



THE HISTORY AND AUTHORITY OF THE ALEPPO CODEX

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The Aleppo Codex (*Keter Aram Zova*) is one of the most important and authoritative early manuscripts of the Bible. It was written in Tiberias in the early tenth century and, because of its great prestige, the title *keter* (crown; in Arabic, *taj*) was attached to it soon after its completion. The words *Aram Zova* were added a few hundred years later, when the manuscript had found a new home in the Syrian Jewish community of Aleppo, which the Jews called *Aram Zova*.

The many changes in the fortunes of this important manuscript, both in the Middle Ages and in much more recent times, will be discussed below. But let us begin with the city of Tiberias, where the Codex was produced.



Tiberias and Its Cultural Significance

At the beginning of the first century CE, Herod Antipas built an administrative *polis* on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee and named it after his friend and benefactor, the Roman emperor Tiberius. In the period of the Mishnah and the Talmud, this city became a major center in Palestine, thanks to its proximity to the fresh water of the Sea of Galilee, its medicinal hot baths, its outstanding scholars, and its many synagogues. The *tanna'im* (first- and second-century sages) Rabbi Yosei Ha-Gelili, Rabbi Shimon ben Ḥananyah, Shimon ben Azai, Rabbi Meir, and others lived there. The rabbis of the Talmud identified Tiberias with Rakkat, a fortified town mentioned in the book of Joshua (19:35) as part of the territory of Naftali; for halakhic purposes they therefore viewed it as an ancient city surrounded by a wall in the time of Joshua. The city was also called Ma'azyah, after an early priest who is mentioned in the Bible as the head of the last of the twenty-four divisions of priests that served in the Temple (1 Chron 24:18). The names Rakkat and Ma'azyah appear in various *piyyutim* (liturgical poems) as alternative names for the city.

For many generations Tiberias served as an important intellectual and religious center. From 235 onward it was the seat of the Sanhedrin and its leaders, the *nesi'im*. The Talmud mentions ten places to which the Sanhedrin was exiled after Titus destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem, with the list culminating in Tiberias (BT Rosh Hashanah 31a).

In time, the city became the main center of the Jewish population in Palestine, and it was there that the Jerusalem Talmud was completed in the fourth century. When pilgrimages to Jerusalem were forbidden by the Byzantine authorities, Tiberias became a pilgrimage destination for the Jews of the Diaspora.

In the Middle Ages Tiberias was the most important Jewish city in Palestine and also in the Diaspora, surpassing even the holy city of Jerusalem. The capital of the Muslim administration in northern Palestine, it was the economic hub of the country, maintaining commercial ties with Syria in the north and Baghdad and Persia to the east. In the tenth century agricultural produce from Palestine included olive oil, raisins, and carobs, as well as cotton and textiles. In fact, Tiberias was famous for its fabrics, woven textiles, and mats. The large Jewish market in the town offered a rich variety of goods at low prices. Tiberias flourished until the arrival of the Crusaders in the early twelfth century. Destroyed during the conflict with the Crusaders, the city was almost entirely deserted until its reconstruction in the sixteenth century. (On medieval Tiberias see also Allony 1995; Assaf and Mayer 1944.)

One of the most important activities associated with Tiberias was the insertion of vocalization signs (*nikkud*) and accentuation marks (*te'amim*) in the text of the Bible and the accurate preservation of the text through the corpus of notations called the Masorah. Other early systems of vocalization –



the Babylonian and Palestinian systems – are known to us, but the tradition preserved by the Masoretes of Tiberias is acknowledged as the most advanced and the most precise. The vocalization signs introduced in Tiberias spread to every Jewish community over time, and they are used in Hebrew to this day. Abraham ibn Ezra wrote in his treatise on grammar *Zahot* (Purity) that “the Sages of Tiberias are the main authority, because they included the Masoretes, from whom we received the entire system of vocalization” (Lippmann 1827, 7a). As early as the tenth century a Karaite scholar named Karkasani wrote that all his contemporaries recognized the authority of the reading tradition practiced in Palestine (the Tiberian system): grammar was to be explained from it alone, and not from the Babylonian tradition (Klar 1943, 37).

The writings of an Arab historian inform us that Sa’adyah Gaon, who is regarded as the first Hebrew grammarian, spent some time in Tiberias, learning the reading tradition and other aspects of the language from a scholar named Abu Kathir Yehia ben Zekharia (Dotan 1997, 18–19). The names of some of the grammarians and Masoretes who lived and worked in Tiberias are known to us, among them Rabbi Pinḥas the head of the yeshivah, and Aḥiyyahu ha-Cohen he-Ḥaver (Baer and Strack 1879, 78–79).

Yet another source provides surprising information about the use of Hebrew by the people of Tiberias. In the tenth century a Hebrew grammarian of the

city wrote a work that has been preserved in part in the Cairo Genizah. He relates that he studied the accent of the people of Tiberias, especially their way of pronouncing the letter resh when reading the Bible and when speaking Hebrew. To that end he would spend long hours in the city streets and squares, listening to the speech of ordinary people, in Hebrew and in Aramaic (Allony 1970, 98–101). This description, which is written in Arabic, indicates that in the tenth century Hebrew was actually spoken in Tiberias and was not only a literary and liturgical language.

The best-known grammarian and Masorete to come out of Tiberias was Aharon ben Asher, who lived in the tenth century. The text entitled *Dikdukei ha-Te’anim* (Grammar of the Accents) is attributed to him, and a note at the beginning of the book states that Rabbi Aharon ben Asher was “from the place Ma’azyah, which is called Tiberias, on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee” (Baer and Strack 1879, 1). Another early source states that Rabbi Aharon belonged to a dynasty boasting six generations of prominent Masoretes. In 895 his father, Moshe ben Asher, wrote the “*maḥzor* [codex] of the Bible . . . in Ma’azyah, the renowned city of Tiberias,” as attested at the end of a manuscript found in Cairo (Glatzer 1989, 251–52). It was his son, Aharon ben Moshe of the Ben Asher family, who proofread, vocalized, and added accentuation signs and Masoretic notations to the most important Bible manuscript of all, the Aleppo Codex.



