

The Battle Over the Hebrew Vowel Points,
Examined Particularly As Waged in England

By

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I. Introduction

הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר הָיָה אֵל-יְרֵמְיָהוּ מֵאֵת יְהוָה לְאמֹר כֹּה-אָמַר יְהוָה
אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְאמֹר כָּתֹב-לְךָ אֵת כָּל-הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר-דִּבַּרְתִּי אֵלֶיךָ אֶל-סֵפֶר
הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר הָיָה אֵל יֵרֵמְיָהוּ מֵאֵת יְהוָה לְאמֹר כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה
אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְאמֹר כָּתֹב לְךָ אֵת כָּל הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתִּי אֵלֶיךָ אֶל סֵפֶר

“The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying, Thus speaketh the LORD God of Israel, saying, Write thee all the words that I have spoken unto thee in a book...” (Jer 30:1-2). When God revealed Himself so to Jeremiah, did the prophet write down the pointed Hebrew text above,¹ with the addition of accent marks, or only the unpointed consonants—or perhaps even only those consonants without the so-called vowel letters? Certainly the answer to a question of this kind has large theological and hermeneutical significance. Can a solely consonantal text serve as the perspicuous, final, and ultimate authority in all matters pertaining to God, or does its ambiguity lead to the necessity of church tradition to properly understand the Word of God? How does the pointing, or lack thereof, of the text influence the doctrine of inspiration? Would the addition of points, accents, and other things to a supposedly consonantal original text violate “Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you” (Deut 4:2) and mean that the Old Testament was not “by [God’s] singular care and providence kept pure in all ages”?² Such

¹ Note that the Hebrew *Textus Receptus*, the 2nd edition of the Bomberg Masoretic Text as edited by Ben Chayyim, fully pointed the Tetragrammaton, and so printed יהוה as in the text above; the modern critical texts print יהוה, omitting the cholem, and so differ in the pointing of the Divine Name in thousands of places—defenders of the points would therefore generally lament the modern United Bible Societies Hebrew text printed above as woefully corrupt, and not that “Hebrew original of the OT which we have received and to this day do retain as . . . inspired by God” (The Formula Consensus Helvetica of 1675, Canon 2, quoted from *TrinJ* 11:1 (Spring 1990) p. 115) The Hebrew *Textus Receptus* (and Greek *Textus Receptus*, for that matter) are still being distributed by the Trinitarian Bible Society (U. S. A. Branch, 1600 Leonard St., N. W., Grand Rapids, MI 49504) as they have been since its formation in 1831. The 1524-1525 five volume *Biblia Rabbinica* edited by Ben Chayyim, as originally published with targums, Massorah, and rabbinic commentaries, is available from Good Books, 2456 Devonshire Road, Springfield, IL, 62703. It is also worthy of note that “the . . . Hebrew *Vorlage* . . . of the Targums . . . was very nearly the same as that of our ‘received text’ (i. e., the second Bomberg edition)” (pg. 54, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, Gleason L. Archer, rev. ed. Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1994).

² The Westminster Confession of Faith of 1647, 1:8, pg. 604 in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, vol 3., 4th ed., New York, NY: Harper and Brothers, 1919.

questions as these shake the foundations of Christianity, and, in the theological ferment that followed the Reformation, formed the subject of heated debate. Indeed, the argument is not completely over; while the overwhelming majority of modern Hebrew scholarship believes in the Masoretic addition of the points, some sections of fundamentalism still hold to a pointed *autographa*.³

II. General Background to the Controversy, Including Affairs on the Continent

Medieval Judaism accepted the inspiration of the Hebrew points⁴ and generally dated them to Moses, although Ezra was often held to have exercised a prophetic role in the standardization of the text;⁵ the available copies were considered perfectly preserved from the

³ For example, the KJV-only, Landmark Baptist periodical *The Plains Baptist Challenger*, a ministry of Tabernacle Baptist Church of Lubbock, TX, on pgs. 3-8 of its July 1991 edition, reprinted George Sayles Bishop's sermon "Inspiration of the Hebrew Letters and Vowel Points," which defended the coequality of the points and the consonants, from pgs. 43-59 of *The Doctrines of Grace and Kindred Themes*, George Sayles Bishop, New York, NY: Gospel Publishing House, 1919; note as well his "Relative Value of the Old Testament" (pgs. 88-100) and "The Testimony of Scripture To Itself," pgs. 19-42.). Bishop was a contributor to the epoch-making volumes *The Fundamentals* ("The Testimony of the Scriptures to Themselves," pgs. 80-97, vol. 2, *The Fundamentals*, eds. R. A. Torrey, A. C. Dixon, etc., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1970, reprint of the original 1917 ed. of the Bible Institute of Los Angeles) although he did not address the question of the Hebrew vowels in his article in that series apart from a statement that "We take the ground that on the original parchment . . . every sentence, word, line, mark, point, pen-stroke, jot, tittle was put there by God" (pg. 92, *The Fundamentals*, vol 2.), which was ambiguous enough to satisfy consonant-only fundamentalists. Furthermore, the young-earth creationist organization *Answers in Genesis* has put John Gill's dissertation on the originality of the points on the web, and the Online Bible has made it a downloadable module (see <http://www.onlinebible.net/topics6.html>).

⁴ There seem to be very few possible exceptions to this view in medieval Judaism; the only two possible prominent candidates would be the ninth century Natronai ha-Sheni ben Hilai and the twelfth century Ibn Ezra (pg. 63, Gray, Edward McQueen, *Old Testament Criticism: Its Rise and Progress*, New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1923, also pg. 44-45, Preface to *Massoreth Ha Massoreth*, Ginsburg). Their testimony is asserted not to be in favor of a Masoretic origin of the points by disputants on the pro-points side such as Buxtorf and Owen (i. e., pg. 110, *Of the Integrity and Purity of the Hebrew and Greek Text of the Scripture; with Considerations on the Prolegomena and Appendix to the Late "Biblia Polyglotta,"* in vol. IX, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. Gould, William H, & Quick, Charles W., Philadelphia, PA: Leighton Publications, 1865). A representative affirmation of the inspiration of the points is made by Kimchi: "[T]he vowel-points should . . . not . . . in any way be changed from what they were as given to Moses on Sinai" (p. 81a, *Michlol*, ed. Hechim Fürth, 1793; cited. pg. 122, *Massoreth Ha Massoreth*, Levita, trans. Ginsburg). Whitfield (pgs. 250ff. Whitfield, Peter, *A Dissertation on the Hebrew Vowel-Points, showing that they are an original and essential part of the Language*. Liverpool, 1748) shows that the quotations from Ibn Ezra that are alleged to show that he believed in the recent invention of the points do not do so, but simply state that the vowels were passed down by the Tiberian Masorites.

⁵ It was "the tradition of the Jews, once so popular among the Protestant divines . . . that Ezra, by divine inspiration, published an edition of the sacred books, exhibiting in every page and line, an infallibly correct and perfect text... This tradition had obtained footing in the church so early as the days of Tertullian" (pg. 46, Porter, J. Scott, *Principles of Textual Criticism*, London, England: Simms and M'Intyre, 1848. cf. pgs. 115-117, Whitaker, William, *Disputations on Holy Scripture*, Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 2000, reprint, 1st pub. in 1588).

time of their original inspiration, and not only consonants and vowels, but Masorah and tradition, handed down unchanged from God to the patriarchs to the present day.⁶ However, in 1538 Elias Levita, a famous Jewish grammarian and scholar, published his *Massoreth Ha-Massoreth*,⁷ which asserted that the vowels had been added by the Masorites c. A. D. 500,⁸ although they

⁶ “At the revival of learning in the west of Europe, a short time before the era of the Reformation . . . Jewish teachers... seem either to have had or to have affected the most unreasonable opinions as to the infallible accuracy with which their scriptures had been handed down; they held that every letter, vowel-point, and accent which was found in the modern copies of the Old Testament was of divine authority; and that not a single thing, however minute, had been added, altered, or omitted, since the time of the sacred writers. These opinions were too hastily assumed as true by most of their Christian pupils.” pg. 59, Scott, *ibid*.

⁷ This is available in *The Library of Biblical Studies*, ed. Harry M. Orlinsky, *Jacob Ben Chajim Ibn Adonijah's Introduction to the Rabbinic Bible and The Massoreth Ha-Massoreth of Elias Levita*, trans. and notes by C. D. Ginsburg, 2nd ed., New York, NY: KTAV, 1968.

⁸ Levita's view did not go unchallenged among the Jews; Azzariah de Rossi, in his *The Light of the Eyes of 1574-5*, devotes chapter 59 in part 3 to an examination of Levita's arguments and presents historical evidence for his position. He argued that the existence of the vowels seems to be indicated in the Talmud, that the *Bahir* and *Sohar*, which he asserts were written before even the Mishna was edited, specify the points by name and ascribe a divine origin to them, the analogy with other languages requires them, the nature of Hebrew necessitates the permanent existence of the points, the command to write the law “very plainly” (Deut 27:8) requires pointed copies of the text, even if these were not universally made, and Jerome appears to refer to the points. See pg. 52-53, “Life of Elias Levita,” in Ginsburg, *ibid*.

