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# **Medieval Massorah's Impact on Hebrew Philology**

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**MEDIEVAL MASSORAH'S IMPACT ON HEBREW PHILOLOGY**

*Asher Finkel, Ph.D.*

Biblical writings are preserved in ancient Hebrew, which was the spoken Semitic language of the Jewish people, akin to other Semitic tongues in the distant past. The Hebrew tongue developed over the centuries of the millennium B.C.E. and it enjoyed a classical peak during the Davidic dynasty but did undergo changes after the destruction of the Solomonic Temple. Due to the dispersion into foreign lands, Jews began to speak other tongues and their Hebraic mind-set was now influenced by Aramaic and Greek expression and construction. Hebrew language experienced a revival in Hellenistic times during the Hasmonean rule of an independent Jewish state. This resurgence gave rise to Mishnaic Hebrew of the post Destruction period. Only recently have we become aware of pre destruction Qumran writings preserving literary use of resurgent Hebrew, which strives to imitate the classical speech of the Bible but pales in comparison to its original splendor. However, Qumran attests to the scribal knowledge of Hebrew, which the rabbis also attribute to the former generation of teachers (the 'eskeloth) who are also known as the "men of the Great Synagogue" during the Greek era. These teachers were guided by the scribal activities of Ezra in the late Persian period.

Ezra and the men of the Great Synagogue were responsible for the canonical preservation of the "Torah and the Prophets". These canonical works served as the constitutional writings for the theocratic state of the Hasmoneans. The written text of the consonantal Hebrew in Assyriac script was now accompanied by a proto-massorah that determined its reading and meaning. This dual Torah of written and oral tradition guided the Pharisaic-Rabbinic schools over the centuries in the transmission of the Biblical canon and its interpretive Targum and Midrash. Earlier, the canon of Ezra and his men was set apart from the Samaritan version and it became the vorlage of the Greek translation by the seventy priests (so Letter of Aristeas), as well as the vorlage for the Zaddokite priests and the Essenes of Qumran, as the recent findings reveal.

Following the Destruction, Christianity incorporated into its Biblical canon the Septuagint text but the early Church Fathers, from Origen to Jerome, were seeking to establish a proper understanding of its translated texts in comparison with its Hebrew vorlage. Yet, a critical inquiry into the linguistic makeup of the Hebrew "Torah and Prophets" was not pursued by the Church Fathers and the Rabbis, in their investigation of phonetics, morphology and syntax. After all, the knowledge of classical Hebrew grammar allows for a better exegetical understanding of its compositional intent. However, scriptural debates on messianic fulfillment between Rabbis and Christian Fathers focused on key linguistic formulations, with a lack of linguistic understanding by the latter of the Hebrew. The rabbis who have enjoyed an upper hand in their debate was due in the main by their reliance on proto-Massoretic or scribal tradition.

Apparently the early schools of Massorah were committed to the linguistic study in great detail, as they saw their task to be the preservation of God's words in reliable Hebraic forms. An early theosophic-cosmospherical writing, the "Book of Yesirah" (Formation) relates the mystical use of Hebrew script that determines the works of Creation by God's intent via the use of Hebrew alphabet. Letters assign signification to the acts of creation by the sign, number and relationship (sefer, sefor, sefar). These three vectors determine the study of Hebrew grammar. How sound conveys speech by its permutation of the root form due to its vocalization and accompaniment of prefixed and suffixed particles. How the very triletteral word captures varied and polarized meanings, through transposition or cognate signification in similar parts of speech. How the words in their particular relationship and given formation produce complete thought in a sentence. This approach covers the rudiments of phonetics, morphology and syntax in the scribal study of the Hebrew language. By which the reader can explain the intent of evocative and performative speech. "God speaks let it be and it becomes."

