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THE DEVELOPMENT AND TRANSMISSION OF THE HEBREW TEXT  
UNTIL THE COMPLETION OF THE MASORETIC TEXT

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## INTRODUCTION

The four-fold purpose of this research was to determine the general history of the Hebrew Old Testament text; to identify the various stages of the textual development; to identify influences and developments of the text in each stage; to identify and categorize significant extant witnesses to the text.

## THE EARLY PERIOD

This presentation of the history of the Hebrew Old Testament (OT) text will begin with an examination of its earliest times. Regrettably, research discovered that little information is available about the text of this period.

### The Scarcity of Data

Information is essentially non-existent concerning the original autographs of the Hebrew OT. The knowledge of the autographs is limited to a very few biblical passages, and these are only passing references. According to Exodus 24:12, the Ten Commandments were written in stone. Jeremiah chapter 36 mentions the use of ink and a scroll in recording Jeremiah's prophecies. However, more detailed information about the autographs than such instances has yet to be found. As rare as data is on the originals, data on the textual witnesses between the times of the autographs and the fifth century BC is even more rare.

The lack of even the most basic information about these early documents has led to various speculations. These speculations include, among others, whether the

originals were *scriptio continua* (without spaces between the words) and even which languages were used.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, however, one must acknowledge that the facts are simply not available to be conclusive about details of the text during this period. “In our efforts to trace the history of the biblical text we have to plead ignorance about the earliest stages of its transmission.”<sup>2</sup>

### The Reason for the Silence

The OT has been extolled by the Jews as being the greatest book of all times. Christians through history considered it the foundation undergirding their most cherished beliefs. Mankind at large has acknowledged it as an essential part of the most revered book to grace our planet? With the importance that has been placed on this book, why are no copies available from its first thousand years of existence.

In considering this question Wegner delineates four reasons why so little remains of the centuries of the Hebrew Old Testament. Specifically, he lists:

Age and decay. Being largely made of leather or papyrus the manuscripts (MSS) were given to wear and tear from regular usage and from the normal decay experienced by these materials.<sup>3</sup>

Calamities That Befell the Jewish Nation. The land of Palestine has seen almost constant warfare since Israel’s original occupation. The many wars have undoubtedly damaged or destroyed a number of the OT texts.

Reverence for the Text. The ancient scribes were concerned that the name of God, even in written form, not be treated with any disrespect. Because of this concern the worn or damaged scrolls were segregated to a holding area until a ritual burial ceremony could be conducted.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul D. Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 166.

<sup>2</sup> David Ewert, *From Ancient Tablets to Modern Translations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 86.

<sup>3</sup> The problem of decay was compounded by the climate of Palestine, where most of the documents were written, used, and stored.

People Who Sought to Destroy the Work. From Jehoiakim to the medieval persecutions of the Jews [and beyond], men have maliciously attempted to destroy the Word of God.<sup>4</sup>

### Extant Witnesses

Virtually no witnesses to the Hebrew text exist prior to the fifth century BC. The only surviving witnesses that have surfaced to date are silver amulets excavated in Jerusalem by Gabriel Barkay (1985).<sup>5</sup> These amulets were worn as charms against evil or injury, and are inscribed with the priestly benediction similar to Numbers 6:22-27.<sup>6</sup> They date to the mid-seventh century BC, and are the earliest evidence of biblical text.<sup>7</sup>

### THE PERIOD OF THE SOPHERIM

With one of the stated purposes for this research being the identification of the various stages of the textual development, a need arose to delineate those stages. A time-based delineation, such as those presented by Sanders<sup>8</sup> and Tov,<sup>9</sup> were first considered. The ambiguity in Sanders' system and the desire for smaller time periods prompted the search of another categorization system.

Research shows OT textual development is inseparably linked to the scribes behind the work and regulations of copying the text. Wegner's historical outline of the scribes<sup>10</sup> provided a much more adaptable system of categorization. Therefore, the outline of this presentation is built upon the Wegner's scribal outline.

