

A Unique Biblical Papyrus.

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MR. WALTER F. NASH, F.S.A., has recently become possessed of a fragment of Hebrew papyrus, which by reason of its antiquity and contents is one of the most interesting 'finds' of recent years. Hebrew papyri are rare enough to make the discovery of a new specimen a matter of interest to specialists, but if I am correct in my view that this fragment represents a pre-Massoretic form of the Old Testament text, and dates from the second century of the Christian era, the uniqueness and importance of Mr. Nash's papyrus will be apparent to every biblical scholar. As a more or less complete account of the papyrus appears elsewhere,¹ it will suffice here to give evidence in support of the view I have maintained, and to add certain supplementary remarks in the hope that they may lead to a solution of the problems which it presents.

The papyrus comes from Egypt; it is of a dark brown colour, and is written only on one side. There are twenty-four lines of Hebrew, written without vowel-points, accents, or diacritical marks. The verses are not divided, and occasionally, even, the words are scarcely separated from one another. There are no 'crowns' to the letters, and ligatures—rarely found in Hebrew—are frequent. The writing is transitional, between the middle Aramaic (e.g. the Egyptian-Aramaic papyri) and the settled 'square character' of the third century A.D.; indeed, several of the letters find their nearest parallels in such Aramaic scripts as the Nabataean and Palmyrene inscriptions, and in the ancient Palestinian ossuaries, or present peculiar forms of which only the merest traces have survived in the oldest 'square' Hebrew inscriptions. The writing has a certain superficial resemblance with the later Rabbinical forms, but this is no argument against its antiquity. The differences far outweigh the points of agreement, and it is to be remembered that even the Egyptian-Aramaic papyri of the Ptolemaic period, as far as general features are concerned, reveal an astonishing likeness to mediæval Rabbinic. The fact that

¹ In the *Proceedings of the Society of Biblical Archaeology*, January 1903 (with Plates).

the final letters are regularly employed makes it improbable that the papyrus can be much earlier than the end of the first century A.D., and the palæography forbids us to ascribe it to a date later than the third. On the whole, the indications safely point to the second century of this era, and in this conclusion I have the valuable support of Mr. F. C. Burkitt.² To understand what this means, it is only necessary to recollect that the oldest dated biblical MS., the St. Petersburg Codex of the Prophets, bears date 916 A.D., and that there are perhaps a few undated biblical MSS of the ninth century. The Hebrew papyri in the Berlin Museum may be as early as the seventh century, but it is doubtful whether any known specimens of 'square' Hebrew (inscriptions and the like excepted) are earlier. On the most cautious estimate, therefore, the new papyrus may claim to be the oldest Hebrew MS. of any kind in existence.

The papyrus contains the Decalogue and the Shema' (Dt 6¹ sq.). It is mutilated at the foot and at both edges, but in spite of its condition the whole of the Decalogue can be restored with comparative certainty. The head is complete, and begins: '[I am the L]ord thy God,' etc.,³ agreeing with the Deuteronomic recension (Dt 5⁶) rather than with that in Ex 20, which is preceded by an introductory verse (v.¹).

The fourth commandment agrees on the whole with Ex 20⁸⁻¹¹, but it has the reading '*thine ox, and thine ass, and all thy cattle,*' which is characteristic of Deuteronomy (5¹⁴), although it is also given by the Septuagint in Exodus. Here, too, the papyrus reads: '*but on the [seventh] day . . . in it thou shalt not do any work . . . wherefore the Lord blessed the seventh [day] and hallowed it.*' All three variants are supported by the Septuagint; the first can be justified by Ex 16²⁶ 31¹⁵, etc., the second by *ib.* 35², and the last by Gn 2³, whence it has been thought that Ex 20^{11b} is derived.

The fifth commandment runs: 'honour thy

² Cf. art. 'Text and Versions,' sec. 42, *Encyc. Biblica*, vol. iv.

