

Masoretic Text vs. Original Hebrew

Posted on [March 12, 2012](#) by [Fr Joseph Gleason](#)



The Masoretic Text is significantly different from the original Hebrew Scriptures. I used to believe the [Masoretic Text](#) was a perfect copy of the original Old Testament. I used to believe that the Masoretic Text was how God divinely preserved the Hebrew Scriptures throughout the ages.

I was wrong.

The oldest copies of the Masoretic Text only date back to the 10th century, nearly 1000 years *after* the time of Christ. And these texts differ from the originals in many specific ways. The Masoretic text is named after the [Masoretes](#), who were scribes and Torah scholars who worked in the middle-east between the 7th and 11th centuries. The texts they received, and the edits they provided, ensured that the modern Jewish texts would manifest a notable departure from the original Hebrew Scriptures.

Historical research reveals five significant ways in which the Masoretic Text is different from the original Old Testament:

1. The Masoretes admitted that they **received corrupted texts** to begin with.
2. The Masoretic Text is written with a **radically different alphabet** than the original.
3. The Masoretes **added vowel points** which did not exist in the original.
4. The Masoretic Text **excluded several books** from the Old Testament scriptures.
5. The Masoretic Text includes **changes to prophecy and doctrine**.

We will consider each point in turn:

Receiving Corrupted Texts

Many people believe that the ancient Hebrew text of Scripture was divinely preserved for many centuries, and was ultimately recorded in what we now call the “Masoretic Text”. But what did the Masoretes themselves believe? Did they believe they were perfectly preserving the ancient text? Did they even think they had *received* a perfect text to begin with?

History says “no” . . .

[Scribal emendations – Tikkune Soferim](#)

Early rabbinic sources, from around 200 CE, mention several passages of Scripture in which the conclusion is inevitable that the ancient reading must have differed from that of the present text. . .

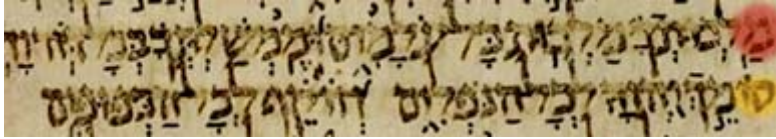
. Rabbi Simon ben Pazzi (3rd century) calls these readings “emendations of the Scribes” (tikkune Soferim; Midrash Genesis Rabbah xlix. 7), assuming that the Scribes actually made the changes. This view was adopted by the later Midrash and by the majority of Masoretes.

In other words, *the Masorites themselves felt they had received a partly corrupted text.*

A stream cannot rise higher than its source. If the texts they *started* with were corrupted, then even a *perfect* transmission of those texts would only serve to preserve the *mistakes*. Even if the Masoretes demonstrated great care when copying the texts, their diligence would not bring about the correction of even one error.

In addition to these *intentional* changes by Hebrew scribes, there also appear to be a number of *accidental* changes which they allowed to creep into the Hebrew text. For example, consider Psalm 145 . . .

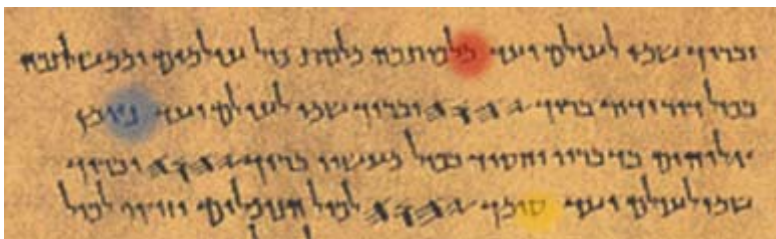
Psalm 145 is an acrostic poem. Each line of the Psalm starts with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Yet in the Masoretic Text, one of the lines is completely missing:



Psalm 145 is an acrostic psalm where each verse begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In the Aleppo Codex the first verse begins with the letter aleph, the second with the beyt, the third with the gimel, and so on. Verse 13 begins with the letter מ (mem-top highlighted letter), the 13th letter of the Hebrew alphabet; the next verse begins with the letter ס (samech-bottom highlighted letter), the 15th letter of the Hebrew alphabet. There is no verse beginning with the 14th letter נ (nun).

Yet the Septuagint (LXX) Greek translation of the Old Testament *does* include the missing verse. And when that verse is translated back into Hebrew, it starts with the Hebrew letter נ (nun) which was missing from the Masoretic Text.

In the early 20th century, the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in caves near Qumran. They revealed an ancient Hebrew textual tradition which differed from the tradition preserved by the Masoretes. Written in Hebrew, copies of Psalm 145 were found which include the missing verse:



When we examine Psalm 145 from the Dead Sea Scrolls, we find between the verse beginning with the מ (mem-top) and the verse beginning with the ס (samech-bottom), the verse beginning with the letter נ (nun-center). This verse, missing from the Aleppo Codex, and missing from all modern Hebrew Bibles that are copied from this codex, but found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, says אלוהים נאמן

מעשיו בכול וחסיד בדבריו (The Lord is faithful in His words and holy in all His works).

The missing verse reads, “*The Lord is faithful in His words and holy in all His works.*” This verse can be found in the [Orthodox Study Bible](#), which relies on the Septuagint. But this verse is absent from the [King James Version](#) (KJV), the [New King James Version](#) (NKJV), the [Complete Jewish Bible](#), and every other translation which is based on the Masoretic Text.

In this particular case, it is easy to demonstrate that the Masoretic Text is in error, for it is obvious that Psalm 145 was originally written as an acrostic Psalm. But what are we to make of the *thousands* of other locations where the Masoretic Text diverges from the Septuagint? If the Masoretic Text could completely erase an entire verse from one of the Psalms, how many other passages of Scripture have been edited? How many other verses have been erased?



God’s name is shown here in Paleo-Hebrew (top) and in modern Hebrew (bottom). Modern Hebrew letters would have been unrecognizable to Abraham, Moses, David, and most of the authors of the Old Testament.

A Radically Different Alphabet

If Moses were to see a copy of the Masoretic Text, he wouldn’t be able to read it. As discussed in [this recent post](#), the original Old Testament scriptures were written in Paleo-Hebrew, a text closely related to the ancient Phoenician writing system.

The Masoretic Text is written with an alphabet which was borrowed from Assyria (Persia) around the 6th-7th century B.C., and is almost 1000 years *newer* than

the form of writing used by Moses, David, and most of the Old Testament authors.

Adding Vowel Points

For thousands of years, ancient Hebrew was only written with consonants, no vowels. When reading these texts, they had to supply all of the vowels from memory, *based on oral tradition*.

In Hebrew, just like modern languages, vowels can make a big difference. The change of a single vowel can radically change the meaning of a word. An example in English is the difference between “SLAP” and “SLIP”. These words have very different definitions. Yet if our language was written without vowels, both of these words would be written “SLP”. Thus the vowels are very important. The most extensive change the Masoretes brought to the Hebrew text was the addition of [vowel points](#). In an attempt to solidify for all-time the “correct” readings of all the Hebrew Scriptures, the Masoretes added a series of dots to the text, identifying which vowel to use in any given location.

Adam Clarke, an 18th Century Protestant scholar, demonstrates that the vowel-point system is actually a running commentary which was incorporated into the text itself.

In the General Preface of his biblical commentary published in 1810, Clarke writes:

“The Masorets were the most extensive Jewish commentators which that nation could ever boast. The system of punctuation, probably invented by them, is a continual gloss on the Law and the Prophets; their vowel points, and prosaic and metrical accents, &c., give every word to which they are affixed a peculiar kind of meaning, which in their simple state, multitudes of them can by no means bear. The vowel points alone add whole conjugations to the language. This system is one of the most artificial, particular, and extensive comments ever written on the Word of God; for there is

not one word in the Bible that is not the subject of a particular gloss through its influence.”

Another early scholar who investigated this matter was Louis Cappel, who wrote during the early 17th century. An article in the 1948 edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica includes the following information regarding his research of the Masoretic Text:

“As a Hebrew scholar, he concluded that the vowel points and accents were not an original part of Hebrew, but were inserted by the Masorete Jews of Tiberias, not earlier than the 5th Century AD, and that the primitive Hebrew characters are Aramaic and were substituted for the more ancient at the time of the captivity. . . The various readings in the Old Testament Text and the differences between the ancient versions and the Masoretic Text convinced him that the integrity of the Hebrew text as held by Protestants, was untenable.”

Many Protestants love the Masoretic Text, believing it to be a trustworthy representation of the original Hebrew text of Scripture. Yet, at the same time, most Protestants reject Orthodox Church Tradition as being untrustworthy. They believe that the Church’s oral tradition could not possibly preserve Truth over a long period of time.

