

Texts without Contexts*

The Dating of Biblical Texts

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Abstract

We know little about the circumstances which gave rise to the composition of biblical texts, except what they themselves choose to tell us, and there is much debate about their dates and origins. They not only furnish a salutary example, however, of the many problems involved in trying to pin down the date of ancient texts, but also emphasize the need to consider such texts against a broader background. They are not necessarily simple products of single contexts, but may be used and re-used across long periods, with different circumstances potentially providing new contexts and new uses. Ultimately, there is more to texts than their date of composition, and it would be a mistake to rely wholly on theories of origin as a key to interpretation of meaning.

1 Introduction

Works which established themselves as important to the cultural identity of ancient societies were naturally read and copied over long periods of time. The very fact of such transmission, indeed, probably contributed both to perceptions of their importance, and to a tendency for some types of text to claim much greater antiquity than they in fact possessed. All scholars of ancient literature, therefore, have to face a double problem when they try to date a text, that both the external circumstances of its preservation and the internal evidence for its origin may be deeply misleading. Most scholars who find themselves in such a position, however, do at least have some resort to other circumstantial evidence: even classicists, whose texts have so often been preserved only in medieval copies, can at least attempt to place most of their texts (Homer aside, of course) within a relatively familiar cultural, linguistic and historical context, the contours of which can often be delineated in great detail from other sources.

Biblical scholars have no such luxury, and may not be the very best people to ask about the dating of texts – although we do have some expertise in quarrelling about dates: as a discipline, we enjoy little consensus about most issues of dating, and the differences of opinion expressed are often considerable. Although that problem is driven in part by

* Conscious that this text does, in fact, have a context, which does not lie in the familiar surroundings of my own discipline, I have attempted to tailor its content to the requirements of the discussion at hand. Correspondingly, bibliographical references are largely indicative rather than comprehensive, and I have not engaged in detail with the many significant issues raised here, but attempted instead to give an overview of the problems. I am grateful to the organizers of the conference for the opportunity to participate in a discussion which has so many points of contact with issues familiar to biblical scholars, but which also offers a new perspective on some key problems.

disputes about the very character of the texts, which are sometimes motivated by interests that are more theological than historical, it is exacerbated both by a significant shortage of external evidence, and by some very real concerns about the ways in which the external evidence which we do have should be interpreted. Of course, many of the arguments go back to the origins of the modern discipline, and to the realization that biblical texts are not always what they claim to be, or at least not what their readers have traditionally believed them to be. The widespread acknowledgment that laws were not written by Moses, psalms by David or proverbs by Solomon was a significant shift in perspective for many scholars, but older ideas were often not so much displaced as discarded, and the vacuum filled by a plethora of theories about origin and date, which have pre-occupied biblical scholarship ever since.

I can offer no quick solutions or magic bullets in this paper then, and I certainly will not hold up biblical studies as a model for other disciplines to follow. Indeed, I believe that many Egyptologists have approached issues of dating, at least in recent decades, with a rather greater level of sophistication than have many scholars of the Hebrew Bible. It is with due humility, therefore, that I shall try to outline in this paper some of the key problems that we have tried to address, and the issues which have arisen from addressing them.

2 The survival of texts

To begin with, though, it is worth saying a little about the materials with which we work, partly for the benefit of those unfamiliar with the field, and partly because it is important to highlight how very different they are from most Egyptian texts. A generation ago, perhaps, some of these differences would have been more obvious: until the finds at Qumran, which included more or less fragmentary copies of most of the biblical texts,¹ those texts were known to scholars principally through a process of transmission, not discovery. Indeed, the standard critical editions of the Hebrew Bible are based on manuscripts which date from the 10th or 11th centuries CE,² and for insights into the earlier history of the text we still depend heavily on the parallel transmission of translations in Greek or other languages.³ Although Qumran has supplied a great deal of important evi-

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- 1 The book of Esther is the exception, although there is some evidence for a knowledge of the book in other works found there (Talmon 1995).
 - 2 The key manuscripts used are the Leningrad Codex from 1008/1009 CE, and the Aleppo Codex, which is slightly earlier, but from which around 40% of the pages have been lost. The Hebrew text was effectively fixed by the Masoretes for some centuries before this – they employed relatively sophisticated techniques for proof-checking – and there is little evidence of significant variants in the tradition after the First Century CE. This reflects not so much a consistency of transmission going back to even earlier times, as the elimination of “deviant” Hebrew texts or readings: a particular form became fixed.
 - 3 The so-called “Septuagint” version contains a series of Greek translations produced from about the Third Century BCE. The Hebrew originals on which they were based pre-dated the standardization of the Hebrew text, and the Greek is often considered to reflect earlier readings. However, many Greek texts were effectively corrected against the later Hebrew text used by Origen in the Third Century CE: his Hexapla included a Greek text revised in the light of the Hebrew, and this was widely copied; Septuagint manuscripts also include different Greek redactions for certain books. In

dence for readings and variants, furthermore, the texts were found there as parts of a large collection, carefully put away for preservation or disposal, and there is still considerable debate about the nature of this collection and its owners. Their presence in the collection offers affirmation of the status which the individual texts had achieved by the first century CE, but it adds little useful, direct evidence for their more general use and distribution. We lack archaeological contexts for the reading and copying of our materials.⁴

