

# **Narrative-critical approach as hermeneutical framework for a creative dialogue between biblical sources and secular extra-biblical sources: The Lord of the Rings as an entry into the Book of Revelation**

R Meylahn<sup>1</sup>

(University of Pretoria)

## **ABSTRACT**

### **Narrative-critical approach as hermeneutical framework for a creative dialogue between biblical sources and secular extra-biblical sources: The Lord of the Rings as an entry into the Book of Revelation**

*This essay is motivated by the challenge that biblical texts have very often lost their affective power to address and transform the lives of readers today, because they are either not read at all or they are not fully understood as the world of the text is too far removed from the world of the reader. There are however wonderful contemporary texts that do affect readers' lives and the question arose if the contemporary texts cannot be read together with the biblical texts, to bring them "to life" again?*

*A hermeneutical approach needed to be found that could create the necessary space for non-biblical literary texts to be used to interpret and elucidate biblical texts. The narrative approach provides this space for the two texts to enter into creative dialogue, given that the two texts coincide sufficiently in the significance for the two implied authors, the reference of the texts and in the situation of the implied readers.*

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

It is not uncommon these days to be shown a movie clip or to be reminded of a best-selling novel in a sermon as the preacher uses these to elucidate a biblical text. The reason for this increased use of multi-media is not just to enhance the act of worship or to bring it in line with the digital world of our life-experiences, but is rather a response to numerous challenges that we – as a church – face regarding the Bible. I believe that these challenges are hermeneutical

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1 Dr R Meylahn is a Research Associate of the Department of New Testament Studies at the University of Pretoria.

challenges, as we struggle to interpret and understand the Bible and ourselves in relation to the Bible. I would like to highlight just three of these challenges.

The first challenge is described by James Smart as the strange silence of the Bible in the church (Smart 1970) and refers to biblical illiteracy. This was also Ebeling's concern, that for the modern person discussions and reflections about God are nothing more than "a tradition, a mere form of speech, a dead relic of the language of the past" (Ebeling 1967:3). The current situation in the Western world is that the world is emerging from the secularised modern proclamation that God is dead, into a postmodern era where there is a new found interest in religion and with this interest a rise in religious fundamentalism and thus the markets are flooded with biblical and devotional literature. If there is such a surplus of biblical literature available, is it plausible to describe this phenomenon as biblical illiteracy? James Smart argues that "in a century during which biblical scholarship has made tremendous advances in America, with literature on the Bible expanding enormously and a number of new highly readable translations become best sellers, there has been an increasing frustration of preachers with Scriptures as a basis for sermons, a steady decline in the educational use of the Bible in the church, and a mounting ignorance of the contents of the Bible among members of the church" (Smart 1970:9-10). His concern is not that the Bible is not used, but how the Bible is used. The Bible is used mainly for personal devotions which would explain the explosion of devotional literature, but he argues that this Bible use "seems to be totally devoid of any biblical insight on questions such as race, nation, wealth, war, ecumenical relations between Christian churches, and the total responsibility of the church for the world beyond itself" (Smart 1970:17). If this reality of the Bible is lost and the reading of the Bible is reduced to personal devotions and individual spiritual growth then Smart argues that the church and the world no longer hear the essential message of the Scriptures and soon cease to understand what the Bible is for and are thus open to be captured by the dominant religious philosophy of the moment, which is usually some blend of cultural nationalism with Christianity (Smart 1970:10). This is what happens for example when the political right and Christian fundamentalists become very compatible bedfellows. They agree on the personal issues of values and morality and support each other on public and foreign issues.

The second challenge is the role of the Bible within postmodernity. The fundamentalists understand the Bible as the book of literal truths, while in a postmodern context fundamental truths, absolutes and authority are questioned and deconstructed. Should the Bible and Christianity be abdicated to the fundamentalists or is there another response to postmodernity where the Bible can still play an important *authoritative* role in the construction of Christian identity and ethics? I believe that, as protestant Christians, we cannot give up one of our founding pillars (*sola Scriptura*) and need to struggle with this idea of founding authoritative narratives that play a primary role in the construction of Christian identity, which then inevitably determines our ethics in the world. Authority, understood as Schütz (Schütz 1975) understands authority, is that which exerts affective power. Authoritative power is the power to bring about something or to affect something in the world. I believe this is the role of Scripture within the world and especially amongst believers – to affect faith, identity, and thus influence ethics in the world, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

This leads this article into the third challenge, namely, if the texts are to play such an important founding/authoritative role in the construction of identity which impacts our ethics, these texts need to be understood and read “correctly”. I am fully aware that there cannot be *one* correct reading of a text, but I do believe that one should seek to remain true to the intention of the text.

This leads us back to Smart’s problem that the Bible is not read correctly within the church. According to him the reason for this is a biblical illiteracy caused by a hermeneutical blindness. Many preachers are trained for years to do proper exegesis and text interpretation, but these skills are not transferred to the lay member and thus a tremendous gap is created between a scholarly interpretation of texts and the interpretation of the lay member. The hermeneutical task has been left to the academic professionals (Wink 1973:8-11), whilst it should be brought into the midst of the congregational life if Scripture is to play its role as founding narrative (*sola Scriptura*).

The fact that the Bible is embedded in a language and a language world that is far removed from our own particular language worlds aggravates these challenges. “Given that the various books that together make up our New Testament took shape in the context of the struggles of God’s people with their identity and their purpose

before God and in ever-expanding contexts, does it not follow that these texts might also shape our similar struggles?” (Green 1995b:413). What does this mean today for readers of these texts?

