

## THE BEN ASHER TEXT

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Where is the true Ben Asher text to be found?

I first became interested in this question in 1934 when the British and Foreign Bible Society of London asked me what was to be done concerning their current Letteris edition of the Hebrew Bible. This edition was published in 1866, and it was very popular among both Jews and Christians. Everybody liked its bold, clear type, especially when it was printed on the kind of paper available before the 1914-18 war. The late Chief Rabbi Hertz was very fond of it indeed, and used it in his commentary on *The Pentateuch and Haftarahs* (1935). Nearly seventy years of successive printings had so worn the plates that it was evident that new plates would have to be made from type newly set up. In this case, why not try to obtain a better text? And so it was decided to publish a new edition independent of any modern printed Bibles. The result is the new Hebrew Bible published in December 1958, of which I had the great honour of being editor.

Meir Halevi Letteris was born in Austria in 1800 and died in Vienna in 1871. His family were printers in Amsterdam and he himself was a reader in printing houses in Berlin and Pressburg. Later he was librarian in the Oriental Department of the Imperial Library in Vienna. In 1852 he prepared a two-volume Hebrew Bible based on the text of Van der Hooght. The 1866 Bible was a revision of this. Actually this 1866 Letteris Bible seems to be based to a marked extent on MS Erfurt 3, readings of which are to be found in the Michaelis 1720 Bible. Whether Letteris actually consulted this MS I do not know, but he often has the same reading where the MS varies from printed editions. This MS is now known as Berlin MS Or fol 121 and is kept in the Westdeutsche Bibliothek in Marburg. It is important because there is to be found in its margins the text of *Okhlah we-Okhlah*, an ancient collection of Massoretic notes, apparently the only such study to which the famous Jacob ben Ḥayyim had access. Since it was held in the last century that the true Massoretic text of Ben Asher was to be found in the Second Rabbinic Bible of 1524-5, printed by Bomberg in Venice and edited by Jacob ben Ḥayyim, it could then be said that the Letteris Bible was a good, sound text. It is closely allied to the text of Jacob ben Ḥayyim because of its closeness to MS Erfurt 3.

The next Hebrew text published by the British and Foreign Bible Society was that edited by C.D. Ginsburg in 1911-26. This was a revision of a text

which he edited for the Trinitarian Bible Society in Vienna in 1894. It contains a collation of 75 MSS and 19 printed Bibles, concluding with the 1524-5 Bomberg Bible (Jacob ben Ḥayyim's text). Ginsburg took no notice of the first hand of any manuscript, and he claimed that he followed Jacob ben Ḥayyim's text. This is mostly true, though not entirely. It is true because most Ashkenazi MSS which I have examined have been of the same type of text as the MSS which Jacob ben Ḥayyim used, and further, virtually every Sephardi MS I have seen has either had the same type of text, or, much more likely, has been "corrected" to the Jacob ben Ḥayyim standard. Now Ginsburg apparently thought that the better reading could be determined by a simple majority, irrespective of the origin, history, date and character of the MSS. Apparently, for his purpose, one MS was as good as another. An illustration of this is to be found in Josh.v,6 where he reads לאבתם, following 26 MSS and 6 Edd. But Jacob ben Ḥayyim read לאבותם with 15 (Ginsburg's reckoning) MSS and 5 Edd.—and this latter is the reading in Kittel, Baer, Letteris, Michaelis, Athias 1661 and 1666, and MS Or 2627 (see below). A similar case is to be found in 1 Sam.i,4 where Ginsburg has ובנתיה with 30 MSS and 5 Edd.; but Jacob ben Ḥayyim read ובנותיה, with (Ginsburg's lists) 14 MSS and 6 Edd. This is the reading in Kahle, Letteris, Baer, Michaelis, Kittel and Athias. There are very many cases of this kind. Sometimes this method has produced the right result. See 2 Kings xxv, 17. Here Ginsburg has הכתרת following 21 MSS and all printed editions earlier than Jacob ben Ḥayyim. This is what Kahle printed because he was following the Leningrad Codex. This is what I have printed because I have followed Norzi and Or 2627. It is also printed by Michaelis, Letteris, etc. Jacob ben Ḥayyim has הכותרת, and so Kittel and 8 MSS in the Ginsburg list. In this case Ginsburg's method produced the right result; this was not because his method was right.

Ginsburg also published a huge compilation entitled *The Massorah* (London, 1880, printed in Vienna). This is a collection of massoretic notes culled from the margins of manuscripts. There are three volumes of it, twenty inches by thirteen inches in measurements. A massoretic note by itself is of little value. These notes belong to the MS on which they are written and are usually true for that particular MS. If they are not true of that particular MS, they are true of the MS from which the copy was made, and the variation is due to a vagary, or perhaps intentional variation, of the copyist. These notes are true only of the particular MS and its near relations. This fact became clear to me when I compared the massoretic notes in Jacob ben Ḥayyim's edition of 1524-5 with those in Jablonski's 1699 Berlin collation and in Lonzano's *Or Torah*. In these two sources the existence of a different Massora was evident. It is necessary to know from which MS a note is taken before that note can

be trusted. The neglect of this fact makes Ginsburg's herculean labours largely a monument of wasted endeavour.

The whole study of the Massoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible has been changed in recent years by the work of Professor Paul Kahle, now resident in Oxford. It was on his advice that Rudolf Kittel did not reprint in his third edition the Hebrew text of his 1909 *Biblia Hebraica*, which was based on Jacob ben Ḥayyim's text, and is indeed much closer to it than Ginsburg's text or even Baer's (Leipzig, 1869-95). Dr. Kahle says in his *The Cairo Geniza* (2nd ed. 1959) that not long before 1926 (when Kittel wrote to him concerning his own new edition) he had found a number of MSS in Leningrad dated between 929 and 1121 C.E., and the text of these differed from the Jacob ben Ḥayyim text. Dr. Kahle was convinced that he had found the true Ben Asher text, and this was especially to be found in Leningrad Codex B 19a. This MS was copied in 1008 or 1009 C.E., only a few decades after the death of the great Aaron ben Asher himself. Actually it is the oldest dated MS of the complete Hebrew Bible which we have. This fact of its early date is, of course, important, but in itself it is not decisive. The origin and the history are also of importance.

There was a time when Baer's text was held to be the sound massoretic text. This was largely because of Franz Delitzsch's support. Seligmann Baer (1825-1897) followed Wolf Heidenheim (1757-1832). Their main principle was to smooth out difficulties by "correcting" any deviations and thus to produce a uniformity. One typical result of their work is severely and rightly condemned by Paul Kahle in his *The Cairo Geniza* (2nd ed., pp. 113f.). It is concerned with the rules for the use of *metheg*, as now found in all Hebrew grammars. They are all wrong, quite wrong. The trouble began with Heidenheim's **משפטי הטעמים**, published in Rödelsheim in 1808. Baer published a German edition of these rules in 1869 under the title: *Die Metheg-Setzung nach ihren überlieferten Gesetzen dargestellt*. There was a preface written by Franz Delitzsch, and it was through his support that these rules found their way into all Hebrew grammars. The root of the trouble was that Heidenheim and Baer had worked out these rules from late Ashkenazi MSS. They believed that these were the rules which Ben Asher followed. It is no wonder that Heidenheim and Baer severely condemned the Aleppo Codex, because the use of *metheg* in that codex is substantially the same as in the Leningrad Codex which Kahle used, much the same as in his text in Kittel's third edition of the *Biblia Hebraica*.

This much is to be said for Seligmann Baer: the tendencies of development which led to the rules to which he adhered are already plain to be seen in Jacob ben Ḥayyim's 1524-5 text. They are by no means fully developed, but the tendencies are there. Kahle is right (p. 113) when he says that Heidenheim and

Baer both actually knew a great deal of Massora and were so devoted to its study that one can almost regard them as in a way continuing the work of the Massorettes, as "the last Massorettes". The phrase "the last Massorettes" is good, because the Baer texts are the last and completest development of all the tendencies which developed in Ashkenazi Jewry and their study of the Massora.

These Baer texts were published by Bernhard Tauchnitz in Leipzig between 1869 and 1895, but these volumes include only *Genesis* of the Pentateuch. A complete Pentateuch is in the Rödelheim edition. But Baer's text is not the Ben Asher text.

Dr. William Wickes was an ardent follower of Baer. He was responsible for two treatises on the Hebrew accents: *טעמי כ"א ספרים* (*Hebrew Prose Accents*), 1887, and *טעמי אמת* (*Hebrew Verse Accents*), 1881. The former treatise, that on the Prose Accents, is substantially sound, but he speaks too often, especially in the footnotes, about "manifest mistakes" in MSS. When an author uses frequently such words as "manifest", "obviously", "clearly", we have a situation fraught with suspicion. On p. 84, for instance, he says "The blunders of Van der Hooght's text, copied without scruple by Theile, Hahn and J. d'Allemand, are often under this head most provoking". At first I accepted that statement and was full of distrust of the work of Van der Hooght and Hahn, but I have since realised that Hahn's text does not deserve these strictures. "Blunders" is not the right word. The text of Van der Hooght is nearer to the true Ben Asher text than is that of Baer. As I have said, Wickes was in the main right about the Prose Accents, except that he imagines the rules to be much more rigid than they really are. But this desire for regimentation and uniformity is a fault common in German textual scholarship, as is instanced in the frequent correction of the text on grounds of rigid metre alone, and in the decimating work of Duhm on Jeremiah and Hölscher on Ezekiel. Duhm reduces the true Jeremiah to 250 verses, whilst Hölscher reduces Ezekiel to 143 verses, in both cases largely on severely metrical grounds. In his treatise on the Verse Accents, Wickes propounds a complicated "transformation" theory. I hope to produce in the course of time a theory concerning these accents which is not so cumbersome and which is based on a more accurate series of texts than the "corrected" texts of Heidenheim and Baer.

