ONCE AGAIN MASORET IN EZEKIEL AND IN RABBINIC
LITERATURE: A REJOINDER TO PROFESSOR BASSER

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In his “Yona and Gruber on the Usages of Masoret,” Herbert Basser writes concerning our study (RRJ X:2 [2007]), “Their etymological and philological views concerning the word masoret are not supported by the available evidence.” Basser argues that our interpretation of the dictum attributed to Aqiba in M. Ab. 3:13—masoret seyag la-Torah; “The consonantal text is a protective fence for the Torah”—fails to reckon with the evidence to the contrary presented by Albert Baumgarten, that Hebrew masoret here corresponds to the Greek para-
dosis, “tradition,” in Josephus’s description of Pharisaic doctrines and “oral Torah” in Sifra, Sifre Deuteronomy, and the Talmuds.¹ We

¹ Basser refers to A.I. Baumgarten, “The Pharisaic Paradosis,” in Harvard Theological Review 80 (1977), pp. 63–77. In fact Baumgarten states there, p. 65, n. 9: “I would not call the supra-biblical observances of non-rabbinic groups their ‘Oral Law’… In my view, oral law is a specific term for the way in which the rabbis understood the relationship between the written Torah and the supra-biblical legislation they accepted. I believe it anachronistic and potentially misleading to use the rabbinic term for other (earlier) groups.” See also p. 66, n. 11: “I omit from this discussion a number of questions concerning the paradosis which, while much discussed, do not seem susceptible to definite answers, e.g., what is the precise relationship between paradosis and oral law? Was either the paradosis or oral law written down?” So much for Basser’s attempt to invoke Baumgarten in support of his argument that “there is a much longer use of the term masoret to uphold the idea of a body of oral law passed down by Jewish Fathers and Elders from antiquity than they [Yona and Gruber] allow for….” Moreover, Basser invokes W. Bacher, “A Contribution to the History of the Term ‘Massorah,’” in JQR, O.S., 3 (1890), pp. 785–790, in support of the contention that “the ancient rabbis of all periods used the term [masoret] to signify inherited traditions.” But Bacher writes, p. 790, n. 1: “It is to be observed that halachic tradition is never indicated by this expression.” Thus Basser’s attempt to invoke Bacher to argue against our understanding of masoret in M. Ab. 3:13 is no more successful than his invocation of Baumgarten in favor of his contention that masoret in that Mishnah designates “Oral Torah.” With reference to the distinction between the paradosis of Josephus’s Pharisees and the “Oral Torah” of post-Mishnaic rabbis, see Mayer I. Gruber, “The Mishnah as Oral Torah: A Reconsideration,” in Mayer I. Gruber, The Motherhood of God and Other Studies
disagree with Basser. In addition to the evidence that in Rabbinic Hebrew one of the meanings of *masoret* is “the consonantal text” as opposed to what is sung by the Torah-reader, the technical term for which in Rabbinic Hebrew is *miqra*, often a different word altogether, it is of utmost importance to read the dictum in M. Ab. 3:13 in light of Aqiba’s well-known rejection of the doctrine of “Oral Torah.” Nevertheless, Basser would like to read the dual Torah doctrine into the latter dictum.

In fact, Aqiba’s rejection of the doctrine of what Jacob Neusner in his many books on the subject calls “the dual Torah of Moses our Rabbi—Written and Oral” is reflected in the following account in Sifra Leviticus on Lev. 24:46:

> “These are the statutes and the ordinances and the Torahs . . .” (Lev. 24:46). [The expression] “and the Torahs” teaches that two

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2 Cf. Baumgarten, “The Phrasal Paradosis,” p. 73, n. 38: “Note, e.g., the well-known Talmudic phrase *yesh ‘em la-masoret* referring to the written text of the Bible (as opposed to the oral-reading tradition). Note also that *paradosis* can refer to the written text of the Bible. . . . “In fact, the marginal notes in the printed Bibles indicate that in some cases, e.g., Ruth 3:5, 17, the person who sings the synagogue lection pronounces a word that is totally absent from the Scroll from which the biblical text is ostensibly read. Similarly, while the written text of the Pentateuch in all but eleven instances (Gen. 14:2; 20:5; 38:25; Lev. 11:39; 13:10, 21; 16:31; 20:17; 21:9; Num. 5:13, 14) employs the unsex third person personal pronoun *hu* to designate both “he” and “she,” the person who sings the Pentateuchal lection is required to read *hy* meaning “she” whenever the pronoun is traditionally understood to refer to a feminine antecedent. Cf. David Weiss Halivni, *Revelation Restored* (Boulder, 1997), p. 43: “On the one hand the problem of *keri* and *ketiv* demonstrates the inviolability of the text. Even as altered readings (*keri*) effectively superseded the scriptural orthography, these readings did not displace the written words themselves. The scriptures maintained their form, and the divergent readings were transmitted as an oral tradition, adjunct to the preserved holy text.”

3 Aside from the monumental study by S. Abramson, which we cited and commented on, major studies of the Rabbinic texts that refer to such a distinction include the following: Noah Aminah, “‘Em La-Miqra’ and ‘Em La-Masoret’ as Normative Expressions,” in *Te udah* 2 (1982), pp. 43–56 (in Hebrew); Shelomo Nah, “Is There No Authority for the Consonantal Text or: Did the Tannaim Expound the Written Text of the Torah against the Accepted Oral Reading?” in *Tarbiz* 61 (1992), pp. 402–448 (in Hebrew); see also the few earlier comprehensive studies cited in Aminah, p. 52, nn. 1–3.

4 Our earlier article, p. 220, referred to the discussion in Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Torah from Heaven* (vol. 1; London, 1962) [in Hebrew]; see Heschel, p. 6.