

History and religious experience in biblical research¹

Pieter G R de Villiers

University of the Free State
Bloemfontein

Abstract

This essay firstly investigates the role of history and religious experience in the research of biblical texts generally and on the Book of Revelation in particular. It delineates limitations of some established historical interpretations and new developments in historical work on the Bible. The second part illustrates these trends by comparing earlier historical readings of Revelation with recent work in which the experiential plays a decisive role. The article argues that where historical scholarship distorts, neglects or excludes the religious dimensions of a text, it fails to understand the true nature of the biblical text and interpretation is skew.

1. FROM THE HISTORICAL TO THE EXPERIENTIAL

During the last decades of the twentieth century, there was a notable shift in focus within biblical studies to an almost exclusively historical investigation of biblical texts. This approach became so established that key figures like Räisänen (1990) argued that the task of biblical scholars is limited to historical observations about the text and about early Christianity as a movement.²

The role of historical research has, however, been reconsidered in recent times. In a publication by the Old Testament scholar, Perdue, with the telling title, *The collapse of history* (1994), Brueggemann, the editor of the series in which it

¹ This article was read as the first, introductory part of a paper presented on invitation to the Annual Meeting of the New Testament Society of South Africa in April 2003. For related work, see De Villiers (2002), (2002a).

² For examples of the debate about the place of theology in New Testament Studies as a discipline, see the interesting work of Balla (1997:6-12).

appeared (*Overtures to Biblical Theology*), noted in his foreword how historical scholarship reacted against “a theological propensity in interpretation dominated for an extended period by Karl Barth.” It thus moved away from “any normative notion of theology in Bible study and has returned to a greater interest in the history of Israelite religion,” producing historical work characterized by historical categories “that valued objectivity, positivism, and scientific precision about the text” (Perdue 1994:viii). Moving away from the study of facticity, biblical research began pursuing other literary, social and anthropological approaches.

More critical and controversial in its evaluation of some historical approaches, is the book by Watson (1994), once again with an informative title, *Text, church and world: Biblical interpretation in theological perspective*. He also refers to the commitment of biblical scholarship to secularity and to a body of rules for biblical interpretation that excludes or questions faith as a subjective, private orientation from research. Of special importance is to note that it is not the historical approach that is under criticism here, but the exclusive way in which it often has been used and applied. Watson rather shares the apprehension of Brueggemann about the consequences of this particular canon of historical interpretation in biblical studies. Whilst Brueggemann points out to other possible readings of biblical texts, Watson specifically points out “that the historical-critical paradigm seems to condition its practitioners to believe that the biblical texts are unable to bear very much theological weight” (Watson 1994:12-13). Brueggemann and Watson thus both insist that the historical interpretation of biblical texts is only one of several possible interpretative approaches.

One of the consequences of this strong focus on historical studies was the almost complete disappearance of the genre of theologies of the bible during the latter part of the second half of the twentieth century.³ Earlier on, major New Testament theologies were written by Büchsel (1935), Stauffer (1941), and especially in the second half by Bultmann (1952), Cullmann (1965), Ridderbos (1969, on Paul), Conzelmann (1969), Jeremias (1971), Kümmel (1972) and Goppelt (1975). It was only after almost two decades in the nineties that new

³ For more discussion about the disappearance of this genre, see Brett (1991:1-2).

publications on this field reappeared with, for example, the theologies of Hübner (1990), Gnifka (1994), Stuhlmacher (1997) and others.⁴ Even then the resumption of these publications was accompanied by an intense debate among researchers about the role of a theological approach in a discipline that is often regarded as being historical in nature and as being focussed on historical work.⁵

This debate on the role and place of historical research coincides with or may even have been stimulated by a notable, even ironical trend in secular studies of the Bible at universities outside theological or divinity faculties or departments. Traditionally these departments restricted their research on the Bible to its literary aspects. As a result, historical questions did not play such a seminal role here as within biblical studies. In recent years, though, they began investigating the historical work of biblical scholars. Proponents of *New Historicism*, for instance, argued against the fallacy of older historical readings that claimed that non-historical matters like theological considerations should be abandoned in pursuit of facticity and objectivity. They strongly questioned the value-free reading of text, deconstructing, for example, the vested interests of previous generations of scholars in modernist historical scholarship. They promoted a new focus on history⁶ that would more adequately reflect the deeply seated theological and ideological convictions and interests, even passions in biblical texts and in their interpretation. In this way they unmask the power play behind claims about objective historical studies. Thus, not only texts, but also researchers of the text are regarded as having been determined by ideological and subjective considerations. Of special importance in the context of this article, though, is that these considerations do not relate to ideology or theology only. Veeseer (1989:ix), for example, challenging the norm of disembodied objectivity to which humanists have increasingly aspired, observes about his own approach to

⁴ On Ridderbos and Cullmann, see the discussion of the history of salvation approach in the nineteenth century by Frei (1974:179-182). For later works, see Stuhlmacher (1997:33ff).

⁵ See esp the works by Räisänen listed in the bibliography below and also the interesting discussion in Thurén (2000:5ff).

⁶ Thus the designation “New Historicism.”

history and texts that, far from invisible when he describes how in his own work his own “desires and interests openly preside: the investigative project proceeds from an unabashed passion. Nor is that passion bland or banal.”⁷ This quotation illustrates how experience is being taken seriously in scientific interpretive work. A more contrasting position can hardly be found: whilst biblical scholars previously required the observer to be uninvolved in historical research, he or she is seen by secular scholars of the bible as actively and irrevocable part and even a focus of research. The presentation of history involves the comprehensive subject of the historiographer with all his or her experiential baggage.

Factors like ideology, emotions, pathos and the subjective are thus regarded as necessary elements in the process of decoding the meaning of a text. It is being argued that the very nature of a text requires such a comprehensive decoding. Pointers to this insight are found when Jeanrond (1998:242) remarks that “(t)he relationship between biblical studies and theological thinking has, for some time now, not been good. Biblical scholars often find theology to be non-scientific speculation, while theologians often understand biblical exegetes to be more historians without any deeper concern for the *larger semantic-theological dimension* of the biblical texts” (secondary italics). The false dichotomy between objective facts and the non-historical is being questioned in the new trend with its focus on the implications of language for understanding texts. New Historicism, for example, is a literary movement that argues that the *linguistic* nature of biblical texts *requires* that they be read theologically or ideologically (cf. further under 4 below). The investigation of semantics (implying, for that matter, theology, but also requiring pragmatics) is not merely an add-on to or follow-up of a neutral historical study, dependent on facts provided by an objective investigation, but rather an essential part of any study of texts. A text cannot be understood, even historically, without taking into consideration linguistics and its cultural setting.⁸ That is why, for example, New Historicism claims for itself also the designation *Cultural Poetics*, thereby

⁷ Similarly, in another New Historicist context, Jeanrond (1998:245) wrote that theology is, in the first instance, an intellectual exercise that is provoked by “aspects of the communicative potential of the biblical texts themselves which are disclosed in the act of reading.”

indicating that a text is firmly part of a particular societal setting that is characterized by textual and cultural complexities.

Before this is discussed in more depth, it must be pointed out that there are many other reasons for this reappraisal of historical work. Of concern was that the historical approach, firstly, monopolized the discipline and that it tended to become the exclusive paradigm of research on the New Testament, reducing the biblical text to a text providing historical information. Existing historical readings then, secondly, also failed to spell out how irreducibly deficient and fragmentary the Bible is for the purposes of historical reconstruction. That was why historical reconstructions by modern scholars were often not necessarily less idealistic in nature than those theological distortions that they wanted to replace, or why they resulted in little more than theological abstractions (Johnson 1986:10). Meeks (1983:2), for example, referred to the vague generalities with which the historical situation of biblical texts was described in much of contemporary New Testament research. This vagueness included references to such general motifs like the Greek concept of immorality, the Roman genius for organization, the spirit of Hellenism, the Jewish doctrine, and even “the generalizations and idealizations that aristocratic writers of antiquity themselves repeated” (Meeks 1983:2).

In response to this monopolizing dynamic and in order to solve the problems of historical reductionism, scholars pleaded for a more comprehensive, interdisciplinary approach to the Bible that included literary, societal and anthropological studies. A historical or literary reading also should be seen for what it really is, that is, as yielding historical or literary results and nothing more. These approaches should serve the interpretation of texts, rather than develop into exclusive canons or models of interpretation. It is increasingly argued that a responsible model of interpretation normally allows for many methods that would promote the understanding of its object of interpretation. Such a model also should be truly comprehensive and dynamic⁹ in terms of its methods, its object of research as well as its research context (Johnson 1986:8-11). Once this is said, it implies an ongoing theoretical self-critical approach of and within the discipline.

⁹ The dynamic character is illustrated in the criticism of a positivist approach with its illusionary focus on objectivity and facticity and of an idealist approach that reconstructed history in a Hegelian manner as the development of seminal ideas (e.g. Frei 1974:173-81).

Historiography, for example, specifically requires theoretical self-consciousness and reflection on the notion of history.

The reappraisal of historical scholarship relates, on a deeper level, to a growing understanding of biblical texts in terms of their religious nature and in terms of religious experience as a neglected dimension. It is perhaps most characteristic of a significant amount of biblical research that it tended to move away from such religious dimensions of the text. An adequate study of the New Testament thus requires that its *religious* nature and integrity must be acknowledged. Where historical work distorts, neglects or excludes this religious dimension, it fails to understand the true nature of the text and interpretation is skew.

