

History of the Old Testament Text

OT 5202 – Old Testament Text and Interpretation
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Introduction

The earliest era of the Hebrew Scriptures transmission remains wrapped in the cloud as it did upon that mount in the wilderness of Sinai. There is little that is known of that earliest textual tradition because much has been obscured by time, through the ironic attempts to actually preserve the very texts that have been yet further obscured. This is not to say the texts have not been preserved faithfully, but only that there are indeed certain other traditions that were deemed fitting to the community of faith to be preserved within Israel's history. So Israel has given us their story and the story of their God and His revelation to them as it was finally passed down into the form we now encounter in the Masoretic text (and less so in the text now preserved in the traditions of the Eastern Church) from that earliest diversity of the nascent story. The following is that account briefly re-told with an eye to the history of the text itself, one, however, that recognizes that the text and the people cannot be conceived as separate without doing a severe injustice to one or the other...and so the story will be told of both.

1.0 Hebrew versions of the Old Testament text

On the mountain, Moses ascended into the cloud enveloped beyond the perceptions of the community (Exo.24:16). Even once he descended the community demanded that his face be veiled from them (Exo.34:29-35). Those days of his absence upon the mountain were obscured whereupon he received directly from Yahweh the revelation for Israel. Once in the camp of Israel, again the cloud remained...now upon the tent of Yahweh's presence where Moses would meet with Yahweh as seemed "face to face" (Exo.33:10-11). Yet this direct revelation to Moses was still hidden behind the hand of Yahweh (Exo.33:22, 23) and so despite the direct expectation

of unmediated revelation there remained a veil and a cloud. Israel could perceive as only from a distance (even when Yahweh drew near) the revelation of their God of the covenant. Upon the mountain there were rumblings...indistinct...unclear...diverse. This was followed by what may only be considered those laws which were indeed etched in stone by the hand of God (Exo.24:12; 31:18), though broken by the hands of man (Exo.32:19) and at the command of Yahweh re-engraved upon stone again (Exo.34:1, 28), this time to be kept in perpetuity in the ark of the covenant in the midst of the camp of Israel (Deut.10:1-5). This is the story of those texts and that final authoritative text.

1.1 Diversity (Early to 70CE)

The cloud shrouds in mystery Moses in the divine presence. Though he meets with Yahweh, none but he may approach the mountain that trembles and quakes. The Hebrew texts which eventually are compiled into the Old Testament as we know it are clouded in mystery. They are nearly unapproachable. There are hints here and there...rumblings...signs...but little of clear indication of their precise original forms. This first period of time may best be characterized as a period of diversity.¹ Each book has its own individual diverse history that requires specific tracing that has largely been lost, though some manner of recreation has been re-attained through the rumblings of the Qumran finds. This community (whatever it truly signifies) has provided evidence of a rich diversity of text forms of the Old Testament in Hebrew that perhaps were indicative of the diverse textual traditions present in Palestine in the first centuries before the Christian era. There were as yet no standardized texts or vocalizations of texts in the Hebrew, though this does not mean there were not individual scribes (or scribal schools?) that did not

¹ Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (2nd Rev. Ed., Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 29-33, 191.

attempt some form of vocalization standardization. The varieties of forms of the texts in the Hebrew appear to have simply existed side by side without any apparent significant difficulty for Israel.² The rumblings, after all, were part and parcel of the divine presence. How could one simply not admit them? The cloud could conceal and this would be not only acceptable, but necessary. In revelation Israel would be (and must be) content to let the veil remain.

1.2 Standardization (70CE to 700/800CE)

With the destruction of the temple and the dispersion of Israel among the nations, once again Israel was driven to her scriptures. This had an inherent effect (as it appears to have done in the Babylonian exile and destruction of the temple) of placing an intense weight upon the preservation of the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament). The instruction had been given as by the very hand of Yahweh Himself and so (though the veil remained) there was less room for rumblings, variety and distance. A new day had dawned for Israel. The elders and teachers of Israel (coming from what may be called the central stream of Israelite thought) knew that in order to preserve the teachings of Yahweh and preserve the people in the faithfulness of the covenant there would need to be a standardization of the texts.³ This was a long and slow process wherein standardization still managed to preserve many of the oral teachings to aid in the instructions given to Moses at Sinai and to offer aid to the scattered nation. If the hand of Yahweh had written in stone not only once (and that first time unseen except by Moses), but twice, the words which were given to Israel as covenant (תַּיִת ׀ Exo.34:28), and if the Torah could preserve these very words in two differing forms (Exo.20:1-17; Deut.5:6-21) then the move had already been made towards a standardization that recognized diversity. The stones

² Though the very existence of the Rabbinic writings testifies to the complexities of interpretations and as in one of those traditions for a book like Ezekiel there was a first century CE question about how to square Ezekiel's "torah" with the Torah of Moses as one of the most complex interpretive issues of all.

