

CAROL A. NEWSOM

Rhetoric and  
Hermeneutics

*Forschungen  
zum Alten Testament  
130*

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**Mohr Siebeck**

# Forschungen zum Alten Testament

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130





Carol A. Newsom

# Rhetoric and Hermeneutics

Approaches to Text, Tradition and Social Construction  
in Biblical and Second Temple Literature

Mohr Siebeck

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To the memory of Gene M. Tucker (1935–2018)  
Colleague, Mentor, Friend

And to the memory of Charlyne (Charcky) Williams Tucker (1937–2018)  
Kind and Generous Friend



## Preface

The orientation that has guided my work throughout my career is a fascination with rhetoric, defined in the socially active way that Kenneth Burke understood it. Every text, he observed, is “a strategy for encompassing a situation.”<sup>1</sup> What I have found so satisfying about attending to the rhetoric of texts is that it provides an ideal way of combining the interests of traditional historical criticism, which is frequently oriented to the situation that lies behind the text, with a concern for what is sometimes called the literary dimension of the text. At about the time that I entered the field of biblical studies literary approaches were becoming fashionable. Too often, however, such studies divorced themselves from the historical dimensions of the text, resulting in an intellectual thinness. Attention to rhetoric, however, allows one to see how situations and discourse are inextricably intermingled within texts. Burke’s further observation, that every text is “the *answer or rejoinder* to assertions current in the situation in which it arose,”<sup>2</sup> makes his approach to understanding texts highly compatible with that of Mikhail Bakhtin, whose work on the dialogical aspects of language was becoming influential in the humanities and even the social sciences in the 1980s and 1990s. These two figures have been my intellectual lodestars.

If rhetoric is about persuasion, then it is also fundamentally connected with hermeneutics, which, as Gerald Bruns described it, is about “what happens in the understanding of anything, not just of texts but of how things are.”<sup>3</sup> All texts make claims about the nature of reality. They do this not only through their explicit arguments but also by means of their genres, their metaphors, their strategically chosen vocabulary, and much more. Some texts model new ways of being in the world and even attempt to restructure our very sense of self. Rhetoric thus has a socially constructive force that we can uncover by attending to the hermeneutical dimensions of the text.

Rhetoric, dialogics, and hermeneutics all come together, of course, in the way that texts continually engage one another, explicitly or implicitly, in the complex process of “recycling” that constitutes textual and cultural tradition. Indeed, one of the most significant changes in the field of biblical studies during the past generation has been the embrace of what is often called the history of reception.

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1973), 109.

<sup>2</sup> Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 109 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>3</sup> Gerald L. Bruns, “On the Tragedy of Hermeneutical Experience,” in *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 179.



Increasingly, however, it is recognized that this is no separate post-canonical phenomenon but rather a process that is integral to the production of all texts.

The essays that follow are a selection from my work that engages these issues. The earliest comes from 1989; the most recent is a previously unpublished essay from my current research. They are not presented in chronological order, however, but are grouped thematically. I have attempted to give the essays a consistent style and have corrected minor errors, but I have resisted the temptation to engage in substantive revisions, with one exception. The essay entitled “‘Sectually Explicit’ Literature from Qumran” required updating in its discussion of the number and distribution of texts from the Qumran caves. Also, I have changed my mind about the sectarian status of the Sabbath Songs, and it is important to indicate that change of position. For the most part, however, it seems best to let the essays represent my thought as it was at the time each was written. Two of the essays (nos. 2 and 10) were substantially incorporated into monographs I later wrote. I have included them here, however, because they illustrate key methodological themes.

### *I. Essays in Method*

1. “Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth.” *JR* 76 (1996): 290–306.  
Bakhtin’s understanding of the social dynamics of language as discourse provides a particularly useful way to read the diverse texts of the Hebrew Bible. In particular, it facilitates a strategy for reading the multi-vocality of the Bible that has shaped both individual books and the collection as a whole. This essay attempts to make the case for a dialogical biblical theology.
2. “The Book of Job as Polyphonic Text.” *JSOT* 97 (2002): 87–108.  
However the book of Job was composed, it has a unique affinity for being read as a polyphonic text. This essay, which anticipates the arguments of my book, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (New York: Oxford, 2003), illustrates the productivity of a Bakhtinian reading.
3. “Woman and the Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom: A Study of Proverbs 1–9.” Pages 142–60 in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*. Edited by Peggy Day. Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1989.  
Although this essay was written some years before the essay on “Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth,” it forms a good complement to it in that this essay attempts to describe what I consider to be a highly monologic form of speech within the wisdom corpus. Moreover, it also highlights the social dynamics of rhetoric.

