Framing the text: 'Background studies'

and New Testament interpretation

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Abstract

Understanding a text always demands knowledge of its context. Possible reasons why context is frequently regarded as a subordinate part of interpretation are analysed. Interpretation within a communicative perspective, and facets of contextualisation are discussed; some theoretical aspects concerning contextual issues are clarified. The notion 'framing the text' is defended to emphasise that history is constructed and always presupposes a perspective. Framing is a comprehensive activity which adds complexity. Because it engages in historical interpretation and describes aspects of the various levels of context, one's framing activity can be criticised and improved. Framing arises from oscillation between intensive interpretation of details and generalisation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The appeal to context in matters of dispute about meaning is a natural and obviously important feature of interpretation. The significance of context has been stressed by all disciplines engaged in interpretation. From psychological research into human communicative behaviour and the phenomenon of meaning (e g Bransford &

Johnson 1972; Palermo & Bourne 1978:160-173) to folklore studies (Ben-Amos 1983; Honko 1984) the concept *context* is constantly stressed. This emphasis seems to be related to the very structure of knowledge and understanding: Something outside the 'object' is needed in order to know or to understand. The basic idea has been well expressed by Ong (1990:206):

> ...the notion of *text*, and its plasticity when subject to various forms of mediated communication, is one...concept in need of more sensitive examination...an inscription is not fully a text until someone reads it, that is, until someone produces from the writer's text something non-textual...To do this requires a code that the text itself does not provide. Texts, as texts, are dependent on something nontextual. All text is pretext. Unless someone has this extra textual code which makes reading possible and applies the code, the physical inscription remains forever no more than a visible pattern on a surface.

The indisputable and indispensable role of this nontextual 'something extra', is usually referred to as *context*. However, context turns out to be a complex concept. It may be possible to clarify some of the problems by analysing aspects of the concept *context*. After all, reflection on the conditions for understanding is very much part of the process itself.

More specifically, this study must be understood with reference to a clearly observable phenomenon in New Testament scholarship. There is undoubtedly a strong emphasis on the importance of context in this field of study. A few examples, which can be multiplied almost indefinitely, are Martin (1977:220-222), Roberts (1978:63-64), Malbon (1983:223), Vorster (1984:111) and Botha (1991a: 280, 287; 1991b: 296, 299). No one seriously denies the contribution and/or value of context. Despite the affirmation, what exactly is meant by context is left unclear: Why it is important – in practice – usually turns out to be a rhetorical move to prop up one's interpretation. How context should be utilised for the proper interpretation of texts is seen as somehow a common sense activity.

South-African New Testament research has been assessed as having a distinct perspective – almost an exclusive concern with literary and textual matters (Elliott 1988; cf a similar remark by Moore 1989:xiv n3). A motley array of reasons can probably be supplied, but this *de facto* slighting of context appears to be related to, or rather, to be a symptom of a misconception of history. In a defense of a 'historicized' approach to reader response gospel criticism, Beavis (1987) has commented on the assumption that literary and historical criticism do not mix; a sentiment that, disguised in various terminologies (synchrony/diachrony; text/extra-text etc), is quite common. Yet these are activities that presuppose each other, neither of these

perspectives can legitimately function without the other. In a sense, it is a false dichotomy (see, for instance, De Beaugrande & Dressler 1981:6-12 on the coherence and other standards of textuality; Winner 1990:221; Zima 1981:103).

I would like to argue that participating in historical activity, in a comprehensive, interpretive sense is more than of importance to New Testament research. It relates to the very essence of understanding. Construing a text is *always* also construing its context. To underscore the fact that context is construed, *actively made* by the interpreter, the notion of 'framing a text' will be developed. We frame texts on the basis of relevance – consequently what we are and want to know are part and parcel of the 'context' of the text. That 'framing' implies an interplay with the various levels of context as well as an active engagement in describing aspects of these levels makes it possible to discuss and criticise (to 'control') our frames with evidence, in the sense of patterns of relationships through time.

2. SOME CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Vorster (1984:111) has castigated conventional scholarship (which he calls traditional historical interpretation) for seeing the scope and function of context far too limited; for focusing on only part of the situational context. The way in which context is usually employed in much of New Testament research seems to refer to history as a backdrop to the texts.

Why is it that history often seems to be utilised in such a facile way? Or why is historical understanding reduced to enumeration of historical aspects which are usually considered to be clearcut 'data'? Why are texts often considered to be interpretable in themselves, with context only being added later, or called in to resolve difficult parts? In this section I identify three metaphors (functioning as assumptions) that possibly contributed to the shape of New Testament scholarship.

2.1 History as 'backdrop'

In his discussion about the 'stages' of the interpretive process (as specifically related to the New Testament), Marshall (1977b:12) informs us that '[a] third *stage* in understanding is concerned with background. It *may be useful* to know *something* about the geography...A knowledge of the...author of the Gospel and his intended audience will *help us to appreciate* the point of the story. Much of this can be found *fairly simply* from reference books' (my italics).

The underlying conception of historical context is obvious: It is something like a backdrop to an image, unproblematic in itself, possibly useful for the 'task of eluci-dation' (Marshall 1977a:126). Historical 'evidence' (background studies) when used like a wood-worker uses nails, makes context into a mere step within the interpre-tive process, accorded a role that is rated anything from important, or even neces-sary, to merely interesting and optional.

