

The Identity of the First Masoretes

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Only a few studies have been written concerning the evolution of the Masorah.¹ Elijah ha-Levi Ashkenazi (Bahur) (1468-1529) wrote in the third introduction to his book *Masoret ha-Masoret*: “There were hundreds and thousands of Masoretes, generation after generation, for many years, and we do not know when they began and when they ended.”² He surmises that the Masoretes lived after the Talmudic period. According to Israel Yeivin, “The Masorah had its beginnings in the halakhot of the writing of the Torah scroll... The early ones who engaged in the Masorah were most likely the scribes in the early Second Temple period.”³ He observes that “the activity of the Masoretes began after the Talmudic period, and continued until the beginning of the time of the grammarians, that is, ca. 550-950 CE.”⁴ Both apparently refer to the written work of the Masoretes.

Aron Dotan, however, writes: “The activity of the Masoretes begins in an earlier period, and accompanied the process of the transmission of the text, from

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¹ Determining the identity of the early Masoretes is an extremely suitable topic with which to honor my teacher, Prof. Aron Dotan, the acknowledged authority of the Masorah. This article was written following my lecture “On the Identity of the First Masoretes” delivered at the 16th Congress of the International Organization for Masoretic Studies (Cambridge, July 20, 2003). The present article is an expansion of my article “On the Role of the Priests and Levites in the Teaching and Reading of the Biblical Text” (Hebrew), *Beit Mikra* 180 (2004), 20-31.

² R. Elijah ha-Levi ASHKENAZI (BAHUR), *Masoret ha-Masoret*, ed. Christian D. Ginsburg (New York 1867), third introduction, p. 137. See also M. Z. SEGAL, “On the History of the Transmission of Scripture” (Hebrew), in *Minhah le-David... Presented to Dr. David Yellin* (Jerusalem 1935), 1-22: “The scholars did not give us in their studies a clear picture of the historical evolution of the formulation of the form of our version, because this development was not clear to them, as well” (p. 1).

³ “Masorah” (Hebrew) *Enziklopedyah Mikra’it [Encyclopaedia Biblica]*, vol. 5 [Jerusalem 1968], cols. 150-152.

⁴ Israel YEIVIN, *The Biblical Masorah* (Hebrew, Jerusalem 2003), p. 15.

its very beginning. This accompaniment was initially oral, and some time later, beginning in the sixth or seventh century CE, it was committed to writing in various forms: marks, abbreviations, and acronyms.”⁵

And, similarly, David Lyons, without specifying a defined time or the identity of those involved in this activity: “Some of the instructions (for preventing the interchange or corruption of the written word... and for the precise reading and [proper] accentuation of the verses of Scripture) were apparently already established in an early period, before the institution of the graphic symbols marking the vocalization and notes.”⁶ We shall follow Dotan, whose assertion that “the transmission of the Bible is as old as the Bible itself”⁷ provides the key to any inquiry related to the initial formulation of the Masorah.

The first Masoretes have still not been identified.⁸ I must admit that I, too, did not find direct and unequivocal testimony concerning the identity of these early Masoretes. If such testimony existed, we could logically expect it to be well-known. After, however, our disappointment at the lack of findings, we should employ deduction in our search for an answer to our question.

By “first Masoretes” we refer to the first to engage orally, and afterwards in writing, in the preservation of the version of the Torah from the time of its giving/writing, and not to the redactors of the Masorah lists in the manuscripts of the Bible or in independent lists.

A study of Rashi’s commentary on a passage from the Song of Songs indicates a group of individuals who, for the first time, were engaged in the preservation of the Biblical text. We read in *Song of Songs* 3:7-8: “There is Solomon’s couch, encircled by sixty warriors of the warriors of Israel, all of them trained in warfare, skilled in battle, each with sword on thigh because of terror by night.” According to the simple meaning of the passage, the verses portray King Solomon’s wedding bed, accompanied by sixty royal bodyguards. Rashi’s commentary on the *Song of Songs* is clearly homiletical in nature. He sees in every

⁵ Aron DOTAN, “From the Masorah to Grammar: the First Blossoms on Hebrew Grammatical Thought” (Hebrew), *Leshonenu* 54 (1990), 155-168, p. 156.

⁶ David LYONS, *The Cumulative Masora: Text, Form and Transmission* (Hebrew, Beersheva 2000), p. 3. See also Saul LIEBERMAN, “The Texts of Scripture in the Early Rabbinic Period,” *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York 1962), p. 20: “The Bible contained words written in the text which were not read, emendations by the Soferim [...], dots on certain letters and special signs. Most of these sources date from the second century C. E., but the tradition itself is, no doubt, of much earlier origin.”

⁷ “Masorah,” *Enc. Judaica*, vol. 16 (Jerusalem 1971), cols. 1401-1482, esp. col. 1404.

