

In Memoriam Norbert Lohfink SJ (28 July 1928–23 September 2024) ז"ל

Bernard M. Levinson, University of Minnesota

בְּלֶע הַמְּוֹת לְנִצָּח וּמִתָּה אֲדַגֵּי יְהוָה דְּמִצָּה מֵעַל כָּל-פְּגָיִם
(Isa 25:8a)

International Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Rome 1991

Sometimes chance encounters can be life-changing. At the Society of Biblical Literature's Meeting in Rome (July 14–17, 1991), I attended my first international congress, presenting material from my just completed dissertation on Deuteronomy. The session took place in the large, high-ceilinged lecture hall of the Pontifical Gregorian University. During the intermission that morning after my presentation, a gentleman approached me and, with a smile, explained that he was hard of hearing and that the acoustics of the room made it very difficult to hear my presentation. He asked if I could give him my paper copy to read during the break. Later, when the session concluded, he approached me again and introduced himself as Norbert Lohfink. He said that he agreed with my argument in the paper and asked if I would send him my full dissertation to read when he returned to Frankfurt. Having only heard of this mythological giant of a scholar, of course I was honored and, in those pre-Fed-Ex days, mailed him the dissertation. Six weeks later I received his response: a twelve-page, single spaced letter, affirming the main approach and analysis, but pointing out in extensive detail multiple ways in which the dissertation could be revised and improved. Norbert stressed the need for much greater engagement with German scholarship and offered to nominate me for a Humboldt scholarship, to spend a research year in Germany. In the end, because he was going to spend the next year teaching in Rome at the Pontifical Biblical Institute, as he regularly did, he felt he could not serve as a host for the Humboldt. He had shared my dissertation with Eckart Otto, then in nearby

Mainz, who, after reading it, very graciously himself invited me to spend a year working with him in Mainz, with a visiting appointment to the Johannes Gutenberg University, a wonderful opportunity.

The following summer, when I arrived at the Frankfurt airport, Norbert (who was in Rome) had arranged for Prof. Hans-Winfried Jüngling, one of his colleagues at the Philosophisch-Theologische Hochschule Sankt Georgen, to meet me at the airport and host me there for several days to get oriented. Sankt Georgen became a second home in Germany. I visited Norbert there many times once he returned from Rome and attended his retirement celebration in July 1993. In the three decades since that amazing year in Germany, I flew back to Frankfurt multiple times to visit him at Sankt Georgen and was welcomed into the Jesuit community there.

The encounter with Norbert Lohfink at the ISBL in Rome, which led in turn to the year in Germany, changed my life intellectually, professionally, and personally. It introduced me to the world of German biblical scholarship in an intensive way. It introduced me to the German language, not as “German for Reading Knowledge” but as a spoken language with its beautiful *Satzmelodie*. It made my research and writing better and opened new possibilities of analysis; it facilitated much more meaningful communication with German colleagues. That year was a life-changing gift. It created lasting friendships, including the long-standing, close connection to Norbert. In gratitude to him, what follows is a brief tribute, personal and academic.

Brief Biography

Norbert Lohfink was born on July 28, 1928, as the eldest of four siblings, just outside of Frankfurt. His two sisters, Marianne and Margret, died as young children during the war because

of Allied bombing. His brother Gerhard, a well-known New Testament scholar, died just six months before Norbert at the age of 89. As a teenager in the last years of the war, like many of his compatriots, Norbert was drafted into the German military's anti-aircraft corps (*Luftwaffenhelfer* or *Flakhelfer*), manning one of the bunkers ringing Frankfurt, learning to use the rangefinders. He also participated in clandestine Church youth group meetings, keeping his distance from National Socialist ideology. During long off-hours at the flak battery, he read literature, providing him a literary perspective and sensitivity to language that had a major impact on his approach to biblical texts. That experience also impacted the quality of his writing. All of his articles are beautifully written; the German flows clearly and deftly, with a clear goal of reaching a reader and communicating.