These books were written in a language that was embedded in the cultural world of the believers. The authors used symbols and metaphors that today do not make any sense. One can explain and interpret symbols and metaphors, but in the process they lose their affective power to transform and construct identities, therefore one could argue that it makes complete sense to use extra-biblical material, which is written in the language of the believers today, to convey a Biblical message. For example, many find in the Narnia books of C S Lewis, Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, or in films like the *Matrix Trilogy*, *As it is in Heaven* and *Chocolat*, biblical themes which can be used effectively to help convey the Biblical message, but in a language that is more accessible to the believers today. A film like *As it is in Heaven* had a tremendous impact on people. Can this impact (affect of the narrative) be compared to the intended affect of biblical narratives?

To use a movie clip or a passage from a novel to elucidate a particular biblical or Christian theme makes sense. But what if there is a narrative that is read by numerous people today that has so many similarities to a particular biblical narrative that these two could be read together thereby not only opening the door to better understanding of the biblical text, but also keeping the affective power of the text to help construct identities and ethical roles? For example, the Book of Revelation was for the early Christians a powerful text of hope that helped to construct Christian identity and thereby define the ethical role of believers within the Roman Empire. The book of Revelation had a tremendous affective power within the early church’s context of suffering and persecution at the hands of the Roman Empire. However, that powerful affective message is lost because in this book all the above challenges become acute as it is either not read at all, or it is read “incorrectly” because the metaphors and symbols used are culturally embedded and belongs to “*Privatsprache*”. Academically a lot has been written about the Book of Revelation explaining all the different metaphors and symbols, but these academic books are not accessible to the lay person and secondly such academic works probably will not inspire the laity to Christian life-style and ethics. For the book of Revelation to really have the same impact as it once had, it is necessary to find a

new narrative – a narrative that inspires hope, constructs identities and challenges believers to a specific ethical life-style within the world. Could it be that there are authors who had exactly this in mind, namely to write something that inspires hope, affects the construction of identities/personhoods that would rise to the ethical challenges of our time? I believe there have been such narratives. In my own journey, Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* has been a constant companion and time and again it has been a source of encouragement and hope to rise to the challenges of our time. The question that this article will seek to answer, is: is it justifiable to compare the Book of Revelation and *The Lord of the Rings*, and to “use” the one to elucidate the other? To answer this question some other questions must be asked:

- Is it hermeneutically justifiable to do this? Can one use one narrative to explain - but more than explain - to bring another narrative back to life again?
- What would be the criteria for such a comparison?
- Do these two specific narratives coincide sufficiently?

In this article, I will respond to the three challenges by seeking answers to the above questions.

## **2 IS IT HERMENEUTICALLY JUSTIFIABLE TO USE AN EXTRA-BIBLICAL NARRATIVE TO ELUCIDATE A BIBLICAL NARRATIVE?**

In the bulk of this article I will explain my understanding of hermeneutics and why I believe that it is hermeneutically justifiable to do this.

### **2.1 The task of hermeneutics and the new hermeneutics**

In the past hermeneutics was very much understood to be the science of interpretation focusing predominantly on the historicity of the texts and to discover the historical truth of texts via the historical critical method which has been dominant for more than a century (Krentz 1975). The result was that hermeneutical scholars were historians searching for the historical truth behind the ancient texts and no longer theologians. The more the focus was on the historical distance of the texts of antiquity the less the focus was on the theory and praxis of interpretation of those texts for today. “The more the exegete became a historian, the more the question of the contemporary meaning of biblical texts was left to the devices of

pastors and theologians charged with the ‘edification’ of the church” (Gillespie 1986:194).

The so-called New Hermeneutics, which is namely attributed to Ebeling and Fuchs, responded to these shortcomings of the historical-critical method. They changed the focus from the historical origins behind the text to what happens in front of the text, with the question: how can the Word of God be proclaimed today so that it awakens faith in the hearers? Ebeling feared that language about God (proclamation) has become for today’s hearer nothing more than “just a tradition, a mere form of speech, a dead relic of the language of the past” (Ebeling 1967:3). Fuchs asked the question: “What do we have to do at our desks if we want later to set the text in front of us in the pulpit?” (Fuchs 1964:8). He continues and writes: “...the text is interpreted when God is proclaimed” (Fuchs 1964:141).

What was needed was as Barton describes it, a paradigm shift “away from historical methods and towards ‘text-immanent’ interpretation which is not concerned with the historical context and meaning of texts” (Barton 1998:9), but focuses on what these texts mean for today’s context and readers. Ernst Fuchs argued that what is needed is a stronger connection between academic reflection and the preaching of that text from the pulpit (Fuchs 1964:8). The task of hermeneutics is not completed until the text comes to life again. “The text is itself meant to live... the text is interpreted when God is proclaimed” (Fuchs 1964:140-141).

I would like to return to the ancient Greek use of the verb *hermeneuein* (“to interpret”) and its derivative noun *hermeneia*. The root of the word means to *bring that which is unclear to clarity*. According to James Robinson we discover in this ancient meaning of the word three points in the overall task of literary interpretation (Robinson 1964:1-6). I will shortly reflect on these three points because I believe it can help us to open the scope of hermeneutics as it moves away from a historical understanding to a more comprehensive understanding of bringing the text to life.

