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Rewriting the Sacred Text: What the Old Greek Texts Tell Us about the Literary Growth of the Bible

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As I read this book, I was frequently transported into meetings of a seminar course in a major graduate school. It was being led quite breathlessly by a professor enjoying the opportunity to enthuse rather able students in her current research field. The discussion was exciting; the questions under review were the big ones; students were introduced gradually to reading some Masoretic notation and the detail of a textual apparatus; the perspectives were fresh; most of the major players in this field were mentioned (although there was the occasional surprise); and I too was thoroughly enjoying the experience. The main issue being explored was the importance of Greek biblical manuscripts for the study of the Hebrew Bible: What could we have known about the text of the Hebrew Bible if we had studied sources different from the Dead Sea Scrolls more carefully?

Four working examples are taken from the books of Esther, Joshua, and 1 Esdras. Each discussion starts from only one or two verses and broadens out to include the whole structure of the book in question, before returning to the starting point.

The first takes its departure from the phrase “from another place” in Esth 4:13–14 and asks whether the Greek translator, though operating quite literally in this phrase, betrays evidence elsewhere that this phrase too should be understood religiously: “by divine

agency.” The second compares MT and Old Greek in Josh 10:14–18, and argues that a Hebrew tradition older than what we see in MT contained neither 1:15 and 17 nor 1:43. The interest in Gilgal of the proto- MT (1:15 and 43) was encouraged by the importance of nearby Modi’in as campaign center for Judas Maccabeus. The third example argues that the letter of Mordecai at the end of the AT Greek version of Esther, which is unique to that version of the book, was developed in part from the additions over against MT in the OG text of Esther. The fourth compares the Aramaic text of Ezra 4:24 with the Greek versions in 1 Esdras 2:25 and 2 Esdras 4:24. Here it is argued that 1 Esdras was based on a lost Hebrew-Aramaic text that itself was a rewritten version of the familiar Ezra and part of Nehemiah. The first example thus offers a rewritten Hebrew text; in the second the additional verses in Joshua represent some of the final touches to the MT in that book; in the third AT Esther is rewritten from another Greek text (OG Esther); and in the fourth 1 Esdras, on the other hand, was rendered like OG Esther and Joshua, from a Semitic original.

I rather think that the inspiring seminar leader of my reverie is not wholly distinct from the author of this book. However, I find the book a less-satisfactory “product” than the implied seminar. The rich seminar sessions tended to run out of time before all the main strands could be reviewed in a more orderly way. This member of the seminar would have liked to detain the instructor to discuss other details in the given verses—with the hunch that divergent answers to the big questions might have suggested themselves. It is hard to agree that the challenge undertaken by the author, to write an easy book, has been achieved.

Further, there is the title. De Troyer easily defends the position that each of the texts under review did become and was preserved as one of the sacred texts of a Christian or Jewish community. It is, however, much less clear to me that these texts already enjoyed “sacred” status at the time they were being revised. The biblical books recovered from Qumran that (1) are represented in more copies, (2) are often cited as authoritative, and (3) exhibit less textual variety despite the larger number of copies available for comparison do not even include Joshua, much less Ezra and Esther. Was Joshua at that time a “core” book of the Hebrew Bible (127)? Whose “sacred text” were the scribes under review rewriting: their own or ours?