

3

How Well Was the Text of the Old Testament Preserved?

The transmission of a text across almost three millennia is certainly a cause for great concern. It leads to questions like: Who copied these texts through all these millennia? What methods did these copiers use to make sure that the integrity of the autograph was preserved? And do the copies that we now possess reflect the original texts? These questions will affect the issue of reliability faster than any other problem.

It is important to note right up front that no original manuscripts (or autographs) exist for either the Old or New Testament. Indeed, the very word *manuscript* itself is derived from a Latin word meaning written by hand. Up to the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century all books were copied by hand. These manuscripts would have been written on papyrus or leather from clean animals. However, given the high liability to deterioration, along with wear and tear, it was almost a foregone conclusion that these originals would not last for long. Add to this the fact that the major cities of Israel suffered many times when their place of worship was sacked, burned and leveled to the ground, and the chances for finding a surviving original are most unlikely.

Of course there were provisions for manuscripts that began to show signs of wear. These manuscripts were disposed of by placing them in a storage room called a *genizah* ("hidden") until enough manuscripts were available for a ritual burial ceremony. One such *genizah* from the late-

How Well Was the Text of the Old Testament Preserved?

41

nineteenth-century synagogue in Cairo yielded a large number of more recent manuscripts that illustrate the procedure described here.

But what did these earlier Hebrew manuscripts look like? Few exemplars were available as recently as fifty years ago. We were limited to the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Septuagint, and the Nash Papyrus dating from around A.D. 1000. But with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls beginning in 1947, our evidence took a leap of some 1000 years back in time. These 800 exemplars of biblical texts ranged in date from 250 B.C. to A.D. 50. But even these Dead Sea Scrolls were written in the Square or Aramaic script.

The earliest biblical texts, we believe, were written in a Proto-Canaanite or Paleo-Hebrew script. The earliest example of a biblical text appears on silver amulets dated to the mid-seventh-century B.C. It contained the Aaronic Benediction from Numbers 6:24-26.¹ The change from the Paleo-Hebrew script to the Square or Aramaic script probably took place sometime between the fifth and third centuries B.C.²

A second issue emerges: Did the Israelites use a continuous writing without spaces between the words? We cannot be sure, but it seems possible that they did have spaces between the words. Early Aramaic correspondence showed evidence of spaces, and at times, even markers between words. For example, the Paleo-Hebrew inscription at the end of the Hezekiah Tunnel has dots between the words. But would sacred scrolls follow such an example? In the silver amulets referred to already, they do not have spaces or any markers between the words, but then again, such amulets may not have been treated as reverently as Scripture. Without the word dividers, there would be room for ambiguity in certain contexts.

This raises the question all the more pressingly: How well was the original text of the Old Testament preserved for us today? Can the present text be trusted as an authentic transmission of the words that came from the pens of those prophets, poets and sages who were authorized by God to record them? What assurance do we have that all our efforts to understand the Bible before us are not in vain? If key points on which we base our theology and our eternal destiny turn out to be based on insecure readings or texts that are not true to the original wording given by the author who stood in the council of God, how can they be considered reliable? In order

G. Barkay, "The Priestly Benediction on the Ketef Hinnom Plaques," *Cathedra* 52 (1989): 37-76.

Frank M. Cross, "The Development of the Jewish Scripts," in *The Bible in the Ancient Near East*, ed. G. Ernest Wright (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961), pp. 133-202 (reprinted Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1979).

to answer these questions, we must delve into a bit of history of the text.

This history usually begins by affirming that the most important witnesses to the original text of the Old Testament are found in the Hebrew manuscripts. There are three major sources for these Hebrew witnesses: (1) the Masoretic Text, a Hebrew text preserved by a group of Jewish scholars known as the Masoretes (A.D. 500-1000); (2) the Samaritan Pentateuch; and (3) the Dead Sea Scrolls found in the Judean Desert at Qumran.

