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Christoph Levin: The Old Testament

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CHAPTER 1



“NOT A DOT, NOR A TITTLE
SHALL PASS”

The Text of the Old Testament

A book which goes back to the time before the invention of printing makes us ask about the history of its written transmission. How reliable is the version that has come down to us? What earlier versions preceded it? How far back do the testimonies which we have in black and white go? It is only if we can be sure that we have an authentic text before us that we have a basis for conclusions about the origin of what the text contains.

THE HEBREW TEXT

The oldest extant complete Hebrew manuscript of the Bible is *Codex B19A*, which is now in the public library in Saint Petersburg. It is known as the *Codex Leningradensis*, but has recently been renamed the *Codex Petropolitanus*. The scribe's colophon states that it was written in 1008 CE, in Cairo. It is also the best preserved manuscript of the whole Hebrew biblical text, and is the basis of most scholarly editions. It is excelled

only by the *Aleppo Codex*, which is a few decades older, but a quarter of which has been lost since 1948.

The Aleppo and other manuscripts were written by what are known as the Masoretes, who were active from the eighth to the tenth century CE in Tiberias, on Lake Gennesaret. The Hebrew word “Masora” means “tradition,” and the text passed down by these scribes is known as the *Masoretic text*. There were two leading families of scholars, the ben Asher family and the ben Naftali family. The Aleppo Codex, which served as a master copy for the preparation of other manuscripts, was vocalized by Aaron ben Asher, the Codex Petropolitanus by Samuel ben Jacob, on the basis of Aaron ben Asher’s vocalization.

The impetus for this work came from the sect of the Karaites (“adherents of Scripture”), which spread from Babylonia from the eighth century onwards. The Karaites rejected the rabbinic interpretation, as passed down in the Talmud, and turned exclusively to Holy Scripture itself—a Jewish example of what Luther was later to insist on as *sola scriptura*—“through Scripture alone.” Once tradition was no longer used as a help in the reading, it was important that even the most minute detail should not be in doubt. This attitude, in its turn, had a subsequent influence on rabbinic Judaism too. The Masoretes were Rabbanim.

The most important achievement of the Masoretes was the precise recording of the pronunciation. Like all Semitic alphabetical scripts, Hebrew-Aramaic is a consonantal script—that is to say, only the consonants in a word were written down. The result is a multiplicity of ambiguities and uncertainties. It is as if we

were presented with the word “ht” and had to deduce from the context whether to read it as “hat”, “hit”, “hot” or “hut.” It is true that the text never existed without a traditional pronunciation—people knew how they were expected to read it—but now the exact reading was fixed in writing through a system of vowel signs and accents: the *punctuation*.

The vocalization subjected the language which had developed in the course of centuries to a unified grammatical system. This could cause inconsistencies between the transmitted text (the *K^etîb*) and the Masoretic reading (the *Q^erê*). The Masoretes resorted to noting their interpretation of the consonantal text in the margin of the column. This marginal apparatus (the “small Masorah,” or “*Masorah parva*”) also offered the opportunity to pass on old traditional readings as well as statistical and grammatical indications. Its main purpose, however, was to protect the text from alteration. “Masoret is a fence for the Torah,” said Rabbi Aqiba (d. 135 CE). In addition to the *Masorah parva*, the *Masorah magna*, or “large Masorah,” was added at the head and foot of the columns. This is an apparatus of parallel passages, compiled in the course of a long interpretative tradition.

In rabbinic Judaism, the text which emerged in this way pushed out all other versions. Manuscripts which had become unusable were not preserved, let alone used again, it being the custom to bury them solemnly; and this meant that earlier forms of the text were lost. For a long time enquiries into the pre-Masoretic textual history therefore drew a blank. The biblical quotations in the rabbinic writings showed only that the consonantal

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text agreed down to the smallest detail with the textual form which was the only one to be passed down in Judaism from the end of the first century CE. It was a sensational discovery in the second half of the nineteenth century which first brought about a new situation for textual study. A large number of manuscripts—an estimated 200,000 fragments—which had been forgotten and escaped destruction were discovered in the *Genizah* (Heb.: “storage place”) of the Old Cairo synagogue. Today these fragments are in the University Library in Cambridge, England, and in other European and North American libraries. The oldest go back to the sixth century CE. This discovery revealed, among other things, that there were preliminary stages to the Masoretic system of vocalization.