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<sup>4</sup> Wegner, 165.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Wegner, 167.

<sup>8</sup> James A. Sanders, "Text and Canon: Concepts and Method," Journal of Biblical Literature 98 (1979): 12.

<sup>9</sup> Emanuel Tov, Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992): 29-39.

<sup>10</sup> Wegner, 172.

## The Scribes

The history of the scribes readily divides into four stages based upon the title given to the scribes. Those titles are Sopherim (c 500 BC – AD100), Tannaim (c AD 20-200), Amoraim (c AD 200-500), and Masoretes (c AD 500-1000).<sup>11</sup>

The Sopherim were an influential group of teachers and interpreters of the Law. The time of their beginning is unclear, but was likely prompted by the need to teach the Law during the captivity. Ezra (Ezra 7:6) possibly belonged to this group.

## The Text

### Extant Texts

Compared to the scarcity of witnesses to the Hebrew OT prior to 500 BC, a multitude of MSS have been discovered from the next half-millennium.

Dead Sea Scrolls. The Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) are undoubtedly the most notable find of all times for the Bible student. “It is no exaggeration to say that the scrolls from the Dead Sea caves are the biggest discovery yet made in what may be called the archaeology of the Hebrew Bible.”<sup>12</sup> Norton elaborates on the importance of this discovery.

[T]he Dead Sea Scrolls may easily be one of the greatest archaeological finds of all time. They take us a thousand years deeper into the history of the Hebrew Old Testament, giving us the ability to assess all the other ancient witnesses with greater understanding.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Sir Frederic Kenyon, Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts (New York: Harper, 1958): 31.

<sup>13</sup> Mark A. Norton, Texts and Manuscripts of the Old Testament, in The Origin of the Bible. ed. Philip Wesley Comfort (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House, 1992): 161.

With some of the Dead Sea MSS dating from the mid-third century BC, scholars now had available MSS dating to only 300 years after the close of the OT canon.<sup>14</sup>

What began with a young goat herder's chance find in 1947 ultimately totaled discoveries from eleven caves yielding almost 600 MSS (200 being biblical material). An additional 50,000 to 60,000 leather and papyrus fragments were also found.

One item of particular note was the differences among the texts within the Qumran community. "The texts from Qumran suggest that there was some diversity of readings in the Hebrew books prior to the time of Christ."<sup>15</sup> There is no indication that the textual diversity was a cause for concern. "[T]he materials from the Qumran community... do not reflect any frustration with varying texts within that community."<sup>16</sup>

Samaritan Pentateuch. Other finds during this period may pale in comparison to the DSS, but they are important pieces in reconstructing the transmission of the Hebrew text. Among this list is the Samaritan Pentateuch, dating to the third or second century BC.<sup>17</sup> Of particular note is the similarity between this text and the MT Pentateuch. There are approximately 6,000 variants, most of which are minor spelling or grammatical changes. MacRae finds encouragement in the similarities. "The great similarity between the Samaritan Pentateuch and the MT, despite the long period of independent development, argues for the general accuracy of the Torah."<sup>18</sup>

The Samaritan Pentateuch, however, has its differences with the MT. There are approximately 2000 instances where it prefers the reading of the Septuagint to that of

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<sup>14</sup> Norton, 156.

<sup>15</sup> Ewert, 94.

<sup>16</sup> Norton, 169.

<sup>17</sup> Wegner, 178.

<sup>18</sup> H. R. W. Gesenius, "The Samaritan Pentateuch," in The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, vol. 5, ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982): 244.

the Massoretic Text (MT).<sup>19</sup> There are also a number of expansions and some sectarian tendencies.<sup>20</sup>

Septuagint. Although not a Hebrew text itself, the Septuagint (LXX) is indispensable in the study of the history of the Hebrew text. According to the *Letter of Aristeas* the Pentateuch portion of the LXX was translated into Greek in Egypt sometime between 285 and 247 BC,<sup>21</sup> but the authenticity of *Aristeas* is far from generally accepted. "Modern scholars usually consider the *Letter of Aristeas* a legendary account written about 100 B.C to enhance the status of the Septuagint."<sup>22</sup> The remaining books of the OT were translated in stages, probably by various translators, as time passed.

