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Imagination: A Hermeneutical Tool for the Study of the Hebrew Bible

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Abstract

Biblical scholars use the word 'imagination' more and more often, but in different cases 'imagination' covers different concepts. In order to reach a more systematic application of 'imagination' in hermeneutics and Old Testament Studies in general, there is a need to explore the possible uses of 'imagination'. This article comprises: 1) a theoretical introduction extending what Barth and Steck wrote in their classical primer on exegetical methods; 2) a section on imagination and history; 3) a heuristic classifying survey of Brueggemann's use of the word 'imagination'; 4) a reflection on how imagination is restricted by parameters of time and place. The article distinguishes between imagination of ancient people and of people nowadays, but deals with the interplay of both as well. It further reflects on the informed, controlled use of imagination in hermeneutics. After a brief comment on "moral imagination," a survey and mapping of the uses of imagination in hermeneutics rounds off the article. This will make clear how the different notions referred to with the word 'imagination' are related and why it is important to consider them as interdependent concepts. Although the majority of the examples will be taken from the Hebrew Bible, the thoughts expressed here are applicable to the study of the New Testament as well and some more specific New Testament issues and related literature will be referred to.

Keywords

Hermeneutics, imagination, Hebrew Bible, history, method, New Testament, Brueggemann, cognitive environment.

Norman K. Gottwald expressed that exegetical approaches should be appropriate "to clarifying major aspects of the Hebrew Bible that excite curiosity and imagination."[1] Over 25 years before, he stated, "Adequate

[1] N.K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2nd edn, 1987), p. 21.

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understanding of the Old Testament is achieved only by *imaginative* and *disciplined* study."[2] Texts may excite curiosity and stimulate imagination; imagination—together with disciplined study—should also be employed to lead to an adequate understanding of the texts and the text corpus. Everyone can imagine what *discipline* implies, but what is *imagination* in this context?

James D. Nogalski employs in his translation of the classic hermeneutical primer by Hermann Barth and Odil H. Steck[3] the word *imagination* in the phrase "fantasy and imagination;"[4] this phrase is the equivalent of the German "Fantasie und Intuition" and seems to have become a hendiadys. Whereas Barth and Steck dealt with "Intuition," this article rather deals with *Vorstellungsvermögen*, imagination.[5] Like Barth and Steck, the present article focuses on historical exegesis, an understanding of the Biblical text in its emergence.

Imagination and Exegetical Method

Barth and Steck's manual introduces historical methods. It preliminarily remarks: "Vor, neben und in der Anwendung der Methoden ist die exegetische Arbeit auf Beobachtung und Einfall angewiesen."[6] And that: "die Praxis exegetischer Arbeit (…) offen ist für alles, was auffält".[7] Simply stated: exegesis is encapsulated in all that pops up in the mind

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2) N.K. Gottwald, *A Light to the Nations: An Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Harper, 1959), p. 1. Italics mine.

3) H. Barth and O.H. Steck, *Exegese des Alten Testaments: Leitfaden der Methodik: Ein Arbeitsbuch für Proseminare, Seminare und Vorlesungen* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2nd edn, 1989), for the German the 2nd edition is used to acknowledge a historical root of this topic—although with different wording.

4) O.H. Steck, *Old Testament Exegesis: A Guide to the Methodology* (translated by J.D. Nogalski; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), p. 6 *et passim*.

5) Imagination is not only the capacity (intuition), but it also denotes the "product" of intuition/imagination. Moreover, using the word "imagination" leaves more room for reason and considering facts than "intuition."

6) Barth and Steck, *Exegese des Alten Testaments*, pp. 5-6. In the later version, on which the English translation has been based, this part was rewritten and has not a clear English equivalent—therefore, the article quotes the German.

7) Barth and Steck, *Exegese des Alten Testaments*, p. 6. See n. 6.

(that stirs curiosity), through observation and association. However, every association and suggestion, everything that intuition and imagination bring, should be checked methodologically. Method does not restrict possibilities to be explored, but it forms and calibrates exegetical conclusions and the way they are reached. Thus, associations and suggestions can enrich exegesis through methodological calibration, for method provides an "agreed on", a proved basis that makes conclusions transparent. In brief, imagination introduces new elements which either corroborate or contradict the status quo; methodologically sound procedures should decide whether these elements are rightfully assumed.

Steck (in Nogalski's translation of the 12th edition, 1989) deals with fantasy and imagination in terms of "employing fantasy in the desire to understand the text historically."[8] Fantasy—maybe better: creative imagination[9]—broadens one's view beyond the beaten tracks of exegesis. This can be elaborated in two main points.

Firstly, realize that the ancient text is read today; imagine how the reader today would react when for instance, *realia*, processes, acts or geographical entities are referred to. Do the present day readers share the concepts the ancient reading community had when hearing or reading about bread, mill stones, certain kinds of clothing, threshing, cities? Moreover, what does the text communicate today when specific expressions or literary conventions are used? Take as an example Qoh. 11:1. Today, an uninformed reading of "send out your bread upon the waters" may lead to the association with feeding ducks in a nearby pond (speaking within cultures with parks, ponds and ducks, of course). Furthermore, beyond this problem of perception of the contents of the text, the reader today will have their own associations with and reactions on the events and themes described in the texts; one may think of perspectives on war or parenthood, for instance.

