

THE HEBREW UNIVERSITY BIBLE PROJECT

reviewed by

Prof. Shemaryahu Talmon*

The first fascicle of the planned edition of the Hebrew Bible to be published by the Hebrew University Bible Project (HUBP) has just appeared. It contains the text of the first ten chapters of Isaiah edited by M. Goshen-Gottstein. This is the first part of a comprehensive project which is meant to bring before the reader a new scholarly edition of the Hebrew Bible based on all texts and witnesses of importance that are available to us. It is intended to present the facts concerning the text of the Bible as they emerge from our sources in Hebrew and translational Versions. Rather than advocating the supremacy of one or another variant, it is left to the reader to form his own opinion on the basis of the material exhibited about the forms and the early history of the Bible text.

Although not directly triggered off by the important Qumran finds of biblical scrolls and fragments, the Hebrew University Bible Project without doubt to some extent was engendered by, and at the same time illustrates the renewed interest in biblical textual research stimulated by these important discoveries.¹ The connection is illustrated by the fact that as the first book to be published by the HUBP, the Book of Isaiah was chosen. The existence at Qumran of an almost complete Isaiah scroll (1QIs^a) which shows a remarkable number of divergencies from the received Hebrew text, that is to say the Masoretic text (MT), gives scholars a welcome opportunity to compare the Hebrew text of a pre-Christian manuscript of the book with a text form which developed over the centuries and became the *textus receptus* of the Synagogue. The contemporaneous presence of other Isaiah manuscripts at Qumran, foremost the only partially preserved so-called Second Isaiah scroll (1QIs^b), and additional fragments which concur in almost all details with the MT, gives us some insight into divergent textual traditions which were known as early as the first century C. E. or even before the present era.

* The Hebrew University Bible – The Book of Isaiah, Part I; edited by M. H. Goshen-Gottstein. Jerusalem, 1973, The Magnes Press, Hebrew University.

Hebrew title: תורה, נביאים וכתובים מהדורת האוניברסיטה העברית – ספר ישעיהו, חלק ראשון; בעריכת משה גושן-גוטשטיין.

¹ A critical survey of these developments is given by S. Talmon, The Old Testament Text, in: The Cambridge History of the Bible, Vol. 1, edited by P. R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans (Cambridge 1970), pp. 159-199.

Another factor which induced the editors of the HUBP to select the book of Isaiah as a starting point for the new endeavour was the rediscovery of the famous Aleppo Codex of the Bible after the project itself was already under way. This 10th century manuscript is an authoritative copy of the MT as it was established by the school of Ben Asher. The manuscript is the handiwork of the last scion of that school, Moses ben Aaron ben Asher, and was prepared under his guidance and supervision and with his active participation in its writing. Detailed investigations have convinced the editors of the HUBP and other scholars that it was exactly this manuscript which Maimonides, the most prominent Jewish scholar of the Middle Ages, considered the most reliable and authoritatively binding in the traditing of the Hebrew Bible.²

This important manuscript had been considered lost since 1948. Up to that time it had been kept in the synagogue of the Aleppo Jewish community who revered it to such an extent that the attempt of the late Professor U. Cassuto to photograph it for collation in 1947 had failed, as had all previous efforts. In 1948 during riots against the Jewish community in Aleppo, their synagogue was burnt down. Reports had it that the codex had also perished. However, it later transpired that the manuscript indeed had suffered considerable damage but, being kept in an iron box for safety, the larger part of it had withstood the effect of the fire. The outer parts of the codex were completely charred, with the result that the whole of the Pentateuch is missing, with the exception of ten pages containing the last part of the Book of Deuteronomy. Likewise Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Ezra and Nehemiah, which came at the end of the codex, are no longer extant. This proves, by the way, that the order of the "Writings" is that found also in some other old codices, in which the Book of Chronicles opens the collection of the Hagiographa, in distinction from the tradition which underlines our printed Bibles, in which it closes the collection.

As against this, the remaining books of the Bible, i. e. the Former and the Latter Prophets and most of the Writings, have been preserved almost fully with only some single pages missing here and there, or being partly damaged. One notable exception is the Book of Jonah, which is missing *in toto*.³ This absence can be accounted for by the assumption that the book was taken out of the bound codex, most probably for liturgical use in the synagogue during the afternoon prayers of the Day of Atonement, when the Book of Jonah traditionally is recited. This must have been done before the burning of the codex in 1948. Therefore this part of the manuscript probably was not burned, and possibly may turn up in the future.

² See the detailed analyses by M. H. Goshen-Gottstein and S. D. Loewinger in *Textus I* (1960), pp. 17-111.

³ For additional details consult the late President Ben-Zvi's "The Codex of Ben Asher" *ib.*, pp. 1-16.

