

Chapter Eleven: Reliability of the Hebrew Scriptures

The Masoretic System of Vowels

This chapter traces the textual history of the Hebrew scriptures including some twists and turns that may interest Muslim readers—because these developments evidently took place in response to Muslims in Muslim lands. The Aleppo Codex, dated to the first half of the tenth century AD, is the oldest existing manuscript of the complete Hebrew scriptures. The remarkable feature of the Aleppo Codex is that it has a fully developed set of notations known as the *masora* (vowel signs/points scribes invented to supplement the otherwise purely consonantal text). These vowel signs were used “to save the purity of the Torah in the face of the encroachment of Islam” since “Hebrew was in danger of being lost after the Muslim onslaught.”

תורת יהוה תמימה משיבת נפש

תּוֹרַת יְהוָה תְּמִימָה מְשִׁיבַת נַפְשׁ

The Jewish development of the *masora* invites comparison to the development of the Qur’anic text to supplement the earliest Arabic “consonantal skeleton.” However the Qur’anic text needed not only long vowels and short vowels, like the Hebrew scriptures, but also diacritic dots to distinguish consonants that otherwise have the same shape.

1. The history we share

- Any discussion of the reliability of the Hebrew scriptures where Islam is concerned must take into account the large amount of material in the Qur’an about biblical figures like Moses and Abraham. The Hebrew scriptures contain the earliest accounts of those famous characters.

2. The Torah is with them

- All eighteen occurrences of *tawrāt* (Torah) in the Qur’an give the immediate sense of it as a book in the possession of the Jews at the time of the recitations (i.e. in the seventh century AD). Are Muslim readers willing to read the original stories of the famous biblical figures who also appear in the Qur’an (e.g. Moses, Abraham, Joseph, Noah, Adam, David, Solomon, etc.)? If not, why not?

3. Reliable transmission of the text

- Close study of the Dead Sea Scrolls (dated between 250 BC and 70 AD) over several decades led Dr. Ulrich to write, “the biblical text we have inherited in the traditional Hebrew Bible has been amazingly accurately preserved over the intervening two millennia.” As for deliberate changes, scholars have found that the impulse of scribes was to improve the text, rather than falsify it.

4. Canon of the Hebrew scriptures (Torah/Law + Prophets + Psalms/Writings)

- The evidence suggests the collection, fixing, and practice of preserving the “Torah” took place during the Babylonian exile of the Jews in the sixth century BC. The “Prophets” collection (which included the “Historical Books”) was canonized by the late fourth century BC. The collection of the “Writings” was already known in the second century BC but may not have been finalized until well into the second century AD.

5. Differences among the earliest manuscripts (Masoretic Text, Septuagint, Samaritan Pentateuch)

- The *Izhār al-ḥaqq* overstated the differences between the three textual traditions. The Samaritan Pentateuch is a sectarian version, but Deuteronomy 27:4 is the main—and in fact, the only significant ideological difference scholars have found among the early Torah manuscripts (Mt. Gerazim vs. Ebal).

6. Choice of a *textus receptus*

- We find interesting parallels in what Muslim sources and Western scholars say about the formation of the Qur’an (e.g. *Codex San’a’ I* provides material evidence of a different “text type” of the Qur’an).

7. Differences between historical accounts

- Almost all of the accusations of the *Izhār* concern differences in names and numbers that have no impact on the major themes of the Hebrew scriptures. Yet if we compare the situation in the Qur’an with regard to violence (“Meccan” *suras* are largely peaceful, “Medinan” *suras* have repeated commands to fight and kill non-Muslims), we find the Islamic teaching on violence asks readers to allow for a major change (abrogation) in the commands of Allah within a space of 23 years.

8. Original established to the limits of science (i.e. the science of textual criticism)

- It is reasonable to assume the stories of major biblical figures came into the Qur’an from the Bible.
- Scholarly critique of the accounts in the Hebrew scriptures apply equally to the Islamic versions.