Lohfink spent decades teaching at the Sankt Georgen Graduate School of Philosophy and Theology in Frankfurt, to which he was appointed in 1963. In 1966, he was appointed to the Pontifical Biblical Institute (PBI) in Rome, where he remained until 1970. He could not comfortably maintain his appointment there for health reasons. He suffered from Ménière's disease (an inner-ear affliction, responsible for the partial deafness described earlier) and therefore returned to Sankt Georgen, where he continued teaching until his retirement (with occasional semesters teaching at the PBI). He continued living post-retirement at Sankt Georgen, until moving to a retirement home in Unterhaching, just outside of Munich, in 2021. After a brief illness, he passed away in the evening hours of September 23, 2024, at the age of 96. His interment, with a celebratory Requiem mass, took place on the afternoon of October 7, 2024. Just weeks before his death, he was able to hold in his hands his long awaited, 606 page long major

commentary on Deuteronomy 1, the product of a lifetime of work (co-written with his close colleague, George Braulik).¹

Impact

It is impossible to do proper justice to Lohfink's scholarly accomplishments. His bibliography extends to nearly 900 titles. He has done groundbreaking work on Deuteronomy, Koheleth, Psalms, and biblical theology. He was active in Catholic-Jewish dialogue. He had a major impact upon Catholic biblical scholarship, entering the field at a crucial juncture for the discipline. When he defended his doctoral dissertation in 1961, the critical study of the Old Testament, associated with the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome, was being challenged by conservative circles of the Church and viewed as theologically suspect. His dissertation defense became a defense not only of his specific approach to Deuteronomy (*Das Hauptgebot: Eine Untersuchung literarischer Einleitungsfragen zu Dtn 5–11*) but also, much more profoundly, of the entire academic methodology associated with the PBI: of the historical and contextual study of the Bible. Rather than take place indoors as conventional, in one of the rooms at the PBI, the dramatic high-stakes defense took place in the atrium of the Gregorian, with 400 bishops and cardinals in attendance (in 1962). Their presence demonstrated their support both for the method and for the PBI. Lohfink's work, as it flourished, continued to inform and be informed by the important movement of Vatican II.

Lohfink also contributed to textual criticism. He was part of the original team of six scholars that made up the Hebrew Old Testament Text Project (which also included Dominique

¹ Georg Braulik and Norbert Lohfink, *Kommentar zu Deuteronomium I* (Österreichische Biblische Studien 60; Berlin: Peter Lang, 2024).

Barthélemy of Fribourg, Hans Peter Rüger of Tübingen, A. R. Hulst of Utrecht, James A. Sanders of Claremont, and W. D. McHardy of Oxford). The group met for a month every summer for more than a decade to work through an extensive set of text-critical questions. The publications that resulted from that effort remain valuable as windows into the formation of the biblical text, with particular attention to the history of interpretation (including medieval Jewish grammarians) as shedding light on textual difficulties.² Their approach and their published findings have had an important impact upon the development of *Biblia Hebraica Quinta*, one of the major new scholarly editions of the biblical text currently in progress.

Lohfink was an early and skilled advocate of the use of computers in biblical research, leading eventually to his creation, together with Georg Braulik, of a remarkable, free online bibliographical resource for research on Deuteronomy and Deuteronomistic literature. The resource, called *Analytical Bibliography of Deuteronomy* (AnaBiDeut for short) is described more fully below.

Brief and Selective Scholarly Appreciation, with Focus on Deuteronomy

Having devoted his life to the study of Deuteronomy, Lohfink has in many ways revolutionized the study of that important biblical book. He was one of the very first to recognize and stress its literary artistry and rhetorical structure. In doing so, he sought to create an implicit dialogue between standard continental diachronic approaches (source-critical and text-critical) and the methodology of contemporary literary studies. He also sought to address the cultural

² Dominique Barthélemy, ed., *Critique textuelle de l'Ancien Testament: Rapport final du Comité pour l'analyse de l'Ancien Testament hébreu institué par l'Alliance Biblique Universelle* (4 vols.; OBO 50; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982–2005); and Dominique Barthélemy et al., eds., *Preliminary and Interim Report on the Hebrew Old Testament Text Project* (5 vols.; 2d rev. ed.; New York: United Bible Societies, 1979–1980).

