Searching for the "Original" Bible

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Do the Dead Sea Scrolls help?

When ancient Biblical texts differ from one another, which one should we believe?

More specifically, in answering this question: How helpful are those ancient scrolls of the Hebrew Bible found among the Dead Sea Scrolls?

Prior to their discovery, scholars looked mainly to two texts to answer the question posed at the beginning of this article—the traditional Hebrew text known as the Masoretic Text (or MT), which was finalized by Jewish scholars in about 1000 C.E., and a Greek translation of the Hebrew text called the Septuagint (or LXX). This Greek translation of the Pentateuch (Torah) was made for the Jews of Alexandria in the beginning of the third century B.C.E. According to tradition, 72 or 70 wise men translated the Torah into Greek in 72 days, seated in 36 separate cells, and, lo and behold, they produced identical Greek translations, supposedly testifying to the accuracy of their translation. The other books were translated in the course of the next century.

Then, almost 70 years ago, the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in caves near the ancient site of Qumran. Some of these Hebrew texts have more in common with the Greek Septuagint (LXX) than with the traditional Hebrew text (MT). This shows that the Greek

translators must have held in their hands some Hebrew scrolls that resembled the Hebrew texts among the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The main question I wish to raise here is how important are the Hebrew texts among the Dead Sea Scrolls for elucidating the text of the Hebrew Bible. Are they equally as trustworthy as the other two sources that we use all the time, that is, the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint?

I believe the answer to this question will inevitably be subjective. In asking which among two or more readings (i.e., differences in manuscripts) reflects an original or more acceptable text than the others, we are embarking on a subjective search that can be crowned only by an equally subjective answer that may be contested by other scholars. In the end, it is subjective. Sometimes there does seem to be a "right" answer, but often there is no "right" answer.

Let me illustrate this with a few examples.

ON WHICH DAY DID GOD REST AFTER THE CREATION? (*GENESIS 2:2*)

The statement in *Genesis 2:2* is clear: Upon finishing the creation activity in six days, God rested on the seventh day. Most translations, such as the New Revised Standard Version and English Standard Version, render the Hebrew text literally: "And on the *seventh* day God finished the work that he had done (and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done"). This has been the usual translation in English ever since the King James Version of 1611 ("And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made").
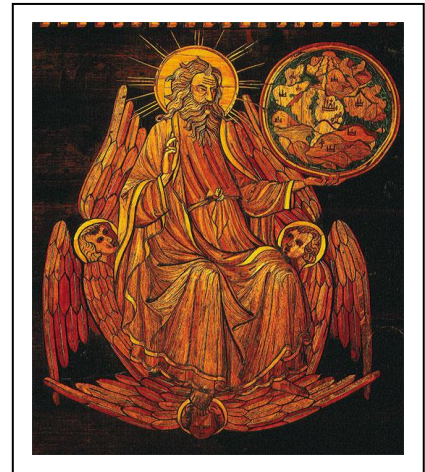
All these translations pose an exegetical challenge, however: If God finished his work *on* the seventh day, by implication he must have performed at least a minimal amount of work on that day.

The medieval Jewish commentator Rashi suggested that God performed only "a hair's breadth" of work. There is no real linguistic problem in this verse, however, if the Hebrew is taken to mean something like "*By* the seventh day God finished his work." At the same time, according to some commentators there is still a theological problem, for if people are not permitted to work on the seventh day, why did God perform even a minimal amount of work on that day?

Well, help may come from an unexpected place. The ancient Hebrew text known as the Samaritan Pentateuch reads "On the *sixth* day God finished …" This reading is also reflected in the Septuagint and the Peshitta (in Syriac).

Now, which Bible text are we to believe? Modern scholars disagree. Some prefer the reading "On the sixth day" because it is so much easier in the context. Others would say just the opposite: The reading "sixth" should be rejected precisely because it is so easy ("too good to be true"). That is, it must have been created in order to solve the problematic issue. In other words, these scholars would still prefer the slightly problematic received text referring to the "seventh day."

This verse has not been preserved among the fragmentary Dead Sea Scrolls. In my view, however, even if a reading "seventh" or "sixth" had been preserved in an ancient Dead Sea Scroll, I would still claim that we should be guided by content considerations in deciding upon the "correct" reading. I would still choose "on the seventh day."
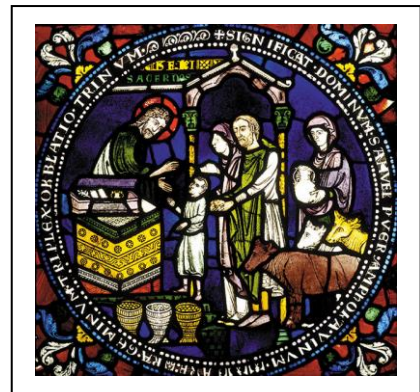
In other cases, as in the next example, relevant guidance *is* available in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

DID HANNAH BRING ONE BULL OR THREE BULLS AS AN OFFERING AT SHILOH? (*1 SAMUEL 1:24*)

When the infant Samuel had been weaned and his mother, Hannah, finally came to Shiloh with her son, she also brought with her an offering for the Lord that is described in two ways in our textual sources. According to the Masoretic Text, she brought "three bulls," but according to the Septuagint and a Qumran scroll (4QSam[a] from 50–25 B.C.E.) she brought one "three-year-old bull."

