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SUPPLEMENT SERIES 1

The Rediscovery of the Hebrew Bible

THE STRUCTURE OF THE CANON¹

R. Zuurmond

INTRODUCTORY

In antiquity the 'Old Testament' existed basically in two forms: one in Hebrew and one in Greek. Neither of these two was rigidly fixed. From the caves of Qumran we know that up to the first century some biblical Hebrew manuscripts had a text rather different from others. In the Torah (Genesis – Deuteronomy) these differences were mostly minor, but in other parts they can be quite substantial. From the second century CE onwards, however, the Hebrew textual tradition has been drastically standardized. The odd orthographic variant remained, but all major differences have been removed. The nowadays widely used edition,² based on a manuscript of the early eleventh century, represents this unified text, commonly known as the 'Masoretic Text' (abbreviated 'MT').

The Hebrew Bible, or parts of it, have often been translated into Greek and these translations have been subject to an ongoing process of correction and revision. Since there were differences in the underlying Hebrew it goes without saying that the Greek 'Old Testament' in the first century existed in various forms, as the 'Old Testament' quotations in the 'New Testament' clearly demonstrate. In the course of history, the Greek text of the 'Old Testament',

¹ This article confines itself to the main aspects of the structure of the canon in the Hebrew and Greek traditions, in particular the theological relevance thereof. For details and more references see the handbooks, e.g., M.J. Mulder (ed.), *Mikra: Text, Translation and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, Assen / Philadelphia 1988, which contains a wealth of information on the Hebrew canon as well as on the Septuagint and other ancient Versions of the 'Old Testament'.

² *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (abbreviated: 'BHS'), Stuttgart 1967/77.

now commonly known as the 'Septuagint'³ (abbreviated 'LXX') has also been more or less standardized, although not as rigorously as its Hebrew counterpart.

There are important differences between the Hebrew Bible and the Septuagint in text, in content, and in structure. The Hebrew Bible contains thirty-nine 'canonical' books, to which the Septuagint usually adds another fifteen 'apocryphal' books. The Hebrew Bible is divided into three parts: Torah, Prophets, Other Books. The Greek 'Old Testament' consists of three main sections, according to literary category: books of history, books of poetry, books of prophecy. Within their categories both systems arrange the books according to various principles. We shall deal with these points one by one.

TEXT

At least up to the fifth century, the Septuagint or one of its daughter translations⁴ was the 'Old Testament' of the Christian Bible. In some churches it still is.⁵ The origin of the Septuagint is Jewish, but the tradition is Christian. All printed editions of the Septuagint are based on medieval, Christian manuscripts. On the whole the monks who copied these manuscripts were reliable enough, but every now and then they may have adapted their Greek text to a 'New Testament' quotation. The text-critical apparatus of a scholarly edition provides us with ample evidence of this procedure.

The 'New Testament' quotes the 'Old Testament' in Greek, but not necessarily always according to what is now known as the Septuagint. Some 'New Testament' authors like Paul may have translated the Hebrew text themselves, most likely from memory. One can not even exclude the possibility that 'New Testament' authors occasionally translated an 'Old Testament' quotation into Greek from a Jewish Aramaic translation with which they happened to be familiar. Although the presently existing Aramaic translations of the 'Old

³ It would be more precise to speak of 'Old Greek', as distinct from other Greek types of text, but for reasons of convenience we maintain the traditional name of 'Septuagint'.

⁴ Notably the Old Latin, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, and Ethiopic Versions. Part of the Slavonic Version is also based on the Septuagint.

⁵ In Latin speaking Europe after the fifth century it was eventually replaced by Jerome's Vulgate.

Testament' (the 'Targums') are all of a later date, we know from Qumran that Aramaic translations of parts of the 'Old Testament' did exist in the first century AD. Besides, Jesus not only spoke Aramaic, he also quotes Psalm 22:2 in Aramaic, not in Hebrew (Mark 15:34).⁶

The reliability of the Greek translation was strongly enhanced by the legend of its origin in the 'Letter of Aristeas'. According to this document the Hebrew Torah was translated into Greek in Alexandria in the early third century BCE under the auspices of the Egyptian king. Aristeas underlines only the piety and competence of the seventy-two translators,⁷ but in the Christian era the legend assumed some miraculous features. As a consequence it was generally believed that the Septuagint was as divinely inspired as the Hebrew Scriptures. In fact some theologians of the early church suggest that the differences between the Greek and the Hebrew were the result of willful alterations by the Jews. That totally unfounded accusation was probably prompted by the fact that the Jews in the second century CE abandoned the existing Greek translations and, after having made a few of their own,⁸ soon rejected the whole idea of translating their sacred books.

