

# ***A Brief History of the Traditional Hebrew Massoretic Old Testament Text***

The Hebrew Old Testament Scriptures offered by Light for Israel is known as the *Second Great Rabbinic Bible*, or the Ben Chayyim Massoretic text. A brief history of this text follows.

The Massoretic text is named for a group of Hebrew scholars called the Massoretes. They had schools in Babylon and Tiberius by the Sea of Galilee. They flourished from 500 to 1,000 A.D. The word "*Massoretic*" comes from the Hebrew word "*massorah*" which means "tradition". The idea is that of both preserving something and passing it down to the next generation.

The Masoretes both preserved the Hebrew text and made accurate copies to hand down to succeeding generations.

Before Gutenberg invented the printing press in 1452, Scriptures had to be copied by hand. The Masoretes were the ones who made these copies. They had to follow certain rules when making a copy of the Synagogue Rolls of the Hebrew Scriptures. These rules are listed in the Talmud and repeated here to show the great care taken in copying the Scriptures.

1. The parchment must be made from the skin of clean animals; must be prepared by a Jew only, and the skins must be fastened together by strings taken from clean animals.
2. Each column must have no less than 48 nor more than 60 lines.
3. The ink must be of no other color than black, and it must be prepared according to a special recipe.
4. No word nor letter could be written from memory; the scribe must have an authentic copy before him, and he must read and pronounce aloud each word before writing it.
5. He must reverently wipe his pen each time before writing the word for "God" [which is Elohim] and he must wash his whole body before writing the name "Jehovah" [which is translated "LORD" in the King

James English Bible] lest the Holy Name be contaminated.

6. Strict rules were given concerning forms of the letters, spaces between letters, words, and sections, the use of the pen, the color of the parchment, etc.

7. The revision of a roll must be made within 30 days after the work was finished; otherwise it was worthless. One mistake on a sheet condemned the sheet; if three mistakes were found on any page, the entire manuscript was condemned.

8. Every word and every letter was counted, and if a letter were omitted, an extra letter inserted, or if one letter touched another, the manuscript was condemned and destroyed at once. [From General Biblical Introduction by H.S. Miller, 1960, p. 184-5]

Miller added the following comment which is worth repeating:

"Some of these rules may appear extreme and absurd, yet they show how sacred the Holy Word of the Old Testament was to its custodians, the Jews, and they give us strong encouragement to believe that we have the real Old Testament ... which was originally given by inspiration of God." [Miller, p. 185]

The Massorettes main concern was safeguarding the Hebrew consonantal text. Originally the Hebrew text was written only in consonants as there were no vowels. The Masorettes added vowel markings underneath the consonants called "matres lectiones" meaning "mothers of reading". The vowel markings allowed those not familiar with the text the chance to read it. They also provided explanations of ambiguous words, and counted the verses, words and letters of the Old Testament. The standardization of the Hebrew text was completed between 600 - 700 A.D.

Daniel Bomberg first printed the Hebrew text in 1516-17. This was called the First Rabbinic Bible, Daniel Bomberg edition. Bomberg published the Second Great Rabbinic Bible in 1524-25. It was edited by Abraham Ben Chayyim and is also called the Ben Chayyim Massoretic text. This became the standard Massoretic text for the next 400 years. This is the Hebrew text that the King James English Old Testament was translated from in 1611.

[Biblical Criticism Historical, Literal, Textual by Harrison, Walkie, and Guthrie, 1978, p. 47-82.]

Light for Israel offers the Old Testament in the Ben Chayyim Massoretic Hebrew text and the King James English Bible to Jewish readers who desire a copy.

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