

Lost in Translation, Session 4: Unsung Heroes: The Masoretes and their Work

Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz
London School of Jewish Studies

Barry Levy, Fixing God's Torah (Oxford, 2001), p. 14

Practically speaking, the Masorah or Masoret includes the entire corpus of traditional teachings about the Bible text: hundreds of lists of (often abstruse) data about the text and any rare or unusual phenomena in it; comparisons of similar or identical usages, spellings, or constructions within a single book, the third of the Bible in which that book appears, or the entire Bible; tabulations of the numbers of verses in each book and the number of times each letter in the alphabet can be found; and similar material.

Jerusalem Talmud, Ta'anit 4: 2

Three books they found in the Temple court: the book *me'oni*, the book *zeturlei*, and the book *hi*. In the one they found written *ma'on elohei kedem* and in the two they found written *me'onah* [Devarim 33: 27], and they upheld the two and set aside the one. In the one they found written *vayishlach et zeturlei benei yisra'el* and in the two they found written *vayishlach et na'arei benei yisra'el* [Shemot 24: 5] and they upheld the two and set aside the one. In the one they found written nine times *hi*, and in the two they found written eleven times *hi*, and they upheld the two and set aside the one.

Babylonian Talmud, Kidushin 30a

The early [scholars] were called *soferim* because they used to count all the letters of the Torah. Thus, they said that the *vav* in *gachon* [Vayikra 11: 42] marks half the letters of the Torah; *darosh darash* [Vayikra 10: 16], half the words; *vehitgalach* [Vayikra 13: 33], half the verses. ‘The boar out of the wood [*miya'ar*]’ [Ps. 80: 14]: the *ayin* of *ya'ar* marks half of the Psalms. ‘But he, full of compassion, forgives their iniquity’ [Ps. 78: 38], half of the verses. Rabbi Joseph propounded: ‘Does the *vav* of *gachon* belong to the first half or to the second?’ They said to him ‘Let a scroll of the Torah be brought and we will count them! Did not Rabbah bar bar Hanah say, ‘They did not stir from there until a scroll of the Torah was brought and they counted them?’ They were thoroughly versed in the defective and full readings but we are not ... Our rabbis taught: There are 5,888 verses in the Torah; the Psalms exceed this by eight; while Chronicles are less by eight.

Midrash bereshit raba 12: 6

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahman said, ‘All the instances of the word *toledot* in the Torah are *chaserin* [defective] except for two ...’

Sifrei bemedbar, 59 (on Bemidbar 9: 10)

On a distant journey: There is a dot over the *heh* [of *rechokah*, ‘distant’]....

Avot derabi natan 34 (30b) (?700-900 CE)

Now why are all these passages dotted? But this is what Ezra said: If Elijah comes and says to me ‘Why did you write in this fashion?’ I shall say to him, ‘That is why I dotted those passages.’ And if he says to me ‘You have written well’, I shall remove the dots from them.

Babylonian vowels (source: Wikipedia)

<i>nikud</i> with בּ	בּ	בּ	בּ	בּ	בּ	בּ	בּ
Tiberian analogue	<i>patah, segol</i>	<i>qamatz</i>	<i>tzere</i>	<i>hiriq</i>	<i>holam</i>	<i>qubutz, shuruq</i>	<i>shva mobile (shva na)</i>
value	/a/	/ɔ/	/e/	/i/	/o/	/u/	/ə/

Palestinian vowels (source: Wikipedia)

<i>nikud</i> with בּ	בּ	בּ	בּ	בּ	בּ	בּ	בּ
Tiberian analogue	<i>patah</i>	<i>qamatz</i>	<i>segol</i>	<i>tzere</i>	<i>hiriq</i>	<i>holam</i>	<i>qubutz, shuruq</i>
value	/a/	/ɔ/	/ɛ/	/e/	/i/	/o/	/u/

Ketiv/qere ('as it's written/ as it's read')

Bereshit 8: 17

כל-השׁנִית אֲשֶׁר-אָתָה מְלֵל-בָּשָׂר בַּעַזְרָה וּבְבָמָה וּבְכָל-הָרֹמֶשׁ הַרְמֵשׁ עַל-הָאָרֶץ
[הַצְאָה] אֲתָה וְשָׁרַצָּו בָּאָרֶץ וְפָרוּ וְרָכוּ עַל-הָאָרֶץ:

Bring out with you every living thing of all flesh that is with you: birds, animals, and everything that creeps on earth; and let them swarm on the earth and be fertile and increase on earth.

R. David Kimchi (1160-1235), introduction to commentary on Nevi'im, on ketiv-kere

These variant words apparently developed because during the First Exile, the texts were lost, the scholars were dispersed, and the Torah scholars died. The Men of the Great Assembly who restored the Torah to its former state found differences in the texts and followed the reading of those which they believed to be in the majority. When they were unclear about this, they wrote one version without pointing it, or they wrote it in the margin and not in the text, or they wrote one version in the margin and one version in the text.

