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## What Can Texts Do?: A Proposal for Biblical Studies

### I. The Three Worlds of the Text

Over the last several decades, the landscape of biblical studies has drastically changed.<sup>1</sup> To simplify matters — perhaps too much, it should be admitted — the modern academic discipline of biblical criticism emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The early critics conceived their task primarily in historical terms, and so biblical criticism centered on the tasks of identifying the original text of the Bible, reconstructing its ancient context of origin, and, by understanding how the original text functioned in its original context, ultimately revealing its original meaning.<sup>2</sup> This approach, usually called “historical criticism,” made possible some truly remarkable insights, such as the realization that biblical texts are products of a long period of composition and redaction. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, a series of questions about historiography, the nature of texts, and the identities and presuppositions of readers led to a reevaluation of the academic discipline itself.<sup>3</sup> In what follows, I will discuss the recent changes to biblical studies, focusing on the Hebrew Bible (what Christians call the “Old Testament” and Jews call the

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of changes in New Testament scholarship, see James D. Ernest’s article on the *Bible Odyssey* website: <http://www.bibleodyssey.org/tools/bible-basics/how-has-new-testament-scholarship-changed-over-time.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> See Martti Nissinen, “Reflections on the ‘Historical-Critical’ Method: Historical Criticism and Critical Historicism,” in *Method Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Bible in Honor of David L. Petersen* (eds. J. LeMon and K. H. Richards; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 479-505, for an overview of these concerns.

<sup>3</sup> See Carol Newsom, “Reflections on Ideological and Postcritical Perspectives,” pages 541-560 in *Method Matters*.

“Tanakh”).<sup>4</sup>

Recently, many biblical scholars have used Paul Ricoeur’s model of the “three worlds of the text” to help think about these wide-ranging changes.<sup>5</sup> Ricoeur suggested that one might conceive of textual studies as inquiries into three different worlds: (1) the world behind the text, (2) the world in the text, and (3) the world in front of the text.<sup>6</sup> The world behind the text refers to the historical context of the text’s production and the historical events or milieu to which it refers. In other words, if one asks, “Are the books of Samuel reliable accounts of King David’s reign?” then one is asking about the history to which the text ostensibly refers, which Ricoeur called the world behind the text.<sup>7</sup> The world in the text refers to the text as a literary object that creates its own rhetorical, artistic reality.<sup>8</sup> For example, if one asks about the characterization of David in the books of Samuel, or about the plot of the David narrative, or the themes developed in the text, then one is asking about the world in the text. And finally, if one asks about the readers of biblical texts, or about the contexts in which these texts were copied or translated, or even about the ethical or theological implications of biblical texts for the modern world, then

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<sup>4</sup> See the list of canons on the *Bible Odyssey* site: <http://www.bibleodyssey.org/tools/bible-basics/three-biblical-canons.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Luke Timothy Johnson, “Literary Criticism of Luke-Acts: Is Reception-History Pertinent?,” *JSNT* 28 (2005): 159.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University, 1976), 87-94.

<sup>7</sup> See Carol Meyers’ discussion of the relationship between the Bible and history on the *Bible Odyssey* website: <http://www.bibleodyssey.org/tools/bible-basics/does-the-bible-relate-to-history-meyers.aspx>

<sup>8</sup> For a more thorough discussion, see my article on Literary Criticism from the Society of Biblical Literature’s “Teaching the Bible” site: [http://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/TBReadingGlasses\\_BB.pdf](http://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/TBReadingGlasses_BB.pdf)

one is inquiring about the world in front of the text.<sup>9</sup>

## II. The World Behind the Text

Before the 1970s, almost all critical biblical scholars focused on the world behind the text. According to John Barton, historical-critical scholars “ask questions about the origins and development of the text, the intentions of its author or authors and its connection with other, similar [ancient] texts.”<sup>10</sup> According to Barton, however, historical criticism is “now under a cloud,” since there has been a “‘paradigm shift’ away from historical methods,” and many current scholars are “not concerned with the historical context and meaning of texts.”<sup>11</sup> More recent approaches, according to many biblical scholars, have shifted to asking about the “world in front of the text” because of their interests in “feminist criticism, rhetorical criticism, postcolonial/liberationist criticism, and several other methodologies.”<sup>12</sup> Since feminist scholars, for example, seem to be asking questions about the gendered identity of modern readers, some scholars imagine that they must be focusing on the world in front of the text, as opposed to the primarily historical questions asked by traditional historical critics.