Secondly, when asking for the perception of the text today, it seems almost superfluous to point to the (possibly) different first reception of

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8) Steck, *Old Testament Exegesis*, p. 6.

9) The present article avoids the term "fantasy" because of its possible association with arbitrariness and not to be corrected unrealism. Furthermore, the word "imagination" as label for a concept allows for a less individual use. See also the considerations in the penultimate section of this article.

the text. An interaction between observing the text and one's imagination is to create as complete a picture as possible of the historical circumstances of communicating and understanding the text in order to reach a living picture of "the text as life-event of its time."[10] This involves:

a) a close reading of the text, taking in regard the historical context(s) with its (their) numerous phenomena (see the example from my first point above) and 'historical understanding;' "What should the listener/reader see before one's own inner eye because it is expressed or intended?"[11] This can be applied to words, sentences, the text as a whole (their form and their content) and the thematic context.
b) A study of the emergence of the text: this implies besides the different historical circumstances study of the editorial growth of the text and
c) imagining the communication of the text: its intention, its meaning(s) and its effect.

Exegetes vary in their views on these issues of historical context, emergence and communication of the text, because of differences in 1) knowledge: imagination should be controlled by proper knowledge, this requires *study*;[12] 2) "the ability to conceive historically:"[13] beyond pure knowledge is the creative ability to empathize with the historical event of the text, this requires *skill*; and 3) unbiasedness: one needs to do research without calculating which conclusions would best suit one's personal preferences; this requires *honesty*, including an awareness of one's perspective and the reason or occasion (in the present) to relate to the past.[14]

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10) Steck, *Old Testament Exegesis*, p. 8.

11) Steck, *Old Testament Exegesis,* pp. 11-12.

12) Different approaches to and conclusions in New Testament scholarship may be due to different academic backgrounds which either put more emphasis on the Hellenistic or on the Jewish background.

13) Steck, *Old Testament Exegesis*, p. 13.

14) In line with n. 12. Among the most obvious examples are social-nationalist readings which are philo-hellenistic at the cost of denying Jewish roots. See A. Merz, "Carl Schneiders exegese van de Openbaring van Johannes en de invloed van het

All these issues can be taken as preparation for exegesis; imagination should lead to and inspire methodological exegetical research. The fact that the text emerged in a historical context forms the basis for a historical approach; study of the historical context provides one with the circumstances in which the text came into existence and was expressed; thus, study of the historical context in which the text emerged sheds light on the communication process of the text, the meaning, the choice of words and the intention of the text from a historical perspective. Therefore, historical and archaeological methods should fulfil an independent function in concluding a holistic historical view.[15]

Elaborating on Steck, intuition and imagination are to be employed as catalyser, stimulating and creating extra questions and ideas to scrutinize the emergence (and reception) of the text. However, besides the listener or reader's inner eye, the inner eye of the text-receiving communities (according to the growth and early use of the text) should not be overlooked, for also the ancients had their imagination, their cognitive environment;[16] they shared in an intellectual entity which makes the communication of the text possible.

Imagination and History

When the reader or researcher today is challenged to come up with a holistic historical view, imagination serves history writing. These processes can be linked in several ways.

Imagining How Things Were

As part of his programme for positive history writing that aims to provide a background for comprehension of the text,[17] Andrew G. Vaughn writes, "Common or ordinary imagination completes the fragmentary

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nationaal-socialisme," G. van Oyen (ed.), *Een Tip van de Sluier: Vier Wegen naar het Boek Openbaring* (UTR 52; Utrecht: Universiteit Utrecht, 2005), pp. 49-50.

15) Cf. Steck, *Old Testament Exegesis*, p. 14.

16) A term used by J.H. Walton in *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), p. 21, n. 11.

17) Cf. A.G. Vaughn, "Can We Write a History of Israel Today?" in J.K. Hoffmeier and A. Millard (eds.), *The Future of Biblical Archaeology: Reassessing Methodologies and*

data."[18] Michael Tilley and Christopher Y. Shanks state, "Understanding both *reproduces* and *produces*."[19] Study of the past includes reproduction of the sources,[20] drawing conclusions and "producing knowledge" to fill the gaps in order to reach a more complete picture of the past. One way to fill gaps is by 'producing' through drawing conclusions from comparisons. In doing so the uniqueness of a particular situation should be kept in mind, for comparison should always consider the possibility of chronological, geographical and cultural discontinuity. Simultaneously, one is to be aware not to conclude too quickly or assume discontinuity.

Othmar Keel's study of the prohibition not to boil a kid in the milk of its mother provides a simple example here. Keel disagrees with the prevailing 19th and 20th century view that this prohibition would have been cult polemic. He argues that this assumed discontinuity with the Canaanite religion is unfounded and shows how the motif of the lactating mother in the Israelite-Palestinian iconography evidences a symbol of blessing, delight in fertility and tenderness. The expression of this sentiment and its implied valuing of procreation make it impossible to assume that boiling a kid in the milk of its mother was a practice among the Canaanites. This same sentiment is reflected in the Israelite law; the biblical text implies that the Israelite community respected this "Manifestation göttlichen Wohlwollens und der daraus resultierenden Zärtlichkeit und Lebenslust."[21]

Imagination employed to reconstruct the background of texts can build on common emotions and insights, since both readers nowadays and the people among whom the text was first communicated are all

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Assumptions: The Proceedings of a Symposium, August 12-14, 2001 at Trinity International University (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 368–385.

