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NUMBER OF LETTERS IN THE PENTATEUCH

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The number of letters in each of the books of the Pentateuch is not found in any edition of a Masoretic Bible before Ginsburg's. The latter derived his figures from his MS. 6, a compilation of the early part of the nineteenth century by one Simon Silberberg who intended to publish and collected subscribers for his work in 1828-1834.[1]

Professor Blau[2] pointed out that there are very curious mistakes in these numbers: to Leviticus exactly the same number of letters is given as to Genesis, and to Exodus 20,000 less than to any other book. He further proved their inaccuracy by comparing these figures with the sum of those given to the weekly portions in the Masora. Ginsburg nevertheless repeats his incorrect statements in his new edition of 1908.[3] Yet there is Masoretic information available on this point which has been overlooked by both scholars. Richard Simon in his *Histoire Critique*, book I, chapter XXVI, gives the data from a Bible MS. written in Perpignan 1300. The MS. he refers to is undoubtedly the one described as no. 7 of the *Catalogue des MSS. Hébreux et Samaritains de la Bibliothèque Impériale*, Paris, 1866, formerly MS. Oratoire 5 and thus coming from the Library of the institution with which Simon was connected. For the

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[1] Ginsburg, *Introduction to the Massoretico-Critical Edition of the Hebrew Bible*, London, 1897, p. 762-5. *Ib.*, p. 110-11, a specimen of Silberberg's method is given which shows that he followed to some extent the scheme given by Hartmann, *Linguistische Einleitung in die Bücher des A. T.*, Bremen, 1818, p. 133, which Hartmann thought to be that of the Old Masoretes.

[2] *J.Q.R.*, XVI, 359-60.

[3] In the same way Ginsburg in the IV vol. of his *Masora* takes no cognizance of Blau's proof (*J.Q.R.*, VIII, p. 352 seq.) that Saadiah's poem on the letters contains only the number of times they occur in Prophets and Hagiographa excluding the Torah.

sake of convenience I quote his words from the English transla-
tion:[4]

"I have nevertheless seen a Manuscript of Perpignan wherein
was this part of the Massoret with several others. And that no
one may doubt hereof I will set them down as I read them
reckon'd up in this manuscript Copy. There are 12 Parscioths
or great Sections in Genesis. There are 43 of those which are
call'd Sedarim or Orders. There are 1534 Verses, 20,713
Words, 78,100 Letters, and the midst of this Book consists in
these words, Ve al harveka tihich, in Chap. 27. Ver. 40. There
are five Points, (these are Points made on the top of some letters
mention'd by S. Jerom.)[5] Exodus has 11 Parscioths, 33 Seda-
rims, 1209 Verses, 63,467 Letters, and these words, Elohim Lo
Tekallel, in Chap. 22. Ver. 27, are in the very middle of this
Book. There are in Leviticus 10 Parscioths, 25 Sedarims, 859
Verses, 11,902 Words, 44,989 Letters, and these Words, Vehan-
nogea bibesar, in Chap. 15. Ver. 7, are the middle words. There
are in Numbers 10 Parscioths, 33 Sedarims, 1288 Verses, 16,707
Words, 62,529 Letters, and these words, Ve haia-is asher ebehar,
in Chap. 17. Ver. 5, are the middle words. There are in Deu-
teronomy 10 Parscioths, 31 Sedarims, 9055 Verses, 16,394 Words,
54,892 Letters, and the middle words of this Book are ve Ascita
Alpi Hadavar, in Chap. 17. Ver. 10."[6]

My attention was drawn to this quotation by a reference in an
old, otherwise useless grammatical work by Georg Sharpe[7] in
which the number of letters is discussed in order to prove the

[4] *A Critical History of the Old Testament. Written originally in French
by Father Simon, Priest of the Congregation of the Oratory. And since
translated into English. By a Person of Quality* [R. Hampden]. London,
1682, p. 162. He refers to the same MS. in chapter XXIII, p. 147, with
the words: "I have seen a MS. which had 24 Books of the Bible which had
been writ at Perpignan in the year 1300 in a neat Character."

[5] On the margin he adds the reference: Hieron. Quest. Hebr. in Gen.

[6] The Samaritans also have counted words and letters of their Pentateuch;
see *Hebraica*, IX, 222 3; *JBL.*, XXV, 40 2.

[7] Two Dissertations: I. Upon the Origin, Construction, Division, and
Relation of Languages. II. Upon the Original Powers of Letters; wherein
is proved from the Analogy of Alphabets, and the Proportion of Letters,
that the Hebrew ought to be read without Points. To which is added, The
Second Edition, enlarged, of a Hebrew Grammar and Lexicon, without
Points. By Gregory Sharpe, LL.D. London, 1751.

unreliability of the Masoretes. It is interesting to compare his
method with that of Professor Blau[8] who repeated the same
investigation using as one of the three texts on which he bases
his calculations the very edition consulted by Sharpe. As
Sharpe's book is not very common it may not be superfluous to
reprint his words (p. 69-72) in full:

"The Masorets are said to have counted every letter in every
book, and to have left us the exact number of times that each
letter occurs throughout the Bible. It must have been very diffi-
cult for them, not having the artificial arithmetic of the moderns,
to manage very large numbers; and, to be sure, they did not
imagine that any man would be so idle as to reckon them up
after them, to prove the truth or falshood of their calculations:
And if the proportion of some of their letters had been more
accurately expressed, the reader would not have been troubled
with the following supputation:

"In the bible published by Desmarestz at Amsterdam, Anno
1701, without points, each leaf contains four columns, each
column 51 lines, and each line, at a medium, 21 letters; which
is less than the truth. To determine the number and proportion
of letters, I cast up four columns, in four different books. Part
of the 27th chap. of Genesis, making a complete column, contains
1110 letters; part of the 23d chap. of Jeremiah 1090; the book
of Obadiah 1121. For a medium, if you add these numbers
together, and divide the total by four, you have 1092, which is
more than 21 letters to a line. After this I went through the
bible, page by page, and allowed 21 letters for each line that I
supplied, in order to make the number of lines in every column
full 51, where the beginning of books, of chapters, or of sections,
occasioned any break or defect in the lines: Allowing also for
six blank columns after the Pentateuch, for four blank columns
between Kings and Isaiah, for six before the Psalms, and two
at the end: And as some few pages of names and numbers did
not contain 21 letters in each line, I reckoned them at 19 letters
the line. On the whole, in this way of supputation, I deducted
20 leaves, 1 column, and 18 letters from the 293 leaves there are
in the whole book: And then multiplying the remainder by 4
for the number of columns, and the product by 51 for the num-

[8] *J.Q.R.* VIII, p. 345-46.

ber of lines, and that again by 21 for the number of letters, the total came out 1,168,083; which, although it be less than the truth, is 352,803, more than 815,280, the number of the Masorets. And if you were to take away 400 columns, or 100 leaves from the 293 there are in the book, the remainder alone will exceed the Masoretic number by 11,532. Hence, to use the words of Buxtorf, Luculenter perspicitur, quanta horum hominum fuerit industria, quam laboriosum studium, quantusque zelus, ut integritatem vel in minimo APICE inviolatam conservarent.

"Pere Simon says, he saw a manuscript at Perpignan in Spain (sic), in which there was an account of the number of letters contained in the Pentateuch, very different from that of Rabbi Saadia, which is called the Masoretic number. In the Pentateuch only, according to that MS, there are 303,977 letters. And if, according to my manner of computing them, you allow 13 columns and the two blank columns after the Pentateuch, which belong to p. 75 and four lines, which is near the truth, and deduct this from the product of $75 \times 4 \times 51 \times 21$, you will have $305,151 =$ the number of letters in the Pentateuch. This is 1,174 more than in the MS. of Perpignan; but then it is as near as possible: For if I had allowed 50 instead of 51[9] for the number of lines, and 20 for 21, the number of letters in a line, the total would have come out 19,057 less than in the MS. If I had allowed 51 lines in a column, and only 20 letters to a line, the number would have been 13,357 less than in the MS. If I had allowed 21 letters to a line, and but 50 lines to a column, the number woud have been less than that of the MS. by 4,811. The difference therefore of 1,174 is not to be regarded. It is rather a proof that neither of the sums are very far from the truth; but which is nearest will not be readily determin'd by those, who know how difficult it is to sum up such a number of letters."

Sharpe comes back to this question in the preface to his Lexicon p. 9-11 and here he gives some really valuable information as far as these minute questions are of interest.

"I have lately received an account of the numbers taken by Meyer Cohen, a Jewish teacher, learned in his own language, under the direction and for the satisfaction of a gentleman

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[9] Blau deducts four lines less and his result (ib. p. 346) is accordingly slightly different (305235).

skilled in the mathematic sciences, who required the sum of the
letters to be taken or cast up in small parcels, verse by verse;
which was done, and the entire sums are as follow:

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                              י......31530......(31522)¹⁰
                              ו......30513......(30419)
                              ה......28052......(28148)
                              א......27057......(27055)
                              ב......26344......( 1634)
(14474)..14472......כ.... )
(10616)..10623......ם.... } 25095
                              ל......21570......(21612)
                              ר......18125 .....(18106)
                              ת......17049......(17960)
                              ש......15596......(15592)
( 9873).. 9854......ג.... )
( 4352).. 4257......ן.... } 14111
( 8616).. 8610......כ.... )
( 3362).. 3350......ך.... } 11960
                              ע......11247......(11244)
                              ח...... 7186......( 7187)
                              ד...... 7032......( 7034)
( 3975).. 3976......פ.... }
(  831)..  834......ף.... } 4810
                              ק...... 4694......( 4701)
( 2929).. 2925......צ.... /
( 1033)..  1067......ץ.... \ 3992
                              ז..... 2198......( 2200)
                              ג ..... 2109......( 2105)
                              ם...... 1833 .....( 1843)
                              ט...... 1802......( 1812)
                              ─────
              Total.......304805
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The number of Letters in
    Genesis............... 78964
    Exodus............... 63529
    Leviticus............. 44790
    Numbers 63530
    Deuteronomy..........54892

        Total 304805

According to my account..305151
Difference only........... 346
According to the MS. of
    Perpignan...............303977
Difference................ 828

[1] For the sake of comparison I add in brackets the numbers of Silberberg
as put together from Ginsburg's Massorah by Blau (ib., p. 352-3).

Evidently Meyer Cohen did the same work which Silberberg repeated seventy years later and with very similar results. Considerable differences we only find in a few instances: with ל they amount to 40; with ו to nearly 100; and with ה to 900; in a few other instances differences amount to about 20. The only very large differences we find in reference to ב. Here Ginsburg gives the number 1634 while the number found by Cohen amounts to 26.344. Blau had pointed out the evident incorrectness of the former figure in this instance. But his similar claims in reference to נ ז ם ר are not substantiated by the calculations of Cohen.