


# Deconstructing the past: Behind the text, in the text, confronted by the text

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This article, taking the Faculty's centenary celebration slogan of 'Gateway to' as cue, reflects on the contributions made by lecturers in the Department of New Testament Studies, University of Pretoria, that 'opened the gates' for the disadvantaged, excluded and marginalised. How did these scholars envisage inclusive believing communities and an open society with equal opportunities for all? It is argued that because of a historical, critical and close reading of the texts of the New Testament, many scholars belonging to the Department during the past 100 years were able to hear the texts of the New Testament in their original socio-historical settings (what it meant for its original readers), and therefore were able to apply these meanings in ever-changing new contexts (what it means).

## Introduction

Since 1917, the Department of New Testament Studies at the Faculty of Theology (first Sections A and B, and the amalgamated Faculty since 2000) had 14 professors<sup>1</sup> and 2 senior lecturers<sup>2</sup> (retired and current). These scholars have published an extensive number of articles, chapters in books, books, memoranda, popular articles and some of their unpublished lectures are extant. The content of these publications and lectures cannot be summarised in one essay.

Reading these publications and available lectures, several topics or focus areas emerge as dominant. To name but a few: the image of God, the church and its development in the New Testament, the imperative of the church to be missional, the need for and aim of the translation of the New Testament, from exegesis to responsible preaching, demonology, the relationship between the creeds of the church and the New Testament, exegetical approaches and methods (hermeneutics), the sacraments, the relationship between Biblical and Systematic theology, Christology, New Testament ethics, eschatology in the New Testament, sexuality in the ancient world, marriage as institution in the (Old and) New Testament, the relationship between the Old and New Testament, gender, the virginal conception and the resurrection of Jesus, the reading of the New Testament from an African perspective, non-canonical literature, and many more. Regarding the 27 texts of the New Testament, almost all of these texts received their due attention, with some more in focus than others. Here can be mentioned Romans, Galatians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Philippians, Mark, Matthew, Luke-Acts, John and Revelations, as well as the quotations from the LXX in especially Luke-Acts and Hebrews. Interestingly, almost all these scholars published on the topic of the authority and use of Scripture, which seems obvious; New Testament scholars sometimes do read texts!

As Steyn has recently indicated, there are several common denominators that are present in the published works and lectures of the 16 scholars referred to above: a focus on the texts of the New Testament as the primary source of exegesis, exegeses that always start from the Greek text while taking the historical and social contexts of these texts seriously and exegesis that aims to be a catalyst for transformation and inclusivity (see Steyn 2017:1–16).

In an effort to deconstruct the contributions made by the 16 New Testament scholars referred to above, where does one start? On what does one focus? No scheme can be suggested that will be inclusive of all contributions made. As a safe way out of this conundrum, I have decided to take the slogan of the Faculty's centenary celebration, 'Gateway to', as cue. How did these scholars open the gates for the disadvantaged, excluded and marginalised? How did they envisage inclusive believing communities and an open society with equal opportunities for all? Can we

1.Professors J.H.J.A. Greyvenstein, E.P. Groenewald, A.S. Geyser, S.P.J.J. van Rensburg, A.B. du Toit, G.M.M. Pelser, F.J. Botha, A.G. van Aarde, J.G. van der Watt, S.J. Joubert, G.J. Steyn, E. van Eck, J. Kok and M. Speckman.

2.Doctors E. Mahlangu and Z. Dube.

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detect critique with regards to systemic injustices, and can we detect a call for social justice? This focus, of course, will exclude many contributions made by those previously and currently attached to the Department, but it does not mean that these contributions are not important or of lesser value.

The way I want to address this focus is by structuring this essay by means of three topics, namely 'behind the text', 'in the text' and 'confronted by the text'. I now turn to the first topic, 'behind the text'.

