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## ART. II.—THE MASSORETIC TEXT, AND THE VERSIONS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT.

IN the February number of this Magazine, I endeavoured to give some account of the Massorites, and I pointed out that the object of the Massorah was not the formation of the text, but the fencing it round with safeguards, to prevent any deviation whatever from that which they had received. And the great bulk of the notes by which they effected this was not invented by them, but handed down to them by tradition.

Now this word *tradition* has an evil reputation. When the controversy raged between the Buxtorfs and L. Capellus as to the date of the vowels, what made it so bitter was the tacit assumption that if tradition was on one side, truth must be on the other. And when the controversy was ended by the concession that the vowels were modern, or at all events, that the sounds remained unwritten until forms for expressing them were invented in the years 550 and 570 A.D. respectively, some of the most learned scholars of the Reformation period rejected them. And to this day many Hebraists persist in the refusal to concede to them any authority whatsoever. Since the appearance even of the Revised Version a new translation of the Old Testament has been published, the work of Mrs. Spurrell, a lady of no mean attainments; and in it she rejects the vowels, and makes her translation direct from a text consisting of consonants only. And this is nothing new or extraordinary. All Biblical scholars who possess for their studies that indispensable condition for accuracy, a knowledge of the languages in which the Scriptures were written, draw a sharp line of demarcation between the consonants and the vowels; though I for one am prepared to attach considerable authority to the latter. And if I must give my reason, it is because I regard them as having the authority of the Jewish Synagogue. The Palestinian Massorites began to commit them to writing about 570 A.D., but I believe them to be, as far as the sounds went, ancient, and that the work of the Massorites was to contrive a system which made the traditional method of reading the Scriptures independent of oral teaching and memory. And even before this date something had been done to settle doubtful places by the insertion in the text of what are called *matres lectionis*; that is, certain consonants which indicated what were the right vowels.

But what authority had the tradition itself? Had corruptions crept in unawares? Had the text even been falsified wilfully under the influence of dislike to Christianity? The

Jerusalem Talmud, as I mentioned in my last paper, gives an account of the *Tikkun Soferim*, "the Restoration of the Scribes." Might not the scribes have been right, and these *restorations* been amendments without MS. authority? Let me take a suspicious case. St. Paul quotes Hab. i. 5, as follows: "Behold ye despisers, and wonder, and perish." The LXX. has: "Behold ye despisers and regard, and wonder wonderfully and perish." The Syriac: "Look ye audacious ones and regard, and wonder, and be astonished." But the Massoretic text and the Vulgate: "Look on the nations," etc. Now first of all, the preposition is a difficulty, though cleverly got over by rendering, "Behold ye among the nations," so that it does not trouble an English reader as it does one who has a knowledge of Hebrew. He is used to find that preposition indicating the object and not the subject (see Gen. xxi. 16, xxxiv. 1; Exod. ii. 11; Ps. cvi. 5), and would translate, "Look ye on the nations."

And in the second place, commentators always have to explain why the heathen are addressed, when the sense requires that it should be the Jews. Now the whole difference in the Hebrew consists in the lengthening of the top of a single letter, whereby a *w* becomes *d*. Evidently it was read in the second century with a *d* in Palestine, for so it appears in the Versions of Aquila, Theodotion, and Symmachus. In the Vulgate, too, we find "in gentibus;" but Jerome notices that he had found authorities which read, one *contemptores*, the other *declinantes*. But surely St. Paul, who had studied at the feet of Gamaliel, must have known what was the reading in his days, that is, in the first century; and as the LXX. was made, as we have reason for believing, from copies written in the old, now called the Samaritan, character—and as *w* and *d* are quite unlike there, it would not have been easy for the translators of the Septuagint to have made the mistake.

Now I mention this simply as one out of many instances in which the Massoretic text has been accused of an anti-Christian bias. And this is a case in which it is averred that a consonant has been tampered with, and not merely the vowels changed. Was it beyond the power of the scribes at Tiberias, or even of one leading Rabbi, to indoctrinate his pupils with a "restored" text, which suited controversial purposes? Had we only the Massoretic text, with what scorn would the negative critics treat a work which was the outcome of the silent studies of a very obscure body of men, many centuries after the Christian era had begun. And what answer could we give? Where should we find that "reason for the hope that is in us," which St. Peter requires every well-taught Christian to be prepared to give to all questioners?

I venture to think that the Versions alone enable us to give a confident answer to gainsayers. I grant all their imperfections, though the charges brought against them are often greatly exaggerated, and made by men who do not know how to use them rightly. With shame I acknowledge that not one of the chief authorities has received thoroughly satisfactory editing, nor has anyone been examined as to its bearing upon the Massoretic text. Here and there commentators have made a passing remark upon some differences of reading. What we need is, first an accurate edition of the Massoretic text, such as that which Dr. Ginsburg is preparing; and next, accurate editions of the LXX., the Peshito, and the Vulgate; finally, that some company of scholars should collate these with the Hebrew text, treating them as MSS., just as in critical editions of the New Testament the readings are given which are found in the most ancient translations. Such a comparison of the Hebrew text, the weakness of which lies in its modern date, with these ancient authorities, would prove its general trustworthiness, while in many places it would certainly offer us better readings.

