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Rethinking the origins and textual history of ancient Jewish literature: A Review of Recent Works by Emanuel Tov, James Nati, and Nathan Mastnjak

Abstract:

This essay discusses the current state of research on the origins and textual history of early Jewish literature in light of three recently published books. On the one hand, the current practice of textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible, well presented in the standard handbook of the topic, is anchored in relatively traditional views on the origins of biblical books. On the other hand, two studies challenge current ideas about the ontology and materiality of ancient Jewish literature. An analysis of the *Serekh ha-Yahad* scrolls reveals that usual models of textual growth cannot account for the entirety of the intricate textual history of certain compositions. A material history perspective suggests that, before the Hellenistic period, literary works existed in the form of collections of scrolls, which has potentially profound implications for understanding how they came to become books. Whether rather conservative or innovative in outlook, these books show that in the field of textual criticism, theory and practice are inextricably linked.

Keywords: textual criticism; material history; ontology of literature; *Serekh ha-Yahad*; scrolls; early Jewish literature

What has happened to textual criticism? Some of us are old enough to remember a time when, for most students of the Hebrew Bible, the practice of text-critical analysis of a text basically meant deciphering the BHS apparatus and, in light of its suggestions, slightly emending (or not) the MT in a few places. Of course, many students and scholars knew better: they realized that the Septuagint and the Dead Sea scrolls gave us access to significantly different forms of the text – what came to be called “distinct literary editions.” Yet many of them still focused on the MT and treated textual criticism as a “lower criticism,” seen as a preliminary, technical tidying up of the text before moving to the lofty realm of “high criticism.”

Today, one could be forgiven for not recognizing the field. Discussions of textual multiplicity go well beyond reflections on the *transmission* of the text: they challenge long-held views about the *origins* of biblical works (as in one of the books under review here, written by Nathan Mastnjak¹), or they explore the “ontology of literature” (as in the title of another one,

¹ N. Mastnjak, *Before the Scrolls: A Material Approach to Israel's Prophetic Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).

authored by James Nati²). Some call into question fundamental notions, from that original text down to the very notion of “book.” The keywords are no longer haplography and homoioteleuton, but materiality and ontology.

This is not to say that these theoretical extensions of the realm of textual criticism into fundamental issues replace the concrete practice of textual criticism. On the contrary, they are based on the painstaking comparison of textual witnesses. Theory and practice are inextricably linked. This is already apparent in the fourth edition of Emanuel Tov’s handbook of textual criticism, which he has substantially revised in light of his changing views about the textual history of the Hebrew Bible.³

Taken together, these three books by Nati, Mastnjak, and Tov, exemplify well the current state of textual criticism. Mastnjak’s book, although considered here from that perspective, has a larger scope, but that is the point: today, textual criticism penetrates deep into the territory of compositional history. Tov’s fourth edition of *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, the standard presentation of the discipline, provides an appropriate starting point for a conversation.

In a remarkable move, Tov has made numerous changes out of a concern for pedagogical issues. First, whereas most handbooks on the subject, including the third edition of Tov’s, introduce the student to textual multiplicity by presenting variants between several textual witnesses (typically, the MT and the LXX or the DSS), Tov prefers to first explore internal masoretic differences. Apart from a very few examples in the introduction (pp. 6-8), the student will read more than seventy pages devoted to a presentation of the (proto-)MT and to internal variations apparent when one compares parallel texts in it (such as Ps 14 and 53), before being introduced to other textual witnesses in detail, and encountering variants they offer compared to the MT. Tov proceeds that way because the MT “is known best to all scholars, in Hebrew and/or in translation”, and in order to refute “the myth that one needs to turn to textual criticism only when MT differs from the other textual witnesses” (pp. xxii–xxiii). This is, of course, a fine point and a valid approach. That said, it will presumably work better with students who are predisposed to grant a privileged status to the MT, whereas the alternative approach, which starts with variants that are often much more striking than internal Masoretic differences, may remain the most expedient one for other students.

A second type of change made out of a concern for pedagogical issues is the addition of twenty-three annotated sample texts or critical editions, and of forty-one exercises. This gives the handbook a more practical outlook. Sections have also been omitted or abridged, including some pertaining to technical matters (such as “scribal markings”). Other authors might have been tempted to revise their handbook only expanding it, to make it more exhaustive or encyclopedic. Tov has made the laudable decision to remove some material (for which nerds will consult the third edition) to make his handbook even more of just that. This makes all the

² J. Nati, *Textual Criticism and the Ontology of Literature in Early Judaism: An Analysis of the Serekh ha-Yahad* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2022).