Correspondingly, of course, we have never been able to make significant use of textual discoveries for the dating of our texts – which may be just as well. The history of such discoveries in related areas does not suggest that manuscript evidence is in itself a useful or reliable guide to anything except the establishment of a rough *terminus ad quem* for composition. This may, moreover, be very rough indeed: amongst the many non-biblical works attested at Qumran was a work called the Damascus Document, and that composition was previously known only from two medieval fragments, preserved in the Cairo Genizah.⁵ It is clear from such examples that the gaps in attestation of texts can be very substantial, and that the earliest known witness to a work may be very much later than its composition. Furthermore, although our manuscript witnesses for the biblical texts themselves are largely quite late, the significant quantity of evidence which we do have, especially from the parallel transmission of texts in Greek, paints a complicated picture. It is by no means the case simply that the earliest manuscripts represent the earliest forms of each text, and that the latest show the most developed: again, there are gaps in the family tree. The physical attestation of biblical texts is distinctive, but it does offer some general warnings about reliance on manuscript evidence for dating of form or composition.

3 Compositional and redactional issues

Another feature characteristic of the field lies in the compositional complexity of the texts themselves, and in the fact that it is really not clear just how many texts we have. This

order to reconstruct the original Greek, daughter versions (including translations into Latin and Coptic) are often used, and important readings often stand in manuscripts which are quite remote from the Hebrew originals.

- 4 A possible exception lies in the presence of blessings found on two silver amulets from Ketef Hinnom, near Jerusalem. These amulets have been dated to the 6th/7th Century BCE – although that dating has not gone unchallenged (most notably by Renz 1995: 447-56) – and the blessing on amulet Ketef Hinnom II is close to a benediction found in Numbers 6.24-26. Of course, if the amulet shows the antiquity of that benediction, it does not (despite many subsequent claims) show the antiquity of the book of Numbers, which may just be using a long-established form of blessing. More significantly, the most thorough recent attempt to establish an early date (Barkay, Lundberg, Vaughn & Zuckerman 2004) tends to affirm the possibility of 6th/7th-century origin, without actually excluding the possibility of a much later one.
- 5 Published by Schechter (1910): he dated one fragment to the 10th Century, the other a little later (datings which are still retained), although he recognized that the origins of the composition lay in much earlier Jewish sectarianism. We have no way to know how this text survived more than a thousand years between the copies from Qumran and from Cairo, when the sect that produced it apparently did not. It is sometimes suggested, however, that some texts were recovered from caves in the Qumran area in medieval times, and there are traditions to this effect: if so, transmission may not have been continuous, and the genizah texts may be a witness to medieval antiquarianism, rather than to any persistent religious practice.

problem is straightforward enough at one level: some books of the Bible are parts of larger compositions, and others are anthologies of works which were originally separate. So, most significantly, the first five of the thirty-nine books which constitute the traditional Protestant canon are traditionally grouped together as the Pentateuch, which has both a special status in Judaism, and also a rather complicated and contested compositional history. Whether those five books can usefully be treated as a single work is a good question in itself, but they certainly are not just five distinct texts. Another large block is formed by the historiographical books of Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings, which seem to present an understanding of the past connected to the distinctive concerns of Deuteronomy, and so are generally known collectively in modern scholarship as the “Deuteronomistic History”.⁶ The character and make-up of that work is itself the subject of much debate, but it is likewise not just a collection of separate compositions.⁷

On the other hand, though, we frequently find the aggregation of materials elsewhere: the twelve short books known collectively as the “minor prophets”, for instance, were transmitted together from an early period as a “Book of the Twelve”.⁸ The books of Psalms and Proverbs are more explicit anthologies, which probably incorporated existing collections or individual compositions, and the same may be true of some other works, such as the Song of Songs. Aside from such collections, though, we also have more complicated accumulations of material. Most famously, the book of Isaiah shifts its attention from the late 8th to the 6th century rather abruptly in chapter 40, marking what is generally agreed to be the introduction of material from a new writer.⁹ That is merely the tip of the iceberg, however, in a book which very probably contains material from many different periods – including some which appears, a little differently, in the Deuteronomistic History.¹⁰ Although scholars still debate the details, the Pentateuch also probably came into being through comparable processes of combination and supplementation, so that it is a composite work in two ways: simultaneously the sum of both the existing five books and of the sources or editorial additions which went into its original formation. The extent to which other works arose in this way is difficult to establish, but few have escaped at least the suspicion that they contain sources or secondary additions, and there have been many attempts to isolate different layers in many different books.

6 See especially Noth (1967).

7 In fact, the problems of the Deuteronomistic History cannot be isolated from those surrounding the Pentateuch in this respect. As Römer (2005) suggests, it may have been the formation of the Pentateuch which broke up the Deuteronomistic History, drawing Deuteronomy away from the head of the story and into a different complex of texts.

8 The extent to which they were treated as a single work, so that the anthology can be regarded as a composition in its own right, is much debated; see, for instance, Ben Zvi & Nogalski (2009).

9 Williamson (1994) argues that the second writer, commonly known as Deutero-Isaiah, in fact created much of the book as it stands, deliberately including earlier material, and intending that the earlier chapters should be read alongside his own work. Chapters 56-66 (“Trito-Isaiah”), are usually considered to post-date the work of Deutero-Isaiah, and may not be the work of a single hand; there are further, late additions within chapters 1-39.

