



# Missing Link in Hebrew Bible Formation

Paul Sanders

**NEW ANALYSIS OF A PREVIOUSLY KNOWN** scrap of a Biblical text provides fascinating insight into the formation of the Hebrew Bible. Known as the Ashkar-Gilson Hebrew Manuscript #2, the text is a remnant of a Torah scroll from the seventh or eighth century C.E. and contains a crucial section of the Book of Exodus.

Although the fragment came to light more than three decades ago, it was disregarded by scholars and remained unpublished. But a recent analysis shows that this damaged sheet fills a gap in our knowledge regarding the transmission of the Biblical text.

The earliest texts of the Hebrew Bible—or the Old Testament, as Christians call it—are found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, which include more than 200 Biblical texts ranging from a few words to almost complete books, such as a nearly undamaged copy of the Book of Isaiah (1QIsa<sup>a</sup>).<sup>\*</sup> The dates of these ancient Bible manuscripts range from c. 250 B.C.E. to 115 C.E., so they are much older than the Ashkar-Gilson Manuscript. In this early period, the texts were not yet completely fixed; their transmission was still fluid. Copyists made mistakes, wanted to

improve or expand a text, or adapted the spelling of certain words.<sup>\*\*</sup> Sometimes the copies could be quite different versions of the same text—for example, the Book of Jeremiah.

<sup>\*\*</sup>Emmanuel Tov, “Searching for the Original Bible: Do the Dead Sea Scrolls Help?” *BAR*, July/August 2014.

**MISSING LINK.** The Hebrew Bible had a long transmission history before it reached its standardized form, as seen in the Aleppo and Leningrad Codices from the 10th and 11th centuries C.E., respectively. While the Dead Sea Scrolls represent much earlier copies of the Hebrew Bible—about two millennia old—they do not comprise a complete copy of the Hebrew Bible, and the Hebrew text of the scrolls was not yet standardized. The Ashkar-Gilson Manuscript (right) is a seventh- or eighth-century C.E. manuscript that sheds light on the formation of the Hebrew Bible in the period between the Dead Sea Scrolls and the later codices; some call this time the “silent era.”

Found in Beirut, Lebanon, by Fuad Ashkar and Albert Gilson in 1972, the Ashkar-Gilson Manuscript might have originated in the Cairo Genizah. However, since Ashkar and Gilson purchased the manuscript from an antiquities dealer, the provenance of the piece is not certain. Ashkar and Gilson donated the manuscript to Duke University. Since 2007 Duke has lent the piece to the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, where it is currently stored in the Shrine of the Book.

<sup>\*</sup>Hershel Shanks, “Isaiah among the Scrolls,” *BAR*, July/August 2011; Sidnie White Crawford, “A View from the Caves: Who Put the Scrolls in There?” *BAR*, September/October 2011.





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PHOTO BY BRUCE AND KENNETH ZUCKERMAN, WEST SEMITIC RESEARCH, IN COLLABORATION WITH THE ANCIENT BIBLICAL MANUSCRIPT CENTER, COURTESY RUSSIAN NATIONAL LIBRARY

Thus, the Biblical text in the Dead Sea Scrolls is not quite the same as the version that later became official in Judaism and Christianity. The text that is authoritative in present-day Judaism is first found in codices, bound books produced many centuries after the Dead Sea Scrolls. Virtually all modern translations of the Hebrew Bible are based on these relatively late codices.

The earliest Hebrew Bible codices date from only the ninth or tenth century C.E. The authoritative Aleppo Codex (c. 930 C.E., with extensive parts missing since 1947)\* and the well-preserved Leningrad Codex (c. 1008 C.E.)\*\* comprise all the books of the Hebrew Bible. Other codices comprise only a part of the Hebrew Bible, for instance only the Torah (Genesis–Deuteronomy) or only the Prophetic Books (Joshua–Malachi).

