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A Contribution to the History of the Term "Massorah."

—In the first chapter of his *Commentarius Massoræ Historicus* (Tiberias, Part I.), Buxtorf says that the pronunciation now generally in use among the Jews of the name of the Tradition that dealt with the biblical text is **מְסוֹרָה** (after the form of **בְּנוּדָה** Jer. iii. 7), and as *samech* has a sharp sound, the word is written with a double *s*, Massorah. This manner of spelling the word, although it was not adopted by Buxtorf himself, is still everywhere in vogue; at the same time, however, one generally recalls the possibility referred to by Buxtorf that the form of the word may be **מְסוֹרָה** (with a dagesh in the ס). Buxtorf also mentions that the word was by many read **מְסָרָה** or **מְסָרָה** and even **מְסָרָה** (by Pagninus), while he himself adduces the form **מְסוֹרָה** (compare **בְּשׁוֹרָה** **עֲבֹרָה**) as possible. This remarkable fluctuation in the pronunciation of a word of such frequent use, as well as in the grammatical explanation of its form, still prevails. Compare F. Buhl, *Kanon und Text des alten Testaments* (Leipzig, 1891), page 95 *seq.* The very foundation upon which the use of the word itself rests is extremely uncertain. In the oldest sources (Talmud and Midrash) it is not to be found at all, as in these only its equivalent **מסורת** is to be met with. Similarly, later authorities speak only of the **מסורת**, which expression is very often employed to indicate the Massorah in its written form, as, for example, by Abulwalîd (see quotations in my *Life and Works of Abulwalîd, Merwan Ibn Ganah*, etc., p. 52). Elias Levita speaks constantly of the **מסורת** not of the **מסורה**, both in the title and in the body of his great work dealing with the subject; the Massorites are with him, as with Ibn Ezra, **אנשי המסורת**. I am not in possession of the requisite data to be able to explain how, in spite of all this, the expression **מסורת**, for which alone there is foundation in ancient usage and literature, has been displaced by the other terms. Elias Levita himself makes use of the other expression, **מסורה**, (mostly written *defective*, **מסרה**), in order to indicate both the Massorah as "written down by the sages of the city of Tiberias," as well as the written Massorah which is to be found in Bible MSS. (see beginning of the Third Introduction ed. Ginsburg, p. 103, **ומהם מסרה לה מסרה**, and towards the end of the same Introduction, p. 138, **המסרה הגדולה** and **מסרה קטנה** *seq.*)¹. He thus appears to recognise the name **מסרה** as applicable

¹ Instead of Ginsburg's **בל המסורה הנדפסת** p. 138, the edition 1538, p. 28, line 4, has **בל המסורת הנדפסת**.

only to the concrete form of the written Massorah, not to the Massorah in general.¹ Jacob ben Chayim, the first editor of the Massorah (in Bomberg's Bible, 1518), speaks in the Preface as well as in the prefatory remarks to the Massorah finalis, mostly of *מסורה* (always without ו), but also of *מסורת*, while he calls the written Massorah consistently *מסרה*, *defective*. His example will certainly have been of the greatest influence in the further use and general adoption of the word *מסרה*. As regards its pronunciation, the word *מסורת*, resting, as it did, upon better testimony, was decisive, both words being considered as similar substantive forms, distinguished only by the feminine endings *ת* and *ת*; and, as Buxtorf asserts, the word was pronounced *מסוֹרֶה*. The question, however, arises whether this was the original pronunciation of the form of the word written with *ה*. This may be doubted, since both Jacob ben Chayim and Elias Levita, unquestionably relying upon MS. sources, always write the word without a ו; while *מסורת* is always written with a ו. This doubt is strengthened by several very significant facts in the cognate literature. I have already pointed out (*Life and Works of Abulmalid*) that one of the two Oxford MSS. of *Kilāb-al-Luma* (No. 1,462) very often instead of *מסרה* (or *מסורת*) writes *מוסרת*, which spelling is also found in an exegete of the fourteenth century. Since then I have discovered that this variant spelling of such a well-attested word as *מסורת* can be explained by the influence of the form *מוֹסְרָה*. This form of the word is used almost exclusively to indicate the Massorah in the so-called "Massorah from Teman," which Ginsburg has edited in the third volume of his great work on the Massorah (p. 53 *seq.*). Here *מסורת* is only now and then to be met with (in Gen. xliv. 6; Exod. xxix. 15), elsewhere, *המוסרה*, also *מוסרה רבה* and *מוסרה קטנה*. This pronunciation is attested from very ancient times. The Karaite exegete, Japheth ben Ali (end of the tenth century) says in his commentary on Daniel ix. 29 (ed. Margoliouth, p. 101, line 3), *ויצבמת במוסרות* "it is fixed in the M.;" and the same plural form of the word is also to be found in the renowned St. Petersburg *Biblecodex* of the year 1010, where in the superscription of a Massoretic section, the expression occurs *ולא נאמר בְּמִסְרֹת גדלות* and *ולא במִסְרֹת קטנות*, the vocalisation being as here given, where, however, strange to say, the word is written once with cholem and once with kometz (see Baer and Strack, *Dikduke Ha-Teamin*, p. xxvi.).