This line of thought, however, is extremely problematic. Feminist biblical

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<sup>9</sup> For a brief discussion of the role of the reader in modern biblical scholarship, see Marc Zvi Brettler’s article on the *Bible Odyssey* website: <http://www.bibleodyssey.org/tools/bible-basics/what-role-has-faith-played-in-scholars-reading-of-the-bible.aspx>

<sup>10</sup> John Barton, “Historical-Critical Approaches,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation* (ed. J. Barton; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 14.

<sup>11</sup> Barton, “Historical-Critical Approaches,” 9. Note that many scholars rightly argue that this is an overstatement, as historical critical concerns are still commonplace in the field. See David J. Clines, “Historical Criticism: Are Its Days Numbered?” *Teologinen aikakauskirja* 6:542-58, and Martti Nissinen, “Reflections on Historical Criticism,” cited above.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Dozeman, “Preface,” in *Methods for Exodus* (ed. T. Dozeman; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), xii.

criticism is not entirely, or even primarily, a shift in focus from the worlds behind and in the text to the identity of the reader in front of the text. Rather, the diverse scholars and textual studies that might be loosely gathered under the label “feminist” would be more accurately characterized by a continuing interest in the ancient historical context as well as close readings of biblical texts. Feminist scholarship does often arrive at different conclusions than what some would call “normal,” mainstream biblical scholarship — namely, the scholarship that has been produced predominately by Christian males of European descent over the past two centuries.<sup>13</sup> But this is because the particular concerns, commitments and identities of feminist interpreters led them to ask different questions of the ancient context and primary texts. There is no “feminist method” and there is no singular “feminist perspective” or identity, but merely an openness to attend to many different perspectives that have been ignored throughout the history of academic biblical scholarship.<sup>14</sup>

For example, the discipline of biblical criticism has overwhelmingly read the troubling story of the rape of Dinah in Genesis 34 from the perspective of the male in a position of power, and much of the interpretive activity concerning this chapter has focused on either the lost honor of Jacob and his sons or on apologizing for

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<sup>13</sup> See Sharon H. Rindge, “When Women Interpret the Bible,” pages 1-10 in *Women’s Bible Commentary, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition* (ed. C. Newsom, S. Rindge, J. Lapsley; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> See Carol A. Newsom, “Women as Biblical Interpreters before the Twentieth Century,” pages 11-26 in *Women’s Bible Commentary, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition* (ed. C. Newsom, S. Rindge, J. Lapsley; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012).

Shechem's behavior.<sup>15</sup> Feminist scholars who read this text in light of questions concerning the power dynamics associated with gender asked new questions: what happens to Dinah in this text? Why does the narrator not discuss what Dinah wants to happen?<sup>16</sup>

Of course, the predominately white, male biblical scholars who were focusing on men in biblical texts were indeed accurately reconstructing something quite real about the ancient context. Namely, all of the cultures of the ancient Near East enacted hierarchies of gender that regarded women, as well as people such as eunuchs that did not fit comfortably within the binary categories of male/female, as something less than a full, normal human, imaged as a male (cf. Deut 23:1). But at the same time, the ancient context also included women and eunuchs, who were in actuality full human beings with minds of their own that are not represented in the majority of ancient Near Eastern texts. It is also intriguing that many feminist scholars of the ancient Near East have discovered that, in practice, gender dynamics in the world behind the text are not always so simple as they might seem — women did indeed conduct business, own property, run households and even communities, including nations.<sup>17</sup> Every ancient context, in other words, included multiple perspectives, some of which are recovered when one attends to dynamics of gender

