

# GUIDE TO THE MASORETIC TEXT

BETHEL SEMINARY



CENTER FOR BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

PAUL W. FERRIS JR., PH.D

## 1 Text Criticism

From c. 400 B.C. until c. 200 A.D. there developed and flourished a guild of scribes who came to be recognized as the custodians of the biblical text. They were called the *Sopherim*. They standardized the consonantal text. To insure the integrity of handwritten copies, they counted all the verses, all the words and all the letters of each book of the Bible and recorded those figures in a sort of appendix at the end of each book. This was used to check subsequent copies. If the numbers did not match, the scribe would know to search for an error.

## 2 Masoretic Text

This standardized consonantal text formed the basis of what we call the *Masoretic Text* (MT). The statistics of the *Sopherim* are included in what came to be called the *masora finalis*.

## 3 Vocalization

It was not until after c. 500 A.D. that the system of vowel points were invented. There had been no written tradition of pronunciation or vocalization -- only oral tradition. By the fifth century it had become apparent that the *matres lectionis* would be insufficient to protect the reading and interpretation of the text. Thus, after several attempts to deal with the problem, a system of marks inserted above and below the consonantal text was devised. Actually, two different systems developed. One in the diaphora, known as the Babylonian system, and the other at "home," known as the Palestinian system. Both of these were supralinear. Finally, the Masoretes at Tiberias, of whom perhaps the ben Asher family is the best known, standardized the system that has been preserved in the BHK and BHS via the "*textus receptus*," e.g. the ben Hayyim edition (publ. 1525-6 as Bomberg edition).

## 4 Masora

The evidence points to a fairly consistent consonantal text from the second cent A.D. with the vocalization, accentuation and

NOTES:

cantillation becoming more or less fixed by the ninth - tenth centuries.

NOTES:

In the West, there is a distinction made between the *masora marginalis* and the *masora finalis*. The former is divided into the *masora parva* (Mp) in the side margins and the *masora magna* (Mm) in the top and bottom margins. The Mp lists notations regarding the literal form of the text such as *kethib - qere*, defective writing, *hapax legomena* and many other features.

The Mm records specific lists of many of the items noted on the Mp.

## 5 Significance

The problem of using the masorah is highlighted by A.B. Davidson's comment that the masorah was "so confused and unintelligible that not much that is rational can be drawn from its depths; and, except for such devoted Jewish inquirers, few have the courage to let themselves down into its unilluminated abysses." -- *Outlines of Hebrew Accentuation*, p. vi.

Wurthwein notes that for a time, not even Jewish scholars understood the notes because they were so cryptic and in Aramaic. Finally, in 1538, a commentary on the masorah was published by Eliahu ha-Levi called *Masoret ha-Masoret*.

An abbreviated list of the Aramaic terms used in the Mp and their abbreviation is printed in the Prolegomena to the BHS, pp. L - LV. The most frequent notation is the letter lamed with a dot over it (indicating "abbreviation") indicating that the annotated word or that spelling of the word does "not" (אֲלֹ) occur elsewhere in Scripture. This warned scribes that if they found it elsewhere, it was in error.

In short, due to the meticulous care of the Masoretes and of the Sopherim before them, we have at our disposal a Hebrew text that is essentially identical with the text that was in use and considered authoritative in Jesus' time.

Shemaryahu Talmon concluded, "The scope & variation within all these textual traditions is relatively restricted. Major divergencies which intrinsically affect the sense are extremely rare. A collation of variants extant, based on the synoptic study of the material available, either by comparison of parallel passages within one Version, or of the major Versions with each other, results in the conclusion that the ancient authors, compilers, tradents and scribes enjoyed what may be termed a controlled freedom from textual variation." (*Qumran & the*

*History of the Biblical Text*, p. 326) And Douglas Stuart argues that, "It is fair to say that the verses, chapters, and books of the Bible would read largely the same, and would leave the same impression with the reader, even if one adopted virtually every possible alternative reading to those now serving as the basis for current English translations." in *Inerrancy & Common Sense*, p.98

NOTES: