Pre-script

"What was originally expressed in Hebrew does not have exactly the same sense when translated into another language. Not only this book, but even the Law itself, the Prophecies, and the rest of the books differ not a little when read in the original."

The prologue to Ecclesiasticus

In the winter of 1997/98, Sue and I celebrated Christmas twice; once at home in Worcester with our family and in the splendour of Worcester Cathedral; and once, a few days later, in the company of 30,000 others on a hillside near Lallibella according to the liturgy of Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The differences were striking.

In Worcester, dark green Christmas trees stood either side of the altar; there was a nativity scene with Joseph and Mary, the baby Jesus, oxen and ass, shepherds and kings. The town was filled with the iconography of Christmas; images of Mary on a donkey; of holly, ivy, mistletoe, of snow covered country scenes, of reindeers and jolly gnomes; of doves, robins, partridges, geese, pheasants and turkeys; of stars, rings, sailing ships, tinsel and ribbons; of warm wine and rich puddings. That year, Christmas had fallen on a Monday and the Cathedral authorities had wanted to cancel the family service on the previous Sunday, anticipating a lack of interest in attending church on two successive days. In the end, popular demand had re-instated a lay-led service of readings and carols. At midnight on Christmas Eve, the Cathedral was filled with 1,500 people come either to celebrate their saviour's birth or to soak up the atmosphere after an evening of partying. And in the morning, the various services at 8:00, 9:30 and 11:00 were well attended – some with congregations of a hundred or two.

In Lallibella, there was no decorated altar. For days before, people from the surrounding country had come over the mountains on foot. Thirty thousand people had come to this village of a thousand souls and now were sleeping on the bare hillside above the rock-hewn churches. Priests had shown us images of the miracles of Mary from the scriptures of their church. There was no story of a journey on a donkey to find no room at the inn. None of the people on that hillside could afford a donkey; and inns were just for wealthy foreigners. On Christmas Eve at 10:00 in the morning, the service began in a sunken courtyard. Each chant building to its climax of trumpets and cymbals over ten or fifteen minutes and in the silence that followed a single priest would commence the next chant. All through the day and into the night the service continued. At midnight fireworks lit the sky, let off by the people on the courtyards rim. The priests and people leant their chins on prayer-staffs to prevent themselves from falling as the chanting and the lack of sleep induced a trance-like state. At dawn there was an outbreak of ecstatic dancing amongst the congregation. Towards the third hour after dawn the priests withdrew within the church to celebrate mass, and only then did the people begin to disperse, walking in single file; long lines of people walking back over the mountains in every direction.

The central part of Ethiopia is surrounded by high mountains. Around them the gorge of the Blue Nile cuts a deep ravine, two thousand feet deep in places, and beyond that there are deserts to the West, East and North, and swamps to the South. For much of its history, Ethiopia has been cut off from the world and has tended therefore either to preserve unchanged some of the ancient ideas and customs it once shared with the world, or to develop them in its own way. Thus a familiar core event, the birth of Christ, is celebrated in a powerfully different way and associated with strangely different stories and images.

Looking at Christmas in Worcester from an Ethiopian perspective, it is possible to discern an ancient pagan mid-winter festival taken over by the Christian Christmas story and then overlaid again by a modern mid-winter festival. It is as if time has allowed the original spiritual truth to be encrusted by the culture into which it has been placed until it is nearly impossible to discern the form of the underlying truth.

On that journey I began to wonder what else in my religion, apart from Christmas, I was seeing in an encrusted form. I wanted to try to loosen the encrustations of time and culture, so as to get a better glimpse, however partial, of what might have been the underlying insights. A starting point for this quest seemed to be a re-reading of the Bible. I wanted to read the bible not in the order it is printed, but in the order it was written, and to try to carry with me in that reading the historical awareness and cultural experiences that the writer would have had. In this reading, I wanted to forget the knowledge of someone who has grown up in the Anglican tradition of 20th Century England, and to read the bible, as it were, for the first time.