The Turbulent History of *Keter Aram*

Zova

The thousand-year history of the *Keter* has been far from quiet. Sometimes the Codex remained in the same place for only a generation or two; sometimes it stayed put for centuries. Usually it was moved from place to place at the initiative of its owners, but on at least one occasion it was stolen and taken elsewhere by a foreign conqueror.

A dedicatory inscription at the end of the *Keter*, no longer extant, provided information about the move from Tiberias to Jerusalem after the death of Aharon ben Asher: the Codex came into the possession of Israel ben Simḥah of Basra, who apparently purchased it from Aharon's heirs and delivered it for safekeeping to the heads of the Karaite sect in Jerusalem, Yoshiyahu and Yehizkiyahu. At that time, he imposed numerous conditions for its preservation and protection. Both Karaites and Rabbanites were only permitted to consult the Aleppo Codex to satisfy doubts regarding the wording of the Bible, not to read or study from it.

As it turned out, however, these stipulations did not prove to be very long-lasting. The Codex arrived in Jerusalem in the mid-eleventh century and almost immediately thereafter was stolen and taken to Egypt – either in 1071 by the Seljuks or in 1099 by the Crusaders. Knowing that they would be able to demand a great deal of money from other Jewish communities for its return, the conquerors did not damage their prize. Letters discovered in the

Genizah mention manuscripts that were redeemed from the Crusaders in Ashkelon, with the help of the Jews of Egypt, and it is possible that the Aleppo Codex was among these books (Goitein 1980, 231–35). In any event, it was ransomed from its captors and reached the Rabbanite synagogue in Fustat (Cairo). As we shall see below, Maimonides consulted the Codex while it was in Egypt. From there it was taken to Aleppo in Syria, apparently during the fourteenth century. (On the history of the Codex, see Ben-Zvi 1960.)

The Damaged *Keter* Reaches Israel

For more than a thousand years the Codex was preserved in its entirety, remaining intact despite the passage of time and its long itinerary: Tiberias, Jerusalem, Egypt, Syria. For many centuries the Aleppo Jewish community served as exemplary guardians, and no one damaged the manuscript. Here and there the signs of age were evident: on some pages the ink had peeled off, leaving only traces; a few pages were cracked and cut. At the end of the nineteenth century a reddish-purple stain, the result of a fungus, appeared on most of the pages on the lower outside corner, which caused some of the letters in the Masoretic notes to be blurred (Glatzer 1989, 182–83). Still the Aleppo Codex remained the oldest complete manuscript of the Hebrew Bible in the world. All 480 of its pages were preserved, and it was possible to read from “In the beginning” to the last words, “O my God, remember it to my credit” (Nehemiah 13:31; in the



Keter, as in other Tiberian manuscripts, Chronicles appears at the beginning of the Writings, and the last book in the Hebrew Bible is Ezra-Nehemiah). In 1943 Professor Umberto (Moshe David) Cassuto traveled from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem to Aleppo, examined the *Keter*, and described it in detail. He wrote that it was kept “in a wooden case covered with red leather. This case opens up, with the book fastened to it as though to the two boards of an ordinary binding” (Ofer 1989a, 279).

Cassuto was one of the last people to see the Codex while it was still intact. On December 1, 1947, two days after the United Nations voted in favor of partitioning Palestine, anti-Jewish riots broke out in Aleppo. The fate of the Aleppo Codex is described in the account of the city’s rabbi, Moshe Tawil:

They removed forty Torah scrolls and burned them outside with kerosene and oil. The Jews were afraid to leave their homes because they were certain to be killed. The government warned the people not to kill, although they were permitted to rob and to destroy . . . At that time they burned all the synagogues, notably the Great Synagogue . . . After four days we entered the Great Synagogue and saw the ashes of books and small fragments . . . The *Keter* was discovered lying in ashes, its case broken into many pieces.

(Shamosh 1987, 43)

Most of the Aleppo Codex was saved from the ashes and hidden in a secret place, with the aim of sending it to the land of Israel at the first opportunity. The events surrounding the rescue of the Codex and its secret transfer to Israel are told in brief on a page that was attached to it:

This *Keter Torah* was delivered by the Chief Rabbi of Aleppo, Rabbi Moshe Tawil, and the *Dayan* (Judge), Rabbi Shlomo Za’afarani, to Mr. Mordecai ben Ezra ha-Cohen Faham in the year 1957 in order to bring it up to the holy city of Jerusalem. This privilege devolved upon Mr. Faham, who agreed to risk his life to save [the *Keter*] and bring it to Jerusalem, and deliver it to His Excellency the President of the State, Mr. Itzhak Ben-Zvi.

(Shamosh 1987, 117)

The *Keter* was deposited in the Ben-Zvi Institute in Jerusalem, and a Committee of Trustees was appointed to be responsible for its care. The director of the Ben-Zvi Institute serves as chairman of this Committee, and the Rishon le-Zion, the Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel, is also a member.

Preserving the Existing Parts of the *Keter*
Not all of the Aleppo Codex was saved from destruction. The first and last parts are missing, as are individual pages from the middle (Ofer 1989a, 280–82; Glatzer 1989, 170–71). The entire five books of the Pentateuch have been lost, except for the end of Deuteronomy, from the word “וּמִשְׁאֵרֵי”



(*umishartekha*; Deut 28:17). The last word in the extant Codex is now "צִיּוֹן" (*Ziyyon*; Song of Songs 3:11), and most of the Five Scrolls are missing (the end of Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, and the book of Esther). The books of Daniel and Ezra are also lost. Rabbi Mordechai Breuer has applied the verse "all that remains in Zion [הַנִּשְׁאָר בְּצִיּוֹן – *ha-nishar be-Ziyyon*] and that has been left in Jerusalem, let it be called holy" (Isaiah 4:3) to the rescued partial manuscript, playing on the words that open and close the extant text, *umishartekha* and *Ziyyon*.

