Digging Deeper into the Hebrew

What I am going to cover in this chapter is probably more technical than most laypeople care to read, but if you're one of the curious ones, you should understand that what I present here is still a simplification of a complicated topic.

How Was the Old Testament Written?

The origins of much of the Old Testament are hidden in obscurity. Many of the books are anonymous. For some books, it's suggested they were originally separate accounts strung together by an editor. As the Hebrew language evolved (as all languages do), we know that the grammar and vocabulary of the books were updated, much like the King James Version was updated to the New King James Version. Given these facts, can we know how the Old Testament was actually written, compiled, and transmitted up until the time of Jesus?

We have hints. God started the process by writing the Ten Commandments with his very own finger (Exod 31:18) and then having Moses write a second set (34:1). Repeatedly God told Moses to write out what had happened: "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will completely blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven'" (Exod 17:14; see also 34:27; Num 17:2).

At the end of Moses's life, he was told to write out all that he had been told: "After Moses finished writing in a book the words of this law from beginning to end, he gave this command to the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord: 'Take this Book of the Law and place it beside the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God. There it will remain as a witness against you'" (Deut 31:24–26; cf. 31:9–13). Notice that he did not write *some* of the words of

this law; he wrote *all* the words of the law—"from beginning to end." However, we don't know precisely what "this law" was.

The priests were to write out the curses on a scroll (Num 5:23). The future king was "to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the Levitical priests" (Deut 17:18). When Joshua entered the Promised Land, God spoke these words to him:

> "Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful." —Joshua 1:7–8

The laws Moses had given to the people had to be written down by this early date. The point of all this is to show that the people of God placed a high priority on the written word. The Hebrew Bible also references other written documents that have been lost, such as the Book of Jashar (Josh 10:13; 2 Sam 1:18) and the Book of the Wars of the Lord (Num 21:14).

Jeremiah 36 contains the story of how the prophet wrote his book. God told him to "take a scroll and write on it all the words I have spoken to you concerning Israel, Judah and all the other nations from the time I began speaking to you in the reign of Josiah till now" (v. 2).
This means that Jeremiah (or an assistant) must have been keeping records of the previous prophecies. Jeremiah dictated the prophecies to his scribe Baruch, who wrote them on a scroll (v. 4), which was then read out loud (vv. 8–10). Baruch must have kept his records because after King Jehoiakim cut up the scroll and burned the pieces (v. 23), Jeremiah and Baruch were able to repeat the process (v. 28). Jeremiah's book must have been kept intact, since Daniel was reading it seventy years later as he struggled to understand why the captivity had not ended (Dan 9:1–2).

Jesus repeatedly referred to things Moses had written (Matt 8:4 [Mark 1:44; Luke 5:14]; 19:7–8 [Mark 10:4–5]; Mark 7:10), including the story of when God spoke to Moses in the burning bush recorded in "the Book of Moses" (Mark 12:26; Luke in his gospel [2:22] references "the Law of Moses"). The text doesn't claim that Moses wrote every word of the Pentateuch; Moses undoubtedly did not write about his own death (Deut 34:5–12). However, Jesus did place Moses's stamp of authority on it, and it is certainly a strong biblical tradition that Moses wrote and assembled most of the Pentateuch.

The book of Joshua claims to have been written by Joshua (24:26). We don't know who wrote Judges and Ruth (perhaps Samuel), 1 and 2 Samuel (perhaps Samuel wrote the first part), 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Esther, or Job. The prophets did attach their names to their writings, and so we believe that they, or their students under the supervision of the prophet, wrote their own books (cf. Jer 36:2).

Starting with Ezra, we know there was a renewed interest in the Hebrew Bible, and perhaps it was Ezra who collected all the ancient writings and put them together, including the psalms of David and the writings of Solomon (Proverbs, perhaps Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs). Peter Gentry points out that according to 2 Maccabees 2:13–14, a book in the Old Testament Apocrypha, "Judas collected the books *as a library* after the war, following the example of Nehemiah before him.[1]

The point of all this is that the Jewish people have been writing down the sayings of God and the activities of his people from the earliest of times, even if we don't know exactly who wrote what.

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[1] Peter J. Gentry, "The Text of the Old Testament," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 52, no. 1 (March 2009): 19, italics original, www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/52/52-1/JETS%2052-1%2019-45%20Gentry.pdf.

Transmission

The Hebrew text used for modern translations is called the Masoretic Text. The Masoretes were Jewish scribes from the seventh to tenth centuries AD who worked to create a standardized Hebrew text and also added vowel signs and accent marks. For centuries, written Hebrew only contained the consonants, and people had to fill in the vowels as they read. After the Babylonian exile, Aramaic slowly supplanted Hebrew as the spoken language. As you might imagine, as time went on, people forgot what vowels to use, how to pronounce Hebrew, and even how to understand the Hebrew text.

Consider the sequence of Hebrew letters מלך (*mlk*). If you add one set of vowels, it means "king" (מֶלֶךְ, *melek*). If you add another set of vowels, it means "Molech" (מֹלֶךְ, *molek*), the name of a Canaanite god. (The vowels are the dots, and sometimes dashes, under and over the consonants.) The name of God is written in the account of the burning bush as "I am who I am" (Exod 3:14), and as "I am" when used as a name. The consonants are YHWH (יהוה), and we don't know for sure what the vowels were. Today, the standard English pronunciation is "Yahweh."

The Aleppo Codex dates from AD 900 to 950 and may be the purest form of the Masoretic Text. Codex Cairensis is from AD 895, the Petersburg Codex from AD 916, and Codex Leningradensis from AD 1008. Codex Leningradensis has become the basis for all major modern Hebrew texts. It's the oldest complete Hebrew Bible. The original Aleppo Codex was once the oldest complete Hebrew Bible, but it was damaged and lost for a while during the Second World War. It is no longer complete, since most of the Pentateuch is missing.

The vowel symbols added by the Masoretes were based on the traditional interpretation of the texts, traditions coming from previous centuries. There is no guarantee that this was the original meaning of the text, but they are significant traditions. Most, if not all, modern English

translations favor the Masoretic Text. There are times when the Masoretic Text doesn't make sense to translators. Because the vowels were not part of the original text, translators will sometimes supply different vowels that produce different meanings as suggested by other sources such as the Septuagint (see below); this is generally not indicated in footnotes. It's called "revocalization." At other times, translators will change the actual consonants, and in the NIV (and ESV as I recall, and perhaps in other translations as well), this is usually indicated in the footnotes. Some of the Hebrew consonants are quite similar, and we can imagine a scribe could easily confuse them. For example, the ה and ח and ת are quite similar, as are ד and ר. I doubt that today's major translations would change the consonants without the support of other ancient witnesses such as the Septuagint.

Considering that Malachi is dated in the fourth century BC, it is reasonable to ask if the Masoretic Text is the same as what was originally written.[2] What evidence leading up to the time of the Masoretes would support or contradict their work?

The Septuagint (LXX)

By far the most significant witness to the proto-MT tradition is the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. Technically, the term *Septuagint* refers just to the Pentateuch, and the rest of the Greek Old Testament is called "Old Greek." However, *Septuagint* is now used generally of the entire Greek Old Testament. It's also called the "LXX," reflecting the propaganda in the apocryphal *Letter of Aristeas* (307) that claimed the Pentateuch (Torah) was translated by seventy translators in seventy days: "As I have already said, they met together daily in the place which was delightful for its quiet and its brightness and applied themselves to their task. And it so chanced that the work of translation was completed in seventy-two days, just as if

[2] See Walter C. Kaiser, *The Old Testament Documents* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2001), 40–49.

this had been arranged of set purpose." There is some question as to whether there were seventy or seventy-two translators, and seventy or seventy-two days.

