

FELIX PRATENSIS AND
JACOB BEN CHAIM IBN ADONIJAH
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Five hundred years ago, in the early 16th century, an interesting chapter in the history of the transmission of the Bible intersects with a remarkable story of the triumph of God's grace. The work that was done at this time in establishing the text of the Hebrew Scriptures would last for centuries, but the transformation that took place in the lives of those who were involved in this work would last for all eternity. Not only that, but the work primarily of one individual would affect the Reformation, contribute to the translation of the Bible into common language, and eventually lead to the founding of the State of Israel.

From the 8th to the 10th centuries, a number of attempts had been made to translate portions of the Bible into English. These Roman Catholic versions had been based upon the Latin Vulgate, which was an earlier translation of the Bible into Latin, substantially by Jerome, in the early years of the fifth century. This meant that these later translations were actually translations of a translation. As such, they inevitably introduced wording and expressions that reflected the Latin, rather than the original Hebrew and Greek. To further complicate the picture, the Vulgate itself was subject to change by copyists, and this resulted in an increasingly corrupt text.¹

Even the Hebrew text was somewhat uncertain, as there were many discrepancies between the Hebrew manuscripts. These were, for the most part, relatively insignificant differences in spelling, vocalization, etc., but they raised questions about the reliability of the text. There was a need for a careful study of all the variants in as many manuscripts as possible, in order to establish a more reliable text of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Felix Pratensis and the First Edition of the Rabbinic Bible²

This need was addressed by one of the earliest major publishing houses, one which was owned and operated by Daniel Bomberg in Venice. Bomberg undertook a major publishing project for the Jewish community. He employed a bright, young Jewish scholar, Felix Pratensis, to gather Hebrew manuscripts of Scripture, establish the text, and supply respected rabbinic commentary on each book. The result was the first edition of the Rabbinic Bible, published in 1516–17.

¹Stanley E. Porter, "Modern Translations," in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Bible*, ed. John Rogerson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 147.

²The first edition was titled, *Biblia Veneta*.

This work contained the Hebrew Scriptures with commentaries and Targumim. Some of the targumic texts he included had never before been published.³ Also included were the variant readings of Ben Asher and Ben Naphtali, Maimonides' Articles of Faith, the 613 precepts, and tables of readings. This edition is the first in which the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles are each divided into two books and Ezra is separated from Nehemiah. It is the first to include the Masoretic variant readings (*Q^ere^e*, "qere").⁴ Finally, it is the first edition to indicate the chapter numbers with Hebrew letters in the margin.⁵

Who was this Felix Pratensis? What is known is that he was born in Prato, Italy, in the second half of the fifteenth century and died in Rome in 1539.⁶ Perhaps due to his prolonged focus on the text of Scripture, he became convinced that Jesus is the Messiah and trusted in Him for salvation, probably in 1515.⁷ He later devoted himself to the task of persuading Jewish people to follow their Messiah, Jesus. His mastery of three languages and of the biblical materials, commentaries, and Targumim served his zeal for his Lord. Interestingly, Aaron Bernstein has a curious reference to "Bromberg" (by which he undoubtedly meant Bomberg) as Pratensis' "disciple."⁸ If there is truth to this, Pratensis must have played a role in introducing his Gentile publisher to his Messiah and instructed him in the faith. In any case, at approximately the time that Pratensis was born again, he gave birth to the Rabbinic Bible.

³Isaac Landman, ed., *The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia: An Authoritative and Popular Presentation of Jews and Judaism since the Earliest Times*, vol. 2 (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1969), 297.

⁴While *Kethibh* refers to the text that is written, *Qerê* is the text that is to be read. This assumes that in a particular verse there has been an error by a scribe, for which a correction is offered. See Isidore Singer, ed., *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. 3 (New York: Funk and Wagnall's Company, 1907), 158. See also Basil Hall, "Biblical Scholarship: Editions and Commentaries," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible: The West from the Reformation to the Present Day*, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 52.

⁵Christian D. Ginsburg, *Introduction to the Massoretico-Critical Edition of the Hebrew Bible* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1966), 26.

⁶See "Jacob B. Chajim Ibn Adonijah (Life and Works)," in Christian D. Ginsburg, *Jacob ben Chajim Ibn Adonijah's Introduction to the Rabbinic Bible, Hebrew and English, with Explanatory Notes*, 2nd ed. New York: KTAV, 1867; reprinted, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009. See also A. Bernstein, *Some Jewish Witnesses for Christ* (London: Operative Jewish Converts' Institution, 1909), 42.

