Reading the Bible in the 21st century: Some hermeneutical principles (Part 2)

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This essay is to be an extension of the essay 'Reading the Bible in the 21st century: Some hermeneutical principles (Part 1)'. Two more 'hermeneutical aspects' are proposed and discussed in this essay: the aspects of spirituality and embodiment. These two aspects are presented in this essay to supplement and compliment the hermeneutical process. A few remarks on the idiosyncrasy of texts pave the way for the legitimate exploitation of spiritualities (lived experiences) embedded in biblical texts which should be regarded as an addition to 'biblical hermeneutics' and which have to serve as a catalyst for the embodiment of the 'reading texts'.

Introduction

In the first part of this essay 'Reading the Bible in the 21st century: Some hermeneutical principles (Part 1)',[1] it was pointed out how single methodological approaches were applied in the reading of biblical texts during the largest part of the 20th century. During the last two decades of the 20th century, a new interest developed in a more integrated approach in the methodology of interpreting biblical texts. This seems to be the hermeneutical approach of biblical texts for the 21st century. In the brief analysis of the various methodologies, the approach of Vernon Robbins demonstrates itself according to Kloppenborg (2003:64) and Aune (2010:4) to be an appropriate multi-dimensional approach.[2] It serves not only as a taxonomy of the various methodologies[3] but is recommendable due to its multi-dimensional approach, advanced analytical character, coherence, praxis,[4] clear epistemology of what socio-rhetorical criticism comprises[5] and its continuous dynamic academic development.[6]

In this multi-dimensional methodology to studying biblical texts, I am convinced that one more texture or component can be added to the proposed textures of socio-rhetorical criticism (inner-, inter-, socio-cultural, ideological and sacred textures): the texture or component of spirituality. The texture of spirituality should not be regarded as another linear component in the methodological process. Spirituality should rather be regarded as complimentary to each of the texture activities in a contemplative studying of scripture. This can then contribute to and facilitate the realisation of the embodiment[7] of 'biblical principles' in the lives of Christian believers as the culmination of the hermeneutical process, which is the second aspect that I would like to address in this essay.

In their discussions on reading and interpreting the Bible, some scholars (Deppe 2011; Hays 2007; Köstenberger 2011, 2012; Virkler & Ayayo [1981] 2007) refer to the application of biblical texts as the last phase in the hermeneutical process. This essay takes such an 'application' a step further. The supposed 'application' of the message of the Bible in the lives of many Christian believers seems ineffective.[8] Appropriation seems only to be reached when the embodiment of

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1.See the publication of Part 1 (*Reading the Bible in the 21st century: Some hermeneutical principles, Part 1*) in this same volume of *Verbum et Ecclesia.*

2.Unless a person wants to work with only one specific aspect of the hermeneutical process.

3.A problem emerges when scholars absolutize the individual methodologies they employ. Such methodologies are then used as a lens through which they look at and interpret everything (texts, even every phenomenon).

4.Robbins also shows or explains how the various textures can be applied. It is not only a matter of 'what' should be done but also of 'how' it should be done.

5.According to Van Eck, Robbins' approach lacks serious contribution to the matter. See for example an evaluation of his method in Van Eck (2001a) and Van Eck (2001b). Van Eck's description and definition of socio-rhetorical interpretation covers, according to my assessment of these two articles, all the textures referred to by Robbins. The exegete does not need to follow exactly the methodology and hermeneutics of the textures as described by Robbins. The essence for me is whether the exegete does justice to the execution of a texture and relates these textures to one another. Where Robbins uses columns in the inner texture to determine the rhetoric of the author, I make use of discourse analysis to determine not only the rhetoric but also semantic networks.

6.The other hermeneutical approaches to which I referred briefly are also invaluable. Each one has its own distinctiveness, approach and vantage points and can be used complementary to the comprehensive and coherent socio-rhetorical methodology of Robbins.

7.The Oxford Dictionary defines embodiments as '[t]he representation or expression of something in a tangible or visible form' or '[a]tangible or visible form of an idea, quality, or feeling' (Embodiment n.d.).

8.The terrible condition of many churches worldwide as well as the content of sermons verify this statement.

biblical principles is realised in the lives of believers. This embodiment has to be facilitated by the spiritualities embedded in the biblical text which should emerge when the text is investigated.

