



**Dotan, Aron, ed.**

***Biblia Hebraica Leningradensia: Prepared according to the Vocalization, Accents, and Masora of Aaron ben Moses ben Asher in the Leningrad Codex***

Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2001. Pp. xxv + 1264.  
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This edition of the Hebrew Bible is a thoroughly improved version of the Tanak published in Tel Aviv in 1973. As the title indicates, it was based on the well-known manuscript B19a kept in St. Petersburg, formerly Leningrad, hence its common designation “Leningrad Codex.” It is the only extant manuscript of the complete Masoretic Bible. The editor Aron Dotan claims that his edition is now “accurate according to the Masora” (vii). This proud statement is intended to distinguish his work from other attempts to reproduce the text of B19a, such as the Kittel-Kahle edition (*BHK*<sup>3</sup>) and the Stuttgart edition (*BHS*).

It is true that both these editions contain many flaws, among them numerous erroneous and inaccurate representations of B19a. It is certainly not without reason that already for many years a large group of competent scholars has been working on the *Biblia Hebraica Quinta* (*BHQ*), which is supposed to address these issues. Due to the erratic and arbitrary treatment of text divisions in the extant scholarly editions, they are also unsuitable for Jewish ritual use. Dotan claims to have solved all these problems. But in contrast to the scholarly editions just mentioned he omits most of the *Masora parva* and *magna* of the codex without giving his reasons for this decision.

The subtitle on the title page, quoted above, creates the inaccurate impression that it was Aaron ben Moses ben Asher himself who provided the Leningrad Codex with its vocalization, accents, and Masorah. In reality it was the scribe responsible for the codex

as a whole, Samuel ben Jacob, who also copied the vowels, accents, and Masoretic notes as faithfully as he could from codices (plural!) written by Aaron ben Moses. However, he and later scribes introduced many corrections, and we do not know the principles according to which Samuel ben Jacob chose between the manuscripts of Aaron ben Moses at his disposal.

The Codex Leningradensis contains many erasures, corrections, and blurred passages where Dotan had to make choices. Verses where his printed text deviates from the codex are indicated by an uppercase “A” added to the numeral of the verse. The “A” refers to appendix A, in which Dotan renders account of these deviations. Other peculiarities of the codex, such as the inconsistently used *raphe* sign, were omitted without further documentation. Erased letters were omitted from the edition even if they were readable. Missing *maqfef* was added if it seemed to have been omitted accidentally. This too is not documented in the edition. The order of the books of the Ketubim in the Codex Leningradensis “is no longer familiar to the Hebrew reader,” and therefore Dotan changed it (xviii). The size and placing of *setumot* and *petuchot* was adapted to the Halakhah (= Maimonides), but in this case Dotan indicates at least part of the actual situation in appendix B. The layout of certain biblical songs was adapted to the Halakhah as far as possible (xix), but again a partial documentation is given (appendix C). Appendix D offers Dotan’s observations on deviations with regard to gemination in Tiberian vocalization. Appendix E lists the Scripture readings for weekly readings and the readings for holidays and special occasions.

The value of this edition is questionable. According to all experts there never was a unified tradition that one might call “the Masora” (as Dotan does [vii]), let alone that it would be justified to correct a manuscript according to “the commonly accepted reading” (xi). Dotan himself has demonstrated in many fine studies that Samuel ben Jacob sometimes followed the pronunciation practice to which he was accustomed instead of the “correct” reading according to the Ben Asher tradition. If one compares the Leningrad Codex with other early manuscripts produced in the Ben Asher tradition, such as the Cairo Codex, the Aleppo Bible, the Damascus Pentateuch, the number of variant readings with regard to *matres lectionis*, vowels, and accents is considerable. Recently members of the Pericope group have pointed out important differences with regard to the insertion of *petuchot* and *setumot* as well as the colometric layout of poems in the manuscripts belonging to the Tiberian school of Ben Asher. If one collates later manuscripts of the Tiberian tradition, quite a number of differences with regard to vocalization appears to have escaped the vigilance of the keepers of the Tiberian Masoretic tradition. Contrary to what Paul Kahle and others have asserted, some of these variants do affect the meaning of the text and should long have been made accessible to scholars. The differences with regard to both vocalization and accentuation become even more noticeable if one also

takes into account manuscripts of the Palestinian, Babylonian, and Ben Naphtali traditions. It is simply misleading to create the impression that the medieval efforts to establish a single authoritative reading tradition have succeeded completely.

No doubt the Codex Leningradensis is our most reliable complete witness for the Tiberian Masoretic tradition, but from a scholarly point of view it is unwarranted to lend a kind of canonical status to this manuscript. It should be compared to other Tiberian manuscripts, and variant readings in this and other traditions should be presented in a critical apparatus, as is the case in the Hebrew University Bible project. Moreover, it should never be forgotten that in many respects the Tiberian tradition rests on the rabbinic exegesis compiled in Mishnah, Talmud, and Midrashim. Quite often this exegesis is no longer acceptable to modern scholarship, for example when it rests on fanciful etymologizing. Especially where the Hebrew text is extremely difficult, it is worthwhile to adduce the testimony of premasoretic manuscripts such as those of Qumran and/or the ancient versions. In other words, Dotan's claim that his edition meets the needs of scholars (x) must be challenged. A scholar cannot do without a critical edition. In view of Dotan's many deviations from the codex itself, scholars will certainly prefer to consult Freedman's facsimile edition of the Codex Leningradensis (1998) in cases of doubt. Since Dotan did not take the trouble to personally collate the codex in Saint Petersburg in every spot where the photographs left something to be desired (xii), his edition has no additional value over Freedman's facsimile edition.