

The Old Testament, the Bible, and History

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A number of years ago, a professor of Systematic Theology in Berlin, Notger Slenczka argued that the Old Testament should no longer be included in the sacred scripture of the Christian Church. His was not a new argument. Negative attitudes about the inclusion of the OT date back already to the debates surrounding the formation of the Bible that circulated around Marcion in the second century CE. Thinking along these lines resurfaced time and again, but notably in conjunction with the German Christians in the period of National Socialist rule who removed the OT from the scripture of the church and any sympathetic passages or books in the New Testament. Before I consider my view about the irreplaceable contribution of the OT to theological study, let me briefly introduce myself.

My work on the OT over the last 15 years has taken me from Oxford to Århus to Zürich and now to Copenhagen for a two-year appointment to fulfill the teaching duties of Associate Professor Søren Holst. Degrees in Jewish Studies, Oriental Studies, and Theology have sparked my interest in a number of research areas. What unifies my work is the endeavour to understand the record of thinking about

God, the human person, and its reception in religious communities against the backdrop of cultural embeddedness. My work includes monographs, edited volumes, essays, and articles that fall under 5 main topics; (1) reconstructions of the thought and literature of the period considered to be the great watershed in biblical memory, commonly referred to as the exile, but which I call the Templeless Age, (2) attention to the distinctive contribution of biblical Diaspora case studies which evidence positive attitudes towards an adoptive homeland as well as strategies for constructive and successful integration, (3) greater awareness of prophetic ethics that contribute to inclusion and openness in theological and anthropological reflection, (4) the significance of the temple as a religious, economic, and social edifice in biblical Israel and for Jewish communities in the Greco-Roman world, and (5) re-defining and characterizing aniconism and its importance for theological analyses of the *imago Dei*.

Historicity and God-talk

Religious communities understood that they could modify and create new stories of encounters with God exactly

because the Hebrew scriptures present a testament of a deity active within historical time. Notably, a consideration of the OT or perhaps better, the Hebrew Bible, discloses an overwhelming interest in historicity. The historical bent of the OT encourages us to get to know something about the cultural contexts in which it arose. Its literature, then, invites us to have a narrow view of the world in which it claims to have arisen as well as a broader view of the various ancient Near Eastern cultures within which it existed, with which it shared ideology and theology, and against which it negotiated for its distinctiveness and survival. Through this narrow and broader view, we come to know both the oddness of the biblical world and possibilities for approaching its message today. With the risk of being reductionist, let me point to two examples of what I mean.

(1) The OT comes from a cultural setting that is vastly different from (post-) modern Europe. The material evidence that remains includes copious religious and administrative records, such as liturgies, laments over fallen cities, and details about cultic preparations and rituals as well as lists of various monarchs, their military campaigns, and treaties or other bureaucratic documents, but with less narrative framing and interpretation than that found among the traditions of ancient Israel. Moreover, the iconography of the ancient world from Egypt, the Mesopotamian empires of Assyria and Babylonia, and the Persians farther to the East, discloses how ancient peoples sought to depict themselves and their ideologies. They conceptualized themselves quite differently than we would – with

exotic hairstyles, exaggerated eyes, long beards for the men, different clothes, and vastly distinct depictions of symbols, flying disk deities, and other mysterious creatures – hybrid and whole. To learn about the OT entails getting to know the different and, from our point of view, often strange world in which it existed.

When seen in this way, the loss of the Hebrew scriptures from the canon removes the opportunity to experience the ‘old’ of the OT or the symbolic universe of the ancient world that is from our post-modern vantage point totally other. In so doing, it omits that which can make us uncomfortable or challenge our conceptions of ourselves, our societies, our systems of government, and our religious beliefs. At the same time, greater awareness of a critical approach to the biblical literature that includes a view to its cultural context in the ancient world restricts the interpreter from making facile, one to one correspondences in interpretation, application, and exegesis.

(2) The study of the OT also enables us to think through questions about the authority of scripture as a testament separated from the ‘old’ that we name it. A way to think about this results from new research that I am conducting on Rewritten Scripture in antiquity, but which also aligns with some texts we recently studied in class. Rewritten scripture refers to sacred traditions, often understood as historical accounts of encounters with God, that were inherited, updated, and modified within local religious communities to meet the needs of the present. There are examples of Rewritten Scripture in the Bible, but the terminology primarily describes a phenomenon related to extra-

biblical literature of the intertestamental period know from the Dead Sea Scrolls (the book of Jubilees or the Genesis Apocryphon), Josephus' *Antiquities*, and Greek versions of the stories of Esther and Daniel, for example.

