

## WHAT IS MASORA AND HOW CAN IT SERVE THE BIBLICAL SCHOLAR?

By Aron Dotan

The literal meaning of the term "Masora" is 'transmission' and also 'counting' and it has perhaps also several other meanings. The written Masora can be divided into several categories. In the widest sense it denotes everything that is connected with the ancient consonantal text, everything which accompanies it with the aim to transmit the correct reading. This includes all graphemes accompanying the script: vowel signs, accent signs, and also various marginal notes and instructions for the reader and the scribe, such as *qere* notes and other masoretic notes.

The term Masora, as used today, denotes the narrowest sense of the term, namely, the marginal masoretic notes.

The notes point out to the reader, and sometimes to the scribe, forms in the text concerning which there is some possibility that the reader or the scribe-copyist may err, that is: spelling with or without *matres lectionis*, certain vowels or accent signs, certain grammatical forms, the joining or omission of certain particles, unusual combination of words, etc.

In most masoretic notes, the approach is descriptive-comparative and only rarely normative. In general the question is not what is the standard form and does the item in question conform to it, but rather does the item in question conform to the common form - whether or not it be standard or grammatically exceptional - and does the item belong to the majority or to the minority. This last principle necessitates the constant counting of the word-forms, and they are counted in the various divisions of the text (in the entire Bible, in one or two of the three parts of the Bible, in a certain book, or even in a specific section). The notes then refer to this count.

The masoretic notations are classified today (though this was not the ancient original classification) for the sake of convenience into *Masora Qetana* (or Masora Parva = MP) and *Masora Gedola* (or Masora Magna = MM). The notes of the MP are expressed in extreme brevity, generally by abbreviations. They are listed in the manuscripts and also in printed editions in the margin of the biblical text. There is a small circellus over the word or group of words to which the MP is directed. I am of course referring only to the Tiberian Masora which is our concern here.

The MM is a detailed expansion of the MP. A large part of the MP notes occur in greater

detail in the MM, with exception of the *qere* notes and the indication of unique forms (*let* notes). It is assumed that originally both types, MM and MP, were parallel systems of representations. In the course of time, due to reasons which do not concern us here, they drifted apart, to the extent that we find today many MP notes with no parallel MM, and vice versa. What is worse, they sometimes contradict each other.

My main object in this workshop is to explain and demonstrate how the Masora serves me and how it can serve biblical scholars as well.

Perhaps all notes concerning plene and defective spelling - מלא וחסר - are more important to the biblical scribe than to the scholar, although a note like הַנוֹגֵעַ גַּמַּל (Lev 15:27) might be interesting for those who are grammatically oriented, for as you know, the normal spelling for these participle forms in the biblical spelling is defective without waw (as against the normative plene spelling in modern Hebrew).

The structural approach of the masoretes may be recognized in such a note as MM Ex 34:33:

		מְדַבֵּר ח
(מ-דְּבַר=)	(Gen 31:29)	יש לאל ידי
(מ-דְּבַר=)	(Ex 34:33)	ויכל משה
(מתדבר*)	(Num 7:89)	ובבא משה
(מ-דְּבַר=)	(1Sam 25:17)	והוא בן בליעל
(מתדבר*)	(Ez 2:2)	ואשמע את מדבר אלי
(מתדבר*)	(Ez 43:6)	ואשמע מדבר אלי
(מ-דְּבַר=)	(Ps 34:14)	נצר לשונך מרע
(מ-דְּבַר=)	(Ps 52:5)	אהבת רע מטוב
		וחד
(וּמ-דְּבַר=)	(2Sam 14:13)	ומדבר המלך

The form מְדַבֵּר represents two different grammatical structures: 1) as a combination of the infinitive דְּבַר with -מַ as prefixed preposition; 2) as a participle of the *hitpa'el* conjugation of the root דבר, contracted by assimilation \*מְדַבֵּר < מְדַבֵּר.

On the matter of pronunciation we have a note like: לְשֹׁכְרֵי לִי מֵלֵעַ (MP Job 38:36). The word is unique, but the masoretic note draws attention to the penult stress, a pronunciation which is quite often overlooked.

Likewise: צָרָה לִי מֵלֵעַ (MP Is 28:20), which is not only a matter of pronunciation but is important for the grammatical analysis, hence also for interpretation. Let us dwell a little on this point. Usually the adjective צָר (=narrow) has a feminine form צָרָה, stressed ultimately:

כִּי- (Pr 23:27) (= and a strange woman is a narrow pit). However in our verse - כִּי- (MP Is 11:11). This expression appears eight times with this accent (מונח לגרמיה) in this book (Isaiah).

Those who are interested in the peculiarities of accentuation may find interest in such notes as:

כִּי בִטֵעַ בְּסִיפֵי (MP Is 30:16). The uniqueness of this word is through these two accents (אזלא ומירכא).

כִּי בִטֵעַ (MP Ez 23:2). *בן-אדם* never has the accent *Atnah*, except in this single occurrence.

Of a more general interest is the issue of phrases and word combinations, some of which involve matters of style.

כִּי בִטֵעַ בְּסִיפֵי (MM 2Sam 20:21). The verb *נשא* in its various conjugations has generally the accusative marker *את* before the direct object in its various declensions, except in eight cases where the marker *את* is missing.

