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RABBI DAVID KIMHI, *Sefer ha-shorashim* (The Book of Roots)

In Hebrew, manuscript on paper

Yemen, c. 1500-1550

iii + 325 + iv folios on paper (in first half, similar to Briquet 5282, "croissant," Mantua, 1468, in second half, similar to Briquet 10718, "main," Digne, 1515), modern foliation in pencil in Arabic numerals in upper-outer corner of recto (1-142a, 142b-324), incomplete, lacking about 10.5 leaves' worth of text, one leaf lacking before f. 1, one leaf lacking between ff. 3-4, 22-23, 267-268, 298-299, 299-300, 320-321, two leaves lacking between ff. 5-6, 304-305, mysterious blanks left on ff. 145v, 231v, 238v, 240v, 298r-v, 319v without loss of text, stubs present between ff. 157-158, 247-248 without loss of text (collation indeterminate due to tightness of binding), later horizontal catchwords on versos (except f. 24v), sometimes decorated, occasionally cropped, ruled in blind (justification varies), single-column text written in an elegant Yemenite semi-cursive script in dark brown ink in 27-31 lines, ff. 23v-28 written in a different Yemenite semi-cursive hand in black ink without loss of text at the transitions, titles and new lemmata enlarged and written in square script, letters flourished intermittently, letter peh formed as lefufah (spiral) in typical Yemenite fashion in some lemmata on ff. 228, 230v-231, sporadic Tiberian vocalization, Tetragrammaton abbreviated either to three Hebrew letters yod arranged in a triangle followed by a wavy line or to vav-holam yod-vav, justification via insertion of space fillers, abbreviation, dilation and contraction of final letters, and diagonal inscription of final words (producing a "carpet fringes" effect) (see also alternating justification on f. 30), corrections, marginal and interlinear insertions, and strikethroughs in primary and later hands, Judeo-Persian marginalia in hand of later owner (see Provenance), small decorative motif added in outer margin of f. 138, slight scattered staining, dog-earing, and dampstaining (though see ff. 247-253 for more substantial staining), corners rounded, ink biting and abrading at times toward front of volume, ff. 1-2 cropped in outer margins, short tears in outer edges of ff. 1-13, 34, 70, 126, 173, 257, 259, 322-324, in upper edge of f. 35, and in lower edge of f. 131, long tears in upper quadrant of f. 3 and in lower edges of ff. 213-214, small holes on ff. 1, 112, 178, 240, 243, 250, 274, 276-277, 279, 285, 294, 305, 315, 323-324 mostly affecting individual letters (holes on ff. 216, 236, 294 not affecting text), minor loss of text near upper-inner margin of f. 5 and in upper-outer corner of f. 275, some blemishes repaired with tape, partially obscuring text on ff. 275r-v, 284v, 323v-324. Early (premodern) Middle Eastern calf over pasteboards, stab-stitched with cord, extensively worn, rubbed, dried out and cracking, spine and boards lined with burlap, remnants of old endbands, upper and lower joints of both boards damaged, spine partly exposed but sewing largely intact, vestigial ties to fore-edge, Judeo-Persian word (translating to "book") inscribed on outer edges, premodern paper pastedowns and flyleaves, housed in a modern brown cloth protective sheet and matching folding case with gilt title and author name on spine. Dimensions 286 x 208 mm.

One of the most influential Biblical Hebrew dictionaries of the Middle Ages, *Sefer ha-shorashim* is a monument of Provençal lexicographical scholarship whose importance is attested in part by its having been printed no fewer than three times in the incunable period; there is still no modern critical edition. It organizes the roots of Biblical words alphabetically. The present volume of the second expanded edition and one of only a handful of known exemplars still held privately is an excellent witness to the long and distinguished scribal culture of the Yemenite Jewish community.

