

OLD TESTAMENT STUDIES: ‘QUO VADIS’?

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Abstract

This paper examines three influential trajectories in the recent study of the Old Testament and argues that they deserve to and probably will remain influential. Historical study (broadly taken and including archaeology) continues to broaden our understanding of the ancient context, it is argued, is important for several reasons. Literary study, both as “close reading” and as literary theorizing and hermeneutical reflection, has made us conscious of what was often too easily taken for granted. Feminist study (taken here as synecdoche for various approaches from the side of the excluded) has, through its passion and eloquence, humanized the study of the Bible. The conclusion of the paper reflects on the difficulties of teaching the Old Testament today and the dangers of pursuing novelties before a thorough foundation has been laid. It suggests, however, that the Old Testament may continue to address its readers in totally unexpected ways. (So as to leave the original paper more or less unchanged, I deal with most references and some of the questions that arose in the discussion in footnotes.)

Key Words: Historical criticism, Literary Criticism, Feminist Criticism, Trajectories, Teaching

The Future of Two Pasts

What future can one predict or desire for the study of a corpus of texts that is, for all its diversity, not that extensive? Great optimism would be misplaced in an age that has largely turned its back on the past, even the recent past, and that dashes madly from one temporary pillar to the next “post”. Postmodern disdain for whatever claims to be foundational or canonical, post-colonial distrust of whatever can be seen as a colonial heritage, post-Christian apathy towards the tradition of the Church: all of these count against the Old Testament. If, as Rodd (2001:3f) has it, the Old Testament offers us, after much effort, mere “glimpses of a strange land”, it might be neither clear and nor relevant enough to warrant detailed rejection. Why not visit one of the many trendier and cheaper destinations for theo-tourism?

Partly, I suppose, because for many of us the study of the Old Testament has another past, that of our own introduction to it. Some thirty years ago I was among those who sat here at Stellenbosch, enveloped by reformed conservatism that rendered the study of the Bible self-evident, but equally aware of the towering cedars of German scholarship that rendered it exciting. Von Rad, above all, but also Westermann, Zimmerli, Eichrodt, Wolff and mavericks such as Mowinckel embodied the aspirations of those of us who chose to specialize in the Old Testament. Our world stood firm on the massive, erudite volumes of BKAT; for the latest one did not have to look far beyond *ZAW*, *VT* and *JBL*. The ancient battle between the evangelicals and the higher critics still raged, at least in Stellenbosch, but, since both sides used essentially the same historical-critical weapons, the storm did not threaten to shatter the teacup.

Structural analysis, we knew, was the coming thing; hermeneutics, we were beginning to suspect, would require more of our attention. Even those who regularly criticized apartheid seldom read the works of liberation theologians, just as they maintained a discreet silence about their Marxist or neo-Marxist leanings. Feminist theology was a distant cloud no bigger than a man's hand. The single female student in the class could not be prevented from doing a BTh, but would of course not be admitted the male mysteries of the Licentiate.

Only the hidebound will claim that all is as it was; only the starry-eyed will say "We have changed all that!" Our relationships with our pasts are never as simple as that. Yet, if our relationships with the distant world of the Old Testament are complex beyond unravelling, perhaps the path from our more recent past to the present here in South Africa will help us to make educated guesses about the future, its challenges and opportunities. As a prophet I therefore side with the former and not the latter prophets: my prophecies are *ex eventu*.

The Cunning Passages of History

The two constants of history are continuity and change. The former survives the restlessness of the human mind; the latter overcomes the inertia of the human organism. But, as Qohelet already knew, these two constants do not enable us to solve the equations of time. That the Old Testament wisdom tradition would be better served in the literature now than it was thirty years ago was perhaps predictable. When old veins petered out, new shafts had to be opened. Who was to know, however, that Barr's biblical semantics would reach the point of diminishing returns so soon or that structuralism would succumb to poststructuralism before would-be disciples had quite mastered its complex terminology? And why does *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Alter and Kermode 1987) now appear so unliturgical and *The Postmodern Bible* (The Bible and Culture Collective 1995), which criticized it mercilessly, so antiquated?

Even hindsight is not 20/20. Undoubtedly the "globalized" community of Old Testament scholars today is far larger, more diverse and more fiendishly productive than the rather parochial circle of my student days. But were the old cedars really taller and sturdier than the current crop, or am I, standing in the middle of a forest, unable to judge the height of the trees around me? And are these really cedars or merely pines – the very trees that have to be planted *en masse* to provide paper for the torrent of publications on, say, ecological theology? Then an intimation of continuity intrudes on my reflections on change: old fogies mulling over glory days have their own, old poetic theme: "Where are the snows of yesteryear?"

