Current Trends in Old Testament Textual Criticism

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There are some exciting trends currently underway in OT textual criticism. The purpose of this article is both to summarize these trends and to suggest a way forward in a few cases. Three areas that will be addressed in this article are (1) the formation of the Hebrew text, (2) the goal of OT textual criticism, and (3) a diplomatic Hebrew text versus an eclectic Hebrew text. The Hebrew text of the OT has an amazing heritage that is well worth tracing through the process of textual criticism.

Key Words: OT textual criticism, current trends, Masoretic Text, Septuagint, Dead Sea Scrolls, goal, aim, diplomatic, eclectic

Until about 60 years ago, very little was known about the Hebrew text prior to A.D. 800—among the few works that could help to shed light were the Samaritan Pentateuch [SP], the Septuagint [LXX], and the Nash Papyrus. Since then the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls provided a great number of manuscripts dated between about 250 B.C. and A.D. 100; this and other finds have opened up whole new avenues of research for today’s scholars. These documents have also led to the questioning of older theories and the development of new theories as to how the text was developed. In this article, I would like to highlight briefly three of the most important current trends in OT textual criticism: (1) the formation of the Hebrew text; (2) the goal of OT textual criticism; and (3) a diplomatic Hebrew text versus an eclectic Hebrew text. This overview is intended to acquaint readers new to the field of OT textual criticism with current trends, as well as to provide a few significant steps forward for those already at work in the field.

The Formation of the Hebrew Text

The issues of OT canon and the Hebrew text are intricately related with, at times, a very fine line between when a text achieved its final literary form and when the process of transmission of the text began. It is not crucial for our purposes to determine an exact date when the OT canon was complete,
but there is significant evidence to suggest that it was established at least by the second century B.C.\(^1\)

There have been several theories as to how the Hebrew text developed, as indicated in table 1. There is little evidence from the text itself, but what we have suggests that even at an early period some parts of Scripture were treated with great reverence and thought to be authoritative.\(^2\) The law of Moses was taught to the priests and commanded to be publicly read aloud every seven years so that the Israelites would not forget God’s laws (Deut 31:9–11; see Deut 5:22). It was to be stored alongside the ark of the covenant (Deut 31:24–26), and nothing was to be added to or deleted from

\(^{1}\) Prologue to Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) and the Letter of Aristeas. See also Roger Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and Its Background in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985). See also the following works that suggest a completed canon (2 Esdr 14:21–48; 1 Macc 9:27; 2 Macc 2:13–14; 2 Bar 85:3; b. Nezikin 3:46; Sanhedrin 11a; Tos. Soṭah 13:2; 48b; B. Bat. 12a; etc.).


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<tr>
<th>Scholar</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Description of Theory</th>
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<tr>
<td>Paul de Lagarde (Göttingen)</td>
<td>1827–1891</td>
<td>The Masoretic Text [MT] began as one original copy; all OT manuscripts are deviations or copies of this single original manuscript.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paul Kahle (Oxford)</td>
<td>1875–1964</td>
<td>There were many divergent manuscripts that at some point were standardized into an official text.</td>
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<td>William F. Albright (John Hopkins), Frank M. Cross (Harvard)</td>
<td>Albright (1891–1971) Cross (1921–2012)</td>
<td>There may have been an original authoritative text, but it was copied and maintained in three different areas, giving rise to three local recensions, text types, or text families. These recensions originated from Palestine (SP, MT of Chronicles, some Qumran manuscripts), Babylon (MT), and Egypt (LXX).</td>
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<td>Shemaryahu Talmon (Hebrew University)</td>
<td>(1920–2010)</td>
<td>The Hebrew text existed in a diversity of forms—the three text-types are only a remnant of much more diversity in early Judaism that was lost. The three recensions survived because they were protected by religiously cohesive sociological groups: the LXX by the Christians, the SP by the Samaritans, and the MT by rabbinic Judaism.(^a)</td>
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<td>Emanuel Tov (Hebrew University)</td>
<td>(1941–)</td>
<td>There was no single, original, authoritative text; instead, there may have been several authoritative forms of a biblical book. Instead of recensions or text families, Tov argues that the various manuscripts are related to each other “in an intricate web of agreements, differences, and exclusive readings.”(^b) He recognizes five groups among the Qumran manuscripts: (1) manuscripts following “Qumran practice” (20 percent); (2) proto-Masoretic manuscripts (35 percent); (3) pre-Samaritan manuscripts (5 to 15 percent); (4) Ur-LXX manuscripts (5 percent); and (5) non-aligned manuscripts (35 percent).(^c)</td>
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its words (Deut 4:2; 12:32). According to Josh 8.35, the Israelites held the law of Moses in high regard stating, “there was not a word from all which Moses commanded (them) which Joshua did not read before the whole congregation of Israel.” The book of Joshua claims that Joshua wrote the words of the covenant and added them to the book of the law of God but is not any more explicit as to what this book was or where it was kept (Josh 24:26). 1 Sam 10:25 records that Samuel wrote down the ordinances of the kingdom in a book and placed it before the Lord, presumably in the sanctuary. Later in the seventh century B.C. during the reign of King Josiah, the law of Moses was found in the temple and sparked a revival (2 Kgs 22–23). Throughout the OT and NT, the law of Moses is referred to, suggesting that it was a distinct, authoritative source.

