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JOHN VAN SETERS, AUTHOR OR REDACTOR?

AUTHOR OR REDACTOR?

JOHN VAN SETERS

WATERLOO, ON, CANADA

1. INTRODUCTION

The choice of whether a certain form of literary activity reflected in the biblical text should be characterized as that of an author or a redactor, and whether or not these terms are even appropriate, has now come to the fore in biblical studies. In a couple of preliminary articles, as well as in a recent monograph, I have challenged the use of “redactor” and “redaction criticism” in biblical studies as anachronistic and inappropriate for antiquity.¹ To this challenge Jean-Louis Ska has offered a significant response in his Sigmund Mowinckel lecture to the University of Oslo: “A Plea on Behalf of the Biblical Redactors.”² Eckart Otto has defended the notion of the redactor in what seems to me a quite hostile recent review of *The Edited Bible*.³ Christoph Levin has just published an article in defense of the understanding of (his) Yahwist as an editor, *not* as an author, as he rejects my critique of the notion editor in *The Edited Bible*.⁴

So the debate has begun – it was long overdue – and I am sure that it will continue for some time to come. This article is meant to advance this debate by dealing with the issues raised along with its historical and methodological underpinnings. In addition, this article will attempt to remove

¹ J. Van Seters, *The Edited Bible: The Curious History of the “Editor” in Biblical Criticism* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006); idem, “The Redactor in Biblical Studies: A Nineteenth Century Anachronism,” *JNSL* 29/1 (2003) 1-19; idem, “An Ironic Circle: Wellhausen and the Rise of Redactional Criticism,” *ZAW* 115 (2003) 487-500.

² J-L. Ska, “A Plea on Behalf of the Biblical Redactors,” *ST* 59 (2005), 4-18. Ska, of course, responded to my articles, not to the monograph, which was published later than his response.

³ Eckart Otto, Review of John Van Seters, *The Edited Bible: The Curious History of the “Editor” in Biblical Criticism*, *Review of Biblical Literature* [<http://www.bookreviews.org>] (2007).

⁴ C. Levin, “The Yahwist: The Earliest Editor in the Pentateuch,” *JBL* 126 (2007), 209-230.

some misrepresentations of my position that not only do not contribute to this necessary scholarly debate, but actually hinder it.

2. A RESPONSE TO JEAN-LOUIS SKA'S POSITION ON THE QUESTION OF 'AUTHOR OR EDITOR'

Ska briefly summarizes my two earlier articles before he begins his response to them. Although I am not entirely happy with his summary of my views, I will not quibble about the details and turn directly to his position. Rather than attempt to defend the notion of *editor* in antiquity, Ska attacks the appropriateness of the notion of *author* for any work “both in Greece and in Israel.” The concept of *author* is held to be a product of the “Romantic Movement” in the modern world and as such is inappropriate for antiquity. Of course, notions of authorship covering a wide range of literary genres changed over time, even when there was quite conscious imitation of classical models for centuries in the modern era. But this is hardly reason for regarding ancient poets, dramatists, historians and other writers as “editors” rather than authors.

The claim by Ska, and others, that an *author* is an invention of 18th and 19th century “romanticism” is, however, worth examining because a large part of the present problem results from the application of this very anachronistic understanding of authorship and the corresponding romantic understanding of *redactor* to biblical studies.⁵ Prior to the rise of romanticism numerous texts were part of the educational curriculum and the object of academic study. There were, of course, the great classics works of the Greeks and Romans in many different genres, the theological classics of the early church and the medieval and early modern period. There were the great poets and playwrights, the philosophers of many ages, the historians, and the like. There is little point in denying authorship to this large corpus of traditional work, all of it held in the highest esteem.

The primary function of academia at all the great centers of learning at the time was the transmission and perpetuation of this traditional corpus as the embodiment of wisdom and truth with little room for innovation.⁶ With the rise of the natural sciences and historical criticism from the sixteenth century onwards, however, this whole system was challenged. Now, innovation and new truth that was not based upon the old “canonical” tradition

⁵ For a thorough discussion of the rise of academic authorship in the Romantic Era as a form of “academic charisma,” see William Clark, *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

⁶ All this is spelled out in great detail in Clark’s book, cited above.

was seen to be possible, and this in literary studies was most keenly reflected in the “battle of the books.”⁷

The Romantic Movement of the late eighteenth century through the nineteenth century was the ultimate flowering of this new spirit as reflected in what William Clark calls the “academic charisma,” not in the mere transmission of the older tradition, but in works that reflected creativity, originality and individuality, and the author’s own persona.⁸ As in the arts and music, these works consciously broke with tradition, were distinctive, and challenged the accepted wisdom and truth. They aspired to be judged by the labels of “inspirational” and “charismatic” and as such were judged on the basis of consistency, unity, coherence. These became the attributes and fundamental criteria of authorship. All authors were artists subject to certain ideals of craftsmanship that typified this romantic period. Under the influence of romanticism older works were judged on the basis of whether they corresponded to these ideas. Consequently, what we are really talking about is a particular form of authorship that arose in this period, which revolutionized the study of literature up to the post-modern period.

Furthermore, it is in this same Romantic Era that there was a great fascination with the collection and editing of folklore and folk traditions that are understood as the work, not of authors, but of the *Volke* as a whole and the embodiment of their *Volksgeist*. Such folklore was considered as reflective of oral tradition, so that it was expressed in terms of the contrast between the oral and the written, the traditional and that which is new and original. Those responsible for the collection and transmission of the traditional lore in written form were editors or redactors, as distinct from authors in the romantic sense as stated above. The oral sources, the singers and storytellers, could remain quite anonymous; they were of no consequence. It is no surprise that this romantic understanding of authorship and redactor came to the fore in the Germanic states and was pervasive in the German academic world and within biblical scholarship in particular in the nineteenth century. What is astonishing is that this romantic notion of the author/editor dichotomy still persists in biblical studies to this day.