Nash Papyrus. In 1902 W. L. Nash, then the secretary of the Society of Biblical Archaeology in England, acquired an ancient Hebrew document containing biblical passages. Examination showed "it was not part of a biblical scroll but rather a collection of texts used for another purpose...."<sup>23</sup> This collection included a damaged copy of the Decalogue, Deuteronomy 6:4 and part of Deuteronomy 5:6-21. The Nash Papyrus was dated to the Maccabean period (169-37 BC) by Albright.<sup>24</sup> Norton<sup>25</sup> and Ewert<sup>26</sup> indicate that this MS was the oldest Hebrew witness to the OT prior to the DSS finds.

Murabba'at MSS. In 1952 more witnesses to the Hebrew OT were found in the caves above Wadi Murabba'at. Along with fragments from the Pentateuch and Isaiah the caves yielded a second century BC scroll of the Minor Prophets. The scroll contains

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<sup>19</sup> Ewert, 100.

<sup>20</sup> Wegner, 186.

<sup>21</sup> Septuaginta, (Stuttgart, Germany: Biblia-Druck, 1935): LVI.

<sup>22</sup> Wegner, 195.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 188; cf. Norton, 162.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Norton, 162.

only three significant variants from the MT,<sup>27</sup> which suggests to some scholars that a standardization of the consonantal text had already started. “Scholars have now gone so far as to identify the... texts as a 'Proto-Masoretic' standard. This seems to indicate that the Hebrew consonantal text was already approaching a standard in Palestine by the first centuries AD”<sup>28</sup> (Tov describes “proto-Masoretic” as the text “...which are the actual forerunners of the Masoretic Text, belonging to the same family....”<sup>29</sup>)

Masada MSS. Remains of fourteen scrolls, both biblical and non-biblical, were excavated from Masada in 1963-65. The biblical texts come from Genesis, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Psalms, and Exekiel.<sup>30</sup> The scrolls pre-date the AD 73 storming of the fortress by the Romans.

## Variants

One thing that is striking about the OT Hebrew texts during this period is the vast amount of variants. “The early history of the Old Testament text... shows a remarkable fluidity and diversity. Evidently the standardizing process did not begin at the earliest stages.”<sup>31</sup> Kenyon refers to a theory of Paul Kahle when he notes “...the text-tradition of the Hebrew Bible was much more fluid than was previously thought. This was certainly the case before the destruction of Jerusalem, when the forms and types of text represented by the Samaritan Pentateuch and the Septuagint were not deviations from the norm, but competing traditions in their own right.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ewert, 92.

<sup>27</sup> Wegner, 188.

<sup>28</sup> Norton, 170.

<sup>29</sup> Tov, 21.

<sup>30</sup> Wegner, 190.

<sup>31</sup> Norton, 169.

<sup>32</sup> Kenyon, 72.

Wegner includes Kahle's (1875-1964) theory with two others theories about the variants. Prior to Kahle, Paul de Lagarde (1827-1891) proposed that all the variants came for a common origin, the MT. Later (mid-1950's) William F. Albright and Frank M. Cross theorized that the variants represented three major text types. The three types were geographically centered in the regions of Palestine, Babylon and Egypt. But, Wegner notes, the similarity of some of the Qumran scrolls to other text types causes no small degree of difficulty for the latter theory.<sup>33</sup>

While these theories suggest the relationship between the variants, they don't address the question of why the variants arose in the first place. One suggestion is these earlier texts tended to popularize the biblical text. "There is no early biblical manuscript of which I am aware... that does not have some trace in it of its having been adapted to the needs of the community from which we, by archaeology or happenstance, receive it."<sup>34</sup> Wurthwein specifically notes the assimilation into the text many of the characteristics of the spoken language current at the time of the text, including the substitution of Aramaic forms.<sup>35</sup> He also notes there were cases of "filling out the text," i.e., inserting details found in parallel passages into a text.