We believe that the translation of the Pentateuch began during the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285–240 BC) in Alexandria, Egypt, and that the remaining books were completed by 130 BC, as suggested by the prologue to Sirach (see the previous chapter). As such, they witness to the biblical text prior to the time of the Dead Sea Scrolls, but there are problems comparing the Septuagint (or any translation) with the Hebrew.

We know that the Greek of the earlier biblical books in the Septuagint was already being updated before the remaining texts were translated, so at times it's difficult to reconstruct the Hebrew text that was originally translated.

It's possible that parts of the Hebrew text translated by the Septuagint were more accurate than the Hebrew text of the Masoretes. (By "accurate," I mean closer to the original.)

Different biblical books were translated with different theories of translation. Some books were translated with what today we call a "formal equivalent" approach to translation (like the ESV) that tries to repeat the Hebrew in as close to a word-for-word method as possible. For example, the translation of Ecclesiastes is overly wooden, with the Greek sticking as close to the Hebrew as possible. Other books were translated with what we call a "dynamic" approach to translation (like the NLT). These latter books include updates to archaic expressions, simplifications, paraphrases, harmonization, and at times what feels like a running commentary. The relative value of the Septuagint is therefore dependent on the translation theory of a particular book. The Pentateuch of the Septuagint is quite close to the Masoretic Text. There are places in the Prophets where the Septuagint and the Masoretic Text differ. There is a wide divergence between the Septuagint and the Masoretic Text of Daniel, 1 Samuel, and Jeremiah.[3]

[3] The text of Jeremiah in the Septuagint is 14 percent shorter than the Masoretic Text. Interestingly, the Hebrew

Another challenge comes from the fact that many of the biblical books are shorter in the Septuagint than they are in the Hebrew (Former Prophets, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Job, Proverbs). Does this mean the Septuagint is based on Hebrew texts that themselves are substantially shorter? Research suggests that much of this "shortening" is due to translation theory. Peter Gentry argues that "the differences [in Job] were due to a functional equivalence approach to translation in which many of the long, windy speeches were made more manageable for a Hellenistic readership."[4]

After the fall of Jerusalem, we believe there was a standardization. A priority was given to the Hebrew texts, and the Septuagint became more connected with Christianity. There are three great uncial manuscripts that contain the Septuagint. Codex Vaticanus (fifth century) seems to be the best copy. It's followed closely by Codex Sinaiticus (fourth century) and Codex Alexandrinus (fifth century, which has more alterations due to its attempt to harmonize difficult passages).

At first glance, the variations and obstacles seem overwhelming and lead us to abandon any hope of learning what the original authors said. But we can be encouraged that despite all the technical, linguistic, and exegetical hurdles, the Septuagint and the Masoretic Text (especially supported by the Dead Sea Scrolls) show a significant level of agreement, especially in the Pentateuch. Many of the differences are due to translational issues and not a different Hebrew text. There are many individual verses where the wording of the original is in question, but overall the proto-Masoretic and the Masoretic Texts have a fundamental agreement as to the basic message of the Hebrew Bible.[5]

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manuscripts found among the Dead Sea Scrolls are often closer to the Septuagint than to the Masoretic Text. It's possible that there were two textual traditions of Jeremiah, but by the first century AD, the Masoretic Text had become standardized and the Hebrew texts behind the Septuagint had become lost.

[4] Gentry, "Text of the Old Testament," 28.

[5] Gentry writes, "Let us not forget that both LXX and MT in tandem witness to a Hebrew text that is, for the most part, ancient and pristine" ("Text of the Old Testament," 39). He argues that there is a "high level of agreement between MT and the presumed parent text of the LXX," and that many of the differences are due to the fact that the

It's important not to overstate this conclusion. While it's certainly true of the Pentateuch, in other places there are significant differences between the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint. As I said, the Septuagint of Jeremiah is significantly shorter than the Masoretic Text (as is 1 Samuel) and arranges the prophecies in a different order. But even in Jeremiah and 1 Samuel, both versions have the same basic message. In other words, when you look at the Septuagint and the Masoretic Text together, they both point to a Hebrew text that is very old and trustworthy.

