

Massoretic Text

The Old Testament Hebraic scriptures are commonly called the Massoretic Text. This is named for the Hebrew scholars called the Massoretes. The Massoretes were responsible for preserving and copying accurately the Hebrew scriptures. These scribes added vowel markings and annotations to the “consonant only” Hebrew scriptures, and they counted the verses, words and letters, thereby making the reading possible to those not familiar with the text. The standardization or vocalizing of the Hebrew text was completed between 600-700 A.D.

In A.D. 1452 Johann Gutenberg invented the printing press, and Daniel Bomberg first printed the Hebrew text in 1516-1517 A.D. This was called the First Rabbinic Bible, Daniel Bomberg edition. He published the Second Great Rabbinic Bible in 1524-1525 A.D. It was edited by Jacob ben Chayyim and is called the Ben Chayyim Massoretic text. This was the standard Massoretic text that the King James English Old Testament was translated from in A.D. 1611.

Aleppo Codex

The Aleppo Codex is the oldest known complete manuscript of the Hebrew Bible, handwritten in Tiberias of Palestine in the early 10th century around 915 A.D. by the scribe Shlomo Ben-Buysa. The text was then given vocalization signs and accent marks, and provided with Massorah — a system of comments cross-referencing the spelling and occurrence of particular words, and proofread by Masorete Aaron Ben-Asher. It is also the most authoritative manuscript of the Massoretic text of the Bible, the most accurate, and sacred source document, both for the biblical text and for its vocalization, cantillation and Massorah (literally, “translation” of the Bible, the oral and written tradition by which the Holy Scriptures have been preserved and passed on from generation to generation). It has greater spiritual and scholarly importance than any other manuscript of the Old Testament.

The Codex was stolen and transferred to Cairo in Egypt at the end of the 11th century. At the end of the 14th century the Codex was moved from Cairo and placed in the Jewish city of Aleppo in Syria, where the rabbis and elders of the community guarded it for more than 500 years.

After the Jewish Holocaust there came disputing among the Arab and Jewish populace in Syria. Nevertheless the rabbis of Aleppo had come to believe that their exclusive possession of the manuscript would cause God to protect the Jewish community in Aleppo from all harm. Then as a reaction to the United Nations resolution to divide Palestine into Arab and Jewish states, Arab riots broke out against the Jews and Jewish property in Aleppo. In December 1947 A.D. the community’s ancient Joab Ben Zeruiah Synagogue was set on fire, and the Scripture which was kept in a small vault in the “Cave of Elijah” under the synagogue disappeared. The rabbis allowed the world to think that it had been destroyed in the fire, and for ten years they had tried to hide the fact that the manuscript was rescued from the fire, and that it was still in their possession. However their secret was revealed to the Israeli government by informants who had witnessed the rescue of the manuscript, and a concerted effort of pressure and persuasion was directed at them by the Israeli government and scholarly institutions and Jewish organizations to show the manuscript.

After Israel was made a State in 1948, the persecution of Jews remaining in Syria became common. In 1957 A.D. the Codex was smuggled out of Aleppo to Israel. And in January 1958 A.D. the rabbis finally surrender the manuscript, and it is being kept in Israel at the National Hebrew Library in Jerusalem. Unfortunately, almost the entire Pentateuch was missing, in that no more than 295 of the original 487 leaves survive. It was reported that the missing sections were burnt, but this is doubtful, because none of the surviving sections show any signs of fire damage. It is due to nearly 20 years of dedicated work by the renowned Scholar Rabbi Mordechai Breuer that the lost parts could be reconstructed. Later, in December 1982 A.D., one missing leaf was turned over to the Jewish National Library in Jerusalem by a family of Jews who had moved from Aleppo to Brooklyn, New York in the United States of America.

The first edition of the Aleppo Codex as a printed Bible was published in 2001 A.D., entitled “Keter Yerushalayim” (ie: “The Jerusalem Crown”). In a short appendix of the Bible, Rabbi Mordechai Breuer explains the principles of the text reproduction, and lists the deviations from the 11th century Leningrad Codex which was handwritten in Cairo Egypt in 1009 A.D. by Shemuel Ben Yacov. The published edition of the Leningrad Codex is known as the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (BHS 1967-1977 A.D.).