Thus this essay addresses two things. It endeavours to indicate how the spiritualities embedded in biblical texts can be experienced in the studying of these texts and how these spiritualities can facilitate to constitute the embodiment of biblical principles in the lives of Christian believers. Before investigating these aspects, a few remarks are required regarding the idiosyncrasy of texts. This will verify the legitimacy and validity of incorporating these two aspects, spirituality and embodiment, in the hermeneutical process: analysis, interpretation and application processes of biblical texts. Embodiment is to be understood as the culmination point of the hermeneutical process, and spiritualities are the lived experiences of the divine during the studying of Scripture.

A few remarks on the idiosyncrasy of texts

Influenced by the works of Ricoeur, Gadamer, Schneiders and Vanhoozer, the following remarks with regard to the phenomenology of language (text) and interpretation are important to support and legitimate the addition of spirituality and the embodiment of texts in the hermeneutical process.

A new reading

The New-Testament text is no longer exclusively about the world to which it was written. Rather, it projects the world of Christian discipleship into which it invites readers of succeeding generations to enter. The contemporary meaning of the text is not something added on to a basic literal meaning. It is intrinsic to the meaning of the text. The question about the spirituality embedded in texts asks for a new reading of biblical texts.[9]

Dialectical illumination

Studying a biblical text is not the dissection of the text into its constituent elements for a description of its origin but the appropriation of the meaning of the text. The objective of interpretation ought to be the dialectical illumination of the meaning of the text as well as '… the self-understanding of the reader' (Schneiders 2003:184). In this dialectic, the interpreter moves, through finer mediations,[10] between the pole of explanation by means of solid exegesis and the pole of understanding by means of theological-spiritual sensitivity and the embodiment of texts (cf. Schneiders 1982:68). Thus, a text mediates meaning that is not only behind the text when the text was composed. In fact, meaning also lies in the text as well as in front of the text in the possibilities of human and Christian reality which it pictures for the reader (cf. Ricoeur

1976:87; Schneiders 2003:184; Smith 1971:41–56). Here faith, spirituality and culture become hermeneutical tools in the understanding process.[11]

Meaning of texts is not limited to the intent of the authors. The meaning of a text is open: whatever it means when validly interpreted and whether or not the author intended such a meaning (cf. Schneiders 2003:185; also Ricoeur 1976:25–44, 29–30). Readers always owe some debt to an author. Ricoeur (quoted by Vanhoozer 1998) writes:

> We may have to repay a debt owing to the authors we read. So we cannot say whatever we like … Perhaps we could say that a text is a finite space of interpretations: there is not just one interpretation, but, on the other hand, there is not an infinite number of them. A text is a space of variations that has its own constraints; and in order to choose a different interpretation, we must always have better reasons. (p. 436)

Total reader involvement

The text embodies its meaning in some literary genre which operates in such a way as to engage the reader, cognitively and affectively, in certain quite determining ways (Schneiders 1982:59). Literary genre, in other words, is not just a tool for classifying texts. It is also a strategy for total reader involvement with the subject matter of the text (Schneiders 1982:60).[12] Even Bultmann (1984:145–53), over four decades ago, argued that exegesis without presuppositions is not possible.[13] Thompson (2000:204) refers to Iser (1978:275) who states that meaning occurs not in the text itself but in the convergence of the text and the reader.[14] It '… brings the literary work into existence'. Meaning then is found only when '… the imaginative activity of the reader seeks to create coherence while reading progressively through the imaginatively-composed biblical text' (Thompson 2000:204).[15]

Texts are linguistically polysemous

A text is by virtue of its linguisticality, polysemous[16] (see Ricoeur 1973b:97–111). The meaning of a text cannot be reduced to a single, univocal, literal sense. The polyvalence of words and the semantic richness of larger linguistic units generate various valid interpretations in different readers. The biblical interpreter today has an advantage over the readers of the 1st

9.See also Vanhoozer (1998:197–452) regarding his discussion on the redoing of interpretation in his book, *Is there meaning in this text?* Also Williams (2011:16–30).

10.Cf. Maddix and Thompson (2012:85) on *Lectio divina* of texts. Also Howard (2012:56–77).

11.See also Issler (2012:120) who refers to two modes of reading scripture: (1) the mode of 'exploring' and 'research' and the other mode of 'listening' and 'hearing'.

