

Tracking the Master Scribe: Revision through Introduction in Biblical and Mesopotamian Literature.
By SARA J. MILSTEIN. Oxford: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2016. Pp. xviii + 241. \$99.

Milstein's monograph is a welcome addition to the variety of recent works that are pursuing a critical reevaluation of the criteria often used in source criticism and redaction criticism through the lens of empirical evidence or what she prefers to refer to as "hard evidence." Her first two chapters are introductory. Chapter 1 includes her statement of method within the context of the secondary literature. Chapter 2 concerns what she calls "revision through introduction," including a summary of previous discussions of the Sumerian King List, the Epic of Etana, the Community Rule of Qumran, and the Book of Esther, and a list of conclusions concerning revision through introduction as a redactional technique (pp. 73–74). The next four chapters include her discussion of two Assyriological texts and two biblical texts. Chapters 3–4 concern revision through introduction in Adapa and the Gilgamesh Epic, respectively. Chapters 5–6 concern Judges 6–9 and what she considers to be a source, an "old Saul complex" (Judges 19–21, 1 Samuel 1, and 1 Samuel 11), respectively. Chapter 7 contains her conclusions.

Milstein reaches some excellent conclusions that should be carefully considered by all scholars interested in the literary study of ancient texts; however, a tension remains in her own work in which it seems that she does not follow the full implications of some of her insightful conclusions. Below I will begin with a summary of these conclusions and then discuss how I think that some of her own methodological assumptions and their application to the biblical texts analyzed in chapters 5–6 are inconsistent with the full implications of her conclusions.

One of the most commonly used criteria for discerning sources and redactional layers in ancient texts is "inconsistencies," whether the "inconsistencies" are "literary," "historical," "linguistic," or some combination of these. The following quote from Milstein's conclusion is an excellent statement of the difficulty of assuming that what we moderns identify as an "inconsistency" may not have been considered as such (or at least to the same degree) by the ancients.

Allow me to return to that pesky word "inconsistencies." In fact, it is not that the master scribes were simply "more comfortable" with inconsistencies, as I tend to phrase it, but rather that in the context of collective text production, they must not have perceived them as such. The very term "inconsistencies" derives from our deeply ingrained sense that texts are fixed objects with single authors. But texts of the ancient Near East were not merely the products of collective work; they were and would have been perceived as traditions in motion. For us moderns who associate creativity so deeply with individuality, it can be difficult to imagine what it would have been like to be creative while relinquishing ownership over the final product. Or what it was like to be "creative" in some cases under the patronage of someone else. Even the master scribes who put new words into writing for the first time would have known, even if subconsciously, that any text that entered the stream of tradition was bound to undergo change. These traditions were living, breathing things morphing into new forms that would pop up in writing, only to enter the stream and change again. In this context, the master scribe could supplement a text—even turn it on its head in our later estimation—and yet somehow this did not seem to require overhauling it completely. Revision through introduction worked precisely because it relied on the solid foundation of what was already there. Whether out of deference, tradition, obligation, or underdeveloped egos, these supplementing scribes seem to have been inclined to retain a good portion of the old. (pp. 208–9)

Milstein's distinction between our modern assumptions and how "authorship" worked in the ancient world is especially insightful. In a real sense, if "each tablet or fragment reflects a mere snapshot of a much larger tradition that surely had numerous oral and written expressions" (p. 12), no single scribe had full control over his text, because any "mere snapshot" would be heard or read within the "much larger tradition," so much so that any purported change that was too radical could easily be corrected when it entered the stream of tradition that acted as a conservative force upon textual production and transmission. Because of these characteristics of textual plurality and textual fluidity, "it is generally inapt to posit a single, linear development for the available evidence" (p. 12).

These insights by Milstein are especially consistent with the “empirical evidence” or “hard evidence” found in Mesopotamian literature, in Qumran literature, and in the text-critical comparison of the MT, LXX, SP, and other “versions” of the Hebrew Bible (for example, see the essays in Person and Rezetko 2016, including one by Milstein on the Gilgamesh Epic). These insights need to be taken far more seriously especially by biblical scholars, because as Milstein notes there is a tension between Assyriologists and biblical scholars: “In response to these and other factors, Assyriologists focus considerably less on questions of textual development” (p. 13). “The enormous amount of evidence that is available makes Assyriologists acutely aware not only of what they have but also of what they are missing” (p. 13).

Nevertheless, Milstein’s analysis of the biblical texts in chapters 5–6 proceeds in a manner consistent with how biblical scholars have practiced source and redaction criticism for the past 150 years or more—that is, putting a tremendous emphasis on what the modern scholars consider to be “inconsistencies”—despite the fact that there are biblical texts for which “hard evidence” is available for revision through introduction, as Milstein herself noted (pp. 58–61). But she clearly wanted to demonstrate how her study of revision through introduction with “hard evidence” in Mesopotamian texts may serve as some type of control on source and redactional arguments of biblical texts for which there is no “hard evidence” (pp. 28, 38). However, in order to do just that, she had to resort to playing very close attention to “inconsistencies.”

In her analysis of the Gilgamesh Epic based on textual variation, Milstein includes an entire section on “Competing Sets of Logic in the Old Babylonian Epic” (pp. 115–22). With the “hard evidence” we have for the epic, we are on a sounder footing to talk about “inconsistencies” here, but Milstein’s conclusion concerning “that pesky word” (p. 208; quoted above) nevertheless still applies to some degree. That is, these “inconsistencies” nevertheless continued within the stream of tradition. However, the use of “that pesky word” is much more problematic in her discussion of the biblical texts for which there is no “hard evidence” in her sections “The Independent Logic of Judges 9:26–54” (pp. 153–60), “The Independent Logic of Judges 8:4–21” (pp. 161–64), and “Competing Sets of Logic in Judges 19–21” (pp. 175–85). As she notes, “the two Hebrew cases . . . rely primarily on inconsistencies in the final forms of the texts” (p. 41). In my opinion, her argument for revision through introduction would have been much stronger if she had discussed those biblical texts for which “hard evidence” exists rather than relying on the problematic criterion of “inconsistencies” alone for her analysis of the biblical texts.

Therefore, Milstein reaches some important insights that all scholars of ancient literature need to take far more seriously when they analyze ancient texts. Unfortunately, in my opinion, this sometime includes Milstein herself as she analyzes the biblical texts in chapters 5–6. Nevertheless, Milstein’s discussion of revision through introduction is an important addition to recent discussions of the literary history of ancient texts, especially since it is the first monograph devoted to revision through introduction, a scribal technique that obviously was used widely through the ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean world.

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Recent studies have shifted the focus of Hittitologists from the subject matter of a text to its creation and the organizational *apparatus* underlying it: archives, scribes, and scribal culture (Gordin 2015, van