

Pieter M. Venter's contribution to Old Testament Studies – an appreciation

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The contribution that Professor Pieter M. Venter has made to the study of the Old Testament during his academic and ecclesiastic career is reviewed. After a brief biographical introduction, the article surveys the development of his research interests, focusing specifically on his contributions to the study of wisdom literature, narratives and narratology, second temple literature, the formation of the canon, and Old Testament Theology. The review concludes with reference to his way of practising critical theology, taking full cognisance of research into the linguistic, historical critical, narratological and ideological aspects of Old Testament texts, but always with a sensitivity for the needs of the church as interpretive community.

Introduction

Pieter Michiel Venter was raised within the Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa (NRCA; Afrikaans: Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika). As a teenager, he was inspired by his predecessor, Prof. J.P. Oberholzer, in the Department of Old Testament, University of Pretoria, to study theology in order to become a minister of the church. On completing his training in 1971, he successively served as minister in the congregations of Sasolburg-Suid, Witbank-Suid, Durban, Roodepoort and Swartkop. He continued his theological studies while serving in the church, passing his doctoral exams in Old Testament (with New Testament Exegesis and Phenomenology of Religion as ancillary subjects) *cum laude* in the beginning of 1978.

A part-time appointment as lecturer of Old Testament at the University of Pretoria was followed by full-time appointment as senior lecturer in Old and New Testament at the University of the North in 1980. He completed his doctoral dissertation in 1981, and was promoted to Professor and Head of the Department in 1982. At the beginning of 1984, he returned to the University of Pretoria where he taught Biblical Studies and Old Testament until his retirement in 2012.

During his tenure at the university, he continually expanded his academic horizons and, by the time of his retirement, had contributed five popular scientific monographs (aimed at an informed church readership) and almost 80 scientific articles as sole author or co-author in peer-reviewed and accredited journals, with scores of others of a more popular scientific character. All the while, he was active in the church by preaching, presenting Bible courses, serving on a number of church commissions and writing study reports.

Wisdom literature

Prof. Venter completed his doctoral dissertation on Proverbs 1–9 in 1981 under the supervision of Prof. J.P. Oberholzer. The work comprises a thorough overview of research on wisdom literature in the 20th century up to that time, and reflects the theological foci of the time. On the one hand, the focus on methodology is clear in the exegesis of each pericope where demarcation, textual criticism, translation, structural analysis and content, form, background and aim of the pericope are systematically discussed. On the other hand, the concern to integrate wisdom literature into the broader context of the canon and specifically the endeavour to write a theology of the Old Testament is evident. He came to the conclusion that there is a central idea expressed in a fixed threefold scheme in each of the individual poems in Proverbs 1–9: sayings on various topics are related to wisdom and wisdom to life in its fullness before YHWH. 'In this way the will of God is revealed to man and is he given access to God's salvation' (Venter 1981:343).

Narratives and narratology

Having acquired notable wisdom during the course of his doctoral research, Venter further published a number of articles and book reviews on wisdom literature *per se*, but gradually started exploring other parts of the Old Testament and also new exegetical methodologies.

From the early 1980s and onwards, Venter ably demonstrated the value of reading biblical texts as narratives. At his inauguration as professor at the University of the North in 1983, he interpreted the book of Ruth as a biblical novel about God's action in the world. In a later article (Venter 1989b), he took this forward by analysing the way in which characters and space are presented in the narrative of Ruth, and pointed out that the two main characters, Naomi and Boaz, are never placed in the same space in the narrative and in fact never meet. The ironical contrasts between Bethlehem and Moab illustrate how God works in unexpected places and through people whom the readers would not have expected. He came to the conclusion that:

The spacial aspect of the story is used to enhance the theological perspective, namely that there is a third dimension to human interaction: God uses everyday events and common people in his ongoing dealings with mankind. (Venter 1989b:916)

Venter continued to investigate the function of space in a number of other publications, explaining its importance for understanding biblical narratives as follows:

