



THE BOOK OF BOOKS

Biblical Canon, Dissemination and Its People

Editors

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On the cover
Illuminated Bible in Latin
Ink and pigment on parchment with leather cover and brass ornamentation; 15th century; Bohemia (Czech Republic)
Green Collection, GC.MS.000486; Photo: Ardon Bar-Hama

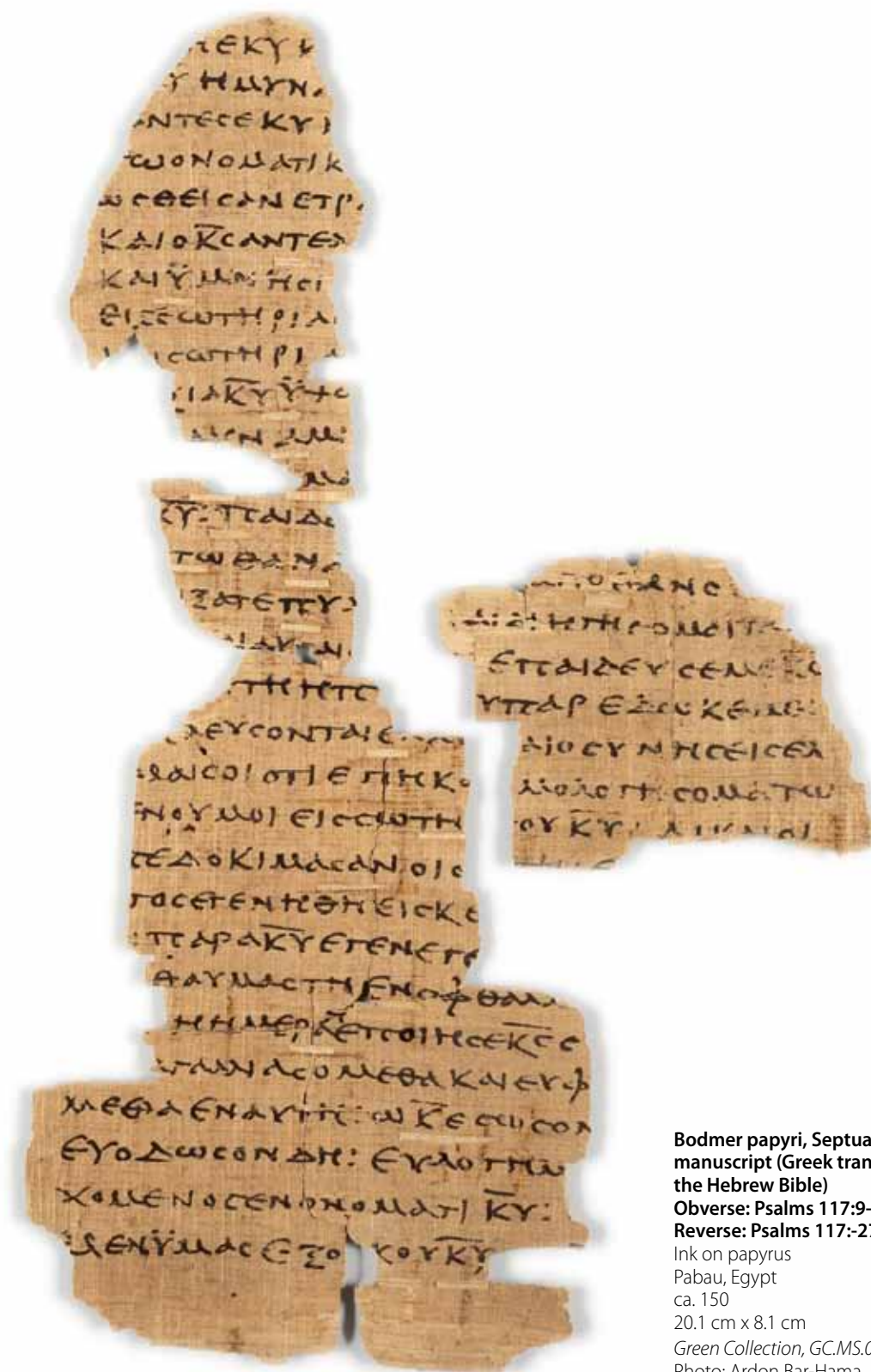
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Richard A. Linenthal Collection
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Bodmer papyri, Septuagint manuscript (Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible)
Obverse: Psalms 117:9-23
Reverse: Psalms 117:27-118:11
Ink on papyrus
Pabau, Egypt
ca. 150
20.1 cm x 8.1 cm
Green Collection, GC.MS.000170.48
Photo: Ardon Bar-Hama

