Talmon, Shemaryahu

Text and Canon of the Hebrew Bible


James A. Sanders
Ancient Biblical Manuscript Center
Claremont, California

Shemaryahu Talmon, editor of the Ezekiel volume of the Hebrew University Bible (2004), as well as general editor, and professor emeritus of Bible at the Hebrew University Jerusalem, died at age ninety on 15 December 2010. The loss of this giant in the fields of the textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible, Qumran studies, and early Judaism in the Persian period is inestimable, yet we must be grateful for the fact that Talmon lived as long and produced as effectively as he did right up to death—and that he was able to see this last effort from his pen before he left us. Another similar collection of his essays, according to his widow, is in the hands of students in Jerusalem, who are preparing them also for publication.

The present volume is a collection of eighteen studies scattered about the scholarly landscape in numerous journals, compendia, and Festschriften on the topics of the textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible and of its canon. There is only one chapter, the last, specifically on the issue of canon (first published in 2002), but it bears well the weight of the controversial topic. Most are reproduced as first published. Talmon edited them very little to fit the present volume. (There are some unfortunate errata that the publisher should have caught.)
The collection begins with the seminal, brilliant study published in a volume of essays by Talmon and Frank Moore Cross of Harvard (Harvard University Press, 1975). Talmon had been visiting professor at Harvard with Cross but in this study indicated a path at odds with the Albright-Cross consensus concerning the history of the text of the Hebrew Bible. Whereas Cross subscribed heartily to the views of Paul de Lagarde (1860s–1870s) in developing his theory of the three “families” of texts of the Hebrew Bible in antiquity that had stemmed from an Urtext, Talmon was leaning, on the contrary, toward the contradictory views of Paul Kahle, who argued strongly in the early part of the twentieth century, on the impetus of the Cairo Genizah discoveries, for a history of the text that developed from multiple vulgar (vulgata) texts. The extensive essay (eighty pages) in the Cross-Talmon volume laid forth solid arguments indicating where Talmon’s thinking was tending, and while it did not openly oppose Cross’s position in that early volume, it clearly showed the solid bases of the contrary argument he set forth later. One sensed that Talmon’s warm respect for Cross held in check a confrontational statement at the time.

Twenty-seven years later, in his contribution to a compendium published in 2000, Talmon wrote in a more incisive way his disagreements with the Lagarde/Urtext theory. In “Textual Criticism: The Ancient Versions,” he put to rest any ambiguity one might have in this regard: “One more readily views parallel passages in MT and/or the ancient versions as possibly exhibiting valid ‘genuine’ traditions, rather than as variously contaminated emanations of one common prototype which presumably can yet be recovered by their submission to an eclectic critical analysis” (418 in the present volume). Talmon notes that his former student Emanuel Tov, who also studied with Cross at Harvard, subscribed in the first edition of his book on textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible (1992) to the prototype theory (418 n. 81). This chapter, with the first noted above, bracket the fifteen intervening chapters, which focus on particular problems involved in textual criticism in the light of recent developments; the two state his thesis with utter clarity. The last entry in the book (from a 2002 compendium) offers Talmon’s view of the canonical process in the light of the Scrolls. More on that later.

At the fiftieth anniversary congress in Jerusalem celebrating the discovery of the Judean Desert Scrolls (Dead Sea Scrolls), I asked in forum if Talmon was not indeed subscribing to the Kahle perspective, and his response was a clear yes. The current volume leaves no doubt whatever, and the arrangement of the various prior essays provides insight into Talmon’s increasing conviction on the issue.

While I had already read almost all the essays accumulated in this final statement of Talmon’s views, I took delight in rereading those and the few I had not read to see how Talmon wanted his position understood by posterity. The papers are not arranged in the chronological sequence in which they appeared but are grouped to show how his thinking
developed and solidified on various issues related to the text over the years of a very active scholarly life, much of which was spent as a general editor of the Hebrew University Bible.

Rather than attempt to critique the essays in the order selected for this volume, I will instead select a few salient issues to highlight for the sake of the reader. Students of the history of the text of the Hebrew Bible become early on aware that the border area between the history of the formation of the text and the history of its transmission is not as clear and neat as one would wish. Those are the two major areas of biblical study, and the neophyte learns early on to distinguish carefully between the two (unfortunately also called higher criticism and lower criticism). Theoretically the later history begins when the authors and editors had finished their work on a given biblical book or body of text, and while a distinction between the two should be kept, the actual border between them is murky. All students agree to this point, but Talmon in his work expanded the border area considerably.

Textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible has three purposes: the task is to identify true variants as over against false or pseudo-variants from among all the valid witnesses available; the goal is to establish the critically most responsible text possible out of the true variants identified; and the aim is to locate as much as is feasibly possible the point in the development of a body of text (biblical section or book) when the distinction between formation and transmission becomes clear in order to establish the text as nearly as possible at that point.

Work on the Judean Desert Scrolls and fragments has shown clearly that most of the actual biblical texts, from the Qumran caves especially, exhibit a fluidity markedly different from that in the later proto-Masoretic texts found in the other areas of recent discovery in Palestine/Israel and from the versions known to us stemming from the subsequent centuries C.E.

A major discovery from the Judean Desert affecting our understanding of the history of the transmission of the text was not found in a Qumran cave but in one in the Nahal Hever (Wadi Habra). The scroll of the Minor Prophets in Greek found there provided to the sharp eyes of Dominique Barthélemy the “chainon manquant” (missing link) in the move from fluid pre-MT texts to the more stable proto-MT texts found at Masada and Muraba’at, and even a few late biblical Qumran texts (Barthélemy, Les Devanciers d’Aquila, 1963). Barthélemy showed that the link between pre-MT fluidity of texts to the stability of proto-MT texts was indicated by the Kai-ge version of the Minor Prophets text he edited. Here was a Greek translation that reflected an early proto-Masoretic Vorlage. There was a gradual movement afoot in Judaism, in other words, from focus on the
message of the biblical texts to focus on the words and even letters of the text, no matter their message, that marked the proto-MT Greek translations of Aquila and Theodotion of the second century C.E. Barthélemy dated his text to the first century C.E. It showed, for example, how the rather fluid text of the first century B.C.E. Isaiah scroll from Cave 1 related to the more stable proto-MT text of the smaller Isaiah scroll from the same provenance.

It had already been fairly clear that the delineation between the history of formation of the text and the history of its transmission was not a clean break, but after Barthélemy it was clearer that there had been an early period of fluidity that continued down into the beginnings of the history of its transmission. This induced Barthélemy to restate the overall outline of the history of transmission of the text as follows: pre-Masoretic, proto-Masoretic, and Masoretic (IDBSup, 1976). His work formed part of the basis of the work of the Hebrew Old Testament Text Project (1969–1980), which has issued in Critique textuelle de l'Ancien Testament (so far four volumes 1982–2005) and in Biblia Hebraica Quinta (fascicles from 2004–).

Building on the new history of the text, Talmon showed that the delineation between the history of the formation of the text and the history of its transmission was an attenuated period that extended down through the pre-Masoretic period until stabilization firmly took place after the Great Divide (a term Talmon coined; 439), that is, the last quarter of the first century after the destruction of the temple (70 C.E.) up to the destruction of Jerusalem itself at the end of the Bar Kokhba Revolt (135 C.E.). For Talmon, the period of fluidity included even the reworked or “rewritten Bibles.” Subscribing to Kahle’s views, Talmon went on to view some of the apocryphal and pseudepigraphical literature as a part of the diverse texts of some biblical books in the early Jewish (or Second Temple) period. In effect, the earlier period of the formation of texts continued well into the pre-Masoretic period and included the “interaction of the original authors, and the reproducers and transmitters of their works” (16). This period of interaction coincided with the variety of expressions of Judaism in the period before the Great Divide.

After the Great Divide, only three forms of biblical religion subsisted: rabbinic Judaism, Samaritanism, and Christianity. Uprooted from Jerusalem, they went their diverse ways. Rabbinic Judaism saw the development of Oral Torah and Christianity the development of the New Testament. But while Christianity retained early Greek translations (later their Latin translations, Vetus Latina) as their First or “Old Testament,” rabbinic Judaism accepted the proto-Masoretic text of the Tanak as its biblical canon while focusing on developing Oral Torah. For the latter, prophecy or further divine revelation had long since ceased, so that it was claimed that Oral Torah derived from Sinai itself. Christianity, like other pre-Divide Jewish sects, including that at Qumran, believed, on the contrary,
that revelation had not ceased but continued in the incarnation and in the development of the New Testament and indeed church magisteria.