Since I cannot survey three decades of Old Testament scholarship, I restrict myself to three "trajectories", chosen mainly because they interested me. My childhood interest in history was reinforced by my training; I still cannot contemplate reading any text in a historical vacuum. My interest in the Old Testament as literature also has its roots in my childhood, when I was struck by the poetic splendour of the readings on Sundays and dumbstruck by the inability of the minister to derive anything but prosaic moralizing from them. Of all the truly new approaches, feminist interpretation¹ has probably taught me most (and that fairly recently), therefore I let it stand as synecdoche for ideological criticism in general. Much as I admire Marx as a thinker, Freud as a rhetorician and Derrida as a

¹ Feminists would, however, be wise not to enquire too closely. Note that I did not say "feminist hermeneutics".

conjurer with words, none of them could *show* as clearly how ideology is imprinted in a text and in the gaps in a text as the best of the feminists did.

Having looked all too briefly at these trajectories, I shall turn, equally briefly, to a question that I suspect many Old Testament scholars prefer to avoid. What, apart from a nice line in academic irony, should we be teaching our students? With what lime tea and madeleines can we retrieve lost times for those forced by curricular continuity to sit through our classes while they are yearning to be producers of knowledge in, say, constructive theology? And what are we to do with those students who embarrass us with a totally untutored enthusiasm for the Old Testament, those who want from it something we cannot (or can no longer) give? We can, to be sure, turn some of them into harmless drudges to continue our line, but what reason can we give them for doing so? That is, what answer can we give ourselves?

History, Actually

The historical study of the Old Testament is not dead, probably not even moribund. It is, however, caught somewhere between the smell of mothballs and that of cordite. On the one hand, some literary historians still tread well-worn paths, wielding ever sharper versions of older tools and indulging, in accepted fashion, in ingenious speculation. On the other hand, some apply the latest theories in sociology, anthropology or historiography to the theme "Israel's history" and come out with guns blazing when they sense a challenge to their findings. Somewhere in the middle are those who suspect that redaction criticism is a genre of fiction² and that we know practically nothing about Israelite history one way or the other.

There are piquant moments in this. When Tsevat complained that historical scholarship no longer offered a widely accepted picture of Israelite history to interpreters and suggested mildly the latter should perhaps return to their old task of reading the texts, Gottwald applauded Levine's acid comment that Tsevat "seems willing to live with the myth and give up the search for reality".³ But not long afterwards, Thompson (1987:18) dismissed with a cavalier wave of the hand "Mendenhall's tenth-generation mythology" and Gottwald's "personal religious and political prejudices". Now the latest "science" tells us that a small group of people, dividing among themselves in yet smaller warring factions, spent a century or so concocting, in divergent styles and diction, elaborate, conflicting versions of an imaginary history to make points so subtle as to escape all notice.⁴ Suddenly Gunkel, risen from the grave, whispers in my ear: "When iron floats, one is not dealing with history."

Then again, when I have to wade through many dense pages to learn that an unbearably subtle redactor, by means of miniscule changes to the text, conveyed a coded meaning to an alert audience – if, that is, they lived at a particular time and that time was as we imagine it to have been – watching paint dry sounds exciting. I begin to sympathize with Whybray's rough and ready solution to the problem of the Pentateuch (cf Whybray 1995:10), even if I wonder how he disposed of all the questions that had plagued scholars since the time of Ibn Ezra.

² Delbert Hillers set out the arguments against redaction criticism years ago. It is "hypothetical at too many points to be interesting" (1988:3), leaving the critic "in despair over the insufficient evidence" (1988:4).

Though I tend to agree, I have played the game myself. For a balanced discussion, see Barton 1996:45-60.

³ These various comments were made in the open discussions during the Congress on Biblical Archaeology, Jerusalem, 1984 (*Biblical Archaeology Today* 1985: 88f [Tsevat], 92 [Levine and Gottwald]).

⁴ For criticism of the extreme view, see Dever 2001, 2003, but also Dever's sworn enemy Finkelstein 2002.

Still, historical scholarship in all its guises has added much to our knowledge over the past decades. I will not try to enumerate the gains, which can readily be gauged from this: in many areas of study one now has a plethora rather than a paucity of literature. We now have, for instance, some good commentaries on Jeremiah and Ruth, a selection of studies on aspects of Old Testament law and a wealth of material on Deuteronomy. We can now make some fairly confident statements about the material culture, economic life and social structures of Israelite villages and cities. In practically every area comparative studies, drawing on increased knowledge of the Ancient Near Eastern world, has enriched or modified previous insights.