⁸ According to Yeivin, “the description of the development of the Masorah is built mainly on a few allusions and numerous conjunctures” (“Masorah,” col. 150).

verse a symbolic allusion to a historical event connected with the fate of the Jewish people; King Solomon is the Holy One, blessed be He, and His covenant with *Knesset Israel* (the Israelite nation) is compared to the marital pact, that is expressed in the Tabernacle and Temple service. In this spirit, he interprets:

“Solomon’s couch” – the Tent of Meeting and the Ark that were borne in the wilderness. “Encircled by sixty warriors” – encircled by [the] sixty myriads [of Israel]. “Of the warriors of Israel” – only from those able to bear arms, excluding those below the age of twenty and those above the age of sixty. “Skilled in battle” – the war of the Torah; and similarly the priests, who encircle it, who are encamped around the Tabernacle, are skilled in the order of their service. “Each with sword” – his weapons are the Masorah and the marks (i.e., the Masorah notes), by which they preserve the [correct] version, so that the oral tradition shall not be forgotten.⁹

Rashi bases his commentary on *Midrash Rabbah on Song of Songs*,¹⁰ that offers four different exegeses concerning the identity of the *giborim* – “warriors” and different understandings of the *herev* – “sword.” Rashi incorporates elements from all four expositions in his commentary: But at the end of his commentary Rashi offers his own independent interpretation, which we have not found in any midrashim or other source, the weaponry of the priests, that is, the tools of their trade: “the Masorah and the marks, by which they preserve the o[correct] version, so that the oral tradition shall not be forgotten.” While our understanding of the primary role of the priests arouses immediate associations with the sacrifices during the time of the Tabernacle and the Temple, and with the Priestly Blessing, Rashi teaches us something new in his commentary, that is of a historical nature: the labor of the Masorah is to be ascribed to the priests.¹¹ Rashi alludes in his commentary to the written means of the Masorah: “*Masoret ve-simanim*” that are almost certainly the various Masorah notes that Rashi saw in the books that were before him, and to which he refers in his commentaries.¹²

⁹ Following Jehuda ROSENTHAL, “Rashi’s Commentary on the Song of Songs (from MSS edited and annotated)” (Hebrew), in Sh. Bernstein and G. A. Churgin (eds.), *Samuel K. Mirsky Jubilee Volume* (New York 1958), pp. 133-188.

¹⁰ *Cant. Rabbah* 3:11-14 (ed. Sh. Dunsky, Jerusalem 1980), pp. 90-92.

¹¹ Rashi might have ascribed the activity of Masorettes to the priests, based on the historical reality known to him, but even if this statement was made for a different purpose, this should not detract from their historical veracity.

¹² See Lea HIMMELFARB, “On One Masora in Rashi’s Biblical Commentary,” *Sef* 64 (2004), 75-94; EAD., “On Rashi’s Use of the Masorah Notes in His Commentary” (Hebrew), *Shnaton: An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near East Studies* 15 (2005), 167-184; EAD., “Masorah Notes as a Tool for the Corroboration of the Biblical Text in Rashi’s Commentary on the Bible” (Hebrew), Sh. Vargon, A. Frisch, M. Rachini (Eds.) *Studies in Bible and Exegesis Presented to Elazar Touitou*, Vol VIII, (Ramat-Gan 2007), 231-246.

The general picture that we gather from his commentary is one of great appreciation for the role of the priests, “by which they preserve the correct version, so that the oral tradition shall not be forgotten.”¹³

An understanding similar to that of Rashi was mentioned in another context by Ephraim Urbach,¹⁴ without proofs, and was not used over the course of time: “It seems that the proofreaders of these books [i.e., the proofreaders of the Temple Chamber scrolls] in Jerusalem were scribes and priests. [...] All the extant testimonies prove that there was a class of scribes who copied Scripture and preserved its Masorah, the teachers and exegetes of the Torah. We have already found hints that the first scribes were connected with the Temple, and most likely were priests.”¹⁵

Following Rashi and Urbach, we propose that the priests could be considered the first Masorettes, whose initial activity was oral. We shall bring proofs from the historical reality in the period between the time the Pentateuch was received and the early Second Temple period, that the priesthood enjoyed a central, and exclusive, standing as regards the teaching, writing, and public reading of the Torah. We may therefore assume, with a high degree of confidence, that the priests were the ones who preserved the sacred text of the Torah and its exact language from the time that it was received.¹⁶

It should be noted that a study of the verses of the Bible raises questions connected with the distinction between the standing and role of the priests, on the one hand, and those of the other Levites, on the other, questions that Biblical scholarly research has difficulty in answering. This issue is not cardinal

¹³ Ashkenazi refers to Rashi in his third introduction to *Masoret ha-Masoret* (above, n. 2): “...*Song of Songs* III. 8 to refer to ‘the Massorah, and to the signs designed to preserve the low being forgotten in the captivity’” (p. 137), without mentioning the latter by name (he is cited only by Ginsburg, n. 110), and without referring to the priests. He might possibly have disregarded the latter because the version he possessed differed from ours; or, possibly, he merely wished to stress the nature of the Masorah as a bulwark against corruptions; or perhaps he did not see any connection between the priests and the Masorete activity.

