

[Bible] Genesis

In Hebrew, manuscript on parchment

Northern France or Germany, c. 1250-1300

125 folios on parchment, unfoliated, missing three leaves (collation i¹² [-1] ii¹² [-2 and 12] iii-v¹² vi-xiii⁸ xiv⁴), catchwords verso of final leaf in each quire, ruled in blind, remnants of prickings visible in upper and outer margins of some folios (justification 115-125 x 75-80 mm.), written in neat Ashkenazic gothic semi-cursive script in black ink in a single-column of text of seventeen lines on ff. 2-12v, fourteen lines on ff. 13-19v, and fifteen lines on ff. 20-128, enlarged initial word panels at the start of each of the traditional Torah portions, partial vocalization and/or accentuation on ff. 75, 76, 83v, 85, 91v, 92v, 99v, 102, 104v, 106v-109, marginal corrections and aliyah (lectionary break) markers in hands of primary and secondary scribes throughout, Torah portion headings on ff. 4-12, 15-19, 54, 89, 123v, justification of lines using verbal and ornamental space holders, pen trials on ff. 80v, 102v, 128v, double-conical/catenoid arrangement of text on ff. 127v-128, dampstaining, stains from former mold, and dog-earing intermittently throughout (especially at the beginning and end), tear along base of f. 2 affecting part of the last line of text on recto and verso, small holes and tears affecting a few words on ff. 21, 109, 114, 120, 123, worn at edges with consequent loss of some marginalia periodically throughout (e.g., ff. 54, 55v, 62, 73), f. 125 reinforced along inner margin, owner's mark and first 3.5 verses of Exodus blotted out on f. 128v. Modern quarter binding with maroon cloth spine, title on spine in gilt, blue paper flyleaves and pastedowns. Dimensions, page size 170 x 115 mm., binding 180 x 125 mm.

Written on exceptionally smooth parchment in a convenient, portable format, this beautifully executed copy of the biblical book of Genesis is also remarkable for its gothic Hebrew calligraphy and several unique features of the text. Furthermore, its thirteenth-century origins place it among a group of the earliest medieval Ashkenazic Bible codices to have come down to us.

PROVENANCE

1. While the manuscript has no colophon, it is possible to date and localize it approximately to the late thirteenth century in Northern France or Germany based on the distinctive Ashkenazic gothic script in which it is written, which bears strong resemblance to that found in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS héb. 164 (dated 1250), and in Zurich, Braginsky Collection, MS 274 (dated 1288).
2. At some point, this Pentateuch came into the possession of Joseph bar Moses ha-Kohen, who wrote the following on f. 128v (now blotted out): "One should always inscribe in his books: 'This book is mine.' [Signed] Joseph bar Moses ha-Kohen of <Fürth?>, may his soul repose in Eden."

TEXT

ff. 2-10, the Torah portion *Be-resbit* (Gen. 1:18-6:8); [f. 1, Gen. 1:1-17, now lacking];

ff. 10-21, the Torah portion *Noah* (Gen. 6:9-11:32); [f. 14, Gen. 8:13-9:1a, now lacking];

ff. 21-31, the Torah portion *Lekh lekha* (Gen. 12:1-17:27); [f. 24, Gen. 13:17-14:10a, now lacking, supplied by a later scribe in the margins of ff. 23v and 25];

ff. 31-44, the Torah portion *Va-yera* (Gen. 18:1-22:24);

ff. 44-53, the Torah portion *Hayyei sarah* (Gen. 23:1-25:18);
ff. 53-62, the Torah portion *Toledot* (Gen. 25:19-28:9);
ff. 62-75, the Torah portion *Va-yetse* (Gen. 28:10-32:3);
ff. 75-87v, the Torah portion *Va-yisblab* (Gen. 32:4-36:43);
ff. 87v-96v, the Torah portion *Va-yeshev* (Gen. 37:1-40:23);
ff. 96v-111, the Torah portion *Mi-kets* (Gen. 41:1-44:17);
ff. 111-120v, the Torah portion *Va-yiggash* (Gen. 44:18-47:27);
ff. 120v-128v, the Torah portion *Va-yebi* (Gen. 47:28-50:26).

While we can never be absolutely certain about its original purpose, since it may not have been completed as intended (for example, the initial word panels at the start of each of the Torah portions seem to leave room for further decoration that was never added), this manuscript would appear to be most closely related to the Hebrew biblical codices known as liturgical Pentateuchs. The scribe did not leave space either for Masoretic notes or for commentaries, and its miniature size and layout certainly suggest that this copy of Genesis – as evidenced by the double-conical/catenoid arrangement of the text on ff. 127v-128, the manuscript probably never included more than one biblical book – was meant to be used to follow along with the Lectionary in the synagogue.