significance of Deuteronomy. (In the discussions that follow, all publications will be referenced by their date for brevity; the full references are then given below in the bibliography at the end.) One of Lohfink's early studies (1971), written in the excitement associated with Vatican II, argues that two key concepts associated with constitutional theory (the separation of powers and the subordination of all governmental bodies to the constitution or the rule of law) originate with Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy thereby makes an overlooked contribution to the history of Western political thought.

In the important article published in 1995, Lohfink mounts a powerful and sustained challenge to the standard scholarly model, one especially prevalent in European contexts, that isolates discrete strata of Deuteronomistic redactional activity in the prophetic corpus, based upon minor variations of language, and then reconstructs (without other evidence) a distinct social and religious *Bewegung* [movement]. Rather than assume that each variation of language represents the "fingerprints" of a specific social group, or stages of that group's development, Lohfink maintains a much greater capacity for authors, in working with texts, to vary their language. He argues that such ancient authors would almost certainly imitate the language of the literary sources upon which they draw. From this perspective, any stylistic variation (including grammatical inconsistencies) found in their sources could well become a kind of literary model to be used in the creation of new literature.

A crucial article in 1996 provides a close reading of several key legal texts in the Covenant Code and Deuteronomy, thinking through with wonderful clarity how to understand their literary relationship. Stress is placed on the rules for the sacrificial worship of God (the altar laws of Exod 20:24 and Deut 12) and the manumission laws (Exod 21:2–11; Deut 15:12–18). The article demonstrates the exegetical power of the author of Deuteronomy, as he

fundamentally transforms the literary model of the Covenant Code: placing new wine in old skins. Another aspect of the article is equally important. Quite self-consciously, it reflects upon the different theoretical models used to account for “inner-biblical interpretation.” Using the specified texts as a series of test cases, Lohfink argues that the conventional continental model of *Fortschreibung* envisions straightforward extensions to or adjustments of a source text, while nonetheless preserving it intact. This model fails to do justice to the much more dynamic reworking of the Covenant Code by Deuteronomy. Lohfink implicitly calls for the more powerful model of “exegesis.” His reading powerfully demonstrates that legal rewriting and revision is an act of originality and authorship in the strong sense.

In his 2003 article, Lohfink’s point of departure is the hermeneutical problem created by the remarkable redacted nature of the Pentateuch itself, which includes three originally inconsistent, independent, and mutually exclusive legal collections (the Covenant Code, the Holiness Code, and the legal corpus of Deuteronomy), while granting each equal authority. Lohfink astutely asks the fascinating question: How could such a text have been read in antiquity? He explores how a hypothetical “first reader” might have understood the Pentateuch from the moment after its creation. His approach integrates synchronic and diachronic scholarship.

Lohfink was one of the first scholars to recognize and stress the literary artistry and rhetorical structure of Deuteronomy. In his 2005 collection (one of a series), he seeks to create an implicit dialogue between standard Continental diachronic approaches (source-critical and text-critical) and the methodology of contemporary literary studies. Lohfink also regularly sought to make biblical scholarship accessible to a broader reading public. For example, his 1994 edited

volume provides a useful overview of the main theological themes present in the Priestly and Deuteronomic traditions.

Finally, the 2024 major commentary by Lohfink and his Vienna close colleague, Georg Braulik, represents the culmination of decades of meticulous reflection on how Deuteronomy works as a text, devoting 606 pages to the first chapters of Deuteronomy. Literary, text-critical, methodological, and rhetorical questions are systematically investigated in this capstone of an outstanding scholarly career.

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an analytical internet bibliography of Deuteronomy, designed for quick searches and title

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- A major resource, freely available, that provides an annotated, organized, bibliographical database for scholarship on Deuteronomy. The most complete and analytical resource of its kind, it shares a lifetime of work by these two leading scholars.

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