

**Formation of Canonical Texts:**  
**The Question of the “Original” Text of the Old Testament**

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## The Question of the Original Text

The question of the “original” text of the books of the Old Testament is a question that cannot be answered easily, nor should it be. It is a question that has a long history and one that requires a multifaceted answer. “The formulation of the original text is complicated by the assumption that in some books the authoritative edition such as known from MT was preceded by earlier literary editions, each of which was accepted as authoritative by subsequent generations.”<sup>1</sup> Questions of communities of faith and authority in the light of various histories and localities are key to answering the question of the “original” text. As such, there will be several brief case studies offered in order to better grapple with the question of the “original” text of at least several of the books of the Old Testament and thus perhaps to provide a slightly better perspective on the wider Old Testament as a whole.<sup>2</sup> These four case studies are each taken from a different portion of the Old Testament—the Torah (Deuteronomy 32), the Former Prophets (1 Samuel 1 and 11), the Latter Prophets (Jeremiah 25), and the Writings (Daniel 4)<sup>3</sup>—in order to better encompass some of the range of the Old Testament and to test the very boundaries of just how the original might be conceived in various settings.<sup>4</sup> Following the case studies will be a brief discussion of the texts used as canon, followed by a personal appraisal of the original text of the Old Testament in light of the foregoing case studies.

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1 Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 177.

2 “All the textual witnesses—except for those that reflect an early literary stage of the book—developed from the final authoritative copy which it is the object of textual criticism to reconstruct, even if only in isolated details”, *Ibid.*

3 The origins of a text like Deuteronomy 32 are well beyond the range of this paper (as are even the other texts as “brief” as they are) and so even within the selected passages only a very small sampling of one or two issues can be analyzed and even then it must be only cursory (so the specific passages will actually only cover Deuteronomy 32:8; 1 Samuel 1:22; 11:1; Jeremiah 25:1-13; and Daniel 4:4, 6-10). Another issue that will be discussed throughout this paper in the footnotes is the use/non-use of the variants within the texts and footnotes of the following English translations as testimony to various faith communities and the tension of a common text and the “original” text: ESV, NAB, NET, NIV (1984, 2011), NLT, NJB, and NRSV.

4 Also, the issue of generic genre covered by Deuteronomy 32 is poetic with portions of Jeremiah 25 and the semi-poetic Daniel 4. The two portions from First Samuel are narrative with most of Daniel 4 as well. While Jeremiah 25 has been written as prophetic oracle. This offers a fairly wide spectrum of genres though certainly not all and these are only broad categories not specifically delineated on purpose for the sake of the brevity of this paper and to simply engender some sense of the scope of the issues involved.

## Deuteronomy 32

The Song of Moses offers an insight into what many believe to be one of the earliest literary pieces of the Old Testament. It also offers interesting tidbits in particular because of the finds of the Dead Sea Scrolls and their relation to the LXX in contrast to the text as it has been preserved in the MT as the “original” Song of Moses. There are actually far too many textual issues to deal with in this extensive “song” and so only the following verse will be analyzed (vs.8):

בְּהִנֵּךְ חֵל עֲלֵיוֹן גּוֹיִם      בְּהִפְרִי דוֹ בְּנֵי אָדָם  
יַצַּב גְּבוּלֵת עַמִּים      לְמַסַּךְ פְּרָבֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

“When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance / When He divided it among the sons of man / He set the boundaries of the peoples / According to the number **of the sons of Israel.**”<sup>5</sup>

The point of particular interest in this passage are the very last two words in the Hebrew (which I have boldfaced in my translation). Most manuscripts of the LXX (=Aquila) read ἀγγέλων θεοῦ “angels of God” (LXX<sup>848 106c</sup> read ὑἱων θεοῦ “sons of God”) and a fragment from Qumran (4QDeut<sup>f</sup>) reads בני אלהים “sons of God.”<sup>6</sup> The issue at stake here seems to be the awkward juxtaposing of אָדָם (man) and יִשְׂרָאֵל (Israel) in the Masoretic text (followed by the Samaritan Pentateuch, Targumim, Syriac and Vulgate) which would not actually make for the poetic form that אֱלֹהִים (God) (or another form of the divine name) would in place יִשְׂרָאֵל which only requires the deletion/addition of יִשְׂרָאֵל.<sup>7</sup> It seems likely that theologically both the LXX and the MT have altered the “original” text (albeit for slightly differing reasons—see footnote six) in order to try to

