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## “Seeing” with reverence: Dirk Smit on the ethos of interpretation

### ABSTRACT

The essay briefly discusses aspects of the contribution of Dirk J Smit, South African systematic theologian and ethicist, to an *ethos of responsible (biblical) hermeneutics*, an ethos of interpretation that invites and encourages human responses of faith and hope. The crucial starting point of such an ethos, the author argues, is the gift of “seeing” differently, of discerning faithfully, of imagining God’s radical presence in the world.

The art of “seeing” with respect to Smit’s thinking is discussed under five interrelated rubrics: (a) Seeing the *Bible* as foundational resource for Christian theology; (b) Seeing the *history* of biblical interpretation ethically; (c) Seeing Christian *ethos* and *ethics* differently; (d) Seeing *people* through narratives of God’s grace; and (e) Seeing a transformed *society* through the calling of the church.

With continual reference to the “moral world” of the Judeo-Christian narrative, Smit emphasises *memory* and *hope* as powerful mechanisms toward developing the moral home of faith communities. Through liturgy – where the narratives and vision of God’s dynamic yet paradoxical presence are celebrated and nurtured—God’s Spirit continues to invite “communities of character” to reimagine their identity and ethos beyond all stereotypical views of God, humanity and the rest of creation.

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things *not seen*.  
(Hebrews 11:1)

*Reverence* begins in a deep understanding of human limitations; from this grows the capacity to be in awe of whatever we believe lies outside our control – God, truth, justice, nature, even death. The capacity for awe, as it grows, brings with it the capacity for respecting fellow human beings, flaws and all ... Simply put, reverence is the virtue that keeps human beings from trying to act like gods.  
(Woodruff 2001:1-2).

I am blessed to have known Dirkie Smit personally for about 38 years—initially as a fellow-student, later as an advisor for my doctoral studies, and since 2000 as a colleague in the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University. Because I have come to appreciate him as a profoundly *reverent* observer of God’s presence and acts in history, of people and their stories, of texts and events, I feel ambivalent about the invitation to comment on his life and work. On the one hand I am grateful for the opportunity to reflect on his contribution to my own spiritual and academic growth as well as to theological discourse in South Africa and further a field. On the other hand, however, I hesitate in fear of reducing it to something that would unworthily represent the depth of his integrity and excellence.

The subtitle of the essay is “Dirk Smit on the ethos of interpretation.” To describe the process of interpretation as particularly *ethical*, basically refers to the wide range of *choices* interpreters have to make. This, in turn, depends on what they *see*, and ultimately on *who* they are, and on *whose* they are. The subject could, therefore, be approached from various legitimate angles. For the purpose of this essay I will focus on Smit’s contribution to an ethos of responsible biblical interpretation, and, as a consequence thereof, his appropriation of biblical perspectives in contemporary Christian ethos and ethics.<sup>1</sup>

Smit’s literary *oeuvre* represents a myriad of *genres* – from numerous academic articles and chapters in edited volumes (often serving as introductory or conclusionary perspectives), to hundreds of sermon guidelines and meditations. As far as I am familiar with his teaching, preaching, and writings, I would like to describe every breath of his prolific and multifaceted work as embodying what has come to be known as “an ethics of interpretation.” Why would this be significant? Why would it be important to highlight the *ethics of his interpretive work*, and not (e.g.) his impact on the lives of students, church leaders, and the concrete needs of people? Would the cry in (Southern) Africa at the moment not rather be to *change* the world than to *interpret* it? Certainly, one may agree, but “we will change too little, and that probably too late, if we do not at the same time change our understanding of what we mean when we so easily claim to interpret the world” (West 1991:6, with reference to David Tracy).

Smit’s life and work, in my view, have to be appreciated within the context of a growing debate worldwide with respect to the functioning of Scripture in Christian ethos and ethics. This forms part of a much broader discussion among literary scholars on “the ethics of interpretation,” *which requires that people take responsibility for their acts of interpretation*—both with regard to the nature of the literature involved *and* the socio-historical contexts within which it is received. The challenge becomes even more urgent when it comes to canonised (religious) texts, which are read with the anticipation to communicate meaning and hope. That this is by no means a straightforward issue for Christians, speaks from the wide variety of ways in which the Bible has been interpreted and appropriated during the course of history. The wonder *and* complexity of the matter are *inter alia* due to the rich yet intricate nature, authority and intentions of the biblical documents themselves, as well as the vast temporal, socio-historical and philosophical differences between the worlds of the Bible and later/contemporary audiences (Lategan 1982; cf. Mouton 1997).<sup>2</sup>

It is amidst these dynamic yet hyper complex hermeneutical trends – exacerbated by rapid processes of political and academic transformation in South Africa since the nineties of the previous century – that the contribution of Dirk J Smit as systematic theologian and ethicist represent a particularly sensitive, timely and nuanced prophetic voice. I refer to his approach as