The book of Ezra speaks about guidelines for the service of God found in the book of Moses (Ezra 6:18) and that Ezra, who had been living in Babylon, was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses (Ezra 7:6, 10, 12). Ezra 7:14, 25–26 implies that Ezra and those returning to Judah had a copy of the law of Moses (sometimes called “the law of God”); thus even following the exile, the law was maintained and studied. See Ezra 9:11–12 which

appears to be quoting from this law; however, it does not directly quote any particular passage, but rather a combination of passages. Bruce K. Waltke and Michael O’Connor make an interesting observation suggesting how important the scribes believed the biblical books to be:

That no other Israelite writings, such as the Book of Yashar (e.g., 2 Sam 1:18) or the Diaries of the Kings (e.g., 2 Chr 16:11), survive from this period indirectly suggests the determination of the scribes to preserve the books that became canonical. The foes of Hebrew Scripture sometimes included audiences who sought to kill its authors and destroy their works (cf. Jeremiah 36). From the time of their composition, however, they captured the hearts, minds, and loyalties of the faithful in Israel who kept them safe often at risk to themselves. Such people must have insisted on the accurate transmission of the text.

The OT also mentions written forms of prophetic oracles and histories recorded by prophets.

There is still much we do not know about the interaction that took place in the development of the Hebrew texts, but the possibility of an autograph, for at least parts of the canon, seems to be implied by several OT passages that were considered authoritative. The elders of the land during Jeremiah’s time knew of the prophecies of Micah and quoted from them as authoritative information (Jer 26:17–19). However, the first reference to a collection of biblical books (הַסְּפָרִים hassepārîm) is in Dan 9:2, which states: “in the first year of his reign [Darius], I, Daniel, perceived in the books the number of the years which (was revealed) by the word of the Lord to Jeremiah, the prophet, for the filling up of the desolations of Jerusalem, (namely) seventy years.” This passage indicates that in Daniel’s time the book of Jeremiah was part of a larger collection of books which he considered authoritative.

Other biblical authors make reference to earlier biblical writings, and the prophets often rebuke Israel for not obeying the words of their predecessors. It seems reasonable that initially the scribes maintained the Hebrew texts. Because the temple was the center of the study of Scriptures

4. E.g., v. 11 // Deut 18:9, 12; v. 12 // Deut 7:3; 23:6; Deut 1:8, 39; 4:38.
8. R. K. Harrison states, “If the reference in Daniel 9:2 to the books is to a collection of prophetic writings, as seems most probable, it would imply that these works were regarded as having divine authority, and were thus akin to the Pentateuchal compositions” (Introduction to the Old Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004], 266).
9. For reference to earlier biblical writings, see 2 Kgs 14:6; 2 Chr 25:4; 35:12; Ezra 5:1; 6:18; Neh 8:1, 3, 5, 8, 18; 9:3; 13:1. For the rebukes of the prophets, see 2 Chr 24:19; 36:15–16; Ezra 9:11; Neh 9:26, 30, 32; Jer 7:25; 25:4; 29:19; 35:15; 44:4; Ezek 38:17; Dan 9:6, 10; Hos 6:5; 12:10; Zech 1:4–6; 7:7, 12; 8:9.
and most likely where they were copied, it was fairly easy to maintain high standards in the process of copying and maintaining the text. However, centralized study and worship was not possible in the Babylonian captivity, making it much harder to maintain a stable textual tradition. Following the return of the remnant from Babylon, there were two centers of biblical tradition. These centers gave rise to two different Talmunds (the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds), as well as variants in the Masorah of the Hebrew text itself that indicate differences between readings of the Eastern Masoretes and the Western Masoretes. Almost all scholars recognize the diversity of the OT textual tradition toward the end of the Second Temple period, but there is very little consensus as to why. Emanuel Tov describes the textual variations from this period:

The textual reality of the Qumran texts does not attest to three groups of textual witnesses, but rather to a textual multiplicity, relating to all of Palestine to such an extent that one can almost speak in terms of an unlimited number of texts. Indeed, in the discussion of the textual status of the Qumran texts five different groups of texts have emerged. Three of these were known—though in a different form—to the generations preceding the discovery of the scrolls (proto-Masoretic and pre-Samaritan texts as well as texts close to [LXX]). The other two groups were not known before the Qumran discoveries, namely texts written in the Qumran scribal practice and non-aligned texts, that is, texts that are not exclusively close to one of the other groups, and hence give a special dimension to all the Qumran texts. The latter group, in particular, sheds a special light on the web of relations which exist between the textual witnesses.

However, there is a significant difference between the varied textual traditions found at Qumran dating between the third and first centuries B.C. and the minimal deviations in the Hebrew texts by the end of the first century A.D. There is little agreement as to why this unified text came about, but the traditional view has been that during the first century A.D. a strong movement emerged in Judaism to establish a standard, authoritative text of the Hebrew Bible. This text was dependent on earlier traditions available to the Jewish scribes at that time, but variants and differences in the text

10. Several times the notes of the Masorah indicate differences among the scribes—מְדִינְחָאֵי, which means “(the Masoretes) of the East” and מַעַרְבָּאֵי, which means “(the Masoretes) of the West.” In 2 Kgs 8:16, the name Jehoram (יהורם) appears to be known to the Masoretes of the West, but a variant reading Joram (יוֹרֵם) was known among the Masoretes of the East. These changes appear to be very early because they only deal with the consonantal texts and not the vowels or accents (Tov, Textual Criticism, 26. See also C. D. Ginsburg, Introduction to the Massoretico-Critical Edition of the Hebrew Bible (London: Trinitarian Bible Society, 1897), 197–240; idem, “On the Relationship of the So-Called Codex Babylonicus of A.D. 916 to the Eastern Recension of the Hebrew Text,” in Reueil des travaux . . . M.D. Chevelson (Berlin: Calvary, 1899), 149–88; Israel Yeivin, Introduction to the Tiberian Masorah [ed. and trans. E. J. Revell; SBLMasS 5; Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 1985], 139–41).


12. See Hebrew texts from Masada (just prior to a.d. 73), Wadi Murrabaʿt, Wadi Sdeir, Nahal Ḫever and Nahal Ṣeʾelim (written before the Bar Kochba Revolt in a.d. 132–35).
were removed. Once the scribes had a standard, authoritative text, they were meticulous to ensure that the Hebrew text did not become corrupted.