12.According to Robbins (1996:215), postmodernism made us aware that a biblical text has no one objective meaning. This perspective is flawed since the interpreter has shaped and contributed to every step of the pursuit. See also Thompson (2000:201–202) who supported this point of view.

13.See Thompson (2000:202) for his focus on the reader's contribution in the interpretation process.

14.The first question should be how the first hearers, not the modern readers, heard the text.

15.Vanhoozer (1998:417–18) distinguishes four kinds of interpretive plurality: Firstly, a plurality of authorial intentions occurs. An author might intend a number of interpretive possibilities in a particular text. Secondly, there is a plurality of intra-textual relations and intertextual contexts. Thirdly, a plurality of readers and the contexts of these readers may be discerned. Multiculturalism influences biblical interpretation: 'In order to serve the various needs and desires of various readers, texts *ought* to have plural meaning.' Fourthly, a plurality of reading methods occur.

16.See Wittig (1977:78–87) for the plurisignification in the parables in the essay *A theory of multiple meanings.*

century. The tradition which is operative in contemporary interpreters helps them to draw from the text richer meanings than was available to the original readers (see Gadamer 1975:300–307; Ricoeur 1976:43–44; Schneiders 2003:185).

A much wider horizon

The historical distance between the text and the contemporary reader needs not be an obstacle to understanding but rather an advantage for understanding.[17] The original readers interpreted the text within essentially the same historical horizon as the author. Subsequent readers interpret the text within a much wider horizon,[18] one that results from the fusion of the horizon of the text and that of the later interpreter. Today we have the tradition that stretches over 2000 years as well as centuries of scholarly research and publications and the help of the Spirit-Paraclete who, according to Paul (1 Cor 2:14) and John (Jn 15:26; 16:13) makes Scripture spiritually understandable to the believer (Schneiders 2003:185–86).

Primary and deeper significations

According to Schneiders (2003:187; Ricoeur 2004:12–13), all literary texts are linguistic entities that consist of '… both a primary, direct and literal signification and a deeper, secondary signification that is attainable only in and through the primary signification'. This assumes that the interpretation of texts (especially symbolic texts) should always bring to explicit formulation the thought that lies embedded in the text. With regard to the gospel, this implies that the text is the symbolic locus of the revelation of God in Jesus.

Faith in God

For Christian believers, faith should be the fundamental hermeneutical tool in the hermeneutical process (cf. Hays 2007:5). Their faith in the divine should constitute their obedience to God to become 'lived experiences' (cf. Köstenberger 2012:9).

These remarks on the phenomenology of texts (language) and interpretation prepare the way for the discussion of the textures of spirituality and embodiment in the hermeneutical process. These two textures will now be discussed.

Textures of spirituality and embodiment: Reading scripture in the 21st century

Biblical interpretation must comply with the Gospel message and the needs of its readers. One of the greatest needs believers experience today is the need to nourish

their own spiritualities.[19] The huge interest in spirituality[20] in the post-postmodern era (or pseudo-modernism) can be seen in the growing worldwide interest in the phenomenon of spirituality, which is evidenced by the vast number of publications, both popular and scientific. Experts from the major religious traditions are very productive within their particular spiritualities. An increasing number of tertiary institutions worldwide have introduced academic programmes on spirituality. Societies for the study of spirituality have been established, and academic journals in the field are on the increase (Van der Merwe 2014a:392).[21] This implies that the phenomenon, spirituality, should receive more and constant attention and definitely be incorporated in the hermeneutical process of reading Scripture (cf. Kourie 2006:20).[22]

This texture asks for a new reading of the Bible text. Correct[23] discernment of Scripture (text) is enabled by the Spirit to those who are spiritual (1 Cor 2:14), not only by way of inductive impressions but also through the deductive activities of imaginative exegesis.[24] The activity of the Holy Spirit does not offer the reader a shortcut that avoids grammatical, syntactical, literary, historical, cultural and theological exegesis. There is no easy way to interpreting the Scriptures and to perceive and embody their message. The Spirit does not instil a meaning or meanings beyond what He has already taught biblical authors when they combined spiritual truths with the appropriately taught spiritual words. However, the Spirit of God does, and indeed must, aid the reader in assessing, appraising and evaluating the word. He also facilitates to value, to apply and to embody the significance of a biblical truth with the need, personal condition and cultural conventions of the reader (Kaiser 1981:319).

