

Librarian's Lobby

By Daniel D. Stuhlman

Influential Books

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Recently one of the listservs for librarians that I participate in asked about influential books. I thought for a while what books have influenced me. I could have given pat answers such as the *Torah*, *Perke Avot*, or *Talmud* but these are books we study all the time. In order for a book to have a great influence, the first reading would have been at a crossroads or seminal time of my life. College is a time of change in learning skills. The power of analysis develops and the understanding of time and history changes to more sophisticated adult levels.

One book symbolic of that change in my learning was *Understanding Genesis : the heritage of Biblical Israel*, by Nahum Sarna. (New York, Schocken Books, 1970) This book has an interesting story behind it. Dr. Nahum Mattathias Sarna (born 1923 in London) retired from Brandeis in 1985, but later taught at Columbia, Yale and, most recently, Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton. He also served as the librarian of Jewish Theological Seminary and taught in the Bible department in 1957-59. Dr. Sarna passed away on June 23, 2005 in Boca Raton, Florida.¹

Understanding Genesis was commissioned by the Melton Research Center as a source book for teachers of *Tanach*. The materials produced by the Melton Research Project were used by my teachers when I was in 9th and 10th grade. As a college student I was able to read the scholarly basis that my high school teachers used. *Understanding Genesis* provided the background to the religious and ethical issues in sefer *Bereshit*.

The chapter on the patriarchal period discusses chronology. "When did all this take place?" is one of Sarna's questions. No external contemporary sources exist referring to the patriarchs by name. Without outside synchronistic controls dating depends on Biblical data. This is where Sarna helps the student make a bridge from the Bible stories told to children to the sophisticated analysis of an adult Bible student. Sarna also tells us that numbers are important in the Biblical story. There is a message in the numbers that is not always literal. For example the life spans of the patriarchs constitute a mathematical sequence when factored.

Abraham	175 years	=	7×5^2
Yitzhak	180 years	=	5×6^2
Ya'akov	147 years	=	3×7^2

The coefficients decrease by two; while the base of the squared numbers increase by one. Sarna says that numbers are not intended to be accurate historical records. The use of numbers in the *Tanach* is the way of conveying the idea that the history of Israel was part of God's grand design.

¹ Jeffrey H. Tigay, professor of Hebrew & Semitic Languages & Literatures at the University of Pennsylvania wrote an obituary that was published in many newspapers as it was distributed by JTA. The piece was adapted from the foreword he wrote to Nahum Sarna's book, *Studies in Biblical Interpretation*, published by the Jewish Publication Society in 2000. In this article Professor Tigay said that *Understanding Genesis* was one book that he wished he could have put in the hand of every college student. Professor Tigay was one of my teachers the summer before I started college. He did put the book into my hands. I never met Professor Sarna in person.

Understanding this plan is an important part of break between juvenile and adult understanding of the Biblical events, theology, and sociology.

A question this past week reminded me of the importance understanding history and chronology. In September 2003 in this column (<http://home.earthlink.net/~DDStuhlman/crc64.htm>.) I wrote a line "Even though the scribes were very careful variations have crept into the text. One reason is that the original Torah scrolls were in the ancient Hebrew characters without spaces between the words and without final letters." The writer sent a picture from the Dead Sea scrolls saying that the words and spaces are clearly visible. She wanted me to help her figure out the inconsistency.

The Dead Sea scrolls were written in the period of about 250 B.C.E. to 68 C.E. They are the oldest extant copies of many Biblical books. The most famous is the Isaiah scroll. There were no Torah scrolls in the cache. If you take 1240 B.C.E. as the approximate date of the Exodus and King David's reign as 1010-970 B.C.E. that would make the Torah of Moses 1000 years older and the from the age of the prophets and kings 700 or more years earlier. Before the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls the earliest texts of the *Tanach* were fragments. Some of the fragments were discovered in the Cairo Geniza only about 50 years earlier than the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls. Even though the Masoretic text of the *Tanach* was established about the 2nd century B.C.E., we have no full texts older than the 9th or 10th centuries C.E. Much of our knowledge of ancient Hebrew is based on inscriptions on stone, pottery, and metal. Much of our knowledge of the ancient Hebrew Bible text is based on early Greek, Latin and Aramaic translations.



Transcription of the Mesha Stone

How did I know that the ancient Torah scrolls, that is the ones before 400 B.C.E. had no spaces? The Mesha Stone (also called the Moabite Stone) was discovered in 1868. It has 24 lines written in ancient Hebrew script. On the left is a picture of the transcription of the text. Note the lack of spaces between the words. There are dots between words. Other inscriptions also lack spaces.

This picture is from: *Hebrew, the eternal language*, by William Chomsky (Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1957) Chomsky discusses how Hebrew developed and changed over the years. Language originated as speech. Even the etymologies of the word "language" in English, "lāshon לָשׁוֹן" in Hebrew and "Sprach" in German are connected to tongue or speaking. Spoken language was probably much more localized than in our time. The pronunciations of words varied by location. Chomsky gives some examples of the Hebrew of Israel compared to several places in Europe. (see chapter 3) Chomsky gives examples of English changes from the time of Chaucer to our time. (see p. 52)

The existence of one stone without spaces between words is not conclusive evidence that a Torah scroll was written without spaces. The evidence from other inscriptions on coins, gems, and pottery as well as evidence from Phoenician does support the idea that words were not strictly

divided in ancient Hebrew. C.D. Ginsburg has a whole chapter on word division in his *Introduction to the Massoretico-critical edition of the Hebrew Bible* (1896)² He gives examples from manuscripts with differing ways of dividing the letters into words.

There are many questions that bear investigation, but some will never be answered without new discoveries. We have a gap in our knowledge of ancient Hebrew because our study is limited by a lack of written evidence. Writings on organic materials (parchment, papyrus, leather, etc.) have not survived.

When documents were written as scrolls there was no documentation as to the name of author or scribe or dates. When the codex became the form of circulating books, scribes documented their names and the dated the copies. For a librarian this documentation is extremely important. That is the data we use to describe, catalog, and reference library materials.

The original question was lacking knowledge of the history of the Hebrew language. The questioner thought "early" referred to the 2nd commonwealth era or the 1st century. The earliest Torah scrolls were copied over 1000 years before the 1st century. The influence of one book, *Understanding Genesis*, lead me on a journey of Bible study and to an answer for a question received last week.³

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² The edition that I used includes a major introductory essay by Harry M. Orlinsky bringing a much needed update to Ginsburg's research. After Ginsburg the field of Biblical scholarship changed greatly. The discovery of the Cairo Geniza, the Dead Sea scrolls, the English translations of Jewish Publication Society, and publication of many Hebrew editions of the *Tanach* all came after Ginsburg's work. These works were all influenced by the work of Ginsburg. The full citation is: *Introduction to the Massoretico-critical edition of the Hebrew Bible*, by Christian D. Ginsburg; with a prolegomenon by Harry M. Orlinsky, The Masoretic text: a critical evaluation. [New York] : Ktav Publishing House [c1966]

³ Just a comment-- Some of these ideas were discussed with Rabbi Moshe Mescheloff. I wish to thank and acknowledge his help in clarifying the ideas and encouraging new trains of thought.