18) Vaughn, "Can We Write a History," p. 376. Cf. L.G. Perdue, *The Collapse of History: Reconstructing Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), pp. 263-265 and L.G. Perdue, *Wisdom & Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), pp. 49-74.

19) M. Shanks and C.Y. Tilley, *Re-constructing Archaeology: Theory and Practice*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 107. Italics original.

20) The problem of fakes is outside the scope of this article.

21) O. Keel, *Das Böcklein in der Milch seiner Mutter und Verwandtes: Im Lichte eines altorientalischen Bildmotivs* (OBO 33; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1980), p. 144.

human beings. Among these insights can be what would be experienced as "practical". This provides a perspective which sustains Yigael Yadin's reading of the "the spear as a weaver's beam" in 1 Sam. 17:7. He shows how this "weaver's beam" (מנור ארגים) refers to a leash-rod which in shape (rather: functionality) is compared with Goliath's javelin, as both had loops. The looped cord of the javelin provided a more efficient way to throw the javelin and achieved a larger range.[22] Besides emotion and what is practical, this train of thought also holds true for a basic understanding.

The famous watermelon experiment provides another example of imagining "how things were." By taking a watermelon, calling it Abimelech, putting it in a position implied in Judges 9 and having women throwing upper mill stones, the experiment proved that throwing a mill stone from a wall on to the head of a person could have a mortal effect. Thus the experiment shows that the situation related in Judges 9:53-54 can be imagined to have happened in the way described.[23]

Anthony C. Thiselton daringly states that "most (not necessarily all) biblical texts are optimally understood with reference to a directedness willed by an author towards a situational context for which some reconstructive imagination and enquiry is invited."[24] Such a reconstruction of a historical situation can deal with the many, innumerable aspects of the past and countless relations between these aspects.[25] On the one hand, the exegete being confronted with a complex past with innumerable aspects is challenged to collect, to reproduce (and thus also to produce) as much relevant information on the historical background of the emergence of the text. On the other hand, the exegete, like the historian, needs the wisdom to make a choice in presenting the most

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22) Y. Yadin, "Goliath's Javelin and the מנור ארגים," *PEQ* 1955, pp. 58-69.

23) D.D. Herr and M.P. Boyd, "A Watermelon Named Abimelech," *BAR* 28.1 (2002), pp. 34–37, 62.

24) A.C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Harper Collins, 1992), pp. 583.

25) Causes, indirect causes, the role of human beings, intentions, unintended effects and side effects and the different problems involved in examining and underpinning these. Cf. C. Lorenz, *De constructie van het verleden: Een inleiding in de theorie van de geschiedenis* (Amsterdam: Boom, 6th edn, 2002).

relevant data which he or she has gained from his or her study of the past, enriched by, but also informing and verifying, imagination.[26]

Critical history research and a historical exegetical approach toward the Bible make one aware of the different circumstances in which the text emerged, the conditions under which it was edited and communicated and the situations of later readers and researchers. Researchers are challenged to employ the study of the past (as is done in archaeology)[27] to gain information about how events and rituals happened, how items looked and about the cognitive environment, in which the ancients' own imagination itself should not be forgotten.[28] Historical study fills the empty spaces in one's knowledge of the past and stimulates the imagination to fill the remaining gaps a little more. Filling remaining gaps, however, is always preliminary as stipulations can be replaced by firmer knowledge about the past. Thus, what is imaginatively pictured by researchers is both verified and falsified; it leads to more reliable knowledge of the past and further feeds one's imagination.

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26) Cf. the classic R.G. Collingwood, "The Historical Imagination," in *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 231-249, with his concept of the "web of imaginative construction."

27) Within archaeology reconstruction is possible with the help of "archaeological imagination;" see: J. Thomas, *Time, Culture and Identity: An Interpretative Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 63; C. Gamble, *Archaeology: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 1-2.

28) Another of many examples of how the researcher's imagination is a means of stimulating historical imagination is V.D. Verbrugge's remark in a review of Shiell, William, *Reading Acts: The Lector and the Early Christian Audience* (Leiden: Brill, 2004) at http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/4827_5611.pdf, accessed 10/10/2007: "This book also teases the reader's imagination by placing him or her into the ancient world and experiencing an oral presentation of the book of Acts." The New Testament scholars Luke Timothy Johnson and Richard B. Hays also employ the concept of imagination in different ways, among which also in a historical sense denoting the imagination of ancient people, see: L.T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 5; L.T. Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996); R.B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996); R.B. Hays, *The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel's Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005). See also the section "Imagination Then and Elsewhere" below.