Fortunately, no collection of books has been more widely studied than the bible and no ancient history more extensively investigated than that of the people who wrote it. There are excellent studies of the text but these generally deal with the text in the order it is printed, and the history is often shaky. And there are some excellent historical works based on extensive archaeology and objective evaluation of all the relevant finds, but these historians seem sometimes to be unaware of the findings of related textual scholarship. Further, many of the more scholarly books refer to biblical passages purely by chapter and verse leaving the reader who does not know his bible by heart with the choice of either taking the references for granted, or painstakingly looking them all up. As a result, I started to make notes, cross referencing between the historical works and the textual studies and copying in at least a part of the relevant biblical passages where that was helpful. This process was the origin of the notes that follow. They are an attempt to find the sequence of the writings and to place them in their cultural context and thus to read the bible, as nearly as might be possible, as it was written.

Early on I realised that for many of the books of the bible, there is no single author, and no single date of creation. Much of the bible was probably relayed orally before it was written down: it was certainly created within an oral, not a literary, culture. The inspiration for the oral material may indeed have been real events close to the date of its creation, but transmission may have altered it so as to make it, in one sense or another, a 'better' story. And when it was written down for the first time, the scribe may have used a style appropriate for his own age, may have discarded some incongruities in the ancient tradition and amended the text, or added to it, to suit his own times and purposes. And because the text needed to be copied in order to be preserved, the copyists might have continued to adapt the material for some time until a particular form of the text became standardised and regarded as 'scripture'. This whole process could have lasted many centuries – during which time the cultural, political and historical context would have been changing. Thus it was necessary to understand as much as possible of the history of the text, and to realise that whilst a temple priest in the 9th century BCE might have been aware of many of the stories that make up our book of Genesis, he would not necessarily have been aware of all of them, nor would they have been structured in the same way. And he would be quite ignorant of the changes that later editors would make – some of which he might have found to be quite surprising.

The history of Israel presents problems at least as great. There are, it would appear, two histories of Israel. There is one favoured by historians to which the biblical texts only contribute in so far as they meet the historian's normal tests for reliability – that is, they should be roughly contemporary with the events they describe and should have an understood purpose which is compatible with a reasonably objective recording of those events. Texts from neighbouring countries and archaeological studies form a major part of the source material in these histories. The other history, often favoured by biblical scholars, is a paraphrase of the bible, sometimes with the references to God removed (thus making them sound more like history) and supplemented with archaeological and non-biblical texts where relevant. And there are mixtures of the two in which primacy is given to archaeological data when it is in conflict with the bible, but when there is no archaeological data then, in default of anything else, the bible, usually with God removed, is treated as if it were a history.

In order to illustrate the difference between a historian's history and a scriptural history of the area, I will attempt a brief historian's history of the Coastal Levant[1].

A history of the Coastal Levant

In the first half of the 2nd millennium BCE, the northern part of Egypt was ruled for a time by a Semitic group known to history as the Hyksos.[2] This group probably originated in the Levant. Evidence for their occupation and particularly their expulsion comes from several Egyptian texts and archaeological investigations.

When the Egyptians liberated themselves from the rule of these foreigners, they pushed the occupiers into the northern Levant – the area that is today's Lebanon and was previously known as

[1] The geographic area associated with the bible has gone by many names – Canaan, Israel, Samaria, and Palestine to name a few. The definitions of these many of these terms have changed over time. To avoid confusions. overtones and anachronisms, I shall call the area 'the Coastal Levant' and confine the use of the term Israel to the Northern country also known as Samaria, whilst Judah remains, of course, the hill country immediately around and to the south of Jerusalem

[2] Semitic here is used to refer to a group of peoples whose cultures and languages were connected – and whose languages would today include both arabic and hebrew.

Phoenicia. In this area, in the 14th century BCE, there was a rich and successful culture as evidenced by the palaces, the fine works of art and the great library found there[3].

The Egyptians determined that they would never again be victim to a foreign invasion from the North and took a number of measures in pursuance of this objective. Their policy became one of maintaining an empire whose northern border was well beyond Egypt proper. Sometime around 1400 BCE, they deported nearly 90,000 people from the coastal Levant – substantially emptying the area. They maintained Egyptian control there through local administrators and garrison cities as confirmed by excavations in the area and by the Armarna letters – correspondence between Egypt's foreign office and its vassal states in the mid 14th century.

