

Making Sense of the Polyphonic Voices in Biblical Interpretation

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1. Introduction

The¹⁾ Hebrew Bible owes much of its origin to the Fall of Jerusalem(586 BCE), the Exile and the proclaimed Return(538 BCE). In brief, the Bible was regarded as having been composed in the post-exilic community.²⁾ The impacts of the tragic events and expectation of restoration on the shaping of the faith and identity of the people of God cannot be undermined. I will cite the three examples of Jeremiah's vision of the two baskets of figs, the conflict in the claim for the Abraham tradition in Exile and the appropriation of the sword and plowshare motif by Isaiah, Micah and Joel.

There are, in the canon of the Hebrew Bible, diverse voices of the different communities in contest as well as various interpretations put forward by groups in dispute. I shall examine the scope of God's voices and how it relates to the people's voices, which cannot by any means be divorced from people's experience. What are being canonized in the biblical text itself

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1) This Paper is a revised version of the author's article entitled Philip Wickeri, ed., "Polyphonic Voices in the Bible," *Scripture, Community, and Mission* (Hong Kong: CCA-CWM, 2002), 177-192.

2) Philip R. Davies, *Whose Bible Is It Anyway?* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995).

are mostly human concerns in the face of God and witnesses of the divine in human life, which also can never be detached from people's socio-political context. What I am to demonstrate from the present exercise is not only the polyphonic nature of the text but also, more strikingly and rather unexpectedly, the politics of canonization between communities in dispute and in the struggle for legitimacy and authority. It is not, therefore, simply canonization of human experience over and against divine revelation, but the uplifting of one segment of human experience of a specific community overriding that of the down-trodden and the underprivileged. How do we make sense of the Bible and what ethical implication this reality of the text would have on our present day audience, that demands our openness in hearing contradictory voices from conflicting experiences of the people? Are we ethically compelled to making the suppressed voices heard again? How do we position ourselves in the flux of the many voices? These are challenges we have to take up in our own interpretation of the Bible rather than assuming that the Bible, being the Word of God, is apolitical and devoid of active human participation.

2. Tuning in to the Variety of Voices of God and of the Prophets

We have witnessed in the past couple of decades the decline of the supreme approach in the discipline of biblical studies; namely, the historical-critical method. Once the dominant position of this presumably objective and scientific method is called into question, scholars will then be liberated from its limits but to adopt a variety of approaches and to explore new ways of reading the biblical text. The role of the reader and the reading process are given importance in biblical interpretation. It is a well-acknowledged fact that biblical scholarship has entered into

an exciting era of great creativity with diversified and pluralistic approaches. The monolithic dominant paradigm of historical-critical method has largely been given way to the myriad of contesting voices.³⁾ Feminist interpretation, ideological criticism and contextual reading of the Bible from Asia, African and Latin American perspectives are being recognized, which have presented great challenges to the biblical discipline. The situation is like ‘a hundred flowers blooming at the same time.’ When scholars are now open to different approaches, the polyphonic voices in the biblical text itself will be more likely to be heard. The scholars will be more readily prepared to tune their ears to them.

It is nothing new to see that the Hebrew Bible contains a multitude of voices. There are human voices of “crying”(Isa 65:19; Ps. 6:8), “lamenting”(Jer 51:54; Ezek 27:28), “groaning”(Ps. 102:6) as well as “jubilation”(Isa 48:20). In dealings between God and humans, the psalmists have shown different expressions of praise, thanksgiving, petition and complaint.⁴⁾ These various voices are formulated in individual or communal speeches. The Hebrew word for ‘voice’ or ‘sound’ is *kol*, which occurs 505 times and its Aramaic equivalent appears 7 times in Daniel.⁵⁾ This word is used throughout the Bible, indiscriminative of the different types of literary modes. It appears in the Pentateuch, the Prophets and the Holy Writings. But this is not the only Hebrew word used to express the conception

3) For discussions on approaches to the Bible, see Sharon Ringe and Caroline Vander Stichele, eds., *Her Master's Tools? Feminist Challenges to Historical-Critical Interpretations* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005).

4) Ernest Betz, “phony,” Gerhard Friedrich, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 9 (Grant Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 28.

5) C. J. Labuschague, “Voice,” Ernest Jenni and Claus Westermann, eds., *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* 3 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997), 1132-1136. Also Ernest Betz’s article on “Phony,” Gerhard Friedrich, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 9 (Grant Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 278-309.

of God's voice. Precepts, commandments, laws, stipulations, etc., are alternative terms used to capture the teachings of God for the faith community in the Bible.

