

THE OLD TESTAMENT AND ITS INHERITORS

“...at once perfect and perpetually incomplete.”

KENT HAROLD RICHARDS

We take for granted our language. What was spoken and written at home becomes our speaking and writing. We inherit the accents, syntax, grammatical frailties, idioms and some suggest even the tonal qualities. How many times has a daughter or son answered the phone, turned to you and with some indignation said, “They think I’m you!”

We do not inherit our language systematically, but rather in a hit and miss fashion. We are not instructed first to distinguish the imperative from the indicative—and many will not in their adult years be familiar with these terms—yet most three year olds know all too well the imperative mood!

There are some occasions when we can *not* take our language for granted. These situations are startling and profound. They cause us to reflect upon the marvelous inheritance we call language. For example, seeing an autistic child isolated—however explained—from the inheritance of language. Walking into a cardiac unit of a hospital where someone we know lies there incapable of expressing through their inheritance the words and expressions once so facile. These are dramatic experiences which call us to reflection on many dimensions of life. We may think that these reflections are beyond language. They bring us face to face with who we are and one might say with our finiteness. Yet even the recognition of one’s finiteness is formed by language. Language shapes experience just as much as experience shapes language.

Less dramatic but equally revealing is the experience of learning a new language or visiting a country whose language we do not know. We are reminded in those contexts of both the convenience of language and what *The New English Bible* calls the “babble of the language of all the world” (Genesis 11:9). Until we meet the boundaries we are seldom jostled into considering this inheritance we call language. We rarely of our own volition take the initiative. Linguists, who are trained in these matters and have a curiosity for these issues, recognize that research on a well known language can yield surprises. I have always been under the assumption that “near” is a preposition in phrases like “near the wall.” I had never accounted for the fact that in standard English one can say “nearer the wall” or “nearest the wall.” We all know that prepositions don’t have comparative or superlative forms, therefore, “near”

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must be functioning as an adjective, or more precisely, as one linguist suggests, a transitive adjective.¹ These examples where we lack knowledge and seem insensitive to the familiar could be multiplied.

If one can understand language as an inheritance it may provide an analogue in seeing the Old Testament (hereafter OT) as an inheritance. Just as with language, there are enormous variables in what each of us has inherited of the OT. Some may not be sure whether the book of Psalms is a part of the OT or not since the practice of printing the Psalms with the New Testament has a long history. Others may have inherited the Jonah story as a narrative about a whale and a man, when in fact no whale is mentioned. Others will have as their OT inheritance the awareness that the Greek text of the Jeremiah book is one eighth shorter than the Hebrew text. Most of us will have inherited the OT in a haphazard fashion just as we did our language. Until we are thrust into the necessity—for whatever reasons—of confronting the OT we all too frequently accept it as a matter of fact. The acceptance can range between those who see it as an ancient pagan classic or, if in one religious community or another it might be understood as canon, scripture or sacred book.

Inheritance is a peculiar and fascinating phenomenon. On this occasion it seemed appropriate that I might examine what the OT suggests about inheritance and from that point of departure determine the implications for those of us who understand ourselves as inheritors of this library of books.

My critical, reflective work in the OT dates back almost exactly twenty-five years ago this fall at the University of Southern California in one of my only two undergraduate religion courses. I had met this library of books before that time. In fact, I still have the Bible I was given in third grade at Sunnyside Presbyterian Church. It is not marked up like many of those I use today. Its binding is still in tact. I do have one text marked in that King James Version but that is because I had to read it in fifth grade in public worship. I remember having Bible stories read to me (the one that I remember most vividly was the Joseph story and what we now call the “technicolor robe”). I heard the great Howard Thurman and Henry Hitt Crane read it. My grandfather, a Church of the Brethren pastor and teacher of homiletics, comes to mind as one of the voices who read it. But twenty-five years ago amidst all the furor of being a sophomore in college the OT took on a new shape. I could say the initial inheritance as a child was sufficient yet incomplete. I did not have to throw out the old, OT which I had more haphazardly encountered. I do not think I was as cognizant then as I am now that my “haphazard stage” was in continuity with this new critical reading as a sophomore. Nevertheless I think there were clear indications then as now that my inheritance of the OT was changing but not in a way that was focusing on the disjunction of understanding. My work in seminary and graduate school, as well as my teaching over the last fifteen years could be placed in much this same framework.

¹Arnold M. Zwicky and Geoffrey K. Pullum, “Cliticization vs. Inflection: English NT,” *Language* 59 (1983) 502.

This is the context in which I would like to place these observations on the OT and its inheritors. First, I will discuss the inheritance traditions found in the Hebrew canonical literature. Second, the focus will turn to several implications for the contemporary inheritors.