4. "Spying Out the Land: A Report from Genology." Pages 437–50 in *Seeking out the Wisdom of the Ancients: Essays Offered to Honor Michael V. Fox on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*. Edited by Ronald L. Troxel, Kelvin G. Friebel, and Dennis R. Magery. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005.  
Although the development of form criticism within biblical studies contributed to theories of literary genre in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the subsequent conversation between biblical studies and genology has been sporadic at best. This essay presents and evaluates developments in genre theory that may be useful to biblical studies.
5. "The Rhetoric of Jewish Apocalyptic Literature." Pages 218–34 in *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*. Edited by John J. Collins. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.  
This essay and the following one attempt to supply a lacuna in the study of apocalyptic literature and the Dead Sea scrolls. Although the analysis of the genre of apocalypse is well developed, the study of the rhetoric of apocalyptic literature more broadly has received less attention. This essay makes a case for apocalyptic literature as a kind of "epiphanic" rhetoric and suggests some methodological ways forward.
6. "Rhetorical Criticism and the Reading of the Qumran Scrolls." Pages 683–708 in *The Oxford Handbook of the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Edited by John J. Collins and Timothy H. Lim. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.  
This essay also attempts to supplement a largely untheorized approach to reading the rhetoric of the Dead Sea Scrolls and by suggesting some methodological directions for further work, as well as providing case studies.

## II. *Language and the Shaping of Community at Qumran*

7. "'Sectually Explicit' Literature from Qumran." Pages 167–87 in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Interpreters*. Edited by William Henry Propp, Baruch Halpern, and David Noel Freedman. BJSUCSD 1. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990.  
This essay raises methodological question about what one means by the term "sectarian text" and how one identifies rhetorical markers of sectarian discourse. The case study on the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice suggests how difficult such issues can be. As my final note indicates, I have now reverted to my previous judgment that the Sabbath Songs are most likely a sectarian composition.
8. "He Has Established for Himself Priests': Human and Angelic Priesthood in the Qumran Sabbath *Shirot*." Pages 101–20 in *Archaeology and History in the*

*Dead Sea Scrolls*. Edited by Lawrence H. Schiffman. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990.

Although this essay does not self-consciously foreground rhetorical analysis, it is guided by the fundamental question of how a set of liturgical and mystical songs serves to construct an experiential reality that underwrites the identification of members of the Qumran community as elect by giving them privileged access to the worship of the priestly angels. It is thus an example of the epiphanic rhetoric of apocalyptic literature.

9. “Constructing ‘We, You, and the Others’ Through Non-Polemical Discourse.” Pages 13–21 in *Defining Identities: We, You, and the Others in the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Edited by Florentino García Martínez and Mladen Popović. STDJ 70. Leiden: Brill, 2008.

The sectarian literature of Qumran offers an ideal venue for rhetorical criticism, since rhetoric, as Kenneth Burke often noted, is directed both to identification and division. Although polemical speech often draws the most attention in describing sectarian rhetoric, this essay makes the case for the significance of non-polemical speech in the construction of sectarian identity. Examples are drawn from the Serek ha-Yaḥad and the *Hodayot*.

10. “Apocalyptic Subjects: Social Construction of the Self in the Qumran *Hodayot*.” *JSP* 12 (2001): 3–35.

Rhetoric is deeply connected with forming identity, and in the Qumran *Hodayot* one finds a type of literature that is tailor made for identifying formation. This essay examines the strategies used in the Qumran *Hodayot* both for forming positive sectarian identity and for establishing a sense of separation from other identities.

### III. Fashioning and Refashioning Self and Agency

11. “Models of the Moral Self: Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Judaism.” *JBL* 131 (2012): 5–25.

This essay examines a variety of rhetorical constructions that model forms of self and agency in order to address the problem of sin and obedience. Sometimes, too, these models served as means of separating Jews from gentiles or “the righteous” Jews from the “wicked.” The variety of alternative models, especially in the late Second Temple period, indicates that the self can indeed be a “symbolic space” serving a number of social functions.

12. “Flesh, Spirit, and the Indigenous Psychology of the *Hodayot*.” Pages 339–54 in *Prayer and Poetry in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Literature: Essays in Honor of Eileen Schuller on the Occasion of Her 65th Birthday*. Edited by

Jeremy Penner, Ken M. Penner, and Cecilia Wassen. STDJ 98. Leiden: Brill, 2011.

Novel interpretations of Genesis 2–3 and 6, as well as of Ezekiel 36–37, allowed the authors of the Hodayot to make radical new claims about the nature of humanity and the sectarian elect. Their focus was the status of the fleshly/dusty human body and the breath/spirit that was infused into it. Through their interpretive work these authors constructed a powerful rhetorical appeal for identification with the sectarians claims of the Yaḥad and a sense of fearful repugnance toward their former selves.

13. “Sin Consciousness, Self-Alienation, and the Origins of the Introspective Self.” Previously unpublished.

This essay traces a gradual refashioning of the symbolic structures of the self and inner self-relation (the “I-me” relation) in a significant strand of late Judean and Second Temple sources. The creation of new rhetorics of the self is dependent on hermeneutical re-workings of key texts from Genesis and Ezekiel but also through the transposition of some of these central tropes from narrative and prophetic genres into the genres of prayer and psalmody.