Space depicted in narratives, is never without ideological meaning. It is always part of the strategy followed by the narrator. Space contributes to the narrator/author's communication of his/her/their ideology. Space not only indicates physical areas, but also has ideological meaning for those who live in it. (Venter 2006:993)

In the story of the spies sent into Canaan (Nm 13 and 14), Venter (1993a) identified a typical commissioning type-scene (or actually a combination of two such type-scenes). After discussing the most important previous interpretations of the passage (from the perspectives of various historical critical and structural approaches), he demonstrated that this narrative is a distinctive example of the commissioning type-scene with a stock story structure (following Morosco's work on Matthew, 1984). He then placed the narrative within the broader context of Numbers 11–25 and concluded that it really revolved around the tension between faith and disbelief. Rather than interpreting the narrative from the perspective of priestly or prophetic literature (as was often the case in the research history), Venter saw the narrative illustrate a typical wisdom perspective, namely that calamity is the result of man's disbelief. Accordingly, he concluded that the narratives of the journey through the wilderness reflect the continuous crisis of Man before God.

In another narratological study, Venter (1993b) investigated the narrative of Daniel explaining Nebuchadnezzar's dream (Dn 2). Here he searched for the function of two poetic sections (Dn 2:20b–23 and 2:47b–e) set within the structure of the surrounding narrative. He analysed the structure of these two poetic sections and found that the repetition of words and themes reflects an equivalence between them. 'In Daniel's benediction (vv. 20–23) God is praised because he has wisdom and reveals the future to God-fearing and wise men' (Venter 1993b:1019). However, this poem also includes the theme of God's sovereign rule, and both these themes are echoed in the second poetic section, the king's speech in

Daniel 2:47b–e. Moreover, these themes can also be found in the narrative within which the poetic sections are embedded, although they operate at different levels. Within the narrative of Daniel 2, the poetic speech is used as a focusing technique to highlight God's supremacy and superiority over the kingdom of Nebuchadnezzar.

Second temple literature

Venter's interest in the Writings (*Ketubim*) and literature of the second temple period seems to have developed gradually. His study of narratology first led him to study the books of Ruth and Daniel, and the book of Daniel became a focal point for Venter's research. His approach is often narratological (e.g. when he studies the concept of time, Venter 2000), and intertextual (e.g. when he investigates links between Psalm 89 and Daniel 7, Venter 2004).

However, his research eventually extended into comparisons with extra-biblical literature of the same period. He became a member of the International Enoch Seminar based in Michigan, United States of America, and published a considerable number of articles on this and other extra-biblical books from the period of the second temple.

One of his first major publications about the literature of this era (Venter 1997) compares the social groups from which the authors of the books of Daniel and the Ethiopian book of Enoch respectively come. He concludes that both groups belonged to the apocalyptic Hasidic movement, but that they took opposing positions when confronted with the drastic measures that Antiochus IV Epiphanes took against the temple and the Jews in 167 BC. Whereas the authors of Enoch supported the activist stance taken by the Maccabees, the authors of Daniel rather withdrew from the public sphere, living an ascetic life of sanctification. The authors of Enoch became part of the Essene branch of the Hasidim, whilst the authors of Daniel can be identified with the Pharisee branch of the Hasidim. Owing to the later influence of the Pharisees, Daniel became part of the Hebrew canon, which was not the case with the book of Enoch.

In another article (Venter 2003b), he engaged in a tradition-historical investigation, studying the northern traditions in 2nd-century BC literature, specifically 1 Enoch 1–37, the Aramaic Levi document, the Greek Testament of Levi, and Jubilees 30–32. For this purpose, he first studied the historical and geographic context of the northern areas mentioned, before tracing their use in a number of selected biblical texts. On the basis of this investigation, he distinguished between northern traditions from the Samaria area and northern traditions from the Galilee-Huleh area, showing that they had been used differently in different literary works from the 2nd-century BC.