5 My own translation.

6 According to a textual note in the NET Bible at Deuteronomy 32:8, “Sons of God is undoubtedly the original reading; the MT and LXX have each interpreted it differently. MT assumes that the expression “sons of God” refers to Israel (cf. Hos. 1:10), while LXX has assumed that the phrase refers to the angelic heavenly assembly (Pss 29:1; 89:6; cf. as well Ps 82). The phrase is also attested in Ugaritic, where it refers to the high god El's divine assembly. According to the latter view, which is reflected in the translation, the Lord delegated jurisdiction over the nations to his angelic host (cf. Dan. 10:13–21), while reserving for himself Israel, over whom he rules directly. For a defense of the view taken here, see M. S. Heiser, “Deuteronomy 32:8 and the Sons of God,” *BSac* 158 (2001): 52-74.”

7 Technically, it is proposed (and far more likely) that בני אלים (as noted in the emendation suggested by BHS) or בני אלהים (as in 4QDeut<sup>f</sup>) and not בני אל was the original reading as this would have fill out the poetic structure of each portion of the quatrain the most effectively.

understand or better represent an interpretation of it rather than to allow it to be free-standing as it was originally. The evidence certainly seems to actually point to Qumran and the LXX (at least several of the manuscripts) as preserving the original text of Deuteronomy 32 in this case.<sup>8</sup> On theological grounds this may be contentious, but on literary grounds the original seems to be the “sons of God” whatever that might be taken to *mean* to the community of faith is another issue altogether.

### **1 Samuel 1 and 11**

The second case study of interest is found in the Former Prophets and belongs to one of the books of the Old Testament known to have a long and difficult textual history for reconstructing—First Samuel. Two verses from different chapters will be examined and analyzed as a part of this case study to try to work towards a clearer understanding of the “original” text of the Old Testament in light of the “original” text(s) of First Samuel.<sup>9</sup>

The first chapter of Samuel in the twenty-second verse there is the additional phrase about Samuel that he would be a “Nazarite for all time” found in 4QSam<sup>a</sup> (and Josephus *Antiquities* 5.347 offers a comparable explanation that fits this gloss). The evidence for the addition against the MT of 1 Sam. 1:22 has been included in the text of the NAB, NRSV and as a footnote of the NLT and the NIV(2011). It is not even mentioned by the ESV, NET, NIV(1984), or NJB. Emanuel Tov, while recognizing that the rule of scribes being more “prone to add details than to omit them” cannot truly be “proven,” still he argues that the shorter text

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8 Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 269. The translations examined for this paper that presented “sons of God” within their respective texts as “original” were ESV, NAB, NJB; while the NET and NLT have the more interpretive “heavenly assembly/court”; and NRSV still more radically interpretive “[number of the] gods”. It was only footnoted in the NIV(1984, 2011) where “sons of Israel” remains in the text proper.

9 A text in 1 Samuel that has undergone considerable scrutiny and yet is recognized as likely in the end representing variant streams of “original” texts by the LXX and MT is found in the account of David and Goliath in 1 Samuel 17. Some of the major divergences for understanding which to prefer as “original” tend to be based more upon issues of text-critical or literary-critical grounds, but there are other divergences as well. See the extensive discussion and this particular conclusion in Dominique Barthélemy, *The Story of David and Goliath: Textual and Literary Criticism: Papers of a Joint Research Venture* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 73, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), 5, 155-156.

(represented by the MT) in 1 Samuel 1:22 “preceded the longer” text found at Qumran and suggested by Josephus.<sup>10</sup>

There is also another expansion in 1 Samuel at 11:1 in 4QSam<sup>a</sup> where Josephus (*Antiquities* 6.68-70) agrees with the reading.<sup>11</sup>

Nahash, king of the Ammonites, had been grievously oppressing the people of Gad and Reuben who lived east of the Jordan River. He gouged out the right eye of each of the Israelites living there, and he didn't allow anyone to come and rescue them. In fact, of all the Israelites east of the Jordan, there wasn't a single one whose right eye Nahash had not gouged out. But there were 7,000 men who had escaped from the Ammonites, and they had settled in Jabesh-gilead. (NLT)

