THE TEXTUAL TRANSMISSION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

By the Rev. D. K. INNES, M.A., West Ealing

2 TIMOTHY 3: 16 states that every Scripture is 'theopneustos, and Evangelicals rightly insist that this means, not that the Scripture is 'breathed into' by God, but that it is 'God-breathed', the product of the creative breath of God.1 Scripture is, then, objectively and in itself, a revelation of God, and is infallible 'as originally given'. The purpose of this article is not to prove this doctrine, and the writer assumes it. Such a doctrine of inspiration, however, does not excuse an evangelical student of theology from facing up to the facts concerning the transmission of the Bible. He must determine, in the light of the biblical doctrine of Scripture and of ascertainable facts about its history, what its attitude ought to be to the Bible as he has it. The present writer has no qualification to offer any original contribution, but it may be worth while to glance at the main stages in the history of the Old Testament text, in the light of the doctrine of inspiration outlined above.

The first stage, strictly speaking, was the setting down in writing of the revelation given by God to the biblical writers. This was done by various hands. Much of the Pentateuch, for example, claims to have been written by Moses (cf. Ex. 17: 14; 24: 42; Nu. 33: 21; Dt. 31: 9, 22, 24);2 and the oracles of the prophets were committed to writing by themselves or their disciples (Is. 8: 16; Je. 36). This written material was then arranged, in many cases by later hands, and sometimes combined with earlier or later material (e.g. the Creation narratives, Dt. 5: 4); Gn. 36: 31; etc.).3 Our doctrine of inspiration necessitates acceptance of the fact that those who produced the books of the Old Testament canon were guided by the Holy Spirit so that what they wrote accurately represented what God said. Otherwise they are not a wholly true embodiment of revelation. If the history has been falsified or misinterpreted, we can get from it only a distorted view of God. Similarly if the oracles and poems have been 'written over' by a later redactor in the interests of his own doctrinal views, they are no longer what they purport to be. That is why the conservative view attaches so much importance to the written word — because it is our only record of the Word of God. As Dr. J. I. Packer has written,4 'We do not stress the verbal character of inspiration from a superstitious regard for the original Hebrew and Greek words (like that of Islam for its Koran, which is held to consist essentially of Arabic words, and therefore to be untranslatable); we do so from a reverent concern for the sense of Scripture.' And E. A. Litton wrote5 in connection with the New Testament in a similar strain: 'The inspired oral teaching of the Apostles stood exactly on the same footing as their inspired written teaching: we pay no superstitious reverence to the book as such, that is, as distinguished from instruction conveyed orally.' This is in marked contrast with the Jewish view, which can draw conclusions from the letter irrespective of the sense — as when Rashi says that the occurrence of the article (expressed by the fifth letter of the Hebrew alphabet) in Genesis 1: 31 indicates 'that he made a pact with them (His creatures) on condition that Israel took upon themselves (to observe) the Five Books of the Law'.

Such a literalistic attitude to the Scriptures demands a standard text, fixed in every detail. This is presumably the reason why some Christians still insist that the AV, based on the 'Received Text', is the only unadulterated Word of God, while other versions such as the RSV and NEB are the work of the devil. Their idea of inspiration necessitates such a view. Christ, however, showed that Scripture is a means of grace not as a mere written code, but because of its testimony to Him (Jn. 5: 39). We may infer that in Matthew 5: 18 He refers to the Scriptures as conveying a message, and not to the in as far as it expresses the message. An examination of the text suggests that it has in fact undergone certain changes in the course of its history, though never such as to modify its message. We will summarize the history of the text, and also the evidence for textual corruption.

a. Word-divisions

These must have been inserted early, for they are said to be clearly marked in the biblical MSS of the Dead Sea Scrolls, where they almost always agree with the Massoretic Text. The parent MSS of the Septuagint, generally dated in the third century B.C., appears to have showed a different word division from the Massoretic Text.6 There is some evidence for erroneous word-division in the text as we have it. Thus in Jeremiah 25: 33, for the AV 'What burden?'; which reads strangely in the context, the RSV mg. and new substitute 'You are the burden', a change which is made only by regrouping the letters of the unpointed Hebrew text: 'ē-m h-m-s-· for 'ē-t m·h m-s-·. Moreover this reading is supported by several of the Versions. In Isaiah 2: 20 the word translated 'to the moles' in the English Versions is split in two in the MT. The MT of Amos 5: 13 runs literally 'Shall horses run upon the rock? will one plow with oxen?' — 'there' in the AV being inserted. One supposition is impossible, but the other is not. The AV rendering 'Does one plow the sea with oxen?' is only altered by altering the word division, thereby also giving a more usual form of the word for 'oxen'.

b. 'Matres lectionis'

