
HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING HAS A HISTORY

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Abstract

This article is dedicated to Hendrik Bosman and to a certain extent it is the outcome of our many discussions about the historical understanding of the Old Testament. In this article it is argued that such an understanding comes a long way and that since the times of the Early Church scholars desired to understand texts within a historical context, but they lacked the knowhow. Only since the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, profound thinking about history began to shape Old Testament scholarship decisively. This is illustrated with reference to amongst others Gabler, Wellhausen and Gunkel.

Key Words: Exegesis, History, Historical Understanding, Religion, History of Religions

Introduction

This article is dedicated to Hendrik Bosman whom I have known since the seventies of the previous century. Over the years he became a dear friend, a much-respected colleague and an excellent scholar with a deep understanding of the Old Testament and its message. Many a time we discussed the nature of historical understanding and with his great knowledge of the subject and his ability to formulate clearly he always opened up new worlds to me and for that I will always be grateful to him. I wish him all the best for the future and may he still experience many fruitful years as a scholar.

In memory of the wonderful years we had at Unisa, Pro Pent and other places I would like once again to focus on the historical understanding of the Old Testament. Since the earliest beginnings of the church, 'history' or 'context' were important for the understanding of the Old Testament. Whether it was the Early Church's appropriation of the historical Israel or the resistance against allegory's excesses or the Reformation's attempt to understand the Old Testament in a new way, the importance of historical understanding was always emphasised. From 1787 onwards the historical approach became extremely important and was elaborated and applied in many different ways. However, in the course of time this way of understanding was viewed as outdated and a way of destroying the Old Testament's message and undermining its use in the church.

This article argues against these views in an attempt to accentuate the importance of history for Old Testament study by emphasising that it formed an integral part of our scholarship since the earliest beginnings. Although there was always the yearning to link a text to a context it was only since the nineteenth century that Old Testament scholars came to a deeper understanding of what this entails. This is illustrated by means of a brief description of the overwhelming tide of historical study in the nineteenth century and how it shaped Old Testament scholarship from Gabler to Gunkel.

The aim of this article is also to show that there was a time in Old Testament scholarship when 'history' and 'historical study' took centre stage and much was expected of this 'new' approach which has shaped scholarly endeavours up to this day. It is stated that if one wants to work historically it is difficult to move beyond the ideas of the

nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Since current scholarship does not have access to Israel's past Gunkel's views about imagination and the reliving of the experiences of others are still relevant. Although Wellhausen's views were severely criticised he at least made it clear that there are sources in the Pentateuch, which can be retrieved and used.

First of all we focus on the severe criticism, which was launched against the type of historical investigation of the past two hundred years and more.

Collapse of History (Perdue)

Over the years the words 'history', 'historical understanding', 'historical criticism', 'historical critical method' were treated with great scepticism because it was believed this approach undermined the unity and authority of the Hebrew Bible, reduced Israel's history to mere myths, destroyed any meaningful relationship to the New Testament and has rendered the Hebrew Bible of no particular value to church and theology.

In his work on the collapse of history, Leo Perdue does not mean the 'end of history' but refers to the resistance against "the domination of history (particularly in its positivistic expression) and the historical method in accessing the meaning of the Hebrew Bible and birthing of Old Testament theology".¹ After World War II the 'voices of discontent', which protested against the Enlightenment strategies for knowing, historical criticism and especially the theologies, which were based on them, became louder. These voices grew in number and it can be seen in the variety of post-colonial and liberation theologies, linguistic and narrative approaches, feminist and postmodern interpretations and various ethnic interpretations that emerged.²

This resistance against historical approaches are of course understandable because new ways of understanding based on different epistemologies emerged asking other questions to the text and were largely ahistorical in nature.³ In our South African scholarly community we experienced something similar when an approach was developed, which focused more on the final text and structural analysis and underplayed historical information. The extra-linguistic world was bracketed and the single sign or word or expression was viewed as sufficient for understanding a linguistic utterance. All that was needed was the correct method and the correct execution of the different exegetical steps. This synchronic way of working was often viewed as a substitute for historical criticism or diachronic reading.⁴