10 Compare Isaiah 36-39 with 2 Kings 18-20.

There is probably some foundation to the corresponding suspicion, voiced *sotto voce* in other disciplines, that biblical scholars always read their texts with a pair of scissors to hand (indeed, it seems likely that some have a chainsaw on their desk). However, the fact that we sometimes have to deal with over-enthusiastic and methodologically problematic attempts to isolate sources or redactors should not disguise the fact that significant portions of our material have almost certainly reached their present form as the result of quite complicated processes. This may well be a consequence, at least in part, of the very particular status and authority accorded to some literature in early Jewish culture, but, whatever the cause, it poses some serious and distinctive problems for biblical scholarship in a number of areas, including that of dating. If we want to date the final form of a text, we have to reckon with the possibility that linguistic features or historical references apparent within it belonged originally to earlier forms of the work, or to sources which it has recycled. If we want to date such earlier forms or sources, on the other hand, we have first to isolate them, and it can be difficult to establish criteria that do not lead simply to circular argumentation. Despite the problems, many of the most intense debates about dating have centered on such materials, although it should also be observed that they provide an intriguing illustration of the ways in which texts may be used, re-used, and aligned with other texts: the very complexities of composition and transmission have proved fertile ground for discussion.

4 Historical context and allusion

Biblical scholarship, then, is often working with a type of composite textual evidence that is less commonly encountered in other fields, and that plays a significant role in our discussions. Whether they have emerged from such processes or not, however, all of our texts are the product of a culture about which we know little beyond what they tell us. In historical terms, indeed, the very concept of an “ancient Israel” is deeply problematic, and arises principally from the insistence in some of our literature that two separate political entities in Iron Age Palestine originally constituted a single nation: from other evidence, it is difficult to verify any more than that the kingdoms of Israel and Judah both recognized the god YHWH within their national cults, and the biblical accounts themselves claim political unity only for a brief period in about the 10th century BCE. If we speak of “Israelite” literature, therefore, we are essentially buying into a particular ideological position, the historical basis for which is questionable, or possibly irrelevant. In this, and many other respects, our texts themselves seek to shape the historical context within which we seek to place them; for some, indeed, it may have been a prime concern to present the past in a particular way. Biblical literature, moreover, has not come to us simply through the vagaries of archaeological discovery, and is not usually complemented by any significant amount of information from other sources: what we see is, in essence, what much later tradition has chosen to show us.

None of this means that what the texts tell us about the past should automatically be rejected: the promulgation of an ideology need not require inexactitude, and may involve

issues of selection and presentation more than outright fabrication.¹¹ It does mean, however, that any attempt to locate a biblical text within that past requires not just an evaluation of the text's literary development and composition, but also a critical assessment of the evidence offered by our sources for the historical period or periods within which that text might be located. To date biblical texts is a complicated business, which can often hover perilously close to circular argumentation.

On the positive side, many biblical texts, unlike much other ancient literature, do address themselves explicitly to specific historical events. Although we must be duly cautious about our sources of knowledge for such events, they do commonly offer a basis for establishing the earliest possible date at which a text can have been composed. The book of Ezekiel, for instance, is set in the Babylonian exile, and was certainly written after the initial deportation of some of the population from Jerusalem (although how much later might strictly be judged an open question). Even that sort of conclusion can be complicated by other considerations, however, and it is widely supposed, for example, that the Deuteronomistic History originally addressed the situation of Judah following the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel, but was then updated to incorporate the fall of Judah itself.¹² It is also difficult to judge proximity to an event. We may presume, say, that the poems in Lamentations were indeed written after the destruction of Jerusalem, and they describe the aftermath with vivid detail. These are poetically sophisticated acrostic compositions, however, that are informed both by theological analysis and by traditions of lament. It is unlikely that they were really written while there were still corpses in the street (e.g. 2.21), and some of their descriptions probably reflect not actual events so much as a stylized depiction of chaos – as when chapter 5 declares that slaves are in power, princes hung up by their hands, and elders shown disrespect. The poems may date from the period of Babylonian domination, as commonly assumed, but it would be difficult to prove that they were not written many years afterwards, as imaginative reflections on that period.¹³ Elsewhere, indeed, we find texts like Daniel and Jonah, or the apocryphal book of Tobit, which are set within quite specific historical periods, but which are recognized by common consent to be the work of much later writers. As a rule of thumb, historical references rarely tell us more than our earliest option for dating, and our earliest option for dating is not inherently, of course, our best option.


Rules need exceptions, of course, and it is true that, just occasionally, we are in a position to use historical events indirectly to establish also the latest probable date for a text, by arguing on the basis of references to an absence, or absences of reference. If we accept the biblical account of an exile and return, then the book of Haggai, for example, only makes any obvious sense if it was written after the return of a group from Babylon, but before their initial rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple: it is a plea for just such a

11 There is a tendency in much recent biblical scholarship to use “ideology” pejoratively, and to confuse motive with method. Aspects of this issue are addressed in an interesting way by Barr (2000: esp. 102-140).

