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THE TEXTUAL TRANSMISSION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

By the Rev. D. K. INNES, M.A., *West Ealing*

2 TIMOTHY 3: 16 states that every Scripture is *theopneustos*, and Evangelicals rightly insist that this means, not that the Scripture is 'breathed into' by God, but that it is "God-breathed", the product of the creative breath of God.¹ Scripture is, then, objectively and in itself, a revelation of God, and is infallible 'as originally given'. The purpose of this article is not to prove this doctrine, and the writer assumes it. Such a doctrine of inspiration, however, does not excuse an evangelical student of theology from facing up to the facts concerning the transmission of the Bible. He must determine, in the light of the biblical doctrine of Scripture and of ascertainable facts about its history, what his attitude ought to be to the Bible as he has it. The present writer has no qualification to offer any original contribution, but it may be worth while to glance at the main stages in the history of the Old Testament text, in the light of the doctrine of inspiration outlined above.

The first stage, strictly speaking, was the setting down in writing of the revelation given by God to the biblical writers. This was done by various hands. Much of the Pentateuch, for example, claims to have been committed to writing by Moses (*Cf.* Ex. 17: 14; 24: 4; Nu. 33: 2; Dt. 31: 9, 22, 24),² and the oracles of the prophets were committed to writing by themselves or their disciples (Is. 8: 16; Je. 36). This written material was then arranged, in many cases by later hands, and sometimes combined with earlier or later material (*e.g.* the Creation narratives, Dt. 34; Gn. 36: 31; etc.).³ Our doctrine of inspiration necessitates acceptance of the fact that those who produced the books of the Old Testament canon were guided by the Holy Spirit so that what they wrote accurately represented what God said. Otherwise they are not a wholly true embodiment of revelation. If the history has been falsified or misinterpreted, we can get from it only a distorted view of God. Similarly if the oracles and poems have been 'written over' by a later redactor in the interests of his own doctrinal views, they are no longer what they purport to be.

That is why the conservative view attaches so much importance to the written word — because it is our only record of the Word of God. As Dr. J. I. Packer has written,⁴ 'We do not stress the verbal character of inspiration from a superstitious regard for the original Hebrew and Greek words (like that of Islam for its Koran, which is held to consist essentially

of Arabic words, and therefore to be untranslatable); we do so from a reverent concern for the sense of Scripture.' And E. A. Litton wrote⁵ in connection with the New Testament in a similar strain: 'The inspired oral teaching of the Apostles stood exactly on the same footing as their inspired written teaching: we pay no superstitious reverence to the book *as such*, that is, as distinguished from instruction conveyed orally.' This is in marked contrast with the Jewish view, which can draw conclusions from the letter irrespective of the sense — as when Rashi says that the occurrence of the article (expressed by the fifth letter of the Hebrew alphabet) in Genesis 1: 31 indicates 'that he made a pact with them (His creatures) on condition that Israel took upon themselves (to observe) the Five Books of the Law'.⁶

Such a literalistic attitude to the Scriptures demands a standard text, fixed in every detail. This is presumably the reason why some Christians still insist that the AV, based on the 'Received Text', is the only unadulterated Word of God, while other versions such as the RSV and NEB are the work of the devil. Their idea of inspiration necessitates such a view. Christ, however, showed that Scripture is a means of grace not as a mere written code, but because of its testimony to Him (Jn. 5: 39). We may infer that in Matthew 5: 18 He refers to the Scriptures as conveying a message, and to the letter insofar as it expresses the message. An examination of the text suggests that it has in fact undergone certain changes in the course of its history, though never such as to modify its message. We will summarize the history of the text, and also the evidence for textual corruption.

