

What is an Emendation?

Jewish tradition holds that the Soferim (Levite scribes) were responsible for copying and maintaining the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible or Christian Old Testament) after the Jews returned from Babylonian Exile. While the Bible speaks of several scribes before the Exile, Jewish tradition recognizes Ezra as the first who was given the task of maintaining the Tanakh's accuracy and providing the correct interpretation of its meaning.

"This Ezra went up from Babylon, and was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given; and the king granted him all he requested because the hand of the LORD his God was upon him." (Ezra 7:6)

"Now this is the copy of the decree which King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe, learned in the words of the commandments of the LORD and His statutes to Israel:" (Ezra 7:11)

At the end of the second century (200 A.D.), early rabbinic sources came to the conclusion that several passages of the present text differed from the ancient manuscripts. In the third century, Rabbi Simon ben Pazzi called these presumed differences "tikkun Soferim", which means "emendations of the Scribes" (Midrash Genesis Rabbah xlix. 7).

The Midrash, an exegetical and homiletic method of interpreting the Old Testament also accepted the view of scribal emendation. Initially preserved in oral form, they were written down in the second century A.D. They exist today as exegetical or homiletical commentaries on the Tanakh.

Later, the majority of Masoretes accepted this view, and the assumed changes were attributed to either:

Ezra or, Ezra and Nehemiah or, Ezra and the Soferim or Ezra, Nehemiah, Zechariah, Haggai and Baruch.

"Emendation" is defined as an "alteration intended to improve."

Despite God's prohibition found in Deuteronomy 4:2 ("You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, not take away from it,..), it is believed that the Sopherim made changes to 1) correct errors that crept into their copies, 2) clarified the intent of the passage or 3) maintain the appropriate reverence towards the sacred name of God.

The presumed emendations can be categorized into four types of changes:

1. Safeguarding the unity of divine worship in Jerusalem.

Example: Isaiah 19:18

"In that day five cities in the land of Egypt will be speaking the language of Canaan and swearing allegiance to the LORD of host; one will be called the City of Destruction." The emendation had the phrase "city of destruction" as "city of righteousness."

2. Safeguarding against idolatry by the substitution of an offensive or disparaging term for one that might encourage idolatry.

Example: the disparaging term "boshet" (shame) is substituted for "ba 'al" (lord). "Ba 'al" was originally a title for the God of Israel and was later used for the name the Canaanite God Baal.

Saul's son named Eshbaal (1 Chron 8:33; 9:39) was changed to Ish-bosheth (2 Sam 2:8).

Saul's grandson named Merib-Baal (1 Chron 8:34; 9:40) was changed to Mephilbosheth (2 Sam 4:4).

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3. Safeguarding the honor of God with the use of a euphemism: the substitution of an agreeable term for one that is perceived as blasphemous.

Examples:

Genesis 18:22. "... Abraham was still standing before the LORD" was an emendation of "the LORD remained standing before Abraham."

1 Samuel 3:13. "... his sons were blaspheming themselves.." was an emendation of "his sons were blaspheming God."

4. Safeguarding the sacred name of God, the Tetragrammaton YHWH.

Because Jews considered "YHWH" (Yahweh) too sacred to be spoken aloud, diacritical marks were made beneath it to indicate its pronunciation as "Adonai," which changed the translation from "LORD" to "Lord."

In other instances when "Adonai" preceded or followed "YHWH", it was pronounced as "Elohim", which was usually used when ascribing the physical attributes of man to Yahweh.

This category of emendations is what the Emendation of the Sopherim is largely known for. There are some 134 of such presumed changes. Here are few of these presumed emendations.

Example: The Sopherim did not believe it was appropriate to address God by name.

Exodus 4:13 "But he said, "Please, Lord,..." was changed from "LORD".

Example: The Sopherim did not believe that God should be perceived as personally involved with human beings.

2 Kings 7:6 "For the Lord had caused..." was changed from "LORD".

Example: The Sopherim did not believe that criticism should be directed at God.

2 Kings 19:23 "Through your messengers you have reproached the Lord,.. " was changed from "LORD".

In most cases, the emendations did not significantly alter the meaning of the Bible, but removing them can help clarify the passage.

The interpretation of Psalms 110 is perhaps one of the most contended among all of the Psalms. Psalms 110:1 or 4 are quoted several times in the New Testament (Matt 22:44; 26:64; Mark 12:36; 14:62; Luke 20:42–43; 22:69; Acts 2:34–35; Heb 1:13; 5:6; 7:17, 21) or alluded to (Mark 16:19; John 12:34; Rom 8:34; 1 Cor 15:25; Eph 1:20; Col 3:1; Heb 1:3; 5:10; 6:20; 7:3; 8:1; 10:12–13; 12:2).

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Psalms 110:1-7 (note the emendation of verse 5)

- 1) The LORD says to my Lord:
“Sit at My right hand
Until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.”
- 2) The LORD will stretch forth Your strong scepter from Zion, saying,
“Rule in the midst of Your enemies.”
- 3) Your people will volunteer freely in the day of Your power;
In holy array, from the womb of the dawn,
Your youth are to You as the dew.
- 4) The LORD has sworn and will not change His mind,
“You are a priest forever
According to the order of Melchizedek.”
- 5) The Lord is at Your right hand; (**Scribal emendation**: Adonai [Lord] here was changed from YHWH [LORD])
He will shatter kings in the day of His wrath.
- 6) He will judge among the nations,
He will fill them with corpses,
He will shatter the chief men over a broad country.
- 7) He will drink from the brook by the wayside;
Therefore He will lift up His head.

When the scribal emendation is removed, Psalms 110:5 speaks of the simultaneous presence of two Yahwehs. Scribal emendation took place, because this was a blasphemous thought for the Jews who believed that the Messiah was not equal to God. Judaism believed that their human Messiah was lower than God.

This can be further understood in light of Matthew 22:41-46 and why Caiaphas tore his robes in Matthew 26:64-65.

Jesus provides a clearer understanding of Psalms 110 and its succinct Messianic message is perhaps the main reason why it is so often referred to in the New Testament.

It should be noted that the presumed Emendations of the Scribes is difficult to verify with absolute certainty. Aside from comparing ancient manuscripts such as the Dead Sea Scrolls to the Septuagint and others, there aren't any pre-Sopherim texts in possession to study. Despite this, there is a strong basis to acknowledge the existence of the Emendations of the Scribes albeit the specific emendations may be contested.