


# We are shaped by past interpretations



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Eckart Otto's four-volume commentary on Deuteronomy will remain for many decades a benchmark for the study of Deuteronomy and the Pentateuch. One important aspect of Otto's work is his focus on research history, and in this article the importance of this kind of study is highlighted by means of Hans-Georg Gadamer's view of '*Wirkungsgeschichte*' or the 'historically effected conscious' and the notion that understanding is a way of participating in an intellectual tradition. In the first volume of his commentary, Otto took us through an interpretation history of more than three centuries. It was a staggering journey confronting us with many scholars, showing us that understanding also implies participation 'in an event of tradition'. In the light of this history, Otto indicated how the problem of diachrony and synchrony could be approached.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** This article highlights the importance of the history of research for the understanding of the Old Testament as well as the New Testament. It also emphasised the important contribution of philosophers such as Hans-Georg Gadamer and his emphasis on '*Wirkungsgeschichte*'.

**Keywords:** History; History of research; Deuteronomy; Pentateuch; '*Wirkungsgeschichte*'; Synchrony; Diachrony.

## Introduction

It was a fine day in 2000 when Eckart Otto first visited the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria. It was the beginning of great things for us because Pro Pent was founded, and most importantly, our confrontation with and appropriation of Otto's views about the Pentateuch in general and Deuteronomy in particular had a profound influence on a whole community of scholars. Otto is a prolific writer and wrote on many aspects of Old Testament scholarship and is indeed a man for all seasons. He has published so much and his thinking is so profound that it would take many generations of Old Testament scholars to fathom and appropriate it (Cf. Le Roux 2001a:234–244, 2001b:380–395, 2005:265–280, 2009:100–120, 2010:20–35, 2012, 2013, 2015).

In this article, we focus on one important aspect of Otto's work and that is his emphasis on the importance of interpretation history. The interpretations of the past have shaped us all. Sometimes more and sometimes less directly, but its influence we can never escape. Without knowing, the history of interpretation has moulded our scholarly approach to the Old Testament in different ways (Gadamer 1990:306). Gadamer used the word '*Wirkungsgeschichte*' to describe the accumulation of interpretations and their continuing influence on scholarship and on us. We can broadly describe '*Wirkungsgeschichte*' as the 'effective history' or 'historically effected conscious', which had a formidable effect on our understanding of the Old Testament (Gadamer 1990:295).

Eckart Otto offers an excellent example of 'historically effected conscious', because he took past interpretations very seriously. These interpretations formed the horizon of understanding for his interpretation of Deuteronomy and the Pentateuch. One can be critical of Otto's history of interpretation and doubt whether it could really contribute to a better understanding of a text, and below we attempt to answer this question by referring to Gadamer's views about '*Wirkungsgeschichte*'.

## We cannot escape past interpretations

In every new context, novel and different readings of the Old Testament originated and all these centuries-long interpretations are not dusty archive material or outdated works stored on bookshelves. They can aid us to understand the versatility of the Old Testament and to discover meanings we did not know or have forgotten. The understanding of a text is also determined by the history of its interpretations. In other words, one can never understand a text on its own, because it is embedded in a long interpretation history and can never be understood apart from

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those interpretations: *‘Verstehen ist seinem Wesen nach ein wirkungsgeschichtlicher Vorgang’* (Gadamer 1990:305) or *‘Understanding is essentially a historically effected event’* (Gadamer 2003:300).

In a well-known quote, Gadamer says that the *‘Wirkungsgeschichte’* has to do with the whole of our being: *‘Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein ist mehr Sein als Bewusstsein’* (Gadamer 1993:101). Knowledge of the Old Testament’s interpretation history therefore penetrates the exegete’s total existence so completely that he/she can never free himself/herself from it. The exegete is always part of a tradition and his/her interpretation always carries the marks and influence of previous interpretations: *‘The interpreter is always, as part of tradition, the effect of prior interpretation’* (Lawn & Keane 2011:79–80).

To reiterate: We are never alone when explaining a text because past interpretations contribute to our understanding. Understanding is therefore not so much an objective act of a subject but rather a process in which we become part of a text’s history of interpretation (Gadamer 1990:295). The narrative of past interpretations involves us and we become one with it: *‘Das Verstehen ist selber nicht so sehr als eine Handlung der Subjektivität zu denken, sondern als Einrücken in ein Überlieferungsgeschehen’* (Gadamer 1990:295) or *‘Understanding is thought of less as a subjective act than participating in an event of tradition’* (Gadamer 2003:290).