It should, therefore, be quite unnecessary to say that such an understanding of author and redactor prior to the romantic era is an anachronism, and this is certainly the case with respect to classical and biblical au-

⁷ See J. Levine, *The Battle of the Books: History and Literature in the Augustan Age* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Van Seters, *The Edited Bible*, 121-24.

⁸ See Clark’s work in n. 4 above.

thorship. Yet it is precisely this romantic ideal of authorship that is being used to judge whether any of the writers in the Bible are authors and to dismember texts if they do not meet the strict “romantic” standards of organic unity, coherence, originality and consistency of theme and outlook. The slightest deviations from such norms lead to the invoking of the redactor, who, of course, is not an artist but a mere collector of traditional lore, with no regard for coherence and consistency. However, the very essence of much of the activity of ancient *authorship* is based upon the collection of ancient lore and of giving it some form of cohesion and continuity, especially as it had to do with presentations of the past. Herodotus is a good example. It is a marvelous collection of very diverse material that hardly has an obvious coherence or thematic unity, most of it, according to him, based upon oral tradition. Furthermore, scholars have long debated the question of the theme of the *Histories* without much agreement because there is no single theme and no reason why there should be. To apply the criteria of modern authorship to Herodotus and then deny that he is an author is anachronistic, but to assert that because he is primarily a collector of oral tradition he is merely an editor, this is doubly anachronistic. Yet that is precisely what has happened in biblical studies. The Pentateuch and the historical books become merely anonymous collections of popular tradition and the expression of Israel’s *Volksgeist* put together by editors.

Consequently, one often encounters the argument that, unlike most of classical literature, the literature of the Hebrew Bible is *anonymous* and therefore of a different character from those works in which the author is known. This notion likewise rests upon the romantic construction of authorship, which stresses the importance of originality, individuality, and notoriety as reflecting the persona of a particular writer and his genius, his distinctiveness from his predecessors. In the pre-romantic period it was the *text* that was all-important and the source of truth and wisdom. To be sure, it was mediated by means of a charismatic or inspired person and his name attached to the text gave it a certain authenticity as “canonical” or classical, but his individuality and persona was of little concern as far as the content of the text was concerned. It is true that from classical times authorship implies identity and authority, the one who takes responsibility for a written work or document, and thus it was that at a certain point in the biblical “canonization” process, in imitation of the classics, names of authors were attached to biblical writings. Nevertheless, because a literary work does not have a known author and is therefore anonymous does not necessarily make it a different kind of work from one whose author is known or assumed to be known. The mere loss of “the title page” does not make a piece of writ-

ing different in origin or mode of composition, although it *may* affect the reception of the work and its interpretation. Pseudonymous works try to influence their reception by falsifying the true authorship of their writings. The author (or authors) of Deuteronomy is unknown, but it is reputed to be the written words of Moses (Deut 1:5; see section III), in order to imbue it with greater authority. Nevertheless, it is entirely appropriate to use the term *author* for the writer of a literary work in the sense of the one who is responsible for its composition, whether the name of such a person is known or not. There is nothing inappropriate or contradictory in speaking about an unknown or anonymous author. And if a name is associated with a literary work and we know nothing more than that about the author, how does that fact make it any different from a work that is anonymous?

Ska, however, wants to attribute a quite different significance to biblical anonymity. He suggests that ancient texts in general and biblical texts in particular are anonymous “since they are not the works of individuals, or not considered as such, but works belonging to the ‘tradition’ of the communities. The ‘author’ or ‘writer’ is the mouthpiece of the community and ‘says,’ interprets and actualizes the tradition, the common possession of all members of the community.” In this capacity, Ska claims: “Their task is twofold. First, they are to be spokespersons of the common tradition, to be the living tradition for their contemporaries; second, they are to ‘actualize’ the tradition or traditional texts, because the writer is always the bridge between the past and the future. This is the reason there is ‘editorial,’ ‘redactional’ or ‘compositional’ activity in antiquity.”⁹ Here we come to the heart of the matter. Ska is not speaking about biblical literature in general, much of which would hardly fit this description, but the Pentateuch and, to a lesser extent, the historical books. Ska presents this description of the literary nature of the Pentateuch as if it were a self-evident truth, without the slightest need for justification, and as such, the reason for speaking about redactors rather than authors.

As I have suggested above, it is this redactor and his relationship with the traditional that is also a product of the Romantic Era, a corollary of the romantic author, and both equally anachronistic. In fact, it has its origins in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in which there was great concern to collect and edit and transmit into written form the folk traditions of Europe and other peoples.¹⁰ Friedrich Wolf was strongly influenced by this

⁹ Ska, “A Plea,” 7.

¹⁰ Of course the editors of folklore in the modern period were not anonymous,

movement and saw in Homer this same collection of oral folk traditions and he anachronistically reconstructed the same process by which oral traditions of the Iliad and the Odyssey were gathered together and put into their written form by editors in 6th century B.C.E. Athens.¹¹ The same understanding of the Pentateuch as a collection of small units of oral tradition was taken up by Wilhelm de Wette and was extensively developed by Hermann Gunkel and Hugo Gressmann, although they thought more in terms of collections of tradition made by story-tellers, rather than editors.¹² Noth also pursued this approach to Pentateuchal tradition with his block model of tradition transmission, which was wedded to the Documentary Hypothesis with its redactors.¹³ This modern process of collection and transcription of oral tradition to ensure its preservation is completely anachronistic for antiquity. Those writers that made use of traditional materials to create new compositions to address the concerns of their contemporaries were certainly not editors or redactors; they were authors. Thus the great Greek dramatists who used primarily the well-known traditional themes of the heroic age were certainly individual authors and not merely editors and “channels of transmission” of communal tradition. Even Homer, whose treatment of the older traditions becomes the most authoritative and “canonical,” can hardly be described as an editor and “channel of transmission,” and few would so characterize him today.

