D.J. Human

Prof. D.J. Human,
Department of Old Testament
and Hebrew Scriptures, Faculty
of Theology and Religion,
University of Pretoria. E-mail:
dirk.human@up.ac.za,
ORCID: https://orcid.
org/0000-0003-0346-4209

Re-interpretation as transformation. Perspectives and challenges for Old Testament interpretation[1]

ABSTRACT

This contribution explains that the re-interpretation of theological motifs or ideas leads to transforming theology and religion. This phenomenon takes place within the corpus and boundaries of the Old Testament. Inner-biblical debate or "later" texts that re-interpret "earlier" texts underscore this process and confirm a transformed theology that is relevant and life-giving for the "new" or "later" context. Because these processes happened within the range of a long history of development of Old Testament literature, the article first discusses important hermeneutical realities or directives for Old Testament interpretation. It then mentions a few approaches to, and challenges of interpreting Old Testament literature. Finally, it briefly portrays how the book of Ruth re-interpreted certain pentateuchal texts as an act of transforming theology.

1. INTRODUCTION

Transformation[2] is a life-giving principle that applies to people, systems and even written texts. Changing circumstances and new contexts always require different answers, fresh solutions, and new approaches. Through the process of transformation, new life energises existing systems, people, cultures, texts, and contexts. By interpreting and re-interpreting (religious) texts, transformation processes give birth to a "new" life-giving theology, which creates hope, encouragement, and revived faith among people of religious communities.

Transforming theology and religion obviously has many faces. In the past decade, the debate on transforming theology and religion in South Africa has indeed intensified.[3] To keep theology and religion alive and relevant in a society or among adherents of different ecclesial groups, their religious scriptures must be interpreted and re-interpreted within their respective contexts. For a theology to be relevant in different historical contexts, various interpretations might prevail, because differences in time and space mostly cause different interpretations of identical texts. This is further enhanced by the different needs, "eyes", and contexts of interpreters.

Continuous transforming of theologies in the discipline of Old Testament Studies, among other sub-disciplines, is vital and imperative. This contribution aims to show that the re-interpretation of theological motifs or ideas leads to transforming theology and religion. This phenomenon takes place within the corpus and boundaries of the Old Testament. Inner-biblical debate or "later" texts that re-interpret "earlier" texts underscore this process and confirm a transformed theology that is relevant to, and life-giving for the "new" or "later" context. Because these processes happened within the range of a long history of development of Old Testament literature, I will first discuss important hermeneutical realities or directives for Old Testament interpretation. Secondly, I will mention a few approaches to, and challenges of interpreting Old Testament literature. Finally, I will briefly portray how the book of Ruth re-interpreted specific pentateuchal texts as an act of transforming theology. The core aim of this contribution is to underscore the imperative need for on-going activities of

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2   Since the dawn of democratic South Africa in 1994, the term "transformation" is a buzzword in all sectors, including the political, social, economic, religious and other spheres of the South African society. The intention is to create change "for the better", to improve quality of life and to create a more equal, equitable and fair society, where all people are treated with dignity and humanness.

3   See aspects of the debate in Deist (1994:33-51), Venter & Tolmie (2012); Snyman (2013:1-5); Venter (2016); Human (2017:46-47).

transforming theology and religion in a broken world, religious societies, and churches.

2. HERMENEUTICAL REALITIES

The Old Testament or Hebrew Bible has captured the imagination of world literature of all times and has extensively influenced the religion and culture of the Western world (Deissler 2006:16; Levin 2010:7-8). In the history of the reception of the Old Testament, this library, or parts thereof, was often valued or rejected (Hasel 1972:15-34, 145-165; Odendaal 1979:4-5).

Several hermeneutical realities should be considered when interpreting and understanding the Old Testament. The Old Testament is *not a book*, but rather a collection that consists of different *genres* and literary forms of communication (*Redeformen*). It comprises a *library* consisting of different kinds of literature in ancient Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek (LXX). With poetry and prose as the overarching *genre* depictions, sub-genres include, *inter alia*, narratives, different kinds of poems, songs, genealogies, history-writing, prophetic oracles, visions, dreams, parables, fables, proverbs, wisdom sayings, apocalyptic literature, and so on. Knowledge from the humanities' disciplines of Languages and Literature makes it clear that every kind of literature requires its own set of hermeneutical keys and interpretation rules. In order to understand the different kinds of texts, the reader should, therefore, use differentiated readings, in order to decode and understand the different Old Testament *genres*.

The Old Testament is a literary *product of the ancient world(s)*.[4] Behind this multi-coloured library, not only ancient world views and mythological allusions are captured,[5] but there is also a complex history of growth behind its origin, development, and different canonical forms (Human 2003:266-272). Texts have grown from an oral phase to a stage of written documents over very long periods of time through the work of educated scribes (Schmid 2011:246). Gradually, texts went through different phases of development by means of *Fortschreibung* (further editing/writing) to larger texts and text collections. Ultimately, they formed books and larger canonical sections.[6] Due to these processes, the "central figure"

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4   This includes the Egyptian, Canaanite, Mesopotamian, Persian and Hellenistic cultures with their respective religious, political, social, and economic influence on the Hebrew literature.