From Hasmonean time to the end of the first millennium, rabbinic massorah indeed preserved peculiar and particular features and given characteristics of the text, with word texts as lexical notes and grammatical observations. These concordant lists offered the scholar access to the linguistic study of scriptures. However, scribal activities were pursued by dedicated few and their circles. For the rabbinic masters and their schools were concerned with the legal and exegetical studies. The philological discipline was neglected by the main centers of rabbinic scholarship until the days of the Egyptian Saadia Gaon in the tenth century. His innovative linguistic studies, that were shared by his contemporaries and disciples, are seen by the Spanish Abraham Ibn Ezra, two and half centuries later as the foundational work of the "elders of the Holy Tongue." In the early centuries of the second millennium, linguistic study of the Hebrew language shifted to the Iberian Peninsula. There emerged the great grammatical work of Yehudah Ibn Chayug and Yonah Ibn Jarach. With the decline of the Geonic period in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Spain now gave rise to Jewish scholarship, where the study of philology, science and philosophy have flourished, as indeed exemplified by the great philologist of the twelfth century, Ibn Ezra.

Saadia Gaon, who introduced the philological approach to Hebrew, even offered an authoritative Arabic translation as it relied on the ancient tradition. For in his days the anti-rabbinic movement of the Karaites emerged to challenge the Gaonic authority, as they relied only on the written text by its linguistic determination. Their motto was "to search the meaning textually is only proper", and Saadia Gaon demonstrated how inadequate was their grammatical understanding. Now the Babylonian academics focused on lexical studies, grammatical analysis and comparative semitics, which came to support the massoretic readings of the rabbinic tradition.

Jewish scholarship on the Iberian peninsula enjoyed a different environment. Abd el Rahaman III (912-61) provided support and encouragement to Jewish masters to pursue their studies in science, philosophy and linguistics. The preoccupation of Arab masters with poetry and their linguistic rich expression spurred the Jewish scholars to demonstrate that Hebrew too was rich and versatile as a Holy tongue to express prayers and prophetic words. The atmosphere of scholarly challenge and competition offered the impetus to the study of language itself. The environment nurtured the great liturgical poets and philosophers of Judaism in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century, Yehudah Halevi and Shlomo Ibn Gabriol, Abraham Ibn Ezra and Maimonides, as well as the masters of Hebrew grammar, whose work influenced the Rheinisch schools of Rashi and the Tosephists.

The striking development in Jewish scholarship at the end of the Geonic age and at the beginning of the second millennium correlates to the final publication of the authoritative work on the Massorah by the Tiberian scribal family of Ben Asher. The grandson Aaron produced a work, that is now designated as the Leningrad Manuscript, originally at Fustat. This classic work captured the scribal efforts over the past millennium in the preservation of the Biblical canonical texts with its Massorah Magna and Parva, its Tiberian vocalization and punctuation in form of cantillations, as well as its prosaic and poetic structural and paragraphic design. This very work was seen by the great rabbinic codifier, Maimonides, who declared it to be the authoritative guide to all biblical copies. There after all manuscripts adhered to the Leningrad edition, and indeed it became the vorlage for the critical work of *Biblica Hebraica*. Prof. Gerard Emmanual Weil, the noted Massoretic scholar prepared the companion volume to the recent edition of *Biblica Hebraica*, that offers the Massorah Magna. In addition, Aaron the grandson also published a Massorah manual "Dikduke Hata'amim," that appeared at the end of the Leningrad manuscript. This item was published separately by Baer and Strack with notes, Leipzig (1879). More recently Prof. Dotan of Tel Aviv University and the chairperson of the International Committee of Massoretic studies, issued a detailed analysis of this significant work. The manual invites the scholars into the portals of Massorah that has determined the linguistic dynamics of the Hebrew Bible, in the areas of phonetics, morphology and syntax.

The consonants of the Hebrew alphabet are represented by 22 characters, however in addition seven letters can be pronounced differently with a dot in the letter (the dagash lene) and another letter with a diacritical point on top. Thus, thirty consonantal values emerged; with four characters representing liquid letters (i.e., they can serve as vowels, the letters a, h, w, y). Long and short vowels are designated by pair of signs and they form the syllables but they are not written into the text. Various signs are used but the Tiberian Massorah prevailed. Letters that are not vocalized receive a colon sign below, that can determine two possibilities, of the pausal and the mobile. Thus, a set of six vowels accompany the Hebrew alphabet of twenty-two letters. Three consonants represent the root of each word, to be permuted by its vocalization in addition to preformative and affirmative particles that are attached to the root. Such structure affect the morphology, allowing for varied pronunciation of key sacred words which was known only to priestly scribes. The case in point is the pronunciation of the tetragrammaton, the divine name, which allows for 72 possibilities that result from all its consonantal permutations by six vocalizations.