In the same volume that Marshall contributed to, we find Drane's (1977:117) statement: 'It is...essential for the student of the New Testament to be thoroughly familiar with the background of religious thought *against which* it was written' (my italics). The New Testament *is* as much first century religious thought as other texts from the time. To think otherwise is to make silly distinctions, such as between the Old Testament and contemporary (first century) Judaism (as Drane 1977:117-119 does). Imagine Matthew's (or Jesus') surprise at being informed that they were not Jews but exponents of the *Old* Testament!

The whole idea of context as a fixed, determinative background to which dis-putes concerning meaning can appeal is misplaced. For example, where does one draw the line when delineating the context of a text? 'Each text reflects the coloring of its context, and each context the coloring of its ring of contexts' (Barnhart 1980: 504). Context is just more text, just as much in need of interpretation and in fact constituted by a similar configuration of opaque factors that produced the ambi-guities and concerns it is being called on to clarify. The appeal to context does not resolve controversy about meaning but shifts the research to a larger and more pro-blematic area; it generates the search for the relevant context. While meaning is context-bound, context is boundless.

> This is something lawyers know well; context is in principle infinitely
> expandable, limited only by their resourcefulness, their clients' re-
> sources, and the patience of the judge. There is always more evidence
> that may bear in some way or another on the meaning of the act or
> words at issue...Context is often thought of as a given, but lawyers
> know that it is produced, and that it is not saturable. Contextualiza-
> tion is never completed; rather one reaches a point where further con-
> textualixation seems unproductive.
>
> (Culler 1988:148)

This forces one to recognise that the interpreter actively brings to the text selective factors with which to designate contexts (and other texts) to the text (cf De Villiers 1984:68).

2.2 Communication as transmission

Whether explicitly, such as Vorster (1977:18-23), or at a more general level, there exists widespread agreement that exegesis is about 'letting the texts speak', allowing the texts to 'communicate'.

Problems arise, not with this, but with the way that communication is conceptualised. Highly influential has been the *linear*, Sender → Receiver model (or metaphor). This is by far the most favoured model used to account for human communication. It goes back to Shannon & Weaver (1949 – though, like most influential ideas, with roots going back much further according to Sperber & Wilson 1986:5-6) and became particularly widespread through the work of various scholars. A significant motive in the development and adoption of the model appears to be the fact that it was taken from electronic communication engineering in an effort to emulate the hard sciences. In this perspective, human communication is broken up into three domains, which however much qualified, remain separate. The success of the metaphor witnesses to the fact that similarities exist, but it remains a metaphor.

Descriptions and analyses based on the source-channel-receiver model have not yielded sufficiently integrative explanations of communication. It is not so much wrong as inappropriate or insufficient. The metaphor creates an expectation and/or a discourse of successful method. The interpreter must 'overcome' various obstacles ('noise', 'interference') and solve problems by using the right 'method' or 'instruments'. If you cannot understand the text, it is not because the author was an incompetent communicator; the fault is yours, because you have not invested enough intellectual labour/used the correct method/applied a proper reading technique (cf McGee 1990; Gouran 1985:108).

To study human communication we need something that differs from the engineer's measuring instruments (see the important discussion by Sless 1986:10-23). When studying ancient documents the researcher actually functions as both transmitter and receiver *within* the communicative event. In other words, the transmission metaphor deceives with regard to the active role that the interpreter plays when interpreting, 'creating' the author and the auditor/audience. One does not first study the author, then the text and then the audience (or in any other order). One can only look at the audience with the help of the text – a text construed by the interpreter. We only have a text-author and a text-audience.

Viewing the world as a neutral space in which discrete entities (objects, beings etc) occasionally act or exert influence on one another is necessary in order to picture communication in terms of a linear sequence of events (X acts, Y reacts, X reacts to Y's reaction and so forth). This picture of neutral space within which we act facilitates the image of meaning that is encapsulated (translated) in stuff (ges-

tures, sounds, objects) which can be untangled or decoded. But the researcher judges the performance(s) of the sender/receiver on the basis of one's own understanding of language and history. One does not enter a neutral space, one is already part of the process, as much constructed and constructing as the other parties.

'Transmission of information' models usually make communication something clear and straightforward, ignoring or simplifying the inherent instability of human communication. They also often fail because of an underlying idea of disembodied information (which can somehow be extracted from the medium), and linear, causal models fail because they almost always omit the complexities and interrelatedness of the many communicative elements which are most crucial for understanding human behaviour.

2.3 Meaning as system
The widespread influence of Saussure in linguistics and literary theories is well known, and also well deserved. Yet, the tendency of researchers to present controversial ideas without critical discussion creates more havoc than illumination. Saussure has formulated, amongst others, some rather limited and vague ideas, generating a wealth of debate, but often with only a superficial understanding of the problems (Saussure 1974; cf Culler 1976; Sless 1986:132-145; Coward & Ellis 1981: 162-164). One particular concept has led to misconception, namely that meaning is related to sharing in a system.

'Language exists in the form of a sum of impressions deposited in the brain of each member of a community, almost like a dictionary of which identical copies have been distributed to each individual. Language exists in each individual, yet it is common to all' (Saussure 1974:19). This fundamental assumption has become very powerful.

Following Saussure and others who have emphasised the shared aspect of languages (meaning as *system* to refer to the collective nature of language) there has been a tendency to gloss over the breaks, fissures and chasms which characterise the infrastructure of understanding in favour of holistic (read monistic) approaches. These approaches examine the nature of understanding and texts with constructs such as 'linguistic competence', the 'logic of culture' or 'discursive practices' – in short *The System* which answers all questions. The practical correlation of this assumption is that human action can be explained by reference to laws and initial conditions, by 'discovering' independent unvariables; or by exposing essences ('deep' structures).