The people of Israel strongly believed in the active participation of God in human history. The voice of God is therefore also perceived and heard in historical events. In the historical psalms, Israel is admonished to be attentive and give ear to God's word(Ps. 78:1). Psalm 81 also fashions a case of God's word spoken in historical event, though scholars disagree on the meaning of the "unknown voice":

He made it a decree in Joseph,
when he went out over the land of Egypt.
I hear a voice I had not known:
‘I relieved your shoulder of the burden;
your hands were freed from the basket.
In distress you called, and I rescued you;
I answered you in the secret place of thunder;
I tested you at the waters of Meribah.
Hear, O my people, while I admonish you;
O Israel, if you would but listen to me!⁶⁾(Ps. 81:5-8)

The *shema* in Deut 6:4 is a classical example of a divine imperative to hear and listen to God's commandment in worshipping the Lord, YHWH alone. It represents the faith testimony of the Jewish community as it is recited three times a day by pious Jews.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.

The word of God carries creative power in the creation narrative in Genesis 1. Psalm 19 sees the voice of God as being expressed in both nature and in the written *torah*. The Psalm

6) Bible verses are taken from *the New Revised Standard Version*.

is typical in combining these two modes of God's word. Many biblical scholars attribute Ps 19:1-6 to its Canaanite origin and assume that it is a hymn to the sun deity. It does not escape our attention of the difference in the way God is being named in the two parts of the psalm. Ps. 19:7-14, being written in praise of God's *torah*, is generally thought to be of a later date. In reading Ps 19 we wonder how God's voice is perceived if it is not heard.

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
Yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world(Ps 19:1-4).

While the psalmist asserts that the heavens proclaim God's handiwork and declare knowledge, but there is no speech, no word and the voice not heard. Yet, on the other hand, the voice and words of heavens have extended to the whole earth. Confucius expresses similar understanding of the silence of nature and the orderly workings of heaven. He says: "I wish not to speak." Tzu Kung asked: "Master, if you did not speak, then what shall we, disciples, pass on?" Confucius said: "Does heaven speak? Yet the four seasons continue to change, and hundred things are born. Does heaven speak?"(Analects 17:19). Psalm 29, which also exhibits traces of Canaanite influences, presents the voice of God in natural phenomena: lightning, fire, thunders and roaring water. On the other hand, the Elijah passage insists that God is not bound by any natural phenomena.

And he said, 'Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD.' And behold, the LORD passed by,

and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him, and said, 'what are you doing here, Elijah?'(I Kg 19:11-13)

Elijah did not see God. He could only hear God's voice. This aniconic tradition testifies to the basic assumption of the Bible that no human should see God and live.⁷⁾ In the Deuteronomic understanding, *davar* is a mode of the theophany of Yahweh. This conviction of an absolutely formless deity is also stipulated in the Decalogue:

You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth(Deut 5:8).

When the people assemble on Mount Sinai to hear God's instruction and commandment they could only see burning fire and dark clouds.

And you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, while the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven, wrapped in darkness, cloud, and gloom. Then the LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire; you heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice. And he declared to you his cov-

7) Brian B. Schmidt, "The Aniconic Tradition: On Reading Images and Viewing Texts," Diana Vikander Edelman, ed., *The Triumph of Elobim, From Yabwisms to Judaism*s (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 75-105.

enant, which he commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments; and he wrote them upon two tablets of stone. And the LORD commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and ordinances, that you might do them in the land, which you are going over to possess. "Therefore take good heed to yourselves. Since you saw no form on the day that the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire(Deut 4:11-15).

Moses in the Deuteronomic understanding is portrayed as the prophet par excellence, the proto-prophet, so to speak(Deut. 18:15-19). In the description of the tradition, it is said that as the people requested not to hear God's voice direct at Horeb where Moses was appointed as prophet to represent God's word. God thus declares: "I will put my word in the mouth of the prophet."(Deut 18:19).

In West Asia the prophet is considered the messenger of God's word. Standing in the Council of the Gods is a criterion for judging the validity of one's prophecy(Jer 23:18). The religious-cultural framework for understanding divine-human communication in terms of the Council of Gods⁸⁾ and the related medium of prophetic proclamation must not be undermined if we are to grasp an informed interpretation of the biblical text. The prophet is a messenger and an interpreter of the word of God. An examination of the opening chapter of Deutero-Isaiah will illustrate this.

