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Further biblical models

The time is the eighth century before Christ. A shepherd leaves a small village which lies a few miles south of Bethlehem in the hills of Judah. He is setting out to travel to Bethel, the chief city in the northern kingdom of Israel. Somebody else must keep his sheep and tend his fig trees because, for now, he has more important and more urgent work to do. The shepherd is a man with a message for kings and peoples, especially for the king and people of Israel. “The lion has roared”, he shouts, “Who will not fear?” He speaks not of a mighty beast that he has heard in the thicket, where it prowled seeking animal or even human prey. This lion is the Sovereign Lord, Israel’s and Judah’s God, and the shepherd who tells of his presence is the one we know as Amos the prophet. “The Sovereign Lord has spoken,” he calls out again, “Who can but prophesy?”

The Lion-King, the Lord “roars from Zion and thunders from Jerusalem”. What does he say? This is what the Lord says, through

Amos his prophet. There is a judgment coming, and it is coming for all of Israel's neighbours, for Phoenicia and Aram to the north, Ammon to the east and Philistia, Edom and Moab to the south. None is spared, not even the southern kingdom of Judah, for the Lord will send fire upon it that will eat up even the fortress-city of Jerusalem.

Up to this point, there are probably eighth century BC equivalents of 'Amen!' and 'Preach it, brother!' from the audience. However, all of this is but the prologue to the main message of the shepherd-prophet. This message is for Israel, for the people among whom Amos now stands and for Jeroboam their king. For them the roar is loudest and longest. The lion neither roars in the thicket nor growls in his den when he has caught no prey. They will not escape what is to come, neither the swift nor the strong, neither the warrior nor the horseman. The fact that the Lord has chosen them and brought them out of Egypt and into this land of milk and honey will not save them. Their sacrifices, tithes and offerings will not help them. For they have trampled on the poor, oppressed the righteous and "turn(ed) justice into bitterness". Will any be saved? This is what the Lord says: "As the shepherd saves from the lion's mouth only two leg bones or a piece of an ear, so will the Israelites be saved". Not even two legs of lamb, just their bones! But these words speak of hope on the far side of the darkness, of a new day that is coming. The Lord will then restore the ruins of Israel, he will plant his people in their own land, never again to be uprooted. On that day, says the Lord their God through Amos the prophet, "new wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills".¹

Amos is a true prophet. His recorded speeches display all the marks of prophetic literature: their account of both his own call and credentials and those of Israel, his pleas to the people to repent and to God to relent, the pronouncements of judgements and the promises of restoration.²

What, you ask, can all this have to do with education and schooling in the twenty-first century? The disruptive ministry of the prophet seems far removed from the activity of today's teachers! What relevance can this have to classroom education nearly three millennia

¹ The quoted phrases are from Amos 3:8, 1:2, 5:7, 3:12, 9:13.

² Sanders describes seven different kinds of statement which are characteristic of prophetic literature, all of which are found in the book of Amos – see Sanders, 1972:74-75.

into the future? Much in every way, is the answer that Walter Brueggemann gives us in his book *The Creative Word*.³

The prophets and education

We saw in the previous chapter that Brueggemann regards Torah education as a paradigm of a particular mode of teaching and learning. But it is not the only mode that he finds in the Old Testament scriptures, and to teach as if it were could do the community a great disservice. He writes:

A community which educates its members in the Torah will do them a great service. It will make available a center for life, a core of memory, a focus around which to organise all of experience. But if a community educates only in the Torah, it may also do a disservice to its members. It may nourish them to fixity, to stability that becomes rigidity, to a kind of certitude that believes all of the important questions are settled. The answers need only to be recited again and again.⁴

Can it not be said of much Christian education in churches and probably also in schools and homes that this rings true? Sadly, all too often this is the dominant mode. What else is needed? Brueggemann's first answer is that we also need the prophetic mode of teaching.

But what do Amos and his fellow-prophets have to add to our understanding of learning and teaching? Prophecy and teaching seem a bit far removed from each other. Prophecy is popularly seen to be essentially a matter of foretelling the future. The word has connotations of magical prediction, something not too different from astrological utterances. These specially gifted people can see further than the rest of us and we hang upon their words for the fate of planet earth. But this popular understanding misses the heart of prophecy by a long way. Its heart is to be found in the task of relating faith and history. Sanders describes the prophets as those that took the faith that the God of Israel was the

³ Brueggemann, 1982.

⁴ Brueggemann, 1982:40.