Two important notions must consequently be emphasised. Firstly, that communication is a very, very complex thing.

> Communication as sharing looks backward to a romantic notion of community that we can never recapture, even assuming that it ever existed; the curse of Babel has probably always been there, waiting in the wings to overwhelm us at any moment with confusion and misunderstanding. Transmission as a concept of communication is firmly rooted in the ideology of imperialism. Once we question the authority of the imperialist we must also question the validity of his intellectual postures.
>
> (Sless 1986:23)

Communication also generates misunderstanding and conflict, and must be regarded as an *ongoing problematic* rather than as an integrated and homogeneous entity. Novelty and deviation are as much a part of the communicative contexts of human life as are routine and the taken-for-granted procedures through which coordinated human behaviour is accomplished.

Secondly, in place of a search for laws and independent essentials there should be a careful investigation of the situation in which an action (communicative event) was performed. Just as shapes or figures are similar or different depending on their ground or context, so meanings, events, acts, people and their ideas can only be similar or different in relationship to a background (see Baker & Hacker 1980:258-283). 'Meaning' is not a private, subjective entity, but is created by the use of expressions in social interaction: Only an analysis of the context of human action can give insight into both its determinants and its meaning. 'That is, without the historical dimension, which provides the context of a communicative act, the meaning of a communicative act cannot be fully or truly understood' (Mander 1983:11).

3. SOME DISTINCTIONS

Thinking about context clearly demands some distinctions, and one frequently finds the distinction between micro and macro context. Noting the distinction between the subpart of the universe of discourse as context of an utterance and the discourse shared, though often helpful, should not disguise the relationships and interrelationships of aspects designated micro context. Thus, not only should the distinction be refined, but one should ask about the connections between facets of a supposed context, how they 'change' when 'moved' from macro to micro level, and how aspects *mutually* define and determine each other. In attempting to remain aware of these difficulties, I suggest distinguishing between setting, environment and encyclopaedic

or thematic knowledge. I will also add some remarks about how it may be possible to do this sort of thing realistically and fairly.

No doubt should exist as to the fact that these 'features' describe more than mere parts of a process; they are aspects with substantiality in themselves, yet irretrievably interwoven with each other. Thus, the idea is not to create the impression that contextualising is like *assembling*, building by taking blocks from the one 'level' for constructing the other. There is an extensive interplay between the various 'levels', these distinctions are made for argument's sake.

The point I am trying to make has to do with the phenomenon that context is often reduced to *disconnected* details. To counter this, the emphasis is on the importance of working with background aspects themselves in order to get a feeling for the interwovenness of data selected for a context; not only interconnected, but related to the environment in strange and unexpected ways. The dynamic side to the aspects selected for a constructed setting can be illustrated with reference to orality and literacy in antiquity. Notions like texts, tradition and even writing derive their meaning from the normative cultural values within which they occur. When it comes to New Testament documents we should not only beware of our literate bias and assumptions about communication implying inherent, constant and unchanging qualities, or, put differently, imputing contemporary notions to historical concepts, but should also relate our selected aspects to others: Talking about transmission of traditions is also talking about ancient education, ancient literacy and ancient storytelling (Achtemeier 1990; Botha 1990, 1992a).

3.1 Setting

With the term 'setting' the idea is to refer to context in the sense of *actual, relevant frame*. It can be argued, in principle, that 'the proper context of anything written is everything written'. But when a text is being understood, 'its actual context is much more narrow and far less textual than that. It is a fusion of the relevant segments of the reader's and the text's respective horizons, that is to say, a fusion of as much of the reader's intersubjective lifeworld with as much of the text's intertextual context as becomes subjectivley mobilized in a particular reading experience' (Hernadi 1988:751).

In practice only a finite and discrete set of cultural 'imperatives' need to be treated as implicatives within a specific discourse.

When describing a context it is important to bear in mind that context presupposes 'a statement of the inner logic, the interior structure, of the thing subject to interpretation' (Neusner 1986:ix). After all, the major clues to the context of a text

arise from interaction with the text itself. The construal of the text should proceed *pari passu* with the construction of its context (Seung 1980:91). Taking a cue from Dundes (1964), I have elsewhere illustrated how the 'texture', the linguistic structures, of Mark's gospel, a reading of the text and a possible historical setting for the gospel interact and interrelate: Mark is a dramatic story narrated in a style not unlike oral-formulaic composition by an itinerant 'teacher' (Botha 1991, 1992b).

3.2 Thematic knowledge (or: comprehensive narratives)

A major quality of an interpreter is a store of historical knowledge – knowledge of the events, beliefs and values making up cultures and periods. One does not become an interpreter by merely learning a method; scholarship and sensitivity, wide reading and membership of a critical culture (community) are called for.

A wide variety of information in memory is needed to understand even simple events in the world. This knowledge cannot be stored in memory as a random collection of isolated facts. If we are to be able to access and apply this general knowledge to new events, it must be organised functionally in memory. That is, the knowledge must be organised in memory so as to activate related information that may be useful, motivate inferences to fill in information not explicitly stated, provide expectations about what may occur next, and call to mind previously understood episodes that contain similar information.

These types of activities are basically the same when 'scientifically' interpreting ancient texts. What is different is the explicit intensification of awareness and argument called for. This is when the formal use of concise models and intense involvement with interdisciplinary research are of the utmost importance (on these issues see Barton 1982:13-14; Elliott 1986; White 1986; Rohrbaugh 1987).

Themes, events, actions and so forth in the narrative/text to be interpreted can typically only be causally explained and the pieces of the story connected together to form a coherent whole with additional knowledge about them, so that it is obvious that one needs packages of thematic knowledge, or what Sperber & Wilson (1986: 236) call 'encyclopaedic schemas' or 'encyclopaedic entries' (Sperber & Wilson 1986:87-89). This type of knowledge is relatively abstract, and is developed from many other settings involving other particular goals and actions. It provides connections between story elements and connections to related information in memory. This process of drawing on related knowledge to add to explicit information, to make *inferences*, is vital to comprehending both textual material and natural experiences.

Such 'packages' of historical knowledge are usually organised in narrative form: For example the conventional concept of *Hellenism* has as plot the movement and success of 'Greek culture' (particularly Greek language) and contains characters such as Alexander the Great.

Adopting terminology from Goldstein's discussion of the philosophy of history (Goldstein 1976:140-143), we can distinguish between the infra- and superstructures of these 'narratives'. The superstructure refers to the various packages of thematic knowledge, the 'visible' results of historical work. The infrastructure of a 'bundle' of historical knowledge refers to the models and techniques employed by the historian in the course of the production of the superstructure, from the first acquaintance with the historical data to the end result. The reason for alluding to infra- and superstructure is to emphasise the connection between them.

Returning to our example, Hellenism, we note that the conventional super-structure follows from a political infrastructure, combined with a 'great man' concept of history. Working with a religiously and sociologically determined infra-structure would lead one to characterise Hellenism by a distinctive worldview and cosmology (scientific – for the time – and fatalistic), the development of a distinctive monarchically based socio-economic system and a particular attitude towards writing and literacy (on these issues see Jones 1964; Martin 1987:6-12; Ulansey 1989: 46-94, 125; Lentz 1989). Our perception of the widespread value of the Greek language is probably overrated (MacMullen 1990; Harris 1989:175-190).

3.3 Environment

One can imagine a sort of intermediate level between one's 'encyclopaedic entries' and the text setting: contextual effects and information at the level of what could be relevant and what the sphere of reference should be.

3.3.1 Normal pragmatic context (the to be expected)

Guessing the setting of a communicative event is in a sense saying something about what one considers to be usual or normal for such a supposed situation. A concept of a situation and a perception of normality of performance in such a situation are inseparable in a pragmatic sense; one cannot be determined without determining the other at the same time. Thus, thinking about a setting involves reflection about an ideal setting. It is this normality of the pragmatic context that serves as the fundamental premise in our inferential knowledge of the speaker's or author's intention, or construction of meaning (Seung 1980).

The normality of the pragmatic context is always culture bound; both what is and what is not normal in the performance of speech acts and their situations, are determined by the conventions of culture. The recognition of pragmatic contexts always depends on our knowledge of historio-cultural contexts. Such a recognition depends on a *description* of socio-cultural conventions.

3.3.2 Description (what was it like?)

The spectres of misapprehension and mystification haunt the interpreter unrelentingly. One can only exorcise them with an attempt at *authentic* description (Runciman 1983:223-300). Now, it is very difficult to say what is authentic, although the basic idea is obvious: Our descriptions should also be valid for those we are describing.

The often voiced despair at such an enterprise reflects an illegitimate conception of 'telling it "from the native's point of view"'. In seeking to uncover such a perspective, Geertz (1983:69-70) counsels us to

> oscillate restlessly between the sort of exotic minutiae (lexical antitheses, categorical schemes, morpho-phonemic transformations) that make even the best ethnographies a trial to read and the sort of sweeping characterizations...that make all but the most pedestrian of them somewhat implausible. Hopping back and forth between the whole conceived through the parts that actualize it and the parts conceived through the whole that motivates them, we seek to turn them, by sort of intellectual perpetual motion, into explications of one another.
>
> In short, accounts of other peoples' subjectivities can be built up without recourse to pretensions to more-than-normal capacities for ego effacement and fellow feeling. Normal capacities in these respects are, of course, essential, as is their cultivation, if we expect people to tolerate our intrusions into their lives at all and accept us as persons worth talking to.

A well-known example of what difference the authentic-for-them principle makes, is the description of first century Judaism. Sanders (1977:33-238) in particular, has done important work on how many New Testament scholars simply distorted rabbinic Judaism to suit their own purposes, without an effort to understand it on its own terms. A similar manifestation can be detected in descriptions of emperor worship, which is usually characterised, with a stunning disregard for the ancients' sincere religious intentions, as political exploitation (Botha 1989).

Working with ancient documents necessarily implies that any misapprehension or mystification in a source can only be corrected in the light of other sources. This makes it more complex, but not necessarily more difficult than interpretive descriptions involving contemporaries. Sins (to be avoided of course) in such an activity are: incompleteness, oversimplification and ahistoricity; suppression, exaggeration and ethnocentricity.

3.3.3 Picturing the function of socio-cultural knowledge

When one is considering the usefulness and/or validity of components of a possible context, it helps to visualise how one's socio-cultural and historical knowledge functions.

I think one's contextual knowledge can function in one or more of the following ways. It can be seen as 'codes' constraining content and form, and specifying rules for the particular event, genre, program, etcetera. Or, it can be pictured to function like scripts (or schemata). This way the participants are seen as actors 'acting' out a script. One is then in effect describing underlying expectations. Also, contextual matters can be seen as strategies for associating knowledge: cues for relating texts, events and artifacts to each other.