³ Words in brackets are restored from the Massoretic text.

father and thy moth[er, that] *it may be well with thee, and that thy days may be long* upon the land,' etc. This agrees with neither Ex 20¹² nor Dt 5¹⁶ word for word, but is the reading of the Septuagint in both. It is supported by Philo and St. Paul (Eph 6^{2,3}), and its genuineness is proved by the general agreement of the order with other characteristic passages in Deuteronomy.¹

Another interesting feature is the transposition of the sixth and seventh commandments, which recurs also in Mk 10¹⁹ (A.V.), Lk 18²⁰, but not in the parallel Mt 19¹⁸, where the ordinary 'Massoretic' arrangement has prevailed. It is also supported by the Vatican MS. and the Lucianic recension in Deuteronomy, the Septuagint support for the reading in Exodus being much weaker. Another piece of evidence which tends to link the papyrus with the Deuteronomical recension of the Decalogue appears in the ninth commandment, where the papyrus expressly reads עַד שֵׁוּי as against עַד יִשָּׂר in Ex 20¹⁶. Similarly, in the tenth commandment it is practically certain that the 'wife' was mentioned before the 'house,' and this, together with the insertion of 'his field,' agrees with Deuteronomy, and also with the Septuagint in Exodus.²

Immediately after the Decalogue the papyrus begins with a fresh line: '[and these are the statute]s and the judgments which Moses commanded the [children of Israel] in the wilderness, when they went forth from the land of Egypt. Hea[r, O Israel],' etc. This introductory verse is found nowhere in the Old Testament, but it has been faithfully preserved by the Septuagint and old Latin versions (Dt 6¹), and it is only through their help that the missing words (in brackets) can be restored. The presence of this verse in the Septuagint has not attracted much notice, nor has it been satisfactorily explained by the assumption that it originated with the translator. The verse has every appearance of being genuine, a title is not out of place, and the only difficulty is to account for its omission in the Massoretic text. It is not always easy to explain a corruption or alteration in a text, nor is it always deemed necessary. In this case, however, it is possible that evidence can be adduced which will provide

¹ So Dt 22⁷: 'that it may be well with thee, and that thou mayest prolong thy days' (cf. 4⁴⁰ 5³³).

² The papyrus has preserved only: 'Thou shalt not covet . . . [thou shalt] not covet thy neighbour's h[ou]se, or his f[ield],' etc.

a plausible explanation. The clue is supplied by the Palestinian Targums, which have inserted before the Shema' a characteristic Haggadah ascribing the Shema' to the sons of Jacob as they stood at the deathbed of their father. This tradition reappears elsewhere in Rabbinical writings, and when we consider the importance of the Shema' in early times, it may be conjectured that the tradition faithfully reflects popular belief. If this be granted, it seems not unlikely that the verse now under discussion once stood in ancient recensions of Deuteronomy, and fell out merely on account of its disagreement with a currently accepted view. This tendency to thrust back rites and laws to pre-Mosaic times is perfectly intelligible, and the procedure is so well known from the Pharisaic Book of Jubilees, that there is nothing improbable, perhaps, in the nature of the suggestion I have hazarded.

These are the more remarkable features of the papyrus. There are also noteworthy grammatical forms: one, the nominal suffix of the third person singular masculine in ה, which occurs sporadically in biblical Hebrew; another, the suffix in ויקרטי, which is absolutely unique. Further, the restoration of the papyrus suggests that in two or three cases the text must have differed from the Massoretic, although, naturally, the original reading cannot be recovered. Of these, the most striking is the fact that in Ex 22^{2,3} there could not have been room for all the words between 'Egypt' and 'other gods before me,' and the probability is that 'the house of bondage' was omitted.

A study of the variants in the papyrus shows that although a small number may occur singly among the hundreds of MSS collated by Kennicott or De Rossi, no one MS. contains the whole of them, nor any number of them, and that a large proportion of them are absolutely unique. On the other hand, with scarcely an exception, they are all supported by the Septuagint, and thus acquire additional authority and trustworthiness. But the text is neither a retranslation nor an adaptation from the Septuagint or any other version. The Hebrew Pentateuch was read in Egypt at least as early as the time when the Letter of Aristeeas was written, and apart from the improbability of such a procedure, there are readings in the Septuagint which are not in the papyrus, or which would have been expressed differently.

Accordingly, one can see no reason why the

papyrus should not be regarded as a genuine Hebrew text. It is well known that the 'Received Text' has scarcely undergone any change since the second century A.D. The variants in the extant MSS are remarkably slight compared with those in the payprus, and their text agrees substantially with that presupposed by the Vulgate, the Targums, and Aquila's translation. But the evidence of the Septuagint, the Samaritan Pentateuch, and other witnesses, has led to the inference that at an earlier date other recensions of the Hebrew text must have been in existence. No actual Hebrew specimen of such a recension has hitherto been known, but the theory is founded so securely upon evidence that cannot be shaken, that it has been never refuted and but rarely denied. It is accepted by almost every biblical scholar: only the precise manner in which the Scribes formed the so-called 'Massoretic' text, and the exact date of its formation, are uncertain.

