FOLIA ORIENTALIA
VOL. 48 2011

Krzysztof Sonek, OP
Independent Researcher, The British Library

HANS W. FREI'S HERMENEUTICS AND GENESIS 12–25: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

Abstract

This article evaluates potential ways in which Hans W. Frei's interpretative approach and his reconstruction of pre-critical hermeneutics can be profitably used in the modern exegesis of the patriarchal narratives, especially of the Abraham Story in Gen 12–25. It begins with a short analysis of the critical voices which have been raised against Frei's theory over the last 30 years. This analysis helps to highlight both the obvious strengths and deficiencies of Frei's approach. Next, the article focuses on the model text of Gen 15 and asks further questions concerning the applicability of pre-critical hermeneutics to biblical narratives. This discussion results in a number of conclusions and in a blueprint for combining traditional and critical approaches within one methodologically correct model.

Hans W. Frei's *magnum opus*, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (1974), contains two distinct theses. The first one is a reconstruction of pre-eighteenth century biblical hermeneutics, usually called classic or traditional hermeneutics.[1] The second thesis shows the development of biblical interpretation from the end of the seventeenth until the first half of the nineteenth century[2] resulting in the eclipse of the "realistic narrative reading of biblical stories" (Frei 1974: 324). In this article, I am interested more in Frei's reconstruction of traditional hermeneutics than in assessing the accuracy of his historical analysis. In this respect, I follow Justin J.

[1] In this article, I use the term *traditional hermeneutics*.

[2] A discussion of the hermeneutical contribution of Friedrich Schleirmacher (1768–1834) and that of Georg Hegel (1770–1831) form the core of the final parts of Frei's book.

Kelly who focuses on Frei's "thesis rather than on his hermeneutical history, in the belief that most of the novelty and interest of his work depends on the former" (Kelly 1975:156). Because of the shift in biblical interpretation which has taken place over the last three hundred years, it seems that a large number of pre-critical commentaries have been banished from the world of critical exegesis. They are the object of interest of patristic scholars, but they seldom feature prominently in modern academic commentaries on Scripture. As a result, both their theological depth and linguistic analyses appear lost to modern biblical criticism. This article argues that, given the importance of traditional hermeneutics[3], we should not easily allow this to happen, and look for possible ways of introducing certain aspects of pre-critical exegesis into modern commentaries. It goes without saying that the use of traditional hermeneutics in modern exegesis must be selective and critical. This is why, in the following paragraphs, I will attempt to critically discuss chosen aspects of Frei's reconstruction of pre-modern hermeneutics as well as drafting a preliminary version of an interpretative model which draws upon traditional hermeneutics without violating the principles of modern biblical criticism.

In the article focused on establishing possible links between traditional hermeneutics and historical criticism (Sonek 2011), I have said that the ground common to both types of approaches is their attention to the plain sense of texts with its emphasis on genre and semantics. What follows is that the rift between pre-critical and critical approaches, even if obvious and undeniable, was less dramatic and clear-cut than we usually think. In the following paragraphs, I would like to continue this topic and ask about the possibility of combining other aspects of pre-critical exegesis with modern critical insights with a view to reinterpreting the patriarchal stories.

I shall begin by briefly listing the features of traditional hermeneutics presented by Frei in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*.[4] Frei emphasizes that for pre-modern readers the most important characteristic of Scripture was an ability to integrate its numerous stories into one all-encompassing and universal narrative. The unity of Scripture was brought about by three main factors. First, the totality of scriptural narratives tells a meta-story which describes the sequence of events from the creation of the universe in the book of Genesis to its recreation in the book of Revelation. Secondly, the unity of biblical books results from

[3] "From the point of view of Christian communities, traditional hermeneutics helps to preserve the unity of the canon, it accounts for the interpretation of Scripture characteristic of pre-critical times, and, by establishing a dialogue between the past and the present, it allows pre-critical exegesis to influence modern thinking. It should, at the same time, be borne in mind that traditional hermeneutics is also an important way of reading Scripture in pastoral contexts" (Sonek 2011).

[4] Cf. George S. Lindbeck's presentation of classic Christian hermeneutics in "Postcritical Canonical Interpretation" (1999:29–31).

figurative (typological) interpretation. Earlier personages and events foreshadow their later counterparts, and, in consequence, they establish a complex net of links between various biblical texts. Thirdly, for Christian interpreters, the four Gospels contain the stories of utmost significance, which serve as the principal interpretative key validating various readings of Scripture and helping to sift out readings considered to be inaccurate or straightforwardly false.

