

RABBI DAVID KIMHI, *Sefer ha-shorashim* [The Book of Roots (or Dictionary)]

In Hebrew, manuscript on paper

Southern France or Northern Italy, c. 1370-1430

ii + 266 + i folios on paper (similar to Briquet 8427, "lettre n," Pisa 1372, Rodez 1373, Toulouse 1387, and to Briquet 8429, "lettre n," Pisa 1459), premodern circular marks in pen in upper-outer and lower-outer corners of openings about every ten folios, periodic modern foliation in pencil in Arabic numerals in lower-outer corner of recto, modern foliation in pencil in Arabic numerals in upper-outer corner of recto (cited), incomplete, lacking 3 leaves' worth of text (collation i-iv [indeterminate due to later replacement of numerous leaves [see below] but presumed to have originally been composed of 20 folios each] v-vii<sup>20</sup> viii<sup>20</sup> [-7, missing one leaf, without stub] ix<sup>20</sup> [-20, missing one leaf with stub present] x-xi<sup>20</sup> xii<sup>18</sup> [-3, missing one leaf, with stub present] xiii<sup>20</sup> xiv<sup>16</sup> [-14 through 16, three leaves presumed lacking, though text is complete due to later replacement]), horizontal catchword on f. 1v only, ruled in blind (justification 205 x 130 mm.), double-column text written in an elegant Sephardic semi-cursive script in dark brown ink in 33 lines, each new letter of the Hebrew alphabet enlarged and written in square script, each new lemma likewise enlarged and written in square script, many scriptural quotations vocalized with Tiberian vocalization, Tetragrammaton abbreviated to three Hebrew letters yod arranged in a triangle followed by a wavy line, justification via use of anticipatory letters, insertion of space fillers, abbreviation, dilation and contraction of final letters, and suspension of final letters above the line, poems on ff. 154v, 264v-265, very occasional corrections and strikethroughs in later hands, marginal citations of verses added intermittently by a later Sephardic hand and more thoroughly by the Yemenite hand that copied the replacement leaves (see presently), ff. 1, 17-24, 265-266 written in Yemenite square and semi-cursive scripts in black ink on unmarked Yemenite paper to replace missing text, more minor text replacements on ff. 13, 25-26, several pairs of leaves (ff. 7-8, 183-184, 186-187) currently reversed, ff. 15-16, 14 currently misbound (should be between ff. 1-2), f. 232 currently misbound (should be between ff. 263-264), scattered thumbing and staining (though see ff. 95-98), some corners rounded, slits opening up periodically along marginal ruling lines or along edges of watermarks, some ink bleeding, episodic letter abrasion, tape repairs in margins of ff. 1-4, 14-16, 25, 46, 136 with slight loss of text on ff. 2-3, 14, 25, 46 near inner margins and more extensive losses on ff. 15-16, 136, smaller tape repairs intermittently throughout, especially in lower edges, occasionally with loss of text, small losses in the middle of ff. 1, 41, 163, 171, 176, 178, 203, 230, minor worming on ff. 88-93 affecting individual letters, lower-outer corner of f. 131 almost completely detached, lower-outer corner of f. 201 detached but present, tape partially obscuring a couple of letters on ff. 256v, 259v. Bound in modern, blind-tooled three-quarters polished calf, rubbed and worn along edges, title and author name lettered in gilt on spine, green speckled paper edges, modern paper pastedowns and flyleaves. Dimensions 262 x 193 mm.

One of the most influential biblical Hebrew dictionaries of the Middle Ages, *Sefer ha-shorashim* is a monument of Provencal lexicographical scholarship whose importance is attested in part by its having been printed no fewer than three times in the incunabular period; there is still no modern critical edition. The present volume survives as a beautifully written copy of this text, one of only a handful of known exemplars still held privately.

## PROVENANCE

1. While the manuscript has no colophon, it is possible to date and localize it based on the paper used, which seems to have been in circulation primarily in Southern France and

Northern Italy in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Given that the script is Sephardic, the scribe must have been either an immigrant to Northern Italy or (more likely) a resident of Jewish Provence, whose geo-cultural characteristics, including scribal practice, overlapped to a great extent with those of Iberian Jewry living just over the Pyrenees.

