



# Understanding of failure and failure of understanding: Aspects of failure in the Old Testament

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Taking its cue from Rudolf Bultmann's famous verdict that the Old Testament is a 'failure' ('*Scheitern*'), the article reviews three influential negative readings of Israel's history as told in the Former Prophets. It is then argued that awareness of the theological problem posed by Israel's history enabled the redactors of both the former and the latter prophetic collections to deal with the element of human failure in a way that facilitated Israel's retaining of her faith. Next, the sapiential insight in failing human discernment is drawn into the equation. Failure of human action is here interrelated with failure to comprehend God's order. By virtue of its incorporation into the totality of the Tanak, this insight became a constructive part of Israel's faith. Therefore the concept of failure comprises more than coming to terms with Israel's catastrophic history. Since it is encoded in Israel's Holy Scripture, 'failure' is a major concept within the Old Testament internally and is therefore not suitable as a verdict over the Old Testament by an external value judgement. 'Failure' thus becomes a key hermeneutical category, not merely so that the Old Testament could become a 'promise' for the New Testament to fulfil, but as a manifestation of limits in human religion and thought. Far from undermining self-esteem, constructive use of the concept of her own failure sustained Israel in her catastrophe and should be adopted by Christianity – not least in South Africa, where the biblical message was often misappropriated to bolster apartheid.

## Preamble to the first Albert Geyser Memorial Lecture

The article offered here is a lecture in *memory* of Geyser, not *about* him. It does not offer a biographical sketch, but an argument on a topic enabling the author's discipline of Old Testament studies to meet Geyser's discipline of New Testament scholarship. Although neither his career in general nor his specific opposition to the theological defence of apartheid is described, the main thesis of the lecture does suggest an analogy to the history of Geyser's criticism of the harnessing of theology in the service of ideology. The thesis is that the Bible is the result of Israel's admission of failure. Israel overcame its existential and religious crisis through honest and self-critical theological confrontation with her past failures. This may suggest a model for facing up to the consequences of the historical failures of Geyser's own faculty, church and community towards both him personally and that for which he stood. In order to survive the present-day crisis in this church and theology, it may prove salutary to contemplate the momentous result of Israel's acknowledgement of her own failures. These thoughts pervade the background of the lecture, intending as it does to remember and honour Albert Geyser.

## Introduction

The ambivalence in the subtitle of this article is obvious. It can refer to the way in which perceived historical flaws are handled within the Old Testament texts themselves, specifically the way they are handled at the level of the redaction of the texts we know as the Old Testament. But it can also refer to the way in which all of this is interpreted from the outside by readers of the Old Testament, especially in the context of a Christian exegesis that brings the New Testament into play. If the importance of the idea of failure in both the Bible and the work of its interpreters can be shown, that would suggest its hermeneutical significance. For the purpose of the first Albert Geyser Memorial Lecture I propose to show how that is indeed the case, which will allow us to reflect on the momentous result that arose from Israel's admission of her failure, namely the Bible – the Holy Scripture not only of Judaism but also of the early church and therefore of the New Testament and Christianity at large. I hope it will also allow us to extend our reflection to the all too obvious analogies between two theological nuclei, the one centred in the temple of Jerusalem during the late pre-exilic period and the other centred in the University of Pretoria during the late 20th century.

## The collapse of Israel's history

I begin with three interpretations of Israel's 6th century BCE exile as a theologically significant failure. The first of these is topical precisely for its New Testament perspective on the Old Testament's failure.



## Rudolf Bultmann's application of the idea of failure

Together with his programme to demythologise the Bible, Rudolf Bultmann is perhaps best known for his view of the Old Testament in terms of the scheme 'promise and fulfilment'. This required him to view the Old Testament as important but nevertheless a failure. In a significant essay on 'promise and fulfilment' dating from 1949, he formulated it unequivocally:

In what sense is the Old Testament/Jewish history [*die alttestamentlich-jüdische Geschichte*] a promise that is fulfilled in the history of the New Testament church [*in der Geschichte der neutestamentlichen Gemeinde*]? It is a promise by virtue of its inner discrepancy, its failure. (Bultmann [1949] 1968:183)

When Bultmann here refers to the history of 'the Jews' he hyphenates it to 'Old Testament'. Likewise, in the parallel phrase he refers not to the history of the 'early church' but to that of the 'New Testament church'. This demonstrates that his interest lies in the historical reference of the two respective literary corpuses. For this purpose he identifies the two histories with the two Testaments in question. His statement therefore means: *Israel's history* was a failure and as such it became something that had to be fulfilled by another history. Simultaneously the dictum means: The *Old Testament* is a failure that had to be fulfilled by another Testament. That this is his intention is not only clear from the general flow of his work, but also from his formulation in so many words in an essay on the relationship of Old Testament scholarship to New Testament scholarship:<sup>1</sup>

Old Testament scholarship should clarify the language of the Old Testament, the relationship of promise and fulfilment and of Law and Gospel in cooperation with New Testament scholarship, it should interpret the Old Testament from the vantage point of the New Testament and not construe a history of its religion [*keine Religionsgeschichte*]. (Bultmann 1984:465–466)

Bultmann refrains from distinguishing between the biblical books and the history they refer to. Therefore he leaves the boundaries between them undefined so that any catastrophe that happened to the historical Israel is identified with a failure of the Old Testament as a collection of writings. In her book on 'the Old Testament and Jewry' (*Altes Testament und Judentum*) in the early work of Bultmann, Karolina de Valerio does seem to be aware of this, however without paying much attention to it. She says:

The deficit of his doctrine of the Old Testament and Israel remains to this day; his theological language, describing as it does the Old Testament and Jewry [*das Judentum*] with the negative concepts of 'Law', 'indirect revelation' and 'failure', which he links to the positively connoted concepts 'Gospel', 'revelation for Jews', and 'promise', can neither appreciate adequately the lasting meaning of Israel, the people of God, nor describe the Old Testament in its diversity. (De Valerio 1994:380)

Nevertheless, the basic point made by Bultmann remained influential, notably that the very failure of the Old Testament

made it possible for it to become a promise. To put it the other way round, it needed to be a failure for the fulfilling to be successful in the New Testament. The New Testament could not have brought it to fulfilment if the Old Testament itself was a success. This seems to be how the Bultmannian construct was received in Systematic Theology. Helmut Thielecke (1978) describes Bultmann's construct in the following terms:

The old promises were to be realised for a historical people in this world and failed as such. They are radically ended in the new covenant and are denied by the eschatological negation of the *new* kingship of God. ... Precisely this failure, this impossibility of the Old Testament expectation is however the *real* promise. (p. 208)

Somewhat further on Thielecke (1978:209) shows that for Bultmann the promise of the Old Testament does not mean that it 'points' to the New, but that it limits human experience of God to God's presence in historical acts. In other words, the failure is not merely the plain fact that Israel ended up in exile, but that Israel made God's presence this-worldly (*Verdiesseitigung*). This experience of God is what drives the Old Testament into its failure, which then transmutes to the function of promise or prophecy (*Verheißung*) of a new eschatological world.<sup>2</sup> This may sound very radical, but there are at least two grounds to interpret it as the consequence of faithful Protestant thinking.

