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Tradition of reform as reform of tradition: some considerations on the relation of religion and reform

ABSTRACT

*This article begins by questioning the commonly held assumption that tradition is fixed and does not change over time. Reform, which is all about introducing change and bringing newness, must be opposed to tradition. In light of recent scholarly discussion, this article suggests that tradition is a dynamic concept. As traditions undergo constant revision and amendment, the article takes a renewed look at the relationship between reform and tradition. The concept “reform” is understood as a **means** of change with recourse to the past. Reform, it is argued, while currently more of a highly metaphorical and no less normative concept, proves to be a structural moment of tradition insofar as reform is related to tradition and tradition to reform. This insight is then combined with a reflection on the concept of “invention” with regard to tradition. It is argued that invention is an inherent moment in the structure of tradition. To demonstrate the relationship between reform and tradition, three short case studies are developed, in which the recourse to traditions in reforms turns out to be an innovation and an invention of tradition. These three examples are the Josianic reform in 2 Kings 22-23, Ezra’s reading of the Torah in Nehemiah 8, and the renewal of YHWH worship in Samaria in 2 Kings 17.*

1. INTRODUCTION

It is one of the many unquestioned views of modernity that “reform” and “tradition” are

mutually exclusive. The seduction of teleological concepts is constantly lurking in the feuilleton, at the regulars' table and on the market of simple solutions. Reform creates something new – hence discontinuity –, while tradition preserves what was already there – the traditional. Traditionalists hold back – in every respect. Reform is progress, tradition is regression. Religion is viewed as being on the side of tradition and in need of reform, which is imposed on it from within or sometimes from without. Accordingly, reform is elevated to a word of salvation (“Heilswort des Politischen”, Waschke 2009a:1), while tradition is branded a no-go area – old school. This occidental figure of thought stands firm, even though it has been broken many times over (Schmidt 2001) and its ambivalences are obvious. In a deeper discussion of both concepts, this view proves to be poorly founded. Not only are innovation and tradition inextricably linked, but reform and tradition are also mutually dependent. This article will begin with a discussion of the concept of “reform” and its impact on religious studies. Following this, three case studies from the Hebrew Bible will elaborate on the general understanding of tradition and reform developed in the first section. Finally, a brief conclusion ends the article, which can be read in the context of further considerations about tradition by the author (Frevel 2015; Frevel 2020a:270, 280).¹

2. REFORM AND RELIGION – FORWARD DUO OR OPPONENTS?

In 1947, Karl Barth greatly popularised the medieval principle *ecclesia semper reformanda est* (Mahlmann 2010). Since then, it has largely become common knowledge in both Reformed Churches and the Catholic Church in the context of the Second Vatican Council: “The Church ... follows constantly the path of penance and renewal” (dogmatic constitution, *Lumen Gentium* 8). Since the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation at the latest, the connection between church and reformation has become commonplace. Even beyond Christianity, reform and religion often form a pair: Reform Judaism, Islamic reform, Orthodox reform, Zoroastrian Reform Society, church reform in the 21st century, Daoist reform in the 20th century, Reform Hinduism, and so on. Dare I say that reform and religion are apparently inseparable. Is this due to external conditions leading to necessary adaptations in time or is “reform” a *constitutive* part of religion as such? What is the relation between religion and reform?

1 I am grateful to Jordan Davis for improving my English. The considerations have benefited greatly from the discussions in the interdisciplinary consortium of the Käte Hamburger Kolleg (2017) “Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe” in Bochum 2008-2019.

In the past, scholars desired to discover the inconvertible in religion and – in relation to God – found it, for instance, in concepts of the immutability of God. Monotheisms, in particular, were falsely accused of having elevated sacral immutability to a central value and ideal: religions are traditional in the preservation of the essence. Nowadays, such static concepts have been challenged: “It is a mistake to presume any particular religion is a monolithic entity.” (Gifford 2010:397). Any essentialism in the understanding of religion can, at present, confidently be regarded as overcome. *Religion is not static*. Since religion and society are inseparably intertwined, it goes without saying that religions are constantly evolving.

Religion is a human, historical, social and cultural phenomenon. As such, religious ideas, practices, discourses, institutions, and social expressions are in constant change (Bochinger & Rüpke 2016:1).

Religions are subject to change and a basic metaphor for change is “reform”. Paradoxically, the literal meaning of *reformatio* stands in contrast to the contemporary understanding of the word “reform”. Taken literally, reform *forms* something and the direction is backwards. That is, it gives something or somebody a shape or state that it had before, hence the “re” in re-form. The original meaning, based on Latin *reformare*, is to *restore to its original form, to reconstitute or to recover*. Within the widely ramified discourses, *reform* was still closely connected with a return to the beginnings and sources, which the striking widespread *ad fontes* clearly indicates.

Few slogans have captured the essence of an era so perfectly as ‘Ad fontes!’ or, ‘Return to the sources!’ These words were much more than a trendy slogan in the fifteenth century: they were also a battle cry, a paradigm for genuine reform. *Ad fontes* became a mentality (Eire 2016:95).

Consequently, reform came to mean transformation, improvement, renewal, and change, starting with the Reformation in the 16th century, and it became a popular metaphor of *change* from the 18th century onwards. However, this change of meaning in the notion of “reform” reveals a remarkable feature in the reception of change. It is rarely evaluated equally and constantly by everybody concerned with it either positively or negatively. It is an antagonism in the reception, which results in counter-reforms.