Adam S. van der Woude argues for a uniform tradition even alongside the various “pluriform” traditions:

there was always a relative uniformity of textual tradition in the religious circles around the temple in Jerusalem. This means that there was a basically uniform tradition besides a pluriform tradition in Palestine Judaism in the last centuries B.C., in the sense that only the proto-Masoretic textual tradition was passed on in Jerusalem, whereas elsewhere also biblical manuscripts circulated which bore close resemblance to the text of the Septuagint or the Samaritan Pentateuch or differed in other respects from the proto-Masoretic tradition.\(^{13}\)

We agree with van der Woude that there was a “central stream” of the Hebrew text that was maintained by the temple scribes that existed throughout Israelite history. However, in the last centuries B.C., pluriform traditions also arose in Palestine Judaism alongside this central stream of the Hebrew text.

Hebrew manuscripts copied before the first century A.D. show two distinct tendencies on the part of the scribes: they preserved the accuracy of the text and, at the same time, were willing to revise or update the text.\(^ {14}\) James Sanders, Eugene Ulrich, and Peter Gentry\(^ {15}\) recognize these two tendencies and classify the earliest witnesses into two groups of manuscripts: (1) the “repetition factor”—those manuscripts that reproduced an accurate, straightforward copy of the text; and (2) the “resignification factor”—those manuscripts that revised and updated the text to make it more relevant to circumstances at the time. The problem is that the resignification factor can include anything from slight modifications and updates (e.g., like word spellings; the addition of matres lectiones) to an entire commentary (e.g., the Habakkuk Commentary that applied the text of Habakkuk to the circumstances of the Qumran Community. Using the distinction between repetition and resignification, Peter J. Gentry has suggested a different reconstruction of the history of the Hebrew text which I believe is largely correct:

Up until the fall of Jerusalem, Judaism was highly variegated, and textual transmission answers to a broad continuum of texts ranging from repetition to resignification. Scribes in the circle of the temple

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nearly always preferred texts representing repetition rather than resignified texts. After the fall of Jerusalem, in the Hebrew textual transmission there was only repetition and no longer any resignification. This gives the impression that the text was standardized at this time, but, in fact, this is an incorrect conclusion. Two important reasons support this reconstruction. First, after the destruction of Jerusalem, Judaism was no longer variegated but rather dominated by one sect, the Pharisees, the precursors of the rabbinic tradition. Their approach to the text restricted transmission to repetition. Second, the period from the first to fourth centuries AD is the period in which the Aramaic Targums were developed. ...they exhibit exactly the same types of resignification that we see earlier at Qumran. Thus, there was resignification after the fall of Jerusalem, but it was in Aramaic and in the targumic tradition and therefore separate from the textual transmission of the Hebrew text.  

Gentry’s reconstruction answers several important issues and is supported by the following evidence:  

(1) It provides a rationale for both van der Woude’s description of a relatively uniform textual tradition in the religious circles around the temple in Jerusalem, while at the same time accounting for clear evidence of a pluriform tradition in Palestine Judaism.  

(2) Evidence from some of the Qumran texts could easily be understood as a resignification of the MT and not a different text type. Even Tov’s classification of the so-called Qumran practice, which demonstrates a different approach to morphology, orthography, copying practices, and grammar, could be understood as a resignification of the MT rather than a separate text type. At the same time, 1QIsa (dated to about 100 B.C.) seems to have been corrected toward the MT, suggesting that scribes at Qumran also desired to maintain a steady stream of tradition of the OT text.  

(3) Evidence from the SP suggests that it is a resignification of the MT. The SP differs from the MT in about 6,000 places; however, most are minor spelling or grammatical changes. It tends toward harmonizations (to bring into accord with the proto-MT), updates, corrections, modernizations, or conflations (to combine readings from two passages), but there are also several significant expansions of the text quite different from the MT.

17. See also Waltke and O’Connor’s distinction between the scribes’ tendencies toward preserving the accuracy of the text while at the same time being willing to revise or update the text (Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax, 15–22).  
18. In Paulson Pulikottil’s detailed examination of 1QIsa, numerous scribal changes that suggest harmonization, explication, modernization, and contextual changes could be explained as the resignification of a known mainstream text (Transmission of Biblical Texts in Qumran: The Case of the Large Isaiah Scroll 1QIsa [JSPSup 34; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001]).  
19. Similarities: In the MT, Exod 20:8 begins with זָכֹר (zākôr, “to remember”) and Deut 5:12 with שָׁמֹר (shāmôr, “to observe or keep”), whereas the SP reads שָׁמֹר (shāmôr) in both places. It is also common for the SP to include conflated readings in the case of parallel passages; e.g., in Exod 18:24 the parallel verses from Deut 1:9–18 are included (see also Bruce K. Waltke, “Samaritan Pentateuch,” ABD 5:936–38; and Stefan Schorch, “The Septuagint and the
Sectarian differences also color portions of the SP. For example, in Gen 22:2 Abraham builds an altar to offer up Isaac on Mt. Moreh near Shechem, a chief place of worship for the Samaritans, instead of Mt. Moriah as in the MT. In the SP of Deut 12:5, Moses says they are to worship at “the place where Yahweh has chosen” (past tense, meaning Mt. Gerizim) instead of the MT’s reading “the place where Yahweh will choose” (future tense, meaning Jerusalem). Changes such as these suggest a mainstream text that was intentionally changed. Gentry goes even further to state:

Thus a comparison between the SP and the later MT shows that many differences between the two represent a modernizing of the former in terms of grammar and spelling. What became the proto-SP is a modernization and popularization of the proto-MT. The SP is thus a strong witness to the antiquity and purity of the tradition in the MT, since the proto-MT had to be modernized and popularized in the second century BC so that it could be understood.20

