

Inter-Faith Dialogue in the Book of Esther: A Poser for Redaction Criticism

Dr. Luke Emeka Ugwueye

Senior Lecturer

Emmanuel Nwachukwu Uzuegbunam (PhD student)

Department of Religion & Human Relations

Faculty of Arts

Nnamdi Azikiwe University

Awka-Anambra State

Nigeria

Abstract

Authors of Sacred texts consist of redactors who use the source materials within their reach to advance theological viewpoints. Two centuries after the exclusive society, advocated by the Ezra-Nehemiah Priestly redactors, generated anti-Semitic prejudice against the Jews, culminating in racial hatred and threat of total extinction of the Jewish race, redactors of the book of Esther used the inter-faith marriage of Eshter, a Jewess, to Mordecai, a Persian, to open up inter-faith dialogue to guard against genocide and societal uproar. Redaction through holy writs has a way of influencing interpretation by votaries of religion. It could pitch one religion against another to cause crises. The redaction in the book of Esther clearly defines what appears to be a consensus of the Old Testament as far as inter-faith marriage is concerned. And this thus presents a poser to the entire Old Testament redaction criticism. Beyond that, the book of Esther presents redaction of sacred writings, not as a thing to be given a once-for-all-finished finite perspective, but as a dynamic phenomenon that is on-going, constantly adapting the demands of faith to the challenges of society, for the ultimate survival of mankind.

Keywords: Inter-faith, dialogue, poser, redaction and criticism

Introduction

Sacred writings are the instruments for propagating religious thoughts. They are as old as human society. In the pre-scientific period of human development, sacred writings provided the basis for interpreting all phenomena associated with life and the universe. They supplied the laws that governed the process of living and as well moderated the nature and patterns of inter-personal relationships. They formed the rationale by which the human society was ordered, including spelling out the penal systems, existentially and eschatologically. The intervention of the scientific era has provided an alternative perspective for interpreting life's processes and the nature of the universe, that is, the physical universe. But even this has not completely vitiated the relevance of religious thought and of the sacred writings.

Although the sacred writings are associated with some divine origin, in the main and to a large extent, they are the product of human thought and creativity. It is human beings who speak for the deities. Authors of sacred writings, even if they are seen as inspired spokesmen of the deities, at the end of the day, are human beings who have social, philosophical and theological positions to advance, for the good or ill of society.

Sacred writings to a large extent determine the state of human society. They determine whether people appreciate, love and respect each other, or whether they are at each other's throat. Today, the world is polarized along religious lines, and the human society has become a complex admixture of diverse religious thoughts sometimes hostile to each other. The world today faces a severe survival threat at the hands of religious adherents. Religion has been clearly adjudged the greatest motivating factor to armed conflicts in the 21st century human society. Religion is the reason for the escalating dimensions of terrorism in the modern society, and by far the greatest threat to human survival. Much of this threat is traceable to the sacred writings which represent the human interpretations of divine will and wishes.

The Old Testament reaches a climax with the Ezra-Nehemiah post-exilic reconstruction and reforms, credited to the Priestly redactors.

Because of the need to purify the newly emerging Jewish nation from unwholesome influences from, and contacts with the foreigners, endogamy, marriage from within one's ethnic group, became the cardinal instrument for the reform. Marriage of Jews outside the Jewish race became elevated to the status of treachery (לַעֲוֹן) against God. Menezes (2009) observes that the culprits are to "put away their wives under pain of confiscation of their goods and ostracism from the community (Ezra 7-8)" (p. 65). From this, an understanding grew among the Jews that association with their neighbours would corrupt them and pollute their faith. This understanding was to lead the Jews to an exclusivist attitude to life with large scale discrimination and segregation. The Jews developed a superior notion of themselves as a holy race (שֵׁנִי עַם קָדְשׁ (Ezra 9:2), which tended to belittle everyone else in their sight.

