Standardisation and variation in the orthography of Hebrew Bible and Arabic Qur‘ān Manuscripts
by Geoffrey Khan

At certain stages in the history of the text of the sacred scriptures of both Judaism and Islam an effort was made to standardise their oral and written form. The standardisation of the written form of the text aimed to fix not only the content and its grammatical details but also the orthography in which the words were represented. When a manuscript of the Hebrew Bible or of the Arabic Qur‘ān was produced the scribe was generally not free to follow the orthographic system which was customary in the period in which he lived but was required to reproduce the orthography which had been fixed at an earlier period, despite the fact that the orthography in use in other types of manuscript had changed.

In this paper I shall concentrate on the standardisation of the orthography of the Bible and the Qur‘ān and discuss the constraint this imposed upon scribes in the production of manuscripts. It will be argued that this constraint was not absolute but was conditional upon other aspects of the manuscript which the scribe wrote.

In certain cases the constraint on orthographic innovation was relaxed and the scribe felt a certain amount of freedom to diverge from the traditional orthography. This constraint on orthographic innovation could be relaxed because the orthography became an integral component in the overall codicological structure of Bible and Qur‘ān manuscripts which became fixed by tradition. If the codicological structure was altered in other aspects the constraint on orthographic innovation was weakened.

The extent to which the standardisation of the graphic form was observed also depended on the function which the manuscript played within society. In the production of a carefully executed model manuscript for a community the fixed tradition of the orthography of the text was meticulously followed. The Bible and the Qur‘ān, however, were also written in manuscripts which, unlike these model manuscripts, were not intended to bear the burden of the preservation and control of tradition but were only written for private study. The writer of such ‘popular’ manuscripts did not feel himself so constrained by the traditional orthography of the text and did not take such care to reproduce it in all its details. These manuscripts no doubt generally functioned as an aide-mémoire for the oral tradition of the text. They, in fact, are best considered as standing outside the written tradition, although they were generally influenced by it to a greater or lesser extent. Their existence reflects the fact that oral tradition of scripture was not always indissolubly bound with the written tradition. The transmission of the written tradition was in the hands of a specific group of people and did not have such a wide distribution in society as the oral tradition.

This leads us to another factor which is traceable in the history of at least Biblical manuscripts. Since the written tradition was controlled by a limited group of scholars it was susceptible of losing its hold on a sectarian group opposing the main religious orthodoxy with which the scholars were associated.

In what follows I shall discuss some aspects of the history of Biblical and Qur‘ānic manuscripts which illustrate these tendencies. Hebrew Bible manuscripts will be dealt with first and then parallel phenomena will be sought in the development of Qur‘ān manuscripts.

A study of the orthography of North West Semitic languages in the first millennium B.C. suggests that the traditional orthography of the Hebrew Bible was fixed during the Persian period (550 — 350 B.C.). Texts written earlier in the first half of the millennium exhibit a more sparing use of matres lectionis than is found in the traditional Biblical orthography whereas texts from the subsequent period attest to the use of an orthography which is fuller than the Biblical orthography. The official standardised orthography involved the revision of the earlier orthography and resulted in the change of such details as the spelling of final long ō with waw instead of with he and the insertion of yod before the 3rd person singular suffix of plural nouns. The general uniformity and consistency of the fixed Biblical orthography gives the impression that it was the result of a single systematic act of recension in this period. It has recently been proposed by Andersen and Forbes that this revision of the Biblical orthography coincided with the change from the use of paleo-Hebrew script to the use of the square Hebrew script in Biblical manuscripts. We know that this change in scribal practice took place at approximately this period. The survival of the earlier more defective orthography in the Qumrān scroll 4QSam and also
the continued use of the paleo-Hebrew script in a few of
the Qumran Biblical texts indicates that the early
orthography and script type did have a certain strength
of tradition. The coincidence of the orthography
reform with the change in script type in the Persian
period would be an example of how the orthography
of the text was integrally bound with the codicological
structure of manuscripts.

