**Uncertainty and Undecidability in Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible:
Three Epistemic Issues**

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"Because it was he, because it was I." This is the best known sentence in the *Essays* by Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592). It is the only explanation he could provide for his close friendship with Etienne de la Boétie, and it remains, to this day, one of the most popular statements about friendship. This sentence is also a gloss. It entered the first posthumous edition of his book, in 1595, but was absent from the previous editions (from 1580 to 1588). The 1595 edition was prepared by Marie de Gournay, allegedly on the basis of a manuscript given to her by Montaigne before his death in 1592. The "master copy" used by the printers was most likely destroyed after the book was printed, in keeping with the practice of the time. But scholars are lucky enough that a copy of the previous edition (1588), annotated by the very hand of Montaigne, surfaced two centuries later. On this "Bordeaux copy", as it is named, we can see that the famous sentence was a marginal addition made by Montaigne – one of the innumerable additions he made. In fact, a difference in the color of the ink shows that he added it in two stages: "because it was I" was inserted later.
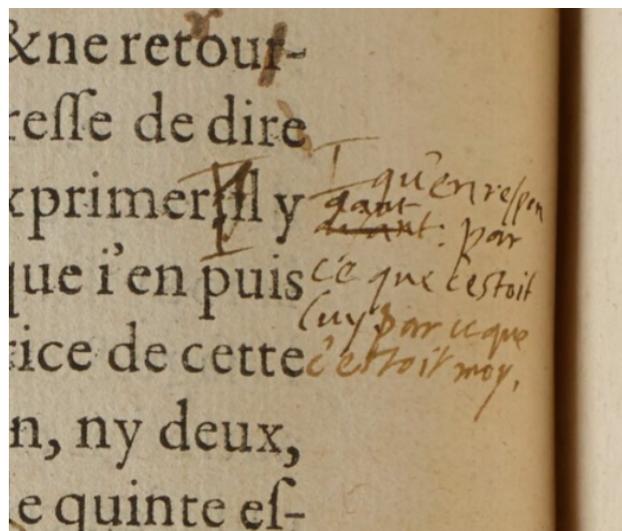
Problem solved? We seem to be able to locate with certainty the very point in the textual history of the *Essays*, where the sentence was added. Except that the we don't. The 1595 edition includes the sentence but differs in many ways from the Bordeaux copy, and we are ignorant of the exact relationship between them. The Bordeaux copy included a page with instructions for the printer, and yet it was never printed as such. Was it nevertheless used as a basis for Marie de Gournay, who modified it with considerable freedom? Or was it a mere draft that Montaigne himself used as a foundation for making a new, cleaner copy that was then used by Marie de Gournay? We don't know. The uncertainty surrounding the textual history of the

Essays make the work of its modern editors a "nightmare, an infinite confusion."[1] Scholars simply don't know which text they should edit. Today, some editions are based on the 1595 publication, others on the Bordeaux copy.[2]

This illustration from a literary work far removed from the world of the Hebrew Bible shows that even in the case of a single, well identified author, in the printing age, and when we have a sort of "autograph," a lot of uncertainty remains. Textual fluidity cannot be controlled, sentences slip out of our hands, and the very basis of critical editions proves shaky. Indeed, before turning to the Hebrew Bible, I find it important to remind ourselves that biblical scholarship is no island: the difficulties we encounter in the study of its text are not specific to it. We might find inspiration from the way in which our colleagues from other fields tackle the same problems. To take but one example, the latest edition of the *Essays* attempts to give an idea of their textual fluidity by printing Montaigne's handwritten annotations to the 1588 edition in small characters within the running text. Montaigne also had an interesting perspective on the life of his own book, to which I shall later return.

As any practioner of the textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible knows, the judgments made by scholars on variants are subjective and uncertain. But I don't think that the full import of the epistemological issues surrouding the work of text critics, and their ramifications, has sunk in yet. Focusing on uncertainty runs against the grain of a widespread scholarly habitus that overacts by showing an excessive confidence in the presentation of results. Presenting our own hypotheses as merely "plausible" does not sell well in our field, it doesn't sound "scientific" enough, perhaps because we want our work to resemble "hard science" (based on a very schematic view of the latter). Yet in my view, qualifying our hypotheses by ascribing them a degree of plausibility, recognizing our uncertainty, does not render our work less scientific: it makes it *more* scientific. The limits to our knowledge are also the borders of our knowledge; they give us an idea of the extent of what we know. However, the problem here goes deeper than a simple "glass half full, glass half empty" situation. Exploring the cracks in our knowledge, the uncertainty that meanders at the surface of our work, leads us to deeper, structural issues. In the following, I will point out a number of situations where uncertainty, including undecidability, complicates the task of text critics who prepare critical editions of the Hebrew Bible, to such a point that even they themselves are not always aware of it. The current editions comprise:

- The BHQ, a diplomatic edition of the Leningrad Codex, which is progressively replacing the BHS;
- The HUB, a diplomatic edition of the Aleppo Codex;
- The HBCE, an eclectic edition.

My discussion will be informed by my experience in the making of two such editions, as lead editor of 1 Kings in the HBCE, and as a modest collaborator in the BHQ, playing the role of co-editor reviewing forthcoming volumes. I will try to show that uncertainty affects textual

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[1] C. Blum quoted in Montaigne, *Essais* I, ed. E. Naya, D. Reguig, and A. Tarrête (Folio classique; Paris: Gallimard, 2009), 84.
[2] See the Introduction of Montaigne, *Essais* III, ed. E. Naya, D. Reguig, and A. Tarrête (Folio classique; Paris: Gallimard, 2012).

criticism at three levels with increasing seriousness: (1) the explanation of isolated variants; (2) the textual history that is presupposed in critical editions of books that existed in multiple literary editions; (3) the hypotheses regarding the origins of biblical books that underlie critical editions. I will also try to indicate ways in which current or future editions could integrate these difficulties.