Around 1200 BCE, archeological evidence indicates a sharp increase in the population of the Levant. On the coast, the new immigrants brought with them Mycenaean pottery. From bones found in their villages, it is clear that they kept pigs amongst other animals. They were part of the "sea peoples" of Aegean Greek or Cypriot origin. Some of these people may have been the Philistines of the bible. Their movement across the whole of the eastern Mediterranean seems to have been triggered by new tribal influxes coming south into Aegean Greece. The 'sea peoples' were resisted by the Egyptians, but only with partial success. In the hill country that would later become known as Israel a different group of people arrived. These immigrants seem to have been displaced from elsewhere in the Levant; the artefacts associated with them – cisterns, thick rimmed pottery and a particular house style - have been found elsewhere in the region even before the Aegean 'invasion', but these artefacts are found more plentifully in the hill country than elsewhere.

A contemporary Egyptian stele that celebrated pharaoh Meneptah's 1232 BCE victory over the Libyans allied to the 'Sea Peoples' on his western border also refers, in an appendix, to a campaign in western Arabia where a number of peoples were subdued – the Tehenu, the Hatti, Canaan, Ashkelon, Gezer, Yenoam, Israel and Hurru. This is the first written mention of Israel.

Egypt's influence on the area faded for a while but was re-asserted by Sheshonk who sent an army into the area and erected a stele near Megiddo as an expression of his power. In the 10th century, archeological evidence points to a Jerusalem of a few hectares with a population of no more than a couple of thousand – 300 to 400 adult men[4]. Very little written material dating from this time has been recovered from Jerusalem and its surrounding area. Under all archeologically available measures, the surrounding territory remained impoverished through the 10th and 9th centuries. It is not until the late 8th century that public works, written material and the kind of luxury items that are associated with a ruling class appeared in any quantity. The written material found associated with the 8th century mainly records business transactions scratched on pottery shards. Nothing has been found equivalent to the epic works of literature that came from the great libraries of the Canaanite city of Ugarit[5].

In the early 9th century, the northern hill country, biblical Israel, acquired an empire stretching from Demascus to Eilat under king Omri. His son, Ahab maintained the empire and was, according to Assyrian records, a leading figure in a coalition of Levantine states that opposed their advance. Shalmaneser III records his battle against a coalition including 'A-ha-ab-bu' (presumed to be Ahab) who contributed 2000 chariots and 10,000 soldiers to the anti-Assyrian forces. The battle took place at Qarqar in 853 BCE and seems to have been effective in arresting the Assyrian advance for a while.

An inscription from Transjordan, probably late 9th century, records the success of a Moabite king in liberating his country from the House of Omri. The 'House of Omri' was then the usual name for biblical Israel as used in the non-biblical texts of the time. The Moabite text mentions Yahweh as the god of the House of Omri, and Chemosh as the god of Moab.

The Assyrian Adadniri III (810-793) included the House of Omri along with Tyre, Sidon, and Edom amongst his vassal states. He mentions that he received tribute from Joash of Samaria. Tiglath Pileser III refers to Menahem as being from Samaria, whereas a later biblical author included him as a king of Judah! Tiglath Pileser also mentions a deportation from the House of Omri, the dismissal of Pekah and the installation of 'A-u-si' (Hoshea) as king. Tiglath Pileser cut the boundaries of the House of Omri down to the environs of the town of Samaria. But it was Sargon II who finally destroyed the biblical Israel, deporting a claimed 27,290 people, in 722 BCE or early the following year.

The southern kingdom lived on for a time. Assyrian sources refer to Judah only after the fall of Israel, perhaps because it was neither economically nor geographically significant until the 7th century. But thereafter there are several Assyrian references. The Assyrian records always used the term Judah, never the 'House of David'.

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[3] Evidence for this comes from the excavations at Ras Shamra, ancient Ugarit, which commenced in 1929 CE

[4] Israelites in History p 79

[5] Destroyed at the end of the 13th Century

Jars bearing the inscription "*l' melech"* (meaning 'belonging to the king'), found in Judah and dated to the late 8th century, indicate a degree of national strength and royal organisation in Hezekiah's time. These stamps disappear early in the next century giving way to indications of economic breakdown; there are destruction layers in the excavated sites of many cities. In the annals of the Assyrian king Sennacherib, the claim is made that he destroyed 46 towns in Judah – virtually all the country except Jerusalem. This is dated to the time of Hezekiah (ca. 700 BCE). Isaiah of Jerusalem provided a contemporary Judean account.