These are 'vowel letters' inserted in the text as an aid to correct pronunciation. They were not original in Hebrew and the cognate languages.7 It is said that the LXX parent text differs from the MT in the use of them. B. J. Roberts8 quotes, e.g., 1 Samuel 12: 7; 2 Samuel 7: 1; Psalm 14: 7. In the Dead Sea Scrolls final vowels regularly have extra vowel-letters not in the MT.9 It appears that sometimes matres lectionis were inserted erroneously, e.g., in a Sumerian inscription: 'the word for garrison' is plural in the MT but by moving the letter the pluralism is lost which is also read by the Versions. A similar instance in Jeremiah 2: 25 is noted by the Massoretes, and the alternative form directed to be 'read'.

c. Vowel points

The original text was consonantal only, and the present system of pointing was adopted by the Massoretes in the seventh century AD.10 It is possible that in a very few cases an erroneous punctuation was recorded by them.11

d. The fixing of the text

(i) It is generally agreed that a great impulse was given towards the fixing of the Old Testament text by Rabbi Akiba (died c. 132). His method was literalistic to an extreme. Pfeiffer12 remarks that he 'discovered through incredible ingenuity a hidden meaning in apparently insignificant Hebrew
particles'. For this kind of interpretation a standard text is vital. Akiba also inspired Aquila to make a literal Greek version of the standard Hebrew text. Probably through his influence there was a definite movement for fixing the text early in the Christian era. It is significant that the text of the scrolls differs chiefly in small details of morphology and of the second century, and the Vulgate (fourth century) presuppose a text nearer to the MT than does the LXX.14 But there has been a reaction against the Vulgate text laid in the last century, and which the scholars have established in the second century AD. Further study has underlined the number and significance of the variations between Hebrew MSS. It has also been shown that Aquila's text was by no means identical with the MT. Both authorities who have studied the text in Rabbinic circles more than one form of the Hebrew text was current.

(ii) During the first five centuries of the Christian era the scribes divided the text into pericopes and liturgical divisions, and added diacritical marks, the meaning of which is now only partially understood. They inserted words to be omitted, and forms which were 'pointed'. Rabbinic commentaries and Masoretic works also indicate a variable number of 'emendations of the Scribes', designed to avoid anthropomorphisms. Pfeiffer also has an extensive 'dogmatic revision' of the Versions made without being noted, in the interests of religious views. For example the phrase 'to curse God' was altered to read 'to bless God', and the word 'ephod' was substituted for all references to 'ark or divination boxes' other than the 'ark of the covenant'. But this appears to savour of invoking the aid of the Scribes to make the Old Testament square with one's own views. Several alternative explanations of the difficulties surrounding the word 'ephod' are mentioned e.g. in ICC, Judges, pp. 306. As in the phrase 'to bless God', BDB appears to accept the hypothetical 'meaning of the root brk — a blessing overdone and so really a curse'. But it is clear that it early became customary to read bōšēth (shame) for the names of the heathen deities Astarte and Molek. In the Vulgate the names were vocalized, and MA and MSS, and is probably pointing of the word Topheh appears to have similar a meaning. Some of these changes are not in the consonantal text but in the vocalization. There is evidence also that Baal was changed to Bosheth or El in proper names. In Amos 1: 5, 6 the names Kawanu and Sakkut are pointed with the vowels of shiqquts (detested thing).

The Massoretes finally fixed the Old Testament text, and it was to guarantee its accurate transmission that they indulged in the infinite and sometimes pointless labour of copying, and with peculiarities in the variant readings were recorded in the margin as to be 'read' (qere), while the text itself (kethib) was pointed with the vowels of the qere reading. It is said that there are about 1,500 examples of qere-kethib variants in our current editions.

e. The transmission of the text

There are two classes of Old Testament text, connected respectively with the Masoretic families of ben Asher and ben Naphtali. Both of these families flourished in the first half of the tenth century AD. In the twelfth century the Decree of Maimonides established the ben Asher Text as standard. There are, however, several MSS of the ben Asher family, as well as some ben Asher ms. Until the third edition of Biblia Hebraica all printed editions were based on the text of Jacob ben Chayyim (1525-26). It has been shown, however, largely through the work of Professor P. Kahle, that this was an eclectic text based on poor material. Kahle has also drawn attention to the importance of some manuscripts in the Firkowitsch collections in Leningrad, and one of these (B19a, also known as L) forms the basis of the third edition of Biblia Hebraica. It was written in 1098, and Kahle and his pupils have shown that it must be designated as a pure ben Asher text.

Let us summarize so far. We have seen that the period up to c. 500 AD was characterized by a comparatively fluid state of the text, though there were some stabilizing influences. Then the Massoretes produced a standard text by a process of collating the MSS at their disposal. They also took elaborate precautions to ensure that the text should not be changed. There are some pre-Massoretic MSS now extant, and they have largely tended to justify confidence in the MT. At the same time the MT can hardly be expected to be a transcript of the original documents.

