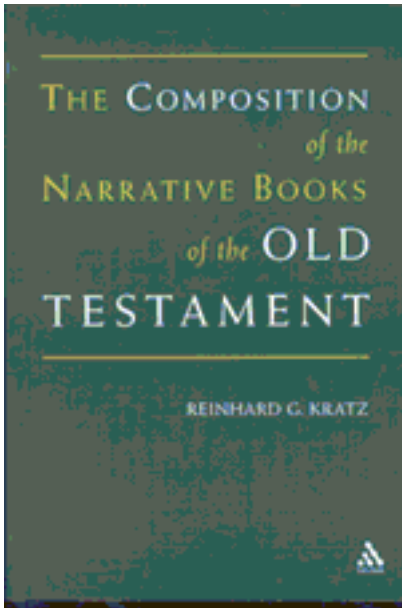


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Kratz, Reinhard G.

The Composition of the Narrative Books of the Old Testament

Translated by John Bowden

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This work is a translation of a book that first appeared in German in 2000. For the English edition, opportunity has been taken to revise a few points in the text and to add some English titles to the bibliography.

The task that Kratz sets himself is to trace the history of the composition of the narrative books of the Hebrew Bible, at any rate of Genesis–2 Kings, Chronicles, and Ezra–Nehemiah. He begins with the latest materials, Chronicles and Ezra–Nehemiah (treated as ultimately one work as the “overlap” at the end of 2 Chronicles and the beginning of Ezra is taken to indicate), for it is in this context that the evidence of compositional and editorial techniques is at its clearest. Thereafter, Kratz turns his attention to law in the Pentateuch, to the composition of the Former Prophets, and to the relationship between these two great divisions in the Hebrew Bible. Finally, he turns to the composition of the Pentateuch itself. The thoroughness of the execution is impressive; a consistently intense level of engagement with these highly complex materials is sustained throughout the book.

Many of the sentiments of the writer seem uncontentious and can be readily agreed with: for example, it is clear that if we begin from what is given, Genesis–Kings form a consecutive narrative” (98–99); “It is not enough to replace one unknown core, the

ancient primal Israelite core, by another unknown, the cipher of the ‘final redactor’ ” (135); the basic distinction of materials in the Pentateuch is between “P” and “non-P” (229); “passages need not come from another context, but could have been composed for their present context” (261). But it is not long—inevitably in the unpacking of such complex materials below surface agreement—before divergent thoughts arise in this reviewer’s mind.

Already in the discussion of the genealogies in 1 Chr 1–9 a theory on the history of the literary evolution of that section is developed: only the first part of 1 Chr 2, the general genealogy of Israel and the particular genealogy of Judah down to David, is original; this is then continued by the narrative on David’s reign beginning in 1 Chr 11. This proposed literary history of a restricted original subsequently supplemented by all manner of materials is matched by external political history: the original version focusing on the House of David corresponds to the hopes of the returning exiles in the early Persian period; the discursive development reflects later internal consolidation when political hegemony simply passes from Persia to Greece. This discussion sets the tone for Kratz’s interpretation throughout the book: except where the original materials recovered are so slight and obscure that no historical context can be proposed with certainty, literary evolution can be matched with external developments in political history.

A fundamental issue is thereby raised: that the biblical writings contain materials with a complex history of development is surely beyond dispute, but do materials reused in literary compositions retain the impress of the contexts in which they originally arose and of the stages of their evolution or are they to some extent at least transformed in the reuse? The genealogies in 1 Chr 1–9 provide a case in point: whatever the origin of the materials (a historical question that will probably never be resolved), it is the shaping of them now in their present context that is significant. Two of the most salient features of these genealogies are, first, the recurring patterns of ten generations (Adam to Noah; Shem to Abraham [not to mention the subsequently established thirty generations from Abraham to Josiah], oddly enough recognized by Kratz for the genealogies in Genesis [237] but not noted in the case of Chronicles, so far as I can see); second, the occasional obtruding of overt theological evaluation, all the more significant because of its rarity. A striking feature of that episodic theological evaluation is the repeated use of the term **מעל**, derived from the vocabulary of guilt and atonement, which not only recurs at key points in the genealogies (2:7; 5:25; 9:1; Israel has been guilty from first to last, on West Bank and on East) but then punctuates the theological evaluation of the history of Judah, the true remnant of Israel, from the first post-Davidic/Solomonic king, Rehoboam, in 2 Chr 12:2 to the last, Zedekiah, in 2 Chr 36:14. Thus the exile is explained. Neither of these features, which to my mind provide the essential clues to the overall chronology of Chronicles and to its theology, indeed to its eschatological expectation, is alluded to by

Kratz. The kerygma is stifled by the reconstructed literary history and proposed matching historical settings.