It was to the extent that a marital relationship with their neighbours became a treachery (לַעֲוֹן) against God (Ezra 10:2). As Boadt (1984) noted, this attitude was to attract widespread anti-Semitic reactions and prejudices against the Jews. A little more than two hundred years after the Ezra-Nehemiah reforms as recorded by the Priestly redactors, a new group of redactors arose with the specific objective of producing a textual response to the situation that confronted the Jews. Their concern was to create an inter-faith dialogue through exploring the possible salvific gains of inter-faith marriage.

The product of their frame of thought is the book of Esther. Boadt (1984) places the book of Esther in the list of Old Testament books which, according to him, were the outcome of the situation of the Jewish "Faith confronting new challenges. Also included in this list are the canonical book of Ruth and the apocryphal books of Judith and Tobith noted particularly for espousing deep intimate inter-faith relationship. Thus the book of Esther presents a poser to the theological position of the Old Testament which reaches a climax with the Priestly redaction work that stipulated a stringently exclusivist Jewish society. In doing so, however, the redactors of Esther seek to show that redaction is not a once-for-all finished exercise, but rather a continuous effort to adapt the demands of faith to the current challenges of society, for the ultimate survival of mankind.

In this paper, we shall explore the inter-faith dialogue advocated in the book of Esther through the inter-faith marriage and the inclusive religious posture proposed. We shall see that although this posture seems to run counter to the redaction work of the Old Testament which reached a climax with the Chronicles-Ezra- Nehemiah corpus of the Priestly redactors, yet, it became very vital for the deliverance of the Jewish race from total annihilation in the period of anti-Semitic prejudices generated by the religious restrictions of the preceding period.

Redaction Criticism

Redaction criticism is one of the historical-critical approaches to the study of the Old Testament. According to Bergant (1985); "Redaction Criticism is devoted to the study of how written sources were used by an editor or redactor and what this interpretative editing says about the theological interests of the redactor" (p.62). Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia further elucidates that:

Redaction criticism, also called *Redaktiongeschichte*, *Kompositionsgeschichte* or *Redaktionstheologie*, is a critical method for the study of biblical texts. Redaction criticism regards the author of the text as editor (redactor) of his or her source materials. Unlike its parent discipline, form criticism, redaction criticism does not look at the various parts of a narrative to discover the original genre; instead, it focuses on how the redactor has shaped the narrative to express his theological goals. (p. 1).

Redaction criticism presupposes that the author of a text has a starting material available to him which he freely uses, employing a vast array of editorial and compositional skills, to advance a theological position. This starting material could be written or oral. H. Gunkel, the founding father of form criticism had explored the oral forms that lie behind the written biblical texts. In a sense, it was form criticism that ignited the interest in what we know today as redaction criticism, which follows from the product of form criticism, and tries to see how the author of a text has used the material available to him to advance his point. Thus, redaction criticism asserts that the authors of the biblical texts are not just passive compilers of the existing traditions but active theologians using the existing traditions to craft new theological positions. Hence Bruce (1962) has this to say of Redaction Criticism:

The author of a biblical book may receive material handed down by tradition, but he did not reproduce it exactly as he received it.

He was not a mere transmitter: he was an author with his own life setting and point of view, and he shaped his material accordingly. The study of his own contribution to his work is the business of redaction criticism. (p. 142).

Redaction Criticism began in Germany in the early 1700's, with Hermann Reimarus who was a Professor of Oriental Languages in Hamburg. Originally, redaction criticism was restricted to the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), but it has been applied to other areas of Scripture. According to Perrin (1969), quoted in Erickson (1999);

The prime requisite for redaction criticism is the ability to trace the form and content of material used by the author concerned, or in some way, to determine the nature and extent of his activity in collecting, and creating, as well as in arranging, editing and composing. (p. 99).

