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The Torah as Multi-Authorial Literature of Discussion

The History, Aesthetics, and Hermeneutics of a Product of Collaborative Writing

Abstract

The Torah is traditionally ascribed to Moses as its author, but it is in fact an anonymous work of scribes who produced it as a written text between the 9th and the 4th centuries BCE. Its oral traditions even reach back into the 2nd millennium BCE. The complex result of this long composition history is an often contradictory yet readable text, as its long reception history, foremost in Judaism and Christianity, demonstrates. If read closely, the Torah reveals an interesting set of checks and balances between its theological positions. It seems that its authors were not concerned primarily with narrative consistence in the first place, but with creating a literary universe that includes a variety of theological perspectives.

1. Introduction

The Torah – the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, also known as the Pentateuch – is one of the best known and most widely distributed texts in world literature.[1] At the same time, it is an excellent example of a textual corpus that emerged as a collaborative scribal enterprise. Like almost all biblical literature, the Torah developed from anonymous or pseudonymous scribal traditions.[2] It grew over several centuries and was composed by a considerable number of scribes, who had no interest in divulging their identities or their names. Rather, they endeavoured to preserve and update the traditions that were available to them. Aleida and Jan Assmann describe this process as an integrated approach of "tending to text" and "tending to meaning,"[3] which means that the authors responsible for the Torah did not limit themselves to passing on the text but also con-

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* Translated by Alexander Wilson. Quotations for which no other translation is cited have also been translated by Wilson.

1 See Schmid / Schröter 2020.
2 See Schmid 2011a; Schmid / Schröter 2020; Schmid 2021.
3 See Assmann / Assmann 1987, pp. 12f.

cerned themselves with its significance, which involved constant updating, revision, and expansion. The result of this authorial activity was, of course, a very complex text, which in its final form contains different perspectives and positions on a variety of issues, is very difficult to read, and has yielded an abundance of hermeneutical approaches to the Bible, which are documented today in the rich history of its reception.[4]

In the following considerations, the basic features of how current scholarship understands the composition of the Torah will be outlined first. Knowledge of the Torah's scribal development is important for appreciating its specific character as an agglutinative, perpetuated work of literature. In the second step, the discussion will focus, with the aid of two examples, on how a complex text such as the Torah could have been read from the perspective of the authors who wrote it. The Torah never explicitly states how readers should understand its text. It is therefore only possible to deduce implicitly from historical reconstructions of its literary accretion what kinds of reading processes the authors of the Torah had in mind for their audience. On the one hand, a small-scale, commentarial continuation (Gen 18:6) will be presented as a first example; it shows how certain attempts at compromise are undertaken within a multi-authorial and multi-perspectival text like the Torah. On the other hand, as a second example the juxtaposition of two divergent creation narratives in Gen 1–3, which date back to different contexts of origin, is interrogated with regard to its hermeneutical logic. Of course, this approach can only offer two exemplary highlights to address the question of the Torah's historical hermeneutics; these would also have to be cross-checked with reference to early reception, such as in the Book of Jubilees or the 4QReworked texts of the Pentateuch.[5]

2. Who Wrote the Torah?[6]

Against the backdrop of over two hundred years of critical scholarship and ongoing debate on this question,[7] the answer still remains: we do not know. Tradition claims that it was Moses, but the Torah itself says otherwise. Only small sections of the Torah, not even close to its entire body of texts, are attributed to him: Ex 17:14 (the battle against Amalek); 24:4 (Book of the Covenant); 34:28 (Ten Commandments); Num 33:2 (the itinerary of the Israelites); Deut 31:9 (Deuteronomic Law); and 31:22 (Song of Moses). In spite of the disagreement in current research, the situation of Pentateuch scholarship – to use the term more commonly employed in scholarship, instead of 'Torah' – is by no means

4   On this subject, see the *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, published by De Gruyter since 2009.
5   See Zahn 2011; Kugel 2012.
6   See Schmid 2022 for more details.
7   See, for example, Römer 2013a; Römer 2013b, pp. 120–168; Gertz et al. 2016; Kratz 2016; Dozeman 2017.

hopeless, however, and it is indeed possible to make some basic statements about the origin of the Torah.

2.1. The Pentateuch's Body of Texts

What is the textual basis for the Pentateuch?[8] Which of its manuscripts remain extant? At this juncture, the so-called Codex Leningradensis or B 19A should be mentioned first.[9] This manuscript of the Hebrew Bible dates from the year 1008 CE, and is thus a medieval text, but it is at the same time the oldest complete textual witness for the Pentateuch. This appears to put researchers in a very awkward position: we are dealing with a text that supposedly goes back 2500 years, but its earliest textual attestation is only 1000 years old. Yet the situation is not hopeless.