The above considerations can well be illustrated by the discovery of the inscription "*yehud*" on coins. When a *yehud* reading was first suggested by Sukenik he closed his article by stating "I shall not be surprised if the near future will bring us coins with legend *Yehud*."[29] The notion made Stanley Cook sceptically remark that "more evidence must be produced before the new reading can be safely accepted."[30] More of these coins were indeed found, confirming Sukenik's "gap filling."[31]

Empathy

The complexity of past communication and the desire to comprehend this communication challenges researchers to go beyond obtaining knowledge of the past to attempt an epithetical approach in order to grasp as much as possible of historical experiences. A specific aspect of this challenge is to determine what was taken for granted and understood as natural. This can be exemplified by the introduction to one of the chapters in William Loader's *The New Testament With Imagination*:

> What would be the first thing you would smell when you woke up, if you were living in Capernaum in the time of Jesus? Perhaps it might be the straw which made up the bed on which you were lying. Was it the smoke from the oil lamp which an early riser had already lit? If winds were from the south you might smell the tang of dried fish from the works across the lake near Magadan. Or it could be the smell of the fishing nets as the men were coming home from a night out trawling their nets.[32]

The straw of the bed may be a self-evident element for that time, but may seem strange or even inconvenient for some readers nowadays. Though it would not have been an element that stirred up thoughts then, hay may well have negative, or even romanticised, associations for a 21st century (western) reader. The hermeneutical adoption of

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29) E.L. Sukenik, "More about the Oldest Coins of Judaea," *JPOS* 15 (1935), pp. 341–343 (343). Italics original. His first article on this issue was: "Paralipomena Palæstinensia," *JPOS* 14 (1934), pp. 178–184.

30) S.A. Cook, "The Yahu Coin," *ZAW* 65 (1938), pp. 268–271 (268).

31) Although this does not imply that the inscription on the coin which caused this discussion definitely reads *yehud*.

32) W. Loader, *The New Testament With Imagination: A Fresh Approach to Its Writings and Themes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), p. 1.

empathy works in the same way as imagination: both require study, skill and honesty.

How Things Were Not

For heuristic reasons, as a kind of hermeneutic of suspicion, one may imagine how things were *not*. Such "what if" cases may unmask a writer or editor's ideology in current polemics and detect self-evident elements which are not debated any more. A good example can be found in one of Susan E. Ackerman's titles: "What if Judges had been written by a Philistine?"[33] In this article Ackerman focuses on two potential political viewpoints in the Samson cycle by comparing Delila with the Israelite heroines in the book of Judges. She concludes: "If Judges had been written by a Philistine, it might well be Delilah who would bear the epithet otherwise given to Jael in Judg. 5:24, 'most blessed of women.'"[34]

A Heuristic Investigation of Brueggemann's Use of 'Imagination'

"Imagination" seems to be one of Walter Brueggemann's pet words in his oeuvre.[35] As Brueggemann employs this word in different combinations and with different meanings, his publications present a good opportunity to explore the possible concepts indicated by this same word 'imagination' and map further meanings and applications of this word and its related concepts in Biblical Studies.

Prophetic Imagination

Brueggemann employs the term "prophetic imagination" to refer to the prophets' pictures of the future, which they preached among their audiences. The prophet imagines, and makes his or her audience imagine, an alternative world—which in prophecy is usually a future world.[36]

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33) S.E. Ackerman, "What If Judges Had Been Written by a Philistine?" *Biblical Interpretation* 8 (2000), pp. 33–41. See also: J. Cheryl Exum (ed.), *Virtual History and the Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

34) Ackerman, "What if Judges had been Written by a Philistine," p. 41.

35) Other examples are "linger," "live word," "exile."

36) W. Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2nd edn, 2001).

The New Testament also has its visions of the future, especially in the genre of apocalypse. In fact, apocalyptic visions are also a product and an example of imagination. This is also reflected in the title of John J. Collins's book, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*.[37]

Imaginative Remembering

The focus of "prophetic imagination" is on the future whereas Brueggemann uses the term "imaginative remembering" in reference to the past. He presupposes that the Hebrew Bible has been written after the exile. Thus, often the Hebrew Bible deals with past, "died away"[38] times, which live on only in memory. In this way the writings of the Hebrew Bible mirror the collective memory of a literature-producing group in the post-exilic society -it shows how this group (or groups) wanted to remember the past.[39] Where memory—like testimony in Brueggemann's theology—becomes immaterialised, danger arises in that there is less and less need for a basis of the Hebrew Bible in historical events, persons, encounters.

When remembering the past, however, the question arises as to the extent of the historical reality behind the memory. When focusing on memory alone, there is little need for the historical events to have happened. This is the danger with Brueggeman's theology of testimony as well.[40] A fair historical approach needs to consider the historical context of the remembering community and the historical reality which constitutes this memory.

Therefore, it is methodologically important to examine how people remember and imagine their past, realizing that people can alter their memories of the past for ideological reasons, even if unconsciously. Not only people nowadays can "imagine how things were not," but people

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37) J.J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2nd edn, 1998), p. 283.

38) Compare the German v*ergangen*: past, decayed, bygone.

39) W. Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003).

40) Cf. J. Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (London: SCM Press, 1999), pp. 541-562.

then might have imagined their past in a certain way to create their version of history.[41]

Israel's Imagination

Whereas the prophets imagined the future, and several biblical writers imagined the past, Israel's praise was—according to the way Brueggemann imagines and presents it—the most important alternative world for the Israelites. For Brueggemann, Israel's liturgy was probably the most important element in Israel's imagination.

In his *Israel's Praise,* which deals with liturgy, Brueggemann employs "imagination" in a similar sense of creating an alternative world, as with "prophetic imagination; he also speaks about "world making" in this context. He apparently regards the liturgy in a similar way as an alternative world.

