

Reading the Blood Plague (Exod 7:14-25):

The Hermeneutics of a Composite Text

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I.

This essay aims to rethink the presuppositions about compositional practices with respect to the assembly and production of what has come to be called the Pentateuch. In particular, the essay reflects on the historical composition of Exod 7:14-25 in the context of the Exodus narrative, in order to reconstruct a reading practice that we suggest is appropriate to the complex compositional nature of this text. Thus, this article is not trying to identify the historical layers of the text, that is “P” and “non-P”,¹ nor is the goal to reconstruct the earliest part of the text. Nevertheless, history and composition provide the focus. Reading Exod 7:14-25 triggers a practice of exegesis that can overcome the gapping or interruption due to the compositional history of the text. Or, in other words, readers are challenged by the text to make sense of contradiction in a way that forces them to inherit multiple traditions through exegetical strategies that involve making sense of scripture. One

¹ See below n. 29, 36, 37.

should keep in mind that the quest for unambiguousness in reading a text is, to a large extent, a modern achievement.²

It is to be expected that the composers of Exod 7:14-25, or of the Pentateuch more generally, had a strategy for assembly as well as a strategy for what it is to read the text. The text has an embedded compositional history which is left transparently at the surface for all to see and engage. No attempt is made to erase the complexity of this composite work. And so, to read this text, even today, is also to participate in the history of the text because one must participate in a practice of exegesis as a way of preserving the inconcinnities, the gaps, and the interruptions in the narrative. In sum, these gaps or interruptions are part of the artistry of the text and inherent to the compositional practices. The text therefore participates in and is a product of a long and complex history of composition.

Before moving to the textual example of Exod 7:14-25, it is helpful to refine and reflect on method. Although this article focuses on a particular pericope in the book of Exodus, it is also the case that this approach is informed by a critical orientation to existing scholarship, notably “neo-documentarianism’s” notion of a

² See Thomas Bauer, *Die Vereindeutigung der Welt: Über den Verlust an Mehrdeutigkeit und Vielfalt* (Leipzig: Reclam, 2018) and below n. 60. See also Michael E. Lyons, “Standards of Cohesion and Coherence: Evidence from Early Readers,” *HeBAI* 9 (2020): 183-208; D. Andrew Teeter and William A. Tooman, “Standards of (In)coherence in Ancient Jewish Literature,” *HeBAI* 9 (2020): 94-129, particularly 108-112.

“mechanical” compiler of the Pentateuch.³ The compiler is supposed to have produced an “unintelligible”⁴ text by limiting himself to “preserving intact the precise verbal form of each one [of the four sources] to the greatest extent possible and intervening—altering, adding, deleting, or rearranging [...] only when absolutely unavoidable.”⁵ When looking, for instance, at the evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls, such a conclusion seems utterly improbable.⁶

In addition to an explicit critique of the state of affairs in current scholarship that subscribes to a neo-documentarian approach, this essay wants to think about a forward moving practice which can be demonstrated in a reading of the Pentateuch and more generally in the Hebrew Bible and a whole host of biblical traditions from the Hellenistic period as well. This is what one could call a larger discourse about compositional history and the vitality of texts through their own pluriformity and history of refinement, correction, deletion, and revision.⁷ Here the focus is not only the Pentateuch, but

³ See Joel S. Baden and Jeffrey Stackert, “Convergences and Divergences in Contemporary Pentateuchal Research,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Pentateuch*, ed. Joel S. Baden and Jeffrey Stackert (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 1–22, esp. 13. On the provenance of this moniker see Jeffrey Stackert, *A Prophet Like Moses: Prophecy, Law, and Israelite Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 19 n. 63.

⁴ Baruch J. Schwartz, “The Documentary Hypothesis,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Pentateuch*, ed. Joel S. Baden and Jeffrey Stackert (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 165–187, here 178.

⁵ Schwartz, “The Documentary Hypothesis,” 185.

⁶ On this point, see Molly Zahn, ‘Editing’ and the Composition of Scripture: The Significance of the Qumran Evidence,” *HeBAI* 3 (2014): 298–316, at 315: “To my mind, the evidence places the onus on opponents of redaction criticism to make a convincing argument demonstrating why the closest available textual analogues should not be regarded as relevant.” See also Konrad Schmid, “The Neo-Documentarian Manifesto: A Critical Reading,” *JBL* 140 (2021), in press.

⁷ Here see Bernard M. Levinson, *Legal Revision and Religious Renewal in Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). See also Hindy Najman, “The Vitality of Scripture Within and Beyond the Canon,” *JSJ* 43 (2012): 497–518.

also other works such as Jubilees or Jeremiah, as well as books that are anthological such as Psalms or Proverbs.⁸ To be sure, these various collections and biblical “books” are not uniformly the same in any way. While Proverbs might be called anthological, Jeremiah might be considered a collection of oracular and historiographical traditions around the figure of Jeremiah and other prophetic figures and textualized prophetic traditions.

So instead of focusing on differentiating different genres or kinds of collections or assemblies of traditions (e.g., anthological collections) this essay takes a progressive approach to composition.⁹ This approach enables readers to consider the history of the document and, at the same time, to make sense of what it is to read the whole of a composite text. It is not a straightforward matter to read a text with a complex history of compositional layers. To be sure, scholars may acknowledge that all texts have histories so that even the most ancient readings reflect histories of editing, deletions,

⁸ Some useful discussions about anthology can contribute to the consideration of compositional practices as *forward moving*. James L. Kugel, “Wisdom and the Anthological Temper,” *Proof 17* (1997): 9–32; Eva Mroczek, *The Literary Imagination in Jewish Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁹ See the discussion of a progressive approach in Hindy Najman and Eibert Tigchelaar, “Unity after Fragmentation,” *RevQ 26* (2014): 495–500, here 495: “Instead of using contradictions to look backwards in the hope of finding sources, we can use them to look forward, to study the dynamic development of scriptural traditions. A text is like a movie. Just as it is possible to break the movie down into static frames, so we can break the text down into reconstructed sources. In some sense, the movie is composed out of frames, and the text is composed out of layers. But if we look only at the frames, separately, we will not understand the flow of the movie, let alone the connections that exist at a holistic level between this movie and other movies with which it is interacting. Similarly, if we look only for the sources of the text, we risk missing the flow of the text, which not only gives it unity as a text, but which also unites it with other scriptural texts that participate in the same creative process.”

