An important new publication

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Gottwald's recent book, *The Hebrew Bible. A socio-literary introduction*, is an excellent work. While reading it one has the feeling of entering a strange and fascinating world. "Strange" in the sense that it is so different from the majority of histories of Israel and introductions to the Old Testament, and "fascinating" in that the world, the society in which Israel existed and which shaped its theology, is reconstructed in an interesting way. The book is, therefore, filled with maps and tables to illuminate the author's view.

The importance of this book for the South African Biblical scholar lies in the crucial relationship between literature and society which Gottwald emphasizes. Gottwald stresses that Israel's literature can never be separated from the society in which it originated and functioned. The sociohistoric horizon of each period is briefly sketched and then related to the literature which originated in that period. Gottwald has perhaps made the greatest contribution to the sociological study of the history of Israel. His voluminous book on the tribes of Israel in which a sociological study of premonarchic Israel was made, was a pioneering work. The present volume is the result of three decades of study and research of the Hebrew Bible.

Since very little has yet been done by way of sociological research of the Bible in this country, it is worthwhile to sketch some of Gottwald's main thoughts with the sincere hope that it will give South African scholars a greater awareness of the important contribution of sociology to Biblical scholarship. Gottwald begins his book with a chapter on methodology. This not only enables the reader to describe the place of the author in the history of research, but also enables one to understand how the author reached his conclusions. According to Gottwald the confessional religious approach was the first stage in Biblical scholarship. This approach advocated that the Bible is the pure revelation of God, which forms the only foundation of faith and which can never be studied from a critical point of view. In other words, the
Bible is the only inspired Word of God and the only norm for regulating the Christian's life. The Bible must be accepted as such and no critical questions can ever be addressed to it. The acceptance of the historical critical method was the second major phase in the study of the Hebrew Bible. According to this method the Bible is a human product which originated over many years, to which many people contributed contradictory theologies and which can be studied by means of methods which have become sophisticated through the years. For at least two centuries those two methods existed among Christians and Jews: "The Bible approached as the revealed Word of God and the Bible approached as the human literary product of an ancient sociopolitical and religious community" (p. 16). There were scholars who tried to synthesize the confessional approach and the historical critical method, but in the 1960s this attempt failed and a general sense of dissatisfaction pervaded the scholars of the Hebrew Bible and the history of Israel.

Although the historical critical method contributed immensely to the study of the Bible, scholars came to the conclusion that this method, in its present form, has reached its limits. There are important questions about the Hebrew Bible which the historical critical method just could not answer. Specific questions about the literary shape of the Bible and the social milieu were just beyond this method's ability. The situation of dissatisfaction gave rise to new literary methods and sociological exegesis. According to the new literary methods the text is studied as such: The Hebrew Bible is a literary production "that creates its own fictive world of meaning and is to be understood first and foremost, if not exclusively, as a literary medium" (p. 22). The text of the Hebrew Bible is a total, self-contained literary work which is independent of any historical critical investigation.

Although Gottwald stresses the value of this method he opts rather for a sociological approach to the Hebrew Bible. According to this approach the Hebrew Bible is a social document which reveals the history of changing social structures, functions and roles in ancient Israel which provides the essential context for the study of the literary, historical and religious features of the Hebrew Bible. Sociological exegesis attempts to situate each Biblical book or part of it in its proper social setting. It therefore concentrates on the text and the conceptional world as well as its social setting.
In his book Gottwald constantly discusses the "sociohistoric horizons" which actually generated texts and concepts and which are directly or indirectly reflected in these texts. To do full justice to the texts, the conceptual world and social setting Gottwald employs "a grid of key components arranged along domain, sectoral, and geographical axes" (p. 598).

The broadest social and political organizations in Israel are to be distinguished according to the domain axis. Gottwald says that there are five sociopolitical domains: The socioreligious counter-revolution of those tribes in Canaan who worshipped Yahweh and formed a confederacy; the sociopolitical counterrevolution of united Israel under the kings; the division of the united monarchy into a southern and a northern empire; the fall of both states and the subjection of the population to exile and colonial rule; the restoration of Judah and the subjection to colonial home-rule and different world powers.

