

CHAPTER 1: THE QUESTIONS AT STAKE

"The determinative lineage defining the people of Israel comprises the series of the three Patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" (Malamat 1994:195). Yet, among these three father figures, Isaac is the foster child – in the Old Testament itself¹, in Old Testament scholarship, in religious circles and in the public mind (so too Boase 2001:312). Apart from the Genesis 22* account of Isaac's near-offering by Abraham – the popular renown of which may well be attributed to the psychologically disturbing, hence narratologically evocative idea of child sacrifice – Isaac remains largely disregarded. The surprising scarceness of references to Isaac in the Old Testament and the associated relative dearth of research into this patriarch thus run parallel to the public and ecclesial lack of attention to this figure. Such a state of affairs alone would merit investigation into the subject of Isaac in the Old Testament.

However, on theoretical grounds too a study of Isaac is warranted. The relative theoretical stability for almost a century since Wellhausen's influential theory on the composition of the literature of the Old Testament, particularly the Pentateuch, has been upset since the 1970s. None of the current rival theories has however gained such broad acceptance as to be regarded as, now, "normal science" (in the Kuhnian sense - cf. Kuhn 1962). In Isaac one finds a theme of manageable proportions, when compared to e.g. the Abram / Abraham or Jacob / Israel cycles in the Pentateuch, by means of which to reflect on the validity of approaches to the

¹ As e.g. Andersen 1994:250-251 indicates on genealogical grounds only, Isaac is offered greater prominence than most characters encountered in Genesis. Yet, compared to the extent of the material devoted to the other two patriarchs, Isaac features poorly.

Pentateuch. Isaac is thus diminutive enough a figure or theme in Old Testament literature – both primary and secondary – to serve as a not too unwieldy test case for reviewing the extent to which Pentateuch theories can lead to an understanding of the patriarchs. Underlying this aspect, and thoroughly determinative of it, is the philosophical view of history subscribed to by scholars, often as an unrecognised or under-recognised influence.

Indeed, with each of the Pentateuch theories, the devil remains in the details. The validity each theory holds in its broad brush strokes across the Pentateuchal canvas seems less forceful, however, once detailed, penetrating questions are asked². Precisely such exercises have over the past few decades given rise to a number of substantially altered pictures of how the Pentateuch had come into being. A theme such as Isaac holds promise of possibly being a helpful interpretative key within this recurring debate on the compositional history of the Pentateuch.

It is for these reasons that this study, as presented here, is structured first to trace the underlying influences – philosophical, historical, exegetical – which led to the insights in the subsequent exegetical and interpretative parts of the study. Academic integrity demands a laying bare of presuppositions too: scholarship is always co-determined by the intellectual spirit of the times the researcher either accepts or reacts to. These hermeneutical-methodological considerations will be followed by fresh exegetical investigations into the Isaac texts in the Old Testament, with the text

² Zenger 1995a:102 formulates this point as follows: "...die planvolle Komposition der Endgestalt der Tora/des Pentateuch ... war ein Blick aus weiter Ferne. Aus der Nähe betrachtet ist alles viel komplizierter."

of Genesis 22* proving to be the key passage in this regard. In closing follows a critical retelling of the story of Isaac, as far as it could be traced in the exegetical sections, summarising the conclusions, and hinting at further implications the interpretation on offer here can have for the understanding of the patriarchs in the first instance, but also for other figures in the Old Testament.

The main parts of the dissertation therefore are:

- Argued acknowledgement of the influences that have informed this study;
- Investigations into the Isaac texts, with Genesis 22* as the prime pericope;
- A critical retelling of the Isaac tradition we encounter in the Old Testament.

Let us then turn, as a start, to four points of orientation which have guided the rest of this study.

CHAPTER 2: FOUR POINTS OF ORIENTATION: PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE; PENTATEUCH SCHOLARSHIP IN SOUTH AFRICA; A METHODOLOGICAL CHOICE; THE PATRIARCHS IN CRITICAL RESEARCH

Insights, though always born afresh through a creative process the dynamics of which cannot with any validity be precisely determined, are also, at the very same time, borne by a series of external influences which have become internalised in an investigator. Though such influences, which may be described as the spirit of the times or the intellectual climate within one works, cannot ever be fully acknowledged, the main influences often can be teased out. That is what is attempted in this chapter. Four of the main series of influences which have formed and informed, in other words: which in very concrete ways have made possible the exegetical insights on offer in Chapter 3, are acknowledged here in Chapter 2. Naturally, in the scholarly enterprise, such shaping influences are not merely confessed to, but are argued. Either in explicitly building forth on what has gone before, or in reacting against past and present contexts by critical rejection, the own “intellectual innards”, that is: the determinative undercurrents which give rise to the scholarly identity of the researcher, are to the extent possible layed bare.

This is done not because of an inherent sense of insecurity, as post-modernist scholarship has often been accused of, but for the exact opposite reason; that is: for the sake of intellectual openness – so that the interpreter may be interpreted. This section is thus an attempt at giving voice, to some extent at least, to the communal aspect of the academic enterprise.

The four most prominent aspects acknowledged here, are:

- The philosophy of science which has fundamentally determined my studies;
- The main points of local Pentateuch scholarship, which are both reacted to and built forth on;
- The deliberate and argued methodological choice in favour of historical readings of biblical texts; and
- The main turning points in modern research into the Old Testament patriarchs, in overview.

2.1 Considerations from philosophy of science

Not to beg the always-present implicit questions, the reasons for the preponderance of historical-critical theories (as opposed to text-immanent readings), as well as the reasons for the number of divergent historically-oriented theories on the composition of the Pentateuch, call for discussion. Why do historical theories dominate the scene? Upon which follows directly: why do the historical theories differ so dramatically? These two matters are inherently connected, since both relate fundamentally to underlying philosophies of science that, though seldom indicated, are determinative of what has happened to date in critical Pentateuch scholarship.

2.1.1 History as scholarly paradigm

The tradition of science that has developed most strongly in the Western(ised) world, and as far as - for our purposes here - Old Testament scholarship is concerned, most influentially in and from German circles, is a thoroughly historical enterprise. By this is meant that, whatever the subject matter under investigation (be it the universe, *homo sapiens*, language, political theory, philosophy, literature, and so forth), it is considered to be understood and explained once the way³ it has developed into its present form is made clear. The purpose of scholarship, in this model of science, is that we gain knowledge of how our subject matter came into being – differently put: how it evolved to reach its present state. Much of modern Western theology can be understood in this way: from the basic *ad fontes* call of the Reformation (cf. e.g. Tracy 1987:252-267), to the search for *ipsissima verba* of Jesus or the Old Testament prophets (cf. e.g. Soulen 2001:40-41, 88), to the recurring *religionsgeschichtliche* interest (cf. e.g., most recently, Albertz 1992), to the demythologising quest in the biblical sciences (for which Bultmann is most famous; cf. e.g. Bultmann 1984). This historical approach to science has often been accompanied by what may be characterised as optimistic expectations (cf. le Roux

³ This “way” involves not only the trajectory along which something had developed, but also the factors that had been determinative in steering a phenomenon in this direction and that. These factors may include almost haphazard historical confluence (for example, how relatively unknown Old Testament scholars come to influence Old Testament scholarship, namely via the work of Max Weber - see Otto 2001: e.g. 3 & 8-9, 139-143), or may include factors regarded by Old Testament scholars as fundamentally influential, such as ideas (Hegel, influencing Old Testament scholars such as Wellhausen 1963) or the economy (Marx, influencing Old Testament scholars such as Gottwald 1983).

1993:114-140), namely that the application of (positivist) scholarship would yield truth, and (romanticist) ideals of laying bare “facts” about what had “really” happened, or, for the sake of the present study, the “true” identities of the person(s) referred to in a biblical account.

2.1.2 Idealisms disappointed

Such optimistic expectations of the pioneering stage of scholarship within this philosophy of science were difficult to sustain for later writers, mainly because almost all findings came, in time, to be contested. In the case of Pentateuch scholarship, substantial variations within the widely accepted Wellhausenian approach to solving the riddle of the evolution of the Pentateuch texts were concluded to. Within a philosophy of science which seeks truth, and seeks truth via controlled method, this indicated to some that new methods were called for. Those who grew disillusioned with the inconclusiveness of the proposed historically-oriented answers or theories, therefore proposed alternative approaches, often still with the optimistic assumption that, now, “solutions” would be found. Yet, as will be set out more fully below, approaches such as narrative and structural analyses of the texts of the Old Testament ultimately failed the positivist requirement of unanimity of results, a unanimity which would then have served as a guarantor of “truth”.

In addition, and vitally important, these non-historical approaches could not answer the research problems which historically-oriented research into the biblical texts had uncovered. Once opened, the Pandora’s box of historical questions cannot be closed: the European mind and, hence, science as it to a great extent remains

understood among scholars internationally, have a strongly evolutionistic, that is, historical slant⁴. This applies no less to theology as a scholarly activity. The alternative approaches to reading the texts from the Bible provided fruitful new pathways, both as avenues in themselves⁵ and in time as enrichment to the established historical approaches⁶, but by no means have the older roads been made redundant⁷.

