

Taj Torah, and related works

In Hebrew, illustrated manuscript in Hebrew

Yemen, c. 1400-1450

With 10 full-page carpet pages including 1 schematic drawing of Jericho

347 leaves, 36 quires, originally each of 5 bifolio (10 leaves), some leaves bound out of place (reconstruction of the quires and the configuration of leaves supplied on request), written in neat Yemenite script copied by Sa'adiyah ben Joseph ben Gad ha-Levi, the biblical text on two columns, of 18 lines, letters filled with color, red, green, or yellow, chapter numeration, denotation of chapters, ornamentation in the form of vertical columns of trifoliate vegetation, red, green, or yellow, small decorations in the homilies of the sages, wavy texts (f. 58a), zigzag (f. 106b), braided design (f. 169v), and so forth, extensively and skillfully restored with paper reinforcement on all pages. Modern red morocco binding inset with marble paper. Dimensions 275 x 210.

Written by an important Yemenite scribe, this is one of only three known Hebrew manuscripts with illustrated carpet pages, prefacing the books of the Pentateuch. It also includes a rare copy of the Tajim (a Yemenite grammar designed as a guide to reading the Torah) and a unique set of mnemonic tables, designed for memorization and study of the Torah. It is the only Yemenite manuscript illustrated with a drawing of the labyrinth of Jericho. In spite of its condition (expertly restored), the manuscript thus has considerable cultural significance and is of the greatest rarity.

PROVENANCE

1. Certainly constructed and written in Yemen, probably before 1455 on paleographic and codicological grounds: the scribe is identified as a scribe active in Yemen who signed a related manuscript 1444, and the paper is the type used in Yemen until the end of the fifteenth century. The Torah had a special place in the culture of the Yemenite Jews, who learn to read it from an early age. In part, this explains the presence of the mnemonic tables as well as the grammar or "manual" that fills the first 58 folios.).
2. At the top of 59a, in the upper "folio", is a (handwritten) promissory note, in Arabic [... have come before us, we the Jews whose testimony is attested to at the bottom of this leaf, Hazeh Yosef b. Mori Avraham El(-)nah and Suliman b. Suliman Alrimi and this book has been placed as a pawn in the hands Suliman b. Salam Alrimi...] (Crossed out by obliterating lines).
3. Rabbi Yosef Kafah (1917-2000), a major figure in Hebrew studies, especially of Yemenite manuscripts, astronomy, the thought and writings of Maimonides, and the literary works of Saadia Gaon; see the obituary assessing his life and work by Tzvi Langerman in *Aleph*, 2001, p. 333 ff.

TEXT

The manuscript is copied by Sa'adiyah ben Joseph ben Gad ha-Levi, who worked in the city Sa'ada (M. Beit-Arie with Edna Engel and Ada Yardeni, *Specimens of Medieval Hebrew Script*, vol. 1, *Oriental and Yemenite Script*, Jerusalem, 1987, no. 137). For another manuscript by the same scribe,

see New York, Jewish Theological Seminary, MS L 430, Psalms, Proverbs, and Lamentations, signed and dated 1444 and transcribed in the city of Sa'ada.

ff. 1-58, Machberet Tijan (=Ketarim) in its Hebrew version, a notebook or manual on the Scriptures for specific use of the Yemenite Jews.

Published with an introduction, annotations, and translation into French on the basis of a single manuscript in J. Derenbourg, "Manuel du lecteur, d'un auteur inconnu: publié d'après un manuscrit venu du Yémen et accompagné de notes," *Journal asiatique* 6 (1871) [as a separate volume]. This is a Yemenite work containing the grammar of the language of the Scriptures, the division of the Torah chapters, the books of the Scriptures and their relationship to their authors (based upon the Breita in Bava Batra), and the chronology of the Scriptures. According to Zucker, there is as yet no modern critical edition, nor a list of the manuscripts. See MS 761 in the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, another copy of Tijan's grammatical introduction to the Bible bound with a Yemenite Torah, 13c.