- 1 The fact that language is used is in itself an act of interpretation. Not all the scholars agree but the evidence concerning the original use of the word *hermeneuein* points in the direction of “speak” or “say”. In speaking the unclarity of thinking becomes clear. In the process of

speaking or writing, thoughts are formulated and thereby clarified. Language (spoken/written) itself is an act of interpretation.

- 2 Not all use of language is necessarily clear in its interpretation of meaning. Discourse is not necessarily univocal. The norm is that there is a speaker/writer and a reader/interpreter. In this context commentary or explanation is necessary to achieve clarity (Gillespie 1986:194).
- 3 There is also a material task in all literary interpretation. The word *hermeneia* also means translation. “In translation the meaning that is originally interpreted in one language is reinterpreted in another” (Gillespie 1986: 194).

Translation needs to be qualified. It is not the strict correspondence of the linguistic conventions of two cultures, but it involves the transference of meaning from one culturally determined language to another culturally determined language.

Gillespie argues that by going back to the root and early uses of the word *hermeneia*, two distinct and important functions can be brought to light with regard to the task of hermeneutics:

- i) to interpret by bringing the unclarity of speech into clarity through explanation and or commentary
- ii) to translate the meaning (constituted by sense and significance) into clarity (Gillespie 1986:195).

Thus the understanding of hermeneutics shifted from a historical-critical investigation to a broader more inclusive process that translates texts from one culturally determined historical context to another culturally determined historical context. Barton quotes Thiselton in his understanding of the task of hermeneutics when he says:

Hermeneutics entails critical reflection on the basis, nature and goal of reading, interpreting and understanding communicative acts and processes. This characteristically concerns the understanding of texts, especially biblical or literary texts, or those of another era or culture. However, it also includes reflection on the nature of understanding human actions, sign-systems,

visual data, institutions, artefacts, or other aspects of life. In biblical studies it applies traditionally to the interpretation of texts, but also the interweaving of language and life both within the horizon of the text and within the horizons of traditions and the modern hearer.

(Barton 1998:11)

Green agrees that the hermeneutical task has expanded tremendously.

It is clear that at this juncture we have moved far beyond the central concern of most hermeneutical reflection in this century. Hermeneutics has been occupied pre-eminently with how texts serve to pass on information. Biblical interpretation has emphasized “getting the meaning right” ...however, the focus has shifted to the question of how texts might have a transformative role. One way of making plain the difference with which we are concerned is to ask: What is the end of exegesis? What is the end of the critical engagement with a New Testament text? Is it the sermon? An essay? A commentary? Or is it a people who embody its message?

(Green 1995b:413)

This widens the scope of hermeneutics into a much more comprehensive task. I would like to suggest that hermeneutics has a dual task of translation and interpretation, which deals with four components:

- 1 Text (sense) which deals with the linguistic conventions of the specific language and therefore it is to an extent historically and culturally determined
- 2 Author (significance), who intended to convey some meaning through the medium of language.
- 3 Subject matter (reference) – that to which the text refers and wants to tell the audience/reader about.
- 4 Interpreter/audience/reader, who receives the text and discovers meaning and significance in the text for him/herself.

If these four components describe the scope of hermeneutics to fulfil the task of interpretation and translation of texts it would make sense



to argue that two different texts (sense) can be used to elucidate one another if there are sufficient similarities in the other three components of hermeneutics.

This thought I would like to unpack by shortly reflecting on each of these components and how these different components relate to each other thereby seeking a hermeneutical approach that takes all four of these components seriously and thus makes such a comparison between two texts possible.

## **2.2 The developments in hermeneutics**

In this section, in the search for an appropriate hermeneutical approach, I will reflect on each of these four hermeneutical components and how the hermeneutical key shifted from one component to another. This reflection will not follow a historical path, as these four components in the development did not follow each other historically. I would prefer to see this development as a dance between these four components as the focus shifted from one to the other. In true multi-disciplinary fashion, I believe that each of these developments has something important to offer the overall understanding of hermeneutics today.

### **2.2.1 The sense or the text**

#### **i) Pre-Reformation**

It is best to begin with the text itself in the dance towards narrative-critical hermeneutics, because it is here that the reformers made their radical break with the allegorical method of interpretation dominant in medieval Catholicism (Gillespie 1986:193). The reformers did not subscribe to the idea that in every text there were numerous levels of meaning, but that each biblical text had one specific meaning and that specific meaning was its grammatical meaning.

#### **ii) Reformation and the grammatical sense**

The reformers focused not only on the true sense of the text (*verus sensus*), but also the true use of the text (*verus usus*). For the reformers “interpretation moves quite naturally from *explicatio* via *meditatio* to *applicatio*. Any difference sensed by the exegete between an original and a present meaning of the text was transcended intuitively if not theoretically” (Gillespie 1986:193).

This was rather a naïve understanding of the meaning of texts, but it was an important understanding as it liberated the texts from the allegorical interpretations.

### **iii) Historical-critical method**

The philologists soon exposed the naiveté of this method of interpretation as they argued that the meaning of words depends upon their usage and usage of words is dependent on the historical and cultural context of this usage. This insight prompted a movement away from the grammatical understanding of texts to the historical understanding (Kümmel 1972:62ff) of texts and the rise of the historical-critical method. As the Reformation developed with the Enlightenment to give birth to modernity so also the exegetical methods developed in line with the main fundamentals of modernity, namely the search for objective verifiable facts by neutral scientific subjects.