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1. I will argue that the significance of Smit’s contribution particularly lies within the dynamic yet risky interface between the biblical sciences and systematic theology. Christian communities explicitly appeal to, or implicitly presuppose the continuing *authority* of the biblical writings when using them to explain and justify their moral arguments and behaviour. The question is not *whether* the Bible is authoritative for Christians, but *how* this authority has to be defined, and how its continuing relevance across times and cultures has to be understood.
  2. The current interest in the *ethics of interpretation*, emphasising the role and contexts of receivers in the process of understanding, may be ascribed to a whole range of factors, such as socio-political developments on a global scale, distinct epistemological shifts in the human sciences, and the intellectual and socio-economical climate of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (cf. Smit 1993a, 1994c; Lategan 1984, 1991, 1992a, 1992b; Mouton 2002:207-219). These *inter alia* account for the emergence of postcolonial, feminist, womanist, male and fundamentalist theologies (Dube 2000, 2001).

the art of “*seeing*” with reverence, of *discerning* with awe, faith and respect, of *imagining* God’s radical presence in a broken world while *identifying* with, and *paying attention* to the person, community, subject or problem at stake. This attitude may be viewed as the starting point of all ethical being, decision-making and action (Tödt 1977; De Villiers & Smit 1996; Mouton 2002:244-251). I will, therefore, discuss Smit’s ethos under five interrelated, yet distinguishable, rubrics: “Seeing” the *Bible* as foundational resource for Christian theology; “Seeing” the *history* of biblical interpretation ethically; “Seeing” Christian *ethos* and *ethics* differently; “Seeing” *people* through narratives of God’s grace; and “Seeing” a transformed *society* through the calling of the church.

## “SEEING” THE BIBLE AS FOUNDATIONAL RESOURCE FOR CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Over almost three decades, Smit consistently and passionately emphasised the life-giving, life-sustaining, community-forming nature and authority of the biblical writings as foundational to Christian theology and ethics. How people hear and read the Bible, and how they appropriate it in their everyday life situations, is nothing but an issue of serious *moral* concern to him. *Indeed, for Dirkie Smit the very identity of Christian faith, and the heart, ethos, integrity and credibility of Christian theology* are at stake in the way people understand and interpret the Bible (Smit 1987a, 1988a, 1989, 1991a, 1992, 1993b, 1993c, 1994b, 1994d, 1994f, 1996).

In the context of biblical scholarship at large, questions regarding an ethics of interpretation were most pertinently asked by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza during and since her presidential address at the Annual Meeting of the *Society of Biblical Literature* in Boston, December 1987 (Fiorenza 1988, 1999:1–102).<sup>3</sup> Contrary to the tendency in twentieth century formalist literary criticism to emphasise a text at the expense of its context, Fiorenza’s critical theory of *rhetoric* insists that context is as important as text, and that one’s social location is decisive for how one sees the world, constructs reality, or interprets biblical texts. “What we see depends on where we stand” (Fiorenza 1988:5; cf. Botha 1994c). If biblical scholars, theologians and ethicists assume responsibility for the relevance of their interpretive task in relation to the context of contemporary readers, questions such as the following become central: Who is involved in the reading process? On whose behalf is the text being read? What sparks the interest in, and reaction to the text? Whose – which individual or group – interests are served? What kind of world is envisioned? What roles, duties, and values are advocated? What happens between reading a text, and its understanding as practical ethos or change of behaviour? What social effects are our theological activities supposed

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3 In her challenging and now influential 1988 article, Fiorenza defines the ethics of interpretation as a reading that respects the rights of texts, and assumes that a text being interpreted “may say something different from what one wants or expects it to say” (1988:5). At the same time, with respect to the ethics of biblical scholarship as an institutionalised academic practice, she maintains that “biblical interpretation, like all other scholarly inquiry, is a communicative practice that involves interests, values, and visions” (1988:4). These interests and values, Fiorenza argues, do not always reflect the perspectives of the biblical texts. The thrust of her argument is therefore a plea for a redefinition of “true scholarship.” Her vision firstly entails a *decentering* of the dominant scientist ethos of biblical scholarship in the SBL, and secondly its *recentering* to include the rhetorical context of all readers (especially women), and to become a critical interpretive praxis for liberation. For some of the American and South African responses to Fiorenza’s provocative address, see Smit 1990a, 1990b; Botha 1992:174-184. In his 1990a article Smit relates her views to that of three other scholars who had emphasised the need for a shift in the ethos of scholarly interpretation, namely Anthony Thiselton and David Tracy who both work from a hermeneutic tradition, and Wilhelm Wuellner who reintroduced rhetorical criticism.

to have (cf. Smit 1993c)? These questions, Fiorenza argues (1988:14-15; 1999:26-30), require a double ethics, an ethics of *historical reading* and an ethics of *accountability*, an ethics that respects both the “textuality” of a text and its readers (cf. Smit 1991a, 1998b; Botha 1994a, 1994b).