Judah seems to have 'learned her lesson' from Sennacheribs's campaign, for Esarhaddon (680- 669) and his successor Ashurbanipal both note the loyalty of Judah's King Manasseh.

Assyrian power eventually weakened. Egypt took the opportunity to re-establish her control over Philistia and Phoenicia. In the northern Levant, she supported the declining Assyrians against the rising power of Babylon. Judah under Josiah also sought to expand her influence and foolishly interfered with the Egyptian army on its way north to confront the Babylonians. Josiah died in battle with the Egyptians at Megiddo. When they returned south, the Egyptians installed a puppet king over Judah. Egypt maintained its power in Syria until 605 BCE, when the Egyptian forces were severely damaged in the battle of Carchemish. Judah then offered tribute to Babylon. Inside Judah there were both pro-Egyptian and pro-Babylonian parties. The book of Jeremiah gives a contemporary account of these tumultuous events. Sensing a moment of Babylonian weakness, Judah rebelled against Babylon expecting Egyptian support. The Babylonians could no longer tolerate rebellion and in 597 their records show that they sent a major army under Nebuchadrezzar to deal with the problem. After a nine-month siege Jerusalem fell and the first deportation took place. Further rebellions resulted in further deportations until, in 586 BCE, Jerusalem was destroyed.

Persian records detail the rise of Cyrus the great. In 539 BCE he conquered Babylon almost without a fight and subsequently permitted the Judeans to return from exile in a decree which is preserved, probably accurately, in Nehemiah.

Nehemiah's memoir is a contemporary record of the process of rebuilding Jerusalem as a Jewish state within the Persian empire. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah are contemporary prophets whose words tell of the difficulties that occurred in the rebuilding of the temple. These record the near extinction of Judean culture and language in its ancient homeland and Nehemiah's desperate but successful attempts to maintain it. Judah, now Jehud, continued as a minor Persian province until the arrival of Alexander the Great

Alexander's conquests are well documented. His conquest of Persia in 331 BCE gave him Judah as part of the package - if he had not already secured it on his way to Egypt the previous year. With Alexander's death, Judah, now Judea, eventually became a territory under the control of the dynasty formed by the Greek general Ptolemy who ruled from Alexandria. In 203 the Seleucid Greek dynasty ruling out of Antioch exploited a Ptolemaic weakness and acquired Judah. The Jewish revolt of 164 lead by Judas Maccabee, recorded contemporaneously in Maccabees II and in Greek sources, led to a period of Judean independence, which was terminated when Pompey was invited into Jerusalem in 63 BCE."

Some of this history finds no echo in the bible – notably the Canaanite conquest of northern Egypt and its subsequent liberation; the Egyptian deportations of around 1400 BCE and their domination of the Coastal levant from then till 1150; the invasion of the Sea Peoples; Omri's empire and Ahab's leadership of an anti-Assyrian coalition in 853. Equally many of the key events in the bible find no echo in this history – the enslavement in Egypt, the Exodus, the Conquest of the Promised Land and the empires of David and Solomon.

It is true that, in general, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Nevertheless, if much diligent searching has taken place and still nothing has been found, then the probability that there is nothing to find must be taken seriously. In this case, much research effort has gone into trying to find archaeological evidence of the underlying history precisely because the missing elements are so fundamental to the biblical story of the origin of the Judah and Israel. And in most cases, nothing has been found, so far, that supports the historicity of these particular elements in the way that the bible describes them.

The differences between the two histories raise many interesting questions as to the motivation and origin of the biblical accounts, which will need to be addressed if the process of removing the encrustation of the ages is to have any chance of success.

The problem of dates

An ideal procedure would be to examine a secure history with a solid basis in research and then to place the texts and their revisions within this context. In order to do this, the dates of the

historical events and the dates of the writing of the texts need to be independently established with reasonable accuracy.

