

# 구약논단

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Coote Robert B.(San Francisco Theological Seminary) Back to the Future  
The OT and Its Interpretation in the Cross-cultural World ..... **119**  
본 연구는 구약성서 연구에서 역사적 비평의 필요성과 당위성을 주장하는 글로써, 고대  
이국 문화를 해석하는 효과적 기능을 한다고 주장한다. 따라서 필자는 비평적 연구는 교  
차-문화적 연구를 할 수 있게 하는 매우 효과적인 틀을 제공해 준다고 보았다.

Coote Robert B. Back to the Future  
The OT and Its Interpretation in the Cross-cultural World ..... **119**

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## Back to the Future: The OT and Its Interpretation in the Cross-cultural World

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### I. Encountering Biblical Cultures: OT Study and Historical Criticism

The critical study of the OT is increasingly cross-cultural in a world marked by a vast proliferation of encounters, exchanges, and collaborations across national, ethnic, and cultural boundaries. Forty years ago most meetings of OT scholars involved mostly white men speaking English or German and occasionally. Today international congresses are nationally diverse, with scholars from numerous countries. The Internet envelops the globe in instantaneous intercultural discourse. Scholarly forums include women, often in numbers equal to men. Classrooms in biblical studies are increasingly culturally heterogeneous, offering opportunity, to both students and teachers, for stimulation of the historical imagination and broadening of interpretive attentiveness, while casting doubt on assumptions that went without question in culturally homogeneous classrooms. <sup>1)</sup>

In the midst of this multifarious multicultural mixing, with its mutual invigoration, frustration, miscommunication, and revealing misunderstanding, one great cross-cultural encounter stands out above all others: engagement with an alien Bible. The Bible is a foreign book, written long ago and far away, in ancient languages and often involving unfamiliar assumptions and experiences that despite appearances were utterly different from our own. In biblical studies, reading the Bible remains the primary cross-cultural encounter. If allowed, and if culture shock does not set in, the foreignness of the Bible relentlessly asserts itself.

The realization that the Bible is alien results from modern discoveries. These can be ignored, but they cannot be put back in the bottle. A short list of modern discoveries might include the following: the world is not static but changing and evolving; the biblical world was a minute part of the world of the ancient Near East that has come to light in the last 150 years; the Bible was produced in a lengthy and complex process of composition and most of its texts are composite; there is little if anything in the Bible that can best be understood as culturally unique. Until the modern era, the main textbook for ancient history was the Bible. Now that relationship is reversed: the main textbook for the Bible is ancient history. This realization has faced resistance from scholasticism, from orthodoxy, and from religious defensiveness; but in most open societies these have mitigated, and the future of biblical criticism, at least with respect to itself, is encouraging.

Most biblical interpretation makes no use of specialized training, and most such popular interpretation has its own obvious worth. But, since the Bible is a product of the past, until someone invents time travel understanding the Bible on its own terms will be a historical task. And it will be a critical task in the sense that, since understanding the Bible on its own terms is a matter of inevitable uncertainty, interpreters must make the case for their understanding on the basis of evidence and reasoning and before an audience.

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1) According to a recent notice in *Biblica*, in 2009 the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome counted students from 59 nations.

This is how I understand criticism at heart.<sup>2)</sup> Those who presume to stand above criticism and critique the historical-critical method tend to do so in terms of a caricature of critic is man indulgence invited by the fruitless pedantry of much of historical criticism. Criticism is disparaged for among other things pretending to certainty. It is true that much biblical criticism involves a deceptive and self-deceiving logic of proof. All the same, the charge of claiming certainty is a bum rap. At their best biblical critics know full well that they deal in probabilities and that their goal is not to prove a case but to convince an audience, i.e. that biblical criticism is fundamentally a rhetorical exercise. Thus multiculturalism in biblical studies means not only that multiple cultures are involved in assessing evidence and making arguments, but also that multiple cultures are involved in judging the evidence and arguments. This goes a long way toward helping to assure that contemporary multiculturalism plays its essential role in understanding. Of course everyone, no matter what their culture, is susceptible to the influence of their own as well as a dominant culture. Thus the critical analysis of ones own culture must be as much a part of biblical studies as the critical analysis of biblical culture.

Reading the Bible often outwardly clear, just as often strange or obscure must be regarded as a cross-cultural challenge. This is the one specific cross-cultural experience all students of the OT, no matter how advanced, have in common, the one experience that unites us in the work of understanding the different, the obscure, the alien, the mysterious, the bizarre in the Bible though what seems different, obscure, alien, objectionable, mysterious, or bizarre may differ from one scholar to another. Understanding the Bible requires the same cross-cultural awareness, sensitivity, and humility that make possible cross-cultural understanding of strangers in our own world. How to make the other intelligible while respecting its otherness this is the task of biblical study and interpretation, as with every well-meaning

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2) David Zarefsky, *Argumentation: The Study of Effective Reasoning*, 2nd ed. (Chantilly: Teaching Company, 2005).

cross-cultural encounter. The underlying basis, and therefore the root task, of critical interpretation is historical understanding. The integrity of the one requires the other. As music is more than notes, interpreting the Bible is always more than historical understanding, but never less. The two are inextricable; but the distinction between them remains useful insofar as it reminds us that all interpretation for our cultures must be continuously tested against the cultural otherness of the text. Indeed I was taught that the better the historical understanding, the readier the contemporary interpretation. This paradox has proven true for me, but as might be expected so has its opposite.

When I speak of historical understanding, I mean understanding the Bible using the primary warrants in OT criticism: philology, history, and archaeology, which incorporate literary analysis, rhetorical and ideological criticism, socio-historical comparison, and other standard methods of critical biblical study. But understanding the Bible requires more than these. Equal attention must be given to a historical understanding of ourselves. Who are we, as culturally embedded interpreters, and how did we come to be such? To understand ourselves, again history is essential, along with comparative social inquiry and contemporary social analysis the modern, historicist contention that ideas and cultures cannot be understood outside their social and historical context or apart from their function and origin. When in a moment I discuss three broad examples of otherness in the Bible ethnicity, religion, and the nature of its texts my main interest will be in the interference created by an inadequate historical understanding of our own cultures. <sup>3)</sup>

Given the nature of the Bible, from a past time and another place, for

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3) Of course the critique of our own cultural context is not a new problem. At the dawn of modern critical studies, in the early seventeenth century, Francis Bacon described what he called the idols of the mind, the obstacles to thinking created by accustomed habits of mind. Already in Bacons analysis, the idols that most interfered with perception were the idols of the marketplace, the tendency to accept ideas built into language, reinforcing cultural myopia, and what he called the superstitious idols of the theater, the tendency to presuppose received theological ideas. Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum* [1620] with *Other Parts of The Great Instauration*, trans. and ed. by Peter Urbach and John Gibson (Chicago: Open Court, 1994), 64, 71-72.

understanding the Bible one perspective is essential, namely the historical perspective. And given the nature of the Bible as intrinsically uncertain of meaning, and the nature of the global scholarly community as profusely diverse, one method, among many useful methods, is essential, namely critical argument. The experience of contemporary cross-cultural OT study is new. But the future of OT study in the enhanced global forum of our insistently cross-cultural, seductively postmodern world calls for the same old method of a bygone and forthcoming modernism, a robust historical criticism. Or, to use another risky appellation, easily misunderstood and misrepresented: science. To repeat, to engage in criticism, to be critical, to be scientific, is to make provisional judgments about matters that are significant but *uncertain*, using evidence and reasoning, expecting assent to argument rather than to assertion or authority. Criticism is rhetorical, serving to persuade rather than to prove.<sup>4)</sup>

I want to stress the provisional character of criticism, rooted in exploratory judgment and contingent on assent. It does not produce proven certainties arrived at by lock step logic, contrary to the rhetoric of many scholarly articles in our field. Two plus two equals four is not a critical argument. Criticism like science can be reduced to four steps: play, guess, test, argue. Science requires art. The diversity of views on a given biblical passage is often seen as a scandal of criticism; on the contrary, it is a measure of the intrinsic uncertainty in all critical study. Thus OT studies in the cross-cultural world must continue to be modernist, with postmodernism playing a subordinate, heuristic role. Do not hear cross-cultural as implying postmodern and therefore a historical. Historical criticism is essential.<sup>5)</sup>

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4) The greatest contribution of criticism as science at this time may be to underscore not how much we know but how much we don't know. A recent review of the science of climate change in *The Economist* confirmed that uncertainties are indeed rife in climate science (which does not excuse inaction), contrary to many claims in the ongoing argument. Another recent article described the so-called CSI effect, named for the television crime drama Crime Scene Investigation, which induces jurors in real life to expect more proof than forensic science is capable of delivering.

