

‘QUO VADIS’ OLD TESTAMENT STUDIES? A RESPONSE

L Juliana M Claassens
Visiting Professor of Hebrew Bible
Wesley Theological Seminary
Extraordinary Visiting Associate Professor of Old and New Testament
University of Stellenbosch

To start off, I want to thank Douglas Lawrie for a very entertaining, sharp-witted paper that gave us quite a bit to ponder. I want to make three comments as part of my initial response, working my way back through the three main points Douglas has made:

- Firstly, those of you who know me would be well-aware that I very much share Douglas’ appreciation for the work done by Feminist theologians in the field of Old Testament (OT). I do wonder though whether gender really is now “a fixture on the agenda as an item that can be chosen but does not have to be desperately defended” as Douglas suggests. In many circles in both the United States and South Africa, it is indeed a question whether the gains of feminist theology have seeped through to practices in academia and the church – one just has to recognize the difficulty many of our female students have in entering ministry or/or breaking through the stain glass ceiling, or consider the obstacles female scholars face in academia to realize that self-evident conceptions with regard to gender are not that self-evident after all. And not to mention the gender inequality exemplified by the violence against women in the communities around us. As long as there are women who are raped, violated or killed, and as long as we live in a society where the full dignity of women are not fully respected, I would contend that is not just eloquence or even passion that is important when it comes to Feminist theology. Feminist biblical interpretation matters because what are at stake are the very real lives of women (and men). In light of the history of the way in which the OT had been used (abused), I would strongly contend that a primary objective of OT studies ought to be to cultivate alternative reading practices which include noticing the marginalized or “muted” voices in the text, for precisely the reason that the way we read mirror the way we live.

For instance, to name but one example, in her book, *Nameless, Blameless, and Without Shame*, Gina Hens-Piazza focuses on the story of the two cannibal women before the king in 2 Kings 6:24-33. Throughout her interpretation, Hens-Piazza (2003: 83-84) shows how important it is not only to focus on the stories of kings, but to really see the plight of these two unnamed women. She argues that “the mothers and their unresolved crisis” are “dwarfed and rendered insignificant” by the “national and international power struggles” of the powers to be – something that she likens to the thousands of nameless victims we see, or rather do not see, as accompanying footage to the national and international headlines in our newspapers and on our TV screens and the Internet.

Hens-Piazza’ (2003: 94) imaginative interpretation that gives voice to the plight of these seemingly insignificant characters is a prime example of how noticing the muted voices in the text helps one to also be attentive to the voices in society whose cries are muted or overlooked in a daily basis. So attention to these two women challenges us “to confront what is lost when only the so-called ‘major’ characters are studied or when

only the people deemed important by cultural standards are considered.” As she rightly notes: “As the fullness of meaning in a biblical tale increases when each and every character is assessed, so too is the fullness of life itself extended when each person is regarded as worthy of attention.”

- Secondly, I want to respond to Douglas’ assertion that “The OT is not a suitable basis for systematic theology and the better it is read, the less suitable it becomes.” Now the systematic theologians in the room may help us in this regard, but I would say that there are few systematic theologians these days who would propose a system that is utterly void of complexity and ambiguity and loose threads.¹ As someone who claims the designation “biblical theologian,” I myself would like to ask theological questions of the text, moving beyond history and narrative art to contemplate the significance of these ancient texts for contemporary communities today. Douglas cites as evidence for the inability of the OT to serve as source for theological reflection the difficulty (impossibility) the two creation stories of Genesis 1-2 holds for a systematic theology. As but one example of the potential of this multiplicity/diversity to serve as source for theological reflection, I would point to the work of Terence Fretheim in his recent book, *God and the World*, who productively uses exactly the similarities and differences of these divergent stories to develop a relational understanding of a Creator God. Within this theological reconstruction, diversity and multiplicity is not something to obscure but to celebrate. For instance, Fretheim argues as follow: “there is a degree of openendedness in the created order, which make room for novelty and surprise, irregularities and randomness” (Fretheim 2005: 19). I would thus say that the different theological voices of the tradition, woven together, offer to us some rich theological perspectives on creation and God’s relationship to creation with all its “sheer diversity, unresolved tensions, curious juxtapositions, conflicting claims” as Douglas would say.
- Finally, even though I appreciate Douglas’ concern for the historical situatedness of the OT traditions, I have questions about the implicit notion that historical scholarship is somehow more “scientific” or “objective” whereas many of the “fads” of the time such as “Bakhtin and the Bible” and “Zizek and the Bible” are lenses that one could say “distort” the true meaning of the text. Historical reconstructions of the OT use lenses as well – cf. e.g. the difference it makes for our understanding of the exile to read the literature of the exile through the lens of refugee studies, i.e., understanding the victims of the exile as the survivors of state-sponsored terrorism as Daniel Smith-Christopher would do in his *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (2001).

