Redactor or Rabbenu? Revisiting an Old Question of Identity

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After the publication of his translation of the Torah with Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig wrote, in an open letter to the Orthodox leader and critic Jacob Rosenheim on April 21, 1927: “We translate the Torah as one book. For us, it is the work of a single mind. We do not know who the mind was; we cannot believe it was Moses. We name that mind among ourselves by the abbreviation with which the higher criticism of the Bible indicates its presumed final redactor of the text: R. We, however, take this R to stand not for Redactor but for rabbenu. For whoever he was, and whatever text lay before him, he is our teacher, and his theology is our teaching.”

It is not entirely clear to what extent this statement signifies either acceptance or rejection of the classical nineteenth-century source-critical venture. On the one hand, the Mosaic authorship of the Torah is clearly seen as impossible, and Rosenzweig acknowledges that the “author” of the Torah had materials before him. On the other, the precise nature of those sources is left unstated, and any individual voices or perspectives they may have had are subsumed in the solitary voice of the final “author.”

This having-it-both-ways perspective became something of a standard Jewish approach: we see it also strongly at play in the work of Umberto Cassuto, who wrote that we need to recognize “the unity of the Torah—a unity, in truth, that does not exclude . . . a multiplicity and variety of source materials, nor even their reflection in the text before us; but a unity, none the less.”

Yet Rosenzweig’s formulation can well be interpreted in multiple ways: as a rejection of the Documentary Hypothesis in its entirety as irrelevant for the interpretation of the final form of the text, a form that, it is assumed, has a

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narrative and theological integrity that can be attributed to its final editor; or, from the other side, as an argument for the importance of understanding the editorial techniques employed in the compilation of the classical pentateuchal sources, with an eye particularly toward revealing the narrative and theological intentions of the redactor.

Buber and Rosenzweig, in their celebrated translation of the Torah, inaugurated in many respects a mode of reading the biblical material that continues strongly to the present, namely, the observation of explicitly literary features in the service of arriving at a fuller and, it is often claimed, more accurate understanding of the meaning of the text. The most famous of these techniques, of course, is the use of the Leitwort—a felicitous and now ubiquitous Buberian neologism—the repeated word or phrase that, it is claimed, ties together disparate and, in some cases, rather far-flung materials. The use of the Leitwort and other literary features, it is argued, demonstrates the essential and substantial unity of the Torah, at least for the purposes of reading and interpretation. This stance is often set in opposition to the traditional historical-critical position, sometimes derisively referred to as “geneticist,” which, it is claimed, fails to do justice to the inherent literary properties of the text as a literary text.3

What is unstated in Buber and Rosenzweig’s treatment, and all too often in the analyses of the very many literary critics who have come in their wake, is that although the literary analysis of every text may proceed on the same basic grounds—the observation of literary features and the evaluation of the ways that they contribute to the text’s meaning and aesthetic quality—not every text is equally affected by literary analysis. There is a difference between the literary interpretation of a compositionally unified text and one that is not a unity—a difference that lies not in how the interpretation proceeds but in what the interpretation achieves. This is because the most important indication of a non-unified text—indeed the only sure indication—is that it contains narrative contradictions and discontinuities. Thus while a literary reading of a literary-historically unproblematic text may contribute to an already comprehensible text a sense of artistic or aesthetic pleasure, or reveal previously unnoted nuances, or illuminate otherwise hidden meanings, the literary reading of a composite text serves to move it from the basic category of incomprehensible (understood broadly) to comprehensible (understood loosely). The former is far easier to do, and far more often done: so many of the best-known examples of literary analysis of biblical texts, even those from the Torah, are carried out on passages that no decent source critic would dream of dividing.