

A SAMPLE CHAPTER

Ad Fontes: The Old Testament Text

How We Got Our Hebrew Bible

By **Larry Herzog Jr.**
larryherzogjr.com

CHAPTER ONE

Why Does My Bible Have These Footnotes?

THE OLD TESTAMENT'S OWN TEXT QUESTION

Open your Bible to the fourth chapter of Genesis, and let your eye fall to the bottom of the page.

Most weeks you would never look down there. The text is up at the top, in comfortable type, and that is where we live when we read. But in this chapter I want you to notice something you have walked past a thousand times. In the story of Cain and Abel, right at the moment the two brothers are out in the field, there is a small raised number — and at the foot of the page, in smaller print, a note. In the ESV it reads: “Hebrew; Samaritan, Septuagint, Syriac, Vulgate add Let us go out to the field.”

Read that again slowly, because a great deal is hiding in one short line.¹ Your Bible is telling you that the Hebrew text it translated does not contain the words “Let us go out to the field” — but that four other ancient witnesses to Genesis do. Someone made a decision. Someone weighed the Hebrew against the Samaritan and the Greek and the Syriac and the Latin, and decided which words to set in the large type and which to mention only in the small type at the bottom.

That decision — and the few thousand like it standing behind every page of your Old Testament — is what we are going to spend the next fourteen chapters learning to understand. Not to read Hebrew; I am not going to ask you to do that. Not to second-guess your Bible; I am going to give you reasons to trust it more, not less. But to understand what those footnotes are, where they come from, and why a Christian who loves the Word of God should be glad they are there.

WE HAVE DONE THIS BEFORE — BUT NOT WITH THIS BOOK

If you were with us for the first volume of this study, you already know the shape of the question. There we asked how we know what the apostles actually wrote. We learned that we do not have the original letters of Paul or the original Gospel of John in their

1. ESV footnote at Genesis 4:8. The translations' own notes are cited throughout from the published ESV; comparisons with the NASB, NET, and KJV/NKJV are drawn from those editions directly.

own hands; we have copies — thousands of them — and the work of comparing those copies, weighing them, and recovering the wording of the originals is called textual criticism. We learned that this is not a threat to Scripture but a friend of it, and that the very abundance of New Testament manuscripts is one of the great gifts God has given His church.

This volume asks the same question of a different and older book. How do we know what Moses wrote? What Isaiah preached? What David sang? The discipline is the same, but the terrain is harder and stranger, and I want to be honest with you about that from the first hour.²

Consider three differences. First, the time. The New Testament was written across perhaps fifty or sixty years in the first century, and our earliest substantial copies come within a couple of centuries of that. The Old Testament was written across more than a thousand years, and for most of its history we had no ancient Hebrew copies at all — our oldest complete Hebrew Bible dates from around the year 1008 — more than two thousand years after Moses. Second, the witnesses. For the New Testament the story is mostly told in Greek. For the Old Testament we will have to listen to Hebrew, yes, but also to Greek, and Aramaic, and Latin, and Syriac, and a rival Hebrew text kept by the Samaritans — a whole choir of voices, not always singing the same note. Third, and most surprising, a translation will sometimes turn out to be our best witness to the original — older and truer in a given place than the Hebrew copies we possess. We will spend real time on why that can be, and what it does not mean.

So this is not the same problem we met in Volume One. It is its older, weather-beaten cousin. And the footnotes in your Old Testament are the visible trace of it — the place where your translators, in honesty, let you see that there was a decision to be made.³

THREE FOOTNOTES, THREE DIFFERENT QUESTIONS

Not every footnote means the same thing. One of the most useful skills I can give you in this chapter is the ability to tell them apart. Let me show you three, drawn from passages we will return to later, and let me name what each one is really telling you.

The first is the one we have already met, at Genesis 4:8. Here the question is *addition*: the ancient versions contain a clause — “Let us go out to the field” — that the traditional

2. The standard scholarly handbook is Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012); a shorter introduction is Ernst Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014).

Hebrew text does not. Cain says something in the Samaritan, the Greek, the Syriac, and the Latin that he does not say in the Hebrew. Did the words drop out of the Hebrew by accident, so that the versions preserve what Moses wrote? Or did the versions smooth out a rough Hebrew sentence by adding the natural-sounding line? That is a real question, and the footnote is your translators showing their work.

The second is at 1 Samuel 13:1, and here the question is *damage*. If you read it in the ESV you find a strange-looking sentence: “Saul lived for one year and then became king, and when he had reigned for two years over Israel . . .” — with footnotes telling you that a number is missing in the Hebrew. And a number truly is missing. The Hebrew literally says something like “Saul was a year old when he became king,” which cannot be right, and then gives a reign of “two years,” which also cannot be the whole story. Somewhere in the long centuries of copying, a numeral fell out of this verse and was never recovered. The footnote here is not pointing to a disagreement between witnesses; it is pointing to a wound in the text that all our witnesses share. Your Bible is being honest enough to tell you so.