Lord of history out of the temple or sanctuary and into “the marketplace of human affairs where history was in process”. History for the prophets meant “not just the future, but past, present and future – the present and immediate future viewed in light of the past”.⁵ The past is seen through the stories of the Torah, and this provides for continuity between the Torah and the prophets. However, the prophets also critique the community’s settled understanding of the Torah and move beyond it. As Brueggemann puts it,

...the Torah is the ‘Yes’ of God to Israel (2 Cor. 1:19). Yes, I will be your God. Yes, you are my people. Yes, I will be with you. The prophets add a critical footnote to all of this. ‘Yes, but what if ...’ Thus there is a tension between Torah and prophets which must always be attended to in education. The tension is the dialectic of establishing or *asserting the consensus*, and then raising questions which break or challenge or *criticize the consensus* for the sake of a new word from the Lord. The two divisions (Torah/prophets) of the canon together suggest that education is a nurture of a restlessness with every old truth for the sake of a new truth which is just breaking upon us.⁶

The poetic imagination of the prophets seeks to provide a different context for life in the world by “creating a different presumptive world which is buoyed by different promises, served by different resources, sobered by different threats and which permits different decisions”.⁷ The prophets call their hearers to step outside the familiar, to see everything differently, to nurture their flights of thought with new metaphors, to refuse the domesticating pressures of the conventionally mediocre. The prophets stand for an openness to spiritual reality beyond the bounds of the dominant rationality of the culture. Their claim to speak in God’s name challenges the belief of the powerful that decisions all rest in their hands.⁸ A mode of teaching oriented to

⁵ Sanders, 1972:55.

⁶ Brueggemann, 1982:41.

⁷ Brueggemann, 1982:52.

⁸ See also Brueggemann, 1978

the prophets will not simply tell students “this is the way it is”, but will seek creative and vivid ways of making them feel that things should be profoundly *different* from the way they are now. It will point to the sinful distortions of life as presently lived and seek to awaken a hunger for change.

In an article on educating for social justice,⁹ Clarence Joldersma provides examples which could illustrate such a mode of teaching in action. He questions the wisdom of encouraging the trait of self-sacrifice in a young African-American woman who exhibits a caring gift when the character of that gift is partially a consequence of being female in a marginalised group of people. He asks whether we can wholeheartedly celebrate a would-be cheerleader making the squad because of her looks or body shape when we ought to question the value system which defined her success, “a social injustice embedded in the current configuration of cheerleading”. He suggests that service learning experiences which purport to help ‘urban street kids’ may reinforce stereotypes in the minds of the participating students if they themselves are not also helped to see “the more complex nature of the problem, including the students’ own implicit role in creating that situation by virtue of being part of a privileged socio-economic or racial group”. Joldersma goes on to say,

Seeking shalom needs a *critical* side, one that engages students to become ‘sites of resistance’ with a healthy dose of distrust of the status quo injustices in which they are embedded.¹⁰

So we have a second mode of teaching and learning in the Old Testament canon. We need both. If all is the promotion of stability, security and continuity, we have an education which fixes and fossilises and accepts the world as it is too complacently. If all is the questioning of the received ways of thinking and acting, we have an education which deprives learners of any stable place to stand. However, Brueggemann

⁹ Joldersma, 2001; the article is a response to Stronks & Blomberg, 1993.

¹⁰ These examples come from pages 110, 111, 113 and 114 of Joldersma’s article. A well-known example of a Christian educator whose work is in this mould is Paulo Freire (Freire, 1996a, 1996b), whose pedagogy seeks to evoke a critical awareness of injustice and promote social change.

goes on to suggest that we have more even than this to learn from the shape and processes of Old Testament literature and he turns his attention to the third major division, that known as the Writings.

Wisdom added to knowledge

The Writings are the third division of the Hebrew Bible. They are in a way the ‘everything else’ that is left after we have taken the books of the Law and the Prophets. They include the Psalms and the Wisdom literature (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes) and also 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah, Ruth, Esther, Song of Songs, Lamentations and Daniel. They therefore contain: the historiography of the chronicler, the short stories of two women in very contrasting settings, a love song, an elegiac lament at the fall of Jerusalem, the apocalyptic visions of a Jew in Babylon as well as a dramatic poem in which the writer wrestles with the paradox of the suffering of the righteous, the parables, riddles and aphorisms culled from contemporary proverbs, and the philosophical questionings of the searcher for meaning in the face of apparent meaninglessness.