The latter may be ascribed to at least two reasons. First is the already mentioned feature that non-historical approaches could not solve the penetrating and fundamental questions raised by historical-critical research. Second and equally

⁴ This approach has been given a thoroughly different, and to my mind theologically very productive (cf. Lombaard 2007c:1-10), life with the recent publication of van Huyssteen 2006.

⁵ These avenues never truly attained the Kuhnian status of “normal science”, though: even in their rejection of the historically-oriented readings of the Pentateuch, the non-historical readings retain both as their point of departure and as their constant partner for dialogue the historical readings. In this respect, at least, it could be argued that the historical readings remain the mainstream of Old Testament scholarship, trends to the contrary (cf. e.g. Prinsloo 1995:459-469) despite.

⁶ For instance, the use of narratological language within historical-critical research has always been common, and remains so after the rise in popularity of literary (i.e. text-as-literature) interpretations, albeit now with the literary/narrative concepts having gained greater depth of meaning. Westermann's extensive use of narratives in his Genesis commentary - certainly one of the high points in the history of critical scholarship - provides a good case in point (cf. e.g. Westermann 1974:24-89).

⁷ *Contra* a “shift... from history to story” (Stendahl 1983:4) perceived earlier; cf. Norton 1993:350³. See also Ryken 1984:11-12. Complementarity - of different sorts and to differing extents - is usually accepted of historical approaches, on the one hand, and on the other, synchronic / rhetorical / canonical (à la Childs 1979) / new literary approaches (cf. Wenham 1987:xxxiv; Coggins 1984/5:9-14; Muilenburg 1969:18; Alonso Schökel 1985:7; Schmid 1991:1, 84-88; Jonker 1997). On complementarity across this divide, though, see below.

important are theological reasons: once doubt had been raised – to employ for the moment here the language of positivism – about the factual accuracy (i.e. the historical reliability) of the biblical narratives and about the textual integrity (i.e. the compositional unity) of the biblical texts, historical-critical research *had* to be sustained. The “truth” about these matters simply had to be uncovered. The insight that philosophical assumptions about the nature of truth (objective *versus* relational *versus* subjective), the nature of historiography (positivist *versus* perspectivist) and the nature of the biblical text (“inerrancy” *versus* “humanity”) were more determinative of both the problem and its proposed solutions than were the historical approaches to biblical exegesis themselves, took some time to gain acceptance. Beside such insights, historical-critical readings of the Bible with changed philosophical underpinnings (often implicit) had become less intimidating and, surprisingly for many, had become theologically edifying. For a Western cultural conscience in which history is fundamental, researching the involvement of God in the *history* of humanity as reflected upon in the biblical texts seems innately appropriate; hence, the historical-critical methodologies gained theological legitimacy, even urgency⁸.

From a broad perspective such as this, hence, the existence of historical-critical theories on the Bible is thus mandated culturally, theologically and scientifically. This

⁸ This, to the point that classical historical-critical exegesis can become a refuge for evangelical concerns (e.g. Koster 2000:130-140), in the face of the theologically uncomfortable assumptions and implications related to the non-referentiality of texts in other approaches (see Thiselton 1992:597-604). To some extent now, again, as was the case when the historical-critical exegetical enterprise took root, *apologetic* reasons thus lie at the heart of this exegetical approach (cf. Barton 2007).

explains, to some extent at least⁹, both the preponderance and the endurance of historically-oriented work on the biblical text, when considered in relation to, for example, structural and narratological studies.

2.1.3 More-than-one-ness as customary theoretical state

The problem of the variety of mutually exclusive theories on the Pentateuch (among other biblical *corpora*) remains, though.

At present, for instance, at least half a dozen historical theories on the composition of the Pentateuch vie for scholarly attention (cf. e.g. Zenger 2006:86-88, 92-123). This number of theories, all of which but one postdate the 1970s, show a kind of response different from those of the non-historical reactions against the Wellhausenian approach during the 20th century: the uncertainties of results yielded in the Wellhausenian tradition does not lead within these historical proposals to a search for a different kind of method, but to a search for a better, yet still wholly historical explanation. The evolution of the Pentateuch into its present shape remains the primary focus.

⁹ Other reasons may be posited too, such as the nature of – for our purposes here – the Pentateuchal material in particular. As a point of comparison, the Pretoria school of structuralism (cf. Lombaard 2001a:468) finds its primary field of textual application in the Psalms; to a significant extent, this is because the Psalms lend themselves better to such analyses than does, say, the Pentateuch. Similarly, the Pentateuch by its very nature calls forth historical questions. The nature of the texts elicit certain readings more readily than others.

Naturally, this theoretical diversity implies that no firm consensus exists in contemporary Pentateuch studies. Precisely this state of affairs has been a much maligned aspect of this field of study (cf. e.g. Fohrer 1988:243-254; Lohfink 1988:638-641; Schmid 1991:87-88). However, another perspective on this variety of Pentateuch theories may carry greater validity: that any number of competing theses indicate the *healthy condition* of the discipline, with lively – at times even harsh (cf. Lombaard & le Roux 2002:1857) – debate, and ongoing primary research into a problem that certainly escapes simple solution.

Perhaps, then, the despair expressed at times at the state of Pentateuch theory has less to do with the variety of rival theories on offer than with a combination of the demanding complexity of the subject matter itself, dishearteningly so for many, on the one hand, and on the other hand, more fundamentally, the continuing underlying philosophical assumptions in much of the academic world about the end¹⁰ of science – that a final answer, and if not that, then at least a “best answer” must be concluded to. Whereas the former point on the complexity of the Pentateuch as subject matter requires no proof, the latter point requires further exposition.

Science under its modernist cloak (cf. Lombaard & Froneman 2006:152-256, 2004a:2-9; 2002a) does not accept as part of its outer apparel a fundamentally existential engagement with a chosen subject matter, namely, quite simply,

¹⁰ The dual meaning of “end” is intentional: both the idea that science has a purpose, namely to unveil the “truth”, and the consequent implication that, should that be done, the purpose of science would have been served to conclusion, are referred to here.

"because" - like Mount Everest - "it is there!"¹¹ Engagement with a topic for the sake of intellectual challenge, or joy, or calling, or chance, may at best – and then only grudgingly – be donned by modernist science as an undergarment, which is for the sake of propriety covered by more acceptable outer garments ("objectivity", "method", "control", and other protocols of science) without ever being discussed in polite academic society. Science in this way of thinking is, above all, about discovering the truth by means of certain accepted rational endeavours – though precisely what constitutes rationality is hardly ever considered outside of Philosophy.

Such a model of science admits of no limits: it is utterly positive that given enough resources and the diligent application of its protocols, solutions to problems of understanding will be found. As a corollary, this model of science cannot bear the existence of more than one acceptable theory, all mutually exclusive, as a solution to a problem. Furthermore, an accepted theory is regarded as a vessel of truth – the latter understood more or less as correspondence between what occurs in "reality" and our understanding of these occurrences. Hence, much literature has been devoted to the formulation of criteria for choosing a single best theory, in the eventuality that multiple theories propose concurrent solutions. The criteria to decide on such a theoretical guarantor of truth include the internal coherence of a given theory, its explanatory width, concord with other theories in related fields, its heuristic value, and its relative simplicity (cf. e.g. Hempel 1965; Stegmüller 1976:53-54, 122-133; Weimer 1979; Dilworth 1981; Kitcher 1988:167-187).

¹¹ This was the response of Alpinist George Mallory (1886-1924) to the question of why one should want to climb the highest mountain on earth.

These very criteria themselves reveal a model of science not devised to deal with unmanageably complex subject matter, such as human beings and their enterprises, except in reductionist ways, such as behaviourism, or – the ultimate power play of positivist science – by ejecting fields of scholarship, such as theology, philosophy and ethics from the precincts of legitimate science. Multiple truths are anathema in this model of knowledge. Order, the hallmark of such science, cannot bear contradiction. Truth is, simply, singular.

A different, less objectivist and more humanist approach to science, is to view theory not as a vessel of truth, hence supra-human, but as giving expression to substantial understanding of, and an aid to, further insight into a given subject matter by an individual scholar or, intersubjectively, by a group of scholars. Not the theory, but the persons involved are the carriers of science. Simultaneously, science is not constituted by series of single facts which are now above human elucidation, but by series of coherent insights by a scholar or within a scholarly community. This approaches even an existential view of science, and is applicable to all pursuits of knowledge, with science understood in its simplest form as intellectual engagement with one's subject matter (and the subject matter would be come by in any number of ways, not thrust "objectively" on one).

2.1.4 The scholar and the scholars

Despite the importance of the intersubjective dynamic of a scholarly community, as mediating factor in scholarship, science in this approach remains also an individualistic affair. No two scholars are in complete agreement. I offer my insights

along with, or in the face of, extant interpretations, and my analysis may or may not find a certain degree of acceptance or resonance within my scholarly community. Even when acceptance of a proposed insight or sets of insights (that is, theories) occur, by me or by colleagues, this too constitutes either an individual's or individuals' acceptance. Though broader society may be much affected by a proposed insight or theory, the theory remains an utterly individualistic affair to each who – in each case, for different sets of reasons – accepts it.

