Do they read the Bible in a different way from what Groenewald and others have done, and if so, what are the differences? Or do they still read it in exactly the same way, but from a different ideological orientation?

### ***Apartheid and the anti-apartheid scholarship: the same paradigm?***

These questions have been asked in two very instructive contributions by the well-known New Testament professor of the University of South Africa, Willem Vorster.

One could argue that Vorster represents, at least with these two contributions, a second phase within Afrikaner Reformed New Testament scholarship, reflecting the ethos of historical, scientific research.

From this position he was one of the first to criticize the *apartheid*-scholarship, not only in its initial crude form, but specifically in its refined version in the famous 1974-document *Human relations and the South African scene in the light of Scripture* of the Dutch Reformed Synod. This article was already published in 1979, then thoroughly revised and rewritten for the influential *Apartheid is a heresy*, (eds J de Grunchy & C Villa-Vicencio), and as part of this volume also published in German, *Wenn wir wie Brüder beieinander wohnten ...* (1984).<sup>4</sup>

In terms of my distinction, one could say that he directs his criticism in this contribution towards the first phase of Afrikaner biblical scholarship.

Lesser known, but also extremely instructive, is a second contribution by Vorster, called 'The use of Scripture and the NG Kerk: a shift of paradigm or of values?'.<sup>5</sup> The title clearly suggests the focus: this time he addresses the new wave of Afrikaner biblical scholarship, also reflected in new documents and decisions of church

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<sup>4</sup> First publication in *Ekumene onder die Suiderkruis* (ed A C Viljoen), 1979, Pretoria: UNISA; rewritten for *Apartheid is a heresy* (eds De Grunchy & Villa-Vicencio), 1983, Cape Town: David Philip; German edition 1984, Neukirchen-Vluyn. In the references, page numbers are omitted.

<sup>5</sup> *New faces of Africa*, 1984, Hofmeyr J W and Vorster W S, (eds), Pretoria: UNISA, 204-219.

meetings and synods, and asks whether this new movement really reflects 'a new paradigm' - in different words: a new ethos of scholarship - or merely the same kind of (ethical, socio-political) scholarship, but now from a new socio-political perspective, i.e. the new 'values' of anti-*apartheid*, in its diverse forms.

In terms of my distinction, one could say that he directs his criticism in this contribution towards the third phase of Afrikaner biblical scholarship, arguing in fact that it is not a new phase at all, but the old in disguise.

Because his analyses are so penetrating and clear, a closer look at them may help to define the issues at stake still further.

In addressing 'The Bible and *apartheid*', he formulates his point of departure as follows:

In view of the important role the Bible seemingly plays in South Africa and the many different ways in which it is appealed to, it would seem that the interrelation between the Bible and politics need to be investigated afresh,

or, more specifically:

The sole purpose of my investigation is to test the credibility of the use of Scripture in this document (*Human relations ...*) in order to further discussion of the matter.

He directs his criticism at three issues: the use of Scripture; the Bible and history; the Bible as a book of norms.

For present purposes, the first issue is the important one. As far as the use of Scripture is concerned, he says that the report undoubtedly reflects a change in comparison with earlier DRC documents on race relations, but, this is a change in political premises and attitude and not in its use of the Bible, 'the change is political and not interpretative'.

The same basic assumption remains, namely that 'the Bible has something to say about race relations in a plural society', or: 'On the grounds of the authority and so-called all-sufficiency of Scripture it is believed that the Bible is a guide for all times and all problems of all natures'.

This assumption, says Vorster, is highly problematic. The Bible simply becomes an 'oracle book' of proof texts, and almost anything can be read into it when using it to establish an ideology like *apartheid*, he argues. This is 'the result of a history of uncritical hermeneutics, a hermeneutics of acceptance in which the relevance of the Bible is not questioned but simply accepted and confessed'. Precisely this assumption needs thorough revision, is his point.