5) Cf. George Aichele, Peter Miscall, and Richard Walsh, An Elephant in the Room: Historical-Critical and Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible, *JBL* 128 (2009) 383-404. The article concludes with examples of the supposed shared interests of a postmodern historical

Historical criticism has been criticized as parochially Western, the product of the Enlightenment in a pejorative sense. But criticism need be no more culture-bound than argument itself, and no more culturally confined or subliminally insidious than Western music. A few months ago there occurred the world premier of *Kinshasa Symphony*, a German documentary on Central Africa's only symphony orchestra and their performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. The film highlights the fervor of the performers, all amateurs, for this Western art form. Was this a Gramscian moment of unconscious acquiescence in insidious bourgeois values, or a genuine broadening of cultural experience? The same ambiguity applies to criticism. Modernism eventuating in market capitalism certainly has contributed to a homogenization of cultures worldwide, a development I'll say more about in a moment, and thus has to answer in part at least for the suppression of culture. But as shared behavior critical argument is an unlikely ideological stalking-horse for market capitalism. On the contrary, a better argument can be made for postmodernism itself in that role, as both market capitalism and postmodernism came into their own during the late twentieth century. Critical argument engaged in by autonomous subjects, in contrast, has a lengthy pre-modern heritage.<sup>6)</sup> To dissolve referential representation, obligations of critical subjects, and a comprehensive perspective the foils of postmodernism in an acid bath of multiculturalism is to give in to the illusions of today's global political

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criticism that might just as well be regarded simply as historical criticism.

6) David Hawkes, *Ideology* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 1-12. These are the three major ideas which are under attack in the postmodern era: (1) the referential mode of representation, (2) the autonomous subject, (3) the totality, whether this takes the form of history as a whole, or of the whole of society. But what has brought these new ideas into being? The last fifty years have witnessed a dramatic expansion in the power and influence of the capitalist market economy. Postmodernism celebrates the autonomy of representation; attacks the autonomous subject; [and] criticizes the tendency to refer individual phenomena to their context within a totality. Above all, postmodernism challenges the concept of ideology as false consciousness. The autonomy of representation removes our access to any absolute criterion of truth; the destruction of the autonomous subject throws doubt upon the existence of an independent consciousness; the attacks on totality and teleology remove the contexts against which the discrete appearances of today's society might be found wanting. Postmodernism does all this in the interests of market capitalism. Postmodernism is nothing more than the ideology of consumer capitalism.

economy, in which as far as the market is concerned culture means differences that don't matter. Moreover, is the monoculture of historical-critical biblical studies any more consistent with global market capitalism than the niche marketing of culture-centered or culture-engaged biblical studies? History as a critical discipline did emerge in the modern period in the West, and the study of the OT continues to bear the imprint of its origins in Protestantism, nationalism, and Romanticism. However, although exclusivist in origin, OT studies is now, like science, fully intercultural and ecumenical, with the open and welcome participation of Jewish and Catholic scholars since the mid-twentieth century and evangelical scholars more recently.

The realization that all understanding is partial, meaning both incomplete and biased, is now commonplace. Or so I would have thought. A recent experience in a class in exegetical method gave me pause. Nowadays nearly all students arrive in seminary educated in postmodernism and well aware that truth is contingent and knowledge biased. I therefore usually find myself having to make the case, in opposition to student skepticism, for criticism as a quest for common understanding in the face of contingency and bias. Hence I was taken by surprise by what happened in my course on exegesis. The textbook contained chapters on ten so-called methods of exegesis.<sup>7)</sup> Nine of these were established and familiar: text criticism, form criticism, literary criticism, tradition criticism, structural criticism, etc. The tenth chapter was titled Exegesis with a Special Focus: Cultural, Economic, Ethnic, Gender, and Sexual Perspectives, that is, engaged interpretation that unlike the other methods availed itself of bias. The students, representing a broad range of ethnic cultures, worked contentedly through the first nine chapters, but when we came to the tenth chapter they balked. How could deliberately biased interpretation, nearly every student in the class wanted to know, contribute to knowledge? One of the course assignments required students to compose a list of the exegetical methods we were studying, with a short account of each in

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7) John H. Hayes and Carl R. Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis: A Beginner's Handbook*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: WJK, 2007).

their own words. When we got to exegesis with a special focus, several students were so put off by the idea of deliberately partisan interpretation that they refused to include it in their lists. I don't know who was more amazed, I at their refusal to countenance what they saw as blatant prejudice, or they at my insistence that partisan criticism, as I dubbed it, was a boon and essential, so difficult was it for them to grasp, despite their education, the contribution of methodological partisanship, in conjunction with other critical methods, to cross-cultural understanding, notwithstanding the predisposition of culturally engaged readers to favor the familiar in *their* eyes.

Cross-cultural comparative criticism presents a welcome opportunity to further the promise of modern criticism.<sup>8)</sup> I recently read an illuminating example of such a study, Shigehisa Kuriyama's *The Expressiveness of the Body and the Divergence of Greek and Chinese Medicine*,<sup>9)</sup> a revealing account of what for me was an alternative view of reality that cast my Western view into sharp relativistic relief. Good examples in OT studies include several GTU dissertations by Koreans supervised by Dr. Marvin Chaney.<sup>10)</sup> Another promising area is the exploration of the meanings of words through other languages, looking beyond simple translation. Examples include recent works by Uriah Yong-Hwan Kim of Hartford Seminary on how Korean *jeong* may illuminate Hebrew *hesed* in the David story, and Wei Huang of the Chinese University of Hong Kong on the way Chinese *wu chang*, impermanence, may illuminate Hebrew *'olam* in Qohelet.<sup>11)</sup> I hope that members of the Korean Society of OT Studies will someday write a lexicon of biblical Hebrew based not on existing English or German lexicons, but on independent Korean perception, including critical assessment of existing Korean translations,

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8) For a recent account of this promise, see Sander Bais, *In Praise of Science: Curiosity, Understanding, and Progress* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010).

9) New York: Zone Books, 2002.

10) Including Taek Joo Woo, *The Marzeah Institution and Rites for the Dead*; Eun Suk Cho, *Josianic Reform in the Deuteronomistic History*; and Sung Hyuk Hong, *The Metaphor of Illness and Healing in Hosea*.

11) Uriah Yong-Hwan Kim, *Identity and Loyalty in the David Story: A Postcolonial Reading* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008); Wei Huang, *The Meaning of h'lm in Qohelet 3:11: From a Chinese Perspective*, SABS, Seoul, July 2008.

perhaps starting with a simple glossary of Korean equivalents, and then share their semantic insights with their non-Korean colleagues. As for partisan interpretation, there were, it seems to me from the posted abstracts, worthwhile examples at the 2008 Society of Asian Biblical Studies conference.<sup>12)</sup> Some of these extended the honorable tradition of interpreting the Bible vis-à-vis struggles in recent Korean history.<sup>13)</sup> But international OT studies have on the whole not been significantly multicultural in any intentional way though it is possible that indirect or subliminal influences can play a role. A survey of articles published in the last year in the main international OT journals shows a uniformity of perspective, as I will detail shortly, with scarcely a hint of distinct cultural insight. This could be seen as lost opportunity. At the same time it confirms, albeit in a disquieting way, the primary objective upheld by the editors who publish such journals and the scholars who contribute to them, whatever their cultural identity: historical critical argument in the worldwide forum.

In sum, the program for the members of this body is the same as for every community of OT scholars committed to the one international shared pursuit of OT understanding:

- 1) Assure that scholars and students of other cultures feel fully welcome in the common task of critical understanding.
- 2) Become members of at least one global forum, such as the SBL.
- 3) Publish in major international journals.<sup>14)</sup>

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12) A notable example concerned the New Testament: Min Kyu Lee, An exploration of the parable of the shameful father swayed by his two prodigal sons from the prospective of the East-Asian patriarchic society influenced by Confucianism. Most of the essays from the conference mentioned in this paper can be found in Yeong Mee Lee and Yoon Jong Yoo, eds., *Mapping and Engaging the Bible in Asian Cultures: Congress of the Society of Asian Biblical Studies 2008 Seoul Conference* (Seoul: Christian Literature Society of Korea, 2009).

13) Samuel Cheon, Biblical Interpretation in Korea: History and Issues, in *Ways of Being, Ways of Reading: Asian American Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Mary F. Foskett and Jeffrey Kah-Jin Kuan (St. Louis: Chalice, 2006), 31-44.

14) European universities are increasingly assessing their faculty by looking at their research output. Research Assessment Exercises as conducted in the United Kingdom might not yet be omnipresent, but in many countries one can definitely see a tendency to head in that

- 4) Direct aspiring students to doctoral programs in OT that include ancient Near Eastern studies.<sup>15)</sup>
- 5) Give particular respect to colleagues who try to give a critical account of their present interpretive context.<sup>16)</sup>

## 2. The Problematic Nature of Culture

Which brings me to my next subject. In our context, we should be wary of adopting the notion of culture, and thus notions of a multiplicity of cultures and of cross-cultural experience, as of obvious and straightforward importance, because culture is a problematic concept.

We can begin by recognizing that, as already indicated, the culture of criticism is itself a culturally limited way of seeking and expressing truth, one intellectual culture among many. In a short article I've used with students, Walter Truett Anderson reduces knowledge to four such cultures. Anderson calls these four different ways to be absolutely right, a kind of diversity, he points out, often overlooked when people talk about pluralism or diversity.<sup>17)</sup>

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direction. When universities and regulating bodies develop a research assessment system, they often base themselves on what are seen as commonly accepted parameters in sciences and life sciences. In these disciplines, books are not regarded as particularly important, and exhibition catalogues are unheard of. Major publications in these fields are articles in reviewed journals with high ranking and high impact factors. The ranking of journals and the calculation of their impact factor is generally done by relying upon the ISI Web of Science, which offers such services through its SCI (Science Citation Index), SSCI (Social Science Citation Index) and AHCI (Arts & Humanities Citation Index). Unfortunately, the AHCI is far less comprehensive and serviceable than the other two citation indexes. Books are not excerpted in AHCI and many important journals never made it into their list of titles. AHCI is therefore not a good basis for assessing the research output in many humanities disciplines: Hilde Heynen, *A Ranked List of Journals: Reconfiguring the Field* at [www.eaae.be/eaae2/documents/docs/ListOfJournals.pdf](http://www.eaae.be/eaae2/documents/docs/ListOfJournals.pdf) (2009). Yonsei University, I am informed, puts a premium on *Biblica*, *CBQ*, *JBL*, *JNES*, and *VT*, and oddly not *ZAW*. *JSOT*, an important journal, is not on the AHCI list. So far the Korean contribution to published OT studies as a whole is small. By inexact calculation, according to the index for *OTA* for 2009 approximately two-thirds of one percent of the articles and books listed were by Koreans.

- 15) To judge from the 2008 SABS conference abstracts, current leaders in such research include Hyun Joon Choi, Jong Keun Lee, Daegyu J. Jang, and Sung Kim.
- 16) Several of the papers at the 2008 SABS conference did that, e.g. Kyung Sook Lee, *Confluence of the Story of Ruth and Korean Confucianism*.
- 17) *Four Different Ways to Be Absolutely Right*, in *The Truth About Truth: De-confusing and Re-constructing the Postmodern World*, ed. Walter Truett Anderson (New York:

The four ways are (a) the postmodern, which sees truth as socially constructed, (b) the scientific, in which truth is found through a disciplined common inquiry, (c) the traditional, in which truth lies in the heritage of the past, and (d) the romantic, in which truth is found through harmony with nature and humanity or delving into the spiritual self. Clearly this scheme does not fit with the way I have defined criticism as science that takes full account of the social construction of knowledge. But the scheme does give us a shorthand way of saying criticism is not the only way to know something.

Criticism is one among several valid cultures of knowing. However it is a luxury to be complacent about the essential value of criticism for our shared goal of understanding the past, in the well-intentioned desire to clear space for non-critical perspectives. Today academic society in the humanities is dominated by postmodernism, whose insights are often to be appreciated, not least the historically contingent and symbolic nature of culture, but whose approaches frequently settle for incoherence and solipsism. Religious culture in the West is now dominated by the romantic, which celebrates instinctive identities both individual and collective, in the ascendancy of personal spirituality over collective affiliation and the assumed primacy of the ethnic folk. And political society is threatened, when not dominated, all over the world by the traditional in the form of often arrogant and malign narrow-mindedness in the name of religion not least in my own country.<sup>18)</sup> Such alternative or under-represented perspectives will be of little value in OT studies unless they pass the test of evidence and argument before an informed audience.

The diverse cultures of knowing are not the only problem with the concept of culture. A second problem is that there are innumerable categories of culture within a given cultural setting. The current meaning of culture is itself a recent development. It does not appear in the original *Oxford English Dictionary* only a hundred years ago. In the current online *OED*, meaning (7),

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Tarcher/Putnam, 1995), 110–116.

18) Sabrina Tavernise, The Fight for Pakistans Future, Violently Reflected on Campus, *The New York Times*, April 21, 2010, A1.

the last, under the rubric of extended senses, is divided into ideas, customs, etc. of a) a society, people, or period, b) a way of life or social environment, with cites as recent as the last decade, giving as examples warrior culture, gun culture, corset culture, beer-parlor culture, and jogging culture, and c) an institution, organization, or business, as in corporate culture. Obviously the pattern of the multi ethnic society, incorporating cultures within cultures, extends, as it were, all the way down to the household and individual, themselves a complex mix of cultures. A moments thought leaves one wondering why the primary association of the word culture today is the ethnic one (a question that will yield quite well to historical analysis). Last week I received a notice for a new series published by Kohlhammer in 22 volumes: *The Bible and Women: An Exegetical and Culture-historical Encyclopedia*.

Uriah Kim, in his book cited above, *Identity and Loyalty in the David Story*, argues that cultural hybridity is the new global norm, joining many others in this conviction, including Duk Ki Kim at the SABS conference here in 2008.<sup>19)</sup> From a Korean-American perspective, Kim makes thought-provoking use of ethnic hybridity to address the dilemmas of Americas hyphenated ethnicities. Whatever the critical cogency of such interpretations with regard to the Bible, they make clear that from now on the idea of bounded ethnicity as the seat of a defined culture is likely to become increasingly muddled.<sup>20)</sup>

Since one of the core subjects of the OT is Israel, it is difficult to avoid taking ethnicity as the core basis of biblical culture. Moreover in our context the cultural part of the term cross-cultural practically guarantees that ethnicity or nationality represents the salient category, hence for the biblical world as well. As a reflex of this tendency, we are prompted to look at the

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19) Pauls Cultural-Political Theology and East-Asian Subjectivity and Cultural Identity: Towards a Theoretical Foundation of Asian Biblical Hermeneutic. Cf. Frank M. Yamada, Constructing Hybridity and Heterogeneity: Asian American Biblical Interpretation from a Third-Generation Perspective, in Foskett and Kuan, eds., *Ways of Being, Ways of Reading*, 164-177.

20) Recently Gale Yee problematized the notion of Asian-American biblical interpretation as interpretation based primarily on ethnicity in Yin/Yang Is Not Me: An Exploration into an Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics, in Foskett and Kuan, eds., *Ways of Being, Ways of Reading*, 152-163.

international forum of OT studies to see what nations, the supposed embodiments of ethnicities, are represented. But are American, Canadian, German, Israeli, Korean, etc. the salient cultural categories in the diversity, such as it is, of OT studies? Practically speaking, national culture makes next to no difference in OT studies. (Of course this statement could be qualified in minor and curious ways.) A glance at a sample of international journals in OT studies points up not their cross-cultural but mono-cultural character. I looked at all the OT articles published in 2009 in five journals: *Biblica*, *JBL*, *JSOT*, *VT*, and *ZAW*, noting residency or guessing at nationality. The inexact results: USA 48, Israel 20, Germany 13, UK 13, Netherlands 7, Australia 5, Canada 4, France 3, two each from Belgium, Finland, Spain, Switzerland, and Korea, and one each from Austria, Italy, Hungary, Rumania, South Africa, New Zealand, Japan, Nigeria, and Chad. Of these 132 articles, 131 were written entirely within the intentionally nonpartisan monoculture of Western criticism, including those from Japan, Nigeria, and Chad the latter apparently by a German-speaking European. The sole exception was an article by a Korean in the USA, whose interpretation of Jonah's silence, as he termed it, was formed with the plight of the Korean and other oppressed people in mind.<sup>21)</sup> That which lies behind the claim of universalism [in Jonah], the author wrote, might well be the dominance of First-World interpreters. The author is a recent GTU graduate, and the paper one of those presented at the second Society of Asian Biblical Studies conference here in 2008. The GTU, if I may say so, has apparently been a leader in encouraging such cross-cultural discourse, witness the publication in Brills Biblical Interpretation Series of Yong-Sung Ahn's dissertation, *The Reign of God and Rome in Luke's Passion Narrative: An East-Asian Global Perspective* (2006), beyond which however the author commendably looked in his SABS paper in 2008, in light of the Korean context as he experienced and understood it since the writing of his dissertation.<sup>22)</sup>

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21) Chesung Justin Ryu, Silence as Resistance: A Postcolonial Reading of the Silence of Jonah in Jonah 4.1-11, *JSOT* 34 (2009) 195-218.

22) Rather than the imperial politics, the central role of the Jewish religious leaders in the

Another way to think about the ambiguity of culture is to recall the many works in our field which explain, and often illustrate in full color, the culture of the biblical world as different from the modern world. Some titles will bring them to mind: *The World of the Bible* (1995), *Life in the Bible* (2002), *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the OT: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (2006), and now the five-volume *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary* (2009). These are often informative works, but they rarely give a sense of just how different from ours the social and social-psychological worlds of the Bible are.

A third problem with culture is that often the notions of culture we use in understanding are themselves embedded in complex and not always apparent ideological contexts. Its not too difficult to notice cultural embeddedness in the social consciousness of others, but harder to see it in oneself. Recently the historian Tony Judt, an Englishman, made this observation when asked What kinds of linguistic subterfuge do we practice in Europe and America?: In America the misuse of language is usually cultural rather than political. What we have in the US is cultural communities policing what can and cant be said, and that shapes how we define difference. The idea is that you cant have an elite, since elitism is undemocratic and un-egalitarian. Therefore, you always make the point that people are in some important way the same. If they are badly disabled like me Judt suffers from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) they are differently abled, which I find, Judt says, very amusing. It is not a different ability: it is no ability. But since its politically uncomfortable to distinguish between people who can do things and people who cant, the latter are described as separate but equal. There are numerous things wrong with this: first, it is lousy language; second, it creates the illusion of sameness or achievement in its absence; third, it conceals the effects of real power and capacity, real wealth and influence. You describe everyone as having the same chances when actually some people have more chances than others. And with

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crucifixion of Jesus seems more relevant to the biblical interpretation in present-day Korea, particularly because Korean churches wield tremendous power (authors abstract).

this cheating language of equality deep inequality is allowed to happen much more easily.<sup>23)</sup> The insistence on respect for difference has taken an illiberal turn in many parts of the supposedly liberal world, not least on academic campuses, where current culture teaches that everybody has the right to be free from any kind of insult, upset, or perturbation that might pose a challenge to their peace of mind.<sup>24)</sup>

A fourth problem is how multiculturalism as we conceive of it disguises an international cultural uniformity, a transnational monoculture. The paradox is that the more we emphasize our differences, the more alike we are becoming. The stress on cultural differences in our contexts masks this increasing sameness, which it is often politically offensive to make explicit. An amiable example of this masking occurred last November in New Orleans when the vice president of the SBL introduced the SBL president, David Clines, prior to the annual presidential address. Clines is an Australian who has lived and worked in Britain most of his life and who was the first person living outside North America to be elected president of the SBL. Clines thus embodied cultural hybridity, a one-man cross-cultural assemblage. As a symbol of this cultural mix, the speaker pointed to New Orleans, the jazz capital of the world: how appropriate it is that we gather as an academic society in this place that has historically represented and continues to represent promiscuous gatherings of people to the point that identities and origins and traditions are dramatically mixed, gumbo-ed (gumbo=hodgepodge stew). The speaker was black, and since August 2005, when due largely to public neglect Hurricane Katrina submerged 80% of the city in flood waters, New Orleans, a predominantly black city, has become in American culture an emblem for the ongoing problem of race relations that haunts the national consciousness, in the words of the speaker analogous to the deep uneasiness of cross-cultural encounter. David Clines, the speaker concluded, represents the future of

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23) Tony Judt talks to Kristina Bo iæ about the way things are and how they might be, *London Review of Books*, March 25, 2010, p. 11.

24) Margaret Wentz, on the silencing of conservative critic Ann Coulter in Ottawa in late March, in the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, as quoted in *The Week*, April 9, 2010, 17.

biblical scholarship, the future that can no longer countenance the focus on the single tradition or the single nation, a future that must mean opening up to the world, not merely staging meetings over there, but truly being open in terms of scholarly orientation, definition, practices. He then explicitly characterized Clines-Australian, British, American-as emblematic of the cross-cultural future: "the mixed discursive gumbo that... characterizes our present and suggests the way of our future."<sup>25)</sup> Clines then delivered the presidential address, recommending student-centered learning, an old idea presented in a conventional manner with no sign at all of cultural otherness or mixing.

Israeli-American writer Aviya Kushner recently described how Americans have developed an admirable fondness for books, food, and music that preprocess other cultures. But for all our enthusiasm, she asks, have we lost our taste for the truly foreign? i.e. the genuine cross-cultural encounter. We congratulate ourselves on our globalized world view, but we read ethnic literature the way we down an ethnic meal: Its adjusted especially for our taste.<sup>26)</sup> Not long ago *The Economist* posited that the recent accent on Confucian values throughout East Asia was prompted by more than anything else reaction to the homogenization of culture within the capitalist market world order. John Gray of the London School of Economics said a decade ago, Conservative parties today we should probably say nearly everyone seek to promote free markets, while at the same time defending traditional values. It is hard to think of a more quixotic enterprise. Free markets are the most potent solvent of tradition at work in the world today. As they continuously revolutionize production, they throw all social relationships into flux.<sup>27)</sup>

Nowhere has this been more true than in South Korea, which in the last 50 years has undergone arguably the most radical cultural transformation in the world, where, to name just one example, the changing status of women and the plummet in the fertility rate mean that 2,500 years of East Asian family

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25) Vincent L. Wimbush, introduction to the Presidential Address, *JBL* 129 (2010) 3-4.

26) McCulture, *Wilson Quarterly*, winter 2009, 22-29.

27) Hollow Triumph, *Times Literary Supplement*, May 8, 1998, 3-4.

tradition stand to come to an end with the regions rising generation<sup>28)</sup> or another obvious example, the effect of the Korean wave in media throughout East Asia.

Perhaps the feature of the global monoculture that most bears on our sense of the importance of culture is what New York University professor George Yúdice calls the expediency of culture.<sup>29)</sup> He explores how groups ranging from indigenous activists to nation-states to nongovernmental organizations have all come to see culture as a valuable resource to be invested in, contested, and used for varied socio-political and economic ends. At every level, cultural agency is negotiated within globalized contexts dominated by the active management and administration of culture.<sup>30)</sup>

There is, however, no reason to fear that the monoculture of biblical studies will lead to loss of diversity. The tremendous diversity of historical understandings of every passage and book in the OT and the huge holes in our knowledge of the OT and the OT world guarantee that this situation is not likely to change. Nor reason to fear for insights to be gained within this monoculture, including from Europeans and Euro-Americans.

What makes most sense is adopting education that encourages questioning and critical thinking, the construction of critical argument based on new information and in the face of changing circumstances in a word, liberal education, a trend that continues in Korea today. One of the best ways forward is to continue to encourage cross-cultural encounters in education, especially exchanging students and faculty, as many schools in Korea are already doing.<sup>31)</sup>

When it comes to critical examination for OT studies, as Ive said, the study of the present is as important as the study of the past.<sup>32)</sup> Indeed, often more

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28) Dominic Ziegler, The Odd Couple: A Special Report on the Koreas, *The Economist*, September 27, 2008, p. 4, quoting Nicholas Eberstadt of the American Enterprise Institute.

29) George Yúdice, *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

30) *Expediency of Culture*, blurb.

31) Richard Levin, Top of the Class: The Rise of Asias Universities, *Foreign Affairs* 89:3 (May/June 2010), 63-75.

can be at immediate stake. To illustrate the challenge, which puts all biblical scholars on the same plane, I went to deal briefly with three subjects of great importance for both understanding the Bible and understanding ourselves: ethnicity, religion, and the nature of the biblical texts. All three represent areas of significant cultural difference between the biblical world and our world, all are areas of significant cultural presupposition, and all are areas where significant pressure exists against critical analysis, pressure that detracts from OT studies.

### 3. Ethnicity

The first example is ethnicity, the nature of the social group, which in our world is inevitably tied up with notions of nationality and race. Here the subject of the Bible is defined as a people, and the challenge to OT studies comes with the question, What do we refer to with the name Israel?

Modern critical biblical studies emerged in tandem with ethnic nationalism, from the late eighteenth century to the present. Against the modern homogenization of culture including political culture, as constitutional democratic republicanism has become, ideologically at least, nearly universal nations everywhere have confirmed their existence and bolstered their congruence through the cult of nationalism, based on the myth of the congruence of ethnicity and the state, in which ethnicity is epitomized sometimes as race but always as culture, and on the idea that political legitimacy is a function of the people ethnically or culturally defined. In sum: one people, one culture, one language, not the Deuteronomists assertion of one God, one cult, one people, but the myth of modern nationality.

It is now widely recognized that race, ethnicity, and nationality are contingent social constructs rather than inherent fixed realities. Nations are

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32) For an informative analysis of cross-cultural interpretation in light of contemporary experience in the American context, see Fernando F. Segovia, *Toward Latino/a American Biblical Criticism: Latin(o/a)ness as Problematic*, in *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, ed. Randall C. Bailey, Tat-siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia (Atlanta: SBL, 2009), 193-223.

imagined communities, in the familiar phrase of Benedict Anderson, whose work gave rise to a spate of books entitled the invention of this and that national identity identities no less real for being imagined. This recognition is coming gradually to OT studies, though this may be harder to grasp in some contexts than in others. Ostensibly the United States and Korea stand at opposite ends of the spectrum with regard to ethnic make-up, as I have noted for years in classes consisting almost entirely of Americans and Koreans. Americans know that American national identity, though real, is constructed, because the nation is less than 250 years old, and because after 200 years of further immigration and 150 years of African-American emancipation American society has become patently mongrel, and not only in its current president a source of pride to some and disgust to others. A sense of Korean ethnic unity has been important for Korean self-identity for over a century. Of course Korean cultural continuity goes back a lot longer than that. But the Korean sense of *danil minjok*, singleness of race, or ethnic homogeneity, came to the fore as a widely held ethnic essential only in the aftermath of Japanese colonization.<sup>33</sup> Indeed the contemporary meaning of ethnicity everywhere is a very recent development. Until the nineteenth century, ethnic in English meant heathen, pagan. When first used for a people of a given culture, this pejorative sense was still evident, as the word referred to immigrant, colonized, or otherwise subordinated groups, in opposition to the nation. Only recently has the phrase ethnic group lost enough of its negative valence to apply to any people of a definable culture, including the nation itself. Almost needless to say, the ambiguity of terms like nation, ethnicity, and race makes their general use all the harder to pin down.

Getting its history wrong is part of being a nation, the nineteenth-century French philosopher Ernest Renan famously observed, as one of Renan's critics put it with unwitting accuracy, a nation is a group of people united by a

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33) Gi-Wook Shin, Ethnic Pride Source of Prejudice, Discrimination, *The Korea Herald*, August 2, 2006; *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, Politics, and Legacy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006). Shin is director of the Shorenstein Asia Pacific Research Center at Stanford University.

mistaken view about the past and a hatred of their neighbors.<sup>34)</sup> It seems that all nations engage in this perpetual project of creating partial, illusory, one-sided narratives of national origins and national history whether national epic, myth, or lie tends to reside with the beholder. Instances are ubiquitous. In the USA, we have a new example in the TV series begun a month ago on the History Channel: *America: The Story of Us*. Patriotic distortions of national history are often reflexive and benign, but not always. They can be intentional and pernicious. They have serious consequences when nations threaten or go to war, and even graver consequences when governments encourage war between groups within nations, the root cause of genocide.<sup>35)</sup> As OT scholars, the modern national histories we must pay most attention to are our own for me the United States, for you Korea and for both of us modern Israel,<sup>36)</sup> all cases in point of the development of nationalism since the late eighteenth century.

Such an investigation is a prerequisite to the study of ancient Israel's history, which can no longer be the history of an assumed single homogeneous mono-cultural society. Ethnic nationalism has influenced the study of all ancient. Ancient what? Here I hesitate, since any word I use is likely to connote a self-contained ethnic whole: not just nations, but societies, peoples, civilizations, cultures. I recently attended a lecture by Jerrold Cooper, retired professor of Akkadian and Sumerian at Johns Hopkins University, who showed how the notion of the Sumerians developed in the late-nineteenth

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34) As quoted in E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 12, and Margaret MacMillan, *Dangerous Games: The Uses and Abuses of History* (Toronto: Viking, 2008; New York: Modern Library, 2009), 82.

35) The pattern and recent examples are detailed in Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Worse Than War: Genocide, Eliminationism, and the Ongoing Assault on Humanity* (New York: Public Affairs, 2009). The PBS documentary based on this work has just been issued (June 2010).

36) For Israel, see e.g. Zeev Sternhell, *The Founding Myths of Israel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998; French 1996), and Shlomo Sand, *The Invention of the Jewish People* (New York: Verso, 2009; Hebrew, French 2008). Sternhell is professor of political science at Hebrew University and the recipient of the Israel Prize in political science in 2008. Sand, whose book has stirred heated controversy within the Jewish community, is professor of history at Tel Aviv University.

and early-twentieth century reading of cuneiform texts and how little the notion has to do with the probable social history of the third-millennium Mesopotamia.