³ Ibid., 29, 33-35, 191.

had both been written upon, but there was yet to be any final placement within the camp. Full standardization would still await the work of others intent on once-and-for-all placing the writing in the Ark of the Covenant.

1.3 Masoretic (800CE to 1000CE)⁴

The final stage of the history of the Old Testament in Hebrew concerns the Masoretes. Under their care the Hebrew was meticulously counted and commented upon. They have become the ‘everlasting’ preservers of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament. One particular family of note was the Ben Asher family of Masoretes that preserved variants in the texts they had as well as vocalizations and making notes in the margins and throughout the text. It is only appropriate that there should have come down to us one primary text preserved as the text by which others are compared. While matters of textual criticism having bearing on the original text (a matter for discussion in a later paper) there still remains the wonder of the text(s) of the Masoretes that is amazingly standard. They took meticulous care to delineate the texts which best represented and preserved the faith of Israel (again many times preserving notations where some variants occurred). Though in the process they did exclude the Greek texts of the Old Testament for which reasons will be briefly discussed below. The community of Israel thus became the preserver of her Scriptures, and it is in her midst that this Masoretic work of preservation continued in perpetuity.

2.0 Greek versions of the Old Testament text

As Israel struggled in the desert with the unapproachable covenant God who spoke to Moses from the cloud upon the mount, it became apparent that the nation craved more...specifically the

⁴ For the sake of simplicity the term “Masoretic text” and “Masorete” is used while recognizing that there remains considerable variety among the various witnesses. I have used it in the paper with specific attention to the work of the family of Ben Asher of the Tiberian Masoretes. This should be borne in mind as one reads what follows. See the comments in Emanuel Tov pp. 22, 23.

delicacies of Egypt (Num.11:1-34). In Yahweh’s anger there would be a provision for the nation that would be both judgment and blessing. Judgment for failure to be satisfied in the provision of Yahweh; blessing because Yahweh is gracious and compassionate. At **הַקְּבֻרֹת הַיְהוֹדִים** “the-graves-of-the-ones-craving” in the wilderness, the very cravings of Israel led to an unexpected prophetic endowment of the Spirit. Yahweh came down in the cloud and took that very **רוּחַ** (Num. 11:25; “spirit”) that was on Moses and it rested upon the seventy elders and they prophesied (two even outside of the proper bounds of the tent of meeting precinct against the proper authority of Joshua’s wishes, but with Mosaic blessing). The Targum and the Vulgate versions seem to (better) fit the account that carries our story forward⁵: the elders of Israel were endowed with the very spirit of Moses and continued to prophesy from that day on. This gave them the authority of Moses. Not different from Moses, but *of* Moses. Perhaps with this story we might better frame the story of the Septuagint text of the Old Testament as the story of the elders receiving the very spirit of Moses (that is Yahweh’s Spirit)...some within the proper camp...some without...but all with Mosaic spirit (the Spirit of Yahweh) and approval. This was both a sign of judgment and blessing to the community of Israel. It meant judgment that Israel was scattered among the nations; blessing that Yahweh was still Lord of Israel even among the nations and particularly that the nations’ election in Christ would mean the certain election of Israel (though that is another story for another time).

2.1 Old Greek – Pentateuch (3rd century BCE) and other portions (2nd and 1st BCE)

⁵ The Masoretic text reads **וְלֹא יִפְּטְרוּ** (Num.11:25) and the LXX reads **καὶ οὐκέτι προσέθεντο** both of which may be literally interpreted “and they no longer added (or continued)” whereas the Targumim reads **וְלֹא פִּסְקִין** and the Vulgate reads *nec ultra cessarunt* which may be rendered as “and they no longer ended/ceased”. While the former reading seems more likely given the antiquity and authority of the readings, yet the latter readings seemed pertinent for telling the story of this particular project.

Israel had grown numerous in Egypt. It was the third century before the Common Era and there was a burgeoning need for the Torah in the language of the Jews of Alexandria, Egypt who no longer could read or understand Hebrew. According to the Letter of Aristeas, Ptolemy II of Egypt requested six elders (scribes?) from each of the twelve tribes of Israel be sent to translate the Torah of Moses into Greek and this was miraculously accomplished by them writing identically the same translation, though isolated from one another. The claims of some in the first century were such that divine inspiration was claimed for the Septuagint translation (as the foregoing tradition would suggest). The tie-in to the account in Numbers eleven is to be found in the actual name “Septuagint” which means “seventy” and the early claims of inspiration and authority for this translation. It appears that only the books of Moses were initially translated (though whatever actual history may be deduced from the Letter of Aristeas is questionable, yet there was a significant translation project that happened in the third century BCE) followed in the next several centuries by less careful translations by other translators of the other books of what eventually was compiled into the Old Testament. It is apparent that all of the texts of the Old Testament were originally written in Hebrew, but at times it is not apparent what Hebrew *Vorlage* laid behind the various Greek translations in part due to the various techniques of the translators as well as the quality of the translations made. The needs of the Diaspora were great but it was recognized that the “Seventy” were inspired by the same spirit as Moses to meet those needs. The blessing would not be untainted.