All of this leads to a selective use of Scripture. 'Most Christians', says Vorster, 'be they defenders of *apartheid*, feminism, materialism or liberation, tend to use the Bible selectively as a kind of proof text'.

The result is ideological.

The argumentation in the report runs in a vicious circle. It starts with an ideology which is introduced into Scripture and in the end it becomes an ideology based on Scripture.

In the third part of his article he rejects the claim of the report that the Bible contains 'meta-historical norms' to be applied again and again in human history, quoting Klaus Berger's discussion of the hermeneutical problem of 'applicability' with strong approval. From these remarks it must be clear that Vorster is not criticizing (or defending) apartheid, but the way the Bible is being misused. Perhaps one can say that he is interested, as New Testament scholar, in defending the ethos of scientific biblical scholarship, against a selective, uncritical and ideological appropriation of the Bible for reasons of socio-political expediency.

This becomes even more obvious when he analyzes the way the Scripture is being used by opponents of *apartheid*, in the second of his articles referred to.

He explicitly sees this as a continuation of his investigation 'as a biblical scholar' of 'the use of and appeal to the Bible by the NGK'.

As point of departure, he takes a decision of the Western Cape Synod in 1983 (on open churches) and compares it with a decision of the General Synod of nine years previously. The problem is that they are, according to him, in 'direct contradiction' to one another, but that 'both resolutions have allegedly been passed as if in accordance with Scripture'.

This helps him to phrase the difficulty:

The question therefore arises whether both resolutions can be based on Scripture, and if so, in what sense?

His own thesis is that, although both resolutions claim to be biblical, they should rather be regarded as products of contextualized theology based on social interaction and legitimized, as a religious convention, by an appeal to Scripture.

Once again he starts his observations by acknowledging that the Synod's decisions reflect a major change, and even regards it as 'a contradiction and refutation' of the General Synod of only one year earlier. Once again he goes on to ask what really gave rise to this change, whether it constituted 'a shift in the way in which the Bible was interpreted', i.e., 'a shift in paradigm', or something else.

In an attempt to trace the origin and 'theological context' of this shift, he immediately starts with a thesis:

One needs to be open to the possibility that theology of *apartheid* might in principle be based on theological bias and foundations which need not differ, theologically spoken, much from anti-*apartheid* theology or Black theology. To put it another way, it is possible in the end that anti-*apartheid* and *apartheid* theology have, for example, the same view of Scripture, but that in each case a different political grid of interpretation is used to justify 'theological' views.

The rest of the article is an attempt to substantiate the claim that this is indeed the case in anti-*apartheid* circles within the DR Church-family, and that accordingly there has been only a shift of values and not of (hermeneutical) paradigm at the Western Cape Synod, and for that matter in the Dutch Reformed Church-family at large.

It is obvious how he equates *apartheid* and anti-*apartheid* theology. He recalls a previous article which he wrote on a book on the so-called Open Letter (1982) in which 123 theologians attacked *apartheid* and asked the DRC to reconsider its position on several issues.<sup>6</sup> He already then argued

that the Bible is used in anti-*apartheid* theology in the same selected way, as a book of norms without sensitivity for the fact that biblical texts are ancient texts and without taking into account the 'garstige Graberrof Lessing'.

He now repeats this warning, saying that meetings of the DRC itself have now started to operate with these new values, but still with the same, illegitimate appeal to Scripture. His criticism is sharp:

Both *apartheid* and anti-*apartheid* theologians in the NGK undoubtedly operate with exactly the same view of Scripture. The main difference is the (political) grid through which the Bible is read .... It is remarkable how zero terms like 'the gospel', 'biblical message', 'scriptural', 'according to the Bible', 'biblical views', 'biblical justice', 'biblical love', and so on abound ....