A remarkable characteristic of Smit’s work (as a systematic theologian) is his ability to hold these aspects (of biblical interpretation) together in a creative and constructive tension. Whilst doing systematic theology from within the perspectives of the biblical texts, the many different contexts of audiences through the ages form an almost natural part of his thinking. For him, the functioning of the Bible in Christian theology is primarily an *ethical* issue – with respect to both the nature, intentions and authority of the biblical texts and the contexts within which these texts are received, where they are anticipated to communicate meaning and hope. For many years Smit consistently challenged (South African) biblical scholars and other theologians by pleading for some kind of integration of interpretive methods and reading strategies into a “responsible hermeneutics”. He emphasised that, “after the methods of interpretation have had their day, the results must be organized in some way so that people can believe, hope and act” (Smit 1988a:478).

### “SEEING” THE HISTORY OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION ETHICALLY

The long journey of biblical interpretation since the first centuries CE reveals a large variety of ways in which the Bible functioned in concrete situations, stimulated and influenced by numerous existential needs, historical and philosophical paradigms, models of rationality, interests, personalities, abilities, and views of the Bible.

In South Africa, Dirkie Smit for many years played a crucial role in assisting students and church leaders toward understanding and appreciating the endless number of spheres and contexts within which the Bible played an important role. As an authoritative guest lecturer at numerous public seminars and workshops, he reminded his audiences of decisive historical phases in the development of ethics in general and *Christian* moral thinking in particular.<sup>4</sup> Christian ethics was decisively influenced by these developments, but, in turn, also influenced, and continues to influence the interpretation of the Bible in many ways. By reviewing these trends, Smit continues to encourage and facilitate critical, constructive dialogue among biblical scholars and systematic theologians (cf. Smit 1988a, 1989, 1990a, 1990b, 1991b, 1992, 1994d, 1996).

In an extended essay on the first nineteen centuries of biblical interpretation (interwoven with developments in Christian ethics), Smit observes that Christian believers—at least until the Enlightenment – listened to, interpreted, and appropriated the Bible in a great variety of ways, with a view to understanding *their everyday lives*. They were not so much interested in the Bible itself, or in what we today know as the *academic or intellectual* study of the Bible, but in the Bible as *canon*, as norm – a guiding lamp, a light for their path. Without appropriating the Bible to their everyday needs and challenges, suffering, fears and hopes, the reading process would for many simply be incomplete and pointless. For them the Bible would be *only* useful in so far as it helps them to live *coram Deo* (Smit 1998a:275-291).

Since the Enlightenment, Smit argues, the Bible was approached differently however, by means of different sets of questions. Paradoxically, people often became more interested in this

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4 To speak about “phases,” Smit admits, is perhaps not the best explanation of the process of interpretation, because it gives the impression of consecutive periods replacing each other in the course of history. We should rather speak of historical “paradigms,” for in many aspects of social history today, *all* these phases are simultaneously prevalent and influential. Most of the time we live in all these paradigms at the same time.

collection of ancient canonised documents as an *object for study* – as distinguished and separated from understanding life *by means of it*. The questions being asked of the Bible were increasingly of a scientific, theoretical, “objective” nature, instead of being personal, existential, and related to the everyday life situations of its recipients (Smit 1998a:291-296).

At the moment – broadly speaking since World War I – Christianity is going through a phase during which many believers worldwide are rediscovering the (trans)formative potential of the Bible for their daily lives. The cumulative debate regarding the use of Scripture in Christian ethos and ethics needs to be appreciated within this context. As indicated earlier, it forms part of a much broader discussion amongst literary critics on the “ethics of interpretation,” which requires that people take responsibility for their acts of interpretation – both with regard to the nature of the literature involved *and* the socio-historical contexts within which it is being read. An “ethics of biblical interpretation” would thus be challenged to account for the multidimensional, relational nature of these texts on the one hand, *and* their appropriation in terms of the faith experiences and needs of present-day audiences on the other.

It is in this sense that Smit’s “typologies” of historical paradigms in biblical interpretation and (Christian) theology and ethics have become particularly helpful. With reference to moral philosophers, theologians, ethicists and other scholars from various contexts and times, he surveys the long, rich yet complex history of both (biblical) interpretation and the development of (Christian) ethics while translating it with remarkable wisdom and care into “accessible grids” of major paradigmatic phases. He broadly refers to these as the *classical*, *premodern* and *modern* periods with respect to moral thinking (Smit 1990a, 1991b, 1992, 1994b, 1994c, 1997, 1998a, 1998b; cf. Mouton 2002:201-219). His work assisted and continues to assist many students, scholars and church leaders over decades in identifying, describing, and responding to, the many implications and challenges for an ethically responsible interpretation of the Bible in (South) Africa during these times. In the process he indicated how the Bible functioned in many different ways in Christian ethics in the past – *depending on the particular question(s) being put to it*. Both the methodology to be followed, as well as the ethical answers to be found in the Bible, Smit argues, depend to a large extent on the point of view of the researcher, and the question(s) being put to the Bible.<sup>5</sup> If people want to use the Bible in making decisions with regard to particular moral *issues*, they will use it in a specific way. If they wish to use it in *forming communities of character* where people learn to become wise readers of Scripture and truthful disciples, they will use it in other ways. If they want to use the Bible to accomplish their vision of the *world and society*, they will use it in yet another way. People thus approach the Bible from radically different historical paradigms, and consequently come to different conclusions.

Smit continuously pleads for a balanced and properly nuanced functioning of Scripture with respect to all these questions.

## “SEEING” CHRISTIAN ETHOS AND ETHICS DIFFERENTLY

Answers to the ethical questions posed by the various historical phases, Smit would likewise argue, will consciously or unconsciously be influenced by all possible factors involved in the hermeneutical process.<sup>6</sup> Accounting for these aspects would for Smit necessarily form part of an “ethics of interpretation.”

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5 This confirms the relational nature of all human knowledge, including interpretations of the Bible (cf. Botha 1994a:40-42; Mouton 2002:201-219).

6 These include aspects such as the secxxlf-understanding of the moral agent, the historical paradigm from which s/he operates, the ability to read the situation or context, the interpreters’ critical awareness of their own personal, socio-cultural and religious presuppositions, academic background, personality structure,

In essence, the different paradigms of biblical interpretation and ethical thinking brought at least three major clusters of moral questions to the fore, which are all still widely influential today. This, for Smit, means that the subject of (Christian) ethics and ethos may be approached from several different angles or that the ethical question can be phrased in different ways (Smit 1993b:2–5).

Firstly, it may be asked: What is good and moral *action*? For Christians, the question is: What is the biblical, the Christian view of good and moral decisions, actions and conduct – under specific circumstances, and in the face of specific challenges? Secondly, it may be asked: Who are good and moral *people*? What constitutes a good and morally responsible *person*? And, for Christians: What is the biblical, the Christian view of a good and moral person? What is her/his character supposed to be like, and where are such people formed? Thirdly, one may ask: What is a good and moral *society*, a good and *moral world*? For Christians, the question is: What is the biblical, the Christian view of a good, happy and moral society? (cf. Smit 1994a, 1994b, 1994c).

The first question, *What is good and moral action?* concentrates on specific *issues*, activities, concrete decisions or choices with regard to particular circumstances and moral dilemmas (cf. Smit 1990c:18; 1992:316). In the second question, *Who is a good and moral person or Christian?* the emphasis is on *virtues* (e.g. wisdom, humility, honesty, trustworthiness, integrity). What is considered to be *moral* is determined by the type of human beings people want or choose to be—by their character, or identity. Thirdly, the question *What is a good and moral society?* focuses on *values* (e.g. peace, justice, equality, liberty, liberation), which are normally communicated via symbols, slogans and banners. For people living in this frame of mind, that which is considered to be *moral*, is determined by the kind of value or cause they live and strive for. Christian ethos and ethics, according to Smit, invariably involves all these dimensions.

To summarise, the question concerning good/moral action can also be phrased as a *how* question: HOW should we behave in particular circumstances? the question of good/moral people as a *who* question: WHO should we be?; and the question of a good/moral society as a *what* question: WHAT should we strive for? The first question (How should we behave?) represents an ethics of *Doing* (*Sollen*), whereas the second and third questions (Who should we be? and What should we strive for?) represent an ethics of *Being* (*Sein*). In the first paradigm the moral *act* is important, while the moral *agent* is central in the second position, and the moral *ideal* or *vision* in the third (cf. Smit 1991b, 1994b).

While dealing with the nature of ethics in general and *Christian ethics* in particular, Smit emphasises a useful distinction between (Christian) *ethics* and (Christian) *ethos*. “In a technical sense ‘ethics’ is a scientific discipline, the ‘science of morals,’ the discipline dealing with processes of human decision making on moral issues. ‘Ethos,’ however, is ‘the habitual character and disposition of a group’” (Smit 1991b:52; cf. 1992:303-317). Using influential arguments of Meeks, Hauerwas, and Gustafson, Smit (1991b:52-55) gives several reasons why the difference between *ethics* and *ethos* is extremely important, particularly with regard to the use of the Bible in both. Referring to the public importance of *ethics*, he warns against its overestimation, and subsequently indicates that – from a methodological point of view – ethos is the more comprehensive and socially influential factor: “(E)thics seldom determines ethos. *Ethos more often determines ethics* ... Put differently: the ethos of a group determines how its members live

