

# When *they*, *we*, and *the passive* become *I* – Introducing autobiographical biblical criticism

P J W Schutte (Witbank)<sup>1</sup>

Research Associate: Department of New Testament  
University of Pretoria

## Abstract

*The aim of this article is to introduce the reader to autobiographical biblical criticism. Autobiographical biblical criticism entails an explicitly autobiographical performance within the act of criticism. Autobiographical biblical criticism is to implement personal criticism as a form of self-disclosure, wittingly, while reading a text as a critical exegete. It thus has to do with a willing, knowledgeable, outspoken involvement on the part of the critic with the subject matter. This phenomenon is a natural consequence of the postmodern shift towards a personal spirituality. These issues are investigated and the phenomenon of this exegetical method is evaluated in the article.*

Although the professional guild is accepting of imagination and flights of fancy in traditional criticism of the Bible ... the distancing ploys of third person pronouns and passive *verbal* constructions disguise the speculative foundations of much of our traditional research.

(Anderson & Staley 1995:14)

## 1. LET ME INTRODUCE YOU

For a long time, scholarly writing has been defined by the absence of the “I” or any reference to the personal situation of the writer or to the writing process. This article is different. I am not an objective, indifferent and impersonal researcher. I am myself, in flesh and blood, and I am writing this article, in the

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Flip Schutte (P J W) Schutte (DLitt et Phil, DTh, PhD) is a research associate of Prof Dr Andries G van Aarde, Department of New Testament Studies, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria. This article is a reworked version of a section from Dr Schutte’s PhD dissertation, “Jesus – a kerygma to live by: A postmodern understanding of myth, resurrection and canon.”

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first place, to introduce you, the reader, to the *science* of autobiographical biblical criticism. Secondly, I want to convince you that autobiographical criticism is a style with a rhetorical candour that has to be regarded as legitimate scholarship by academics. Thirdly, I will put a few examples of autobiographical criticism on the table for scrutiny.

According to Moore (1995:19), autobiographical criticism is also known as personal criticism, confessional criticism, autocritography, New Belletrism, New Subjectivism, or even *moi* criticism. Autobiographical criticism is thus a form of self-disclosure, but the degree of self-disclosure, or self-exposure, varies.

We are living in the era of the reader. According to Fowler (1995:232), most of the currents in theory and criticism in the past twenty years have concentrated heavily on the problematic of readers and reading. The widespread acceptance of responsibility to and for our own reading experiences is one of the major catalysts for the present surge of autobiographical criticism.

## **2 AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS EPISTEMOLOGY<sup>2</sup>**

According to Miller (in Moore 1995:21), autobiographical biblical criticism entails an explicitly autobiographical performance within the act of criticism. Autobiographical biblical criticism involves implementing personal criticism as a form of self-disclosure, wittingly, while reading a text as a critical exegete. It requires, as Miller puts it, with a willing, knowledgeable, outspoken involvement with the subject matter on the part of the critic. It spells out the notion that the acts of reading and interpreting are subjective (see Pippin 1995:157). It yields to an invitation extended to the potential reader to participate in the interweaving and construction of an ongoing conversation, even as the biblical text remains a text (cf Henking 1995:241). It gives scholars a critical forum for exploring the connections between themselves as real readers and their exegesis of biblical texts in a self-conscious and autobiographical manner (Anderson & Staley 1995:10). Hagner (1995:58) admits, as Immanuel Kant did long before him, that there is no such thing as an “objective” interpretation, and that every interpreter brings a great deal to the text. According to Anderson and Staley (1995:10), the autobiographical mode of criticism can offer itself as a partner in a hermeneutical dialogue with those rhetorical tropes of academic writing which are normally claimed to show scientific objectivity.

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<sup>2</sup> Epistemology is how we can know anything. Everything has an epistemology. It is the way a person organizes his or her perceptions and thus ascribes meaning to his or her experiences.