I should add that from what I know of the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, “Bakhtin” does not constitute a singular lens and his work including some key concepts such as dialogue, polyphony, heteroglossia, chronotype, and carnival actually offers multiple frameworks that may help us gain some insight into the literary *and* the historical dimension of the biblical text.²

¹ With regard to theologians who have engaged Genesis 1-3 in all of its complexity and ambiguity, I am thinking e.g. of the work of Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (2003) and Michael Welker, *Creation and Reality* (1999).

² For instance, a recent collection of essays, *Bakhtin and Genre Theory* (2007), offers some great examples of the manifold different ways in which some key Bakhtinian concepts such as dialogue, polyphony, heteroglossia, chronotype, and carnival are used by the contributors to serve as windows on a wide range of texts from the Hebrew Bible and New Testament (In my bookreview of this book, I refer to two essays in particular that serve the purpose of illustrating the value of Bakhtin’s understanding of the social context or social construction of genre for reading OT texts. For instance, Christine Mitchel explores the role of power and *eros*

Given the fact that none of us can escape using lenses when reading the text, I would say that a fruitful exercise would be for us to consider *what* lenses we and our students bring to the task of interpreting the OT. Moreover, I would further suggest that we talk some more about the nature of history and in particular the role of hermeneutics in contemplating the historical dimension of the text.³

- In conclusion, Douglas' paper succeeds well in conveying just how important the study of the OT is for what we do in a seminary and/or university setting. In his very funny and provocative conclusion, I was struck again by the OT's ability to surprise. I look forward to further conversation on what and how we share this rich heritage with our students.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Boer, Roland (ed.) 2007. *Bakhtin and Genre Theory in Biblical Studies*, Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature.
- Claassens, L Juliana 2009. "Book review of *Bakhtin and Genre Theory in Biblical Studies* (ed. Roland Boer)" in *Biblical Interpretation* 17," 362-363.
- Fretheim, Terence E 2005. *God and the World In The Old Testament: A Relational Theology Of Creation*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- Hens-Piazza, Gina 2003. *Nameless, Blameless, and Without Shame: Two Cannibal Mothers Before a King*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press.
- Keller, Catherine 2003. *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*. London: Routledge.
- Smith-Christopher Daniel L 2001. *A Biblical Theology of Exile*. Overtures to Biblical Theology. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Welker, Michael 1999. *Creation and Reality*. Trans. John F. Hoffmeyer. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

in considering the effect of genres with special attention to the Chronicler's application of folktales and the Deuteronomistic framework texts. A similar point is made by David Valeta in his essay on the interaction of languages in the book Daniel, arguing that the polyglossia in this book contributes to its parodic nature which serves as an important tool for people in oppressive situations to "define their identity and to subvert the violence of power" (p 105). Cf. Claassens 2009: 362-363.

³ I would argue that all of us have lenses through which we read the biblical text, and moreover that none of us merely uses one lens in interpreting the text (after all we teach our students to use numerous tools including historical and literary tools, ideological criticism etc to foster good exegetical practices).