The first is identified by Anthony Thiselton (2007). According to him Bultmann's concept of the Old Testament as a failure is the result of a pietistic mind applying the:

nineteenth-century understanding of Luther's theology, which sees any attempt to trust in biblical reports of descriptions of 'objective' events as an attempt to work one's way to God by intellectual effort. (p. 42)

Thus Thiselton sees in Bultmann's whole concept the faithful manifestation of the most basic tenet of Protestant faith as this was given its classic expression in Luther's confession of salvation by faith alone. The rejection of salvation by good works (*Werkgerechtigkeit*) is only the negative form of the confession typical of Lutheran theology.<sup>3</sup>

The second reason to understand Bultmann's seemingly radical construct as an expression of orthodox Lutheran faith is perhaps the most important. For Bultmann the failure of the Old Testament notably is that it does not live up to the eschatological reality epitomised in Jesus' words, 'my Kingdom is not of this world' (Jn 18:36). This fits the beloved

2. Otto Kaiser (1993:26–29) modifies the general denial of an eschatological dimension by pointing out that in Judaism the total absence of an eschatological expectation was only typical of the Sadducees, whereas the Pharisees' expectation of the kingdom of God in this world was eschatological all the same and, over and above that, was also combined with an expectation of the resurrection of the dead. The view of scripture in Qumran was equally eschatological, where the holy writings were applied to contemporary events, combined with an expectation of two Messiahs to usher in the eschatological glory for Israel. According to Kaiser, precisely this widespread Jewish tenet became a necessary presupposition for the early Christian view and use of the Old Testament as its Holy Scripture. It should be added that the 'this-worldly' character of these expectations in Bultmann's sense is not denied by Kaiser's fine-tuning of the eschatological character of the beliefs entertained by large sections of the Jewish faith communities at the time of the origin of Christianity. But it does relativise the sweeping application of 'eschatology' to early Christianity.

3. This can even be applied as a normative criterion in Lutheran theology (cf. Jüngel 1997:394–406).

1. This essay was written in 1941, but published for the first time only in 1984 in the *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*.



Lutheran scheme of promise and fulfilment perfectly.<sup>4</sup> The negative logical presupposition necessarily implied in the concept of promise is that its fulfilment is still lacking. Bultmann reads the history of Israel as it is described by the Deuteronomist (not by the books of Ezra and Nehemiah) in the light of the lacking fulfilment. This is a devout Lutheran thing to do. The minus of the promise vis-à-vis the plus of fulfilment offers Bultmann his concept of 'Scheitern'.

## Martin Noth's anticlimactic reading of the Deuteronomistic History

Another influential interpretation of Israel's history as a theologically relevant cataclysm is the classic thesis on the Deuteronomistic History and its theological intention presented by Martin Noth. Hailing from the same period as Bultmann's cited works but quite independent of him, it first appeared during the Second World War as a paper of the Königsberg Academy of Sciences (1943) and was published in a second edition only after the war. In Noth's view, diverse materials from Israel's historical traditions were summarised and combined by a single author according to a meticulously thought-through plan to make up the books now comprising the Deuteronomistic History, notably Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings (Noth [1943] 1957:11). He regards the plan underlying the whole work as one central theological notion (*theologischer Leitgedanke*) and explains it as follows (Noth [1943] 1957):

The Deuteronomist did not write his work as entertainment for dull times or to satisfy interest in national history, but as instruction about the true sense of the history of Israel from the conquest to the fall of the old order; and to him this sense becomes apparent in the recognition that God acted discernibly in this history by responding to the continuing apostasy with warnings and punishments and finally, when this proved fruitless, with total destruction. The Deuteronomist thus recognises the righteous retributive action of God, not yet so much in the fortunes of the individual as in the history of the nation. For him, this constitutes the great substantial coherence of events ... (p. 100)

The Deuteronomist's theological perspective on history is not an incidental example, but correlates with the specific role assigned to the people of Israel. Its theological presupposition is the special relationship between God and Israel. Although the Deuteronomist never uses the *term* בְּחֵר as it is found in Deuteronomy (cf. Dt 7:6; 14:2) to refer to Israel as the chosen people, he does use the *concept* by referring to Israel as the people of God (cf. 1 Sm 12:22; 1 Ki 8:16; 16:2 etc.). The closeness of Israel to God provides the Deuteronomist with the foundation for the real topic of his work as a whole, which is the behaviour and the fate of Israel in the Promised Land (Noth [1943] 1957:101–102).

In accordance with this perception, the repeated sins manifested in Israel's history are so sweeping that the

point of no return arrived in the 6th century BCE, after which nothing could be remedied any longer. Noth argues that this is persuasively attested by what the Deuteronomist could have done but did not do. The Deuteronomist's own summaries in which he appraises historical periods afforded him ample opportunity to address the question of whether a positive result could still come from the ruin, but he nevertheless refrained from even putting the question. Since the expectation that a new order will rise from the ashes characterised the time of writing – which is particularly understandable in the light of the fact that even the pre-exilic prophets saw the catastrophe as the starting point for a new era – the silence of the Deuteronomist is all the more eloquent (Noth [1943] 1957:107–108). This does not amount to an *argumentum e silentio* [argument from silence], since Noth does not infer the existence of a phenomenon from the non-existence of evidence for it, but interprets what he regards as the Deuteronomist's avoidance of a future perspective precisely where it was manifest and imposing to other interpreters of Israel's downfall.<sup>5</sup>

Noth does not declare the history of Israel a failure or *Scheitern* from his own vantage point, but his thesis is that the Deuteronomist himself makes this declaration (Noth [1943] 1957):

Without looking for a goal of history that might lie beyond his own present, the Deuteronomist simply saw in the situation of this present the order willed by God and made known by him in the time of Moses. Likewise, the Deuteronomist regarded the possibility of the destruction of the nation, which had already been entertained by the Deuteronomic Law,<sup>6</sup> as punishment for disobedience, i.e. as a reality meanwhile fulfilled historically. In this way the order of things as already presupposed by the Deuteronomic Law now found a final ending. The real purpose of his whole presentation of history was to teach that this [*final ending, 'abschließendes Ende'*] should be understood as divine judgement. (pp. 108–109)