I believe that Hannah probably offered only a single bull (as in the Septuagint and 4QSam[a]); supporting this choice is the next verse in the Masoretic Text which speaks about "*the* bull." I believe the Masoretic Text was textually corrupted when the continuous writing (without spaces between words) of the original words *prm/shlshh* (literally: "bulls three") underlying the Septuagint was divided wrongly to *pr mshlsh* ("three-year-old bull").

The evidence of the Septuagint, being in Greek, always depends on a reconstruction into Hebrew, and consequently the Qumran scroll here helps us in deciding between the various options. Incidentally an offering of a "three-year-old bull" is mentioned in *Genesis*

15:9. It shows that a Hebrew text underlying the Septuagint once existed in which Hannah brought only one three-year-old bull.

WERE THE NATIONS DIVIDED ACCORDING TO THE NUMBER OF THE SONS OF GOD? DID GOD HAVE SONS? (*DEUTERONOMY 32:8*)

The first 43 verses of *Deuteronomy 32* comprise the beautiful poem of Moses. *Deuteronomy 32:8* in the King James Version reads: "When the Most High divided to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the people *according to the number of the children of Israel*."

"The Most High" then divides the nations according to the "number of the children of Israel" of which there were "70" (the number of the descendants of Jacob who went down to Egypt). That is, the number of the nations equaled the number of the children of Israel. Each of the 70 nations had its own god. In the next verse we read that YHWH, the personal name of the God of Israel, received Israel as "his portion." There seems to be no connection, however, between the number of the nations of the world and the number of the children of Israel.
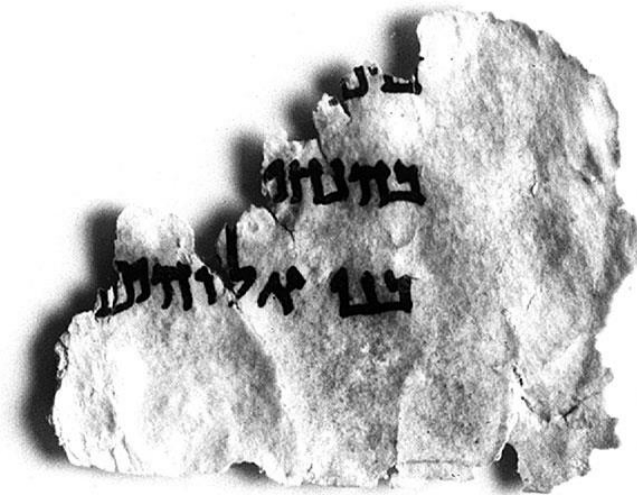
We should therefore take a serious look at a different reading found in the Qumran scroll 4QDeut[j]; according to that text, the nations were divided "according to the number of the sons of *Elohim* (God)." In this reading, which is also reflected in the Septuagint, "the Most High" divided the nations according to the number of the sons of *Elohim*. This reading seems more logical than that of the Masoretic Text. It seems even more logical that the original text referred to the Canaanite god El rather than the Israelite *Elohim*. In its probable original wording, reconstructed from 4QDeut[j1] and the Septuagint, the Song of Moses originally referred to an assembly of the gods in which "the Most High (*'Elyon*)

fixed the boundaries of peoples according to the number of the sons of the God (*El*)." The next verse stresses that the Lord, YHWH, kept Israel for himself. Within this supposedly original context, *'Elyon* and *El* need not be taken as epithets (appellations) of the God of Israel, but as names of the gods known from the Canaanite and Ugaritic divine assembly.

This obviously bothered a scribe of an early text, now reflected in the Masoretic Text; he did not feel at ease with this polytheistic picture and replaced "sons of *El*" with "the sons of *Israel*," thus giving the text a different direction by the change of a single word. Another scribe, the source of the Qumran scroll, changed *El* to *Elohim*, God, which is a natural development since both words are used in Hebrew texts as "God." If this reasoning is correct—it is no more than speculation—a Qumran fragment together with the Septuagint helps us to recover the original text in one important detail, but one that may be embarrassing to a modern reader (and even to ancient ones), referring as it does to the division of the nations according to "the sons of God."

DID JEREMIAH PRAISE GOD OR ONLY RANT AGAINST IDOLATRY? (*JEREMIAH 10*)

The prophet Jeremiah is well known for his rants against idolatry. In one of his most outspoken utterances, he eloquently mocks the idols, but also praises the Lord. Listen to the prophet, as quoted in the Masoretic Text (I have put his praise of the Lord in italics, in contrast to his mockery of the idols):

> [3]… For it is the work of a craftsman's hands.
>
> He cuts down a tree in the forest with an ax,
>
> [4] He adorns it with silver and gold,
>
> He fastens it with nails and hammer,
>
> So that it does not totter.
>
> [5] They are like a scarecrow in a cucumber patch,
>
> They cannot speak.
>
> They have to be carried,
>
> For they cannot walk.
>
> Be not afraid of them, for they can do no harm;
>
> Nor is it in them to do any good.
>
> [6] *O Lord, there is none like You!*
>
> *You are great and Your name is great in power.*
>
> [7] *Who would not revere You, O King of the nations?*
>
> *For that is Your due,*
>
> *Since among all the wise of the nations*

And among all their royalty

There is none like You.

⁸ But they are both dull and foolish;

[Their] doctrine is but delusion;

It is a piece of wood,[2]

⁹ Silver beaten flat, that is brought from Tarshish,

And gold from Uphaz,

The work of a craftsman and the goldsmith's hands;

Their clothing is blue and purple,

All of them are the work of skilled men.

¹⁰ *But the Lord is truly God:*

He is a living God,

The everlasting King,

At His wrath, the earth quakes,

And nations cannot endure His rage.

(*Jeremiah 10:3–10*, JPS)

This same pattern continues, but this is enough to raise the question: Have the passages praising the Lord been added by a later scribe or redactor?

The question is raised rather insistently because the verses of praise are lacking in the Septuagint. More recently, in a text of this passage among the Dead Sea Scrolls (4QJerᵇ), the italicized passages praising the Lord are also lacking. On this basis it is often argued that the shorter text from the Septuagint and the Dead Sea Scrolls reflect the original form and that the Masoretic Text reflects a later tradition in which the praise of the Lord has been added in contrast to the futility of the idols. Indeed, in the development of Scripture, usually elements were added, not deleted. Moreover, it is intrinsically more plausible that verses of praise were added than omitted.

Which text reflects the original words of the prophet? In an abstract way, both may be original: The short text, containing only the mockery, reflects a first stage in the prophet's thinking. This early formulation may have been expanded, either by the prophet himself or by a later scribe or redactor. In that case, we learn about the system of expanding text in the course of its literary history. The relatively late Dead Sea Scroll fragment and the Septuagint thus help us to understand the complicated composition history of this book.

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These examples illustrate how the Dead Sea Scrolls do make a difference. They often show us the right way in our search for the nature of the original Bible text. But we do not automatically choose the Dead Sea Scroll text over the Masoretic Text or the Septuagint simply because the Dead Sea Scroll text is older than the others. We could have made such an argument based on the age of the Dead Sea Scroll texts, arguing that these 2,000-year-old texts are likely to reflect the more original readings—the later the Bible copies, the more likely they were subjected to the process of scribal corruption (the technical term for scribal errors).

Instead, I have argued that the preferred text is what makes the most sense in the given context. My reasoning is based on internal logic. By its very nature, however, this is a hypothetical and therefore highly subjective process.

Therefore, I offer the above analyses of these Biblical passages with due caution and modesty. I invite readers to consider other, more powerful arguments or counter-arguments.

But one thing is clear: Those counter-arguments are also subjective. In this process of comparing texts there are no winners and losers; there is no right or wrong. What seems to me to be right today may seem to me wrong tomorrow. In any event, the Biblical texts among the Dead Sea Scrolls remain a significant source of information to be used judiciously alongside other sources, the main ones being the traditional Hebrew text (MT) and the Septuagint (LXX).

Some Dead Sea Scrolls are more significant than others. One of the less significant, surprisingly, is the great Isaiah scroll, 1QIsa[a]. Preserved in its entirety except for a few

words, this scroll gives us an excellent picture of what *a* text of Isaiah looked like. (Please note, I did not say, *the* text of Isaiah.) This scroll is a classroom example of what an inferior text looked like, with its manifold contextual changes, harmonizations, grammatical adaptations, etc. It is also a scroll with many mistakes and omissions, an unusual spelling system and bad handwriting.

Nevertheless, even a scroll that is somewhat inferior to the Masoretic Text, like 1QIsa[a], contains a few pearls of significant ancient readings.

In finding our way in the labyrinth of textual sources of the Bible, we must slowly accumulate experience and intuition.[3] When maneuvering among the sources, we will find much help in the Dead Sea Scrolls. But they must be used judiciously.

In many instances that ideal that we are searching for—the "original text"—is unobtainable. We must recognize that often we must simply give up the search. We must remain modest with regard to what we can and cannot achieve.[1]

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[1] Tov, Emanuel. "Searching for the 'Original' Bible," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 40.4 (2014): 48–53, 68.