1. The explanation of isolated variants

The difficulties pertaining to the "routine" work of text critics are well known by its practitioners and I will content myself with noting a few selected, and typical, situations. What is seldom discussed and is of particular interest to my present purpose is how the uncertainty is (or isn't) represented in critical editions.

A first and ubiquitous problem is that our access to ancient Hebrew textual witnesses is often indirect because many of them are known through versions. When there is a semantic or syntactic difference between MT and a version, it is often difficult to distinguish between a difference due to the translational process and a difference that was already present in the Hebrew *Vorlage* of the version.[3] This difficulty is more significant when it comes to books translated in a "free" fashion, such as Isaiah or Proverbs, whereas in books where the translation technique is "literal" and isomorphic, like Samuel-Kings, the translator wanted to reflect the Hebrew model without deviating deliberately from it. In the latter case, differences compared to MT are taken as possible reflections of a Hebrew text different from MT. In such cases we can talk of a "reasonable assumption", more reasonable than the opposite, which would consist in ascribing every difference to the liberty of the translator; but it is still an assumption. A further problem is that even when we are reasonably sure that a difference was already present in the Hebrew *Vorlage*, we may hesitate between several possible retroversions.

How are these uncertainties represented in critical editions? They often use little devices to indicate the hypothetical character of their proposals. Thus, BHS editors often qualify their proposals with adverbs like "perhaps" ("frt" for *fortasse*) and "probably" ("prb" for *probabliter*) and they sometimes use a question mark that immediately follows the proposed retroversion, as is still done in the BHQ. In HUB, a "p", for "perhaps", precedes a number of retroversions. But it probably says a lot about our inability to measure degrees of probability that "p" also stands for "possibly" and "probably" in that edition. Moreover, there is *always* some degree of hypothesis. The absence of the devices just noted does not indicate that the editors are absolutely certain of their proposal; rather, its presence shows a higher degree of uncertainty compared to the rest of the time.

Uncertainty regarding retroversions are often indicated by questions marks in BHS, BHQ, HUB and by asterisks in the HBCE. In the BHQ, some readings in the versions are explained as based on a certain Hebrew form, introduced by "via". For instance, in the description of an eschatological battle in Zech 10:4, we read that out of the Judeans will come "a bow of war"

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[3] For a recent discussion, see M. M. Zahn, *Genres of Rewriting in Second Temple Judaism: Scribal Composition and Transmission* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 147-150.

(קֶשֶׁת מִלְחָמָה) according to MT, but "a bow in anger" (τόξον ἐν θυμῷ) according to LXX. BHQ explains this as follows:

מִלְחָמָה V S | ἐν θυμῷ G (via בחמה)

Yet according to the editorial rules of the BHQ, "via" does not mean that the Hebrew word was necessarily present in the *Vorlage*; it means that it was present in the mind of the translator, even if this was perhaps due to a misreading on his or her part. This convention is a necessary mark of scientific rigour, but it also means that it is not always clear whether it is the *existence* of an underlying Hebrew variant that is hypothetical, or the *particular retroversion* that is offered. In addition, BHS sometimes hesitate between two possible retroversions; the same in HUB (e.g. Ezek 27:16). In BHQ this is not done in the apparatus but, sometimes, in the textual commentary.

Now when text critics are reasonably sure they are dealing with two (or more) readings in Hebrew, whether attested directly or indirectly by a version, and want to decide which was the earliest and how the others derived from it, they often hesitate between competing scenarios of equal plausibility. And yet critical editions do not often report such hesitations. The HUB sometimes indicates several possible explanations, but in a very concise manner. Tov notes that in the BHQ, the "explanations are often no more than learned guesses and since only a single factor is mentioned, that remark creates the impression of a definitive answer to an often difficult issue."[4] Actually it is not in that spirit that characterizations are indicated in the BHQ. The idea is to provide the most probable explanation in the apparatus if one is available (others can be mentioned in the commentary). It is *implied* that these are "learned guesses" – does it ever get better than that in textual criticism? – and it is expected that the reader will receive them as such, and try to make up his or her own mind. If editors are so hesitant that they don't want to propose any characterization, they may be satisfied with writing a commentary in which they can explain the arguments and counter-arguments. The HBCE edition of Proverbs rarely mention alternative characterizations, separated by "or," in the apparatus; here's an example in 30:14 ("orth or gram"):

30:14 ואביונים M S (ܡܣܟܢܐ)] ואביונם* G (τοὺς πένητας αὐτῶν) (orth or gram) ‖ 30:16 מים M S (ܡܝܐ)] מים מים* G (ὕδατος καὶ ὕδωρ) (dittog

Maybe future editions will frequently indicate several, alternative characterizations and even assign them of a coefficient of plausibility, although would result in an extended and complicated apparatus. In the meantime, the HBCE innovates by adding "equal" among the possible characterizations. It means that the reading indicated in the apparatus is, compared to the lemma found in the main text, of equal plausibility. For instance, in Prov 15:32a, the MT criticizes "he who heeds (וְשׁוֹמֵעַ) admonition" whereas LXX has "he who keeps (ὁ δὲ τηρῶν) reproofs", thus presupposing ושומר. It is impossible to say that one of these synonymous readings is earlier than the other, as indicated in the HBCE apparatus:

[4] E. Tov, "The Philosophy of the *Bibla Hebraica Quinta* Edition," in *La Bible en face: Etudes textuelles et littéraires offertes en hommage à Adrian Schenker, à l'occasion de ses quatre-vingts ans*, ed. I. Himbaza and C. Locher (Cahiers de la Revue Biblique 95 ; Leuven : Peeters, 2020), 36.

