The Book of the People
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Approaches to the Study of the Pentateuch

II

Traditional Exegesis

If it is difficult to reconstruct the physical features of Biblical books in their earliest formats, or the technical procedures that went into their production, it is even harder to arrive at a consensus about the textual appearance of the earliest editions, or the editorial processes by which these were constructed from the available sources. Indeed, in traditional exegesis, these questions are considered beyond the scope, permitted or obligatory, of human inquiry.

Rabbinic exegesis of the Biblical text began as soon as the canon closed in the second century B.C.E.\(^1\) with the Tanna'im (2nd century B.C.E. - 3rd century C.E.), and has continued under the Amora'im (3rd-6th centuries C.E.) and their successors down to the present. It is founded on a profound, intimate and literal familiarity with the entire Biblical text, a familiarity fostered from earliest childhood and reinforced by constant recourse to the text for liturgical use, for meditation, for citation and otherwise. The natural and even inevitable consequence of this familiarity is the overwhelming tendency to interpret the Biblical text from within, i.e., to illumine one passage, word or form in the text by another. A corollary of this tendency is another, namely to treat the entire text as an integral whole, all of whose parts are equally suitable for such exegetical

\(^1\)Leiman 1976.
juxtaposition, a principle enshrined in the Rabbinic dictum that there is no "earlier" and no "later" in the text.\(^2\)

But the object of Rabbinic exegesis was not so much to elucidate the text as to maintain its integrity: by dint of finely honed legal arguments or of elaborate legendary and homiletical expansions built on minute lexical, grammatical, orthographic and other textual details, the Rabbis succeeded in fixing the text in their minds even before the Massoretes of the 6th to 9th centuries did so on paper. They thus carried forward a task which had been begun by the "scribes" (sōphērim, literally: tellers, counters) beginning, according to tradition, with Ezra the priestly scribe in the fifth century B.C.E.\(^3\)

Traditional Christian exegesis of the Bible is also largely indifferent to the historical dimension, i.e., to questions of the origin and evolution of the text. It focuses rather on the links between Old and New Testament, identifying passages in the latter which quote, fulfill or otherwise presuppose the former, and those in the former which somehow "prefigure" the latter. The Old Testament retains the status of authoritative and infallible divine revelation for Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant Christianity alike, but since its literal prescriptions are superseded by the New Testament, literal interpretation gives way to allegorical and figural interpretation. The latter, also known as typology, sees the Old and New Testament as one indivisible whole in which any event in the Jewish past can serve as a prototype and prefiguration of one in the life of Jesus. Thus, for example, the figure of the serpent in Genesis 3:15 can be taken as the prototype or promise, and Jesus' triumph over sin and the devil as the antitype or fulfillment, of one and the same figure.\(^4\) Or again, the manna from heaven which sustained the Israelites in the wilderness (Exodus 16) is transformed in the Gospel of John into Jesus himself.\(^5\)

But such departures from literal exegesis did not preclude a sustained interest in the Hebrew text. As against the claim of the Catholic and Orthodox churches to papal and other sources of authority by the side of the Bible, the Protestant Reformation emphasized the exclusive authority of the Bible. This helped stimulate the long tradition of Christian Hebraism which, often

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\(^2\)Palestinian Talmud (Megilla 1:9, 80b; cited by Besser 1969, note 2). For the application of this principle to Biblical archaeology, cf. Aharoni 1976, esp. pp. 73f.

\(^3\)Sarna 1972; Sarna and Hallo in Jick 1970.


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relying on Jewish scholarship, laid the foundations of modern Biblical research.⁶

A contemporary reflex of the earlier Christian tradition, but making full use of newer methods, is the so-called "canonical" approach to Biblical exegesis. As practiced by its principal advocate, it involves treating each book in its "canonical shape," i.e., the form in which it achieved its full intent – which is usually, though not always, the Massoretic text as found in printed editions of the Hebrew text. It also considers each book in its canonical context, i.e., as an integral part of the entire Bible, functioning to complement or balance other parts of the canon.⁷

This approach has a curious parallel of sorts in Assyriology: neither Assyrian nor Babylonian culture completed a final canon before the demise of the respective political systems which provided their patronage, but the separate constituents of their literary heritage had achieved a kind of canonical status and were well on their way to being integrated into one continuous, authoritative corpus. Modern reconstructions have therefore striven to recreate that corpus.⁸

**Historical-Critical Approaches**

In marked contrast to the traditional approaches, content to work with the finished canon as is, and to Assyriology's attempt to reconstruct a finished canon from disparate cuneiform fragments, the modern critical study of Biblical literature has proceeded in the opposite direction: it aspires to break up the known, received corpus by reconstructing its presumed original constituents. This general tendency in Biblical studies is part and parcel of a broader movement in European, and particularly in German intellectual history, notably the rise, at the end of the 18th century, of a historicism which regarded the origin of a thing as a necessary and often enough also as a sufficient explanation of that thing, and its evolution as the likeliest clue to its nature.⁹

