



ProPent and its Implied Conversation Partners'

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Aristotele e S.Tommaso sanno che ogni scienza ha un oggetto formale proprio ma che l'oggetto materiale eccede sempre l'oggetto formale di una scienza e anche la somma degli oggetti formali che concernono quell'oggetto. — Buttiglione 2018

(Aristotle and St. Thomas know that every science has a formal object of its own but that the material object always exceeds the formal object of a science and also [exceeds] the sum of the formal objects related to that object.)

[Summarised: What we study always lies beyond our full comprehension. Reality / life is "larger" than understanding; beyond science.]

Abstract

This contribution is a slightly edited invited presentation at the Society for Biblical Literature annual international conference at the University of Pretoria, 3-7 July 2023, at a panel discussion titled "The role of context in Biblical Studies / exegesis". A broad overview-interpretation of the past half a century Pentateuch studies in South Africa is offered, indicating implied, though seldom stated, dynamics of Hebrew Bible scholarship, doing so by means of an Aesopian interpretation. These concrete webs of meaning in substantial ways steer also the guild of Pentateuch scholars in South Africa in our time, in how historical exegesis has had to be arranged.

Keywords: Pentateuch studies in South Africa, diachronic exegesis, text-immanent exegesis, genitive-theological readings

APPROACH

I approach my characterisation here from two vantage points:

- *Still Plato versus Aristotle, after all these years:* To state as above, that "What we study always lies beyond our full comprehension. Reality / life is 'larger' than understanding; beyond science", is here not meant as a broad-ranging philosophical statement (as was the case in the Buttiglione 2018 address), but as an applied characterisation of methodology in Old Testament Studies in South Africa. Simply stated, the past half-century of studying the Old Testament may be sketched as methodological continuations of an ancient dispute on reality versus understanding; that is, Plato versus Aristotle (or idealism versus realism, or epistemology versus ontology). This is a characterisation I have attempted once before (Lombaard, 2015:1–7); here expanded, and meant as a broad typology.



In doing so, to sketch these two broad orientations so very briefly, I of necessity have to employ here something akin to Weberian ideal-types (cf. Weber, 2001 [1922]:1577–1607), which, to be sure, never quite seem believable when viewed up-close, but affords greater coherence at a distance, as it requires a broader perspective — like pointillist paintings (such Vincent van Gogh’s famous 1887 self-portrait.)

- *Aesop-yarns*: Texts ancient as much as modern, religious as much as philosophical (cf. e.g. Rossouw, 1990) and more, can only be well understood if one grasps what they react against. Without having an idea of the matters responded to, texts seem esoteric, hollow, free-floating; purposeless. Contextless, the meaning of texts can hardly be understood on their (own) terms — although much meaning may be ascribed to texts (leading us down the road of Reader Response theories — cf. Thiselton, 1992 — to, in more extreme cases, what I elsewhere termed *Derridadaisms*). All texts communicate *also* by way of Aesopian language (Saltykov-Shchedrin, 1881-1882; cf. e.g. Satkauskytė, 2019:18–36); that is, apart from the more obvious messages of texts straightforwardly indicated by the usual communication models, texts also have extended webs of well-considered reaction to their contexts. (Such webs are present in a literary-realist manner, and not in the linguistic “signs of signs” semiotic sense, on which e.g. Peirce had for a time been influential in South African Biblical Studies; cf. e.g. Peirce, 1982). These webs of meaning lie not *in* the words, but between the lines, as it were; yet they communicate at least as powerfully as the explicitly-written message — that is, for those who are part of the contextual-historical “in-group” of the communicative event. This is indeed *context* — the webs of life in which a text lies and within which it talks and whispers; says and alludes; states and hints. The unmentioned (or unmentionable, at times) is the background-life that historians of an incident or readers of a text may try to “live into”, so as more fully to appreciate the communicative event, also by recouping some of these Aesopian, that is hidden-but-concrete, nuances.

We know these concrete webs of meaning are there, in ancient as much as modern texts; in any communicative act. These webs are a substantive, physically intangible yet nevertheless fully material, part of a communicative event. This is what the historian and the historically oriented exegete pursues with texts of old; this is what a communicator presents, to varying degrees on a continuum of implicit to explicit intent. Exegetes / interpreters may of course decide rather to ignore that part of the “living into” labour of understanding, to concentrate either on the remaining, seemingly firmer fragments of that event (the texts themselves, calculatingly without taking cognisance of any other than their explicitly referred to historical contexts) or on what we may make of that event (our nimble, at times quite acrobatic, interpretativeness)¹.

