Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible, Methodology

Textual criticism deals with the nature and origin of all the witnesses of a composition or text—in our case the biblical books. This analysis often involves an attempt to discover the original form of details in a composition, or even of large stretches of text, although what exactly constitutes an "original text" (or "original texts") is debatable.

In the course of this inquiry, attempts are made to describe how the texts were written, changed, and transmitted from one generation to the next. People who express a view on the originality of readings do so while evaluating their comparative value. This comparison— the central area of the textual praxis—refers to the value of the readings (variants) included in the textual witnesses. However, not all differences should be subjected to a textual evaluation. In our view, (groups of) readings that were produced at the literary growth stage of the biblical books (editorial variants) should not be subjected to textual evaluation, since they were not produced during the course of the transmission of texts. This definition does not refer specifically to the traditional text of Hebrew–Aramaic Scripture, the so-called Masoretic Text (MT), but rather to all forms of Scripture.

One of the practical results of the analysis of textual data is that it creates tools for interpreting Hebrew and Aramaic Scriptures. Interpretation is based on a text or texts and can only proceed if the nature of that text has been determined. By the same token, all other disciplines, such as the historical, geographical, and linguistic analysis of Scripture, operate from a text base. In each case, the scholar has to identify the text base for the exegesis, and by necessity this involves the analysis of textual data beyond the text base.

The Need for Textual Criticism of Hebrew and Aramaic Scripture

Several factors require the involvement of textual criticism within the discipline of biblical studies. In view of the focus on the Masoretic Text by all scholars, such an examination remains relevant.

Differences among the Many Textual Witnesses

The biblical text has been transmitted in many ancient and medieval sources that are known to us from modern editions in different languages: We possess fragments of leather and papyrus scrolls that are at least two thousand years old in Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic, as well as manuscripts in Hebrew and other languages from the Middle Ages. These sources shed light on and witness to the biblical text, hence their name: "textual witnesses." All

these textual witnesses differ from one another to some extent. Since no textual source contains what could be called *the* biblical text, a serious involvement in biblical studies necessitates the study of all sources, which necessarily involves study of the differences between them. The comparison and analysis of these textual differences thus holds a central place within textual criticism.

It is not only the differences among the various textual witnesses that require involvement in textual criticism. Textual differences of a similar nature are reflected in the various attestations of a single textual tradition of Hebrew and Aramaic Scripture, namely the Masoretic Text (MT), often described as the main textual tradition of Scripture. Such differences are visible in all attestations of MT, ancient and medieval, and even in its printed editions and translations, since these editions are based on several different sources.

The following are examples of the differences between the most frequently used editions of MT: sequence of books, chapter division, layout of the text, verse division, single letters and words, vocalization and accentuation, notes of the Masorah, different editions based on the same manuscript, and differences due to printing errors.

Mistakes, Corrections, and Changes in the Texts, Including the Masoretic Text

Most texts—ancient and modern—that are transmitted from one generation to the next get corrupted (the technical term for various forms of "mistakes") . For modern compositions, the process of textual transmission from the writing of the autographs until their final printing is relatively short, thus limiting the possibilities of them becoming corrupted. In ancient texts, however, such as Hebrew and Aramaic Scriptures, these corruptions were more frequent as a result of the complexities of the writing on papyrus and leather and the length of the transmission process, conditions that prevailed until the advent of printing. The number of factors that could have created corruptions is large: the transition from the early Hebrew to the square script, unclear handwriting, unevenness in the surface of the leather or papyrus, graphically similar letters which were often confused, the lack of vocalization, unclear boundaries between words in early texts leading to wrong word divisions, scribal corrections not understood by the next generation of scribes, etc.

The Masoretic Text Does Not Reflect the "Original Text" of the Biblical Books

It should not be postulated that MT is better, or more frequently reflects the original text of the biblical books, than any other text. Furthermore, even if we were to surmise that MT reflects the "original" form of the Bible, we would still have to decide which form of MT

reflects this "original text," since MT itself is represented by many witnesses that differ in small details.

Differences Between Inner-Biblical Parallel Texts in the Masoretic Text

The textual witnesses of the biblical books often contain parallel versions of the same unit. Some of these reflect different formulations in MT itself of the same psalm (Psalm 18 // 2 Samuel 22; Psalm 14 // Psalm 53), a genealogical list (Ezra 2 // Neh 7:6–72), segments of books (Jeremiah 52 // 2 Kgs 24:18–25:30; Isa 36:1–38:8 // 2 Kgs 18:13–20:11), and even large segments of a complete book—for example, in Chronicles large sections run parallel to the books of Samuel and Kings. Some of these parallel sources are based on ancient texts that already differed from one another before they were incorporated into the biblical books; they additionally underwent changes while being transmitted from one generation to the next.