Not only are biblical texts in the first instance religious texts that reflect religious contexts, contents and experiences, but biblical scholars operate with fundamental religious assumptions, convictions and experiences when they interpret these texts. No one reads the Bible without an explicit or implicit understanding and experience of religion, even where it is done historically. This religious position of the interpreter contributes to the outcomes of his or her research. Debate on historical interpretation of the Bible is impeded if such convictions are not explicated.

The notions of religion and especially of religious experience are controversial and open, so that it can be understood in many ways. Some, for instance, view religion idealistically as, "a distinctive set of ideas, or a set of symbols that express an underlying state or array of disposition" (Meeks 1983:4). Others prefer to see it from a wider, anthropological perspective as "consisting of cultural patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings" (Meeks 1983:140-1). The experiential is also a difficult notion. Johnson (1998:12-13) wrote: "the history of early Christianity has tended to be a history primarily of theological ideas or social institutions and one in which developmental theories have had to do much of the heavy lifting to compensate for the lack of real evidence (of experiential language). Within an enterprise thus understood and thus constrained, the language of religious experience appears as overly subjective and elusive to serve the cause of historical reconstruction." The experiential is further controversial because of the excesses that characterized the work of the History of Religions approach and of psychological exegesis (cf

Johnson 1998:18-20, esp Theissen 1997:1-4).¹⁰ The recent investigation of the experiential, aware of these deficiencies, wants to avoid such mistakes – as will become clear in the exposition below.

The biblical text in its religious nature claims transcendent characteristics and features, fundamentally linked with inner experiences that cannot be expressed or exhausted in an exclusive manner with immanent, historical or psychological categories. Since biblical texts are in the first instance religious in nature, and since their religious nature is closely linked with fundamental religious experiences, a basic question then is, “*what sort of religious experience gave rise to the Christian movement and motivated the writings that now interpret it*” (Johnson 1986:11). What are the religious nature, motivation, claims and experiences reflected in the text?

This focus on the religious dimension does not represent a shift away from the historical, the literary and anthropological, but incorporates them as methods in a model that is focused on reading New Testament texts in terms of their nature as religious texts with religious claims (Johnson 1986:11). Such a focus would help the discipline to move beyond the limitations of and reductionism inherent in much of contemporary historical research. It is, in fact, an indication of the *maturity* of existing research that gaps and limitations of existing research have been made explicit and that more adequate models for interpretation are being developed.

2. REVELATION FROM A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The cursory and general remarks in the above introduction are best illustrated by a discussion of research on Revelation.

2.1 Earlier historical work

Revelation has been subjected to rigid historical work at an early stage in the history of scholarship in what was to become known as the *zeitgeschichtlich*

¹⁰ Theissen (1997:1) lists some problems. Psychological exegesis, or the analysis of experience, reads the impossible into the text, imposes modern categories of psychological and experiential analysis on ancient texts, compromises the central place of the text in favour of non-textual issues or interests behind the text, and, finally, “relativizes the text’s theological claim through appeal to factors that are all too human.”

approach to the book. The works of Ramsay (1906) in the early part of the twentieth century and of Hemer (1989) towards the end of the century, both widely read and quoted, are examples par excellence of the quest for historical realities behind the book. Such research investigated the book in the first instance and almost exclusively in terms of its late first century setting.

This historical reading of Revelation reacted against well known a-historical claims of fanatical groups on the fringe of society that sought to identify symbols in the book in an arbitrary manner with personalities and events from very diverse periods. The history of revival movements in the nineteenth century with their destructive social consequences cried out for such deconstructive work to be done (De Villiers 1987:4-11). The spate of commentaries (e.g., Bousset 1906; Swete 1906; Charles 1913; Lohmeyer 1934) that appeared at the beginning of the twentieth century, should be understood against this background. Their *zeitgeschichtlich* approach had a deep seated polemical character, representing a much-needed correction of the arbitrary nature of speculative and fanatical readings.

2.2 Cracks in the facade

Cracks gradually appeared in the façade of this approach, especially because it did not establish any consensus in the understanding the book of Revelation. Historical observations were often restricted in value, or, in some cases, tended to become as arbitrary as the speculative readings they replaced. The work of Ramsay on the physical realities behind the seven churches, for example, was quoted endlessly in later works without really contributing to a meaningful exegesis of the text as a whole. More importantly, serious academic questions were raised about his historical claims. Aune (1997:131), summarizing recent work on the context of the book, remarked that Ramsay's proposal about the seven churches as part of a postal route, "have turned out to be based on a minimum of archeological fact combined with a healthy dose of conjecture."¹¹

¹¹ I have pointed out, for example, at a paper read at section on New Historicism of the international meeting of the SBL in Rome (2001), how Naturalism as an ideology, greatly in vogue in his time, decisively steered his reading rather than historical information. This contribution will be published elsewhere.