## Behind the text

To come to a tentative conclusion on what a text means, it first has to be established what the text most probably meant. This, of course, implies a critical investigation of the text. In the Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa (NRCA), it was Greyvenstein, the first professor of New Testament Studies, who took the first steps in establishing historical-criticism as one of the main exegetical approaches advocated in the Faculty. His lectures on especially Mark and Romans give a clear indication of his historical approach to the texts of the New Testament, an approach he clearly had come into contact with during his studies in Berlin and Utrecht (Van Eck 1999:41). As indicated by Van Aarde (1992:151–152), simply by looking at the works Greyvenstein used in his publications and lectures, it is clear that he not only was a staunch advocate for academic freedom but also employed the historical-critical approach as the main starting point in his exegesis.

Greyvenstein's successor, Albert Geyser, deepened Greyvenstein's focus on the historical-critical approach, by focusing on a historical, analytical, critical, philological and etymological interpretation of the text in his lectures. In his lectures on the Sermon on the Mount, he, for example, focused on the possible *ipssissima verba* of Jesus, and the possible historical referent of the poor and marginalised referred to in the Sermon. In some of his lectures, he also gave attention to text-critical issues, as well as critical questions regarding the development of the canon of the New Testament. Interestingly, the Synoptic problem did not receive attention, while he, at the same time, attempted to identify the source behind the Lukan *Sondergut* in Luke's story of Emmaus in Luke 24 (Van Eck 1999:42–43). By the time Van Rensburg succeeded Geyser in 1963, the historical-critical approach as the starting point to analyse the text of the New Testament was cemented in the Department of New Testament Studies (Section A). This can be seen in the fact that Van Rensburg, like his predecessors, mainly departed from a historical-grammatical exegetical approach in his lectures (Van Eck 1999:43; see also Engelbrecht 1992:185–186).

The Dutch Reformed Church joined the Faculty in 1938, with Groenewald as the first professor in New Testament. Groenewald's exegetical approach, generally speaking, can be described as critical. He did not, however, overtly propagate the historical-critical approach and focused more on the necessary piety when interpreting the text of the New Testament (Steyn 2017:2). At times, his interpretation of the

text of the New Testament was allegorical, as can be seen in his publication on the parables (Groenewald 1973a). He also, for example, defended the integrity of 2 Corinthians, a point of view that is not supported by the majority of New Testament scholars (Groenewald 1973b:17–21). Groenewald was succeeded by Du Toit in 1971. Du Toit was, and still is, a New Testament scholar who always engages the text from a critical point of view. Although his main exegetical focus was a synchronic exegesis of New Testament texts, his many publications on Paul attest to his critical point of departure (Steyn 2017:6).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, especially after the early death of professor Botha (1976–1985), the focus in the Department of New Testament Studies in Section B of the Faculty, apart from the contribution of Du Toit (who retired in 1993), moved mostly to the study of John from a text-immanent perspective (see, e.g., Van der Watt 2003; 2006; 2007). With regards to the study of Paul, after Du Toit's retirement, the focus was less on a historical-critical reading of Paul's letters, and more on the study of leadership, based on Paul's writings (see Joubert 2000; 2002; 2015).

In 2000, the two Sections of the Faculty amalgamated into one, and the focus in exegetical approach the new Department of New Testament Studies was soon to change. Van Aarde, who was appointed in 1984, from the start rigorously approached the texts of the New Testament from a historical-critical perspective. I myself experienced his rigor in this regard, even in 1982–1984 when Van Aarde was still a senior lecturer in Old Testament in the Department of Biblical Studies, simultaneously lecturing New Testament in Section A of the Faculty. Van Aarde's emphasis on the historical-critical understanding of the New Testament texts can be seen from his many publications, and an example *par excellence* of his application of this exegetical paradigm is his interpretation of the miraculous multiplications of loaves (Mt 14:13–21 and *par*; Van Aarde 1986:229–256). When the Faculty amalgamated in 2000, Van Aarde continued to advocate this approach as the starting point of all exegesis until his retirement in 2005 (see, e.g., Van Eck 1992:242), dedicating a semester module to the theory and application of the historical-critical approach. Gert Steyn joined the Faculty in 2003. At the time of Steyn's appointment, and Van Aarde's retirement, the Faculty was in the process of redrawing its curriculum, and from the then-new content of the New Testament curriculum, it is clear that the historical-critical approach was not deemed as that important anymore. Steyn, however, especially in his publications and lectures on the citations from the LXX in Luke-Acts and Hebrews, took the historical-critical approach as the point of departure for responsible exegesis (see Steyn 2017:6). Thus, in spite of the fact that exegetical approaches and methods were not formally part of the curriculum anymore, Steyn deemed it necessary to engage his students with the text from a critical point of view. Van Eck was appointed in 2006 and followed the same approach as Steyn, especially in his lectures on Mark, including the Synoptic problem as part of the introduction to the study of the Synoptic gospels.