refinements, and accretions. But a text such as Exodus or Jubilees along with many other biblical examples, also preserves competing as well as parallel narratives that are embedded as part of a whole, or what one might call a textual unity. To be sure, one must acknowledge the complexity of Exod 7:14–25, but nevertheless it is important to note that the ancient biblical texts are readable not only through an uncritical lens, but also through hyper-critical lenses. That is to say, to perceive an assembled whole, one can nevertheless speak to the interpretative traditions that make up the whole (e.g., P and non-P). Moreover, critical reading can be generative for narrative and for meaning without having to ignore the complexity of the very history and contradiction that it identifies. This seems like an obvious point to make. But it is important to make this explicit in order to respond to those strands of current Pentateuch scholarship that abandon any claims of a qualified hermeneutical profile of its composite text.¹⁰ Such a position is not new, Hugo Gressmann already signaled that in *Mose und seine Zeit*.¹¹

¹⁰ See, e.g., Joel S. Baden, “Why is the Pentateuch Unreadable?—Or, Why Are We Doing This Anyway?” in *The Formation of the Pentateuch: Bridging the Academic Cultures of Europe, Israel, and North America*, ed. Jan Christian Gertz et al., FAT 111 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 243–251, particularly 250: “If the text is sick, it requires surgery ... Our text is sick, and that illness is exclusively the literary contradictions on the level of the plot.” Also 251: “What makes the Pentateuch unreadable is its thorough-going internally contradictory plot.” See also Schwartz, “The Documentary Hypothesis,” 177–178, 185.

¹¹ Hugo Gressmann, *Mose und seine Zeit*, FRLANT 18 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913), 22f: “Bisweilen wird freilich gefordert, man dürfe die Schichten nicht nur abtragen, sondern man müsse sie auch wieder an ihren Ort zurückbringen, oder ohne Bild gesprochen, man solle die Quellschriften nicht nur in der Vereinzelnung betrachten, sondern auch den jetzigen Zusammenhang würdigen, in dem sie uns überliefert sind. Wer einen Trümmerhaufen ausgräbt, tut es, um die Trümmer zum Reden zu bringen und ihre Geschichte festzustellen. Zu diesem Zweck trägt er Schicht um Schicht ab; denn nur die genaue Kenntnis der einzelnen Schichten und ihrer chronologischen Aufeinanderfolge hat

Instead, we read the plague cycle by engaging internal contradiction and focussing on meaning and inclusion of traditions that are intertwined. This can also acknowledge that internal contradictions (e.g., between P and non-P) preserve traditions in such a manner not to efface the work of assembly that exposes its own history. Of course, Pentateuch scholarship is aware both of the disparity, but also of the connectedness of the biblical traditions contained within the Pentateuch,¹² but dissolving this composition into pieces without acknowledging the possible senses of the whole

wissenschaftliche Bedeutung. Wenn er diese Aufgabe geleistet hat, die Ergebnisse daraus gezogen und alle Einzelfunde sorgfältig eingeordnet hat, dann ist sein Werk schlechterdings vollendet. Jene Forderung aber besagt, daß er seien Ausgrabungen wieder zuschüttet, ja sogar, daß er den wiederhergestellten Trümmerhaufen würdigen und den Wirrwarr sinnvoll erklären solle! Die Wissenschaft hat mit einer solchen Aufgabe nichts zu tun." (Sometimes, of course, it is demanded that the layers should not only be removed, but that they should also be returned to their place, or, spoken without a picture, that the source writings should not only be considered in isolation, but also in the present context in which they have been handed down to us. Whoever digs up a heap of rubble does so in order to make the rubble speak and to establish its history. For this purpose, he removes layer after layer; for only the exact knowledge of the individual layers and their chronological sequence has scholarly significance. When he has accomplished this task, has drawn the results from it and has carefully classified all the individual findings, then his work is simply complete. That demand, however, says that he should fill up the excavations again, even that he should appreciate the restored heap of rubble and explain the confusion in a meaningful way! Scholarship has nothing to do with such a task.) See also Christoph Berner, "Gottes Wort und Schreibers Griffel: Die Redaktionsgeschichte alttestamentlicher Texte als Herausforderung für Exegese und Theologie," *ZTK* 118 (2021): 141-159

¹² See e.g. Joel S. Baden, *The Composition of the Pentateuch: Renewing the Documentary Hypothesis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012); Thomas Römer, "Zwischen Urkunden, Fragmenten und Ergänzungen. Zum Stand der Pentateuchforschung," *ZAW* 125 (2013): 2-24; idem, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament: Die Bücher der Hebräischen Bibel und die alttestamentlichen Schriften der katholischen, protestantischen und orthodoxen Kirchen* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2013), 120-168; Reinhard G. Kratz, "The Analysis of the Pentateuch: An Attempt to Overcome Barriers of Thinking," *ZAW* 128 (2016): 529-561; Jan Christian Gertz et al., eds., *The Formation of the Pentateuch: Bridging the Academic Cultures of Europe, Israel, and North America*, *FAT* 111 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016); Thomas B. Dozeman, *The Pentateuch: Introducing the Torah* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017); Bradford A. Anderson, *An Introduction to the Study of the Pentateuch* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017); Joel S. Baden and Jeffrey Stackert, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Pentateuch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

is as misleading as reading the biblical text¹³ without paying sufficient attention to its compositional complexity.¹⁴ One can mention here, for instance, the literary approach, i.e., the “Bible as Literature” (e.g., Sternberg, Alter, Pardes)¹⁵ that operates with exemplary sensitivity to the poetics of the biblical texts, but sometimes exhibits an insufficient hermeneutic with respect to the incoherence of the text, and without a sufficient account of repair or response to the tensions within the text.

How, then, was this complex text nevertheless read, translated, interpreted, performed, and understood as holy scriptures across centuries despite of its compositional complexity? The biblical texts will continue to be copied, revised, and actualized through commentary and legal traditions across multiple and competing religious traditions. The ancient and medieval readers noted the

¹³ See Erhard Blum, “Gibt es die Endgestalt des Pentateuch?,” in *Congress Volume: Leuven 1989*, ed. John A. Emerton, VTSup 43 (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 46–57.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM, 1979; repr. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011); see also Stefan Krauter, “Brevard S. Childs’ Programm einer Biblischen Theologie. Eine Untersuchung seiner systematisch-theologischen und methodologischen Fundamente,” *ZTK* 96 (1999): 22–48; Daniel R. Driver, *Brevard Childs, Biblical Theologian: for the Church’s One Bible*, FAT II/46 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010); Paul R. Noble, *The Canonical Approach: A Critical Reconstruction of the Hermeneutics of Brevard S. Childs*, BIS 16 (Leiden: Brill, 1995). In his commentary on the book of Exodus (Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*, OTL [Louisville: Westminster Press, 1974]), Childs presents the usual source division of the plague cycle (130–142), but then interprets the text as it stands (for Exod 7:14–25, see 153–154).