12 So, classically, Cross (1973) and Nelson (1981).

13 Discussion of the issue is summarized in Berlin (2002: 33-37). Thomas Thompson (1999: 220-222) in fact understands the poems in terms of a virtual myth of destruction and re-birth, which characterized a quest for identity in the Persian period.

reconstruction. The book may have been preserved to incite further work, since it expects a building rather grander than anything which the group actually achieved. The second part of Isaiah, on the other hand (in chapters 40-55), clearly post-dates the rise of Cyrus (who is mentioned in the text), but seems to pre-date the actual return of Jews from exile, for which it seems to serve in part as a manifesto: its hopes, again, are much higher than the later reality seems to have been. Such arguments are tricky, though, and there is a danger of imposing our own expectations and knowledge upon the texts.

A more serious difficulty in the use of historical references can arise when texts speak about the past by speaking to the past. In a way that will be familiar to anyone who has read Nefer  prophetic books in the biblical corpus typically claim to report the words of an individual prophet who addresses events which lie in his present or future, although most of these had probably occurred already when the books themselves came into existence. So, for example, the book of Amos introduces us to a prophet who is characterized as a Judahite shepherd, living in the days of Uzziah, king of Judah, and Jeroboam, king of Israel, who both reigned in the eighth century (at least according to the biblical accounts), in a period of Assyrian ascendancy. Amos prophesies against the Northern Kingdom, and he accuses it of social and religious abuses which will bring about its destruction; a third-person account in chapter 7, indeed, describes him prophesying against Jeroboam at Bethel, the royal sanctuary of Israel. The book that presents his words, however, is almost certainly later, and its very dating of the prophet using kings from both kingdoms seems to reflect a style and ideology most commonly associated with the Deuteronomistic History. We do not know the relationship between prophet and book, or even whether there ever was a historical Amos: many problems are raised by the conventional assumption that much earlier oracles were somehow preserved for centuries before finding their way into books. The historicity of some prophet Amos and his words, though, is barely relevant to questions about the purpose and date of the book which claims to represent them. Whether it is an attempt to explain the fall of the Northern Kingdom, or merely a piece of “told you so” polemic, the purpose and date of the book have to be distinguished from those of its protagonist: there are, in a sense, two separate time-frames involved.¹⁴

A failure to recognize this, of course, has commonly led in the past, and often still in contemporary scholarship, to a characterization of books like Amos, or the similar Hosea, as much earlier than they probably are, along with a corresponding tendency to trim from the books as secondary anything that might give us a clue to their real date and context. That attitude is changing, and some recent work on other prophetic literature, indeed, has begun to emphasize just how far the prophets themselves, and the activities ascribed to them in the prophetic books, serve as vehicles for the later messages of those books: there is a growing perception, in other words, of prophets as characters rather than authors, and of prophetic books as literary creations, not mere repositories for oracles.¹⁵ Similarly, when it comes to other literature, there is a greater willingness, perhaps, to

14 See Weeks (2010a).

15 This does not, of course, exclude the possibility that more than one later stage of composition and redaction is involved; see, e.g., Carroll (1981).

accept that Nehemiah need not be a contemporary memoir just because it is written in the first person,¹⁶ or that the love-life and emotional state of King David may have been imagined by a later writer, rather than gleaned from court gossip at the time.¹⁷ As we acknowledge the possibility of greater sophistication in our literature than was once envisaged, so we increasingly have to allow for a clear distinction between that literature and the periods about which it chooses to tell us, and a date for the literature itself has to be established on other grounds.

Gradually, then, even those texts which are most concerned with relatively late events are joining the large group of biblical texts for which a simple dating by historical reference is not a serious option. This group has long included most of the psalms, the wisdom literature and other non-historiographical texts, but also some narrative literature with an ostensibly historical setting: there has never been much dispute in modern scholarship that the book of Ruth, for example, was written later than the pre-monarchic period in which it is set.¹⁸ Although they may contain historical references related to their time of composition, moreover, the Pentateuchal materials which recount the pre-history of Israel and the world probably belong here also: we simply do not have enough information to evaluate the date of, for example, allusions to Edom in the story of Jacob and Esau.¹⁹

Some of these materials raise particular issues for dating. Certain psalms, for instance, have conventionally been viewed in relation to specific liturgies, and if some were indeed used in the enthronement ceremonies of Judahite kings, for example, then it seems reasonable to date them to the period of Judah's monarchy.²⁰ There can be more than a little circularity involved in such identifications, however. A significant number of psalms, furthermore, have titles which classify them or ascribe them to a particular author. These may be important in establishing the development of the present collections, but the explicit historical information which they offer is generally either obscure

16 See Clines (1990).

17 Contrast, e.g., David Gunn's description of the material as, "a story in the sense of a work of art and entertainment" (1978: 38), with Norman Whybray's statement, ten years earlier, that, "There is almost universal agreement that the author [of the narratives about David in 2 Samuel 9 – 1 Kings 2] was a contemporary, or near-contemporary, of David and a member of the court, who was therefore in an excellent position to write an authentic history of the reign" (1968: 11). The account of David's reign is commonly regarded as a separate block of material within the Deuteronomistic History.

