

Research Article

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Understanding the Text of the Bible 65 Years after the Discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls

Abstract: The focus of this study is the biblical Dead Sea Scrolls, 65 years after their discovery near the Dead Sea, with the purpose of improving our understanding of the text of Hebrew Scripture. The Qumran finds (more than 200 fragmentary scrolls) reflect textual plurality, and all the biblical texts were probably considered authoritative. At the same time, the 25 Scripture scrolls from sites in the Judean Desert outside Qumran are virtually identical to the medieval MT.

Keywords: Qumran, textual criticism, biblical scrolls, Judean Desert, Masoretic Text.

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Background

The focus of the article¹ is the biblical Dead Sea Scrolls, 65 years after their discovery near the Dead Sea, with the purpose of improving our understanding of the text of Hebrew Scripture. In the course of those 65 years the study of the text of the Bible has changed immensely, and will never be the same again. For some biblical books these changes were dramatic and revolutionary, and for others less so. We now know that 2000 years ago the biblical scrolls differed from one another significantly, and we can now see with our own eyes what the biblical scrolls looked like at the time. This knowledge helps us in our search to understand the text of the Bible. At the same time, we should stay modest. The Dead Sea Scrolls were copied one century after the last Bible book, Daniel, was written, or in other cases, three, four, or five centuries after they were *first* penned down. That is a long period, and therefore, while we did get closer to first-rate information on the Jewish Bible, we are still centuries removed from the first copies, often as much as we are removed today from the time of Shakespeare. In simple terms, there is no evidence to either prove or disprove the Documentary Hypothesis for the Pentateuch, or to determine whether Isaiah chapters 40-66 were written by a different prophet than Isaiah, son of Amotz, who wrote the first 39 chapters.

When speaking about the Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls, we first have to define these entities. The Bible is for us the collection of Jewish sacred writings, which overlaps to a large extent with the Christian collection of the Old Testament.² The term Bible also refers to the New Testament, but those writings were not found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, and we therefore limit ourselves to the Jewish Bible.

The Jewish Bible is known to us today in modern English translations such as the *New Revised Standard Version*, the *New International Version*, and the *Jewish Publication Society* translation. If we go back in

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² The Christian collection contains a few additional books that reached us through the Greek LXX translation, namely the so-called Apocrypha.

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history, the Jewish Bible is known from medieval manuscripts, 1000 years old, in Hebrew and Aramaic. Ultimately, these medieval manuscripts were copied from scrolls from the time of the turn of the era, as well as from still older scrolls; but the relation between these two is much more complex, as we will see. It remains true that all editions of the Hebrew-Aramaic Bible are based on medieval manuscripts. By the same token, modern translations of the Bible are mainly based on these medieval sources, and not on sources from antiquity.

Between 1947 and 1956, tens of thousands of scroll fragments of all sizes were found in eleven caves near the Wadi Qumran, predominantly in the so-called caves 1, 4, and 11 - the so-called Dead Sea Scrolls, copied between 250 BCE and 70 CE. Probably the most valuable ones were stored in jars. Some of these fragments are sizable, and in rare cases very large, even constituting complete scrolls, while most are medium-sized to small. Some are very small. These fragments belonged to what were once some 930 complete documents in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. These Qumran scrolls include some 210 fragmentary manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible.

When using the term Dead Sea Scrolls we think in the first place of the Qumran caves. But the Dead Sea area encompasses more than the Qumran area, since remnants of scrolls have also been found south of Qumran, in Naḥal Ḥever, Naḥal Şeelim, Wadi Murabba'at, Wadi Sdeir, Naḥal Mishmar, and on top of Masada, some of them *under* the floor of the synagogue. The texts from Masada are contemporary with those from Qumran, while those from the other sites were penned later, up to 135 CE. Most of the interest has been directed at the manuscript finds at Qumran.