What then do we see when we turn to the OT world informed by the history of modern societies of which we are a part? Let me make three brief points as examples. In each case, the error lies in thinking that Israel was an ethnic singularity.

1) Israel began as a tribal formation. The primary basis of identity in so-called tribal society was kinship. This is virtually a matter of definition. Israel was an eponym before it was an ethnonym the name of an ancestor before the name of a people and remained so during most if not all of the OT period. Consider three phrases: sons of Israel, Israelites, Israel. In English these scarcely allow anything other than a national or ethnic understanding. But the first means the sons of a particular man, whose story is told in Genesis (the inclusive language version, children, is linguistically justifiable but socio-historically misleading). The second, Israelites, today can hardly mean anything other than the ethnic group or nation of undifferentiated Israel. And the third, Israel, even more so, to the point where one sometimes sees the phrase Israel she, a usage that depends entirely on modern nationalism and that rules out an eponymic understanding. The more usual expression runs like for example the blurb for the newest work of a well-known OT scholar and theologian: In the pages of the Hebrew Bible, ancient Israel gave witness to its encounter with a profound and uncontrollable reality experienced through relationship the popular penchant for interpretive abstraction is signaled here in full force.<sup>37)</sup> The entire effort to describe Israel early, monarchic, or late as an ethnic entity, or single-culture people, is an anachronism.<sup>38)</sup>

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37) Blurb for Walter Brueggemann, *An Unsettling God: The Heart of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009).

38) The GTU dissertation of Pong Dae Im (2010) contributes to the growing realization that Israel did not originate as a single ethnic entity, whether full-fledged or proto-, and probably did not continue as such either. Cf. Dermot Anthony Nestor, *Cognitive Perspectives on*

2) In the biblical world, the gap between elite and peasantry within a given society was typically greater than among elites of the different societies by which supposed ethnicities are usually identified. This observation, which I learned from Marvin Chaney, is an example of the kind of insight that social history makes possible. A different but related observation, and also one that I learned from macrosociology, is that rule in the biblical world was proprietary, a function of the ruler's house, to be exercised and passed on as a property rather than an office defined in terms of a given people. The subject people were defined by the vicissitudes of the power and prerogative achieved and imposed by a ruling house, not the scope of a people. However, the claims of the ruling house often involved defining a subject people, not least in the case of Israel. The political rhetoric that results, found in the OT as mainly the corpus of the ruling house of David, represents a giant distraction for the historian of OT Palestine.<sup>39)</sup> Furthermore, in the last fifteen years, scholars have found it easier to question the existence of an early Iron II state of Israel than an early Iron II nation of Israel. Doubting the existence of the state is in itself a laudable skepticism. But by focusing mainly on the issue of the timing of the emergence of the Israelite state rather than the nature of petty agrarian monarchies in antiquity, they have allowed modern notions of the state to obscure the proprietary, contingent nature of such monarchies and ended up misunderstanding the early Israelite monarchies.

3) The problem of Israelite ethnicity raises the issue of how to translate Hebrew *'am* and *goy*, longstanding questions. Because the notion of people as an ethnicity so often precludes sociopolitical distinctions, the situation is not unlike the erroneous translation of singular *yô çb* as inhabitant rather than ruler, magistrate, as it should be in for example Isa 5: 3, as Marvin Chaney has explained.<sup>40)</sup> I

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*Israelite Identity* (London: T & T Clark, 2010).

39) In today's world, where nations are defined by internationally sanctioned fixed borders, there are still examples of near-proprietary rule. A year ago the president of Gabon in West Africa, Omar Bongo, died after 42 years of rule during which, in the words of *The Economist*, he made no distinction between Gabon and his private property (June 19, 2009). Though in theory Gabon became a democracy in 1993, Bongo was succeeded by his son, whose main rival was a Bongo daughter.

mention just two examples involving *'am*, both patent but ignored, from the beginning of Exodus and the beginning of Isaiah 2 and Micah 4. Exod 1: 9: Pharaoh said to his *'am*, The *'am* of the sons of Israel are more numerous and mighty than us. Pharaoh is not addressing the Egyptian people, but his court of military elite, who are also the magistracy. His fear concerns not the people of Israel, the Israelites, as usually translated, but their burgeoning cadre of mighty men. More momentously, Isaiah 2: All *gôyîm*, many *'ammâm*, as alien magistracies, will stream to Zion to be instructed in Yhwh's judicial standards. Yhwh himself will adjudicate their disputes, so that as elite warriors they have no further use of weapons to settle their disputes by war. Its not about pilgrim proselytes of discrete ethnicities, but the worlds militarized ruling magistrates. Similarly, the problem of Israelite ethnicity raises the issue of what Hebrew was. Hebrew a rare word in the OT is usually thought of as the national language of the Hebrew people. What was Hebrew, and what is biblical Hebrew, if there was no such thing as the Hebrew people?

Because of the importance of ethnic nationalism in our own context, there may indeed be ways to use contemporary ethnic national identity as a lens for understanding the Bible, but the case must be made.<sup>41)</sup>

#### 4. Religion

My second example of significant cultural presupposition is religion, through which the subject of the OT is defined as OT religion. The recognition in recent works that OT religion was plural religions is of course valid but does not affect what I want to say here. The concept of religion continues to be subject to extensive critique in religious studies, an important discussion to which I do not expect my comments here will contribute. The focus of my

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40) Marvin L. Chaney, Whose Sour Grapes? The Addressees of Isaiah 5:1-7 in the Light of Political Economy, *Semeia* 87 (1999) 105-122.

41) Cf. e.g. Hae Kwon Kim, A Reading of Isaiah 11 in the Context of Two Divided Korea, SABS Seoul, July, 2008: ...an Asianically (Koreanically) reading of Isaiah 11 will instruct an engaged reader regarding how to act out or historicize such unification-related oracles in order to make sure that they will be substantiated in the Korean peoples effort to achieve national unity.

interest is simply the difference between the typical experience of religion today and what I believe was the experience of religion in the biblical world, a difference that makes the modern notion of religion inapplicable to the cultural world of the Bible likewise an anachronism.

This difference does not have to do with the definition of religion per se. Religion defined for example as reverence for transcendent powers and a system of practice grounded in that reverence works fine for both the biblical world and ours.<sup>42)</sup> The difference that concerns me has to do instead with the experience of the relationship between religion and the rest of life. In the OT world, religion was intrinsic to the rest of life, in our world extrinsic. In the OT world, there was no sense of separation between the transcendent powers, personified as gods, and the immanent powers of real life, especially as embodied in kings, princes, warriors, and their court servants, the powers in whose image divine powers were conceived. In contrast, in our world the sense of separation is ineluctable. As a recent book on the category religion expressed it, Religion and the state, religion and politics, religion and economics, religion and civil society, and religion and science these binary oppositions are fundamental to the modern construction of discourses on religion, because they are fundamental to the modern experience of religion.<sup>43)</sup>

The modern experience of religion is integrally related to the modern experience of the secular, or secularization, an even more controversial subject. I think that secularization arose with a development I have already mentioned, namely the process, however explained, by which constitutional democratic republicanism, albeit in many varieties, became the prevailing ideology and form of national government throughout the world. Modern democratic republicanism is typically religiously neutral, as in the United States and Korea. The two most noted ideological alternatives to constitutional democratic

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42) The term religion has had a long history, much of it, prior to the sixteenth century, irrelevant to contemporary usage: Jonathan Z. Smith, Religion, Religions, Religious, in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 269.