18 Debate over the dating of Ruth, although it draws in discussions of linguistic and other criteria, tends to be polarized between a more traditional view that the book was composed in reaction to post-exilic attacks on intermarriage with non-Jews (around 500 BCE), and an idea that it was written in support of the Davidic dynasty in Judah, and so must be regarded as a product of the monarchic period. Both ideas emphasize, perhaps over-emphasize, the closing genealogical statements (Ruth 4.17-22), which make Ruth herself an ancestress of King David. Even if these really are crucial to the purposes of the book, which is questionable, we know far too little about the broader historical context to determine that these are the only periods in which foreignness and King David would have been matters of interest to an author. David, indeed, is a figure of great interest to the Books of Chronicles, which are usually dated much later than 500 BCE. A few scholars have proposed dates for Ruth as late as the Hasmonean period.

19 See especially Genesis 36.

20 On this approach to the Psalms, see especially Mowinckel (1962).

or misleading: a number betray, for instance, what is generally considered to be a late and secondary interest in the supposed circumstances of their composition by David. Particular references in the poems themselves may seem more helpful, as when Psalm 132.8 refers to the ark as though it were present in the temple: the ark, after all, disappeared after the Babylonian destruction of the first Jerusalem temple. A date before that time seems less compelling, however, when we realize that the psalmist is putting a speech into the mouth of King David, who was famously associated in biblical tradition with bringing the ark to Jerusalem (cf. 2 Samuel 6), and so may be writing retrospectively from almost any period. Elsewhere, the ascriptions of material to Solomon in the book of Proverbs probably reflect no more than a desire by the writers, or subsequent editors, to link those materials with a king famous for his wisdom and his creation of such proverbs. Solomon may appear in the Song of Songs for similar reasons: biblical tradition makes him a rather accomplished lover – of 700 wives and 300 concubines (1 Kings 11.1-3). Historical references in the non-historical materials tend to be interesting for other reasons, then, but they are potentially unreliable guides to the date of composition.

I say “potentially” because, of course, it is generally no easier to demonstrate, say, that David did not write a psalm than to demonstrate that he did. Indeed, scholars writing from a conservative perspective can – and sometimes do – argue that the burden of proof rests with those writers who would reject such ascriptions and references as historical data.²¹ The fact that the New Testament (e.g. Luke 20.42) apparently reflects an ancient acceptance of at least some ascriptions, furthermore, may shed light on the motives of certain such scholars, but it does also indicate that relatively early readers of our texts were either oblivious to any convention of pseudonymity or secondary contextualization which was involved, or else chose to ignore it. Indeed, since mainstream scholarship has also traditionally accepted some ascriptions, especially in the prophetic literature, whilst rejecting others, it may seem not at all unreasonable to suggest that double standards are being applied, and that the assertions of the texts themselves are being accepted or rejected rather arbitrarily. That inconsistency arises principally, however, from a perception that different factors are at work in different texts; the undoubted use, moreover, of pseudonymity and historical retrojection in so much apocalyptic or other early Jewish literature must compel us to think rather carefully about the ancient attitude to such conventions, and about where the burden of proof really lies when it comes to the biblical texts. Whilst our understanding of so many issues in the composition and transmission of the texts remains incomplete, there is no general, self-evident or default position that we can adopt when it comes to the credibility of ascriptions or other aspects of self-presentation.

21 Bruce Waltke (2004: 31-36), for instance, argues for the Solomonic composition of Proverbs, and along the way asserts both David's authorship of the Psalms, and that “No attribution of authorship within the Old Testament has been proved spurious” (p. 35). It is not clear what would constitute proof in such a discussion.

5 Language

Where texts have no helpful references, few connections with other texts, or simply a timeless quality, there is little option for us but to date them on linguistic grounds, and these are often a factor in dating more generally. Our knowledge of the development of Hebrew, however, is hampered both by our inability to agree on the date of many of our texts with precision, and by a shortage of inscriptional material which is both dateable itself and more than a few words long. We rely to a great extent on rabbinic Hebrew, and more recently on texts from Qumran, to establish a trajectory for the language, and this enables us to say a certain amount about the features characteristic of late Hebrew. Corresponding comparisons with earlier North West Semitic languages, principally Ugaritic, are fraught with difficulties, but provide some evidence for archaic forms. We know very little, however, about dialectal variations, and the current classifications of Hebrew are rather blunt instruments when it comes to date.

The most thorough recent work on the subject (Young and Rezetko 2008) concludes that the biblical texts largely represent two literary forms of the language. Broadly speaking, one is used throughout the period in which texts were composed, and is very conservative; it typically excludes the use of certain forms which were in colloquial use, although these appear sporadically. The other is more liberal in its acceptance of many such forms, and is restricted to later literature. If this description is accurate, of course, then it makes the dating of short texts very difficult on linguistic grounds, and the dating of texts which employ the more conservative register almost impossible. Only where it is clear that texts are written in the later register does this give a probable basis for dating them, but even then the period to which they may be assigned is long and rather ill-defined. Of course, broad classifications tell only a part of the story, and we may say with some confidence, for example, that the presence of Persian loan-words in Ecclesiastes are indicative of a date no earlier than the fifth century.²² Other idioms or lexical items are often drawn into discussions of date and may provide useful evidence, but the corpus of biblical Hebrew is generally too small for us to limit the date of such items with confidence.