Historical dates can be established by documents or by archaeology. Where documents are used, events are often assigned a date such as 'in the third year of king …', but this then requires knowledge of the dates of the kings. King lists may help with this, but omissions, regencies, inter-regnums, parallel reigns (where a country is split between two brothers for example) all confuse the issue. Other lists, such as those of high priests, chancellors, or royal architects, can help – but also confirm the problem. Archaeology relies on artefacts, cultures and particularly pottery and technology to determine dates. A large-scale framework is provided in the form of the stone age, the bronze age and the iron age; but these technologies did not change at the same time in all places. Archaeological data can link events, such as the destruction of a city, to the artefacts in use at the time. It is then necessary to date the artefact, usually by reference to another event whose date is known by other means. Modern scientific techniques can help provided appropriate samples are available, but even these techniques are of limited accuracy. All these problems mean that dates get increasingly inaccurate as time gets more ancient. Whilst dates from the 6th Century BCE or later may be accurate to within a year or two, dates from the second millennium BCE may be subject to dispute by plus or minus a century or two.

Texts may be dated by their style, by other documents that refer to them or by the historical references they make – or fail to make. Obviously, this can be a shaky procedure at times. Styles may be changed by copyists, and the failure to refer to an event cannot be proof that the event had not happened at the time of writing.

Thus the process of merging a historian's history of events with biblical scholars' interpretation of the provenance of a text is fraught with difficulty and the risks of spurious accuracy. But the attempt is still worth making. Fortunately, the precise date is not always of fundamental importance to the correct sequence of events, and it is the latter that is the primary consideration.

Language and Literature

Then there is the problem of the text itself.

Most of the bible (the Torah and the major prophets)[6] was originally written in the dialect of Canaanite that was in use in Judah in about the 8th century BCE. Although nowadays called Hebrew, this term has only been used for around the last thousand years, having been introduced by the Arabic Scholar Saadia Gaon (882–942 CE) when he compiled its first grammar. First Isaiah, writing around 720 BCE, refers to the biblical language as the 'tongue of Canaan' (Isaiah 19:18). Prior to the 8th Century BCE the archeological record reveals almost no written material from Judah, but in that and the following century there is datable material in the form of ostraca (administrative notes on broken pottery), funerary inscriptions and commemorative texts. The language of these texts is held to be essentially the same as that of the Torah and the major prophets.

Canaanite in its various forms and dialects was used in a strip of land from coastal Syria southward to the Sinai. The Phoenicians spoke Canaanite and 'Canaan' was the name they chose for their North African province around Carthage. Hebrew and the other languages of the area can be regarded as dialects of the same basic tongue. Canaanite is one of a group of related Semitic languages, which include Arabic, Akkadian (the Mesopotamian language from Akkad that became the language of business and diplomacy in the Ancient Near East) and Aramaic (which became the popular language of the second half of the first millennium, and was the language spoken in Galilee in the lifetime of Jesus of Nazareth)

The earliest Canaanite texts come from the great library at Ras Shamra near Ugarit. These texts date from 14th and 13th centuries BCE. This material includes important epic poetry of a style, vocabulary and grammatical structure similar to early biblical poetry[7]. There is additional evidence of the type of Canaanite in use before 1200 BCE in the form of the Amarna letters. These letters were

[6] The Torah is the 'Teaching'. This division of the Hebrew bible runs from Genesis to Deuteronomy. In the Hebrew bible the Former Prophets then start with Joshua and run through to the end of Kings. Of the Later Prophets, the earlier ones, such as Amos, Hoshea, Micah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah were also written in this dialect of Canaanite as were many of the psalms.

[7] In 13th Century BCE, Canaanite nouns had case endings, a grammatical construction that does not appear in the Canaanite that forms the bulk of the prose of the Hebrew Bible, indicating that the Canaanite dialect in which even the earliest biblical prose was written had moved on from that in used in Canaanite poetry. The grammar of biblical poetry, however, is very close to Canaanite poetry.

written between 1350 BCE and 1320 BCE by various Canaanite rulers to the Egyptian administration in Amarna. Two of these rulers were responsible for territories roughly geographically equivalent to Judah and Israel. Although predominantly in Akkadian, the letters include some Canaanisms. Between 1200 BCE and 800 BCE, however, there are virtually no datable Canaanite texts.