One of the glories of “historical criticism” has always been that it is not a method or even an ordered set of methods; it is a loose conglomerate of procedures that interact in different, unpredictable ways in specific cases.⁵ A bit that turns up in one area may fit into a picture someone else is working on elsewhere and the “fuller picture” may, in turn, upset an older theory in a third area. Thus Tigay took Avigad’s work on seals and bullae, apparently of interest only to specialists, and based an ingenious (and to my mind unrefuted) argument on the theophoric personal names.⁶ Two more recent finds, 9th century inscriptions referring, respectively, to the house of David and king Joash, are of obvious interest – but their authenticity is questioned.⁷ This, in turn, poses a challenge to those who specialize in authenticating ancient texts, palaeo-orthographists, for instance, to show their skills.

It is this catch-as-catch-can aspect of historical criticism that deserves to and probably will survive. When historical critics claim scientific status for their work, they are, ironically, scorning what has always been the great strength of historical study in the broad sense: its ability to get to grips with actualities that do not yield to neat theories.⁸ Historical critics unearth *clues* and no theoretically informed definition can tell us what *type* of thing a clue is. Something *becomes* a clue – often long after its discovery – when it is found to fit in a plausible reconstruction. Compared to the orderly world of the theorist, the world of the historical critic is strange and messy, a *bricolage* of sophisticated science, chance finds, unexpected conjunctions and disjunctions and educated guesses shading into plain speculation. But it is in this world, not the ethereal world of theory, that we live every day.

Historical criticism also deserves to survive because it fosters a particularly valuable type of argumentation (cf Collins 2005:11). Those who tackle an Old Testament text with a chosen set of theoretical tools also engage in argumentation when they demonstrate what these tools yield in the particular case. They are not, however, compelled and seldom bother to ask how their results weigh up against those reached by other means. They produce argumentative monologues or, at best, conversations between a text and a theory. In the best historical criticism the critic has to cross swords with a host of interlocutors. In the classic German dissertation the first chapter, following the brief introduction, invariably deals with the history of exegesis. Apart from demonstrating erudition and competence, it sets a challenge. The candidate now has to show that her thesis is different from and superior to other theses in the field. An argument has to be mounted *as against* other actual or potential arguments.

⁵ Barton (1996:244) is to my mind correct when he says that supposed methods of interpretation are really *theories* “which result from the formalizing of intelligent intuitions about the meaning of biblical texts”.

⁶ The reference is to Tigay 1986. For Avigad’s findings, see, for instance, Avigad 1986, 1987, 1988.

⁷ On the Tell Dan inscription, see Davies 1994, Rainey 1994, Freedman and Geoghegan 1995; on the more disputed Joash inscription, see Norin 2005.

⁸ Collins’s reply to those who accuse historical critics of looking for “some absolute truth” is apt: “Nothing could be further from the case” (Collins 2005:10).

Much ink and eloquence has been devoted to showing that we are prisoners of something we “always already” are or have. I might, in spite of the lack of evidence, be tempted to believe this if it were not for the sloppy thinking, writing and reading⁹ of the adepts of this view. Nobody with a hangover or a bothersome old sports injury believes that the past has no relevance for the present or that we can construct, deconstruct or reconstruct it at will. We should not teach our students to play tennis with the net down – it isn't even much fun.

Thus I hold to the antiquated belief that “wie es eigentlich gewesen [ist]” matters and lies close to the heart of all academic endeavour.¹⁰ When we pride ourselves on knowing that we might never get even close to the answers, we should consider that Ranke knew as much. We already have *Levinas and Biblical Studies* (Eshkenazi, Phillips & Jobling 2003) and *Bakhtin and Genre Theory in the Biblical Studies* (Boer 2007); Žižek and the Bible is sure to follow – if it is not with us already. There is nothing wrong with using such lenses, the more the better. But the notion that “the Bible” is *simply* the product of the lens we have chosen does not stand up to scrutiny. So we *know* “Levinas”, that is, a text like the Bible?¹¹ Derrida seldom spoke clearly and unequivocally; he did so regarding the need for “guardrails” and the role of historical scholarship in providing them.¹²

Of Artistry and Artificiality

When in the study of the Bible the turn of literary studies came, Old Testament scholars could for once look down their noses at their New Testament colleagues. Right, the New Testament is not as devoid of literary artistry as it appears to be, but literary scholars who are not theologians are unlikely to get worked up about it.¹³ Once the new well had been uncovered, the first trickles of my student days soon swelled into a torrent of publications, not less impressive for being of unequal quality. Who dares to say the Fokkelman's tomes¹⁴ cannot stand alongside the monuments of historical scholarship for sheer detail of argumentation?

