

Diachronic Study of the Hebrew Bible: A Field in Crisis¹

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Since the dawn of critical study of the Hebrew Bible, the diachronic paradigm has reigned supreme. Scholars have understood their primary task to be that of laying bare the history of the text: how many stages were there in the composition of the text? What were the various strata of the text's composition and when were they each added? This field of study continues to be the primary focus for much of biblical studies. Increasingly, however, there have been signs of crisis within this field. I'd like to share with you this morning some signs of this crisis and how I believe the field can emerge from this crisis and move forward on better footing.

I'd like to build my analysis of the state of diachronic study of the Hebrew Bible around a fascinating set of papers that were delivered at a major conference on the topic of Pentateuch formation this past May at the Institute for Advanced Study on the campus of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. A group of eight leading scholars in the field were invited to participate in a year-long study group at the Institute. The scholars were in residence on a daily basis and engaged with each other in ongoing consultation on both a formal and informal basis. These scholars hailed from the leading centers of Pentateuch study today – Israel, Central Europe and the United States. They committed themselves to addressing the fundamental methodological questions of the discipline. What are the advantages and disadvantages of the major approaches to the formation of the Pentateuch—sources, fragments or supplements? Just what is meant when we use a standard term of the trade such as “source”: is this an individual, a school, a tradition? Do we have access to the sources in full form, or only in partial form? When speaking of “source” criticism how do we identify the source? Do we seek similarities of style, and then with a delineated set of texts, go back and only secondarily determine the ideology? Or, is it perhaps, the opposite: a source is identified on the basis of its ideology, with no regard to style. What do we mean when we speak of “redactor”: One or many? Is the redactor a technocrat who combines, but has no ideology of his own? Or, as redaction criticism emphasizes, do we see the work of the redactor as central to determining the message of the completed whole? What do we mean by an “editorial layer”? Does an editor simply add material to an already canonized text, or were editors also free to delete material? How many, redactors? How many layers? It is the Institute's custom to conclude the year-long project with an open conference, in which another dozen or so scholars from the field are invited and the proceedings are opened to the public.

One of the conveners of the conference, the eminent scholar Bernard M. Levinson opened the proceedings with a bold statement. He declared that no progress had been made on a single one of the issues to which the study group had devoted itself. Bolder still, was his conclusion that no progress on these issues is even possible. Levinson explained this impassible gridlock, saying that the members had failed to find a common language with which to tackle these issues and

¹ Paper read on the occasion of Professor Nicolai Winther-Nielsen's 60th birthday at the conference “New Approaches to Text and Meaning” in Copenhagen, October 3-4, 2013.

that it often seemed that the study group members were talking past each other. The members of the study group each chaired sessions over the ensuing three days, and all echoed Levinson's assessment of the year they had spent together. The study-group and the conference were devoted to Pentateuch formation. Nonetheless, it will be clear that their assessment of gridlock holds true as well for the diachronic study of virtually all books of the Hebrew Bible. After all, questions of "source," "redactor" and "layer" are *de rigueur* across the entire discipline of the diachronic study of the Hebrew Bible.

One scholar who had been sitting next to me commented to me that he was not surprised to hear this consensus of gridlock and crisis. As he put it, this should have been the expected result of bringing together accomplished and senior members of the same field. If you are a scholar whose entire output has consisted of studies predicated on source-criticism, it is difficult to imagine that perhaps sources, classically conceived, don't exist. The American novelist Upton Sinclair is famous for saying, "*It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends on his not understanding it.*" We may apply Sinclair's observation to the world of academic publishing and say, "*It is difficult to get a scholar to understand something, when his entire cv depends on his not understanding it.*" Put differently, perhaps this deadlock stems from what Thomas Kuhn taught in the *Structures of Scientific Revolutions*: paradigms do not shift overnight. When scholars have worked with a given paradigm for a long time, he wrote, the problems of the paradigm are never quickly acknowledged. The old paradigm will not be discarded until another paradigm is proposed that is demonstrably more compelling. We stand today in diachronic study of the Bible at a midpoint in this process. Problems have been identified with the reigning paradigms. Yet no alternatives have been proposed that are demonstrably better. In this intellectual climate, it is to be expected that different scholars will stick to their academic guns.

I want to make very clear that I in no way wish to impugn my colleagues who were members of that study group. I suspect that we are all blinded by the brilliance of the studies that already appear on our own cv's; We all function within the conceptual paradigms we chose long ago. So before we accuse other scholars of close-mindedness, let us all beware: scholars who write and publish in glass houses should not throw stones.