The appearance of the variants within the texts might cause concern among some. With so many variants at the earliest periods of available texts, can any of the texts be trusted as accurate? Modern Bible scholars find no cause for such alarm. "It should be noted, however, that the basic text that modern scholarship has identified as

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<sup>33</sup> Wegner, 169-170.

<sup>34</sup> Sanders, 13.

<sup>35</sup> Ernst Wurthwein, The Text of the Old Testament: An Introduction to Kittel-Kahle's Biblia Hebraica, trans. Peter R. Ackroyd (New York: Macmillan, 1957): 13.

closest to the original was among the Dead Sea texts..., ”<sup>36</sup> which was from this time period. That Christ and His disciples were taught from these texts and used them in their own ministries is another source for assurance.

### THE PERIOD OF THE TANNAIM

During the most of the first century AD the period of the Sopherim was giving way to the next group of scribes, the Tannaim, who would serve as the guardians of the Hebrew text until the beginning of the third century.<sup>37</sup> This transition likely included the period of Christ’s ministry and the earliest activities of the church. Christ’s scathing rebuke to the scribes (Matthew 23) was made during this period of transition and, thus, must have been addressed to one or both of these groups.

#### The Scribes

The Tannaim “taught the religious system of the Pharisees as opposed to that of the Sadducees.... [A]fter the Destruction they took the position, naturally and almost immediately, of sole and undisputed leaders of such Jewish life as survived.”<sup>38</sup>

The Tannaim (“lit. ‘repeaters,’ teachers of the Oral Law”<sup>39</sup>) accomplished the writing of the oral traditions handed down from their elders for generations. During this period the written traditions, called the Mishnah, began to take shape under Rabbi Akiba (c. AD 55-137) and was finally published by Judah the Prince near the end of the second century AD.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Norton, 169-70.

<sup>37</sup> Wegner, 171.

<sup>38</sup> Mishnah, trans. Herbert Danby (Oxford: Oxford, 1989): xiv.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

## The Text

The Tannaim's most notable accomplishment from the Christian's perspective was beginning the process of standardization of the Hebrew OT text.

### Standardization

The Background. The long-standing degree of tolerance for the diversity in the Sacred Texts changed in the first century AD.

There is a significant difference between the varied textual traditions found at Qumran dating between the third and first centuries B.C and the minimal deviations in the Hebrew texts from Masada (just prior to AD 73), the caves at Nahal Hever (late first century), and the Wadi Murabba'at (written before the Bar Kachba revolt of 132-35). Thus sometime between these periods the text must have been standardized.<sup>41</sup>

Wurthwein makes a similar point,

"This text [consonantal text of c. 100 AD] has passed through a critical revision, as can be seen from several older witnesses to the text which differ from [the Masoretic].... From these witnesses to the text, which all go back to a time before the authoritative fixing of the consonantal text, we may see that texts which differed from the [Masoretic] were then in circulation."<sup>42</sup>

With the work of establishing a standardized text well underway, the diversity of the previous centuries would never be seen again. "Once this standardization of the text took place, scribes were meticulous to ensure that the Hebrew text did not become corrupted."<sup>43</sup>

The Reasons. One certainly must wonder why such drastic changes occurred in the way the Hebrew texts were handled. Various scholars and writers have offered several reasons.

<sup>40</sup> Ewert, 87.

<sup>41</sup> Wegner, 171.

<sup>42</sup> Wurthwein, 12-13.