Part of Israel's imagination, as well as part of Israel's liturgy, consisted in many metaphors, as they are also used in the Hebrew Bible.[42] Biblical scholars are challenged not to use the Bible as the only source for understanding these metaphors and—more broadly—for understanding Israel's imagination and cognitive environment. Historical circumstances include not only the material realities of a certain period, but part of the cognitive environment too, with its perception, its

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41) Knowledge about history is possible, and one should always strive for as correct an account of the past as is possible. The role of ideology among people in the past shows that one does not need New Historicism's denial of historical knowledge to get an individual or distorted picture of the past. Moreover, imagination is not a wild-card for simply publishing personal associations without giving account. New Testament Studies provides with its paradigm of pseudepigrapha an even stronger example of "imaginative remembering," focusing less on how the past is to be remembered, but rather on how the recent past is to be complemented in order to shape the present; see A. Merz, *Die fiktive Selbstauslegung des Paulus: Intertextuelle Studien zur Intention und Rezeption der Pastoralbriefe* (NTOA/StUNT 52; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), A. Merz, "The Fictitious Self-Exposition of Paul: How Might Intertextual Theory Suggest a Reformulation of the Hermeneutics of Pseudepigraphy?" in: T.L. Brodie, D.R. MacDonald and S.E. Porter (eds.), *The Intertextuality of the Epistles: Explorations of Theory and Practice* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), pp. 113-132.

42) W. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), pp. 234-235.

conceptual metaphors, its mental configurations, ideas and values. Such a cognitive environment is constitutive for communication between 'Bible writers' and their public. Next to the Bible and other texts, Biblical scholars should employ iconography[43] and "historical imagination" in order to reach a more complete picture of the context of the Hebrew Bible in its complexity.

Historical Imagination

Brueggemann also uses the term "historical imagination." Like Steck, he uses it to refer to present day people picturing the past. In this context, it comprises for Brueggemann "an openness and sensitivity to the pulses of meaning that can be discerned in reflection upon historical experience preserved in a historical community."[44] This is another call to make every possible effort to disclose the cognitive environment, the mental map of the people in the time of the emergence of the biblical writings.

"Imaginative remembering" refers to the imagination of the composers of the biblical writings, in fact this could be called "historical imagination" as well. However, the difference in terminology underlines the suspicion regarding the truthfulness of their rendering of the past. Secondly, the term "historical imagination" is usually employed with the implication of present day people or scholars as agents. Distinguishing "imaginative remembering" and "historical imagination" and suggesting a more critical stance towards the former, does not imply that the latter should not be critically evaluated. The image of the past presented in (academic) publications should also be interrogated concerning possible manipulation.[45]

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43) As in the oeuvre of Othmar Keel and the Fribourg School; cf. I.J de Hulster, *Illuminating Images: An Iconographic Method of Old Testament Exegesis with Three Examples from Third Isaiah*, PhD dissertation University of Utrecht, January 2008, especially ch. 2. See also: I.J de Hulster, *Iconographic exegesis and Third Isaiah* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009).

44) W. Brueggemann, *The Bible Makes Sense* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2nd edn, 2001), p. 14.

45) Cf. C. Uehlinger, "Neither Eyewitnesses, Nor Windows to the Past, but Valuable Testimony in its Own Right: Remarks on Iconography, Source Criticism and Ancient

The biblical writers, however, might also have needed historical imagination in order to fill the gaps in their knowledge about the past and to keep their picture of the past consistent. However, it should not be underestimated how much knowledge the biblical writers had at their disposal, as also the following quotation from James K. Hoffmeier shows:

> It seems to me easier to believe that the Bible accurately preserves an authentic picture of the travels and life in the Sinai wilderness than to suppose that authors six to seven hundred years later, writing in ignorance of the past and using creative imagination, got so much certifiable correct as this investigation has demonstrated.[46]

A related example is the question of which geography the (subsequent) composers of the Exodus narrative had in mind and which geographical state of affairs made it to the final version. Of course, this question is even more complicated because of the different opinions on the growth of the Pentateuch and the Deuteronomistic History.[47]

This demonstrates that by the time of text's emergence there is a distinction to be made between (oral or written) transmission, memory (that is ideologically biased) and a reconstruction of various states of affairs.

Postmodern Imagination

History, present and future also constitute part of the train of thoughts expressed in Brueggemann's book *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination*.[48] It deals with the possible role of the Bible in pastoral care and liturgy.

Data-processing," in H.G.M. Williamson (ed.), *Understanding the History of Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), pp. 178, 190-192.

46) J.K. Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel in Sinai: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 249.

47) This is to be distinguished from changes in topographic records under influence of "imaginative remembering," or due to "inculturation" (cf. M. Dijkstra, "Religious Crisis and Inculturation: The Example of Post-Exilic Israel," in M. Frederiks, M. Dijkstra and A. Houtepen (eds.), *Towards an Intercultural Theology: Essays in Honour of Jan A.B. Jongeneel* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2003), pp. 97-115, especially pp. 113-114).

48) W. Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

Acknowledging "imagination as a valued and authoritative practice of epistemology,"[49] Brueggemann opposes "postmodern imagination" and modern ways of acquiring knowledge and certitude. Through pastoral care, liturgy and proclamation, the Gospel provides pieces of a counter world to "fund," to feed postmodern imagination. These pieces represent "counter imagination" and comprise past, present and future:

1) living memory: an awareness of God's creation and an appreciation of the unique human self, God's creation of order, life and joy and God's gift of community;
2) maintaining the covenant community as the opposite of the individualised consumption society;
3) hope in an amazing future.

In the "zone of imagination," the counter imagination, rooted in the Bible,[50] comes in touch with the interests, fears and pains of human beings. In this zone, human beings can choose to be comforted, healed, encouraged and changed by the voice of the Bible.[51]

Reading Brueggemann's work one cannot completely avoid the impression that he assumes a kind of "quick connector" between human expressions, the spirituality of the Bible and present day humankind. Although he acknowledges important epistemological problems and is clearly aware of the historical gap between readers then and now, Brueggemann strangely thinks it easy for present day researchers (and believers) to understand and participate in the biblical testimonies. To make sense of the Bible's spirituality apparently does not require any hermeneutics, as present day readers can readily understand the text.

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49) Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation,* p. 13.

50) B.B. Stott employs counter-imagination in a similar way, but without reference to Brueggemann's elaboration of the concept. Stott regards the parables of Jesus as an imagination of an alternative world, God's Kingdom. See: B.B. Stott, *Re-Imagine the World: An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 2001).

51) Brueggemann's *Texts Under Negotiation* written in a hausse of publications on imagination, which started circa 1975. This book also reacts to rational, modern historical-critical Biblical scholarship. He recognizes the need to take into account small details, but he does not aim to iron out difficulties. See Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation*, p. 60.

Imagination Then and Elsewhere

This section touches in more depth on the parameters of time and place in relation to imagination and its human agents.

Then and Later

As mentioned before, not only 21st century people have an imagination. Taking imagination as a human distinctive implies that not only prophets had this characteristic, but that also other humans share this capacity. As imagination comprises stock elements, such as stereotypes, but also stimulates creativity, it is possible to speak about a "mental map" shared by people in a culture which forms a frame of reference for new expressions of imagination. Metaphor theory provides an example of distinctions ranging between dead metaphors or clichés and new or creative metaphors. A new metaphor creatively draws on existing metaphors and can employ these to create new meaning and emphases. The term 'mental map' functions as a label for the culturally communal figurative reservoir of, for example, associations, conceptual metaphors, and *lieux de mémoire*.[52]

Besides the "ancient" creators of the text (who are crucial in an approach which focuses on the emergence of the text) and the recipients of the text today (whether researchers or other readers), there is an important group of people in between them. These people have created the reception history during the time between finalizing or canonizing the text and the present. This reception history is the expression of their imagination in words and images.[53] They studied the text in their own conceptual environment and put their emphases in interpretation. They have a great share in our own reception of the text. Although study of the text in its earliest historical setting may serve as a calibration mark, we cannot do without the people in-between.[54]

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52) It is beyond the scope of this article to refer to the literature on metaphor theory and cultural memory.

53) Cf. John Pfordresher, *Jesus and the Emergence of a Catholic Imagination: An Illustrated Journey* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2007), deals with the imagination of Jesus and with the Christian imagination as expressed in the art of the first centuries.

54) Cf. E. Talstra, *Oude en nieuwe lezers: een inleiding in de methoden van uitleg van het Oude Testament* (Kampen: Kok, 2002), and D.P. Parris, *Reading the Bible with Giants:*

Within the historical approach taken in this article, it is important to reconstruct the imagination of the people who composed the biblical text(s), which is approximate to the imagination of those among whom the text was first communicated. Appealing to the shared mental map, the composer(s) could creatively add new elements and thus extend the mental map, or could express the sometimes obvious classifications they employed. Two sentences from Leo G. Perdue's *The Sword and The Stylus* serve as examples, "The sages of the Proverbs used their imagination to give rise to a variety of metaphors to portray the cosmos as the creation of a God who established and now oversees the structures of life … in their imagination, the sages categorized humans in a dualistic structure of wise/righteous and foolish/wicked."[55]

Reflection on the text, or study of other texts is not the only access-point to the imagination, the mental map, the way of perceiving and thinking of the community in which the biblical texts emerged. For this purpose the archaeological evidence, and the pictorial evidence in particular, should be considered as well. The famous example that marked the post-Second World War revival of incorporating images in exegesis is Keel's *Symbolism of the Biblical World*.[56]

Then, Now and Elsewhere

It is clear that one should be aware of differences in imagination throughout different periods of history.[57] What is easily overlooked,

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How 2000 Years of Biblical Interpretation Can Shed New Light on Old Texts (London: Paternoster, 2007) which both point to the importance of taking into account the existence of earlier readers and encourage one to carefully consider their conclusions.

55) Leo G. Perdue, *The Sword and the Stylus: An Introduction to Wisdom in the Age of the Empires* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), pp. 105-106.

56) O. Keel, *Die Welt der altorientalischen Bildsymbolik und das Alte Testament: am Beispiel der Psalmen*, 1st edition (Zürich: Benziger Verlag, 1972), O. Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms*, (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2nd edn, 1997). The Fribourg School and several others followed in his footsteps; see, for example, the EABS "Iconography and Biblical Studies" research programme (with the forthcoming volume: I.J. de Hulster and R. Schmitt (eds.), *Iconography and Biblical Studies: Proceedings of the Iconography Sessions at the Joint EABS/SBL Conference: 22-26 July 2007, Vienna, Austria* (AOAT 361; Münster: Ugarit Verlag, 2009) and the SBL consultation "Iconography and the Hebrew Bible."