While the word originally denoted the restoration of monasteries, it has currently penetrated the vocabulary in many ways, as it marks the “not yet” state of the contemporary, and the need for being adapted to

the present. Reform is a process, but regarding certain institutions, this process is somehow suspended or immobilised: reform pedagogy, Reform Judaism/Islam, or the German *Reformhaus* (a special kind of health food store). This already points to the normative aspect often associated with reform (see below). While it is not necessary to define “reform” in this context, it may help characterise the varying degree of reconnection to the notions of restoration, reform, and revolution (Waschke 2009a:1-2; Berlejung 2009:70):

change with reconnection to the/a tradition		
restitution	reconfiguration	abandonment
continuity	—————→	
restoration	reform	revolution

3. REFORM AS A CONCEPT IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES

As noted earlier with regard to religion, “reform” is connected strongly to *movements* of change in the development of religions. However, upon closer examination, it must be admitted that “reform” is everywhere in religion, but *reform* is more a catchword than a *concept* in religious studies. While thousands of articles have “reform” in their titles, not a single book is entitled “Reform in religions” or “Reform and religion”, and so on. This may be coincidental but can be corroborated by scrutinising some standard encyclopaedias of religious studies. Strikingly, there is no entry on “reform” in either Kocku von Stuckrad’s (2006) *The Brill dictionary of religion* (only reformation), or in the famous German handbook by Cancik *et al.* (1988) (where “reform” is not even listed in the index).² Apart from a few exceptions (Bori *et al.* 2007) and the insular attention from a Hebrew Bible perspective (Hoffmann 1980; Waschke 2009b), “reform” is not a topic discussed in comparative religious studies. Only theological encyclopaedias include not only comprehensive entries on “reformation”, but also some reflections on *reform*, for example, in the “Idea of reform”, in *Religion in past and present* (Köpf 2009) or the article “Reform” in the *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* (Baumgartner & Fuchs 1999).

One reason for this is the vagueness of the term, which is, without further specification, no more than a synonym for “change”. Any definition of “reform” usually comprises the keywords “action”, “change”, and

2 It is interesting to note that one can nevertheless find a reference arrow to an article “reform” in the systematic section (Zinser 1998), but this entry does not exist in the alphabetical part.

“improvement”. A person or structure is reformed by changing it, in order to make an improvement. Accordingly, the direction of change is implicitly assessed positively: it is an *improvement*. But, without a clear conception of how the situation *improved*, “reform” is at least a vague if not a meaningless term.

However, the history of religion is probably inconceivable without reform. It is an unbroken chain of criticism of the respective earlier, predominant, or foreign religions (Zinser 1998:310-311). Zinser further introduces the important differentiation between critique *in* religion and critique *of* religion. Both are essentially related to “reform” as a trigger of change. This brings us to the aspect of normativity in the concept of reform.

4. REFORM AS A NORMATIVE CONCEPT AND CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR

Traditional religion must change and adapt to modernity. Reform is a must and the attitude of assuming, in principle, a need for reform of religion has sometimes become a common “mission statement” particularly towards Islam in Western Europe in the 21st century (Tibi 2009). This is not the place to discuss the corresponding misinterpretations of religion and modern Islam, in particular. It seems nevertheless necessary to contradict the antagonism of text and reform, and to underline that the concept of “reform”, even in Islam, can be approached in a more differentiated fashion, starting with aspects of reform in the Qur’an itself (Haddad 2020; Hamid 2007; Ramadan 2009, among others). However, what is particularly clear from the alluded attitude in modern discussions is that the concept of “reform” has obvious normative implications.

Reform is viewed as a requirement to adapt to modernity; reform becomes a cipher for contemporary relevance. This is especially true for religions that need to “reform”. This radically calls their traditions into question.

This aspect of normativity is closely linked to the fact that reform – in contrast to its literal meaning (see above) – is a metaphorical concept. Reform is thus related to conceptual metaphors that indicate change. The target domain is adaptability and often enough “modern-ness”. Reform is “viability”, it is “modern”, and it is “rethinking”. It is easy to observe that reform is used almost as a generic metaphor to build some effective conceptual metaphors that are employed in the argument:

REFORM IS A STRUGGLE

REFORM IS A WAY OF LIVING
 REFORM IS A CONDITION AND A STATE
 REFORM IS A PEACEFUL AVENUE
 REFORM IS A REMEDY

In these metaphors, reform is always directed towards the positive, always looking forward; it is a kind of evangelism for a better, peaceful future. The source domains of these metaphors are *motion* and *change*. Given this, speaking of religious reform becomes even more normative. This applies to Islam, Judaism, and Christianity in its *ecclesia semper reformanda est*, which is also a metaphor. The need for adaptation and adjustment is expressed in using the conceptual metaphors related to reform. That said, the aspect of innovation becomes strongly connected to reform. In contrast to restoration, reform is not associated with the orientation towards past forms of thought and design, or to their restoration. Reform does not describe recourse. Rather, and more precisely, it describes creative innovation (Baumgartner & Fuchs 1999:927).

5. INNOVATION AS RENOVATION

The historical dynamics of religion is the innovation of tradition, or as Robinson Waldman and Baum (1992):241 aptly put it, by focusing on prophets as agents of change: "Innovation as renovation." Change in religion is not only triggered by the needs of adaptation, assimilation, or accommodation; it is rather inherent, due to the dynamics of recursivity. In contrast to the common understanding, tradition is not a static, unchangeable block; rather, it is formed by adaptive application, and is thus dynamic. "Religious traditions are invented and re-invented or they might be imperceptibly transformed, violently reformed or emphatically defended and petrified." (Bochinger & Rüpke 2016:2) Paradoxically, the petrification of a tradition leads not to its solidification, but to its disappearance. Breaks in tradition are usually triggers of transformation rather than stoppers. In sum, the adaptation and change of the *traditum* determines the *tradere*.