For the Massoretic text, though remarkably good, is, like all human things, not absolutely perfect. I will mention only a solitary instance. In 1 Sam. xiii. 1 it says: "Saul was one year old when he began to reign." I regret that any attempt was made in the margin to amend the passage, because what the Revisers have put there is misleading. The Alexandrian text of the LXX. agrees with the Massorites, and we thus have proof, first, that this error—for it can scarcely be anything else—is of vast antiquity; and secondly, that the Massorites did not tinker up their text.

I propose, then, to give a brief account of these texts and versions, considering them as ancient witnesses, whose testimony really gives us confidence in the general trustworthiness of the work of the Jewish scribes.

And first we have the text of the Pentateuch, written in Samaritan characters, and also a translation of it into the Samaritan dialect. The first is a very important document, if only because it has been in the custody of a sect who were bitter enemies of the Jews, and also because it is in the ancient character. For what is now called the Samaritan alphabet is really that of the Jews before the exile, as is proved by the inscriptions found in the aqueduct of Siloam and on the Moabite Stone.

Now the Samaritans assert that they have at Nablous a copy of the Pentateuch which belonged to Abishah, son of Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron. And this they preserve in an antique silver case, photographs of which were taken by the

agents of the Palestine Exploration Fund. We may well believe that what they have is very old, but that its antiquity has been exaggerated. Our editions rest chiefly upon the MSS. brought by Archbishop Ussher from Damascus; and Kennicott, in his great work on the Bible, has noticed all the variations from the Massoretic text. Professor Petermann has edited a new edition of the Samaritan Pentateuch, and Dr. Heidersheim is editing a new edition of the Targum—that is, its translation into the Samaritan dialect. Both offer various readings, but absolutely the same text as the Hebrew.

We next come to a group of works which are the product of Jewish learning at Tiberias in the second century. These are the Targum of Onkelos, and the translations into Greek made by Aquila, Theodotion, and Symmachus. Onkelos is generally supposed to be identical with Aquila, in Greek Akulas; and his Targum is believed to contain much ancient matter, received by him from Jewish Rabbins by tradition. These three men were all Greeks, and converts to Judaism, and hence probably their desire to commit to writing what the Jews were satisfied with having in the form of oral tradition; they wished also to give their countrymen a more accurate translation of the Hebrew text than that found in the LXX. It is curious, nevertheless, that both this Targum and the Samaritan Version and Pentateuch all show signs of the influence of the Septuagint, which is surely a remarkable testimony to its importance. The value of this group, of which, however, the remains, excepting the Targum of Onkelos, are but fragmentary, is, that being of Palestinian origin, they carry the Massoretic text back to the second century, with, upon the whole, unimportant variations. And thus the Hebrew received text no longer rests upon the authority of the Massorites, but is carried back to the age of the Soferim or scribes.

There is yet another Palestinian authority, namely, the Latin Vulgate. It was in the interval between 391-403 A.D. that Jerome made this translation, having settled at Bethlehem about six years previously, and being then a man of middle age. In order to master the Hebrew language, he was visited secretly at night by a Jew named Bar-Aninah, and subsequently had teachers from Lydda, and from Tiberias itself. Jerome's Version was thus made under Jewish influences; but he had devoted many years previously to Biblical studies, and had access to MSS. which have long since perished. He was, moreover, a Christian, and a man of a very controversial mind; so that we may with good reason look upon him as an independent witness, who shows us what was the text current among the Jews at the end of the fourth century of our era.

But these witnesses have not proved as yet very much.

Leaving out of consideration the Samaritan text and Targum, we have had before us five Palestinian authorities, and they at least show that the Massorites did not form the *textus receptus* of the Jews; for it existed two centuries before in Jerome's days, and four centuries before in the days of Aquila and his compeers. They give us different readings, but the same text. But what security have we that this text had not been tampered with at Tiberias by those translators into Greek, seeing that two at least were perverts, who had abandoned Christianity for Judaism?

We appeal, then, to a document even more important than the Vulgate—namely, the Peshito-Syriac. Here, again, we have a text which deserves a scholar-like edition. The materials for the work lie unused in the British Museum in the shape of valuable MSS.; and whereas in Walton's Polyglott the vowels have little authority, a Syriac Massorah is to be found there, ready for the editor's use. Something was done by Dr. Samuel Lee for an edition of the Peshito published by the Bible Society, but we need much more before we can rely upon its readings. Now, for this translation of the Old Testament into Syriac, the claim has been put forward that it was made centuries before Christ. This I think improbable; but Edessa was converted to Christianity at an early date, and claimed Adai, one of the Seventy, as its apostle. It was its great pride that it accepted Christ in the years immediately following His crucifixion, and it claimed to be impregnable owing to a promise of its inviolability given by Him to Abgarus, its king. Now, we find that the Peshito Version not merely existed in the fourth century, but is treated by the great Syriac poet and commentator, Ephraim Syrus, who flourished in that century, as the received Version of the Bible in his Church. We may well believe that the Christian missionaries to Mesopotamia carried with them there copies of the Hebrew Scriptures, and that a translation was made, gradually perhaps, but early enough for it to be an old book in Ephraim's time. Here, then, we get two things of primary importance: for, first, the Peshito is a Christian translation; and, next, we have good reason for believing that it was made from MSS. older than the time when the Jews might have been induced to tamper with the Scriptures under the influence of feelings hostile to Christianity.

