THE STUDY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT
IN AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

Jan Botha

ABSTRACT

Countries, governments and international agencies have explicit expectations of and goals for higher education. In a number of recent reports and studies, these expectations have been articulated with particular reference to the developing world, including the African continent. In this essay the possible relation of the study of the NT in African Universities to these expectations and goals are considered.

1. Introduction

In her presidential address to the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) in 1987, Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza referred to the statement of Rudolf Bultmann that World War II had no effect whatsoever on his NT scholarship. In her address she argued that the dominant “scientist” ethos of biblical scholarship should be “decentred” in the scholarly community of the SBL and “recentred” to become “a critical interpretive praxis for liberation”. To achieve this, she argued, a double ethics is needed: an ethics of historical reading (which asks what kind of readings can do justice to the biblical text in its historical context) and an ethics of accountability (which holds the biblical interpreter responsible not only for the choice of theoretical interpretive models but also of the consequences of the biblical text and its meanings” (Schussler Fiorenza 1988, 14–15).

In this essay, I will address this challenge for social accountability for NT scholarship from a somewhat different perspective and in a broader context than the scholarly guild within which biblical

1 I acknowledge the contribution of my colleague, Dr. Dudzirai Chimeri (Baptist Theological Seminary, Gweru, Zimbabwe), to this paper.
scholars usually conduct their work. I will consider the issue in the context and from the perspective of what universities are (or can be), in particular in the African context (as part of the developing world).

2. African universities offering learning and teaching and research opportunities in NT Studies

The NT is included in the research activities and in the learning and teaching programmes of various universities in different African countries. For the purposes of this essay a survey of the institutions considered to be “universities” was undertaken, limited to public and private institutions functioning on a post-secondary level. However, not all post-secondary institutions are universities, therefore the scope of the survey was narrowed down to those institutions operating at a university level as defined in the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED 1997), namely ISCED levels 5 and higher. For the purposes of this survey the most recent publication of the Association of African Universities (AAU) was used, namely the Guide to Higher Education in Africa (AAU 2002) as well as the 2003 publication of Taferra and Altbach, African Higher Education: An International Reference Handbook. The information in these books was updated, as far as possible, with current information about African universities available on the internet. However, since the data for the 2002 and the 2003 publications were mostly collected during the years preceding these publication dates, and since web sites of institutions (where available) do not always contain up-to-date information, the information may not in all cases necessarily represent the actual state of affairs as it was in August 2004 when this survey was completed.

In the 54 African countries with one or more universities a total of 312 universities was identified. Of these universities, about 40 universities, located in twelve different countries, include research and/or teaching programmes in NT Studies in their activities. In a number of cases NT Studies are housed within a faculty of theology (e.g. in certain universities in South Africa, the DRC, Ghana, Kenya and Zimbabwe). Other universities house it in faculties or institutes (e.g. in Humanities, Arts, African and Democracy Studies) or in departments (e.g. biblical or religious studies).

From this survey, it became clear that the New Testament is stud-