

Introduction to Textual Criticism

(Last edited October 26, 2011)

In a way any introduction to textual criticism involves two main parts:

I. Understanding the history and nature of the Masoretic Text that we have before us in *BHS*.

II. Understanding the history and nature of *other* witnesses – other manuscripts, text types, and translations – to the Hebrew Bible.

Ia. Understanding the history and nature of the Masoretic Text that we have before us in *BHS*

The *BHS* does not – does not! – contain the pure and perfectly preserved text of the Hebrew Bible. Sorry. It doesn't. If we could travel back in time and look at the first manuscripts of the finished books of the Hebrew Bible there is no doubt there would be many differences. Many of those differences we might regard as trivial. But many would not be. There might be significant differences in how verses read. There might be entire sections even chapters in the Masoretic Text that are not in the first manuscripts. And vice versa.

Some scholars would argue there may not always be first manuscripts. That there were multiple versions of some biblical books right from the start.

This is not to denigrate the value or importance of the Masoretic Text. It is old and reliable. But not always or necessarily original.

Ib. Just so you know right up front the *BHS* – except for the critical apparatus – is based on the Leningrad Codex which dates to 1008 CE and is the earliest complete copy of the entire Hebrew Bible. That includes (a) the consonantal text (b) the vowels (c) the notes in the margin (d) the notes at the end of each book (e) the accent/cantillation marks and (f) an assortment of other little marks and notes that the Masoretes added. There is a facsimile copy of the Leningrad Codex in Coates 116 which is the Philosophy and Religion Department seminar room. No kidding.

Ic. The transmission of the text of the Hebrew Bible

Let us assume for the sake of discussion that before 300 BCE all or most of the Hebrew Bible was written down. For the record there is almost no doubt in my mind that the books of Esther and Daniel were composed during the 2nd century BCE. But for the sake of discussion we will assume there was a complete or nearly complete text of the Hebrew Bible. What happened next?

Id. The period 300 BCE to 135 CE was crucial for the transmission of the Hebrew Bible. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls aka Qumran scrolls transformed our understanding of the history of the Hebrew Bible. Most of the Dead Sea Scrolls date to the 2nd-1st centuries BCE. Included among the Dead Sea Scrolls are manuscripts or fragments of every book of the Hebrew Bible except Esther.

But here is the thing. These biblical manuscripts show that there were multiple versions of (books of) the Hebrew Bible. At least five main types:

1. Proto-Masoretic (more or less agree with the Masoretic Text) = 60%
2. Pre-Samaritan or what appears to be the basis of the Samaritan Pentateuch
3. What appears to be the basis of the Septuagint
4. Mixed (mixtures of #1-3)
5. Qumran (distinctly Qumran way of writing the Hebrew Bible)

The first three types are the most important. Qumran shows there were at least three main(?) versions of the Hebrew Bible. #2 and #3 together represent 5% of the biblical manuscripts at Qumran.

Frank Moore Cross hypothesized three main text types/families corresponding to three main centers of Jewish life and scholarship.

- a. Egyptian
- b. Palestinian
- c. Babylonian

By the 5th century BCE there was one text type (of the Hebrew Bible) in Palestine (Eretz-Israel) and another in Babylon.

By the 4th century BCE there was a third text type in Egypt that came from the Palestinian.

During the 3rd-2nd centuries BCE the Egyptian text type was translated into Greek. That is where the Septuagint comes from.

The Samaritan Pentateuch comes from the Palestinian text type.

During the time of the Maccabees (2nd century BCE) the Babylonian text type was brought to Palestine (Eretz-Israel). The official form of the Torah and Former Prophets came from the Babylonian text type. The official form of the Latter Prophets came from the Palestinian text type. Put those together and you have what eventually would become the Masoretic Text.

You should know that not everyone agrees with Cross.

Now pay attention. Manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible were also found near Wadi Murabba`at. They date to 135 CE. These manuscripts all resemble the Masoretic text form. *This indicates that between 300 BCE and 135 CE one text type – that would eventually become the Masoretic Text – became authoritative.* Other evidence suggests this happened early in the 1st century CE.

Ie. So by 135 CE Jewish scribes adopt one standard text that eventually becomes the Masoretic Text.

Even with one standard text there are some differences between Palestinian and Babylonian Jewish scribes. There are some differences between how they divide the Hebrew Bible into verses. The Palestinian Jewish scribes divide the Hebrew Bible into 452 *sedarim* – to read the entire Bible over a three year cycle. Look for ם in the margin. The Babylonian scribes divide the Bible into 54 *perashot* – to read the Bible every year. Look for פרשׁ in the margin.