My problem in 1934 was this. Can I find any way of obtaining the Ben Asher text independently of Leningrad Codex B 19a? My search led me to Norzi's *מנוחת שי*, his great critical study of the Massoretic text completed in 1626 and printed in Mantua in 1742. Rabbi Jedidiah Solomon ben Abraham Norzi was the greatest scholar of the Norzi family. He was born in Mantua ca. 1560 and was a friend of Lonzano, the author of *Or Torah*, a work which had already come to my notice.

It was soon plain to me that the readings which Norzi preferred were those which are to be found as the first hand of many Sephardi MSS, all of which have been corrected to agree substantially with the Jacob ben Ḥayyim text. Further, I found that here in the first hand of these Sephardi MSS I had the type of text on which Lonzano's *Or Torah* and Jablonski's work were based. Still further, this text was very close indeed to the text which Dr. Paul Kahle had produced from the Leningrad Codex. I had therefore found what I wanted: a way of producing the true Ben Asher text independently of the Leningrad Codex. I therefore picked the best MS I could find and to which I had easy access. This is the three volumes in the British Museum, London, of Or 2626-28 and the first hand of this MS. This MS was written in Lisbon in 1483. It is no. 62 in Margoliouth's catalogue and no. 48 in Ginsburg's descriptions found in his *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (London, 1897), pp. 707-714. The reference in the Ginsburg Bible is no. 52, but he gives only the "corrected" text. It is probably the most beautifully illuminated MS in the British Museum and the calligraphy is superb. It was written by "Samuel the Scribe the son of R. Samuel Ibn Mūsā who rests in Paradise". The MS is somewhat late, but it is accurate.

I also consulted another MS in the British Museum: Or 2375. This is a Yemenite MS and it contains most of Saadiah's Arabic Version in Hebrew characters in alternate verses. It contains only the Kethubim. It is no. 147 in the Margoliouth catalogue and no. 47 in Ginsburg's descriptions. The date of the MS is 1460-80, another late MS. What the history of the MS is I do not know, but I do know that by checking it against Or 2626-28 I found it so reliable that I came to regard it as an accurate and trustworthy MS.

I used another MS also as a check, the so-called Shem-Ṭob Bible which was formerly in the library of Mr. David Sassoon. My access to this MS was limited by circumstances, and I used it only as an additional check if and when I was still in doubt after I had consulted my main sources. The MS is no. 82 in the Sassoon catalogue. It was written in Soria in Spain in 1312. The details of the history of this MS are obscure, but the first hand is of the same accurate type as that of Or 2626-28.

The Hebrew Bible, therefore, which I edited for the British and Foreign Bible Society is based on the work of Lonzano and Norzi, together with the first hand of the British Museum MS Or 2626-28.

But what of Norzi's sources? The MS which he trusted most was de Rossi 782, written in Toledo by Ḥayyim ben R. Israel in 1277 C.E. Of it de Rossi says that it is most elegant, most accurate, most carefully copied according to the massoretic rules, so that it is to be regarded as being a most perfect exemplar of the massoretic text (de Rossi, *Variae Lectiones Veteris Testamenti*,

Parma, 1784, vol. I, p. cxxiii.). For Norzi's relations with Lonzano, see de Rossi, *ibid.* vol. I, pp. xl, xli.

It is clear that accurate Ben Asher MSS must have been introduced into Spain at a comparatively early period of the time when Spain became the great centre of Jewish learning. This is what Dr. Kahle says (*ibid.* p. 140). It is clear also that these MSS were copied in Spain with the utmost care. Further, Norzi had associations with Aleppo.

This brings us to the famous Aleppo Codex which has been preserved in the Synagogue of the Sephardi Jews in Aleppo, now at last available in photographic form. This is the basis of the Hebrew Bible which is to be published in Israel. I find photographic copies of MSS normally to be of limited value. It is very difficult to detect corrections, especially if these have been made carefully. But, as in the case of the Leningrad Codex which Dr. Kahle used, this difficulty does not arise in the case of the Aleppo Codex. Both codices have been kept secret and safe from zealous "correctors". There is no doubt about the soundness and trustworthiness of the Aleppo Codex, and therefore no doubt but that the new Hebrew Bible to be published in Israel on the basis of the Aleppo Codex will be a sound Ben Asher text.

It is evident that the Ben Asher text was much more widespread than was at first realised. Professor Kahle was naturally under the impression that it was to be found only in the Leningrad Codex. We know now, as he more than suspected some years ago, that it is to be found in the Aleppo Codex. We know also that it is to be found in the first hand of the best Sephardi MSS, and that Norzi had access to it in 1626 C.E.