Kuhn's accounting of how and when paradigms change in academic pursuits may offer a partial explanation for the gridlock that Prof. Levinson described. I believe, however, that the root of the malaise of diachronic study of the Bible lies elsewhere. I take a cue from the late Cambridge economist Joan Robinson, who said, "In a subject where there is no agreed procedure for knocking out errors, doctrines have a long life."² In biblical studies, doctrines have a long life. The doctrines that I have in mind are the competing hypotheses of sources, redactors, editorial layers, and the like. It isn't that any one of them is wrong, or that they are all mistaken. It's that we have "no agreed procedure for knocking out errors." All have a certain plausibility to them and thus all have a circle of adherents. The problem with the methodology of diachronic study is that it has never insisted on external control to validate its results. It has never arrived at an "agreed procedure for knocking out errors," and hence its "doctrines" have all had a long life.

² Joan Robinson, *Economic Philosophy* (London: Penguin, 1962), 79.

In what follows I would like to entertain two large questions. First, why has the discipline developed this way? The *sine qua non* of responsible, cautious scholarship is the establishment of controls to validate our results. We can only know that we are right if there is a way to know that we are wrong. Why hasn't biblical scholarship insisted on implementing such controls? From there I will move on to a second question: How should diachronic study of the Hebrew Bible move forward? What would such external controls look like?

I take up, then, my first question: why the discipline has developed without a culture of methodological controls to check the competing methodologies employed. Part of the answer, no doubt, stems from the limited resources available to the earliest scholars of the discipline. From the dawn of the critical study of the Bible until the late-nineteenth century it would have been difficult to identify any external control through which to develop theories of biblical composition. The ancient Near Eastern comparative materials we have today were discovered for the most part only in the last decades of the nineteenth and first decades of the twentieth century. Scholars of earlier eras, therefore, did the best they could and adduced theories that could accommodate for the seeming fissures that they saw in the biblical text. Yet, by the early twentieth century comparative evidence was amply available. Nonetheless, no concerted effort was undertaken to base the theories of biblical composition in the empirical evidence available concerning the growth of texts from the ancient Near East. I would suggest that this was due to ideological commitments that guide the premises of much diachronic scholarship. In the early nineteenth century the father of modern historiography, Leopold von Ranke, taught that history could only be discerned by returning to original sources – *Quellen*. Within biblical studies that spurred an effort to work back from the received text to its original sources, fragments, editorial layers, etc. This was deemed essential, because only by doing this could the real history of the text and, indeed, the real history of Israel be laid bare. Source criticism today is considered a subfield of biblical studies. Historically, however, quite the opposite was true: the diachronic study of the Hebrew Bible was a subfield of the movement to retrieve original sources as von Ranke had taught. A range of methodologies and hypotheses have since been developed to tease out the history of the text, working from only the final, received text that we have in hand. Scholars would debate the merits of each method, but rarely was it questioned whether it was really possible for us to retrace the composition of a text with only the final version in hand. To admit that this might be the case would have been to admit “defeat.” It would have meant that we are ill-equipped to do history as von Ranke taught us we must. It would have meant admitting that the compositional past of the received text is hidden from our view, and hence the history of Israel that compositional history would reveal, is likewise hidden from our view. I would contend that biblical scholarship has yet to confront this possibility and the massive implications it would inhere for much of the past two centuries of scholarship.

To illuminate the situation at hand, I would like to turn to the lessons being learned in another discipline, far afield from our own. No field of academic study today is in as much turmoil as the field of economics. The economic downturn that began in 2007 was predicted by only a handful of doomsday prophets who were largely ignored. The Nobel laureate in economics, Paul Krugman, asks how it is that the entire guild of economists—himself included—got it so wrong (Krugman 2009). And his conclusion is this: “As I see it,” Krugman writes, “the economics profession went astray because economists, as a group, mistook beauty, for truth. The central

cause of the profession's failure," he goes on, "was the desire for an all-encompassing, intellectually elegant approach." Krugman goes on to explain how the neoclassical belief in markets had an allure because it allowed scholars to do macroeconomics with clarity, completeness and with beauty. The approach seemed to explain so many things.