One endeavours to define the way one uses historical knowledge in order to gain a sense of realism. It also helps one to be careful: We need to look at how choices are determined in and by particular situations. Often, as individuals, people communicate in ways not constrained by their cultural backgrounds. Interaction is always 'emergent', that is, communicative strategies are negotiated among participants and seldom a copy of the normal pragmatic context.

4. SOME CONSTRUCTIVE CONSIDERATIONS

4.1 The communicative event as the aim of interpretation

Among the monumental consequences of Einstein's theory of relativity is a fundamentally profound truth regarding communication and knowledge. By demonstrating the interactive effects between the observer and observed, making final measurements problematic, Einstein opened the way to a theory of intersubjective constitution of time-consciousness (Joas 1985:172-198; cf Einstein 1973:290-323, 341-356, 360-377). Less ponderously put, his work allows the insight that reality is always encased in a communicative matrix. Consequently, communication indeed encompasses everything that is human. Such grand scale thoughts aside, what is dif-

ferent from two rocks next to each other and two humans within a relationship is that humans communicate.

This is a basic stance not without consequences. The focus moves from texts as such (as if they could be objects in themselves) to the communication events of which texts are part. Usually, this means a focus on the people in, around, behind and created by texts. Such a focus is also pragmatic.

Pragmatist philosophy and theory attacks reductionist and dualistic ontologies and epistemologies. It utilises the concept of *coordination*: Human behaviour is on-going, interconnected activities, which involves divisions of labour and functioning factors within a vast complex. Communication always depends on processes of reference and the circumstances of experience. It is in and through communication that human societies are created and maintained. Communication and the processing of information are not merely 'aspects' of human societies; rather, societies would be totally impossible without communication in one form or another (Goody 1973; Maines 1984).

The challenges I have in mind arise from Western culture's general abandonment of uncritical positivism as philosophy, from the comprehensive nature of our interests as expressed in key terms like *communication* and *rhetoric*, and from a growing distrust of linear, mechanical conceptions of communication.

The single, most pressing challenge is to find ways of understanding and studying human communication as a highly complex, *transactional* process. Far too little of our research views 'all parties to a persuasive transaction as *changeable* and *interactive* rather than conceiving of persuasion as a process whereby the persuader(s) *act* and the targets *react*' (Miller, Burgoon & Burgoon 1984:456). Interpretive studies must reflect on the ways in which all classes of variables affecting group processes are *interconnected*. Human communication must be conceptualised as *interplay* of forces with *variable* consequences for different, individual, *situated* persons, and those problems call for re-examination of some basic concepts used in our scholarship. Communication is not so much like a transaction, but more like 'behavioral management of co-presence' (cf Ciolek 1986:49; Arnold & Frandsen 1984).

4.2 Inside

When studying communication there is no vantage point from which all things are visible. This contrasts with the electronic transmission metaphor which locates the researcher outside like an objective, all-seeing observer (cf the diagram by Lategan 1984:3). Researchers are like the figures in a landscape: We can see only what is before us and must imagine what is hidden from view. Though we can and do share

discourses, our position in the 'landscape' (that is, the notions we are developing/have about the text) determines what we see.

This realisation provides us with a powerful critical facility. One realises that *all* interpretation is man-made, and can be criticised and improved. One also realises that it is imperative to see oneself as within history, part of the very processes one is trying to understand.

We are part of our interpretations: Changing the signs themselves and bringing new signs into existence. One is not looking upon the works of others, but is part of the communication with the very thing one wants to scrutinise. In connection to this Geertz (1983:16) provides a valuable reminder:

> To see ourselves as others see us can be eye-opening. To see others as sharing a nature with ourselves is the merest decency. But it is from the far more difficult achievement of seeing ourselves amongst others, as a local example of the forms human life has locally taken, a case among cases, a world among worlds, that the largeness of mind, without which objectivity is self-congratulation and tolerance a sham, comes.

4.3 Beware of *'the* method'

Critics such as Stout (1982, 1986), Fish (1980:147-173; 1985), Knapp & Michaels (1982, 1983, 1989) and particularly Rorty (1982, 1985) have convinced me to give up on the quest for basic ground rules of rationality or criteria for public discourse as *such*. There is no ultimate perspective and consequently no true, final method. Instead, as have been eloquently argued by many, we should cultivate a pragmatic approach.

Clearly, theoretical reflection is important. It can and does throw light on practice, in the sense of contributing to self-consciousness about definitions, categories and boundaries (Lentricchia 1985). But there is no project that can govern interpretations of particular texts by appealing to an account of (all and any) interpretation in general. What we do have are rules of thumb, so to speak. Rules of thumb cannot be formalised because the conditions of their application vary with the circumstances of the ongoing practices of interpretation; as those circumstances change, the very meaning of the rules (the instructions they are understood to give) changes too.

Any attempt to formulate a comprehensive method in the sense of a device that will replicate operations and results (like mathematical theory: formal, abstract, general, invariant) has always failed and will never be successful. An example of

such a method is the goal of Chomskian theory: the construction of 'a system of rules that in some explicit and well-defined way assigns structural descriptions to sentences', where 'explicit' means mechanical (like an algorithm) and the assigning is done not by the interpreter but by the system (Chomsky 1965:8). Theoretical reflection in this sense strives for the impossible. It will never succeed simply because the data and the formal 'laws' necessary to its success will always be developed from within the context of which they are supposedly independent. As Rorty (1982:162) puts it, '[t]here are no essences anywhere in the area. There is no wholesale, epistemological way to direct, or criticize or underwrite the course of inquiry...It is the vocabulary of practice rather than of theory...in which one can say something useful about truth.'