It is in these writings that Brueggemann discerns a third mode of teaching and learning, one that focuses on the discernment of order in everyday living, on the exploration of the potential and limitations of individual and communal experience. The emphasis is on the wisdom that must accompany the knowledge given in the story and critically evaluated under prophetic questioning. This, of course, is not detached spectator knowledge but the ‘on the field’ knowing of those who know who they are and to which people they belong. Having all that, how then shall we live? Sanders puts it in this way: “... wisdom stresses realism...The word *wisdom* in the Bible sometimes means the craft of living under God so that disruption is held in check and stability is maximised”.¹¹

Between the two poles of the security of our big story and our openness to probing criticism of all our understandings of it, we need to learn to live wisely in all the varied experiences of life, from the ordinary pastoral setting of the cornfield to all the risks of life in royal court, from the ecstasies of loving intimacy to the depths of anguished

¹¹ Sanders, 1972:99.

grief, from the soaring flights of the seer to the profundities of the common-sensical.

Wisdom and knowledge go hand in hand through the pages of scripture. The leaders of Israel had their wise men to advise them. The Christian church has its teachers and prophets to whom we flock to hear their words. Where are the wise? Where the love of wisdom? Wisdom is not spectacular. She does not draw the crowds. She is too realistic, too ordinary and everyday. But she calls aloud in the streets and raises her voice in the public squares, “How long will you simple ones love your simple ways?”¹²

Of this third division of the Hebrew scriptures and associated third mode of education, Brueggemann writes:

...we have here neither *disclosure* nor *disruption*, but *discernment*. The educational task, then, is to discern and to teach to discern, to attend to the gifts given in experience, to attend to the world around us. It is to read ourselves and that world in its playfulness, to know that what immediately meets the eye is not all there is. It is to know that as we touch the dailyness of our lives, we are in touch also with something precious beyond us that draws close to the holiness of God. In this way we learn that in our knowing we have not been permitted to know fully, but only in a mirror darkly (1 Cor. 13:12).¹³

Similar thoughts are expressed by Charles Melchert in his very helpful book on biblical wisdom and education as he writes:

One of the major liabilities of contemporary education is the tendency to become a series of isolated specialities that seem to have little to do with learning to live one's daily life in the real world. Wisdom texts have an in-depth concern for the *whole* human condition. Focusing upon the everyday questions of the ordinary individual and community, wisdom texts can help us attend to and

¹² Proverbs 1:20, 22. ‘Simple’ in Proverbs generally denotes one without moral direction and inclined to evil.

¹³ Brueggemann, 1982:75.

learn from birth, life, death, sex, polite manners, sensuality, doubt, pride, injustice, suffering, and other realities and joys of everyday life. These texts are both intellectually honest, as they deal with the puzzles and mysteries of human life and divine presence, and emotionally passionate, as they express and try to make sense of the pain, the incoherence, the sadness, the despair, and the exuberant joy of human existence.¹⁴

Melchert goes on to point out that wisdom texts assume we can learn from others, even from those outside our cultural and religious tradition. Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes all seem to borrow or adapt material from Semitic or Egyptian sources and they weave it into a framework of Hebrew thinking. In this way, the material from without is valued for the truths it contains and refined for use by the people of God in their own way of life.

Melchert also says that the wisdom texts teach that we can find God in nature as “an arena of divine presence”, whilst at the same time being sensitive to the limits of our understanding of Him. Brueggemann suggests that there is a playfulness and delight in the discerning of wisdom in experience, not only good humour but also the ‘play’ that we find in a steering-wheel, “slippage that cannot be overcome or explained” for “to want more certainty is to crush the wonder that belongs to knowing”.¹⁵ Melchert writes in similar vein:

Sometimes they tell the reader-learner *what to do* (which is the teacher-author’s task), but more often they tell the reader *how to steer* (which is the learner’s task). They make observations and invite or tease readers into drawing their own conclusions, to be practised and tested in life experience, which learners must do for themselves.¹⁶

There is a sense of the interconnectedness of all things but we cannot see in our darkling mirror just how and where many of these

¹⁴ Melchert, 1998:3.

¹⁵ Brueggemann, 1982:80; cf. Johnston, 1987.

¹⁶ Melchert, 1998:59.

connections are to be made.¹⁷ A growing ability to make these connections, to discern how to ‘steer’ through life wisely, is perhaps most clearly and poignantly evident in areas such as learning about human relationships or making career choices. However, the need for wisdom is also present across the wider curriculum, for instance in learning about how to relate to the natural world.

The significance of the canon

Having considered some educational models implicitly present in the Torah, the prophets and the writings, we can now stand back and consider why the concept of canon is so important to Brueggemann’s argument, and what makes it a distinct addition to our range of approaches to the Bible and education. Clearly, Brueggemann has been involved in interpreting various particular statements, stories and images in the Hebrew scriptures and exploring their educational implications. However, he goes beyond examining individual passages and invites us to consider the implications of the fact that the Bible, in its final canonical form, contains this *range* of pedagogical emphases standing in this particular relationship to one another.

In other words, it is not enough to note that this or that passage of Scripture models this or that pedagogical emphasis; we should go on to ask what overall collection or pattern of emphases is modelled by the Bible as a whole. As Brueggemann points out, the Torah comes first and provides the foundation, a stable sense of identity, but it comes to need the word of prophet, which both builds upon the Torah and criticises the complacent consensus which it can engender. Within this secure-yet-vulnerable context of Torah and prophets the Writings invite us to explore the meaning of our experience of the world around us. Accepting these different texts as *canonical*, as carrying authority when taken together, seems to imply that not only individual passages but also this overall pattern of pedagogical emphases should be taken seriously.¹⁸

¹⁷ On wisdom and pedagogy see further Blomberg, 1998; Blomberg, 1986. See also Groome, 1980:139-151.

¹⁸ This point is developed in relation to college education by Spina (1989).

This is an addition to the approaches considered thus far in this book for two reasons. First, it raises the possibility that the results of the various strategies for relating the Bible to education could, even if successful on their own terms, still be unbiblical in terms of the bigger picture. We could immerse ourselves sensitively and creatively in the statements, stories, exhortations and images of the Torah, but the results would still be partial. They would not reflect the other canonical emphases, the critical challenge of the prophets and the exploratory wisdom of the writings. A canonical approach emphasises the need to attend to the whole, and to find in it correctives to our natural propensities as teachers. Am I mostly a Torah teacher, committed to the value of teaching basic truths well? Perhaps I need to hear the warnings of the prophet. Am I more prophetically inclined, eager for my students to question and criticise the deformities of the world around them? Perhaps I need to ask where they will find a secure sense of identity, or what they might gain by watching an ant. Attending to the larger canonical pattern can provide a way of questioning different teaching styles without denying their value.

Second, a canonical approach invites us to attend to a different aspect of the Bible. While the other approaches considered thus far ask us to identify biblical teachings, exhortations, images and stories, a canonical approach invites us to consider the *process and shape* of the biblical canon. We are asked to consider the pedagogical process by which the biblical writings were passed down across the generations, a process recorded in many of the passages discussed above. In other words, what pedagogies were considered right for the communication and preservation of God's truth? We are also asked to consider the overall shape of the final canonical text, its peculiar pattern of emphases and the way it places the pedagogical voices of Torah, prophets and writings in relation to one another.

Back to Jesus

By now the attentive reader may well be feeling a growing gap in the argument: do the Torah, the prophets and the writings by themselves make up the 'overall shape' of the Bible? What of the New Testament? This is indeed a serious point of incompleteness in the way in which a

canonical approach to education has been articulated. Brueggemann, whose account is the most extensive, limits himself to the Old Testament, and even there gives little attention to the narrative history books. What about the rest of the Christian canon?

This question immediately returns us to the first biblical model we looked at, that of Jesus the Teacher. In his teaching it is not hard to find exemplified all three modes. Here was someone who, in his mountainside teaching, asserted that he had not come “to abolish the Law and the Prophets”. Far from it, he had come to “fulfil” them, to affirm them by filling them out with his life and teaching.¹⁹ The Law truly and rightly said that one should not commit murder or adultery nor divorce one’s wife nor break an oath. Here we stand and here he stands. But Jesus the Prophet-Teacher questions our traditional understandings of these commands, understandings that have turned to stone as the centuries have passed. “An eye for an eye” says the Law, but he says “go not one mile but two, go the distance of love, even love of those who would torture you”.²⁰ He refers frequently to Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, Jonah and thereby roots his listeners in the familiar story of their people but, he asks them, are they truly the children of Abraham, the followers of David’s example?

In Jesus we find not only the rooting in the Torah and the prophetic shaking of accepted readings but all this, as we saw in the last chapter, accompanied by the proverbs and riddles, the sayings of wisdom that called again and again for the discerning of experience. Jesus is the ‘model of the models’ for in his teaching can be seen the three emphases already discussed.

Even having extended Brueggemann’s account to include Jesus, there is more work to be done: what is added by the later New Testament books, or by the narrative histories of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles? Nevertheless, enough has been said to enable us to identify the *strategy* at work, one of pointing us to the way in which the Bible, not merely in its several parts but also in its overall shape or pattern, models a particular range of educational emphases. This is the key point for our purposes here. If the existing attempts to work out the implications of this approach remain deficient, that does not

¹⁹ Matthew 5:17.