In short: Each attempt to interpret continues what has already been said in the past and contributes to the way the future generations would interpret a text. A next generation will be influenced by today’s interpretation of the Old Testament, which will become part of the *‘Wirkungsgeschichte’*, which will shape future interpretation (Gadamer 1990:305–312, 2003:300–307).

## The bridge between yesterday and today

With the rise of the historical consciousness at the end of the 18th century, the tension between the present and the past became a painful experience because history was regarded as unreachable and inaccessible (Scholtz 2013):

It is well-known that G.E. Lessing saw a ‘horribly large gap’ (*‘der garstige breite Graben’*) between contingent historical facts which cannot be demonstrated and the truths of reason, and he confessed being unable to jump over the gap and to base his moral and metaphysical convictions on such historical facts. (p. 80)

However, the *‘Wirkungsgeschichte’* or history of interpretation fills the gap between the past and us. Therefore, no empty or horrible abyss exists between present and past, between history and us. We can also describe it as follows: Between the Old Testament and we, there is no emptiness, because it has been filled with centuries-long interpretations that opened up new explanations and perspectives and ways to

interpret the text. Today’s Old Testament scholarship is thus inconceivable without these past interpretations. Each understanding is the result of an existential experience with the text as well as the fusion of the horizon of the exegete with that of the text. Thus, the question is not whether the Old Testament has been explained precisely or not, but whether we have become an inseparable part of the constant process of interpretation and reinterpretation over the centuries. So, it’s not about a clinical factual understanding of the past, *‘but the re-creation of it in a way that brings it to life’* (Thiselton 1980:67).

An example of the powerful process of the history of interpretation and reinterpretation and how it fills the time-gap between then and now can be seen in the four-volume commentary on Deuteronomy by Otto. This commentary is an outstanding achievement which will shape the thinking of many future generations about Deuteronomy and the Pentateuch. It will remain a standard work for Deuteronomy studies for a very long time, and it is unlikely to be replaced by anything similar soon. The first volume appeared in 2012 (622 pages), volume 2 also appeared in 2012 (450 pages), volume 3 appeared in 2016 (692 pages) and volume 4 appeared in 2017 (529 pages). In total, all volumes have more than 2300 pages.

Otto’s works are so rich in information about language, history and theology that it must be reread constantly in order to discover new viewpoints on the book of Deuteronomy. His views were moulded, formed and enriched by the interpretations of the past. It is, however, important to note that it all started with Moses, who was the first exegete, and this idea exerted great influence on Otto’s reading of Deuteronomy.

## Everything started with Moses

An important feature of Otto’s commentary is the many pages which he devoted to the interpretation history of the book of Deuteronomy. Each volume begins with a thorough investigation of the research history as well as Otto’s response to this interpretation history. His understanding of the book Deuteronomy was profoundly shaped by this interpretation history, and this can be seen clearly in his exegesis. The research history at the beginning of each volume and Otto’s reference to research in the rest of his commentary is therefore not an accidental or separate section of the commentary but fulfils an indispensable function. It was a past that could not be avoided and to which Otto felt himself bound. In short: The *‘Wirkungsgeschichte’* or the interpretations of past centuries shaped Otto’s explanation of the book of Deuteronomy.

There is, however, something else. According to Otto, Deuteronomy’s interpretation history already started with Moses, because Moses was the first exegete and he gave rise to the on-going process of interpretation and reinterpretation up to this day. Put differently: Moses’ exegesis gave rise to a

chain reaction that has continued until today. In the book of Deuteronomy we see Moses the exegete at work, and his exegesis especially reveals three characteristics. Firstly, older texts and interpretations were not archives to be rejected but had to be reinterpreted in new contexts; they had to be reinterpreted for new period and new situations. Secondly, each reinterpretation of a text differed from the 'original' and was not a mere continuation of an earlier meaning. Thirdly, in the process of reinterpretation, new meanings were discovered, and consequently texts grew in meaning (cf. Otto 1997:321–339, 1999b:1–84).

Below we briefly explain Moses' way of working by showing how the laws given at Sinai (Ex 20–23) were reinterpreted 40 years later in the plains of Moab, before the entry into the Promised Land (Otto 1998:876–887, 1999a:625–628).

### What texts did Moses receive? The laws of Sinai

At Sinai, God gave Israel the Ten Commandments or Decalogue (Ex 20) and the Book of the Covenant (Ex 21–23). In the Book of the Covenant, the Ten Commandments were made relevant for daily life, which had to serve as guidelines to Israel (Otto 2001a:1–188; 2001b:1–120; 2006:71–102). In other words, the Book of the Covenant was an example of how Israel had to apply the Ten Commandments in their lives; therefore the references to slaves, unintentional murder, theft and so on (Otto 1998:876–887).