It is very difficult to find an adequate description of the contents of the Dead Sea Scroll fragments from Qumran. Almost all these fragments are segments of literary works, and this fact has major implications for our understanding of the nature of this site. On the other hand, most of the fragments from the other Judean Desert sites are “documentary texts” pertaining to daily life, such as receipts, contracts, and lists of various kinds.

An additional difference between the Qumran corpus and the other Dead Sea corpora is that almost all the Qumran documents are inscribed on leather, while the other sites preserved mainly papyri.

As to the nature of Qumran, according to the most widely accepted theory, a select group of Essenes lived in this area from about 100–50 BCE until 68 CE,³ and when moving to the desert, they took with them scrolls deriving from various places in Israel. At the same time, they also created original compositions and copied scrolls at Qumran itself. Many of the Qumran texts are biblical and they provide us with an excellent record of the transmission of the biblical text in the period between 250 BCE and 70 CE. The oldest scrolls thus attest to the period prior to the settlement at Qumran, and they were brought to the Dead Sea area by the settlers. Whether or not one accepts the majority scholarly view that the Qumran community were Essenes, this has no bearing on our understanding of the biblical scrolls. After all, most scholars agree that some or many of the scrolls found at Qumran were copied elsewhere, while others were copied at Qumran itself. More importantly, we have no proof that the Qumran scribes embedded their sectarian views into the biblical scrolls they copied by changing the text intentionally.

By way of these scrolls, we now have a clear picture of the Jewish literature of this period, as the caves contained hundreds of literary works. The corpus of compositions found at Qumran probably reflects the literary taste of the Qumran community, but as this assumption is not certain, the most we can say is that the members of the community possessed these writings. These scrolls include compositions in diverse genres such as Wisdom literature, psalms, biblical interpretation, apocalyptic compositions, calendrical documents, prayers, rewritten biblical books, eschatological writings, and magical documents, some composed by the Qumran community, and some elsewhere. Almost every text found at Qumran expands our understanding of the literary genre to which it belonged. Some scrolls are sectarian and written in a cryptic script. Many texts have been found in multiple copies, enabling an examination of the relationship between these copies.

³ According to the revised chronology of Magness, *The Archeology*, 65.

The Hebrew–Aramaic Biblical Scrolls

The biblical Dead Sea Scrolls found at Qumran are so well known that the public often thinks that the Qumran corpus is confined to the 24 canonical books of Hebrew Scripture, but biblical fragments comprise only one quarter of the total manuscript finds at Qumran. An analysis of the scrolls found in the caves makes it appear likely that the Qumran community made a special effort to collect all the individual Scripture books as well as other compositions they considered important. This assumption is based on the fact that *all* the canonical books of the Hebrew Bible are represented in the Qumran corpus, with the sole exception of the short book of Esther. The absence of an Esther scroll from Qumran should, in my view, be attributed to happenstance, as the leather of its mere ten chapters was probably eaten by the Qumran worms. Other scholars claim that the book of Esther was rejected by the Qumran community, or was not known to them, but I embrace a more prosaic solution.

The number of biblical copies found at Qumran

The Table shows which texts have been found in the Qumran caves.⁴

Biblical Scrolls Found at Qumran (2009)

<i>Book</i>	<i>Square Script</i>	<i>Paleo-Hebrew Script</i>	<i>Notes Referring to Additional Books Included</i>
Genesis	20–21	3	4QGen-Exod ^a includes Exodus; 4QpaleoGen-Exod ⁱ ; 4QRP ^a : Gen, Exod; 4QRP ^b : Gen, Exod, Num, Deut; 4QRP ^c : Gen-Deut
Exodus	15	1	4QExod ^b includes Gen; 4QExod-Lev ^f ; 4QRP ^d : Exod, Num, Deut
Leviticus	10	4	4QLev-Num ^a includes Numbers
Numbers	5	1	
Deuteronomy	30	2	4QDeut ⁱ includes Exod
Joshua	2		
Judges	3		
Samuel	4		
Kings	3		
Isaiah	21		
Jeremiah	6		
Ezekiel	6		
Minor Prophets	8–9		4QXII ^{b,s} contain more than one book
Psalms	36		
Proverbs	4		
Job	3	1	
Canticles	4		
Ruth	4		
Lamentations	4		
Qoheleth	2		
Daniel	8		
Ezra–Nehemiah	2		
Chronicles	1		