In order to support this romantic notion that the Pentateuch consists almost entirely of very primitive oral tradition that was continuously transmitted and “actualized” Ska creates a body of writers who transcribed the tradition into written form and then were responsible for its continuous transmission and “actualization” (by which he means the interpolations) over several centuries. These writers are neither authors nor editors but anonymous “redactors.” The distinction is not new but quite familiar in the 19th century between two kinds of editors or redactors, the critical scholarly editor (*diorthotēs*) of the Alexandrian type, who never made additions to the text, but tried to identify mistakes and corruptions made by earlier scribes, and the “revisers” (*diaskenastai*), those responsible for interpolations in the text.¹⁴ The terminology comes from the scholia of Homer but Wellhausen and Kuenen, among others, made use of these terms as a useful distinction

any more than authors, and some like the Grimm brothers, quite famous.

¹¹ Van Seters, *The Edited Bible*, 133-51.

¹² *Ibid.*, 205-15, 247-56.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 265-69.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 35-45, 140-51.

between different types of redactors of the Pentateuch. Kuenen merely lumped together all types of redactors under the single rubric R, which results in the completely contradictory notions about the editor/redactor in biblical studies today.¹⁵ The *diaskewastai* who simply represent scribes who “corrupted” the text with longer or shorter interpolations for their own personal reasons should never have been regarded as editors in the first place. This 19th century confusion is the origin of Ska’s “redactor.”

Ska seeks to account for the existence of the “redactor” as he understands it by pointing to certain kinds of “redactional activity” that cannot be attributed to either authors or editors. He asserts that in their role as “living channels of transmission” they “actualize” the text by means of “succinct and relevant additions.” This seems to be a polite way of referring to the *diaskewastai*, the “revisers” or corrupters of texts, as they were regarded in the Homeric tradition. Ska argues that the textual variation to be found in the Qumran texts reflect precisely this kind of editorial activity. Thus he points to the two different versions of the text of Isaiah and suggests that they “can hardly be attributed to the same ‘author.’”¹⁶ Of course, critical scholars have never attributed any particular text of the book of Isaiah to a single author and therefore, single authorship is not the real issue. To be sure, the two texts reflect scribal variation related to different text traditions, though it is not clear that this is the result of a conscious, actualizing, “editorial” activity. There is certainly no ideological *tendenz* that can be attributed to either version to suggest a deliberate “actualization” of the text by the religious sect at Qumran.

Ska also calls attention to the pre- or proto-Samaritan texts of Exodus and Numbers (i.e., 4QpaleoExod^m and 4QNum^b) which have many of the same expansionist characteristics as that exhibited in the Samaritan Pentateuch. While similar to SamP in their expansionist additions and therefore belonging to the same text-family, they nevertheless lack the one distinctive ideological feature, that of the command to build the altar on Mount Gerizim as an addition to the Decalogue, so this clearly attests to a late ideological addition by a member of the Samaritan community. Yet it would appear that the rabbis at a still later date deliberately altered the reference to Mount Gerizim in Deut 27:4 to Mount Ebal in order to counter the claims of the Samaritans.¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid., 235-38.

¹⁶ Ska, “A Plea,” 8.

¹⁷ *The Edited Bible*, 334-40.

From these examples one may draw the following conclusions: (1) expansionist texts are not *necessarily* the result of an editing meant to turn the text into one that is particularly relevant to the needs of a singular community; two quite different sects of Judaism made use of the same expansionist text-tradition; (2) a particular addition can be made to a text for ideological purposes, even when one sect uses an expansionist text-family and the other sect a more conservative text-family; and (3) there is no reason to attribute such deliberate “corruptions” in the textual tradition to editors or “redactors.”

There are, likewise, long texts, medium texts and short texts within the text-tradition of Homer, just as there are in the Hebrew Bible. The expansionist texts of Homer betray the same tendencies that one finds in Qumran, to include within one part of the text quotations drawn from another part of the text or a parallel text-tradition. Thus the expansionist text of Numbers (i.e., 4QNum^b) contains quotations from Deuteronomy where they are deemed appropriate. This kind of text expansion appears to have been a habit of both Homeric and Pentateuchal scribes, to perhaps recall from memory closely related texts in order to fill out a particular narrative with more detail. This appears to have been a widespread habit of ancient scribes which editors of texts resisted. Even in the fairly rare case in which we have such a blatant “correction” as the altar on Gerizim in SamP or its further “correction” to Ebal in MT, these should not be attributed to editors but to religiously zealous scribes.¹⁸ What becomes abundantly clear from the great variety of text-families represented at Qumran is that there was no attempt to edit the biblical texts to make them fit a particular religious bias. The Essenes could easily make any text fit their religious perspective *just by giving it the appropriate interpretation in their commentaries*. Redactors had nothing to do with either textual transmission or the commentaries associated with the biblical texts.

