

## TRANSLATION OF FRAGMENT c. 1450 OF THE TORAH FROM BEN EZRA SYNAGOGUE, EGYPT

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### ABSTRACT

The preservation of ancient texts is vital for understanding not only culture and ensuring the survival of traditions but also to safeguard this linguistic heritage for future generations as well as to give more scholars access to manuscripts, thereby allowing for translation and expansion of linguistic knowledge. Cross comparison of texts and translations can then be conducted for the purpose of understanding grammar, content, stylistic change over periods and to ascertain the reliability of copies when compared over large periods of time. The translation of the Fragment from Ben Ezra Synagogue is such an attempt. This fragment written circa 1450 provides a brief insight into the scholarly work of Hebrew Soferim (סופרים) during the Islamic rule of the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt (سلطنة المماليك) (Saltanat al-Mamālīk). This will further provide a source of comparison for Bible translation in unison with the use of older as well as newer copies of the Sacred writings.

**Keywords:** Bible, Hebrew, Translation, Ben Ezra, Egypt, Tetragrammaton, Jehovah.

### INTRODUCTION

For centuries the Hebrew Soferim have recorded with painstaking accuracy the Torah and other texts considered sacred. The Torah or Book of the Law is considered especially sacred and contains the laws given to the nation of Israel through the Prophet Moses. The Ben Ezra Synagogue itself has a considerably long history and has been part of the landscape of Cairo for centuries. Evidence points to the existence of a building on the site from before the period dating to 882.

Originally, there was a degree of difference in scholarly opinion as to the date of the establishment of the synagogue itself. Once commonly accepted theory was that the patriarch of the Coptic Church in Cairo sold property to a group of Jews who converted the church into the Ben Ezra Synagogue. However, evidence points to it being established well before 822. The church mentioned was sold to a group of Babylonian Jews which followed the Talmudic Academies of Babylon while the form of Judaism practiced at Ben Ezra belongs to the branch of Syria Palaestina. It is unlikely that the form of Judaism practiced in one synagogue would change one into another rival form.

During the purging of the religions of the “People of the Book” that is to say Jews and Christians undertaken by Abū ‘Alī Maṣṣūr (996-1021) also known as al-Ḥākim bi-Amr Allāh (الحاكم بأمر الله) the Ben Ezra Synagogue was demolished (circa 1012). Later, Abū ‘Alī Maṣṣūr relaxed his policies pertaining to other religions and Jews and Christians were able to rebuild their houses of worship. Medieval writings indicate that the synagogue was rebuilt and hence rededicated in 1025, this time with an immense genizah which Glickman points

out was more of a silo than an actual genizah.

Due to Hebrew tradition Holy writings especially containing the Tetragrammaton or Divine Name of God (יהוה commonly rendered Jehovah or Yahweh in English but due to superstition considered unpronounceable in Hebrew) could not be destroyed and were stored in genizah until they eventually disintegrated from age.

It is due to the dry and dark conditions of the Ben Ezra Genizah that many valuable and varied manuscripts and fragments were able to survive for centuries and remain in very good condition for the most part.

In 1888, a Jewish Romanian by the name of Jacob Saphir purchased over 25,000 documents from the genizah. Since that time the collection has spread to public and private collections with many of them being deciphered and dated. Solomon Schechter (שניאור זלמן הכהן שכטר) of Cambridge University is widely considered to be the first to begin in making an academic investigation into the contents of these documents.

It is believed that this document was one of those that found its way into a private collection. It measures 194mm X 172mm and is written on lambskin in the Ashuri script (פְּתֻבָּ אֲשֻּׁרִי) and shows the excellent penmanship of a trained Sofer.

## METHODOLOGY

The translation of this piece has followed a cross textual form whereby the text is referenced to other existing texts to provide the clearest possible translation of the fragment.

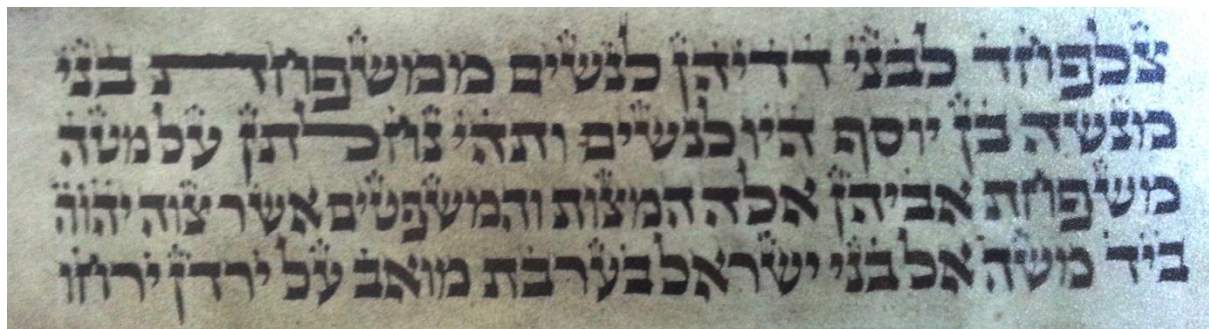
Contrary to the tradition of many Jewish and Christian translators, the Tetragrammaton or Divine Name as represented by the four Hebrew consonants YHWH (יהוה) has been translated into the vernacular English form of Jehovah. The Tetragrammaton appears twice. The exact pronunciation is not known, however the reasons for rendering in the vernacular have already been expounded in *The Tetragrammaton : Its Phonetics, Phonology, Semantics and Argument for Rendering in Vernacular Languages*.