The Enlightenment's quest to liberate humanity from the darkness of suspicion and the bad faith of tradition influenced the biblical scholars as they attempted to liberate the biblical texts from "bad faith" and suspicion, by seeking verifiable objective facts that could substantiate their arguments. This method was not a single approach, but a "conglomeration of different approaches seeking to "reconstruct the life and thought of biblical times through objective, scientific analysis of biblical material" (Powell 1990:2).

### **iv) Pros and cons of the historical-critical method and its necessity for today**

The main critique against the historical-critical method is its belief, which it shares with modernity, that a subject can discover objective verifiable facts and that this is the basis of truth and thus of correct understanding and interpretation of texts. "Perhaps the most important of all, historical criticism was meant to be value-neutral, or disinterested. It tried, so far as possible, to approach the text without prejudice, and to ask not what it meant 'for me', but simply what it meant" (Barton 1998:11-12). Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann pointed out, in their criticism of the historical-critical method, that the biblical text has an important function namely to affect faith in God, but if the text is seen purely as a historical document and the interpretation is not the discovery of God, but a historical verifiable truth value behind the document, something very important is lost. The criticism against this method was not so much

against what it did, but where it stopped. It stopped at the historical setting and did not translate this word into today's context and thereby this academic scholarship failed the church and the world as it prevented the world from hearing the hidden Word of God concealed in historical-cultural trappings of biblical texts. To be able to interpret Scriptures the interpreter needs to be both a historian and a theologian, in other words there needs to be a bias on the side of the interpreter as Lategan says: "Completely objective exegesis is impossible, and real understanding requires the interpreter's personal input" (Lategan 1992:151). This is vitally important as the subject matter of Scripture is more than literature, history and religion. It is "a witness that extends over more than a thousand years to a relationship between God and man in which, first Israel, then in Jesus Christ and his church, the deepest mysteries of man's life in time and beyond were revealed" (Smart 1970:78).

This was also one of the main insights that challenged modernity's faith in objective knowledge: that the prejudice or the pre-knowledge with which the subject approaches his/her object of investigation determines the discoveries. Prejudice and/or pre-knowledge needed to be incorporated into the hermeneutical process.

Yet Hagner argues that because these ancient texts are embedded in the historical-cultural language of their time the historical-critical method is not an option but a necessity (Hagner 1991:75). Biblical interpretation cannot do without the historical-critical method, as this method liberates the ancient texts from absolute claims and places these texts into the life of real humans and the biblical authors are liberated to be humans of their time and context. It brings out the humanity of the biblical texts and thus frees these texts to speak (Barton 1998:17). It places the text into a historical context and thereby relativises the biblical "truths", which is an important step in the overall hermeneutical process thus preventing idolatry. There is always a very powerful urge in humanity to give God some form of visibility or tangibility and historical scholarship prevents the church or humanity from doing this with Scripture. Historical criticism "when it is allowed its full exercise, exposes ruthlessly the relativity of everything historical, puts an end to the absolutizing of anything human, and restores the distance between God and man, between temporal and eternal" (Smart 1970:84).

Yet the criticism remains that it stopped short of the task of the exegete and this amongst others led to the development of the New Hermeneutic as a response to the failings (shortcomings) of the historical-critical method.

### **2.2.2 The significance for author or interpreter/reader**

The focus changed as the scholars realised that not only does the pre-understanding or intentions of the scholar influence the outcome of research, but the author's/editor's intentions also play a vital role in the writing/editing of the text. Thus the focus shifted from trying to discover the historical verifiable facts behind the text to the "true" intentions of the author, namely, what the author wanted to say. Schleiermacher, who combined aspects of pietism and rationalism was pivotal in the development of this new focus (Black & Dockery 1991:49). His thinking was fundamental in breaking open the subject-object dualism as he argued that for a subject to understand an object he/she must already have a certain pre-understanding of the object and thus epistemology became a lot more interactive and dialogical between the object of inquiry and the subject of inquiry and no longer just a one-way direction of understanding. He argued that there is circularity in understanding (Thiselton 1986:161).

Schleiermacher's thoughts highlight two aspects that are crucial to hermeneutics:

- i) understanding is circular and thus the development of the Schleiermacher's hermeneutical circle.
- ii) Pre-understanding (prejudice) is necessarily part of the hermeneutical process and there is interaction between object and subject so much so that the subject might even be transformed by this interaction with the object of inquiry. The text has an effect on the subject (Barton 1998:109).

The basic principle of understanding was that a subject has made certain experiences and his/her intention is to communicate these experiences through the medium of language (text). The interpreter/reader will understand something of this experience if he/she can identify with the experience, in other words has some inclination (prejudice/foreknowledge) of this experience. Stated differently, understanding occurs if the reader finds significance in that which was for the author significant enough to communicate.

Schleiermacher in his hermeneutical circle wanted to re-experience the author's intentions and believed that interpretation was only complete once the reader/interpreter could re-experience that which was significant for the author. The interpreter had to recognise the rationality (sense) of the text and submit to this rationality. This line of thinking presumes that the interpreter can reach out to the subjectivity (significance) of the author *through* the objectivity (sense) of the text. "The ultimate aim was to get through to an author's unique individuality, a psychological interpretation" (Black & Dockery 1991:58). This sounds close to being miraculous, taking into consideration that one is dealing with texts where the author and the interpreter are separated by two thousand years of immense cultural and historical differences. Schleiermacher argued that although there is a great historical and cultural divide this divide can be bridged because of a shared relationship to life (Gillespie 1986:210). One could argue that it is a modernistic belief that the interpreter has access to some verifiable objective significance that imparts to the text its correct interpretation.

