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# Research Review: The Phenomenological Dynamics of Proto-Masorah

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# **Research Review: The Phenomenological Dynamics of Proto-Masorah**

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**67<sup>th</sup> Catholic Biblical Society Annual Meeting**  
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**RESEARCH REVIEW:**  
**THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL DYNAMICS OF PROTO-MASORAH**

*Asher Finkel*

**The Historical Development**

The past year of my sabbatical in Jerusalem was dedicated to research and the preparation of a monograph on a highly neglected focus in Biblical Studies, namely the phenomenological dynamics of Proto-Masorah. During the Hasmonean-Herodian period, the Hebrew canon was referred to as "Torah and the Prophets," so is the witness in the writings of Qumran, Jewish-Christian and early rabbinics. For these works were the "holy writings," the "set apart" literature which enjoyed unique significance and central role in the life of Jews in their own theocratic state. Their system of government and religious orientation was distinct in the Greco-Roman world. Since the Persian time, the Jewish returnees from Babylonian exile determined their own fate democratically, by their representatives of the three groupings of priests, Levites and Israelites who affixed their signature to a "Ketav 'amanah," a voluntary covenant in the days of Ezra the scribe and Nehemiah the administrator. Following the successful Maccabean revolt against the Seleucid Greek and Jewish rule, their first act of restoration apart from cleansing the Temple was to collect the "Torah and the Prophets" writings and to store them in the Temple area, as the standard for copying and consulting. The Hebrew canon governed the life of the theistic people in a theocratic state. The "Torah and Prophets" generated a different world-view and produced a human consciousness in total contrast to mythopoeic thought and nature worship. It advanced human freedom and dignity and related human reason to the experience of awe and love of God.

The very text was written in Aramaic- Hebrew script, due to Ezra's innovation against the Samaritan schism. It consisted of consonants only with their vocalization and punctuation transmitted orally. Varied voices of the theocratic state addressed the written tradition and its proper verbalization, i.e., the "katuv" as related to "miqra." This was the initial signification of written and oral tradition. Varied voices produces key differences between the religious movements that appeared in the independent state of the Jews, as attested by Josephus the historian and verified by contemporary discoveries and scholarship. It began with the rift between Samaritan and Jerusalemian priesthood, the latter eventually embracing Zadokite or Sadducean orientation, The Hasidim groups gave rise to Pharisees, a nickname for the "pursuers of holiness" as well as the break away Hasidean-Essene priest who left with his followers the Temple for the desert of Qumran. Before the destruction of the Second Temple, the Pharisees established two schools, the Shammaites in majority and the Hillelites in the minority. Various messianic groups appeared as well as the early Jewish-Christians in Galilee and in Jerusalem. Exilic Jewry at that time enjoyed a knowledge of Greek and their philosophies, as well as the reading of

the Bible in Greek. Eventually Biblical works became known in Greco-Roman time, inviting "fearers of God" among the gentiles to join the Community of Jews.