The earliest Hebrew Bible manuscripts are the Dead
Sea Scrolls. These emanated from a sectarian Jewish
community who had broken away from mainstream
Judaism and lived in a cenobitical community in Qum-
rán. The Bible manuscripts exhibit various types of
orthography. Some manuscripts have an orthography
which is very close to that of the model medieval
Biblical manuscripts. Others have either a more defec-
tive or a more plene orthography than the standard so
called ‘Masoretic’ orthography. The fact that the
official orthography of the Biblical text was already
fixed explains why at least some of the Qumran Biblical
texts conform more or less to the standard ortho-
graphy with its mixture of defective and plene forms.
It is relevant to note that Biblical texts found in Wádi
Murabba‘át in the Judean Desert datable to a period
only slightly later than that in which the Qumrán
manuscripts were produced all conform closely to the
standard orthography. Why were Biblical manuscripts
with non-standard orthography written in the Qumrán
community? We may invoke two of the typological
tendencies outlined above to explain this. Firstly it is
of importance to note that the circles from which the
Wádi Murabba‘át texts came were loyal to Pharisaic
Judaism and were likely to follow the orthography of the
Biblical text which the authorities had fixed. The
Qumrán community, on the other hand, were hostile
to the Pharisaic authorities under whose auspices the
orthography was fixed. It is, therefore, not surprising
that their observance of this standard was no more
than half-hearted. Another factor which should be
taken into account is that the texts with conspicuously
plene orthography such as IQIsa may have been
popular texts. The expanded orthography was prob-
ablely intended to guide the reader in private study
with regard to the vocalism of the text. Such texts, as
observed in the introduction of this paper, to some
extent stood outside the written textual tradition.

In the early Middle Ages Jewish scholars in various
centres in the Near East began to develop systems of
notation to indicate more details of the oral rendi-
tion of the Biblical text than was expressed by the tradi-
tional orthography. A systematic extension of the
orthography by the addition of matres lectionis was
not tolerated so vowel signs were devised which
expressed phonetic details independently of matres
lectionis. Three major systems of vocalisation evolved;
These are usually known as the Palestinian, Babyloni-
ian and Tiberian systems respectively. There was also
a hybrid type of Tiberian vocalisation which scholars
refer to by various names such as expanded Tiberian,
Palestino-Tiberian, Pseudo-Ben Naphtali. The ordi-
ary Tiberian system eventually became the standard
system and supplanted the other systems. Unlike the
Palestinian and Babylonian systems, which were often
used only to vocalise isolated words in the text, the
Tiberian vocalisation was complete. The signs indicated
all the phonemic vowel qualities. Vowel quantity was
not phonemic in the Tiberian reading tradition of
Biblical Hebrew. The Tiberian vocalisation system,
however, in combination with the system of cantillation
signs, which were placed on the stressed syllable of
each word, allowed the reader to determine whether
the vowel was pronounced long or short. Vowel length
was dependent on the syllable structure. A vowel
which was indicated by a vowel sign was long if it was
in a stressed syllable or in an unstressed open syllable.

Despite the fact that the vocalisation systems left the
traditional consonantal orthography unchanged it was
still felt to be an innovation in the graphic form of the
Biblical text. It was only tolerated in manuscripts
which had the form of codices but was not allowed in the
manuscripts of scroll form, which was the traditional
codicological structure of Biblical manuscripts used in
the synagogue service. We have here, then, an example
of how change in some other aspect of the codicological
form of the manuscripts allowed the graphic form of the
text to be modified. The vocalised codices were
used for study. They contained details of the oral
rendition of the text including the vocalism, the cantil-
ation and also the cases where the reading tradition
contained a word which differed from what appeared
in the written tradition. Certain of the codices also
contained textual or ‘Masoretic’ notes. In certain
respects, therefore, the codices stood outside the written
tradition of the Bible text which was perpetuated in the
synagogue scrolls.

The ‘Masoretic text’ of the codices was itself stan-
dardised. This applied especially to the Tiberian Maso-
retic text which eventually supplanted the others.
Communities possessed model codices which accura-
tely reproduced the detailed notation which was per-
fected by the last generation of Tiberian Masoretes in
the ninth century. A number of the old model Tiberian
codices which were probably produced by the Tiberian
circle of scholars themselves have survived. Many of
them are in Leningrad library collections.

In addition to these model codices, however, people
also possessed ‘popular’ codices for their own private
study. Many manuscripts of this type are found in the
Cairo Genizah. They generally have a smaller format
than the model codices. In most cases they are not
carefully written and they deviate from the standard
Tiberian text in a number of features. The majority of
these deviations are the result of carelessness and lack
of concern for complete accuracy rather than the result
of a systematic conscious effort to modify the text such
as was apparently the case in some of the ‘popular’
plene Qumrán manuscripts such as IQIsa. In some of
the ‘popular’ medieval manuscripts the consonantal orthography is slightly more plene than the traditional orthography. Additional *matres lectionis*, however, only occur sporadically and are not introduced systematically. Their insertion was no doubt the result of an unconscious interference from the contemporary type of plene orthography which was used in non-Biblical manuscripts. The ‘popular’ Biblical codices also contain many deviations from the standard Tiberian vocalisation. These can be classified into two groups. Firstly deviations which resulted from interference from the scribe’s own pronunciation tradition of the Biblical text. Although the Tiberian vowel notation system was standardised the actual Tiberian pronunciation tradition which it reflected was only used in restricted scholarly circles outside of the area of North Palestine where it originated. The standard Tiberian vocalisation of the model codices was read with different forms of pronunciation in the local communities. These non-Tiberian pronunciation traditions interfered with the vocalisation of the ‘popular’ texts, the scribes of which were not concerned to reproduce accurately the Tiberian Masoretic notation. The second category of deviations in the vocalisation of the ‘popular’ texts is constituted by those which do not reflect a different pronunciation but rather are a different form of notation. I am not referring here to non-Tiberian systems of vocalisation such as the Babylonian or Palestinian systems but rather to a non-standard use of the Tiberian signs. This non-standard use in most cases does not seem to be related to the hybrid type of Tiberian vocalisation developed in certain Masoretic circles, to which I alluded above. It is more reminiscent of the popular forms of Tiberian vocalisation which were used in the Middle Ages in non-Biblical texts. Many of these vocalised texts have been preserved in the Cairo Genizah. They are predominantly Hebrew poetry and Talmudic texts though also include non-Hebrew vocalised texts such as Judaeo-Arabic, Judaeo-Persian and Judaeo-Greek. The major component of the vocalisation which falls into this category is the use of the šewa sign. The writers of the ‘popular’ Biblical codices, therefore, only felt weakly constrained by both the traditional consonantal orthography and the standardised Tiberian vocalisation. These texts may be considered as standing outside the written manuscript tradition of both the Biblical scrolls and the model codices. They were essentially *aide-mémoires* of the oral tradition of the text which were weakly influenced by the written tradition.

In the Middle Ages Judaism was split into two main groups, the Jews following the mainstream Rabbinic tradition known as Rabbabites and those who rejected the Rabbinic tradition known as Karaites. A number of medieval Hebrew Bible manuscripts written by Karaites have survived. Some of them exhibit a rather surprising feature — they are transcriptions of the Hebrew text into Arabic script. These were mostly written between the tenth and twelfth centuries in scribal circles in Palestine.

The motivation for the Karaites to transcribe the Hebrew Biblical text had its origin in their sectarian opposition to the Rabbabites. The sect had an ambivalent attitude towards the written tradition of the Biblical text. The colophons of some of the old model codices emanating from Tiberian Masoretic circles indicate that, in at least some stage of their history, they were in the possession of Karaites communities. References to the Biblical text in the works of Karaite grammarians, lexicographers and Bible commentators make it clear that they were using Bible manuscripts written with the traditional Hebrew orthography and not Arabic transcriptions. Certain passages in Karaite literature, on the other hand, testify to their qualms about following the written tradition of the Biblical text, which had been transmitted by Rabbinic scholars. The Karaita al-Qiqisâni in his work *Kitâb al-Anwâr wa-l-Maraqib* maintains that the present reading tradition represented the original reading of the Biblical text which had been preserved since the time of the prophets. In cases where the kêtib (written text) conflicted with the qêre (reading tradition) the qêre, in his view, represented the original tradition and not a change to the text. A more explicit impugnment of the reliability of the written tradition of the Biblical text, which had been transmitted by Rabbinic scholars, is found in the work *תִּיסְדִיק בּוֹתְהֵן תֵּרוֹפָא* by the twelfth-century Byzantine Karaite Eliaj ben Abraham.