This fragment was written in circa 1450 during the rule of the Burji Dynasty (المماليك البرجية) and likely during the rule of Sayf ad-Din Inal who was notably less tyrannical than his predecessors. Another possibility is that it was written during the life of his predecessor Sayf ad-Din Jaqmaq or one of his successors, as his death lead to a turbulent time of short lived rulers.

The fragment contains two sections of script. In the first section contains the part recognised in the modern Christian Bible as Numbers 36:11-13 (במדבר-In the desert). The second section contains Deuteronomy 1:1-6 (דברים-Words).

The text has been cross referenced to the Westminster Leningrad Codex with vowels, JPS 1917 Edition and the Aleppo Codex. Translation has been done from the comparison of the original text with these ancient codices and several modern rendering.

Brackets explain inferred meaning and the translation uses both formal and dynamic equivalence in order to give meaning in modern English and given Hebrew text is taken from the JPS 1917 Edition with diacritics.



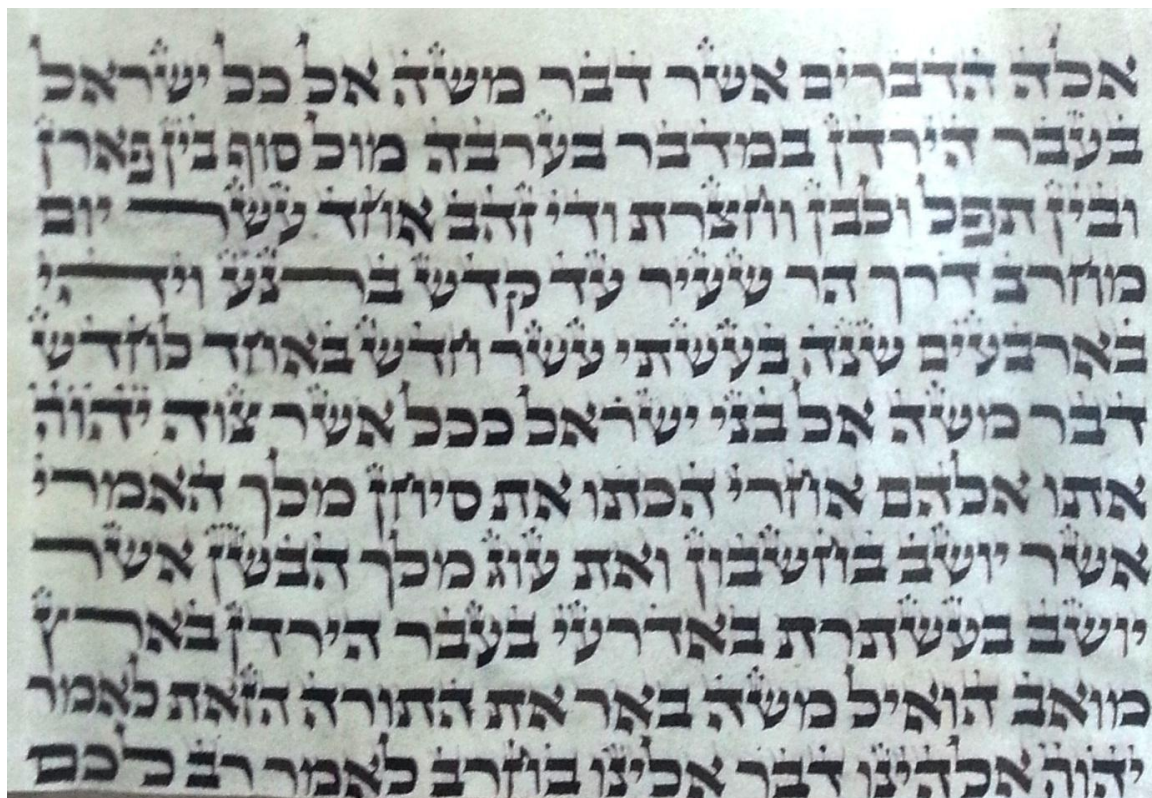
Numbers 36:11(latter part of verse): (daughters of) Zelophehad got married to their fathers' brothers' sons.

