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## Searching for a question and an answer

### ABSTRACT

This article focusses on Eckart Otto's theory of the Pentateuch, his contribution to Pro Pent (the "Project for the study of the Pentateuch") and his influence on our understanding of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. There was something in his thinking that appealed to many South African scholars; an appeal that softened down the harsh criticism and blunted the sharp edges of Pentateuch study of the past two centuries. And this was accomplished by turning the focus to the theological and ethical issues, which were the driving forces behind the formation of the Pentateuch. Put differently: to show the Pentateuch as an answer to a question and Pentateuch criticism as a constant search for the questions to which the Pentateuch is answer.

He arrived on a Tuesday. The exact date I cannot remember anymore. It was, however, a fine day in the year 2000 when Eckart Otto visited the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria. For the next decade he would return each year for lectures to theologians, sociologists and philosophers. Each visit was packed with meetings with students and others. He was always accompanied by colleagues and friends wanting to talk, discuss issues or just enjoy a cup of coffee with him. Each visit was demanding and strenuous but he kept up an unbelievable pace.

He has been honorary professor of the Faculty since 2000, became honorary member of the Old Testament Society of South Africa and received an honorary doctorate from the University of Pretoria in 2007. Owing to Otto contracts were negotiated between the faculties of theology of Pretoria and Munich and later also between the two universities. It was, however, for the meetings of Pro Psalms and Pro Pent that he came each year. Especially Pro Pent which the two of us "founded" in a noisy student café during his first stay. Pro Pent became a joint project between Pretoria and Munich and Otto's lasting influence must be sought here (Le Roux 2005:1-21). He changed our worlds in more than one way: he introduced a new way of understanding the Old Testament and showed us a different but very challenging way of understanding the Pentateuch. Due to our theological past Pentateuch criticism became a thorny issue and terms like "source criticism", "Pentateuch criticism", "sources", et cetera are still regarded with suspicion (Le Roux 1993:26-33).

Below we endeavour to determine the significance of Otto's contribution for the South African context by interpreting his views in terms of a hermeneutics of question and answer and in such a way that the Pentateuch can be understood as answer to a question. To serve as background against which to appreciate his unique approach, earlier efforts from this country to understand the Pentateuch in a more historical critical way, as well as the commotion it incited, will be referred to.

### PENTATEUCH ANGER

Otto stepped into our world which was not particularly inclined to Pentateuch criticism or theories explaining its origins and growth. One reason for this was that since 1971 South African

biblical scholars started to focus more on the final text and structural analysis and to underplay historical information. The extra-linguistic world was bracketed and the single sign or word or expression was viewed as sufficient for understanding a linguistic utterance. All that was needed was the correct method and the correct execution of the different exegetical steps (Le Roux 2007:1-18). This synchronic way of working was often viewed as a substitute for historical criticism, the diachronic reading of the Pentateuch and Pentateuchal theories.

Another reason for the lack of a local Pentateuch tradition was the lot that befell some Pentateuch scholars in South Africa. They often found themselves at loggerheads with the church and the faith community and often were not tolerated. *John William Colenso* serves as an outstanding example. He was an English bishop who arrived in South Africa on 20 May 1855 and took up residence at Bishopstowe, just outside Pietermaritzburg where he stayed for the rest of his life and where he devoted himself to missionary work and Pentateuch study (Chadwick 1971:7-23).

Colenso was a mathematician and as a young man he found his way through life by teaching arithmetic, at times from five-thirty in the morning to the early evening. At Cambridge he contributed to his upkeep by teaching and writing text-books on mathematics which allowed him to attend university and pursue his dreams in the world of learning. Colenso, however, was not financially independent in these years but when his publishers in 1853 bought the copyright of his books it enabled him to settle his debts and take care of the bishopric of Natal in South Africa. It was with this mathematical mindset that Colenso began his study of the Pentateuch (Cox 1888:40-47; Hinchliff 1964:60-64; Guy 1983:3-56).

