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Study Group B: Old Testament in Ancient Near Eastern Context

"Accusation, Anger, and Defense: Rhetorical Questions in the Hebrew Bible"

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SLIDE 1: Title

This paper began as a fairly simple observation: As I engaged in a long-term project of reading the Bible in Hebrew, I was struck that in places where the episode involves betrayal or poor dealing, we often hear the injured party asking some version of "What is this you have done?" The more I read the text the more I began to "hear" this phrase as a marker of anger and a harbinger of drama. I began to notice rhetorical questions used to express emotion, particularly anger, across a range of texts, from Genesis through 2 Samuel. Rhetorical questions are also used to express accusation of wrongdoing, and defensive behavior[1] These questions serve to enrich the literary quality of the text. The reader, given enough background to be aware of the motives of the speakers, hears the questions echoing in the air, not needing an answer.

In working with these emotionally laden questions we can begin to see that they are not just reflective of immediate emotional response, but serve additional important functions. L.R. Martin argues, and I agree, that a community is shaped by BOTH logical reasoning and by the emotional response to what happens within the community. Both positive and negative emotions shape the whole of human experience. Biblical literature uses emotion and the passions to teach and shape commitment to a community and its values.[2] In addition to marking an emotional component of the text, such questions serve to move the narrative forward. They set the stage for a response from another party, either by words or action. Adina Moshavi notes "Rhetorical questions…can be used as a persuasive device: the speaker attempts to convince the hearer to accept the implied answer to the question by implying that the answer is obvious.[3]" We see illustrations of this with episodes found in Judges and into Samuel. In these texts rhetorical questions begin to be used as part of political and diplomatic language. They clearly are intended to persuade and are sometimes part of negotiations between speakers. These questions often appear as sets, with the several questions reinforcing each other or highlighting different parts of the issue at hand. Today I'd like to present just the first part of this study, which focuses primarily on Genesis and Judges.

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[1] Adina "Two Types of Argumentation Involving Rhetorical Questions" 34-35, 39.

[2] Martin, L. R "Rhetorical Criticism and the Affective Dimension of the Biblical Text

[3] Moshavi, Adina "Two Types of Argumentation Involving Rhetorical Questions in Biblical Hebrew Dialogue" 33-34

Slide 2: title “Genesis”

The Guilty Before God: Genesis 3 and 4

Slide 3: “Where are you?”

The way questions are used in the first chapters of Genesis can best be compared with other dialogue between God and humans, such as is found in the prophetic material. Rhetorical questions in prophecy and between man and God deserves separate consideration, but here we will focus on Genesis 3 and 4 as the first instances of the rhetorical question in the canon as it currently stands. These chapters also center around the idea of wrongdoing, which is a large part of the later usage of such questions. The episodes of the forbidden fruit and the first murder are attributed to the J source according to the documentary hypothesis.[4]

In Genesis 3:9-11, when God asks Adam “Where are you?” we already know what has happened and why Adam seeks to hide. In context, the omniscient creator does not need to ask where Adam is. It is a powerful moment. It immediately highlights the vast chasm that has now opened between man and God. Adam’s guilt has prompted him to hide, so the question highlights his emotion of shame. “Where are you?” is also God seeking to call his fallen children back to Him. This is followed up by several more questions: "Who told you that you were naked?” And “Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?" We should especially note the question found in Gen 9:13 “What is this you have done” Where hear this here for the first time of many times to follow.

Slide 4: “Where is Able your brother?”

A close parallel to this rhetorical pattern soon follows when a second great transgression occurs: this time it is murder in Gen 4:6-11. The scene is set with questions that are clearly intended to foreshadow what will come. Again, we have multiple questions, and we again classify these as rhetorical. Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? 7 If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door…”

In the aftermath of the murder of Abel we have a third question set, but this time it is in the form of a back-and-forth exchange. Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" "I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?" 10 The LORD said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground.

With both episodes the reader understands that God is not seeking information. The questions open a dialogue that highlights divine knowledge and human guilt. The use of a question as a defensive gesture arises in Gen 4 when Cain infamously asks, “am I my brother’s keeper?” Cain’s question seeks to deflect the original accusing question posed by God, but of course this tactic fails. We should especially take note of the form of God’s response: “What have you done?” because this phrase and its variants will frequently signify accusations of wrong doing in our following texts. We can see here three question sets clustered closely together and serving similar functions. They highlight divine knowledge and human guilt. They also play on powerful emotions of shame and rage. Finally, the entire narrative structure is moved forward and bound

[4] Friedman, “The Bible with Sources Revealed” 37-39

together. In Genesis 3-4 questions connect the actions of the past with the consequences of the future.

