METHODOLOGY, SPEECH, SOCIETY

The Hebrew Bible

Yehoshua Gitay
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Preface

The appearance of this book has been made possible by the input of a number of dear people who believed in the project and thus contributed to its accomplishment.

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The graduate Old Testament seminars, those Wednesday afternoon meetings, have been a source of inspiration to both Tzfira and me. In the course of the seminars, we have dealt with significant issues that gave birth to a number of the essays that are presented in this volume.

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Yehoshua Gitay

Beit Berl Academic College/Stellenbosch University
Introduction

The studies, which compose the present book, were written during my sojourn in South Africa as the Isidore and Theresa Cohen Chair of Hebrew Studies at the University of Cape Town and as an Extraordinary Professor at the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University. My work as a Biblical researcher in the South Africa of the post-apartheid era has not been isolated from the social and political powers that gave birth to the new democracy. The influence is reflected, I believe, in the choice of the subject matter of my research which implies, given the political-social context, a representation of relevant pragmatic topics of study. However, I pursued my study without compromising the methodological principles of scholarship.

Consequently, the opening chapter seeks to clarify the issue of scholarship versus public taste. We are inundated with articles and books which apply current political and social subjects to Biblical issues but which jeopardise true scholarship in an attempt to satisfy the audience’s interest in political issues that relate to Biblical topics. Thus, we need to ask ourselves what true scholarship is – is it a discipline, a science? This issue is discussed in the opening essay, “Literary Criticism versus Public Criticism”.

The present volume presents a number of my publications (many of which have appeared in leading South African journals on Biblical and Semitic studies) under three categories – Methodology, Speech and Society.¹ The reader will not be surprised that the study sets off with the issue of methodology since there is no meaningful scholarship without sound methodology. The question of Biblical hermeneutics is extremely important because the way we interpret the text as a set of philological literary rules affects our reading and teaching.

Thus, we must draw a distinction between lay reading and professional methodological study. Given this distinction, I argue that, as scholars, we must keep asking ourselves the basic question of why and how we scholars do what we do; how we study a specific text, a specific literary genre or a specific literary

¹ Some parts of the chapters in this volume may differ slightly from the original articles because they have undergone certain changes in order to ensure coherence of the whole. The updates are editorial and stylistic in nature and do not affect the overall content or message of the original articles.
stratum; and how we deduce from the setting of the text, its meaning, and its literary structure. Those are crucial questions in my research. I constantly re-examine the foundation of our scholarly exploration, and I do not hesitate to doubt certain premises and to offer substitutes which in my investigation could respond better to the nature of given texts.

My goal is to understand the principles of Biblical hermeneutics – to clarify the assumptions of our methodology. As a rule, scholarship is shaped by specific paradigms that are considered sacred cows. But are we not worshipping the cows rather than scholarship itself? Are we listening to new discoveries that might provide a fresh look at and new insights into the material, thereby opening new avenues of scholarship? Are we not enslaved to the routine of the convenient? Are the linguistics and theoretical principles valid?

Scholarship is based on fixed paradigms. The main reason is that scholars are educated in terms of a given set of rules and assumptions which create a mindset that determines the ways and directions of the scholarship both in teaching and in publication. It is very seldom that Biblicists themselves create a paradigm shift. For instance, the recent shift in Biblical scholarship from the search for the original to the focus on the final product has shown that the so-called Redaction Criticism has been initiated not necessarily by Biblicists themselves. Rather, leading literary critics (such as Northrop Frye, Frank Kermode and Robert Alter) who, given their reputation and high authority as literary-textual scholars, have affected the realm of Biblical scholarship. Obviously, the community of Biblical scholars has joined “the big names” that seek better communication with the community at large rather than confine itself to the small and closed circle of academic scholarship.

The African environment encourages us to look carefully at the tradition of oral presentation, the poetics of oral literature. I have discovered a minefield of data which stimulated me to call for a paradigm shift in aspects of Biblical scholarship such as narrative studies.

My research, which has been influenced to a certain degree by the African environment, has indicated that the poetics of oral literature characterises the Biblical discourse as well. Supplementing this finding by theories of narrative studies, I have reached the conclusion that the current paradigm of complex literature constructed by a chain of literary levels and pieces is questionable. The poetics of oral literature and narrative studies might indicate a mixture of genres, repetitions, grammatical and syntactical varieties which are considered the cornerstone of the paradigm of the critical-analytical studies of the Hebrew Bible.
that lead to a mixed literature of actually artificial rules. Two studies, "A Call for a Paradigm Shift" and "The Promise: The Winding Road – Genesis 13-14 in Light of a Theory of Narrative", re-examine the current paradigm and offer an alternative critical approach which initiates a new paradigm that reconsiders the matter of the composition as the work of a single scribe.

This is just a beginning. Nevertheless, I have also presented this approach in my study of the poetics of the prophetic literature (Prophecy and Persuasion and Isaiah and His Audience).

