

Book Review:

Biblia Hebraica Leningradensia

Edited by Aron Dotan (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001) \$49.95

Reviewed by David E. S. Stein

For nearly three decades, Israel's government has distributed the original (1973) edition of this Hebrew Bible to its soldiers and schoolchildren. Here now is a fully revised and retypeset version. It takes advantage of developments since 1973: Prof. Dotan's further analysis of the scribe's idiosyncrasies; recently published high-resolution photographs of the original manuscript; and improved technology for typesetting biblical Hebrew.

Its Latin title (abbreviated as *BHL*) is academic shorthand for "a Hebrew Bible based on the nearly 1000-year-old manuscript known as the Leningrad Codex." Unlike most Bible editors, Aron Dotan carefully explains his methodology, as one would expect from an emeritus professor at Tel Aviv University whose career has featured masoretic studies. In this edition, such documentation is in English.

Professor Dotan strove to produce "a Ben Asher text of the Bible"—the elusive goal of most Bible publishers, scribes, and scholars since before the invention of printing. Arguably he has achieved his objective; he started with a manuscript that was copied from others that were proofread by the last masorete, Aaron ben Moses Ben Asher—and systematically corrected it where its readings appeared implausible. And he did so based on masoretic evidence rather than on grammarians' rules regarding how the Bible is "supposed to" read.

In contrast to the 1973 edition, this one is meant to be suitable for use in worship. To convey its significance for the synagogue world, I first must review how the biblical text—in terms of how it reads—has always been an evolving document.

The masoretes never conclusively settled certain issues, as Israel Yeivin noted in his *Introduction to the Tiberian Masorah* (1980). Most such fine points were matters of notation, akin to English variants such as "decision making" vs. "decision-making," "worshipped" vs. "worshipped," and "resume" vs. "résumé." Pronunciation was rarely affected definitively, and cantillation was nearly the same regardless. Thus in certain spots, some scribes strung words together via conjunctive accents, while others used a hyphen (*makkef*). They also differed on where it was best to write a mobile schwa versus a reduced vowel, and regarding which of several overlapping ways it was best to clarify intended pronunciation or meaning via the small, sublinear, vertical line known as *ga'ayah* or *meteg*.

Compounding such variance, however, was the fact that two centuries after Aaron Ben Asher's death, full mastery of the masorah vanished (except in the isolated community of Yemen), and manuscripts that consistently reflected his teaching became rare. Furthermore, no one manuscript was error-free, and copying errors multiplied through the centuries. Every so often, an authority sought to sort out the problems.

Comparison with the “Received” Versions

The upshot of this history is that thousands of variant characters exist within today’s “received” tradition, although few Jews are aware of it. The “received” text is exemplified by the Letteris Bible (used in the Hertz *humash*), the Koren (“Jerusalem”) Bible, and the Artscroll (“Stone”) Bible. Each such text differs in numerous small ways from the others; careful readers can find occasionally significant discrepancies that are not mere typos.

However, the past century—and particularly the past thirty years—has seen a significant development: the publication and analysis of Tiberian masoretic manuals and manuscripts (including the Leningrad Codex) that were essentially unavailable to the previous twenty generations of authorities. This has improved scholars’ knowledge of Ben Asher’s intentions and achievements.

Strikingly, the newly available evidence belies some readings found in all printed editions, where it turns out that masoretic tradition prescribed a *different* disjunctive accent (e.g., five places in the Book of Genesis: 15:5.6; 20:11.4; 25:3.6; 28:16.4; 34:7.1–2).^{*} Moreover, the Tiberian manuscripts resolve discrepancies within the “received” tradition regarding which disjunctive accent is correct—a matter that affects cantillation (e.g., Gen. 1:18.4; 3:24.11; 8:15.2; 18:14.4; 30:19.1–3; 45:28.3). They also weigh in on minor matters for which later authorities—and printed editions—disagree among themselves, such as which of two similar vowels is correct in a particular place; for these cases too, we now know that Tiberian masoretic tradition made

a clear choice. In sum, the Torah text in *BHL* is substantially at odds with any “received” text in at least a few dozen instances, and it differs in minor ways in dozens of more readings.

