

# Historical Criticism in Light of Documented Evidence: What Does Text-Critical and Other Documented Evidence Tell Us About the Early Transmission of the Hebrew Bible?

**JUHA PAKKALA**

*University of Helsinki*  
juha.pakkala@helsinki.fi

## INTRODUCTION

The Hebrew Bible was the focus of intensive scribal activity for centuries, and therefore many of its texts are multilayered. Because the layers derive from different socio-historical contexts and times, the Hebrew Bible is an exceedingly difficult historical source. At the same time, it is a key source for many central questions regarding ancient Israel and the emergence of early Judaism. Much information would be lost without the Hebrew Bible, and for this reason, biblical studies has gone to great lengths to understand and reconstruct the literary development of the texts contained in it.

Historical criticism (or the historical-critical method) has been the classic method to unwind and reconstruct the complicated literary and redaction histories of the texts.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the method has never

---

<sup>1</sup>An older term for historical criticism would be higher criticism (cf. lower criticism, i.e., textual criticism). Historical criticism roughly corresponds to “Literarkritik,” “Redaktionskritik,” and other methods connected to them in the German-speaking scholarship. The German term “historisch-kritische Methode” usually includes textual

been universally recognized in biblical studies; in recent decades it has been increasingly sidelined. Although literary-critical theories still receive attention—especially Pentateuchal theories and the Deuteronomistic history—studies that focus on literary- and redaction-critical reconstructions have clearly declined from their historical position in earlier scholarship. A reason for this is, in part, a growing skepticism about the results achieved by this method. Too many theories have contradicted each other, causing doubts as to whether the method is a certain basis to build on.

Some scholars have addressed weaknesses in historical criticism,<sup>2</sup> but the overall criticism has been rather general and lacking in methodological depth. Although isolated attempts to question individual aspects and techniques of the method can be found, Ray Person and Robert Rezetko have, for example, criticized the use of a *Wiederaufnahme* as an indicator of later additions,<sup>3</sup> it is more common to either neglect historical criticism without any apparent need to justify this position, or to use its results only sporadically. The lack of methodological reflection is apparent even in studies that use historical criticism,<sup>4</sup> and this may have con-

---

criticism, while the English term “historical criticism” usually does not. Because of this difference, there is confusion about these terms. Among others, John Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 1–3, calls the method “biblical criticism.” Many also use the terms “literary” and “redaction criticism,” which will also be used in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Many names could be mentioned here, such as David Carr, Stephen Kaufman, Niels Peter Lemche, Ray Person, and Ehud Ben Zvi.

<sup>3</sup> Ray Person and Robert Rezetko, *Empirical Models Challenging Biblical Criticism* (Atlanta: SBL, 2016), 25–30.

<sup>4</sup> Many recent commentaries do, for example, occasionally refer to sections as being later additions, but there is rarely any methodological discussion as to when these were made, and to what extent possible additions should be taken into account when there is no text-critical evidence to support the assumed addition. Older commentaries, especially those from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were more consistent in asking which sections could be later additions, but there are also good examples from more recent research, such as Timo Veijola, *Das fünfte Buch Mose (Deuteronomium)*

tributed to its decline in biblical studies. The methodological silence is problematic when multilayered texts are used as historical sources. If scribes repeatedly changed the texts in their transmission, any theory that uses them for historical conclusions is directly affected, depending on how one relates methodologically to these changes. The implementation of a method thus necessitates a conception of how the texts evolved and what kind of changes the scribes could make.

This article seeks to evaluate historical criticism in light of documented evidence, especially intentional scribal changes observable in text-critical variants. What do these changes tell us about the potential usefulness of historical criticism? Text-critical evidence shows how scribes actually changed the texts, while historical criticism seeks to detect and reconstruct the changes by using only text internal signs, such as inconsistencies, tensions, contradictions, syntactic problems, and grammatical mistakes. Are the basic assumptions of historical criticism correct *in principle*? Can one detect scribal changes reliably without text-critical evidence? Does the method reach scientifically viable results?

Text-critical variants in the Hebrew Bible and its versions bear witness to intentional scribal changes in the last centuries BCE in particular, and to some extent even in the first centuries CE. Nonetheless, it is fair to assume that these variants are representative of the earlier transmission as well. A huge number of variants are preserved in the Hebrew Bible, so that one can get a good picture of the scribal changes before the texts were frozen for changes, and there is no reason to assume a fundamental difference between the documented later transmission in the last centuries BCE and the earlier transmission in the immediately

---

*Kapitel 1,1–16,17*, ATD 8/1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004); Ernst Würthwein, *1.Kön 17–2.Kön 25*, ATD 11/2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984); and to some extent also Andrew D. H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy*, NCBC (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1979). Some commentaries, such as Richard Nelson, *Deuteronomy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 7–8, acknowledge that the texts were repeatedly revised, but assume that the redaction history can no longer be reconstructed.

preceding centuries. At least some constancy of scribal processes has to be assumed for the formative period of transmission when the texts were still evolving. The textual transmission of the Hebrew Bible can roughly be divided into four phases:

- 1) Creation of works, which may include the collection of sources and their early shaping. The formation differs from book to book, but it is mostly a brief period before a text became significant enough to be transmitted further as an authoritative, normative, or otherwise important document.
- 2) Undocumented early formative transmission, where the book gradually became the focus of intensive scribal and exegetical activity. The constant updating by scribes for some centuries created exceptionally multilayered texts.
- 3) Documented formative transmission generally followed the same rules of transmission as in phase 2, but the scribal changes of phase 3 are preserved in text-critical evidence. The vast majority of scribal changes in the Hebrew Bible were made in the formative transmission, or phases 2 and 3.
- 4) Transmission of canonical texts within the Hebrew Bible. In this transmission phase, the texts are frozen for any meaningful scribal changes. There may be some minor orthographic changes and corrections of mistakes, but it was no longer possible to make any substantive changes in the consonantal text.