The NET textual note on this verse suggest that it is possible it was original, but that the “external evidence is limited” and so one should be cautious about adopting the expansion though they do mention R. W. Klein and P. K. McCarter in their respective commentaries on 1 Samuel as offering reasonable support for the reading as found at Qumran and in Josephus. Emanuel Tov argues at length that at most the evidence of the 4QSam<sup>a</sup> addition's “originality seems plausible” and that it was likely “accidentally omitted at a very early stage” though it is not without its difficulties (one being the possibility of this being a *midrashic* addition).<sup>12</sup> This variant introduces material that is not actually pertinent to the main purpose of the larger narrative and it also “may introduce a chronological problem into the narrative flow (cf. 10:8; 13:8-14).”<sup>13</sup> However it is understood, it was certainly thought to be “original” for a particular faith community at one time and certainly offers a plausible explanation of the immediate text of 1 Samuel that follows it. While this does not prove the variant was the “original”, it is certainly

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10 Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 306.

11 The NLT and NRS have chosen to include this variant within the text proper, while the NAB, NET, and NIV(2011) have only included it as a footnote and the ESV, NIV(1984), NJB have no mention of this variant reading.

12 Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 343, 344; see especially on the possibility of the *midrashic* additions: 344fn22

13 Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 135; and see particularly his comments from Gordon and Baldwin's commentaries on this portion and the significance/usefulness of its place in our modern translations, 135fn35.

in its favor.

Eugene Ulrich argues extensively (through analysis of many other factors as well) that Josephus and the LXX used a text like 4QSam<sup>a</sup>.<sup>14</sup> In the quest for an “original” (from our perspective) this simply becomes another reminder that there was a wider community that possessed and used a common text of the different scrolls of the Hebrew Bible and thus testifies to various originals among different communities at various times held to be authoritative within those respective communities.

## Jeremiah 25

Moving on to a discussion of the Latter Prophets and specifically Jeremiah chapter 25 (a very pivotal chapter in a pivotal prophetic book), one discovers two variant traditions suddenly making their own way bravely forward with what appears to be two varying “originals”—Jer<sup>MT</sup> and Jer<sup>LXX</sup>.

The differences between Jer<sup>MT</sup> and Jer<sup>LXX</sup> are such that they cannot be attributed to scribal errors in the process of transmission. Nor can the Hebrew *vorlage* of the Septuagint be interpreted as an abbreviated version of the book. In view of their different placement of the Oracles against the Nations, Jer<sup>MT</sup> and Jer<sup>LXX</sup> represent two different editions of the same book. Chronologically, the edition reflected in Jer<sup>LXX</sup> precedes the one extant in Jer<sup>MT</sup>.<sup>15</sup>

Karel Van der Toorn argues that the scribes of Jer<sup>MT</sup> “expanded their text” in Jeremiah 25

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14 Ulrich describes what he believes to be Lucianic, *kaige*-Theodotian and Old Greek portions of the LXX of Samuel-Kings and Josephus overall reliance upon this Greek text for his base text in his *Antiquities*. Eugene Charles Ulrich, *The Qumran Text of Samuel and Josephus*, Harvard Semitic Monographs 19 (Missoula, MT, 1978).

15 Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 200; Emanuel Tov states nearly the same when he proposes: “Possibly in some cases two texts were equally authoritative, but in different milieus or different periods, but such an assumption cannot be supported with sound evidence. Upon completion of each literary stage it was distributed and became authoritative. However, when the next literary edition was created on the basis of the previous edition and was circulated, the previous one could not be eradicated. Therefore, even at a late period such as the time of the LXX translation or in the Qumran period, both literary forms were circulated. As a result, the Qumran manuscripts include both 4QJer<sup>a,c</sup> (=MT) which probably had the imprimatur of the Jerusalem spiritual center, and 4QJer<sup>b,d</sup> (=G [LXX]) which lacked such an imprimatur when it was brought to Qumran, even though it probably was acceptable to those circles at an earlier period.” Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 178; and also he defends this in Emanuel Tov, “The Contribution of the LXX to the Literary Criticism of the Bible,” *The Text-Critical Use of the Septuagint in Biblical Research*, revised and enlarged second edition, (Jerusalem Biblical Studies 8, Simor Ltd., 1997), 243-244.