¹⁵ See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); idem, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (London: Collins, 1987); Ilana Pardes, *The Biography of Ancient Israel: National Narratives in the Bible*, Contraversions 14 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); see also idem, *Melville’s Bibles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, ISBL (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

challenges that scholars today speak of.¹⁶ Ancient, medieval and even early modern scholars would justify or apologize for ruptures in the text. It is essential to highlight that the documented history of the transmission and interpretation of the biblical traditions was not blind to the insights that later eighteenth and nineteenth century scholars would come to rearticulate in different garb.

The goal in this essay is thus to trace the ways in which close readers of the biblical text can follow the history of composition on the surface of the text. Then, with some pointed questions and some careful answers, one can begin to see the exegetical creativity and ingenuity already embedded in the text itself. Processes of exegesis are not external to the text; rather there is a conversation between sources and traditions that is already part of an exegetical engagement by virtue of these sources being placed side by side within a new whole. Thus, the text itself is participating in interpretative expressions, and in some sense comes to function as a precursor for subsequent interpretative traditions.¹⁷ Even the very first readers can already trace signs of exegesis and conversation embedded within the sources, i.e., compositional history, itself. It follows then that more compelling than Gressmann is Wellhausen

¹⁶ See e.g. Shimon Gesundheit, "Die Midrasch-Exegese im Dienst der Literarkritik: Zum Beispiel: Krieg und Frieden in Dtn 2,24-32," in *Congress Volume: Munich 2013*, ed. Christl Maier, VTSup 163 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 111-124.

¹⁷ Jorge Luis Borges, "Kafka and his Precursors," in *Borges a Reader: A Selection from the Writings of Jorge Luis Borges*, ed. Emir Rodriguez Monegal and Alastair Reid (New York: Elsevier-Dutton Publishing Co., 1981), 243. For implementation of this notion of precursors in ancient Jewish texts see Hindy Najman, "Text and Figure in Ancient Jewish Paideia," in *The Authoritativeness of Scriptures in Ancient Judaism*, ed. Mladen Popović, JSJSup 141 (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 253-265.

when he stresses the importance of the “vital process” that generated the biblical texts early on:

Mit der mechanischen Zerlegung hat die Kritik (freilich) ihr Werk nicht getan, sie muß darauf hinaus, die ermittelten Einzelschriften in gegenseitige Beziehung zu setzen, sie als Phasen eines lebendigen Processes begreiflich und auf diese Weise eine stufenmäßige Entwicklung der Tradition verfolgbare zu machen.¹⁸ (Critique has [obviously] not done its work with mechanical decomposition; it must aim to put the individual writings into mutual relationship and to understand them consequently as phases of a vital process, and in this way to make a step-by-step development of tradition traceable.)

As opposed to his common perception, Wellhausen was not just a source critic; he was also interested in understanding the literary product that resulted from the combination and expansion of the Pentateuch's sources in a diachronically sensitive way.

“Reading the Blood Plague” is conducted in this essay with attention to the literary structure and to composition history, but also with an eye towards rendering comprehensively a text that is layered, entangled across history. Thus, this approach maintains that one can begin to think about the text as a whole if one also attends to the historical composition that sets up P and non-P materials in conversation. Furthermore, there is acknowledgment that while both P and non-P require discrete deciphering, one can nevertheless speak of a textual unity. This approach does not leave the pericope fragmented, but it recognizes nevertheless that the assembly is itself

¹⁸ Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels*, 6th ed. (Berlin: Reimer, 1905), 293f.

fragmentary, and that, furthermore, one cannot reconstruct the parts with certainty.¹⁹

In addition to identifying with Wellhausen’s “vital process,” this essay also draws from the work of the young Friedrich Nietzsche and the philosophical framework of the critique of philological practices that he set up in his inaugural address in Basel in 1869,²⁰ where he criticized Friedrich August Wolf’s search for the Urtext and for the original author of the *Iliad*.²¹ Nietzsche created a new way of thinking of the author, namely not as an historical entity, but rather as a concept of unity—be it Homer, or in our case Moses.²²

The work of Wolf and other developments of classics in his day are the focus of Nietzsche’s critique. Nietzsche’s critique can be very useful as scholars seek to engage both the reconsideration, and the integration of the history of early reception of the plague cycle, within and beyond the biblical corpus. Additionally, Nietzsche’s

¹⁹ A common shortcoming of many approaches in reconstructing the Pentateuch’s compositional history is the lack of will to admit unclear cases. There is no need to fill “blank spaces” where the literary evidence does not allow a reader to come to a conclusion regarding the specific place of a piece in the compositional history of the Pentateuch. A different view is held by Kratz, “The Analysis of the Pentateuch,” 541.

²⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, “Homer and Classical Philology (Inaugural Address Delivered at the Basel University, 28th of May, 1869),” trans. J. M. Kennedy in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Oscar Levy (Edinburgh: T. N. Foulis, 1909–1914), 3:145–170. On this point see the discussion of a forward moving mode of reading in Hindy Najman, “Configuring the Text in Biblical Studies,” in *A Teacher for All Generations: Essays in Honor of James C. VanderKam*, ed. Eric F. Mason et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 1:3–22.

²¹ See Anthony Grafton’s introduction to Friedrich August Wolf, *Prolegomena to Homer (1795)*, trans. with introduction and notes by Anthony Grafton, Glenn W. Most, and James E. G. Zetzel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). See also Hindy Najman, “Ethical Reading: The Transformation of the Text and the Self,” *JTS* 68 (2017): 507–529 and James I. Porter, *Nietzsche and the Philology of the Future* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

²² See discussion of Mosaic Discourse in Hindy Najman, *Seconding Sinai: The Development of Mosaic Discourse in Second Temple Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

profitable critique of the search for the historical Homer can also be extremely useful. Historicist tendencies in our own field obscure much of what one can say about history and instead look for things, or people, or historical events that scholars cannot confirm.

In exposing the various layers and units that are embedded in a single text, it is possible to mark the extensive, complex, and even intricate interrelationality between a whole series of texts within and beyond Exod 7:14-25 itself. This facilitates the perceiving not only of compositional layers, but also of editorial practices. These practices, the compositional and the editorial, can be considered to be overlapping and at times even isomorphic. Furthermore, it provides us with a window onto the history of religion in ancient Israel with respect to concepts of deity, redemption, and perfection of the human, specifically with respect to the priestly aspiration to become godlike,²³ as well as the idea of Israel as God's people. These can be unveiled through the marking of interrelationality of narratives across the Pentateuch and beyond (i.e., the rest of the Hebrew Bible as well as other relevant and engaging participants such as Judith, Ben Sira, and Jubilees).

The classical foundation for the field of biblical studies was laid in a time of historicism.²⁴ But it was also founded on a presupposition that the goal was to get to a place that was ancient Israel, or before

²³ See, e.g., Hindy Najman, "Imitatio Dei and the Formation of the Subject in Ancient Judaism," *JBL* 140 (2021): 309-323.

²⁴ See Hindy Najman, "Textual Unities and Poetic Processes in Ancient Judaism," in *Congress Volume: Aberdeen 2019*, ed. Joachim Schaper, VTSup (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

Judaism: the *ipsissima verba*, the earliest layers of the text. It is important to emphasize both complexities and limitations of this goal, but also to engage a series of reciprocal rewritings across narratives and across time—a reciprocal process that will continue to have significant repercussions across time and across interpretative traditions.²⁵

II.

The blood plague (Exod 7:14 - 25) is integrated both into the plague cycle itself, and into the exodus framework, chapters 1-15. Furthermore, our unit has implications beyond Exodus itself, for example, throughout the Pentateuch, the Psalter (e.g., Psalm 78),²⁶ and texts that engage the exodus narrative such as Jubilees, Wisdom of Solomon, and the *Exagoge* of Ezekiel, as well as the emerging Passover *Haggadah* liturgy which continues this dynamic practice of reading. Our mere mentioning of these other texts is not to suggest intertextuality or rewriting. Rather, some of the challenges that reading presents in Exod 7:14-25 are responded to and even developed in sensitive ways in later textual engagement and

²⁵ See e.g., the case studies from the legal tradition analyzed by Shimon Gesundheit, *Three Times a Year: Studies on Festival Legislation in the Pentateuch*, FAT 82 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012); D. Andrew Teeter, *Scribal Laws: Exegetical Variation in the Textual Transmission of Biblical Law in the Late Second Temple Period*, FAT 92 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014).

²⁶ See e.g. Judith Gärtner, *Die Geschichtspsalmen: Eine Studie zu den Psalmen 78, 105, 106, 135 und 136 als hermeneutische Schlüsseltexte im Psalter*, FAT 84 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 36-134; Anja Klein, *Geschichte und Gebet: Die Rezeption der biblischen Geschichte in den Psalmentexten des Alten Testaments*, FAT 94 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014).

repurposing of the first fifteen chapters of Exodus and especially the plague cycle.

The plague cycle exhibits signs of reading and responding. Thus, there is a responsive aspect to composition itself. When one considers a text, it is essential of course to take into account its history of composition. However, it is equally important to study signs of composition and rewriting, both of which are exhibited in the text itself. So not only should scholarship think about these texts as glimpses of some of our earliest audiences, but also how they read and responded to each other across time and in time. But furthermore, other Pentateuchal narratives also exhibit the reading, reception, and rewriting of the Exodus 1-15 narrative, as well as of particular moments in the plague cycle itself. The practices of reading and responding are attested already in some of what can be called the first readers of Exodus. Furthermore, these practices are evidence for the kinds of practices in the composition of Exodus itself, preserved in the text as it is transmitted.

To be sure, a fuller exploration of these dynamics and later rereadings of the Exodus of course need to be considered in order to justify this approach and critique, but it is nevertheless necessary to signal the larger and later implications for our historical, compositional, and literary work on the Exodus cycle with which scholars engage. Scholars are no doubt shaped by the later readings and one cannot erase the inevitability of anachronism, of what

Nietzsche would come to call *untimeliness*, but one can read the text within an initial expression of its compositional complexity and, even more, one can try to make sense of its historical context, its literary form, and its theological and conceptual expression—albeit a layered expression due to the combined and integrated nature of various sources that make up even small units like the plague cycle.

As already intimated in the introduction, this essay focuses on the dynamic and transformative nature of the biblical text. Moreover, by tracing the compositional growth of the texts through literary and poetic analyses, a close reading can generate insight into the historical, theological, and ideological dimensions of the text.

So, instead of reducing the texts to its constituent parts or to a prehistory, as neo-documentarians and redaction-historian sometimes do, and instead of considering the biblical pericope to be a snapshot as scholars who read it as literature do, we see it rather as a dynamic film.²⁷ The text of Exodus itself is fluid and alive to the very traditions it inscribes and rewrites. This paper seeks to reopen the textual unit of the plague cycle with an eye towards its history (insofar as it can be reconstructed), and its aesthetic—with respect to its philological, ideological, and literary development. Erhard Blum did something similar in his seminal *Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuch* and he called his approach “diachrone

²⁷ Najman and Tigchelaar, “Unity after Fragmentation,” 495.

Reliefbeschreibung”²⁸—i.e. diachronically informed description of a text’s relief. Blum tried to ascertain both the text’s cohesion on the surface and its character as a composite text that is still discernible under its surface. His interest was primarily to reconstruct the literary composition history of Exodus to Numbers. Nevertheless, he was aware of the very specific nature of the biblical text as both a composite complex and, at the same time, a whole that calls the reader to engage in the work of integration.²⁹

III.

Among critical scholars, there is no doubt that Exod 7:14–25 is a composite text,³⁰ as this is true for the whole plague cycle in Exodus 7–12³¹ which nevertheless is organized in a skillful and meaningful way.³² The compositional difficulties that are discussed in this section

²⁸ Erhard Blum, *Studien zur Die Komposition des Pentateuch*, BZAW 189 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990), 72. See also Ernst Axel Knauf, “Audiatur et altera pars: Zur Logik der Pentateuchredaktion,” *BK* 53 (1998): 118–236; Berner, “Gottes Wort.” On Blum see also Mark G. Brett, *Locations of God: Political Theology in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 69–70.

²⁹ Within the realm of the prophetic literature, one could also mention the approach of Odil Hannes Steck, *Gott in der Zeit entdecken: Die Prophetenbücher des Alten Testaments als Vorbild für Theologie und Kirche*, BThSt 42 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2001).

³⁰ See e.g. the reconstructions of Werner H. Schmidt, *Exodus*, BKAT II/2 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1995), 377–382; Jan Christian Gertz, *Tradition und Redaktion in der Exoduserzählung: Untersuchungen zur Endredaktion des Pentateuch*, FRLANT 186 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 112f; Thomas B. Dozeman, *Exodus*, ECC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 213–217. Baruch J. Schwartz, “The Documentary Hypothesis,” employs Exod 7:14–25 as his test case for reconstructing the compositional process of the Pentateuch and maintains, although without giving further arguments: “The results of this analysis of the account of the plague of blood are not the exception but the rule” (177).

³¹ See Schmidt, *Exodus*, 351f.