Colenso therefore read the Pentateuch as an arithmetician indicating the 'remarkable inconsistencies and contradictory statements' in the text (Colenso 1863:163). He, for instance, investigated the tabernacle's court to determine whether it could accommodate the total number of the congregation. This inquiry was prompted by the continual reference to the assembly of Israelites who had to gather at the door of the tabernacle (cf Lev 8:1-4). According to Colenso's calculation this was impossible. There was not even adequate space for a small section of the assembly. Although it was extremely difficult to determine the size or the nature of this assembly Colenso nevertheless restricted himself to the numbers mentioned in Numbers 2:32: the Israelite warriors amounted to 603 550. They must have formed part of the assembly but definitely did not enter the tabernacle. The width of the tabernacle was 10 cubits or 18 feet and its length 30 cubits or 54 feet. If two cubits were allowed for each person, only nine could have attended the meeting. If all the warriors were filed in ranks of nine they would have formed a line of more than 100 000 feet - 'in fact, *twenty miles*' (Colenso 1862:33).

By means of his mathematical approach to the text he indicated sufficiently 'the utter impossibility of receiving any longer this story (of the Pentateuch) as literary and historically true' (Colenso 1863:169). And when the first part of his book on the Pentateuch was published in October 1862 in London it caused a sensation and Colenso was ridiculed. In 'a rising wave of hysteria' (Hinchliff 1968:68) Colenso's views were fiercely rejected and unfairly attacked whilst many wanted him to be deposed from his office as the Bishop of Natal. Today all the uproar seems unnecessary but in the nineteenth century it was a reality. And it was all caused by a lonely missionary at the southern tip of Africa who read the Pentateuch critically and thereby contributed to a way of reading that prevailed ever since (cf Wellhausen 2001:346).

Colenso was not the only victim of Pentateuch anger. *Johannes du Plessis* caused a stir in the Afrikaans community in the late nineteen twenties and thirties of the previous century. He propagated a very mild form of historical criticism and distinguished between the Elohist, the author of the first creation story, the Jehovist, the author of the second creation narrative, the Deuteronomist, who was responsible for Deuteronomy and the Junior Elohist, who became

united with the Jehovist. Du Plessis' source criticism was not complicated because he wanted to convince the church of the importance of historical criticism. He was of opinion that the church could no longer ignore these insights and challenges. Du Plessis never developed his Pentateuch theory further but nevertheless agitated the Afrikaans community and the church. In the end he was dismissed from his post as professor in theology at the theological seminary of Stellenbosch. Du Plessis appealed to the higher court which returned a verdict in his favour. Thus an early attempt to read and understand the Pentateuch from a critical historical perspective was nipped in the bud (Du Plessis 1926a:100-106; 1926b:80-87; 1927:23-26; Deist 1986b:36-65).

Nearly a century after the death of Colenso *Ferdinand Deist* picked up the threads again. After Colenso he was the first South African who approached the Pentateuch in a true historical critical manner. The academic year that he spent in Marburg with Otto Kaiser enabled him to appropriate and understand especially the German critical or scholarly mind. He was not only acquainted with the method but also with the philosophy and theory of science underlying the critical study of the Pentateuch. It enabled him to understand the Pentateuch critics and to penetrate their theories intellectually. No other South African Old Testament scholar has immersed him/herself so completely in the works of critical Pentateuch scholars as Deist. This resulted in a book on the history of Pentateuch research which was first published in Afrikaans and subsequently in English. It was the first book on Pentateuch scholarship to have appeared in South Africa and it confronted the academic community with a long forgotten tradition. It once again caused repercussions in the community and Deist also had to suffer the burning anger of many who adhered to the Mosaic origin of the Pentateuch. However, with Deist's untimely death on 12 July 1997 at the age of fifty two, his Pentateuch research was brought to an abrupt close (cf Deist 1976a:1-12; 1976b:1-36; 1977:325-357; 1981:23-39; 1983:26-48; 1984:98-132; 1986a:159-172; 1986b:36-65; 1988:1-47).