The above description reveals a deep distrust in the epistemologies or theories of knowledge of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. Optimism in the belief that the historical approach is able to give access to the meaning of the Old Testament was severely criticised. Scholars experienced a gap between past and present and according to Perdue "the collapse of history has been due in part to a challenge as to whether the historical critical method ... is appropriate for theological discourse".⁵

This article would like to emphasise the contrary. Historical understanding of texts cannot easily be substituted by other approaches because it has always been part of the Old Testament scholar's or the theologian's DNA. Historical questions have always been posed because it was a way of retrieving the meaning of the text, keeping the meaning alive and emphasising the living process between text and context. Despite criticism and the awareness that meaning will always elude us, historical inquiry has nevertheless accomplished much. What is said of history in general is equally true of the historical critical approach to the Hebrew Bible: "The past is finished, so much is clear. Yet it is difficult to determine exactly what kind of finality it possesses".⁶ With this 'finality' or

'pastness of the past' Old Testament scholars have always grappled. Despite constraints the critical scholars of the past centuries have made enormous attempts to glean meaning from the Hebrew text and Israel's history. In the next paragraph it is stated that this yearning to understand historically was always present.

An Ever-present Desire

To underscore the ever-present yearning to understand Old Testament texts within historical contexts we briefly refer to three random examples from the Early Church (Theodore of Mopsuestia), the Middle Ages (Hugo of St Victor) and the Reformation (Calvin). Although these interpreters of the Old Testament did not know how to integrate the text into a historical context, lacked the knowledge to explain the text's message in terms of its life context and were unable to determine how the Israelite context shaped the theology of the Old Testament there was always a yearning to link texts to events in Israel's past.

Historical investigation thus did not first occur in the nineteenth century but already thrived in the Early Church and Theodore of Mopsuestia (352-428) was a striking example.⁷ He rejected the Alexandrian emphasis on allegory and adopted a form of historical investigation starting with the search of an original or a final text. Then he 'exploited' all historical references in the text in order to construct a kind of historical context. In his study of the Psalms, for instance, he focused on the superscriptions and tried to date each one. According to him most psalms belonged to the time of David which he wrote during the persecution of Saul, the affair with Bathsheba, the rebellion of Absalom, et cetera.⁸ Some psalms clearly belonged to a later period but were still written by David because the Holy Spirit granted him the spirit of prophecy. What is typical of this kind of historical understanding is the search for every bit of information on the surface of the text in order to forge a link with a context.⁹

Another example refers to Hugh of St Victor's (1097-1141) historical understanding of the text: "Hugh presents ... the *fundamentum fundamenti* in the field of exegesis, that is to say the *lectio historica* of the whole Sacred Scripture, i.e. a historical *summa*".¹⁰ To accomplish this Hugh followed the Medieval exegetical practice which viewed each text from different angles so that multiple meanings could be abstracted from it. The first step focused on the 'letter' of the text: "Littera gesta docet", or "the letter learns what happened". The visible words in the Old Testament text were important because it narrated the story of Israel's history. The literal meaning informed the reader about God's history with Israel and the world and should therefore be treated with great care.¹¹

According to Hugh historical investigation formed the basis for all exegesis because it emphasised God's involvement in human affairs and therefore words, names, references and other historical information on the surface of the text were extremely important and had to be investigated thoroughly. In his exposition of Noah's ark, for instance, Hugh carefully investigated each bit of information about the ark and then gave a minute depiction of the form of the ark, its measurements and interior arrangements. He made "the letter a proper subject for study" and he wanted "to understand the literal meaning of Scripture exactly, so as to visualize the scene".¹² Only after this historical inquiry would Hugh go to the next step: "quid credas allegoria", or the spiritual meaning. There was, however, an important requirement: allegory had to articulate the deeper mystical significance of the 'historical facts' which were retrieved during the first step. Literal (or historical) and the allegorical way of understanding were actually inseparable; allegory just had to explore the deeper

meaning of Israel's history and therefore his important advice: "Primo historialiter, deinde mystice".¹³

