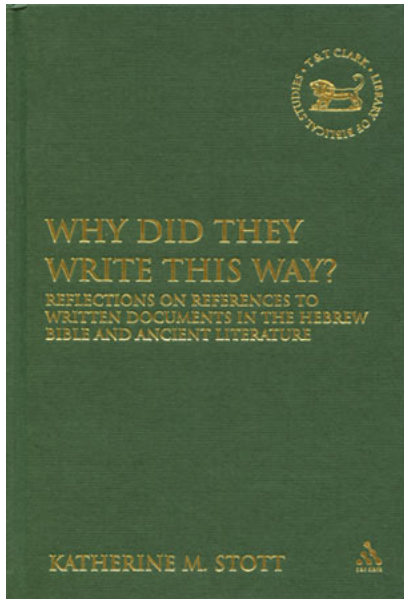


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Stott, Katherine M.

Why Did They Write This Way? Reflections on References to Written Documents in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Literature

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Werner H. Kelber
Rice University
Houston, Texas

The compositional processes of ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean scribal productions pose formidable challenges to the historical imagination of modernity. How is one to conceive of what F. Gerald Downing in *Doing Things with Words in the First Christian Century* (Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) has referred to as “word-processing in the ancient world”? Did the composers simply work from the facts before them? Were the scribal products free-standing literary products written by solitary authorial figures with pen in hand? Were papyri and manuscripts dictated as memorially accessible or mentally composed materials? Should one think of ancient scribal documents as products rooted in oral tradition and perhaps as transcriptions of oral performances, or were they transmitted by local informants and eye-witnesses? No doubt, the ancient scribal productions admit of a vast repertoire of communicative strategies and verbal dynamics. Katherine Stott’s book examines one principal aspect of ancient text-making: the use of sources. It is an issue very worth addressing. Source citations bulge large in the ancient surviving documentary evidence, suggesting that sources may have provided a kind of reservoir on which ancient scribal composers were readily drawing. Not surprisingly, therefore, sources played a critical role in the reigning literary and historical disciplines. Indeed, in historical criticism the literary question has often been reduced to one of sources. In short, source criticism constitutes one of the intrinsic features of classical and

biblical studies, promising answers to the nature of the tradition, to the genesis of the composition, and to our search for documentary truths.

Stott has chosen an unconventional approach that moves beyond literary source criticism toward a phenomenology of source citations. She has done so in two ways. One, she examined the Hebrew Bible exclusively with a view toward explicit references to what often claim to be written documents. To that end, she directed her attention to sources that are introduced as such, without, in most instances, disclosing their content. Rather than lending herself to the often speculative stratification theories that tend to extrapolate traditional layers or sources from the final textual product, she focused strictly on manifest citations of apparently written documents. Among the substantial number of biblical sources she singled out are citations to “the book of the generations of Adam” (Gen 5:1), “the book of the wars of the Lord” (Num 21:14), “the book (or document) of the acts of Solomon” (1 Kgs 11:41), “the book of the chronicles of the kings of Israel” (1 Kgs 14:19), “the book of the chronicles of the kings of Judah” (1 Kgs 14:29), “the midrash of the book of kings” (2 Chr 24:27), “the book of the kings of Judah and Israel” (2 Chr 27:7), “genealogical record” (Ezra 2:62), “letter” (2 Chr 2:11–12; Ezra 4:7), “royal edict” (Ezra 1:1), “sealed document” (Isa 29:11), “writing on a tablet, inscribing in a book” (Isa 30:8), and many, many more. Of special significance to Stott’s argument is the well-known story of the finding of “the book of the law” in the temple during the reign of King Josiah (2 Kgs 22:8–10). Enumeration of the abundance of source citations may give the impression of the Hebrew Bible as a deeply intertextual construction, closely interwoven with multiple records, chronicles, annals, laws, and other scribal genres.

Two, Stott employed a comparative approach, extending the discussion of sources in the Hebrew Bible to a wider cultural context. While the micro-textual focus undoubtedly plays a primary role in biblical studies, the author’s broadening of the frame of reference has succeeded in casting a novel light on the source phenomenon. Impressively researched and painstakingly documented, Stott’s study covers an astonishingly wide range of ancient Near Eastern, classical, and Hellenistic literature. Her explorations include the use of sources mostly among historians such as Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Polybius, Diodorus Siculus, Plutarch, Ephorus, Livy, Philo of Byblos, Dictys of Crete, Antonius Diogenes, Philostratus, Pausanias, Livy, as well as the source practices of authors who wrote about the world outside of Greece and Rome, such as Ctesius of Cnidus (*Persica*), Hecataeus of Abdera, who provided information on Egyptians and Jews, Berossus (*Babyloniaca*), Manethos (*Aegyptiaca*), and Josephus (*Antiquities*). Her study is accompanied by a series of detailed histories of research that significantly deepen readers’ understanding of the complexities of ancient source citations. Generally, Stott’s comparative approach proves eminently useful in illuminating points of connection between ancient Near Eastern, classical, and biblical text processing. But the author wisely

stayed away from postulating theories of cultural borrowing or direct cultural trajectories. Her principal concern is to utilize the source phenomenon, internationally explored, to help readers understand aspects of the making of ancient Near Eastern, classical, and biblical texts.