¹⁴ Ephraim E. URBACH, “The Derasha as a Basis of the Halakha and the Problem of the Soferim” (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 27 (1958), 166-182.

¹⁵ URBACH, “The Derasha as a Basis of the Halakha,” pp. 173-174.

¹⁶ SEGAL, “On the History of the Transmission of Scripture,” views Ezra as the forefather of the scribes. He writes, concerning the scribes who succeeded Ezra: “These scribes were men of the book [...] they were also the teachers and the instructors of small children. They engaged in the labor of writing the Torah [...] they were not simply copyists in a mechanical sense [...], but were the ones who redacted the version that they copied, which they corrected and proofread [...] and they taught the Torah to the pupils and to the whole people,” and “their activity [...] was not limited to the Torah, and extended to the other books of the Bible, as well” (p. 3).

to our discussion, and so we have not drawn any distinction between these two groups.¹⁷

1. THE LOCATION OF THE TORAH SCROLLS

We learn from a few verses that the Torah scrolls were mainly kept by the priests, who were entrusted with their preservation. *Deuteronomy* 31:9 relates: “Moses wrote down the Torah and gave it to the priests, sons of Levi, who carried the Ark of the Lord’s Covenant, and to all the elders of Israel.” Although one view understands the word “Torah” in this verse in a minimalist manner, that is, as restricted to the Book of Deuteronomy,¹⁸ the verses in the end of the passage unquestionably refer to the Torah in its entirety: “When Moses had put down in writing the words of this Torah to the very end, Moses charged the Levites who carried the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord, saying: Take this book of Torah and place it beside the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord your God, and let it remain there as a witness against you” (vv. 24-26).¹⁹ This teaches that Moses gave the scroll of the Torah to the priests for safekeeping. As Nahmanides observes: “from then on they would not touch it at all, to add [to it] or to detract [from it]” (*Deut* 31:9).

The picture that emerges from the sources is that the Torah scroll is entrusted to the custody of the priests, next to the Ark, and the other scrolls would be proofread, or corrected, in accordance with this “master copy.” Thus, for example, in *M Mo‘ed Katan* (3:4): “[...] during mid-Festival, or correct a single letter even in the *Ezra* scroll.”²⁰ The commentary attributed to Rashi indicates that the intent is to the Torah scroll of Ezra the Scribe, or to the scroll of the Temple Court, that is, to “the corrected scroll that was in the Temple Court, by which all the scrolls of the Diaspora were corrected.”²¹ We are familiar with

¹⁷ See e.g., Jacob LICHT, “Levi, Levites” (Hebrew) *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, vol. 4, cols. 460 ff.

¹⁸ Thus, e.g., according to Sforno (*Deut.* 31:9), the intent is to “the passage of the king, the public reading of which was now commanded at the *Hakhel* assembly”; Rashi (*Deut.* 31:11) greatly expands this purview: “From the beginning of ‘These are the words’ [*Deut.* 1:1]”; while Nahmanides (*Deut.* 31:9) goes even further, and prescribes: “From the beginning of ‘In the beginning’ [*Gen.* 1:1] to ‘in the presence of all Israel’ [31:10].”

¹⁹ For the disagreement concerning the writing of the last eight verses of Deuteronomy, see BT *Bava Batra* 14b; Abraham J. HESCHEL, *Theology of Ancient Judaism* (Hebrew, London and New York 1965), vol. 2, pp. 381-393.

²⁰ For the textual variants, see Y. S. SPIEGEL, *Chapters in the History of the Jewish Book: Scholars and Their Annotations* (Hebrew, Ramat Gan 1996), p. 25 n. 2.

²¹ For the commentary of Rashi, see SPIEGEL, *Chapters in The History of the Jewish Book*, p. 26 nn. 5-6, 8.

the *baraita* in the Palestinian Talmud, *Ta'anit* (3:2) regarding the “three scrolls found in the Temple Court, the scroll [in which] *me'oni* [was written, instead of *me'onah* - *Deut.* 33:27], the scroll [in which] *za'atutei* [was written], and the scroll in which *hi* [is written with the letter *yod* instead of the usual *vav*]”²² that indicates the need, at times, to decide, even between the exemplary copies in the Temple Court, that contained textual differences.

According to the midrash: “R. Banai taught in the name of R. Huna that Moses wrote thirteen Torah Scrolls: twelve for the Twelve Tribes and one for the Tribe of Levi. Thus, if any one of the tribes were considering the excision of even a single word from the Torah, the Tribe of Levi would bring forth its Torah Scroll and thereby maintain the correctness of the text.”²³

In the time of Josiah the High Priest Hilkiah found a Torah scroll in the Temple: “Then the high priest Hilkiah said to the scribe Shaphan, ‘I have found a scroll of the Teaching in the House of the Lord.’ And Hilkiah gave the scroll to Shaphan who read it” (*II Kings* 22:8 ff.; *II Chron.* 34:14 ff.).