These codices were composed by a group of specialists known as Masoretes, who worked in Tiberias, on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, but

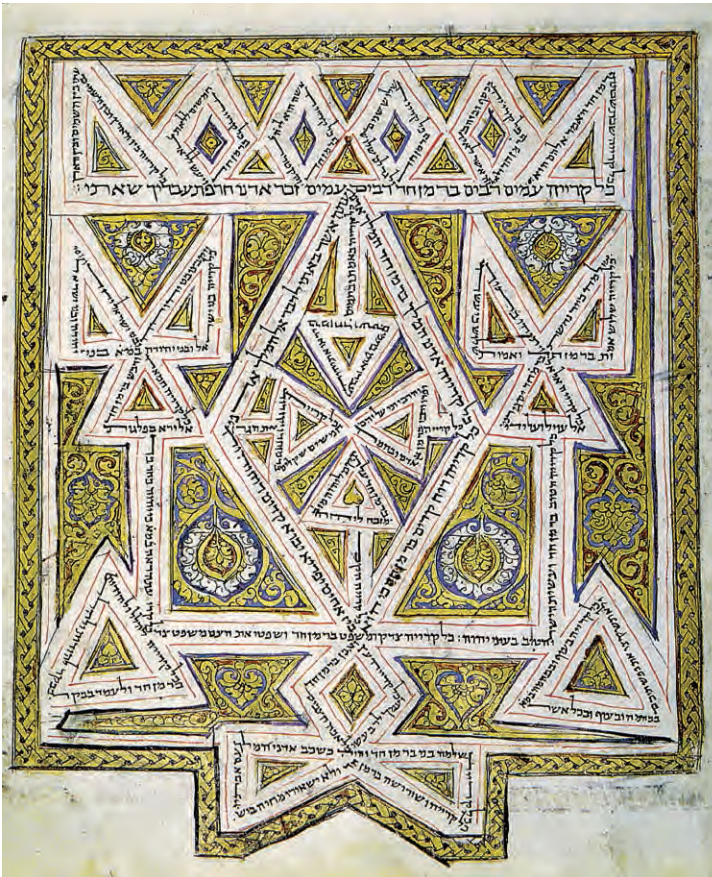
**OLDEST COMPLETE HEBREW BIBLE.** The Leningrad Codex dates to 1008 C.E. It is currently stored in the National Library of Russia in St. Petersburg (formerly Leningrad, hence the name). Prior to arriving at the National Library, the codex was in the possession of Abraham Firkovich, a Karaite collector. Before that, we know only part of the codex's history. In the codex itself are two colophons—one at the beginning of the codex and one at the end—that state that the codex was copied in Cairo by Samuel ben Jacob. Eventually the codex made its way to the Damascus Synagogue. While Firkovich did not specify where he had originally procured the codex, it seems plausible that he acquired it in Damascus.

The text of the Leningrad Codex was used as the base for *Biblia Hebraica Quinta*, the most recent critical edition of the Hebrew Bible in the *Biblia Hebraica* series. In addition to being authoritative, the codex is beautifully decorated, replete with 16 illuminated carpet pages, such as the one on the opposite page. Interwoven in the designs of the carpet pages are Biblical texts and blessings.

also in some Mesopotamian cities with large Jewish populations. Most of the surviving codices, however, were produced by the Masoretes of Tiberias. They succeeded in their effort to completely stabilize the Biblical text, and their work has remained

\*Yosef Ofer, "The Shattered Crown: The Aleppo Codex, 60 Years after the Riots," *BAR*, September/October 2008; Yosef Ofer, "The Mystery of the Missing Pages of the Aleppo Codex," *BAR*, July/August 2015.

\*\*Astrid Beck and James A. Sanders, "The Leningrad Codex," *Bible Review*, August 1997.



era.” The puzzling question is how the text developed during these enigmatic centuries.

From the “silent era,” there are many manuscripts of Greek, Latin, Syriac and Coptic translations of the Hebrew Bible—but hardly any Biblical texts in the original Hebrew. The prevalent conjecture is that the continuing persecution of the Jews, first by Christians and later by Muslims, led to the destruction of their Hebrew Bible manuscripts. Apparently the Christian persecutors did not realize that the Jewish Bible manuscripts they destroyed might be more accurate than the translations that the Christians used, such as the Greek Septuagint.

Knowledge of developments in the “silent era” has increased significantly, however, with the rediscovery of the Ashkar-Gilson Manuscript—which would certainly seem to be an unlikely source. It is a severely damaged and blackened manuscript containing excerpts only from Exodus 13:19–16:1, and it

authoritative to this day.

But the Masoretes even went a step further. To the existing text, which comprised only consonants, they added vowel and accent signs indicating how exactly the text was to be read. They also wrote short (and sometimes longer) notes in the margins to elucidate textual problems and to prevent even the slightest changes.