John Calvin never developed a historical method and was even called by some 'vorkritisch' but he nevertheless contributed to a historical understanding of text and context.¹⁴ Calvin criticised his contemporaries for neglecting the context of the text. Philip Melancthon for instance was a good exegete but did not investigate the text's historical context. Martin Bucer was a man of great learning, but he burdened his readers with too much information and eventually lost them. Zwingli was also criticised: he had some exegetical talent, but was often inaccurate because he treated the text too freely and in the process the meaning was lost. Luther was criticised for not treating the text's grammar carefully and neglecting the historical context.¹⁵

An example of such a 'historical' comment is found in Calvin's Genesis commentary. He accepted Moses' authorship, but at the beginning of his commentary asked where Moses had obtained the contents of Genesis. Where did he get the information about the creation, the Patriarchs and Joseph? He would not have sucked it out his thumb, but must have used age-old traditions. According to Calvin Moses took the stories, which were told by Israel's ancestors over many centuries and reworked them into the Genesis text that we possess today.¹⁶ Without knowing it Calvin already emphasised the long tradition history of the Pentateuch and stressed how traditions were handed down from generation to generation and were only written down at a much later stage.¹⁷

If church history can be described as an attempt to understand how the understanding and the exegesis of the Bible shaped theology, theologians and confessions through the centuries, then the historical understanding of texts formed an integral part of that history. Put differently: the historical exegesis of Old Testament texts shaped the life and thinking of the church since its beginnings. Initially the attempts were humble, but in the nineteenth century a new era dawned and with it a profound thinking about history and the understanding of texts.

A Gulf that Overwhelmed the World

Although historical inquiry has always been part of Old Testament exegesis it obtained a remarkable significance in the nineteenth century.¹⁸ The deep and profound thinking about history during that time shaped Old Testament scholarship decisively. The rise of the historical understanding in Old Testament scholarship was moulded by the historicising of the world or "de historisering van het wereldbeeld" from 1800 onwards.¹⁹ One of the greatest intellectual developments in the history of hermeneutics occurred during this period when at the end of the eighteenth century people became aware of the historical nature of human existence. They became convinced that a historical understanding opened up insights "unprecedented in the Western intellectual heritage, opening a theoretical eye to ... the uniquely individual aspects of the human world".²⁰

This wave of historical understanding was not limited to a section of society only but was an all-encompassing movement enclosing the past, present and the future within a unity. Troeltsch referred to "the new conception of history" which has "radically altered our whole attitude to the past and the future" and understood the present "in the whole concatenation of things".²¹ He described the "cultured man of to-day (as) a person who thinks historically" and who can only "constructs his future ... by means of historical self-knowledge".²² No one could escape historical thinking and the historical method because it dominated scholarship and also shaped Old Testament scholarship thoroughly. Its

'shattering' nature, however, also had to be taken into account.²³ Once applied to the Biblical sciences and church history the historical approach becomes "ein Sauerteig, der alles verwandelt und der schliesslich die ganze bisherige Form theologischer Methoden zersprengt".²⁴

Thus the historical critical scholarship of the Old Testament was not primarily a movement devised to undermine the authority of the Bible or the church. It was merely a minor part of a much greater cultural movement.²⁵ Nineteenth century Old Testament scholarship was thoroughly moulded by this historical model of rationality.²⁶ Hermann Gunkel, for instance, depicted the "Religionsgeschichtliche Schule" as "nothing but a new wave of the mighty historical current set in motion by our greatest idealist thinkers and poets". And this historical torrent "affected our entire mental life, and has now long influenced our theological outlook also". Gunkel therefore found "our lofty models in the great historians of our nation ..." and our sole aim was to apply with strict consistency to the study of the Bible the same principles as are followed in all other historical work.²⁷ Thus: the historical critical understanding of the Old Testament formed an integral part of the great cultural development of the previous century.

Gabler: An Optimistic View of History

In his well-known inaugural address on 30 March 1787 Gabler clearly differentiated between a scientific understanding of the Old Testament and dogmatics. According to Gabler Biblical theology was a historical enterprise and 'history' has an explanatory function. And when the historical task has been accomplished diligently "there will be the *happy* appearance of biblical theology, pure and unmixed with foreign things".²⁸ Another positive function of history is that it can *illuminate* the Old Testament's obscurity. Many things contribute to the Old Testament's unintelligibility: the nature of the Biblical material, the strangeness of the words, the unusual ways of expression, the authors' ancient way of thinking, the unusualness of ancient customs. The historical approach would ensure the understanding of the text within its 'original' context. A historical reading would bring the text so to speak much closer to the present day.²⁹

A historical investigation can also identify Biblical truths. Gabler lived in an era when old certainties were challenged and the credibility of the Bible threatened. He therefore wanted to reaffirm the importance of the Bible's religious truths as a basis for Christian faith. And history stood him in good stead. Not that history constitutes the truth or that it can be equated with truth. As a child of his time Gabler probably also believed that "accidental verities of history can never become the proof of necessary verities of reason".³⁰ Historical truths remained therefore secondary to religious truth: "the rind on the orange and not the fruit itself".³¹ History was nevertheless an important aid to lay bare the Biblical truths. Put differently: history has the ability to unmask and to abstract timeless truths from the Bible.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century Old Testament scholarship had developed a very optimistic view about history and it was believed that a historical approach could really accomplish much. However, at that stage it was still not possible to identify historical sources within the Pentateuch, which could be dated, and which could serve as a basis for a historical description of Israel's religion. Neither was it possible to ask questions about the world behind the texts and to focus on an oral tradition. That only came with Wellhausen and Gunkel.

Further Development

Gabler's important observations were interpreted in many ways and reached a high watermark in the works of Julius Wellhausen and Hermann Gunkel. Both scholars developed the history paradigm in such a way as to link the Hebrew Bible to real people who lived and died in the living history of Israel. Wellhausen's view of history implied at least two typical features: the development of a method (literary criticism) which allowed him to identify different 'historical' sources (JE, D and P) and which enabled him to describe the growth of Israel's religion from an early phase when Abraham could still sacrifice anywhere, to Deuteronomy which centralised the cult in Jerusalem and to P who intensified this centralization of the cult by means of a hierarchical priesthood, a solid sacrificial system and a cultic calendar. What is important in Wellhausen's view of history was the movement from JE to D to P.³² Although he was often accused of Hegel's development of knowledge from a thesis, to an anti-thesis and finally to a synthesis Wellhausen provided scholarship with a method (literary criticism), sources (JE, D and P), which form the building blocks for his understanding of Israel's past and his depiction of the development and growth of Israel's faith.³³

Gunkel rejected Wellhausen's views because he wanted to peek behind the Genesis text in order to understand what lies behind the stories of creation and the patriarchs. Behind the Hebrew text, there were legends about figures like Abraham and he began his commentary on Genesis with a famous sentence: "Die Genesis ist eine Sammlung von Sagen".³⁴ The book of Genesis is a collection of legends. The stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were compiled from a large variety of legends, which were shaped into units, "Sagenkränze".³⁵ And if we want to understand something of Abraham, we must take these legends seriously. Through these legends Abraham was shaped into a "living human being"; legends were the 'building materials' from which the 'life story' of Abraham was formed; they were like 'archival sources' shedding light on the "life and work of Abraham".³⁶

According to Wellhausen this was too vague, too uncertain and actually useless. In the written sources JE and P (in Gen. 12-25) we have the Abraham narrative and there was no need to look behind the final text for legends or the origins of Abraham. Gunkel vehemently disagreed. When JE and P wrote about Abraham (in Gen. 12-25), the figure of Abraham had already been formed by the legends, which JE and P just took over.³⁷ To Gunkel this pre-phase, this pre-written phase was such a vibrant and exciting era that it formed a prerequisite for the understanding of Abraham.