First, there are ancient translations that clearly came into existence before Codex B 19A. The earliest ones are the major codices of the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek, the oldest of which is Codex Sinaiticus.[10] Admittedly, this text is no original, but it is a good witness to the Hebrew text on which it is based, as it dates from the 4th century CE. The Greek text of the Pentateuch occasionally differs from the Hebrew text, especially in Ex 35–40. Julius Popper, the first scholar to deal extensively and specifically with very late additions to the Pentateuch, noted this problem as early as in 1862.[11]

Second, there are older surviving parts of the Pentateuch in Hebrew. Before 1947, the oldest surviving fragment of a biblical text was the so-called Nash Papyrus, which probably dates from around 100 BCE and contains both the Decalogue and the beginning of 'Shema Israel' from Deuteronomy 6.[12] Much more important, however, were the textual finds from the Dead Sea near Qumran, which began in 1947.[13] The remnants of around 900 scrolls were discovered, with many biblical texts among them. These date mainly from the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE. Most of the texts are fragmentary; many of them are no larger than a few square centimetres. All the biblical fragments are accessible in the book "The Biblical Qumran Scrolls" by Eugene Ulrich.[14]

What do these Qumran texts reveal about the Pentateuch in the early post-biblical period? The most enlightening aspect is the remarkable proximity of these fragments, insofar as they have survived, to Codex B 19A. In the case of Gen 1:1–5 in 4QGen^b, for example, there are no differences at all in the consonantal text.[15] Nevertheless, the

8   See Lange 2016.
9   See Tov 2012, pp. 23–74.
10   See Parker 2010.
11   Popper 1862; see also Wade 2003; Lo Sardo 2020.
12   See Tov 2012, p. 111. This text, however, is more 'liturgical' in nature than 'biblical.'
13   See Lange 2009; Xeravits/Porzig 2015, pp. 23–47.
14   Ulrich 2010, with the sections on the Pentateuch on pp. 1–246.
15   See Ulrich 2010, pp. 1f.

various scrolls seem to reveal affiliations with the traditionally known textual families of the Pentateuch that emerged after 70 CE. Armin Lange provides the following esti-mate:[16]

Proto-Masoretic: 37.5 %
Proto-Samaritan: 5.0 %
Proto-Septuagint: 5.0 %
Independent: 52.5 %

A certain preponderance of the proto-Masoretic strand is conspicuous in these figures, although there is a considerable number of independent readings. Sometimes the dif-ferences are indeed relevant, as the readings of Elohim instead of Yhwh in Gen 22:14[17] or of Mount Gerizim instead of Mount Ebal in Deut 27:4 indicate (the latter fragment, however, could be a forgery).[18] As concerns the majority of the proto-Masoretic texts, Emanuel Tov asserts:

> The differences between these texts [the proto-Masoretic texts, K.S.] and L [Codex Leningraden-sis, K.S.] are negligible; in fact, they do resemble the internal differences between the medieval manuscripts themselves.[19]

The findings from Qumran thus represent an important starting point for the exegesis of the Pentateuch and underpin the legitimacy of the critical use of the Masoretic text in Pentateuch scholarship. On the one hand, it is justified to place significant trust in the Hebrew text of the Pentateuch as it is attested in the medieval manuscript of Codex B 19A, which forms the textual basis for most modern editions of the Bible. On the other hand, there was evidently at that time no stable text of the Pentateuch in which every single letter or word was fixed as part of an entirely canonized Bible – as the differences between the scrolls show.[20] Concerning the composition of the Pentateuch, it can also be deduced from Qumran that the Pentateuch was fundamentally completed at the latest in the 2nd century BCE. Some of its texts are certainly much older, but probably none of them is younger.

One epigraphic witness should be expressly mentioned in connection with the textual attestation of the Pentateuch. There exists a quasi-biblical text from the biblical period in the shape of the silver amulets of Ketef Hinnom, which offer a text that comes

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16   Lange 2009, p. 155.
17   See Römer 2012.
18   See Kreuzer 2015, pp. 151–154.
19   Tov 2003.
20   See Grabbe 2006.

close to Num 6:24–26 and which can be dated somewhere between the 7th and 2nd centuries BCE. Because of its textual peculiarities and deviations, however, this is not to be considered a witness to a 'biblical' text.[21]

2.2. Sociohistorical Conditions for the Creation of the Pentateuch

How should we imagine the cultural and historical background to the emergence of the Pentateuch?[22] Who could read and write in the first place? There are various estimates for the ancient world, but they agree that probably no more than five to ten percent of the population were skilled in reading and writing to the extent that they could understand and produce texts of some length. Literacy was presumably an elite phenomenon, and texts were distributed only in the circles surrounding the palace and the temple.[23] In the biblical period, the production of literature was mainly the preserve of professional scribes, and the reading of literature was generally restricted to the same circles.