³ E. Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (rev. and expanded fourth edition; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2022). The author himself provides a helpful list of the main modifications compared to the third edition (p. xxii–xxv).

more sense given that the large encyclopedia *Textual History of the Bible*⁴ is now being published (with several volumes co-edited by Tov himself).

Tov's work reflects the latest views of a seasoned scholar of staggering erudition. These views inform and therefore impact the presentation of the textual witnesses and the reconstruction of the textual history that are offered. As a result, it is a "personal introduction," as the author unapologetically tells the reader from the outset, noting that this is an unavoidable consequence of the inherently subjective nature of textual criticism (xxi). Nevertheless, he sometimes mentions alternative views and critiques of his own views (e.g. 80 n. 90; 121 n. 22). There are instances where further efforts in that direction would have been beneficial, particularly when assertions are made that are far from reflecting a consensus among scholars. For instance, Tov argues that the absence of Sg 4:7–6:11 from 4QCant^a, and of 3:6–8 and 4:4–7 from 4QCant^b, results from the intentional shortening of the text. He is content to note that the alternative view, namely that these scrolls attest to an earlier compositional stage compared to the proto-MT, "though not impossible, is not accepted here", without providing any discussion of that view (156–157; see also 127–128).

Likewise, he asserts that 11QPs^a, notable for a sequence and composition of poems that differs markedly from those of the MT Psalter, "should be regarded as liturgical and not a regular Scripture scroll" (129). Similar scrolls with large-scale differences compared to the MT "should not be used in canonical and literary criticism of Hebrew Scripture." (130), as these differences are regarded as secondary changes made for liturgical purposes; only the small variants found in the scrolls "are taken into consideration in text-critical analysis." (130). Naturally, Tov is perfectly entitled to these views and to foreground them in his handbook. However, a student reading it might not be made sufficiently aware of the reasons why a substantial number of other scholars regard the Psalms scrolls as reflections of different literary editions of the book, while still others consider this textual fluidity as evidence that "Psalms" was not conceptualized as a "book" in the Second Temple period.⁵

The book also presents new views that have profound implications for the reconstruction of the textual history of the Hebrew Bible. For instance, Tov has come to think that the ancient witnesses of the Pentateuch can be divided into two "text blocks" (379–381). The "MT group", made up of the proto-MT as found in some DSS and in some teffilin, and reflected in some ancient versions and in quotations in rabbinic literature, offers a "conservative" text, deemed closer to the earliest text of the Torah than the second block, which is made up of all the other witnesses and represents a "popular" text, marked, in the LXX and the SP, by harmonizations.

Other views are virtually unchanged from previous editions, and it is this continuous adherence to them that may strike some scholars. At first, Tov finds it "almost impossible" to decide between the model of multiple parallel texts defended by Paul Kahle, and the traditional model, presented in previous editions as the "original text" model (345). But he still clearly prefers the latter, except that he now intentionally replaces, wherever possible, the phrase

⁴ A. Lange et al. (eds), *Textual History of the Bible*, 3 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2016–2023).

⁵ E. Mroczek, *The Literary Imagination in Jewish Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

“original text” with “early text” (344–48, see 336).⁶ It seems, however, that he is thinking of the same reality as beforehand: a “literary crystallization” at the end of the compositional process and the beginning of the transmission process (349). Furthermore, Tov now posits that the goal of textual criticism should be to come closer to the “earliest text,” not to approximate the form that the text took in the fourth or third century BCE (396–98). As he notes, “this view reflects a conservative return to the classical views, though with new arguments” (398).

What is surprising is that this view is defended very briefly. Tov argues that reaching the “earliest text” is what scholars do in practice; they seek the “contextually best reading”, which means the best candidate for the “original wording” used by an “author” or an “editor” (398). This argument has merit; however, given the complexity and thickness of the compositional history, as well as the fogginess surrounding the notion of “author”, a more comprehensive discussion would have been appropriate. Tov’s view depends on his understanding of the emergence of an “early text”. Tov further notes that if previous scholarship aimed at reconstructing the form that the text took in the fourth or third century BCE, it was because of the dating of the earliest Dead Sea scrolls. But he argues that “the evidence from the Dead Sea scrolls is fragmentary so that their usefulness is limited” (398), and that many of their readings have been regarded as secondary (398 n. 31). Some may disagree here with Tov’s downplaying of the textual value of the scrolls.

