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Taj (Yemenite Pentateuch)

In Hebrew, decorated manuscript on paper in two volumes

Yemen, c. 1500-1600

Two volumes on Yemenite (unmarked) paper, modern paper flyleaves and pastedowns, vol. 1 (Genesis and Exodus), 312 pages, vol. 2 (Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy), 364 pages, modern pagination in pencil in Arabic numerals in lower margins at center, lacking ornamental section dividers for Genesis and Deuteronomy, as well as final two leaves of Deuteronomy (supplied by a later hand as 2:363-364), vol. 1: (original collation, i^o [i1 lacking], ii-viii^o ix^o [ix3 lacking] x-xv^o xvi^o), vol. 2: (original collation, i^o [i1 lacking] ii-v^o vi^o [vi5 lacking] vii-xviii^o xix^o [original xix4-6 lacking but later replaced with xix4]), first and last folios of each quire signed in ink at head and foot, respectively, of recto and verso, respectively (some signatures cropped, especially in vol. 2), ruled with a mastara (ruling board), justification of lines via dilation or contraction of letters (see esp. 2:176, 325), written in elegant Yemenite square (text body) and semi-cursive (Masorah) scripts in black ink (1:163, 2:108-109, 242 blank) in one column of sixteen lines per page, except in the cases of the two Pentateuchal songs and 2:38, 202, 363-364, slanted inscription of final words (producing a "carpet fringes" effect; see, e.g., 1:33, 35, 94, 2:22, 240), insertion of space fillers (see, e.g., 1:9, 2:114), and use of anticipatory letters (see, e.g., 1:120, 156-157, 161, 170, 173-174, 185, 251, 264, 282, 294, 298, 2:23, 75, 99), complete Tiberian vocalization and accentuation of biblical text throughout (with occasional, typically-Yemenite confusion of patah and segol vowels) except on 2:138-142, Masorah magna and Masorah parva written in micrography in margins except on 2:363-364, Tetragrammaton represented via three yods in the Masorah, corrections added in margins intermittently throughout (see, e.g., 1:4, 19, 36, 68, 88, 133, 176, 182, 280, 2:125, 131, 154, 226), last line of 1:280 repeated at the top of 1:281, pen trials on 1:1, 235, 237, 260, 2:194, three ornamental section dividers at the end of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers (1:311, 2:107, 243) featuring the rubricated words of an Aramaic mnemonic for the names of the parashiyot, surrounded by geometric frames in red and black, new parashiyot generally indicated via decorated, rubricated marginal pe or samekh and accompanied by a verse tally and mnemonic for the previous parashah (though see 1:152), later parashah headers on many rectos and some versos in vol. 1 but very infrequently in vol. 2, enlarged rubricated Hebrew letters (bet through zayin) generally used to mark the start of new aliyot, rubricated decorative devices used to mark the start of some festival lections and the end of Genesis and Leviticus (1:55, 162, 201, 225, 237, 278, 2:82, 106, 146, 302), decorated and rubricated marginal Masorah markers used at some biblical halfway points (see 1:81, 238, 2:24, 33, 55), books generally end with masoretic notes on the number of verses and paragraph breaks they contain (1:162, 309, 2:106, 241), Masorah magna inscribed in various geometric patterns in upper and lower margins, sometimes with an extra decorative flourish, Arabic tha used to mark the end of many masoretic notes, where a full-line paragraph break occurs in the first or last lines of a page, a pe (standing for petuhab [open]) and/or three dots are written on that line to indicate that it has been intentionally left blank (see, e.g., 1:123, 181, 2:102; though see 2:352), the Song of the Sea (1:212-214) and the Song of Moses (2:356-360) are either (in the second case) written in two mini-columns with a space in between or (in the first case) made to look like brickwork, rubricated decorative panel at the bottom of 1:309, marking the end of Exodus, scattered staining (more intense on 1:67-68), smudging, and thumbing, ink episodically deteriorating, some worming, mostly marginal and not affecting text (though see 1:291-308, 2:77-140, 153-162, 191-202, 341-364), outer edges of Vol. 1 frayed and torn in places, usually without loss, outer edges of vol. 2 cropped, corners of vol. 1 rounded, 1:1-2, 63-64, 139-140, 218-218, 253-258, 2:355-356, 363-364 remargined without loss, 1:307-310, 2:1-2 remargined with some loss of Masorah, 1:3-4, 59-62, 2:83-84, 317-318 reinforced along gutters, parts of outer margins of 1:13-14 lacking, without loss, tear causing minor loss on 1:29-30, minor repairs on 1:59-60, 186, 273-274, 2:2-3, 91-92, 146, 148, 197-198, 241-242, 314, 317, more serious repairs on 2:159-160, 357-362, lower-outer corner of

1:61-62 and upper-outer corner of 1:281-282 lacking, with some loss of Masorah, small holes on 1:69-70, 141-142, affecting individual words, short slits/tears within the text on 1:119-120, 267-268, 2:1-2, 17-18, 135-136, 213-216, longer slits in outer margins of 1:117-118, 191-192, 259-260, small patches on 1:248, 2:117-118, affecting a few letters, 1:311-312 loose and with slight damage to decorative border, 2:359-360 mostly loose, slight damage near upper edge of 2:351-356, with some loss of Masorah. Bound in modern green buckram, slightly worn around edges, shelf marks lettered in gilt on spines, loose paper labels placed below upper boards. Dimensions (vol. 1) 265 x 190 mm, (vol. 2), 242 x 190 mm.

A Yemenite Pentateuch, bound in two volumes, with complete Tiberian vocalization and accentuation of the biblical text throughout, and with the Masorah *magna* and *parva* written in micrography, arranged in geometric patterns, in the margins. Written in a clear, bold hand, these are beautiful books, complete with elegant decoration, including ornamental section dividers at the end of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. Hebrew Bibles copied in Yemen were the product of a unique scribal culture and are renowned for the quality of their texts.