Such a model of science allows scholars to find meaning in different and competing theories, such as has become the case with the Pentateuch, since each theory constitutes a certain individual's understanding, or a group's, within a given set of circumstances. Science is thus perspectivist (cf. Lombaard 2004a:2-9; Lombaard & Froneman 2006:151-158), in a dual sense: theories offer broad interpretational perspectives, *and* engagement with a field of scholarship includes taking cognisance of those interpretational perspectives extant in the field. The existence of a variety of competing theories is therefore no detractor from science, in this model, but its *essence*. The way in which the individual scholar engages with the theories – the *process* of science – is not scientific because of some set of criteria for judging any variety of theories, but because the engagement is *intellectual*. The mind has been applied with specialist dedication. The subject matter is scrutinised; the widest possible range of applicable literature is reviewed; arguments are weighed and conclusions evaluated; in this critical process, some propositions are found acceptable and others not; during the course of this critical engagement one or more theories may seem more attractive than others, or if none such is found, a new

thesis may be formed; conclusions are left for others to review in recurring scholarly engagement.

A broad (that is, popular) culture and a smaller, scientific culture that can accept this kind of view of science will not seek to restrict the areas of scholarly engagement, but would welcome all spheres of investigation academics find themselves drawn to. Academics are, in this line of thinking, never managed; only encouraged¹². Relevance cannot be prescribed (cf. Lombaard 2006a:144-155), in much the same way as certain fields of inquiry and research results may for the sake of academic freedom not be proscribed. In this view of academia, science is science not because society (or perhaps more accurately: influential sectors of society, such as politicians, state bureaucrats, or leaders of “big business”) allows it or defines it or requires it, but only because the broader culture implicitly values the existence of intellectuals and their scholarly engagements as part of the art of living well. Like superior cuisine, fine wine, good music and engaging company, exceptional intellectual rendezvous enrich life.

Hence, even competing theories may be appreciated by an individual researcher for their value, and may be weighed, apart from their explanatory value, in aesthetic terms too. The elegance of a theory becomes as much a criterion for its acceptance, or not, in such an existentialist or humanist view of science, as does the intellectually satisfactory nature of it. The explanatory and, where applicable, predictive powers of a theory are however not the full measure of the value of that theory. Very often, a

¹² Herein lies, to my mind, the heart of the problem at many universities worldwide, where a managerialist approach to university leadership dominates – cf. Lombaard 2006b:71-84.

theory fully comes into its own only when one encounters what it renders interesting, that is, what is left *unexplained* (cf. Burawoy 1991:3). It is precisely these unexplained areas that form the arenas of contestation between different theories, and in the Kuhnian model of science (cf. Kuhn 1962), provide the possible seeds of an imminent paradigm shift, and in the Popperian model of science (cf. Popper 1968), fundamentally constitute the status of a theory as truly scientific. Naturally, following this line of reasoning, one finds oneself pushed in scholarship towards the spheres of deep-seated uncertainty and relativity, even relativism. That is appropriate. These states of insecurity are inherent both to existentialism and the continued pursuit of science. Since the latter entails the advancement of understanding, it inherently implies rendezvous with uncertainties. In this respect, scholarship equals life itself: vitality acquires its vigour most clearly on the brink of death. The need for scholarship is most clearly felt where the boundaries of extant knowledge have been reached.

2.1.5 On to the next...

Although this would in one sense be the perfect point at which to move on to the text of Genesis 22, in which being on the brink of death is the issue at stake in another way, three further matters of orientation remain to be discussed in this chapter devoted to primary issues of scholarly points of reference. The first of these concerns an interpretation of the history of Pentateuch scholarship in South Africa.

2.2 Of serpents, reeds, understanding, and turns. Some perspectives on implied apologetics and recent Pentateuch theory

The matter of some local (that is: South African, though in a somewhat loose sense) Pentateuch interpretations is brought to the fore in this part of the study. Though, certainly, the whole of local Pentateuch scholarship is by no means taken into review here (for that, see le Roux 1993:88-203), some influences of the past half-century are described in order to help draw some of the intentional parameters of the present study.

2.2.1 A continuation of a history...

The history of the churches in South Africa has to a substantial extent, and in various ways, also been a history of the scholarly interpretation of the Bible. Where the latter has on occasion not sat well with church authorities, far-reaching conflict had ensued. The most prominent earlier cases in this regard include the figures of John Colenso (see e.g. Erasmus 1986) and Johannes du Plessis (see e.g. Nicholls 1997). In two substantial works, but in quite different ways, the later historical repercussions of these earlier impulses have been traced, namely in le Roux's *A story of two ways. Thirty years of Old Testament scholarship in South Africa* (1993) and in Deist's *Ervaring, rede en metode in Skrifuitleg. 'n Wetenskapshistoriese ondersoek na Skrifuitleg in die Ned. Geref. Kerk 1840-1990* (1994). Building forth on these two works of socio-theological history, and advancing their time frame from the early 1990s to include also the present, the way in which particularly critical Pentateuch

theory in South Africa has had to be accompanied by something of an apologetic tradition, is outlined in its major points here.

2.2.2 The five-headed serpent

In *The Old Testament according to Spike Milligan*, a single note (Milligan 1994:5) relates to South Africa:

Now the serpent was more subtle than beasts of the field; he said unto woman: 'Come and eat the fruit of this tree.' Woman said, 'Nay, if we eat or touch it we die.' And the serpent said, 'Fear not, they are not from South Africa,' whereupon she ate and gave of it to her husband.

British comedian Milligan's parody may, for our purposes here, be used as a metaphor of sorts, in which the wily Pentateuch invites its readers to try to come to an understanding of it. Scholars may recoil, as hinted at above already, in trepidation at its complexity. Yet, this five-headed beast, the Pentateuch, does after all assuage our fears; we will – in either prophetic or apocalyptic mode – eat from this book. To recoup here the earlier metaphor: though we know that, always with Pentateuch theory, the devil remains in the details, Pentateuch scholars remain keen to pass on to others (uninterested spectators, or willing initiates) their broad understanding, inviting those attracted to share in the intellectual feast.

Leaving this now strained, and mixed, metaphor aside, the point remains: the Pentateuch continues to challenge our theories of its composition (cf. e.g. Wellhausen 1963, Blum 1990, Houtman 1994, Carr 1996, Braulik 1998:125-141, Van

Seters 1999, and Otto 2000). However, taken as a group, Pentateuch theorists have had another front on which to defend their enterprise, namely that of criticism of their critical work. Though not always experienced as directly as overt rejection of the historical enterprise, still, a sense has often remained with critical Pentateuch scholars that they have some explaining to do...

In what follows, three ways are indicated in which this has been done by influential Old Testament scholars¹³, all of whom either are from or have a strong South African connection. Drawing on this synopsis, a few concluding remarks are made on – unintentionally – again three possible ways this could develop over the next decades.

2.2.3 The reed that has been bent

AH van Zyl, University of Pretoria Old Testament professor from 1966, followed a very specific technique in conveying, to his students mostly, his views of the layeredness of the Pentateuch texts (van Zyl 1975:73-98). While his strongly confessional style has been analysed (le Roux 1993:141-152), which included stressing by repetition the divine inspiration of the human authors of the Pentateuch texts, little has been said of his rhetorical style. It is through precisely this aspect, though, that one is alerted to van Zyl's sense that he has had to tread carefully, not only because of what may well have been personal convictions (Brown 1979:146; le

¹³ It would be difficult to include here the work of the at present most influential Old Testament scholar in South Africa, JH le Roux, since he is also the supervisor of this study. Cf. however my article on him: Lombaard 2006f:912-925; also Lombaard 2001a:467-478.

Roux 1993:144), but most particularly because the ideas he had wanted to convey were what may be termed "a difficult sell" to his intended audience.

Van Zyl's rhetorical strategy operated as follows: in the conclusion to his three editions of *Gods Woord in mensetaal*, van Zyl uses the example of certain Boer generals from the Anglo-Boer War (now also called the South African War) and how stories about them were circulated differently in different rural Afrikaner circles, to explain the uneven emphases found in the textual layers of the Pentateuch (van Zyl 1971:138, 1975:239, 1976:239). In addition, van Zyl employs another metaphor, namely that of reeds. In a personalised, almost intimate style, he briefly explains how as a youth he had woven reed whips, and how the tiny reeds were plaited together, one into the other, almost seamlessly, to create the end product (van Zyl 1971:74, 1975:101, 1976:101; van Zyl then repeatedly continues to allude to this imagery in the relevant sections of these works). With this, then, van Zyl provides his students with an analogous explanation of how the Pentateuch's textual layers had been intertwined.

