

Preface

Or, Why Did We Write This Book?

The age of the Hebrew Bible is difficult to determine. It is a brittle text, fracturing under the slightest pressure. Any biblical book may turn out to contain strata and fragments composed at wholly different periods. Many books are projected into a distant past, written down on the basis of oral traditions and cultural memory that may span centuries, but the details about the events and characters reveal little about the age of the written account. The history of ideas (e.g., monotheism), institutions (e.g., the monarchy, sacrifice, festivals), or hidden power struggles (e.g., priestly rivalries or anti-Samaritan polemics) might give useful hints, if it weren't for the fact that most of these extratextual realities are known exclusively from the text that situates them in time. Even a relative dating based on the use of one text in another, or the response of one passage to an earlier one, is hard to achieve in the absence of clear criteria that help to decide in which direction the textual contact runs. Is Ezekiel the “father of the P source”? Or is he a priest indebted to priestly traditions of the type written down in the Pentateuch? Such debates may be interminable.

Many scholars argue that we should drop the whole issue and concentrate only on the final form of the text or its reception. Isn't the life of the Bible independent of its time of composition? Perhaps in many respects it is. But it is also shaped by its history, even as it shapes later history. Its central narrative relates to tribal, national, and cultural history from end to end. Its historylike narrative is neither a parable nor an atemporal myth. If we could only place it in its historical context, even approximately, we would understand its nuanced meanings better. But this means taking on the challenge of dating the texts.

In many cases the best evidence—sometimes, though not always, the only evidence—is language. Language evolves. Its sounds,

semantics, and syntax change through time. This makes it possible, in theory, to determine, more or less, a chronology for individual writings. Dating texts by their language is a well-established practice in biblical studies as in many other fields. The procedures involved are complicated, and the results not always as precise as one could wish. There is leeway for discussion and debate. Yet, contrary to recent claims, dating Hebrew texts on the basis of their language is not impossible.

It is the conjunction of these two circumstances—the difficulty in dating biblical texts, and the opportunity granted by recent work in historical linguistics—that instilled in us the desire to write this book. Linguistic dating is not a new approach. Much of the historical-critical method as it developed in the nineteenth century is based on it, at least in part. But in recent times, as a result of the ever-growing necessity to specialize, the approach has fallen into disuse among biblical scholars, allowing it to be caricatured and prematurely rejected. The idea of this book is to reinscribe historical research on the Hebrew language where it belongs: at the heart of biblical studies. We aim to gather the fruits of recent research on Biblical Hebrew and to present them to the student and scholar in an accessible way. The book blends the functions of introduction, synthesis, and scholarly dialogue. We hope that it will instruct and inspire others to engage with this field of research.

It has been a rare pleasure to cowrite this book. We have discovered that two minds are better than one, especially when they are passionate about a common subject. The whole and the parts were jointly conceived, but each chapter has a primary author. Chapters 1, 2, 8, and appendix 2 are primarily Hendel's handiwork, and chapters 3–7 and appendix 1 are primarily Joosten's. Each of us reviewed and revised the other's contributions, so that we are both responsible for the whole.

It has also been a delight to pursue this project with visits on both sides of the pond, including memorable workshops at the University of California, Berkeley, and the Université de Strasbourg. We thank the France-Berkeley Fund for making this intercultural project possible. Our thanks also to many colleagues who participated in the workshops or otherwise helped us along the way: Steve Fassberg, Randy Garr, Noam Mizrahi, Na'ama Pat-El, Matthieu Richelle, Konrad Schmid, and Bill Schniedewind. We are grateful to the University of Oxford for providing a grant to cover the indexing, and to Vladimir Olivero for creating the indexes. Jodi

Beder deftly improved our prose. Finally, our thanks to each other's families for sharing meals, hikes, and guitar playing.

We know that agreement about basic issues is elusive in the current situation of biblical scholarship. Our goal is to think clearly about some complicated matters and to contribute to a multilayered understanding of the biblical text. We invite our readers—and our critics—to consider patiently the merits of our explanatory model, its consilience, simplicity, and scope.

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