ושומע M S (ܘܢܛܪ) [ושומר* G (ὁ δὲ τηρῶν) (syn, equal) 15:32

The "equal" characterization creates a certain advantage compared to the other editions in that it allows the editors to frankly admit that some issues are undecidable. In the Books of Kings, it frequently happens that arguments in favor of a textual scenario are matched by arguments in favor of the scenario the other way around. Arguments and counterarguments cancel each other out and it is simply impossible to decide. My impression is that this frees the editors from a psychological pressure, or a typical temptation, to explain away the readings that differ from MT as secondary, which is a risk in diplomatic editions.

An often overlooked consequence for the HBCE is that in spite of appearances, it actually admits the equal plausibility of many texts, not just the one or two printed as the edited text, in one or two columns. Every time the characterization "equal" is used in the apparatus, two texts are regarded as having the same degree of plausibility of representing the earliest attainable text: the main text, and a text where the alternative reading would be incorporated. If "equal" appears 5 times in a chapter, it is therefore 2^5 texts that are theoretically concerned.

The last situation I want to mention here occurs when scholars are altogether unable to explain a variant. Scribes make mistakes that do not enter in the usual categories such as homoioteleuton, for instance; cognitive interferences of various ways may disturb them. Some deliberate changes are introduced for reasons that escape us. In the BHQ, book editors are supposed to provide characterizations in every instance where it can be done with a reasonable degree of plausibility. Tov notes that the system of characterization "requires the rather unusual presupposition that there is an explanation for every variant, a view that I do not share".[5] In reality, however, a number of variants are indicated without any characterization and sometimes even without any commentary, because editors consider that they are unable to provide an explanation with sufficient plausibility (this varies depending on the volume). In such a case, silence speaks volume. The HBCE editions uses "unc" as a characterization when no clear explanation is forthcoming.

To conclude so far, uncertainty affects many concrete situations in the "routine" work of text critics, and it is partly, not fully, represented in critical editions. And yet this should not lead us to relativism. Commenting on the fact that the BHQ volume on Genesis, prepared by Avraham Tal, systematically explains away variants found outside the MT as secondary (with only 9 exceptions), Tov writes: "The beauty of textual criticism is that everyone is entitled to his or her own view. There is no right or wrong in this area, and we should accept the editorial decisions of Tal who apparently strives to maintain MT under virtually all circumstances."[6] This is a generous but questionable statement. It suggests that any reading can be defended with sufficient plausibility as being the earliest attainable – the determination of which is the explicit goal of the BHQ's apparatus. Perhaps a case can be made for any reading, but that doesn't mean that any case is plausible or has the same degree of plausibility as any other. Rather than taking it literally, I receive Tov's statement as the expression of the wisdom of an experienced scholar

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[5] E. Tov, "The Philosophy of the *Bibla Hebraica Quinta* Edition", *La Bible en face. Etudes textuelles et littéraires offertes en hommage à Adrian Schenker, à l'occasion de ses quatre-vingts ans*, ed. I. Himbaza and C. Locher (Cahiers de la Revue Biblique 95 ; Leuven : Peeters, 2020), p. 34-35.

[6] Ibid., 24.

of exceptional erudition, who rightly points out that our undertakings and hypotheses should be taken with a pinch of salt.

Be that as it may, I now turn to even more problematic situations in which our uncertainty is rooted in the ways in which we reconstruct the textual history of the book.

2. The textual history of biblical books

One of the most interesting developments in textual criticism during the last few decades is the full realization that a number of biblical books existed in distinct literary editions. The textbook case is Jeremiah: we know a shorter edition, mostly reflected by the LXX but stemming from a Hebrew form of the book, and a longer version found in the MT. [7]A few DSS fragments contain texts that are close to that of each edition. What is crucial here is that the integrity of each edition must be preserved, because they both constitute literary projects in their own right. It does not make sense to reconstruct a text that would be a mixture of both; that would mean creating a hybrid that does not correspond to anything that existed and that would break the inner logic of each edition.

The BHQ and the HBCE strive to take this into account, in different ways. When the BHQ editors record a variant reading in the LXX that resulted from the revision leading to a distinct edition, they label it as a "literary variant" and they use the characterization "lit". The HBCE, for its part, will use parallel columns, typically one column for the archetype of the MT and one column for the archetype of the OG; if the editor deems one edition as the ancestor of another, he will designate the former as "edition A" and the latter as "edition B" in the apparatus.

So far, so good. The trouble begins when it comes to decide, faced with a given variant, whether it originates from the major revision that led from one edition to another, or whether it is an isolated change that was made independently from that revision, for instance at a later stage. We encounter here the same methodological problem as in compositional criticism, when scholars try to disentangle successive redactional layers and isolated additions. In Jeremiah, most scholars accept the notion that the longer edition is a revision of the shorter; its creation entailed a number of small and large-scale changes, the most evident of the latter being the relocation of the oracles against the nations from the middle of the book to its end. But the two editions as we know them also exhibit many other differences that may, or may not, be due to the same revision. It's possible that a number of plusses in MT are also additions made by the same "main redactor" who is behind the new edition, but a number of them may also be unrelated *Fortschreibungen* inserted several centuries later. Likewise, the LXX is not a pristine reflection of the earlier Hebrew edition, it also incorporates a number of later changes. The problem is that it is not always possible to decide to what stage of the textual history a given variant belongs.

