

This article is based on a paper given by Judith McKinlay at the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Biblical Studies (ANZABS) annual conference, held at the University of Otago in December 2017. Judith indicated to us that this would be her final conference presentation, so we were delighted to publish it in the Bible and Critical Theory. We have also invited several scholars who have either worked with Judith, or engaged with her work, to reflect on this article in light of “where they are now” in terms of context, scholarship, and the critical matter of interpretation.

Sadly, Judith passed away earlier this year. Most of the responses to her article included in this issue were written prior to her death, but together, they form a fitting memorial to her remarkable scholarship as well as her collegiality and friendship.

Aroha nui.

The Critical Matter of Interpretation, with a Sideways Glance at Huldah and Josiah

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This article has been sparked by two recent comments. The first by Esther Fuchs, writing of “the field of biblical studies” being “in crisis” (2016, 6). She has, in fact, been saying this for some time. So is it? “In crisis”? I suspect the nub of the matter has to do with the questions we ask of the texts. All, I think, would agree that questions are the tools of interpretation, and that different questions bring different aspects of the texts into view. But as the range of questions grows ever wider, which tools we choose, and why, becomes an ever more pressing question. That word “choosing” is key, highlighting the matter of choice. Is this the point of crisis? That we are having difficulty with difference: different means of engagement, different views of the task?

Most of us have lived through various critical moves. We’ve become used to the catchy threesome: author, text, and reader, otherwise known as the worlds “behind the text, in the text and in front of the text.”¹ In 1995, Gale Yee added a fourth category: “power,” in order to answer the question, “whose meaning and whose truth?” (1995). Who were these biblical writers? Why were they writing these texts? Yee’s point is that everyone writes for a purpose, and there is no question that the biblical writers had very clear purposes and agendas.

As Terry Eagleton (1976, 101) writes, “It is in literature, above all, that we observe in a peculiarly complex, coherent, intensive and immediate fashion the workings of ideology.”² I am using the word “ideology” not in any pejorative sense, but simply to express writers’ quite particular avowed world views, driving their quite particular purposes. What is not so clearly recognized is that we, as readers

¹ See Scholz (2016) for a collection of essays ordered by these three categories.

² Cited in Økland and Boer (2008, 4).

and interpreters, all have our own purposes—our own ideological perspectives—in engaging with these texts, even if unstated and unacknowledged.

This brings me to the second comment sparking this paper: Louis Stulman writing in 2015, “that a good number of scholars would make the case that critical interpretation functions best as a dispassionate enterprise” (95). He disagrees, while noting that, “to an extent,” this “has been the point of departure since the inception of the modern period” (ibid.). A few years earlier, in their introduction to *The Art of Reading Scripture*, Ellen Davis and Richard Hays describe this “art of reading” as a creative discipline requiring “engagement and imagination, in contrast to the Enlightenment’s ideal of detached objectivity” (2003, xv). It is, I suggest, a matter of imagination meeting imagination for, to quote Walter Brueggemann, “imagination is the capacity to image a world beyond what is obviously given ... and that’s what biblical writers mostly do” (Winters 2007). That is the hope of the Gospel. So the question for us: how to engage creatively to keep this imagination alive?

In a recent discussion, Pamela Milne and Susanne Scholz (2016, 34) call for feminist researchers “to be transparent about our assumptions and motivations.” To be up front, and state the imaginings that drive our work, for feminist criticism is by its very nature an ideologically “interested” enterprise, and certainly not “dispassionate.”

Yet there are differences even within this field, differences in methodology and particulars of interest, just as biblical writers themselves differed in how and why they wrote. Yet while their differences are regarded as quite “natural,” it seems that difference in the ways in which readers like us engage is a problem. If there is a crisis, is it that we cannot cope with such difference?