Judaism before 70 was variegated, attesting to distinct views and different interpretive approaches to the canonical text. What then was the crucial difference between the sects, especially between the Sadducees and Boethesians, on one hand and the two schools of Pharisees? The simplistic view of Geiger in "Schrift und Uebersetzung," that saw the contrast between strict and loose construction, cannot satisfy the witness of the Dead Sea Community. Their teacher and followers are known in rabbinic writing as the Boethesians (Bet-Yose in contrast to Bet Absalom in IQpHab) or Essenes in Philo's and Josephus' writings. Their texts entertain a variety of themes, from the mystical and the apocalyptic to peshet and midrash, as well as prayers and testimonia, with the original account of debate in their Teacher's epistle and the original communal manuals. In a similar way, the very sayings of Jesus are offered in parables and his very teachings are stated<sup>1</sup> to be "not like the scribes but by exousia." Why did he offer parables even in the area of halakhah, which requires precise formulation? How did "exousia" affect the verity of his teaching, as introduced contrastingly with "Amen (verily)?" These phenomena are not fully understood today, especially in their interpretative relationship to the written words of the Torah. Moreover, how did the school of Hillel emerge after 70 to consolidate post Destruction Judaism? Surely not by its revolutionary attitude ascribed by J. Neusner to Rabbi Yochanan. As I indicated in the past the very epistle of the Teacher at Qumran can be dated before 70 and surely he covers the same points of conflict with the Hillelitic disciples before 70 as the Mishnah in "Yadayyim" records. Moreover, the very scribe, in Mark 12:32-33 only, points out that Jesus' teaching of the dual love commandment is "kalos" and he adds that it is "better to perform hesed (eleos) than to offer many sacrifices" (quoting Hos 6:6) which also guided the Hillelites before 70. Surely R. Yochanan in both cases used the same approach of the Pharisees before 70 that J. Neusner finds revolutionary only after 70. Apparently the historical circumstance changed after the war and destruction, when many Shammanites as zealots were killed and the Hillelites by the departure of R. Yochanan from Jerusalem enjoyed the majority. For halakhah is to be decided democratically by majority rule, so the Mishnah formulates and the Palestinian Talmud verifies.

In light of above questions, it is very striking to all how the Hillelitic rabbis' major concern was the guiding principle of hedging ('seyag').<sup>2</sup> First they applied it to the scriptural Masorah<sup>3</sup>, as the hedge of the canonical written Torah. It also parallels their focus on the Oral law of enactments and rules that are introduced by the use of "hedging." Thus both the Masorah and the Mishnah are the very focus of the Hillelitic rabbis especially after 70. From these beginnings the development led to the classical Masorah schools at the end of the first millennium. A similar development of Talmudic tradition from early Mishnah to canonical Mishnah led to two Talmudic compilations ending in the Saboraic-Gaonic transmission of the final redacted oral tradition with all its aspects. The contemporary study of classical Masorah and its schools as well as Talmudic Gaonic succession of rabbinic academies especially in Babylon are to be applauded. However a veil must be lifted over the entire first millennium for the careful study of the proto-Masorah by its phenomenological dynamics preserving the compositional intent of the Holy Scriptures. After all, the Tiberian school of Ben Asher issued the authoritative codex that became the official standard for the second millennium due to Maimonides' authority in world Jewry. Such a codex is the Leningrad manuscript that serves the scholars today as the critical edition of

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<sup>1</sup> In Mk 1:22 and Matt 7:29 with a distinct difference, the first on Jesus' acts and the second on his sayings.

<sup>2</sup> Years ago I also demonstrated that Jesus used this guiding principle in his antithetical sayings of the Sermon on the Mount.

<sup>3</sup> Mishnah Avot 3:17, in the name of Rabbi Akiva.

the *Biblica Hebraica*, the latest editions by my esteemed teacher Prof. Elliger and by his student and my colleague Prof. Rueger. Now its publication includes in the apparatus the Masoretic references, as they are presented on the Masorah Magna by Prof. Weil. Contemporary scholarship relies on the Masoretic reading with its vocalization (*nequdot*) and punctuation (*te'amim*), divisions (*parsiyot*) and lectionary (*sidrot*). However, the scholar remains oblivious to the main part of Masoretic work over the first millennium. For the classical Masorah preserved varied phenomena by particular formulations and examples with reference to scribal "secrets," and these phenomena also appear throughout the rabbinic literature from Mishnaic to Gaonic times.