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There is no single Hebrew term which contains the inheritance traditions within the OT. Rather there are over a half dozen words which contribute to the meanings of inheritance. These words are sometimes found by themselves which can demonstrate the distinctive qualities of each term. Other times they appear in parallel. These parallel structures indicate a degree of synonymous meaning, that is indicative of the interconnection of the terms.

Surprisingly little critical scholarship has been devoted to the individual terms or their interrelationships. One rarely finds the term inheritance in a subject index of an introductory OT textbook. Bible dictionaries do not treat it as a major entry. The new theological wordbooks are forced to have articles on the separate terms since most of the words occur more than sixty times. These wordbooks infrequently cross reference the terms despite the numerous passages where more than one of the words appears.

There are two reasons these words surrounding inheritance have not been studied together. On the one hand, the immediate inclination is to view inheritance solely within the legal sphere. That is, to examine testamentary activities, transference of possessions and comparative juridical practices in the ancient Near Eastern world. This is an immense, rich and complicated enterprise in which few are trained sufficiently to deal with the wide range of languages. It also takes a certain degree of nerve to jump into this arena. One colleague observed, who wants to study inheritance? The most you could get out of it might be a novel paragraph for your will!

The other reason the terms have not been taken together is that several of them overlap and play into other concepts of long standing interest. One of these is the idea of promise. A concept important not only to Hebrew scripture (promise to the patriarchs, house of David, etc.) but also, within the Christian tradition, a theological concept used to link the testaments.

Before turning to the Hebrew terms one additional comment may be helpful. I have opted for the English word inheritance knowing that there are other terms that might be used. Many would suggest that "heritage" is a better term since I am dealing with "something transmitted by or acquired from a predecessor." One of the key Hebrew terms, *naḥālāh*, is occasionally translated with the word heritage. Others might suggest "legacy," although this term is not used in many translations. Its older and more primary meanings surround the office of legate. Much of the discussion and some of the English biblical translations focus on yet another term, "patrimony." Historically and culturally, most of the property inheritance in the OT is deriv-

ed from “fathers.” Yet the fundamental issues and implications as I see them are not gender oriented. Inheritance is intended as a generic term which enables me to speak of the *act* of dispensing and acquiring, as well as the *content* of what is dispensed and acquired. It encourages an examination of the total perspective.

There are six Hebrew words which I have placed initially into this complex. First, *hlq*, usually translated “portion” or “share.” It can be used in a very straightforward, unreflected manner to refer to part of the whole piece (Genesis 14:24). However, in Psalm 50:16-18 the wicked are characterized as those whose portion or inheritance is with adulterers as opposed to the righteous who may reside near God and take on their lips the covenant. Here two kinds of inheritance—good and bad—are set in opposition. A second term, *gōrāl*, is usually translated “lot,” as in the casting of lots. Joshua at Shiloh casts lots to apportion land. He says, “I will cast lots for you (Israel) here before the LORD our God” (Joshua 18:6). However, in the next verse one finds “lot” identified with the first term I mentioned, “the Levites have no inheritance or portion (*hlq*) among you, for the priesthood of the LORD is their inheritance (*naḥālāh*).” “Lot” and inheritance are synonymous.

This introduces the third term, *naḥālāh*, which has been the focus of most of the previous inheritance discussions in the secondary literature. Two quite different passages let us see the interconnection of the three terms.

Their lot shall be portioned (*hlq*) according to the inheritance (*naḥālāh*) between the larger and smaller.

Numbers 26:56

The LORD is my portion and my cup,
You increase my lot
The lines fall for me in pleasant places,
Yea, my inheritance is beautiful.

Psalm 16:5-6

Without a detailed exegesis one can readily ascertain the interconnection, if not synonymous quality of these terms. They designate what is dispensed and acquired.

The fourth term, *segūlah*, occurs only eight times in the OT. The biblical interpreter is always delighted to find a term that occurs so sparingly since massive theories can be evolved best from miniscule data! One writer said of this Hebrew term, “it is filled with theological and spiritual treasures!” Whatever the case, the term does emerge in some intriguing passages which would need to be located in the complex of ideas under discussion.

Listen to the usage in this famous Exodus text.

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant you shall be my own possession (*segūlah*) among all peoples.

Exodus 19:4-5

Inheritance terms occur frequently within the promises to the patriarchs. The fifth word, *'ahūzah*, surfaces in this promise context.

I will give to you, and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan for an everlasting inheritance (*'ahūzah*), and I will be their God.

Genesis 17:8

The word appears in two other quite different, but interesting texts. Psalm 2, usually designated a royal psalm, has the king reporting what the LORD has said to him.

...you are my son, today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance (*naḥālāh*), and the ends of the earth your possession (*'ahūzah*).

Psalm 2:7-8

These terms are found together in a number of places, further substantiating their interconnection. This is also the case in the second passage which deals with women inheriting property rights. The text deals with a question raised by the daughters of Zelophehad on the occasion of their father having died in the desert, but with no sons. Moses reportedly brings this case to the LORD to which part of the response is the following.