There are several other features Jewish scribes add to the text between 135-500 CE. They also begin to develop vocalization systems for the consonantal text such as the Palestinian and Babylonian vowel systems.

If. Between 500-1000 CE is the time of the Masoretes. They develop the Tiberian vocalization system which replaces the other two. The Tiberian vowel pointing system is what we find in the *BHS*. They develop the system of accent marks we see today. They also develop and add specialized notes. Such as:

- i. The ketib-qere system

- ii. The Masorah *parva* – those little notes and abbreviations in the margin.
- iii. The Masorah *magna* – much more extensive than Masorah *parva*. Not in the *BHS*. The little footnotes between the Hebrew text and the critical apparatus refer to the Masorah *magna*.
- iv. The Masorah *finalis* – those notes at the end of each book.

By the end of the this time period there were two main families of Tiberian Masoretes – Ben Asher and Ben Naphtali – who implemented the Masoretic system differently. The differences are small and not important. Printed editions of the Masoretic Text come from the ben Asher text.

Name	Siglum	Date	Contents	Type/Comments
Aleppo Codex	A	925	all of OT, but most of Torah lost	pointed by Aaron ben Asher basis for Hebrew University Bible Project
Leningrad Codex	L	1008	all of OT	close to ben Asher tradition, but not as close as A basis for <i>BHK</i> 3d ed. and <i>BHS</i>
British Museum 4445	B	925	most of Torah	not as close to ben Asher as either A or L
Cairo Codex	C	896	Former and Latter Prophets	closer to ben Naphtali than ben Asher tradition
Sassoon 507	S	10th cent.	most of Torah	mixed text (ben Naphtali and ben Asher)
Sassoon 1053	S'	10th cent.	most of OT	least carefully written of group
Petersburg Codex	P	916	Latter Prophets	written with Babylonian vowel signs, but reflects Tiberian vowel tradition

(scanned chart from *Old Testament Textual Criticism* by Ellis Brotzman)

The genius of the Masoretes – what with all their little notes and careful counting of how many times this word or that form appears, how many words, how many letters in each book, which word is the exact middle of each book, and so on – is a system that made it almost impossible to change the text of the Hebrew Bible. Oh there might be tiny differences here and there. But basically any mistakes or changes would show up when you compare the text to the Masoretic notes.

Summary

before 300 BCE	individual books written and copied on scrolls introduction of some vowel letters crowding sometimes messes up word division change from archaic to square script
300 BCE - 135 CE	development of text types adoption of proto-Masoretic Text
135-500 CE	<i>Talmudic period</i> book form for private copies scroll form for synagogues verse, paragraph, liturgical divisions
500-1000 CE	<i>Masoretic period</i> written vowel system accent system ketib-qere finalized different Masoretic treatises
1000-1450 CE	transmission of Masoretic Text with only minor changes
1450 CE - present	printing press printed editions modern critical editions

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II. The history and nature of *other* witnesses to the Hebrew Bible.

Iia. *The Samaritan Pentateuch*

The Samaritans probably did not separate from “mainstream” Judaism until the Maccabean/Hasmonean period about 166-63 BCE. Only the Torah. Written in a modified archaic Hebrew script. More than 6000 differences from the Masoretic Text. More than 1900 of those differences it agrees with the Septuagint against the Masoretic Text.

Many of the differences are simply differences in spelling, or smoothing out grammar. Some of the differences reflect the religious views of the Samaritans. Genesis 5 and 11 however show differences from Septuagint and Masoretic Text.

Although some scholars believe the Samaritan Pentateuch is not valuable for textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible, Ernst Würthwein writes that the Samaritan Pentateuch is a “very important witness to a form once widespread, that shows agreements with Qumran, the Septuagint, the New Testament, and some Jewish texts that escaped revision” (*The Text of the Old Testament*, 46).



IIb. *The Peshitta*

The Peshitta is basically a translation of the Hebrew Bible into Syriac which is a dialect of Aramaic. Scholars debate whether it is a translation from Hebrew or Aramaic. Revisions of the Peshitta were strongly influenced by the Septuagint. So when the Peshitta and the Septuagint agree against the Masoretic Text that often counts as one witness not two.

IIc. *The Targumim*

The Targumim are Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible. They were produced because around the 2nd century BCE most Jewish people in Palestine (Eretz-Israel) spoke Aramaic not Hebrew. Therefore they needed Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible for use in the synagogue.

There are actually several Targumim. The official Targumim are the most important. Targum Onqelos is the official Aramaic translation of the Torah. It was written down in 2nd century CE although it is based on traditions from before the Common Era. It is generally a very literal translation with very little paraphrase of the Hebrew text. One characteristic of the Targumim is an effort to remove anthropomorphisms in reference to G-d.