Clearly, these phases are abstractions of a very complicated development and the transitions between the phases were not abrupt. Many aspects of the transmission can be discussed in much more detail. Moreover, they mainly refer to intentional scribal changes, while scribal mistakes took place in all these phases.

With the available documented evidence, it is thus possible to gain a relatively good understanding of the scribal processes during the formative transmission, roughly divided into two phases (phases 2 and 3) for the purposes of this paper, while phase 1 may be more challenging. For an illustration of this process, see Figure 1 below.

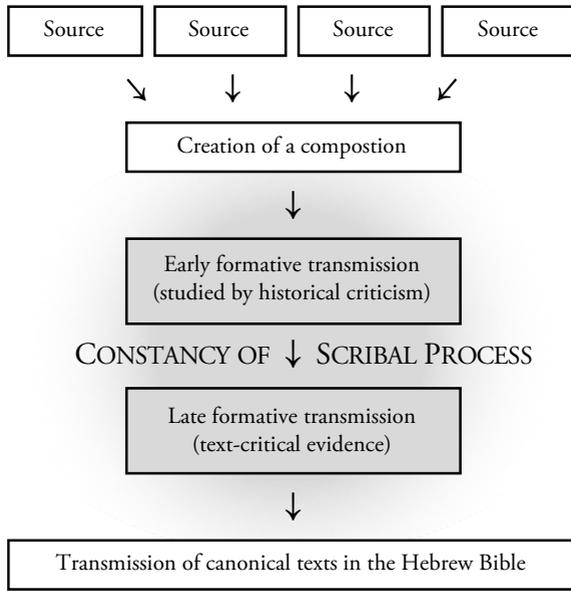


Figure 1: *Formation and Transmission of Biblical Texts*

## DOCUMENTED EVIDENCE<sup>5</sup>

Documented evidence for scribal changes, which can be observed when text-critical variants are compared, shows that the texts in the Hebrew Bible were very heavily edited. Although many scholars imply that the Hebrew Bible was only lightly edited,<sup>6</sup> the multilayered nature of most

<sup>5</sup> The observations made here are essentially based on my previous methodological studies on omissions (see Juha Pakkala, *God's Word Omitted* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013]), as well as a review of hundreds of text-critical variants throughout the Hebrew Bible, which Reinhard Müller and I have analyzed for our forthcoming book on the future possibilities of historical criticism, to be published in 2020 by the SBL Press. See also Reinhard Müller, Juha Pakkala and Bas ter Haar Romeny, *Evidence of Editing: Growth and Change of Texts in the Hebrew Bible* (Atlanta: SBL, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Light editing is often merely implied, but this position is evident in a number of

texts in the Hebrew Bible can be clearly shown. To be sure, this includes the Masoretic text (MT). In fact, documented evidence suggests an even heavier editing than most *historical critics* assume, let alone what biblical scholars at large assume.<sup>7</sup> Consider the following example as an illustration of this.

A short account of Gedaliah's murder is preserved in three versions, MT Jer 41:1–3, LXX Jer 48:1–3, and 2 Kgs 25:25, which provide three glimpses into the development of the account.<sup>8</sup> The oldest text is preserved in 2 Kgs 25:25 (normal text below), the second phase is witnessed by LXX Jer 48:1–3 (underlined), and the youngest text is found in MT Jer 41:1–3 (gray):

ויהי בחדש השביעי בא ישמעאל בן־נתניה בן־אלישמע מזרע המלוכה ורבי המלך ועשרה אנשים אתו אל־גדליהו בן־אחיקם המצפתה ויאכלו שם לחם יחדו במצפה ויקם ישמעאל בן־נתניה ועשרה אנשים אשר־היו אתו ויכו את־גדליהו בן־אחיקם בן־שפן בחרב וימת<sup>9</sup> אתו אשר־הפקיד מלך־בשל בארץ ואת כל־היהודים ואת־הכשדים<sup>10</sup> אשר־היו אתו את־גדליהו במצפה ואת־הכשדים אשר נמצאו־שם את אנשי המלחמה הכה ישמעאל

In the seventh month Ishmael, son of Nethaniah, the son of Elishama, who was of royal seed and one of the king's high officers,<sup>11</sup> came with ten men to Gedali-

---

studies where the Hebrew Bible is used as a historical source as it is preserved in its “final” form (mostly the MT).

<sup>7</sup> This seems to be the case for the Pentateuch, the historical books, the prophetic books, and the Psalms. Slight editing would be an exception.

<sup>8</sup> For details of this passage and arguments for the development suggested here, see Juha Pakkala, “Gedaliah’s Murder in 2 Kgs 25:25 and Jer 41:1–3,” in *Scripture in Transition: Essays on Septuagint, Hebrew Bible, and Dead Seas Scrolls in Honour of Raija Sollamo*, FS Raija Sollamo, ed. Anssi Voitila and Jutta Jokiranta, SJSJ 126 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 401–411.

<sup>9</sup> וימת is an addition in 2 Kgs 25:25 and MT Jer 41:2 (shaded).

<sup>10</sup> The sentence was slightly reformulated in the Jeremiah versions: ואת־הכשדים ואת־הכשדים became part of the next sentence.

<sup>11</sup> An alternative reading would be “and officials of the king.” Both readings are represented in the research, as well as in Bible translations. Although both readings are grammatically possible, officials of the king do not play any role in the rest of the

ah, son of Ahiqam, to Mizpah. When they were eating a meal together at Mizpah, Ishmael, son of Nethaniah, and the ten men who were with him, stood up and struck down Gedaliah, the son of Ahiqam, the son of Shaphan, with the sword so that he died (killing) him, whom the king of Babylon had appointed as governor over the land, and all the Judeans and Chaldeans who were with him, with Gedaliah, at Mizpah, and the Chaldeans who were found there, the soldiers, Ishmael struck down.