Apart from the fact that such imagery seems somewhat quaint to later generations of Old Testament scholars, the metaphor is by no means innocent; as novelist Primo Levi (1988:77) warns: "Beware of analogies"! Van Zyl, with both the more elaborate reed-weaving image and the nationalistic military illustration, plays on the Afrikaner's primarily small town / rural-oriented sense of identity at the time (this can also be seen in other cultural activities of that period – cf. Coetzee 2000). Whether by unreflected impulse or by carefully thought-out design, van Zyl in this manner speaks to the "soul" of his Afrikaans readership: romanticised associations of cultural

heartland values are played upon. To try for a moment to formulate an understanding as it may have been experienced by Afrikaans students in the 1970s: the Word of God came into being in a safely homely way.

The point here is not that this rhetorical strategy is in any sense "bad"; however, van Zyl experiences within a conservative socio-theological climate (cf. le Roux 1993:16-26) the need for a kind of apologetic which will circumvent any possible strong reactions against critical theory, in which he himself was versed well enough. The Pentateuch texts thus could not just be analysed and presented as such to students; more was required: the case had to be explained with care; defended, even.

2.2.4 Minding the mind

FE Deist may be used as an example from the next generation of Old Testament scholars who has had to develop a strategy with which to coat, or even: to justify his historically-oriented views on the textual composition process of the Pentateuch. Although a freer academic climate than van Zyl's may be posited for Deist, aided also by the fact that he never held a church-funded university chair, the general religious climate within which Deist lived certainly was still (and to a significant extent remains so) conservative, even fundamentalist (cf. Deist 1994:7-24, 355-365). To the latter audience, Deist communicated through a great number of popular or popular-scientific publications on theological matters (e.g. Deist 1986), with his literary work (e.g. Deist 1987) assisting in establishing his credentials as a theologian with a "common touch". With his theologically trained readership, though, Deist engaged by means of an entirely different strategy – through "mind games"; put

differently: by analysing what it means to understand. Through an *intellectual* pathway, Deist could waylay fears and criticisms of his historically-oriented views. Formulated in an alternate way: Deist "minded" his own business and that of the elite who would read his scholarly publications. It is noteworthy therefore that in the same year as Deist's history of Pentateuch theory, under the characteristically inventive title of *Mosaïek van Moses*¹⁴, appears, namely 1976, his first hermeneutics book, *Historiese heuristiek, teologiese hermeneutiek en Skrifgesag*, is also published¹⁵.

This sets the trend for Deist's publications along these lines: fully-fledged historical-critical studies (e.g. Deist 1988b), along with contextually-oriented theologico-political publications (e.g. Deist 1983), complemented with at times painstakingly detailed analyses of what it means to "understand" (e.g. Deist & le Roux 1987; Deist 1994¹⁶). Deist's apologetics was thus an affair of the mind. "How the mind works" was his buffer, implicit or covert in many instances, in protecting him against reactions to his ideas on "how the Old Testament works"; that is, on how he understood the coming into being of the Old Testament texts (the historical or evolutionary form of

¹⁴ An English translation of this work was only to appear twelve years later – Deist 1988a.

¹⁵ It has been brought to my attention that Deist's 1976 *Historiese heuristiek, teologiese hermeneutiek en Skrifgesag* was in fact written as a direct response to criticisms from church circles on what he had been teaching his students at the University of Port Elizabeth (now renamed the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University) at the time, which further strengthens the case that Deist's writings on hermeneutics were to a substantial extent at least, if not wholly so, an apologetic strategy.

¹⁶ Along with Deist's 1988b textual criticism work, I regard this 1994-book – *Ervaring, rede en metode in Skrifuitleg* – as the crown of Deist's publications, even if it was – in his own words to me – "killed by silence" ("doodgeswyg"), and in my view also by very poor marketing; cf. Lombaard 1998a:645-646; 2001:471⁸; 2005b.

scholarship referred to earlier). Though this approach did not save Deist from cases being brought against him in church quarters, his literary output on hermeneutics was such that it simply had to be respected by the church leadership and by less historically-oriented academic colleagues.

For Deist, then, it was in a certain sense a case of mind over against matter: the difficulty of understanding runs parallel to the difficulty of the Old Testament text. Namely: understanding understanding and understanding the Pentateuch are both thoroughly theoretically embedded enterprises¹⁷. This "theoretical approach" was Deist's practice of scholarship (cf. le Roux 1992:4-5, 9-10).

2.2.5 Otto's turn

The Munich Old Testament scholar E Otto has, through his association with J le Roux and as *extraordinarius* for Old Testament at the University of Pretoria, become the most prominent influence within the present generation of South African Pentateuch scholarship (cf. le Roux 2005:1-21). His theory, that the beginnings of the Pentateuch should be sought in pre-deuteronomistic Deuteronomy's reaction to neo-Assyrian imperial law (cf. e.g. Otto 1999:364-378; Lombaard 2008e:119-138), and that this is played out in an exilic–post-exilic debate between the Pentateuchal authorial groups of D and P (cf. e.g. Otto 2004:23-35), has become one of the leading contenders on the at times highly contested international marketplace of compositional theories on the Pentateuch. However, as had happened exactly 200

¹⁷ In this respect, the thoughts of Deist and of his long-time colleague and friend Jurie le Roux (cf. e.g. le Roux 2001:444-457) run along the exact same lines.

years previously, in 2005 (with precursors in e.g. Otto 2004:14-35), again everything changed: in a University of Pretoria lecture (Otto 2005) memorialising WML de Wette's 1805-published theory, that the law book the discovery of which is reported in 2 Kings 22 was proto-Deuteronomy, Otto put forward what may be called the Pentateuch's theory of the Pentateuch (cf. Otto 2007:19-28).

Breaking with the established scholarly analytical tradition that the Pentateuch redactor-authors either had little insight into the roughshod nature of the editorial work they were doing, or that they were for various proposed reasons too timid to conceal their sources and their work on them, Otto proposed that the textual inconsistencies were purposeful signs (Otto 2005:5-8; 2007:23-25). These "signs" were left in the text, even introduced, by the editors, in order for their intended readers to note the way the text had been put together. Assumed, thus, are both highly gifted redactional craftsmanship and a decidedly intellectual, textually vigilant readership. Though the former has often been asserted, most notably over the last three decades by a-historical exegetical approaches (cf. Lombaard 2007a:61-70 / 2006c:18-31), the emphasis that the textual tensions are deliberate "writerly"¹⁸ attributes, is something of an about-turn.

This turn of Otto's, from his first major Pentateuch theory to this, his second, has its own apologetic motivation too. In the quest for greater interdisciplinarity in our time, but in which it has become increasingly difficult for theologians from outside the discipline of Old Testament scholarship to understand the issues, theories and

¹⁸ I appropriate here a term from the hermeneutics of Thiselton (1992:98), which denotes that an author deliberately writes in order to invite the reader to ascribe meaning.

debates surrounding Pentateuch composition, Otto (2005:2, 8; 2007:20, 28) proposes his theory, namely the Pentateuch's theory of the Pentateuch, as a simpler, more manageable alternative to follow for scholars in other disciplines, for students, and for Old Testament exegetes outside a primarily European frame of reference and debate. The historical Midas touch, the touchstone of modern scholarship, thus remains intact (cf. Otto 2005:4; 2007:23); however, the plurality of complex modern compositional theories that detracts from the accessibility of Old Testament studies to non-specialist interested parties is replaced with an ancient, inner-Pentateuchal historical approach.

Another advantage of this approach is educational: for students from mostly conservative or even fundamentalist theological backgrounds, an analysis of the Pentateuch's own theory of its composition is bound to seem less threatening. Otto's turn would thus not "lead us away from the Bible", as is at times complained, since an inner-biblical, yet at once intellectually satisfying compositional theory may be studied. Only after an initial exposure to such an approach – shall we call it "Otto II" or "Otto light"? – would follow advanced study of what may now be termed "Otto *maior*" and the other historical Pentateuch theories on the scholarly marketplace.

Otto's turn is thus an apologetic of Pentateuch theory meant for the ears of the theologically schooled community. Put differently: Otto has now become the missionary of Moses to the devotees to other scholarly disciplines and to the initiates into the exegetical mysteries of the Hebrew Bible.

2.2.6 Three apologetics, taken together

We see, here, in three different periods of South African Pentateuch scholarship, three different examples of expression being given to an experienced need not just to analyse the biblical text, but to do more. Somehow, something additional is required in order to make Pentateuch criticism acceptable. The strategies could hardly have been more diverse: van Zyl relies on a personal memory that will resonate with the psyche of his Afrikaner audience; Deist's appeal is to the head, by introducing philosophical hermeneutics; Otto turns to the Bible, devising a completely new "ancient Pentateuch theory" from the Pentateuch texts themselves. Whether by personality, philosophy or exegesis, respectively, reliance on some additional resource is shared by these three figures, in order to ensure the broadly perceived legitimacy and integrity of this scholarly project of studying the composition of the Pentateuch. An enterprise that is often perceived with apprehension, either because of its complexity or because of its perceived potential for undermining certain religious ideas, seems in need of mediating instruments. The serpent, which we know from Ancient Near Eastern mythology is really a wise animal, must be presented as tamed to audiences who perceive it as, only, dangerous.