17. See Ricoeur (1973a:129–41, 1976:43–44) for his discussion on 'productive distanciation'. Some years later, Gadamer (1975:300–307) deals with the same phenomenon in his explanation of the concept 'effective historical consciousness'.

18. Gadamer (1975:269–274) was the first to refer to the 'fusion of horizons'. For Gadamer, it is not possible to fuse the historical horizons of scripture with the historical horizons of contemporary readers. Then came Thiselton (1980) with his first major publication on hermeneutics, *Two horizons*, in which he discusses the possibility of the fusion of horizons.

19. The interest in biblical or Christian spiritualities is evident in the continuous decline of membership of the mainline, more conservative churches. Members leave these churches because of a desire for deeper spiritual meaning and then join the Evangelical, Charismatic and Pentecostal churches. A large majority of these people believe that the churches are no longer sufficiently concerned with spiritual matters (Collins 2000:9–10).

20. In order to define the notion of 'spirituality', I consulted the works of three influential scholars, in my view, in this field. Philip Sheldrake (2000:40) defines (Christian) spirituality as '… a conscious relationship with God, in Jesus Christ, through the indwelling of the Spirit and in the context of the community of believers'. Sandra Schneiders (2000:254) defines spirituality as '… the experience of consciously striving to integrate one's life, in terms not of isolation and self-absorption, but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives'. Spirituality, then, as a lived experience, is by definition '… determined by the particular ultimate value, within the horizon of which the life project is pursued'. In 2002, Kees Waaijman (2002:312) defines spirituality as '… the divine-human relational process of transformation'. This can be dissected as a 'divine-human relationship' and a 'relationship of transformation'. He also speaks of spirituality as that which touches the core of human existence, namely '… our relation to the Absolute'.
Due to these three and other related definitions of Christian spirituality, it is necessary to construct a working definition of Christian spirituality that will feature in this essay. A combination is opted for these complemented definitions of Waaijman, Sheldrake and Schneiders. In my view, spirituality refers to 'living a life of transformation and self-transcendence that resonates with the lived experience of the divine'. This definition consists of two constituents: 'a lived experience of the divine-human relationship' and 'living a life of transformation and self-transcendence that resonates with that of the divine-human relationship'.

21. See also Waaijman (2002:1–4) for references to the growing interest in spirituality worldwide.

22. Hettema (2011) refers to such a process as 'spiritual hermeneutic'.

23. 'Correct' is used here in the sense that Paul refers to 'discernment' in 1 Corinthians 2 to understand and to know the 'revealed wisdom' of God in Christ.

24. Lombaard's (2008:139–153; cf. also Schneiders 2002:137ff.) use of this phrase 'imaginative exegesis' is very descriptive in terms of what really happens or should happen in doing exegesis.
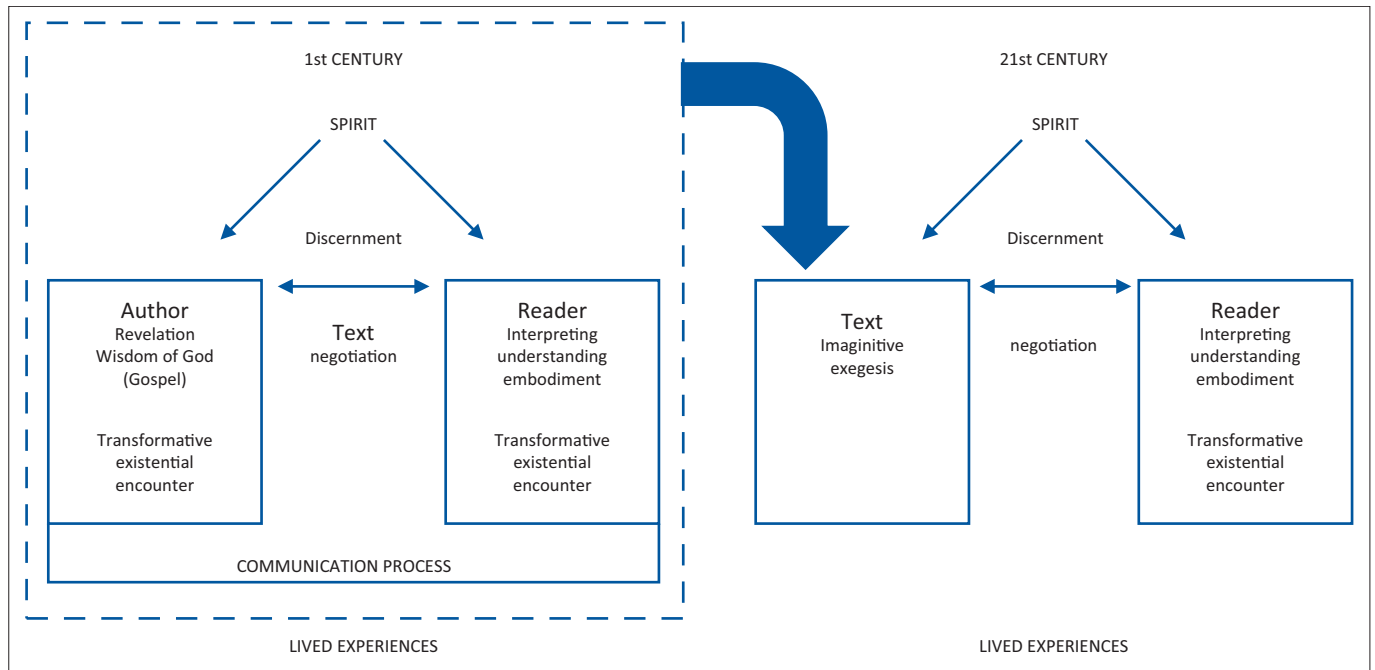
FIGURE 1: Transformative existential encounters with texts.