Finally, underlying the whole discussion lies Tov’s subscription to the traditional notion that text critics should prioritize the reconstruction of the earliest (attainable) text, which translates into a specific focus on textual decisions in favor of preferable readings. Yet other goals are also commendable, such as the in-depth study of secondary readings as reflections of ideological and theological concerns in antiquity. A broader view of textual criticism would consider its overarching objective to be the reconstruction of the entire “life of the text.”⁷

What I have just noted about “preferable” readings must be qualified. One of the novelties of this edition is the recognition of the existence of many “nongenetic variants,” thus called in contrast to genetic variants, which “developed in a linear way from one another” (393). They include synonymous readings, literary variants, and “variants for which the genetic relation *cannot be determined*” (395, emphasis in original). These variants “should not be evaluated textually” (395). This significant and beneficial shift has far-reaching implications for the practice of textual criticism.

Ultimately, although there exist valuable introductory books whose size may be more accessible or practical for some teaching contexts, Tov’s book is likely to remain the Rolls-Royce of handbooks on textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible for the foreseeable future. The wealth of information it contains renders it an invaluable reference book to which students and scholars alike will often return. On the other hand, the admirable efforts made to render it more student-friendly draw it more into the direction of a handbook.

⁶ My own view on the subject can be found in M. Richelle, “Reflections on the Model of Early Parallel Texts,” in *Urtext, Archetype, Fluidity or Textual Convergence*, eds. J.-S. Rey, S. Schorch, and S. Robert (Leuven: Peeters, forthcoming).

⁷ R. Troxel, “Writing Commentary on the Life of a Text,” *VT* 67 (2017): 105–28.

Both a reference work and a handbook, Tov's book nevertheless lacks substantial engagement with recent theoretical challenges to traditional models by Hindy Najman, Eva Mroczek, Brennan Breed, and others. That is exactly what James Nati provides in the sophisticated book based on his doctoral dissertation, written under the supervision of John Collins and Hindy Najman: *Textual Criticism and the Ontology of Literature in Early Judaism: An Analysis of the Serekh ha-Yahad*.

As the subtitle indicates, the bulk of the work is an analysis of the scrolls containing forms of the *Serekh* (or *Community Rule*). Nati's objective is not to examine any single minor variant in detail. Rather, it is to provide a picture of the pluriformity of the *Serekh* in light of small-scale and large-scale differences between its witnesses. While exploring each literary unit, Nati maintains exactly the right focal distance from the intricate textual realities of the scrolls, to illustrate the textual fluidity of that work eloquently without losing the reader. He succeeds in demonstrating that traditional models of redaction and transmission in biblical studies cannot adequately account for all the pluriformity of the *Serekh*.

Based on these observations, Nati puts forward a new scenario for the development of the *Serekh*, by combining the results of textual criticism with insights of literary criticism. Overall, the argumentation proves impressive and compelling, although it does contain some speculative elements, which are unavoidable and duly acknowledged when they occur. Crucially, whereas scholars have often been tempted to regard 1QS as the *telos* of the development, Nati shows that some trajectories in the textual history did *not* culminate in 1QS (163). He also argues that 1QS and 4QSD^d reflect different conceptions of the foundations on which the rules are grounded ("the wisdom of the created world" as reflecting "God's will and divine truth", and the Torah, respectively; 214). This further proves that 1QS can hardly be regarded as the fullest form of the *Serekh*: both scrolls evince distinct theologies and that of 1QS does not subsume that of 4QSD^d.

This detailed analysis is bracketed with theoretical considerations. Chapter 1 reviews current debates surrounding issues such as textual pluriformity, the notion of original text, and the ontology of biblical literature (what is a biblical book?). This sets the ensuing discussion about the *Serekh* against the background of fundamental questions to which Nati returns afterwards, in chapter 5. The *Serekh* proves an exceptionally interesting case to explore such questions afresh. It might be objected that the *Serekh* is not a biblical book. However, the scribal activity underpinning its development is similar to that behind biblical books, and, as is well-known, the notion of "biblical" is anachronistic for the time of the Dead Sea scrolls⁸ (we use it as a conventional expedient).

