

OF SERPENTS, REEDS, UNDERSTANDING, AND TURNS: SOME PERSPECTIVES ON IMPLIED APOLOGETICS AND PENTATEUCH THEORY¹

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Abstract

The history of the churches in South Africa has also been a history of the scholarly interpretation of the Bible. Critical Pentateuch theory has a peculiar nature in this regard in that its main proponents have felt a need to explain what they do. In this article, the associated rhetorical strategies of three Old Testament scholars from or with a strong link to South Africa are briefly described. And, cognisant of how this history may play out in future, suggestions are offered on three possible directions for the accompanying dynamics to Pentateuch theory in South Africa.

1 A CONTINUATION OF A HISTORY

In various ways, and to a large extent, the history of the churches in South Africa has also been a history of the scholarly interpretation of the Bible. Where the latter has on occasion not found resonance with church authorities, far-reaching conflict has ensued. The most prominent earlier cases in this regard relate to John Colenso (Erasmus 1986) and Johannes du Plessis (Nicholls 1997). Two substantial works, J H le Roux's *A story of two ways: Thirty years of Old Testament scholarship in South Africa* (1993) and F E Deist's *Ervaring, rede en metode in Skrifuitleg: 'n Wetenskapshistoriese ondersoek na Skrifuitleg in die Nederduitse Gereformeerde. Kerk 1840-1990* (1994) have traced the later historical developments of these earlier impulses, albeit in quite different ways. Building on these two works of socio-theological history, and advancing the time frame from the early 1990s to the present, this article analyses the

way in which, particularly, critical Pentateuch theory in South Africa has had to be accompanied by something of an apologetic tradition.

2 THE FIVE-HEADED SERPENT

In *The Old Testament according to Spike Milligan*, a single note (Milligan 1994:5) relates to the country we find ourselves in for Pro Pent 2006:

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

For our purposes here, British comedian Milligan's parody may be used as a metaphor of sorts in which the wily Pentateuch invites its readers to try to understand it. Scholars may recoil in trepidation of its complexity. Yet, this five-headed beast does after all assuage our fears; we will – in either prophetic or apocalyptic mode – "eat" from this book. And although we know that with Pentateuch theory the devil remains in the details, we will pass our broad understanding on to others (be they innocent bystanders or not) and invite them to share in this intellectual feast.

Leaving this now strained, and mixed, metaphor aside, the point remains that the Pentateuch continues to challenge our theories of its composition (cf. e.g. Wellhausen 1963; Blum 1990; Houtman 1994; Carr 1996; Braulik 1998:125-141; Van Seeters 1999 & Otto 2000). Taken together, Pentateuch theorists have had to defend another front of their enterprise, namely criticism of their critical work. Although not always experienced directly as overt rejection of the historical enterprise, critical Pentateuch scholars do have the sense that they have some explaining to do.

This article indicates three ways in which this has been done by influential Old Testament scholars, all of whom are either from South Africa or have a strong South African connection. Drawing on this synopsis, a few concluding remarks are made – again unintentionally

– on three possible ways in which this could develop over the next decade.

3 THE REED THAT HAS BEEN BENT

A H van Zyl, University of Pretoria Old Testament professor from 1966, followed a very specific technique in conveying, mostly to his students, his views of the layeredness of the Pentateuch texts (Van Zyl 1975:73-98). While his strongly confessional style has been analysed (Le Roux 1993:141-152), which includes emphasising by repetition the divine inspiration of the human authors of the Pentateuch texts, little has been said (on paper, at least) about his rhetorical style. It is through this exact aspect, though, that one is alerted to Van Zyl's sense that he had to tread carefully, not only because of what may well have been personal convictions (Brown 1979:146; Le Roux 1993:144), but most particularly because the ideas he wanted to convey were what may be termed "a difficult sell" to his intended audience.

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

Apart from the fact that such imagery seems somewhat quaint to us, as later generations of Old Testament scholars, the metaphor is by no means innocent. As novelist Primo Levi (1988:77) warns: "Beware of analogies!" Van Zyl, with both the more elaborate reed-

weaving image and the nationalistic military illustration, plays on the Afrikaner's primarily small town/rural-oriented sense of identity at the time (this can also be seen in other cultural activities of that period - cf. Coetzee 2000). Whether by unreflected impulse or by careful design, Van Zyl thus speaks to the 'soul' of his Afrikaans readership: romanticised associations of cultural heartland values are played upon. An attempt at formulating an understanding as it may have been experienced then is as follows: the Word of God came into being in a safe, homely way.

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

4 MINDING THE MIND

F E Deist may be used as an example of the next generation of Old Testament scholars who have had to develop a strategy with which to justify their historically oriented views on the textual composition process of the Pentateuch. Although a freer academic climate than Van Zyl's may be posited for Deist, aided also by the fact that he never held a church-funded university chair, the general religious climate within which Deist lived certainly was still conservative (and to a significant extent remains so), even fundamentalist (cf. Deist 1994:7-24, 355-365). To the latter audience, Deist communicated through many popular/popular-scientific publications on theological matters (e.g. Deist 1986), with his literary work (e.g. Deist 1987) assisting to establish his credentials as a theologian with "a common touch". With his theologically trained readership, though, Deist engaged by means of an entirely different strategy – through "mind games"; put differently: by analysing what it means to understand. Through an *intellectual* pathway, Deist could waylay fears and criticisms of his historically oriented views. Formulated in an alternate way: Deist "minded" his own business and that of the elite who would

read his scholarly publications. It is notable that in the same year (1976) as Deist's history of Pentateuch theory, under the characteristically inventive title of *Mosaïek van Moses*,² his first hermeneutics book, *Historiese heuristiek, teologiese hermeneutiek en Skrifgesag* was published.³