Now, generally this Version supports the Massoretic text, but it offers us many more variations than we find in the Vulgate. It often has a difference of consonants; still more frequently a difference of vowels. But this is just what we should expect; for the second century of our era was the great age of Jewish activity upon their sacred books. It was then

that the right reading in many doubtful places was settled, and notes began to be contrived for preventing uncertainty for the future. In the Peshito we have a text of a date anterior to this labour, and one, therefore, which enables us to form a judgment upon it.

We need not suppose that the MSS. taken into Mesopotamia were very choice and of especial merit; more probably they were average specimens of what was then current. Nor need we condemn the work of the Jewish schools during the second century. It may have removed many errors and settled many difficulties correctly. But in the Peshito we have the materials for forming a judgment both upon the Hebrew text current in our Lord's days, and upon the work of the scribes of Tiberias. And we must add that Ephraim, a competent authority, speaks of "our Version" in a way that shows his respect for it.

There remains one still more venerable witness, namely, the Septuagint. This was the work of Jews, but settled in Egypt, chiefly at Alexandria, and betrays, except in the Pentateuch, a defective knowledge of Hebrew, and the use apparently of indifferent MSS. But it does not, therefore, cease to be of immense value, though it does require care and judgment in its use.

It probably began with the translation of portions of Holy Scripture to be read in the synagogue, and as the Pentateuch would be the part most needed, this would be first turned into Greek, and hence its greater correctness. But the very necessity of the translation arose from the fact that the Jews in Egypt, giving themselves to trade, were losing the knowledge of their mother tongue. There would still be Rabbins and learned men, but as more and more of the commonalty ceased to have a knowledge of Hebrew, it was a wise forethought which led to their Scriptures being given them in a language which they understood. As for the want of knowledge of Hebrew, we must remember that even in Palestine the common people spoke an Aramaean dialect, and that Hebrew was a learned language. And the longer they lived in Egypt, the more the knowledge possessed even by their most learned men would decline; so that we do not wonder that often they could not translate a word at all, but were content to write it down in Greek characters.

The story of the Version having been made by seventy-two men, six from each tribe, was rejected long ago by Jerome, and is scarcely worth referring to. It is more important to notice that the Vatican and our Alexandrine MSS. seem to represent two recensions. Of the former there is a valuable critical edition by Holmes, and Dr. Field has given us a very careful edition of the Codex Alexandrinus, which is one of the many precious treasures of our own British Museum.

Now, as regards the LXX. I shall make but two remarks: the first, that it absolutely knows nothing of the vowels used by the Massorites. Its pronunciation of the words is altogether different, and as the vowels constantly settle the sense, even where it represents the same consonants it often gives them a different meaning. And next as regards the consonants, these it often groups differently; and even where it separates them into the same words, it presents a large number of various readings.

Now, granting that the MSS. used in Egypt were of indifferent quality, and the knowledge of the translators small, yet it was the LXX. which prepared the heathen world to receive Christ. It is quoted as Scripture in the New Testament, and for centuries it sufficed for the sustenance of souls in the Christian Church. And to us it is valuable, not merely for its antiquity, but because it is so absolutely independent of the learning of the Jews in Palestine. I do not believe that such learning existed anywhere at the time when the LXX. was made. It was a slow upgrowth, which arrived at maturity in the second and following centuries at Tiberias and Sura. I believe that the textual work of the scribes there was thoughtful, and, upon the whole, trustworthy. But I could not come to this conclusion unless I had the materials for forming a judgment; and those materials are chiefly given me by the Peshito-Syriac and the Septuagint texts. And for a last word, I find in these many "recensions," to use the word employed in the Preface to the Revised Version of the Old Testament, not a very large uncertainty, but its corrective. I believe the Massoretic text to be eminently good and trustworthy, because I have the materials for forming a judgment; and that is supplied me by the evidence of the many witnesses which the good Providence of God has given us, from various countries and of various dates, but all testifying to the substantial accuracy of the Jewish traditional text. It is not perfect; nothing with any human admixture is so. But it justly holds the post of authority, and emendations can be accepted only if supported by solid proof. To make light of these documents is to turn out of court our witnesses, and depend upon the loud assertions of an advocate. So to do were folly indeed. The true scholar will reverently use all the helps that God has given him, and it is only one weak in faith who fancies that the Word of God cannot endure the most searching inquiry. The believer regards it as the gold that will be made only the more pure by the refiner's fire.

R. PAYNE SMITH.

