Book Reviews

TOV, EMANUEL. Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992. x1+456 pp. $40.00 (cloth).

As editor in chief of the Dead Sea Scrolls publication project, Emanuel Tov possesses encyclopedic knowledge of the Massoretic text of the Bible, of the Septuagint, and all the other ancient versions, and, of course, of the Dead Sea Scrolls themselves. This handbook, revised and expanded from an earlier version published in Hebrew, treats every subject the textual critic needs to know, always providing ample bibliography and hundreds of examples, and writing with a fairness and equanimity that are models for all scholars.

He explains simply and clearly items like vocalization, Massoretic notations, the kinds of text represented by the Samaritan Pentateuch and the Dead Sea Scrolls, how ancient texts were copied, and what the goals and procedures of modern textual criticism should be. Thirty plates at the end of this book illustrate what ancient manuscripts and what various editions of the Hebrew Bible have looked like over the centuries. Amid this thicket of issues he takes positions on dozens of controverted questions, which naturally will not satisfy everyone, but will always provide the reader with sufficient reasons for Tov’s own position and the data on which one could build an alternate viewpoint. One case worth noting is the identification of layers in the Lucianic tradition of the historical books where kaike-Theodotion has replaced the Old Greek. Tov finds two layers here (the Old Greek and a revision by Lucian, p. 148), whereas F. M. Cross has detected a third layer which he calls proto-Lucianic.

Tov divides the Dead Sea Scrolls into five groups. Twenty percent of the scrolls are written in the “Qumran practice,” that is, they reflect a free approach to the text, frequent errors, and numerous corrections. Sixty percent contain the consonantal text of the Massoretic text; thus, they offer no new information. Five percent of the texts are either in the pre-Samaritan tradition or are close to the presumed Hebrew source of the Septuagint. The rest are unaligned. Tov believes that the Vorlage of the Septuagint was a single copy of a text, and not a family, recension, or revision, and therefore holds that such texts are of limited importance for our understanding of textual procedure.

At the end of the process of the composition of a biblical book there was one textual entity, which it is the object of textual criticism to reconstruct. Tov acknowledges, however, that textual studies sometimes uncover earlier editions of biblical books that have been circulated before the final edition was produced—the shorter text of Jeremiah witnessed to by the Septuagint and the Dead Sea Scrolls would be good examples. Tov views such discoveries as exercises in literary criticism, which may be enormously useful in reconstructing how a book came to be, but they are not really what he means by textual criticism. The text that we have in our Hebrew Bibles was not created by ancient textual critics, nor did the Massoretic text finally triumph over all others. Rather, those who preserved it constituted the only organized group within Judaism which survived the destruction of the Second Temple.

Tov believes that the so-called rules of textual criticism have very limited value. This applies to both external and internal criteria and to such handy guides as the preference for more difficult or shorter readings. He concludes that it is the choice of the contextually most appropriate reading that is the main task of the textual critic, and he acknowledges that this is as subjective a criterion as one could imagine. Common sense and mature judgment are the main guides.

This book will soon be viewed as a classic of biblical studies.

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