The daughters of Zelophehad are right; you shall give them possession (*'ahūzah*) of an inheritance (*naḥālāh*) among their father's brethren and cause the inheritance (*naḥālāh*) of their father to pass to them.

Numbers 27:7

A final Hebrew term, *yrs*, depending upon grammatical form and context, is translated "to take possession" or "inherit." In the nominal form it can mean an "heir." In Genesis 15, Abram complains that he has no offspring except a slave who is born in his house. God responds, "This man shall not be your heir; your own son shall be your heir" (15:4). Or later in this passage God says

I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess (*yrs*).

Genesis 15:7

This overview of the six Hebrew words gives some impression of the complex of terms identified with the inheritance traditions. The focus has been on the connection of the terms, not their individuality or uniqueness. To the English reader there is displayed a range of meanings which include possession, boundaries, portions, lots, limits and numerous nuances which deal with dispensing and acquiring.

One might expand the range of these terms by calling attention to the content of what is inherited. Several of the examples illustrated the inheritance of land. These examples could be expanded if one listed the numerous promise texts. Other passages cited point to the people as the inheritance of the LORD. The largest number of occurrences fall into this category. Two of the examples cited designate the LORD as that which is inherited. In fact the Joshua passage which was quoted distinguishes the land inheritance of the tribes from the Levites' inheritance of the LORD. The inheritance even comes to signal what one might call "destiny." One of Job's "dear" friends, Zophar, speaks of the destiny of the wicked

The possessions of his house will be carried away,
dragged off in the day of God's wrath.
This is the wicked one's portion (*hlq*),
the inheritance (*naḥālāh*) decreed for him.

Job 20:29

Or Job says in his final defense,

What would be my portion (*hlq*)
from God above,
And my inheritance (*naḥālāh*) from
the Almighty on high?

Job 31:2

Still other passages speak of inheritance in an eschatological context. That which was inherited spans an enormous spectrum in the OT. It can designate a specific plot of ground and a particular possession. Or it can encompass the issues of individual and communal destiny.

Inheritance traditions in the OT were influenced by the juridical understandings. One can observe martial contexts of inheritance as well. However, the most striking factor comes in what one scholar called the "richly theologized" usage. I would prefer to call it a secondary, reflected richness. By this I

mean, after working through over 500 occurrences of these Hebrew words one walks away, not with a sense of having fallen into the pit of technical inheritance cases and laws, but rather of being thrust into the necessity of grappling with those competing, complementing, multifaceted dimensions of dispensing and acquiring even life itself.

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The implications of this all too brief overview of inheritance in the OT are manifold. Had I found a limited perspective the task would have been simple. A novel paragraph here or there in a will would have been fun! If inheritance had been understood with one or at most two Hebrew terms the conclusions might have been neat and precise. Some will complain that this is typical of the so-called biblical scholar who always finds “things” more ambiguous and complicated than anyone else! It is possible to point toward several implications. While these may not be elementary, they can be transparent and understandable.

First, there is a tension which pervades the texture of inheritance in the OT which is not fully expressed in the overview of terms. The point is that there is a *reciprocity between the inheritor and the inherited*. This reciprocity or mutuality resides deep in the social fabric of the people of The Book.

Inheritance is not something you take or leave. Jewish law assumes that children become the inheritors. Children are heirs *eo ipso*. They may not renounce their inheritance, since one cannot waive what one already possesses. Through the laws of transference an inheritance may be conveyed but never waived. One might say inheritance is automatic and immediate.

This is not terribly comforting to a time and culture which so emphasizes individual freedom. We want to make up our own minds about what we inherit and from whom we inherit it. The focus upon individuality seems pervasive except for our desire to have Dior ties, a Sassoon hairdryer, Izod shirts and a pair of Jordache jeans!

One historian in examining early 19th century American usage of the Bible points to what he calls the “individualization of conscience.” He gives several alluring examples. One is the Reverend Elhanan Winchester, a famous Baptist preacher who when fighting the Calvinists on their unwillingness to accept Universalism (the idea that all persons are eventually saved) proposed a method of resolving theological issues. His method was to lock the door of his study and come to grips with the Bible for himself.

I shut myself up chiefly in my chamber, read the Scriptures and prayed to God to lead me into all truth, and not suffer me to embrace any error; and I think with an upright mind, I laid open to believe whatsoever the LORD had revealed. It would be too long to tell all the Teaching I had on this head; let it suffice, in short, to

say, that I became so well persuaded of the truth of Universal Restoration, that I determined never to deny it.²

I suppose one could argue that the Reverend Winchester really understood OT inheritance best of all since he was so close to his Bible. The problem with this free-flowing individualism, which I think is still riding a crest in twentieth century America, is that I doubt that there is much reciprocity between the inheritors and that which is inherited. The focus of individualism is upon the inheritor deciding in isolation what to inherit and not allowing in any genuine way that which is inherited to shape the inheritor.