⁷Norman Snaith claims that Pratensis became a Christian in 1506, but this seems unlikely, as it is hard to imagine that the Jewish community would have accepted him for this project had he been a Christian already. N. H. Snaith, "Prolegomenon," to *Jacob Ben Chajim Ibn Adonijah's Introduction to the Rabbinic Bible, Hebrew and English; with Explanatory Notes by Christian D. Ginsburg*, ed. H. M. Orlinsky (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1968), viii. However, it is worth noting that when he included Kimhi's comments on the Prophets, he omitted the anti-Christian passages. See n. 21, below.

⁸Bernstein, 42.

Although there were inadequacies and inaccuracies in this first edition, it was a major, pioneering effort and not without original contributions, as already mentioned. The division into chapters was a great help for students of the Bible. Nevertheless, this first edition was not well received by the Jewish community, in part because Pratensis had become a Christian.⁹ So the work would pass to another.

Jacob Ibn Adonijah and the Second Edition

Jacob Ibn Adonijah: His Life

Birth and Early Years. Jacob Ibn Adonijah was born in about 1470¹⁰ and was most likely a native of Tunis. Regarding the explanation for his family's presence there, Christian David Ginsburg speculates:

Whether his ancestors were among the first and second masses of emigrants from Spain, who successively fled from that accursed country, to escape the fiery persecution consequent upon the successive inflammatory preachings of the fanatical priests, Fernando Martinez (March 15–August 1391), and Vincente Ferrer (1412–1414), and settled down in the North of Africa by thousands; or whether they were among the three hundred thousand who were expelled from Spain in 1492, is difficult to decide.¹¹

Arrival in Italy. Ginsburg suggests that Ibn Adonijah was forced to flee Tunis in 1510.¹² In the face of Catholic Spain's military conquest of Tunis, Ibn Adonijah traveled from place to place in Italy for seven years. Finally, he found himself in Venice, and soon became associated with Daniel Bomberg and his famous Hebrew press. Later, as he would recount his first meeting with Bomberg, he said, "God sent a highly distinguished and pious Christian Daniel Bomberg to meet me."¹³ If Bomberg was a pious Christian at this time, the mentoring of Pratensis must have borne fruit.

Jacob Ibn Adonijah: His Work

⁹Page H. Kelly, Daniel S. Mynatt, and Timothy G. Crawford, *The Masorah of Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia: Introduction and Annotated Glossary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 24.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 2.

¹¹Ginsburg, *Introduction to the Massoretico-Critical Edition of the Hebrew Bible*, 2. NB: Ginsburg was also a Jewish believer in Jesus.

¹²*Ibid.*, 5.

¹³Hall, 52–53.

The partnership between Ibn Adonijah and Bomberg does seem to have been divinely ordered, for it gave rise to Ibn Adonijah's life work. Building on the labors of Pratensis, Jacob Ibn Adonijah began his preparation for the second edition of the Rabbinic Bible shortly after the first edition had been published. He completed his work in 1524–25. What he was able to accomplish in only seven or eight years is astonishing. Even to this day, almost five hundred years later, scholars are in awe of the amount of work Ibn Adonijah was able to accomplish. For example, Snaith remarks:

What is certain is that during the years 1517–1527 Ibn Adoniyah accomplished a truly prodigious amount of work. He edited the whole of the Babylonian Talmud, Rabbi Nathan's Concordance and the *Mishne Torah* of Maimonides. And all the time he was busy traveling, collecting and collating codices preparatory to the publishing of the great Rabbinic Bible which was accepted as the authoritative text for four hundred years and more.¹⁴

His work on the Rabbinic Bible involved a number of different assignments. First, he had to establish the text of Scripture. To do this, however, he not only had to collect the biblical manuscripts, but also to bring order to the tremendous number of variations in the texts found in them. This he did by means of the Masorah, extensive notations on the Hebrew text, giving all kinds of detailed information about the variations in the manuscripts, information about unusual forms or letters, and information about the number of times a word occurs, etc. Only after the text and the Masorah had been fixed was he able to add the commentaries.

