



Fashioning a New Bible: Why and How?

Steps to a New Edition of the Hebrew Bible

By Ronald Hendel

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Reviewed by Gary A. Rendsburg

RONALD HENDEL HAS written a wonderfully erudite book about the arcane world of textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible. He demonstrates mastery of the subject on every page, as he cites not only the standard surveys of the field (from Julius Wellhausen of yore to Emanuel Tov of today), but also more obscure and narrower studies on particular passages, along with general treatments that reach beyond Biblical studies into other fields within the humanities.

With such an opening paragraph, one might expect me to give this book a glowing review. And, of course, I would, except that I personally hold to the polar opposite view to the one promoted by Hendel.

About 20 years ago, Hendel conceived of a new project—nothing less than a new edition of the Hebrew Bible, starting from scratch. To appreciate what that entails, some background is required.

There have been two types of editions in the history of the humanities: diplomatic and eclectic. With a diplomatic edition, the scholar (or team of scholars) decides which historical manuscript is the best one. This manuscript is

then painstakingly transcribed into regular printed font and presented as the main text, with any variants that appear in other manuscripts relegated to the bottom of the page, in what scholars call the critical apparatus.

For an eclectic edition, the scholars sift through all of the available manuscripts and select the best reading for each verse or passage. With this approach, the final product is posited to be the best possible reconstruction of the *Urtext* (the original text), whether or not such a text ever existed.

In the history of Biblical studies, the former route has dominated, with scholars typically choosing the St. Petersburg [Leningrad] Codex (L) or the Aleppo Codex (A). Hendel is bucking the trend, however. His project, known as the Hebrew Bible Critical Edition (HBCE), presents to the reader an eclectic text, with each reading justified in the critical apparatus. To his credit, Hendel has amassed a superb team of scholars to produce this edition, with one volume already published.¹

The book under review is a collection of essays—almost all of them previously published—in which the author attempts to justify his approach. Hendel argues very well for the eclectic approach, and he also addresses the objections of his critics (Emanuel Tov, Hugh Williamson, et al.).

The central problem, however, remains: The produced text is one that does not exist, nor ever existed, but which rather has been fashioned by the text-critical scholar in his or her study. Hendel and his colleagues may believe that it is possible to reconstruct the *Urtext*, but if the field of ancient Near Eastern studies has taught us anything, such an enterprise is a “pursuit after the wind.” Not a single composition from the ancient world, for which we have multiple copies, bears a single uniform version. Instead, given the manner in which ancient texts were composed and transmitted—not by a scribe at a desk, but rather in an oral-aural manner or, to be more accurate, somewhere along the oral-written cline—we cannot speak of a single text-type, or prototype, but rather of a plurality of versions from the outset.

Scholars will learn much from this scholarly book, which stands as an important statement in support of an eclectic edition of the Biblical text. But while I was reading this book, all that came to mind was a story related to me by my teacher Cyrus Gordon. His teacher Max Margolis (on the faculty of Dropsie College) was the foremost text-critic of his day in the field of Septuagint studies with his five-part work *The Book of Joshua in Greek* (1931–1992) standing as his magnum opus. The work’s goal was to use all the surviving

Greek manuscripts and the daughter versions (in Coptic, Ethiopic, etc.) to reconstruct the “original” Old Greek version of Joshua. One fine day (c. 1929), Gordon entered Margolis’s office for an appointment, to find him hard at work on his project, at which point, the great master put down his pen and said, “There has to be more to life than this. This truly is *re’ut ruah*” (“pursuit after the wind,” quoting Ecclesiastes 2:11, 2:17).

¹ Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs: An Eclectic Edition with Introduction and Textual Commentary* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015).

