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## Theological Reflections on an International Colloquium on Deuteronomy

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This past month I had the privilege of participating in an international colloquium on the book of Deuteronomy held at the University of Louvain in Belgium, Aug. 17–19. The occasion was the 33<sup>rd</sup> such meeting of the Colloquium Biblicum Lovaniense which, like its predecessors, attracted more than 100 scholars from across the world to focus their attention for three days on a specific area of mutual concern. Prof. Norbert Lohfink of Frankfurt, who taught here in the GTU [Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley] as a visiting professor at JSTB [Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley] some years ago, was the chairman and organizer of the conference.

I led the English seminar, which met for two one-and-a-half hour sessions on the topic, “Chiastic Structures in Deuteronomy 1–11.” Three other seminars were led by Profs. C. Brekelmans (Dutch), H. Cazelles (French) and G. Braulik (German). A series of nine major papers were presented, most of which will be published in a forthcoming issue of *Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium*.

In many ways the colloquium at Louvain was a reflection of the current turmoil in biblical studies which was also clearly evident at the XI International Congress for the Study of the Old Testament and the First International Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, both of which were held in Salamanca on Aug. 27 – Sept. 2. (I also had the privilege of presenting two papers on the book of Jonah there.) The so-called “New Literary Criticism” has come of age in Old Testament studies, and the inherent tensions with older methodologies and long-established presuppositions in the field was keenly felt. The term “Literary Criticism” in Old Testament studies has traditionally been applied to the study of the “sources” which lie behind the received biblical text. The growth of Redaction Criticism was thus a logical development within the mainstream of academic study of the Bible. Recently a growing number of biblical scholars have turned their attention to the biblical text in its final form. Their interests focus on the literary aspects of the received text with little concern for the reconstruction of its redactional history. Thus when Robert Polzin presented his literary analysis of the different voices present in the

narrative text of I Samuel, he was greeted by a series of revealing questions. “How can you accept the masoretic chapter division as the proper boundary for your analysis? Are you ignorant of the careful redaction and text critical work already done on this passage?” His response was even more disconcerting when he insisted that a proper starting point for such a literary analysis is calculated naiveté. Too much knowledge of traditional historical critical study of such texts get in the way and is simply not necessary for the task of true literary criticism as such.

When Luis Alonso-Shoekel insisted in his presidential address that the two approaches to the biblical text must stand together, he was greeted with resounding applause. But his further claim that there is no real inherent contradiction in the two methodological approaches seemed to strike a hollow note in the minds of some, at least in informal discussion outside the lecture hall.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate the “division in the ranks” is to describe a simple incident that took place at Louvain during the presentation of a paper on the redactional history of Deut. 5–11 by Prof. Vermeylen. A prominent European scholar handed a note to an American colleague sitting in front of me on which were written only two words, “SCIENCE FICTION”! The most extreme position against the redaction critics was presented by Prof. Labuschagne who was greeted by “Unglaublich” (“unbelievable”) from virtually all sides. Acrimony slipped in even to one of the major addresses where arguments came perilously close to *ad hominem* use of innuendo and sarcasm. But for the most part the lively and sometimes heated debate remained on a healthy and stimulating level.

My own presentations on “Prose and Poetry in the Bible: Narrative Poetics in Deut. 1:9–18” and “Form and Structure in Deut. 1–11” received a mixed reaction, as I anticipated it would. My research of the past three years has convinced me that the received Hebrew text of Deuteronomy can be scanned metrically, in its entirety, without significant textual emendation. Moreover, the resultant architectural design as revealed by such prosodic analysis of Deuteronomy is indeed elegant and quite different from the linear structural outlines presented in the commentaries. If I am correct, the implications may be rather profound and will add still further fuel to the fire in current methodological battles.

To put the matter simply, if the received text can be scanned without significant emendation, then our very way of conceiving the redaction process is challenged. The last hand that touched the text is not some scribe adding a gloss here or deleting a word or phrase there. He is in some sense the “author” of the text, or at least functions with the freedom we normally reserve for the author of a text. For the addition of a single word, or the deletion of a single word, would destroy the metrical structure as such. And that structure appears to be still intact in the Masoretic textual tradition, at least for Jonah and Deuteronomy. There is not doubt an extremely complex history of the biblical text, perhaps more so than we have yet been able to see. But the model of the “redactional” process as described thus far is much too bookish.

As I argued for the book of Deuteronomy at Louvain, none of the current models for understanding the literary form of the book are adequate. Though the book contains a collection of laws, it is certainly not a law code as such. And though there are strong affinities with international treaty texts, the book is not the text of such a covenant treaty per se. Gerhard von Rad may have been correct to look to the preaching activity of Levitical priests to explain the form of the book, but once again the model of the sermon is less than adequate to explain the book. And the model of the archive is too pedantic to do justice to a work of such remarkable literary beauty. We must turn to field where aesthetics are more central like art and music to find an adequate model. For above all else the book of Deuteronomy, and for that matter the Bible as a whole, is a work of literary art, composed to be recited in public, perhaps with music as an integral part of the tradition, for didactic purposes. Recent experiments in the oral communication of the Scriptures with music in sub-Saharan Africa may point the way to a more adequate model to explain the biblical text.

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