

Textual Criticism and the Hebrew Bible

The History of the Transmission of the Hebrew Bible

The discovery of the Qumran materials gave scholars a chance to look behind the standardization of the Masoretic Text (MT) in a direct way for the first time. Some aspects of that textual history have not changed. For example, scholars still think that the writing of biblical materials began in about 1000 B.C.E., and that the MT was finally established by the 9th-10th C.E. However, most scholars agree that the middle period history, particularly from about 300 B.C.E. to 70 C.E. has had to be rewritten from scratch. What has emerged is a four-stage history of textual transmission which has a wide consensus among textual scholars of the Hebrew Bible in its major outlines.¹

The key discovery has been the discovery of the textual fluidity present at Qumran in the pre-70 C.E. period.² James Sanders' work on the 11Q Psalms scroll showed the canonical openness present at Qumran in this period, and Emmanuel Tov has taken a radical position on the textual diversity present there.³ The wealth of evidence presented by Qumran and its usefulness in evaluating other textual witnesses (especially the LXX) has apparently broken up the conjectural approach to text criticism of the Hebrew Bible taken in the last two centuries and put it on a firm manuscript evidence basis. Both major Hebrew Bible projects now underway agree completely in this regard.

As a result of the discoveries at Qumran, Frank Moore Cross set out to answer three questions: 1) Why so many manuscript types at Qumran? 2) Why so few "families?" 3) Why did these "families" persist so long? He assumed that texts and text families are fragile, and will disintegrate if left in close contact with other manuscripts of a different text family - either by mixing or by being swallowed up by them.⁴ Cross posited a "local texts" theory, in which he saw different textual traditions being perpetuated in different geographical regions.

Shemaryahu Talmon has suggested that sociology and history, not geography, provide the best answers to Cross' questions. Thus Talmon and others have seen the period of pre-70 C.E. as one of textual pluralism and tolerance (cf. Sanders' distinction between sacred story and sacred text) where manuscripts of

¹ No attempt is made here to be comprehensive on the theoretical or methodological levels. Even so, a brief recap of the present situation helps provide the context for the practical remarks. Other useful background papers on this subject: Scanlin, "What is the Canonical Shape of the Old Testament Text we Translate?" (*Issues in Bible Translation*, UBS, 1988) and Arichea, "Jeremiah and the HOTTP" (*TBT* 33:101-106).

² S. Talmon, *Cambridge History of the Bible*, 1970, J. A. Sanders, *JBL*, 1979, *HOTTP*, 1982, et. al.

³ *HUCA*, 1982

⁴ *Qumran and the History of the Biblical Text*.

different types could exist side by side.⁵ According to Talmon, mixing might well take place, but the “swallowing” would not until “sociologically integrated and definable” bodies (i.e. Sanders’ “believing communities”) felt an identity crisis, and moved to exclude other textual possibilities while they excluded other sociological ones (the “heretics”).⁶

In spite of the apparent diversity reflected among the different scholars, there is really an amazing amount of unanimity on all the major points regarding the history of the text of the Hebrew Bible. First of all, most scholars see certain canonical/text-critical watersheds. Furthermore Talmon, along with Barthelemy, Sanders, and Goshen-Gottstein are sensitive to the fact that while during the period 70-135 C.E. the text was standardized, canonization itself was pretty much complete a century earlier.

Barthelemy and Sanders present a more nuanced position in this regard. Sanders notes that while the Pentateuch was canon by the 6th-5th century B.C.E., as well as the former prophets, the latter prophets did not attain this status until the 6th-2nd B.C.E., and the writings were left open until 70 C.E. Thus canonization for Sanders took place in the response of Judaism to Persian and Hellenistic influences, and began the process of standardization as well, which in turn came to a rapid conclusion in 70-135 C.E. Thus each section of the Bible was going through the inevitable overlapping sequential and interrelated processes of canonization and textual standardization.⁷

It is Sanders who has done the most work in explaining the canonical processes behind this new textual history. He agrees with Talmon that believing communities are responsible for textual transmission and history. He agrees further that there is an apparent shift from “biblical” to “post-biblical” ways of thinking about texts (a shift in ontology of text from sacred story to sacred text). Under cultural pressure, first the Jewish and later the Christian communities found ways to both preserve their authoritative traditions and to keep them relevant.

Text-critically, the most important period is undoubtedly 300 B.C.E. to 70 C.E. Here the manuscript evidence begins, and here the major transformations of the Hebrew Bible from sacred story to sacred text took place. The rise of Rabbinical literature reflects the radical shift in ideas about of text (and canon) that took place gradually from 550 B.C.E. to 70 C.E. but more rapidly from the first century B.C.E. to 70 C.E.

⁵ Cf. Sanders 11Q Psalms vs. the canonical Psalms scroll comparisons versus Cross' insistence that if different manuscript traditions were at Qumran, they were there because someone from Egypt had brought a manuscript there.

⁶ Tov, of course rejects Cross' limited families on the basis of his work on 11QPaleoLev.

⁷ Torah and Canon.

Finally, the textual diversity in the pre-70 C.E. period seems to extend back to the pre-textual phase. Thus the LXX may well reflect at certain points a literary redaction (not a textual corruption) different than that found in the MT. Also the interpenetration of the phases of textual history make it quite complex at times. For example, there are cases of textual corruption and subsequent literary reintegration. This is due to the overlapping processes in the different sections of the Bible. Chronicles treats the Pentateuch quite carefully, but its rewrite of Kings is quite extensive and free. Furthermore, later correction of Chronicles to agree with Kings was evidently not felt to be necessary (cf. the four gospels), perhaps because Kings/Chronicles was not fully canonical yet.

The canonical processes which produced the biblical literature in the first place⁸ continued into the scribal phase as harmonization and textual leveling.⁹ Talmon sees these as a recurring processes, the result of identity crises which have a “decidedly integrating effect” on communities and their sacred traditions. Sanders sees specifically in the case of the Hebrew Bible the sacred story-to-sacred text shift until only a few alterations were allowed under a textual scribal mentality. Thus we can sometimes recover an earlier state of the text, while a yet earlier literary handling of the same problem would be beyond text-critical reach, and would present itself as two divergent literary and textual traditions.

It is here that canonical criticism can play a role, avoiding on the one hand a rejection of the canonical process which produced the biblical texts by going behind the latest layer to an “original” reading seen as the valid one (as some form critics have done) and also a rejection of a narrow and static view of canon which would assume not only the unique validity of one community’s canon but of its text as well. The latter position does not recognize that accepting a certain community’s canonization of texts does not mean we accept all of that community’s textual standardization as well.

Certain principles have emerged from the analysis of the changed situation which have guided biblical Hebrew Bible text critics of late. The first is a preference of empirical evidence. This is in part because we now have more direct evidence, but also because given the state of the text at Qumran, the best text critics are able to do in many cases is to group text traditions which appear to go back as far as the beginning of canonization for that text. Thus in general terms wherever possible Hebrew manuscripts are usually preferred over the ancient versions, and both are preferred over conjecture, though of course each case must be treated on its own merits.

⁸ Cf. Genesis 1 versus the other creation stories from the ancient near east.

⁹ This same dynamic has been at work as well in the history of biblical interpretation, including of course, the history of biblical translation.

Text critics of all types have supposedly adhered to the principle of the preference of harder/shorter reading for some time, but the difficulty of the problems in the Hebrew Bible have strained the loyalty of many. Recent text critical work has reaffirmed this principle in general, however, if it is taken together with other principles.

The most important new principle is that of the reconstruction of the text within the period in which it came to be viewed as sacred scripture. Thus following only the first two principles, one could easily reconstruct an “early” text of Jeremiah or parts of Samuel from Qumran Hebrew texts agreeing with a shorter LXX. The danger in this approach is that the Qumran texts put us far enough back in time as to cast doubt on the canonical status of the reconstructed text.

Examples

It should be noted from the outset that the scholars at times have trouble distinguishing text-critical and translational decisions. For example, when a translation disagrees with the MT, is it really a text-critical decision, or just making implicit information explicit? The issue is a real one both in principle and in practice at many points. As it turns out, there are usually text-critical arguments made, but nearly always themselves based on an ancient translations, which to a certain extent begs the text-critical question again.

The problem for the text critic is that in the absence of concrete data to the contrary, he or she is just about forced to treat any significant variation in the modern versions as text-critically motivated, not only because there is often (interestingly) already a variant reading or text of some kind to support the variation, but also because even in the absence of such, the difference between text-critical conjectures and modern translational adjustments are many times (at least for many people) simply the way in which one chooses to think about the problem.

From time to time there is a textual reading which is followed by the modern versions text-critically but not exegetically or translationally. For example, in Genesis 9.10 the form “from (those in ark) . . . to (those on earth later)” sounds at first like some animals escaped the flood. This formulation, however, is taken by some text critics to be another way of expressing the permanence of the covenant by mentioning the beasts of the earth (and others) who go out of the ark and then repeating again the beasts of the earth (who will be the descendants of those going out of the ark). This could actually be made quite clear in translation, but has not been done by any major modern language translation as yet. It may well turn out that these kinds of comments are the most interesting of all for translators.

The Masoretic Text can many times be understood without resorting to versions or conjecture. An example of this is found in Is 48.10, where the MT’s “I have refined you . . . “ becomes the LXX’s “I have

sold you.” Here the Masorah notes the complement to this verb “with silver” occurs in this form fifteen times. A check of these fifteen occurrences in their contexts turns up Isaiah 52.3, which in the MT says “I have sold you, and not with silver I will redeem you.” Thus the LXX can be seen as assimilation to a parallel passage. Still further concordance work shows refining can and does take place with people (e.g. Isaiah 1.25, Malachi 3.3).