43) Timothy Fitzgerald, *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity: A Critical History of Religion and Related Categories* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 23.

republicanism, communist centralism and militant fundamentalism, fall at opposite extremes with regard to religion, the one bent on steering clear of it altogether, the other making it all-encompassing. Most of us, taking for granted the form of government that we have experienced and that prevails nearly everywhere, find both these extremes alien and outrageous. We label militant fundamentalism with the pejorative theocratic, usually ignoring the irony that such theocracy was the norm in the biblical world. However secularization is to be explained, the abstraction or circumscription of religion is a feature of modernity that distorts our perception not only of ancient religion but also of ancient politics, economics, and the rest.<sup>44)</sup>

Thus for years I have taught students not simply that there was no separation of church and state, as it were, in the biblical world, but that in the biblical world cult and jurisdiction, as I have phrased it, were inseparable. This means that there was no separation between religion and law (law in the ancient Near East was revealed law), between religion and courts (judicial process was sanctioned by oath, ordeal, etc. as well as investigation), or between religion and politics.

We think of religion as a distinct compartment of life, even if for many of us the most important. People understandably deny they think this way, appealing particularly to spirituality, which however itself implies disembodiment; and to construe spirituality as the contrary to mere religion shows how ordinary religion in the circumscribed sense is. If religion is benign, tolerant, and apolitical, then spirituality per se is even more so. Ironically perhaps, this sense of religion springs from the same liberalism that gave us modern critical thought. It scarcely applies to antiquity, in which religion was likely to be malign, intolerant, and political, and never less so than in the OT, in which the religious as e.g. the work of God is entirely embedded, enmeshed, and resonant with the political. Indeed in the Torah and Prophets the religious has meaning almost entirely as regards a political

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44) On the origin of religion as private and its effect in biblical studies, see e.g. Rob Barrett, *Disloyalty and Destruction: Religion and Politics in Deuteronomy and the Modern World* (New York: T & T Clark, 2009), 23-35.

nation and its monarchic regime, a meaning continued in many, perhaps most, of the Writings. The prevalence in the Bible of the judicial metaphor for God and Gods work makes the same point. Similarly, holy in Isaiah and elsewhere is to be defined in terms of Gods asserted monopoly on political force.

In this context I think of modern Arabic *dīn*, the usual word for religion. The word is almost certainly related to the Arabic cognates of the Hebrew root *dyn* used for judge, judgment, and associated concepts.<sup>45)</sup> Modern Arabic dictionaries, though, usually give the root with religious meanings a separate entry, in line not with the words history but with the modern experience of religion, even in Islam. The same bifurcation occurs in our thinking about the Bible, reflected in our translations. We are likely to associate forms of the root *sdq*, for example, with English righteousness, even though the root nearly always has judicial implications and connotations: justice, right, acquittal, vindication, justification, legitimization, etc. I call modern religious words like righteousness stained-glass language, because it reinforces the tendency to shrink religious reality to the compass of the church or synagogue. Whatever else might be said about Robert Alters new translation of the Psalms into English, he has been rightly praised for shifting the diction of the psalms in English away from their Christian religious cast.<sup>46)</sup> However, even Altar is inconsistent, and he misses a parade example of how translation can create modern religious sentiment where there is none, namely Psalm 7. To paraphrase this psalm: Rise up, Yhwh, in your anger, arise in your wrath against your adversaries. Over them *return* (*šûb*) to the height (of your throne). God judges in favor of the innocent, Gods indignation does not fail. If he (God) did not return (*im lô yâšûb, scil. to his throne of judgment*), then the enemy would whet his sword, draw his bow, and prevail. But the trouble the enemy makes will return (*yâšûb*) on his own head. The

45) See e.g. Bernard Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 33.

46) Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2007), xxxi-xxxiv. For praise of Alters de-Christianization of the Psalms, see e.g. Eliot Weinberger, Praise Yah, *London Review of Books*, January 24, 2008, 12-14; James Wood, Desert Storm: Understanding the Capricious God of the Psalms, *The New Yorker*, October 1, 2007, 94-97.

phrase *im lô yâ ûb* is virtually always taken to mean if he (the enemy) does not repent, then Yhwh will prepare Yhwh's weapons to destroy him. Alter's translation follows religious convention in this interpretation: If a man repent not, which looks like stained-glass language to me. This mistakes an incensed God's just judgment for a patient God's merciful warning and blurs the rhetorical linkages created by the use of *šûb*. Hence with his rendering of the final line Alter remains mired in religious convention: Let me acclaim (Hebrew thank ) the Lord for His righteousness rather than his just judgment (*sedeq*) and let me hymn (*zammēr*) the Lord's name, Most High.

Another good example of this tendency to make the Bible religious by separating supposedly secular and religious spheres is found in the Exodus story.

At the heart of the Exodus story lies the conflict between God and Pharaoh over which of them is to be served by the Israelites. Virtually all translations obscure the rhetoric of this clash by rendering the Hebrew words based on the root *bd* with words related to slave when referring to Pharaoh and words related to worship when referring to God. Such translation turns one term, *'ebed*, into two, a secular slave and religious worshipper, making Israel slaves of Pharaoh and worshippers of Yhwh, thereby obliterating the core rhetoric of the story. The issue is not whether Israelites should be *abadim*, workers, servers, slaves, but *whose* workers, servers, slaves they should be. To grasp this theme of the Exodus, we should hear Moses say not Let my people go so that they may worship me in the wilderness (Exodus 7:16), but rather Let my people go so that they may be my servants in the outback rather than your servants in the valley.

Another important area in which the modern concept of religion has a misleading effect lies just beyond the scope of OT studies but is indicative. This is the common understanding of synagogue. Synagogue is usually understood to mean a religious institution a building, chiefly the Jewish equivalent of what we experience as church, where the Jewish people gather to worship God with hymns, prayer, Bible reading, and preaching. This is

what the modern synagogue is, but the ancient synagogue was something quite different. The ancient synagogue included practices we identify with worship, but it was more than that, and it wasn't religious in the modern sense. The synagogue was the local assembly, above all of the Jewish magistracy, who gathered as the heads of the assembly (Hebrew 'ēdā, *knesset*), to read and discuss the laws of Moses, in an arena of casuistry, exhortation, and debate, as the basis of their role in Jewish self-adjudication, the foundation of Jewish socio-political autonomy, to the extent it could be maintained.<sup>47)</sup> These are functions congruent with the later *bêt dîn*. Moreover, the synagogues of the Greco-Roman period were similar to the range of household, local, occupational, and cult associations characteristic of Greek cities under Roman rule in having a variety of functions. All such associations, most of whose functions we would probably define as secular, included their own cult practices.<sup>48)</sup> Clearly the modern notion of religion does not apply any more than it does to the ancient *ekklesia*, for that matter.

A new book of essays on the religious cultures of ancient Israel has just appeared, the latest of a number of works on the subject.<sup>49)</sup> The authors, all renowned, undertake to describe what the editors call the diversity inherent to ancient Israelite religion. In counterpoint to this diversity and comprehending it, Israelite religion is taken as single. The ethnic or social whole coincides with the religious whole, *within* which diversity is to be located. This concept of religion prevails in each of the book's three sections. The first deconstructs common assumptions about Israelite religion and reconstructs Israelite perceptions of the nature of the religious world, particularly the assumed

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47) Richard A. Horsley, *Galilee: History, Politics, People* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 222-237; Pieter W. van der Horst, Was the Synagogue a Place of Sabbath Worship Before 70 CE? in *Jews, Christians, and Polytheists in the Ancient Synagogue: Cultural Interaction during the Graeco-Roman Period*, ed. Steven Fine (New York: Routledge, 1999), 18-43, reprinted in Van der Horst, *Japheth in the Tents of Shem: Studies on Jewish Hellenism in Antiquity* (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 55-82.

48) Philip A. Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

49) Francesca Stavrakopoulou and John Barton, eds., *Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah* (New York: Continuum, 2010).

dichotomies of Israelite vs. Canaanite and official vs. popular. The second explores the relationship between worshippers [varied] social locations and their perceptions of the divine. The third deals with how geographical distinctions influence Israelite religion. The main goal, the editors state, is to explore the ways in which worshippers socio-cultural contexts shape and color their religious beliefs and practices. Of course this is a commendable goal, as far as it goes. What concerns me is the subject of religion as a self-contained set of beliefs and practices.