The Bible simply serves as a coat-hanger onto which a particular view of reconciliation, unity, peace, justice and so on it hung in order to promote in the name of the Bible a particular view on church and society in South Africa .... It is absolutely amazing to page through the weekly *Godsdiens-aktueel* in the daily newspaper *Beeld*, written by prominent representatives of this anti-*apartheid* stream of thought, to notice how readers are manipulated to believe that views presented are 'biblical', simply by the use of terms like 'Scriptural', 'the gospel' and 'biblical', without argumentation or substance. *Apartheid*-readings of Scripture are counter-acted and contradicted by anti-*apartheid* readings ... in an attempt to deconstruct the policy and its bad consequences for society. In this respect 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 viewpoint.

And that makes all these readings equally ideological:

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 .... The Bible is just not that kind of book. 'Biblical message' can stand for an ideology in the same way as 'liberation theology' or '*apartheid* theology' can stand for an ideology.

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<sup>6</sup> 'Boekbespreking: Bosch, König & Nicol', 1982, *Theologica Evangelica* 16 (2), 66-68. It refers to *Perspektief op die Ope Brief*, 1982, Kaapstad: Human & Rousseau.

*In essence there is no difference in the use and appeal to the Bible between apartheid and anti-apartheid theologians. There is, however, a difference in values.*

Of special importance for present purposes, is the way he laments the fact that the methods of interpretation taught and studied in biblical scholarship are not employed in these decisions:

Although new methods of biblical scholarship are even (sic) taught at theological seminaries of the NGK and cognisance is taken of developments in biblical interpretations elsewhere, it would be wrong to think that implications of these methods are integrated into theology or applied to views on Scripture.

And when he analyses the Western Cape decision and its origins in a Stellenbosch congregation, in which some of the biblical scholars participated, he remarks:

I cannot imagine any of my fellow New Testament scholars who were co-responsible, to be unaware of the very selective way Ephesians 2:18-9 was being used. No serious reader of the Bible would not notice how the author of Ephesians is manipulated by selective omission and inclusion of material to say what he did not say!

What are these 'new methods of biblical scholarship', taught but not applied? Although he does not spell it out in this particular context, the reference to Lessing and the description of the Bible as an 'ancient text' suggest that the ethos of a strong historical awareness is somewhere beneath the surface.

In other words, he is faced here with the same problem which he had with the *apartheid* theology of *Human relations ...*, namely that the historical nature of the Bible was not understood, or seriously and scholarly respected.

An important question remains, in order to clarify the issues at stake still further. Does Vorster himself provide us with possible directives as to how the Bible should be used, if at all? The answer is not very clear, and to be fair, it has not been his purpose to provide one. His aim was to unmask a wrong way of reading and using the Bible, selectively and ideologically, and not to describe possible legitimate ways of reading and appealing to the Bible. And therefore, although he seems to suggest on several occasions that an appeal to the Bible may function somewhere in socio-political discussions, it is not clear precisely how.

In the first article, for example, he expresses himself positively, saying:

What I have in mind is the creation of a contextualized theology which is *credible* and will stand the test of time.

But how will Scripture function in this?

First of all, the relevance of the Bible for present day matters political should not be taken for granted. The Bible does not possess meta-historical norms. The historical nature of the Bible should be taken fully seriously. What then?

It has become clear that the Bible is a collection of *ancient* books which have to be interpreted in the light of their own character, that is, occasional religious writings of different kinds which were written long ago over a long period of time (his italics).

What are the implications?

... (T)he application of the Bible is a matter of decision and action. *On the ground of his salvation* a Christian can decide and act from his understanding of a situation and not on account of meta-historical norms. These actions and decisions are determined by the tension between *the salvation a Christian already has* and *the hope in Christ*. They can be 'in line' with what the Bible teaches but need not flow from or relate to an aspect of the Bible. The Bible is a living witness that is not to be 'copied' slavishly, for it seeks to enter into a dynamic, inspiring relationship with us (my italics).