The same situation occurs in books where large-scale differences affect a few chapters only. The main difference between MT and OG in Ezekiel appears in chapters 37-39, where the

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[7] M. Richelle, "Jeremiah and Baruch," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Septuagint*, ed. A. Salvesen and T. M. Law (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 259-284.

sequence is 38-39-37 in OG according to Johan Lust and many other scholars. In the OG, the "valley of dry bones" seems to be the *result* of the war against Gog. Let's assume, for the sake of the argument, that Johan Lust is right in thinking that MT represents a later edition of Ezekiel (made, in his view, in the Hasmonean period).[8] There are many other local differences between MT and LXX spread over the book, and it is not always clear whether they were made by same redactor who changed the sequence in chapters 37-39.

Ascribing variants to the major revision that produced a new edition may be warranted in two situations. First, when those variants were part of the very literary mechanism (e.g. a rearrangement) behind the revision. For instance, Bogaert has shown that the relocation of the oracles against the nations, from right after Jer 25:12 to right after Jer 45, was accompanied by various changes in the "oracle of the cup" (25:15-29) to make it fit its new role: while it was formerly the conclusion to these oracles, it now became the conclusion to the oracles againt Judah.[9] Likewise, Lust has argued that Ezek 36:23c-38, a plus in MT compared to LXX, is an addition made to smooth the transition to chapter 37 in its new location. The possibility cannot be entirely ruled out that the changes just noted in Jeremiah and Ezekiel were made *after* the main revisions, in their wake or much later, to smooth transitions or iron out (perceived) tensions created by the revision in the book, although it is a less economical hypothesis. Second, if some variants reflect the same concerns (whether theological or other) as those underlying the revision, it may be that they were part of it. But it's also possible that some later scribes imitated their predecessors and made changes in the same spirit, in the same way that late scribes added, in a number of books, glosses of deuteronomistic flavor that should not be ascribed to the major Dtr redactions of the 7th–6th centuries BCE but are due to late "imitators."[10]

Two factors complicate the matter further. The first is the fact that even when variants were made during a large revision, the reasons that prompted a number of them generally come from their immediate, local, context, and thus they can often be explained as assimilations, explicitative additions, and so on. Hence they can be mistaken for isolated variants. This may be the reason why the BHQ edition of Esther did not have recourse to "lit": variants in the LXX are explained in isolation, by way of a whole variety of set of other characterizations, rather than connected to a different literary edition. This has been criticized, not without reason, since it is widely acknowledged that Esther existed in several literary editions.[11] But the very fact that it was possible to proceed that way shows that two levels of explanation are often possible: variants are part of an overall revision, and yet they are also made for "local" reasons.

The second complicating factor is that some *literary* differences – not just isolated variants – do not necessarily "belong" to the reedition process. For instance, MT and LXX offer very different forms of the complaint on the ruler of Tyre in Ezek 28:11-19. In MT, the ruler is

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[8] This is debated; see H. Patmore, *Adam, Satan, and the King of Tyre: The Interpretation of Ezekiel 28:11–19 in Late Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

[9] P.-M. Bogaert, "La liste des nations dans l'oracle de la coupe (Jr 25:16–26): Juda, les peuples voisins et les grandes puissances," in *L'Ecrit et l'Esprit: études d'histoire du texte et de théologie biblique en hommage à Adrian Schenker*, ed. D. Böhler, I. Himbaza and P. Hugo (OBO 214; Fribourg/Göttingen: Academic Press/Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht), 1-14.

[10] It is not a matter of size (see M. Zahn, "Editing'and the Composition of Scripture The Significance of the Qumran Evidence," *HeBAI* 3 [2014], 309-11.

[11] Tov, "The Philosophy of the *Bibla Hebraica Quinta* Edition," 30.

metaphorically assimilated to a cherub who ends up expelled by God from his sacred mountain. In LXX, the rule is *accompanied by* a cherub, and it is the latter who expels the ruler from the moutain of God. The difference takes the form of a network of variants that could legitimately be characterized as "literary." And yet the literary revision at play was not part of the same revision noted in chapters 37-39. Lust believe that in Ezek 28, the Hebrew model of the LXX is an earlier stage of the text, while MT is a rewriting. But Lust considers that the MT form of the text was made very late, later than the time of the Three, thus not before the 2nd century CE, and therefore much later than the Hasmonean edition behind the rearrangement of Ezek 37-39. If so, we have two distinct sets of literary changes, made at two different times. Which raises the question of whether the use of the same "lit" characterization in BHQ might create the misleading impression of a single literary revision. Other scholars,[12] including myself,[13] think that the OG in Ezek 28:11-19 is secondary compared to the MT, which would lead to the same conclusion: the literary differences here were not part of the MT revision of 37-39.

In sum, we may agree on the *existence* of literary editions but are often unable to delineate their *shapes*, that is, to describe their precise contents and contours. In some very difficult cases, we are not in a position to reconstruct a textual history in which the literary editions can easily find their place.[14] In my view, this problem is one of the main challenges for the future volumes in the series BHQ and HBCE. It will affect the use of the "lit" characterization in BHQ, and it will affect the use of columns, as well as the ascription to "edition A" or "edition B", in HBCE. Inescapably, those editions will reflect the personal views of the book editors about its literary editions and their mutual relationship. But an even more problematic issue concerns the origins of biblical books.

3. The origins of biblical books

The last area where uncertainty affects textual criticism, and is likely underestimated, is the origins of biblical books. That it concerns the HBCE is clear since much of the debate surrounding its rationale and feasibility revolves around the notions of *Urtext* and archetype; the explicit goal of that edition is an approximation of the archetype. And while the topic of the origins of biblical books may seem far removed, chronologically and conceptually, from the purpose of diplomatic editions of Medieval codices (HUB and BHQ), that is not the case when it comes to their critical apparatus and (in the case of the BHQ) the textual commentary, as we shall see.