The final count of the biblical scrolls amounts to 210–212 fragmentary scrolls from Qumran of the Hebrew–Aramaic Bible and 25 fragmentary scrolls from other sites in the Judean Desert. However, many doubts remain regarding the exact number of scrolls. For example, it is often uncertain whether the separation of several groups of fragments into different manuscripts or their combination into one manuscript is correct. For example, are 4QJer^{b,d,e} indeed three manuscripts, as was claimed in their publication in *DJD XV*, and are the Deuteronomy and Exodus segments of 4QDeutⁱ indeed part of the same manuscript, as was claimed in

⁴ The numbers are based on the summary in Tov, *Revised Lists*.

DJD XIV?⁵ As a result of these and similar problems, the total numbers of manuscripts of the biblical books are only approximates.

The Qumran caves contain almost 200 copies written in the regular Hebrew script, also named “square” or “Aramaic.” In addition, fragments of eleven or twelve biblical scrolls in the ancient Hebrew (paleo-Hebrew) script have been found there as well. This early script is otherwise known from ancient inscriptions and coins.⁶

Most texts represent regular biblical scrolls, but some texts named “biblical” are not biblical in the usual sense of the word, but may represent a different type of composition even if the content is mostly biblical. For example, among the cave 4 fragments we find several so-called abbreviated or excerpted compositions. E.g., 4QExod^d omits the narrative sections 13:17-22 and all of chapter 14. Two scrolls of the Song of Songs, 4QCant^a and 4QCant^b, omit *some* love songs, and one of the scrolls ends in the middle of the book, after 5:1 of the traditional text. Liturgical collections, such as the large Psalms scroll from cave 11, rearrange the Psalms according to certain themes, probably for use in worship in the Qumran community. This and other Psalm collections also omit several biblical Psalms, while adding non-canonical Psalms, such as the well-known Psalm 151, also found in the LXX, constituting an autobiographical Psalm of David. The evidence provided by the minor details of such scrolls is relevant for textual criticism, but the large differences, such as the rearrangement, addition, and omission of Psalms, are not relevant for the understanding of Scripture. However, no two scholars agree, and there are those who claim that even the strongly divergent Psalms scrolls once had authoritative status, and that the short scrolls of Canticles circulated in ancient Israel alongside the longer, traditional form of that book.⁷

The number of the copies of the individual books in the Table shows the different measure of interest in the books. The exceptionally large number of copies of Genesis (20–23), Deuteronomy (32), Isaiah (21), and Psalms (36) probably reflects the interest of the Qumran covenanters in these books. They took a liking to the preaching style of Deuteronomy and created original compositions imitating that book, their theology was much influenced by Isaiah, and they wrote several collections of psalms imitating the biblical book of Psalms. Genesis was the source of several rewritten Bible stories found among the Qumran scrolls.

A Qumran canon?

Scholars often wonder which Hebrew Scripture books were considered authoritative in ancient Israel and Egypt. The evidence of the LXX translation definitely differed from that embedded in the traditional or Hebrew Masoretic Text. It is, however, unclear whether the Greek evidence reflects the situation in Egypt, in Israel, or in both, since the LXX is no longer considered to be linked to Egypt. Only the Torah and some additional books were rendered in Egypt, while most of the other books were probably produced in Israel. Some of the additional books of the LXX that are not found in the MT, the so-called Apocrypha, are well evidenced in Israel, especially at Qumran. Thus we found the Hebrew Ben Sira at Qumran and on the Masada, and we found the Greek Epistle of Jeremiah and the Hebrew and Aramaic Tobit at Qumran. We also found at Qumran many copies of Jubilees and Enoch as well as several copies of the Temple Scroll. Probably these three books were considered authoritative at Qumran. The so-called Psalm 151 was also found at Qumran, as well as several apocryphal Syriac Psalms. Within this framework it is difficult to evaluate the evidence of biblical books found in the Qumran caves. Some scholars attach a great deal of importance to the fact that certain scrolls were found at Qumran, claiming authority for all the biblical and apocryphal scrolls found there. Others claim that the mere presence of scrolls at Qumran does not necessarily imply

⁵ By J. A. Duncan.

