

Apr 11th, 2:15 PM - 3:30 PM

The Old Testament 30 Years Later: Consistency and Change

Alice Laffey

College of the Holy Cross, alaffey@holycross.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://crossworks.holycross.edu/alumni_continuing_ed_day



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#)

Laffey, Alice, "The Old Testament 30 Years Later: Consistency and Change" (2015). *HCAA Continuing Education Day*. 3.
http://crossworks.holycross.edu/alumni_continuing_ed_day/2015/2015/3

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Alumni Relations Office at CrossWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in HCAA Continuing Education Day by an authorized administrator of CrossWorks.

The Old Testament: Thirty Years Later

Although the Hebrew and Greek texts haven't changed, the Masoretic text and the Septuagint, haven't changed, translations have. In English, there is a New Revised Standard Version, for example, and new translations of the New Testament and the Psalms of the New American Bible and several scholars have produced their own translations, reputedly published. Translation is always done with a view to a target audience.

In 1981 the assumption was still that Protestants knew the Bible better than Catholics, though Catholics' familiarity with the biblical text had grown by leaps and bounds since Vatican II and the proclamation of the Gospel in the vernacular. Therefore, any student sitting in the Old Testament class at Holy Cross in 1981 was likely to know the accounts of creation, the stories of the patriarchs, of Joseph in Egypt and the Exodus, of the covenant at Sinai and the entry of Jacob's descendants into the Promised Land, of King David and the monarchy, of the prophecies of condemnation and consolation, as well as the wisdom teachings of books such as Proverbs and Job. And so with at least a rudimentary grasp of the text itself, the Old Testament course could proceed to introduce students to what biblical scholars refer to as "the world behind the text," the world out of which the biblical text came. This was the world of archaeology and of historical criticism. The study of the material remains of ancient peoples, particularly the remains of the people who became Israel, the people about whom the Bible is chiefly concerned, revealed some disconcerting data. Did Jericho, the city described in chapters 2 and 6 of the book of Joshua, even exist, never mind undergo conquest at the time that the Bible says the Israelites conquered it? What was the route of the Exodus? Did people cross the

Red Sea, or was it merely a Sea of Reeds? Who wrote the Bible anyway? When was it written? Why was it written?

Efforts to answer these questions forced biblical scholars back into the history of the Ancient Near East—not only Israel’s history but the history and literature of the surrounding peoples as well. And what were some of the discoveries. Most of the people in the ancient world didn’t write (or read); they told their truths orally, in the form of stories, often around a campfire. The stories were repeated, with variations and different emphases for different occasions and so we can imagine several versions of more or less the same story. Passed down from father to son, from the ancestors of the clan or tribe to their descendants, only after many centuries were they committed to writing. Or so we think—not only for Israel and the other nations of the ANE, but for all ancient or illiterate peoples. But then these stories get committed to writing. It’s not surprising that there are variations of the same story, and that preservation may mean repetition and combination. That seems to be what we find in the Pentateuch—many episodic stories telling a people’s truth, sometimes seeming to be more disconnected than connected, sometimes overlapping. Scholars suggest that we have in the Pentateuch several sources, at least four strands of written material, much of it comprised of what was originally oral traditions, now written down. This explains why there are two creation stories, many stories that are etiological, explaining why things are the way they are, why cities bear the names they do, why people are separated by language, why women have pain in childbirth, why men must work, etc. But if some people wrote down the stories they remembered, those that were important to them, those which bore their greater truths, why were these stories put together the way they have been? Was there an editor who put the

material in the Pentateuch all together with some comprehensive intention? And if so, what was it?

Let me pause here. You are 18 or 19 thirsty years ago, and history, the world behind the text, is the focus of the course. You come from familiarity with the text from going to Church and what you are learning is history. Many of the students were more interested in what the text could or should mean to them, then, that what it means thousands of years before. So my job was to convince them why this past was important. What truths were the ancient Hebrews telling, sitting around their campfires that still held relevance and importance for us today?

Fast forward, five to ten years. At the request of women students, I introduced a seminar that I entitled, "Women in the Old Testament." Acknowledging that ancient Israel possessed a patriarchal culture, we attempted to highlight women who, despite the culture, were able to function in leadership roles (e.g., Rebecca, Deborah, Jael, Abigail, Esther, Judith) or who despite their traditional roles, changed history (e.g., Sarah, Rachel, Hannah). We also looked at issues like rape (e.g., Dinah, Tamar, the law in Deut. 26). Eventually the title of this seminar changed to "Women and/in the Old Testament," which allowed the students in the class to share any incidents of expressions of patriarchy they had heard or read about or encountered during the past week. What the change in the seminar's title had done was to shift the focus slightly from the texts to "the world in front of the texts," the people who were actually reading and interpreting the texts in the classroom. What the seminar had allowed me to do in the classroom was to shift from a "modern" approach, assuming total objectivity, to a post-modern approach that acknowledged the social location of the student-interpreters of the text.

By 1995, the school had adopted a program entitled, "Writing across the Curriculum," Based on the assumption that the more you write, the better writer you will become and that one doesn't have an idea in one's head and then write it down but that as one writes one clarifies their ideas, I moved from requiring one research paper due at the end of the semester to assigning three papers, for each of which students could write and submit drafts and even do re-writes. After the papers had earned an initial grade. This changed the nature of the assignments. No longer did they go to the library to do research, but the first paper required historical analysis or literary close reading while the second and third papers were creative—transforming an Old Testament prophetic speech into contemporary proclamations or writing a homily, based principally on the Old Testament text and psalm response, for a contemporary clearly defined congregation. The shift in assignments conformed not only to the College's writing program but to shifts in the Academy's approach to scholarship more generally, and to reader-response criticism in the interpretation of literary and religious texts in particular. Coupled with feminist approaches to the texts, reader-response criticism shifted the focus from the world behind the texts to the world in front of the texts, namely the reader or interpreter.

