

[Bible] Psalms  
In Hebrew, manuscript on parchment  
Spain, 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries

34 folios on parchment, medieval foliation in pen in Coptic numerals (original collation indeterminate, but missing about sixty-six leaves), ruled in blind (justification 105-110 x 140-150 mm.), written in neat Sephardic square script in dark brown ink in sixteen long lines, complete Tiberian vocalization and accentuation of text by primary scribe, marginal corrections in hands of primary and secondary (perhaps also tertiary) scribes periodically throughout, marginal chapter numeration added in hand of secondary scribe in black ink, prickings visible in virtually all outer margins, justification of lines using verbal space holders and stretching of final letters, traditional stichographic arrangement of text, curlicue decorative flourishes on some letters, dampstaining and browning throughout (especially on ff. 15, 16v, 20v-23, 27v), some dog-earing, small holes as well as tears in edges periodically affecting text, damage especially significant on ff. 3 and 22, text occasionally faded and chipped (e.g., ff. 18, 19v, 25, 28v, 33, 34v), ink transferred from another manuscript to the margin of f. 6, several pages loose at head. Modern quarter binding with brown cloth spine, title on spine in gilt, blue paper flyleaves and pastedowns. Dimensions, page size 220-225 x 170-175 mm., binding 238 x 190 mm.

A very early copy of the psalms originating in Spain, this manuscript made its way eastward before being deposited in the Cairo Genizah. It is a rare survival and one of the most complete copies of the psalms from that famous treasure trove of medieval Hebrew texts. There are no more than about thirty extant Sephardic books of psalms (most part of complete Hebrew Bibles) written before 1300, almost all in public collections in Europe (one each recorded in Israel and the United States); they are very rare on the market (none have sold at auction since 1980).

## PROVENANCE

1. While the manuscript is fragmentary and has no colophon, it is possible to date and localize it approximately to the twelfth-thirteenth centuries in Spain based on the distinctive shapes of the letters *pe* and *shin* characteristic of Sephardic scribal practice in this period.
2. Considering the fragmentary nature of the text and the use of Coptic letters as its mode of foliation, it seems likely that this book was eventually brought to Egypt and ultimately discarded in the Cairo Genizah.

## TEXT

ff. 1-2v, the text of Ps. 6:9b-9:21a;

f. 3rv, the text of Ps. 18:4b-28a;

f. 4rv, the text of Ps. 23:2b-25:8a;

ff. 5-6v, the text of Ps. 49:14b-51:21;

ff. 7-11v, the text of Ps. 59:12b-68:14a;

ff. 12-15v, the text of Ps. 69:22b-74:12a;

f. 16rv, the text of Ps. 80:4-81:9a;  
f. 17rv, the text of Ps. 94:14b-96:5a;  
ff. 18-19v, the text of Ps. 98:1b-102:14a;  
f. 20rv, the text of Ps. 103:10b-104:12a;  
ff. 21-22v, the text of Ps. 106:40b-108:5a;  
ff. 23-24v, the text of Ps. 116:1b-119:8;  
ff. 25-26v, the text of Ps. 119:65-119:120;  
ff. 27-32v, the text of Ps. 120:1-137:2a;  
ff. 33-34v, the text of Ps. 144:9b-147:10a.

Our manuscript consists of approximately a third of the contents of the book of Psalms; in its original form, the text likely took up about one hundred folios. While we cannot know for sure, given its fragmentary state, whether it was originally composed as an independent volume (i.e., a Psalter) or as one section of a larger collection of Scripture (either the Hagiographa alone, or perhaps as part of *Sifrei emet*, the "poetic" books of Psalms, Proverbs, and Job), it seems likely, given its size, that it was not originally included in a full set of the Hebrew Bible. Moreover, because independent codices of the Hagiographa and of *Sifrei emet* from Spain are rare in this period, those two options seem unlikely as well. Instead, our manuscript was most probably (though by no means definitely) originally copied as a Psalter to be used for religious devotion or study, or both (on which, see Stern, 2012).

Indeed, according to Moshe Goshen-Gottstein, evidence from the Cairo Genizah suggests that independent codices of the Psalter (or parts of it) were rather common at this time: "The Genizah 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" (Goshen-Gottstein, 1962, p. 41). Independent consultation of the Friedberg Genizah Project confirms that fragments of psalms composed before the year 1300 can be found under seventy-one separate shelf marks, more than any other biblical book outside of the Pentateuch itself (Online Resources; see also Dukan, 2006, for a number of biblical Genizah fragments containing sections of the psalms).