One should realize that in a Platonic intellectual environment like the early church, a translation is judged basically on its capacity to convey 'ideas'. The actual wording is just a tool to that aim. Even an occasional double translation (a 'doublet') does not really bother the reader as long as it is supposed to bring us closer to the 'meaning' of the text. 'Meaning' in this case is taken in the sense of extra-lingual, 'spiritual' truth. Jewish tradition, although not completely escaping the process of Hellenization, obviously offered some resistance to this tendency. High esteem for the Holy Scriptures curbed the willingness to interpret and consequently translate in a way that was too far removed from the original. Relying too much on 'meaning' apart from the actual wording is sensed to water down the impact of the sacred text.⁹ Jewish translations

⁶ Aramaic and in particular Jewish Aramaic, like Syriac, were in antiquity often seen as dialects of the Hebrew language (or the other way around).

⁷ The number seventy (LXX) is probably derived from the seventy peoples of the earth according to Gen. 10. Ex. 24:9 may also have played a role.

⁸ 'Aquila' and 'Theodotion'. Tradition makes them both into Jewish proselytes.

⁹ This sentiment is well expressed already as early as ± 130 BCE by the grandson of Jesus ben Sirach in the Preface of his translation of his grandfather's book: 'things spoken in Hebrew have not the same power ("meaning") when translated into another language'. In Rabbinic times (e.g., in the Talmudic Tractate 'Soferim') this opinion dominates the strong negative

therefore tend to be rather 'literal'.¹⁰ An extreme example is Aquila's word-for-word translation, but the Septuagint, in particular the Torah, is also rather 'literal' as compared, e.g., with Jerome's Latin Vulgate.

SEQUENCE

The Hebrew 'Old Testament' in its present form consists of thirty-nine books. That number is rather arbitrary. If one does not count Samuel, Kings and Chronicles each for two the number becomes thirty-six. Combining Judges with Ruth, Ezra with Nehemiah, Jeremiah with Lamentations and counting the twelve 'Minor Prophets' as one, one arrives at the number of twenty-two, maintained by Josephus toward the end of the first century CE.¹¹ Counting Ruth and Lamentations separately, one arrives at the traditional Jewish number of twenty-four.¹²

In the pre-Christian period and the first centuries of the Christian era the books of the Hebrew canon were mostly written on separate scrolls. Under those conditions their sequence was hardly an issue; however, as soon as larger manuscripts began to be produced decisions had to be taken. Although the basic structure of the Hebrew Canon remained stable, small differences in manuscripts and printed editions began to appear. The five books of the Torah always come first. In modern printed editions, the Torah is followed by the 'Prophets' in two sub-groups, the 'earlier Prophets', consisting of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, and the 'later Prophets', comprising Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve Minor Prophets. The Hebrew Bible closes with a third category known as 'the Hagiographa' ('Holy Writings', Hebrew

feelings about translation of the Holy Scriptures.

¹⁰ E.A. Nida calls this type of translation 'static equivalent'. 'Idiolect' would be a more appropriate term. It is the type of translation that gives as much weight as possible to idiom, style and formal elements of the original. The Jewish 'Verdeutschung' ('Germanisation') of the 'Old Testament' by Buber and Rosenzweig (1926-1957) is a fair example. In many ways this type of translation antecedes the results of modern (mainly French) semiotics.

¹¹ Josephus, *Contra Apionem* I,37-40.

¹² The earliest witness is Ezra Apocalypse 14:45. Common in rabbinic literature (not in the Mishna, but frequently in the Midrash, e.g., Cant. R. IV,11). These early numbers are artificial: they are either deliberate multiples of twelve or equal to the number of characters in the Hebrew alphabet (twenty-two).

'ketubim'), consisting of (in order) Psalms, Job, Proverbs, the five 'Scrolls' (Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther), Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles.

An interesting difference lies in the order of the 'later Prophets'. The Babylonian Talmud¹³ puts Jeremiah and Ezekiel before Isaiah. Two contradicting principles are at work here. According to the supposed chronology, the order had to be: Isaiah – Jeremiah – Ezekiel, but applying the traditional method of decreasing size¹⁴ yields the order: Jeremia – Ezekiel – Isaiah. In the printed editions of the Hebrew Bible, based on medieval manuscripts, the former method prevailed.