The last two possibilities — concentrating on the residuals of the communicative event or on our receptivity — are Platonic (or idealist, or more epistemological) in nature: not the “reality” of the text within its originating communicative contexts, but what we have of it or make of it, draws our scholarly attention. (These orientations fit well within what is usually understood under post-modernism.) The Aristotelian (or realist, or more ontologically inclined) orientation is to study the originating communicative event, pragmatically aware of all the inhibiting factors which render exegesis such a humble science: the occurrence or the text. (These orientations

¹ Lategan 1984:1–17 creatively reinterpreted the most basic communication model, influentially to cast exegesis as focusing variously on the (historical) sender, the (textual / biblical) message and the reader-as-interpreter, going against the grain of what is usually meant by this communication model.



fit well within what is usually understood under modernism and, lately, neo-realism or critical realism.) Along with this goes the historical methodologies we know and love so well.

MARCHING TOGETHER, OUT OF PACE, BUT NEVERTHELESS

In another context, I shorthand-listed five historically-representative, culturally-related categories of exegetical methodology (Lombaard, 2014:210–216):

1. Pre-modern allegory (amongst related primarily theological interpretations);
2. The various well-known historical-critical methods;
3. The structuralist and narratological text-immanent approaches;
4. Genitive-theological hermeneutics: “theology of...” readings related to liberation, gender, the ecology and other urgent liberative matters of our time;
5. Mystagogical, that is, faith-formative appropriation of Bible texts, scholarship and interpretations.

Numbers 1 and 5 on this list are for the moment not relevant here (cf. however Lombaard, 2020:1–8; Lombaard, 2023/2024; for a brief overview on methodological approaches in Biblical Spirituality, cf. Welzen, 2011:37–60; for an example, cf. Waaijman, 2004). In northern hemisphere scholarship, numbers 2, 3 and 4 in the list above can be regarded as, broadly speaking, a chronological flow of methodologies, with the 1970s as something of a hinge decade in this regard. In South Africa, however, the initially fierce reaction to historical criticism from certain circles in academia, church and broader society (on the in/famous 1920s Du Plessis case, cf. e.g. Le Roux, 1993:107–114 and more broadly, Spangenberg, 2009:662–676 [however, another Du Plessis, now seldom remembered, some 1 300 km north of Stellenbosch, in Potchefstroom, attracted little of this negative reaction — cf. Du Plessis, 1947 & 1950]), meant that by the 1980s, a-historical methodology dominated the exegetical scene here.

My generation of theologians, as well as colleagues a little older and a little younger than me, were trained in the Pretoria school of structuralism — or discourse analysis — as the dominant text-immanent method (cf. e.g. Vorster, 1971:139–148; Louw, 1979; Loader, 1979; Prinsloo, 1988), though with narratological methodology strongly present too (cf. e.g. Potgieter, 1991; Tolmie 1999; Gottcent, 1979), and with limited interest in semiotics (perhaps because it seemed too philosophical in orientation, and would hence, in the understanding then, be given to something akin to methodologically-uncontrolled or -unrepeatable interpretation, rather than the high measure of methodological lucidity regarded as important for scholarly validity then).

Yet, historical criticism was always present, either as bogeyman or as straw dolls; but mostly, with such formidable proponents of historical criticism as Deist and Le Roux (e.g. Deist, 1988; Le Roux, 2005:265–280), these methodologies could not be despatched. Moreover, the nature of many of the questions commonly asked of and on the Bible simply require historical analyses; a-historical approaches cannot do what the historical can (cf. Lombaard, 2008:49–62). The methodological uncertainties inherent to the latter (also the Aesopian dimensions thereof, mentioned above) are more realistic than the a-historical certainties — the “platonic truths” — striven for by the alternative methodologies. In time, the historical interpretations would approach the state of being regarded as normal science (in the sense of Kuhn, 1962), except... (see point 3 below).

Despite the *story of two ways* (in the famous title of Le Roux, 1993), viz. historical criticism and text-immanent methodologies, being one of marching out of pace with each another, these two dominant exegetical approaches were by means at odds on what would be studied. It was *the text* of the Old Testament that was the prime focus; always. Vigorous, at times quite fierce as the methodological debates were (with only here and there some attendant humour, such as Celia Kourie’s quip on Reformed exegesis in South Africa being “*sola structura*”), the



energies were nevertheless all aimed at the text of the Bible. Whether the research interest was how the parts of a (final or canonised) Bible text related to one another or how the text had developed through various stages — ironically, these divergent approaches could both hence employ the term “composition” — it was always the text that was studied.

The contemporary implications from a Bible text were by no means regarded as unimportant (the Old Testament Society of South Africa first voted, almost unanimously, in favour of the Africanisation of Old Testament Studies at its 1976 Rand Afrikaans University – current University of Johannesburg- conference); hermeneutics (in its various meanings: exegetical methods; the philosophy of understanding; “application” in various ways) was taken very seriously; however, the prime focus remained always the text. Regardless of the methodological controversies; perhaps better said: partly as a function of these disputes (there were other reasons besides), the text of the Bible was the focus of Old Testament scholarship.

