

THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS AND THE TRANSLATOR

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It is now more than 30 years since the famous Qumran or Dead Sea scrolls were discovered, in what was one of the most sensational finds in the history of archaeology. The discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls is important for a number of reasons, but one of the most important is its contribution to the study of the biblical text. And in the light of this it is really very important for Bible translators to have access to the results of that study.

As is now well known, the Qumran biblical scrolls are at least 1,000 years older than the oldest Hebrew manuscripts upon which modern versions of the Old Testament are based. And these scrolls offer a number of variants that could represent better readings in certain passages than those of the Masoretic Text (MT), which is the standard text for translation of the Old Testament at present. In some other cases the Qumran variants may be able to shed some light on the meaning of particularly difficult passages.

Although a considerable number of variants have already been noted, only a few have been studied and evaluated enough for translators to feel justified in adopting them in place of the corresponding MT readings. It seems that most leading Jewish and Christian scholars consider that in general the Qumran biblical texts support the MT. And they seem to agree also that not all the Qumran variants should be accepted as genuine readings of earlier Hebrew texts. Besides the usual errors of copyists, there seems to be strong evidence that here and there the text was actually changed to make it fit the theology or peculiar way of interpreting the scriptures of the Qumran community.

The need to be cautious about Qumran readings should not, however, prevent the translator from looking to them for help in his work. Which ones should be adopted instead of MT is of course a question that requires careful study and scholarly guidance.

As a matter of fact, the extent of the actual biblical text recovered from Qumran is relatively small, and therefore the number of variant readings is also quite limited. And in addition to this the Qumran texts in themselves represent a variety of textual traditions. Their main contribution has been to the history of the biblical text and in throwing light on the nature of ancient interpretation and use of the text. Still, even with these limitations, the manuscripts from Qumran are of considerable importance for the particular task of the Bible translator. (For a full discussion of this, see *The Meaning of the Qumran Scrolls for the Bible*, by William H. Brownlee.)

It would be good if the United Bible Societies could issue fairly soon some direct informative material for translators on the variant readings of the Qumran biblical texts. Perhaps it would be worthwhile for this purpose to put out a small book in the Helps for Translators series, possibly with a system of rating like that in the Greek New Testament. Qumran variant readings have apparently not been considered so far in the Hebrew Old Testament Text Project which the UBS is sponsoring: although it is to be hoped that they will be considered before the final reports of the Project are prepared.

In the meantime, some help is available to the translator from various sources. For translators who can read Hebrew there is the excellent critical apparatus of the recently published *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, in which a number of Qumran variants are noted, some of them as recommended readings. Another source is the range of books about Qumran in which treatment of the variant biblical readings is included. A third source, and one which is available to most translators, is found in those modern translations of the Bible that have made use of Qumran variants, either by adopting them for the text or by giving them as alternative readings. Unfortunately most of these modern translations (for instance Good News Bible and New English Bible) do not mark the adopted readings as from Qumran, which makes it hard for the translator to identify them.

At an early stage in the preparation of the Revised Standard Version, Millar Burrows, who had just returned from Palestine, supplied the translation committee with a list of variant readings in the great Isaiah scroll from Qumran. Thirteen of these were adopted for the text; and they are noted in the footnotes as from "One ancient manuscript". (Uncertainty about the legal ownership of the Qumran manuscripts at the time made it advisable not to identify the scroll in writing.)

