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Martin's "Multiple Originals: New Approaches to Hebrew Bible Textual Criticism" - Book Review

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Multiple Originals: New Approaches to Hebrew Bible Textual Criticism. By Gary D. Martin. Atlanta: SBL, 2010. Pp. xiv + 341.

In the West, textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible has been driven by a desire to reconstruct, from the extant textual witnesses, the likely original form of the text. This program is obviously driven by an overarching assumption; namely, there was *an original form* (singular) of the text. Before 1948, two characteristics of the data made it impossible to clarify—let alone verify or disprove—this assumption. The first was the lack of copies of Hebrew manuscripts that were within a millennium of the date of their composition. The extant Hebrew manuscripts were all from the Masoretic tradition, were all relatively late (no earlier than the eighth century CE), and they all bore witness to a manuscript tradition that was remarkable in its uniformity. We simply could not see clearly behind the Masoretic manuscript tradition to tell if its uniformity was characteristic of the earlier stages of textual transmission. The second characteristic of the data that hindered our progress was the fact that the old manuscript we did have were in languages other than Hebrew—Greek, Syriac, and Old Latin, for instance—and because they were translations rather than copies in the same language, it was always possible to imagine that their variations bore witness, not to different Hebrew originals, but to interpretive activity on the part of the translators. Therefore, the assumption of an original form of the text was not only unchallenged, it was unchallengeable.

With the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, we finally do have manuscripts that are as old as or older than the translations, and, somewhat to our collective surprise, they do not evidence the same uniformity as the later Masoretic manuscript tradition; quite the contrary. It has taken almost the entire first generation of Dead Sea scrolls studies for the situation to become perfectly clear, but now it is. The Dead Sea scrolls have pushed the manuscript evidence back to within a few centuries of the composition of most of the books of the Hebrew Bible and the variations among the manuscripts demand two conclusions. First, generally speaking, the uniformity of the Masoretic manuscript tradition is not at all representative of the state of textual fluidity that characterized the era before it. True, some of the Dead Sea manuscripts have such a high level of affinity to the later Masoretic tradition that it seems fair to call them “proto-Masoretic manuscripts.” But even these do not evidence as high a level of affinity to one another as are reflected among the manuscripts of the later Masoretic tradition. In fact—and this is the second conclusion—the other, non-protoMasoretic manuscripts make it very clear that during this time certain books of the Hebrew Bible were circulated in multiple forms and, as far as we can tell, had existed in multiple forms from the very earliest stages of their transmission.

With this as background, Martin’s book takes us into even newer territory in the study of textual criticism. Multiple originals is not only the correct way to think about the text at the level of the side-by-side versions; it is also the way that we must think about certain parts of the language within the books themselves. At the very level of word and phrase, Martin “challenges the assumption that there can be only one correct reading.” In fact, he argues that a careful analysis “demonstrates that in some cases

multivalences were intended by the composer” from the very beginning (back cover).

After reviewing the established approaches to determining the original form of the text (Chapter 1), Martin explains the recent rise of studies in orality (Chapter 2) and underscores how these have begun to pressure the traditional approaches to expand its scope. When these are given adequate attention, Martin argues, two types of multivalency become detectible. These, he says, were not uncommon in texts from antiquity but our methodological assumption about one original meaning has been blinding us to their presence.

The first of these realms of multivalency in the ancient text has to do with “Multivalencies of Meaning” (Part Two of the book), especially as a result of word play and pun. It takes Martin seven full chapters (Chapters 3–9) to fully explore this phenomenon. He elucidates his thesis in the form of a test case, a textual variant in Song of Songs 1:2, “for your love/breasts are better than wine.” Regarding the manuscript evidence, Martin concludes “I have found no ‘mixed’ traditions. All extant Greek and Latin (classical languages of the Mediterranean world) witnesses read ‘breasts.’ All extant Hebrew, Syriac, and Aramaic (Semitic languages of the Near and Middle East) witnesses read ‘love’ (108).” What, then, can account for these variants? His pursuit of an answer to this question leads him across Semitic texts in the ancient Near East (Chapter 4), through the “Christian Interpretation History of Song 1:2” (Chapter 5), the “Jewish Interpretation History of Song 1:2” (Chapter 6), to what he calls a moment of “Textual Conversion” where Christianity eventually adopted the Jewish reading (Chapter 7). Ultimately, he concludes (Chapter 8) that only one commentator in the entire transmission history, Nicholas of Lyra, has recognized the inherent ambiguity—indeed, multivalences—of the Hebrew term in question. Only he is able to see that, *from its inception*, the writer’s use of the term was intended in just this way, as a multivalent word designed to call up in the reader’s mind two or more simultaneous possible meanings at once.

Martin seems mistaken about one small point. The Ethiopic version provides an example of the mixed tradition that Martin claims does not exist. The Ethiopic language is, of course, a Semitic language. Nevertheless, the Old Ethiopic version was translated from the Greek. And the commitment of the Ethiopic translators is illustrated in the text under study:

አዳም : አጥባትኪ : እምወይን ('ādam 'äṭbatki 'ämwäyən)
“your breasts are better than wine.”

Notwithstanding, I do not believe it damages his overarching argument: “in reconstructing textual histories of early Jewish writings, scholars need to become more alert to the possibility that textual variations in their earliest known historical contexts are not necessarily the results of intentional or unintentional [*sic*] scribal intrusions into a hypothetical pristine original In some cases multivalences can be demonstrated to have been intended by the composer ...” (ix). This, Martin argues, is the case in Song 1:2. The term is intended to be “equivocum,” as Nicholas of Lyra put it, ambiguous.

And, once this *double entendre* is acknowledged, one can begin to detect other possible cases of the same device in the Song (Chapter 9).

If new insights from the study of pun and word play form the basis for understanding one set of underappreciated meanings in the Hebrew text, a second source of such underappreciated meanings can be detected through insights from the realm of formulaic theory. Martin provides a brief introduction to this developing methodology in Part One of the book and then comes back to it in Part Three of the book, entitled “Multivalencies of Text.” In the same way that he used a test case (from Song 1:2) as a venue for exploring issues of method in Part Two, Martin uses the case study of Decalogue texts as the venue for elucidating his thesis in Part Three. Chapter 10 introduces the texts, Chapter 11 sets forth the “Textual Categories of Decalogue Manuscripts,” Chapter 12 makes an “Application of Formulaic Methods to Decalogue Texts.” And, further examples of different types of textual (as opposed to oral/aural) multivalencies of text are offered in Chapter 13, “Letter Confusion in the Prophets.”

According to Martin’s preface, the final section of the book, “Part Four,” attempts to provide “insight into some of the more significant motives, agendas, and practices that drive current practices of textual criticism” (8). I was excited to see the title of Chapter 14, “Audiences and Agendas.” I was hoping that Martin would explore the fascinating reality that each religious community represents an audience with its own agenda for textual criticism. In spite of the fact that Western Christianity is driven by an agenda to recover the likely original of the text, the same can be said for no other Jewish, Samaritan, or Orthodox Christian community in the world or in history. Modern Jews are as fascinated by the Dead Sea scrolls as Western Christians are. But, when it comes to defining the object of their text critical enterprise, Jewish Bible translation projects have no interest in recovering the likely original form of the Hebrew Bible. That is not the form of the text that carries the fullest form of the truth of God. The form of the text which, for them, holds that distinction is the Masoretic text. Thus, the Masoretic text is the object of their text critical enterprise. Likewise, the object of Old Testament textual criticism for the Greek Orthodox Church is the Septuagint form of the text, because for them, the Septuagint translators were as inspired as the writers of the Four Gospels. For the Ethiopian Orthodox Church the form of the text that is authoritative—and, thus, the object of the text critical enterprise—is the Ge’ez, which, they say, was first translated, with the help of the Holy Spirit, by founding father Saint Frumentius, the Revealer of Light. I could go on and on with similar examples from the other Orthodox Churches, and from the Roman Catholic Church’s commitment to the Latin. Suffice it to say that, it seems to me, Western Christianity, and along with it, the entire text critical enterprise which serves it, seems quite un-self-aware of the fact that we—just like all the rest—set our agenda for text criticism based on a set of philosophical and theological decisions which make sense to us, *but only to us*. And it is capricious simply to brush these texts aside as “ecclesial texts.” That chapter would have been interesting to read. Instead, Martin’s Chapter 14 presents a few observations about how Western textual critics sometimes bring their own personalities and psychological agendas to the text critical enterprise. This is inter-

esting, but not, in my opinion, nearly as interesting or relevant to the subject as the other topic would have been.

In spite of these small criticisms, I have to say that Martin's study is carried out with a level of erudition and nuance that is not possible to do justice to in a thousand-word review. He summarized well the paths that have led to this moment in textual criticism, and described well the likely possible futures for the field in Chapter 15. The body of his book sets forth the inner workings of new methodologies with painstaking thoroughness and detail. This is a real contribution.

Martin's book is rendered even more accessible and helpful through the inclusion of extensive back matter: three appendices ("Extended Citations for Chapter 1," "Sources for English and German Bibles," and "Decalogue Text Comparison" [itself 30 pages long]), a fifteen-page bibliography, and two indices (Modern Authors, and Biblical References).

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