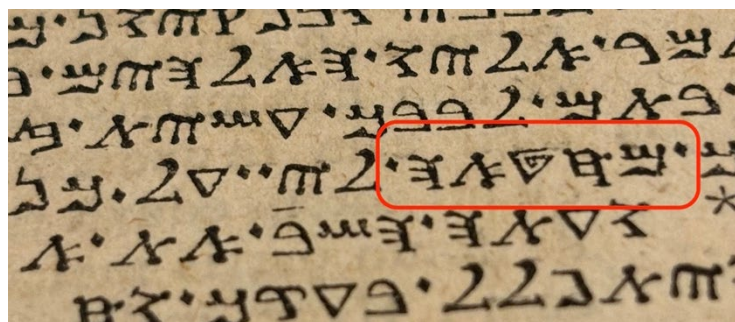Vayera 5785   וירא תשפ״ה

Can You Spell-check the Tanakh?

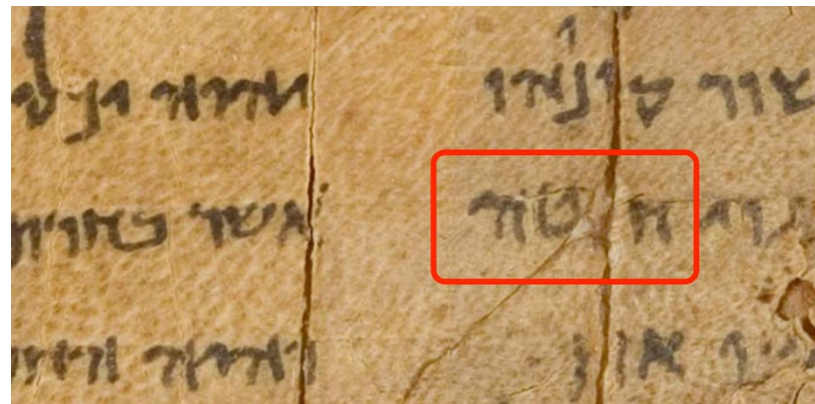**Rabbi David Moster, PhD, Director of Biblical Hebrew, JTS**

There is a puzzling word in this week's parashah: מֵחֲטוֹ "from sinning" (Genesis 20:6). God appears to Abimelekh in a dream and says, "I myself have kept you from sinning (מֵחֲטוֹ) against me [with Sarah]." The word מֵחֲטוֹ is unusual because it should be spelled with an *alef*, either as מֵחֲטֹא in 1 Samuel 12:23 or as מֵחֲטוֹא in Psalm 39:2. We know there should be an *alef* because the Hebrew root חטא "to sin" appears 603 times in the Tanakh and has an *alef* 99.2% of the time. So, is the missing *alef* of מֵחֲטוֹ a spelling error? It depends on who you ask.

Let us run a thought experiment by asking our question to three scribes from divergent times and places in Jewish history. Scribe #1 lives in Jerusalem during the Biblical period. According to Scribe #1, the *alef* of חטא is indispensable, meaning Genesis 20:6 originally had an *alef*. A sloppy scribe must have omitted the letter by accident, and that error would be copied over and over for millennia. Interestingly, the Samaritan version of the Torah has מחטאה "from sin" with an *alef*. Perhaps this is because the Samaritan Torah branched off from the Jewish Torah at an early point in time before the *alef* of מֵחֲטוֹ was lost.

Scribe #2 lives at Qumran in the Judaean Desert during the 1st century BCE, which is after the close of the Biblical period. The scribes at Qumran, who wrote many of the Dead Sea Scrolls, viewed the *alef* of חטא as preferable but not necessary. For example, the Great Isaiah Scroll (1:4) has חוטה with the letter *heh* instead of חֹטֵא with the letter *alef*. In other Dead Sea Scrolls one finds חט "sin" instead of חטא, חטתו "his sin offering" instead of חטאתו, and חוטי "sinners of" instead of חוטאי (11Q19 57:10; 1QS 3:8; 1QpHab 10:2). According to Scribe #2, there are two ways to write the Hebrew root חטא, one with an *alef* and one without. The missing *alef* of מֵחֲטוֹ is unusual but it is not technically an error.
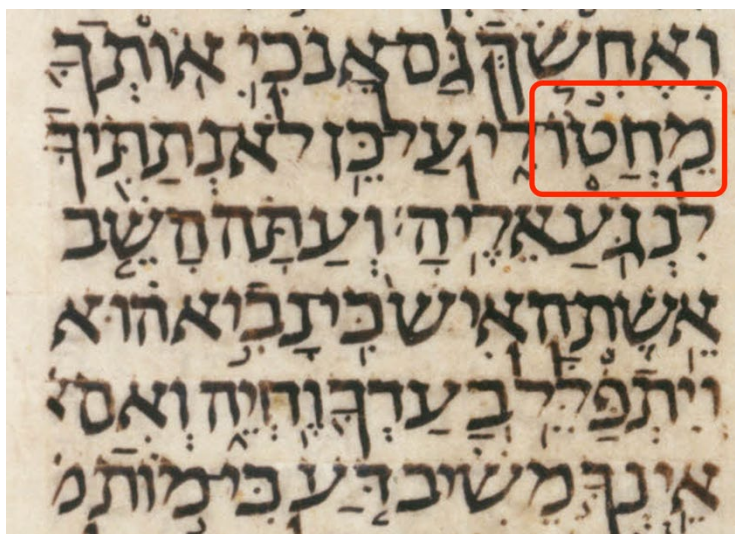

חוטה with the letter *heh* in the Great Isaiah Scroll (1:4)

Scribe #3 lives in Toledo, Spain, in the 1200s CE. He has written many Tanakhs, one of which can be found at [The Jewish Theological Seminary](#). By this time, the Masoretes have transformed the Jewish Tanakh, adding approximately two million lines, dots, and marks for vowels and cantillation. Masoretic Tanakhs also contain notes about the frequency and spelling of unusual words. The scribe of the famous Leningrad Codex, for example, wrote the following note about the word מֵחֲטוֹ in Genesis 20:6:

מחטאה with the letter *alef* in the Samaritan Torah (Gen 20:6)

that different methods will most likely lead to different results.

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ג חד כת טא וחד כת טו וחד כת טוא

[The word appears] 3 times, one written with טא, one written with טו, and one written with טוא (1 Sam 12:23; Gen 20:6; Ps 39:2).

For Scribe #3, the so-called "missing *alef*" of מֶחֲטוֹ is the exact opposite of a spelling mistake. It is how the Tanakh is meant to be written. If a Torah scroll were to contain the word מֶחֲטוֹא with an *alef* in Genesis 20:6, it would have to be set aside from use until it was corrected by a qualified scribe.

מֶחֲטוֹ with its note in the Leningrad Codex (Gen 20:6)

So, is it possible to spell-check the Tanakh? Scribe #1 says yes, and מֶחֲטוֹא with an *alef* is the correct form. Scribe #3 also says yes, but מֶחֲטוֹ without an *alef* is the correct form. Scribe #2 says no, allowing for both forms to coexist. Thus, it appears that one's approach to difficult words such as מֶחֲטוֹ depends upon one's viewpoint. The crux of the issue is whether one is searching for the "original" text as Scribe #1, the Masoretic text as Scribe #3, or something in between as Scribe #2. This is significant to contemporary readers because there might not be a single "correct" answer for a difficult word such as מֶחֲטוֹ. The Tanakh has been passed down from scribe to scribe for millennia, which makes all of these issues much trickier. Instead, we should appreciate

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