Hebrew Masoretic Text

Likely late 10th/11th Century, Near East

Parchment Leaf

Height: 39.5 cm, Width: 35.0 cm

A single large, square parchment leaf with three 22-line columns of an excerpt from the Bible in Hebrew (Zechariah 14:21-Malachi 2:10). The text is written in clear, square script with nikkud, Masorah magna above the text and Masorah parva below the text, and small Masorah inserted between the columns.

This page is an example of the earliest extant form of the Hebrew Bible in codex form, of equal or near-equal antiquity to the earliest surviving manuscripts. It is arranged in the oldest known codex format of a nearly square leaf with three columns of text, echoing early papyrus codices. The earliest surviving Hebrew biblical books date to the ninth or tenth century, including the surviving parts of the Aleppo Codex (c. 920, now Jerusalem, Shrine of the Book), the Damascus Pentateuch (c. 1000; also Jerusalem, Hebrew University), the St. Petersberg Codex (dated 1008/09, now National Library of Russia, MS.B19a), British Library, Or.4445 (Pentateuch only, tenth-century), and the near complete ninth- or tenth-century codex, ex D.S. Sassoon, sold in Sotheby's, 5 December 1989, lot 69, for £2,035,000. This leaf joins these codices as the key records of the format of the text as selected by the Masoretic scholar, Aaron Ben-Asher (d. c. 960), in Tiberias (modern Palestine). Ben-Asher's text was adopted by Maimonides as the most accurate Bible, and remains in use today.

Professor of Jewish Studies at University College London, Chimen Abramsky (1916-2010), assigned this leaf securely to the same scribe that recorded the tenth-century codex now in the British Library, Or. 4445. As Or.4445 does not feature a eulogistic acronym for Ben-Asher, this suggests that it was written

during Ben-Asher's lifetime. German scholar, Paul E. Kahle has even suggested that Or.4445 was the work of Ben-Asher himself, meaning that the scribe who wrote this leaf was a member of Ben-Asher's circle during the critical formative stages of the Hebrew Bible. A sister leaf to this example was also in the Schøyen Collection, and sold at Sotheby's on 10 July 2012.

Exhibitions

XVI Congress of the International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament, Library of Law Faculty, University of Oslo, 29 July-7 August 1998.

Literature:

Western Manuscripts and Miniatures, Sotheby's, London, 18 June 1991, Lot 57 (part).

Doug Powell, Holman QuickSource Guide to Christian Apologetics (Nashville, Tennessee, 2006), p. 189.

Western and Oriental Manuscripts and Miniatures, Bloomsbury Auctions, London, 10 July 2018, Lot 6.