by subtly “adding various references to King Nebuchadnezzar and the reign of the Babylonians.”<sup>16</sup> According to his thesis these scribes imposed a perspective upon the text with the addition of dating the first year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign (Jer.25:1) with Jehoiakim's fourth year as opposed to Jer<sup>LXX</sup> which does not include this time stamp and thus ties it in with Jeremiah 36:1-2. According to Van der Toorn, this becomes a theological interpretation for the community of the MT in light of the ending of the Davidic reign and the rise of the empires.<sup>17</sup> Emanuel Tov follows this same argument concerning Jeremiah when he writes that “some biblical books, like Jeremiah, reached a final status not just once, in MT, but also previously, as attested by some witnesses. Thus, when at an early stage the edition incorporated in the short texts of 4QJer<sup>b,d</sup> and G [LXX] ('edition I') was completed, it was considered authoritative and was circulated in ancient Israel.”<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps the conclusions of Duane Christensen would be appropriate when he states concerning the “original” text of Jeremiah 25 that “both LXX (as a translation and in terms of its Hebrew *Vorlage*) and MT are the canonical 'Word of God,' at least within their respective communities of faith.”<sup>19</sup> He proposes that there likely never was an “autograph” and even if there were it is well beyond our ability to know precisely just what it was now. Also, he believes that it would be preferable that there should not be a choice made between which text (LXX or MT) of Jeremiah 25 is “inerrant” or in our case “original”. Both may be maintained for the respective benefits to the wider community of faith without any harm being done and while maintaining the integrity of the text as it has been preserved by both communities and remains indiscernible concerning which was more “original” than the other. Both may be affirmed as

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16 Van der Toorn 201.

17 Van der Toorn 201, 202.

18 Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 178.

19 D. L. Christensen, “In Quest of the Autograph of the Book of Jeremiah: A Study of Jeremiah 25 in Relation to Jeremiah 46-51,” *JETS* 33 (1990), 153.

original in their own right and in relation to their respective immediate contexts and communities.

#### **Daniel 4**

The final case study is taken from the Writings portion of the Old Testament and specifically the book of Daniel. Daniel has a very complex history of development and transmission (one that is hotly debated) and certainly contains *midrashic* (i.e., Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three) and additional accounts (i.e., Bel and the Dragon, Judith).<sup>20</sup> Daniel 4 has two distinct texts forms—LXX and MT with Theodotion<sup>21</sup>—which will be examined briefly as a part of this study.

The LXX text of Daniel chapter four is a fourth longer than the Masoretic text<sup>22</sup> but still lacks 4:6-9. This section—and its lack in the preserved text—seems to be an attempt by the LXX to solve the dilemma of Daniel's absence from Nebuchadnezzar's court, while the Theodotion text follows much closer to the Masoretic longer text (4:3-5) in maintaining these four verses. Also, of interest is the theologically significant time notation that is found only in the LXX and not in Theodotion (4:4) which reads ἔτους ὀκτωκαιδεκάτου τῆς βασιλείας Ναβουχοδοноσορ (“the eighteenth year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar...”).<sup>23</sup> This would place the events of Nebuchadnezzar's humbling insanity right on the heels of the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem in 586BCE. The LXX had similarly given this exact time stamp to Daniel 3:1 in order to indicate the date for the story of the three Hebrews—

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20 Emanuel Tov clarifies the issue somewhat when he states “the recensionally different Hebrew texts behind various sections in [LXX] in...Daniel, in our mind all later than the edition of MT...are probably later *midrashic* developments, [and] need not be taken into consideration in this context.” Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 179.

21 One other notable variant is the *midrashic* “Prayer of Nabonidus”, one form of which has been preserved by three fragments at Qumran in 4QPrNab.

22 Joyce G. Baldwin, *Daniel*. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries vol. 23, (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2009), 123.

23 Of the eight translations being examined in this paper only the NET (at 4:4 in a footnote) mentions the LXX textual variant for the time notation concerning Nebuchadnezzar and the significantly differing texts of the LXX and MT throughout Daniel 4.

Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael—being thrown into the fire and yet preserved by God despite Nebuchadnezzar's greatest attempts to destroy them. The LXX translators thus seem to be trying to draw a theological connection between the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem and the events of Daniel (3 and) 4.<sup>24</sup>

Daniel 4 presents us with a text with two basic forms and one that seems preferably to be found in its “original” form in the MT. It appears that later it was re-interpreted with expansion by the LXX translation in order to offer a particular theological understanding of the events of the destruction and the supernatural preservation. Is it possible that the LXX was using a Hebrew text that contained this material? It is possible that this is the case and that it also contained a much shorter text of Daniel 4 (as noted earlier), but it seems more likely that given the state of the LXX text in Daniel there may be considerable disarray of the “original” text (such as its notable *midrashic* expansions in a book already filled with midrashic-like elements), but one should not rule out the absolute possibility that there were two distinct “original” texts of Daniel that were preserved by two different communities—one by the Masoretic tradition and the other by the LXX.