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<sup>15</sup> See Suzanne Scholz, "Through Whose Eyes? A 'Right' Reading of Genesis 34," pages 150-171 in *A Feminist Companion to Genesis* (ed. A. Brynner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, "Tipping the Balance: Sternberg's Reader and the Rape of Dinah," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110 (1991): 191-211.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Christine Roy Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance: A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 1-9 and 31:10-31* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001)

and differences of power while reading ancient texts.<sup>18</sup> The recent changes in biblical scholarship are, in many ways, perspectival shifts having to do with the identity of the reader, but they are at the exact same time rediscoveries of elements that are in fact in the text and have always been a part of the historical context for the text. And what is true of gender is also true of many other perspectives — including concern for the functions of ethnicity, class, ideology, empire, and disability, to name only a few, in the text and its ancient context. The “world in front of the text” always informs the way one attempts to reconstruct the world behind the text and understand the text itself — and this is, and has always been, true of all biblical interpreters.

### III. The World in the Text

James Muilenburg’s 1968 presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature catalyzed an interest in what the New Criticism had called “the text itself.”<sup>19</sup> Rather than reading and dissecting biblical texts primarily to find information about the ancient genres and historical milieus in which the texts were formed, Muilenburg asked biblical critics to pay close attention to how particular biblical texts functioned as works of literature. What structural patterns, literary devices, and stylistic idiosyncrasies might one find in each text if they are read as unique compositions? Reading the Psalms, for example, as poems rather than sources for historical knowledge would produce a new realm of scholarly

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<sup>18</sup> See Carol A. Newsom, “Woman and the Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom: A Study of Proverbs 1–9,” pages 43-57 in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (ed. Peggy L. Day; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).

<sup>19</sup> James A. Muilenburg, “Form Criticism and Beyond,” *JBL* 88 (1969): 1-18.

knowledge. In the wake of Muilenburg's "rhetorical" criticism, interest in narratology and structuralist criticism gained ground in biblical studies.<sup>20</sup> In religious communities, this "return to the text" allowed for a new way of understanding the connection between theology and the biblical text. Biblical scholars had long located primary theological claims in the world behind the text, which often flatly contradicted the claims made by the text itself. Muilenburg's valorization of the text as the proper object of critical biblical scholarship also gave pretext for confessional scholars to focus on the world within the text — sometimes to the exclusion of the historical context.

Postcritical interpreters bracketed the questions and concerns of historical-critical biblical scholarship, recovering pre-critical practices and forms of interpretation, such as typology and allegory, in the process.<sup>21</sup> Postliberal Christians such as Hans Frei, for example, understood the imaginative world produced by the text as the point of biblical literature, particularly when understood theologically as scripture.<sup>22</sup> Brevard Childs' canonical criticism proposed the "final form" of the Masoretic Text as a focal point of biblical criticism and theological reflection, but he also incorporated into his reflections earlier traditions that had been edited into the final form of the text.<sup>23</sup>

Alongside the sharp increase in scholarly interest in the "text itself," however,

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<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Phyllis Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method and the Book of Jonah* (GBS; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

<sup>21</sup> See Peter Ochs, *The Return to Scripture in Judaism and Christianity: Essays in Postcritical Scriptural Interpretation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993).

<sup>22</sup> Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974).

<sup>23</sup> See Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979).

there slowly grew a consensus about the importance of — and great challenge posed by — the Dead Sea scrolls. Among the thousands of scrolls dating from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE to the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE discovered at Qumran, a religious settlement near the Dead Sea, many hundreds contain some version of texts that would, in later centuries, be included in various biblical canons.<sup>24</sup> While many of these texts belong to the Masoretic Text, a version of the Hebrew Bible that Jewish and Catholic as well as Protestant Christians consider authoritative, many others belong to a number of different versions that disagree with the Masoretic Text. Until the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls, scholars had assumed that the varying versions of biblical books in the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, often called “the Septuagint,” were simply later redactions or even corrupted texts. But in the midst of the Dead Sea scrolls, scholars found Hebrew texts that agreed with the Septuagint against the Masoretic Version, as well as Hebrew texts that exhibited an early version of the Samaritan Pentateuch (a version of the Torah previously thought to have been quite late and peculiar to the Samaritan community itself).<sup>25</sup> There were also other editions of biblical texts that disagreed with all other known versions. For example, the book of Jeremiah exists in a Masoretic version that is one-fifth longer than the Septuagint counterpart, and Hebrew versions of that shorter version of Jeremiah have been recovered at Qumran. The Qumran community did not seem to sort these scrolls into categories that conformed to any later textual or canonical categories, suggesting that they all functioned in some way as scriptural. Moreover, there are