A slave's life was unbearable and therefore arrangements regarding his release and family had to be made (Ex 21:2–11). Murder had to be punished, but sometimes the death was not intentional. A person who inadvertently killed someone, therefore, had to be dealt with in a different way (Ex 21:12–14). Fighting men were a common phenomenon, and those cases had to be judged on legal grounds (Ex 21:12–14) (Otto 1998:876–887, 1999c:693–696).

All these events took place 3 months after the exodus, at Sinai (Otto 1999d:1603–1606). Later, after 40 years Israel was still in the desert, but circumstances had changed radically, and the 'old texts' had to be reinterpreted for a new context (cf. Otto 2000a:43–83).

### A new interpretation in the Moab plains

After 40 years of the Sinai event, the scene is moved to the plains of Moab, where Israel was at the border of the Promised Land. The old generation, led from Egypt, had died in the desert and a new generation of younger people was now ready to enter the land, which had been promised to Abraham and his offspring. A new country, a new world, a new lifestyle and totally different challenges would be waiting for them. At this juncture in Israel's history, Moses once again spoke to them, and in the book of Deuteronomy his last words are directed to the new generation (Otto 2000b:43–83).

And how did he go about? The answer is found in Deuteronomy 1:5: 'It was ... in Moab that Moses began to

explain the law' (אָתְּהִתְנַחֵם בְּאֵר). The Hebrew word for 'explain' indicates the interpretation of something and its explanation. One dictionary describes this with 'to explain, clarify' and 'they will do to explain, i.e. they will occupy themselves in explaining' (Otto 2012a:304).

What did Moses explain? The Sinai laws (Ex 20–23). In other words, after 40 years of roaming in the wilderness, Israel reached Moab, and Moses realised that it was the end – the end of his life, but also of 40 years of wanderings in the wilderness, and at that juncture Moses began to explain the laws of Sinai (Ex 20, 21–23) to the people (Otto 2012a:319–320, 2012b:678–684).

Moses radically reapplied the Book of the Covenant (Ex 21–23) to the new situation. For example, we see this in his view of the release of slaves. In the Book of the Covenant, everything is stated concisely: '[w]hen you buy a Hebrew slave, his service will last for six years. In the seventh year he will leave a free man without paying compensation' (Ex 21:2).

Just before the entrance into the Promised Land, Moses explained this text with much compassion and understanding (Dt 15:12–17) (Otto 1999d, 2016):

If your fellow Hebrew, man or woman, sells himself to you, he can serve you for six years. In the seventh year you must set him free, and in setting him free, you must not let him go empty handed. By way of present, you will load his shoulders with things from your flock, from your threshing-floor and from your winepress; as Yahweh your God has blessed you, so you must give to him. Remember that you were once a slave in Egypt and that Yahweh your God redeemed you; that is why I am giving you this order today. (1999d:1603–1606; 2016:1336–1373).

A new world was awaiting the new generation, and therefore the Sinai Torah or laws had to be reinterpreted for a new generation standing on the verge of entering the land (Otto 2012b:765–769). Moses' interpretation did not imply the rejection of the older texts in Exodus 20–23; however, his understanding of them changed because the context has changed. It is important that we see a movement: Moses was the first exegete; he interpreted and reinterpreted texts of 40 years ago; in the process new meanings have emerged, introducing a history of interpretation stretching to our times (Otto 2000b:43–83).

The notion that the Moab Torah is an interpretation of the Sinai Torah is an extremely important aspect of Otto's thinking about Deuteronomy, and one comes across it often in his work. It enabled him, for instance, to critique Martin Noth's view of a Deuteronomistic History stretching from Deuteronomy to Joshua to Judges to the books of Samuel and Kings. According to Noth, Deuteronomy must be detached from the Pentateuch to form the introduction to the Deuteronomistic History, but this was rejected by Otto because Deuteronomy is a reinterpretation of the Sinai Torah and therefore belongs to the literary history of the Pentateuch (Otto 2012a:133–137).

After Moses, the book Deuteronomy and the Pentateuch have been interpreted and reinterpreted for millennia, and Otto is very conscious of the fact that he is part of this process. This point is further elaborated below.

## Appropriation of past interpretations

Otto did not describe past interpretations of Deuteronomy in an objective or detached or clinical way, but he became involved in his renditions of the views of other scholars, clearly indicating what he appreciates and what he criticises or rejects. Below we give a very brief account of Otto's attempts to be open to the views of others, and how he would reinterpret and rework these perspectives in his commentary.