The Deutero-Isaiah opens with a host of voices(Isa. 40:1-6). It is not clear who the speakers are and to whom the sayings

8) The capital letter G is used in the word "God" or "Gods" in this article, which is contrary to the conventional practice of using the honorific form exclusive for the Christian God and the plural form and small letter for other deities. The general practice of translating the same word Hebrew term *elohim* into God when it refers to the Christian God and gods if it is applied to other deities is also heavily ideologically or theologically driven.

are directed, namely the addressee is represented by the pronoun “your.” What exactly is the context for the different voices is puzzling to the reader of the text:

“Comfort, comfort my people,” says your God.
“Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her
that her warfare is ended,
that her iniquity is pardoned,
that she has received from the LORD’s hand double
for all her sins.”

A voice cries:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

A voice says,

“Cry!”

And another voice⁹⁾ said,

“What shall I cry?”(Isa 40:1-6)

The scene of the above passage is most probably set at the heavenly court where Gods assemble in meetings to resolve problems and make decisions. The cohortative “let us make humans in our own image” in Genesis 1 implies a setting at the divine council. The opening chapter of Job also represents one of these divine councils presided by the High God. In the case of Canaan, it is El, who, being the High God of the Canaanite pantheon, convenes the assembly. The psalmist preserves one of these features in Ps. 82: “God has taken his place

9) These Bible verses follow the rendering of RSV except here where RSV has “And I said.”

in the divine council; in the midst of the Gods he holds judgment”(Ps. 82:1).¹⁰⁾ Prophetic figure can be understood in this context as one being called and sent by God to bring forth the message from the council. The messenger formula of which begins with “Thus says the Lord”(Isa 50:1) and ends with “Says the Lord”(Isa 54:17) bears witness to the relationship between the servant and the one who sends. Prophetic oracle is divine word communicated through a human agent and formulated in human words.

In sum, the Bible can be said as polyphonic. It contains the voice of God in nature and in history. In the Hebrew Scripture there is a host of different voices recorded in the text, but there are also unheard voices referred to in the Bible. They are the suppressed voice, the disputed voice, and the silenced voice. The prophet acting as a medium between God and the people is the messenger and, at the same time, an interpreter of the word of God to the people.

3. The Abraham Tradition in the Exilic Communities

When we listen to the Deuteronomic formulation of the so-called early “credo” of Israel with a summary of the people’s past vis-à-vis the saving grace of God, we hear the community’s confession of her identity and the claim to ancestral origin. In Gerhard von Rad’s understanding, Deut 26:5-9 represents the recitation of Israel’s faith in a God who brought her out of the land of the Egyptian bondage with signs and wonders.¹¹⁾

10) On the identification of Yahweh with the tradition and images of the great Canaanite god El, see Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God, Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (New York: Harper-Collins Publisher, 1990), 7-12.

11) Gerhard von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (London: SCM Press, 1966), 3-13.

Comparing the present form of the Pentateuch and the historical summaries we immediately observe that the Pentateuch traditions of creation(Gen 1-11) and the Abraham and Isaac stories are found missing(e. g. Ps. 78 and 106, except in Ps. 105). The Exodus and the land motif are closely linked but both are quite independently of the traditions of the wilderness sojourning and the gift of the Mosaic Torah at Sinai. Like many other recitations of history in the Hebrew Bible(Josh 24:2-13; I Sam 12:8; Ps. 105; Ezekiel 20; etc.), the climax of the saving deeds of God is the people's arrival and settlement in the land. What the community, who claims and recites these historical summaries intends to convey is the gift of the Promised Land to the people. The eventual entry to the land marks the fulfillment of God's promise as it is advocated at the end of Joshua's speedy and total victory over the Canaanites and final allocation of land of Canaan to Israel:

Thus the Lord gave to Israel all the land, which he swore to give to their fathers; and having taken possession of it, they settled there. And the Lord gave them rest on every side just as he had sworn to their fathers; not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the Lord had given all their enemies into their hands. Not one of all the good promises, which the Lord had made to the house of Israel, had failed; all came to pass(Joshua 21:43-45).