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Q&C

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Ralph K. Hawkins Responds: *The territory of eastern Manasseh has an average rainfall of about 300 mm in the Jordan Valley, which is just under a foot. This rainfall is divided unequally over seasons and years, resulting in irregular sowing. These climatic conditions make agricultural cultivation difficult, so that no more than 10–20 percent of the area is cultivated, even today. During the Middle Bronze Age II, Iron Age II, and Byzantine period, settlements were growing—also in the hill country to the west. These periods may have witnessed higher rainfall, yet the rise in population may have been caused by political reasons, such as the emergence of regional states (at least during the Middle Bronze Age and Iron Age II), causing people to “stretch” the local subsistence conditions*

further in this region. The same favorable conditions might not have existed in the Late Bronze Age.

Joseph—a Father to Pharaoh

The intersection of two paths of monotheism suggested in Alain Zivie’s article “Pharaoh’s Man, ‘Abdiel” (**BAR**, July/August 2018) makes the speculations about the connection to Joseph inevitable. I have heard two theories on the way the Israelite and Egyptian cultures could have influenced each other. First, Joseph’s faith in one god could have caused a shift in the personal beliefs of Amenhotep III toward his concept of Aten, which his son Amenhotep IV/Akhenaten took further by making it the state religion. Second, the concept of Aten as the universal creator god refined and transformed the tribal god of the Hebrews through Joseph. Of course, neither can be proved, just as there is no

STRATA ANSWERS

How Many? (from p. 16)

Answer: Around 100

If you were asked to name a book that mentions lions, cheetahs, crocodiles, hippos, and hyenas, your thoughts might turn to *Tarzan* or some other such exotic tale. Bears, jackals, monkeys, and panthers are the domain of *The Jungle Book*. All these animals are also found, however, in the Bible.

There are around a hundred different types of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, fishes, and invertebrates mentioned in the Bible. (It’s difficult to give a precise number because there are several words that may be synonyms for the same creature, as well as words that scholars are not certain even refer to animals.)

Since the setting of the Hebrew Bible is the Holy Land and its environs, the animals described in the Bible are native to that regional confluence of western Asia and northern Africa. Thus, there is no mention of pandas, penguins, or polar bears in the Bible. There are some exceptions, however; monkeys and peacocks from the Indian subcontinent appear in the Bible. The reason for this

is that they were shipped in to adorn King Solomon’s palace. There is also a possible reference to the giraffe, which was likewise sometimes exported from Africa and shipped internationally as gifts for kings. Aside from such exceptions, the animals of the Bible are from the region of Israel.

However, one cannot read a modern book on the fauna of Israel to gain an understanding of Biblical wildlife. There are several species that live in the modern State of Israel that are introduced species and did not live there in Biblical times and, thus, do not appear in the Bible. Mynah birds, nutria (beaver-like rodents), and the ubiquitous brown rat are plentiful in Israel today, but they did not live there during Biblical times—or at least they are not mentioned in the Bible.

Conversely, many other species mentioned in the Bible lived there in Biblical times but subsequently disappeared from the area. These include hippopotami, crocodiles, hartebeest, cheetahs, bears, and lions. Some other such animals have been bred in captivity and were subsequently released back into the wild, such

as ostriches, Mesopotamian fallow deer, and the magnificent oryx antelope.

Because the Land of Israel bridges Europe, Africa, and Asia, it was home to a unique combination of animals. It was the northernmost part of the range of many African animals, such as crocodiles and hippopotami; it was the southeastern part of the range of many European animals, such as fallow deer and wolves; and it was the westernmost part of the range of many Asian animals, such as the Asiatic cheetah. In addition, due to its location on the eastern side of the Mediterranean, it is part of the migration route for countless birds passing between Europe and Africa. Thus, the range of animals found in the Bible is a unique combination that would not be found anywhere else in the world.

Since specific species are limited to particular regions of the world, historically people who did not live in Biblical lands were not familiar with the animals of the Bible. Consequently, they transposed the names of Biblical animals to their local equivalents. Thus, the *zvi* of the Bible is the gazelle, but in Europe, where there were no gazelles, the name