Perhaps it was unfortunate that the “literary criticism” reached biblical scholarship from the outset in two distinct guises. Drawing on the old New Criticism and relying on close

⁹ A case in point: Derrida is often cited in defence of views he explicitly rejected.

¹⁰ Biblical scholars who poke fun at Ranke's supposed positivism usually take the quotation out of context (cf Bentley 1999:39). The dictum is tacitly endorsed by historians with impeccable postmodern credentials (Ankersmit 2000:161; LaCapra 1998:104; Norman 1998:168). It does not help when Ranke is misquoted as having said “wirklich” rather than “eigentlich” – as I did in my presentation. Ranke's sworn enemies were the French *scientific* historians.

I labour the point, because I was accused of regarding historical study as “more scientific” or “more objective”. I would not use the word “scientific” regarding historical study; I might use “objectivity” in the sense that Collins uses it when he speaks of the need to “distance” oneself from the text in order to “respect its otherness” (Collins 2005:10). See also Derrida's comment that in some contexts he firmly believes in objectivity (1988:136). For my views on the limits and uses of historical criticism in the study of the Bible, see Lawrie 2001.

¹¹ Since I frequently use Kenneth Burke as my lens, I can hardly object to the use of lenses. My point is simply that lenses do not *create* what is viewed through them, therefore the relationship between text and lens can always be reversed – I can read Bakhtin with the Bible as lens. All texts have to be read (interpreted) before they can be put to use, and surely nobody claims that Levinas or Bakhtin are easy reading.

¹² Derrida (1988:143ff) insists that an understanding of the various contexts that determine a text – explicitly including the historical context – is a prerequisite for the type of interpretation that he advocates, “otherwise one could indeed say just anything at all and I have never accepted saying...just anything at all...”

¹³ The position is as old as CS Lewis – and Nietzsche!

¹⁴ I take Fokkelman's massive volumes on the Samuel books (1981, 1986, 1993) as paradigmatic, but I could also have mentioned the works of Robert Polzin, Dana Fewell and David Gunn, and a host of others.

reading, some literary critics dealt with the stylistic, poetic and artistic qualities of individual biblical texts. Others took the latest literary theory (originally structuralism) as their point of departure and sought the underlying compositional rules of biblical texts – or of all texts *tout court*.¹⁵ Exaggerating only slightly, one can say that the one group would lavish several pages on the intricacies of a short passage, whereas the other could reduce a substantial text to a one-page diagram. There were, of course, many hybrids.

Biblical scholarship gained from both forms of literary criticism. Only those who neglect their works can doubt that many of the old historical critics were superb readers with a fine appreciation of literary artistry. They did not, however, explicitly *teach* these skills, which they apparently took for granted. Today both commentaries and monographs alert students to matters of diction, composition and style, so that asking “literary” questions becomes a reflex. Why does the narrator oscillate between repetition and reticence? Can the structure of the passage elucidate an obscure verse? What literary features enable us to detect the patterns of emphasis and de-emphasis, association and dissociation, in the text? In brief, we have become aware of the close link – falling just short of complete identity – between form and content.

Biblical authors are, thank goodness, no longer seen as primitives unreflectingly reflecting their contexts or bunglers stringing words together. It is recognized that literary *history* alone cannot answer the problems presented by the texts. For instance, more adequate theories of narrative (arguably the most valuable legacy of structuralism), of type scenes and of specifically Hebrew compositional techniques often allows one to forgo the scissors of source criticism. Reading an Old Testament text becomes much more rewarding when one allows for the possibility that the author could have been a master of irony, ambiguity and multivalent imagery. The first pericope in Qohelet gains much in meaning when its repetitive style is seen as a deliberate device to represent *tedium vitae* and its oscillation between the human to the natural as a reductive equation of human life with a purely material course of nature.