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[12] J. Barr, "'Thou art the Cheroub': Ezekiel 28:14 and the Post-Ezekiel Understanding of Genesis 2-3," in *Priests, Prophets and Scribes: Essays on the Formation and Heritage of Second Temple Judaism* , ed. E. Ulrich et al. (JSOTSup 149; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 213-223 ; *CTAT* 3, 237-238.
[13] M. Richelle, "Le portrait changeant du roi de Tyr [Ézéchiel 28] dans les traditions textuelles anciennes," in *Phéniciens d'Orient et d'Occident: Mélanges Josette Elayi*, ed. A. Lemaire (Paris: Maisonneuve, 2014), 113-25.
[14] For an example, see A. Piquer Otero, "What Text to Edit ? The Oxford Hebrew Bible Edition of 2 Kings 17.1-23," in *After Qumran: Old and Modern Editions of the Biblical Texts – The Historical Books*, ed. H. Ausloos, B. Lemmelijn, and J. Trebolle Barrera (BETL 246; Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 236-237 2 Kgs 17; T. T. Tekoniemi, *The Textual History of 2 Kings 17* (BZAW 536; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2021).

The Urtext model

In their paratext, the BHQ and the HBCE editions compare readings and try to decide, for instance in the case of two variant readings, which is earlier and which is later, as well as why a scribe or copyist replaced the former with the latter. The HUB also does it in its fourth apparatus, albeit not systematically. By doing so, the editors tacitly or explicitly presuppose that there exists, in traditional terms, a "genetic" relationship between the readings. The opposite situation would be that of unrelated readings, that is, readings of different and independent origins; in such a situation, it would not make sense to try to understand how one reading originates from the other or why it was meant as a replacement of it.

The underlying model postulates that the extant textual witnesses belong to a unique series or at least to a set of interconnected series – what is traditionally called a "genealogical tree". The standard view posits that such a "genealogical tree" originates from a unique starting point, an *Urtext*. As Tov and Ulrich write:

> Almost all scholars are involved with the evaluation of textual variants, but often they may not be aware that this procedure actually requires the acceptance of the idea of an original text in some form (…) the authors and users of the BH series and the HBCE, and the authors of all critical commentaries by implication accept the idea of an original text.[15]

For the concrete practice of textual criticism, what matters is not the *Urtext* (which no one claims to be able or even willing to reconstruct) but the fact the readings are "genetically" related. This model has been challenged in various ways and two different approaches have been put forward.

The variance of texts

Whereas Tov, Ulrich and others have recently reaffirmed the importance of the notions of original text and archetype, thus ascribing special importance to specific (and early) stages in the textual history of a given book, a recent stream of scholarship approaches ancient texts in an altogether different way, through the lens of its *variability* over time. An eloquent and radical representant of that approach is Brennan Breed.[16] He summarizes and develops a number of standard criticisms mounted against the Urtext-archetype model, while adding others. The most relevant aspects of the discussion, in my view, are the following.

First, the *Urtext* model has sometimes been associated with a Romantic approach to the *Urtext*, in a hierarchical framework whereby the original is pure and the rest is inferior, or an alteration, degradation, or corruption, such that the *Urtext* must be recovered while the rest is depreciated. Tov and Ulrich, in a passage I have quoted above, use the phrase "value judgment" to describe what text critics do when assessing variants. It is interesting to note in that

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[15] E. Tov and E. Ulrich, "1.1.1.2.5: The Search for an Original Text" *Textual History of the Bible*, vol. 1A: *Overview Articles*, ed A. Lange and E. Tov (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2016), 16. They add that "the authors and users of the HUB edition do not have to make a decision because that edition does not include value judgments," but the fourth apparatus of HUB includes explanations of variant readings by way of various characterizations ("abbr", "condens", "expans", "dupl", "exeg", "hapl", "ditt", "gloss", etc.).

[16] B. Breed, *The Nomadic Text: A Theory of Biblical Reception History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

connection in a more recent work mostly devoted to NT textual criticism, Yii-Jan Lin has demonstrated that 19th-century scholars employed biological metaphors to describe textual history, often with racial and depreciative implications.[17]

Second, it is argued that the Urtext model does not correspond to anything in the actual history of biblical books. It is often tied to the notion of author, whereas literary works in the ANE were multigenerational, collective literary projects. More than that, is it is impossible to pinpoint a stage in the textual history of a book that could be privileged on objective grounds. Neither the disreputed notion of authorial intention, nor the elusive frontier between composition and transmission, nor a hypothetical time of "publication", nor a specific "authorization" or special reception by a community could constitute objective grounds for privileging a form of the text. What we observe is a continuous and seamless development. Even the MT was not completely stabilized in medieval times.

This criticism is all the more interesting since recent studies have revealed a conceptual gap between the etic perspectives of modern scholars on ancient Jewish literary works and the emic understanding of the scribes who wrote and copied them. In an important book, Eva Mroczek has pointed out that the latter did not conceptualize the works they copied as "books" in the modern sense of the term; it would be better to speak of "projects".[18] Other scholars have noted that some scribes regarded themselves as "inspired" and strived to improve the texts, perhaps to resemble a heavenly model,[19] which is vastly different from the transmission of an authored work.

Third, in light of the works of Paul Zumthor and Cerquiglini in French medieval literature, the concept of variance aptly captures the life of biblical books. The history of a book is that of a movement, of a perpetual process of change. In such an approach, all the variants are legitimate, and it is possible to study all the ramifications of the textual history without prejudice.[20]

Breed's claims call for a nuanced assessment, and in fact some of these arguments are not novel. I agree with his claim that it is problematic to elevate one text or variant while relegating others to inferior status. Textual criticism is a historical task; it is descriptive, not prescriptive, it is not authorized to determine the "best" text, and should not make value judgments. Of course there is no transcendant justification that would make unavoidable, or grounded in absolute motives, the choice of a particular form of a text. (Religious communities, on the contrary, can

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[17] See already B. Cerquiglini, *Eloge de la variante: Histoire critique de la philologie* (Paris : Seuil, 1989), 76-77.