Krugman's analysis of what happened to an entire guild of economists gives me cause for reflection as a biblicalist. Now, we, in biblical studies, have one distinct advantage over our colleagues in Economics. Thankfully, no matter how off the mark we might be in our work, there will be little if any consequences from our errors. But could it be that we, too, within our discipline, fall victim to the allure of mistaking beauty for truth? All of us here are no doubt aware of the enormous complexity involved in sorting out the prehistory of a received biblical text. And it is true that by elegantly positing the precise date and the precise parameters of each stage of composition we create an elegant recreation of the text's history and of Israel's history. But could we, too, be mistaking beauty for truth? Krugman writes, "if the economics profession is to redeem itself, it will have to reconcile itself to a less alluring vision," and that "what's almost certain is that economists will have to learn to live with messiness." Perhaps we, too, "will have to learn to live with messiness" and avoid the pitfall of mistaking beauty for truth. Perhaps we, too, may have to settle for the realization that we cannot work back from a received text and reconstruct its compositional history.

I'd like to highlight the futility of the search for the compositional history of biblical texts by posing the following challenge. We have in our possession today several texts from the ancient Near East, where we have iterations of the text as it evolved over time. We have several iterations of the Gilgamesh Epic. We have the Temple Scroll and its original sources from the Pentateuch. We have the Book of Chronicles and its *Vorlage* of the Books of Samuel and Kings. We have the Diatesseron—a second century work by Tatian—and the gospels that he wove to create that work. Here is the challenge: For any of the pairs, take half of the later work—half of the Temple Scroll, half of Chronicles, etc. and subject it to a careful analysis vis-à-vis its source: compare the first half of the Temple scroll to its sources in the Pentateuch; the first half of Chronicles to its sources in the *Vorlage* of Samuel and Kings. On the basis of the evidence, adduce an algorithm that explains what the later text does to the earlier text to produce what we see in the later text. This literary algorithm will tell us how the later text systematically adopts or adapts, adds or deletes material relative to the source texts. Now move to the second half of the later text—for our experiment that means now sitting with the second half of the Temple Scroll and the second half of Chronicles. Now apply the algorithm to the second half of the later work. Based on that algorithm, can you now faithfully recreate the second half of the source text? You should be able to. There is little theory or hypothesizing here. The beauty of this experiment is that it is totally empirical. Hypotheses about what the second half of the source text should look like are made entirely on the basis of data mined from the relationship between the first half of the source text and the first half of the later text. In an oft-cited article, Steven A. Kaufman says that he began to try to do such an experiment with the Temple Scroll and the Pentateuch until he saw that it was "a consummately fruitless endeavor" (Kaufman 1982:29).

One would have expected that long ago the field would have insisted on conducting such experiments in order to provide control for the diachronic analysis of these texts. I would contend that it is not an accident that such a call has not been made until very recently. If

Kaufman is correct—and I believe that he is correct—then the search for such a control would reveal that we do not have the capacity to reconstruct the text’s history with only the final version in hand. That is a very threatening conclusion because it suggests that an enormous amount of scholarly effort has been—and continues to be—in vein.

I’d like now to present two fruitful avenues of pursuit currently underway that have the potential to restore diachronic study of the Hebrew Bible to secure methodological footing. At the May conference in Jerusalem, David Carr gave a paper that sought to outline what controls we might have available to us. I summarize here his comments made there, and in his pioneering book from 2010, *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible: A New Reconstruction*, Carr suggested that to begin to put diachronic analysis on sound footing, we should investigate documented examples of textual growth. He pointed to works like the Gilgamesh Epic, the Temple Scroll relative to the Pentateuch, and Chronicles relative to Samuel and Kings. Taking all the known documented cases of textual growth, Carr proceeded to create an inventory of literary conventions that seem to guide the growth of a text. Remarkably, Carr found that the same strategies seemed to be employed in Mesopotamia, in biblical Israel, and in the second Temple period. Equally remarkably, Carr found that many of the hypotheses that scholars work with today have no founding when we examine how actual texts grew over time.

Here are some examples. Carr found that conflation of texts was relatively rare. He could find no example of successive conflation—for example, of the type of weaving back and forth between a so-called J source and a so-called E source—that was the central pillar of the documentary hypothesis for so long. On the rare occasions where some conflation was exhibited, there was never complete preservation of the conflated sources. That would imply that even if conflation is at work, say in the composition of the Torah, and even if we could successfully unravel those literary pre-texts, at best we would emerge with an incomplete record. The fragments that dissection would produce would not be free-standing complete literary works.