The term, "Redaction Criticism" (*Redaktionsgeschichte*) was formulated by W. Marxen to denote the method whereby a researcher investigates how an editor or author expresses his (or her) theological outlook by means of the arrangement and editing of pre-existing traditional material. Traditional material is literally that which is handed onto the author, his source, in whatever form these may have taken. These sources could include oral and written materials, or in the case of the gospels where redaction criticism was first applied, the source could be a complete gospel.

The floodgate for the Old Testament application of redaction critical thought was first opened in 1753 by Jean Astruc, a French physician who published the theory that Moses had composed Genesis from two main ancient *memoires* and a number of other shorter documents. The clue to the identification of the *memoires*, according to him, was the use of the divine names; one employed אֱלֹהִים (God) and the other employed יהוה (Yahweh). Following in the trail, Alexander Gedds, a Scottish Roman Catholic Priest, pursued Astruc's identification of several *memoires* and developed, between 1792 and 1800 the fragmentary theory in which he stated that the Pentateuch was composed by an unknown redactor from a number of fragments which had originated in two different circles, one Elohist, the other Yahwist.

It was Julius Wellhausen who from 1876 to 1884 set out what is commonly known today as the four document theory of Old Testament sources, summed up as J.E.P.D. (J for the Yahwist source, E for the Elohist source, P for the Priestly source and D for the Deuteronomists). Of the four sources, two are the main source materials; namely J and E, and the other two, P and D are redactors with different theological slants. The D redactors are responsible for what we refer to as the Deuteronomistic history which spans from the Book of Joshua through 1st and 2nd Kings, although this strand of redactors further edited some of the prophetic books during the exilic period. Essentially, the D strand of redactors are concerned with the unique theocentric nature of Israelite history and commended the leaders who recognized, upheld and promoted this uniqueness, while condemning leaders who tended to play down this uniqueness. The P redactors took up the materials available and with them crafted a historical viewpoint that was not restricted to Israel but spread to the entire humanity. Thus, while the main bulk of the work of the P redactors is the Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah corpus, this strand of redactors also produced the creation narrative which immediately projected the jurisdiction of God beyond Israel to the entire humanity.

Book of Esther

Two versions of the book of Esther are preserved for us. The first is the Hebrew version which is adopted without any alteration in the canon of the Old Testament. The second version is found in the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament). This Septuagint version contains six apocryphal sections added, possibly, by a later redactor of the Hebrew version. Menezes (2003) includes the book of Esther in the group or subdivision which he calls "Theological Midrashim". According to him:

Under this new subdivision of the literature of the Old Testament, modern scholars include the Books of Esther, Ruth, Jonah, Tobith and Judith. One could well also include the Second Book of Maccabees. The word Midrashim could be translated as theological novels. (p. 101).

The Midrashim are actually a collection of books appreciated more for delightful reading and moral lessons than for historical or theological values. Fischer (1986) classifies the book of Esther, together with four other Old Testament books in the group "Called Megilloth ("Scrolls") by the Jews". (p. 5). He asserts that:

They are gathered together for convenience, since the Jews read them on feast days in the synagogue. The tradition, however, is not constant and unanimous, and it is certainly not as old as the books. The Book of Esther contains the story that is the basis for the celebration of the feast of Purim. (p. 5).

The contention over the historicity of the book of Esther remains a nagging one till today. Prolonged hesitation greeted the acceptance of the book in the Hebrew canon, particularly because neither אֱלֹהִים (God) nor יהוה (Yahweh) is mentioned in the book. Nevertheless, the book was eventually accepted in the Hebrew canon and the Jews have implicit confidence in its historicity. If nothing else, it is the only book of the Hebrew canon and the Old Testament Canon that gives the historical basis for the Jewish feast of Purim. On the authorship of the book, Wright (1962) says that some Jews regard Mordecai as the author and the references in 9:20, 32, suggest this. Much of the contents may have been inserted in the annals of the Kings, as mentioned in 10:2 and perhaps 6:1 and this would account for the omission of the name of God, although the reference to the fasting for Esther in 4:16 certainly implies prayer, and the doctrine of providence is stated in 4:14.