[18] E. Mroczek, *The Literary Imagination in Jewish Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[19] Zahn, *Genres of Rewriting in Second Temple Judaism*, 211-222.

[20] Currently there seems to be little dialogue between those who defend the *Urtext* model and those who criticize it and emphasize the processual character of biblical works, perhaps in part because the former are involved in the concrete, painstaking work of textual analysis, whereas the latter focus on theoretical, conceptual matters – two noble undertakings that are often kept separated, unfortunately. Ronald Troxel, editor of Isaiah 1-39 in the HBCE series, has written a sophisticated reaction to Breed's work ("What is the 'Text' in Textual Criticism?," *VT* 66 [2016]: 603-26). There he points out that one cannot avoid taking a hermeneutical stance and every reading is contextual. James Nati notes that Breed's critique that one's arbitrary selection of a text ironically opens up the possibility of defending it, like Troxel does, on the basis of "cultural contingency", and that such "a particular hermeneutical stance" is warranted as long as it is done "with parameters that are agreed upon by its practitioners" (J. Nati, *Textual Criticism and the Ontology of Literature in Ancient Judaism: An Analysis of the Serekh ha-Yaḥad* [SJSJ 198; Leiden: Brill, 2022], 244).

value a text as inspired or canonical, but such values belong to a completely different context than academia.) There is some degree of ambiguity when scholars speak of "superior" or "preferred" readings. There is no "superior" reading in the absolute; but if the project is to reconstruct a precise form of the text, for instance the earliest attainable text, then it may be legitimate to "prefer" a reading in the sense that it corresponds better than the other readings to the goal of the project. If so, "preferred" does not imply "intrinsically superior", but rather "better fitted to the purpose of the project". Even scribal mistakes can result in new, interesting forms of narratives, as I have argued elsewhere,[21] and can be interesting because they were more received in history than more "correct" readings. At any rate, I tend to think, like Breed, that the best course of action would be to avoid any language that is suggestive of intrinsic hierarchy – but that does not exclude diachronic descriptions in terms of *chronological* priority and genetic developments.

But while Breed ties his avoidance of intrinsic hierarchy to the notion that no *Urtext* ever existed, and to a distate for such diachronic assessements, this is unwarranted. One could still hold to these aspects and adhere to Breed's purpose, which is to advocate a view of textual criticism in which no single text would be privileged to the detriment of the others—a textual criticism in which all the forms of the text would be equally valued and studied. I agree with Breed's holistic view, but this perspective is not new and is defended by other scholars. For example, Alexandre Rofé speaks of the "the pursuit, step by step, of the history of the text."[22] Ronald Troxel presents the goal of his commentary in the HBCE edition of Isaiah 1-39 as "a commentary on the life of a book."[23] Hindy Najman notes that scholars can adopt either a retrospective approach (aiming at the earliest attainable text) or "a prospective approach, studying the interpretative, religious, and cultural developments that precede, succeed, and intervene in the formation of texts." In Najman's words, "If we take a prospective approach, we will not see textual variation and proliferation as error and corruption. We will see them instead as signs of life—as manifestations of the vitality of the traditions that we are studying."[24] I agree, and I would go further. In a sense, one cannot separate retrospective and prospective approaches. In order to fully unpack the history and the dynamics of the vitality of traditions, and to contextualize them, we need to understand the history of those dynamics, how they unfolded throughout time. Distinguishing between earlier and later is necessary to that project, and the earliest attainable text can be regarded as a starting point for such a description; the prospective approach can serve as a "basis" for the prospective approach.

What remains unsatisfactory in current editions is that they relegate variants to apparatusses. Maybe some scholars do it or receive it in the framework of a view that depreciate these variants. In my view, it is merely a practical issue, although it does create the impression that the variants are less important, which is a limitation. A possible alternative would be a synoptic or polyglot edition, but in printed form this still requires the selection of a few witnesses and

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[21] M. Richelle, "Towards a Variegated Approach to Textual Fluidity: Limited Variations, Deliberate Duplication and Creative Scribal Mistake in 2 Kings 10:15-31," *Henoch* 42/2 (2020): 92-114.

[22] A. Rofé, "The Historical Significance of Secondary Readings", in *The Quest for Context and Meaning: Studies in Biblical Intertextuality in Honor of James A. Sanders*, ed. C. A. Evans and S. Talmon (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 402.

[23] R. Troxel, "Writing Commentary on the Life of a Text," *VT* 67 (2017): 105-28.

[24] H. Najman, "Ethical Reading: The Transformation of the Text and the Self," *JTS* 68 (2017): 517.

thus the exclusion of others. Cerquiglini himself was thinking of digital editions using separate windows to alleviate the problem of "bidimensional" representation of synopses.[25] There is little doubt that in a few years or decades, text critics will be able to design digital editions that they will offer an adequate representation of all the multiplicity of textual forms. They will also show how a form of a text "morphed" into a later form through scribal agency, along single or multiple tracks, and this will be a sound basis to reflect on the dynamics at play in the development of the text over time. They will regard us as dinosaurs, and rightly so.

