



“CONTAMINATION” IN THE SCRIPTURES

EM CAMPOS/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

The Bible is an example of long-term textual transmission in which “contaminations” result, in part, from the unique role of the text itself.

*Moses by Michelangelo
(San Pietro in Vincoli, Rome)*

Łukasz Niesiołowski-Spanò

University of Warsaw

For historians, it is self-evident that when striving to understand the meaning of texts, we should always try to look at their oldest versions. The discipline concerned with this aspect of scholarly inquiry, called textual criticism, is conventionally di-

vided into external and internal criticism. External criticism involves describing the physical media carrying the preserved texts being studied by a historian, whereas internal criticism seeks to extract insights from the content of those texts – regarding the time and place in which they were written, their author or authors, and other circumstances important for reconstructing textual meaning.

In the case of the Old Testament, textual criticism is a particularly complicated enterprise. For centuries, its most common versions known in Europe were not original texts, but translations: the Vulgate had been



**Łukasz
Niesiołowski-Spano,
PhD, DSc**

is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of History, University of Warsaw. His research interests focus on the history of ancient Palestine in the first millennium BCE. His recent publications include *Historia Żydów w starożytności: Od Thotmesa do Mahometa* [History of the Jews in Antiquity: From Thutmose to Muhammad] (written together with Krystyna Stebnicka), Warsaw 2020. l.niesiolowski@uw.edu.pl

A page from the
Codex Peterburgensis
manuscript of the
Hebrew Bible



translated into Latin by Jerome (in the fourth/fifth century CE), while the Septuagint, the Greek translation dating back to antiquity, had many authors (and likely came together over a long time). For most parts of the Old Testament, there is also a Hebrew version, which for centuries had been used and copied mostly by Jews. Following the “Protestant Revolution” in Western Europe, a shift emerged from the use of the Latin version of the Bible towards translations into modern national languages (on the grounds that they would be easier for people to understand). However, those translations were intended to be based on the original version of the Bible: for the Old Testament, this means the Hebrew text. The notion of *veritas hebraica*, recognizing the primacy of the scriptures written by Jews in Hebrew, stemmed from a conviction that ancient translations into Greek and Latin had distorted the original message, whereas the Hebrew text preserved the original wording – and, by implication, was directly inspired by God.

Paradoxically, however, the Hebrew text, while theoretically closer to the original, is itself based mainly on manuscripts dating from the Middle Ages. The oldest complete text of the Hebrew Bible (also known as the *Tanakh*, an acronym made from the first letters of the Hebrew words *Torah* – law, *Nevi'im* – prophets, and *Ketuvim* – writings) is contained in the Codex Peterburgensis (also referred to as the Leningrad Codex), written by the scribe Aaron ben Moses ben Asher in the year 1008 CE. The Aleppo Codex is somewhat older (early tenth century), but incomplete, which is why critical scholarly editions are based on the Codex Peterburgensis. The oldest Greek manuscripts of the Old (and New) Testament, which were written several centuries earlier, are collected in the Codex Sinaiticus, Codex Alexandrinus, and Codex Vaticanus. Their manuscripts date from the fourth and fifth centuries CE, which means that they are half a millennium older

than the oldest known complete texts of the Hebrew Bible. Similarly, the translation into Latin was made six hundred years before the Codex Peterburgensis was written down. So when scholars strive to access texts as authentic as possible, what would be the advantage of using ones written down later (albeit in the same language as the original text), rather than earlier translations (which are not in the original language, but nevertheless closer in time to the creation of the ancient original)?

New data

The twentieth century brought researchers new data in this respect, prompting a new approach to the textual analysis of the Bible. A set of scrolls found in the mid-twentieth century in the caves near the shores of the Dead Sea included numerous fragments of the Old Testament. Most of them were written in Hebrew, some in Greek. All of them date back to the period from the second century BCE to the first century CE. Consequently, these manuscripts reflect the practice of how biblical texts were being used by the inhabitants of Palestine around the time of the life of Jesus. Scholarly study of the Dead Sea Scrolls revealed an interesting regularity: almost half of the Hebrew biblical manuscripts in the scrolls were not fully consistent with the version preserved in Codex Peterburgensis, adopted as the standard text of the Hebrew Bible. If we further note that the manuscripts written in Greek and Aramaic also indicate that they were translated from a different version of the Hebrew text than the one preserved in the manuscripts by Aaron ben Moses ben Asher, we must conclude that the hypothesis of *veritas hebraica* was built on shaky ground. All this means that long before the notion of a “canonical” biblical text emerged, defined as a fixed list of books with theoretically unchanging texts, the world of Judaism was teeming with great variety of literary traditions, which making up a diverse biblical literature.

This leads to the pessimistic conclusion that what is often regarded as the most authoritative biblical source, as a continuation of the rabbinic transmission of the Hebrew text, may not necessarily be the closest approximation to the original version. After all, the “contaminations” that found their way into the text over the course of a thousand years of manuscript transmission may have distorted the details in a way that hinders its interpretation. Critical editions of the Hebrew Bible employ the *mas'ora*, a system of vocalizing the purely consonantal Hebrew text. It was developed by the Tannaites, sages from the first and second centuries CE, as a set of diacritic markings added to the text to convey the proper vocalization, accentuation, and punctuation. Consequently, it offers yet another filter that could point to the correct

interpretation of specific words, as well as show how they were altered compared with the intentions of the authors. A well-known example of interference with the original wording of the Hebrew Bible involves the name “Ishbaal” being changed to “Ishbosheth” in order to remove the *Baal* element, which might suggest the name of a god then rivaling Yahweh, instead replacing it with the word *bosheth*, which means “shame”.