Norton considers the destruction of the temple in AD 70 to be one catalyst behind this standardization.<sup>44</sup> Kenyon expands this thought, “After the fall of Jerusalem, when the need for drawing Judaism together... became more and more pressing, the movement towards standardization of the text began to make itself felt.”<sup>45</sup>

Standardization of could also be partially from Greek influence. “The contact of Jewish scribes with the Greek world of letters in the intertestamental period probably encouraged greater exactitude in the transmission of the biblical texts.”<sup>46</sup>

Kenyon thinks the presence and challenges of the infant church were instrumental in standardization. “[As] meeting the claims of the Christian Church became more and more pressing, the movement towards standardization of the text began to make itself felt.”<sup>47</sup>

Wurthewein suggests yet another reason behind standardization. “A fully reliable text became a necessity with the completion of the process of canonisation....”<sup>48</sup>

The Means. A problem arises at this point in the process: If standardization of the text is undertaken, upon what was it to be based? With the number of variant texts at that time, the modern Bible student must be concerned about the antiquity and reliability of the text(s) behind this standardized work.

It appears to be universally accepted that the scribes of that period took adequate measures to assure their new work was based upon the oldest and most reliable texts. “This standardized text was dependent upon the earlier traditions that

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<sup>43</sup> Wegner 171.

<sup>44</sup> Norton, 170.

<sup>45</sup> Kenyon, 72.

<sup>46</sup> Ewert, 86.

<sup>47</sup> Kenyon, 72; cf. Ewert, 86.

<sup>48</sup> Wurthewein, 12.

were available to the Jewish scribes at the at time, but variants and differences in the text were removed.”<sup>49</sup> In comparing the standardized work to the texts that were popular just prior to the second century AD, “...it becomes clear that the fixing of the text was based upon an older form, earlier than that of the popular texts. We are indeed told that the text was established with the assistance of ancient manuscripts.”<sup>50</sup>

Scribes also took measures to prevent deviations from corrupting their new work. “[T]here became dominant in Judaism, particularly through the work of Rabbi Akiba (c. 55-137 AD), a method of exegesis in which even the smallest details and peculiarities of the text are of significance.”<sup>51</sup>

#### Extant Texts

As has already been mentioned, no extant witness for this period were found in this research. Tov comments, “Most of the witnesses for this period pertain either to its beginning or its end, while for the intervening time there exists but little evidence.”<sup>52</sup>

Due to differences in period division the witnesses Tov refers to have been categorized elsewhere in this study.

## THE PERIOD OF THE AMORAIM

### The Scribes

As the third century began to dawn, the Tannaim gave way to the third group of scribes: The Amoraim. The period of the Amoraim (“expositors”)<sup>53</sup> lasted from c. AD

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<sup>49</sup> Wegner, 171.

<sup>50</sup> Wurthwein, 13.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>52</sup> Tov, 33.

<sup>53</sup> Wegner, 172.

200-500. This period is also called the Talmudic Period,<sup>54</sup> since during this time the Amoraim placed considerable effort on the work of the Talmud (supplemental materials to the Mishnah). Actually, two Talmuds were produced from this period, one from each of the two centers of Jewish scholarship (Babylon in the east and Palestine in the west).

### The Text

Little is known of the actual work done to the Hebrew text during this period, but Ewert notes a couple of the activities. “One of the great contributions of the scribes in the pre-Masoretic period was to make word divisions in the Hebrew consonantal text....”<sup>55</sup>

The Amoraim also undertook dividing the text for devotional and lectionary purposes.<sup>56</sup> As with the Talmud, the two centers of Jewish scholarship developed two different types of divisions. The Palestinian scribes divided the Torah into Sedarim, which provided weekly lessons to cover the Torah in three years. The Parashoth divisions, developed by Babylonian scribes, scheduled the Torah to be read each year. The Palestinian system eventually gave way to the Babylonian, and by the thirteenth century the latter was established as the universal practice in Jewish synagogues.

## THE PERIOD OF THE MASORETES

### The Scribes

The Masorettes, the fourth and final group of scribes, were dominant from c. AD 500-1000. As the scribes before them, they took great pains in preserving the

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<sup>54</sup> Ewert, 87.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

standardized text. The Masoretes did, however, add a number of “helps” to the MSS they copied.

