Empirical Models and Biblical Criticism
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Abstract

On the basis of empirical models conventional biblical (source and redaction) criticism has been challenged by many scholars. Some of their observations and criticism of source and redaction critical reconstructions are justified, and the most extreme reconstructions are too hypothetical. On the other hand, documented evidence has shown that source and redaction criticism have a realistic understanding of how the Hebrew Bible developed. A rejection of these methods, as implied by some critics, is an impasse: Without distinguishing between different layers of the text, much of the information in the Hebrew Bible would be unusable for historical purposes. Since conventional historical-critical methods have, in part, neglected empirical models, a refinement of the methods on the basis of these models is needed.

The 2016 volume *Empirical Models Challenging Biblical Criticism* by Ray Person and Robert Rezetko is one of the most recent challenges to the conventional method of biblical criticism,[1] which primarily refers to source, literary, and redaction criticisms. The critique of these methods is especially found in the editors' introduction to the volume.[2] They seek to correct "the current discussion of the efficacy of source and redaction criticism." At least in part, their discussion partner is *Insights into Editing* written by Reinhard Müller, Bas ter Haar Romeny, and myself.

Ray and Robert write: "too often biblical scholars make source and redactional arguments based on inappropriate criteria."[3] The examples discussed in their book "caution against the kind of excessive conclusions often reached by source and redaction critics."[4] They conclude "future studies in source and redaction criticism

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[1] Perhaps the most recent extensive publication challenging these methods is Lied L. & Lundhaug, H. (eds.) (2017). *Snapshots of Evolving Traditions: Jewish and Christian Manuscript Culture, Textual Fluidity, and New Philology*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

[2] According to Person and Rezetko "some of these conclusions may go further than the conclusions reached by some of the individual contributors to the volume. Nevertheless, these conclusions are our interpretation of the rhetorical force of our edited volume as a collective."

[3] Ray Person and Robert Rezetko, *Empirical Models Challenging Biblical Criticism*, Atlanta: SBL, 2016, 1.

[4] Person and Rezetko, *Empirical Models Challenging Biblical Criticism*, 18.

must accept much more limited goals and objectives, primarily focused on the extant texts in their textual plurality and how that plurality may enlighten us on the prehistory of the chosen literary text, even if only faintly."[5] This is a pessimistic conclusion that, if I am not completely mistaken, essentially rejects literary and redaction criticism.

We clearly agree that the Hebrew Bible mostly consist of heavily edited composite texts.[6] This is not self-evident among biblical scholars. Our main disagreement concerns the question, what should we do about it. I will argue that the challenges portray the classical methods in an excessively negative light. Without these methods much of the information in the Hebrew Bible about early Judaism could not be appreciated. At the same time, I acknowledge that we have to be more aware of the limits and possibilities of conventional biblical criticism.

Ray and Robert draw attention to weak points in literary criticism. Some of the documented cases imply so complicated processes that a critic could not detect, let alone reconstruct without textual evidence. Some texts were omitted and rewritten, making reconstruction unachievable. Accordingly, the criteria for detecting additions would be too uncertain to reach reliable results.

Particular attention is given to the *Wiederaufnahme*, or resumptive repetition, commonly used as a criterion for a later addition. This would be an uncertain criterion, since a single author could also produce a similar feature. They conclude: "*Wiederaufnahme* cannot be understood as a discernible trace, if that term implies an objective criterion that necessarily identifies an insertion." I fully agree, the repetition of an element in a resumptive way does not *necessarily* mean a later addition. *Wiederaufnahme* is *one possible* sign for an addition. This leads us to an important point, perhaps a misunderstanding about literary criticism. None of the criteria used in literary criticism should be used alone or mechanically as an

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[5] Person and Rezetko, *Empirical Models Challenging Biblical Criticism*, 35.

[6] Tigay's volume *Empirical Models for Biblical Criticism* was a very important contribution in this respect, especially in the English speaking world. However, not all scholars agree that the texts were very heavily edited, and many assume that the Masoretic text in particular was spared of major revisions.

inevitable (or "objective") indicator for an addition.[7] There should always be more than one criterion, and the more there are, the more probable the analysis it. These limitations are also well known. In his book on biblical criticism, Steck lists a variety of limitations.[8] Many books of methodology explicitly note that not all repetitions should be regarded as signs for later additions.[9] Surely, one may find weak analyses, where one indicator has been mechanically used as the basis of a literary critical decision, but a method should not be judged on that basis.

The critics should always have a deep understanding of the text and have a critical attitude towards each of the possible criteria. One should also not forget the so-called *Gegenprobe*—crosscheck or control test—which tests whether the text would function at all without the assumed addition. On top of that, one rarely does anything with an isolated addition. In a typical case, one detects similar additions, perhaps a certain topic or theological idea, in different parts of the composition, whereby a theory is corroborated.