In 1993 the Roman Catholic Church's Biblical Commission produced a document, "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church: which both valued historical criticism and pointed to its shortcomings. Its historical emphasis and its objectivity were insufficient without any sustained effort at applicability. What did the texts mean for believing communities today? The Church reaffirmed the role of faith as well as reason in biblical interpretation. Though the Church's intent was pastoral, from a scholarly perspective, it was conforming to recent biblical scholarship, taking into consideration, in fact, highlighting or giving primacy to the social

location of the interpreter. What I was reading as a scholar was a plethora of monographs and articles written from acknowledged perspectives. From Phyllis Trible's groundbreaking work *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* published in 1978, to Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert's *Reading from this Place*, to Athalya Brenner's feminist commentary series, to the *Women's Bible Commentary*, to *The African Bible* to the *Global Bible Commentary*.

These did not claim the objectivity of the historical methods; in fact, they questioned the objectivity of the historical methods. Were not those methods the creation of male, German Protestant biblical scholars, many of them ministers, who had developed the rational methods in response to the challenges to the Bible that had come post-Enlightenment, post development of the scientific method and with Darwin? In other words, claiming objectivity, was not their social location a significant cause of the interpretation they undertook?

Back to the classroom. How does this scholarship and Rome's document affect an Introduction to the Old Testament? Usually when I begin the course I spend the first few classes on translation, on the 24 books of the Jewish Bible being the same as the 39 books of the Protestant Bible with Roman Catholics and Greek Orthodox adding 7 books, preserved in Greek, as part of their canon. I added to those introductory materials, painting with a broader historical brush. I began to introduce the course with a synopsis of pre-modernity, modernity, and post-modernity, characterizing pre-modernity's interpretation of the Scriptures as assuming faith on the part of the receiver and divine revelation on the part of the text. We now read about 20 pages of Augustine's *Commentary On Genesis*. I then move to the modern period and its challenges to faith and to divine revelation, the response of faithful ministers, and the development of historical criticism. The Bible could stand up to rational analysis. Finally, I

provide a handout on social location, written as it happens by an African nun who got her PhD in Scripture from Fordham. The students investigate their own social locations in small groups, and discuss how their social location affects their investment in the course.

The textbooks available in 1981 presumed that Christian students knew the biblical texts and so emphasized only the history. Knowing that Holy Cross students were bright, I required the reading of the Bible along with the textbook. I was pleased when a Religious Studies major who attended Weston Jesuit School of Theology determined that the textbook they used was inferior to the one we had used; she knew more than she was learning. (I knew the other textbook and could agree; though I was friends with its author whom I dearly loved, it was not as good a textbook as the classic by Bernard Anderson which had four editions.) I was also pleased when another HC Religious Studies major who attended Union reported that they were using Anderson's text and she had "done all that." She was exempted from the course.

Though Bernard Anderson's text was, from my perspective, undoubtedly the best, I have tried several texts over the years, usually coming back after a semester or two to Anderson. The Bible assignments provided the biblical text; Anderson provided a comprehensive history, and I provided a synthesis, taking into consideration the real human beings sitting in front of me, why they were there, and what they hoped to achieve. A few of those students would become majors but most would be fulfilling a common area requirement. My job, as I understood it, was to try to introduce the Old Testament in a way that would make them knowledgeable and that they could see its relevance.

And so what did I do this year? I used to teach in the FYP and more recently had been teaching in Montserrat, so returning to the Old Testament (which I wanted to do at the end of my career though I also loved teaching in Montserrat) required a look at the new texts that had appeared. I chose Walter Brueggemann's text for the first semester but found it wanting; I chose John Collins' text for this semester, and am much more satisfied. I know and respect both of the authors and each leans slightly in a direction that I don't think is helpful for the students sitting in front of me, Collins is better. He struggles to bring the historical and the contemporary together, particularly with respect to those subjects that can be controversial, e.g., the conquest of Canaan under YHWH's direction.

How to avoid relativism... For me, I still cling to history. Recognizing the ambiguities of history (the Steelers announcer tells a different story from the Patriots' announcer at the same game, still, a touchdown is a touch down, and neither side can dispute that.) But I give space for the social location of my student-interpreters, many of whom claim faith as part of their social location. For me, they should be allowed to articulate how they understand the text from the position where they stand, what it means to them—as believers or non-believers. That is part of their social location and why we read a small post-modern text that contains global perspectives on the Old Testament

Most recently our department, at the recommendation of outside evaluators, no longer requires a course in Old Testament for the Religious Studies major. We require a course in "Sacred Texts" that can be Old Testament, New Testament, or the sacred texts of another religious tradition. I would argue that we need a course, then, on the Christian Bible, because for Christians its sacred text includes the Old Testament. But the Academy sees the two

testaments together as too large a corpus to focus on with any expertise, and so scholars are trained as experts in one text or the other. As post-modern interpretation becomes more widespread that dilemma should be resolved. I have been a part of the evolution and now I am comfortable in leaving it to others. It is in capable hands.

Thanks.

I took questions and then the second part of the “class” involved the book of Ruth using modern and post modern methodologies.