

Appendix I: Concerning Ancient Manuscripts and Versions

It has been over half a century since the first Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered near the Dead Sea. The initial scholarly enthusiasm has subsided, as no great change to the Old Testament message has resulted. Still, it has been possible to make a few scroll-supported corrections with greater confidence. So we may consider where the ancient manuscripts and versions have come from, and then what we can learn from them.

The Septuagint

Beginning in the third century BC, about seventy-two Jewish scholars in Alexandria, Egypt, were funded by Ptolemy II to translate the Hebrew Scriptures into a Greek version called the Septuagint (meaning Seventy). A century later, in the time of the Greek/Syrian kings' (the Seleucid Dynasty, of Greek origin) conquest and subjection of Judea, the high priest's office came to be gained by bribing the Syrian king, and even by murdering the legitimate high priest. Thus began the dissension between the Pharisees (including most scribes of the Massoretic Hebrew text of the Old Testament), who refused to accept appointment of God's high priest by a Gentile, and the Sadducees (Zadokites), the wealthier faction headed by the high priest. (The Septuagint¹ appears to have been translated from a text close to that of the later Sadducees, and not from a Massoretic text type.)

Dead Sea Scrolls

When the leaders of the Maccabean revolt against the Syrian kings deposed the high priest for not supporting the revolt, and substituted one from among their own, a portion of the priesthood and their followers withdrew from the Jewish community altogether and settled in the desert around Qumran, just west of the Dead Sea. From the Biblical and commentary scrolls, which they hid in their caves, we have today the Dead Sea Scrolls. A few more scrolls were preserved nearby at Wadi-Murabbaat, Nahal Hever, and Masada.²

Massoretic Text

Forty years after the first Passover of Jesus' ministry, the Romans came to Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple. The sect of the Sadducees, whose work had centered around the Temple, was destroyed with the Temple.³ From that time on, the Massoretic text has held sway.⁴

Aramaic, Vulgate, and Others

The Samaritans, a people of mixed Israeli and foreign parentage, have preserved a Pentateuch in their dialect, which shows evidence of contact with the Septuagint. The Aramaic (Syriac) and Latin-Vulgate versions were translated from the Massoretic text, but later revised in several places by comparison with the Septuagint, and possibly other Hebrew texts. Owing to Jewish dissatisfaction with the Septuagint, other Greek translations were made from the Massoretic text, notably by Aquila (torturously literal), Theodotion (a revised Septuagint), and Symmachus (literary Greek). Later Greek editions of Origen and Lucian are of still less value to us today.

¹ The Septuagint was quoted or paraphrased in the New Testament much in the same way the King James Version (Authorized Version) is quoted today.

² The Biblical Scrolls, translated into English, have been published by Martin Abegg, Jr., Peter Flint, and Eugene Ulrich, "The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible;" San Francisco: Harper, 1999.

³ Qumran was abandoned within three more years, just before the fall of Masada in AD73.

⁴ The Massorettes were charged with faithfully copying the Bible (Old Testament) possibly as early as the time of Ezra the priest after the fifth-century return from Babylonian captivity. From the small number of variants between hundreds of Massoretic manuscript copies known today, and yet written up to a thousand years apart, one may infer that the earlier Massorettes had not been any less careful. Thus, the present Massoretic text (apart from vowels) should be a good representation of the text of two thousand years ago. [Vowels were not added to the text until a thousand years later; so occasionally, there is an ambiguity in reading from the consonants alone.]

Also, Aramaic paraphrases, called Targums, offer some early understanding of various texts. Josephus gives a history (in Greek) paralleling the historical books of the Old Testament.

Text of the Scrolls

More than two hundred fragmentary Biblical manuscripts were recovered from Qumran's caves, in a race between Arabs and archaeologists (Arabs winning most of the time). Twenty-one manuscripts are from Isaiah, one is virtually complete (1QIsa^a, where "1" stands for Cave 1, "Q" stands for Qumran, "Isa" stands for Isaiah, and "a" stands for the first manuscript catalogued for that book and that site; written likely in the 2nd century B.C., and therefore about the oldest Dead Sea Scroll, it might have even preceded the Septuagint translation of Isaiah). Although this latter exhibits over a thousand variants from the Massoretic text, most are minor.⁵ In the first ten chapters of Isaiah, 1QIsa^a's variants are singular (unsupported by any other manuscripts or versions) about 15% of the time; its variants disagree with the Massoretic text about 90% of the time, and disagree with the Septuagint about 60% of the time. (The Massoretic text and Septuagint agree with each other in about half of these variants.) On the other hand, two Cave-4 manuscripts, 4QIsa^b and 4QIsa^f, agree with the Massoretic text more than half the time; 4QIsa^f agrees with Aramaic and Latin most of the time, but not with the Septuagint. (1Isa^b, present intermittently from chapter 10 on, usually agrees with the Massoretic text. 4QIsa^c agrees with the Massoretic text in nearly half the variants. Other scrolls are more fragmentary.)