Subsequent articles investigate five historical reviews in the Cairo Damascus Document (Venter 2003a), and compare penitential prayers found in biblical Daniel 9 and the extra-

biblical book of Baruch (Venter 2005). Typical of Venter, these articles demonstrate his thorough study of the relevant research into the socio-historical background of the books. It is this sound research base that underpins all his subsequent investigations into the literature emanating from the period.

Formation of the canon

A significant part of Venter's research focuses on the process that led to the formation of the Old Testament canon. His various publications on this subject reflect an acute awareness of the complexity of the process of formation of the canon.

Venter (1987) is critical of Childs's refusal to investigate the complex history of the canon formation process and to focus solely on the final result of this process. James Barr's recognition of the written finalised canon as but one phase in the history of the canon is more accurate, as is his insight that different faith communities have through the centuries actualised the canon tradition to serve as their *regula fidei*. Eventually this tradition fixated in written form, but still served later generations as a paradigm of faith. Although Venter agrees with Barr, he laments the fact that Barr failed to substantiate his insights with specific evidence from the process of canon formation. In this respect, he voices his appreciation for James Sanders who pays much more detailed attention to the canon formation process and all the various factors playing a role therein. Sanders not only studies the development of tradition, but also the hermeneutics at work in the process of canon formation. The insights gained from these studies are deepened by studying the interpretative processes at work in the Midrash of early Judaism. Sanders comes to the conclusion that two opposing forces were at work during the whole period, from the destruction of the first temple to the destruction of the second temple: one manifesting in ever new and fresh proclamation of the Word of God, and the other in stabilising and fixing the tradition.

Venter identifies the need for a comprehensive history of the canon to be written, covering firstly the history of the period from the middle of the second millennium BC to the 1st-century AD and all the relevant political, socio-religious and psycho-cultural information that could elucidate the circumstances of the communities that passed on these religious traditions. Venter further identifies the need to thoroughly describe the process of formation of tradition and literature, and the factors that explain why some traditions and written literature are retained whilst some are augmented and others replaced or rejected outright. Finally, this endeavour should result in a third focus: the quest to explain what motivated specific communities under specific socio-historic circumstances to appropriate and pass on the specific traditions to future generations.

Old Testament theology

From the start of his academic career, Venter was interested in Old Testament theology as the overarching discipline that

strives to relate the diverse contents of the Old Testament to each other, and also to the New Testament, biblical theology and dogmatics and the faith of the church (Venter 1982, 1985). Having promoted as Old Testament scholar on Proverbs, he was acutely aware of the way that wisdom literature was mostly ignored or sidelined in Old Testament theology. In an article early in his academic career, he reflected on the challenge facing biblical theology when it tries to identify which common factor led to the specific formation of the canon, including certain pieces of literature and excluding others. He rightly rejected the notion of a single central idea that functioned as a cohesive factor explaining the historical growth process of the Old Testament. However, he then showed how research into wisdom literature could actually point in the right direction.

The inclusion of wisdom literature in the canon reflects a connection between itself and the other material included in the canon. Following Sheppard (1980), he referred to the way in which Ben Sira and Baruch recontextualised the Torah during the post-exilic period so that it could serve as confirmation of wisdom and a guide for practising wisdom. On the one hand, Ben Sira and Baruch presented wisdom as being grounded in the interpretation of the already canonical Torah traditions, whilst on the other hand wisdom literature confirmed the authority of the Torah by demonstrating how it actually informs the concerns of wisdom itself. In this way, wisdom became a hermeneutical construct for interpreting sacred Scripture.

However, Venter warned that it would be an overstatement of the influence of wisdom literature to suggest that it now becomes the norm for the continued significance of the Torah. Whilst the way in which wisdom literature made canonical literature relevant for later religious practice can be demonstrated, wisdom literature does not establish unity in the canon. In fact, when (some) wisdom literature is taken up into the broad canon, it becomes an element of an existing canon. This view needs to be taken into consideration when discussing the relation of wisdom literature and the rest of the canon, and also when trying to identify the common factor in the canon that Old Testament Theology searches for.