#### *IV. Recycling: The Hermeneutics of Memory and Reception*

##### *Part A: Job*

14. “Plural Versions and the Challenge of Narrative Coherence in the Story of Job.” Pages 236–44 in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*. Edited by Danna Nolan Fewell. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

The book of Job contains within itself multiple ways of telling “the same” story. Each version makes a different claim about the nature of reality and how meaning may be constructed. Indeed, even as various receptions of the book of Job in later tradition attempted to rewrite the book in new ways, they tend to finalize its meaning in a manner that the canonical book resists.

15. “Dramaturgy and the Book of Job.” Pages 375–93 in *Das Buch Hiob und seine Interpretationen*. Edited by Thomas Krüger, Manfred Oeming, Konrad Schmid, and Christoph Uehlinger. Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2007.

This essay, though written earlier than the previous one, actually functions as something of an illustration of the claims made there about the ways in which Job lends itself to rhetorical reinvention and a kind of polyphonic debate across time concerning claims about the nature of God, humanity, and the world. Particular attention is given to the intense contestation over the

significance of Job in post-World War I and post-World War II Germany and America.

16. “The Book of Job and Terrence Malick’s *The Tree of Life*.” Pages 228–42 in *A Wild Ox Knows: Biblical Essays in Honor of Norman C. Habel*. Edited by Allen H. Cadwallader. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013.  
Terrence Malick’s film explicitly and implicitly positions itself as an engagement with the book of Job, especially the prose tale and the divine speeches. The philosophy of Martin Heidegger is an important influence on Malick’s films and provides a hermeneutical key to his engagement. Malick’s nuanced “reading” of the divine speeches also contrasts in intriguing ways with the largely post-religious interpretations of the mid-twentieth century plays examined in “Dramaturgy and the Book of Job.”

### *Part B: History and Politics*

17. “Rhyme and Reason: The Historical Résumé in Israelite and Early Jewish Thought.” Pages 215–33 in *Congress Volume: Leiden, 2004*. Edited by André Lemaire. VTSup 109. Leiden: Brill, 2006.  
Little is more rhetorically contested than the “shared” history of a people. This essay looks at a broad range of short historical résumés, comparing their different rhetorical strategies for conveying the significance of a purportedly shared history. The examples demonstrate how malleable the traditions are and how they can be persuasively shaped to argue for highly divergent perspectives, even when they are placed side by side in canonical ordering.
18. “God’s Other: The Intractable Problem of the Gentile King in Judean and Early Jewish Literature.” Pages 31–48 in *The “Other” in Second Temple Judaism: Essays in Honor of John J. Collins*. Edited by Daniel C. Harlow, Karina Martin Hogan, Matthew Goff, and Joel S. Kaminski. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011.  
Fredric Jameson astutely reframed Kenneth Burke’s dictum that “language is symbolic action” by observing that a symbolic act is paradoxical in that it is both the accomplishment of an action but also a substitute for action, a compensation for the impossibility of direct action. Such was the problem ancient Israel faced in its attempt to frame the problem of aggressive foreign kings who represented threats to Yahweh’s power. This essay examines the various ways Judean literature enacted symbolic defeat upon these kings.
19. “Why Nabonidus? Excavating Traditions from Qumran, the Hebrew Bible, and Neo-Babylonian Sources.” Pages 57–79 in *The Dead Sea Scrolls*:

*Transmission of Traditions and Production of Texts*. Edited by Sariano Metso, Hindy Najman, and Eileen Schuller. STDJ 92. Leiden: Brill, 2010.

This essay is a case study of two forms of symbolic action, stemming from the recognition of strong traces of Nabonidus traditions within the stories about Nebuchadnezzar in the book of Daniel and the recovered Prayer of Nabonidus from Qumran. It attempts first to recover evidence of intense rhetorical contests among Jews of the late exilic period and then to trace the later hermeneutical need to recast the Nabonidus traditions into ones concerning Nebuchadnezzar in order to address the wounds of memory created by the defeat of Judah, the exile, and the diaspora.

Preparing a collection of essays seems like a simple enough task, but the technical aspects of scanning, converting digital formats, regularizing styles, and so forth make it a somewhat daunting task. I would not have been able to do this without the help of some key people. As always, my husband, tech guru, and resident editorial consultant, Rex Matthews, advised me and facilitated many steps in the process. My amazing research assistant, Evan Bassett, was a life-saver. I might have given up several times were it not for his ability to untangle seemingly intractable knots of digital information and to present me not only with beautifully prepared files but also carefully organized supplementary materials and check-lists for trouble-shooting.

But there is another effect of preparing a selection of essays written across one's career. It provides an occasion for reflecting on the course of that career and the factors that shaped it. My career as a scholar was strongly supported from the beginning by my colleague Gene Tucker, who encouraged me to take risks I might not otherwise have taken, gave me sage advice when I needed it, and smoothed many paths for me. He was a wise and generous colleague and friend, and his beloved wife Charly was always a welcoming and warm friend. It is with gratitude that I dedicate this book to their memory.