A Modern Approach to the Textual Criticism of the Bible

Since the discovery in 1947 of Hebrew and Aramaic texts in the Judaean Desert, dating from ca. 250 BC until AD 135, our knowledge about the text of Hebrew and Aramaic Scriptures has increased greatly. It should be remembered that until the time of that discovery no early texts of the Hebrew and Aramaic Bible were known, except for the Nash papyrus of the Decalogue. As a result, the manuscripts of MT from the Middle Ages served as the earliest Hebrew and Aramaic sources. Therefore, the research before 1947 was based on Hebrew and Aramaic texts that had been copied 1200 years or more after the composition of the biblical books. Scholars also relied on manuscripts and early papyrus fragments of the ancient translations, especially of the Septuagint and the Vulgate, which brought them much closer to the time of the composition of the biblical books. Therefore, the discovery in the Judaean Desert of many Hebrew and Aramaic texts dating from two millennia ago has considerably advanced our knowledge of the early witnesses and the procedure of the copying and transmitting of texts.

The study of the biblical text was initiated as an auxiliary science to biblical exegesis. Therefore, the results of textual investigation have always been taken into consideration in exegesis, and that practice continues to be followed today.

Text, Canon, and Sacred Status

The books of Hebrew Scripture were gradually accepted as authoritative when they were integrated into different collections of sacred writings—those of MT, the Septuagint, and the

Samaritan Pentateuch. However, scribal transmission started a long time before the books obtained authoritative status, also named canonization when referring to Scripture as a whole. For example, Jer 36 describes how the prophet dictated the contents of a second scroll to Baruch following the burning of the first one by the king. That scroll thus constituted the second stage of the scribal development and the growing process of the book. The contents of the second scroll cannot be reconstructed, let alone the first one. In other cases, we know more about the development stages of the books. Thus, we are able to analyze the relation between the MT and Septuagint versions of Jeremiah, suggesting that the Septuagint represents an early stage in the literary development of that book— which preceded the edition of MT that became canonical in Jewish tradition. Likewise, there are many additional examples of literary variants preserved in non-Masoretic sources. On the basis of this understanding, we therefore submit that scribal processes and textual transmission should be discussed without reference to the process of canonization. Valuable variants may be found also in *tefillin*, *mezuzot*, quotations in non-canonical works such as non-biblical Qumran texts, and so-called rewritten Bible compositions found at Qumran and elsewhere.

When opening up new sources that are relevant for textual criticism, we should also keep an open mind about different Scripture collections. Since textual criticism deals with all forms of Hebrew Scripture, it also covers the content of other sacred collections, namely those included in the Septuagint, Samaritan Pentateuch, and some Qumran scrolls. Some of these preceded the literary crystallization of MT, while others were composed subsequently.

Finally, there is not necessarily a connection between the sacred status of the Bible books and the nature of the scribal transmission. Even the most sacred book of the Bible, the Torah, was not transmitted more carefully than the other books.

Procedure

After the variations between the textual witnesses are collected, it remains to be seen what should be done with the rich store of information included in these sources. While the contents of the non-Masoretic witnesses, including the Judean Desert scrolls and the Septuagint, are often disregarded in commentaries and introductions, it would seem more appropriate to use these data within the exegetical procedure. However, when turning to textual data, problems pile up to such an extent that some scholars shrink away from using them. These problems are visible both at the theoretical end (guidelines for the use of the textual data) and at the practical level (which variants should be used by exegetes and how). At both levels, there are no firm answers and no generally accepted views. The

discussion of the shape of the biblical text in early periods is of central importance to this analysis.

Theory of Textual Criticism

The discussion of the practical aspects of textual criticism depends upon an analysis of its essence and aims.

The textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible differs from textual criticism of other compositions that are usually reconstructed in their original form, for there have been relatively few attempts to reconstruct the original text of a biblical book, for theoretical as well as practical reasons. Most of the existing critical editions are editions of MT that record variant readings in an accompanying critical apparatus (diplomatic editions).

The problems with which the textual critic is confronted, the growth of the books through complex stages of editorial revision and textual transmission, are not confined to biblical research, since other literatures, especially Akkadian compositions, developed in a similar way. Likewise, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* went through several stages of textual manipulation. At the same time, it seems that the textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible raises unusually difficult problems, partly because these two literatures are preserved better in early witnesses.