Targum Jonathan is quoted in the Babylonian Talmud from the 4th century CE. It covers the Former and Latter Prophets. Its style is much more paraphrastic – that is it paraphrases and expands upon the original Hebrew text. In a way the Targumim are sometimes as much commentaries as they are translations.

There is some fragmentary and/or manuscript evidence for an early Palestinian Targum that was used before the official Jewish Targumim such as Targum Onqelos and Targum Jonathan.

Compare the English translation of the Targumim to that of the Hebrew Bible.

Genesis 22:1 Targum Onqelos = “And it was after these things that the Lord tempted Abraham; and He said to him, Abraham! And he said, Behold, I am.”

Targum Pseudo-Jonathan aka Targum Yerushalmi = “And it was after these things that Izhak and Ishmael contended; and Ishmael said, It is right that I should inherit what is the father's because I am his firstborn son. And Izhak said, It is right that I should inherit what is the father's, because I am the son of Sarah

his wife, and thou art the son of Hagar the handmaid of my mother. Ishmael answered and said, I am more righteous than thou, because I was circumcised at thirteen years; and if it had been my will to hinder, they should not have delivered me to be circumcised; but thou wast circumcised a child eight days; if thou hadst had knowledge, perhaps they should not have delivered thee to be circumcised. Izhak responded and said, Behold now, today I am thirty and six years old; and if the Holy One, blessed be He, were to require all my members, I would not delay. These words were heard before the Lord of the world, and the Word of the Lord at once tried Abraham, and said to him, Abraham! And he said, Behold me.”

Pentateuch	Targum Onqelos (Official) Codex Neofiti I (Palestinian) Targum Pseudo-Jonathan (Palestinian) Fragment-Targum (Palestinian) Fragments of Palestinian Targum in Cairo Geniza
Prophets	Targum Jonathan (Official)
Writings	Various unofficial Targums available except for Daniel and Ezra-Nehemiah

III d. *The Septuagint (Greek Versions)*

The Greek versions of the Hebrew Bible – at which point we might need to say Jewish Scriptures – are extremely important. Partly because of the light they shed on the religion and culture of Diaspora Judaism.

There is a document called the Letter of Aristeas that supposedly dates to around 285-247 BCE and tells the story of how the king of Egypt wanted to have a copy of the Jewish Scriptures for the library of Alexandria. The high priest in Jerusalem sent 72 (or 70 depending on the version of the story) Jewish scholars to Egypt. After 72 days they produced a Greek translation of the Jewish scriptures that was beautiful and accurate.

That is where the word Septuagint comes from – from the Greek word for ‘seventy’. It is often abbreviated LXX.

The story is a “pious legend” but contains some important truths. The Jewish community in Alexandria needed a Greek translation for use in synagogues for the same reason the Jewish community in Palestine (Eretz-Israel) needed an Aramaic

translation. Jewish scholars began to translate the Torah into Greek during the 3rd century BCE and eventually finished translating the entire Hebrew Bible by 150 BCE.

The Septuagint was a group effort. Different books show different styles and different qualities of translation. There is evidence they had a different Hebrew text. In addition to many differences in wording *there are more important differences from the Masoretic Text*. In some places the Septuagint is shorter or longer than the Masoretic Text. For example the book of Jeremiah in the Septuagint is shorter. And interestingly at Qumran was found part of a short version of Jeremiah in Hebrew.

Between the “original” Septuagint and 2nd century CE there were two revisions.

1. “Proto-Lucian” because it resembles 4th century CE revision by Lucian. Sometimes corrects Septuagint to make it more like Palestinian text family.
2. Kaige recension because it translates Hebrew וְ as Greek και γε. Between late 1st century BC and early 1st century CE. Revises Septuagint to make it more like the proto-Masoretic text.

The Septuagint was a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible by and for Greek speaking Jewish communities. It was adopted and used by the early Christian churches – who used the Septuagint as the basis for Christian interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures. This is one reason the Jewish community began to abandon the Septuagint and/or to revise the Septuagint to make it more like the official text of the Hebrew Bible.

This tension – between Jewish and Christian interests – led to three other Greek versions.

3. Aquila. Convert and student of Rabbi Akiba. Around 150 CE produced extremely literal Greek version of Jewish Scriptures.
4. Theodotion. During 2nd century CE produced more literary Greek version. His version of Daniel replaced the original Septuagint version.
5. Symmachus. Last Greek version of 2nd century CE. Good Greek style.

Okay. So by end of 2nd century we have *four* competing Greek versions of the Jewish Scriptures. There were many differences between the four versions and between them and the Hebrew text.

Along came Origen. Over fifteen years he produced a massive work called the Hexapla. Six columns – each with a different version of the Jewish Scriptures.