(4) There is significant evidence that the LXX is a resignification of the MT. Recent studies of the LXX have demonstrated some very interesting conclusions: First, they have shown that the proto-MT underlies a significant portion of the readings in the LXX.21 What scholars previously thought to be a distinct reading of a Greek text that went back to a Hebrew Vorlage can now be better understood as a translator’s free rendering of the proto-MT.22 Second, even the Old Greek texts that are thought to be the basis for the original Greek text of the LXX have apparently undergone revisions and recensions that have brought them into greater conformity to the proto-MT (e.g., the kaige recension, which appears to be dated to the mid-first century B.C., indicates clear revisions toward the proto-MT).23 Third, some of what are termed large-scale differences (e.g., the LXX of Jeremiah is one-sixth shorter than the MT; the LXX’s text of Ezekiel is


Differences: For example, in Exod 14:12 after the Israelites complain to Moses that they would have been better off back in Egypt, the question “Is not this what we said to you in Egypt?” appears in the SP but not in the MT.


21. Al Wolters has correctly stated: “Since 1970 a number of volumes have appeared in the Göttingen edition of the LXX, accompanied by an impressive series of auxiliary studies. As this hitherto most comprehensive and reliable edition of the LXX nears completion, scholars have begun to realize that its textual base shows much greater affinity to the MT than was previously assumed. For one thing, the study of the translation technique employed in many books of the LXX has made clear that Greek renderings that used to be taken as evidence of a non-Masoretic Vorlage can in many cases be explained as reflecting a Hebrew text that is identical with the MT (“The Text of the Old Testament,” in The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches [ed. David W. Baker and Bill T. Arnold; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999], 23–24).


shorter) may best be handled by arguing that the LXX is a resignified text of the MT (an intended shortening of the text). 24

(5) Much of the biblical literature from Qumran demonstrates the “repetition factor.” Even Tov, who does not use the terms resignification or repetition factors to distinguish texts, recognizes that following the Second Temple period there was a clear “repetition factor”:

The representatives of מ form a tight group which differs from other texts. Nevertheless, no special characteristics of מ can be identified on a textual level, except for the accuracy and quality of its text for most of the biblical books. On the other hand, on a socio-religious level this text has a unique character, since at a certain stage it was preferred to the others by a central stream in Judaism (the Pharisees?).

When מ became the central text, at first of a central stream in Judaism and later of the whole Jewish people, no further changes were inserted into it and no additions or omissions were allowed . . . not even in small details such as the use of מטרSES ס.

(6) A group of deluxe manuscripts found at Qumran suggests that some scrolls were intended to be repetitive, maintaining the main stream of the text of the Hebrew tradition. Tov noted a special group of scrolls that were primarily of Scripture and reflected a higher quality manuscript (precision in copying, quality of leather, esthetics of layout, and so on; see especially 1Qlsa\textsuperscript{b} and 11QPs\textsuperscript{a}). 26 He suggests that these scrolls were produced by the spiritual center of Judaism and that they may even be the “corrected scrolls” mentioned in rabbinic literature. 27

(7) The existence of several commentaries found at Qumran suggests a resignification factor. Some of these commentaries are on biblical books (Habakkuk Commentary [1QpHab], Nahum Commentary [4Q169], a Commentary on Psalm 37 [4Q171, 173]), and some thematic commentaries (Florilegium [4Q174], Testimonia [4Q175], Melchizedek Text [11QMelch], A Commentary on Genesis [4Q252]). 28

(8) There are a number of textual features that suggest a repetition factor. One of the strongest reasons Paul de Lagarde argued that the Hebrew texts arose from one original copy was that they all contained some specific characteristics (e.g., puncta extraordinaria, “extraordinary points”—dots above words that the scribes questioned). These dots are placed on Hebrew

24. See Gentry’s very careful discussion (ibid., 39–44).
26. Tov describes them as follows: “it appears that the use of large top and bottom margins is the major criterion for establishing that a scroll was prepared to be a deluxe edition (as in similar Alexandrian Greek scrolls . . .) together with a large writing block, fine calligraphy, the proto-rabbinic text (proto-MT) form of Scripture, and only a limited amount of scribal intervention” (Scribal Practices and Approaches Reflected in the Texts Found in the Judean Desert [Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah, vol. 54; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004], 125–29).
27. Tov, Scribal Practices, 128.
letters 15 times in the MT, suggesting that these letters should be removed from the text, 29 but they have been retained (cf. Deut. 29:28, where dots appear above the phrase “to us and to our sons”). 30 There are other indications that the scribes were reticent to change the text: (1) sometimes a Ketib and Qere suggest differences in the reading of Hebrew texts, implying that the scribes did not wish to lose a reading that may be correct; 31 and (2) the Babylonian Talmud (Ned. 37b) also mentions five occasions when a waw was omitted from a word, calling them scribal omissions (itture sopherim), 32 but they did not change the text.

While Gentry’s reconstruction resolves many of the problems surrounding how the OT text developed, there are other complications that must be factored in:

(1) Some matres lectiones appear to have been added to the text fairly early, suggesting that at least some level of resignification was taking place long before the end of the Second Temple period. Waltke and O’Connor argue for the possibility that matres lectiones were added as early as the 9th century B.C. 33

(2) There is some evidence for additions or modifications (resignification) happening early on in the history of the transmission of the Hebrew text (e.g., “Dan” in Gen 14:14; Isa 7:8). Because there is no evidence from Hebrew manuscripts or the versions that suggests any other reading, they appear to be very early modifications.

(3) The changeover from paleo-Hebrew to square (or Aramaic) script took place between the fifth and third centuries B.C. 34 and would probably have been hastened by the Jews’ exile in Babylon where Aramaic was the

29. See also Gen 16:5; 18:9; 19:33; 33:4; 37:12; Num 3:39; 9:10; 21:30; 29:15; Deut 29:28; 2 Sam 19:20; Isa 44:9; Ezek 41:20; 46:22; Ps 27:13; as well as one instance when dots are placed below letters (Ps 27:13).

