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HOW THE BIBLE  
HAS COME TO US

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*Nihil Obstat:*

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*Imprimi potest:*

✠ Dermot

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THE BOOKS which make up Sacred Scripture and which we read today in the Bible were written over a period of more than a thousand years beginning in the thirteenth century before Christ and ending in the first century after Christ. How can we know that the texts now in our hands correspond literally to the original texts? This is the question we will try to answer in this booklet. The thesis we defend is that we conserve "substantially" the text of the Old Testament.

By this we mean that the documents written by the sacred authors correspond to those which we now possess in our printed Bibles, though there may have been some modifications of minor importance in the transmission of the text.

One must remember that no original manuscript of either the Old or the New Testa-

ments has come down to us — that is, no manuscript written by the hand of the sacred authors. But we conserve a multitude of hand-written copies of later epochs. From the fifteenth century onwards, the time of the invention of printing, there are no problems: we still have copies of the earliest printed editions.

### I. History of the text of the Old Testament

The text of the Old Testament was written chiefly in Hebrew. There are some books, such as the book of Wisdom or the books of the Maccabees and Ecclesiasticus which were written originally in Greek. Some passages also exist in Aramaic. So the conservation of the Old Testament has been achieved principally from copies in the Hebrew tongue.

Many Hebrew texts of diverse epochs are conserved. Through them we can see the relationship among the various manuscripts and compare all the material available in order to make a faithful reconstruction of the Old Testament. We possess two types of manuscript: (1) some, as we have said, are in the original Hebrew; (2) others are translations into ancient languages, but each version reflects a Hebrew text. Very useful also, in questions of detail, are quotations from the Old Testament in Jewish literature and in Christian authors, chiefly in the Fathers of the Church.

The manuscripts in the Hebrew tongue itself are usually called *direct* witnesses to the text; translations or versions in other languages are indirect witnesses, since they do not transmit the text to us in the same language in which it was written.

*Manuscripts of the Hebrew text*  
*Masoretic; Samaritan Pent.; Dead Sea Scrolls*

As far as the direct witnesses are concerned, that is, the manuscripts themselves, there are three types: (1) one type is called the Masoretic Text and it is the most important; (2) a second type, very much smaller in number, is the so-called Samaritan Pentateuch, that is to say a group of manuscripts conserved by the Samaritans for their religious rites on Mount Gazarim and used by them to the exclusion of all the Hebrew Bible except the Pentateuch; (3) finally, we have the Dead Sea Scrolls (Qumram) texts which are short but very important.

### *Dating the Hebrew manuscripts*

What is of primary interest is to know in what epoch these documents were written. (1) The manuscripts of the Masoretic text number several hundreds and were written from the ninth century after Christ onwards. Since it is known that the most recent books of the Old Testament are from the first century before Christ, some ten centuries elapsed between the date of composition of the originals and

*Hebrew texts + Samaritan Pent. + Dead Sea Scrolls*

the copies of the manuscripts that we now possess.

It is clear that the fact that a manuscript dates from the ninth century does not mean that its fidelity to the original text is minimal: it may be totally exact: for example, if a direct copy is made of an earlier document. And this is how the treasures of Greek and Roman culture have come down to us; there is no doubt at all about their fidelity. Think, for example, of the works of the great Greek philosopher, Aristotle, who lived around the fourth century before Christ. (2) Of the Samaritan Pentateuch there are very few copies, three or four; the basic manuscripts we retain are from the thirteenth century; and all of them are absolutely trustworthy copies of a much more ancient text which dates probably as far back as the fourth century before Christ. (3) The date of composition of the Dead Sea Scrolls is very much more ancient; they were written around the second century before Christ. As we see, the jump backwards with these new manuscripts, found beside the Dead Sea, is enormous. Hence the sensation caused by their discovery and the work devoted by scholars in recent years, to these old manuscripts.

#### Language of the primitive texts

Around the eighteenth century before Christ, Abraham reached Palestine and learned the tongue of the Canaanians; some inscriptions in Canaanian have been found and it is ex-

tremely similar to Hebrew.

Canaanian, by means of a slow evolution, gave rise to Hebrew. In the beginnings of biblical literature, during the time of Moses, the language was in a state of development and underwent changes throughout the succeeding centuries. If we go back to the original composition of the sacred books we come to the conclusion that the different sacred writers were writing the Bible over a period of a thousand years: from the thirteenth century before Christ (the time of Moses) until the second century.

In what language were those books written which are traditionally attributed to Moses? From the Biblical narrative we deduce that Moses was a man instructed in Egyptian culture and who received a careful education at the court of Pharaoh.

For this reason we might think that Moses, during the exodus through the desert used hieroglyphic writing, but this seems unlikely. At that time two other types of writing were known, both more perfect than the hieroglyphic.