¹ In Tishbi sub voc. *מסר* he does not mention the form *מסרה* at all, but only says in reference to Aboth iii. 13, *והיא המסורת הכתובה כתיב ספרי*, *המקרא*.

A further proof of the age of the form of spelling מוֹסְרָה is furnished by the circumstance that the Karaite lexicographer *David ben Abraham*¹ calls the Massorah in Arabic *אלמאסרה, מאסרה* (see my treatise: *The Grammatical Terminology of Jehudah ben David ibn Chajjag*, p. 36); he thus forms the participle of the first conjugation of the verb *מסר* after the Arabic manner, corresponding to the Hebrew construction *מוסרה* as Kal participle. The Massora Magna he also calls in Arabic *אלמאסרה אלכבורה* (see Pinsker, *Sikkute Kadmonijoth*, p. 140 of the text). It is therefore proved that the word *מסרה* has been pronounced *מוֹסְרָה* since the tenth century, and one may assume that this is not an arbitrary pronunciation, but that it was the original pronunciation of the form *מוסרה*, which grew up in addition to the older form *מסורת*. The above-mentioned lexicographer, David ben Abraham, also uses the Hebrew form *מסרה* (אל) without ו (see Neubauer: *Notice sur la Lexicographie Hébraïque*, p. 100, l. 13), as in the St. Petersburg *Biblecodex*.

It follows from the preceding that the form *מסרה* is not a later invention of the Massorah-scribes, but is to be regarded as an ancient term of the Massorites. I believe that the employment of this ending was determined by the fact that one of the encampments of Israel in the wilderness was called *מוֹסְרָה* (Deut. x. 6), and *מוֹסְרוֹת* (Numb. xxxiii. 30 and 31). Nothing was more natural than that this name should be used as a synonym for *מסורת*, whose plural *מסורות* also occurs.² It is, however, remarkable, that *מסרה* is written *defective*, while *מוסרה* in Deut. x. 6 is *plene*; but perhaps this is owing to *מסורות* being *defective* in Numb. xxxiii.³

¹ Formerly regarded as belonging to the tenth century. A later date has, however, been assigned to him. (See P. F. Frankl, Article "Karäer" in *Ersch und Grubers Allgemeine Encyclopädie*, 2 Section, xxxiii. 17.)

² Ibn Ezra in one place calls Ben Asher and Ben Naphtali *שני שרי המסורות* (see my *Ibn Ezra als Grammatiker*, p. 38, note 13), and his contemporary, the Karaite, Jehudah Hadassi, likewise speaks, referring to Ben Asher, of the *מסורות* (see Baer und Strack, *Dikduke Ha-Teumim*, p. xiii., note 14; comp. *Ibid.*, p. xxviii., line 6 from the end; *Ibid.* page 79, line 8). In *Midrash Touchuma*, *וּאֵתְחַנֵּן*, *fin.*, R. Jonathan (third century) says . . . *ניטלו מסורות החכמה ממושה*, for which passage the Midrash Petirath Moshah (Jellinek's *Beth-Hamidrash*, vol. i., p. 127) has *מוסרות החכמה*, perhaps a mistake in transcription from *מסורות החכמה*. See also *Bab. Megillah*, 3a; *Nedarim*, 37b; *אלו המסורות*, for which *Jerus. Megillah*, 74d, *fin.* has *זה המסורת*.

