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The History of the Biblical Text as a Testimony of Evolution under God's Guidance in the Light of Josh 8:32-35

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Summary: The biblical texts of the Old Testament do not argue with Darwin's theory of evolution and do not undermine it. On the contrary, properly interpreted, they allow it and even help to look at it from the perspective of faith in God. We can say that the evolution of the world takes place under the guidance and control of God and is inspired by him. This process of evolution occurs in nature and in society. There are texts of the Old Testament which testify to the evolution of socio-religious institutions and socio-religious views, and the history of some biblical texts attests to such evolution under the control and inspiration of God. One of the examples comes from Josh 8:32-35: Joshua wrote a copy of the Torah of Moses on the stones in the presence of the Israelites and afterwards he read it in the presence of the whole assembly of Israel, including women and children, and the foreigners living with them. This text can be regarded as a post-exilic reinterpretation of Deut 17:18-20. That reinterpretation is a sign of a new view of reality and a new understanding of national and religious identity in the post-exilic community of the Judeans. A history of the biblical text that reflects such a change of views and understanding can be considered as a testimony to evolution under the control and inspiration of God.

Keywords: evolution, Old Testament, the Book of Joshua, history

Historia tekstu biblijnego jako świadectwo ewolucji pod kierunkiem Boga w świetle Joz 8,32-35

Streszczenie: Teksty biblijne Starego Testamentu nie kłócą się z teorią ewolucji Darwina i nie podważają jej. Przeciwnie, właściwie interpretowane dopuszczają ją, a nawet pomagają spojrzeć na nią z perspektywy wiary w Boga. Można powiedzieć, że ewolucja świata odbywa się pod kierunkiem Boga i jest przez Niego inspirowana. Ten proces ewolucji zachodzi w przyrodzie i w społeczeństwie. Istnieją teksty Starego Testamentu, które świadczą o ewolucji społeczno-religijnych instytucji i poglądów, a historia niektórych tekstów biblijnych wskazuje na taką ewolucję pod kontrolą i natchnieniem Boga.

Jednym z przykładów jest tekst Joz 8,32-35: Jozue sporządził kopię Tory Mojżesza na kamieniach w obecności Izraelitów, a potem przeczytał ją wobec całego zgromadzenia Izraela, w tym kobiet i dzieci oraz obcych mieszkających z nimi. Ten tekst można uznać za powygnaniową reinterpretację Pwt 17,18-20. Ta reinterpretacja jest znakiem nowego spojrzenia na rzeczywistość i nowego pojmowania tożsamości narodowej i religijnej w powygnaniowej społeczności Judejczyków. Historię tekstu biblijnego, która odzwierciedla taką zmianę poglądów i rozumienia, można uznać za świadectwo ewolucji pod kontrolą i natchnieniem Boga.

Słowa kluczowe: ewolucja, Stary Testament, Księga Jozuego, historia

Introduction

On the first pages of the biblical canon, right at the beginning of the Book of Genesis, there are two descriptions of the creation of the world and man (Gen 1:1–2:3; 2:4-25). Although these descriptions differ from each other, both show the appearance of the world and man as a result of God's creative action. For some readers, these descriptions are enough to be convinced that God completed all of creation in seven days, including establishing order in the universe - in its space and time, giving shape to the earth, filling it with plants and animals, and creating man in his own image. A literal understanding of the content of these descriptions forces many people to reject the Darwinian theory of evolution.

On the other hand, there are advocates of the theory of evolution who understand it purely biologically and deny any participation of God in it. For example, Daniel Dennett, one of the leading representatives of the so-called new atheism, stated that „Darwin's idea has banished the Book of Genesis to the limbo of quaint mythology”¹.

The research presented in this article takes issue with such opinions and points to the possibility of a broader and theological understanding of the theory of evolution, based on the observations regarding the development of the Biblical text of the Old Testament on the example of Josh 8:32-35.

1. Evolution and the Bible

It is true that the presentation of the origins of the world in the first chapters of Genesis (1-2) does not correspond to Darwin's theory of evolution or to the conclusions of research carried out in natural sciences. This does not mean, however, either that the Bible does not tell the truth, or that the theory of evolution is wrong. The difference between the two concepts results from the nature of both - the Bible and the theory of evolution. The Bible is not a collection of scientific texts in the field of natural sciences. The biblical presentation of the creative work (Gen 1-2) serves to express a theological message and not the truth in the field of natural sciences. Darwin's theory does not compete with the content of Genesis because it is not Re-

¹ Quoted after J.F. Haught, *Responses to 101 Questions on God and Evolution*, New York 2001, p. 8.

velation. In the same way, the biblical texts of the Old Testament cannot argue with Darwin's theory of evolution or undermine it. On the contrary, properly interpreted, they allow it and even help us to look at it from the perspective of faith in one God. However, the point is to understand Him not as a „God who fills the gaps” in human knowledge, whose action is one of the links in the world's chain of finite causes, but as the ultimate ground of all natural causes².

