

Preface

The Bible was passed on from generation to generation over millennia in Jewish communities throughout the world. Thousands of copyists copied the books of the Scriptures, and millions of Jews read them and pronounced their words following traditions that were transmitted from a father to his children and a sage to his pupils. Naturally many disagreements arose regarding every aspect of the text: orthography, the spacing of sections and the writing of poetic passages, pronunciation, cantillation, pauses, how to divide the passages for public reading etc. Experts in every generation occupied themselves with making decisions about disputed issues, trying to achieve a uniform and single text that would reflect the word of God. For this purpose the Masora was created, including various compositions, thousands of rules and tens of thousands of short and long notes. All of these together comprise a sophisticated and integrated defense mechanism for the preservation of the text.

The Masora was the work of hundreds of sages, most of them anonymous, who devoted their lives to preserving the text of the Bible and standardizing it with precision. Each and every letter in the Bible, every vowel, every cantillation mark – were given attention; and all of this in order to pass on precisely the word of God in the twenty-four books of Scripture.

Due to the development of means of copying and preserving texts – mainly printing and the computer – only a few experts still deal with the accuracy of the Biblical text. In earlier times every copy of the Bible was written specifically by a scribe with expertise in the Masora, and each one needed to devote great time and effort to producing one single copy of the Bible or a part of it. However, today editions of the Bible are printed and reprinted over and over and distributed in computer programs and computerized editions. Most of these editions were prepared by experts, but these are few, and only a small number of experts still have the ability to use Masoretic notes and compositions.

The purpose of this book is to tell the story of the Masora, and to enable the wide community of people who study the Bible to enter its gates.

Among the few introductory books on the Masora I should mention in particular that of my late teacher, Israel Prize laureate, Prof. Israel Yeivin, *Hamasora Lamiqra* (The Biblical Masorah). This book originated in a modest textbook published in 1972. It was translated to English by E.J. Revell in 1980. An updated Hebrew edition, which I edited, appeared in 2003.

This book differs in character from that one. It does not give encyclopedic descriptions of the manuscripts, types of Masoretic notes and Masoretic compositions; nor does it sum up all the studies of the Masora in the last generations. Its purpose is to present the basic questions that have been discussed in research on the Masora and the problems raised by its study, particularly in recent years. I have not refrained from giving my opinion on central research questions which have been dealt with by researchers of the Masora, and in some cases I have based my writing on my own sci-

entific articles, which were published in a number of venues. The discussion includes many examples and photographs of manuscripts, which demonstrate and enrich the theoretical discussion.

The chapters of the book are divided into three sections:

The first section describes the areas with which the Masora deals – orthography, vocalization signs and cantillation marks, spacing of passages and poetic sections, distinctions between the written text and its traditional reading – and the way in which the Masora works: important manuscripts, the techniques used by the Masora in different types of notes, the efficiency of Masora mechanisms and the degree to which it has succeeded in preserving the text.

The second section describes the text of the Bible according to the Masora: the role of the Masoretic text in the history of the biblical text, differences between the Babylonian Masora and that of Tiberias, the special status of the Aleppo Codex and the effort to find or reconstruct its missing parts, the difference between the system of marking *ge'ayot* (secondary stress marks) in manuscripts and printed editions, various printed editions of the Bible and their degree of proximity to the Masoretic texts and that of the Aleppo Codex.

The third and final section of the book deals with the relation between the Masora and other related areas that interact with it: Hebrew grammar, biblical exegesis and Halakha.

The chapters of the book are a product of courses on the Masora that I taught at Bar-Ilan University and Herzog College.

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My hope is that these chapters will provide students and other interested individuals entrance into the world of the Masora, enable them to familiarize themselves with its riches, and appreciate its secrets.

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