PREFACE

The Book of Books is a fitting title for both the exhibit at the Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem, and this book that accompanied its opening.

From the time of Moses to the present, the Bible continues to be the most-read text in history in spite of various attempts to prohibit or extinguish it. It has been banned and burned in many communities, along with multitudes of adherents to its teachings. However, for both Jewish and Christian believers, the more adversity the stronger the Bible's appeal. Oftentimes, when physical copies were rare, the entire text was memorized. Today we have numerous early copies of the texts that comprise the Old and New Testaments, and we can be reasonably certain of the Bible's original message. From the silver amulet with the Priestly Code dating to the 7th century BCE, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Cairo Genizah leaves and Masoretic texts to the thousands of early papyri and manuscripts of the New Testament dating to the first few centuries of the Common Era, the Judeo-Christian religious texts have solid evidence of their early role among Bible Lands communities.

Through a large network of scholars, such as those associated with the Green Scholars Initiative and the Bible Lands Museum, we can trace the historic spread of the Bible and its impact on those societies. Our extended family has committed both time and resources to telling this story in exhibits like **The Book of Books**, and in a permanent museum in Washington, DC (projected opening in the spring of 2017). We believe like millions of others that the Bible's history, story and impact provide insight into how God is at work in this world, and the truth found in the words themselves. From our perspective, we find divine intervention both in the text, from the Creation account to the eschatological prophecies, to how it plays out in history to the present. But that is our perspective, and we respect your right to form your own.

We trust that this book, like the various exhibits associated with the Green Collection and the research of the Green Scholarship Initiative, help you in that process. At the least, it is easy to conclude that the Bible has changed the world, and continues to do so.

Steve Green

President, Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc.

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Jewish Biblical Interpretation in the Middle Ages