The Dead Sea Scrolls

The Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, beginning in 1946, in the caves near Khirbet Qumran in the desert northwest of the northern tip of the Dead Sea. It's generally believed they were the work of a Jewish sect called the Essenes, a group of people who had retreated to the desert in anticipation of the coming of the Messiah and the entrance of God's kingdom on earth. While many of their own books were discovered, two hundred fragments of manuscripts of every Old Testament book except Esther were also discovered. One copy of Isaiah is complete and in magnificent shape, and a copy of Habakkuk is nearly complete.

With these ancient manuscripts, we were able to see how accurately the Masoretes had copied the Hebrew Bible. The Qumran documents are dated from 250 BC to AD 70, some of them one thousand years prior to the Masoretes. What we discovered was that the Jewish scribes throughout the centuries had done a remarkable job of being accurate. When you compare the Isaiah scroll (1QIsa[b]) with Codex Leningradensis (see below), "only five complete words are added and six words are missing in a text that contains parts or all of forty-six chapters of Isaiah.

LXX is a translation; most of the differences are not due to the LXX being based on a substantially different Hebrew text that disagrees with the Masoretic Text.

[This excludes changes in spelling.] Also, 4QGen[b] is identical to Genesis 1:1–4:11 in L [the Leningrad Codex]."[6] This is a remarkable fact, since they were copied a thousand years apart.

This result did not come as a great surprise to many. We know that the copying methods of the Masoretes were fastidious, to say the least. When a scribe was done copying a book, they would count from the beginning and the end of the book to find the middle letter and the middle word; they knew what the middle word and middle letter was for every biblical book, thus confirming the precision of their work.

The term "proto-Masoretic" ("proto-MT") is used for these manuscripts (and the others below) since they witness to the biblical text at a time prior to the time of the Masoretes.

Masada

When the Romans began their siege of Jerusalem (AD 70), about one thousand Jewish zealots fled to Herod's fortress on the western side of the Dead Sea. They brought with them biblical scrolls that were discovered in the mid-twentieth century. It is believed that these manuscripts are representative of the mainstream Hebrew text that later became the Masoretic Text.

Cairo

More than 300,000 fragments were discovered in the genizah of the synagogue in Cairo. (The genizah was a room in the synagogue where old manuscripts were stored.) The earliest biblical manuscripts found in this genizah date from the fifth century AD.

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[6] Richard S. Hess, *The Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 13.

The Samaritan Pentateuch

The Samaritans accepted only the Pentateuch as inspired Scripture, and after John Hyrcanus attacked Shechem in 128 BC, the separation of Jews and Samaritans was set. This makes the Samaritan Pentateuch valuable for us, since it was transmitted independently of the Jewish version. In other words, changes in the Masoretic tradition wouldn't necessarily be reflected in the Samaritan Pentateuch.

On the one hand, the Samaritan Pentateuch is of limited value since it has been updated. "It is characterized by replacing archaic lexemes, morphology, and syntax in Hebrew with those of a later linguistic tradition. Exegetical and historical difficulties have been removed and parallels are harmonized."[7] On the other hand, it suggests that the Hebrew text of 128 BC was old (i.e., closer in meaning to the original text), since it had to be modernized in order to be understood.

Proto-MT Translations

There are translations other than the Septuagint that witness to the biblical text at a time before the Masoretes. The challenge of using them to get back to the original wording of the biblical texts is that they are translations.