30. Jewish tradition explains it this way: “The words ‘unto us and to our children’ (Deut. 29:28) are dotted. Why is that? . . . This is what Ezra said: If Elijah comes and says to me, ‘Why did you write in this fashion?’ I shall say to him: ‘That is why I dotted these passages.’ And if he says to me, ‘You have written well,’ I shall remove the dots from them” (ʿAbot R. Nat. A, 34; p. 51 in Schechter’s edition; cf. y. Pesax. 9:36d). See also Tov, Textual Criticism, 56.


32. Tov, Textual Criticism, 67; Würthwein, Text of the Old Testament, 18–20; Yeivin, Introduction, 57; omissions four times from the word רמא (Gen 18:5; 24:55; Num 31:2; Ps 68:26) and once from משליך (Ps 36:7).


common language. Gentry acknowledges this changeover is a form of updating, but he argues that the change is minimal; however, the same could be said about matres lectiones. A more significant update would have been when the Masoretes added vowel pointings to the consonantal text in the fifth to ninth centuries A.D., which was clearly during the period of maintaining the text. This process inherently demands many choices to be made (e.g., in Jer 9:21 can be pointed a variety of different ways); some choices would affect the consonantal text (e.g., whether a sin or a šin is represented, because a mere dot distinguishes these two letters).

There is also the curious fact that some scribes appear to have continued the use of paleo-Hebrew script even after the changeover to square script, if not for the whole text at least for the name Yahweh. Tov points out that almost all of these paleo-Hebrew texts reflect the proto-MT and are probably copied from even older texts. This would suggest these are resignified texts, even though they follow the repetition factor.

(3) There are several occasions when the Masoretes actually changed the Hebrew text. Letters are suspended four times in the MT. In Judg 18:30, the letter nun is suspended above the line: with the nun the Hebrew text spells “Manasseh,” and without the nun it spells “Moses.” Jewish tradition says that Micah acted more like Manasseh than he did Moses; thus, the nun was added to his name out of reverence for Moses.

37. Twelve biblical texts have been found at Qumran in paleo-Hebrew (1QpaleoLev, 1QpaleoNum, 2QpaleoLev, 4QpaleoGen-Exod, 4QpaleoGenm, 4QpaleoExodm, 4QpaleoDeutm, 4QpaleoJobm, 6QpaleoGen, 6QpaleoLev, 11QpaleoLevm).
38. Tov, Textual Criticism, 28.
39. Litterae suspensae “suspended letters,” Judg 18:30; Job 38:13, 15; Ps 80:14. See ibid., 57; Yeivin, Masorah, 47; Wegner, Journey, 173; Würthwein, Text of the Old Testament, 18–20; b. B. Bat. 108b. The Jewish expositor Rashi (1040–1105) argued: “Because of the honour of Moses was the Nun written so as to alter the name. The Nun, however, is suspended to tell thee that it is not Manasseh, but Moses” (Christian D. Ginsburg, Introduction to the Masoretico-Critical Edition of the Hebrew Bible [repr., New York: KTAV, 1969], 336).
40. The actual text reads:
If so, [is] this [the reason] why Micah said, “Now know I that the Lord will do me good, seeing I have a Levite as my priest”? — Yes; [he was glad] that he happened to obtain a man whose name was Levi. But was Levi his name? Surely his name was Jonathan, for it is said, and Jonathan the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh, he and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites?—He said unto him: But [even] according to your argument, [it may be objected], “Was he the son of Manasseh? Surely he was the son of Moses, for it is written, the son of Moses: Gershom, and Eliezer”; but [you must say that] because he acted [wickedly] as Manasseh, the Scriptural text ascribed his descent to Manasseh, [so] also here [it may be said that], because he acted [wickedly] as Manasseh who descended from Judah, the Scriptural text ascribed his descent to Judah. R. Johanan said in the name of R. Simeon b. Yohai: From here [one may infer] that corruption is ascribed to the corrupt (b. Baba Bathra, 109b). (I. Epstein, ed., The Babylonian Talmud [accessed 12 December 2011. Online: http://halakhah.com/bababathra/bababathra_109.html])
records 18 scribal corrections (תְקִין ספֵרִים) where the scribes changed or removed words they considered objectionable or inappropriate. In Gen 18:22, the phrase “to stand before someone” came to mean “to stand in subservience to someone,” so that the statement “but the LORD remained standing before Abraham” was seen as disrespectful to God. The scribes, therefore, changed the word order to “but Abraham remained standing before the LORD” and noted in the margin that a correction had been made by the scribes (see also Num 11:15; 12:12; 1 Sam 3:13; etc.). Both types of changes suggest that the Masoretes needed sufficient cause to modify the Hebrew text.

While the evidence strongly suggests that Gentry’s reconstruction of the history of the Hebrew text is to be favored, there is still much we do not know about the transmission of the Hebrew text. Perhaps it would be best to argue that what was the ideal did not always work out in practice; however, it seems more likely both repetition and resignification factors were at play throughout the transmission of the Hebrew text. During the earliest stages of transmission, a certain amount of resignification happened (i.e., adding of matres lectiones; changing of archaic names; modification of the Hebrew script; updating place names), but at times (both at the beginning of the history of transmission and toward the end) the resignification factor was kept to a minimum. Even toward the end of the Second Temple period when certain manuscripts (LXX, SP, some Qumran manuscripts) clearly demonstrated much stronger tendencies toward resignification, there were scribes who chose to correct texts back toward the MT (e.g., the kaige-recension, Isaiah Scroll [1QIsa³]).

