

Textual Criticism: A Radical Reassessment

A Plea for Utmost Restraint

The discovery in our time that the biblical writings are numerical compositions has far-reaching consequences for our view and treatment of the biblical text. Speaking for myself, this insight has aroused in me a profound respect, not only for the compositional craftsmanship of the biblical authors, but also for the two great codices of the Hebrew Bible, the Codex Leningrad and the Aleppo Codex. The reliability of Codex Leningrad, the only codex containing the entire canonical text of the Hebrew Bible, has been confirmed by the profound integrity of its numerical features. This insight has led to a radical change in my attitude towards textual criticism. For my numerical structural investigations of the biblical writings I strictly abide by one particular textual tradition, the one to be found in Codex Leningrad. If I would allow myself to use other texts and to 'mix' textual traditions, there would loom the great danger of emending a text *in order to* achieve desired numbers. Being deeply aware of this, I shall never yield to the temptation. That is the reason why I adhere to one specific textual tradition as a principled choice.

This means that the purpose of quantitative structural analysis is to explore the features of this textual tradition to the full and does not aim at establishing the 'original', but the 'canonical' text. My approach is strictly *synchronic*, taking the text primarily in the form it has been handed down to us. Therefore, the *literary* analysis of the form of a text as we have it should be clearly distinguished from the *historical* research of the history of its coming into being and its development. It is a matter of methodology and priorities. In other words, in my view, the *synchronic* approach to the text must always precede and hold sway over a *diachronic* investigation.

The ascertainment of the crucial function of the structural numbers in the formation of the biblical writings provides us with an effective tool to investigate, respect, and appreciate the text studied, annotated and transmitted by the Masoretes as the canonical text of the Hebrew Bible. This is a decisive exercise in future textual criticism. Potential emendations of the text can now also be evaluated in light of its numerical features, which go back to the authorial or redactional stage. Addressing a text-critical problem, one needs to consider all relevant issues, including the numerical aspects of the text in question. An emendation that disturbs the numerical features of a text that has been finalized and canonized by multiples of **17** and **26** is in principle intolerable. Moreover, on the whole, emendations should be restricted to what is absolutely necessary.

Awareness of this, and utmost restraint, are the most effective safeguards against emendations, a practice that was rife among biblical scholars in the past century and is still practised. Therefore, the 'reconstruction' of texts, especially in older commentaries, is for the most part unacceptable.

We now have an ultimate reason to think twice before changing MT. However, this does not portend the eclipse of textual criticism; it rather implies a radical change in its application. In short, using the numerical features of the text as criterion for textual criticism, our main objective is to show that there is no warrant for emendations, unless they improve or restore the numerical and/or poetical structure.

For some telling examples of unavoidable corrections, see my quantitative structural analyses of Hosea, Micah, Haggai, Song of Songs, and Esther. See my website: <http://www.labuschagne.nl/>.