Israel Finkelstein and others have made the proposition that the Lachish Ostraca – some of which, including at least six different manuscripts, can be traced back to a military outpost – indicate that literacy was more widespread, even among soldiers in the early 6th century BCE.[24] This reading of the evidence, however, remains controversial.

Othmar Keel, Matthieu Richelle, and others have argued for a continuous literary tradition in Jerusalem from the Bronze Age city-state to the early Iron Age.[25] Even though this view is probably not entirely incorrect, it should not be overstated. Abdi-Hepa's Jerusalem was rather different from the Jerusalem of David or Solomon, and there was evidently a cultural rupture between the Jerusalem of the late Bronze Age and that of the early Iron Age. One example of this is the Ophel inscription from Jerusalem, which evidences a rather rudimentary level of linguistic education.[26]

A second question is: How did people write? Most of the inscriptions available to us today are on pots or stones, and these are the only objects to have survived. For obvious reasons, texts on stone or clay endure much longer than texts on papyrus or leather, so we cannot simply conclude that people only wrote on what archaeologists have found. (In fact, there is only one papyrus sheet left from the period of the monarchy, Mur. 17.)[27]

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21 See Berlejung 2008a; Berlejung 2008b.
22 See Tappy / McCarter 2008; Rollston 2010; Richelle 2016; Blum 2016a; Grund-Wittenberg 2017; Blum 2019; Finkelstein 2020.
23 See, for example, Hezser 2001; Carr 2005, pp. 70f., 165f., 172f., 187–191; Rollston 2010, pp. 127–133; Carr 2011, pp. 128f. Alexander 2003 presupposes widespread reading and writing competence in the community of Qumran.
24 Finkelstein 2020; see also Faigenbaum-Golovin et al. 2016.
25 Keel 2007, pp. 101–132; Richelle 2016.
26 See Lehmann / Zernecke 2013.
27 Published in *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert* 2, pp. 93–100.

In addition, an impressive number of sigils and seals from Jerusalem, on which remains of papyrus can be found, survive from the time of the First Temple, a sure indication that papyrus was a common writing medium. Some of the seals bear names such as *Gemaryahu ben Shafan*, who is mentioned in Jer 36:10, or *Yehuchal ben Shelemyahu* and *Gedaliah ben Pashchur*, who are known from Jer 38:1.[28]

The writing material for texts such as the Torah was most likely papyrus or leather; longer books had to be written on leather because papyrus leaves quickly became brittle. The ink consisted of soot and metal. It is generally assumed that a professional scribe needed six months to write a book the length of Genesis or Isaiah. If we add to this the value of the sheepskins, it becomes clear how costly the production of such a scroll – which, in the case of Isaiah, was over eight meters long – must have been.

During the biblical period, probably only very few copies of biblical books existed. For the 2nd century BCE, 2 Macc 2:13–15 provides evidence that the Jewish community in Alexandria, which was probably one of the largest diaspora groups, did not possess a copy of every book of the Bible. In this text, a letter from the Jerusalemites to the Jews in Alexandria is quoted, in which they are invited to borrow from Jerusalem a copy of those biblical books that are not in their possession:

> Nehemiah [...] founded a library and collected the books about the kings and prophets, and the writings of David [...]. In the same way Judas also collected all the books that had been lost on account of the war which had come upon us, and they are in our possession. So if you have need of them, send people to get them for you. (2 Macc 2:13–15)[29]

Historical knowledge about scribes and scribal schools in ancient Israel is very limited. Both biblical testimonies and preserved sigils (and sigil impressions)[30] from the pre-exilic period amply attest the existence of professional scribes (see, for example, 2 Sam 8:17; 1 Kgs 4:3; Jer 32; 36; 43; 45 [Baruch the scribe]; Ez 7:6:12–26 ["Ezra the scribe of the law of God in Heaven"]; Neh 13:12–13; Sir 38–39; Mark 11:27–33; Matt 23). In the course of history, their function shifted towards scriptural scholarship, which was not only in charge of the recording of texts (though this remained necessary due to the limited durability of textual means), but also of the expansionist interpretation of the texts they passed down (see Jer 36:32).

In the light of comparable cultural and historical analogies, we may envisage scribes who were trained at schools in the temple or in the palace. Such schools are hardly ever mentioned in the Bible (only in Sir 51:23; Acts 19:9), so that they must instead

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28   See the discussion in Richelle 2016.

29   Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this contribution are derived from the Revised Standard Version (RSV) of the Bible.

