The initial announcement of the Dead Sea Scrolls in April 1948 had trumpeted the discovery of the earliest known manuscript of the entire Book of Isaiah, and noted that it was older than any other complete Hebrew manuscript of the book by about a thousand years. W. F. Albright promptly predicted that the new discoveries would revolutionize the field of text criticism of the Hebrew Bible. And so they did.

Modern translations of the Hebrew Bible are based on what is known as the Masoretic Text, or MT. The Masoretes were Jewish scribes and scholars, based primarily in the cities of Jerusalem, Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee, and Babylon, in the 7th to 11th century CE. The oldest complete manuscript of the Hebrew Bible is the Leningrad Codex, which was copied about 1008 or 1009 CE. Another important manuscript, the Aleppo Codex, is almost a century older, but it is incomplete.
Besides the Masoretic Text, two other major witnesses to the Hebrew Bible were known before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

One was the Samaritan Pentateuch (SP), which is the Samaritan form of the first five books of the Bible (the Torah in Jewish tradition). This was generally regarded as an inferior variant of the Masoretic tradition. It expands the text in some places and tends to harmonize passages that disagree. Its most distinctive aspect is that it claims that Israel's central altar was to be built on Mount Gerizim (the holy mountain of the Samaritans) and that God had chosen Mount Gerizim rather than Jerusalem as the place where his name would dwell.

The other major witness was the Greek translation, popularly known as the Septuagint (LXX), because of a legend that it had been translated by seventy-two Jewish elders at the behest of Ptolemy II (285–247 BCE), who supposedly wanted a copy for the library of Alexandria. These scribes were only supposed to have translated the Pentateuch or Torah, but the name “Septuagint” became attached to the entire Greek Old Testament. The Greek translation was preserved in full in manuscripts from the fourth and fifth centuries CE, which were older than the complete Hebrew manuscripts by several centuries. These manuscripts did not necessarily preserve the original translation exactly. Older
forms were occasionally discovered in papyri, or could be detected in the New Testament and other sources. The prevailing opinion before 1948, however, was that when the LXX differed from the MT, this was due to the deficiencies of the translation.

More than two hundred manuscripts of books that we regard as biblical were discovered in the caves around Qumran. The original seven scrolls from Cave 1 included two copies of the Book of Isaiah. One of these, “The Great Isaiah Scroll” or 1QIsa, differed from the MT in many details, but few of these were significant. The second one, 1QIsa, corresponded closely to the traditional text. Initially, the deviations in 1QIsa were thought to be a peculiarity of the sect that had preserved it. As more biblical texts were examined, however, the picture grew more complicated.

Different Textual Traditions in the Scrolls

A manuscript of Exodus (4QpaleoExod) dated to the middle of the first century BCE (on the basis of paleography) consistently preserves the expansions beyond the MT that are known from the Samaritan Pentateuch. It does not, however, appear to have the specifically Samaritan commandment, to build an altar at Mount Gerizim. (In the Samaritan text,
this commandment is inserted in Exodus 20. The
Qumran manuscript does not have enough space
for the additional commandment at that point.)
This suggests that the Samaritan Pentateuch was
based on a Jewish text that still circulated in the first
century BCE, and differed from it only by the addi-
tion of the commandment about Mount Gerizim.
A manuscript of the book of Numbers, 4QNumb, is
similar. It also included expansions found in the SP
but not in the MT, but it does not contain specifi-
cally Samaritan readings. Again, a form of the text
that was essentially the same as the Samaritan, but
without the special references to Mount Gerizim,
seems to have been circulating in Judea in the first
century BCE. This form of the text became known
as “proto-SP.”