5   The influence of the literature of the Ancient Near East (ANE) on Old Testament texts is innumerous. See the parallels and similarities in the contributions of Gressmann (1926); Pritchard (1954); Beyerlin (1975); Mathews & Benjamin (1997); Hallo (1997); Hallo & Younger (1997, 2000, 2002); Janowski & Wilhelm (2004); Kaiser *et al.* (2005); Hays (2014).

6   The Pentateuch (Torah), Genesis to 2 Kings, Prophets, or the Writings.

behind books and larger units was not a definite single author, but rather transmitters (*Tradenten*) of this tradition literature (*Traditionsliteratur*) over longer periods of time (Schmid 2011:243).[7] Jeremiah[8] gives evidence of growth by means of *Fortschreibung*. These complex growth processes comprise activities of *Fortschreibung* (further writing), interpretation and reinterpretation of earlier text variants,[9] as well as redactional work that includes later insertions and additions to these variants.[10] In the case of Hosea, it is evident that more than one world or historical context is captured in the book, including a possible Northern Kingdom-Israel context (Hos. 1-3), a Judean context (3:5), an exilic context (dtr), and a post-exilic wisdom saying (14:10). All these contexts are captured or frozen into a so-called "final" text of the book. This makes the interpretation process of the text a challenging academic endeavour.

The content of Old Testament books and narratives was written down in time periods much later than the time in which their described events took place. Distinction should, therefore, be made between the *time of narration/narrator* (when the document was written) and the *narrated time* (the time of the described events). The reader must, therefore, be on the alert to identify and assess indicators of the context of the time of narration. The book of Daniel, for example, describes events encompassing four centuries (6th-2nd centuries BCE), probably from a historical context and crisis situation in the second century BCE (Niehr 2012:615-616). In this severe crisis, when Israelites were persecuted, the literature was meant to comfort listeners, in mid-2nd century BCE, with apocalyptic language. They were comforted with the visions and dreams of Daniel, conveying a "meaning" that the Israelite God, Yahweh, will protect and care for his people Israel against the life-endangering activities of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (Schmitt 2007:460-461; Witte 2012:646).

Due to the scribal processes, namely the *growth and development of the Old Testament*, these texts often reflect contradictions, a lack of logic and unity, as well as some incongruities. Simultaneously, these contradictions and incongruities challenge the exegete to determine the historical "truth" and understanding of biblical events. For example, what did Moses do at

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7   Many Old Testament books grew over long periods of time, including Deuteronomy, Psalms, Isaiah and Hosea, among others.

8   Jeremiah 36:32 reads: "So Jeremiah took another scroll and gave it to the scribe Baruch son of Neriah, and as Jeremiah dictated, Baruch wrote on it all the words of the scroll that Jehoiakim king of Judah had burned in the fire. *And many similar words were added to them*." (NIV).

9   See, for example, Psalms 14 and 53; 40 and 70; deuteronomistic history (Deut. – 2 Kgs) and the chronistic history (1-2 Chr.; Ezr.-Neh.).

10   Several layers in prophetic books, and in the Psalms (130:7; 131:3).

the Red Sea? Did he hit the water with a rod (Ex. 14:16) and raise his hands over the water (Ex. 14:22), or did God address the waters (Ps. 106:9)? Another example: Did Satan or Yahweh urge David to count the people (2 Sam. 24:1; 1 Chr. 21:1), causing the death of thousands of God's people (2 Sam. 24:15; 1 Chr. 21:14)? Which history seems to be the "factual" and correct one: the deuteronomistic history (Deut.-2 Kgs) or the chronistic history (1 & 2 Chr., Ezr.-Neh.)? There are many other examples to illustrate this point. If the principle where a text is to be interpreted according to its historical (*Sitz im Leben*) and literary contexts (*Sitz in der Literatur*) is followed, it is more convincing to assume that Old Testament texts are neither dogmatic utterances nor history-writing in the modern sense of its understanding (Becker 2005:1). Incongruities or contradictions often illustrate a development in the inner-biblical debate on theological issues or confirm that different contexts provide different, even contradicting, theological wisdom and insights in the processes of interpretation and re-interpretation.[11]

3. APPROACHES TO TEXT INTERPRETATION

3.1 Introduction

To expose and understand Old Testament texts require certain premises and methodological approaches. Old Testament texts are literary congealed and "interpreted" historical events, which developed and grew in different contexts over long periods of time into independent text units through the processes of theological interpretation and reinterpretation. Nowadays, in retrospect, the exegete may use a variety of approaches to expose and understand these texts (Richter 1971; Human 1999:254-369; Adam *et al.* 2000; Gorman 2009).