### **The Differences of Texts Used as Canon**

The question still remains...how does one evaluate the data and discern the “original” text of the Old Testament? Perhaps the careful evaluation of such scholars as Ulrich and Tov who believe that “when the early editions of these books were completed, they were accepted by the people as final and were accordingly put into circulation, but at a later period 'revised editions' of the books, intended to replace the earlier ones, were written and circulated” is sufficient for our purposes of what constitutes the “original”.<sup>25</sup> While these earlier editions remained only for

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24 Stephen R. Miller, *Daniel*. The New American Commentary vol. 18, (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 1994), 128fn4.

25 Tov, *The Text-Critical Use of the Septuagint in Biblical Research*, 240.

small scattered communities and only “by mere chance” have survived to the present “in the Septuagint translation and through the discoveries of Qumran,”<sup>26</sup> yet (at least for the Eastern Orthodox Churches) the text of the LXX has preserved what is considered the “original” text of the Old Testament—authoritative for one particular community of faith—first for the Jews of the Diaspora and then for the Greek speaking Church.

The MT has preserved another stream of the “original” text of the Old Testament. One that appears at times to be older than the Hebrew *vorlage* of the LXX,<sup>27</sup> but still one that suggests itself as the “original” text of the central stream of the community of faith in Israel. It found its appeal in the centralized worship of the Temple and later in particular in the keepers of the Jewish traditions and Scriptures—the Pharisaic fathers. This became the basis for the Jewish faith's text as canon once it was apparent that the Church had adopted the Greek text of the Old Testament for its own purposes (among certain other sociological and religious issues). It was considered the only “original” text (even though there were still minor divergences among the manuscripts).

Lastly concerning the issue of text used as canon is not only the LXX and MT, but also the texts of Qumran. While the community (?) of Qumran remained buried until the 20<sup>th</sup> century affirming (at times) that very same strand of the “original” text as the LXX and at others the MT and at others an elsewhere altogether unattested text-form. Do these non-aligned texts of the Judean Desert testify to yet another possible stream of “original” text-form of the Old Testament beyond the LXX and the MT? Did the Qumran community (?) consider their texts a “canon”? There still remain far too many mysteries about the remains of Qumran and those who deposited

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26 Ibid.

27 It is intriguing that at times the LXX has added significant portions and at others the MT. Once again careful consideration must be made of the individual books of the Scriptures as well as even individual portions of those very books in order to attempt to discern the strata of composition and transmission and how this affects the perspective of what constitutes the “original” text.

the texts there to state emphatically just what the view was, but it does seem apparent that there was a sense of sacred Scripture even in the midst of all of the various types of writings.

### **So What Is An Original Text of the Old Testament? A Personal Perspective(?)**

So what is an “original” text of the Old Testament”? It is a text that was composed and recognized as authoritative to the community of faith in Israel. This is an issue of the wider acceptance and of authority. The majority of texts of the Old Testament are quite clear as to what is “original” since the variants are simply either not extant or non-substantial. There are not many questions regarding such texts. However, some must be determined through significant processes of literary, text-critical, historical, theological methods, etc. (such as the texts of Deut.32:8 and the possibility of Dan.4:4, 6-10). While other passages, even after such processes, must be allowed to maintain a sense of multiplicity in there being more than one “original” text (such as in 1 Sam.1:22; 11:1 and more particularly in the case of Jer.25:1-13). In other words, there are no simple answers to the question of what is the “original” text of the Old Testament. Perhaps part of this may actually be demonstrated even by the modern translational choices where there have been footnotes that demonstrate variant “originals,” but because there still can be only one text in the text proper there must always be some primary choice for the community, but with the allowance/recognition of a multiplicity of possible streams of the “original” text.

This question cannot (nor should it) be answered properly as an individual. There must always be a careful and thoughtful sifting and this must be done as a part of the broader community of faith since this was always an issue of the various communities' “original” texts to begin with. It truly can never become a “personal perspective” or it fails to be that which it is and always was—the communities' text (even while it remains a text that is external to said community as constitutive and corrective of that very community). This is not to say that the individual does not have an opinion about matters of this or that issue, but only that in the end all

matters still belong to the wider community of faith in one sense or another (whether to a broader community or a narrower).

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