The interpretation of de Rossi appears to have support from the Targummim on Deuteronomy 27:8. Targum Neofiti reads, “And you shall write on the stones all the words of this Torah, written, inscribed [חקיקן, Peal passive participle, “being engraven”] and explained well [מפרש], Pael passive participle, “being specified” + יאות, “rightly, properly”], so as to be read [מתקרא], Ithpeel participle from קרי, thus, “to call by name”] and translated into seventy languages” (והכתבון על אבנייה ית כל פתגמי אוריתה הרה כתיב חקיק ומפרש ומתקרא ומתרגם בשבעים לשון:). If the Torah was to be “engraven” and “specified” on the stones so that “all the words” would be able to be “called by name” and accurately translated into seventy languages, specific, vocalizable words, including vowels, would have been required. The Targum Pseudo-Jonathan (Targum Yerushalmi I) on Deuteronomy 27:8 reads, “And you shall write on the stones all the words of this Torah, an engraved and distinct writing, read in one language and translated into seventy languages” (אבניא ית כל פתגמי אורייתא חדא כתב חקיק ומפרש מתקרי בחד לישן ומיתרגם בשבעין לישנין) (והכתבון על אבנייה ית כל פתגמי אורייתא חדא כתב חקיק ומפרש מתקרי בחד לישן ומיתרגם בשבעין לישנין). Here again the Targumic wording supports a vocalized text being engraved on the tablets. Compare also Targum Yerushalmi II, where Fragment Targum Paris reads: ומפרש טבא מתקרי בחד לישן ומתורגם בשבעין לישן: and Fragment Targum Vatican reads: ומתורגם בשבעין לישן: והכתבון על אבניא ית כל מילי שבה אורייתא חדא כתב חקיק ומפרש טבא מתקרי בחד לישן ומתורגם בשבעין לישן: והכתבון על אבניא ית כל מילי שבה אורייתא חדא כתב חקיק ומפרש טבא מתקרי בחד לישן ומתורגם בשבעין לישן: (cf. also MS D).

One also notices statements in the Talmud such as: “Said Mar Zutra, “Read the verse as though the vowels yielded not, *that they may learn*, but *that they may teach*” (*Bavil Tractate Hagigah*), which certainly look like evidence for the existence of the points at the time of its composition.

Furthermore, de Rossi's contention that the Law would not be “very plain” as mandated in Deuteronomy 27:8 without vowels deserves serious consideration. The verse reads, “And thou shalt write upon the stones all the words of this law very plainly.” (וְכָתַבְתָּ עַל-הָאֲבָנִים אֶת-כָּל-דִּבְרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת בְּאֵר הַיָּשָׁב:). One notes that the only other reference to writing plainly in Scripture is Habakkuk 2:2: “And the LORD answered me, and said, Write the vision, and make *it* plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it” (וְיִשְׁעֵנִי יְהוָה וְיֵאמְרַךְ כְּתוּב חֲזוֹן וּבְאֵר עַל-הַלְלוֹת לְמַעַן יָרוּץ קוֹרֵא בּוֹ:). Why would not the way of making the Law “very plain” so that “he may run that readeth it” be by writing a pointed copy? Would the people be able to “write upon [the stones] all the words of [the] law” (Deuteronomy 27:3) so that they could “keep all the commandments” (27:1) in them with an unpointed copy? How would they know whether or not they were forbidden to boil goats in their mother's milk (תִּלְבַּב) or fat (חֵלֶב), for

represented the true vocalization and interpretation of the text as originally given by inspiration.⁹ Among the Jews, Levita's "denying the divine origin and antiquity of the vowel-points was regarded not only as heterodoxy, but as a most unpardonable sin."¹⁰ The idea of the recent addition of the points was popular among the Catholics, for it lent support to their idea of the superiority of the Latin Vulgate to the Hebrew (and Greek) original, formally canonized in the Council of Trent,¹¹ and became a tool in anti-Protestant polemic, for the ambiguity which resulted from the removal of the points mitigated the Reformers' doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture and supported the Romanist contention for the necessity of infallible interpretation by their organization.¹²

Indeed, many among the Catholics had, to better oppose the Jews, held to the late origin of the points for some time in the medieval era. Raymond Martin (c. 1220-1287), the Dominican, argued that the points were added by Ben Naphtali and Ben Asher around 900-960 and the *Emendations of the Scribes* were a few of many willful Jewish corruptions and perversions of the Hebrew text to erase testimonies to Christianity. The Jewish proselyte to Catholicism Nicholas de Lyra (c. 1270-1340) also asserted the late addition of the points. Jacob Perez de Valencia (c. 1420-1491), an Augustinian hermit, asserted that "no faith is to be placed

example (Exodus 23:19; 34:26; Deuteronomy 14:21), since, without vowels, the two words are exactly the same (אֱלֹהִים), and there is nothing in the context of the texts that would prove the one or the other reading is correct?

⁹ "Levita did not question the validity of the vowel sounds, but only the vowel signs." (pg. 308, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism, vol. 1: A Study of Theological Prolegomena*, Robert D. Preus (Saint Louis, MS: Concordia, 1970). Advocates of the inspiration of the vowel points found Levita's affirmation that "the Vowels and Accents, with which every Word was to be pronounced, and all the *Dageshes*, and other Points, to regulate the reading, should be retained . . . by Tradition and Memory . . . [which] is the only Foundation, upon which, *Elias Levita* and his Followers depend for the Truth of their Doctrine . . . is almost as easy to suppose [as] that the whole Text might have been retained [perfectly in memory, consonants and all]" (pg. 20, *A Dissertation on the Hebrew Vowel-Points, showing that they are an original and essential part of the Language*, Peter Whitfield. Liverpool, 1748).

¹⁰ Pg. 156, "The Vowel-Points Controversy in the XVI and XVII Centuries," B. Pick. *Hebraica*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press), 8:3-4 (April-June 1892).

¹¹ "But if any one receive not, as sacred and canonical, the said books [Bible with Apocrypha] entire with all their parts, as they have been used to be read in the Catholic Church, and as they are contained in the old Latin Vulgate edition... let him be anathema... Moreover, the same sacred and holy Synod... ordains and declares, that the said old and vulgate edition... be... held as authentic; and that no one is to dare, or presume to reject it under any pretext whatever." *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, Fourth Session, April 8, 1546, "Decree Concerning the Canonical Scriptures," pg. 82 of Philip Schaff, *Creeeds of Christendom*, vol. 2, New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1919.

¹² "no one, relying on his own skill, shall, — in matters of faith, and of morals pertaining to the edification of Christian doctrine... presume to interpret the said Scripture contrary to that sense which holy mother Church— whose it is to judge of the true sense and interpretation of the holy Scriptures— hath held and doth hold; or even contrary to the unanimous consent of the Fathers; even though such interpretations were never [intended] to be at any time published. Contraveners shall... be punished with the penalties by law established." (pg. 83, Schaff, *ibid.*)

in the Holy Scriptures, as the Jews now interpret and punctuate them.”¹³ The body of the first generation of Reformers,¹⁴ including Luther,¹⁵ Calvin,¹⁶ and Zwingle, taking up the Catholic

¹³ For most of the information in this paragraph, including sources, see pg. 44-47, Preface to *Massoreth Ha Massoreth*, Ginsburg. De Valencia also stated that “After the conversion of Constantine the Great, the Rabbins perceived that great multitudes of Gentiles embraced Christianity with the greatest devotion all over the globe; that the Church prospered very favourably; and that also of the Jews an immense number became convinced of the truth by experience and miracles, whereby their gains and revenues were lessened. Roused by this wickedness, they assembled in great multitudes at the Babylon of Egypt, which is called Cairo, where they, with as much secrecy as possible, falsified and corrupted the Scriptures, and concocted about five or seven points to serve as vowels, these points having been invented by Ravina and Ravashe, two of their doctors. The same Rabbins also concocted the Talmud.” Ginsburg, *ibid.* John Owen lists Leo Castrius, Gordonius Huntlaeus, Melchior Canus, Petrus Galatinus, Morinus, Salmeron, Pintus, and Mersennus as Catholics who argued that the Old Testament was corrupted by the Jews; Bellarmine, Genebrard, Sixtus Senensis, “with most of the rest of them” argued that the negligence of scribes led to its corruption. (pgs. 90-91, Owen, John, *Of the Integrity and Purity of the Hebrew and Greek Text of the Scripture; with Considerations on the Prolegomena and Appendix to the Late “Biblia Polyglotta,”* in vol. IX, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. Gould, William H, & Quick, Charles W., Philadelphia, PA: Leighton Publications, 1865.)

¹⁴ Bert Loonstra, in “Scholasticism and Hermeneutics,” (pgs. 295-306 of *Reformation and Scolasticism*, eds. Willem J. van Asselt & Eef Dekker, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001), asserts that “as late as 1627 a less rigorous position [than the view that the vowel points were in the original Hebrew text] was held by Rivetus... although there was no reason to be afraid that this assumption would cause uncertainty about the meaning of the original text.” (pg. 296), and cites *Isagoge seu Introduction generalis, ad Scripturam Sacram Veteris & Novis Testamenti* (Leiden, 1627), 100-5 by A. Rivetus. Note, however, that Rivetus changed his view back to one of the originality of the points after reading Buxtorf Jr.’s reply to Cappel’s *Anticritica*, a fact which Loonstra does not mention; Turretin asserts that Rivetus was only dissuaded from his former position in favor of their originality by the *Anticritica* in the first place (pg. 122, Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*). Loonstra also asserts that Rivetus’ position was “in line with the views of Calvin, Zwingli, and Piscator,” (pg. 296), although Piscator remarked in his commentary on Matthew 5:18 that “it appears from this that the Holy Bible in the time of Christ had the points, and that the punctuation was approved by our Savior” (quoted from Ginsburg, *ibid.*, cf. pg. 45, Bishop, *Doctrines of Grace*; Edward McQueen Gray, in his *Old Testament Criticism: Its Rise and Progress From the Second Century to the End of the Eighteenth; A Historical Sketch* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1923), provides the exact Latin passage from Piscator’s 1594 commentary on pgs. 236-237, cf. 65-66.) Muller also, with Loonstra but contrary to Ginsburg, Bishop, and Gray, puts Piscator within a list of those who favored the Masoretic origin of the points (pg. 56, “The Debate over the Vowel Points and the crisis in orthodox hermeneutics”); while those who put Piscator with those who support the Mosaic origin of the points have his commentary on Matthew 5:18, the men who place him among those who believed in their Masoretic origin do not state evidence for their view. Interestingly, neither side seems to acknowledge the existence of another school of thought about his position.