Furthermore, Frei (1974:10) states that for pre-eighteenth century interpreters biblical narratives were "realistic and history-like (though not necessarily historical)." It has to be said that Frei's overall explanation of this particular feature of biblical narratives is far from being exhaustive. However, his remarks help to grasp a general idea behind his description. Frei (1974:13) says: "what they [biblical narratives] are about and how they make sense are functions of the depiction or narrative rendering of the events constituting them—including their being rendered, at least partially, by the device of chronological sequence." Francis Watson contrasts Frei's understanding of biblical realism with that of Eric Auerbach and explains that "Frei interprets 'realism' in formalistic fashion as denoting the containment of meaning within the text, irreducibility to non-narrative discourse" (Watson 1994:27). According to Frei, we should not attempt to extract a system of theological truths from narrative texts. On the contrary, we should acknowledge that the message which a text communicates is inseparable form that text's narrative form. It is the analysis of different aspects of narrative form which leads to an elucidation of the text's meaning. Frei, obviously, explains what he means by the narrative depiction, even if, sadly, he does not illustrate his discussion with almost any examples:

"The narrative depiction is of that peculiar sort in which characters or individual persons, in their internal depth or subjectivity as well as in their capacity as doers and sufferers of actions or events, are firmly and significantly set in the context of the external environment, natural but more particularly social. Realistic narrative is that kind in which subject and social setting belong together, and characters and external circumstances fitly render each other. (Frei 1974:13)"

A direct consequence of the realistic and history-like character of biblical narratives is that their meaning does not depend on any external reality: biblical narratives simply mean what they say. The majority of pre-critical interpreters were not interested in establishing the meaning of biblical narratives in relation to historical events (*ostensive reference*) or general theological truths (*ideal reference*) (see Frei 1974:86–104)—in fact, and strictly speaking, such an option did not yet exist for them.

It was the development of biblical hermeneutics since the end of the seventeenth century which has brought a major interpretative shift recognizable in the works of eighteenth and nineteenth century theologians and constituting the solid basis of modern biblical criticism. Frei (1974:16) calls that shift the

"eclipse of biblical narrative" and explains that "the realistic or history-like quality of biblical narratives, acknowledged by all, instead of being examined for the bearing it had in its own right on meaning and interpretation was immediately transposed into the quite different issue of whether or not the realistic narrative was historical." The obvious and direct consequence of the eclipse was the collapse of the unity of Scripture. Instead of being an all-encompassing meta-story, it shattered into a thousand relatively independent pieces, and each of those pieces became the object of interest of historically-oriented scholars.

Frei's influential book and its extremely nuanced analyses have both staunch critics and devoted admirers. As regards the critics, it has been customary to disapprove of Frei's convoluted style of writing.[5] While this criticism is, by and large, justified, it misses the point that the real difficulty with the book is its partial failure to clearly define basic terms and to exemplify its statements.[6] Frei was aware of this deficiency and thought that it had resulted from the book's genre. He says in the preface to *The Eclipse*: "This essay falls into the almost legendary category of analysis of analyses of the Bible in which not a single text is examined, not a single exegesis undertaken. ... there is no denying the odd result of a book about the Bible in which the Bible itself is never looked at" (Frei 1974:vii). Hence it is unfair to criticize Frei for not writing an exegetical commentary on Scripture, because he actually never intended to write it.[7]

However, the critical remarks made by his reviewers are to the point for those who would like to develop Frei's approach to Scripture. This is why G. H. Boobyer is right in saying that Frei's book needs a companion volume which will fully explain his discussion (see Boobyer 1975:579–80). Similarly, Dennis Nineham complains that the various ways in which the eclipse of narrative form has taken place in biblical exegesis are not exemplified: "There are, as W. B. Gallie for example has shown, some sorts of subject-matter (for instance a game of cricket) to which only a treatment in narrative form can do justice. If in such cases the narrative character of the treatment is not taken seriously, the subject treated is seriously misunderstood. That this has happened to the biblical material Dr Frei has made clear. It would have been helpful if he had drawn out more

[5] E.g. G. H. Boobyer (1975:578) says: "Unfortunately, however, the author's abstract and rather involved style has made the book too long and difficult to read." P. H. Reardon's reaction (1975:175) is representative of all those who failed in the attempt to pass through the thicket of Frei's academic prose: "In all honesty this reviewer is unable to recommend this work except to those with a patience beyond the ordinary."

