

5. Ancient Texts

An OT text may contain a late passage, such as a prediction of the Return, permitted by Cyrus in 0478. But is the *whole text* of that date, or is that passage merely a later addition? That question must be asked of each OT text in turn. One technical skill that is needed by the Old Testament reader, then, is the ability to detect later additions in a text. It is introduced in this chapter.

The results can be interesting. Some passages seem to form a sequence: the David who killed Goliath on his own is also said to have done so at Saul's order; or again, David enters Saul's service as a warrior and a skilled musician. No two of these are compatible; still less all three. But together, they show David being gradually integrated into the story of King Saul, as the writers work to accept and accommodate a new institution: the monarchy.

Any addition to a text may be called an interpolation, but that term is better reserved for the fourth of the commonest ways of adding material to a text. Here are all four, with examples from both Testaments.

A / AT THE END

The most natural place to add something to a text is **at the end**.

1. To the **Isaiah** core (Isa 1-39, nominally pre-Exilic) were added Deutero (Isa 40-55, openly Exilic) and Trito (Isa 56-66, envisioning an ideal future), adjusting previous encouragements to the changing times.¹

2. In the Gospel of Mark, there is no birth narrative; Jesus enters the story as an adult, to be baptized by John in the Jordan. Matthew adds a virgin birth story, and Luke adds an even grander virgin birth story. Finally, in John, Jesus becomes virtually equal to God:

John 1:10. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, and the world knew him not. [11] He came unto his own, and they that were his own received him not. [12] But as many as received him, to them gave he the right to become children of God, even to them that believe on his name . . .

Having reached that insight, why did not the churches get rid of the earlier, now theologically obsolete, Gospels? Answer: Because those Gospels had already reached the status of sacred texts, and were cherished by many. To disown them would produce a crisis of confidence among the believers.

So too with the Old Testament's outdated stories: they were too widely accepted by too many. The boy David, the heroic slayer of Goliath, will always have his enthusiasts. Why start a war with them? Better just to leave it alone: a tradition which argues with itself only becomes less authoritative.

And so the young David and the human Jesus are still before us in the Bible.

¹Duhm **Jesia** (1892); for later contributions, see Williamson **Book** (1994).

B / BEFORE THE BEGINNING

New material can be placed **at the head**, not the tail, of a text. That first contact will greatly affect future readers' perception of everything that follows.² To do so was precisely the intent of whoever preposed that material.

3. The seven-day creation story in **Genesis 1** precedes and contrasts with the older Eden story, Genesis 2-3; it gives cosmic sanction to the seven-day Sabbath custom. To make that point was probably the motive for its addition, and its prominent initial placement.

4. The **Gospel of Luke** had originally begun, in proper historical fashion, by defining the political context: "Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judaea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee . . . There was later preposed **Lk 1-2**, a miraculous Birth Story, to catch up with the one in Matthew, and keep current with the latest thinking on the status of Jesus, who (see #2) was increasingly seen as divine.

C / CONCENTRIC: AT BOTH ENDS

New material may be added at **both the head and tail** of a text, either successively or as a one-time framing device. This keeps the ends of the work mutually compatible, and gives an overall impression of unity of thought.

5. **The Torah Psalter**. At one point, the evolving Psalms collection was framed by the head-and-tail addition of Psalms 1 and 119, making the whole Psalms collection as of that time proclaim that post-monarchic theme. (§59)

6. **1 Peter** was at first a widely distributed but anonymous baptismal homily. But in response to the expulsion of Jesus followers from synagogues in c85, it was reissued with new material at the head (**1:1-2**) and tail (**4:12-5:11**), which equipped it to address the new emergency ("the fiery trial among you"), and which also attributed it to Peter, who by this time (though not earlier) had come to be seen as the greatest of Jesus' disciples:

1Pet 1:1. *Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the elect who are sojourners of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia . . .*

1Pet 4:12. *Forasmuch then, as Christ suffered in the flesh, arm ye yourselves also with the same mind; for he that hath suffered in the flesh hath ceased from sin; [2] that ye no longer should live the rest of your time in the flesh to the lusts of men, but to the will of god . . . [5:10] And the God of all grace, who called you unto his eternal glory in Christ, after that ye have suffered a little while, shall himself perfect, establish, strengthen you. [11] To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.*

This very influential text has now found its proper place in the canon.

²It may seem that preposed material cannot outweigh, in the reader's mind, all that follows. But a new reader has *not yet seen* what follows, and the first thing encountered will set the tone for the rest.

D / DISTINCTIVE MATERIAL: INTERPOLATIONS

A passage may differ in tone or content from its neighbors, or interrupt a narrative. If you tentatively remove it, and its neighbors *become consecutive*, like your finger when you take a splinter out, *that* was an interpolation.

7. The Hebrews, having escaped from captivity in Egypt, are heading south, toward Mount Sinai. They are told to avoid the dangerous northern sea road:

Exod 13:17. “And it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God led them not by the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near, for God said, Lest peradventure the people repent when they see war, and they return to Egypt, [18] But God led the people about, by the way of the wilderness by the Red Sea.”