One should be a pragmatist. The interesting fact is that when it comes to interpretation we are, in any case, pragmatic. Whatever positions people think they hold on language, interpretation, and belief, in practice we are all pragmatists. We all think language is intentional, and we all think our beliefs are true. In scientific conjecture, we may distinguish between speech acts and language, between having beliefs and claiming to know, between having true beliefs and really knowing. We do not practice such distinctions. Yes, a text can be anything that we want to make it. But we never make it everything, we unceasingly make it something, and that something is always something *determinate but never anything final.* A text can be a lot of things, but not at the same time; final meaning is always deferred, but determinate meaning is not (cf Wasiolek 1983:140).

4.4 Texts

The discussion in this section is prompted by the well-known adage that New Testament science is (or should be) a text-centred science (cf J E Botha 1991a:278) – which simply raises the question: What is a text?

A text is a state of potentiality, and acquires reality in the consciousness of the addresser/addressee. The 'document' (as physical object or sound) may be an artifact, but strictly speaking the text is not. An object 'becomes' a text when imagined as the means of expression for all the actions, relationships and connections that discourse mediates (cf Fowler 1986:86). 'Texte sind nicht isolierte Größen, sondern sind in einen größeren Zusammenhang eingebettet' (Egger 1987:34; De Villiers 1984:66). Whatever is created by an author (the writer/speaker) is not the whole being of the text. Nothing is possible without the pre-existing discourse which is rooted in social, economic, political and ideological conditions. Comprehension does not proceed from straightforward analysis of linguistic structure. A text is part

of a complexly structured *process* or *event*; its structural form, by social semiotic procedures, constitutes a representation of a world, characterised by activities and states and values. Outside a communicative event (in which it is created/fictionalised/projected for sure) a text is a mere artifact. A text is a communicative interaction between its producer and its consumers, within relevant social and institutional contexts (cf Fowler 1986; De Beaugrande & Dressler 1981). To adopt the very descriptive dictum of Lotman (1990:63-64), a text is a meaning-generating mechanism in a relationship of mutual activation with its readership (cf Lotman 1990:11-111).

Philology, traditionally the text-centred study of language, as contrasted to linguistics, which is speech-centred, has of course been concerned with making ancient or recondite documents accessible to those for whom they are ancient or foreign or esoteric. Terms are glossed, notes appended, commentaries written, and, where necessary, transcriptions made and translations produced in order to produce an annotated, readable 're-presentation' of the text.

Leaving out of the picture the practical difficulties (which as we all know are not inconsiderable), this 'picture' of interpretation seems fairly clear and acceptable. However, as Geertz has noted, when philological concern goes *beyond* routinised craft procedures (authentication, reconstruction, annotation) to address itself to conceptual questions concerning the nature of texts as such – that is, to questions about their principles of construction, the why, how, and what for – simplicity flees.

> The result is a shattering of philology, itself by now a near obsolescent
> term, into disjunct and rivalrous specialties, and most particularly the
> growth of a division between those who study individual texts (histo-
> rians, literary critics) and those who study the activity of creating texts
> in general (linguists, psychologists, ethnographers). The study of in-
> scriptions is severed from the study of inscribing, the study of fixed
> meaning is severed from the study of the social processes that fix it.
> The result is a double narrowness. Not only is the extension of text
> analysis to nonwritten materials blocked, but so is the application of
> sociological analysis to written ones.
>
> (Geertz 1983:31)

The repair of this split and the integration of the study of how texts as part of a process is built into the social phenomena are what various interdisciplinary enterprises attempt to do, and what I would like to see New Testament scholars take very seriously. The need is for extensive and critical working knowledge of a very wide ranging spectrum of interests in the contextual web. A mere reading of texts (even

of most of them, were one endowed with superhuman skills and energy), or collecting of 'facts' is not yet contextualising, nor understanding.

One cannot oppose text to context, or reduce text to a function of context, nor see a text as something caused by context. In this regard I found Barthes' discussion concerning myths as signs helpful (Barthes 1973:120-138 – Barthes is not addressing the issue of text and context as such). We tend to think of the relationship between context and text as one of 'equality'. But the relationship is one of 'equivalence'. What we need to grasp in the relationship is not the sequential ordering whereby one concept *causes* the other (the citing of parallels), but the interrelatedness which *unites* them and makes the text *and* the context what they are.

4.5 A semiotic perspective

What I want to emphasise in this section is 'the proposal that cultural phenomena should be treated as significative systems posing expositive questions' (Geertz 1983:3). This proposal can be described as a semiotic perspective.

It must be stressed that this proposal concerns a point of view, not a method, but a way of looking at things. The work of Barthes (1973), in particular, deserves to be mentioned as an example of a semiotic perspective. Published originally in 1957, *Mythologies* has been one of the most influential texts determining the study of culture. It is an evocative work; a collection which, for the most, consists of critical review articles exploring the meaning of representations or things of popular culture in France. Barthes offers readings of 'texts' such as wrestling, soap-powders, margarine, cars and news photographs and demonstrates that these texts can be used to conjure up a world of myth and paradox and give unexpected comprehension of human activities.

Looking at words, things and events as *standing-for* can yield a rich harvest of understanding and insight. Semiotics is concerned with relations: how, when one statement is made, others are necessarily implied.