¹⁵ i. e., “At the time of St. Jerome, the points did not as yet exist, and the whole Bible was read without them. I submit that it is the modern Hebrews who affixed them, in order to give a proper sense and meaning to the Hebrew language. However, since they are not friends but enemies of Holy Writ, I often utter words which strongly oppose these points” (Luther on Gen 47:31) and “that most dangerous people, the Jews, falsify the words of the prophets with the points and distinctions; and their points, which are nothing but a modern invention, most assuredly are not to be preferred to the simple, correct, and grammatical sense.” (Comment. on Is 9:6), pg. 49, Ginsburg, *ibid.*

¹⁶ While Calvin did not take a stand in favor of the inspiration of the vowels, he did follow the general consensus of his era and accept as correct the pronunciation *Jehovah* (cf. Exodus 6:3; Psalm 83:18; Isaiah 12:2; 26:4, KJV) for the Tetragrammaton. “It would be tedious to recount the various opinions as to the name ‘Jehovah.’ It is certainly a foul superstition of the Jews that they dare not speak, or write it, but substitute the name ‘Adonai’; nor do I any more approve of their teaching, who say that it is *ineffable*, because it is nto written according to grammatical rule. Whithout controversy, it is derived from the word הַיָּהוָה , *hayah*, or הָוָה , *havah*, and therefore it is rightly said by learned commentators to be the essential name of God, whereas others are, as it were, epithets. Since, then, nothing is more peculiar to God than eternity, He is called Jehovah, because He has existence from Himself, and sustains all things by His secret inspiration. Nor do I agree with the grammarians, who will not have it

viewpoint, now backed with the apparently substantial¹⁷ arguments of Levita, and not necessarily thinking through all the consequences, were happy to, in the name of *sola Scriptura*, shed what they perceived to be mere Rabbinic tradition along with the inventions of Catholicism; moreover, a desire to stay on the good side of the State and so retain life and freedom, and contentions with Catholics about pressing matters from the sacraments to the Pope to purgatory would naturally seem a higher priority than the examination of Rabbinic literature to dispute the origin of Hebrew vowels.

However, the church at Rome, displeased with the Reformers' cry that the Bible, unfettered by tradition, was the complete and authoritative Word of God, took Levita's assertion of the recent origin of the points and wielded it against the Protestants, affirming that it demonstrated that the Bible could not be understood apart from the Catholic church. For example, John Morinus (1591-1659), Catholic convert from Protestantism, represents typical counter-reformation apologetic:

The reason why God ordained the Scriptures to be written in this ambiguous manner [without points] is because it was His will that every man should be subject to the *Judgment of the Church*, and not interpret the Bible in his own way. For seeing that the reading of the Bible is so difficult, and so liable to various ambiguities, from the very nature of the thing, it is plain that it is not the will of God that every one should rashly and irreverently take upon himself to explain it; nor to suffer the common people to expound it at their pleasure; but that in those things, as in other matters respecting religion, it is His will that the people should depend upon the priests.¹⁸

Argumentation of this sort helped bring the Protestants, to avoid such damaging conclusions, to take the traditional Jewish position and affirm the originality and inspiration of the points. On the Continent, for example, by 1609, Amandus Polanus (1561-1610), professor of theology and Old Testament exegesis at the University of Basel,¹⁹ argued for the inspiration of the points on the basis that Scripture teaches the inspiration of words, and not consonants alone, or merely thoughts, and that the faith was based on the words of the prophets, not of the Masorites.²⁰

pronounced, because its inflection is irregular; because its etymology, of which all confess that God is the author, is more to me than an hundred rules." (*Harmony of the Law: Commentaries on the Last Four Books of Moses, Arranged in the Form of a Harmony* vol. 1, comment on Exodus 6:3, John Calvin, trans. Charles William Bingham. elec. acc. *John Calvin Collection*, AGES Digital Software Library, Albany, OR: 1998, ver. 1.0)

¹⁷ In contrast with, for example, the opinion of De Valencia in the previous footnote.

¹⁸ quoted in Ginsburg, pg. 50, from Morinus' *Biblical Exercitations on the Hebrew and Greek Texts* (*Exercitationes biblicae de Hebraici Graecique textus Sinceritate*), Exeritat. iv. cap. ii, s. 8, p. 198; Paris, 1633.

¹⁹ pg. 861, Elwell, Walter A., ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1984.

²⁰ pgs. 296-297, Loonstra, *ibid.*

Buxtorf Sr. took the same position that year in his *Thesaurus Grammaticus*.²¹ The points found numerous defenders among men like Gerardus, Junius, Gomarus, Polanus, Whitaker, Ussher, Rainolds, Buxtorf Sr. and Jr., Voetius, Deodatus, Lightfoot, and Heidegger.²² Lutherans such as Flaccius, Gerhard, who brought “the view into general acceptance among Luthern theologians,”²³ and Dannhauer²⁴ defended the points, and their originality and inspiration became a fundamental theological tenet of Reformed high orthodoxy.²⁵ Furthermore, in contrast with some willingness among the partisans of Rome to engage in lower criticism, usually with the intention of undermining the authority of the extant original language copies, Protestants generally believed “the original texts of the Old and New Testaments [had] come down to us pure and uncorrupted”²⁶ and consequently affirmed the preservation of both the New Testament *Textus Receptus*²⁷ and the 1524-1525 Hebrew Old Testament, the 2nd Rabbinic Bible edited by Jacob ben Chayyim, “accepted as the authoritative text (*textus receptus*) for four hundred years

²¹ pg. 227, Burnett, Stephen G., *From Christian Hebraism to Jewish Studies: Johannes Buxtorf (1564-1629) and Hebrew Learning in the Seventeenth Century*, Leiden, the Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1996.

²² Turretin (himself a prominent apologist for the points) lists in their favor “many celebrated men, grammarians as well as theologians, Protestants and papists: Junius, Illyricus, Reuchlin, Munster, Cevalerius, Pagninus, M. Marinus, Polanus, Diodati, Broughton, Muis, Taylor, Bootius, Lightfoot, the great majority of modern theologians, and the Buxtorfs” (pg. 116, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology, vol. 1*, Francis Turretin, Trans. George M. Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1992). Owen adds to these Glassius, Flacius Illyricus, Whitaker, Hassret, and Wolthius (pg. 90, *Of The Integrity and Purity of the Hebrew and Greek Text of the Scripture*, in vol. 9, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. Goold & Quick, Philadelphia, PA: Leighton Publications, 1865).

²³ pg. 387, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism, vol. 1: A Study of Theological Prolegomena*, Robert D. Preus, Saint Louis, MS: Concordia, 1970.

²⁴ The entry of the originality of the points into Lutheran dogmatic tradition, with sources for further study, appears on pg. 228, 237, 239 of Burnett, *From Christian Hebraism to Jewish Studies*. See also pgs. 307-309, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism, vol. 1: A Study of Theological Prolegomena*, Robert D. Preus (Saint Louis, MS: Concordia, 1970).

²⁵ Richard A. Muller, *The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, “The Debate over the Vowel Points and the Crisis in Orthodox Hermeneutics,” 10 (1980) 1, pgs. 55-56.

²⁶ pg. 106, Turretin, Francis, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology, vol. 1*, Trans. George M. Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1992, originally published in 1679.

²⁷ This is evident in the fact that Bible translations were made from the TR, in the quotation of distinctively Received Text readings in Protestant confessions of faith (i. e., 1 Jn 5:7 in chap. II and Mark 16:15-16 and Ac 8:37-38 in chapter XXVIII of the Westminster Confession of Faith (pg. 608, 662, Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3); in arguments for *Textus Receptus* readings and against modern Critical Text readings by prominent men who worked with the form of the Greek text from Erasmus to Luther to Calvin to Beza, including 1 John 5:7 (cf. pg. 346, *Reformation of Church and Dogma*, Jaroslav Pelikan, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1985) and the fact that nobody really disputed the Elzevirs’ contention when they stated in their preface to their 1633 printing of the text that “You have therefore the text now received by all (textum ab omnibus receptum) in which we give nothing changed or corrupt” (see pgs. 192-208, *The King James Version Defended*, Edward F. Hills, Des Moines, Iowa: Christian Research Press, 1956.). Indeed, editors of the modern critical text such as Kurt Aland acknowledge that “it is undisputed that from the 16th to the 18th century orthodoxy’s doctrine of verbal inspiration assumed th[e] *Textus Receptus*. It was the only Greek text they knew, and they regarded it as the ‘original text.’” (pg. 131, Aland, Kurt, “The Text of the Church?” *Trinity Journal*, 8:2 (Fall 1987) 131-144).

or more... [and which] fixed the vowel-letters, the vowel points, and the accents as well.”²⁸ Ben Chayyim’s introduction to the Masoretic *Textus Receptus*²⁹ assumed the vowel points were given by inspiration to Moses at Sinai³⁰ and his Massorah finalis included a Jewish treatise by Moses the Punctuator that took the same view, and “has since been reprinted in all the editions of the Rabbinic Bibles.”³¹ This could not have been other than a point in favor of the Hebrew vowels among the Protestants.