Aaron Ben-Asher, as well, seemingly attributes all the details of the accepted version of the Torah to the scroll that was in the Temple and was considered to be the exemplar by which all other scrolls would be corrected. In *Dikdukei ha-Te'amim*, chap. 2 (that Dotan views as “a sort of general introduction to the realm of the Masorah”),²⁴ Ben-Asher provides a list of ancient Masorah terms: “The vocalization [that also includes accentuation marks], the dependent letters [such as the *nun* of *Menasheh* - *Jud.* 18:30], the small, the large, and the deep [the final letters *khaf*, *nun*, *peh*, and *tzaddik*], the external dots [the notes re-

²² *Sifrei* on *Deut.* 35:27 (ed. Finkelstein, p. 423). For the textual differences between the four sources containing the description, see Shemariahu TALMON, “The Three Scrolls of the Law That Were Found in the Temple Court” (Hebrew), in J. M. Grintz and J. Liver (eds.), *Studies in the Bible Presented to Professor M. H. Segal* (Jerusalem 1964), pp. 252-264. See also Menahem HARAN, “Torah and Bible Scrolls in the First Centuries of the Christian Era” (Hebrew), *Shnaton: An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near East Studies* 10 (1990), 93-106, esp. pp. 96-97. For the proofreading of the Torah scroll in the Temple Court, see SPIEGEL, *Chapters in the History of the Jewish Book*, pp. 25-27.

²³ *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 2, Vezot Haberakhah* (trans. W. G. Braude and I. J. Kapstein: *Pesikta de-Rab Kahana* [Philadelphia 1975], Supp. 1:8, p. 450); and with changes, *Midrash Tehillim* (= *Shoher Tov*) 90:3 (ed. Buber, p. 386; see n. 11); *Deut. Rabbah* 9:9 (interpreted by M. Mirkin [Tel Aviv 1975], p. 137). For the depositing of an inspected copy in the Temple, a library, or archives, as proof of the original version, see Saul LIEBERMAN, “The Publication of the *Mishnah*,” *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine*, p. 85; Id., “The Publication of the Torah,” pp. 200-201. See also J. KALLIRS, “Torah Scrolls Written by Moses” (Hebrew), *Ha-Ma'ayan* 37 (1997), 48-56.

²⁴ Aron DOTAN, *The Dikdukei ha-Te'amim of Aharon ben Mose ben Asher with a Critical Edition* (Hebrew, Jerusalem 1967), p. 170.

corded beyond the text], the *setumim* and *petuhim*, what is written and not read, what is read and not written, and separating letters [...],” and concludes: “they [that is, “the entire writing and pronunciation” - referring to the consonantal text and its traditional pronunciation] return to this method in the place of the Holy of Holies,”²⁵ which Dotan interprets: “all the matters mentioned here [...] return to that same method that already was in practice during the time of the Temple. [...] The intent is apparently to the [Torah] scroll of the Temple Court.”²⁶ Of relevance to our discussion is the indication by Aaron Ben-Asher that the Torah scroll in the Temple Court contained the Masorah, in addition to providing a reliable text.

We may therefore conclude, with a great degree of confidence, that the activity of the priests in the Temple Court also included the correction of scrolls.

Additional support for our hypothesis that the priests were the first Masoretes is related to the role of these priests.

2. THE PRIESTS ROLES

2.1. *The Priests as Teachers of the Bible*

One of the priestly functions was to teach Torah to the Israelites, as Leviticus specifies: “And you must teach the Israelites all the laws which the Lord has imparted to them through Moses” (*Lev.* 10:11).²⁷ In Moses’ blessing to the Israelites, he mentions their teaching role before the offering of sacrifices: “They shall teach Your laws to Jacob, and Your instructions to Israel. They shall offer You incense to savor, and whole-offerings on Your altar” (*Deut.* 33:10). We

²⁵ DOTAN, *The Diqduqei ha-Te’amim*, p. 110.

²⁶ DOTAN, *The Diqduqei ha-Te’amim*, p. 169. Significantly, Dotan indicates that most of *Kuntrese Masorah* (the collections of Masorah notes) presented by this chapter of *Dikduqei ha-Te’amim* draw a parallel between the Bible and the Masorah, on the one hand, and two parts of the Tabernacle, on the other: along with the place of the “Holy of Holies,” that symbolizes the text and its pronunciation, mention is also made of the “Tent of Meeting Court,” that corresponds to the Masorah. Despite our lack of proofs for the dependence of Rashi’s interpretation on the version of the *Kuntrese Masorah*, the very Tabernacle-Masorah parallelism in various sources is of great interest.

²⁷ “It has been suggested that *Torah* comes from the verb *yarah*, meaning ‘to throw,’ and occasionally ‘to cast lots’ (*Jos.* 18:6); consequently, this role of the priest has been linked with his role as a man who gives oracles” (R. DE VAUX, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* [London 1965], p. 354).

also find that the priest did in fact fulfill this educational function, as in *Malachi* (2:6-7): “Proper rulings were in his mouth [...] and he held the many back from iniquity. For the lips of a priest guard knowledge, and men seek rulings from his mouth”; and similarly: “[...] without a priest to give instruction and without Torah” (II *Chron.* 15:3).

