CHAPTER SIX

THE HEBREW TEXT

INTRODUCTION TO THE SOURCE

*The Masoretic Text as Interpretation*

What if anything can we say of the Masoretic Text as interpretation? After all, it is not a translation whose interpretative slant is betrayed by the way in which it differs from its base-text; nor is it a midrash or a homily, which draws on specific elements within the base text to develop an exegetical point.

When we read the Masoretic Text we are not reading the original text of the book of Ezekiel written in the 6th century BCE shortly after the prophet’s ministry (if such an original ever existed in the singular). Rather, we are reading the text in the form that it has been transmitted to us by generations of Jewish scribes. The book of Ezekiel underwent a centuries-long process of formation and transmission so that the Masoretic Text that we find in the famous medieval codices of the Hebrew Bible—Codex Leningrad, Codex Aleppo, or Codex Cairo for example—stands at the end of this long process of historical development. This process of formation betrays an interpretative trajectory.

In order to identify the interpretative trajectory latent in this process, one must begin by distinguishing the various historically distinct components of which the Masoretic Text as we have received it is composed. The Masoretic Text is not a single entity. Rather, it is composed of several layers: the consonantal text, the system of vowel signs (or pointing), the division of the text into sense units by the marking of accents, and the system of *Mesorah Parva* and *Mesorah Magna*. Each of these layers reflect to some extent an understanding of what the text was saying and how it ought to be handled, and in this sense they represent an interpretation of the text.

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In this chapter we are primarily concerned with the first three layers (i.e. consonantal text, vowel points, accents), because these influence the meaning, whereas the principal purpose of the Masorah Parva and Masorah Magna was to preserve the text from error in transmission. How do we understand these as interpretation? Different forms of the text were in circulation in Antiquity, yet at some point the consonantal framework of the Masoretic Text was given its ‘final’ shape and this final form was preferred in some circles. This required choices to be made about the text while it was still in development, and subsequently about which text-form was to be preferred (even if the vicissitudes of history may account for its later displacement of other text forms). At a much later stage the need was felt to add vowels and punctuation to the written text. Where the consonantal text allowed more than one reading a choice had to be made between the possible meanings of a word or the possible divisions of the text into syntactical units. These choices were exegetical in nature. With the exception of some individual instances, the fluidity of the text form of the Book of Ezekiel in the last centuries before the Common Era make it extremely difficult to reconstruct the text from which the consonantal form of the Masoretic Text as we now have it developed; our focus here is therefore on the subsequent interpretive stages, namely the vowels and punctuation.

**History of the Source**

**Dating the Consonantal Text**

At a particular point in time the text that was subsequently preserved by the Masoretes became reasonably fixed. Once it had become fixed the text was transmitted with great care, ensuring a remarkable degree of consistency between the extant copies. Can we determine when the stabilisation of the text with which we are concerned, namely Ezekiel 28:11–19, occurred?

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3 Cf. Greenberg who argued that MT and LXX could not be compared simply on text critical grounds, but that variants in MT had to be seen as deliberate developments that expressed an exegetical intention; Greenberg, ‘The Use of the Ancient Versions for Interpreting the Hebrew Text,’ 131–40.