Noth rejects any interpretation of the improvement in the situation of Judah's deported King Jehoiachin (2 Ki 25:27–30) as a bird of dawn for hope despite the catastrophe. He judges it to be too trivial for such high-flung hopes and thinks that he has shown that the conditions for a positive springboard are absent in the Deuteronomistic History. But thereby he invokes his thesis in its own support and ignores the fact that hope often hangs on to the most meagre of straws. Therefore it is not unexpected that his reading of the Deuteronomistic History as a huge anticlimactic design was soon criticised. Firstly by Gerhard von Rad ([1947] 1958:202–203) who objected that, on the contrary, a kind of Messianic expectation is provided by the thrust of the Deuteronomist's work. In his view, the promise of an everlasting Davidic dynasty prophesied by Nathan (2 Sm 7) performs a counteracting function in the overall history, so that God could use it as a new starting point after the exile. Von Rad applies the Lutheran concept of Law and

5.Noth ([1943] 1957:109) particularly refers to the prophets Deutero-Isaiah and Ezekiel, both of whom hail from the same period as the Deuteronomist and both of whom attribute the sense of a future expectation to the acknowledgement of Israel's God by 'all nations' (cf. Is 52:10; Ezk 36:36).

6.Noth ([1943] 1957) uses the sigla 'Dt' for the Deuteronomic Law, 'Dtr' for the Deuteronomist, 'Dtn' for the Book of Deuteronomy and 'D' for the Deuteronomic strand in what became the Pentateuch.

4.Cf. the Concord of Leuenberg, Article 7: 'The Gospel is the message of Jesus Christ, the Salvation of the world, as the fulfilment of the promise made to the People of the Old Covenant' (cited and commented upon from a Lutheran perspective by Siegert [2012:275]).



Gospel respectively to the element of righteous judgement highlighted by Noth and his own idea of the promise of Nathan as a kind of κατέχων [restraint], a constraint on God's judgement. No less Lutheran than Bultmann (although arrived at along a different route), Von Rad deems the history as told by the Deuteronomistic Historian to call out for fulfilment (Von Rad [1947] 1958:204; cf. also Von Rad 1957:340–342):

The Deuteronomistic History shows in an exemplary way what salvation history is in the Old Testament: it is a course of history that is formed by the judging and saving word of Yahweh continually injected into it and moving towards a fulfilment. (p. 204)

Soon Noth's reading was also criticised by Hans Walter Wolff (1961:308–324). According to Wolff, the thesis provokes the question to what end the Deuteronomist had to write such a voluminous history at all – and of course leaves it unanswered. The events themselves demonstrated God's judgement clearly enough (1961:310). But Wolff also criticises Von Rad's use of the promise of Nathan as a check on God's judgement, since the promise is always subject to keeping the stipulations of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel. If this is abandoned, so is the promise, which can therefore not function along the lines of Law and Gospel to work its way towards fulfilment. His own proposal is that the kerygma of the Deuteronomistic History with all its negativity is to call to repentance. That would mean that a positive future can indeed dawn for Israel, not via the mechanism of promise and fulfilment, but on the grounds of Israel's repentant turning back to God. The greatest catastrophe in its history, until then, does not call for handing out cheap forms of easy hope, but it does call for repentance, which the Deuteronomist often highlights throughout his work (e.g. 1 Sm 7:3; 12:14–15; 2 Ki 17:13; cf. the repeated apostasy and return to Yahweh described in the book of Judges; Wolff 1961:314–315).

Recent scholarship has strongly criticised the whole concept of a unitary work as initiated by Noth (e.g. Knauf 1996:409–418; Kratz 2000:155–161; Westermann 1994:passim). However, it is not my purpose in this essay to discuss the literary merits (still championed by Aurelius 2003:passim; Blum 2007:67–98; Van Seters 1983:passim and others) and demerits of Noth's thesis,<sup>7</sup> but to highlight his observation of failure in the Old Testament as a hermeneutically significant category. It is this observation that has become central in the redaction criticism of the Old Testament, as we shall see below. Although Noth does not explicitly make the connection to Lutheran theology in his strictly historical-critical treatment of the Deuteronomistic History, it is interesting to bear in mind that the compatibility of his thesis with Lutheran theology goes hand in glove with his theological stance on the relationship of Law and Gospel in the Bible,<sup>8</sup> typical of dialectical theology in the mid-20th century.

7.The issue has become a major research interest in recent Old Testament scholarship; cf. the useful overview by Römer (2011:55–60). Calling the field a 'jungle of publications and hypotheses' in which it is not easy to find one's bearings, Römer nevertheless helps appreciably with an overseeable referencing of recent literature, including further overviews going beyond the introduction to his own contribution, and summarising five main research directions (the Noth-model, the Cross-model, the Smend-model, the mediation model, and the rejection of the existence of a Deuteronomistic History). Cf. also Knoppers (2000:341–342) and McKenzie (2006:106–108).

8.Cf. Honecker (1990:77), where Noth's position on this issue is connected to that of, among others, Von Rad, despite the latter's different views on the message of the Deuteronomistic History.

## James Crenshaw: the Deuteronomistic History as theodicy

One of the major research interests of the American expert on wisdom literature, James Crenshaw, is the idea of theodicy. Theodicy as such is not our primary concern in this article, but it does concern us as a way of reading the Deuteronomistic account of Israel's history. Crenshaw's reading results in a very negative verdict on the Deuteronomistic History. In connection with examples from types of literature as diverse as the narrative, prophetic and sapiential genres he makes the following statement:<sup>9</sup>

[The] tendency to save God's honor by sacrificing human integrity seems to have caught on in ancient Israel, for every effort at theodicy represents a substantial loss of human dignity. The various attempts at theodicy constitute immense sacrifice: of the present, of reality itself, of personal honor, and of the will. (Crenshaw 1983:7)

According to Crenshaw (1983:6) all forms of theodicy 'sacrifice human integrity', which he finds fatally flawed in that it denigrates the really human – whether the disparagement results in 'some mystical union' or in 'abject groveling upon the ground before the mighty God.' According to him, '[s]uch a condition gives rise to utterances like the following':

The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. (Gn 6:5)<sup>10</sup>

It seems to me that Crenshaw (1983:6) emphasises one side of the question so heavily that he overstates the case. His view that such 'abject groveling before the mighty God' allows the deity to 'achieve absolute pardon' presupposes only the question whether a God who allows such catastrophes as experienced by Israel can be just, and his answer is negative. But the neglected side of the problem is that another question is not considered, notably whether human *injustice* can merely be allowed to remain unpunished if God is to be the guarantor of justice. How could God turn a blind eye to the injustices of Israel, her political and religious elite as described by the Deuteronomist and the prophets and still be taken seriously as a God of justice? Injustice cannot merely be glossed over with the help of the motif of God's mercy, which is shown plainly in the quoted Jeremiah text and in many other prophetic texts, as well as in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gn 18:16–19:38), where it plays a major role. Despite the fact that the motif of the absence of just punishment occurs in both the 'theodicy psalms' (cf. Pss 37:9–10; 49:6–7; 73:3–4; Gn 18:16–33) and the book of Job (cf. the passages introduced by Job 21:6 & 24:1), Crenshaw does not allow it due scope in his judgement of the Deuteronomist (and the other relevant narrative and poetic texts).