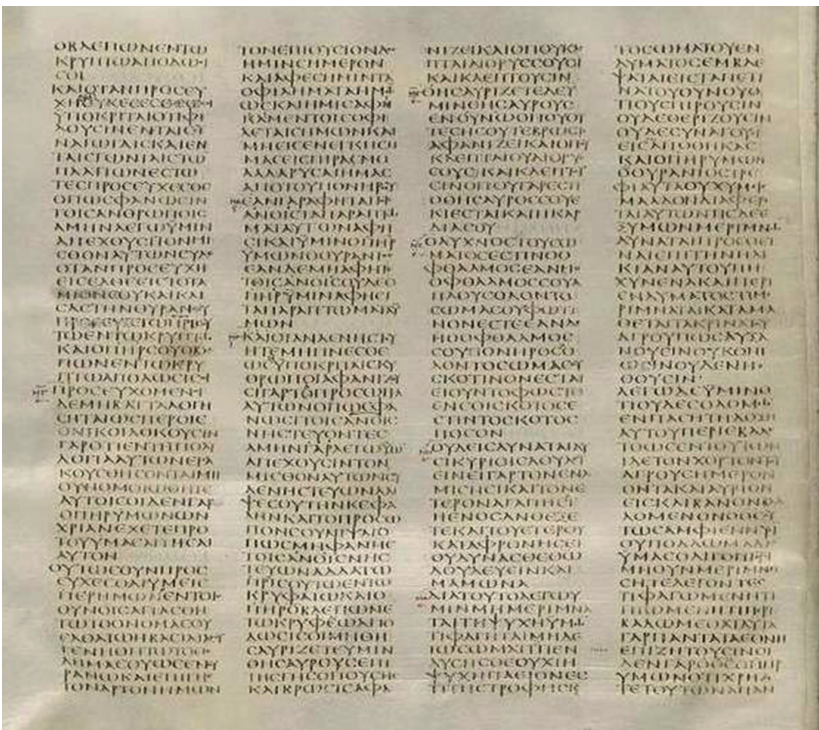
In search of an original

In search of the original, and therefore, the most authentic form of the biblical texts, we must therefore look beyond their theological value as carriers of the word of God, and draw upon as many versions as possible so as to try to unveil the original wording and intentions by applying the tools of philology and historical analysis. For example, the name of some locality or person may actually be preserved more correctly (in a version closest to the original) in the Coptic, Georgian, or Aramaic translation. Many such “contaminations” are well-known to scholars studying the Bible. Therefore, contemporary textual research has inevitably evolved into a collaborative endeavor, analyzing a multitude of variants and variations of the text in many languages.

Another form of “contamination” that historians must be particularly attuned to involves distortions stemming from interpretive traditions. The Bible holds immense cultural significance and is considered a key source of revelation by adherents of several religions. Consequently, scholars tend to be more deeply entrenched in traditional interpretations when dealing with the Bible as compared with other ancient texts. Interpretations of the Bible that have prevailed across centuries can exert a strong influence on contemporary researchers, sometimes in a way that significantly “contaminates” their understanding. One particularly apt illustration of this is the case of the “horns” of Moses, visible for instance in the famous sculpture of Moses by Michelangelo. Exodus 34:29, where the Hebrew phrase describing Moses’ face as “shining” was translated into the Latin Vulgate as *cornuta esset facies sua* – i.e. referring to Moses’ “horned” face. A different type of convention that places interpretive constraints on scholars pertains to the Decalogue. Traditionally, we refer to the “Ten Commandments,” even though the two slightly different versions of them presented in the Bible (Exodus 20:2–17 and Deuteronomy 5:6–21) actually contain more than ten proscriptions.

The traditional approach

Various echoes of tradition can clearly be sensed in how places that play a crucial theological role get analyzed. Christian theology highlights the Old Testa-



ment themes that have been interpreted throughout the centuries as foreshadowing the coming of the Messiah. In Judaism, on the other hand, the act of creation described in Genesis 1 was interpreted, somewhat in defiance of the text itself, as *creatio ex nihilo*. But even in earlier times the emergence of the Hebrew Bible involved various forms of interventions in the text, reflecting changes in the political circumstances and religious concepts. For example, passages containing references to monarchical ideology came to be edited once the Judeans governed themselves without kings, and what was originally a courtly erotic poem – the Song of Songs – came to be “dressed up” in the convention of a parareligious text. The narratives of the ancient mythic past were likewise reshaped to align with the social, political, and religious situation at the time when the text was edited.

The job of a historian trying to work with biblical sources is therefore particularly challenging due to such “contamination” of the source texts and the careful means of analysis this situation demands. However the resulting meticulous study of its various layers transforms into something more than just an effort to uncover the original meanings evident within the earliest layers; it also involves interpreting the intentions and political and religious views of those who edited the Bible over the centuries. Uncovering the motivations of those who modified the earlier text offers invaluable insights into the attitudes, literary tools, and views on moral and religious issues that prevailed among believers back in those times, as well as the objectives pursued by the ancient editors. ■

A page from a Greek text of the bible (Codex Sinaiticus)

Further reading:
Rogerson J.W., 1999.
Introduction to the Bible.
Penguin.