The book of Esther contains a vivid description of the Persian customs, indicating that the author is faithful to the facts as far as a characterization of the era in description is concerned. This situation has often weakened the argument of those who attempt to discredit the book of Esther on grounds of lack of factual historicity.

Schmidt (2008) attempts to mirror this dilemma by saying that the story certainly has a great deal of Persian atmosphere and a good many Persian names; (1:10, 14, 9:7 ff), but no concrete historical background can be discovered that corresponds to the story. The course of events and the Jewish triumph over their enemies are not historical and therefore the book of Esther has also been called a “historical novel”. The general situation however, is indeed historical: Judaism at this time spread throughout the world, met with rejection and even persecution (cf. Dan. 3ff) because of its alien character (3:8).

While the setting of the book of Esther is around the period of the reign of Xerxes, 485 – 465BC, the date of the composition of the book is about the second half of the 2nd century BC. The situation in the book of Esther, with the complex admixture of fact and fiction, is one which scholars are very conversant with. It is a situation in which a redactor takes up some factual material background and fictitiously crafts a theological position out of it. This is perhaps why the book of Esther is a juicy material for redaction critical analysis. This analysis will reveal the background source material for the book.

Source Material for the Book of Esther

The first evidence that the source material from which the book of Esther was composed is foreign to the Jewish environment and background is in the names chosen for the supposedly Jewish hero and heroine, Mordecai and Esther, respectively. These names have no bearing with the Jewish setting; neither do they have any Jewish etymological connotation. Schmidt (2008) suggests that Mordecai possibly means “Worshipper of Marduk”, and Esther could mean “Persian Star, cf Ishtar”. In fact, the strong relation of the two key names in the plot to well known deities in the region, strongly suggests that the setting of the original source material may have to do with a clash of the deities in the Ancient Near East. Hinson (1992) concurs with this suggestion, and asserts further that the names Vashti and Herman found in Esther are supposed to be Mashti and Humman of the Elamites.

This immediately takes the setting of the conflict to the realm of the deities, a situation very common in the Ancient Near Eastern literature, in which the nations (גוֹיִם) not only want to show their might over their neighbours, but also seek to assert the supremacy of their deities over those of their neighbours. It is therefore not surprising that the redaction commentator on the book of Esther begins the Septuagint version of the book with a dream by Mordecai, in which, according to Fischer (1986) two great dragons came on, both poised for combat. They uttered a mighty cry, and at their cry, every nation prepared for war, to fight against the race of the just. It was a dark and gloomy day. Tribulations and distress, evil and great confusion lay upon the earth. The whole race of the just were dismayed with fear of the evils to come upon them.

This apocryphal synopsis to the Septuagint book of Esther is particularly significant for the fact that it situates the book under the era of Jewish apocalyptic writing, the era in which Judaism was facing persecution around the world, particularly from the hostile rulers. This clearly justifies the historical setting of the Esther story. Hinson (1992) asserts that the original source material from which the book of Esther was composed was a Babylonian myth about a clash of deities, which often featured in their cult festivities. According to him some believe that it is based on a pagan tradition and cult, perhaps originally celebrating a victory of the Babylonians over the Elamites.

It has been suggested that the leading characters in the story are really the gods of these two people, and that their names provide evidence of this.

Redaction Critical Issues in the Book of Esther

The use to which the redactor puts his source material is evident in the plot. First, a setting is created of two irreconcilable enemies **מֹרְדֵכַי בֶּן יָאִיר בֶּן שִׁמְעִי בֶן קִישׁ יְמִינִי** (Mordecai, Son of Jair, Son of Shimei, Son of Kish, man of Benjamin 2:5), on one hand, and **הָמָן בֶּן־חַמְדַּתָּה אַגַּגִּי** (Haman, Son of Hammedatha, the Agagite 3:1) on the other hand. The setting is artfully retrojected to the monarchical narratives. Here the perennial aggression between the house of Saul, the first king of Israel (**מֶלֶךְ לְיִשְׂרָאֵל**) and the Amalekites, whose King during Saul's reign was Agag, is mirrored. The hostility culminated in Saul leading the entire nation of Israel to go and wipe out the entire nation of Amalek, ostensibly on the instruction of God through his prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 15).

