Recent developments in the history of ancient Israel and their consequences for a theology of the Hebrew bible

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Recent Developments in the History of Ancient Israel and their Consequences for a Theology of the Hebrew Bible

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1. Introduction: The Relevance of History for a Theology of the Hebrew Bible

The past decades of research have (again) revealed the considerable differences between the biblical picture of the history of ancient Israel and the historical-critical reconstruction of that history. This is true not only regarding the pre- and early history of Israel and Judah and the period in which these two small states emerged, but also with regard to the following centuries of Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian dominion over the Southern Levant. How large was the empire of David and Solomon? Do the Elijah-narratives or the accounts of the cult reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah have a historical core, or are they legends which originated only in post-exilic times? Was the second temple in Jerusalem built at the end of the sixth or the fifth century BCE? Is Ezra a historical or a fictional figure? And so on. You don’t have to be a so called “minimalist” to realize that a considerable amount of the historical traditions in the Hebrew Bible are not only legendarily embellished but more or less freely invented.

The historical origin and development of the biblical literature presently seems to have been considerably more complex than it appeared 30 or 40 years ago. Today we know that these writings were repeatedly edited and supplemented like comparable writings from the Ancient Near East. For the most part they got their present shape only relatively late, in the Persian or the Early Hellenistic period. The differences between the Septuagint and the Massoretic Text as well as the biblical and the so called “para-biblical” manuscripts from Qumran show, that the texts had not reached something like a “final form” as late as the beginning of the Common Era. Often, as in the case of some prophetical books, it seems virtually impossible to determine which texts originated from the respective prophet – if there are such texts (and such prophets) at all.

1 See, e.g., Hartenstein, Geschichte.
2 See, e.g., Schmid, Literaturgeschichte.
In the field of religious history the biblical account that the Israelites learned monotheism, aniconism, the Sabbath and the mosaic torah in the wilderness and began to adopt elements of the local and neighboring cultures as soon as they entered the land of Canaan is hardly tenable. All findings suggest that the cultures of Israel and Judah at first conformed widely to those of their neighbors. The well known peculiarities of the biblical religion of Israel developed only gradually and in important aspects only in the Persian period.

What are the consequences of these insights for a theology of the Hebrew Bible? First of all it seems to be obvious that the Bible is not the infallible and absolutely true word of God as it has been thought to be for a long time. The Bible is a work of human beings and as such it is not free of errors and mistakes. It is an "earthen vessel" containing a "treasure" — to adopt a metaphor used by the apostle Paul in 2 Korinthians 4,7 for the human heart containing the knowledge of God. But which treasure can we find in the Bible?

Today a considerable number of scholars appear to think that the vessel itself is the treasure. They are not so much interested in the reality to which the biblical texts relate, as in the texts themselves, their literary shape and their effect on today’s readers. No doubt it is reasonable and important to study biblical texts in this way. However, from a theological point of view such a method is questionable if it completely ignores the realities of the time in which the biblical texts were composed and to which these texts relate.

It is a commonplace of historical research that historical facts cannot be neatly separated from their interpretation. When we label and describe reality we do also interpret it, even if we don't want to. And when we describe a historical process we narrate it and give it a literary shape, as Hayden White pointed out in his well known Tropics of Discourse (1978). Nonetheless it makes sense to maintain that there is a difference between the texts and their virtual worlds on the one hand and the historical realities to which they refer and which are reflected in them. A well written history-book can be read like a novel. But not later than we are done with reading we want to know whether all did really happen thus or alike or if it was a fictitious story only. In case what we read may have an impact on our opinion about a person or a group of human beings, we actually are morally obliged to examine whether it corresponds to reality or not, in order to avoid being deceived by prejudice or defamation. This is true for persons or people of biblical times as well as for our contemporaries.