Talon stresses the break rabbinic Judaism made after the Great Divide between the biblical period and the rabbinic period. Quotations and citations of the Tanak in rabbinic literature reflect both early and later stages in the transmission of the text, but it is rarely the message of the biblical text in reference but phrases, words, and even the letters through a developing set of hermeneutic techniques that began with Hillel’s seven midot that evolved into thirty-two by the time of the codification of the Mishnah circa 200 C.E. The comparison to the earlier divide that took place in the sixth century B.C.E. between the traditions of the old tribes of northern Israel and southern Judah and the “new Israel” (early Judaism) that arose in the Persian period out of the ashes of the destruction of them is compelling. As in the earlier case, there was an abrupt break with the past and yet an urgent insistence on continuity of the authority of the earlier patriarchs, promises, and prophets.

The early Greek translations (the so-called LXX) in liturgical use by the churches were joined by quite literal types of translations for study and for debate between the Christians and the rabbis about interpretations of the texts, Aquila, Theodotion, and even Symmachus. Origen, a scholar residing in Alexandria and then Caesarea Maritima, produced in the early third century C.E. a comparative Old Testament in six columns to assist Christians in those debates. But the rabbis accepted the stabilized proto-MT text of the Tanak even while still quoting and alluding to earlier forms of biblical texts in the developing rabbinic literature. The New Testament reflected the pre-MT Greek texts as well as early methods (somewhat like those at Qumran) of reference to them. It would not be until Jerome heralded his belief in Hebraica Veritas, at the end of the fourth century C.E., that the church gradually (though reluctantly) abandoned the earlier Greek and Latin versions of the First Testament and adhered to the proto-Masoretic Text reflected in the Vulgate. By the time of the Reformers, the MT became the text of the Christian First Testament, all the while keeping the basic order of the earlier Greek versions. This anomaly of MT text but basic LXX order belies the use of the term “Hebrew Bible” as the modern title for the First Christian Testament. The Tanak is tripartite, and the Old/First Testament is quadri-partite. Structure or order determined the hermeneutic by which adherents read the text and is an integral part of the text itself. “Hebrew Bible” in a Christian setting is a misnomer and misleading, but it is nonetheless used by many Christians in curricula and publications when Old or First Testament is meant. Hebrew Bible (or Biblia Hebraica) always indicates the Tanak, not the Old Testament.

Talon concludes this volume with his 2002 essay titled “The Crystallization of the ‘Canon of Hebrew Scriptures’ in the Light of the Biblical Scrolls from Qumran.”
was no word for “canon” in Judaism; in fact, the concept probably did not arise at all at Qumran. One could refer to “Torah, Prophets and Writings” without a sense of exclusion but simple reference; one could even use the word “Torah” in an expansive sense of all valid Jewish tradition. Talmon in this final essay (419–42) cites my works as supportive, especially in the final footnote. This contradicts a point he made in his 1966 essay on Ps 151 (included herein, 369–82) to the effect that the large Psalms Scroll, edited by me and published the preceding year, was a liturgical edition. One wishes that Talmon had edited that essay to be more in accord with his later view. No one can dispute that the Psalms Scroll was a liturgical edition; one assumes that all editions of Psalms were “liturgical,” including that in the MT itself.

Peter Flint in a masterful study (1997) argued cogently that the Scroll was organized as a “Davidic Psalter” that proved the solar calendar of the Qumran sect to be the correct one. In doing so one does not suppose, as Talmon seemed to in his 1966 essay, that Judaism had already settled on an official book of Psalms. Talmon’s 1966 essay showed clearly why an interval occurs in the major MT manuscripts in the middle of the verse at 1 Sam 16:12 (noted by a peh in printed editions), but it did not sufficiently address the matter of whether it was accepted at Qumran as an official (or canonical) Psalter. Much of the thinking back in those days was about when a canon of Scripture came into being for all Judaism. The issue I, as editor, had to address was whether the Psalms Scroll was a postcanonical liturgical edition or a mark en route to a later, final 150-psalm Psalter of the Tanak. I chose the latter option, and it appears it was the right one.

If one has a serious criticism of this most welcome collection of important essays on the text of the Hebrew Bible, it is that it would have been an even more powerful statement of the rich legacy of the master if the essays had been sculpted a bit more cogently into a statement of his thinking after over fifty-five years of invaluable contribution to the field. Even so, as is, it should be required (re)reading by everyone in the field who claims interest in the history of the text of the Hebrew Bible since the discovery of the Judean Desert Scrolls.