Some Reflections on Consistency in the Activity of Scribes and Translators

1 Background

The British writer Aldous Huxley (1894–1963) once said, “Consistency is contrary to nature, contrary to life. The only completely consistent people are the dead.” The topic of my paper is a study of this consistency. We all know that there is no consistency, but nevertheless in our analysis of the ancients we often act as if they embraced that ideal. When analyzing an author, scribe or translator we can easily find ourselves saying, “here the scribe wrote x, but in chapter 6 he wrote y.” Or, “here the scribe inserted a new section, but in a similar situation he did not do so.” Or, “here a translator used this equivalent, but in chapter 7 he rendered differently.” Our analysis refers to the implications of the word “but.”

In this paper, we want to offer some reflections on consistency in the world of ancient biblical scribes and translators. I suggest that consistency was not part of their world. These persons sometimes display tendencies towards consistency, but no more than that. The absence of consistency did not disturb the ancients, since the aspiration for consistency is an invention of later centuries. Consistency is probably a product of schools, universities, and other frameworks that did not exist in the world of the ancient biblical scribes and translators and to the extent that such frameworks did exist, the ancients did not try to adhere to them.

This paper examines approaches of ancient scribes and translators. When we talk of scribes, we refer to the two functions of these tradents, authorship combined with copying at a stage when the content of compositions could still be altered, and the technical copying when such changes could no longer be inserted. In this brief paper, we limit ourselves to some philosophical deliberations.

Consistency pertains to situations in which, under normal circumstances, the same procedures, approaches, and actions are expected. If different opinions or differences in taste created variation, such differences are not taken into consideration. We claim that consistency can be studied only in some areas of activity. As with the phenomenon described, this paper is neither exhaustive nor consistent.
Hebrew Scribes: Spelling

When turning to the area of spelling in Hebrew compositions, it would be natural to first turn to MT, but MT is not a manuscript written by a single scribe. It is the end product of a long scribal tradition. We can no longer locate the individual scribes behind this procedure. Probably none of them adhered to a clear system, and MT thus reflects a patchwork of different scribal practices.

MT is a precise text, and from a certain period onwards its underlying text was copied very carefully. Within the framework of its precision, we would expect MT to be consistent in its orthography but it is not so, neither within individual Scripture books nor between the books. Consistency and precision thus are disparate features. Paradoxically, each generation of Masoretic scribes precisely copied the inconsistent spelling of earlier generations. A case in point is the spelling of me’orot (luminaries) in the first chapter of Genesis. The spelling of this word provides four possibilities, which we will examine in MT, SP, and two Qumran scrolls.

- Full-defective with the waw in the first syllable: מַאֲרוֹת (as in רָאָמ)
- Full-full with the waw in both syllables: מַאֲרוֹת
- Defective-full: מַאֲרוֹת
- Defective-defective: מַאֲרוֹת

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We note the following:

1. MT is internally inconsistent, with two defective (vv. 14, 16) and one full-defective (v. 15) spelling.¹

¹ Cf. also מַאֲרוֹת (Ezek 32:8). The noun in the singular is always מַאֲרוֹת: Gen 1:16, 16; Exod 27:20; 35:8, 14, 28; 39:37; Lev 24:2; Num 4:9, 16; Ps 74:16; 90:8; Prov 15:30; the only exception in MT is מַאֲרוֹת מַאֲרוֹת (Exod 25:6 (SP מַאֲרוֹת)).