This version of the Hebrew Bible, known as the Masoretic text, became normative in Judaism—and it still is. The scrolls that since then have been produced for use in synagogues contain exactly the same consonantal text, although the vowel and accent signs are left out because they are not original. Not a single consonant, however, may differ from the normative, Masoretic version found in the earliest codices.

Thus we have a standard text from about the tenth century C.E. and a variety of differing texts (some close to the Masoretic text) from about a millennium earlier (i.e., the Dead Sea Scrolls). But we have almost nothing—just a few scraps—from the centuries in between.<sup>1</sup> The history of the text of the Hebrew Bible is almost blank in this intermediate period. Scholars sometimes refer to it as the “silent

contains only the consonantal text.

In 1972, two American doctors, Fuad Ashkar and Albert Gilson (hence its name), bought the sheet from an antiquities dealer in Beirut. Several years later, Ashkar and Gilson donated it to Duke University. The renowned New Testament scholar James Charlesworth, who was then teaching at Duke University, dated it to between the sixth and eighth centuries C.E. on the basis of a paleographical analysis. His dating was soon narrowed by scientific carbon-14 analyses, showing that the parchment is authentic and dates from the seventh or eighth century C.E.

Since 2007, the Ashkar-Gilson Manuscript has

## Who Were the Masoretes?

The Masoretes were groups of Jewish scribes who set up a system to ensure that the text of the Hebrew Bible was transmitted accurately. They lived in communities—the most famous one in Tiberias, Israel—during the sixth through tenth centuries C.E. While the original Hebrew text contained only consonants, the Masoretes added vowel pointings and cantillation marks to the consonantal text to indicate how particular words were pronounced. They also added notes (*masorah*) to explain textual issues and to prevent alterations. The Hebrew text we use today relies on their meticulous work.





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**BIRDS OF A FEATHER.** The London Manuscript (above) and the Ashkar-Gilson Manuscript are both pieces of the same seventh- or eighth-century Torah scroll. This identification was made by Mordechai Mishor and Edna Engel, who saw the Ashkar-Gilson Manuscript on display in the Shrine of the Book and recognized its similarities with the better-preserved London Manuscript. The London Manuscript contains Exodus 9:18–13:2, and the Ashkar-Gilson Manuscript picks up just a few verses later with Exodus 13:19–16:1. Only one column is lost between the two sheets. The London Manuscript is currently in the possession of New York collector Stephan Loewentheil; it derives its name from the London School of Jewish Studies (formerly Jews' College in London), where the manuscript was once housed.

been on extended loan in the Shrine of the Book of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. However, it will soon return to Duke University, where it will be housed in the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library. While the sheet was on display in the Shrine of the Book, two Israeli experts, Mordechai Mishor and Edna Engel, noticed that the handwriting and layout reminded them of a better-preserved sheet of a Torah scroll, known as the London Manuscript, which contains the text of an earlier passage: Exodus 9:18–13:2. The two scholars had seen a photo of the London Manuscript in the *Encyclopaedia Biblica* (1968). Strangely enough, the London Manuscript too had been disregarded in

scholarly research. It had been kept in Jews' College in London—hence its name—but had been sold to the New York collector Stephan Loewentheil.

Following some additional research, it was established that the London Manuscript was a remnant of the same Torah scroll as the Ashkar-Gilson Manuscript. The two sheets were divided into columns of 42 lines and were written by the same hand. One complete column appears to have been lost between the two sheets. From the size of the surviving sheets it can be inferred that the Torah scroll was originally around 20 inches high.

Although the authenticity of the two fragments is beyond doubt, it is unclear where they came from and how they became separated from each other. One guess is that they came from the famous Cairo Genizah. Although most of the fragments from this hoard—more than 200,000 pieces—ended up in university libraries, some were obtained by antiquities dealers.

In May 2014, I obtained an infrared photo of the Ashkar-Gilson Manuscript from the Israel Museum and soon thereafter published the results of my study.<sup>2</sup> Both the Ashkar-Gilson Manuscript and the London Manuscript contain the consonantal text of the authoritative Masoretic codices of several centuries later. (Since 1947 the text of Exodus has been missing from the Aleppo Codex, the most accurate of the early codices, but its text can be reconstructed



## Song of the Sea

As well as being one of the most beautiful pieces of poetry in the Hebrew Bible, scholars agree that Exodus 15, the Song of the Sea, is one of the oldest passages in the Hebrew Bible. The Song of the Sea describes Yahweh's deliverance of his people Israel from Egyptian slavery. While the Israelites crossed the Red Sea safely, the Egyptians who pursued them were drowned—as Exodus 15:4 says, “Pharaoh’s chariots and his army he [Yahweh] cast into the sea.”