As explored at length by David Stern, following Moshe Goshen-Gottstein, medieval Bible codices can be roughly divided into three groups: Masoretic Bibles, liturgical Pentateuchs, and study Bibles (Stern, 2012; Goshen-Gottstein, 1962). The first generally included the vocalized and accentuated biblical text, accompanied by two sets of so-called “Masoretic notes” meant to record every exceptional detail of the consonantal and vocalic structure of Scripture. The second usually featured the text of the Pentateuch divided into weekly Torah portions and accompanied by the *haftarot* (weekly lectionaries from the Prophets), the Five Scrolls (Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther), and a *targum* (translation) into Aramaic. The last was used, as its name suggests, to study Scripture more in-depth and normally included the comments of one or more of the traditional medieval rabbinic exegetes. Interestingly, according to Stern’s calculations, while Sephardic Jewry tended to favor the Masoretic Bible, “roughly two-thirds of the surviving Hebrew Bibles written in Germany, Northern France, and England in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries fall under [the liturgical Pentateuch] rubric” (Stern, 2012, p. 56).

Books were a rare commodity in Ashkenazic communities prior to the thirteenth century (Shulvass, 1958; Ta-Shma, 2003; Kanarfogel, 2011). Most Jews in Germany and France had neither the skills necessary to copy their own texts, nor the resources available to pay others to do so on their behalf. As a result, the average Ashkenazic Jew living in this period generally prayed from memory and followed along with the weekly Torah portion simply by listening carefully, since he had no Pentateuch of his own.

The situation began to change, however, in the thirteenth century, with an increase in Bible production among both Gentiles (Ruzzier, 2013) and Jews, especially in France. Although, according to Kanarfogel, even in this period “the average person ‘in the pews’ had neither a prayer book nor a copy of the Torah or other biblical texts in his hands during synagogue services” (Kanarfogel, 2011, p. 257), the phenomenon of Jews bringing their own liturgical Pentateuchs to the synagogue was gradually becoming more common. Stern argues that “[t]he profusion of liturgical Pentateuchs in Ashkenaz is best explained as part of this larger change in reading practice wherein individual members of the audience became active participants in communal events of reading” (Stern, 2012, p. 64).

All of this would seem to support the theory that our manuscript, a product of the late thirteenth century, was written with weekly synagogue use in mind. Even the virtual complete lack of vocalization and accentuation of our text, as well as the relative frequency of errors committed by the original scribe, would, as explained by Goshen-Gottstein in his analysis of thousands of biblical fragments from the storied Cairo Geniza, strengthen this thesis:

The bulk of biblical MSS were written “wholesale” by scribes – or else not too carefully by the future users themselves – for liturgical needs. They were not written as “sacred copies” but were meant for everyday use. [...] The recital of portions of the Bible was a central part of worship. For halakhah [Jewish law] it was solely the reading from the scroll by the “Reader” that was important. It was not the *reading* of the congregant but the *listening* that counted. Many of the congregants, however, followed the reading in their own private copies, as is the practice in most places today. [...] The Geniza discloses clearly what was used: the “hand copy” contained mostly one book of the Pentateuch (or the Psalms, etc.), and often one weekly portion only. [...] It is this habit that accounts for the small-size paper fragments which abound in the Geniza. If we wanted to press our point, we might say that these were little more than “hearing aids”. They were not only written without massoretic notes, but each scribe – or rather copyist – copied the text with just as much exactitude as he wanted, and mostly did not take great care with the vowels and accents (Goshen-Gottstein, 1962, pp. 40-41).

In addition to its unique gothic script and portable format, our manuscript also displays a number of other interesting phenomena. First and foremost, and related to its small size, it is written in a single column, unlike most other contemporary Bible codices. Moreover, several of the *parashah* (pericope) breaks here diverge from the accepted practice among Ashkenazim today, as do a number of spellings of individual words (see, e.g., Gen. 4:13 [*mi-neso*] and 7:11 [*ma'yenot*]). In fact, it would seem that while the original scribe wrote *va-yihyu* in Gen. 9:29 (f. 16v), as the text reads in Yemenite Torahs, a later user scratched out the offending *vav* at the end of the word to transform it into *va-yehi* and thus bring it in line with general Ashkenazic convention. Finally, the corrector(s) of this text employed a number of strategies, outlined by Yossi Peretz in his article on the topic (2009), to remove problems he/they encountered, including strikethroughs (f. 20v), erasure (f. 67v), reversal of words written out of order by inserting numbers above them (f. 70r), and the replacement of an incorrect divine name (which cannot be erased, according to Jewish law) with the correct one by circling the first and writing the second in the margin next to it (f. 70r; cf. f. 40r).

Only about eighty-three, or slightly over one-third, of surviving Ashkenazic Pentateuch manuscripts were copied before the year 1300 (Yossi Peretz, personal communication). Moreover, it is most unusual for such texts to reach the public market. Indeed, since 1980, only three (other than ours) are known to have been sold by major auction houses. The manuscript described here stands out as an elegant and early witness to the textualization of Ashkenazic society in the thirteenth century and beyond.

LITERATURE

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