Sociologically speaking, lived traditions are culturally necessary as symbolic reproductions of continuity and embedding (Auerochs 2001:24). This is the reason for the closeness that Wiedenhofer (2006:376; 2004:230) (with recourse to Maurice Halbwachs, Jan and Aleida Assmann) emphasises between the meta-concept of tradition and "concepts of "memory", "commemoration" or "remembrance". A major function of tradition is the "transmission of the collective memory" (Wiedenhofer 2006:391). Because of the culturally fundamental validity of recursivity, Auerochs (2001:24) even identifies tradition as an anthropological universal. Adorno's (1977:315,

“Das absolut Traditionslose ist naiv”) dictum that the absolutely traditionless is naïve points in a similar direction. Thus, the concept of “tradition” has certain merits to describe the strategies of continuity and their relation to change. More recent discussions on the breaches of traditions (Jaklitsch 2020) evince that these are rather a somewhat paradoxical trigger of continuity than the stopper of tradition. With regard to the two concepts of tradition and cultural memory, this advises against putting the two concepts in sharp contrast to each other, even if the dynamic aspect of forgetting may be stronger in the concept of memory, as emphasised by Assmann (2006:52-53).

Following Herder, scripturality is often conceived to have been a game changer with regard to the transmission of tradition, “*Textpflege*” and “*Sinnpflege*” (Assmann) step apart, as do “text” and “interpretation”. However, facing the more recent discussion on transmission, textual stability, and the implicit interpretation in transmission processes, this holds less water than usually expected (see, for example, Zahn 2020). Of course, even texts themselves are not static; although the words may not change, they become dynamic through the process of interpretation and re-interpretation (within and beyond texts). It is the paradox of tradition, that it is a concept that expresses *continuity* and *stability*, on the one hand, and that it simultaneously forms the basis for *discontinuity* and *change* related to it, on the other.

With Shils (1981:44-45) and many others, it should be emphasised that traditions bridge discontinuity by a continuous process of change. In the paired process of handing down and taking up, traditions undergo constant revision and amendment. Usually, the addition or renewal is not marked as new or as an addition, but rather as being age-old and “ever since” one can remember. Hence, it is a common misunderstanding of tradition that it stands in opposition to progress, innovation and, most pointedly, modernity.

The relation of modernity is much more complex than it can be addressed in this article. However, that Eisenstadt (2006:6), who was dissatisfied with the dichotomous view of tradition and modernity, replaced the term “post-traditional” with his understanding of multiple modernities indicates that, even in modernity, there is a “continual reconstruction of tradition”. The notion of post-traditional and “reflexive modernity” introduced strongly by Giddens (1994) gives the impression that traditional societies are not reflexive, and that modernity and tradition stand in diametrical opposition to each other. It would be worthwhile to examine the connection between axially and the reflexivity of tradition in greater detail, but this is only hinted at, in this instance.

Questioning the *traditional*, however, is not synonymous with the absence of tradition. To challenge the notion of “post” regarding tradition does not mean that traditions remain unchanged. A decisive point is that there are not only processes of de-traditionalisation in modernity, but also formations of new traditions. Tradition keeps on embedding the modern subject not by simply providing its identity, but by relating it to its cultural understanding in the course of time. This becomes clear when one muses on the metaphors used to frame the understanding of tradition. Some of the most prominent are *textus*, *network*, or *cluster*, to mention a few. These metaphoric expressions often employ frozen everyday metaphors as source domains, such as point at a certain connectedness, relatedness, or embedding. By this, they point at the recursive connectedness of traditions. Traditions are a means of embedding. Giddens even admits that reflexive modernity is not non-traditional, when he accepts that traditions do not disappear in processes of de-traditionalisation. By contrast, traditions sometimes blossom in a new way; they are “redressed” rather than disposed, they become, according to Shils (1971:147), “creative and innovative”. Giddens (1990:38) characterises this same process negatively, by suggesting that such re-dressings were “sham clothing”, in that it transforms the inherent significance of tradition to an “as if”, that was (fraudulently) granted significance, in order to justify the tradition. Mellor (1993:144) rightly criticised Giddens’ criticism of “sham clothing” as overstressing the difference between modern and pre-modern religious traditions. Many have reinforced the idea that the reflexivity of traditions is not limited to modern traditions (Kockel 2007), nor is questioning the persuasiveness of traditions reserved for the modern age. There are many examples such as the reliability of Herodotus questioning the role of ancient gods in myth, or of the foundation myth of Rome, and so on. By contrast, contesting traditions is the basic means to employ the demarcative function of traditions from the outside.

It is not, then, that traditions are invented and the history of their invention is suppressed and discovered later by historians. Rather, people accept traditions as legitimate because historical conditions have changed in some decisive manner; and tradition, understood in our strong sense, papers over the change (Baumgarten & Rustow 2011:210).

The role of reflexive reasoning has changed, but modern globalised societies are by no means non-traditional in their reflections. The disenchantment of the world becomes itself a mythic tradition, if it is meant as dissolving any traditions. If traditions are understood to hold a connection to the past and avoid fragility via bridging the discontinuity

of history, then there are naturally traditions in modernity. Traditions are not blockades of development, but rather triggers of progression; they *are* innovative (Frevel 2015).

6. INVENTED TRADITION AS INNOVATION

The above argument clearly indicates that “tradition” and “innovation” are by no means exclusive concepts. By contrast, there is no tradition without innovation and no innovation without tradition. Starting from this basic insight, it seems exciting to ask where actual or stylised traditions motivate, trigger, or even justify change. The most interesting cases are those of invented traditions. Traditions often claim to be old, even if they are fairly recent or even invented. A striking example from my field is the decision of the Jewish community on the canon at the Council of Jamnia at the end of the 1st century. In 1871, Heinrich Graetz first proposed the narrative that, in Jamnia, the Jews finalised and formally decided upon the biblical canon; it was then re-narrated into a continuous tradition in the 20th century, where this narrative was exposed as a construction (Stemberger 1988).