January 6, 2019

Carol A. Newsom



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## Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by David Noel Freedman. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992
AGJU	Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums
ANEP	<i>The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament</i> . 2nd ed. Edited by James B. Pritchard. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994
ANET	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> . Edited by James B. Pritchard. 3rd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969
AOAT	Alter Orient und Altes Testament
ATANT	Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments
ATDan	Acta Theologica Danica
BA	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>
BASOR	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
BETL	Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
BibInt	Biblical Interpretation Series
BIOSCS	<i>Bulletin of the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies</i>
BJJ	Brown Judaic Studies
BJSUCSD	Biblical and Judaic Studies from the University of California, San Diego
BKAT	Biblischer Kommentar, Altes Testament
BR	<i>Biblical Research</i>
CANE	<i>Civilizations of the Ancient Near East</i> . Edited by Jack M. Sasson. 4 vols. New York, 1995. Repr. in 2 vols. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CBQMS	Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series
CHANE	Culture and History of the Ancient Near East
CP	<i>Classical Philology</i>
DDD <sup>2</sup>	<i>Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible</i> . Edited by Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking and Pieter W. van der Horst. 2nd rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999
DJD	Discoveries in the Judean Desert
DSD	<i>Dead Sea Discoveries</i>
DSSR	<i>The Dead Sea Scrolls Reader</i> . 2 vols. 2nd ed. Edited by Donald W. Parry and Emanuel Tov. Leiden: Brill, 2014
EdF	Erträge der Forschung
EDSS	<i>Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls</i> . Edited by Lawrence H. Schiffman and James C. VanderKam. 2 vols. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000
EJL	Early Judaism and Its Literature
EPRO	Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'empire romain
<i>ErIsr</i>	<i>Eretz-Israel</i>
FM	<i>Field Methods</i>

FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
HAR	<i>Hebrew Annual Review</i>
HDR	Harvard Dissertations in Religion
HSM	Harvard Semitic Monographs
HSS	Harvard Semitic Studies
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
ICC	International Critical Commentary
IDBSup	<i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: Supplementary Volume</i> . Edited by Keith Crim. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1976
IEJ	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
IOS	<i>Israel Oriental Studies</i>
ITQ	<i>Irish Theological Quarterly</i>
JAJSup	Journal of Ancient Judaism Supplements
JAOS	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JJS	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
JNES	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
JSJ	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Periods</i>
JSJSup	Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism
JR	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
JSP	<i>Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha</i>
JSPSup	Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha Supplement Series
NIB	<i>The New Interpreter's Bible</i> . Edited by Leander E. Keck. 12 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 1994–2004
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIDB	<i>New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i> . Edited by Katharine Doob Sakenfeld. 5 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 2006–2009
NLH	<i>New Literary History</i>
NovT	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
NTTS	New Testament Tools and Studies
OBO	Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
OLA	Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta
OTL	Old Testament Library
OTP	<i>Old Testament Pseudepigrapha</i> . Edited by James H. Charlesworth. 2 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1985
PRSt	<i>Perspectives in Religious Studies</i>
QD	Quaestiones Disputatae
QR	<i>Quarterly Review</i>
Re&T	<i>Religion &amp; Theology</i>
RB	<i>Revue biblique</i>
RevQ	<i>Revue de Qumran</i>

RHR	<i>Revue de l'histoire des religions</i>
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBL SBS	Society of Biblical Literature Sources for Biblical Study
SBS	Stuttgarter Bibelstudien
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
ScrHier	Scripta Hierosolymitana
SHR	Studies in the History of Religions (supplements to Numen)
ST	<i>Studia Theologica</i>
StABH	Studies in American Biblical Hermeneutics
STDJ	Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah
STTCL	<i>Studies in Twentieth &amp; Twenty-First Century Literature</i>
SUNT	Studien zur Umwelt des Neuen Testaments
SVTP	Studia in Veteris Testamenti Pseudepigraphica
SymS	Symposium Series
TDOT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> . Edited by G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren. Translated by John T. Willis, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and David E. Green. 16 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–2006
TLZ	<i>Theologische Literaturzeitung</i>
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
VWGTh	Veröffentlichungen der Wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft für Theologie
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
WO	<i>Die Welt des Orients</i>
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
WUNT 2	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe
YNER	Yale Near Eastern Researches
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

### *DJD Volumes Referred to in the Essays*

- DJD VII Maurice Baillet, *Qumrân grotte 4.III (4Q482–4Q520)*, DJD VII (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982).
- DJD XI Esther Eshel, et al., *Qumran Cave 4.VI: Poetical and Liturgical Texts, Part 1*, DJD XI (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998).
- DJD XXII George J. Brooke, et al., *Qumran Cave 4.XVII: Parabiblical Texts, Part 3*, DJD XXII (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996).
- DJD XXIII Florentino García Martínez, Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, and Adam S. van der Woude, *Manuscripts from Qumran Cave 11.II (11Q2–18, 11Q20–30)*, DJD XXIII (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998).
- DJD XXVI Philip Alexander and Géza Vermes, *Qumran Cave 4.XIX: 4Qserekh Ha-Yahad*, DJD XXVI (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998).
- DJD XXX Devorah Dimant, *Qumran Cave 4.XXI: Parabiblical Texts, Part 4: Pseudo-Prophetic Texts*, DJD XXX (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001).