Some of the priests’ instructions to the people were a byproduct of their occupation with the rite. Thus, for example, the Torah would be learned when the priests instructed the people on matters concerning purity and the causes of impurity, as: “In cases of a skin affliction be most careful to do exactly as the levitical priests instruct you. Take care to do as I have commanded them” (*Deut.* 24:8); the prophet Ezekiel proclaims (44:23): “They shall declare to My people what is sacred and what is mundane; and inform them what is clean and what is unclean.” The realm of priestly instruction, however, was broader, and encompassed the comprehensive teaching of the Torah. Thus, for example, in the kingdom of Judah, Jehoshaphat sends his officers with the priests and the Levites to teach Torah to the masses, as II *Chronicles* (17:7-9) attests: “They offered instruction throughout Judah, having with them the Book of the Torah of the Lord. They made the rounds of all the cities of the Lord and instructed the people.” Hezekiah commanded “the inhabitants of Jerusalem to deliver the portions of the priests and the Levites, so that they might devote themselves to the Torah of the Lord” (II *Chron.* 31:4), that is, to set aside for the priests and the Levites their due, so that they could devote themselves to the study and dissemination of the Torah. We further read that “one of the priests whom they had exiled from Samaria” (II *Kings* 17:28) was sent from the territory of the kingdom of Israel to the peoples that had been settled there, and he “taught them how to worship the Lord.” After the Return to Zion, as well, the priests continue to fill this teaching role; see, for instance, the prophecy by Haggai: “Thus said the Lord of Hosts: Seek a ruling from the priests, as follows [...]” (2:11).

We learn from several of the reproaches delivered by the prophets that the priests did not fulfill their duty to teach the people Torah. Thus, for example, in *Ezekiel*: “instruction shall perish from the priest” (7:26); and in *Zephaniah*: “Her priests profane what is holy, they give perverse rulings” (3:4).

The priests who taught the Torah to the members of their generation instructed their pupils how to properly read the written text. These instructions, however, were not committed to writing, and in the first stage they were orally transmitted from one generation to the next. We may assume that the priests took care to preserve the text of Scripture within the context of their teaching role.

Obviously, the teacher of the Bible must be familiar with its exact text, and he must preserve this version. Although conclusions are not to be drawn from the Aggadah, the narrative in *Bava Batra* 21b that Joab assumed that his teacher instructed him “you shall blot out the males [*zakhar*] from Amalek” instead of “[...] the memory [*zekher*] of Amalek” (*Deut.* 25:19), as he consequently “killed every male in Edom” (*I Kings* 11:15), attests to the importance of a command of the Biblical text by those teaching Scripture, and their transmission of the correct reading tradition of each word.

2.2. *The Priests as Scribes*

The role of teacher was combined with that of scribe, and these two professions were often embodied in a single individual. Thus, for instance, *Tosefta Megillah* 3:8: “[...] and the scribe teaches as is customary”;²⁸ and in *Tosefta Sukkah* 2:6: “This is comparable to a scribe who entered the schoolhouse.”²⁹

No proofs are required for the close connection between teaching and the occupation of writing. In antiquity the entire latter realm, and especially the occupation of the scribe, were given over to the priests and the Levites, as is indicated by the verse relating to Josiah’s appointment of scribes from among the Levites: “some of the Levites were scribes” (*II Chron.* 34:13). We may assume that the priests copied the Bible in order to teach.

We learn from the Torah that the priest is obligated to write the parchment of the *sotah* (the wife accused of infidelity): “The priest shall put these curses down in a book” (*Num.* 5:23). The priests had to preserve the text of Scripture, since they were required to dictate the Torah for the king’s personal scroll, as set forth in *Deut.* 17:18: “And it shall be, when he sits upon the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this Torah in a book out of [that which is] before the priests the Levites.” This verse is interpreted by *Sifrei*: “‘Before the priests the Levites’ – that it shall be corrected before the priests the Levites.”³⁰

²⁸ *T Megillah* 3:38 (ed. Lieberman, p. 363).

²⁹ *T Sukkah* 2:6 (ed. Lieberman, p. 263). For the teacher of small children (*melamed*) who wrote out the book of Leviticus, and from whom R. Akiva and his son learned, see *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan*, Version A, chap. 6 (ed. Schechter, p. 15). Dotan wrote about the title “*melamed*,” in another context: “It seems that the first to engage in grammar and Masorah were *melamdim*, who earned their livelihood from teaching Scripture and writing to small children” (Aron DOTAN, “Was Ben-Asher a Karaite?” (Hebrew), *Sinai* 41 [1957], 280-312 and 350-362, esp. pp. 283-284).

³⁰ *Sifrei* on *Deut.* 160:18 (ed. Finkelstein, p. 211); cf. PT *Sanhedrin* 2:6, 20c. See also SPIEGEL, *Chapters in the History of the Jewish Book*, p. 26 n. 7.

