The Present State of Old Testament Studies in the Low Countries

A Collection of Old Testament Studies
Published on the Occasion of the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the Oudtestamentisch Werkgezelschap

Edited by

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### Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List of Illustrations</th>
<th>ix</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Contributors</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Seventy-Five Years Oudtestamentisch Werkgezelschap: The Study of the Old Testament in the Netherlands and Belgium  
   *Klaas Spronk*  
   1

2. Micah in the Low Countries  
   *Bob Becking*  
   13

3. Revelation, History and Religious Plurality: Old Testament Studies from the Apeldoorn / Kampen Reformed Perspective  
   *Koert van Bekkum and Eric Peels*  
   30

4. Salient Features in the Book of Job  
   *Jan Fokkelman*  
   47

   *Gerrit van der Kooij*  
   64

   *Gert Kwakkel*  
   104

7. The Rise and Demise of the So-called Deuteronomistic History: A Plea for the Compositional Unity of Genesis–Kings  
   *Casper Labuschagne*  
   122

8. Septuagint Studies in Louvain  
   *Bénédicte Lemmelijn and Hans Ausloos*  
   145

   *Pieter van der Lugt*  
   159
10 Biblical Violence and the Task of the Exegete 180  
   Ed Noort

   Reinoud Oosting

12 Old Testament Exegesis and Biblical Theology from an Ede/Leuven Evangelical Perspective 210  
   Mart-Jan Paul

13 Data, Knowledge and Tradition: Biblical Scholarship and the Humanities 2.0: Exodus 19 as a Laboratory Text 228  
   Eep Talstra

14 Towards an Annotated Edition of Tannaitic Parables 248  
   Lieve M. Teugels

15 Delimitation Criticism: An Interim Evaluation 267  
   Wilfred G.E. Watson

Index of Authors 283
Index of Textual References 290
CHAPTER 1

Seventy-Five Years Oudtestamentisch Werkgezelschap: The Study of the Old Testament in the Netherlands and Belgium

Klaas Spronk

1 Remarks on the OTW, Its Members and Its Character

On the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary in 1965 the then president of the Oudtestamentische Werkgezelschap, Piet de Boer, remarked that according to the Old Testament twenty-five years are no reason for a jubilee. He did this in the introduction to a volume of Oudtestamentische Studiën that was nevertheless devoted to that anniversary.1 He added some thoughts on a number of texts mentioning the period of twenty-five years, relating them to the occasion. He noted that Jehoshaphat reigned for twenty-five years in Jerusalem (1 Kgs 22:42) and that he had succeeded in keeping some kind of independence. Apparently this could be seen as an example of or a goal for the OTW. Another association was the fact that Ezekiel received his vision of the new temple in the twenty-fifth year of the captivity (Ez. 40:1). Although De Boer had some clear ideas about the policy of the OTW, he modestly did not relate that to this prophecy.

Fifteen years later it would have been much easier for Adam van der Woude to give the 40th anniversary some numerological biblical background. He did not give in, however, to the temptation to play with the many possible associations with the biblical texts mentioning the number forty. He limited himself to the remark that the past forty years may not have been like a journey through the desert, but that they have not been without hardship, disappointment and sorrow.2

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Ten years later Van der Woude made no attempt to find a connection with the biblical number fifty.\(^3\)

The number seventy-five occurs only once in the Hebrew bible: ‘Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Harran’ (Gen. 12:4). To this can be added that Abraham died precisely one hundred years later, at the age of one hundred and seventy-five (Gen. 25:7). Celebrating its seventy-fifth anniversary, the OTW can feel some connection to this patriarch. The comparison forces itself on a man called upon to set the next step on the road taken by his ancestry. Abram is staying in Haran, where he arrived an unknown number of years ago in the company of his father Terah after having left Ur. According to Genesis 11:39, Terah was heading for Canaan, but had stopped in the Northern Syrian city of Haran. It was left to the next generation to move on. When we apply this to our situation, we could say that as the present generation of Old Testament scholars we realize that we are following in the footsteps of predecessors like De Boer and Van der Woude, but that we also have to take our own steps. Thinking about the right direction to go, we have to consider their goals, whether they have reached them and whether adaptations are necessary.

Abram left after the death of his father. We commemorate the members of our society who have passed away in the last twenty-five years.\(^4\) Each name evokes stories and we thankfully acknowledge their contribution to the study of the Old Testament and the ways they passed on their insights to the new generation. We mention them in the order of the year of their death:

- J.H. Hospers (1993)
- M.J. Mulder (1994)
- B. Maarsingh (1995)
- B.J. Oosterhoff (1996)
- J.L. Koole (1997)
- R. Oost (2000)


\(^4\) Thanks are due to Wim Beuken, Wim Delsman, Cees Houtman, and Arie van der Kooij for their help in compiling this list.
May their memory be a blessing.