In the Psalms, 11QPs^a often varies (though not often significantly) from the Septuagint, and still more often from the Massoretic text. But from Masada, MasPs^b may be considered a Massoretic text. The situation is similar in many other books. Thus, the Dead Sea Scroll libraries represent more than just one or two text types.

Considering the origin of the Qumran community, one might have expected its scrolls to agree more with the Sadducee texts, and with their presumed-derivative Septuagint, than with the Massoretic text. But it appears Qumran had some texts of each type, not infrequently differing with each other, and none being entirely free of scribal mistakes. The hundreds of Massoretic manuscripts are much closer to one another than are the Qumran manuscripts, or even the Greek Septuagint manuscripts.⁶

Estimated Value of the Old Testament Manuscripts and Versions

It is quite generally acknowledged that the Greek New Testament is the second-best-preserved book of antiquity, and the best-preserved is the Hebrew Old Testament. Still, some corrections can be made from the ancient manuscripts and versions (translations into other languages). It would appear that the best witnesses to the text of the Hebrew Old Testament are, in approximately decreasing order of value,

Class A (Best)	Class B	Class C
Massoretic ^{MT} (text)	Aramaic (=Syriac)	Aquila (Greek; Gk ^{Aq})
Dead Sea Scrolls	Vulgate (Latin)	Theodotian (Greek; Gk ^{Theod})
Massoretic ^{mg} (margin)		Symmachus (Greek; Gk ^{Symm})
Septuagint (Greek)		Targum[s] (Aramaic paraphrases)
Samaritan (Pentateuch only)		Josephus (a Jewish history)

⁵ The most common variant is the inclusion or omission of a single letter, vav (ו), most-often translated "and." Spelling variants are also common. Isaiah has about 1291 verses, which averages about one variant per verse, no matter how trivial.

⁶ The Sopherim, perhaps in the time of Ezra, or perhaps as late as the first century, made around two hundred alterations in the Hebrew text thence preserved by the Massorettes, but these changes were recorded by the Massorettes in the margins of their manuscripts.

The Hebrew Alphabet and its Alphabetic Numerics

Letter	Name	Sound	Number	Gk. Equiv.	Letter	Name	Sound	Number	Gk. Equiv.
א	aleph	-*	1	α	ל	lamed	l	30	λ
ב	beth	b (v)	2	β	מ	mem	m	40	μ
ג	gimel	g	3	γ	נ	num	n	50	ν
ד	daleth	d	4	δ	ס	samech	s	60	ξ
ה	he	h	5	ε	ע	ayin	-*	70	ο
ו	vav	v	6	[/]	פ	pe	p	80	π
ז	zain	z	7	ζ	צ	tsade	ts	90	-
ח	cheth	ch	8	η	ק	qoph	q*	100	[]
ט	teth	t	9	θ	ר	resh	r	200	(ρ)
י	yod	i, y	10	ι	ש	shin	s, sh	300	(σ)
כ	kaph	k	20	κ	ת	tav	th	400	(τ)

*Originally, א aleph likely had a very soft h sound; ע ayin a gh (aspirated) sound (compared to g, as ch is to k); ח ch as in the Scottish loch, or German ich, mich; ק q is pronounced from deeper in the throat than k. [Although the Greek alphabet was derived from the Canaanite/Hebrew alphabet, tsade was not retained, while /vau (digamma, 6),] qoppa (90), and] sampi (900) were later dropped. Beginning with] = 90, the Greek alphabetic numerics are moved up one notch; so ρ = 100, σ = 200, τ = 300, υ = 400, φ = 500, χ = 600, ψ = 700, ω = 800, [] = 900]. ζ was often substituted for / . Note that the Hebrew letters face left, while the Greek letters face right; each faces in the direction in which it is written.]

An example of the use of these alphabetic numerics in very ancient Hebrew manuscripts seems implied in Nu 3:28, as outlined in its footnote.

Hebrew vowels are given below, with pronunciations as given by Hebrew Student's Manual (HSM; 19th century), and for modern Sephardic and Ashkenaz Jewry per Sol Scharfstein, A Reading and Prayer Primer; Hong Kong: Ktaz Publishing House, Inc., 1989.

Long Vowel	HSM	Sfardi	Ashkenazi	Short Vowel	HSM	Sfardi	Ashkenazi	Vowel	HSM	Sfardi	Ashkenazi
ָ	ā	ā	aw	ַ	ă	ă	ă	ְ	brief ä		
ֶ	ē	ā	ā	ֻ	ě	ě	ě	ִ	brief ě		
ִ	ī			ֵ	ĩ	ĩ	ĩ	ֶ	brief ö		
ֹ	ō	ô	ō	ֻ	ǔ	ǔ	aw	ִ			
ֺ	ū	ōō	ōō	ֵ	ũ	ōō	ōō	ֶ			
				ֻ				ִ	silent	silent	silent

ōō is pronounced as in ooze, moon, room. ô as in corn, more. ָ and ַ may be either long or short. The Hebrew Students Manual, p. 5-7, gives for vowels the pronunciation rules in older Hebrew.

The Hebrew alphabet was evidently already in use in Moses' time, but the vowel points were not invented until somewhere around the seventh century A.D., more than two millennia later.