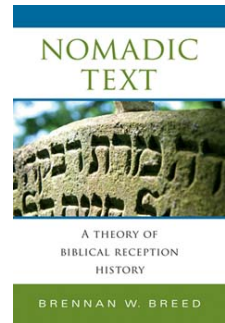


Nomadic Text: A Theory of Biblical Reception History, by Brennan W. Breed

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Brennan Breed's *Nomadic Text* begins with what at first blush seems to be a simple question: where is the line of demarcation between the composition and reception of a text to be located? He notes that the consensus amongst reception historians is to divide the textual changes happening through the process of composition of the text (analysed by source and redaction criticism) from those changes which derive from the reception of the text (e.g., scribal modifications, translations, and the acceptance of different textual archetypes). For Breed, traditional "biblical studies... presupposes a clear distinction between the text's original meaning in its original context and its later meanings in later contexts" (3). Breed suggests that the "original text" and "original context" of the bible are both modern scholarly constructions, neither of which actually existed. In his words, "the biblical literature is itself a changing process. It was built up over a lengthy span of time and continued to develop and transform until well after any supposedly 'original' period. In the form of translations, critical editions, and innovative readings, it continues to change still" (12).



The argument progresses in two distinct movements. First, a theoretical section adroitly analyzes concepts of “original text,” “original context,” and “authorial intention” in light of current theories of biblical composition. This section brings the consensus position dividing a text from its reception into question. Breed points out several significant weaknesses in that consensus, and postulates a resulting theoretically appropriate way forward which requires that the “biblical text” be understood as a process, not an event; a topological identity, not a definitive shape; and as containing several virtual meanings at the same time, one (or more) of which are actualized in each context of specific reading. Second, Breed exemplifies his theory of the nomadic nature of the biblical text through a discussion of Job 19:25–27 (“For I know that my redeemer lives...”).

The theoretical section of *Nomadic Text* takes place in the first five chapters of the book. Chapter 1 analyzes the idea of “original text,” specifically considering the time at which various textual critics explain that a text achieves its original formation. The consensus, as Breed sees it, is that “at one point in time, there was a text—either an original text, an autograph, a pristine copy, an archetype, a text that was considered authoritative, a final form of the text or merely a relatively more original version—that stood at the end of a process of composition and simultaneously at the beginning of a process of copying” (50). Previous to this point in time, changes to the text are a part of the process of its composition, but after this point, any alterations become corruptions. Breed argues that giving preference to one form of the text as “original” is a modern distinction, which does not adequately reflect the pluriformity inherent to the manuscript tradition. So in chapter 2, Breed lays out an alternative approach to textual criticism, which starts from the presupposition that there was never an “original text” of the Bible, but only particular forms of the text, which were read in particular circumstances. He argues for what he terms “new textual criticism,” concerned not with getting back to the original text, but with analyzing and describing “the various representations of the changing biblical text” (55).

Chapter 3 is an analysis of the notion of “original context” and “authorial intent.” Breed’s basic question is this: since “modern criticism has shown decisively that biblical texts are composed of many sources, traditions, and redactions” (75), which author or context can defensibly be called original? As the chapter unfolds, Breed considers the contexts of semantics, genre, and history and argues that none provide any justification for the separation of “original” from “reception.” Therefore, Breed presents an alternative under-

standing of context in chapter 4. His argument is that the very act of writing text creates a durable product intended to be meaningful in a different context from its composition. Further, he suggests that any description of historical or original context is a necessarily incomplete creation of modern scholars. Contexts, according to Breed, “must be determined by the individuals and groups living within them just as they must be (re)determined by the scholars who study them” (100). This chapter also reconsiders the idea of authorial intention. His argument is that “authors are not in full control of what they write” (108), and so notions of “authorial intent” fail.