30   See Richelle 2016.

be deduced from analogous situations, which does not necessarily speak against this hypothesis. There was also no strict separation between the schools of the temple and the palace. The temple was not an autonomous institution but rather depended on the royal court.

The Talmudic tradition knows of 480 schools in Jerusalem (y. Meg. 73b), although this figure is possibly exaggerated. In any case, there were presumably a considerable number of schools, especially in Jerusalem, beginning in the Hellenistic period. We should not necessarily think of these schools as separate buildings of their own; more central was the relationship between teacher and pupil (1 Chr 25:8; Prov 5:12–14; Ps 119:99). The instruction of pupils could take place in the rooms of the temple or in the private homes of the teachers. It may be assumed that there were private libraries in the priestly families which played a role in the transfer of scriptural knowledge within the family.

Occasionally, scholars characterize the lack of evidence for schools in ancient Israel as typical and instead attribute the training of scribes to the transmission of knowledge that tended to take place within the 'families' of the scribes. The two hypotheses should probably be combined with one another and not played off against each other.[31]

Regarding the question of how the Torah was understood at the time of its emergence, it remains to be said that it was written down, commented on and transmitted in comparatively small circles of literati. Its literary production and reception can be characterized as an in-group phenomenon, even if one cannot imagine a homogenous group of scribes who would have moved in a uniform intellectual sphere because of the variety of theological positions represented in the text. The diversity of the content of the Torah, however, may be due especially to the different traditional backgrounds of its material. In any case, the scribes recede entirely behind their texts.[32]

2.3. The Dating of the Torah

When was the Torah written? Because it originated as a communal undertaking by scribes, it is not possible to provide an exact date but only a span of time in which the texts emerged. For the *terminus a quo*, an important clarification is needed: only the beginnings of the earliest written versions of a text can be determined. In other words, the oral prehistory of the text is left out in the cold. Many texts in the Bible, especially in the Pentateuch, go back to oral traditions that may be much older than their written counterparts. The *terminus a quo* thus determines merely the beginning of the written

31 See, for example, the Jerusalem scribal family of the Shaphanids, who were close to both the royal court and the temple (2 Kgs 22:3; Jer 36).
32 See Schmid 2019.

transmission of a text that, for its part, may already have been known as an oral narrative or comparable form.[33]

In contrast to many prophetic texts, no dates of origin are mentioned in the Pentateuch. We must therefore search for internal and external indicators to determine the date of its composition. There is one crucial finding that is significant when it comes to determining the beginnings of the Pentateuch's literary emergence. In the 9th and 8th centuries BCE, a historical caesura in the cultural development of Israel and Judah can be established with certitude. At this point in time, a certain degree of statehood and literacy had been achieved, and these two elements belong together, in the sense that the further developed a state is, the more bureaucracy and education are required – especially in the area of writing.

If one looks at the number of inscriptions found in ancient Israel and in Judah, a clear increase can be noted in the 8th century, which should presumably be interpreted as an indication of cultural development in ancient Israel and in Judah. This assumption can be substantiated by the texts found that can be dated to the 10th century BCE, such as the Gezer calendar,[34] the clay sherd from Jerusalem,[35] the Baal inscription from Beth Shemesh,[36] the abecedarium of Tel Zayit,[37] and the ostracon of Khirbet Qeiyafa.[38] These all date from the 10th century BCE or from the period immediately before or afterwards. The simplicity of the content and writing style is not difficult to detect.

A century later, in the 9th century BCE, a very different picture of a strongly developing written culture emerges, even if some of this evidence is written in Aramaic and not Hebrew. The first monumental stele from the region is the Mesha Stele, on which can be found written testimonies in Moabite and which includes the first documented reference to Yhwh and Israel as we know them.[39] Another monumental text is the Tel Dan Stele in Aramaic, which is known especially for its mention of *Beth David*.[40]

An impressive written testimony is also found on the 8th-century Aramaic wall inscription from Tell Deir 'Alla[41] which mentions the prophet Balaam who appears in Num 22–24. The story of Balaam in the inscription differs greatly from the narrative about him in the Bible, but it is still one of the earliest instances of a literary text in the immediate vicinity of ancient Israel. Erhard Blum, alongside others, has convincingly argued that the site of Tell Deir 'Alla should be interpreted as a school, namely

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33   See Steck 1999, pp. 63–75; see also Wahl 1997.
34   See, for example, Pardee 1997; Sivan 1998.
35   See Lehmann / Zernecke 2013.
36   See McCarter / Bunimovitz / Lederman 2011.
37   See Tappy / McCarter 2008.
38   See Schroer / Münger 2017.
39   See Dearman 1989.
40   See Athas 2005; Blum 2016b.
41   See Weippert / Weippert 1982; Blum 2008a; Blum 2008b.