The term Masorete is use somewhat ambiguously at times. The term is used to refer to scribes dating as far back as the first century AD. This usage evidently comes from the fact that these scribes began the work that eventually lead to the Masoretic Text. This, however, this is not the strict use of the term. Kelly indicates that there is “...evidence of interest in Masoretic phenomena in the Talmud... [but] there is no evidence for Masorah or Masoretes in the Talmudic period....”<sup>57</sup>

Specific mention should be made of two specific families within the Masoretes.

In the early half of the tenth century two notable Masoretic families flourished in Tiberias, the Ben Asher and Ben Naphtali families. It was once thought that these two families maintained significantly different textual traditions, but more likely they represent only one textual tradition with minor variations.<sup>58</sup>

The impact of these two families, and especially the ben Asher family, on the development of the Hebrew text during this period can hardly be overstated. “Any account of the principal Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament must begin with Moses ben Asher and his son Aaron ben Moses ben Asher.”<sup>59</sup> Kelly states “Scholars agree that the Ben Asher family of biblical texts is the most reliable.”<sup>60</sup> He later adds, “The last member of the family, Aaron ben Asher, was the most famous because his system of vocalization, accents, and Masorah eventually gained fame as the best.... His accomplishments in preserving the textual tradition... are revered until today....”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Page H. Kelly and Daniel S. Mynatt, The Masorah of Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998): 14.

<sup>58</sup> Wegner, 173.

<sup>59</sup> Kenyon 84.

<sup>60</sup> Kelly, xi.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 18.

## The Text

Although the standardization of the Hebrew text began in the first century, and the standardization of the consonantal portions of the text (often called the proto-Masoretic text<sup>62</sup>) was probably completed during the second century, it remained for the Masoretes to produce the text's long-standing official form: The Masoretic Text. It was also during this time (c. AD 500-800) that the Masoretes would add the vowel points, accents, and the Masorahs.

### Developments

Vowel Pointings. As has been mentioned, the Hebrew texts prior to this point contained consonants only. The scribes grew concerned that by simply using the wrong vowels a reader could read an incorrect word into the text. In an effort to alleviate such mistakes the scribes added the vowels into the text. Regular use of vowel pointing began c. AD 600-750.<sup>63</sup>

Various systems of vowel pointings arose during this period.<sup>64</sup> The two most notable came from the two Jewish centers of scholarship: The Babylonian system and the Palestinian (Tiberian) system. The latter eventually become the official system.

Kenyon notes a unique element of the vowel pointings, and the pronunciation that thus became "official," "[T]he pronunciation which was fixed for all time was not that which was then normally used by Jews, but the *ideal* pronunciation as the Masoretes conceived it."<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Tov, 23.

<sup>63</sup> Kelly, 15,

<sup>64</sup> Kenyon, 77,

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.; cf. Wurthwein, 20.

Masorah. Besides vowel pointing, the scribes found other reasons to add helps to the Hebrew text. These additions, called the Masorah, usually served the purpose of footnotes. As we have seen in other instances, the Palestinian and Babylonian traditions produced significantly different Masorahs.<sup>66</sup>

Used in its broadest sense, the written Masorah "... is the collected body of information transmitted with the text of the Hebrew Bible. It includes everything transmitted with the consonantal text except the consonants themselves (even vowel and accent signs.)"<sup>67</sup> The conventional use of the term Masorah, however, "...refers only to the marginal notes transmitted with the traditional text of the Hebrew Bible."<sup>68</sup>

According to Wurthwein, the Masorah proper was made of two major parts, the marginal Masorah and the final Masorah. The former was itself composed of two parts, the Masorah parva (Mp) and the Masorah magna (Mm). The Mp contained scribal notes written in the right and left margins of the page. Its main purpose was to prevent the text from being inadvertently or purposely altered. The Mm was marginal notes located at the top and bottom of the page and were supplemental to the Mp.<sup>69</sup> The final Masorah contained detailed information to help scribes check the accuracy of their copies of the text.

Ewert provides some detail on the marginal Masorah. He notes that the margins occasionally contained euphemisms for idols, sexuality and certain bodily functions. However, a much larger percentage of the notes were given to what the scribes considered to be questionable readings in the text.