4.6 The 'problem' of subjectivity

Clearly, when working with dated texts, with persons long dead, we are engaging in a hypothetical and imaginative *construction* when we 'communicate'. In a very real sense we have nothing but silent documents, apparently forcing us into a vicious circle. The fact that interpretation/understanding takes place at all points to the role stereotyped knowledge plays. 'When reading a text, people utilize their prior knowledge of the subject matter covered in the text' (Abbot, Black & Smith 1985:179) – a

phenomenon that is philosophically described by the concept *Vorverständnis*. The existence of a preunderstanding does not 'make the dialogue dogmatic, for in genuine dialogue preunderstanding can be brought to consciousness and checked against its ramifications in terms of the subject matter itself' (Hoy 1978:77). But this is to move the problem only one step backward as one must still determine what the subject matter at stake is, against which one can test the preunderstandings. However, for a large part, the subject matter of a text is a *practical* affair, concerning genre, structure, questions addressed and created by the text, eliminating irrelevant cultural references, constructing arguments for one's choices and so forth.

Yet, this is where at least two theoretical issues concerning one's approach to a text should be enumerated.

The first is a consent to self-censure (which we all share, at least in theory). We do need preunderstanding, presuppositions and assumptions to understand at all; that is not the issue. The problem is to critically relate to our assumptions. Serious and consistent historical work is clearly needed, but *also* about one's own position, perspectives and aims. 'Self-reflection and a clearer self-understanding are critical if the interpretive process is to realize its essential possibilities...In order to understand the past, it is necessary to try to understand one's own presuppositions and prejudgments in order to realize how these mediate one's perception of the past' (Hoy 1977:viii, 94).

In short, the circular activity of one's reasoning seems vicious only

> ...when we forget how often...assumptions and the background beliefs that engender them undergo change in response to the interpretive process itself...We move from part to whole and back again, adjusting preliminary expectations and background beliefs as we go along to make the explanatory problem easier. The fact that this process sometimes leads us to abandon attitudes about ourselves and our world we would otherwise never think to question – and would not even think to include at the outset in a list of relevant background assumptions – shows that the hermeneutical circle...is a helix.
>
> (Stout 1986:106; Barnhart 1980:510-511)

Secondly, the basic thing about interpretation is a commitment to not making the text into a mirror, or falling into ventriloquism. True interpretation concerns the fundamental acceptance of the possibility of the differentness of another's meanings: Someone else speaks. We should extend this ethical commitment to democratic values to a basic stance, making it a habit, or better still, a culture. 'This is to be open to encounters with other actual and possible cultures, and to make this openness central to its self-image. This culture is an *ethnos* which prides itself on its sus-

picion of ethnocentrism – on its ability to increase the freedom and openness of encounters, rather than on its possession of truth' (Rorty 1991:2).

A basic sequel concerning historical activity follows: acknowledging that the past is a different country – to adapt the famous adage with which a novel by Hartley (1963:9) opens: 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there' (cf also Lowenthal 1985:28-34, 410-412). 'Historical study takes an interest in what is really new – that is, in what is unlike ourselves' (Hirsch 1985:196).

The study of history (or historical activity) is not a possibility or condition for arriving at something (e g self-clarification), but is a fact, something going on any way. This is of course not a very useful remark, but at least it serves to raise the (rather important) question that what is really at stake can only be how it (history) can be meaningful and truthful.

The *gebildeten Verächteren* of history and historical understanding will be quick to point out that I am connecting two positions that (some would like to claim) are in opposition, namely emphasis on the cognitive apriori and the priority of historical interpretation. Underlying my exposition is the conviction that the famous subjective-objective polarity is a plague that needs to be eradicated from our discourses. The dichotomy: either ahistorical unchanging canons of rationality *or* cultural relativism is a dichotomy only when one adheres to a 'copy' theory of truth, 'the conception according to which a statement is true just in case it "corresponds to the [mind independent] facts"' (Putnam 1981:ix). There is an extremely close connection between the notions of truth, rationality and values; between 'objectivity' and one's historicity, not a cancellation of one by the other (on these issues see Bernstein 1983; Putnam 1981:103-216; Raval 1986:121, 103; Hernadi 1988:752).

The realisation that we are fully and completely enclosed by our history and that all our knowledge is mediated knowledge is a challenge: 'Our intellect and understanding are bounded only by the limits of the structures we can invent, and... any limitation of intellect is a limitation of inventiveness...Whatever limits there are to human imagination would seem to be those we have placed on ourselves by culture, training, and experience. We live by the learned images and the myths in our heads' (Cooper 1980:14-15).

5. FRAMING THE TEXT

5.1 Dynamic framing versus static context
What I have been working up to should be fairly clear by now. Interpretation *is* contextualising. Talking about a text is talking about its context, and the context-text continuum is a matter of imaginative construction.

The notion of 'context' should not be pictured as something in itself. Such a distinction oversimplifies rather than enhances critical and interpretive discussion, since the opposition between an act/event and its context seems to presume that the context is given and determines the meaning of the text/event. Context 'is not fundamentally different from what it contextualises; context is not given but produced; what belongs to a context is determined by interpretive strategies; contexts are just as much in need of elucidation as events; and the meaning of a context is determined by events' (Culler 1988:ix).

As Culler warns, we should beware of the (implied) suggestion of most uses of the term *context*: a suggestion of it being something static, real and to be discovered. Criticism (in the sense of striving for understanding) deals with how signs are constituted (framed) by various discursive practices, institutional arrangements, systems of value, and semiotic mechanisms.

> The expression *framing the sign* has several advantages over *context*: it reminds us that framing is something we do; it hints of the frame-up ('falsifying evidence beforehand in order to make someone appear guilty'), a major use of context; and it eludes the incipient positivism of 'context' by alluding to the semiotic function of framing in art... Although analysis can seldom live up to the complexities of framing and falls back into discussion of context, with its heuristically simplifying presumptions, let us at least keep before us the notion of framing – as a frame for these discussions.
>
> (Culler 1988:ix)

Adopting the notion of framing helps us to express the underlying relevance of our interpretive activities.

5.2 Relevance

Describing interpretations as mapping of texts into language, Stout (1986:103) notes that

> not just any sort of text-mapping would ordinarily count as interpretation. Utterly arbitrary, pointless mappings would not. This suggests...that even bad interpretations can be recognized as interpetations only relative to interests and purposes of some sort – relative to something that would give them interest and point...abstracting from interest and purpose altogether produces mappings that are good for nothing.

Stout (1986:115; cf also Raval 1986:125-126) continues by asking what the goodness (in the sense of truthfulness, validity, etc) of an interpretation is relative to. Clearly, the answer is the interests, purposes, and background beliefs of interpreters. 'The idea is to keep the various purposes of interpretive practice in view, not to propose maximizing utility (or anything else, for that matter) as a purpose for every occasion.'

Because we are part of the contextualising enterprise, because cognition presupposes the principle of relevance, we are forced to confront ourselves. The ideal to be historical, to let others speak – like all other interpretive ideals – turns back on us. There is a whiplash to our interpretations in the sense that our results ask to what interests and purposes our efforts are relevant. One's ethics, desires and attitude to other persons and mankind in general are, in other words, entwined with one's interpretive strategies, one's framings.

Consequently, we should move beyond a naive quest for the meaning of a text, or the dispute about the right method, towards a struggle over what makes these texts worth caring about and what kind of society to strive for. *These* matters determine our interpretive purposes and aims. If we do not want hierarchical, authoritarian societies engaging in violence and psychological terrorism (a device that the church likes to resort to – Cupitt 1985:48-121), nor want to raid texts in order to confirm an irrelevant metaphysics, we have already made important decisions with regard to 'method' and interpretive aims. Having chosen for an open, 'democratic' society (this must not be taken in a cheap, count-the-votes sense – see Rorty 1989, 1990), the need for historical, contextual interpretation is emphasised.

A striving to let those authors really say what *they* intended is a criterium made relevant, amongst many other reasons, by my own context, where so many people have been abused. Of course, a different context and other aims could change the relevant criteria determining a good/proper interpretation and normative aims. Be that as it may, at issue is that our ethical and political conceptions are part of that which we bring to the text, and interpretation, if we want it to be any good, forces those attitudes into our methodologies and aims. Explicitness about relevance necessarily asks for discussion and criticism of our interests, purposes and ideals.

6. SUMMARY
New Testament research is a multi-faceted and complex discipline. It is a historical discipline, in a comprehensive sense, concerned with the social, psychological, experiential and religious matters of the people and their activities that started Christianity.

Our interpretations of their ventures and communications should demonstrate that to refer to the social and contextual use of words is not to simplify interpretation or to cut down ambiguity. In current critical debates, invocation of the social character of texts and of the need for reference to context often turn out to be a reductive move, based on the assumption that contextual determination will in fact produce final meaning. Recourse to social attitudes and usage, or to authorial intentions, or to underlying cultural scripts or codes, simply gives access to that which in themselves are divided and multi-layered and generate more complex explanations and realistic perceptions.

History opens complexities rather than narrowing down to univocal meanings. One cannot oppose text to context, as if context were something other than more text. Context is in itself just as complex and in need of interpretation. Reference to social usage does not end exploration of meaning, it is initiated by such reference.

What I have been trying to say is that background studies are not for filling in missing parts of the puzzle. Interpretation is to engage in communication, and communication is an immensely complex and involved process. Instead of using the metaphor of transmission (or a derivative) I would suggest the metaphor of a *you-are-now-here-map*. It effectively acknowledges that the researcher is inside the process, that one has a point of view (for instance, now looking at author-text, then at reader-text, etc) that is limited according to various factors, and one has to shift point of view to change these limits. It also emphasises that one is feeling one's way, exploring, looking from the inside, so to speak, instead of knowing and looking at everything from above.

'To speak of the meaning of the work is to tell a story of reading' (Culler 1982: 35). Or, in my context, making a map about where one was and how one got to where one now happens to be. Most emphatically, I do not want to claim a new method, but rather to extricate our interpretive activities from an obsession with method. Instead of asking about the right method, or objective results, it is maintained that the question of attitudes (such as a democratic commitment) determines methods and relevance of interpretation. Consequently, less negative and insulting activities, but more serious straining towards true contextual understanding. A critical community is better than a knowing one. A critical community with good manners better still. And, the best of worlds would be one that is also historically minded.

I have provided an argument for an elaborate and complex interweaving of questions and possible explanations concerning texts and their contexts which sees influences bouncing back and forth in intricate and unpredictable patterns.

Consider the previous sentence: It is a rather nice example of academic formulation. What does it really say? Not much: It says one does not know how events and texts affect another; they do, but we – or at least I – have not been able to figure out exactly how or exactly why. To do so, is of course to transcend humanity: vain and dangerous. Ours is to try, to attempt understanding and explanation: creating our own texts through which we live our lives. Historical enquiry is the force which assists both understanding and self-understanding.

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