By taking literary, historical, and reader-response theories of the Humanities into consideration, and how they contribute to the development of the biblical sciences, methodological approaches to the processes of exegesis can be summarised as follows (Barton 1984:201). First, exegetes pose questions about people, circumstances, historical events, or theological ideas *behind the text*. This includes questions about the possible author or transmitters (*Tradenten*) who wrote, interpreted, or transmitted a text, as well as questions about the community to whom the texts were directed or the social and historical circumstances under which the documents were written. Secondly, questions are asked about

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11   Proverbs 26:4-5 provides evidence from the wisdom literature as to how opposite or diverse interpretations could be made in the same context.

the *text itself*: its composition, form, texture, and synchronic nature. Thirdly, questions also address issues *before the text*. These questions pertain to matters regarding the "reader", including the role, "spectacles" (read presuppositions and prejudices), and socio-historic context of the interpreter, who co-determines the "meaning" and outcome of the exegetical approach. Such exegetical endeavours can broadly be indicated as the *historical-critical approaches*, the *literary or form-analytical approaches* and the *reception-theoretical* or *reader-response* approaches. Although *the* meaning and *the* truth of texts cannot be captured by an exegetical method(s) (see Gadamer 1960), these methodological approaches serve as vehicles to illuminate aspects of meaning in a text.

3.2 Historical-critical approaches

Historical-critical exegesis takes the historical context(s) behind the text as point of departure in the exegetical processes (Barton 1998:9-20). This method addresses the diachronic aspects, with attempts to determine a text's origin, growth, and development (*Fortschreibung*). Various historical-critical perspectives such as textual criticism, literary criticism, transmission history, redaction criticism, form criticism, tradition criticism, and so on are unearthed in the application of historical criticisms. The quest for the historical context and date (*Sitz im Leben*) behind a text is complemented by the search for its *Sitz in der Literatur* and *Sitz in der Liturgie* (Fohrer 1983:32-150; Becker 2005:14-136; Köhlmoos 2011:38-45), *i.e.* the literary context of a text or pericope in the frame of the larger contexts of a book and its place or function in the ritual or liturgy (for example, Psalms). Shortcomings of historical criticism such as its silence on questions about the form and structure, or the literary characteristics of a given text have stimulated the rise of the literary or structural analytical approaches.

3.3 Literary and structural approaches

Since the beginning of the 20th century, literary or structural analytical exegesis started to gain momentum in Old Testament scholarship (Longman 1999:97-115; Jasper 1998:21-34). As a text-immanent approach, the "close" or literary reading of a text sought to expose the synchronic aspects of such texts. The function of structure, style, figures of speech, and language features all contribute comprehensively to the theological understanding of a text. Similarly, the rhetorical, narrative, and semiotic analyses belong to this category. In addition, the canonical approach includes synchronic components, because the textual shape or body of texts (canon) is determined by literary criteria and theological reasons from a specific faith tradition (Protestants, Catholics, Orthodox, Jews, and so

on). This specific shape of an authoritative corpus of texts enhances the meaning or theology of a given text.[12]

From the above methodological considerations, three basic text-hermeneutical perspectives determine the way in which Old Testament literature can be read, namely as historical documents, as aesthetic literary work, or as the canon of a specific faith tradition (Utzschneider 2006:79).

3.4 Reception-critical approaches

The reception-theoretical or reader-response approaches to text interpretation analyse the text from the viewpoint of the reader, the interpreter or the receiver in the communication process. In the hermeneutical processes of understanding, two different communication processes must be distinguished when an ancient text is read: the first process happens between the author and the "original" first audience(s); the second process appears between the current reader and the text. The pre-knowledge, presuppositions and prejudices of the reader-interpreter as well as his/her contextual position (*Sitz im Leben*) influence the meaning and outcome of the reading process. The importance of the reader's context paves the way for approaches that use the human sciences to determine aspects of the meaning of a text. This includes sociological, cultural, anthropological, psychological, and psychoanalytical approaches. In addition, contextual approaches such as the liberationist, feminist, black or white theologies, post-colonial, and Africanised readings of the Old Testament belong to this important angle of incidence (Barton 1998:50-94).

An overview of the South African exegetical landscape from the beginning of the 20th century until the 1970s shows that the Old Testament interpretation,[13] especially among the White male, mainstream ecclesiastical groups, was characterised as "confessional and conservative", with pre-enlightenment, orthodox, Calvinistic, a-historical, biblisistic-fundamentalistic, and idealistic-deductive ways of thinking that also featured in their theologies (Deist 1994:33-51; Groenewald 2004:545-546). Theology as a critical science was strongly opposed in ecclesiastical circles during this time period and historical criticism as approach was viewed negatively. In the thirty years between 1957 and 1987, the South African Old Testament landscape can also be described as a "story of two ways", namely one between synchrony and diachrony (Le Roux 1993).

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12   See, for example, the shapes of the *Tenach* and the Septuagint (LXX) canons, which differ from each other.

13   See the overview of contributors and approaches in Botha *et al.* (1994:9-353).

From the 1970s until the end of the 20th century, stronger emphasis was placed on synchronic, linguistic, and structural exegesis (Groenewald 2004:547-549). Although different individuals, groups or interpretation schools have chosen either a synchronic or a diachronic emphasis to execute their exegetical programmes and hermeneutic activities, the former (synchronic reading of texts) was still a dominant approach in Reformed circles.