Written in a pattern resembling brickwork, the Song of the Sea is set apart from the surrounding text. The only other poem in the Hebrew Bible that is given such special formatting is the Song of Deborah in Judges 5.

The earliest appearance of the Song of the Sea with this special brickwork formatting is in the Ashkar-Gilson Manuscript (bottom left). It also appears in the well-preserved Leningrad Codex (bottom right) and became the standardized way of copying the poem. To this very day, Torah scrolls—such as the one pictured to the left (c. 1780–1810)—are written using the brickwork pattern.

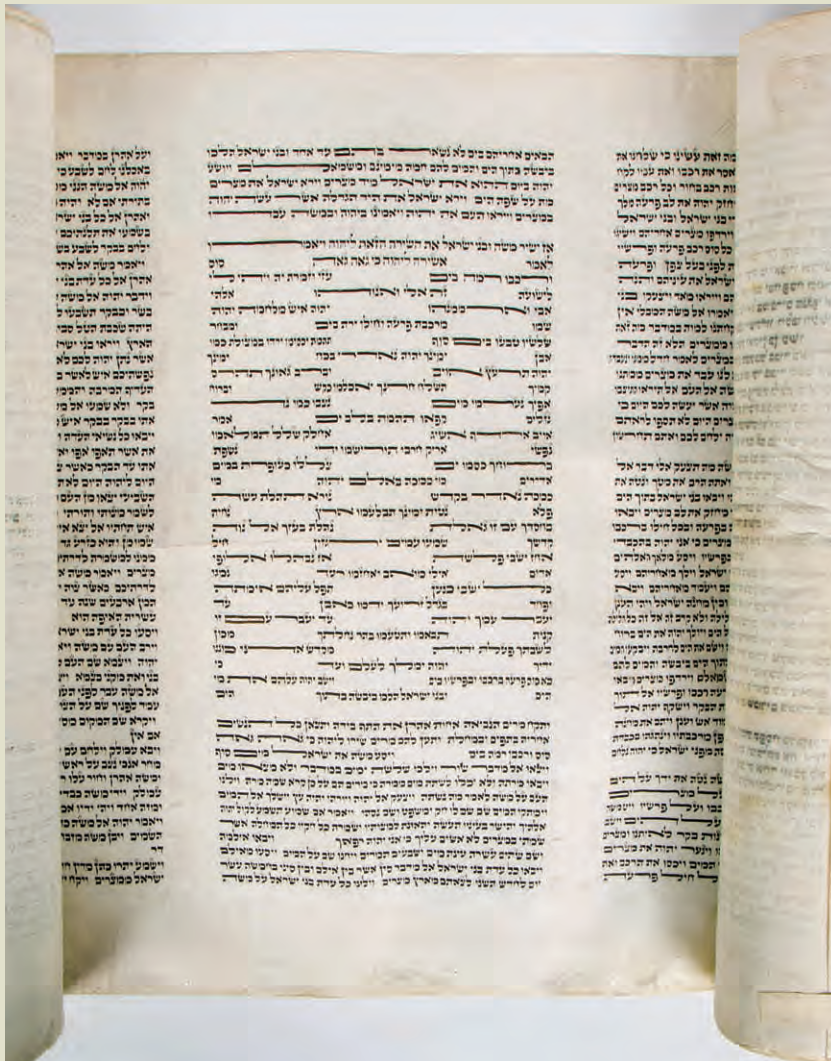
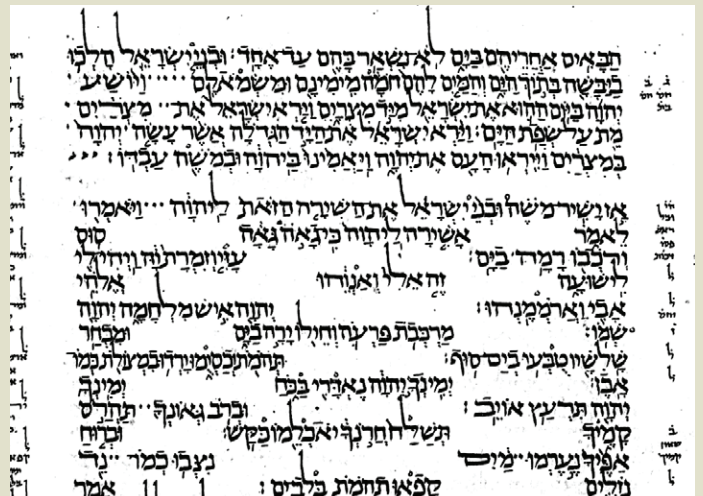
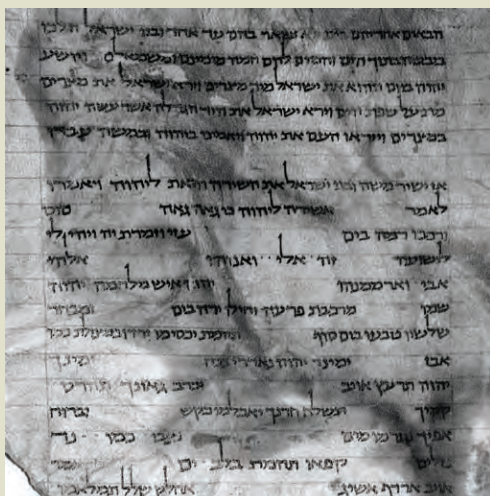
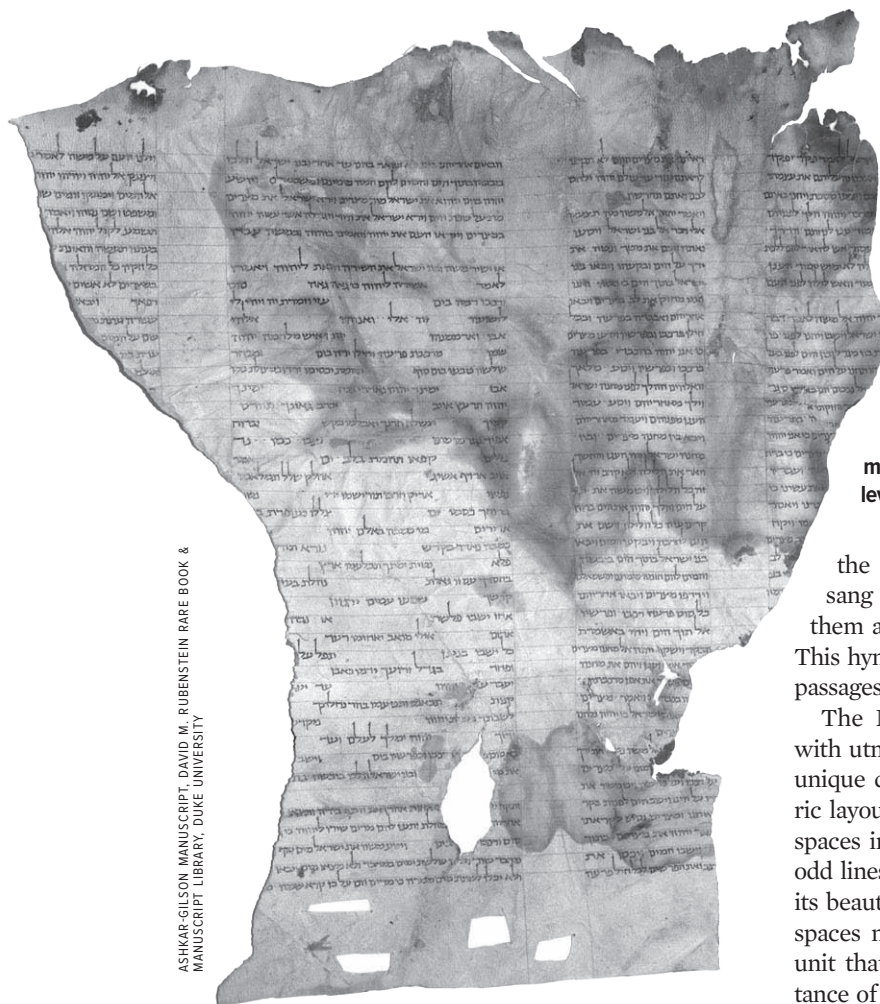


PHOTO BY BRITTNEY BROWN, MUSEUM OF THE BIBLE



ASHKAR-GILSON MANUSCRIPT, DAVID M. RUBENSTEIN RARE BOOK & MANUSCRIPT LIBRARY, DUKE UNIVERSITY



ASHKAR-GILSON MANUSCRIPT, DAVID M. RUBENSTEIN RARE BOOK & MANUSCRIPT LIBRARY, DUKE UNIVERSITY

**IN A NEW LIGHT.** In normal light, the Ashkar-Gilson Manuscript is difficult to read (see image on p. 47), but in the infrared photograph (left), its writing becomes more legible. The consonantal text found in the Ashkar-Gilson and London Manuscripts conforms exactly to the Masoretic text in the authoritative codices from the ninth and tenth centuries. This demonstrates that the Masoretes had a standardized text of the Hebrew Bible from several centuries earlier than the Aleppo and Lenin-grad Codices.

Look closely: In the infrared lighting, horizontal and vertical lines appear; Jewish scribes made these lines to ensure that their writing was level and that they stayed within the margins.

the Sea (Exodus 15). Moses and the Israelites sang this hymn after God had parted the sea for them and then drowned Pharaoh's pursuing army. This hymn, it is generally agreed, is one of the oldest passages of the Hebrew Bible.

The Masoretic copyists transmitted this poem with utmost care. Apparently they were aware of its unique quality. They copied it in a special symmetric layout that resembles brickwork, with two blank spaces in the even lines and one blank space in the odd lines. This arrangement was chosen not only for its beauty but also for its meaning, with each of the spaces marking the end of a colon (a small poetic unit that must be sung in one breath). The importance of this brickwork layout is reflected in the fact that it is reproduced in every Torah scroll used in synagogues today. (A similar layout is required only for the Song of Deborah in Judges 5, another old and exceptionally beautiful poem.)

In the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Song of the Sea does not yet have this special layout. But it does appear in the Ashkar-Gilson Manuscript! This marks the first time the brickwork pattern is found, without any deviation from the later arrangement.

In the Ashkar-Gilson Manuscript, some minor details in the column with the song are accidental. These details concern the layout, as well as the column's coincidental start with an ordinary Hebrew word (הָבֵאִים) meaning "that went in" (namely, into the sea; Exodus 14:28).

Remarkably enough, even these insignificant details are also found in the oldest Masoretic codices. But there they are not accidental. The copyists had to make a special effort to reproduce them as faithfully as possible. For instance, they compressed or spaced out the text in the preceding columns to let the column with the Song of the Sea start with

with certainty.) The text of the codices agrees completely with the text of the Ashkar-Gilson and London Manuscripts. (In some codices there are a few insignificant orthographic deviations concerning some slightly different spellings.)

This shows for the first time that the Masoretic copyists reproduced an older consonantal text as faithfully as possible and did not allow their copies to deviate from the original. Only meaningless variants were sometimes still accepted. Of course, the Ashkar-Gilson and London Manuscripts display only part of the Hebrew Bible—some excerpts from Exodus—and it cannot be proven that the rest of the Hebrew Bible was also copied so carefully. But it is hardly conceivable that the care of the copyists was limited to these sections of Exodus. *This proves that the text of the Hebrew Bible was stabilized earlier than when the Masoretes created their first codices.*

But there is more. By some good fortune, the Ashkar-Gilson Manuscript contains one of the most beautiful examples of Biblical poetry, the Song of

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## Bible Missing Link

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exactly the same word as the column in the Ashkar-Gilson Manuscript. Even the copyists of the more recent Torah scrolls did their best to reproduce these seemingly insignificant details.

How can this be explained? I think there is only one convincing solution: The very Torah scroll of which the Ashkar-Gilson Manuscript and London Manuscript are remnants was consulted by the Masoretes of Tiberias. In other words, this seventh- or eighth-century Torah scroll must have figured prominently when they produced the now-standard text of the Hebrew Bible.

The Masoretes were apparently impelled to maintain the “brickwork” layout of the original because of its exceptional beauty. This is hardly surprising. Other scribal features of the ancient Torah scroll are also impressive and conform to the highest standards of

the early Middle Ages. The sheets were dry-ruled before being inscribed—both vertically, to demarcate the margins of the columns, and horizontally for the individual lines. Also, the height of the columns conforms to the early medieval rule that a column of a Torah scroll must be 42 lines high. The text was written with a firm hand, and the copyist observed the ruled margins, trying to avoid protrusions beyond the margin line. Such features indicate that the Torah scroll was a first-class manuscript that deserved to be copied. So it is quite understandable that the Masoretic copyists selected this scroll.

