

THE MASORETIC GUILD AND THEIR GIFT TO POSTERITY: THE TEXT OF THE OLD TESTAMENT¹

A Aliança Massorética e sua transmissão à Posteridade:
O Texto do Antigo Testamento

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RESUMO

A Palavra escrita de Deus é um presente para todas as gerações. É o caso do Antigo Testamento, em que Deus revelou Sua vontade para Israel e para nós. Esta Palavra foi conservada através de gerações por homens que passaram suas vidas no processo de copiar e manter tão puro quanto podiam o texto bíblico. Eles eram os escribas e os massoretas. Assim, nós herdamos a Palavra Sagrada de Deus, e é nosso dever manter a cadeia de transmissão às gerações futuras, de modo que todas as gerações possam ter a oportunidade que tivemos de conhecer a vontade de Deus escrita.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Crítica Textual. Masorah. Bíblia Hebraica.

ABSTRACT

The written Word of God is a gift to all generations. It is the case of the Old Testament in which God revealed His will to Israel and to us. This Word was kept through generations by men who spent their lives in the process of copying and keeping as pure as they could the biblical text. They were the scribes and the Masoretes. Thus we have inherited the Sacred Word of God, and it is our duty to keep the chain of transmission to future generations; so that all generations might have the opportunity we had of knowing the written will of God.

KEYWORDS: Textual Criticism. Masorah. Biblia Hebraica.

INTRODUCTION

In order that the word of God could reach the last generation, before the coming of the Lord, the text of the Old Testament in Hebrew had to be preserved and transmitted through centuries, in its purity. God, in His omniscience, foretold the need to keep His word pure from corruption. Therefore God used skillful men, whom He could trust the task of keeping His word from additions and/or omissions made by human interference. The history of this process of careful preservation and transmission of the Sacred Text can be didactically divided in eras. Each era had its own special contribution to this process.

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THE SCRIBAL ERA: THE STANDARDIZED CONSONANTAL TEXT

This work of preservation of the Word started, in a systematic way, during the postexilic time. Probably its root is found in the Babylonian exile during the ministry of Ezekiel and his scribe Baruch. It took a systematic shape, however, with Ezra³ in the second half of the fifth century before Christ in the land of Israel, in this case, in the Persian province of *Yehud*. Its beginning coincides with the origin of Judaism as well.

Having the need of instructing the returnees in the Law of God, Ezra trained a group of knowledgeable scribes, probably Levites, in the copying, preservation of the text, and its teaching to the returnees in *Yehud*. In several texts Ezra is called “scribe” of the Law of God: “Ezra came up from Babylon; and he *was* a skilled **scribe** in the Law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given,” (Ezra 7:6, 11, 12, 21; Neh 8: 1, 4, 9, 13; 12; 26, 36). Thus, he mastered the Hebrew and the Aramaic languages, which were necessary for the preservation of the Old Testament Text. He established a scribe guild specialized in the copying and distributing of the sacred text, in this case the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses. Since the Jews had forgotten the Law of God, Ezra started to teach them based on the first five books of the Old Testament (see Neh 8:1).⁴

The Hebrew term for scribes is *sōpērīm*, they formed a guild that would continue until the time of Jesus and after (400 B.C.-200 A.C.). Their greatest achievement was the standardizing consonantal text of the Hebrew Sacred Scripture by the end of the first century of the Christian era. They counted the text; this is why they were named *sōpērīm*. The verb *spr*, from which their name comes, means both “to write” and “to count.” The methodology of counting the letters of the text was one of the ways to preserve it without additions and omissions. The Jewish

³ According to White, “The efforts of Ezra to revive an interest in the study of the Scriptures were given permanency by his painstaking, lifelong work of preserving and multiplying the Sacred Writings. He gathered all the copies of the law that he could find and had these transcribed and distributed. The pure word, thus multiplied and placed in the hands of many people, gave knowledge that was of inestimable value,” PK, 609.