But suddenly, a *change of direction* to that dangerous sea route is ordered:

Exod 14:1. And Yahweh spake unto Moses, saying, [2] Speak unto the children of Israel, that they turn back and encamp . . . between Migdol and the sea, before Baal-zephon.

There, Pharaoh’s pursuing chariots are defeated, when the magically withheld waters magically return; a very dramatic episode.³ Then, *without any comment*, the Hebrews continue their previous southward journey. Its late literary style, and its interruptive placement, both identify that episode as an interpolation.

8. The Farewells of Jesus in **John 15-17**, coming after a brief parting scene at the end of John 14, and directly before the arrest of Jesus, were introduced in order to extend this moment, so appropriate for Jesus’ “last words” advice to his disciples, who would later transmit his message to Christian posterity.⁴

F / FINAL CONSIDERATION

If you are in charge of a growth text, where do you stop? An accumulation may reach a satisfying total number of chapters (12, 40, any multiple of 10), which will then be protected against further additions – or maybe not.

9. The **Psalms** had reached a total of 150, but some Maccabean Psalms, responding to the 0168 desecration of the Temple, demanded to be included. Room was made for them by eliminating some Psalms, or by pushing two together as one. For the first option, notice the double heading of Psalms 88-89, which implies the existence of an Ezraite Psalm; that Psalm *no longer exists*.

It is only under such unusual conditions that an ancient growth text, or a growing ancient tradition, is likely to delete earlier material. In this exceptional case, an urgent contemporary need has been met, the Maccabean challenge has been dealt with, and the canon of the Psalms can resume its former character, as a finished and complete authority.

³For the full story, see §21. Its literary success is manifest: this incident is often referred to in the Psalms and other later literature.

⁴See Wellhausen **Erweiterungen** 7-15.

Earlier and Later Passages

To distinguish early from late evidence, and to recognize the factors that led from the one implied situation to the other, is to know how to do history. But ancient history presents a difficulty which is unknown in later periods: the fact that one text may, and often does, contain material of more than one date. The point of this chapter has been to introduce that complication, with examples.

Apart from such evidence of addition to one text as thematic discontinuity or contrast, there are also literary clues, which may also be applied to passages *in different texts*. On this last page, the most important of these are noted.

- (1) **Yahweh**. He constantly intrudes to create updated versions of stories.
 - In **1Sam 11**, Saul is chosen king by acclamation of the people. In **1 Sam 9-10**, he is anointed by Samuel *as chosen by Yahweh*. The latter is the later.
- (2) **Priests**. Later stories show only priests as having access to Yahweh.
 - In **Exod 3**, Moses is called to lead the people out of Egypt; in **Exod 4**, Aaron, ancestor of the priests, is called to *speak for him*. The Aaron version is later.
- (3) **Rulers**. Later stories tend to associate an individual's deed with a ruler.
 - In **1Sam 17:20-58**, David kills Goliath; Saul does not know him. In **1Sam 17:31-40**, David kills Goliath *at the request of King Saul*. The latter is the later.

Later passages tend to (4) appeal to **Emotion**, as Ruth's devotion to Naomi in **Ruth 1**, or (5) feature **Women**, as Rahab in **Joshua 2-6**, or to (6) be **Long**, as the Joseph Story in Gen 37-50, the longest consecutive narrative in the Bible.

There are also reasons why ancient writers may *correct* an earlier text:

- (7) **Amelioration**. The Bible likes to leave its major figures in a positive light.
 - In **Num 12**, Miriam opposes Moses. In **Exod 15:20-21**, she and her maidens join in *celebrating a victory of Moses*. The latter is the later.
 - In **1Sam 8:1-5**, the corruption of Samuel's sons is the reason for shifting Yahweh's favor from priests to kings. But in **1Sam 12:1-5**, Samuel is shown to have been at least honest *in his own judgements*. The latter is the later.
- (8) **Patches**. If something lacks narrative continuity, a patch may be added.
 - Hagar *twice* flees Sarai, when she is pregnant (**Gen 16**), and after her son Ishmael is born (**Gen 21:9-21**). Each time, Ishmael gets a blessing. A patch at **Gen 16:6** gets Hagar back to Sarai, so she may be driven out a second time.
 - The people left with little more than the clothes on their backs (**Exod 12:34**). But when the Tabernacle is built, they contribute so much gold and fine fabric (**Exod 35:4 - 36:7**) that the collection is halted. *Where did they get that stuff?* Material was added at **Exod 3:22, 11:2, and 12:35**, saying that, before leaving, the people had "despoiled the Egyptians." Those explanatory patches are later.
- (9) Last is the **Completest**, who may add an alternate tradition, like Abram's rescue of Lot in **Gen 14** (incompatible with Lot's unaided escape in **Gen 15**), not because it fits, but just because it is there, and he wants it not to be lost.

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And with that much by way of orientation, we may turn to reading texts.