⁶ The background and nature of these scrolls is still unclear, but it is not impossible that they derived from Sadducean circles. These fragments contain mainly texts of the Torah and Job, both of which are traditionally ascribed to Moses. The paleo-Hebrew scrolls are copied very carefully and almost completely lack any evidence of scribal intervention.

⁷ A few scrolls contain more than one biblical book: 4QGen-Exod^a, 4QpaleoGen-Exod^l, 4QExod^b, and possibly also 4QExod-Lev^f, 4QLev-Num^a, and Mur 1, the latter possibly containing Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers (see *DJD* III, 75–78 and plates XIX–XXI). In any event, at the time of the Qumran scrolls we have no hard evidence of scrolls containing all of the Torah. Fragments containing some of the Minor Prophets likely derived from scrolls that contained all of these books.

authority. Some scholars believe that the Qumran canon was open-ended, while others consider it more or less closed, but including more books than the MT. Probably other criteria for determining authoritative status are more pertinent, such as a large number of copies (Jubilees, sectarian writings) or the quotation formula “as is written in ...”. On both accounts we should include Jubilees among the books accepted by the Qumran community. Another criterion may be the luxury format of several of the canonical scrolls, such as the Masada Psalms scroll, as well as of the Temple Scroll (11QT^a). In short, it is likely that the canonical books of Hebrew Scripture, as well as a few additional books, held authoritative status at Qumran. Much remains nebulous in the area of the authority of the scrolls found at Qumran, but the relevance of these finds for the textual criticism of the Bible is beyond doubt. We turn to this topic next.

The Qumran scrolls and textual criticism

Prior to the discovery of the scrolls, the *Hebrew* text of the Bible included in Bible *editions* was based on 1000-year old *medieval* manuscripts. This may sound strange, but Hebrew Scripture is not unique in this regard, as the editions of many Greek and Latin authors, as well as the Samaritan Pentateuch (SP), are based on medieval sources. When referring to the medieval text of the Hebrew Bible, we have the traditional, Masoretic Text in mind. This is the central text in Judaism, and it is the central text of the *Hebrew Bible* for Christianity, and for the scholarly world. The Masoretic text is also the basis for all modern translations of the Bible. Accordingly, even if you don’t know the technical term “Masoretic Text,” you are likely to read in that text and to quote from it.

What are the implications of our use of Bible editions based on medieval manuscripts, while we now possess Dead Sea Scrolls that are still 1000 years older? Well, virtually all the Qumran scrolls are fragmentary and therefore difficult to use for a text edition. On the other hand, the Isaiah scroll from cave 1 is complete, and can very well be compared with the medieval manuscripts. How then do we summarize our approach? First the good news. The medieval manuscripts of the Masoretic Text are precise, very closely mirroring the text of *some* of the scrolls from the Judean Desert. Therefore, in spite of the late date of the textual base of the Bible editions, we now know that they preserve the ancient texts very well. Now the bad news. This presentation of the MT only would be simplistic, and we need to turn to the textual picture in its entirety, which we shall do next.

Different types of scrolls

We are able to demonstrate that the text found in the medieval manuscripts is exactly the same as the text found in the Judean Desert, in scrolls of 2000 years old. This text hasn’t changed for two millennia, and this is almost a miracle. Not a divine miracle, but a man-made miracle, since the so-called Masoretes, keepers of the Masorah, carefully guarded the Masoretic Text against changes. The only changes made in the Masoretic Text, MT, was the addition of vowels and accentuation signs, *te’amim*, in the tenth century. According to Jewish and Christian tradition, these signs reflect an ancient oral tradition from the days of the revelation at Sinai. The *first point* we wish to stress is that the consonantal framework of the Masoretic Text was already present in scrolls from the Judean Desert. We name these texts proto-Masoretic.