a. *Word-divisions*

These must have been inserted early, for they are said to be clearly marked in the biblical MSS of the Dead Sea Scrolls, where they almost always agree with the Massoretic Text. The parent MS of the Septuagint, generally dated in the third century BC, appears to have showed a different word division from the Massoretic Text.⁷ There is some evidence for erroneous word-division in the text as we have it. Thus in Jeremiah 23: 33, for the AV 'What burden?', which reads strangely in the context, the RV mg. and RSV substitute 'You are the burden', a change which is made only by regrouping the letters of the unpointed Hebrew text: '*t-m h-m-s-*' for '*t m-h m-s-*'. Moreover this reading is supported by several of the Versions. In Isaiah 2: 20 the word translated 'to the moles' in the English Versions is split in two in the MT. The MT of Amos 6: 12 runs literally 'Shall horses run upon the rock? will one plow with oxen?' — 'there' in the AV being inserted. One supposition is impossible, but the other is not. The RSV rendering 'Does one plow the sea with oxen?' is obtained only by altering the word division, thereby also giving a more usual form of the word for 'oxen'.

b. *'Matres lectionis'*

These are 'vowel letters' inserted in the text as an aid to correct pronunciation. They were not original in Hebrew and the cognate languages.⁸ It is said that the LXX parent text differs from the MT in the use of them. B. J. Roberts⁹ quotes, *e.g.*, 1 Samuel 12: 7; 2 Samuel 7: 1; Psalm 14: 17. In the Dead Sea Scrolls final vowels regularly have extra vowel-letters not in the MT.¹⁰ It appears that sometimes *matres lectionis* were inserted erroneously, *e.g.* in 1 Samuel 10: 5 the word for 'garrison' is plural in the MT, but by moving the letter *yodh* we obtain the singular, which is also read by the Versions. A similar instance in Jeremiah 2: 25 is noted by the Massorettes, and the alternative form directed to be 'read'.

c. *Vowel points*

The original text was consonantal only, and the present system of pointing was inserted by the Massorettes in the seventh century AD.¹¹ It is possible that in a very few cases an erroneous punctuation was recorded by them.¹²

d. *The fixing of the text*

(i) It is generally agreed that a great impulse was given towards the fixing of the Old Testament text by Rabbi Akiba (died c. 132). His method was literalistic to an extreme. Pfeiffer¹³ remarks that he 'discovered through incredible ingenuity a hidden meaning in apparently insignificant Hebrew

particles'. For this kind of interpretation a standard text is vital. Akiba also inspired Aquila to make a literal Greek version of the standard Hebrew text. Probably through his influence there was a definite movement for fixing the text early in the Christian era. It is significant that the text of the Dead Sea Scrolls differs chiefly in small details of morphology and orthography from the MT. Moreover, it is said that the Greek translations of the second century, and the Vulgate (fourth century) presuppose a text nearer to the MT than does the LXX.¹⁴ But there has been a reaction against the view, generally held in the last century, that the text was finally established in the second century AD. Further study has underlined the number and significance of the variations between Hebrew MSS. It has also been shown that Aquila's text was by no means identical with the MT. Roberts¹⁵ quotes authorities who have shown that in Rabbinic circles more than one form of the Hebrew text was current.

(ii) During the first five centuries of the Christian era the scribes divided the text into pericopes and liturgical divisions, and added diacritical marks, the meaning of which is now only partially understood. They also noted words to be omitted, and forms which were 'unexpected'. Rabbinic commentaries and Massoretic works also indicate a variable number of 'emendations of the Scribes', designed to avoid anthropomorphisms. Pfeiffer¹⁶ also supposes quite an extensive 'dogmatic revision' of the text, i.e. alterations made without being noted, in the interests of religious views. For example the phrase 'to curse God' was altered to read 'to bless God', and the word 'ephod' was substituted for all references to 'arks or divination boxes' other than the 'ark of the covenant'. But this appears to savour of invoking the aid of the Scribes to make the Old Testament square with one's own views. Several alternative explanations of the difficulties surrounding the word 'ephod' are mentioned e.g. in ICC, *Judges*, pp. 380f. As regards the phrase 'to bless God', BDB appear to accept the 'anti-theological' meaning of the root *brk* — 'a blessing overdone and so really a curse.' But it is clear that it early became customary to read *bōsheth* (shame) for the names of the heathen deities Astarte and Melek. In the pointed copies they were vocalized as Ashtārōth and Mōlek. The pointing of the word Tōpheth appears to have a similar explanation. These of course are changes, not in the consonantal text but in the vocalization. There is evidence also that Baal was changed to Bosheth or El in proper names.¹⁷ In Amos 5: 26 the names Kaiwanu and Sakkut are pointed with the vowels of *shiqquts* (detested thing).