Autocritography provides a yardstick with which to measure the autobiographical swerve in biblical studies. It helps the reader to assess the collision of the personal and the professional that has resulted from that swerve, along with its consequences or a lack thereof (Moore 1995:20). According to Fowler (1995:232), the current widespread acceptance of responsibility to and for our own reading experiences is one of the major catalysts for the present surge of autobiographical criticism, because reading is never disinterested, not even postmodern reading (cf Rohrbauch 1995:248)

Maldonado (1995:91) discerns two levels on which autobiography has an impact on the interpreter. He calls the first the *idio-autobiographical*. The idio-autobiographical level refers to the ordinary, usual meaning of autobiography, namely the particular events, moods, motivations, and agenda that comprise the life story of the individual interpreter. These would, broadly speaking, be the data of a biography or an autobiography. The second level, more elusive and subconscious, he calls the *meta-autobiographical*. This level incorporates the available and recognizable autobiographical plots that the culture of the teller determines.

An autocritographer's reading can or should never pretend to represent the only way to read a given text (Anderson & Staley 1995:11). There can never be a single African or feminist or gay perspective on a given text. The inescapability of multiple perspectives only becomes more apparent when both personal experience and social markers are taken into account (Anderson & Staley 1995:11). Autobiographical criticism, by its very nature, underlines multiple perspectives, because it highlights the individual as well as some shared experiences that play a role in a reading. Its rhetoric often openly avows the interconnections between the personal and the social (Anderson & Staley 1995:12). An autobiographical critic does not claim to uncover absolute truth and or to practise pure science. Instead, the critical text provides an opportunity to introduce the flesh and blood author as a scholar. It makes the point that no writing or academic research takes place in a vacuum.

An autobiographic critical text creates space for contextualization, culture, and experience (cf Moore 1995:26). However, according to Anderson and Staley (1995:12), it can be a dangerous and bewildering enterprise for scholars to explore how their personal experiences and social locations relate to their professional discourse on the Bible. One of the arguments of autobiographical criticism is that these two, scholarship and life, are always connected. In academic language, it is easy to disguise one's person and life with the third person pronoun and with constructions in the passive voice. However, to write about how our personal lives, economic situations, and

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prejudices affect our interpretation of the Bible is to reveal the tenuousness and interested nature of our exegetical moves. According to Patte (1995:74), writing in an openly autobiographical manner exposes our exegetical enterprises as rooted in “ordinary reading” like all other reading of biblical texts.

According to Fowler (1995:234), autobiographical scholars have discovered (and admitted) that they cannot tell where the text ends and where they, as exegetes, begin. Existential exegesis as “reception aesthetics” yields the admission that the interpreter and interpreted texts are deeply embedded in each other. Fowler (1995:234) states: “Autobiographical criticism seeks not the implied reader as much as the impaled reader, a real, flesh-and-blood person pierced by the tenterhooks of history, culture, and personal experience.” Yet to say something about yourself in an academic work makes you vulnerable. It is a risk that you take. However, I cannot do biblical criticism without a personal and autobiographical dimension.

Autobiographical biblical criticism is not and should not be or become the only way to do biblical criticism. Nevertheless, according to Anderson and Staley (1995:14), it has a place in a discipline where a notion such as the “hermeneutical circle” plays a pivotal role. It represents a discipline that takes seriously the rhetorical question Bultmann asked in an essay: “Is exegesis without presupposition possible?” According to Bultmann (cf Pelser 1987:178; Fergusson 1992:55), interpretation can only commence on the basis of a prior understanding of the subject matter. Any text must thus be interpreted in the light of some pre-understanding.

One can therefore assume, as Fowler (1995:231) does, that the implied reader in many of our critical texts “was really myself” and that “the meaning that I was finding was the meaning/manufactured in the here and now ... *I* am responsible to and for what the text says *to me*”. Autobiographical biblical criticism allows us to begin to see how and why we sometimes wear tinted glasses, and reading a wide variety of autobiographical criticism allows us to see what we share with others and where the colours of their lenses differ from our own (Anderson & Staley 1995:15). Scrutinising both idiosyncratic and shared interpretive lenses allows us to begin to ask how we take responsibility for our interpretations and how we make judgments about the value of various interpretations for particular times and places.

