

HEBREW BIBLE OLD TESTAMENT

The History of Its Interpretation

Edited by Magne Sæbø

III/2: The Twentieth Century

Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht

Magne Sæbø, Hebrew Bible / Old Testament

Hebrew Bible / Old Testament
The History of Its Interpretation

Volume III/2



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VOLUME III
From Modernism to Post-Modernism
(The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries)

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From Modernism to Post-Modernism
(The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries)

In Co-operation with
Peter Machinist and Jean Louis Ska, SJ

edited by
Magne Sæbø

PART 2

The Twentieth Century –
From Modernism to Post-Modernism

Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie;
detailed bibliographic data available online: <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

ISBN 978-3-525-54022-0

You can find alternative editions of this book and additional material on our Website: www.v-r.de

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Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht LLC, Bristol, CT, U.S.A.
www.v-r.de

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Printed in Germany.

Typesetting by Dörlemann Satz, Lemförde
Printed and bound by Hubert & Co, Göttingen

Printed on non-aging paper

Gerhard von Rad
(1901–1971)

the Interpreter

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Preface

With this second part of volume III of *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: the History of Its Interpretation* (HBOT), devoted to the relevant research and studies on the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament in the twentieth century, the HBOT Project's long road has finally reached its end, Vol. III/2 being the fifth part volume of the whole enterprise.

From the first planning of the HBOT Project – around 1980 – it has been one of its main intentions to contribute to and to further the ponderous traditions of Ludwig Diestel (*Geschichte des Alten Testaments in der christlichen Kirche*, 1869) and Frederic W. Farrar (*History of Interpretation*, 1886) in the nineteenth century as well as to continue and extend the recent studies of the history of biblical research where scholars have presented not only specialized studies in this field of research history but even handbooks and dictionaries.

The first books that in the twentieth century opened for a new interest in the history of biblical research with special regard to the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament were the handbooks of modern Old Testament study history presented by Herbert F. Hahn in America (*Old Testament in Modern Research*, 1954) and Hans-Joachim Kraus in Europe (*Geschichte der historisch-kritischen Erforschung des Alten Testaments*, 1956). Towards the end of the last century and in the beginning of our own a new situation has developed, and at present there seems to be a remarkably great engagement worldwide in this area of biblical research, and the publication of individual studies and general histories here is just increasing. Among the new works special reference may be made to the monumental *Bible de tous les Temps* (in eight volumes, 1984–89), written by Roman-Catholic scholars, and the impressive individual opus by Henning Graf Reventlow, *Epochen der Bibelauslegung* (in four volumes, 1990–2001); out of many important books and actual ventures these two projects may be mentioned especially. The present situation in this field of biblical studies seems to be open in various ways; to some extent biblical scholars may be reflecting over their own position – not least in the perspective of what past generations have achieved. As for the contributions to this last part volume of HBOT, covering our recent past, it was regrettably unavoidable that some occurrences of over-lapping between near related essays came about – the relevant contexts of these cases, however, being different.

In earlier research and descriptions of biblical interpretation history the borders of the actual enterprises were frequently drawn rather narrow, in this way or another; often was the long historical perspective shortened, or the broad and manifold Jewish study of the Hebrew Bible was overlooked, if not completely set aside. To a great extent, the history of biblical interpretation has been written from an European point of view, which in the present – and future – situation most likely will be replaced by perspectives that are longer and more open.

The books and studies of biblical interpretation history referred to above as well as many similar ones tend to cover the whole Bible, not only the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament but the New Testament as well. Many of these books have, further, been written by single authors alone. Also at this point the situation of today has changed considerably. Because of the great and quickly growing amount of research and studies in this field there seems to be less place and possibility any longer for one-man enterprises; instead the present challenges may call for more organized team work .

