INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 1

THE DEVELOPMENTAL COMPOSITION
OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT

The Hebrew Bible—Tanakh in Jewish tradition, the Old Testament in Christian tradition—has been transmitted to us in a complex array of variant forms. Most people encounter the text in the form of a single book with a clear text, but that apparent simplicity is the result of numerous editorial or religious decisions which have made repeated selections from among the myriad variant forms. Behind that clarity is a long and fascinating history of growth from innumerable sources into unified books, as well as an intriguing political-social-religious history of the selection process that determined which books were eventually to be included and which to be excluded.

There is no single existing text that exhibits what we seek. The text of the Hebrew Bible is an abstract entity: the ideal pure text to which our combined extant manuscripts witness. This chapter, building on the cumulative results of centuries of intense international and interconfessional biblical scholarship, anticipates the evidence presented in subsequent chapters. It will offer the reader a general map of the territory, a brief overview, sketching the main paths by which the text has been transmitted, from its earliest beginnings to the forms in which we encounter it.

The history of scholarship shows a classic contrast between theories proposing a single Urtext (the “original” form of the text) which spread to multiple forms, and theories proposing early texts already showing pluriformity which were eventually supplanted by a single standardized text. In order to achieve perspective on these views, to appreciate why scholars propose such contrasting explanations of the evidence, and to adjudicate this classic contrast, it is important to explore the full range of the origins and transmission of the text from its earliest visibility to its current forms.

THE FORMATION AND NATURE OF THE TEXT

The Hebrew Bible is an anthology of ancient Israel’s faith literature. Thus, any description of its text and transmission must include the complexity occasioned by the diverse compositions and genres which constitute that anthology in its final form. Each of those diverse compositions, while giving the appearance of homogeneity in its final, collected form as the Bible, has its own trajectory of development from its origins to its final form. Since many of the books are themselves composite works, the origins of each become yet more difficult to sketch. In short, the seemingly unified Hebrew Bible, as its origins and
composition are explored, appears more diverse the further back one goes. The text during its early centuries was not a single static object but a pluriform and organically developing entity. At least three factors help to explain this.

One of the principal reasons is the adaptability of the subject matter. It is partly because certain ancient texts, meaningful in their original context, could also be experienced as meaningful by new generations in new contexts that they were preserved, handed on, and eventually recognized as Sacred Scripture. Often, the wording of those older traditions was adapted to apply more specifically to the new context, thus creating variant forms of the text.

A second reason for the variation is that the Scriptures for the most part originated and developed as traditional literature in a largely oral culture and thus were community-created. That is, each book is the product not of a single author, such as Plato or Shakespeare, but of multiple, anonymous bards, sages, religious leaders, compilers, or tradents. Unlike much classical and modern literature, produced by a single, named individual at a single point in time, the biblical books are constituted by earlier traditions being repeated, augmented, and reshaped by later authors, editors, or tradents, over the course of many centuries. Thus the text of each of the books is organic and developmental, a composition-by-multiple-stages, sometimes described as a rolling corpus.

Thirdly, the path that stretches from the original “authors” to our earliest preserved manuscript evidence often spans several centuries and is tortuous indeed. Over and over, oral tradents and scribal copyists did their best to hand on the text as accurately as possible, but each was fallible and some were creative; so it is difficult to find any single text that does not have in it unintentional errors and synonymous variants, as well as intentional expansions and clarifications. Each of these factors complicates in its own way the search for “the original text.”

An earlier view, still held by some today, saw a dichotomy between two virtually discrete periods: the period of the composition or formation of the text, which eventually became fixed, and the period of transmission, which attempted to hand down as faithfully as possible that fixed text. But the evidence from Qumran indicates that the two processes of textual formation and textual transmission repeatedly overlapped for extensive periods of time. Thus, the two must be studied together.

**Oral Beginnings**

Large parts of what end up as passages in the written books began as small oral units. Certain legal pronouncements, cultic prayers, or wisdom sayings, for example, secured an enduring existence by becoming part of a law code, a liturgy, or a collection of proverbs. Individual hymns, love songs, or dirges were transmitted across generations and immortalized in the Psalter, the Song of Songs, or narratives involving death. Myths, legends, and tales that taught and entertained successive generations became incorporated into the large narrative strands that constitute many of the biblical books.

Israelite culture, like most ancient cultures, was primarily an oral culture. Even when extended narratives, law codes, prophetic traditions, or wisdom collections were written down, they were nonetheless primarily recited and transmitted orally. Although oral transmission can preserve texts with great accuracy, it is quite likely that certain variations of synonymous words and phrases, as well as expansions by inclusion of