The past two decades have revealed a stronger balance between synchronic and diachronic approaches in both Europe and Africa (Barr 1995:11-14; Berges 2000:170; Otto 2005:22-49). The importance of both historical and literary readings of Old Testament (and biblical) texts seems to be imperative in approaching Old Testament exegesis with a comprehensive reading strategy. Depictions such as the "literary-historical" reading (Human 1999:359) or the "diachronically reflected synchronic reading" (Groenewald 2004:553), among others, illustrate the change in approach within the South African context. In the past decade, academic debate on methods during the ProPent and ProPsalms seminars (held in Pretoria) demonstrates that this comprehensive reading approach has definitely been more strongly established and has brought a balance to the previously dominating synchronic approach, (at least) at the University of Pretoria (Otto 2005:22-49; Le Roux & Otto 2007).

4. CHALLENGES FOR OLD TESTAMENT INTERPRETATION

Recent reflections on the history of the literature of the Old Testament (*Literaturgeschichte*) made Old Testament scholars aware of the challenges they are facing in executing their scholarship (Schmid 2008; 2011:244-262). An awareness of these challenges among scholars of other theological disciplines will built mutual understanding and cohesion in their distinct endeavours to build the *Sache* of theology as an interdisciplinary theological enterprise. Some challenges and problems, which will succinctly be addressed, amount to the following categories identified and argued by Schmid (2008; 2011).[14]

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14   In his intention to provide an introduction on the history of Old Testament literature, Schmid (2008; 2011:250-262) identifies and discusses these problems in detail . In this part of my article, I am indebted to Schmid's research and I acknowledge it as his work.

4.1 Scribal activities and schools in Israel

The past decade saw the publication of several books on the scribal culture in Israel and the origin of the Old Testament (Schniedewind 2004; Carr 2005; Van der Toorn 2007). Among others, attempts were made to identify time periods, in which the Old Testament and its literature originated (Schniedewind: 8th century BCE), and when the largest part of the texts was produced. The awareness is stressed that Old Testament books often took five to six hundred years to grow to the "complete" form they have reached (for example, Isa. and Jer.). The Second-Temple period seems to be an important, though not the only period of Old Testament text production.

Carr (2005)[15] drew a comparison between ancient cultures and showed that the scribes received a classical education. In order to control the texts, the scribes had memorised these texts, which they later cited or alluded to. The Old Testament is thus the work of educated scribes (*Schriftgelehrten*), who had elite status in Israelite society and who were connected to the temple, and probably also to the royal court (2 Kgs 12:11; 2 Chr. 24:11; Esth. 3:12; 8:9).

The Amarna correspondence serves as evidence that, already in the Bronze period (prior to 1100 BCE), writings, scribes and schools were active in Canaan. Scribes or authors were educated at places (or schools?). In the Persian period, the education of authors most probably took place at the Jerusalem Temple (Ben-Zvi 1997:194-209).

It is imperative that Old Testament scholarship continues to investigate the scribal culture and role of the scribes in the processes of text production in ancient Israel. This aspect confirms how the production and transmission of texts were dependent on their memory and interpretation.

4.2 Role of non-canonical, early Israelite and Jewish literature

As authoritative corpus of texts in Judaism and Christianity, the Old Testament comprises only part of the kaleidoscope of ancient Israelite and early Jewish literature. Not all these books and literature were canonised as Old Testament and Jewish sacred Scriptures. It can, therefore, be assumed that the Israelite/Jewish canons represent only a narrow perspective in the broader kaleidoscope of ancient Israelite and Jewish literature.

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15   Carr (2005:3-176) portrayed the literature in comparison with literature in ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greece, but also with the Hellenistic world and Qumran (Carr 2005:177-276).

Apart from earlier texts that might have been lost, due to the deterioration of the material (leather and papyrus) on which they were written, Old Testament texts also referred to other unknown literature.[16] In addition, there were probably pre-exilic written prophetic texts (*Heilsprophetie* – salvation prophecies) that must have been preserved after the fall of Jerusalem.[17] Further literature such as Enoch, Jubilees and others originated in the 3rd century BCE in Hellenistic times, and did not form part of the Old Testament text corpus.

In general, Old Testament scholarship has the obligation to determine the relationship between the Old Testament texts and this ancient Israelite/ early Jewish literature. One should similarly examine the broad literary function and theological position of those literatures in ancient Judaism. Furthermore, the content and comparison with these texts will definitely influence the interpretation and re-interpretation of current Old Testament texts.

4.3 Orality and written texts

Old Testament texts originated and were received in environments that were characterised by oral communication and activities (Schmid 2011:254-255). Although this was predominantly an illiterate environment, it was richly filled with poetic and linguistic imagery, motifs, and allusions inspired by the literary traditions of its *Umwelt*. The Israelite political, social, and religious *Umwelt* was well established long before the birth and activities of the Israel community and their Yahweh religion.