(i) Conclusion of letters. Certain letters were easily confused, either in the MT, or in the MS, or in the Versions, or in the Vulgate, or in the LXX. This was true of later square 'characters', or in both. The word 'ēyām', for example, occurs only in Isaiah 11: 15. The meaning is doubtful; BDB suggest 'glow'. The alteration of one letter produces 'esem' (might). The Versions appear to have read it thus: the AV and RV read 'glowing'. The word 'destroyed' in the English Versions of 2 Chronicles 22: 10 depends on reading a letter of the MT differently, with the support of the Versions. The case is similar with the word 'court' in 2 Kings 20: 4 (cf. AV and RV) of a reading supported by the qere, and the Versions of some MSS of the Hebrew text.

(ii) Ditography. This is the technical term for the erroneous repetition of consonants or words. Sometimes, as in 2 Kings 15: 16, this results in a grammatically impossible revision of the text. In Isa 44: 12: 18, AVRSV suggest that words have been repeated erroneously; e.g. Psalm 18: 13, 'Hail stones and coals of fire' (omitted by LXX and SA). Cf. verse 13; Psalm 112: 9, 'For, lo, thine enemies'; Ezekiel 16: 6; four words repeated; Leviticus 20: 10, five words; 2 Samuel 6: 3f., six words. In Isaiah 17: 12, 13 five words are apparently repeated with one variation, suggesting that a textual variant has found its way into the text; a similar case occurs in 1 Kings 7: 41, 42. All these instances can be followed in the AV. The RVMS support some of these alterations.

(iii) Haplography. This is 'the inadvertent writing once of what should have been written twice'. Thus the English Versions assume the reading hehuju for ħdyu in 1 Samuel 14: 21. In Jeremiah 31: 38 the word 'come' is represented in the text, whereas the qere, together with the Versions, suggests that the word translate 'talked' really means 'said', and is normally followed by direct speech, as in English. The RV mg. and RSV append a passage found in the Versions, but not in the MT. Often the Versions indicate the omission of a word by pointing the vowel points but not the consonants (e.g. Jdg. 20: 13; Ru. 3: 5).

(iv) Homoeoteleuton. This is produced where the eye of the scribe has jumped the contents of a passage between two identical or similar words. The Versions have themselves to varying degrees suffered from textual corruption, often to a far greater degree than the MT. Their readings, therefore, cannot be accepted uncritically as representing the original Hebrew text.

The conservative student will be cautious in making emendations, especially where these are without any objective support — for God's Word is not a fit object for the display of human cleverness. On the other hand the conclusion is irresistible that no one manuscript can claim to have a monopoly of accuracy, or to have been preserved in such a way as to be an exact verbatim reproduction of the original text. Does this mean that the evangelical doctrine of inspiration will not stand up to a critical examination of the text? It cannot be retained without intellectual dishonesty. Certainly it is perilous to go on from theoretical study and one's devotional approach to the Bible in separate water-tight compartments. Difficulties, including textual difficulties, must be faced up to honestly. But what is implied by our attitude to Scripture is that the text has not been altered to such an extent as to obliterate its meaning.
and it is noteworthy that the MSS we have do not differ in such a way as to cast the slightest doubt on the message they proclaim. This can be said even in the light of the evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls, which seem to vary from the MT largely in minor matters of detail. The verdict of the Westminster Confession remains true, that the Scriptures 'being immediately inspired by God, and by his singular care and providence kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentical'.

We should reverence the Scriptures, therefore, as the written embodiment of God's revelation. Can we also confidently preach from its actual words? How can we be sure that what we say does not rest on a textual corruption? By comparing Scripture with Scripture, and filling our minds with the great themes of God's revelation. Apart from textual considerations, it would be precarious to interpret any passage in a way which found no support elsewhere in Scripture! God's providence has given us no distorted record of the written revelation. This fact is implied in the biblical idea of inspiration. For it is not likely that God would have given to men an inspired revelation, and afterwards allowed it to become obliterated. This is the faith with which we as Evangelicals approach our Bibles. But this conviction also stands up to the study of the text. We shall, therefore, on the one hand, hold fast our confidence in God's Word written; while on the other hand we can accept sound textual criticism, based on objective evidence and not merely subjective criteria, as God's gift, ensuring to us the best possible text of Holy Scripture.

Footnotes:

4 'Fundamentalism' and the Word of God, I.V.F., 1958, pp. 89ff.
5 *Introduction to Dogmatic Theology*, James Clarke, 1960, p. 59.
19 Chambers' *Twentieth Century Dictionary* (New Mid-century Version).
21 I. viii.