By closing this last volume of the HBOT Project I would like to extend, again, my heartfelt thanks to Dr. Arndt Ruprecht, of Göttingen, who as Publisher so readily accepted my first proposal and idea of the present Project and has sustained it ever since. Further, I am deeply grateful for excellent co-operation with him as also with the staff of the Department of Theology and Religion in Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Verlag, Göttingen; especially, I would like to thank those with whom I have been in direct contact for the last volume: Jörg Persch, Christoph Spill and Renate Rehkopf. Further, I would like to express my best thanks to Professor Ronald Clements, of Cambridge, for all his help as linguistic consultant. Finally, I would also express best thanks to my co-editors; for the last Volume III they are Professor Peter Machinist, of Harvard, and Professor Jean Louis Ska, SJ, of Rome. Last but not least I am deeply obliged to all the individual authors of the HBOT Project – without whose contributions there would not be any Volume III/2.

Oslo, in July 2014

Magne Sæbø

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

In Our Own, Post-modern Time – Introductory
Remarks on Two Methodological Problems in Biblical
Studies

By MAGNE SÆBØ, Oslo

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The achievements of exegetical, theological as well as historical studies on the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament in the twentieth century were both great in number and many-sided in character so that the foregoing bibliographical summary represents no more than a small part of a more extensive bibliography of the scholarly research and publications in this field, which appear with increasing rapidity.

In regard to the distinctive character of this last period of the research history of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament the first point of note is that in the twentieth century scholars of various disciplines and traditions have been particularly concerned with the phenomenon of history and its great challenge. Although this is not altogether dissimilar from what was achieved in the immediately preceding centuries, it differed in certain respects from the biblical research of the nineteenth century, described in the first part of the present volume.¹ So far as history is concerned it may, first of all, be noted as significant that this subject, more than any other of those closely related to it, has remained a central and important field of research throughout the twentieth century also. The historical aspect may even be regarded as a common denominator of widely different subject-areas and disciplines of study. The issue of history then does not represent a minor but a major point of interest and has, accordingly, formed a highly complex subject within modern biblical studies. Also, in modern research the discipline of history has been placed under the closest scrutiny, with a greater conceptual sub-division than ever before, not least in respect of methodology. To an increasing extent this may itself be the consequence of the separation of the various disciplines that relate to this field of research.²

Two problems therefore are prominent and call for special attention at this point, making it appropriate to discuss them briefly at the outset. The first is related to the use and meaning of the term 'history', especially when as here, this concerns 'contemporary history'. The second problem arises from the strong plurality of methods that has become a prevalent feature of biblical studies and has caused some embarrassment among scholars.

1. Contemporary History as a Historiographical Challenge

When the subject of history was brought into focus in a new way during the early Renaissance and subsequently became a significant part of many new studies in that creative period, the sense of distance in time, which included historical perspectives and a sense of different *epochs*, was taken to be the main feature of what was considered to constitute history. For instance the epoch of the Renaissance was closely related to the comparable period of classical Antiquity.³ However, temporal distance is a relative and complex matter, and its importance diminishes as the period in question draws closer to the time and events of the author's present, when history takes on the character of becoming 'contemporary history'.

The concept of 'contemporary history' (*Zeitgeschichte*, *l'histoire contemporaine*) may seem, at least *prima facie*, to be a self-contradiction. However, the

¹ Cf. the introduction by Sæbø, Fascination with 'History', HBOT III/1 (2013), 17–28.

² Cf. i.a. Rowley, "Introduction: Trends in Old Testament Study", *The Old Testament and Modern Study* (1951), xv–xxxi, esp. xviii: "In contrast to the large measure of unity that prevailed a generation ago, there is today an almost bewildering diversity of view on many questions, and it is necessary to speak of trends, rather than of a single trend, in our studies".

³ See further HBOT I/2 (2000), 19–27; HBOT II (2008), 26–33.

terminology is well established and indicates the most recent aspect of the long process of history. It is therefore both meaningful and functional and should be retained. Standing between the present and the past, to which it belongs, contemporary history shares the general condition of all human activities which are in perpetual transition from the past to the present, since time is in continual motion and the present becomes part of history. This endless passage of time has not always received sufficient attention by scholars; however, as a historical phenomenon it poses a major historiographical challenge, especially when the issue of 'contemporary history' is raised.