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commitments, preferences, interests, etc. For Christians’ the answers to these questions will also be influenced by their particular understanding of the biblical vision of God and God’s involvement with humanity.

and act almost unconsciously, unreflectively, in their everyday actions and decisions” (Smit 1991b:52 – emphasis EMM).<sup>7</sup> He further seriously considers the question as to how the Bible influences the ethos, the moral world, the public morality of a particular society.<sup>8</sup> Drawing on Gustafson’s famous analysis of the role of the Bible in Christian ethics (1984), as well as Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic approach, Smit indicates how powerfully the Bible affected the moral language and imagination of traditionally Christian societies, and therefore also their culture and ethos, and how its role and importance change with changing socio-historical circumstances (Smit 1991b: 55-61).<sup>9</sup>

## “SEEING” PEOPLE THROUGH NARRATIVES OF GOD’S GRACE

Consequently, one of the main concerns for Christian ethics, according to Smit, can be described in terms of the following question: *How can the Bible influence and transform the identity awareness and ethos, the language, story and culture of individual people and contemporary societies?* Or, phrased differently: Are the communities, institutions and establishments who are reading the Bible (albeit in diverse ways), powerful, persuasive, convincing enough to influence the personal and public ethos in a given society? (Smit 1991b:59-63).<sup>10</sup>

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7 For Smit (1991b:52), “(t)he difference between ethics and ethos often has something to do with the difference between (moral) decisions and acts and (moral) human beings, between acts and agents.” With reference to Hauerwas (1981), Smit argues that the emphasis ought to be on the latter, on the formation of the character, the ethos, the moral identity of a group. Hauerwas’ interest is, therefore, in the formation of “communities of character,” and in the role the Bible can play in it. “He challenges the popular inclination to link ethics with ‘difficult decisions’ and argues instead for the importance of creating contexts more conducive to deciding one way or another. Contexts like these are found in communities, like the church: social institutions seeking to embody a specific configuration of virtues in its members. These virtues are formed by the language, the ‘grammar,’ the collective stories or narratives of the group.... Much more important, according to Hauerwas, than looking at the role of the Bible in particular difficult decisions and acts, is therefore to look at the role of the Bible within the social institutions where the people’s ethos is being formed” (Smit 1991b:53; cf. 1994b). According to this emphasis, an ethics of responsibility (Doing) presupposes an ethics of relationality (Being). What we do is the result of who we are (cf. also Heinz E Tödt’s well-known processes of ethical decision-making, and particularly the role of identity and “seeing” in each phase – Tödt 1977; Mouton 2002:243-251).

8 The term “moral world” refers to the collective moral network of a group or society, i.e. the world which they construct for themselves to live in, the world which has been internalised in their thoughts and deeds (Meeks 1986:11–17; Smit 1991b:56; 1992:303–306). The alternative ‘moral world’ of the New Testament represents its own distinctive atmosphere and language, images, values, dispositions, habits, customs, rules, taboos, traditions—meant to be a *dwelling place*, a moral *home* to be inhabited by the Jesus followers (Smit 1991b:59, with reference to Lindbeck). The overarching notion in a moral world is “moral agency,” a technical term in (Christian) ethics for the human capacity to choose and act responsibly, in such a way that people are held accountable for their choices and actions. This includes moral vision, character formation, decision-making and behaviour, i.e. the good and moral *person, society* and *action*, moral virtues, values and obligations; in short: the ethics of being and doing. It refers to the inseparable unity of Christian identity and ethos—hence the particular choice for this essay’s subtitle.

9 “In short... biblical literacy – in Lindbeck’s terms – means that the Bible influences the imagination and the language of society, the way people see, their vision, their grasp of reality, of history, of totality, and the way people talk, their language, ‘the house in which they learn to live’ ... One can therefore popularize these views and say that the Bible will influence the ethos, the moral world, of society to the extent that it teaches people to see and it teaches them to speak” (Smit 1991b:59; cf. 1986b, 1987b, 1997, 1998c, 2000a, 2002a, 2003a, 2005).

10 In this context Smit particularly addresses South African New Testament scholarship, reminding that it has not been very influential in the ethos of past and present South Africa. “In fact ... one may generalize

The premise of Smit's work is a view of biblical authority that acknowledges the dynamic yet complex linguistic, literary, socio-cultural and theological-rhetorical nature of these texts. In accordance with their implied moral effects, he stresses that such readings have to be legitimised by corresponding (publicly accountable, trustworthy) action. Since the fields of Biblical Studies and Christian Ethics have developed each with its own range and focus, he continuously emphasises *how essentially they complement each other*. What makes this an urgent *moral* issue for Smit, is not only the *integrity* and *relevance* of the Bible as resource for Christian *ethics*, but more acutely, *its influence on contemporary audiences' understanding of God, their identities and public ethos*.