Ska further argues that evidence for “redactional” activity is the best explanation to account for the contradictions and inconsistencies between the sources of the Pentateuch and he appeals to the “pioneers and forefathers of the documentary hypothesis” throughout the 19th century in support of this view. Since I have reviewed this scholarly development in considerable detail in my new book, *The Edited Bible*, and concluded that the notion of such editors making diplomatic copies of archival texts and con-

¹⁸ For a comparable example in New Testament textual criticism see Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture : the Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1993).

flating them into a single document is both anachronistic for editorial activity in antiquity and very problematic as a literary theory, I will not repeat that discussion here.¹⁹ The non-biblical parallels are nevertheless worth brief consideration. The Akkadian *Gilgamesh Epic* appears to be a case of a writer using several different stories about Gilgamesh and Enkidu, along with some other materials, such as the flood story, to create a quite remarkable composition. Even though it is quite possible to identify some of the writer's sources, based on older versions of the stories, there is no reason whatever to suggest that he should not be considered as the author of this epic and be demoted to the role of mere editor. That other ancient authors, such as all the great dramatists of Greece, made use of traditional stories which they then reshaped for their own purposes, does not make them any less authors than Shakespeare, who also did the same thing. It is likely that the *Gilgamesh Epic* was also subject to some later expansions, but even these should not be regarded as editorial. Since there was no ancient notion of copyright, a scribe could do whatever he or she liked with the text. Furthermore, Ska points to a parallel between *Gilgamesh* as a collection of traditional material and that of Gunkel's approach to Genesis. Gunkel, however, treated the Yahwist's collection of small units as the gradual accumulation of traditions by a school of story-tellers, not as the work of a redactor, and von Rad directly challenged Gunkel's position by arguing that the Yahwist was indeed an author and historian in the way in which he put his quite diverse materials together.²⁰

Ska likewise points to the parallel between research on the composition of Homer and that of the Pentateuch, which supports "the idea that the long poems [of Homer] we know are actually compilations of originally independent poetic pieces."²¹ As such the poems also contain "inconsistencies" and these are Ska's primary point of comparison with the Pentateuch and which have been used in the past to argue that Homer was the work of redactors. However, after citing a number of examples from the *Odyssey*, Ska comes to the surprising conclusion: "To be sure, J. Van Seters would rejoin that nobody considers Homer as the 'redactor' of the *Odyssey* because he may have used and re-elaborated earlier poems. The mere presence of inconsistencies in a literary work is not sufficient to deny its writers the title of

¹⁹ See *The Edited Bible*, chap. 6.

²⁰ G. von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1966), 50-52.

²¹ Ska, "A Plea," 11.

‘author.’” Ska goes on to point out that the inconsistencies are far greater and more numerous in the Pentateuch and consequently, Homer is not a legitimate parallel to the Pentateuch.

Contrary to Ska’s guess as to how I would respond to the comparison between Homer and the Pentateuch, I have tried to show in my recent publication that for 150 years leading classical scholars *did* believe that the inconsistencies in Homer were the result of redactors. Furthermore, it was the literary analysis of the *Odyssey* and the notion of parallel sources combined by a final redactor that so strongly influenced similar documentary theories in Pentateuchal studies.²² It is true that over the last 50 years or so, the notion of the *final redactor* has largely disappeared from Homeric studies—in contrast, redactors have proliferated in biblical studies. It should also be pointed out that in Ska’s examples from the *Odyssey* the most serious cases of contradiction are to be found in the ending in book 24, with that of earlier episodes. Now the editors of Alexandria already recognized this as “unhomeric” and marked it with obeli in their editions, and this judgment has been almost universally accepted by classical scholars in modern times. This ending was the work of a later poet (not an editor) to “improve” the older poem, and in spite of the Alexandrian scholars it remains in the vulgate text. It is such supplementations and interpolations that are often the cause of contradictions in the extant form of the text, but these can hardly be blamed on editors.

Ska cites a number of examples of contradictions in the Pentateuch and historical books as indisputable evidence of redactors in the formation of the biblical text. I would not for a moment dispute the existence of such contradictions, so that is not the issue. The question is how best to account for such contradictions, and Ska’s answer is the editor or redactor. That explanation only works if one adopts the original view of Richard Simon that the Bible consists of numerous archival documents that were rather artificially combined by editors without any addition or intervention in the text, a view which can hardly be sustained today. As soon as the editor is allowed to intervene in the compositional process with his own additions and modifications, then there is no reason why an editor should tolerate contradictions any more than an author. Indeed, editors are scholars who are especially sensitive to mistakes and contradictions, and they regard it as their task to correct, not corrupt, the texts that they edit. On the other hand, ancient texts without copyright are notoriously prone to interpolation, supplementation and modification, usually in a very unsystematic fashion and at

²² See *The Edited Bible*, chap. 5.

the whim of a copyist. Many such interpolations can be identified by contradictions because the interpolator is usually concerned with only the immediate context in the original to which he/she is making an addition and not the literary work as a whole.²³ However, there is no single explanation for all contradictions and each case must be evaluated on its own merits. Nevertheless, the attribution of contradictions to the role of an editor seems to me the *least* likely of all the possibilities. It is not a self-evident solution to the problem.

The final evidence for redactors that Ska discusses is that of “interpreters of ancient texts.”²⁴ Here the editor has changed from his role as one who merely conflates parallel sources in the classical Documentary Hypothesis to that of a theologian and interpreter of the traditions that he takes up, so that texts once attributed to the sources are now reassigned to editors. Indeed, an increasing volume of texts are attributed to redactors in the new “redaction criticism” so that the very existence of authors and historians such as the Yahwist (von Rad) and the Deuteronomistic Historian (Noth) have been completely supplanted by editors who are the new interpreters of ancient tradition. Ska and others seem quite oblivious to the fact that two entirely contradictory notions of redactors are being advocated, which seems to confirm the fact that even modern authors can incorporate quite contradictory notions into their works. It seems much more reasonable to me, following von Rad, to attribute the texts of Genesis, cited by Ska as redactional, to the author and historian, the Yahwist, and to make him responsible for the reformulation of older traditions in a programmatic way so as to make them fit his history from creation to Israel’s arrival in the promised land. That is what we know ancient historians did in their writing of “archaic histories” by which they constructed national identity.