The Protestant defense of the vowels viewed the historical question through theological lenses; orthodox presuppositions of the verbal inspiration of the *autographa*, verbal preservation of the available and received text, and Biblical perspicuity pressed them to affirm the univocality of Hebrew Scripture and brought the doctrine of the inspiration of the points into theological

²⁸ pgs. ix, xi-xii, “Prolegomenon” to Ben Chayyim’s *Introduction* and Levita’s *Massoreth Ha-Massoreth*, Norman Snaith, in Orlinsky, *Library of Biblical Studies*. Ben Chayyim’s Masoretic Text was essentially used universally until Kittel’s 3rd edition of the MT in 1937, which abandoned the *Textus Receptus* for the Leningrad Manuscript. Furthermore, “his version of the Masorah, which was the first printed Masorah, came to be viewed as a codification of the Masorah, as if exclusively it were the standard Masorah (which explains why references in the older literature to “the Masorah” or “the printed Masorah” refer to the Masorah of the *Second Rabbinic Bible*” (pg. 25, *The Masorah of Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia: Introduction and Annotated Glossary*, Kelley, Page H., Mynatt, Daniel S., & Crawford, Timothy G., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998). “Jacob ben Hayyim’s edition, the first printing of the Masorah, was accepted as a sort of codification of it. Most of the *Miqra’ot Gedolot* (“Rabbinic Bibles”) printed from his time to our own have copied his Masorah, and the treatises on the Masorah are based on it.” (pg. 126, Revell, E. J., trans. & ed., *Introduction to the Tiberian Masorah*, Israel Yeivin, Chico, CA: Scholar’s Press, 1980.)

²⁹ “*The Standard Printed Edition of the Massoretic Text*. This is the text of Jacob Ben Chayyim published at Venice (1525–1526) in four volumes. This venture was sponsored by D. Bomberg, who had previously sponsored his first Rabbinical Bible in 1516–1517. Ben Chayyim’s text, essentially a recension of Ben Asher with only an occasional reading from Ben Naphtali, remained unsurpassed among the early editions and became standard. This is the so-called *editio princeps* of the Hebrew Bible, forming the standard edition of the Massoretic text. It was frequently reprinted in the sixteenth century. It was used by Rudolf Kittel in the first and second editions of his *Biblia Hebraica* (1905 and 1912)—unhappily, however, with tacit emendations in the form of variants from the ancient versions. It was also used by C. D. Ginsburg (1894 and 1926). The received text of our standard editions is substantially that of Jacob Ben Chayyim. It is the basis of the manual edition of J. Buxtorf (Basel, 1619), and finally of A. Hahn (1832, 1833 and 1868) and M. Letteris (Vienna, 1852), that which was reprinted in 1866 by the British and Foreign Bible Society.” (pg. 39, “The Text of the Old Testament,” Merrill F. Unger, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 108:429 (Jan 51). Norman Snaith mentions that “The text of the 1524-25 Rabbinic Bible, that which was edited by Ibn Adoniyah [i. e., Ben Chayyim], came to be recognized as the true masoretic text. It was followed in Bibles printed in Venice during the next ninety years: e. g., the 1546-48 Bible, that of 1568, and that of 1617-19... Rudolf Kittel kept close to the Ibn Adoniyah text in his *Biblia Hebraica* of 1909, and Ginsburg claimed to do this in his text, published by the Trinitarian Bible Society in 1894 and again in 1896; the same text was used for the centenary edition published by the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1911-26.” (Snaith, pg. XII, “Prolegomenon,” in *The Library of Biblical Studies*, Orlinsky.) Interestingly, Ben Chayyim converted to Christianity in 1536, as had the Jewish editor of the first Rabbinic Bible of 1516-1517, Felix Pratensis, in 1506.

³⁰ pgs. 36-57, *Introduction to the Rabbinic Bible*, Jacob Ben Chayyim, in Orlinsky, *ibid*.

³¹ pgs. 123-124, *Massoreth Ha-Massoreth*, Levita; cf. pg. 7, *Introduction to the Rabbinic Bible*, both in Orlinsky, *ibid*. Of course, this statement is only necessarily true until the date of the publication of the book that made it.

textbooks such as Francis Turretin's influential³² *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*³³ and the statement of faith the *Formula Consensus*³⁴ of 1675, adopted by the Swiss Reformed and Geneva; indeed, their later abrogation of the *Formula* was the beginning of their decline from Reformed and then simple Christian theological orthodoxy.³⁵ These theological presuppositions

³² "The influence of Protestant scholasticism was both immediate and long-range... The dominant Reformed scholastics... were Beza, Vermigli, Adrianus Heerebout, and, most importantly, Francis Turretin (1623-87). Turretin's *Institutio* became the standard work for modern Protestant scholastics, as it was used as a textbook to shape the modern Princeton Theology. Reformed scholasticism in this tradition led to what is generally labeled Calvinist orthodoxy" ("Scholasticism, Protestant," in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Elwell, Walter A., ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1984).

³³ "[The inspiration of the vowel points would not] be difficult to establish... by various arguments, [Buxtorf Sr.'s *Tiberias, sive commentarius Masorethicus triplex* and Buxtorf Jr.'s *Anticritica: seu vindiciae veritatis Hebraicae* have just been referenced] if appropriate here. But as this question seems rather to be grammatical than theological, we are unwilling to bring it into our field. Suffer us briefly to say that we have always thought the truer and safer way to keep the authenticity of the original text safe and sound against the cavils of all profane persons and heretics whatever and to put the principle of faith upon a sure and immovable basis, is that which holds the points to be of divine origin, whether they are referred to Moses or to Ezra (the head of the great Synagogue). Therefore, the adversaries err who wish to impugn the authority of the Hebrew manuscript from the newness of the points." (Turretin, *Institutes*, pg. 116). Note that while Turretin affirms that the issue is rather grammatical than theological, he provides theological reasons for the inspiration of the points and affirms that the view of "the punctuation [as] a merely human invention, depending solely upon human will... if established, would greatly weaken the authenticity of the Hebrew manuscript... since vowels are the souls of consonants, a doubtful sense (and in fact no sense at all) would constantly arise from the words, unless they were coeval with the consonants" (pg. 115). A concern for Biblical authority undergirded the defense of the points.

³⁴ The *Formula Consensus* was composed in Zürich, AD 1675, by John Henry Heidegger, of Zurich, and assisted by Francis Turretin, of Geneva, and Lucas Gernler, of Basle. Its full title was "Form of Agreement of the Helvetic Reformed Churches Respecting the Doctrine of Universal Grace, the Doctrines Related to It, and Some Other Points." Canon II affirms that "[t]he Hebrew original of the OT which we have received and to this day do retain as handed down by the Hebrew Church, "who had been given the oracles of God" (Rom 3:2), is, not only in its consonants, but in its vowels—either the vowel points themselves, or at least the power of the points—not only in its matter, but in its words, inspired by God. It thus forms, together with the Original of the NT[,] the sole and complete rule of our faith and practice; and to its standard, as to a Lydian stone, all extant versions, eastern or western, ought to be applied, and wherever they differ, be conformed." (pg. 115, "The Helvetic Formula Consensus (1675): An Introduction And Translation," Martin I. Klauber, *Trinity Journal* 11:1 (Spring 1990), 103–123.

³⁵ "Jean-Alphonse Turretini contributed to the demise of what he referred to as Reformed scholasticism through the abrogation of the Formula Consensus [in 1706], his emphasis upon the fundamental doctrines of Christianity, his use of Cartesian philosophical categories in theological discourse, and his desire to present a form of religion that would be credible even to the deist. He defined the term Reformed scholasticism primarily in the context of the system of theology epitomized in the Formula. Ironically, it was his own father, François Turretini, who was the main protagonist in favor of the creed in Geneva. The elder Turretini, as professor of theology at the Genevan Academy, was the leader of the more conservative theological movement that principally desired to defend the orthodoxy of the Synod of Dort against the Remonstrants and the theology of the Academy of Saumur in France [where Louis Cappel (1585–1658), the prominent exponent of the Masoretic origin of the points, whom Buxtorf Jr. wrote against, taught]. Not only was François Turretini the leader of the conservative wing, he was the dominant personality at the academy and his influence carried considerable weight in forcing any dissenters from his views into tacit submission... In his attempts to protect the core of Reformed beliefs, Turretini opened the door toward the very heterodoxy that he feared the most. His most prized follower and student, Jacob Vernet, who was to perform the oration at Turretini's death in 1737 and who would translate and edit most of his works, used his rationalistic methodology to reject the last vestiges of orthodoxy, the mysteries of the Incarnation and the Trinity that Turretini had deemed beyond the scope of reason. In essence, Turretini's conquest of scholasticism set the stage among the

of the verbal inspiration and preservation of the *textus receptus* were brought to bear in the standard-bearing treatises for the originality and inspiration of the points by Buxtorf Sr. and Jr.,³⁶ alongside of philological and grammatical exercitation.³⁷

While the defenders of the originality of the points were overwhelmingly staunch advocates of Protestant orthodoxy, supporters of the Masoretic origin of the points fell into two distinct camps; the first, which took the position of Elias Levita, affirmed that the points, although written down in the Christian era, were authoritative expressions of the autographical understanding, while the latter, which took the position adopted by a prime mover in rationalistic Old Testament textual criticism, Cappellus,³⁸ viewed the points as unauthoritative and the Hebrew text as corrupt. Levita's stance was far more compatible with orthodoxy than Cappel's, which degenerated into ever-increasing rationalism and heresy³⁹— it also brought on less passionate opposition from the pro-points side,⁴⁰ although those who supported their inspired

theological faculty for the development of an autonomous rationalism that was also characteristic of the Enlightenment.” (pgs. 326-327, 338, “Jean-Alphonse Turretini and the Abrogation of the Formula Consensus in Geneva,” Martin I. Klauber, *Westminster Theological Journal*, 53:2 (Fall 1991), 325-338; cf. “Francis Turretin,” pgs. 1116-1117, Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*).