In a remarkably consistent sequence of academic and popular writings Smit showed and continues to show how this may happen, with particular emphasis on the rhetorical purpose and transforming potential of liturgy.<sup>11</sup> Through these writings Smit creatively shows how the cult, its festivals and specifically its liturgy, provided for the participants in the Judeo-Christian story – both in the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament—the *moral space, the frame of reference, the horizons for a reality* within which they collectively expressed and cultivated their vision of, and trust in an omnipotent God. Through rituals of public worship (sacrifices, hymns, confessions of faith and guilt, prayers, blessings, listening to the covenant stories and the Torah, and later the participation in the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist) they were constantly reminded of, empowered and encouraged by who God is and by what God had done in the past. By retelling and reactualising their stories from within the covenant relation, their moral identity and ethos as God's alternative family, as “a community of character” (Hauerwas 1981; cf. Smit 1991b; Richardson 1994), would be shaped and constituted.<sup>12</sup> Collective *memory* thus played a crucial role in the formation of their self-understanding – not only the memory of good times of harmony and peace, but also the deliberate recalling and uncovering of past sins, failures and negligence. Through repentance and reconciliation, remembering would become a *hopeful* act, a confession of faith in the living God of history, which would open up new perspectives on the present and future (cf. Smit 1997).

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and say that its own dominant ethos has been, for many years, the scientific ethos of detached inquiry, and that it has deliberately stayed clear from the corridors of power in both church and society, thereby influencing ecclesial and public ethos only in the negative way that it did not really contribute much” (Smit 1991b:63; cf. 1990a; 1990b; 1992:317–325; 1994d). Smit's criticism should be welcomed as a constructive contribution toward an inter-disciplinary discussion among biblical scholars and Christian ethicists, particularly by considering methodological (including philosophical-interpretive) difficulties implicit in the role of the Bible in society, and by helping to formulate more precisely the complexity of issues at stake.

- 11 Cf. Smit 1986b, 1987b, 1988b, 1998c, 1993b, 1995c, 1997, 1999, 2000b, 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2003a, as well as his numerous contributions to the influential *Woord teen die Lig* series of sermon guidelines (published by Lux Verbi, Cape Town, since 1981), of which he is a co-editor.
- 12 The stories of the biblical communities witness to the reality that they did not so much *have* a social ethic as that they *were* a social ethic, a *koinonia* ethic in the process of formation. “The community's task was to socialize its members into forms of life which displayed the kind of conduct befitting the experience of God in community. To be a Jew was to learn the story of Israel and the rabbinic traditions well enough to experience the world from within these stories, and to act in accord with that experience as a member of an ongoing faith community. Similarly, to be a Christian was to learn the story of Israel and of Jesus and the ongoing church traditions well enough to experience the world from within those stories, and to act in keeping with that experience, as a member of that community” (Birch & Rasmussen 1989:21, cf. 66-84; Hauerwas 1985:181-184; Meeks 1993:172-173,189-210). A primary function of liturgy and ritual, therefore, is to commemorate and nurture this communal identity and corresponding ethos in covenant relation with a living God (Smit 1997).

Similarly, the biblical documents have stimulated and facilitated an ongoing process of interpretation. The *imperative* of such an ongoing process is in fact implied in the very nature of these texts (Lategan 1982:48-50). Ethical interpretations of the Bible by subsequent audiences therefore call for continuous wrestling, for imaginative, Spirit-filled, critical and faithful reflection on the active presence of God in ever-changing times and circumstances. It is in this sense that biblical scholars and Christian ethicists share the *moral obligation* to engage in the creative tension between the dynamics of biblical texts and their ‘moral worlds,’ and the ‘socio-cultural worlds’ of present-day readers—between history and eschatology, between remembrance and hope (Smit 2002a; cf. Fiorenza 1988:13; Mouton 2003). It is the creativity of such ‘in between’, liminal stages that provided the biblical authors with the stimulus, values and virtues to redefine their humanity and moral existence in different times and places, under many diverse circumstances (cf. Mouton 2005).

In very general terms one may summarise the implied moral effect of the biblical writings as the radical and total revisioning of the lives of their recipients from within their faith relationship with a living God. Christian life is about learning to live in relation to the mystery of the Triune God (Smit 1997, with reference to L Gregory Jones). It is within such processes of ongoing reorientation that Smit believes the transformative potential of the biblical texts has to be explored and experienced by later audiences. In view of these convictions, he repeatedly challenges his readers to identify with questions such as: How did the biblical authors go about influencing their audiences to accept their new position and lifestyle *coram Deo*? How was the change of attitude and behaviour on the side of those audiences supposed to take place? And how is it supposed to happen in new contexts today?

