

FOUR LARGE LETTERS IN THE BIBLE

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The Mesorah lists certain letters that are written in the Torah scroll larger than the others (*oht rabati* is the Hebrew term for such a letter). There are differing traditions as to which letters should be written this way. While there is no universally accepted list of these letters, some are more common in manuscripts than others. For example, the large letter "bet" which begins the first word of Genesis [בראשית] is found even in the earliest manuscripts and in all Torah scrolls today. There are various explanations offered as to why particular letters in various books of the Bible are meant to be written in an unusual manner.

Yeivin² gives three categories of types of large letters:

1. Letters are written large at the beginning of a book, such as the first letters of Genesis, Proverbs [משלי], Song of Songs [שיר] and Chronicles [אדם], or at the beginning of a new section within a book, as in Ecclesiastes 12:13 [סוף].

2. Letters are written large to draw attention to some significant point, such as the large "vav" in Leviticus 11:42 [גחון] and large "gimmel" in Leviticus 13:33 [והתגלה], that mark the traditional halfway points of the Torah in letters and words. Similarly, the large "he" in Deuteronomy 32:6 [ה ליהיה] calls attention to the fact that the letter should be written as a separate word.

3. Letters are written large to avoid errors and insure that the reading is precise. An example of this is the large "dalet" in Deuteronomy 6:4 [אחד] to make sure the word is not read as if it had the very similar appearing *resh* [אחר].

Yeivin writes: "In most cases, however, there is no obvious reason for the large letter, as in Genesis 30:42 [ובהעטיף], Deuteronomy 29:27 [וישלכם], Numbers 27:5 [משפטן], Numbers 13:30 [וייהס]."

Tov similarly states:

The occurrence of some of these special letters (e.g. Genesis 30:42

[ובהעטיף], Numbers 27:5 [משפטן], Deuteronomy 29:27 [וישלכם] is prob-

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ably random, that is, the special letters may have differed coincidentally from the surrounding ones, and hence they carry no particular message.³

In this article, I will demonstrate that there is significance to these four large letters, and that they even fall into the three categories noted above.⁴

GENESIS 30:42 - ובהעטין

This verse gives details on the techniques of breeding that Jacob used after he told Laban that he will take the speckled and spotted lambs as his wage: *But with the feebler [ובהעטין] animals he would not place them there. Thus the feeble ones went to Laban and the sturdy to Jacob* (Gen. 30:42). Eisenstein, in his article on the topic of small and large letters in the Bible, explains that the large letter here functions to insure that the word is not read as "ובהעטין" with a "nun" at the end.⁵ The word "עטין" means breasts or udders, and the word ובהעטין would mean "when their breasts are full."

Eisenstein states that because of this misreading the Septuagint translates this as "Whenever the cattle happened to bring forth," when their udders were full with milk, referring to the point in time that Jacob placed the rods before the cattle. The Targum translates ובהעטין as "and the late," meaning the cattle that go into heat too late, due to their feebleness.⁶ This translation of the word is basically the opposite of the translation given in the Septuagint. According to Eisenstein's explanation, the large letter in ובהעטין falls into Yeivin's third category, a letter written large to insure the correct reading and avoid errors.

NUMBERS 13:30 - ויהס

This verse quotes Caleb speaking to the Israelites after the mission of the spies: *Caleb hushed [ויהס] the people before Moses and said, 'Let us by all means go up, and we shall gain possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it.'* The large letter "samekh" in the word "ויהס" only appears in a few lists of large letters. Most Masoretic lists have Ecclesiastes 12:13 [סוף] as the location of the only large "samekh" in the Bible. Machzor Vitry does list the "samekh" in "ויהס" as a large letter, based on a tradition that the Torah contains a large version of each letter of the alphabet, and the Prophets and Writings together have each letter of the alphabet large as well.⁷

This letter can be understood to be written larger in order to avoid confusion with the similar appearing letter "mem" when it is the last letter of the word. Switching these two letters would lead to reading the word as "ויהם" [confounded], as in Exodus 14:24. Rashi explains that ויהם denotes confusion connected to a thundering sound. Reading the word ויהם [to silence] as ויהם [to confound through loud noise] would be completely opposite to Caleb's action of hushing the people. This large letter falls into Yeivin's third category; a letter written large to insure the correct reading and understanding of the verse.