57) Church historian Matheson describes such a difference, pointing to a change in the

however, is that geography is—next to time—another parameter that can be brought into play in the search for dissimilarities in imagination. Although discerning cultural differences depends on more than time and place, where they correlate with the borders of a community those two aspects are, roughly speaking, the most important factors. An ideal example of difference in imagination, combined with simultaneousness but also with temporal and geographical distance, has been worked out in Dick Kroneman's dissertation on the translation of the shepherd metaphor into the language of the Una people in Papua (Irian Jaya), Indonesia.[58] Kroneman scrutinized not only the shepherd metaphor in the Hebrew Bible, but also the figurative language employed by the Una people. Three kinds of agents of imagination play a role here: the imagination of the Psalm writer and the original understanding of the shepherd metaphor, the imagination and understanding of the Una people and the imagination of the translator who bridges those parties in order to successfully communicate the psalm.

Moral Imagination

"Moral imagination" could be described as conscience put into operation; it points to the phase before action, the process of decision and ethical deliberation. The element of imagination points to the possibility of thinking ahead, imagining the consequences of different possible acts and coming to a balanced decision in tune with conscience. Thus, moral imagination operationalises conscience and forms the ground for well-considered moral acts, for which one can take responsibility.

An example of a study on moral imagination is Brown's *The Ethos of the Cosmos*[59] in which Brown shows the impact of conceptions of

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period of the Reformation, dealing with imagination, understood as the accommodation of concepts, such as peace and justice, and spelling out apocalyptic visions. These concepts and visions are influenced by (and often explicitly based on) the Bible and can also be regarded as part of the reception history. Cf. P. Matheson, *The Imaginative World of the Reformation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

58) D. Kroneman, *The Lord is My Shepherd: An Exploration into the Theory and Practice of Translating Biblical Metaphor*, unpublished Ph.D thesis (Amsterdam: Free University, 2004).

59) W.P. Brown, *The Ethos of the Cosmos: The Genesis of Moral Imagination in the Bible*

creation on "moral imagination," the ethos of the community or communities gathered around the Hebrew Bible. This shows that moral imagination has a communal ground; culture and society shape consciences, and decisions and acts shape society and culture. Thus, this subsection underlines the inclusion of moral aspects in the cognitive environment.

Imagination: A Reflection

Imagination is the capacity to create an image, as real as possible. This emphasis on conformity to reality again underlines why the word "fantasy" is misleading.[60] Imagination as a creative capacity cannot be caught in methods. Simultaneously, this points to imagination's heuristic hermeneutic significance; imagination explores, and, moreover, proposes, possibilities which methodology cannot suggest. These possibilities, however, are to be checked methodologically. Imagination's ability to go beyond the beaten track and to bring to mind viewpoints and material from outside a methodological framework makes it invaluable and indispensable. Therefore, imagination is an essential tool in hermeneutics. These possible images can also be denoted as 'imagination;' similarly, imagination can also refer to collective images, formed within a culture.

This context may recall Brueggemann's 'spirituality quick connector'. Besides the heuristic value of imagination as a tool for understanding and exploring new possibilities and view points, imagination also serves to grasp the spiritual contents of faith related expression in the biblical texts. This has been worked out and applied in different theological disciplines, such as hermeneutics, biblical studies and church history.[61] Thus, imagination is deployed in order to discover and uncover

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(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); cf. also C.A. Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). For New Testament Studies see: Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament;* n. 28 above.

60) Fantasy suggests a fantastic, grotesque, unreal world to be real; however, this made-up world of fantasy is so much implausible and absurd that it can never become real or that it cannot reasonably be assumed ever to have been real. See n. 9 above.

61) See L.T. Johnson, "Imagining the World that Scripture Imagines," in: L.T. Johnson and W.S. Kurz (eds.), *The Future of Catholic Biblical Scholarship: A Constructive*

the hermeneutical and homiletical strength of the biblical text(s). In line with this, Kathryn Tanner makes a plea for "biblical imagination" to become the task of theologians: theology as "a science of the possible" should research the potency of the biblical text, in order that it can be applied in practice.[62] This leads to the challenging question as to whether employing the tool of imagination would only generate more possible ideas or whether it would also improve existing interpretations. Beyond this an awareness of the imagination(s) at play during the text's emergence, in combination with an awareness of the present day imagination(s),[63] is a hermeneutical and homiletical necessity.[64]

With their spirituality, the ancients' imagination comes into view again. A crucial step is still to be made. Imagination is taken as a collective activity in which individuals share, even a quality distinctive of humans, but with changing contents, depending on time and place, on a community. The Bible has been written, composed and shaped as the product of people who shared in a culture; it has been communicated over centuries as part of a community and thus reflects the imagination of that community. One of the major differences in the expressions of this ancient culture in comparison with the present Western cultures is that these expressions, especially because they have been shaped over years, are less individual. Taking them as expressions of a collective, a community in which they functioned, justifies understanding these

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Conversation (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 119–142); L.T. Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2006); G. Green, *Theology, Hermeneutics, and Imagination: The Crisis of Interpretation at the End of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); D.W. Brown, *Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); D.W. Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination: Christian Tradition and Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

62) K. Tanner, "Scripture as Popular Text," *Modern Theology* 14 (1998), pp. 279– 298 (295).

63) Which can be more precisely defined by place and culture, as shows the example of Kroneburg, see n. 58 above.