Saul according to the narrative had spared Agag, king of Amalek, a development which angered Samuel the prophet; where upon, the prophet took a sword and killed Agag the king. Here in the Esther plot, it is a descendant of this Agag that becomes the vexed enemy of the Jews, and it is on Mordecai the descendant of Saul that the responsibility falls to devise the plot to deliver the Jewish nation from this threat of national extermination. In the monarchical narrative, God rejected Saul as King of Israel for the singular reason of his refusal to carry out the instruction of the total extermination of Amalek. The redactor in Esther takes the matter one step further to show the disastrous consequence of Saul's act in sparing Agag and or possibly his family.

The point must be made here that the distinction between the Hebrew and the Septuagint versions of Esther on grounds of canonicity is quite subtle. This is a peculiarity which perhaps only the book of Esther enjoys among all the Old Testament books. Both versions of the book have enjoyed a near equal prominence; such that scholars have often wondered which of them will rightly be adjudged the original text. Nowell, Craven and Dumm (1990) believe it is only a matter of assumption that the Hebrew Esther is taken as the original. This situation is perhaps created by the fact of the very short interval between the dates of the two versions. The Hebrew version is dated 125 BC, while the Septuagint version has been known since 114 BC. Another peculiarity which the book of Esther enjoys among Old Testament books (including the apocryphal books) is the fact that no fragment of Esther was found at Qumran. The Qumran scrolls have been used to authenticate the Old Testament books. Prior to the Qumran finds, the oldest Old Testament documents preserved were the Masoretic texts which are dated 11th century AD. The Qumran discoveries present to us fragments dated 200 BC and thus became useful for assessing the Masoretic texts. The absence of Esther in the Qumran finds leaves us without a firm resolution of the matter of the authenticity and originality of the Hebrew and Septuagint versions of Esther.

The redaction work in the book of Esther (Hebrew or Septuagint) adapts it to the common Old Testament thesis of assimilation. For instance, Moses, the Israelite law giver, was, by a cunning ploy assimilated as a prince in the palace courts of Egyptian monarchy. Joseph by a similar arrangement became the Prime Minister in Egypt. Daniel became a prominent officer in the government of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon and King Darius the Mede in the days of Israelite captivity (**שְׁיִבָה**). Nehemiah became the cupbearer to the Persian King, Cyrus. These privileged positions were used to promote the interest and well being of the Israelites at a time of persecution, and therefore whatever means was used to ascend to such a position became approved by **יְהוָה** (Yahweh) .

Here again, the common theme of Hebrew wisdom literature, which is steadfastness of faith in the face of severe persecution is re-enacted. In the case of the book of Esther, the heroine, Esther, is assimilated into the palace courts of the king of Persia through the doorway of inter-faith marriage, a theme which makes the book of Esther quite unpopular, and a position that brings the redaction work in the book in sharp contrast to the redaction work of the Old Testament which reaches a climax with the prohibition of inter-faith marriage in Ezra- Nehemiah, the height of the work of the Priestly redactors.

The critical point of conflict between Haman and Mordecai in the Esther plot is the point of bowing (**עָרַב**) and worship (**שָׁחָה**). In the setting, Haman had just been promote (**גָּדַל**), from the adjective **גָּדוֹל** , meaning great. The Hiphil causative verb form, (**הִגְדִּיל**) is usually translated magnified, that is made great, lifted). So, it follows that all should bow down to him and worship him.

