

A Brief History of the Hebrew Bible

by Debra E. Anderson

For the greater part of its history our Society has given a very prominent place to the Word of God in Hebrew for the Jew."¹

This work increased in 1882, when Isaac Salkinson formed an association with the Society in order to publish his translation of the New Testament into Hebrew, a work which was completed by Dr. C. D. Ginsburg. For some years the Trinitarian Bible Society published the Ginsburg-Salkinson New Testament and the Ginsburg Old Testament separately, and in 1937 as a whole Bible in the Hebrew language. This year sees the continuation of this work with the publication by the Society, in conjunction with the Gereformeerde Bijbelstichting in The Netherlands, of the Ginsburg Old Testament/Delitzsch New Testament Hebrew Bible.

The Old Testament

The story of God's providential preservation of His Word as is found in the Old Testament has a long, distinguished and intricate history. Some fifteen centuries before the birth of Christ, God raised up the prophet Moses to begin His great work of written communication with man. Thus began the writing of the Old Testament, a work which would continue for eleven centuries and would constitute the basis for the growth and development of Christianity.

Even as early as the writing of Deuteronomy, God began to instruct His people in the preservation of His Word. Each person was commanded to know the Law of God² and to teach it to his children in all situations and at all times (Deuteronomy 6.6-7). God's people were to bind the law upon their hands and between their eyes (6.8), a command which the Jews took literally by producing *tefillin* or phylacteries. Jewish homes were to have the Law written on their doorposts and gates (6.9); in fulfilment of this Jews still produce *mezuzot*, copies of passages of the Law which are placed in metal or leather receptacles on the doorposts of Jewish homes. Each person was also to make for himself, or have made, a copy of the Torah³ for his personal use.

God gave His Word without error in the original manuscripts, but with all this copying, errors would have early crept into individual copies. These errors would have been inadvertently perpetuated in copies made from these copies. However, God also commanded that a copy of the Torah be kept beside the Ark of the Covenant, first in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple, where it could be safeguarded by the priests and used to correct errant copies (Deuteronomy 31.26). This would ensure that there was always an authoritative copy of the Torah available. The centuries passed and other writings were added to the Torah. These, called the *Nabi'im* (Prophets) and *Ketubim* (Writings),⁴ in due course came to complete God's Old Testament, and it is assumed that these were included with those kept in the Temple.

The books which formed the Hebrew Old Testament were written in the common Hebrew style -- without word breaks and without vowels and accents.⁵ All they had was a continuous flow of consonants. This would be akin to writing "In the beginning

God created" of Genesis 1.1 as "nthbgnnnggdcrtd". It was necessary for those who knew the Word well to pass the Word on orally as well as in written form from one generation to the next in order to maintain understanding of God's Law.

With the continuing sins of the Jews came the resultant destruction of the First Temple (586 BC; see 2 Kings 25.9; 2 Chronicles 36.19), and the disappearance of the authoritative copy of the Torah. However, by the time that Ezra and Nehemiah led the Jews back into the land of Palestine, there were numerous copies of the existing books of the Old Testament available. Some of these, having been carefully copied from the authoritative Temple copy before the destruction of the Temple, would have been very accurate. Others, copies of copies or those produced with less care, would have been more likely to contain errors. Regardless, the copy from which Ezra and Nehemiah taught was considered authoritative and held the confidence -- and fear -- of the faithful Jews who returned from exile, for they "trembled at the words of the God of Israel" (Ezra 9.4) and obeyed it, even to the 'putting away' of their foreign wives (Ezra 10.19) and strict enforcement of Sabbath regulations (Nehemiah 13.15-22).