Rabbinic Judaism was not the only religious community to hand down the Old Testament. There were also the Samaritans, who had their own shrine on Mount Garizim near Sichem. They had split off from the postexilic Jewish community at some unknown date, and kept the Torah as their Holy Scripture, though not the rest of the Old Testament. The earliest extant manuscripts of the *Samaritan Pentateuch* date from the twelfth century. Apart from some dogmatic corrections, they preserve a separate form of the text, which goes back to pre-Christian times.

THE GREEK TEXT

Hellenistic Diaspora Judaism also possessed its own version of the Old Testament: the *Septuagint*. The Latin

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means “seventy,” and this Greek text is designated by the Roman numbers LXX (seventy). The name goes back to the legend about its origin handed down in the Letter to Aristeas, which was written in the first century BCE. According to the story, Demetrius of Phaleron, the head of the famous library in Alexandria, proposed to King Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285–246) that the Jewish laws be included in the library. For this purpose, the Torah was translated into Greek in exactly seventy-two days by seventy-two learned men, six from every tribe of Israel, whom the high priest Eleazar sent from Jerusalem to Alexandria, the translation then being approved by the Jewish congregation there. The account was given a miraculous embroidery in later Christian tradition, but may be based on historical fact to the extent that in the middle of the third century BCE the Torah was first translated into Greek for the religious needs of the Egyptian Diaspora. After that the rest of the Old Testament was gradually translated too (in different ways in the individual books). The prologue to the translation of the book of Sirach (made after 132 BCE) is aware that “the Law, the prophets, and the other books” exist in Greek.

The Septuagint differs from the Masoretic text not only in its language. The copy from which the translation has been made (the *Vorlage*) represents a different form of the text. That is particularly evident from its compass. The Septuagint includes a number of books which are missing in the Hebrew Bible. The book of Daniel and the book of Esther are much longer in the Greek version, and others, such as the book of

Jeremiah, are shorter. If we put the Greek and Hebrew texts side by side we are inescapably faced with the question: which text is the original? In the case of Holy Scripture the comparison is gunpowder, in religious terms. What is to count as revelation? It is obvious that the Hebrew text must take precedence. There are indications that even in the pre-Christian era the Greek Bible had occasionally been corrected according to the Hebrew text. But this presents textual studies with a problem: the Hebrew text which provided the basis for the corrections was not identical with the copy from which the translation had been made. So the Septuagint began early on to lose its character as representative of a separate textual form.

In the year 70 CE, with the destruction of the Second Temple, the Jewish community lost its focal point and this meant that the reference to Holy Scripture acquired all the more importance for Jewish religious identity. Judaism finally became a book religion. Consequently it was no longer possible to tolerate a multiplicity of textual forms. From this point on, reference was made solely to the version from which the Masoretic text was later derived, all others being rejected. Christians coming from Judaism, on the other hand, who appealed to the authority of Jesus Christ as well as to Scripture, did not share this exclusive understanding of Scripture, and they kept the traditional Greek Bible. It thus came about that the Septuagint was passed down only by the church, and became the Christian version of the Old Testament.

In the second century CE, new translations of the proto-Masoretic text were made for Greek-speaking

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Jews in place of the Septuagint. The translation which best reflects their mentality is the *Aquila* translation, which attempts a literal rendering of the Hebrew text into Greek. From now on, just as in the rabbinic interpretation of Scripture, every detail was important theologically as being part of revelation; ultimately speaking, the sacred text cannot be translated at all. The somewhat later translations of *Symmachus* and *Theodotion* are closer than *Aquila* to the nature of the Greek language. But in the end the commitment to the Hebrew text was so strong that none of these translations remained in use, and except for some traces in Septuagint manuscripts they have been lost.

The relation between the Hebrew and the Greek text was not, however, elucidated just because the Jewish community abandoned the Septuagint. In the dispute about the Christological interpretation of the Old Testament, the difference acquired dogmatic importance. Although the Christians were convinced that their text had the quality of revelation, its difference from the Hebrew text of the Jews infused an uncertainty; and out of this an early form of textual criticism developed, its most masterly achievement being the *Hexapla*.

The *Hexapla* is a six-column Bible, compiled round about 240–245 CE, with which the great Alexandrian theologian Origen, working in Caesarea on the Palestinian coast, aimed to prove (or if necessary construct) agreement between the Greek and Hebrew texts. This gigantic work is said to have comprised fifty volumes. The Hebrew consonantal text, a Greek transliteration, the *Aquila* and *Symmachus* translations, the Septuagint,

and the Theodotion translation were set side by side. On this basis, manuscripts were prepared which corrected the Septuagint according to the Hebrew text. In particular, the extra passages in the Hebrew text were inserted into the Septuagint from the Theodotion, Symmachus, or Aquila translations. These were marked by asterisks. Anything in the Greek text which was missing in the Hebrew was marked with an omission sign (*obelos*). In the course of further copying, these signs could easily drop out, the result being the "hexaplaric" text, with which the Septuagint lost its character as a form independent of the proto-Masoretic text.

