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INTERPRETATION IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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BB412 – Studies in the Old Testament

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Interpretation in the Old Testament

The Old Testament is the result of faithful interpretation of past traditions, which means that the interpretation is never mere reportage.[1] It was formed by a process whereby new generations took up older traditions and reshaped them according to the horizons and needs of the particular contemporary community in its new circumstances.[2]

Although the writers and editors of the Old Testament drew on historical sources, such as royal chronicles, their aim was not to present a chronological account of Israel's history.[3] Rather, their interpretation would challenge readers to faith in God amidst their new situations.[4] Stories were retold because of the need to recast them in ways to meet the needs of new circumstances in the life of God's people.[5]

This paper discusses the above concept of interpretation in relation to the three divisions of the Old Testament: Torah, Prophets, and Writings. For the Torah, the exodus narrative (Exodus 1:1 to 15:21) is used as a main illustration.

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[1] Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 394.
[2] Brueggemann, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 394.
[3] J. W. Rogerson, "The History of the Tradition: Old Testament and Apocrypha", in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, ed. J. D. G. Dunn and J. W. Rogerson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 3.
[4] Rogerson, "The History of the Tradition, 3.
[5] Donald S. Deer, "How the Bible Came to Us", in *The International Bible Commentary*, ed. William R. Farmer (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 170. In this process, new generations produced literature in response to their needs, resulting in a variety of kinds of literature: allegories, apocalypses, fables, history, hymns, letters, parables, prayers, prophecies, proverbs, rituals, speeches, and treatises.

The Torah: The Exodus Narrative

Today scholars recognize the difficulty of precisely locating the exodus event historically.[6] Based on the Documentary Hypothesis, the present form of the exodus narrative took shape as late as the exile – which means that the episodes were told, imagined, and shaped in the sixth century.[7] The fact that the story includes a variety of literary "sources" indicates that the community recounted the event in many generations and circumstances, and found it as powerfully disclosing as it was in the initial tellings.[8]

Therefore, due to the limited historical evidence of the original, particular events themselves – and with the powerful use of narrative in Israel's liturgy – it can also be concluded that a text, such as one describing the exodus event, would invite and allow rereading in a variety of contexts.[9] Accordingly, one can concur with Brueggemann that "the upshot of such a critical awareness is the chance to see that any episode of the narrative can be read with reference to any encounter with overwhelming, abusive power; consequently, the theme of 'YHWH versus Pharaoh' functions not as historical reportage, but . . . is characteristically and inescapably focused upon a contemporary or near-contemporary occurrence of 'tyranny and deliverance' that still has pertinence to the retelling community".[10]

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[6] Walter Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus", in *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 54.
[7] Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus", 54.
[8] Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus", 55.
[9] Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus", 54. It is possible then, for example, that the "pharaoh", could also represent Nebuchadnezzar, the great Babylonian ruler who attacked Jerusalem.
[10] Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus", 54-55.

Interestingly, this paradigmatic reuse of the exodus event is used in other parts of Scripture.[11] For example, a replication of the exodus that demonstrates the sovereignty of Yahweh is seen in Joshua 4:21-24 (crossing of the Jordan); in 1 Sam 4:1-7:1 (ark narrative; see especially 4:8, 6:6, and Exodus 10:1-2); and in Isaiah 40-55 (return home of Jews from Babylon; see especially 52:11-12 and 55:12).[12] In each passage, the exodus account is reiterated for a different generation under new circumstances, and given new meaning.[13]

With the paradigmatic reuse of historical narratives, another important aspect emerges – the role of liturgy. In Exodus 1-15, for example, the redaction of chapters 12-15 shows that liturgy is a key to its correct interpretation.[14] Fretheim makes a significant statement: "It has been common to suggest that these materials were written under the influence of later cultic practice. That is to say, later practice of these rituals has influenced the way in which the narrative has been composed. To put it succinctly: liturgy has shaped literature".[15] And so, as a result of centuries of religious practice, different layers of tradition have been incorporated into the final form of the narrative.[16]

Redactionally, in Exodus 12-15, the story and liturgy have been woven together in such a way that they cannot be correctly understood when separated from each other.[17] The historical event is simultaneously a liturgical event.[18] However, in parts of Exodus 12-15 (see for example, 12:1-28 and 14:1-31), the liturgy has not only shaped the literature, but it

[11] Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus", 55.
[12] Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus", 55-56.
[13] Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus", 56.
[14] Terence E. Fretheim, "From Passover to Praise", in *Exodus* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 133.
[15] Fretheim, "From Passover to Praise", 133.
[16] Fretheim, "From Passover to Praise", 133.
[17] Fretheim, "From Passover to Praise", 137.
[18] Fretheim, "From Passover to Praise", 136.