צִלְפֹּחֶדֶד: לְבָנֵי דִידֵהוּן, לְנָשִׁים.

12: They were married into the families of the sons of Manasseh the son of Joseph and their inheritance remained in the tribe of the family of their father (tribe of Manasseh).

מִמִּשְׁפַּחַת בְּנֵי-מְנַשֶּׁה בֶּן-יוֹסֵף, הָיוּ לְנָשִׁים; וְתָהִי, נַחֲלָתָן, עַל-מִשְׁפַּחַת אֲבֵיהֶן.

13: These are the commandments and the judgements, which Jehovah commanded the children of Israel in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho by means of the hand of Moses. אֵלֶּה הַמִּצּוֹת וְהַמִּשְׁפָּטִים, אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה בְּיַד-מֹשֶׁה--אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: בְּעֶרְבַת מוֹאָב, עַל יַרְדֵּן יְרֵחוֹ . Moses.



Deuteronomy 1 verse 1: These are the words Moses spoke to all of Israel in the wilderness, on this side of the Jordan between the plain over against the Red sea between Paran and Tophel, between Laban, Hazeroth and Dizahab.

אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים, אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּעֶבֶר, הַיַּרְדֵּן: בְּמִדְבַר בְּעֶרְבָה מוֹל סוּף בֵּין-פָּאָרָן וּבֵין-תִּפְלֵי, וְלָבָן

וְהָצֵרְתָּ--וְדִי זָהָב.

2: It is eleven day from Horeb by the way of Mount Seir to Ka'desh-bar'nea.

אֶחָד עָשָׂר יוֹם מִחֶרֶב, דֶּרֶךְ הַר-שֵׁעִיר, עַד, קִדְשׁ בָּרְנֶעָה.

3: And it came to pass in the fortieth year, on the first day of the eleventh month that Moses spoke to the children of Israel all that Jehovah had commanded him to speak.

וַיְהִי בְּאַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה, בְּעֶשְׂתֵּי-עָשָׂר חֹדֶשׁ בְּאַחַד לַחֹדֶשׁ; דִּבֶּר מֹשֶׁה, אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, כָּל אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה אֹתוֹ, אֲלֵהֶם.

4: After he had defeated Sihon the King of the Amorites who dwelt in Heshbon and Og the King of Bashan who dwelt in Ashtaroth of Edrei.

אַחֲרֵי הַכֹּתוֹ, אֶת סִיחוֹן מֶלֶךְ הָאֲמֹרִי, אֲשֶׁר יוֹשֵׁב, בְּחִשְׁבוֹן--וְאֶת, עוֹג מֶלֶךְ הַבָּשָׁן, אֲשֶׁר-יוֹשֵׁב בְּעֶשְׂתָּרֹת, בְּאֶדְרֵעִי.

5: On this side of the Jordan in the land of Moab, Moses began to expound this law saying;

בְּעֶבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן, בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹאָב, הוֹאִיל מֹשֶׁה, בָּאֵר אֶת-הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת לֵאמֹר.

6: Jehovah our God spoke to us at Horeb saying "It is long enough that you have ... (incomplete)

יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ דִּבֶּר אֵלֵינוּ, בְּחֶרֶב לֵאמֹר: רַב-לָכֶם

(the fragment ends here, however reconstruction from Strong's interlinear and the Aleppo codex finishes this verse as - dwelt in this mountain". (שָׁכַת, בְּהָר הַזֶּה--))

## CONCLUSIONS

This fragments as with many others attests to the great devotion and accuracy with which the Torah and other Hebrew writings that make up the modern Bible have been transmitted from generation to generation. It also helps to show how certain texts can be clarified and made easily readable through the referencing of numerous ancient texts. furthermore, it validates the integrity of many modern translations in their conveyance of meaning in its original context but also to create versions that are readable by a modern audience. All differences in letter formation were found to be merely as a result of regionally based scribal practices in calligraphy which dictate the exact manner in which a letter is formed. No differences were found to any extent in the meaning of the text in any form. It is hoped that the translation and public availability of such manuscripts will enhance translation and preserve these vital texts for many generations to come.

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### Bibles

The Aleppo Codex

Westminster-Leningrad Codex with Diacritics

Masoretic Text- Jewish Publication Society 1917

Strong's Hebrew Interlinear

New American Standard Version

New World Translation of the holy Scriptures

The Bible in Living English

The King James Version