The gains produced by the turn towards literary theory, though less obvious, are possibly of more lasting importance. I have refrained from assigning to hermeneutics a special heading, since anyone who enters this minefield needs many pages to get out of it again. That is, if one emerges alive, for the field is strewn with mangled reputations and even more badly mangled sentences. Suffice it to say that the shift from a limited number of complementary methods to a daunting array of disparate approaches is permanent. It is no longer enough to work hard, read copiously and put familiar tools to new uses; one also has to think furiously, which, it turns out, is hellishly hard work. With many new opportunities to catch the limelight comes many new opportunities to make a fool of oneself.

With so many delicacies on offer, what is there not to like? Is it ungracious to say that the close readers are sometimes too theoretically unsophisticated and the literary theorist often too painfully unlitrary? To revert to a previously used example, George Steiner (quoted in Wilder 1991:5f) said devastatingly of *The Literary Guide to the Bible* “a terrible blandness is born” and *The Postmodern Bible* leaves the impression that, once one has struggled through reams of intricate (and sometimes badly digested) “theory”, it is hardly necessary to read the text at all.¹⁶ And these are by no means bad examples of each type. Meir Sternberg’s vicious comment that there is no cure for incompetence (Sternberg

¹⁵ On the distinctions between Anglo-American and Continental formalism, see Lawrie 2005:78f.

¹⁶ The point being that the text – any text – can only “instantiate” the theory. The Bible hardly features in *The Postmodern Bible*. Precisely the same complaint is heard concerning literary studies in, say, English.

1985:4) does not apply to them as, unfortunately, it does to some other works that I shall not name.

The worst products of breezy, informal formalism hover between breathless artiness and ponderously implausible squeezing of blood from stones. Confronted with the glaringly obvious, one feels that perhaps some reading skills *should* be taken for granted. When the name of the main character of a narrative appears in its first and last sentence, one may doubt whether this constitutes an artistic *inclusio*. It gets even worse when one gets told, on the basis of a misreading of the New Critics, that literary criticism *by its nature* assumes that "the text" (which one?) is a unity. This is artificiality one.

The worst products of hyper-sophisticated "Theory"¹⁷ are preposterously pretentious, painfully badly written and patently elitist. The arcane terminologies, while they effectively exclude all but the holy family, may also deter those who suspect that the argumentation is weak from testing their hypothesis – life is too short. Weird as it is that one can write so badly (supposedly) about literature, it is weirder still that some defend the impenetrable style and fulminate against "the tyranny of lucidity" or "repressive clarity".¹⁸ Are they that much better than Von Rad, Freud and Nietzsche, all of whom were superb writers? This is artificiality two.

No trend should be judged by its worst excesses. Literary criticism has contributed much to the study of the Old Testament, despite of rather than because of the conflicting theories that have at various times informed it. It will and should survive, not least because it is a response to the powerful, pre-theoretical lure of the texts themselves. If we can teach students in an age of non-readers to be critical *and* appreciative readers of the Old Testament, we shall have achieved something, even if the students later find reasons for rejecting the Old Testament.

Yet I rather hope that a new generation of theologians will continue to read the Old Testament to beyond the point where historical criticism can take them. In saying this, I take sides with the close readers against the theorists (as I think Derrida does in a convoluted way). The Old Testament is not a suitable *basis* for systematic theology and the better it is read, the less suitable it becomes.¹⁹ Students will be confronted with the imperious claims of systems and theories wherever they turn in academia; in reading the Old (or New) Testament, have to come to terms with sheer diversity, unresolved tensions, curious juxtapositions, conflicting claims. One does not have to go further than the two creation stories in Genesis with their tantalizing pattern of similarities and differences to see the point.

Women, Silenced and Eloquent

Trible's *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (1978) appeared shortly after I had completed my initial studies; I did not read it until many years later. Though I recognized that women had a number of legitimate claims that were not being met, I initially had no interest in feminist theology. I still have no great knowledge of or overriding passion for it. History and literature are old friends of mine and I still expend most of my energy trying to get

¹⁷ That "theory" is now often used *sans phrase* and capitalized is telling enough.

¹⁸ Jacoby (1994:166ff) provides painful examples of the defence of obscurity – and sharp criticism of it.

¹⁹ Exactly this, which does not mean that no *conversation* between biblical scholarship and systematic theology is possible. Since we always proceed on the basis of theories (as Smit pointed out), we are forever organizing, systematizing, generalizing. Similarly, reading (and re-reading) texts continually recalls their particularity and thus calls into question our systems. This, I believe, is the inescapable dialectic of biblical studies and systematic theology (in which each also contains a moment of the other).

them married to each other. But – this is the point – feminist scholars²⁰ changed my mind in a way that historical and literary scholars never did.