Although Wellhausen and Gunkel differed from each other they took the concept of historical understanding much further by showing a method (literary criticism) in order to identify historical sources (JE, D and P) and to get glimpses of real people and living contexts. This notion was elaborated further when the study of religion became important in the nineteenth century.

A Study of Religion

In the nineteenth century the term 'history' was interpreted in such a way that it brought us 'closer' to Israel and their faith. It all happened when scholars began to focus on religion and linked it to history. Accordingly 'theology' and 'Biblical theology' became problematic while 'religion' became the prime focus of historical research. According to Gunkel the expression 'Biblical theology' was outdated because of the doctrine of inspiration, which was underlying it. The understanding of the Early Church that the Bible is a unity

containing the same meaning, theology and ethics in each verse, chapter and book formed the basis of this doctrine. Gunkel argued that this view had become untenable and had to be replaced by “the spirit of historical scholarship” which in the late nineteenth century meant “history of Israelite religion”.³⁸ Scholars became convinced that religion was such a deep and rich experience that it could not be understood and explained by traditional theology or philosophy. For instance Johann Salomo Semler defined religion “as an inner spiritual fulfilment, infinite religion, which continually grows in spiritual understanding of an infinite God” and theology was merely an imperfect reflection on religion.³⁹ Religion was viewed as an “experience, feeling, sensibility and sensitivity for the eternal that theology cannot explain and define, but rather corrupts”.⁴⁰ Scholars then became interested in the living religion of Israel before Biblical authors reflected on them theologically.

To explain this interest in religion we briefly focus on the group of young intellectuals in the 1880s who resisted Albrecht Ritschl’s dogmatics, which he developed into a closed system of objective truths of faith.⁴¹ People like Wilhelm Bousset, Wilhelm Heitmüller and Hermann Gunkel assembled around Albert Eichhorn (1856-1926) who became the spiritual father of the movement who focused on ‘history’ and ‘religion’ and which was called the ‘Religionsgeschichtliche Schule’. This implied a rigorous scrutiny of a religious tradition’s origin and growth up to its final phase. All emphasis was laid on the history of religion and how and why it was formed and shaped through the ages. Put differently: the Israelite or Old Testament religion had to be understood and explained in terms of its historical growth. To be a theologian thus implied that one should study the history of Israel’s religion and how it was moulded by new contexts and new ideas.⁴²

In his work on creation, “Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit”, Gunkel illustrated how Israel took over creation motifs from the Babylonian creation stories and how they have creatively adapted and reworked these narratives into something new and unique. In his research Gunkel wanted to highlight this ‘new’ and ‘innovative’ element in Israel’s religion and their view of creation. Gunkel referred to the ‘Eigentümliche’ of Israel’s religion and described it as follows: “Dieses ‘Eigentümliche’ ist der Glaube, dass Gott sich in der Geschichte des Volkes Israel geoffenbart habe”.⁴³ And this ‘Eigentümliche’ could only become manifest in a religious-historical understanding of Israel’s past and the experience that “God works in the world as the quiet, hidden, basis of all things” and his efficacy “can almost be apprehended in particularly momentous and impressive events and persons”. In the stories of Genesis we can detect the wondrous way in which God has caused all things and how events and people are interrelated. In Genesis God walks in the garden, forms people with his own hands, closes the doors of the Ark himself, appears to Abraham and Lot in the form of a traveller (18-19), smells Noah’s sacrifice (8:21) and speaks to people in a very personal way (12:1).