The morphological aspects of the Hebrew language enjoys grammatical ruled that determine declensions and conjugations, formations and constructions Massoretic notes however not only point to their grammatical forms but also preserve their particular sense in given texts to their unique appearance. Sacred connotations like that of the tetragrammaton enjoy different notation than the use of grammatical forms of its shared root. This allows for a deeper understanding of its intentionally. Thus, one can wonder if our grammatical rules are not only for surface understanding. This becomes more apparent with its sentence structure due to cantillation. For sentences expressed thought, but Massorah can offer varied pronunciation and vocalization, substitute reading or variants that generate varied meaning and compositional intention to the reader. As the Massoretic teachers state: the "Torah offers seventy faces" to be considered by the reader. This deep sense of scriptures was captured by the millennial schools of scribes but as their work and manuals became known their grammatical rules were studied and used for philological examination.

The reception of linguistic understanding by Christian and Jewish scholars in the post-Renaissance time was limited to the philological account and to the grammatical discipline. The great rabbinic philologist at the end of the Middle Ages was Elijah Levitas (1489-1549). He was born in Neustadt near Nuremberg, Germany but spent most of his life in Italy, where he taught Hebrew language and grammar. He used the Massorah and its manuals with the Hebraic studies of the early Spanish and French rabbis to produce his lexicons, concordances, grammar books, and introduction to Massorah. Indeed he was instrumental in spreading the knowledge of Hebrew language in post Medieval time among the Jews and Christian humanists. His work on grammar, the "Sepher Habahur" became a classic and guided all Hebrew studies and his grammatical rules are still in use today.

Currently, the critical study of modern comparative Semitic studies comes to challenge the accepted views. For ancient grammar works of Akkadian and Ugaritic languages can guide the scholar to unveil the mind-set of the Hebrew language during the monarchical period. How three distinct conjugations of the verb, the perfect (the hamtu) the imperfect (the maru) and the historical part govern all verb formations that describe action in the story. The use of the historical past is captured in a unique Hebrew formation, that is "waw" consecutive. It serves to link sentences in that narrative by the chain of verbs at the beginning with "waw" vocalized by "patah" and the imperfect verb in the form of apocapped jussive. In this manner the narrative moves from action to action to record the story. These verbal sentences can be interrupted by use of nominal sentences to describe a still picture, the scene. In addition it interjects speech in a conversation. The art of Hebrew storytelling is captured by these devises.

In the Massorah, according to Elijah Levitas, the determination of the waw with an imperfect in the chain is to be distinguished by a mechanical observation, namely it is a "waw" conversive, the imperfect turns into the perfect, as if to say the future becomes the past. His observation secreted the Massoretic intention of its use, to relate a story in the Bible from the compositional aspect of God as the author. In the divine foreknowledge of all events that occur in human life as open ended are already in the past, but only to the people on the historical they appear in the future. Such a theological view guides the Massoretic teachers and therefore their manuals must be studied with their insight. In a similar vein, Maimonides recognized that the work of the Massorah is to preserve a "sacred" tongue. It deletes offensive speech and limits the use of pornographic and profane speech by its substitute clean forms. This reveals a biblical intention on the use of speech that is divine and authoritative. Speech should not be used to incite, to deceive, to arouse people to violence and indecent behavior. Biblical speech contrasts with the erotic and mythopoaic language, to promote a higher spiritual intention. Thus, the Song of Songs is not love poetry but holy or set apart language. Canticles capture parabolic and mystical realities in the determination of the human encounter with a transcendental being. This view of the early rabbis was recorded in Origen's Commentary to Canticles and it is verified in their own Midrashic writing at the beginning of the first millenium. This understanding come to challenge our study of the Massoretic intention in the Hebrew composition of biblical text. Their approach offers the contemporary scholar a dynamical view of their concern for the presentation of compositional intentionality of "sacred" scriptures and not merely concordatial, lexical and grammatical curiosities.

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