The Textual Development of the Torah

When studying Scripture based on the complete spectrum of the textual witnesses, we have to turn to a long list of handbooks and text editions, since there is no single edition that provides the full text of these witnesses. The editions of the Hebrew University Bible Project and of the *Biblia Hebraica* series are very helpful, but they provide only a selection of the variant readings. For a comprehensive analysis of the textual evidence, we would have to study the full content of these texts in parallel columns.

The Scripture text is ancient, and we would like to know what this text looked like in early centuries. However, we have no tangible evidence for the Hebrew Bible before the Qumran copies that date to the middle of the third century BCE. All analyses of the text prior to that period are mere speculation, and while many aspects relating to the later periods are also speculative, they are at least based on some evidence.

When analyzing the textual transmission in these early centuries, we try to distinguish between facts and assumptions. The topic of the present investigation is the textual transmission of the Torah, but in order to examine this process effectively, we have to first broaden the analysis to all the Scripture books. The description below takes the textual evidence as its point of departure, and not any of the textual theories on the history of the Scripture text, such as the theory of the original text of de Lagarde, the theory of early parallel texts of Kahle, or the local texts theory. All these abstract theories revolve around general ideas and do not necessarily start with a study of the evidence itself. On the other hand, the following description attempts to be text-based, but is not necessarily more objective than any of the other ones.

The textual evidence from the last three centuries BCE shows that the individual Scripture books differ from each other in three categories; (1) the number of Hebrew copies that have been preserved for each book; (2) the number of textual branches that differ in content; and (3) the nature of the variation between the textual branches.

(1) In some biblical books, especially the Torah, Isaiah and Psalms, we are blessed with many early sources, whereas in other books the evidence is scant.\(^1\) Differences in the number of copies of the separate Scripture books found in

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\(^1\) For details, see *TCHB*, 96–97.
the Judean Desert definitely reflect differing levels of interest in and use of these books. (2) Likewise, in some books we witness more textual branches than in others, differing in large as well as small details. We will attempt to understand the background of these differences as well as their nature. It has never been defined what exactly constitutes a textual branch, and obviously scholars will hold different views on this matter. I consider as a separate textual branch a text or a group of texts that has a distinct place in the stemma of a specific biblical book. (3) The differences in content between the textual branches and their number help us to better understand the diffusion patterns of the biblical books, transmitted in one or more groups of textual sources. Each group consists of one or more sources, which may be thought of as the branches of the textual transmission tree. Obviously, there is room for different views as to what exactly constitutes a textual branch. Likewise, some scholars hold different views on the number of textual branches in each book, while most scholars do not think along these lines at all and mainly comment on MT, that is, the text that for most of us is the central Scripture text.

The classification to be suggested here is subjective, since the textual data may be presented in different ways. The purpose of this classification is to better understand the internal relation between the textual sources as well as their relationship to earlier text forms. Its focus is the differences of types 2 and 3, that is, the number of textual branches and their nature, and not the differing numbers of copies found in the Judean Desert (1).

Different distribution patterns of texts emerge from this classification, ranging from a unified textual transmission to manifold textual branches. A rather unified textual tradition is visible in Judges, Job, Ruth, Qohelet, Lamentations, Psalms, and probably also in Isaiah, since their main sources,