Diana Lipton

Philology – the Oldest Profession?

Zusammenfassung

»Philology – the oldest profession?« ist eine Replik zu Kapitel 8 von Marianne Moyaert's *Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other. A History of Religionization* (Blackwell Wiley, 2024), das einen Fokus darauf legt, wie Geisteswissenschaftler:innen des achtzehnten und neunzehnten Jahrhunderts zu europäischen imperialistischen und kolonialistischen Bestrebungen beitrugen. Selbst als sie von biblischen zu säkularen Erklärungen dafür übergingen, warum die Welt so sei, wie sie ist – so Moyaert –bewahrten die Vertreter:innen der Orientalistik, der vergleichenden Religionswissenschaft und der Ethnologie biblische Kategorisierungs- und Organisationsformen. In diesem Kapitel widmet sie sich insbesondere den Philolog:innen. In meiner Replik zeige ich, dass viele der von ihr erörterten Sprachperspektiven des achtzehnten und neunzehnten Jahrhunderts bewusste biblische Parallelen aufweisen.

Summary

»Philology – the oldest profession?« is a response to Chapter 8 of Marianne Moyaert's *Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other. A History of Religionization* (Blackwell Wiley, 2024), which focuses on how eighteenth and nineteenth century human scientists contributed to European imperialist and colonialist endeavors. Even as they turned from scriptural to secular explanations for why the world was the way it was, Moyaert says, practitioners of oriental studies, comparative religion, and anthropology preserved biblical modes of categorization and organization. In this chapter, she pays special attention to philologists. In my response, I show that many of the eighteenth and nineteenth century perspectives on languages she discusses have self-aware biblical parallels.

About the Author

Diana Lipton read English Literature at Oxford University and completed a PhD in Hebrew Bible at Cambridge University. She was a Fellow of Newnham College, Cambridge (1997–2006), and Lecturer and then Reader in Hebrew Bible and Jewish Studies at King's College London (2007–2011). After moving to Jerusalem in 2011, she was an Adjunct Lecturer at Hebrew University's International School (2011–2016) and a Teaching Fellow at Tel Aviv University (2018–2024). Diana's published books include *Revisions of the Night: Politics and Promises in the Patriarchal Dreams of Genesis* (1999); *Longing for Egypt and Other Unexpected Biblical Tales* (2008); *Lamentations Through the Centuries* (2012, with Paul Joyce); *From Forbidden Fruit to Milk and Honey: A Commentary on Food in the Torah* (2018), and several edited collections.

ORCID: 0009-0002-7929-4576

GND: 1081830328

›Religio-racialized Taxonomies Based on Comparative Philology‹ (257–290), chapter 8 of Marianne Moyaert's *Patterns of Religionization. An exploration of selfing and othering predicated on religious difference*, focuses on how eighteenth and nineteenth century use of emerging human science disciplines – oriental studies, comparative religion, and anthropology – contributed to European imperialist and colonialist endeavors (Moyaert 2024: 257).

At the same time, Moyaert points out, scholars in these and other fields shifted from scriptural to secular explanations for why the world was the way it was. But even as they turned away from scripture, she says, they preserved its modes of categorization and organization. Moyaert gives the example of the Botanist Carl Linnaeus (1707–1778), »sometimes called the father of taxonomy«, who was »probably the first to explicitly place ›man‹ in the realm of nature«. His taxonomy into four peoples, she suggests, was »still influenced by biblical assumptions«, such as the four rivers in the Garden of Eden (Moyaert 2024: 260).

In my 2013 paper ›Egypt-watching: Orientalism in the Hebrew Bible‹ (Lipton 2013), I presented what, in the light of Moyaert's work, I now see as another possible example of this phenomenon. Based on Edward Said's account of orientalism, the conceptual umbrella that covers many of the academic and cultural endeavors Moyaert discusses in chapter 8 of her book, I showed striking parallels between eighteenth and nineteenth century western perspectives on the East and the Hebrew Bible's presentation of Egypt.

Similar to the orientalist view of the East, the Hebrew Bible's perspective on Egypt is characterized by fantasies of licentiousness and rampant sexuality (Potiphar's wife tries to seduce Joseph, Gen 39:1–23); heightened human fecundity (Abraham's barren wife gives him her Egyptian maidservant to bear a child she plans to raise as her own, Gen 16:1–16); agricultural abundance (Egypt is compared to the Garden of Eden, Gen 13:10, Ezek 31:1–13; Hebrews go down to Egypt in times of famine, Gen 12:10, 42:1; and Israel's rain-dependent fields are contrasted to Egypt's Nile-fed gardens, Deut 11:10, Num 11:5); dubious moral values (Abraham suspects the Egyptians of wanting to kill him to take his wife, Gen 12:10–20); wealthy despotic rulers (Pharaoh) and exotic practitioners of the unnatural arts (Pharaoh's magicians, Exod 7:11–13, 22). Egypt is also a source of plunder (Abraham leaves Egypt with great wealth, Gen 12:16–20; as do the enslaved Israelites, Exod 12:35–36). Hebrews outdo Egyptians in their own skills (Joseph interprets dreams, Gen 40:1–23; 41:1–32; Moses outperforms the Egyptian magicians, Exod 8:12–15); and they even manage Egyptian resources on their behalf (Joseph organizes Egypt's grain supply, Gen 41:33–36, while at the same time reinventing Egypt as a feudal society all of whose citizens are enslaved to Pharaoh, Gen 47:22–22). The signal difference between the Hebrew Bible's presentation of Egypt and the orientalist's view of the East is that Israel has no imperial ambitions. The closest it gets is the hope that another country, Babylon, will overthrow Egypt (Ezek 32:11–13).