## The Phenomena

The varied functions of the scribe from early time are captured in the word "*Sofer*." It represents three related meanings for the root "*sfr*." First, "*Sefer*" as a noun is related to the verb "*sipper*," i.e. to relate the text. Second, "*Sefor*" as a noun is related to the verb "*safar*," i.e. to count or enumerating the varied expressions in the list, as singular or repeated. Third, the noun "*Sefar*" indicates the border, determining the literary structure of prose and poetry by their divisions. The scribe then relates the text by its verbalization i.e. vocalization and punctuation, allowing the written form (the "*Katuv*") to be properly recited or read (the "*Miqra*"). Initially, the written is related to the oral by its transmitted verbalization. In addition, the scribe also determines the particular significance of words or given sentences throughout the Bible by the count of expressions. These are the lists of the "*sefurot*" in the Masorah, which were recalled also by "*simanim*" (mnemonic acronyms). Finally, the scribe alerts the reader to unique compositional placement and arrangement of given texts affecting the juxtapositional and divisional considerations.

The early "*Soferim*" were concerned about plene and defective readings in the utilization of the liquid letters *h w y* in Hebrew. They pointed out the unique and similar expressions, as well as the repeated form with its varied usage. They spoke of "*panim*" (faces) to the Torah text as well as the hidden (*nistar*) and the manifest (*nigleh*), two sides to the wording. They alert us to inductive signification and multifaceted meanings of words as well as the unique speech forms that are written and cannot be read, especially with the divine names. Moreover, they indicate dual readings, "read and not written" or "written and not read," alternative reading due to omissions or inclusions. In addition, Masoretic scribes who offered compositional rules and directives, signs and lists, arrangement and design, were careful in counting verses, words and letters, even *parsiyot* and *sidrot*. Such a rich tradition over the millennium until the classical period appears to have affected the early witness of writing citing the Hebrew Scriptures. They shed light on the particular way they recorded God's name and the formation of words and verses defining His intention. This major aspect of proto-Masorah was not entertained since the days of Jean Astruc and the proponents of the Documentary Hypothesis, which focused on the use of vocabulary and parallel material.

Moreover, the phenomenon of canonicity does not pertain only to a council's decision at the end of the historical process, from documents to redacted books and then to their formal approval by the synagogue and the Church. Canonicity arose from the collective people's acceptance of the works as "set-apart"; for it governed their way of life. They lived by its value system affecting their transpersonal, interpersonal, intrapersonal and subpersonal relationship. It gave rise to a theocratic society in contradistinction to the Greco-Roman world, following the Persian period. This occurred before 70, i.e. before the council's decision at Yavneh or later at Nicea. Canonical consciousness stamped the different

movements before 70, as they all shared the "Torah and Prophets." Their conflict over the matters of the Biblical law and theological thought arose from their approach to interpretation.

In the case of Qumran writings, I already demonstrated that the Peshetic approach was not an enigma. It simply disclosed how the priestly teacher approached the Biblical text by the manner of "dream" interpretation. The prophets relate that they have received God's words via a "dream" and so did the Qumran teacher, who as a priest claimed to be given the privilege to relate God's words (see Malachi 2:4-7). He sought therefore to unlock the significations of these words by a mantic reception that can be projected on later times. For the Qumran teacher, the prophetic reference to "the latter time" came to designate his time of "the latter generation." He projected the prophetic text on the very persons, people, events and circumstances to explicate the "dream" in the manner of "*patar-pasar*" of the written text. In a similar way, the Qumran teacher offers a "Midrash Torah" that is contrasted with the Midrash of the Pharisaic rabbis. They are described by the Teacher as "Dorshe Halaqot," those who interpret divisively. For they are misled by the "false preacher" (*matif hakazav*), whereas their Teacher is offering the teaching of truth (*'emet*). The crucial difference between these two approaches, as I originally demonstrated in my book "The Pharisees and the Teacher of Nazareth," is between the "one who seeks (*doresh*) the Torah as a Book" by rational means of scriptural interpretation and the "one who seeks (*doresh*) God" by oracular means, that produces harmonistic and conflated reading of Biblical texts as Midrash or even collected testimonia to be projected as peshet.