The study of speech constitutes a major part of my research. Indeed, the core of my scholarship is rhetoric. I became interested in rhetoric as the art of argumentation, first, because of my love for oratory and, second, because rhetoric is the essence of human activity, given its communicative skills, and the Biblical authors sought to communicate with their audience.

Rhetoric, the art of argumentation and persuasion, is a method which is applied in almost every chapter in this volume. Indeed, I have adapted rhetoric, the art of persuasion and argumentation as a major instrument of introducing the Hebrew Bible because we are confronted with a lively Book that reflects disputes among people as well as ideologies that argue one against the other. Thus, the method that fits the study of the Hebrew Bible as a lively Book rather than a dry document is rhetoric, the art of argumentation and persuasion. Rhetoric enables us to penetrate the feelings of biblical characters and their ways of thinking. Rhetoric enables us to discover the debates and arguments that shape the culture of the Book and the conflicts that shaped ancient Israelite life through the writers and editors that formed this dynamic Book.

Thus, I became interested in the power of speech as an essential factor in the rise and fall of leadership, and I studied the phenomenon in the light of the Biblical account of the rise of Judah as his brothers’ leader, based on his rhetorical skills. In addition, I have attempted to shed light on the issue of creating a dialogue between two opponents who debated crucial issues of justice and authority. The book of Job is instrumental to our understanding of the process of argumentation which ignores the human feelings on the account of the schematic paradigm on the one hand, and which longs for support for the misery of the suffering individual, on the other hand.

The Hebrew Bible deals with the issue in matters that seem to question God’s justice when a human being feels that God acts against the principles of
righteousness. The study addresses the problem by examining certain Biblical figures that question God such as Abraham and Job who present their integrity and belief in justice before God, believing that the matter of justice is absolute even for God. How should human beings behave under such circumstances? Should they follow the conventional wisdom of God's justice or listen to their own heart? This Biblical attitude that regards justice as the absolute leading force of truth is the essence of human integrity as well as the core of true democracy – the right and justification to question even God's authority, given the human self-conviction of their own integrity.

Indeed, South Africa's multi-cultural arena calls attention to crucial questions regarding the meaning of democracy. What is the meaning of a dialogue? Do people listen to the other? And to whom should we listen – to the conventional public wisdom or to the voice of the individual victim? This is the essence of democracy, on the one hand, and the core of conflict resolution, on the other. Do we know how to handle our differences? Do we understand the depth of a sincere dialogue when discussing openly our disputes? The book of Job sheds light on the issues, and the subject is investigated in the present volume through a study which throws light on a crucial matter in our society – the conflict between religious thinking and humanistic modes of thinking.

Furthermore, the technological society has created a dilemma. Technology is so highly developed that only experts may understand its functions but the lay leaders must make crucial decisions on behalf of the people. This is a complex situation that creates problems for the decision makers. The book of Job is a point of reference for such a discussion. Job's friends operate on the basis of common wisdom while Job represents the dissident. To whom should the non-expert decision maker listen? The book of Job praises the individual who dares to question the common wisdom but points out as well that there is a limit to the individual human wisdom. Therefore, the book of Job provides a cognitive and moral lesson for one who takes the responsibility of asking questions but who should know as well the limitations of such responsibility.

South Africa is reshaping its collective memory; but how is such an important target taking place? How do people deal with the difficult reality and still create a narrative of hope and vision? Indeed, the question of collective memory is the subject matter of the essay “History, Memory and Literature” which discusses the issue of reshaping the national narrative through the problematic but dramatic period of Restoration that witnessed the rewriting of the narrative of Israel.
However, the work is yet to end and I would remind us of the words of the wise regarding unfinished tasks:

The day is short, and the task is great, and the workmen are sluggish, and the reward is much, and the Master of the house is urgent ... It is not for thee to finish the work ... if you learn much Torah, they give thee much reward (Rabbi Tarpon in *Pirqe Aboth* = *Saying of the Jewish Fathers*, Chapter 2).

Yehoshua Gitoy
METHODOLOGY
How to Read the Biblical Text — The Ongoing Debate between Scholars and Lay Readers

Since the end of the nineteenth century, Biblical criticism has distinguished itself through a strict methodological framework that focused on the history of the Biblical literature. The aim was to retrieve the origins of the historical settings of the atomic literary unit, assuming that the origin was a sporadic unit that has been developed gradually into the canon through a complex process of redaction. This method of Biblical analysis was applied not only to the Biblical narrative, but also to the study of the prophetic literature. The analytical method has depicted the narrative (specifically the Pentateuch) as a chain of isolated genres or tales and regarded the prophetic books as originally independent short utterances that are the kernels of this literary material. This critical-analytical method was clear and well defined from both the literary aspect and the philological criteria that determine the units (Gitay 2001a:101-128).