But that is not the whole story. The fragmentary proto-Masoretic scrolls found at Qumran differ from similar ones found in other places in the same region. More precisely, all 25 of the scrolls found in Judean Desert sites *other* than Qumran are identical to the medieval consonantal text of MT, whereas the proto-Masoretic Qumran scrolls differ slightly. This pertains to the texts found in Naḥal Ḥever, Naḥal Şelim, Wadi Murabba’at, Wadi Sdeir, Naḥal Mishmar, and Masada.⁸ The rare deviations from the medieval text in these scrolls pertain to a very few differences in orthography, a few minute details, paragraphing, and the layout of individual Psalms. These minor variations resemble the internal differences among the medieval manuscripts of MT themselves. In other words, the Masada texts of 2000 years ago differ from the medieval

⁸ See Tov, *Textual Criticism*, 28 – 29.

texts no more than the latter differ among themselves. Accordingly, codex L(eningrad), the oldest complete copy of MT, and texts from the Judean Desert outside Qumran belong to the same group, or in our terminology, to the inner circle of proto-rabbinic texts. This inner circle contained the consonantal framework of MT one thousand years or more before the time of Masorah. On the other hand, the large group of MT-like scrolls from Qumran is slightly removed from the medieval text. At stake is the quantity of the differences. The MT-like Qumran scrolls thus differ more from codex L than similar scrolls from other Judean Desert sites.

Our explanation of the different types of proto-Masoretic scrolls from the Judean Desert is a matter of speculation. In my view, this situation was created by the different socio-religious background of the texts found at Qumran and at the other sites in the Judean Desert. These other sites were inhabited by what we may call the rebels of Masada (70 CE) and the freedom fighters of Bar Kochba (132–135 CE). These groups possessed Hebrew and Greek biblical scrolls that closely reflected the instructions of the Jerusalem spiritual center, a fact that comes as no surprise, as Jerusalem's influence over these groups is evidenced in other areas as well. In fact, in one of my studies I tried to show that these scrolls were copied from the master copy of the Bible books that was kept in the Temple court (*sefer ha-'azarah*). In contrast, the Qumran community was not bound by these rules, and what we find in Qumran are copies that were one step removed from the exact copies from other sites in the Judean Desert. *Lesson two* thus is: The Scripture scrolls from the sites in the Judean Desert outside Qumran are identical in all details to the medieval MT, because they were produced by the people who followed the rules of the Jerusalem Temple; on the other hand, the proto-Masoretic scrolls from Qumran deviate slightly from this central text.

Phrased more sharply, the scrolls found in the Judean Desert in sites other than Qumran reflect only the MT, while the Qumran discoveries include all kinds of scrolls reflecting textual variety. This is the *third lesson*.

We already mentioned that the MT was found in various Judean Desert sites, so that we now turn to the wide variety of texts found at Qumran.

Before the Qumran scrolls were found we already knew that the MT, our Bible, so to speak, was not the only Scripture text used in antiquity. It was an accepted view that the Torah of the Samaritan community, the Samaritan Pentateuch, or SP, faithfully represents a text of 2000 years ago, differing from MT in many large and small details. The largest details are the long editorial pluses of the SP. Further, large and small deviations from MT were also known from the LXX, which may be translated back from Greek into Hebrew. It was thus a widespread assumption that in pre-Christian centuries at least three textual entities existed: MT, SP, and the LXX. However, the background of this textual variety was unknown. We now know from Qumran that many different scrolls were in existence around the turn of the era. This is our *fourth lesson*.