וְכָל־עַבְדֵי־יְהוָה־אֲשֶׁר־בְּשַׁעֲדָהֶם־לְחַכֵּר יַעֲמִישׁוּ־תַרְיָם־לְהַמְּן־כִּי־כָל־צָנְהִילוּ־הֵמָּלָךְ
וְמֶרְדֵּכַי־לְאִיכָרֶעֱ וְלֹאֲשַׁחֲתֵהּ:

(And all the servants of the king who were at the king's gate bowed and worshipped Haman as the king had commanded for him, but Mordecai did not bow, and did not worship: Esther 3:2). Thus the setting reduces the point of conflict to be directly related to the observance of the Decalogue stipulation to bow to and worship no other God than יהוה (Yahweh). Those who attempt to discredit the book of Esther on the point of lack of religious value grossly lose sight of the fact that in the setting of the book, a man faced death, not only of himself and his family, but also of his entire race, and yet remained faithful to the tenets of the Decalogue.

The apocryphal redactive commentator endeavouring to give a theological interpretation to the plot, states in the 'Prayer of Mordecai' what he considers the theological value of Mordecai's act in refusing to bow to, and worship Haman at the gate. "You are Lord of all and there is no one who can resist you Lord. You know all things. You know, O Lord, that it was not out of insolence, or pride, or desire for fame that I acted thus in not bowing to the proud Haman. Gladly would I have kissed the sole of his feet for the salvation of Israel. But I acted as I did so as not to place the honour of man above that of God". (Fischer, 1986 p.99).

By this, the apocryphal redactor elevates Mordecai to the level of the well known Old Testament defenders of the Hebrew faith who were willing even to die for their convictions; the group to which Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego of the apocalyptic book of Daniel belong. Norwell, Craven and Dumm (1990) assert that 'Mordecai represents all the Jews who tried to maintain their religious and ethnic distinctiveness in a foreign environment (p. 577).

Inter-Faith Marriage in Esther and the Old Testament

There seems to be ambivalence over the issue of inter-faith marriage in the Old Testament. While this may be as a result of the strands of redactors that worked on the Old Testament text over different periods of the people's struggle for survival and national and religious independence, there is a lack of cohesive viewpoint among the Deuteronomic redactors that set out the Deuteronomistic history of Israel, whose works stretch from the Pentateuch to the monarchical period in 2 Kings while also reaching to the prophetic books. The Deuteronomic redactor seems to be advocating a society which is very closed indeed. Israel should sedulously avoid all contact with the surrounding nations. Israelites should carefully observe the practice of endogamy, i.e. to marry only within the Israelite community. He seems to be afraid that the surrounding nations might pollute Israel. They could be a subtle and invisible trap (מִקְשׁוֹ) for Israel (cf. Exod. 23:32 – 33; 34: 12; Deut. 7:16). But most astounding of all, even the Deuteronomic legislator has no problem if Israelite soldiers take pagan captive women as wives with full rights and duties (cf. Deut. 21:10 – 14). This goes contrary to what we find in the book of Exodus, in a text which forbids inter-marriage with the pagan nations and is normally attributed to the Deuteronomist.

The reason commonly given for forbidding inter-faith marriage, it must be noted, is religious and cultic, rather than social and political. Thus, in Exodus 34:15 – 16, (also Numbers – 25), it is aptly stated;

You shall not make a covenant (תִּפְּרָו) with the inhabitants of the land, for when they prostitute (זָנְוּ) Qal active) themselves to their gods and sacrifice to their gods, someone among them will invite you, and you will eat of the sacrifice. And you will not take wives from among their daughters for your sons, and their daughters who prostitute (זָנְוּ) Qal active) themselves to their gods will make your sons also prostitute (זָנְוּ) Hiphil, causative) themselves to their gods. (Exodus 34:15 – 16).

The Deuteronomic redactors, interpreting the monarchy of Israel posthumously attribute the collapse of the monarchy to the unfaithfulness of the people to the cult and covenant of יהוה, and hold exogamy singularly responsible for this turning away from the faith. Thus, reference is often made to Solomon, reputed as reaching the peak of wisdom, but was destroyed by his foreign wives. (1 Kings 11: 1f)

For when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart (לָבָב) after other gods, and his heart (לָבָב) was not wholly true to the Lord (יהוה) his God, as was the heart (לָבָב) of David his father (1 Kings 11: 4).