The present canonical shape of the Pentateuch does not correspond to this main thrust of the recitation. Not only is the land occupation not the central theological theme, but the book that clearly promotes this, namely, the Book of Joshua, is excluded from the Pentateuch which becomes in a way an unfinished corpus hanging in the air, as though it is being truncated. James Sanders refers to the rupture, which is caused by the intrusion of the Book of Deuteronomy between the narra-

tives in Numbers and those in Joshua, as “unnatural in the extreme.”¹²⁾ He further assesses the effect of the final shape of the “Torah Story” in quite a convincing way. It is worthwhile to quote his words in full:

Deuteronomy thus wedged itself between the narrative portions of JE found in the Book of Numbers and their continuation in Joshua; in effect it displaced Joshua and its conquest narrative as the climax of the canonical period of authority. The wedging and the displacement did not take place in any final way until the jarring events of destitution forced the radical review of Yahwism, which accompanied the exile. But once it had done so, the Deuteronomic perspective held sway. True authority lay with Mosaic period only; the periods of Joshua, Samuel, and David, each of which had served as climaxes in earlier versions of the national story, now retained only secondary authority.¹³⁾

The new Mosaic authority embodies the divine word (*davar*) and instruction (*torah*), which shifts the emphasis from an unconditional promise of God to Abraham (Gen 15) and to David (II Sam 7:11-15; Ps 89:24-37)¹⁴⁾ to a conditional covenant based on obedience and love, on choice between life or death and good or evil (Deut 30:15-20). It also expresses urgency and a critical response to the call to make a commitment at this very moment represented by ‘today’ (Deut 30:18-19). The hope of the people lies in the immediate future when the people at the border of the land are to enter it from outside. The Book of Deuteronomy figures the gathering of the whole community standing on Mount Moab overlooking the Promised Land.

12) James Sanders, *Torah and Canon* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 25.

13) James Sanders, *Torah and Canon*, 45.

14) Ronald Ernest Clements, *Abraham and David; Genesis XV and Its Meaning for the Israelite Tradition* (Naperville: A. R. Allenson, 1967).

Moses is portrayed as giving admonition and expounding on the meaning of the torah(Deut 1:5).

The present form of the Pentateuch, therefore, reflects the social and geographical location of the community outside the land expecting to enter it and claiming the ancestral and exodus traditions as her own. The exilic community, having to make sense of the whole disastrous event of the deportation from Jerusalem and to relocate herself in the historical traditions of the people, finds hope in God's promise of the land. She competes with the Judeans left behind in the land in their claim as heir to the Abraham tradition.

Abraham engenders the imagination of the people of Israel during the exilic period and "provides a typological warrant for new hope."¹⁵ These Judeans who were deserted amidst ruins of the land find great comfort in the claim that "Abraham was only one man, yet he got possession of the land; but we are many, the land is surely given us to possess"(Ezek 33:24). This hope in despair does not match with the extremely unfavourable response from Ezekiel who is quick to shatter the wish of the people by his harsh word of condemnation and destruction(Ezek 33:25-29). To the prophet, the claim to be the heir to the Abrahamic promise of land is to be denied on the basis of the sinful past of the people. The exilic community, on the other hand, has been purified and her sins have been purged of by the radical and tragic event of the destruction(Isa 1:25-26).

It is not at all to one's surprise that the same Abraham tradition is also claimed in the discourse of Deutero-Isaiah. This time the location has shifted from the Judean community left in Jerusalem to the exilic community taken to Babylon. The typological use of Abraham is again to generate new hope:

15) Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 375.

Look to Abraham your father,
And to Sarah who bore you;
For when he was but one I called him,
and I blessed him and made him many(Isa 51:2).

Besides this verse, Deutero-Isaiah has one other reference to Abraham, which also strikes a note of comfort and salvation to the ear of the audience:

But you, Israel, my servant,
Jacob whom I have chosen
The offspring of Abraham, my friend(Isa 41:8).

Deutero-Isaiah is known in his special way of creating “typological linkages” between the exiles and older stories. We have similar intertextual linkages in the Pentateuch. The exile from Canaan to Babylon resembles the journey taken by the ancestor, Jacob and the exodus from Egypt to Canaan is closely linked with the expected homebound journey from Babylon to the land of Israel(Isa 43:16-21; 51:9-11; 63:11-14).¹⁶⁾ The reference to Abraham and Sarah is also a case in point. The journey taken by the patriarch and the matriarch from Mesopotamia to Canaan recorded in Gen 12:1-3 does present some kind of connection with the return of the exiles proclaimed by Deutero-Isaiah.¹⁷⁾

What we hear in the two versions of the claim to be the inheritance of the Abraham tradition are two voices represented “an ideological conflict erupted between the exilic community and the Jerusalem remnant.”¹⁸⁾ The prophet Ezekiel assumes

16) Benjamin D. Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40-66* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 133.

17) Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 375.

18) Kenton L. Sparks, *Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1998), 285.

with the Book of Deuteronomy “the conditionality of land inheritance.”¹⁹⁾ He also goes along with Jeremiah’s position to advocate the legitimacy of the exilic Israel over and against the Judean majority left behind in the land. The right to the land-promise is therefore understood to have been transferred to the former.

The situation of “interested parties” in conflict results in the brutal policy of exclusion and the claim for divine endorsement for legitimacy. The vision of the two baskets of figs in Jeremiah(Jer 24:1-10) and the preview of the return of the exilic Israel to the homeland in Ezekiel(Ezek 11:14-21) both basically defend the deliverance of the exilic community as the true inheritors of the homeland at the dispense of the majority of the house of Israel, who have not gone through the exilic experience. The competition and conflict between the two fractions have given rise to the two major disputing voices in the period of restoration. The exilic experience has become an identity marker and a group membership requirement.²⁰⁾

After Nebuchadrez'zar king of Babylon had taken into exile from Jerusalem Jeconiah the son of Jehoi'akim, king of Judah, together with the princes of Judah, the craftsmen, and the smiths, and had brought them to Babylon, the Lord showed me this vision: Behold, two baskets of figs placed before the temple of the Lord. One basket had very good figs, like first-ripe figs, but the other basket had very bad figs, so bad that they could not be eaten. And the Lord said to me, “What do you see, Jeremiah?” I said, “Figs, the good figs very good, and the bad figs very bad, so bad that they cannot be eaten.”

Then the word of the Lord came to me: “Thus says

19) Kenton L. Sparks, *Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel*, 289.

20) Kenton L. Sparks, *Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel*, 315.

the Lord, the God of Israel: Like these good figs, so I will regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I have sent away from this place to the land of the Chalde'ans. I will set my eyes upon them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up, and not tear them down; I will plant them, and not up-root them. I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart. But thus says the Lord: Like the bad figs which are so bad they cannot be eaten, so will I treat Zedeki'ah the king of Judah, his princes, the remnant of Jerusalem who remain in this land, and those who dwell in the land of Egypt. I will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth, to be a reproach, a byword, a taunt, and a curse in all the places where I shall drive them. And I will send sword, famine, and pestilence upon them, until they shall be utterly destroyed from the land which I gave to them and their fathers(Jer 24:1-10).

From what we have shown above it is obvious that there are communities of interpreters who, for various reasons having to define self-understanding or to draw boundaries to exclude others, or to establish a position of power and authority by repudiating other competitors of the shared tradition, have to re-read or re-appropriate the past. Ethically though, it is extremely harsh to the indigenous people who are to be dispossessed as a result of the takeover of the well-off minority returning to Jerusalem and Judea, claiming their right to the land and sole ownership of the Abrahamic promise. There are certainly moral and ethical implications for our interpretation. The returnees have the power of speech as they, being former government officials, scribes, warriors, artisans and smiths, are in possession of the literary skills to write and the right to interpret. They admitted that they have sinned against God in

the land. They want to start a new page and by turning their back to the past. They have to break away from all the local religious practices which were taken as detestable and abominations. This explains for the peculiar form of religious belief we have now preserved in the Hebrew Bible: a monotheistic faith in an aniconic God who is in radical opposition to the religion of the land in an agricultural context. Ezekiel shares the same position when it comes to lifting up the returnees from the Exile at the expense of the poor remainders left behind in the desolated land of Jerusalem and Judah. The latter are people to be condemned as God has chosen to be on the side of the small population taken captivities who are to return to the land to start everything afresh.

4. Swords or Plowshares: Communities of Interpretation

One significant feature of the Bible is the high degree of tolerance exhibited by the community in transmitting the polyphonic voices to be incorporated in the Bible. There seems to be no unnecessary pressure to silence the many voices in order to maintain a monolithic authoritarian view. Neither is there an over-riding amplified voice that should eliminate dissonance.