On the occasion of the anniversary in 1965 Theodoor Vriezen presented an outline of ‘twenty-five years of Old Testament study in the Netherlands’. For this he needed fewer than twenty pages. Fifteen and twenty-five years later no such attempt was made any more. With the growing number of members and the ever increasing pressure on scholars to publish, such a general survey would have become too lengthy. It would have been interesting, however, to note some tendencies. One could even say that this is necessary when we take the comparison made above with Abram seriously. We need a good overview of our field of research in order to set the right goals for our work in the future. Specialization may be unavoidable to keep up academic quality, but then it is the task of a study society to promote cooperation that is more than just summing up separate studies. Abram was called to go on where his father had stopped. His goal was the same. We must ask ourselves whether we are in the same situation or whether we have to find new ways to different goals.

Let us first realize what our predecessors in the OTW had in mind when they started their journey seventy-five years ago. The minutes of the first meetings are safely stored in the department of special collections of the library of the University of Leiden. They note that the OTW was founded on June 1, 1939 by

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5 OTS 14, pp. 397–416.
6 ‘Archief van het Oudtestamentisch Werkgezelschap, 1940–1996’, numbered BPL 2900, 3222, and 3222A.
De Boer and Vriezen. They already had been working together for a long time and wanted to establish more cooperation between Old Testament scholars in the Netherlands, following the example of colleagues in other countries.

The first official meeting was on the fourth of January 1940, in the home of De Boer in Leiden. Besides De Boer and Vriezen, the following persons were present: B.D. Eerdmans (Leiden), G.J. Thierry (Leiden), C. van Arendonk (University Library, Leiden), J. de Groot (Utrecht), A. de Buck (Egyptologist, Leiden), J. Simons, S.J. (Nijmegen), M. David (professor of old-semitic, hellenistic and Jewish history of law, Leiden), B. Alfrink (Seminary of Rijsenburg) and M.A. Beek (Amsterdam); absent with notification were G.E. Closen and N.H. Ridderbos (Free University, Amsterdam). Palache (Amsterdam) had indicated that he wanted to join later. The reformed colleagues J. Ridderbos (Kampen) and G.Ch. Aalders (Free University, Amsterdam) had declined the invitation. Apparently they were reluctant to cooperate with their liberal colleagues and preferred to do their work in isolation. The fact, however, that N.H. Ridderbos, the son of J. Ridderbos a close colleague of Aalders at the Free University, would attend future meetings indicates that the OTW succeeded in bridging the confessional gap. As is well described in the contribution by Van Bekkum & Peels in the present volume, also colleagues from other church-related institutions started participating and were fully accepted in this academic circle.

In the first meeting the following goals of the society were formulated:

a) The advancement of the study of the Old Testament
b) The advancement of interrelationships among Dutch Old Testament scholars
c) The advancement of international cooperation among Old Testament scholars.

To achieve these goals the following arrangements were made:

1) Regular meetings with lectures
2) Joint study of texts

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7 It is telling that in his valedictory speech in 1950 Aalders, giving a survey of the present state of the Old Testament research, emphasizes that the reformed theology should follow its own path: ‘het blijft (…) de taak en roeping van onze Gereformeerde Theologie haar eigen weg te gaan’ (G.Ch. Aalders, *De huidige stand der Oud-testamentische wetenschap*, Kampen 1951, 19). In his lecture he welcomes recent discussions about the documentary hypothesis and the redaction of the book of Isaiah as indications of the growing insight that the historical-critical approach is a failure.
3) Consultations on publications
4) Making contact with foreign societies.

De Boer tried in vain to name the society after Abraham Kuenen. Eerdmans proposed as a compromise the name Abraham. Most members, however, preferred the prosaic name ‘Het Oudtestamentisch Werkgezelschap in Nederland’ (in 1993 supplemented with ‘en België’). In the first meeting there were ideas about inviting young, promising scholars. Some names were mentioned, but eventually it was considered not prudent to expand the society too much. So for the first years the number of participants remained restricted to eleven. The first lecture was given by De Boer and was titled ‘Het hof-in-Eden verhaal’.