In this rather doctrinal indictment of Solomon over the issue of exogamy, David is presented here as a perfect role model. He became the yardstick for measurement of kingship in Israel, and the subsequent kings of Israel were assessed by that standard, by the judgment of the Deuteronomic redactor. But even David has also married foreign wives of different nationalities and faiths, or in any case, outside the cult of יהוה (Yahweh).

And sons (בָּנָיו) were born to David at Hebron; and his first born was Amnon, of Ahinoam of Jezreel, and his second, Chileab, of Abigail the widow of Nabal of Carmel; and the third, Absalom the son of Maacah the daughter of Talmai King of Geshur, and the fourth, Adonijah, the son of Haggita; and the fifth, Shephatiah, the son of Abitai, and the sixth, Ithream of Eglah, David's wife. (2 Samuel 3:2, RSV).

So, quite evidently, David married foreign wives, and it is rather surprising that the Deuteronomic redactors found no problem with it, suggesting that the redactors were content to treat each case of exogamy or inter-faith marriage on its own merit. This would imply that even the Deuteronomic redactors would endorse exogamy (marriage outside one's ethnic group) if in the end it serves a constructive end, such as in the book of Esther in which the inter-ethnic marriage became the instrument that gave a Jewish lady privileged access into the palace courts of the king, leading to the saving of the entire race of the Jews from sudden total destruction.

Kizhakkeyil (2007) explores further the use to which personalities in Israel employed inter-faith marriage, to the ultimate benefit of the nation. According to him, through marriage alliance, Solomon had established peace (שָׁלוֹם) with most of his neighbouring countries and sometimes even extended the boundaries of his kingdom. But those very marriage alliances that Solomon made with his pagan neighbours made him vulnerable to their cultic influence.

This fact of the use of inter-faith marriage in Israel to achieve political and economic purposes is further confirmed by Heaton (1968), in his comment concerning Omri, King of Israel. Omri rescued his country from civil anarchy and put an end to half a century of ruinous conflict with Judah. He revived valuable trade relations with Phoenicia and sealed the alliance by the fateful marriage of his son Ahab to Jezebel of the Phoenician royal house.

So, it can be stated by way of sketch that though the Old Testament redactors handed down explicit legislation against inter-faith marriage, some room was left to explore the gains of the process and those who explored such avenues to the benefit of the nation and the people were commended, albeit tacitly.

The Redactive Challenge of the Book of Esther

Julius Wellhausen's four-document source criticism of the Old Testament has provided us a lasting framework for understanding the nature of composition of the Old Testament books. Of the four document sources, two, the J (Yahwist source) and the E (Elohist source) are original compositions, while the D (Deuteronomist source) and the P (Priestly source) are redactors. The Deuteronomists provide what we have come to know as the Deuteronomic history, concerned with the faith and nationhood of Israel, culminating in the post-monarchical commentaries on the failure of Israel as a people to abide by the cult and covenant (יְהוָה יִהְיֶה of Yahewh יְהוָה). The Priestly redaction took their post-exilic work back to Genesis to create not just a history of Israel but the origin of mankind on earth. Their major work, the Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah corpus reaches a climax in the post-exilic sanitization of the Jewish community with severe prohibition of inter-faith marriage, as a measure aimed at preserving the pure Jewish blood. That is understandable at such a critical time.

Two centuries after, the closed society advocated by the Priestly redactors generate anti-Semitic prejudices against the Jews, culminating in racial hatred and threat for total extermination of the Jewish race. A new set of redactors arise and swiftly respond to the challenge of the times by producing Ruth and Esther which advocate an open, inclusive Jewish religion and society, exploring the gains of inter-faith marriage for the preservation of the Jewish race.