- DJD XL Hartmut Stegemann with Eileen Schuller, *1QHodayot<sup>a</sup>: With Incorporation of 1QHodayot<sup>b</sup> and 4QHodayot<sup>a-f</sup>*, with translation of texts by Carol Newsom, in consultation with James VanderKam and Monica Brady, DJD XL (Oxford: Clarendon, 2009).

## I. Essays in Method



## 1. Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth

An interview for a candidate in Old Testament at Emory University School of Theology provided an all-too-familiar example of the impasse at which conversations between biblical scholars and theologians tend to arrive. The theologian asked the biblical scholar what he considered the theological center of the Old Testament to be. The biblical scholar demurred at the notion of a center, insisting instead on the Bible's diversity. "Yes, of course," said the theologian, "but surely there must be some primary theme or themes that run through the diversity – covenant? creation?" "There may be *some* prominent themes among *certain* large blocks of material," conceded the biblical scholar, "but identifying any one or two of those as the unifying themes of the Old Testament betrays its extraordinary variety and distorts its historical particularity." "Well," said the theologian, "what about taking all its varied and diverse statements as claims about a single referent – God?" "Even that," the biblical scholar argued, "runs aground when one considers the nature of biblical religions and the various local manifestations of deity. The modern conception of 'God' is problematic for these texts." "I'm not trying to do violence to the historical particularity of the Bible or its cultural context," said the increasingly frustrated theologian. "I'm just trying to find something that theology can work with."

My sympathies in this conversation were largely with the biblical scholar, defending the "pied beauty" of the variegated biblical text against the reductionist quest for a center. Nevertheless, I was troubled by the fact that the biblical scholar's stance was essentially one of resistance only. The theologian's expectation that biblical studies produce "something that theology can work with" struck me as an entirely legitimate expectation. But how can this be done in a way that respects the radical particularity of biblical texts? Traditional biblical theologies have attempted to negotiate the tensions between "the one and the many," but in a way that has taken the philosophical assumptions of theological discourse for granted. One can hear this in the way the language of unity, center, or system appears in biblical theologians' definitions of what they do: "The theology of the Old Testament may be defined as the systematic account of the specific religious ideas which can be found throughout the Old Testament and which form its profound unity" (Edmund Jacob);<sup>1</sup> "Any 'Old Testament theology' has

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<sup>1</sup> This and the following quotations are collected by Ben C. Ollenburger, "Old Testament Theology: A Discourse on Method," in *Biblical Theology: Problems and Perspectives*, ed. Steven J. Kraftchick, Charles D. Myers, Jr., and Ben C. Ollenburger (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995).



the task of presenting what the Old Testament says about God as a coherent whole" (Walther Zimmerli); "A theology of the Old Testament has the task of summarizing and viewing together what the Old Testament as a whole, in all its sections, says about God" (Claus Westermann).

Despite the expressed commitments of the totality of the biblical text, the quest for system and unity often results in practice in a sharp distinction between center and periphery, if not in the outright disqualification of those texts which resist the biblical theologian's systematization. The implications of such thinking are illustrated in a comment by Diethelm Michel. At the end of a very learned book on Ecclesiastes, he cannot help putting the book in its place theologically: "[Qoheleth's] 'God who is in Heaven' is not the God of Abraham, not the God of Isaac, not the God of Jacob, not the God in Jesus Christ. That, for all the fascination which comes from this thinker, one may not overlook."<sup>2</sup> Here, a salvation-historical theology is implicitly treated as the center of biblical religion, and what does not cohere is marginalized or excluded. Concerning the impasse that often develops between theologians and biblical scholars, I want to suggest that part of the problem is that the type of discourse which is natural to the theologian and which has often been imported into biblical theology is not adequate for engaging the biblical text. Another model of discourse exists, however, which I think is adequate for engaging the biblical text and which does give theology something to work with. This alternative model I find in Mikhail Bakhtin's distinction between a monologic sense of truth and a dialogic sense of truth as he works these out in his book *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*<sup>3</sup> and in his essay "Discourse in the Novel."<sup>4</sup>

The monologic conception of truth is fairly easy to grasp, because it is the conception of truth that has dominated modern thought for some time, characteristic not only of philosophy and theology but also of literature. There are three important features of the monologic sense of truth. First, the basic building block of monologic truth is the "separate thought," a statement which does not finally depend on the one who says it for its truth. We customarily call this sort of "separate thought" a proposition. Pragmatically, of course, who says it may matter a great deal, but the content of the thought is not determined by the one who says it. It is repeatable by others and just as true (or untrue) when spoken by them. Bakhtin calls these "no-man's thoughts." The second feature of the monologic sense of truth is that it tends to gravitate toward a system. It seeks unity. These may be larger or smaller systems, but monologic statements

<sup>2</sup> Diethelm Michel, *Untersuchungen zur Eigenart des Buches Qohelet* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1989), 289.