I introduced the personal note because I think many men and some women have shared my experience over the past decades. It is not merely that feminist biblical scholars have produced a significant corpus of work on the Old Testament or that many of them now stand in the front ranks in the discipline – as scholars, not merely as women. It is that they have, I believe, made a difference to the way many people now read, as if by second nature, the texts of the Old Testament. When, in the recent past, three female postgraduate students told me that they did *not* wish to work on a feminist theme and two male students told me that they did, I saw the success, not the failure, of feminist biblical scholarship. Gender is now a fixture on the agenda as an item that can be chosen but does not have to be desperately defended.

I suspect that feminists endeavours have not met with similar success elsewhere and I am at a loss to explain why this could be so. Did the undeniably patriarchal texts of the Old Testament supply feminists with precisely the material they needed to prove their points? Did the distance between our world and the ancient texts create a gap that allowed potentially hostile male readers to hear before they blindly rejected? Did feminist scholars in this field, perhaps constrained by some residual respect for the biblical text, make their case less stridently but more persuasively? Could it be, as a female postgraduate student suggested to me, that part of the appeal came from the strength and resourcefulness of the female characters²¹ in the Old Testament? Finally, it is beyond doubt that the feminist cause had some very eloquent advocates. Probably all these factors played a role.

Whatever the case may be, many feminists, Tribble, Exum, Fewell, and others, wrote with passion and human passion always deserves to be taken seriously.²² Two qualifications are needed here. First, passion is not the preserve of women, neither for better nor for worse. Von Rad wrote with equal passion. Secondly, truly passionate writing, “writing in blood”, has to be distinguished both from writing driven by an animus against something and from writing artificially inflated in the interest of personal or political gain. Some feminists have indulged in mere “venting”; others have tried to grab the limelight for themselves or their cause. It belongs to the full humanity of women that they are as prone to err as men are. Beyond this lie the longings, the affirmations seeking a shape, the calls for a hearing. When feminists writing on the Old Testament made these gropings of the human spirit evident, they did not merely advance their cause; they also humanized the study of the Old Testament. Unless this is done from time to time, Old Testament studies are reduced to poring over yellowed texts and sifting through crumbling bones.

Female scholars in particular (though not only they) have let me see the “human comedy” in Ruth and have drawn my attention to the archetypical human virtue of *חסד*.²³

²⁰ I use the terms “feminists” and “feminist scholars” loosely throughout to mean “feminists, fellow travellers and feminists *malgré lui*”.

²¹ The telling example is Jezebel, the epitome of the evil foreign queen and yet invested with considerable grandeur (see particularly 2 Kings 9:30f and the LXX text of 1 Kings 19:2). Ruth is of course a remarkable character, but so was the masterly author of the book that bears her name, an author whom I cannot envisage as a man. Nor can I shake off the childhood impression that Eve had some spunk while Adam was a wimp.

²² I always intended “passion” to be taken in its full range of meanings, hence also the Nietzschean reference to “writing in blood”. I did not say “emotions” or “feelings”, for we do not always take these seriously even when they are our own.

²³ Starting with Tribble (1978:166-199), a host of feminist scholars have been invaluable to me in my study of Ruth, Green (1982), Fewell and Gunn (1990), Nielsen (1997) and Sakenfeld (1999) standing out in this regard. See also the collected essays in Brenner (ed) 1993a.

They have made me hear the anguished cry of Tamar bath-Dawid²⁴ and the ecstatic cries of the female lover in the Song of Songs.²⁵ They have dramatized for me the scenes in which women (say, Hagar and Sarai) had to thread their way through a masculine maze and those in which women were conspicuous in their absence or silence. They have flipped the coin on perfectly valid perspectives to show an equally valid perspective, normally obscured, on the obverse.²⁶ They have, indirectly and unintentionally, provided me with skills to proceed along the paths they had opened up – though not necessarily in the directions they would have chosen.

That is why I let feminist interpretation stand as a synecdoche for all versions of what is unfortunately called the hermeneutics of suspicion. Unfortunately, because I am convinced that the force of feminist Old Testament scholarship lies in its ability to go beyond suspicion. When I am told that all is not what it seems in a revered text, I may believe it. A theory of systematic oppression may be expounded to me so convincingly that I accept it in principle. When I change my opinion in response to such promptings, I have not necessarily changed my mind, my way of seeing. That happens only when I come to see a concubine lying on the doorstep, her palms on the threshold, come to hear how her *לַנְּנָה* reverberates through centuries of silence and come to recognize in this scene the one moment of high eloquence in a chapter of dark savagery.²⁷

Rhetoricians would like to believe that an elective affinity links passion to eloquence. Passion is not satisfied with any old words; the finest phrases call for feelings that match them. I know that this is not always so. Nevertheless, a good number of feminists have produced compelling prose. Intelligent undergraduate students are a good test here. Knowing as yet too little to be snared by novel ideas alone, they are drawn to the authors who present interesting ideas with clarity and verve²⁸. Tribble, much maligned for not being radical enough, is a firm favourite, also among male students, as Von Rad has always been and remains.

