# The Masoretes

## 2.1 The Work of the Masoretes

The goal of the Masoretes was to guard and preserve the text of the Bible, which had been handed down from generation to generation. To achieve this goal, the Masoretes worked in several parallel directions, and in the end they were highly successful. The Masoretes worked to determine the text of the Bible. They stated the proper way of writing and reading the Bible, and in passages where they found differences between texts and ways of reading, they issued a decision and ruled as to which opinion was correct. These decisions related not only to verses and words, but to every single letter.

The Masoretes dealt extensively with questions of [complete] and defective spellings, and on the basis of old and reliable manuscripts, they decided how to write every single word in every place in the Bible. For example, the word קולות (qolot – voices, sounds) was to be written with defective spelling, without either of the two vavs, in Exodus 9:28: "the voices (קלת) of the Lord and hail." A few verses later, it was to be written with a vav after the lamed: "and the voices (ה[קלות]) and the hail ceased" (Ex. 9:33). In contrast, in another verse in Exodus, it was to be written with a vav before the lamed: "and all the people saw the voices (ה[קולת])" (Ex. 20:14).

In addition to determining the text, the Masoretes also dealt with inserting the vocalization and cantillation marks, and this too was an extremely important project, whose contribution to the Hebrew language is inestimable. The Masoretes sought to preserve the reading tradition of the Bible, which had been transmitted orally from generation to generation. To that end, they developed the vocalization signs, which help the reader to read the letters, by indicating the vowels. Until the time of the Masoretes, there had been no vowel signs at all. The ancient scrolls that were found in the Judean Desert, like today's Torah scrolls, have no vowel signs, and in each verse the reader must depend upon the oral tradition, which teaches him how to read. For example, whenever the verb ויאמר (and he said) appears, the reader must know whether to pronounce it vayomer, with the penultimate syllable accented, or vayomar, with the final syllable accented. It could also be pronounced, "veyomar." In many cases, the context and the rules of grammar cannot help the reader, and he can depend only on a transmitted tradition, as to how that word is to be read in a specific verse.

Like the vowel marks, the Masoretes determined the cantillation marks. These signs convey the tradition of the melody of the reading, which was also passed on from generation to generation. In fact, vocalization and the cantillation marks are two interdependent and interconnected systems, and the vocalization of many words changes according to the cantillation marks. For example, the word ארץ (earth) is usually pronounced erets, but when the word is accompanied by a cantillation mark indicating a strong pause, such as that at the end of a verse or in the middle (etnahta), it is vocalized arets. Moreover the dagesh (the mark distinguishing between hard and soft consonants in the cases of bet, gimel, dalet, kaf, pe, and tav) at the beginning of a word also depends on the cantillation marks. Following the determination of the text and the insertion of vocalization and cantillation marks, the need arose to preserve the text of the Bible, to prevent

the emergence of further controversy. To that end, the Masoretic apparatus was developed. Thousands of masoretic annotations describe the spelling of each and every word in the Bible. They also deal with vocalization and the combination of words. These annotations are also written in the manuscripts of the Masoretes, that is to say, in the codices.

Bibliography: Yosef Ofer, “The Aleppo Codex – the History and Authority of the Manuscript”; “The Present Edition and the Principles of its Text” in M. Glatzer (ed.), Jerusalem Crown - the Bible of the Hebrew University: Companion Volume, Jerusalem, 2002, pp. 25-50.

## 2.2 The Vocalization

One of the important projects of the Masoretes was the invention of vowel marks for the Hebrew language. Hebrew writing is mainly consonantal. Auxiliary letters, alef, vav, and yod are occasionally used to indicate the vowel sound, but they only can be used for some of the vowels, and those vowels cannot be indicated unambiguously by the auxiliary letters. Thus, for example, the word דבר can be read: davar (thing), diber (he said), dubar (it was said), dever (plague), and so on. Even when an auxiliary vav is added, as in דובר, this can be read as dubar (it was said), dover (a speaker), and dover (a stall). Because of the sanctity of the Bible, it was not permitted to add or remove letters. Therefore the Masoretes invented the vowel signs, which are placed above, below, or within the letters. According to information that has come to us from the Masoretic literature, most likely they first used a simple point, which was written above or below a word to distinguish between two pronunciations, which were differentiated merely by a single vowel, such as המשל (hamshol, to be compared?), שופטים פרק ט פסוק ב: מַה טּוֹב לָכֶם הַמְשֹׁל בָּכֶם שִׁבְעִים אִישׁ כֹּל בְּנֵי יְרֻבַּעַל אִם מָשֹׁל בָּכֶם אִישׁ אֶחָד איוב פרק כה (ב) הַמְשֵׁל וָפַחַד עִמּוֹ עֹשֶׂה שָׁלוֹם בִּמְרוֹמָיו: המונחים 'מלעיל' ו'מלרע' כאן משמשים במשמעות אחרת מן הרגיל כיום. אין פה כל קשר להברה המוטעמת. הסימון המשוער של נקודה מעל המילה או מתחת לה ציין את ההבדל בתנועות. accented (from above), in contrast to המשל (hamshel, to compare??) accented (from below). Similarly, there is בנגע (banega’, in the wound), , and benega’ (in a wound), It is possible that they also used this way to indicate differences in the manner of accentuation, such as חרש (horesh, a grove of trees), accented on the first syllable, andחורש (horesh, he plows), accented on the second syllable.

Full systems of vocalization were apparently developed in the seventh and eighth centuries. We know of three main systems: the Tiberian, which is still used today, in which most of the signs are written below the letters; the Palestinian, which was apparently created in southern Eretz-Israel; and the Babylonian, which was created in Babylonia. The latter two systems place marks above the letters. They were used in the past and have been found in many manuscripts. Today, however, they are not used.

Most of the signs in the Tiberian system indicate vowels, and they probably reflect the way the vowels were pronounced in Tiberias at the time of the Masoretes. Essentially, there are seven vowels signs: hiriq (the “ee” in “meet”), tsere (the “ay” in say), segol (the “e” in led), patah (the “a” in “ma”), qamats (similar to the patah), holam (the “o” in “go”), shuruq-kibuts (the “oo” in “too”). The last-mentioned pair is not two separate vowels but rather two different symbols for the vowel ‘u’. When plen? spelling is used, the auxiliary vav was written as a shuruq, as in יָשׁ?ב? (yashuvu, they will return, Gen. 15:16) and הָכָּ?ה (he was hit, Ps. 102:5). However, when the spelling is defective, they used a qibuts as in יָשֻׁבוּ (yashuvu Jer. 24:7) and הֻכָּה (he was hit, Num. 25:14). Other signs that belong to the system of vocalization are the sheva, the dagesh, and the

dot that distinguishes between the letters shin and sin. The sheva has two possible meanings. It can indicate the absence of a vowel (sheva nah, lit., a stationary sheva) or a very short vowel (sheva na', lit., a moving sheva). The dagesh also has two meanings. It may indicate the doubling of a consonant (a strong dagesh) or the hard pronunciation of one of the letters bet, gimel, dalet, kaf, pe, or tav (a light dagesh). The dot that distinguishes between a shin and a sin indicates which way the letter שׁ is to be pronounced.

The Palestinian system of vocalization was practiced in Eretz-Israel only from the eighth to the eleventh century, and it was not used after that. Manuscripts vocalized with this system have survived only from the Cairo Geniza. Some of them are passages from the Bible, but most are manuscripts of hymns. This system also has seven signs for vowels, but in most of the manuscripts, the signs for the patah and the qamats as well as the tsere and the segol are used interchangeably. Thus, they reflect a pronunciation of Hebrew similar to the Sephardic accent and to the accent of contemporary Israeli Hebrew.

The Babylonian system of vocalization was practiced in Babylonia and the countries near it beginning in the eighth century. In most places, people stopped using it in the twelfth century, but in Yemen it was used until a hundred years ago. It was used in all types of literature: Bible, works in rabbinical Hebrew, and hymns. This vocalization system has six vowel signs: the patah and the segol are a single vowel, and there is no hataf.

Bibliography: Israel Yevin, "Vocalizations," a volume for the Year of the Language: Leshonenu la'am 40-41, 1989-1990, pp. 112-118 (Hebrew).

## 2.3 Cantillation Marks

The cantillation marks, which accompany the biblical text, fulfill three functions simultaneously: (1) a musical function – they serve as a kind of musical notation to chanting the text in the customary tune, when it is read in a ritual framework; (2) a phonetic function – they indicate where a word is accented, in that they are generally attached to the accented syllable; (3) a punctuative-syntactic function – some of the cantillation marks serve as punctuation marks in a hierarchal order of "emperors," "kings," "viceroys," and "satraps," which divide the verse in binary fashion, again and again, division within division, and in this manner they indicate the inner syntactical relations within the verse. The implications of the third function for the interpretation of the text are clear: all punctuation and all syntactical division indicate a certain way of understanding the text, thus they may lean toward a certain interpretation and work against another. Although the three functions of the cantillation marks are embodied in a single, common system of signs, it is possible to focus on each of them separately.

In reading the Bible, especially when part of the ritual, the importance of the musical and phonetic functions of the cantillation marks is prominent. This does not apply to Bible study, the purpose of which is to understand the text. Here the phonetic function is diminished, and the musical function gives way to the punctuative-syntactic function, where the main contribution of the cantillation marks for interpreting the Bible is concentrated. The melody of the chant as practiced in synagogues varies among the various ethnic groups: Ashkenazim (Jews from Germany, Poland, Russia, etc.), Sefardim (Jews descended from the Jews expelled from Spain), Bavlim (Jews from Iraq), Yemenites, and others. The melody of the chant also varies according

to the occasion: there is a chant for reading the Torah, for reading the Haftara, for reading the book Lamentations, and so on. It cannot be determined to what degree the melodies sung today reflect the ancient melody. However, it is likely that some ancient elements have been preserved.

Bibliography: Yisrael Yevin, “Cantillation Marks,” a volume for the Year of the Language, Leshonenu la’am 40-41, 1989-1990, pp. 119-124 (Hebrew). Simha Kogut, The Bible Between Cantillation marks and Interpretation, Jerusalem, 1994, pp. 13-19, (Hebrew).

## 2.4 The Masoretic Annotations

To understand how the Masoretic apparatus works, let us take a look at a page from the Aleppo Codex: *** Deut. 32:50-33:29 – open the page using the homepage of the website. The page under consideration has three columns, which is the ordinary way of writing early codices of the Masora. The words are vocalized and the cantillation marks have been inserted. Between the columns are many Masoretic annotations, which are written in small letters. These are known as the Masora Qetana, the small Masora. At the head and foot of the page come the Masoretic annotations, which are longer. These are known as the Masora Gedola, the large Masora. Let us return to the biblical text. It is possible to notice here that there are spaces of whole lines or parts of lines. These spaces indicate a break between portions: in two places on the page, the portion begins after a space of a whole line, and this is known as an “open” portion (see "וזאת הברכה" [“this is the blessing”] and "וללוי"[“and to Levi”] in the right column). In other places, a portion begins after a small indentation from the beginning of the line (as with "וזאת ליהודה" [“and this to Yehuda”] in the first column), or after a space that is included within a line (as with "ולגד" [“and to Gad”] in the third column). These are known as “closed” portions. A scribe who writes a Torah scroll must be just as careful to observe the correct layout of the open and closed portions, as he must be precise in writing the letters of the text itself. A baraita (a saying by a Mishnaic Sage included in the Talmud) presented in the Talmudic tractate Shabbat, 103b, and which was accepted by Maimonides as a Halakhah in Hilkhot sefer Torah 11 ,7 פרק ז הלכה יא (not 87) 87: הי"א, states: “He shall not make an open portion closed, and he shall not make a closed one open.” At the end of the lines, here and there one may note signs that seem like parts of letters. See, for example, the marks in various shapes in the left column, after the words: ,"וישׁשכר" "גור" , "עשה" ,"כלביא" ,"טמוני". *** see enlargement of the passage with the words in question. These are filler signs. Their function is to justify the ends of the rows, so that a person might not mistakenly think that the space left at the end of the line has the meaning of an open or closed section. Today’s word-processors automatically justify lines. Scribes who write Torah scrolls generally expand certain letters (אהלתם) if there is a need to fill a line, and the following word in the text is too long for that, however the Masoretes did not use that method. They did not expand letters in an artificial or exaggerated manner, and if a space was left in a line, they filled it with graphic fillers. The form of these fillers is not fixed. Every scribe chose a form as he wished: parts of the letters ם ,ש ,א ,י, or just dots and angular lines. Sometimes it is possible to identity a scribe by means of the filler signs or to determine whether two codices were written by the same scribe. The weekly portion, “This is the blessing,” begins in the right column. This is the last portion in the annual cycle of readings as practiced by Jews today. Let us examine an enlargement of this passage: *** See enlargement of the passage from the right column and the commentary to its right. To the right of the column is an ornament, in which is written the letters “פרש”, an abbreviation of פרשה (parasha, portion). In the empty line before the portion, “And this is the blessing,” the letters ב 'נ appear. This is the sum of the verses in the weekly portion that

ends there, the portion “Give ear,” which contains fifty-two verses. To the right of the column the letter ס' is also written, and it belongs to a different reading custom, according to which the Torah is divided into about 150 “orders,” and the cycle of reading the Torah lasts about three years. The Babylonian Talmud indicates that the three-year reading cycle was practiced in Eretz-Israel, whereas the one-year cycle was practiced in Babylonia. Later, the one-year cycle spread gradually supplanting the three-year cycle.

Let us return to the ordinary Masoretic annotations. The small Masoretic comments are short, sometimes very short, and some are only one letter long. The comment is attached to the biblical text by a curved line above the letter. The Masoretic comment can be attached to a word in the line to its right or left. The most common Masoretic annotation is the letter lamed, which is short for the Aramaic phrase, “ליתא דכוותיה” (leita dikhvateih), which means there is nothing like the word so marked; it is a hapax legomenon. This might mean that the word is unique in a particular form. For example the form “ולנפתלי” (ulenaftali, and to Naphtali) is unique, although the proper name Naphtali appears often in the Bible. *** See enlargement of the passage from the middle and left columns. Other Masoretic comments indicate the number of times a word occurs in the Bible. For example: regarding the word “וליוסף” (uleyosef, and to Joseph), the letter ב indicates that this form appears twice in the Bible (in the verse in question and in Gen. 41:50).

According to the tradition, certain words in the Bible are not to be pronounced as they are written. Instructions as to the written and pronounced forms are included in the Masora. For example, see the right column, regarding the word “אשדת” (written: ashdot, slopes), an annotation in the small Masora to the right says: “it is written in one word and read in two,” for the word is traditionally read as אש-דת (esh-dat, a fiery law). *** See enlargement of the passage from the right column and the comments to its right. A small Masoretic annotation (the “Masora Parva”) usually gives a number without explicitly indicating the verses, whereas a large Masoretic annotation (“Masora Magna”) is longer and presents a number [word missing in Hebrew?]. Here, for example, is the first large Masoretic annotation on the page: “it shone 3 and it shone from Se’ir and your light shone in the darkness and the sun shone and the sun set.” This means: the word “it shone” appears three times in the Bible, and these are they: “it shone from Se’ir” refers to the verse in the present page, the second verse in the portion, “and this is the blessing”; the second occurrence is in Isaiah 58:10, “then shall thy light shine in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noonday”; and the third occurrence is in Ecclesiastes 1:5. *** See enlargement of the large Masoretic comment in the upper right.

Bibliography – detailed explanation of the Masoretic commentary: Israel Yevin, The Masora of the Bible, Collected Articles on the Language 3, The Academy of the Hebrew Language, Jerusalem, 1993, pp. 72-92 (Hebrew).

## 2.5 Aharon Ben Asher

Aharon Ben Moshe Ben Asher was the last in a lineage of Masoretic scholars, as recounted in an early Masoretic treatise: Asher the great elder of blessed memory, and after him his son Nehemiah, may his soul rest in peace, and after him was Moshe the son of Nehemiah, and after him his son Asher, and after him Moshe his son, that is to say, Moshe Ben Asher, and after him was Aharon his son, that is to say Ben Moshe. And you should know that Aharon Ben Moshe Ben Asher Ben Moshe Ben Nehemiah Ben Asher the elder of blessed memory was the last in the lineage. The Ben Asher family was active in the city of Tiberias, as we learn from the introduction to a treatise on the precise cantillation marks written by Aharon Ben Asher: "This is the book on precise cantillation marks composed by Rabbi Aharon Ben Asher in the place Ma'azia, which is called Tiberias, which is on the Sea of Galilee to the west." In addition to this work, other Masoretic treatises are attributed to Aharon Ben Asher, such as the list of eighty pairs of words from the Bible that are pronounced the same way but have different meanings, the rule regarding letters sometimes used as auxiliaries, א, ה, ו, י, which sometimes cause the following בגדכפ"ת consonants to be softened.

Aharon Ben Moshe Ben Asher was the Masorete and vocalizer of the Aleppo Codex, as stated in the dedication of the manuscript, which was written several decades after his death: This is the complete codex of the twenty-four books, written by our teacher the rabbi Shlomo known as Ben Boya'a the swift scribe, and the spirit of the Lord guided him, and it was vocalized and transmitted with great meticulousness by the great scholar and wise sage, the lord of scribes and the father of sages, the chief of scholars, swift in his deeds, whose understanding of the work was unique in his generation, master Rabbi Aharon the son of master Rabbi Asher, may his soul be bound in life with the prophets and righteous and pious.

For generations the name Ben Asher signified the most precise and reliable text of the Bible, and many Masoretes and printers sought to emulate the text he had established. Here are the words of Rabbi Menahem De Lonzano of the sixteenth century in the beginning of his book, "The Light of the Torah": And all the Jews in those lands relied upon the reading of Ben Asher, as though a divine voice had proclaimed: "Ben Asher and Ben Naphtali – the Halakhah is according to Ben Asher." In the nineteenth century, certain scholars suggested that Aharon Ben Asher might have been a Karaite and not a rabbinic Jew. Aharon Dothan has examined this issue from many angles, and his conclusion is that Ben Asher was a rabbinic Jew. Recently, Raphael Zer has raised this issue again and presented new evidence.

Bibliography: Aharon. Dothan, The Book of Precise Cantillation Marks by Rabbi Aharon Ben Moshe Ben Asher, Jerusalem, 1967, pp. 15-25 (Hebrew). Aharon Dothan, "Was Ben Asher Really a Karaite?" Sinai 41 (1957), pp. 280-312 (Hebrew). Raphael Zer, "Was the Masorete of the Aleppo Codex Rabbinical or Karaite?" Sefunot N.S. 8 (23), 2003, pp. 573-587 (Hebrew).

## 2.6 Other Masoretes

In the third preface to his book, The Tradition of the Masora: "There were hundreds and thousands of Masoretes generation after generation for years, and the time of their beginning and of their end is unknown." This statement is also true of our knowledge today: nothing is known to us about those early sages who did the immense work that is invested in the foundation of the

Masoretic commentary and treatises. Almost all the Masoretes mentioned by name disagreed about details of vocalization and the cantillation marks. Hence, they could not have preceded the eighth century.

In the various Masoretic commentaries, in manuscripts and in the Masoretic notes, variant readings of the Bible are presented, mainly in the name of these old sources: the masters of Tiberias or Tiberias; Mahzor Raba or Ruba; Moshe Ben Moha (Mohe?) or Moshe Moha; Haviv Ben Pifim; Moshe Gamzuz; Pinhas the head of the yeshiva or simply Pinhas. The latter might have been the poet Pinhas Hacohen Birbi beRabi or Beirabbi – the other names are OK Ya'aqov of Kafra, a suburb of Tiberias, dozens of whose poems were discovered in the Cairo Geniza. The best known Tiberian Masoretes were Aharon Ben Moshe and Moshe Ben Naphtali. These sages lived in the first half of the tenth century, and they disagreed about the vocalization of cantillation marks of several hundred words in the Bible. The list of the differences of opinion between them was made in the eleventh century by Mishael Ben 'Uziel and it is known as Sefer hahilufim (The Book of Variants). The list contains 867 differences of opinion and another 406 "agreements," that is to say, the common opinion of both of these Masoretes, which sometimes opposed that of other Masoretes. All the scholars mentioned until now belonged to the Tiberian school of the Masora. However, there were Masoretes outside of Eretz-Israel, in Babylonia. In some Bible manuscripts there appears a list of about 250 differences between the people of the East, that is to say, the Sages of Babylonia, and those of the West, Eretz-Israel. These differences mainly have to do with matters such as the name יהורם-יורם (Yehoram -Yoram, 2 Kings 8:16) and written versus pronounced forms. Among the Babylonian Masoretes the names of Rav Yishai, Rav Shmuel, Rav Zana, Yehuda Bar Yehezqel, Beit Yelta, and Rav Nahum Bar Rav Abba. Some of these rabbis might have been Talmudic sages, who were also concerned with matters connected to the text of the Bible. Moreover, several Masoretic schools, which were active in Babylonia, are mentioned: Surai, Neharda'i, and Mahuzanai. The name of their town is Mehoza. They may be called Mehozna'ei

Bibliography: Israel Yevin, The Masora of the Bible, Jerusalem, 2003, pp. 114-120 (Hebrew). Israel Yevin, "From the Teachings of the Masoretes," Textus 9 (1981), pp. 1-27 (Hebrew).

## 2.7 The Later Masoretes

The later Masoretes did not seek to establish the text on the basis of personal transmission, but rather according to the written Masoretic commentary in manuscripts or independent treatises, and also according to manuscripts regarded as accurate. Later, they also relied on the indications of the linguistic scholars who preceded them. Many scholars dealt with collecting Masoretic comments and determining the text of the Bible over the generations. There were vocalizers and grammarians whose main concern was that, and there were scholars of the Torah and the Halakha who dealt with the Masora among their other interests. Here we shall mention those who made the most important contributions in this field: Yequtiel Hanaqdan (the vocalizer) Ben Yehuda (the second half of the twelfth century). His book, 'Ein haqore (The Reader's Eye) contains a grammatical introduction and commentaries on the entire Pentateuch and some of the writings. Meir Ben Todros Halevi Abula'fia (c. 1180-1244). His book, Masoret syag laTorah (The Masora is a Fence for the Torah) deals with writing the letters of the Pentateuch, especially plen? and defective spellings and it is regarded as a masterpiece of the Masora. Menahem Hameiri (1249-1306). His book, Qiryat sefer (City of the Book) has two parts. The first part

deals with the laws of writing a Torah scroll (the parchment, the ink, tracing the lines, and so on), and the second part deals with the spelling of the Torah, the portions, grammatical rules, and so on. Menahem de Lonzano (late sixteenth century), his book, Or haTorah (The Light of the Torah) deals with spelling and matters of vocalization and the cantillation marks. His main concern was correcting errors that had crept into the printed editions in circulation in his day (Miqraot Gedolot, printed in Venice in 1547 and Miqraot Qetanot, printed in Venice in 1544). Yedidiah Shlomo of Norzi (early seventeenth century), his work, Minhat shai (Sacrificial Gift; its original name had been Goder perets, Fencing a Break), is a comprehensive work on the entire Bible. It deals with the letters, vocalization, and the cantillation marks, and it is based on old manuscripts, on Meir Ben Todros, and on Lonzano, but it is mainly based on the Masoretic commentary. He also gathered material from hundreds of books in the areas of Halakhah, Midrash, Kabbalah, Commentary, and Sermons that indicate the spelling and vocalization of the Bible. Minhat shai has been printed in many editions of the Bible to this day, and it is regarded as the final authority in matters of the text of the Bible.

Other scholars who dealt with the Masora and with the text of the Bible were: Yihya Tsalah OK (Yemen, 1715-1805); Shlomo Dubna OK (1738-1813), the author of Tiqun sofrim (the printed guide for scribes and readers of the Torah). Wolf Heidenheim (1757-1832), and Yitshaq Zeligman Be'er (1825-1897). It should be noted that all of the scholars mentioned above were unfamiliar with the Aleppo Codex, since they worked in places far from the city of Aleppo, Syria, where the codex was preserved.

Israel Yevin, The Masora of the Bible, Jerusalem, 2003, pp. 114-120 (Hebrew).

