The time is ripe for a critical edition of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. For every major ancient text tradition scholars expect and benefit from a critical edition – with one exception. Whereas the Greek and Roman classics and even the NT and Greek OT enjoy critical editions, it is only the Hebrew Bible which lacks a critical edition.

The Complutensian Polyglott, whose fifth centenial (1514–2014) this volume celebrates, was an initial step on the road to a critical edition. It was the first effort to present the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin (and for the Pentateuch, the Aramaic Targum Onqelos) texts in parallel columns for ease of critical comparison.

The modern lack of a critical edition has been attributable to an understandable cause. The necessary prerequisite for a full critical edition is a sufficient number of variant manuscript witnesses, and up to the middle of the twentieth century all available Hebrew biblical texts closely attested the Masoretic textus receptus. The variant Samaritan and Septuagint textual traditions were undervalued: the SP as a sectarian text secondarily developed from the MT, and the LXX as an untrustworthy free translation or paraphrase of the MT. Thus, the lack of a critical edition was understandable, due to the lack of evidence.

The discovery of more than two hundred scriptural manuscripts, however, older by a millenium than the preserved Masoretic textus receptus, marvelously transformed the situation and removed the obstacle to a critical edition by supplying a generous array of variant Hebrew and Greek manuscripts. The publication of these manuscripts in the volumes of Discoveries in Judaean Desert by the close of the twentieth century provides the evidence, and requires the attempt, to begin a critical edition.2


There are often criticisms of the steps along the way toward the critical editions we possess today, and this should be expected. Seldom does a major innovation issue in a perfect result on the first attempt. So for a critical edition, various scholars view the project from differing viewpoints and refine the criteria for improved versions. Consider, for example, probably the two closest parallels to the HB, the LXX and the NT, and the paths toward the production of their critical texts.

Paul Anton de Lagarde (1827–1891) sought to analyze the plethora of manuscripts of the Greek OT and produce a critical text as close as possible to the original translation. Though he formulated solid principles, he never achieved this ambitious goal. His student Alfred Rahlfs (1865–1935) began the project, producing probes for Ruth and Genesis and eventually his tentative edition of the Psalms, but regarding the full OT he achieved only a “pocket edition” entitled simply Septuaginta, based on but confined to “the three most important manuscripts,” Vaticanus, Sinaiticus, and Alexandrinus. A parallel project published in England was The Old Testament in Greek: According to the Text of Codex Vaticanus, edited by Alan England Brooke and Norman McLean (1906–1940). It presented a diplomatic text, the text of Vaticanus, supplemented where necessary by Alexandrinus, because “it would be premature to attempt to provide a reconstructed or ‘true’ text.” Thus, it was understood that the desired “true” text would be a critically established edition, but they judged that the practical, achievable goal was to present the textus receptus represented by Vaticanus.

The large number of volumes, however, of the Göttingen critical editions since published by the Septuaginta-Unternehmen have overwhelmingly shown the possibility and great value of critical editions, though it does take several attempts before the effort achieves full success. The essential early step for producing a critical edition of the Greek OT was the break with a textus receptus.

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5 The Old Testament in Greek: According to the Text of Codex Vaticanus ... (ed. Alan England Brooke and Norman McLean; vol. 1. Part 1; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1906), i.
6 Note Rudolph Kittel’s similar statement below regarding the edition of Biblia Hebraica.