Until recently, it was assumed in Old Testament scholarship that texts in their written form originally contained oral traditions that could be traced back to specific historical contexts. A lament, for example, would have belonged to a context where someone bewails a painful or distressful situation. With the help of perspectives from *Formgeschichte*, the identified *genre* of these texts can be interpreted as if it alludes to specific historical contexts (*Sitz/e im Leben*). The lament could, therefore, have referred to the context of a funeral, the threats of an enemy, the illness of a supplicant, or even the exilic suffering of Israel, but in its written form the lament could have had a different function, namely to express a victory (Isa. 14) or to expose characteristics of a hymn (of Zion) (for example, Ps. 137). Context

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16   Schmid (2011:254) mentions the Book of the wars of Yahweh (Num. 21:14), the Book of the
     Righteous (Jos. 10:13; 2 Sam. 1:18), the Book of the Song (1 Kgs 8:53 LXX), the Book of the
     History of Solomon (1 Kgs 11:41), the Book of the History of the kings of Israel (1 Kgs 14:19), the
     Book of the History of the kings of Judah (1 Kgs 14:29).

17   Similar neo-Assyrian texts were found (Schmid 2008:73-108; 2011:254).

and function should thus be distinguished in a refined way when texts are interpreted.

Orality and the written form of texts in ancient times do not always reflect a direct proportionate relationship. The relationship between the oral and the written form of texts remains obscure and debatable, while the borders between form-historical, transmission-historical, and tradition-historical criticisms are not always clearly demarcated in this regard. Old Testament scholarship has the obligation to continue contemplating these relationships in every single text in its interpretation and re-interpretation.

4.4 Periodising Old Testament history of literature

Internal and external principles were used in the past to periodise ancient Israelite literature in different epochs (Schmid 2011:255). With the application of the external principle, namely the influence of the hegemonic world powers of Mesopotamia and Egypt, it has become evident in which time period there were similar and comparative problems and when these problems changed. In the early period of Israel's and Judah's state formation (9th and 8th centuries BCE), these world powers culturally and linguistically influenced and determined them. Two very important theological works, namely Deuteronomy and the Priestly Writing, probably originated and were conceptualised in reaction to the influence of these powers during this period (Schmid 2011:256-7): Deuteronomy as subversive reception of new Assyrian covenant theology, and the Priestly Writing as a modified reception of Persian kingdom ideology.

Gunkel earlier distinguished three epochs to categorise ancient Israelite literature, namely the time of the folk narratives (until ca 750 BCE), the time of the great authors (ca between 750 and 540 BCE), and the epoch of the followers or "Epigonen" (Schmid 2011:256) This tripartite division might theoretically still be relevant, but the development of redaction-historical processes has brought the insight that it might be necessary to revise this model. With the fall of the Northern Kingdom in the 8th century, this epoch remains important in its emphasis on the prophetic doom traditions as well as the kernel of the Patriarchal, Exodus and David narratives as foundational narrative of the whole of Israel. The epoch of the "Epigonen" should currently be revised, since the idea of educated scribes or (*Schriftgelehrten*) *Tradenten* has replaced the notion of so many identified "authors" and "Epigonen" as "implicit authors", according to Gunkel's model. Current Old Testament scholarship needs to revisit existing hypotheses.

4.5 Methodological challenges regarding historical text arrangement

It is difficult to arrange Old Testament texts historically on a timeline (Schmid 2011:258). Although this difficulty varies in the three canonical parts (Torah, Prophets, and Writings), the absolute dating of Old Testament texts is almost impossible. Texts are, therefore, mostly dated relatively, because of a lack of internal textual evidence for possible datings. Clues for dating are often obscured behind narrative language and mythical portrayals. To date, prophetical texts seem easier, rather than texts from the Pentateuch and the Writings, because the former often reflect clearer political and theological indications and clues for possible dating and arrangement of texts.

Several challenges contribute to the difficult arrangement of Old Testament literature on a timeline. Historical statements and indications in narratives frequently illuminate the "narrated world", rather than the world of narration of a given book or text. These indications then do not serve the interest of "factual" historicity and accurate dating. Furthermore, the nature of poetry and its universal, timeless formulations pose hindrances to date texts.

Scholars often use the methodological instrument to arrange Old Testament texts historically, namely the exegetical process, differently and inconsistently. Methodological aspects for the dating process are nonetheless inextricably interdependent. The exegete should, therefore, carefully weigh and assess the application of (especially diachronic) methodological aspects. Scholars should be aware that, if specific methodological "steps" enjoy preference above others or are dealt with more extensively than others, this will influence the historical arrangement and dating of texts. Dating of Old Testament literature, therefore, remains a difficult but necessary exegetical endeavour. For interpretation in exegesis on text comparison, dating (even if it is relative dating) is important.

4.6 Relationship between history of literature and canon history

A history of Old Testament literature (*Literaturgeschichte*) aims to seek the origin, arrangement, and growth of Old Testament texts chronologically and historically. Canon history, on the other hand, intends to interrogate how and why the different lists of Old Testament books and different parts of the "canon" in different faith communities received authoritative status. These scholarly activities are different, but simultaneously overlap (Schmid 2011:259).

Both tasks are challenging for the Old Testament scholar. Both activities rely on the best scholarship, creativity, and skills of specialists to reconstruct these histories. Standard theories on how the phases of canonical growth and authority are visualised; when these canonisation processes were concluded; what the relationships between the tripartite Law, Prophets and Writings were, and which factors had contributed to the authorisation of texts, are all challenged in view of new information, findings, and insights. The fact that there was probably no final form (*Endgestalt)* of Old Testament texts, but rather different textual witnesses such as the Pentateuch makes the task of Old Testament scholarship in this regard more difficult (Blum 1991:46-57).