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<sup>24</sup> See the article on the Qumran community on the *Bible Odyssey* website:

<http://www.bibleodyssey.org/places/related-articles/dead-sea-scrolls-community.aspx>

<sup>25</sup> See the articles by Emanuel Tov and Robert T. Anderson in *The Samaritans* (ed. A. Crown; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989.).



many other books included in the Dead Sea Scrolls, such as *1 Enoch*, that seemed to function scripturally in Second Temple Judaism.<sup>26</sup> In other words, there was a pluriformity of the scriptures during the Second Temple period, and this did not apparently seem to bother or embarrass these sectarians who were zealous about their religion.<sup>27</sup>

The full impact of the Dead Sea scrolls has not been felt in the field of biblical scholarship, let alone outside it. We face many new questions about the “text itself” that are produced by recent inquiry into the world behind the text. What is an “original text” if there were already multiple versions of ancient texts that coexisted before there was a concept of a biblical canon? How could one decide which version is better than another if they are both ancient, both accepted as important by Second Temple Jewish communities, both witnesses to something real in the original context? What is an original context if there is no singular original text? And what consequences does this question pose for the perceived scholarly task of putting texts back into their ancient contexts?

These questions raise significant problems for any scholar who wishes to ignore questions of the world behind the text and simply focus on the text itself – because, simply put, they indicate that there is no “text itself.” There are multiple, irreducibly different versions of the texts as far back as we can discover. Particular communities of faith, of course, have their commitments to particular canons and particular versions of texts. Now we know, however, that at the dawn of both Christianity and

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<sup>26</sup> See the article on the “other” Bible at Qumran by Sidnie White Crawford: <http://www.bibleodyssey.org/places/related-articles/other-bible-from-qumran.aspx>

<sup>27</sup> See Eugene Ulrich, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Origins of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

Judaism there was not a pristine text, but rather a general acceptance of pluriformity. Canonical and versional preferences are later developments. Thus, the “text itself” is not simply one version of a text; rather, the text itself is the totality of the various forms that a text has taken. Analyzing the text itself would then be the process of studying the various forms that a text has taken — without building a hierarchy of those forms. Of course, one may decide to read the form of the text authorized by a particular community, such as the Masoretic Text for Protestant Christians. Yet this seems not an exercise in reading the text itself so much as it is a turn to the identity of the reader — which brings us to the third world of the text.

#### IV. The World in front of the Text

In 1967, Roland Barthes famously declared the “death of the author” and the simultaneous “birth of the reader.” Barthes was not suggesting that any particular author had died, but rather that scholars of literature had begun to doubt the authority of the author’s intentions in the determination of the true and unique meaning of that author’s work.<sup>28</sup> If authors could no longer tell all readers what to think of their works, then, Barthes reasoned, readers would find the freedom to posit their own ideas about what texts might mean — which would truly be reading, as opposed to reassembling an author’s intentions. Many literary scholars, including a small number of biblical scholars, began to think more about how individual readers and reading communities construct their own meanings with texts, regardless of the meaning those texts might have held in their original contexts.

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<sup>28</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” pages 142-148 in *Image-Music-Text* (trans. S. Heath; New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).