In the introduction to their anthology *The invention of tradition*, Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983:1-14) aptly described the phenomenon of innovations that are introduced and masked as age-old traditions. Since then, the influential concept has been widely borrowed by other authors, even in religious studies (Lewis 2007; Cox *et al.* 2011; Palmisano & Pannofino 2017), and transferred from early modernity – where Hobsbawm located the most productive phase in the history of invented traditions (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983:263) – to antiquity (for example, Boschung *et al.* 2015:1; Baumgarten & Rustow 2011:210; Ebach & Leuenberger 2019:V). This is a significant extension, since it already indicates that, beyond the preserving, the inventive could be a structural moment of tradition. To give only a few examples: In a 1999 conference, Karel van der Toorn and Rainer Albertz marked the biblical Exodus tradition as a particular case of invention and re-invention of tradition (Henten & Houtepen 2001). I applied the fruitful concept most recently to the so-called “sin of Jeroboam” in the evaluation of kings (Frevel 2018b:303, 308), to the special position of the Levites in the wilderness (Frevel 2020b:146), and to the Aaronide blessing in the book of Numbers (Frevel 2016:132-133). In this last example, a small portion of text is authorised by a particular historicisation; only the Aaronide priests are legitimised to apply the benediction to the people. The blessing is established as an age-old tradition dating back to the wilderness.

The central thesis of Hobsbawm and Ranger has been widely accepted, and, according to critics, almost axiomatically. Only some have criticised the approach, mostly because they understand tradition as invariance. However, pointing at the mutability of traditions and the chain of transmission, which lacks an origin in a fixed beginning, does not exclude traditions to be employed as artifacts or fictional narratives. It is simply not true that

the historical study of tradition is a potent reminder that history is essentially not only about dynamics of change but also equally about patterns of continuity (Beiner 2010:1).

The opposite seems to be the case, as emphasised in most of the research in tradition-building. The underlying assumption that the understanding of tradition in modernity differs *in principle* from the function of tradition in the pre-modern era is a wrong preconception of tradition. As noted earlier, processes of de-traditionalisation and re-traditionalisation are not mutually exclusive.

The “invention of tradition” does not challenge the function of *tradition*. Rather, it challenges the historicity of charter myths. Authenticity and originality are not so much characteristics of tradition, if its function is related to the building of collective identity rather than to the condensed narrative storage of the past. Likewise, invented tradition should not necessarily be understood to be an illegitimate replacement of “real” tradition via a false claim to authenticity. Finally, that traditions become invented (or inventions tradition) is *not* an indicator that the importance of tradition is waning. The opposite is the case. It is mistaken to evaluate the invention of tradition necessarily to aim at “debunking and unmasking ‘tradition’” (Kirk 2018:229). On closer inspection, “invented traditions” turn out to be neither completely new, nor completely different, nor completely devoid of recursivity to the traditional. A common misunderstanding of the concept is that the invention of tradition is a counter-concept to the formation of tradition. While “real” tradition is authentic, continual, and a true reflection, invention is spurious, unveracious, and a pale pretence. The bias must be questioned about the general understanding of tradition. Both the “invented” and the “inherited” tradition are traditions. They do not differ in principle, as becomes clear in Hobsbawm’s definition of invented traditions:

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the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983:1).

The only difference of invented traditions to tradition is the qualification of being fabricated rather than grown or inherited. However, when one considers that inherited traditions cannot be traced back to a fixed historical point of origin, this distinction becomes less clear-cut. To put it differently, every tradition has an inherent moment of the inventive. The fiction of perfect originality and authenticity is just as misguided as the tracing back to a single historical starting point.

This can be observed in many of the biblical traditions such as, for instance, the weekly Sabbath, the Pesach festival, or circumcision, which cannot be traced to an exact point in history. Rather, they are simply connected to events in the textual world, such as Abraham, the Exodus, or the wilderness journey. Similarly, both forms of tradition are connected with each other in that both are principally legitimacy and implicitly normative. While Hobsbawm and Ranger focused mostly on lived traditions, I would like to apply the concept of “invented traditions” to literary traditions, particularly foundational narratives and charter myths. However, this would need more discussion beyond the three examples given below.

The strategy of making traditions continuous, even in times of disruption, is the usual way of preservation and the disclosure of values, identity, and belonging. Renewal is often part of the tradition itself and it is often fictitious in historical respect. It does not matter much whether the origin of a transmitted tradition is historical or fictitious if its transmission reinforces social cohesion. I will now delve from the level of concepts and systematics into case studies from a particular field, and introduce three examples, in which an alleged or actual age-old tradition is employed to renew the understanding of traditional religion. The three examples of a reform have strong similarities and differences.

6.1 Staging a religious reform under King Josiah (2 Kgs 22-23)

In 622 BCE, during a time of hardship (the Assyrians expanded to the West and made Judah a vassal of the great king of Assur), the biblical account reports that, in his 18th year, King Josiah demanded a renovation of the temple in Jerusalem, directed by the priest Hilkiah (2 Kgs 23:3-4). The care for sanctuaries was one of the fundamental duties of kings in the ancient Near East (Pietsch 2013:61-63, 73). Strikingly, it is not the client who provides funding for the project, but the priest Hilkiah is commanded to release money brought to the temple *by the people*. The rhetorical

emphasis on the participation of the people is a first textual signal that there is more than simply a building report in 2 Kings 22-23. Whether there was a temple property independent of the state budget is open to discussion. The financial background of common levies and taxes in the temple building in Jerusalem (in contrast to the large Babylonian temples) in the 7th century remains dubious, especially since, unusually, the title of high priest from the Persian period (Josh. 20:6; Neh. 3:1; Hag. 2:2; Zech. 3:1, and others) is used for Hilkiah. Be that as it may, a cultic official is obviously engaged with the renovation. He is said to be the administrator of the money paid in by the people. On the one hand, the note is related to 2 Kings 12:11-13 and emphasises the constant renovation of the temple that was fully agreed upon (Davis 2019:60-66); on the other hand, involving the people is a common feature, at least in Old Testament temple-building and renovation (Berlejung 1996:158-159). The latter intends to repair the breaches of the house (לחזוק בדרך הבית).

[T]he constant renovation of temples was not simply a consequence of the perishability of building materials but also a matter of paying respect to the gods (Dubovský 2015:11).