9.For the following, see Loader (2001:3–23). Crenshaw's statement concerns the Deuteronomistic History, but is also in keeping with much of his later writing on the question of the defence of God; cf. Crenshaw (2005:76) (including endnote 7 on p. 218); Crenshaw (2005:179) (where he rejects Kaiser's positive exposition of relevant texts in the Pentateuch [Kaiser 2000a:773–788]), and others. This book is devoted to diverse aspects of theodicy and incorporates outputs of the author's studies on the topic.

10.Cf. also Genesis 6:12. The declaration of the general sinfulness of all humans is expressed even more sweepingly in the Psalms (Pss 14:2–3; 53:3–4).



In his view the forfeiting of self-esteem and human dignity in order to absolve the deity of blame characterises the mentality of the whole of Deuteronomistic theology:

Such salvaging of God's honor at the expense of human integrity eventuated in a grandiose interpretation of history that amounts to a monumental theodicy. This Deuteronomistic theology justifies national setbacks and political oppression as divine punishment for sin. The portrayal of Israel and Judah as corrupt to the core suffices to justify divine abandonment of the chosen people, but such rescuing of God's sovereignty and freedom was purchased at a high price, the self-esteem of humans. (Crenshaw 1983:7)

Whether this does justice to the historical traditions of Israel, particularly the Deuteronomistic History, but also the Latter Prophets, is questionable. On the one hand it is to be asked whether the whole idea of Israel's disobedience to the divine Torah, to the demands of the Deuteronomic-Deuteronomistic tradition (including the social injustice so severely criticised by the prophets), was merely invented as a hermeneutic key for the sole purpose of salvaging God's honour. Or was this interpretation justified in terms of the criteria of the Deuteronomic-Deuteronomistic tradition? Was a theology of sin and punishment only derived from the catastrophe by deduction or was an existing critical strand confirmed by the events and therefore applied as an interpretative principle? Moreover, there is no reason that this interpretation must necessarily be a *theodicy* for absolving God. It can also be an *aetiology* for the demise of both the Northern and the Southern Kingdom, that is, provide the substantiation for it. Otto Kaiser (1993) opts for this take because the narration of experienced history does not only provide the reason for the exile, but also a paradigm for Israel in exile:<sup>11</sup>

in that it demonstrates that the obedience of Israel always had positive consequences, while disobedience always had catastrophic consequences and that this will remain the case in future. (p. 186)

A second reason to question the Deuteronomistic History's failing in Crenshaw's terms is the fact that the aetiology of sin and punishment enabled Israel to *survive* the catastrophe. Therefore not the loss, but on the contrary, the preservation of her self-esteem and her identity became possible. Rather than an urge to absolve God from all blame for injustice, the urge for survival was at work here. Israel could rally around these traditions and did in fact survive with the help of the Deuteronomistic explanation of Israel's failure.<sup>12</sup>

Whereas Bultmann declares Israel's history (and therefore the Old Testament) a failure from his own external theological vantage point, Noth holds the failure concept to be internal in the Deuteronomistic History and the essential message of

the Deuteronomist. Crenshaw seems to combine an external and an internal dimension in that his personal conviction of theodicy as a sacrifice of self-respect is applied from without, while claiming that the texts themselves develop the self-deprecation of failure in order to uphold the urge to absolve God. All three apply the concept of failure as a central hermeneutical category.

## The 'redactional will'

Bultmann's judgement is based on a reading of the Old Testament in the light of the New. However, it is not a canonical reading since it does not work with a literary unit comprising the two Testaments (which never existed), but with an external theological criterion requiring that one canon be understood in the light of another. His position does not reflect the intention of authors or redactors, neither does it claim to, but works on a classical form-critical basis and reflects the hermeneutical framework of the reader. Because of the close association and even identification of 'the Old Testament' and 'Israel's history' in his judgement of their being a failure, the critical consideration of his construct requires attention to the Deuteronomistic History, that is, the Former Prophets. However, Noth's study concerns specifically this literary corpus which in his interpretation represents not the intention of a redaction, but of a single author. For that very reason it is also to be considered in the light of redaction-critical work on the Former Prophets. In turn, Crenshaw's judgement does not reflect the intention of any redactional strand, but it does claim to describe a general inclination found in many Old Testament texts, including the Deuteronomistic History, which he calls a 'tendency' that 'seems to have caught on in ancient Israel' (Crenshaw 1983:7) and uses to argue for his harsh judgement on the whole Deuteronomistic History. These readings of Israel's history as a failure require attention to the Deuteronomistic History and therefore necessarily what Kaiser calls 'the redactional will', which includes 'the concluding redactional exemplification [*Deutung*] and positioning' (Kaiser 2000b:153, 155; cf. Miles 1981:9–31 for the idea of 'will' as an aesthetic concept in the redaction process).

Of course this is so not only in the light of recent developments in Old Testament scholarship, but also because the redactional dimension plays no role in the case of two of the negative readings and is denied in the other one (Noth [1943] 1957). The fact that the practice of redaction understood as a process of interpretation and re-interpretation of existing texts is as old as historical criticism (cf. Kratz 1997:370–371) has not prevented it from only becoming effective in the younger stages of Old Testament scholarship (similarly Schmid [2004:4], who shows that the phenomenon was recognised specifically in pro-phetic literature as early as early as J.G. Eichhorn 1803). Whether called 'redaction history', 'literary reception history' (Steck 1996:141–142) or 'inner-biblical exposition', it acquires a totally new plausibility for taking the growth of the present text and the implications thereof seriously (Schmid 2000:2). By considering this perspective, Kaiser reaches the diametrical opposite of negative results for

11.K. Schmid (1999:221) calls it a 'notable achievement in the thinking' of the Deuteronomists, even as a theodicy, and points out that it called forth the priestly response that, in his love for them, this God consequently turned to his people.