It is against this background of Pentateuch anger that Otto's contribution must be understood. There was something in his thinking that appealed to many South African scholars; an appeal that softened down the harsh criticism and blunted the sharp edges of Pentateuch study of the past two centuries. *And this was accomplished by turning the focus to the theological and ethical issues, which were the driving forces behind the formation of the Pentateuch. Put differently: to show the Pentateuch as an answer to a question and Pentateuch criticism as a constant search for the questions to which the Pentateuch is answer.*

## AN ANSWER TO A QUESTION

Hermeneutics has to do with a question and an answer: "Die Frage nach der Frage, auf die die Hermeneutik die Antwort ist" (Marquard 1991:117; Körtner 2006:1-5). Reflecting on a hermeneutics for the Pentateuch the words "understand", "question" and "answer" are constitutive (Marquard 1991:117-138). They can serve as building blocks for appreciating Otto's understanding of the Pentateuch's context and growth.

The answer, however, is always incomplete: "Was ausgesagt ist, ist nicht alles" (Gadamer 1973:504). To rephrase: the Pentateuch as an answer to a question (or many questions) is never complete and present in its fullness. Augustine's distinction between *verbum cordis* or "inner word" and *verbum exterior* or "outer word" explains this incomplete nature of an answer. The inner word is the "word" before it is uttered in sound (Drobner 1994:352-354). It is more authentic, is the real true word and it never loses its quality as the ineffable inner word. Not every word we utter is therefore the true word and the word that sounds outwardly is only a sign of "the word that gives light inwardly". Thus, the words in the Pentateuch are not the full expression of the authors' inner word; the authors' inner words were not fully emptied in

the “final text”; something remained “behind”, so to speak (Augustinus, *De trinitate*, 11,20; cf Grondin 1994:24-39; 2001:50-59; Figal 2002:102-125).

And this “unexpressed information” can only be “retrieved” in the dialectic of question and answer. We must always ask “which answers to which questions fit the facts”. This “is in fact the hermeneutical ‘Urphänomenon’” (Gadamer 1966:224). The Pentateuch’s meaning is therefore linked to this dialogical process of question and answer. The exegete must therefore become engaged in the endless process of asking (historical) questions: What was the original question? What were the circumstances? To what is this or that section of the Pentateuch an answer? To whom was it directed? How did the editors interpret and formulate the answer? Et cetera (Zenger 2008:60-135, 156-187).

The Pentateuch is an answer to the questions that lived in the hearts of people. At specific junctures in Israel’s history certain questions were posed and the various redactions of the Pentateuch are attempts to provide answers to these questions. Traces of the original questions and answers can still be detected and the scholar must endeavour to determine the original questions with which the authors grappled. And the way in which Otto described the origin and growth of the Pentateuch helps one to understand something of Israel’s world and the existential problems they were confronted with.

## THE PENTATEUCH AS AN ANSWER TO A QUESTION

There is something in Otto’s approach which averted (at least in scholarly circles) the Pentateuch anger as described above. Something which contributed in a remarkable way to a kind of South African Pentateuch tradition which would take the critical study of the past two centuries seriously but also become “practical”. Practical in the sense that the critical study can be used in discussions about human rights and theological issues (such as the greatest gift of Yahweh to Israel). And Otto accomplished exactly this by treating the Pentateuch as an answer to a question; by understanding the Pentateuch in terms of a very creative dialogue between questions posed and answers given. Existential questions prompted by the struggles of life, many human failures and the bleak expectations of a new future. Life-related answers to people in specific contexts in Israel’s history. And as said above, it is a never-ending dialogue because no answer is complete or a full expression of the author’s views (Lawrence 2002:167-200). To illustrate some examples from Otto’s work are given below.