We usually call Phoenician writing a type which is found for the first time in that geographical region and from which come the alphabets of the western world. A third type has been called cuneiform writing because the shape of the letters resembles wedges (Latin: *cuneus*) and this form of writing was widely used in the Middle East.

The first texts of the Bible would have been written in three totally different types of

writing, but in any case this problem would affect only the more ancient narratives. Once the conquest of Palestine took place and the Jewish people established themselves there, there is no doubt that they used the Phoenician alphabet, which is nearer to Hebrew and the latter probably derives from it. It is certain that the Israelites, on their return from exile in Babylon, used the square alphabet (so called because of the shape of its letters) used in the present-day manuscripts that we have.

#### *Variations from the original text*

What happened to the text of the Old Testament from its origins in the thirteenth century until the second century before Christ? In the Dead Sea Scrolls it has been established that the text has suffered some small variations. The greater part are changes in spelling of little importance, or the substitution of some words. In some manuscripts one word is given, while in others an equivalent word appears. Infrequently, there are variations of an entire phrase which slightly modifies the meaning.

*also* For this period, besides the manuscripts which are direct witnesses of the text, we can also use the Greek version known as the Septuagint, which was written in the third and second centuries before Christ. We have complete manuscripts of this version and so it can be verified that small variations also exist in regard to the Dead Sea scrolls where some books of the Old Testament have appeared —

for example the entire text of the prophet Isaias. This is a fact of great interest, because the manuscripts of the Qumram are approximately of the same era as the version of the Septuagint.

To summarize, until the first century after Christ all the evidence we have shows a substantial identity in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament. In other words, throughout this first period, from the composition of the original texts until the end of the first century after Christ, the sacred text has undergone slight variations which do not affect the substance of the Word of God.

#### *Fixing the Hebrew text*

We have set a limit to this first epoch: the end of the first century after Christ. The reason for choosing this date is that around the year 80 A.D. the Jewish Congress of Jamnia or Jamne took place. At this congress the most celebrated rabbis and masters of Israel gathered to deal with different religious and juridical questions, and one of them was the problem of the diversity of texts of the Bible.

As Jews travelled from one city to another, they realized that, in the sabbath readings in the synagogues, differences appeared in some phrases. So they thought it advisable to unify the sacred text. To do so, they turned to the manuscripts which they considered most faithful, most of them originating in Jerusalem, and they made a detailed comparison of various versions of the whole Bible.

The result was a new official text which was a synthesis of the most important manuscripts. Little by little all of the synagogues of the Jewish world, in Palestine and the Diaspora, began to adopt this text; they shelved their ancient copies and substituted for them the copies of the now official text. This happened at the end of the first century after Christ.

#### *Consonantic text and vocalic text*

A piece of information which it is important to recall is that the Hebrew text of that epoch, as happens with other Semitic languages, is written with consonantic text. For example, in English the word *woman* is written in its entirety, with five letters. In Hebrew it would be written *umn*, that is to say with the three consonants. This type of writing does not lend itself to mistakes if one is familiar with the text.

But around the sixth century after Christ, the readers in the synagogues began to make mistakes because of the absence of vowels, which had to be improvised at the moment of reading; and this difficulty led the rabbis to invent some vowel signs.

The rabbinical schools, moreover, added to these texts notes of an exegetical or literary character taken from Jewish tradition; divided the text into verses; and at the end of each book indicated the number of verses which it contained—which is very important data for subsequent studies. They also added marginal notes, or at the end of the book they

clarified questions relating to the text: for example, they clarified doubts about which is the more correct reading, and so there are notes which say "Written . . . such and such; read . . . such another" because from the time of the unification of the text already mentioned, Sacred Scripture was respected in such a way that no rabbi dared to change even a single letter.

Let us examine a very graphic case. If the copyist had made a fault of spelling, for example, writing the word *man* without the letter 'a', the rabbis did not dare to complete the word, correcting the fault, but they noted "Written *man* without *a*; read with." They dared not make any modifications in the text because it was sacred. They confined themselves to proposing corrections when they thought that the spelling or grammatical error derived from the copyist.

This work of the rabbinical schools gave rise to a text which remained fixed in a definite way in the tenth century after Christ, and which receives the name of Masoretic Text (*Masora* means Tradition) because the rabbis adhered faithfully to the traditions of Jewish culture in composing those notes, as we have seen.

The manuscripts of the Dead Sea present some variations as compared with the Masoretic text, but in spite of being older the text is not a better quality; at times even it has words which are incorrectly written. From comparing these studies, one reaches the conclusion that the Masoretic scholars worked

with care and even succeeded in correcting previous errors or at least indicated them in their notes.

#### *Ancient versions*

During the third and second centuries before Christ the version known as the Septuagint was made. This is a translation from Hebrew into Greek; the need for this version derived from the commercial and cultural importance which the Greek language had achieved.

