Memory, Cultural Memory and Rewriting Scripture

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Introduction

The study and analysis of Rewritten Scripture, especially as exemplified by some compositions amongst the Dead Sea Scrolls, has become an increasingly debated and contested area. It is interesting to note immediately that the study of memory, either individual or collective or cultural, has played little or no part in the discussion; this may be somewhat surprising, since the rewritings to be found in works like Deuteronomy or 1–2 Chronicles can be fruitfully analysed in such terms,¹ and remembrance plays a significant role in several compositions found in the caves at and near Qumran.² This paper attempts to start a conversation that gives some place to memory in the consideration of Rewritten Scripture. Until now, for the Rewritten Scripture compositions from the late Second Temple period, what might be loosely referred to as the pre-canonical period, at least three schools of thought seem to have emerged.

In the first school belong those who wish to retain the label Rewritten Scripture, or possibly even Rewritten Bible, as concerning matters of genre.³ For such scholars there is some significant value in trying to articulate the literary features of such a genre. Commonly such features are to some extent predetermined by the selection and demarcation of those compositions that are widely considered as belonging to the genre, notably Jubilees, the Temple Scroll, the Genesis Apocryphon⁴ and the Reworked Pentateuch in its various manifestations.⁵ One feature of the approach of those scholars who might be allocated

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¹ See, e.g., Rogerson 2009, 13–41.
² Wold (2007, 50–63) describes the use of zkr and related terms in relation to the recollection of the Exodus in 4Q185, 4Q370, 4Q462, 4Q463, 4Q504, and the Damascus Document.
³ Of course most scholars resist categorization by others, but this group could include Alexander (1987) and Bernstein (2005). Zahn (2012, 286) defines Rewritten Scripture as “a genre that functions interpretively to renew (update, correct) specific earlier traditions by recasting a substantial portion of those traditions in the context of a new work that locates itself in the same discourse as the scriptural work that is rewritten.”
⁴ Some of the issues surrounding the discussion of the genre of the parts and whole of the Genesis Apocryphon, including the suitability of the term “Rewritten Bible,” are discussed in Bernstein 2010.
⁵ Those four compositions are often mentioned as having become in some way normative in scholarly discussion; see e.g., Zahn 2010, 324–25; 2011, 8.
to this category is the assumption, sometimes unstated, that a more or less authoritative form of the Torah has already come to be recognized which such compositions are using as hypotext.

In the second school belong a group of scholars who also acknowledge the key role to be played by the analysis of such compositions as the four just mentioned, but who have noticed that the literary exercise that such compositions represent is to be observed in a wide range of additional works. On the one hand such attention to breadth undermines and challenges those approaches that are concerned with neat generic classification, since the larger the family of compositions to be considered, the less possible it is to insist on distinct family features in every case: very large literary families destabilize literary genres. On the other hand broadening the basis of the discussion is commonly based on the observation, analysis and discussion of literary processes, so that the characteristic of this school of thought is attention to such processes.6

From such a perspective Rewritten Scripture loses its suitability as a literary genre tag and becomes a way of talking about a set of phenomena that are observable in various compositions.7 It is as if one is moving from the consideration of whether a particular composition can be labelled as Rewritten Bible to consideration of whether certain compositions illustrate the processes of Rewriting Scripture.8

In the third school we might put a smaller group of scholars who wish to combine both perspectives, arguing for the existence of certain core literary or generic features but thinking more creatively about what such features seem to indicate about the character of the transmission of tradition or traditions in the Second Temple period. Thus some who might be put in this group have tried to articulate what they consider to be characteristic features, for example, of Mosaic discourse.9 More broadly others have sought to describe how a range of compositions enlarge and enhance the suitable description of scriptural exegesis in the Second Temple period.10

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6 Note, e.g., the contribution by Klostergaard Petersen 2007.
7 The breadth of discussion by scholars in the first volume of an ongoing project on Rewritten Bible illustrates well how Rewritten Bible can lose all sense of being a literary genre: Laato and van Ruiten 2008.
8 Note the title of the book by White Crawford 2008.
9 E.g., Najman 2003. Najman looks mainly at Jubilees and the Temple Scroll and then uses Philo to articulate broader issues. For evaluation of some of Najman’s ideas see Brooke 2010.
10 See, e.g., Zahn 2010, 323–36.