It is interesting and instructive to take note of the way De Boer and later Van der Woude evaluated the work of the society on the occasion of the previous anniversaries mentioned. In 1965, De Boer remarks that the OTW had stimulated the regular meeting of those who teach the Old Testament at the universities and that this certainly was fruitful for education and research. He is disappointed, however, about the fact that it hardly ever resulted in joint undertakings in their field of research. Neither did the meetings have the character of a ‘college’ in the literal sense of coming together to read texts where each member would contribute his own knowledge and the results of his own preparation. The only thing the participants did was to give their lecture or listen to the work of others and give their judgment, for which the outline sent beforehand was more or less helpful. De Boer notices hardly any influence upon each other’s work based on the discussions in the society. He concludes that is difficult to remain a student.

In his survey of the work of the members of the society, Vriezen is also restrained in his praise. He doubts whether it will be remembered by future generations and assumes that the coming digital age will not alter this: ‘the generation that is going to make use of computers will probably be even more likely to forget it than our generation has forgotten much of the work of our predecessors.’ He argues that things have to change and just like De Boer he emphasizes that there should be more cooperation between the different biblical faculties. A matter of concern—already fifty years ago—is the lack of growth of this kind of research at the universities. Fifteen and especially twenty-five years later, Van der Woude repeats this by referring to

8 It was later published as a booklet: P.A.H. de Boer, Genesis II en III: het verhaal van den hof in Eden, Leiden 1941.
9 ‘Leerling blijven is een moeilijke kunst’ (De Boer, 1940–1965, p. x).
10 Vriezen, OTS 14, p. 416.
the cutbacks by the government. Van der Woude is more positive about the OTW, especially regarding the joint meetings with the British Society for Old Testament Study, taking place every three years. He also points to the ever rapidly growing number of publication of the series Oudtestamentische Studiën (OTS), which is related to the society and started in 1942.

Twenty-five years later one can only agree with Van der Woude when it comes to the publication of OTS. In the first twenty-five years, fourteen volumes were published, in the next twenty-five years, eleven, and in the last twenty-five years more than forty. With regard to internalization, which from the beginning was an important goal, we can add that next to the joint meetings with the British colleagues there are now also regular meetings with our sister organization in South Africa. With regard to the situation of biblical studies at the universities, we have to be less optimistic. Over the last years there was a dramatic decline of academic jobs on our field. Departments of biblical studies at the universities of Amsterdam, Leiden, and Utrecht have been closed or reduced to small faculties which have become part of more general departments of religious studies with only little attention to the historical sources. In line with this, Semitic studies and Egyptology have almost completely disappeared from the universities of Groningen and Leiden, which housed many famous scholars in these fields in the past. This asks for an adequate response from the OTW and underlines what was already put forward by its founding fathers, De Boer and Vriezen, that it is necessary for the universities to cooperate in this matter, which should start, as advised by De Boer, with studying together.

2 Old Testament Research in the Netherlands in the Last Twenty-Five Years: Tendencies and Teamwork

As was noted above, at the fiftieth anniversary Van der Woude did not attempt to give a survey of the work of his colleagues as Vriezen had done twenty-five years earlier. Again twenty-five years later it is even more difficult to do justice to what is achieved on this ever-expanding field of research. Instead, the members of our society were asked to write in the present volume about their own work within the framework of the recent more or less national history of research. The result may be called impressive, but insiders will notice that it is far from complete. For various reasons specific parts were not covered, for instance, the study of the history of religion. Therefore, in order to give a more balanced picture some—admittedly subjective—remarks will be made about
tendencies that can be noted in the last decades. These are based on the contributions to the present volume, supplemented by references to important aspects not covered by them.

What should be acknowledged, to begin with, is the fact that many members of the OTW have been involved in the study of the archaeology of ancient Israel or (as it nowadays usually called) the southern Levant. Between 1968 and 2013 they also had their own organization: ‘Het Werkgezelschap voor de Archeologie van Palestina (WAP)’. Its first president Henk Franken is well known from the excavations at Deir Allah (with the spectacular discovery of the Balaam inscription), his publication of the British excavations at Jerusalem, and from the close attention he paid to the methods of field archaeology and technical pottery studies. The work at Deir Allah was continued by Gerrit van der Kooij (see his contribution in this volume). Among the other Dutch scholars active in this field only the presidents of the WAP are mentioned: Margreet Steiner and Karel Vriezen, the son of Theodoor and final president of the WAP.

On looking through the table of contents one may note an emphasis on the study of formal features (numbers and structures) of the biblical texts. Next to the research as presented in the contributions by Fokkelman, Labuschagne, Van der Lugt and Oosting, one can also refer here to the groundbreaking work achieved especially by Ellen van Wolde and Pierre van Hecke on the application of cognitive linguistics in biblical research. This has resulted in much concrete data, presented as ‘hard’ evidence, but unfortunately—as is also illustrated in some of the contributions to the present volume—not in much consensus about the way it should be interpreted. Characteristic of this situation is the fact that much of this research is done individualistically. One may also

11 Its archive can be consulted at http://www.dans.knaw.nl/.
note, however, a tendency in the other direction. De Boer and Van der Woude would have been very happy to see their wishes about teamwork fulfilled nowadays in the form of many big and long lasting projects. In fact, they gave the good example themselves in respectively starting the projects on the study of the Peshitta and Dead Sea scrolls.

