

Editor's Note: *Alterität, the Reader and Historical Consciousness*

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With this issue the OTSSA welcomes its newly appointed and expanded advisory board for *Old Testament Essays*. Their task is the following: (a) to assist with the peer-reviewing of articles submitted for publication; (b) to adjudicate an article when the initial peer-reviewing resulted in contrasting evaluations and (c) to review each volume in terms of academic quality and scientific nature of published articles. *Old Testament Essays* would like to maintain and enhance its stature as a scholarly publication. The contribution of an advisory board consisting of scholars representing several continents, expertise, race and gender would be invaluable in this regard.

The essays in the current volume, without any preconceived structure or plan, converse with one another in supportive and contrasting ways—illuminating ideological, theological and academic differences within the guild that are so necessary for the academic discourse, yet laying bare issues that need to be researched, analysed and addressed within the South African community.

Robin Branch intends to give Jerobeam's silent wife a voice. She argues that despite lack of evidence of physical abuse, textual evidence indicates abuse in that she is isolated, passive and obeys the king immediately. Jerobeam's abusiveness can be seen in his control over her movements, the way he addresses her, his cowardice in sending her to Ahijah and his earlier violent abuse of the man of God in 1 Kings 13. Lisbeth Haase (1991:103-104) once gave the wife of Jerobeam the following voice (but not within an abusive relationship):

Ich wurde benutzt als Objekt, zum Botengang und zum Leiden. Als Person bin ich nicht wichtig, deshalb wurde mein Name nicht überliefert. Ich laß es so. ...

In großer Sorge bat mich Jerobeam... Voller Angst machte ich mich in Fremden Kleidern auf den langen Weg. Allen Mut riß ich Zusammen, als ich mich dem Alten in Silo näherte.

Abuse of women is currently a contentious issue in South African society, as Sarojini Nadar's reference to President Jacob Zuma's rape trial in her article indicates. Moreover, from 25 November to 10 December there is a public observance of sixteen days of activism for no violence against women and children. It is a campaign that aims to increase awareness of the negative impact of violence on women and children and to mobilise society against abuse.

The problem of giving voice to those who remain silent in the text raises the matter of cultural relativism and relativity. It is an age-old hermeneutical problem of the biblical text belonging to one culture and the reader belonging to another. Cultural relativism holds that texts from one culture are basically inaccessible and totally irrelevant to another culture. Cultural relativity holds that texts from one culture, while tinged by that particular culture and only understood relative to it, are nevertheless accessible to someone from another culture. Ignoring the historicity of the text in the Bible and the historicity of the current reader leads the latter to equate a situation in the biblical text with a situation perceived to be present in the readers' world of reception. Reader-response or its continental counterpart, reception theory, may help solve this problem if the two contexts are kept apart in a creative tension which Jauß (1977:14-18) once termed "Alterität".

Nadar focuses the attention on the role of the ordinary reader at the interface between faith communities and the academy around issues of social transformation. Liberation theology did not solve all injustices, as the bodies of children in Gaza seem to be proving. Yet it is in the injustices that liberation theology should find its impetus. To Nadar, liberation can only be achieved when people are not only conscientised of their own oppression, but also of the oppression of others. It is this conscientisation then that motivates them to change the situation. Her approach is perhaps a concretisation of Spivak's (1985) "subaltern" who is not given a voice, but the space that will allow her to speak. However, Nadar warns of the destruction and life-denying interpretations of the uncritical acceptance of indigenous knowledge that appears as almost sacrosanct. She argues that "reading in community" helps overcome the challenge of the power imbalance that is created when interpretation is left in the hands of a single all-powerful individual, but it is never a valorisation of "community wisdom" when such wisdom is far from life-giving.