As examples of Qumran variant readings that may possibly be superior to MT, we may consider the following, all taken from quotations of the biblical text in the Habakkuk commentary:

- 1.17 "He shall unsheath (*literally* empty) his sword" for MT "He shall empty his net", which does not seem to correspond with the last part of the verse, and may probably be simply a duplication of "net" in verse 16.
2. 5 "Wealth betrays" (*hwn ybhgwd*) for MT "Wine is treacherous" (*hayyayin bôgēd*), which does not seem to parallel the second part of the verse.
2. 7 "Shall tear you asunder" (*yqysw*) for MT "shall awake" (*yiqsu*).
- 2.16 "And stagger" (*whr'l*) for MT "and be (*or* stay) uncircumcised" (*w'eh'rel*). In this case the Qumran reading is supported by the Septuagint (LXX) and other ancient versions. RSV marks it as a conjecture, but refers for comparison to LXX and the Syriac versions. No reference is given to "One ancient manuscript", probably because at the time the committee did not yet have on hand the variant readings in the Habakkuk commentary.

Ordinarily, it would hardly be expected that the Bible translator could draw help on the text from the nonbiblical documents from Qumran, still less help on the Greek text of the New Testament. But this may happen. An example is seen in Acts 6.2 and other passages where the word *plēthos* occurs. This word literally means "multitude", and this is the way it has traditionally been rendered in the versions. Some, however, noticing that in some instances this rendering did not seem to fit the context, gave a different translation. The passages where this happens will be mentioned below. The main case is that of the passage already mentioned. For it seems strange that the apostles should call a meeting of "the multitude" in order to elect deacons of the church, and that this action was approved by "all the multitude" (verse 5). Again, in 15.12,

it was not “the multitude” that was listening to Peter but a meeting of “the apostles and the elders” (verse 6), and in Antioch their decision was not communicated to “the multitude” but to the congregation. Then it seems that in 19.9 the reference is to the synagogue, in 25.24 to the Jewish authorities, and in 23.7 to the council or Sanhedrin (see verse 1).

So, while the King James Version still rendered “multitude” in all of these cases, the American Standard Version translated “assembly” in 23.7. Smith in “An American Translation” did not use “multitude” in any of them. With some inconsistency, RSV renders “the body of disciples” in 6.2, but “the whole multitude” in 6.5, while it translates “the congregation” in 15.30 and 19.9, “the assembly” in 23.7, and “the whole Jewish people” in 25.24, which is also a possibility. GNB also has “all the Jewish people” in that passage, but in all the other cases renders “the whole group” or “the group” (“of believers”). The Bible de Jérusalem has *l'assistance* (“the congregation”) in 19.9 and *la communauté juive tout entière* (“the whole Jewish community”) in 25.24, but *l'assemblée* (“the assembly”) in the other cases. Reina Valera Revised Version (1960) retains “multitude” in all but two of these passages: *la congregación* (“the congregation”) in 15.30, and *la asamblea* (“the assembly”) in 23.7.

The Qumran light on this matter comes from the nonbiblical scrolls, such as the ones called the *Rule of the Community* and the *Damascus Document* in particular, which have to do with the organization of functioning of the Qumran sect. In them the word *rabbîm*, literally “the many”, which is the Hebrew equivalent of *plēthos*, is used to designate the whole body of full members of the community especially when they assemble for a formal meeting, equivalent to what in modern parliamentary terms is called a plenary session. It is not, therefore, in that context simply “a multitude” or any gathering of “many people”. In the light of this use of the word, Nueva Versión Castellana offers the following renderings: *El pleno de los discípulos* (“The full number of the disciples”) 6.2,5); *toda la asamblea* (“the whole assembly”) (15.12); *el pleno de la congregación* (“the full number of the congregation”) (15.30); *la congregación en pleno* (“the full congregation”) (19.9); *el pleno* (“the whole group”) (23.7); *la comunidad judía entera* (“the entire Jewish community”) (25.24).

The appropriate renderings in some of the cases quoted above thus receive an unexpected and solid support from these ancient documents that biblical archaeology has made available to the translator. There is a strong probability that some members of the Qumran community joined the church of Jerusalem at an early stage, and, if so, by contributing their organizational experience, they may have had a definite influence in the way the church was organized and even in its official terminology. And this may very well have been how the special sense of *rabbîm/plēthos* found its way into The Acts of the Apostles.