Summary

Exploring the Hebrew Bible from a discourse analytical perspective: A case study on the polemics against other gods

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What do I need a method for?

In my doctoral thesis, I investigate how biblical polemics against other gods developed. A number of texts in the Hebrew Bible denigrate both gods other than Yahweh and the people who worship them (e.g. 1 Sam 5, 1 Kgs 18, Isa 44, Jer 10, Letter of Jeremiah, Bel et Draco, Wis 13-15, etc.). I am interested in the formation of these texts and in their purpose. My thesis will contain a redaction-critical analysis of the texts. For the analysis of contents, I need an approach which provides a conceptual framework for the description and the analysis of the polemical texts as a group. To fit my research interests, this approach should meet the following requirements:

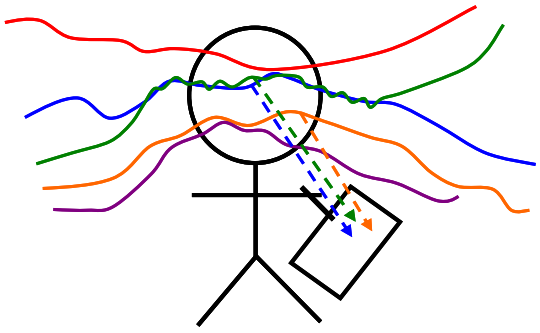
- It can explain the particular relationship of the polemical texts (neither a unified redactional layer nor direct literary dependence nor mere similarity in content).
- It allows to investigate the development of the texts.
- It considers the function of the texts with regard to non-textual reality.

In my paper, I present discourse analysis as an approach which meets these requirements.

What is discourse theory and discourse analysis?

KELLER, R., *Wissenssoziologische Diskursanalyse: Grundlegung eines Forschungsprogramms*, Wiesbaden, ^{2}2008.
JÄGER, S., *Kritische Diskursanalyse: eine Einführung* (Edition DISS 3), Münster, ^{5}2009.

By "discourse" I refer to a structured set of statements which produces societal reality.
Not everything can be said at a certain time and at a certain place. The set of used and valid statements is limited and structured by certain rules, for example underlying deductive patterns or story lines. Truth and reality can be expressed only through utterances which follow these rules. Discourses thus have creative power, they shape our mental concepts, influence our actions and lead to the establishment of institutions. They are the source of knowledge valid in a certain society, and consequently shape societal reality.



Discourses are produced by a community. Persons who produce texts are not autonomous agents. Their knowledge is shaped by discourses established previously and they have to join existing discourses by following their rules. A text thus contains elements of societal discourses, and is at the same time a contribution to a societal discourse itself. It reproduces the statements of a discourse in an actual utterance and it may be instrumental in modifying the discourse. A text is thus a fragment of a super-individual discourse (and as such a collective, societal product). As a discourse fragment, a text does not passively mirror reality, but it is part of the process in which knowledge and reality are shaped.
Discourse analysis is the study of discourse, usually of a certain discourse strand (= a thematically uniform discourse). Discourse analysis aims at the reconstruction of the rules, the structure and the progression of a discourse strand. In a discourse analysis, then, the analysis of a single text (= a discourse fragment) is always carried out as an intermediate

step. The objective is the analysis of the discourse strand, either synchronically as a cross section, or diachronically in terms of development.

How does discourse analysis suit my research project?

Discourse theory provides a coherent framework for the description of the polemical texts as a group: the polemical texts against other gods can be described as fragments of a certain discourse strand. These texts show similarities of style and motifs, because they participate in the same discourse strand and thus follow the same discursive rules. Discourse analysis considers texts on a societal level, and is thus particularly suitable for anonymous, traditional literature like the Hebrew Bible.

The discourse analytical approach also provides an appropriate conceptual framework for the analysis of these texts. It allows for the integration of various methods (diachronic and synchronic) that are currently used for the study of biblical texts. The question of development is inherent to discourse analysis: Discourses are the "flow of knowledge through time" (S.Jäger). A discourse analytical study based on carefully reconstructed stages of the growth of the texts allows to follow very closely the development of the discourse strand: It can be observed how discursive rules are modified, how the discourse strand entangles with other discourse strands or how it splits up into several discourse strands.

According to discourse theory, all texts have a general function with regard to real life: They participate in discourses which struggle for the shaping of knowledge (and consequently of reality). To examine the function of the polemical texts, I have to determine which aspects of reality this discourse strand shapes and how it shapes them (i.e. what knowledge about these aspects it establishes). Reception history can provide hints on the impact or success of the discourse strand.

The conceptualisation of the polemics as a discourse strand provides a coherent theoretical framework within which the questions of development and of function can be addressed. The description of textual phenomena and their relation to societal reality in terms of discourse analysis also offers a different perspective, which can contribute to open up new ways of thinking.