Heinrich Ewald distinguished between the Deuteronomist as the author and editor of the book of Deuteronomy and a final editor of the Pentateuch, a view 'was in *diesem Kommentar modifiziert, wieder zur Geltung gebracht wird*' (Otto 2012:75). Otto also appreciated the insights of Eduard Reuss and his views that the '*Urdeuteronomium*' comprised Deuteronomy 5–26 and 28, which were later framed by 1–4 and 29–30. Reuss also stated that the author of the frame in Deuteronomy 1–4 and 29–30 edited the books Deuteronomy and Joshua, 'was *modifiziert in diesem Kommentar erneuert wird*' (Otto 2012a:77). Otto linked on to Carl Heinrich Cornill's view that Deuteronomy 4:9–40 is post-exilic and reflects priestly language, as well as Ezechiel's influence, 'was *dieser Kommentar bestätigt*' (Otto 2012a:88). Heinrich Graetz believed that the book of Deuteronomy was published in the 8th century, during the time of Isaiah, but because it mainly circulated amongst the priests it was forgotten and only, in a sense, discovered during the time of Josiah. Otto took notice of this view because it accentuated the importance of the addressees in the book of Deuteronomy (Otto 2012):

Damit hat H. Graetz als einen wichtigen Aspekt die Frage nach den Adressaten des Deuteronomiums in die Diskussion eingebracht, der in diesem Kommentar nicht als diachrones Argument, sondern synchron in der Rechtshermeneutik des Pentateuch zur Geltung gebracht wird. (p. 95)

Otto also referred to David Hoffmann, who said that Deuteronomy forms part of the Pentateuch and that its (final) form in the Masoretic text must be understood synchronically. Although Otto did not agree with everything that Hoffmann said, he nevertheless stated that Hoffmann's remarks on Deuteronomy have '*auch Bedeutung für diesen Kommentar, als er wichtige Gesichtspunkte dafür liefert, wie das Deuteronomium als Teil des Pentateuch in der im masoretischen Text vorliegende Gestalt synchron zu interpretieren ist*' (Otto 2012:95).

If one follows these and other remarks on the views of scholars past and present, one already gets an impression of the approach that Otto intends to follow in order to understand and explain the book of Deuteronomy. This makes his interpretation of the history of research so important. In the next two sections, we focus more on his views on diachronic and synchronic approaches.

## Diachronical interpretation

After Moses, the first exegete, the book of Deuteronomy has been interpreted without end, but Otto picked up the threads at that moment when Moses' authorship of the Pentateuch and Deuteronomy was denied in favour of Ezra, who wrote it in the post-exilic period (Otto 2012a:62–64). In 1670, Baruch Spinoza wrote in an anonymous publication that Ezra compiled Genesis to 2 Kings in various fragments from different places narrating the story of Israel from the creation to the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE and the Babylonian exile. Moses could, therefore, not have written the Pentateuch or Deuteronomy, and further to substantiate his views, Spinoza mentioned amongst other things that Moses is often referred to in the third person, and that many places mentioned in Genesis originated only after the time of Moses (Ska 2013:319–321).

Ezra, as then the author of the Pentateuch, adapted the narrative to his post-exilic context, and this can especially be seen in the Decalogue of Exodus 20 and its reworking in Deuteronomy 5. What is important for the study of Deuteronomy is that Ezra would first write the book of Deuteronomy, and only after that would compile the narrative from the creation to the exile (Houtman 1994:40–43). At a certain stage the book of Deuteronomy was then inserted into this narrative stretching from the creation to the exile, and therefore the study of the Pentateuch must start with the book of Deuteronomy. Because Spinoza suggested that the Pentateuch/Deuteronomy be read in a rational way, it had to be approached similar to any other historical document, and this implied that the intention and context of the authors and their addressees be determined and the origin and growth of the Pentateuch and Deuteronomy be described (Houtman 1994:42).

In short: Spinoza's views would influence generations of scholars who were convinced that the Pentateuch and Deuteronomy ought to be studied historically or diachronically, emphasising the origin, growth and context of writing and addressees.

In his work of 1753, Jean Astruc wondered, similar to Calvin two centuries earlier, from where did Moses obtain the information contained in Genesis (Römer 2013:401). Knowledge about the creation, the garden, Abraham etc. had to come from somewhere else. Moses' career only began in Exodus 3 and he did not experience the events described in Genesis first hand and therefore had to use written sources (Smend 2007:7). According to Astruc, Moses held these original sources in his hands, treated them with utmost care and used them to write the book of Genesis (cf. Graf Reventlow 2001:213, 285).