As noted above, in addition to its clear Sephardic square script, our text also features an elegant stichographic layout of the verses. In his study of biblical poetry, James L. Kugel suggests that the original purpose of stichography as applied to Hebrew Scripture was likely to demonstrate graphically the parallelism contained within the verses (Kugel, 1981). By the time of the Dead Sea Scrolls, however, "stichography had already acquired another purpose beyond (and sometimes instead of) its verse-dividing, punctuating function: it was also a distinctive feature, marking passages as 'special' or simply arranging them so as to make a pleasing design" (Kugel, 1981, p. 120). It would continue to function in this aesthetic capacity throughout the Middle Ages, when

“it was common practice for Jewish scribes to use some sort of special spacing at least for the ‘poetic’ books of Psalms, Proverbs, and Job” (Kugel, 1981, p. 123). With the advent of print, however, stichographic arrangement of the text became a technically complicated and laborious chore and was therefore largely abandoned (except in laying out the biblical “songs,” like Ex. 15 and Deut. 32). Our manuscript thus hearkens back to a time when effort was invested on the part of scribes to make the text visually interesting and appealing.

The text of the psalms themselves generally corresponds with what we know today as the Masoretic Text, though divergences (perhaps the results of mistakes, perhaps intentional) do occur here and there. (Some of the more obvious mistakes include the transcription of God’s Name instead of the name *Yebudab* [Judah] on f. 8v, the misplacement of an entire verse on f. 11, and the accidental deletion of an entire verse on f. 20.) The same is largely true of the vocalization and accentuation of the manuscript. One interesting feature of the former with which many modern readers might not be familiar is the practice of writing the so-called “furtive *patah*” under the letter *preceding* the guttural consonant it is meant to vocalize (space permitting).

The psalms are numbered in this manuscript. From the differences in the scripts, it would seem that this marginal chapter numeration written in black ink was added by a later hand, perhaps once the codex had migrated eastward. (It appears that the Coptic foliation was added at about the same time.) This impression is strengthened by examining the layout of the beginning of Psalm 99: throughout the rest of the manuscript, the original scribe would indicate the beginning of a new psalm by graphically separating it from the one preceding; here, however, Psalm 99 seems to continue uninterrupted from Psalm 98. Different scribes throughout the medieval Jewish world divided the book of Psalms in a variety of ways; there was apparently no consensus on the number of chapters (i.e., psalms) the book contained (Yarchin, 2015). And so, here, too, the manuscript as originally copied seems not to have considered Psalms 98-99 to be separate units; it was only the later hand, adding chapter numeration in the margins, that imposed its own system upon the text. (While the end of the manuscript is lost, it would appear that the later scribe did in fact assign one hundred fifty psalms to the book as a whole, though we cannot be certain that the original copyist did so.)

If we are correct and this manuscript does in fact derive from the Cairo Genizah, it is one of the most complete copies of Psalms from that storied treasure trove of medieval Hebrew texts. The number of surviving books of Psalms (usually occurring as part of complete Hebrew Bibles) deriving from Sephardic lands in the period before 1300 is probably no more than about thirty, the vast majority of them residing in public collections in Europe, with only one each in Israel and the United States. Moreover, at no point in the years since 1980 has another copy of the Psalms with such an early Sephardic pedigree come to the public market. The closest one gets are a fourteenth-century Sephardic *mabazor* (seasonal prayer book) that originally contained all of Psalms in its upper and lower margins but is now missing about half, sold by Sotheby’s New York in 1984; and ninth- to tenth-century fragments of the Pentateuch and Psalms written in an Eastern hand, sold by Sotheby’s London in 1994.

The value of the present manuscript, then, lies not only in its aesthetically pleasing appearance and (probable) Cairo Genizah provenance, but in its rarity as an early manifestation of the Sephardic scribal traditions regarding the composition of the book of Psalms.

## LITERATURE

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## ONLINE RESOURCES

Our MS

[http://rosetta.nli.org.il/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps\\_pid=IE12756730](http://rosetta.nli.org.il/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE12756730)

The Friedberg Jewish Manuscript Society (free registration required)

<http://www.jewishmanuscripts.org>

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