Her discomfort with the internalisation of oppression causes her to present alternative presentations in which to tell the truth. Here she alludes to the role of the public intellectual à la Said (1994), but then not only to embarrass the ruling elite's power (Said 1994:13), but also the subordinate's internalisation of subordination. McCutcheon (1997: 459) says it is important to expose those mechanisms (texts, ethnicity, traditions, gender, et cetera) whereby truths are constructed by communities. In Nadar's case, the critical scholar brings with him or her a critical consciousness which allows for the critical appropriation of the text as long as the critical scholar is in the midst of the community. However, what happens when he or she leaves (cf. Snyman 1999)?

The embodiedness on which Nadar builds her proposition finds resonance in a peculiar way in Coetzee's reading of Psalm 19. He argues that the tight revelatory relationship between nature as creation proclaiming God's glory, and torah as his restorative teaching in Psalm 19, reflects Israel's social

and cultural definition of the ideal body as a “whole” body. Following Berquist (2002) Coetze shows how the body’s representation of social cohesion finds its way into Israel’s thinking and metaphorising in nearly every aspect of Israel’s economics, politics, societal issues. For example, Mohrman (2004) illustrates how the body is employed to set boundaries so that secular life and religious life come together in the practices of the body and the metaphors of society. Mohrman uses the logic of Leviticus 18 which regulates relationships in terms of the family, the tribe and the people. The sexual prescriptions regulate from the most intimate relationships to the most public relationships in terms of geographical boundaries (2004:75):

The organizing scheme for vv. 6-23 overall is its progression of sexual laws, which it implicitly achieves through the body’s symbolic representation of cultural boundaries. The implied meaning of the sexual laws was a strategy to circumscribe life through multiple layers of boundaries.

In other words, the body as container is employed to circumscribe social boundaries.

Whereas Coetze reads Psalm 19 in terms of a tight relationship between the proclamation of God’s glory by creation and the revelation of God’s will through torah, Viviers (2008) questions the notion of the “existence of god” that seems to be a presupposition for Psalm 19. He (2008:560) says that many natural scientists regard the question of “god” as redundant, yet they are surprised at the persistence of “god” in human thought. In this volume, Viviers takes his cue from Armstrong’s proposition that people create gods (1993) and intends to prove that both science and theology are cultural or world-making activities. He wants to find common ground between them. Viviers’s allusion to theology inclined to a kind of *fictional supernaturalism*, which he describes as a faith experience of a culturally unmediated “more”, put him in direct opposition with Branch’s construction of God in her presentation of Jerobeam’s wife.

The fusing of creation and torah as means of revelation of God’s glory in Psalm 19 links up with Van Dyk’s essay on creation and the temple. Van Dyk argues that creation and temple-building were often linked in the Ancient Near East. With the temple “symbolically” seen as the whole world, he postulates that the link between creation and temple may have played a role in the thoughts of Israel. Van Dyk inquires into the question of how do readers understand ancient texts like Genesis 1-11, especially when they are far removed from us both in time and culture. Viviers’s notion of fictional supernaturalism can be detected in Van Dyk’s inquiring into the reasons why the “otherness” of the biblical text is often ignored. He deems an answer to this question important in his attempt to understand the Old Testament accounts of creation and temple building.

Van Dyk addresses a similar problem Jauß (1977) intended to address with regard to the “modern reader” of Middle Age literature. In the relationship between a Middle Age text and a modern reader, Jauß sees a double structure at work, namely a structure

der uns als Zeugnis einer fernen, historisch abgeschiedenen Vergangenheit in befreimender „Andersheit“ erscheint, gleichwohl aber als ästhetischer Gegenstand dank seiner sprachliche Gestalt auf ein *anders*, verstehendes Bewusstsein bezogen ist, mithin auch mit einem späteren, nicht mehr zeitgenössischen Adressaten Kommunikation ermöglicht.