Nati observes that the multifold development of the *Serekh* cannot be adequately described by traditional models of literary growth, neither the rolling corpus model nor that of successive literary editions. He is especially wary of a teleological or retrospective approach whereby earlier forms of the text are tacitly deemed provisional. Instead, he invites us to think *with* ancient scribes, for whom each stage or form of the text may have been endowed with some

⁸ On the persistent issues with this and other anachronistic terms, see M. Zahn, *Genres of Rewriting in Second Temple Judaism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 34–37. See also E. Mroczek, "The Hegemony of the Biblical in the Study of Second Temple Literature," *JSJ* 6 (2015): 2–35.

authority. A survey of philosophical perspectives on literature leads him to an important conclusion: “the question of what a biblical book *is* is answerable only if the question is re-directed toward what a biblical book *was* in the context of its composition” (235). In his view, the claims of authority underlying 1QS and 4QS^d (in relation to divine wisdom grounded in the creational order, or to the Torah) make them “different compositions in the minds of the scribes who composed them” (220).

Nati’s approach has much to commend it and it resonates well with the conception of textual criticism as a reconstruction of the “life of the text.” I wonder if a possible downside could not be that the ontology of literary composition is determined here by the *intention* of scribes. Could this lead to conundrums similar to those created by the notion of intentionality in the case of authors? The situation of 1QS and 4QS^d is (thanks to Nati) relatively clear, but what about other compositions or scrolls stemming from an underlying project that eludes us? In other words, I wonder if Nati’s suggestion might not be concretely applicable to only a part of the “life of the text.” This points to a general issue: to what extent should our etic perspectives be aligned with, or inspired from, the emic perspectives that we discern in ancient literature?

At any rate, Nati’s impressive work returns full circle to a final reflection on the goal(s) of textual criticism and critical editions. This discussion enters into dialogue with two opposite approaches to textual criticism: the desire to reconstruct the earliest attainable text (as in the HBCE project according to Ron Hendel⁹), and that of taking into account the full extent of textual variance (well advocated by Brennan Breed¹⁰). He rightly finds virtues in Troxel’s conception of the “life of the text,”¹¹ and in Najman’s commendable call for an integration of retrospective and prospective approaches¹² (respectively directed towards the earliest text and towards its development over time). Scholarly concerns for editing the text are qualified by a lucid take on philological subjectivity, inspired by Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht.¹³

Whether or not one agrees with each detail of Nati’s reconstruction of the *Serekh*’s development, his masterful control of the empirical data, combined with his sophisticated, thoughtful, lucid, and nuanced discussion of theoretical issues, is impressive. Where some scholars limit themselves to the technical analysis of variants, while others focus on theoretical considerations, Nati does both. His monograph is proof that we *do not have to choose* between theoretical and practical approaches to textual criticism, and that when we do both, both aspects of our work are enhanced.

In *Before the Scrolls: A Material Approach to Israel’s Prophetic Literature*, Nathan Mastnjak offers another welcome challenge to our understanding of early Jewish literature. He calls for a major rethinking of the way we understand the origins of prophetic books. He argues, first, that Israelite and Judean scribes generally wrote literary texts on papyrus scrolls until the

⁹ R. Hendel, *Steps towards a New Edition of the Hebrew Bible* (Atlanta: SBL, 2016).

¹⁰ B. Breed, *The Nomadic Text: A Theory of Biblical Reception History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

¹¹ Troxel, “Writing Commentary.”

¹² H. Najman, “Ethical Reading: The Transformation of the Text and the Self,” *JTS* 68 (2017): 507–29, esp. 517–18.

¹³ H.-U. Gumbrecht, *The Powers of Philology: Dynamics of Textual Scholarship* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

Ptolemaic period, at which time the use of processed animal skins become much more widespread in Judah. Second, he notes that papyrus scrolls had an average length of 3–4 m, which could not have accommodated the entire text of long books like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, or the Twelve. According to Mastnjak, it is the use of animal skins that made it possible to produce scrolls long enough to carry such lengthy works. These observations, which take up and revise observations made by Menahem Haran,¹⁴ lead to the core thesis of the book: “the most likely form for the Judean prophetic ‘book’ in the Persian period was a collection of multiple scrolls of papyrus. Only with the Hellenistic shift to processed animal skins were these books likely rendered on single book-scrolls” (34).