For as long as there have been biblical texts, there have been multiple interpretations of texts. According to Anderson and Staley (1995:16), identifying some of the reasons for multiple interpretations and shouting “Vive la différence” is simply not enough. Thus, autobiographical biblical criticism does not mark the end of criticism, but rather points the way toward a more

rigorously self-reflective and contextualized biblical criticism. According to Henking (1995:244), it is valuable in the sense that it creates a new tradition of scholarship – one that exposes and enacts the risky business of biblical studies. It would thus be wise to take to heart Seán Freyne’s (1997:91) advice when he asked in Arnal and Desjardins’ *Whose historical Jesus?: Galilean questions to Crossan’s mediterranean Jesus*:

I am convinced that the present “third wave” quest for the historical Jesus is no more free of presuppositions than any of the other quests that went before it. Nor could it be otherwise, no matter how refined our methodologies. If we are all prepared to say at the outset what is at stake for us in our search for Jesus – ideologically, academically, personally – then there is some possibility that we can reach an approximation to the truth of things, at least for now. Even that would be adequate.

### **3. MY THOUGHTS ON THE ISSUE**

The shift to an autobiographical style in doing theology came along with the paradigm shift from a modern to a postmodern exegesis, but it also accompanied a move in many circles away from theological objective academic language to personal spirituality. Let me explain.

#### **3.1 Postmodern exegesis**

According to Via (2002:97), postmodernity may refer to a style of thought that is suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason and objectivity.

Postmodernism is not so much a method as a stance or posture composed of malleable and conflicting variables. Postmodernism is characterized by three broad and encompassing features: it is antifoundational, antitotalizing and demystifying (see Adam 1991:4). It is antifoundational in that it denies any privileged unassailable starting point for the establishment of truth. It is antitotalizing in that it is critical of theories that seek to explain the totality of reality; and it is demystifying in its effort to show that ideals are characteristically grounded in ideology or economic or political self-interest.

There are as many varieties of postmodernism as there are people who want to talk about the subject. The name itself suggests that it defines itself as different from “modernity.” It is fair to think of it as a movement of resistance. Postmodern thinking, to explore the premise of Adam, evolved as a critique on certain values of modernity. In the first instance, it can thus be seen as antifoundational. Someone who believes in foundationalism believes that knowledge has firm foundations (Mouton & Pauw 1988:177). Such a person

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accepts no absolute truth and regards no premise on which truth claims are based as the one and only starting point (Adam 1995:5).

Secondly, the stance is antitotalizing in the sense that, according to those who practise it, no theory can provide the full and total answer to questions that are posed. Van Aarde (2002:431) states: "Information contradicting a theory or providing another possible angle can always be found. If a theory claims to be 'total', it in effect means that the other possibilities that do exist have simply been disregarded or the criteria were designed to eliminate them."

Thirdly, according to Adam (1995:5), postmodernism is also demystifying: "... it attends to claim that certain assumptions are 'natural' and tries to show that these are in fact ideological projections." It questions the presuppositions that certain things are "natural" and others "unnatural" and can therefore be discarded, seen as untrue or marginalized. Generally accepted values based on the notion that some things have been legitimated, for instance, by God or the Bible, are questioned. These "natural" and "legitimate" values are exposed by postmodernism as concealing underlying ideological motives (Van Aarde 2002:431). Economic or political motives can be camouflaged by claims of universality or necessity. A postmodern version of demystification is therefore a matter of permanent criticism and self-reflexive critique.

For a long time, the foundation of philosophical thought was Descartes' *Cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am). Postmodern thought undermines the assumption that one needs a foundation. They argue that no philosophical foundation is foundational enough (Adam 1995:6). Therefore, no foundation is necessary. "They do not do the work one asks of them, and they simply provide one more point to which an opponent can object" (Adam 1995:7).

