

# NEW TESTAMENT EXEGESIS IN THEORY AND PRACTICE\*

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## ABSTRACT

Exegesis should incorporate the basic insights of modern linguistics and literary studies, without ignoring the older grammarians and rhetoricians. Divergent interpretations of a text is possible, but authentic understanding remains within certain parameters. Responsible exegesis needs a multi-dimensional approach. The contribution from various sciences towards the theory of responsible exegesis is discussed. The two most decisive elements in specifying meaning are text and context. Contrary to the voices calling for the death of the author, he remains an important factor. The role of the reader has become increasingly important. The ideal would be a controlled and controllable exegetical procedure. An exegetical programme is proposed to serve as a very basic and flexible vademecum.

## 1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

- Exegesis is more than a mere technique or method; it is an *art* of attentively listening to the Bible and of creatively transforming what *has been said* into what *should be said* today. But an art must also be developed, and, in order to do that, even the best artist needs a substantial amount of technical know-how. For that reason it is crucially important to reflect on the theory and practise of exegesis.
- During the twentieth century the scientific study of human language has made tremendous progress. If it is true that the nineteenth century saw the birth of scientific linguistics, it is even more true that modern linguistics, of which Ferdinand de Saussure should rightly be regarded as the founder, has given this study a sound scientific basis.<sup>2</sup>

\* A fuller version of this and the following article is due to appear in a volume under the title *Close reading the New Testament. Hermeneutics, exegesis and methods*, Protea Book House.

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2 See the overview in Lyons (1968:22-52). Turner (1995) offers a concise and clear introduction into the basic principles of modern linguistics, together with important suggestions for further reading. In his introduction to the English translation of Egger's 1987 work, Hendrikus Boers (see Boers 1996) also gives a valuable overview of some of the most important recent developments.

The biblical texts were not written in some kind of heavenly language. Although dealing with foundational religious beliefs, they remain straightforward specimens of linguistic communication. Modern linguistics and literary science have therefore much to contribute towards our understanding of the Bible. The problem with publications in this field, including those of biblical scholars who have mastered the intricacies of linguistic and literary understanding, is that they are so often written in what others experience as highly idiosyncratic language. The different schools develop their own linguistic micro-worlds in which only the initiate is at home. When the ordinary exegete wants to evaluate or make use of the insights of such a school, he<sup>3</sup> is forced, first, to undertake a time-consuming study in order to break its code. The situation becomes even worse when various approaches and methods, which may enrich our understanding of the biblical text, are on offer.

In this presentation, an attempt is made to incorporate those insights from linguistic and literary studies which seem most relevant for exegesis, and to formulate them in a manner which those also who have received only a basic training in traditional grammar and stylistics, may understand and implement. Some technical terminology could not be avoided, but these terms will be explained.

At the same time, it would be a grave mistake to disregard the insights of older grammarians and rhetoricians. First, because modern linguists often simply reformulate language phenomena with which previous generations were already familiar. Secondly, these older students of language stood in an ancient tradition, dating back to the pre-Christian era, the language conventions and strategies of which were well-known to our New Testament authors. To ignore this heritage would be extremely unwise.

## 2. RESPONSIBLE EXEGESIS

Any student of the Bible, whether studying it from inner conviction or merely as an important religious or cultural phenomenon, should certainly strive to understand this collection of ancient documents as closely to their original meaning as possible. In the case of Christian readers, whether lay Christians, theological students, ministers or theologians, there is the additional motivation that they believe that God spoke to people in the Bible and that, through these texts, he still has a message for us today. For them exegesis is much more than a cerebral activity; it becomes an existential engage-

3 Masculine pronouns should be taken to include the feminine whenever applicable.

ment.<sup>4</sup> Misinterpreting the text, let alone distorting it, can therefore have grievous implications, as we know from so many instances in church history.

There is a certain ambivalence with regard to our ability to understand the New Testament. In a given situation, a child may grasp the thrust of a New Testament passage better than a professor of theology. On the other hand, understanding the New Testament correctly is complicated by so many factors that the chances of misinterpretation are infinitely greater. One of these complicating factors is the fact that we are not the direct recipients of the messages which have been encoded in the New Testament documents. A cross-cultural divide of two millennia separates us from the first century readers or hearers of these writings and our frame of reference regarding them is full of gaps. To retrieve these messages as the first recipients would have experienced them is indeed an awesome venture.

