



David McLain Carr. *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible: A New Reconstruction.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 544 pp. \$74.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-974260-8.



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The *Einleitung*--an advanced technical introduction to the field of biblical studies which deals with issues of authorship, history of scholarship, and method and applies these in a comprehensive survey of the contents of the Hebrew Bible--is a familiar staple in the training and practice of any biblical scholar. Classic introductions like those of Otto Eissfeldt, Georg Fohrer, Godfrey Driver, or Brevard Childs assume the Graf-Wellhausen documentary hypothesis, which dominated scholarship until the last quarter of the twentieth century but has since been severely compromised. Even recent efforts to resurrect it acknowledge and aim to address major problems. Biblical studies is now characterized by a diversity of approaches--arguably a positive development--but can sometimes seem adrift without a shared methodological foundation. David Carr's volume, *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible: A New Reconstruction*, offers a powerful anchor for this ship as he implores us to ground ourselves in what can be observed about scribal activity and the production of literature in antiquity.

The first section of the volume examines certain tendencies in transmission history evident in documented examples (e.g., different iterations of the Gilgamesh epic, rewritten Bible, and versions). For example, graphic variants such as haplography suggest that sometimes scribes copied from a text that was in front of them. Memory variants such as substitution of a word or phrase or interpolation of similar passages from elsewhere in the corpus, on the other hand, suggest that they wrote from memory. Carr is careful not to use the word "oral" here, because exclusively oral transmission is very fluid whereas memory variants reflect writing-supported memory, which is highly stable because it has been aided and controlled by written texts in the process of scribal training and practice. Documented cases also display certain types of internal revision--combination of preexisting texts, expansions, selective preservation, and harmonization--sometimes leaving marks of revision and sometimes not. These tendencies should serve as a control on how we deal with

texts when there is no extant documentation of their transmission history.

What we can learn from documented cases, therefore, has implications for how we deal with undocumented cases. Perhaps the most obvious is that we can no longer speak of oral stages of transmission superseded by written stages. This approach to the problem of orality, which was taken for granted in early- and mid-twentieth-century scholarship, has been eroding for some time, but the phenomenon of writing-supported memory in texts from various periods throughout the ancient Near East should drive the final nail in its coffin for anyone still inclined to it. A second implication is that vocabulary and style—long viewed as criteria that can be used to distinguish one source from another—is not terribly reliable. Again, biblical scholars have been raising this concern for some time, but the documented tendencies to update language and to exchange one word for another in memory variants raise serious problems for the use of such criteria except where a group of features creates a very distinctive profile. Third, because previously existing text is sometimes only partially preserved, we should not necessarily expect to reconstruct sources in full; Carr cautions that trying to do so may lead us to create “sources” that are more a reflection of our assumptions than what scribes actually worked with. Fourth, we should be wary of positing too many stages of transmission, because documented examples tend to have only two or three. Finally, Carr emphasizes the need to acknowledge limits on our ability to reconstruct transmission history in undocumented cases because we can tell where material has been combined or expanded only where the scribes left signs of their work. Where they did, we are on more solid ground. But the better the scribes did their work, the harder it is for us to do ours, and we may often have to content ourselves with suggesting possibilities, being clear about our warrants, and offering appropriate qualifications.

Carr offers not only an astute set of reflections on *how* to study the formation of the Hebrew Bible but also a framework within which to pursue such study. The second and third sections of the volume lay out a profile of scribal activity and literary production for each period of Israel’s history. The Hasmonean period is characterized by emergent standardization of a corpus of Torah and Prophets, probably sponsored by the Hasmoneans in an effort to provide a Jewish alternative to the authorized corpus of early Greek writers central to the foundation of Hellenistic culture. Of course the Qumran material indicates that this proto-Masoretic corpus stood alongside other text traditions which included more literature. Literary activity during the Hellenistic period was carried out by priestly tradents outside centers of power and involved the composition of apocalyptic and wisdom literature as well as diaspora texts such as Esther and Daniel. An earlier form of Hebrew was used as a literary language in cases where it was desirable to suggest antiquity. Texts explicitly linked to restoration (Haggai, Zechariah, Ezra, Nehemiah) or which are pro-Persian in their outlook (Isaiah 56-59) create a profile for the Persian period. Literature explicitly linked to exile, or which shows the influence of trauma related to forced migration, likewise creates a profile for the period of exile; such texts include Lamentations, Ezekiel, Deutero-Isaiah, and anti-Babylonian updates to previous collections of oracles. Competing non-Priestly and Priestly versions of Genesis-Joshua were probably created (using earlier materials) as a foundation for building Israelite identity during this period, and the process of combining and harmonizing these two versions extended into the Persian and Hellenistic periods. Texts which adopt and invert Assyrian genres and literary motifs as well as some prophetic oracles which relate to contemporary events may be best situated in the Neo-Assyrian period.