The presentation shows that the oldest text consists of 22 words (124 characters), while the second phase consists of 39 words (225 characters), and the youngest text of 54 words (308 characters). This means that the text has been expanded by almost 150 percent. Since the three observed phases are only coincidentally preserved glimpses from random points in time, the whole development is likely to be more complicated. Other examples from different parts of the Hebrew Bible that reveal a similar picture could also be presented, and this implies constant editing by scribes for several centuries prior to the time when texts were frozen for changes.<sup>12</sup>

Another prominent feature that can be seen in the documented evidence is the *size* of the additions. The vast majority of additions were very small, as we can see in the example text above. There are repeated additions of details, such as names, patronyms (son of Ahiqam), titles (רבי המלך), locations (Mizpah), and clarifications (את־גדליהו). They also show that the development was notably fragmentary. Quantitatively, the most typical additions are single words, word-clusters, and short sentences.

When evaluating historical criticism, this is an important observation, because most literary-critical analyses and redaction-critical models assume a less fragmentary development. The reconstructed scribal changes tend to be larger sentences, sentence clusters, and entire blocks

---

passage, so a reference to them would be unmotivated. Moreover, the idea that Ishmael was an official of the king may be a later editor's attempt to increase his standing.

<sup>12</sup> See a discussion of fifteen documented cases of expanded texts in Müller, Pakkala and ter Haar Romeny, *Evidence of Editing*.

of text.<sup>13</sup> Although there are larger additions among the text-critical variants as well, they are far outnumbered by the smaller additions. In this regard, there seems to be an inconsistency between what we can see in the documented text-critical evidence and what historical critics usually assume when reconstructing older developments.

Moreover, typical redaction-critical reconstructions assume theologically motivated redactions that would span entire compositions.<sup>14</sup> However, it is difficult to find any documented evidence for redactions where several additions would form an interconnected stage in the development of a composition. This is also true regarding the assumption that the redactions would have revised a composition towards a certain theological perspective. It finds no match in the documented evidence. For example, in his commentary on Deuteronomy, Timo Veijola assumed successive redactional layers that would have developed the book in a specific theological direction.<sup>15</sup> Although the documented evidence does not prove that such redactions could *not* have existed, the contrast be-

---

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, the redactional layers reconstructed in Veijola, *Buch Mose*; Würthwein, *1.Kön 17–2.Kön 25*; Christoph Levin, *Der Sturz der Königin Atalja: Ein Kapitel zur Geschichte Judas im 9. Jahrhundert v. Chr.*, SBS 105 (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1982); Juha Pakkala, *Ezra the Scribe: The Development of Ezra 7–10 and Nehemia 8*, BZAW 347 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004); Thilo A. Rudnig,  *Davids Thron: Redaktionskritische Studien zur Geschichte von der Thronnachfolge Davids*, BZAW 358 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> Thus, for example, Würthwein, *1.Kön 17–2.Kön 25*; Veijola, *Buch Mose*; Rudnig, *Davids Thron*; Pakkala, *Ezra the Scribe*. This is especially the case with continental European scholarship, but similar assumptions of overarching redactions can also be found in the so-called Double Redaction Models of the Deuteronomistic History. See, for example, Richard D. Nelson, *The Double Redaction of the Deuteronomistic History* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1985).

<sup>15</sup> See Veijola, *Buch Mose*, 4–5. For example, he assumed that the so-called DtrB (or *bundestheologische Redaktion*) would have revised the book with a specific focus on the Law, the First Commandment, and the covenant between YHWH and Israel. Similarly Würthwein, *1.Kön 17–2.Kön 25*, who assumes DtrN throughout Kings; and Nelson, *The Double Redaction*.

tween what is assumed of the undocumented earlier transmission and what is documented in the later transmission is evident.

The closest documented example of something that has some similarities to a classic redaction can perhaps be found in Jeremiah. The MT version of this book adds dozens of references to Babylonia, to its king, to Babylonian chronology, or to something else about the Babylonians.<sup>16</sup> Although the similarity between the additions implies a connection and perhaps even a systematic attempt to add the Babylonians to the book,<sup>17</sup> it is difficult to see a clear ideological or theological reason why they were inserted. The additions are not systematically negative or positive towards the Babylonians.<sup>18</sup> In this respect, this evidence does not correspond to the typical redaction assumed in redaction criticism.

Another potentially interconnected layer of scribal changes can be found in the Greek Esther (in both versions, the LXX and the Alpha text), which systematically softens the aggression towards non-Jews that can be seen in the MT (see for example, Esth 8:11 and 9:1–5). The Greek versions also add references to God and his involvement, which are completely lacking in the MT version (e.g., Esth 2:20, and especially the large additions A to F). Although one cannot entirely exclude the possibility that the changes already took place in the Hebrew *Vorlage*, it is more likely that they were made in the translation process. The motive to do this was to accommodate the nationalistic undertones of the Hebrew version to the heterogeneous Greek speaking audience in Alexandria so that the book was made more acceptable as a religious

---

<sup>16</sup> For example, in Jer 25:1 the MT adds a reference to the Babylonian chronology; in v. 8 the MT additionally refers to Nebuchadnezzar as YHWH's servant; in v. 11 the MT introduces the idea that the nations will serve the king of Babylon; and in v. 12 the MT has specified that the one to be punished is the king of Babylon. Similar additions can be found throughout the MT of Jeremiah.

<sup>17</sup> Although it is not clear that the "Babylonian" additions were written by the same scribe, it seems likely that many of them are from one scribe or a related scribal group.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. the idea that the Babylonian king is the servant of YHWH in Jer 25:8 and the idea that YHWH will punish the Babylonian king in 25:12.

document and as part of the emerging Hebrew canon. It should also be noted that the revision of Esther is far more extensive and text-invasive than redaction-critical models assume, for many passages have been comprehensively rewritten, which is very untypical of the documented evidence that can be traced back to the Hebrew transmission with certainty. In any case, these examples from Jeremiah and Esther are exceptions in relation to the text-critical evidence from the Hebrew Bible. The vast majority of text-critically documented additions are instead isolated. Clearly interconnected additions from the same scribe seem to be infrequent, and parallels to classic redactions are completely missing.