The "Old Latin" (ca. AD 150) is a translation from the Septuagint, but Jerome translated the Latin Vulgate (AD 391–405) from the Hebrew. The Peshitta (a translation into Syriac) was completed by the third century AD, and the Targums (Aramaic paraphrases) are generally from the third and fourth centuries AD.[8]

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[7] Gentry, "Text of the Old Testament," 24.

[8] On these different texts, see F. F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments: How We Got Our English Bible*, 3rd ed. (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1984), 114–62.

Post-Masoretes

Since the time of the Masoretes, we have better evidence of the transmission of the text. Rabbi Jacob ben Chayyim studied the Hebrew manuscripts in the libraries of Europe, and in 1525 he published the Second Rabbinic Bible, complete with vowels and accents. This became the standard printed Hebrew Masoretic Text for four hundred years. *Biblia Hebraica* was published in 1937 and updated in 1977 as *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, which serves as the base Hebrew text for modern translations.[9]

Changes in Hebrew

Part of what makes studying the transmission of the Hebrew Bible so difficult is the significant amount of updating that has happened to the Hebrew text. Put bluntly, if someone were to give Moses a copy of today's Hebrew Bible, he would not be able to read a single word. I am not saying he didn't write Genesis, but I am saying that whatever he wrote was in a much older version of Hebrew (or a precursor to the language) than what we have today. This is technical, but let me explain what happened to the language.

Like any language, Hebrew evolved. The oldest parts of the Hebrew Bible preserve a form of Hebrew (called archaic biblical Hebrew) that is different in many ways from the younger parts. Examples of archaic biblical Hebrew are found in the poetic texts of Genesis 49, Exodus 15, and Judges 5, which contain linguistic elements that disappeared in later forms of the language. Most scholars believe that the standard form of Hebrew probably dates from about the tenth century BC, the time of King David.

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[9] For a summary of the transmission of the Hebrew Bible, see Paul D. Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 165–205.

In addition, orthography (spelling) changed over time. For example, standard biblical Hebrew (Hebrew from approximately the time of the united monarchy to the beginning of the exile) began to use certain consonants to indicate vowels, now called vowel letters. Late biblical Hebrew (from approximately the exile and after) used vowel letters more often and exhibits Aramaic influences, since Aramaic became the lingua franca of the region during the exile.

This is the point: whatever Moses originally wrote has been linguistically and orthographically updated in the version we have today. Perhaps someone like Ezra the scribe assembled and updated the final form of the Hebrew Bible. At that point, the books of Moses would have been about one thousand years old, and even the most conservative of languages would exhibit significant changes during such a lengthy period of time.

Let me give you an example in English. *Beowulf* is a poem written in Old English around the beginning of the second millennium AD. While the language is called Old English and is a parent of modern English, I doubt any of us could understand it without help. For example, here is the first sentence. “Hwæt. We Gardena in geardagum, þeodcyninga, þrym gefrunon, hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon.”

Here is a translation by J. R. R. Tolkien: “Lo! the glory of the kings of the people of the Spear-Danes in days of old we have heard tell, how those princes did deeds of valour.”[10] If the original author wrote “Hwæt” and the document we were reading said “Lo!” we would know that the English had been updated, but it doesn’t change the authorship or the meaning of the poem.

[10] Christopher Tolkien, ed., *Beowulf*, trans J. R. R. Tolkien (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), 13.

Conclusion

As Christians, we accept the Hebrew Bible as it has come to us through the centuries and has been affirmed by Jesus, the apostles, and the early church. This is not blind faith. We recognize that some of the books are collections of material that grew over time. We recognize that the Hebrew was updated through the centuries. We recognize that the history of the transmission of the text is somewhat veiled. And we recognize that many passages are difficult to interpret. But we also recognize that the general content and message of the Hebrew Bible as they have come to us are clear and that they have been preserved over time with remarkable accuracy and fidelity.

As is the case with the New Testament, the issues related to the Old Testament manuscripts do not impact the basics of what we believe or how we are to behave. The core message of the covenant remains intact.

For Further Reading

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