According to the ancient Jewish writings, the Talmud, Ezra formed a synod of scribes and teachers, known as the Great Synagogue or Great Assembly (*Kenesseth ha-Gedolah*) for the purpose of teaching and interpreting the Torah. In order to do this effectively, one of their tasks was the production of a standard Old Testament text. The Great Assembly was replaced by specialised schools of scribes, the *soferim*, in about 300 BC. The term *soferim* had been used somewhat more loosely in previous eras, but now came to designate a specific group of men who were trained Torah scholars and copyists. They took up the mantle from the Great Assembly and continued the work of producing a standard Hebrew Old Testament text by evaluating available copies and working to eliminate textual differences and variants. This they did by comparing available manuscripts and copies, ascertaining which were most correct and where they differed taking the majority readings of those copies deemed most reliable as official.

It is contended, on the basis of ancient Jewish writings, that some of the early *soferim* made corrections to the text based upon variant readings, spelling changes and even theological conjecture.⁶ However, the later *soferim* did not believe themselves qualified to make such changes and instead accepted the text as they had it in hand, even to the perpetuating of peculiar readings and spellings, and words or letters which were completely out of place. Instead of changing what they viewed as erroneous readings, they marked them with various dots or circles and placed what they believed to be the correct readings in the margins.⁷ In addition, over time the *soferim*, and then their successors, the Masoretes, set about counting the words and letters of the standardised text and established strict rules for copying, to ensure that no errors or changes would be allowed in the text. In time the various notes and marginal readings came to form what is known as the Masorah.

While the *soferim* worked to standardise and protect the Hebrew text, other Jews, who had been taken from their homes into Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar, found themselves and their children losing the ability to read the Hebrew text. Thus, various alternative editions and translations began to be made. The Hebrew-language Samaritan Pentateuch, as the name suggests, had a limited circulation only outside of

mainstream Judaism. More important was the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament completed about 200 BC, which was very popular particularly amongst the Jews living in Alexandria, Egypt, and those influenced by Hellenistic thought. By the time of Christ, it was the Bible of many even in Jerusalem, and was used by the New Testament writers in some of their Old Testament quotations.

The Christian Era

It was the Hebrew, however, that continued to be used and copied in Temple circles. However, Jewish revolt against Rome brought about the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD. The remaining Jewish scholars met in Jamnia, northeast of Gaza, about 90 AD to discuss, among other things, the preservation of the Hebrew text. At this time, the text was still in its original format: without word breaks and without indications of vowel sounds.⁸ The correct understanding of the text was known through the oral tradition passed down through the centuries by priests and parents. Without the Temple, the Jews feared that the oral tradition, and the correct reading of the Hebrew text, would be lost. In order for the text to continue to be understood in succeeding generations, the Jews realised that it would be necessary to find a way of incorporating the oral tradition into the text itself. Thus began the work of the Masoretes, the Jewish scholars who completed the work of vocalising, standardising and propagating the Hebrew text.

The Masoretes, like their predecessors, held the consonantal Hebrew text to be sacrosanct, and would not condescend to change it other than by placing breaks between words. Thus, much of the early work of the Masoretes entailed introducing into the text a series of dots and lines with which to indicate vowel sounds but which would not interfere with the text. These dots and lines have come to be known as vowel points. In addition, the Masoretes produced accents to indicate stops and non-stops, much as in musical notation, to facilitate the reading of the text.

The work of the Masoretes continued up into the medieval period. Today we have available two extant manuscripts, the Leningrad Codex of 1008 AD and the Aleppo Codex of 925 AD, from the hands of the greatest of the Masoretic families, the ben Ashers.

Work until the invention of the printing press continued by hand by Jewish Masoretes and Christian scribes, and was limited to the copying of the authoritative text with its Masorah. However, many of those copying the text were uneducated in the meaning and purpose of the Masorah; and, while they were meticulous about the text they were inefficient in their copying of the Masorah. Thus, by the 15th century, there were many copies of the Hebrew Old Testament. Most copies contained odd fragments or portions of the Masorah, but the items in the Masorah lacked identifiable order, with references to one verse being placed next to others, etc., so that the Masorah in most copies was no longer of any use.

The first portion of the Hebrew text to be printed was a Psalter in 1477. Others followed, including a complete Old Testament in 1488. In 1494 the Old Testament was published by Soncino, which became the standard edition for some years and was used by Luther in his German translation. The year 1517 brought some of the most important work on the printed Hebrew text. That year saw the publication of the

Complutensian Polyglot and the first Rabbinic Bible. The Polyglot's Hebrew text was without accents, and the vowel points were unreliable, but the consonantal text proved to be very accurate. More important was the first *Biblia Rabbinica*, edited by Felix Pratensis, a Jewish Christian, and published by Daniel Bomberg. This edition placed chapter and verse numbers in the margin and included quality Masoretic information.

The most important edition of the Hebrew Old Testament to be published before the 20th century was the second Rabbinic Bible of Jacob ben Chayim (or Hayyim), published by Bomberg in 1524-5. Ben Chayim, using money provided by Bomberg, collected as many manuscripts of the Old Testament as possible from around the world and collated them to produce the most complete Bible available. It was the first to present a complete Masorah and was the only authorised Masoretic recension, and in time became the 'textus receptus' of the Old Testament. It was published and reprinted more or less as it stood in numerous well-known editions, including such editions as Plantin 1566, Hutter 1587, Buxtorf 1619, Athias 1611, Leusden 1667, van der Hooght 1705, Kennicott 1780, Letteris 1852 and our own Ginsburg 1894/1998, and was used as the basis for the Old Testament for many Reformation-era translations such as the English Authorised Version and the Dutch Statenvertaling.

The Ginsburg Old Testament

In 1831 Christian David Ginsburg was born in Warsaw. He was educated in the Rabbinic College there and became a Christian in 1846. In the late 19th century, he set out to collate and correct the Masorah and to study the Hebrew text. He travelled all over Europe to find as much material as he could, and then set about the work of examining the text and the Masorah, avoiding the new principles expounded in then-current New Testament textual criticism.⁹

No one, from 1525-6 to the time of Dr. Ginsburg, had ever attempted to carry out, perfect, and complete the work so nobly begun by Jacob ben Chayim, until Dr. Ginsburg devoted his learning to it, and made it the work of his life.¹⁰

Rather than change the text, as was becoming common in New Testament work, Ginsburg's studies led him to base his 'Massoretico-Critical' edition of the Hebrew Bible upon the text of Jacob ben Chayim, the Bomberg 1525.¹¹ In 1894 the Trinitarian Bible Society published this edition of the Hebrew Old Testament, and now, in conjunction with the Gereformeerde Bijbelstichting, are pleased to be able to provide this edition again. It is our prayer that this edition will find wide distribution, particularly amongst the Jews in Israel and throughout the world who are in desperate need of the Word of God, as well as for other Hebrew readers, Old Testament translators and biblical scholars.

The Hebrew New Testament

In order better to reach Jews with the whole Word of God, the Society is pleased to be producing with its Ginsburg Old Testament an edition of the Hebrew New Testament which is based upon the Greek Received Text.

Christians throughout the ages have sought to bring the Jews to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, and one major way of doing this has been through the production of the

New Testament in Hebrew. The New Testament, unlike the Old Testament, was originally written in Greek. Therefore, for Jewish readers to have a New Testament in Hebrew, it would need to be translated from the Greek. This task was undertaken on various occasions. The first printed portion of the New Testament in Hebrew was an imperfect edition of Matthew's Gospel in 1537, with the first complete New Testament, translated by Hutter, being printed in 1599.

A variety of other editions of the Hebrew New Testament appeared in print through the next three centuries. In 1886 the Society published an edition of the Hebrew New Testament which was begun by Isaac Salkinson and completed by C. D. Ginsburg. This edition, in an idiomatic type of Hebrew and prepared from a critical form of Greek text, continued to be circulated by the Society until the 1960s.

The British and Foreign Bible Society in 1873 commissioned Franz Delitzsch to prepare a translation of the New Testament in Hebrew. This translation, completed in 1877, was in a more literal style and was also made from the critical text of the Greek New Testament. The next year, at the request of the BFBS, Delitzsch revised this translation in order to bring it into conformity to the Textus Receptus.

In the Society's desire to see the Scriptures produced in faithful and accurate editions, in 1963 the Rev. Terence Brown, then Secretary of the Society, advised the Committee of the Society that the currently-circulated Ginsburg-Salkinson Hebrew New Testament was still in conformity to the critical text, whereas the Delitzsch Hebrew was Textus Receptus based. Thus, it was decided that the Society would cease publication of the Ginsburg-Salkinson and begin publication of the Delitzsch. We continue to do so to this day, and it is this Delitzsch New Testament which will complete our Hebrew Bible.

Thus it is with praise to Almighty God that we again have in print the Bible in the language of the Jews. May our great God be pleased to use these to the furtherance of His kingdom amongst the Jews.

Endnotes

¹ *Quarterly Record* No. 330, April-July 1943, p. 5

² **These were not just individual laws, but the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, commonly known by conservative Christians as the Pentateuch.**

³ **See Deuteronomy 31.19, which speaks of the Song of Moses, but was regarded by ancient Jews as including all of the Torah.**

⁴**The Jews call the Old Testament *TaNaK*, (or *Tanakh*) taking the first letter from the three Hebrew words to form an anagram. However, they often also use the term Torah to refer to all of the books of the Tanak.**

⁵ **Modern Hebrew documents, except for those designed to be used by people learning the language, are written with word breaks but without vowels. However, the Old Testament without vowel points (except for scrolls used in the Synagogue) would be unacceptable to most Jewish people.**

⁶ The Talmud calls some of these various changes *ittur soferim* (embellishments of the scribes, *Ned. 37b*) and *tikkun soferim* (emendation of the scribes, *Sif. Num. 84*), and speaks of dislocated verses (regarding Numbers 10.35; *Shab. 115b-116a*).

⁷ The *soferim* intended that the word in the text, the *Ketiv* (meaning 'written'), would be replaced, particularly in oral readings, with the reading in the margin, the *Qeri* (meaning 'read'). One example of this is in 1 Kings 22.48 (verse 49 in Hebrew). The Hebrew text (the *Ketiv*) has "ten" with a small circle above the word; the margin (the *Qeri*) has "he made". Thus, when reading the text, the Hebrew reader will substitute "he made" for "ten". This *Qeri* reading was also substituted in the text by the Authorised Version translators, who give the reading as "Jehoshaphat made ships ..."

⁸ There is some evidence that some non-biblical texts were vowel pointed as early as the first Christian century, and some late Talmudic works claim that the Old Testament text was pointed by Ezra or the Great Assembly. However, manuscripts from the Dead Sea region and other materials, as well as notes supplied by the Masoretes, indicate that vowel pointing of the Old Testament text was completed, if not begun, by the Masoretes in the centuries after 200 AD.

⁹ *Quarterly Record* No. 358, January-March 1952, p. 2.

¹⁰ *Quarterly Record* No. 359, April-June 1952, p. 4.

¹¹ In 1937 there was a slight change in Old Testament publication. Rather than publishing an edition of the Bomberg text, current Old Testaments are generally editions of the Leningrad Codex 1008 AD. However, this change creates only minor repercussions in terms of translation, since there are only eight differences between the two texts which affect the translation of the text. Some scholars have set out to produce new texts of the Old Testament using variants found in the Dead Sea Scrolls or translating the Septuagint back into Hebrew to provide different readings, thus providing a critical Old Testament text akin to that in the New Testament. But in the Old Testament, the idea of the critical text is generally rejected in favour of printing what is called a 'diplomatic' text, and placing variants in a critical apparatus at the bottom of the page. A diplomatic text is a text which is copied 'as is', without alteration. Today, the Leningrad Codex is printed verbatim, with any variants placed in the lower margin. Conversely, a critical or 'eclectic' text is one which is produced by sifting through variant readings, choosing those deemed, on whatever basis, to be 'best', and producing a text which includes these 'best' readings. The United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament is an example of a critical text.