⁴ For further studies on this subject see: CHAPMAN, Stephen B. **The law and the prophets:** a study in Old Testament canon formation. Forschungen zum Alten Testament 27 8Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000; COOGAN, Michael David. Literacy and the Formation of Biblical Literature. In: WILLIAMS JR., Prescott H.; HIEBERT, Theodore (eds.). **Realia dei:** essays in archaeology and biblical interpretation in honor of Edward F. Campbell, Jr., at his Retirement. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1999. p. 47-61; CRENSHAW, James L. **Education in ancient Israel:** across the deadening silence. New York: Doubleday, 1998; CRIBIORE, Raffaella. **Writing, teachers, and students in graeco-roman egypt.** American Studies in Papyrology 36. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1996; DEARMAN, J. Andrew. My servants the scribes: composition and context in Jeremiah 36. **JBL**, n. 109, 1990, p. 403-421; DEMSKY, Aaron. Writing in ancient Israel: the biblical period. In: MULDER, Martin-Jan (ed.). **Mikra:** text, translation, reading and interpretation of the hebrew Bible in ancient judaism and early christianity. Compendia Rerum Judaicarum ad Novum Testamentum 2/1. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1988. p. 2-20; ELMAN, Yaakov. Authoritative oral tradition in neo-assyrian scribal circles. **Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Studies of Columbia University** 7, 1975, p. 19-32; CHARPIN, Domonique. **Reading and writing in Babylon.** Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press, 2010; TOORN, Karel van der. **Scribal culture and the making of the hebrew Bible.** Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press, 2007.

tradition applies the term *sōpēr* to the first scribes from the time of Ezra until the third century B.C.

In the second phase of the Scribe era, they were named *Zugoth*, meaning “pair of scholars,” from the second century, starting with Jose ben Joezer, to the first century B.C. ending with Hillel. In the last phase, they were called *Tannaim* “repeaters” or “teachers.” This final phase started with the death of Hillel and ended with the death of Judah Hannasi around the 200 A.C. The *Mishnah*, the *Tosefta*, the *Baraitoth* and the *Midrash* contain the teachings of these three groups of scribes (ARCHER JR., 1994, p. 69).

Judaism⁵ preserved initially, an oral tradition together with the written Sacred Scripture, the Old Testament. This oral tradition had the purpose to safeguard the written revelation. Sometimes this oral tradition was embellished with folk tales and anecdotes with the aim of teaching and simplifying the explanation of a specific text.

After the consonantal text was standardized, the scribes of the law produced a textual study of the biblical manuscript consisting on interpretations of the text. These interpretations were gathered in a literary work called the *Midrash* 100 B.C.-300 A.C. Since after the Babylonian exile the returnees to the Persian province of *Yehud* spoke Aramaic and also Hebrew, the *Midrash* uses both languages in different sections of its work. In other words, it was a commentary divided in two sections: on the Torah, the Pentateuch, this section is named *Halakah* (“procedure”), and on the rest of the Old Testament is named *Haggadah* (“explanation”). These comments are very important for the study of the Bible, for they are witness of the consonantal text during its standardizing process.

The second literary work made by these scribes is named *Tosefta*, meaning “supplement,” to the former interpretation of the text. This work was prepared from the first century of the Christian Era until the fourth century. It contains a facilitated version of the teachings of Rabbi Aqiba, which were not in the *Mishnah*, and was used for memorization and as a teaching device.

The greatest literary work in Judaism was the Talmud (WALD, 2007, p. 470-481). Its name came from the Hebrew word “instruction” and from the verb “to teach” (100-600 A.C.). It was divided into two major sections. The first one was the *Mishnah*, which was finished around 200 A.C., and it contains traditions and explanations of the Law of Moses (WALD, 2007, p. 319-331), composed in the Hebrew language. The writers of the *Mishnah* were the *Tannaim*, they were scribes belonging to the last phase of the *Sopherim*, as mentioned above. The second division of the Talmud is the *Gemara*, from the Aramaic verb “to complete.” It contains an expanded commentary on the *Mishnah*. The scholars

⁵ NEUSNER, Jacob. **Torah through the ages: a short history of judaism**. Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990. Neusner explain the origin of Judaism based on the dual Torah, the Written and the oral one. BLENKINSOPP, Joseph. **Judaism: The first phase, the place of Ezra and Nehemiah in the origins of judaism**. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009.

who prepared this section were named *Amoraim* from the Hebrew verb “to speak.”