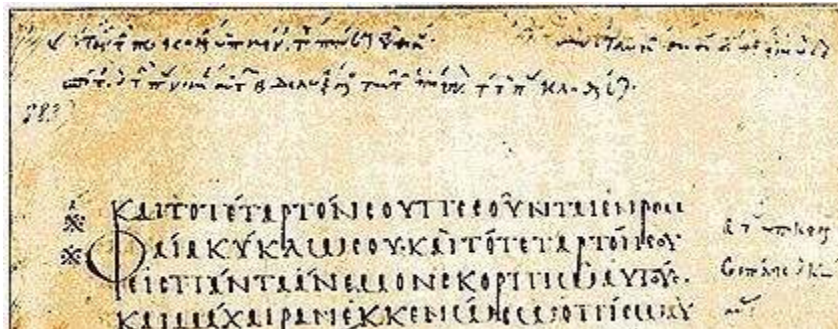
- i. Hebrew text.
- ii. Hebrew text in Greek letters.
- iii. Aquila's version.
- iv. Symmachus' version.
- v. Origen's revision of Septuagint. With special symbols to show any changes to make it closer to Hebrew text.
- vi. Theodotion's version.

Keep in mind we do not have (complete?) copies of Origen's Hexapla. To a large extent Septuagint scholars are working with major Septuagint manuscripts to reconstruct earlier versions – and to use these reconstructions to establish the text of the original(?) Septuagint.

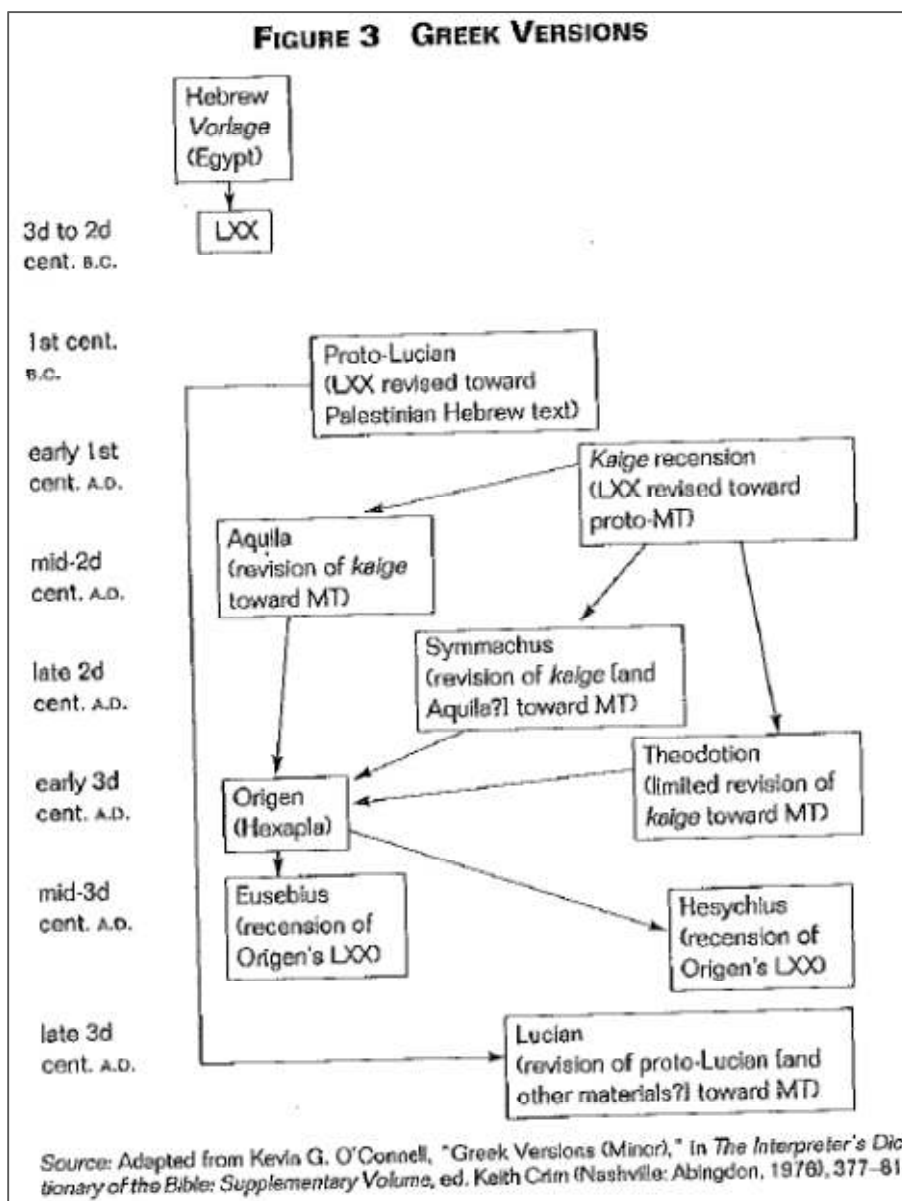
An important debate among Septuagint scholars is whether there is really any such thing as the “original” Septuagint. Some scholars argue that there were many different early Greek translations. And what we call the “original” Septuagint was Greek speaking Jewish scholars trying to produce one “official” Greek translation of the Jewish Scriptures. There is a similar debate among scholars of the Aramaic Targumim. Perhaps there was no “original” Aramaic Targum. There were many. From which Jewish scholars eventually produced one “official” Aramaic Targum.

