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FOCUSING ON THE MESSAGE. NEW TESTAMENT HERMENEUTICS,  
EXEGESIS AND METHODS

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This book is about methods — methods used in understanding the message of the New Testament. But contrary to what one would expect of a textbook on methodology, this book pays scant attention to the historical critical paradigm. It rather focuses on the so-called synchronic methods which deal with the final text of the New Testament. There is one exception though, namely redaction criticism, seemingly because the latter represents a “hybrid” approach consisting of diachronic and synchronic moments; it starts out studying the sources or prehistory of the text, but in doing so it also exposes its final features.

The book is also a tribute to South African New Testament scholarship. Not only are the contributions exclusively by South African scholars, but they should also be read against the backdrop of the *methodenstreit* that has raged since the 1970’s in the circles of *The New Testament Society of South Africa*, where most New Testament scholars contributed to this debate. The debate was not so much about wresting biblical scholarship from the dominance of the historical critical paradigm, because the latter, unlike the case in Europe and North America, never had a stronghold in South Africa. The more important issue was that South African biblical scholars had to wean themselves from a naive historical-grammatical approach to the Bible. And I think it is fair to say that we have done just that. Most biblical scholars today realise that exegesis employs a variety of methods, each important in itself and making a unique contribution to understanding the biblical text. We have come to realise that exegesis is “a multifaceted process in which, depending on the questions asked, various methods can complement one another” (Preface). And to this insight the book pays tribute.

The book is published as a standalone, but in fact it is part of a larger project that has started out in 1978 with the publication of the first volume in the series *Guide to the New Testament*. Since then five volumes have appeared, and with the current publication — taking its place as volume three — the six volume series is brought to a conclusion. In itself this is a tribute to the unflinching enthusiasm of the editor of the series, the doyen of New Testament scholars in South Africa, Andrie du Toit. The series, as is this publication, is aimed at students and younger academics, but advanced scholars will most certainly benefit from it too.

The book consists of fifteen chapters, following an inner logic, “moving from the *theory* (hermeneutics) to the *process* of explaining and understanding, from the *informative* to the *pragmatic*” (Preface).

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The first two chapters are written by Bernard Lategan and deal with New Testament hermeneutics (parts I and II, respectively). Part I gives an overview of the understanding of the Bible through the ages, from the early church to modern theories of understanding. Part II is about the hermeneutical process itself, mapping out the communication process in terms of sender/author, message/text and receiver/reader, as well as the hermeneutical spiral.

*Chapter three* deals with the exegetical process in theory and practice (Andrie du Toit). An exegetical programme is proposed which consists of a preparatory phase, a main phase and a concluding phase. According to the author this programme has been “implemented, tested and continually developed in exegesis classes” (p. 120 fn 26). *Chapter four* was written by the late Willem Vorster and has been updated by Herman du Toit. They try to explain the type of Greek encountered in the New Testament. They stress that New Testament Greek exhibits the same features as the Koine Greek of its time, namely “considerable variation, which was a natural result of the broad geographical area it covered and the variety of its speakers with another language as their first language” (p. 158). Apart from this the books of the New Testament are characterised by considerable language variation because of the different style of its authors, the variety of literary forms used, etcetera.

*Chapter five* is an update on textual criticism as basis of New Testament exegesis, by Gert (Jorrie) Jordaan. Jordaan stresses that there are basically four models with a view to the reconstruction of the history of the text based on external evidence: The Historical model, the Münster model, Amphoux’s model and the Majority model, and that none of these can make an absolute claim that its model is based purely on documented evidence. Each has to depend on certain assumptions and theories (p. 202). Therefore a shift has occurred toward a balance between external and internal considerations, resulting in the so-called eclectic method which gives equal weight to external and internal considerations. But in turn this is only a temporary solution because of unsatisfactory reconstructions of the textual history.

*Chapter six* explores textual structure, making use of discourse analysis (Andrie du Toit). This chapter pays tribute to the pioneering work of Jannie Louw, former professor of Greek at the Universities of the Free State and Pretoria. In this brand of discourse analysis the basic unit is the colon. A colon consists of one main verb, with its imbedded clauses. By analysing a pericope, and eventually a whole book, in this way, important interlinking structures can be identified, resulting in describing the flow of the main argument of the text. Three elaborate examples are given of this method, namely Rom. 6:1-23, Phil. 3:2-11 and Gal. 5:13-6:10.

In *Chapter seven* Herman du Toit discusses contributions of modern linguistics to New Testament exegesis. He highlights two fields that could profit

the exegetical enterprise, namely modern syntax, specifically the notion of deep structure analysis, and the field of modern semantics. In *Chapter eight* Jan van der Watt focuses on New Testament imagery. Figurative language can most effectively communicate spiritual matters such as God, heaven, evil powers, etcetera. Attention is given to metaphors, symbols and parables, stressing the dynamics of their communication. *Chapter nine* is about redaction criticism, by Bernard Combrink. Although redaction criticism, together with source criticism, form criticism and tradition criticism belong to the diachronic paradigm of research, some components of redaction criticism broadened their scope to include aspects pertaining to a synchronic approach. As such this method can be discussed together with other synchronic methods. Examples are given of redaction criticism, and the chapter concludes with a discussion of the positive contribution as well as problematic aspects of redaction criticism.

*Chapter 10* is about narrative criticism, treated by Andries van Aarde. Various aspects are touched on, such as point of view analysis, including the narrator's situation, the narrative discourse (time, space, characterisation), and ideology. The narrative point of view aspect is then applied to John 4:43-54. *Chapter eleven* deals with social-scientific criticism, jointly written by Andries van Aarde and Stephan Joubert. In an introduction the authors treat various exegetical-methodological approaches in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that led to social-scientific criticism, as well as other factors in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that caused the resurgence of this approach in the 1970s. Subsequently some results are discussed, followed by a discussion of various sociological models and approaches. The chapter concludes with a few remarks on the on-going critical debate.

The final chapters of the book are aimed at the impact of the message of the New Testament on the reader. *Chapter twelve* focuses on reception theory (Bernard Lategan), dealing with aspects such as basic concepts (implied reader, gaps in the text, wandering viewpoint), relevance (reader research, the reading process), and an application on Mark, Galatians and Romans 13:1-7. In *Chapter thirteen* Eugene Botha treats speech act theory — how authors *do* things with words. The theory is then applied to John 4:16 and 1 John. *Chapter fourteen* is about rhetorical criticism, by Johannes Vorster. He mentions a wide variety of rhetorical approaches, not all of them equally useful for the biblical scholar. He then goes on to discuss the historical development of rhetoric. Subsequently he treats the rhetorical situation, especially what role the notion of problematisation plays in the rhetorical situation. This is then applied to 1 Cor 1:10-4:21. In a following section the importance of person or personhood for rhetorical analysis is treated. The chapter concludes with the discussion of a few guiding principles for the biblical critic. *Chapter fifteen* brings the book to a close with an overview on Bible translation (Johnnie Roberts). It discusses various kinds of translations, such as formal equivalent, functional equivalent and free translations, followed by a discussion of the

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problems, place and function of the different kinds of translations. Related issues, such as the textual basis, the authority, and the language level of a translation are treated too.

The book is rounded off with subject, author and text indexes. The interested reader will find the extensive bibliographies at the end of each chapter very useful.

The book is scholarly and lucidly written and updates the reader in the shortest period of time as regards the methods used today to discovering the message of the New Testament.

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