³² See e.g. Moshe Greenberg, “The Redaction of the Plague Narrative in Exodus,” in *Near Eastern Studies: Festschrift William Foxwell Albright*, ed. Hans Goedicke

illustrate the composite nature of this passage. It is fair to say that there is a consensus of identifying (at least)³³ a series of five “plagues” in P that are organized as leading up to a climax and that also include the transformation of the rod to a snake (Exod 7:1-13) as an integral element.³⁴ Then follow the miracles of converting water to blood (Exod 7:14-25) and the invasion of the frogs (Exod 7:26-8:11). As the lice come over Egypt (Exod 8:12-15), the Egyptian magicians already have to admit: אצבע אלהים הוא “this is the finger of God” (Exod 8:15), whereas the plague of boils (Exod 9:8-12) decides the contest: The magicians cannot even present themselves in order to repeat this miracle. Interwoven with this series of P-texts is another sequence of plagues (overlapping partly with the non-P-texts) that is focussing on their function as factors forcing Pharaoh to acknowledge God’s universal power. They include: dying of the fish in the Nile (Exod 7:14-25), frogs (Exod 7:26-8:11), swarms (Exod 8:16-28), pestilence of livestock (Exod 9:1-7), hail (Exod 9:13-35), locusts (Exod 10:1-20), darkness (Exod 10:21-29) and death of the firstborn (Exod 11-12).

The blood plague (Exod 7:14-25) in its present shape is a readable and understandable passage (as centuries of the reception

(Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), 243-252; Gertz, *Tradition*, 74-79.

³³ See e.g. Jeffrey Stackert, “Why Does the Plague of Darkness Last for Three Days? Source Ascription and Literary Motif in Exodus 10:21-23, 27,” *VT* 61 (2011): 657-676.

³⁴ See e.g. Thomas Römer, “From the Call of Moses to the Parting of the Sea: Reflections on the Priestly Version of the Exodus Narrative,” in *The Book of Exodus: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation*, ed. Thomas B. Dozeman et al., VTSup 164 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 121-150.

history of the book of Exodus demonstrate), but it clearly shows signs of being a composite unit:³⁵ Firstly, the pollution of the water seems to be linked to two different factors. There is, on the one hand, the dying of the fish (Exod 7:18, 21a, 24f), on the other hand the transformation of the water to blood (Exod 7:17b, 19, 20b, 21b).³⁶ Secondly, this difference seems to correspond with a different amount of the affected water: The dying of the fish affects the Nile (Exod 7:15, 17f, 21, 24f), whereas the blood transforms all water in all Egypt (Exod 7:19b, 21b), even in vessels of wood and stone (Exod 7:19). Thirdly, a different duration is envisioned for these two modes of the plague. Whereas the Egyptians are not able to drink from the Nile that is polluted by dead fish for “seven days” (Exod 7:25), the magicians are able to immediately repeat the transformation of water to blood. Scholarship has generally identified a P-version of this plague in 7:19f*; 21b, 22, whereas the non-P version can be found in Exod 7:14, 15a, 16-18, 20*, 21a; 23-25*.³⁷ Some elements in Exod 7:17, 20, 24f are usually attributed to a redactor that combined the two versions.³⁸ Instead of entering into the details of the reconstruction of the growth of this text, this essay aims at a “close

³⁵ See Schmidt, *Exodus*, 376f.

³⁶ It is, however, unclear whether the blood and the dying of the fish are two separate causes, see e.g. Gertz, *Tradition*, 100.

³⁷ See e.g. Gertz, *Tradition*, 395; Helmut Utzschneider and Wolfgang Oswald, *Exodus 1-15*, IECOT (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2013), 207-211. The asterisk (*) signals that only parts of the verse are denoted.

³⁸ See e.g. Schmidt, *Exodus*, 385f. Schwartz, “The Documentary Hypothesis,” 177, holds: “Most important, it appears that the compiled text rigidly preserves all of the words of each of the two accounts, in their original order, and without addition.”

reading” of Exod 7:14-25 that bears in mind its character as a composite text.

The blood plague for the non-P tradition begins in Exod 7:14:

ויאמר יהוה אל־משה כבד לב פרעה מאן לשלח העם

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Pharaoh’s heart is hardened; he refuses to let the people go.”

The setting of this verse is both abrupt and interruptive to the dynamic of the narrative. God speaks directly to Moses with no clear preparation or expectation. Unlike other biblical narratives, here in Exodus 7 there is no revelatory setting, no dramatic call, no description of how or from where God speaks to Moses.

God describes Pharaoh’s hardened heart and refusal to send the people out. Obviously, this opening of the plague cycle presupposes the broader literary context of the exodus story. It is worth noting that this rearticulates the previous passage in 7:13 where Pharaoh’s heart was hardened and the verse speaks directly to the audience. The reader of 7:14 (now shifted where God speaks to Moses) is expected to have a lot more information and context in order to locate the divine call.

Exod 7:15 continues as follows:

לך אל־פרעה בבקר הנה יצא המימה ונצבת לקראתו על־שפת היאר והמטה אשר־נהפך לנחש

תקח בידך

“Go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he is going out to the water; stand by at the river bank to meet him, and take in your hand the staff that was turned into a snake.”

Pharaoh comes out in the morning, from the palace. This is a returning theme in plagues: 1 (water to blood), 4 (swarms, see Exod 8:16), and 7 (hail, see Exod 9:13), that serves to structure the whole plague cycle as a threefold series of three plagues that are followed by the striking of the firstborn as their ultimate climax.³⁹ He comes out to the very waters that are the object of the first plague and that eventually will also surface as the main topic of Israel’s salvation at the sea in Exodus 14.

The phrase שפת היאר (“the river bank”) is not new for the reader of the block of text (Exodus 1-15). Already invoked in Exod 2:3, the attentive reader is drawn back to Exod 2:1-10. One could consider the assembled unit as one that connects forwards and backwards for the reader to other events that have taken place or will take place. Can the attention to draw a reader back be seen as a kind of weaving together of the Exodus 1-15 narrative? This is a way of tracing compositional processes—towards the writing of a coherent and multi-layered narrative that on the one hand holds together, and on the other hand repeatedly betrays its own compositional history. The emphasis here is on composition instead of allusion or intertext, in

³⁹ See above n. 35.

order to highlight the key phrases across P and non-P traditions that get intertwined like a double helix.

The staff plays an integrative role across the first three plagues, since it refers back to the prologue in Exod 7:8-13 and includes the first three plagues as the first unit within the cycle. The staff is identified as the same staff that was transformed into the snake, a transformation that bears the imprint of divine power.

The symbol of the hand (holding, grasping, seizing with strength) is a way of integrating both God and Moses. The staff is a kind of extension of the hand of Moses as well as the divine hand. Thus, the staff becomes the snake, God's power is transferred to Moses, and, yet, it is still God's power. The staff becomes a unifying force for the narrative as a whole as it crosses over individual plagues and, of course, symbolizes power, redemption, and divinely authorized magic. The contest is won from the outset, which makes the narrative itself a retrospective which already presupposes full knowledge of the outcome.⁴⁰ Thus, the narrative makes known to its very first readers that the crisis is already overcome, which is common to mythical argumentation in the Hebrew Bible. The reader already knows what will happen and yet the progression continues in a dramatic and escalating manner.

