

Editorial: Parameters of (South) African Old Testament Scholarship*

GERRIE F. SNYMAN (UNISA)

The current volume has been collated during a time of serious upheaval in the tertiary sector of the South African educational system. The recent slogan #Feesmustfall is the continuance of the previous #Rhodesmustfall rallying cry against the coloniality of knowledge, of being, and of power. To understand these rallying cries, it is important to take note of the decolonial turn, regardless how uncomfortable it may be when one finds oneself caught up in the corridors of the Western scholarly ivory tower. The essentialising nature of the current decolonial discourse in the country may cause one to remain there, mouth shut and immobile. But the discourse may also propel one to reflect within the parameters of Old Testament scholarship on the challenges the decolonial turn put on the table.

Hendrik Bosman reflects on Old Testament scholarship in South Africa the past twenty years. He sees a need for stimulating reflection on how to cross the divide between the current biblical readers in different parts of Africa and the production of the ancient biblical text. He refers to the necessity of a historical consciousness as well as an ethics of interpretation. The latter is the more difficult part, as it is permeated by "vulnerability in the fragile (but hopefully resilient) dialogue with those who differ from us – the 'other' without whom no critical self-understanding is possible." He sees three kinds of enterprises currently at work within (South) African Old Testament Studies: ants engaging in philological studies philological data to engage with biblical texts primarily on, spiders spinning on a diachronic level new hypotheses on elements of Israel's history, and bees who try to balance synchronic and diachronic studies in producing what Bosman calls "theological-ethical honey." His differentiation is a useful key to explain the current issue.

Let me start with what I perceive to be the bees. Hulisani Ramantswana, taking his cue from the Berlin Conference in 1884-85 when Africa was partitioned among European imperial powers, argues that this colonising act divorced Africans from nature. On the basis of Isa 11:6-9 (set within the context of the defeat and humiliation of Israel during the period of domination by the Assyrian Empire), he argues that human liberty is intertwined with the liberty of nature. He concludes that the African is not free as long as Africa's wildlife remains colonised.

* To cite: Gerrie F. Snyman, "Editorial: Parameters of (South) African Old Testament Scholarship," *Old Testament Essays (New Series)* 28 no. 3 (2015): 577-580. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2312-3621/2015/v28n3a2>

As a Motswana woman, Mmapula Diana Kebaneilwe argues that patriarchal structures created dominance over nature and women. In her essay on Genesis 2-3 she shows an interconnection between the oppression of women, in particular black women and the subjugation of the ecosystem leading to its depletion. She concludes that domination over women, land and animals is against the creator's vision of a good world.

With his reading of Psalm 23, Ndikho Mtshiselwa provides the reader with an example of how to cross what Bosman referred to as the nasty *udonga* between the biblical text and its reception more than 2500 years later. Mtshiselwa outlines the correspondence as well as differences between the *Sitz-im-Leben* of Psalm 23 and the current South African context of poverty, corruption, injustice and conflict.

In similar vein Alexander Abasili embarks on a contextual reading of 1 Sam 1 in which he utilises the silent childless ordeal of Hannah to mirror the equally silent plight of barren or childless women in polygamous African families.

Reading about poverty, corruption, injustice, conflict, barrenness, all in the African context, one wonders what is there to laugh about. L. Juliana Claassens proposes tragic laughter as a heuristic concept which may help one to make sense of traumatic memories. She reads the Book of Jonah in terms of humour in order to make sense of the traumatic experiences of the exile and its aftermath that derailed the lives of the people of Judah.

Willie Wessels read Jer 5:1-9 as a modern day reader struggling with leadership issues in his society. His article describes the process of relating an ancient text such as the Jer 5 to modern day leadership issues. He pays tribute to the long line of interpreters of Jeremiah and takes responsibility for his own lack of innocence, or rather, presence of his own ideological interests and struggles. He concludes that engaging texts with a religious perspective is still a meaningful endeavour and a necessary exercise.