### TYPES OF ADDITIONS

The types of documented additions are particularly interesting when evaluating historical criticism. Most of the additions arise either directly out of the older text and seek to explain or clarify it in some way, or are written in close dialogue with it. In brief, the following types of changes can be found:<sup>19</sup>

- Added titles, professions, patronyms, epithets, etc.<sup>20</sup>
- Added sentence constituents, such as subjects, objects, etc.<sup>21</sup>
- Implicit is made explicit, gaps are filled<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Clearly, categories are always abstractions of a complicated reality. It is also evident that the categories both overlap and could be subdivided.

<sup>20</sup> For an example, see the discussion of MT Jer 41:1–3, LXX Jer 48:1–3, and 2 Kgs 25:25 above.

<sup>21</sup> Later editors often added subjects and objects, which the older text implied but did not express because they were mentioned earlier or are evident. A typical example can be found in Jer 41:3, where the older text refers to “him” (אִתּוֹ), while the MT version has added “with Gedaliah” (אֶת־גְּדַלְיָהוּ) thus creating a redundancy (“... who were with him, with Gedaliah”).

<sup>22</sup> These types of additions mostly do not add new information, although the act of making the implicit explicit may contain an interpretation of what was meant. For example, Jer 41:3 refers to the Chaldeans who were with Gedaliah, who most probably

- Clarifications and explanations<sup>23</sup>
- Harmonizations between passages<sup>24</sup>
- Addition of details<sup>25</sup>
- Exegetical expansions<sup>26</sup>
- Added involvement of persons or groups<sup>27</sup>
- Updating of texts to correspond with the current social order
- Theological interpretations
- Theological changes

These types are presented in a very rough order of frequency as they appear in text-critical evidence. Most common are the first three. Although it is only a short text, the account of Gedaliah's murder did contain most of these common types of changes. In contrast to this, the introduction of something entirely new—that is, the last types presented in the list—is not common. To show this, examples of some of the consequential types of changes that introduce additional substance to the text will now be provided.

We look first at a harmonization between the books of Samuel and Kings found in the MT 1 Kgs 15:5, where the addition introduces a theological change:

---

would have been soldiers. The MT makes this explicit by specifying that they were soldiers, although this is not inevitably the case.

<sup>23</sup> In the example text above, 2 Kgs 25:25 and MT Jer 41:2 clarify that Gedaliah was killed when Ishmael struck him, while this is not explicit in LXX Jer 48:2.

<sup>24</sup> The Jeremiah versions specify that Gedaliah was the one who “the king of Babylon had appointed as governor over the land,” which is a reference to the appointment in 2 Kgs 25:22 and Jer 40:5, 7, 11. This addition can be seen as a clarification and a harmonization with the other passages.

<sup>25</sup> For example, MT Jer 41:2 adds that Gedaliah was killed “with the sword” (בחרב).

<sup>26</sup> The reference to Ishmael as “one of the king's high officers” (רבי המלך) can be regarded as an exegetical expansion. The information probably combines the idea that Ishmael was of royal blood and led a party of ten men. The addition may seek to strengthen the impression that the murder was commissioned by the remnants of the deposed royal house.

<sup>27</sup> As an example, the involvement of a priest is often added in later expansions, as in the MT version of 1 Kgs 8:4 (cf. LXX).

MT LXX

אשר עשה דוד את־היהוה	ὡς ἐποίησεν Δαυιδ τὸ εὐθὲς
בעיני יהוה	ἐνώπιον κυρίου,
ולא־סר מכל	οὐκ ἐξέκλινεν ἀπὸ πάντων,
אשר־צוהו	ὅν ἐνετείλατο αὐτῷ,
כל ימי חייו	πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας τῆς ζωῆς αὐτοῦ.
רק בדבר אוריה החתי	

For David did what was right  
in the sight of YHWH,  
and did not turn aside from anything  
that he commanded him  
all the days of his life,  
except in the matter  
of Uriah the Hittite.

For David did what was right  
in the sight of the Lord,  
and did not turn aside from anything  
that he commanded him  
all the days of his life.

In both versions David is first portrayed as an impeccable king who sets the standard for other kings, but the MT mentions an exception at the very end. The LXX version is consistent, while the MT contains a peculiar tension between the מכל, “from anything” and the exception. Since the reference to David’s whole life (כל ימי חייו) implies that there would be no exceptions, and since the connection of the sentence beginning with רק to the preceding is syntactically loose, it is very likely that the LXX version has the more original reading. The tension probably arose when Kings, with a very idealistic view of David, was merged with Samuel, which contained a passage that could only be interpreted as a sin (2 Sam 11). A scribe in the transmission of the MT version sought to harmonize the contradictory images.

Another example is 1 Kings 8, which provides a number of documented cases of additions in its description of the inauguration of the temple. At the beginning of the scene, after the competition of the temple, Solomon assembles key people to bring up the ark to the temple, but the MT and LXX of 1 Kgs 8:1 differ as to who the key people are:<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Many LXX manuscripts, such as A, follow the MT plus, but this is probably due to a later recension towards a proto-MT type, while the minus more likely represents the

MT	LXX <sup>B</sup>
אז יקהל שלמה	<i>τότε ἐξεκκλησίασεν ὁ βασιλεὺς Σαλωμων</i>
את־זקני ישראל	<i>πάντας τοὺς πρεσβυτέρους Ἰσραηλ</i>
את־כל־ראשי המטות נשיאי האבות	<i>ἐν Σιων</i>
לבני ישראל אל־המלך שלמה ירושלם	
להעלות	<i>τοῦ ἀνενεγκεῖν</i>
את־ארון ברית־יהוה	<i>τὴν κιβωτὸν διαθήκης κυρίου</i>
מעיר דוד היא ציון	<i>ἐκ πόλεως Δαυὶδ αὕτη ἐστὶν Σιων</i>
Then Solomon assembled the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the leaders of the ancestral houses of the Israelites, before King Solomon in Jerusalem, to bring up the ark of the covenant of the Lord out of the city of David, which is Zion.	Then King Salomon assembled all the elders of Israel in Zion  to bring up the ark of the covenant of the Lord out of the city of David, which is Zion.

