

4. Establishing the Biblical Text

For ease of discussion and due to the way in which Hebrew is written, we divide the biblical text into the consonantal and vocalic expressions.

a. The Consonantal Text

The statement of Wurthwein seems adequate to summarize this part of the text:

"From this historical survey it appears that we may reckon with the existence of a fairly constant consonantal text even from the beginning of the second century AD but that the pointing and accents which now appear in the text were achieved in the ninth and tenth centuries, after some hundreds of years of study and of tentative preparatory work." (p. 19)

This opinion is based on this evidence:

The apparent harmony of the Jerusalem scrolls with the later Masoretic texts...

The agreement of Christian era Greek translations with the MT in opposition to the apparent disagreement with the LXX...

The traditional notations in the Jerusalem Talmud: T'anith 4:2. See also Sphre 356, Sopherim 6:6...

And the traditions of the temple torah, as noted.

Further reading to confirm these notes on the consonantal text may be had in Roberts: OLD TESTAMENT TEXT AND VERSIONS, page 26 ff.

b. The Vocalic Text

Hebrew had no vowel markings in the original text. A language that writes only consonants is sooner or later going to have difficulty in maintaining the understanding of past ages and this is especially true if the language is no longer spoken. When a language is learned in living process, it is possible to see only the consonants and know how they should be pronounced. But when the learning is second-handed, it is very difficult to do this for one generation, let alone for many. Oral tradition in itself could become corruptive of the text in a culture where the physical and social ends were so subject to change. It is a hard point for us to grip but one with which we can easily sympathize.