To understand this uniqueness of Israel’s religion a specific approach to Genesis was called for: it must not be read as history but as legends. Although historical criticism formed part of Gunkel’s intellectual makeup he made a clear distinction between historiography and legend. Historiography is interested in actual events, searching for facts and is written in prose. If Genesis is understood in terms of hard facts and exact descriptions of events the true meaning is lost. The term ‘legend’ is something totally different and “is by nature poetry” and is more interested in elevating the spirit, touching the soul and inspiring the depressed. To do justice to the narratives in Genesis something important is also required: a sufficient “esthetic sensibility to hear an account as it is and as it wants to be” and to “lovingly ... understand”. We must, for instance, have “the heart and the sensitivity” to realise that the narrative about Isaac is not meant to establish historical

facts but rather to “feel the heartrending pain of the father who is to sacrifice his own child with his own hand and, then, his infinite thankfulness and joy when God’s grace frees him from this heavy sacrifice”.⁴⁴

A religious-historical study thus entails much more than a text or a method: it needs feeling, imagination and spiritual empathy. Historical investigation of Israel’s religion of the heart comprises much more than a mere reconstruction of Israel’s history. It involves the exegete as a spiritual being and his/her capacities to feel his/her way through the text. Behind the text there is a world of real and sincere experiences, which the scholar must penetrate. Due to the theology of the Pietists and Schleiermacher scholars became aware of the importance of religious feelings. When touched by God the heart of the pious becomes the well out of which religion eternally flows. Religion thus has to do with the innermost affections of good people; the deepest religious feelings of pious persons. And the task of critical Old Testament scholarship must be the understanding of these most profound religious feelings, sentiments and convictions of the Old Testament figures.⁴⁵

To accomplish this the Old Testament scholar must first of all become “as intimately as possible” acquainted with the religious atmosphere of the Old Testament. Put differently: the modern scholar must become contemporary with the original context, relive the experiences of the biblical parsonages, enter the Old Testament world of religious experience by means of spiritual sympathy, re-enact the original religious experiences and appropriate the original message. In short: “We must penetrate so deeply into their experiences that we can sympathize with them, that we can repeat them in ourselves, and become the interpreters of them to our own generation”.⁴⁶ By means of empathy and imagination a whole new world will be unlocked; a world inhabited by real human beings with profound religious convictions and which formed the living context from which the Old Testament arose.⁴⁷

The view that these stories are legends does not in any way diminish the value of the Old Testament but is another way of expressing its literary beauty and “is the judgement of piety and love”. These poetical accounts are indeed the most beautiful ever written and “may be the most beautiful and profound ever”. Gunkel urged the church to take this seriously and admit that Genesis contains legends and “that only this awareness makes a historical understanding of Genesis possible”.⁴⁸ This is such an important point that we would like to rephrase it: only when the church appropriates these legends in Genesis can she fathom the uniqueness of Israel’s religion and relive their deepest religious feelings.

Concluding Remarks

The Old Testament survived the ages and for “the entire duration of its history, the very nature of sacred Scripture has made it vulnerable to exegesis”.⁴⁹ The Old Testament has indeed been exposed to different exegetical approaches and the attempts to understand historically also contributed to this vulnerability. Once there was this optimistic view that we could reach the past and reconstruct Israel’s history but this is impossible. As Karel Schoeman once said, the past is another country and no one knows the road that could lead you there.⁵⁰ However, the road that Old Testament scholarship has travelled the past two centuries fills one with awe and respect for those who showed us the possibilities of historical understanding. Despite criticism and rejection Wellhausen’s insights will always inspire us and the yearning to search for traces of sources in the Pentateuch will always be a driving force.

However, it is Gunkel who deserves a lasting influence. The way in which he described our approach to Israel's past will remain forever. There is no other way out than the one which Gunkel has described. No method, technique or approach can ever bring us closer to Israel's past. It's gone forever. Only through imagination, empathy and compassion can we penetrate Israel's past and relive their experiences.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Leo Perdue, *Reconstructing Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 4.
- ² Perdue, *Reconstructing*, 6.
- ³ Perdue, *Reconstructing*, 76-101; 239-279.
- ⁴ Jurie le Roux, *A Story of two Ways* (Pretoria: Verba Vitae, 1992), 16-86.
- ⁵ Perdue, *Reconstructing*, 8.
- ⁶ Jerome Veith, *Gadamer and the transmission of history* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 1.
- ⁷ Maurice Wiles, "Theodore Mopsuestia as representative of the Antioch School," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible I*, ed. Peter Ackroyd and Christopher Evans (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 489-494.
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