In the past exegesis was mostly understood as an almost intuitive insight into the meaning of biblical utterances. As long as one kept the grammatico-historical realities in mind, exegesis could be practised with confidence. Modern scholars realise the complexities of exegesis much better. They have also become much more humble regarding their results. The optimistic claim that one can determine *the* meaning of a text has made way for the conviction that, within the textual and contextual constraints of a given utterance, various understandings may be possible and that these understandings may vary in accordance with the different social situations and personal dispositions of primary and secondary readers of the text.<sup>5</sup> In addition, communication science has made it quite clear that communication, including written communication, is a very complicated process which seldom results in a fully appropriate transfer of meaning. According to Coupland, Giles and Wiemann (1991:3) “language use and communication are in fact pervasively and even intrinsically flawed, partial and problematic.”<sup>6</sup>

Are exegetes therefore not engaging in a hopeless endeavour? Should we not in fact despair of deriving authentic meaning from the New Testament

4 According to Peterson (1998:269)

the text moves from our heads into our hearts, where it gives shape and energy for living, not just ideas for thinking.

5 Cf. Combrink (1984); Porter (1997:18).

6 They refer to the communication model of Sperber and Wilson, according to which miscommunication is the norm, not an exception (*idem*:8). As editors, these three authors have brought together an impressive number of essays on the prevalence of miscommunication in various fields of modern communication.

texts? In this regard we should clearly distinguish between *some* loss/distortion of meaning and a complete breakdown of authentic semantic transfer. Although misunderstanding is a serious factor to reckon with, not every communication necessarily results in substantial or total miscommunication. The deconstructionist position that a text can have an unlimited number of meanings, with the implication that it would be impossible to derive any more or less reliable meaning from the biblical documents, is certainly untenable.<sup>7</sup> If someone were to shout “fire!” in an office complex, certainly nobody would respond with “There is a cold spell coming. I need to fetch my winter coat.”

It is true that we may be confronted with a bewildering multiplicity of readings derived from a specific biblical text. Such a text can certainly speak in many different ways to different audiences in different locations and periods, and even to varying audiences within the same space and time slot. However, among those varying understandings, most discerning interpreters will be able to differentiate between those which they experience as falling within the constraints of a given communication and those falling outside of it. When we speak of various possible meanings, we therefore refer to a spectrum of meanings *within certain parameters* which most experts would accept as possible within the network of constraints created by a given utterance. In the case of the New Testament, the writers sought to convey crucially important faith and life changing ideas. They would certainly have endeavoured to communicate effectively. There are texts which for us are extremely difficult to understand. Also many texts were misunderstood or abused in the past. Nevertheless we have sufficient reason to approach the New Testament documents in the expectation that, by minimising those factors impeding understanding, we can retrieve enough essential meaning to allay our fears of busying ourselves with a hopeless task.<sup>8</sup>

Regarding the use of methods, there is an emerging consensus that, in order to determine this essential message, no single method will suffice. Responsible exegesis needs a multi-dimensional approach, making eclectic use of all the relevant methods available.<sup>9</sup> At the same time it is imperative that these methods should be integrated into an exegetical programme which can guide the exegete towards his goal.

7 Thiselton (1992:103-132) evaluates the deconstructionist position from a hermeneutical perspective. For a concise description, cf. Abrams (1999:225-230).

8 Cf. the remarks of Court (1997:155-159) about the “connecting and redeeming” Ariadne’s thread guiding us through the labyrinth of interpretations.

9 See also Porter (1997:10-11, 17-18).

### 3. THE CONTRIBUTION OF VARIOUS DISCIPLINES

#### 3.1 General remarks

Several disciplines contribute towards a better understanding of our exegetical task. Biblical scholars borrow, *inter alia*, from communication science, linguistics, literary science, philosophy, history, sociology and archaeology. Specific biblical applications of some of these sciences have developed into important sub-disciplines of New Testament research, such as textual criticism, background studies (including socio-scientific studies of the Mediterranean world) and biblical archaeology. All of these research fields contribute immensely towards our understanding of the New Testament. No serious scholar can afford to ignore the contribution of these disciplines.

Since the New Testament texts were forms of communication, it will be worth our while to focus on some implications of communication theory for exegesis. At the same time, reference will also be made to certain other fields of study.