It happens only rarely that a direct antecedent of ancient Biblical manuscripts can be traced. That this specific Torah scroll was used by the Masoretes could not have been shown on the basis of the London Manuscript alone. By a fortunate coincidence, the Ashkar-Gilson Manuscript also displays the text of the Song of the Sea and its context, thereby

providing crucial evidence for the use of the scroll in the creation of the Masoretic text still used in synagogues today.

Of course, this does not mean that the Masoretic text is the original text of the Hebrew Bible. The Biblical texts preserved among the Dead Sea Scrolls differ from the Masoretic text that ultimately became authoritative. These Biblical manuscripts document the fact that at that time there was still a lot of flexibility in the transmission of the text.

So the Masoretic text is the fruit of a long process of both adaptation and faithful transmission.\* The period between the second and sixth centuries C.E. must have been one of gradual stabilization of the Biblical text. All of the surviving Dead Sea Scrolls that were written after the first Jewish revolt (post-70 C.E.) show a Biblical text that is already relatively close to the Masoretic

\*David Marcus and James A. Sanders, “What’s Critical About a Critical Edition of the Bible?” *BAR*, November/December 2013.



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text. For example, the Twelve Prophets' Scroll from Wadi Murabba'at, about 10 miles south of Qumran, was transcribed around 115 C.E. and contains excerpt passages from Joel to Zechariah. The text is remarkably close to the much later Masoretic text.

The following centuries must have seen a further stabilization of the normative Jewish Bible text. The Ashkar-Gilson and London Manuscripts prove that this process of stabilization had already come to an end some centuries before the Masoretes started to produce the earliest Bible codices. The Masoretes reproduced a text that had already been stabilized and no longer allowed any deviations. It was not their goal to innovate—but rather to preserve the finest textual traditions that existed at the time. ■

<sup>1</sup> For example, in his essay "The Development of the Masoretic Bible," in Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004,

2014), Jordan S. Penkower notes the paucity of texts in this interim: "It is especially difficult to reconstruct this period because we lack direct witnesses to the Hebrew text; i.e., we do not have Hebrew mss [manuscripts] from most of this period." The Ashkar-Gilson manuscript had apparently not yet been published.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Sanders, "The Ashkar-Gilson Manuscript: Remnant of a Proto-Masoretic Model Scroll of the Torah," *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 14 (2014); see [http://www.jhsonline.org/Articles/article\\_201.pdf](http://www.jhsonline.org/Articles/article_201.pdf).

## First Person

*continued from page 6*

Even Solomon's Temple, at least what we know about it, features other models. Perhaps the most distinctive Israelite architecture is the simple Four-Room House.

There is, of course, one other thing: Israel has the Bible. But the obvious answer to this is: The lands to the east are also the lands of the Bible—Sumer,

Mesopotamia, Babylonia and Persia. But the modern countries that comprise these lands don't want to think of their countries this way. And who can blame them? They have their own heritage.

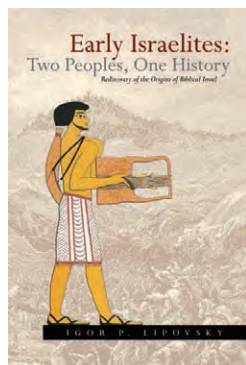
Even within Israeli archaeology, there is sometimes a contrast (or contest?) between people who want to find out what archaeology has to say concerning the Biblical text and scholars who want to focus on the details of daily life for its own sake or, more specifically, as background to the Bible.

In sum, archaeology is thriving in Israel, despite its comparative material poverty. In the east, archaeology was much more circumscribed even before the present turmoil.

So what are we to make of all this?

Clearly, I do not have answers. I can only make these disparate observations, some of which themselves may be inaccurate. But can I start a conversation? Let me have your thoughts. We will publish the most interesting.—H.S.

## Igor P. Lipovsky titles

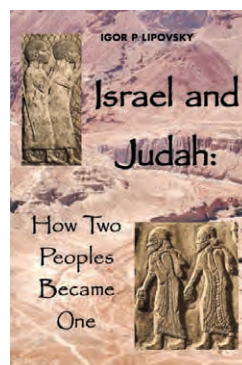


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