It is very likely that the congested and longer MT is the result of a later addition and that the LXX is more original in the large plus (but not necessarily in the smaller variants).<sup>29</sup> The addition was probably motivated by changes in the social structure, for the elders of Israel may have been central in earlier stages, while the heads of tribes and especially the leaders of ancestral houses became more important in the later Second Temple period. A scribe thus appears to have updated the text to correspond to the current social order and its hierarchies.

A typical theological addition that clearly changes the meaning and interpretation of a text can also be found in the MT of Josh 1:7:

---

Old Greek. Note that the verse numbers between the MT and LXX are slightly different here; the LXX 1 Kgs 8:1 corresponds to MT 1 Kgs 7:51–8:1; here only MT 8:1.

<sup>29</sup> Note the peculiar repetition of King Solomon in the MT and the idea that they assembled before Solomon to bring up the ark.

## MT LXX

רק חזק ואמץ מאד	ἴσχυε οὖν καὶ ἀνδρίζου
לשמר לעשות	φυλάσσεσθαι καὶ ποιεῖν
ככל-התורה	
אשר צוך	καθότι ἐνετείλατό σοι
משה עבדי	Μωυσῆς ὁ παῖς μου,
אל-תסור ממנו	καὶ οὐκ ἐκκλινεῖς ἀπ' αὐτῶν
ימין ושמאול	εἰς δεξιὰ οὐδὲ εἰς ἀριστερά,
למען תשכיל	ἵνα συνῆς ἐν πᾶσιν,
בכל אשר תלך	οἷς ἐὰν πράσσης.

*But* be strong and very *courageous*,  
to observe (and) to do  
according to the whole law  
that my servant Moses  
commanded you;  
do not turn from *it*  
to the right hand or to the left,  
so that you may be successful  
wherever you go.

*Therefore* be strong and *manly*,  
to observe and to do  
  
as Moses my servant  
commanded you;  
and do not turn from *them*  
to the right or to the left  
so that you may be perceptive  
in everything you do.

In the older text, which is preserved in the Greek, YHWH commands Joshua to do as Moses commanded him, but the MT adds here ככל-התורה, “according to the whole law,” which substantially changes the meaning. The older text refers to Moses’s instruction on how to conquer the land (Deut 31:7–8 and/or 31:23), but in the MT, the focus is turned to the Torah and its observance, which effectively diverts attention from the main subject of the passage (cf. v. 6, this variant will be further discussed below).

Similar additions of one added word causing a substantial change in meaning can found in 1 Kgs 8:5 (added reference to the congregation of Israel, עדת ישראל; cf. LXX, which only refers to Israel); 18:18 (added reference to the commandments in the MT; cf. LXX); 19:10 and 14 (added reference to the covenant in the MT; cf. LXX), for instance.

When evaluating historical criticism, it is thus important to note that many of the theological expansions are very small, some only consisting of one or two words (such as in Josh 1:7), while larger theological

expansions are much less frequent. When we consider that theological expansions are already a minority among all the documented additions, the percentage of larger theological additions is exceedingly low. This contrasts with many redaction-critical reconstructions and other assumed additions in historical-critical approaches.<sup>30</sup>

### ONLY ADDITIONS?

Historical-critical models typically only assume that additions have been made, and this is especially apparent in redaction-critical reconstructions of multilayered texts where the older layers are assumed to have been preserved in full. Many literary critics explicitly reject the existence of other types of scribal changes, that is, omissions and replacements or rewritings.<sup>31</sup> The implementation of literary criticism also partly builds on the assumption that nothing could have been omitted. The so-called *Gegenprobe* (or “cross-check”) is a case in point. After hypothesizing an addition, the older text should be fully consistent, for otherwise the reconstruction is assumed to be incorrect.<sup>32</sup> However, if scribes had omitted parts of the text, this approach will not work, at least not in every instance, since texts should be reconstructed that also lack part of the text. Therefore, the assumption that only additions have been made may even lead to erroneous conclusions.

---

<sup>30</sup> In some cases, nearly all reconstructed additions are theological and part of redaction layers (thus, e.g., Veijola and Würthwein, see above).

<sup>31</sup> Jean-Louis Ska, *Introduction to Reading the Pentateuch* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 169–170; Christoph Levin, *The Old Testament: A Brief Introduction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 26–27; Uwe Becker, *Exegese des Alten Testaments*, UTB 2664 (Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 84; Reinhard Kratz, “Redaktionsgeschichte/Redaktionskritik I Altes Testament,” in *TRE* 28 (1997): 367–378, here 370.

<sup>32</sup> E.g., Ludwig Schmidt, “Literarkritik I Altes Testament,” *TRE* 21 (1991): 211–222, here 211, and Siegfried Kreuzer et al., *Proseminar I Altes Testament: Ein Arbeitsbuch* (Stuttgart et al.: Kohlhammer, 1999), 60.

The documented evidence manifestly invalidates the assumption that nothing was omitted. I have dealt with this subject in a separate study,<sup>33</sup> and therefore one brief example will suffice here. A very typical omission is found in 2 Sam 15:8, where Absalom, after returning from exile in Geshur, speaks to David:

MT	LXX <sup>L</sup>
כִּי־נָדַר נָדַר עַבְדְּךָ	ὅτι εὐχῆν ἠῤῥατο ὁ δοῦλός σου
בְּשַׁבְתִּי בְּגֶשׁוּר	ὅτε ἔκαθήμην ἐν Γεσσειρ
בְּאֶרֶם לֵאמֹר	ἐν Συρίᾳ λέγων
אִם־יָשִׁיב יְיָ יְהוָה	Ἐὰν ἐπιστρέψων ἐπιστρέψῃ με κύριος
יְרוּשָׁלַם וְעַבְדְּתִי	εἰς Ἱερουσαλημ, καὶ λατρεύσω
אֶת־יְהוָה	τῷ κυρίῳ ἐν <del>Χεβρον</del> .

