



CATHOLIC CHRONICLE.

VOL. IV.

MONTREAL, FRIDAY, JULY 7, 1854.

NO. 47.

THE HEBREW MANUSCRIPTS OF THE BIBLE.

(From the Buffalo Sentinel.)

Hebrew manuscripts when collated do not present so many discrepancies as the Greek manuscripts, because they are not so numerous, nor have we any very ancient Hebrew manuscripts. There is no Hebrew manuscript at present known older than the eleventh century; and again, all those that we know being of an age subsequent to the formation of the rules of the Masora have, for the most part, been corrected according to these rules. However there are still many discrepancies between Hebrew manuscripts; and, in the first place, as Richard Simon well observes, in his *Critical History of the Old Testament*, we must cautiously distinguish between the synagogue manuscripts and those which have been made for the use of private persons. The Synagogue manuscripts of rolls have been always made with greater care than the others—(the Jews always use only manuscripts for the reading of the Scriptures in their Synagogues.) The Talmud contains most particular rules in regard to these manuscripts, prescribing the utmost accuracy to the transcriber, and various superstitious niceties, which, it is said, the Jews always most particularly follow. In the first place, these rolls contain only the portions of Scripture appointed to be read in the synagogue, viz.—first, the Pentateuch; second, the sections of the Prophets appointed to be read; and, the Book of Esther, as it is in the Hebrew Bible, which last is only read at the feast of "Purim" or lots. These three portions of Scripture are never put together, but written on separate rolls. They are written in the Chaldee or Square Hebrew character, without vowels and accents. The parchment is prepared by Jews only, and must be made from the skins of clean animals; then they are divided into columns, the breadth of which must never exceed half their length. The number of the columns is fixed, as also of the lines in the column, and of the words in each line. Then the ink is to be prepared, and the copyist must purify himself before transcribing the incommunicable name of Jehovah. When the manuscript is finished its revision must take place within thirty days after, and although it will not be set aside on account of a few mistakes in the copying, yet if they exceed a certain fixed number, which is yet very small, the whole manuscript will be condemned as unfit for the synagogue. These manuscripts for the synagogue are taken from the best exemplars; and certainly, as far as they are known to Christians, exhibit a great uniformity in their text; but then, as Richard Simon well observes, these minute rules by which so much uniformity is now secured in the transcription of the synagogue rolls, are, comparatively speaking, of modern date, and therefore, do not prove that formerly many mistakes of copyists may not have crept even into the manuscripts of the synagogue.

Manuscripts which have been made for the use of private individuals are held in much less esteem than those of which we have been speaking. They are written, some in the Chaldee square character, and some in the Rabbinical. Their form is left to the will of the transcriber, or of him for whose use they are made; hence they are found in folio, quarto, &c. They are found either written on parchment, or on cotton paper, or on the common kind of paper. The vowel points are not excluded from these, but they are generally written with ink of a different color from that used for the consonants; the consonants are written with black ink. Initial words and letters are frequently decorated with gold and silver colors. But few of these manuscripts are exact; it being difficult to find copyists well qualified for the task.—However, it will sometimes happen that these manuscripts will scarcely yield in exactness of execution to the synagogue rolls, when they have been made for the use of wealthy persons, who being anxious to procure the best copies, were, at the same time, able by their wealth to secure the labor of the best copyist.

Richard Simon (loco citato), and many other critics with him form a much higher estimate of the manuscript of the Spanish Jews than they do of those of the French and Italian Jews, or of the German Jews, which last class of manuscripts they consider the most inaccurate of all. These three classes of manuscripts are distinguished by three different kinds of character. The Spanish character is square and majestic. The French and Italian character is somewhat more round and less majestic. The German is sharp-cornered and leaning. Simon adds that these good manuscripts made by the Spanish Jews can now be found only at Constantinople, Salonica, and some other places on the Levant, where the Spanish Jews took refuge when they were driven from Spain. The Jews acknowledge two principal rescensions or editions of the Hebrew Bible, proceeding from their