on the basis of a late Hellenistic parallel to the architecture of Trimithis in Egypt (ca. 4th century CE).[42] This interpretation as a school could also pertain to Kuntillet Ajrud, where wall inscriptions can similarly be found.[43]

Another important development corresponds to the paradigm shift expressed through the large number and new quality of written texts in ancient Israel and in Judah in the 9th and 8th centuries BCE. At this time, Israel begins to be perceived as a state by its neighbours. That Israel and Judah had reached a level of cultural development in the 9th to 8th centuries BCE that made the production of literary texts possible is indicated not only by internal changes in the development of writing, but also by external, contemporary perceptions. A good example of this can be found in the Assyrian inscriptions from the middle of the 9th century BCE in which Jehu, the man of Bit-Humri, i.e. Jehu of the House of Omri, is mentioned. The Black Obelisk, which includes pictorial representations and texts about the reign of Salmanassar III, even shows an image of Jehu (bowing before the Assyrian king) and is thus the oldest surviving image of an Israelite.[44]

On the basis of these observations about the development of a scribal culture in ancient Israel, we can assume that the earliest texts of the Pentateuch as a literary work date back to the 9th and 8th centuries BCE.

When was the Pentateuch completed? With regard to this question, three points of reference can be taken into account. First, there is the translation into Greek, the so-called Septuagint, which can be dated to the middle of the 2nd century BCE.[45] Although it contains some divergences, especially in the second account of the Tabernacle in Ex 35–40,[46] the Septuagint is basically indicative of a complete Pentateuch. Second, the books of Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah, which probably date back to the 4th century BCE, refer to a textual corpus named either the Torah of YHWH or the Torah of Moses. It is unclear whether this indicates an already completed Pentateuch, but it at least points in that direction.[47] Third, there is no distinct allusion in the Pentateuch to the fall of the Persian Empire in the course of Alexander the Great's conquests.[48] The Persian Empire existed from 539–333 BCE, a period perceived in ancient Israel as politically stable – and, in some texts, even as the end of history. The loss of this political order was accompanied by numerous questions. In prophetic literature, above all, this event was interpreted as cosmic judgement. In the Pentateuch, however, no text

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42 Blum 2019.

43 See Meshel 2012.

44 See Keel / Uehlinger 1994.

45 See, for example, Siegert 2001, pp. 42 f. The oldest manuscript of the Greek Pentateuch is the Rylands Papyrus 458, which dates back to the middle of the 2nd century BCE; see Wevers 1977; Troyer 2008, p. 277.

46 See, for example, Wevers 1993.

47 See García López 1995, esp. pp. 627–630; Steins 1996.

48 See Schmid 2016a.

clearly alludes directly or indirectly to this event. The Pentateuch thus seems to be, in essence, a pre-Hellenistic text, dating from the time before Alexander the Great and the Hellenization of the East.

There are, however, a few exceptions that speak against an entirely pre-Hellenistic origin of the Pentateuch. The best candidate for a post-Persian, Hellenistic text in the Pentateuch seems to be the little 'apocalypse' in Num 24:14–24, which mentions the victory of the ships of Kittim over Ashur and Eber in v. 24. According to the opinion of some exegetes, this text most probably alludes to the battles between Alexander and the Persians.[49] Other post-Persian elements could be the specific numbers in the genealogies of Gen 5 and 11.[50] These numbers shape the overall chronology of the Pentateuch and vary considerably between the different versions. Yet these exceptions are insignificant: the substance of the Pentateuch seems to be pre-Hellenistic.

There thus remains a historical span between the 9th or 8th century and the 4th century BCE for the composition of the Torah. Of course, many of its texts trace back to earlier oral traditions, but, as written texts, they did not emerge before the first millennium BCE.

In more recent scholarship, the Torah thus presents itself as a text that has grown to its present form over several centuries. The processes behind this can no longer be elucidated in full, but it can be established that the text grew continuously through numerous updates and also through combinations of formerly independent pieces of text. Some of these literary activities have rather small-scale horizons that extend no farther than a verse or a pericope; others encompass larger textual units up to entire books or the entire Torah.