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3 See, e.g., Hartenstein, Religionsgeschichte.
4 See, e.g., Pannenberg, Crisis.
5 See, e.g., Holladay, Methods.
6 See, e.g., Goertz, Geschichte.
From a theological point of view one cannot avoid to ask how the biblical texts relate to reality, because the subject of theology is God’s working in the world and with humans to which the biblical texts refer or to which they bear testimony, as it is often called in a theological context. In the past decades there was an intense theological discussion about what is more important for the Christian churches and for Christian theology: the beliefs that are expressed in the bible or the working of God to which the biblical texts refer. Whereas Karl Barth and others emphasized the importance of the “message” of the bible which was understood as the “word of God”, Wolfhart Pannenberg, among others, pointed to history as the proper place of God’s revelation(s). I think, like fact and interpretation, history and belief cannot be strictly separated, but they need to be distinguished of each other. Reality is always ambiguous and can become God’s revelation only when it is interpreted as such by humans. In turn, such an interpretation of historical reality has to stand the test of time or needs to be corrected, modified or even replaced by a better interpretation in the course of history.

To mention a final point, the historical realities from which the biblical texts emerged and to which they refer cannot be ignored in a theological interpretation of the Old Testament for a basic linguistic reason. Texts are always incomplete. No text expresses everything his author(s) wanted to communicate. A person writing a text can normally assume that the readers will complete what is not expressly stated in the text but tacitly presupposed from their cultural knowledge about the world, when they read the text and try to grasp its meaning. The better you know the world from which the text emerged, the better you can understand the text.

2. Examples for the Relevance of History for a Theological Understanding of the Hebrew Bible

2.1 The “Shema’ Yisrael” (Deuteronomy 6,4-5)

This can be exemplified by the well known “Shema’ Yisrael” in Deuteronomy 6,4-5 which is translated by the Revised Standard Version in the following way: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” A present-day reader will most probably wonder why the text does not say: “The LORD our God is the only God.” That would conform to other monotheistic statements in the Hebrew Bible. Isn’t it self-evident that Yahweh, “the LORD”, is only one God and not multiple gods? Ever since we

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7 See Barth, Church Dogmatics; Pannenberg, Crisis; Pannenberg, Revelation.
8 See, e.g., Iser, Act; Iser, Reader.
know the Hebrew inscriptions of eighth century Kuntillet Ajrud, which mention a “Yahweh of Teman” and a “Yahweh of Samaria” as well as “Yahweh and his Asherah”, we understand what it means that Deuteronomy 6,4 insists on the unity of Yahweh, who is to be worshipped in only one single sanctuary. The order to “love” Yahweh wholeheartedly and exclusively obtains a new significance when it is read against the background of the Neo-Assyrian vassal treaties which demand such an undivided “love” to the Assyrian overlord from his subjects and vassals. This example shows that a better knowledge of the historical realities, in which and for which a biblical text was written, can contribute to a better understanding of its theological statements.

2.2 The Book of Daniel

However, a better knowledge of historical circumstances can also lead us to question theological conceptions in the Old Testament from our present point of view. So, e.g., the Book of Daniel expresses the belief that the course of history has been predetermined or at least foreknown by God in detail long before things happened, and that he has revealed to Daniel what will happen until the end of this world. Already in the third century CE the philosopher Porphyry of Tyre realized that the Book of Daniel contains predictions after the fact, which concur with the course of history until the religious crisis under Antiochus IV around the year 165 BCE, but after that date clearly differ from the real events. With this historical insight, the theological understanding of history and prophecy in the Book of Daniel is empirically disproved. It appears that Qoheleth was right with his skepticism concerning the possibility of prognoses. That does not mean that we cannot gain valuable theological insights when we read the Book of Daniel. But it seems to me indisputable that a historical-critical analysis of the Book of Daniel and its historical background has significant consequences for its theological meaning and interpretation.

