

## **Lost in Translation, Session 4: Unsung Heroes: The Masorettes and their Work**

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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 *zetutei*, and the book *hi*. In the one they found written *ma'on elokei 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 zetutei 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 bemidbar, 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)

nikud with כ							
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)

nikud with כ							
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

כָּל־הַחַיָּה אֲשֶׁר־אֵתָּךְ מִכָּל־בֶּשֶׂר בְּעוֹף וּבַבְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל־הַרֶמֶשׂ הָרֹמֵשׂ עַל־הָאָרֶץ  
 [הַיָּצָא] (הוֹצֵא) אֹתָם וְשִׂרְצוּ בָאָרֶץ וּפְרוּ וּרְבוּ 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**

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 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/>