One of the clearest examples of a biblical book that has been updated, added to, and modified over time is the book of Isaiah. Starting with the Enlightenment, but certainly consistent with the precedent set by the pre-critical work of the medieval rabbis, the book of Isaiah divides into three main sections. It includes prophetic oracles associated with different historical figures; Isaiah of Jerusalem who prophesied in the eighth century BCE (chs. 1-39), an anonymous prophet of the Exile active after the fall of Jerusalem in the sixth century BCE (chs. 40-55), and another anonymous prophet of the Restoration associated with the reconstruction of the imperial province of Yehud with its capital in Jerusalem in the fifth century BCE (chs. 56-66).

Chapter one seems to represent the work of the final editor of the book of Isaiah who intended to provide a suitable introduction to its 66 chapters of disparate material. Because the work introduces the prophet Isaiah by presenting a summary of the entirety of his prophecies, the first chapter can appear disjointed, with various verses spliced together in the redactor's presentation. For example, an oddly placed woe oracle appears as an independent unit between material with which it otherwise has nothing to do, "Ve det syndige folk, et folk der er læsset med skyld, en slægt af forbrydere, børn der volder fordærv; de har svigtet Herren, ladet hånt om Israels Hellige og vendt ham

ryggen" (Es. 1,4). According to redaction critics, this saying has been relocated from its place as the introduction to a series of woe oracles that appear in chapter 5 (Es. 5,8-23) after what is known as the Song of the Vineyard (Es. 5,1-7). In its rightful place, it would have introduced a series of woe oracles directed to specific groups with a general divine word and rounded the number of woes to 7, one of the numbers in scripture that symbolized holiness and completeness.

Attention to the historical embeddedness of scripture reveals that the book of Isaiah has been organized and framed in order to introduce its message to a new audience in a new cultural context, even perhaps in a new place. Without diving too deep into a discussion of the editing of biblical texts, it suffices to point out what is important about this illustration. Sacred scripture was inherited and updated in later times and by different authors within communities that found its message authoritative, and so important to frame and maintain for the current generation and for posterity. This suggests something about the task of the interpreter and the theologian: sacred scripture licenses the ongoing disclosure of religious messages for the succour of people and communities of faith in new times and circumstances by priests, preachers, and teachers, not rigidly and woodenly, but flexibly and imaginatively.

Appreciating the stranger among us

Circling back to calls for the ejection of the Hebrew scriptures from the Bible of the Christian Church, perhaps we should be honest about the fact that the OT is

not an easy read. It is full of conflicting messages, difficult passages in terms of translation as well as appreciation, horror stories and tales of tragic loss, human suffering, and catastrophes, strange concepts, weird cultic rituals, and even a marked preference for exclusion – what I have recently discussed with my students as intolerant monotheism. The OT is as fraught with competing voices, entrenched views, and discord as the recent presidential election in the United States of America. Similarly, it invites its readers and hearers into dialogue and debate in order to grasp their ‘better angels’ and lean into justice and ethical behaviour to the neighbour, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan – as we just translated in class, ‘to put right the oppressor (lit. ‘the exploiter’)’ (Isa. 1,17).

The OT forms an important part of the anthology of the Christian Bible. By reminding us of what is different, odd, and strange, it enables us, encourages us even, to be tolerant of, to acknowledge lines of commonality with, and have re-

spect for other points of view, cultures, and religions. At the same time, scripture presents itself as holding universal truths that span time to speak a new word beyond its cultural embeddedness. It is the responsibility of practitioners, then, to update its message to meet the challenges of changing times whilst respecting a distinctive voice from a setting that differs dramatically from our own.

The Old Testament is a significant part of holy scripture, not just because the early church used it for liturgy and self-understanding, but also because it enables us to better appreciate that which makes us uncomfortable. To lose the OT is to whitewash the messiness of the testimony of scripture. Through the ‘strange fire’ of its literature we are in a better position to grapple with that which is foreign to us, with that which is odd to us – in outlook and expression, and ultimately with that which can challenge us to confront and wrestle with as well as to see what is remarkable and beautiful in the ‘other’.