³⁶ Namely, Buxtorf Sr.'s *Tiberias, sive commentarius Masorethicus triplex* and Buxtorf Jr.'s *Anticritica: seu vindiciae veritatis Hebraicae*.

³⁷ “Buxtorf [Sr.] concluded [*Tiberias*] by arguing for the religious necessity of divinely inspired vowel points. Countering Levita's position that the vowel points were not necessary while Hebrew remained a living language, Buxtorf argued that without points there was no way to ensure the transmission of correct readings and vocalization. Buxtorf maintained that the vowels are the soul (*anima*) of textual readings, and that divinely inspired consonants alone were not enough to enable interpreters to understand the Hebrew Bible... [a]s a Protestant, Buxtorf felt the consequences of such a position were theologically dangerous” (pgs. 222-223, Burnett, *From Christian Hebraism to Jewish Studies*).

³⁸ cf. pg. 295, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, Emanuel Tov. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001, 2nd ed.

³⁹ For example, Whitfield wrote: “I think it necessary . . . to remark upon what Capellus says upon the Supposition, that there may be such Differences of reading, without Violence to the Sense . . . [Capellus writes, translated into English] ‘What Harm will it be, if we take both the Punctuations, and both the resultant Senses?’ I own I think there is a good deal. Perhaps this might be sometimes allowed in humane Compositions; but the Case is different with regard to Divine Writings. . . . Would it have been equally an Execution of the Divine Command, whether Saul had only killed the Males [זָכָר] of Amalek, or blotted out the Memory [זִכְרוֹן] of the whole Nation?” (pg. 60, *A Dissertation on the Hebrew Vowel-Points*; cf. 1 Samuel 15; Babylonian Talmud, *Baba Bathra* 21a-b).

⁴⁰ i. e., Francis Turretin argues, against those that would undermine the authority of the Hebrew received text on lower critical grounds, that “even if the points were lately added... it would not follow that the punctuation was a merely human invention, depending solely upon the human will... according to this latter hypothesis the points may not have been from the beginning as to form, still it cannot be denied that they were always as to sound and value or power,” (pg. 115, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol 1), and he quotes “the very learned Walton,” who took a position like that of Levita, to affirm that even if the points were written down recently (which he does not by any means concede), “the certain and constant sense of the Holy Spirit might [still] be gathered” (pg. 116, *ibid.*). Articles I-III in the *Formula Consensus*, which deal with bibliology, were specifically directed against the views of Cappel.

origin still dissented theologically, historically, and philologically. Levita had stated that no man was to “add to nor diminish from anything which the men of the Great Synagogue⁴¹ have determined as regards *plene* and *defective*, *Keri* and *Kethiv*, the major and minor letters, the open and closed sections of the Pentateuch, &c., &c. Neither must he gainsay the statements of the Massorites respecting the vowel-points and the accents, the number of words which they have counted, and marked with mnemonical signs.”⁴² If one replaced “the Massorites” with “the men of the Great Synagogue” in this statement, it could easily be thought to have issued from the pen of a Buxtorf.⁴³ In contrast, Cappel argued that with the addition of the points, and the alteration of the original form of the Hebrew script,⁴⁴ many *matres lectiones* were eliminated, and the Hebrew *textus receptus* often required emendation.⁴⁵ The points, a human invention, could be altered when necessary, along with the consonants when they presented difficulties— ancient

⁴¹ The Mishnah in Aboth i.1 names the men of the Great Synagogue (the scribes of Ezra’s time) as the successors of the prophets. (Also see Bab. Yoma 9b; Bab. Sotah 48b; Bab. Sanhedrin 11a; Seder Olam Rabbah 30 [quoting Prov 22:17]; Jer Taanith 2.1; Jer Makkoth 2.4-8; Bab. Yoma 21b; Bab. Baba Bathra 12a-b.)” pg. 410, “The Gift of Prophecy in the Old and New Testaments,” F. David Farnell, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149:596 (Oct 92).

⁴² pg. 137, Levita, *Massoreth Ha-Massoreth*, trans. Ginsburg.

⁴³ Indeed, Levita even stated “I shall first do battle against those who say that [the points] were given on Sinai, and then state who invented them, and when they were originated and affixed to the letters. But if anyone should prove to me, by clear evidence, that my opinion is opposed to that of our Rabbins of blessed memory, or is contrary to the genuine Kabbalah of the *Sohar*, I will readily give in to him, and declare my opinion as void.” (pg. 121, Levita, *Massoreth Ha Massoreth*, trans. Ginsburg). However, the *Sohar* or *Zohar* clearly does mention the points, a matter which Buxtorf made great use of in his *Commentarius Masoreticus* (cap. ix., p. 74, ed. Basel 1620) against him. For example, *Zohar* I, 15b states “This... corresponds to the movement given by the accents and notes to the letters and vowel-points which pay obeisance to them and march after them like troops behind their kings. The letters being the body and the vowel-points the animating spirit, together they keep step...” (pg. 65, *The Zohar*, vol. I., trans. Harry Sperling & Maurice Simon, London, England: Soncino Press, 1933). “[T]he vowel-points proceeded from the same Holy Spirit which indited the sacred Scriptures, and that far be the thought to say that the scribes made the points, since even if all the prophets had been as great as Moses, who received the law direct from Sinai, they could not have had the authority to alter the smallest point in a single letter, though it be the most insignificant in the whole Bible” (*Zohar on the Song of Solomon*, 57 b, ed. Amsterdam, 1701, in “Life of Elias Levita,” Ginsburg, pg. 48).

⁴⁴ Those who advocate the originality of the points typically also argue for the originality of the Hebrew square letters found in the Reformation (and modern) editions of the Hebrew Old Testament and in the extant MSS of the Masoretic Text. (see, i. e., “Concerning the Antiquity of the Hebrew Letters,” chapter 2 of John Gill’s 1767 *A Dissertation concerning the Antiquity of the Hebrew Language, Letters, Vowel Points, and Accents*, originally published in 1767, available at <http://www.onlinebible.net/topics6.html>). Cappellus thought, on the contrary, that the modern forms of the Hebrew consonants differed from the ancient shapes, and the script of the *autographa* was very different. The philology of the Reformation also generally held that Hebrew was the original language for reasons such as those advanced by Gill; this view generally disappeared in the twentieth century as evolutionary conceptions of the origin of language replaced Biblical presuppositions. The commonality of this belief is evidenced in the preface to the King James Bible, which stated (in the section “Translation necessary”) that Hebrew was “the ancientest” tongue without any hint that such a view was even controversial.

⁴⁵ It is possible that his views grew more radical over time— or that he simply grew more free in his expression of them. cf. pgs. 55-57, “Life of Elias Levita,” in Ginsburg.

interpreters or translations could correct the standard Hebrew text when they seem to be better—even conjectural emendation, without any physical evidence, was at times possible. Indeed, “[t]he authority of the Septuagint is above that of the present standard, not only in those places where its reading gives a better sense, but also where it gives one as good and appropriate, and that because it is the more ancient. The same can and ought to be said of all the codices of the ancient interpreters.”⁴⁶ The great variations in the Septuagint from the standard Hebrew text, such as the fact that the Hebrew of Jeremiah 25-45 roughly corresponds to chapters 32-51 in the Greek,⁴⁷ and the poor quality of much of its translation, illustrates how greatly Cappel’s lower critical views undermined the current Protestant bibliology. While some maintained it alongside of fundamental Christian orthodoxy in other areas, Cappel’s criticism tended to gut Biblical authority, and utterly rejected the general orthodox consensus of the time that the available Hebrew and Greek *apographa*, not the autographs alone, were inerrant.⁴⁸ The positions of Buxtorf, Levita, and Cappel all found supporters in England, as on the Continent.

III. The Controversy Within England And Its Results

The positions that the Hebrew vowel points were coeval with the consonants, that they were of Masoretic origin but still authoritative, and that they were of Masoretic origin and consequently unauthoritative all found representatives in England. The latter view was generally held by the Catholics and used to support an infallible church and the superiority of the Vulgate in controversy with English Protestants, as with their Continental counterparts; if “the Hebrew tongue [is] a very nose of wax, to be turned by men which way they please, and to be so given of God on purpose that men might subject their consciences to [the] infallible [Roman Catholic] church,”⁴⁹ then *Sola Scriptura* must necessarily be abandoned. For the sake of an infallible, available Bible which could provide a sound basis for opposition to an infallible church, English

⁴⁶ Cappel, *De Critica... epistola apologetica in qua Arnoldi Bootii*, quoted in F. Turretin, *Institutes*, pg. 118; pgs. 116-123 constitute Turretin’s of Cappellus’ textual criticism.

⁴⁷ cf. pg. 79, *Invitation to the Septuagint*, Karen H. Jobes & Moisés Silva, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000.

⁴⁸ cf. pg. 433, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, Richard A. Muller, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993.

⁴⁹ Morinus, Exercit. lib. i. exer. i. cap ii., cited in John Owen, *Of the Integrity and Purity of the Hebrew and Greek Text of the Scripture*, in vol. IX, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. Gould, William H, & Quick, Charles W., Philadelphia, PA: Leighton Publications, 1865. Morinus lived from 1591 to 1659, renounced Protestantism, and joined the Catholics in 1618. see pg. 50, “Life of Elias Levita,” Ginsburg.