Carr emphasizes that the farther back we go, the more cautious and qualified we must be in our reconstructions, an important corrective to

the classic introductions which confidently dated material to the early monarchy. Some scholars now shy away from discussing literary production during this period because of the many ambiguities involved in our understanding of state formation and scribal activity, but Carr is not one of them. Debates about its extent aside, he reviews evidence of state formation during the tenth and ninth centuries BCE, and deems it reasonable to think that even a limited state apparatus would have involved a standard system of education and text production. In Carr's view, such a system likely used a standardized Phoenician script, showed signs of some Egyptian influence (e.g., use of hieratic numerals), and created a corpus of literature modeled on foreign examples to serve the purpose of *Israelite* enculturation. With this characterization of the period in mind, Carr cautiously inches out on a limb to suggest that some royal psalms, proverbs, love lyrics (Song of Songs), legal texts (Covenant Code), and the non-Priestly primeval history (which is a great deal like Atrahasis) *may* be dated to this period. Not all will agree, to be sure. But these types of literature do have parallels in Mesopotamian and Egyptian scribal curricula, and the notion that a nascent *Israelite* state would seek to train its scribes and officials on an *Israelite* version of a foreign model is certainly plausible, so Carr's reconstruction of this early period is interesting and worthy of engagement.

The depth and breadth of Carr's knowledge of text as well as secondary literature is impressive. He successfully integrates current trends in a number of subfields within biblical studies into a holistic approach for studying the transmission history of the Tanakh. Introductions or comprehensive works like this can be slow to pick up current thinking in specialized subdisciplines, but Carr is often on the cutting edge. For example, I was grateful to see that he consistently makes use of versions. The distinction between lower and higher criticism has been eroding within the community of scholars who regularly work on ver-

sions, but it is not clear how far the word has gotten out. Carr presents, for beginners and advanced scholars alike, a model of "doing biblical studies" that does not leave the study of versions merely for the preliminary step of establishing a good text but actualizes its potential to help us understand transmission history, an approach which should become normative. On the other hand, Carr does not give adequate attention to supplementary models of composition history when he discusses the formation of Torah. He prefers a model that involves combination and harmonization of preexisting sources because this is well attested in documented cases of transmission history. Yet he also discusses documented cases of expansion and applies the idea to the formation of oracle collections as well as the Deuteronomistic History, so it is puzzling why he does not give it more equal consideration for Torah. But this is a minor issue, and Carr's holistic approach will be of great use to biblical scholars who want a view of what is going on in subfields other than their own, to scholars in related disciplines (e.g., Jewish studies, classics, Assyriology, Egyptology) who want a detailed and current introduction to biblical studies, and especially to graduate students in biblical studies for whom this volume should be required reading.

Carr's methodological focus is another of the great strengths of this work. He presents specific readings of a wealth of texts in order to illustrate the method and engage readers in seeing and further exploring how it works. Some examples are discussed in great detail and can be studied thoroughly while other examples are just mentioned and can be further pursued, but both have great pedagogical value whether one is reading the work on one's own or using it in a classroom. Carr is more concerned that readers grasp the methodological issues he aims to illustrate with these readings than that we adopt his specific readings. As he notes: "In the final analysis, my claims for the application of such an approach in this book are modest. It is meant to be synthetic and sugges-

tive. My claims for the methodology are stronger” (p. 492). Carr thus encourages readers to take up the approach he advocates here and use it to further our understanding of the Tanakh’s formation, even if we end up calling his own readings into question. This is admirable in such an expansive, authoritative work.

While the tendencies we observe in documented cases of transmission history should serve as a control on how we deal with undocumented cases, Carr emphasizes that they are *trends* and not laws. In other words, we should use them flexibly. A work of this sort must paint in broad brush strokes, and doing so has its limitations. For example, Carr’s delineation of the non-Priestly version of Genesis-Joshua involves tracing themes like promise as oath through the corpus. While he has certainly shown thematic trends, he has not demonstrated that all of these texts are actually part of the same composition, because it is possible for later writers to pick up and develop themes already in previously existing texts. Moreover, while Carr’s profiles of literature in various periods provide a helpful framework, we will certainly find texts that fit more than one of those profiles and have to decide how best to account for *all* its characteristics without forcing it into one box or another. For example, this reviewer found that the Priestly version of the wilderness narrative inverts an Assyrian genre, which would fit Carr’s profile for the Neo-Assyrian period, but does so in service of literary and ideological goals which better fit Carr’s profile for exilic or early Persian period literature.[1] The fact that a particular text does not fit one profile does not suggest shortcomings in Carr’s work; indeed, I wish I had been able to access his work before mine was finished because his profiles would have given me a very helpful way to frame my discussion of this situation, as I suspect and hope it will for other scholars. In the end, there is no substitute for detailed study of specific texts, with attention to how features like the ones Carr points out serve the literary and ideological goals of a given passage.

Carr’s insights should be used in studies which *can* paint with finer brush strokes, some of which will inevitably critique and correct readings Carr has offered here, an outcome for which Carr himself hopes (p. 149).

Carr does not brand his work as an *Einleitung*, but it certainly could and should be used as such. He does not offer a definitive theory of composition that might replace the documentary hypothesis, but this should not be lamented. The diversity of approaches that currently characterizes biblical studies can be a real asset if basic methodological assumptions are shared, and Carr successfully provides us with a well-illustrated foundation suited to the state of biblical scholarship in the early twenty-first century.

Note

[1]. Angela R. Roskop, *The Wilderness Itineraries: Genre, Geography, and the Growth of Torah*, History, Archaeology, and Culture of the Levant 3 (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011).

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