Therefore, the vowel points of the Masoretic Text put Protestants in a precarious position. If they believe that the Masoretic vowels are *not* trustworthy, then they call the Masoretic Text itself into question. But if they believe that the Masoretic vowels *are* trustworthy, then they are forced to believe that the Jews successfully preserved the vowels of Scripture for thousands of years, *through oral tradition alone*, until the Masoretes finally invented the vowel points hundreds of years after Christ. Either conclusion is at odds with mainstream Protestant thought.

Either oral tradition can be trusted, or it can't. If it can be trusted, then there is no reason to reject the Traditions of the Orthodox Church, which have been preserved for nearly 2000 years. But if traditions are always untrustworthy, then the Masoretic vowel points are also untrustworthy, and should be rejected.

Excluding Books of Scripture from the Old Testament

The Masoretic Text promotes a canon of the Old Testament which is significantly shorter than the canon represented by the Septuagint. Meanwhile, Orthodox Christians and Catholics have Bibles which incorporate the canon of the Septuagint. The books of Scripture found in the Septuagint, but not found in the Masoretic Text, are commonly called either the *Deuterocanon* or the *anagignoskomena*. While it is outside the scope of this article to perform an in-depth study of the canon of Scripture, a few points relevant to the Masoretic Text should be made here:

- With the exception of two books, *the Deuterocanon was originally written in Hebrew*.
- In three places, *the Talmud explicitly refers to the book of Sirach as "Scripture"*.
- [Jesus celebrated Hanukkah](#), a feast which originates in the book of *1 Maccabees*, and nowhere else in the Old Testament.
- The New Testament book of *Hebrews* recounts the stories of multiple Old Testament saints, including a reference to martyrs in the book of *2 Maccabees*.
- The book of *Wisdom* includes a striking [prophecy of Christ](#), and its fulfillment is recorded in *Matthew 27*.
- Numerous findings among the Dead Sea Scrolls suggest the existence of 1st century Jewish communities which accepted many of the Deuterocanonical books as authentic Scripture.
- Many thousands of 1st-century Christians were converts from Judaism. The early Church accepted the inspiration of the Deuterocanon, and frequently quoted authoritatively from books such as *Wisdom*, *Sirach*, and *Tobit*. This early Christian practice suggests that many Jews accepted these books, even prior to their conversion to Christianity.
- [Ethiopian Jews](#) preserved the ancient Jewish acceptance of the Septuagint, including much of its canon of Scripture. *Sirach*, *Judith*, *Baruch*, and *Tobit* are among the books included in the [canon of the Ethiopian Jews](#).

These reasons, among others, suggest the existence of a large 1st-century Jewish community which accepted the Deuterocanon as inspired Scripture.

Changes to Prophecy and Doctrine

When compiling any given passage of Scripture, the Masoretes had to choose among multiple versions of the ancient Hebrew texts. In some cases the textual differences were relatively inconsequential. For example, two texts may differ over the spelling of a person's name.

However, in other cases they were presented with textual variants which made a considerable impact upon doctrine or prophecy. In cases like these, were the Masoretes completely objective? Or did their anti-Christian biases influence any of their editing decisions?

In the 2nd century A.D., hundreds of years before the time of the Masoretes, Justin Martyr investigated a number of Old Testament texts in various Jewish synagogues.

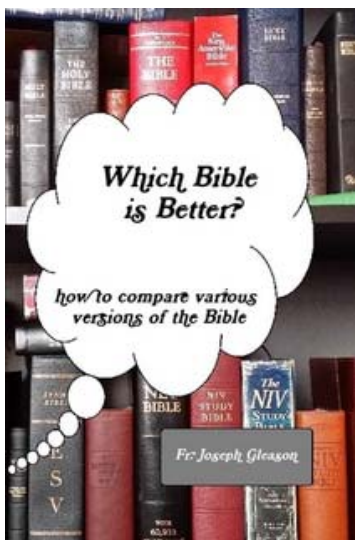
He ultimately concluded that the Jews who had rejected Christ had also rejected the Septuagint, and were now tampering with the Hebrew Scriptures themselves:

“But I am far from putting reliance in your teachers, who refuse to admit that the interpretation made by the seventy elders who were with Ptolemy [king] of the Egyptians is a correct one; and they attempt to frame another. And I wish you to observe, that they have altogether taken away many Scriptures from the [Septuagint] translations effected by those seventy elders who were with Ptolemy, and by which this very man who was crucified is proved to have been set forth expressly as God, and man, and as being crucified, and as dying” (~150 A.D., Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho the Jew, Chapter LXXI)

If Justin Martyr's findings are correct, then it is likely that the Masoretes inherited a Hebrew textual tradition which had already been corrupted with an anti-Christian bias. And if we look at some of the most significant differences between the Septuagint and the Masoretic Text, that is precisely what we see. For example, consider the following comparisons:

This passage in the New Testament . . .	depends on this passage from the Septuagint (LXX) version of the Old Testament . . .	to show that God had prophecied this . . .	but the Masoretic Text (MT) reads quite differently . . .
<p>"when He [Jesus] comes into the world, He says, ' . . . a body you have prepared for me' . . . we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ" (Hebrews 10:4-10)</p>	<p>"Sacrifice and offering You did not will; But a body You prepared for me" (Psalm 39:7, Orthodox Study Bible)</p>	<p>The Incarnation</p>	<p>"You desired neither sacrifice nor meal offering; You dug ears for me" (Psalm 40:7, Complete Jewish Bible)</p>
<p>" . . . Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel . . ." (Matthew 1:21-23)</p>	<p>"behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and you shall call His name Immanuel." (Isaiah 7:14, Orthodox Study Bible)</p>	<p>The Virgin Birth</p>	<p>"behold, the young woman is with child, and she shall bear a son, and she shall call his name Immanuel." (Isaiah 7:14, Complete Jewish Bible)</p>
<p>"And again, when he bringeth in the firstbegotten into the world, he saith, And let all the angels of God worship him." (Hebrews 1:6)</p>	<p>"Rejoice, ye heavens, with him, and let all the angels of God worship him" (Deuteronomy 32:43, Brenton's LXX)</p>	<p>The Deity of Christ</p>	<p>The MT of Deuteronomy 32:43 says nothing about angels worshiping the Messiah. (KJV, Jewish Bible, etc.)</p>
<p>Jesus said He fulfilled the OT prophecy to "proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind" (Luke 4:18)</p>	<p>The OT prophecied that Messiah would "preach liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind" (Isaiah 61:1, Orthodox Study Bible)</p>	<p>Jesus Healing the Blind</p>	<p>The MT of Isaiah 61:1 says nothing about the blind having their sight restored. (KJV, Jewish Bible, etc.)</p>
<p>Numerous NT passages mention Christ's hands and feet being pierced by crucifixion.</p>	<p>"They pierced my hands and my feet" (Psalm 21:17, Orthodox Study Bible)</p>	<p>The Crucifixion</p>	<p>"like a lion, my hands and my feet" (Psalm 22:17, Complete Jewish Bible)</p>
<p>"and in his name shall the Gentiles trust." (Matt. 12:21)</p>	<p>"and in his name shall the Gentiles trust." (Isaiah 42:4, Brenton's LXX)</p>	<p>Gentiles Trusting in Jesus' Name</p>	<p>"and the isles shall wait for his law." (Isaiah 42:4, KJV)</p>

These are not random, inconsequential differences between the texts. Rather, these appear to be places where the Masoretes (or their forebears) had a varied selection of texts to consider, and their decisions were influenced by anti-Christian bias. Simply by choosing one Hebrew text over another, they were able to subvert the Incarnation, the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, His healing of the blind, His crucifixion, and His salvation of the Gentiles. The Jewish scribes were able to edit Jesus out of many important passages, simply by rejecting one Hebrew text, and selecting (or editing) another text instead.



Fr. Joseph's booklet is now available, exploring how the Masoretic Text and Septuagint have influenced various translations of the Bible.

Thus, the Masoretic Text has *not* perfectly preserved the original Hebrew text of Scripture. The Masoretes received corrupted texts to begin with, they used an alphabet which was radically different from the original Hebrew, they added countless vowel points which did not exist in the original, they excluded several books from the Old Testament scriptures, and they included a number of significant changes to prophecy and doctrine.

It would seem that the Septuagint (LXX) translation is not only far more *ancient* than the Masoretic Text . . . the Septuagint is far more *accurate* as well. It is a more faithful representation of the original Hebrew Scriptures.

Perhaps that is why Jesus and the apostles frequently quoted from the Septuagint, and accorded it full authority as the inspired Word of God.