In light of this description, it is now possible to formulate the aims and method of the textual criticism of the Bible. The study of the biblical text involves an investigation of its development, copying and transmission, and of the creation of readings over the centuries. In the course of this procedure, textual critics collect from Hebrew and translated texts all the details (readings) in which these texts differ from one another. Some of these readings were created during the textual transmission, while others derive from an earlier stage, that of literary growth.

Praxis of Textual Criticism

Practicing textual criticism consists of the analysis of the textual data and their use in biblical exegesis. It involves two sets of data:

1. The biblical text as found in Hebrew manuscripts and reflected in the ancient translations
2. The conjectural emendation of the biblical text invoked when neither the Hebrew manuscripts nor the ancient versions preserve satisfactory evidence.

The first area may be called textual criticism proper, while the second is supplementary to it.

Textual criticism proper is subdivided into two stages:

1. Collecting Hebrew readings and reconstructing them from the ancient versions
2. Evaluation of these readings

This process involves all Hebrew and reconstructed details (readings) that differ from an accepted form of MT via pluses, minuses, differences in letters, words, and the sequence of words, as well as differences in vocalization, word division, and sense divisions. MT (usually Leningrad codex B19A) is taken as the point of departure for describing textual variations because it has become the *textus receptus* (received text) of Hebrew Scripture, but this procedure does not imply a preference for its contents. In the course of this comparison we ought to remember that most early sources of the biblical text have been lost. Thus, although readings in the ancient witnesses (e.g., the Septuagint) are compared with MT, there may have been several intervening stages between that source and MT. Nonetheless that complication does not invalidate the procedure itself. All details in manuscripts are considered readings, while readings differing from MT are named variants.

As a rule, the collation of Hebrew variants from biblical manuscripts is relatively simple. Somewhat more complicated is the collecting of variant readings from biblical quotations in non-biblical sources. The reconstruction of variant readings from the ancient translations is equally complex.

After collecting variants from Hebrew and translated texts, they are usually compared with their counterparts in MT. The implication being that a specific reading may be preferable to all other readings, also phrased as the assumption that all other readings may have derived from that reading. If a scribal development—such as textual corruption of a specific reading to other readings is assumed—the aim of this comparison is to select the *one* reading that was presumably contained in the original form of the text. Even if more than one original or determinative form is presupposed this procedure would still be followed when textual corruption is posited—necessitating the assumption of one original text at least in the case of readings that developed from one another. Due to the vicissitudes of the textual transmission, in any given verse, MT may contain an original reading in one detail, while the original reading for another detail may be contained in the Septuagint.

The comparative evaluation of variants is necessarily subjective. This procedure is limited to readings created during the textual transmission, excluding those created during the literary growth of the book, even though they are included in textual witnesses. However, it remains difficult to decide which readings textual analysis should be applied to and which readings should be left without evaluation.

While there are no objective criteria for the comparison of readings, we often find some support in criteria applied to the comparison of variants, often named "rules." In our view, external criteria (nature of the textual witnesses, preference for MT, broad attestation, age of textual witnesses) are of little help. At the same time, some internal criteria that have a bearing on the intrinsic value and content of the readings provide some help. Among these, the rule of the *lectio difficilior* ("the more difficult reading is to be preferred") provides occasional help, although it is impractical since it fails to take simple scribal errors into consideration. Other "rules" pertain to "the shorter reading is to be preferred" and assimilation to parallel passages (harmonization). In our view, these rules should be used sparingly and with full recognition of their subjective nature. On the whole, the employment of such rules is very limited for the internal comparison of Hebrew variants and for the comparison of such variants with Hebrew variants reconstructed from the ancient translations.

This assertion leads to some general reflections on the nature of textual evaluation and the use of guidelines within that framework. The quintessence of textual evaluation is the selection from the different transmitted readings of the one that is the most appropriate to its context. Within this selection process, the concept of the "context" is taken in a broad sense, as referring to the language, style, and content of both the immediate context and of the literary unit in which the reading is found. This procedure necessarily allows great liberty but, at the same time, burdens us with the task of negotiating through a labyrinth of data and considerations. Since the context is taken in a wide sense, we have to refer to data and arguments bearing on different aspects of the text, and hence to different disciplines: the language and vocabulary of individual literary units and of the Bible as a whole, the exegesis of individual verses, chapters, and books, and the general content and ideas of a given unit or book. In addition to these, we must be aware of the intricacies of textual transmission, and in particular, of the types of errors made in the course of that process.