The destruction of Jerusalem and the subsequent Babylonian exile all but extinguished the Judean dialect of Canaanite, or Classical Hebrew as it has come to be known. In Nehemiah 8:8 it is stated that the returning scribes had not just to read the law to the people, but also to translate it into words they could understand. Subsequent books, such as Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon, Esther and the Hebrew parts of Daniel are said to be composed in Late Biblical Hebrew, a version influenced by contact with Aramaic and Greek, but probably only used by educated men and women in and around Jerusalem. The non-Hebrew parts of Daniel are written in Aramaic, which had become the customary language of the people. Some late books, such as Judith, may have been written in Greek, the language of the intelligentsia of the day.

In the third century BCE a translation of the Hebrew scriptures was prepared for the benefit of the Greek-speaking Judeans living in Alexandria. It was called the Septuagint after the approximate number of translators, seventy, who were said to have worked on the project. Dahood in his three-volume work on the psalms comments that those translators had 'an inadequate knowledge of biblical poetic idiom' indicative of the long period of time that had passed between the creation of some of the psalms and their translation into Greek[8].

The monastery of Qumran was active from around 150 BCE until 68 CE when it was overrun by Roman Legions. The books of their library were hidden in local caves and not recovered until the 'Dead Sea Scrolls' began to be unearthed by Bedouin shepherds in the 1940's. The caves revealed that the monks possessed copies of nearly all the books now found in the Hebrew bible[9]. They possessed more than one version of many of them, suggesting that they did not put undue stress on the specific words and structure of scripture, but respected the several different versions of the texts they had inherited. They also possessed Targums, Aramaic translations of many of the books, and copies of the Septuagint. The existence of the translations suggests that whilst educated religious people still made use of the scriptures in classical Hebrew, it had become a specialist religious language, difficult for ordinary people to understand.

Around the turn of the eras, at about the time that Jesus of Nazareth was teaching, a new form of Rabbinic Judaism was beginning to emerge. Rabbinic Judaism built upon the foundations established in the legal sections of the Hebrew bible. The resultant literature was known as the 'Oral Torah', since it was regarded as a companion and supplement to the 'written Torah'. It was first written down about 135 CE by Rabbi Akiba, when it became known as the Mishnah. The Mishnah is written in a terse, almost telegraphic style known as Tannaitic Hebrew, quite different from the poetic fluency of the language used in the Torah around a millennium earlier. Although not written down till over a century after Jesus' death, the Mishnah's language was probably similar to that used by the Pharisee's of Jesus time in their scholarly debates.

The final dispersion of the Jews began in 70 CE with the destruction of the temple and was concluded in 135 BCE by the crushing of Bar Kokba revolt. Thereafter Hebrew was a 'dead' language, used only as a means of communication between Jews who otherwise would have no language in common. It was studied by educated Jews who were trained to read the Hebrew bible and the Mishnah in their original forms, just as modern Moslems read the Koran in the language in which it was originally written.

In the 1st century CE a translation of the Hebrew bible into Syriac was prepared on the occasion of the conversion of the royal house of Adiabene to Judaism. A Latin translation was also prepared by Jerome (late 4th century) – mainly from the Hebrew, although some books were revisions of Latin translations of the Septuagint. The Aramaic Targums, the Greek Septuagint, the Syriac translation and Jerome's work are known as primary versions since they are translations of the Hebrew. Other works such as the Old Latin translation of the Septuagint are secondary versions since they are translations of translations.

Around 500 CE, a group of monks, the Masoretes, took up the challenge of maintaining an accurate text for the Torah. It is now known that they used as the basis for their work one of the several versions available to the monks of Qumran, and by chance a different version to that used by the translators who produced the Septuagint about 800 years earlier. They were so committed to producing

[8] Mitchell Dahood (1965). Anchor Bible; Psalms I; Introduction p xxx.

[9] Parts of all the books except Esther have been found. But in view of the small fragments of some of the books and the tiny fraction of the original library that has been recovered, this omission is not significant.

accurate copies that they even reproduced errors such as inverted letters and marks around the letters that might have been due to faults in the paper of the original document they were copying. It did not matter whether the text they were copying made sense or not; accuracy not understanding was what mattered. This process has obvious advantages, but it has the disadvantage that once an error has been incorporated, there is no process for removing it. Scholars believe that whilst, by and large, the texts maintained a high degree of accuracy over a long period of copying, some errors did occur – the raw material for scholarly dispute.