If you think about it you can see why this debate is important for how we use the Septuagint for textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible.

By the way to this day the Greek Old Testament – which includes some biblical books not in the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible – is the official Old Testament for Orthodox Christianity.



Codex Marchalianus (6th century CE) showing Ezekiel 5:12-ff



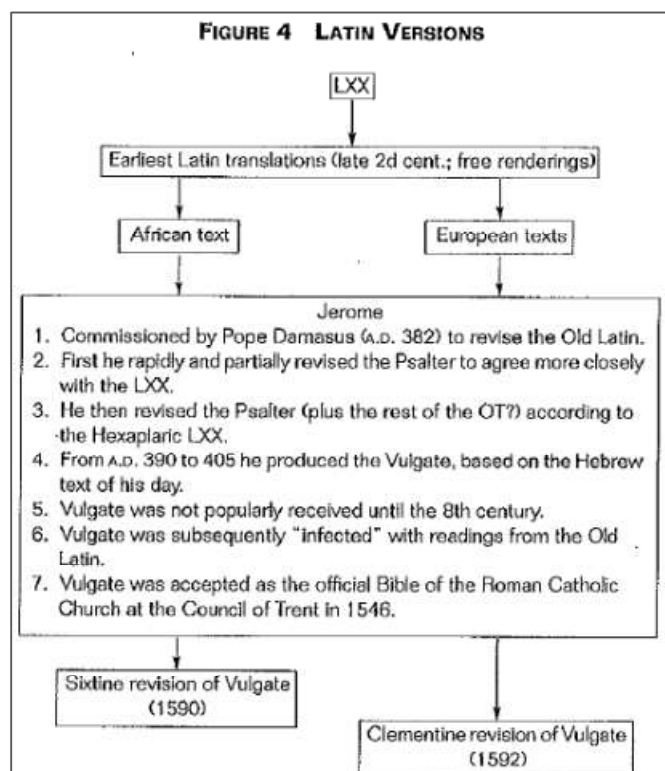
IIe. *The Latin Versions*

The Old Latin translation – also called *Itala* – was made during the 2nd century CE. It is a “daughter translation” which means it is a translation of a translation in this case a translation of the Septuagint. There were actually two different Old Latin translations – a European and an African version. Because the Old Latin translations are before the revisions of the Septuagint they are important for reconstructing the “original”(?) text of the Septuagint.

By the 4th century CE the Old Latin was no longer uniform. So Pope Daniel I commissioned Jerome to revise the Latin Bible. Jerome did this work in stages.