2.2 Revisions

There was a need for revisions almost immediately. It is uncertain what motivated the revisions beyond the recognition that there was discord with the Hebrew texts upon which the Greek was

supposed to be derived. The diversity (noted above) of Hebrew texts encountered by the Greek translators would have necessitated some sort of revisions as well as the need to attempt to improve the quality of the various Greek translations. Some of those revisions have been preserved (*kaige*-Theodotian, Aquila, Symmachus, Origen, Lucian) for our benefit. Perhaps there would still be a rejoinder to return to the “spirit of Moses,” as some translations were felt to have strayed too far, and a renewed call to the center of Israel was necessary.

2.2.1 *kaige*-Theodotian

The first revisions of the Greek translations occurred fairly early on and so what has become known as the *kaige*-Theodotian translation was born. It was the work of multiple translators covering what appear to have been several centuries of work. What little that remains of this particular text-form (Judges, Daniel, the Twelve and some of Samuel among possible several conjectured other portions of the Old Testament) demonstrates a *Vorlage* text that is in transition towards a proto-Masoretic text much like what emerged later in the standardized era of the Hebrew textual tradition.

2.2.2 Aquila

Another more literal Greek translation is that of Aquila in the early second century CE. He worked carefully from the Hebrew texts available to him and followed such a literal method that he even translated the untranslatable particle לְ with the Greek $\sigma\upsilon\nu$ “with” in order to preserve everything that he encountered in the Hebrew before him.⁶ The work of Aquila became the last of the Jewish attempts at revising the Greek translations and a return to the Hebrew. This was an attempt to demonstrate the very spirit of Moses that was continued upon the elders of Israel. Some (like *kaige*-Theodotian and Aquila) spoke more clearly within the precinct of the tent of

⁶Ibid., 146.

meeting, while others would speak from the outside. Those outside the tent were those confessing faith in the prophet like Moses – the Messiah Jesus of Nazareth.

2.2.3 Symmachus

Symmachus, an Ebionite of the second-third century CE, made a further revision of the Greek texts based upon the *kaige*-Theodotian revision, but following the sense of the text rather than trying to strictly translate every word from the Hebrew as Aquila before him had done.⁷ He did not follow the normal conventions of Greek translation as it had been practiced before him and thus was certainly considered ‘outside the camp’ though arguably he was trying to present the Scriptures in the spirit of Moses rather than the letter of Moses.

2.2.4 Origen

A massive work of the mid-third century CE was carried out by the tireless Church Father Origen called the Hexapla. It contained six columns representing a proto-Masoretic Hebrew text, a transliteration in Greek, and then the Greek translations by Aquila, Symmachus, Origen (in Origen’s column an obelos notes where the Hebrew has something but the LXX does not and an asterisk where the LXX has something that the Hebrew does not), and Theodotian.

2.2.5 Lucian

Another churchman named Lucian made a revision of the Greek text some time in the late third century/early fourth century CE. His work appears to have several layers of translational tradition some of which may actually testify to a very early (even original?) translation of the Hebrew as found at Qumran.⁸ Lucian’s work became the basis for what later has become the primary Old Testament text of the Eastern Church.

⁷ Ibid., 146, 147.

⁸ Ibid., 148.

Conclusion

The story of Israel is indeed the story of the Book (or so it would seem). The Hebrew and Greek of the history of the Old Testament belong to the story of Israel as a people. Israel (the Hebrew) before the mountain...trembling...receiving the very words of Yahweh, but veiled and yet preserved forever in the very midst of the congregation. Israel (the Greek) in the wilderness...needy...receiving the very spirit of Yahweh (that had been on Moses), but the blessing would be judgment...and the judgment would be blessing. The Hebrew textual tradition was from diversity to standardization. The Greek textual tradition was one that attempted from the Jewish translators (within the camp) to adhere more and more to the spirit of the letter of Moses, while the Christian translators (without the camp) felt free to adopt another way of the spirit. It was the Christian adoption of the Greek translations that likely finally led to the abandonment of Israel's revisions of the Greek translations and wholesale adoption of the Hebrew. The Church adopted the Greek of Israel. Israel returned to the Hebrew from which it had come, but the Church serves as both blessing and judgment to Israel (according to the reading of the Old Testament found in the New Testament). And so continues the story of Israel, her God, and His book.

Bibliography

Tov, Emanuel. *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*. 2nd rev. ed., Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001.