Lategan argues that this re-experience can never be completely identical with the original experience because it is co-determined by the interpreter's own historical horizon (Lategan 1992:149).

Maybe one can move beyond this search for verifiable objective significance if one distinguishes between the *sense* and the *significance* of a text.

Heidegger's philosophy had a tremendous influence on our understanding of language and its relationship to being. Heidegger gave priority to being (*Sein*) over thought. This means that being (experience) calls forth thought, it beckons for comprehension (language). Thought is the expression given to the silence of being and this can only happen through the medium of language. Heidegger later coined the concept that language is the house of being. For Heidegger an experience is meaningful if things (beings) present themselves to view as they are unveiled, but for them to be meaningful and truly understood they need to be intelligible (make sense) and must be *significant* to human existence. A text might be intelligible as it makes grammatical *sense*, but the text is only understood, truly understood, if it is *significant*. "A text that has meaning for an interpreter must be intelligible and significant to the interpreter" (Gillespie 1986:197).

It is clear that biblical texts were significant for the authors of the texts, but some of these texts were written two thousand years ago. Is it possible to grasp the significance or to have access to the significance that it had for the authors? Texts do have significance to readers today, but it would be naïve to think that the significance that these texts have for the readers today is the same as it was for the original authors.

Heidegger argued that it is obvious that the meaning of a text would differ to the degree that the significance of a text differs for the author and the interpreter. This leads us into the idea of semantic autonomy of the texts, namely that texts have significance for readers, but this significance is autonomous, in other words free of the significance it had for the author.

Thus, a text is meaningful as a result of both sense and significance. Sense (grammatical intelligibility) remains constant through time, but significance changes with time. When schoolchildren read Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* today and find it meaningful it is safe to presume that the reasons for them finding it meaningful will differ from the meaning that Shakespeare had in mind when he wrote the play and this is because of the difference in significance.

This raises an important question, namely: does a text mean that which the author intended or that which is meaningful today? Which significance is determining with regard to the meaning of a text – the significance of the author or the significance of today's reader? This question has caused major controversy in the hermeneutical debate. Hirsch (1967) and Caird (1980:1) argue that the "true" meaning of a text is that which the author intended, in other words, the "true" meaning of a text is dependent on the significance the text had for the author. On the other side of the spectrum was the argument that the meaning is independent of the author's intentions (significance) and the text is semantically autonomous and thus open to endless interpretations.

Heidegger's thoughts once again help in the development of this thought. It is not about having access to some reality, but it is within the logic or the universality of being that this bridge is discovered.

He argued that it is not some objective psychological reality that the interpreter has access to, but that meaning is generated from

an existential awareness of human possibilities. This awareness is in turn based upon the ability of human-beings to exist in various ways (Gillespie 1986:212). This can be broken down into three steps.

- i) Something is expressed in discourse
- ii) What is expressed is a projection of possible states of human-being (an ideal human existence)
- iii) Understanding happens when the reader/interpreter appropriates the potential way of being which is projected by the text.

Heidegger writes: "... in every case this interpretation is grounded in something we have in advance – in a fore-having [*Vorhabe*]". Understanding for Heidegger depends on having a particular "point of view" which is grounded on a "fore-sight" [*Vorsicht*]. This entails a particular way of conceiving things, it is therefore "grounded in a fore-conception [*Vorgriff*]" (Heidegger 1962:191). These thoughts I will take up later again in my understanding of the narrative-critical approach and its understanding of the implied author (significance) and implied reader (significance) and how identity and personhood is constructed by acts of interpretation.

The main critique against this development is that it focussed so much on the human aspect of the text, either the psychological identity of the author or the human interpretation and construction of being, that there was little room for "any positive affirmation about the Being of God as He is in Himself" (Torrance 1968:278). Yet these biblical texts are not just about the psychological experiences of the various authors, but are about a very specific subject-matter, namely God and God's relation to firstly the people of Israel and then through Jesus Christ to the New Testament authors and communities.

This brings us to the next aspect of hermeneutics, namely the subject-matter or the reference of the text.

### **2.2.3 The reference of the text**

Firstly, when reflecting on the reference of texts it must be noted that not all speech or texts are referential in character, but I believe that one can agree that most speech and texts do indeed refer to something. Gadamer opened up this discussion as he argued that language does not only orientate itself to the text (*sense*) or to the author (*significance*), but to the textual *reference* understood as the

subject matter of the text. Robinson called this shift to the *reference* of the text the “ontological turn” (Robinson 1964:69). Gadamer focussed his attention on the dialectical relationship between *Sprache* (speech) and *Sache* (subject matter) of literature. According to him, in most literature somebody is saying something to somebody else about something. The *reference* of all speech is its subject matter and for Gadamer this subject matter provides the connection between the text and the interpreter/reader as it is in the subject matter that the reader discovers meaning and thus understanding. In the act of interpretation it is the subject matter which emerges (*es kommt heraus*) in the interaction between the text and the interpreter (Gillespie 1986:207).

This shift towards the interaction between text and *reference* (subject matter) also redefined hermeneutics not so much as a methodological theory, but as a “coming to speech” of the subject matter (*das Zur-Sprache-Kommen der Sache selbst*) (Gadamer 1989:379).

The issue of how language relates (refers) to reality can be traced all the way back to a distinction that Plato made in his *Cratylus* between words being either signs or images. Plato argued that words are signs and not images and this idea has determined Western thought for centuries. His thinking was based on his dualism between thought (ideality) and reality. For Plato thought was silent and therefore thinking did not need words, and therefore thought and language were radically separated and words were merely signs at the disposal of thinking. Words point to the *Sache* and their function is to bring the *Sache* into view, but words remain secondary to the *Sache*. Gadamer returns to this distinction and unpacks this distinction for the hermeneutical process (Gadamer 1975:366-397). Gadamer challenged these long held views of Plato and argued that it is too narrow. Language is not detached from the *Sache*, but in language itself there is a mysterious connection to the subject matter. Language is not merely an instrument, a tool or a sign that we use to point to things, but in the words themselves there is an ideality which is its meaning or sense (Gillespie 1986:207). If words are only viewed as signs that means they are viewed alone in their function, namely to point to things. If words only point to reality it is clear that they cannot manifest a reality, but only describe it. Words as signs only have meaning in relation to the object signified and never have any meaning or content on its own. We know that this is



not true, as texts have an affective power that is beyond the scope of just pointing to things. This affective power of texts brought the idea of words as images back into discussion. An image on the other hand does have content on its own (Gillespie 1986:207), and is not dependent on something outside of itself that it points to. In an image the subject matter is (imagined) represented and not just pointed to. The subject matter (*Sache*) is imagined and thereby made present. In an image through its resemblance character something can be made present which otherwise would not be present. This understanding of language was totally discredited by Plato.

It is true that language arises out of experience, but experience itself is already embedded within language and it is because of this very nature that we seek words to express that which we experience so that the experience can “come to language”. This is not just a matter of finding the right word to copy/reproduce the experience, but the word already participates in the experience (subject matter) and the experience (subject matter) in the word. It is this participation of language in being that makes language more than mere signs. “The starting point for the formation of a word is the intelligible *Sache* that fills the mind. But the thought seeking expression through speech refers to the subject matter of discourse rather than to the mind which produces it” (Gillespie 1986:207).

This means that humans are already within language when they seek to express an experience. We are born into history and language which were there prior to us. Historical realities are prior to human experience and they determine the way in which things are to be interpreted. In other words an individual belongs to history before history belongs to him/her, which means that individuals are born into a certain history/tradition which determines the horizons of interpretation, and therefore meaning transcends the horizon of experience of an individual and is rather constituted by the tradition, heritage and history of the individual. Communication therefore takes place not only between subjective individuals but between these collective “traditions” or language communities. Hermeneutics thus becomes for Gadamer an “act of transmission in which the past and the present are constantly being mediated. This process of “effective history”, as Gadamer calls it, is made possible by the “‘fusion of horizons’ represented by author and interpreter” (Gillespie 1986:214). Thus, interpretation and understanding is not a matter of recognition, but a matter of translation.

Ricoeur agreed with Gadamer that the textual meaning of a text is constituted by both the *sense* (grammatical intelligibility) and the *reference* of the text. Ricoeur took this argument a step further and argued that a text does not only bear witness to a world of reality (reference), but actually projects such a possible world. This aspect of Ricoeur's thinking, that texts project a reality, rather than point (bear witness) to reality, is vitally important. A text does not only describe a reality, but in a certain sense creates or re-creates such a reality. Discourse has the ability to manifest a reality to the interpreter/reader (Ricoeur 1976:92).

The meaning of the text is therefore not something to be found *behind* the text in the self-understanding of the author or *in* the rationality of the text, but *in front* of the text in the world that is projected (created/re-created) by the text. In the beginning of the essay I reflected on the New Hermeneutics and their emphasis on what happens in front of the text, in other words, what effect the text has on the readers.

Thus the possibility of understanding the sense of a text is for Ricoeur grounded in the universality of *sense* rather than in the universality of *reference*. The ideality of textual sense, its *noematic* content, is the logical dimension of its proposition which can be analysed. Therefore the *noematic* content of a text is intelligible across history and culture. Thus it can be argued that meaning is determined more logically than culturally and historically. The text manifests a certain world to the interpreter and this world the interpreter can appropriate personally. It is this *noematic* content of the text, its *sense* in dialectical relation to its *reference* that makes translation and meaning possible across the gap of history and culture. The text itself is the bridge and therefore the interpreter does not have to make the leap into the world of the author.

This does not in any way exclude the historical-critical reading of the text. "The recognition of modern linguistics that language is both synchronic and diachronic requires the 'said as such' of discourse to be interpreted in the light of its particular synchronic period of origin" (Gillespie 1986:218). However the presumptions of radical historicism are blatantly false that texts can *only* make sense within its synchronic period of origin.

The conclusion that I can come to is that historical relativism is only relatively true. In the hermeneutic circle the initial guess to the

meaning of the text, which needs to be explained and if necessary corrected by explanation using all the different historical and literary tools, is limited to the *noematic* content of the text. The *noematic* is the “what” of the textual sense. It is at this level that Ricoeur argues that the text bears a determinate and thus determinable meaning. It is this aspect which remains constant. This constant factor points and directs the interpreter to the “what about” of the text, or in other words, the *sense* of the text points towards the *reference* of the text. It is here at the point of *reference* that the interpretation process encourages diversity of understanding. Yet this diversity of understanding is not absolute, because it is limited by the sense of the text. This brings us to the last component of hermeneutics, namely the role of the interpreter who reads the sense of the text and in the sense of the text finds meaning and understanding influenced by his/her context of reading.

