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ALTERATIONS OF THE HEBREW TEXT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Many people think that we have a text for the Old Testament that has been perfectly preserved, one which could not possibly contain any errors. But that is not correct.

The truth is that the Hebrew text, as it is available to us today, contains MANY HUNDREDS OF CHANGES from the way the text was written down by the original authors. Let me hasten to add here that the vast majority of these changes do not impact on any teachings derived from the Bible. I personally am at this stage only aware of two passages where the unauthorized changes have a major impact on doctrinal understanding. Those two passages are found in Exodus chapter 34 and in Deuteronomy chapter 16, and both of these changes are discussed in specific articles also found on this website.

Of all the unauthorized changes contained in the present Hebrew text of the Old Testament, SOME are changes that were DELIBERATELY made, while the majority are genuine unintentional errors made by some of the scribes. I will present some examples of both categories below.

KETIV AND QERE

When we look into the Hebrew Scriptures there are two terms we quickly come across: "ketiv" (sometimes also spelled "kethiv") and "qere". "Ketiv" means "written", and "qere" means "read".

The vast, vast majority of Hebrew scribes were very conscientious and meticulous in the way they made new copies of the Scriptures. However, even then changes crept into the texts. So when a subsequent scribe came across what he believed was an error in the actual text of the Scriptures, then he did not simply correct the error. That would have been deemed presumptuous. No, he faithfully copied the error, but then made a notation in the margin to the effect that he believed this was an error. Later scribes would then faithfully copy the texts plus all the marginal notations. In time a very large body of marginal notations was built up.

Now the written variations in the actual text of the Scriptures are known as "ketiv", and the marginal notes are known as "qere".

The very fact that there are "written variations" in the actual text of the Hebrew Scriptures is proof that changes did in fact creep into the text.

In our English translations the translators actually followed the marginal reading (i.e. the "qere") rather than the reading that is in the body of the text in well over 200 instances. And in most cases that is very likely correct. But that means that what used to be a part of the actual text of a book of the Old Testament is now only a marginal comment; the text itself saying something different. There are also many instances where the translators followed the "ketiv" (the written variation in the actual body of the text) and ignored the "qere" reading. It goes both ways; sometimes the marginal reading makes more sense, and at other times the perceived "written variation" makes more sense. And so we are forced to choose between them.

These are examples of totally unintentional changes. Conscientious scribes meticulously copied what they perceived to be errors, but then noted this in the margin. And, as already stated above, in the vast

majority of cases this does not affect an understanding of the teachings of the Bible one way or the other.

Here is one example:

Then THOU SHALT SEE, and flow together, and thine heart shall fear, and be enlarged; because the abundance of the sea shall be converted unto thee, the forces of the Gentiles shall come unto thee. (Isaiah 60:5 AV)

Here the KJV translators followed the marginal note ("qere"), which is the verb "ra'ah", which means "to see". And thus they translated this as: "then you shall see ...". However, the actual text of this verse ("ketiv") has the verb "yare", which means "to fear, to be afraid", and I have not seen any English translation which has followed the "ketiv" here.

[Comment: The expression "qere we-la' ketiv" means "read although not written"; and the expression "ketiv we-la' qere" means "written but not read", two expressions one may encounter in studying this subject.]

NUMERIC DISAGREEMENTS

There are a number of numeric disagreements regarding the same people or the same events when we compare the accounts found in the books of Kings and in the books of Chronicles. In some cases we may be able to reason out a way to justify these discrepancies, but in other cases we simply don't have an explanation. The point is that these numeric discrepancies are simply genuine unintentional mistakes, just like the "ketiv" passages.

A simple example is this:

2 Kings 8:26 states that Ahaziah was 22 years old when he began to reign.

2 Chronicles 22:2 states that Ahaziah was 42 years old when he began to reign.

Ahaziah was either 22 years old or he was 42 years old when he began to reign, but one of the above verses must obviously contain a scribal error. Since there was nothing to be gained by making such a change, this error is obviously unintentional. But such errors DO EXIST within the Hebrew text of the Old Testament. It is one of very many such minor errors.

PLACES WHERE THE SCRIBES CHANGED GOD'S NAME

It is also well-known that the scribes (known as "soferim" or "sopherim") in many instances DELIBERATELY changed the name "YHVH" in the text of the Hebrew Scriptures to "Adonai".

Christian David Ginsburg's edition of the Massorah lists 134 places where this change was made by the scribes. Now we can debate the justifications that are presented for them having made these changes, but the bottom line is that THEY CHANGED THE TEXT of the Hebrew Scriptures. God did not give those scribes permission, let alone authority, to exchange one word for another. When God had originally inspired the word "YHVH", then God did not later change His mind and approve an alteration to the name "Adonai".

So these changes were not accidental errors; they were made deliberately and intentionally. Again, these changes do not have any major effect on any biblical teachings, since we are quite clear that God

is being spoken about, whether the text says "God" or "Lord" or "LORD" or "Eternal" or "Almighty".

So we know that some changes were made deliberately. The reasoning may appear to have been noble, but then Uzzah's motivation was very likely also "noble" when he put forth his hand to steady the ark of God (see 2 Samuel 6:6-7); however, God struck Uzzah dead for this act. So likewise, I do not believe that God approved of those scribes changing "YHVH" to "Adonai".

ONCE A CHANGE IS "IN" THEN IT IS "IN FOR GOOD"!

Here is a point we should consider. The very fact that the scribes were so conscientious as to never remove even those mistakes which they could CLEARLY IDENTIFY AS MISTAKES, meant that once an error or a mistake had been inserted into the text of the Hebrew Scriptures, then it was there to stay! It could be highlighted by marginal comments, but it could not be removed.

Now there are TWO passages (and if there are others, then I am at this stage not aware of them) where two different scribes at different times DELIBERATELY ALTERED THE TEXT, in the same way as other scribes had deliberately changed "YHVH" to "Adonai". And the weakness of the system is that once those changes were "in", then unfortunately they were also "IN FOR GOOD"!

Now consider:

Well over 200 "written variations" ("ketiv") have been identified in the body of the text of the Old Testament. Once some scribe had identified some word as "ketiv", then that information was preserved. However, there obviously is no guarantee of any kind that the scribes were able to catch EVERY "written variation". If you have evidence for over 200 changes in the text, who is to say that there are not also other changes that have NOT been documented by any of the scribes?

[Comment: I am aware of 297 instances where the KJV translators followed the "qere" reading over the "ketiv", and a further 73 instances where they followed the "ketiv" reading and rejected the "qere" reading.]

The two articles on Exodus 34:25 and on Deuteronomy 16:1-6 speak for themselves. I might mention that THE WAY in which I have established that those two passages were altered is exactly the same way that the scribes in many cases concluded that something was a "ketiv" reading, for which they then provided a "qere" reading in the margin. They used their minds, and when something didn't make sense to them, then they noted this in the margin as a "qere". The evidence I have provided in those two articles likewise exposes conflicts between the two altered passages and the rest of the Bible. However, these two altered passages are vital to justify Jewish customs and traditions regarding "the Passover", and so they have never been questioned by Jewish scholars.

So when you examine those two articles, realize that it is known that the text of the Old Testament was in one way or another, be it deliberately or be it unintentionally, altered in many other places as well.

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