### **The Judean Deuteronomy’s answer to resistance**

In the seventh century Judean intellectuals grappled with the problem of insubordination and defiance (Otto 1999a:15-109; 1999e:1-84; 2001b:1-120; 2002c:43-83). It was the time of the neo-Assyrian power and the loyalty oath of the Assyrian King Esarhaddon (VTE) of 672 BCE. Due to the massive military power of the neo-Assyrian empire the Northern kingdom was destroyed in 722 BCE and in 701 Jerusalem narrowly escaped Sanherib’s siege. By 699 BCE Manasseh subdued himself to the Assyrians and Judah became an Assyrian vassal state. This implied that Manasseh had to accept the vassal treaty of Esarhaddon, which expected absolute loyalty. Even the smallest member of the family was involved in this act of loyalty and any form of disobedience was brutally punished. As a vassal of this world power Manasseh also had to accept the Assyrian thinking that only they had a positive influence on the world and that only through them could all nations unite and live in peace, harmony and social justice. And of course he had to worship Assur. This god was enforced upon all defeated nations and all had to revere Assur (cf Albertz 1992:291–304).

Many people in the seventh century experienced everyday life as harsh and difficult to cope

with but the “judäischen Intellektuellen” devised a brilliant “intellectual rebellion”. They took over the Assyrian totalitarian ideas and terminology and rewrote it in such a way as to honour Yahweh alone. An anti- Esahaddon strategy was developed by borrowing Assyrian ideas and terminology but redefining and rewriting it in such a manner that Yahweh’s uniqueness was emphasized and Israel’s absolute loyalty was stressed (Otto 1997a:321-339; 1998a:1876-1877; 1998b:1-84; 1999a:1-90; 2000g:43-83; 2007a:19-28; 2007b:173-178; 2007c:29-53). A consequence of this resistance and devotion to Yahweh alone was the rejection of Assyrian anthropology and the clear boundaries for state intervention, political demands and allegiance to the king that were set. According to Assyrian political theology the king was the “representative” of Aššur but in the eighth psalm everything is democratised. Although frail and weak, human beings are nevertheless God’s representatives “und ... insgesamt mit der Königsfunktion beauftragt” (Otto 2000a:29-32; cf 1994:1-120; 1999d:1603-1606; 1999f:1609; 2000d:822-823; 2000e:845-848). This answer of the “judäischen Intellektuellen” to the question of resistance thus had a tremendous influence on the history of Israel and of human rights in general.

### **The answer about the future of the exiles**

During the bleak days of the exile people struggled with the very painful question whether there was a future (Otto 1998b:1-84; 1999c:693-696; 2000a:43-83; 2007b:140). Did the exile imply the end of God’s history with his people? In their spiritual odyssey the dates 722 (the fall of Israel) and 586 (the fall of Judah) haunted them because they were historical markers accentuating defeat, suffering and loss. Would the Babylonian exiles experience the same fate as Israel? Would Judah’s identity also be completely destroyed as in the case of the people of Samaria? Would Judah also fade from the pages of history as did Israel? The Zadokite intellectuals had to provide answers to these pressing questions of the first generation of exiles (Otto 2000a:237-243; 2002a:29-32; 2002b:282-290; Schmid 1999:273-301). Standing in the intellectual tradition of the priests responsible for the neo-Assyrian resistance these Zadokites created something new, fresh and original. Their answer to these questions is called DtrD and refers to the first Deuteronomistic redaction of Deuteronomy. It consists of a Moses discourse (Dt 5; 9-10\*) and a Deuteronomic legislation (in Dt12-26\*), both linked to Horeb, the mount of God. This redaction also inserted the story of the golden calf, Moses’ intercession and the reissuing of the Ten Commandments (Dt 9:9-21; 10: 1-5). This sequence of events (calf worship, intercession, reissuing the commandments) underscores the fact that despite the people’s transgression of the main commandment the covenant of Horeb remains intact (Otto 1997b:197-209; 1999b:625-628; 2000f:1570-1571).