According to the above reasoning, the hermeneutical process can diagrammatically be explicated as follow:[25]

Figure 1 describes hermeneutics from a certain perspective in order to facilitate a hypothetical understanding of the hermeneutical process. According to the '1st century' diagram, the Spirit communicates the wisdom of God[26] to the biblical author (who seems to be spiritual, πνευματικος, 1 Cor 2:13, 14) via revelation, inspiration, interpretation and illumination (1 Cor 2:6–16; Van der Merwe 2012:176). The way in which the author discerned this wisdom of God should have created within him 'lived experiences', a transformative existential encounter. The first readers or hearers would also have experienced a transformative existential encounter when they read or heard the message. According to the '21st century' diagram, the Spirit also gives wisdom to spiritual persons through imaginative exegesis.[27] Their discernment of this wisdom of God also creates within them lived experiences of transformative existential encounters.[28] The 'lived experiences' of those authors in the 1st century create through the text new spiritualities in the lives of not only the first readers of the text but also spiritual people today when they study scripture. In the 21st century, the role and task of exegesis also contribute to the 'revelation, teaching, re-interpretation and understanding' of divine wisdom through the Spirit. The isolation of cultural and historical antiquities should not excuse readers from searching for meaning and contemporary significance for the church (cf. Kaiser 1981:305; Schneiders 2005:21).

The dynamics of the texture of spirituality as embedded in the text

In the framework of the socio-rhetorical reading and interpretation of texts, the texture of spirituality[29] is chosen as part of this hermeneutical process in parallel as well as sequential capacities. It is parallel with the execution of the other textures in which the reader conforms with the text and its meaning, and it is sequential as the embodiment of the text as the culmination of the hermeneutical process. The following discussion casts some light on how this can be achieved.[30]

Waaijman (2002:742) points out that readers shape the portrayal of texts in their imagination and effectively participate in the texts. In such an event, readers are pulled into texts and texts into readers. During the 1st century, early Christian documents were read over and over when the Christians assembled on Sundays for worship. This may have brought a sense of proximity to the text.[31] Even copying these texts meant much more than merely reproducing them. 'It was a way of appropriating a text' (Waaijman 2002:744). This suggests that the reading of biblical texts produces various kinds of spiritualities or 'lived experiences' of God and the resurrected Christ, depending on what the text

25.I got this basic idea from Lombaard (2008:139–153) but adapted it to the reasoning of this article.

26.See 1 Corinthians 2 where Paul refers to the gospel message about Jesus as the 'wisdom of God'.

27.Lombaard's (2008:139–153; cf. also Schneiders 2002:137ff.) use of this phrase 'imaginative exegesis' is very descriptive in terms of what really happens or should happen in doing exegesis. Exegesis can include 'scripture', 'tradition' as well as 'circumstances'.

28.See Schneiders (2002:139–141) on *lectio divina*.

29.McClendon (2012:207, 221–24) refers to 'Biblical Spirituality … as the basis for shaping one's understanding of and experience with God'.