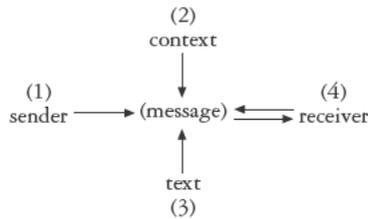
We have a whole array of communication models available, varying from the relatively basic to the very sophisticated.<sup>10</sup> However, basic to all of them are the following six elements (cf. Jakobson 1966:353):

- (3) context  
 (1) sender.....(4) message.....(2) receiver  
 (5) contact  
 (6) code

According to this scheme, the six key elements in communication are the sender (addresser, source, author, speaker, encoder), the receiver (addressee, reader, audience, decoder), the context, the message, the contact between sender and receiver, and the code. For our purpose the element of “contact” can be disregarded, because it is not constitutive of the content of the message itself, but rather of its transmission. And in the case of written communication we can replace the “code” with the specific way in which a message is being linguistically “encoded”, namely the “text”. The message (meaning)

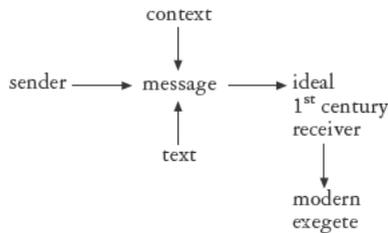
10 Well-known examples, from various perspectives, are those of Shannon & Weaver (1963 [1949]:5); Schramm (1955:4-8); Jakobson (1966 [1960]:353); Berlo (1960:72); Casmir (1974:10). Hernadi (1976) offers four useful communicational “maps” for literary purposes.

is determined by the interplay between the text, the context, the sender and the receiver. We could visualise this interaction as follows:



Does this imply that all four strategic poles are equally indispensable? Certainly each of them contributes towards specifying meaning. But not all are equally indispensable. In poems the targeted readers usually play a minimal role. The writers of newspaper reports, like the tellers of stories, often recede into the background. In the case of the Gospels, neither their writers nor their intended readers can be identified with certainty. Nevertheless these documents still communicate. The same holds true of a book such as Hebrews, although knowing the author and the addressees would certainly have helped one to determine its message more precisely. This implies that the two most decisive elements in specifying meaning are, in order of importance, *text* and *context*.

The purpose of exegesis is to read the original message as closely as possible to the way in which its first century readers would have done, by means of an informed “tuning in” to the interplay between the text, the context, the writer and the addressees. The exegete would want to “sit in” the position of such an addressee. Formulated more precisely: the exegete would endeavour to occupy the position of an “ideal reader”.<sup>11</sup>



11 Cuddon (1998:409) defines the concept of “ideal reader” as what every author wants. That imaginary person who, the writer hopes, will understand completely the experience he is trying to convey, and respond to it as he wishes.

In identifying these four strategic poles, we should keep in mind that there exists an important overlapping between them. The author (sender) and his situation can, in a sense, be visualised as part of the context. The same will be true of the reader (addressee). Viewed from another angle, it could be said that the writer as well as the addressees form part of the text in so far as they are encoded in the text. However, for the purpose of our present discussion, we shall treat these four poles separately. This will be useful in order to highlight the intricacies and caveats of the exegetical process.

### 3.2 The text

The text is the final arbiter of meaning. The first and decisive rule of exegesis is respect for the supremacy of the text. From the vast number of language signs at his disposal, the author deliberately made a specific selection and he arranged these items in a specific way in order to convey his message. This is really a platitude, but it is amazing how often this rule is bent or even disregarded. *Eisegesis* (reading into the text what one would like it to say) is practised instead of exegesis.

Illustration: An obvious example of such *eisegesis* is the way in which South African advocates of apartheid gleaned justification for this ideology from certain biblical texts. For instance the speaking “in other tongues” on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:4) was interpreted as a confirmation that God wanted different nations to exist separately. Likewise the translation of Acts 17:26 that God determined for the nations “the boundaries of their habitation” was read as a clear indication that the various groups in South Africa should each have its own territory. That this text in reality focuses on God’s actions with humanity as a unity, and on his intent that the human race should “seek him” was blatantly ignored (Combrink 1986:222-223).

Due to the importance of the text, determining its exact form is a prerequisite. This is the function of New Testament textual criticism. Mastery of the code in which the text was originally written is another essential. This implies a good knowledge of Greek, especially New Testament Greek, of its vocabulary, its syntax and its literary conventions. Millions of Christians get immense spiritual help from using translations, dictionaries, concordances and commentaries in their Bible studies, but these can never fully replace the living experience of the original text. Another prerequisite would be an understanding of linguistic and literary basics such as syntax, structure, genre, etc. It is rather astounding that, almost a century after Ferdinand de Saussure, even the difference between the synchronic and the diachronic study of language and the decisive importance of linguistic structure are still not universally acknowledged.

