

INTRODUCTION TO THE OLD TESTAMENT

THE OLD TESTAMENT consists of a body of literature spread over a period extending from the twelfth to the second century B.C; this literature is written in classical Hebrew, except some brief portions which are in Aramaic, a cognate or sister language (Ezra 4.8 – 6.18 and 7.12-26, Jeremiah 10.11, Daniel 2.4 - 7.28). No manuscripts of the Old Testament from the earlier part of this period have been preserved; indeed much of it must have been handed down by oral tradition from generation to generation. The impetus to collect, edit and make copies of the national literature may well have come from the disaster of 587/6 B.C., when the Babylonians captured and burnt Jerusalem and carried off many of its inhabitants into exile.

The earliest known Hebrew manuscripts containing any parts of the Old Testament are among the Scrolls (commonly called the Dead Sea Scrolls) found in caves at Qumran near the north-western end of the Dead Sea; they may be dated in the last two centuries B.C., though some may be a little earlier and others somewhat later. They include two copies of Isaiah, one complete and another badly damaged, a commentary containing most of the text of the first two chapters of Habakkuk, and fragments of every other Old Testament book, except Esther. The text which they present is to a large extent identical with that in our Hebrew Bibles.

In the second century A.D. or even earlier the Rabbis, the Jewish religious leaders, compiled a text from such manuscripts as had survived the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and on this basis was established the traditional or Massoretic text, so called from the Hebrew word *massorah* 'tradition'. This text incorporated the mistakes of generations of copyists, and, in spite of the care bestowed on it, many errors of later copyists also found their way into it. The earliest surviving manuscripts of this text date from the ninth to eleventh centuries A.D.; and it is this text, as printed in R. Kittel's *Biblia Hebraica* (3rd edition, 1937), which has been used for the present translation.

The traditional text was originally written only in consonants, but in order to preserve what they regarded as the correct pronunciation of the words the Rabbis added vowel-signs to the text. Of the various systems of vowel-signs which were devised, that developed at Tiberias in the fifth to sixth centuries A.D. ultimately prevailed and is still used in our printed Bibles. The vowels are here represented by means of strokes and dots added to the consonantal text, and this method of vocalization made it possible for the Rabbis to indicate variant readings which they preferred, without meddling with the consonants: they put in the margin of their manuscript the consonants of the reading which they wished to adopt and added the vowel-signs of this reading to the consonants in the text which they were rejecting. The reader knew that he was to pronounce the consonants in the margin with the vowels in the text.

One variation of this convention is of special importance, inasmuch as it affects the divine name. This personal proper name, written with the consonants *YHWH*, was considered too sacred to be uttered; so the vowels for the words 'my Lord' or 'God' were added to the consonants *YHWH*, and the reader was warned by these vowels that he must substitute other consonants. This change having to be made so frequently, the Rabbis did not consider it necessary to put the consonants of the new reading in the margin. In course of time the true pronunciation of the divine name, probably *Yahweh*, passed into oblivion, and *YHWH* was read with the intruded vowels, the vowels of an entirely different word, namely 'my Lord' or 'God'. In late medieval times this mispronunciation became current as *Jehova*, and it was taken over as *Jehovah* by the Reformers in Protestant Bibles. The present translators have retained this incorrect but customary form in the text of passages where the name is explained with a note on its pronunciation (e.g. Exodus 3.15) and in four placenames of which it forms a constituent element; elsewhere they have followed ancient translators in substituting 'LORD' or 'GOD', printed as here in capital letters, for the Hebrew name.

So much for the text of the Hebrew Old Testament as it lies before us; but it is certain that this does not always represent what was originally written. The translator must often go behind the traditional text to discover the writer's meaning. For this purpose he may have recourse first to the Scrolls; but these cover only a very small part of the Old Testament writings. Secondly he may have recourse to the Samaritan Pentateuch, which, though extant only in late manuscripts, the earliest being dated about the eleventh century A.D., may be somewhat earlier than the Scrolls and represents the text of the five books of the Law (Genesis to Deuteronomy) which the Samaritans took with them when they seceded from Judaism. It differs from the traditional Hebrew text in a considerable number of small and mostly unimportant points.