⁴⁰ See Thomas C. Römer, "Competing Magicians in Exodus 7-9: Interpreting Magic in the Priestly Theology," in *Magic in the Biblical World: From the Rod of Aaron to the Ring of Solomon*, ed. Todd E. Klutz, JSNTSup 245 (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 12-22.

The artistry of Exod 7:15 creates a narrative that teaches both the Egyptians and the Israelites that the narrative is at once past (with respect to covenantal promise), present (with respect to crisis and the urgency of freedom), and future oriented (with respect to the promise of redemption and a reentry into the land). The narrative is tightly woven and yet often unintegrated or even interrupted in its incorporation of various sources. This produces a retold narrative that is never singular or univocal in its representation. The justification for the plagues is described in a twofold manner: the cruelty of Pharaoh's affliction to Israel *and* Pharaoh's own hubris as he refuses to acknowledge the God of Israel, in Exod 7:16:

ואמרת אליו יהוה אלהי העברים שלחני אליך לאמר שלח את עמי ויעבדני במדבר והנה
לא־שמעת עד־כה

Say to him, "The LORD the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you to say, 'Let my people go, so that they may worship me in the wilderness.' But until now you have not listened."

Moses is thus a representative of the deity who can exemplify divine power, who will be used to measure out cruelty against Pharaoh. It will also be important at a later time, in the narrative, to limit Mosaic power and to differentiate between human and divine power.

All along there is a message that things have not yet changed, but they will. It is noteworthy to focus briefly on עַד־כֵּה. This phrase is neither temporal nor locative, but rather is adverbial—"until thus." It

signals that the reader and the writer already know the outcome. There is no surprise and no drama. Gen 22:5 also exhibits this elusive and suggestive use of עַד־כֹּה although it is in a locative not an adverbial sense. From an interpretative and integrated reading perspective, this connects the near death of the first born in the binding of Isaac and the immanent tenth plague, which will be the catalyst for the climax of the exodus narrative.

In Exod 7:17, a close reader receives a glimpse of the entirety of the plague cycle:

כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה בּוֹאֵת תִּדְעֶה כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה הִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי מַכֶּה בַּמַּטֵּה אֲשֶׁר־בְּיָדִי עַל־הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר בַּיָּאֵר
וְנִהְפְּכוּ לְדָם:

Thus says the LORD, “By this you shall know that I am the LORD.” See, with the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water that is in the Nile, and it shall be turned to blood.

God here resurfaces, indicating a universal framework.⁴¹ In Second Isaiah, it is Cyrus who should know God and Pharaoh is depicted as his anti-image.⁴²

Another important point here concerns the divine vs. human distinction. אֲנֹכִי (“I”) seems to relate to God and yet it is Moses and/or Moses and Aaron who are doing the striking. Thus, there is some confusion as to whether it is God or Moses that is striking with the

⁴¹ See Schmidt, *Exodus*, 386. This passage also reflects divine self-revelation not unlike in previous moments earlier in Exodus 1-15, e.g., Exod 6:2, 6, 29; 7:5.

⁴² See Martin Leuenberger, *“Ich bin Jhwh und keiner sonst” (Jes 45,5f): Der exklusive Monotheismus des Kyros-Orakels Jes 45,1-7 in seinem religions- und theologiegeschichtlichen Kontext*, SBS 224 (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2010). It is notable that this framework suggests compatibility, but not necessarily influence, with Isaiah 45:1-7.

staff.⁴³ In the context of the plagues, it is Moses (Exod 7:15, 20; 9:23; 10:13) and it is Aaron (Exod 7:9–12, 19; 8:12f), but fundamentally and essentially it is God as expressed *verbatim* in 7:25 at the conclusion of the blood plague. This is particularly important in light of the earlier discussions of hands as the divine oversight of the events and the preparation for the eventual exodus from Egypt.

With Exod 7:18, the argument is further developed within the narrative:

והדגה אשר־ביאר תמות ובאש היאר ונלאו מצרים לשתות מים מן־היאה

The fish in the river shall die, the river itself shall stink, and the Egyptians shall be unable to drink water from the Nile.

Already in verse 19, the plague is spread everywhere:

ויאמר יהוה אל־משה אמר אל־אהרן קח מטך ונטה־ידך על־מימי מצרים על־נהרתם על־יאריהם

ועל־אגמיהם ועל־כל־מקוה מימיהם ויהי־דם והיה דם בכל־ארץ מצרים ובעצים ובאבנים

The LORD said to Moses, “Say to Aaron, ‘Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt—over its rivers, its canals, and its ponds, and all its pools of water—so that they may become blood; and there shall be blood throughout the whole land of Egypt, even in vessels of wood and in vessels of stone.’”

It is notable here that even the water in the vessels (ובעצים) [“even in vessels of wood and in vessels of stone”] has turned to blood. In diachronic terms, as is generally recognized, this is P’s vision of the plague cycle, whereas the non-P tradition focuses on the

⁴³ For a detailed discussion of the staff see Gertz, *Tradition*, 99 n. 89.

Nile water alone.⁴⁴ For Egypt, it resembles the destruction of the world as creation motifs are incorporated into the narrative. The redactional integration of P and non-P materials serves as a climax in the depiction of the plague: the plague as it stands first envisions the transformation of the Nile water to blood, but eventually, all of the water in Egypt turns to blood.

In Exod 7:20-21 Moses and Aaron did together what was instructed—but then there are singular verbs—it is Moses or Aaron:

ויעשו־כן משה ואהרן כאשר צוה יהוה וירם במטה ויך את־המים אשר ביאר לעיני פרעה ולעיני עבדיו ויהפכו כל־המים אשר־ביאר לדם²¹ והדגה אשר־ביאר מתה ויבאש היאר ולא־יכלו מצרים לשתות מים מן־היאר ויהי הדם בכל־ארץ מצרים

Moses and Aaron did just as the LORD commanded. In the sight of Pharaoh and of his officials he lifted up the staff and struck the water in the river, and all the water in the river was turned into blood,²¹ and the fish in the river died. The river stank so that the Egyptians could not drink its water, and there was blood throughout the whole land of Egypt.

It is notable that one can carry through verse 7:18 but not 7:19. Thus, one can see the first but not the second step of escalation. Not that the phrase “there was blood throughout all the land of Egypt” in 7:21, mirrors 7:19, it is as if the rest of 7:19 is telescoped.

