

Judaeo-Arabic Bible Translation and the Tiberian Masoretic Tradition

1

11 AUG 2020

by Joseph Habib

Introduction

The great textual critic Dominique Barthélemy (1921–2002) lamented the fact that scholars of the time were too quick to render a difficult passage in the Masoretic Text as corrupt or unintelligible. The Masoretic Text refers to that reading tradition of the Hebrew Bible which the Masoretes of Tiberias worked to codify from the period of about 500 C.E.–900 C.E. Barthélemy had come to realize that the solution to some of these issues were to be found in a deep understanding of Biblical Hebrew grammar, syntax and style, an understanding which Barthélemy found in none other than the Bible translations and commentaries of R. Saadya Gaon (d. 942 C.E.) and the early-medieval Karaites (ca. 850–1099 C.E.), both of whom wrote in Judaeo-Arabic. Barthélemy's description of these scholars' work reflects his high esteem for them:

"...[T]here are two groups of sources of the greatest import to which we will frequently turn ... First are the commentaries of those literal interpreters who are both contemporaries and compatriots of the Masoretes to whom we owe the model codexes of Cairo, Aleppo, and Leningrad. These include the commentaries of Daniel al-Qumisi and Saadya Gaon ... But the most valuable for us are those of Yefet ben Ely ... Yefet, who lived in Palestine, wrote a commentary in Arabic on all of Scripture ... [H]is copious commentary testifies to a number of exegetical traditions that preceded him. It is thus likely one of the best witnesses of literal exegesis that would have vividly in mind those who fixed the vocalization and accents of the classical Tiberian text."^[1]

To my knowledge, these sources remain relatively unknown to those outside the specialised field of Judaeo-Arabic literature in general, and to those within the fields of critical study of the Bible in particular. In this post I offer a few examples where these medieval scholars provide unique insights into the Biblical text. These insights also seem to reflect certain developments within Tiberian reading tradition as well as clarify otherwise difficult texts.

Some Examples

1 Samuel 3:3 in one of the oldest and most prestigious Tiberian Bibles, the Aleppo Codex—from around 930 C.E. (open access), contains the problematic image of Samuel sleeping in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was" (English Standard Version), contains the problematic image of Samuel sleeping in the temple. Early on in the Jewish tradition, this issue was resolved by interpreting that Samuel was in the courtyard of the tabernacle along with the Levites, not in the Holy of Holies itself.^[2] Later commentators noticed the accent sign *athnach* (which looks like an upside-down "v") underneath the word שכב "lying down." The accent *athnach* marks the main division of a verse.

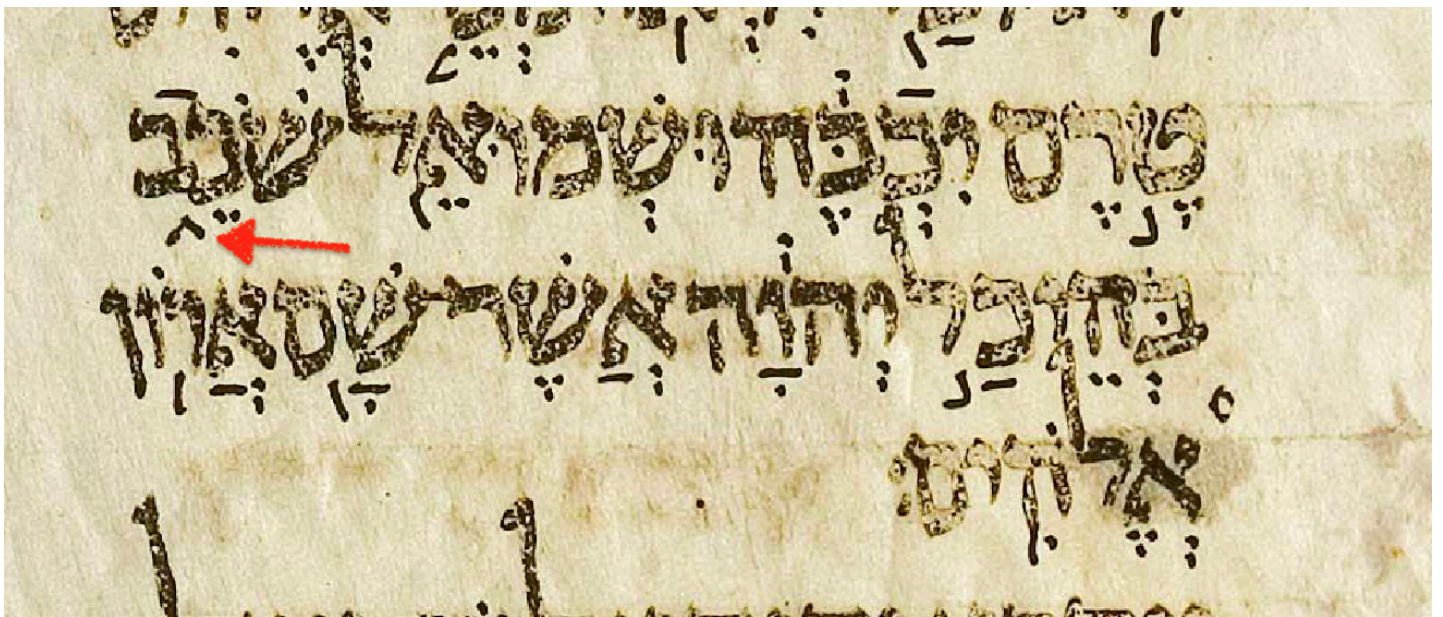


Figure 1 1 Samuel 3:3 in one of the oldest and most prestigious Tiberian Bibles, the Aleppo Codex—from around 930 C.E. (open access). Notice the *athnach* underneath the word שכב.

This placement of the *athnach* therefore rendered the phrase ושמואל שכב "and Samuel was lying down" as a parenthetical statement so that the lamp—not Samuel—is in the Holy of Holies. According to this interpretation, the verse could now be translated as, "And the lamp of the Lord had not yet gone out (Samuel was lying down) in the temple of the Lord where the ark of God was."^[3]

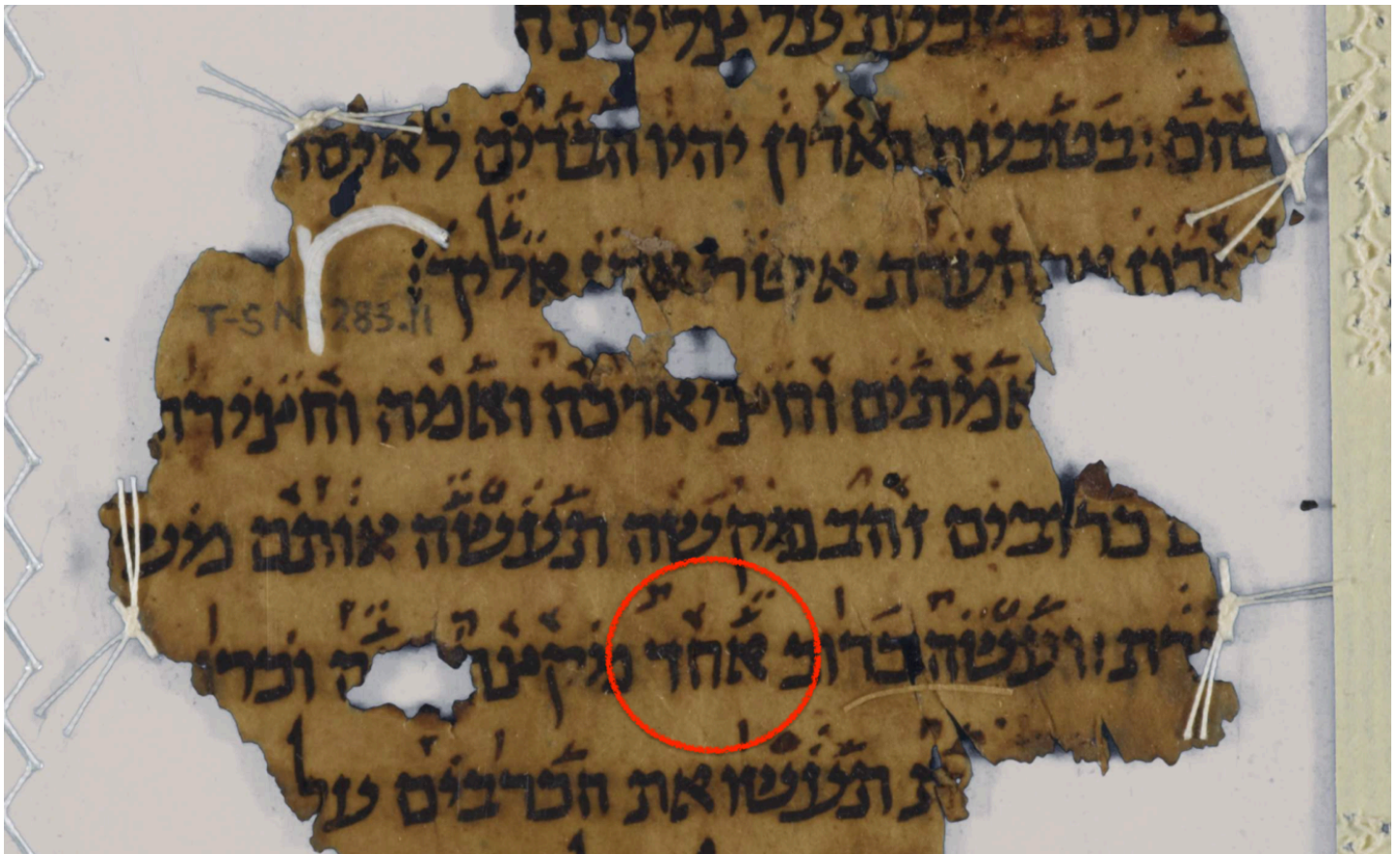


Figure 4 The non-construct vocalisation of אָחַד in Babylonian pointing from Exodus 25:19 (T-S N 283.11). According to Yeivin (see note 11), this is how the consonants אָחַד are pointed in Genesis 3:22. (An image of that manuscript was not available to me.) In the Babylonian tradition, the vowels are above the letters, not below as in the Tiberian tradition. I thank the Syndics of Cambridge University Library for permission to reproduce this image.

The Karaite al-Fāsi knew this tradition of the "Iraqis" (עראקין) and explains its interpretation:

"The Lord Almighty said, 'Behold mankind has become as one. The means to obtain knowledge of good and evil belong to him.' The meaning is that mankind has become like one. He has become without parallel in his judgement. The free will to know/learn good and evil belong to him. So, lest he also exercise his free will and take from the tree of life..."[12]

Yefet also mentions this same interpretation as one possibility among many others known to him, again confirming part of Barthélemy's statement above.[13] This evidence strengthens the possibility that the same interpretations which gave rise to the various reading traditions among the masorettes were known in Karaite circles.

Conclusion

The Judaeo-Arabic Bible translations and commentaries of Saadya Gaon and the early medieval Karaites are important sources for those engaged in critical study of the Hebrew Bible. As knowledge of this exegetical literature grows, it seems to confirm Barthélemy's general attitude towards these sources. The Karaites and Saadya Gaon certainly had contact with the Tiberian masorettes. It is difficult to imagine that this contact would not affect their translations and exegesis to some degree. In any case, the evidence suggests that there is no reason to not make the utmost use of these sources for a precise understanding of the Masoretic Text as it stands.

Joseph Habib is entering his third year of PhD studies at the University of Cambridge under the supervision of Prof. Geoffrey Khan and co-supervision of Prof. Tamar Zewi (University of Haifa). The topic of his research is 'Accents, Vocalisation and *qere/ktiv* in the Bible Translations and Commentaries of Saadya Gaon and the Early Medieval Karaites'. This work is made possible thanks to a generous contribution from the Valler Doctoral Fellowship granted by the University of Haifa's Department of Biblical Studies and Jewish History.

