



Jordan Penkower

Masorah and Text Criticism in the Early Modern Mediterranean: Moshe Ibn Zabara and Menahem de Lonzano

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This is a remarkable book, or rather several books in one. First, it meticulously describes a previously unknown fifteenth-century Spanish codex of the Pentateuch and Former Prophets, MS Zurich Jeselsohn 5. Second, it provides a detailed description of the text-critical practices of its scribe, Moshe Ibn Zabara, revealed mainly through his additional notes to the *masorah parva*. Third, it describes of the textual-critical practices of its later owner, Menahem de Lonzano (d. ca. 1624), an Italian-Turkish masoretic scholar whose annotations and corrections in this codex formed a basis for his great work, *’Or Torah* (“Light of the Torah”), which systematically corrected the *textus receptus* of the Pentateuch of his day (the Rabbinic Bibles of 1544 and 1548, which reprinted the Second Rabbinic Bible of 1524–1525, edited by Jacob Ben Ḥayyim). Finally, in the appendices, Andreina Contessa provides a fascinating study of the artistic decorations in the codex’s margins (smiling dragons, pheasants, flowers, etc.) in the context of Renaissance illumination, and Tamar Leiter and Shlomo Zucker address further codicological aspects, showing in fine grain how Ibn Zabara did his scribal work. In all of these parts, the book is lucid, lavishly illustrated, and immensely informative.

David Jeselsohn purchased the new codex (or half-codex, since it lacks the Latter Prophets and Writings) from a private collection, and it is now in the Jeselsohn Collection in Zurich. Jeselsohn underwrote the present volume and invited Penkower and the other specialists to produce it. This is a model of how private collectors ought to treat

their valuable manuscripts, rather than hoard them in secret vaults. Such openness and philanthropy ought to be the norm rather than the exception in the shadowy world of collectors.

On the basis of handwriting, layout, and material features, Penkower and colleagues identify the second half of this codex as MS Sassoon 1209, which contains the Latter Prophets and Writings. In the colophon at the end of the Sassoon codex, the scribe identifies himself as Moshe Ibn Zabara, a Spanish scribe who wrote, among other biblical codices, the lavishly illustrated Kennicott Bible (MS Oxford, Bodeleian Library, Kennicott 1), which was acquired for Oxford by the renowned textual critic Benjamin Kennicott. Ibn Zabara states that his codex (MS Jeselsohn 5 + MS Sasson 1209) was completed in 1477 in the town of al-Muqassam in north-central Spain. This is one of the last great Spanish codices, completed fifteen years before the expulsion of the Jews.

In the first chapter, Penkower explores the textual affinities of the codex and the scribal practices of Ibn Zabara, the latter primarily drawn from the notes that he added to the *masorah parva*. In these notes Zabara comments on variants between his text and the “accurate codices” that he consulted, including references to the famous (but long lost) Hilleli and Zambuqi codices. Sometimes he registers his criticism of the variant reading in other codices, as at Exod 26:27, where his reading, לקרשי המשכן (“for the frames of the tent”), contrasts with a longer phrase in other codices, לקרשי צלע המשכן (“for the frames of the side of the tent,” as in our “accurate codex” L). He writes: “I object that the writing צלע is in error.” To complete this text-critical analysis, he need only have added that this is a reminiscence of the longer phrase that occurs twice in the previous clauses. Ibn Zabara’s analysis is seconded by some modern textual critics (e.g., W. H. C. Propp, *Exodus 19–40* [New York: Doubleday, 2006], 332). Through Ibn Zabara’s notes—and Penkower’s scrupulous scholarship—we enter into the text-critical mentality of one of the last great Spanish biblical scholars.

The following chapters are devoted to the life and work of Menahem de Lonzano, who acquired this “accurate” Spanish codex and made additional corrections to the text (usually in vocalization or accents) and added numerous marginal notes. Many of the notes cite variants from old codices that Lonzano consulted or acquired in Jerusalem, Damascus, and Aleppo. His younger contemporary, Yedidyah Norzi, wrote in the introduction to his textual treatise, *Minhat Shai*, “He [Lonzano] opened my eyes greatly based upon the many codices that were before him in Jerusalem.”

Penkower places Lonzano’s text-critical sensibility in the context of other Jewish textual scholars, including Jacob Ben Ḥayyim and Norzi, and in the context of contemporary Christian textual scholars, including Joseph Scaliger and Isaac Casaubon (both of whom

knew Hebrew and engaged with Jewish scholars). Placing Lonzano's work in this broader context is an important contribution, allowing us to perceive the continuities and divisions in these fields of textual scholarship. Close attention to manuscript variants and exacting analysis unites these fields. But where Scaliger, Casaubon, and other Christian scholars often proposed emendations (usually to Greek and Latin texts) based on ingenuity rather than manuscript evidence, Jewish scholars generally eschewed this practice. Commenting on a textual treatise on the Midrash Rabbah, Lonzano criticizes the author: "he sometimes corrected the text, emending it based upon his reasoning, and he did not know that the scholars put a ban on correcting books based on reasoning [alone]; and this is what Nahmanides of blessed memory wrote ... correcting books based upon reasoning is a sin, and one should be excommunicated for doing this." But correcting books based on reasoning and manuscripts is the right path, in Lonzano's words, for "the lover of truth."

Penkower and his colleagues are to be congratulated for this book, which provides a superb entry into the textual world and mentality of medieval and early modern Jewish textual criticism, based on one of the last great biblical manuscripts of the Spanish Jewish golden age.