William F. Albright states:

A principle which must never be lost sight of in dealing with documents of the ancient Near East is that instead of leaving obvious archaisms in spelling and grammar, as later became the fashion in Greece and Rome, the scribes generally revised ancient literary and other documents periodically. This practice was followed with particular regularity by cuneiform scribes.

These tendencies are not necessarily contradictory—the scribes assigned to Scriptures a high degree of authority and upheld them with great reverence, but their desire was for readers to understand them. This care in copying corresponds well with the copying practices throughout the ancient Near East as Albright also points out: “The prolonged and intimate study of the many scores of thousands of pertinent documents from the ancient Near East proves that sacred and profane documents were copied with greater care than is true of scribal copying in Graeco-Roman times.”

43. Albright, Stone Age, 78–79.
While the primary reason for the repetition factor in texts after the first century A.D. appears to have been the Pharisees’ preference for this method of copying texts, there may also have been other reasons. For example, the Christians primarily used the text of the Septuagint. As they began to distinguish themselves from the Jews, both groups would have needed to know exactly what their biblical texts said for debates that would most certainly have arisen between them. Also the development of the Targums demonstrates both factors in that they are an Aramaic resignification of the Hebrew text, but they needed a stable text on which to expound. It was the job of the “correctors” or “revisers” (maggihim) to safeguard the writing and transmission of the Hebrew texts; because they were paid through temple funds, this suggests they were authorized to make such changes.\textsuperscript{44} The Talmud also mentions scrolls that are “revised” or “corrected” (sefer muggah) in contrast to those that are not (sefer Heʾêno muggah, b. Kethubim 19b), and that fathers should use the former scrolls to teach their sons (b. Pesah 112a). It even appears that a certain amount of textual criticism took place in the temple:

Three scrolls of the Law were in the temple court. These were the maʿon (“dwelling”) scroll, the zaʿqaṭuṭê (“little ones”) scroll, and the hy’ scroll. In one of the scrolls, they found written, “The eternal God is (your) dwelling place (מַעֲן maʿon)” (Deut 33:27). And in two of the scrolls it was written, “The eternal God is (your) dwelling place (מְנוָה mĕʿonah = מַעֲן).” They adopted the reading found in the two and discarded the other. In one of them, they found written, “He sent the little ones (zaʿqaṭuṭê) of the sons of Israel” (Exod 24:5). And in two it was written, “He sent young men (나ʾרê = מְנוָה) of the sons of Israel.” They adopted the reading of the two and discarded the other. In one of them they found written היה, hwʾ, nine times, and in two, they found it written היא, hyʾ, 11 times. They adopted the two and discarded the other (y. Taʿan. 4.68a).\textsuperscript{45}

In this description only one of the examples affects the meaning of the passage. The final example most likely reflects the removal of an archaism from the text.\textsuperscript{46} In time even minor changes like these were not allowed, as implied by R. Ishmael’s words: “My son, be careful, because your work is the work of heaven; should you omit (even) one letter or add (even) one letter, the whole world would be destroyed” (b. Soṭ. 20a).\textsuperscript{47}

It should be no surprise that there are variations between the different Hebrew manuscripts—even with the strict guidelines indicated in the Talmud.

\textsuperscript{44} “Maggihim of books in Jerusalem received their fees from the temple funds” (b. Ketuvim, 106a).
\textsuperscript{46} However, they do not remove all of them because the form היה (for the 3fs pronoun) appears in the Pentateuch 195 times.
\textsuperscript{47} Tov, \textit{Textual Criticism}, 33.
for copying biblical scrolls. Copying mistakes would, over time, be incorporated into the biblical texts. There are simply too many manuscript copies, made over an extensively long period of time, by many different scribes, to assume that all copyist mistakes could be averted. This is even more true given the fact that the temple was destroyed twice and throughout Israel’s history the nation was persecuted and deported from its land.

THE GOAL OF OT TEXTUAL CRITICISM

One of the most important areas, and yet one of the most challenging, is attempting to determine the goal of OT textual criticism. This is complicated by the fact that it is difficult to determine when the composition of its individual books was completed and the transmission of the text began—both processes may overlap to some extent. Two examples should suffice to demonstrate this difficulty: (1) Gen 14:14 names the city “Dan” before it was ever called that—no manuscript evidence suggests a different reading. If the name was changed by a copyist or an editor, it had to have happened quite early. So which reading is the original text, the reading before an editor or copyist modified it, or the later reading? (2) The phrase “and within yet 65 years Ephraim will be shattered from being a people” in Isa 7:8b has puzzled scholars for years, because it does not appear to fit the context even though its information appears to be correct. Esarhaddon (680–669 B.C.) and/or Ashurbanipal (= Osnappar, 669–627 B.C.) secured this

48. Sometime during the talmudic period (100 B.C. to A.D. 400), which overlaps the periods of the Sopherim, Tannaim, and Amoraim, meticulous rules were developed to preserve the OT text in synagogue scrolls:

1. Only parchments made from clean animals were allowed; these were to be joined together with thread from clean animals.
2. Each written column of the scroll was to have no fewer than 48 and no more than 60 lines whose breadth must consist of 30 letters.
3. The page was first to be lined, from which the letters were to be suspended.
4. The ink was to be black, prepared according to a specific recipe.
5. No word or letter was to be written from memory.
6. There was to be the space of a hair between each consonant and the space of a small consonant between each word, as well as several other spacing rules.
7. The scribe must wash himself entirely and be in full Jewish dress before beginning to copy the scroll.
8. He could not write the name Yahweh with a newly dipped brush, nor take notice of anyone, even a king, while writing this sacred name.