This sets the trend for Deist's publications: fully fledged historical-critical studies (e.g. Deist 1988b), along with contextually oriented theologico-political publications (e.g. Deist 1983), complemented with at times painstakingly detailed analyses of what it means to "understand" (e.g. Deist & Le Roux 1987; Deist 1994).⁴ Deist's apologetics was thus an affair of the mind. "How the mind works" was his buffer, implicit or covert in many instances, protecting him from reactions to his ideas on "how the Old Testament works"; that is, on how he understood the coming into being of the Old Testament texts. Although this approach did not prevent cases being brought against him in church quarters, Deist's literary output on hermeneutics was such that it simply had to be respected by the church leadership and by less historically oriented academic colleagues.

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

5 OTTO'S TURN

Münchener E Otto has, through his association with J le Roux and as *extraordinarius* for the Old Testament at the University of Pretoria, become the most prominent influence on present South African Pentateuch scholarship (cf. Le Roux 2005:1-21). His theory, that the beginnings of the Pentateuch should be sought in predeuteronomistic reaction to Babylonian imperial law (cf. e.g. Otto 1999:364-378), and that this is played out in an exilic-post-exilic D and P debate (cf. e.g. Otto 2004:23-35), has become one of the leading contenders in the sometimes highly contested marketplace of compositional theories on the Pentateuch. However, as it did 200 years previously, in 2005

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

Breaking with the established scholarly analytical tradition that the Pentateuch redactor-authors either had little insight into the roughshod nature of the editorial work they were doing or were for various proposed reasons too timid to conceal their sources and their work on them, Otto proposed that the textual inconsistencies were purposeful signs (Otto 2005:5-8). These "signs" were left there in the text, even introduced, by the editors, in order for their intended readers to note the way the text had been put together. Assumed, thus, are both highly gifted redactional craftsmanship and a decidedly intellectual, textually vigilant readership. Although the former has often been asserted, most notably over the last three decades by ahistorical exegetical approaches (cf. Lombaard 2006b), the emphasis that the textual tensions are deliberate "writerly" attributes (to appropriate a term from the hermeneutics of Thiselton, 1992:98, denoting that an author writes in order to invite the reader to ascribe meaning) is something of an about-turn.

This turn of Otto's, from his first major Pentateuch theory to this, his second, has its own apologetic motivation too. In the quest for greater interdisciplinarity in our time, but in which it has become increasingly difficult for theologians from outside the discipline of Old Testament scholarship to understand the issues, theories and debates surrounding Pentateuch composition, Otto (2005:2, 8) proposes his theory, namely the Pentateuch's theory of the Pentateuch, as a simpler, more manageable alternative for scholars in other disciplines, for students, and for Old Testament exegetes outside a primarily European frame of reference. The historical Midas touch, the touchstone of modern scholarship, thus remains intact (cf. Otto 2005:4); however, the plurality of complex modern compositional theories that detract from the accessibility of Old Testament studies to non-specialist interested parties is replaced with an ancient, inner-Pentateuchal historical approach.

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

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

6 THREE APOLOGETICS, TAKEN TOGETHER

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

7 THE FUTURE

This situation, of a perceived need for an instrument for apologetics, is not likely to change. South African society is, with small pockets of exception, not becoming more theologically literate: between growing fundamentalisms, nationalisms and secularisms, Pentateuch theoreticians will continue to feel the vague urge to “please explain”.

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

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

As we, as academics interested in how the Pentateuch came into being, often stumble as we tread around the very borders of science, we are forced to face and accept the uncertainties of our insights (Le Roux 2005:277). Hence, precisely: scholarly theories! Still, though, hubris is a dragon easily, and repeatedly, slain by our chosen subject matter. What is more, we also have to contend with assuaging the various misgivings of our audiences – in the academy, church and society (Tracy 1981:3-46) – and we will develop certain strategies to accompany us on this endeavour.

Perhaps, on this never-ending enterprise, we can find some solace in the mythical Scheherazade in *The book of one thousand and one nights*. Each night she *must* tell a story; each story must be at least as engaging as the previous. It is a task of which one may grow both weary and wary. Still, like Scheherazade, it is in the telling of the story that one finds life.

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ENDNOTES

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- 1 This article is based substantially on a paper read at the Pro Pent (Project for the Study of the Pentateuch) conference, 26-28 August 2006, Bass Lake Country Lodge, University of Pretoria.
 - 2 An English translation of this work was only to appear twelve years later – Deist 1988a.
 - 3 Since reading this paper it has come to my attention that Deist's 1976 *Historiese heuristiek, teologiese hermeneutiek en Skrifgesag* was written in direct response to criticisms from church circles on what Deist had been teaching his students at the University of Port Elizabeth (recently renamed the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University), namely the product of his research stay in Germany which was published as *Mosaïek van Moses* (1976).
 - 4 Along with Deist's 1988b textual criticism work, I still regard this 1994-book – *Ervaring, rede en metode in Skrifuitleg* – as the crown of Deist's publications, even if it was – in his own words – “killed by silence”, and in my view also by very poor marketing; cf. Lombaard 1998:645-646; 2001:471⁸; 2005.
 - 5 In this respect, the thoughts of Deist and of his long-time colleague and friend Le Roux (cf. e.g. Le Roux 2001:444-457) run along the exact same lines.