### 3.3 Context

Context (social context, situation, setting) is also crucially important for determining meaning. Unless we know the context of an utterance, multitudes of meanings are possible.

Illustration: The sentence, “I shall get you”, could be the threat of a desperate sleeper to a mosquito. It could be the words of a convicted criminal to the officiating magistrate. It could be the groan of a disappointed lover addressing the object of his affection. It could indicate a promise to fetch a friend at the airport, etc., etc. Only when the context has been identified do these words acquire a specific meaning.

Although the implications of a specific social context are, in everyday communication, almost immediately processed by our “internal computers”, context is in reality a very complex matter.

To begin with, it is important to differentiate between context in the “situational” sense (= social context) and linguistic context. Social context deals with the life setting within which the participants in a given passage exist and function. Linguistic context or co-text refers to the structured arrangement of linguistic signs in a given document, e.g. when we refer to the place of the Sermon on the Mount *within the context of Matthew*.

We should also distinguish between intra-textual and extra-textual contexts. “Intra-textual context” refers to the *picture of the real world created within the text*. The latter will overlap in varying degrees with its real life counterpart, but does not necessarily coincide with it. The subjectivity of a particular writer, authorial intentions and many other factors may produce an oblique image of the real world.

Illustration 1: In Galatians Paul stigmatises the Judaizers who threatened to undo his work in the Galatian churches. He calls them “undercover agents” (παρείσακτοι) who “stalked in to spy” (παρεισηλθον κατασκοπησαι) and “to enslave” (να καταδουλωσουσιν) (Gal. 2:4). He uses this stigmatising rhetoric in order to persuade his readers to dissociate themselves from the opposition and to reassociate with him. To deduce from this that, in real life, the Judaizers were such slimy characters would be to misunderstand the text.

Illustration 2: It may even happen that the textual world is sketched as so drastically different from the extra-textual reality that it is this contrast which produces the cutting-edge of an utterance. In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37) we would have expected, from our background knowledge, the priest and the Levite to take pity on the wounded man, but the opposite happens. From the Samaritan we would have expected to disdainfully ignore the slain traveller or perhaps even deal him the final blow. But the

absolutely unexpected takes place. It is precisely this clashing of expectations which has a lasting effect on the audience (readers). It would be entirely wrong to deduce from this parable that in the extra-textual world Samaritans were typically kind and priests and Levites heartless.

“Extra-textual context” refers to the real world setting within which an utterance should be understood. In our endeavour to reconstruct the real world context of a given New Testament passage, we, naturally, try to glean as much information as possible from a judicious reading of it.<sup>12</sup> We also muster all our relevant knowledge of the New Testament worlds (Semitic, Jewish, Graeco-Roman, Hellenistic-Jewish etc.), as provided by background studies, socio-scientific research, archaeology, etc. We consult introductions to New Testament books. We glean information from non-biblical and biblical writings. In short, we collect as much information as humanly possible pertaining to the situation within which a New Testament communication should be decoded.

Secondly, we must distinguish between “general” and “immediate context”. The former indicates the general socio-politic and religious context which sender and receiver share with many others. The latter refers to the specific situation of the writer and his readers. The writer may be in prison; the readers may be facing burning pastoral issues, etc.

All these aspects of social context have consequences for determining meaning. It is therefore absolutely indispensable that the exegete should piece together all available contextual information and integrate it into the reading process. The main mistake in fundamentalistic exegesis is that historical context is ignored, with the result that almost anything can be read into the text.<sup>13</sup> But non-fundamentalistic readers (including preachers!) also misunderstand New Testament texts or miss their distinctness, depth and variety when they do not give sufficient attention to the social contexts concerned.

Illustration: Only social context can explain Paul’s unqualified approval of the state, more specifically, of the Roman state, in Romans 13:1-7, while some decades later Revelation 13:1-10 pic-

- 12 For the reasons mentioned above the qualification “judicious” is important. In order to obtain the needed information, we resort to “mirror reading” the text, that is the identifying of reflections of the real, extra-textual world in the text. For the dangers of injudicious mirror reading, see Barclay (1987). However, this does not imply that we do not get invaluable information from these texts. Often they are our only sources of information.
- 13 Allegorical exegesis is even worse, since it ignores both the context and the obvious semantics of the text.

tures that same rule so negatively. In the first passage, Paul argues against the background of the beginning of Nero's reign, which was generally experienced as very positive. Therefore he depicts the Roman state, without qualifications or reservations, in terms of what we would expect from an ideal state, namely that it should be a servant of God. In Revelation 13, on the other hand, against the background of the persecution of Christians, that very same state is depicted as an instrument of Satan.