The Scrolls also yielded Hebrew texts of some
books that correspond to the Septuagint rather
than to the MT, and so might be labeled “proto-
LXX.” The text of Samuel found in three scrolls
from Cave 4 consistently agrees with the Greek
where the latter disagrees with the MT. One man-
uscript (4QSam3) contains a paragraph that is not
found in either the MT or the LXX, but is reflected
in the paraphrase of the biblical account by the his-
torian Josephus (Ant 6.68–69). An interesting case
is provided by the Book of Jeremiah. The Greek
text is shorter than the MT by about one-eighth.
Before the discovery of the Scrolls, it was often thought that the translators had simply abbreviated the book. Two small fragmentary manuscripts, however, attest to a Hebrew form of the “short” text underlying the Greek. Both of these manuscripts (\(4\text{Q}\text{Jer}^b\) and \(4\text{Q}\text{Jer}^d\)) are relatively early, dating from the second century BCE. Two other manuscripts of Jeremiah, however, including one early one (\(4\text{Q}\text{Jer}^c\), from the early second century BCE), have the long form of the text known from the MT.

The Scrolls have provided plenty of evidence that the traditional text of the Hebrew Bible, the MT, or rather the proto-MT, was well known already in the last centuries BCE. But it was not the only form of the text. Different editions circulated side by side, much as different English translations of the Bible circulate in the modern world. (The textual differences in the Scrolls, however, are considerably more substantial than the differences between modern translations, at least in some cases.) The Book of Exodus was part of the Torah of Moses, and was certainly regarded as authoritative. But it was the book that was authoritative, rather than a particular form of the text, just as in a modern context the authority of the book does not depend on the wording of any one translation. For Christians brought up to believe in verbal inspiration, this may come as something of a shock. The actual words of the

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Bible, even the words of the Pentateuch or Torah, were not definitively fixed in the time of Christ.

Local Texts

In 1955, William F. Albright, the leading authority on most things relating to the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East, attempted to bring order to the evidence for textual fluidity by proposing a theory of local texts.¹ The proto-MT would have developed in Babylonia, the proto-LXX in Egypt, and the proto-Samaritan in Palestine. This theory was refined and propagated by Frank Moore Cross.² The underlying assumption was that different forms of the text could only have developed in distinct locations. Nonetheless, the evidence for the three distinct forms of the text was all found together in a cave at Qumran.

Not all scholars believed that the evidence could be so neatly organized. No two manuscripts are actually identical. Dividing them into groups, or “textual families,” always involves a measure of subjectivity in deciding where to draw the lines. Where Albright and Cross saw the distinct contours of forests, others saw only trees, some clustered to be sure, but in great variety. Emanuel Tov, who eventually supervised the publication of most of the Scrolls, but had begun his career as a text critic and student of Frank Cross, ar-
gued that some texts should be recognized as “non-aligned,” meaning that they should not be categorized as proto-MT, proto-SP, or proto-LXX. Others would argue that no text is ever “non-aligned,” but that the relationships between them are too complex to reduce to textual families.

Moreover, sociological context may be more important than geographical context. Eventually, the MT was preserved in Jewish communities, the LXX by Christians, and the SP by Samaritans. It may be that the different text types were also developed by different groups, although we cannot now identify them. Many scholars think that the textual tradition that became the MT was that of the Pharisees, the precursors of the Rabbis. If the Scrolls can be taken as evidence for preferences of one particular sect—the Essenes—however, it would seem that they had no clear preference for one textual tradition. Scholars have increasingly come to think that in this respect at least the Scrolls are broadly typical of Palestinian Judaism in the period before the revolts against Rome, and that there was no officially standard text in this period.

A Move Toward Standardization?

In 2002, when the process of publishing the Scrolls was nearing completion, an attempt was made to
provide an overview of the corpus in a way that had not previously been possible. This included a chronological index of the texts—an attempt to arrange them by the date on which they were copied. These dates are not beyond dispute: they were assigned by the various editors on the basis of paleography, or handwriting. Not all editors necessarily used the same criteria, or were equally competent. But the list at least gives an impression of which texts were earlier and which were later. If we may take this list as a guide, there was great variety in the text types of the biblical manuscripts until the middle of the first century BCE. Some proto-MT manuscripts are also early, even from the second century BCE. They become more numerous, however, in the second half of the first century BCE. In the first century CE, the number of manuscripts that are not proto-MT decreases steadily. All the manuscripts found at Qumran are assumed to date before 70 CE. A few biblical manuscripts from the period after 70 were found at Murabba‘at. These are all of the proto-MT type.

While the dating of these manuscripts is somewhat tentative, they do appear to show a trend toward adopting the proto-MT tradition as the standard form of the text, in the first century CE. The Scrolls give no clue, however, as to how or why this came about. There is nothing to indicate that the
sectarians ever had a distinctive form of the text. In principle, they seem to have used those forms of the text that were current at the time. Since the proto-MT form of the text prevailed after 70, it is safe to say that it was not especially associated with the Essenes. It may have been preferred by the Temple scribes, or perhaps by the Pharisees, but this is mere conjecture.

The most notable lesson from the Dead Sea Scrolls about the text of the Hebrew Bible, however, is that prior to the turn of the era there were many forms of it in circulation.

The Phenomenon of Rewritten Scriptures

The fluidity of the biblical text is related to another phenomenon that figures prominently in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Beginning about the late third or second century BCE, it became popular to write paraphrases of biblical books, often introducing new ideas in the process. These rewritings could serve various purposes. Some Jews in Alexandria, writing in Greek, tried to recast parts of the biblical narratives in the Greek genres of epic or tragedy. The Jewish Antiquities of Josephus was an attempt to present the entire biblical record as history. The Aramaic Genesis Apocryphon, one of the initial
scrolls found in Qumran Cave 1, is an entertaining account of some episodes of Genesis that included an expanded description of the beauty of Sarah, wife of Abraham. In other cases, the rewritten scriptures lay claim to the status of revelation, and their relation to the traditional scriptures becomes problematic.

A particularly clear case of rewritten scripture is provided by the Book of Jubilees. This text was preserved in full in Ethiopic, and was regarded as scripture in the Ethiopian church. Fragments of the Hebrew original were found at Qumran. It is believed to date from the second century BCE. It is a paraphrase of Genesis and the first part of Exodus, with a definite theological message. The laws of Moses were already observed by the patriarchs in Genesis, and the true calendar was the solar one, with 364 days. Jubilees, however, sometimes refers to what had been revealed in “the first Torah,” and so it clearly was not trying to replace the traditional Torah, only to supplement and interpret it. Nonetheless, it is cited as an authoritative text in the Damascus Document, and it later became canonical in the Ethiopian church.

The situation was different with the Temple Scroll, which we have already discussed in chapter 5. This too was a rewriting of a part of the Torah, but in this case there was no acknowledgment of
“the first Torah,” and the reformulated laws were presented as divine revelation. The Temple Scroll does not repeat everything that is found in the laws of the Pentateuch. It does not, for example, include the Ten Commandments. But for the matters it does address (largely matters relating to the purity of the Temple, but also some laws from Deuteronomy), it claims the highest imaginable authority. When it was first published, some scholars thought that this was “the Torah of Qumran,” the special sectarian edition of the Law. In fact, however, citations of the Torah in the Scrolls generally conform to the traditional text, not to the Temple Scroll. If the authors of the Temple Scroll wanted it to be accepted as the official Torah, they failed. Nonetheless, several copies of it were preserved among the Scrolls.

An even more problematic case is that of a text known as 4QReworked Pentateuch. This title refers to a set of five fragmentary manuscripts that were originally thought to pertain to the same text. They are now regarded as five separate compositions. Compared with the MT, all five show major expansions. For example, the “song of Miriam” in Exodus 15:21 was filled out in a way that has no parallel in the MT. Material is also rearranged in some cases. There is no indication, however, that this material records a new revelation. The differ-
ences over against the MT are typical of the proto-Samaritan tradition. Increasingly, scholars have come to regard these fragments not as “Reworked Pentateuch” or “Rewritten Bible,” but simply as a variant edition of the Book of Exodus. Here again it seems that scribes were not bound by any official, standard, form of the text in the last centuries before the turn of the era.