<sup>3</sup> Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), 259–422.

are congenial to being ordered in a systemic way. The third feature characteristic of the monologic sense of truth is that in principle it can be comprehended by a single consciousness. No matter how much complexity or nuance in a proposition or system, a person of sufficient intellectual ability can think it. Perhaps it would be more apt to say that the proposition or system is structured in such a way that even if it is the product of many minds, it is represented as capable of being spoken by a single voice.

Although the paradigmatic examples of the monologic sense of truth would be the great philosophical systems of the nineteenth century, Bakhtin insists that this sort of conception of truth is actually quite pervasive. It is the sense of truth that undergirds all sorts of critical activity, but it is also the sense of truth embedded in most literature. Bakhtin identifies the lyric poem as a particularly clear example of monologic discourse, since it works resolutely through the construction of a single voice or consciousness through which all perceptions and statements are organized. But most novels are also monologic. Despite the fact that they may have many different characters, drawn quite differently and acting as spokespersons for different ideologies, it is finally the author's ideology and perspective which coordinates all the parts of the novel and gives it unity.

One can see how the operation of these assumptions have created problems for the understanding of the Bible and for the conversation between theology and biblical studies. Critical biblical scholarship was founded on the perception that the Bible was not monologic. It lacked precisely those features that characterize monologic discourse. Biblical criticism used the evidence of contradiction, disjunction, multiple perspectives, and so forth, to make the case for the Bible's heterogeneity. This was not a book that could be understood as the product of a single consciousness. Moses did not write the Pentateuch.

Driven by the "self-evident" claims of monologic truth, however, biblical criticism attempted to disentangle the various voices, so that one could identify the different individual monologic voices. That seemed to be the only way to deal with the phenomenon of a text whose multivoicedness contradicted the reigning notions of authorship. In so doing, however, biblical scholarship found itself notably lacking in a theoretical framework for understanding the whole. Neither redaction criticism, which examined the latest stages of composition and editing, nor tradition criticism, which investigated the deepest layers of tradition and their reworking, provided an adequate mode of understanding the whole. Literary readings of the new critical persuasion offered to deal with the final form of the text but did so by reading the text "as though" it had been the product of a single author. Reader response approaches located the unifying consciousness increasingly in the reader. With the exception of certain deconstructive approaches, all of these attempts have begun with an unchallenged assumption of a monologic sense of truth.

But what if a monologic conception of truth is not the only possibility? Bakhtin developed his notions of dialogical truth and polyphony to account for what he perceived to be a radical distinctiveness in the novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky. He saw Dostoevsky as the precursor of a new way of writing and a new way of representing ideas. There is also a strong ethical component in Bakhtin's work. Dialogism is not only descriptive of certain kinds of literature; it is a prescriptive model for understanding persons and communities and for the conduct of discourse. This double orientation of his thinking makes it particularly fitting to bring to a problem of how to understand the Bible in relation to theological discourse.

Compared with monologism, it is less easy to describe what Bakhtin means by a dialogic sense of truth, in large part because we are unaccustomed to thinking in these terms. The first and most important characteristic of a dialogic sense of truth is that, in contrast to monologic discourse, it "requires a plurality of consciousness ... [which] in principle cannot be fitted within the bounds of a single consciousness."<sup>5</sup> A dialogic truth exists at the point of intersection of several unmerged voices. The paradigm, of course, is that of the conversation. One cannot have a genuine conversation with oneself. It requires at least two unmerged voices for a conversation to exist.

A second important feature is the embodied, almost personal quality of dialogic truth in contrast to the abstraction characteristic of monologism. Again, the paradigm of the conversation is illustrative. The participants in a conversation are not propositions or assertions but the persons who utter them. In contrast to monologic discourse, Bakhtin says, "the ultimate indivisible unit is not the assertion, but rather the integral point of view, the integral position of a personality."<sup>6</sup> Consequently, this is an emphatically nonabstract understanding of discourse and of truth. In a conversation statements are not "no-man's thoughts." It is of the essence who says them.

Third, there is no drift toward the systematic in dialogic truth. What emerges is not system but "a concrete event made up of organized human orientations and voices."<sup>7</sup> "Event" rather than "system" is what gives dialogic truth its unity. It is a dynamic, not a propositional, unity. One of the things that drew Bakhtin to Dostoevsky's ability to represent the "image of an idea" in the interactions of his characters was the way he captured the dialogic nature of ideas themselves. An idea does not live in a person's isolated individual consciousness but only insofar as it enters into dialogical relations with other ideas and with the ideas of others.<sup>8</sup> It may attempt to displace other ideas, seek to enlist other ideas, be qualified by other ideas, develop new possibilities in the encounter with alien

<sup>5</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 81.

<sup>6</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 93.

<sup>7</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 93.

<sup>8</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 87–88.

ideas. That is how it lives. All of an idea's interactions are a part of its identity. The truth about the idea cannot be comprehended by a single consciousness. It requires the plurality of consciousness that can enter into relationship with it from a variety of noninterchangeable perspectives.