Venter always appreciated the value of Old Testament theology. Studying and applying new exegetical methods on selected passages from the Old Testament (much in vogue in the 1980s) would never be sufficient, *inter alia* because students of theology in their practice as ministers of the church often fall back on the broad approaches to the Old Testament that they were taught as students (Venter 1983:123).

To ensure that the Old Testament received its rightful place both in theological studies and the church, it would be important to guard against the two extremes of either degrading the Old Testament *vis-à-vis* the New Testament (e.g. by notable persons such as Marcion, Harnack and



Bultmann, each in their own way) or reading the Old Testament as a Christian book testifying to the coming Christ (e.g. by Vischer 1934). Rather, the unique character of the Old Testament material should be appreciated. This material is historically situated and so pluriform that it can no longer be systematised under a single concept. Venter agrees with Von Rad in describing the Old Testament material as the formulated *credo* of a religious community, but is cautious about Von Rad's use of typology to relate the Old Testament to the New. He appreciates Childs' focus on the context that the canon provides for individual passages from the Old Testament and the community of faith that gave shape to this canon and treasured it, although he is critical when Childs proposes to start with those Old Testament passages cited in the New Testament, ignoring those passages immediately preceding or following the selected passages in the Old Testament itself. Venter denies both the existence of a centre to the Old Testament and a continuous line of revelation in the Old Testament. In the end, there is no simplistic scheme to summarise the Old Testament or relate it to the New Testament, and the only possible approach is to start with exegesis of the smallest unit and gradually expand to include the full context of the canon in its full diversity (Venter 1983:128–134).

Practicing theology

It is to the credit of Venter that he practised critical theology without restricting himself to traditional or confessionalist boundaries, and yet he has always been aware that he practised theology within the context of the church. He therefore also contributed a considerable number of publications on theology as it took shape within the context of the church, and then specifically the church he was an active member of: the NRCA.

In an article providing an overview of Old Testament Studies as practiced in the NRCA and the erstwhile Faculty of Theology (Section A) at the University of Pretoria, Venter identified three determining factors:

- the study of Semitic languages
- the definition of theology in the faculty
- the definition of science at the university and the resulting relation between theology and other sciences (Venter 1994:401).

These factors are also clearly at work in Venter's own work. He therefore constantly engaged with the primary texts (in Hebrew, Aramaic and other languages), taking full cognisance of historical critical, narratological, ideological and other research results. He practised theology as an enterprise of existential importance to the earlier writers and readers, but also to present-day readers.

Venter's own situatedness within the church is evident also in his academic work, where he often referred to the relevance of the Old Testament for ministers in the church

(e.g. Venter 1983:123). That is naturally to be welcomed from the perspective of this particular interpretive community that is always directly or indirectly the client served by theological research. However, it is also to be welcomed from the epistemological perspective of our postmodern interpretive situation where it is evident that any reading of a text reflects a certain interest. As Walter Brueggemann (1997:63) says: 'We now recognize that there is no interest-free interpretation, no interpretation that is not in the service of some interest and in some sense advocacy.'

Conclusion

It is to Venter's credit that he has established a solid track record as a thorough Old Testament scholar, whilst at the same time maintaining a sensitivity for the needs of the church as a vitally important interpretive community to be served by Old Testament Studies.

Venter's work consistently testifies to a thorough knowledge of scholarship on the topic, a good command of exegetical methods, the ability to formulate conclusions clearly and concisely, and the willingness to spell out the theological implications of his exegetical results, so as to make his research useful for theology in general and for the proclamation of the church. I can personally attest to the fact that Venter was an outstanding teacher and pedagogue who could digest complex theories and explain them in understandable terms to his students. His many Afrikaans publications made his work easily accessible for ministers and serious Bible students, and at the same time made a valuable contribution to confirm Afrikaans as an effective vehicle of higher learning.

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Competing interests

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