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THROUGH THE 'I'-WINDOW

THE INNER LIFE OF CHARACTERS IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

Barbara M. Leung Lai

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INTRODUCTION

Through the 'I'-Window: The Inner Life of Characters in the Hebrew Bible—the title indicates the nature (uncovering), the scope (internal profiling), and the unexplored domain (the inner lives of Isaiah, Daniel and to a certain extent, the Hebrew God) of this endeavour.

Five factors shape the interpretive interest of this undertaking. *First*, the post-modern notion of the 'self' and the prominence of emotion studies in the past decade incite an impetus to look into the interiority of the Hebrew characters explored in the book. *Second*, the long-standing claim that individuality/selfhood does not even exist among personalities in the Old Testament creates a certain discontent.[1] Notwithstanding the idea of corporate personality in the Hebrew mentality as best demonstrated within the book of Psalms, the emotive dimension of each individual psalmist is often explosively laid raw in front of the readers (e.g. Pss. 44; 73). *Third*, this research interest exemplifies a biblical scholar's passage from modernity to post-modernity. Internal profile and its peripheral topics (e.g., self, emotion, interiority, voice, and their interconnectedness)—which have been dormant in my modern mind and repressed in my reader perspective—are now placed in the foreground of exploration.[2] *Fourth*, as a reader of the Russian literary theorist Mikhail M. Bakhtin, approaching the first-person texts included in this study from a Bakhtinian perspective has

1. Cf. Philip R. Davies, *First Persons: Essays in Biblical Autobiography* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), pp. 13-14. See also, John J. Pilch, *Introducing the Cultural Context of the Old Testament* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), esp. pp. 95-116. Pilch presents a renewed angle of perception between individuality and corporate personality. The Hebrew culture values group-centric identity and corporate solidarity (pp. 97-98). Using Ps. 22, an individual psalm of lament as an illustration, Pilch points out that from beginning to end, the psalmist 'echoes group orientation'. Apparently, Pitch seeks to distinguish between 'individualism' (as group-centric dynamics) and 'individuality' (the 'person' perceived as an entity). He further concludes that 'while individualism is totally lacking in the Bible, there definitely is no lack of individuality' (p. 114).

2. According to Francis L.K. Hsu, the autonomy of the self is not recognized in traditional Chinese culture. The Chinese 'self' can be described as interdependent and sociocentric (or situation-centered). Cf. Hsu, 'The Self in Cross-cultural Perspective', in A.J. Marsella, G.A. DeVos, and F.L.K. Hsu (eds.), *Culture and Self: Asian and Western Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 24-55.

yielded some promising results,[3] particularly along the trajectory of the Bakhtinian view on polyphony and dialogism. This realization has called for some conceptual and methodological reorientation for an original study of this nature. Incorporating the Bakhtinian perspectives is thus an encouraging step to expand the horizon of reading, pushing explorations further beyond the more traditional terrains. *Fifth*, as the title of the book indicates, the 'uncovering' in this endeavour together with the uniqueness of the subject (internal profile) demand a multi-disciplinary and integrative approach and a carefully hammered out methodology.[4] This 'multi-integrative' necessity becomes a vibrant and invigorating force, thus a highly motivated engagement.

Employing a psychological lens among other interdisciplinary interpretive tools, this book is an endeavour to *uncover* the internal profile of three Hebrew personalities: the sage Daniel, the prophet Isaiah, and the Hebrew God as presented in three prophetic texts (Isa. 5.1-8; Jer. 8.18–9.2 [8.19–9.3]; Hos. 11.1-9). Although Philip R. Davies maintains that dimensions of the inner life of the characters (such as feelings, conflicting emotions, hopes and regrets) are *virtually absent* in the Hebrew Bible,[5] dimensions of the Danielic and Isaian 'inner depths' (and to a certain extent, the Hebrew God) can be detected. Using the 'I'-window (places where the character speaks in the first-person singular voice) as a 'port of entry', this study deals with the selected first-person texts of the Old Testament.[6] It focuses on the apocalyptic portion of Daniel (chs. 7-12); the fifteen identifiable 'I'-passages in Isaiah (5.1-30; 6.1-13; 8.1-18; 15.1–16.14; 21.1-12; 22.1-15; 24.1-23; 25.1-12; 26.1-21; 40.1-8; 49.1-6; 50.4-9; 51.17-23; 61.1-11; 63.7-19), and the 'I' voice of the Hebrew God as represented in Isa. 5.1-7, Jer. 8.18-9.2 [8.19–9.3], and Hos. 11.1-9. This port of entry is an unexplored dimension of the angles of approach that have already been discussed to this point.

Oriented in the empirics of a text-centered and reader-oriented interpretive model, this book undertakes a three-world approach (that is, the world behind the text, the world of the text and the world in front of the text) to psychological biblical studies. With an array of tailor-made,

3. Cf. Barbara M. Leung Lai, 'What Would Bakhtin Say about Isaiah 21: 1-12? A Re-Reading', *OTE* 23.1 (2010), pp. 103-16.

4. The selected first-person texts in this study represent a variety of biblical genres (narrative, poetry, prophetic writings, and apocalyptic literature) and subgenres (first-person call/vision report, prayer, monologue/imaginary dialogue, third person projection of first person views, etc.). Treating the biblical materials collectively towards the portraiture of the internal profile of each personality demands a set of methodology that is intentionally tailor-made.

5. *First Persons*, pp. 13-14.

6. This, I believe, is an area of oversight for character studies in the recent past.

perspectival reading tools (i.e. 'points of entry'), it examines the interplay of self/dialogical-self and emotion, voice/polyphony and interiority, autobiography and personhood, and language of religious faith (prayers, laments, praises) and internal profile. In advancing the field of psychological biblical studies, the primary purpose of the book is to demonstrate an interfaced model[7] of psychological exegesis on the internal profile of the three personalities. Each in its own ways is still an uncharted terrain of Old Testament studies.

Both psychology and biblical studies are systems of interpretation.[8] With a text-anchored approach to the selected first-person texts, the 'empirics' of reading[9] (emotive experiencing) is the backbone of this study. My point of departure is neither a school of psychology nor any pre-adopted psychological theories. The subject matter (internal profile) as well as its peripheral topics (self, emotions, interiority, speaking voices, etc.), together with specific biblical genres represented in the selected texts (e.g. Apocalyptic, Hebrew poetry, first-person call/vision report, lament and other language of religious faith, and the more sophisticated third-person projection of first-person view, etc.) entail attention to the 'empirics' of the reading process. Thus an elevated level of reader engagement and experience is anticipated. At the interface of these three perspectives—biblical, psychological, and experiential—the anticipated outcome is that a rich Danielic and Isaian internal profile, as well as dimensions of the interiority of the Hebrew God, may emerge.

7. According to J. Harold Ellens, the relationship between psychology and the Bible is less a matter of integration and more a matter of interface that affords mutual illumination (see Ellens, 'The Bible and Psychology: An Interdisciplinary Pilgrimage', *Pastoral Psychology* 45 [1997], pp. 193-208 [193]).

8. To Andrew D. Kille, psychology is itself a hermeneutic system, seeking models for understanding human behaviour ('Psychology and the Bible: Three Worlds of the Text', *Pastoral Psychology* 51 [2002], pp. 125-34 [127]).

9. I borrow this term and concept from Schulyer Brown, *Text and Psyche: Experiencing Scripture Today* (New York: Continuum, 1998). The 'empirics' of reading refers to the experiential dimension of reading as an event.