3. How Can the Torah Be Read?

How are the texts of the Torah, which were created by many hands over long periods of time, to be read and understood? To answer this question, one must reconstruct a comprehensive historical hermeneutics of the Torah.[51] The determination of different literary strata in the Torah is a science that has only emerged since the early modern period. That said, earlier interpreters of the Torah also had to come to grips with its complexity and developed a plethora of approaches concerning the question of how it should be read.[52] It is impossible to deal with the subject of a historical hermeneutics of the Torah in a satisfactory manner here, even if only in broad outline. Instead, this

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49   See Rouillard 1985, p. 467; Crüsemann 1992, p. 403; Schmitt 1994, p. 185.
50   See Hughes 1990; see the objections of Hendel 2012 against dating the figures in MT to the 2nd century BCE.
51   See, for example, Spieckermann 2012.
52   See, for example, Dohmen / Stemberger 1996; Brettler 2007; Kugel 2008.

contribution must limit itself to two examples that illustrate at least some very basic aspects of the problem as to how a multi-layered text that was written by several scribes over a considerable period of time is to be understood.

3.1. Gen 18:6 as an Editorially Expanded Text

A brief and useful example of an editorially expanded text is Gen 18:6, which may shed light on how the texts of the Torah were potentially supposed to have been read.[53] Gen 18:1–16 tells the story of Abraham and Sarah; they are visited by three men who ultimately turn out to be God himself. We are dealing here with a traditional story of theoxeny. Probably the best-known text of this genre is Ovid's *Philemon and Baucis*: gods visit a pious married couple and are generously entertained; the couple is consequently presented with a divine gift. In the case of Gen 18, God appears in the form of three men – often interpreted in the Christian tradition as *vestigium trinitatis*.[54] Abraham and Sarah prepare an opulent meal for them, and at its conclusion, they receive the divine promise that they will finally have a son. The preparation of the flatbreads served to the three visitors is described as follows:

> And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of flour (*qæmaḥ*), fine flour (*solæt*), knead it, and make cakes." (Gen 18:6)

It is notable that the flour to be used for the flatbread is described in two ways: it is first called *qæmaḥ*, i.e. normal flour, but this is immediately followed by *solæt*, which signifies something else, namely a particularly fine flour. These choices of expression – *flour* (*qæmaḥ*), *fine flour* (*solæt*) – are striking, even if it is indeed grammatically possible.[55] What should Sarah use after all, flour or fine flour? One answer could be provided by the observation that the specific term *fine flour* (*solæt*) is found in the description of the grain offerings to God in the Book of Leviticus. Here, the regulation demands that such offerings consist of fine flour (*solæt*):

> When any one brings a cereal offering as an offering to Yhwh, his offering shall be of fine flour (*solæt*). (Lev 2:1)

The simplest explanation for the sequence *flour* (*qæmaḥ*), *fine flour* (*solæt*) in Gen 18:6 is hence the assumption that a later redactor reading the story in Gen 18:1–16 was of the opinion that Abraham and Sarah's food for the divine visitors should comply with the

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53   See Ska 2009.
54   See, for example, Schwöbel 2009.
55   Waltke / O'Connor 1990, pp. 229–232.

prescription in Lev 2:1:[56] the flatbread must be produced with the correct ingredients that are necessary for sacrificial offerings. He thus added *fine flour* (*solæt*) after *flour* (*qæmaḥ*) to emphasize Abraham's unconscious adherence to the Torah, which would only later be passed on to Israel under Moses. At the same time, this redactor apparently decided not simply to replace *flour* (*qæmaḥ*) with *fine flour* (*solæt*). The text in its available form already possessed a certain authority, such that the editor did not want to, and perhaps was not able to, reformulate it – he could merely add to it.[57]

What does this mean with regard to the intended reader of such a story? Gen 18:6 is evidently intended for a reader who is well-versed in the Torah. In order to recognize Abraham's unconscious observance of the prescription in Lev 2:1, such a reader must have knowledge of the intertextual connection between Gen 18:6 and Lev 2:1. Reading Gen 18 thus requires considerable ability to recognize allusions to other texts of the Torah, which confirms that, in the case of the writers and readers of the Torah in the biblical period, we are probably dealing with the same group.

3.2. Gen 1–3 as a Narrative Sequence

The second example comes from the beginning of the Torah in Gen 1–3.[58] It is one of the oldest, and still relevant, observations of biblical criticism that Gen 1–3 contains two formerly independent creation narratives:[59] one in Gen 1:1–2:4a, which tells of God's creation of the world in six days and his rest on the seventh day; and the other in Gen 2:4b–3:24, which reports the creation of the first humans in the Garden of Eden and their expulsion. Not only is God named differently in both accounts – Elohim in Gen 1:1–2:4a, and Yhwh Elohim in Gen 2:4b–3:24[60] – but the two stories also contradict each other in essentials. First, the order in which plants and humans are created is different. In the first account, plants are created on the third day and humans on the sixth day, while the second account informs its readers at the very beginning:

> When no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up [...] and there was no man to till the ground [...] then Yhwh Elohim formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. (Gen 2:5–7)

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56   Gen 18 is a comparatively old – in any case, pre-Priestly – text, which does not yet presuppose Lev 2; see Schmid 2019, p. 163.