6 Forms and concepts

Not dissimilar problems confront attempts to date literary forms, ideas or concepts, although such attempts obviously face many other difficulties. Issues of identification and interpretation aside, we cannot assume that development in such matters was linear, or that the biblical texts alone provide adequate resources to describe or delineate such development. It is sometimes still claimed, for instance, that the long units of advice in Proverbs must be a secondary development from the sort of short sayings which dominate the book.²³ Were this true, it would not indicate that any long unit was necessarily later than any short one: both forms clearly co-existed. In fact, though, it is quite unlikely to be true, and a glance over the fence at literature abroad would show that each more probably belongs to a distinct and well-established genre, with neither ultimately derived

²² E.g., *prds* in Ecclesiastes 2.5 (cf. Nehemiah 2.8).

²³ So Westermann (1995: 99).

from the other.²⁴ Reconstructions of Yahwistic theological development similarly posit various relationships between universalism, monolatry and, ultimately, monotheism, which are very difficult to verify, and which certainly offer no good basis for situating texts at particular points along some speculative path to enlightenment. The complexities are well illustrated by the book of Job, which is arguably second to none in its proclamation of a universal creator god, but which also credits this god with children: its unique deity is a requirement of its discourse, not a sign of its monotheism.²⁵ As with words and idioms over against language more generally, so individual forms and themes may offer scope for dating or investigation of the relationship between certain texts, but we cannot construct big developmental schemes for the literature and thought to use as measuring rods for all our literature.

7 Relative dating

Mention of the relationship between texts brings me to the first of two areas which may be more fruitful. As I observed a little earlier, texts which deal with the distant past do not lend themselves to dating by direct reference to historical events: outside the bastions of religious fundamentalism, biblical scholars are not inclined to date texts relative to the flood, say, or to the tower of Babel. They might well look, however, to the periods when Jewish writers were exposed to Mesopotamian flood narratives, or first encountered ziggurats, for the origin of such stories and of the texts which tell them. Identifiable influences, though, like historical references, can tell us only about the earliest possible date of a text, if they tell us anything new at all. In itself, for example, the apparent influence of the Instruction of Amenemopht on parts of the book of Proverbs raises some interesting questions, but does nothing to narrow the range of possible dates for the Hebrew materials, any more than does the less certain influence of Gilgamesh on Ecclesiastes:²⁶ neither of these Hebrew compositions could possibly be as old as the foreign texts which they used, and those foreign texts could have been used by Hebrew writers of almost any period. Where the sources are closer in time, though, or where the period of potential influence can be more closely defined, this is an approach which may have much to offer.

²⁴ See, e.g., Kayatz (1966), McKane (1970).

²⁵ On the presentation of God in biblical wisdom literature, see Weeks (2010b: 117-119). Little if any of the material in the Hebrew Bible is monotheistic, in the strict sense of insisting upon the *existence* of only one divine being, although whether the term can usefully be applied at all is a matter of debate; “monolatry” may be a more appropriate category for understanding many of the texts. Accordingly, there are many references to a divine assembly and to children of God (see, e.g., Deuteronomy 32.8 – where the original “children of El” is preserved in the Greek text – and Psalm 89.6-7). These were later understood in terms of angels or other supernatural beings, but in Job God’s actual paternity tends to be affirmed by the juxtaposition of God’s family gathering with the gathering of Job’s children. See Job 1.1-6; 2.1.

²⁶ Erman’s supposition (Erman 1924), that Amenemopht influenced Proverbs, has largely been affirmed by subsequent studies, despite some expressions of doubt. For the possible influence of Gilgamesh on Ecclesiastes, see Loretz (1964: 116-122); Uehlinger (1997: 180-192).

In the case of influences from Mesopotamia, it is always tempting to look to the Babylonian exile as a self-evidently important time of exposure to literature and ideas, but easy at the same time to forget both earlier influences on Palestine in the pre-Israelite period or during the neo-Assyrian period and the continuing existence of a Jewish diaspora community after the sixth century. For Egypt, there is no particular reason to look for particular periods of cultural or political influence when, again, there were Jewish communities in Egypt at least as early as the Persian period. There are too many possibilities and too little information for the influence of foreign texts to be especially useful in dating. The influence of biblical materials on each other is, in practice, much more productive, since, if the direction of influence is clear, then we are at least then able to date texts relative to each other. The most obvious, and relatively uncontroversial example is the close relationship between the books of Chronicles and Kings, from which it is evident that the Chronicler drew heavily on the Deuteronomistic History, or at least some version of that work close to what we have today.²⁷ Sources and directions of influence are not always so clear, but there are sufficient inter-relationships that the assignment of a date to one text may have significant repercussions on the dating of many others, and the relative dating of texts, less frequently challenged than any absolute dating, is a distinctive feature of biblical scholarship. This imposes, of course, a corresponding burden on the re-dating of any individual texts linked to others, since it must demonstrate compatibility of the new date with features of those others, or else re-examine the link.

8 Historical circumstance

The second area in which much useful work is done involves identification of the historical circumstances most likely to have given rise to the ideas or concerns expressed in particular texts. Conclusions in this area may be rather provisional: archaeological evidence and changing attitudes to the texts provoke frequent shifts in our understanding both of the historical context and of the concerns expressed by our writers. So, for instance, it was very common, not so long ago, for biblical scholars to speak of an “Enlightenment” under Solomon, fuelled by wealth and political stability, which gave rise not only to the later association of this king with literary composition, but actually to some of the key materials now preserved in the Pentateuch, along with, possibly, much other literature. A time of ambition, prosperity and international trade seemed appropriate for the crafting of stories about Israel’s patriarchal ancestors, which placed the unified nation in a broader international context, and optimistically affirmed its possession of a prosperous future in its promised territory.²⁸ Now there is considerable debate about the whole period of the “United Monarchy”, and even those scholars who accept Solomon as a historical personage are less likely to view his reign through quite such rose-

²⁷ The only significant objection raised against this assumption in recent years is Auld (1994), which posits a shared source instead of direct dependence, but which has attracted few followers.