Another dimension of this reciprocal relationship which produces ambiguity and some tension, has been seen in the overview of Hebrew terms. These words seem to refer to an ever widening number of inheritances.

Therefore when one asks, what is the inheritance of the OT? There is no single answer. One cannot say it is the land or the people or the LORD or even human destiny. Each of these interconnect. It is not that there are no distinctions in inheritance. The overview of terms pointed to some of these and one could accumulate numerous examples.

There is embedded within the OT from a very early time the comprehensiveness of the LORD's inheritance. This comes to light in one of the earliest Hebrew psalms. God sits in the divine council and asks those around him how long they will judge unjustly. God goes on to pass judgment on them. The psalm ends with God no longer speaking but being called.

Arise O God, judge the earth
for to thee belong (*nḥl*) all the nations!

Psalm 82:8

Here all the "nations" are God's inheritance. It is on this basis that God is called to pass judgment. Inheritance moved to this level certainly affirms the fundamental reciprocity between inheritor and the inherited.

One further observation on this point may be significant for our contemporary context. If one sets aside the problem of the "individualization of conscience," there still exists a dilemma. Who are the inheritors of the OT? Several groups will step forward. Certainly Judaism will stand as an inheritor—not under the name OT—but of the Hebrew scripture. Islam will find a place. The Christian Church sometimes haltingly has laid claim to this literature. It is the new group of literary critics which present an interesting case for their inheritance. One of these critics, Harold Bloom, bemoans the current course of literature saying,

²Nathan O. Hatch, "*Sola Scriptura* and *Novus Ordo Seclorum*," in the *Bible in America* (Edited by Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll. 1982) 68.

Everyone who now reads and writes in the West . . . is still a son or daughter of Homer. As a teacher of literature who prefers the morality of the Hebrew Bible to Homer, indeed who prefers the Bible aesthetically to Homer, I am no happier about this dark truth than you are.³

Some have thought that Bloom and others around him constantly reflect on origins, or I would say on inheritance. Some think the key to Bloom may be found in his quote from Kierkegaard, "He who is willing to work gives birth to his own father."⁴ Here the reciprocity between inheritance and the inherited takes on yet another twist.

This leads directly to my second and final point. Our inheritance of the OT is "*at once perfect and perpetually incomplete.*" Deep into my work on the inheritance terms and after submitting the title of this lecture I began to wonder why so many different Hebrew words were emerging to express some dimension or another of the OT understanding of inheritance. I would work through a group of texts, begin to see, for example, how the inheritance of land worked. The inheritance was expressed usually in a context of promise. One received the inheritance not on the basis of inheritance in a strict sense but because of what God had done. God had been faithful therefore the inheritance could be grasped.

I understood inheritance and that set of texts seemed clear enough. It worked perfectly. Here is where the problem emerged. I had to go to some other set of texts and words in order to finish my work. Then I ran into other issues and overlapping problems. The inheritance wasn't the land, it was destiny or even God. Given the context in which I found each of these it seemed perfect. It worked, but why the variation? How could I explain this?

My first answer came in a less refined although similar point to the one I have already mentioned regarding the reciprocity between the inheritor and the inherited. The inheritance is in part new and in part old. The occasions on which Israel inherited something provided a new and dangerous time in which the old became present. Each new inheritance then in its turn became part of the old. Variation was inevitable so long as the inheritor and the inherited contributed mutually. One might suppose that if you could find the penultimate inheritance they would all be waiting there to be swooped into the same grand finale. There were those in Israel (and there have been many since) who tried but failed because they forget they were a fallible link in the inheritance. After this attempt I came upon the comment of Louis Finkelstein regarding the nature of Torah. He said that

³Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (1975) 33.

⁴Susan A. Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses* (1982) 182.

...the text is at once perfect and perpetually incomplete; that like the universe itself it was created to be a process rather than a system—a method of inquiry into the right, rather than a codified collection of answers...⁵

This provided an analogue for my understanding inheritance in the OT. Furthermore, it helped me understand my own inheritance of the OT. Inheritance is a “method of inquiry” not a collection of codes. Inheritance is—so to speak—continually completing itself. The structure for this continuing project is found in the reciprocal relationship between the inheritor and the inherited.

Finkelstein went on to say more about the Torah. It is there

“...to discover possible situations with which it might deal and to analyze their moral implications in the light of its teachings...” He contended that this “is to share the labor of the Divinity...”

This certainly is an awesome plane on which one may place our responsibility, but it is equally certain that this is a part of our unending inheritance.

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⁵Louis Finkelstein, “Introduction” in *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* by Solomon Schechter (1909. Reprint 1961) xix-xx.

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