Bibliography

Barry Levy, *Fixing God's Torah: The Accuracy of the Hebrew Bible in Jewish Law* (Oxford, 2001)

Page H. Kelley, Daniel S. Mynatt, & Timothy G. Crawford, *The Masorah of Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia: Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1998)

Menachem Cohen, 'The Idea of the Sanctity of the Biblical Text and the Science of Textual Criticism' (Heb.), in U. Simon (ed.), *Hamikra ve'anachnu* (Ramat Gan, 1988) – English translation available at <http://cs.anu.edu.au/~bdm/dilugim/CohenArt/>

Ökhlak ve'ökhlah

ed. S. Frensdorff, Hanover 1864

בעורות שוכן מעלה, אכחוב מסורת הנרולה:

בראשית GENESIS

וְאֵלֶיךָ בְּרָאָשִׁית בָּרוּךְ אֱלֹהִים אֲחַת הַשָּׁמִים וְאַחַת הָאָרֶץ: ² וְהָאָרֶץ
 הַיְתָה תְּהוֹ וּבָהּ וְחַשְׁדָה עַל־פְּנֵי חַזּוֹם וּרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרֻחֶף עַל־פְּנֵי
 הַמִּים: ³ וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְקֻיַּם אָוֹר וּוַיֹּאמֶר: ⁴ וַיֹּירָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־
 הָאָוֹר כִּי־טוֹב וַיַּכְלֵל אֱלֹהִים בֵּין הָאָוֹר וּבֵין הַחַשָּׁךְ: ⁵ וַיֹּקְרָא
 אֱלֹהִים לְאֹזֶל יוֹם וְלַחֲשָׁךְ קָרָא לִילָה וְיַהְיֵה־עָרָב וְיַהְיֵה־בָּקָר יוֹם.
 אַחֲרָה: ⁶ וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְקֻיַּם רָקִיעַ בְּתוֹךְ הַמִּים וַיֹּעַשׂ
 בֵּין קִימָם לְמִסְמִים: ⁷ וַיַּעֲשֵׂה אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הַרְקִיעַ וַיַּכְלֵל בֵּין הַמִּים אֲשֶׁר
 מִתְחַחֵת לְרָקִיעַ וּבֵין הַמִּים אֲשֶׁר מִעַל לְרָקִיעַ וּנְהִי־קָנוֹן: ⁸ וַיֹּקְרָא
 אֱלֹהִים לְרָקִיעַ שָׁמִים וּנְהִי־עָרָב וּנְהִי־בָּקָר יוֹם שְׁנִי: ⁹
 וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְקֻוּ הַמִּים מִתְחַחֵת הַשָּׁמִים אֶל־מִקְומָם אֶחָד וְתָרָא
 נִיקְשָׁה וּנְהִי־קָנוֹן: ¹⁰ וַיֹּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים וַיִּקְשֵׁה אֶרְזָן וְלִמְקֹונה הַמִּים
 גָּבָא זִמְמִים וַיֹּירָא אֱלֹהִים כִּי־טוֹב: ¹¹ וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים קְרַשָּׁא הָאָרֶץ
 לְדָשָׁא עַשְׁבִי מִזְרִיעַ זָרָע עַזְזָע פָּרִי עַשְׂה פָּרִי לְמִינְיוֹ אֲשֶׁר זָרָע־בָּבוֹ
 עַל־הָאָרֶץ וּנְהִי־קָנוֹן: ¹² וַתֹּצֶא הָאָרֶץ דְּשָׁא עַשְׂבִי מִזְרִיעַ זָרָע לְמִינְיוֹ
 וְעַז עַשְׂה פָּרִי אֲשֶׁר זָרָע־בָּו לְמִינְיוֹ וַיֹּירָא אֱלֹהִים כִּי־טוֹב: ¹³ וּנְהִי
 עַרְבָּה וּנְהִי־בָּקָר יוֹם שְׁלִישִׁי: ¹⁴ וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְקֻיַּם מְאֹרֶת
 בְּרָקִיעַ הַשָּׁמִים לְהַבְּדִיל בֵּין הַיּוֹם וּבֵין הַלְּילָה וְהִי לְאֹתָה וְלִמְעוֹרְדִים
 וְלִזְמִים וְשְׁנִים: ¹⁵ וְהִי לְמְאוֹרֶת בְּרָקִיעַ הַשָּׁמִים לְהָאֵר עַל־הָאָרֶץ
 וּנְהִי־קָנוֹן: ¹⁶ וַיַּעֲשֵׂה אֱלֹהִים אֶת־שְׁנִי הַמְּאוֹרֶת הַגְּדוֹלִים אֶת־הַמְּאוֹרֶת
 אֶת־הַמְּאוֹרֶת וְהַמְּאוֹרֶת אֶת־הַמְּאוֹרֶת.

Cp 1. ¹Mm 1. ²Mm 2. ³Mm 3. ⁴Mm 3139. ⁵Mp sub loco. ⁶Mm 4. ⁷Jer 4,23, cf Mp sub loco. ⁸Hi
 38,19. ⁹2 Ch 24,20. ¹⁰Mm 5. ¹¹Mm 6. ¹²Mm 3105. ¹³חַד לְשָׁקָר. ¹⁴Mm 200. ¹⁵Mm 7. ¹⁶Mm
 1431. ¹⁷Mm 2773. ¹⁸Mm 3700. ¹⁹Mm 736. ²⁰לְקָרְבָּה פָּס Ps 66,6. ²¹Mm 722. ²²Mm 2645. ²³Qoh 6,3.

Cp 1,1 ^aOrig Βρηγσιθ vel Βαρηγσιθ (-σεθ), Samar bārāśit || 6 ^bhuc tr 7 ^{c-d} cf § et 9,11,15,20.
 24,30 || 7 ^{d-e} cf 6 ^a; ins אֱלֹהִים כִּי־טוֹב וַיֹּירָא § 9 ^e § συναγω-
 γείν + καὶ συντήχθη τὸ ὄντεα τὸ ὑποκάτω τοῦ σύντανοῦ εἰς τὰς
 συναγωγὰς αὐτῶν καὶ ὥφθη ἡ ἔηρα - πανταχού - || 10 מִקְוָה הַמִּים cf מִקְוָה -
 וְהִי הַפִּים סְפִיחָה הַשָּׁמִים אֶל־מִקְוָה וַיֹּירָא נִקְשָׁה -
 11 ^{f-g} § 1 c pc MSS απειρον καὶ δέσμης עַשְׂבִי cf 12 || ^f pr̄s dl cf 12.