³ It should also be observed that *מוֹסְרָה*, *מוֹסְרוֹת* in the sense of *rineulum*, band (comp. Psalm ii. 3; cvii 14; cxvi. 16), was a very general

The pronunciation of מסורה is likewise not free from doubt. True, Buxtorf (Tiberias, *loc. cit.*), referring to the spelling מִסְוֶרָה, says, "Quæ pronuntiatio itidem communis est," and at the present day also this mode of spelling is almost universally adopted as the correct one. Levy (*Neuheb. Wörterbuch*, iii. 178) adopts this punctuation, so also Strack in the *Dictum of Akiba, Aboth*, iii. 13 (*die Sprüche der Vater*, 2, Auflage, p. 38). But in reality the spelling מִסְוֶרָה, which has been emphasized by Buxtorf, and which is based upon the expression בְּמִסְוֶרַת הַבְּרִיית (Ezek. xx. 37), appears to be more accurate. For although the word in Ezekiel is not exactly derived from מסר, but from אסר, to bind to fetter (=מִאֲסָרָה), as Abulwalid already perceived (*Kilāb-al-Luma*, p. 244, line 17; *Rikma*, p. 146), and as, following him, David Kimchi explains, yet the traditional rendering of the word seems to have assigned to it the meaning "Tradition, Handing down," in agreement with which Rashi explains בְּבְרִית לַכֹּהֵן. As a fact, the Targum retains the Hebrew word, together with the corresponding Aramaic term (במסורת קימא), and Theodotion translates, ἐν τῇ παραδόσει τῆς διαθήκης (see Field, *Hexapla II.*, 820a). Aquila, it is true, translates ἐν δεσμοῖς τῆς διαθήκης, and, following him, Hieronymus in *Vinculis Fœderis*. Still, for the dominant conception of the word in the time of the Tanaim and Amoraim, the Targum, when it is unopposed by any other explanation in the literature of tradition, is sufficiently convincing, especially as its translation is supported by Theodotion, and as Rashi gives evidence for the maintenance of the traditional view.

It is now more than probable that if the Tanaim employed the expression מסורה, not only for the text of the Scripture but also for the traditions relating to it, they did not introduce a newly-formed word into the terminology of the schools, but adopted the word from the Book of Ezekiel as a welcome substantive to the verb מסר, which latter occurs only twice in the Bible (Numb. xxxi. 5 and 16), but has passed from Aramaic into New-Hebrew, and which became, in *constructio pregnans*, an expression in common use in the schools (see Mishnah, *Aboth*, i. 1). For it is difficult to see why, for the purpose of expressing the idea of "Tradition," a word of such rare occurrence, even in biblical Hebrew, as מִסְוֶרָה (after the model of מִצְוֶרָה, בְּמִסְוֶרָה), should have been formed from the verb ימסר instead of

expression in the language of the Mishnah (see Levy, iii., 53b), and was even brought into connection with מסר by the Babylonian Amorah Raba (see *Baba Mezi'ah*, 8b.)

