



Van Seters, John

***The Edited Bible: The Curious History of the “Editor”
in Biblical Criticism***

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This book attacks the notion that “editors” or “redactors”—John Van Seters is using these terms promiscuously—played any part in the creation of the Hebrew and Greek Bible. During the past several hundred years scholars have worked within a framework that was developed by postbiblical editorial practices in antiquity and the Middle Ages. In the twentieth century, these assumptions of postbiblical editors became “the new science of German biblical scholarship” (297). The German scholars speak of editors and redactors instead of creative authors. Already a look at German handbooks by, for example, O. H. Steck and K. Koch using the term *Redaktionsgeschichte* could show that they are working with unproven hypotheses that underlie their conceptions of the growth of biblical books and the transmission of the biblical text, because biblical books had never been “edited.” The methodological “fall of man” began already with R. Simon in the seventeenth century, who used the false assumption of an editor to explain the literary history of an Enneateuch of the books Genesis–2 Kings. The outcome of these nearly four hundred years of using a false methodology is the latest German scholarship of the twentieth century. Instead of using an “anachronistic analogy” (297) as a key for the explanation of the literary history of the Bible, “all talks of ‘redactors’ and ‘redactions’ should be scrupulously avoided in biblical studies” (398). Instead of the conception of redactors, John Van Seters recommends that of “ancient historiography,” since the Yahwist and the

Deuteronomist were “historiographers.” As a German scholar who received his exegetical training as a student by K. Koch and O. H. Steck at the University of Hamburg and who is still using the term and method of *Redaktionsgeschichte*, I would be glad if Van Seters would have convinced me, because our task to understand the literary history of the Bible would have become much easier at once. But there are some reasons why I have problems following this “temptation” of an easy method although I confess I am an ardent adherent of Occam’s razor to reduce the complexity of our exegetical task wherever it is possible. So I give my reasons why I am still convinced that biblical scholarship was not entirely on the wrong track since R. Simon, well aware of the fact that nowadays we are standing at decisive turning points of biblical scholarship. But I am not sure if we should follow the direction Van Seters wants us to go:

The reader of this book will be confronted with a history of the latest European studies and those of three hundred years of Pentateuch research that is characterized as “curious,” except from the two “heroes” Martin Noth and Gerhard von Rad, because they knew that the books of Genesis–2 Kings were not the outcome of redactions but written by historians as authors comparable to and influenced by Greek history writing. Already in his previous book Van Seters tried to prove that the Covenant Code was written by a Yahwist as a historian using Deuteronomy, the Holiness Code and Codex Hammurapi as sources, although the authors of the Pentateuch knew that Deuteronomy was written after the Covenant Code (see below). Already Van Seters claimed there that he “stand[s] in the tradition of Gerhard von Rad, who likewise considered the Yahwist as a historian” (J. Van Seters, *A Law Book for the Diaspora*” *Revision in the Study of the Covenant Code* [Oxford, 2003], vii). Most of the reviewers of *Law Book* insisted that the Covenant Code was the result of a redaction integrating it in its context and that Deuteronomy was a revision of the Covenant Code. But even more important is the fact that after the decline of the Graf-Kuenen-Wellhausen model of source division in the Pentateuch, which meant the end of the Documentary Hypothesis of a Yahwist at all, models of redaction history arose in Europe (e.g., R. Rendtorff, E. Blum, K. Schmid, R. Kratz, J. Gertz, Th. Krüger, E. Otto, R. Achenbach, and M. Arneht) describing the literary history of the Pentateuch as part of a Hexateuch or Enneateuch. Most of these scholars stand in a direct tradition that is connected with Gerhard von Rad. R. Rendtorff was a direct student of von Rad, and younger scholars are students of von Rad’s students, so E. Blum coming from Rendtorff, this reviewer from K. Koch, R. Kratz and K. Schmid from O. H. Steck, Th. Krüger from K. Baltzer, and with my students R. Achenbach and M. Arneht already the third generation arises. All these scholars identify redactions in the Pentateuch, but Van Seters insists that all of them have misunderstood von Rad.

But was von Rad really of the opinion that the Yahwist was an author and historian, not a redactor? His famous “Das formgeschichtliche Problem des Hexateuch” (1938)

demonstrates the Yahwist as a redactor of the Shechem and Gilgal traditions, incorporating a great number of narratives that were until then handed down independently from the source of the Yahwist. As K. Koch correctly has said, it was von Rad who introduced the method of redaction history in Old Testament scholarship. The same was true for von Rad's analysis of the primeval story in Gen 2–11*, which was not invented by the Yahwist but was the outcome of a redaction of older material that was adjusted to its function within the Yahwistic Hexateuch and linked together with the stories of the patriarchs by Gen 12:1–3.