These literary works form the core of Judaism until the present time (MOORE, 1960, p. 3-28). Immediate after their completion (600 A.C.) a new era of preservation of the Sacred Text started with a group of Jewish scholars named Masorettes. They took the painful task not only to preserve the text, but also to transmit a technique that would provide resources for future generations to continue the process of preservation of the Sacred Text. Their work continued until the tenth century after Jesus. The Hebrew Bible we have today we owe to them.

Each era had its importance for the transmission of the Sacred Text. The work of all these specialized groups was a gift to humanity. Thanks to them we can have a text that remained in its standardized form over millennia, and when compared with the Dead Sea Scroll their differences are insignificant (WALTKE, 2001, p. 27-50). This group, the Masorettes, is the focus of this article.

THE MASORETIC ERA: THE STANDARDIZED MASORETIC TEXT⁶

This article has not the intention to be an exhaustive investigation about the Masoretic work and techniques, but rather an introduction to the importance of their work for the preservation and transmission of the Biblical Text. The Hebrew terms *ba'alé hammasorá*, is the name for the scholars who directed the process of copying of the Masoretic Text. As seen above, the scholars from the first centuries before and after Christ occupied in this activity were known as *sōpērîm*, “scribes.” The scribes were the ones who standardized the consonantal text (REVELL, 1996, p. 594).

The scribe’s guild went through a process of transformation into the era of the Masorettes. These latter Jewish scholars developed a well elaborated and detailed system to preserve the text in such way that later generation of Masorettes could recheck the text and find out if it was a pure text or a corrupted one. This collection of rules or list of characteristics of a specific book of the Bible was named Masorah.⁷ Thus, lists of individual words, different spellings, supposed errors in the

⁶ For more information see this reference: BARRERA, Julio Trebolle. **The Jewish Bible and the Christian Bible: an introduction to the history of the Bible.** Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998. p. 272-290.

⁷ According to E. J. Revell Masorah consists in “A small circle (*circellus*) above a word in such a text (or between two or more words) indicates that a marginal note provides information on that word (or group of words). The basic information is given in the vertical margin beside the line of text. The most common information is represented by the letter *lamed* representing the Aramaic word for “none,” indicating that the word (usually specifically that combination of letters) does not occur elsewhere. Where a word occurs more than once, other letters, representing numbers, are used to record the number of occurrences. One example is the first word in Genesis, *br’ÿyt*, which, as the letter *be* signifies, occurs five times in the Leningrad Codex. In some cases, further highly abbreviated information is added. In Gen 1:1 the note adds “Three (of the five cases occur) at the beginning of a verse.” A small proportion of these notes gives other sorts of information, such as the required pronunciation (Heb *qere*) in cases where the form written in the text (Heb *kētib*) suggests a different word. See *kethib* and *qere*. Collectively, these notes placed in the vertical margins of the text are known as the *masorah parva* or “lesser Masorah” (Mp), or Heb *masorâ qeṭannâ*.” ABD, 4:593.

original manuscript, words that appeared once in the text, etc., were kept faithfully as evidence of the consonantal text preserved by the scribes. Such lists provided a means of reference against which innumerable details of spelling of the text could be checked. Hence, the Masoretes developed the Masorah appended at the margin and at the end of the manuscripts. This Masorah contained all the elements necessary to check the purity of the manuscript in which it was appended. Another innovation of the Masoretes is the development of the accents and the invention of the vowels (WICKES, 1887). Since the return from the Babylonian exile, the community of *Yehud* spoke mostly Aramaic and later Arabic, many of them having some difficulty in understanding the consonantal text left by the Scribes Guild. Therefore, the vowels helped them read the text. The accents assisted in the correct pronunciation and in the grammar as well in the syntax of the text. Also, the accent was an important religious tool for the chanting of the text in the Sabbath reading in the *Beth Knesset* (Synagogue). The Masoretic tradition seems to be a continuation of Ezra's work.

