

Editorial: Readers and Context*

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The tri-annual meeting of the *International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament* (IOSOT), in conjunction with the *Old Testament Society of South Africa* and the *South African Society for Near Eastern Studies* (SASNES) on the campus of the University of Stellenbosch, 4-9 September 2016, puts the study of the Old Testament with concomitant ethical questions under the spotlight. It is of academic-political significance that the IOSOT decided that their 22nd conference is held outside of the borders of Europe. Not only does it put pay to the claim to internationality in its name, but it also reveals the energy of Old Testament/Hebrew Bible scholarship in South Africa. Since 1994 there is a constant participation by a South African contingent of Old Testament/Hebrew Bible scholars participating in the tri-annual meetings of IOSOT and it is an honour to welcome the various delegates from the world in Stellenbosch.

With the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible in focus, it is perhaps opportune to deliberate on the nature of the study of this ancient text on the southern tip of the African continent. The socio-political context in which the study of the OT/HB takes place, is, amongst others, the overcoming of the legacies of the past, such as racism, poverty, and corruption. The question of who the OT/HB scholars serve in their interpretation of the text is a burning issue. Are the research questions in some manner related to the construction of the new society emerging from the legacies of racism and colonialism? It is not a question of effecting any change, but contributing in some way or the other via our understanding of the ancient biblical text towards addressing pressing questions that influence the livelihood of thousands.

Ntozakhe Cezula's question concerns the problem of reconstructing postapartheid society, especially in the light of the spate of xenophobic attacks on foreigners in the different metropolises in the past years. His essay responds to Jesse Mugambi's proposition of a biblical paradigm for reconstruction in Africa. Whereas Mugambi utilises the books of Nehemiah and Ezra for his theology of reconstruction, Cezula finds the book of Ezra-Nehemiah to uphold xenophobic thought-patterns, whereas 2 Chr 6:32 bestows some respect to foreigners. The latter thus speaks for Cezula directly to the South African context with regard to the plight of xenophobia that flares up every now and then.

But not everyone is concerned with their immediate socio-political context. For example, who would be served by Emmanuel Antwi's essay on the well-known Documentary Hypothesis? He seeks to re-examine the sources,

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formation and the socio-historical context of the Joseph narrative under the Documentary Hypothesis. In the construction of his research, a reader not knowledgeable about the Documentary Hypothesis will certainly get a glimpse what it is all about.

In line with Antwi's study, and adding to his own study of the Pentateuch by playing on the knowledge of an informed reader, Pekka Pitkänen looks at how priestly legal materials can be seen to have been used in the book of Joshua. His argument is that priestly material has been incorporated in a Deuteronomic framework and that Joshua can be seen as a document that quite uniquely combines Priestly and Deuteronomic legal materials. In his mind, such a perspective makes the composition of the book neat and straightforward. The book of Joshua then presents the reader with an essential unity, revealing an authorial purpose that is without the usual complicated redactional considerations.

Lydia Lee has the scope of the interpretation of the Bible in her sight in her essay dealing with the reception of the story of Noah in Darryl Aronofsky's film "Noah." Her essay is very good example of popular reception theory when biblical literature meets popular culture. Her argument is that the Noah film is an illustration of the open-ended nature of biblical literature. This means that the interpretative task never stops. Her message is that, just like Aronofsky in his movie, Bible readers need to choose how they want to understand, interpret, update, and live out the gaps found in the biblical text.

Abraham Shemesh also deals with the reception of the biblical text. Whereas Lee looked at current interpretation Shemesh enquires into the reception of Exod 7:15 and 8:20 in the Middle Ages. Shemesh argues that the exegetical principle underlying these interpretations is the view that some royal practices were shared by rulers of ancient Egypt as well as medieval Muslim and Christian European rulers.

The role biblical interpretation plays within particular socio-political contexts, is clearly illustrated by Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele)'s response to an article by Joel Biwul in *OTE* 29/1 (2016). She challenges what she calls the "hi-jacking" of a paean in praise of a female to serve a male agenda in reading Proverbs 31. To her it is quite problematic to read a text that is about women in such a way that the woman is defined out of the text in favour of the man behind the woman. The biblical text is already an androcentric text. Her argument is that women facing these texts are in need of reading themselves into places where they are not perceived to be present.

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