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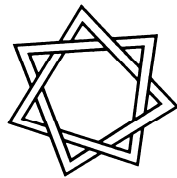
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# Manuscripta Orientalia

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## BOOK REVIEW

**David Stern. *The Jewish Bible. A Material History*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2017. 303 pp. With ill. ISBN 9780295741482.**

For many centuries, the Hebrew Bible has undoubtedly been the main book of Judaism and the richest source of creative inspiration for Jewish people. The text of the Bible forms the foundation of Jewish liturgy as the Bible is weekly read in Synagogues (I mean weekly portions of the Torah text and fragments of the Prophets (*haftarot*)). When we habitually describe Jewish people as the People of the Book, this description really does reflect the significance of the Bible for the whole of Jewish civilization [1]. Furthermore, the study of this great monument of writing has long become an independent science.

There is no need to mention how truly enormous is the scope of literature concerned both with various aspects of the biblical texts and with their existence in the context of Jewish culture. If the latter needs to be proved, then one look at any, even very general, encyclopaedic article on the Hebrew Bible, will provide sufficient evidence thereof [2]. That said, the rightful question might arise: how there can be anything new that yet another book on the Jewish Bible can bring to light? The answer may be formulated as follows: the new book by Harry Starr Professor of Classical and Modern Jewish and Hebrew Literature, David Stern provides an overall overview of the material history of the existence of the Biblical texts in the Jewish environment. It is this very aspect — the existence in the environment — that might have been the reason behind the choice of the title for the book. It is a practice generally accepted in academic circles to refer to a literary monument in the language it was written in, which in this case was Hebrew, so here it should have been the Hebrew Bible (in Latin — *Biblia Hebraica*). However, if David Stern's book focuses on the historical existence of this literary monument in the Jewish environment, which also involves its numerous translations into various Jewish languages (Judeo-Arabic, Yiddish, and so on), then the title Jewish Bible seems to be totally justified.

Naturally, this is not the first time that a book of this kind has been written. One might remember a classical

monograph of Ch. D. Ginsburg [3] or very good book of R. Posner & I. Ta-Shema [4], that contains a vast material on the Bible as well. And yet, I would like to once again reiterate: to the best of my knowledge, this is the first time that we have been presented with a monograph that explores all the aspects of the historical being of the Bible [5]. Thus, the book by professor Stern undoubtedly fills a long felt void in the Hebrew Bible studies.

The book consists of four chapters that reflect various stages of the text's existence in the Jewish community: “The Torah Scroll” (pp. 11—61), “The Hebrew Bible in the Age of the Manuscript” (pp. 63—135), “The Jewish Bible in the Early Age of Print” (pp. 137—157), “The Jewish Bible Since the Sixteenth Century” (pp. 159—204) and completes with Epilogue (“The Future of the Jewish Bible”, pp. 205—208) [6]. Each chapter has subchapters and paragraphs that highlight different aspects of the theme. For example, there is a vitally important, at least so it seems to me, overview of “The Invention of the Masorah”, as well as the sections devoted to the traditions of copying the Bible in different geo-cultural zones (Sepharad, Ashkenaz, Italy, Yemen), etc.

This order of narration seems to me rather logical and entirely consistent with the goals this edition is supposed to achieve.

In this review I would like to concentrate on several aspects that fall within the scope of my specific academic interests, manuscripts and incunabula, the analysis of which, as far as I can tell, is not as accurate and detailed as they deserve.