Increasingly, in recent years, scholars began pointing out that the results of the historical approach were unconvincing, if not contradictory (cf De Villiers 2002). Historical interpretations of the time of origin, author, provenance and referents of symbols varied greatly from scholar to scholar. The nineteenth century consensus that the book originated in Neronian times was replaced in the following century with a much later, Domitianic, dating.¹² Even among those who agree about this later context, differences on major issues of interpretation exist, often to intense frustration of researchers.¹³ For a long period, for example, it was widely accepted that Revelation was the product of a persecution under Domitian towards the end of the first century. Now scholars argue that there was no such official persecution, replacing it with a crisis theory. The author, it is said, created a crisis mentality in order to shape the behaviour of his readers so that they could become a “sectarian countercommunity in the midst of an unbelieving world” (Knight 2000:29; cf De Villiers 2002a).

More significant is, though, the way in which historical hypotheses take on a life of their own, determining the interpretation of the text in a decisive manner. Scholars who think that there was no official persecution of Christians by the Roman state in the first century, for example, practically use this historical information to redefine the text. They argue that persecution is not such an important motif in the book as was previously argued. As a result, they deny that John was banished to Patmos, as has been accepted in the most common readings of Revelation 1:10 and argue that John went there to receive his revelation (De Villiers 2002a). Such historical work with its inconsistencies and its suffocating grip on the text is endemic in contemporary research, implying that the method with which the text is analyzed needs to be reconsidered and a proper hermeneutics should be developed.

¹² One of the best known exceptions was the dating of the book by Robinson (1976:221-53) in the late sixties of the first century.

¹³ Schüssler-Fiorenza (1986:124-5) noted the contradicting interpretations of the 144,000 in Revelation 14. Because of these contradictions, as well as the many other arbitrary readings, “many exegetes and Christians throughout the centuries have relinquished an understanding of the book in despair ...”

3. THE DISTANCE BETWEEN A TEXT AND HISTORICAL REALITIES

The reconsideration of the method should begin by elucidating the notions of history and of text with which scholars operate.

3.1 A first distance: History as creation

Historical research by Ramsay and Hemer reflects a naïve historical reading of texts, assuming that they are a window through which one views “real,” objective historical events. Increasingly, though, the distance between historical events and reports about them is being spelled out. Historiography represents a first step away from real events or historical realities. “History” is the product of intelligent and creative selection and combination of events. Johnson (1996:81-2) wrote about this, observing succinctly that the term history could not “be used simply for ‘the past’ or ‘what happened in the past.’ History is, rather, the product of human intelligence and imagination.”

3.2 A second distance: History and experience

Not only the reporting of history, but also the very notion of a historical event is also problematic. Events are considered historical because they are experienced as such. They are accessible in or the result of experiences. These experiences reflect what sense was made of what happened and determine what is reported as having happened (Johnson 1996:82). Observers decide what happenings are worthwhile to be recorded and to be regarded as historical in the light of their experiences.

Much, for example, has been written about the selection of the seven churches in Revelation 1-3. Why are insignificant cities, hardly mentioned in contemporary sources, included in the list? Why are more significant churches excluded from the list? How did it happen that synagogues in three churches of Revelation provoked such memorable imprints in the mind of the author, whilst other sources yield no information on them? Part of the answer is that the list reflects the historical consciousness and experience of an individual author.

There is no direct link between what actually transpired and what is experienced as historical as if the one reflects the other. Human perceptions, feelings, emotions, prejudices, experiences and many other subjective matters determine and express the historical. This is an important further distance between text and extra-textual realities.

3.3 A third distance

Schüssler-Fiorenza (1986:125) stressed the necessity of historical work on Revelation by observing that, “we are never able to read a text without explicitly reconstructing its historical subtext within the process of our reading.” She adds, however, that history relates closely to a text and “is not accessible to us except in textual reconstructions.” Historical experiences are linked to and determined by a particular *textual* presentation of historical realities, creating distance between what “really” happened and what is reported to have happened in a text. Textuality refers to an author’s literary competence and performance.

It was pointed out above how Ramsay situated the seven churches on a physical circular route as recipients and intermediaries of communications like. But the description in Revelation 1-3 is much more than a literal report about historical conditions and locations of the churches. Literary conventions shaped these chapters incisively. This is evident from their close link with the introductory vision, their shared message and the carefully constructed chiasmic pattern in them. The longest letter (to Thyatira) is in the middle, with the two “positive” churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia framing it in the second and sixth positions. This literary character does not necessarily imply that the references to the churches are a-historical or unhistorical, but means that a book must be read in terms of literary conventions *before references to historical realities are considered*. “Historical” events may turn out to be nothing more than stereotyped or conventional literary motifs, weakening the possibility to reconstruct historical information. Recently Knight (1999:11), for example, wrote,

Given that most apocalypses contain warnings of cataclysm and disaster, these are exactly what we should expect to find in Revelation irrespective of its actual 'setting in life'. We do indeed find them there. One should thus beware of extrapolating from the work's selection of themes, which reflects a literary tradition, to a situation of 'acute crisis' that is judged to lie behind it. *There may be no direct connection between the imagery of an apocalypse and the situation that it addresses*¹⁴

In other words, textual characteristics rather than historical realities may explain certain motifs in a book, creating distance between text and historical realities.