Carr also noticed that there is no documentation of the joining end-to-end of previous free-standing narrative, as is hypothesized in Genesis that a “Joseph novella” was appended to a “Jacob cycle.” To sum up, Carr utilized the same data that I pointed to in the “challenge” that I put forth earlier. I claimed that even when you have ample data it is not possible to produce an algorithm that will tell you how to work back from the text in hand. Carr, however, has brought us several important conclusions by tracing how subsequent composers reworked the texts they inherited. What he has discovered may not give us the holy grail of a sure method to work back from the received text. But it may be the beginning of applying Joan Robinson’s logic to biblical studies. Carr may be providing us with “agreed procedures for knocking out errors.” Carr has shown us that what has been known as the “sources” theory and the “fragments” theory for the composition of the Pentateuch show little if any reflection in the documented record of textual growth and composition.

Carr’s findings also point us in a positive direction: what is seen repeatedly in these cases is a process that would best be described as evidence of the supplements theory. Later writers supplement or compose an expansion or extension to an existing base text. Remarkably, Carr noted, nowhere do we see more than two or three levels of supplementation in a work. This challenges some diachronic approaches that suggest that many hands were involved in the

creation of a text over many periods of time. Carr also noted that the documented examples of supplementation reveal that supplementation rarely constitutes more than a quarter of the length of the original work. Of course, what one witnesses in the development of the Temple Scroll, say, need not hold true for another work. In theory, each work could have been *sui generis*, and there is no telling for sure. However, the fact that certain compositional practices appear time and again across the record, while other hypothesized practices are consistently unattested, should suggest the strength of some theories over others when we hypothesize the growth of biblical literature.

Allow me to digress for a moment and address the theological implications of Carr's conclusions, because I believe they are vast. Compositional theories of sources or of fragments imply a very weak sense of ultimate authority. Take, for example, the classical documentary hypothesis as envisioned by Wellhausen. Who is the authority behind that text? Each of the authors of the so-called sources? Perhaps in the hands of each of the redactors? The sources bicker with each other, and a referee—the redactor—blows the whistle, and determines what role each will have in the final text. Within such theories, is the core of the Torah J? or, perhaps P? or, perhaps the redactor? The classic theory of the documentary hypothesis, if accepted poses a problem for theology because it has no strong, single authority behind it. It is almost an accident of history.

The same holds true for a fragmentary approach to composition. If it is accepted that the Torah is a stitching together of discreet units—two creation accounts, a Jacob cycle, an Exodus myth, etc., then again, here, it is hard to see in this process a locus of authority. Redaction criticism exacerbates the problem, because it puts the locus of authority in a shadowy figure—the redactor—whose own words are often barely present.

Carr's "revelation," if you will, changes the equation dramatically. Carr tells us that the most prevalent compositional strategy employed in the ancient Near East was one of supplementation. This approach implicitly places the locus of authority on the original stage of the composition. Later hands reworked the original core, but did so in conversation and with it and in interpretation of it. This is certainly true if, indeed, supplements rarely exceeded 25% of the original. This suggests a process that respects the standing of the core of a work, even as it is interpreted and applied to new circumstances.

Carr's work, then lays out an important avenue for future diachronic research: we need to conduct as full an investigation as possible of known instances of textual growth. We need to see what models we find, and no less importantly, what models we don't find. With that we can return to the biblical text. Having said that, it may still be the case that even if we can trace how some texts grew and evolved, we will not have the capacity to work from the final product back to constituent parts.

A second approach that needs to be much more widely adopted in diachronic work, is linguistic analysis. At the May conference a paper arguing just this point was given by Jan Joosten. Scholars such as Joosten and Avi Hurvitz make compelling cases for identifying aspects of language that may be termed late and aspects that may be termed early. In some cases we have the advantage of external control, where we can see that what is thought to be pre-exilic Hebrew matches the epigraphic record of Hebrew inscriptions from the pre-exilic period, and the aspects

of language thought to be late biblical Hebrew, match the Hebrew of Qumran. This approach claims, that, not surprisingly, in the books of Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Lamentations, we find elements of both classical and late biblical Hebrew, which would support the claim that these books were written during the exilic period. Data mining and analysis of the Hebrew Scriptures are still in their infancy, and it can only be hoped that as our sophistication grows in these fields, that tools will become available to help us more clearly determine linguistic features that may have been early and those that were late.

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