GENITIVE-THEOLOGICAL READINGS

The genitive-theological readings of the Bible show an impressive array of interests which are brought to the Bible, in order for the Bible to be brought to bear on these matters. This can be done on confessional grounds, in the belief that the Bible carries religious weight which would certainly weigh in positively on the matter at hand; it can also be on more instrumental grounds, with the Bible regarded as a powerful liberative tool to lead religious communities to insights and/or actions that would benefit them and/or the cause advanced. Such interpretative evangelism — in a sense — include theologies of liberation (originally Latin-American, inspiring Black theology in the USA, African theology on this continent, and more), on the ecology, of feminism, expanded to LGBTQTI+ and related theologies, and of a range of urgent social justice issues.

In South Africa, because of the abhorrent apartheid history of the country in which everyone and everything had been implicated, the sheer moral force of genitive-theological readings of the Bible rendered it, and not one of the two exegetical approaches as might earlier have been expected, the dominant form of interpretation. No longer exegesis with its textual focus, but relevance or application, with its societal (and broader) focus, took central stage. The dominance is evident therein that (parallel to the journalistic vignette recounted in Bloom, 1994:16 on Literature Studies) one is hard-pressed to find anyone who does not declare sympathies to liberation theology. The mantra of “God’s preferential option for the poor”, for instance, dare not be questioned, except perhaps in the quietest of corners. The programme has been set, firmly. Even critical contributions meant in support of this broad approach, are strongly (mis)taken as a negative orientation towards the project of democracy, liberation, upliftment and so forth — as I have experienced (with many years later, still, rumours drowning out the reality of the published texts). The cause at hand is sensed to be of such consequence, that nothing which might possibly detract from it, is countenanced.

Importantly for the topic of this session: the dominance of the genitive-theological approaches to Bible scholarship, means also that the major academic gatherings had to follow these outlines too. The more traditional exegetical investigations, of understanding the Bible texts on their terms (not meant here in any hermeneutically naïve way), were certainly still on the conference programmes; however, the quiet or Aesopian sense was that those are perhaps less worthy studies. Imperative are the socio-political and ecological urgencies of the present; there lie the primary foci. These worthy, idealistic interests have to be pursued with greatest energies. Plato reigns!



HENCE, PRO- : AN AESOPIAN UNDERSTANDING

As may plainly sociologically be expected, with the primarily exegetically oriented Bible research in a soft sense suppressed or marginalised in the major research fora, deeply exegetical interest would find other avenues. The first of these, and still a model for many in its dedicated focus and research productivity, was the ProPent project, with the first meeting taking place in the year 2000. (It was a year of a few other theological “firsts” too, with e.g. the first local chair in Spirituality Studies established, at the University of South Africa.) Now, the method-of-exegesis pendulum between diachronical and text-immanent swung firmly in favour of the former: the Midas touch of history (in the language of Otto, 2004:14) would, unashamedly, colour the Project for the Study of the Pentateuch. The focus was on *the text* of the Moses books, with the classic sources in this regard, the newer and the very newest theoretical developments and the best historical exegetes from across the globe in this field amongst the stars that aligned, to render ProPent, next to the establishment of the major local academic societies in Theology, the most influential research initiative in South Africa.

To be sure, in the same way as the major academic organisations certainly still included more traditional exegetical contributions, ProPent included speakers with a primarily genitive-theological approach; in parallel to the topics deemed politically relevant that dominated the major academic organisations, societally relevant topics (such as land) were included in the ProPent schedules. Moreover, this inclusiveness extended to sponsoring younger Old Testament scholars from Africa north of the South African borders; inviting colleagues from other theological disciplines; taking pains to involve speakers from a wide range of South African universities. However, the resultant variety of presentations did not detract from the main foci: that *the texts* of the Pentateuch be studied (also in their various interrelationships), and that the historical paradigm holds sway.

The personalities involved, the retreat-like academic conferences with the attendant collegial atmosphere, but most particularly the deep specialisation that went along with uncompromisingly critical discussions of the Bible texts concerned and the papers presented, rendered this a highly productive project. Unproclaimed in any grand manner, yet through its primary orientation on Pentateuch texts being studied historically, ProPent over two decades (which thus constitutes two or perhaps three academic generations) became an intellectual beacon. It forged intellectual identities; it made some careers. The two leading figures, the two universities most formally at the steer of this project, the cohort of regular and semi-regular and once- or twice-off participants, and the quality and quantity of the ensuing publications, benefitted all who were touched, at various distances, by this enterprise. The many Pro- and Pro-like projects in its wake, each though with its unique features, give evidence for the strong heuristic value of ProPent as “pro-genitor”.

Along with the other diversities on offer on our research menu, these strengths are certainly worth retaining.

Conclusion

Perhaps I have said too much here in too fleetingly characterising the rises and falls of South African Bible scholarship over recent decades. However, the unsaid or perhaps unsayable — Aesopian language — are as much a part of the reality in which we work as are the more straightforwardly visible aspects. Extending the validity we strive for in understanding how the Pentateuch texts came about, also to understanding our exegetical realities honestly too, may perhaps at times be uncomfortable; yet, such is the nature of critical scholarship. Silence on our subject matter, on our methodologies, as much as on the nature of our research enterprise, would be saying very much too.



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