Some reader-oriented scholars have worked within the “reader response” paradigm, in which a critic either theorizes a potential reader or studies the responses of particular readers to a text.<sup>29</sup> Other scholars have focused on tracing the histories of interactions with a particular text across different communities and through time; this approach is usually called “reception history.”<sup>30</sup> Recently, Timothy Beal has developed a “cultural history” approach that focuses on the particular ways that biblical texts are (re)produced within a particular culture, instead of focusing on the text’s meanings or uses across cultures.<sup>31</sup> All of these approaches share an interest in the particular positions of readers and users of texts, and the ways in which differences in context create different potential meanings and effects for the same text over time.

A problematic assumption often undergirds all of these approaches, as well, however. They posit a divide between the original context of the original text — which supposedly holds an original meaning, or perhaps several original meanings — and later contexts, later readers, and later meanings. Reception history, in particular, seems to organize itself as a field of scholars interested in studying the text after it leaves its original context, which I have referred to as the world behind the text.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> For an example of a focus on the potential reader, see Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); for an example of a survey of actual responses, see Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967).

<sup>30</sup> See B. Breed, *Nomadic Text: A Theory of Biblical Reception* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

<sup>31</sup> See Timothy Beal, “Beyond Reception History: Toward the Cultural History of Scriptures,” *Biblical Interpretation* 19 (2011): 357-72.

<sup>32</sup> As James Barr claims, reception history is the “history of the effects of writings rather than [their] origins,” and thus it focuses on the period “after they were composed, after they were finalized.”

Yet there is a significant issue with this assumption: namely, how does one discern the end of the original context and the beginning of a later context? As discussed above, there is no particularly compelling justification for choosing one text of the many discovered at Qumran to serve as an “original text.” Moreover, we now know much — thanks to the work of historical-critical scholars — about the formation of the biblical text, and in particular its long history of authorship that stretches across centuries. Some biblical texts, such as the story of Noah in Genesis 6-9, draw on older traditions that stretch back to the origins of writing in Sumer, and also include several layers of ancient Jewish stories that show evidence of significant recomposition at several points in time.<sup>33</sup>

Who counts as the author of the Noah text? It is not clear that any of the several author-editors of the Noah story intended all of it in a univocal manner, as they all preserved and altered older materials for which they were not responsible. And where did this period of original composition end? At what point did editing suddenly become corruption? The Old Greek translator of the book of Job, for instance, edited down the text of the book to make it less tedious, especially in the Elihu section (chapters 32-37).<sup>34</sup> Why would this editorial action be considered secondary, but the addition of Daniel 7-12 to the pre-existent cycle of court stories

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James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), 447. See also John Barton, *Oracles of God* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2007), x.

<sup>33</sup> See Christopher B. Hays’ discussion of the re-use of Mesopotamian flood narratives in the biblical story of Noah: <http://www.floodofnoah.com/#!ane-gilgamesh-flood-comparativ/c1jce>

<sup>34</sup> For background, see my article on texts and translations on the *Bible Odyssey* website: <http://www.bibleodyssey.org/tools/bible-basics/what-are-the-earliest-versions-and-translations-of-the-bible.aspx>

in Daniel 2-6 is considered part of an original edition of Daniel?<sup>35</sup> And why would Daniel 7-12 be original, but Susanna and Bel and the Dragon be considered “later additions” that deserve to be relegated to the Apocrypha?<sup>36</sup>

## V. What Next?: A Proposal

Upon inspection, the divisions between original biblical texts/texts/meanings and later texts/texts/meanings are not objective, universal, or necessary. On the contrary, they are subjective, particular, and contingent. In other words, these boundaries function only within particular communities who have — after the fact — decided upon a particular boundary between “original” and “later” with respect to biblical texts. Where, then, does the world behind the text end? Are not modern critical editions and translations continuing to reproduce — and thus alter in some way — the text itself, thus extending the world behind the text to include even us here today (cf. Deut 5:3)? As some scholars have ventured: it is reception history all the way down.<sup>37</sup>

The three worlds of the text, then, are a helpful heuristic device for organizing our questions about the biblical text — but in the last century of biblical scholarship, it has become evident that there is no objective way to properly divide them. The three worlds all impinge on one another, and their borders, when analyzed, dissolve rather quickly. Perhaps this would be cause for concern among some biblical