²⁸ The idea of a Solomonic Enlightenment is particularly associated with the work of Gerhard von Rad; see especially von Rad (1944).

tinted glasses.²⁹ On the other hand, the biblical emphasis on Israel's distinctiveness, once accepted merely as historical fact, raises pressing questions in the face of archaeological evidence which tends to show an essential cultural continuity between the "Canaanite" Palestine of the Late Bronze Age, and the "Israelite" Palestine of the Iron Age,³⁰ and the hunt is on for circumstances which might explain this biblical emphasis.

The fact that circumstantial arguments for dating may be superseded by changing evidence or ideas does not mean that they are wrong-headed in principle, although the limits of our information mean that they may always be somewhat speculative. Some are very hard to sustain, like the suggestion that the book of Job must reflect ideas of suffering and injustice occasioned by the experience of exile.³¹ Others, though, have endured for many years. It is difficult to verify the biblical claims about King Josiah of Judah, whose officials purportedly found the book of the Law lying neglected in the Temple, who consequently had those laws read to the people and instituted a religious reform that embraced even the sanctuary of Bethel in the now-defunct Northern Kingdom, and who ultimately died fighting an Egyptian force at Megiddo, in the far north of Palestine (2 Kings 22-23). Many scholars have long found it no less difficult, though, to resist the suspicion that the story is associated in some way with the promulgation of Deuteronomy, a hugely influential book that insists on the oneness of YHWH, the unity of the people and the need to concentrate religious practice at a single site – an ideology that would be very useful were Judah staking a claim on Israel's territory after the withdrawal of Assyrian power in the period to which Josiah belongs. Josiah has long been, in effect, our Senwosret I, and the biblical account of his reign has been the foundation of many theories about the background to particular texts or ideas.

In general, the constant shifts in evidence and attitude have tended over the last few decades to push the dating of biblical texts ever later, with many now quite often being dated to the exilic period (although such datings rarely if ever provoke a scholarly consensus).³² We have little detailed knowledge either of the exilic community or of the situa-

29 A belief in the existence of David and Solomon seems to have become something of a touchstone in recent historical debates, especially following the bitter exchanges about an inscription recovered from Tel Dan, which appears to mention the "House of David" (Biran & Naveh 1993), and which has been heralded as proof of David's existence. Even the more radical participants rarely venture, in fact, to suggest that these individuals definitely did not exist, but there are good reasons to doubt many of the details of their reigns offered in the biblical accounts; for a cautious summary of the evidence in the case of Solomon, see Miller & Hayes (2006: 186-220). Grabbe (2007: 115) writes pessimistically that, "...here and there might be a verse that reflects the historical Solomon, but to my mind the Solomon story is the most problematic, providing the thickest cloud of obscurity over the history that lies behind it". A comparison is often drawn with the relationship between history and the Arthurian legends, and that comparison may be apt.

30 There is a substantial literature on this topic; see conveniently Miller & Hayes (2006: 30-118).

31 So, e.g., Perdue (2008: 117-118). The principal objection, of course, is that we have a range of earlier literature from other cultures exploring or touching upon similar issues, so that Job's suffering would appear to be connected more to literary topos than to historical circumstance.

32 Amongst the suggestions are such works as Deuteronomy (so, e.g., Pakkala 2009) or the Yahwistic source in the Pentateuch (e.g., on various grounds, Van Seters 1975; Schmid 1976; Vorländer 1978; Levin 1993), which are generally perceived to have strong interconnections with other materials: a

tion in Palestine during the Babylonian exile – and the literature itself is largely, perhaps curiously, silent on the topic. The context itself, however, is widely perceived to supply motives for a significant number of the preoccupations to be found in biblical material, from the anti-monarchic streak visible in some Deuteronomic and Deuteronomistic materials (if the monarchy was held responsible for the disasters), through to the promotion of YHWH as a god of the world, not merely the god of a distant state, whose temple has been destroyed. If there was such a surge of literary activity in this period, of course, it raises interesting questions about the reasons why inhabitants of this defeated state should have been so concerned to preserve and re-evaluate their identity. There are also many implications for the relative dating of some texts, or of components within texts, which were previously presumed by most scholars. Such issues, though, have been confronted and resolved many times in the past.

For all that it once seemed radical, however, that trend has been overtaken in the last twenty years by a much more profound revisionism,³³ which has been greeted not merely with scepticism in many quarters, but with outright hostility.³⁴ Essentially this revisionism – often characterized (initially, at least, by its opponents) as “minimalism” – builds on a long-standing perception that biblical historiography involved a re-shaping of the past to suit the concerns of its own time, and that the biblical Israel was a product of biblical literature, more than the biblical literature a product of Israel. This idea goes back to the early days of 19th-century German biblical scholarship, and had itself engendered a certain amount of friction between German and American scholars in the post-war period. The more recent revisionists, however, draw from it either the logical conclusion or the *reductio ad absurdum* (depending on one’s viewpoint), that the history of Israel portrayed in biblical sources is essentially a fiction, created to provide a past and a sense of identity for a community in Palestine during the Persian, or even the Hellenistic period.³⁵ The actual identity of that community is understood differently by different scholars, but it is sometimes taken to be a new group – perhaps brought there themselves as exiles – which essentially borrows the identity of a previous culture in Israel and Judah,

re-dating to this period would have profound implications. Against this trend, see especially the papers in Day (2004).