Both Steyn and Van Eck, from 2006 to 2014, expressed their unease with the state of affairs with regards to the lack of a formal introduction of especially the historical-critical approach in the curriculum. In 2015, under the guidance of Steyn, a formal module on exegetical approaches and methods was reintroduced into the curriculum, including *inter alia* a focus on the historical-critical paradigm.

Thus, the belief in the Department, as was the case in 1917, is still that a literal reading of the text should be avoided and that responsible exegesis always starts with a critical and historical engagement with the text. The first focus should always be what the text meant. Only then can one ask what the text possibly means in any given context. Moreover, it is only with this exegetical point of departure that that one can really be confronted by the text, as will be indicated below.

## In the text

The focus in the New Testament departments of Sections A and B was not only on the historical-critical aspect of New Testament texts. Several publications indicate that a text-immanent approach (or close reading) was also deemed as very important. Here the contributions of Du Toit and Van Aarde should be mentioned. With regards to argumentative texts, Du Toit championed the South African discourse analysis, as can be seen from his lectures and many publications on especially Paul. Through the work of Du Toit, this text-immanent approach was not only introduced to his students and scholars nationally but also to an international audience. Du Toit's many publications on Paul show how he meticulously applied this method and gave new meaning to what a close reading of especially argumentative texts entails (see, e.g., Du Toit 2009:217–265).

Van Aarde, on the other hand, focused on the narrative texts in the New Testament and introduced his students to what has come to be known as narratology or narrative criticism. Apart from aspects such as real author and real reader, implied author and implied reader, narrator and narratee, story time and discourse time, Van Aarde gave special attention to the narrative point of view in narrative texts. Narrative point-of-view analysis relates to what is known as the ideological perspective (theological perspective) of the narrator and enables the exegete to identify ideologies in texts that either questions or confirm, for example, convictions, existing cultural scripts and power relations.<sup>3</sup>

Van Eck, building on the work of Van Aarde, focused on space in Mark as an ideological concept. In his doctoral thesis, he combined a narrative critical reading of space in Mark with the social-scientific approach in reading texts, an exegetical approach that was also introduced by Van Aarde to his students (see Van Eck 1995a). This approach opened the way to read the texts of the New Testament from a cultural-sensitive perspective and also to identify power structures that may be present in some texts; power structures

that resulted in the exploitation and marginalisation of those without power (see, e.g., Van Aarde 1988:829–846; Van Eck 2014a:101–132). As such, this approach, like historical-criticism, contributed to the extent in which lecturers in the Department were confronted by the text, and as a result became voices that sided with the excluded and marginalised.

## Confronted by the text

Any ancient text that is being read has a situation and strategy. The situation of a text has to do with its socio-historical setting, including the dynamics of the social world in which the text originated. The strategy of a text refers to how it is 'made', that is, its rhetorical structure primarily as a mode of persuasion. As indicated above, the dominant tradition in the Department(s) of New Testament Studies since 1917 (NRCA) and 1938 (NRC), and then since 2000 (the amalgamated faculty), was to give attention to both these dimensions in discerning first and foremost what a text meant. In applying what a text means, in a different or current socio-historical setting, it flows naturally that a text that questioned specific dominant cultural convictions, values and cultural scripts (read 'gospel' or 'canon'), would question the same dominant cultural convictions, values and scripts that may exist in the world of the exegete.

That this is indeed the case in the exegetical endeavours of some of the New Testament scholars who graced the corridors of the Faculty in the past 100 years is clear from their publications, memoranda and lectures. Because of space limitations, two examples will suffice.

