

THE VOWEL-POINTS CONTROVERSY IN THE XVI. AND XVII. CENTURIES.

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The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew, but the Hebrew character which appears in all existing Hebrew MSS. and printed editions, is not that which was always used. Another character was employed before the present. A change was made in the forms of the letters. They were wholly altered from their first condition. The so-called square character—such as we have it now—was introduced by Ezra as tradition has it, and the text prepared in these characters consisted only of consonants and had nothing of those ornaments of the letters as we now find them in our editions. These ornaments of the letters consisting of signs, points and strokes, partly below, partly above, partly within the text were the work of the so-called Massorites, and our text is therefore called the Massoretic text. The preparation of the Massoretic, or standard text, was commenced at a very early period and was finally settled in the eleventh century, and thus it happens that all extant MSS. and printed editions present one and the same text. But it was not always so. A comparison of our present Hebrew text with the Samaritan Pentateuch and with the Alexandrian version shows that other versions were current in the pre-Christian period, for otherwise we cannot account for the variations found in the Samaritan when compared with the Hebrew, in the Greek when compared with the Samaritan, in the Hebrew when compared with both. “And these variations” as Dillman observes, “are not to be set down to the charge of carelessness or willfulness on the part of the Hellenistic Jews and Samaritans, as was the old opinion, but are explained by the less weight then put upon exact uniformity of the text, and the existence of the mistakes in current copies. And when the Septuagint and the Samaritan Pentateuch agree in good readings, and still oftener in bad ones, against the Massoretic text, we are to conclude that these readings were spread by many copies current among the Palestine Jews, and are therefore not to look upon them as offensive, or thoroughly unreliable.” The Massoretic text was not known to the Talmud, i. e. as far as vowels and accents are concerned, nor to Jerome who translated from an unvowelled text; and the unpointed synagogue rolls of the present day are survivals of ancient custom. Upon what principles the work of the Massorites was done, we are not able to say, but it must be admitted that the text which they present is the best and most reliable, although not absolutely correct. The similarity of letters

would easily lead to a mistaken reading, and the Talmud (*Shabbath* fol. 103, col. 2) calls attention to a number of letters which must not be interchanged. From the Talmud we also learn many other things which are interesting in other respects. According to the Talmud, the Pentateuch contains 5,888 verses, the Psalms 8 more, and Chronicles 8 less. We call this computation the Babylonian, because the Talmud was the outcome of the learning of the Babylonian Jews. But the Massoretic work *Dikduke ha-Teamim* (ed. by Baer and Strack, Leipzig 1879) counts the verses in the Pentateuch 5,845, in the Prophets 9,294 and in the Hagiographa 8,064, so that the famous Jewish critic Norzi in his commentary on Levit. VIII. 8 expresses his surprise at the difference between the Talmud and the Massorah, and hopes that Elijah the Tishbite will make everything clear.

The various readings so frequently found in the margins and footnotes of our Hebrew Bibles known as K[·]rî and K[·]thîbh i. e. read and written; K[·]thîbh w[·]lo K[·]rî i. e. written but not read; K[·]rî w[·]lo K[·]thîbh i. e. read but not written, the Talmud (*Nedarim* fol. 37, col. 2) traces back to Moses on Sinai. According to the Massorah as printed in the first Rabbinic Bible, the sum total of K[·]rîs and K[·]thîbhs, occurring in the Bible, is 1,359; but the number is larger, as may be seen from table VIII. appended to the several parts of the Hebrew Bible edited by Baer and Delitzsch.

The Talmud mentions instances in which the scribes removed a superfluous *v'* which has crept into the text and which e. g. has been erroneously prefixed to *achar* in Gen. XVIII. 5; XXIV. 55; Num. XXXI. 2. But upon examining the ancient versions we find that the Samaritan, Syriac, Septuagint and the Jerusalem Targum still have the ancient reading *v'achar*. This removal is called 'ittur Soferim.'

In the most ancient Jewish writings, such as *Mechilta* (a commentary on Exodus, first probably compiled about 90 A. D.), *Sifri* (a commentary on Numbers and Deuteronomy, compiled by Rab 219-247 A. D.), *Tanchuma* (a commentary on the Pentateuch, compiled by Tanchuma ben-Abha, who flourished about 440 A. D.) mention is made of the *tikkune Soferim* or "emendations of the scribes," according to which eighteen alterations were introduced into the text, in order to remove anthropomorphisms and other infelicities of expression.

From these few statements it will be evident that our Massoretic text can neither claim absolute completeness nor infallibility, as was held by the Buxtorfs and their party, in the interest of the then prevalent views of inspiration. In order to ascertain the true text, we must make use of such critical helps which lead to that end, for as Canon Cheyne (*Prophecies of Isaiah* (3d ed.) vol. II., p. 240) observes: "the true spiritual meaning of the Scriptures can only be reached through the door of the letter, and the nearer we approach to a correct reading of the text, the more vivid will be our apprehension of the sacred truths which it conveys." The controversy whose history we give in the following pages has