In some respects, I sense this has lessened in recent years. Working as a feminist in the 1980s and 1990s was a fraught experience for many. So I wryly note the many current feminist collections rolling off the academic presses, which incorporate wide ranges of critical approach. And not only feminist collections: Diana Edelman and Ehud Ben Zvi’s recent volume (2014), *Imagining the Other and Constructing Israelite Identity in the Early Second Temple Period* is introduced as “involving multiple perspectives ... and conducted using various methodological approaches” (Edelman 2014, xiii). Difference deliberately sought!

This all assumes a significant move away from the assumption, in the guise of objectivity, that everyone, everywhere, using the accepted critical tools appropriately, would work in the same way for the same end,³ no matter their own context, history, or experience—all those identity factors that constitute and characterize us as readers (Segovia 1995, 29-30). Although, engaging without drawing upon at least some of the historical-critical tools would, I think, be somewhat anarchic! Careful historical research remains a must, as does redaction and genre studies. And we certainly cannot engage at all without the aid of textual criticism.

At the same time, where critical difference is very clear, and not at all dispassionate, is the field of Hebrew Bible historical studies, with its opposing

³ Traditionally understood as the meaning intended by the author.

schools of “minimalists” and “maximalists.” Here, there is admittedly a basic problem, noted by Mary Calloway (2015, 33), who writes of Jeremiah being “already an adaptation of an irretrievable ‘original’.” So the current move, largely drawing on cultural or social memory theory, is towards “an interest in the way the past has been constructed at different occasions and by different people” (Lemche 2010, 12). For what exactly is meant by “Ancient Israel”? Is it, to quote Ehud Ben Zvi (2014, 3), not so much “history” as a construct, “evoked” by later Israel “reading and rereading a particular repertoire of books”? Particularly the so-called Deuteronomistic works, which another scholar describes as testifying to “the sheer genius of the tradents” in “using stories about cult, politics and the concept of *otherness*” in order to “generate a common bond” (Forget 2010, 9). Not so much history as ideology, and certainly “interested.”

A few years ago, I became interested in Huldah, and the way in which she apparently appears out of nowhere (McKinlay 2005).⁴ There is much in the text in 2 Kings 22-23 to raise suspicion. Was a lost law book found?⁵ Or is this a literary or political trope, as many are suggesting?⁶ If so, not unprecedented. Among other Ancient Near Eastern examples, the Egyptian king Shabaka (c. 710 BCE) claimed he had found an ancient document, “a work of the ancestors” which he restored “in order that his name might endure and his monument last ... throughout eternity.”⁷ Certain classical writers also employed stories about lost and found documents, as “literary ploys to bolster the credibility of the texts within which they appear” (Stott 2005, 153).⁸ Is the 2 Kings account simply another example?

And the Josiah reform? As Lester Grabbe (2017, 74) notes, there is “no direct evidence outside the biblical text.”⁹ Nor is Josiah’s existence verified by any extra-biblical source (Grabbe 2005, 112). Could the whole reform narrative be “a reconstruction inspired by the exilic situation, in which there was no longer any king to personify the law and put it into effect” (Assmann 2006, 68)? Their situation and their theology required such a king and cultic reform. “Created by deuteronomistic historiographers,” it becomes “part of the foundation myth of the later Jewish

⁴ The article was reprinted in McKinlay (2014, 134-65).

⁵ As Nadav Na’aman (2011, 53) notes, “Surprisingly, there is no hint in the history that the ‘book’ disappeared and was later found.” His point, that “from a literary point of view, the detailed description of the cult reform carried out by Josiah requires an engine to ignite the process. Hence, the *Auffindungsbericht* must have been an integral part of the original story of the cult reform” (54), is strongly persuasive.

⁶ So Davies (2014, 33): “There is ... no sound reason to read the legend of 2 Kgs 22 as a reliable historical account.”

⁷ Noted by John Van Seters (2006) in his review of Römer (2006). Although written in archaic language, it was, in fact, composed in Shabaka’s time, so that “the king clearly intended it to serve his own ideological and propagandist purposes.” See Na’aman (2011) for further examples.