A Biblical Canon?

Strictly speaking, it is anachronistic to speak of a Bible at Qumran or in the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Bible as we know it had not yet taken its final shape. That did not happen until the late first century CE, or possibly later. But there is no doubt that sacred scriptures were enormously important for the life of the sect, and even that the interpretation of those scriptures was its raison d’être.

Several passages in the sectarian rule books testify to the importance of the Law of Moses. In CD 15, the members of the new covenant are enrolled “with the oath of the covenant which Moses made with all Israel, the covenant to return to the Law of Moses with a whole heart and soul.” Elsewhere, the same document cites Numbers 21:18: “the well
which the princes dug, which the nobles of the people dug with the staff;” and explains it as follows: “the well is the Law, and those who dug it were the converts of Israel.” The staff is “the interpreter of the Law,” who defines how the Law is to be observed. The manner in which the Law was studied is prescribed in 1QS 6:

and where there are ten, there shall never lack a man among them who will study the Law, day and night, one relieving the other. And the Many shall be on watch together for a third of each night of the year in order to read the book, explain the regulation and bless together.

Even the quotation of Isaiah 40:3, “in the desert, prepare the way of the Lord,” is interpreted as

this is the study of the Law which he commanded through the hand of Moses, in order to act in compliance with all that has been revealed from age to age, and according to what the prophets have revealed through his holy spirit. (1QS 8)

The Law, in these passages, is the Torah of Moses, the first five books of the Bible, or Pentateuch. This was evidently the touchstone for proper religious life. The prophets were also important.
These scriptures were not peculiar to the sect. They were the scriptures of all Israel. When a sectarian leader appealed to the High Priest in 4QMMT, he wrote:

We have written to you that you may study the book of Moses and the books of the Prophets and David.  

“David” here means the Book of Psalms, which was often read as a prophetic text. This passage in 4QMMT shows that the sectarians accepted the same basic scriptures as the High Priest, and even as their opponents, the Pharisees. The Law and the Prophets, or the Law, the Prophets, and David, were the scriptures shared by all Judeans in the first century BCE.

The traditional Hebrew Bible contains a third category besides the Law and the Prophets—the Writings. (The Hebrew Bible is sometimes referred to as the TANAK, for the Torah [Law], Neviim [Prophets], and Kethuvim [Writings].) The earliest evidence for this division is found in the Greek translation of the Book of Ben Sira, by his grandson, in the late second century BCE. In the prologue to the translation, the grandson says:

So my grandfather Jesus, who had devoted himself especially to the reading of the Law and

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the Prophets and the other books of our ancestors... was himself also led to write something pertaining to wisdom and instruction.

This passage has often been taken as evidence that the three-part canon of scripture was already established by the end of the second century BCE. In fact, it indicates that the Law and the Prophets were well-established categories. “The other books,” however, was an open-ended category of edifying literature. Ben Sira himself fancied that he could contribute to it.

When 4QMMT was published, some scholars thought it provided evidence for a three-part canon: the Law, the Prophets, and David. A fragmentary mention of “generations” was sometimes read as a reference to the books of Chronicles, and thought to imply that the whole Hebrew canon as we know it was included. This is not convincing, however. It is clear that both the sect and its opponents regarded the Torah, the Prophets, and Psalms, in some form, as authoritative, but that was the extent of the shared scriptures in the early first century BCE.

The word “canon” means measuring stick. It was applied to the scriptures by the Christian Church Fathers. There was no such term in Hebrew, but the idea of a corpus of authoritative scriptures was cer-
tainly present by the time of the Dead Sea Scrolls. It has often been pointed out that every book of the Hebrew Bible except the Book of Esther has been found at Qumran, with the implication that they were all recognized as authoritative scriptures. But the situation is somewhat more complicated than this.