Even today, we can still see Moses' patchwork by looking for the repetition of the same events (such as the creation stories in Gn 1 and 2), the interchange of the names 'Elohim' and 'Yahweh' and the occurrence of anachronisms.



In Moab, before the entry into the Promised Land, Moses had in this understanding a small library containing a number of sources, including those using 'Elohim' and 'Yahweh' and about 10 other sources: 'Damit war ein Paradigma der historischen Kritik des Pentateuch geboren' (Otto 2012a:65). This was also the beginning of the documentary hypothesis, which would exert an enormous influence on scholars even until the 20th century. It is interesting to note that, according to Astruc, Moses was indeed the author of Genesis and the Pentateuch, and it was not necessary to shift authorship to Ezra in the post-exilic period (Houtman 1980:54–55). This also had consequences for the study of the book of Deuteronomy because with the Deuteronomistic History attention was moved from Deuteronomy to the book of Genesis (Otto 2012a:65)

Johann Gottfried Eichhorn differed from Astruc and said that Moses did not write Genesis or the Pentateuch, but that these works were compiled by an anonymous author long after Moses, during the time between Joshua and Samuel. Moses did write certain sections, because in Deuteronomy 31:9, 26 Moses is summoned to write down a testament and to put it next to the ark. This was the beginning of a temple archive, which contained in the pre-exilic era also texts from other parts of the Old Testament. Many copies were probably made of Moses' laws because according to 2 Chronicles 17:9, Josaphat sent teachers of the laws to all towns in Judah so that the people could learn the laws: 'They gave instruction in Judah, having with them the book of the Law of Yahweh, and went round all the towns of Judah instructing the people'. Because of the invasion and destruction of Jerusalem, this temple archive was destroyed, but luckily many copies of the law were owned privately and formed the basis of a new temple archive. To protect this archive from further destruction, the process of canonisation started (Otto 2012a:66–67).

During the 18th century, the search for documents or sources underlying the canonical text continued, and the methods were also refined. Study and analyses of the Pentateuch increased and obtained a dynamic of their own ('*Eigendynamik*'), giving rise to even more theories about the origin of the Pentateuch. Astruc's and Eichhorn's theories and their emphases on doublets, tensions, contradictions etc. remained important for a historical or diachronical interpretation of the Pentateuch, which continued without end. In the work of Wilhelm Martin Leberecht De Wette, there is a break with the Pentateuch's perception of history, which is the result of a long-lasting development (Jüngel 2004:904–919; Otto 2007a:19–28, 2007b:29–53; Rogerson 1992:10–150; Römer 2013:393–400). Otto appreciated De Wette's emphasis that Deuteronomy is later than the Tetrach (Gn to Nm) and that it contains characteristics not to be found in the Tetrach. According to De Wette, Deuteronomy presupposes the Tetrach (Gn to Nm), and Deuteronomy concluded the literary history of the Pentateuch during the exile. However, Otto was rather critical about a remark which De Wette made in 1805 and which became a kind of Archimedes point or fixed point for the historical

dating of the Pentateuch and the other parts of the Old Testament. It appeared as a footnote in De Wette's Latin thesis, '*Dissertatio critica exegetica*', and in this work an important connection was established between Josiah's reformation and the book Deuteronomy. This remark had shaped the Pentateuch research for the past two centuries (Smend 2004:1499–1502, 2007:47) because it gave rise to the quest for the 'law book' and the 'book of the covenant' and initiated intensive research to determine which parts of Deuteronomy were available during Josiah's period and how they influenced him (Otto 2012a:69–72). In his work, Otto often critically refers to this notion and the effect it had on the understanding of Deuteronomy.

It was the great scholar Julius Wellhausen who formulated the classic view of the documentary hypothesis. He identified the four sources of the Pentateuch: the Yahwist (J), Elohist (E), Deuteronomist (D) and the Priestly writer (P). Wellhausen (1963:200–207) did not always distinguish clearly between J and E and referred to them jointly as the Jehovist (JE). His literary-critical or historical-critical search for the sources underlying the Pentateuch was an attempt to understand the history of Israel's religion. According to Wellhausen, the sources JE, D and P reflect three stages in the development of Israel's religion: JE depicts a spontaneous form of worship; according to Deuteronomy, worship must be centralised; in P, religion became regulated and hierarchical (Wellhausen 2001:43–52). In his commentaries, Otto often critically referred to this literary-critical analyses of the text, the division into sources, the dating of the layers, etc., because this was an inadequate or at least a one-sided understanding of the book of Deuteronomy and the Pentateuch (Otto 2012a:83–87). Literary criticism '*verdunkelt*' has clouded our understanding of the Pentateuch and Deuteronomy, and therefore had to be overcome; in Gerhard von Rad there was something quite new which opened up such avenues.