The fourth aspect of dialogic truth is that it is always open. Bakhtin's term for this may be more elegant in Russian, but in English it has been translated as "unfinalizability." As Bakhtin puts it, "Nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future, and will always be in the future."<sup>9</sup> There is an ethical component to this observation. Since the idea and the person who utters it are not separable, it is *persons* who are not finalizable. Whereas monologic conceptions make it possible to "sum up" a person, a dialogic orientation is aware that persons have never spoken their final word and so remain open and free.

These notions are easier to grasp with a concrete example. In discussing *Crime and Punishment*, Bakhtin notes that prior to the action of the novel the character Raskolnikov has published a newspaper article (a monologic form), giving the theoretical bases of the idea which so preoccupies him. But Dostoevsky never puts that article before the reader. Rather, the content of that article is introduced by another character, Porphyry, who gives a provocatively exaggerated account of it in a conversation with Raskolnikov, who replies at various points. Raskolnikov's comments, however, themselves contain a number of possible objections to his own perspective. They internalize a kind of dialogue about his own ideas. A third character joins the conversation with additional perspectives. Later in the book others with quite different life positions engage Raskolnikov's idea, disclosing new aspects and possibilities inherent in it, taking it up as their own or repudiating it. As Bakhtin says, "In the course of this dialogue Raskolnikov's idea reveals its various facets, nuances, possibilities, it enters into various relationships with other life-positions. As it loses its monologic, abstractly theoretical finalized quality, a quality sufficient to a *single* consciousness, it acquires the contradictory complexity and living multi-facedness of an idea-force, being born, living and acting in the great dialogue of the epoch and calling back and forth to kindred ideas of other epochs. Before us rises up an *image of the idea*."<sup>10</sup>

Texts, of course, are not conversations. Even novels, although they may contain staged conversations between characters, are usually not true conversations in the sense that Bakhtin meant. Most literary works are monologic in that the voices appearing therein are controlled by the author's perspective. They cannot address the reader directly, since they are approached only through the author's evaluating perspective. Bakhtin, however, believed that it was possible to

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<sup>9</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 106.

<sup>10</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 89.

produce in a literary work something that approximated a genuine dialogue, a mode of writing he called polyphonic. This is the type of writing that he believed Dostoevsky embodied. Polyphonic writing makes several changes in the position of the author, the role of the reader, the status of the plot, and the nature of a work's conclusion. The relationship between the author and the characters of the book is changed in that the author must give up the type of control exercised in monologic works and attempt to create several consciousnesses which will be truly independent of the author's and interact with genuine freedom. This is not to say that the author gives up a presence in the work, but that the author's perspective becomes only one among others, without privilege. Bakhtin himself makes a religious analogy. The author's relation to these free characters is like that of God who creates human beings as morally free agents.<sup>11</sup> The reader's position in a polyphonic work is changed in part because the function of the plot is also changed. In a monologic novel the reader is asked primarily to analyze characters, plot, circumstances.<sup>12</sup> But in a polyphonic text the dialogic play of ideas is not merely a function of plot and character but is the motive of the entire work. As Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, the foremost interpreters of Bakhtin, put it, "One must read not for the plot, but for the dialogues, and to read for the dialogues is to participate in them."<sup>13</sup> Finally, the shape of a polyphonic work is different. It would be contradictory to expect closure in such a work, because dialogue by its nature is open, "unfinalizable." In Bakhtin's view, Dostoevsky did not solve this creative problem well, with the exception of *The Brothers Karamazov*. There the novel ends "polyphonically and openly," inviting the reader "to draw dotted lines to a future, unresolved continuation."<sup>14</sup> The final word, as Bakhtin insists, cannot be spoken.

What Bakhtin has to say about polyphony in Dostoevsky and about dialogic truth as an alternative to monologic modes of thought may be interesting in their own right, but the pertinent issue here is what use these observations might be to biblical studies and particularly to the conversation between Bible and theology.<sup>15</sup> As a descriptive category, polyphony is a useful model for understanding the nature of the biblical text, one that can avoid some of the distortions of the various attempts to grasp its unity in terms of center, system, and abstract summary. Since polyphonic texts by their nature draw the reader into engagement with the content of their ideas, this way of reading the Bible might also lead to nonmonological forms of biblical theology that could provide a

<sup>11</sup> Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 240.

<sup>12</sup> Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 249.

<sup>13</sup> Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 249.

<sup>14</sup> Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 253.

<sup>15</sup> A different sort of appropriation of Bakhtin for literary study of the Bible has been proposed by Walter Reed, *Dialogues of the Word: The Bible as Literature according to Bakhtin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

way around the impasse that frequently develops between biblical studies and theology.