two celebrated academies of Tiberias and Babylon. These schools flourished in the period from the fifth to the ninth century. The discrepancies between these two editions have been noted after a diligent collation of the manuscripts of the western (Tiberias) and eastern (Babylon) Jews, made by Aaron Ben Asher, president of the academy of Babylon.—This collation was made about the beginning of the eleventh century. The discrepancies almost all relate to the vowel points, and, consequently, are not of great importance. The western Jews, and our printed editions of the Hebrew scriptures, almost wholly follow the rescension of Aaron Ben Asher.—In the *Bibliotheca sacra*, of Le Long, may be found an interesting catalogue of the most famous Hebrew manuscripts. The same writer also furnishes us with a full catalogue of the printed editions of the Hebrew scriptures, brought down to the beginning of the eighteenth century. But we must reserve for another time the observations which we have to make on the printed editions of the Hebrew bible. The present place will not, however, be inappropriate for discussing the antiquity of the Hebrew vowel points, by the way of Appendix to this dissertation.

ON THE ANTIQUITY OF THE HEBREW VOWEL POINTS.

Were we to believe what some of the Jews tell us on this subject; we should look upon the points as coeval with the text itself; however, even the Jews are, for the most part, satisfied with ascribing their additions to the text, to Esdras and the great Council that was held in his time. Elias Levita, a German Jew, was the first, in modern times, to dispute their antiquity. He wrote about Luther's time. He would not admit that they were introduced by Esdras, but ascribed their invention to the Masoretic doctors of the school of Tiberias. Buxtorf, the father, endeavored to refute his arguments. But Ludovicus Cappel, a Protestant divine of France, and Professor of Hebrew in the Protestant University of Saumur, replied to all that Buxtorf advanced, in a work entitled "*Arcanum Punctuationis Revelatum*." Buxtorf, the sons in vindication of his father's opinion, wrote an answer to Cappel. This answer was not considered satisfactory, and hence the generality of the learned have adhered to the opinion of Cappel. The Catholic doctors, in particular, have never been favorable to the pretended antiquity of these points. Following these, we assert that the introduction of these points cannot be ascribed to a period earlier than the sixth century of the Christian Church.—They were invented by the Jewish rabbins of the school of Tiberias, and added to the text, in order that the genuine reading of the scripture received from tradition might be ever after preserved. These rabbins were called Masorets, from having composed the "Masora," as we have observed in another place. This work, called by the name of "Masora," which name signifies Tradition, is defined to be "the critical doctrine regarding the right reading and writing of the Hebrew text of the sacred scripture." It is to be observed that no one says that the Hebrew text was ever pronounced without vowels, since without these the consonants could not be pronounced; but the opinion which we defend is, that none of these vowel points were added to the text before the time of the Masorets, and, consequently, neither by Moses nor Esdras. This opinion is established by the following arguments:—First, the inscriptions on the Jewish sicles in the old Hebrew (Samaritan) letters want the points. Now we have no Hebrew coins older than the time of the Machabees, which was, as is well known, posterior to the time of Esdras.—Again, the Samaritans have no points in their Pentateuch, which is still written in the old Hebrew letters—a proof that the points were not in use when they received this book. Let us take the earliest date to which their getting possession of this book will be ascribed, i.e., when the Hebrew priest was sent amongst them. It follows, at least, that these points were not invented or used by Moses, otherwise this book would not have been without them. Secondly, the sacred volumes or rolls, which the Jews use in their synagogues, are written without these points, nor is it lawful for the Jews to use the points in these synagogue manuscripts—a thing that certainly would be lawful, if not prescribed, supposing them to have been invented by either Moses or Esdras. Thirdly, in the whole Talmud there is no mention made of the vowel points, whereas in very many places there was occasion to mention them if they existed at the time. When, for example, there is an inquiry into the meaning of a word which would admit of different meanings, according to the different points with which it would be joined, the Talmudists never say, "read the word with such a vowel, nor with such an other."