12.In my opinion Crenshaw's (1983:1) categorical opening statement is too sweeping to convince: 'The human compulsion to deny death is exceeded only by a desire to absolve the deity of responsibility for injustice.' How can we gauge which 'compulsion' is the stronger? If the compulsion to absolve God were really stronger than the compulsion to deny death, it would be hard to see how God could be confronted by reproaches and accusations in the face of death (cf. Job 9:15; 10:15; 23:12–13; 27:2; 31:1ff. and others).



the Deuteronomistic History (as well as the other historical books of the Old Testament, Kaiser [1993]), namely:

that every one of them, each in its own way, was concerned to show that the bond of Yahweh to his people that had become questionable as a result of the catastrophe of the Kingdom of Judah was indestructible. (p. 210)

Although arrived at along another way, this is essentially the result to which Wolff (1961) had come 30 years earlier and Knierim (2001:370) more or less simultaneously with Kaiser (1998), notably that the Deuteronomistic History is a call to repentance, a warning or admonition so that the future may unfold positively.

Since not only the Former Prophets, but also the Latter Prophets were edited in the same exilic-postexilic period and also interpret the catastrophe of the exile while incorporating the call for Israel's repentance,<sup>13</sup> the latter too would, in Crenshaw's (1983, 2005) terms, be guilty of an undignified theodicy by the sacrificing 'of personal honor, and of the will'. Therefore they cannot be discarded in an inquiry of this nature. If we now turn to the Latter Prophets, we will find a will that has *not* been sacrificed, notably the 'redactional will' as focused on in recent research. Enquiring into this dimension is unavoidable, since we only have edited writings to go on.<sup>14</sup>

## The twofold heart of prophetic literature

Even Noth pointed out that the pre-exilic prophets did not regard the catastrophe they announced as the final end for Israel, but rather as the starting point for a new beginning, which was also typical for the time of the Deuteronomist (Noth [1943] 1957:107–108). This presupposes that people other than the Deuteronomists, working in the prophetic tradition, both announced a catastrophe *and* construed that catastrophe as the dawn of a time of salvation. Although Crenshaw does not deny the element of salvation in prophetic literature, he fails to consider the implications of the redactional dimension. Therefore he focuses on what he regards as the 'self-abnegation' of humans who wish to absolve God from the blame for evil. Quoting Jeremiah 5:1, he finds '[t]he same sort of reasoning' in prophetic literature 'to justify the later calamity that befell the southern kingdom in 587' (Crenshaw 1983:6, cf. 2005:218):

Run to and fro [*sic*] through the streets of Jerusalem, look and take note! Search her squares to see if you can find a man, one who does justice and seeks truth; that I may pardon her. (p. 6)

As opposed to this, the twofold heart of the Latter Prophets has often been noted.<sup>15</sup> The ball was set rolling by the

13. Kaiser (1993:261) puts it categorically: 'The origin of the prophetic books have the same causes as those of the Deuteronomistic History', which is no coincidence, for the Deuteronomists appropriated both the historical and the prophetic heritage to explain the exile as Israel's own fault so that they could, 'first indirectly, then later also directly open the way to hope in this manner.' Similarly Knierim (2001:370–371).

14. Cf. Steck (1996:139), who does not deny the kerygmatic oral preaching of prophetic individuals, but only – and rightly so – that this can be retrieved.

15. Cf. Kratz (2003:63) (Is); p. 92 (Deutero-Isaiah); p. 69 (Am); p. 84 (Jr & Ezk). Kaiser (1993:260–261) argues that the two aspects are so deep-seated that they have to be basic to the origin and growth of all the prophetic books as we have them.

theological realignment caused by the fall of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, when the destruction was interpreted as divine punishment (Kratz 2003:47). It was brought to a climax in Persian and Hellenistic times, when prophecies of salvation were added 'all over' the books in the last phase of their growth (Kratz 2003:87). In this way the books of the Latter Prophets became a depository of critical as well as hopeful prophecies, that is, oracles of doom as well as oracles of salvation.<sup>16</sup> The message is unfolded by the respective concepts of divine *justice* and divine *mercy* carried by these genres. In both these forms the Latter Prophets 'intend to give their readers reassurance, orientation and guidelines for action in their own present and particularly for the future', since the words written down in the books 'have the potential for being meaningful beyond the times addressed in them' (Kratz 2003:45). This obviously entails that the prophetic books do not merely claim to explain Israel's failures in terms that justify God's cruelty of the past, but do so especially in terms of paradigmatic guidelines for a positive future.

The prime example in this respect would be the book of Isaiah. In the first 39 chapters critical prophecy dominates, whereas salvation and a new future predominate in Deutero-Isaiah (Is 40–55). Even in the first part of the book ruin is not the last word and salvation is envisaged on the horizon, albeit only after point zero of the impending doom. The third part of the book (Is 56–66) addresses the problem of the non-realisation of the positive expectations called forth by prophecies such as those of Deutero-Isaiah,<sup>17</sup> and does so by returning to the sin-punishment scheme. As the Holy One (Is 6:3), Yahweh demands righteousness and justice, failing which he practices it himself by inflicting punishment. But as the Merciful his clemency requires him to save the same people even after point zero, which Deutero-Isaiah envisions in terms of a new creation (Is 40:12; 21–22; 26) and a new exodus (Is 52:4 11–12). Going further still, when Israel comes to harm as the Suffering Servant (Is 53), her catastrophe is not only instrumental for her own salutary future, but also for that of other nations.

Even the book of Jeremiah, which constitutes the aetiology *par excellence* for the exile of Jerusalem and Judah (Kaiser 1993:234) contains pivotal passages of hope alongside the most explicit prophecies of doom, as in Jeremiah 5:17–18:

They shall devour your harvest and your food;  
they shall devour your sons and your daughters;  
they shall devour your flocks and your herds;  
they shall devour your vines and your fig trees;  
they shall destroy with the sword your fortified cities in which you trust.  
But even in those days, says Yahweh, I will not make a full end of you.

As the God who deploys such force against his people, he also has the power to redeem them again (cf. Jr 25:11–14)

16. Cf. Steck (1996:*passim*), where it is shown from especially the book of Isaiah and from the Minor Prophets that precisely the redactional growth of the books reveal their theological message.

17. This is not identical with the idea of failure as Israel's aporia, which is our concern in this article. On the problem of failure in the sense of the non-realisation of prophecies, see Carroll (1979:*passim*).



and he will write a new covenant in their hearts to replace the old covenant broken by them (Jr 31:31–34). In this way his mercy can prevail without the loss of the demands of his righteousness and justice.

As idiosyncratic as the book of Ezekiel may be, it contains the same association of punishment for Israel's failure to practise the will of God and the positive note of a new heart and a life in obedience to his precepts (Ezk 11:19–20; cf. Schöpfli 2002:341–342 and her reference to the prophecies of salvation in Ezk 34–37). The book ends with a great vision of a new Jerusalem and a new land in which a magnificent future awaits Israel.