57   For elisions in the process of the Hebrew Bible's creation, see Pakkala 2019.

58   See Schmid 2019, pp. 10–14.

59   See Bührer 2014, pp. 275–375; Gertz 2018, pp. 29–146. See also Schmid 2012.

60   See, for example, [Astruc] 1753.

Here, man is created prior to the plants. From the reader's perspective, the question arises as to which is the correct order. A clear answer does not emerge from the textual context of Gen 1–3. The depiction is more a matter of ensuring the integrity of both accounts,[61] rather than providing a coherent portrayal of the chronology of events in the two accounts summarized in Gen 1–3. At the seam of Gen 1:1–2:3 and 2:5–3:24, however, in Gen 2:4, there is a recognizable attempt on the editorial level to harmonize this problem of the connection between the two narratives:[62]

> These are the generations of the heaven and the earth when they were created. In the day [/ at the time] (b^eyōm) that Yhwh Elohim made the earth and the heaven [...]. (Gen 2:4)

The formulation b^eyōm, which is literally translated as 'in the day,' can also be understood more generally as 'at the time' (for this usage, see Ex 6:28; Num 3:1; Isa 11:16; Ez 28:13). Yōm ('day') picks up on the seven days of Gen 1:1–2:3, but, at the same time, the phrasing suggests to the reader that yōm ('day') is to be understood more fluidly: it is not a typical day but rather denotes a more flexible span of time. Seen in this way, the contradiction between the creation of plants on the third day (Gen 1:11–13) and humans on the sixth day (Gen 1:26–30), on the one hand, and the converse order in Gen 2:5–7, on the other hand, is not resolved, but is, in a certain manner, alleviated. The strict daily structure of Gen 1:1–2:3 is qualified by the singular use of b^eyōm ('in the day' / 'at the time') in Gen 2:4 as an introduction to Gen 2:5–3:24, and the creation in seven days is condensed into one event, which is interpreted overall as a 'day.'

Second, both creation accounts explain why man is similar to God in some specific respects.[63] In the first creation narrative, God created man in his own image, on his own free initiative:

> So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Gen 1:27)

The second narrative also ends with God describing humans as similar to himself:

> Then Yhwh Elohim said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil." (Gen 3:22)

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61 Presumably, the story originally only used the name *YHWH*, and *Elohim* was added to make it clear to readers that *YHWH* in Gen 2:4b–3:24 is not a different deity than *Elohim* in Gen 1:1–2:4a. See Gertz 2018, pp. 96 f.

62 On their literary-historical relationship, see Bührer 2014; Bührer 2015.

63 See Stordalen 1992.

Yet this is not the result of God's plan but of human disobedience: the humans ate from the forbidden tree (Gen 3:6), which made it possible for them to become like God, just as the serpent promised (Gen 3:5).

If we read Gen 1–3 as a single piece, the question thus arises for all readers: man is like God, but how did this come about? Did God himself bring about man's likeness to God (Gen 1:27), or did mankind capture it from him against his will (Gen 3:6–7)? On a compositional level, Gen 1–3 offers no clear indications of how this equivocation is to be understood. It seems that, for the authors of the Torah, this was not a matter of strict narrative coherence.[64] It was apparently more important to them to present their readers with the different traditions known to them, in accordance with the guiding principle *audiatur et altera pars* ('the other side should also be heard').[65] The text survived as a complex interweaving; it obviously undertook a clear and complex attempt to preserve various traditional perspectives. One may assume, however, that from the point of view of the composers of Gen 1–3, there was a certain precedence given to the perspective of Gen 1:27 in comparison with that of Gen 3:6: it comes first in the reading sequence. Moreover, one can frequently observe in the editorial history not only of the Torah but also of the Hebrew Bible as a whole that hermeneutical texts were placed before the passages they interpreted to ensure a corresponding editorial perspective on them.[66]

3.3. The Ambiguities of the Torah and the Requirement of 'Stereometric Reading'[67]

In his book "Die Kultur der Ambiguität" (The Culture of Ambiguity), Thomas Bauer describes a specific intellectual approach to the problem of ambiguity in premodern Islam.[68] In his view, ancient cultures did not necessarily endeavour to disambiguate every intellectual, social, or political ambiguity in order to be able to live with it. Instead, they tried to balance out ambiguities in order to maintain different, sometimes even contradictory, but nevertheless legitimate perspectives alongside one another. Only through the process of the 'Islamization of Islam' was this culture of ambiguity called into question and, in certain parts of the Islamic tradition, eventually lost. Modern readers are interested in clarifying the text for their own reading, but perhaps ancient authors, when composing their texts, wanted to retain various philosophical and theological dimensions of the text, in Bauer's sense, and this occurred at the expense of overall coherence.