Protestants early rose to the defense of the originality of the Hebrew points. William Fulke⁵⁰ maintained their inspiration in 1583 when he published his *A Defense of the Sincere and True Translation of the Holy Scriptures into the English Tongue, against the Manifold Cavils, Frivolous Quarrels, and Impudent Slanders of Gregory Martin*,⁵¹ one of the Readers of Popish Divinity, in the Traitorous Seminary of Rheims. Hugh Broughton, in his commentary on Daniel, published in 1596, upheld the same view, as did John Piscator in his 1594 *Analysis Logica Evangelii secundum Matthaeum*.⁵² These early Englishmen affirmed, as did a continuing Protestant tradition, that the *keraiia* or “tittle” of Matthew 5:18 referred to the points of the Hebrew text, so they existed in Christ’s day and received His Divine sanction.⁵³ However, the

⁵⁰ “[I]t is without perhaps, or peradventure, that not one iota or prick of the law of God can perish, by the testimony of our Saviour Christ, Matthew v. . . . [A]ll the accents and Hebrew points . . . Christ . . . will never suffer to perish. . . . [Since] our Saviour Christ hath promised that never a prick of the law shall perish, we may understand the same also of the prophets, who have not received the vowels of the latter Jews, but even of the prophets themselves. . . . [W]e acknowledge the text of the Old Testament in Hebrew and Chaldee [Aramaic] . . . as it is now printed with vowels, to be the only fountain, out of which we must draw the pure truth of the Scriptures of the Old Testament” (pg. 55-56, 578, 78). Parker society ed. Cambridge: 1843). Fulke even cites “an excellent learned papist . . . Arias Montanus” (pg. 55) who also believed in the inspiration of the vowels and accents. Fulke was appointed Lecturer in Hebrew at St. John’s College in 1567, and he continued to teach in England at various institutions afterwards. It is not certain exactly when or how he came to believe in the originality and inspiration of the points, but certainly it would appear from his example, among others, that this position on the points found its way into English theological institutions early in the Reformation era, where it could influence coming generations of ministers and other students. (cf. pgs. 77-78, *Selected Christian Hebraists*, William McKane, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁵¹ Martin had composed *A Discovery of the Manifold Corruptions of the Holy Scriptures by the Heretics* (1582), which alleged that the points were a late invention the Jews used to deliberately corrupt the Old Testament.

⁵² pgs. 66-67, Gray, Edward McQueen, *Old Testament Criticism: Its Rise and Progress From the Second Century to the End of the Eighteenth; A Historical Sketch*, New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1923.

⁵³ Fulke, for example, stated “seeing our Saviour hath promised that never a prick (*i. e.*, a vowel point) of the Law shall perish, we may understand His words of all the prophets, for we do not receive the vowels from some later Jews, but from the Prophets themselves.” (cf. pgs. 55-56, 578 of *A Defense of the Sincere and True Translation of the Holy Scriptures into the English Tongue*, footnote #48; also Bishop, *Doctrines of Grace*, pg. 45.). Ussher and Maresius also referred to Mt 5:18 to give the Lord’s stamp to the vowels (Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, pg. 430). Even in 1767, the Baptist John Gill did the same in his *Dissertation concerning the Antiquity of the Hebrew Language, Letters, Vowel Points, and Accents*— he also replied subsequently to those that disputed his contention that the $\kappa\epsilon\rho\alpha\iota\alpha$ (*keraiia*) of Mt 5:18 is the Hebrew vowel *chireq*; see his arguments synthesized on pgs. xxx-xxxii of *Sermons and Tracts, vol. 1*, John Gill, Streamwood, IL: Primitive Baptist Library, 1981, (a reprint of the 1814 printing), or pgs. 82-87, *A Brief Memoir of the Life and Writings of the Late Rev John Gill, D. D.*, John Rippon, London, England: John Bennett, 1838. Indeed, in the early twentieth century Reformed fundamentalist George Sayles Bishop still defended this view of the tittle (pgs. 43-59, “The Inspiration of the Hebrew Letters and Vowel-Letters,” a sermon with Mt 5:18 as its text.). *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd. ed. (BDAG), (Danker, Frederick William (ed.), Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), states $\kappa\epsilon\rho\alpha\iota\alpha$ is used to refer to “part of a letter, a *serif*” (the anti-point definition for Matthew 5:18) or to “accents and breathings” (consistent with the pro-point definition in Matthew 5:18).

necessity of coeval vowels and consonants was not universally recognized as necessary to maintain Protestant bibliology; Anglican John Jewel, who wrote against the Catholic convert Thomas Harding some years before Fulke's pro-points work,⁵⁴ mentions that a variety of opinions existed about their age of origin, from Moses to the Masorites, but as the ancient practice of writing Greek without accents never prevented the common man from reading his language, so the absence of vowels in a Hebrew text never hindered the Jews from reading the Bible: "Certainly Mr. Harding knows that even now not only the learned of the Jews, but also the very children of ten years of age, are able to read without pricks or vowels."⁵⁵ While some Protestants feared that anything less than points inscribed by the Prophets would destroy Scriptural authority and deliver victory to Rome, others argued that an unpointed text was still perspicuous and therefore yielded nothing to the Papist contention in any case.⁵⁶

It appears, however, that at the time of the publication of Brian Walton's⁵⁷ *Polyglot* in 1657 (as earlier; so it is likely that a belief in the inspiration of the Hebrew vowels was maintained either universally or at least by the main body of the translators of the *King James Version* of 1611) the general Protestant consensus in England favored the points' inspiration and originality.⁵⁸ Buxtorf Sr. had written his *Tiberias*, defending the originality and inspiration of

⁵⁴ Harding (1512-1572) was Professor of Hebrew at Oxford under Henry VIII, a staunch Protestant under Edward VI, and a zealous Romanist under Queen Mary. He argued that "among the people of Israel, the seventy elders only could read and understand the mysteries of the holy books, that we call the Bible. For, whereas the letters of the Hebrew tongue have no vocals, they only had the skill to read the Scripture by the consonants; and thereby the vulgar people were kept from reading it, by special providence of God, as it is thought, that precious stones should not be cast before swine, that is to say, such as be not called thereto, as being, for their unreverent curiosity and impure life, unworthy" (*Exercitationes Biblicae de Hebraici Graecique textus Sinceritate*, Exercitatio. iv. cap. ii., s. 8, p. 198), cited in "Life of Elias Levita," Ginsburg, pg. 50.

⁵⁵ *The Works of John Jewel, Bishop of Salisbury* (Cambridge, 1848), II, pg. 679, in Muller, "Debate Over Vowel Points," pg. 55. Jewel held to the verbal, plenary preservation of available Scripture: "[T]he whole word of God is pure and holy; no word, no letter, no syllable, no point or prick thereof, but is written and preserved for thy sake" (*A Treatise of the Holy Scriptures*, in *The Works of John Jewel Bishop of Salisbury* [Cambridge: The University Press, 1850 (4.1175)], cited in "Biblical Authority: Towards an Evaluation of the Rogers and Mckim Proposal," John D. Woodbridge, *Trinity Journal* 1:2 (Fall 1980) p. 192, footnote #129). In this he shared little common ground theologically with Cappellus.

⁵⁶ Interestingly, while many Protestants feared the conclusions of Cappel in his *Arcanum* (which was more moderate than his later *Critica Sacra*), others used it as a weapon against the Catholics (see pgs. 236-239, Burnett, *From Christian Hebraism to Jewish Studies*), arguing in a manner similar to Jewel for a perspicuous solely consonantal text.

⁵⁷ Interestingly, Walton not only advocated an anti-vowel position, but he was a prime father of Old Testament textual criticism in general; "the earliest list of guidelines suggested for the comparison of reading in the Hebrew Bible is that of Walton" (pg. 295, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, Emanuel Tov. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001, 2nd ed.)

⁵⁸ i. e., Gray, *Old Testament Criticism*, pg. 67. Archbishop Ussher (1581-1656) had stated Cappellus' views contained "a most dangerous error" to be met at once before they could spread; at that time they had not yet

the points, in 1620, to which Cappel had replied with his 1623 *Arcanum punctationis revelatum*; Buxtorf Jr. published a series of dissertations on the antiquity on the Hebrew language and its antiquity in 1645, and a specific rebuttal of the *Arcanum punctationis* in 1648. Cappel's *Critica Sacra*, his most radical work, appeared in 1650, to which the younger Buxtorf wrote a refutation in 1653.⁵⁹ Lewis Cappel replied to Buxtorf Jr.'s rebuttal of his *Arcanum*, but this work remained unpublished until 1689.⁶⁰ Consequently, while Walton's work appeared during the height of the classic formulation of the debate about the points, and some within the sphere of Protestantism continued to avow anti-point positions, the younger Buxtorf's reply to the *Arcanum* had apparently stemmed the strong philological assault which it had made against his father's *Tiberias*. Contrary to the Buxtorf position, Walton maintained that the Hebrew points were added to the text between A. D. 500 and 600 and are consequently not of absolute divine authority, than an examination of Hebrew variants outside of the *textus receptus*, as well as of early translations, was appropriate to determine the true reading and at times correct the Received Text, and conjectural emendation could be adopted in especially difficult circumstances. However, by affirming the basic integrity of the Hebrew copies,⁶¹ their perspicuity through the *matres lectionis*, and their fundamentally greater authority than that of translations, especially the Vulgate (and so maintaining his opposition to the Catholic formulation of Trent), he sought to avoid the theological and hermeneutical quagmire, which seemed to lead either to rationalism or Rome, of the wholesale acceptance of Cappel's position, and so adopted a position on the points similar to Levita.