has also shaped the event itself – in other words, the event is liturgy.[19] Consequently, with liturgy being structured into the story of the past redemptive historical event, then the salvific effect of the past story can be appropriated or realized in every new present circumstance.[20] Fretheim summarizes: "The saving power of the original event is made available ever anew to the community by God's redeeming activity within the context of worship".[21]

In summary, the exodus narrative indicates that the redactors recognized that the material is not historical reportage.[22] Rather, it was intended for liturgical reiteration so that the saving event and Yahweh's sovereignty could be remembered and reenacted in other times and places.[23]

The Torah: Deuteronomy

In the remainder of the paper, the text-forming process that eventuated in the Old Testament continues to be developed. It is a creative process – never mere reportage – whereby new generations take up older traditions and reshape them according to the needs of the contemporary community.[24]

For the book of Deuteronomy, the "historical" locus of the material that became the book is during the eighth or seventh century, during the time of Assyrian domination.[25] A key reference point during this time is the reform of Josiah (see 2 Kgs 22-23).[26]

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[19] Fretheim, "From Passover to Praise", 137.
[20] Fretheim, "From Passover to Praise", 139.
[21] Fretheim, "From Passover to Praise", 139.
[22] Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus", 57.
[23] Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus", 57.
[24] Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 394.
[25] Walter Brueggemann, "Introduction", in *Deuteronomy* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 18.
[26] Brueggemann, "Introduction", 19.

Brueggemann then suggests that "the older eighth- to seventh-century materials were taken up and framed in the first speech (1:1-4:40) and the third speech (29:2-32:47) to serve the needs of the exilic community in the sixth century, after Jerusalem had been lost and the opinion-makers in the community were deported out of the land".[27] In the fifth century, the older materials of Deuteronomy were again reused, this time by Ezra and his followers, after which the corpus of Deuteronomy later became a canonical book.[28] In sum, the reference points of Moses, Josiah, and Ezra illustrate a long process of faithful interpretation whereby new reliable meaning is derived from older texts.[29]

The Torah: The Deuteronomic History

The corpus of the Deuteronomic History (that in its final form includes the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings) can also be considered in the light of re-interpretive history being developed in this paper, especially the books of 1 and 2 Kings.

Brueggemann proposes that "the entire literature of the Deuteronomic History seeks to illuminate the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E. . . . that pivots around the rule of YHWH".[30] Most scholars would agree in that they recognize the purpose of the Deuteronomic History is to help explain why the kingdom failed and the people were exiled despite God's covenant promises.[31] A deeper and more spiritual view of God's actions in the world resulted over time.[32] Boadt identifies three major stages: an early stage

[27] Brueggemann, "Introduction", 19.
[28] Brueggemann, "Introduction", 20.
[29] Brueggemann, "Introduction", 20.
[30] Walter Brueggemann, "The Books of 1 and 2 Kings", in *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 145.
[31] Lawrence Boadt, "Jeremiah and the Deuteronomic History", in *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 380.
[32] Boadt, "Jeremiah and the Deuteronomic History", 381.

of reform recorded in Deuteronomy 5-26 (700's); the application of this reform by King Josiah (600's); and a final edition of the Deuteronomic History during the exile (500's).[33] In short, the Deuteronomic History was a major endeavour to re-look at beliefs, and to understand the ups and downs of the history of God's people in a new light.[34]

Specifically, most of 1 and 2 Kings re-imagines and re-interprets the remembered past of Israel in relation to YHWH, the God who makes promises and gives commands.[35] In other words, 1 and 2 Kings is not historical reportage – rather its purpose is interpretive commentary on the history available in other source material.[36] Three specific references are given in 1 Kings – the Book of the Acts of Solomon (1 Kgs 11:41), the Book of the Annals of the Kings of Israel (1 Kgs 14:19), and the Book of the Annals of the Kings of Judah (1 Kgs 15:7). In sum, the focus is not on the sources, but on the interpretive imagination whereby, according to Brueggemann, "the will and purpose of YHWH is defining – in judgment and in grace – for the life and memory this community".[37]

The Prophets

In the Prophets, the second division of the Old Testament, the prophetic literature also attests to an interpretive process whereby new meaning is derived from older texts. The Prophets include the books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, as well as the writings of the major (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel) and the minor (Hosea-Malachi)

[33] Boadt, "Jeremiah and the Deuteronomic History", 381.
[34] Boadt, "Jeremiah and the Deuteronomic History", 381.
[35] Brueggemann, "The Books of 1 and 2 Kings", 145.
[36] Brueggemann, "The Books of 1 and 2 Kings", 146.
[37] Brueggemann, "The Books of 1 and 2 Kings", 148.

prophets.[38] These individuals interpreted events from the perspective of Israelite religious and ethical traditions – they understood Yahweh's hand at work behind events.[39] Also, in order for the Israelites to understand their own times, the prophets re-formulated earlier prophetic words, added short comments, or linked prophetic accounts to another portion of the canon.[40] In summary, a distinguishing feature of prophetic literature is the contemporizing of prophetic words for new generations.[41]