The Masoretic Text

The greatest witness of the three is the Masoretic Text, distinctive largely because of the system of notes and signs the Masoretes designed to preserve the integrity of the text. Normally the term Masoretic Text (hereafter MT) is restricted to a particular manuscript that came from the tenth-century A.D. hands of Aaron Ben Asher. It is a text that reflects his analysis of hundreds of medieval manuscripts (hereafter MSS). The accuracy of the MT was validated when some of the oldest Dead Sea Scrolls (hereafter DSS), dating from the first and second century B.C., were found to reflect essentially the same text we have inherited from the Masoretes and the text set forth in Ben Asher's tenth-century A.D. Hebrew Bible.

In addition to the Ben Asher family, another family flourished in Tiberias at the beginning of the tenth century A.D., the Ben Naphtali. These two families maintained two textual traditions, but in reality they both represented only one text with minor variations. In fact there were only eight minor differences in the consonantal texts between the two families, even though they differed on vocalizations and some word divisions. The Ben Naphtali tradition died out and the Ben Asher tradition continued and represented the superior text.

The oldest complete manuscript is referred to as Leningrad B19a (with the sigla [see glossary] of "L"), dated to A.D. 1008-1009.³ (Leningrad received its name from the library where it is now kept.) This is the text that serves as the base of our present Hebrew Bibles, which are produced by a committee of international scholars headed up by K. Elliger and W. Rudolph. This text also is practically the same as Ben Asher's text, again reflecting the Masoretic examination of hundreds of medieval manuscripts.

The work of the Masoretes involved four specific tasks. First, they designed an apparatus of instructions that surrounded (or as the Masoretes preferred to say, "hedged in") the consonantal text. These marginal readings were called *masorah*. The point was this: the consonantal text of the Scriptures (Hebrew is written in consonants) had long since been received as a fixed given, perhaps long before the first century A.D. There could be no tampering with any of these consonants by any of the Masoretes. Emanuel Tov illustrated how important such scribal precision was when he quoted from the *Tahmud* this word from Rabbi Ishmael:

My son, be careful, because your work is the work of heaven; should you omit [even] one letter, the whole world would be destroyed. (B. *Sotā* 20a).⁴

Thus the Masoretes in generation after generation worked to make sure that the Hebrew text of the first thirty-nine books of the Bible was maintained in all its purity. They hedged the text about with marginal notes along the sides and below the text with various instructions to make sure no nuance or the slightest detail escaped the notice of any copying scribe. In order to prevent any copying mistakes, each biblical book had as a colophon (end piece) the total number of consonants, the middle letter of the book by location and other mathematical devices that were used by the copiers to check and recheck their work.

In addition to these marginal notes, the Masoretes added vocalization to the consonantal text. They added vowel points above and below the lines of the consonantal text, thereby preserving the oral tradition about how the words were to be pronounced and read. Prior to the work of the Masoretes some earlier scribes had begun the practice, common in later postexilic times, of adding very occasionally four Hebrew consonants (*gōd* [y], *waw* [w], *hēh* [h], and *āleph* [ʾ]). These letters were known as *matres lectiones* ("mothers of reading"). While these "mothers of reading" were only sporadically added to make sure that the reader read the text with the correct vowel, a whole system of vocalization was added to the entire consonantal text without adding or deleting one consonant to the already fixed text of consonants.

A third piece of work by the Masoretes involved adding accentuation to the Hebrew text. These diacritical marks accomplished three tasks, serving (1) as punctuation marks, (2) as musical notes for chanting the text in

³K. Elliger and W. Rudolph, *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1977).

⁴Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), p. 33.

cantation, and (3) as accent marks to show which syllable of the word was to be emphasized.

The last function that the Masoretes performed was one of denoting paragraph divisions and certain annual or three-year reading programs for the synagogue. Along with these marginal notations, the Masoretes noted a handful of preserved corrections by adding inverted *nun*s that appear something like half-brackets, to call attention to a needed correction of the received text. Another set of important corrections to the text were called *Kethiv-Qere* variants. *Kethiv*, meaning "written," referred to what was "written" in the consonants of the text, while *Qere*, meaning "read," referred to the consonants in the margin along with the vowels that were found in the text of the *Kethiv*. This illustrates the extreme reluctance of the Masoretes to do any sort of meddling with or changing of the received consonantal text. Thus, while what was "written" was preserved and left unchanged, for fear of distorting the text, the tradition was to "read" it another way, all the while calling to the attention of all who should be aware that something here might be awry.