2. The manuscript eventually made its way to Yemen. While there, folios at the front and rear of the volume that had been damaged or lost entirely were replaced by an anonymous Yemenite scribe (see above). This copyist apparently had access to the Venice, 1546 edition of *Sefer ha-shorashim*, since he used its distinctive title page text when writing f. 1. Because of the replacement and misbinding of a number of leaves, the original collation of some of the book's quires is indeterminate.
3. Sa'id ibn Daud ibn Ibrahim Gershom al-Kohen acquired the volume and signed his name on one of the replacement leaves (f. 266v): "This book, *Sefer ha-shorashim*, belongs to Sa'id ibn Daud ibn Ibrahim Gershom al-Kohen. May God bring auspicious omens and blessing to him and his descendants from now till eternity. Amen, so may it be the will of Heaven." A *kohen* (priest) by the name of Sa'id ben Ibrahim ben Gershom is recorded as the seller of a late fifteenth-century manuscript now housed at The Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York (MS 9783; see f. 165v). The date of the sale is given as Tuesday, 2 Shevat 1890 AG (January 19, 1580). It is possible that the seller of the JTS manuscript is identical with the owner of ours, his father's name, Daud, simply having been omitted from that book's deed of sale.
4. Some time later, the book was bought by Joseph ibn Shuker al-Sarem, who signed his name on ff. 1 and 266v and added an inscription now pasted to the (modern) second front flyleaf: "I merited to purchase this *Sefer ha-mikhlol* through the labors of my hands. May the blessed Omnipresent give me the privilege to immerse myself in it—I, my descendants, and my descendants' descendants until the last generation. Amen, so may it be [His] will. He who takes it and does not return it—may his name and memory be obliterated from the world, and may he be bitten by a snake. But may the nation of God dwell in peace. [Signed] the humble Joseph, son of our teacher Shuker al-Sarem, may his Rock and Redeemer keep him and may his end be good." Apparently the same Joseph ben Shuker al-Sarem drew up a deed of sale, dated Sunday, 28 Iyyar 2164 AG (May 18, 1718), on the front flyleaf of a copy of the *Nezikin* volume of the Mishnah published in Venice in 1549 that is currently held by the National Library of Israel ([https://www.nli.org.il/he/books/NNL\\_ALEPH990020235060205171/NLI](https://www.nli.org.il/he/books/NNL_ALEPH990020235060205171/NLI)). The reference in our inscription to *Sefer ha-mikhlol* may be a mistake, or else it may be al-Sarem's way of referring to *Sefer ha-shorashim* (on which, see further below). It is also possible that this volume was originally part of a set that included *Sefer ha-mikhlol*, although this would presumably mean that al-Sarem acquired the manuscript before Sa'id ibn Daud, who mentions only *Sefer ha-shorashim* in his above-quoted inscription.
5. The book was eventually bought for Kanisat al-Usta, a beautiful synagogue and spiritual center in Sanaa, Yemen, here (f. 1) referred to by the acronym used for its builder/restorer, Rashba (Rabbi Shalom ben Aaron ha-Kohen Iraqi), an eighteenth-

century communal leader and activist. The synagogue continued to function until the mass migration of Yemenite Jewry to the Holy Land in 1948-1950 (Nahshon, 2000). The manuscript was presumably then taken by a member of the community to Israel, where it was apparently rebound.

6. On November 24, 2009 (lot 140), and then again on December 19, 2012 (lot 111), our volume was offered at auction by Sotheby's in New York.

7. Private Collection.

## TEXT

[f. i, blank]; f. ii, Owner's inscription in Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic pasted to modern flyleaf;

ff. 1-266, Rabbi David Kimhi's *Sefer ha-shorashim*, incipit, "sefer ha-shorashim ve-hu ha-helek ha-sheni me-ha-mikhlol she-hibber he-hakham ha-gadol she-ba-medakdekim she-hayu be-doro rabbeinu david ben yosef ben kimhi ha-sefaradi nero dolek tamid la-talmidim ha-lomedim ba-torah ha-kedoshah ... yezakkenu ha-e-l li-re'ot binyan ha-har'el haverim am kol yisra'el ba-agala u-bi-zeman kariv amen ve-amem";

f. 266v, Owners' inscriptions in Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic.

With the completion of the long process by which the so-called Masoretic Text of the Bible was fixed in the late ninth or early tenth century, and especially with the spread of the Tiberian system of Hebrew vocalization throughout the Diaspora, Jewish scholars living under Muslim rule (and thus familiar with Arabic philological teachings) began to explore Hebrew linguistics as an independent area of study and research. The individual usually identified as the first Hebrew linguist was Rabbi Saadiah ben Joseph Gaon (882-942), who wrote at least three works on Hebrew lexicology and grammar. He would be followed by linguistic luminaries such as Rabbis Judah ben David Hayyuj (c. 945-c. 1000), Jonah Ibn Janah (Abu al-Walid Marwan; first half of the eleventh century), and Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra (1089-1164), among others, each of whom attempted to move the field forward by recording his insights into the inner workings of the language of the Bible.