This new book develops the recognition that religion in Israel was not uniform but pluriform, varying from place to place whether temple, tomb, or home and within and among different groups of people from rural households to royal households, from garrison troops to women local networks. Indeed, it is now understood that the religious worlds of these groups were likely populated by different combinations of various deities and divine beings notable diversity across various cults, so that, for example, the Yhwh worshiped in the temple in Samaria was not the same as the Yhwh worshiped in the Jerusalem temple.<sup>50)</sup> This book includes what the editors call a nuanced engagement with the idea that religious beliefs and practices are social and cultural activities. Accordingly, scholarly reconstructions of ancient Israelite and Judahite religions have become much more context-specific in dealing with the social dynamics and locations of religious activity, so that in paying closer attention to the many diversities and varieties inherent within and among different social groups (such as royal households, agrarian families, or local mantic specialists), the diversities and varieties of religious expression within a given society are more readily acknowledged, addressed, and understood.<sup>51)</sup> Thus the subject is religious diversity within the societies of Israel and Judah, as though these were both self-contained and distinct, and as though the category religion was such that its diversity could be delineated within such a society.

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50) *Religious Diversity*, p. 1.

51) *Religious Diversity*, p. 1.

Supposed Israelite religious diversity, a captivating subject of late, can be overstated as well as understated. The growing realization that society under Israelite rule was polytheistic is a welcome development. But it can easily lead to understatement of significance of Yhwh. This is especially erroneous for the Bible, which features Yhwh as the god of political Israel, mainly if not only. The exceptional prominence of Yhwh, both historically and in the OT, derives from the exclusive role of Yhwh as the avatar of El or Baal over political Israel whether defined in tribal or monarchic terms. This has also to do with the nature of the texts, to which we now turn briefly, as conceptualizing the political nation under monarchic sovereignty, i.e. pursuing a thoroughly socio-political subject and therefore focusing on Yhwh as a socio-political deity.

##### 5. The Nature of the Biblical Text

The third example of cultural presupposition I want to mention is the nature of the Bible seen as text. In light of my comments on nationality or ethnicity and religion, the Bible is to be seen neither as a repository of national folk tradition nor a book of religious history and revealed wisdom. It is also not to be seen as a book of literature, a third recurrent fallacy of contemporary OT studies.

On this subject I can be very brief, because I think the point is indisputable. OT scholars continue to approach the Bible as though it were a collection of religious writings by our religious forerunners not always, but often. This is the modern churches concept of the Bible, so it comes as no surprise that most of us who pursue OT scholarship in the service of the church approach the Bible the way the church does, as religious history and revealed wisdom. Inevitably we must cope with the ambiguities of critical study in traditional contexts, constantly asking ourselves not only what is true, an essential but by itself empty question, but also whether we better serve the church by confirming the familiarity of the Bible in traditional terms or highlighting its strangeness in critical terms. The choice is a matter of judgment, and usually the more it matters the more controversial it is. As moderns we cannot avoid

the choice, and as scholars we should support our choice by argument.

The several dimensions of the fallacy of the Bible as literature all stem from abstraction in one form or another. The irony is that the laudable desire to take the Bible seriously on its own terms as text often leads to misconstruing the nature of the text in this way. The anachronism of modern-day searches of past works of literature for expressions and explorations of the self has once again been exposed, in the most recent discussion of who wrote Shakespeare.<sup>52)</sup> Only with Romanticism did artworks begin to be perceived as expressions of their creators inner self.<sup>53)</sup> Attempts to avoid the fallacies of literature or author often make the situation worse, as more rather than less of the reality of the Bible's production is left out of consideration.

The overriding subject of the Bible as a collection of ancient texts is the political nation Israel under the sovereignty of the house of David. The large majority of OT texts are therefore inherently political in nature. And because the constitution of political Israel and the legitimacy of sovereignty over it were perpetually *contested*, the texts of the Bible are overwhelmingly polemical. They were composed as documents and incorporated into set collections of documents in the midst of political contest and conflict, involving mainly divisions within the social body, Israel or the church, not between it and outsiders. (Given time I could drive home this point with examples from most of the OT.) Therefore the main discipline of the study of the Bible as text must be the analysis of its political rhetoric, implicit as well as explicit. The reigning question must be: what is the text politically for, *and* what is it politically against?

One brief word regarding the great hazard in Christian interpretation of the OT, interference from the NT. Contrary to the venerable tradition of interpreting the OT in terms of the New, there is greater critical integrity and reward in interpreting the NT in terms of the Old. This is not mainly as an

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52) James Shapiro, *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

53) John Carey in the *Sunday Times* (London) on Shapiro, *Contested Will*, as quoted in *The Week*, April 9, 2010, p. 24; cf. Shapiro, *Contested Will*, 263-273.

exercise in literary intertextuality, as scholars tend to label the NT use of the OT, but in the history of inner-Jewish exegesis of the Jewish Scriptures in the Greco-Roman period. We should take seriously the continuous NT claim, explicit and implicit, to be grounded in Scripture, i.e. the OT. The last twenty years of mainly New Testament study have produced many illuminating works from this perspective. To bring the ancient OT into harmony with the ancient NT as a cross-cultural task, the key is to make the NT use of the OT a matter of NT interpretation.

#### 6. Working in Teams and Choosing Levels of Abstraction

For understanding the OT, then, the future should look like the past: the modernist project of historical criticism, of the Bible's past, but also of our present. For interpreting the OT, the tension between the critical perspective of scholarship and the traditional perspective of the church will persist, hopefully to the benefit of both. The same tension frequently exists in the individual interpreter as well, until it is gradually resolved, as most often it is, by the spiritual advantages of a disciplined criticism. The problem that the critical interpreter then faces is how to be immersed in history and remain relevant to the church immersed in tradition. The history of biblical interpretation in Korea is no different from anywhere else in this regard. Of course there are numerous attempts to address this dilemma, like John Barton's recent book *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, which starts with the indispensability to the church of the plain sense humbly defined.<sup>54</sup> The biblical themes remain the same: love, justice, trust, humility, repentance, restoration, and re-creation. But the biblical faiths do not have a monopoly on these, and it takes a critical perspective to show just how these unfolded in biblical times and unfold in our time.

In conclusion, for the continuing dialogue between scholarship and the church I have two modest suggestions. The first is to develop research and

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54) Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007. Cf. John J. Collins, *Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

interpretation teams. OT study and interpretation are still almost entirely solo activities, like nearly all writing in the humanities. The use of research teams in science may offer a way to develop the potential of cross-cultural study in our field, but also an added way to negotiate the tension between scholarship and church.

The second suggestion is for interpreters in every setting to become more aware of levels of abstraction in interpretation. By levels of abstraction I mean how specific we decide to be when making analogies for interpretation. This is a hermeneutical decision; it is also a political decision, i.e. it positions us in relation to dynamics of power in our own situation. To illustrate, let's take Second Isaiah as I understand it. At what level of abstraction do I describe the message of Second Isaiah? I could distinguish, for example, six levels of decreasing abstraction as follows:

- a. God saves his people from distress.
- b. God summons his people to a higher calling.
- c. God calls an expatriate people to return to their homeland.
- d. God delivers a defeated expatriate elite by returning them to their homeland.
- e. God delivers a repentant defeated expatriate elite by returning them to their homeland.
- f. God delivers a reluctant repentant defeated expatriate elite by returning them to their homeland.

The meaning of Second Isaiah can be seen in other terms than these. I am simply using this sequence to illustrate levels of abstraction in the drawing of analogy. The level of abstraction is likely to be a significant locus of cross-cultural difference, as interpreters of different cultures find different analogies meaningful. When levels of abstraction come into play, diversity of interpretation is likely to have a significant payoff. We have seen that cross-cultural historical analysis produces limited diversity. But cross-cultural interpretation based on level of abstraction can produce much illuminating diversity.

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