In 1986 the Aleppo Codex was sent to the conservation laboratory of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, for restoration. This process took ten years, in the course of which pieces of tape and spots of dirt that had adhered to the *Keter* were removed, and the ink was reinforced in the places where it had begun to disintegrate (Schenhav et al. 1989). An expert from the Department of Clinical Microbiology at Hadassah Medical Center examined the pages of the Codex and identified the fungus that had attacked it as belonging to the genus *Aspergillus*. The fungus is no longer active, and there is no reason to fear that it will spread and further damage the manuscript (Polachek 1988).

Restoration and Reconstruction of the Missing Parts

There were many attempts to locate the missing pages of the Aleppo Codex, and from time to time it was rumored that such pages had indeed been

found somewhere in the world. Some individuals claimed that they had seen the *Keter* after the riots and that only a few pages had been missing from it; others said that they had found pages and passed them on to other people. The question of the missing pages also engaged the writer Amnon Shamosh, who proposed an imaginary solution to the problem in his novel *Michel Ezra Safra and Sons* (Shamosh 1978). The television series produced from this book attracted a great deal of attention in Israel. In Shamosh's story, the missing pages were placed in a secret safe deposit box in France and in the end they disappeared without a trace. In a work of non-fiction, *Ha-Keter: The Story of the Aleppo Codex* (Shamosh 1987), the same writer devoted many pages to the question of what exactly happened to the missing parts of the Codex, and in 1988 he even set out on a journey on its trail (Shamosh 1988).

In addition to the 294 pages of the *Keter* that were brought to Israel in 1957, to date one complete page has been located, along with a small fragment of another page. The whole page, one of those that were lost from the middle of the Codex, contains a passage from Chronicles. A member of the Aleppo community found it on the floor of the Great Synagogue after the fire and gave it to his mother. Some time later they went to the United States, where the page lay in a drawer for many years, as a protective amulet, until it was brought to Jerusalem in 1981 and reunited with the *Keter* (Beit-Arié 1982; Yeivin 1982).



A small fragment of a page from Exodus is kept to this day in the wallet of a native of Aleppo who lives in New York. He claims to be the first person to have entered the synagogue after the riots, when he picked the small scrap of parchment from the floor with his own hands. A photograph of the fragment was published in 1989 in the journal *Pe'amim* (Ofer 1989b).

Will more pages and pieces of pages from the Aleppo Codex be found? Only time will tell.

Photographs of the Aleppo Codex

And so, a large part of the Codex remains shrouded in mystery – but were any photographs ever made of the pages that are now missing?

It turns out that two photographs, containing three pages of the *Keter*, were taken. One page was photographed at the end of the nineteenth century, and two others were photographed together in the early twentieth century. The single page, containing a passage from Genesis 27, was published in a book about the accentuation of the biblical text written by the English scholar William Wickes (Wickes 1887). The second photograph was published in 1910 in a travel book by a missionary named Joseph Segall. It shows the Ten Commandments as they appear in Deuteronomy (see Goshen 1966; these two photographs were also reproduced by Amnon Shamosh [Shamosh 1987, pl. A and p. 54]).

Professor Cassuto had intended to photograph the *Keter* – or, at the very least, the first part of the

manuscript – but after exploring several avenues, he realized that it would be difficult to obtain film in Aleppo, that the quality of the photographs would be poor, and that he was unlikely to obtain the agreement of the Jewish community's leaders. He therefore gave up on the idea and confined himself to copying out parts of the Codex (Shamosh 1987, 105).

The Work of the Masoretes

This, then, is the troubled history of the Aleppo Codex, during which many generations and communities sought to protect the precious manuscript. Ultimately it suffered serious damage, and then efforts were made to locate missing pages and to find a safe home for whatever had been rescued from destruction. During the long years that it survived intact, numerous sages and scholars made their way to Aleppo in order to examine the *Keter* and record the textual tradition it preserved.

What made the Aleppo Codex so special? How did it differ from other manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible, and how did it come to be acknowledged as the most authoritative manuscript? Despite its antiquity, the *Keter* is not the oldest biblical manuscript known to us: the Dead Sea Scrolls predate it by about a thousand years. The unique importance of the Aleppo Codex derives from the fact that it was produced by a Masorete.

The Masoretes set out to preserve and perpetuate the wording of the Bible that had been transmitted from generation to generation. To that end, they



pursued a number of paths simultaneously, and it might be said that they achieved their goal most successfully.

They were concerned with establishing the biblical text, which they did by setting down the proper way to copy and read the Hebrew Bible. When it came to differing traditions regarding the writing of the text and/or the way it should be read, they ruled as to which opinion should be followed. Their decisions relate not only to verses and words, but also to every single letter. Basing themselves on ancient books and documents, the Masoretes carefully considered the matter of *plene* (full) and defective spelling and determined how each word should be written in every instance. For example, the word קולות (*kolot*; sounds) is written entirely defectively in Exodus 9:28 (קלה). However, several verses later, in 9:33, it is written with one *vav*, after the *lamed* (הקלות), while in Exodus 20:15(14) the single *vav* appears before the *lamed* (הקולת).

Apart from determining the correct text, the Masoretes also introduced vocalization and accentuation marks – another major undertaking of inestimable importance to the Hebrew language. In order to preserve the traditional way of reading the Bible, they inserted vocalization marks under, in, and over the letters, helping the reader pronounce the words correctly. Until the time of the Masoretes, there had been no vocalization marks at all. The ancient manuscripts discovered in the Judean Desert (like Torah scrolls to this day) do not contain vocalization, and in every verse the reader is

dependent on the oral tradition. For example, the word ויאמר (and he said) appears frequently in the Bible, and every time one encounters it, one has to know whether the accent is on the penultimate syllable (ויאמר – *vayyómér*) – or the final syllable (ויאמר – *vayyómár*) – or perhaps the *vav* should be vocalized differently, which would result in a change of tense altogether (ויאמר – *veyómár*; and he will say). In many cases neither context nor rules of grammar can help the reader, and he must rely on received tradition regarding the pronunciation of a given word in a given verse.

The accentuation marks (*te'amim*) inserted by the Masoretes indicate the conjunction or disjunction of words and the melodic tradition for chanting the text. Indeed, vocalization and accentuation are interconnected, since the vocalization of many words changes according to the accentuation. For example, the word ארץ (land) is generally vocalized as ארץ (*erez*), but when it is marked with a pausal sign (found at the end of a verse or dividing two parts of a verse), it is vocalized as ארץ (*arez*). The presence or absence of a *dagesh* in words beginning with the letters ה, פ, ב, ד, ג, ב, indicating whether they are to be given a hard or soft pronunciation, also depends upon the accentuation.