The first is the conviction that existed until 2016 that the NRCA, in terms of its ecclesiological self-understanding, was considered to be a 'people's church' (or 'ethnic church'), first embodied by Article II (taken up in the Church Order of 1904), then by Article III (in 1951), and later, in 1997, by Ordinance 4 of the NRCA's Church Order, only to be abolished finally in 2016.<sup>4</sup> Even one of the main proponents of this idea, Adriaan Pont, conceded that this ecclesiological self-understanding implied boundaries of exclusion; it excluded those 'who are not like us'.

The first voice in the NRCA against this ecclesiological understanding was that of Greyvenstein (Van Eck 1995b: 827–829). Although not directly referring to the NRCA's exclusive ecclesiological self-understanding, then enshrined by Article II, Greyvenstein, in 1936, wrote in *Die Hervormer* that the church of Christ consisted of all those who are reborn, including believers from all generations and nations (Van Eck 1995b:828). Later, in 1943, in an article that focused on Paul's worldview, he stated that discrimination in terms of race as well as a feeling of superiority over those from different ethnicities are hindrances towards, what he called, a universal humanity. This conviction was also clear from his theology, in which he emphasised the universal character of the kingdom of God, as preached by Jesus (Van Eck 1995b:828).

3. See Van Eck (1995:425–426) for a list of publications of Van Aarde on narrative criticism as an exegetical approach.

4. Articles II and III in essence stated that only white people can be members of the NRCA, thus excluding all other races.



Geyser's critique on the NRCA's ecclesiology was both indirect and direct. In an article in 1953, titled 'First General Assembly' (referring to the Apostle Convent in Acts 15), he argued that the early church, in its teaching principle and compilation, decided that all who believe in Christ – Jews and non-Jews – are part of God's elected and church (Van Eck 1995b:830). For Geyser, the church was not exclusive, but inclusive and universal, a point he made already in 1947. The church, if it wants to heed to its call, had to transcend national and geographical boundaries. In a 1948 publication this conviction was repeated; the main task of the church was to confess Christ to all and not to serve national-political and ethnic interests (Van Eck 1995b:831). In a 1960 publication, Geyser again took the NRCA to task regarding its exclusive ecclesiology. In comparing the terms *logos* and *ideologia*, Geyser stated that the *Logos* of God, Jesus, preached an unlimited and unqualified love, while the NRCA, as a manifestation of *ideologia*, proclaimed a limited and qualified love towards those 'who are not like us'. This, Geyser lamented, was nothing other than hate, and when *ideologia* is dressed in nationalism, it is nothing other than idolatry. For him, the NRCA turned justice into self-righteousness, love into self-love, the duty to preserve life into self-preservation and respect for the dignity of others into self-respect. This was not the *Logos* of God, the *vox Dei*, but the *vox populi*, as embodied by Article III (Van Eck 1995b:832–833).

A year later, in 1961, Geyser published a review article in the then *Hervormde Teologiese Studies (HTS)* of a publication by A.B. du Preez, titled 'Separate development as a service to the nation: The hope for South Africa'. Geyser's review article was accompanied by a footnote by the editor, stating that the opinions of the author were his own and not necessarily that of the editorial board (see Van Eck 1995b:845, n. 4). This, according to my knowledge, was a first, editorily speaking, for the *HTS*. In his review of Du Preez's publication, Geyser condemned Du Preez's effort to use Scripture to support racial segregation in church and society. Clearly, Geyser's opinion carried the minority voice in the then NRCA (Van Eck 1995b:833–838).

Geyser's direct critique of the NRCA's exclusive ecclesiology came in 1960 in the now well-known publication 'Delayed action: An ecumenical witness from the Afrikaans-speaking churches' (my translation), in which he again reiterated that the church, as body of Christ, consists of all who confess Christ, notwithstanding differences in race or ethnicity (see Van Eck 1995b:838–842).