Centuries later, and as a consequence of the predominance of the language of Imperial Rome, a Latin translation was made: this is known as Vetus Latina and became widespread. Around the year 480, St. Jerome set out to improve on this ancient version, and wrote the Vulgate, another translation into Latin. In the meantime, translations were made into Aramaic, Syrian, Armenian, Ethiopian, and Coptic, and when the Roman Empire fell, it was translated also into some Slavic languages. Very ancient manuscripts are kept of all these translations, but those of the Vulgate are especially numerous — there are approximately 30,000 of them.

With all these texts in different languages, the critics have been able to make comparisons with the Hebrew text and have come to the following conclusion: the text which reproduces most perfectly the original, as we suppose it to have come from the hands of the sacred writers, is the Masoretic Hebrew text. This can be credited to the enormous care the

Jewish scholars took to conserve the text inspired by God.

The conclusion of these Scriptural studies is that we conserve substantially the original text of the Old Testament. The small variations indicated are not great enough to alter the meaning substantially. These studies, therefore, confirm that the text of the Old Testament which we have today, faithfully reproduces what God inspired in the sacred authors.

#### *Editions from the Sixteenth Century on*

After the invention of printing, the Hebrew text was printed on the basis of the best manuscripts which the editors had at hand. As the centuries passed and the culture of the modern era advanced, this work of editing became more perfect.

Around 1520 the Hebrew text was published in an edition known as the "Polyglot of Alcalá." A polyglot Bible is one in which different languages are arranged in parallel columns so that the different versions can more easily be compared. Improvements were made in successive polyglot editions published in Paris and London.

In the eighteenth century the period of textual criticism began — experts trying to handle not just a group of manuscripts, but all the possible manuscripts, and at the foot of the page, adding some notes in abbreviated form, explaining why one text or another has been chosen.

This is a technique similar to that used for critical editions of secular literature, with the difference that in classical Graeco-Latin literature the manuscripts are few, while those of the Bible are very many. This is why the critical editions of the Bible always involve much more work than the edition of any secular work, but the enormous number of manuscripts which have been preserved assure the integrity and fidelity of the text.

At present, first place among critical editions of the Bible is given to a German edition in which a good number of Scriptural scholars collaborated. It was originally directed by Rudolf Kittel and Paul Kahle. It is the basic edition, the one used by the experts; in it are incorporated all the variations of the manuscripts of which we have spoken, including in its latest edition, the Dead Sea Scrolls. The researchers who prepared this Bible are Protestants, but the work has been done with the utmost care and the edition is made with all scientific guarantees.

## II. History of the text of the New Testament

The books of the New Testament were written in a short period which covers, in round figures, from the year 50 A. D. to the year 100. The language used is Hellenistic Greek, that is, the language which developed in the time of the empire of Alexander the Great. At this time Greek became unified in the near

East and a new language was born called *Koine dialectos* which means the common Greek language. This is an international language which was used in all the Eastern parts of the Mediterranean, in the cities, in trade and among the educated classes of Rome.

The vocabulary of the New Testament is very homogeneous because the Gospels and Epistles were composed in a short period of time, within some fifty years, as we have already said.

Except for St. Luke, the other authors of the New Testament were of Hebrew origin and therefore their language was influenced by Hebrew and Aramaic turns of phrase. Sometimes, as in the Gospel of St. Mark, one also finds some Latin idioms. This confirms the origin of the Gospel of St. Mark who, according to Christian tradition, wrote down the catechesis of St. Peter in Rome. The stereotyped formulas of preaching and of the liturgy appear as Latin derivations in the Greek text. As we know, in Rome two languages were used: Latin as the official language and Greek as the commercial and cultural language.

### *Integrity of the text*

All these causes combine to permit the text of the New Testament to present far fewer difficulties than the Old. Indeed, we can say that there is no major difficulty, since the variations of the New Testament are insignificant,



most of these are variations of spelling, omission of an article or something of this sort arising from copyists' errors.

→ Some authors count only from seven to ten variations which affect the significance of the phrase in any way. Generally these variations are minimal, and in no case are there proofs that the text was written later.

Scriptural scholars have taken tremendous trouble to reconstruct scrupulously the text of the books of the New Testament just as it left the hands of the sacred authors. We have to remember that the small differences indicated, such as the omission of an article, or some spelling variations, which are unimportant as far as spiritual reading is concerned, do have importance for dogmatic theological study. For this reason, and because of the veneration owed to the sacred text, we can understand the enormous interest with which the exegetes have tried to reconstruct the original Greek text.

This reconstruction of the text is based on the study of the many ancient manuscripts which are conserved in the original Greek, and, in translations. Useful also in this work of reconstruction are the numerous quotations which are found in the books of ecclesiastical authors, chiefly the Fathers of the Church.