1. We first turn our attention to several Qumran scrolls that differ from MT in many minor details of spelling and language. The differences in spelling are similar to those between, for example, British and American English. No fixed rules existed for the spelling of Hebrew; even in modern Hebrew the spelling is not fixed. In MT, most books have a somewhat defective spelling. On the other hand, the large Isaiah scroll, together with a group of similar scrolls, reflects a completely different spelling system. Its orthography is full to the extreme, including such spellings as *ki* with an *aleph*, *yatom* with an internal *aleph*, etc. This group of texts also contains morphological novelties, especially lengthened forms in pronouns (for example, *hiah*, *atemah*) and so-called pausal forms (e.g. *yirdofu*).⁹

2. Scrolls also differed in small details, including mistakes. For example, according to MT, in 1 Sam 1:24 Hannah takes Samuel with her to Shilo “with three bulls,” while according to the Qumran scroll 4QSam^a and the LXX she takes a “three-year-old bull” with her. This is a case of a scribal mistake in the traditional text (word division, different reading of the vowels) in which the “three-year-old bull” has been corrupted. In v. 28 of the same chapter, Elkanah bowed before the Lord in the Temple according to MT. According to the same Qumran scroll and the LXX, however, it was Hannah who bowed down. This may well be a case where Hannah's active role in the cult was replaced in the MT with that of Elkanah.

⁹ These features appear together with scribal peculiarities, such as the writing of the *tetragrammaton*, the name of God, in the ancient Hebrew script.

3. Scrolls also differed in several large details. Thus 4QDeut^a and the LXX have a few extra lines beyond MT at the end of the Song of Moses (Deut 32:43). This Qumran scroll, probably containing only that poem, mentions details that one may describe as polytheistic. It has an added phrase in v 43, “prostrate to him, all you gods,” (והשתחוּ לו כל אלהים). Further, according to this scroll, as well as the LXX, Moses proclaims, “be joyous, heaven, with him” (הרנינו שמים עמו), as opposed to MT הרנינו עמו, “be joyous, peoples, his nation” and probably not meaning “make happy, peoples, his nation.” The longer text of Qumran and the LXX has all the marks of originality, as similar references to an assembly of Gods are found elsewhere in the Bible, and in the earlier West Semitic literature - for example in the cuneiform texts found at Ugarit in present-day Syria, dating to around 1200 BCE. Scholars believe that the MT removed these remnants of polytheistic beliefs as an act of censorship.

We have given some examples of small and large differences between the various scrolls. We can also describe the new information gained from the Dead Sea Scrolls from the angle of the relationship between sources. Thus, in Qumran we found Hebrew scrolls that differed from everything known before 1947. There were some real surprises among the Qumran scrolls that truly revolutionized the study of the text of the Hebrew Bible. This is the *fifth lesson*. Thus we found in Qumran *Hebrew* scrolls that were close to the source from which the Greek LXX was translated; scrolls that were very close to the SP; and scrolls that did not resemble any pattern known before.

Probably the largest deviation in any Qumran scroll is found in the Jeremiah scrolls from cave 4, 4QJer^{b,d} usually agreeing with the LXX. The text of these two scrolls is shorter than MT in many details, especially in many personal names and titles. For example, in 4QJer^d Jer 43:6 reads “Nebuzaradan” instead of “Nebuzaradan *the chief of the guards,*” and in the same verse the scroll reads “Gedaliah son of Ahikam” instead of “Gedaliah son of Ahikam, *son of Shaphan*” in the MT. Equally important, in chapter 10, vv 6, 7, 8, 10 are lacking in that scroll as is also the case in the LXX. The section lacking in 4QJer^b and the LXX has a uniform character: it extols the Lord of Israel, while the remaining verses deride the idols of the godless people. It is hard to imagine that the scribe of the Qumran scroll omitted this praise; instead, it seems more likely that the hymn about God was added in the MT edition in order to stress the difference between the idols and the God of Israel.