4.7 Texts in discussion with each other

If Old Testament texts and canonical parts have grown over long periods of time through *Fortschreibung* by educated scribes, then the Old Testament is not only a text or a library, but also a commentary (Schmid 2011:258). Inner-biblical debate characterises the relationship between the three canonical parts and single books mutually. Written texts of later time periods often react to, and comment on earlier texts as dense reflected literature. Examples include the discussion between Isaiah 65 and Ecclesiastes 1,[18] the debate between the book of Ruth and pentateuchal texts on the interpretation of the levirate marriage and the care of foreigners (Ruth 1-4; Deut. 23-25); the book of Jonah's debate with earlier prophetic understandings of God's rigid judgement and relation to foreign nations (Jonah; 1 Kgs 21:27-29; Nah.), and the theology of God's grace in the book of Jonah in view of the pre-history (*Urgeschichte*) in Genesis 1-11 (Hartenstein 2012:435-456).

Texts and books, in which these inner-biblical debates can be identified, allude mostly to earlier texts, thus transcending their own time and context (Schmid 2011:258). Because they are reflecting, commenting, or even rejecting and broadening opposing or one-sided theological interpretations of laws and ideas of earlier times and distant places, these debates and interplays are often not distinctly visible or intelligible. In the search for this intertextual play and tradition-historical relationships between texts, Old Testament exegetes should constantly be on the alert to explore mutual traditions and motifs (*Traditionsgut*) among texts. In these inner-biblical debates, we find the transformation of earlier ideas when the authors/scribes/transmitters are transforming past theologies.

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18   For more details on the debate between the texts of Isaiah 65 and Qohelet 1, see Schmid (2011:259) and Krüger (1997:107-129).

This exegetical activity remains a challenge, because the exegete seeks inner-biblical historical debates between the lines of synchronic texts.

5. TRANSFORMING THEOLOGIES: RUTH AND DEUTERONOMY 23-25

5.1 Introduction

As illustration of transforming theologies within the corpus of the Old Testament, which is explained by the inner-biblical debate, the discussion between the book of Ruth and the Deuteronomic Law (Deut. 12-26) can be used as an example. Aspects of the debate show that the act of re-interpretation constitutes transformation in theology.

The short narrative of Ruth comprises four acts and a genealogy. In Chapter 1, the family of Elimelek departed from Bethlehem to Moab, where, after his and his sons' death, his wife Naomi and Moabite daughter-in-law Ruth moved back to Bethlehem. In Chapter 2, on a harvest field in Bethlehem, Ruth went to pick up grain on the field of a close relative of Elimelek, namely Boaz. In their encounter, Boaz took special care of this foreign Moabite woman. She gleaned about an ephah of barley. In Chapter 3, there was another encounter between Boaz and Ruth on a threshing floor. After taking care of her, Boaz promised Ruth to find the close kinsman-redeemer to take care of her future. He gave her roughly six measures of barley, double the measure he gave her on the harvest field. Chapter 4 describes a meeting between Boaz, the close kinsman-redeemer, and witnesses. After negotiations and a transaction, the kinsman refused to fulfil his levirate duties and Boaz took on this responsibility. Boaz took the Moabite as his wife, a son Obed was born from this relationship, and Obed became a forefather of David, whose genealogy is described in Chapter 4 (4:18-22), from Perez to Obed to David.

An inner-biblical debate prevails between the book of Ruth and a part of certain laws (Deut. 23-25) of the Deuteronomic Law in Deuteronomy 12-26.

5.2 Dating of Ruth and Deuteronomic Law

Although the dating of Old Testament texts is a difficult and contentious endeavour, it is important to suggest a dating (or relative dating) to determine in which direction the chronological order of the Deuteronomy and Ruth texts dates.

The book of Ruth itself indicates the *time of its narration* in the Israelite history during the period of the Judges, *circa* 1200-1000 BCE (1:1). Nonetheless, the *narrated time* of the book causes more challenges. Due to the book's possible redaction history and literary (dis)unity, David's genealogy could not have been added to the remainder of the text prior to the post-exilic period. Therefore, different scholars date the book of Ruth in various epochs, namely in the pre-exilic, exilic, and post-exilic time periods of Israelite history (Prinsloo 1982:4-7; De Villiers 2015:43-49). The most convincing arguments given for its origin is in the Second-Temple period (Lanoir 2013:588; De Villiers 2015:48-49) in the 5th century BCE (Zenger 2012:285).[19] Witte (2012:592) is even convinced that the Persian Period origin is likely, due to literary and theological motifs.[20]

In short, the book shows the theological intention to encourage solidarity and create hope for the Second-Temple community. The book also tends to be in discourse with exclusive groups interpreting the Deuteronomistic Law (Deut. 12-26) rigorously regarding an exclusive Israelite identity. The book of Ruth thus portrays a unique Israelite identity with inclusive future identity.