### 3.4 The sender

Communication science has identified various factors on the part of the real sender (author, speaker) which may influence the way in which the message is encoded. Apart from his personal situation, personal factors such as convictions (including world-view), motivations, attitudes, intentions, skills, knowledge and many others play a role in the sender's formulation of the text.

We should distinguish between the "real author" and the "implied author", the latter referring to the special way in which the author presents himself to his readers.

Illustration: Paul starts his self-presentation in Romans 1:1 by first depicting himself to his Roman readers as a "slave of Christ Jesus", thereby not only reflecting his total commitment to Jesus, his Lord, but at the same time inviting his readership, which consisted to an important extent of slaves and ex-slaves (Lampe 1989:141-153), to identify positively with him. Only subsequently does he put his apostleship on the table. In Galatians, on the other hand, where he felt that a heavy hand was necessary, he foregrounds his apostleship massively by stating that he received it "not from men nor by man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead" (Gal. 1:1).

The concept of intentionality is very important. What effect did the author want to produce? Relevant questions would be whether the author intended to inform, to persuade or to entertain.<sup>14</sup> In line with the answers to these questions communications can be characterised as informative, persuasive, aesthetic, or as a combination of these. Although the "will to adorn" is sometimes clearly discernible in New Testament passages,<sup>15</sup> these writings were primarily intended to inform and to persuade. With a view to the persuasive intent of the New Testament writings, interactional tools such as reader response criticism, speech act theory and rhetorical criticism especially contribute considerably towards our understanding of these documents.

14 Cf. e.g. Casmir's model in Casmir (1974:10).

15 E.g. in 1 Corinthians 13, Romans 8:28-39 and Romans 12.

In former exegetical practice there was often a one-sided concentration on the sender, his intentions and his circumstances, known as “author/speaker analysis” (cf. Poythress 1977:123). The temptation to read certain intentions into the minds of biblical writers is often referred to as the “intentional fallacy”.

Illustration: In the past many scholars were convinced that gnosticism was the great threat to early Christianity. Accordingly, they tended towards reading anti-gnostic motivations into the minds of New Testament authors. No wonder they regularly found an anti-gnostic edge in New Testament utterances. The golden rule would be that one should refrain from conclusions like these unless the text itself contains identifiable indications to that effect.

### 3.5 The receiver (reader/audience)

In an article published some 20 years ago, Bernard Lategan draw attention to what he called the “massive movement” away from the source (or sender) to the receptor (1984:3-4). Thereby the reading process and the creative involvement of the reader/hearer were explicitly put on the table. Following developments in the literary field, reception or reader response criticism became an exciting and rewarding avenue of biblical research. At the same time, however, the integrity of the exegetical process is threatened when the creative input of the reader is emphasised at the cost of the limits set by text and context.<sup>16</sup> Then the text merely becomes a stimulus to trigger unbridled subjectivity. The logical consequence of this trend would be the deconstructionist position, where the hegemony of the text is totally surrendered.

The same factors which are at play in the case of the sender are also important in the case of the receiver. Situation, convictions (including worldview), motivations, attitudes, skills, knowledge and even intentionality are part of the disposition of the addressees and influence the communication process. However, a distinction should be made between the way in which the disposition of the addressees, as far as it was known to the author, influenced his *encoding* of the message and the way in which it influenced its *decoding* by the addressees.

Balancing the idea of the “implied author”, we also have that of the “implied reader/hearer”. The implied reader refers to the receptor of the message *as portrayed by the author*. This concept should be distinguished from

16 See in this regard the well-balanced article (with suggestions for further reading) of Vanhoozer (1995).

that of the “real” or “intended reader”, as well as of the “ideal reader”.<sup>17</sup> The implied reader is a construct of the writer which is often used as a device to manipulate his real readers positively.