The Samaritan Pentateuch

The second most important witness to the text of the Old Testament was the Samaritan Pentateuch. This text came from the hands of a group that once thrived, but now has been reduced to a small sect centered near modern Nablus, the former biblical Shechem/Sychar.

The Samaritans arose after the fall of Samaria in 721 B.C. when the Assyrian king made it his policy to deliberately mix up resident-conquered-peoples with nationalities from other conquered areas. This led to a diluting of the purity of the Jewish people who had lived there previously.

The Samaritans distinguished themselves from the Judean Jews by centering their worship on Mount Gerizim (one of the two mountains alongside of Shechem) instead of at Jerusalem. Their Scripture was confined to the first five books of Moses.

The history of the Samaritan Pentateuch begins, according to our best knowledge, toward the end of the second century B.C. It would appear that the Samaritan Pentateuch is a modernized, smoothed-over and somewhat expanded text as compared to the Masoretic Text. For instance, one obvious interpolation is one that made possible their distinctive of worshiping on Mount Gerizim by making it the tenth commandment. They did this by combining the first two commandments into one and then by

inserting texts from Deuteronomy 11:29; 27:2-3; 28:4-7 and 11:30 after Exodus 20:17. Thus the material from Deuteronomy 28:4-7 and 11:30 became the tenth commandment for the Samaritans.

The Dead Sea Scrolls

One of the most famous finds of the twentieth century began in 1946 in the first of an eventual eleven mountain caves west of Khirbet Qumran (a defunct site about nine miles south of Jericho near the Dead Sea). These caves have yielded some eight hundred scrolls, with parts of, in some cases, the entirety of the text of all thirty-nine books of the Old Testament except the book of Esther.

A few other sites have yielded additional scrolls. Nahal Hever and Wadi Murab'at have given us a few more examples of Proto-Masoretic texts, along with a few from Masada, which fell to the Romans in A.D. 70.

More recently the oldest textual evidence for the Hebrew Bible, as we have already mentioned, was found at Ketef Hinnom, just south of Jerusalem alongside the valley of Hinnom. There two minute silver rolls, in the form of signet seals that were worn about the neck, recorded the Atonic benediction of Numbers 6:24-26. These date to the seventh or sixth century B.C.⁵

Various exemplars of the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) exhibit Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek text forms. The dates generally given for the DSS, on the basis of paleography, numismatics and what slight archaeological context surrounds them in the caves where they were found, are from the mid-third century B.C. to A.D. 135. About 60 percent of these Qumran scrolls reflect the same text that the Masoretes institutionalized. It was what scholars call a Proto-Masoretic text. Other text forms were present as well; for example, a pre-Samaritan text, others with a strong resemblance to the Greek Septuagint's *Vorlage* (in this case, the [Hebrew] text "lying [chronologically] before" the one reflected in the Greek Septuagint), and even other nonaligned text types,⁶ i.e., those not represented by the preceding types in some very slight differences.

The state of purity in some of the DSS is nothing short of spectacular. For instance, in one complete Isaiah scroll, only three words exhibiting a

⁵Barclay, "Priestly Benediction," pp. 37-76.

⁶According to the pseudepigraphal Letter of Aristeas (ca. 130 B.C.), the Pentateuch was translated into Greek somewhere around 285 B.C. by seventy-two translators (hence its title of Septuagint, "seventy," as rounded off). Later this tradition was expanded to include all thirty-nine books of the Old Testament.

different spelling were found for a book that runs about one hundred pages and sixty-six chapters in our English texts.⁷ That is the state of high quality preservation from texts that derive from 100 B.C. and were not witnessed for an intervening period of a thousand years until we come to our next Hebrew text as witness to our present text of Isaiah.

The Issue of the *Urtext*

But the real question is this: Could all of this accurate copying be traced back to one original or *urtext*? The proposition that all manuscripts of the Masoretic Text came from one source (an *archetype* or *Urtext* of the MT, which it was thought possible to reconstruct) became known as the *Urtext* theory. The majority of text critics have embraced this *Urtext* theory. The first theoretical statements about the development of the biblical text in modern times came from J. G. Eichhorn (1781 and later), G. L. Bauer (1795) and E. F. C. Rosenmüller (1797), all of whom determined that all Hebrew manuscripts of the Masoretic Text reflect this single, original *Urtext*.⁸

It was P. de Lagarde (1863)⁹ who gave the theory that all manuscripts of the MT derived from one source, which served as an archetype for the MT, its most concise statement. De Lagarde claimed that it was possible to reconstruct the original form of the biblical text from the texts that were now available to us. It is this proposition that became known as the *Urtext* theory of de Lagarde.

P. V. Kahle, however, argued in part against de Lagarde. While not denying the assumption that there was one original text, Kahle emphasized instead that the texts known to us were created from an intermediary source which he named in 1915 the "Vulgar Texts."¹⁰ Kahle's idea was that these texts developed from a plurality of texts into a unity, whereas de

Lagarde argued for the unity of the text that preceded the plurality of texts. Emanuel Tov raised a number of difficulties against Kahle: (1) Kahle's "Vulgar Texts" did not have the central status he attributed to them; (2) there was no justification even in Kahle's time for claiming that the MT was edited at a later period, especially now after the sensational finds of the DSS which exhibit many Proto-Masoretic Text types from the third century B.C. onwards; and (3) the texts from the Cairo Geniza from which Kahle drew for his theory of textual multiplicity are late and do not pertain to the Second, much less the First Temple periods.¹¹ Very few scholars accepted the views of Kahle. A few picked up his concept of "vulgar texts," but with key changes. The name "vulgar" denoted the free manner in which changes were inserted in these texts, including changes in spelling.

A new school of thought opened, mainly in the United States, in the wake of a brief article by William Foxwell Albright in 1955. This school championed the view that all textual witnesses could be divided into groups, at first described as "recensions," but later as "families." The families were linked to particular geographical localities: Babylon (MT), Palestine (Samaritan Pentateuch, MT of Chronicles and several Qumran texts), and Egypt (the Hebrew *Vorlage* of the Septuagint). Frank Cross developed this view further with the assumption that the biblical text was developed in different ways and directions in different locations where they were preserved and copied. The thesis here was that lack of contact between centers created different characteristics in the text, with the Palestinian taking on an expansionistic form with many glosses and harmonizing additions just as the Egyptian text was full and the Babylonian text was short and conservative.¹²

However, there was no way to verify such details as the Albright/Cross theory of localized families of texts demanded. Tov found these problems with that theory: (1) the textual characteristics were too general and without proof; (2) the idea that the Septuagint derived from Egyptian characteristics was unproven, and it is more likely to have been derived from Palestinian texts as the Letter of Aristeas claimed; (3) the discovery of the Qumran texts demonstrated a mixture of all three local textual groups

⁷This conclusion was shared in a 1960 university class I took with Dr. Harry Orlinsky, the only Jewish scholar on the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Originally, the RSV made only thirteen word changes based on the new DSS, but later these thirteen were collapsed to only three, based on a more careful investigation. For a fuller discussion of this same point, see p. 164 later in this book.

⁸See the fine article and documentation by Emanuel Tov, "The History and Significance of a Standard Text of the Hebrew Bible," in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*, ed. Magne Saebø (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 1:52.

⁹P. de Lagarde, *Anmerkungen zur griechischen Übersetzung der Proverbia* (Leipzig: n.p., 1863).

¹⁰Paul Kahle, "Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Pentateuchtextes," *ISK* 88 (1915): 399-439. Also see his book *The Cairo Geniza* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1947, 1959).

¹¹Emanuel Tov, "The History and Significance of a Standard Text," pp. 52-53.