First, let us consider the descriptive issues. The Bible certainly is not a monologic text. There is no single “author” who coordinates and controls meaning across the whole. One can easily identify a plurality of unmerged voices in the Bible. That is not to say that it is a polyphonic text in the same way that Bakhtin claims *The Brothers Karamazov* is, however. For Bakhtin, the polyphonic text is an intentional artistic representation of the dialogic nature of an idea. Whatever the Bible is, it is not that. Unless one wants to claim that the Holy Spirit is the polyphonic author of the Bible in the same way that Dostoevsky is the polyphonic author of *Karamazov*, then one has to admit that Bakhtin’s categories must be used only in a heuristic way. Although there are some things that one can say about the whole Bible in light of Bakhtin’s categories, it is easier to evaluate the potential of Bakhtin by beginning with the largest possible compositional units. These would include the Primary History (Genesis through 2 Kings) and the Secondary History (1–2 Chronicles, plus Ezra-Nehemiah). Beyond that, the compositional units would primarily be the individual biblical books. In what follows, it is possible to make only the sketchiest suggestions for how an approach based on Bakhtin’s dialogism might proceed. There are, however, four different examples which give some idea of the possibilities.

The first example is a book that actually comes very close to Bakhtin’s model of a polyphonic text – the book of Job. If one makes the heuristic assumption (as I do) that a single author wrote the book, then it reads very much like a polyphonic text. The author has created a series of free and unmerged voices (the narrator, the three friends, Job, Elihu, God). The book is an intensely ideological and explicitly dialogical work. Ideas which are first presented monologically are soon subjected to a great deal of dialogical refraction as they are answered, echoed, nuanced, parodied, and placed in new relationships with other ideas.<sup>16</sup>

The way the characters use language in Job is a textbook example of the dialogical characteristic of speech Bakhtin calls “double-voicing.” The friends populate their speech with schematic renderings in the diction, accents, and style of traditional moral and liturgical discourse. The voice of the other can be heard sounding within their own speech in a mutually reinforcing dialogic agreement. Job double-voices words in a different way. For example, he uses the worlds of psalmic discourse, yet overlays them with his own intentions, so that

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<sup>16</sup> Bakhtin himself identified the book of Job as one of the influences on Dostoevsky’s dialogic style: “The influence on Dostoevsky of Job’s dialogue and several evangelical dialogues is indisputable, while Platonic dialogues simply lay outside the sphere of his interest. In its structure Job’s dialogue is internally endless, for the opposition of the soul to God – whether the opposition be hostile or humble – is conceived in it as something irrevocable and eternal. However, Biblical dialogue will also not lead us to the most fundamental artistic features of Dostoevsky’s dialogue.” See Bakhtin, “Three Fragments from the 1929 Edition *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Art*,” in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (n. 3 above), 272–82 (280).

assumptions and ideological commitments which were obscure when those words were voiced monologically suddenly become evident. It is no accident either that the climactic moment of the book is a dialogical one. Everything in the book comes down to Job's answer, a voice that must affirm, reject, or demur.

The book of Job even succeeds better than Dostoevsky in dealing with the artistic problem of devising a polyphonic conclusion. The ending of the book undermines any monologizing tendencies by thwarting all attempts to harmonize the various elements of the book. One is faced with the elusiveness of the divine speeches, the semantic ambiguity of Job's reply, the disconcerting segue to the prose in which God explicitly repudiates what the friends have said and affirms what Job has said; and yet in the narrative conclusion God acts, and events unfold, just as the friends had promised. The apparent monologic resolution is an illusion, and the conversation is projected beyond the bounds of the book. The shape of the book grants a measure of truth to each of the perspectives and so directs one's attention to the point of intersection of these unmerged voices.

What difference does it make to read Job through a Bakhtinian model? It deals more adequately with the literary shape of the book and the way in which it makes dialogue thematic. It resists the attempt to reduce Job to an assertion, to encapsulate its "meaning" in a statement, which is still the tendency in much scholarship. It suggests a model in which the "truth" about a difficult issue can only be established by a community of unmerged perspectives, not by a single voice, not even that of God. It honors the book's own insight about the non-abstract character of statements, the intimate relationship between a statement and the person who makes it. The congenial fit between Bakhtin and Job is itself an indication of the fruitfulness of the relationship, but other parts of the Bible are not so self-consciously committed to dialogue. Nevertheless, a Bakhtinian approach offers useful options.

The Primary History, Genesis–2 Kings, provides a second example, although it is possible to look at only a fraction of it. Here even the heuristic fiction of a single author is not appropriate. This is not polyphonic writing in Bakhtin's sense. Many things are known about scribal compositional practices, both inductively from the Bible itself and from empirical evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls and from non-Israelite ancient Near Eastern sources. It was the practice for scribes to incorporate earlier source material into their own compositions in ways that often (but not always) left the voices of those source materials unmerged. Thus, whereas a narrative like the Primary History is not a self-consciously polyphonic text, there is a kind of incipient polyphony in the cultural and intellectual practices which made use of a variety of distinctive and unmerged voices in the production of a complex narrative.

Another objection to the applicability of Bakhtin's approach might be the lack of explicit dialogical engagement among the various voices that one can identify in the Primary History. Instead of the intense dialogical engagement of a

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