In Search of "The Missing Voice"

A Tradition of Interactive Learning in the Hebrew Bible?

Questions related to education and schools in ancient Israel have traditionally been debated in a close dialog with the wisdom literature of the Hebrew bible. The book of Proverbs has, as long as the debates have been going on, often been a natural starting point for educational studies. Based on Prov. 1-9 teaching has been viewed as a dialog between a father and his son, and the education as such as cooperation between the parents and the schoolteachers.[1] A major problem in this discussion is the fact that the student's voice is missing. James L. Crenshaw has articulated this problem as "The Missing Voice" and points out how "the son, ever-present as addressee, never assumes the position of respondent".[2] When Crenshaw concludes his work on *the missing voice,* he draws our attention to how the students most likely kept silent due to the risk of being punished. Crenshaw makes a comparison to contemporary Singapore, which has reinstated caning as punishment for criminal acts performed by juveniles, and creates a picture of the student in ancient Israel as one being put to silence out of fear.[3] In search of *the missing voice* I am looking for interactive learning processes in the Hebrew bible, and I will try to describe how the role of the student in ancient Israel most likely was an active one, one which was active and vocal.

---

[1] A vital contribution cane as early as in 1908 when August Klostermann on bases of Isa. 1, 2 and Prov. 1-9 pointed out that teaching in ancient Israel where a cooperation between the parents and the schoolteachers in "Schulwesen im alten Israel". Crenshaw, J. L., *Education in Ancient Israel. Across the Deadening Silence*, New York 1998, p. 4.

[2] Crenshaw, J. L., *Education in Ancient Israel. Across the Deadening Silence*, New York 1998, p. 187.

[3] Crenshaw, J. L., *Education in Ancient Israel. Across the Deadening Silence*, New York 1998, p. 203

A great challenge in working with questions related to schools and education in ancient Israel has been to detect who the teachers were and of course where the teaching took place. Were the teachers connected to the prophets, the priests, or was there a school system within Monarchic-Judah? These are questions at the core of most discussions on education and schools in ancient Israel. Until recently scholars have been quite optimistic about being able to reconstruct schools, or even school systems, in ancient Israel. Nowadays most scholars are far more minimalistic in their reconstructions. Rather than describing "Schulwesen im alten Israel"[4] they ask questions like "Were there Schools in ancient Israel?",[5] or "What do we really know about education in ancient Israel?"[6] To be a bit more careful in reconstructing schools and educational systems in ancient Israel is perhaps a good thing, at least it forces anyone interested in this field to rephrase their questions and reconsider the way one approaches this subject.

Crenshaw chooses to open his book "Education in Ancient Israel. Across the Deadening Silence" by answering the question "What do we really know about education in ancient Israel?" with "not very much". Well aware of the fact that there is little one can say for sure about the education and schools in ancient Israel I will try a slightly different approach starting with what we actually *do know* of processes affecting education in ancient Israel. Because we *do know* that there must have been some kind of teaching going on in ancient Israel. Someone, at some point, must have been passing on their knowledge and experience from one generation to the next. If this had not happened we would certainly not have been discussing any questions related to the Hebrew bible or the ancient Israel today. Since the bible has been passed on to us as a religious text we might as well embrace the idea that the content of the Hebrew bible is written as a compilation of knowledge and experiences of a religious nature. Knowing this one may ask what an adequate starting point for a search for traditions of learning in the Hebrew bible would be. In this search I will keep it as simple as possible. I will be looking for a *teacher*, a *student,* or the *content*. The content understood as the essence of the teaching in place. I will be looking for

[4] Note 1.

[5] Davies, G. I., "Where there Schools in ancient Israel?", *Wisdom in Ancient Israel*, ed. Day, R., Gordon, P. R., Williamson, M. G. H., Cambridge 1995.

[6] Crenshaw, J. L., *Education in Ancient Israel. Across the Deadening Silence*, New York 1998, p. 4.

these three elements together, in pairs, or for texts referring to one of these elements separately.
Since questions related to education and schools in ancient Israel no longer is a discussion exclusively connected to the wisdom literature,[7] this research, for traditions of interactive learning in the Hebrew bible, will therefore welcome any text reflecting a learning process. This research starts in Exod. 24.