These few indications should already show that the textual rhetoric in 2 Kings 22 is not exhausted in giving a report that is true to reality. This becomes more evident in the finding of a book associated with the renovation. In the process of renovation, the priest Hilkiah, who is now obviously deeply involved in the work, reports the finding of a book:

Then the high priest Hilkiah said to Shaphan, the scribe (הספר): 'I have found a scroll of the Teaching (ספר התורה) in the House of Yahweh.' And Hilkiah gave the scroll to Shaphan, who read it (2 Kgs 22:8).

Shaphan was a high official and member of a very influential family. Since the clerk is said to be commissioned by the king to carry out the renovation, he is the obvious contact person for the book find. But if one considers that now the book is handed over to a prophetess, Huldah, for interpretation, one may wonder whether the chain of delegations does not paradigmatically involve all the important offices (king, official, priest, prophet). One gets the impression of a highly reflected – but not necessarily in all details – historical report. When the book is read to the king, he asks for an interpretation by the prophetess Huldah, who takes the book as a word of doom and threat for the city and its inhabitants. This is in accordance with the reaction of the king, who tore his clothes out of horror and grief (2 Kgs 22:11, 19). Upon receiving the report of the prophetic oracle of doom, the king gathers all his people at the temple and reads out the book to the public. With reference to what has been read, he makes a

covenant, and all the people accept the terms of the covenant (2 Kgs 23:1-3). Subsequently, the king has an extensive cult reform carried out, which cleanses the temple of existing foreign cultic influences (2 Kgs 23:4-12). The cult reform is then extended to the entire country (2 Kgs 23:13-20). The report concludes with a communal celebration of the Pesach, which is depicted as the resumption of the ancient festive tradition (2 Kgs 23:21-22). Not least because of the summarising concluding formulation in 2 Kings 23:24, which refers back once again to the content of the found book, the so-called reform report proves to be a dense and deliberate narrative composition (Pietsch 2013:472), which nevertheless will have grown over a long time. This is indicated not least by the parts of the so-called Josianic reform that are quite different in themselves, but nevertheless related to each other: renovation of the temple, finding of the book, cult reform, and celebration of Pesach.

In the history of research, the narrative in 2 Kings 22-23 has been of great importance since Wilhelm Martin Leberecht de Wette – in his 1805 Latin dissertation – identified the book found in the temple in a historicising manner with the so-called “Urdeuteronomium”, the original part of the fifth book of the Pentateuch, Deuteronomy. The demand for purification, the monolatrous tendency and the feasting of a Pesach are drawn from Deuteronomy as a blueprint of king Josiah’s reform. Although this identification is still assumed in major parts of research, there are a number of reasons to challenge it.³ The identification is based on an equation of the ספר התורה (2 Kgs 22:8, 11) with the book of Deuteronomy, which is hardly convincing, because the only attestations of this designation referring to this book come from two late passages: Deuteronomy 31:26 and Joshua 1:8. In 2 Kings 23:3, 21, it is called ספר הברית, of which the only other attestation is found in the Covenant Code (Ex. 24:7). Only the fact that Deuteronomy speaks of several covenants and that 2 Kings 22-23 relates the reform to passages in Deuteronomy is hardly sufficient for the identification. This raises many issues of historicity and literary history that cannot be discussed in this article.⁴ Briefly summarised, the historical core remains neither the book finding nor a nationwide cult purification and cult centralisation, but perhaps a minimum of measures, which mainly included the removal of the Assyrian sun chariots (2 Kgs 23:11) and the cult image of the goddess Asherah from the temple (2 Kgs 23:6-7) (Frevel 2017:497-524). For our focus on the interplay between tradition and reform, three aspects are of particular importance, namely the initiation of the reform and its link

3 For a discussion, see Pietsch (2013:480-482); Ebach (2014:34-36); Stott (2005); Na’aman (2011).

4 For the state of discussion, see Weippert (2019).

to the book finding; the performance of the reform and its setting, and the implementation of ritual elements related to the reform.

To begin with the book finding. While earlier research saw in the book finding an unconditional historical core, which at times was even made the Archimedean point of Pentateuchal research, the suggestion that it is a stylised legend has much to commend it. That it is an *invented tradition* becomes apparent when one considers the parallels with other book discovery reports in antiquity. In this light, the book finding is a legitimising story, “a literary stratagem to bolster the credibility of the story within its literary context” (Na’aman 2011:48). By hinting at examples from Egypt and Babylonia, Na’aman (2011:53, italics, CF), in contrast, emphasised the *real* character of the book:

Text manipulations of many forms and functions, *all of them real artifacts*, are attested from (at least) the early second millennium onward.

The parallels may indeed demonstrate that the existence of the book found in the temple is *plausible* in historical respect, but nothing more can be said. Whether the book existed or not, or more precisely whether a real book authorised the reform or the *narrative* of the reform legitimised a written tradition, cannot be decided. The fact that the book motivates the king to act in an extraordinary way and makes him conclude a covenant on the basis of the book (which is first of all an instrument of foreign policy action) makes the historicity of the circumstances rather unlikely. It is rather an asserted tradition that legitimises action at the textual level. The reform is related to tradition. This becomes even clearer, if one focuses on the way the content of the tradition is presented.

The more interesting point is that the book’s contents are never disclosed in the narrative. Rather, the book is read (2 Kgs 22:8), read out before the king (2 Kgs 22:10), read aloud before the people (2 Kgs 23:2), and then referenced by the king (2 Kgs 23:21). This artificial setting reinforces the impression that it is a stylised narrative, in which “text” has an important legitimising function. One could simplify this as: the media is the message. Textuality is more important than content. Thus, the reform is related to this tradition without quoting the wording, whereby the content of the book becomes a claimed legitimising tradition. The claimed content motivates change, it becomes a means of interpretation, and it is raised to the benchmark of action in history, present and future. This becomes clear, when the book is to be subjected to the contemporary interpretation by the prophetess Huldah:

Go, inquire of the LORD for me, for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that has been found; for great is the wrath of the LORD that is kindled against us, because our ancestors did not obey the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us (2 Kgs 22:13, NRS).