Postmodern thinkers also generally resist totalities because totalities either include everything altogether or proceed by excluding some possible members:

If the totality includes everything, it is intellectually useless .... The sort of totality that serves some useful purpose works by differentiating members from nonmembers, human from nonhuman, individual self from not-self. However, the process of exclusion requires us to make judgments about what is in and what is out. This is where problems with totalities come in: Who decides what counts and what doesn't?

(Adam 1995:8)

Totalities are always flux and a totality in flux simply is not total enough.

Demystification has played a leading role in modern thinking. As Adam (1995:11) comments: “The rationalist criticism of theological doctrine, the Marxist critique of capitalism, the psychoanalytical critique of consciousness, all partake in the demystification of institutions and functions which had been thought ‘natural’ or divinely ordained.” When faith is dismissed as wish fulfilment by an analyst, and when a political agitator points out to what extent the electoral process is restricted by financial issues, he or she displays “the characteristically modern ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ which looks in every closet to discover the lurid secrets that are surely concealed there” (Adam 1995:12).

However, modernism has generally restricted the scope of this demystifying suspicion to particular classes of institution and theory. Certain domains have remained above suspicion. Postmodernism is changing this situation. No intellectual discourse is above postmodern criticism.

Where modern criticism is absolute, postmodern criticism is relative; where modern knowledge is universal, unified and total, postmodern knowledge is local and particular; where modern knowledge rests on a mystified account of intellectual discourse, postmodern knowledge acknowledges that various forces that are ostensibly external to intellectual discourse nonetheless impinge on the entire process of perceiving, thinking, and of reaching and communicating one’s conclusions. Nothing is pure; nothing is absolute; nothing is total, unified, or individual.

(Adam 1995:16)

An autobiographical manner of doing exegesis and theology is thus a natural consequence of the paradigm shift.

Reading a text in a postmodern way is not to read the text a-historically or even in an anti-historical critical manner. The time, date, place, text critical notes, grammar, *Sitz im Leben*, and all the other exegetical questions remain important. It stays a critical way of doing biblical exegesis, but, instead of formulating your exegetical results impersonally, or using passive constructions, you are free to formulate it personally, or even autobiographically, if you wish. According to Van Aarde (2002:431), the postmodern way of thinking is interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary, and from a literary point of view, relevant documents should be read against the background of their chronological periods and respective contexts.

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When, for example, I do theology, I not only take the context of the texts and their background and chronology into account, I also take my self into account. This *method* can perhaps be called deconstruction.

Adam (1995:31) is convinced that when deconstruction moves into the discourse of biblical criticism it displaces many of the cardinal characteristics of institutionally legitimated interpretation. First, it underlines antifoundationalism:

... there can be no absolute reference point by which we orient our interpretations: not the text, the author, the meaning, the real historical event, nor any other self-identical authoritative presence. Second, it implies that when an author tries to compose a text that overcomes the limitations ... she will inevitably fail: there will always be traces of the exclusions and the distinctions that do not make a difference, which a careful reader can locate and use to undermine the rhetorical power of the supposedly authoritative text.

(Adam 1995:31)

Deconstruction demystifies. It separates history from fiction.

Third, according to Adam (1995:32), deconstruction shatters totalities by deconstructing the identity, the shadowy presence, which they claim to represent. Fourth, deconstruction grants interpreters permission to interact with texts in ways that we are not at all accustomed to; deconstruction suggests to us that there are no unnatural acts of textual intercourse. The deconstructive biblical interpreter must abandon the illusion that there is something behind the text, which we might get at by way of sufficient research or the right method. They should forget to try to locate the world behind, or in, or in front of the text, and they should remember that meaning is what we make of texts. It is not an ingredient in texts (see Adam 1995:33).