Now the Talmud was not completed until about the beginning of the sixth century.—The Talmud is a body of doctrine [as its name indicates,] on the

whole sacred and civil law of the Jews. It is twofold: the Talmud of Jerusalem, finished about the year 230 of the Christian era, or perhaps later; and the Babylonian Talmud, which belongs to a later date. Fourthly, St. Jerome, who flourished in the fourth century, and was perfectly skilled in the Hebrew language, testifies that the Hebrews even then were accustomed to write without the addition of vowels, and that, in consequence, there arose sometimes an ambiguity in the exposition of the scripture. For thus he writes, in his commentary on Jeremias, IX. 22, "Verbum Hebraicum quod tribus literis scribitur [vocalis enim in medio hoc verbum apud Hebræos non habet sed pro consequentia et legitis arbitrio.] si legatur, *dubar, sermonem significat, si deber, mortem; si daber, loquere.* Unde et 70, et Theodotus junxerunt illud præterito capitulo, ut dicerent; *Disperdent parvulos de foris, juvenes de plateis morte.* Aquila vero et Lymmachius traustulerunt, id est *loquere.*" And again, the same father, on the reading *zacar* and *zeccer* writes thus—*Nec nos terre debet quod 70 maculum et ceteri interpretes memoriam transtulerint, cum iisdem tribus literis Z, C, R, utrunque scribatur et Hebræos, sed quando memoriale dicimus, legitur zeccer quando, masculinum zacar.*" The meaning of all which is, that as the Hebrews write these words without vowels, and as the words will bear different senses, according to the different vowels that are supplied, therefore have they been translated differently by the Septuagint and other translators. Many other arguments are adduced in favor of this opinion, which we here omit, having produced enough to establish our conclusion. Let us now examine the objections with which the adversaries of this opinion impugn it.—*The first objection* is, that no language can exist without vowels, therefore neither can the Hebrew be supposed to have existed without them. *Answer*—No language can be pronounced without vowels, but the same necessity does not exist for the use of vowels in order to write the words of a language where he exemplifies this by a reference to the Samaritan language, ancient Arabic, &c. Simon, in his critical history of the Old Testament, book i. chapter 27, has some very appropriate observations on this same point.—Conformably to the excellent observations of Veith, in the work just mentioned, we say that the ancient Hebrews made certain letters of the Alphabet perform the function of vowels in the writing and reading of their books. These letters were four, *Aleph, He, Vau, Yod.* However, the use of them was attended with many difficulties; and for the right understanding of the text they required the assistance of that great key of which we shall afterwards speak. The difficulty in the use of them proceeded chiefly from three causes. First, because these same letters sometimes performed the function of consonants, which was their proper function, sometimes that of vowels; nor could it be easily discerned when they performed one function and when the other; that is, without the help of that key to which we have just referred. Secondly, the same letters could hold the place of different vowels; for *Aleph* was often pronounced *e*, oftener *a*, sometimes *i*, and *o*; *He* was more frequently expressed by *e*, but often also by *a*; *Vau* in the beginning of a word was always pronounced *u*, but in the middle and end sometimes *u* and sometimes *o*; *Yod* could have the sound of *i* or *e*. Thirdly, oftentimes none of these vowels was written in the word, but they were left to be understood. We see now why the Masorets invented the vowel points, which are fourteen in number. After the invention of these the four letters above mentioned ceased to perform the function of vowels, and began to be termed *quiescent letters*, because in consequence of this invention they are not now always pronounced, even when written, but are often quiescent; their duty being performed by the vowel point which is joined to them: indeed *Aleph* has at present no sound but that of the vowel point which is under or after it.