¹ In New-Hebrew there is no substantive of this form so far as I know, and Siegfried, in his *Lehrbuch der Neuhebräischen Sprache* (1884) is only

מְסִירָה or מְסִירָה; even מְסִירָה (comp. עֲבָרָה), מְסִירָה (comp. סְעִירָה), and מְסִירָה (comp. דְּרִשָּׁה), would have been more conformable to analogy. The linguistic process probably took the following course: on the one hand מסר, having become a familiar verb, led to Ezekiel's word מְסִירָה being used in the sense of Tradition.¹ On the other hand, the word was admitted into the terminology of the schools in order to form a substantive corresponding to the verb מסר. Had the word in Ezekiel not reached us with the Massoretic punctuation, it could certainly have been read מְסִירָה quite as well as מְסִירָה, after the analogy of מְסִירָה (from אכל), 1 Kings v. 25, as indeed Abulwalid also remarks (*loc. cit.*) that in מסרת the ס of the root has become softened, quiescent, but has not assimilated with the ס. As, however, we must assume that the word in Ezekiel was already read in the manner in which we find it punctuated in the earliest periods of the transmission of the text, it follows that the New-Hebrew expression based upon the word in Ezekiel must also be so pronounced, viz., מְסִירָה. He who speaks and writes מְסִירָה is therefore guilty of no inaccuracy, as the word in Ezekiel might also sound thus, but he has against him the facts as above presented in their historical development. Under no circumstances may מְסִירָה be regarded as a direct noun-form derived from מסר, and independent of the biblical word.

I wish further to draw attention to the interesting fact that Elias Levita, in the explanation of the word מסרות, at the beginning of the third introduction to his *Masoreth Hamasoreth*, points only to the verb מסר, but makes no mention whatever of the passage in Ezekiel,² no doubt because he explained the biblical word according to its right meaning of fetter, band, and he therefore saw in it no connection with the end-form מסורת.

The following may serve as a brief summary of the results of the above investigations into the history of the name of the Massorah:—

1. From Ezek. xx. 37 the noun מְסִירָה, as if it was derived from

able to adduce as examples of the ground-form *qattól* the "Fem. מְסִירָה, מְסִירָה" (p. 44.) The form had long lost its propagative power, and even among the Payetanim, who had the courage to revive many a rare form, it is not represented by a single example. See the register of noun-forms in Zunz, *Die Synag. Poesie des Mittelalters*, pp. 383-409.

¹ Comp. opinion of Raba referred to above, p. 787 note 3.

² What Levy (*Wörterbuch*, iii. 179 b) cites in the name of Levita appears to rest upon some confusion with another author.

the verb **מסר**, was adopted as the expression to designate oral tradition,¹ but especially the tradition fixing the pronunciation of the biblical text. (Compare specially the expression **אם למקרא אם למסורת**.) The term is also used in the plural.

2. In post-Talmudic times another substantive, also a biblical word, was applied with a similar meaning to the verb **מסר**, viz., **מִסְרָה**, pl. **מִסְרוֹת**. It was regarded as participle *hal*, and accordingly was cast in Arabic form. Under the influence of this word arose also the form **מוֹסְרֵת** instead of **מסורת**.

3. The form **מסורת** remained until modern times, and even with Elias Levita, as the usual term to designate the Massorah. The form **מסרה** or **מסורה**, its pronunciation **מִסְרָה** being copied from **מִסְרוֹת**, gradually became the customary designation of the Massoretic discussions (first edited by Jacob ben Chayim), and displaced the expression *Mâsôreth*.

4. The pronunciation **מִפְסוֹרָה** has no historical justification.

5. For **מסרה** the pronunciation **מוֹסְרָה** alone is attested from ancient times; the forms of spelling **מִסְרָה** and **מִפְסוֹרָה** rest only upon the analogy of the two styles of spelling **מסורת**.

6. The transliteration *Massorah* or *Masorah* owes its right to further existence only through its having been long naturalised in scientific literature.²

W. BACHER.

¹ It is to be observed that halachic tradition is never indicated by this expression. See the examples in Levy, iii. 178 *seq.*

² So also one may continue to write "Agadah" as the transcription based upon long and general usage for **הגדה=אגדה** (*Haggadah*, *Aggadah*) just as foreign proper names are retained in the transliteration in which they have become usual, although they be not scientifically correct. Zunz, in his great work on the history of the Aggadah (*Die Gottesdienstlichen Vorträge*) writes *Hagada* (with one *g*), and similarly in his later works which is even less correct than *Agada*, as one may suppose a root **אגה** for **אגרה**, and may punctuate the word **אֲגָרָה**.