Gadamer's fusion of horizons has been developed further by Jauß (1982) into a structure of *poiesis*, *aisthesis* and *catharsis* which takes into consideration the historicity of the text as well as of the reader. *Poiesis* presupposes the reader as an active participant in the understanding process. *Aisthesis* relates to the reader's interaction with the text in terms of the known and unknown. *Catharsis* presupposes the changes a reader experiences after having read the text. *Aisthesis* links up with Gadamer's fusion of horizons and suggests that any reader will do a text an injustice when the difference between concepts of reality of the text and the reader is ignored and a different concept is enforced on the text (cf. Snyman 1991:200). One should remember that those questions to which a text originally provided an answer may appear strange to a later reader. They represent a historical experience, but their validity is not applicable to experiences of later times. But these initial questions may be used as stepping stones to arrive at those questions to which a text originally did not provide an answer to, but to which it can pose a solution (Jauß 1987:3).

Whereas Van Dyk is concerned with an ecotheology in general, Wittenberg presents us with a very particular question in ecotheology, namely a theological response to climate change. He employs Hosea 4:1-3 to develop tools for a theological response to climate change. He argues that Hosea aims his words against the Yahwist cult. Its pervertedness causes a degeneration of the moral fabric of society and a subsequent ecological catastrophe. The consequence of a lack of knowledge of Yahweh is social and ecological disaster. The earth mourns and experiences a lack of life-giving capacity. It becomes barren and nature wanes.

As with Coetzee's suggestion that embodiedness is reflected in creation, here disorder in the social realm has consequences for the cosmic realm. To misquote Nadar, bodies do not lie. Wittenberg's claim that theology for far too long has concentrated on salvation to the detriment of creation should be taken seriously. The relocation of God's acts away from nature to history had dreadful consequences in the world. The concept of a god whose initial primary task was the salvation of Israel and later the salvation of the individual through Jesus Christ can be seen in the “temples” — or to use Viviers's words, “the erec-

tion of impressive buildings for worship" amidst the squalor of squatter camps and in theological debates about the historicity of the creation narratives, Jesus' virgin birth and his resurrection, and in the continuous injustices despite liberation theology Nadar laments.

Viviers refers to the task of theology as redescription or narrative over against causal explanation within the realm of natural sciences. He suggests that narrative adds cultural perspectives. Firth inquires into certain narrative aspects of the biblical text, i.e. chronology in the books of Samuel. Moving from the known to the unknown in an aesthetic reading, he adopts Gérard Genette's fourfold model of the relation between narrative voice and chronology to the books of Samuel.

How should one evaluate his conclusion that the books of Samuel employ the principal modes of narration with regard to narrative voice and chronology and should therefore be regarded as an important exegetical consideration in interpreting the book? In terms of *Alterität* the answer to this question will be determined by the way in which Genette's approach denies the biblical text its own voice. However, the unknown, which is represented by the Hebrew text, can only be opened up by the known, a narrative approach (in this instance, Genette's model). This opens up new possibilities for understanding an ancient text, a valid approach as long as the biblical text retain its measure of foreignness and strangeness.

Related to the science:religion debate mooted by Viviers, is Gericke's philosophical approach towards the god-talk in the Old Testament. He refutes the popular belief that philosophical concerns are distortive of the non-philosophical god-talk in the Old Testament. In fact, he is of the opinion a philosophical analysis that is historical and descriptive may provide new insights into ancient Israel's own metaphysical assumptions. Gericke's philosophical inquiry is historical and descriptive in that it seeks to find conceptual clarification of the Old Testament's beliefs in their own context, for their own sake. He thus looks to biblical rather than to systematic theology for its issues of interest.

In a context of an ever-widening gap between systematic theology and biblical scholarship his perspective appears to be rather refreshing. Within the Afrikaans Reformed tradition there is large discomfort within certain systematic theological circles (cf. König's [2008] criticism of Old Testament scholars such as Dirk Human, Jurie le Roux and Sakkie Spangenberg) regarding what is going on in the biblical scholarship. Such criticism reflects a lack of historical consciousness in the sense that the strangeness and foreignness of the biblical text in relation to a 21st century reader is ignored. Gericke takes Schüssler Fiorenza's (1988) appeal for an ethics of interpretation seriously in as much as he endeavours to do justice to the biblical text in its historical originating context as well as taking responsibility for his own methodology.