49. The following suggest that this phrase is likely the original reading of the text: Derek Kidner, Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary (TOTC; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1967), 16; Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks, Genesis: A Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 232; Claus Westermann, Genesis 12–36: A Commentary (trans. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 201.
region approximately 65 years after the time of Isa 7 and appear to have repatriated even more people into this region (cf. Ezra 4:2, 9–10). The most likely explanation is that this phrase was added by a copyist or an editor sometime later (for instance, when these events happened). Once again, no textual evidence suggests that this phrase was a later addition to the text. Because these changes appear in all the extant Hebrew manuscripts and ancient versions, they must have been incorporated into the sacred text very early and ultimately became part of the authoritative text maintained by the scribes. So how can we determine when the Hebrew text became the authoritative text? Any understanding of the final form of the text must include at least these types of modifications. Not knowing exactly when the text became the authoritative form greatly affects the process and end point of textual criticism.

What, then, is the goal of OT textual criticism? Table 2 (p. 476) suggests six different possibilities. As we can see, scholars begin from significantly different presuppositions about the OT text. All of this directly affects the perceived goal(s) of textual criticism. In addition, there remain significant gaps in our knowledge of OT transmissional history.

An established text in one sense makes the text critic’s task easier because there is a standard against which to judge, as was the case from about the 1st to the 15th centuries A.D. But as I have argued above, there appears to have been a central stream of transmission throughout the history of the Hebrew text with corruptions periodically entering during this process. Is it possible, then, to determine a form of the OT text that preceded the first century A.D.? In some cases, yes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genesis 4:8</th>
<th>Some Hebrew Manuscripts, SP, LXX, Peshitta, Vulgate</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>וַיְהִי אָחִיו אֶל־הֶבֶל קַיִן וַיֹּאמַר וּוַיִּהְרֵג אָחִיו אֶל־הֶבֶל קַיִן וַיָּקָם דֶה בִּבִּיֹּתָם</td>
<td>&quot;And Cain said to Abel his brother, and when they were in the field then Cain rose up over Abel his brother and killed him.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each version has a reading similar to “And Cain said to Abel his brother, ‘Let us go out into the field’; and when they were in the field then Cain rose up over Abel his brother and killed him.”

The BHS text of Gen 4:8 can be translated literally as “And Cain said to Abel his brother, and when they were in the field then Cain rose up over Abel his brother and killed him.” An obvious element missing from this verse is what Cain said to Abel. Several ancient versions or recensions (SP,


### Table 2. Goals of Old Testament Textual Criticism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Goal</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Scholars</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Restore the original composition</td>
<td>The goal is to recover the author’s <em>ipsissima verba</em>, “to establish the text as the author wished to have it presented to the public.”</td>
<td>Most older textual critics, Harrison(^a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Restore the final form of the text (many modern textual critics)</td>
<td>The goal is to recover the <em>ipsissima verba</em> of the final redactor, assuming that the book has gone through some evolutionary process to get to this final form.</td>
<td>Brotzman,(^b) Deist,(^c) Würthwein(^d)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Restore the earliest attested form</td>
<td>The goal is to recover the earliest attested form of the text for which there are actual textual witnesses. Generally the text which is aimed at is from the second century B.C. and conjectural emendations are not allowed.</td>
<td>Hebrew University Bible Project, UBS Hebrew Old Testament Text Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Restore accepted texts (plural)</td>
<td>The goal is to recover the texts as they were accepted by particular religious communities; each text may be different according to the authoritative standard of that particular community.</td>
<td>James Sanders, Brevard Childs (though he centers on the MT text accepted by the Jews)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Restore final texts (plural)</td>
<td>The goal is to recover the final form of the texts; in some books or pericopes this may mean there are several equally valid texts of the OT that need to be restored.</td>
<td>Emanuel Tov,(^e) Bruce K. Waltke(^f)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Restore all various “literary editions” of the OT</td>
<td>The goal is not to just reproduce the MT, but to restore all the “literary editions” of the various writings that can be discerned in the evolution of the Hebrew Bible (e.g., the LXX, SP, MT, as well as all others represented at Qumran and other places).</td>
<td>Eugene Ulrich(^g)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) Harrison, *Introduction*, 259.  
\(^e\) Tov, *Textual Criticism*, 171.  
\(^g\) Eugene Ulrich, “Multiple Literary Editions: Reflections toward a Theory of the History of the Biblical Text,” in *Current Research and Technological Developments on the Dead Sea Scrolls: Conference on the Texts from the Judean Desert, Jerusalem, 30 April 1995* (ed. Donald W. Perry and Stephen D. Ricks; Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah 20; Leiden: Brill, 1996) 78–105. Ulrich disagrees significantly with Tov: “Thus the target of ‘textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible’ is not a single text. The purpose or function of textual criticism is to reconstruct the history of the texts that eventually become the biblical collection in both its literary growth and its scribal transmission; it is not just to judge individual variants in order to determine which were ‘superior’ or ‘original.’ The ‘original text’ is a distracting concept for the Hebrew Bible” (“Multiple Literary Editions,” 98–99.)
LXX, Peshitta, Vulgate), as well as some Hebrew manuscripts include the phrase, “Let us go out into the field” (זָדֶה שִׂמְלָה), which appears to be necessitated by the context. These sources may have included this phrase to smooth out the translation; however, it seems more reasonable to assume that the phrase (or something similar) was originally part of the text but that at some point in the copying process was omitted from the MT (possibly because the eyes of the scribe mistakenly jumped from the waw at the end of אָחִיו to the waw at the beginning of וַיְהִי, leaving out everything in between).

Although evidence of the earliest stages of the transmission of the OT is somewhat scarce, it is nevertheless a reasonable goal to attempt to determine the earliest form of the canonical text. Waltke urges OT text critics to “resist the temptation to lower their sights from the high ideal of recovering final text(s) that emerged in Israel before prophecy ceased in Israel.” It is appropriate to ask which of the texts we know to have existed before the first century A.D. (e.g., Dead Sea Scrolls, LXX, SP) most likely reflect the original form of the Hebrew text. For example, did Deuteronomy 27:4 originally contain a prescription of worship at Mt. Ebal as the MT states or at Mt. Gerizim as the SP has it? Is the MT correct in saying that the Israelites spent 430 years in Egypt (Exod 12:40), or are the LXX and SP correct that this period included the time spent in both Egypt and Canaan?