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64 See Bührer 2014, pp. 341–351 for details.
65 See Teeter / Tooman 2020.
66 See Knauf 1998.
67 See Steck 1999, pp. 76–97.
68 The following ideas were developed together with Prof. Hindy Najman (Oxford).

The Torah can be read with the help of a creative hermeneutic that weaves the potential meanings of existing narratives – in the case of the example used here, Gen 1 and Gen 2–3 – into a new whole. Gen 1–3 is a text that remains open to the interpretation of its readers in a very fundamental way; to put it another way, the combination creates the need for commentary.[69]

A particular reading practice is required in order to understand these texts. In the end, it cannot be a matter of disassembling the narrative of Gen 1–3 into its constituent parts and interpreting them as separate units. Rather, one should respect the fact that inconsistencies or contradictions have survived primarily for reasons of tradition. Collectors and editors evidently did not attach great importance to producing the smoothest or most seamless integration possible. The principal guideline of the Torah's compilers was not to create a coherent, streamlined narrative but rather to integrate as much as possible from the existing traditions.

The particular way in which the Torah was written requires readers to participate in the hermeneutics embedded in the text. The Torah is a composite text, but the task of scholarship goes beyond the mere reconstruction of the various layers in the Torah's literary development. There is also a need for a hermeneutical approach to develop a reading of the Pentateuch that takes into consideration, respects, and adheres to the ambiguities that its authors and redactors produced and which are responsible for the dynamic character of both the text itself and its reception history.[70]

The Torah must be viewed as an organic textual unit – with a broad appreciation of the complex history of its formation. This manner of reading ties in with Nietzsche's critique of the disassemblement of Homer.[71] The current state of scholarship indicates that the Torah's group of readers is identical with the community of its authors, which is to say, that the readers are its authors, compilers, and editors.[72] In antiquity, writing texts meant both recording the tradition and adapting and engaging with the existing tradition. It may be that ancient writers and readers knew how these texts originated and that they endeavoured to preserve differences – not to produce a seamless, linear overall narrative, but to impart to readers how they could develop their own meaning from the foundation of a very complex, often inconsistent, and sometimes even contradictory textual basis.

We could describe this evocation of meaning in a new dimension as 'stereometric reading.'[73] The most important interpretations of the Torah are not explicitly stated in the text; rather, they surface in the process of its reception by the audience. This charac-

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69   Bauer 2019, see also Bauer 2018.
70   See Schmid 2016b in more detail; see also Levinson 2008; Teeter 2014.
71   See Najman 2012; Fischer 2013.
72   See Nietzsche 1869.
73   See, for example, Schmid 2011b; Schmid 2019, pp. 10–14; Blum 2019.

Fig. 1. Cathedral of Syracuse [Sicily], completed in 1753 following the plans of architect Andrea Palma.

teristic of biblical texts is of great significance for their literary aesthetics. The audience is compelled to draw certain synthesizing conclusions during the reading itself, without unequivocally distilling the meaning of the text. In a certain sense, reading the Torah can be compared to contemplating a building that has equally grown over the centuries, such as the Cathedral of Syracuse in Sicily (Fig. 1).

The Cathedral of Syracuse[74] dates back to a Greek temple that was erected in the 5th century BCE and dedicated to the goddess Athena. The columns of the temple were reused and can still be seen on the sides of the cathedral today. From the 7th century CE, a basilica was established by incorporating the previous building. In 878, the church building was converted into a mosque but was reconverted again in 1085. After an earthquake in 1693, a baroque façade was added to the church. The result is a highly multi-faceted building that reflects its own history. It is possible and even appealing, all the more so for a modern observer, to determine the architectural tensions and incoherencies of the building that comprise its beauty.

74   See Landsberger 1965, p. 17; Rad 1970, pp. 42–53; Wagner 2007, pp. 11–13; Janowski 2013, pp. 13–21.

Reading the Torah requires a similar openness to perceive its diversity, and, as in the case the Cathedral of Syracuse, the act of engaging with this kind of complexity is a meaningful and rewarding task. In the case of the Torah, it can quite rightly be said that its multi-layered character is one of the most important reasons for its centuries-long persistence: the density of the Torah as a text, as well as its inclusion of a myriad of different perspectives, has made it attractive to centuries of reception.[75] Without the continuous process of reading, copying, and commenting, the Torah would probably have faded into obscurity shortly after its emergence, and we might have learned of it only through a chance archaeological find.

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75   See Giangreco 2009.

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