It is obvious from these tentative and extremely confusing remarks that Vorster, at that stage and in that context, was only trying to make a polemical point and not to give positive guidelines. What does 'on the ground of one's salvation' and 'the hope in Christ' mean? Where does one find the content of these expressions? How does one decide from one's understanding of the situation? How can anything be 'in line' with what the Bible teaches, if the Bible is merely an ancient collection of occasional religious writings, written over a long period of time, i.e. if the concept 'the Bible' itself becomes problematical? And how can these actions be 'in line with the Bible' but 'need not flow from or relate to any aspect of the Bible'? How does one then know that it is 'in line' with 'the Bible'? Is it really 'the Bible' that seeks to enter into a dynamic relationship with us? Similar questions can be multiplied. It is clear that Vorster was not even interested in phrasing the systematic, ethical and hermeneutical questions correctly, but that his argument was against the selective, ideological and a-historical use of the Bible, from the ethos of scientific, historical scholarship.

In the second essay, he does go further in explaining his own convictions, pleading for a process of 'co-operative human decision and action', for a theology of contemporary 'doing and making, not simply of receiving and transmitting'. He once again emphasises the importance of making 'one's own decisions', again saying that the rediscovery of the importance of the unity in Christ is 'in line' with 'New Testament relieving of the Easter-faith, presence of God, and so on - but it is not given as a norm in the New Testament. 'Biblical associations cannot sanction, substantiate or undergird contemporary decisions nor do they prescribe: they offer incentives to Christians who want to do likewise, not the same!'

Once again, it is not clear what 'in line' means, especially when it is in line with 'relieving of the Easter faith, presence of God and so on'! The question is precisely what the content of the 'presence of God and so on' is. And interestingly enough, when he clarifies his own commitment almost in passing, he says:

For the sake of clarity let me underline that from my point of view open churches and joint worship should be commonplace among Christians on the



ground of *the fact* that membership of the Body of Christ should be determined by faith, not by any other factor (my italics).

Now how can one say that, on this position? What kind of 'fact' can that be? And how does he know that it is a fact - given the fact that this is precisely what the heated argument in the church is all about? But that merely in passing, to point to the fact that all of us, even the scientific scholars regarding the Bible as a collection of ancient religious writings need some kind of systematic, 'dogmatic' grid.

Of special importance may be a new category of ideas which he introduces in the second article. He remarks that E Nida has made him aware of the fact that 'power and association are the basic dynamics behind communication during a recent seminar on 'socio-linguistics and Bible translation'.' He then analyses the rhetorical function of the decisions of Synod with great clarity, saying that they serve social power in a context where an appeal to Scripture is regarded as authoritative, where it is a matter of convention and expediency to do it like that in order to mobilize religious and divine legitimation and sanction.

The crucial point, however, is that he obviously regards this only negatively. The socio-political power of this rhetoric, the pervasive influence of the Bible and biblical associations in such an ecclesial and public context, the ethos of such an interpretive community - all these factors seem to contradict his ethos of biblical scholarship, which prescribes that the Bible, as a collection of ancient, occasional religious writings cannot and should not be used in such a way.

That means that, although he is more aware of these factors than the people involved in these interpretive communities themselves, and precisely because he understands these collective processes so well, he wants to counter them, arguing that one (in individualistic fashion) must make one's own decisions, without any religious appeal, on one's own responsibility, in a rational, discursive argument, on the grounds of one's analysis of the situation alone.

Why is it so important for him? There are two possible reasons. Either he employs this powerful socio-political and ideological rhetoric because he really wants to serve the interests and the ethos of institutionalized biblical scholarship itself. Or he employs this powerful rhetoric and appeals to the values of this particular interpretive community (of institutional biblical scholarship) because he wants to serve direct socio-political purposes in the public South African context, e g taking the *apartheid* debate out of a religious context. His last remarks may reflect something of this when he says:

*The risk of making theological decisions in your own name is less dangerous than making them in the name of and on behalf of the living God.*

In short, Vorster is also playing with the idea of a 'new paradigm', but only in the negative sense that he argues that it has not yet appeared in the biblical scholarship of the anti-*apartheid* theology. And in discussing the role of rhetorics, language, power and interpretive communities, i e the theoretical tools advocated by Wuellner, Fiorenza *et al*, he does not see that as positive possibilities, but merely as instruments to demonstrate the selective and ideological use of the Bible.