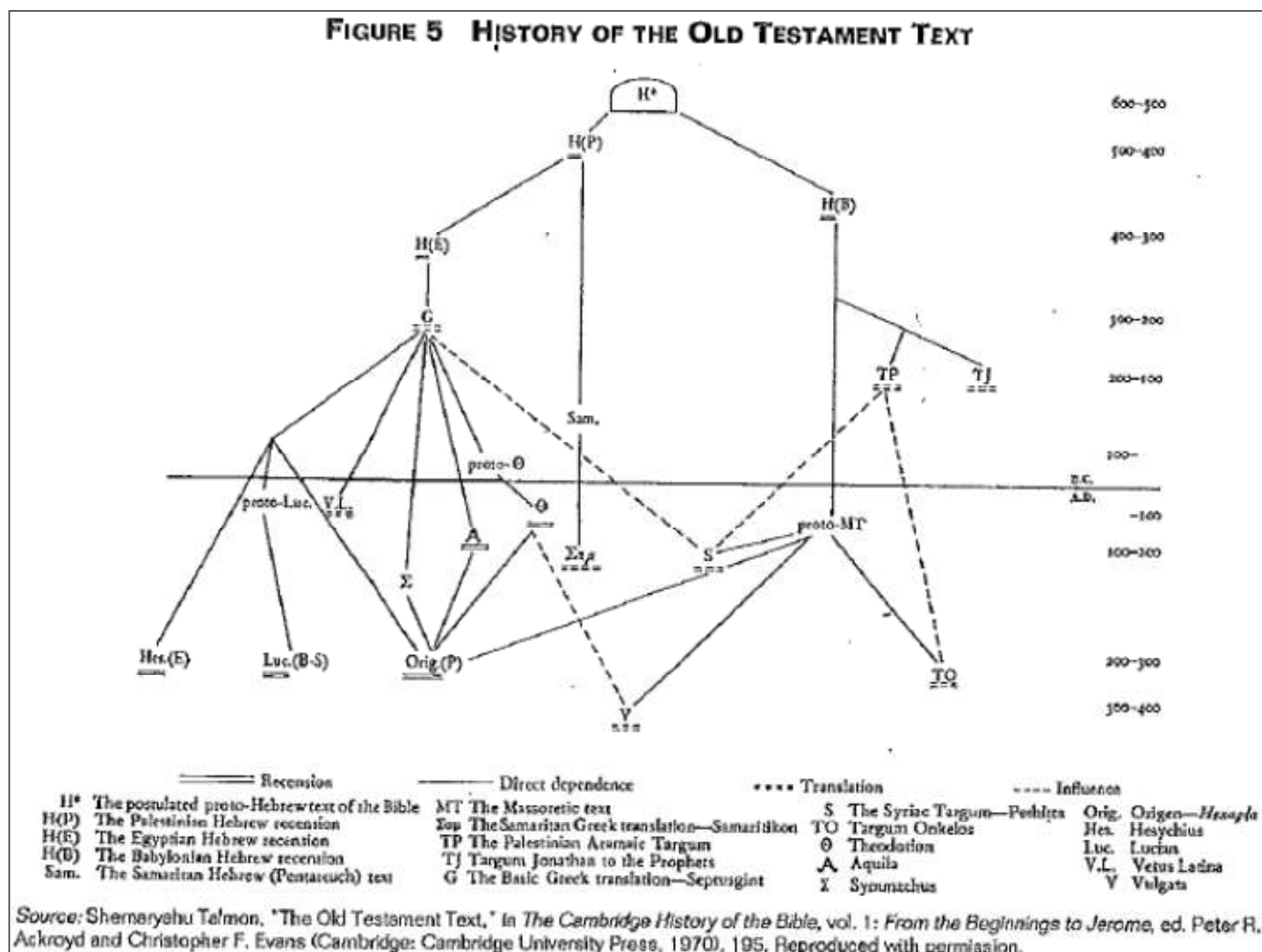
1. Minor revisions of Book of Psalms based on Septuagint = Roman Psalter.
2. Major revisions of Book of Psalms based on Septuagint and Hebrew text = Gallican Psalter.
3. Complete revision of Old Testament based on Hebrew text = the Vulgate.

By the 8th-9th centuries the Vulgate became more accepted than the Old Latin. In 1546 CE the Roman Catholic Church adopted the Vulgate as its official Bible at the Council of Trent.



IIIe. Putting it all together

It looks confusing at first but this chart summarizes everything above. Pay attention to “proto-MT” which is where the Masoretic Text comes from.



IIf. Short list of symbols used in *BHS* (you might print this for reference)

Ⲙ	Samaritan Pentateuch
α'	Aquila's Greek version
ε'	Origen's Greek revision
θ'	Theodotion's Greek version
ο εβρ'	Origen's Hebrew text
σ'	Symmachus' Greek version
Ⲁ	Arabic version
ⲛ	Bomberg edition (ben Hayyim)
Bo	Bohairic version (Coptic)
C	Cairo Codex of the Prophets
Ⲛ	Hebrew fragments from Cairo Geniza
Ed(d)	Hebrew editions according to Kennicott, de Rossi, Ginsburg
Ⲅ	Septuagint
Hier	Jerome
K	Ketib
L	Leningrad Codex
Ⲉ	Old Latin (itala)
ⲛ	Masoretic Text
Mm	Masorah magna
Mp	Masorah parva
Ms(s)	Medieval Hebrew manuscript(s) according to Kennicott, de Rossi, Ginsburg
Occ	Western Masoretes
Or	Eastern Masoretes
Orig	Origen
Q	Qere
Ⲓ	Qumran
Ⲥ	Syriac (Peshitta)
Sa	Sahidic version (Coptic)
Ⲛ	Targumim
Tiq soph	Tiqqun sopherim
Ⲟ	Vulgate (Latin)
+	it adds, they add
>	is omitted, is missing

Introduction to Textual Criticism – Textual Changes

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III. Textual Changes

IV. Basic Principles of Textual Criticism

III. Textual Changes

Obviously there are many differences between the Masoretic Text we have in *BHS* and (a) other biblical manuscripts and (b) other recensions and translations. These changes had to come from somewhere. There are three main ways that scribes made changes when they copied a text.