Recently I presented a paper on the "Oracular Reading of the Biblical Texts" at the last World Congress of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem. I described the priest practicing a meditative reception of the Torah texts. He visualized God's words of the Torah as illuminated writing on the screen of his mind. Various parts of the Torah text produce an insightful Scriptural mosaic. The Teacher is called "*Doresh HaTorah*," who is excavating (*mehoqeq*) the hidden to become manifest by offering the harmonistic text. This phenomenon finds a parallel also in the Samaritan use of the early Hebrew text in Phoenician script.

The above features involve in essence the priest who has preserved a tradition of the oracular use of *Urim Vethumim*. On the breastplate of the High Priest, there appeared light from twelve precious stones, on which six letters per stone were inscribed, totaling 72 letters. When light shone on particular letters, they are called "*Orim*" in the plural. Since all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet are inscribed, any arrangement of words is possible. Light on given letters need to be completed into words, which is called "*thumim*." *Urim Ve thumim* is the plural wording, from which the singular forms emerges as "*Orthum*." An *Orthum* Midrash is referred to by the Teacher at Qumran, as it appears in the Thanksgiving scroll, the collection of his grateful prayers. When "*Orthum*" is applied to canonical text, it produces the harmonistic arrangement of God's words. For "Or" (light) is cast on various similar words in different Torah texts to be combined and completed, i.e. "*thum*," which results in the new reading as "truth."

The reference in 4Q322, as the proper ending to the Damascus Document, related how the members of "Yahad" community at Qumran renewed their covenant on the day of Pentecost to accept the "final Midrash Torah" of their Teacher as their guide to set-apart life in the Desert. They became the "Children of Light." Their final Midrash Torah is nothing but the "Temple Scroll," so named by Yadin. He noted the harmonistic tendencies in this work but regrettably he assumed that this scroll was another canonical Torah book. He also noted that in the Temple Scroll how God speaks in the first person singular,

revealing its authorship. However, he was not aware that the priests' approach to the "*Orthum*" midrash results in the usage of the first person for the Tetragrammaton. The pronominal form came to replace God's name, which cannot be pronounced. The priestly tradition originally claimed to have preserved the particular pronouncement (*Haggo*) of the Tetragrammaton. It was pronounced by a series of permuted letters of the "Four Letters." Since there were two identical letters of "He," the permutation allows for twelve possibilities (by Pascal's rule that multiplies the four items and divides by two of the same). Thus, the permutation of letters allows for 12 arrangements to be pronounced by six vowels (a e i o u and the "*shewa*"),  $12 \times 6 = 72$  permutations. This is the sacred number associated with the Tetragrammaton. The priests from childhood needed to learn how to pronounce God's name by visualization of the varied combinations and this is referred to in Serekh Haberakhot, as the "Manual of Haggo." This mystical knowledge indeed appeared in early time but only resurfaced as a mystical system for letter meditation in the work of the prophet Abulafia in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the time when the Zohar appeared. Mystical interpretation is based on meditative gazing of Scriptures and God's name.

Apparently the distinction between the Pharisaic scribes and Qumranite scribes results in two contrasting Midrash. The Pharisaic teachers relied heavily on the preserved written text and therefore Masorah is most significant. In their study the Sadducean Boethessian priests rely on the oracular readings of the Torah that produce harmonistic text and therefore their writing cannot be compared to Masoretic text. My research unveils the very dynamics guiding the early text, whether from the early Rabbinic or Essenic writings, Jewish-Christian works as well as apocryphal and pseudepigraphal works, in comparison with early Aramaic and Greek translations. These works attest to a proto-Masoretic development from the Hasmonean-Herodian times until the classical period of Massorah. They also attest to two sides of interpretation that produced a literal and rational exegesis or the allegorical and parabolic reflection on one hand, and on the other hand, an oracular and mystical approach to Scriptures. The latter originally appeared with the priests after the prophetic era but the former emerged with Pharisaic scribes and charismatic teachers.

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