The first chapter of the book “The Torah Scroll” tells us, in accordance with its title, about the existence of the text of Torah in the form of scrolls. The chronological range of the chapter is vast — from the scrolls of Qumran (and earlier) to the works of modern copyists. This reflects a truly unique book practice of Jewish people. In the general history of books' development, the scroll form was gradually giving place to books in the form of codex. A most interesting phenomenon in the history of Jewish book tradition is found in the fact that codices have not fully replaced scrolls, but just narrowed the sphere of their usage leaving them only for Synagogue liturgies. Thus, scrolls as a book form do exist in the Jewish tradition even

now. Nevertheless, the very title of this chapter, if seen within the context of the book's overall task, does not seem quite correct. Moreover, this "incorrectness" of the heading chosen for the chapter results in the failure to give a full account of the matter under consideration. The subtitle of the book being "A Material History", why it should be just Torah? In the library of Qumran, there were discovered all but one (*The Book of Esther*) the books of the Bible!!! Incidentally, the illustration of the Qumran scroll found on pages 24 and 25 shows the fragments of the scrolls of the commentary to the book of the prophet Habakkuk (Peshar Habakkuk) and to the Isaiah scroll, but not to Torah! Even a more important omission, that, in my opinion, this chapter is guilty of, is that it completely ignores the other parts of the Bible which, along with Torah, are still copied in the form of scroll. By the latter I mean the five books of the Bible section of the Writings (so called *Hamesh Meggilot*), that are publicly read in Synagogues on special days, and until this day are copied in the scroll form. The *Five Scrolls* are: "The Song of Songs" (read on Saturday that falls within the period of Pesach (Passover) 15—21/22 Nisan); "the Book of Ruth" (read on Shavuot, Sivan 6—7); "Lamentations" (read during the Tisha-B'Av 25-hour fast on 9 of Av); "Ecclesiastes" (read on Saturday that falls at Sukkot, 15—21 of Tishrei); "Esther" (read on Purim, 14 of Adar), and the scroll with the texts of the prophets that bring to the close the so called public readings in Synagogues (*haftarot*).

Indeed, these scrolls are mentioned in the fourth chapter, in the part that discusses the illuminated scrolls of the Book of Esther ("The Illustrated Esther Scroll", pp. 160—164). However, thematically these scrolls with the fragments of the Bible text from the "Prophets" and the "Writings" sections rather belong in the first part of the book. The same is true about the already mentioned section on the Esther Scroll.

In other words, if it is the material history of the Biblical text that we are discussing, then a much more appropriate title for the first chapter would be not just "The Torah Scroll", but "The Scrolls", or "The Biblical Scrolls", thus covering all the cases when the text of the Bible has been and is written in the form of scroll.

The second chapter "The Hebrew Bible in the Age of the Manuscript" tells us about the existence of the Biblical text in the form of codex and the forming of the corpus of the so called Masoretic Bible — a vocalized and accompanied by cantillation signs text that was written along with the *masorah magna* and *masorah parva*. This chapter contains a detailed account of the history of the Aleppo Codex, which is generally believed to be the most accurate text of the Bible, as well as the discussion of some other manuscripts. Among the latter, there is a famous codex of the complete Bible, that is also the oldest dated one. This codex is now preserved in St. Petersburg (The National Library of Russia, call No. EVR 1 B 19a). Stern refers to it as to the "Leningrad Codex" (or in Latin *Codex Leningradensis*), and does this probably "out of habit" as, after the city had regained its original name of St. Petersburg in 1991, the codex was also renamed and now we use its initial name and call it *Codex Petropolitanus*. Although it might be

a streak of "local patriotism" in me, but I do strongly believe that, as most of the early Bible codices are now preserved in NLR, this collection deserves to be given "more floor", that is a more detailed description [7]. I am far from accusing the author of total neglect — the story of both the collection and its collector Abraham Firkovitch (1787—1874 [8]) is to be found in chapter four, in the section "The Rediscovery of the Ancient Manuscripts" (pp. 199—200). And yet one cannot help feeling some disappointment as the author bypasses without a smallest hint a most brilliant catalogue of the Hebrew biblical manuscripts from the NLR collection that was prepared by outstanding Hebraists Abraham Harkavy (1835—1919) and Hermann Strack (1848—1922) [9]. This catalogue contains a most thorough and meticulous description of both the scrolls and codices and is also equipped with quite detailed information about each manuscript, in particular, about colophons.