It would appear that the Masoretes added the vocalization and accentuation marks to the text during the seventh or eighth century. To do so, they needed special manuscripts that took the form of codices – books with bound pages – rather than scrolls. (The Hebrew term for codex is *mizháf*,



derived from the Arabic; in antiquity the Hebrew word *mahzor* was used. See Glatzer 1989, 261–63; the transition from scrolls to codices is discussed at length in the article by Mordechai Glatzer in this volume.) This new form of the book had several advantages over ancient scrolls: it was possible to write on both sides of the page and also to leaf through the pages, moving quickly from place to place. The Masoretes thus combined tradition with innovation: public reading from the Torah in synagogues continued as before, using scrolls without any vocalization or accentuation, while codices were used for recording the accepted system of vocalization and accentuation.

Once the vocalized text was established, it became necessary to preserve it and forestall further controversy. The apparatus of the Masorah was developed with this purpose in mind. Thousands of Masoretic notes were compiled, describing the proper way of writing words in the Bible – vocalization, accentuation, and specific combinations of words. This annotational complex was also inserted in the Masoretes' codices, whose layout left room for many notes. Thus the biblical text, incorporating the vocalization and accentuation marks, occupied three narrow columns on each page. Dozens of very succinct Masoretic comments were written in the outer margins of each page as well as in the margin between the columns. Many of these brief notes contain only a single letter, indicating how many times the word appears in the Bible – two (ב), three (ג), or more. (If the word appears

only once in the Bible, it is marked ו, standing for the Aramaic phrase *let dikhvateh*, meaning there are no others like it.) These short rubrics are known as the Masorah Parva (small Masorah), as opposed to the Masorah Magna (large Masorah), which involves longer comments written on the tops and bottoms of the pages. The Masorete who annotated each manuscript decided which rubrics to include and where to place them. As a result, there is no standard order for the Masoretic notes, and no two manuscripts are identical in the wording or sequence of the annotation.

Here is an example of the Aleppo Codex Masorah Magna to Joshua 10:11 (which begins ויהי בנסם):

בנוסם ב' חד מל וחד חס ויהי בנסם בנוסם במלחמה. בתר' מל'

This comment tells us that the word *be-nusam* (in their flight) appears twice in the Bible, once defectively (בְּנוֹסָם) and once in *plene* spelling (בְּנוֹסָם). The first instance is Joshua 10:11 (referred to with the words ויהי בנסם), and the second is 2 Samuel 19:4 (בנוסם במלחמה). The Masorah comments that in the second instance (בתר'), the spelling is *plene*, thus indicating by inference that the spelling in the first instance is defective. Incidentally, a famous manuscript of the Prophets from Cairo and some present-day printed editions have the *plene* spelling of בְּנוֹסָם for Joshua 10:11, and thus do not follow the Masorah in this instance.

The work of the Masoretes took place over generations. Their text of the Bible – the Masoretic text – spread throughout the Jewish people with astonishing uniformity, and their vocalization



system was accepted by every Jewish community and was applied to texts other than the Bible. Quite a few codices produced by Masoretes have survived to this day, some in their entirety. This huge and complex project was the work of many men, of whom only a small number are known to us by name. One of the best known and most important is the man who produced the Aleppo Codex, Aharon ben Moshe ben Asher.

The Uniqueness of the Aleppo Codex

Having examined the unique contribution of the Masoretic text and the difference between these codices and the scrolls that preceded them, let us consider why the Aleppo Codex is the most important of the Masoretic codices.

How many early Bible codices are there in the world? The answer depends on the wording of the question. If we restrict ourselves to codices containing the entire Hebrew Bible (Torah, Prophets, and Writings) written before 1500, there are no more than 200 in the world. Moreover, only four or five of these were written in the tenth or eleventh century. Hence the Aleppo Codex belongs to a very small group of early manuscripts that contain the entire Bible.

If we count all the early codices from the tenth and eleventh centuries, including those that contained, at the time of their writing, only part of the Bible (such as codices of the Torah, of the Former Prophets, and so on), we find that there are dozens. About fifty of these are extant in large part (more

than a hundred pages). Of the rest, only isolated pages or parts of books remain. Although these manuscripts can be found in many libraries around the world, most of them are in the Firkovich Collection in St. Petersburg.

Scholars have developed various methods to study Masoretic codices and determine their degree of accuracy with regard to spelling, vocalization, accentuation, secondary syllable stresses (*meteg*, *ga'ayah*), and other criteria. Comparison of the manuscripts reveals a long list of differences in each of these areas. However, the existence of a variety of criteria and the broad range of findings vis-à-vis these criteria still cannot tell us whether one manuscript should be preferred over another. How is it possible to ascertain which manuscript is more authoritative and exact?

As we shall see, two kinds of evidence – internal and external – can be studied to arrive at a final answer.

Internal Evidence: The Accuracy of the Masorete Who Produced the *Keter*

The internal test concerns the consistency of the manuscript itself. Sometimes manuscripts contain clear mistakes, such as the omission of vocalization and accentuation marks, or combinations of accents that are not permissible, which must be the result of carelessness on the part of the scribe. In this matter, the Masoretic notes are of great importance. It is possible to verify whether the annotation was written correctly, and whether the text of the Bible corresponds to the contents of the Masoretic note



accompanying it. For example, if a Masoretic note lists the verses in which a certain word must be written with *plene* spelling, while the manuscript itself has the word written defectively in some of those same verses, this is a sign that the Masorete did not do his work properly: he failed to ensure that the text reflected the contents of the Masorah in every instance.

Moreover, comparison of the Masoretic rubrics in various manuscripts has shown that they usually are consistent with one another and refer to a single text of the Bible. The accuracy of an individual manuscript must therefore be examined not only in relation to its own Masoretic apparatus, but also in relation to all of the Masoretic notes found in early Bible manuscripts.