2.2.7 The future...

This situation, of a perceived need for an instrument for apologetics, is not likely to change. South African society is, with small pockets of exception, not becoming more theologically literate: between growing fundamentalisms, nationalisms and

secularisms, Pentateuch theoreticians will continue to feel the vague urge to, please, explain.

Naturally, the future in this regard too can only really be predicted *ex eventu*. Still, from recent developments among those interested in the Bible as a book of some importance, at least three likely trends, quite possibly to run concurrently, may be identified:

- A growing rationalism, among an intellectual few, who perceive truth in modernist categories, and who will, for a Pentateuch theory to be acceptable, demand strict historical veracity, not in the service of religious convictions, but more oriented towards exposing religious conservatism (cf. Muller et al. 2002; Lombaard 2007d:206-208 / 2006d:251-253);
- An orientation towards the spiritual, even the mystical, in which experiencing God becomes of growing importance, not by means of a return to pre-critical faith, but as what Ricoeur (1967:350-352) had termed a second naiveté, in which thorough historical scholarship, such as that on the Pentateuch, and meaningful religious commitments serve one another (cf. de Villiers 2006:99-121; Lombaard 2003:433-450; Sheriffs 1996; Bosman 1990:45-56);
- An interest in "biblical archaeology" and Ancient Near Eastern culture, not in the sense either to prove or disprove the veracity of Bible or views around its inspiration or inerrancy, but simply as a way of furthering knowledge, either related to faith or not, but in so doing creating an informed frame of reference within which Pentateuch theory will have to ring true for it to be noteworthy (cf. Scheffler 2000; Deist & Carroll 2000).

As the small group of academics interested in the Pentateuch often stumble as we tread around the very borders of science, we are – to reiterate the earlier conclusion from my philosophy of science section, above – forced to face and accept the uncertainties of our insights (le Roux 2005:277). Hence, again, precisely, the need for scholarly theories. Still, though, hubris is a dragon easily, and repeatedly, slain by the Pentateuch as subject matter. What is more, assuaging the various misgivings of the audiences of Theology – in the academy, church and society (Tracy 1981:3-46) – will also have to be contended with, by developing certain strategies to accompany the endeavour of the scholarly interpretation of the Pentateuch.

Drawing on the three selected important figures in the history of South African Pentateuch scholarship, the impulses which will show most clearly in the exegetical investigations later in this study are: the strongly historical orientation we see in all three the figures discussed; the influence of hermeneutics and philosophy of history from, most particularly, Deist; and, lastly, taken most directly from Otto, the active interplay between text and history, and especially the active intertextual interpretative play of related Old Testament texts.

2.2.8 Again, on to the next...

Perhaps, on the never-ending enterprise of interpreting the texts of the Old Testament anew, yet never with a conclusive finality, some solace can be found in the mythical Scheherazade in *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights*. Each night she had for the sake of her continued existence to tell a story; each story had

to be at least as engaging as the previous. Transposed to the field of Pentateuch studies, it is a task of which scholars may grow both weary and wary. Still, like Scheherazade, it is in the telling of the story that one finds life...

These remarks lead us back again to the opening section of this chapter, on the philosophy of science that forms the underpinnings of this study. Both the lines of thought explored thus far in this chapter, namely on philosophy and history, belie any supposed positivistic firmness of scholarly method, both to academic investigations in general and as it applies to Old Testament studies in particular. This line of thought will be continued below, but will then be related directly to one of the most distinctive features of the study of the biblical texts in South Africa, namely the choice of exegetical method. Within this decades-long local debate, my choice for a historical method is argued on two fronts: methodological soundness, and theological validity. Not to leave these theoretical arguments hanging in the air, though, the choices argued for will be demonstrated practically by the exegetical studies offered in Chapter 3 of this study, on Genesis 22* in particular.

However, before the exegetical concretisation is offered, the two further points of orientation which constitute the substance of this chapter will now be taken into view, the first of which is the matter of exegetical methodology.

2.3 The Old Testament between diachrony and synchrony: two reasons for favouring the former

The identity of an exegete, the more so in the South African Bible disciplines of the last almost four decades than in most other contexts, is to a large extent decided by where one finds oneself within the debates on exegetical methodology. Hence, for this study too it seems there is no escape from that heritage: the insights and decisions arrived at within these debates have contributed fundamentally to the exegetical conclusions reached below on Isaac in the Old Testament.

2.3.1 A personal route

It is a by now centuries-long convention in the elite centres of theological scholarship internationally for exegetes to be trained in the historical-critical methods of Bible interpretation (cf. Lombaard 2008c:289-305). In South Africa, at least among the Afrikaans language churches, the tradition has been since the 1970's (but before that time too in a different way), to train students in non-historical methodologies. Dominant has been what I refer to, somewhat imprecisely, as the Pretoria school of structuralist exegesis¹⁹. In this tradition the text is read, inflexibly, synchronically.

19 In Lombaard 2001a:468 & Lombaard & le Roux 2002:1862 I distinguished the Pretoria school of structuralism from French structuralism (based on de Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale*; see however Thiselton 1992:100-101, Deist 1995:37-42 and Tallis 1988), the Amsterdam school in the Netherlands (cf. Oost 1986), the Richter Schüle in Germany (cf. Richter 1971), and the Claremont school in the USA (cf. e.g. Knierim 1992).

My exegetical journey has however been on a road less travelled: I was trained initially in the narratological exegetical methodology (cf. e.g. du Rand 1985:18-36²⁰), then in Pretoria's structuralist exegesis, most influentially by Prinsloo and du Toit (cf. e.g. Prinsloo 1992 & 1988:3-7 and du Toit 1980:119-136²¹, both mediating Louw, Vorster and Loader - see e.g. Louw 1979²²; Vorster 1971:139-148; Loader 1978:1-40; cf. le Roux 1993:27-28, 216-245), and only then did I come into direct contact, formally at least²³, with historical-critical methodologies (methodologically more explicit: Vosloo – e.g. Vosloo 1989 & 1995:63-68²⁴ –; broader and bolder: le Roux – e.g. le Roux 1995 –; in both cases, presented always and expressly as nurturing of the faith, and therefore as good Reformed theology – cf. Deist 1984:5-12, 158-164).

This non-traditional personal academic history has given me not only direct exposure to the "inner workings" of each of these approaches to exegesis, but has also afforded me something of a comparative perspective on the claims, value and

²⁰ Most influential internationally have been works such as Alter 1981, Bar-Efrat 1989, Berlin 1983, and Sternberg 1985. See also the work by the South African New Testament scholar Tolmie 1999 for a good example of this methodology.

²¹ Here one of the occurrences of the now classic "ten steps of exegesis" is to be found.

²² This study is a good example of the accompanying "kerugma", the kind of enthusiastic optimism that was found in the 1970's and still persisted into the 1990's with regard to structuralism, namely that, once this method was employed, one would have no need of commentaries or other academic sources. Du Toit 2004:212 refers to this manner of thinking as "methodological imperialism"; le Roux 1996:44 calls it "hubris".

²³ My own reading had earlier been inclined toward the historical interpretations, simply because I found Westermann 1974 more interesting than anybody else on Genesis.

²⁴ A source-critical remark: these pages by Vosloo come from an earlier booklet, which has been taken up into this 1995-publication.

problems of each methodology. It is from this background that my remarks below should be understood.

2.3.2 The beauty in the pond of the text

In the European and North-American contexts, some scholars trained in the historical-critical methodologies of exegesis seem over time to grow discontented with these approaches. I do not refer here to the conservative-confessional rejection of historical research on the Scriptures (e.g. Linnemann 1990), but to serious and critical exegetes who become dissatisfied with what their historical research and others' have rendered (e.g. Fischer 2005:62-73).

Usually, this dissatisfaction lies on two levels:

- *Scientifically*, the open-endedness of historical research is often experienced as unsatisfactory. Results, it is found, are hardly ever conclusive. In time, even the firmest of most dearly held hypotheses are questioned, by an ever-expanding community of scholars and a volume of publications that can hardly be covered. Different, even contradictory, positions on any given exegetical issue are taken strongly and convincingly. This leaves some researchers, if not bewildered, at least disillusioned. The quest for "truth" (understood Platonically as singular, eternal, and incontestable) has been shown to be futile.
- *Spiritually*, this leaves some exegetes who are inclined towards matters of faith, at a loss. The sense – which may have been the motivation underpinning much study and research – of contributing to the church's

understanding of the Scriptures, is lost. In a way, a loss of the sentiments of calling, purpose and service are experienced. From a certain point onwards, uncertainty prevails, hindering both firm personal conviction and public kerugma.

Both these aspects create a need, perhaps founded as much scientifically as spiritually, psychologically and existentially, to seek new alternatives. The historical-critical exegesis, it is argued (or perhaps, really: felt), has to be amended, or – more strongly – replaced by an approach that will at once provide firmer and more apparently useful answers.