Daniel J. Lasker

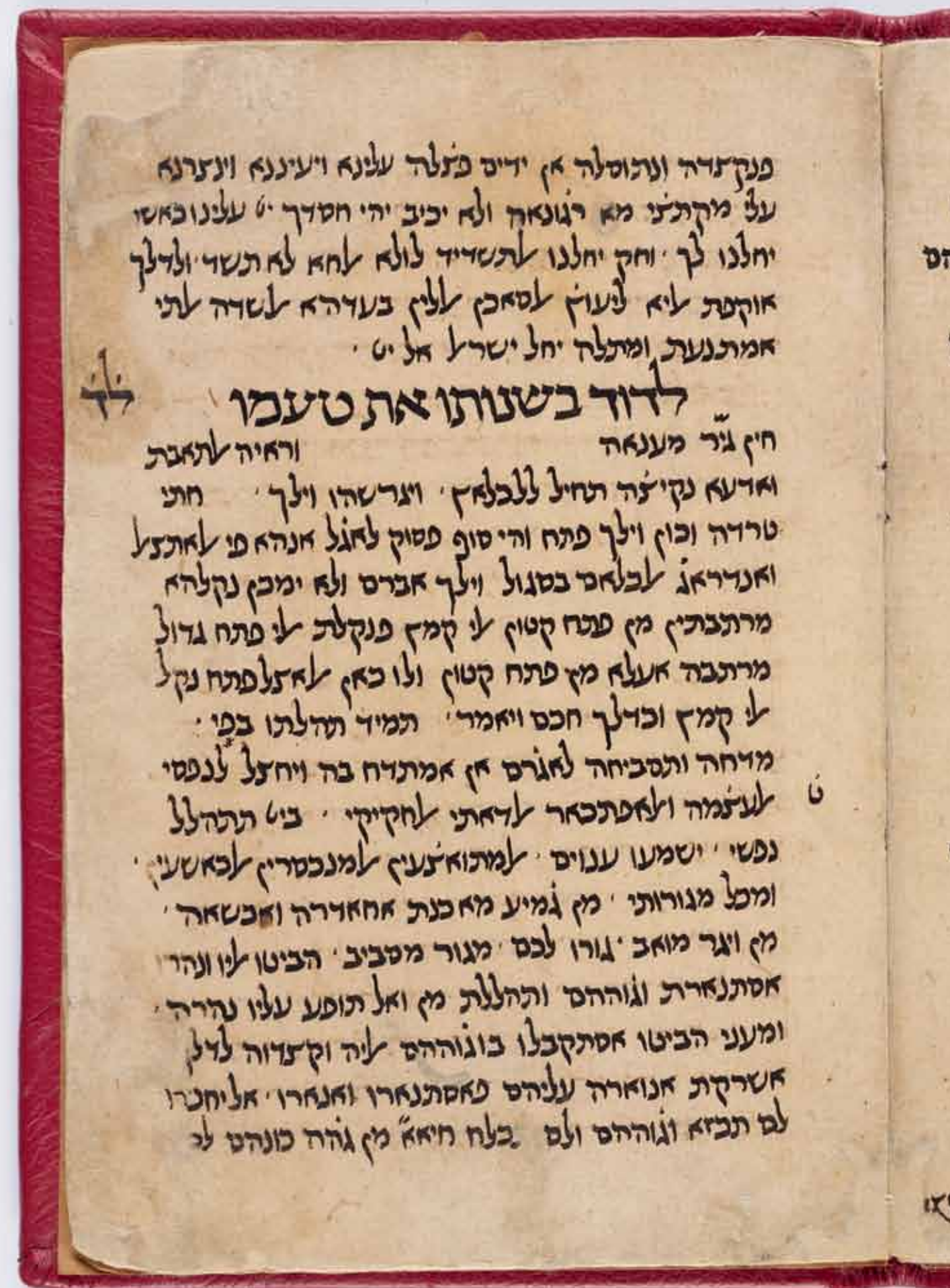
The first Jews to write verse-by-verse commentaries on the Bible lived in Islamic countries, wrote in Arabic in Hebrew script, generally provided Arabic translations in addition to explications, and partially used Quranic exegesis as their model. Some belonged to the majority Rabbinite community, most prominently Saadia Gaon (882-942 CE, who wrote in Iraq), whose comments reflected both rabbinic tradition and contemporary theology. Other exegetes were members of the Karaite minority, whose interpretations were marked by close adherence to Hebrew grammatical principles, a scripturalist interpretation of Jewish law, and the reading of contemporary events into the books of prophecy. The major Karaite exegete was Yefet Ben Eli (late 10th century) who lived in the Land of Israel and who wrote commentaries on the entire Bible.

The pioneering commentaries from the Middle East made their way to Andalusia (Iberia/Sepharad) where they influenced both grammarians and exegetes. The leading representative of the Sephardic School was Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1164), whose commentaries were composed after he left Iberia for Christian Europe. Ibn Ezra, who wrote in Hebrew, attempted to expose northern European Jewish communities to the grammatical method which had developed under Islam, emphasizing the *peshat* (the simple or contextual meaning) and generally eschewing rabbinic *midrash* (often non-contextual exegesis). Ibn Ezra's commentaries had an impact on the works of Benedict (Baruch) Spinoza (1632-1677) and on modern biblical scholarship.

French Jews began writing biblical commentaries in the 11th century, starting with Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac, known as Rashi (France, 1040-1105), who combined

Opposite
Commentary on Psalms by Tanhum Ben Yosef
 (in Judeo-Arabic)
 Manuscript, ink on paper
 Egypt
 13th century
 22 cm x 15 cm x 1.5 cm
 Green Collection, GC.MS.000470
 Photo: Ardon Bar-Hama

Next pages
Taj Torah: commentary in Hebrew
 with some Arabic
 Ink on paper
 Early 16th century
 Yemen
 27.5 cm x 21.8 cm x 6 cm
 Green Collection, GC.MS.000472
 Photo: Ardon Bar-Hama





שם אלכסנדר
היה בן יונה
היה בן יונה
היה בן יונה

what he considered *peshat* (including glosses with translations into the French vernacular) with a large admixture of rabbinic legendary material. Although Rashi often distinguished between *peshat* and more fanciful rabbinic comments, at other times he seems to have considered the Midrash to be the accurate interpretation of the text. This popular mixture, and Rashi’s pellucid style, led to authoritative, canonical status for his commentaries which became the benchmark against which later commentaries were to be compared.

Rashi’s *peshat* method was extended by the generation of his grandchildren (mid-12th century), most notably his daughter’s son Rabbi Samuel ben Meir (Rashbam), who regularly took an even more contextual view of the Biblical text, ignoring the *midrashic* material which makes Rashi’s commentaries so appealing. Although Rashbam’s *peshat* approach often led him to understand laws in the Pentateuch at variance with the rabbinic traditions, he was fully committed to observing normative Jewish law. Rashbam’s methodology, as well as that of his colleagues, Rabbi Joseph Kara, Rabbi Eliezer of Beaugency, and Rabbi Joseph Bekhor Shor, may have been influenced by the biblical studies of Victorine Christian scholars, with whom they were in close contact; if so, they represent a Jewish response to the Christian “Twelfth-Century Renaissance.” This exegetical movement was no longer active after the end of the 12th century.

Another method of biblical interpretation was the inclusion of mystical teachings, often hinting at esoteric doctrines which were considered embedded in the biblical text even if not stated explicitly. The first major commentary to include mystical material was by Rabbi Moses Ben Nahman, known as Nahmanides (Catalonia, 1194-1270). Nahmanides was critical of Rashi, usually in regard to his use of *midrashim*, but he saved most of his ire for Ibn Ezra’s literalism. He was especially acerbic when reacting to Ibn Ezra’s rationalistic rejection of rabbinic traditions. Nahmanides himself often hinted to a mystical content in the text, an approach which was developed further by Rabbi Bahya ben Asher (Aragon, fl. 1291). Mystical exegesis of the Bible reached its apogee at the end of the 13th century in the Zohar’s quasi-*midrashic* running commentary to the text.

Although the foremost Jewish philosopher Rabbi Moses Ben Maimon (Maimonides, 1138-1204) did not write commentaries, his works are full of allegorical interpretations of the Bible. Subsequently, Provence became a center of philosophical Biblical exegesis written by authors who were influenced by Maimonides in one way or another. Rabbi David Kimhi (Radak, 1160-1235) tried for a balance between *peshat* and *midrash*, presenting a moderate conservative view of the Bible, rejecting overtly literal readings of some supernatural passages. Rabbi Levi Ben Gerson (Gersonides, 1288-1344), Rabbi Nissim of Marseilles (early 14th century), Rabbi Joseph Ibn Caspi (first half of 14th century), and other Provençals interpreted the biblical text in a rational manner, treating both anthropomorphisms

and many supernatural events as allegorical. Their radical interpretations were often criticized by traditionalists.

The last great medieval exegete was Don Isaac Abarbanel (1437-1508) who started his career in Portugal, fled to Spain, and went to Italy after the expulsion of 1492. Although his verbose biblical commentaries were marked by conservative rationalism, and he maintained a great respect for rabbinic tradition and his Jewish exegetical predecessors, one can already detect in his works stirrings of modernity reflecting a Christian Renaissance environment. His sensitivity to issues of context, authorship and chronology are reflected in conclusions about the text which were seen by some contemporaries and successors as beyond the pale of accepted Jewish beliefs.

Recommended Reading

Frank, D., *Search Scripture Well: Karaite Exegetes and the Origins of the Jewish Bible Commentary in the Islamic East* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2004).

Grossman, A., *Rashi*, (Oxford/Portland Oregon: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2012).

Jacobs, L., *Jewish Biblical Exegesis* (New York: Behrman House, 1973).

Next pages
Manuscript containing *haftarot* (a short reading from the Prophets). In the Yemenite tradition, the Hebrew verses are accompanied by an Aramaic translation (targum)
Ink on vellum
Yemen
15th century
Green Collection, GC.MS.000473
Photo: Ardon Bar-Hama

וישדלמן ונגה יהוה את מצרים
עוף השמים ושרי צהר ונעדר
להסודתם וימחי ית מצרי
מאויסלון ויתולכן רפלה נא רשי
ויקביל עלות הון ויסי יהוה
ביום ההוא תהיה מסלה מצרים
אשורה וצא אשר במצרים
ומצרים באשור ועבדו מצרים
את אשר בעד נא הוא תהי
אודח כבישא ממצר לא תור
ויביחון אתולא כי מצרי ומצרי
כאתולא ויפלאון מצרי את
אתולא ביום ההוא יהיה
ישדאל שלישיה למצרים ויש
בכה בקרב הארץ בעד נא
ההוא יהי ישראל תהיה למצרי
ולאתולא כדכא כזה הארעא
אשר בדכר יהוה צבאות לאמר
בדור עליונים צרים ומעשה יד
אשור ונחלת ישראל וצדקיה
בצבא למימד בדיד עמי

ואפקית ממצר על הון וקדמה
אנליתי יתהון לאתולא וצדקיה
דכא מתקדן עמי ואחסנתני ישראל
ויהי בשלה
בשפטים 4
ויכנע אלהים פנים ההוא את יבין
מלך כנען לפני בני ישראל ויתנ
בי כיומא ההוא את יבין מלכא
דכנען קדם בני ישראל ופלה
יד בני ישראל להלוה וקשה על
יבין מלך כנען עד אשר הכינהו
את יבין מלך כנען ואתולא וצדקיה
ישראל אתולא ותקפא עד יבין
מלכא דכנען עד דשיעיו ית
יבין מלכא דכנען
והשד דכורה וגרה כזאב ילעם
ביום ההוא לאמר כמזע
פרעות פישאל כהתנע עכבניה
יהוה שמעו מדכר האזינו
רוגס אנכי יהוה אנכי
אשרה אומר ליהוה אלוי ישראל

יהוה בצאתה משעיר בצערך
משדה אדום ארץ רעשה גם
שמים גטפונעבים גטפונמים
נזלונמכני יהוה והסיני
כימי שמעך בוענת בימי עלה לאתולא
נתיבות ילכו ארחות עלקלות
עד שקמת דכורה שקמת אסבישראל
אלהים חדשים אזרחם שערים
בישראל לבי לחסתי ישראל המתנדבים
ברכו יהוה רכב אתנות צהרות ישבי על
מדן והלכי עלהרה שיחוני
מחצית כין משאבים שם יתנו צדקות יהוה צדקת
פרזון כישראל אזיד וילשעך פעם
עודי עודי דכורה עודי עודי
באכנעם אזיד שריד לארדים עם יהוה יודלי
מני אפרים שרשם כעמך
מכיר ירדו מחקקים ומזכורן משכים בשבט
ושרי כיש שפרעם דכרה ויששכר כזכר בעמק שדה
כדגליו בפלונת דאוכן גדרים חקידכ
ישכר ביי המשפטים לשמע שריקות עדדים לסלמות דאוכן
גלעד חקידכ
בעד הירדן שבן דולמה יגד אמתא שישל לחקך

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