3.4 A fourth distance

The above remarks should not create the impression that the experience and recording of history is completely subjective. In writing history an author is part of a communal setting which determines and directs his text. Historical experiences in Revelation are expressed, for example, in motifs and symbols that are communal in nature and that are deeply determined by their long history of transmission in particular societal structures. The symbol of harlotry in Revelation 17 is often regarded as a reference to events in the Roman Empire, especially because of the motif of seven hills on which the whore sits (cf De Villiers 2002a). This historical understanding is strengthened by the use of the symbol of the great "city," understood in terms of Rome. But both these symbols played a seminal role in Hebrew Scriptures where they initially recalled historical characters and events during the Babylonian exile. In the highly symbolic Jeremiah 51:25-6 Babylon as the symbol of evil in the end time is linked with "mountain" as a symbol of evil. Both these symbols, seminal in key eschatological traditions, are reintegrated in an eschatological context in Revelation 17, reflecting the collective forces of evil opposition to God in the end time. John takes them over from these communal prophetic traditions in which they already had an a-historical character to express in a new, more intense way, opposition to God. Evil, the destroyer "mountain" in the time of Israel will be sevenfold more evil in the end, thus the *seven hills* (Lohmeyer 1953:277). To

¹⁴ Knight (1999:29) uses this remark to deny that there was an actual, "real" crisis behind Revelation, but that does not diminish the value of his observation.

relate the hills to physical Rome is to overlook this highly symbolic link. These collective, traditional symbols determine the religious experiences of the author of Revelation as decisively as his historical context. They create further distance between what “happened” and what is related in the text.

3.5 A fifth distance

The process is still not as simple as placing authors and texts within their socio-cultural and linguistic structures. More must be said about a still larger distance between historical realities and texts that also illustrates the role of experience in interpreting Revelation. Thompson (1986:163-4) noted that those who interpreted Revelation as the direct result of and response to a historical crisis, distinguished between “social, institutional entities, on the one hand, and symbolic, literary entities, on the other,” favouring the social institutional forces as *cause or occasion* of the literary expressions. “The symbolic is then regarded as malleable to the more “real” social, political situation.”

This is a reductionist understanding of social reality because no “social institution” drives oppression such as in Revelation. John’s symbolic world, filled with symbols, myths, ritual observations and theological motifs was meant to console his readers in their alienation caused by their *experience of other symbolic worlds* in that time. John offers his readers an alternative to these symbolic worlds. There is no “ordered, central reality to the social world” (Thompson 1986:166). Readers do not respond to “historical realities” but respond to symbolic worlds that compete for their allegiance. There is thus a huge distance between Revelation as one option among several symbolic worlds and the “real” world outside the text.

The notion of experience is again strongly underscored by this insight. A text serves to resolve tensions between faith as expressed in a particular symbolic world and social *experience* (Thompson 1986:166; cf Johnson 1986a:14-18). John delineates a comprehensive symbolic structure that embraces the whole of Christian existence including social, political exchanges in everyday life. Those who accept this symbolic universe will find it a coherent

offer, integrating human experience and making Christian existence whole. His symbolic world is a “grid or an overlay that orders all experience” (Thompson 1986:166). Now,

conflict arises for John, not between elements of Christian existence, but between his comprehensive and coherent world and the comprehensive, coherent universe embodied in the Roman Empire Tribulation as a hyperbolic theme in John’s literary world functions not as a reflection on tensions between *faith and sociopolitical realities* but as an expression of the conflict which he perceived between the two ‘worlds.’ Their opposition is expressed mythically in John’s symbolics by homologizing Rome with evil, demonic forces to the faithful followers of God.

(Thompson 1986:166; secondary italics).¹⁵

Revelation is not a response to religious and social institutional persecution. John’s text reflects his religious experiences over against other alternative experiential options: “Tribulation correlates in John’s world with true knowledge, authentic self expression and service to the true God. Further ... it becomes a means of sharpening the boundary between the seer’s world, on the one hand, and Rome’s world, on the other” (Thompson 1986:169). His text offers the authentic experience, asked readers to imitate Jesus’ faithful witness unto death even if it brings persecution with it. The text thus seeks to form the experiential world of the readers: “Religious identification with the crucified King shaped psychosocial identification with the crucified King. In the process, however, John believes that Christians gain true knowledge which replicates itself in all dimensions of their lives to create a comprehensive, whole world” (Thompson 1986:170).

