

Preface

*Sicut enim a perfecta scientia procul sumus,
leboris culpa arbitramur saltem parum,
quam omnino nihil dicere.*

Since, then, we are far from perfect knowledge,
we may be less guilty in daring such a leap
than in saying nothing at all.

Jerome, *Commentary on Ezekiel* Part 3, 44, PL 25, 380B

This book is an English translation of my *Literaturgeschichte des Alten Testaments*, published by the Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt, in 2008 with an updated bibliography. It deals with the presuppositions, backgrounds, processes, and intertextualities making up the literary history of the Old Testament (for the relationship between “Old Testament” and “Hebrew Bible,” see below, A.I.5). My aim is to present a history of the literature contained in the Old Testament that attends primarily to the lines of intellectual development and the textual relationships within it. It needs to be highlighted at the very beginning that this book intends to be nothing more than an introduction. Its purpose is not to treat its subject exhaustively. In the present state of research, with its multiple branches, that could scarcely be achieved, certainly not by a single individual and within a limited scope. At the same time, what follows is to be seen neither as merely a risky adventure nor as simply a fragment. It is true that nowadays the diffuse character of current research is often invoked, but from one point of view it is also often overestimated. Of course, Old Testament scholarship knows a great number of suggestions, often difficult to reconcile, regarding the origins and historical arrangement of the books and texts of the Old Testament, to which a literary history must, in principle, orient itself at least to a minimal degree. But the latest discussions among scholars have begun to reveal some contours of a new consensus that, while only partial and, perhaps, sometimes more representative of the European than the American

academic context, nevertheless extends to some important basic conclusions. This emerging consensus thus by no means renders the project of a literary history of the Old Testament impossible from the outset. Rather, it supports such a project insofar as understanding the details at the same time requires the whole, just as comprehension of the whole depends on the details. In this regard, biblical scholarship, whose virtues do not always include an adequate measure of critical self-reflection, should not be less perspicacious than Schleiermacher.

Thus, broad perspectives are also important for the discussion of individual exegetical problems. In particular, the introduction of literary-historical considerations can either give crucial support to individual decisions in the exegetical sphere or show them to be improbable. In the present state of research, the literary-historical perspective cannot simply consist of a collection of already existing conclusions of scholarship on the subject of Old Testament introduction; rather, it is in a sense also a part, a continuation, and a reinforcement of that scholarship. Only an entirely positivistic approach to historical biblical scholarship could demand that the project of a literary history of the Old Testament be begun only after all the individual results of exegetical scholarship are on the table. Those results are, in fact, only hypotheses to begin with, and their plausibility depends not only on themselves, but also on the frame of reference within which they are placed. If scholars don't want simply to rely on traditional assumptions, nothing dispenses us from paying attention to overarching questions such as the possibilities of literary-historical synthesis. Of course, it would be an equally positivistic misunderstanding to present these *vice versa* as determinants of what individual exegesis will then illustrate. Both approaches must be fundamentally open to revision, and addressing the question of binding together their preliminary results remains an ongoing task of biblical scholarship.

Thus, this contribution sees itself neither as an end nor as a beginning of literary-historical scholarship on the Old Testament, but rather as an intermediate stopping place from which to pose the literary-historical question as such and to present some preliminary perspectives regarding content. It is neither intended nor able to offer an adequate evaluation and synthesis of the state of research on the history of the origins of the Old Testament, certainly not to summarize it. Its purpose, instead, is to reflect the historical-critical reconstruction of the conversation among the most important of its texts and textual corpora as the historical and theological task of scholarly research on the Old Testament.

The literary-historical framework that is discernible in the arrangement of this book, which presumes a series of classifying decisions, may appear

problematic to some readers. On the most general level, literary-historical epochs are distinguished (pre-Assyrian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Ptolemaic, and Seleucid periods). A second level distinguishes different fields of literature within these epochs (cultic and wisdom, narrative, prophetic, and legal traditions) while, finally, on a third level, the concrete literary works and positions are discussed. Most controversial will be the arrangements proposed on this third level, while the distinction of different eras in the literary history of the Old Testament according to the particular ruling powers in the Levant and their specific cultural impacts will probably encounter no fundamental dispute in the present state of the discussion. Likewise, the assignment of texts to the various spheres of literature (cultic and wisdom, narrative, prophetic, and legal traditions) will probably find little resistance, especially since these are of lesser significance as regards their content and serve mainly to facilitate an overview. As regards the concrete literary-historical classification of the Old Testament texts and writings, while we must readily acknowledge the uncertainties in scholars' discussions, there remain two things that should receive close consideration. On the one hand, behind and alongside all confusion and disagreement, we can perceive a sufficient degree of historical ordering of parts of the Old Testament literature to make possible—and certainly not impossible—a reconstruction of the basic lines of an Old Testament literary history. This includes, within the Pentateuch, the delimitation and ordering of the Priestly writing; with some reservations, also the literary-historical core of Deuteronomy; among the Former Prophets, the identification, and recently also the redaction-critical distinction, of the “deuteronomistic” interpretive perspectives; among the Prophets, the distinction between First and Second Isaiah as well as the acknowledgment of the long-drawn-out history of the redaction of the prophetic books; likewise, in the Psalms and Wisdom literature, it does not appear hopeless from the outset to distinguish, for example, positions from the monarchical and post-monarchical periods. Of course, on the whole, more remains disputed than undisputed, but this is in the nature of a literary-historical project and cannot seriously be adduced against an attempt at the undertaking itself. In addition, a literary history of the Old Testament does not differ fundamentally in this regard from the task of commonly known “introductions to the Old Testament,” the legitimacy of which is not disputed on the basis of the existence of controversial findings.

On the other hand, it should be emphasized that as a rule, the assignment of a position to a particular period of time is only relative. Many Old Testament texts and writings possess both an oral and a written pre-history as well as a post-history even within the Old Testament itself, so

that discussing them in the context of one literary-historical epoch and not another need not mean that the material and texts that are used and worked over at this point were first conceived from scratch in this or that writing and were not altered thereafter. Rather, the Old Testament is in principle to be regarded as traditional literature, so that, for example, the treatment of the Moses-Exodus story in the context of the Neo-Assyrian period does not exclude, but instead includes the perspective that this narrative also makes use of older levels, just as it was later given a further substantial literary expansion. However, the Neo-Assyrian period is posited as the time of its first literary formation, and therefore it is discussed in that chapter and not elsewhere.

Information on historical matters in a detailed sense, given from time to time within the literary-historical exposition, is included only insofar as necessary for treating the literary-historical questions. For additional information and discussions, one should consult the recent works of introduction to the Old Testament and the history of Israel. The literary references in the text may appear rich, but in view of the breadth of the discussion of the subject they are merely examples.

Some passages in this book are revisions of essays previously published, modified here in different ways. The section on the history of research (A.I.3) is based on a much-shortened version of my essay, "Methodische Probleme und historische Entwürfe einer Literaturgeschichte des Alten Testaments."¹ In the reflections on the literary-sociological aspects of literary production and reception (A.II.3), the presentation in "Schreiber/Schreiberausbildung in Israel"² has been adopted and broadly expanded. The sub-chapter on the beginnings of the deuteronomistic books of Kings (B.III.2.a) is borrowed in part from "Das Deuteronomium innerhalb der 'deuteronomistischen Geschichteswerke' in Gen–2Kön,"³ and some of the sections on the prophetic literature rest, sometimes shortening and sometimes lengthening, and wherever possible by means of literary-critical interconnections, on my introductory essay on the Later Prophets ("Hinteren Propheten").⁴

Biblical passages marked with an asterisk denote a preliminary stage in the historical development of these texts: for example, Gen 28:10-22* refers to the literary kernel of that pericope.

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but also and above all for the intensive encounter with an American biblical scholarship that differs in a number of aspects from German discussions, as readers of this book certainly will notice. Nevertheless, I hope that this book will foster the dialogue between German and English speaking scholarship in biblical studies which is still in need of further development.

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