The extant Karaite manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible in Arabic script are not letter for letter transliterations of the traditional Hebrew orthography but are transcriptions of the oral tradition of the text. This is clearly shown by the fact that, where the qêre differs from the kêtib only the qêre is represented. A number of different types of transcription are found in the manuscripts. These can be classified into three groups: 1. An orthography equivalent to the plene Hebrew orthography which was used in non-Biblical manuscripts in the Middle Ages; 2. a mixed orthography containing features of both Classical Arabic and also plene Hebrew spelling; 3. a Classical Arabic type of orthography (the system used in most of the extant manuscripts). The intention of the Karaite scribes was evidently to represent the oral tradition directly in a plene orthography and discard the traditional orthography of the Biblical text with its greater number of defective spellings and its frequent conflict with the oral tradition. The earliest system of transliteration which they used was the one based on plene Hebrew orthography. Why did they not simply write the text in Hebrew script and add more vowel letters as was done by some of the Qumran scribes. We have mentioned already that the contemporary style of plene orthography did penetrate some ‘popular’ Biblical codices to a certain extent. Since, however, the extra plene spellings in these texts do not occur systematically they
resulted most likely from carelessness rather than from a conscious effort to rewrite the text with a different orthography. The Karaites, by contrast, set themselves the task of systematically representing the oral tradition of the text in a consistently plene orthography. The reverence for the fixed orthography of the Hebrew Bible, which, in the Middle Ages, had been fixed for over one thousand years, was deeply ingrained in Judaism. Despite their qualms about the written text this reverence was also felt by the Karaites. They were, therefore, constrained from rewriting the Hebrew text. It was only by writing the text in another script that they were freed of this constraint and could systematically change the orthography. We, therefore, have here an example of how the constraint of the tradition of the fixed orthography of the Bible was weakened when a change was made in some other aspect of the traditional codicological structure of manuscripts, in this case a change in script. The transcriptions were the result of a tension between the burden of tradition and sectarian opposition to authority. They were not intended to replace the traditional orthography but stood outside the written tradition and provided an alternative to it. Their status was similar to that of the aforementioned ‘popular’ Hebrew Bible codices. They were evidently only used for private study. This is shown by the fact that many of the manuscripts of the transcribed Bible texts also contained the text of one of the Karaite Bible commentaries. The traditional written tradition was continued in the Karaite communities by the model codices. One may perhaps compare this ambivalent attitude to the traditional Biblical orthography with the attitude of the Qumrán sectarians to the traditional fixed text which was followed by Pharisaic Judaism. The presence in Qumrán of Biblical scrolls such as 1QIsa, the orthography of which is very close to that of the Masoretic text, indicates that the sectarians did not totally reject the traditional graphic form of the text. It is clear, however, from the numerous scrolls with a much fuller form of spelling that they did not feel very strongly constrained by it either.

Finally, before closing our discussion of Hebrew Bible manuscripts it is relevant to draw your attention also to the orthography of the Samaritan Pentateuch. This exhibits a more abundant use of mater lectionis ‘alif than is found in the Hijāzi manuscripts. There may have been a certain chronological overlap between this new Kufic manuscript type and the Hijāzi type manuscripts with their more defective orthography. It is possible that this increase in the use of mater lectionis ‘alif for long ā was the result of concerted policy of orthographic reform in Iraq. This is suggested by the report by Ibn ‘Abi Dā‘ūd al-Sījistānī in his Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif that the governor of Iraq, ʿUbaydallāh ibn Ziyād (d. 67 A.H.), instigated a more extensive use of mater lectionis ‘alif to spell long ā in the Qur’ānic text and thereby increased it by two thousand letters. Ḥajjāj ibn Yusūl (d. 95), a later governor of Iraq, ordered that the letters of the Qurān be counted and that it be determined at which letter of which word the half way point of the text fell. He also required it to be divided into seven sections of equal length and, likewise, determine at exactly which letter the boundaries of the sections fell. The purpose of this action of Ḥajjāj was evidently to provide a means of controlling the spelling of the Qur’ānic text and preventing any additions, even of single letters. Concern to prevent the orthography of the Qurān from being modified is expressed by such statements as the following attributed to Mālik (d. 179 A.H.):

\[\text{مِسْتَلِ مَالِك: "رحمه الله هل يكتب الصحيح على ما أحدثه الناس من اضطاء، فقال لا إلا على الكتابة الأولى.}"\]

\[\text{Mālik — may God have mercy upon him — was asked "Should the Qur‘ān be written with the modified spelling which people have introduced" and he said "No (it should only be written) with the old orthography" (al-Dānī, Kitāb al-Muqni, ed. Pretzl (Leipzig 1932), 10).}\]
Was it a chance coincidence that the orthographic reform associated with 'Ubaydallāh ibn Ziyād was also accompanied by a modification in the script style from the Meccan-Medinan type to the more monumental Kūfic type, as is demonstrated by the extant manuscripts? We may have here an example of how the constraint of the tradition of orthography was weakened when other features of the traditional codicological structure of the manuscripts were modified.