The biblical texts which tell stories about the creation of the world are a record of old religious traditions and a result of long theological reflection³. Their final editing took place in post-exilic times during the Persian period (5th-4th century BC). Neither the authors or editors of these texts nor their first addressees had any idea about the theory of evolution. Darwin presented it in the 19th century A.D. The authors /editors of biblical texts referred to the traditions and imaginings known to the people of their time. If the texts on creation were formed today, they would probably take into account the theory of evolution and the results of modern research in the natural sciences. This would be essential for the effective transmission of the theological message.

In interpreting the biblical descriptions of creation, one should take into account the ancient Near East ideas in this field and the language of those people. We can quote Johann W. von Goethe here: „Wer den Dichter will verstehen, muss in Dichters Lande gehen”⁴. This can be rendered in English: „If you want to understand a poet [or an author], you must go to that poet's land”. The reading and interpretation of the texts from the first chapters of Genesis in the context of what today's empirical science is saying require respect and honesty. Respect will be expressed in reading the Bible in its world, not ours, while honesty will be shown in openness to the truth, that is, to what the holy texts say and what empirical science is saying today⁵.

The Bible tells us about the progressive revelation of God to man. This revelation took place within a covenant relationship that assumed the characteristics of an evolving relationship – from the blessing given to creatures to the development of the Church⁶. One may venture to speak of the „evolutionary history of salvation,” realized under the leadership and guidance of God.

In such an understanding, God as the Creator (*creator*) is the very basis, the transcendent primordial ground of everything. Creation (*creatura*), on the other hand, is the result of a continuous creation process (*creatio*), which explains evolutionary

² Cf. J.F. Haught, *Responses to 101 Questions on God and Evolution*, New York 2001, p. 18-19.

³ Cf. e.g. G. von Rad, *Genesis*, London 1972, p. 63; J.J. Scullion, *Genesis. A Commentary for Students, Teachers, and Preachers* (Old Testament Studies; 6), Collegeville 1992, p. 9-10.22; C. Westermann, *Genesis*, Bd. I: 1-11, Teil 1: Gen 1-3 (Biblischer Kommentar. Altes Testament; I/1), Neukirchen-Vluyn 41999, p. 26-65.

⁴ J.W. von Goethe, *West-östlicher Divan*, Stuttgart 1819, p. 241.

⁵ Cf. D.R. Venema – S. McKnight, *Adam and the Genome. Reading Scripture After Genetic Science*, Grand Rapids 2017, p. 98-105.

⁶ Cf. D. Liroy, *Evolutionary Creation in Biblical and Theological Perspective* (Studies in Biblical Literature; 148), New York 2011, p. 243-247.

development as the continuing creative action of God (*creatio continua*)⁷. It can be assumed that this continuous action of God also took place in the transmission of God's message on to the pages of the Scriptures. The long history of the formation of biblical texts, confirmed by its historico-critical studies, reflects an evolutionary development of the socio-religious views of believers who kept in mind the experience of God's action, being responsible for the transmission of religious traditions, writing them down and editing them. We can say that the history of the biblical text of the Old Testament attests to an evolution under the guidance and inspiration of God. One example of the result of such an evolutionary process is the text of Josh 8:32-35.

2. Josh 8:32-35 as a testimony of evolution under God's guidance

According to Josh 8:32-35, Joshua at Mount Ebal wrote on the stones a copy of the Law /the Torah of Moses (*mišnê tôraq̄ mōšē*) which he wrote in the presence of the sons of Israel (v. 32). Then he read all the words of the Torah „before all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the foreigners who were among them” (*negeḏ kol-q̄hal yīsrā'el w^ehannāšim w^ehaṭṭap w^ehagger hahōlek b^eqirbom*) (w. 34-35). On a literary and canonical level, these actions of Joshua appear as the fulfilment of the command of Moses from Deut 27:1-8. Moses and the elders of Israel commanded the people to set up great stones on Mount Ebal, cover them with plaster and write upon them all the words of the Torah (*w^ekātabtā 'alehen 'eṭ-kol-dibre hattôrâ hazzō 't*) – on the day when they cross over the Jordan (v. 1-4.8).

