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Israeli scholar completes mission to 'fix' Bible

By Aron Heller, Associated Press

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RAMAT GAN, Israel – For the past 30 years, Israeli Judaic scholar Menachem Cohen has been on a mission of biblical proportions: Correcting all known textual errors in Jewish scripture to produce a truly definitive edition of the [Old Testament](#).

His edits, focusing primarily on grammatical blemishes and an intricate set of biblical symbols, mark the first major overhaul of the [Hebrew Bible](#) in nearly 500 years.

Poring over thousands of medieval manuscripts, the 84-year-old Cohen identified 1,500 inaccuracies in the Hebrew language texts that have been corrected in his completed 21-volume set. The final chapter is set to be published next year.

The massive project highlights how Judaism venerates each tiny biblical calligraphic notation as a way of ensuring that communities around the world use precisely the same version of the holy book.

According to Jewish law, a Torah scroll is considered void if even a single letter is incorrect or misplaced. Cohen does not call for changes in the writing of the sacred Torah scrolls used in Jewish rites, which would likely set off a firestorm of objection and criticism. Instead, he is aiming for accuracy in versions used for study by the Hebrew-reading masses.

For the people of the book, Cohen said, there was no higher calling.

"The people of Israel took upon themselves, at least in theory, one version of the Bible, down to its last letter,"

Cohen said, in his office at [Bar-Ilan University](#) near [Tel Aviv](#).

The last man to undertake the challenge was Jacob Ben-Hayim, who published the Mikraot Gedolot, or Great Scriptures, in Venice in 1525. His version, which unified the religion's varying texts and commentaries under a single umbrella, has remained the standard for generations, appearing to this day on bookshelves of observant Jews the world over.

Since Ben-Hayim had to rely on inferior manuscripts and commentaries, numerous inaccuracies crept in and were magnified in subsequent editions.

The errors have no bearing on the Bible's stories and alter nothing in its meaning. Instead, for example, in some places the markers used to denote vowels in Hebrew are incorrect; or a letter in a word may be wrong, often the result of a centuries old transcription error. Some of the fixes are in the notations used for cantillation, the text's ritual chants.

By Dan Baility, AP

Menachem Cohen reads from a book at the library of Bar Ilan University, outside Tel Aviv, Israel.

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Most of the errors Cohen found were in the final two thirds of the Hebrew Bible and not in the sacred Torah scrolls, since they do not include vowel markings or cantillation notations.

Cohen said unity and accuracy were of particular importance to distinguish the sacred Jewish text from that used by those sects that broke away from Judaism, namely Christians and Samaritans.

To achieve his goal, Cohen relied primarily on the Aleppo Codex, the 1,000-year-old parchment text considered to be the most accurate copy of the Bible. For centuries it was guarded in a grotto in the great synagogue of Aleppo, Syria, out of reach of most scholars like Ben-Hayim. In 1947, a Syrian mob burned the synagogue, and the Codex briefly disappeared before most of it was smuggled into Israel a decade later.

Now digitized, the Codex, also known as the Crown, provided Cohen with a template from which to work. But because about a third of the Codex — nearly 200 pages — remains missing, Cohen had to recreate the five books of Moses based on trends he observed in the Codex as well as from other sources, such as the 11th-century Leningrad Codex, considered the second-most authoritative version of the [Jewish Bible](#).

Cohen also included the most comprehensive commentaries available, most notably that of 11th-century Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, known as Rashi.

The result is the completion of Ben-Hayim's work.

"It was amazing to me that for 500 years, people didn't sense the errors," said Cohen, who wears a knitted skullcap and a gray goatee. "They just assumed that everything was fine, but in practice everything was not fine."

He's not the only scholar to devote decades to the task. In 1976, Rabbi Mordechai Breuer published a version of the Torah based mainly on the Aleppo Codex. The Hebrew University Bible Project in Jerusalem has also been working on a scientific edition of the Hebrew Bible, but theirs is directed toward scholars, while Cohen's output is aimed at wider consumption.

Rafael Zer, the project's editorial coordinator, called Cohen's work "quasi-scientific" because it presents a final product and does not provide the reader a way of seeing how it was reached. He credits Cohen for bringing an exact biblical text to the general public but said it "comes at the expense of absolute accuracy and an absolute scientific edition."

With the assistance of his son Shmuel, a computer programmer, Cohen launched a digital version he hopes will become a benchmark of the Israeli education system. He said his ultimate goal was to "correct the past and prepare for the future."

As a former teacher, Cohen said he took particular pride in a sophisticated search engine that allows even novices to explore his work with ease. He called computers a "third revolution" to affect Jewish scripture, following the shift from scrolls to bound books and the advent of the printing press.

"I want the Bible to be user-friendly," said Cohen, a grandfather of eight. "Today, we can create sources of information and searches that allow you to get an answer to everything you are wondering."

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Valerie Plumb · Top Commenter · Gosford High School

The bible is mostly incompatible with the archaeological evidence from the area. The older biblical stories are particularly suspect. The archaeology shows that the jews originated in Caanan - revolted against Caananite class society and took on a distinctive identity by borrowing from stories around them. Hope this helps....

Reply · 2 · Like · August 8 at 6:11pm



Stephen Williams · Top Commenter · Admiral King

To be accurate, the jews didn't borrow from the stories around them. The stories the jews and the Caananites told had common elements but different theologies. For example, the Emanu Elish creation story and the Jewish creation story have common elements, but the theologies differ drastically.

Reply · Like · August 10 at 10:41am



Stephen Williams · Top Commenter · Admiral King

There's errors in the bible? Wow. Do the fundamentalist christians know this?

Reply · 1 · Like · August 8 at 6:14pm



Ani Crotophaga · Top Commenter

How do you fix the "word of god"?

Reply · 1 · Like · August 8 at 7:47am



Greg Krynen · Top Commenter

Word of god as transcribed by man. People always forget that part, it was all transcribed, much from oral history.

Reply · 8 · Like · August 8 at 8:19am



Susan Jones · Top Commenter

And likely edited for content, compiled by different authors from different eras, and intended to be both descriptive of the time/faith and prescriptive in how the faithful should act...just like most culturally significant Sacred Texts. That's why it is a Sacred Text; but its fascinating.

Reply · Like · August 9 at 3:59pm



Daniel Beard · Top Commenter · Modesto Junior College

"All Scripture [from Genesis to Revelation] is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." 2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NKJV)

Reply · Like · Sunday at 1:45am



Stephen Williams · Top Commenter · Admiral King

According to Jewish law, a Torah scroll is considered void if even a single letter is incorrect or misplaced. Cohen does not call for changes in the writing of the sacred Torah scrolls used in Jewish rites, which would likely set off a firestorm of objection and criticism. Instead, he is aiming for accuracy in versions used for study by the Hebrew-reading masses.

So, there is a Torah used for rites and a Torah used for study? I wonder what the differences are and why.

Reply · Like · August 8 at 6:17pm



James D Morris · Top Commenter

Please note that they were fixing minor transcription errors and not adjusting textual meaning.

Reply · Like · August 8 at 2:26pm



James D Morris · Top Commenter

Joe Samson You are such a silly person.

Reply · Like · August 8 at 4:05pm



Joe Samson · Top Commenter

The Christians already beat them to changing the meaning. <http://www.aish.com/jw/s/48892792.html>

Reply · Like · August 8 at 4:06pm



James D Morris · Top Commenter

Joe Samson Perhaps you should read the bible and not post debunked nonsense.

Reply · Like · August 8 at 4:08pm

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