The Problem of Translation

Hebrew, like its fellow semitic language Arabic was originally written using only consonants. The reader was expected to pick the right word from the context whenever the spelling made more than one option possible. In the 8th Century CE, the Masoretes started to add marks above and below the consonantal text that indicated the reading that they believed to be correct. The earliest such Masoretic text discovered to date comes from the 9th century CE. It was found in a synagogue in Old Cairo. It is incomplete, but where extant it differs little from the Masoretic texts produced later. It has notes for scholarly use in Medieval Europe. The translators of the New English Bible used the earliest complete Hebrew manuscript available in the Masoretic tradition. That manuscript, now in Leningrad, dates from 1008 CE. Since then new material published from Qumran and elsewhere and further linguistic research has led to a proliferation of modern translations.

The King James Bible, for many people still the most authoritative of all the English bibles, was not a translation but a compilation of the best of a number of earlier works, some of which were in turn influenced by Latin and Greek versions of the Bible. Where these translations were based on Hebrew texts the ones used were not necessarily the best now available. This resulted in a literary masterpiece but it was also a text whose defects as a rendering of the Hebrew original were 'so many as to call for revision'. This was the motivation of the translators that produced the New Revised Standard Version,

A version of Hebrew started to become a live language again when the Jews who returned to Jerusalem in the mid 19th century CE needed a common language. Being mainly Sephardic Jews (that is Jews from Spain and Portugal) they used Sephardic as the basis for the new national language. Had these settlers been predominantly from Eastern Europe instead, perhaps Yiddish would have been the basis of modern Hebrew. Finally, with the formation of the modern state of Israel, classical Hebrew was re-introduced as the national language, employing the best scholarly understanding of the ancient language then extant. Thus modern Hebrew usage gives no additional clues to the meaning of the ancient Hebrew texts.

The problem facing the translator of the Hebrew bible is that the text forms the overwhelming majority of all the available material in the Canaanite dialect in which it was mainly composed. The other material comprises tax and inventory notes on ostraca, an ivory plaque found in Mesopotamia, a house name-plate, the 'BethDavid" inscription now in Jerusalem – and that is about all. Of the 8000 or so basic words used in the biblical texts, about 2000 occur only once. Whilst the translators believe that there are very few errors in the consonantal text preserved by the Masoretes, the same cannot be quite so firmly said of the vowels that were introduced about one and a half millennia after the original composition. The vowels may not therefore have been always what the original authors intended. Particular difficulties occur when the original authors used proper names; it is not always possible to confidently recognise them as such. For example *'galil*' could either be the place Galillee or a word meaning 'district', and context may allow either interpretation.

Modern translators have at their disposal not only the Masoretic Text, but also the various Texts available from Qumran, the Septuagint and the versions which often witness to alternative Hebrew readings. The use of multiple sources enables them to extract meaning from verses which are obscure in the Masoretic Text. Translators may also look to the usages made of similar words in related languages and to prior and later usages. They also look to see whether alternative vowel readings preserve a more consistent sense, are better grammar, or in the case of the poetry, more faithfully maintain the rhythm and structure of the verse. This gives reasonable scope for scholarly disagreement about the correct meaning intended by the authors and their editors. The Italians have a saying "traduttore traditore" meaning roughly 'he who translates, deceives' and such are the difficulties facing translators that the reader is wise to remember that such deception, whilst unintended, is often unavoidable. The footnote "meaning of Hebrew uncertain" occurs occasionally in many modern translations. Even so, a comparison between recent translations of a great many verses will often show wide variations - with no admission to any uncertainty in the footnotes!

The problems of translation are only beginning when the expert believes that the intentions of the original author have been understood. The next problem is to render those intentions in the target language. A word in Hebrew may have a range of meanings and associations which may not all be rendered by one word in English. Thus, depending on the context, translators may use one English word on one occasion, and another when the same Hebrew word occurs elsewhere. But suppose the original author deliberately chose to use the same Hebrew word or phase in order to achieve an allusion in the mind of the reader. Should translators strive for translating the meaning as fluently as possible or should they strive for word for word consistency? Should they attempt to reproduce the poetry, the alliterations, the rhythms, the wordplays and the assonance's? Clearly to do everything is impossible. In striving to understand the way the writing of the bible might have taken place, it is necessary at times to consider issues of style, vocabulary and allusion for which a word-for-word approach is appropriate. At other times finding the best corresponding modern English way of expressing the meaning will be important. The English renderings of the biblical texts that follow have therefore been prepared according to the reason for which the texts are quoted. Subject to that ambition the quotations adopt the following general principles