The second objection is, that without the vowel points the sense of the Hebrew text would be vague, doubtful, and uncertain.—Now, the adversaries say, that it cannot be supposed that God would leave the Hebrew text in this way down to the fifth or sixth century of the Christian Church. To this we answer with Veith, that the meaning of the text was by no means vague, doubtful, or uncertain; the ambiguity being prevented by the continual tradition, use, and judgment of the Hebrew Church; and in the early Christian Church the correct reading of the Hebrew text was known principally by means of the version of the Seventy. Tradition, then, was the great means by which the correct reading of the Hebrew text was known before the invention of points, and this was the great key [to the understanding of the scripture at that time] to which we have already more than once referred. From this providence in reference to the scripture, Morinus in-

fers well the counsel of God, that all should submit themselves to the judgment of the church as did the Israelites formerly, who knew that to be the genuine reading of the text which was handed down from the doctors of the law to their successors. Nor can it be urged that we assign an improbable mode of explaining how the true method of reading could be preserved for so long a period without the vowel points; for it is not difficult to be conceived how the aforesaid tradition regarding the correct method of reading the Hebrew text without points could be preserved in its integrity for so many ages; for there were in every age many doctors among the Jews, who were continually occupied with the reading of the sacred scripture, and who taught the disciples formed by them the true method of reading according to the tradition of the fathers. Add to this, that at least from the time of the captivity, the whole Jewish people were accustomed to hear portions of Moses and the prophets read in the Hebrew, every sabbath in the synagogues. It is not wonderful, therefore, that the right method of reading and pronouncing the Hebrew text was preserved without the points. Lamy observes, in reference to this matter that the children of the Turks, Arabians, Persians, and, in fine, of all the Mahometans, learn to read without the points. The same method of preserving the true reading of Greek and Latin books, was scarcely less necessary at the time when these books were written as one word, without the distinction of words, pauses, &c.

The third objection urged is taken from the fact that in the Masora itself there are certain observations regarding the points, which would seem to show that the points were invented before the time of the Masoret. For example, there are words marked as being irregularly pointed. Now, our adversaries will say, it cannot be supposed that the Masorets would point the words irregularly, and then subjoin observations on the violation of their own rules. The answer to this objection is, that the Masorat was not the work of one doctor, or of one age, and hence those who added to the Masora in later times remarked on the points which their predecessors invented. Again, they object from the words of the Gospels, Matthew v. 18, "Iota unum aut unus apex," &c., one jot or one tittle; and again, in Luke xvi. 17. "Unum apicem," &c., one tittle, where they understand *apex*, a tittle, to mean a vowel point.—The answer is, that *apex* or tittle does not mean a vowel point, but a small portion of a letter, as *iota* or *jot*, designates the smallest of the letters. The testimony of St. Jerome is clear on this point, where he says that the letter *Resh* differs from *Daleth* in apice.—A certain work called the Book of Zohar, is referred to among the other arguments which the advocates of the points adduced. But at present no one would appeal to such an authority on the subject as the Book of Zohar. See the various notices of this book by Richard Simon, in his *Critical History of the Old Testament*, book i. chapter 20. At the end of the chapter, and in several other parts of his work, he explains well the character of the book; and as to its reputed antiquity, Veith demonstrates that it is much more modern than the Jews would have us to believe.

We have said enough on the antiquity of the vowel points, which is not defended at present either by numerous or by learned advocates. In the days of Buxtorf and Cappel the case was different. These have exhausted the arguments on both side. Walton also, in his *Prolegomena* on the London Polyglot, has dwelt at considerable length on the controversy, deciding, of course, against the antiquity of the points.

We conclude this inquiry with the following appropriate observations from Veith (loco citato): "Since the vowel points are not of divine authority, but a human invention of the Rabbins, who, long after the birth of Christ, added them to the text, lest the pronunciation might be quite forgotten, it is clear that these points, considered precisely by themselves, have not an irrefragable authority. Nay, there are not wanting those who say, with Calnut, that the purity of the text has been sometimes corrupted by the Masorets out of hatred to the Christian religion. In this, however, all are agreed, that the Masorets, with the exception of the places which, according to the opinion of some, they have corrupted out of hatred to the Christian religion, were very diligent and even minute in preserving in the genuine state the other Hebrew texts of the scripture. Whence it follows that the Hebrew text can be of great service in the explanation of our Latin version; and that the interpreters of the bible can derive great assistance in their labor from a knowledge of Hebrew. They must never lose sight, however, of the authority of the Latin vulgate approved of by the Council of Trent."