²⁰ See Matthew 5:38-42.

necessarily deny the validity of the approach; perhaps there is an invitation here to further work.²¹

And one more thing ...

Early in the process of writing this book, we made a presentation to a conference of Christian educationists in which we outlined the main links we saw between the Bible and education. In the question session after the presentation, one person put her hand up and quietly suggested that we might be missing something from our list. We seemed to be focused on answers, she suggested, perhaps we were missing the way in which the Bible alerts us to new or different questions to be asked in educational discussions.

In his book *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, George Marsden argues that Christianity can shape research agendas for, he says, “Christian motives can determine what fields people go into, what topics they study in those fields, and what questions they ask about those topics”.²² Marsden goes on to instance some examples. These include a study of the French Revolution which broke new ground because it looked at the religious origins of that movement in contrast with the prevailing outlook which sought only secular roots (and naturally only found them). They also include a study of Puritan sermons which was not only focused differently from other Puritan scholarship but also asked a different set of questions: previous scholars had focused on the place of the Puritan mind in American intellectual history; the study discussed by Marsden inquired into Puritan faith as a factor in history, and as a result gave more attention to sources such as the spirituality and devotional practices of the

²¹ The same holds for other weaknesses in Brueggemann’s particular account. We find, for instance, his mapping of the three pedagogical emphases of the Old Testament canon onto modern understandings of teacher-centred, critical and child-centred pedagogy loose to the point of being misleading. Nevertheless, even if a simplistic correlation of, say, the Writings with Dewey is inadequate, the broader point about the importance of acknowledging the diverse pedagogical models in Scripture still stands.

²² Marsden, 1997:64.

Puritans.²³ Part of what Christians are called to is living certain questions that their faith leaves them with, and not only to walking in the truths that it supplies.

Here again is this emphasis upon the raising of different questions. And does not the Bible itself provide us with examples of this too? Its 'research agenda' seems to be distinctively focused. When we read the stories of the kings of Israel there seems to be a certain selectivity and even incompleteness about them. The stories are summed up with statements about whether or not the kings did what was right in the eyes of the Lord. But what of the economic progress of the nation under their different rules? What of the gaps in their stories – and the chapters taken up with detail of particular events, e.g. the illness of a foreign army commander, repairs to a temple, the discovery of a dusty old scroll? The lengths of the accounts do not seem proportionate to the lengths of their lives or the relative impacts of their reigns in the world of their time. The accounts we have fit in neither of our categories of biography or history. When we come to them we find that the Bible is pursuing a set of questions which may not be the same as ours, and this underlying set of questions itself offers a model which can redirect our questioning.

The Bible may be linked with education in stimulating questions about neglected aspects or ignored issues. The prevailing view of language teaching, for example, may focus on the cognitive, the affective, the social and, more recently, even the cultural. But what of the spiritual and moral? Are these important not only in religious education and personal and social education where the spiritual and moral are normally seen to be at home? In the teaching of languages? Or mathematics? Or science?²⁴ The focused agendas of the Bible remind us that we should beware of letting the fashions of the age shape our agendas. Perhaps as important in education as the 'hidden curriculum' (of the underlying worldviews evident in practices and ethos rather than in written statements of mission) is the 'null curriculum', that which is not there at all because the prevailing worldview ignores it or shuts it out.

²³ Marsden, 1997:65, 71.

²⁴ Such questions about the spiritual and moral dimensions of apparently 'secular' subject areas lay at the basis of the Charis curriculum project. See Shortt, 2000; Smith, 1999.

Education can too easily become the practice of the absence of God or, at least, of some of the central divine concerns that come to the fore in the Bible. With the example of the Bible's different kinds of interests and focuses before us, we may be stimulated to ask questions that would not otherwise be asked. The answers to those questions may not come directly from the Bible nor even easily be found anywhere, but directions are changed and new and better vistas of possibility open up before us.

The modelling function of Scripture, which has been the focus of this chapter and chapter 12, adds to and interpenetrates the approaches discussed earlier in the book. One reason for Christians to take story seriously is because the Bible in general and Jesus in particular seem to honour story as a prime vehicle for learning and understanding. In the same way, the profusion of fertile metaphors in Scripture can lead us to take the role of metaphor in our educational thinking seriously. The Bible's central interest in faith can lead us to place an exploration of the implications of our beliefs high on our agendas, and the imitation of Christ has always been central to the Christian understanding of growth in virtue. Once again we find the various strands of the rope connecting the Bible to education to be intimately intertwined; pursuing any one strand sooner or later brings us into contact with the others. Having considered them all individually, it is time to stand back and see where we have come to.