¹²William Foxwell Albright, "New Light on Early Recensions of the Hebrew Bible," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 140 (1955): 27-33; Frank M. Cross, "The History of the Biblical Text in Light of Discoveries in the Judean Desert," *Harvard Theological Review* 57 (1964): 218-99; Frank Cross, "The Contributions of the Qumran Discoveries to the Study of the Biblical Text," *Israel Exploration Journal* 16 (1966): 81-95.

located in Palestine, which contradicts the theory of local families.¹³

Accordingly, a textual theory that can explain the development of the biblical text in its entirety does not exist. All the texts described here as vulgar and nonvulgar were in existence during the last three centuries B.C. and on into the beginning of the Christian era. This does not prove, however, that they did not all derive from an original *Urtext* as P. de Lagarde argued so well over a century ago.

The Scope of Variation in the Biblical Texts

Shemaryahu Talmon summarized the amount of consensus and genetic relation to the original *Urtext* of the Hebrew Bible. He concluded:

The scope of variation within all these textual traditions is relatively restricted. Major divergences which intrinsically affect the sense are extremely rare. A collation of variants extant, based on the synoptic study of the material available, either by a comparison of parallel passages within one Version, or of the major Versions with each other, results in the conclusion that the ancient authors, compilers, tradents, and scribes enjoyed what may be termed a controlled freedom from textual variation.¹⁴

In order to determine the effect of all of these variants on our understanding of the purity of the text as we now possess it, we need to recognize that almost all of the variants are fairly insignificant and hardly affect any doctrine. My colleague Professor Douglas Stuart agrees:

It is fair to say that the verses, chapters, and books of the Bible would read largely the same, and would leave the same impression with the reader, even if one adopted virtually every possible *alternative* reading to those now serving as the basis for current English translations.¹⁵

¹³Tov, "History and Significance of a Standard Text," p. 54. Tov argued that certain biblical books such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel went through more than one stage in their development: an early short edition and a later expanded edition. Thus the text critic's task is not to reconstruct the earlier shorter editions, but the final edition, such as the fully developed proto-MT of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Tov did not use the term original text in its usual meaning, for in his view copies of some of the material in the biblical texts preceded the fuller final written stages of the text (Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992], pp. 171-77).

¹⁴Shemaryahu Talmon, "Textual Study of the Bible—A New Outlook," in *Qumran and the History of the Biblical Text*, ed. Frank M. Cross and S. Talmon (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), p. 326.

¹⁵Douglas Stuart, "Inerrancy and Textual Criticism," in *Inerrancy and Common Sense*, ed. Roger R. Nicole and J. Ramsey Michaels (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1980), p. 98.

Accordingly, it is possible to say with Bruce Walke that over 90 percent of the Old Testament is textually sound and uniformly witnessed to by major exemplars. Of the remaining 10 percent of the text that exhibits any type of variation, extremely few are of such significance that they would involve any major doctrinal issues.¹⁶

Conclusion

The task of evaluating a reading to see if it represents the original text or not is both an objective science and a subjective art. The most foundational rule is to argue that the reading that is to be preferred over all others is the one that has most likely given rise to the other readings. Thus, the reading that cannot be explained away is most likely the original.

It should be noted that the Qumran scrolls, which are a millennium earlier, do not always or necessarily contain better readings than the Masoretic Text. This is to mistake the fact that a random find of an earlier text demands that we designate that text automatically as the preferred text when indeed it may have preserved variant or unattested readings. The scribes in the MT exhibit a greater accuracy in preserving the original text than many at Qumran, based on the analysis of these texts by the scholarly community so far. However, a specific pattern does emerge from an analysis of the DSS at Qumran. Slightly over half of the DSS reflect the same text found in the Masoretic Text.

Textual criticism is necessary to the scholarly study of the Old Testament simply because there are no error-free transcripts of the Old Testament. In the long process of transmission, however, it is remarkable that these texts have suffered as few variations as they do. The task of helping contemporary readers get back to the original text will be an ongoing challenge, since all the original documents have perished as far as our current information exists. Whether the errors that currently appear are accidental or deliberate (for political or self-serving reasons, as in the case of the Samaritan Pentateuch), they must be ferreted out and the original text restored to the best of our ability.

When all is said and done, the text has had amazing care in its transmission.

¹⁶Bruce K. Walke, "Old Testament Textual Criticism," in *Foundations for Biblical Interpretation*, ed. D. S. Dockery, Kenneth A. Matthews and Robert Sloan (Nashville: Broadman, 1994), p. 157.