There is a significant logical gap between 7:21 and 7:22. How and when did the blood turn back to water in time for the magicians

⁴⁴ See e.g. Gertz, *Tradition*, 79-97. The motif of the staff in the plague cycle is framed by that of the “hand,” see Exod 7:4f; 8:2; 9:3, 22f; 10:12f, 21f.

to perform the same miracle? The narrative is thus somewhat artificial in the current assembly. The narrative leaves gaps for the readers and thus demands exegetical imagination.

It is notable that in Exod 7:22-23 there is an emphasis on the powers of the magicians: ויעשו־כן חרטמי מצרים בלטיהם ויחזק לב־פרעה ולא־שמע אלהם כאשר דבר יהוה²³ ויפן פרעה ויבא אל־ביתו ולא־שת לבו גם־לזאת:

But the magicians of Egypt did the same by their secret arts; so Pharaoh's heart remained hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said.²³ Pharaoh turned and went into his house, and he did not take even this to heart.

Note the suffix in the third person plural of בלטיהם (“their secret arts”), instead of referring to divine power. It is not God hardening Pharaoh's heart, but the heart itself is hard and remains so—no cause is articulated. There is of course still a residual question: could Pharaoh have controlled his own heart? Within the plague cycle, there is a significant amount of discussion on this theological topic that is taken up here again from Exod 7:13 and never will be unambiguously solved in the context of the following plagues.⁴⁵

According to Exod 7:24 the Egyptians are digging for water (but that only make sense if it is *the Nile alone* that is turned into blood).

ויחפרו כל־מצרים סביבת היאר מים לשתות כי לא יכלו לשתת ממימי היארה

⁴⁵ For a detailed discussion see Edgar Kellenberger, *Die Verstockung Pharaos: Exegetische und auslegungsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zu Exodus 1-15*, BWANT 171 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2006).

And all the Egyptians had to dig along the Nile for water to drink, for they could not drink the water of the river. In diachronic terms, 7:24 represents the non-P perspective within the first plague.⁴⁶ But in the integrated text, the motif is not meaningless. The Egyptians are not fully aware that all water in Egypt turned to blood, so they are searching at the side of the Nile, however in vain.

According to Exod 7:25 it was God who hit the Nile, not Moses or Aaron: וימלא שבעת ימים אחרי הכות־יהוה את־היאֵר (Seven days passed after the LORD had struck the Nile.). This statement appears to presuppose the integration of P and non-P.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, this motif makes perfect sense in its current literary context, as it highlights God's own activity behind everything that Moses and/or Aaron do. The idea then of a textual unity⁴⁸ is not a precritical assessment of a text without attention to its history. Rather, it is useful to remain mindful of the historical layers and the integration of various sources in order to enable a rich reading of the biblical text.

Within the context of the Torah as a whole, the seven days for the plague can be read as an allusion to creation, but now in the form of an unravelled creation, i.e., entropy. Creation is disassembled and natural order will be overturned now back to chaos (cf. 7:20, ויהפכו [...was turned into]). There is an ongoing theme

⁴⁶ See Gertz, *Tradition*, 97–113.

⁴⁷ See Schmidt, *Exodus*, 386; differently Gertz, *Tradition*, 113.

⁴⁸ See discussion of a textual unity, despite compositional and historical complexity, e.g., in the case of Homer in Nietzsche, "Homer and Classical Philology," 145–170.

of overturning, moving towards redemption, and an overarching account of recreation.

The plague of blood serves as a complex microcosm for the whole of the plague cycle. The intricate interweaving of sources and the overarching integrating of themes creates a whole for the cycle but also prepares the way for a resolution of the narrative at the end of the exodus cycle in Exodus 15.

IV.

The blood plague (Exod 7:14-25) is intrinsically interwoven not only within the plague cycle (Exodus 7-11), but also with the broader exodus narrative. This is true for its sources, but also for the composition as a whole. An important element in that regard is that of retrospective reading. It already occurs in the prologue to the cycle (Exod 7:1-13), but also in some of the subsequent plagues. The integrated P and non-P text creates the conditions for an integrated storyline that then *repeatedly* retells the narrative across Exodus 1-15. In a sense the text is already obsessed with the charge (Exod 13:8):

והגדת לבנך ביום ההוא לאמר בעבור זה עשה יהוה לי בצאתי ממצרים

You shall tell your child on that day, "It is because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt."

Additionally, consideration of the concept of didactic narrative is a way of thinking about the overarching performance of the plague cycle. It is constructed so that the narrative already presupposes full knowledge of the outcome. The text dramatically and dynamically draws the reader through the events teleologically in order to get the reader to reperform the text by retelling.

The entirety of Exodus 1-15 is framed by the motif of water, which is all the more poignant when it is pointed out that the first plague removes all water from the Egyptian population. So, the narrative begins in the vulnerable state of the near drowning of Moses and ends with the drowning of every one of the Egyptians through water and the saving of the Israelites as they pass through the water. The surrounding waters from the frame of Exodus 1-15 are essential to the way scholars have already read that section as a creation narrative, and are also already manifest in some of the rereadings of the plague cycle in liturgical texts that will play a role in shaping what will emerge as much later liturgical and ritual contexts for retelling the exodus narrative, such as the book of Jubilees or the later rabbinic Haggadah. In literary historical terms, it is especially the P-strand in Exodus 1-15 which retroverts history into myth, as notably Norbert Lohfink, Albert de Pury, and Ernst Axel Knauf have pointed out.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ See Norbert Lohfink, "Die Priesterschrift und die Geschichte," in *Congress Volume: Göttingen, 1977*, ed. John A. Emerton, VTSup 29 (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 183-225 = idem, *Studien zum Pentateuch*, SBAB 4 (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1988), 213-253; Albert de Pury, "P^g as the Absolute Beginning," in *Les dernières rédactions du Pentateuque, de l'Hexateuque et de l'Ennéateuque*, ed.

Water is above and below as a kind of recreation for the people. Water is life and it is death. It is the beginning and the end of the world as the exodus cycle knows it. This framework around the theme of water serves to further integrate the parts of the narrative and locates the plague cycle in the larger exodus narrative of history and redemption and additionally ties in with the creation theme of Genesis 1.

There is a second important motif that frames the plagues: life and death. This theme reflects the whole of the plague cycle which repeatedly destabilizes the order of nature and creation of the world and threatens to send the world (or at a minimum Egypt as the world) back to a state of primordial chaos. The threat of losing light, animals, crops, and water is manifest throughout the pericope, but also the loss of life of the innocent infants. One could argue that the whole of Exodus 1-15 is about the viability of Israel, as a whole and as the plagues threaten creation and sustainability. The plague cycle is written to prepare for the miracle at the sea in Exodus 14-15. The plagues are small miracles preparing for the final exodus that is represented as redemption from slavery and as a covenantal fulfilment as described by the exodus narrative. As mentioned

Thomas Römer and Konrad Schmid, BETL 203 (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 99-128 = idem, *Die Patriarchen und die Priesterschaft / Les Patriarches et le document sacerdotal: Gesammelte Studien zu seinem 70. Geburtstag / Recueil d'articles, à l'occasion de son 70e anniversaire*, ATANT 99 (Zürich: TVZ, 2010), 13-42; Ernst Axel Knauf, "Der Exodus zwischen Mythos und Geschichte: Zur priesterschriftlichen Rezeption der Schilfmeer-Geschichte in Ex 14," in *Schriftauslegung in der Schrift: Festschrift für Odil Hannes Steck zu seinem 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Reinhard G. Kratz et al., BZAW 300 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2000), 73-84.

earlier, the water theme initiates the suffering of the Egyptians as the water become blood⁵⁰ and the water that also drowns the Egyptians. Eventually, however, it is only the tenth and last plague, the striking of the first born, that enables the exodus to be realized. The plague cycle is thus framed by blood, not water. In contrast it is water that frames the larger exodus narrative. Both blood and water serve to spare life and to take life. Between the framing of blood and water is a complicated narrative of the suffering of the Egyptians through the plagues. The suffering of the Egyptians is rationalized in light of the cruelty of the Egyptians towards the Israelite slaves, and the Egyptians' refusal to release Israel.

These themes that envelope the current form of the exodus text leave an unmarked text with respect to author function or historical context. Nevertheless, the narrative betrays signs of the history and importance of aesthetic and literary choices with respect to the crafted narrative. Here consideration of the unity of the text is done with an eye towards its compositional whole, but also noticing its history and integration of pre-texts. However, this essay does not focus on the original text or author and in this way the warnings of Nietzsche's inaugural address are heeded. Instead, the dynamic hermeneutic which interlaced P and non-P materials, or a variety of sources as the composers sustained and integrated their past and

⁵⁰ This also serves as a hint to the Passover in Exod 12:7, 13, see Schmidt, *Exodus*, 378.

present, into a new whole that would generate a future readership and tradition, is the focus.

V.

Unitary logical or literary coherence is not a necessary goal for the composers of the plague cycle. But, rather, an integrated literary whole, appears to be an end result of the composers, collectors, and editors. The text survived in a complex integration and seemed to perform a clear and complex attempt at preserving different traditional perspectives. Thomas Bauer identified a specific intellectual approach to the problem of ambiguities in premodern Islam that he called “Die Kultur der Ambiguität”—i.e. “The Culture of Ambiguity.”⁵¹ By this term he means that ancient cultures did not necessarily strive to make any intellectual, social, or political ambiguity unequivocal in order to live with it. Rather, they tried to balance ambiguities, in order to maintain different, sometimes even contradicting, but nevertheless legitimate perspectives side by side. It was only by the process of the “Islamization of Islam” that this culture of ambiguity was challenged and in certain parts of the Islamic tradition finally lost. The modern reader is interested in unlocking the text for the purposes of her or his own reading. Maybe the ancient authors who composed wanted to maintain various

⁵¹ Thomas Bauer, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität: Eine andere Geschichte des Islams*, 6th ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2019). See also Joshua Berman, *Inconsistency in the Torah: Ancient Literary Convention and the Limits of Source Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 277–278 who, however, pursues his own agenda of analysing and dating biblical texts.

philosophical and theological dimensions of the text in the sense of Bauer, and this was at the expense of the overall coherence.

The entirety of the Exodus narrative can be read as the result of a creative hermeneutics that weaves together previously existing narratives—in the case of P and non-P—into a new whole. The process that is being traced here reveals both the oral or performative dimension and the literary dimension of the Exodus text. Thus, the end product is a text that remains alive to its readers. Or in other words: conflation creates commentary.

Perhaps what is needed is a different scholarly reading practice to understand these texts. The solution cannot be to disintegrate the narrative into parts. Rather, expressions of inconsistency or contradiction are preserved for a whole host of possible reasons: reasons of tradition or of integration of communities with competing traditions (among other reasons). Perhaps one can take a step further and suggest that the collectors and editors did not prioritize a smooth or seamless integration. Could the default option of biblical editors not have been to create a coherent streamlined narrative, but rather to integrate as much as they could from existing traditions?

The particular way in which biblical texts were composed demands that readers participate in the hermeneutic that is embedded in the text itself. No one in the scholarly field contests the assumption that the Pentateuch is a composite text. But the task as

scholars goes beyond disintegrating or even dismembering the Pentateuch in its various sources, parts, and redactions. Can scholars take a hermeneutical turn in Pentateuch studies to develop a way of reading the Pentateuch that takes into account the ambiguities that its authors and redactors produced, which are responsible for the dynamic nature both of the text itself and its reception history?

This essay has considered the Pentateuch, in particular the plague cycle in Exodus as a textual unity—with full acknowledgement of its complex compositional history. This mode of reading is indebted to Nietzsche’s critique of how Homer was being dissected. The proposal of this article is towards a *philology as hermeneutics* that both presupposes the rigors of etymology and grammar but moves beyond that mode by applying it to a practice of reading which is intricate and interwoven with respect to the work or collection.

This approach is deeply indebted to the historical context, but with an eye towards what makes a text dynamic to itself and to its reading community. Processes of composition and reading are dynamic and vital.⁵² These processes are both performative and liturgical.

Moreover, they are essential to practices of reading and exegesis; both within and beyond the preserved textual traditions.

⁵² Najman, “The Vitality of Scripture,” 497–518.

Current scholarship suggests that the Pentateuch's earliest readers in antiquity were isomorphic with the community of authors, i.e., the readers are the composers, collectors, and editors.⁵³ To compose in antiquity was to record tradition but also to read existing tradition and to engage with it. The ancient writers and readers perhaps knew how these texts came about. And they were committed, not to producing a seamless linear narrative, but to preserving differences. This integrated mode of reading can contribute to understanding a whole and thus pave the way to a new hermeneutic for reading the Exodus narrative.⁵⁴

⁵³ See, e.g., Konrad Schmid, "Authorship. I. Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible/Old Testament," *EBR* 3:116-120; idem, *A Historical Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 10-14; Erhard Blum, "Institutionelle und kulturelle Voraussetzungen der israelitischen Traditionsliteratur," in *Tradition(en) im alten Israel: Konstruktion, Transmission und Transformation*, ed. Ruth Ebach and Martin Leuenberger, FAT 127 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 3-44.

⁵⁴ Many thanks to Angela Erisman and Nathan MacDonald who initiated this essay by inviting us to participate in their SBL session on new methodological perspectives on the Pentateuch and also to all of the participants in the session in San Diego 2019. Thanks also to suggestions by Mark Brett, Annie Calderbank, Judith Newman, Elizabeth Stell, and the two anonymous readers of this article.