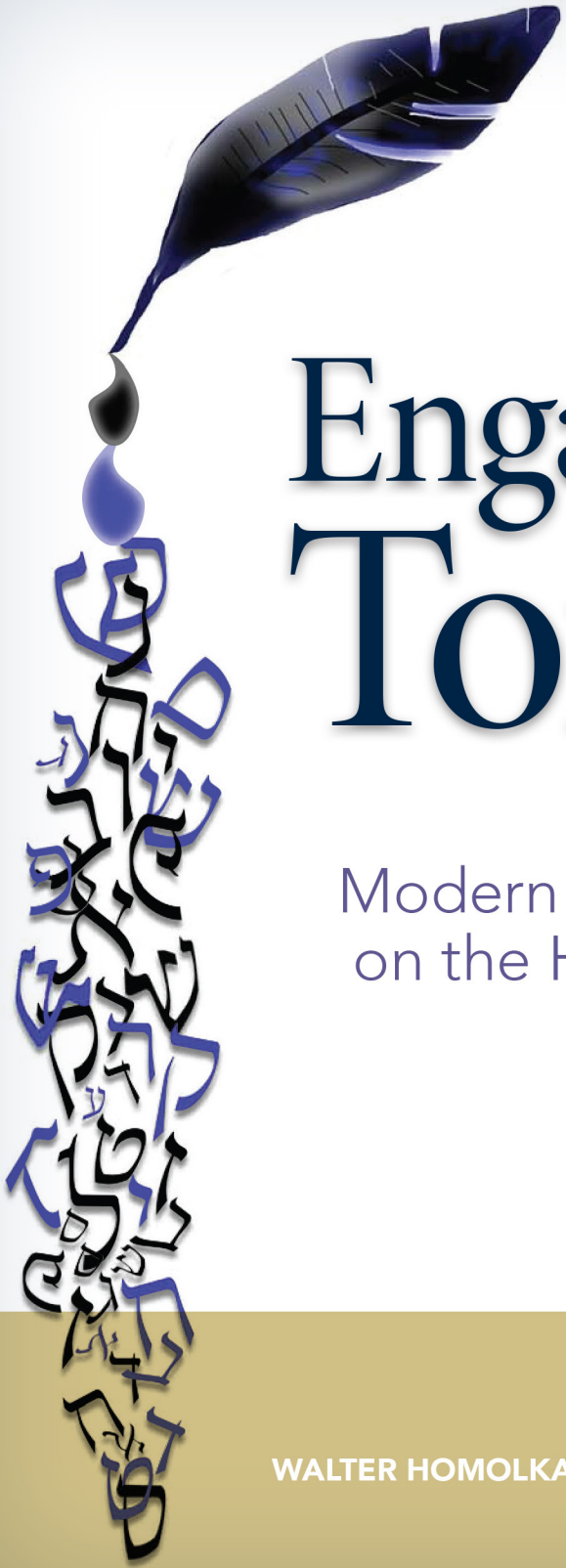


Engaging Torah

Modern Perspectives on the Hebrew Bible

EDITED BY
WALTER HOMOLKA AND **AARON PANKEN**

ENGAGING TORAH:
MODERN PERSPECTIVES ON THE HEBREW BIBLE

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Edited by
Walter Homolka
and
Aaron Panken

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This book is dedicated to Rüdiger Liwak,
in gratitude for his immense achievement as
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(2013–2018)

Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Preface xi
Aaron Panken
Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion

An Introduction to *Engaging Torah* 1
Walter Homolka
Abraham Geiger College at the University of Potsdam

The Torah in Jewish Life from the Nineteenth Century until Today 11
Tamara Cohn Eskenazi
Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion

Introduction to Genesis 19
Ziony Zevit
Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies of American Jewish University

Introduction to Exodus 33
David H. Aaron
Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion

Introduction to Leviticus 43
Alan Cooper
Jewish Theological Seminary

Introduction to Numbers 51
Jacob L. Wright
Emory University

Introduction to Deuteronomy 61
Bernard M. Levinson
University of Minnesota

Introduction to the Haftarot 77
Lawrence A. Hoffman
Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion

Introduction to *Nevi'im* 87
Marc Zvi Brettler
Duke University

Introduction to *Ketuvim* 99
Deborah Kahn-Harris
Leo Baeck College

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Walter Homolka
Aaron Panken

February, 2018

Preface

AARON PANKEN

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THE BIBLE IS UNDOUBTEDLY THE STARTING POINT OF JUDAISM. Within its pages are the laws, ideals, narratives, and poetry that shape every generation of Jewish thought, initiating vast trajectories of interpretation, jurisprudence, argumentation, and literary and artistic creation – a process which began millennia ago yet continues fervently today. Wherever Jews lived, whatever language they spoke, the Bible remained a core text read publicly and regularly, studied and taught incessantly, shaping a common cultural language that spanned generations and geography. Love for the Bible and the creative interpretive possibilities it brought into being carried Jews through times both agreeable and awful, uniting them as a single people in service to their God.

Ask any Jewish individual which text is the faith's most sacred, and the universal answer will be: the Torah, comprising Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The name "Torah" arises from the Hebrew root *y-r-h*, meaning "to teach." Its name, therefore, means "teaching" or "learning." The word *torah* appears within the Torah itself (including in Lev 6:7, 7:1, 7:37–38 and 14:54–56; Num 6:21; Deut 4:44 and 33:4), where it means a collection of laws or rules. The term *Torat Moshe* (the Torah of Moses) is used in the Prophets and may refer to the Five Books of Moses (see Josh 1:7; Ezra 3:2 and 7:6; Mal 3:22), suggesting that some version could have been extant and was already considered holy by the time these works were written.

Explanations of the Torah's origin vary significantly across the streams of Jewish life: some view it as divinely revealed in its entirety at Mount Sinai; others see it as the result of centuries of editing by various authors with their own political, religious, and moral agendas drawing heavily upon texts and customs of the surrounding Ancient Near East; others, still, find a middle point in which individual divine revelations led to acts of inspired writing and editing within particular cultural environments. However one happens to view the Torah's derivation, it occupies a uniquely revered place in the Jewish canon, and serves as the key source in the development of later Jewish literatures, from the Dead Sea Scrolls, Greco-Roman Jewish writings, and rabbinic literature, to later Jewish prayer books, medieval commentary and poetry, and more recent post-Enlightenment works that grapple with its place in a very different contemporary world. What is certain is that the entirety of the Jewish people, despite their significant differences in outlook, agree that the Torah, predominantly, and the Bible to a slightly lesser extent, are sacred and form the basis for the development of the life of the Jewish people.

During the past three centuries scholars have radically reinterpreted both the Jewish and the Christian relationship with Scripture. While prior Jewish commentators like Ibn Ezra would highlight challenges within the biblical text (contradictions, anachronisms and the like), such discrepancies were often viewed as exceptional, and were generally dismissed as valid evidence for disproving the unity of the Torah itself. The seventeenth-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza was among the first to question publicly Moses's authorship of the Torah, which eventually led to his expulsion from the Jewish community. Undeterred, he outlined new ways of reading the entire Bible that defined new pathways of interpretation extended by scholars ever since. There now exist more nuanced and variegated ways of reading that bring together the disparate fields of archaeology, history, source criticism, comparative Ancient Near Eastern studies, literary criticism, feminist and queer readings, alongside many other approaches, to render the Bible meaningful in the contemporary world. While the concept of