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<sup>35</sup> For background, see Daniel Smith-Christopher’s discussion of the book of Daniel on the *Bible Odyssey* website: <http://www.bibleodyssey.org/people/related-articles/daniel-and-diaspora.aspx>

<sup>36</sup> For a discussion of the “later additions” to Daniel, see Craig Evans’ article on the *Bible Odyssey* website: <http://www.bibleodyssey.org/people/related-articles/daniel-in-later-literature.aspx>

<sup>37</sup> See John Lyons, “Hope for a Troubled Discipline? Contributions to New Testament Studies from Reception History,” *JSNT* 33 (2010): 207-20.

scholars. As far as I see it, however, this realization opens up spaces for new kinds of biblical scholarship that work with all three worlds of the text explicitly in view.

Such new spaces include room for new theologies of scripture, new conceptions of biblical theology, and an increased interest in discovering just how these borders came to be — and perhaps a concurrent interest in learning across those borders, from other communities, about their versions and meanings and contexts for sacred scripture.

Biblical scholars must take seriously that biblical texts overrun boundaries between the worlds behind the text, in the text and in front of the text, as a matter of course. And this is what we should expect, because we write things precisely in order to surmount these very boundaries. People write things down precisely because we want people to be able to read them in other contexts, after we write them, even when we are not present.<sup>38</sup> That is, we write texts because they do leave contexts. The skill of escaping contexts is not an anomaly or problem but is in fact the central attribute of texts- it is a feature, not a bug. Escaping contexts is simply what texts do, and if they did not do this very thing, then they would not be very useful at all.

Letters, rituals, poems and laws are written precisely to be taken and read out of their original contexts, and in other contexts, understood in light of the contexts of the readers as well as the writers. Letters are intended to be read in the absence of their author, rituals are intended to be performed by people long after the inscription of the ritual itself; laws are written to be applied to many different

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<sup>38</sup> See Jaques Derrida, *Limited Inc* (trans. S. Weber; Evanston: Northwestern University, 1988), 7-8.

and even as-yet unknown contexts. And biblical texts are especially important boundary-crossers, because they were formed by many hands over a long period of time, and they have no clear point of closure. They are, from the very point of origin, on the move. Biblical texts are not, and have never been, static objects. They are processes, and deserve to be studied as such.

If texts are supposed to function outside their context, perhaps we should then assume that the natural habitat of a text is, in fact, living in the wild, and as a result, we should spend time studying how biblical texts function in a variety of contexts. Perhaps we should no longer ask “What does this text mean,” or “How should we read this text” – but rather, “How has this text functioned? What can it do? Of what is it capable? What capacities does it have, and how might these capacities reveal themselves in a variety of contexts?”<sup>39</sup> Biblical scholars would not then ignore the ancient context: on the contrary, it would offer the starting point for any mapping of biblical text’s trajectories. Biblical scholars would not then ignore the text, either: it would, on the contrary, provide a more robust account of the identity and potential of each text. And readers would not provide the only horizon for scholarly pursuits, either. I am not proposing a reader-oriented approach to biblical scholarship. Since biblical scholarship is a textualist enterprise, the readers can provide a backdrop to see how the text functions in a variety of circumstances. Misreading and misuse constitute some of the potential uses of any text: the readers are not always right, if we define “right” as a reading that makes sense of the text. (Of course, there are many other potential uses for texts, but that is another

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<sup>39</sup> This line of questioning derives from Gilles Deleuze’s reading of Spinoza. See Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (trans. T Conley; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1993), 20-22.

conversation).

In short, I propose that biblical scholarship re-imagine itself not as an updated historical-critical enterprise, or as a society of close readers, or as a guild of cultural critics, but rather as a group of nomadologists. We study the text wherever it goes, from the ancient Near East to the present day, as it moves through a myriad of contexts, both at home everywhere and ultimately at home nowhere, with this question always in mind: *What can these texts do?*