As regards the making of a copy of the Torah, there is a mention in another biblical text, namely, Deut 17:18-20. There is the command of Moses for the future king. When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he has to make a copy of the Torah (*mišnê hattôrâ hazzō 't*) in the presence of levitical priests (*millipne hakkōh^anim halwūim*), to learn to fear his God and to keep the Torah's commandments. The purpose of writing, holding and reading a scroll (*seper*) with a copy of the Torah (*mišnê hattôrâ*) is to supervise the proper exercise of the royal authority and prevent its abuse⁸.

Some translators and commentators of the Hebrew phrase *millipne hakkōh^anim halwūim*, from the end of verse 18, propose a translation: „from that of the priests, who are Levites” or „from the text of the levitical priests”. They suggest in this way that these words refer to the original text (*editio princeps*), which formed the basis of the royal copy, and which, at the will of Moses, was in the custody of the levitical priests (cf. Deut 31:9.24-26)⁹. In the statement from Deut 17:18, it is also reasonable

⁷ Cf. e.g. H. Kessler, *Evolution und Schöpfung in neuer Sicht*, Kevelaer³2010, p. 148-152.

⁸ Cf. e.g. J.H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy* (The JPS Torah Commentary; 5), Accordance electronic ed., Philadelphia 1996, p. 168; M.A. Grisanti, *Deuteronomy*, in: *Numbers-Ruth* (The Expositor's Bible Commentary. Revised Edition; 2), ed. T. Longman III – D.E. Garland, Accordance electronic ed., Grand Rapids 2012, p. 647.

⁹ Cf. e.g. *Biblia Tysiąclecia*, Poznań 2018; *Die Bibel. Einheitsübersetzung der Heiligen Schrift*, Stuttgart 1981; J.H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, p. 168; E.J. Woods, *Deuteronomy. An Introduction and Com-*

to understand the meaning of the preposition *millipne* in the sense of „in the presence of”, „in front of” (cf. e.g. Lev 16:12; Ps 97:5; 114:7). The presence of the levitical priests, in front of whom the King had to make a copy of the Torah, is associated with their function as guardians, institutional interpreters and teachers of the Torah (Deut 17:8-12). The mention of them in the command from Deut 17:18 serves to point out that they were supposed to watch over the correct execution of the copy, without adding or omitting anything, and to secure the proper application by the king of the Torah regulations in the rule of the people¹⁰.

In the present text of Deuteronomy the statement from 17,18-20 is the second part of the recommendations of Moses concerning the future king of Israel (Deut 17:14-20). In terms of the history of the formation of the so-called „law of the king”, this second part can be treated as the result of a subsequent update and further development of the text. First, the authors of the 6th century BC ordered Moses to announce the appointment of the king whom God YHWH will choose from among the Israelites (v. 15), and commit him to moderation in the possession of horses, in the taking of wives and in the accumulation of wealth (vv. 16-17). Then, the authors /editors from the 5th-4th century BC introduced a new aspect of the law of the king, associating the king with the Torah and ordering him to submit to its regulations (v. 18-20)¹¹.

By the expression *hattôrâ hazzô 't* („this Torah”), Deut 17:18 recalls the words of Deut 1:5, from the end of the preamble of the book (1:1-5): „Beyond the Jordan, in the land of Moab, began Moses to explain this Torah (*'et-hattôrâ hazzô 't*)”. At this point, the term *hattôrâ hazzô 't* refers to Moses' explanation of the Torah written at Sinai with the interpretation of the history of Israel during the wandering from Horeb (Sinai) to Moab¹². By the same phrase (*hattôrâ hazzô 't*) Deut 17:18, it is also anticipatively related to Deut 31:9. There is a historicising mention that Moses „wrote down this Torah” (*'et-hattôrâ hazzô 't*), and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and to all the elders of Israel”. In the perspective of the historicizing presentation of Deuteronomy, this information

mentary (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries; 5), Downers Grove 2011, p. 219; E. Otto, *Deuteronomium 12-34* (Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament), Freiburg – Basel – Wien 2016, p. 1487.