The time the Masoretes started their work is very difficult to specify. They might have started in an oral manner, way before the traditional accepted date (sixth-seventh century A.C.). Since the text was considered sacred and could not be touched in any manner, the appending of the Masorah would be considered a violation of the sacredness of the text itself. Therefore, the Masoretes could have started during the Talmud formation, but in an oral and written tradition separated in treatises or written lists of specific characteristics. This could explain why some Masoretic information can be found in the Talmud (Babylonian) referent to the consonantal text: (1) *Kiddushim* 30a, mentions the number of verses in biblical books. This numbers of verses does not match the numbers found in the Masoretic Text, but at least it indicates that a new trend was being developed in the process of copying and preservation of the text as they had received. (2) *Bereshit Rabba* 12:6 present a list of references to defective and correct spelling. (3) *Puncta Extraordinaria*, found in *Sifre* Numbers 69, and the *Itture Sopherim* "scribal omission," found in *Nedarim* 37b-38a, and the large and small letters in *Megillah* (WÜRTHWEIN, 1988, p. 18).

Having the evidence at hand one can determine an approximated period for the beginning of the Masoretic Work. It could be well established around 600-700 A.C (YEIVIN, 1980, p. 164). When the vowels and accents were already being used in manuscripts not used in religious services. Jerome is a witness of the Hebrew text he used for the Latin Vulgate, he mentions that the Jewish language did not have any sign to indicate the vowels; evidently he is not implying the vowel letter, or *matres lectionis* (DOTAN, 1971).

Aaron ben Asher became the most famous Masoret. The Masoretic treatise *Diqduqe ha-te'amim* is traditionally attributed to him. He collected all the information he could find regarding the systematization of the Masorah and compiled them in this treatise. His work dealt with accentuation, *shewa* and *ga'ya*. Dotan prepared an edition of Aaron ben Asher (DOTAN, 1967). Two manuscripts have been

accepted as being from ben Asher influence. The Leningrad codex [B19a] prepared in 1008 A.C. by another Masoret named Samuel ben Jacob (LOEWINGER, 1970). He copied from a manuscript from ben Asher tradition. This is the most important codex today, for it was used for the modern edition of the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. The second important codex is the Aleppo Codex written by Solomon ben Buy'a, but the Masoretic notes, accent and vowels were placed by Aaron ben Asher himself, as evident in the colophon. A facsimile edition was published of this codex (GOTTSTEIN, 1976).

The Arabic treatise *Kithab al-Khilaḥ*, on the difference between ben Asher and ben Naphtali, two important Masoretes, was written by Mishael ben Uzziel. The Hebrew edition was named *Sefer ha-Hillufim*, which means “the book of the differences” (LIPSCHÜTZ, 1965).

The most impressive treatise on Masoretic notes comes from the tenth century, named *Okhlah we-Okhlah*. It contains a long list of the most various differences chosen by the Masoretes to help perpetuate the text in its purity. Two modern editions have been prepared of this treatise (FRENSDORF, 1975).

A treatise on the grammatical rules based on the Masorah was the Arabic work named *Hidayat al-Qari* “the direction of the reader.” It has a systematization of the rules regarding the use of the Masorah as grammatical tool. It was prepared no later than the tenth century (DÉRENBOURG, 1879, p. 309-550).

The Masoretic Era ended after the death of ben Asher and ben Naphtali (ca. 950). The end of this era marked the fixation of the Tiberian tradition regarding the accents and vocalization of the consonantal text received from the Scribal Era. Therefore manuscripts from this Era are very important and rare. After the year 1100 the manuscript found so far are the inferior quality to those from the Masoretic Era.

THE PRINTING ERA: MAKING THE TEXT AVAILABLE

This era characterizes by monumental literary works undertaken by scholars from different geographical areas. This was possible, in part, due to the invention of a movable printing device by Guttenberg (ca. 1500). This task of producing the text of the Old Testament in its entirety was done through painstaking effort. The mention of some of them, in this article, does not discredit those omitted, since all, including the least literary work of this era, are important to the process of keeping and transmitting the text to posterity.