Illustration: “Construct” does not necessarily imply the portrayal of the implied reader is fictitious. In Gal. 4:12-20 Paul deliberately portrays his readers in their original hospitality and kindness towards him in order to influence them to react positively. He declares that they accepted him “as an angel of God” (v. 14) and continues: “... if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me” (v. 15). The implication is clear: It is simply unthinkable that such kind people, who have treated me so hospitably and who would have done anything for me, would now reject my entreaties.

The notion of intersubjectivity is also relevant here. It concerns the relationship between the author and his readers. Intersubjective relationships influence the presentation of a communication drastically.

Illustration: When Paul writes his letter to the Galatians, he is very conscious of the fact that he, as the apostle to the nations, has founded the churches in Galatia. Therefore he feels free to rebuke them sternly (Gal. 3:1-5), but also to plead with them like a mother (4:19). The tone of his letter to the Romans is totally different. No real relationship has as yet been established. Paul knows that his readers can easily reject his attempts to bond with them. Therefore he is much more polite and reserved. Fearing that he may have been too forward in stating that he would bring them a spiritual blessing (1:11), he immediately softens his tone by saying that they will mutually encourage one another (1:12). Likewise, in Romans 15:14-15, he fears that he might have come over too strongly. Therefore he praises the spiritual maturity of his readers and states that he only wanted to “remind” them.

It is exceedingly important to realise that the same kind of factors influencing the first century addressees of the New Testament documents are also playing a major role when we as twenty-first century readers encounter these texts. Our presuppositions,<sup>18</sup> including our world view, are filters through which we read them. It is therefore crucially important that, as we move and continue moving through the hermeneutical circle, we should be extremely critical of our own presuppositions and allow the text to come into its own.

17 See note 11 above.

18 On the crucial role of presuppositions, see Stanton (1977), Thiselton (1980: *passim*) and McKnight (1995) (with suggestions for further reading).

Illustration: Nowhere is the role of presuppositions in the analysis of New Testament texts clearer than in the history of Jesus research. In the period of rationalism a Jesus emerged who acted according to the canons of human reason. Jesus' resurrection, for instance, was explained as an awakening from a deep coma. Romanticism made of him a romantic hero. In the Hitler period Nazi theologians produced an Aryan Jesus with blond hair and blue eyes. During the revolutionary period of the twentieth century Jesus became a revolutionary, gathering around him a group of politically motivated, anti-Roman disciples. The anti-metaphysical trend of the late twentieth century created Jesus the sage. This Jesus, according to the presuppositions of his protagonists, could not have performed any miracles, could not have been resurrected from the dead, and certainly could not have been the Son of a transcendent God, because such a god does not fit into a closed, anti-metaphysical world-view.

### 3.6 Concluding remarks

Scrutinising the most important insights from communication science and related sciences, it has become clear that exegesis is a very complex task. Superficially, understanding an everyday communication seems quite simple. But this only seems to be the case, since man is equipped with a stupendous ability to process the various facets of communication almost instantaneously, provided that he has the necessary information at his disposal. However, this does not take away the fact that a communication, once we analyse it, consists of an intricate web of factors and relationships, which become increasingly difficult to access the further we are removed from its original expression in time and space. In order to bridge this gap, sound exegesis requires, first, that we should gather every bit of information which could elucidate understanding; secondly, that we should apply all the exegetical tools at our disposal to further this process. Part of our instrumentation would be an exegetical procedure resting on a sound linguistic and literary basis which could guide our analytical activity. And, thirdly, that we should be critically aware of all the factors which impinge on the supremacy of the text. Responsible exegesis is first and foremost a recognition of the decisive importance of the text. To ignore this basic rule and read our own pet ideas into the text or into the minds of the biblical authors is a blatant abuse of the Bible.

In light of what has been said above, we can describe New Testament exegesis as the process by means of which we endeavour, through studying and contemplating a communication within its literary and real life constraints, using all the linguistic, literary and historical means at our disposal, to recapture the message and the effect of that message, which a New Testament

author would have wanted to convey to an ideal or model<sup>19</sup> first century reader.

Contrary to the voices calling for the death of the author, this definition retains him as an indispensable factor, but limits his role to what is actually reflected within the text itself, thus countering the ever imminent threat of author analysis and intentional fallacy. To absolutise the role of the author is fundamentally wrong, since we only have the author as he comes to us in the garb of a specific text. On the other hand, to absolutise the role of the receiver and to claim that all impulses resulting from reading the biblical texts, regardless of one's own presuppositions, are equally justified, is also a fallacy. Such a position would infringe on the claim of the biblical documents and narrow down their "otherness" to merely an invitation to a better self-understanding.