The redaction in the book of Esther clearly defies what appears to be a consensus of the Old Testament as far as inter-faith marriage is concerned. And this thus presents a challenge to the entire Old Testament redaction. Beyond that, the book of Esther presents a poser to redaction criticism. It presents redaction not as a thing to be given a once-for-all-finished finite perspective, but as a dynamic phenomenon that is on-going, constantly responding to changing times. This perspective suits our world today, in the face of escalating levels of religiously motivated terrorism and armed conflicts, traceable to the contents of the prevalent religious sacred writings. Sacred writings and their accompanying interpretative teachings generate bad blood and fuel terrorist attacks.

The notion here is that sacred writings, as far as redaction criticism is concerned, are, and remain the products of human (inspired) ingenuity and are always subject to human (inspired) redaction.

Since it has been established that it is the sacred writings that shape the religious cultures of people which determine how they relate to other people, it is only wise to apply the tenets of redaction criticism to update the sacred writings that do not make for peace and mutual coexistence of the numerous religions in our pluralistic world.

Thus we see the overriding influence which scholars have in deciding not just the contents of the sacred books and their accompanying interpretative manuals, but also in deciding which injunctions should be emphasized over the others. It is this overriding influence of the Esther redaction concern that we demand that religious scholars invoke and use to the ultimate benefit of the society by emphasizing those injunctions that make for greater love, peace and mutual acceptance of one another, over and above the injunctions that create war, terrorism and armed conflicts.

Conclusion

The book of Esther holds a vital key to the resolution of the threatening wave of religiously motivated terrorism and armed conflicts in our world today. The redaction in the book of Esther, though not in accord with the existing religious norm and consensus of the day, takes a bold challenge to confront and diffuse the threat of total annihilation that faced the Jewish society. It did that by strongly advocating an open religious society for the Jews and breaking the yoke of exclusivism that generated the anti-Semitic prejudices in the first instance. By advocating inter-faith marriage in the context of inter-faith dialogue, the redactors of the book of Esther present to us in the 21st century world the one instrument by which the universal aspiration of assimilation of all humanity into one whole peaceful family can be achieved, as a means of ending the ceaseless cycles of religious conflicts and religious-induced terrorism.

The challenge of redaction as an on-going open process must be embraced by our generation, to look back at our documents of faith and be inspired afresh in such directions that will reproduce and update sacred writings or new interpretations on them that would make for peace and mutual interrelationship of the various religions and people.

References

- Bergant, D. (1985). *Introduction to the Bible*. Mumbai: St Paul's.
- Boadt, L. (1984). *Reading the Old Testament*. New York: Paulist.
- Bruce, F.F. (1962). *Redaction criticism*. In J. D. Douglas (Ed). *New Bible dictionary*. England. Intervarsity.
- Erickson, M.J. (1999). *Christian theology*. Michigan: Baker Books.
- Fischer, J.A. (1986). *Song of songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther*. Mumbai: St Paul's.
- Heatons, E.W. (1968). *The Hebrews kingdom*. Oxford: Oxford University.
- Hinson, D.F. (1992). *The books of the Old Testament*. London: SPCK.
- Kizhakkeyil, S. (2009). *The Pentateuch: An exegetical commentary*. Mumbai: St Paul's.
- Menezes, R.D. (2003). *The Old Testament in our times*. Mumbai: St Paul's.
- Menezes, R.D. (2009a). *Portrait of ancient Israel: Collected essays*. Mumbai: St. Paul's.
- Menezes, R.D. (2009b). *The global vision of the Hebrew Bible*. Mumbai: St Paul's.
- Norwell, I. Craven, T.Z. & Dumm, D. (1990). Tobith, Judith, Esther. In R. E. Brown et al (Ed). *The new Jerome commentary*. Mumbai: St Paul's.
- Schmidt, W.H. (2008). *Old Testament introduction*. Mumbai: St Paul's.