#### **2.2.4 The reader/interpreter**

As soon as the hermeneutical development moved away from the historical-critical method it became clear that the reader/interpreter plays a vitally important role in the whole hermeneutical process. Ebeling argues that texts/words can only produce understanding by appealing to experience and leading to experience. He says, “Only where word has already taken place can word take place. Only where there is already previous understanding can understanding take place. Only a man who is already concerned with the matter in question can be claimed for it” (Ebeling 1963:320).

In the section discussing the significance of the text it already became clear that the significance that a text has for a reader differs from the significance a text had for the author, thus the meaning and the interpretation of texts are largely dependent on the readers.

The understanding of the text remains open because the meaning of the Scriptures discloses itself anew in every future...since the exegete exists historically and must hear the word of Scripture as spoken in his personal historical situation, he will always understand the old word anew. Always anew will it tell him how he, man, is and who God is...

(Bultmann 1964:105)

Does this mean that the interpreter can read anything into a text? No, there is a dialogue between reader and text and these dialogue partners are equal and the text should be treated as an “other” (Green 1995b:420).

In this dialogical context between reader and the text the historical cultural distance between the interpreter and the biblical text might be a good thing. I believe this distance is important because it creates the necessary space for the horizon of the text to critically challenge the horizon of the reader and it does this by the very fact that it is so different. If the horizons were very similar then the reader could too easily presume that the text is only a reflection of his/her life situation.

### **2.3 Narrative-critical hermeneutical approach**

In the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as part of the above developments a narrative-critical approach developed. This approach is interested in narratives, which includes any literary work that tells a story (Weinrich 1977:47). I believe the narrative-critical approach to be a very apt hermeneutical approach for the following reasons.

- i) Many of the biblical texts are narratives
- ii) Identity and personhood I believe are constructed via our personal narratives
- iii) Narratives do not only point to realities, but create realities and are therefore highly suited for the development of new identities and hope
- iv) The narrative approach as a literary approach focuses on all four of the components of hermeneutics, whilst the text remains central
- v) The text remains central and the meaning of the text is not sought elsewhere beyond the text

What I especially like about the narrative approach is that it focuses on the text, because that is where I believe the challenges are to be found that I referred to in the introduction.

The text is all we have access to, which is an interesting twist to one of the reformation pillars, *sola scriptura* (alone the Scriptures). We do not have access to the objective historical reality behind the text, we do not have access to the psychological intentions of the author and we do not have access to the actual

physical reference of the texts. Yet we have the texts and the understanding, interpretation and translation of these texts do indeed incorporate all four of the components discussed previously, but these components are all internal to the texts themselves. In the narrative approach the significance of a text is important as the author's and the reader's intentions do indeed play an important role in the interpretation of the texts, but the only author and reader that we have access to is the implied author and reader *in* the text (Booth 1983:66-67). The reference of these texts is vitally important for the interpretation, understanding and translation of the texts, but the only reference that we have access to, is the reference (subject matter) *in* the text which is created/projected *in front* of the text as we do not have access to that which is *behind* the text.

### **3 WHAT WOULD BE THE CRITERIA OF SUCH AN APPROACH**

The narrative-critical approach works with the following criteria:

Author (implied author), reader (implied reader), point of view, sense, significance, reference, discourse, space, actions and causal links. Somebody (author) writes a text to somebody (reader). The text in this case is a story and a narrative consists of two main elements, story and discourse. The story refers to the content of the narrative: something happens (actions) to someone (characters) in a certain time and place (place) (Brink 1987:39). The interaction of the elements of actions, characters and place forms the plot. Discourse refers to the way in which the story is told and thus includes the genre that is used, the point of view of the author, symbolism, irony and other narrative elements.

Different narratives can thus be analysed and compared with one another to discover if they have enough similarities so that the one can serve as a hermeneutical bridge to elucidate the other.

The narratives would need to be similar in the intentions of the author (significance), the message of the text (sense) and the reference of the text. These similarities can be determined according to the principle of analogy.

#### **3.1 Analogy**

“The principle of analogy states that when the same word or phrase is found in two passages of the Old Testament, one can be used to illumine the other” (Martin 1977:247). That means that one text can

be used to illumine another text if there are sufficient similarities. We can use this principle that Martin uses for the Old Testament for other texts as well, because the principle of analogy stays the same. Richard Soulen (1976:15) defines analogy in the following way: “Analogy (Greek *ana loga*: proportion, correspondence). To ‘draw an analogy’ is to make a comparison between the similar features or attributes of two otherwise dissimilar things, so that the unknown, or less known, or less well known, is clarified by the known. Strictly speaking, an analogy is predicated on the similarity of relationships which two things have.”

I believe that after reflecting on the importance of the four components of hermeneutics, namely text, author (significance), reference (subject matter) and the role of the interpreter and how these aspects developed over the last few decades, that the narrative-critical approach best incorporates all these aspects. It is because it takes all these aspects into consideration that I believe it is best suited to bring an ancient biblical text to speech through the use of an extra-biblical narrative.

Is it hermeneutically and theologically justifiable to make use of secondary, non-biblical literature which is comparable in its intent and genre as a hermeneutical tool with which to elucidate and gain access to primary biblical literature?

This is essentially a question of hermeneutical orientation and in this essay I have tried to describe my hermeneutical orientation. In this concluding section I would like to argue that it is hermeneutical justifiable to use secondary literature to allow an ancient text to come to language.

I started off this essay by looking at the crisis in the church with regard to scripture and that this crisis is a hermeneutical crisis. I then reflected on the development of hermeneutics over the last few decades and established this study within this hermeneutical development specifically within the narrative-critical approach.