2.3 The Siege of Jerusalem 701 BCE

Another example of the interrelation of history and theology is the siege of Jerusalem by the Assyrian King Sennacherib in the year 701 BCE. Assyrian sources say Sennacherib shut up Hezekiah within Jerusalem like a caged bird and Hezekiah paid him a heavy tribute. The narrative in 2 Kings 18-19 alleges

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9 See Dobbs-Allsopp et al., Inscriptions, 285-286 (KAjr 14), 289-292 (KAjr 18), 293-295 (KAjr 19), 295-297 (KAjr 20).
10 Cpo. the Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon, § 24: “If you do not love the crown prince designate Ashurbanipal ... as you do your own lives ...” (ANET, 537).
11 See Berchman, Porphyry, 157-167.
12 See, e.g., Chavalas (ed.), The Ancient Near East, 346-347.
that Hezekiah first paid tribute to Sennacherib and Sennacherib then besieged Jerusalem anyway. Thereupon the angel of the LORD killed 185'000 Assyrian soldiers which persuaded Sennacherib to depart from Jerusalem. The version of the narrative in Isaiah 36-37 then does not mention Hezekiah's tribute at all. Most likely we can see in these texts how a relatively "profane" event, the avoidance of a military conquest of Jerusalem by way of paying tribute, was more and more interpreted in religious or theological terms. It seems plausible to see a connection between this process and the emergence of the theological concept that Zion and Jerusalem as the city of Yahweh cannot be conquered by foreign military forces, as it is stated e.g. in Psalm 46. If Christof Hardmeier (Prophetie im Streit vor dem Untergang Judas, 1990) is right, the narrative of the miraculous deliverance of Jerusalem in 2 Kings 18-19 and Isaiah 36-37 was used roughly a hundred years later to support Zedekiah's rebellion against the dominion of the Babylonians - and as a defamation of the defeatism of Jeremiah who warned the inhabitants of Jerusalem again and again that they should not feel safe in the temple and in Jerusalem (Jeremiah 7), and who called them to submit to Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians (Jeremiah 27-28). It would, then, be another example for a theological concept that was based on a falsifying or a distorted perception of reality and did not stand the test of time - and that has already been criticized in the Hebrew Bible.

2.4 The Exodus Tradition

Considerably more complex things present themselves with regard to the Exodus tradition. It is a consensus of present historical-critical research that the Exodus as it is depicted in the bible, never happened in real history.13 If the biblical Exodus narrative has a historical core - which is far from certain - it is now distorted beyond recognition by the repeated literary shaping of the texts. That does not mean there are no historical references in the Exodus narrative, which incorporates experiences of many generations of tradents and editors. Particularly obvious is the quarrel with the Neo-Assyrian ideology of power (most clearly in the story of Mose's birth which grapples with the birth legend of king Sargon of Akkad and its Neo-Assyrian reception14) and with the circumstances of the Persian period (the tent sanctuary as a critical counter-image of the Jewish-Persian temple of Jerusalem). There might be references also to the compulsory labor under Solomon and to the founding of imperial sanctuaries by Jeroboam I (the "golden calf") - if these are not merely literary allusions. Outside of the Exodus narrative the Exodus tradition is time and again taken up to reflect in it new historical experiences: the Neo-Assyrian dominion

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13 See, e.g., Redmount, Lives.
14 See, e.g., Foster, Muses, 912-913.
over Israel in Hosea, the return from the Babylonian exile in Second Isaiah, the dispersion of Israel among the nations and its final gathering and restitution in Ezekiel, to name only the most prominent examples.

It is nearly impossible today to understand the Exodus narrative and the Exodus tradition as a “testimony” of a singular and datable historical event. Rather it is a kind of literary metaphor that offers interpretations for historical experiences. Israel Finkelstein recently argued for this understanding:15 “faith and historical research should not be juxtaposed, harmonized, or compromised. When we sit to read the Haggadah at Passover, we do not deal with the question of whether or not archaeology supports the story of the Exodus. Rather, we praise the beauty of the story and its national and universal values. Liberation from slavery as a concept is at stake, not the location of Pithom.”