In order to reach a general conclusion regarding the quality of a manuscript, scholars must perform thousands of checks of the type outlined above. Two distinguished scholars who carried out meticulous examinations of the Aleppo Codex and compared it to related manuscripts, including their Masoretic annotation, have come to definite conclusions. Professor Israel Yeivin states:

This manuscript is vocalized and accentuated in the most exact fashion, preserving intact the early tradition of accentuation, which was lost in later manuscripts. In sum, with regard to these features, it is the most exact of all the Tiberian Bible manuscripts of which I have examined the photographs.

(Yeivin 1968b, 10)

Rabbi Mordechai Breuer writes:

Anyone who examines the Aleppo Codex carefully, both along general lines and in detail, cannot help but be amazed by the almost superhuman ability of the Masorete who produced such perfect work. He was expert in defective and *plene* spellings, in vocalization and in accentuation, and no secret of the Masorah escaped him. He is the only one of all the scribes, vocalizers, Masorettes, and proofreaders who managed to produce a full manuscript of the Bible without deviating from the Masoretic rules and precepts.

(Breuer 1996, [4])

A few statistics will illustrate this point. In the manuscript known as the Leningrad Codex there are more than 250 places in the Prophets where the scribe erred with respect to *plene* and defective spellings. In the Cairo manuscript of the Prophets there are about 130 errors in *plene* and defective spellings. However, in the Aleppo Codex there are *two places* in the Prophets where it is clear that the scribe erred with respect to *plene* and defective spellings.

(Breuer 1977, Preface)

External Evidence: Aharon ben Asher, the Masorete of the Aleppo Codex

The external test of a manuscript relates to its provenance and status among the Masorettes. In this respect as well the Aleppo Codex is superior to all



the other manuscripts of the Bible. It was produced by Aharon ben Moshe ben Asher, one in a long and distinguished line of Masoretes. Aharon ben Asher's renown within his profession is evident from the fact that other early Masoretes made a point of stating that they followed his system. Examples from two early codices containing the entire Bible may be cited in this regard. At the end of the famous Leningrad Codex, written in 1008, we find: "Shmuel ben Ya'akov copied, vocalized, and wrote the Masoretic notes of this *mahzor* [codex] of the Bible from the corrected and annotated books that were made by the learned Aharon ben Moshe ben Asher, may he rest in peace" (Baer and Strack 1879, xi; *Codices hebraicis* 1997, 116). Similarly, the Masorete who wrote a tenth-century manuscript previously found in the Sassoon Collection (Sassoon MS 1053) indicates his source after quoting a particular rubric: "... and we have found it given by the great scholar Aharon ben Moshe, in his work in the *mahzor* known as *al-Taj*" (Ofer 1989a, 302).

Al-Taj in Arabic is of course "the Crown" – *Keter* in Hebrew – which demonstrates that as early as the tenth century the great scholar Aharon ben Asher was already famous, as was his exceptional manuscript of the Bible, known as the *Keter*.

The identity of the Masorete who produced the Aleppo Codex is revealed by the dedication that was written at the back of the manuscript about a century after its completion, on the occasion of its

presentation to the Karaite community of Jerusalem. The dedication reads:

This is the complete codex of the twenty-four books copied by the master and teacher Shlomo ben Buya'a, the ready scribe, may the spirit of God give him rest, and it was vocalized and given a full Masorah by the great scholar and wise sage, the master of scribes, father of sages, and chief of scholars, quick of deed, and understanding in action, unique in his generation, the master rabbi Aharon the son of master Asher, may his soul be bound up in the bundle of life together with the prophets, saints, and pious men.

(Ofer 1989a, 287)

Such are the fulsome words with which the expert Aharon ben Asher is praised. The scribe who copied the manuscript, Shlomo ben Buya'a, whose work must have been the mainly technical task of copying the letters in a fine hand, was apparently engaged by its vocalizer and annotator, Aharon ben Asher. This Shlomo ben Buya'a also wrote a Torah manuscript that is now in the St. Petersburg National Library of Russia (EBP II B17; see Baer and Strack 1879, xxxvi–xxxvii; *Codices hebraicis* 1997, 53–55). The inscriptions appended to the end of this manuscript state that it was written in 929, thereby suggesting the approximate date of the Aleppo Codex. A comparison of the handwriting of the two manuscripts reveals that they were indeed produced by the same scribe, which



corroborates the dedication of the *Keter*. (This was noted by Cassuto, Goshen, and Beit-Arié; see the summary of the discussion on this subject in *Codices hebraicis* 1997, 67–68).

Another proof that the vocalization, accentuation, and secondary syllable stresses of the *Keter* were all done by Aharon ben Asher emerges from *Kitāb al-Khilaf* (The Book of Differences; Lipschütz 1965), an early work listing more than 1,200 passages in dispute between Aharon ben Asher and his contemporary, David ben Naftali (and between these two Masoretes and others). Most of the disputes deal with minutiae of vocalization, accentuation, hyphenation, and stresses. Careful scrutiny shows that the text of the Aleppo Codex follows Aharon ben Asher's opinion, as recorded in *Kitāb al-Khilaf*, more than any other manuscript known to us (agreement in 93% of the instances [Yeivin 1968b, 2]; regarding the other cases, it may be that an error crept into *Kitāb al-Khilaf*, or that Ben Asher changed his mind in another manuscript he vocalized).

Over the years Aharon ben Asher came to be regarded as the final authority in matters of the Masorah. Rabbi Menahem de Lonzano (1550 – before 1624) wrote at the beginning of his book *Or Torah* (Light of Torah): “All the Jews in these lands relied on the reading of Ben Asher, as though a heavenly voice had come forth, saying: [when there is disagreement between] Ben Asher and Ben Naftali, the halakhah follows Ben Asher.”