Apparently missing are two leaves; in the middle of the composition, two leaves are missing between leaves 25-26, whose corresponding text in print is on page 67, line 11 ("ס בשלש") – page 74, line 8 ("... על זאת יתפלל כל חסיד"). In that place the restorers bound a blank leaf.

ff. 58b-268b, Pentateuch, accompanied by the Homilies of the Sages, the Masorah Ketanah, and the Sum Total of the Commandments according to Maimoides, both positive and negative Commandments; Genesis (f. 58), Exodus (f. 116b), Leviticus (f. 243b), Numbers (f. 268), Deuteronomy (268b).

ff. 269-347, Haftarah.

ILLUSTRATION

The cultural significance of this manuscript lies in its near-unique series of illustrations, mostly carpet pages filled with mnemonic devices. There is a long tradition of manuscripts with carpet pages in the East and the West, originating in the first millennium with carpet pages painted at the beginning of the books of the Koran. They signify the beginning of a "holy space." Carpet pages were then drawn among books of Hebrew scripture and the text books used to teach children the alphabet in the Middle East during the ninth to the eleventh centuries, from where the style spread to Spain and also reached Yemen. However, very few Yemenite manuscripts have survived with carpet pages. Only two such manuscripts including carpet pages are known to Professor Zucker. The first is a Pentateuch with Haftarah [Lectinary of selected chapters from Prophets to be read after the weekly portion according to Yemenite custom copied by David ben Benayah ben Sa'adiah copied in Sane'a in 1485, then in the possession of the Hibshush Family, hence called the "Taj Hibshush" and now in Jerusalem, National Library of Israel 4=5840 (see the facsimile edition, Tel-Aviv 1985). The second is a Taj, Pentateuch with Aramaic translation, now MS Cambridge Westminster College, copied by David ben Benayah ben Sa'adiah, for the cantor Aaron ben Amram, in Sane'a (unsigned, but identified through the Palaeography Project).

For the tradition of Carpet pages and its connection with Islamic manuscripts, see Ettinghausen and Graber, 1987, pp. 119-124, and Narkis, pp. 23-28.

f. 58v-59, [end of Genesis], Carpet pages, including the number of chapters in a frame with a plant in an arabesque, mnemonic signs for the purpose of recalling the order of the chapters in

the book. The mnemonic signs were apparently intended to teach children the Torah, and they are unique to this copy;

Two parallel "carpet" pages, spread in the preface by which we enter the book. The outer edges of the "carpets" are surrounded by frames, along which are various decorations drawn with vacant ink lines, whose interior has been filled with the colors red and green or yellow that has turned brown, and in which there are stylish vegetative motifs in arabesque form, whose stems twist in scroll like fashion, and join together in zigzag style. The area inside the frame of the entire "carpet" is divided into two rectangles of disparate height (5 and 9 cm.). The top rectangle of the entire "carpet" has at its center a large and concise circle, whose circumference contains a closed arabesque sphere and two smaller concise spheres on the sides of each of them. Inside each of the spheres is an enclosed decoration consisting of integrated lines that take the shape of a flower. At the corners of the upper rectangles and in the vacant space – are additional decorations.

f. 116v [end of Exodus], Carpet page with mnemonic signs

Mnemonic signs for the purpose of recalling the order of the chapters in the book, inside a "carpet" the size of the text column, with the top and lower edges done with lines formed in zigzag fashion. The area inside the frame consists of text done in large decorative script, in red and green or yellow that has become brown. Six lines of two words each, with the spaces between the lines and at the line's end done in the shape of a bud or acorn in two colors each.

קדמת – allusion to Genesis;
נח – allusion to Noah;
אזל – allusion to "לך לך";
וירא – allusion to וירא ;
דחיי – allusion to "חיי שרה";
יצחק – allusion to "תולדות יצחק";
נפק – allusion to "ויצא";
ושלח – allusion to "וישלח";
והיא – allusion to "ויחי"

The above allusions were apparently intended to teach children and are an exceptional phenomenon.

f. 243v-244 [end of Numbers], double Carpet page with mnemonic signs; includes a summation of the number of verses and open and closed chapters in a book; a double frame, reminiscent of a small "carpet", done in arabesque fashion, with zigzag pattern; and a complete "carpet" page for the mnemonic signs that prompt the order of the chapters in the book; a frame consisting of various shapes made up of loops and angles in the horizontal edges, and zigzag lines along the vertical edges, rectangles in which there are small combined ornaments of various shapes in the corners (right top corner; the ends of the loops done in the shape of bird heads). The text in colored decorative script:

במדברא קביל. ואסיק שלח קרח. גזיר[ת] בלק פנחס. ריש מטלניא

במדבר - במדברא
נשא - קביל
בהעלותך - ואסיק
שלח לך - שלח

קרה – the same as the chapter's title
חקת - גזירת
בלק, פינחס - the same as the chapter's title
ראשי מטות – ריש
מסעי – מטלניא

f. 268v, [end of Deuteronomy], double Carpet page with mnemonic signs;

Includes a frame for the "summation of the number of verses of this book," done as combined ornaments consisting of zigzag and braided lines, resembling a small "carpet." The top and lower edges executed in arabesque fashion; and a complete "carpet" page for the mnemonics signs that prompt the order of the chapters in the book: an arabesque frame with combined ornaments; text in colored decorative script.

אלין צלותיא. חלף הזו דיניא. ארי עלמא וקמנא. אציתנא ואתברכנא

אלו הדברים – "אלין"
ואתחנן – "צלותיא"
עקב – "חלף"
ראה – "הזו"
שופטים – "דיניא"
כי תצא = "ארי"
כי תבא – "עלנא"
נצבים [וילך] - "וקמנא"
האזינו – "אציתנא"
וזאת הברכה – "ואתברכנא"

f. 288v-289 [end of Leviticus], double Carpet page with a summation of the number of verses of the Pentateuch and parts of the books, total number of words and letters.

f. 289v-290, Ornamental page facing Carpet page with a drawing of the city of Jericho in the shape of a labyrinth; there are the seven walls that surround the city, having only one entrance. A written description of the drawing of the walls of Jericho appears in the inner circle of the labyrinth: "The shape of the walls of Jericho, who reads it as if he walked in."

It is extremely rare to have a drawing of the labyrinth in a Hebrew manuscript. This is the only known Yemenite manuscript of such a drawing. For related drawings, which are in any event scarce, see examples in Latin manuscripts from the ninth century, in a Syriac Maronite manuscript from 1059, and from Latin manuscripts of the twelfth century. There is a Hebrew manuscript of a Bible from the lower Rhine, dated 1294 (New York Public Library, Spencer Collection, MS 1); a Bible written in Provence or Catalonia, Farhi Bible, Sassoon Collection, written between 1366 and 1383 (see www.farhi.org); and an illustration in a scroll depicting the holy places in the Land of Israel (see Zucker, 1997, fn. 7).

f. 290v, Carpet page of a "magical square".

An arabesque frame executed with braiding and combined ornaments (in the corners) inside of which are squares, which if followed from each in particular directions will arrive at identical relationship. For example: From each of them downward and to the right it will meet the same letter; from each at an angle to the right and down, we will arrive at the same letter in an

ascending arithmetical column: אאאאא , ייי , וו , אא etc. Believe it that this magical square has power entrusted by Kabbalah.

f. 291, Carpet page composed of circles and arabesques.

A framework of arabesques in which are symmetrically organized five perfect circles one large one in the center, and four smaller ones at its four corners. In the center of each is a precision drawn flower as if by calipers and having six chalice-like sepals. The central circle is surrounded by arabesque and among the extremities of the sepals are arched lines that convert the flower into an umbel.

Flowers enclosed inside a sphere and arranged in a similar way are found in three other beautiful Yemenite Taj manuscripts: New York, Jewish Theological Seminary, לוצקי Collection no. 58 (from 1325); Jerusalem, National Library of Israel, MS Heb 40 432 (from 1460), and London manuscript, The British Library, MS Or. 2348, (from 1469). All three are micrographic illustrations (see Sirat and Avrin, 1981, pp. 19-21).

291v, ""...לכל התורה..."" [בשמ ה'] אל עולם [אתחיל] לכתוב העניינות שמפטירין בהן לכל התורה...

LITERATURE

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ONLINE RESOURCES

The Farhi Bible, Sassoon MS 368

<http://www.farhi.org/genealogy/index.html>

The Xanten Bible, New York Public Library Spencer MS 1

<http://exhibitions.nypl.org/threefaiths/node/19?highlight=1>

Hibshush Bible, National Library of Israel MS 4

http://web.nli.org.il/sites/NLI/English/collections/treasures/shapell_manuscripts/mikra/yemen/Pages/default.aspx

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