#### “SEEING” TRANSFORMED SOCIETIES THROUGH THE CALLING OF THE CHURCH

Dirkie Smit’s writings are characterised by the remarkable ability of human imagination to *redescribe* reality, to *rename* experiences, to *retell* stories from new angles. This refers to the human capacity to speak *metaphorically* – to see new possibilities and to make new connections between known images and (past and present) experiences.

Metaphorical language typically permeates the biblical writings. Literary devices such as *genre* (narrative, parable, poetry, apocalyptic symbols), liturgy, art, tradition (as extended metaphor), style (repetition, irony, humour), and even people all function rhetorically as instruments for *re-describing* reality from new perspectives. The early Christians – by, for instance, referring to God as creator and redeemer in Jesus Christ; to Jesus as son of God, lord (*kurios*) and saviour; by witnessing to the Spirit as the seal of their ownership by God; to themselves as the body of Christ, God’s household, a holy temple – *reimagined* and *renamed* their understanding of God and their (ordinary) life experiences from the new perspective of the Christ event. In this way metaphor can function as a powerful, reorienting lens toward a renewed self-understanding and ethos, toward “seeing” and making sense of the past, present and future.

Of particular interest with respect to Smit’s work is the transformative nature of metaphor, its ability to *refer* to an alternative reality, and thus to make sense of this reality. According to Ricoeur (1975,1977), the transformative, life-giving power of a text lies *in its ability to suggest, to open up, to mediate, to make possible (glimpses of) a ‘proposed world’ which readers might adopt or inhabit, an alternative point of view with which they can identify*. In this way a text may disclose new possibilities – new ways of looking at things, new ways of relating to people, new ways of thinking and behaving (cf. West 1991:124-130; Thiselton 1992:351-372; Lategan 1994:131-133).

Since the development of reader response and reception theories, Iser’s concept of the ‘implied reader’ became a powerful tool in describing the role of readers/audiences in the process of

understanding. The implied or textually defined reader refers to “the anticipated role a potential reader is expected to play in order to actualize the text ... (It) is a device to engage the real reader by offering a role to be played or an attitude to be assumed” (Lategan 1989:5,10). In this sense metaphor, tradition (as extended metaphor) and parable (story) are important lenses, clues, signals or shifting devices by means of which an author can instruct or guide an audience toward adopting a preferred position, or inhabiting a new moral world. In helping them to *see* differently, these lenses may help readers to integrate and redescribe their experiences – in so far as they are willing to accept those alternative perspectives.

The movement from one insight (position) to another may be described in terms of the typical metaphorical processes of *orientation, disorientation and reorientation* (cf. Ricoeur 1977:65-100; McFague 1982:46-48). These processes essentially reveal the interruptive, subversive, and reorienting potential of metaphorical language, which forms the heart of biblical hermeneutics. As a true and novel parable, Jesus always reorders, shocks and upsets familiar, conventional preconceptions and understandings of God. The whole network of Jesus’ life thus provides a grid through which the understanding of God may be *redefined* (Smit 1987b, 1988b, 1994e, 1999, 2000, etc; cf. McFague 1982:49-54; Hays 1990:45-50; Ricoeur 1975:122-128).

The transformative potential of the biblical story consequently lies in its *referential power*, in its ability to point beyond itself to an awesome reality which it could only describe in limited human language: *the rich and full story of God’s engagement with creation*. For Smit, its authority – its liberating and healing power for subsequent audiences – resides in the *continuing encounter with the living God* mediated and stimulated by it (Smit 2000a; cf. Lategan 1994:131-133; Mouton 2002:192-194). For the church to identify with, and inhabit, the strange, alternative world of the biblical writings is therefore a delicate, ongoing, interactive process. It involves the wonder of a creating and recreating Sender-God’s initiative, on the one hand, and the receiving of God’s grace by ultimately dependent individuals and faith communities, on the other hand.

Where could such continuing encounters with a living God and fellow members of God’s household be embodied? Of all the authoritative contexts and resources that may be conducive to shaping people’s moral worlds, much of Smit’s work focuses on the reorienting role of *liturgy* (Smit 1984, 1986a, 1994a, 1994e, 1997, 2003a, 2003b, 2004a, 2004b; cf. Fowl & Jones 1991; Mouton 2001:123-125). For him, the worship service – as the central point of all ecclesial activities and experiences – is essentially transformative and rhetorical in nature. It is the primary context where believers continuously are *constituted* and *affirmed as a community of character*. It is the primary location where they remember God’s involvement in their own and other people’s biographies, and where a collective identity is assigned to them – where they learn to know who they are and whose they are. This is where they learn to dream about God’s eschatological future which has already become a reality in Christ, and from where they are sent out to care for one another and the world. In this sense liturgy should always distance (alienate) its participants from the obvious values and virtues of their everyday life and traditions, by offering them alternative perspectives and lifestyles (Smit 1997). From this *Liturgy* God’s household – as a social, communicative, domestic, economic entity – moves into society to proclaim God’s presence in the *liturgy* of everyday life.