After the rebuilding of the Temple (rededicated in 515 B.C.E.), prophetic literature continued to be written – however, it occurred in the form of notes, additions, and supplements to earlier words.[42] Yahwism, from essentially being a nation-state religion, became Judaism – a religion that could be practiced elsewhere (such as in Egypt and Mesopotamia).[43] Accordingly, as Peterson states, "this new form of religion, oriented around divine instruction, did not so much need new "words" . . . as it needed interpreters of words that already existed, particularly those of the Torah or the Pentateuch".[44]

The Writings

Finally, in the third division of the Old Testament, the Writings, the same interpretive process is at work, ensuring that texts have pertinence in later new

[38] David L. Peterson, "Introduction to Prophetic Literature", in *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. VI, ed. L. E. Keck et al (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 2. Those considered as prophets had various titles or role labels – four such titles in the Old Testament are: "seer", "diviner", "man of God", and "prophet" (page 4).
[39] Peterson, "Introduction to Prophetic Literature", 7.
[40] Peterson, "Introduction to Prophetic Literature", 17-18.
[41] Peterson, "Introduction to Prophetic Literature", 18.
[42] Peterson, "Introduction to Prophetic Literature", 8.
[43] Peterson, "Introduction to Prophetic Literature", 8.
[44] Peterson, "Introduction to Prophetic Literature", 8.

circumstances. A striking case in point, for both the Jewish and Christian tradition, is the figure of Lady Wisdom whose identity is defined anew in successive generations.[45]

The book of Proverbs reflects a period when wisdom writers presented a degree of certitude and easy answers to life's experiences.[46] By contrast, the book of Job, generally thought to be later than Proverbs, reflects a time when the straightforward answers of the earlier wisdom writers no longer worked.[47] While Proverbs was optimistic about the fact that good things come to the wise, and punishment occurs for the wicked, the author of Job realized that life was not that simple.[48] In sum, according to Dell, the book of Job is a kind of paradigmatic story that may take "its starting point from the character and contexts of the book of Proverbs".[49]

Like the book of Job, the book of Ecclesiastes represents wisdom in revolt – in other words, while working within the wisdom tradition, the author is testing its maxims against experience.[50] Dell shows the interpretive process at work in that "there is a pessimism here that contrasts sharply with the optimism of the early wisdom writers, but an accompanying realism and a trust in God that the early writings lacked".[51] In summary, wisdom literature shows change and development over time as contexts vary and theological thought develops.[52]

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[45] Roland E. Murphy, "Lady Wisdom", in *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 146.
[46] Katherine Dell, "Wisdom", in *The Biblical World*, vol. 1, ed. John Barton (London: Routledge, 2002), 112.
[47] Dell, "Wisdom", 112-113.
[48] Dell, "Wisdom", 113.
[49] Dell, "Wisdom", 115.
[50] Dell, "Wisdom", 117.
[51] Dell, "Wisdom", 117.
[52] Dell, "Wisdom", 124.

For the book of Psalms, the same interpretive process occurs, making worship pertinent for the Israelites in each particular period – from the Yahweh faith established under Moses, carried down through the tribal period until David, continued from the building of the Temple under Solomon until the people's exile in the sixth century B.C.E., and culminating in the renewed worship after the exile.[53] The compilation of the book of Psalms involved a long process of selection, reuse, revision, and grouping of the psalms that went with their constant use in Israel's worship.[54] Psalms were revised and expanded to adapt them for new generations in new circumstances.[55] May aptly states that "in them [the Psalms] we encounter the voices of individuals and communities speaking of predicaments and possibilities that belong to their experiences".[56] In short, a process of rereading, revising, and relocating took place in the production of the book of Psalms that now exists.[57]

Conclusion

In having briefly examined the Old Testament – its three divisions of Torah, Prophets, and Writings – one can concur with Bruggemann that "the text-forming process that eventuated in the Old Testament is one of bold, ongoing *interpretation*, and interpretation is never mere reportage. It is rather a creative process that identifies and articulates meaningfulness that is in part *discovered* in old nuances and that is in part *invented* in the struggle from older meaning to newer text".[58] Such an interpretive process

[53] Lawrence Boadt, "Israelite Worship and Prayer", in *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 380.
[54] James Luther Mays, "Introduction", in *Psalms* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 9.
[55] Mays, "Introduction", 10-11.
[56] Mays, "Introduction", 8.
[57] Mays, "Introduction", 11.
[58] Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 394.

means that there is an ongoing openness in the interpretation of a text and cautions against a final settled meaning, or for literalism to take root.[59]

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[59] Brueggemann, "Introduction", 23.

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