It would be unrealistic to claim that exegesis can definitely determine the one and only meaning of a biblical communication. As we have seen, within the parameters of text and social context, and depending from the angle from which we approach the text, quite a wide spectrum of meanings is possible. At the same time, that spectrum also has certain verifiable limits. A controlled and controllable exegesis respects these limits.<sup>20</sup> If the exegete has followed sound linguistic and historical indicators; if he can give a good account of the exegetical route he has taken and of how he came to his conclusions, he can not only evaluate his own work, but others can do the same.

Of course the exegete, as a Christian, believes that his scholarly analysis and the work of the Holy Spirit are not mutually exclusive. He will also know that on the risky road which begins in the study and ends on the pulpit, contemplation, meditation and prayer should be one's constant companions.

19 Umberto Eco (1979:7) refers to a "model reader" as one supposedly able to deal interpretively with the expressions in the same way as the author deals generatively with them. In his further discussion (1979:7-11) he does not draw a distinction between the model reader and the ideal reader.

20 Cf. Loader (1978).

## 4. PROPOSED EXEGETICAL PROGRAMME<sup>21</sup>

### 4.1 Diagram of the proposed exegetical programme

<i>Preparatory phase</i>	<i>Main phase</i>	<i>Concluding phase</i>
1. Preliminary selection of passage	5. Determining the real world context of the micro-text	10. Formulating the message for the first readers
2. First close reading	6. Determining the literary type of the micro-text	11. Guidelines regarding the text's message for today
3. Demarcation of text	7. Determining the place of the micro-text within its macro-structure	12. Translation (optional)
4. Textual criticism	8. Analysing the structure of the micro-text	
	9. Detailed analysis	

### 4.2 General remarks about this programme

#### 4.2.1 Its purpose

Certainly the linguistic and literary specialist would look for a more sophisticated model than this one. The programme presented here is intended as a very basic and flexible *vademecum* to guide the exegete towards an exegetical outcome which could be regarded as responsible with regard to the present state of our knowledge; which could also be cross-checked by others; and which could be adapted and further refined. As already indicated, we are aiming at a *controlled* and a *controllable* exegetical procedure, which takes into consideration the intricate network of factors constraining meaning and which is at the same flexible enough to accommodate varying exegetical questions and situations.

21 The prototype of this model was the outcome of a research programme sponsored by the Human Sciences Research Council of South Africa. Since 1984 it was implemented and tested in exegesis classes and seminars, and developed further.

#### 4.2.2 The problem of dissecting a holistic and integrated process

Everyday communication is a holistic and integrated event. Ideally it takes place spontaneously. When speaker A tells a joke to hearer B, a whole series of reactions is almost instantly triggered in the mind of the latter: an appraisal of social setting, a decoding of the message in its syntactic structure, its genre and its semantic and pragmatic thrust, resulting in a smile or a fit of laughter — or perhaps in a frown when the communication fails. The genre (a joke), for instance, can be misunderstood, causing painful embarrassment for both speaker and hearer.

When reading or hearing a biblical passage, immediate and essential understanding may occur, but partial or even total misunderstanding is a real and constant hazard. In order to minimise this we are forced to focus, chronologically, on the individual elements of the understanding process. However, while doing so, we are constantly moving towards finally integrating the various elements into a meaningful whole. Criticism that an exegetical programme like this one conflicts with the spontaneous character of the art of understanding therefore misses the real point.

#### 4.2.3 The sequence of the various phases

Linguistically, the sequence of the various steps in this programme makes good sense. However, other options could be chosen. Step 4 (textual criticism) could, for instance, be moved upwards. Steps 1 and 3 could be combined, etc. Also, it is not always necessary to implement all the stages. The necessity of these steps may vary according to the nature of a specific passage and the type of research which is undertaken.

In implementing the various steps, it becomes evident that they partially overlap. In the process of understanding, a segment always presupposes and reaches out towards the whole. This is not a negative point, because in this way the different steps complement and cross-check one another. Exegesis is a process of ongoing verification. Discourse analysis (step 8), for example, may compel the analyst to adapt his original demarcation of a textual unit (step 3). In fact, no single exegetical stage is ever entirely finished.

#### 4.2.4 Synchronic, not diachronic

All the steps in this programme are functioning on the synchronic level. The crucial distinction between a synchronic and a diachronic study of language is one of the important insights which modern linguistics has given

us.<sup>22</sup> This implies that, in practising exegesis, we should not use texts as windows onto the pre-history of their sources; we should read them as “self-contained worlds” (Petersen 1978:19).

