

The Hebrews of the Masoretic period sensed the reality of this danger. Aramaic had become their spoken language: Hebrew schools were divided by geography and sometimes ideology: there was a danger that the correct pronunciation of the text could be lost in the passage of time. It became a necessity that a text be preserved that would continue the vocalic sounds as well as that of the consonants.

Consequently all of our pointed texts are Masoretic in point of time. None are earlier. We are compelled to assume that the pronunciation they sought to preserve was the pronunciation as known in their day and acceptable in the tradition to ancient times. Apart from comparative translation studies, there can be neither the confirmation nor denial of this.

So the first move came with the development of the vowel letters (presumably), a system whereby certain letters were assigned tonal qualities as well as consonantal expression. These were limited in total usage, tended to confuse the text, and could at best only influence a few key sounds. But it was a step and these letters are called matres lectionis (mothers for letters) and include aleph, he, yodh, and waw.

This limited system made the development of a broader and more expressive system mandatory. Apparently three systems served as models of which only the Tiberian proved really adequate. It featured the invention of a number of signs that would represent vowel tones. These signs were placed under the proper syllable and an accent devised to mark the stress of the word. Thus with such system both syllabification and pronouncement were certified. This is the system used in your Bible today although with the perfection of printing the signs are not written in cursive form and are a bit easier to read than in older mss.

Of the other two systems, the Babylonian used existing letters and put them in a supralinear arrangement while the Palestinian system used known letters in a sub-linear system. I do not know much about these but my books suggest they allowed for considerable complication of the readings of texts and lines. Certainly when it is all over the Bible text is finished by 950 AD.