Walton's position was strenuously opposed by Lightfoot, who had worked with him on the *Polyglot* and was probably the highest authority in Hebrew learning in England at the time, and by John Owen. Lightfoot declared pointedly:

There are some who believe the Holy Bible was pointed by wise men of Tiberias.

multiplied in England (pg. 122, *Institutes*, Turretin), although Cappel had studied two years at Oxford and was consequently known in the land. The "generality of learned men among Protestants are not yet infected with this leaven," said Owen in his thoughts on Cappellus' criticism in his discussion of Walton's polyglot (pg. 87, *Integrity and Purity of the Hebrew and Greek Text*, John Owen). It did not help Cappel's case among the Protestants that his *Critica* was published by Catholics, nor that "his son [was] a great zealot amongst them" (Owen, *Integrity*, pg. 87).

⁵⁹ pg. 429, Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*.

⁶⁰ pg. 55, "Life of Elias Levita," Ginsburg.

⁶¹ "By the use, and according to tradition, by the aid of the three letters 'vy [ׁ׃ׁ], called *matres lectionis*, and standing in the place of vowels before the invention of points, the true reading and pronunciation has been preserved" ("De Textum originariorum integritate et auctoritate," [Prologema, 7] in *Biblia Sacra Polyglotta* [1657], 1:44, cited in Turretin, *Institutes*, pg. 116.).

I do not wonder at the impudence of the Jews who invented the story, but I wonder at the credulity of Christians who applaud it. Recollect, I beseech you, the names of the Rabbins of Tiberias, from the first situation of the University there to the time that it expired; and what at length do you find, but a kind of men mad with Pharisaism, bewitching with traditions and bewitched, blind, guileful, doting, they must pardon me if I say, magical and monstrous! Men, how unfit, how unable, how foolish, for the undertaking of so divine a work! Read over the Jerusalem Talmud, and see there how R. Judah, R. Chaninah, R. Judan, R. Hoshaiia, R. Chija Rabba, R. Chija bar Ba, R. Jochanan, R. Jonathan, and the rest of the grand doctors among the Rabbins of Tiberias, behave themselves, how earnestly they do nothing, how childishly they handle serious disputes! And if you can believe the Bible was pointed in such a school, believe also all that the Talmudists wrote. The pointing of the Bible savours of the work of the Holy Spirit, not the work of lost, blinded, besotted men.⁶²

Owen likewise considered that any compromise of the divine origin and inspiration of the vowels would lead to disaster. He stated:

I confess, considering the days we live in, wherein the bold and curious wits of men, under pretence of critical observations, alluring and enticing with a show of learning, have ventured to question almost every word in the Scripture, I cannot but tremble to think what would be the issue of this supposition, that the points or vowels, and accents, are no better guides unto us than may be expected from those who are pretended to be their authors. The Lord, I hope, will safeguard his own from the poison of such attempts. The least of its evil is not yet thoroughly considered. So that... I must needs say, I had rather that [Walton's *Polyglot*, despite its usefulness], and all works of the like kind, were out of the world, than that this one opinion [of the recent origin of the points] should be received, with the consequences that unavoidably attend it.⁶³

Although Owen's fear of the consequences of the adoption of a non-authoritative view of the points is manifest in his *Integrity and Purity of the Hebrew and Greek Text of the Scripture, with considerations on the prologomena and appendix to the late "Biblia Polyglotta,"* he presented a scholarly and gentlemanly rebuttal to Walton, and asserted the fixation of the points by "the men of the great synagogue, Ezra and his companions, guided therein by the infallible direction of the Spirit of God... [although he did] not oppose them who maintain that they are coevous with the

⁶² Lightfoot, *A Chorographical Century, searching out some more memorable places of the Holy Land of Israel, chiefly by the light of the Talmud*. Chap. lxxxi, works, vol ii., p. 73, &c., ed. 1864, cited in "Life of Elias Levita," Ginsburg, pg. 58.

⁶³ pg. 92, *Of The Integrity and Purity of the Hebrew and Greek Text of the Scripture, with considerations on the prologomena and appendix to the late "Biblia Polyglotta,"* John Owen, in *The Works of John Owen, vol. 9*, ed. William H. Goold & Charles W. Quick, Philadelphia, PA: Leighton Publications, 1865.

letters—which are not a few of the most learned Jews and Christians.”⁶⁴ Walton published a rather vitriolic and abusive reply, *The Considerator Considered*, in 1659. Neither side seemed to decisively win the day; although the Enlightenment *zeitgeist* assisted the anti-vowalists over time, their antiquity found a continuing chain of advocates such as Joseph Cooper,⁶⁵ Samuel Clark,⁶⁶ Whitfield,⁶⁷ and John Gill.⁶⁸ Indeed, arguments for the originality of the points continued into the nineteenth century and beyond.⁶⁹ C. D. Ginsburg, translating and commenting

⁶⁴ pg. 89, *ibid.* Owen also presents and argues for his view of the points on pgs. 495-533 of his 1661 *Biblical Theology: A History of Theology from Adam to Christ, or the Nature, Origin, Development, and Study of Theological Truth, in Six Books, in which are examined the origins and progress of both true and false religious worship, and the most notable declensions and revivals of the church, from the very beginning of the world. With additional discussions on Universal Grace, the Rise of the Sciences, Bellarmine’s Roman “Notes of the Church,” the Origin of Writing, the Antiquity of the Hebrew Language, and its Vowel-Pointing, Translations of Sacred Scripture, Jewish Rites, and Other Matters* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1994 trans. from Latin by Stephen P. Westcott), which exercitates upon these matters in a manner meet for its very Puritan, and gargantuan, title.

⁶⁵ His dissertation is entitled *Domus Mosaicae Clavis, sive Legis Septimentum; in quo punctorum Hebraicorum adstruitur antiquitas; eaque monia, cum accentualia tum vocalia ipsis, literis fuisse coeava, argumentis, undique petitis demonstratur. Quae adducuntur, multa cum fidelitate examini subjiciuntur et diluntur, &c.* London, 1673. (pg. 59, “Life of Elias Levita,” Ginsburg).

⁶⁶ *An Exercitation concerning the original of the chapters and verses in the Bible; wherein the divine authority of the points in the Hebrew text is clearly proved by new and intrinsic arguments.* London, 1698 (cited in *ibid.*).

⁶⁷ *A Dissertation on the Hebrew Vowel-Points, showing that they are an original and essential part of the Language.* Liverpool, 1748 (*ibid.*).

⁶⁸ Gill, John, *A Dissertation concerning the Antiquity of the Hebrew Language, Letters, Vowel Points, and Accents*, London, 1767; see also pgs. xxx-xxxii, Gill, John, *Sermons and Tracts, vol. 1*, Streamwood, IL: Primitive Baptist Library, 1981, reprint of the 1814 printing.

⁶⁹ “In the first half of the eighteenth century, Schultens and Michaelis could still hold the view that some of the points antedated the Masoretes, and even the great synagogue. (Whitfield, *A Dissertation on the Hebrew Vowel-Points*, writes (pg. 32): “Schultens seems to think, some few Additions may have been made, to the ancient Punctuations . . . but he rejects, with Contempt, the Opinion of the Novelty of the whole System of the present Points, as a manifest Absurdity. And in his Dissertation on the Grammatical Regimen and Variation of the Points, he treats them all, not excepting *Sheva* and the *Chatuphs*, as originally essential to the language; notwithstanding what is noted above.”) Whitfield continues in his description of the state of the controversy up to his day, “against Elias Levita, Capellus, Walton, etc. we need not blush to place the two Buxtorfs, Father and Son, (who may, not improperly, be stiled the Restorers of Hebrew learning) Leusden, sometime Professor of Hebrew at Utrecht, and Author of the, then, most perfect Edition of the Hebrew Bible; Vander Hooght, who has improved upon Leusden, and given the World the most correct and beautiful Impression of the Hebrew Bible ever published; to which we may add the very learned Gagnier, late Professsor of Arabic at Oxford, and the most learned Scultens, in the same Character at Friesland, who have, with a great many others, strenuously aasserted the Antiquity of the Hebrew Points” (pg. 288, *A Dissertation on the Hebrew Vowel Points*). Eichhorn placed the origin of the points after Ezra, but before the Talmud, Jerome, and the Masorites, and credited the latter only with finalization and codification. It appears to have been left to Gesenius and Hupfeld—as late as 1830—to settle the argument finally in favor of a Masoretic origin of the vowel points” (Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, pg. 431). However, even in 1830 the conflict was not over, although the pre-Christian vowel point position was becoming a strongly minority view, as it was thoroughly impalatable to higher critics, evangelicals were abandoning the strict views on inspiration by dictation and the verbal, plenary preservation of the *textus receptus* advocated in works such as Owen’s *Of the Divine Original, Authority, Self-Evidencing Light, and Power of the Scriptures; with an Answer to that Inquiry, How We Know The Scriptures to be The Word of God*, and his *Of the Integrity and Purity of the Hebrew and Greek Text of the Scripture*, (pgs. 13-139 in vol. IX, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. Gould, William H, &

on Levita's *Massoreth Ha-Massoreth* in 1867, stated that the controversy started by Levita "cannot be said to have as yet fully subsided."⁷⁰ Thomas H. Horne of St. John's College, Cambridge, in his 1868 *An Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures*, discussed the vowel controversy and affirmed that the Masoretic origin of the points "is now generally received, although some few writers of respectability continue strenuously to advocate their antiquity."⁷¹ Horne still maintained that Hebrew was the original language.⁷² Indeed, copying Horne, even the Catholic writer A. E. Breen in his 1897 *A General and Critical Introduction to the Study of Holy Scripture* stated that "By some... learned men... the origin of the Hebrew vowel points is maintained to be coeval with the Hebrew language itself: while others assert them to have been first introduced by Ezra after the Babylonian captivity... some few writers of respectability continue strenuously to advocate their antiquity."⁷³ However, while apologetic for the inspiration of a pointed text did not cease in the Reformation era, but has continued even to the present day, in the eighteenth century the anti-vowelists seized the dominant position, which they have since maintained.

Despite the greater sympathy of Walton for Levita's position than Cappel's, those who followed him in asserting the novelty of the vowels tended to do exactly what John Owen had feared; the points were widely rejected as modern, useless or worse than useless, and entirely unauthoritative, and the practices advocated in Cappellus' *Critica Sacra*⁷⁴ of profligate conjectural emendation and the downgrading of the Hebrew text in favor of ancient versions multiplied rapidly. Two alternative schools of interpreters arose, both of which undermined

Quick, Charles W., Philadelphia, PA: Leighton Publications, 1865) and Francis Turretin's *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* to contend simply for the verbal, plenary inspiration of the autographs and allow for lower criticism, after the fashion of the Old Princeton theology; the bibliological basis of the coeval point position was thus no longer defended. Furthermore, the pro-points minority had no champion to discover new philological, historical, and archeological arguments for their view, as they did in the Reformation with the Buxtorf's, so they had to argue from a more strictly presuppositional and theological viewpoint, which limited their audience to those who would consider such a method. See footnote #3.

⁷⁰ pg. 44, "Life of Elias Levita," Ginsburg.

⁷¹ pg. 6, Horne, Thomas Hartwell, *An Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures*, vol. 2, Boston, MA: Littell and Gay, 1868. Horne states that "Bishop Marsh, (Lectures, part ii. pp. 136-140) has enumerated the principle writers for and against the vowel points." (pg. 10, *ibid.*). This work by Marsh, while difficult to find, is at least theoretically extant and available.

⁷² George Sayles Bishop, contributor to *The Fundamentals*, similarly maintains that Hebrew was the original language, and provides strong arguments in favor of it, based on his Christian presupposition of inspired autographs of the Bible. See pgs. 38-42, *The Doctrines of Grace*.

⁷³ Breen, A. E., *A General and Critical Introduction to the Study of Holy Scripture*, Rochester, NY: The John P. Smith Printing House, 1897, pg. 387.

⁷⁴ Cappel's theories and their problems are discussed on pgs. 117-123 of Turretin's *Institutes*.

Biblical authority. The first, and less radical, considered that “the Masoretic punctuation is an interpretation of the text made by the Jews, probably not earlier than the eighth century, and that, accordingly, our public translations... close copies of the Hebrew pointed text, are in reality only versions at second hand, translations of the Jews’ interpretation of the Old Testament”⁷⁵ and the Hebrew text itself “is considerably injured, and stands in need of frequent emendation.” It put great weight upon early versions and made conjectures based on flights of fancy that greatly undermined the authority of Scripture. Advocates included Archbishop Secker and Drs. Durell, Judd, Lowth, Blayney, Newcome, Wintle, Horsley, Good, and Boothroyd.⁷⁶ The second yet more radical school, maintained that the Jews designedly corrupted the Hebrew through the insertion of the points and letters, and that, as “their last shift to change their evasions of the truth,” they made “the words different from what they were, or of another root, or of another signification, than the words would have been without pointing in the context.”⁷⁷ To this school belonged William Romaine (1714-1795), friend of Whitefield and chaplain to the Countess of Huntingdon, along with Bishop Horne, Parkhurst, and others. The idea of learning the Hebrew language without employing the points at all spread widely.⁷⁸

John Moncrieff, professor of Oriental Languages at the Andersonian University, who argued in his *1833 Essay on the Antiquity and Utility of the Hebrew Vowel Points* that the sounds of the points, marked in the text in some manner, were authoritative and pre-Christian, even if the current signs were invented by the Masorites, lamented:

Without anticipating any evidence which may be advanced, or any judgment to which we may be led on the question, as to the authenticity of the Vowel-Points, I hesitate not to affirm, that the great indifference which has, for a considerable time, prevailed, to acquire any critical knowledge of the Hebrew language, has been, not only because many public Teachers have been averse to teach it in any

⁷⁵ quoted from *Preliminary Dissertation to his translation of Isaiah*; see pg. 59-60, “Life of Elias Levita,” Ginsburg.

⁷⁶ pg. 60, *ibid*.

⁷⁷ pg. 153, *The Covenant in the Cherubim, so the Hebrew writings perfect. Alterations by Rabbies forged. Shewing the evidence for the Scriptures; that Christianity was exhibited to Adam, invisibles by visibles; past and to come by types; by Cherubim, Urim, Thumim, Sacrifice, Cloud, &c.; that the Jews and Gentiles understood them; that the tradition was of the things typified. That though they understood the tradition even of the covenant before the world, they had perverted the intent of it. That the alterations and stories of the Jews, after they had lost their types and Hebrew, are not traditions, but studied evasions to expositions of inspired Christians, &c., and to support their apostasy. That the grammatical formation of the Hebrew, which is descriptive, so gives proper names, cannot admit vowel-pointing, nor Mr. Masclef’s method,*” by John Hutchinson (1674-1737), in his *Collected Works*, vol. vi., p. 153. London, 1749, quoted in pg. 60, *ibid*. The title supports the negative view Hutchinson of the points established by the quotations.

⁷⁸ As, i. e., Horne suggests, pg. 10, *Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures*.

other way than according to the letters, but have boldly proscribed the method of reading with the Vowel-Points, in the language of bitter ridicule, and magisterial condemnation... The practice of exclusively teaching the language by means of the letters alone, in so many of our Seminaries, when viewed in connexion with the acrimonious and condemnatory language, employed against the other method of reading, has not only produced in students an aversion to be qualified to judge with discrimination on the vital question, as to the antiquity of the Vowel-Points, and other questions connected with the Language; but there is reason to believe that this resolutely exclusive course of procedure, has had the unhappy influence, though no doubt far from what was intended, to produce a great indifference, with many who are professionally occupied with Theology, to acquire any knowledge of this original language, even in its very first principles.⁷⁹

Moncrieff pleaded that teachers, regardless of their view of the points, at least teach their students what they were, had to defend the existence of the Hebrew dual, attack the anti-point reading paradigm then in vogue, which led to countless bizarre and false vocalizations, and argue that “Not only some of the best ancient translations, but our own excellent authorized version, and some other comparatively modern translations into other languages which are held in high esteem, have been executed according to the present written system of punctuation, because all these translators held this system to be of the greatest utility and essential to the integrity of the text, even though some of them held that it was only a traditional reading, however correct, before the time which was fixed upon for the invention and notation of these written signs, of which the system is made up... [t]he fullest, most critical, and every way the best Lexicons and Grammars of the Hebrew language, in more ancient or later times, have been executed on the principle of having a strict regard to the reading according to the Vowel-Points...”⁸⁰ While Moncrieff does make positive arguments for the antiquity of the points from passages in Josephus, Philo, the LXX, and other ancient witnesses, the overriding purpose of his composition is less his readers’ adoption of the position of Buxtorf on the points than a desire that the simple fundamentals of Hebrew grammar and syntax be taught and prized against rampant alternative systems of vocalization that wreaked havoc upon the text. He needed to defend the Hebrew Bible’s mere coherence against those who were concluding otherwise from their opinions of the lack of authority of the points, and would doubtless have rejoiced to see Hebrew teachers return

⁷⁹ pg. 6-7, Moncrieff, John, *An Essay on the Antiquity and Utility of the Hebrew Vowel-Points*, London, England: Whittaker, Treacher, and Arnot, 1833.

⁸⁰ pg. 5, *ibid.*

merely to the position of Levita from the wanderings Owen had warned them against and Cappellus had led them to. The growth of anti-vocalizing criticism in England as a result of the Reformation debate led to severe negative consequences.

IV. Conclusion

A consideration of the origin, inspiration, and authority of the Hebrew vowel points has tremendous bibliological and hermeneutical significance; controversy surrounding them generated great heat in the Reformation and post-Reformation eras and is, indeed, still with Christendom today, when atheistic presuppositions plague much of the study of the historiography and philology of Hebrew and dominate both higher and lower biblical criticism. While the current customary evangelical position on the points is less destructively radical than the extremes that appeared in England after the common adoption of Cappel's textual critical philosophy, seventeenth century theological orthodoxy, with its general acceptance of a dictation view of inspiration and its confidence in the verbal, plenary preservation and authority of the available Biblical *textus receptus*, both in Hebrew and Greek, which provided a strong theological support for the doctrine of the originality and authority of the Hebrew vowels, is generally abandoned—so the problem of the multivocality of the text for the evangelical supporter of *Sola Scriptura* remains. Without some manner of theological presuppositions about the preservation of the Hebrew text, beyond a simple acceptance of the inspiration of the *autographa*, is assurance of an authoritative and available revelation from God, as sure as the audible voice of the Father that Peter heard on the Mount of Transfiguration (2 Pet 1:16-21), possible? Can we say “Thus saith the LORD” without adding “unless there is a variant”? Perhaps the fundamentalist, KJV-only advocates of the verbal, plenary preservation of the *textus receptus* and the prophetic authorship of the Hebrew vowels have a point after all.

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