A well-known text-critical problem occurs at Genesis 4.5. There, almost all the modern versions have followed the LXX in adding “let us go out into the field” to the MT’s “Cain said to Abel his brother...” This seems likely enough, since we seem to have a missing speech. The Targums, however, go on with the missing speech and make it into a theological dispute, during which Cain finally blasphemes God and kills his brother. This kind of progressive pattern from a small speech to a longer speech built on the small one makes some text critics suspect that the smaller one is either a condensation of the longer tradition or the longer one a development of the shorter. With the added data that *vayomer* (“said”) can function in an absolute sense with the meaning “speak with,” the MT itself can be rendered “Cain spoke/was speaking with his brother Abel...” with no need of the versional speech at all to makes sense of the MT.

As a matter of fact, text critics often favor the MT not for its own sake, but because it usually represents the best manuscript tradition from the period in which the Hebrew Scriptures came to be considered authoritative. In other words, the MT happens to be considered the best text most of the time given the rules of text criticism, but the rules were not created especially for it, and other texts are taken seriously, even surprisingly at times. In 1 Samuel 27.8 HOTTP, VP, and JB have LXX’s “Telaim” against MT’s “from ancient times,” which is followed by the following list: RSV, NIV, and TEV. In I Sam. 13.15, HOTTP gives LXX “A” against the MT.

In some cases, the LXX demonstrably provides the harder reading. Genesis 11.31 is an example of this. There the MT’s “they (Terah and Lot) went out with them” and the Syriac’s “he (Terah) went out with them” may have replaced an earlier text following the LXX’s “he (Terah) brought them out.” In Genesis 12.1ff and 15.7 God commands Abram out of Ur and brings him out. Also the Exodus tradition (cf. Nehemiah 9, Daniel 9), which must have exerted a powerful influence on this text, has God acting on his own initiative to bring the people out. God is the guide, leader, and protector for Israel and for Abraham, and thus Terah must be excluded from this role.

Conclusion

Much of the issue in text criticism is simply whether we believe that scribes tend to simplify and explain or not. In any case translators should let the text stand at a distance, and try to understand it first on its own terms (which were doubtless quite different from ours) and then decide what will be attempted in

translation. Ironically, we will take away in translation much of what we do in text criticism. That may not be so bad. That seems to be what even the ancient versions were doing much of the time. It is far worse to mix text criticism and translation together or, worse yet, to allow our search for a good translation to determine what our textual decision will be.

APPENDIX - THE LANGUAGES OF THE BIBLE

I. **Hebrew** The original language of the people of Israel was Hebrew. Most of the Old Testament is written in Hebrew.

II. **Aramaic** The Hebrew name for Syria is Aram. The language of Syria was known as Aramaic. It is a language very much like Hebrew, but it is still a different language.

Aramaic became the important international language of the Middle East during the years before the fall of Jerusalem. In Isaiah 36 (especially verses 11-13), we seen an interesting example of the relationship of Hebrew and Aramaic in the days of King Hezekiah. Aramaic was the language for discussion with the foreigners, but Hebrew was the language that the ordinary people used.

It seems that when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and carried many of the people of Judah away to Babylon, this was the beginning of the end of the Hebrew language. After this, the Aramaic language began to become more important in the land of Israel as well as in other areas. This continued over the years, and by the time of Jesus, Hebrew probably was not spoken any longer, except for religious purposes. Proof of this language change can be found as early as Nehemiah 8.8, where the book of the law (the Pentateuch) is read in Hebrew and translated orally on the spot into Aramaic so that the people can understand it.

A few parts of the Old Testament are written in Aramaic---Ezra 4.7-- 6.18 and Daniel 2.4--7.28, as well as a few scattered verses elsewhere. Unofficial versions of Old Testament materials were also translated into Aramaic to aid those who had to preach in the synagogues. These translations are called the Targums.

III. **Greek**

Alexander the Great was a mighty conqueror, and he conquered all the countries from Greece to Egypt and India, including Syria and Israel and Persia. After he died, his territory was divided up between his generals. One of them was the first of the Ptolemy family who ruled Egypt. Another was the first of the Seleucid family who ruled Syria. From at least this time Greek became a very important language in this part of the world.

These two families of kings---the Ptolemies of Egypt and the Seleucids of Syria---became very important for the history of the Jewish people between the Old and New Testaments. These kings were always fighting for control of the land between them, so there were many battles in the land of Israel. Sometimes Israel was ruled by Egypt, and sometimes it was ruled by Syria.

¹⁰ This section was originally drafted by Norman Mundhenk and edited by the author.