It is difficult to know how Vorster will react to Fiorenza's claims. In fact, he explicitly included 'feminism' when he said that 'most Christians, be they defenders of apartheid, feminism, materialism or liberation, tend to use the Bible selectively as a kind of proof text'. Now, perhaps he said that merely with rhetorical (in the popular, negative sense!) purposes, trying to show the *apartheid* readers, by way of unimaginable associations, how bad they really are! But perhaps he really said that seriously and on purpose, arguing from the ethos of scientific scholarship.

In a recent publication, he has directly addressed the issue of a new paradigm for biblical scholarship, in the context of an important conference on 'Paradigms and progress in theology'. He was one of the organisers, and this was the key-note address. Once again, however, his own position does not become very clear. He seems to affirm that changes are taking place within New Testament scholarship which, taken together, point to something more than merely 'the restoration of the historico-critical paradigm', and in this argument he often refers to Fiorenza, but he does not commit himself in any way or make evaluation comments of any sort.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps it is therefore fair to say that Vorster is arguing from the ethos of scientific, historical biblical scholarship, convinced that this second phase or paradigm has not even succeeded in replacing the old ideological way of reading within South African scholarship.

## A new wave of socio-political interpretation

How do the anti-*apartheid* theologians, as Vorster describes them, read the Bible?

It is extremely difficult to answer this question, primarily because anti-*apartheid* theologians are not a homogeneous group at all. *Apartheid* is being criticised and rejected by different people, in varying degrees, for diverse reasons, in many contexts and with the use of a variety of reading strategies. In fact, even to use the categorization 'anti-*apartheid* theology' and to apply it to biblical scholarship may be a gross generalization, confusing more than it clarifies.

The most important anti-*apartheid* theology is in fact being done outside the circles of biblical scholarship. And it is perhaps not without reason that so few black, and feminist, theologians in South Africa have so far completed doctoral degrees in New Testament studies, compared to ethics, systematic theology, historical studies and practical theology.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Paradigms and progress in Theology*, eds J Mouton, A G van Aarde and W S Vorster, Human Sciences Research Council, 1989, 31-48.

<sup>8</sup> Fiorenza says in her address: 'To my knowledge only one Afro-American and one Asian-American woman have yet received a doctorate in biblical studies' (footnote 10, p 6). Much the same can be said with regard to black South Africans, particularly from the Reformed tradition, and New Testament studies. In a recent, as yet unpublished paper, G D Cloete, professor in New Testament at the University of the Western Cape and one of the few exceptions, dealt with this issue and some of the reasons. He argued, amongst other things, that the division of theology into separated disciplines, with

The point is, however, that in the eighties a growing number of Afrikaner biblical scholars came to the fore, from the Reformed tradition, and critical of the way the Bible has been and still is being used to legitimize apartheid. The distinctive point, however, is that they do not want to oppose that from the ethos of scientific scholarship, denying socio-political appeals to the Bible, but who want to read the Bible differently, claiming it for their own socio-political visions and strategies. Therefore, to focus and limit the question: How do these scholars claim to read the Bible?

It is impossible to go into detail. A few examples and generalizations must suffice, all of them taken from members of the respected New Testament Society of South Africa.