To me this means that you are autobiographically active with the text. No method can thus claim that it is *the* method. All interpretation is therefore hermeneutical and personal. Doing exegesis autobiographically is thus to join in the search for meaning and to move from the known to the unknown, from what we are familiar with, to what may seem strange to us. The faith and the story stay the same, but it is a venture in trying to formulate differently, to address issues, and to come to a new self-understanding in our process of our being busy with and engaging actively with the richness of the texts. Doing postmodern exegesis in an autobiographical style brings with it a shift, in many circles, away from theological objective academic language to a more personal use of language and to a personal spiritual involvement of the critic.



### **3.2 Personal spirituality**

All over the world, there is a resurgence of interest in spirituality. This sounds like a contradiction if one compares this statement to the declining numbers of members in institutionalized churches, but, as Woods (1996:88) explains, society is “not disinterested in God; society is disinterested in the institutionalized church. Society has become increasingly distrustful of all institutions ... Society has not detached itself from spirituality; it is just rebelling against the ways that the church has sought to guide spiritual experiences.”

The church has sought to guide the spiritual lives of its members in very practical and reasonable ways. According to Woods (1996:88), that sounds like a compliment, but it is not, because contrary to Western thought, spirituality is anything but reasonable and practical. Ever since medieval times, the Western church has reacted against knowing God by direct experience and has supported the notion of knowing God through secondary means, such as the Bible, sermons, devotional writings, theology, commentaries, and hymns. The church has encouraged people to reason about God more than it has encouraged them to relate to God (see Woods 1996:88). Reasoning about God is helpful but limiting, because it is impersonal, while communicating with God in a direct manner allows God to speak to us in a much more personal way. In the Christian tradition, the Bible is seen as the word through which God speaks. It is the function of the church to proclaim this word of God.

However, the Bible is no longer only the “possession” of the church. Many people who do not belong to a church still read the Bible. They “decanonize” the Bible for themselves when they use it as inspirational literature to guide their meditation and contemplation. In using and studying the Bible, there has been a remarkable shift away from its theological and academic features to its usefulness for personal spirituality.

For a long time, in the past, theology had become more and more an enterprise of the academy and its professionals and less and less relevant to everyday life. According to Mead (1993:56), the theological frontier was addressed in learned study and in the library, but ordinary Christians had little knowledge of its usefulness. Today, more people, not only theologians, or even church members, but also ordinary people, some who do not even belong to a church, are talking theology. Even in academic circles, not everyone who is interested in the Bible or theology is a member of a church, or even a Christian. The purpose of theological research is not only to result in the life and preaching of the church anymore. Researchers and theologians have different agendas. For those who do not have the life of the church as

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their focus when they are doing theology, most of the time, their research and study are either for the sake of the academy itself, or for their own spirituality. This shift facilitates the shift to an autobiographical style.

People are thus moving away from the institutionalized church and away from a fixed and formal religion, but they are not necessarily moving away from the Bible or from God. They can still use the Bible as a book where one can find testimony about people's experiences of God, and where one can find, perhaps, even a word from God. It is thus a move towards spirituality.

Autobiographical criticism is thus part of the bigger picture of a paradigm shift towards postmodernity. Writing autobiographically is a shift away from the claim to objectivity. It is a shift away from making authority-bearing statements, which claim to consist of eternal truths. It is a recognition of the fact that my premise is only another premise. It underlines only *my* point of view. It is also a shift away from theology as an *ivory tower pure science* concept to theology as a spiritual activity between the text and me. Actually, it is also an attempt to take the mythical character of Biblical texts seriously.

Autocritography has thus to do with your understanding of, and perspective on what Scripture is for you. In my case, then, because the Bible is not the word of God, or the only word of God to me, but only a source of testimonies of other people's experiences and understandings of God, I can be autobiographical in my study of the Bible, because the Bible only facilitates my experience of God. My theology can also be autobiographical because it does not have to result in the life of the church; instead, its results are applicable only to my personal experience of God. Therefore, Christians outside the church can still read the Bible and do theology – autobiographical theology in fact, because they do not do it for the church. They do it for spirituality, for their own spirituality.