Deuteronomy 23-25 is part of the Deuteronomic Law (Deut. 12-26) that forms the legislative core of Deuteronomy with apodictic and casuistic laws (Gertz 2012:312). This Deuteronomic Codex can be divided into three groups, namely 12:2-16:17, 16:18-18:22, and 19:1-25:16 (Braulik 2012:176), of which the last group reflects the exposition of the 5th to the 10th decalogue commandments.

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19   Arguments include the following (Zenger 2012:285; Witte 2012:592; De Villiers 2015:48-49): The book offers a creative solution for the term "redeem" (4:4) which binds the levirate custom with the purchase right for clan possessions (Halacha to Lev. 25 and Deut. 25); the redemption of property is based on Leviticus 25; emphasis on family and clan for the community at large in time of state collapse; motifs of "return" from foreign land and birth of child for childless widow reminds of Lamentations and Isaiah 40-60; play with meaning of proper names typical for post-exilic period; perspectives on women such as foreigner Ruth, Rachel, Leah and Tamar was not typical for pre-exilic times; many intertextual relations require post-exilic origin; if the book of Ruth is against rigoristic interpreters who reject foreign women (Ez. 13; Neh. 10) or in polemic with mixed marriages, the post-exilic context is the most appropriate dating of origin (De Villiers 2015:80-113); archaic language was typical of the Second-Temple period; the book's position in the Hebrew canon; books on women (Esther, Judith) typical for Second-Temple period; the book is aware of most of the texts in the Pentateuch that developed in the exilic and post-exilic times (De Villiers 2015:50-62).

20   The pro-foreigner motif and similarity with the book of Jonah are arguments for him (Witte 2012:592).

It is possible to date parts of Deuteronomy in the declining of the monarchical period. Either the Hezekiahan (723-695 BCE) or/until the Josianic (622 BCE) reforms (2 Kgs 22-23) might have served as basis for the Deuteronomic Law (Lohfink 1991:417; Gertz 2012:317-318; Braulik 2012:172-175; Rose 2013:276-279).[21] Even the redactional editing or *Fortschreibung* activities in the late exilic or early post-exilic periods could serve as date of origin for the Deuteronomic Law as part of the deuteronomistic history (DtrG).

From the above depiction, one could conclude that the Deuteronomic Law can be dated in either the pre-exilic, exilic, or early post-exilic periods, while the book of Ruth dates in the Second-Temple period in the 5th century BCE or in the Persian Period (538 onwards BCE). In such an interpretation, the "later" book of Ruth, therefore, engaged into discussion with the "earlier" deuteronomic laws.

5.3 Aspects of inner-biblical debate

5.3.1 Role of Moabites and foreigners

Author(s) of the book of Ruth must have known core parts of the Pentateuch and the Deuteronomic Law (Deut. 12-26) by the 5th century BCE in the Second-Temple period. The narrative clearly challenged the law of Deuteronomy 23:3-4 in a discourse with a re-interpretation of the position of Moabites as part of Israelite identity.

> [3]No Ammonite or Moabite or any of their descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD, not even in the tenth generation. [4] For they did not come to meet you with bread and water on your way when you came out of Egypt, and they hired Balaam son of Beor from Pethor in Aram Naharaim to pronounce a curse on you (Deut. 23:3-4 NIV).

According to the above statute, Moabites should be excluded from the Israelite nation and identity. The book of Ruth, however, opposed this notion with a positive approach and interpretation of Moabite inclusion. As part of a mixed marriage, Ruth is the daughter-in-law of Naomi, an Israelite (1:8). The redeeming and securing of the Elimelek family name took place between an Israelite close relative of Elimelek and Ruth, the Moabitess (4:9-10). Then there was the mixed marriage relationship between the Israelite and the Moabitess (4:13), from which Obed was born (4:13). This child from Israelite-Moabite origin became the Moabite ancestor of the

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21   Otto (2016:1746) is convinced that Deuteronomy 23:2-9 has a post-exilic dating.

model Israelite king, David (4:18-22). A foreigner was now part of the lineage and genealogy of the Israelite nation.

Not only is the Ruth story a positive counter-narrative for Deuteronomy 23:3-4, but it also serves as polemic reaction to rigoristic interpretations of law texts by Ezra (10) and Nehemiah (13:1-9, 23-31), who prohibited mixed marriages between Judeans and foreign women in a time close to the book of Ruth. Ruth offers an interpreting model, which transformed an earlier interpretation of Deuteronomy 23 into a new life-giving theology for a new time. This re-interpretation of an "early" statute opened up hope, solidarity, and an inclusive future in a "post-state" time period for Israelites (Judeans) under foreign rule (Witte 2012:593).

5.4. Positive role of women

For a predominant patriarchal Israelite society, where women were often treated as possessions and submissive to men, the book of Ruth provides a positive portrayal of women. The emphasis on the positive role of a woman such as Ruth was unforeseeable in pre-exilic times (Zenger 2012:285). Not only is Ruth portrayed as a positive character in the narrative, but, as a foreign Moabitess, she also became part of the genealogy of David, the Israelite nation and its salvation history. She is the only foreign, gentile woman whose name characterises the name of a book in the Hebrew *Tenach*. An important trait is that she showed solidarity or the "covenant love" (*hesed*) of Yahweh (1:8; 2:12; 3:10) to others (Naomi).