⁸ Stott cites *The Phoenician History* by Philo of Byblos (late first or early second century CE). This highlights the usefulness of one particular application of comparative historical criticism, described by William Hallo (2003, xxviii) as setting the text “on a vertical axis between the earlier texts that helped inspire it and the later texts that reacted to it.” Cited in Hancock (2016, 95).

⁹ Grabbe (2017, 74) notes that whereas “it was once conventional to accept Josiah’s reform at face value ... the question is currently much debated.”

people” (Lemche 2010, 17-18).¹⁰ The question then is not did this happen but why might this narrative have been written.

While all answers must remain hypothetical, David Janzen, in a 2013 *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* article, considers the two reform narratives in 2 Kings carefully devised to persuade Jehoiachin in exile to be an ideal king like Hezekiah and Josiah.¹¹ A more qualified view suggests a Deuteronomistic redactor attempting “to endow the Deuteronomic movement with an origin account,” without necessarily denying the reform itself (Römer and de Pury 2000, 108). There is also, of course, the matter of Chronicles, which differs in the time sequence of Josiah’s acts. Ideology appearing again? For it seems that the Chronicler was “not very happy with the deuteronomistic choice of Josiah as the great reformer,” preferring Hezekiah.¹² The crucial point is the infused ideology providing a social memory that creates an identity for this people Israel (see Davies 2014, 47).

If I now pick up a gender lens, Huldah’s role, equally unattested, raises sharp questions. She’s been hailed as the woman who “not only interprets but also authorizes the first document that will become the core of scripture for Judaism and Christianity” (Camp 1987, 109). Narratively true, but a good tick? A woman authorizing the purging of a goddess? For Josiah, following the scroll’s rulings, immediately calls for a purging of the cult: Baal and Asherah vessels burnt, the temple’s Asherah image brought out and beaten to dust, the houses where women wove garments or hangings for her destroyed (2 Kgs 23: 4, 6, 7). There is to be no reminder of this feminine aspect of deity in Israel. The book of Moses has spoken through Huldah’s authorization.¹³ Its absence will leave a haunting memory. Thus, according to Rhiannon Graybill (2015, 50), “history is haunted by Huldah’s call for reforms.”¹⁴

And, as Thomas Römer (2014) and Nadav Na’aman (2011) note, Huldah’s authorization also limits prophetic authority: divine authority now lies with the law of Moses.¹⁵ Is this why an unknown female prophet is set this task? Not a role for a Jeremiah!¹⁶ As I gaze at this text I now see Huldah as the ideological pawn of the elite male deuteronomistic scribe(s). What to do? I return to Louis Stulman (2015, 95), who argues that “a case can surely be made that our work this side of historical paradigms must participate fully in critical junctures of the contemporary world.” He quotes Robert Carroll, who, while certainly “not dismissing the historical character of biblical exegesis” (ibid.), insisted biblical interpretation must begin

¹⁰ See also Finkelstein and Silberman (2006, 269), noting the ongoing discussions regarding the historical reliability of the two cult reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah, with few agreements.

¹¹ Janzen (2013) highlights the importance both of Josiah’s repentance and the fact that he carried out his reforms even though he knew they would not alter his own fate.

¹² In 2 Chronicles 34, the reform comes before the law book discovery. See Lemche (2010, 18).

¹³ Though, as Davies (2014, 43) notes, 2 Kings does not specifically mention Moses, but refers to “the scroll of the law.”

¹⁴ See also Donaldson (2005).

¹⁵ Römer (2014, 200) is following his argument that not only is Huldah seen “as the interpreter of the book and not as an independent prophetess” but that “the passage apparently makes the prophet dependent on a book.”

¹⁶ The rabbis solved the question of why not Jeremiah by supposing him having gone to retrieve the ten northern tribes from exile (Babylonian Talmud, tractate Megillah 14b).