The volume also addresses grammatical problems as a criterion for later editing, but the actual discussion only deals with linguistic dating. I fully agree that linguistic dating is problematic, but I do not think this is widely (if much at all) used in *literary* criticism. Different vocabulary or use of language *may* indicate a different author, but this is a different thing. Potentially, one could use linguistic dating for contextualizing or dating redactional layers in *redaction* criticism, but I am also skeptical about linguistic dating as a method. I do not fully understand why the editors chose to refer to our work in discussing the problems of linguistic dating. After criticizing linguistic dating, they conclude on p. 29: "Therefore, grammatical problems are ineffective as discernible traces."

To be sure, with grammatical problems we primarily mean cases where common rules of grammar are broken, for example a masculine suffix in reference to a feminine correlate (e.g., Josh 1:7), syntactical peculiarities (e.g., 2 Kings 25:10 of

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[7] Person and Rezetko, *Empirical Models Challenging Biblical Criticism*, 26: "earlier publications have clearly addressed the problem of assuming that *Wiederaufnahme* alone can provide evidence of an insertion on the basis of what in hindsight fits Tigay's notion of *empirical* data."

[8] See Steck, 1998: 54–57.

[9] Fohrer et al. 1976, 50–51; Kreutzer & Vieweger, 2005: 61.

MT; cf. LXX[B]), abnormal grammar (e.g., 1 Kings 3:1), unclear subjects or missing sentence constituents (e.g., 1 Sam 21:1; 2 Sam 7:21), etc. I would like to ask Ray, whether such problems could be used a criterion for an editorial intervention.

Tensions, contradictions, unexpected digressions, *disturbing* repetitions, clearly different vocabulary, clear differences in style or language (cf. J and P sources) and other kinds of unmotivated peculiarities are conventional criteria for assuming later editing. The editors discuss these only very briefly and warn that we should not use "our modern notions of literary unity as a standard."[10] Certainly, the critic needs to be familiar with the culture, the way of expression in ancient Hebrew and have a deep understanding of the text, but I would still not discredit contradictions and tensions as a *possible* indicator for different authors. For example, if a text relates positively to kingship and then suddenly negatively, it is not only a modern notion that there is a problem. Timo Veijola observed similar tensions in many texts, which led him to assume that one author may not be behind both conceptions.[11]

Ray and Robert fail to discuss the *possibilities* and *achievements* of these methods. In some cases literary critics detected an addition before it was corroborated by manuscript evidence. Judges 6:7–11 is a famous case; already in the 19th century Wellhausen argued that these verses must be a later addition, and the Qumran manuscript 4QJudg[a] later confirmed this. Steuernagel argued in 1912 that 2Sam 5:4–5 were added later, and these verses were found missing in 4QSam[a], discovered half a century later.

In *Insights into Editing* we discussed several documented cases where it would have been possible to detect later additions without the text-critical evidence. Such cases should also be part of the method's evaluation. First Kings 6:11–14 is a good example. The verses are missing in the Old Greek, whereas the MT is the result of an addition. Notably the addition would have been rather probably detected without the documented/"empirical" evidence from the Old Greek.

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[10] Person and Rezetko, *Empirical Models Challenging Biblical Criticism*, 29.

[11] Timo Veijola, *Das Königtum in der Beurteilung der deuteronomistischen Historiographie*, Helsinki: Suomalainen tiedeakatemia, 1997.

Literary critical approaches have also produced important information. Veijola's theory on kingship was a significant contribution, regardless of whether his analyses are accurate in every passage. By utilizing literary criticism Reinhard Müller has shown the origins of Yahweh as a weather god in the psalms. Christoph Levin has shown that covenant theology is a late development in Jeremiah and Deuteronomy. Only by a literary critical approach can one understand how conceptions in individual books developed. The analysis by Thilo Rudnig on Ezekiel is one among many.

Human sciences commonly produce uncertain theories. In archaeology, the interpretation of walls or destruction layers is a constant matter of discussion. There may be poor evidence that a wall belongs to a stratum or that a locus belongs to a destruction layer. Nevertheless, when an archaeologist spends a lot of time with a site and its material [for example, the way the architecture was constructed in each particular stratum or phase], he/she will start to understand the site, and eventually form a theory about the stratigraphy. An element of interpretation still remains, and it continues to be a matter of debate. Sometimes an archaeological site is a mess and sometimes the strata can be clearly distinguished.