The exact pattern of the Hagiographa has also been settled rather late. The Talmud¹⁵ prescribes the order: Ruth, Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Canticles (also known as 'Song of Songs'), Lamentations, Daniel, Esther, Ezra / Nehemiah, Chronicles – an attempt to put most of these books in a chronological order.¹⁶ Eventually it was decided to pull Ruth and Ecclesiastes out of the chronology and place them together with the other festive 'Scrolls', in which case a liturgical principle prevailed.¹⁷

According to the Talmud¹⁸ the Rabbis did not agree on the canonicity of two of the 'ketubim': Canticles and Ecclesiastes. In the end Canticles was accepted because it was seen as a parable of God's love for Israel. Ecclesiastes could be admitted because of the last verse: 'Let us hear the conclusion of everything: fear God and keep His commandment.'¹⁹

¹³ B. Bathra 14b (5th/6th century CE, but possibly based on earlier traditions).

¹⁴ Arrangement according to decreasing size was also applied to the Mishna, the Epistles of Paul, and the Suras of the Quran.

¹⁵ See note 13.

¹⁶ There are minor variations in the late medieval manuscripts and editions. The date of Job is a matter of dispute and accordingly the book of Job finds its place among the Hagiographa. Another variant is that some manuscripts put Chronicles at the beginning of the Hagiographa instead of at the end.

¹⁷ The Mishna (tractate Megillah) already prescribes the reading of the Scroll of Esther during the festival of Purim. The other connections of 'Scrolls' with a festival (Ruth – Pentecost, Canticles – Pesach, Lamentations – 9th of Ab, Ecclesiastes – Tabernacles) were established in the early Middle Ages.

¹⁸ See note 13.

¹⁹ Ironically these last verses are nowadays widely considered to be an addition by the final redactor. If that is true we should be thankful indeed to this person for rescuing a marvelous

We have little knowledge of the books of the Septuagint written on separate scrolls.²⁰ Every known Septuagint manuscript comes in the form of a codex,²¹ containing a group of books, or in some cases all the books of the Greek 'Old Testament'. Besides the books of the Hebrew Canon, the Septuagint contains a number of books later called 'Apocrypha': 2 Esdra, Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, Baruch, Epistle of Jeremiah, Song of the Three Children, Susanna, Bel and the Dragon, 1-4 Maccabees, and Prayer of Manasseh. Many canonical books have larger or smaller additions or omissions²² in the Septuagint Version.

The sequence of books in the Septuagint is rather different from that in the Hebrew Bible. As in the Hebrew Bible the Torah ('Pentateuch') comes first, but it is usually immediately followed by the books of Joshua and Judges to which the book of Ruth has been attached, making together the 'Octateuch'. Thereafter follow the four books of Kings (= Hebrew: Samuel / Kings) and the two books of Chronicles. The place of Ezra / Nehemiah (in the Septuagint combined as '1 Esdra') and Esther varies from manuscript to manuscript. The remainder of the books of the Septuagint is essentially divided into two groups: poetical books including Wisdom literature (Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Job) and prophetic books (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and the Twelve Minor Prophets). The Apocrypha are usually grouped with the canonical books according to their contents: History, Poetry / Wisdom, Prophecy. Current editions of the complete Septuagint have the poetic books first, but the historical evidence is divided. Manuscripts or ancient lists in no way support the present habit of closing the 'Old Testament' with Malachi.²³

book from oblivion!

²⁰ We know from the Qumran library that Jewish scrolls with parts of the Greek 'Old Testament' did exist in the first century CE.

²¹ Whether the codex was a Christian 'invention' is a matter of conjecture, but it is a fact that from a very early date Christians used the codex for their Holy Scriptures instead of the ancient scroll.

²² In the Septuagint version, Jeremiah is more than 10% shorter than in the Hebrew. Among the Qumran manuscripts is one Hebrew equivalent of the shorter Septuagint version, but also a number of Hebrew manuscripts of the longer version.

²³ Detailed surveys in H. B. Swete, *The Old Testament in Greek*, Cambridge 1900/1902/1914 (latest reprint: New York 1968), 201-214. Editors obviously put Malachi at the end of the 'Old Testament' because it makes a smooth transition to the 'New Testament' (Mal. 4:5 and the appearance of John the Baptist).

STRUCTURE

The structure of the Hebrew Canon is unambiguous: the Torah comes first, followed in that order by the Prophets and the Hagiographa. This threefold division already existed in the first century BCE, when the grandson of Sirach in the Preface to his Greek translation of the Hebrew text of Sirach ('Ecclesiasticus'), writes about 'the Law and the Prophets and the rest of the books'. Whether these terms cover exactly what they stand for today is not absolutely sure.