In the present paper, I'll address Moyaert's central interest in chapter 8: languages. I'll try to show that many, though not all, of the eighteenth and nineteenth century perspectives on languages she discusses have self-aware biblical parallels. In his new book on the subject, Steven D. Fraade points out that Judaism represents one of the longest »continuous, multilingual translation projects of human history«, and »translation among a plethora or languages has been a central com-

ponent of Judaism's cultural vitality […] even as the specific ›languages in contact‹ have changed (as has Hebrew, from time to time and place to place« (Fraade 2023: 191). Yet, despite this »longevity and centrality«, Fraade laments, »we lack a historical, literary, and linguistic overview of multilingualism and translation in Jewish culture across time and place« (Id.: 191). Still, I warmly recommend Fraade's study to anyone seeking more detailed analysis than I can offer here of some of the Hebrew Bible texts I'll be discussing, along with a systematic consideration of the role of multilingualism and translation in ancient Judaism and beyond.

1. Comparative philologists map and remap the world

Eighteenth and nineteenth century comparative philologists, Moyaert claims, pictured themselves working alongside natural scientists to understand human history in relation to the vast plurality of peoples (Moyaert 2024: 261). Similarities and differences between languages suggested the same or different genealogies and kinship relations. The most consequential taxonomy to emerge from the philological workplace »was based on the normative distinction between Aryan (or Indo-European) and Semitic languages« (Id.: 261).

The Hebrew Bible has two competing accounts of how each nation came to have its own language. The second, the story of the Tower of Babel, offers a theological explanation. It opens with the statement that »everyone on earth had the same language« (Gen 11:1). This changed when people who migrated east from the Valley of Shinar attempted to prevent themselves from being dispersed by building a city and a tower that would reach heaven (v. 4). God's response pinpoints the question of language. If this is what a single people with one language do, he said, nothing will be beyond them. Let us confound their speech so that they cannot understand each other (v. 7). Then he scattered the people across the earth. On this account, the emergence of multiple languages was a punishment. It happened at an identifiable moment in time, and its consequence was that people who had previously belonged to one unified group could no longer understand each other (and therefore could not cooperate). The dispersal comes after they begin to speak in multiple languages. They do not scatter and then start to speak differently.

The Hebrew Bible's first, competing, account of how each nation came to have its own language is genealogical. Language was not mentioned as a characteristic that differentiated the descendants of Adam (Gen 5:1–32), but it is one of four categories in the genealogy of Noah (Gen 10:1–32), »from which the whole world branched out« (Gen 9:19), namely land, language, family/clan, and nation (Gen 10:5, 20, 31). To an extent, then, philologists were working in an age-old tradition when they »invented new categories (of language), drew and redrew boundaries between people, and rewrote the histories of people« (Moyaert 2024: 261). Long before eighteenth and nineteenth century philologists, the Hebrew Bible saw language as a core component – along with land, tribal affiliation, and national identity – of what it means to be a people with shared ancestry.

2. Language and Colonialism

The hypothesis of Indo-European language is usually attributed to William Jones (1764–1794), who learned Sanskrit, Moyaert writes, because he believed that British authority to rule India had to be based on ancient laws of the Indian people, which he needed to read himself. Soon after beginning his study of Sanskrit, Jones saw similarities with Greek, Latin and several Germanic languages (Id. 265), but the catalyst to learn it in the first place was practical colonialism.

The Hebrew Bible occasionally draws attention to language when it serves a function in the plot. For example, Joseph speaks to his brothers through a translator when they come down to Egypt to buy grain because speaking Egyptian is part of his disguise (Gen 42:23). The book of Esther also highlights language differences that are not plot-driven. Dispatches from King Ahasuerus and his ministers were sent »to every province in its own script and to every nation in its own language, that every man should wield authority in his own home and speak his own language« (Est 1:21, see also 3:12). Mordecai's reversal, written in the king's name, of Haman's decree to destroy the Jews was sent to Jews, satraps, governors, and officials of »one hundred and twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia, each in its own script and language, and to the Jews in their own script and language« (Est 8:9). Being able to address people in their own language was essential for colonial imperialism.