2.1 The Peshitta Institute

The Peshitta Institute was founded in 1959 with as its primary goal the publication of the first scientific edition ever of the Old Testament Peshitta text. It was an initiative of the International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament (IOSOT), which had asked De Boer to become the general editor. He functioned as the director of the institute until 1980 working together with Wim Baars and Marinus Koster. De Boer was succeeded by Martin Mulder (1981), Piet Dirksen (1982–1993) and Konrad Jenner (1993–2004). Arie van der Kooij, professor of Old Testament at Leiden University from 1989 until 2010 and his successor Bas ter Haar Romeny were also directly involved in the work of the institute. In 2014 it moved to the VU Free University in Amsterdam and is now directed by Ter Haar Romeny (who also moved to Amsterdam) and Wido van Peursen (since 2012 professor of Old Testament at the VU Free University).

In the course of time, hundreds of microfilms and fiches of manuscripts of the Peshitta from all over the world were collected and made available for scholarly research. Some of the original manuscripts have been lost in the meantime, which makes the copies even more valuable. A list of manuscripts was published and via ‘Peshitta Institute Communications’ (in Vetus Testamentum until 1992, and since 2004 in Aramaic Studies) surveys of research in the field of the Peshitta or Aramaic Bible were given. In the beginning it was assumed that within ten years the edition of the Peshitta would be completed. Gradually this unofficial deadline was adjusted to the reality that the work proved to be very complicated and time consuming. The much respected quality of the edition was considered more important than the speed of publication. Gradually the focus of the institute has broadened, towards the historical, ecclesiastical and liturgical context of the Peshitta. Also the New Testament Peshitta, as well as other versions (especially the SyroHexapla) came into sight. One can note this development in the themes of the three Peshitta symposia held thus far. The

theme of the first symposium (in 1985) was ‘The Peshitta: Its Early Text and History’, the theme of the second (in 1993) was ‘The Peshitta as a Translation’. In the third symposium (in 2001) the theme was ‘The Peshitta: Its Use in Literature and Liturgy’. This wider focus is also apparent in the project set up by Ter Haar Romeny in 2006: ‘Identity and Migration: Christian Minorities in the Middle East and in Diaspora’.18

Another development concerns the use of computer technology. In cooperation with the VU Free University at Amsterdam, projects on computer-assisted linguistic analysis of the Peshitta’ were set up, in order to study the relation between the Hebrew and Syriac language systems, their idiomatic and syntactical peculiarities and the relation between them, and thus to obtain a more precise understanding of the translation technique of the Peshitta. This resulted in publications by Janet Dyk, Percy van Keulen and Wido van Peursen.

2.2   **The Qumran Institute**

From the beginning, Dutch scholars were involved in the study of the documents from Qumran.19 Very important was the contribution by individual scholars like Van der Ploeg and Van der Woude, but what stimulated the research most was the establishment by the latter of the Qumran Institute at Groningen University in 1961. A number of scholars worked there together with Van der Woude and they produced many tools for the study of the texts from Qumran. Bastiaan Jongeling worked at the institute from 1968 until 1978. Besides working on a monograph on the Targum of Job he assisted in editing the *Journal for the Study of Judaism* (established in 1970) and on the bibliography of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The appointment in 1980 of Florentino García Martínez was very important for the institute. In 1990 Van der Woude and García Martínez replaced Van der Ploeg as editor of the *Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah* turning it into perhaps the most important series in the field of the study of the Dead Sea Scrolls, both in quality as in quantity. Whereas between 1957 and until 1992 eight volumes had been published, since then more than hundred saw the light.

In 1989 García Martínez and Van der Woude organized the international conference ‘The Texts of Qumran and the History of the Community’, during which the International Organization for Qumran Studies was established

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with García Martínez as executive secretary. Since then every three years a conference has been held. In 2004 Tigchelaar succeeded García Martínez as secretary of the IOQS. Both scholars also cooperated in the publication of the study edition of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1997–98.