PROVENANCE

1. Copied in Yemen in the sixteenth century by a scribe who identifies himself as Salim ibn Joseph al-Aziri at the beginning of volumes one and two: "This was my portion from all of my labors: I, the humble Salim ibn Joseph al-Aziri, may his soul be bound up in the Bond of Life. I have donated this object; he who reads it shall rejoice, while he who steals it shall be obliterated—and the nation of God shall dwell in peace" (1:1). And, in volume two: "This was my portion from all of my labors: I, the humble Salim, son of my master, my father Joseph ben Salim al-Aziri, may his soul be bound up in the Bond of Life. I have donated this object, known as the holy *taj* [...] to my synagogue, which God gave me the opportunity to build in the city Asade [?], may the Uppermost prosper it. It shall be called by my name as a source of merit and as a remembrance. He who reads it shall rejoice, while he who steals it shall be obliterated—and the nation of God shall dwell in peace" (2:1).
2. Belonged to David Solomon Sassoon (1880-1942); nos. 330-331 in Sassoon's catalogue, *Ohel Dawid* (1932, vol. 1, p. 24).

Descendants of David Sassoon (1792-1864), who was born in Baghdad, but emigrated to India in 1832, have been premier collectors of items of historical importance to Jewish history for more than a century. His grandson, David Solomon Sassoon (1880-1942), moved to England in the early twentieth century, was a businessman, philanthropist and also an author and scholar. He was as well an avid collector, who assembled the most important private collection of Hebrew manuscripts ever know. Cecil Roth in 1941 described it as "one of the most magnificent collections of Hebrew manuscripts in private hands in the world to-day."

Over the following decades, this library would expand to comprise more than 1,270 Hebrew and Samaritan manuscripts and a wide range of printed volumes and lithographs, including over forty incunabula, twenty-eight books printed on parchment, and rare titles, periodicals, and broadsides published in Baghdad, Bombay, Poona, Calcutta, and the Far East.

3. The library then came into the possession of Solomon David Sassoon, a rabbi and

communal activist in his own right, who added modestly to the collection and published some of its manuscripts. He, his wife Alice (Aliza Beyla; d. 1998), and their family immigrated to Israel in 1970.

TEXT

Vol. 1, pp. 1-310, Genesis and Exodus; the first volume contains two further distinctively Yemenite features: Rabbi Judah Halevi's (1075-1141) liturgical poem *Yehidah, shabari beit e-l ve-sippav* with supralinear vocalization (p. 1), as well as most of the alphabetical acrostic prayer *E-l, libbi petah* recited by some Yemenite schoolchildren every day before commencing their study sessions (p. 310).

Vol. 2, pp. 1-364, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy; lacking two folios from the end with Deuteronomy 33:13b-32:12, replaced with a single leaf in a 19th-century hand.

Yemenite Bibles, in particular copies of the Pentateuch, are traditionally called *Tijan* (sing., *Taj*, from the Arabic word for "crown"). This manuscript *Taj* includes the complete text of the Pentateuch, lacking only two folios from the end of Deuteronomy (33:13b-34:12), which have been replaced with a single 19th-century single leaf; two section divider folios are also lacking.

The main differences between *Tijan* and Hebrew Bibles copied in other parts of the Jewish world concern minute details of the biblical text, its vocalization, and its accentuation. Examples include the use of the plural form *va-yibyu* (they were), rather than the singular *va-yebi*, in Genesis 9:29 (see 1:26) and the spelling of the word *dakka* (crushed) in Deut. 23:2 with a final alef, rather than a he (see 2:323). Another distinctive feature of *Tijan* is their scrupulousness in laying out the biblical text, especially the songs, in consonance with Maimonides's (1138-1204) prescriptions. The last two lines of the Song of the Sea (Ex. 15:1-19; see 1:212-214) each split their text into two blocks separated by an empty space and the Song of Moses (Deut. 32:1-43; see 2:356-360) is transcribed on sixty-seven, rather than seventy, lines. Both are decoratively laid out; the Song of the Sea is copied to look like brickwork, and the Song of Moses is written in two mini-columns with a space in between.

The decoration of Yemenite Bibles, influenced by their development in an Islamic context, is also distinct from the general tradition of Hebrew manuscript Bibles. This *Taj* boasts extensive rubrication of aliyah and decorative parashah and Masorah markers, as well as the delicately interwoven micrographic Masorah forming characteristic geometric patterns. Three of the biblical books (Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers) are followed by an ornamental section divider with geometric borders in red and black enclosing the rubricated text of a popular Yemenite Aramaic mnemonic for all of each book's *parashiyot* (1:311, 2:107 and 2:243).

The roots of the Jewish community in Yemen stretch back to antiquity (and possibly to Second Temple times), and Yemenite scribes were famous for their high degree of exactitude when copying the Bible and their close adherence to the prescriptions reflected in the *Masorah*. *Masorah* are lists of information containing the details of both the consonantal skeleton of the Bibles, as well as its proper vocalization and accentuation, compiled to ensure that the Bible is copied correctly. They were needed since Rabbinic law requires that a Torah scroll fit for ritual use in the synagogue must be written without punctuation, vocalization, or accentuation. Yemenite scribes embraced the Tiberian *Masorah*, following the example of the famous scholar

Rabbi Moses Maimonides (1138-1204), and observed the rules for the copying the Bible outlined in his *Mishneh Torah* so scrupulously that modern researchers consider *Tajim* to be particularly valuable textual witnesses, especially for the Tiberian tradition.

LITERATURE

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