There are two passages in the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible with reference to turning swords into plowshares. Isaiah has been known to be the first prophet who incorporates the tradition into his writing, though there are views that deny authorship to Isaiah. Scholars mostly agree that either Micah utilizes the Isaiah text or both quote from an independent source.²¹⁾ Isa 2:1-5 is at the beginning of a distinct unit of Isa

21) Gary Stansell does not see any problem of assigning the text of Micah 4:1-5

2-4 with Isa 4:2-6 as its corresponding bracketing ending passage of future exaltation of Jerusalem.²²⁾ Except with slight variation and a different ending, Micah 4:1-5 basically presents the same wording as Isa 2:2-5. The motif of the abolition of war is, though not exclusively, characteristic of Isaiah(Isa 9:4; 11:6-9; and 60:18; 65:25). This call to respond with action to transform weapons of war into farming instruments is in contrast to the portrayal of disarmament initiated by divine act to shatter arms and dismantle war machinery in Ps 46 and Mic 5:10-10.²³⁾

The plowshare passage in Micah functions to bring out the contrast with what has gone before, a prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem and desolation of the Temple as a result of the rebellion of the people and their perversion of justice(Mic 3:9-12). The plowshare figurative portrays a vision of universal peace when the nations give up war and stream up the Temple Mount of Jerusalem to receive the *torah* instruction from Yahweh. The *torah* embodies international disarmament and engagement in the cultivation of the land. The peaceful cohabitation with neighbours under the fig and the vine trees is also a common biblical vision of non-violence(I Kg 4: 29; Zech 3:10 cf. Isa 36:16; I Kg 18:31). Micah has included the element of elimination of fear, which follows the universal disarmament. The conversion of weapon into farming instrument is further coupled with the peaceful pastoral image of everyone sitting under the vine and fig trees to enjoy the result of one's labor undisturbed and with none to terrify. Mic 4:1-5, being later than

to a later date, *Micah and Isaiah: A Form and Tradition Historical Composition* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1981), 7. There is an informative discussion of the issues of the source and date of the tradition in Charles S. Shaw, *The Speeches of Micah, A Rhetorical-Historical Analysis* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 104-106.

22) Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39*, Anchor Bible Commentary (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 191.

23) James Limburg, *Hosea-Micah*(Interpretation) (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 182-184.

Isa 2:2-5,²⁴⁾ exhibits a broader perspective including nations “strong” and “far off” and with a special affirmation of the existence of religions of other people(v. 5). Both texts challenge the audience to make a decision to bring about the realization of universal peace: “Let us walk”(Isa 2:5) and “We will walk”(Micah 4:5). This final exhortation form is to encourage the congregation or audience who hears the word to resolve to take action²⁵⁾.

O house of Jacob, Come,
let us walk in the light of the Lord(Isa 2:5).

For all the peoples walk, each in the name of its god,
but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God
forever and ever(Micah 4:5).

Micah has also included a reference to the existence of other religions. Though the nations are seen as streaming to Jerusalem to hear the instruction of the *torah* Micah has been understood as being realistic about the present reality of life among different peoples and religions. William McKane understands Micah’s position that “the nations should worship their own Gods, the reality of whose existence he did not question,”²⁶⁾ There are views that what is expressed here is the polemic against idolatry of other peoples. But there are others who express appreciation for Micah’s tolerance of the present reality of religious pluralism. James L. Mays asserts that the words are not an easy compromise with theological pluralism, but realism about things as they are.

24) On the discussion of the relationship between the two passages, see James L. Mays, *Micah*(Old Testament Library) (London: SCM Press, 1976), 95-96. James Limburg suggests several features indicating that Micah comes later, 180.

25) James Limburg, *Hosea-Micah*(Interpretation), 180.

26) William McKane, *The Book of Micah: Introduction and Commentary* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 126.

The time of the pilgrimage to the ‘city set on a hill’ is not yet.”²⁷⁾ Seen in the above eschatological vision of a universal peace, the reversal of the plowshare figurative of Isaiah and Micah in Joel 3:10 is striking.

Proclaim this among the nations:
Prepare war, stir up the mighty men.
Let all the men of war draw near, let them come up.
Beat your plowshares into swords,
and your pruning hooks into spears;
let the weak say, ‘I am a warrior.’(Joel 3:9-10).

Few will deny any connection between these texts, especially the possible dependence of Joel on the former.²⁸⁾ There are scholars who take a more cautious position to leave room for a common source independent of the three texts preserved in the Bible. Hans Walter Wolff points out the irony and the obvious contrast of Joel to Isa 2:4 and Mic 4:3.²⁹⁾ What do we make out of these three plowshare texts? How do we understand and interpret them meaningfully? Are we required to take side with the call for peace or the cry for war? These are some of the questions many people have put forward.

Among these three plowshare passages, the claim for an ethical response to identify with one text or be critical of another is not to be dismissed altogether. To James Brenneman, what Isaiah and Micah mean to advocate for Israel is “a peaceful and inclusive resolution to its foreign policy.”³⁰⁾ The universal

27) James L. Mays, *Micah: A Commentary*, 99.

28) On the creative use of Joel of earlier traditions and the practice of interbiblical exegesis in the case of Joel, see the discussion of Richard Coggins, “Interbiblical Quotations in Joel,” John Barton and David J. Reimer, eds., *After the Exile: Essays in Honor of Rex Mason* (Macon: Mercer University-Press, 1996), 75-84.

29) Hans Walter Wolff, *Joel and Amos*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 80.

30) James Brenneman, *Canons in Conflict: Negotiating Texts in True and False Prophecy*

peaceful pilgrimage of the nations to Jerusalem signifies an eschatological vision of the Lordship of God and the harmonious situation of communities in co-existence. This is contradicted by the opposing view of Joel who defends “a violent resolution to those international relationships and an exclusive claim to salvation.”³¹⁾ The war cry in Joel has to be properly understood in the context of the atrocities confronted the vulnerable and defeated community of Israel, which has been tragically exploited and plundered by the unmerciful neighboring nations. It is God who rages the divine war to indict the absolute injustice committed by the nations, which take advantage of the post-exilic Israel in agony and lament.³²⁾ It is not enough for modern readers of the three texts to just state the fact that there are multiple traditions and diverse interpretations by various communities in historically distinct contexts. Are we not obliged to study the contexts of each and take an ethical faith stance, to be attentive to the polyphonic voices, to identify and comprehend them?

James Brenneman goes further to recommend that canon authority should be understood as deriving from its ethical performance.³³⁾ He is critical of the making of the canon that functions “as an act of power” which becomes coercive and oppressive because such a canon has “the potential to demand conformity and silence debate.”³⁴⁾ I agree with Brenneman in

(New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 130.

31) Brenneman provides a good summary table of how the plowshare traditions, which embodies an earlier tradition-Gestalt of Zion theology, are being read and reused by different audiences to set out alternatives for particular contexts, 131.

32) See the analysis of the context of Joel in Bruce C. Birch, *Hosea, Joel and Amos* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 158-160.

33) James Brenneman, *Canons in Conflict: Negotiating Texts in True and False Prophecy*, 140.

34) James Brenneman, *Canons in Conflict: Negotiating Texts in True and False Prophecy*, 139.

his expressing appreciation for the inclusion of contradictory voices in the Bible. In reading the plowshare texts, Brenneman is convinced of Isaiah-Micah's non-violence principle as "paradigm judging all forms of coercive power."³⁵) In view of this principle, even the content of the canon itself cannot be granted exemption. As audience of the polyphonic voices, we must not silence them. Through negotiation, debate and persuasion, we may finally take risk to declare our identification with the one voice that offers the most convincing construal of reality. We are not simply to harmonize the competing viewpoints or the irresolvable conflicting voices, but must allow them a hearing.

5. Concluding Remarks: Polyphonic Voices and Contextual Reading

The Hebrew canon originates in concrete human situations where communities are by no means in harmony. It is a fact that conflicts and disputes characterize human existence. The final form of the Bible does not necessarily represent consensus views and experiences of all. The variform and multivocal features of the Bible exhibit the historically-culturally conditioned reality. The different voices in the Bible express a variety of perspectives from interested parties and social locations. These voices are not always harmonious as if they are under one conductor in a symphony. They may represent conflicts of interpretation or embody politics of truth-claims among communities both synchronically and diachronically. They represent the different communities of interpreters who struggle to comprehend

35) James Brenneman, *Canons in Conflict: Negotiating Texts in True and False Prophecy*, 140.

the word of God spoken through various media: the priests, the sages and the prophets. Listening to one particular voice instead of another involves ethical disposition and moral inclination of the audience. The communities of interpreters engaging the polyphonic voices have to inevitably make an ethical commitment that corresponds to the life context and perceived reality.

It is a great challenge to Christian communities of nowadays to listen to these different voices. Moreover, it is also imperative to find ways and space for the suppressed voices to be heard aloud again. We have come to acknowledge the ambiguous dividing line between the voice of God and the voices of human, which is in no way apparent and clearcut. We must be reminded at all times that there is fluidity between the voice of God and the polyphonic voices of human communities, which may be characterized at best as having creative tension. All of us can play our roles in enriching the Bible and contributing to the discipline of biblical interpretation if we take seriously the nature of the biblical text and make sense of it from our social locations and particular life situation. I am sure this endeavor of reading the Bible in context will enlighten our faith communities that treasure the Bible and engage it existentially. Only when we understand the dynamics of the socio-political struggles of the different communities behind the formulation of the biblical text, can we begin to discern the nature of Bible as being truly polyphonic. The polyphonic voices can in turn enrich our biblical traditions and help to enlighten our own contexts.³⁶⁾ We, in our own communities, are also called upon to add our voices to this polyphonic tradition.

36) On an analysis of the conflicts of the exilic communities and the bearing of the reading location of one's context on the biblical text, see Archie C. C. Lee, "Returning to China: Biblical Interpretation in Postcolonial Hong Kong," *Biblical Interpretation* 7:2 (1999), 156-173.

<주요어>

성서 해석, 다성적 관점, 정경과 사회적 상황, 윤리적 선택

<Key Words>

Biblical interpretation, Polyphonic perspective, Canon and social location, ethical commitment

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<초록>

성경 해석에서 다성적 음성에 대한 인지와 그 해석적 함의

리치창

(홍콩 중문대학교 교수)

히브리어 성경은 서로 조화를 이루지 못하는 공동체들이 함께 살던 구체적인 삶의 정황에서 나온 것이 오늘날의 독자들에게 점점 분명해지고 있다. 성경의 최종 형태는 꼭 모든 사람들의 관점과 경험이 일치하고 있다고 제시하지는 않는다. 성경 속에 있는 다양한 형태들과 다성적 모습은 역사-문화적으로 제한된 환경 속에 있는 삶의 실재를 반영하고 있다. 성경 속에 있는 다양한 음성들은 특정한 이해를 갖고 있는 그룹들과 사회적 정황에서 형성된 다양한 시각을 제시한다. 그들은 제사장들, 지혜자들, 예언자들과 같은 다양한 매체를 통하여 주어진 하나님의 말씀들을 이해하기 위해서 씌름하는 다양한 해석 공동체를 대표하고 있다.

우리는 이 글에서 하나님의 음성의 범위와 그것이 백성들의 소리와 어떤 관계를 갖고 있는지 검토할 것이다. 하나님의 음성과 백성의 소리는 결코 분리될 수 없다. 이로써 우리는 본문의 다성적 성격뿐 아니라, 이 과정 속에서 논쟁 가운데 있던 공동체들이 각자의 정당성과 권위를 얻기 위하여 정경화의 과정에서 갈등을 겪는 것을 보게 될 것이다.

우리가 이와 같은 성경을 어떻게 이해하여야 하며, 그 윤리적인 함의가 무엇인지 검토할 때, 오늘날 독자들이 성경을 읽고 해석할 때 새로운 조명을 얻을 수 있을 것이다. 하나님의 말씀으로서의 성경을 그 어떤 인간적 참여도 없는 비정치적인 본문으로 가정하기보다, 다성적 소리를 가정하고 듣는 것이 청중들의 윤리적 관점에 일치하는 것으

로 보인다. 오늘날 다양한 해석자들로 이루어진 공동체들은 다성적 관점들을 논의하면서 오늘날의 삶의 정황 속에 일치하는 윤리적 선택을 하도록 도움을 줄 것이다.

<Abstract>

Making Sense of the Polyphonic Voices in Biblical Interpretation

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It is clear to its readers that the Hebrew canon originates in concrete human situations where communities are by no means in harmony. The final form of the Bible does not necessarily represent consensus views and experiences of all. The variform and multivocal features of the Bible exhibit the historically-culturally conditioned reality. The different voices in the Bible express a variety of perspectives from interested parties and social locations. They represent the different communities of interpreters who struggle to comprehend the word of God spoken through various media: the priests, the sages and the prophets.

This paper examines the scope of God's voices and how it relates to the people's voices, which cannot by any means be divorced from people's experience. What is to demonstrate is not only the polyphonic nature of the text but also, more strikingly and rather unexpectedly, the politics of canonization between communities in dispute and in the struggle for legitimacy and authority. How do we make sense of the Bible and

what ethical implication this reality of the text would have on our present day audience in reading the Bible and doing biblical scholarship? Are we ethically compelled to making the suppressed voices heard again? These are challenges we have to take up in our own interpretation of the Bible rather than assuming that the Bible, being the Word of God, is apolitical and devoid of active human participation. Listening to one particular voice instead of another involves ethical disposition and moral inclination of the audience. The communities of interpreters engaging the polyphonic voices have to inevitably make an ethical commitment that corresponds to the life context and perceived reality.