I hope that the spirit of feminist scholarship will continue to influence Old Testament studies. My fear is not so much that the feminist enterprise will collapse, but that its more or less total success will efface its legacy. Once much of what feminists fought to establish is taken for granted by male and female scholars alike, some will continue to hunt for ever subtler points to make and others will look for more pleasing arrangements of the existing furniture. In the absence of the passion and the vision, the exercise will come to resemble that of the latter-day source critics, pursuing sources within sources and glosses on glosses. Feminism is important in its own right; it is equally important as a pointer to what academic theology should never lose and is permanently in danger of losing.

²⁴ Again Tribble (1984:37-63) was the pioneer, pointing the way to, for instance, the inspired use made of this text by Ackermann (2001).

²⁵ Here Tribble (1978:144-165) was partly anticipated by Ginsberg (1970/1857) – male, white and as dead as ever was. See also the collected essays in Benner (ed) 1993b and Brenner and Fontaine (eds) 2000, and, as a study in contrasts, Bergant 2001 and Exum 2005.

²⁶ The two series of *Feminist Companions to the Bible*, in which Athalya Brenner has had a large hand as editor, attest to the richness and diversity of feminist scholarship.

²⁷ On this passage too Tribble (1984:65-91) wrote passionately, to be followed by, for instance, Exum (1993:170-201), Fewell & Gunn (1993:133ff) and Keefe (1993). Hamlin (1990: 160-175) provides a good example of passionate and eloquent writing on the topic by a man.

²⁸ Collins (2005:75) say of the voice of feminist criticism that “none is louder, or has commanded more attention” over the past decades; I speak of passion and eloquence. I leave the reader to ponder the difference.

The Latest or the Last?

For centuries the Old Testament was regarded as a precious gift to the Church. It could, in theory, be mined for the treasures of God's word, though this required more digging than most were prepared to undertake in practice. Today many think of the Old Testament as a pernicious source of illiberal dogmas and prejudices. If we are to engage with it at all, it is to undermine it and thus to free ourselves from its lingering influence.

This does not apply in any obvious way to my students. Many of them respect the Bible too deeply to contemplate undermining it; nearly as many know too little of the Old Testament to understand what its baleful influence could be. Before they have been properly inducted, most UWC students don't even know that they should find ancient texts boring and irrelevant. First-year Humanities students regularly enjoy the Gilgamesh Epic and love Sophocles's *Antigone*. From such students (I do not claim that this goes for all students everywhere) the Old Testament will at least get a hearing. The question is what we should let them hear.

In this regard I find myself caught between a rock and a hard place. The old miners have all but depleted the stock of ore; their replacements often work on wafer-thin veins. My students, blissfully unaware of the old "grand narratives" of Old Testament scholarship, are puzzled and confused by the angelic constructs that now dance on the needle-sharp tip of the pyramid. The broad base being nearly out of sight, they do not know where to place the bits of knowledge they acquire. The most intelligent and interested ones despair of ever being able to place anything on the table that has not been placed there – and duly swept off – several times before. To them the "cutting edge" is a threat rather than a promise.

The absence of a discernable base is sorely felt in many areas. Students do not, to start with, know the basic "story" of the Old Testament at all well. Since they lack a historical frame of reference, it is not easy to tell this story to them. The compressed theological curriculum leaves students of theology no opportunity to acquire the "buttresses" provided by subjects such as philosophy. Another result is either that Hebrew is not taught (UWC) or that less Hebrew is required (Stellenbosch). Once students become aware that they cannot hope to progress far in Old Testament studies without Hebrew, they turn their attention elsewhere. The classes devoted to each theological subject have also been reduced. Finally, students of my generation, having been trained on the broad, ancient stream of historical-critical scholarship, were able to negotiate the rapids that followed. Today's students have to cope with old, still indispensable knowledge and kaleidoscopic new developments at once.