In his conclusion, Ska states that the issue is just a matter of terminology and convention and suggests that the term author in the modern romantic sense of the term is just as problematic as redactor. As indicated above, however, there has never been any great problem in the past about discussing authors of the pre-Romantic Movement period, or those of the classical world, only with anachronistically attributing to ancient authors the

²³ See especially William McKane’s discussion of interpolations in Jeremiah and his conception of a “rolling corpus” in *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah*, vol. 1: *Introduction and Commentary on Jeremiah I-XXV* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986), xlvi-li, lxii-lxxxiii.

²⁴ Ska, “A Plea,” 14-15.

expectations of modern authorship. The term *redactor*, which is used as a justification for all kinds of literary theories about the formation of the biblical text, is likewise anachronistic and a serious abuse of language and should be avoided at all cost. We do know what ancient editors, who were the forerunners of their modern counterparts, did in antiquity and they did none of the things that biblical scholars have attributed to this class of persons.

Ska ends with a quote from von Rad that he says addresses “the very question we have discussed at length.”²⁵ It is worth repeating because it actually makes quite a different point from the one he suggests: “None of the stages in the age-long development of this work [the Hexateuch] has been wholly superseded; something has been preserved of each phase, and its influence has persisted right down to the final form of the Hexateuch.”²⁶ This statement, however, must be set in the context of an earlier remark in which von Rad discusses the relationship of the sources E and P to J. He states: “The process by which E and P are superimposed on J, as well as their relationship to one another, is a purely literary question, which adds nothing essentially new to the discussion so far as form-criticism is concerned. The form of the Hexateuch had already been finally determined by the Yahwist. The Elohist and the priestly writer do not diverge from the pattern in this respect: their writings are no more than variations upon the massive theme of the Yahwist’s conception, despite their admittedly great theological originality.”²⁷ What von Rad attempted to argue in *Das formgeschichtliche Problem des Hexateuch*, against Gunkel and the suggestions made above, is that the Yahwist was the one responsible for combining a number of different traditions into one “massive theme” that constituted the basic form and structure of the Hexateuch, and while later authors, E and P, may have added some of their own theological perspective to this work as authors with their own “originality,” they made no fundamental change to its underlying theme. For von Rad, the redactors of the Documentary Hypothesis played a very minor role in this whole process as the ones who preserved the source documents in a combined form and he quite specifically says of this redactional process that it “adds nothing essentially new to the discussion” of the Hexateuch’s form. Apart from its rather passive role, it is hard to find in von Rad’s work any significant function for the redactor in the formation or interpretation of the biblical traditions.

²⁵ Ibid., 15.

²⁶ Von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch*, 78.

²⁷ Ibid., 74.

3. A RESPONSE TO ECKART OTTO'S POSITION ON THE QUESTION OF 'AUTHOR OR EDITOR' AS EXPRESSED IN HIS REVIEW OF *THE EDITED BIBLE*

Eckart Otto's response to *The Edited Bible* is of a different kind. In fact, it bears such a tone that makes it more difficult for me respond to the important issues at stake in this discussion. To put it bluntly, his review is a collection of serious misrepresentations and errors that scarcely reflects the book's thesis, its main arguments, or its contents. He makes reference to less than ten percent of the whole book and ignores the rest. I am left with the definite impression that he has not even cared to read it, at least fully. Whatever the case might be, the scholarly issues in the present debate are important. Thus to further a more fruitful discussion, I will attempt to identify the salient issues that his review raises and then address them.

In his very first statement Otto charges me with using the terms *editor* and *redactor* "promiscuously." Quite apart from the fact that such a derogatory remark sets a dismissive tone from the outset, it is not clear what he means, since I am criticizing the quite indiscriminant use of the terms editor and redactor in biblical scholarship. If he means that I do not accept the recent trend by some scholars to create a distinction between the two terms, then I have already address this issue at great length in my book, which he ignores. To the point, the preferred term in English is *editor* and in German it is *Redaktor/Redakteur* (from the French *rédacteur*), but they mean the same thing.²⁸ How biblical scholarship has abused these terms is the whole point of *The Edited Bible*.

Otto then goes on to attribute to me the view: "During the past several hundred years scholars have worked within a framework that was developed by postbiblical editorial practices in antiquity and in the Middle Ages. In the twentieth century, these assumptions of postbiblical editors became 'the new science of German biblical scholarship'." I am not sure how to square this statement with the gist of *The Edited Bible*. To be sure, the citation is correct,²⁹ but was taken entirely out of context—in fact, this case demonstrates well the perils involved in such actions. To the point, the whole idea that modern redaction-criticism developed out of "editorial practice in antiquity and the Middle Ages" is completely contradicted in the first six chapters of the book. What follows in his review is a caricature of my historical discussion in summary form, which completely contradicts the earlier

²⁸ *The Edited Bible*, 13-15.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 297,

statement so that any reader of the review would be quite confused about the thesis advanced in *The Edited Bible*.