It would unrealistic to expect *certainty* from literary critical reconstructions or archaeological interpretation of strata.[12] That there are two flood stories or two creation stories is a theory, but quite a probable and important one. In all human sciences we have different theories with various probabilities, and we have to choose between them. To expect "certainty" and "objectivity" reminds me of natural sciences, and this easily leads to a pessimistic or even nihilistic perception. On page 35 Ray and Robert write that "there may be some limited cases in which the empirical controls appear to provide relatively sound judgments concerning

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[12] Person and Rezetko, *Empirical Models Challenging Biblical Criticism*, 25: "possible efficacy of these discernible traces *when paired with text-critical variants and other empirical data*. However, as we will see, this does not suggest that these types of discernible traces alone—that is, without text-critical variants—can be successfully used to identify, with certainty, sources and redactional layers. Furthermore, even text-critical variants do not provide completely objective evidence, because there is always a certain degree of subjectivity to text-critical conclusions as well."

sources and redactional layers." This statement implies that every text-critical work, for example in critical editions, is very uncertain.

On the other hand, it is also a theory that a text is coherent, and its probability should also be on the table. If there are different models for the history of a text, their relative probabilities should be evaluated. Going back to concrete examples, if we do not appreciate Veijola's theory on two different positions of kingship in the historical books, we are left with an ambiguous picture. I am not sure that this is a preferable alternative.

Having strongly defended biblical criticism, Ray and Robert are certainly right in some of their criticism. The most radical reconstructions are like houses of cards. Many poor analyses can be found, and one should always be critical of how an analysis is conducted. Ray and Robert are right that omissions took place in the transmission of the Hebrew Bible, but one should not exaggerate their impact. Omissions were rare, and most scribes omitted parts of the text only if there was something theologically offensive. For example, the overwhelming majority of editorial changes in the text-critical evidence from Jeremiah are additions, and the same seems to apply to most of the Hebrew Bible.[13]

Not all additions can be identified by literary criticism. Small additions are particularly challenging, and "discernible traces are sometimes lacking in composite texts."[14] I agree that we cannot reconstruct the history of all texts, and literary critics should not have such a fantasy. Literary and redaction critical analyses are only abstractions of the text's complicated development.[15] Many literary critics recognize the limits of the methods,[16] and yet it is still worth the risks.

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[13] See Pakkala, 2013.

[14] Person and Rezetko, *Empirical Models Challenging Biblical Criticism*, 25.

[15] Quoting the methodological starting point of my literary critical analysis of Ezra-Nehemiah published 12 years ago, *Ezra the Scribe*, 2005, 11: "It is clear that any literary and redaction criticism is only an abstraction of the text's factual development. One cannot identify each addition, and, in many cases, considerable uncertainties remain. In some passages, the history of the text may be too chaotic to be reconstructed anymore by modern scholarship. There may simply not be enough evidence to determine which solution is correct. The editors may also have perfected their methods to the extent that scholars cannot identify the additions."

[16] For example, Timo Veijola, „Deuteronomismusforschung zwischen Tradition und innovation (III)," *ThR* 68 (2003) 1–44, here p. 41.

Nonetheless, the method should be refined by using documented evidence, and in this respect the approach taken by Ray and Robert should be welcomed. However, I am not sure whether this material should only be used to challenge or promote the method. Documented evidence can teach us its limits as well as its possibilities. We should consider the evidence in full, and not merely the very difficult or very clear cases.

The Hebrew Bible remains a central historical source for the beginnings Judaism and ancient Israel, and much of this information cannot be retrieved from any other source or by archaeology. At the same time, it lies beyond reasonable doubt that it was massively edited; many texts were intensively edited for centuries, which makes them difficult sources.

When evaluating classical biblical criticism, the weaknesses and consequences of the alternatives should also be on the table. Although this may sound a bit simplistic, I believe that in the end we are faced with three possible ways to deal with the Hebrew Bible as a historical source. First, try to make sense out of its literary history, despite all the limitations it involves and uncertainties of the theories.

The second possibility is to use the Hebrew Bible as it is—in its "final" form, which usually means the Masoretic text. In this case it should be recognized that the texts may consist of sources and literary layers from different times and contexts. However, this only allows very general conclusions and the results still remain uncertain.

Thirdly, on account of the methodological uncertainties, we can take a skeptical stand, and largely reject the Hebrew Bible as a reliable historical source. My impression is that Ray and Robert favor the third alternative, but in the last clause of the introduction, they leave the door open and write: "future studies in source and redaction criticism must accept much more limited goals and objectives, primarily focused on the extant texts in their textual plurality and how that plurality may enlighten us on the prehistory of the chosen literary text, even if only faintly." It would be fruitful to discuss what this concretely means.