¹⁰ Cf. e.g. F. Brown – S.R. Driver – C.A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon with Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic*, Peabody 1997 (repr. from 1906), p. 817-818; A.S. van der Woude, פָּנִים, *pānīm*, *Angesicht*, in: *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, Bd. 2, ed. E. Jenni – C. Westermann, Gütersloh 1993, p. 444. More see e.g. D.L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1:1-21:9* (Word Biblical Commentary; 6A), Accordance electronic ed., Grand Rapids 2001, p. 386; D.I. Block, *Deuteronomy* (The NIV Application Commentary), Accordance electronic ed., Grand Rapids, 2004, p. 420; T.B. Dozeman, *Joshua 1-12 a New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (The Anchor Yale Bible; 6B), New Haven 2015, p. 380.

¹¹ Cf. G. Braulik, *Deuteronomium II: 16,18 – 34,12* (Die Neue Echter Bibel. Altes Testament; 28), Würzburg 1992, p. 129; E. Otto, *Deuteronomium*, p. 1486-1487.

¹² Cf. e.g. P. Bovati, *Il Libro del Deuteronomio (1-11)*, Roma 1994, p. 34; M.A. Grisanti, *Deuteronomy*, p. 474-477; E. Otto, *Deuteronomium 1-11. Erster Teilband: 1,1-4,43* (Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament), Freiburg – Basel – Wien 2012, p. 320-321.

gives the impression of being later in relation to the statement from Deut 17:18. The king should make a copy of the Torah, which is yet to be written. Some observations in the area of historico-critical analysis suggest, however, that the fragment of Deut 31:9-13, in which, besides mentioning that Moses wrote the Torah, is also given his command to read this Torah to the whole nation, should be regarded as a later insert between two parts of the narrative about establishing Joshua as the successor of Moses (Deut 31:1-8.14-15.23)¹³. After mentioning the return of Moses to the priests and elders of Israel in 31:10, the double use of the singular may be wondered at: „you shall read” (*tiqrā*) in 31:11 and „assemble” (*haqhel*) in 31:12. This transition to a singular can be considered a stylistic feature¹⁴, or it can be seen as a reference to a single person, either to Joshua or to the king¹⁵. It could be an additional element of the intratextual relationship between Deut 31:9-13 and Deut 17:18. The statement of Josh 1:7-8, which is regarded as post-Deuteronomistic¹⁶, speaks about Joshua as the one who has the book of the law (*seper hattôrâ*) of Moses and has to meditate on it day and night, carefully keeping to everything that is written in it. In the post-exilic perspective of updating and of expanding (*Fortschreibung*) Moses’ recommendations in Deut 17,18-20, the king was thus compared to Joshua.

There is certainly a relation between the text of Josh 8:32-35 and that of Deut 17:18-20. In terms of the chronology of the formation and editing of these texts, we assume that the present text of Josh 8:32-35 is later than Deut 17:18-20 and depends

¹³ Cf. D.I. Block, *Deuteronomy*, p. 721-728.

¹⁴ So e.g. D.L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1:1–21:9*, p. 765.

¹⁵ Such an explanation was already suggested in old interpretations. See more e.g. J.H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, p. 292.

¹⁶ The discussion on the historical-editorial location of Josh 1:7-8 continues. The origins of these post-Deuteronomistic verses are written about by, among others, E. Otto (*Deuteronomium 12-34*, p. 1488). R. Smend acknowledges that they are the result of the work by a Deuteronomistic Nomist [DtrN] (*Das Gesetz und die Völker. Ein Beitrag zur deuteronomistischen Redaktionsgeschichte*, in: *Probleme biblischer Theologie*, Fs. G. von Rad, ed. H.W. Wolff, München 1971, p. 494–497). A similar opinion was expressed by A.G. Auld (*Joshua Retold. Synoptic Perspectives*, Edinburgh 1998, p. 113-119) and J. Nentel, who credited verses 8-9 to second Later Deuteronomists (*Trägerschaft und Intentionen des deuteronomistischen Geschichtswerks. Untersuchungen zu den Reflexionsreden Jos 1; 23; 24; 1Sm 12 und 1Kön 8* [Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft; 297], Berlin – New York 2000, p. 305.) as well as G. Szamocki, who acknowledged them as a later Deuteronomistic extension which, in respect of time, can be placed in the context of the post-exilic period of Ezra and Nehemiah (*Do czego Jozuemu odwaga i moc? Studium literacko-historyczne zachęty „bądź mężny i mocny” w Joz 1, 6-9*, „Przegląd Religioznawczy” 220/2 [2006], p. 17-19). C. Edenburg in 1.7 still sees a nomistic supplement („nomistic Fortschreibung or overwriting”), but she already treats 1:8 as „a very late scribal re-interpretation that seems to derive from a time in which its intertexts from Psalms and Trito-Isaiah were already considered authoritative” (*Do the Pentateuchal Sources Extend into the Former Prophets? Joshua 1 and the Relation of the Former Prophets to the Pentateuch*, in: *The Formation of the Pentateuch. Bridging the Academic Cultures of Europe, Israel, and North America* [Forschung zum Alten Testament; 111], ed. J.C. Gertz, et al., Tübingen 2016, p. 803-804). J.J. Krause is of a different opinion. He believes that Josh 1:8 is „an integral component of the first layer to be found in Jos 1” (*The Book of the Torah in Joshua 1 and 23 and in the Deuteronomistic History*, „Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft” 127/3 (2015), p. 419-420).