When R. Rendtorff dissolved the existence of a Yahwist by the insight that the different literary blocks of narratives of the patriarchs, exodus, and Sinai were handed down independently from each other until Deuteronomistic or Priestly redactors composed the Pentateuch out of them, he ratified the perspectives of G. von Rad's study of 1938 and M. Noth's "Überlieferungsgeschichte des Pentateuch" (1948). Rendtorff solved a basic inconsistency in von Rad's and Noth's studies, which was the result of H. Gunkel's and H. Gressmann's compromise with Wellhausen's Documentary Hypothesis. The Wellhausen approach was a kind of literary-critical working down from the surface of the given text to the oldest sources as coherent literary units. The fate of the Documentary Hypothesis in the Wellhausen school demonstrates that they were working with the misconception that we could ever reach coherent literary entities this way. Thus, the sources were reduced more and more and supplements of sources invented (J^s, E^s, JE^s etc.), so that H. Gunkel's form-critical approach seemed to solve this problem better. But Gunkel's method was a working up, starting with the original small units and ending with the sources, not the given text. Von Rad's interpretation of the Yahwist as a redactor who composed his source out of older material was a consequence of this methodological inconsistency that arose from Gunkel's compromise with the Wellhausen school. The Yahwist, rooted in the "Solomonic enlightenment" (so von Rad), had some "historical" interests, but this did not make him an author as a "historian" in the sense of Van Seters.

M. Noth solved the methodological aporia of connecting form history and source criticism by dating the pentateuchal composition of independent themes of the patriarchs, exodus, Sinai, and so forth earlier than the formation of J and E. His supposition of an earlier stratum G demonstrates that he could not solve the problem of the transition from the oral composition of the Pentateuch in Israel's amphictyonic era to the literary sources of J and E. In 1977 R. Rendtorff drew the necessary consequences out of this aporia and voted for a methodologically coherent working up from small units to the given text, with the result that the Yahwist vanished from the scene in favor of an exilic or postexilic composition of the Pentateuch out of independent literary blocks of Noth's "themes." This composition is nothing else but a "redaction," and the latest developments of European Pentateuch studies are not at all "curious" results of it.

Well, as Noth never claimed that J had an interest in history writing in the sense of Van Seters, Van Seters concentrates at this point on Noth's Deuteronomist as an author and historian of his Deuteronomistic History (Deut 1–2 Kgs 25). Again Noth's direct student R. Smend, who wrote his dissertation with Noth, is thought to have misunderstood him, creating the Göttingen hypothesis of different Deuteronomistic redactors in the Deuteronomistic History. But again one must conclude that it is Van Seters who has misunderstood Noth, because for Noth the Deuteronomist was by no means only an author but also a redactor using preexilic narratives such as the succession story in Samuel and prophetic cycles in Kings. The new developments in studies of the Pentateuch and Joshua–2 Kings are not a result of misinterpretations of von Rad and Noth but a methodologically logical consequence of their studies. When Van Seters states that K. Koch, who wrote his dissertation with von Rad, did von Rad and Noth "grave injustice" by saying that they represented the beginning of redaction criticism (10–11), one may ask if this does not better fit Van Seters's claim that von Rad should have understood the Yahwist as "an author and historian" and the same with Noth and the Deuteronomist. What Rendtorff and the majority of European scholars of the Pentateuch did and do is to dissolve Gunkel's aporia of connecting form- and traditio-historical methods, on the one side, with literary-critical approaches of the Documentary Hypothesis of Wellhausen, on the other. The outcome is the method of *Redaktionsgeschichte*, which overcomes the Documentary Hypothesis.

If Van Seters claims that his two heroes were consequently misinterpreted in the last thirty years by their own students, he has to explain where this misunderstanding arose, so Van Seters broadens his perspective: Not only the latest European Pentateuch research went curiously astray, but the Old Testament scholarship of the last three hundred years. Because the term "editor" or "redactor"—Van Seters does not differentiate between them—are nowadays related to the production of works of earlier authors but were not used this way in antiquity, we are anachronistically reading them back into antiquity and with the terms also the method of redaction history, which is, so Van Seters, a projection of modern editorial work since the Renaissance into antiquity. Since the production of books in modern times needs an editor, it is difficult for modern scholars of the Bible to think about the production and publication of biblical books without the assumption of redactors. "The 'editor' in antiquity contributed nothing to the composition of the classical and biblical texts and their influence upon the establishment of vulgate texts was limited, indirect and accidental" (23). With a great effort of many pages Van Seters tries to demonstrate that there was neither any editing of classical texts in general nor texts of Homer in particular before the Hellenistic period, when activities of editing texts, that is, their collection and collation in the sense of correcting scribal mistakes, began. The broad textual diversity of texts in Qumran with no evidence of any critical attempt to establish a

standard text makes it difficult for Van Seters to suppose that there were any attempts to edit a standard text critically. But no one would have expected that there were any activities of editing texts comparable to modern methods of redaction history, which are based on a historical consciousness and a historical-critical approach developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but this does not mean that the Hebrew Bible does not give hints that point exactly into the direction of redaction.

