BIBLICAL EXEGESIS, COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS AND HYPERTEXT

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1. Introduction

In the title of this presentation two disciplines and a technology appear to be equated. For this reason the title demands some explanation from the outset. Firstly, the research project behind this ambitious title is prompted by a perceived “crisis” in the field of biblical exegesis (and in particular the exegesis of the Hebrew Bible). Secondly, it is inspired, in general, by some opportunism that is often associated with interdisciplinarity. More particularly, in the case of biblical exegesis, on the one hand, insights into the cognitive processes involved in analyzing and interpreting literary texts, as a particular mode of human communication, looked promising for addressing some issues in the field of biblical exegesis. On the other hand, there have also been so many apparent parallels between many ideas in current literary theory and hypertext theory that Landow (1997) entitles one of his recent publications: Hypertext 2.0. The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology. If one assumes, and I know this is precarious, that current literary theory represents at least some aspect of what happens in the process of the comprehension of literary texts, it implies that hypertext technology may have something to say for biblical exegesis.

The aim of this paper is to establish whether recent developments in cognitive linguistics, and hypertext as a technology which is supposed to do many things book technology could not do, may indeed make a contribution to some problematic aspects of biblical exegesis. A focus of this study will be to critically assess the current “hype” about (and my own enthusiasm for) the possible practical value of cognitive

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1 Cf. Weingart (2000, p. 39) who states that “Interdisciplinarity may best be described as a result of opportunism in knowledge production”.

2 In Van der Merwe (2000 and 2002) I concentrated on the new horizons provided by hypertext technology.
approaches and hypertext technology for biblical exegesis. From this assessment I believe it will be evident that what is at stake here is more than just another jargon laden theory of language and/or a gimmick that can be left for computer junkies or Bible software companies to make money with.

For the purpose of this presentation it will be important to spell out clearly what I regard as the crisis in current biblical exegesis, and those areas in which I believe cognitive linguistics and hypertext technology could make a contribution. This will be the topic of the first section of the paper. In the second section I will define the notion “cognitive linguistics” and will discuss those aspects of this field of study that are relevant for our purposes. In section three developments in the theory and practice of hypertext technology, in particular those that have potential to be of value for the areas in Biblical exegesis referred to above, will be scrutinized. Since issues in two disciplines and the theory and practice of a new technology are addressed in this investigation—and as a consequence many of the issues will be represented in very broad strokes—the conclusions of this investigation cannot be more than a few general observations.

2. *A crisis in Biblical exegesis*

In terms of this presentation I view the crisis in biblical exegesis with a clear bias. This bias is already encapsulated in the hypothesis that cognitive linguistics and hypertext may help to address the crisis. However, it would be naive to assume that my presentation of this crisis is coloured only by the above-mentioned perspective on it. My own background as a Biblical Hebrew scholar, my academic setting, etc., also play a role.

My perception of the crisis in Biblical exegesis agrees to a large extent with that of Utzschneider (1996). According to Utzschneider, the exegetical crisis has three foci:

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3 Snyder (1999, p. 44) observes: “One interesting difference between the writings of literary and hypertext theorists, however, is tone. Most writings on theory … are models of scholarly solemnity; by contrast, writings on hypertext are often most celebratory”.