For your servant vowed a vow  
while I dwelt at Geshur  
in Aram, saying,  
“If YHWH brings me back  
to Jerusalem, I will offer worship  
to YHWH”

For your servant vowed a vow  
while I dwelt at Geshur  
in Syria, saying,  
“If YHWH brings me back  
to Jerusalem, I will offer worship  
to YHWH in ~~Hebron~~”

By omitting parts of the text, the MT avoids the theologically offensive implication that YHWH had a presence and a temple in Hebron. The LXX preserves the more original reading, for it would be very unlikely that someone had added a reference that implies a temple in Hebron at a very late stage. This obviously breaks with the idea of cult centralization and contradicts the idea that Solomon built YHWH’s first temple. The context also clearly shows that Absalom indeed went to Hebron to worship YHWH there (cf. vv. 7 and 9). It would also be a coincidence if the word Hebron had accidentally fallen out in the verse that specifically shows a cultic connection with the city. The Old Greek is preserved in the Lucianic witnesses of the LXX, while the other Greek witnesses were very likely harmonized according to a proto-MT-type text.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Pakkala, *God’s Word Omitted*.

<sup>34</sup> For further discussion of this variant, see Pakkala, *God’s Word Omitted*, 221–222.

Although omissions are not frequent, documented evidence shows that the texts were not just expanded, which thus contradicts what is commonly assumed in literary criticism. Both omissions and replacements of sections of text with other texts are provide clear challenges to the method, for it is exceedingly difficult to reconstruct what has been omitted.

### SHOULD HISTORICAL CRITICISM BE PRACTICED?

Despite the difficulties of historical criticism addressed here, the method should not be abandoned. Some of the apparent and real problems need to be put into perspective. Firstly, additions are overwhelmingly more common than omissions, replacements, and transpositions.<sup>35</sup> There appear to be at least a hundred additions for each of the other kinds of scribal changes, which relativizes their significance for historical criticism. In fact, text-critical variants imply great respect for the text and a very careful transmission. The omissions and replacements are really the exception that took place in cases where the text was perceived to contradict certain theological conceptions of the emerging Judaism. Many of the significant omissions relate to conceptions of the divine (e.g., ancient polytheistic conceptions were purged from the texts), cult centralization (references to the legitimate use of other cult sites), and similar issues central to later Judaism. Here, the exception confirms the rule, which was the preservation and high regard for the text. Therefore, the scribes omitted parts of the text for very weighty reasons only.

High regard for the text and its preservation are also key factors in explaining the vast majority of additions. The most common types of

---

<sup>35</sup> Transpositions of parts of the text have not been discussed here, but they are a slightly less severe problem than omissions and replacements. See the discussion in Ville Mäkipelto, Timo Tekoniemi, and Miika Tucker, "Large-Scale Transposition as an Editorial Technique in the Textual History of the Hebrew Bible," *TC: A Journal of Biblical Textual Criticism* 22 (2017): 1–16.

additions (see the list above) do not really change the substance of the text but instead seek to conserve it. When a title or a patronym is added, for example, it is usually taken from the immediate context, and the scribe mostly did not seek to change the text's meaning in any way. When what is implicit is made explicit, it is either an evident gap in the text that is filled, or something that is clarified. The additional information is mostly limited, and the underlying principle seems to be the preservation and high regard for the text. There are certainly exceptions to this, and the intention to preserve and conserve may still entail change. For example, additions that seek to clarify the text for the reader bring along the scribe's understanding and interpretation of the text, and this is contingent on the scribe's socio-historical context. Despite their relative frequency, however, it is not crucial if historical criticism fails to detect additions that really do not introduce something new into the texts.

More important is the method's ability to detect significant additions that introduce substantive changes that imply or reflect changes in the socio-historical context where the texts were transmitted. This has been the core task of historical criticism and the rationale with which it can justify the substantial labor put into reconstructing the literary history of texts. In other words, the method should have a realistic chance of detecting scribal interventions where conceptions of society, religion, and history were substantially changed.

There is a *correlation between detectability and the introduction of new ideas into the older text*. The more an addition changes a text, the less difficult it is to detect by text-internal considerations, and vice versa.<sup>36</sup> The reason for this may in part be obvious. If a scribe inserted something entirely new, it is often not in line with the older text and therefore either easily protrudes from its context or is somehow in tension with it. An addition that primarily arises out of the older text is more in harmony with it (see, for example, many of the small additions in the

---

<sup>36</sup> Clearly, there are exceptions to this; see discussion below.

account of Gedaliah's murder), while additions that were made because of a theological motive may neglect the context. For example, the Torah and commandments may have been inserted irrespective of their suitability for the passage (e.g., Josh 1:7). The correlation is connected to the reluctance of the scribes to alter the older text and primarily make additions. If the scribes had frequently resorted to comprehensive revisions, omitting and rewriting sections of the text, the addition of new ideas could have been more easily integrated with the older text. Because the older text was mostly left untouched, the result was a congested text that contained tensions, contradictions, repetitions, and even syntactic and grammatical mistakes.

Joshua 1:7 is a prime example of such a short addition that could be detected even without the more original LXX version. The addition of ככל־התורה created problems in the consistency of the text and its logic as well as its grammar. The text uses the masculine singular suffix in מִמֶּנּוּ (in reference to what Moses has instructed), but after the MT addition, one would expect the feminine singular, since the obviously intended meaning of the addition is that one should not turn away from the Law, התורה (f.). The addition also led to the peculiar idea that one would need to be strong and courageous (even manly) to obey the Law, while in the older text, as preserved in the LXX, courage was logically needed to wrest the land from the powerful nations that inhabited it. One should also note that Moses never instructed Joshua to follow the commandments, while he did instruct Joshua to be strong and courageous to be able to conquer the land (in Deut 31:7). Moreover, the speaker in the text is YHWH, but after the addition, the text describes how YHWH instructs Joshua to follow Moses's instruction to follow YHWH's Torah, which would be a very awkward and unlikely way to express the idea. The scribe who added the reference to the Torah thus forced a theological idea into the text irrespective of the various problems it caused. Here, the literary critic would have a very good chance of detecting the addition, and this is very typical of such forced additions where an entirely new idea is introduced into the text.

A similarly detectable case is 1 Kings 15:5. The MT is inconsistent, for it first states that David did not sin in anything all the days of his life, only to undermine it by the loose sub-sentence at the verse end that refers to his sin with Bathsheba. Here, a careful critic would suspect that the MT is the result of a scribal intervention even if the LXX variant had not been preserved to confirm it. The introduction of new and even contradictory conceptions to the text often leaves traces.

There are also documented cases that contain classic signs for later expansions. Lev 17:4 is an exemplary case of a *Wiederaufnahme*, a “resumptive repetition.”

MT	SP/LXX/4QLev <sup>d</sup>
<p><sup>3</sup> If anyone of the house of Israel slaughters an ox or a lamb or a goat in the camp, or slaughters it outside the camp,</p> <p><sup>4</sup> and does not bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, (ואל פתח אהל מועד לא הביאו)</p>	<p><sup>3</sup> If anyone of the house of Israel slaughters an ox or a lamb or a goat in the camp, or slaughters it outside the camp,</p> <p><sup>4</sup> and does not bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, (ואל פתח אהל מועד לא הביאו)</p> <p>to make it a burnt offering or a peace offering to YHWH, at your own will, for a sweet-smelling savor, and (who) slaughters it outside,</p> <p>and does not bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, (ואל פתח אהל מועד לא הביאו)</p>
<p>to present (it) as an offering to YHWH before the tabernacle of YHWH, he shall be held guilty of bloodshed; he has shed blood, and he shall be cut off from the people.</p>	<p>to present it as an offering to YHWH before the tabernacle of YHWH, he shall be held guilty of bloodshed; he has shed blood, and he shall be cut off from the people.</p>

The plus, which is found in SP, LXX, and 4QLev<sup>d</sup>, is concluded by a sentence (ואל פתח אהל מועד לא הביאו) identical to the one immediately preceding the expansion. The scribe who made what is very likely a later addition tried to make the transition back to the older text as smooth as

possible, but this created a peculiar repetition that a careful critic would notice. A somewhat similar example can be found in 1 Kgs 6:11–14. The end of the addition in vv. 11–14, which is missing in LXX<sup>AL</sup> and is probably original in this regard, repeats a sentence from v. 9: *ויבן את הבית ויכלהו* <sup>37</sup>. *הבית ויכלהו < ויבן שלמה את הבית ויכלהו*.

Nonetheless, there are cases where it would be challenging to detect even significant theological changes without text-critical evidence, and many of them are very small—only one or two words. In 1 Kgs 18:18, a scribe in the MT transmission added the word *מצות*, “commandments.” The older text, as preserved in the LXX version, refers to Ahab and his house forsaking YHWH, while the MT changes this to the idea that they forsook YHWH’s commandments. Without the LXX version, it would be very difficult to detect the addition, which does not disturb the context or syntax in any way,<sup>38</sup> but which substantially influences the theological meaning of the text.<sup>39</sup> Many similar examples could be mentioned (e.g., 1 Kgs 19:10, 14).

Consequently, the documented evidence runs in opposite directions. Some text-critical variants suggest that literary criticism can detect additions, while it is also easy to find examples that would be very challenging, if not impossible, to detect without an older variant reading. Omissions (and replacements) further complicate the issue. A methodo-

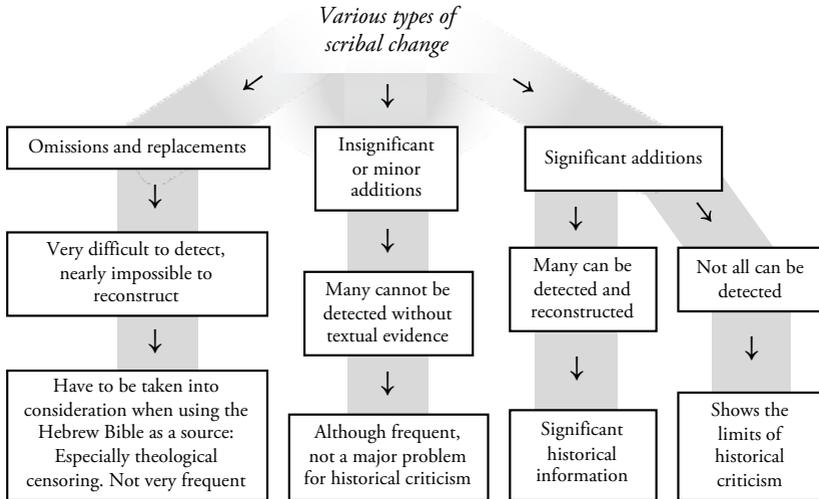
---

<sup>37</sup> Both additions contain several text-internal features such as inconsistencies and tensions which would suggest—also without the shorter and more original version—that we are dealing with an addition. For a more detailed discussion of Lev 17:4 and 1 Kgs 6:11–14, see Müller, Pakkala, and ter Haar Romeny, *Evidence of Editing*, 19–25, and 101–108.

<sup>38</sup> The text reads: *ויאמר לא עברתי את־ישראל כי אס־תה ובית אביך בעזבכם את־מצות יהוה ותלך אחרי הבעלים*, “He said, ‘I have not ruined Israel, but you have and your father’s house in forsaking (pl.) the commandments of the Lord and you (sg.) have followed the Baalim.’”

