EXEGESIS, ALLUSION AND INTERTEXTUALITY IN THE HEBREW BIBLE: A RESPONSE TO LYLE ESLINGER

by

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In a recent article in this journal, “Inner-biblical exegesis and inner-biblical allusion: the question of category”, VT 42 (1992), pp. 47-58, Lyle Eslinger argues against the method of studying inner-biblical exegesis that Michael Fishbane outlines in his book, Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel (Oxford, 1985). He maintains that Fishbane’s diachronic approach is fundamentally flawed by its reliance on historical assumptions. Therefore, Eslinger would replace the study of inner-biblical exegesis with a more synchronic approach oriented towards what he calls inner-biblical allusion. Careful examination of the passages Eslinger cites shows that his claims regarding Fishbane’s reasoning in specific cases and Fishbane’s method in general are unwarranted. Moreover, Eslinger’s model of inner-biblical allusion melds what literary theorists rightly view as two different categories, one historical and one ahistorical, and in so doing he fails to confront the historical category in a serious fashion.

Eslinger contends that Fishbane builds his analyses on assumptions that cannot be supported. However, Eslinger’s discussions of examples from Fishbane’s book are misleading. For example, Fishbane argues (pp. 46-7) that Ezek. xxi 18 is a later gloss (introduced by the deictic particle hu) which explains the preceding sentences. Eslinger asks why the explanatory phrase must have been added by a later hand; it could just as easily been included by the original author to make his own text clearer (p. 51):

the only thing that makes Ezek. xxi 18b an example of i.b.e. rather than a piece of authorial exposition of the same cloth as the rest of the chapter is the assumption that the deictic use of the pronoun is a tool wielded by later “tradents”. Obviously the opposite assumption—that expository comments should always be traced to “the original author”—is equally unfortunate. Fishbane’s approach here is not fundamentally wrongheaded; it is just not well-thought out.
Eslinger’s critique is wrong for several reasons. Fishbane adduces evidence that at least some glosses introduced by deictic particles are indeed the product of later tradents. For example, in 1 Kings vi 38 and vii 2 deictic particles introduce glosses that explain old Canaanite names for months; the glosses add the ordinal numeration of the months commonly used later in Israelite history. These verses leave the strong impression that later readers needed help understanding obsolete terms found in the original text. Thus the deictic particles there most likely introduce later glosses rather than explicative comments by the original author. More importantly, text-critical evidence also indicates that some explanatory phrases are late. For example, the text of 1 Kings vii 2 available to the LXX translators seems not yet to have included the explanatory passage.¹

Nonetheless, Eslinger is correct to argue that we cannot be sure whether the explanatory comment in the case he cites is original or additional. In the absence of text-critical evidence or indications that archaic terms are being updated, it is impossible to decide whether a given case is evidence of inner-biblical exegesis by a later hand or exposition by the original author. We can be sure, however, that the phenomenon of later exegetical glosses does exist (as the evidence cited in

¹ In addition, comparison of the versions shows that many glosses not introduced by deictic particles were added by scribes. In cases of this sort, the original pre-glossed text is preserved in some versions, while other versions contain the later explanatory addition. For examples, see Fishbane, pp. 67-69; Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, Assen and Maastricht, 1992), pp. 258-85; and Yair Zakovitch, *An Introduction to Inner-Biblical Interpretation* (Hebrew) (Even-Yehudah, 1992), p. 21 § 6; p. 22 § 9; p. 26 § 24, and pp. 90-1.

Further examples of glosses most likely added by later tradents come from explanations that seem to be attached to the wrong word. For example, the words “that (ḥā)” is the great city” in Gen. x 12 follow the word “Calah”. But they almost certainly are meant to refer to “Nineveh”, which appears earlier in the verse, because Nineveh is described in Jonah i 1 and elsewhere as “the great city”. As Zakovitch points out (p. 20), a scribe familiar with Jonah must have added the identification, “that is the great city”, into the margin or between the lines, intending it to refer to “Nineveh”; a later scribe inserted the gloss into the text at the wrong place. Zakovitch lists several other cases in which a gloss appears slightly removed from the word it modifies (pp. 20-1). Cases like this are most readily explained as resulting from the activity of several later scribes rather than from the work of an original author.

This sort of empirical evidence of later glosses bolsters the argumentation of scholars who suggest the existence of other glosses without text-critical evidence, though in the latter sort of case, the suggestions must remain tentative. The clear examples of glosses supported by versional evidence suffice to show that during the biblical period, transmission, revision, and interpretation constituted a single process. This process parallels the activity of those who inherited the biblical text in the post-biblical era. This is Fishbane’s central point, which Eslinger seems to miss.