Illustration: In the exegesis of the christological confession in Romans 1:3-4, long diachronic discussions of and speculations about the prehistory of that passage may be interesting, but they are beside the point unless they contribute to our understanding of what Paul, by incorporating it into his text, wanted to convey to his readers. It is much more important to realize that, by contextualising the confession into his discourse, Paul has, in a sense, “paulinised” it, and that one should rather concentrate on understanding the function of this confession within the Pauline micro- and macro-context.

This does not imply that no historical questions should be asked. But these will only be relevant *in so far as they can serve towards specifying the meaning of the text before us*. Determining the specific historical context within which the text functions is in fact absolutely indispensable. Investigating the pre-history of, for instance, a tradition may be helpful if this will illuminate its function within the present text. Also redaction criticism, which is usually regarded as a historical method, but which in actual fact oscillates between diachrony and synchrony, can contribute substantially towards our understanding of the synoptic gospels in their final form.<sup>23</sup>

#### 4.2.5 From the whole to the parts

The new understanding of semantics emphasises that meaning is determined by linguistic context. This implies that, although we initially start with reading the individual sentences in order to internalise the whole of a communication, the semantics of the smaller units are, in the final instance, determined by their arrangement within the larger whole.<sup>24</sup> We are reminded here of De Saussure’s famous comparison of language in use (*parole*) with the pieces on a chess board. He rightly pointed out that it is the relative position of the different pieces on the board as a whole which is decisive, not the individual pieces as such. Likewise, in language, the semantic value of each term is determined by the simultaneous presence of the others (De Saussure 1916:129). This implies that, for meaningful exegesis, we should move from the broader units to the smaller ones: from the whole of a document (the macro-unit) to the meso-units (which may typically be a cluster of chapters

22 Cf. e.g. Thiselton (1977:80-82).

23 *Vide infra*.

24 Just as the meaning of a sentence is primarily determined by the total network of its constituents and not by its individual words.

or a chapter), and from the meso-units to the micro-units. Typically these micro-units may move further downwards from paragraph clusters (pericopes)<sup>25</sup> to paragraphs, to sentence clusters, to sentences, to phrases and to words. Certainly this does not imply that the smaller units do not also contribute heavily towards meaning and in fact define meaning more precisely. Interaction is constantly taking place and therefore one has to work, not only from the larger to the smaller units (the so-called top-down procedure), but also from the latter back to the former (the bottom-up procedure). But this does not take away that the larger contexts are semantically more decisive than the smaller ones.

Illustration 1: 1 Corinthians 13 is often excised from its larger context and seen simply as a glorious hymn to love. However, when read within the context of 1 Corinthians 12-14, this chapter clearly forms part of Paul's directives on how Christians should deal with their spiritual gifts. Love, like service to the body of Christ (12:12-30), the upbuilding of the church (14:1-25) and orderly behaviour (14:26-40), is being extolled as a criterion for the correct application of the *charismata*. Not without reason, several of these gifts are mentioned in 1 Corinthians 13 (vv 1-3, 8-10).

Illustration 2: In Matthew 18:12-14 and Luke 15:3-7 we find the same parable, namely that of the lost sheep, but contextualised within different macro-contexts. The Matthaean macro-context deals with inner-ecclesiastical relationships. Within that context the parable of the lost sheep serves as a guideline of how church members should treat their brothers and sisters who are going astray. Luke 15, on the other hand, sketches Jesus' loving ministry towards the lost, in contrast to the loveless attitude of the Pharisees and law teachers (15:1-2). Within this context, the story of the lost sheep serves as a vindication of Jesus' loving and forgiving ministry to outsiders. The same micro-unit acquires different meanings within different broader contexts.

- 25 For a more precise definition of "paragraphs" and "pericopes", as used here, see below. Mostly no distinction is being made between "paragraphs" and "pericopes", or when a differentiation is made, it is not always linguistically convincing. Fee (2002:13), for instance, states that the Gospels contain pericopes, but the letters paragraphs. For the purposes of New Testament exegesis, it is advisable to reserve "pericope" for a string of closely-connected paragraphs.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

See bibliography at the end of the next article

*Keywords*

Exegesis

New Testament

Linguistics

Context

Reader

*Trefwoorde*

Eksegese

Nuwe Testament

Linguistiek

Konteks

Leser