Maimonides and the Codex

The status of the *Keter* was greatly enhanced during the twelfth century, thanks to the ruling of Maimonides in his codification of Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah*. Discussing the precepts for copying Torah scrolls, Maimonides writes about the sectional divisions (sections that are open – *petuhot* – and closed – *setumot*). He notes that his sources betray confusion and disagreement in this area. In order to solve the problem, he includes a full list of all 669 sections of the Pentateuch in his work, as well as a precise description of the way in which the Song at the Sea (Exodus 15) and the Song of Moses (*Ha'azinu*; Deuteronomy 32) should be written. As the authority for his list Maimonides chose a famous manuscript he encountered in Egypt:

The book upon which I have relied in these matters, a well-known book in Egypt, contains the twenty-four books and was in Jerusalem for several years; it was used to correct scrolls, and all relied on it, because it was proofread by Ben Asher, who devoted years of meticulous attention to it and proofread it many times, according to the tradition, and I relied upon it for the Torah scroll that I wrote according to Jewish law.

(*Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Sefer Torah* 8:4)

Thus Maimonides refers here to a complete manuscript of the Bible (“twenty-four books”) that was proofread again and again by Ben Asher – a codex he prefers to all other Torah scrolls and



manuscripts, and to all the Masoretic lists of the sections of the Torah. He therefore rules that Torah scrolls should be copied according to this Bible manuscript. Maimonides' authority was so great that within a few generations every Jewish community had accepted his ruling, and all Torah scrolls continue to be copied in keeping with his list, which is based on the manuscript corrected by Ben Asher.

Can we be certain that the codex to which Maimonides refers is the Aleppo Codex? According to the tradition of the Jews of Aleppo, the Bible in their possession was indeed the one to which Maimonides referred. (This tradition is documented as early as the fifteenth century by Sa'adyah ben David Ha'adani, who saw the *Keter* during a visit to Aleppo.) One would think it a simple matter to confirm or refute this tradition by comparing the Torah sections of the Aleppo Codex with the long list in Maimonides' work. And yet the matter is not so simple, because most of the text of the Torah has been missing from the Aleppo Codex for fifty years. Only eleven pages, containing just seven chapters, remain.

One man who did examine the Codex while it was still intact believed that it was not the manuscript upon which Maimonides relied. This was Umberto Cassuto, who saw the *Keter* in 1943. He expressed the opinion several times, without explanation, before his death in 1951. In 1946, for example, Cassuto published the Book of Jonah as a sample of a Bible edition he was planning, and

his explanatory note to the book includes the following:

According to the current opinion . . . the manuscript that Maimonides took as his model was the 'Crown' (*keter*) of Aharon ben Moshe ben Asher, which is now kept in Aleppo. But following a detailed examination of the 'Crown', Cassuto . . . was convinced that this view is not correct.

(Cassuto 1973, 301)

It would seem difficult to argue with this negative conclusion by an expert scholar who had examined the entire manuscript. Nevertheless, a short time after the Codex arrived in Israel, Moshe Goshen-Gottstein managed to refute Cassuto's claim by surmising the reasoning behind it (Goshen 1960). The key to the mystery lay in Maimonides' comments on the the Song of Moses (Deut 32). Here is the relevant passage as it appears in most editions of the *Mishneh Torah*: "In the Song of Moses, in the middle of every line, there is a space as in the form of a closed section, and so every line is divided in two, and they are written in seventy lines" (*Mishneh Torah*, loc. cit.).

Fortunately Deuteronomy 32 is included among the Codex's few extant pages from the end of the Pentateuch. There is, however, something irregular about the way the song is written: three of the lines are very long, each one containing text that is usually written in two lines. Hence the number of lines in the poem as written in the *Keter* is



sixty-seven rather than seventy. This would appear to be incontrovertible proof that Maimonides was not referring to the Aleppo Codex, since not only did he state the number of lines contained in the poem, he also listed the words that begin each line and each hemistich. All of his remarks are consistent with a tradition of writing the text in seventy lines. Nevertheless, a more comprehensive examination of manuscripts of the *Mishneh Torah* led Goshen-Gottstein to a surprising discovery: the oldest and most reliable manuscripts do not mention seventy lines. Rather, they speak of sixty-seven lines, and the list of words that open each line accords exactly with the Aleppo Codex! Moreover, Yemenite Torah scrolls follow the tradition of sixty-seven lines, in keeping with the original opinion of Maimonides. Since no other codex of the Bible written before his time has the Song of Moses in sixty-seven lines, there can be little doubt that Maimonides was referring to the *Keter* as his authority.

Why, then, do these printed versions of the *Mishneh Torah* stipulate that the poem must be written in seventy lines? The reason is most probably related to the technical difficulty involved in writing three such long lines. This is only possible if one employs a very wide column, leaving a large gap between the two hemistichs of all the other lines – a scribal tradition that was not current in most communities. Maimonides' ruling apparently aroused opposition, and so someone emended the text of the *Mishneh Torah* to conform to the more common

scribal tradition (which was also an ancient tradition, documented in chapter 12 of *Masekhet Soferim* from the Geonic period).

Goshen-Gottstein's main conclusions were confirmed years later, when the notes that Cassuto made while examining the *Keter* became available to scholars, and it was seen that Cassuto had ultimately based his verdict on the question of Deuteronomy 32. The Aleppo Codex was indeed the book upon which Maimonides relied, and the long-standing tradition regarding its lineage was confirmed (Ofer 1989a, 325–30).

The Aleppo Codex and Recent Editions of the Bible

The *Keter's* arrival in Israel marked the beginning of a new period in the study of this codex and of the Masorah in general. At first the *Keter* was made available for examination by the members of the Hebrew University Bible Project, who decided to base a new scientific edition of the Bible on it. By the end of the year 2000, the books of Isaiah and Jeremiah had appeared in this edition.

In 1976 a photographic facsimile of the *Keter* was published (see Goshen 1976), and the manuscript could thus be studied by the scholarly community at large. Rabbi Mordechai Breuer published an edition of the Hebrew Bible “according to the text and Masorah of the Aleppo Codex and related manuscripts.” (Two editions were published: Breuer 1977 and Breuer 1996. The present edition, *The Jerusalem Crown*, is also based on Breuer's



approach.) In 1992 Bar-Ilan University Press began to publish an edition of the Bible and commentaries entitled *Mikra'ot Gedolot 'Haketer'*, which bears the name of the Aleppo Codex and contains its Masorah Magna and Masorah Parva (Cohen 1992). In addition, dozens of books and articles on the subject have been published, some of which are listed in the bibliography at the end of this article.