Interactive Learning Processes in the Hebrew bible (starting in Exodus 24)
There is most certainly some kind of learning process going on in Exod. 24 and the content of this text is presented as: "All the words which the Lord hath said" (Exod. 24, 3). But who is the teacher, or the teachers, in this text? Moses acts as a teacher towards the people of Israel, but can we refer to the people of Israel as the student in this text? If so, are the students in Exod. 24: "the whole of Israel", "the elders of Israel" or "young men of the sons of Israel"? All of these groups are interactive in this text and it would be fair to say they can all be read as students. The whole of Israel answers when Moses repeat the words of the Lord (Exod. 24, 3); the elders of Israel including Aaron, Nadab and Abitu interact by climbing up with Moses (Exod. 24, 9) and the young men of Israel are sent out to prepare the offerings (Exod. 24, 5). By reading Exod. 24 with an interactive learning perspective the content of this text is no longer reserved to "All the words which the Lord hath said" (Exod. 24, 3) but includes the cult related activities as well.
Despite the fact that the students, by doing religious activities, appear to be active in this text, they remain silent. Moses is also interactive by running up and down the mountain bringing different instructions from the Lord to the people of Israel. But like the people of Israel, Moses does not speak in Exod. 24; *the missing voice* is still missing. To find texts where the student is speaking in Exodus we need to expand our search.

The phrase "The Lord spoke to Moses and said…" in Exodus introduces new subjects and functions as a rhythm though out the texts.[8] The same goes for the phrase "My

[7] Weinfeld, M., Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School, Oxford 1972, p. 289-306

[8] Examples for the Exodus texts are: Exod. 6, 1; 7, 1; 8, 1; 9, 1; 10, 1; 11, 1; 12, 1; 13, 1; 14, 1; 25, 1; 31, 1 and 34, 1. Examples form the book of Proverbs: Prov. 1, 8; 2, 1; 3, 1; 4, 1; 5, 1; 6, 1 and 7, 1.

Child…" in Proverbs and they both underline a clear authoritative voice as the *teacher* instructs the *student*. So far this certainly reminds us of what we have seen in Proverbs, but whilst the student in Proverbs and the wisdom literature shows little sign of interacting whether by acting or speaking, we have seen who Moses and the people of Israel are interacting with by doing ritual actions. Besides, Moses is indeed speaking to the Lord, and the first time Moses actively turns to the Lord and speaks is in Exod. 4, 10:

Then Moses said to the LORD, "Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in time past, nor since You have spoken to Your servant; for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue."

Prior to this event the Lord has been listening to how the people of Israel have been suffering under their slavery in Egypt (Exod. 2, 23-24). As a result of this the Lord assigns Moses to free the people of Israel from their slavery. When Moses starts his dialogue with the Lord he starts off by bringing forth a list of excuses for why he cannot go on with this assignment. The way Moses expresses himself is what we could call a *prophetical denial*.[9] As much as it underlines the position of Moses as a prophet it shows us that there is a certain way of responding when spoken to by the Lord.

Thus, if the Lord is the *teacher* and the prophet is the *student* we can argue that when a student replies to the teacher it seems the student already knows how to behave when speaking to or acting towards said teacher. In other words teaching, as it appears so far in this interactive setting, seems to describe the student as one who has learned the content by heart and speaks when spoken to. This of course fits very well with the idea of education in ancient Israel as instructive and authoritative known from the wisdom literature. At the same time there is at least some kind of activity on the behalf of the student. An interesting text in this perspective could be found in Exod. 13, 14a:

And it shall be when your son asks you in time to come, saying, 'What is this?' then you shall say to him, With a powerful hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery.

[9] When a prophet hears the voice of the Lord Prophets in the prophet literature tend to come up with an excuses for not doing what the Lord instructed them to: Samuel (1 Kgs. 3, 7), Jeremiah (Jer. 1, 6) and Jonah (Jon. 1).

This text is viewed by several scholars as referring to a ritual involving the firstborn of an animal or man and prior to the Exodus text.[10] In a search for traditions of interactive learning in the Hebrew Bible it is interesting to see how this text points out the fact that a student is supposed to ask questions. Even more interesting is it to find that the student is supposed to ask questions as part of a ritual action. In this perspective our previous research in Exod. 24 starts to make sense. Both the people of Israel and Moses were indeed interacting in that text. Not by asking questions but by preparing for a ritual sermon, doing ritual actions. We see how an interactive learning process tends to concern *doing* rather than *talking*. And when the student talks in the Hebrew bible it seems to be within a well know pattern, like a prophetical denial (Exod. 5, 10) or as a response to certain religious actions (Exod. 14, 13a). This pattern may also be seen as a phase in an ongoing learning process. Let us now once again return to Moses and have a closer look at texts where Moses speaks to the Lord:

Then Moses returned to the LORD and said, "O Lord, why have You brought harm to this people? Why did You ever send me? (Exod. 5, 22)

So Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, "What shall I do to this people? A little more and they will stone me." (Exod. 17, 4)

In an interactive learning perspective there are some interesting developments in these two texts. In Exod. 4, 10 Moses was concerned about his own lack of ability to carry out the assignment the Lord had set him to. In these texts it seems Moses has come to terms with his mission, the people of Israel now being his concern; first as a people brought to harm (Exod. 5, 22), then later as a people he is afraid of (Exod. 17, 4). The fact that Moses fears for his life is probably set up to hint to Moses' resemblance to the other prophets, like the one we have seen in the use of prophetical denial (Exod. 4, 10). But in an interactive learning perspective the note worth making is that there seems to be a development in the way Moses (as student) relates to the Lord (as teacher). Albeit the Lord still replies to Moses in an instructive and authoritative way Moses has moved from blaming himself to focusing on the people. In other words we might be witnessing a development in the relationship between the student and the teacher in the Exodus text, a change that could indicate an ongoing and interactive

[10] Durham, J. I., *Exodus*. *Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 3,* 1987, p. 179.

learning process. As we have seen earlier the development occurs on the student's part, but as long as it is not overlooked by the teacher we might assume it is approved of. Later in Exodus Moses confirms this development and we catch a glimpse of a dialogue in process.

Then Moses returned to the LORD, and said, "Alas, this people has committed a great sin, and they have made a god of gold for themselves. (Exod. 32, 31)

Moses is most definitely no longer concerned about his own well-being but that of the people. Moses as a *student* seems to have learned the *content* and is now overtaking the role of the Lord as a *teacher*. By reading the dialog between Moses and the Lord we see how Moses bit by bit gains more confidence and it seems we now have reached the point where Moses and the Lord possess much of the same knowledge. In Exodus the dialogue between Moses and the Lord shows us that the interactive learning process is less static and formulized than it seems to be in the traditional wisdom literature. The first time Moses speaks to the Lord he starts out condemning himself (Exod. 4, 10). Then his awareness of the content seems to grow as he turns his focus from his own lack of competence to the incompetence of people of Israel (Exod. 32, 31). When we now return to Moses and his dialogue with the Lord we see how Moses even starts to criticize the Lord for failing thoroughly to exercise the role as a teacher.

Then Moses said to the LORD, "See, You say to me, 'Bring up this people!' But You Yourself have not let me know whom You will send with me Moreover, You have said, 'I have known you by name, and you have also found favor in My sight.'

"Now therefore, I pray You, if I have found favor in Your sight, let me know Your ways that I may know You, so that I may find favor in Your sight Consider too, that this nation is Your people."

And He said, "My presence shall go with you, and I will give you rest." (Exod. 33, 12-14)

By describing how Moses turns to the Lord with a wish to be taught in a proper way we are encouraged to interpret Moses as a student and the Lord as a teacher. In this particular text the self-awareness of the student has reach the point where Moses dares to criticize his teacher for neglecting him and the people of Israel. Separately this

phrase of criticism is know for from the Psalms (Ps. 22, 2; 42, 10) but what is significant in the Exodus text is that when the student turns on his teacher we read it as a part of an ongoing dialogue. First Moses blames himself (Exod. 4, 10), then someone else (the people of Israel) (Exod. 5, 22; 17, 4) for criticizing the Lord (Exod. 33, 12-13). We are witness to quite a dramatic development and had Moses criticized the Lord with an interactive learning perspective in mind it would probably have sounded a bit like: "Why didn't I get the proper education".

It is quite rare that we find persons or characters in the Hebrew bible addressing the Lord with criticism, whether implied or direct. To find a useful parallel to the way Moses speaks to the Lord in Exod. 33 we will return to the wisdom literature and the story of Job. When Job refuses to speak to the Lord and chooses to be silent (Job 40, 3-5) the Lord finds Job's answer unsatisfying.[11] Viewed in a learning perspective we might say that the teacher in this text is not letting go of his student till the student speaks up and speaks correctly according to the syllabus. When Job eventually speaks up (Job 42, 1-6) the Lord compliments him for speaking correct, or at least more correctly than his fellow student Eliphaz the Temanite (Job 42, 8).
When allowing ourselves to use the *student – teacher* perspective on the story of Moses on that of Job we are likely to draw the conclusion that what the teacher expects from the student is a response to the teacher's instructions and actions. This could explain why the Lord puts pressure on Job to speak, and at the same time it might clarify why the Lord is so pleased with Moses even when Moses is accusing the Lord for not giving him the proper education (Exod. 33, 14). By asking questions, including critical ones, Moses is given the ability to adopt even knowledge of the future:

Then he (Moses) said to Him, "If Your presence does not go with us, do not lead us up from here.