The historical reality teaches that most of the late Second Temple period scribes whose lineage is known were priests, or even High Priests. The first of these known to us was the priest Ezra the Scribe, who was “a scribe expert in the Torah of Moses” (*Ezra* 7:6), and who is mentioned by Scripture a total of five times with the description: “Ezra the priest, the scribe.”³¹

We also know of priest-scribes, such as Joseph (*Tosefta Shabbat* 13:1), Johanan (PT *Ma'aser Sheni* 5:4, 56[c]), the house of Kadros (*Tosefta Menahot* 13:19), and others. The apocryphal literature teaches of the writing of scrolls by the High Priests Joakim (*Judith* 4:6) and Eleazar (*Letter of Aristeas* 41). Additional support for this picture is provided by the archaeological finds, such as the personal seal of Jonathan the High Priest (= King Yannai).³²

All this evidence gives the impression of a high percentage of priests among the scribes.³³ The mutual relationship between the role of the priest and that of the scribe ensued from the general connection between the priests and the Torah.

Dotan already noted the development of the role of the *sofer* from the *kotvanim* (professional writers) and *lavlarim* (copyists), and as related to the act of counting (*sefirah*), by the preservation of the text, as explained in the BT:

³¹ See the paean by Ashkenazi: “Ezra then went, who is the messenger, like munustering angel; the priest, the prince, and the father of scribes, the nursing mother of the Scripture and Massorah... He applied wisdom to understand the Scripture, in its present superior characters. He cut off thorns from every word; he restored the crown to its pristine splendour” (*Masoret ha-Masoret*, p. 88). For Ezra’s occupation in the writing and copying of the Torah, see, e.g., *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan*, Version A, chap. 34 (ed. Schechter, p. 51). As Haim Gevaryahu writes (“Baruch Ben Neriah the Scribe,” (Hebrew), in *The Practice of Bible Scribes* [ed. G. J. J. Gevaryahu; Jerusalem 2000], pp. 69-121): “We have explicit testimony [...] that Ezra the Scribe possessed the scroll of the Teaching of God, apparently among his private collection of books. *The Book of Maccabees* mentions that in the Jews’ houses [...] were Torah scrolls of their own” (p. 116).

³² See the survey by Meir BAR-ILAN, *Scribes and Books in the Second Temple Period and in the Time of the Mishnah and Talmud* (Hebrew, for internal use; Bar-Ilan University 1991), p. 2.

³³ See J. LIVER, *Chapters in the History of the Priests and Levites: Studies in the Lists of Chronicles and Ezra and Nehemiah* (Hebrew, Jerusalem 1969), p. 24: “In the First Temple period [...] some [...] of the Levites undoubtedly served as the Temple scribes, while the others [...] functioned mainly as the teachers of the Torah to the people.” Cf. A. BUCHLER, *Die Priester und der Cultus im letzten Jahrzehnt des jerusalemischen Tempels* (Wien 1895), rendered from the Hebrew translation *Ha-Kohanim ve-Avodatam* (Jerusalem 1966), p. 90: “Already in 200 BCE [...] they [the Levites] served in the Temple only as poets, and possibly also scribes.” Aaron DEMSKY, *Literacy in Israel and among neighboring peoples in the biblical period*, (Ph. D. diss. Hebrew University, Jerusalem 1976), p. 32 n. 42, observes that the Levites settled in cities with an ancient writing tradition, “where it is not inconceivable that the Levites encountered the heirs of the Canaanite culture of scribes.”

“Consequently, the first ones ³⁴ were called *soferim*, because they would count [*soferim*] all the letters of the Torah” (BT *Kiddushin* 30a). ³⁵ We added the identification of the scribes as priests.

2.3. The Priests as Readers of the Torah

The priestly reading of the Torah is known from the Temple rite: thus, for example, the reading by the High Priest on Yom Kippur (*Mishnah Yoma* 7:1), and his reading at the end of the Sabbatical year. ³⁶

The Book of Nehemiah describes three public readings of the Torah by Ezra the priest: the first time, Ezra is asked to bring “the scroll of the Torah of Moses,” possibly because the Torah scroll in the Temple was entrusted to his care. “Ezra the priest brought the Torah before the congregation [...] he read from it [...] the ears of all the people were given to the scroll of the Torah” (*Neh.* 8:2-3). The Levites join in this reading and explain the Torah to the people: “They read from the scroll of the Torah of God, translating it and giving the sense; so they understood the reading” (v. 8). ³⁷ The following day, “the heads of the clans of all the people and the priests and the Levites gathered to Ezra the scribe to study the

³⁴ For the descriptive “the first ones [*rishonim*],” see URBACH, “The Derasha as a Basis of the Halakha,” p. 172 n. 20.

³⁵ DEMSKY, *Literacy in Israel*, as well, relies on the Talmudic source in *Kiddushin* to define the term “*sofer*,” but he asserts that it reflects the role of counter and calculator, as “a recorder of quantities for the Temple administration or the government” (p. 191 n. 12). According to ANSON RAINEY, s.v. “*Sofer*” (Hebrew), *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, vol. 5, cols. 1010-1017, “the connection between the Kenites [who included families of scribes who settled in Jabez (I *Chron.* 2:55)] and the father-in-law of Moses [...] possibly alludes that the art of writing was generally connected with the priestly duties [...] the mutual relationship between the cultic tasks and those of the scribe ensued, on the one hand, from the priests’ general relationship with the Torah, and, on the other, from the need for administrative and fiscal organization to ensure the functioning of the Temple” (col. 1014).