The author then proceeds to show that the Hebrew word *sefer* could, in some cases, refer to multi-scroll books. The bulk of the monograph, however, is devoted to prove that phenomena pertaining to literary criticism and textual criticism in the prophetic books are best explained in the framework of the collection model. Consider the case of Jeremiah: the most favored model today posits that a shorter edition (close to the *Vorlage* of the LXX) was reworked into a longer edition (preserved in the MT) by way of expansions and transpositions (notably, the oracles against the nations were moved from the center to the end of the book). But if “Jeremiah” existed, for centuries, as a collection of scrolls (and possibly sheets of papyrus) transmitted together, then a new model for the emergence of the two editions of the book is possible: the main differences between them, especially in the sequence of passages and sections, result from two independent arrangements of multiple textual objects. Similar considerations apply to the diverging sequences in Ezekiel 37–39 (the important papyrus p967 evinces the sequence 38–39–37). As for Isaiah, Mastnjak argues that chapters 40 and following were not written as a sequel to an early form of First Isaiah; they were separate works joined together in the Hellenistic period. Finally, the twelve minor Prophets, although already redacted in relation to each other, were gathered on single scrolls and ordered differently in the MT and in the LXX’s *Vorlage*.

The importance of Mastnjak’s work for our understanding of the origins of biblical books is readily apparent. He is not the first scholar to suggest that (at least some) biblical books were first preserved as multi-scroll works, but he is the first to defend this thesis in such detail, especially from the perspective of material history, and to explore the implications of this hypothesis for a large corpus. As he notes, most models of compositional criticism rest on the assumption that books were written on single scrolls, already in the Persian period (or even earlier). Abandoning this assumption undermines linear models that assume a genealogical relationship between successive literary editions, and it opens up the possibility of new scenarios based on the collection model.

In assessing Mastnjak’s contribution, one must distinguish between the merits of his arguments about the materiality of scrolls on the one hand, and those of his analysis of prophetic books on the other. Although the overall thesis about multi-scroll books in the pre-Hellenistic period is likely, the arguments are not ironclad. Mastnjak notes that the average length of a papyrus scroll in the Hellenistic and Roman periods was 3.4 m (18), but he does not provide

¹⁴ E.g. M. Haran, “Book-Scrolls at the Beginning of the Second Temple Period: The Transition from Papyrus to Skins,” *HUCA* 54 (1983): 111–22.

the equivalent figure for leather scrolls. He asserts, but does not prove, that the carrying capacity of the latter was significantly higher than that of the former.¹⁵ Insofar as his argument rests on an *average* figure of 3.4 m regarded as the “*preferred* format” for papyrus scrolls (19, emphasis added), it remains suggestive rather than decisive. In fact, he does not exclude the possibility that “longer-than-average papyrus scrolls were occasionally used... prior to the Hellenistic period” (33). Mastnjak admits that papyrus scrolls could extend up to 15 m in Egypt in the Persian period, but insists that this figure corresponds to exceptional cases (18). The reader is left wondering about intermediate figures, since Mastnjak does not say whether a papyrus scroll of, say, 7 or 10 m would then have been extravagant.¹⁶

Nevertheless, some recent studies lend support to Mastnjak’s main thesis from a different angle, by showing that text density significantly increases in the late fourth century BCE. Based on empirical data, Asaf Gayer and David Carr conclude that “a given area of surface on a later Second Temple period scroll could contain three to four times as much text as scrolls written in Persian or earlier periods.”¹⁷ Accordingly, it appears, with the benefit of hindsight, that previous studies considerably overestimated the carrying capacity of pre-Hellenistic scrolls when they made extrapolations on the basis of the length of Dead Sea scrolls. To take an illustration, Gayer and Carr reckon that in the Persian period, Genesis would have required a scroll of no less than 31 m.¹⁸ If we follow Gayer and Carr, Mastnjak was right about the limited carrying capacity of pre-Hellenistic scrolls, even more right than he could know, albeit for a different reason (increased text density) than the one he adduced (supposed longer length of leather scrolls).