Quite apart from the way in which its boundaries may be more narrowly defined, contemporary history not only represents the most recent aspect of history, but may in itself raise the problem that the element of historical distance becomes more restricted. In this way a feature common to all history becomes reduced in perspective. However it may be of greater significance to take into consideration the special character and context of contemporary history, even when it can only be done briefly, as here. This will also include its relationship to the most recent past as well as to the fundamental nexus of cause and effect.

So far as the delimitation of the period of contemporary history is concerned the period should not be defined too narrowly in this context, but may include the whole of the twentieth century. In this there were, as is well recognized, different periods of major events and influential developments, including *inter alia* two world wars that made a broad and deep impact on the general cultural situation as well as on theology. Most interesting, however, these periods of intense crisis gave rise to an increased focus on the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. This had a strong bearing on exegesis and its interpretation as Holy Writ for Jews and Christians which has continued up to the present.

Of greatest significance in this situation is further the fact that this renewal of interest and research in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament was not only linked to Germany and central Europe where it began, but was globalized and became international in its scope.⁴ This was partly in the framework of a specific 'Bible movement'.⁵ From being a predominantly Protestant affair it became a worldwide concern, shared by Roman Catholic and Jewish scholars, as well as others.

It may be regarded most positively that the flourishing of biblical studies during the twentieth century proved to be methodically innovative in various ways and became more productive than ever before. On the other hand it poses a challenging problem for scholars that the various methodological approaches that have been used frequently differ considerably from each other.

⁴ See below in Part B of this volume chapters like 35 on the Americas and Canada, by D. A. Knight, and 36 on Africa, Australia, New Zealand and Asia, by H. L. Bosman.

⁵ Cf. especially B. S. Childs, *Biblical Theology* (1970), 13–87.

2. On the Methodological Pluralism of Contemporary Biblical Studies

Current studies of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament have not only experienced an international expansion of interest and research but have also become specialized as a consequence of the increasingly plurality of methodologies. This is partly on account of the broader, and more precisely differentiated, subject of history.

Increasing differences in exegetical methodology are to some extent rooted in the biblical text itself, being related to various characteristics and aspects of it. On the other hand the variety of approaches has also been rooted in divergences of methodology in modern biblical research or, in a still wider context, they have sometimes been the result of the establishing of a separate identity for various historical sub-disciplines. These factors, along with others, have affected the modern study of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament in a variety of ways, not least in respect of the methods that have been employed.

Biblical studies have brought to light many literary and theological features of the biblical material, as well as the many intrinsic varieties of content. These studies, being mostly historical and critical in character, are manifold and have, taken as a whole, led to the books of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament being scrutinized as literary texts, in a manner that is similar to the way in which ancient texts generally have been regarded in modern times. This feature may be a common denominator of the many specialized methodological techniques that have originated, one after another, and which have, as a result, been adopted as features of ordinary exegetical work on the Bible.

The basic Masoretic form of the text, as also reflected in the ancient versions, has remained as central a challenge as ever in the study of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. In its long and complex history this text exhibits many distinctive aspects and stages. Since this specific textual history fundamentally affects all other approaches in biblical studies it has especially been examined by generations of scholars, perhaps to a greater extent in the present than ever before.⁶ Its challenge is still considerable.

As for other main methodological approaches that have been developed and practised in current study of the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament, the literary-critical approach was one of the first methods that received special attention and gained particular significance; it was mainly developed in the nineteenth century, but has played a key role in the twentieth as well. A chief concern of this approach has been to understand and explain the final form of the biblical books and texts as the result of a prolonged work of editorial combination of older and younger literary 'sources'.⁷ This method was primarily used in the study of the five books of the Law, the Pentateuch,⁸ but was, to some extent, also practised in

⁶ Cf. in HBOT III, Part 1 (2013), Chap. 13 by R. D. Weis, 346–392, esp. 380–392, and see below Chap. 48 by J. de Waard.