Bosman refers to those who collect philological data to engage with biblical texts primarily on a literary and synchronic level as "ants". This issue of *Old Testament Essays* provides a few examples of such ants. Ulf Bergström's essay investigates the semantics of the Biblical Hebrew imperfect and participial predicate in Standard (SBH), and Late Biblical Hebrew (LBH) from the perspective of diachronic typology. He concludes that texts from the LBH-corpus represent a more advanced stage of the progressive-imperfective diachronic path than the SBH texts, with the exception of Ezra and Daniel, which lack sufficient data.

Another hardworking ant is the article by Milda De Vaal-Stanton's grammatological, socio-cultural and juridical investigation into Ruth 4:5 and

the meaning of the problematic word compilation *וּמֵאֵת*. She argues that the story here deals with usufruct and not the sale of the land.

Funlola Olojede provides the reader with a side-by-side reading of night in Job and the Psalter. Acknowledging the role night usually plays in the plans of the wicked, she argues that God also chooses the night as the time to confuse and cut them off. But the night is also a time for a vertical communion between the righteous and God: He gives songs (Job 35:10); speaks to instruct and to warn (Job 33:14-15); gives counsel (Ps 16:7); visits the righteous (Ps 17:3) while the righteous prays/seeks God (Pss 22:2; 42:8; 77:2; 88:1), meditates on God's word and sings to God (Ps 77:6), among other things

Working in the ant colony for years, Henk Potgieter looks at the relation created between the contents of Ps 56 and the heading the editors provided to this psalm, which can be described as a lament with a strong emphasis on trust in God and praise for his word. He argues that the connection made with the experience of David modifies the hermeneutical horizon of the psalm.

Potgieter's co-worker in the ant colony, Gert Prinsloo, shares with him the focus on the Psalm-corpus. Prinsloo looks at suffering in Psalm 11 in spatial terms. According to him, the poet experiences suffering as separation, but in the center of the poem, v. 4, the poet's imagined space literally transports him from *שְׂאוֹל* to *שְׁמַיִם* where he can take refuge in YHWH amidst the crumbling of personal security and comfort (11:2-3). In the presence of YHWH (11:7), he arrives at-center, convinced that the wicked will finally be destroyed.

Hans van Deventer looks into the lion imagery in Daniel 6 and possible roots in Israel's own literary tradition (over against those studies linking the lion to a Babylonian literary motif). Van Deventer links the lion imagery in Daniel to references to teeth in the Psalter, indicating to abusive and/or offensive language or false accusations. He concludes that there is a clear link between the lion metaphors and the teeth in the Psalter on the one hand, and the malicious accusations brought against the psalmist by his enemies on the other.

A new ant in the colony is André Odendaal, introduced to the academic world by his mentors, Jurie le Roux and Alphonso Groenewald. Odendaal looked at the verb *נָהַם* in Deutero-Isaiah. The reason for his study is that the literature focusing on the verb *נָהַם* is minimal. Dictionaries give a summary about the verb and its root meanings in languages of Semitic background. Odendaal wanted to prove that the word *נָהַם* is a theme in Isaiah 40-55.

In this issue, spiders seem to be hibernating. The only one is the essay by Robert Kuloba Wabyanga who reads the story of Sodom and Gomorrah outside of the presupposed immoral (homo)-sexual frontlines and in terms of the perspectives of the political dynamics of the Ancient Near East. Over-against the majority of scholars reading the story as a condemnation of

homosexuality or inhospitality, Kuloba sees the story of Sodom and Gomorrah as victims of military arson and ideological denigration.

Bosman intimates a fourth category, ticks, but after having recently seen my colleague with literally a thousand tick bites on his body, I will refrain from making any assumptions or indications in the latter category with regard to the world of South African academia. The itching of tick bites leaves the body rather vulnerable.

Gerrie Snyman, Editor, *Old Testament Essays*. Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies, Unisa. *Email*: snymagf@unisa.ac.za or ote-editor@otwsa-otssa.org.za.