(iii) The Massorettes finally fixed the Old Testament text, and it was to guarantee its accurate transmission that they indulged in the infinite and sometimes seemingly pointless labour of counting letters and noting peculiarities in the text. Variant readings were recorded in the margin as to be 'read' (*qere*), while the text itself (*kethib*) was pointed with the vowels of the *qere* reading. It is said that there are about 1,500 examples of *qere-kethib* variants in our current editions.

e. The transmission of the text

There are two classes of Old Testament text, connected respectively with the Massoretic families of ben Asher and ben Naphtali. Both of these families flourished in the first half of the tenth century AD. In the twelfth century the Decree of Maimonides established the ben Asher Text as standard. There are, however, several MSS of the ben Naphtali text, as well as marginal entries on some ben Asher MSS. Until the third edition of *Biblia Hebraica* all printed editions were based on the text of Jacob ben Chayyim (1525-26). It has been shown, however, largely through the work of Professor P. Kahle, that this was an eclectic text based on poor material. Kahle drew attention to the importance of some MSS in the Firkowitsch collections in Leningrad, and one of these (B19a, also known as L) forms the basis of the third edition of *Biblia Hebraica*. It was written in 1008, and Kahle and his pupils have shown that it 'must be designated as a pure ben Asher MS.'¹⁸

Let us summarize so far. We have seen that the period up to c. 500 AD was characterized by a comparatively fluid state of the text, though there were some stabilizing influences. Then the Massorettes produced a standard text by a process of collating the MSS at their disposal. They also took

elaborate precautions to ensure that the text should not be changed. There are some pre-Massoretic MSS now extant, and they have largely tended to justify confidence in the MT. At the same time the MT can hardly be expected to be a transcript of the original documents.

What evidence is there for scribal errors in the text as we have it? Apart from those already mentioned, there are several main classes of textual corruption.

(i) *Confusion of letters*. Certain letters were easily confused, either in the Canaanite script in which the books were originally written, or in the later 'square' characters, or in both. The word '*eyām*', for example, occurs only in Isaiah 11: 15. The meaning is doubtful; BDB suggest 'glow'. The alteration of one letter produces '*otsem* (might)'. The Versions appear to have read it thus. AV and RV mg. have 'mighty', RV and RSV 'scorching'. The word 'destroyed' in the English Versions of 2 Chronicles 22: 10 depends on reading a letter of the MT differently, with the support of the Versions. The case is similar with the word 'court' in 2 Kings 20: 4 (cf. AV mg. and RV) — a reading supported by the *qere*, the Versions and some MSS of the Hebrew.

(ii) *Dittography*. This is the technical term for the erroneous repetition of consonants or words. Sometimes, as in 2 Kings 15: 16, this results in a grammatically impossible form. In many cases the Versions and the context suggest that words have been repeated erroneously; e.g. Psalm 18: 13, 'Hail stones and coals of fire' (omitted by LXX and 2 Sa.). Cf. verse 13; Psalm 112: 9, 'For, lo, thine enemies'; Ezekiel 16: 6, four words repeated; Leviticus 20: 10, five words; 2 Samuel 6: 3f., six words. In Isaiah 17: 12, 13 five words are apparently repeated with one variation, suggesting that a textual variant has found its way into the text; a similar case occurs in 1 Kings 7: 41, 42. All these instances can be followed in the AV. The RSV corrects some of them.

(iii) *Haplography*. This is 'the inadvertent writing once of what should have been written twice'.¹⁹ Thus the English Versions assume the reading *hehāyu* for *hāyu* in 1 Samuel 14: 21. In Jeremiah 31: 38 the word 'come' is found in the *qere*, 48 MSS, and the Versions, but not in the text. In the AV of Genesis 4: 8, the word translated 'talked' really means 'said', and is normally followed by direct speech, as in English. The RV mg. and RSV append a passage found in the Versions, but not in the MT. Often the Massorettes indicated the omission of a word by writing the vowel points but not the consonants (e.g. Jdg. 20: 13; Ru. 3: 5).

(iv) *Homoeoteleuton*. This is produced 'where the eye of the scribe has jumped the contents of a passage between two identical or similar words'.²⁰ The Versions suggest that such a passage has slipped out of the text in Genesis 1: 9. Its inclusion would bring the verse more into line with parallel passages in the same chapter. The RSV of 1 Samuel 14: 41 includes a considerable passage taken from several of the Versions.

Examples have purposely been given which largely have support from the Versions. Conjectural emendations can be dangerously subjective. On the other hand even the readings of the Versions may be attempts on the part of the translators to get rid of difficulties in their Hebrew text. Moreover, the Versions have themselves to varying degrees suffered from textual corruption, often to a far greater degree than the MT. Their readings, therefore, cannot be accepted uncritically as representing the original Hebrew text.

The conservative student will be cautious in making emendations, especially where these are without any objective support — for God's Word is no fit object for the display of human cleverness. On the other hand the conclusion is irresistible that no one manuscript can claim to have a monopoly of accuracy, or to have been preserved in such a way as to be an exact verbatim reproduction of the original text. Does this mean that the evangelical doctrine of inspiration will not stand up to a critical examination of the text — that it cannot be retained without intellectual dishonesty? Certainly it is perilous to go on for too long with one's intellectual study and one's devotional approach to the Bible in separate watertight compartments. Difficulties, including textual difficulties, must be faced up to honestly. But what is implied by our attitude to Scripture is that the text has not been altered to such an extent as to obliterate its meaning

and it is noteworthy that the mss we have do not differ in such a way as to cast the slightest doubt on the message they proclaim. This can be said even in the light of the evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls, which seem to vary from the MT largely in minor matters of detail. The verdict of the Westminster Confession²¹ remains true, that the Scriptures, 'being immediately inspired by God, and by his singular care and providence kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentical'.

We should reverence the Scriptures, therefore, as the written embodiment of God's revelation. Can we also confidently preach from its actual words? How can we be sure that what we say does not rest on a textual corruption? By comparing Scripture with Scripture, and filling our minds with the great themes of God's revelation. Apart from textual considerations, it would be precarious to interpret any passage in a way which found no support elsewhere in Scripture! God's providence has given us no distorted record of the written revelation. This fact is implied in the biblical idea of inspiration. For it is not likely that God would have given to men an inspired revelation, and afterwards allowed it to become obliterated. This is the faith with which we as Evangelicals approach our Bibles. But this conviction also stands up to the study of the text. We shall, therefore, on the one hand, hold fast our confidence in God's Word written; while on the other hand we can accept sound textual criticism, based on objective evidence and not merely subjective criteria, as God's gift, ensuring to us the best possible text of Holy Scripture.

Footnotes:

¹ B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1951, p. 133.

² G. Ch. Aalders, *A Short Introduction to the Pentateuch*, Tyndale Press, 1949, pp. 147ff.

³ G. Ch. Aalders, *op. cit.*, pp. 105ff.

⁴ 'Fundamentalism' and the Word of God, I.V.F., 1958, pp. 89f.

⁵ *Introduction to Dogmatic Theology*, James Clarke, 1960, p. 30.

⁶ Lowe's Rashi, The Hebrew Compendium Publishing Company, 1928, p. 44.

⁷ B. J. Roberts, *The Old Testament Text and Versions*, Cardiff, 1951, p. 14.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, pp. 15f.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 16.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, pp. 5f.

¹¹ R. H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, A. & C. Black, 1952, p. 89 (but cf. B. J. Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 60).

¹² B. J. Roberts, *op. cit.*, pp. 97f.; S. R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text of the Books of Samuel*, Oxford, 1913, p. 93.

¹³ *Op. cit.*, p. 76.

¹⁴ B. J. Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 27.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 86ff.

¹⁷ R. H. Pfeiffer, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

¹⁸ *Biblia Hebraica*, Third Ed., (Prolegomena), p. xxx.

¹⁹ Chambers' *Twentieth Century Dictionary* (New Mid-century Version).

²⁰ B. J. Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

²¹ I. viii.