A huge corpus of supposedly revelatory texts was found at Qumran. It is difficult to know how these texts were regarded by the people who read them. Some texts (such as the books of Enoch) that did not become part of the traditional Hebrew canon were preserved in multiple copies. Some books that did become canonical, such as Chronicles, are barely represented. If we judge by the number of copies preserved, such books as 1 Enoch and Jubilees were more important to the sectarian than Proverbs or Qoheleth.

While it is clear that the Law and the Prophets were canonical, it is not certain what these were thought to contain. Would the Temple Scroll have been regarded as part of the Law of Moses? or would even Jubilees have been so regarded, although it clearly distinguishes itself from “the first Torah”? The Book of Daniel is classified with the Writings rather than the Prophets in the traditional Bible. Yet Daniel is called a prophet in the Scrolls (11QMelchizedek). Various prophetic, or quasi-

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prophetic, writings are preserved (e.g., 4QPsuedo-Ezekiel; 4QPsuedo-Daniel). Were these accepted as genuine prophetic writings?

One way of addressing this problem is to note which books are cited, and which ones have commentaries devoted to them. A distinctive sectarian kind of commentary, called pesher, to which we will return below, has been found for Isaiah, Hosea, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, and Psalms. There are also fragments of commentaries on Genesis and on the prophet Malachi. No one would suggest, however, that the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel were not authoritative because we do not have commentaries on them. Several other texts are cited on occasion, but even these citations do not necessarily give us a complete picture. The collection of writings that enjoyed some degree of authority is open-ended.

The uncertainty about the scope of the authoritative scriptures can be illustrated by the debate about a manuscript of the Psalms, 11QPs, which was published by James Sanders in 1965. This scroll contains thirty-nine psalms also found in the MT, as well as ten additional compositions, including a prose account of “David’s Compositions.” Some of the additional psalms were previously known from the Greek and Syriac Bibles. Others were not. The order of the familiar psalms is different from that
of the MT. Two other manuscripts from Qumran seem to have had the same edition as 11QPs, but none of the Scrolls unambiguously supports the order of the MT.

Sanders considered 11QPs a biblical scroll. Several prominent scholars, including Patrick Skehan of the official editorial team and Shemaryahu Talmon of the Hebrew University, rejected this suggestion, and argued that this was only a liturgical compilation. Each side was partially correct, and partially wrong. In this period, there was no such thing as a biblical manuscript of the psalms. All manuscripts of the psalms were “liturgical collections,” including the MT edition. But Sanders was right that 11QPs was as authoritative as any other collection at that time. There was no official “canonical” edition from which this manuscript could be said to deviate.

In short, the Dead Sea Scrolls attest to a collection of authoritative scriptures that overlaps to a great degree with the later Bible of the rabbis. It was substantially the same in the Torah and the Prophets, although the status of some works, such as the Temple Scroll and Jubilees, is unclear. The Essenes may have had a larger collection of prophets and other writings than the authorities in the Jerusalem Temple or the Pharisees; they did not have a smaller one. The whole category of “Writings”
was ill-defined. It is clear that the sectarians valued many writings that claimed to be revelatory, but that were not included in the rabbinic Bible. Only in the period after 70 CE, in the writings of the historian Josephus and in 4 Ezra, an apocalypse written about 100 CE, do we find authoritative sacred writings limited to a specific number. Josephus says that twenty-two books were properly accredited (*Against Apion, 1.39*). 4 Ezra gives the number as twenty-four (probably the same books counted differently), but it also refers to seventy hidden books which contained even greater wisdom. It may be that Josephus's list of twenty-two books had been defined better before 70 CE, either by the Pharisees or by the Temple authorities, but there is no evidence of such a limitation in the Scrolls, and it was evidently not universally accepted.

The Interpretation of Scripture

The received scriptures are interpreted in the Dead Sea Scrolls in manifold ways.

The first batch of Scrolls from Qumran Cave 1 contained a commentary on the prophet Habakkuk of a type that was previously unknown, which became known as *pesher*, from the word it uses for “interpretation.” This was a formal commentary,