“where we are now” (Carroll 2000, 28; cited in Stulman 2015, 95; original italics).¹⁷ So Stulman (2014) reads much of the prophetic canon as “trauma literature.” I suggest the Huldah/Josiah narrative fits well within this.¹⁸ Not only the traumatic removals, but “still YHWH did not turn from the fierceness of his great wrath, by which his anger was kindled against Judah” (v.26). Wrath and judgment wholly in terms of the cult. A holy pogrom. Our world has seen, and continues to see this all too often.

And for us in Aotearoa New Zealand? As Jione Havea and Monica Melanchthon (2016, 566) write, “We all are contexted.” Our context matters, even as we read texts that are themselves differently contexted. How do we, *“where we are now,”* read a Deuteronomic text that promises God-given sustenance and blessing in the land to be given “as a possession to occupy” (Deut. 15:4 et al.), with houses and cities “you did not build ... vineyards and olive groves you did not plant” (Deut. 6: 10-11)?! Don’t we cringe! The connections with our own colonial history in Aotearoa New Zealand are surely all too recognizable, even if not quite so sharply as those with current day Israel/Palestine. Ours are quite different readings than those of people living outside their own land waiting to return.¹⁹ For us, reading texts that confront us with issues of conquest and land, raises the matter of postcolonial criticism, that “reading posture,” which Sugirtharajah (1998, 93) describes as:

a discursive resistance to imperialism, imperial ideologies, imperial attitudes and their continued incarnations in such wide-ranging fields as politics, economics, history and theological and biblical studies.

For those of us here, in this place, viewing through both feminist and postcolonial lenses, this Huldah/Josiah tale of a scroll, inscribed on yet another scroll, calls for quite particular interpretive care, even resisting reading.

If reading differently, through differently chosen lenses, seems a mark of crisis, it pays to remember, as Mary Callaway (2015, 33) reminds us, referring both to early Jewish and Christian traditions, that “biblical texts traditionally had multiple meanings, intended to nourish different aspects of the life of faith.” And choice remains: “Biblical interpretation need not be a zero sum enterprise that requires choosing one approach over all others” (ibid.). There need be no crisis, but equally there can be no shying away from employing those that reveal disturbing and challenging ideologies.

All of which leads to the matter of how we lead students through this perhaps now perplexing field of biblical interpretation. The last paper I taught was

¹⁷ So “for us” in our time “the trope of the lost children of Rachel in Jer 31.15” leads “to the reality of the lost children of Rachel in the death camps ... of the Third Reich” (Carroll 2000, 28).

¹⁸ According to Na’aman (2011, 58), “Cults and rituals everywhere were conceived of as being of divine origin and changes in the religious practice were considered to break the divinely established order. To execute a cultic reform, which amounts to a drastic change in the traditional cult and rites of the kingdom, the king and priests needed an authoritative divine support.”

¹⁹ In disagreement with Richter (2017, 50), who, while making the case for Deuteronomy reflecting “the national profile of the emerging Israelites in the late Iron I and transitional IIA period, and/or the regional profile of isolated village life persisting in parts of the Central Hill Country into the Iron II B,” considers the possibility that a later writer, that is, an exilic or postexilic author, intentionally reflecting an earlier economic reality “unlikely.”

Contemporary Biblical Criticisms. I'd been teaching this over many years, modifying it each time. This time I added Marxist criticism. What was unexpected was that when the class assessments came in, there was one by a student, originally from eastern Germany, who wrote that the Marxist module had made her feel included. I realized afresh how context does matter, and how different approaches allow different people to engage meaningfully. It is not simply a matter of alerting students to these different critical possibilities but offering them the opportunity to use those that connect with who they are themselves. Then they, too, may work from *where they are now*.

These texts come to us as gift, but they are not innocent, just as we, their readers, are not innocent. Critical care is the requirement, but as contexts and times change, there can be no closure and no end to difference.

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