Finally, one of the kings of Syria, named Antiochus Epiphanes, decided to try to destroy the Jewish religion. His soldiers went into the temple, where they were not allowed, and they even sacrificed a pig on the altar of the temple. They tried to force Jews to eat pig meat, and to do other things which were against their religion. The situation became so serious that finally a rebellion broke out, led by the family called the Maccabees. This rebellion was successful. They drove out the foreign army, and were able to win independence for themselves.

The leader of the Jews during this time was the high priest. He was not only the religious leader of the country, but the political leader as well. The Jews remained independent for about one hundred years, until they were finally added to the Roman empire about 60 years before Jesus was born.

Long before, at the time of the fall of Jerusalem, many Jews had gone to Egypt, and after this time the Jewish community in Egypt became very important. Like the Jews in other areas, they stopped using the Hebrew language. But for them the new language was Greek. These Jews wanted to be able to read the scriptures in a language they could understand, and they arranged to have the books of the Old Testament translated into Greek. This was a famous translation known today as the Septuagint.

The Jewish community who used the Septuagint did not use only the books which had been translated from Hebrew. There were other religious books which had been written in Greek (or in Hebrew but passed on to us only in Greek), and some of these were added to the Septuagint as well. So from early days the Septuagint was quite different from the Hebrew scriptures.

IV. The language of Jesus

By the time of Jesus, the language of Palestine (Galilee, Samaria, and Judea) was Aramaic. Jesus must have talked to his disciples and to the crowds in Aramaic. However, it seems likely that Jesus also used Greek, for example when he was speaking to Pilate. Although Latin was the true language of the Romans, Greek was the main language of the Roman Empire.

Many scholars believe that Mark's gospel was written in Aramaic, and only later translated into Greek, and some believe that other portions of the New Testament were also originally written in Aramaic or Hebrew. This may or may not be true, but it is true that the only New Testament materials we have today are all in Greek. By the time the New Testament was being written, the Christian church had spread into many different areas and countries, and Greek was the language needed.

This is extremely interesting because it means that for the most part we do not have any record of Jesus' exact words. We have his words only in the Greek translation that the Gospel writers used. (There are a few cases of Aramaic words in the New Testament, such as Abba, "father.") From the very beginning Christianity has been a religion which has used translation to give its scriptures to the believers. Those of us who are involved in translation today are simply following in the footsteps of the first Gospel writers.

This is true in another way, as well. When the New Testament writers wanted to quote from the Old Testament, they needed to do this in Greek. There were basically three ways in which they did this. 1) They

translated from the Hebrew (or Aramaic translations of the Hebrew) themselves. 2) They quoted from memory (from Hebrew or Aramaic or Greek sources). 3) They used the old Greek translation, the Septuagint. It appears from the form of the quotes that the Septuagint was used as the basis for Old Testament quotes in the New Testament quotes 60% or more of the time.

When the Christian church wanted to agree on which books should be part of its own complete Bible, there was some disagreement, particularly about the Old Testament. Some people felt that only the Hebrew books should be included (these were the only books which were accepted by the Jews). Others felt that they should not lose the extra books and parts of books which had been included in the Septuagint. This disagreement was never settled among different groups of Christians, and it is still with us today. The Roman Catholic Church accepts the Hebrew books as the first part of the Old Testament, but they consider the material from Greek also to be a full part of the Old Testament (the second part, which they call the Deuterocanon). The Anglicans and some Protestant churches also use some or all of these books from the Greek, and they were included in the most Protestant versions when they were first translated into the vernacular. However, other Protestant churches consider only the Hebrew books to be part of the Bible, and now most Protestant versions do not contain these books. The Orthodox churches have even more books they consider authoritative, and these vary as well from group to group of Orthodox believers.

It is because of this that we now have two (and may soon have three) editions of many translations of the Bible. The shorter edition has only the books from Hebrew, and is preferred by most Protestant Churches. The longer edition is mainly for the Catholics, but it is also used by some Lutherans and Anglicans. Orthodox churches, who have only recently been thinking in terms of modern translations, may require yet another version.

Abbreviations

GNT	<u>The Greek New Testament</u>
HOTTP	<u>Hebrew Old Testament Text Project</u> (Interim Report unless indicated)
HUBP	<u>Hebrew University Bible Project</u>
JB	<u>The Jerusalem Bible</u>
JTS	<u>Journal of Theological Studies</u>
LXX	The Septuagint
MT	The Masoretic Text
NEB	<u>The New English Bible</u>
NIV	<u>The New International Version</u>
NJB	<u>The New Jerusalem Bible</u>
NRSV	<u>The New Revised Standard Bible</u>
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
REB	<u>The Revised English Bible</u>
RSV	<u>The Revised Standard Bible</u>
TEV	<u>Good News Bible</u> (Today's English Version)