Bibliography

Barthélemy, D. "Text, Hebrew, History of." Pages 878–84 in the supplementary volume of *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Edited by G. A. Buttrick. 5 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 1962.

———, *Critique textuelle de l'Ancien Testament, 1–4*. Orbis biblicus et orientalis 50. Fribourg/Göttingen: Éditions Universitaires/Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982–2005.

Brooke, George J. "The Qumran Scrolls and the Demise of the Distinction between Higher and Lower Criticism." Pages 26–42 in *New Directions in Qumran Studies*: *Proceedings of the Bristol Colloquium on the Dead Sea Scrolls*, *8–10 September 2003*. Edited by J. G. Campbell et al. Library of Second Temple Studies 52. London: T & T Clark International, 2005.

Childs, Brevard S. Pages 84–106 in *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*. London: SCM, 1979.

Cross, Frank M. "Problems of Method in the Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible." Pages 31–54 in *The Critical Study of Sacred Texts*. Edited by W. D. O'Flaherty. Berkeley Religious Studies 2. Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union, 1979.

Fischer, Alexander A. *Der Text des Alten Testaments: Neubearbeitung der Einführung in die Biblia Hebraica von Ernst Würthwein.* Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2009.

Hendel, Ron S. *The Text of Genesis 1–11: Textual Studies and Critical Edition.* New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Kenney, E. J. "History, Textual Criticism." Pages 676–85 in vol. 20 of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, *Macropaedia*. 15th edition. Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1985.

Klein, Ralph S. *Textual Criticism of the Old Testament: The Septuagint after Qumran*. Guides to Biblical Scholarship *Old Testament* Series 4. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974.

van der Kooij, Arie. "Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible: Its Aim and Method." Pages 729–39 in *Emanuel: Studies in Hebrew Bible,Septuagint*, *and Dead Sea Scrolls in Honor of Emanuel Tov*. Edited by S. M. Paul et al. Vetus Testamentum Supplements 94. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2003.

Kreuzer, Sigfried. "Text, Textgeschichte und Textkritik des Alten Testaments: Zum Stand der Forschung an der Wende des Jahrhunderts."*Theologische Literaturzeitung* 127 (2002): 127–56.

Maas, Paul. *Textual Criticism*. Translated by B. Flower. Oxford: Clarendon, 1958.

McCarter, P. Kyle. *I Samuel*, *II Samuel*. Anchor Bible 8. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980, 1984.

Mulder, Martin J., ed. *Mikra: Text*, *Translation*, *Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*. Compendia rerum iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum, Section Two, vol. 1. Assen-Maastricht/Philadelphia: Van Gorcum/Fortress, 1988.

Orlinsky, Harry M. "The Textual Criticism of the Old Testament." Pages 140–69 in *The Bible and the Ancient Near East: Essays in Honor of William Foxwell Albright.* Edited by G. E. Wright. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965.

Payne, David F. "*Old Testament* Textual Criticism: Its Principles and Practice Apropos of Recent English Versions." *Tyndale Bulletin* 25 (1974): 99–112.

Postgate, John P. "Textual Criticism." Pages 708–15 in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. 14th edition. Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1929.

Roberts, Bleddyn J. *The Old Testament Text and Versions: The Hebrew Text in Transmission and the History of the Ancient Versions*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1951.

Talmon, Shemaryahu, "The *Old Testament* Text." Pages 159–99 in vol. I of *The Cambridge History of the Bible*. Edited by R. P. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans. Cambridge: University Press, 1970.

Thompson, John A. "Textual Criticism, Old Testament." Pages 886–91 in the supplementary volume of *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1976.

Tov, Emanuel. *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*. 2nd rev. ed. Minneapolis/Assen: Fortress Press/Royal Van Gorcum, 2001.

———, *Hebrew Bible*, *Greek Bible*, *and Qumran: Collected Essays*. Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum 121. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008.

Trebolle Barrera, Julio. *The Jewish Bible and the Christian Bible: An Introduction to the History of the Bible*. Translated by W. G. E. Watson. Leiden/Grand Rapids: Brill/Eerdmans, 1998.

Wegner, Paul D. *A Student's Guide to Textual Criticism of the Bible.* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2006.

Waltke, Bruce K. "Aims of Old Testament Textual Criticism." *Westminster Theological Journal* 51 (1989): 93–108.

Würthwein, Ernst. *Der Text des Alten Testaments: Eine Einführung in die Biblia Hebraica.* 5th ed. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1988.

———, *The Text of the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Biblia Hebraica.* 2nd ed. Translated by E. F. Rhodes. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995.

—Emanuel Tov