Every facet of the text needs to be integrated in this religious experience. The researcher needs to ask the fundamental question about the experience that is reflected in the text and the experience that a text seeks to effect. One cannot

¹⁵ I prefer to approach Revelation in a less simplistic manner. The book does not reflect an alternative symbolic world only. In addition to John’s offer, there are at least a symbolic world of his Christian opponents and of his Jewish opponents on offer.

move from particular textual motifs or symbols directly to historical realities outside the text. The text is a carefully designed product reflecting a comprehensive and coherent religious experience of an individual within his religious community and setting and that need to be taken seriously before historical observations can be made. Experience has established itself as a formative factor in and logical extension of historical analysis.

4. RHETORICAL CRITICISM AND EXPERIENCE

The notion of experience is, as was noted earlier, a controversial one. It is regarded with suspicion in biblical studies, since it suggests a speculative interpretive act, moving beyond the certainty of the text and the “historical facts.” Its importance is clear, though, from yet another perspective. It has become a focus of scholarship in an indirect manner with the extensive research on the rhetorical approach to New Testament texts generally and to Revelation in particular. Rhetorical readings of biblical texts represent one of the most significant developments of recent years. They deserve closer attention here because they also illustrate the seminal role of experience in texts.

4.1 Experience on a first level

The rhetorical approach argues that a text is fundamentally integrated in an act of persuasion so that the interpreter is challenged to determine what kind of effect the author of a text aimed to produce in his or her addressees. Not merely what the author wanted to say or his theological insights are investigated (Thurén 2000:50), but also strategic and tactical devices that are used to influence the audience. What is being said is not only linked with why it is said, but is decisively determined by it.

This insight is closely linked with developments in cultural and linguistic studies. Language is not merely about cognitive and prepositional matters or the experiential and expressive. Language functions as a coherent system of communication within a particular culture. What is said in a symbolic structure is decisively determined by its function in that culture and language. The challenge

is to find out what language does in what it is saying.¹⁶ In the case of Revelation this could mean, amongst others, that the book is studied in terms of its function, that is, in what way the author wrote to influence his audience. Schüssler-Fiorenza (1986, following Wilder) wrote about such rhetorical strategies of the author of Revelation to engage his readers. It is on this point that the text is intricately linked to religious experience. The meaning of a text with all its symbols, she argues, is ultimately restricted by its use to change attitudes and motivations. Revelation

seeks to persuade and motivate by constructing a 'symbolic universe' that invites imaginative participation. The strength of Rev's persuasion for action lies not in its theological reasoning or historical argument but in the 'evocative' power of its symbols as well as its hortatory, imaginative, emotional language and dramatic movement, which engages the hearer (reader) *by eliciting reactions, emotions, convictions and identifications*" (secondary italics).

(Schüssler-Fiorenza 1986:124)

This approach assumes, first of all, experience in the text and its world. The audience who is being addressed experiences alienation. The author also had a religious exposure and experience on which he bases a symbolic world that is worked out in the book and that functions to influence and change the behaviour of the audience.

This approach has far-reaching consequences for historical readings of the text, as is so clear from Schüssler-Fiorenza's (1986:124-5) analysis of the passage on the followers of the Lamb (Rev.14:1-5). This enigmatic part of the book, despite its clear structure and marked composition has been related to many historical referents. The overall meaning of the passage in the light of the literary context, she writes, clearly portrays the followers as the anti-image of the beast and its followers. Whilst the beast is traditionally identified with Rome, the

¹⁶ This is a fundamental part of social readings of texts. Meeks (1983:4) reflected on this theoretically in a sophisticated manner in his work on early Christianity, concluding that "we are certainly interested what the early Christians believed and what they said. But we are also interested in what else they did, including what they did by means of what they said."

identity of the followers of the Lamb is, however, less clear, as the many suggestions of possible referents prove. They are regarded as Jewish-Christians, as the elect and “saved” Christians or as Christian ascetic males. Others regard them as the “holy rest” of Israel, as the high-priestly followers of the Lamb, as the military army of the Lamb gathering on Zion for the messianic battle or as those who followed the Lamb into death and in heaven.

These contrasting interpretations challenge historical analysis of Revelation in a fundamental manner, raising the hermeneutical issue of interpreting symbols in the book. According to Schüssler-Fiorenza (1986:140), an adequate explanation of Revelation must first explore the poetic-evocative character of Revelation’s symbols. They cannot be reduced to one historical kernel. Symbols in the book have an open character, she argues, suggesting that they are like an onion with layers of meaning. This does not mean that a symbol can have many meanings and is therefore open to arbitrary interpretations. The meanings are restricted by their mutual relationships and their place in the book as a whole. The text determines its interpretation.

It is at this point that experience is once again of decisive importance for the interpretation of the text. A proper interpretation requires an assessment of the rhetorical dynamics of symbols in a “proportional” reading by elucidating their particular interrelations and the author’s *persuasive* goals. In her interpretation of Revelation, the author uses his text to overcome his readers’ experience of alienation after their conversion. At the same time, though, he wants to alienate them from their pagan context with its mysteries and emperor cult. The structure of the book is designed in such a way that the readers experience a cathartic effect, removing the destructive effects of their situation and helping them to control their fear (Schüssler-Fiorenza 1986:141). Through a literary analysis we can delineate the religious experience that is so foundational in the book and that determines its meaning so extensively.