#### *The Greek texts on papyrus*

Today there are about 4,000 known Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. The most ancient date from the fourth century. In other

languages, that is in translations, they are even more abundant. Of the Latin Vulgate there are around 30,000; in other languages, several hundred. The Greek manuscripts, which are the "direct witnesses" of the original text, date from the fourth century after Christ. So therefore, we have a gap of four centuries which is filled by fragments of Egyptian manuscripts, in papyrus, which contain a part of the Greek text of the New Testament.

The most ancient manuscript (owned by the Ryland Library in Manchester) is dated around the year 125 and reproduces a short fragment of the eighteenth chapter of the Gospel of St. John. Bearing in mind that the apostle wrote his gospel at the end of the first century, it appears that only twenty five years intervene between the original and the papyrus that was found.

The longest papyrus is the one called Bodmer II which appears to date from the end of the second century. This contains the first fourteen chapters of St. John and some fragments of the final chapters: so that almost the whole of the Fourth Gospel appears in this very ancient document. Other noteworthy papyri are the Barcinonen, dating from the second century; and the papyri of the Epistles of St. Paul (Chester Beatty) which date from the third century. Although they are very small fragments, they serve to verify what happened to the text of the New Testament before the fourth century. Up to the present

time, about sixty-five papyri have been discovered.

### *Complete Greek codices*

From the fourth century on, we already conserve complete manuscripts, written on parchment, which is a much longer lasting material than papyrus. Some contain the New Testament alone. Others contain the whole Bible in Greek, in the version of the Septuagint for the Old Testament.

The more ancient codices are written in capital letters, following the custom of the time. Therefore they are called *uncial*; about 240 copies are conserved. Moreover, there are 1,800 very ancient lectionaries, designed for liturgical purposes.

Scriptural scholars are accustomed to using a special system of quotation in order to refer to these codices. In the case of the papyri they use a P and a number; for example P47. The uncial (texts) are quoted using the letters of the alphabet followed by some numbers. Lastly, for the manuscripts in miniscule letters, numbers alone are used for designation.

From the fifth century on, the manuscripts are very numerous and are grouped into "families" according to their characteristics. This means homogeneous groups which take into account the variations of various phrases, the gaps or omissions.

These figures are a guarantee of the conservation of the sacred text. An eloquent comparison can be made with the manuscripts

*P. pinn → P + number*  
*uncial → Capital letters + number*  
*manuscript → letter + number*

retained of secular works: we have only about 100 manuscripts of the Greek author Sophocles and about 250 of Horace.

### *The "families" of codices*

Each "family" of codices is characterized by certain details: for example some copyists interchange other more cultural terms for popular words or phrases. In general, editions published during the Renaissance preferred to use the manuscripts containing cultural language. Today, however, those which use popular language are preferred because the experts consider that this composition comes nearer to reality, since the majority of the New Testament authors did not have a fluent knowledge of the Greek tongue.

It is logical that from the fourth century there should be more manuscripts. The Church had been spreading and with the peace of Constantine, Christianity soon became the official religion of the Empire. Another detail characteristic of the manuscripts of the fourth century is that they are very rich and are written in parchment which is very well preserved. There are about five thousand Greek documents of the New Testament. With these the original text can be reconstructed with great accuracy.

For this reason, in the case of the New Testament, we usually speak of "accidental integrity" which means that even in accidental things we have an assured text, which

coincides therefore with what was written by the author whom God inspired.

### III. Modern translations into vernacular languages

From the Renaissance on, many translations into different European languages were made:

A *Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* (London 1953) points out that versions of the whole or of part of the Bible in the language of ordinary people appeared first in England and Germany in the eighth century; in France and Hungary in the twelfth; in Italy, Spain, Holland and other countries in the thirteenth. During the sixteenth and seventeenth century the Church tried to ensure that these translations did not become a means to propagate heresies—among other ways by providing explanatory notes.

The standard Catholic translations were made from the Latin Vulgate; in English only one such translation existed for over three centuries: the Douay version (Old Testament, Douay 1609-10; New Testament Rheims 1582). This was revised by Bishop Challoner between 1749 and 1772. In the first half of this century fresh revisions were made in America (the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine edition being especially noteworthy). The other major translation of the Vulgate into English which has obtained wide use is that made by Ronald Knox (1945-49).

Much more recent translations have been made not from the Vulgate but from the original texts available. One of these is that called *The Jerusalem Bible*, Alexander Jones, general editor (London 1966); the translation is direct into English; the notes are largely a direct translation from the French *La Bible de Jerusalem* (1956). Although it has acquired a great diffusion, it is not a Bible of popular character; that is to say, its notes are not intended for spiritual or pious reading, but are rather specialized and erudite and presuppose a certain level of scientific formation without which they cannot be adequately evaluated.

Mo-Vulgate. 1979