The third is at Deuteronomy 32:8, and here the question is *choice*. The traditional Hebrew text says that God fixed the boundaries of the peoples “according to the number of the sons of Israel.” But a Dead Sea Scroll and the ancient Greek translation read “according to the number of the sons of God.” And here is the surprising thing: the ESV prints the *Scroll’s* reading in the main text and footnotes the traditional Hebrew.⁴ A conservative, confessional translation looked at the evidence and judged that the older and harder reading — the one most of us never grew up hearing — was probably what Moses wrote. We will give this verse an entire chapter of its own, because it teaches a lesson many Christians have never been told: that following the evidence does not mean drifting toward liberalism. Sometimes the oldest reading is the most orthodox one.

Addition, damage, choice. Three footnotes, three different questions. Most of what we do in these chapters will be learning to ask, of any note we meet: which kind is this? And once you can ask that question, the footnotes stop being a vague source of anxiety and become what they truly are — a window into the most carefully tended text in the history of the world.

3. For the New Testament side of the same discipline, see Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). Volume One of this study leaned on it heavily.

4. ESV footnote at Deuteronomy 32:8, which reads in part, “Compare Dead Sea Scroll, Septuagint; Masoretic Text sons of Israel.” We give this passage a full chapter of its own later in this book.

WHAT A FOOTNOTE IS NOT

Because the word “footnote” can mean several things in a Bible, let me clear away three misunderstandings before they take root, since each one breeds a needless worry.

A textual footnote is not the same as a *study note*. The notes in a study Bible — the paragraphs that explain the meaning of a verse or point you to a cross-reference — are commentary, written by an editor to help you understand. The footnotes we are talking about are something else entirely. They are not about meaning; they are about wording. They tell you not what a verse means but what the ancient witnesses to that verse actually say. A study note is a helpful teacher’s voice in the margin. A textual note is the manuscript evidence itself, peeking through.

A textual footnote is not a confession that your translators are stumped. It is the opposite — it is the mark of translators so confident and so honest that they are willing to show you the one place on the page where a judgment had to be made, rather than quietly making it and hoping you never ask. A surgeon who shows you the X-ray is not less competent than one who hides it; he is more trustworthy. The Bibles that would worry me are not the ones with footnotes. They are the ones that have smoothed every difficulty away and left you no way to check.

And a textual footnote is not a sign that the verse is in doubt as Scripture. This is the worry that does the most damage, so hear it plainly: in nearly every case the footnote concerns a single word, a name, a number, a clause — and the verse stands as the Word of God either way the decision falls. When the ESV tells you that the versions add “Let us go out to the field,” the murder of Abel is not in question; only whether Cain’s invitation was recorded. The towering majority of your Old Testament — chapter upon chapter, book upon book — carries no textual note at all, because the witnesses simply agree. The notes cluster at a relatively small number of places. They are the exceptions the text itself is honest enough to flag, not the rule.

Hold those three together and a footnote changes character in your eyes. It is not a teacher’s opinion, not an admission of defeat, and not a question mark over the verse. It is a witness stand. It is the place where the text invites you to see the evidence on which its wording rests — and an invitation like that is extended only by a document with nothing to fear from your looking.

MEET THE WITNESSES

Before we go any further I owe you an introduction to the cast. When a footnote in your Old Testament names a source, it is almost always naming one of a handful of ancient

witnesses. You do not need to memorize them in this chapter — we will spend whole chapters with several of them — but you should at least know their faces.

The Masoretic Text is the traditional Hebrew Bible, the text that lies under the main column of nearly every Old Testament you have ever read. It is named for the Masoretes, the Jewish scribes who, across the second half of the first millennium, guarded it with almost unbelievable care and added the vowel markings and notes that fixed its reading. When your footnote says simply “Hebrew,” this is what it means.

The Septuagint — often abbreviated LXX — is the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, made by Jewish scholars beginning in the third century before Christ. It is the single most important witness besides the Hebrew itself, partly because it is so old, and partly because the apostles themselves quoted it. When the New Testament cites the Old, more often than not it is citing the Greek. We will give that astonishing fact a chapter of its own near the end.

The Dead Sea Scrolls are the Hebrew (and some Greek and Aramaic) manuscripts discovered beginning in 1947 in caves above the Dead Sea — copies a thousand years older than anything we had before.⁵ They are the great event of Old Testament study in the last century, and we will spend two full chapters in those caves.

The Samaritan Pentateuch is the Hebrew text of the first five books as preserved by the Samaritans — the people Jesus spoke of, who worshiped on Mount Gerizim. It sometimes agrees with the Septuagint against the traditional Hebrew, as it did at Genesis 4:8, and that makes it a valuable second Hebrew voice.

The remaining three you can hold more loosely for now. The Targums are ancient Aramaic paraphrases of the Hebrew. The Vulgate is Jerome’s great Latin translation from around the year 400. The Syriac Peshitta is an early translation into Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic. Each of them, in its own way, is a witness — a person in the back of the courtroom who saw the Hebrew text at a particular time and place and can tell us what it said when they looked.

Here is the picture I want you to carry home. Imagine a single event — what Moses wrote — witnessed long ago, and then reported down to us by many people in many languages. Most of the time every witness agrees, and there is nothing to discuss. Now and then they differ, and when they do, your translators have to weigh them: who is older, who is more careful, who is most likely to explain how the others came to say what they

5. James C. VanderKam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), remains the best lay-level overview. We return to the Scrolls in chapters 5 and 6.

say. The footnote is simply the moment your translators let you stand at the bench and see the witnesses for yourself.

HOW A DECISION ACTUALLY GETS MADE

Let me slow down and show you, with the Genesis 4:8 footnote, how one of these decisions is actually reached. Not because you will be making them — that is the translators’ work, not ours — but because watching it done once will demystify the whole enterprise. You will see that this is not guesswork. It is reasoning, and reasoning you can follow.

Recall the situation. The traditional Hebrew reads, flatly, “Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up . . .” Notice the small awkwardness: “Cain spoke to Abel” — and then we are never told what he said. The sentence promises speech and delivers none. The Samaritan, the Septuagint, the Syriac, and the Vulgate all supply the missing words: “Let us go out to the field.” Now the question. Which came first?

There are two honest possibilities, and a careful reader weighs both. The first: Cain’s words were original, and they fell out of the Hebrew at some point in copying. This is easy to imagine, because the very next phrase is “in the field,” and a scribe’s eye, having just written “field” once, could leap ahead and skip the clause — a common kind of slip with a name scholars need not trouble us with. On this reading the versions preserve what Moses wrote, and the Hebrew suffered a small loss. The second possibility runs the other way: the Hebrew is original, rough edge and all, and the versions — bothered by a Cain who “spoke” but said nothing — helpfully filled the gap with the obvious line.

How do we choose? Here you meet, for the first time, the kind of reasoning that runs through this whole course, and that we will name and gather up properly near the end.⁶ Two instincts pull in opposite directions. One says: prefer the *shorter* reading, because scribes were more apt to add helpful words than to drop them. The other says: prefer the reading that best *explains how the others arose*. And in this case those two instincts genuinely disagree, which is precisely why your translators marked it rather than burying it. The shorter Hebrew has a strong claim; but the easy mechanical explanation for how the clause could drop out of the Hebrew has a strong claim too. Reasonable, reverent scholars land in different places here, and the ESV’s decision — to keep the shorter Hebrew in the text and record the fuller versions below — is a judgment, openly shown.

6. The NET Bible’s translators’ notes are the most accessible window a layperson has into these decisions; they are freely available and recommended throughout.

Sit with what just happened, because it is the whole course in miniature. There was a real difference among the witnesses. There were reasons on both sides. The translators weighed them, made a judgment, and told you they had done so. No article of faith moved. No doctrine trembled. A single clause of narrative detail hung in the balance, and your Bible handled it with exactly the care you would want from a witness under oath. Multiply that scene by the few thousand places where it recurs, and you have the entire discipline. It is not corrosive. It is conscientious.

A WORD ABOUT THE KING JAMES

Some of you grew up on the King James Version, and some of you have heard it argued, with real conviction, that the King James rests on a purer text than the modern translations and that the footnotes we have been discussing are a modern intrusion. I want to address that directly and charitably, because the people who make that argument are usually moved by a good and Christian instinct — a jealousy for the integrity of God’s Word — and that instinct deserves honor even where I think the conclusion goes wrong.

Here is something that may surprise you, and that clears a great deal of fog. The fiercest version of that debate belongs to the New Testament, not the Old. There the argument is between the “Received Text” behind the King James and the modern critical text, and we walked through all of that in Volume One. But for the Old Testament, the King James and the ESV are reading, in the main, the very same Hebrew — the Masoretic Text we met a few minutes ago. On the vast majority of the Old Testament, the translation you prefer changes the English, not the underlying text. So the Old Testament “text question” is usually not King James versus modern at all. It is a different and older question: when the traditional Hebrew is met by an ancient witness that disagrees — a Dead Sea Scroll, the Greek of the Septuagint — which do we follow?