In the final theoretical section, in chapter 5, Breed lays out his own proposal for how biblical scholars ought to understand the biblical text in all its forms. Following Gilles Deleuze, who described a text as containing both virtual and actual readings, Breed suggests that

a text can also be thought of as a virtual multiplicity. The differential relations between lexemes, sentences, and paragraphs, for example, creates a potential field of reading that can be actualized in divergent ways. These differential relations within the text must be set in play with the system of culture within which one reads the text, including the semantic, generic, and historical sets of relations that determine the context of reading. Together, these differential relations comprise the powers of a text. (122)

Breed anticipates the problem of losing the text itself and, borrowing a term from mathematics, proposes that we think of the identity of the individual biblical texts topologically (127). “Instead of looking for a close resemblance of form, topology pays attention to the general coherence of the structure” (130). A bit later, Breed applies topology to biblical studies saying, “We can use topological thinking to break away from Platonic theories of reading and translating. Instead of asking whether a commentator has provided the correct meaning of the text or whether a translator has given the right translation, one could ask a more topological question, namely, how one might bend, stretch, and fold this text in order to read it differently without destroying its form” (130). Recalling Breed’s criticism of textual criticism from earlier in the book, he is arguing that each manuscript and each reading of the biblical text is a different mutation of the biblical text, but so long as it stretches the text and does not break it, it still is obviously Bible. And so,

after much theoretical analysis, Breed proposes his theory of nomadic text. As he contextualizes it, the reception historian ought to “demonstrate the diversity of capacities, organize them according to the immanent potentialities actualized by various individuals and communities over time, and rewrite our understanding of the biblical text” (141).

In chapters 6 and 7, Breed puts his theory of the nomadic text into practice—explaining and organizing the various capacities of Job 19:25–27. He spends some time discussing the composition of the book of Job, and its literary contexts, after which he breaks the text in to “semantic nodes” of justice, survival, and presence. These nodes are essentially textual cues which lead to divergent understandings of the meaning of the text itself.

At least two criticisms of this practical section are necessary. First, Breed spends some time discussing the way in which modern critical editions are a part of the process of the reception of the biblical text early in his work. There, he seems to be arguing that one should consider the meaning of individual manuscripts rather than an arbitrary “original” produced by modern scholars. In light of that criticism, it is surprising that Breed bases his reading of the text from Job on critical editions. Second, whereas Breed has previously argued that text in translation functioned as authoritative for many communities, his lengthy discussion of the translational changes made by the “translator of OG Job” seems peculiar. The same method is undertaken when he discusses the Peshitta, which is unfortunately presented in Latin transliteration. In both of these cases, the discussion of the Vorlage seems out of step with his earlier trenchant criticism of the viability of the traditional ideas of textual criticism. In this section, Breed is speaking about the MT, the Peshitta, and the OG almost as authoritative “original texts,” in ways that very much mirror the views he criticized earlier in his book.

In final analysis, I find this book to be intensely provocative. The arguments are bold, well-researched, and compelling. Of particular interest is Breed’s observation that “biblical texts remain open to change even now” (22), which underpins his categorization of modern critical editions and translations as a part of the reception history of the biblical text. It is obvious that modern critical editions did not exist in antiquity, but Breed is right to observe that this conditions the way in which the Bible is read and becomes meaningful just as much as any ancient community’s decision to read a particular text does. The way that the modern expression of the “original text” has changed or developed specifically in the aftermath of the discovery of the Qumran manuscript horde is worth study in its own right. Also, Breed’s

proposal that scribal and translational changes are simply changes and not corruptions has significant impact. The fact is that many versions of the biblical text existed simultaneously, and were used meaningfully by different communities. Releasing these individual texts from the requirements of conforming to or diverging from an original, however it is conceived, enables these individual manuscripts to be studied differently, not in terms of their text type, or translational fidelity, but in terms of the way they uniquely communicate meaning. The practical section (chapters 6 and 7), describing the various meanings of Job 19:25–27, seems slightly less useful than the theoretical section, in part because, unless I have very much misunderstood Breed's proposal for understanding the biblical text as nomadic, it does not appear that Breed follows his own method absolutely. He certainly focuses on the capabilities of the text, but in so doing, seems to return to evaluative language in explaining some of the differences existing between different translations of the text.

The simple question with which this project began—where is the point of division between text and reception?—has triggered a nearly wholesale revision of the task of biblical scholars. In Breed's own words,

the time is ripe to reconceive the task of the biblical scholar. Though we should not ignore the putatively original contexts or the earliest recoverable forms of the text—surely they are just as important as any other contexts or forms—we must realize that any one determination of a text, context, or meaning is a limited and impoverished viewpoint on the given objectile. A single determination of a text reveals merely a fraction of that text's contour. (206)

His conclusion is that the dividing line between text and reception “runs through the middle of every text” (206), and so the task before us becomes one of describing the various ways in which the biblical text has been determined.

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