

Diachronic Diversity in Classical Biblical Hebrew

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CONCLUSION

The main question addressed in this book is whether an array of linguistic and orthographic features that distinguish the Tiberian Torah from the non-LBH Prophets and Writings should be interpreted as evidence of inner-CBH diachronic development. While scholars debate the quantity of early and late material in the CBH corpus, there is broad agreement that its composition extended over centuries. According to one common scholarly view, this would have run from approximately 1000 BCE to 600 BCE, though the material might well incorporate far earlier traditions and have undergone modification till the Hellenistic period or beyond. In theory, even the maximal span of four hundred years accorded to CBH in the approach adopted in this volume should have provided ample scope for linguistic evolution, which one might reasonably expect to manifest in chronologically distinct isoglosses.

In practice, however, many factors have contributed to obscuring the effects of inner-CBH diachronic evolution: the possible reduction of oral material to written literature; the semi-opacity and ambiguity of the writing system; such secondary processes as levelling due to scribal convention and deliberate or accidental intervention; the imposition on the written text of a related, but semi-independent oral reading tradition—to name but a few complicating elements. The limited sample size of the Tiberian biblical corpus is also a significant issue, made only slightly less problematic by recourse to a range of helpful evidence: non-Tiberian biblical material, ancient textual witnesses in various languages, extrabiblical Hebrew texts, and cognate

sources. According to the approach adopted in this book, such factors complicate, but do not preclude diachronic investigation. Rather than insurmountable barriers, they are hurdles to be taken seriously and overcome by means of judicious use of the evidence, sound methodology, due consideration of alternative explanations, and reasonable and creative interpretation of data, with recognition of the potential implications.

Methodologically, this study confronts two major issues. One, which is raised in every chapter, is the possibility that the extant distinctions between the CBH of the Pentateuch and the CBH of the Prophets and Writings were not representative of the earliest forms of the texts, but developed secondarily, in the course of compositional evolution and transmission. Often considered above is the possibility that a feature once broadly common to all CBH texts was preserved only in the Torah, and superseded in the Prophets and Writings by a variant feature standard in TBH or LBH. Only in the case of a few features, most notably, the onomasticon with and without *yahu* names (ch. 1) and 1st-person *wayyiqṭol* morphology (ch. 2), does the nature of the evidence seem to rule out this possibility. The notion of historically deep, rather than secondary, variation seems marginally more appropriate in the case of other features, too.

When it comes to the features discussed in chs 8–11, a second methodological consideration concerns distinguishing between purely orthographic variation and written variation of genuinely linguistic significance. Conscious of the linguistic semi-independence of the written and reading components of the Tiberian biblical tradition, the approach here is deliberately maximal

in its interpretation of written diversity. Where spelling differences of potential linguistic significance arise, these are taken seriously, and the possible linguistic import is entertained. While such linguistic interpretations may not convince all, or even most, readers, it is surely advisable to note the features and to weigh alternative explanations. All too often, the distinctiveness of such written features goes unnoticed or is uncritically assumed to be purely orthographic, with little to no consideration of non-orthographic alternatives.

At a more theoretical level, in the context of this study, it was at the outset recognised that the principal research question necessarily carries with it a challenge to specific elements or conceptions of at least two entrenched scholarly paradigms that are regularly cited in discussions on the periodisation of biblical literature, generally, and of the Pentateuch, more specifically—namely, the Documentary Hypothesis and the dichotomous CBH–LBH division of biblical language and literature. No direct challenge to either theory is proposed here, but the results, though mixed, arguably call into question certain rigid versions of each approach.

The late dating of P has been challenged repeatedly by a minority of both language and literary scholars (see Young, Rezetko, and Ehrensverd 2008, II:13, for a partial list of such scholars), and the findings here largely support the challengers, as material classified as P patterns, like the rest of the Torah, as CBH. Whether the evidence here raises more fundamental questions about the traditional critical division into sources is left for others to evaluate.

It is also worth noting in this connection that there is nothing in the data that marks the author of P (or of any other Pentateuchal source) as an especially gifted post-Restoration writer capable of flawless CBH. P shares thematic concerns with TBH, LBH, and late extrabiblical compositions, but looks like none of them. While sufficiently different in style from other Pentateuchal sources to be identified by experts, P by and large shares with them CBH₁ style. According to the extant evidence, late writers struggled to compose CBH even over short spans. The possibility of an exception to this rule, capable of long stretches of perfect CBH, cannot be definitively excluded, but seems remote and is devoid of solid evidentiary support.

The dichotomous paradigm of pre-exilic and post-exilic BH, while heuristically valid and practically helpful in the case of many features and compositions, has often been modified to comprehend greater nuance. For example, TBH and ABH are today accepted by some. The distribution of features traced in the present monograph tallies with none of the accepted divisions, demanding instead the recognition of diachronic diversity within CBH, which might lead to an overall schema of ABH–CBH₁–CBH₂–TBH–LBH. Given the number and enormity of evidentiary uncertainties, it is tempting to leave the schema unaccompanied by an absolute chronology. But in a study so focused on diachrony and periodisation, such an omission would be unacceptable. So, acknowledging the dearth and problematic nature of pristine evidence in the extant sources, along with the complicating reality of intervening secondary development, one might reasonably, but tentatively and approximatively, associate CBH with

1000–600 BCE, TBH with 600–450 BCE, and LBH with 450 BCE on (the real-world temporal associations of ABH remain unclear). Based primarily on the evidence in chs 1–2 above, one can further divide CBH into CBH₁, substantially representative of the period 1000–800 BCE, albeit possibly preserving some earlier features of pre-monarchic traditions, and CBH₂, reflecting 800–600 BCE.

As to the broader questions of BH diachrony and linguistic periodisation, it will be clear from this study that the author is far more optimistic than many regarding what may be reasonably argued on the basis of the data. It would be preferable to achieve certitude. But given the quantity and nature of the evidence, perhaps the best that can be hoped for is the integration of plausible narratives of high explanatory value. Here the writer seeks to account for apparent inner-CBH variation, in the hopes that the explanations can be usefully integrated into broader understanding of the development of ancient Hebrew and of the composition and transmission of the Hebrew Bible.