To give the many intervening scribes, editors, and authorities due credit: they managed to preserve the Tiberian reading with astonishing accuracy—for example, 99.94% of the words (and accents) in Genesis are substantially the same. Nevertheless, the eleven aforementioned discrepancies within that book do warrant attention. Implicitly in the new edition of *BHL*, Prof. Dotan urges that our ritual reading of biblical texts employ this new knowledge of Tiberian masorah. Will Jews thus continue to change their received tradition for the sake of preserving tradition? So far as I know, no published *tikkun* (textual guide for Torah readers) yet takes this evidence into account.

Comparison with *Etz Hayim’s* Hebrew Text

Meanwhile, *BHL* is based on the same manuscript as was the Conservative movement’s *Etz Hayim humash*, published the same year. Touching here on the differences between those two books’ Hebrew texts further illustrates the extent to which the Bible is (not) fixed. Some differences between *Etz Hayim* and *BHL’s* Hebrew texts are obvious; for example, one is re-paraphrased into units of thought per the accompanying New JPS translation, while the other’s paragraphing is adjusted to accord with the *halakhah* for Torah scrolls as it has developed since the manuscript was written.

Other differences are far more subtle. Transcription from the manuscript was proofread independently in the two editions; and it appears

^{*} For precise reference, my citation of chapter-and-verse includes the word number within the verse. (A hyphenated compound counts as one word.)

that for pointing (i.e., vowels, accents, and the like), Prof. Dotan caught more minor transcription errors (e.g., Exod. 27:15.3; Jer. 2:5.11). Moreover, *BHL* incorporates dozens more corrections to the manuscript's pointing (usually involving *dagesh* or *mappik*) that avoid confusing the reader with stray, missing, or excess characters. For its part, only *Etz Hayim* includes corrections in the Torah's consonantal spelling ("orthography"). Overall, *BHL* is a slightly more accurate representative of Tiberian pointing, while *Etz Hayim* is slightly truer in terms of orthography. (I believe that the ideal presentation of a Ben Asher text would incorporate both Prof. Dotan's corrections to pointing *and* corrections to orthography according to similar masoretic criteria.)

The books' editors differed somewhat in their criteria for regarding anomalies as scribal errors. The *Etz Hayim humash* is expressly *not* for use as an authoritative text for ritual reading. Its editors attempted to identify and fix only the scribal, transcription, and typographical errors that could seriously mislead readers. For in production, a bilingual edition (being more typographically complex) displays relatively greater instability whenever corrections are made. We also differed with Dotan regarding which errors were worth correcting. Given our deadline, beyond a certain point it was

not worth the time and expense involved to keep tinkering, especially when each desired "correction" bore the risk of creating new errors that might escape notice.

In short, both approaches to textual "correction" were sound; each fit its book's editorial goals and constraints well. And thus the resulting text is not identical.

My summary evaluation of *BHL*: It features clear, readable type. It seems reliable, having been edited using a defensible methodology and produced via careful typography. It serves well as a reference for those who want recourse to the Hebrew Bible for study purposes. Its usefulness in worship by English-speaking Jewry is limited by the absence of translation or commentary. Hence its greatest significance may lie in the added momentum it gives to correcting "received" versions in favor of the "original" Tiberian masoretic text. Jews who care about the fine points of the biblical text—and wish to see where it is headed—should look to *BHL*.

David E. S. Stein, a Reconstructionist rabbi, served as managing editor for the *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh* (1999) and as project manager for production of *Etz Hayim* (2001). His most recent publication is *Ketubah Kit for Rabbis: A Reconstructionist Approach* (eBookShuk.com; 2003).