Likewise, Otto discusses the treatment of the relationship of classical studies to biblical studies in the 19th century in *The Edited Bible*, but contrary to what he reports to be my view, I explicitly stated, and provided ample evidence in the book that there was a lot of influence between the two in *both* directions. Eichhorn certainly did influence Wolf. The close friendship between Wellhausen and Wilamowitz-Moellendorff on the same faculty clearly indicates that intellectual stimulation was a two-way street, as I point out in some detail. Biblical scholars made constant reference to Homer in their treatment of the Pentateuch and even borrowed the technical Greek terminology used for redactors from Homeric studies. All this is well documented in *The Edited Bible*. But more important for the present conversation is that while suggesting that Homeric studies had no influence upon the development of the Documentary Hypothesis, Otto then asserts that the literary inconsistencies within Homer support the notion of ancient redactors as in biblical studies.³⁰ The “editors” of Alexandria, however, identified them as corruptions. They themselves did not make any such additions to the text. Otto criticizes the use of the work of Parry on oral tradition in Homer in *The Edited Bible*. He suggests that this work has now been discredited and thereby dismisses the whole discussion.³¹ I maintain that the work of Parry played an important part in undermining the older consensus regarding the role of redactors in Homeric studies, while at the same time I clearly indicated the limitations of the Parry-Lord method in *The Edited Bible* and that I do not subscribe to its use in biblical studies. More important, however, is the fact that *The Edited Bible* sets the work of Parry and Lord within a far larger context of discussion on oral tradition that continues to be relevant for both Homeric and biblical studies. It is above all the recent work on oral tradition that makes the notion of ancient redactors as the transmitters of this tradition quite superfluous. Moreover, contrary to Otto, such a discussion on oral tradition does not lead inevitably to a “unitarian” view of Homer and I cited strong criticism against the “unitarians” as a kind

³⁰ Contrary to Otto’s suggestion, I did not ignore these contradictions in Homer—in fact, I cited a number of serious problems in Homer, and significantly, many of them were already well known to the ancients.

³¹ Several pages in *The Edited Bible* are devoted to a review of the development of the study of oral tradition as it relates to Homer, from the research of Millman Parry and Albert Lord down to present time, because it has an important bearing upon the question of the so-called redactor’s role in this whole process of transmission from oral delivery to written text.

of classical “fundamentalism.” Otto’s rhetorically charged, and clearly hyperbolic suggestion that the only alternative to redaction criticism in biblical studies is the position that Moses is the author of the Pentateuch is well beside the mark and contributes nothing to the debate.³²

A major part of Otto’s review of *The Edited Bible*, however, is taken up with a critique of my treatment there of G. von Rad and M. Noth, whom he labels as my “heroes” although I never use that term. The fact that Otto devoted so much space to that secondary issue is in itself telling. Certainly the case in favor or against “author” vis à vis “editor” cannot be decided by appeals to any scholarly authority—be it von Rad’s or Noth’s. Therefore I will skip these matters at this point.³³ But that Otto tries to silence the objections raised to redaction criticism in *The Edited Bible* (and previously mentioned articles) by an equally “curious” appeal to biblical authority belongs to the discussion here. Otto states: “The Pentateuch itself knew that Deuteronomy was an interpretation of the Covenant Code (Deut 1:5) and this is exactly what modern exegesis of Deuteronomy says. If the literary theory of the Bible and critical exegesis concur, we can accept a modern historical-critical hypothesis as reliable.” But do they indeed concur? The text in question states: “Beyond the Jordan, in the land of Moab, Moses undertook to make plain (בְּאֵר) this law, saying. . .” and what follows is the direct speech of Moses that includes the whole of Deuteronomy until the account of his death in chap. 34. The obvious meaning of the text is that Moses is the author of Deuteronomy, and comparison with Deut 27:8 suggests that the quoted statement has to do with Moses producing this law in a legible written copy.³⁴ It is therefore unwarranted special pleading to read into the text a reference to the Covenant Code. There is certainly no basis here for a biblical literary theory that agrees with redaction criticism. On the contrary, the biblical text advocates Mosaic authorship of the written Torah (i.e. Deuteronomy), which was eventually extended to the whole of the Pentateuch!

³² It goes without saying that I have outlined my own critical position on the Pentateuch in numerous publications for over thirty years. His not so veiled comment speaks more about him than me.

³³ This said, the tone of the response to my understanding of the positions of von Rad and Noth, as well as comments by others on these matters show, however, that this issue deserves serious discussion. To further this scholarly debate I attach a relevant appendix to this article.

³⁴ See especially the discussion by A. D. H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy* (NCBC; Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1979), 116.

That claim is in complete contradiction to *all* modern historical criticism. Otto's proof-text confirms nothing.

As I try to make clear in *The Edited Bible*, the fundamental problem of the Documentary Hypothesis does not involve the authors J or P, who are the products of source criticism – which is indispensable for any historical criticism – but the theory about redactors, which reflects merely one of a number of theories about how the sources were combined. This is the basic difference between my critique of the Documentary Hypothesis and that of Rendtorff, who saw the problem in the notion of authors, especially J. About thirty years ago both Rendtorff and I independently offered our different views of what was wrong with the Documentary Hypothesis. German scholarship has, for the most part, followed Rendtorff's lead. This development, in my opinion, is a grave mistake. *The Edited Bible*, is the latest and most extensive attempt I made to show why I believe that to be the case.

4. A RESPONSE TO CHRISTOPH LEVIN'S POSITION ON THE QUESTION OF 'AUTHOR OR EDITOR'

Within the recent discussion on the expanded role of the editor in Pentateuchal studies, especially as it has to do with the demise of the Yahwist as author, the position advocated by Christoph Levin demands particular attention. He has defended the existence of the Yahwist, not as an author but as an editor; in fact, as the earliest editor, among many, of the Pentateuch.³⁵ This is not the place to undertake a detailed comparison between his understanding of the character and limits of the Yahwist and those of others, including my own, but to focus only on why he should regard this work as the product of an editor and not an author. It is significant—and relevant to the scholarly context within which he works—that he seems to regard this central claim as self-evident, based upon his own redaction history of the text. Levin justifies his designation of the Yahwist as an editor in the following way:

For a long time scholars saw the development of the pre-Priestly Pentateuch not as a question of redaction, or editorial, history but as a problem about the history of the transmission. The narrative foundation of the Pentateuch was interpreted as a composition that drew on current oral tradition. The diversity that can be detected behind today's text was put down to popular narrative tradition. This approach reflects the in-

³⁵ C. Levin, "The Yahwist: The Earliest Editor in the Pentateuch," *JBL* 126 (2007), 209-230.

fluence of romanticism; the activity of collectors such as the Brothers Grimm and others at that time suggested a model.³⁶

Levin does not say, however, that that the romantic model that was suggested was that of the *editor* of such traditions, not that of an *author*, and it is that model that Levin and other are perpetuating. Levin goes on to say:

But even in the nineteenth century, people became aware of tensions that can be explained only in literary terms. Since the 1960's the internal lack of unity has come to be explained as a result of the redaction history. It is emerging ever more clearly that the Yahwist is an editorial collection with a distinctive literary profile that has fused older written sources into a new whole. Editorial compositions of this kind do not stand at the beginning of the history of a literary culture. Numerous indications point to the period after the end of the Judean monarchy, that is to say, the sixth century B.C.E.

These statements are debatable on a number of points. First, the problem of tensions and contradictions within the Pentateuchal narrative that gave rise to the notion of multiple sources throughout the nineteenth century also called for an explanation of their combination within the present text. One of those explanations was that of an editor who put together older sources or collections of tradition without making any additions of his own. However, the hypothetical editor was *not* the only possibility, and not even the most likely one. Secondly, well before the 1960's there was a proliferation of source division which led to a corresponding proliferation in editors. This process of fragmentation was resisted by von Rad (see appendix), but the tendency has been to revert to the earlier trend of multiple redactors. The only difference is that now some of the features of von Rad's Yahwist that resemble the literary activity of an author are combined with the notion of collector-editor, which von Rad resisted, and thus Levin speaks of "an editorial collection with a distinctive literary profile," which is a completely artificial hybrid. It is authors not editors who have "distinctive literary profiles." Third, dating has nothing to do with editing.³⁷

In a footnote Levin explicitly rejects the criticism of the notion of the editor advanced in *The Edited Bible* as it applies to the Yahwist³⁸ by stat-

³⁶ Ibid., 211-212.

³⁷ Levin's dating of this "editorial composition" to the exilic period merely follows my own late dating of the Yahwist, which I advanced over thirty-five years ago.

³⁸ It should be noted that Levin's Yahwist as set forth in his major work, *Der*

ing: “The inconsistencies in the Yahwistic source make a separation between narrative and editorial text inescapable. The tensions are literary, even textual, in kind and do not fit the concept of a renarration (sic) of traditions by a historian.”³⁹ But his division between the older narrative and the “editorial additions” is often arbitrary and not based on literary criteria, as he suggests. Most importantly, what Levin does not establish is that additions made to the text at any level of its development were ever made by an *editor*. By ignoring this issue, he simply misses the whole point of the critique advanced in *The Edited Bible*. The editor is *his* invention to justify *his* form of literary analysis and there is nothing that can be offered as evidence to prove or disprove its existence.

5. AN INVITATION

It is not possible, within the short space of this response to Professors Ska, Otto, and Levin, to take up all of the questions and issues related to the use of the redactor in biblical criticism. I leave that to *The Edited Bible*. What is important, in my view, is that the discussion has begun and this will hopefully lead to greater clarity in our use of terminology with respect to the composition and transmission of the biblical text, as well as the careful use of comparison in the explanation of these phenomena. The concept of the “biblical editor” cannot be taken for granted. It deserves and demands close and serious scrutiny. This article is an invitation to further this scrutiny.

6. APPENDIX: WHAT DID VON RAD AND NOTH THINK ABOUT THESE MATTERS?

The tones of the response to my understanding of the positions of von Rad and Noth, as well as comments by others on these matters show that a serious debate on these matters is necessary. This is not the place to repeat what I wrote in *The Edited Bible*, or to indulge in a kind of personal apologia,

Jahwist, is highly idiosyncratic and not widely accepted as very close to the traditional understanding of this term. For his full treatment of the Yahwist see, C. Levin, *Der Jahwist* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993). The full extent of J, including both the original source material and J’s extensive “redactional” additions are set out on pp. 51-79. One can see at a glance there that Levin includes only a very small portion of Exodus and Numbers within J. It scarcely resembles the J of von Rad or Noth. From the perspective of the present conversation, it is particularly important to stress that Levin’s Yahwist is different from the Yahwist referred to in *The Edited Bible*.

³⁹ C. Levin, “The Yahwist: The Earliest Editor,” 212.

but to further the conversation on these issues. This said, since Otto has simplified my discussion of their position to the point of misrepresentation, I would like to begin by stressing that I simply pointed out that von Rad identified the Yahwist as a *historian*, a view that simply cannot be denied as all the documentation shows. Noth regarded his Dtr in Joshua to Kings as a *historian*, and not merely a “redactor.” He compared him to Greek and Roman historians, as I also did. It is true that although Noth originally accepted von Rad’s understanding of the Yahwist as a historian—this inspired his treatment of Dtr as a historian, but in his later work on the Pentateuch he developed a quite different view of the Yahwist that eventually led to the redaction criticism reflected in Rendtorff. It is also true that von Rad originally accepted Noth’s view of Dtr, but then had trouble reconciling it with his Hexateuch and reverted to some talk of editors in the historical books. All this is set out in detail in *The Edited Bible*—no reader of Otto’s comments on the book would have guessed that this is the case.⁴⁰ Otto’s major argument against my position seems to be that all the students of von Rad and Noth and their students (including himself) to the third generation could not be wrong in their use of redaction criticism. That, for him, is the true tradition of von Rad and Noth, and not the aberration that I represent. Of course, this is just an *ad hominem* argument.⁴¹