As for the second facet of Mastnjak’s monograph, namely his analysis of prophetic books, this review cannot begin to do justice to a book that abounds in fresh insights and arguments about the compositional and textual history of four major prophetic works. Based on the various objections that spring to mind when reading it, my impression is that we are closer to the beginning of the conversation than to its end. The arguments inevitably rest on specific, still-debated hypotheses. For instance, Mastnjak opts in favor of a scenario where Second Isaiah was not written as a sequel to First Isaiah. He regards many of the catchwords in the Book of the Twelve as already present in the individual scrolls, rather than created when the books were gathered into a single scroll (97). Both of these are perfectly arguable, but much debated, views. In addition, he rejects a bit too forcefully, in my opinion, earlier explanations by Johan Lust¹⁹

¹⁵ He does mention a reduction of the thinness of processed animal skin as a technological innovation, but situates it in the third century CE (41).

¹⁶ David Carr writes that “the substantial attestation of very long literary papyri in the Greek and Demotic corpora show the problems with Haran’s idea that leather scrolls were needed for longer literary documents” (“Background and Aims of a Scrolls Approach to the Formation of the Hebrew Bible,” *AABNER* 3.2 [2023]: 9–79, here 63–64). See also E. Tov, *Scribal Practices and Approaches Reflected in the Texts Found in the Judean Desert* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 30 n. 58).

¹⁷ A. Gayer and D. M. Carr, “Text Density, Scroll Carrying Capacity and Pre-Biblical Sources: How a Hellenistic Period Shift in Text Density is Relevant to Hypotheses about the Formation of the (Hebrew) Bible,” *ZAW* 136 (2024): 51. See already D. Longacre, “Comparative Hellenistic and Roman Manuscript Studies (CHRoMS): Script Interactions and Hebrew/Aramaic Writing Culture,” *COMSt Bulletin* 7 (2021): 7–50.

¹⁸ Gayer and Carr, *Text Density*, 53.

¹⁹ J. Lust, “Ezekiel 36–40 in the Oldest Greek Manuscript,” *CBQ* 43 (1981): 517–33.

and Ashley Crane²⁰ of the diverging sequences of Ezek 37–39 (195–198).²¹ Nevertheless, however much one might question Mastnjak’s occasional reliance on debated views (which is unavoidable), one cannot ignore the formidable challenge that he throws down in conceptualizing the development of prophetic books. He succeeds in troubling the current models and in putting forward an alternative approach to the emergence of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve (no small feat). Future studies cannot afford to ignore the collection model.

A key question for this model is *whether a multi-scroll book could be conceptualized by scribes as internally ordered as a unified literary work, in spite of not being materially ordered in a single scroll*. Were there other ways of creating an order apart from copying the entire text on a single manuscript? Mastnjak does not offer a discussion about the material devices that may have been at the disposal of scribes to that effect. In the classical world, the scrolls (*volumina* in Latin) composing a multi-scroll book like the Iliad could be put away together on a shelf, in a niche, or kept together in a book-chest (*kibotos* or *kibotion* in Greek, *scrinium* or *capsa* in Latin), whether for transportation or for storage in a library.²² To materialize a sequence of scrolls, name tags (*sillyboi* or *indices*) could be attached to scrolls²³ or written on the verso of the scroll.²⁴ The former devices are not attested on the Dead Sea scrolls, but one finds a few instances of the latter: a title written on the back of the first or second sheet, “in such a way that the name would be visible when the scroll was stored on a shelf”.²⁵ By the time of the Dead Sea scrolls, however, the carrying capacity of scrolls had increased so much that many multi-scroll books had likely been copied on single scrolls. Name tags for partial compositions, if they had been used previously, were not necessary anymore, or much less frequently. Unfortunately, we simply do not know whether such devices were used for pre-Hellenistic scrolls, or whether titles of partial works were written on the back of the scroll.

Scribes in the classical world also often used a device internal to the text: they wrote a summary of the preceding scroll at the beginning of the next one, as a seam.²⁶ A comparable technique was used to connect Chronicles (see 2 Chr 36: 22–23) and Ezra-Nehemiah (see Esd 1:1–4), except that the summarized version (not of the entire story, but of Cyrus’ edict) appears at the end of the first work meant to be read.

In sum, we should not be too quick to dismiss the possibility that scribes used practical devices to determine a sequential reading of a set of scrolls. Yet it is not clear that the ability of scribes to conceive of a set of scrolls as ordered was necessarily tied to their material

²⁰ A. Crane, *Israel’s Restoration: A Textual–Comparative Exploration of Ezekiel 36–39* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

²¹ Note also that Mastnjak (96 n. 109) refers to an article by J. Dines (“Verbal and Thematic Links between the Books of the Twelve in Greek and their Relevance to the Differing Manuscript Sequences,” in *Perspectives on the Formation of the Book of the Twelve*, ed. R. Albertz et al. [Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012], 355–70), but does not comment on the fact that this article argues that the *Vorlage* of the LXX version of the Twelve was “a scroll with XII in Masoretic order” (363). If this conclusion is right, that would directly undermine his thesis.