Sometimes explicit words for these emotions are used by the narrator and pared with the questions present in the dialog.[5] Ellen van Wolde notes nine words in Hebrew which denote anger. Most of these suggest a physical aspect of this emotion, such as heat or burning. Anger can also be related to physical or emotional agitation, such as shaking[6] Within dialogue sections of text sometimes the terms for the emotion are used, but at other times this is not necessary because the speech patterns make the emotion clear.

Anger, Deception, and the Patriarchs Genesis 12-44

Slide 5: "Pharoah called to Abram…"

We find many such sets and clusters of questions revolving around anger in the stories of the Patriarchs which are encompassed from Genesis 12-44. The root of this anger is deception and betrayal. Each generation: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph uses or experiences deception. When this deception is uncovered, we find a repeated angry question – a variant of the phrase "What is this thing you have done?" Like the exchanges in the earlier chapters of Genesis, these also highlight the idea of wrong and guilt. The key difference here is that because the exchange is now only on a human level, the speakers have limited knowledge within the text. Shock is added to the mix when the deception is uncovered. The reader of scriptures knows more about the full situation than the speakers.

Matthew Schlim writes "the emotion of anger appears in Genesis not merely to embellish story lines or add color to characters but to express a multifaceted message about the ethical significance of anger. The text does not give readers simplistic instructions about what to do with anger but instead is quite realistic about the limitations that individuals face, and the paradoxes presented by this emotion. Genesis presents anger as an emotion that arises from one's moral sensitivities in response to the perception of wrongdoing"[7] The central question "what is this you have you done" does two things. First it alerts the hearer that the deception or wrong has been discovered, and secondly it implies a "why"– it expects an apology, explanation, or justification to the wronged party. This is sometimes made more explicit in a follow up question.

Genesis 12, 20, and 26, sometimes called the "sister-wife narratives" are excellent examples of the pattern. These narratives are "doublets" and viewed as variations of a single story or theme, wherein the patriarch seeks to avoid conflict over his beautiful wife by claiming that she is his sister. The first and third narrative segments, found in chapters 12 and 26, are attributed to J source, and the second, chapter twenty, is attributed to E[8]. In Gen 12: 18 Pharoah discovers that

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[5] Basic emotion terms such as "love" "hate" "desire" and "anger" "fear" "hope" and others are present, but more nuanced synonyms and idioms are relatively few. Constructions such as "in his heart" and "to burn" as reflective of anger are used.

[6] Van Wolde, Ellen "Sentiments as Culturally Constructed Emotions: Anger and Love in the Hebrew Bible. Biblical Interpretation 16 (2008) 1-24

[7] Schlimm From Fratricide to Forgiveness Siphrut 7, pg 7

[8] Friedman, "The Bible with Sources Revealed" 50-51, 61-62, 72-73

Abraham has falsely called Sarah his "sister" rather than his wife. He says "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife?

Slide 6 "Abimelek called to Abram…"

In the next episode of Gen 20:9-10 we read "Then Abimelech called Abraham and said to him "What have you done to us? And how have I offended you that you have brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? You have done deeds to me that ought not to be done. And Abimelech said to Abraham "What have you encountered that you have done this thing?" This is an excellent series: It asks WHAT (the rhetorical aspect of the dialogue) then twice ask a version of WHY interspersed with a strong statement of "you have done deeds to me that ought not to be done"[9]

Slide 7 "Abimelek said 'What is this you have done?"

Finally in Genesis 26:9-10 we find: **9** So Abimelek summoned Isaac and said "What is this you have done to us? One of the men might well have slept with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us." All three of these episodes retain the same pattern of questions which both accuse and demand and explanation.

Jacob, Rachel, Leah, and Laban

Slide 8 "and in the morning it was Leah…"

Genesis 29:25, also attributed to the J source, is the poetic justice experienced by Jacob. Where once he defrauded his elder brother Esau of his birthright, in his own marriage identity fraud is also committed, and places the unwanted elder sister, Leah, in his marriage bed rather than the desired bride Rachel. In response Jacob asks another series of questions. "What is this you have done to me? Was it not for Rachel that I served with you? Why then have you deceived me?" This is another set of three questions which first ask the rhetorical question "what" and then another rhetorical which serves to highlight what SHOULD have been done and finally demands to know WHY such a wrong act was committed against the speaker.

Laban's response, his justification, is also a play on the earlier fraud committed by Jacob. He asserts that the elder sister should be married before the younger. The rivalry thus engendered between the two sisters is primarily set out by narration. However, there are two places where question-accusations are skillfully used to illustrate the dynamics within this family. In Gen 30 1-2 When Rachel is barren she heartbreakingly cries to Jacob "Give me children or I will die!" His response is a question which is both angry and defensive: "Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from having children?" The narrative in this episode is explicit in identifying the emotions at play. It states plainly that Rachel was jealous of her sister and that Jacob was angered by her demand.