<sup>39</sup> This kind of “Torahization” of the Hebrew Bible is evident in many passages. Later scribes have gradually introduced the Torah and its commandments into the very center of Israel’s religion, which effectively leads to a new religion, Judaism, which has very different conceptions from the ancient Israelite religion.

logically justified position necessitates that all documented evidence be taken into account when historical criticism is evaluated. The following diagram illustrates the types of relevant evidence and their consequences for historical criticism:



*Figure 2: Documented Evidence Relevant for Historical Criticism*

The limits and weaknesses are clear. For example, scribal omissions in the transmission of the Hebrew Bible mean that some theological censoring would go undetected and even lead to biased results. This is especially important for any reconstruction of Israel's monarchic religion, because later scribes censored references to older religious conceptions if they explicitly contradicted those of the emerging Judaism. They also made small additions, some of which are undetectable, which emphasize the importance of the Torah and the commandments in Israel's religion. It is important that historical criticism recognizes areas or topics where it may have difficulties.

It is not imperative to detect inconsequential changes which repeat something from the older text or which are essentially clarifications. The goal of historical criticism should not be to reconstruct every possible

detail in the transmission history of biblical texts, but instead to pursue the recognition of significant scribal changes and thus improve our understanding of historically important developments in the context of the Hebrew Bible. Historical criticism thereby improves our use of the Hebrew Bible as a historical source, which is also the method's original purpose.

Although it is easy to criticize historical criticism by pointing out some of its limits, it is important to acknowledge that the method (or biblical studies at large) is not a natural science where one can reach proven theories and bulletproof results. Some of the recent critics seem to claim that unless the method's conclusions are certain and somehow "objective," the method is problematic. For example, Person and Rezetko expect "completely objective evidence" and "some sort of *objective* means for identifying sources and redactional layers,"<sup>40</sup> but since this is hardly possible in historical criticism, it is easy to point out cases that fall short of these expectations.

Human sciences need to be recognized as non-empirical sciences where we are dealing with theories which seek to explain a very complicated reality, but which can never be proven. If the same kind of "objectivity" were to be expected from other fields of human sciences, not many would stand the test, and it is unclear what would remain of biblical studies at large. The limits of all human sciences are evident, and we are always dealing with probabilities and theories based on a variety of considerations. Documented evidence shows that historical criticism has a very good chance of gaining significant historical information in many texts, but no reconstruction should ever be regarded as 100 percent certain. This should not distract us from the historically significant observations and results, which may be used to build our conception of Israel's history, society, and religion. Furthermore, we should also be conscious of the alternatives to historical criticism. These are illustrated in Figure 3 below.

---

<sup>40</sup> Person and Rezetko, *Empirical Models*, 25.

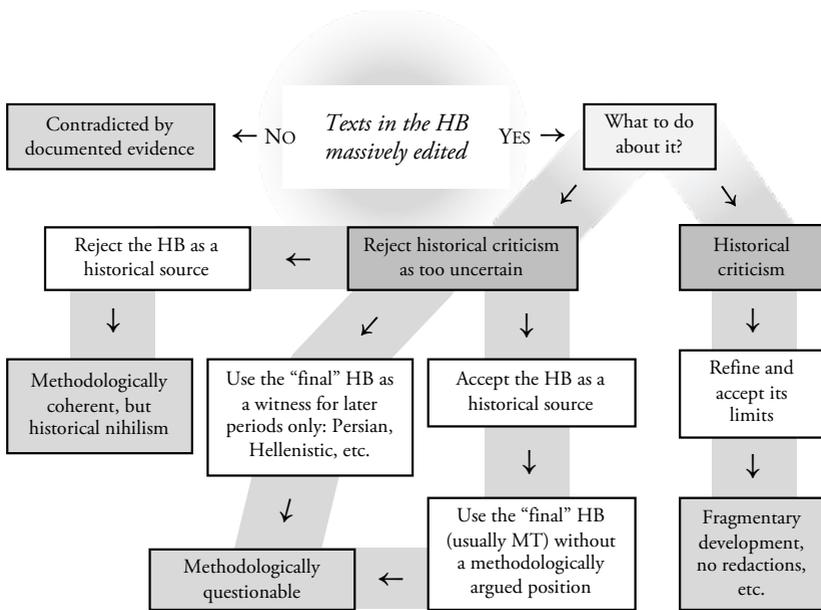


Figure 3: Alternatives to Historical Criticism

Historical nihilism may be a comfortable position because one does not need to be concerned with the uncertainties implied in all historical reconstructions. If this position is adopted, it should also, for consistency's sake, be applied to other fields of biblical studies, and eventually to the entire study of history as well.

Another position is the use of the Hebrew Bible as a historical source *without* historical criticism, but this is methodologically questionable. At least, the position needs to be methodologically justified. If one accepts that the Hebrew Bible was massively edited, it inevitably leads to the question of in relation to which period it can be regarded as a historical source. This issue also relates to the different versions of the text: Which text (the MT, LXX, SP, etc.) is to be used as the basis? When one compares the variants that can be observed among the versions, variants that occur throughout the entire Hebrew Bible in nearly every verse, one is immediately faced with the fact that we are dealing with an

evolving text with complexities that need to be addressed. This makes the use of the “final” versions, such as the MT or LXX, problematic if one is using them as historical sources for the formative period when the texts were still evolving, that is, the monarchic period and most of the Second Temple period.<sup>41</sup> Consequently, when all the alternatives are placed side by side as in Figure 3, and when the implications of the available options are understood, historical criticism may still be the most justified method, despite all its limits. This does not mean that the method should not be improved. In particular, this article has shown that any future models that utilize historical criticism need to take into account the lack of classic redactions and the exceedingly fragmentary development suggested by the documented evidence.

---

<sup>41</sup> Clearly, it is a different issue if one uses the canonical and relatively fixed Hebrew Bible as a source for later reception history, or if focus is on how was used in the later Jewish and Christian communities. On the other hand, even for the later reception history one needs to acknowledge that many different and variant versions were circulating, although the changes made to the *Hebrew* text were very limited in the Masoretic transmission in the Common Era.