Otto devotes much space in his review to outline his own view of the supposed development of redaction criticism from von Rad and Noth to Rendtorff, Koch and Smend, but does not address any of the specific arguments I have advanced in *The Edited Bible* about the points in which they have gone wrong. Most significantly, Otto does not address the evidence from the writings of von Rad and Noth provided in *The Edited Bible*. In fact, Otto chides me for providing too many references from these authors to support my view, but he himself does not offer a single one that contradicts the evidence that I have collected. Instead he interprets von Rad’s presentation of the Yahwist to suit his own purposes. Thus he states: “[Von Rad’s] famous ‘Das formgeschichtliche Problem des Hexateuch’ (1938) demonstrates the Yahwist as a redactor of the Shechem and Gilgal traditions, in-

⁴⁰ See *The Edited Bible*, 256-83

⁴¹ I too studied for a year under von Rad, but that has nothing to do with my being right or wrong. I discuss in *The Edited Bible*, the views of Otto’s teachers, including Koch and Steck, and why I disagree with their attribution of redaction criticism to von Rad and Noth. See *The Edited Bible*, 269-96. These matters cannot be resolved in terms of “(proper) discipleship” but on the basis of the evidence.

corporating a great number of narratives that were until then handed down independently from the source of the Yahwist.”⁴² What von Rad actually says is that the Yahwist was responsible for bringing together a body of scattered oral traditions into a unified literary work “around one central coordinating conception and by some massive tour de force [to] achieve literary status,”⁴³ without any reference to an intermediate source.⁴⁴ Nowhere does von Rad ever identify J as a redactor. That is Otto’s own prejudicial interpretation of von Rad’s remarks. For von Rad, a redactor was someone who combined written sources, such as J, E and P. The Yahwist is viewed only as an historian comparable to the author of the Succession Narrative, both of which he regarded as standing at the apex of Israelite historiography.⁴⁵ Likewise, Noth considers Dtr a historian and quite specifically denies that Dtr is merely a “redactor” as my quotations of Noth prove. Otto’s review, therefore, is just self-serving in favor of his own position.

It should be noted that Levin also seeks to manipulate the views of von Rad and Noth in support of his redaction history. Concerning von Rad’s demonstration, in “The Form-critical Problem of the Hexateuch,” of the literary unity of the Yahwist as an author and historian, Levin states in a footnote that this conclusion “taken as a redaction-history hypothesis, meets the facts with astonishing accuracy.”⁴⁶ There is, however, no justification for turning von Rad’s support for the Yahwist as an *author* into support for Levin’s view of the Yahwist as an *editor*. His misuse of Noth seems, at least to me, even more egregious. In support of his view that the Yahwist reflects an “editorial collection” of narratives in written form he outlines six different blocks of narrative tradition, a modification of Noth’s block theory of primitive oral confessional traditions. These blocks have apparently experienced numerous (redactional?) interpolations prior to the time at which they were combined by the Yahwist, the first great editor. The blocks that cover the exodus, Sinai and wilderness traditions are reduced to very small fragments with editorial expansions by the Yahwist and hardly what Noth had in mind. Noth, of course, did not regard the Yahwist as a redactor of the tradition blocks, nor even as the one who initially put them together.

⁴² Eckart Otto, Review of John Van Seters, *The Edited Bible*, 2-3.

⁴³ Von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch*, 48.

⁴⁴ This intermediary source G was Noth’s invention.

⁴⁵ G. Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) 49.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 211, n. 10.

That unity was already reflected in his *Grundlage*. So Noth's work on the Pentateuch is not helpful at this point in supporting Levin's thesis.

However, in order to explain the editorial process Levin appeals instead to Noth's work on DtrH. He states: "Considering the redaction of the Deuteronomistic History, Martin Noth spoke of the 'evidence that the work is a self-contained whole.' To support his view Noth mentions a number of common characteristics that hold the work together."⁴⁷ It is just such characteristics that Levin also finds in his Yahwist. This should come as no surprise because Noth follows von Rad's example in arguing that Dtr is also an author and historian, just as von Rad did for the Yahwist. Moreover, what is most remarkable is that in the very chapter from which Levin takes his quote, Noth strongly rejects the then prevailing view that Dtr was an editor or editors in favor of the view that Dtr is an author and all of his arguments are meant to support this thesis. This completely contradicts Levin's statement quoted above and all of his arguments based upon it. I have already pointed out these facts at considerable length in *The Edited Bible*, but this evidence is simply ignored. Furthermore, not only does Noth argue throughout chapter two that Dtr is an author and historian, but he even offers the concluding statement: "Thus Dtr.'s method of composition is very lucid. The closest parallels are those Hellenistic and Roman historians who use older accounts, mostly unacknowledged, to write a history not of their own time but of the more distant past."⁴⁸ The same thing could be said of the Yahwist.⁴⁹ Thus, the substitution of "editorial features" as a description for those characteristics that both von Rad and Noth regarded as the basic literary characteristics of an ancient author is, in my opinion, entirely inappropriate and a case of special pleading.

To be sure, my interpretation of the positions of von Rad and Noth on the issues discussed here (and in *The Edited Bible*) may still be shown to be mistaken, but it seems to me that the case for that has not yet been made. I look forwards to the continuation of a frank and open debate on these matters.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 217. Levin's quotation from Noth comes from the chapter heading of chap. 2, p. 4 in M. Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History*.

⁴⁸ Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History*, 11.

⁴⁹ J. Van Seters, "Is There any Historiography in the Hebrew Bible? A Hebrew Greek Comparison," *JNSL* 28/2 (2002) 1-25.