With Branch's, Firth's and Viviers's explicit utilisation of concepts that developed in much later contexts in mind, Gericke's issue regarding the fallaciousness of asking questions to the biblical text of which the ancient Israelites were not interested in, is important to take note of. If these concepts and concerns are *a priori* anachronistic, Gericke is correctly of the opinion that having anachronistic concerns is not the problem, but rather, what he calls "committing anachronistic distortions".

Lombaard too draws the attention to the biblical text in its historical originating context. He argues that the link made in the book of Deuteronomy between "fathers" and the patriarchal trio — Abraham, Isaac and Jacob — is a post-exilic redaction resulting from the dynamics of identity politics of the time. His argument draws on what he calls the sensitivity within Old Testament scholarship that the Bible reflects intense social contestation. The addition of the names to the word "fathers" may reflect, according to Lombaard, "editorial reproduction of the social processes of the time".

In terms of an ethics of interpretation, the plotting of the socio-political location of the researcher has become of extreme importance. Biblical interpretation is never done in a political vacuum. Factors that determine identity — race, gender, economy, age, political power — influence interpretation. If this is true for the reader of the text, it is equally valid for those who once produced these texts. Lombaard does not mention the contents of the post-exilic dynamic of identity politics. But here Gericke's warning of anachronistic distortions in identity discourse is valid when the biblical text is read with a view on the construction of identity in terms of its meaning in the modern sense. What appears to be valid, though, is the fact that identity is a site of contestation, where persons are continuously constructing and re-inventing their respective identities in tandem with the demands and opportunities of the context in which they find themselves (cf. Weeks 2003:125). For example, a post-exilic context for Lombaard's assertion could be the forging of a new allegiance towards the Persians as the new imperial masters.

Realising the strangeness and foreignness of the god talk in the Old Testament, Meyer inquires into the possibility of constructing an ethics of the Old Testament around the notion of imitating God. However, he acknowledges that imitating God — as slave-owner and land possessor — will have detrimental effects. Meyer illustrates Viviers's point of the cultural constraints in constructing theology. He says to imitate God boils down to the use of anthropomorphic language, which not only describe what God is doing rather than asking people to imitate him, but it also shows that the description of God's actions sounds like human actions, because the concepts attributed to God were taken from our world. God as landowner and as slave-owner serves as two examples. Imitation of these two attributes would not be liberating but

oppressive, as Prior (1997) has illustrated regarding British colonialism and apartheid.

Martin's discussion of Yahweh's inner struggle in the book of Judges builds on the god talk referred to by Gericke and Viviers, although in a different manner. He focuses on what he calls God's compassion and anger that are being kept in tension in his portrayal in the book. It is a tension Yahweh suffers and endures "in silence". Martin's structuralist approach stands in contrast to Viviers's idea that god talk is culturally derived and to Gericke's exploration of the historical world of text production.

In the approaches of Martin, O'Kennedy and Weber analysis of the biblical Hebrew text stands central. After all, in the communication process there would be no reception without the text. O'Kennedy looked into the shepherd imagery in Zechariah 9-14. He locates the imagery in the Persian Period and ascribes them to a redactor living outside Jerusalem. The aim of the redactor was to reshape the tradition. O'Kennedy was unable to find a single referent for all the shepherd images, which range from God as the individual divine shepherd to a group of three corrupt human shepherds.

Weber, with precision and thoroughness investigates the thesis of the Asaphite temple singers as the group responsible for the post-exilic part of Isaiah 40ff rather than a prophetic persona. He acknowledges that the origin and transmission of the texts of ancient Israel cannot be considered without reference to the social and institutional aspects. But the problem is that there is very little information to work with and the comparative method he employs, only allows for an approximate construction of reality. Moreover, his textual observations are not determinative for the social context behind the text.

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