"For how then can it be known that I have found favor in Your sight, I and Your people? Is it not by Your going with us, so that we, I and Your people, may be distinguished from all the other people who are upon the face of the earth?"

The LORD said to Moses, "I will also do this thing of which you have spoken; for you have found favor in My sight and I have known you by name." (Exod. 33, 15-17)

[11] Whybray, N., *Job. A New Biblical Commentary*, Sheffield 1998, p. 166.

What Moses now asks of the Lord is the presence of his teacher, a presence which seems to be of great importance. It is as if a good teacher could be described as one that is there for its students. A text describing the importance of the teacher' presence is to be found in 2 Kgs. 6, 1-7. In this text we are at the "school" of Elisha where he and his students are gathered. It is beyond question that Elisha should be referred to as the teacher in this text and that his sons represent the student. What is harder to uncover in this text is the content. Is the idea behind this text to tell how Elisha retrieved an axe? Or maybe the essence of this text is to show how Elisha performs yet another miraculous stunt and thereby shows his authority towards the student? It might be, but reading this text in an interactive learning perspective it becomes clear that the relationship between the student and the teacher is important:

Now the sons of the prophets said to Elisha, "Behold now, the place before you where we are living is too limited for us.
"Please let us go to the Jordan and each of us take from there a beam, and let us make a place there for ourselves where we may live." So he said, "Go."
Then one said, "Please be willing to go with your servants." And he answered, "I shall go."
So he went with them; and when they came to the Jordan, they cut down trees.
But as one was felling a beam, the axe head fell into the water; and he cried out and said, "Alas, my master! For it was borrowed."
Then the man of God said, "Where did it fall?" And when he showed him the place, he cut off a stick and threw it in there, and made the iron float.
He said, "Take it up for yourself." So he put out his hand and took it. (2 Kgs. 6, 1-7)

First we have a dialogue where the students turn to the teacher with a problem, "where we are living is too limited for us". The students also come up with a potential solution to the problem by asking permission to go Jordan to cut down some trees and make themselves a new place where they can live. Elisha says, "Go", but the students are not ready to let go of their teacher and asks Elisha to join them. Elisha does and the importance of the teacher's presence is underlined in the following verses.
The fact that the axe gets lost deals with both a practical and an ethical problem. On the ethical side we may ask what to do when we loose something that does not belongs to us. On the practical side we may simply ask how to fell a beam without an axe. Without an axe there will be no felling of beams or in the worst case scenario

any building of a new place to live. But as we have seen the presence of Elisha is the answer to both problems in this text.

The presence of the teacher is undoubtedly of great importance both for Moses and for the sons of Elisha. The simple answer to this obvious need of a teacher's presence is the students' need of somewhere to address their questions. At the same time we see how a good teacher is described as one who is present for the student in a way the student can recognize. This fits very well with both the story of Moses and the sons of Elisha and if these texts points out what we may call a "good" relationship between a student and a teacher it might also work as an explanation to why Job seems to refuse speaking to his teacher. From Jobs point of view he refuses to speak because his teacher apparently is not present. From the teacher's point of view Job behaves foolishly when refusing to do his duty as a student, namely to speak up and ask questions. Either way there is a conflict, a conflict of perspective. From a learning perspective the exercise of viewing a story from different angles is in itself a good method of learning or teaching, but the conflict in Job could also reflect different traditions of learning in the Hebrew bible.
Suppose Crenshaw is right in describing the context of learning in ancient Israel as commanding fairly harsh treatment of the young, and suppose he is right in drawing parallels to contemporary Singapore, which has reinstated caning as punishment for criminal acts performed by juveniles. Then, what we have seen in Job, 2 Kings and Exodus clearly set off a different perspective; a perspective on education in ancient Israel viewed as an ongoing and interactive process where the student in dialogue with the teacher defines the content.