4.2 Experience on a second level

There is more to the notion of experience than this first level. Experience must be broadened to include contemporary readers’ reading of the text. In an incisive

way Schüssler-Fiorenza (1986:142) argues that the book will only be understood adequately by those modern readers who *share the experience* reflected in it. It can only have the same cathartic effect on contemporary readers if their rhetorical situation “fits” that of the book.

What I am arguing here is that we cannot reduce ‘the reader’ to a timeless, ideal reader if we do not want to essentialize and dehistoricize the book. Rather than pose an abstract reader we must detect and articulate our own *presuppositions, emotions and reactions* to the work in an explicit way, as well as sort out what kind of quality of response becomes dominant in our own reading.

(Schüssler-Fiorenza 1986:142; secondary italics)

The process of interpretation thus involves not only experiences in the text, but also contemporary experiences. The experience of the reader plays a seminal role in understanding. *Not* explicating these experiences means an illegitimate dehistoricizing of the book! This is evident, for example, in the fundamental role that the experience of women plays in, for example, the academic and technical contributions in a recent feminist commentary on biblical and other non-canonical religious works edited by Schüssler-Fiorenza (1994). Few other publications illustrate more effectively how the experience of womanhood affects the process of interpretation. The role of experience is also illustrated in other contexts, as is illustrated by remarks of Pui-Lan (1998:186) who wrote about Western interpretations of Jesus,

The various quests (of Jesus) have always been analyzed and classified according to the tune of European and North American imperial grand narratives. Now we have to rewrite the history from the decentered, diasporic, Third World, Jewish, black, gay and lesbian, immigrant, brown-skinned women’s perspectives, since the quest for Jesus is also a quest for us. We have authorized the quest, though we have seldom claimed it.¹⁷

¹⁷ Cf also the remarks by Segovia (1998:52-53).

In an essay on New Testament scholarship in South Africa, I noted the fundamental role of the reader's social position in his or her interpretation of the text (De Villiers 1989:123), drawing attention to the need to reflect on it in a hermeneutically responsible manner. "More attention is needed for a theoretically founded analysis of who the meaning-constructing reader is within his or her world and how it influences his or her understanding of and questions to the text." I am developing that position in this essay, but this time in a way that affects the ethics of our discipline even more. We approach texts not only as Africans, for example, thereby conditioned to read the text in an African way and address it about who we are as Africans.¹⁸ The African reader of the biblical text is linked to his or her social condition because of religious experiences in the text as well as in his or her own setting. We need to be more explicit about how we approach the text as *African religious* readers, deeply influenced by this experiential setting. By noting who we are in our contemporary religious experience, we shall be clearer about what the text does in terms of this experience and to what extent there is a rhetorical fit between these two experiences. It is only then that an adequate interpretation of the text will be possible.

5. CONCLUSION

The above comments illustrate the limitations of some existing forms of historical work on the Book of Revelation, and, for that matter, on New Testament Studies in general. A historical reading will recognize the gaps between text and historical realities, but also take cognizance of a wide range of other factors that are part of the history of a text and that determine its interpretation. Such factors include not only social and literary matters, but also and especially experiential aspects. Biblical texts are, ultimately, expression and occurrence of human experience and behavior (Theissen 1997:1). At the same time they are also experiential acts when, for example, they exhort, reflect, pray, worship, sing, reinterpret or even evaluate. In the latter sense they include human experiences of the divine, for

¹⁸ Although the notion of "African" is wide open, I am here thinking of the major socio-cultural and political issues that determine lives of Africans on the continent so uniquely and extensively.

which reason they are then known as religious texts. To exclude these factors from the act of interpretation only obfuscates the process of communication.

This development has little to do with arbitrary individual feelings. The experience under discussion here is something different, relating to the illocutionary force of language, or, the pragmatics of a text. In this sense it relates to those emotions, feelings and experiences in the text and its interpreters that can be discerned and determined by a careful, scientific study of language and literature.