Vorster chose church decisions as his point of departure. Now some of the professors in the Faculties of the DRC, like A du Toit (Pretoria) and H J B Combrink (Stellenbosch), both of them members of the group of eight who signed the 1980 Reformation Day Witness, have been actively involved in church committees, decisions and documents critical of *apartheid* in some way or other, like *Kerk en Samelewing* (Du Toit) and the Western Cape Synod's decisions of 1982 and 1986 (Combrink). It is, however, of course not possible to distil their own contributions from these documents and proceedings.

Some other examples may better serve the purpose of illustrating this new kind of scholarship.

The first example is the two books edited by Cilliers Breytenbach of the University of South Africa on *Eenheid en konflik* (1987) and *Church in context* (1988).<sup>9</sup> In both these works, in addition to some prominent younger scholars, several well-known and senior Afrikaner Reformed scholars wrote contributions, including A du Toit, who co-edited the first, Bernard Lategan (Biblical Studies, Stellenbosch), P G R de Villiers, who co-edited the second, J Roberts, I du Plessis (all of them UNISA), J du Rand (Bloemfontein), and Willem Vorster himself. One would be taking things too far to suggest that these essays reflect either a homogeneous socio-political conviction or a single theory of interpretation. To the contrary. In spite of this, however, they are still noteworthy for several reasons.

In the first collection, it is clearly stated, on several occasions, that it is written within the context of the conflict over church unity within the DRC-family.

For many of the authors, this is obviously already a big step, merely to get involved in such a present-day ecclesiastical conflict, with socio-political overtones. When one compares their actual directives, however, it is remarkable to see how reserved, general, and non-committal they are. The reason is obvious. They are so aware of being New Testament scholars, and of the ethos, the 'shared intellectual space of freely accepted obligations and traditions, as well as the praxial space of discourse

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the result that the rhetorical power of the texts is often lost in traditional biblical scholarship, is one of the reasons why black theologians prefer more comprehensive approaches, with more direct relevance.

<sup>9</sup> Both Pretoria: NGKB, respectively 1987 and 1988.

and action' which that involves, that they are almost apologetical of the mere fact that they write with a view to a specific present-day conflict. Merely the fact that they suggest, through this publication, that New Testament scholarship may have something to say to a present-day ecclesiastical and ethical issue is felt as a revolutionary step in itself. They are, accordingly, very careful in the expressions they use. Breytenbach, in the preface, says that they take the 'liberty' or 'courage' (*vrmoedigheid*) to underline the decisions of the Early Church, because they share the conviction that the church should 'take note of' these early decisions. And Du Toit, in the introduction, is also at pains to explain and defend the reasons why they write these essays. All the contributions are careful, scholarly discussions of different historical situations of conflict in the New Testament church, with extremely careful, general and formal concluding remarks. The ethos and the rhetorics are clearly that of biblical scholars - almost apologetic for what they are (not even) doing.

Even more interesting for present purposes, is the second volume. Breytenbach, in the preface, explains that the purpose is to share with the wider public results of socio-historical studies, but also adds that it may 'perhaps help the church in Southern Africa with orientation in its stormy context'. P G R de Villiers, 'South African pioneer of socio-historical interpretation', analyses in his introduction in some detail the relationship between Bible, church and context, dealing explicitly with many of the issues referred to. The important point is that he, although as mindful of the pitfalls as Vorster, and addressing them openly, does so with a view to the possibility that the biblical witness, when read in its socio-historical contexts and as forms of rhetoric, may indeed help to provide guidelines for responsible living. And although almost all the contributors again refrain from giving such guidelines, merely providing socio-historical information on different biblical traditions, the accumulative rhetorical effect is certainly that they think it may be relevant for present-day decision-making.

Breytenbach's own contribution is an interesting illustration. In a previous study of the concept of reconciliation in the Early Church, during a public conference on 'Reconciliation and construction in South Africa', he has shown that he regards his task as a historical one, but that he is not unwilling to draw conclusions and to get involved in present-day socio-political and ethical debates.<sup>10</sup>

The fact that he initiated these two volumes further illustrates this willingness. In his own contribution, with the significant methodological title 'The identity of a Christian - with reference to Paul' (*in aansluiting by ...*), he exercises the most extensive criticism of Groenewald's report to this day and does not refrain from giving his own 'witness, in the tradition of Paul'.

