THE QUMRAN MANUSCRIPTS AND TEXTUAL CRITICISM

BY

P. W. SKEHAN

Washington

As indicated in the outline distributed to the members of the Congress, this is in the nature of one more preliminary report, mainly of the Qumran cave 4 materials on which the writer has himself been working. We may begin by recalling the fact, already indicated by F. M. Cross 1) and confirmed by the further study of J. T. Milik of the various biblical materials from Wadi Murabba‘at, that a definite terminus ad quem for the variety of texts that Khirbet Qumran provides occurs between the two Jewish revolts; somewhere before A.D. 135. The standardizing of the text as regards orthography, conformity to a selected prototype which yields in all essentials the consonants of the Masoretic text, and definitive scribal rules for its transmission, was clearly an accomplished fact at the time of the second Jewish revolt: this is verifiable explicitly for several books of the Pentateuch (Gen., Ex., Deut.), for Isaias, and for the Minor Prophets. The Wadi Murabba‘at materials have none of the variability of text, format and orthography that is to be found at Qumran.

It has already been indicated by Prof. Cross that the Qumran manuscripts of Genesis, six in number, provide nothing of special textual interest beyond a few isolated readings. The same is by no means true, however, with respect to the other books of the Pentateuch, in which we are clearly dealing in many cases with recensional variations. For the paleo-hebrew scroll of Exodus of which a preliminary announcement was published by the writer, 2) there is still no definitive indication as to whether or not one can class it as Samaritan in any sectarian sense. In view of the known attitude of the community towards the “men of Ephraim and Manasses”, however, the probabilities are all against it. We may now add the fact that

Cross is preparing a manuscript of Numbers (4Q Num*) in square-letter script that contains expanded readings hitherto known only from the Samaritan recension—a manuscript with text that is in other respects of a mixed character, going sometimes with LXX against Sam. and MT, and sometimes with MT against LXX and Sam. When one adds to this a manuscript of Exodus (4Q Ex*) of distinctly Septuagintal type, 1) and the ending of the Song of Moses from Deuteronomy published by the writer, 2) which has also pronouncedly Septuagintal affiliations, it becomes clear that, with the exception of Genesis, the books of the Pentateuch still circulated in Palestine down to the First Revolt in copies with varying recensional backgrounds.

This may perhaps be the point for a reflection of a more general character. There are, it will be recalled, some 100 biblical manuscripts from cave 4 at Qumran. At the end of two years' acquaintance, in varying degrees, with these materials, the writer is still not aware of internal evidence which would urge either that any one of these manuscripts was copied from another identifiable manuscript among the finds, or that any two had a common immediate prototype. Put in another way, this is to say that the biblical manuscripts of the fourth cave at Qumran have a spread in time of some three hundred years; that their origins are to some extent necessarily diverse, and that nothing in the materials to my knowledge shows that there was a specific type of text for any book to which the community felt itself especially committed, and which it endeavored to propagate from the scriptorium of the settlement.

Coming back to the Pentateuch in particular, one fact that should perhaps be stressed is that Qumran is not giving us, in these books, a multiplicity of unknown readings. Nor does it absolve us of applying to the readings it does provide, whether or not these are in accord with a known Greek or Samaritan text, the same critical judgment with which we approach the Masoretic text itself. Partisans of a supposed superiority of the Septuagint in particular still tend today, as in earlier times, to regard the evidence of the Greek as though from place to place, and from book to book, it were all on one plane. Nothing could, of course, be further from the truth; and even in such an instance as the end of Deut. xxxii, where materials from the LXX and material from Qumran combine to suggest that