And so it continues. What might have been a promising start of “beginning at the end” of the evolution of the biblical narratives (and the need to appreciate the force of that developed form before attempting to trace back its development) is not pursued. The legal corpora in the Pentateuch are next withdrawn from their contexts as, *ex hypothesi*, secondary and subjected to historical analysis as independent entities. Thus the Decalogue and the Book of the Covenant are both assumed to be later additions to the book of Exodus. That the law in Exodus undoubtedly has a complex prehistory is surely beyond dispute. But does not the present arrangement of, say, the Book of the Covenant, arguably at the very least, depend on precisely the fact that it is now integral to the composition of at least one major level of the book of Exodus? A case can be made that its sacral framework is derived from the first table of the Decalogue and that its legal and ethical content expounds the second table. The “prologue” of the Decalogue exerts its influence in determining that the opening legislation in B deals with the freeing of slaves; the concluding section of B begins and ends with further allusion to the “prologue,” the motivation in dealing with the socially vulnerable of remembering that “you were once sojourners in the land of Egypt.” The alternative strategy, which I prefer, of applying the reminiscences of Deuteronomy—an objectively available instrument for detecting at least two layers in the literary evolution of the Tetrateuch—which confirm the integral nature of Decalogue and Book of the Covenant at the penultimate level of composition, is not employed by Kratz.

The result is an intricate argument dependent upon a mass of, to my mind, highly questionable, if not arbitrary, reconstructions. For example, is it demonstrably the case on page 126 that the **עמ** of Deut 6:4–5 is part of the earliest framework (*sic*; not “reminiscence”) of the book of Deuteronomy (and that, because an introduction to it is needed, Deut 5:1a¹ has to be extracted and attached to it)? Did Moses write Exod 23:20–33; 23:10–19 on the tablets of the Decalogue (134)? Does Moses’ first stay on the mountain of God begin in Exod 19:2–3a and end in 24:18b (283; thus making Exod 24:18b retrospective rather than prospective)? Is the bulk of Exod 1 merely a secondary bridge to link the originally independent J source (now limited to primeval and patriarchal histories in Genesis and passing through development from J^G to J^S) to the E source (“E” now for “Exodus narrative,” and also passing through E^G and E^S, misread as E⁶ and E⁵ in the summary table on 326) that begins with Exod 2 (281; the exposure of Moses on the Nile is now motivated by the shame of Moses’ mother about her illegitimate child)? Is the original continuation of Exod 15:22a to be found in Num 20:1, the account of the death of Miriam (147; I thought I was being bold enough when I proposed, on the basis of the reminiscences in Deuteronomy, that in the matching D-

version Exod 15:22b α is originally continued by Exod 19:2b)? If this identification of the original narrative thread in the Pentateuch is not self-evidently convincing, it is easy to lose confidence in the development of an argument thereon for a process of inclusion of a whole series of further insertions of once independent materials, including Sinai and law.

The problem is perhaps illustrated by the strange absence of the asterisk, not least in the final summary chapter. Here hundreds of proposals for analysis of the text are gathered together and tabulated but, although qualifications such as “except such and such a phrase” are on occasion employed, the convention of the asterisk, to show that a verse or part verse is not amenable to distinct analysis because the editing has penetrated so deeply into the wording that mechanical discrimination is not possible, is not used. The nub of the problem is what is meant by the title term “composition.” The impression is given that the process is more akin to a compilation of disparate materials (compare the term *Aufstockung*, used on occasion in the original, which suggests the addition of a self-contained story to an existing edifice) than to the writing of coherently conceived works of literature.

The English translation comes from the very experienced hand of John Bowden. On the whole it is clear enough, though one wishes that the translator had employed more frequently his initiative to break up some of the longer sentences in the original. In many passages the density of the original is faithfully transmitted but will be a source of some discouragement to the reader. There are occasional lapses that create a barely intelligible text, such as, “Thus Leviticus 26 (27) marks the end of an expanded Priestly Writing which is still independent but, in Exod. 25–40 and Leviticus, is expanded by the law, among other things with details of the cult, above all the notion of atonement which is now dominant, that is, the end of P^S” (111–12). The problems here are the retention of a longish sentence with enclosed relative clause and a misreading of the German abbreviation “u. a.” (in this case, “und andere,” not “unter anderen”); a similar lapse is caused by the ambiguity of the preposition “nach” on 134, foot, where, instead of “According to Exod. 19–24 the fall comes about so suddenly,” “After Exod. 19–24” should be read). The original might be better rendered: “Thus Leviticus 26 (27) marks the end of a still independent Priestly Writing, that is, the end of P^S. It has been expanded in Exod. 25–40 and Leviticus by the law and other details of the cult, above all the now dominant ideas of atonement.” A whole line of the original has been omitted on page 143. It is inconvenient that in the English version endnotes have been adopted rather than the footnotes of the original, for often quite detailed expansions of the running argument are supplied there. Just occasionally the German method of biblical citation (comma dividing chapter and verse, full-stop between verses) has inadvertently been transcribed into the English, leading to some confusion.

In the preface to the English edition, the author expresses his hope that this translation “will help to revive the exchange between German- and English-language biblical study.” This work, which self-consciously stands firmly in the tradition of Wellhausen and Noth, is a strong statement of an approach that closely weds literary analysis to historical criticism. As such, it will make a redoubtable conversation partner for those concerned with more literary and theological approaches.