1. Physical defect in the original. The least common. We will not worry about this for now.
2. Accidental changes. The most common. Sometimes called “errors” or “mistakes”.
3. Deliberate changes.

IIIa. Accidental changes

Some changes – or errors/mistakes – have to do with the letter or word the scribe was copying.

- i. Confusion of similar letters. Misreading one letter for another that looks similar. Keep in mind that some pairs of letters look similar in *archaic* script and other pairs look similar in *square* script.

Isa 63:6 MT ואשכרם בחמתי *make drunk with my anger*

*Mss ואשברם בחמתי *shatter in my anger*

- ii. Wrong word division. A scribe might treat two or more words – especially if they are crowded together on a line of the manuscript - as if they are one word.

Num 23:10 MT מי מנה עפר יעקב *who counts the dust of Jacob*

ומספר את רבע ישראל *and the number of dustcloud of Israel*
 LXX מי מנה עפר יעקב
 ומי ספר את רבע ישראל *or counts the dustcloud of Israel*

iii. Wrong vowels. A scribe might make a mistake copying the vowels. And if the scribe is not copying but translating the Hebrew text into another language this kind of mistake is even more significant.

Isa 7:11 MT הַעֲמֹק שְׂאֵלָה אוֹ הַגְּבֵה לְמַעְלָה *whether it is deep, ask! (as Sheol?)*
or as high as the sky
 ver's *as Sheol*
 שְׂאֵלָה or שְׂאֵלָה

iv. Abbreviations. A scribe might misunderstand an abbreviation for a word in the original manuscript.

Some changes have to do with nearby words.

v. Homoeoteleuton = “similar ending”. If there are words nearby that have the same or similar ending the scribe might accidentally skip from the first word to the second. When this happens the scribe accidentally leaves out anything from a few words to a few verses.

Jer 31:38 הִנֵּה יָמִים בָּאִים נֹאֵם יְהוָה
behold the days (are coming) says Adonai

vi. Homoeoarkton = “similar beginning”. Much less common than homoeoteleuton. If there are words nearby that have the same or similar beginning.

Gen 31:18 MT אֲשֶׁר רָכַשׁ בַּפְּדָן אֲרָם
which he had acquired, cattle that were his
property, which he had acquired in Paddan Aram
 LXX Syr אֲשֶׁר רָכַשׁ מִקְנֵה קַיְנוֹ אֲשֶׁר רָכַשׁ בַּפְּדָן אֲרָם

Some changes have to do with the scribe just plain making a mistake.

vii. Haplography. When a scribe leaves out a letter or word. Often if a letter occurs twice and the scribe only writes it once.

Judge 20:12	K	ולא אבו בנימן <i>and Benjamin were not willing</i>
	Q	ולא אבו בני בנימן <i>and t sons of Benjamin were not willing</i>

viii. Dittography. Opposite of haplography. A scribe writes twice a letter or word that appears once.

Jer 51:3	MT	אל ידרך ידרך הדרך קשתו <i>let not the archer draw draw his bow</i>
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ix. Transposition or Metathesis. Accidentally reversing two letters.

Deut 31:1	MT	וילך משה וידבר את הדברים האלה
	4QDtn	ויכל משה וידבר את הדברים האלה

Some changes have to do with dictation or not hearing correctly. A scribe did not always copy a text by looking at it. Sometimes someone else read a manuscript and the scribe did not hear it correctly. So letters and words that sound the same or similar can become confused.

The last group of accidental changes are mental mistakes.

x. The scribe copies from memory and makes a mistake.

xi. The scribe changes a text to make it more like a parallel text.

xii. The scribe takes a note or alternate reading from the original manuscript and includes it in the copy. Sometimes two alternate readings from the original are combined into one new reading in the copy.

2 Sam 22:43	MT	אדקם ארקעם <i>I crushed them and mashed them</i>
	LXX	אדקם
	4QSam ^a	ארקעם

IIIb. Intentional changes

There are four main kinds of intentional changes.

1. Tiqqune sopherim = emendations of the scribes

The Masorah and Talmud sometimes refer to such changes. According to tradition there are eighteen places where the scribe changed the Hebrew text because of something in the original text that the scribe believed was disrespectful to G-d.

1 Sam 3:13 MT כי מקללים להם בניו *for themselves*

LXX כי מקללים אלהים בניו *that his sons were blaspheming God*

2. Itture sopherim = omissions of the scribes

According to the Talmud there are seventeen examples. Five have to do with omission of ׀. Seven examples we read a word even though there are no consonants in the text. Five examples we do not read a word even though there are consonants in the text – those words are written without vowels.