For further help the translator may turn to the ancient versions. Of these the earliest is the Old Testament in Greek, designed to meet the needs of Greek-speaking Jews in Egypt in the third and second centuries B.C. According to tradition the Pentateuch was translated by seventy-two elders, six from each of the twelve tribes of Israel, and so the Greek version of the Old Testament came to be called the Septuagint, from the Latin *septuaginta* 'seventy'. Clearly it is the work of a number of translators of unequal skill; their rendering is now literal, now paraphrastic, and now interpretative. Not infrequently it contains absurd mistranslations. Yet it is valuable for the recovery of the original Hebrew, because it is based on an underlying Hebrew text older than the Massoretic, and it often preserves the correct reading in passages where our Hebrew manuscripts are manifestly in error, or the true interpretation where this has been obscured in the traditional text. Its defects, however, were patent, and early in the Christian era several scholars, Aquila, Symmachus and Theodotion, tried to improve on it; other scholars produced fresh recensions of it, among which the text associated with the name of Lucian is commonly included.

With the spread of Christianity across the Mediterranean world the need for a Latin version of the Scriptures arose, and a translation of the Septuagint was made by unknown translators. This, known as the Old Latin Version, of which only parts survive, was so unsatisfactory that towards the end of the fourth century A.D. Pope Damasus ordered Jerome to prepare a fresh Latin translation. The new version, commonly called the Vulgate, and produced with the help of Jewish scholars, is idiomatic and forceful, and, being made directly from the Hebrew text, is especially helpful in recovering the form and sense of that text.

As the knowledge of Hebrew died out among the Jews, the reading of the Scriptures in the synagogue had to be followed by a translation of the passages into Aramaic, the language which had supplanted Hebrew. Such renderings, known as Targums (Aramaic *targum*, 'translation'), tended to become traditional and stereotyped and finally were written down. Some of them contain pre-Christian material. There are Targums to every book of the Old Testament except Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah, but only one, on the Pentateuch, is a straightforward translation.

Between the first and third centuries A.D. a Syriac translation, known as the Peshitta (i.e. 'simple') Version, was made; some parts of it are more literal than others, and, though it agrees in the main with the Hebrew text, it bears traces of the influence of the Septuagint. Other versions in various languages appeared between the third and thirteenth centuries A.D., but they are of little value for the recovery and interpretation of the Hebrew text.

In spite of this wealth of ancient versions, and even when the earliest known form of the text has been established, many obscurities still remain in the Hebrew Scriptures. The classical Hebrew vocabulary as known today is small, with the consequence that the meaning of an unusually large number of words is uncertain or unknown. In such cases recourse may be had to the cognate languages. Already medieval scholars had begun to use the Arabic language for this purpose, and in later centuries Syriac and Ethiopic also were used. In more recent times scholars have had access to the vast literature in Babylonian, Assyrian, and kindred dialects which has been preserved on cuneiform tablets. Archaeology, too, has at times been helpful in clearing up an obscurity in the Hebrew text. But in the last resort, the translator may have to arrive at the sense of a word from the context alone, or he may even have to emend what is

demonstrably faulty; such corrections of the text, except when only the vowels are affected, are recorded in the notes of the present translation.

The paragraphs in this translation are a modified form of those in the Authorized and Revised Versions, and the present translators have added headings to the main sections into which the text falls. Sometimes, for what seemed sufficient reasons, the order of the verses has been changed, as will be seen from the verse-numbering. Occasionally passages have been brought together if a common refrain or other evidence shows that they have been wrongly separated; such changes are recorded in the notes.

The headings of the Psalms, consisting partly of musical instructions, of which the meanings have mostly been lost, and partly of historical notices, deduced (sometimes incorrectly) from the individual Psalms, have been omitted; they are almost certainly not original. On the other hand, the designations of the speakers in the Song of Songs, though absent from the Hebrew text, have been introduced, with occasional corrections, from two manuscripts of the Septuagint.

A major difficulty in translating the Old Testament lies in the difference of time and place. Palestine differs greatly from the Western world in its physical aspects, in its plants, birds and beasts, its arts and crafts, as it did also in its social, administrative and religious, institutions, so that no English words exist to represent much about which the Old Testament speaks. The modern translator then must be content to use paraphrase or even to transliterate certain Hebrew words. The present translators have transliterated the Hebrew words for technical terms, where verbal exactness has seemed essential, while in other passages they have allowed themselves a paraphrase to bring out the general sense, where no technical problem requiring particularization is involved ; but they have adopted such devices as rarely as possible.

Finally, the translators have endeavoured to avoid anachronisms and expressions reminiscent of foreign idioms. They have tried to keep their language as close to current usage as possible, while avoiding words and phrases likely soon to become obsolete. They have made every effort not only to make sense but also to offer renderings that will meet the needs of readers with no special knowledge of the background of the Old Testament.

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