The Masorah of the Hebrew Bible. Ibn Adonijah's production of a completely reworked Masorah was a ground-breaking advance. These notations may be found either on the side margins (or between the columns), on the upper and lower margins, or at the end of a biblical book. The first are called the Masorah Parva (the small Masorah), the second, the Masorah Magna (the large Masorah), and the notations at the end of a book are called the Masorah Finalis (the concluding Masorah).

The Masorah Parva consists of brief notations which generally are recorded in the margin beside the line to which they relate, and they give abbreviated information concerning the proper form of the text or impart other relevant information. Variant readings, differences in spelling, letters written in non-standard forms, and statistics showing the number of times a particular form is found in Scripture were all noted in the Masorah Parva.

The Masorah Magna and the Masorah Finalis contained much more extensive notes. The point in all of this, of course, was to establish the correct reading of the Scriptures and to ensure accuracy in the future transmission of the text. This was truly foundational to everything else. The Masorah had fallen into a sorry state of confusion and neglect. To bring order to this system was as much a victory over tedious detail as anything, yet it was of utmost importance.

¹⁴Snaith, ix.

This led Ginsburg to pronounce Ibn Adonijah as the one “who rescued the Masorah from perdition.”¹⁵

Listen as Ginsburg describes the task:

It is perfectly impossible for any one, but those students who have seen the MSS. Of the Hebrew Bible, with the Massorah round the margin, in a most fantastic manner, who have encountered the difficulties in deciphering the hieroglyphic signs, the conceited abbreviations, the strange forms and ornaments into which the writing of the Massorah is twisted, the confusion of the Massoretic notes, etc.; and who have grappled with the blunders which are to be found in almost every sentence, to form an adequate conception of the extraordinary labour and learning which Jacob Ibn Adonijah must have bestowed, in bringing such beautiful order out of such a chaos.¹⁶

Establishing the Text. Because of his detailed analysis of the texts of Scripture, including his labors on the Masorah, the text he produced became authoritative. Bleddyn J. Roberts says: “It became the main basis of practically every subsequent edition of the text until Kittel’s *Biblia Hebraica* [in 1937].”¹⁷ Due to the painstaking work of Ibn Adonijah, the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Scriptures had been rescued, if not from perdition, at least from centuries of scribal error and neglect.

Providing the Commentary. Accompanying the text of Scripture with the Masorah, like Pratensis before him, Ibn Adonijah included Targumim and commentaries. Ibn Adonijah included more commentaries on the various books of the Hebrew Scriptures than Pratensis. For the five books of Moses, he used the commentaries of Rashi and Ibn Ezra. For the earlier prophets, he used commentaries by Rashi, Kimḥi, and Levi ben Gershon. For the latter prophets, he used Rashi and Ibn Ezra. For the Writings, he included the commentaries of Rashi, Ibn Ezra, David and Moses Kimḥi, Levi ben Gershon, and Saadia.¹⁸ It is interesting and perhaps relevant to note that most of these were prominent medieval commentaries in the *peshat* tradition. That is to say, they interpreted the text in a relatively literal sense.

New Birth. The amazing fact is that, just as Pratensis before him, Ibn Adonijah became a disciple of Jesus, as well! How interesting it would be to know the human

¹⁵Ginsburg, “Jacob B. Chajim Ibn Adonijah (Life and Works),” 1.

¹⁶Ibid., 7–8.

¹⁷Bleddyn J. Roberts, “The Old Testament: Manuscripts, Text and Versions,” in *The Cambridge History of the Bible: The West From the Fathers to the Reformation*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 12. See also Porter, 147.

¹⁸Ginsburg, “Jacob B. Chajim Ibn Adonijah (Life and Works),” 6–7.

circumstances that factored in to this decision! In any case, as was the custom at the time, he adopted a new name to reflect the change in his life: Jacob ben Chaim (Jacob, the son of life). This probably took place sometime between 1525 and 1527.¹⁹ Ben Chaim's earthly life had come to an end by 1538,²⁰ while he would have been in his late sixties.