In the meantime, we need to resort to a running text (sometimes with two columns as in the HBCE) as a reference point for our explanations and remarks, which appear in apparatusses and commentaries. And in such a provisional context, it is unavoidable to choose a stage in the textual history in a given textual tradition, or a document; the arbitrariness of such a choice is not a problem as long as one does not pretend otherwise. There may be functional grounds for which a particular form of the text is selected: because it is complete, because it facilitates diachronic descriptions, because it is close to what sprung from the mind of an author (if applicable), or for another reason. Using the earliest attainable text as a basis, as in the HBCE, may have the advantage, for some books, of facilitating diachronic descriptions; it makes sense to begin with the beginning and go all over the subsequent history. This is a functional choice that has nothing to do with the notion that the *Urtext* is "pure" and all the rest of the textual history is "degradation." Whether it is a sound choice for every book is certainly debatable.[26] A natural alternative is to take the MT as attested in a codex, as in HUB and BHQ, but experience shows that it does not allow editors to give the required space to variant forms (and that is not their goal).

Moreover, criticizing the choice of a particular stage in the textual history on the sole grounds that it is a process still rests on a lack of appreciation of what processual realities consist in. François Jullien argues that Western thinking is poorly equipped to think in terms of processes, compared to Chinese thinking.[27] Most of the realities in human life and human history are what he calls "silent transformations". The growth of a human being is such a process. There does not exist a precise time when we could say that a person suddenly becomes an adult. It is obviously arbitrary to draw a line and say that it happens on one's 18th birthday, as is law of many countries. It is purely conventional. And yet, such a convention remains helpful because it is still pertinent to distinguish between children and adults. Stressing the inability to pinpoint a stage that could be privileged within a process is doing no more than saying it is a process.

Furthermore, I am not sure that we gain much by replacing the Romantic view of a pure *Urtext* with a romanticized view of the *process* of variance, as does Breed, who elevates that process to a special ontological status with no more grounds than those who prioritize a form of text. Like textual fluidity, variance points to a general phenomenon. Its purpose is not to lead to a fine-grained description of the textual history. In addition, importing the category of variance from French Medieval literature to the realm of ancient Jewish literature can be

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[25] Cerquiglini, *Eloge de la variante*, 112-115.

[26] M. V. Fox, *Proverbs: An Eclectic Edition with Introduction and Textual Commentary* (HBCE 1; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015).

[27] F. Jullien, *La pensée chinoise: En vis-à-vis de la philosophie* (Folio essais ; Paris : Gallimard, 2015), 21-24.

illuminating in the cases of some books and misleading in others. Using variance to describe the textual history of the books of Ruth or Jonah seems to me problematic.

A fine-grained study of the textual history would attend to the discrete instantiations of a book in text forms over time, distinguish between major revisions and minor cases, would recognize cases of limited fluidity,[28] in a word, would scrutinize an often complicated and uneven history. It would even allow for the possibility that in the case of *some* books (perhaps Ruth and Jonah), a relatively simple compositional history led to a relatively stabilized text quite early, so that Tov's definition of an original text as a crystallized form might be applicable in such cases. Again, this does not mean that a crystallized form of a book should be regarded as superior in absolute terms, but it would make it reasonable, albeit not the sole option, to take it as a reference point from which to describe the subsequent textual history.

The early parallel texts model

The other alternative to the *Urtext* model is the theory of "early parallel texts" defended by a number of scholars, notably Shemaryahu Talmon.[29] According to this model, a work (narrative, epic, etc.) that was first transmitted orally may have developed into distinct oral forms, and the latter were put into writing by various scribes working independently, on different occasions. As a result, there existed, from the start, variant written forms of the same work.

This has far-reaching implications for textual criticism, especially for critical editions. If there was not a unique text from which the rest of the textual traditions stem, but multiple parallel texts that do not derive one from another, then it does not make sense to explain the relationship between them in terms of development from one to another. They are parallel – even if one came into being later than another. In such a situation, we cannot characterize a reading as originating from another by way of the usual scribal changes, the same way that we do not "correct" a literary edition on the basis of another. Theoretically, we could still try to determine whether some text forms are connected. For instance, it could be that one early form of text was copied and gave birth to a whole textual tradition, its own "genealogical tree", while another parallel text gave birth to another "genealogical tree". If so, one could still theoretically try to describe the textual history of each branch. But I am not sure that we would currently be able to disentangle such different branches of textual history.

The early parallel texts model remains counterintuitive to many scholars, and both the BHQ and the HBCE rest exclusively on the competing model. Here again, it is striking that most proponents of both models share one presupposition, namely that the origins of all the biblical books should be explained by the same and unique model. Elsewhere,[30] I have tried to examine the possible merits of the early parallel texts model, noting first of all that this model has been

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[28] Richelle, "Towards a Variegated Approach to Textual Fluidity."

[29] S. Talmon, "Textual Criticism: The Ancient Versions," in *Text and Canon of the Hebrew Bible: Collected Studies* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 383-418.

[30] M. Richelle, "Reflections on the Model of Early Parallel Texts," in *Urtext, Archetype, Fluidity or Textual Convergence: The Quest for the Texts of the Hebrew Bible*, ed. J.-S. Rey and S. Schorch (CBET; Leuven : Peeters, forthcoming).

adopted in other sectors of ancient literature, for works such as the Mahabharata, the Homeric epics and the Quran. I also suggest that the early parallel texts model might be fitting for a few biblical books, while the *Urtext* might remain better for the others.

At the heart of the debate is yet another problem of uncertainty, or more precisely, a problem of undecidability: our inability to distinguish between variants due to scribal changes and variants that stem from parallel texts and ultimately from different oral performances. This is the case, for instance, of many synonymous readings. In fact, a key argument used by Tov and Ulrich against the early parallel texts model is that the textual differences we observe in the witnesses of biblical books can always be explained by genetic development via scribal transmission. The trouble with that claim is that *any* form of the text can be imagined to morph into another form that way. Any change, whether addition, omission, transposition, rearrangement, and so on, can be done by a scribe. Even those variants that likely stem from oral fluctuations could have been made by a scribe.[31] So this argument is too easy, it works only if we use the *Urtext* model as a default model, with a risk of circularity in the argumentation.