Willem Nicol, New Testament scholar and ethicist and outspoken critic of *apartheid* over many years, writes an epilogue, in which he makes far-reaching conclusions with regard to the present-day South African conflict and the fact that the church should stand by the oppressed, and what that means within the spiral of *apartheid*,

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<sup>10</sup> 'Reconciliation: Shifts in Christian soteriology', in *Reconciliation and construction* (ed W S Vorster), 1986, Pretoria: UNISA, 1-25.

injustice and violence. Without doubt, the other authors do not take responsibility for his conclusions, but then again, the rhetorical context of the book as a whole makes this a remarkable publication for South African standards.

A second example. Combrink, known for his interest in literary theories, has written an interesting, concluding contribution in Kinghorn's penetrating and controversial study of *apartheid*, called 'Perspectives from Scripture'.<sup>11</sup> He deliberately addresses the methodological, hermeneutical question, raised by the fact that different church bodies read the Bible differently; he pays attention to New Testament perspectives on nation, culture, groups in society, and so forth; and he discusses New Testament perspectives on the kingdom, the church and the world, and the church's responsibility in society. He emphasises that he deals only with 'perspectives', because he does not want to present a new and alternative social system in the form of 'a new ideological use of Scripture'.

In the process, he discusses the role of the readers, the contextual nature of all theology, which does not imply that all contextualization remains true to the Bible, the role of presuppositions, and the use of Scripture in ethics. Although aware of the historical nature of the biblical documents and the problems of the reading process, he does not shy away from arguing that the interpretive community can detect continuity and tendencies in the New Testament itself, which makes it possible to argue discursively about 'a course' or direction which the New Testament shows.

A third example: Lategan and Kinghorn from the Department of Biblical Studies at Stellenbosch, have recently founded a Centre for Contextual Hermeneutics, with several research projects focusing directly on socio-political issues, e g an important 'Programme for ecumene and contextual theology'.

The first publication of this programme is *The option for inclusive democracy. A theological-ethical study of appropriate social values for South Africa*. Acknowledging that the Bible and the Christian tradition do not provide 'blueprints' for society, the authors argue that these sources do provide 'ethical norms and perspectives on human existence', which are of fundamental importance for present-day Christian life in society. This document, not only in the way it uses Scripture, but also in 'the praxial space of discourse and action' (Fiorenza) which it so deliberately accepts, provides an unprecedented example within this tradition.

### **A shift in paradigms of interpretation in South Africa?**

To conclude with some generalizations: looking at the past decades, one can perhaps say that the stage where Afrikaner Reformed biblical scholarship served the *apartheid* ideology, was replaced by one in which a scientific ethos dominated, in which the scholars tried to carry on as if nothing was happening in society.

This was, however, not only in reaction to socio-political use of the Bible, but also to dogmatic and ecclesial control (Fiorenza). When one is allowed to generalize the

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<sup>11</sup> Cf note 2, p 211-234.

broad trend during this time, it is remarkable to see that almost no biblical scholar wrote anything on the New Testament and ethics; the question of the canon, and the unity of the New Testament was, with one exception, hardly addressed; almost no-one, in fact, wrote a monography of any kind, dealing, e.g., with a theme in the New Testament as a whole; hardly anyone paid attention to New Testament theology, and in the New Testament Society there is no separate subgroup for Biblical Theology; there was almost no positive contributions to the work of systematic theologians coming from biblical scholars.<sup>12</sup> All these factors are symptomatic of the fact that New Testament scholarship was going through a period in which the ethos and practices of institutionalized scientific scholarship were freely accepted, safeguarding the practitioners from the aberrations and conflicts of both the socio-political and ecclesial-dogmatic struggles.