The Qumran institute proved to be a good basis for the acquisition of funds for scholarly research. A project set up by Tigchelaar in 2001 provided the opportunity for Anke Dorman and Mladen Popović to work on Ph.D. projects. Popović became director of the institute in 2007 and was also able to obtain research grants. With this he organized a successful exhibition of Dead Sea Scrolls in the Netherlands. In 2014 the European Research Council awarded him a grant for his project ‘The Hands that Wrote the Bible: Digital Paleography and Scribal Culture of the Dead Sea Scrolls’, in which traditional palaeography and computational intelligence will be combined.

2.3 Other Projects

These good examples of teamwork were followed by other members of the OTW in the seventies and eighties of the twentieth century. They were stimulated by the growing possibilities to receive grants for scholarly research by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research. This enabled in 1977 Eep Talstra to start a project on the computer-assisted analysis of Old Testament texts: the ‘Werkgroep Informatica’, which on the occasion of his retirement was renamed in ‘The Eep Talstra Centre for Bible and Computer’. As is demonstrated in the contribution to the present volume by Reinoud Oosting, it brought many scholars from different countries together, producing considerable output.

In 1987 Johannes de Moor set up a project at the Theological University of Kampen concerning the Targum of the prophets. With the help of the computer, a bilingual concordance to the Targum of the Prophets was produced in 21 volumes, published between 1995 and 2005, edited by De Moor, Willem Smelik, Eveline van Staaldruine-Sulman, Bernard Grossfeld, Floor Sepmeijer, Thomas Finley and Dineke Houtman. In 1999 De Moor, in cooperation with the Peshitta Institute, established the Journal for the Aramaic Bible. After 2005 the work of De Moor was continued by Jan-Wim Wesselius, Houtman and Van Staaldruine-Sulman with projects on the Targum of Samuel and on the ‘Targum in a Christian World’.

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In 1988 Johan Lust established this very fruitful ‘Centre for Septuagint Studies and Textual Criticism’ in Leuven. Its history is described by Hans Ausloos and Bénédicte Lemmelijn in the present volume.

One of the consequences of the way the Biblical research is funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research is that it stimulated Old Testament scholars to look for cooperation outside their specific fields of expertise. Examples of this are the already mentioned projects by Ter Haar Romeny on Syriac studies and the projects set up by De Moor and his team on Targum studies. To this can be added the project on parables, which is presented in this volume in the contribution by Lieve Teugels.

Another project that can be mentioned here is the one on the study of Byzantine biblical manuscripts, which is supervised by the present author. It is focused on manuscripts of the Bible—the Old and New Testament—transmitted in Greek, preserved since the 4th century AD (with Codex Sinaiticus, Codex Vaticanus B and Codex Alexandrinus as the most famous representatives), which are dispersed throughout the Eastern and Western world. They are studied, catalogued to begin with, in their original liturgical context. The idea is that biblical texts should not be isolated from the codex in which they were originally included, and that their evaluation should be based on relating the codices to the liturgical context and practice of the monasteries and churches in which they originated.21

In 1995 The Dictionary of Deities and Demons was published (with a revised edition in 1999). It was the result of the cooperation between a great number of scholars on the field of the history of religion. It was coordinated by Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking and Pieter van der Horst, who until 1993 were colleagues at the university of Utrecht. Other publications in this field of the study of the history of religion deserve to be mentioned here as well, especially the work of Van der Toorn22 and of Johannes de Moor.23 Some meetings of the OTW have been devoted especially to their work.24


24 The 197th meeting of the OTW on January 11, 2008, was devoted to the discussion of Van der Toorn, Scribal Culture, and the 217th meeting on May 16, 2014, to Korpel & De Moor,
On the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the OTW De Moor took the initiative to start the research project ‘כלי—Utensils’. The members of the society were invited to discuss one or more utensils mentioned in the Hebrew Bible on the basis of the latest information from archaeology, comparative linguistics, iconography and anthropology. This is still work in progress. The results are published on the website of the OTW.25

De Moor was also involved, together with Marjo Korpel and Joseph Oesch, in the start of the ‘Pericope’ project, introducing the new approach of ‘delimitation criticism’. This is a way of systematically looking for markers of reading units in the ancient manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint and the Vulgate. The project started with a workshop at the first meeting of the European Association for Biblical Studies in 2000. One of its aims is to provide biblical scholars with all relevant data concerning text division in the biblical manuscripts. The results are published in the series ‘Pericope: Scripture as Written and Read in Antiquity’, with Korpel as executive editor. It is well described and evaluated by Wilfred Watson in the present volume.

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*Adam, Eve, and the Devil. Their The Silent God was evaluated is a special issue of OTS: B. Becking (ed.), *Reflections on the Silence of God. A Discussion with Marjo Korpel and Johannes de Moor* (OTS 62), Leiden 2013.*