The 'correct' type of orthography which was eventually prescribed in the literary sources such al-Dānī's Kitāb al-Muqni' and the successive works which were dependent on this represents a slightly fuller use of mater lectionis 'alif than is attested in the old Hijāzī type codices but still spells a substantial proportion of long ā vowels in medial position defectively. This type of orthography is the one used in the official Cairo edition of the Qur'ān, published in 1925, the consonantal text of which was reconstructed from the Mawrid al-Zamān by 'Abū Abdallāh Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Kharrāz (d. 711 A.H.).

A number of early Qur'ān fragments written on papyrus can be found in Arabic papyri. They were apparently 'popular' texts intended for private study. The orthography of these texts is equivalent to that which was used at the same period in non-Qur'ānic Arabic manuscripts. A fragment formerly in the Michaelides collection, which is datable by its script to the first Islamic century, exhibits a mixture of plene and defective orthography for medial long ā. This type of orthography with extensive defective spelling of medial long ā, which became the standard in model Qur'ān manuscripts, is attested in other papyrus documents from the first century. Later papyrus Qur'ān fragments written in a script characteristic of the late second century or the third century A.H., in conformity with the orthography of contemporary papyrus documents, exhibit a regular use of mater lectionis 'alif for long medial ā except in words which retained their defective spelling in Classical Arabic orthography such as ذلك، هذه، الرحمن، أولئك. The deviation from the standard semi-defective orthography of long medial ā, which is attested in most of the contemporary Kūfic Qur'ān manuscripts, was facilitated by the fact that these papyrus Qur'āns were evidently used only for private study and functioned as aide-mémoires for the reading tradition of the text. The burden of continuing the written tradition of the Qur'ānic text was borne by the model codices. The second and third century papyrus popular Qur'āns, moreover, diverged from the model Qur'ān manuscripts in their use of a free cursive script.

There are conflicting reports as to when vowel signs were devised for Arabic. They evidently emerged either in the last half of the first century A.H. or the first half of the second century. Their use to vocalise Qur'ān manuscripts was at first disapproved of in many circles since they were thought to be an addition to the original graphic form of the text. A statement attributed to Mālik ibn Anas with regard to the writing of vocalisation signs in Qur'ān manuscripts is important for the theme of this paper:

‘As for the small (codices) which are used for study by children — there is no harm in that, but I do not approve of that in the model codices.’ (al-Dānī, Kitāb al-Naqī, ed. Pretzl (Leipzig 1932), 133).

He forbade the writing of vocalisation signs in model Qur'āns used for official purposes (i.e. the manuscripts which people relied upon to preserve the details of the written tradition of the text) but permitted them to be written in small Qur'ān manuscripts which were used for instruction. This again reflects the weakening of the immutability of the written tradition in popular manuscripts, the codicological structure of which differed from that of the model manuscripts. Many of the extant old Qur'ān manuscripts do not have vowel signs or else have vocalisation which has been added by a later hand. Ibn 'Abī Dā'ūd al-Sijistānī (d. 316) states that vowel signs were to be used only where strictly necessary whereas Al-Dānī (d. 444), writing over a century later, prescribes complete vocalisation yet he reports that even in his day many people persisted in reading unvocalised Qur'āns. Vowel signs in the early manuscripts were generally written in a different colour of ink from that which was used for the consonants so as not to appear to be integrated with the consonantal orthography. Moreover the orthography was sometimes made fuller by adding mater lectionis in red ink. This may be interpreted as another example of how some detail of codicological structure was changed in order to relax the constraint of the written tradition.

I hope to have shown by the foregoing short survey of some aspects of the history of Hebrew Bible and Arabic Qur'ān manuscripts that the fixed tradition of immutable orthography was relaxed under certain conditions. These included deviating from the traditional codicological structure and producing manuscripts for private study. What was fixed by tradition was the overall system of codicological details of the manuscript and not the individual details independently of one another. When the system was disturbed the tradition was weakened. Only a limited circle of people bore the burden of accurately preserving the fixed orthography of the written tradition of the sacred text. The other members of the populace produced manuscripts for their own private use without feeling so uncompromisingly bound by the written tradition. Unlike the oral reading traditions of the text, the written tradition was controlled by a circumscribed group of scholars who represented the dominant
orthodoxy. This circumstance of the transmission of the written tradition weakened its influence among sectarian groups opposing the religious orthodoxy.

NOTES


2. Ibid., 322-23.


5. Freedman and Mathews, ibid., 51ff.


8. For a survey of the various vocalisation systems cf. S. Morag. The vocalization systems of Arabic, Hebrew, and Aramaic (Gravenhage 1962) and A. Dotan, art. 'Masorah', Encyclopaedia Judaica vol. XVI, cols. 1401-1482.


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