64) Cf. Schneider"s statement, that (present day written) "theology will say nothing if it does not resonate with the actual imaginative substructure of the culture that produces it." L.C. Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 112.

texts against the background of a collective imagination and assuming a relatively large measure of certainty in interpretation, an intersubjectivity which includes the communities that first received the text. Since the biblical text has come into existence through communities, even before canonization, there is no need to search for unusual readings from lone 'outsiders' in the past. However, this does not imply that there is no imagination needed to recall and understand the text in its historical context, or that difficult texts are lacking that which imagination, beyond method, can help to both interpret and apply.

Heuristic imagination builds a bridge through time, assisting in reaching a better understanding of the text. Imagination concurrently forms the connection between the material and its written sources and their mental counterparts. Insight into the patterns of the ancients' imagination provides a better understanding of the expressions of their imagination in written, material and pictorial form. Therefore, like in Keel's example of *Symbolism*,[65] images and texts, as elements that both function in relation to the imagination, should both be considered when either one of them is being examined.[66] These two functions give imagination value as an epistemological and cognitive bridge.

Whereas modern, positivistic research was interested in 'hard facts' (maybe apart from certain 19th century ideas on (mass) psychology and *Kultur*), the present hermeneutical approach allows to examine 'soft facts'. Although 'soft facts' gained momentum in the humanities, the present article proposes a way to take a controlled step further, with the help of imagination. As discussed above, imagination can—beyond the cognitive environment—be employed as a tool for studying empathy in the past; maybe it is even the key to a hermeneutics of historical empathy; of course, again, in dialogue with the pictorial and written sources that address thoughts, feelings and experiences.

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65) See n. 56.

66) Note, however, that both texts and images (and possibly other material sources) should be studied autonomously, for their own sakes, before interpretations and conclusions are compared and possible brought in tune with each other.

Recapitulation and Conclusion

The different ways in which imagination plays a role in Biblical Studies as discussed in this article are brought together in Figure 1 (below). In reference to the schedule, these ways can be recapitulated as follows:

1. Imagination as a tool to reconstruct history (C1a)
2. Imagination employed to make aware how the ancient text gets across—the perspective of today's reader of the text (C2)
3. Imagination, mental configurations and cognitive environment of the people involved in the first communication(s) of the biblical text(s) (A2)
4. "Prophetic Imagination:" imagination used to sketch an image of the future (A1c)
5. "Imaginative remembering:" imagination used to sketch an image of the past (A1a)
6. "Imagination" in Israel's liturgy as present alternative world (A1b)
7. "Counter imagination:" a biblical response to postmodern imagination (postmodern human's epistemological relation with the world), providing a way to deal with interests, suffering and fear of human beings (C2)
8. Imagination as a hermeneutical-homiletical access to the faith and spirituality, expressed in the text (the correspondence of the spiritual component in A2 and C2 assumed for the epistemological reasons to create within C1a a 'quick connector' to experience)[67]
9. 'Moral Imagination:' usually individual imagination, used to make ethical decisions, rooted in collective values (cf. A2, B2, C2)

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[67] In a broader sense, this can be linked up with empathy; although in both cases one should be aware of possible discontinuities—e.g., because of the wording/phrasing or expression of experiences. For instance, the Psalms may communicate experiences which humans in ancient times and nowadays have in common, but the verbalisation may still—at first sight—be experienced as alienating.

10. The imagination of people in the reception history (B, can be distinguished in the given subcategories).[68]

This article with its summary underlines the importance of imagination in biblical hermeneutics. Study, skill and honesty are essential in this endeavour. Observation of these conditions enables imagination to contribute to a fuller and more accurate understanding of the communication of texts and their contexts.

Two quotations from *The New Testament With Imagination*, which *mutatis mutandis* also hold true for the Old Testament, round off this article:

> The New Testament writings were written by real people for real people.[69]
>
> We need to listen to them openly, including critically, allowing them to speak in their own terms and to be what they are without our prejudgements and prejudices, positive or negative. That demands discipline but also imagination.[70]

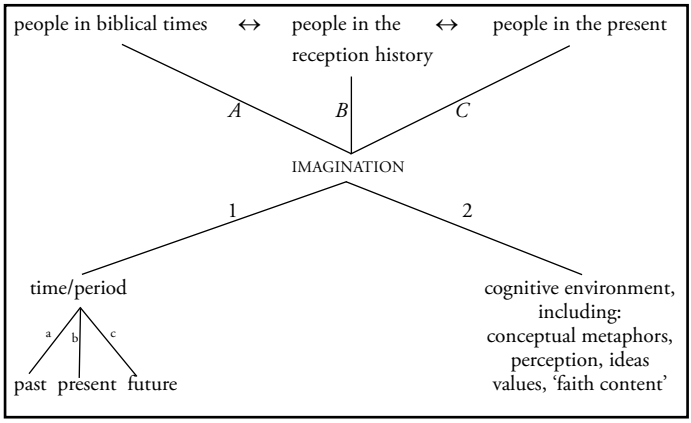

Figure 1: imagination (culturally unspecified).

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68) First of all, this concerns people from other times. The Figure is not culturally specified, which implies that people from other cultures, such as people from elsewhere, are not represented in the diagram (however, the section "Then, Now and Elsewhere" deals with them).

69) Loader (2007), p. 187.

70) Loader (2007), p. 186.