[6] F. H. Borsch (1975:572) rightly notes: "Yet if the author is to engage other historians, philosophers, theologians and literary critics, ... his arguments must come to be stated with more directness and clarity."

[7] Frei's *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (1975) cannot be classified as an exegetical commentary, even if it is not as purely theoretical as *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*.

succinctly the precise ways in which he thinks the Bible was misunderstood as a result of this failure" (Nineham 1976:47–48). In turn, Mike Higton, in his excellent introduction to Frei's narrative theology (2004:137), declares: "The book strongly suggests that it will be possible to retrieve something of the pre-critical acknowledgement of the history-likeness of biblical narratives, without simply turning the clock back on the findings and methods of historical criticism, but does not make it very clear what such a retrieval will actually look like." Furthermore, we should agree with Frederick H. Borsch who complains that Frei does not define such crucial terms as *history* or even *narratives* (see Borsch 1975:572). In view of the above criticisms, any viable exegetical commentary to the book of Genesis which draws upon the insights of traditional hermeneutics must meet the following list of requirements: it should illustrate the ways in which the eclipse of biblical narrative has taken place in the exegesis of the patriarchal narratives; it should clarify and exemplify all the critical terms used; and, finally, it ought to show clearly how the meta-theoretical considerations can be applied to the exegesis of specific texts.

Frei's adversaries point to an inherent problem present in his hermeneutical proposal. The problem concerns the interaction between the world projected by biblical narratives and the outside world of the reader. Frei (1974:3) states: "Since the world truly rendered by combining biblical narratives into one was indeed the one and only real world, it must in principle embrace the experience of any present age and reader." What follows is that in pre-critical hermeneutics, readers and their everyday reality are part of the all-encompassing biblical narrative. The lives of all readers belong to the chronological sequence of the biblical meta-story. However, according to Watson, Frei apparently fails to explain the links between the text and reality, and is constantly afraid of allowing the world of the text to be contaminated by the world of the reader. The biblical text contains and projects the whole of known reality and plays a dominant role. Because of this, Frei sees the interaction between the text and outside reality with suspicion. The danger is that the real world of the reader may infringe on the text's supreme rights. The only thing the reader is authorized to do is to surrender in the face of the text's imperious claims. Watson (1994:26) explains: "The self-contained text is a place of refuge, but it is also in danger of becoming a place of illusion, a wilful refusal of reality. ... The world must not be allowed to contaminate the text."

Leo G. Perdue points out a similar problem with Frei's hermeneutics, and is even more specific in his critique than Watson. He assumes that some Christian readers of the Bible can relatively easily place themselves and their lives within the biblical meta-narrative. However, this may not be the case of other readers. Perdue (1994:262) asks rhetorically: "What of those who are not in the story, either because they have different stories (say, Hindus or Buddhists or Jews) or because they see the story as excluding them (feminists who reject

the patriarchal character of much of the story)?" What is more, Perdue rightly stresses the role of the reader in the process of interpretation, and says that "the hermeneutical process, then, is not a monologue with only the text speaking but a dialogue between Scripture and interpreter" (1994:262).

It seems that both Watson and Perdue have correctly identified the apparent downside of traditional hermeneutics. In order to preserve the integrity of the biblical world, Frei does not allow sufficient communication between the text and the reader. Non-Christian readers, practitioners of the approaches to biblical texts which go against the grain of traditional interpretation, and even moderate reader-response critics will definitely lament this feature of Frei's hermeneutics. Their feeling of unease must be taken into account, and Frei's interpretative model must be rectified in order to, first, explain clearly the interaction between the world of the text and the world of the reader, and, secondly, allow those who feel excluded by biblical stories to speak up. This will be in accordance with Walter Brueggemann's predictions concerning the future of Old Testament theology: "Christian Old Testament theology will be done by reading the text in the presence of Jews, with some attentiveness to the different readings of the text by serious Jews. In time to come, moreover, the same awareness will surely be extended to serious Islamic readers of the text, who are also among the 'peoples of the Book'. Beyond these several communities of the *children of Abraham*, in time to come more attention is likely to be given to the other *children of Noah*" (Brueggemann 2006:692).