In the same way we may traverse the scroll of the Twelve Minor Prophets, where the redactional signs of this polarity are equally abundant. In the book of Hosea, for instance, the theme of doom and salvation appears in the catchwords 'strife' (ריב) and 'turn back' (שוב).<sup>18</sup> Similarly, it appears in the symbolic tension of his marriage: divorce because of the wife's unfaithfulness (= God's justice directed against the unfaithful Israel) does not mean that the husband's love is at an end (Hs 3:1–5). Likewise the symbolic names of his children reflect the catastrophic dimensions of Israel's failure as well as the indestructible love of God: No-Mercy (לא רחמה) becomes Mercy (רחמה) and Not-my-People (לא עמי) becomes My-People (עמי).

The motif of the Day of Yahweh is used in a complementary way in the adjacent books of Joel and Amos.<sup>19</sup> In the former the awesome day brings salvation for Israel (cf. the outpouring of God's Spirit and the accompanying cosmic signs in Jl 2–3), whereas in the latter book the same motif is exclusively disastrous, because Israel is categorically condemned for her injustice. The words of doom in the book of Amos, a most consistent critic of socio-economic injustice,<sup>20</sup> are thus relativised by the redactional placing of the book: the uncompromising declaration goes hand in hand with a new dawn. No wonder that even this book of prophetic threats also ends with a perspective on deliverance (Am 9:11–15).<sup>21</sup>

The same redactional principle can be seen in the successive placing of the books of Jonah and Micah. The quite pronounced societal criticism in the book of Micah mercilessly exposes the injustice of Judah without however calling for repentance. But in the same book this is countered by the promise of a new messianic future in which God's justice will supplant Israel's *injustice* (Mi 4–5)<sup>22</sup> and, externally, by its

counterpart in the preceding narrative of Jonah, which foregrounds the motif of repentance not found in Micah. Jonah even enhances the idea dramatically by showing that God can in fact take back his word of doom. This gives a wholly new perspective to his love, for there are circumstances in which uncompromising adherence to the announced doom would mean that God becomes untrue to his inner character, his *opus proprium*, love.

Between the book pairs of Joel-Amos and Jonah-Micah the short prophecy of Obadiah expresses yearning for revenge because of Jerusalem's fall, thus for salvation, but starts from the premise that the catastrophe was the result of divine punishment, thus: justice. The books of Nahum and Habakkuk contain prophecies against the Assyrians and Babylonians. As such they imply deliverance for Israel, but not without lamenting injustice in Judah, which is first punished by means of God's instrument of chastisement (cf. Is 10:6 and Jr 25:9, where Assyria and Babylon are likewise depicted as Yahweh's instruments of punishment).

The last book ascribed to a pre-exilic prophet, Zephaniah, represents the two-sidedness of the prophetic collection in a remarkable way. It also contains implied deliverance in the form of judgement over foreign nations, but limits the salvation within Israel to the poor classes (Zph 3:12), whereas the rich strata of society are punished (Zph 1:11–13). So, divine justice brings freedom for some and downfall for others. The failure of the upper classes thus forms a social vehicle for the two-pronged future of the negative and the positive at the same time.

Finally, the post-exilic prophets Haggai and Zechariah explain the absence of the expected positive order by applying the same standard as Trito-Isaiah, namely the principle of sin and punishment espoused by their earlier colleagues. So the last pages of the prophetic collection carry the same ideas that characterised so much of the earlier parts: salvation is possible, but it is conditional because justice is expected to be practised by *people*.

It is thus possible to concur with Fohrer (1972)<sup>23</sup> when he states:

The prophets did not intend to foretell a distant future and to bring consolation about some end of time, but they intended to influence their own present and shape their here and now, since thereby the near future is determined. (p. 270)

That holds good not only for the oral utterances by the pre-exilic prophets, but also for the books that were edited under their names. However this-worldly and however near the future that is looked forward to may be, it still is a *future* expectation. Alignment to the future is already given in the very call to repentance and 'return' to Yahweh, exactly as Wolff (1961) maintained for the Deuteronomistic History. Such a call only makes sense if it is to bring about a transition

18. In the book of Isaiah this root is also used with the double reference: 'turning back' or 'returning' to Yahweh makes 'returning' to their land possible (Is 10:21–22; cf. 1:27; 7:3).

19. For the logical extension of the analysis of redactional procedures within one prophetic book to the whole collection of the Latter Prophets, see Clements (1996a:191–202), who speaks of 'patterns in the prophetic canon'.

20. Although in itself an important issue, I shall not consider here the further question mooted by Kratz (2011:32–48), whether the oracles of doom were original or of later redactional provenance, since for the purposes of this article it is the redactional result that concerns us.

21. In the book of Malachi too the Day of Yahweh is a day of fiery terror, but also of salvation, since purification and the advent of the eschatological prophet Elijah is announced (Ml 3:1–18; 19–24).

22. This is introduced by the famous messianic prophecy (Mi 4:1–5), which is also found in the book of Isaiah (Is 2:1–5).

23. Similarly also Smend (1982:263), who points out that the absolute novelty of what was envisaged for the future does not necessarily entail the expectation of life after death, and that it only implicitly had relevance for the life of the individual.



with a view to the future. The very presence of the two sides of prophetic proclamation can only be understood if it means a transition from a past to a coming era. God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked, he says, but rather that they should turn from their ways and live on (Ezk 18:23). It is therefore only natural that Kaiser (1993:232–236) can call the prophetic collection an ‘eschatological composition’.<sup>24</sup> But this alignment to the future is motivated by the past. It is based on the memory of the critical prophets of doom in pre-exilic times. Their message was vindicated by actual events, whereas the prophets of unconditional prosperity (cf. 1 Ki 22:11; Jr 20:1–3; Am 7:10–17) were unmasked as untrustworthy and irrelevant (Kaiser 1993:213). Therefore the edited books have no recourse to such prophets, despite holding out new hope for the time after the catastrophe. This is similar to Geyser’s critical perspective from the past. It was not appreciated in his time, but since his message has been vindicated by events, the memory of them can bring a new salutary alignment to the future as we collect our thoughts and reflect on how this may contribute to a new, constructive future.