The wrath of God, which is not qualified in more detail and has no point of reference in the narrative beforehand, explains that it is about a retrospective interpretation of history that implements tradition, in order to obtain orientation for the future. This reading is aptly corroborated by Huldah's subsequent interpretation (2 Kgs 22:15-16), the covenant made according to the book (2 Kgs 23:2-3), and the reform measures performed in accordance with the tradition contained in the book (2 Kgs 23:24). The final interpretive passage in 2 Kings 23:26-27 makes it clear that the implementation of the Torah is done from hindsight, in order to prevent the repetition of history.

Finally, I will comment briefly on the aspect of the ritual implementation of the reform. As mentioned earlier, a strong emphasis is placed on the completeness of the peoples' assembly (2 Kgs 23:1-2). The people as a whole consent to the king's covenant (2 Kgs 23:3). Remarkably, the Pesach, which is marked "as prescribed in this book of the covenant" (ככתוב על ספר הברית הזה), is also performed by the people as a whole (כל־העם) (2 Kgs 23:21). The development of the Pesach festival is a perfect example of the earlier observation that the beginnings of traditions cannot be determined in concrete terms and that there is usually at least a historicising anchoring in narratives. It contains a strong narrative link to the Exodus tradition (Ex. 12-13; Num. 9:1-14; Josh. 5:10) and is implemented in a network of ordinations in the festival calendars (Deut. 16:1-8; Lev. 23:5-8; Num. 28:16-24) and combined with the Mazzôt. But it remains difficult to answer when this festival became part of the common festival traditions of Israel, and a variety of solutions are suggested within the discussion (Weyde 2004:19-68; Niesiołowski-Spanò 2020). While a nomadic origin can be ruled out (Schmitt 2018) and, accordingly, historical roots in the Exodus from Egypt, its implementation in the festival calendar at least with Deuteronomy 16:1-8 is clear. Even this does not provide a fixed date for the first official installation of the Passover festival. Strikingly, the legend of 2 Kings 23:21-23 claims that the Pesach was not celebrated since the days of the Judges. But was it celebrated previously at all? The biblical authors seem to have no interest in offering a complete history of the Pesach feast and the development of the ritual. They are rather interested in the twofold historicisation in the Exodus and the time of Josiah. Chronicles adds Hezekiah to this line (2 Chron. 30), by keeping

the reference that Josiah's Passover was the first since the days of the prophet Samuel (2 Chron. 35:18). However, this complicates the network of installation of the Passover (Jonker 2016:189-190) and can be ignored for a moment, in this instance.

Most recently, Niesiołowski-Spanò (2020:345) suggested that the Passover was originally linked to royal cult performed by the king at the central sanctuary in Jerusalem, thus seeing the historic roots of the feast in the 7th century reflected in the report of Josiah's reform. But he claims that the feast originated in a protective ritual of the king (and links it unnecessarily to a *molk/molech* sacrifice), so that the report in 2 Kings 23 becomes the legendary justification of the later implementation of the Passover as a communal festival. Although the cultic derivation and the developmental details in Niesiołowski-Spanò's hypothesis are unconvincing, the idea that 2 Kings 23:21-23 is an *invented tradition*, that subsequently legitimised the festival, and not a historical report fits in the scheme discussed in this article. Note, in the following example, that festivals are particularly introduced by the biblical authors as "markers of transition" (Körting 2014:1059).

6.2 Renewal of festival traditions and implementation of Torah (Neh. 8)

The historical setting of the second example is from the early post-exilic period. This much discussed text (Pakkala 2004), which narrates the re-implementation of the Torah in the restored post-exilic community by reading it out publicly, is strongly related to the issue of the *imperial authorisation* of the Torah, which must be answered in the negative (Frevel 2020c). While the early dating of the text and its relation to the Nehemiah memoir is much debated and a late Persian date seems more appropriate, the relation to the identity discourse and the Torah-conform legitimation of Nehemiah is commonly accepted (Heckl 2016). The historicity of the narrative is disputed, in general, even if there remain some clues to relate the narrative to its Persian setting (Whitters 2017). The aspect of the public reading of the Torah is as characteristic as it is decisive for the constitution of collective identity within the textual world (Japhet 2015; Frevel 2012:130-132). Memory and understanding are the crucial concepts in *implementing* the Torah (Häusl 2018:20). As in 2 Kings 22, it is unclear what text the scroll contained: Deuteronomy, the five books of the Torah, a special scroll, and so on? This issue will not be discussed in this article.

The narrative in Nehemiah 8 starts with a plenary assembly in Jerusalem at the Water Gate. The people ask Ezra, the scribe, to bring the scroll of the teaching of Moses (את־ספר תורת משה, Neh. 8:1). He does so and reads it

aloud, standing elevated and visible to all on a wooden tower (*ἐπὶ βήματος* in the Greek version). When he opens the book, all the people stand up. It is explicitly mentioned that everyone in the assembly (הקהל) was able to cognitively understand the reading (וכל מבין לשמע, Neh. 8:2, see vv. 3, 8). Ezra blesses God and the people answer “Amen, Amen”. Thirteen men, Levites, mentioned by name, explained the teaching to the people (מבנינים את־העם לתורה).⁵ The style of reading the scroll out is described by the verbal phrase מפרש ושום שכל, which is unique, and its meaning is not immediately clear. The RSV makes it an addition to the reading: “So they read from the book, from the law of God. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading” (Neh. 8:8). Since Ezra is reading out the Torah of Moses (את־ספר תורת משה) in verse 2, the reading from the book of the law of God (ויקראו בספר בתורת האלהים), mentioned with a plural subject in verse 8, seems to be different. Thus, the מפרש is rendered “interpretation” in the NRSV. For Japhet (2015:176), the “thirteen Levites circulate among the people and explain to them what is being read”, but in this understanding the explicit duplication of the verbal phrase in verses 3 and 8 is not considered. Some still understand Ezra to be the subject of reading, thus reading portions of the text and explaining it as a kind of commentary. Another suggestion is that the Hebrew text was translated *in situ* from Hebrew into Aramaic, the *lingua franca* of the Persian empire (Bänziger 2014:186). Ultimately, the issue cannot be decided, but it seems that the specific emphasis on the Levites seeks to differentiate their role from that of the priests (see Deut. 31). This special function of the Levites as well as the peculiar location of Ezra’s proclamation can perhaps support the argument that the narrative has an “anti-Temple” character (Japhet 2015:178). The people, however, are frightened by the reading, but they are calmed by Ezra, Nehemiah, and the Levites. On the second day, the people engage in a deeper study of the Torah (ולהשכיל אל־דברי התורה, Neh. 8:13), they find the regulation to celebrate Sukkôt and they do so. The celebration is accompanied by further reading, as it is prescribed in Deuteronomy 31