If it is argued that the papyrus is a specimen—and, at present, the only known specimen—of such an early recension, it need hardly be said that, quite apart from the palæographical evidence, it does not necessarily date from *before* the formation of the Massoretic text. Although the date of this event is not known, it must have been shortly after the destruction of Jerusalem when Judaism was reconstructed at the schools of Jamnia. But we do not know how the text was formed, or how long it was before it was finally adopted in Egypt. It is quite conceivable that private MSS, or MSS belonging to people who were not Jews, were not strictly revised until some years had elapsed, and, in any case, the readiness with which earlier forms of text survive in liturgies, etc., is a familiar experience to the textual critic.

As regards the bearing of the new text upon the criticism of the passages it contains, it must be confessed that it would have been extremely interesting had the Massoretic text contained obvious corruptions here. But this is not the case, the variants are of a different type, and opinion will probably differ as to the relative value of each. At all events, the text provides material for future discussion, and is of no little importance for the study of the Decalogue.

It is not easy to decide offhand whether the text of the Decalogue is an independent recension, or is a fuller form of that in Exodus, or, even, a simpler one of that in Deuteronomy. The third

of these views is perhaps the easiest, and it may be supported by arguments into which space forbids me to enter.¹ It is true that the Exodus recension was usually employed in liturgies, but it is not certain that the papyrus was a liturgy. Its original purpose is not clear, and although conjectures may be hazarded, it must be understood that they have only a certain amount of probability, and are merely provisional. In considering this problem, we have to remember (*a*) that it is uncertain whether the papyrus consisted of a single leaf only, or was a roll or codex; (*b*) that the Decalogue is followed by the Shema' to which is prefixed an introductory verse; (*c*) that the Decalogue *may* represent the Deuteronomic recension; and (*d*) that this, in turn, was possibly never preceded by any introduction, heading, or title. It must not be forgotten, also, that according to Rabbinical tradition, it was disputed whether it was right to copy out separate portions of the Law. R. Jehudah (middle of the second century A.D.) is said to have allowed only Gn 1-6⁸ or Lev 1-8. Children learnt the Shema', but it was preceded by the Hallel. It seems unlikely, therefore, that the procedure was tolerated, except perhaps in the case of schoolbooks, but here, even, there is no evidence that the passages contained in the papyrus would have been so treated. It is, of course, not impossible that the Jews in Egypt were not so strict as their brethren in Palestine in such matters, but the above point should not be overlooked in any consideration of the suggestion that the papyrus was a lectionary or collection of passages. A phylactery is out of the question, whether it was a magical charm seems to be capable neither of proof nor of disproof. It would be tempting to suppose that the papyrus was a liturgy, and, in early days, the Decalogue and the Shema' were actually read together at the Temple service. On the other hand, it is not clear whether the Shema' really *followed* the Decalogue,² and the presence of the introductory verse, and the absence of rubrics or benedictions preceding it, seem to constitute a serious objection. Finally, if the

¹ The differences between the two may be removed (1) by the variants in Hebrew MSS of Deuteronomy; (2) by the readings of the Vatican MSS (especially in Dt 5¹⁴); and (3) by critical considerations relating to secondary elements peculiar to the Deuteronomic recension.

² See Blau, 'Origine et Histoire de la Lecture du Schema,' in *Revue d'Études Juives*, xxxi. (1895), p. 192.

Decalogue is that of Deuteronomy, we have an omission of fifteen verses between Dt 5²¹ and 6⁴. May the papyrus have been an ancient roll of the Law in which there was this lacuna? The material is not a great difficulty, since in Egypt papyrus would naturally be more accessible than leather. That faulty rolls existed in Egypt is evident from the complaint of Demetrius, the librarian of Ptolemy,¹ and there is no reason why they should not have been recopied and perpetuated, particularly if they were in private possession.

But, whatever the original purpose of the papyrus may have been, its value as a pre-Massoretic text of the Old Testament is not weakened. It has justified the confidence of critics in the Septuagint,

and at the same time it is a warning that this version is to be used with the greatest discrimination, since comparison of the two reveals the presence of certain paraphrases and additions in the Septuagint which must be secondary. Finally, as the oldest Hebrew MS. extant, it is valuable evidence for ancient Hebrew palæography, and for the manner in which early manuscripts were written. Totally unexpected and unlooked for though the discovery of such a 'find' has been, it gives rise to the hope that future excavation and research may result in the recovery of other papyri of similar character.

¹ Letter of Aristeas; Swete, *Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek*, p. 525, ll. 2-5; Kautzsch, *Pseudepigr.*, vol. ii. p. 7, sec. 30.

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