

The Bible and the Masoretic Text (The accepted Jewish Version)

The Masoretic Text (MT) is the commonly used version of the Hebrew Bible, considered authoritative by Jews for almost two millennia. From the invention of the printing press, all Hebrew editions of the Hebrew Bible have been based on a text form of the MT, with the exception of publications of the Samaritan Pentateuch or eclectic editions.

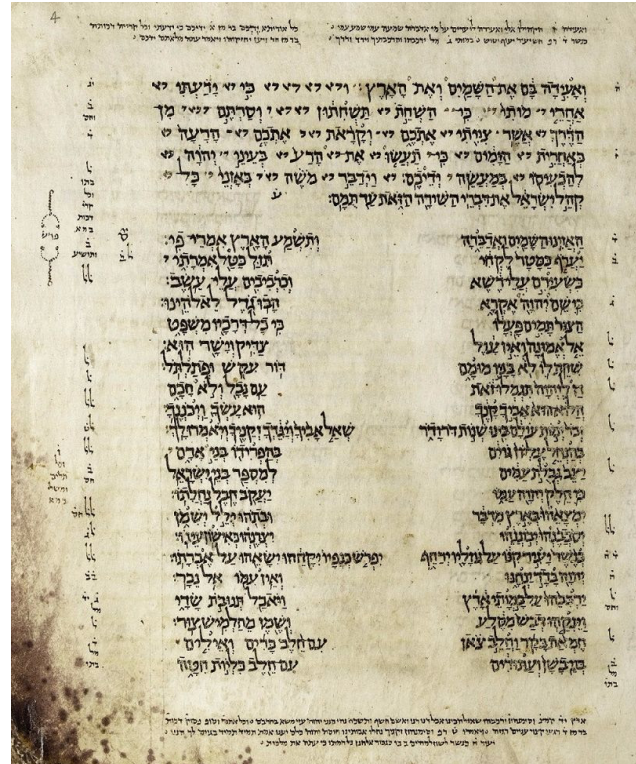
The roots of the MT and its popularity go back to the first century of the Common Era. Before that period, only the proto-rabbinic (Pharisaic) movement made use of the MT, while other streams in Judaism used other Hebrew textual traditions.

In other words, before the first century of the Common Era, we witness a textual plurality among Jews, with multiple text forms conceived of as “the Bible,” or Scripture, including the Hebrew source upon which the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint (LXX), was built.

The First Century C.E.

Around the turn of the era, the consonantal MT text (i.e. no vowels, accents or notes) was accepted as an authoritative form of Hebrew Scripture by the early rabbis (or 'Sages'), whereas other forms were accepted as authoritative by other groups.

With the advent of Christianity in the first century C.E., the LXX (or the Septuagint), which began (actually translated for) as the biblical text for Greek speaking Hellenistic Jews (of Alexandria), was accepted as holy writ by this new group of early Christians, and was concomitantly dropped by other Greek-speaking Jews and ceased to be considered authoritative scripture by them. Around the same time, the Samaritans adopted the version of the Torah known as the Samaritan Pentateuch, and the Qumran community that had assembled texts of different types ceased to exist.



Deuteronomy 32, Aleppo Codex c. 925 C.E.

Thus, since the first century C.E., the consonantal MT version of scripture, including all the books that are contained in it, was accepted as authoritative by all streams of the Jewish people.

- The MT is the only text quoted in rabbinic literature and it is the only text used by organized Judaism for the past two millennia.

Judean Desert Texts Outside Qumran



Signpost to Muraba'at Caves, where some proto-Masoretic (consonants, no vowels, no punctuation, no tropes/melody) scrolls were found

Before the mid-20th century, many scholars divided the texts of the Hebrew Bible into three text types: the Masoretic Text (MT), the Samaritan Pentateuch (SP), and the LXX (The Septuagint Bible).

- Between 1947 and 1956, however, many biblical scrolls dating back to the Second Temple Period were uncovered in the caves of Qumran that did not fit into this neat three-version pattern.
- These scrolls, belonging to the sect of Jews who lived in the area, display broad textual diversity.

- In contrast, twenty-five texts were found in the Judean Desert at sites *other than* Qumran, and these display almost complete identity (roughly 98% agreement) in consonants with the medieval (Jewish) Masoretic text as reflected in the Leningrad Codex, the earliest complete version of MT. Thus, the consonantal text of MT was in existence more than a thousand years before a more authoritative creation of MT emerged (which is what the Jewish community accepts today). Scholars usually designate these along with the Masoretic Text as the Masoretic Text.
- The non-Qumran Judean Desert scrolls were found at both the earlier site of Masada (texts written between 50 BCE and 30 CE) and the later sites of Wadi Murabba'at, Wadi Sdeir, Naḥal Hever, Naḥal 'Arugot, and Naḥal Se'elim, dating to the period of the Bar Kochba revolt in 132–135 CE. The latter were copied between 20 and 115 CE.



Map of the Judean Desert