A biblical book may have gone through some modifications on its way to its final, authoritative form, and there may be times when we can identify these changes (e.g., “Dan” in Gen 14:14; Isa 7:8b). The goal, then, of OT text criticism is to determine the earliest final, authoritative form which then was maintained by the scribes and was later recorded in the canon. While not perhaps obtainable in every case, it is nevertheless a plausible goal in the vast majority of the cases, especially given the number of manuscripts discovered in the 20th century.

**A Diplomatic Hebrew Text Versus an Eclectic Hebrew Text**

Most recent editions of the Hebrew OT are called diplomatic editions and use the Codex Leningradensis (dated to a.d. 1008; BHK, BHS) or the Aleppo Codex (dated a.d. 930; Hebrew University Bible Project) as the textus receptus (or received text), noting variants to the given text in a critical apparatus. Not until 1720 did a text of the Hebrew Bible appear with a textual apparatus that recorded the most important readings of 5 manuscripts at

52. Tov currently argues that the preferred goal of OT textual criticism is “to aim at the one text or different texts which was (were) accepted as authoritative in (an) earlier period(s)” (Textual Criticism, 288).


54. There is no question that differing theological considerations affected the reading of this passage. See James A. Montgomery, The Samaritans: The Earliest Jewish Sect (Philadelphia: Winston, 1907), 35.
Erfurt as well as 19 printed manuscripts. It records variants from 615 manuscripts, 52 editions of the Hebrew text, and 16 manuscripts of the SP. Then in 1784–88, J. B. de Rossi published lists of variants of the Hebrew consonantal texts from 1,475 manuscripts and editions (p. xlv). This work was more comprehensive and accurate than Kennicott’s, but is also not of much value to OT textual criticism, as Würthwein explains: “what is lacking is variants of any real significance for the meaning of the text, such as are found in New Testament manuscripts. These collections of variants provide scarcely any help in dealing with corrupt passages.”

The disappointing outcome of these works led to a declining interest in OT textual criticism, and no further works of this nature had been forthcoming. However, late in the 19th century S. Baer, aided by Franz Delitzsch, prepared an eclectic text of the MT (except for Exodus to Deuteronomy), drawing the most likely readings from various sources. This work did not meet with a favorable response. The Dead Sea Scrolls had not yet been discovered and the medieval Hebrew manuscripts that it used reflected a standardized Masoretic tradition and furnished few significant variations. Recently, there has been a revived interest by Oxford University Press in producing an eclectic edition called *The Oxford Hebrew Bible* with Ronald Hendel, University of California, Berkeley, as editor-in-chief. Another interesting project that has been in progress for more than 30 years is called the Hebrew Old Testament Text Project and is sponsored by the United Bible Societies. The goal of this project is to provide a text-critical commentary on the OT similar to that available by Metzger for the NT; three volumes have already appeared. Al Wolters describes this work as follows: “In volume 2, out of eight hundred emendations that were examined, only seventy-eight are found to be probable, and most of these do not materially affect the sense.” In short, these volumes constitute a massive vindication of the traditional Hebrew text.

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Most scholars today have abandoned any attempt to develop an eclectic Hebrew text. It is generally considered preferable to choose a diplomatic text (taking a particular manuscript of the OT [a textus receptus] and adding to it a textual apparatus to note where the text differs from other readings). The following are some of the reasons why a diplomatic text is generally preferable:

1. The history of the transmission of the OT text is significantly different than that of the NT on two counts. First, there are relatively few Hebrew manuscripts as compared to the vast number of Greek manuscripts, and therefore it is less realistic to attempt to compare enough Hebrew manuscripts to develop an eclectic Hebrew text. Second, OT texts were copied by professional scribes, who made far fewer mistakes in copying than the untrained people who rendered copies of the NT texts.

2. There appears to have been some degree of textual criticism conducted by the temple scribes, as we noted earlier; thus, to prepare an eclectic text would risk undoing some of the work already done by early scribes.

3. There are still significant unanswered questions concerning the skills, goals, and translation techniques of some of the scribes who copied the Dead Sea Scrolls and other ancient versions. Without more information to guide us, it is still premature to attempt an eclectic text at the present time.

Thus, it still seems preferable to produce a known form of the OT than to attempt a hypothetical eclectic text that probably never existed. Given our perspective that a central stream of tradition always existed for the Hebrew text, it is most reasonable to assume that a diplomatic edition with a good textual apparatus (similar to that appearing in the BHS and Quinta versions or the Hebrew University Bible Project) is the best starting point to examine this stream.

CONCLUSION

In many ways, we are living in exciting times for the study of OT textual criticism. Since the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, significant discoveries (such as the Cairo Genizah fragments and the Dead Sea Scrolls) have greatly enhanced our understanding of the Hebrew text. It is hard to imagine that for much of the 20th century the oldest texts available for the OT were Greek and not Hebrew texts. This is no longer the case. OT textual criticism is an expanding and exciting field of study with hundreds of new Hebrew manuscripts to examine. From these, we are seeing that even though the MT has been transmitted

over thousands of years, there appears to be very little corruption within the text. Bruce Waltke notes that in the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS) approximately one textual note appears for every ten words; thus, 90 percent of the text is without significant variation. 68 According to Shemaryahu Talmon, even the errors and textual variations that exist “affect the intrinsic message only in relatively few instances.” 69 Our count of variants in the book of Genesis shows that only about 7 percent of the words in this book are affected. 70 If this is the case, we have an amazing heritage handed down to us in the Hebrew text of the OT.


70. There are about 1,357 words that are affected, out of approximately 19,671 words, or 6.8 percent of the text.