## **4. RECENT EXAMPLES**

According to Moore (1995:20), four books in particular stand out as exemplifying autobiographical criticism. The first is Nancy K Miller's *Getting personal: Feminist occasions and other autobiographical acts*. The second is *The intimate critique: Autobiographical literary criticism*, edited by Diane Freedman, Olivia Frey and Francis Murphy Zauhar. Then there is *Confessions of the critics*, edited and introduced by H Aram Veaser. The fourth is the only full-fledged example of confessional criticism to date by a biblical scholar,

Jeffrey L Staley's, *Reading with a passion: Rhetoric, autobiography, and the American West in the Gospel of John*.

A stream of autobiographical essays has also been issuing from historical Jesus scholars. These have been published either in the Westar Institute's scholarly journal *Forum*, or in its periodical *The Fourth R*, or in independent publications. The scholars publishing these essays include Marcus J Borg<sup>3</sup>, John Dominic Crossan<sup>4</sup>, Andries van Aarde<sup>5</sup>, Eugene Boring<sup>6</sup>, Bruce Chilton<sup>7</sup> and Walter Wink<sup>8</sup>.

## 5. WHAT DOES AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL CRITICISM LOOK LIKE?

Example 1: Jeffrey Staley's *Reading with a Passion*

I have discovered nothing from reading myself as reader. Nothing except that I can as easily hide and lie about myself as I can about the Gospel of John. And if the critics of reader-response criticism tell me my Johannine "reader" is a fiction, critics of autobiography tell me that the "self" I have read reading the Gospel of John is no less a fiction. The "I" of this chapter is nothing more than print and paper conceived from the unholy trinity of Tony Hillerman's popular, quasi-anthropological detective novels, my own piecemeal memory, and sacred Scripture. But then, the same can be said of Jesus' self-disclosing "I Am" in John's Gospel. It is not his own either. It is merely the text of Exodus 3:14 pinned precariously to his lips by some nameless author. All our reconstructed personae are intertextual and linguistic fictions, whether the referent (or "deferent") is "Jesus," "Jeffrey," or the "Johannine encoded reader."

(Staley 1995:198)

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<sup>3</sup> "The Journey Home" in *The Fourth R* 1993 and *Meeting Jesus again for the first time: The historical Jesus and the heart of contemporary faith* (1994).

<sup>4</sup> "Exile, stealth, and cunning" in *Forum* 1985.

<sup>5</sup> *Fatherless in Galilee: Jesus as child of God*, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> "Revolutions in the Jesus tradition: From Bonnie to Dominic", in *Forum* 1985.

<sup>7</sup> "Finding a way", in *The Fourth R* 1993.

<sup>8</sup> "Write what you see: An autobiographical reflection", in *The Fourth R* 1994.

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Example 2: Donald Hagner's *Writing a commentary on Matthew*<sup>9</sup>

What chutzpah it is, in this postmodern era, to publish a commentary on the Gospel of Matthew that pretends to be anything more than subjective reflections of a very personal kind. Do I really think that I have expounded *what the evangelist meant*? Do I think I have done anything more than present some things that Matthew *can be taken* to mean? Is the commentary really anything more than what *I* happen to think Matthew may have meant? Is what I present simply what I *want* Matthew to mean?

In recent years I, too, have become aware of the extent of the involvement of the reader in every act of interpretation. I realize afresh how my own social background, my education, my evangelical Christianity, and all that goes into making me who I am, provide an inescapable and ever-present influence in all my attempts to understand and communicate the New Testament.

(Hagner 1995:51)

Example 3 is only my own. *I will take the risk of disclosing myself.*

Sometimes there are more questions in my mind than answers, questions about the Bible and the church, and questions about the church's interpretation of the Bible and their confessions. The issue that triggered most of my questions is the issue about the two worlds in which the church to which I belong lives. When the church as an institution talks politics and economics, those in a position of leadership try to do it in a modern to postmodern register at a relatively high scientific level.