While the edition of Isaiah was nearing completion, a second team headed by C. Rabin and S. Talmon started work on the Book of Jeremiah. In the preparation of this edition special problems are being encountered. On the one hand, only a few fragments of Jeremiah from Qumran are known, so that there is no possibility of collating, as is the case with regard to Isaiah, a practically full Hebrew manuscript of the pre-Christian era with the MT. However, these fragments (which also have not yet been definitely published) show a surprising affinity with the text of the Septuagint tradition. It stands to reason that we may have here fragments of an exceedingly early Hebrew text which either represents or is akin to the Hebrew *Vorlage* of the main Greek translation where this deviates from the present Hebrew. Since, as is well known, the Septuagint does not render a good number of shorter and more extensive passages in the Hebrew, with the result that the Greek text is some 12-15% shorter than the MT, we may have here evidence for the existence of two different versions of the Book of Jeremiah, a short and a more expanded text of the book, during the last centuries B. C. E.

In order to speed up work on the project, a third team has been set up, to be headed by M. Goshen-Gottstein. This team will begin working on the "Twelve", starting with Hosea.

The lay-out of the edition can be learned from the enclosed loose-leaf: the main, i. e. the Masoretic, text is given at the top of the page. It is a faithful reproduction of the Aleppo codex, complete with vowels, cantillation symbols and the sub-divisions that appear in that manuscript. The text is accompanied by a series of apparatuses:⁴

1. On the top, and in the margin of the page, the Masora of the Aleppo codex is reproduced, the deciphering and interpretation of which was extremely difficult.

2. In the uppermost apparatus beneath the Hebrew text, variant readings from the major translational Versions are recorded. This apparatus is based on a collation of the Septuagint and other Greek translations, the Syriac *Peshitta*, the Aramaic *Targums* (in the case of the Book of Isaiah, Targum Jonathan), the *Vetus Latina* and the Vulgate, and Sa'adia's Arabic translation. The editors thought it to be advisable that variants from translations into Semitic and non-Semitic languages should be presented separately, since the very phenomenon of a meta-language engenders special problems. For this reason, the variants are usually given in the translation language so as to avoid the pitfalls that are unavoidably inherent in a retroversion into Hebrew. Only in exceptional cases, when it was felt that the under-

⁴ A detailed discussion of editorial procedures is presented in M. H. Goshen-Gottstein, *The Book of Isaiah - Sample Edition with Introduction* (Jerusalem 1965). In the meantime, though, many facets of the procedures have been significantly revised.

lying Hebrew of a Version can be recaptured with some confidence by re-translation, such a variant is given in Hebrew.

3. This problem does not exist in the next apparatus, in which variants from other Hebrew sources are collated, foremost the Hebrew manuscripts from Qumran. Wherever Qumran variants coincide with a *qere* reading, traditionally entered in the margins of the Masoretic Hebrew text, this is noted.

An important advance over other critical editions of the Bible is the inclusion in this apparatus of divergent Hebrew readings found in quotations from the Bible which are preserved in rabbinic literature. These are especially interesting when they turn up not only in the lemma, i. e. in the catch-phrase of the biblical text by which a midrashic exposition is introduced, but when the exposition itself clearly implies a different reading from that of the MT. A famous case in point is the 'al-tiqre Midrash (Bab. Tal. Berakot 64a) which hinges on reading in Is. 54:13 – בוניך – “thy builders”, instead of MT: בניך – “thy sons” (cp. G: *tekna*; T: בנך), a variant which now has turned up in 1QIs^a as an emended reading: בוניכי. The phenomenon is comparable to what is sometimes encountered in a Qumran *peshet*. There, as for example in the *Peshet Habakkuk* (1QHap), the actualising interpretation sometimes hinges upon a variant from the MT, or combines divergent readings in an exegetical doublet. Hab. 1:11 MT: וישם זה אז חלף רוח ויעבר ואשם זו כחו לאלהו is quoted as: וישם זה כוחו לאלהו in 1QH^p IV, 9-10. The MT reading, which derives אשם from the root אשם – “to be guilty”, is supported by G: *exilasetai* and T: וחב. In the ensuing comment, which is based on the first part of the above Scripture, 1QH^p clearly shows acquaintance both with its own biblical reading and also with that of MT (G, T), and with the Masoretic sentence-division: (a) על מושלי הכתיאים אשר בעצת בית אשמ[תם] פשרו יעבירו איש (b) מושלי [הם] אחר זה יבואו לשחית את [ה]ארץ [?] ... מלפני רעהו. The second *peshet* (b), in which the salient word is לשחית – “to despoil, to lay waste”, in all probability mirrors וישם of the *Vorlage* from which 1QH^p quoted, the verb being understood as derived from שמם. The first exposition (a), in which [their] house of guilt [תם] אשמ[תם] is the pivotal expression, obviously is based on אשם as found in the MT which reading, though, is not explicitly quoted. However, it is possible that this very reading actually was adduced further on in 1QH^p (IV, 14-15) where another *peshet* is introduced, but was lost for us in a lacuna: ... זה אחר זה יבואו לשחית את הארץ? זה כוחו לאלהו פשרו ... If this indeed can be maintained, we would have here what amounts to a variant-notation, in quotation, together with two Midrash-like expositions which are based alternatively on the one and the other of the parallel variants.