Slide 9: "Wasn't it enough that you took my husband?"

[9] This is echoed in Tamar pleading with her half-brother Amnon in 2 Sam 13:12 "Such a thing should not be done in Israel"

The only direct dialogue between the two sisters in this text includes these questions of accusation. We already know that Rachel is jealous of Leah for her fertility, now we hear directly from that unloved sister. When Rachel asks Leah for some of the mandrakes gathered by her son Reuben, Leah tartly responds **15** "Wasn't it enough that you took away my husband? Will you take my son's mandrakes too?" "Very well," Rachel said, "he can sleep with you tonight in return for your son's mandrakes." (Gen 31:15). The text captures between the two sisters a closeness and familiarity, coupled with years of struggle and resentment. There is subtle humor here also, as the conclusion of this ends with a transaction that amounts to Rachel "selling" Jacob's sexual services to Leah for mandrakes. The back and forth is a type of negotiation that at least temporarily reduces tensions within the family.

When Jacob leaves Laban the only response of the women is formed with a set of rhetorical questions, but it makes their feelings clear: When Jacob makes his intentions known to his wives, in Gen 31:14 Rachel and Leah reply, "Do we still have any share in the inheritance of our father's estate? **15** Does he not regard us as foreigners?" The two questions placed together illustrate the clear outlook of the women towards their father. Interestingly, the theme engendered by the sisters' response is turned around and echoed by Laban. The women have previously stated that their father views them as "foreigners". Laban pursues Isaac and finally confronts him with the questions "What have you done by deceiving me in carrying away my daughters like captives of the sword?" (Gen 31:26). This includes the accusing element "what have you done?" It is made explicit that the problem was not Jacob's actual departure but his deception in his covert slipping away. This is then elaborated upon with the hyperbole "like captives of the sword" Laban's own question suggests that it is Jacob who is treating them poorly, like foreigners who have been captured. Truthfully, Laban's complaint is really that Jacob is treating Laban himself, not the women, poorly by "carrying away his daughters". Genesis 30 and 31 are E source, but uses the same format of "What have you done" that we saw in our earlier episodes from J.[10] This suggests that the format was widely used and well understood to express anger. In Gen 31 the word for anger is paired with his answer. "And Jacob was angered, and he quarreled with Laban, and Jacob answered, and he said to Laban 'What is my offense מַה־ פִּשְׁעִי and what is my sin….?" (Gen 31:36). The outcome of this is a negotiation of peace which is concluded by a treaty and allows for the movement to the next episode.

Joseph

Slide 10 "Joseph said to them…"

Like the Jacob narrative, the Joseph story is also extremely rich with deceptive practice, and so would seem to be fertile soil for the format of the outraged rhetorical question. Wrongful deception works against Joseph in several ways: First when the brothers report Joseph's death to Jacob as a cover for their selling him into slavery, and secondly when Potiphar's wife makes a false claim of assault against him. Joseph weaves his own false narrative as well, by masking his true identity from his brothers and then planting his cup in the bag of Benjamin as a pretext for a false arrest. Interestingly none of the actual wrong deeds done in this text make use of this

[10] Friedman, "The Bible with Sources Revealed" 83

feature. Instead we get an episode of fake outrage that mimics the pattern that we have already seen. When the brothers are arrested and brought trembling before him he asks: **"**What deed is this that that you have done? Do you not know that such a man as I can certainly divine?" (Gen 44:15) This "fake outrage" mirrors very well the pattern of the real thing in Hebrew discourse. It is interesting that the follow up question here is about the brother's knowledge of Joseph "don't you know a man such as I". For the reader the question highlights how much the brothers really don't know about the true nature of "this man" at this juncture of the story. As with the majority of our Genesis texts which use this feature, the Joseph narrative is categorized as being part of J source.

Exodus-Joshua

Exodus through Joshua show these constructions with much less frequency. This is not surprising due to the nature of the texts, which focuses much less on dialogue and contains much more legal material.

We can briefly note a complaint from Exodus which is constructed in the form of an accusing question. "Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? Why have you dealt with us in this way, bringing us out of Egypt?" (Ex14:11)." This question illustrates the continued grumbling and fear or lack of faith of the people which remains an important issue throughout Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. We would of course be remiss if we did not mention the delightful exchange between Balaam and his donkey in Numbers. Even the humble donkey gets to use the complaining rhetorical questions in the wonderful tale of Balaam son of Beor, found in Num 22:28-30.

Judges

Slide 11: Title : Accusation, Defense

It is not surprising when we return to the story-telling style with Judges that rhetorical questions reemerge with more frequency. An interesting development here is the use of rhetorical questions as a diplomatic tool, a use that had not previously been seen, although we have seen them in negotiations between individuals.