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<sup>66</sup> Wurthwein, 22.

<sup>67</sup> Kelly, 1.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Wurthwein, 21.

The Masoretes, in their reverence for the received text, which they called the *Ketib* (“written”) text, put what they thought was the better reading in the margin, and indicated this preferred reading by calling it *Qere* (“read”). They did not want to tamper with the received text, but did not want it to be misread either. There are more than 1300 such instances.”<sup>70</sup>

The measures that the Masoretes took to record and preserve the Hebrew text were extensive. “Often such masoretic notes seem to us far-fetched, frivolous and without purpose. But we must remember that they are the result of a passionate desire to protect the text and to prevent willful or careless mistakes by the scribe....”<sup>71</sup>

Surprisingly the language of the Masorah is not predominately Hebrew. “The language of the Masora is Aramaic and, to a lesser extent, Hebrew.”<sup>72</sup>

Preservation. As the Hebrew OT text reached its final stages of standardization the scribes took great pains in assuring its ongoing integrity.

“It was the Tiberian Masoretic text, vocalized, accented, and provided with marginal notes, which became the accepted norm for the Jews, to the exclusion of any other form of text. Extra-ordinary care was taken to secure perfect accuracy in the transcription of the sacred books. Especially was this the case with the *synagogue rolls*, or copies of the Pentateuch intended for use in the synagogues.”<sup>73</sup>

Extensive requirements were drawn up for those scribes that would follow. One rule required that the scribe not write a single letter from memory. Another demanded the destruction of a scroll that was found to contain as many as three errors on any single sheet. These rule focused on preserving the accuracy of the text. Other rules dealt with measures to show appropriate honor to the name of God, and still others simply dealt with procedural matters.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Ewert, 89; cf. Kenyon 78.

<sup>71</sup> Wurthwein, 21.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>73</sup> Kenyon, 78.

<sup>74</sup> See Ewert (87) and Kenyon (78-79) for a partial list of the scribal regulations.

While the modern Bible student may consider these rules exacting, he can easily find assurance in them as well. “Some of these rules may seem slightly ridiculous to us, but they do encourage great confidence in the accuracy of such copies.”<sup>75</sup>

### Extant Texts

Several texts remain from the Masoretic period. Their extensive marginal notes provide valuable help for textual critics.

Codex Cairensis (C). Written in 895 AD, this codex is both the oldest Masoretic MS<sup>76</sup> and the oldest dated codex known to scholarship.<sup>77</sup> This MS contains only the Former and Latter Prophets and is of the ben Asher tradition. Specifically, it was written by Moses ben Asher for Ya’bes ben Shelomo.<sup>78</sup>

Aleppo Codex (A). The consonantal text of this tenth century work is attributed to Shelomo ben Buya’a, but it was corrected and punctuated with Masorah by Aaron ben Asher, c. AD 930.<sup>79</sup> This codex contained all the OT until 1947-48 when an anti-Jewish riot in Aleppo destroyed about twenty-five percent of the MS.

In 1958 Kenyon wrote of this MS, “If available, this would be the final authority for the Tiberian text of the whole Bible. Unfortunately the synagogue authorities would allow it neither to be copied nor photographed, and it is now reported to be destroyed.”<sup>80</sup> Apparently the reports were false and the authorities changed their minds. Only twenty-five years after Kenyon’s book Ewert states that the MS “is now in Jerusalem and will be

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<sup>75</sup> Ewert, 87.

<sup>76</sup> Norton, 154.

<sup>77</sup> Kelly, 18.

<sup>78</sup> Kenyon, 84.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 85.

used for a new Hebrew Bible to be published by the Hebrew University.”<sup>81</sup> Norton (1992) concurs with Ewert.<sup>82</sup>

Oriental 4445. Currently housed in the British Museum, this MS contains portions of the Pentateuch and “...represents an early form of the ben Asher text.”<sup>83</sup> Oriental 4445 is composed of one hundred eighty four folios. Fifty-five of the folios are late additions (c. 1540), but the remaining folios date to c. 950.