The work of Jacob ben Chayyim, who was a Jewish refugee from Tunis, was the monumental Second Rabbinic Bible. This work was published by Daniel Bomberg in Venice, 1524/25. This edition was based on the First Rabbinic Bible published also by Bomberg and edited by Felix Pratensis (1516/17). The only problem with this first edition was that Pratensis was a converted Jew and his edition was considered too much influenced by Judaism. So As a result, his work met some opposition

among Christians. Jacob ben Chayyim was also a Jew converted to Christianity, but he tried to avoid the same problem of Pratensis. His edition became the most important for centuries. This Rabbinic Bible had the text in Hebrew with its Targum version beside. Rabbinic commentaries were appended to these texts, including a large portion of the Masorah (WÜRTHWEIN, 1988, p. 39).

The second monumental contribution to Masoretic Studies was the work of Elias Levita (1468-1549). He wrote a book called *Massoreth ha-Massoreth*, published in 1538 (GINSBURG, 1867). He explains how the vowels were created by the Masoretes at the end of the Talmud completion. This was a major detour of the general opinion of his time, as it was believed that the vowels were originated at Sinai or by Ezra. Levita discusses several subjects in his work especially on Masoretic elements like *Qere* and *Ketiv*, etc (GINSBURG, 1968).

Jedidiah Solomon Raphael ben Abraham of Norzi prepared a treatise called *Minhat Shay*, published in 1626. This work contains a comprehensive introduction to the entire Old Testament regarding the vowels and accents. In addition he presents correction to the text of the Second Rabbinic Bible.

Seeligmann Isaac Baer published the Baer-Delitzsch edition of the Bible in 1869. Gesenius-Kautzch-Cowley grammar was based upon this Hebrew Bible. Baer tried his best to present a ben Asher text in his Bible, and this edition was welcomed by most scholars of his time.

Christian David Ginsburg edited a Bible for the British Foreign Society published in 1908. He based his work on seventy manuscripts and nineteen printed editions of the Hebrew Bible. He also published several works on the Masorah compiled from many manuscripts available to him (WÜRTHWEIN, 1988, p. 41).

Rudolf Kittel prepared an edition of the Hebrew Bible in 1906 and 1909. His work was based on the Second Rabbinic Bible of Jacob ben Chayyim, 1524/25. It had an apparatus for the variant readings, commentaries and conjectures about the text. His work was called *Biblia Hebraica*, (BHK) and it was the most significant Bible used in biblical studies in the twentieth century. This work was edited and revised in 1929-37 by Albrecht Alt and Otto Eissfeldt. They based the text on the Leningrad codex B19a dated to 1008 from ben Asher tradition, and were able to expand the apparatus with more variant readings and comments. This same edition underwent another revision in 1967-77 receiving the name of *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS). This is the one used up to the present day in biblical studies.

The Hebrew University Bible Project embarks in anew monumental project. This is the new edition of the Hebrew Bible based on the oldest codex, the Aleppo Codex. This work will present the variant readings of the ancient versions, the variant reading of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the different variants on spelling, accents and pointing found in various manuscripts. One of the most important features is that this new edition of the Hebrew Bible contains (or will contain?) information from rabbinic literature which is not easily available (GOTTSTEIN, 1976).

CONCLUSION

Each of these eras left for us an enormous amount of resources for the study of the Old Testament and its preservation. Hence, all modern versions of the Bible, in any language, should make use of these tools. The text in Hebrew should be the base for any serious study of the Old Testament. Exegesis does not exist based on translations; for all translations are actually interpretations of a specific text. Therefore, the preservation and reproduction of the Hebrew Text through history made it possible for us today to have access to a first-hand material for the study of the Bible. We, as scholars, should be thankful for these men who dedicated their lives for the preservation of the Word throughout generations; now we have the obligation to continue the keeping of the Hebrew Text for its study; so that it will continue to be a source for future generations in obtaining a truthful text on which to base their biblical translations and interpretations. Accordingly, all translations of the Old Testament ought and should be as faithful as possible to the Hebrew Text. Thus the new “masoretas”⁸ of our era will fulfill their role as keepers of the Word as it was handed to us from past generations.

⁸ I imply here any scholar or student of the Hebrew Text.

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