⁷ Cf. various contributions in Part 1 of this Volume, esp. Chap. 14 by Th. Römer and Chaps. 15 and 17 by R. Smend as well as Chap. 29 below by J. Barton.

⁸ Cf. in Part 1 Chap 14 by Römer, and see below Chap. 40 by D. Carr.

regard to the older and younger historical books,⁹ and was even applied to some prophetic books.¹⁰ The literary-critical method was practised in different ways,¹¹ and similarly opposed in various contexts.¹² Its general effect has been of great and long-lasting significance.

At the end of the nineteenth century, and especially in the twentieth, the question of ‘sources’, as constitutive elements of a text, was perceived as less relevant for its interpretation, than had previously been the case. Instead, without abandoning the literary-critical perspective, more attention was given to specific literary features of form (*die Gattungen*) that pertain to a given text. Aside from their respective contexts, the individual forms and form elements were compared with analogous or similar forms and form elements in other texts and contexts, including texts from neighbouring peoples.¹³ A further issue of current interest was connected with a closer attention to the specific function that the forms and form elements might have had in their original setting (*Sitz im Leben*), either socially, culturally, or in a cultic sense. Correspondingly this raised questions about what these forms and form elements came to mean in their new context and how they functioned as integral parts of a different setting. The various new usages of forms and form elements showed by all this a distinct historical aspect, as the forms and form elements, in the course of a long editorial process, moved, or were moved, from the original setting to a new one. In this complex and significant historical process of creative re-use, the forms and form elements might acquire a new function and a new meaning in their new context. This whole process has been viewed and placed under scrutiny in historical categories and has generally been characterized as ‘form criticism’ (‘form history’, Ger. *Formgeschichte*). Closely related to this ‘form history’ the ‘tradition history’ (Ger. *Traditionsgeschichte*) represents another approach which also relates directly to the content of the literary units.¹⁴ This was viewed both as *traditio*, i.e. the process of transmission, and *tradition*, the literary unit that was transmitted.

Since this historical process was related to – and actualized – the original location of these various forms and form elements (i.e. their respective *Sitz im Leben*), it also raised major questions regarding their specific social structure and background.¹⁵ That included the wider social framework of which they were a part and which called for attention as well. This was, further, also true with regard to the wider, many-sided, context of biblical studies more generally, including those contexts which were foreign to its essential nature, but covered general history, Semitic philology¹⁶ and philosophy.¹⁷

⁹ Cf. in Part 1 Chap. 19 by K. W. Weyde, and see below Chap. 41 by W. Dietrich.

¹⁰ Cf. in Part 1 Chap. 20 by Chr. R. Seitz, and see below Chap. 42 by M. Sweeney.

¹¹ Cf. in Part 1 Chaps. 7–11 and 17 by J. P. Byrd, J. W. Rogerson, J. Høgenhaven, G. P. Fogarty, E. Breuer, Ch. Gafni and R. Smend, and see below Chaps. 34–38 by D. A. Knight, H. L. Bosman, M. A. O’Brien, S. Sekine, J. Barton, A. Laato and S. D. Sperling.

¹² Cf. in Part 1 Chap. 18 by R. Smend, and see below Chap. 29 by J. Barton.

¹³ Cf. in Part 1 Chap. 16 by E. S. Gerstenberger, and see below Chap. 30 by A. F. Campbell.

¹⁴ See the preceding note and cf. K. Koch, *Formgeschichte* (1964/1969).

¹⁵ See below Chap. 28 by A. Hagedorn.

¹⁶ See below Chap. 27 by S. Fassberg.

¹⁷ See below Chap. 26 by D. Føllesdal.

In summary, the modern history of studies on the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament has become decidedly more complex – and to some extent more confusing, in the last century, not least in regard to the question of the variety of the contexts of its different disciplines. At the present time there is scarcely any sign of radical change in this feature of contemporary research; rather the plurality of methods and their complexity may be still increasing.