But even if we read the Exodus narrative as a literary metaphor and not as a historical report, it is reasonable and essential for a biblical theology to examine the story from a historical-critical point of view. How does the world which the text displays before its readers relate to the real world of ancient Israel and to our real world today? What is shown by the text and what is ignored? Which experiences are in accordance with the text and which experiences contradict it? To which possibilities of changing reality does the text call attention and which possibilities does it conceal? What is the main topic of the Exodus narrative: the liberation of Israel as a nation from foreign dominion or the liberation of slaves from a system that exhausts and oppresses them? Does the narrative question the equation of freedom and power (“freedom is the power to do what one wants to do”) or does it describe Yahweh as more powerful than Pharao and thus as a kind of Super-Pharao? Is it true that the Assyrian dominion emerged as a consequence of the religious conditions in Israel, as Hosea thought? Does it make sense to parallel the escape from slavery and genocide in Egypt and the return home from the Babylonian exile at the behest of the Persian king, as Second Isaiah held?

3. Examples of a Historical-Critical Approach to Theology in the Hebrew Bible

The Hebrew Bible itself provides at least rudimentary models for such a historical-critical examination of theological concepts. So e.g. Deuteronomy 4,34 highlights the uniqueness of Israel’s exodus from Egypt: “Has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, and by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great terrors, according to all that the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes?” This opinion is historically and

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15 Finkelstein, Summary, 187.
Recent Developments in the History of Ancient Israel

theologically criticized in Amos 9,7: “Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel? Says the LORD. Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir?”

Psalm 77 struggles with the question why God in the present does no act any longer in such a prodigious way he acted when Israel moved out from Egypt. Apparently God has changed his course of action. In the words of v. 10: “the right hand of the Most High has changed”. This insight provokes a relecture and reflection of the ancient traditions: “I will remember your wonders of old, I will meditate on all your work” (v.11-12). That leads to a new understanding of the Exodus and God’s acting in it. The latter is depicted as an epiphany of Yahweh as weather god in a thunderstorm with echoes of a battle with the chaotic water (v.16-18). These are phenomena which could be experienced also in the time of the author. This appearance of Yahweh is very impressive, but it cannot be empirically demonstrated: “Your way was through the sea ... yet your footprints were unseen” (v.19). And in the end the acting of God cannot be separated from the acting of human beings: “You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron” (v.20). This critical relecture of the Exodus story does not question the Exodus event. But at least it is based on the assumption that the reality and the acting of God in the world have been substantially the same in the distant past and in the author’s present. This assumption is reminiscent of the principle of analogy which is, according to Ernst Troeltsch, one of the basic principles of the historical method in theology.\textsuperscript{16}

4. Conclusion

To sum up: the historical-critical study of the history of ancient Israel helps us to a better understanding of the meaning of theological propositions and concepts in the Old Testament, of their relevance in their historical context and their importance for us today. At least rudimentary models for such a historical-critical development of theology can be found already in the Bible which documents a process of continuous critical evaluation and revision of theological traditions.

Summary

Recent research has emphasized the gap between the history of ancient Israel and the stories told about Israel in the Hebrew Bible. Should a theological interpretation of the Hebrew Bible ignore these contradictions between biblical texts and historical reality and read the texts in a metaphoric or paradigmatic fashion? Or should it critically evaluate the

\textsuperscript{16} Troeltsch, Method.
theological conceptions developed in the biblical texts in view of the reality they are referring to? This paper argues for the second approach which is consistent not only with our contemporary worldview but also with important biblical traditions of a critical theology.

Zusammenfassung

Die neuere Forschung hat gezeigt, wie stark sich die Geschichte des alten Israel und die Geschichten, die von ihm in der Bibel erzählt werden, voneinander unterscheiden. Soll eine theologische Interpretation der Hebräischen Bibel diese Widersprüche zwischen den biblischen Texten und der historischen Wirklichkeit ausblenden und die Texte als Metaphern oder Paradigmen lesen? Oder soll sie die theologischen Konzeptionen, die in den biblischen Texten entwickelt werden, im Lichte der Wirklichkeit, auf die sie sich beziehen, kritisch prüfen? Dieser Aufsatz plädiert für den zweiten Ansatz, der nicht nur unserem heutigen Wirklichkeitsverständnis entspricht, sondern auch gewichtigen biblischen Traditionen einer kritischen Theologie.

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