30.Here I rely especially on the works of Waaijman (2002) and Robbins (2008:1–26). Both refer to the pictures embedded in texts and how they are created. Their different approaches complement one another. Waaijman adds two more aspects to the creation of spiritualities. See the following two publications as examples: Van der Merwe (2014b) and Van der Merwe (2014c).

31.This also happens today when we read scripture. Over the years, believers have constructed a theological framework that lies latent in the subconscious. When they read scripture or listen to the gospel, this theological framework is recalled to the conscious to help cognitively understand the gospel.

communicates about God or Christ and also depending on who is reading the text.

These spiritualities are created through (1) the composition of images, (2) a dynamic interaction between text and reader and (3) a dialectic of retention and pretension. These three effects help to make sense of the reading text and also help to determine some of the lived experiences evoked when the early Christians read the texts.[32]

The first effect: The composition of images

On a philological level: When the early Christians read these texts, their imagination would have composed images of the text. The reader subjectively and selectively composes the images out of the multifarious aspects of the text as well as the metaphors, symbols and imagery embedded in the text. These created images described in the text are then experienced. The reading process is a catalyst for the passive syntheses through which the meaning of a text and experiences are constituted in the mind of the reader. This implies that text and reader pervade one another. 'The reader himself, in constituting the meaning, is also constituted' (Iser 1978:150). According to Iser (1978:108–118; cf. also Waaijman 2002:745), various perspectives of parts of the text move into focus during the reading process and take on their actuality in their comparison with preceding segments. The reader then forms a sequence of these images in the mind in which the successive images gradually constitute a certain configuration: a field of meaning and experience.

On a literary level: In the framework of socio-rhetorical analysis and interpretation of early Christian literature, different modes of argumentation started to emerge about two decades ago. These modes created remarkable challenges to analysing and interpreting the different kinds of discourse, especially in the New Testament but also in other early Christian literature. Through inductive analysis of these texts, Robbins (2008:3, 2009:7–9) identifies six major kinds of discourse. These discourses functioned as rhetorical dialects (to be named rhetorolects) that interacted dynamically with one another to create the Christian discourse that existed by 100 C.E. These rhetorolects have emerged as: precreation, wisdom, priestly, prophetic, miracle and apocalyptic.[33] In each of these rhetorolects, pictorial narration and reasoning associated with particular social, cultural and religious locations have emerged. The cognition and reasoning emerged from lived experiences in specific places in the 1st-century Mediterranean world (Robbins 2008:3).

Some years after the foundation of socio-rhetorical criticism, Robbins distinguished between 'narrative-descriptive discourse', which he labelled as rhetography, and

'argumentative-enthymematic discourse', which he labelled as rhetology. The essence of rhetography is that '… narrative begins by creating a verbal picture' (Gowler 2010:199). Such a picture is further elaborated with additional sequential pictures to create a 'graphic story'. Then the readers (or hearers), successively, create visual images in their minds as they hear or read the text, according to the way in which the reading or hearing of the text enables the person to see (Robbins 2010:203). Hence, the way the rethorolects function has implications for how readers engage with texts (Gowler 2010:199). Such events, the creation of verbal pictures, would have created spiritualities (lived experiences). According to Robbins (2008:1), rhetography[34] communicates a context of meaning to a reader or hearer. An author composes intentionally but also unintentionally a context of communication through statements, even signs that call up visual images in the mind, which sequentially evoke 'familiar' contexts that provide meaning for the reader or hearer (Robbins *ibid*:2) as well as lived experiences.

In terms of rhetology, which comprises argumentative discourse in the text, it can be mentioned that classical rhetoric developed what Robbins (2008) called a:

> … rhetorical system by picturing the rhetorical dynamics in three locations in the city-state: court room (judicial or forensic rhetoric); political assembly (deliberative rhetoric …); and civil ceremony (epideictic or demonstrative rhetoric) (p. 3)

Classical rhetoricians understand the purposes, goals and procedures of each kind of rhetoric. Therefore, they picture in the mind these three different locations with the speaker (ἔθος), speech (λόγος) and audience (πάθος) in it (Robbins 2008:3). For them, rhetoric became lived experiences.