Moving on now to a strictly theological critique of *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, we should say that many scholars are concerned that Frei's hermeneutics does not adequately explain the divine factor in the process of interpretation. Richard R. Topping (2007:67) states: "The central criticism throughout is that a dogmatic description of the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit in relation to the scriptural witness, especially at the level of its meaning (perspicuity), does not consistently inform his [Frei's] hermeneutic proposal." Nicholas Boyle sides with Topping and accuses Frei of bibliolatry by strongly arguing that the role of the Church in interpretation is hidden from view in Frei's theology. Boyle's first objection (2005:61) is pneumatological: "The text alone, however elaborated and multiple, however full of typological echoes and pre-echoes, will not suffice to interpret the story of Jesus as something that matters. Mattering comes from the Spirit." Secondly, Boyle is at variance with Frei's alleged stance on ecclesiological matters: Frei "is unwilling to allow the church a role in biblical hermeneutics. In the end he too wants to be able to say that the Bible stands alone and that we know God and ourselves *sola scriptura*" (Boyle 2005:62).

Nevertheless, I believe that the above two criticisms partly miss the point, because there are based on the assumption that biblical hermeneutics and dogmatic theology share the same set of basic principles and should account for the same

phenomena. On the contrary, I think that it is better to regard dogmatic theology as an important, or even crucial, supplement to scriptural hermeneutics. The issue is more significant than it appears to be at first sight. At stake is no less than the universal character of our interpretative efforts. If biblical scholars become entangled in dogmatic issues at the very beginning of their exegetical enterprise, there is a serious risk that the results of their work will satisfy the interests of a particular denomination and run the risk of offending the sensibilities of others, instead of being able to serve all of them. It is then important to distinguish between the level of biblical criticism, which should strive to be objective to the greatest possible extent, and the level of ecclesiastical self-understanding, on which a particular community of faith makes its own interpretative choices. There is no doubt that writing an exegetical commentary to Genesis informed by a particular doctrinal stance is possible and will serve the interests of a particular community. Yet the opposite way of proceeding is also possible and desirable. One can envisage a commentary which focuses on the factors mentioned in the preceding paragraphs: on the semantics, genre, internal unity, and narrative depiction of texts; illustrating the eclipse of narrative meaning by meanings based on ostensive or ideal reference; discussing and clarifying critical terms used in exegesis; explaining the interaction between the world of the text and outside reality; as well as allowing different interpretative voices to speak up. The general and objective character of such a commentary would consist in keeping possible interpretative options open and avoiding the sway of a priori dogmatic considerations to the extent it is possible. The outcome of this way of proceeding can be subsequently tailored to the needs of particular communities of faith and shaped by them. The value of Frei's contribution to Christian theology has been recognized but many[8], and it appears that his theory is general enough to appeal to a wide variety of readers. In brief, Topping's and Boyle's postulates should supplement an interpretative theory based on traditional hermeneutics rather than form its very core and its starting point.[9]

My conviction is that traditional hermeneutics practised critically and selectively may offer refreshing ways of reading the patriarchal narratives in the modern context. This is why I would now like to outline a possible application of traditional hermeneutics to Gen 12–25. The implementation of the interpretative principles of traditional hermeneutics to the model text Gen 15 ("God's covenant with Abram") will help to further refine those principles and to exemplify them.

[8] See e.g. Lindbeck 1999, Tanner 2000.

[9] It should be said that the theological critique of Frei's treatment of biblical narratives is a subject in its own right, and this article is not trying to exhaust this topic. There are many other interesting critical points such as that made by F. F. Bruce (1975:201): "Is historical reality relevant or not to our understanding of the [biblical] story? The literary critic may say 'No' but the Christian theologian is apt to say 'Yes.' So Frei's study raises issues to which his terms of reference do not contemplate an answer."

I have already said that traditional hermeneutics shares with modern biblical criticism a concern for semantics and genre. A cursory reading of Gen 15 shows a number of words whose semantic field must be fully established in order to elucidate the meaning of the passage. First, when Yahweh says to Abraham in Gen 15:1 *ʾnky mgn lk*, we should ask what kind of purpose is *mgn* ("a shield") destined to serve. Is its use purely defensive or perhaps other shades of meaning are also included? It may symbolize the action of attacking and invading as in Isa 37:33, "Therefore thus says the LORD concerning the king of Assyria: He shall not come into this city, or shoot an arrow there, or come before it with a *shield*, or cast up a siege mound against it"[10] (cf. 2 Kgs 19:32). It may represent a warrior's preparation for an imminent battle, which is apparent in Jer 46:3, "Prepare buckler and *shield*, and advance for battle!" There are also other uses of *mgn* which represent royal wealth and splendour, e.g. in 1 Kgs 10:17, "And he made three hundred *shields* of beaten gold; three minas of gold went into each shield; and the king put them in the House of the Forest of Lebanon" (see also 2 Chr 32:27).