כִּי בִטֵעַ בְּסִיפֵי (Dt 32:40) כי אשא אל שמים  
 כִּי בִטֵעַ בְּסִיפֵי (2Sam 20:21) נשא ידו במלך בדוד  
 כִּי בִטֵעַ בְּסִיפֵי (Ez 20:5) ואשא ידי לזרע בית  
 כִּי בִטֵעַ בְּסִיפֵי (Ez 20:5) שנים בפסוקה  
 כִּי בִטֵעַ בְּסִיפֵי (Ez 20:6) ביום ההוא נשאתי ידי  
 כִּי בִטֵעַ בְּסִיפֵי (Ez 20:15) וגם אני נשאתי ידי  
 כִּי בִטֵעַ בְּסִיפֵי (Ez 44:12) על כן נשאתי ידי  
 כִּי בִטֵעַ בְּסִיפֵי (Ps 106:26) וישא ידו להם להפיל

We have here six different forms of the verb: *נִשְׂאָה*, *נִשְׂאָה*, *נִשְׂאָה*, *נִשְׂאָה*, *נִשְׂאָה*, *נִשְׂאָה*, combined with two forms of the object: *ידו*, *ידי*. In all other instances of this phrase *את* is always present.

כִּי בִטֵעַ בְּסִיפֵי (MP Jer 26:12). 13 instances where *הָאֵלֹהִים* is missing, as opposed to the majority *האלה*.

את כל הדברים האלה

Sometimes special attention may be drawn to word order, which may bear on interpretation or on cultural analysis.

כִּי בִטֵעַ בְּסִיפֵי (MP Dt 16:18). Only once does *משפט* (=judgement) precede *צדק* (=justice); usually it is the other way round.

Another stylistic feature is sometimes brought forward by the *Sevirin* notes. These point sometimes to a textual feature which may be more common or may even be linguistically better, but is practically rejected by the Masora. Thus:

בַּת אַחַב הָיְתָה לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה (MP 2Chr 21:6). The reading *הָיְתָה לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה*, which seems even better, is rejected by this Masora. Instead of "he had the daughter of Ahab to wife", the Masora prefers "He had the daughter of Ahab a wife". Both renderings are possible. The suggested one (*sevir*) is certainly better (and this is why it was suggested) but the Masora preferred the shorter version, *אִשָּׁה* and not *לְאִשָּׁה*.

הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ יָצָא עַל הָאָרֶץ (MP Gen 19:23). The context reads *הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ יָצָא עַל הָאָרֶץ* (=the sun was risen upon the earth). *שֶׁמֶשׁ* is grammatically both masculine and feminine. However, some conventions of use can be seen in biblical style. The verb *בָּא* (=set) preceding *שֶׁמֶשׁ* comes in the masculine (*בָּא הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ*, *וּבָא הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ*), but when it follows *שֶׁמֶשׁ* it is in the feminine *הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ בָּאָה* (Gen. 15:17). In our verse the parallel opposite verb occurs *יָצָא* (=rise), and standing after *שֶׁמֶשׁ* it may be expected to be in the feminine, parallel to *הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ בָּאָה*, one may expect *הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ יָצָאָה*. But this is not the case. The masculine is used contrary to stylistic expectations. The Masora insists on *הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ יָצָא*.

These cases and other cases of *Sevirin* teach us, biblical scholars, a lesson of modesty. The masoretes were aware of other textual possibilities. A wide range of possibilities was open and was considered by them, yet they insisted on one particular reading. This should serve as a warning to us before we come to suggest corrections and emendations in the text. The masoretes were not less clever than we consider ourselves to be, and they certainly knew Hebrew and the biblical text much better than we do.

Finally, another source of help can be found in the type of notes comparing two unique homonyms *בְּבִתְרֵי לִישְׁנֵי* (=two [equal words] of two meanings), notes which were even arranged in lists to be handy for the reader. Let us consider the pair:

*וְכַחֲוֹל בְּבִתְרֵי לִישְׁנֵי* (MM Job 29:18)

*וְכַחֲוֹל אֲשֶׁר עַל שַׁפְתַּי* (Gen 22:17) (= [I will multiply thy seed] as the sand which is upon the sea shore)

*וְכַחֲוֹל אֲרֻבַּת יָמַי* (Job 29:18) (=I shall multiply my days as the sand).

According to the usual translation, which I have quoted above, the two *וְכַחֲוֹל* are the same: "and as the sand". However, the fact that these two are listed as homonyms speaks for another interpretation maintained by the masoretes, namely, that *וְכַחֲוֹל* in Job is not 'sand' but rather the bird 'phoenix', which was an emblem of immortality in the ancient East. Thus, the verse in Job will mean "I shall multiply my days like the Phoenix", which is also the

interpretation adopted by many Jewish traditional exegetes, as for instance Rashi:

עוף ושמו חול. ולא נקנסה עליו מיתה שלא טעם מעץ הדעת, ולבסוף אלף שנה מתחדש וחוזר לנערותו (=a bird named “*Hol*”. And it was not condemned to death because it did not taste from the tree of knowledge. And after a thousand years it rejuvenates and returns to its youth).

Similarly also in the Midrash, Genesis Rabba 19:5.

These are just a very few examples of cases in which we can learn a great deal from the Masora in various fields. We can be guided by it to a better and more genuine understanding of the Hebrew masoretic text and also to an attitude of respect for the wisdom of the masoretes, which may come useful in biblical exegesis.