In this apparently hopeless situation the golden calf event enabled the exiles to understand the nature of the pre-exilic worship of other gods better. By means of this desert story the exiles got a clearer picture of themselves as well as the unfaithfulness of previous generations. Through reliving the early history the exiles also comprehended that despite their desperate context a new beginning was possible; that there was a new life after the unfaithfulness of the pre-exilic times; that the laws of Deuteronomy were still valid; that each generation was still standing at Horeb; that they can still hear Moses’ voice encouraging them to follow Deuteronomy. In this way the Zadokites (or the first Deuteronomistic editors of Deuteronomy) reworked the suffering of the exiles by giving the breach of the covenant a very prominent position. In this way they comforted the exiles with hope for a new future (Otto 2004:14-35; cf 1995:163-191; 2000b:702-704; 2000c:741-743).

By means of this “hermeneutische Kunstgriff” the first Deuteronomistic redactors of Deuteronomy endeavored to answer the question about the future. It was only through reliving the time of Moses that they re-discovered their own position as the people of God; it was only

through remembering the horrible pre-exilic days and the re-enactment of the Sinai event (Decalogue, covenant making, golden calf) in their minds that they found themselves again and regained hope for the future (Otto 2000a:237-243; 2002a:29-32).

### **The answer about God's greatest gift**

After 538 BC tension mounted as different people started to demand land and small farm holdings. These claims were supported by the Hexateuch redaction (HexRed) who regarded land as the greatest of Yahweh's gifts (Otto 2002a:38-49; 2000a:248-273). According to the authors of the Hexateuch the possession of the land was Yahweh's main goal. In Genesis 15:18 and Joshua 24:13 traces of this kind of thinking can still be found: "On the same day Yahweh made a covenant with Abraham saying: To your descendants I will give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river Euphrates" (Gen 15:18). See also: "I have given you a land for which you did not labour, and cities you did not build, and you dwell in them; you eat from vineyards and oilyards you did not plant" (Josh 24:13). For the priestly authors of the post-exilic Hexateuch the aim of creation and world history (Gen 1-11) was Israel's possession of the Promised Land and their rest in this land.

In the Pentateuch redaction (PentRed) the voice of the diaspora is heard. It also deals with the landless but in a strikingly different way. When Moses died in Deuteronomy 34 the Torah took his place: "Mit dem Tod des Mose wird aus die Sicht der Pentateuchredaktion der Pentateuch geboren. Mose hat den Jordan nicht überschritten, wohl aber die von ihm verschriftete Tora. Mit ihr wird an seiner Stelle die Geschichte des Volk Israel weitergehen" (Otto 2000a:232-233). The Torah must therefore be cherished day and night and in its words Israel must rejoice. For the Pentateuch redaction the Torah was the greatest of Yahweh's gifts and this answer had a decisive influence on Israel's future

## **UNDERSTANDING AS THE RELIVING OF QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

This dialogic nature of Pentateuch study implies a certain kind of understanding or intellectual grasp. A type of understanding that will do justice to the notion that the Pentateuch is an answer to questions which were posed in real life contexts. In short one can say it implies an understanding of an expression ("Ausdruck"), which is the manifestation of a life experience ("Erlebnis"), which is embedded in true-life experiences and which we attempt to re-enact ("nacherleben") (Grondin 2002:36-51) or to re-live by means of spiritual empathy (Gunkel 1903:398-455)

It can also be explained in terms of history's "outside" and "inside". "Outside" knowledge is indispensable but something more is needed (Collingwood 1994:213-215). That is the "inside" story, the thinking behind an event. The "outside" story is something "which the historian looks, not at, but through, to discern the thought within them" (Collingwood 1994:214). And how does one "enter" the inside of an event? One way of saying it is to use the word "re-enactment": Knowledge of the past is gained when the past is re-enacted in the mind of the historian. All history is therefore "the re-enactment of past thought in the historian's own mind" (Collingwood 1994:215). To narrate the story of the Pentateuch we must first of all feel our way into the life-experiences of Israel, relive their past experiences, re-enact that past in our minds and re-tell that story (like Israel) in our own words.