²² M. Bellier-Chaussonnier, “Des représentations de bibliothèques en Grèce Classique,” *Revue des Études Anciennes* 104 (2002): 329–47; F. Ronconi, *Aux racines du livre: Métamorphoses d’un objet de l’Antiquité au Moyen Âge* (Paris: Edition de l’EHESS, 2021), 79–80.

²³ Ronconi, *Aux racines du livre*, 79.

²⁴ Tov, *Scribal Practices*, 113.

²⁵ Tov, *Scribal Practices*, 111–15, quotation on 114.

²⁶ Roncini, *Aux racines du livre*, 80.

arrangement in a specific order. Perhaps pre-Hellenistic scribes always thought of the set of scrolls now collected together as “the book of Jeremiah” as a library or anthology, with no particular concern for a sequence of reading, until they could fix an order thanks to name tags or dense writing on single scrolls. Yet it is also conceivable that they ascribed a particular order to these scrolls beforehand, in their minds. It would be presumptuous of us to argue that they were not capable of that.

In fact, large-scale redactional activity must have happened over multiple scrolls, according to most compositional models of the Pentateuch/Hexateuch/Enneateuch. It could be objected that these essentially narrative compositions followed a chronological order that sufficed to determine a sequence, but the point is that scribes were able to cognitively master and edit a very large amount of text. Moreover, large-scale redactional activity is apparent across lengthy prophetic books. Mastnjak is perfectly conscious of that, and he notes that in pre-Hellenistic times, “both the Jeremiah collection and the Twelve represent collections of texts that were distributed over multiple textual objects and yet thought of and redacted as a unity” (87). He insists on that point in order to show that traces of pre-Hellenistic redactional activity over various sections of Jeremiah or the Twelve do not imply that they were already written on a single scroll – a possible objection to his theory (82–87). He also reckons with partially ordered collections of scrolls (107).

However, this also creates an inherent tension in his collection model, insofar as it was the impossibility of collecting all the Jeremiah material (for instance) on a single scroll before the Hellenistic period, and therefore order it in the process, that prompted Mastnjak’s reassessment of compositional models in the first place. His approach is lucid and appropriately flexible, but, as with the determination of the maximal length of scrolls before the Hellenistic period, there is much room for intermediate scenarios, including some where large-scale redactional activity might still be ascribed to the multi-scroll period, and that activity may well have included some degree of ordering.

Like all important essays, Mastnjak’s is so provocative as to invite the reader to continue the conversation. Obviously, the implications of his fundamental observations concerning the practical limitations of pre-Hellenistic scrolls do not concern prophetic books only. The reader cannot refrain from wondering about other literary genres (Mastnjak very briefly touches upon that; 103–105). How would the recent realization about the limitations of pre-Hellenistic scrolls impact discussions of the compositional history of the books of the Pentateuch/Hexateuch/Enneateuch, or of the Deuteronomistic History? Do we find literary or textual phenomena in the rest of the Hebrew Bible that would be traces of the preexistence of the material on multiple scrolls? It is not the least merit of Mastnjak’s work to prompt such questions.²⁷

In the end, the three books reviewed here illustrate the entanglement of theory and practice in textual criticism. It is concrete observations of textual criticism that inform and support the theoretical views of Nati and Mastnjak. Conversely, Tov’s theoretical views have an impact on the way he instructs students in the practice of textual criticism. Theory and practice feed each

²⁷ This task has already been started by Carr in several articles, including “Background and Aims”; see also Gayer and Carr, “Text Density,” 51–57.

other, and that why the old “lower criticism,” once regarded as a boring, technical endeavor, is back with a vengeance and shakes the very foundations of the “higher criticism.” Whatever this reviewer’s possible disagreements with some of their views, Tov’s willingness to share his considerable (and updated) knowledge with students and scholars, Nati’s thought-provoking discussion on the ontology of literature, and Mastnjak’s bold challenge to traditional models of the origins of prophetic books, should fill us with gratitude.