NUMBERS 27:5 - משפטן

This verse appears after the plea of the daughters of Zelophehad to inherit their father's portion: *Moses brought their case [משפטן] before the Lord* (Num. 27:5). Mordechai Yehudah Leib Zaksh explains that the large letter "nun" comes to distinguish this word from the similar appearing "משפטו," written with a "vav" [his case]. Zaksh notes Rashi's commentary on Numbers 27:16:

When Moses heard that God told him, "Give the inheritance of Zelophehad to his daughters" Moses said, "The time has come that I should ask for my wants, that my sons should inherit my high office." God said to him, "Not thus did it enter My thoughts. Joshua is worthy of receiving reward for his service."

Zaksh states that the Torah wants to emphasize that at the time he brought the case of Zelophehad's daughters before God, Moses was concerned only with their case [משפטן],⁸ and only after did he think to bring up the issue of his own inheritance [משפטו].⁸ Pinchas Wolf, in his Torah commentary, also explains that the final "nun" was written large to distinguish it from a "vav," though with a different homiletic interpretation.⁹ Whether or not we accept the exegesis of Zaksh and Wolf, we can explain that the large "nun" serves to insure that we read the text correctly. It also falls into Yeivin's third category of large letters.

DEUTERONOMY 29:27 – וישלם

This verse is part of the description of the punishment that will befall the Israelites if they follow the gods of other nations. It forms part of the re-

sponse to the question when *all the nations will ask*, 'Why did the Lord do thus to this land? Wherefore that awful wrath?' (Deut. 29:23) The answer ends with, *The Lord uprooted them from their soil in anger, fury, and great wrath, and cast them [וישלכם] into another land, as is still the case'* (29:27) The letter "lamed" is not readily confused with any other letter, so another approach is needed to explain why it is written large. David Zvi Hoffmann, in his commentary on this verse, explains that the large letter indicates that we can read the verse as if a new word begins with the "lamed." If we do this, and also change the meaning of the following word *el* from "into" to "God," the verse now reads "and you will have [וייש לכם] God in another land." The verse then means that even in a foreign land you will not be forsaken by God.¹⁰ This is of course a midrashic interpretation,¹¹ but it falls into a category of large letters that has already been established, a letter written large to indicate a separate word. This is the second category listed by Yeivin, and includes the large "he" in Deuteronomy 32:6 [ה ליהוה]. Whereas the word ה ליהוה is actually written as two words, וישלכם is written as one word, but the two-word possibility is indicated by a large letter.

We have seen that although there are places in the Bible where there does not seem to be a purpose to the large letters, upon further consideration reasons can be found. These reasons need not be completely fanciful. In fact, they fall into the previously established categories set by Masoretic scholars.

NOTES

Translations of biblical verses are taken from *The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1990).

1. Zvi Ron, *Sefer Katan vGadol* (Jerusalem: Rossi Publications, 2006) pp. 1-6.
2. Israel Yeivin, *Introduction to the Tiberian Masorah* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1980) pp. 47, 48.
3. Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) pp. 57, 58.
4. For homiletic explanations for these large letters see *Sefer Katan vGadol*, pp. 141-143, 162-172, 203-210.
5. *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1901-1906) p. 412.
6. *Daat Mikra – Bereishit vol. 2* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 2000) p. 364.
7. *Machzor Vitry* (Jerusalem: Isaac Bulka Publisher, 1988) vol. 2, p. 683.
8. Mordechai Yehudah Leib Zaksh, *Ma'amar Mordechai* (Jerusalem: Midrash Gavoha L'Talmud Beit Zvul, 1994) p. 556.
9. Pinchas Wolf, *Diyukim Al HaTorah* (Jerusalem: Foundation for the Publication of the Writings of Rabbi Pinchas Wolf, 1992) p. 442.

10. David Zvi Hoffmann, *Sefer Devarim Mefurash al yedei Rav David Zvi Hoffmann* (Tel Aviv: Netzach, 1961) p. 547.

11. Jeffrey H. Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996) p. 282, note 27.