After a study of the domain axis the sectoral axis is to be investigated. By this is meant the specific literary form and its typical theological expressions which could have originated in a specific time and under specific sociopolitical circumstances. One first has to identify the specific sociopolitical framework (cf. domain axis) and then the genres, tradition complexes, concepts and patterns of thought which could have developed during that period. The geographical axis implies two elements; the southern and northern kingdoms during the pre-exilic days and the Palestinian Jews and the deported Jews during the exile. In the light of the abovementioned it is possible to determine the literary forms and theological views which existed at a certain period. To illustrate Gottwald's view the following (the period 1250-1000 BCE) can be furnished.

Socio-political domain: This period was characterized by a socioreligious revolution of Yahweh-worshipping tribes.

Social sector: Three social sectors can be distinguished in this period; each one generated a specific literary form and a certain type of theology.

1. Tribal groups existed; new groups included by means of covenantal renewals.
2. Village or tribal courts existed.
3. Family, village and tribal introduction (both formal and in formal).
Literary sector
1. Narratives of deliverance, theophanies, covenant treaties, categorical laws and songs originated.
2. Case laws.
3. Wisdom sayings.

Theological sector
1. Yahweh is described as the deliverer from political oppression and as the maker as well as the keeper of the covenant.
2. Yahweh is described as a God of justice and righteousness.
3. Yahweh is viewed as giver and supporter of a humanly social-ethico-religious world order.

This may seem superficial to many but Gottwald has based his views on a painstaking analysis of Israel's literature and history. His approach is challenging and it opens up a real new way of studying the Hebrew Bible. Of course Gottwald does not always convincingly relate sociology and literature to each other, and many times "society" and its influence is not adequately discussed, but his work must serve as an incentive for further research and study.

Since a subgroup of the South African New Testament Society has devoted the past decade to a study of apocalyptic, it is appropriate to remark briefly on Gottwald's views in this respect. At the outset, it can be said that with regard to "genre", Gottwald is very much influenced by the SBL-group under the leadership of John Collins. The influence of Hanson can also be detected. Gottwald stresses that the point of view from which one is approaching this phenomenon will determine one's description of it. When apocalyptic is studied from a literary point of view, a distinction is being made between form (vision, audition, written document, etc.) and content (temporal axis: imminent end, judgement, transformation, personal salvation, and on spatial axis: guided journey through cosmic regions, angels and demonic beings are encountered and God's throne approached). Due to this literary analysis Gottwald describes the apocalyptic genre as follows: "it is a type of revelatory literature with a narrative framework in which a revelation about end-time judgement and salvation and/or about the heavenly realms is given to a human being by an other-worldly messenger" (584). One is to arrive at a different conclusion when the apocalyptic thought-world is phenomenologically
investigated. In such a phenomenological study the centre of apocalyptic lies in "a radically new summing up and evaluation of history as having run its course" (585). The present time in history is characterized by radical pessimism, due to evil that is experienced. This attitude is also fused with radical optimism because the present era is to pass away and a time of bliss will dawn. According to phenomenological criteria, books such as 2 Enoch, 3 Baruch, Jubilees and Testament of Levi cannot be viewed as genuine apocalyptic. They are indeed employing apocalyptic devices and concepts, but lacking the notion of a decisive end to history.

Although one gets the impression that Gottwald is not very interested in a study of proto-apocalyptic, he nevertheless made an important remark about it. Against the notion that proto-apocalyptic or the dawn of apocalyptic must be sought solely in Isaiah 24-27, 56-66 and Zechariah 9-14 and not in Ezekiel and Zechariah 1-8, Gottwald stresses the importance of both groups of literature. The first group contributed to apocalyptic ideas such as the conflict between good and evil, the cosmic judgement, transformation of the universe, and so on. This contribution is of a more eschatological nature. The contribution of Ezekiel and Zechariah 1-8 on the other hand was mainly visionary because they employed bizarre symbolism, visions and an interpreting angel.

Another important aspect of Gottwald's views concerns the identity of the apocalyptic community. Against the notion that the apocalyptists or the apocalyptic communities merely consisted of poor people or of one social type, Gottwald clearly states that there were various apocalyptic communities and that membership was diverse in class and status.

It is important to note that Gottwald's sociological approach does not attempt to undermine the importance and actuality of the Hebrew Bible. Quite the contrary. A sociological approach to the Old Testament equips one better to grapple with the problems of society. "In so far as theology is an arm of synagogue and church, Jewish and Christian communities are called upon to grapple with the conflictual social origins and content of their own Bible and to ponder deeply what all this means for their placement amid contemporary social conflict and for their social mission within an arena of conflict that cannot be escaped" (609).

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