Thus, Biblical scholarship mapped the historicity of the given text and the outcome of this massive work can be seen in university libraries where shelves upon shelves of books and journals compose a gigantic research literature written in a strict technical-professional manner for a limited circle of experts. These experts engage with a tiring technical language that deals with complex issues that relate indirectly to the Bible itself, focusing on matters of composition and transmission. The result was that scholarship has deepened our knowledge of the process of the literary transmission of the Biblical canon from orality through the written scroll to the printed Book. However, the outcome of this massive scholarship has been problematic regarding the lay readers of the Bible and its pious students who are interested in the Bible itself, in its meaning and theological lesson, rather than in the actual history of the text.

A complex situation has been created. The circle of readers of the vast literature of careful philological and genetic investigation is confined to a close guild of professionals while the majority of the readers and the devoted students of the

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2 This chapter appeared originally as an article in Old Testament Essays, 19/2 (2006), pp. 633-649.
Scriptures— who search for the message and lesson— remain outside of the professional circle. These readers who are sincere learners of the Bible are mostly unfamiliar with the technical language and the terminology of analytical scholarship and have almost no interest in the literary problems revolving around the historicity of the literature. A gap between scholarship and readers of the religious schools, i.e. attendees of Churches or Synagogues, has been created.

Subsequently, current Biblical scholarship did not stay indifferent to the interests of the community of readers who read the Biblical books in their given shape. Biblical critics are shifting the focus of research from the investigation of the historical origins of the setting of the atomic units to the book as a whole, seeking to look at the literary thematic design of the books in their canonical shape. This scholarly endeavour to reach the general readers is altering the analytical orientation from the search for authorship to the focus on audience (for the development, see Gitay *ibid*). The outcome of this shift in the critics’ focus has created a growing literature of synchronic studies of the Biblical literature affected by the community’s interest to read the books in their canonical form, as they are, and to focus on the religious message as a manifestation of the whole rather than the sporadic fragmental literary units. In accordance, the strict professional technical language and terminology that characterised the earlier diachronic scholarship of the historicity of the literature has been replaced by a readable, non-technical and coherent style of writing.

Given this development in the direction of scholarship, a methodological session, presented at the 2000 Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), has set out its goal to monitor—as a self-review—the methodological matter of this shift to the synchronic study. There has been a particular concern to assess the place of Form Criticism, the classical analytical method of investigation in the context of the diachronic study of the Biblical literature. It appears that the scholars who took part in the SBL meeting were determined to respond to the public interest in the canonical shape of the books and to update the form-critical diachronic study of the Biblical literature, freeing it from its literary-historical confines. This has been, in fact, the dramatic conclusion of Anthony F. Campbell in his article (which opens the volume following the editors’ introduction): “Form Criticism Future” (2003:15-31). He writes as follows:

> The meaning of a text emerges from the text as a whole, not substantively from the fragments that can be found in it (p. 24) ...
> Modern Form Criticism ... has a future – if its past is allowed a decent burial (p. 31).
In short, we are experiencing a desperate call to shift the scholarly target from authorship to the readers: “The meaning of the text is dependent on the reader”, claims Edgar Conrad (1996:325), tending therefore to transform the analytical-historical orientation to a syntactical (synchronic) presentation.

Isaiah as a Case Study — From Analysis to Synthesis

The study of Isaiah may demonstrate the switch that revolves around the changes that took place from the process of reading the individual unit to the book as a whole. Given the literary design of the book (the entire 66 chapters), the book of Isaiah has been a subject of form-critical investigation which divided the book into three major historical-literary parts each of which is separated into numerous literary units. The determination of these units is a subject of a complex technical philological analysis which is based on grammar, stylistic features and literary genres. Needless to say, this determination of the literary forms and their linguistically-stylistic characterisation – the subject matter of the scholarly endeavour – is far away from the general Church or Synagogue attendees who seek to read the prophetic message of Isaiah, as a whole, as a meaningful religious-theological manifestation of faith.

Scholars were not indifferent to public interest and responded to the theological concern, aiming their exegesis accordingly thus creating a dramatic shift in the scholarly orientation. In this regard, attention must be given to Peter Ackroyd’s essay, “Isaiah 1-12: Presentation of a Prophet” (1987:79-104) which is a landmark in Canon criticism. This essay demonstrates the move from analysis to synthesis in the context of the study of Isaiah – from the literary fragments to the book as a whole, in order to provide a meaning for the compiler’s readers. Ackroyd considers that the goal of the critic of Isaiah is to reveal

the basis for the acceptance of the present application of what is associated with the prophet to lie in a view of his authoritative status ... the fulfilment of his [the prophet’s] word in events, in the continued vitality of that word in new situations ... Authentication rests then ... in the continuing process by which prophetic word and receptive hearing interact (1987:103-104).

That is to say, the critic aims to provide the meaning of the prophetic word through the relationship between the word, the book and the readers. The prophetic book is presented now in relevance to the readers. In other words, the critic’s new goal is to coordinate the work – the book of Isaiah – as a fulfilment of the prophetic word with an emphasis on the readers’ (hearers’) values. Thus,