There were, of course, many possible avenues of inquiry into origins, backgrounds and constituents of Biblical literature. To the extent that they all broke free from the holistic view and the theological constraints of traditional exegesis, they may be described as critical approaches. (One usually distinguishes between lower Biblical

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⁶Loewe 1971; R. Hallo, 1934; 1983.
⁷Childs 1974; 1978a and b.
⁸Hallo 1962; 1976b.
⁹Frei 1974.
criticism, directed at purely textual problems, and higher criticism which involved exegesis and hermeneutics; the disrepute into which the latter fell, in part as a result of lectures on "Babel and Bible" by the leading German Assyriologist Friedrich Delitzsch in 1902 (English translation published in 1906), was epitomized by Solomon Schechter's equation of higher criticism with "higher anti-Semitism," but is far from deserved). To the extent that they were all inspired by the historicist viewpoint, they may be described as historical. As a group, they may collectively be labeled the historical-critical approach. Their course has been chronicled many times and need not be repeated here except in a cursory overview from the perspective of the changing conceptions as to what constitutes the essential background of the received text of the Pentateuch.

Already the Rabbinic sages had conceded that the conclusion of the Pentateuch with its report of Moses' death (Deuteronomy 34) had to be attributed to Joshua. By the 12th century, Abraham ibn Ezra's discreet comments on this and other passages had cast subtle doubt on the whole question of Mosaic authorship. But the first real crack in the unitary view is generally attributed to Jean Astruc, a French Huguenot of presumably Jewish extraction who in 1753 published an anonymous book identifying two pre-Mosaic sources in Genesis on the basis of two different divine names employed there. Incorporated in J.G. Eichhorn's authoritative Introduction to the Study of the Old Testament (first German edition 1780-1783), the theory was gradually extended to the rest of the Pentateuch (and beyond) by scholars such as Julius Wellhausen. By the end of the nineteenth century, the theory had succeeded in isolating four principal documents that went into the making of the Pentateuch: the priestly source (P), the Deuteronomic source (D), the northern or "Ephraimite" source which tended to employ the generic divine name "God" ( Elohim) (E), and the southern or Judahite source which tended to employ the proper divine name YHWH (Jahweh in German transcription) for which the Masoretic text substituted the epithet "Lord" (adonay) (J).

General agreement was also reached that three of these sources could be dated with a high degree of probability to the tenth (J), ninth (E) and seventh centuries B.C.E. (D) respectively. In the classical view of this matter, the fourth source (P) was the product of the exilic age in the sixth century, but some newer adherents of source criticism prefer an eighth century date for this source, or its core. There are also dissenting opinions on many other crucial points within this school. Given in

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10Finkelstein 1958.
11Tosefta to Baba Batra 14b-15a; ref. courtesy S. Talmon.
addition the fact that the possible recovery of any of the actual documents reconstructed by this method is virtually excluded, the so-called documentary hypothesis remains just that – a hypothesis. The method of literary criticism which it sustains has therefore had to give way, more and more, to other, competing hypotheses.

Faced with the impossibility of recovering "documents" – or even of agreeing on their hypothetical appearance – other scholars have searched instead for the literary forms which underlie the received text. Here the text itself provides numerous clues, preserving the literary units which, answering to the requirement of their respective genres, were put together according to structural principles still visible in the finished oeuvre. This approach also involves the rediscovery of the life-situation, cultic or otherwise, that called forth each genre and is sometimes referred to by its German equivalent as "Sitz im Leben."12

Where the earlier school had emphasized the Pentateuch and especially Genesis, the newer approach took much of its inspiration from the work of Hermann Gunkel, Sigmund Mowinckel and others on the Psalms. It is generally described as form-criticism or form-history.

The twin objectives of form-critical investigation (genre and the "Sitz im Leben") conjured up conceptions of units of recitation, and thus led inevitably to the search for the oral prehistory of the written text, its evolving shape at various stages of its oral and written transmission, and its final fixation – sometimes in two or more divergent formulations – at the end of the tradition. Scandinavian scholars provided much of the momentum for this search, often applying it to the Prophets. Because of its emphasis on the transmission of the material and the editorial work involved in its preservation, this approach is variously known as tradition history or redaction history.

Other approaches, though also originating in (Continental) European scholarship, have found a warmer reception in British, American or Israeli centers. The sociological method pioneered by Max Weber, for example, today seeks the background of Biblical themes and genres in the "support groups" and other socio-economic or demographic realities presumed to have given rise to the major events and movements in Israelite history such as the conquest of Canaan or the rise of prophecy and apocalyptic. The comparative approach, championed by W.F. Albright and his disciples, has emphasized the contributions of archaeology, including the rich textual discoveries of the past century in Israel and the rest of the Near East.

12For an application of this method to cuneiform literature, cf. Hallo 1970b; Wilcke 1972.
Travels in CANAAN
Routes of Abraham and Isaac, Jacob and Esau
(Modern names and places)

The Great Sea
(Mediterranean Sea)