The Missing Pages

Many important details from the Aleppo Codex have been reconstructed in recent years on the basis of testimony by rabbis and scholars who examined the manuscript before it was damaged. We have seen that the fame of the *Keter* spread throughout the Jewish world over the centuries. Among experts in the Masorah, it was known as the precise text produced by the Masorete Aharon ben Asher, the text on which Maimonides relied when he formulated the regulations for writing Torah scrolls. As a result, many of those who dealt with the Masorah and with the writing of Torah scrolls sought to consult the *Keter* for authoritative solutions to problems of the biblical text. Today the notes and other writings of these men can help in the reconstruction of the Codex's missing parts.

Here are four such sources:

1. At the end of the sixteenth century Yishai ben Amram ha-Cohen Amadi, from the town of Amadiya in Kurdistan, corrected the text of the Torah according to the Aleppo Codex. His corrections were found written in the margins of a Pentateuch printed in 1490 that was discovered in the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York (Penkower 1992). At the end of Leviticus, we find the following inscription: "I, Yishai the son of Amram the Cohen, a lowly servant in Israel, corrected my codex according to the *Keter* that was corrected by Ben Asher of blessed memory." Similar inscriptions appear at the end of other books of the Pentateuch. This volume enables us to arrive at important conclusions regarding the open and closed sections in the *Keter* and the form of Exodus 15, the Song at the Sea.
2. When Umberto Cassuto examined the Aleppo Codex in 1943, he found a slip of paper containing a list of eleven differences between the text of Torah scrolls written in Aleppo and the text of the *Keter*. This list, which Cassuto copied into his notes, had been written by a local rabbi, Menashe Sithon. It can be used to establish the text of the Torah in the *Keter* with near certainty (see Ofer 1989a, 309).
3. In the 1850s Ya'akov Sapir, an Ashkenazi rabbi of Jerusalem, composed a long list of more than 500 remarks on the orthography, vocalization, and accentuation in various places in the Torah, the *haftarot* (weekly portions from the Prophets), and the Five Scrolls. He sent this list to the aforementioned Rabbi Menashe Sithon, whom he addressed as "a *nasi* [leader of the community] in Aleppo, as well as a great grammarian and



expert in the Masorah.” Sapir asked Sithon to examine the *Keter* and write “thus” or “not thus” next to every item on the list. The annotated list reached Jerusalem and was copied several times (see Zer 1986).

For example, one of Sapir’s questions concerned the vocalization of the word “זכר” (*zekher*; memory) in the verse “blot out the memory of Amalek” (Deut 25:19). Over the years doubt had arisen as to the way this word should be vocalized: זְכָר (with a *zere*) or זִכָּר (with a *segol*); in some Ashkenazi communities the verse is read twice on the Sabbath preceding Purim, to comply with both opinions. From Sapir’s list we learn that the word was vocalized with a *zere* in the Aleppo Codex.

4. Rabbi Shalom Shakhna Yellin (1790–1874) was an expert proofreader who lived in the Lithuanian shtetl of Skidel. All his life he worked as a scribe, writing Torah scrolls, phylacteries, and *mezuzot* and studying the Masorah to ascertain the correct text of the Bible. In 1855 he decided to settle in the land of Israel, and on his way there he examined Torah scrolls in the communities through which he passed. Shalom Shakhna’s son, Rabbi Arie Leib Yellin, was a rabbi in the community of Bielsk. (He later became well-known thanks to his work *Yefe Einayim*, which was appended to the famous Vilna “*Shas*” [Talmud] printed in 1890.) Here is part of a letter from Shalom Shakhna to his son, Arie Leib:

Now I am setting out to travel to the Holy Land – with God’s help, in safety. And in Aleppo there is a *Tanakh* written on parchment, with the Masorah that Ben Asher spent years correcting, and upon which Maimonides relied . . . and my entire aim, with God’s help, is to reach it and to gain enlightenment and resolve doubts . . . regarding the correct text and the Masoretic notes.

(Ofer 1992b, 314)

Shalom Shakhna Yellin came to Jerusalem and obtained a letter appointing him as the emissary of the most important rabbis of the city, both Ashkenazi and Sephardi. In the end he did not have the strength to make the difficult journey to Syria, and instead he sent his young son-in-law, Moshe Yehoshua Kimḥi. He provided Kimḥi with a Bible in the margins of which he had noted questions and disputed readings requiring clarification, and when Kimḥi got to Aleppo he recorded the reading of the *Keter* in every instance. All the details of the story were set down in contemporary sources, but the location of that Bible, with its information about the *Keter* noted in the margins, remained a mystery.

In 1987 an old house in the Kiryat Moshe neighborhood of Jerusalem, its attic filled with discarded books and documents, was about to be razed. Before the demolition, some of the books – including a small, worn copy of the Hebrew



Bible with tiny handwritten notes in its margins – were removed from the attic. The Bible was given to a bookseller, who was about to put it in a *genizah* (repository for sacred texts not in use). At the very last moment the book was identified: this was Yellin's Bible, and the notes in its margins contained a great deal of precious information about the Aleppo Codex (Ofer 1992b). Among other things, the notes listed all the places in the Prophets and Writings – including passages that were lost – where the text of the *Keter* left a space, indicating open and closed sections. Recent editions of the Hebrew Bible, such as the present one, rely upon that rediscovered old Bible when it comes to this question.

Other Ways of Reconstructing Missing Portions

And yet there still remain many passages that did not survive and cannot be reconstructed from external sources. Is it possible to fill in the gaps in other ways? This task is not merely an esoteric scholarly pastime; it is essential to any edition of the Hebrew Bible based on the Aleppo Codex. One can hardly publish a Bible and leave some pages blank until the missing portions are located.