In the course of time, the documentary hypothesis and form criticism were united, and for many decades this shaped the understanding of the book of Deuteronomy. A kind of synchronical reading developed, and Von Rad was an excellent representative of this way of thinking. His starting point was the Hexateuch in its final form, and from there he worked his way through to the smallest part, the credo in Deuteronomy 26:5–9, showing how the Hexateuch was constructed from the credo to its final form (Von Rad 1971a:9–86).

Von Rad could accomplish this with the help of Wellhausen's literary criticism and the sources JE, D and P. According to Von Rad, the Yahwist started with this credo or short confession of faith in Deuteronomy 26, which contained the basic acts of Yahweh:

My father was a wandering Aramaean, who went down to Egypt with a small group of men, and stayed there, until he there became a great, powerful and numerous nation. The Egyptians ill-treated us, they oppressed us and inflicted harsh slavery on us. But we called on Yahweh, God of our ancestors.

Yahweh heard our voice and saw our misery, our toil and our oppression; and Yahweh brought us out of Egypt with mighty hand and outstretched arm, with great terror, and with signs and wonders. He brought us here and has given us this country, a country flowing with milk and honey. (vv. 5–9)

According to Von Rad (1971:11–16, 1973a:9–108, 1973b:109–153), this credo initially functioned in Sichem and formed part of the covenant renewal festival every seven years in the pre-monarchic period.

In this confession of faith in Deuteronomy 26:5–9, Von Rad distinguished between the ‘stable’ and the ‘variable’ which became a kind of Perdue ‘model’ for thinking about the Pentateuch. According to Von Rad, the ‘stable’ element is the historical credo of Deuteronomy 26:5–9 itself, and has existed from the earliest times and has never changed its form and content. Important is the ‘variable’, the constant interpretation, reinterpretation and expansion of the credo which shed some light on the origin and growth of the Pentateuch. He then added that this distinction between the ‘stable’ and the ‘variable’ highlighted the issue of the *‘End- und Letzgestalt des Hexateuchs’* (Von Rad 1971:11), and although Wellhausen’s literary criticism and the identification of sources still continued, Von Rad *‘sah mit diesem Schluss sehr weitsichtig die Entwicklung der jüngsten Pentateuchforschung voraus’* (Otto 2012a:132).

Over the years, the terms ‘history’, ‘historical understanding’, ‘historical criticism’ and ‘historical critical method’ were in some circles treated with great scepticism because it was believed that this approach undermined the understanding of the Pentateuch and the book of Deuteronomy. There was a resistance against ‘the domination of history (particularly in its positivistic expression) and the historical method in accessing the meaning of the Hebrew Bible and birthing of Old Testament theology’ (Perdue 2005:4). In the work of Otto, this resistance is tangible and aimed against De Wette, Wellhausen and especially literary criticism. All the criticism launched against a diachronical reading of the Pentateuch and Deuteronomy opened the way for the synchronical approach and the emphasis on ‘what the texts themselves say ... in the form in which we have them’ (Perdue 2005:191). This move from diachrony to synchrony is explained in the next section.

## Synchrony challenged the historical paradigm

Over the years, emphasis shifted from a diachronical interpretation to a synchronical reading of the Pentateuch and the book of Deuteronomy. It was thought that the theological depths of Deuteronomy could only be determined synchronically (Otto 2012a:142). Put differently: Scholars realised that a diachronical interpretation cannot explain Deuteronomy’s theology or message adequately (Otto 2012a:189). The synchronical approach to Deuteronomy was also a form of resistance against De Wette, Wellhausen and especially the dominance of literary criticism and the

historical critical method. Emphasis was now laid on texts as we have them in their final form (Otto 2012a:191).

A synchronical approach even implied to some the total rejection of a diachronical interpretation. One scholar even said that if the Old Testament still has importance for someone, he/she must refrain from a historical critical reading because historical criticism and literary criticism are modelled after the objectivity ideal of the natural sciences and would express a message which could be in conflict ‘with the message and the spirit of the biblical text’ (Otto 2012a:193). To determine the theological depths of Deuteronomy, historical information was not needed in this understanding. It was thought by some that a timeless theological message of Deuteronomy could be formulated by merely focussing on the final form of the text, excluding historical questions about author or context (Otto 2012a:191).

Synchronical readings of Deuteronomy increased during the change from the 20th century to the 21st century, but it did not bring with it a new method which was accepted by all. Synchrony also never contributed to a unity of opinion or theology, and a reason for this is the lack of a method applied by all. A diachronical understanding, on the other hand, developed the historical critical method and had a method or ‘*Methodenkanon*’ which enabled scholars all over the world to investigate and interpret texts using a specific approach (Otto 2012a:207).

A synchronical exposition of Deuteronomy implies that Deuteronomy should be viewed as the conclusion of the Pentateuch, and that its relationship with the Tetrateuch (Gn, Ex, Nm, Lv) should be determined. A synchronical analysis which does not treat Deuteronomy as part of the Pentateuch *‘ist methodisch zu eng gefasst’* (Otto 2012a:205). To illuminate this point, we can once again refer to the example given above of the Moab Tora as an interpretation of the Sinai Tora.

Despite their methodological and other shortcomings, Otto nevertheless accentuated that the many synchronical studies of the past provided us with new ways of understanding important themes, questions and answers, which enriched the study of the book of Deuteronomy. A few are mentioned below.

The notion of the *centralisation* of the cult, or Deuteronomy supporting Josiah’s reformation, was severely questioned. Centralisation was merely an ideal which was formed in the period between the entry into the land and the building of the temple, and it was unnecessary to date it to the 7th century (Otto 2012a:189).

Questions pertaining to authorship and the intention of the author became unnecessary, because an awareness of the *effects* of a text on the listener or reader had to be developed. One possible effect, which Deuteronomy creates, is the desire to love God by obedience to the Torah and the rejection of other gods (Otto 2012a:193). This view or effect can also,

for instance, contribute to our understanding of something like monotheism.

The call to worship Yahweh alone does, however, not exclude the existence of *other gods*. It only says that amidst these gods, Yahweh should be loved and worshipped. Yahweh attained this position not because of the creation or by means of his rule over all nations but because of his faithfulness and mercy demonstrated by his election of Israel. In his actions, Yahweh showed that he is God (Otto 2012a:192).

According to another synchronical reading, sections 1:9–18; 4:1–6:9; 12; 16:18–18:22 belong to the heart of Deuteronomy, stressing the *supremacy* of Yahweh and emphasising that the keeping of the Torah is a way of demonstrating loyalty to Yahweh. To listen to the Torah and to apply it to the new contexts in the Promised Land was a way of experiencing the closeness of Yahweh.

Some, like Norbert Lohfink, focussed in a synchronical way on the *'Fabel'* or *'narrative'* of Deuteronomy, and was interested in the sequence of events (*'Ereignisfolge'*) and not so much the sequence of the narratives (*'Erzählfolge'*). Deuteronomy, similar to the rest of the Pentateuch, is a narrative in which Moses tells the history of Israel, but not in a fixed historical order, as things happened. Deuteronomy 1–3, for instance, narrates the events after Horeb, and only in Deuteronomy 5 it is told what happened at Horeb.

To illustrate this point, Lohfink attempted to construct the sequence of events in Deuteronomy 29–31. In these verses, mention is made of the writing of the Torah, the learning of a song, the gathering of people, the Levites, the elder, the ark and the conclusion of a covenant. It is, however, not clear how these events followed each other, and Lohfink suggested the following:

1. At a certain stage Moses wrote down the Tora (31:9, 24).
2. Then the people assembled and the Moab covenant was concluded (29–30). Moses informed them about the dangers they will encounter in the Promised Land (31:1–6) and told them about Joshua, the new commander (31:7).
3. Then a theophany followed, during which a song was given to Moses, which he had to write down and teach the people. During this occasion, Joshua was encouraged to have faith and be strong (31:14–23).
4. Moses called the Levites and gave them the written Torah (31:24–27; 31:9).
5. The Levites gathered together the elders and orally transmitted the song to them (31:28–30).
6. Both groups are instructed to read the Torah every 7th year (31:10–13).
7. People gathered a second time, and Moses and Joshua taught the people the song (32:44)(Otto 2012a:197–201).

Otto concluded his history of interpretation in volume 1 of his commentary with reference to Dominuque Markl's work. He was confronted with the notion that nothing in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 suggests that the Decalogues are of a

higher rank than the other commandments in the Pentateuch. To address this problem, Markl was of opinion that only a synchronical reading could adequately shed light on this problem. He therefore focussed on the *'Endgestalt'* of the Pentateuch and its function in society. He first of all wanted to determine *'wie seine Pragmatik funktioniert, wie es soziologisch faktisch wirkt'*. To accomplish this, he needed a hermeneutics that is pragmatically orientated and which is supported by a *'kommunikationsorientierten Textlinguistik'* (Markl 2007:9).

Markl (2007) then applied this approach to the interpretation of the Decalogues in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, concluding that both are like two *'Brennpunkte'* of an ellipse, answering the question about who are the people of Israel and how should they live (Otto 2012a:215).

## Conclusion

Otto takes us through an interpretation history of more than three centuries. It is a staggering journey, confronting us with many scholars, showing us that understanding implies participation *'in an event of tradition'*, confronting us with many different views, criticising interpretations which neglect the relationship between Pentateuch, Tetrateuch and Deuteronomy, and in the end giving us indications of which things would look like in his four-volume commentary on Deuteronomy.

In the work of Otto, synchrony and diachrony are inseparable and are complementing each other. Diachrony highlights the life world in which the book of Deuteronomy took shape, whilst synchrony sharpens the eyes to detect the unity of a text and its structure as well as its links to the rest of the Pentateuch and the ideas about law that were developed in the book of Deuteronomy.

The insights and perspectives of historical criticism informed Otto's diachronical approach to Deuteronomy as well as his creation of a life context in which Deuteronomy took shape. According to him the process started in the pre-exilic period in Jerusalem when priests resisted against the Neo Assyrian empire by using Assyrian texts to express their resistance. When Esarhaddon exhorted his subjects not to even think of subordination, the priests took over the same wording but applied it to Yahweh: Anyone who became disloyal to Yahweh had to be killed (Dt 13:6–10).

The starting point of Deuteronomy's development thus lies in an act of resistance and it continued into the latter part of the 4th century and the beginning of the 3rd century. Deuteronomy's process of growth evolved over a period of three centuries, but it never was a lifeless or bloodless history but one filled with vigorous discussions about history, religion and, especially, law. Otto therefore understood Deuteronomy's legal history within the light of these historical forces, which shaped Israel over many years.

To understand Deuteronomy's historical origin and growth we have to begin with the Covenant Code (Ex 20:24–23:12) which



originated in the 8th century in an attempt to create order in society by emphasising Yahweh's instructions for daily life. During the time of Josiah in the 7th century the Covenant Code was revised and elaborated by the authors of Deuteronomy 12–26\*. The latter did not want to replace the Covenant Code but reinterpreted and expanded it to fit new contexts and new challenges. This is a very important point because Deuteronomy 'begreift sich als mosaische Auslegung der Sinaitora für die Zweite Generation' (Otto 2012a:364) and this forms the basis of Otto's 'Rechtshermeneutik' or 'hermeneutics of law' which forms part of his synchronical examination and which concludes the exegesis of each pericope in his commentaries (Otto 2012a:322–328, 339–341, 362–366, 403–407, 438–439).

Moses thus interpreted the Sinai Torah in the plains of Moab for the generation on the verge of entry into the Promised Land. And to illuminate this link between the Sinai Torah and Deuteronomy 12–26\* the first verses of Deuteronomy are important. At the end of Numbers it is stated that Yahweh gave Moses all the laws and commandments, and in Deuteronomy 1:5 Moses explained these laws to the people in the fields of Moab.

Otto's synchronical approach to Deuteronomy further implies the examination of a text's unity and structure. This is a very important perspective because it allowed him to detect the message or intention of the authors of Deuteronomy and how it was integrated into the rest of the Pentateuch. To illustrate, we briefly refer to Deuteronomy 1:1–5 discussed above (Otto 2004:14–35; 2005:22–49).

Deuteronomy 1:1–5 serves as an introduction to the book of Deuteronomy but synchronically also reflects a unity and a structure emphasising the intention of the authors. Verses 1a and 5 form the frame of the introduction (1:1–5) and verse 3 forms the centre. In 1:3 and also in 1:1 and 1:5, the place is indicated where Moses delivered his rendition of the Sinai Torah, whilst verses 1:2 and 1:4, which frame 1:3, added a time reference. By means of the structure of 1:1–5, Deuteronomy is linked to the Tetratauch and the function of Deuteronomy as a reinterpretation of the Sinai Torah is emphasised (Otto 2012a:305–311, 322–328).

By optimising diachronical (or historical) and synchronical insights, Otto has created (in four volumes) a specific approach to and a theology of the book of Deuteronomy, which will probably influence the study of the Pentateuch and Deuteronomy for many decades to come (Otto 2014:141–146; 2017:2270–2286).

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