Furthermore, there are some embarrassing inaccuracies that I find rather difficult to explain. For example, on page 2, Stern writes about the famous *Codex Babylonicus* — the oldest dated manuscript of the text of the Bible known to us: "Fig. 2.3 is from a famous Bible known as *Codex Babylonicus*, containing the Latter Prophets, probably written in the tenth or eleven century". This is simply a mistake because one can clearly see the date in the colophon of this manuscript. On page 73, one finds this illustration accompanied by an inscription: "*Codex Babylonicus* with Babylonian vocalization (Isa. 1:1—1:15), folio 1b. Babilonia, 915 CE". As it happens, this is a mistake too. The manuscripts itself proudly treasures a colophon that shows a very clear date: This Codex was finished on the month of Tishre year one thousand two hundred and twenty and eight [from the Seleucid era] [10]. This means September — October 916 AD.

While speaking about the St. Petersburg codex, Stern writes: "This Bible was written, probably in the land of Israel, in 1008–9 and contains the complete *masorah magna* and *parva*. Today it is known as the *Leningrad Codex*" (pp. 199—200). At the same time, the colophon unambiguously indicates the place of copying, "In the city of Egypt" (i. e. Cairo) [11], as Stern himself writes somewhere else [12]. How can this inconsistency be accounted for?

As for the section that is devoted to incunabula, there is only one inaccuracy that I have to mention. The author specifically mentions a small number of the Bible editions with two commentaries as a "special feature of the period". Stern writes (p. 142): "only two Bible editions featured two commentaries, both of them printed by Don Samuel D'Ortas in Leiria, Portugal. This changed in the sixteenth century". And yet, one cannot but wonder what happened to the edition published in Italy, Naples [13], that contains three commentaries, and where the one published in Bologna with two commentaries [14] have gone. Not only do these two editions fully "counterbalance" the otherwise slanted ratio of the other editions of the time issued in the Sepharad-Italy area, but they should also change the general assumption that such editions were "poorly represented" back then.

Still, I would like to reiterate that these insignificant minor inaccuracies in no way undermine the greatness of the work done by the author of this book.

The book is beautifully published and richly illustrated. I am confident that this edition will be very useful

for those who specialize in Biblical studies, for Hebraists-bibliographers, for all specialists in classical Jewish Studies, as well as for everyone who cherishes any general interest in the Bible.

*Sh. Iakerson*

### Notes

1. Strictly speaking, “The people of the Book”, or “The people of the Scripture” — is the definition that in the Muslim texts of religious law is applied to Judaists, Christians, Sabaeans and Zoroastrians. However, today, in a broad cultural context, this definition refers exclusively to the Jewish people. Naturally, the “Book” in this context means “The Hebrew Bible”.

2. See, for example the bibliography to different sections of the article Sarna et al., 2007: 572—679 or Brettler, 2017: 902—927.

3. Ginsburg, 1897.

4. Posner & Ta-Shema, 1975.

5. It is worth noting that the books created on the same principle were devoted to another most important monument of Jewish culture — Talmud: Rabinowitz, 1952; Heller, 1992 ect.

6. Further pp. 209—258 — notes to the text, pp. 259—285, Bibliography.

7. The most striking example of this is the codicological description of the dated Hebrew manuscripts created before 1020: Beit-Arie, Sirat & Glazer (eds.), 1997. All the dated codices described there are stored in NLR. On the value of this collection for the development of Jewish studies see, for example, Beit-Arié, 1991: pp. 33—46.

8. Stern (p. 199) gives the wrong year of the death as 1875.

9. Harkavy & Strack, 1875.

10. Colophon on fol. 222r. Description of the MS in *ibid.*: 222—235.

11. Colophon on fol. 1r. Description of the MS in *ibid.*: 263—274.

12. For example, on the inscriptions under figures on pages 81, 82, 84, 85.

13. *Job...*, 1487 (see: Offenber, 1990: No. 46).

14. *Five Scrolls...*, ca. 1482 (see: Offenber, 1990: No. 47).

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