Footnotes

[1] Dominique Barthélemy, *Studies in the Text of the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Hebrew Old Testament Project*, trans. Stephen Pisano et al. (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 593.

[2] This interpretation may be found in the Babylonian Talmud (*Kiddushin* 782:b), Rashi's commentary and in the Targum.

[3] The role of *athnach* here is recognised by David Qimḥi (1160–1235), Jedidiah Solomon ben Abraham Norzi (1560–1626) who wrote the masoretic commentary *Minchat Shai*, and Rabbi Meir Libush ben Yechiel (*Malbim*; 1809–1879).

[4] For more on these sub-traditions, see Menaḥem Cohen, 'תת-שיטות של הטעמה טברנית "חוץ-מסורתית" ושיעור תפוצתן בכתב-יד של מקרא בימי הביניים', [Subsystems of Tiberian "Extramassoretic" Accentuation and The Extent of Their Distribution in Medieval Biblical Manuscripts], *Léšonénu* 51, no. 3/4 (1987): 188–206.

[5] See The National Library of Russia, St. Petersburg [RNL] Ms. EVR ARAB I 156 fol. 18v In. 1 (fourteenth century).

[6] RNL Ms. EVR ARAB I 1313 fol. 37r Ins. 1–3. See fol. 36v In. 6ff for the remainder of the comments for this verse. *Italics* indicate Hebrew words embedded within the Judaeo-Arabic text.

[7] Yefet, the *Talkhīs* and 'Ali see here a prophecy referring to David's future victories (since David was from the line of Judah); al-Fāsi interprets בְּנֵי מִטְרָף as a subordinate causal clause, "From eating the prey, O my son, you have gone up and you have grown up." For Yefet's commentary see RNL Ms. EVR ARAB I 28 fol. 83r In. 4–83v. In. 8. For the *Talkhīs*, see RNL Ms. EVR ARAB I 4785 fol. 190r. In. 18–fol. 109v In. 13. For al-Fāsi see Skoss, Solomon L. *The Hebrew-Arabic Dictionary of the Bible Known As Kitāb Jāmi' al-Alfāz (Agrōn) of David Ben Abraham al-Fāsi the Karaite (Tenth Cent.)*. 2 vols. Yale Oriental Series Researches 20. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1936, vol. 2 p. 397, for 'Ali ben Sulayman see RNL Ms. EVR ARAB I 2029 fol. 97r Ins. 17–19.

[8] For the vocative sense, one would expect the vocative noun to be grouped with what comes before, such as אֱלֹהֵי יְהוָה אֱקַרְא "To you, O Lord, I call" (Joel 1:19).

[9] תכּוּן יא יהודא כשבּל אסד לאנך כלצת אבני מן אלקתל [RNL Ms. EVR. II C 1 fol. 113r Ins. 7–8].

[10] The verb עָלִית in this case must be reinterpreted as transitive (most likely as Hiphil). Cf. Ibn Ezra's commentary on this verse who also suggests this as a possibility, but for a different reason.

[11] See Israel Yeivin, מִסֻּרַת הַלְשׁוֹן הָעִבְרִית הַמְשֻׁקֶּטת בְּנִיקוּד הַבֵּבֶל [The Hebrew Language Tradition as Reflected in the Babylonian Vocalization], 2 vols (Jerusalem: The Academy of the Hebrew Language, 1985), vol. 2 p. 1107.

[12] Skoss, *Kitāb Jāmi'*, vol. 1 p. 61.

[13] See RNL Ms. EVR ARAB I 26 fol. 51vff. Also found in the British Library Or. 2462 fol. 96rff; National Library of France Ms. Hebr 277 fol. 131rff.; RNL Ms. EVR ARAB I 142 fol. 24rff.; Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, Russia Ms. B 51 fol. 171vff.
[Arabic Bible](#), [Arabic Bible Translations](#), [Bible in Arabic](#), [Bible Translation](#), [Dominique Barthélemy](#), [Joseph Habib](#), [Judaeo-Arabic](#), [Muslim Bible](#), [Saadya Gaon](#), [Tiberian Masoretic Tradition](#), [Yefet ibn Eli](#)