Interestingly enough, the scholars from Afrikaner Reformed circles, with the exception of a few, like Vorster, working within the academic contexts of non-ecclesial faculties like UNISA's, could not rid themselves completely from the powerful controls and the inherent constraints of the institutionalized ecclesial and doctrinal spheres, with the one important result that they never took the historical-critical paradigm fully seriously. In this regard, Vorster's criticism has always been fully relevant.

It therefore came as no surprise that these scholars found the literary-aesthetic paradigm, which Fiorenza describes as the third paradigm in USA-scholarship, so suitable to their interests and ethos. It allowed them the opportunity to operate within the scientific ethos, and to steer free of both socio-political and ecclesial-dogmatic conflicts, and yet not find themselves in the difficulties brought about by the historical-critical paradigm. At the 1987 Meeting of the NTSSA on hermeneutics, for example, when the same periscope was read with a variety of different exegetical methods, it was remarkable, but symptomatic, to see that both historical readings and socio-ethical or ideological readings were almost completely absent.<sup>13</sup>

At present, however, the possibilities of rhetorics are beginning to make a change. As the illustrations have shown, many of these scholars are beginning to address socio-political and ethical issues, although they are still very reserved in their conclusions and very much aware of the ethos of institutionalized scientific scholarship. At the same time, the rhetorical approach provides the opportunity to

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<sup>12</sup> The one important exception referred to on most of these generalizing comments is the authoritative series, edited by A du Toit, with several contributors from the ranks of the New Testament Society, called *Guide to the New Testament*, and meant for use in theological training, of which parts 1, 4 and 5 have already been published in Afrikaans and translated into English.

<sup>13</sup> Cf for the papers delivered, *Neotestamentica* 22/2, November 1988, including my own evaluation 'Responsible hermeneutics. A systematic theologian's response to the readers and readings of Luke 12:35-45'. During 1989 the NTSSA is 25 years old, and a historical study and interpretation is made by J le Roux, professor at Pretoria, which promises to be very helpful for understanding the dynamics and trends of the past decades.

take the historical questions seriously as well, but now not as concern with the history of the text (which remains an ecclesial and dogmatic risk), but in the form of the social history of the biblical narratives, necessary to understand the rhetorical power and function of the biblical texts. As to the reasons why so many of them welcome this opportunity, one can speculate, but not doubt the new values suspected by Vorster and the feeling of public responsibility within the escalating conflict in South Africa play a role.

This may also explain why there has been almost no interest in drawing conclusions in the second direction, namely that of systematic theology.

That these schools share Fiorenza's views on a new paradigm in which biblical scholarship has been decentered and recentered in a critical interpretive praxis for liberation, would be saying far too little.

That most or all of these attempts may indeed be selective and opportunistic and serve new ideological purposes is, of course, possible. That the new claims of rhetorical criticism may be used, contrary to its own purposes, as welcome legitimization of all kinds of 'return to pre-critical reading and facile application of biblical texts' (Fiorenza), is possible. That the kind of criticism by Vorster may be equally, if not more, ideological, especially in the present South African context, is also possible - as I have argued elsewhere.<sup>14</sup> And that my own rhetoric in this analysis may be just as ideological, trying to reclaim the power of the Scriptures for systematic, ecclesial and socio-political purposes, is also possible.

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<sup>14</sup> In a yet unpublished paper 'Ideologie, diskoers, teks - en teologie', delivered during a HSRC-seminar, I tried to show how, for example, the well-known publication by F Deist, *Se God so ?*, with a deliberate anti-ideological purpose, was used very ideologically in the public discourse of the South African (party-)political debate. In a situation where an oppressive system like *apartheid* was religiously legitimated over many years, and where the present-day opponents of this system draw their most important inspiration from religious sources, values and traditions, it is, of course, extremely ideological to deny them that possibility.