## A wider perspective on failure?

We have now found the same pattern in the collections of both the Former and the Latter Prophets: Israel’s history is a failure indeed. Both in the sense of failing her God by breaking his covenant and in the sense of experiencing the historical catastrophe as divine punishment. This amounts to a simple and obvious theological construction of sin and punishment, which is not only compatible with the common Near Eastern nexus of deed and consequence, but also a most sweeping manifestation of its negative side. Therefore the interpretation of Israel’s history as described in the Former Prophets and made manifest in the Latter Prophets as punishment implies a positive potential, for the so-called ‘doctrine of retribution’ or deed-consequence-nexus is a coin with *two* sides. As punishment for sin retribution suggests, by the same token, the opposite of punishment for the opposite of sin. In a grand evaluation of Israel’s history this opposite would entail repentance, turning back to Yahweh and entering into a new, beneficial covenant with him (Jr 31:31–34). It is this dimension that is taken up by the redaction of both prophetic collections in the Old Testament. Therefore neither Noth’s ([1943] 1957) nor Crenshaw’s (1983) exposition of only the negative side should be accepted. The ‘*Scheitern*’ of the exile quite fittingly flows from the ‘*Scheitern*’ of her breaking God’s covenant. In short: Israel failed, so her history failed. In expounding this, the redaction of the two prophetic collections in the Old Testament manifestly worked with the basic idea of retributive punishment. Measured by the yardstick of God’s will, Israel’s conduct failed. Taken as a warning from history, it assumes the function of a call to repentance; it becomes the criterion for a new future in which the same failure is avoided. In short: Israel does not have to fail again, so her future does not have to fail.

24. The examples he offers are such prophecies as Isaiah 2:1–5; Jeremiah 24; 31:31–34; 43:1–7; Ezekiel 4–24 et cetera, as well as the eschatological prophecies within the books themselves (e.g. Jl 1–2; Zph 3; Zch 12–14) and the prophecies influenced by nascent apocalyptic ideas (e.g. Is 24–27; Ezk 38–39).

At this point a next question arises: Is the recognition of Israel’s failure, her falling short of the ideal order of God, to be interpreted only in terms of its result, as it is in the redaction of the Nebiim? If the answer is yes, it would mean accepting the principle of retribution as the exclusive criterion for judging humans, society and their history. This would remain so even if applied as a critical explanation of the past *and* as a positive admonition for the future. Does the Old Testament offer another perspective on human failure? I would suggest it does. This is to be found in the wisdom literature. In this corpus of literature, mainly found in the Ketubim, neither the history of Israel nor its covenantal relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is focused on. The panorama of sapiential interest is human life and conduct in the most generic sense.

Since our topic required us to consider the redactional principle of different parts of the Tanak (the Former and the Latter Prophets) (cf. Clements 1996b:203–216), there is no reason why one should not go on and ‘ask how the various parts of the canon, or aspects of Israelite tradition, relate to each other and to the religious traditions which preserve them’ (Brett 1998:482). On the contrary, if there is any *prima facie* evidence of light that the Ketubim may shed on the same question, we must ask how this relates to what we have found in the preceding part of the canon. The fact that a large part of the Deuteronomistic History, namely the Succession Narrative (2 Sm 9–1; Ki 2) is influenced by the sapiential perspective is not in itself necessary to validate the comparison, but it does add to its force. Wisdom literature exemplifies the mechanism of what Kaiser calls the ‘equilibrium of justice and life’ as patently as the two prophetic collections and indeed the Torah (Kaiser 1998:22) – whether the symmetry is called the nexus of deed and consequence,<sup>25</sup> the deed-result-connection (cf. Miller 1982:138), retribution (so Hausmann 1995:243; Scharbert 1972:322), punishment and reward or by another label, whether it is based on God’s revealed will in the covenant or on observation and rational thought in wisdom. Since God remains the guarantor of the connection, its logic remains the same for the historians, prophets and sages (see Kaiser 1993:263). Moreover, in the latter stages of the formation of the Tanak wisdom literature was subordinated under the Torah in the same way as the Former and Latter Prophets were (Kaiser 1993:22). But the sapiential tradition also carries a major counter-trend that relativises any neat retributive balance.

## Cracks of failure in Israel’s education

The book of Proverbs works with a basic assumption, notably that reality is ordered in such a way that conduct in harmony with it leads to positive outcomes, while conduct in dissonance with it leads to failure and negative results. This is the basic or ‘normal’ situation. Since it has been created by God and is backed up by him, it can be, and was, experienced as retribution in the form of punishment and reward even if its expression in individual wisdom sayings

25. First mooted by Klaus Koch in 1955 (Koch 1955:1–42); cf. Janowski (1994:255–256, 265), who emphasises the social aspect of the balance.



sounds anything but religious. All the more so since wisdom literature was subsumed under the Torah, and therefore was seen to operate according to the same rationale as the one we found to be basic to the redaction of the Former and the Latter Prophets. The book of Proverbs contains many examples of the regular position (see Loader 2004:214–236 for the following argument). For instance, harmony with nature (Pr 20:4):

In autumn the sluggard does not plough;  
when he expects harvest, there is nothing.

Or intrinsic properties of metals and the parallel properties in human political behaviour (Pr 25:4–5):

When you take the dross from the silver,  
the smith can make a vessel;  
when you take the wicked from the presence of the king,  
his throne will be established in righteousness.

A third example would be the natural order of human physiological processes, which brings forth positive results when respected (1 Sm 14:27), whereas running counter to it naturally results in negative physiological consequences (Pr 25:16–17; cf. 27:7):

When you find honey, eat only as much as you need,  
so that you do not get sick and vomit.  
Let your foot seldom come in your neighbour's house,  
lest he become sick of you and dislike you.

One could continue in the same vein (cf. Pr 25:13–14, 19, 23; 26:1; 28:3; further references in Freuling 2008, para. 3.1). However, there are many sayings in the book of Proverbs that show difficulty in coming to terms with the deed-consequence-nexus (cf. Hausmann 1995:97, 250, 231–247 and *passim*). They themselves are not a coherent group and approach the question from either a sceptical or a conservative perspective.

In the book of Proverbs, the words of Agur (Pr 30:2–4) are the clearest denial that the speaker possesses human wisdom – a denial of human achievement in principle, that is, an affirmation of failure in principle:

I am too stupid to be human;  
I have no understanding.  
I have not learned wisdom,  
nor have I knowledge about the holy one.

Agur thus questions any optimistic view of human knowledge. In the same chapter there are several numerical sayings in which wonder at inexplicable phenomena in the world is expressed (Pr 30:18–19):

Three things are too wonderful for me;  
and four I do not understand:  
the way of an eagle in the sky,  
the way of a snake on a rock,  
the way of a ship on the high seas,  
and the way of a man with a woman.

It is but one step from such amazement to a relativised wisdom (Pr 30:24):

Four things are small on earth,  
yet they are wiser than the wise.

In a well-ordered world success is expected from the strong (cf. Pr 28:1). But when the animals mentioned in the following verses of the little poem are wiser than the wise among people that is a paradoxical questioning of the conventional system.

A number of adages contain a basic stratum of belief in God's decisive influence in the world, but simultaneously express the *inability* of humans to determine results:

It is Yahweh's blessing that makes rich,  
and toil adds nothing to it.