Comparing the present narrative with the example of 2 Kings 22-23, the parallels are striking. Both end with a festival that had apparently been forgotten for a long time. In both instances, the reading of a Torah forms the background, whereby in both cases only the result, but not the wording, is communicated. As in 2 Kings 23, the public reading in Nehemiah 8 is introduced as if the people had not yet had any previous contact with the Torah. In both instances, some authorities are employed to interpret

5 The integrity of verse 8 is disputed. Oswald (2009) and others consider them to be accretions. Yoo (2017:124-125) holds the opposite. Other mentions of the Levites in Nehemiah 8 may be additions.

the reading. Both are related to a covenantal renewal and to the people's consent. The stylisation as a renewal implements an old tradition anew. Reading is the strategy of implementing the authority of the text. The gathering of the people at the Water Gate is also unlikely to be a historical event, but rather a stylised implementation of the Torah into the discourse of identity.

6.3 Claiming the roots in the Judean-Samaritan conflict (2 Kgs 17)

The third example is not so much related to reading but to cultic practice and by this to the oral and written tradition. It is the narrative of the “forgotten” worship of the provincial deity. In 722/721 BCE, Assur conquered Samaria; this liquidated the sovereignty of the Northern State of Israel, and successively made the territory of the North into provinces of Assur with a governor each residing in Dor (*Dūr'u*), Megiddo (*Magidū*), and Samaria (*Šamīrīna*). The Assyrians also deported many people from Samaria and its surroundings, mostly the elite upper class people and craftsmen. They resettled them outside of their homeland in the periphery; people from other countries were settled alongside the inhabitants of the country in accordance with the so-called two-way-deportation strategy (Radner 2018:101-123; Sano 2020), of which the political goal is clearly to introduce discontinuity, in order to better maintain imperial control of the subdued territory (Thareani 2016). The former rebellious elite disappear via assimilation into the respective foreign land, where they become tamed invisibles.

The downfall of Samaria and the deportation of its people took place in two waves, in 733 BCE by Tiglath-Pileser III and in 726/722/720 BCE by Shalmaneser V, and with the final blow by Sargon II. This is described in 2 Kings 15:29 and 17:5-6, first slashing the territory to the very core in the Samaritan hill country and then seizing the city of Samaria and the remainder of the territory.⁶ The biblical text assumes (perhaps by analogy with the “myth of the empty land” in the construction of the Babylonian exile) a complete depopulation. Following 2 Kings 15:29, all inhabitants of the captured cities were taken captive to Assyria (ויגלם אשוריה) and, according to 2 Kings 17:6, the Israelites (את־ישראל) were resettled in Halah/*Ḥalahḥu*, on the Habor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes. The population was replaced by people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim. The Assyrian king, Sargon II, is said to have “placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the people of Israel” (2 Kgs

6 For the chronological problems and the historiographic reconstruction, see Hasegawa *et al.* (2018).

17:24). Taking its cue from formulations of the first conquest of the land by the Israelites in the book of Joshua, this settlement is characterised as a conquest. There is ample evidence that foreigners were settled in the west of the province of Samerina along the Via Maris, documented, for instance, by two cuneiform tablets from Tel Hadid (Na’aman & Zadok 2013:181-182).⁷

Besides the historiographic notes about deportation and colonisation, which can be related to, and adjusted by many extra-biblical textual and archaeological sources (Knoppers 2013:18-44; Frevel 2018a:275-277) – a perspective that is not the focus of the following argument –, the chapter of 2 Kings 17 includes two longer sections. The first is a theological reflection on the reason that led to the political and military defeat: religious misconduct (2 Kgs 17:7-18, 20-23). The second is a polemical description of the religious situation after the settlement of the foreign peoples. It starts with bitter irony that those people did not know how to worship the God of the land (לֹא יָדְעוּ אֶת־מִשְׁפַּט אֱלֹהֵי הָאָרֶץ, 2 Kgs 17:26). Thus, one of the exiled former priests is brought to Bethel to teach the colonist to worship YHWH according to the former custom. But this endeavour fails insofar as the foreign people do not accept the YHWH alone requirement and worship other gods alongside YHWH. Thus, the theologically reflective chapter blames the people for having syncretistically eroded the worship of YHWH by the cult of foreign Babylonian gods (2 Kgs 17:29-33). The final part of the chapter generalises this as the misconduct of the North, which persists “to this day”. The Northerners were continuously warned not to do so, but they remain apostate to this day (2 Kgs 17:34, 41).