## 2.8 The Masora and Grammar

Both the Masora and Hebrew grammar deal with the description of biblical Hebrew, with the various forms of the words and their vocalization. Historically, the Masora preceded grammar. The earliest activity of the Masoretes goes back to ancient times, and evidence of the harbingers of the Masoretic project can be found in the Talmud and Midrashim. In contrast, the work of Hebrew grammarians began with the influence of Arabic grammar, mainly from the tenth century on. The approaches of the Masora and of grammar to the biblical text are entirely different, sometimes opposed: whereas grammar encompasses the text as a whole and seeks within it the regular phenomena that are common to all of its parts, in order to organize them in a system of rules, the Masora pays attention to the details and seeks what is unique and exceptional in them, that which is irregular and rare. Grammar seeks to make generalizations according to the majority of cases; it removes phenomena that are in the minority from the whole and sometimes sets them aside. In contrast, the Masora concentrates mainly on deviations. The grammarian sees the entire forest; the Masorete seeks out the individual trees.

However, despite this difference, one finds grammatical insights in the Masora, and these insights are very early, before any contact with Arabic and before the creation of Arabic grammar. Here are two examples of the first stirrings of thought about grammar and the conception of grammar in the work of the Masoretes: The Masora of the Aleppo Codex in Ezekiel 16:39 reads: "'"לשון נקבה (=מלא) אוֹתָךְ י"ו מל'"'." This means that the word אותך (otakh, you, as the feminine object of a verb, as in "he sees you") is written in plen? spelling, and that it is a feminine pronoun. It then lists the sixteen (י"ו) times that appears in plen? spelling, as opposed to

places where it appears in defective spelling (אתך). Another Masoretic comment that appears in the small Masora of the Aleppo Codex refers to Judges 13:15: "and Manoah said to the angel of the Lord: let us stop you, please"). This comment also refers to the word אוֹתָךְ, and states: " ט' לשון זכר [א]מל'." This means that it is written in plen? spelling, it is masculine, and it appears nine times in the Bible. The Masoretes knew that before the end of a sentence or clause, the masculine form of the pronoun is also אוֹתָךְ. They were thus able to distinguish between masculine and feminine grammatical forms, and they used the appropriate grammatical term for the distinction. In this case, the Masoretes separated the discussion of feminine and masculine forms, apparently in order to diminish the number of exceptions and to make things easier for the user of the Masora. It should be noted that in many other cases, the Masora does not distinguish between various grammatical forms such as masculine and feminine, singular and plural, and it includes them all in the common discussion of plen? and defective spellings.

At the end of Bible manuscripts there sometimes appear collections called diqduq Masora – Masoretic grammatical commentary. Some of these works contain systematic and general descriptions of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and their phonetic and graphic characteristics, and accounts of processes of thought, speech, and writing. Here, for example, is such a passage, from the Masoretic compendium that was at the end of the Aleppo Codex. Although the original was lost, copies have been found in the notes made by Professor Moshe David Cassuto and in the archive of the grammarian and scholar of the Masora, Yitshaq Zeligman Be'er. The language of the passage is difficult, and precise explanation of every expression would demand extensive discussion that would be out of place here. The translation reflects the obscurity of the text but endeavors to transmit the flavor of this poem in praise of the Hebrew alphabet: Vesting the use of all/ in speech and the saying of all/ unable to add/ to them a fool. And their dwelling is twenty-two/ engraved on two tablets/ of them doubled and redoubled/ in writing and in speech of lips. And of them four in the list/ go deeply into the chasm/ and one is hanging above/ and stands erect in stature. And of them three are marvelous/ filled with topaz/ and paved with gold/ kings look and soar/ of the three together to befit/ all visible and hidden/ their hands are in all like wild ones/ going and coming. And of them seven are doubled in tongue/ spoken in beauty of whisper/ in the throat and lip and tongue/ and seven stand in excitement. And of them twelve/ contending with all flesh/ to each one a commander and minister/ in knowledge and wisdom and morals. And the number of all of them is twenty-seven letters/ and their basis is twenty-two letters/ stretching and bending/ and five supplements. And our Lord choose in the Torah and the writing/ and with wisdom explained its letters/ in its sayings and the combination of its words/ and its lacks and increments/ and its writers and punctuators/ and its cantillation marks and vowels. And with wisdom determined/ an expressing heart/ like a flowing river/ the throat and the palate/ and the palate and the tongue/ and tongue in the expression of lips/ and the lips and the mouth say the matters of the writing/ and the writing in letters/ and the letters in words/ and the letters in inscription/ and the inscription in points/ and the points in names/ and the names in interpretation/ and the interpretation in the matter/ and the matter in the purification of the intellect.

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