Scholars adopted two principal methods of reconstructing these unattested passages. First, they turned to the Codex itself and applied what they knew from the extant sections to the parts that are missing. For example, in the edition published by Bar-Ilan University Press (Cohen 1992), the editor

scrutinized the manuscript's treatment of certain matters related to accentuation and syllable stresses, and then proposed a way of reconstructing portions that are not in our possession. It is also possible to make use of the Masorah Magna, which determines principles to be applied throughout the Bible. Thus, for example, the Masoretic apparatus of the Aleppo Codex discusses the spelling of words that also appear in missing portions of the manuscript. The second method is to look for other manuscripts that take an approach similar to that of the *Keter*. In general these are manuscripts from the tenth and eleventh centuries that were examined and found to be similar to the *Keter* in various areas: spelling, vocalization, and accentuation.

A satisfactory approximation of the text of the Aleppo Codex can be achieved by combining all of the above: external sources that provide information about the Codex, scrutiny of its remaining parts for evidence about those that are missing, and comparison with related manuscripts. Although Masorah scholars occasionally disagree about fine points of methodology, all agree that the Aleppo Codex is the most accurate Masoretic manuscript. Produced by an expert, meticulous, and diligent Masorete, it is the most secure foundation for any scientific Masoretic edition of the Hebrew Bible.

Masorah and Halakhah

These, then, are the methods that have been employed in order to come as close as possible to the



text established by Ben Asher and the texts of other early Masoretes a thousand years ago. But what is the position of the halakhah (Jewish law) regarding the reconstruction of an early Masoretic text? Can such a reconstruction supersede a tradition of writing or reading the Bible that has been widely accepted among Jewish communities for many years? There are various dimensions to this issue, which might broadly be termed the struggle between the Masorah and the halakhah, and vehement disagreements on the subject have arisen in recent years.

Let us begin with the question of orthography. There are today nine spelling differences between the Torah scrolls of Jews from Yemen and those of Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews. The most pronounced difference is in Genesis 9:29, where the controversy concerns both the way in which the Torah is written and the way in which it is read. The Jews of Yemen write and read: וַיְהִי כָל יְמֵי נֹחַ (*vayyihyu kol yemei Noah*; And all the days of Noah were . . .), whereas both Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews read and write וַיְהִי כָל יְמֵי נֹחַ (with the verb in the singular *vayhi*). The text of manuscripts related to the Aleppo Codex, the Masorah of these manuscripts and of the *Keter* itself, and finally testimony regarding the text of the *Keter* all indicate that the Yemenite tradition is consistent with the Masorah in the example cited here – and altogether in at least eight of the nine disputed passages.

Will this discovery lead to changes in Torah scrolls and a preference for the Yemenite version?

Halakhic decisions of recent years clearly indicate that it will not. The orthography of Torah scrolls in Sephardi and Ashkenazi communities was fixed centuries ago, and modern scholarship and new findings cannot change that tradition. Rabbi Breuer expressed a halakhic opinion several years ago in the following cautious terms: “a new community that does not yet have an established tradition and that contains members of various Jewish ethnic groups, might possibly find it proper to use a Torah scroll written according to the custom of the Yemenites” (Breuer 1976, 9). However, it is doubtful whether any community has acted on this opinion.

In other areas, in which no clear, authoritative tradition has been established, the text of the Masorah, which is also that of the *Keter*, has been accepted without opposition. This is true regarding the transcription of the Prophets and the Writings with respect to vocalization and accentuation. However, there are also certain “gray areas” in which there is no agreement as to whether to accept the tradition of the *Keter* or to prefer other traditions that have the force of custom.

The path of change and innovation in the world of halakhah is never strewn with rose petals. In 1995 a serious dispute broke out in the ultra-Orthodox world: was it correct to write scrolls of the Prophets according to the open and closed sections found in the Aleppo Codex? The controversy was waged by means of posters pasted on walls and tracts published by the parties involved, who set out their



arguments and cited contemporary rabbinical opinion in support of them. A large poster made its appearance in Jerusalem and Bnei Brak, proclaiming opposition to the tradition of the *Keter*; in response a tract entitled *Bittul Moda'ah* (Abrogation of the Poster; Yitschaki 1995) was published. Another tract, *Da'at Torah* (The Opinion of the Torah), opposed arranging the sections as found in the *Keter*, and this opposition was expressed forcefully on the pamphlet's title page:

. . . not like those who change [the tradition] according to a new manuscript known as "*Keter Aram Zova*" and also "Ben Asher" and "the Aleppo manuscript." For this was never done anywhere. . . . [Signed] here in the Holy City of Jerusalem, may it be rebuilt and reinstated, the month of mercy Elul, 5795.

(Hoffmann 1995)

Two of the greatest authorities of the yeshivah world, Rabbi Haim Kanyevsky and Rabbi Nissim Karelitz of Bnei Brak, argued against this position in a tract entitled *Kinat Soferim* (The Envy of Scribes; Karp 1995), stating: "the only tradition [of writing the Prophets and four of the Scrolls] to be passed down from generation to generation is that of the community of Aleppo (Aram Zova): their famous *Keter* was corrected by Ben Asher and relied on by Maimonides."

In their halakhic debate, both sides in the controversy refer to the works of scholars and others who study the Masorah. One important

factor that caused some opponents of the *Keter* to retract their opinion is the clear position taken by Rabbi Shmuel Salant, the Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Jerusalem in the nineteenth century, who signed the letter authorizing Rabbi Shalom Shakhna Yellin's planned expedition to Aleppo. It was as a result of this mission that scrolls of Prophets were written in Jerusalem according to the *Keter's* tradition with respect to the division of sections. Thus we see that reliance on the Aleppo Codex was not reinvented in our generation; it was already practiced in nineteenth-century Jerusalem, with the support of the foremost rabbis of the time.

The *Keter* Today

In the past, the Aleppo Codex was hidden in a chest and locked behind iron bars, so that very few people were permitted to examine it. Today, however, it is available to any scholar or reader thanks to the facsimile edition. A great deal of Masorah research has been devoted to the *Keter*, examining the methods of "the master of scribes, father of sages, and chief of scholars" and attempting to reconstruct the manuscript's missing pages. Many printed editions of the Hebrew Bible base their text on the Aleppo Codex, and every year tens of thousands of visitors to the Shrine of the Book at the Israel Museum have been able to see this ancient, astonishingly accurate manuscript. Having spent most of its long life in exile, the magnificent *Keter*—the Crown—has returned to Jerusalem nearly a thousand years after it left the city.



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