So, for example, I can quote from the opening homiletic reflection of Theuns Dreyer (2004:672), the outgoing chairperson of the synod of the *Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika*. He said (my translation):

Buildings and borders, structures and walls, systems and methods – all these things bring with them a feeling of security because they give structure to the world you live in. They help you to get a grip on reality. Even in the church, they give us that feeling of security! They create the environment for church discipline and order. In fact, the church cannot be “church” without it. However, when the structures that human beings have created become eternal dogmas, it becomes dangerous, because then we begin to think that we can get a grip on God! With our systems and structures, we create boundaries for the love of God. We make calculations

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<sup>9</sup> *Matthew 1-13*, in the Word Biblical Commentary, was published in 1993 and *Matthew 14-28* in 1995.

about God's power, and we limit God's grace. By doing this, the church has degraded people for ages to slaves, and it [the church] managed to keep women out of church offices.

However, when the majority of the church members interpret the Bible, they choose to be mythical and/or dogmatic. To me, these two worlds are irreconcilable. I cannot live from Monday to Saturday in a postmodern world and on Sundays profess that I still believe in the historicity of a virgin conception, a bodily resurrection from death, and a Bible as if it *is* the word of God.<sup>10</sup> Yet, I believe in the resurrection, but in the resurrection as a *kerygmatic*<sup>11</sup> event. I do not read every page or saying and act in the Bible literally. I consider the books of the Bible as I would antique documents from a world that has passed away. Yet, as Marcus Borg (2002:xi) put it in his book, *Reading the Bible again for the first time: Taking the Bible seriously but not literally*, I too still take the Bible seriously, because I have met God in the *kerygma*<sup>12</sup> that is to be found in the Bible.

Although I believe in God, I have never had a "personal relationship"<sup>13</sup> with Jesus of Nazareth and I have never *invited* him into my heart, because I have never heard him *knocking*. It has just never made any sense to me. I do not understand the concept of a conversion to a relationship with a personal saviour that counts as a prerequisite for your life of trust in, and dependency upon God. Since my high school days, when I took Latin and Roman culture and history as a subject, I knew that the miraculous conception, the deifying of a hero saviour after his death, and the ascension of a person who died for a good cause were part of a mythological paradigm. For many years, I was just too afraid to ask critical questions. Luckily, time went by, a paradigm shift came, and I discovered that I am not alone. Through reading, I met many

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<sup>10</sup> It contains the word of God, as I will explain later, but to me the Bible is not the only place where one can find the/a word from/of God.

<sup>11</sup> An event that serves in the proclamation as a metaphor. It is not a positivist fact of history but a mythological fact in the proclamation.

<sup>12</sup> According to Paul (1 Cor 2:2), *kerygma* is the proclamation of the death (and resurrection) of Christ. As a *kerygmatic* event, the resurrection of Jesus is not a positivist fact of history but a "mythological fact", proclaimed by his followers who experienced his presence in an existential way after his death. One can therefore say a "kerygmatic event" serves the proclamation of the church in a similar way as a "root metaphor" which functions as a vehicle in communication, to express authentic existence.

<sup>13</sup> "Do you know the lord Jesus Christ, and do you live in a personal relationship with him? Hear him knock and open your heart!" This is the first question that devoted evangelists ask a potential new convert.

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people with whom I can now associate. I am no longer afraid to formulate my thoughts.

I do not evaluate myths negatively. I evaluate a positivistic interpretation of myths negatively (when myths are interpreted as objective historical data and facts), especially when modern people cling to a mythical worldview (heaven above, earth, and the underworld) of biblicistic fundamentalism. I cannot endorse an anomalous split consciousness allowing people to adhere to pre-modernism because it harmonizes with a fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible, because the same people often claim to embrace a modern to postmodern worldview in the remaining aspects of their lives. I take it for granted that one can speak of the transcendent only in a mythical way. Yet it is helpful to distinguish between myth as a vehicle for communication about the otherworldly, and myth as referring to a mythological worldview. One does not necessarily need a mythological worldview to use, understand, and to appreciate myths. One can appreciate the value of myths even in a postmodern world.