3. Explanatory glosses

An explanatory gloss is like a parenthetical note or comment. These can be subjective. Some text critics might say a gloss was added by a scribe. Some might say a gloss was added by the original writer in order to communicate something to future readers.

Gen 7:6 MT והמבול היה מים על הארץ *and the flood was water upon the earth*

4. Euphemisms

There are at least sixteen examples of changes to avoid a word or expression that is offensive or too explicit. These are indicated by Ketib-Qere in the margin.

2 Sam 12:14 MT נאן נאצת את איבי יהוה *enemies of Yahweh*

LXX Mss נאן נאצת את יהוה... *Yahweh*

4QSam^a נאן נאצת את דבר יהוה... *word of Yahweh*

IV. Basic Principles of Textual Criticism

Okay. So there is a text critical note in the critical apparatus of *BHS*. Or you are working on your doctorate and notice a difference between the Masoretic Text and an original manuscript you are examining in the archives of a famous library. What do you do? How do you evaluate the other readings? Is the Masoretic Text correct? Or could this be an example where a change or mistake happened in the transmission of the Hebrew text?

Many of the principles and practice of textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible come from other fields of study. Such as Classical studies or the study of the New Testament.

IVa. Evaluate the witnesses

Hoo boy. Difficult to summarize this.

First – is the other reading (Hebrew or otherwise) an “authentic” and “independent” witness?

Second – assemble all the witnesses.

- i. Group the witnesses by language. The textual critic compares witnesses in the same language and sometimes reduces them to one or two different readings.
- ii. Compare Septuagint to daughter translations. The daughter translations normally follow the Septuagint. When they do not – that is significant.
- iii. Compare Masoretic Text to non-Greek versions – such as Peshitta, Targumim, and Vulgate.
- iv. Retrovert the variant readings into Hebrew.
- v. Discard any variant readings without independent value. Hard to explain. For example if you retrovert a Septuagint variant and it is almost identical to the Masoretic Text.

An important principle is that you need to *know your manuscripts*. The textual critic cannot just note “oh this variant occurs in this Septuagint manuscript”. You

need to know the family tree, character, reliability of that manuscript. Just because a manuscript is older does not make it better or more important! And just because 100 manuscripts read this way and 10 read that way does not mean the 100 manuscripts are more correct! What if the 100 manuscripts are based on a manuscript by a sloppy scribe? And the 10 are based on a manuscript by a careful scribe? *Manuscripta ponderantur, non numerantur*. Manuscripts are weighed, not counted.

IVb. Decide which reading is most “correct”

P Kyle McCarter famously writes there is really only one principle to which all other principles can be reduced. *Utrum in alterum abiturum erat?* Which would have changed into the other? *Which reading is more likely to have given rise to the others?*

Fair enough. But what are some of these other more specific principles?

a. *Lectio difficilio praeferenda est*. The more difficult reading is preferred.

Generally speaking a scribe would look at a difficult reading – he has trouble understanding a term or the grammar or the meaning – and will copy it in such a way as to make it easier to understand.

b. *Lectio brevior praeferenda est*. The shorter reading is to be preferred.

Generally speaking a scribe is more likely to add something than omit something. As you can see above most examples of accidental changes involve adding something to the text – such as alternative readings or glosses.

c. Which reading is more appropriate to its context.

Very simple. Which reading makes more sense in light of everything else around it?

d. Critics are suspicious of readings that improve style, modernize, simplify, or resolve contradictions.

e. Parallel texts.

Parallel texts are different. What two texts in the Bible are parallel critics prefer readings that are different from the parallel text. For example when comparing Chronicles to Samuel-Kings.

There are of course exceptions to the above rules. For example shorter or more difficult readings are not preferred if the result is garbage.

Here is a list of Four Rules of Textual Criticism that I found:

1. When the Hebrew manuscripts and other versions (such as Septuagint) agree we assume the original is preserved.
2. When the Hebrew and other versions differ among themselves then choose the more difficult reading.
3. When the Hebrew and other versions differ but they offer good and sensible readings *and* a better reading cannot be established go with the Masoretic Text.
4. When the Hebrew and other versions differ *and* they offer less than sensible readings it is allowable to conjecture an emendation.

IVe. Emend the text?

What if after evaluating the witnesses and considering the different readings you conclude that the Masoretic Text is wrong and another manuscript/translation preserves a more original reading?

McCarter leaves us with two important questions:

1. Does the proposed emendation (change/correction of the Masoretic Text) explain all the transmitted readings?
2. Does it fit its context?

If the answer to either of these is “no” then the textual problem should be considered “unsolved”.