³⁶ Thus, e.g., JOSEPHUS, *Ant.* 4:8:12; in the Hebrew translation of A. Shalit (Jerusalem 1963, p. 129 and n. 119; and according to other testimonies, the reading was by the king himself, who received the Torah scroll from the High Priest: thus, e.g., M *Sotah* 7:8. For the reading procedure, see BUCHLER, *Die Priester und der Cultus*, pp. 11 ff. in the Hebrew translation; Saul LIEBERMAN, *Tosefta ki-Fshutah*, vol. 8, *Sotah* (New York 1973), p. 683.

³⁷ Based on the Rabbinic exegesis of this verse: “‘They read from the scroll of the Teaching of God’ [*Neh.* 8:8] - this is [the text of] Scripture; ‘translating it’ - this is the *Targum*; ‘and giving the sense’ - this is the sentence stops; ‘so they understood the reading’ - this indicates the accentuation” (BT *Megillah* 3a; see the parallel in DOTAN, “Masorah,” cols. 1400-11, 1479), the Masorah, the vocalization, and the notes were ascribed to Ezra the Scribe. See e.g. ASHKENAZI, *Masoret ha-Masoret*, pp. 103 ff.

words of the Torah” (v. 13), and the third time, “He read from the scroll of the Torah of God each day” on the Festival of Sukkot (v. 18). This reading was part of the priestly and levitical duty to teach the people, and as long as the priests led the people, they naturally were the ones who read the Torah.³⁸

Meir Bar-Ilan³⁹ maintains that in ancient times, when the Torah was still the exclusive preserve of the priests, they were the only individuals authorized to (and capable of) reading the Torah,⁴⁰ and members of the other strata in society did not engage in public reading. The changed socio-religious reality led to Torah reading entering lower strata of Israelite society.

Accordingly, the seven called up for the reading of the Torah were seven priests, each of whom read three verses. In light of the new socio-religious reality, the reading was transferred to the lower strata, to the extent that the Rabbis declared: “All are included in the count of seven.”⁴¹ The Rabbis’ inclusion of “all” implies that this was not so in the early Halakhah, rather, only a part of the public was fit for the reading of the Torah and for inclusion in those called up.⁴²

3. THE PRIESTS AND *TA ‘AMEI HA-MIKRA* (THE ACCENTUATION SIGNS)

The linkage between the priests and Levites, on the one hand, and, on the other, the music in general needs no further elaboration. See for example: “The priests took their positions as did the Levites with the Lord’s musical instruments ... the priests blew their trumpets...” (II *Chron.*7:6). We may therefore

³⁸ Ismar ELBOGEN, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History* (transl. R. P. Scheindlin; Philadelphia and Jerusalem 1993), p. 130, maintains that: “There can be no doubt that Ezra’s reading is what led to the introduction of the Torah reading.” The reading of the Torah is a rabbinic enactment attributed to Ezra.

³⁹ Meir BAR-ILAN, *Polemics between Sages and Priests towards the End of the Days of the Second Temple* (Hebrew, Ph.D. diss., Bar-Ilan University 1982), pp. 76 ff.

⁴⁰ Bar-Ilan surmises that “in the late second century CE, when the Oral Law blossomed in full force, approximately 15 percent of the population was literate” (*Scribes and Books*, p. 18). For the localities in which only a single individual was capable of reading from the Torah, see, e.g.: “In a synagogue in which only a single person is capable of reading, he stands, reads, and sits; stands, reads, and sits; stands, reads, and sits, even seven times” (T *Megillah* 3:12 [ed. Lieberman, p. 356]).

⁴¹ T *Megillah* 3:11 (ed. Lieberman, p. 356).

⁴² Thus, for example, in an earlier period only the priests would read the Book of Esther, but as time passed, members of the lower strata emulated the priests, and also read Esther, until the Rabbis finally sanctioned this new socio-religious reality by ruling that “All are fit to read the *Megillah* [= the Book of Esther]” (M *Megillah* 2:4).

assume that they were also involved with the musical aspect of the accentuation system that forms part of the Masorah.⁴³

Significantly Aaron Ben-Asher concludes the first chapter of *Diqduqei ha-Te'amim* by stating: "This is the general rule of the accentuation marks and the conjunctive marks [...] from [*mi-pi*] scribes and sages."⁴⁴ According to Dotan, Ben-Asher teaches that "contrary to the view of the Karaites, the accentuation marks were transmitted by the Masorah," as he focuses on the wording "*mi-pi*."⁴⁵ Of greater interest for us is the word "scribes," that alludes to the group of people who were engaged in the transmission of the tradition of the accentuation marks. After our having indicated the priestly activity as scribes, we cannot reasonably dismiss their added involvement in the realm of accentuation marks.⁴⁶

⁴³ There might also be an association between the deliverance of the Priestly Blessing by the priests and melodies that accompany hand movements, a practice for which there are testimonies from the Mishnah and Talmud: "Why should one wipe [after evacuation] with the left hand, and not with the right? [The reason for this law] is similarly the subject of a disagreement among Tannaim: [...] R. Akiva says: Because a person points with it to the [accentuation] marks [during the reading] of the Torah" (BT *Berakhot* 62a). This musical accompaniment was also practiced in the Land of Israel during the time of Rashi (eleventh century), as he confirms in his commentary on this passage in the Talmud: "'The marks of the Torah' - the melodies [designated by] the accentuation marks of the Torah, Prophets, and Hagiographa, whether referring to the vocalization of the scroll, or to the raising of one's voice and sounding of the *pashta*, *darga*, and *shofer mehapekh* notes, he moves his hand in accordance with the note, as I have seen among [Torah] readers who come from the Land of Israel."

⁴⁴ DOTAN, *The Diqduqei ha-Te'amim*, p. 106.

⁴⁵ In opposition to the view of the Karaites (that the notes were given to Moses at Sinai), see DOTAN, "Was Ben-Asher a Karaite?," pp. 306-309.

⁴⁶ This survey would not be complete without the well-known dictum that begins the tractate of Avot and that describes the continuity of the chain of transmission of the Torah, both the written Torah and the oral Law: "Moses received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the Elders, the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets transmitted it to the Men of the Great Assembly." The absence of the priests from this dictum is striking, in comparison with what is related in the Bible itself, concerning their role in the teaching, writing, and public reading of the Torah. The opening mishnah in Avot is difficult, not only for what it omits, but also for what it contains, since the Bible contains no portrayal of the prophets as teachers to the people of the Torah. According to Moshe D. HERR, "Continuum in the Chain of Torah Transmission" (Hebrew), in S. Ettinger *et al.* (eds.), *Yitzhak F. Baer Memorial Volume [= Zion 44]* (1979), 43-56, esp. pp. 44-50; see also Louis FINKELSTEIN, *Introduction to the Treatises Abot and Abot of Rabbi Nathan* (Hebrew, New York 1950), p. 10. The omission of the priests from the list of the chain of transmission might be intentional, since the Hasmonean High Priests were Sadducees. The break between the Hasmoneans and the Pharisees occurred close to the end of Johanan Hyrcanus' reign, or in the beginning of Alexander Yannai's time. In the late second century BCE, except for the short period of Salome Alexandra and Hyrcanus II, there was a high degree of identity between the High Priesthood and the Sadducees, and the total degeneration of the High Priesthood beginning in the time of Herod further fuelled the negative attitude toward the priests. Consequently, the Prophets were introduced in order to fill this gap in the chain of transmission.

In conclusion, we brought support for our hypothesis that the priests who were the ones who preserved the sacred Biblical text and its exact language from the time that it was received should properly be regarded as the original Masoretes.

RESUMEN

Este artículo estudia la identidad de los primeros masoretas. Partiendo de la afirmación de Dotan, según la cual «la transmisión de la Biblia es tan antigua como la misma Biblia», la autora propone que los sacerdotes dedicados a la preservación del texto bíblico desde el mismo momento de su recepción deben ser considerados como los masoretas originales, que desarrollaron primero una transmisión oral y luego escrita de su actividad. El comentario de Raší al Cantar y una aseveración de Urbach proporcionan la primera pista acerca de la relación entre sacerdotes y la Masora. Se añaden pruebas que muestran la realidad histórica de dicha conexión, que se expresa en varios niveles: proximidad de las copias del texto bíblico más precisas al Arca de la Alianza (dentro del Templo), facilitando así el acceso a los rollos de los sacerdotes activos, primero en el Tabernáculo y luego en el Templo. La pericia de los sacerdotes en la Biblia, adquirida con su enseñanza, mel-dado y copia, también les permitió involucrarse en la preservación del texto bíblico.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Masoretas, sacerdotes, levitas, transmisión de la Torá, Raší.

SUMMARY

The paper focuses on the question of the identity of the early Masoretes. We propose that the priests who were occupied with and preserved the Biblical text and its exact language from the time it was received, should properly be regarded as the original Masoretes whose activity was oral at the beginning, and some time later in writing. We began our discussion based on Dotan's assertion that "the transmission of the Bible is as old as the Bible itself." The commentary of Rashi on the Song of Songs and Urbach's statement tutor us with a first clew concerning the linkage between the priests and the Masorah. We add proofs that teach of a historical reality of such a connection, an association that is expressed in a number of realms: the proximity of the accurate copies of the Bible to the Ark of the Covenant (in the Temple Court), thus enabling access to the scrolls by the priests, who were active in the Tabernacle and afterwards in the Temple. The priests' expertise in the Bible, gained from their occupation with its teaching, reading, singing and copying, also enabled them to actively engage in the preservation of the Biblical text.

KEYWORDS: Masoretas, Priests, Levites, transmission of the Torah, Rashi.