Perhaps the best-known family of medieval Hebrew grammarians were the Kimhis, exiles from Spain who, in the middle of the twelfth century, settled in Provence and there disseminated the Iberian linguistic tradition among the Jews of Christian Europe. One Kimhi in particular, David (Radak; c. 1160-c. 1235), achieved great renown on account of both his grammatical works and his commentaries on large portions of the Hebrew Bible.

Radak's philological magnum opus, *Sefer ha-mikhlol* (The Comprehensive Book), is comprised of two parts: the *belek ha-dikduk* (grammatical section), which later came to be known simply as *Sefer ha-mikhlol*, and the *belek ha-inyan* (lexical section), which later came to be known as *Sefer ha-shorashim* (The Book of Roots). In both parts, Radak drew heavily on the research of his family members and predecessors, particularly Ibn Janah, who had himself authored a Judeo-Arabic treatise that was translated into Hebrew in the latter half of the twelfth century under the title *Sefer ha-shorashim*. However, unlike Ibn Janah, whose scholarship was largely original and meant

for the educated elite, Radak intended *Sefer ha-mikhlol* as a highly accessible Hebrew summary of all of the linguistic learning to which he was heir (which had mostly been written in Judeo-Arabic). He saw himself as a teacher and popularizer whose mission it was to reach a wide audience interested in the proper interpretation of the Bible (Talmage, 1975, and Kogel, 2016).

Radak's *Sefer ha-shorashim* is essentially a Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic dictionary, with (mostly triliteral) roots organized alphabetically. Each lemma quotes a verse or verses in which a word derived from the relevant root appears. Radak usually divides the occurrences of a given root into the different parts of speech (verb, noun, adjective) and then subdivides verbal usages among the various *binyanim* (conjugations). He also occasionally appends philosophical or exegetical commentary to the verses quoted. In his introduction to the book, Radak adjures scribes to make sure to copy each and every verse, even every word, within a given entry, because they all carry significance for teaching his readers about meaning, conjugation, pronunciation, or usage.

Yehiel Tzeitkin (2013) has argued convincingly that Radak revised *Sefer ha-shorashim* throughout his lifetime, generally adding insights arrived at while composing his biblical commentaries to the relevant lemmata in order to enhance the reader's understanding of the range of a given root. Because of these revisions, the extant manuscripts largely represent two different recensions of the book: a shorter one reflecting Radak's original composition and an expanded one comprising the edited text thereof—with many manuscripts falling somewhere in between the "original" and "edited" versions. Our manuscript is an exemplar of the more expansive version of *Sefer ha-shorashim*.

Due to its comprehensiveness and comprehensibility, *Sefer ha-shorashim* achieved great popularity both in the Jewish world and, eventually, among Christian Hebraists as well (Abate, 2016, Campanini, 2016, and Corazzol, 2019). It survives in about one hundred complete or nearly-complete manuscripts (and many more manuscript fragments), one of the earliest of which (Toronto, University of Toronto Library Ms. FR 5-010) likely dates from the author's lifetime (Tzeitkin, 2013). With the advent of the age of print, *Sefer ha-shorashim* was one of the first Hebrew books ever published using movable type (Rome, c. 1470), and it would be reprinted several times through the middle of the sixteenth century (see Online Resources; it also appeared in Salonika in c. 1532-1533). For reasons still unclear, however, almost three centuries would pass between the book's 1546-1548 publication in Venice and its most recent edition (Berlin, 1847). It is now in the process of being critically edited by Yosef Ofer and Yehiel Tzeitkin.

## LITERATURE

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## ONLINE RESOURCES

Rome, c. 1470 edition

[https://www.nli.org.il/he/books/NNL\\_ALEPH990009600700205171/NLI](https://www.nli.org.il/he/books/NNL_ALEPH990009600700205171/NLI)

Naples, 1490 edition

[https://www.nli.org.il/he/books/NNL\\_ALEPH990020609240205171/NLI](https://www.nli.org.il/he/books/NNL_ALEPH990020609240205171/NLI)

Naples, 1491 edition

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<https://www.hebrewbooks.org/11648>

Constantinople, 1513 edition

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<https://www.hebrewbooks.org/11903>

Venice, 1529 edition

[https://www.nli.org.il/he/books/NNL\\_ALEPH990011295420205171/NLI](https://www.nli.org.il/he/books/NNL_ALEPH990011295420205171/NLI)

Venice, 1546 edition

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<https://www.hebrewbooks.org/11649>

Venice, 1546-1548 edition

[https://www.nli.org.il/he/books/NNL\\_ALEPH990012271970205171/NLI](https://www.nli.org.il/he/books/NNL_ALEPH990012271970205171/NLI)

<https://www.hebrewbooks.org/11650>

Berlin, 1847 edition

<https://archive.org/details/seferhashorashim00kimh>

<https://hebrewbooks.org/43656>

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