In the edition of the Pentateuch the textually important variants from the Samaritan Hebrew Pentateuch will be integrated into this apparatus.

4. In the third apparatus selected Hebrew manuscripts of the MT are collated, first and foremost consonant and vocalisation variants from the major known manuscripts such as the Leningrad and Cairo codices. To these have been added four less known manuscripts, Kennicott numbers 30, 93, 96 and 150, which upon investigation yielded a comparatively substantial crop of deviations from the Aleppo codex. It is probable that for other biblical books some of these sources may be dropped, and others selected, if detailed research proves them to be more important for textual comparison than the ones used for the Book of Isaiah.

5. The last apparatus records differences in spelling, vocalisation and accentuation found in selected Masoretic manuscripts vis-à-vis the Aleppo codex.

Short notes at the bottom of the page explain in some cases the decisions of the editor in recording or not recording specific variants, and his explanation of the nature of variants collated. These notes perforce express the personal opinion of the individual editor, and therefore are kept to a bare minimum.

The reader will appreciate the intensive scholarly effort that goes into the preparation of this ambitious edition. The scanning of so many diverse sources for variant readings probably is unprecedented. One can hardly conceive of any other literature where the editor would be called upon to utilise for the preparation of a critical edition such a great variety of sources from widely separated eras, and such a multiplicity of languages. It will be understood that the publication of the complete Bible, in which the three editors and some fifteen co-workers are engaged, will take many years. It is hoped that the publication of the "Prophets" will be completed by the end of this decade.

The restrictions imposed upon the natural inclination of a scholar to explain his decisions will to some degree be ameliorated by the publication of supplements to the edition, either as monographs or in the form of articles and notes. For this purpose the annual *Textus* was established, of which so far eight volumes have appeared. Volumes 1-3 of *Textus* were edited by C. Rabin, and the following ones by S. Talmon. This annual is the only international periodic publication which is dedicated solely to textual criticism of the Bible and to the history of the text. Articles were authored by the editors of the Hebrew University Bible Project, their co-workers and by scholars in Israel and abroad. Articles are published in English, French and Hebrew.

Further, a monograph series was started several years ago in which so far the following four volumes have appeared.

Studies in the Aleppo Codex, edited by C. Rabin (Jerusalem 1960 - Hebrew)

L. Lifshuetz, *Kitab Al-Khilaf - Mishael ben Uzziel's Treatise on the Differences between Ben Asher and Ben Naphtali* (Jerusalem 1965)

I. Yeivin, *The Aleppo Codex of the Bible – A Study of its Vocalisation and Accentuation* (Jerusalem 1968 – Hebrew)

M. H. Goshen-Gottstein, *The Bible in the Syro-Palestinian Version, Part I, Pentateuch and Prophets* (Jerusalem 1973).

Mention should be made of the immense technical problems experienced by the editors. The lay-out of a page in which five different alphabets are used in the utmost available variety of types, and in addition to them a series of critical signs and symbols, especially to represent the Masoretic tradition, requires a technical expertise which had to be gained while the work was in progress.

The new edition will become an important tool for the student of the Bible text. The sample, and now the first fascicle of the definite edition have aroused great interest among scholars. The wealth of material scrutinised, researched and collated in the apparatuses, and the publication of the important Ben Asher Aleppo codex will present the scholar with pertinent information, although in an extremely compressed form, on historical and developmental aspects of the Bible text as it was handed down over centuries. The reader will gain a synoptic view of these diverse facets, and thus will be able to appreciate the processes which affected the transmission of the original text and were embodied in variants found in the ancient translations. By this synoptic overview, we will gain a better understanding of the elements of linguistic, literary and theological interpretation which translators infused into their renditions, in order to get the better of a linguistically or conceptually difficult Hebrew reading. At the same time it becomes evident that the Holy Scriptures were known in ancient times in textually divergent formulations, and that only in a long process of unification, which involved the accidental loss or the deliberate suppression of divergent readings, were the presently predominant Hebrew and translational text-types established. However, with the collated material within easy reach, the further observation can be made: the great number of divergencies seldom change the intrinsic meaning of the text. Variation always was kept within narrow bounds and did not seriously affect the basic ideas and beliefs which found their expression in biblical literature.

*Professor Shemaryahu Talmon is Professor of Bible
at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem*