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**SIGNIFICANT DYNAMICS OF MASORAH AS ATTESTED IN EARLY RABBINIC TEXTS,
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Asher Finkel, Ph.D.

Classical Masoretic exploration enjoys a prominent place in the academic disciplines of Biblical Study. It focuses mainly on the Tiberian scribal schools, their manuals and canonical manuscripts before the end of the first millennium C.E. Their scribal work gave rise to a reliable standard text for the next millennium, as the great codifier, Maimonides determined for all future reliable copies. This development is verified by the work of Christian D. Ginsberg, *Prolegomenon to the Massoretico-Critical Edition of the Bible* (rev. 1966). However, significant variants of the past appeared as well as different accounts of Scribal transmission, of which some were preserved in the early translations, especially in the Septuagint. Moreover, scribal traditions of the textual transcription as related to its reading and their interpretation are recorded in early rabbinic works including Biblical translations from the Mishnaic period. The material clearly suggests a symbiotic relationship between text and exegesis, the *sofer* was guided by the tripartite function of *sefer*, *sofer* and *sefar*, i.e. the exact text, a careful count of words and thematic sequence of the portions. These concerns come to determine the interpretation as to Biblical intention, specification and juxtapositional reflection. Indeed, early rabbinic tradition displays these vital determinants of tripartite dynamics of the *Sofer*, for Halakhic and Haggadic examination.

Since the days of Ezra the Scribe, a written account in the square Assyrian script was introduced as contrasting rejection of the Samaritan Pentateuchal text in the ancient Canaanite script. As well, Ezra introduced public readings that emerged by two semi-septennial cycles of consecutive Torah lections, apart from the annual cycle for festival readings, which Nehemiah 8 reflects. The textual account of consecutive “*sidrot*” was introduced from Ezra’s Torah for public reading. Transmitted copies, i.e. “*masorah*,” were prepared for gatherings to be read on consecutive Sabbaths and on holidays. These were followed by public preaching of the reading, the “*miqra*’.” Both functions guided the soferic dynamics that generated its interpretation, as the Torah relates: “Write this for a memorial in the Sefer and place it in the ears of Joshua” (Ex 17:14). The Qeri and Ketiv are the determinants of the Biblical injunction, in this very text, as to the Amalekite threat.¹ The Qeri, “Zekher” governs the halakhic determination as recalled by the early schools of Pharisees. However, the priestly teachers of the Sadducean-Essene schools approached the Biblical text differently during the period of Hasmonean-Herodian time.

¹ See b. Tal Baba Bathra 21 a,b as to the proper reading of said word, “*zkr*.”

I have demonstrated in the past years how Qumranic Pesharim texts preserved their interpretative approach by the “Urthum” determination.² The canonical text of the scriptures was viewed by the varied arrangements of letters appearing in the Biblical text with their pronunciation by means of “hwy” letters as vowels. For peshar interpretation, I determined originally to be a mantic approach,³ namely a permutational reading with given associations as the priestly reading of Urim Vethumim (i.e. “lights” are cast on particular letters to be arranged as words to “complete” the message.) Their interpretative approach contrasted with the rabbinic interpretation that relied on careful reading of the soferic text to be explained by rules of logic (*middot*) and its linguistic formation. Thus, the early school of Tannaim placed great emphasis on *ketiv* and *qeri*, i.e. the “*masorah*” of the text and the concern for “*miqra*” respectively. Both schools of Pharisees, the Shammaites and Hillelites from Temple time until the very days of the Patriarch Rabbi Yehudah, the editor of the canonical Mishnah debated the very issue of priority as related to “*masorah*” or “*miqra*,” to define the halakhah.⁴

Such observation also sheds light why the Septuagintal reading was suspect and considered not reliable by the Tannaitic schools, since its translation fixed a particular reading by the priestly scribes, who also have changed given wording of problematic Hebrew texts, which the early Massorah cites in the thirteen cases.⁵ The Greek rendition of the Hebraic text served the early Church Fathers to advance their semiotic and anagogical meanings. Paul too uses the text for its typological and allegorical significations. Yet, Philo,⁶ who utilized the Greek rendition of the text, was careful with its legal formulation that also depended on its Hebraic wording. Whereas the Pharisaic-rabbinic schools excluded the allegorical approach from the determination of halakhic study of Scriptures, which was explored only by logical principles and masoretic reading. Significantly, the case of Jesus as the teacher from Nazareth offered a witness to the above distinction between the Pharisaic and Sadducean approaches, as related to Masorah.

Jesus and his Jewish followers accepted the very canon of their days as “Torah and the Prophets.” This is recalled in connection with the Pharisaic teacher (Matt: *Nomikos* and Mk: *Grammateus*) inquiring what is the great commandment, the Summarium, as recorded in Matt 23:34-40. He quotes two Pentateuchal commandments that are linked with the same formulation of “*we’ahawta*,” namely the love for God (Dt 6:5) and the love for fellow (Lev 19:18). This is based on analogy from congruent expressions (*Gezerah Sawah*). The very scribe is said to agree with Jesus’ formulation. He also added (Mk only 12:32, 33) that “it is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” He is referring to Hosea 6:6 “For I desire ‘*Hesed*’ and not sacrifice as well as ‘*da’at Elohim*’ more than whole burnt offerings.” The reference to “*hesed*” is love in the interpersonal relationship, i.e. to neighbor, and “*da’at`elohim*” the intimate knowledge as love in the transpersonal relationship. Thus, he supports his teaching with a proof text from the Prophets, addressing him “*kalos didaskale*” (well said, teacher). Apparently, the Pharisaic teacher lived prior to the destruction of the Temple and he is anticipating the known teaching of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, Hillel’s disciple and successor. This attestation from

² A. Finkel, “The Oracular Interpretation of the Torah and Prophets as Reflected in the Temple Scroll and Pesharim of Qumran,” *Proceedings of the Eleventh World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Division A, Jerusalem, 1994.

³ See my original contribution, “The Peshar of Dreams and Scriptures, *Revue de Qumran*”, 15, 4:3 (October 1963), which is not referred to in M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1985, on Mantological Exegesis.

⁴ See B. Tal Sanhedrin 4a as to the principle *Miqra* or *Masorah* in the determination of halakhah and refer to b. Tal Kidushim 18b.

⁵ See b. Tal Megillah 9 a,b and Soferim 1:7 as well the Masoretic Manual.

⁶ See Harry A. Wolfson, Philo, 1947.

the pre-Destruction work of Mark to Pharisaic teaching of the Hillelites is also confirmed by Hillel's formulation of the Summarium.⁷ It is not a revolutionary guideline to Yochanan ben Zakkai's break after the War at Jamnia, as Jacob Neusner maintains in his voluminous writings.⁸

Moreover, there is a clear evidence from the Essene teacher's letter in "*miqsat ma'aseh Torah*," that connects the Hillelitic Pharisaic teachings before the War with the early stratum of Mishnah Yadyim 4. For the Essene expression "*Ma'aseh*" represents "Halakhah" in Pharisaic-Rabbinic writings. The attested decisions of Pharisaic schools were collected at Jamnia from Rabban Yochanan's days after the War⁹. They indeed reflect the particular distinction in praxis from the Second Temple period. In light of this witness, a comparative study to determine the different approaches to Masorah and its interpretation as pursued by the Pharisaic schools in contrast to the Sadducean-Essene teachers should be undertaken with careful analysis of the Temple Scroll. This Qumranic work was mistakenly assumed to be a canonical work by Prof. Yigal Yadin's publication¹⁰. However, in contrast to the Mishnaic collection of halakhic statements as Mishnah, the Essene work relates woven Pentateuchal texts with interpretative additions as extensions and variations, which offer the "*Ma'aseh Torah*" in light of the "*Urthum*" approach.

Significantly, the very writings of the Synoptic Gospels place the issue of the Summarium in agreement with the Pharisaic Hillelites, following the pericope concerning the resurrection in opposition to the Sadducees. Jesus rejects their view of no resurrection in support of Pharisaic basic teaching of final reward.¹¹ He offers a Pentateuchal proof text from Exodus 3:6, stating "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." The very word "Elohim" appears in construct state as the genitive to each patriarch. It comes to determine their state in relation to "Elohim" as eternal life. His proof text was selected from the initial revelation to Moses at the Burning Bush, which is then repeated as a message to the enslaved Israelites (Exod 3:15, 16). However, there it distinguishes between thrice repeated Elohim in the genitive case, to define his mission from the eternal God, apart from the message to the elders with reference to human history. There the patriarchs are grouped together as to mark the past, without "Elohim" repeated with each name. Such careful reading of the Masorah is exhibited in early Tannaitic writings.