Although few exegetes dare express such underlying awarenesses in scientific publications, one finds these commitments in another way in the writings by exegetes (newly) converted to, for instance, narratological and structuralist exegetical practice. Rhetoric reveals the soul...

The argument in such publications runs, ideal-typically, as follows:

- Upon review, the historical-critical analyses of whichever text is under discussion have proven not only inconclusive, but have provided an array of answers so wide ranging as to be, ultimately, scientifically worthless. This creates the sense that the methodology itself is of dubious value. Hence, a new manner of reading the text is called for, which will provide an answer conclusively. The meaning of the text will now become clear.
- The next step of the argument is to provide an analysis of the *Text an Sich*, i.e. the text in its final, "canonical" form. Attempts may be said to be made to

incorporate historical perspectives; however, this is never truly the case (Lombaard 1996:106-113). Moreover, it is often either explicitly stated or strongly implied that this *Text an Sich* has not been taken seriously by the historical-critical methodologies.

The implied legitimating weight of the term "canonical" in this flow of argument is not to be overlooked. It provides, rhetorically, at least overtones of theological and pragmatic legitimacy. Moreover, this term is not used with a perfectly fixed meaning. It could refer to the "the text as we have it here before us", that is, in its final form, with little recognition given to its developmental history. This "final form" would, by implication, be the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* – a thoroughly composite text, of course, and of one textual tradition (cf. Deist 1988b, with the implications spelt out most clearly on pp 198-201; see also Barr 1995:5). There simply is no, nor has there ever been, a "final text" on which to call. Another, associated, denotation of the term "canonical" could be described as "the present text within the context of the canon, consisting of Genesis 1 to Malachi 4"; respectively: "... to Revelations 22" (cf. e.g. Childs 1985; Wright 1983:8-9). In Reformed circles, at least, this view is expressed with as implicit support (apart from the underlying interpretations of the meanings of *ad fontes* and *sola scriptura* indicated by Deist 1988a:1-7, 199) the erroneous and at times rather sloganish adaptations of the concepts of the *claritas scripturae* and, most particularly, *scriptura sui interpres* (cf. Rossouw 1963). Classically, however, neither of these confessions relate to exegetical technique. Rather, they are confessions based on the Reformation conviction that Scripture and Spirit are not to be separated. The existential communication of the Bible thus refers.

Both these denotations of the term "canonical", at times combined, have as their implicit rhetorical purpose that it would give theological legitimacy to *this*: a better, or the best, method. However, these connotations of a "firmer" text are misleading; the term "canonical" itself, as used to legitimate a-historical exegetical practices, is problematic, regarding both the values it confers on itself and those it disallows (cf. le Roux 1996:51) the historically-oriented approaches.

- The conclusion of this line of argumentation by proponents of a new, non-historical method is undertaken after the text has been divided into units, such as "episodes" in narratological exegesis or "cola" in structuralist exegesis. Almost without fail, a concentric build-up of the text is detected. This is taken as proof that what has been studied is a carefully constructed text. Usually the middle episode or colon, often also the opening and closing episodes or cola, are accorded greater weight, though precisely why symmetry would dictate meaning is never explained. It is simply deduced that *here* lies what is of exegetical and theological import. This matter is often rhetorically lent further support by remarks of an aesthetic and/or technical nature, namely, respectively, that the text offers us beautiful patterns of composition, and/or that this has been proven to be a finely-crafted, well-planned and well-executed piece of writing. The movement in the argument from the detection of patterns in the text to the aesthetic pronouncements is never explained. Wherein lies beauty? – No theory of aesthetics, either philosophical or comparative, is ever displayed (see for instance the essays collected in Levine 1994; cf. e.g. Loader 2004:252-266 & Deist 1989:36-52 for useful theological / exegetical strides in this direction). If, then, beauty lies in the eye

of the beholder, should this not provide a hint, at the very least, that what has been identified as pleasing is not the ancient work of writing art, but perhaps more accurately, the modern work of interpretative art? Could this then be called exegesis à la Narcissus: the beauty in the pond of the text as, simply, a reflection of the exegete's own profile?

This latter indication should not be taken as an indictment of the synchronic methods of exegesis. Rather, it is meant as a word of welcome to the world of science. Whereas the rhetorics of synchronicists of providing an alternate methodology would portray it differently, the reality is that we have merely been provided with *another* interpretation, and not *the* interpretation. The synchronically obtained answers initially may seem fresh and the conclusions firm, but that is not a state of affairs that can last for any substantial amount of time. As soon as a second, third, and so forth study from within the same approach (be it structuralist or narratological) is undertaken, again we have a proliferation of results. Again, the problem arises from which these methods sought to run: very soon, a multitude of competing, even mutually exclusive sets of results abound. This is the very nature of science; more radically: its purpose.

To clarify the last statement: if a series of scholars were to read a text and come to the exact same conclusions, time and again, one would have to ask the question whether it is indeed scholarship that is practiced here. Apart from the fact that to read such studies becomes, very soon, tedious, questions about the scientific validity will have to be asked of studies that seem to avoid the possibility of falsifiability (à la Popper – cf. Faure & Venter 1987:31-55).

The point is this: the sense one gets from many works on synchronic exegesis is that something of a holier-than-thou attitude is adopted over against the diachronic approaches²⁵. This is combined with a kind of optimism that, having adopted a new method, the problems are past. As argued above, this is certainly not the case. The synchronic methods are characterised by the very same features of the diachronic methods they seek to avoid. Neither scientific nor spiritual enlightenment should be sought in method (Gadamer 1975; cf. le Roux 1996:45-46).

2.3.3 Two reasons for preferring diachronic to synchronic methodologies

Having thus levelled the playing field a little, different arguments now have to be advanced for choosing between these two approaches. Of course, a whole host of arguments may be offered and counter-offered. For the moment, though, I would like to advance two arguments on a personal preference for the historical-critical methodologies – the one argument methodological, the other theological.

²⁵ This is shown most clearly by the blunt argument that is at times employed, simply declaring historical-critical methods to be *passé*, and not arguing the issue, but calling as testimony the growth in literature on or employing these alternate methodologies. Another way this kind of thinking shows itself is the conviction among at least some structuralists that, by employing their methodology, not a structure, but *the* structure of a given text can be determined.

2.3.3.1 A methodological argument in favour of diachronic methodologies

The use of the Bible for concerns other than exegetical, such as for matters ethical (e.g. Wright 1983:4-11) or spiritual (e.g. Schneiders 1998:43), tends to have a greater appreciation for broad narratives, rather than detailed exegesis. However, I remain convinced that it is "the minutiae of biblical literature (which provide) the unexpected riches" (Lombaard 2003:440; cf. Houlden 1983:48). Whereas synchronic methods tend to offer easier access to larger story lines, these story lines remain limited to what is obvious on the text surface. If the text is dissected historically, a greater number of story lines unfold. Read properly diachronically, these various story lines in the different layers of the text should be related to one another – *Traditionsgeschichte* and *Redaktionsgeschichte* – which again offers its own story lines for interpretation²⁶.

What is more, on each of the layers of the text, synchronic methodologies may be employed, as has been done within diachronic methodology. It is quite possible to read the respective layers of, for instance, the Genesis 11 / Tower of Babel account narratologically. Putting into relation to one another these different, layered accounts, and thus tracing the interpretative history, provides us with further interpretational lines. The latter would be a more valid application of the art of narratological analysis than is on offer with the usual synchronic narratological analyses, in that the comparative interpretation of different stories comes, to a

²⁶ This was, incidentally, what Richter 1971 proposed to do with his *Literarkritik*; cf. Jonker 1996:335-342. However, the way he was applied, locally at least, gave no real recognition to the layeredness of the text.

greater extent, into its own. Outside of theology, in the fields of literature studies, narratological readings are more often than not comparative (a thoroughly historical enterprise; cf. Barr 1995:5-8) – a dimension sorely lacking in what is offered as narrative analyses of biblical texts locally.

To summarise: whereas synchronic methods fail to live up to claims that diachronic aspects are incorporated (Lombaard 1996:107-113), the reverse is true. Moreover, precisely because they trace history, the diachronic analyses offer fuller versions of, for instance, narratological interpretations than wholly synchronic narratological interpretations themselves can offer. Put differently, the diachronic exegetical approaches are, to my mind, methodologically stronger than the synchronic approaches: the former incorporates the latter without difficulty, and executes its methodology better. The historically comparative dimension of the interpretation of narratives in general, lost in its synchronic application to biblical texts, is returned to its historical state by diachronic co-option.

2.3.3.2 A theological argument in favour of diachronic methodologies

Frequently, diachronic exegesis *on* the Bible has had to face the critique that it does not serve the church well: historical criticism has made it difficult to preach or, for that matter, to say almost anything with any certainty *from* the Bible. For a faith that takes the Bible as its prime source, this has proven to be distressing. The greater certainties promised by synchronic methodologies therefore seem attractive. On this impression, two brief comments.

First: the philosophical assumptions on which, for example, narratological interpretations are based, are much more disconcerting than those of diachronic methodologies, long since stripped of their earlier positivist underpinnings. The so-called New Criticism, influential to the point of being determinative of modern literary theory, holds as one of its central tenets the non-referentiality of texts (Thiselton 1992:471-514; Nel 1989:71; cf. Barr 1995:11-14). A text is a world unto itself; no reference to any reality outside itself is possible. The problems this creates for the theological and ecclesial use of the Bible is, clearly, much more serious than those of the diachronic methods (cf. Koster 2000:120-149).

Second: the problems experienced with historical approaches and with applying more broadly the results thereof, have more to do with a view of truth, namely Platonic, than with Christian theology. If the Platonic outlook on truth could be exchanged for a more relational view (both with respect to faith – cf. e.g. Gereformeerde Kerken Nederland 1981 – and reason – cf. e.g. du Toit 2005:52-63), the uncertainties (indecisions, hesitations, ambiguities, insecurities) with regard to the biblical text become theologically appropriate. If one assumes, from a religious vantage point, that the mystery of God is unfathomable in human terms, it should come as no surprise that the Holy Book of this God remains such too. The fact that the Bible is, at the same time, human, all too human, and continuously defies our understanding, is theologically apt too.

The theological match between the nature of the Bible as a book of faith is, therefore, closer with the diachronic methodologies, which seek these mysteries, than with the synchronic methodologies, which seek to circumvent them. Perhaps,

then, it is not surprising that Sheldrake (1998:9-10; cf. Deist 1995:46) warns that the language of postmodernism, within which narratological approaches too are couched, is at times employed for the sake of conservative theology. To allude for a moment to the language of the information technology industry of our time: a more open theology should not be averse to an Open Source. "The Bible critically studied and the Bible spiritually nourishing are not two notions at odds" (Lombaard 2003:439; cf. Schneiders 1989:19).

2.3.4. Combining diachronic and synchronic methodologies?

The most obvious question that would be posed on what is stated above, is: but why not combine synchronic and diachronic exegetical methodologies? Indeed, this has been a popular position of late – in different forms: Carr 1996, Jonker 1996, including previous attempts he reviews; Human 1999:355-362, and Groenewald 2003:6-10 / 2004:552-553. However, the nagging uneasiness with such conciliatory gestures remains: the way in which exegetes look at the text by means of their respective learned approaches, quite naturally call for different perspectives (cf. Gottcent 1979:xii; Vorster 1989:61-62; Nel 1989:71). Richter's 1971-distinction between *Literargeschichte* and *Literarkritik* remains applicable: respectively, they demand cognitive (that is, interpretative) frameworks that see the text as the product of developments, or as the product of an author. The former investigates writing history; the latter investigates writing skill.

As noted above, when a synchronic approach seeks to appropriate diachronic textual insights, it does not truly do so. It transforms what it takes over into just

another synchronic aspect (Lombaard 1996:106-113). Equally, when diachronic methodologies incorporate synchronic methodologies of biblical exegesis, it changes them into historical mode (cf. also Deist 1995:43). The pretence to co-operate, in both instances, merely conceals what has, fundamentally, been altered.

My preference would be that the inherent philosophical differences in the two broad approaches be recognised for how stark they are. This does not mean that either of these broad approaches is poor: for different reasons, which should in true scholarly style be argued reasons, individuals will choose one of these broad approaches. As long as exegetes are hermeneutically aware of both the strong and the weak points of the particular approaches they find themselves drawn to, meaningful exegetical discussion is possible. Blindness to one's own methodological presuppositions, nor veiling inescapable inherent differences between approaches, nor unfair characterisation of methodological positions different from one's own, would be helpful in such discussions.

2.3.5. Yet again, on to the next...

The practical implications of this point will be made clear in the exegetical section below which employs, precisely, narrative methodology to indicate its synchronical limitations *and* its historical possibilities. However, before that can be done, a brief outline of the dynamics of historical research into the patriarchs is required. It is to this aspect, the last of the four primary areas of orientation under discussion in this chapter, that we turn to next.

2.4 Broad outlines of critical research into the patriarchs

As Albertz (1992:45) points out, the problem with research into the patriarchs of the Old Testament is not the dearth of literary material to work with, but the abundance thereof. This stands in contra-distinction with the archaeological material available to us, which leaves us with some broad insights into the historical time frame the patriarchal narratives are set in (that is, the narrated time), but with little material for any detailed analysis of the kind that would aid a thorough understanding of the patriarchs. As to the texts, though, detailed analysis has been precisely the forté of historical-critical work on the patriarchal narratives. Apart from those readings which regard the biblical texts as simple mirrors of past events, thus ignoring both the nature of historical sources and the problem of historiography, the foundational insight that the times of narration of these narratives are vastly different from the narrated times has been perhaps the most fundamental impetus in modern scholarly understanding of these texts and of the figures of whom they tell. In the pre-Wellhausenian era, a simple, or simpler, continuation between patriarchal religion and Mosaic Yahwism could be assumed, even within critical scholarship, based on the representation within the Old Testament texts themselves of this historico-narrative line. However, Wellhausen, drawing on his precursors, most influentially broke with this naïveté, and thus altered the whole of Old Testament scholarship, by showing the vast distance between the patriarchal period (narrated times) and the times during which these accounts were put to text (times of narration). Because of this distinction, increasingly, nothing much could be said from the biblical texts about the patriarchs themselves or their time; however, as a corollary, now much more could be said of the last millennium BCE within Israel-Juda, the time of narration. It

took, most influentially, Alt, with his famous *Gott der Väter* hypothesis and Gunkel, with his form-critical method (e.g. Gunkel 1917), mediated later by Noth and von Rad, to recover some kind of middle ground: that the rather late texts preserve rather older traditions, so that it becomes both possible and necessary at once, in the analyses of the patriarchal texts, to say something about both time of narration and narrated time (cf. Lombaard & le Roux 2002:1855-1867 & Lombaard 2004b:261-276 on the problem of dating).

Subsequent scholarship has been, for the most part, different configurations of these three antecedent positions. None of the three views has seen its end, though: while reconfigurations of the position from Alt, Gunkel, Noth and von Rad may constitute the most common strand of thinking within scholarly circles over the past century, Wellhausen's opinion still echoes in for instance the Copenhagen school of Pentateuch exegetes, controversial for its insistent late dating of the texts (though its more direct impulse is a reaction against the Albright school in the USA; cf. van Seters 1999:53), while the broadly pre-Wellhausenian view has much in common with a-historical, usually narratologically inclined, studies since the 1970s. This underlying debate on the relationship between the story told and the telling of the story – that is: the narrated time and the time of narration – leaves its traces still in all diachronic and synchronic analyses of these biblical texts, and can be noticed in all introductory works.

The distinction between narrated time and time of narration is thus of fundamental importance, namely for the entire endeavour of studying the biblical library and, hence, to the whole of the theological enterprise based on these texts. In the case of

the patriarchal narratives, though, such insights were in addition prised via another important breakthrough, also the brainchild of Alt, which has been highly influential in critical research on the patriarchs.

This is namely the insight that the existence of familial relations between the figures of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, is an idealised reconstruction of later Israel (more specifically: Juda), as part of the fluid processes of constructing an own, in broad respects unified identity in the face of certain historical impulses and / or existential threats (cf. e.g. Ruppert 2002:23-30, 40, with Noth 1948:112-127 the classic source in this regard). These three patriarchal figures thus constitute the identifying, and to a certain extent unifying, iconic figureheads of families, clans and tribes, which were probably constituted differently, socially, at different times (cf. Lombaard 2006e:148-149, following particularly Wilson 1994:200-223, on such genealogical fluidity). Although the social identities of the adherents to these iconic patriarchs are untraceable in any detailed manner, as are the details of the patriarchs themselves, the consensus within this line of thinking is that the patriarchal traditions reflect later social cohesion around relatively strong earlier figureheads who, importantly, were initially independent, that is: familially unrelated figures. However, through the processes of merging and thus newly emerging identities, as the separate adherents to these familial figureheads intermingled and exchanged founding and / or identifying traditions, which had attained the status of myth (not in the popular sense of untruthfulness, but in the technical sense giving existential meaning), new storylines were forged to reflect the new social relations. The patriarchs were imagined as kin, in such a way that none of the tradents of the three patriarchal traditions felt themselves unaccounted for. This served to solidify new structures of

social cohesion within the emerging identity of Israel (the case being different for the figures of Lot, Ishmael and Esau, who in the respective generations essentially fell to the wayside). Imagining bloodlines between the originally unrelated patriarchs thus enabled a more closely felt kinship to be experienced between the latter-day groups who had traditionally identified with these figures independently of one another. As the patriarchs become one family line, so their adherents became as if a family.

This situation of latter-day forged communal identities within Israel based on, now, a shared, re-imagined past of a familial line of founding fathers, had become the centrally communicated vision of the Old Testament texts as we have them. This was the view, in scholarly circles too, and in popular circles still, which prevailed until the dawn of critical scholarship.

However, two problems developed which persist still. First, the trend made possible by the “narrated time” – “time of narration” distinction towards an ever later dating of the Old Testament texts, had stretched the time between “related event” and “relation of event” towards a millennium. The question as to whether any historical value could at all be attributed to the “narrated time” dimension of these texts, as far as the figures of the patriarchs were concerned, was placed ever more forcefully on the exegetical table. Second, the twin issues of the historical referentiality of the patriarchal texts, namely to either the figures of the patriarchs themselves or to the much later communities who related to these narratives as existentially meaningful, has become such an engrossing debate, that too simple a referentiality has been accepted on all sides. That is: irrespective of whether the patriarchal texts are regarded as, on the one hand, primarily descriptions of the lives of the fathers or, on

the other hand, as primarily later identity-creating narratives, the value of which lie for us more in coming to grips with exilic / post-exilic Judean identity politics, a too harmonious picture is presented by ourselves of the figures to which these accounts refer, or more accurately: of the way in which these accounts refer to the respective patriarchal figures. The possible dynamics of the confluence of patriarchal traditions, along with the figures to which they refer, has not been adequately explored²⁷. The debates about time (dating) and referentiality have assumed a simplicity of identity as regards each of the patriarchs.

As to referentiality, at the moment, therefore, three broad positions on the historical value of the patriarchal narratives may be identified. These are:

- Despite the complexity of the transmission processes from an oral phase to a written phase to redactional activities²⁸, we can glimpse behind these processes still something of the life of an individual figure from whom originated, even if just as a kernel, these traditions. The figure of the patriarch is, albeit vague and distant, a historical given.
- Both the texts themselves and the complexity of the transmission processes just referred to prevent us from making any firm deductions about the existence or not of the patriarch concerned. Yet, based on the contents of the texts and, frequently, their placement within the Pentateuch, we can at least

²⁷ I refer here to the confluence of traditions as they relate to an individual patriarch too, namely as a composite / multiplex figure, a position I explain in greater detail below. Noth (1948:109) had suggested such a position regarding patriarch Jacob, though without much influence (Ruppert 2002:25).

²⁸ See Schniedewind (2004:3-23) for a recent discussion of the writing / editing process.

find some socio-cultural material deposited in them, within which a patriarchal figure might have existed.

- The contradictions between the respective patriarchal texts, among other difficulties with them, as well as the complexity of the transmission processes, make it impossible to say that these texts attest to any historical reality in the form of a patriarch, except as a literary creation. There were no real patriarchs. There was, however, a figment or some sort, a literary imagination, the purposes of the creation of which are open to historical investigation²⁹.

As stated above, though, all three these positions still simplify what was clearly a most complex situation. While any one of these three options may to some extent be correct when applied to any given patriarchal account, none would apply to all cases. The reason for this is that the underlying assumption is always found that the traditions relating to a certain patriarch – Isaac, for the purposes of this study – refer to *an* Isaac. I hold the view, however, that all of the patriarchs are composite figures. Even if it could be said, thus, that the Isaac references we find in the Old Testament refer to a historical ancestor Isaac, I would argue that they do not refer to the same individual. An identical position could be taken on traditions related to patriarch Isaac in instances where he is viewed as a purely literary creation: the diversity of Isaac passages do not enable us to link them together to come to a broad vision of

²⁹ An interesting local example of this point of view, because it is based most explicitly on archaeological considerations, is that expressed by Scheffler (2000:98), namely that the absence of 18th century BCE, that is, patriarchal-age human activity at Tel-Beersheba, supports the view that the patriarchal narratives are family legends, to be dated much later and intended to add legitimacy to the contemporary cult, rather than being primarily historical material.

the shared figure of “Isaac”, singular. More accurately, one would always have to refer to this composite or multiplex character in the plural, as “Isaacs”³⁰. This view holds even greater validity within the Alt – Gunkel – Noth – von Rad line of thinking referred to above, complicating matters exponentially as regards the “who” and “what” of the patriarch in question.

The move we have seen in recent decades of Old Testament scholarship away from the minute exegetical analyses of texts to the greater compositional *corpora*, have also had the effect that it enticed us to look past the fact that all historiography, in the Pentateuch, is episodic too. Whereas initially the historical-critical methodology had to a large extent been preoccupied with what may be called the most intimate details of the text (such as the placing of letters within words; words within verses; verses within episodes; and hence: episodes within accounts – in each instance with painstaking attention paid to detail), the recent emphasis on the broader compositional units has, to some extent at least, overcompensated, namely as a reaction to criticisms on these earlier “atomising” tendencies. Between these two extremes, less attention has been paid to the “middle ground” than could have been done, namely to the different Old Testament accounts as, quite often, more or less independent units³¹. Pericopae, thus, form – following here Frykenberg (2001:116-137) – valid anecdotal units³². This move to the “middle ground” does not mean that

³⁰ This view of mine runs in some ways parallel to my views on Bible translation: cf. Lombaard 2002f:754-765 & 2002g:1-12.

³¹ The methodology of Gunkel (cf. Gunkel 1921) remained perhaps closest to these textual units.

³² Though I agree with their underlying understanding of the nature of historiography, I do not use this term here as do Gunn & Fewell (1993:6), in their sense as something historically more reliable than sagas, legends and novellas in the Old Testament, categories which they view negatively. Rather,

looking either at the minutiae of texts (text-critical aspects, for instance) or at the broad compositional layers (such as, currently popular in Pentateuch analyses, P and non-P) is in any sense unimportant. However, in both these approaches Old Testament scholars, having completed these analyses, have been led to assume that, for instance, all the Isaac stories encountered denote the same referent (either as an actual historical figure or as a purely literary character³³). My contention is that all the patriarchs are multiplex figures, referring not to single antecedents. Therefore, neither the relevant textual occurrences, nor within each of those, the different literary or compositional layers, may be assumed to relate to the same underlying “idea” of Isaac, as our case in point. Rather, a “next identity”, a new persona, as it were, composite in nature, is created by each end product; that is: by each editorial or interpretative layer which is added to the collection of Isaac texts. This, then, presents us in each instance, or in some instances at least, with another Isaac, and not one that can now without further consideration be read back into any one or across all of the constituent Isaac texts³⁴.

linking up with the philosophy of history of Frykenberg (2001:116-137), my view here is that, at least as far as the Pentateuchal accounts are concerned, there is value in also regarding each text / pericope / account as a text in itself, with its links to other texts a different matter altogether, which is to be considered *critically*. A link between, say, different Isaac accounts should thus not simply be assumed, as is usually done.

³³ The decision on this matter dare not be generalised either; rather, each anecdotal unit should be evaluated in itself, before deductions are made about the whole of the Isaac corpus, for instance. This is thus an operational modus which is quite at home within classical tradition history.

³⁴ This argument thus runs in some ways parallel to Davies’s on “Israel” in *In search of ancient Israel* (1995), though here filtered through Albertz’s *religionsgeschichtliche* approach (1992).

Of course, it is entirely valid to understand texts as they are reinterpreted in the newly-cast light, for instance to understand Genesis 22:1-14 & 19 in the light of the reinterpretation offered in Genesis

Based on these broad outlines of the interpretation of the patriarchal narratives in modern scholarship, and more particularly on what has been identified as an oversight within this research, namely the focus on either too small or too large a textual unit, to the detriment of a concurrent focus on the anecdotal unit, the decisions taken in the exegetical section of this study below are placed in perspective.

2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, four major points of orientation that underpin what follows have been spelt out. The first of these was the philosophy of science which undergirds this study; second, a brief interpretation of the recent history of Pentateuch scholarship in South Africa was offered; then, the deliberate choice for historical-critical methodologies has been argued for; in closing, to this section, the perimeters of our understanding of the patriarchs, as formed by historical research, have been drawn. Though, in a sense, these four points taken together could be characterised as “too much introduction”, it remains necessary, for the sake of understanding what follows

22:15-18, or to rethink all the Abraham-Isaac texts in the light of Genesis 22, dated late, as will be argued below. It must be made clear, though, that that would then be to follow the thinking proposed by the later editor. That would be the later added layer of meaning. However, the text(s) as understood before the recasting of meaning by this later editor is an equally valid object of investigation, as its own anecdotal unit. To recoup here some of the methodological considerations raised earlier in this chapter: it is on precisely this last aspect that all approaches which stress the “final text” or “canonical text” falter: they simply “buy into” the ideas of whichever editor happened to have a hand in last.

and how the insights and perspectives offered were arrived at. Within the philosophy of science for which was argued here, it remains important that each interpreter is interpreted. To facilitate this, my own placement within the recent history of Pentateuch scholarship in South Africa, and my own choices against what had been the mainstream of exegesis³⁵, had to be made explicit. In addition, the stream of historical patriarch research which lies behind me, and which has now pushed me in a different, own direction, had to be outlined. Now that this interpreter may be interpreted contextually more fully, the table has been set for the exegetical aspects of this study.

³⁵ Signs are, though, that the tide is turning, so that historical scholarship may well become “normal science”, in the Kuhnian sense, with respect to the Old Testament discipline, at least, in South Africa. Cf. also Lombaard 2006f:912-925.