An important analogy comes from recent research on Homeric works. For a long time, scholars have regarded the textual plurality of Homeric manuscripts as variations stemming from a *Urtext*. More recently, however, Graeme Bird[32] and Gregor Nagy[33] have argued that the pluriformity of the textual witnesses is (at least in part) a reflection of the pluriformity of the oral transmission of the Homeric epics. For centuries, the Iliad and the Odyssey were orally recited and performed, with local variations; they were then put down into writing in different places by different people, and as a result, there were from the start different written versions of these works: not a unique *Urtext*, but a "multitext". The same variants that were deemed by West to reflect fluctuations due to scribes, are now regarded as reflections of oral fluctuations. For the present discussion, what is interesting is the very fact that the same variants could be explained in different ways. More than that perhaps, the fact that they could be analyzed as due to scribal changes, during a long period of modern research, in spite of some difficulties, whereas they are now interpreted differently, is telling.

I defend elsewhere[34] the view that a few criteria might make a model more likely than the other for a given book, including:

- whether the book seems to have oral origins and have been orally performed, or is a "bookish" composition that originated as a scribal work;
- whether the variants are typical of oral fluctuations (as in the Homeric formulaic poetry) or typical of scribal changes;

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[31] What complicates the picture further is the interplay between oral and written, and the case of "memory variants": see D. M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[32] G. Bird, *Multitextuality in the Homeric Iliad: The Witness of the Ptolemaic Papyri* (Hellenic Studies Series 43; Washington: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2010). Online edition: https://chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/4864.graeme-d-bird-multitextuality-in-the-homeric-iliad-the-witness-of-the-ptolemaic-papyri.

[33] G. Nagy, *Poetry as Performance: Homer and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Online version: https://chs.harvard.edu/read/nagy-gregory-poetry-as-performance-homer-and-beyond/.

[34] Richelle, "Reflections on the Model of Early Parallel Texts."

- whether the amount of verbal coincidence between the textual witness is high or low – in the former case, one would need to postulate a massive convergence between the textual forms, or that parallel texts have been lost or discarded.

A final aspect must be noted. Even when the early parallel texts model is not fitting to explain the origins of the preserved textual witnesses of a book, it is still possible that parallel forms of the book, or of some stories found in that book, circulated and "interfered" with the transmission of that book. It might well be that some scribes knew of a parallel version (whether oral or written) of a story contained in that book, and that it influenced them when copying the book. If so, the parallel version is not part of the "genealogical tree" of the book, and yet it played a role in scribal changes in the course of its transmission. This should be considered a possible explanation for puzzling variants in the future.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to show that uncertainty affects textual criticism at three different levels and how this could be taken into account to improve the (already excellent) editions we know:

1. *The explanation of isolated variants*: while uncertainty on the first level is acknowledged in critical editions, it is far from being fully represented. I suggest that the work of textual criticism consists in describing not only the textual history of books but also *our ability and inability* to do that. There is room for improvement to make future editions (not necessarily the current projects) more transparent in this regard, although it will certainly weigh down the apparatuses. An example of significant change would be to indicate when there exist alternative, equally plausible explanations of variants.
2. *The textual history that is presupposed in critical editions of books that existed in multiple literary editions*: each edition of a book is defined by a limited set of important textual changes, but for many other variants in the same book, it remains difficult to decide whether they are to be ascribed to the same edition or not. This will be a crucial issue for future volumes of the BHQ and HBCE; in my view, these editions could adopt a flexible system that allow for a distinction between those variants that are assuredly part of an edition, and those that *might* be part of it but are not necessarily.
3. *The hypotheses regarding the origins of biblical books that underlie critical editions*: the current projects seem to presuppose, even indirectly, an *Urtext* model. I suggest that we should at least ask ourselves whether the early parallel texts model could not be pertinent for at least a few books. If so, it might be necessary to devise a means to take that into account, perhaps in the same ways as the BHQ (with the characterization "lit") and the HBCE (with columns) do to take into account multiple literary editions. In addition, the interference of lost parallel texts or traditions might serve to explain some textual differences in the witnesses.

Finally, the limitations of current editions, which focus on a running text and relegate the variants to apparatusses, are unavoidable for now but it is a desideratum that sophisticated,

digital editions will appear in the long run. That way, we will be better equipped to comment on "the life of a text", to borrow again Troxel's phrase. Actually, the metaphor of life applied to books was somewhat anticipated by Montaigne more than four centuries ago. In the last copy that he annotated (the Bordeaux copy), he presents his book as "consubstantial" to his own life, as a commentator writes.[35] On the same page, Montaigne writes "My book is always one" and "me right now and me later are really two," thus pointing to an interplay between identity and change that applies both to his book and to his life. Indeed, he shows that the development of his book reflects in some ways his own development and the changes in his thinking. His book is "always one," yes, but he immediately notes that every time one publishes it again, he "gives himself the right" to make additions so that the buyer gets something new; however, he notes, these additions "do not condemn the first form" of the book.[36] By disarmingly embracing textual fluidity without disowning any stage in the textual history of his mirror-book, Montaigne might well have led the way to a relaxed, wise, and sophisticated view of textual criticism.

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[35] P. Desan, "Montaigne's *Essays*: A Book 'Consubstantial' with Its Author," in *The Oxford Handbook of Montaigne*, ed. P. Desan (New York: Oxford University Press), 1-13, esp 5-6.
[36] Montaigne, *Essais* III, 216 (my translation).