But instead of asking what theory the Pentateuch itself has of its own literary history, Van Seters enfoldes the history of classical studies of Homer since the eighteenth century, which is claimed to have misled biblical scholars. From Friedrich August Wolf (1759–1824), who is thought to have influenced Eichhorn and de Wette, to Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, who is thought have influenced Wellhausen, the German solution of the Homeric question is claimed to have had a negative impact on Old Testament scholarship. A long line of German scholars of classics were of the opinion that the first written versions of the Homeric poems were due to later authors, who edited them as redactors. But the Oral Poetry School (e.g., M. Parry) demonstrated (so Van Seters) that this whole approach was wrong. Consequently, Old Testament scholars who are still working with the idea of redactors are using a model that they took over from classics, where it is now outmoded. But even if the editor-redactor hypothesis does not provide a solution to the Homeric question, this does not at all mean that it is inadequate for the analysis of biblical literature, all the more the counterargument against the Wolf and Wilamowitz-Moellendorff method of the “unitarian” approach of one author of the Homeric poems. The biblical counterpart would be to reinstall Moses as the author of all the Pentateuch, which, I suppose, Van Seters would not subscribe to.

Even if Van Seters were true with his sketch of the Homeric question, the analogy with Old Testament scholarship would not work. But there are good reasons to suppose that the students of classics were more influenced by Old Testament scholars—Wolf by Eichhorn and Wilamowitz-Moellendorff by Wellhausen—than the other way around, so that we could ask if a methodology that was created for the analysis of biblical texts did not fit the study of Homeric poems. But it fits more than Van Seters suggests. The Oral Poetry School Van Seters is relying on lost much of its credibility when scholars of the Oral History School showed that the memory of oral traditions do not last longer than three or four generations. Scholars of the “Neoanalysis” stressed the literary differences between tradition and the composition of Homeric texts. A great number of literary inconsistencies in the *Iliad* contradict the unitarian approach, so the tension between Iliad 8.469–476 and 22.1ff. or 5.576–579 and 13.643–659. None of these literary problems are discussed by Van Seters, who was using only handbooks to find out that a critical approach to the Homeric question is outmoded. Anyone familiar with the current debate of this question can prognosticate that the neo-romantic backlash of the unitarian

approach against the critical school of Wilamowitz-Moellendorff and others will come to an end and a critical view will gain more and more weight. This may be as it will—this has some importance for the solution of the Homeric question but not for our study of the Pentateuch.

What follows in Van Seters's book is a description of three hundred years of Old Testament research from R. Simon to E. Blum as a hell's kitchen because again and again the wrong conception of redaction and redactors gained influence on scholars except for von Rad and Noth (see above). What was already understood in classics, that there were no redactors of Homeric poems, should also be learned in Old Testament scholarship. One may call "curious" this description of the history of our discipline and the claim that Old Testament scholarship adopted some wrong ideas from classics and did not realize that they were already given up there. Van Seters collected a great deal of material (many passages could be much shorter), but he only selected what he needed for this thesis. But also Van Seters needs a prototype with some authority who could be a witness for his own hypothesis of a Yahwist as a historian, so he tries to explain to the reader that von Rad and Noth were these authorities. The price he pays is the statement that both of them were entirely misunderstood by their own students.

One can understand Van Seters's unease with the latest developments of Pentateuch studies, because after more than one hundred years of stability of the Documentary Hypothesis we are back to the nineteenth century with its great number of approaches and hypotheses, following one after the other. But the consequence of Van Seters to interpret three hundred years of Old Testament scholarship as an aberration in order to sanctify his own hypothesis of a late Yahwist as an author and historian is not a proper basis for further Pentateuch study, only a symptom of its crisis. A better solution takes the text of the Pentateuch more seriously because it includes a theory of its own literary origins that is far more sophisticated than the postbiblical "unitarian" idea that Moses was the author of all the Pentateuch, like Homer of his poems. 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 exegeses concur, we can accept a modern historical-critical hypothesis as reliable. Only those hypotheses that have a basis in the synchronically read narrative of the Pentateuch itself (cf. E. Otto, *Das Gesetz des Mose: Eine Literatur- und Rechtsgeschichte der Mosebücher* [Darmstadt, 2007]) should be thought worthy of handing down. We are standing at a turning point after three hundred years of Old Testament scholarship, this is true. But the question is not if a Yahwist was a historian or a redactor but if we will go on looking for a truth behind the text, as Pietism and Enlightenment *unisono* were teaching us, but the truth in the text, well knowing and in the best sense using the observations of three hundred years of Old Testament scholarship, because its history is not at all

“curious” but something we can be proud of, especially when we are standing at a turning point going in new directions far beyond the Documentary Hypothesis and its “Yahwist.”