Works consulted

- Aune, D 1997. *Revelation 1-5*. Dallas: Word. (Word Biblical Commentary 52.)
- Balla, P 1997. *Challenges to New Testament theology*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Bousset, W 1906. *Die Offenbarung des Johannis*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Büchsel, F 1935. *Theologie des Neuen Testaments: Geschichte des Wortes Gottes im Neuen Testaments*. Gütersloh: Bertelsman.
- Bultmann, R 1952. *Theology of the New Testament, 1: The message of Jesus. The kerygma of the earliest church. The theology of Paul*. London: SCM.
- Caird, G B 1966. *The revelation of St John the divine*. London: Black.
- Charles, R H 1913. *A critical and exegetical commentary on the revelation of St John with introduction, notes and indices also the Greek text and English translation, 1 & 11*. Edinburgh: Clark.
- Conzelmann, H 1969. *Grundriss der Theologie des Neuen Testaments*. Tübingen: Mohr.
- Cullmann, O 1965. *Heil als Geschichte*. Tübingen: Mohr
- De Villiers, P G R 1987. *Leviatan aan 'n lintjie: Woord en wêreld van die sieners*. Pretoria: Serva.
- De Villiers, P G R 1989. New Testament scholarship in South Africa. *Neotestamentica* 23, 119-24.
- De Villiers, P G R 2002. Rome in the historical interpretation of Revelation. *Acta Patristica et Byzantina* 13, 120-142.
- De Villiers, P G R 2002a. Persecution in the book of Revelation: *Acta Theologica* 22, 47-70.
- Donahue, J R 1996. The literary turn and New Testament theology. *JSOT* 76, 250-275.
- Frei, H W 1974. *The eclipse of Biblical narrative: A study in eighteenth and nineteenth century hermeneutics*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Gadamer, H-G 1975. *Truth and method*. New York: Continuum.
- Gnilka, J 1994. *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*. Freiburg: Herder.

- Goppelt, L 1981. *Theology of the New Testament, 1: The ministry of Jesus in its theological significance*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Hamilton, P 1996. *Historicism: The new critical idiom*. London: Routledge.
- Hemer, C J 1986. *The letters to the seven churches of Asia in their local setting*. Sheffield: University of Sheffield. (JSNTSS 11.)
- Hurtado, L 1999. New Testament Studies at the turn of the millennium: Questions for the discipline? *SJT* 52, 158-178.
- Jeanrond, W G 1998. The significance of revelation for Biblical theology. *Biblical interpretation* 6, 243-258
- Johnson, L T 1996. *The real Jesus*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.
- Johnson, L T 1996a. *The writings of the New Testament*. Philadelphia: Fortress.
- Johnson, L T 1998. *Religious experience in Earliest Christianity: A missing dimension in Earliest Christianity*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
- Kümmel, W G 1970. *Das Neue Testament: Geschichte der Erforschung seiner Probleme*. 2^o ed. München: Verlag Karl Alber.
- Kümmel, W G 1972. *The theology of the New Testament*. London: SCM.
- Kümmel, W G 1973. *The New Testament: The history of the investigation of its problems*. London: SCM.
- Lohmeyer, E [1934] 1953. *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*. Tübingen: Mohr. (HNT 16.)
- Perdue, S 1994. *The collapse of history*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
- Pui-Lan, K 1998. On colour coding Jesus, in Sugirtharajah, R S, *The postcolonial Bible*, 48-65. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press. (The Bible and Postcolonialism 1.)
- Ramsay, W M s a. *The letters to the seven churches of Asia and their place in the plan of the Apocalypse*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Räisänen, H 1990. *Beyond New Testament theology: A story and programme*. London: SCM.
- Räisänen, H 2000. *Neutestamentliche Theologie? Eine religionswissenschaftliche Alternative*. Stuttgart: Verlag Katholische Bibelwerk. (SB 186.)
- Riches, J 1998. Text, church and world: In search of a theological hermeneutic. *Biblical Interpretation* 6, 205-234.
- Ridderbos, H N 1966. *Paulus: Een ontwerp van zijn theologie*. Kampen: Kok.
- Robinson, J A T 1976. *Redating the New Testament*. London: SPCK.
- Schüssler-Fiorenza, E 1986. The followers of the lamb: Visionary rhetoric and social-political situation. *Semeia* 36, 123-146.
- Schüssler-Fiorenza, E 1994. *Searching the scriptures: A feminist commentary*. New York: Crossroad.
- Stauffer, E 1948. *Die Theologie des Neuen Testaments*. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann.
- Stendahl, K 1962. s v Biblical theology, contemporary. *IDB* 418-432.

History and religious experience in biblical research

- Stuhlmacher, P 1997. *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments, 1: Grundlegung von Jesus zu Paulus*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck.
- Sugirtharajah, R S 1998. *The postcolonial Bible*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press. (The Bible and Postcolonialism 1.)
- Swete, H B 1911. *The apocalypse of St John: The Greek text with introduction, notes and indices*. Third edition. London: Macmillan.
- Theissen, G 1997. *Psychological aspects of Pauline theology*. Philadelphia: Fortress.
- Thomson, L 1986. A sociological analysis of tribulation in the apocalypse of John. *Semeia* 36, 147-174.
- Thurén, L 2000. *Derhetorizing Paul: A dynamic perspective on Pauline theology and the law*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Veeser, H A (ed) 1989. *The new historicism*. New York & London: Routledge.
- Watson, F 1994. *Text, church and world: Biblical interpretation in theological perspective*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Watson, F 1998. A response to John Riches. *Biblical Interpretation*, 6, 235-242.