Ever since the second century BCE the Torah stood as a category of its own. There is some evidence that at an early stage the dividing line between the Prophets and the Hagiographa was not always clear. There is however no doubt that early Jewish and Christian sources, including the 'New Testament',²⁴ support a tripartite structure.²⁵

Things are quite different in the Septuagint. Here, too, the Torah comes first, but not as a book (or collection of five books) in its own right. The 'Pentateuch' is just a part of the 'Octateuch', obviously because it is seen primarily as an ongoing historical account. The position of the Apocrypha confirms that the Septuagint has been organized according to literary categories: historical books, poetical books, prophetic books.

Regarding the inclusion or exclusion of the Apocrypha, history shows two distinct lines. The early church lived by the Septuagint and therefore included the Apocrypha. Judaism lived by the Hebrew canon and therefore excluded the Apocrypha.²⁶ In the fourth century these two principles clashed. Jerome defended the Hebrew canon, Augustine upheld the Greek canon. Augustine

²⁴ Luk. 24:44. Matt. 23:35 and Luk. 11:51 suggest that the 'Old Testament' began at Gen. (see 4:8) and ended at 2 Chr. (see 24:21), which is the Hebrew order, not the order of the Septuagint.

²⁵ The fact that Jesus in his altercation with Satan (Matt. 4:1-11; Luk. 4:1-13) quotes from the Torah whereas Satan only uses a quotation from the Hagiographa (Ps. 91:11,12), could be an indication that already in 'New Testament' times the Torah had more authority than the Hagiographa. In rabbinic Judaism the Hagiographa had little authority unless corroborated by the Torah.

²⁶ The criterion was whether or not the text was supposed to be written during the period that the Holy Spirit was active (presumably up to the 3rd/4th century BCE). In practice those books were accepted that were originally written in Hebrew. The exception to this rule was Sirach, the only apocryphal book mentioned in rabbinic literature.

prevailed. When more than a millennium later the Reformation opted again for the Hebrew canon, the Roman Catholic church declared the Apocrypha 'deutero-canonical'. Such is the situation among Protestants and Roman Catholics to this day.

Regarding the structure of the canon however the entire Christian tradition followed the Greek example. Christianity completely abandoned the tripartite structure of the Hebrew canon.

THEOLOGY

We have seen how various organizing principles have been applied in structuring the books of the canon. Most of these principles are rather formal: size, chronology, literary category ('genre'), liturgical use. Could the structure of the canon have some impact on the way the texts are being interpreted? In other words: is the structure of the canon an element of biblical hermeneutics and biblical theology? That would be hard to deny!

It makes a difference whether the books of Joshua – Kings are part of the Prophets or part of an historical account. Prophecy may well use historical data, but for the exegete the emphasis should be on the prophetic rather than on the historical aspects of the text. It also makes a difference whether the visions of Daniel are prophetic in the primary sense or a reaction to prophecy. Apocalyptic speculations on the basis of Daniel ought to be accompanied by many question marks.

From chronology to 'history' might appear to be a small step, but the consequences are grave. 'History' became a dominant factor in exegesis in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The 'historical value' of biblical texts was hardly an issue when the texts were written and brought together. To interpret Genesis to Chronicles as 'historical books' was an error for which the basis was laid in antiquity by the application of chronological criteria. The full weight of this mistake, however, became apparent only in the nineteenth century when historical research almost replaced the actual interpretation of the texts. In the 'Western' world it contributed to the widespread but theologically questionable opinion that historical reliability is the touchstone of biblical truth.

This is only one reason why the Hebrew canon ought to be restored not only regarding its content but also regarding its form. Another reason is that the tripartite structure creates a centre and a periphery in the 'Old

Testament'. The 'Old Testament' is not as monolithic a book as some might think. The Torah remains in the centre: God's covenant with Israel is the foundation upon which everything rests. The Prophets encompass the Torah, calling Israel back to its origin in God's covenant. The Hagiographa form the outer circle. They contain Israel's response to the Torah and the Prophets, covering every human sentiment: praise of God but also despair in the Psalms, human scepticism in Ecclesiastes, the heights and depths of human eros in the Song of Songs, wry, at times bordering on malicious humor in the Book of Esther, visions of the future in Daniel.

Once we have these concentric circles around the Torah there is no problem finding a place for the Apocrypha. They stand around the outer circle of Hagiographa, together with the rabbis and the church fathers. The place of the 'New Testament' in this model is a matter of discussion. I would prefer to understand the gospel of Jesus as a Messianic commentary on the Torah and the Prophets. In the Christian church such a commentary cannot be ignored, but it should not prevent us from listening to the 'Old Testament' as a document in its own right. It would help tremendously if we realized that the 'Old Testament'²⁷ is not a massive pack of divine truths dropped into the world of mankind, but a lively and intense discussion between voices from all corners of Israel, a discussion in which gentiles, too, have been invited to participate.

²⁷ No less than the 'New Testament'!