CHAPTER 13

Hebrew Lexicography and Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible in Light of Gesenius’ Dictionary

1 Background

The grammatical study of biblical Hebrew and Aramaic almost exclusively refers to the linguistic analysis of the vocalized medieval text of mt. This is understandable, since the foundations of this discipline were laid at a time when the horizon for the knowledge of Hebrew–Aramaic Scripture was not wider than mt. The study of so-called biblical Hebrew was and is equivalent with the analysis of mt. sp’s existence was known when biblical Hebrew started to be analyzed critically, but that text was studied separately as an exponent of the Samaritan tradition, and not as part of biblical Hebrew. Until recently the ancient versions were not used for the study of biblical Hebrew although in cases of well-established reconstructions they could have been used in the area of syntax and possibly also in a lexicon. The main area within grammatical studies in which the LXX was consulted is that of the transcriptions in the LXX and the second column of the Hexapla. Otherwise the LXX is not quoted in grammars such as Gesenius–Kautsch, Grammar or Stade.1 sp is quoted but only minimally. This unusual situation continued also after the discovery of the biblical Dead Sea Scrolls. At the same time, all these tools are named “grammars of biblical Hebrew.”

A similar situation obtains with regard to lexicography. The existing lexicons focus on mt, but their titles are more encompassing, referring to Hebrew–Aramaic Scripture as a whole. For example, E. König, Hebräisches und aramäisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament mit Einschaltung und Analyse ... sowie ... der Massoretischen Randbemerkungen ...;2 F. Brown, S.R. Driver & C.A. Briggs, A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic, Based on the Lexicon of William Gesenius as Translated by Edward Robinson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1907) = BDB. Likewise, the most frequently used lexicon in the twenty-first century, HALOT, is named The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament.3 The extent to which the lexica are

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1 B. Stade, Lehrbuch der Hebräischen Grammatik (Leipzig: Vogel, 1879).
focused on MT is shown by the phrase “mit Einschaltung und Analyse ... sowie ... der Massoretischen Randbemerkungen” that features with pride on the title page of König's lexicon (1886). The name of The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew by D.J.A. Clines is more appropriate since it indicates that it is not limited to the so-called Old Testament according to MT. Its scope is wider than that of the other lexicons, but in the area of Hebrew–Aramaic Scripture it focuses as much on MT as the other tools.

The tradition of almost exclusive attention to MT in critical lexicographical scholarship started with the first edition of W. Gesenius, Hebräisch-Deutsches Handwörterbuch über die Schriften des Alten Testaments (Leipzig: Vogel, 1810–1812) = HW.

Although the textual horizon of early lexicographers was limited, we note a growing awareness of the non-Masoretic sources in the lexicons especially in the twentieth century, but they were never taken fully into consideration. The lexicography of biblical Hebrew and Aramaic remains focused on MT, with occasional attention to other traditions. While the situation that prevailed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is understandable, now in the twenty-first century the time is ripe for a new approach. That said, one must realize that the preparation of a comprehensive biblical lexicon is problematic since the recording of elements from SP and the Judean Desert scrolls would necessarily involve the inclusion of some linguistically late elements.

Standing at the beginning of the history of recording biblical Hebrew and Aramaic is the monumental lexicographical activity of Gesenius, a veritable genius. In his Handwörterbuch (1810–1812) he did not create new entries for the non-Masoretic witnesses in addition to or in the place of the headwords of MT, but in the entries themselves a few non-Masoretic data were mentioned. Sometimes Gesenius mentions details from the versions as a source for the lexicographical analysis (see below), while in other cases the mentioning of the LXX is no more than a formality. The Thesaurus covers more data from the versions, especially the LXX, but here, too, the mentioning of that translation is often no more than a formality (see n. 12). Gesenius was aware of the fact that the procedure of using and evaluating details in the versions and their comparison with MT was not developed sufficiently (HW, Einleitung, XXIV–XXV).

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4 Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press & Sheffield Phoenix Press, 1993–.