1. The main divine names are left untranslated. It seems likely that the original authors expected that the divine name would be publicly pronounced. It was only later, after 200 BCE, that a tradition arose to substitute Adonai (meaning 'Lord') for Yahweh. When this occurred the copyists included a note in the margin to help the reader. Later, when the Masoretic Text had its vowel markers added, the vowels from Adonai were inserted into the divine tetragram. The result, using the german transliteration convention, was the word Jehovah. Thus the precise pronunciation of Yahweh has to be inferred from the fact that it is widely taken to be the third person singular of the causative stem of the verb 'to be' – meaning 'He-causes-to-be'. It is interesting to note that although a tradition has arisen in some quarters that Yahweh should not be pronounced aloud, there are no such inhibitions with regard to the short forms of the name – Yah and Yahu. Yah is used every time the words 'Hallelu Yah' (meaning 'Praise Yah') are said or sung and Yahu is incorporated into many names including modern ones such as Netanyahu.

   The northern country, Israel, preferred to use El and Elohim as the main divine names. El is both a general term for 'god' as well as a name of God. Where it is used as a general term it is translated (as in "the god of …") but where it is used as the name of God it is either capitalised or left as El. Similar comments apply to Elohim which can either be the plural 'gods' or a divine name. 'Elohim' can be construed as singular when it is used as a name; thus the plural form could be regarded as a 'plural of majesty' – similar in principle to the English royal 'we'. It is interesting to note that the term Elohim can also be applied to mortals. The spirit of Samuel that Saul called back from the grave was described as an Elohim – a 'great spirit'. Grammatically Elohim is the plural form of Eloah – which occurs in the book of Job, but otherwise is very rare[10]. It may be that El is simply a short form of Eloah, but it is also the name of the father god in the ancient Canaanite pantheon.

2. Where human names have been introduced with a specific meaning relevant to the story, then the English equivalents are used. In the story about Gideon, for example, the hero's name is translated as 'Hacker' since the name is relevant to the story; he was given it because he hacked down Asherah poles.

3. Where the same Hebrew word recurs in a passage, the temptation to offer a 'good' English style by using a variety of English words has generally been resisted. Where it is believed that the Hebrew author is making a deliberate allusion to another text, then the same Hebrew words are consistently rendered by the same English words

4. Where it is sensible to do so, an attempt will be made to reflect the literary devices, such as word-play and assonance, used in the Hebrew text. Where, as is generally the case, this is not possible and the literary devices are important to an understanding the text, then a transliteration of the Hebrew original will be incorporated.

5. Where there is a good consensus amongst a number of modern translations as to the intended meaning of the Hebrew text, then the English text proffered has been created to reflect that

[10] In the Hebrew Bible, Elohim occurs 2606 times, El 245 times and Eloah just 57 times.

consensus[11]. Where there is no clear consensus, then the notes provided by the authors of the Anchor Bible series of studies have been particularly useful as they offer a verse by verse discussion of the issues facing the translator and the arguments for and against particular solutions. Such arguments have been helpful in deciding upon an inevitably non-consensual interpretation – though this has not always been the one preferred by the author of the notes. On some occasions (usually in the context of poetry) I have offered a fresh translation of my own: but wherever this is done, an explanation is provided.

The aim in what follows remains that of setting the biblical texts in their historical contexts, as far as that can be ascertained.[12] In view of all the problems, there can be no certainties here. Looking back through nearly three millennia and trying to understand the intentions of the scribes that first wrote the great scriptural texts is a wonderfully exciting challenge. It is only possible to make the attempt because no other text, and no other history, has received so much study.

[11] Consensus of meaning has been sought principally within The New Revised Standard Version, The New International Version, The New English Bible, The Jerusalem Bible, and the Authorised King James Version.

[12] Sometimes it will be helpful to quote other texts for reference or as evidence. If these other texts are not thought to have originated from the time being discussed, then, to avoid confusion, these other texts will be quoted in inverted commas using a normal font, whilst contemporaneous quotations will be in italics.