The textual and literary history of this chapter, which cannot be discussed in detail, in this instance, is fairly complicated, because it serves several functions within the larger framework (Robker 2020; Hensel 2016:367-389). It is not only the historiographic conclusion of the history of Israel as a “rebellious” sub-state that broke away from the political and religious orthodoxy of the Davidic and Yahwistic Jerusalem. Following this, it is one of the most explicit adhortative homilies in regard of the first commandment. Above all, it is a polemic against the Samaritans, their origins, and their interpretation of Yahwism. The pejorative allusion to their main sanctuary at Mount Gerizim as “the shrine of the high-places” (בֵּית הַבְּמוֹת – οἷκος τῶν ὑψηλῶν) and the disparagement of their priests as wicked priests (כַּהֲנַן בְּמוֹת – ἱερεῖς τῶν ὑψηλῶν) (2 Kgs 17:32), the accusation of religious deviance and implemented syncretism, the construction of a multi-ethnic mixed multitude, all this can be read not only as anti-Samaritan,

7 For the settlement, see Koch *et al.* (2020).

but also as anti-Samaritan polemic.⁸ Although the Samaritans are not mentioned explicitly, the tradition was re-read and rewritten in this way, as can clearly be noted from the reception in Josephus (*Ant.* 9.278f, 287-291, and so on). This polemic directed against the YHWH worshippers on Gerizim, which has only gradually grown in the text through the course of its history, now makes subtle use of the reform paradigm. The narrative depicts restitutive reform as avoiding heterodoxy and providing continuity. The gap that emerged following the deportation and colonisation is filled and the connection to the supposed orthodoxy is ensured. The “orthodoxy” is the Judean or Jerusalemite perspective that is thoroughly polemical towards the lack of religious continuity, which needs to be re-formed. The historical situation, in contrast, was fairly different. A cult continuity after the fall of Samaria at the sanctuaries and cult places, where YHWH has been worshipped as national deity of the Northern Kingdom, is far more likely than the claimed discontinuity (Na’aman 1990:220; Knoppers 2019).

Northern Israel did not completely disappear after 722 BCE, but ethnic, cultural, and cultic continuity remained predominant for the region [and] contrary to the traditional depiction (Josephus; *Ezra* 4; *2 Kgs* 17:24-41; etc.), the population of the region and later the Persian province of Samaria was neither predominately syncretistic, multi-religious, nor multi-ethnic (Hensel 2020:15-16).

The present text has a clear anti-Samaritan bias. That they did “not follow the statutes or the ordinances or the law or the commandment” (*2 Kgs* 17:34) is a slander, inverting the actual situation regarding the Samaritans, who followed the same Torah as the Jews, even if they differed in several respects. There are no indications of a syncretism or polytheism in the cult of Mount Gerizim (Kartveit 2009), even if it holds true that their iconographic repertoire on coins and seals reveals a much greater variety of gods and a greater internationality than their contemporaneous counterpart from Yehûd (Frevel *et al.* 2014; Wyssmann 2019). The polemic in *2 Kings* 17 is arguing with a loss of tradition, on the one hand, and the missing demarcation, on the other. Thus, the repatriation of a priest to heal the lacking continuity is rather an invented story to mark the importance of continuity within change.

It is interesting to note that the motif of the restitutive reform in *2 Kings* 17:27-28 is not only a polemic against the Samaritans, but also an

8 The terminological difference was introduced to better describe the entanglement between Judah and Samaria as a prerequisite of the much later differentiation between Jews and Samaritans. Several further variants and specifications of the entangled cross-fading of the two have been discussed (see, for example, Hensel 2016).

implicit legitimisation of diaspora, which has often been overlooked. It is presumed that the formerly deported and now repatriated priest continued the tradition of YHWH worship in the appropriate orthodox way. While his “orthodoxy” preached to the Northerners fails (2 Kgs 17:29-33), it continues *implicitly* in the areas of the diaspora to where the true learned YHWH worshippers have been deported. Since the *diaspora* community preserved the tradition, it can send a priest to Bethel. Mentioning Bethel as the base of the restorative reform is particularly interesting and has led to many speculations, mostly directed to the former importance of a sanctuary in Bethel as one of the former state sanctuaries (1 Kgs 12:29). However, the sparse development of the Assyrian settlement in the 7th century and the lacking shrine in the archaeological record (Koene 2003:52-65; Knoppers 2013:34, 53) do not necessarily suggest that, even if the case is re-opened for discussion (Lipschits 2017). To build upon this, the hypothesis of a later displaced proto-Samaritan tradition in Bethel, already in the Neo-Babylonian period, as put forward by Hensel (2018:257-258), remains very uncertain. Perhaps the mention of Bethel in 2 Kings 17:28 should not be interpreted as a polemic against the Israelite cult (Knoppers 2013:54-56), but as an attempt at legitimisation. Bethel is then sanctioned as a “traditionalist” base, which refused to cede its pure Yahwistic tradition to the Samaritan North (see also Judges 20:26-28, with Phinehas in Bethel). That Bethel was a contested space is shown by the relocation of the local tradition to Gerizim and the compound name Bethel-Gerizim in the Samaritan tradition (Knoppers 2013:8-9). Be that as it may, the motif of the restorative implementation of tradition is implemented in 2 Kings 17 by way of “reform-teaching” and this functions as a means of continuity, even if it failed according to the biased narrative. In the reform’s recourse to tradition, continuity is ensured.

7. SUMMARY

All three narratives of reform are characterised by the re-installation of inherited traditions. In each narrative, it became apparent that a historicising or historiographical approach did little to adequately assess the significance of the change. In none of the three examples was a historical reform event reported, but a change was stylised that was accompanied by the implementation of a tradition. All three examples made it clear that invention, innovation, and tradition are not mutually exclusive, but rather are characteristics of a reflexive approach to tradition. Thus, the basic considerations outlined in the first section of the article could be convincingly used as a basis for understanding biblical reform narratives. It suggests itself to follow the paradigm of reform to better conceptualise the

implementation of change in religious traditions. The examples explained the function of embedding for the tradition. This once again underlines the closeness to the cultural memory. The characteristic feature of the stylised reforms was a well-balanced combination of continuity and discontinuity through the linkage back to tradition, which thus itself became a stylised “invented” tradition. In other words: the tradition of reform is the reform of tradition.

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Frevel

Tradition of reform as reform of tradition

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