PROVENANCE

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1. Copied in Yemen, probably c. 1500-1550. The scribe's colophon (f. 324v) reads as follows: "I will bless the Lord Who counseled, aided, and, with His right hand, supported me. Blessed is the Lord forever; amen and amen [Ps. 89:53]. I wrote this book on behalf of my brother, Mr. Jacob—I, the scribe Joseph, son of my father, teacher, and master Abraham, may his name be eternal, and may an auspicious omen be upon him. In exchange, he gave me *Sefer adam ve-havvah* [a Jewish legal work by Rabbi Jeroham ben Meshullam], and I gave him quires of the holy commentary..." No year or location is indicated, but it is possible to approximately date and localize the text based on the hand, which is Yemenite and probably dates from the sixteenth century. Watermark evidence is inconclusive, given the inexactness of the "croissant" match, but similar paper appears to have been in circulation in Southern France and Northern Italy in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Therefore, an origin in the first half of the sixteenth century seems likely. The great Hebrew codicologist Malachi Beit-Arié (2021) notes that Italian paper "was imported to Yemen from the mid sixteenth century on," which roughly aligns with the evidence provided by the present manuscript's watermarks.

The roots of the Jewish community in Yemen stretch back to antiquity (and possibly to Second Temple times). Yemenite scribes were famous for their high degree of exactitude when copying the Bible. The manuscript described here is a witness to the continuation of this tradition in the sixteenth century.

2. The volume later made its way to Central Asia, where a new owner, Reuben ben Abraham (no known relation to the previous owner), inscribed his name on f. 21 and glossed the text periodically with translations into Judeo-Persian, that is, Persian written in Hebrew characters.
3. The book's subsequent travels are difficult to reconstruct. A front flyleaf bears the French inscription "charach ce livre," apparently translating the Judeo-Persian inscription for "This *Shoresb* book" written in the hand of Reuben ben Abraham directly below; a rear flyleaf bears the mirror image of the Judeo-Arabic(?) words *bahr al-nuwahr*(?); the rear pastedown features the sequence "M934" written in pencil; and both the front and rear flyleaves contain modern Farsi text.
4. In the 1960s, the manuscript was acquired for a private collection in the United Kingdom.

TEXT

ff. i-iii, Arrows indicating the proper orientation of the book for those who do not read Hebrew, modern Farsi inscription in blue pen, and Judeo-Persian inscription reading "This *Shoresb* book" written in the hand of Reuben ben Abraham and translated into French as "charach ce livre" (see Provenance);

ff. 1-324v, [Rabbi David Kimhi's *Sefer ha-shorashim*], incipit, "min ha-dagesh be-tosefet nun ve-nafal ha-dagesh me-ha-binyan... nishlam sefer ezra, tehillah la-e-l ha-nora, ha-ehad she-ein lo temurah, barukh noten la-ya'ef koah u-le-ein onim otsmah yarbeh";

f. 324v, Scribe's colophon (see Provenance);

ff. i-iv, Modern Farsi and other inscriptions.

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 wide 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 trilateral) 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 comments 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 to the relevant lemmata insights arrived at while composing his biblical commentaries 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 a number of copies falling somewhere in between the "original" and "edited" versions. Our manuscript is an exemplar of the more expansive version of *Sefer ha-shorashim* and differs from the known printed editions in certain respects.

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, Thomas Fisher Rare Book 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; note that it also appeared in Salonika in c. 1532-1533). For reasons that are 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

Naples, 1490 edition

https://www.nli.org.il/he/books/NNL_ALEPH990020609240205171/NLI

Naples, 1491 edition

https://www.nli.org.il/he/books/NNL_ALEPH990020609430205171/NLI

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

Constantinople, 1513 edition

https://www.nli.org.il/he/books/NNL_ALEPH990011399990205171/NLI

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

Venice, 1529 edition

https://www.nli.org.il/he/books/NNL_ALEPH990011295420205171/NLI

Venice, 1546 edition

https://www.nli.org.il/he/books/NNL_ALEPH990020585130205171/NLI

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

Venice, 1546-1548 edition

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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