Secondly, when we read in Gen 15:12 that *ʾymh ḥškh gdlh* fell upon Abraham, we should be able to understand the precise meaning of this phrase. Is this a kind of fear we experience when we face an enemy, as in Ezra 3:3, "They set the altar in its place, for *fear* was upon them because of the peoples of the lands"? Or rather is it the fear induced by the presence of a mighty and important person such as God, in Exod 15:16, "*Terror* and dread fall upon them; because of the greatness of thy arm," or a king, in Prov 20:2, "The *dread wrath* of a king is like the growling of a lion"? The theological content of the narrative in Gen 15 may have various shades of meaning depending on the answers to the above questions.

Similar questions arise when we try to define the genre of the narratives in Gen 12–25. Should we simply say, after Westermann, that they are "patriarchal stories" or "narratives about Israel's ancestors," and so a kind of non-historical and non-biographical fiction arising from the community of Israel's need for self-definition (see Westermann 1995:41–50)? Or perhaps their genre should be understood differently. Even a brief look at the solutions given by different commentators shows that the question is far from being obvious. We have the well-established but, at the same time, controversial identification of these stories as sagas (see Rad 1972:31–43, Coats 1983:28–29). We have also various attempts to redefine the genre of Gen 12–25 such as David W. Cotter's (2003:79) "stories about the troubled family chosen for blessing." It seems, however, that any genre description which is to be adopted for the analysis of the patriarchal stories should take into account the following remark made by Westermann

[10] All English translations of Hebrew texts are given after the RSV, unless stated otherwise.

in the context of oral tradition, which seems compatible with the approach characteristic of traditional hermeneutics: "The patriarchal traditions are in no sense history, and the question about the historicity of the patriarchal stories and figures is a question wrongly put. ... As the patriarchal stories are neither history nor historical writing, one cannot even raise the question about their historicity or that of the figures concerned" (Westermann 1995:43). As a result, it should be emphasized that mere labelling the genre of Gen 12–25 in one way or another is secondary to the understanding of the consequences of that genre for interpretation. Surprisingly, Westermann's historical-critical investigation of the problem seems to be compatible with the approach employed by traditional hermeneutics: the question of historicity is either sidelined or absent.

Traditional hermeneutics suggests that we read the Abraham Cycle as a unified story which begins with the call of Abram in Gen 12 and ends with his death in Gen 25. What provides the unity of the story are the protagonist Abram/Abraham and the theme centred on the promise of posterity.[11] However, doublets and textual tensions disrupt the unity of the story. Historical criticism provides us with an explanation of those tensions through recourse to source criticism. In the case of Gen 15, von Rad (1972:182) expresses the view of the majority of historical critics: "There are too many contradictions in the chapter for one to think of it as an organic narrative unit (v. 5, night, v. 12, evening, v. 6, Abraham's faith, v. 8, his doubt which God helps to dispel with a real guarantee, etc.)" Furthermore, God promises Abraham a son in Gen 15:4 and in Gen 17:16, but then seems to make an attempt on Isaac's life in Gen 22. Abraham in Gen 15:6 is presented as a paragon of faith and virtue, yet in Gen 16:6 he sides with Sarah and expels Hagar, the mother of his future firstborn. However, when we pay attention to the final form of the text, we may suggest an alternative solution to the problem. These and many other tensions may be interpreted as signs of paradox and ambiguity pervading the narrative world to the same extent as they are present in everyday human experience. This way of explaining the disunity of the story is confirmed by Ronald F. Thiemann, who claims that ambiguity and confusion are inherent characteristics of biblical narratives, and we should be able to read them as such (see Thiemann 2000:30–38). What is more, this feature of Gen 12–25 sheds light on the problem of the communication between the world of the reader and the world of the text mentioned above, and may help mediate between the rather strict position represented by Frei and the the obvious need for communication and interrelationship between the textual and human reality.

It has been said that for traditional interpreters the stories in Gen 12–25 are realistic narratives, i.e. "what they are about and how they make sense are functions of the depiction or narrative rendering of the events constituting them—

[11] On the theological theme of Genesis see Clines 2001.

including their being rendered, at least partially, by the device of chronological sequence" (Frei 1974:13). Two further issues arise in this context. First, in order to analyse the chronological organization of events and the portrayal of the characters in Gen 12–25, we should use the tools of narrative analysis. It seems, however, that a more profitable path to explore is that of narrative semantics and pragmatics rather than that of narrative syntax and discourse.[12] In other words, when we read biblical narratives through the prism of traditional hermeneutics, we should follow the model of reading established by Robert Alter in *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (1981) rather than that exemplified by the recent and excellent book by Françoise Mirguet *La représentation du divin dans les récits du Pentateuque* (2009). We should be interested more in close reading than in establishing abstract modes of narrative communication. We ought to pay attention to "the artful use of language, to the shifting play of ideas, conventions, tone, sound, imagery, syntax, narrative viewpoint, compositional units, and much else" (Alter 1981:12).