The colonized needed access to the language of their rulers. A letter to King Artaxerxes of Persia was written in Aramaic (it appears in the Hebrew Bible in that language, Ez 4:7–16) and translated, presumably into Persian (Ez 4:18). And colonizers found it desirable to train subjects who would be working closely with them in the language and culture of their masters. Nebuchadnezzar required learned, aristocratic Judean exiles to come to court to learn Chaldean language and literature before entering his service (Dan 1:3–5).

The Hebrew Bible highlights language in relation to initial conquest as well as later colonial administration. The very threat of conquest is expressed with reference to language:

> I am going to bring upon you a nation from far away, O house of Israel, says the Lord. It is an enduring nation; it is an ancient nation, a nation *whose language you do not know*, nor can you understand what they say (Jer 5:15 and see Deut 28:49).

Language is also used to illustrate the complex relations that emerge between the conqueror and the conquered. Emissaries of King Hezekiah attempted to prevent the masses from understanding the impending threat of Assyrian invasion and exile: »Please speak to your servants in the Aramaic language, for we understand it; do not speak to us in the language of Judah within the hearing of the people who are on the wall« (2 Kgs 18:26). But the Assyrian messenger ignores them: »Then the Rabshakeh stood and called out in a loud voice in the language of Judah, ›Hear the words of the great king, the king of Assyria!‹« (v. 28). Language was ever understood as central to imperialism.

3. Language as the Gateway to the Spirit of the People

Moyaert discusses the conviction of eighteenth and nineteenth century philologists that »to grasp the core or essence of a language was to capture the true spirit of a people'« (Moyaert 2024: 261). It's hard to find evidence of this kind of thinking in the Hebrew Bible, but the public reading of the scroll of the Teaching in Hebrew to the exiles returned from Babylon might point in that direction (Neh 8:1–8). The use of Aramaic in Ezra (mentioned above) suggests that, as could be expected, the exiles were more fluent in Aramaic than Hebrew. But the Teaching was not translated wholesale and recited to them in Aramaic. Rather, it was read in Hebrew and explained and interpreted by the Levites and others (Neh 8:7,8), an activity that must also have encompassed translation.

A central concern of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah is the rebuilding of religious-national identity after seventy years of exile, and perhaps the insistence on reading the scroll of the Teaching in Hebrew can best be understood in this context. Yet the desire to preserve the original language, even at the expense of comprehension, may also testify to a perception of Hebrew as the unique vehicle for expressing core ideas and essential values, and therefore irreplaceable. As an aside, Jewish Diaspora communities (like Muslim communities in non-Arabic speaking countries) have maintained the practice of reciting and teaching sacred texts in their original language, even when most listeners are unable to understand and need to follow in translation. Similarly, a value is attached to being able to read texts and pray in the sacred language even without comprehension.

4. Purity and Language

Moyaert discusses the view of some philologists that the purity of a language and its capacity to resist mixing was connected to the purity of the people (Moyaert 2024: 267). A related idea appears in the book of Nehemiah, again in the context of returning exiles. Speaking of Jews who had married the woman of Ashdod, Ammon and Moab, Nehemiah laments: »And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah but spoke the language of various peoples« (Neh 13:24). Mixed marriages are condemned elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, but this passage is unique in highlighting the linguistic consequences. Note that the children of these marriages did not speak only the language of their mothers, the language of Ashdod, but »the language of various peoples« (v. 24).

5. Conclusion

I've tried to show that many of the specific ways in which eighteenth and nineteenth century philologists contributed to European nationalism, colonialism and imperialism were not new. The Hebrew Bible saw a remarkably similar role for languages. Where they part company is in regard to a question that Moyaert discusses at some length: languages that were considered by Euro-

pean philologists as both inherently superior to other languages and indicative of the superiority of their speakers. As far as I can tell, the Hebrew Bible has no thoughts along these lines. Beyond seeing this as another example of how these scholars continued to think in biblical paradigms even as they sought to shift away from the Hebrew Bible, I'm not sure what, if any, conclusions Moyaert and her colleagues might draw from my findings. But I'm truly honored to have been invited to contribute to this important conversation.

Bibliography

Fraade, Steven D. (2023): Multilingualism and Translation in Ancient Judaism. Before and After Babel. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lipton, Diana (2013): Egypt-Watching. Orientalism in the Hebrew Bible, in: Aitken, James; Clines, Jeremy; Maier, Cristl (Eds.): Interested Readers. Essays on the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David J. A. Clines. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 121–136. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt5vjz47.14

Moyaert, Marianne (2024): Patterns of Religionization. An exploration of selfing and othering predicated on religious difference. Hoboken: Blackwell Wiley.

Campus der Theologien
Zeitschrift für Theologische
Studien und Kritik

2/2025: Patterns of Religionization