on it. Each of them, however, communicates a slightly different content and a different message.

In Deut 17:18-19, the king has to make a copy of the Torah for himself (*w^ekātab lō 'et-mišnē hattôrâ hazzō 't*). He has to read it himself so that he learns to worship God and obey His commandments. In Josh 8:32-35 Joshua made a copy of the Torah and read it in public before the entire community of Israel (*neged kol-q^ehal yîsrā 'el*), including the strangers in it (*w^ehagger hahōlek b^eqirbom*). Joshua does not play the role of the king, but he enters into the role of the leader and the teacher of Torah, following the example of Moses¹⁷. Through its copy, the Torah is to be made available to the entire community of Israel and provide the foundation for shaping their lives, not just the life of the king. The statement of Josh 8, in comparison with the statement of Deut 17, universalizes the responsibility for living according to the Torah, extending it to the whole community of Israel, both to members of the nation and to strangers. Some exegetes see in this statement even an anti-monarchical accent¹⁸.

Historically, such a reinterpretation can be placed in the late post-exilic period (5th-4th century BC). First, the post-exilic authors /editors of Deut 17:18-19, having abandoned the hopes of renewing the royal dynasty, gave the king's image the characteristics of a scribe like Ezra. A little later, this text was read and again interpreted in Josh 8:32-35. These new editors and re-interpreters were motivated in their work by their current situation. On the one hand, there were the unfulfilled hopes, on the other hand, the need to review the position regarding the understanding of the extent of recipients and beneficiaries of the Torah and its teaching, and consequently also the extent of the recipients of God's blessing and God's acts of kindness. Are they limited to repatriates from Babylonia? Judeans „of flesh and blood”, who enjoyed full rights in the community of Israel? The statement in Josh 8:32-35 is a testimony to the inclusive tendencies that competed with the concept of exclusivism that was concerned about the Judaic identity, determined by fidelity to the Torah as interpreted by priests and carried out under their supervision, and by a lively relationship with the Jerusalem temple and its cult. The motivation for the re-reading of Deut 17:18-22 could also be a matter of the attitude towards the Samaritans and members of neighbouring nations, perhaps not familiar with the Torah, but open to living in its light and respecting Jewish traditions.

Recapitulation

Josh 8:32-35, as the fruit of re-reading and reinterpretation of Deut 17:18-20, is one of the testimonies to the complex historical process of the development of the text of the Old Testament. The content of the statement of Josh 8:32-35 is a reference to a specific event placed in the initial history of Israel. Traditions of this history,

¹⁷ Cf. Nelson, R.D., *Joshua. A Commentary*, Louisville 1997, p. 22; T.B. Dozeman, *Joshua 1-12*, p. 380; M. Ederer, *Das Buch Josua* (Neuer Stuttgarter Kommentar. Altes Testament; 5/1), Stuttgart 2017, p. 152.

¹⁸ So e.g. T.B. Dozeman, *Joshua 1-12*, p. 380.

cultivated for centuries in the community of the believers of Israel, were subject to modification and to interpreting studies motivated by the changing political, social and religious situation. Both the formation of new texts and the reinterpretations and re-editions of already existing writings, took place especially during periods of serious changes and crises. This literary activity was forced by the course of events.

The text of Josh 8:32-35 is also a sign of a new view of reality and a new understanding of national and religious identity in the post-exilic community of Judeans. Therefore it can be seen as the fruit and testimony of the evolution of the biblical text of the Old Testament. This evolution, like the biblical history of Israel, ran under the leadership, guidance and inspiration of God.

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