- 33 Because two of the principal proponents – Thomas Thompson and Niels Peter Lemche – are associated with the University of Copenhagen, this revisionism is sometimes characterized as “the Copenhagen School”. Similar points of view have been expressed by scholars from a wide range of other backgrounds, however, and it is misleading either to see the trend in terms of a “school” (a label rejected by most of those involved), or to associate it particularly with one location.
- 34 The reaction has frequently gone beyond the slanderous, to include quite unfounded claims of anti-semitism (since the understandings expressed of biblical historiography are taken to undermine ideas of Jewish ethnicity) and of ignorance. See, for instance, Rendsburg (1999), which reflects no credit on its author. A defence against more thoughtful claims of ideological motivation is offered in Lemche (2000).
- 35 See, e.g., Davies (1992); Lemche (1988) & (1998); Thompson (1999). These scholars, it should be noted, are no less concerned with what they see as a further fabrication of the past in modern scholarship, which they perceive as having created a history of Israel from an amalgamation of biblical narrative and historical evidence under the influence of contemporary pre-occupations. On this aspect, see the provocative Whitelam (1996).

and weaves a past for itself from scraps of historical remembrance, with an almost Tolkienesque devotion to detail.

Such things do happen, and many modern nation-states treasure traditions about their identity which do not bear close scrutiny. Even before the rise of nationalism, deliberate fabrication of the past was not unknown, and the medieval Declaration of Arbroath, for instance, presents a fascinating but wholly fictitious picture of the Scots as exiles from Troy.³⁶ At the very least, the revisionist hypothesis reminds us that we need to pay more attention to the concerns of the Persian and Hellenistic periods if we are to understand the reasons behind the preservation of biblical literature, and its promotion to the status of scripture: texts are not transmitted by communities which have no interest in them, and the survival of biblical texts over such a long time is too often taken for granted.³⁷ It seems very probable that the Second Temple period furnishes at least a secondary context for the promulgation and re-interpretation of existing biblical texts, and it is interesting to note, for instance, the re-application of biblical prophecies to later circumstances in commentaries from Qumran. It is also more than likely that this period did much to shape what we might call the existing “biblical” presentation of ancient Israel, through the selection and attribution of authority to particular texts: we know that other works have been lost, and it is impossible to say how far the views of, for instance, the Deuteronomistic History were actually normative at an earlier time. To date the actual composition of all our texts outright to the last few centuries BCE, however, is a rather different matter, and requires better explanations than revisionist scholars have been able to offer, especially for the creation of so many texts which have no specific concern with, or direct relevance to identity.

Such explanations may be offered yet, but until then this school of thought offers merely another range of options: in place of Solomon’s enlightenment we get, say, a cultural and political awakening fostered by the Achaemenids; in place of Judahite interests we get the machinations of the Hasmoneans; in place of late Bronze Age *habiru* seeking an identity in Palestine, we get the victims of Assyrian or Babylonian imperialism trying to carve out a new life there. For all its safety-pins and spiky hair, therefore, revisionism lies within a long tradition of seeking contexts for the concerns of the biblical texts, and its claims represent a relocation of those contexts, but not a radical departure in assumptions or methodology. Its greatest contribution lies, perhaps, not in its explanation for the origin of texts, but in the reminder which it offers that the original context of a composition is not the only one which we should consider, or even, perhaps, the most important one. Texts are created, but they are also used, re-interpreted, and, in some sense, constantly re-created through successive generations of readers: their origin is only part of their story.

36 See Cowan (1998). On the creation of modern Scottish identity more generally, see the entertaining Trevor-Roper (1983). This discusses amongst other things, the extraordinary forgery in the 1760s, by two men named Macpherson, of a supposedly early epic by one Ossian, which supplied a wholly fictional ancient past for the Celtic highlanders who had immigrated from Ireland.

37 See Weeks (2002).

To conclude on that note is perhaps the best way to sum up the state of play in biblical studies. Our body of texts has long outlived whatever historical context produced it, but bears the stamp of that context, and carries its own, potentially unreliable accounts of it. These are, in the absence of much else, the best evidence which we possess for the origin of the texts, but shifts in our understanding both of the texts and of their putative backgrounds leave us engaged in a constant effort to relate the two. As other ideas or information are incorporated, so interpretations change and, with them, so do dates. It may be that further evidence will one day consolidate our reigning theories for each text, but it may possibly force us back to some quite different position: when it comes to dates, we must use a pencil and eraser to do the Sudoku. As I said earlier, therefore, biblical scholars may not be the best people to ask about dating: if dating were the whole story, indeed, biblical scholarship would seem a rather meagre and quarrelsome discipline. Somehow, though, we do seem to be able to say rather a lot about our texts without much agreement on date, and our problems in that area serve to emphasize that their content and ideas, which went on to shape so much later history, cannot be reduced simply to the product of particular historical circumstance.

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