The amazing fact about the Qumran scrolls is that all these different scrolls were found in the same caves. The Qumran scrolls show us that textual divergence was the rule rather than the exception at Qumran. These scrolls, brought to Qumran from all over Israel, display a textual variety that must have been characteristic of Israel as a whole in the period between the third century BCE and the first century CE. The existence of this textual variety at Qumran and in Israel as a whole is our *sixth lesson*. In our scholarship today we should remember this fact and not limit ourselves to MT only. As for Qumran, the coexistence of these different scrolls does not allow us to draw any sound conclusions about the approach of the Qumranites towards the biblical text; it is safe to say, however, that they paid no attention to textual differences. When these scrolls were written, the concept that scrolls should be identical simply did not exist in most of Israel. At the same time, this concept presumably *did* prevail in one very important place, namely the Temple, as well as in Pharisaic circles, where the MT, the central Scripture text, dominated. Beyond these circles, such as in Qumran, all texts were tolerated. Or, formulated positively, all texts had equal authority. The issue of the authority of the ancient scrolls is much debated in scholarship. In short, scrolls of the MT and SP carried authority for the two communities in which they were fostered and perpetuated, and undoubtedly the source of the LXX was authoritative for the Greek translators and many others. Otherwise they would not have been translated into Greek. It seems to me that all the Qumran biblical scrolls had equal authority at Qumran, including those scrolls that included numerous mistakes and were written in a wild spelling system. After all, the Isaiah scroll was heavily used in the Qumran community, as is evident from its marginal notes and its preservation in a jar. At that time, before the MT became the sole text of Judaism, all texts were equally authoritative in Israel, except for the MT circles. Our *seventh lesson* is that all Scripture texts were equally authoritative in ancient Israel, except for the circles that created and perpetuated the MT.

The text-critical approach towards Scripture

When analyzing the Bible text today, scholars usually start their study by comparing the small details of ancient manuscripts. One of our goals is to try to understand what Hebrew Scripture looked like when it was authored in the eighth, seventh, or second century BCE. Among other things, we would like to know what happened to the text after its main literary shape was completed, and how it was further developed and changed. For one thing, we know that ancient books were not composed at one time, but were constantly rewritten. Accordingly, there was rarely a stage that could be termed the “original” text of Scripture. In fact, at each stage of its writing, the literary product was considered final. Thus, in the quoted details from Jeremiah, many scholars believe that the Qumran scrolls together with the LXX reflect an earlier stage in the development of the book, rewritten in the MT edition. This is a very special case, not matched by other biblical books among the Dead Sea Scrolls. On the other hand, several books in the Greek LXX do reflect a stage earlier or later than the MT edition.

In modern scholarship there is an increasing awareness of the importance of the new discoveries in the Judean Desert. Small and large details are taken into consideration in text editions and commentaries. We are now beyond the mere excitement of these discoveries, and it is time to integrate this new source of information into our biblical exegesis. The MT remains one of the solid pillars upon which our exegesis is based, but we should broaden this basis by including data from Qumran scrolls, which is equally significant for analyzing the ancient texts, and sometimes even more so. Many scholars approach the MT, SP, LXX, and the Qumran scrolls on an equalitarian basis, although a judicious evaluation of the evidence will determine which details are preferable. If the presumed original reading is found in the MT, that reading will be incorporated in the exegesis, while the other ones will be explained as secondary. If the presumed original reading is found in a non-Masoretic text, the same procedure needs to be followed. In this way it will be found, for example, that commentaries of Samuel make or should make much use of the evidence from Qumran and the LXX.

Summary

The seven points made in the course of this analysis are:

1. The consonantal framework of the Masoretic Text was already present in scrolls from the Judean Desert.
2. The 25 Scripture scrolls from sites in the Judean Desert outside Qumran are identical in all details to the medieval MT; the proto-Masoretic Qumran texts are less close to MT, but still close.
3. The scrolls found in the Judean Desert in sites other than Qumran reflect *only* the MT, while the Qumran discoveries include all kinds of scrolls reflecting textual variety.
4. We now know from Qumran that there were many different scrolls around the turn of the era.
5. There were some real surprises among the Qumran scrolls that truly revolutionized the study of the text of the Hebrew Bible.
6. Qumran and Israel as a whole display textual variety.
7. All Scripture texts were equally authoritative in ancient Israel, except for the circles that created and perpetuated the MT.

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