And on that question, let me say plainly what this book will and will not do. We will treat the traditional Hebrew text with the deep respect it has earned; it is the backbone of the Old Testament, and across the great body of Scripture it has been vindicated again and again, as we will see most vividly when we open the Isaiah scroll. We will not pretend it is flawless where the evidence shows otherwise, because honesty is not the enemy of reverence. And we will never caricature the brother or sister who loves the King James. We will simply ask, every time, the same fair question — who are the witnesses, and what is the most likely account of what Moses wrote? — and we will follow the answer wherever it honestly leads, trusting that the God of truth is not served by our pretending to know less than we do.

WHY THIS FEELS FRIGHTENING — AND WHY IT NEED NOT

I have taught this material long enough to know what some of you are feeling right now, because I felt it myself the first time. There is a quiet alarm that goes off when you realize that the wording of your Bible involved decisions. If there was a choice at Deuteronomy 32:8, the alarm says, then how do I know the rest is solid? If a number fell out of 1 Samuel, what else fell out? Is the Old Testament not, after all, as settled as I thought?

I want to take that fear seriously rather than wave it away, because it deserves a real answer, and the real answer is one of the most steadying things I know.

Begin here. Our confession has always distinguished between the *autographs* — the original documents as they left the hands of Moses and Isaiah and the rest — and the *apographs*, the copies. When we confess that Scripture is God-breathed and without error, we are confessing it of what God actually inspired: the original text. The copies are the faithful, ordinary, human means by which that original has come down to us, and God has used those means to preserve His Word remarkably — but He did not promise that every scribe's pen would be infallible, and the scribes themselves never claimed it. So when we find that a numeral slipped out of 1 Samuel 13:1 in the course of copying, we have not found a crack in the foundation. We have found exactly the kind of thing the doctrine of inspiration always allowed for — a copyist's slip in an apograph, leaving the inspired original untouched in what it was and clearly recoverable in almost everything it said.⁷

Now add the second steadying truth. God has not preserved His Word in any one manuscript, or any one printed edition, or any one translation. He has preserved it in the manuscript tradition as a whole — in the great chorus of witnesses, no one of which is perfect, all of which together carry the Word safely across three thousand years. This is why the footnotes are good news and not bad. A tradition honest enough to footnote its own difficulties is a tradition that has nothing to hide. The places where the witnesses differ are few, they are visible, they are marked, and — this is the heart of it — not one article of the Christian faith hangs in the balance at any of them. We will test that claim together, passage by passage, and you will find it holds.

And then notice, finally, where this instinct comes from. When the Reformers cried *ad fontes* — back to the sources — they were saying that the church must go behind the later glosses and translations to the Word as God gave it, in the original tongues. Textual

7. On the confessional doctrine of inspiration and the autographs, see Robert D. Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture: A Study of the Theology of the Seventeenth-Century Lutheran Dogmaticians* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1955), and Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1950), 1:193–367.

criticism is nothing but that Reformation instinct carried through with patience and humility. To care about what Moses actually wrote, rather than what some later hand assumed he must have written, is not modern skepticism. It is the oldest Protestant reflex there is.

WHAT WE ARE DOING, AND WHY

Let me end by telling you where we are going, so the path feels less like a wilderness. In the next three chapters we will build the map: how a Hebrew Bible was actually made and copied, who the Masoretes were and what those little vowel marks are, and how the Septuagint and the other translations fit in. Then we will go to the caves and spend two chapters with the Dead Sea Scrolls — the most thrilling stretch of this whole story — and learn both what they confirmed and what they complicated.

After that we will roll up our sleeves and work real cases: whether Psalm 22 says “they pierced my hands and feet” or “like a lion”; what the sons of God are doing in Deuteronomy 32; why Goliath’s height wobbles between manuscripts; why the book of Jeremiah comes to us in two different lengths. And we will finish by learning to read the footnotes in our own Bibles like people who know what they are looking at, by facing squarely the fact that the apostles quoted the Greek Old Testament, and by asking the plain question the whole course has been building toward: can I trust my Old Testament? I will tell you now what we will prove then. The answer is yes — and you will hold it not as a feeling but as a conviction you have earned.

So go back, before the next chapter, to that footnote in Genesis 4. Look at it without flinching. It is not a confession of weakness. It is the fingerprint of a God who saw to it that His Word survived every empire that rose to bury it, and of a church honest enough to show you the seams. By the time we are done, I hope you will do what I have learned to do: read straight to the bottom of the page, and give thanks.

This is where the sample ends. The rest of Ad Fontes: The Old Testament Text is the invitation it opens onto.

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