Slide 12 "Now the Ephramites said to Gideon…"

Judges 7-8 uses this form both to accuse and to defend. When Gideon attacks the Midianite war camp with his three hundred chosen men, he calls the men of Ephraim for an additional operation. While this was a success, and resulted in victory and the capture of two leaders of the Midianite forces, it was apparently viewed as disrespect or a slight that the Ephraimites were not "invited" to the first attack. The Ephraimites respond with the now-familiar format of "what have you done."

"What have you done to us, not calling us when you went to fight against Midian? And they contended with him vigorously" The narrative comment emphasizes the emotion behind the question. What comes next is a new usage of the question format. To pacify the men of Ephraim,

Gideon asks a question set in return. “What have I done now in comparison to you? Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer?”

Here the text gives a nice piece of diplomatic language, Gideon is humbling himself in stating that the best of his clan, “the vintage” is less than the leftovers of Ephraim “the gleaning” He reminds them of the glory they have achieved by capturing the captains of Midian, and ends with “What have I been able to do in comparison with you? The text again is explicit in detailing the emotional response to this “When he said this their anger against him subsided” (Jud 8:3).

Slide 13 Gideon and the Ephramites

This episode, which highlights the militant pride of Ephraim, parallels and foreshadows Judges 12, which does not go so well.

Slide 14 The “Ephramites were called out”

Judges 12 presents the same type of issue: The men of Ephraim area again angry at a perceived slight in the military muster. They say to Jephthah, “Why did you cross over to fight against the Ammonites and did not call us to go with you? This is immediately followed with a strongly escalating threat “We will burn your house down over you!” Perhaps as a result of this threat, instead of diffusing the tension with the humble questions of diplomacy, as did Gideon, the response of Jephthah is a counter accusation and question. “…When I called you, you did not deliver me from their hand…and the Lord gave them into my hand. Why then have you come up to me this day, to fight against me? (Judges 12:1-3). The statement is an accusation of one “wrong” and the question is a separate accusation.

Slide 15 “Brotherly discord”

The immediate result is escalation into a very bloody conflict.

Samson

The Samson narrative is dense with questions within the dialogue. These create tension and move the story forward. Questions create the set up for Samson’s conflict with the Philistines: women. His parents ask “Is there not a woman among your kin, or among all our people, that you must go to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines? (Jud 14:3). After the rather disastrous first wedding of Samson, he later returns to claim his bride, only to learn that she has been given to another man. Samson’s father-in-law tries to diffuse the situation “Is not her younger sister prettier than she? Why not take her instead?” (15:2). This is also a type of diplomatic questioning. If offers an out which saves the pride of both parties and allows for repair of the relationship.

Slide 16 “Then three thousand men from Judah went down..”

Here the tactic fails, and Samson again assaults the Philistines.. Samson’s personal conflict with the Philistines over the matter of his first wife spills over and provokes the Philistines into

making a raid into Judah. The "men of Judah" confront Samson, who is from the tribe of Dan. They ask the rhetorical question "Do you not know that the Philistines are rulers over us? Next comes the familiar angry accusation. "What then have you done to us?" As in the earlier Judges episodes the question leads to negotiation and a resolution of sorts. This time, instead of diplomatic pacification or violent escalation, the result is a compromise: Samson will turn himself over to the men of Judah on the condition that they themselves will not harm him.

Samson makes an accusing question against God himself shortly after this, and it closely parallels the "complaining questions" of Exodus "You have granted this great victory by the hand of your servant. Am I now to die of thirst, and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?"

In conclusion, this short overview is just the beginning of a larger study which should include the David narratives also. The court history of David shows many of the same rhetorical features that we have discussed here. Taken together we can see a long standing theme within the final form of the Hebrew text which stretches from Genesis through the Deuteronomic History. We see emotionally laden questions used for accusation and defense between speakers, as well as a part of negotiation as tensions rise. This feature is used in dialogue across a wide range of relationships: between family members, between leaders and groups of people, and even between man and his God. These patterns can be viewed on one level as a long standing linguistic feature: a way in which Hebrew expands its emotional repertoire. However such patterns can also add to the argument, of deeper connections between many of these texts.[11] Finally, viewed individually we can see the impact that such questions have on the emotional and narrative content of each episode. To again connect with L. R. Martin, emotion is used as part of the argument that the stories make in their claim upon the hearts and minds of the community. Rhetorical questions in all of their variations connect with emotion and draw the reader into the world of the scriptural text.

PLEASE NOTE: This is a shortened draft copy for conference presentation. Full article, including more extensive discussion and full works cited, to come.

[11] Friedman, Richard The Hidden Book in the Bible