It can be stated categorically that Van Aarde, appointed in 1984, was the lecturer in New Testament Studies in the then Section A, and later in the amalgamated faculty after 2000, who carried Geyser's flag in the NRCA. In several publications, but especially in memoranda that were tabled at almost all of the General Assemblies of the NRCA since the 1990s, Van Aarde consistently argued against the NRCA's exclusive ecclesiological self-understanding (see, e.g., Van Aarde 1989:461–475). Van Eck, in a 2009 article titled 'Inclusivity as the essential nature of the gospel', reiterated Geyser's

understanding of the inclusive ecclesiology attested by the New Testament. In this publication, using the social-scientific theory on ethnicity, Van Eck argued that for Jesus, Paul, and the author of Acts, in spite of the fact that in antiquity group identity was based on cultural ethnicity, ethnicity meant nothing when it came to being in God's presence, being part of the early Christ-followers, or being part of any local (Pauline) congregation. The New Testament, simply speaking, bears witness to an inclusive ecclesiology (see Van Eck 2014b:57–88).<sup>5</sup> This was a reiteration of the conclusion he came to in his doctoral thesis on Mark, published in 1993, in which he argued that Mark's understanding of the early Jesus-movement is one of inclusivity, embodied by Jesus' new household as depicted in Mark's gospel (see Van Eck 1995a). It must be noted that Van Aarde's introduction of historical Jesus-studies to his students, especially in his publications and postgraduate lectures, as well as the introduction of the social-scientific approach to analyse ancient text were the impetus behind these publications and many other studies of his students.

In 2009, Geyser's critique on the NRCA's exclusive ecclesiology was vindicated. After a visit by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to the Commission of the General Assembly early in 2009, during which some members of the Commission defended Apartheid on the basis of Scripture, five theologians of the NRCA (Johan Buitendag, Yolanda Dreyer, Jimmie Loader, Andries van Aarde and Ernest van Eck), released a press statement in *Beeld* on 10 March 2009 after the NRCA declined to publish the statement in the official church press (Buitendag et al. 2009:2). In their statement, these theologians called on the NRCA to state that it was wrong, for so many years, to support Apartheid on the basis of Scripture. The cat was amongst the pigeons, and after warm debates, which included a case of heresy against the named theologians, the matter was brought to the 69th General Assembly of the NRCA. After a lengthy discussion, the General Assembly adopted Resolution 54/69, in which the church, for the first time, officially stated that supporting Apartheid by means of Scripture was wrong (Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika 2010:109). Although adopted by a majority vote (58% of the delegates), 144 delegates to the meeting noted their vote against the resolution, which later resulted in a schism in the NRCA.

The above very brief description of the NRCA's road from an exclusive to an inclusive ecclesiological self-understanding is almost a mirror image of an earlier script that played out in the NRC, and most probably largely paved the way for other churches, like the NRCA, to follow. In the NRC, focusing on the lecturers in the Department of New Testament Studies, it was especially Groenewald who was a staunch advocate of Apartheid in church and society. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, because of a lack of leadership shown by the Moderature of the NRC regarding the NRC's prophetic role in establishing a just society, an ever-growing number of

5.Kok et al. (2014), also a member of the Department of New Testament studies, has edited a publication that focus on a sensitivity towards outsiders. The different contributions in the publication come to the same conclusion, namely that the New Testament bears witness to an inclusive ecclesiology and community.



members of the church started to ask questions regarding the church's commitment to social justice in church and society. Since no response was forthcoming, on 05 October 1980, Du Toit, with seven other theologians of the NRC, released what has come to be known as the Reformed Day Witness.<sup>6</sup> In the Witness, simply stated, they called upon the church to formally renounce Apartheid in church and society (Van der Merwe 1997:357–358). As was the case later in the NRCA, the cat was among the pigeons, the same as after Cottesloe. The Witness received support and opposition, with prof A.D. Pont, from the NRCA, stating that the witness was nothing less than a left-wing political declaration in religious dress. From the positive side, 86 theology students from the Faculty (Section B), released a declaration on 20 March 1981, published in *Beeld*, in which they supported the eight theologians and the content of their Witness (Van der Merwe 1997:361). This Witness, according to Johan van der Merwe, was indeed the prophetic voice the NRC needed to move from an exclusive ecclesiological self-understanding to an inclusive believing community; a seed that germinated and grew into that what guided the NRC in its self-understanding after the 1980s. It indeed was, as Van der Merwe (1997:360) states, a watershed moment that finally led to a schism in the NRC.