Secondly, George Lindbeck is right in saying that biblical texts project a number of different symbolic words and the reader must be guided which one to adopt.[13] Now, there are many potential symbolic worlds generated by Gen 12–25: they share common basic characteristics, yet they differ in detail. It is up to the interpreter which narrative themes will be brought to the fore and which will be sidelined. My own proposal is to read Gen 15 and indeed the whole Abraham Cycle as a drama depicting the struggle of Abraham, Sarah, and other personages against all kinds of existential realities which are uncontrollable and destructive. In Gen 15, Abram faces the reality of terrifying monumental time, to use the phrase borrowed from Paul Ricoeur (1985). The monumental time—the objective flow of time reflecting the absolute laws of nature governing the universe—is symbolized by such natural phenomena as the stars, the sunset, darkness, fire and smoke, as well as by Abram's reaction: a deep sleep, a dread, and great darkness (15:5, 12, 17) The only way to overcome that reality, which ultimately leads to metaphorical and physical death symbolized by "a deep sleep," "a dread and great darkness" (15:12), is to believe God's promise and to make a covenant with him (15:18). To give another example, in Gen 12:10–20, Abram's and Sarah's lives are threatened by famine. They move to

[12] See my discussion in Sonek 2009:139–42. The difference is between *what* narratives mean (semantics and pragmatics) and *how* they mean (syntax and discourse).

[13] George Lindbeck states that an approach to Scripture based on Frei's analysis and application of traditional hermeneutics can be labeled "interpretation for narrationally structured symbolic worlds" (Lindbeck 1999:26–27). In this model of interpretation, Scripture projects a symbolic world that the reader indwells. The term "symbolic" means in this context "involving representation", and can be factual or fictive—this is why speaking of a "symbolic world" does not deny the objective reality of God and brackets the question of the historical truth of biblical narratives (Lindbeck 1999:33–35).

Egypt and have to confront the sinister reality of a foreign empire. Again, God's intervention provides rescue from an existential situation which is beyond their control: "The Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife" (12:17). Among other examples of the uncontrollable and destructive existential realities we should mention the war depicted in Gen 14, the wilderness in Gen 16 and 21, as well as the apparently perplexing and outré demand of God in Gen 22.

Finally, an important aspect of traditional hermeneutics is the relation between the overarching world of biblical narratives and the world of the reader. There is no doubt that the narratives in Gen 12–25 are an example of "literature that speaks to us urgently, with the power to 'draw us out' of ourselves" (Alter 1992:23). Those narratives project a world which has its integrity, but readers should always be allowed to voice their disagreement or express their approval when confronted with that world. By way of example, there are plenty of themes and images in Gen 15 to which readers may respond by creating a link between a topic in the text and its counterpart in their world. The experience of childlessness (15:2), the promise of progeny and land (15:5–6), helplessness in the face of cosmic and divine reality (15:12), a vision of the future (15:13–16), the need to make a covenant with God (15:18) are among the many topics which resonate with readers and elicit their response.

However, we should remember that the reader's response to the text cannot be categorized as part of the text's meaning, because in traditional hermeneutics meaning is in reference to the text only. Yet since readers belong to the world projected by the text, or at least interact with it, their response should be understood as an important dimension of the text's significance. The distinction between the text's meaning and significance, which finds its classic expression in the works of E. D. Hirsch (1967 and 1976), even if not devoid of potential hermeneutical problems[14] is a pragmatic solution which allows to bring all kinds of modern approaches to the text: feminist, political, or sociological. Without violating the text's meaning, readers can play their own creative game with biblical texts, and still remain an indispensable part of the biblical world.

To put the thesis of this article in a nutshell, reading Gen 12–25 inspired by traditional hermeneutics involves defining critical concepts, discussing the semantics and genre of the texts in question, allowing for paradox and ambiguity, and a close reading of texts. It cannot be called modern or post-modern in any sense if it is not open to a dialogue with other competitive modes of reading.

[14] See Sonek 2009:88–90.

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