THE MEANING OF MASERET IN EZEK. 20:37 AND IN RABBINIC HEBREW

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It was taken for granted in medieval Spanish biblical lexicography that the noun *masoret* in Ezek. 20:37 is derived from the verbal root *ṣr*, meaning, “to bind.” Similarly, it has never been questioned that in Rabbinic literature the term *masoret* when juxtaposed with the term *miqra* refers to the consonantal text of Hebrew Scripture. Moreover, when the term *masoret* is juxtaposed with the term *miqra* in Rabbinic literature, the latter term refers to the customary oral reading of the Scriptural text in the synagogue. Consequently, as we shall demonstrate, in the famous dictum attributed to Aqiba in M. Avot 3:13, which refers to *masoret* as a protective fence for the Torah, *masoret* refers to the Scriptural text, so as to limit the possibility that outlandish imagined or invented traditions will uproot the precepts contained in the Pentateuch. As we shall see, R. Yona Gerondi fully understood this latter point. However, like many modern biblical lexicographers, he was unduly influenced by Rashi (1040–1105), who derived the noun *masoret* in both its single biblical context (Ezek. 20:37) and in its various Rabbinic contexts from the Rabbinic Hebrew verb *masar*, meaning “hand over,” from which, of course, is derived the medieval and modern Hebrew term *masoret*, that is, “tradition.”

Our contention here, that both in Ezekiel and in Mishnah Avot the term *masoret* designates “bond, limitation, fence,” is strengthened by Moshe Greenberg’s demonstration that the original meaning of the term *masoret* in the Rabbinic Hebrew phrase “It is a *masoret* in their hand” was not “tradition” but “binding obligation/oath.” The modern misconception that *masoret* in both Ezekiel and in Rabbinic Hebrew denotes “tradition” is contrary to the traditional lexicography of the Spanish grammarians, and it reflects the pervasive influence of Rashi’s often innovative and imaginative lexicography. The full implications of the recovery of the meaning of *masoret* in Mishnah Avot with respect to the age-old theological controversy as to the...
precise relationship between Written Torah and Oral Torah in the foundational documents of Rabbinic Judaism are spelled out in the conclusions at the end of this article.

Ezek. 20:37 reads: *wehe* bar*ti etekem tahat ha-shebet* //wehe*be'et* ti etekem bemase*oret ha-berit:* “I will make you pass under the shepherd’s staff," and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant.” While a marginal note in NJV states that the meaning of the Hebrew term *masoret* is uncertain, Moshe Greenberg renders “obligation,” and he explains, “The rendering of the hapax *msrt* follows Hayyug (cited in B-Y [= Eliezer Ben Yehuda]).”2 Obviously, Kimhi’s comment, quoted below, is taken almost verbatim from Hayyug as quoted in both the Arabic original and in Hebrew translation by Ben Yehuda.3 The derivation of the noun *msrt* from the verbal root *ysr*, which Hayyug implicitly contemplates and explicitly rejects by his listing the noun under the root *ysr* and then declaring the root to be *h* *sr*, is, allegedly, supported by Eliezer of Beaugency.4 However, as Poznanski notes, the derivation from *ysr* rather than *h* *sr* is highly idiosyncratic.5 Indeed, as we explain below, since both the verbal root *h* *sr* and the verbal root *ysr* refer to discipline by physical means, the equation of the

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1 Marginal note in Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures according to the Traditional Hebrew Text (Philadelphia, 1985) indicates, “i.e., to be counted; see Lev. 27:32.” Hereinafter this translation will be referred to as NJV (i.e., New Jewish Version).


3 This discussion is found in John W. Nutt, ed, and trans., Two Treatises on Verbs Containing Feeble and Double Letters by Jehuda Hayyug of Fez, translated into Hebrew by R. Moses Gikatila of Cordova (London and Berlin, 1970), p. 27, s.v., *ysr*, where Hayyug explains that the root is indeed *hsr* and not *ysr*. As noted by Greenberg, Hayyug was anticipated by Aquila who renders δέσποινας “in bonds” and Symmachus who renders διά κλοιοῦ “in a collar.” For the interpretations of the major ancient versions, see Galen Marquis, ed., The Hebrew University Bible: The Book of Ezekiel (Jerusalem, 2004), p. 82.

4 See Samuel Poznanski, Kommentar zu Ezechiel und den XII kleinen Propheten von Eliezer aus Beaugency (Warsaw, 1913), p. 32 where R. Eliezer writes *bsmr* be*bikt* treating the noun *masoret* in Ezek. 20:37 as a synonym of the noun *bikht* meaning ‘discipline’ (Prov. 5:12; 10:17; 12:1; 13:18; 15:5, 10, 31, 32; 27:5; 29:15; etc.).

5 Poznanski, p. 32, n. 2.