Matthew's Gospel, in the introduction to Jesus' interpretation of principal Pentateuchal laws as presented in the Sermon on the Mount, offers a statement regarding the Masorah as Jesus' guide (Matt 5:17, 18). "Think not that I have come to abolish the Torah and the Prophets; I have come not, to abolish, (*katalysai*) them but, to fulfill, (*alla plerosi*)." This statement is the only Aramaic quote from the original Matthew found in the Talmud (Sabbath 11 6b). It reads "I did not come to deduct (*lemiphath*), nor to add (*le'asuphe*)." The Aramaic reading refers to addition and subtraction while the Greek translation presents a tendentious rendition. For Jesus was referring to Deut 13:1 (*Lo tosiph velo'tigra*) as a guide to teaching the Torah. Thereby he added an introductory statement on the masoretic approach to scripture "For truly I say to you not an "*iota*" nor "*mia keraia*" (the letter yod or a single horn to the letter, Aramaic: *Taga*, a crowned letter) will not be removed (*me parelte*) from the

⁷ See b. Tal. Sabbath 31a.

⁸ J. Neusner, *From Politics to Piety*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1973 and *A Life of Yochanan ben Zakkai*, Leiden, 1962, as well his series on the Mishnah.

⁹ See Tosefta 'Eduyyoth 1.

¹⁰ *Megillat Hamiqdash*, 3 volumes, Hechal Hasefer, 1977; see vol.1, ch. 8 (Hebrew).

¹¹ See b. Tal Sanhedrin 90a – 93a on the Mishnah Sanhedrin 11:1.

Torah (*Nomos*).” The reference to “*yod*” in a text guides the Masoretic reading of *male*’ or *haser* (plene or defectiva). While letter with a crown, as in Qumranic texts from the Temple period, is for example¹² the letter “*Dalet*” as distinct from “*Resh*”, with its horns.

In light of Jesus’ approach, note that he also opens his series of “woes” in Matt 23, to express an agreement with the Pharisaic teachers. He states “on the *kathedra* of Moses sit the teachers and the Pharisees. Whatever they tell you, practice and observe” (23:2-3). The expression of practice relates to positive commandments and the verb observes relates to negative commandments, for the Torah teaches 613 precepts. He agrees with Pharisaic approach to Masorah but criticizes them in their praxis. I introduced originally in my study of “The Pharisees and the Teacher of Nazareth” (Brill 1966 rev 1972) the thesis that Jesus criticizes the praxis of the Shammaitic school which in his days was in the majority; that can be seen in detail from the account of their halakhah in chapter 23 of Matthew. However, following the war, due to their zealotic approach most of their disciples were killed. However Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai escaped during the war¹³ and he established his Hillelitic academy at Yavneh with the support of the Roman ruler. Thus the majority rule shifted to his school that gave rise to the Mishnah, which redactional dynamics was brilliantly presented by Prof. Epstein in his Prolegomenon to the Mishnah. In no way is the Sermon on the Mount’s *Sitz in Leben* situated at Yavneh, as Prof. W.D. Davies maintained in his book, which also influenced J. Neusner’s distorted view.¹⁴ Currently I seek to show how significant is the symbiotic relation of Pharisaic interpretation in connection with early Masoretic dynamics.

I am grateful to my esteemed colleague of note, Prof. Aron Dotan, who heads the Institute of Masoretic Studies, for the inclusion of my presentation at this honorable body of scholars. For I am seeking presently to determine the dynamics of Masorah from early witnesses in order to define the symbiotic relationship of Masorah and halachic interpretation from the Mishnaic period, beginning with the Pharisaic schools. I look forward to continue in my efforts as well to present given results at the occasion when the Masoretic Institute meets with a call to papers that will be published for the public reception. Thank you.

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¹² This observation in the Qumran biblical texts alerts to the scholar to the manner the Hebrew text was written by a scribe. Similarly the use of dots to indicate a missing reading is noted clearly in Abot de R. Nathan 3:4.

¹³ See A. Finkel, “The Departures of Essenes, Christians and R. Yochanan ben Zakkai from Jerusalem,” *Festschrift Reinhold Mayer*, Bleicher Verlag, 1986.

¹⁴ W.D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount*, Cambridge, 1964.