Furthermore, the book serves as positive counter-narrative for the negative Moabite narratives and women who featured in Genesis 19:30-39 and Numbers 25:1-4 (Zenger 2012:285), while Ruth positively emphasises the character of strong women such as Esther, Judith and the wise woman in Proverbs 31:10-31, who acted independently in Israelite literature (Witte 2012:593). The book even sketches the positive roles of Jacob's wives, Rachel and Leah, who were portrayed negatively in the patriarchal narratives (Gen. 29-31) and the foreign woman Tamar (Gen. 38), who slept with her father-in-law, Judah. Comparing these women with Ruth and wishing Ruth their fertility (4:11-12) gives them all the status of arch-mothers and founders of the nation (De Villiers 2015:230-233).

In sum, the book of Ruth radiates the positive and stable roles of women for a nation under foreign rule during the Second-Temple period. Such women seemed to support their families, society and nation with solidarity and care. In the book of Ruth, redemption takes place "through the agency of a foreign women" (Williams & Knowles 2018:141).

5.5 Special care and protection of foreigners, the fatherless and widows

Another broadening of perspective by Ruth as re-interpretation is the care and protection of the marginalised group of foreigners, the fatherless and widows in the earlier Israelite society. The following statute prevailed for the Deuteronomic Law:

> [19]When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands (Deut. 24:19 NIV).

In this instance, one can allege that re-interpretation by the book of Ruth is even radical transformation. The Deuteronomic Law only expects Israelites not to pick up a sheaf that fell down. The marginalised who walked behind the gleaners then pick it up as social help for them as the poor.

Ruth opened up and broadened this perspective. Boaz acted radically. He told Ruth to glean with his servants on his field (2:9); he ordered his men not to abuse her (2:9); he said that she must get water from the water jars of his servants (2:9); he spoke kindly to her (2:13); he gave her bread and wine vinegar at mealtimes (2:14); he offered her roasted corn (2:14); she could even gather among the sheaves, not coming from behind (2:15); he asked his men to even pull out stalks from their bundles and leave them for her to pick up (2:16), and Ruth gathered about an ephah of threshed barley (2:17). In the next act on the threshing-floor, Boaz gave her six measures of barley, double the amount as earlier (3:17).

It is clear that this "royal" treatment of Ruth as foreign widow widened the stature of Deuteronomy 24:19. Not only did Boaz provide the required social care to her, but he specially cared for her and protected her as foreign woman, as if she was someone from his own household.

5.6 Levirate marriage

Even the interpretation of the levirate or in-law marriage in Deuteronomy 25:5-10[22] seems to be broadened in Ruth, probably in view of the

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22   [5] If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband's brother shall take her and marry her and fulfil the duty of a brother-in-law to her. [6] The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel. [7] However, if a man does not want to marry his brother's wife, she shall go to the elders at the town gate and say, "My husband's brother refuses to carry on his brother's name in Israel. He will not fulfil the duty of a brother-in-law to me." [8] Then

redeeming of property rule in Leviticus 25:23-28. Normally, the eldest brother of a deceased was obliged to marry the widow (Gen. 38) "to assure a male lineage", "to preserve the property in the family", and "to provide economic security to the widow" (Witte 2012:590). In the case of Ruth, a close kinsman-redeemer could have fulfilled this levirate and redeeming responsibility (4:1). But he refused (4:6). Then Boaz, a wealthy family member of Elimelek, took over this task (4:9). Boaz was not a brother-in-law of Ruth, but only a close clan member, who then fulfilled the aims of the levirate.

That a close family member and not a brother-in-law fulfilled this social obligation had given the social support custom a broader basis (in view of the later Lev. 25 redeeming law) and secured the family interest. Again, the book of Ruth had, by re-interpreting this earlier statute, transformed a law into a life-giving theology.

6. CONCLUSION

This contribution illustrated how the re-interpretation of theological motifs or ideas leads to the transformation of theology and religion. This phenomenon appears within the corpus of the Old Testament. Inner-biblical debate or "later" texts that re-interpret "earlier" texts underscore this process and confirm a transformed theology that is relevant and life-giving for the "new" or "later" context. Because these processes happened within a long history of development of Old Testament literature, the reader was made aware of important hermeneutical realities or directives for Old Testament interpretation. A few approaches to, and challenges of interpreting Old Testament literature were mentioned. Finally, a short portrayal was given of how the book of Ruth re-interpreted certain pentateuchal texts as an act of transforming theology. This contribution intended to underscore the imperative need for on-going activities of transforming theology and religion in a broken world, in religious societies and in churches, in order to create life-giving theologies.

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the elders of his town shall summon him and talk to him. If he persists in saying, "I do not want to marry her", [9] his brother's widow shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, take off one of his sandals, spit in his face and say "This is what is done to the man who will not build up his brother's family line." [10] That man's line shall be known in Israel as The Family of the Unsandalled (Deut. 25:5-10 NIV).

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