Certain biblical texts, because of their high symbolic and metaphoric content, are inaccessible to the modern reader who does not share these symbols and metaphors. The book of Revelation for example is totally inaccessible to the modern reader because of these time conditioned symbols and metaphors, and without commentary and explanation the text will remain inaccessible to a reader. Yet there are texts, secondary literary works, which are accessible to the

untrained reader because the language and symbolism are part of his/her language tradition. *The Lord of the Rings* for example, which has been hailed as one of the greatest literary works of this century, is very accessible to today's readers.

*The Lord of the Rings*, as a secondary literary text can be used to bring to language the Book of Revelation if it can be discovered that the intentions of the implied author of this secondary literary work are similar to the intentions of the implied author of the primary biblical text. If the subject matter that the text refers to, in other words its theological content, is also similar, and if parallels and similarities can be established between the implied readers of these two texts, then I believe that within the narrative hermeneutical approach it is theologically and hermeneutically justifiable to make use of a secondary literary work to elucidate a primary biblical text.

#### **4 DO THESE TWO NARRATIVES CO-INCIDE SUFFICIENTLY?**

In this article I have argued that if sufficient similarities can be found between the significance for the two implied authors, the reference of the texts and in the situation of the implied readers, then Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* can be effectively used to bring to language anew The Book of Revelation. This means that an extra-biblical text like *The Lord of the Rings* can be used as a bridge to bring an unclear text like The Book of Revelation to language if enough similarities can be found in the other three components of hermeneutics.

It would be beyond the scope of this article to do a full narrative analysis of the two narratives therefore I will only touch on isolated similarities and thereby hope to give a glimpse of the possibility of the above theory. I will very briefly highlight some similarities between the two narratives with regard to significance (for the implied authors), reference and situation of the implied readers.

##### **4.1 Similarities in the significance of the text for the implied authors**

Both authors can be described as traumatised. They were traumatised by the stark reality of the world they lived in – for the author of the Book of Revelation it was the reality of imperial power and oppression and persecution of believers, and for Tolkien it was the reality of dictatorship and the ugliness of war. They both were

confronted with the reality of evil in the world and they wrote these narratives in response to the experience of overpowering evil in the world. A deep rooted question motivated their narratives: If God is God, why then does evil have so much power and influence in the history of the world?

In their narratives they sought to unpack their understanding of God and God's relation to evil (theodicy) and thereby establish a basis for hope in this world.

Both authors also wanted to reveal the true face of evil and how evil functions in this world and at the same time reveal to the readers the "hidden" God, thus helping the readers to develop a new perspective on the following: i) their world, ii) the invisible reality of God and God's participation in the history of this world, iii) themselves and their role in this history of God.

#### **4.2 Similarities in the reference (subject-matter)**

The subject matter that both these narratives refer to is the world as it is, God's action and history in this world and the consequences thereof for the believers (fellowship). The Lord of the Rings does not specifically refer to God, but there is a clear indication that there is an invisible hand that guides the events.

This subject matter is communicated through the characters and the theological point of view of the two narratives.



## 4.2.1 Characters

The Book of Revelation	The Lord of the Rings
<u>Divine Trinity:</u> God Christ  Holy Spirit	<u>Divine Trinity:</u> God (the One) <sup>2</sup> Aragon, Gandalf, Galadriel (Messianic figures) The invisible hand that guides the various characters of the fellowship
<u>Evil Trinity:</u> Satan The monster from the earth The monster from the sea	<u>Evil Trinity:</u> Sauron Saruman Nazgûl
Faithful	Fellowship
Unfaithful	The nations and Gollum

## 4.2.2 Theological point of view

Both narratives have a dualistic worldview where the world is divided into good and evil, light and darkness. Both narratives understand that there is a greater power behind everything, although this greater power is hidden. They believe that there is hope, because the believers (fellowship) are not alone, but there are greater powers at work and evil has been conquered. The path of victory is through suffering and sacrifice.

## 4.3 Similarities in the situation of the implied readers

The implied readers of both narratives are experiencing suffering, which leads to a crisis in their faith in a benevolent and sovereign God. The readers do not comprehend what faith in Christ means in a context of persecution and suffering. Their question is: Why is God silent in the face of so much suffering. The two narratives are written in response to the experience and questions of the readers.

## 5 CONCLUSION

In the beginning of this article I argued that the authority of Scripture is discovered in the role that it plays within the faith community in the forming and reforming of the community's identity and

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2 God as a character is interpreted in the Book of Revelation as the One who sits on the throne and in *The Lord of the Rings* as the power behind everything.

character. This authority and significance of Scripture cannot be taken away by secondary literature. Yet if Scripture is not understood it cannot have this authority and it loses its relevance and therefore new ways have to be found whereby Scripture can be understood by contemporary readers so that it can again fulfil its role as an authority in the formation of the faith community's identity. The use of secondary literature is to have a hermeneutic tool with which to remove the hindrances that stand in the way of the self-interpreting nature of Scripture. *Lord of the Rings* helps in removing the hindrances of:

- 1 Time conditioned symbols of the Book of Revelation as it uses metaphors understood by contemporary readers,
- 2 prejudices and pre-understandings of traditional biblical interpretations as it is a non-biblical book and can therefore be refreshingly new.

I believe that it is hermeneutically justifiable to make use of secondary literature as a narrative hermeneutical tool to elucidate primary biblical texts, that it is theologically correct to do so and that it is practically necessary to find new creative ways to bring the Message to language.

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