This proverb (Pr 10:22) states that it is *only* Yahweh from whom success can be expected and as such it undermines the premise that sapiential effort can achieve its own success. Other sayings show that there are indeed phenomena in the world of human planning and action that cannot be explained in terms of any nexus of deed and consequence, for instance Proverbs 16:33 and 19:21:

The lot is cast into the lap,  
but from Yahweh alone comes the decision.

Many plans are in the mind of humans,  
but it is the plan of Yahweh that comes to pass.

Human calculations are typically sapiential, but are counterpoised here to the divine will that functions in a sovereign way, independent of any system.

There are several further examples.<sup>26</sup> These passages in the book of Proverbs relativise the whole sapiential enterprise as eloquently as Qohelet (Ec 7:24; 8:16–17) or the Poem on Elusive Wisdom (Job 28:12, 20) does. This does not just mean that human wisdom cannot compare with divine wisdom, but that *in principle* the totality of human wisdom is worth very little. It fails to understand reality.

The same consciousness of the instability of a sapiential system working with deed and consequence also occurs in conservative texts (Pr 3:11–12):

Do not, my son, reject Yahweh's discipline,  
nor despise his reproof,  
for Yahweh reproves the one he loves,  
and as a father the son in whom he delights.

The sage is categorically appealing for acceptance of adversity as God's chastisement. The experience of many that the rewards promised in common wisdom (and assumed by the other strands we have been considering) often do not realise is addressed by sages who knew that suffering was possible despite not deserving it in terms of retribution (cf. above on Trito-Isaiah). As an answer they submitted the theory of chastisement. When the balance scheme does not work, it is chastisement for the pious who may know that it comes

<sup>26</sup> For example, Proverbs 20:24; 21:1; 30:31; also Ecclesiastes 7:24; 8:16–17; 9:2; Agur (Pr 30:3) or the Poem on Elusive Wisdom (Job 28:12, 20). For Proverbs, it was already noted and described by Oesterley (1929:ixi–xiv); cf. further Freuling (2008:passim) and Penchansky (2012:22–34).



from God who metes it out 'like a father'. This does not deny the deed-consequence nexus in its entirety, but provides a conservative answer to cater for those cases where the limit of the principle becomes evident. Alongside the normal acceptance of reward and punishment there is an equally clear scepticism as to whether this nexus can cover all aspects of reality (similarly Hausmann 1995:246–247).

The book of Job has no qualms with the deed-consequence-nexus or even a doctrine of retribution. Indeed, Job's argument presupposes the validity of the principle but questions its *application* by God. The divine speech (Job 38–39\*) and the poem on the unattainability of wisdom (Job 28), make it unambiguously clear that wisdom is unattainable, and again the 'normal' position of effective wisdom is relativised (cf. Loader 2001:19–20, where the Job texts are discussed in a broader context of the deed-consequence-tension).

The same happens time and again in the book of Ecclesiastes. For instance, he uses an ordinary sapiential injunction to give advice, as all sages do (Ec 11:6):

Sow your seed in the morning,  
and do not let your hands rest at evening;  
for you do not know  
which will prosper,  
this or that,  
or whether both alike will be good.

Qohelet relates his advice to practical observations of realities in ordinary agriculture. There is a fascinating natural order (Ec 1:4–7; 3:11), but the relativising aspect lies in the substantiation: You do not know whether this wisdom will be successful. Humans cannot explain the enigmas of reality (Ec 1:8; 3:11), there are so many manifestations of the contrary of the deed-consequence-nexus that such a doctrine cannot be upheld (Ec 3:19; 4:1; 8:17; 9:2, 11 etc.). Qohelet's esteem for wisdom (Ec 8:1) does not become undone, but neither does it negate his disappointment at its failure.

In the wisdom books, therefore, an underlying stratum of deed and consequence matches that underlying the Deuteronomistic History and the redaction of the Latter Prophets. But there is also a distinct awareness of the limits of the possibilities of this interpretative key to the discernment of what befalls humans in life. It is like a Pierneef painting. There is a clearly defined, firm and ordered symmetry to the landscape, its trees, mountains and clouds. But a powerful and overwhelming force radiates from its totality, the effect of which transcends all regularity and calculability.

## Conclusion

The guiding code of Otto Kaiser's Old Testament theology entails that the subsuming of the historical, prophetic *and* the sapiential texts of the Old Testament under the Torah moulded it into a literary unit that permits coherent theological testimonies notwithstanding its rich polyvalence. In conclusion, I propose to apply this insight to the question of Israel's failure.

It seems to me that the inclusive frame of the Tanak demonstrates that the failure of Israel was not just needed to explain the catastrophe of the exile. It certainly *also* did that. Israel broke the covenant with her God and experienced the consequences. This was not an explanation intended à la Noth as a full stop at the close of Israel's history. Neither did it merely satisfy the supposed urge to exonerate God even at the price of the loss of self-esteem à la Crenshaw. On the contrary, the traditions of Israel were handed down, edited and understood as the call to repentance that enabled Israel to survive the exile and the catastrophes that were yet to follow. All of this could and did explain Israel's ancient failure, but did so literally in an exemplary way, that is, as a negative yet constructive example to learn from for the future.

But the whole story is not told by stating that Israel invented one failure (the breaking of the covenant) to explain another failure (the demise of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms). Read as part of the whole Tanak this sweeping history now also relates to the sapiential use of the same standard of judgement so that its limits can be seen as well. Not only did God's people fail morally as the prophets show, not only did their national existence fail historically as the Deuteronomistic History shows, but they also failed to comprehend reality. For all its optimism, Israel's education contributed the insight that human capacity for understanding fails when it reaches its boundary. Therefore the explication of the exile given by the Nebiim cannot be the last word. There is an *inexplicable* dimension to reality which defies deed-consequence-mechanisms. *The understanding of failure is relativised by the failure of understanding.* The failure of religion, the collapse of history and the inability of wisdom to give final answers together force the conclusion that the concept of failure is a major hermeneutical category for reading the Old Testament.

Rudolf Bultmann never developed an argument in such terms. But the sweeping nature of his declaration that 'Israel' and 'the Old Testament' are a failure does invite us to understand his declaration along similar lines. There is no sign of anti-Semitic bias in his work and nothing suggests that he intended the '*Scheitern*' declaration in any derogatory way. On the contrary, there is something fascinating and even mysterious in this. To Bultmann the Old Testament points beyond itself. Whatever points beyond itself has not yet attained what it points to. In his theology that was reached in the New Testament or – as he would say – in the kerygma of early Christianity. But by then the Jewish Tanak had already known for centuries that Israel's failed history points beyond itself. I would suggest that the historical failures of our own ecclesiastical and theological history can also powerfully point beyond itself – in the direction in which Albert Geyser gazed half a century ago.

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