Although the Hexapla has been lost except for a few fragments, Septuagint research has ways of reconstructing the original text. A translation of the edited text into Syriac, the *Syrohexapla* (616–617 CE), has preserved the text-critical marks precisely, so that it is possible to trace the process of revision in detail. The church fathers also often quote the pre-hexaplaric text in their commentaries. The great fourth-century Bible manuscripts, the *Codex Vaticanus* (now in the Vatican Library) and the *Codex Sinaiticus* (discovered in Saint Catherine's Monastery on the Sinai peninsula in 1844 and 1849, and now in Leipzig and London) show only slight editorial influence. Papyrus findings testify to the prehexaplaric textual history from the second to the fourth century. Finally, the Septuagint was already translated into the languages spoken in Christendom before the third century. Of these daughter translations, the translations into Coptic dialects made in Egypt are particularly important, as is the Latin translation used in the church of the Western Roman Empire (known as

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the *Vetus Latina*), although only fragments of this have survived.

OTHER TRANSLATIONS

Whereas the Septuagint has remained the Bible of the Eastern churches down to the present day, the biblical tradition of the West was determined by the *Vulgate*, the Latin translation of the Bible made by Jerome (ca. 347–420). This undertaking can be seen as a further attempt to reconcile the Hebrew text of the Jews and the Greek text of the Christians. The translation was commissioned by Pope Damasus I (366–384), and between 390 and 405 Jerome translated the whole of the Old Testament on the basis of the Hebrew text of the time—that is to say, according to the proto-Masoretic text (although the *Vetus Latina* still retained a certain influence). In the eighth and ninth centuries the *Vulgate* came to be generally accepted in the Western church. After proponents of the Reformation, under the influence of humanism, had returned to the Hebrew text, the Council of Trent declared in 1546 that the *Vulgate* was the authoritative text to be used by the Roman Catholic Church in matters of doctrine.

Of other translations, the most important is the Bible used by the Syriac Church, the *Peshitta* (Syr.: “the simple”). It is common to both denominations, the West Syriac Jacobites, and the East Syriac Nestorians, and therefore dates back to the period before their separation in the fifth century CE. There are well-founded reasons for assuming that the *Peshitta* is

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based on older Aramaic translations, known collectively as the *Targumim*. As Hebrew fell out of use, it became the custom in the worship of the synagogues to make the Bible text that was read comprehensible by way of an Aramaic paraphrase. This gave rise to firm traditions, and in the end these were also committed to writing. In the case of the Torah, the Targum Onqelos became authoritative, for the prophetic books the Targum Jonathan.

QUMRAN

The present state of textual study is determined by the findings made between 1947 and 1956 in the Judean desert. In the Qumran area, fifteen kilometers south of Jericho, on the Dead Sea, hidden in eleven caves, fragments of more than 190 Biblical scriptural scrolls came to light. These put our knowledge of the textual history on a new foundation. With the exception of the book of Esther, all the books of the Bible are represented, even if only in tiny fragments. Most impressive is the complete scroll of the book of Isaiah (now in the Shrine of the Book in Jerusalem). The majority of the fragments date from the second and first centuries BCE, but some go back as far as the third century BCE.

These discoveries show that round about the turn of the era, several textual forms of the Old Testament existed side by side. What is especially important is the fact that the proto-Masoretic text is also represented. This shows that this text, which was the only one used in the Jewish community from the end of the

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first century CE, is not an edited revision, but is also a form of the text with its own history. Some of the Qumran fragments are also close to the Samaritan form of the text. Among the earliest manuscripts, we come across some which correspond to the Hebrew Vorlage of the Septuagint. From these we can see how closely the Greek translation adhered to the Hebrew on which it was based. Finally, there are forms of the text which were hitherto unknown and for which we have evidence only in Qumran. These differ from the proto-Masoretic text through, among other things, a freer, less strict mode of transmission.

The path to the original text leads by way of a comparison between the Masoretic text (which can count as being the very best text for most of the Old Testament) and the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Qumran fragments, and above all the pre-hexaplaric Septuagint. In the case of certain books, this comparison can even show that there never was a single original text, but that the different textual forms were stages in a literary process which ultimately branched out into separate paths.