In the worship service, Smit proclaims, the Spirit shapes and refines the senses of believers. They learn to *listen* to God’s words, to each other and to the needs of society and the world. They learn to *feel*, to *smell*, to *taste*. They learn to *look* and *see* and *be surprised* in new ways. They learn to see *God* differently – with awe and reverence – and *one another*, as well as the vulnerable and fragile realities within and around them. In liturgy the Spirit teaches them to *name* their sins, and to grow from *remembering* their inherited traditions of alienation to *dismembering* them in the light of God’s mercy. They learn to see their *past*, their personal and collective scars and guilt of sins committed and omitted for what it is, but also boldly to revisit their own and others’ stories

through the lens of God's great deeds in history, and Christ's forgiving and healing love. In this way the Spirit teaches them to think, speak and act from a new collective identity, and to accept the life stories of all "others" as if they were their own. From there they learn to see the *future* differently, and are challenged to live and speak with courage and hope in the *present* (Smit 1995a,1995b,1995c,1997,1998c,2002a,2003a,2005). Through the liturgical elements the Spirit thus teaches Christian believers to discern an impartial God's radical presence in this world, as well as the world to come. Around the Eucharist table – the sign of the coming feast of God's restored creation – they get dim glimpses of God's encompassing love and hospitality. The Spirit, therefore, teaches them passionately to yearn for God's will to be done on earth, and to groan with creation in labour pains for the fulfilment of God's promises (Smit 1999).<sup>13</sup>

I have suggested that Dirkie Smit's ethos of interpretation be described as a *hermeneutic of "seeing."*<sup>14</sup> A hermeneutic of seeing implies the willingness to perceive with openness and receptivity. It includes *paying attention to, acknowledging, submitting to* the paradoxical, life-giving authority of God's words in human language. As such it would be truthful not only to the nature of the biblical texts we study, but also to the Reformed principle of biblical reading as *discerning the voice of the living God*. A hermeneutic of seeing reclaims the life-changing, transformative potential of the biblical writings as an invitation to accomplish a healed and healing body of Christ. It will, therefore, embrace and enable (public) responsibility and *action*, knowing that those texts are the result of actions and are intended to produce action. A hermeneutic of seeing pays attention to all the voices represented in (biblical) interpretation through the ages, refusing mentally to block out the voices that have not been considered important in the past, including the silenced voices within the biblical texts themselves. It does not eliminate a critical hermeneutics of suspicion and evaluation, but it does eliminate a hermeneutics of arrogance and a presumption that we already have the truth. Humility is part of a hermeneutics of seeing. It, therefore, does not offer universal, absolutistic, final and unalterable answers, decisions and certainties, but rather seeks for solutions that would be truthful to, and that would make sense in individual contexts. It challenges audiences to live patiently and humbly with the tension of risk—the risk to remember, to love, to forgive, to hope—the tension of paradox, ambiguity, ambivalence, even ridicule and pain.

Ultimately, a hermeneutic of seeing gives *priority* to the imaginative possibilities of God's radical, liberating, healing love over the broken realities of our lives and the world. In this way it allows for moral *confidence* and *hope* instead of (absolute) certainty. The early Christians were overwhelmed and surprised by God's presence in the resurrected Jesus and the Spirit, even though

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13 Smit's important role with respect to the conceptualisation and formulation of the Belhar Confession in 1982 needs to be mentioned in this regard. As a member of the Uniting Reformed Church of South Africa (previously the Dutch Reformed Mission Church), his involvement with the Belhar Confession epitomised his prophetic voice of resistance against the theological and biblical justification of apartheid in South Africa (cf. Cloete & Smit 1984).

14 The subject index of Thiselton's *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (1992:681) lists fifteen 'hermeneutics of' categories, which could be expanded easily. Each category functions as a lens through which interpreters try to understand, to evaluate and discern, to make sense of, and integrate (the meaning of) life. My choice here for a "hermeneutics of seeing" is motivated by the way in which biblical reception is described as experiencing God's words with all one's senses. Right through Scripture priority is given to acts of hearing, of seeing, of recognising, of discerning, of paying attention to—particularly in the sense of receiving, of believing, of being moved and persuaded by, of submitting to, of obeying God's will (cf. the Shema in Dt 6:4, foundational to Old Testament covenantal thinking, and affirmed by Jesus as 'the greatest command' - Mt 22:37; Snodgrass 2002:11-12; 23-28; Mouton 2005:18).

they could not understand fully. Dirkie Smit's ethos of interpretation sets a truthful example of what it may mean to experience this likewise (in South Africa) today.

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## KEY WORDS

Biblical hermeneutics  
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## TREFWOORDE

Bybelse hermeneutiek  
 Geskiedenis van (Bybelse) interpretasie  
 Christelike teologie en etos  
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