The second effect: Dynamic interactions between text and reader

Reading is a continuous dialogical negotiation for meaning between text and reader that evokes varied experiences. According to Iser (1978:107), a text is a 'structured prefiguration'. The way in which a text is received depends as much on the reader as on the text. Reading is not a one-way process; it is a dynamic interaction between text and reader (Iser 1978:107). In contrast to the characters referred to in the text, the implied historical readers are actively involved in imagining the field of meaning and trying to view the text as a whole (Waaijman 2002:748). The reading of a text creates not only pictures but also 'lived experiences' of the identity, ethics and character of the characters in the texts, and these become prolific when the (reading) text informs and allows them to bring their own faculties and experiences into play

33.This identification of different discourses by Robbins is debatable. Some New-Testament scholars and linguists will certainly question this. The vantage point of this identification is not whether one agrees or disagrees with the number or kinds of discourse distinguished but rather the association or connection of the discourses with pictorial narration.

34.This 21st-century term relates to the ancient progymnastic rhetorical exercise of *ekphrasis* in ancient Greek literature (Robbins 2008:2). 'An ekphrastic poem is a vivid description of a scene or, more commonly, a work of art. Through the imaginative act of narrating and reflecting on the "action" of a painting or sculpture, the poet may amplify and expand its meaning' (Poetry foundation n.d.). The goal of this literary form is to make the reader envision the thing described as if it were physically present. In many cases, however, the subject never actually existed, making the ekphrastic description a demonstration of both the creative imagination and the skill of the writer. For most readers of famous Greek and Latin texts, it did not matter whether the subject was actual or imagined. The texts were studied to form habits of thinking and writing, not as art historical evidence (Writing about art n.d.). See also Webb (2014).

(cf. Iser 1978:108). The rhetoric of the author influences the 'lived experiences' of the reader.

The third effect: A dialectic of pretension and retention

When reading a text, the reader is extremely active. The reading of a text phrase evokes in the reader an image that appears against a background of what has already read and also against what still remains to be read. Thus the text unfolds at every moment of reading, which creates various 'lived experiences'. This unfolding takes place against '… the combined background of memory and expectation' (Waaijman 2002:744).

Husserl (in Waaijman 2002:744) calls the remembered background 'retention' and the anticipated background 'pretension' (see also Iser 1978:112). Retention encompasses the past, and pretension – which is still unoccupied – conveys what is potentially to come to fruition. The tension created between retention and pretension controls the reading experience. The text read (retention) is recaptured in every reading event. The text to be read (pretension) '… constitutes the projection surfaces against the background of which the images take shape' (Waaijman 2002:744). Iser (1978) puts it as follows:

> Thus every moment of reading is a dialectic of pretension and retention, conveying a future horizon yet to be occupied, along with a past (and continually fading) horizon already filled. (p. 112)

Thus every text-reading moment involves a change of perspective. This consequently constitutes a close combination of '… differentiated perspectives, foreshortened memories, present modifications and future expectations' (Iser 1978:116). Hence, in the reading event, past and future constantly converge in the present moment. Through these synthesising operations, readers experience expanding networks of connections in their minds (Iser 1978:116), networks that move back and forth between the past reading and expected future reading (Waaijman 2002:744). The understanding and 'lived experience' of the reader is at stake in the work of the imagination (Waaijman 2002:745).

The spiritualities (lived experiences of especially the divine) embedded in these three effects should facilitate to embody the content of the text in the life of the reader. Spirituality then becomes the stepping stone for the embodiment of the text.[35]

Texture of embodiment: Reading scripture in the 21st century

The culmination point of interpretation should be the embodiment of the text. The response of an interpreter is finally not only a matter of reading the text but of being. The way of living of interpreters displays the interpretation of the texts they have read. Thus the church is a living commentary of Scripture (Vanhoozer 1998:440–441). According to Ricoeur, there are two phases in the process of reading: (1) the moment

at which the meaning of the text is explained and (2) '… the moment at which the reader recaptures the meaning and gives shape to it in its own existence' (Ricoeur 1991:57). Ricoeur calls this application the understanding of the significance. 'Significance is the moment when the reader takes over the meaning, that is to say: activation of the meaning in the existence of the reader' (Ricoeur 1973a:194).[36] For him, significance is appropriation which comprises the culmination of the interpretation of a text in the self-interpretation of a subject. Such a subject consequently '… understands himself better, understands himself differently, or simply begins to understand himself' (Ricoeur 1991:118). Appropriation then coincides with identity formation. To interpret is to follow the past of thought opened up by the text, to place oneself *en route* toward the orient of the text. Then interpretation '… is to appropriate *here and now* the intention of the text' (Ricoeur 1991:118, 121–22). The understanding of a text implies that the reader is transformed by the text (Boff 1987:137; cf. also Waaijman 2002:768). Appropriation is a process and certainly not a single event (Henrischen & Jackson 1990:271). The hermeneutical process becomes complete when the embodiment of the text investigated realises in the life of the reader or hearer and consequently becomes a new way of life.