The nature of ancient sources and the rationale of their use, Stott demonstrates, are subject to considerable variability. As for the mode of sources, the ancients availed themselves in addition to written sources of personal autopsy, inquiry of eye-witnesses, reliance on predecessors (oral and written), and memorial recall. Depending on communicative circumstances and authorial leanings, these oral-memorial means of acquiring information could well play a central role in the compositional processes. Stott's main interest, however, is devoted to the plural functions ancient sources served and the varying ways in which they were used. There are indeed cases in ancient literature where source citations were genuinely indicative of extratextual materials and representative of historical authenticity. But the comparative survey also suggests different uses. Two of the principal uses to which, according to Stott, ancient sources were put were the embellishment and authentication of the narrative. In other words, source citations often functioned as confirmatory rather than evidentiary devices. In those cases, sources could be the invention of the authors themselves. Epigraphic citations and inscriptions likewise could be constructed in the manner of speeches in ancient historiography: representing authorial constructions as imagined in keeping with the historical circumstances rather than verbatim renditions. Even in cases where ancient historians were prone to consult documentary sources, the authors did not for the most part critically engage the material with a view toward historical plausibility. To the contrary, they seemed to have little hesitation to rephrase, elaborate, and abridge prior versions. In many instances, therefore, citations were not necessarily indicative of an author's first-hand familiarity with the sources. They did not, by our standards, provide historical information about the past, even though they may have assumed to do so.

For the most part, Stott concludes, the ancients' use of sources differed from modern standards in that their sources were not necessarily meant to provide critical evidence of past history. One, therefore, must exercise caution in appealing from source citations to the immediate representation of their historical subject matter. Observing the freedom many writers seem to have used in citing, adopting, modifying, and inventing sources, Stott wonders whether the text makers deliberately misled their audience or whether "their activities can be explained in the light of a different, perhaps more 'oral' attitude toward the written word" (71). She does not, however, pursue this insight further. For the most part, she asserts, ancient documents existed in a different, less categorical world than our neat division of the historical versus the fictional would imply. What may be considered fictionality or even forgery by critical standards of modernity may not have

been regarded as such in the ancient world (even though there was some critical recognition of forgery). Instead of judging ancient source citations by modern standards of historiography, Stott suggests—and this is her central thesis—that we must appreciate the rhetorical role sources and documented stories played in their respective literary contexts. The point is not to comprehend sources and source citations from a “referential” viewpoint, regarding them from a perspective outside the narrative, be it their historical subject matter or their diachronic role in textual history, but rather to understand how sources partook in the text’s construction of the past.

While well informed about the differences between classical and biblical historiography, Stoll insists that the comparative approach raises important issues concerning the function of sources in the Hebrew Bible. At a minimum, the following questions need to be raised: Did a source citation actually exist, or was it invented? Did the writer have direct access to it or relying on memory? Is there evidence of critical engagement in the source, and, importantly, what role did the source serve in the narrative? In short, Stott counsels greater caution in simply assuming and identifying the existence of sources external to the biblical narrative. Specifically, Gerhard von Rad’s premise that “the book of the generations of Adam” cited in Gen 5:1 was an early version of the Priestly document would seem to have drawn unwarranted conclusions from a source citation. The comparative approach would also question whether the sources frequently cited in Kings ever existed, and if so, whether they were personally consulted or “regularly used as a literary device to bolster credibility” (58). Moreover, Eissfeldt’s theory that “the midrash of the book of kings” (2 Chr 24:27) is to be identified with the Chronicler’s primary source that transmitted materials from Samuel–Kings appears likewise suspect. The strength and weight of this source and numerous other citations could well find an explanation in serving to underscore the Chronicler’s historiographical authority. An alternative option might be that the Chronicler’s documents referring to the world of the kings “serve to build a rhetorical bridge” (66) between the preexilic, monarchic period and the postexilic period, the time of the Chronicler’s composition.

The source citation with the most far-reaching implications is that referring to the (discovery of) “the book of the law” in the Jerusalem temple during the reign of King Josiah (2 Kgs 22–23). Ever since W. M. L. de Wette in his Latin dissertation of 1805 advanced the theory that the discovered law book was Deuteronomy, or an early version of it, and Martin Noth in 1943 identified Deuteronomy as the basis of the so-called Deuteronomistic History (Deuteronomy–2 Kings), the law book has acquired an uncommonly pivotal status in the textual history of the Hebrew Bible. Stott’s comparative approach challenges the Deuteronomistic premises of the law book. Examining the story of the lost and found book in ancient Near Eastern and classical literature, she found an astounding number of literary parallels. By and large, the story pattern is characterized by

the following features: a sacred book is authored by an important figure of antiquity; it is deposited in the temple; it is lost or forgotten for a period of time; it is discovered by a priest; it is presented to a king; the book requires interpretation; and it provides the basis for reform. While the story of “the book of the law” in 2 Kings, Stott reasons, may have some foundation in historical reality, it is first and foremost to be understood and appreciated as a literary topos. In the context of 2 Kings, it may have been designed to promote Josiah as the righteous king who acted in accordance with the law. It is, in any case, unlikely, Stott concludes, that the story can be used to “provide insights into the diachronic development of the biblical text” (122 n. 45).

Why Did They Write This Way? admirably fulfills its goal of presenting the phenomenon of source citations in all its complexities. Underpinned by the best relevant scholarship, the comparative approach gives its readers a deepened and expanded sense of the source phenomenon.

One question that accompanied this reviewer along the reading of this very impressive book concerns the exclusive focus on the narrative emplotment. There is an important linguistic issue at stake here. The Saussurean principle of the integrity of language whereby meaning is always figured as a relation within language has encouraged certain literary critics, classicists, historians, and biblical scholars to exclude from the textual world references to tradition, sources, and life as actually lived. What has haunted me, in other words, is whether, notwithstanding the appeal to and pursuit of ancients’ dealing with sources and text-making, we have not been persuaded to read their texts as contemporaries of a mode of literary criticism most prominently represented by Hayden White (86). In the end, has the author viewed the ancient texts from the perspective of a literary world some of us are currently inhabiting?