Assessing the Impact of Jacob ben Chaim

How are we to assess the impact of ben Chaim? One scholar concludes, "This [ben Chaim's second ed.] was the greatest step forward yet taken towards obtaining the best text of the Hebrew Bible, for it included the results of the extraordinary labours of the Tunisian refugee, Jacob b. Chayim, on the Massorah."²¹ Not only so, but Ginsburg notes that ben Chaim's work on the Rabbinic Bible "was the most powerful auxiliary to the then commencing Reformation."²²

The Protestant Reformation

Indeed, the timing could hardly have been more strategic. Just two years before the second edition of the Rabbinic Bible was published, Luther, Melanchthon, and others began a decade of debating and preaching and teaching. Then would come the theological works. Establishing the most accurate Hebrew text allowed reformers, like William Tyndale, an opportunity to break free of the Latin Vulgate and to offer translations of the Hebrew Scriptures based upon the original Hebrew. The Rabbinic Bible of ben Chaim contained the authoritative text, or *Textus Receptus*, of the Hebrew Bible and therefore became the basis for most translations from Tyndale until modern times.

Some may wonder why the Hebrew Scriptures would be so significant to the Protestant Reformation. Yet, as Felix Pratensis rightly claims in his preface to the first edition, "the entire superstructure of Christianity rests" on the Hebrew Bible.²³ This is not even to mention the fact that the New Covenant Scriptures are full of direct quotations and allusions to

¹⁹This is based on the testimony of his contemporary, Elias Levita, who claimed that ben Chaim had "left Judaism" a number of years before 1537 and the claim by Ginsburg that ben Chaim ended his relationship with Bomberg "almost simultaneously with the arrival of Levita at Venice" [1527]. Ginsburg speculates with justification that this was due to his having embraced Christianity. See Ginsburg, "Jacob B. Chajim Ibn Adonijah (Life and Works)," 9, 11.

²⁰Christian D. Ginsburg, *The Massoreth Ha-Massoreth of Elias Levita, Being an Exposition of the Massoretic Notes on the Hebrew Bible, or the Ancient Critical Apparatus of the Old Testament* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader & Dyer, 1867), 37, n. 33. Cf. Ginsburg, "Jacob B. Chajim Ibn Adonijah (Life and Works)," 14.

²¹Hall, 52.

²²Ibid., 6.

²³As cited by Hall, 52.

the Hebrew Scriptures. The New Testament without the Hebrew Scriptures is like a house without a foundation.

Christian Zionism and the State of Israel

There is also a direct line running from the work of ben Chaim to the creation of the modern State of Israel. Ben Chaim, in consolidating and establishing the Masoretic Text, facilitated some of the early translations of the Bible into English, and ultimately, the King James Version (AD 1611). These translations were based upon the *textus receptus* of ben Chaim. Having the Bible in the language of the people, in turn, led to a rediscovery of the place of Israel, i.e., the Jewish people, in the plan of God.

In the late 1500s and throughout the 1600s, England was saturated with the Word of God. John Richard Green says, “England became the people of a book and that book was the Bible. . . . What the revival of classical learning had done on the Continent was done in England in a far profounder fashion by the translation of the Scriptures.”²⁴ H. Hensley Henson adds: “It would appear that the Old Testament was more widely read than the New, certainly its spirit rather than that of the Christian Scriptures coloured the religious thought of the nation.”²⁵

This gave rise to the British Restorationist Movement, which later would be known as Christian Zionism. The first expression of this sentiment in print is the work by Thomas Brightman, *Shall They Return to Jerusalem Again?* (1615). Then came the seminal book by Henry Finch, *The World’s Great Restauration, or, the Calling of the Iewes . . . [etc.]* (AD 1621). Ultimately, these ideas found expression in the Balfour Declaration (AD 1917), and this, in turn, ultimately led to the creation of the State of Israel (AD 1948). The role that the translation of the Bible into English played in all of this is undeniable.²⁶

Perhaps we would do well to listen to ben Chaim’s own very modest words:

Whatsoever my humble endeavours could accomplish was done for the glory of the Lord, and for the benefit of our people. I would not be deterred by the enormous labour, for which cause I did not suffer my eyelids to be closed long, either in the winter or summer, and did not mind rising in the cold of the night, as my aim and desire were to see this holy work finished. Now praised be the Creator, who granted me the privilege to begin and to finish this work.²⁷

²⁴John Richard Green, *Short History of the English People*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1893), 933.

²⁵H. Hensley Henson, *Puritanism in England* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1912), 116.

²⁶See Douglas J. Culver, *Albion and Ariel: British Puritanism and the Birth of Political Zionism* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), pp. 51–70. I am indebted to Culver for drawing my attention to the previous two sources.

²⁷As cited by Ginsburg, “Jacob B. Chajim Ibn Adonijah (Life and Works),” 8.