Schneiders (2002:136) points out that the influence of the Word of God transforms the subjectivity of the reader. This influence and transformation are mediated by the words of the text and made effective by the interior work of the Spirit (according to Augustine). This process culminates in the changing of the person (μετάνοια or conversion) and the continual process of becoming 'more' (spiritual growth or progressive sanctification) (Ricoeur 1976:91–95). Such a change results from engaging into, dwelling in, experiencing oneself within the 'world' of solemn Christian discipleship.[37]

Conclusion

The reading of texts operates from hermeneutical presuppositions and also finds gestalt in it.[38] This was pointed out in the introductory paragraph of the first part of this essay, 'Reading the Bible in the 21st century: Some hermeneutical principles (part 1)', which indicates how Jesus was characterised differently by scholars who study the New Testament. Multiple (different) interpretations of texts can become dangerous if thorough exegesis of the text are neglected, but those same interpretations can be advantageous when they constitute scripture to be relevant for the readers in their specific environment and circumstances. The multiple reading of texts is also endorsed by scholars such as Gadamer, Ricoeur, Schneiders and Vanhoozer and sociolinguists such as Austin, Halliday and Labov.

35.See the application of these two textures in my publications: 'Early Christian spirituality of sin and forgiveness' (Van der Merwe 2012) and 'Early Christian spirituality of "seeing the divine" in first John' (Van der Merwe 2015).

36.For Schneiders (1991:177), '… [t]ransformative interpretation … is not blind submission to the text as answer but an in-depth engagement of the subject matter, of its truth claims'.

37.See Schneiders (2002:137–140) for a discussion of 'Transforming reading of Scripture'.

38.Schneiders (1982:52) observes '… that all interpretation, no matter what its methodology, operates out of hermeneutical presuppositions that are philosophical, that is, ontological, epistemological, and aesthetic in nature'.

In such reading, the faith orientation, spirituality and cultural stand of the reader play important roles. However, such reading must also comply with the primary, direct and literal, signification of the text. The interpretation of texts should be the dialectical illumination of the meaning of the text and 'the self-understanding of the reader'. Therefore, I opt for a multi-dimensional approach to the reading and interpretation of biblical texts, guided by a multi-dimensional hermeneutic. In such an approach, the existential awareness and practice of spirituality (lived experience) and the existential embodiment of the text should become part of the multi-dimensional hermeneutic.

We should see the Bible not merely as a collection of ancient documents, or even as a 1st-century product, but rather as a document without historical limitations. It is important to understand the potential and existential roles of Scripture '… in the life of imagination, its role as an organiser of ideas, images and emotions, as an activating symbol' (Smith 1971:134). Let us know the origin of scripture without neglecting its ontological character. Scholars in the post-postmodern era (pseudo-modern era) ought not only to investigate the socio-historical, literary or reception constituents of the Bible, but they also need to explain why it is regarded as scripture, '… how it came about that Christians continued, century after century to find reason … go on prizing and sacralising it and respond to it' (Smith 1971:135). Most illuminating of all would be to elucidate how scripture has served and still serves the spirituality of many Christian believers – that leads to commitment, liberation and transcendence. Through scripture, many have found not merely ancient history but present salvation, not merely Jesus but Christ, not merely literature but God. Scripture has not transformed lives, but has introduced humans to Him who transforms (cf. Smith 1971:139).

Hermeneutics, in order to remain appropriate, should always be an environment for continuous dialogue between those involved in the discipline in both academic and religious (ministry and personal) contexts. Conversation with other approaches that sometimes differ sharply from one's own is healthy. Ideological warfare is unnecessary, but respect for the opinions of others, even when they differ sharply from yours, is vital (cf. Tate 2011) for vigorous and continuous dialogue. This certainly reflects a level of scholarly maturity.

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Competing interests

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