I believe in God, but I do not think that one can regard the Bible as the only word of God. Yes, one can find the word of God in the Bible as well. Not every word in the Bible is a word of or from God. Sometimes the word of God is manifested as a meta-narrative beyond the biblical narrative that meets the eye. I therefore decanonize the Bible when I reflect on it for my own existential well-being. I recognize a canon behind or beyond the biblical canon. However, this "canon" is not only behind the biblical canon alone. It is also behind nature, literature, music, conversations and interactions with other people.

I call myself a Christian and I am a theologian who has a serious interest in the Bible<sup>14</sup>. I live in a relationship with God within the Christian tradition, even as I affirm the validity of all the enduring religious traditions (cf Borg 2002:x). My academic work and research reflect my own subjectivity. It focuses on the issues that trigger my interest. As I investigate these themes, I hope to find a new understanding of my existence, an existence that arises out of the life and death of Jesus as *kerygma*, the *kerygma*, as Bultmann said based on his understanding of Heidegger, that could lead to a new self-understanding and a total transformation. Maybe that is what I need most! When I do exegesis or when I produce theology, this is the baggage which I bring to the text, and this is the mode in which my thoughts move.

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<sup>14</sup> With "Bible" I mean the Old and the New Testament. One cannot picture Christianity without the Hebrew Bible (*Old Testament*). To a large extent, the New Testament is the exegetical result of Old Testament theology. For many, the New Testament is the fulfilment of the messianic promises of the Hebrew Bible. The writers of the gospels picture Jesus as a Moses/Elijah-figure. Paul got a lot of his theology "from the Scriptures". Christians who do not read the Hebrew Bible not only reject much of their heritage but also impoverish their understanding of Jesus and Christianity itself (see Borg 2002:58).

## 6. I CONCLUDE

*“Speak, Lord. Your servants struggle to understand.”* (Davis 1995:219).

I can conclude by concurring with Julia O’Brien (1995:119), who said: “I am aware of the problems of self-disclosure, the possibility that biblical studies could collapse into ‘what the text means to me,’ into an orgy of the ego. And yet, I am uncomfortable with the alternative.” All autobiographical criticism asks its practitioners to be more, rather than less historical-critical. Although one writes as “I”, one is also a critical scientist, critical not only of the text, but also of the “I”. According to Anderson and Staley (1995:14), autocritographers must “critically reconstruct their own historical circumstances and those of the interpretive communities to which they belong, as well as those of other places and times”. They must engage in critical self-reflection.

Because of the explicit self-reflective nature of this style of scholarly writing, Steven Mailloux points out three main dangers that can arise from it. His analysis is worth quoting in full:

One danger is that rhetorical candor will be read as narcissistic self-indulgence, that it will be seen not as a theoretical move required by rhetorical theory but as another case of theory’s fashionable rereading of itself – self-critique as self-display.

A still greater danger for a rhetorical hermeneutics is that a demonstration of its rhetoricity will undermine its persuasiveness as theory. This is the rhetorician’s nightmare: By arguing that there is no appeal outside rhetorical exchanges, have I undercut the rhetorical force of my own theory? Does rhetorical candor detract from rhetorical effectiveness?

[Finally,] ... one other problem must also be faced head on. It is again the question of consequences, the consequences of rhetorical hermeneutics. Certain traditionalists in hermeneutics and conservatives in politics will worry about its purported relativism and anarchic nihilism, claiming that in such a theory anything goes and all is permitted. Some radical revisionists may accuse this same theory of liberal pluralism and political quietism, not because “anything goes” but because “everything stays” in such theories; nothing is changed because all is (supposedly) tolerated.

(Mailloux 1989:167-168)

According to Fowler (1995:231), it is one thing to criticize another person’s scholarship, but it is quite another thing to comment on another person’s life. An autobiographical biblical critic makes himself or herself vulnerable and takes considerable risks, but on the other hand, biblical criticism was never really without a personal and autobiographical dimension. It is always about what I make of the biblical text.

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