

Know the Scriptures - Part Four

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Old Testament Witnesses

We have mentioned the variations that are to be found in the many witnesses to the Holy Scriptures, and we have discussed the science known as textual criticism, the process that seeks to deal with these variations. Now let us look at some of the more prominent witnesses themselves, manuscripts, versions, lectionaries, and quotations by early church fathers. Their names are not nearly as important as are the dates and some of the circumstances surrounding their origin. Nevertheless, we use the names that have been given them for identification purposes.

Manuscripts

Compared to the New Testament, the number of Old Testament witnesses is not impressive, nor are they as old. Until recently, the earliest existent Hebrew manuscripts dated back only to about 900 A.D. These are called the Cairo Codex and the Leningrad Codex of the Prophets. The British Museum Codex of the Pentateuch (five books of Moses) and the Leningrad Codex of the entire Old Testament are a century or so later. The Hebrew Bible used by our pastors and in our Seminary is based upon these four manuscripts. In 1948 the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, reportedly by an Arab boy looking for a lost goat in a cave. Over 300 rolls have been found in that region, some of them describing religious beliefs of a particular sect of Jews, and others containing fragments of the Old Testament. Two of these scrolls contain most of the book of Isaiah. They are of interest primarily because they date back about 1000 years earlier than the manuscripts mentioned above.

Does this mean that we must now change our Hebrew Bible to bring it into alignment with the Dead Sea Scrolls? Do these newly discovered manuscripts demand a change in our thinking and faith? It is interesting to note that the Revised Standard Version (RSV) adopted only 13 changes in the section, Isaiah 1-40, and one of the translators later said he felt that some of these changes were a

mistake. (The changes based on the Dead Sea Scrolls are identified in footnotes of the RSV by the phrase, "One ancient MS.") Basically, the Massoretic text still stands. God did not make His people wait until the twentieth century before revealing His Truth to them.

Who are the Massorettes?

Before the invention of the printing press, the writings of Moses and the Prophets were copied by hand for future generations. This was the work of the scribes. Because of the difficulty of the Hebrew language and because of the great similarity between some of the letters, errors could have crept into the text. Recognizing the possibility of such errors occurring and dedicating themselves to the task of guarding against them, a group of Jewish scholars, known as the Massorettes, arose. They devised a system of vowels and accents for the consonants of the Hebrew text, and they inserted these vowel points above and below the lines of the manuscript writing to insure the correct pronunciation of the text. Furthermore, in order to eliminate additions or omissions by the scribes they devised a counting scheme by which they determined the middle verse, word, and letter of each Old Testament book. They counted the number of times each letter occurred in each book, they took note of those verses that contained all the letters of the alphabet, and the like. Consequently, when the scribe finished making a copy, he could check his work against the numbering scheme before using it. If it failed to measure up it was buried or burned. This accounts for the dearth of Old Testament variant readings and the marvelous agreement between the existing manuscripts.

Ancient Versions

Really not a translation, but a form of the Hebrew text is the Samaritan Pentateuch, dating back to about 400 B.C. when the Samaritans separated themselves from the Jews. Their form of Scriptures included only the five books of Moses. With the exception of a considerable number of differences in grammar and spelling and some additions that serve to uphold the religious beliefs of the Samaritans, there are few glaring differences between this version and the Hebrew text.

The Septuagint is a Greek translation of the Old Testament. It came into being about 250 B.C. when it became apparent that the Old Testament ought to be translated for the benefit of those Jews who adopted the Greek language and for those Gentiles who wanted to become acquainted with the religion and customs of the Jewish people. The work of translating was probably done in Alexandria, Egypt, the center of learning at that time.

This version was widely known at the time of Christ. The apostles and evangelists usually quoted Old Testament passages according to the Septuagint. Sometimes it does not agree literally with the Hebrew, but by quoting the words of the Greek version, the Holy Spirit endorses them as a true exposition of the Hebrew original. For a while it was the only Bible the early church used.

After the Babylonian captivity, the Jews adopted the Aramaic language. After some time, when people no longer understood the Hebrew Scripture lessons, they were translated or paraphrased in Aramaic. In Aramaic a translation is called a targum. The oldest of these are, no doubt, lost, but those that still exist date from a very early period. The targums are not very literal translations but more like commentaries on the original text.

The Syriac Peshitta, a translation of the late first century, agrees closely with the Massoretic text.

The Old Latin version, dating from 150 A.D. is a translation, not of the Hebrew, but of the Greek Septuagint. The Latin Vulgate, on the other hand, was translated by Jerome around 400 A.D. directly from the Hebrew, under commission of the Bishop of Rome, Damascus. It is still the official Bible of the Roman Catholic Church and was the Bible of the Middle Ages.

Quotations

The Talmud, a collection of ancient regulations developed from the Law of Moses, was in existence at the time of Christ. If Jesus was referring to these as the “traditions of the elders” (Matthew 15:1-9 and Mark 7:1-13), He soundly condemned them. Nevertheless, the Talmud does contain some Old Testament

quotations and is of some value for that reason.

Other lesser known sources are Origen’s Hexapla, the Coptic, Ethiopic, Armenian and the Arabic versions and more.

Not so Old

Relative to the New Testament manuscripts, those of the Old Testament are not so old at all. This might have been a hindrance to their acceptance if the Massorettes had not devised their intricate safeguards and strict rules which governed the scribes and copyists. This, together with the testimony of early versions and other valuable sources, confirms the reliability of our present Hebrew Old Testament.

Additional Notes:

None of the original Bible manuscripts exist. They were lost centuries ago, and the texts that are now in the Bible represent copies of copies that were handed down in a variety of translations over many generations. The most famous version of the Old Testament is a Greek translation, the Septuagint, made at Alexandria by about 70 Jewish scholars beginning in the 3rd century B.C.

Another famous ancient translation, including both testaments, is the Latin Vulgate (which means *common*, or *vernacular*) made by Jerome in about A.D. 400. Throughout the Middle Ages the Bible was translated and copied by hand, a process prone to error. It was only with the invention of printing in the late 15th century that fixed, invariable texts of the Bible could be published.

Chapter and Verse Divisions

The present versification of the Old Testament is based upon the work of a 15th century rabbi. It was edited by Jacob ben Hayyim ibn Adonijah and published in Venice in 1524.

The New Testament division into verses was done by a Paris printer, Stephannus, in 1551. His printed version of the Latin Bible in 1555 was the first edition to contain both testaments in the present chapter and verse forms.