In Otto's work the "outer" and "inner" parts are integrated harmoniously. The outer part is constituted by building blocks like the seventh century BCE; the neo-Assyrian royal ideology; the loyalty oath of the Assyrian King Esarhaddon (VTE) of 672 BCE; the Assyrian totalitarian regime; the disintegration of family life; the collapse of ethical values; the Judean kings Hezekiah, Manasseh and Josiah; the resistance of Judean intellectuals; the fall of Jerusalem; the exile; the

struggle of the first and second generation of exiles; the break between the Aaronides and the Zadokites; the imperial ideology of the Persian rule in Jehud; the intense inner–Judean debates, et cetera. These events and people, these so-called “facts of Israel’s history” are indispensable but they are merely the external framework and the outer structure. One still has to crawl into the inside of an event and understand things from within.

By following the traces in the text Otto then endeavored to bring back the voices of living people from Israel’s past. In other words, by focusing on the inner history he could understand something of the thinking of people like the Assyrians, the Judean intellectuals and the exiles. Although this penetration of people’s inner thoughts is a historical endeavor it always implies thorough text study: “We have seen that the literary history of the Pentateuch preserved intensive debates about “Israel’s” identity, its relation to Yahweh, dialogues, how to understand revelation and what Yahweh’s gifts to His people were, how to live on in hopeless situations and how to define the rights of the individual and the state. A diachronic analysis gives all these voices back to the texts and without it they would have been lost. The reader may decide if this would be a loss or an advantage. I am convinced that we should not let all these voices die. But – and this also should be mentioned – to keep them alive means hard exegetical work” (Otto 2007b:52-53).

To summarize: Biblical scholarship since 1971 focused on language and it is believed that language utterances are self–regulatory (they are not organized according to fixed external principles), self–sufficient (they do not need external information), self–contained (the meaning lies within the utterance) and self–reliant (its meaning is determined by itself). Meaning is thus independent from something outside and free from a dictating mind or an outside world but is determined by the position of the signs within the utterance. A sign is like a code which does not have a meaning of its own but derives its significance from its place within the whole system of codes. And meaning originates through the differences between the signs (Le Roux 2007:1-18). This approach has accomplished and these “studies will forever remain the conscience of our South African Old Testament science ... To a certain extent future generations will always have to measure their work in the light of these studies” (Le Roux 1993:26-33).

There is, however, another perspective, which developed the past ten years. And according to this view terms like “understanding”, “question” and “answer” became important for the study of the Pentateuch. The Pentateuch is now understood in terms of a question and an answer. And the understanding of the Pentateuch as an answer to a question requires that one should treat it as an expression of real life experiences that must be re-enacted in the mind. This implies that the outer history always serves as starting point but that the inner circle is the space so to speak where the voices of the past, the questions people grappled with and the answers that were given can be re-lived. And given the South African intellectual tradition this notion opened up new worlds.

## CONCLUSION

Above we have attempted to interpret and evaluate Eckart Otto’s contribution from a South African perspective. It was stated that since 1862 (when Colenso’s first volume on the Pentateuch was published) a kind of Pentateuch anger prevailed. This has discouraged many and prevented them from appropriating the insights of critical Pentateuch research. An important consequence of this attitude is the little reflection on history and the historical understanding of texts. And therefore we will always remain grateful to Eckart Otto for visiting us and showing us another way of reading and understanding of the Pentateuch. His views are so rich that it can be expanded in many different ways. In this chapter we investigated the possibility of understanding the

Pentateuch as an answer to a question and hopefully this will inspire South African scholars to immerse themselves in Otto's work and to discover a different, fulfilling kind of historical study.

Once again: we are all grossly indebted to Eckart Otto. Not only for the new avenues he opened up but also for what he meant to all as a person. We wish him well.

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