The second example is related to the example above, namely the discrimination in the NRC and NRCA against persons with a homosexual orientation, especially with regards to entry into the ministry. In the NRCA, the General Assembly of 2016 finally opened its doors for homosexual persons without reservation. Homosexual persons can now enter the ministry in the NRCA. In the NRC, the jury is still out, with a 'yes' very recently turned into a 'no'. Focusing on the contributions made to this debate by New Testament scholars from the Faculty in publications that focused specifically on this topic, the publications of Du Toit (2002; see also Potgieter 2006:125–126), Gert Steyn (2007a; 2007b) and that of Van Eck and Barnard (2013) can be mentioned.<sup>7</sup> Du Toit correctly indicated that the main problem of the debate on homosexuality in the church was that exegesis and hermeneutics were not distinguished from one another. This happens when a modern understanding of a phenomenon or topic is read back into the New Testament (ethnocentrism) as if the exact same phenomenon is under discussion. When this happens, the authors of the Bible are forced to make statements about and propose solutions to something that was not part of their world or frame of reference. Steyn and Van Eck and Barnard have come to the same conclusion, arguing that homosexuality, as understood today, is a modern construction not found in the New Testament and that the texts on 'homosexuality' in New Testament cannot simply, on a one-to-one basis, be used to

exclude homosexual persons from the ministry of the church. These contributions may have played a role in the most recent resolution taken by the NRCA not to make sexual orientation a determinant when someone wants to join the ministry and will play a role in the current debates in the NRC on the unlimited inclusion of homosexual persons and persons of all sexual orientations in the ministry of the church.

A final remark, before I conclude. The above two examples epitomise the 'Gateway to' slogan of the Faculty's centenary celebration, that is, opening the gates of the church also to the previously excluded and marginalised. Zoro Dube, in continuing this tradition, currently focuses in his research, also using historical-criticism and social-scientific criticism as hermeneutical approaches, on Jesus' concept of being that can be inferred from his inclusive approach as described in the gospels. This focus, Dube argues, with synergies from Ubuntu philosophy and Gabriel Marcel's theory of participation, can be used to advance a theoretical perspective that responds to the negative effects of globalisation such as rising nationalism, racism, immigration and xenophobia (see Dube 2017:1–6). Again, this has the possibility to open the gates for the excluded and marginalised.

## Conclusion

From the above, I believe it is clear that it has been a long tradition in the Department(s) of New Testament Studies at the Faculty of Theology, in their exegetical endeavours, to be a critical voice against dominant grand narratives that perpetuated, and perpetuate, exclusion and discrimination. This was made possible by those, our foundational fathers to say, who in the beginning laid the solid foundation for a historical, critical and close reading of the text. This made it possible to hear the texts of the New Testament in their original socio-historical settings (what it meant for its original readers) and apply these meanings in ever-changing new contexts (what it means). Critical and engaged exegesis and theology that include, and not exclude, always have been typical of a Faculty that most recently was judged to be among the top 100 theological faculties internationally. May the Department, and the Faculty, in future continue this proud tradition, keep on opening gates and be a gateway to God's unlimited love for the whole of creation. This, however, will ask from us, like some of our predecessors, to oppose all efforts, all *ideologia*, that are erected to close gates, exclude and marginalise. This will only be possible if we are willing to be confronted by an ancient text that, for us, still today is heard as the Word of God.

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### Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

6. The seven other academics who co-authored the Witness were C.F.A. Borchardt, H.J.B. Combrinck, B.A. Muller, W.P. Esterhuysen, J.A. Heyns, W.D. Jonker and H.W. Rossouw.

7. In this regards, the contribution of Yolanda Dreyer can also be mentioned. Although also a New Testament scholar, Dreyer's contribution is not discussed since she is not part of the Department of New Testament Studies. For her contribution on homosexuality, see Dreyer (2006:445–471). See also Dreyer (2000a:672–696; 2000b:949–972; 2007:1493–1521; 2011:1–5) for contributions on topics such as women as the image of God, Barth's male–female order and patriarchy.



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