In such circumstances, the temptation to teach undermining is strong. The art of debunking is fashionable, appealing and relatively easy to teach. Thus I can assure myself that I am teaching the latest and hide from myself that I may be teaching the last, that is, the last generation with more than an antiquarian interest in the Old Testament. I will have helped to demolish a building in which I, and others before me, found much of value. I will have done so before my students have checked for themselves whether they too can find treasures in it.

Resisting the temptation leaves us with a daunting task. Above I have identified three strands of hope. Historical scholarship with all its uncertainties brings us into contact with a speaking past, a past in which God's hand might after all be discerned, as many scholars in the past believed. We may have to forgo teaching "the latest" and point our students to the sturdy old cedars, whose writing they find more appealing and less convoluted anyway. My next hope is based on the power of texts, ancient and modern. Texts that have addressed me might address others too: age cannot wither either *Antigone* or *Ruth*. Here we should not be

teaching either the old or the new, either the former or the latter prophets of literature, but the evergreen arts of reading. Who knows what – old or new – students will hear when, in an age hostile to close reading, their ears are opened? We should also continue to teach, perhaps to preach, the human passion that I found paradigmatically in the feminists, hoping to be the midwives to new ways of seeing. The feminists, as I argued above, were at their most effective when they went beyond suspicion and conjured up intricate patterns of rejection and retrieval. Stripped of the human drama, the Old Testament is no more than a mine for deceptive proof texts or a resort for academic escapists.

The last sentence falls just short of accuracy. Since hope is ultimately not a virtue but a theological grace, I conclude on a more overtly theological note.

A Voice into the Wilderness

Barth's *deus dixit* and Von Rad's "God at work in Israel"²⁹ now seem to many to belong to a past that is emotionally further from us than even the Old Testament texts. Perhaps the sign above our seminaries should read: "Silence. Do not disturb. Theologians at work." Just in case God happened to pass that way.

But there is a certain almost divine – or is it divine? – impoliteness about the texts of the Old Testament. They intrude where they are not wanted. In 1974, when I was in my first year as a theology student, the guest speaker at the annual *Sendingweek* was to be the suitably conservative English New Testament scholar Michael Green. On the first evening he preached on Amos 1:1-2:8. This was to be the first in a series but the series was not to be. When he was asked to leave, he preached his second sermon, on Amos 7:10-17, without appearing on a pulpit or opening his mouth. That was more than thirty years ago. Recently Desmond Tutu was told, in effect, that he is a senile old man and that he had better remain in America. No sign or theory could prevent the Old Testament text from speaking – then and now. According to Von Rad (1968:12), similar things happened frequently in Germany during the Nazi era.

Certain texts cannot be trusted to shut up or trussed up to shut them out. You might one day read Genesis 12:1 in a fit of *theia mania* (which is identical to what Chesterton called "a violent outbreak of sanity") and find written there: "And Yahweh said to Abram: Go forth from your culturally determined world-view and your socio-economic context and your interpretive community to the land that I shall show you." And suddenly you might face neither a predetermined doom (recently transferred from the stars and divided between your genes and your upbringing) nor a blank world waiting for constructivist you to breathe life and meaning into it, but a call that somehow has little to do with what you have read about "the concept of vocation in Calvin".

Or you might read Job and not find your name where you expected it, where "Job" stood, but rather where "Eliphaz" stood, and realize that you have long traded the stormy, scary God of the former for the docile idol of the latter, conveniently encapsulated in the current theory. Even in the New Testament one is not safe: "The first said: I have to finish my manuscript on economic justice. I beg you, please excuse me. And another said: I have to attend a conference on global warming. I beg you, please excuse me. And another said: I have to lead a march against racism. I beg you, please excuse me."

My guess is that in Old Testament studies more than we may expect will remain unchanged for some time and that some of the changes that certainly will come will be unexpected. As for the "changes" that I have referred to briefly in this section, they are not

²⁹ He reference is to the title of von Rad 1980. For the collapse of this view, see Perdue 1994:3-11.

in our hands and have never been.³⁰ These are not the changes wrought by tempestuous winds of change or earth-shaking paradigm shifts or conflagration that raze the edifices of tradition. They come unbidden and unheralded when someone somewhere hears the “voice of thin silence”

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³⁰ That is why I find the titles *Whose Bible Is It Anyway?* (Davies 2004) and *Who Owns the Bible?* (Dornfried 2006) equally unfortunate, in spite of the authors’ opposing views and the considerable merits of the books themselves. The world of these titles is different from the one in which von Rad could say of his work “Mir ist ab und zu etwas aufgefallen” (Wolff 1970:657).

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