Codex Leningradensis (L). Based upon exemplars written by Aaron den Asher, this codex was written by Samuel ben Jacob in AD 1008.<sup>84</sup> Kelly notes that there are a number of erasures in the MS, which are presumably corrections “... intended to bring the codex closer to the tradition of Aaron ben Asher.”<sup>85</sup>

According to Wegner, Leningradensis was the oldest complete Hebrew MS prior to the discovery of the DSS.<sup>86</sup> Recent critical Hebrew texts (*Biblia Hebraica* and *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*) relied on Leningradensis as their main source “because older manuscripts were unavailable at the time [of their writing].”<sup>87</sup>

Cairo Geniza Fragments. A geniza in an old synagogue in Cairo, Egypt, was found to contain a treasury of biblical text fragments from the sixth to eighth century. A geniza was a storage room where old, damaged or faulty MSS were held. Once enough such MSS accumulated they were ceremonially and respectfully buried or burned. As many as 200,000 fragments of biblical and non-biblical texts were found in the Cairo synagogue.

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<sup>81</sup> Ewert, 91.

<sup>82</sup> Norton, 154.

<sup>83</sup> Kenyon, 85.

<sup>84</sup> Wegner, 187. Wegner also notes that portions of the OT possibly pre-date this by even a century.

<sup>85</sup> Kelly, 19.

<sup>86</sup> Wegner, 187.

Reuchlin Codex. Only one MS following the ben Naphtali tradition was found in this research. This codex contained the Prophets, and dates to c. AD 1105.

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The end of the Masoretic period brought no end to the work on the Hebrew Old Testament. The invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century would prove to be one of the biggest single advancements in the transmission of the Hebrew text. After the first complete Hebrew Bible was printed in 1488 the work of the scribe would never be the same again.

Even though advances would continue to be made in the transmission of the text, the development of the Hebrew OT text itself was largely set half-a-millennium before the printed Hebrew Bible was available. Today's students of the OT are forever in debt to this work accomplished by those scribes of old.

Through the course of this study some thoughts of interest have come to this student. Please consider a few of these in closing.

What is the first written document of the Hebrew OT? Research failed to find anyone that addressed this question. It's possible that this distinction belongs to the earliest portions of the Pentateuch or the book of Job. However, the earliest record of the writing of Holy Scriptures found during this research was in reference to the Decalogue (Ex. 31:18). It is interesting that God Himself may have inscribed the first written scripture.

The possibility of the earliest MSS having no spaces between the words was noted earlier. The question that arises is why would those who so set on producing the

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 194.

exactness of the consonantal text be willing to allow such a massive variance to that exactness. Space “pointings,” similar to nature to the vowel pointings, would be more in line with scribes’ respect for the text. The scribes’ willingness to insert hundreds of thousand of items foreign to the original seems unlikely. Thus, this student is inclined to think the spaces were in some form a part of the earliest texts.

The texts produced before the destruction of the Temple in AD 70 show a widespread tendency to popularize the biblical text, probably not unlike the proliferation of contemporary English Bibles in modern times. As already mentioned, the texts of this period were undoubtedly those Christ, the apostles, and the early church learned from and used in their ministries. One must wonder what implications this might have on the use of contemporary translations in modern times.

While the resources consulted in this study have presented the work of the scribes with great underlying admiration, some degree of balance may also be due. As noted earlier, it was towards some of the scribes of the mid-first century that Christ pronounced His most scathing rebukes.<sup>88</sup> Maybe Wurthwein best sums up and applies what should be learned from the scribes. “The Masora bears witness to an extremely exact revision of the text, which deserves our respect, even though there is always the danger that in the care for the letter of the text its spirit has been missed.”<sup>89</sup> May the modern student see his search for the exactness of God’s Word not as an end within itself, but as a means to better understand the heart of the One who wrote it.

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<sup>88</sup> See Matthew chapter 23.

<sup>89</sup> Wurthwein, 21.

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